

Calf Love

A law has recently been scrapped by the House of Lords which came as something of a surprise. From this coming April it will no longer be obligatory to print all legislation on vellum, made from calf skin. This will save, it is claimed, some £80 000 per year. Who knew that for over a thousand years all legislation had been printed in this traditional way? From now on archive paper will be used instead. An improvement? Hardly. Archive paper has a life span of about 500 years, whereas vellum can last up to 5000 years. Some of our most important documents have survived because of this tradition. They include Doomesday Book, Magna Carta and many religious psalters.

I had been made aware of the durability of vellum when preparing a talk on the medieval Luttrell Psalter. This dates from the first half of the 14th century and in spite of the passage of time the handwritten text and the hundreds of coloured images which adorn the psalter remain as sharp and as vivid as when first created. It is now in the care of the British Library and a complete digital copy can be downloaded for less than £10. Other similar documents survive, - the Lindisfarne Gospels and the personal psalter of Henry VIII, complete with notes on it in his own hand. We have these still thanks to calf skin and the parchment created from it.

The new deal seems to me to be a pretty poor bargain. The lifespan of an historical document reduced by 4500 years to save £80 000. It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that a member of the House of Lords can receive £300 per day expenses just for turning up. There are 819 members of the House. If they all turn up on one day that is almost a quarter of a million pound in expenses. In 2013/14 the total expenses claimed by the Lords came to £21.4 million pound. Scope for a bit of scrapping here too, perhaps?

Footnote

Since the above was first written a few days ago, the Government has now stepped in following widespread protests at the decision by the Lords. The Cabinet Office will now fund the continuing preservation of important documents on vellum. The Middle Ages remain alive and well.