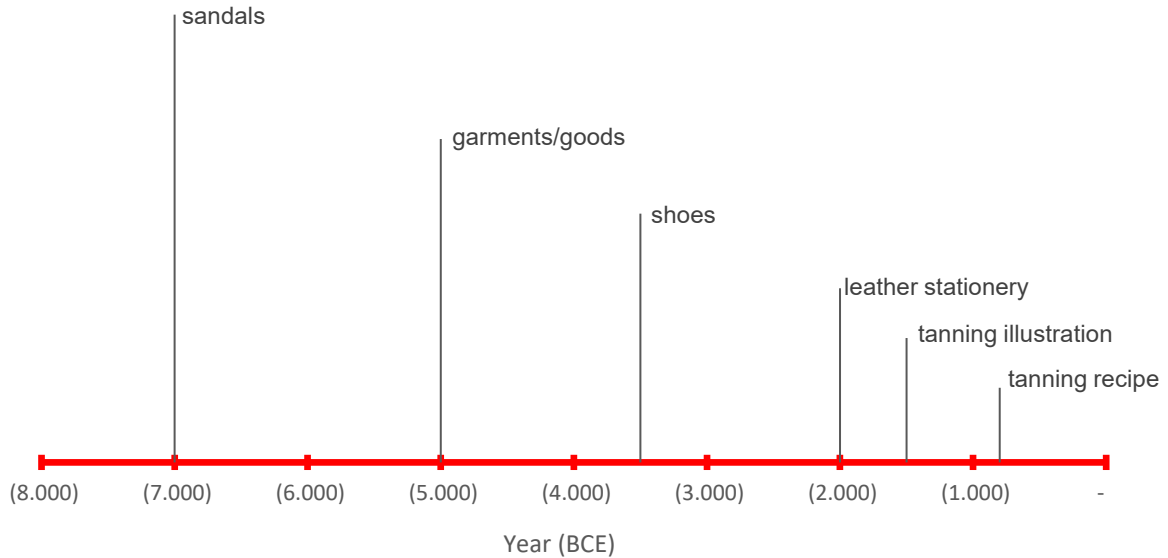




VEGETABLE TANNING; PART 2. HISTORY.¹

Leather, and vegetable tanning in particular, has been closely linked with human development over thousands of years. Remains of footwear and garments dating back 9,000 years and 7,000 years respectively, have been discovered in various parts of the world.



Evidence of leather and leather products (based on Redwood)².

Apart from providing protection and comfort, leather products also facilitated the development of agriculture and transport; by way of harnesses and saddlery for horses (for example). Such was the demand for leather products of various sorts in England, that tanning and leather-related trades were among the biggest sources of employment (after agriculture, textiles, and construction); accounting for 11 to 17% of all workers in some urban areas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Clarkson, 1966). Throughout the EU today, only 0.2% of the labour force is engaged in leather-related work.

Examples of leather products.

Category	Example	Category	Example	
Binding	Books	Goods	Bag	
	Boxes, etc.		Ball (cricket, football, etc.)	
Footwear	Boots		Belts and straps	
	Sandals		Cup	
	Shoes		Gloves	
	Slippers		Hat	
	Socks		Key fob	
Furniture (Upholstery)	Chair		Purse	
	Pouf		Sheath (knife)	
	Sofa		Strop	
	Stool		Wallet	
	Table (top, inlay)		Water bottle (skin)	
Garments	Apron		Horse tack	Bridles
	Coat/waistcoat			Halter
	Jacket			Reins
	Shirt	Saddle		
	Shorts/trousers	Stirrups		

¹ 'Vegetable Tanning; Part 2. History' is the second of a series of brief articles describing some basic aspects of vegetable tanning; and was preceded by 'Part 1. Introduction'. Follow-up articles will concentrate on the science, technology, and current developments related to vegetable tanning. More detailed information on all topics (including theory and practice) will be provided during inputs to training planned for later in 2022.

² Timeline for the leather industry (mikeredwood.com).



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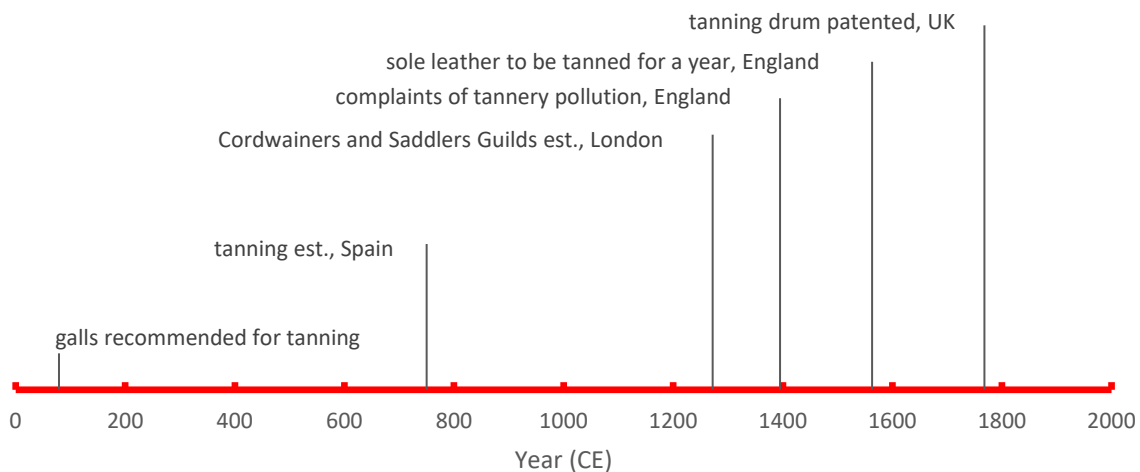
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Armour	Skirt	Souvenirs	Whips
	Gauntlets, jerkin, etc.		Miscellaneous

Throughout the medieval period (fifth to fifteenth centuries) in Europe, vegetable tanned leather was an essential raw material for the manufacture of innumerable essential personal, household and work-related products. In England, powerful trade associations were established and controlled particular activities; including, for example:

- 1272, Worshipful Company of Curriers (tanning),
- 1272, Worshipful Company of Cordwainers (footwear manufacture)
- 1327, Worshipful Company of Girdlers (belt manufacture)
- 1327, Worshipful Company of Skinners (hides and skins trade),
- 1349, Worshipful Company of Glovers (glove making)³
- 1444, Worshipful Company of Leathersellers (leather trade)

Later, developments in the demand for raw materials for the fur trade, prompted establishment of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1670. It went on to control much of what is now Canada, and was inextricably linked to the colonization of North America.



Developments in tanning (based on Redwood).

The Industrial Revolution (1760 to 1840) proved a blessing and blight for vegetable tanning. For example, the cotton gin invented in 1794 incorporated rollers constructed (in part at least) of vegetable tanned leathers. Similarly, like many other machines, the belt drive supplying power from the (steam) engine to the cotton gin was made of leather. And leather fan belts were still being used on cars after the First World War (1914 to 1918). However, in the nineteenth century, new materials (rubber, plastics, mineral tanned leather, etc.) and methods (extrusion, synthetic adhesives, machine stitching, etc.) started to offer improvements in performance and production that provided goods that were superior to those made previously from vegetable leather.

Today, the demand for many types of traditional products (from any sort of leather) has decreased or disappeared. For example, as horses have been replaced by motor vehicles, the need for tack has dropped considerably. Similarly, developments in fashion and (safety) performance requirements, have changed the demand for footwear; with an increasing proportion of shoes now made from other, non-leather materials. Conversely, the appeal of some types of leather products has escalated to luxury status; such as in automotive upholstery, designer handbags costing tens of thousands of dollars, etc.

³ Historically, most gloves were made by 'tawing' (using mineral salt/s; not tannins) so the product was not really 'leather' (i.e. not resistant to water).



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Sustainable Yak Leather

And interestingly, many of the materials now used to complete with and/or replace leather (*'leatherette'*, Corfam®, Texon, etc.) still try to mimic many of the obvious features of leather; such a grain pattern, texture, etc.). The copying is so good that many consumers are now unable to tell the difference between the leather and the non-leather products. Inevitably perhaps, this has led to counterfeiting of leather products, to such an extent that among the world trade in 2019, 3.3% was estimated to involve fake goods; led by footwear, clothing, leather goods⁴.

Vegetable tanned leather products of various sorts have been prevalent in the home, at work and in warfare for thousands of years. More recently, alternative materials have been adopted for the construction of many such products. But with others, modern vegetable tanned versions remain, and have been elevated to the status of desirable, luxuries; with prices to match. In short, the very long history of vegetable tanned leather has not ended. On the contrary, the *'organic'*, *'vegetable'*, and *'natural'* credentials of tanning with plant-based materials, make it an increasingly attractive alternative to mainstream mineral tanning.

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Clarkson, L.A., The leather crafts in Tudor and Stuart England. The Agricultural History Review. Vol. 14, No. 1 (1966), pp. 25-39 (15 pages)

⁴ <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/trade-in-fake-goods-is-now-33-of-world-trade-and-rising.htm>