ENGLISH MEDIEVAL LEATHERWORK

By JANET RUSSELL

As a stout, durable substance, leather was widely used during the Middle Ages for purposes to which it is not generally applied to-day: for instance in 1349 two calfskins were required to bury the body of the King of France,[1] and a charge is recorded in 1392 for mending twelve pieces of leather to lay on the ground of the French royal chamber.[2] The leather used for these purposes was probably plain, but a good deal of decorated leatherwork has survived in the shape of cases, belts and sheaths, in addition to bookbindings. This latter class of material has been dealt with by Mr. Hobson,[3] but at least until the beginning of the fourteenth century it appears to have been an unrelated and more specialised type of craft. In the early Middle Ages it was subject to the patronage and control of the Church, and was generally the product of monastic workshops. Later it declined in quality as it became a commercial proposition in the hands of secular craftsmen.[4] Most early medieval book-covers are decorated with a variety of repeated metal stamps, the design being completed by a few lines engraved with a blunt tool. On the whole the stamps used are more elaborate and finely cut than those employed on what may be called domestic leatherwork, and the general treatment is of little use for comparative purposes.

Four different decorative techniques may be distinguished on ordinary leatherwork.

(1) The use of metal stamps similar to the bookbinders', one of whose stamps can be seen at the British Museum, while another was picked up at Belvoir Priory.[5] In subject ordinary leather stamps seem to

[1] Gay, *Glossaire Archeologique*, p. 514.

[2] *ibid.*, p. 514.

[3] *English Binding before* 1500: *The Library* xix, 1938, p. 243; *The Library* xv.

[4] Hobson, *English Binding*, p. 15.

[5] *Antiquaries Journal* iv (1924), p. 272.

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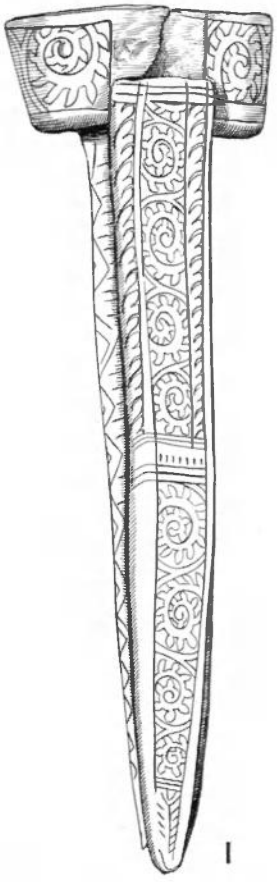
PLATE I.

1. FIFTEENTH-CENTURY SHEATH STAMPED WITH FLEUR-DE-LYS.
2. THIRTEENTH-CENTURY EMBOSSED SHEATH.

IN THE LONDON MUSEUM.



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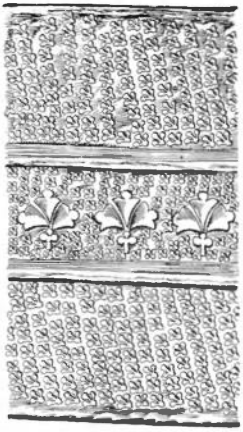

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FIFTEENTH-CENTURY LEATHERWORK IN THE LONDON MUSEUM. 1. RONDEL DAGGER SHEATH WITH INCISED COIL DECORATION. Scale $\frac{1}{2}$. 2. PART OF STAMPED AND INCISED FLEUR-DE-LYS DECORATION ON A BELT. Scale $\frac{1}{1}$. 3. MOULDED RELIEF DECORATION ON A CUIR-BOUILLI INKWELL. Scale $\frac{1}{1}$.

have been generally heraldic (Pl. I, No. 1), the fleur-de-lys, the eagle displayed and the lion rampant are most commonly found. Stamps covered with a diaper of small fleur-de-lys or millefleur were used for backgrounds at least from the fourteenth century onwards, and small single point punches were used for the same purpose.

(2) Embossed or relief designs, were either worked from the back, the softened leather being filled up to the required design (Pl. I, No. 2), or else it was moulded with flat and pointed instruments from the front (Pl. II, No. 3), as the twelfth-century Irish book satchels were treated.[1]

(3) Designs were also engraved with a blunt tool on leather which had probably been damped (Pl. III, No. 2), and a combination of this linear decoration with embossed and stamped designs is common.

(4) The use of a sharp knife or pointed tool to achieve a definitely incised design is a characteristically late medieval development, often used to outline lettering (Pl. III, No. 1).

The term *cuir bouilli* is frequently used in contemporary documents, the earliest allusion dates from 1185, 'sou poitrail lui laça qui fu de cuir bolis' (*Chanson d'Antioche*).[2] The term is misleading as the leather appears not to have been boiled but soaked in wax or oil, a process which rendered it supple and easy to work, though when dry it hardened, ensuring the permanence of the shape and decoration. Cases and wooden boxes covered with leather were treated in this way, but where it was desirable that the finished article should be pliable, this method was not employed.

Probably most leatherwork was originally painted and sometimes gilded, like the fifteenth-century coffer described by Brinkman,[3] which is still gaily coloured. Traces of a red background are described on an allegedly fourteenth-century box in the York Museum,[4] and similar remains of red are observable

[1] *Journal of the Royal Soc. of the Antiquaries of Ireland* v, 6th series, xlv, p. 300.

[2] Gay, *Glossaire Archeologique*, p. 515.

[3] Brinkman, *Führer durch des Hamburgische Museum fur künst u. Gewerbe* (1894), p. 116.

[4] *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* iii, p. 123.

on a late medieval sheath in the Guildhall Museum (1934–127). The mitre-case of William of Wykeham, now at New College, which is decorated with a close diaper of fleur-de-lys stamps, was evidently gilt.[1]

The craft organisation of the industry was simple in the early Middle Ages, when the cordwainer or worker in Cordovan leather made all sorts of leather articles. In the eleventh century the shoewright is recorded making bottles, bridle strings, trappings, flasks, wallets and pouches.[2] In 1272 all leather-workers were still included in the Cordwainers' Company, but the regulations preserved at the Guildhall make separate provision for tanners, curriers, cordwainers, cofferers and others, and prove that specialisation had begun. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries each process in the preparation of the leather and each finished article was the work of a different guild or fraternity. Skinners, curriers, leather-sellers, pursers, girdlers, cordwainers, saddlers and cobblers were some of the more prominent. But the pursers and leather-sellers issued joint regulations in 1372.[3] In 1476 the makers of leather bottles were so impoverished that they amalgamated with the tanners.[4] The makers of sheaths appear at one time to have had a distinct though unchartered society. Stowe says that before the reign of Henry VI the Cutlers were divided into three companies, the Bladers, the Haft-makers and the Sheathers, and in 1408 the cutlers complained that certain sheathers discredited the cutlers by supplying unworkmanlike goods.[5]

PRE-CONQUEST LEATHERWORK

The Stonyhurst Gospels are bound with the earliest known piece of post-invasion leatherwork, attributed to the seventh century: it combines an embossed design with interlacing engraved with a blunt tool.

Some interesting late Anglo-Saxon and Viking

[1] *Connoisseur*, Jan. 1905, p. 56.
[2] Mander, *Guild of Cordwainers*, p. 12.
[3] Hazlett, *The Livery Companies of the City of London*, p. 133.
[4] Baker, *Black Jacks and Leather Bottels*, p. 24.
[5] Stowe, *History of London*, vol. ii, p. 211.

1. INCISED SHEATH, FIFTEENTH CENTURY. LENGTH $9\frac{1}{2}$ in. 2. ENGRAVED SHEATH DECORATED WITH EMBOSSED BIRDS IN ACANTHUS SCROLLS, TWELFTH CENTURY. LENGTH 8 in. 3. PART OF A SWORD-SHEATH DECORATED WITH PUNCHED AND ENGRAVED FLEUR-DE-LYS, FOURTEENTH-FIFTEENTH CENTURY. LENGTH 13 in. IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

PART OF A SHEATH, BACK ENGRAVED WITH ANIMALS IN ACANTHUS ROUNDELS. IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

sheaths have also survived. The scabbard of a Viking scramasax, probably *c.* 1000 A.D., is now in the Guildhall Museum.[1] Like all the known pre-medieval sheaths, the leather is not sewn up the middle of the back but riveted up one side. The decoration, a knotted interlace on the front, and an engraved cruciform pattern on the back, has been effected by pressure with a blunt tool. A small fragment, also from the city, has been similarly treated, and a rough stamp employed perhaps to make the ring and dot pattern.[2] The disintegrated interlace on the front is very similar to that on a fragment from Hexham, now in the British Museum.[3] Both these pieces probably date from the tenth or eleventh centuries. A scramasax sheath similar to that in the Guildhall, found at Trondheim, is supposed to be of English origin.[4]

Some fragments of Anglo-Saxon leather sheaths of the same period are preserved in the York Museum. The design on one piece[5] is very similar to that on a sheath found at Lund, which is described at length by Blomquist.[6] Like the previous examples, it is for a scramasax, the leather being riveted together up one side, and decorated back and front. The decoration clearly indicates the handle and the blade, a habit almost universal then and in the subsequent medieval period. Apart from the whorls, similar to those on the Yorkshire sheath and the key pattern border, the decoration is elaborate and confused, characteristic of the distintegration of late Anglo-Saxon motifs.

The sheath of the scramasax now at Aachen, called 'Charlemagne's hunting knife,' is very probably of late Anglo-Saxon workmanship.[7] The riveted overlap is decorated with applied silver filigree once set with jewels, and in front the sheath is modelled into high relief, with acanthus sprays, and scrolls enclosing animals' heads, and the inscription 'Byrhtsige mec fecit.' This Anglo-Saxon craftsman of the tenth or eleventh centuries reached a very high technical

[1] *Antiquaries Journal* vii, p. 526.
[2] *Antiquaries Journal* xii, p. 177.
[3] *Guide to A.-S. Antiquities in the B.M.*, Fig. 129.
[4] Blomquist, Fig. 23.
[5] *V.C.H. York*, p. 107, Fig. 27.
[6] *ibid.* p. 151.
[7] Dreger, *Zeitschrift fur hist. Waffen-und Kostumkund*, Neue Folge Band i, Heft 4, 1924.

standard, and similar work must have commanded a ready market abroad, as English work continued to do, at least in the north, throughout the Middle Ages.

EARLY MEDIEVAL LEATHERWORK

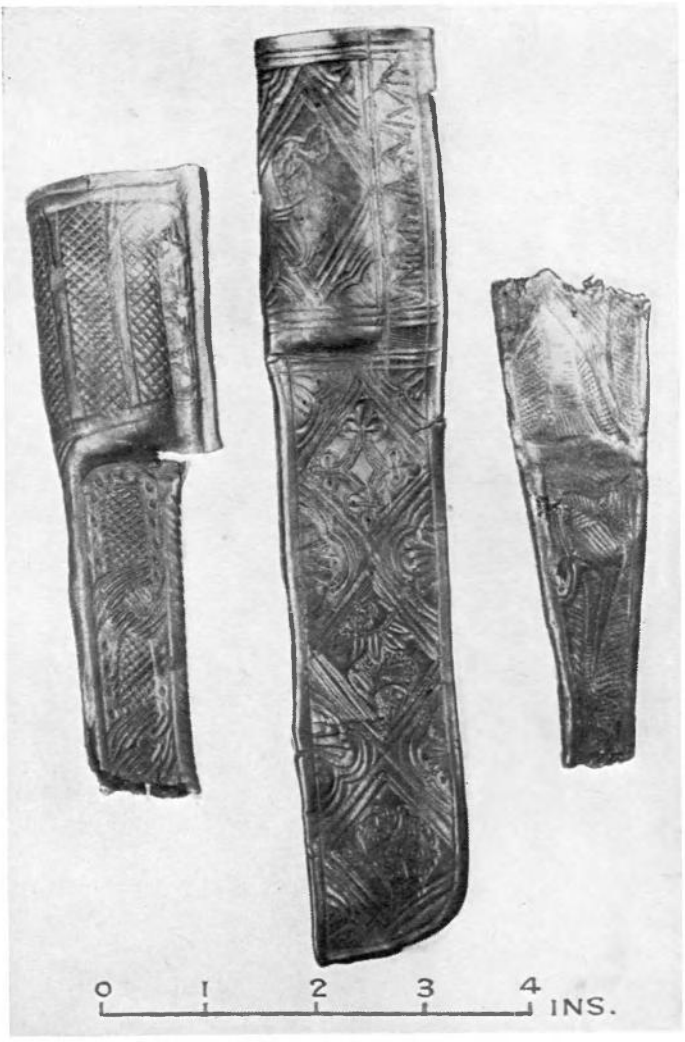
A fairly well-marked type of late twelfth-century leather sheath survives, the design being based on the acanthus scroll filled with some bird or animal and outlined with a blunt tool (Pl. III, No. 2). The back of the sheath is generally roughly decorated with spandrils. Examples may be seen at the London Museum, the British Museum and the Guildhall, and have been found at Coventry.[1] A probably slightly later type combines those features with heraldic shields, e.g. part of a fine sheath, now in the British Museum (Pl. IV), indicating a growing fashion for engraved armorial bearings. Specimens entirely decorated in this way probably date from the thirteenth century. It seems likely that the bearings were often those of the owner, but this assumption is difficult to verify.

The persistence of old design long after new styles have come into fashion is typical of the minor arts, and the filled scroll is not the only Anglo-Saxon motif to last into the Middle Ages. A sheath of supposed English workmanship found at Lund in an early fourteenth-century level[2] is decorated with an engraved interlace pattern. The sheath is designed for a wide, straight-backed knife, and a fold bored with two holes to receive a thong projects from the upper part where a panel in the design indicates the handle. It corresponds closely to a considerably larger sheath in the London Museum, and to two sheaths in the British Museum. In fact this would seem to be a distinctive thirteenth- to fourteenth-century type (Pl. V, No. 1).

The use of metal stamps and punches appears to have been generally confined to bookbinding before the fourteenth century, but some early embossed pieces have survived. The fragments of a thirteenth-century

[1] Chatwin, *Trans. and Proc. of Birmingham Arch. Soc.* lviii (1934), p. 61.

[2] Blomquist, p. 155.



1. FOURTEENTH-CENTURY SHEATH. IN THE LONDON MUSEUM. 2. FIFTEENTH CENTURY SHEATH WITH ENGRAVED AND PRICKED DESIGN. IN THE GUILDHALL MUSEUM. 3. SHEATH WITH TOOLED AND PRICKED ZOOMORPHIC DESIGN, THIRTEENTH-FOURTEENTH CENTURY. IN THE LONDON MUSEUM.

SUGGESTED PART OF A SADDLE. IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

sword sheath in the London Museum illustrates the method by which the relief is obtained by pressure from the back. The leather is very thin and was certainly stretched over a wooden frame. The embossed animals in high relief are outlined with a blunt tool and the borders drawn (Pl. I, No. 2). Late thirteenth-century sheaths survive with decorations in relief, obtained by moulding from the front, as on the Irish book satchels. But the type of Gothic zoomorphic design which is most characteristic of this technique belongs to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

LATE MEDIEVAL LEATHERWORK

The enclosed animal motif is still found in this period, but instead of the acanthus scroll, the bird or animal is generally enclosed in a lozenge-shaped frame with a trefoil at each corner. Sheaths decorated in this way are frequently found, an example has been found in a fourteenth-century level at Bergen,[1] a similar specimen is illustrated in Mr. Chatwin's article,[2] and a fifteenth-century sheath is preserved in the Guildhall (Pl. V, No. 2). Embossed zoomorphic designs become increasingly popular, strange birds and animals involved in foliage, similar to those found in Gothic sculpture, are worked in relief, sometimes with stamped or punched backgrounds (Pl. V, No. 3). A superb example with a fantastic animal whose tail breaks into foliage, crawling up the whole blades of the sheath, is now in the Guildhall. The embossed body of the animal is pricked and engraved. Another example of this type of relief moulded from the front is in the British Museum, and supposed to be part of a fifteenth-century saddle.[3] It is decorated with a raised design of vine leaf scrolls, enclosing birds and animals with semi-human faces. The background has been closely punched (Pl. VI). The front of a fine pouch, also in the British Museum, which has a knot in high relief

[1] Blomquist, ibid., p. 159.
[2] *Trans. and Procs. of Birmingham Arch. Soc.* lviii (1934), p. 60.
[3] Roach Smith, *London Museum Antiquities*, Pl. xi.

embossed from the back, running diagonally across it, is probably French.

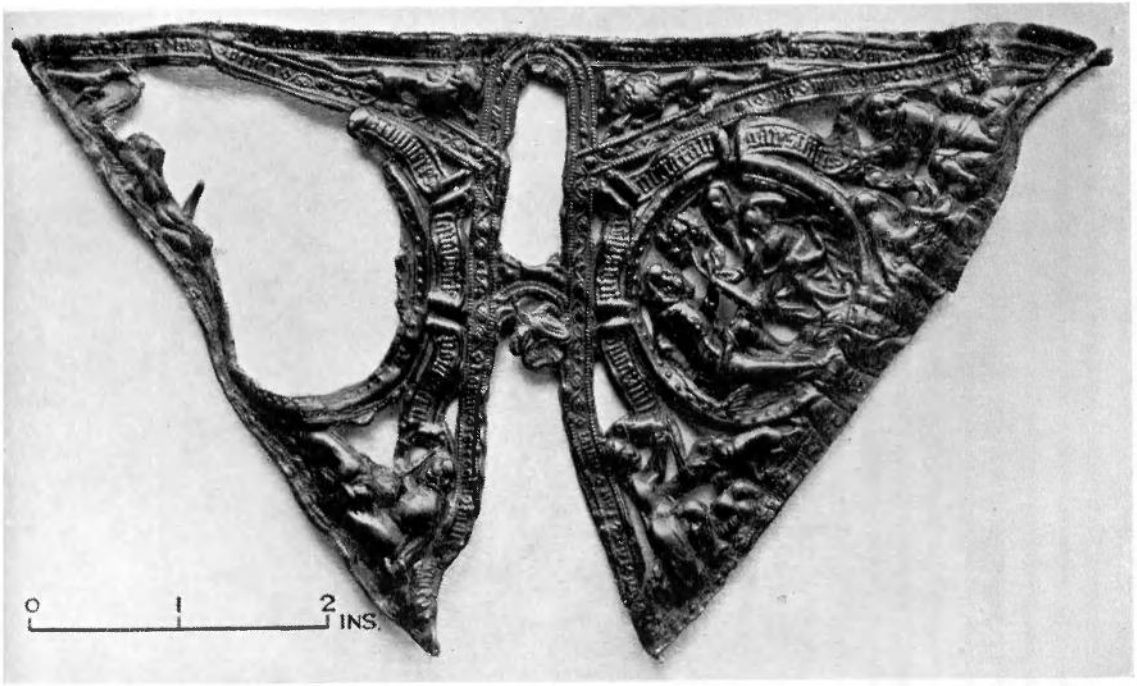
A small *cuir bouilli* inkhorn in the London Museum is a unique example of moulded relief on a small scale, consisting of a double row of tiny figures of the saints under arcading. It dates from about the year 1500 (Pl. II, No. 3). A triangular piece of leather (Pl. VII) in the British Museum, supposed in spite of its delicacy to be the toe of a shoe, illustrates probably the highest degree of craftsmanship attained during the late middle ages. The small figures are moulded in relief, and the background entirely cut away, except for scrolls bearing mottos. There is also a fragment in the Guildhall which appears to be part of a similar piece.

The use of repeated metal stamps is characteristic of late medieval leatherwork, and numerous sheaths from this period are decorated with small repeated fleur-de-lys stamps, often framed in an engraved lozenge-shaped border, the intervening angles being filled with a modified fleur-de-lys or three-feather motif. The lion passant and displayed eagle motifs were nearly equally popular, and a group of sheaths, including sword sheaths, treated in this way has been discovered at Lund, which Blomquist claims to be of English origin.[1]

Punched backgrounds were very popular from the fourteenth century onwards, and the granulated effect obtained in this way is the only decoration on a knife sheath in the London Museum. Frequently the leather was covered with a diaper of small fleur-de-lys or millefleur (Pl. II, No. 2). The fact that there are three very similar fragments of sword-sheaths in the London Museum and the British Museum, treated in this way, with a rib of plain leather up the middle outlined with a blunt tool and an engraved fleur-de-lys, indicates how stereotyped many of the designs employed must have been (Pl. III, No. 3). The decorated sheaths, presumed to be of native manufacture, found at Coventry, are also strikingly similar in design to those found in London.

In late leatherwork, the design is often obtained

[1] Blomquist, *id.*, p. 158.



TOE OF A SHOE. IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

by cutting the leather through for about half its thickness (cf. Pl. II No. 1). The sheath of a rondel dagger in the London Museum has been treated in this way—the design, although crude should be noticed, as it is not only frequently found on English leatherwork, e.g. the Welnetham casket in the British Museum, but also on French[1] and Flemish work[2] (Pl. II, No. 1). Incised foliage scrolls, vine or ivy, against a punched background were a popular late medieval form of decoration, cf. a fragment of a costrel in the London Museum.

But perhaps the most interesting series of decorated leather objects are the *cuir-bouilli* boxes, used for the transport and preservation of objects of value. Some of these were moulded to fit the object they were to contain, like the cases for a basin and ewer now preserved in the museum of the Public Record Office. These are stamped with a large diaper of fleur-de-lys, very similar to the mitre case of William of Wykeham[3] preserved at New College. All three probably date from the late fourteenth century, and appear to be the only published surviving examples, presuming the box made for the Luck of Edenhall in the V. and A. to be French.

But a series of cylindrical caskets, designed generally to hold plate, similar to the well-known Cawston Casket, has survived. A list of them has been published by Mr. Hobson[4] with references. They are ten in number, if the two in the Public Record Office, which are of quite a different type, are excluded. He has, however, omitted one mentioned in the *Proc. Soc. Ant.* ix, p. 325, from Cumberland, decorated with crude foliage and crowns, whose whereabouts may no longer be known. All these boxes have been subjected to the same type of decorative treatment as the Cawston casket and the Welnetham box. One, supposed to be in the Public Record Office,[5] but now untraceable, was decorated with what may be called the 'budded whorl' pattern, (Pl. II, No. 1) whose popularity has already received comment. They undoubtedly bear

[1] Leather box illustrated in Gay, *Dictionnaire Archeologique*, p. 682.
[2] Casket in the B.M.
[3] *Connoisseur*, Jan. 1905, p. 56.
[4] '*English Binding before* 1500,' p. 50.
[5] *Arch. Journ.* xxviii, p. 138.

out Mr. Hobson's contention that the generality of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century leatherwork in England did not reach the same standard as on the continent.

Two other leather boxes deserve mention. One is the hexagonal box bound with iron, belonging to the Gold Cup in the British Museum. The leather is stretched over wood and is so worn that traces of incised decoration remain only on the top in the form of scrolls, formal leaves and blank shields against a punched background. The inscription on the scrolls reads: 'YHE . SUS . O . MARYA . O . MARYA . YHE . SUS.' Though nothing is known of its history, this box is probably English, of the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. The other is a large trunk, also in the British Museum, covered with incised designs, including the figures of S. Peter and S. Paul, but this though of great interest and remarkably well preserved, is almost certainly of French workmanship.

Two boxes in the Record Office, which once contained indentures relating to Westminster Abbey, show the final development of medieval leather decoration. The lids of both are covered with a delicately incised decoration against a punched background. One, No. viiB in the Catalogue, has the lid covered with elaborate foliage and flower scrolls, with a Tudor rose and portcullis or rondels; the other, No. viiA, is engraved with the royal arms as well, and the scroll foliage is less elaborate. They were probably made in 1504, the date of the indentures which they hold, and while the workmanship is of a high standard, the treatment is no longer medieval in inspiration.

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