

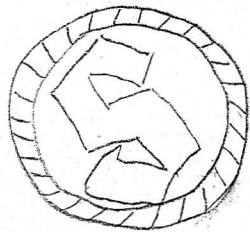
## Leather Stamping Designs from the London Finds

THL Anna z Pernstejna

The inspiration for this class came from the book Dress Accessories by Geoff Egan & Frances Pritchard. (ISBN 0851158390) The book is the third in the series *Medieval Finds from Excavations in London*. The series documents finds from the rubbish in-fill of an area of the Thames riverfront in London, covering the period from 1150 to 1450. The conditions at the site allowed for unusually good preservation of organic materials. Leather is notorious for not surviving the ravages of time, and gifts such as this that nature and circumstances have provided us are always appreciated.

The book contains a wide array of buckles, strap ends and metal decorations. Fortunately for the leatherworker, some of the original leather is still attached. The book gives a wonderful assortment of photos and detailed descriptions of the pieces. The timeframe for manufacture of the items described in this class are listed as post 1350. As the author was not American and was somewhat uninformed of leatherworking techniques (at one point he notes that leather can be softened by soaking in hot water), I will be interpreting the works from my observations using modern common leatherworking terminology.

The first piece we will look at is a basic repetitive stamp. It consists of an S surrounded by a rope edge. The stamp is  $5/16$ " wide, and is repeated every  $1/16$ " inch. The strap itself is  $3/4$ " wide. The stamped area runs the length of the strap and is bordered by two carved lines. The author mentions that the S pattern was commonly used to denote allegiance to the Lancastrian cause.

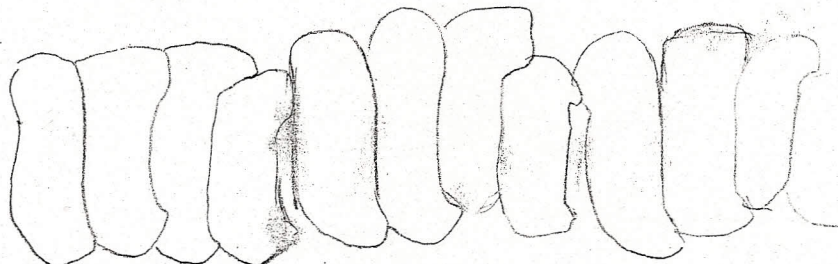


Strap 15, pg 40, figure 22

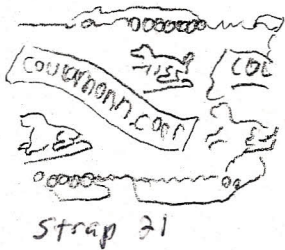
The next piece is a repetitive word stamp. The word IHR (an abbreviation for the name Jesus) is repeated continuously over the length of the strap. The stamp is  $3/8$ " long, the strap  $3/4$ " wide. The stamp marks are touching each other, giving the strap the look of a continuous, almost random pattern, yet one can tell upon close inspection that there is more to the meaning of the design.



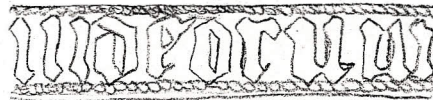
Strap 16, pg 41  
figure 23



Single letters and repeating words are not the only alphabet stamps we see. Three other straps contain words. One is a phrase on a banner, repeated in a constant pattern, probably a single stamp. The other two are individual letters making up words.



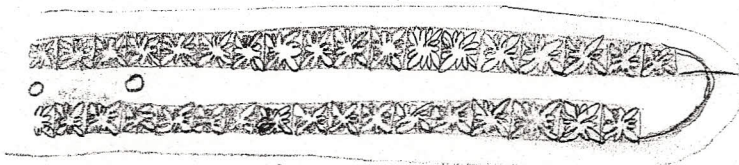
Strap 21



Strap 22

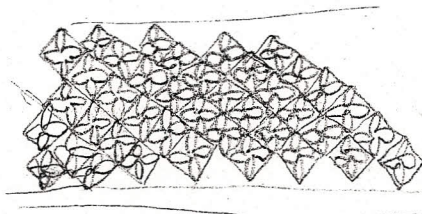
pg 46  
figure 28

There are a series of geometric stamps. The first is a floral design inside a square border. The stamp is  $\frac{3}{8}$ " square. There are two rows of repeating stamps, with a  $\frac{3}{8}$ " space between the rows.



Strap 17 pg 42 figure 24

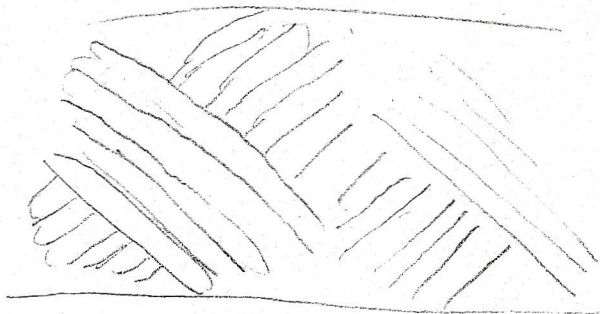
Next we find another floral design in a square stamp. This time the stamp is repeated in a diagonal manner. Each row has between 6 and 8 stamps, and is lined up with the stamp in the adjoining rows. The pattern is bordered by lines that are either carved or impressed. The strap is  $1 \frac{1}{16}$ " wide. The stamp appears to be a single stamp, only  $\frac{1}{8}$ " square.



Strap 594  
pg 178 figure 84

I am now convinced that nothing in fashion or design is new in our world. In leatherwork, one of the things that always screamed "modern" to me was basket weave stamping. From the book we see there are two examples of medieval basket weaving!

The first is a stamp with a diagonal weave design. It was run in a lengthwise manner along a strap  $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide. The stamp is  $\frac{5}{16}$ " tall and  $\frac{3}{8}$ " long.



Strap 18  
pg 43 figure 25

The second example uses a stamp with a 4 part pattern of lines. The lines are in quadrants and each quadrant alternates running horizontal and vertical. The pattern is stamped in two adjoining rows. This gives the appearance of a weave of a single alternating pattern of 4 wide. The same tool is used on another strap, this time 5 rows wide, appearing like 10 single rows in width.



close-up pg 45

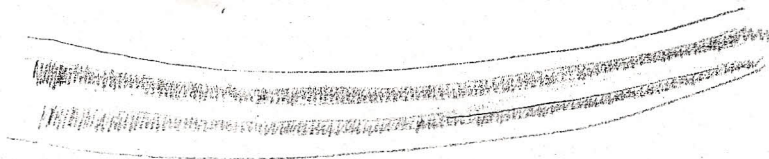


strap 19 pg 43  
figure 26



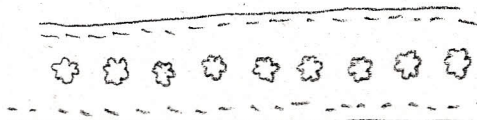
strap 20  
pg 45 figure 27  
(also showed evidence of mounts)

The simplest stamping design is from a strap that is 7/16" wide. It has two rows of grooving marked in it. A similar mark could be made with a modern pear shader or modeling spoon with a ball end.



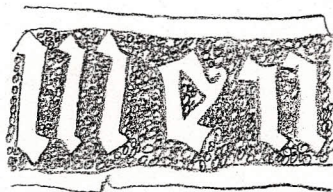
strap 24  
pg 46 figure 28

There was even an example of filigree work. One strap 1 1/4" wide consisted of repeated floral shaped holes from a punch 5/16" wide. This strap had a backing sewn on it.



strap 25 pg 47 figure 29

Besides the alphabet stamping, there were two other instances of multiple stamp use on one strap. One of the word stamped straps referred to earlier had the area around the words backgrounded with a seeding tool. The strap had an unmarked border.



strap 23  
pg 46 figure 28

The other instance was the previously described word-on-a-banner tool alternating with a laying dog.



Strap 21 pg 46 figure 28

"I am mann coer"  
(all my heart)

For the adventurous, one can make your own stamps to mimic the medieval finds. If you don't mind using modern tools, you can make a small stamp from a large flat headed bolt. First grind the top flat, then use a dremel with a fine bit to make the pattern. Used drill bits with diamond heads can be gotten for free from your dentist (they usually sterilize them first.)

Wooden stamps can be carved with a knife or a drill. Use a fine grained hardwood such as maple. If you will be using the stamp a lot, you might want to try coating it with a marine varnish to protect the wood from the moisture in the leather.