

Reading and writing





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Penner and quills

This cylindrical leather case was made to hold quills. Penners were made by cutting the leather to shape, stitching it together, soaking it in water, and moulding it around a wooden former. The finished penner is waterproof, and strong enough to protect the contents.

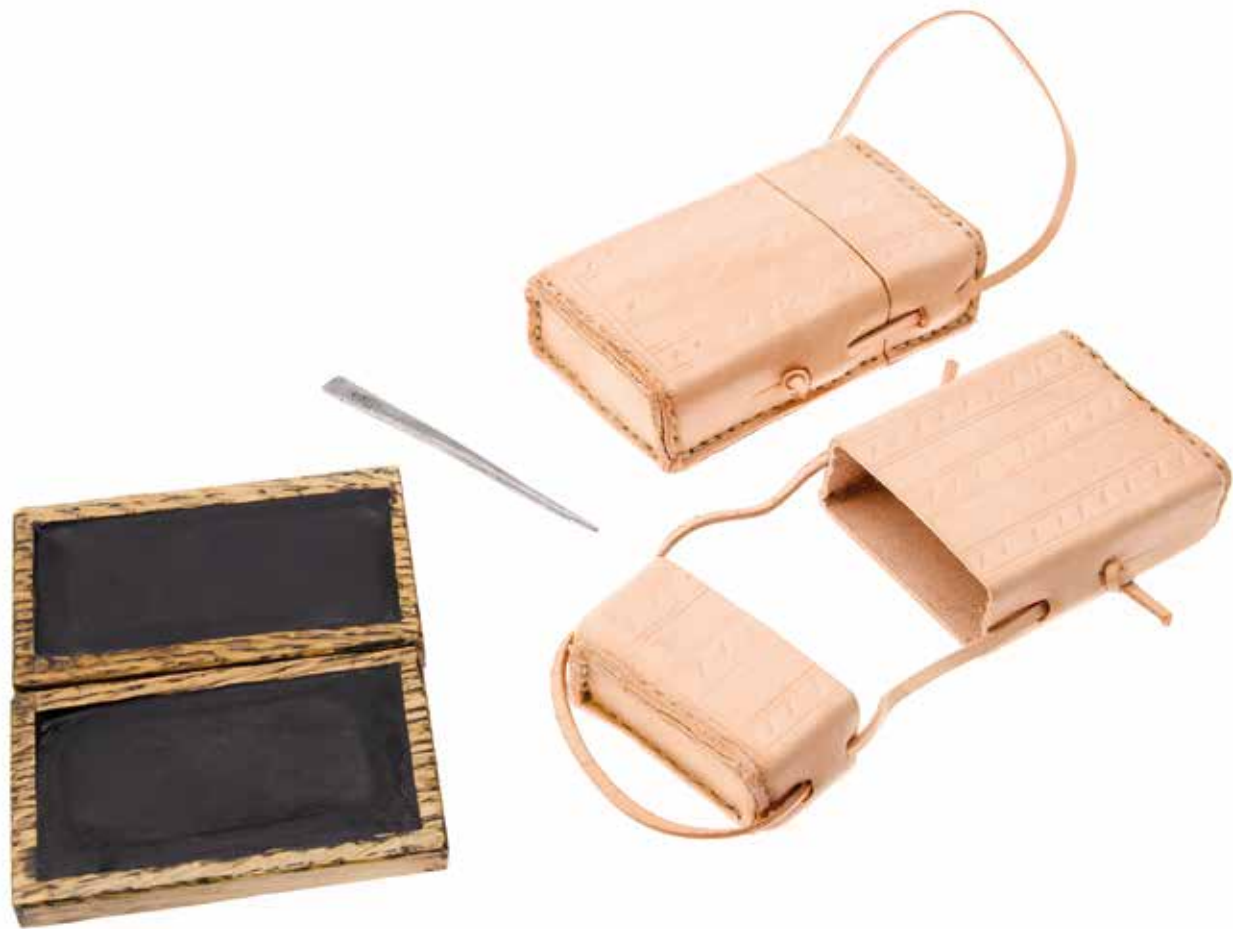
Quills were pens made from the longest wing feathers of geese or swans, with shafts of at least 1/3 cm in diameter. The feathers were soaked overnight before the bare part of the feather shaft was cured or tempered in very hot sand, to toughen it. The excess plume was stripped off so that it didn't get in the way of the writer's hand, and a nib was cut into the feather end. The nib got blunt through use, but could be re-cut 3 or 4 times before the quill had to be thrown away.

People dipped quills into ink to use them. There were many ink 'recipes', but the most permanent ink was made from a mixture of oak galls, copper sulphate, ferrous sulphate and gum Arabic.



How do we know about penners and quills?

Illustrations and descriptions in Tudor documents, and finds made during archaeological excavations.



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Tablet with stylus

These wax-filled wooden pages, joined together, were the notebooks of Tudor times. The metal stylus was used to scratch notes in the wax. The wax could be melted again and again, to provide a new writing surface, and was often red, green or black, as these colours showed the writing up well.

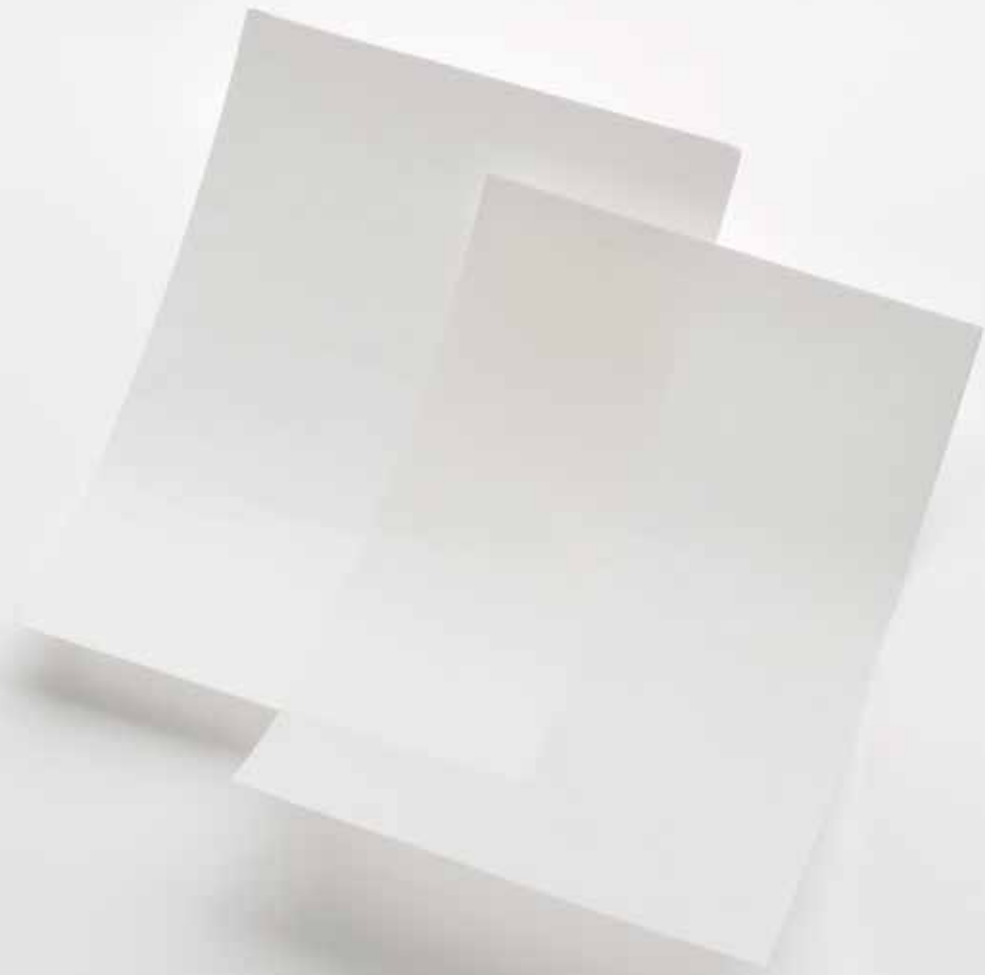
The tablet and stylus were kept safe in a leather case, which was attached to the owner's belt with a leather loop. The case was made by cutting the leather to shape, stitching it together, soaking it in water, and moulding it around a wooden former. The leather was patterned by stamping or carving once dry.

Paper began to be more widely used in Tudor times, and people stopped using wax tablets.



How do we know about tablets and stylii?

Illustrations and descriptions in Tudor documents, and finds made during archaeological excavations.



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Calf vellum

This strong white material was used as a writing surface. Both sides of the vellum are suitable for writing on, and it was used for important documents such as illustrated manuscripts, and books.

Vellum is made from calf skin, by soaking it in lime to remove hair, dirt and grease. The skin is then sewn onto a wooden frame, and kept damp while it is stretched and scraped until it is thin and smooth. The tension is increased during this process, to make the writing surface as thin as possible. Once it is thin enough, the parchment is allowed to dry, removed from the frame, and cut into smaller sheets for use by the scribe.

Sheepskin parchment

This strong, translucent material was used as a surface to write on, for important documents such as letters and legal documents. Only the flesh side can be used for writing on.

Made in the same way as vellum, sheep based parchments are often slightly thinner, and are greasier due to the fatty composition of sheep skin.



How do we know about vellum and parchment?

Many medieval manuscripts, books and documents made from vellum and parchment survive in libraries around the world.

