

How parchment is made – Domesday – BBC Two

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-SpLPFaRd0>

Dr. Stephen Baxter interviews Wim Visscher

[Music]

Dr. Baxter: I've come to Buckinghamshire to meet Wim Visscher, one of the few people who still makes parchment in the traditional way.

[Music]

W. Visscher: Right, this is where it all starts. Now, you may need to hold your nose, these are natural animal skins, they are raw skins, you know, they do smell.

Dr. Baxter: Yes, it's quite a strong smell, isn't it?

W. Visscher: Yeah. So, there we are. There's a calfskin, preserved in salt, and that'll keep for up to six months like that. And we've been very, very careful in selecting these. We have to literally select every single skin to make them good enough for parchment. The big problem with parchment, compared to leather, is that there's no dye, no printing, so you see the actual skin when it's finished, and you write on it. And so, any blemishes also show up.

Dr. Baxter: So, what's the next stage of the process?

W. Visscher: Well, we've got to start cleaning the skins up, getting rid of the salt, and I've got some pretty primitive washing machines here to show you.

[Sound of machine and water]

W. Visscher: I'll just turn it off. I'll show you what's going on in here. There we are. These skins are soaked in lime, and the lime works into the skin and loosens the roots of the hair. See how it starts to become loose?

Dr. Baxter: Oh, right, yeah.

W. Visscher: And that's entirely due to the lime acting through the skin.

Dr. Baxter: Yeah, comes away really easily, doesn't it?

W. Visscher: Yeah, and so this skin's been in here for, oh, quite a few days.

Dr. Baxter: It feels very smooth on the skin.

W. Visscher: Yeah. So, you're left there with the skin surface completely undamaged, which will be the surface of the parchment. So, the next stage is to remove all that hair. There we are. The way this works, you trap the skin there with your body, and, off you go.

Dr. Baxter: So, we take it from here for a further stage of cleaning?

W. Visscher: Yeah, the other side hasn't been touched yet. That was the side where the meat was.

Dr. Baxter: Oh, yeah. So, this is fat and skin. That's going to be really difficult to get away, it's completely unlike the hair, isn't it?

W. Visscher: It's really tough.

Dr. Baxter: How do you actually get this side off, then?

W. Visscher: Uh, knives. Scraping.

Lee's working on this at the minute, and the main idea is that the skin has to be stretched in a frame, so that, as you can see, you can start to clean it and scrape it. And it's the essence of parchment making: basic, very simple stuff, but you've got to really get at all that muck off there, all the flesh, all the dirt to make a perfect surface.

Dr. Baxter: Hmm. Looks a very laborious and skillful process.

W. Visscher: It is, but it's quite simple. You want to have a go?

Dr. Baxter: I'd love to, yeah.

Lee: It's like a punching motion. See? You're punching at the flesh, so you're trying to raise the flesh up.

Dr. Baxter: Yeah, brilliant. Okay. I'm not going to sort of cut through here, am I?

Lee: No, no, no, this will take quite a lot of work.

Dr. Baxter: Right, okay. Right, so I punch into it.

Lee: That's it, you want slightly shorter movements, shorter.
Yep, that's it.

W. Visscher: So, finally, it's the drying stage. Here they all dry. We have heat in here to dry them, and they'll be in here for like half a day, something like that. It depends again, summer or winter, it changes a bit, and when they're just right, we'll cut them out.

Dr. Baxter: How long has it taken to get to this stage?

W. Visscher: About four weeks.

Just show Stephen. There you go. We have to watch we don't crease it. That's quite a nice large skin that, but that, it needs a bit of sanding doing to it. That's about all, apart from that. That's the finished parchment, and you see the other side is, is as clean as the the side that we were looking at.

Dr. Baxter: It's really nice to hold it in hands.

W. Visscher: Yeah.

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