

## A MEDIEVAL POTTERY INKSTAND FROM BYLAND ABBEY (PL. XXXVI)

The inkstand illustrated in PL. XXXVI was found during clearance of the chapter-house at Byland abbey, near Helmsley, Yorkshire, by the Office (now Ministry) of Works in 1924. Byland abbey was founded by the Cistercians in 1177, and the chapter-house was built c. 1180-1200; the abbey was suppressed in 1539.<sup>39</sup> The extreme limits for the date of the inkstand are thus between the early 13th century and the early 16th century. The quality of the dark green glaze covering it, however, points to a date in the latter part of this period, in the 14th or 15th century. For this reason the inkstand may be identified as that in use in the chapter-house during the years preceding the suppression.

The inkstand was found in three pieces which have been joined, and the missing corner restored in plaster. It is made of light red ware, entirely covered by thick, dark green glaze on the top and sides, and is 7 in. square and 2½ in. high. Sunk below the top surface are three sets of holes, which differ in number, size and shape. Inside the raised margin on all four sides are fifteen vertical holes, each about ¼ in. across and 1½ to 2 in. deep. Within this series of holes in adjacent corners are two large conical holes, each 1½ in. across at the mouth and 2 in. deep. At the centre is the largest hole, which is basin-shaped, 2¼ in. across and 1¾ in. deep.

The top of the inkstand is decorated with small impressed stamps, apparently made by the end of a piece of metal bent into an open tube. The stamps encircle the margins of the three large holes, and from the central hole lines of stamps pass radially to the corners and to the middle of the sides, to meet stamps in a square immediately within the raised margin of the top. Two lines of the same stamp are also on three of the vertical sides of the inkstand, the fourth side being plain.

The character of the three sets of holes can be explained by the different purposes which they served. The fifteen small holes were to hold the pens, the two conical holes were for the ink, and the large central hole was either for water to clean the pens after use or for sand (pounce) used for drying ink before the invention of blotting-paper.

The size of the marginal holes shows that quill pens were used. Goose quills are the most suitable, and experiment shows that these stand upright when placed in the holes of the Byland abbey inkstand. In medieval times the practice varied as to how the quill was treated for use as a pen, after the end had been sliced to form the nib. Usually the shaft of the quill was stripped of its filaments for easy handling, and quills so treated are shown in many illustrations of medieval scribes at work. Reference may be made to illuminated manuscripts of the 12th and 13th centuries,<sup>40</sup> and others of later date, such as the drawings of Jean Mielot, secretary to Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy (1456)<sup>41</sup> and Casper Neff (1549).<sup>42</sup> Sometimes, however, the filaments were left in position along one side of the quill, as depicted in use by John Rous in compiling the Warwick Roll (1477-85) in the College of Arms.<sup>43</sup>

The inkstand is exhibited in the site-museum at Byland abbey.

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## THE ISLE OF MAN CONFERENCE, 1961

The fourth Annual Conference of the Society was held in the Isle of Man from 14 to 17 April, 1961. The theme of the Conference was 'Celt and Viking in the Isle of Man'. In the evening of the first day the members of the Conference were given an official reception by the Trustees of the Manx Museum and were welcomed by His

<sup>39</sup> Ministry of Works Guide, *Byland Abbey, Yorkshire* (1960 ed.), pp. 3-4 and 8.

<sup>40</sup> D. Hartley and M. Elliot, *Life and Work of the People of England, 11th-13th Centuries* (1931), pl. 35, a, d and pl. 36, b, c; T. S. R. Boase, *English Art 1100-1216* (1953), pl. 52, a and pl. 53, a, b.

<sup>41</sup> E. Johnston, *Writing and Illuminating and Lettering* (1927).

<sup>42</sup> Aubrey West, *Written by hand* (1951), p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> G. M. Trevelyan, *Illustrated English Social History*, 1 (1950), pl. facing p. 33.