

Reading and writing



Reading and writing

Penner

Penner — a cylindrical leather case designed to hold pens. These cases were made by stitching the leather, then soaking it in water, then moulding it around a wooden former. Once dry the case was covered in thin goat or calf skin. This makes a case which is quite waterproof and strong enough to protect the contents.

The pens are made from reeds, and there were many ink recipes available to medieval writers — the simplest being a mixture of egg white and soot.



How do we know about penners?

Descriptions and illustrations in medieval manuscripts, including the Bedford Hours, and finds of penners during archaeological digs.

Reading and writing

Wax tablet with stylus

Wax tablet with stylus — two wooden 'pages', filled with beeswax, and tied together using leather thongs. The first known manufacture of paper in Britain was in 1494; before that date people used this medieval 'notepad' to make brief notes. Some wax tablets had an additional double sided 'page'. The stylus, made from brass, was used as a 'pen' with which to scratch the notes.



How do we know about wax tablets?

Illustrations in medieval manuscripts, plus many examples have been found during archaeological digs, notably in York.

Reading and writing

Vellum and parchment

Calf vellum — white, and less translucent than parchment. Both sides of the vellum are suitable for writing on. Vellum is made from the skin of a calf, which is soaked in lime to clean it, removing hair, dirt and grease, and then stretched on a wooden frame. The skin is kept damp and under tension, which can be increased, while the skin is scraped thin and smooth. If necessary, the skin may be bleached during the process. Once the desired thickness is reached, the parchment can be allowed to dry and finally cut down, ready to be turned into smaller sheets for use by the scribe.

Sheepskin parchment — pale, thin and translucent, only the flesh side can be used for writing on. Made by the same process as calf vellum, sheep based parchments are often very slightly thinner, and are greasier due to the fatty composition of the skin they are made from.

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.



Reading and writing Parchment pricker

Parchment pricker — this tool, carved from bone, with a metal tip, was used to mark out illuminated letters, illustrations on parchment and vellum before the final writing and colouring was done using inks.



How do we know about parchment prickers?

Illustrations in medieval manuscripts, finds of parchment prickers during archaeological digs.