

Sewing and braiding



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Coil headed pins

Coil headed pins — pins were very important in medieval times, and were made from bone, fish bones, wood, thorns, ivory, shell and metal. Pins were used to hold fabric together to be sewn, and to hold other clothes together, and fine bronze or copper alloy pins they were used to pin together ladies headwear — wimples consisted of bands of cloth pinned together around the top half of the head and also from chin to the top of the head, and veils pinned to the bands.

Pins were made by drawing brass or copper alloy wire (through a die) to the required length, sharpening one end, and coiling softer, finer, wire around the other end to form a 'head'. This process requires 14–16 different steps, all done by hand. Pins were valuable luxuries in medieval times.

In the 14th, the English parliament passed an act allowing the pin-maker to sell his pins in “open shop” only on the 1st and 2d of January of each year. This was intended to prevent the sale of these “luxuries”, as they were then regarded, to too great an extent. It was on these two days of the year that the court ladies and city women of high and low degree flocked to buy them, having first been provided with money by their husbands called “pin money.” When pins became cheap and common, the ladies spent their allowances on other fancies, but the term “pin money” still remains in the English language.



How do we know about coil headed pins?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs.

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Brass needles

Brass needles — medium and fine brass needles would have been used with linen or silk thread to sew fine linen and silk fabrics. The needles were made by drawing brass wire to length, sharpening one end to a point, flattening the other end, and punching a hole in the flattened end.

Linen thread is stronger and more resistant to wear if it's run through a bit of beeswax before it's used. It's generally assumed that this practice was common in the Middle Ages.



How do we know about brass needles?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs.



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Bone needles

Bone needles — bone needles, much thicker than brass, would have been used with wool or linen thread to sew coarser woollen fabrics. They may also have been used to sew leather together, threading through holes made using an awl or similar tool.



How do we know about bone needles?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs.

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Leather needle case

Leather needle case — small leather case for keeping pins and needles safe. Needle cases were made from leather, bone, horn and metal. Pins and needles were expensive and valuable and hard to get hold of in medieval times, so needed looking after. The leather loop shows that it was intended to be worn hanging from a belt or girdle.

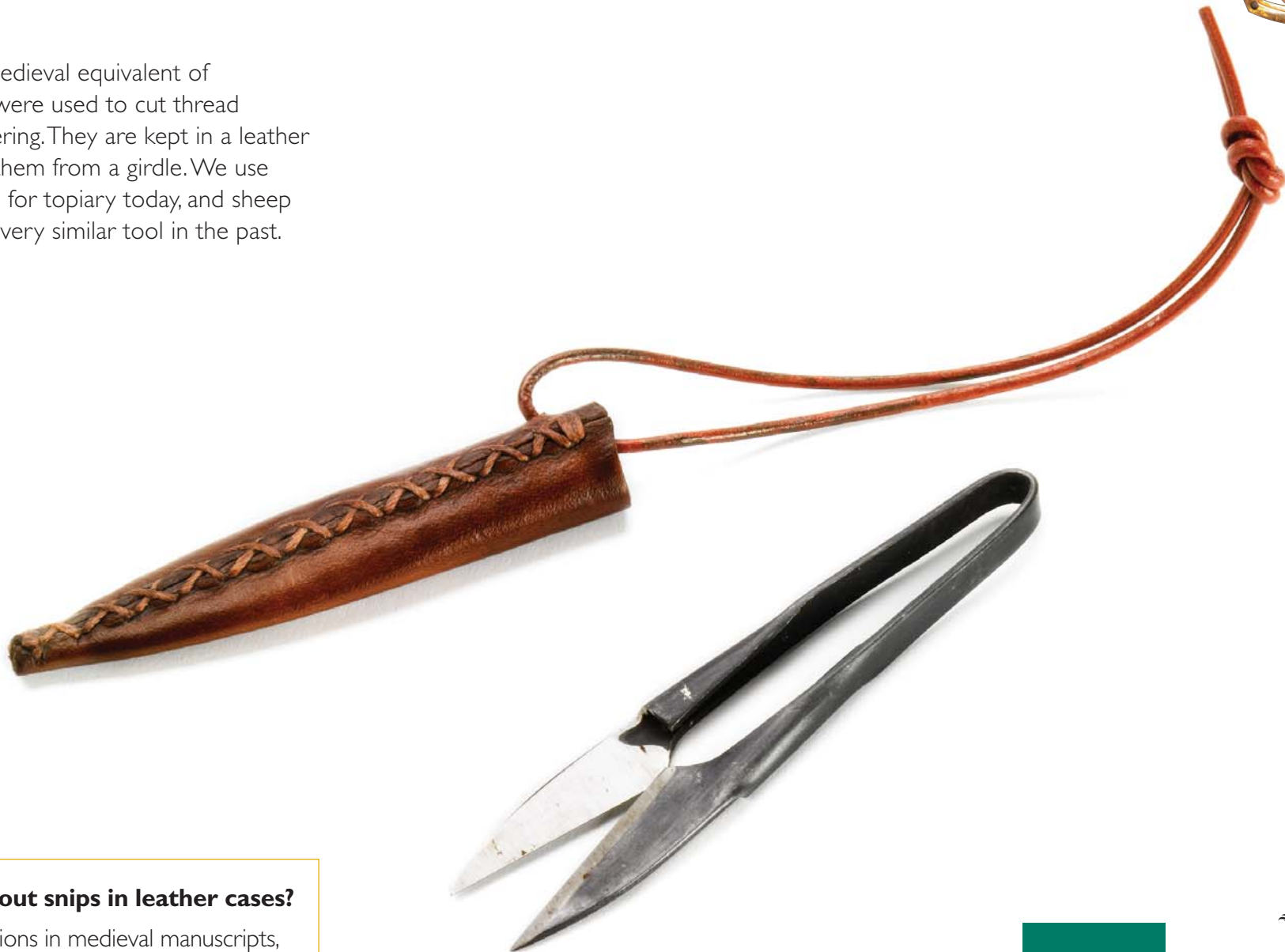


How do we know about leather needle cases?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs. This leather case is based on examples in manuscripts dated between 1250-1600.

Sewing and braiding Snips

Snips — these are the medieval equivalent of embroidery scissors, and were used to cut thread when sewing or embroidering. They are kept in a leather case with a loop to hang them from a girdle. We use larger versions of this tool for topiary today, and sheep shearing was done with a very similar tool in the past.



How do we know about snips in leather cases?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs.

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Brass open ended thimble

Brass open ended thimble — called a 'thymel' in medieval times, this would have been used to push the needle through coarser materials and leather. Thimbles were also made from leather, and wood.



How do we know about open ended thimbles?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs. This thimble was cast from a C13th original.

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Pewter buttons

Pewter buttons — although buttons had been used by people since at least 3000BC, these early buttons were purely decorative — rather like sewn on brooches. Functional buttons with buttonholes for fastening or closing clothes first appeared first in Germany early in the 13th century, and their use was widespread across Europe in C13th and C14th, as fashions changed and closer fitting clothes became fashionable. These buttons have been cast from pewter.



How do we know about pewter buttons?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs.

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Aiglets

Aiglets — these tips were used on ribbons, braids and cords. Aiglets could be plain or highly decorated. Having a tip on the end of your ribbon, cord or braid makes it much easier to thread through holes to lace two parts of a garment together. Many women's garments were fastened by lacing, at the front, back or side, and sometimes sleeves were laced to bodices. Men's clothing was sometimes laced, usually using laces to join hose or trousers to jackets and doublets, and also sleeves to jackets. We still use aiglets today — they are usually made from plastic, on laces used to tie shoes and trainers.



How do we know about aiglets?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs.

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Netting shuttle

Netting shuttle — used to make hair nets for noble and middle class ladies. These are made from brass or copper alloy, and the thread used to make the nets was wound around the shuttle between the forked ends. The shuttles were then used to pass the thread between other threads and to make knots holding the threads together to make nets. Similar methods using much heavier wooden shuttles are still used today to make hand knotted fishing nets.



How do we know about netting shuttles?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs.

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Lucet

Lucet — a simple tool for making woven braid. Lucets were made from bone, wood, horn, and ivory, and could be used to make single or two coloured braid, in a number of simple and more complex patterns. A sample of a simple braid made using the lucet is tied to the lucet.



How do we know about lucets?

Illustrations and descriptions in medieval manuscripts, and finds made during archaeological digs.