

Jot & Tittle



A personal selection of Wessex, British Isles and world history.

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This is a special edition intended primarily for the guides at Salisbury Cathedral. As a Chapter House guide and an Archive volunteer I have a special interest in Magna Carta and manuscripts in general. Recent reading has included *Scribes & Illuminators* by Christopher de Hamel, Head of Illuminated Manuscripts at Sothebys (British Museum Press 1992) and *Magna Carta, Manuscripts and Myths* by Claire Breay, Lead Curator of Medieval and Earlier Manuscripts at the British Library (The British Library 2010). I have written extensively in the past on these subjects but these notes are a significant addition. For example, I have often wondered why when the cathedral at Old Sarum was well known for copying books, yet there was no *scriptorium* at the new cathedral. I now realise that at this time Cathedrals and monasteries often gave way to professional craftsmen who were not only very highly skilled but could spend their whole day on the work. This was even more important when illuminators and bookbinders were also involved.

THE WRITING MEDIUM

A parchment maker was known as a *percamenarius*. Parchment (principally from sheep, as quoted by Hamlet) is often confused with vellum which comes from *vitellus*, the Latin for calf. However, nowadays the terms are interchangeable whatever animal provided the skin - although the academics at the Bodleian prefer *parchment* and the British Library, *vellum*!



Medieval animals would have suffered from diseases and ticks that would leave flaws on the flayed skin. Cows and goats largely had brindled or piebald colouring, the effect of which on the parchment could be regarded as a positive. To treat the skin it was first washed in running water for 24 hours. In northern climates the hair was loosened by soaking the skins in vats of lime and water for three to ten days whilst given an occasional stirring.

The wet skins were then draped over a 'beam' and the *grain* side scraped with a two handled, curved blade to remove the hair. The skin is then flipped over and any clinging flesh removed. Finally it is given another two days' soaking to remove traces of lime. The skin is now stretched on a frame. Smooth pebbles are pushed into the soft border, folding the skin to form knobs. Cord is then looped around the knob and tied to the nearest peg. The pegs are then turned to provide the necessary tension. Any accidents in the flaying will see holes appear

at this stage which can sometimes be seen in inexpensive parchment. The taut skin is now soaked with hot water and scraped with a curved blade with a central handle called a lunellum. The skin is then left to dry on the frame. Now a more careful scraping begins to remove the glassy shine. The peelings were often kept and boiled down for glue. It was often sold at this stage.

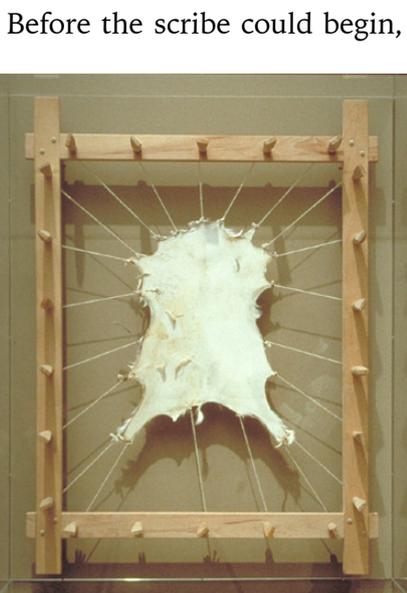


There is a 1298 account of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris for the purchase of 972 dozen skins at 3 sous each, plus 24 livres and 6 sous for scraping and 60 sous for the expert making the selection and 10 sous for the valuer. High quality parchment can last for over a thousand years and initially would have been soft, thin and velvety so it could fold easily. This in part was due to scraping away almost all of the outer skin. Funnily, parchment, unlike paper benefits from being handled to keep it supple. Poorer parchment tends to curl with the grain side innermost, making it more difficult for the scribe. Wild animal skins are given to blood marking unlike at the abattoir where animals are bled. In such cases the scribe will often write around the blemish.

There was a very expensive uterine vellum sold but there can't have been enough aborted calves to account for the demand. It could be that skins were split to provide the required thinness.

Papyrus was not satisfactory for books but paper (the name comes from papyrus) was used in medieval times for cheap books. The Duke of Burgundy's library was recorded in 1467 as housing 900 volumes with some 20% being of paper. Medieval paper was made from linen rags as indeed account books were in my youth. This was stronger and more durable than wood pulp. Rags were sorted and washed then allowed to ferment for four or five days. The resulting mess was cut up and beaten in clean running water. After a week it was beaten again and the pulp scooped into a vat. A wire frame is used to scoop out the fibres and lay them on a felt sheet. Another felt sheet is placed on top and subsequent sheets arranged in a sandwich which is placed in a press to remove water. The paper is then hung up to dry before being sized in animal glue to make it less absorbent and able to take ink. The Italians particularly would then polish the paper with a smooth stone.

By 1300, European manufacturers had begun twisting the wires so as to leave a *watermark* on the paper as their trademark. The big difference between paper and parchment is that paper's dimensions are not restricted by the size of the animal.



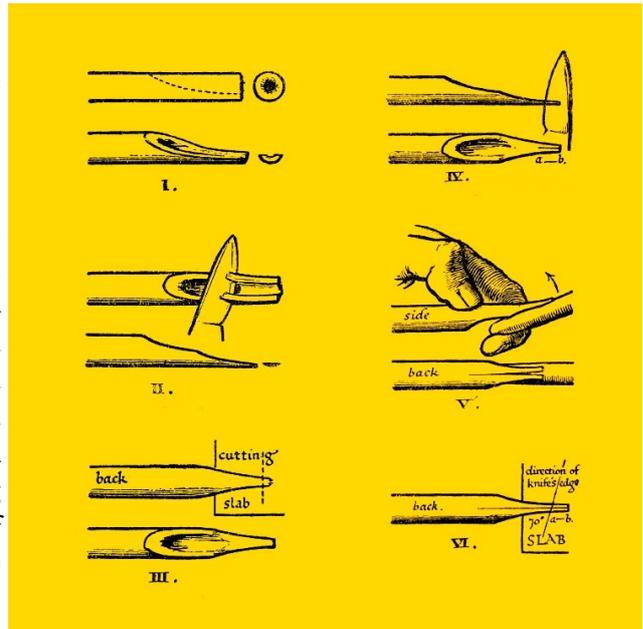
Before the scribe could begin, the parchment had to be ruled with lines. There are mentions in the Chapter Minutes of the employment of a Church *Pricker*. As books were no longer being written this must have been in order to produce the staves for music, but the principle is the same. Tiny holes would be punched at regular intervals down the left and right margin and lines marked between them in *drypoint* using a special stylus or possibly the back of a knife. Sometimes lead, graphite or even silver were used. There is a 9th century manuscript that lays out the mathematical rules for the layout but the gaps between the lines would have depended on the type of script being used. The idea of using columns probably evolved from writing on rolls. Many Gothic texts are in two columns but Magna Carta was written as a single column. Sticks of lead have been found, called plummets, that were used as rulers. Later, there are examples where holes have penetrated several sheets to cut down the labour.

Finally, before writing the parchment was often polished with pumice and smoothed off with chalk to remove grease stains.

THE WRITING EQUIPMENT

The next consideration is the pen which could be reed but was mainly a quill.

There are a number of birds whose feathers have been used for quills but the scribe's favourite came from the five outer wing pinions of a goose and for all right handed scribes it was the left wing that curved the correct way. Often the feathers needed to be hardened by soaking in water followed by plunging into hot sand for a few minutes. Most of the barbs would be shaved off with a *penknife* leaving just a few at the end farthest from the ink. The end was shaped and split up the middle. The nib was then cut on a firm surface with the blade of the knife removing the tiniest amount to give a squared tip. One of Thomas Becket's clerks would have 60 to 100 quills cut in advance before starting the day's work. Unlike today, scribes worked at a sloping desk so that the pen was at right-angles to the parchment. This could cause the ink to settle in the bottom of letters. The grip on the pen was with the pen pointing downwards on the inside of the middle and forefinger whilst steadying with the tip of the thumb. A knife was held in the left hand, often pressing on the parchment to prevent curling. The knife would also be used if a mistake was found straight away.



Medieval illustrations show the ink held in inkhorns, sometimes placed in holes in the desk. Two types of ink were involved, a carbon ink made from lamp-black mixed with gum and a metal-gall ink. This latter was the most usual for documents that were expected to last. The recipe comprises the dust inside an oak apple (wasp gall) which was rich in tannin and gallic acids, the finest specimens of which came from Aleppo. The galls were crushed in rainwater and warmed by the sun or a fire. Sometimes wine vinegar was used instead of rainwater. The second ingredient was *copperas*, a ferrous sulphate also known as green vitriol or sal martis which was found naturally in Spain by the evaporation of water from iron earths. Some ground up gum arabic was added - the dried sap of the acacia tree, imported from Asia Minor.



Most scribes used at least two colours, red being the second comprising *vermillion* - mercuric sulphide ground up with white of egg and gum arabic. Red was used for headings, initials, highlighted *rubrics* (hence the word) and *red-letter* days on calendars.

All this was expensive so materials were often recycled. The earliest English public advertisement (1340) was found by accident as it had been reused for padding out a binding.

MAGNA CARTA

Although there were exchanges between King John and his barons prior to 15th June 1215, Archbishop Langton and William Marshall (probably the two most sensible members of the 'cast') carried on secret negotiations. The result was the *Articles of the Barons* which, following Runnymede, Langton afterwards lodged in the archives of the archdiocese of Canterbury. The exact sequence of events is not clear but the chancery officials drafting Magna Carta may well have used an annotated (or even sealed) copy of the Articles to work from. The convention was that the date would be of the agreement rather than the that of the completion of Magna Carta.

Although Magna Carta satisfied many of the Baron's, it was not the same with the lesser landholders. They wanted the malpractices of the sheriffs curtailed and a reduction in the extent of the royal forests. The 1215 and 1217 charters went some way towards this but Henry III later denied or reversed such gains.

Clause 33 prohibiting fish-weirs stayed on the statute books until removed as part of the overall repeal of the 1297 charter by *Statute Law Revision Acts* between 1848 and 1948, and later by the *Statute Law (Repeals) Act* 1969. My understanding is that this (fish-weir) law was useful for barristers to use in a variety of situations.

In order to guarantee that the text to be issued by the king did not vary from that agreed with the barons, the king provided written security in the form of a copy of the agreement sealed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and Dublin, other bishops and the papal legate. Clause 62 stated that what became known as the *letters testimonial* was sealed before the copies of MC were sent out. The document has since been lost, all that remains is the copy in the *Red Book of the Exchequer*.

It is likely that recipients were charged for a copy of MC. A chancery writ of 19th June instructed sheriffs to read it out in public though I am not sure how this would have worked with it being written in Latin. The Salisbury MC was not written by a chancery scribe so was most likely crafted at Old Sarum and then presented for authorisation under the Great Seal. As the king's seal had two faces it had to have two matrices and two blocks of wax with the ribbon placed between them. This involved a heavy press like the Canterbury one shown right - and a *spigurnel* to operate it.



John of course had no intention of obeying the charter and asked the Pope to annul it which was the subject of a papal bull dated 24th August 1215, likely to have arrived in England at the end of September. John died on the night of 18th October 1216. As his son was only 9, William Marshall was appointed regent and lost no time in reissuing a revised MC on 12th November 1216, and a more considered version on 6th November 1217. This latter MC had the clauses concerning royal forests removed, amplified and issued as the *Charter of the Forest* (left, copy in the national Archives). It was at this point that the larger charter became known as Magna Carta, purely due to its size.



Henry III issued MC under his own seal in 1225 and in 1297 it was copied on to the first statute roll, incorporating MC into English law. A document was issued in 1253 at Westminster Hall stipulating excommunication as the punishment for breaking its terms. From 1265 it had to be read out twice a year in county courts and in 1297 this was extended to cathedrals.