

Stitching in the Ditch



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Pretty much anyone who has ever read an article or pattern related to quilting will have heard of Stitch in the Ditch, SID or Ditching, and many of us have given it a try. Basically it involves stitching on the lower side of a seam, as close to the seam as possible. Easy right?! Well not always. I thought it would be good to take a closer look at this technique. In my research I've spoken to a number of domestic machine quilting friends and learned a number of things! Even when you think you know a lot, there is always something more to discover!

There are many reasons to stitch in the ditch. The most obvious is as a utilitarian way of quilting a top and getting it finished. Stitching in the ditch is not a very difficult technique to master and will allow you to finish off quilts without having to go through a huge learning curve. In fact, it's one of the skills you as a quilter will return to over and over again.

The down side of quilts only ditched is that it doesn't add much texture or a secondary design to your quilt that can really make it WOW. Having said that, some quilts look really wonderful when only ditched. I've quilted many Dear Jane quilts over the past few years using only ditching in the pieced blocks.

If you use a batting with more loft, like a wool, then you get more texture than with flat battings and the quilts look wonderful.

Another reason to ditch would be to stabilize areas of your quilt. Whether you are quilting on a domestic machine or a longarm, it's good to "isolate" areas of your quilt with stitch in the ditch before you fill in more complex designs. It helps to stop the

batting and fabric layers moving and causing pleats and puckers, and I feel it also gives a nicer finish to the quilt. It is also a great way to control added fullness because the ditching keeps the fullness in one place so you can deal with it rather than just pushing it to another section.



The very first quilt I ever pieced lay in a cupboard as a UFO for a few years until I got my first longarm. Then, because I didn't know better, I quilted it without any ditching. The result is ok and I'm proud of it as my first finished quilt, but if I quilted it today I would certainly outline the pieced designs and blocks. It just makes them more prominent and it keeps straight lines straight.

When you quilt you are basically distorting the fabric with your stitches, so if you have ditched an area before you add other designs the fabric is not able to distort as much.

I always stitch in the ditch around applique. To me it just brings the applique to the fore and allows it to shine. The stitching holds down the edges of the applique and in conjunction with the background designs, allows the applique to pop up and be the star of the quilt... and that's why you spent some many hours on the applique, right?!

Before we go into the technique of actually stitching, let's look quickly at a few other important points.

Thread

I prefer to use polyester threads in my machines as they work so consistently and look beautiful. I would therefore choose a colour of thread that matches or blends with the background fabric colour.

Often a finer thread, between 50 and 100 weight, will blend in better so if you do deviate from the seam line, it will be less obvious.



Alternatively, you could choose to use a clear or smokey "invisible" thread. The advantage of these is that any wobbles across seam lines and out of ditches will be less obvious. Also, if you have a quilt that makes use of many different coloured fabrics for applique and backgrounds then it can be extremely difficult to select a colour thread that would blend with everything. In this scenario, an invisible thread would work great. Be aware that they can be quite stretchy so you will need to reduce your tension to prevent the seams from pulling up and bunching once quilted.

I also use a smaller needle with invisible threads to try and reduce the hole size and improve stitch quality. I'm not a great fan of invisible thread because it's like sewing with hair! I'm often nervous that the stops and starts won't be very secure and I dislike the look of a line of holes in the fabric where you can't see the thread, but it definitely has a place and I do use it on occasion. I personally wouldn't use it to quilt an entire quilt though, it's just not my style.

Stitch length

The second question that's often raised when talking about stitch in the ditch is what stitch length to use. Personally I prefer to use a shorter stitch; 12-13 stitches per inch, or

about 2 on a domestic machine but others prefer longer lengths. I feel the shorter stitch buries itself in the seam better and is less obvious, but play around and find what works best for you.

As with many things in quilting, there is no right or wrong! Just go with what feels and looks right to you.

How do you press your seams; open or to the side?

This is a big bone of contention in my life! I'm a quilter and I want to be able to make the most of my quilts and believe ditching helps me to achieve this. I, therefore, want my seams pressed to the side. Period.

Working this way gives me a consistent line to work with which is much easier to quilt and also allows the thread to nestle into the lower side of the seam and do it's best to do a disappearing act.



Seams that have been inadvertently switched (one end sewn into the next seam in the opposite direction to how you started out) means the ditching has to jump across from one side to the other at the point where the fabric turns.

The thread is going to be much more visible as it crosses this line and it's also the highest point on the seam which highlights the jump even more.



Some quilters and many modern quilting patterns and books advocate pressing your seams open.



They argue that this reduces bulk where seams intersect and makes the quilt lie flatter, but I beg to differ on this point. To ditch these seams also means I'm relying on the backing, batting and thread of the stitches alone to hold the quilt together.

By stitching in these open ditches, I feel the strength of the seam is being compromised and could lead to them splitting open after repeated washing and use.

Also, if you get up close and personal to an open seam, you will notice that there is no real "ditch" because there is an equal amount of fabric layers on each side of the seam. This makes it extremely difficult to sew "in the ditch". I have on occasion ditched quilts that had open seams when I felt they really had to be treated this way to get the best out of them, but

many would shoot me for it and it would not be my first choice, especially for quilts that will see heavy use.

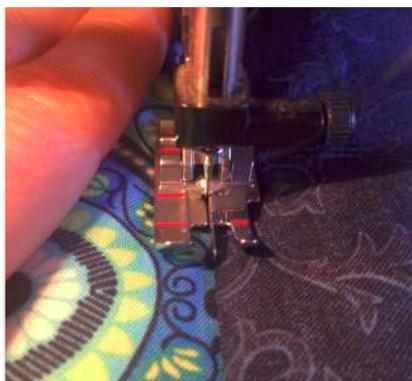
The technique of Stitching in the ditch for Domestic machine quilters.

As you will no doubt know by now, domestic machine quilting is not my speciality so I spoke to a few friends including Bernina Quilting Ambassador, Telene Jeffrey, for confirmation on a few points for you.

So here's what we came up with together:

Use a walking foot or machine with independent feed system with the feed dogs engaged so that the layers of the quilt a feed through the machine evenly and don't shift. You can get versions with an open toe for great visibility, or with a guide plate that you run along the ditch.

You will need to try each one out to see which you prefer but both can do the task. This is fine on a small quilt or one with lines that stretch all the way across or down the quilt but becomes more difficult if you want to ditch around a block in the middle of a big quilt. Pivoting the quilt to go around a block can lead to bunching of the fabric and those dreaded pleats if you have not basted sufficiently. It's also just really awkward to do, but with patience can be achieved.



Alternatively, you can drop your feed dogs and free motion quilt your

ditches. Now you will be in control of the stitch length rather than the feed dogs and keeping straight lines can be tricky. Slow right down and concentrate on the point on the seam where you want to needle to go and you should be ok. Recently, ruler feet for domestic machines have been introduced.

Whilst still relatively uncommon, they are great and allow you to use machine quilting rulers without damaging your machine. They do allow you much greater control of straight and curved lines with domestic machines and help you stay in the ditch.



NOTE: you do need to be sure you have the correct foot for your machine and are using the correct thickness of ruler!

Longarm quilters:

Longarm quilters have the advantage that they don't need to turn quilts to be able to move in all directions but their disadvantage is that they don't have feed dogs to control the movement of the machine or fabric. This makes freehand ditching really quite tricky! Luckily, all longarm machines have ruler feet and you can use a small straight edge ruler to keep your stitch in the ditches straight.

Curved lines or applique designs can also be ditched using a ruler with a special 'notch' in it. This can be

rested against the foot and used to stabilise the machine. You can push the machine using the ruler and at the same time guide your stitches using the hand holding the machine.



Some general tips

- Sit or stand in line with the needle. This gives you the most comfortable sewing position and puts least strain on your body and eyes
- Look at the line of the ditch when you are stitching rather than at the needles itself.
- Stitch on the lower side of the seam and if a seam is switched and you do have to lump to cross, do so in as few stitches as possible.
- Slow down and maintain control.
- Take frequent breaks. Stitch in the ditch takes considerable concentration and places strain on your eyes. I read something recently that advocated drinking a large glass of water before you start your quilting session to ensure you will have to take a break before too long! It made me smile, and would certainly achieve its objective!

Well I hope these few pointers will help you with your machine quilting and that over the Christmas break you will have time to get another quilt out of the UFO cupboard and onto the finished pile!

See you again in the new year!

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