

# A History of Leather Tanning

It's unlikely we'd be where we are today without leather. Since prehistoric times, leather has been an essential tool in almost every aspect of life. Leather can be made into a light and fabric-like vellum or a hard book cover. It can form soft, delicate gloves as well as impenetrable armour. Leather belts and straps have been incorporated into everything from human attire, to luggage cases, to saddlery, to machinery.

This incredibly versatile resource has helped men and women to travel great distances on foot and then harness horses. In the past, it has also allowed us to bottle water, protect our bodies and homes from the elements, communicate, and even conduct business. Whether used for playing sport or playing musical instruments, animal hides or skins have played a key role in our cultural rituals.

## **From the Discovery of Leather to the Birth of Tanning**

In the Paleolithic period, around 40,000 years ago, people started making moccasin-like wraparound footwear out of softened animal skins, or rawhide. This seemingly simple advancement gave humankind a major leg up in long-distance travel and marked the beginning of leather-making.

When formerly nomadic tribes established agricultural settlements, animal husbandry provided a steady and easily accessible source of food and rawhide. This allowed our ancient ancestors to develop a process that made hides more durable and less susceptible to decomposition. This process evolved into the craft known as tanning.

Between 12,000 and 6,000 years ago, tanneries began cropping up in towns in Sumeria, Mehrgarh, and other ancient cultures.

## **The Toughest Job in Antiquity?**

The work of an ancient tanner was unglamorous to say the least. It started with an arduous preparatory stage that could take several weeks. First, the animals skins were cleaned and softened with water. Once cleaned, the tanners still had to pound the hides to remove excess fat and flesh. Next, to loosen the hair follicles, they would either coat the hides with an alkaline lime mixture, leave the hides out to putrefy for months, or soak them in vats of urine before removal with a dull knife (scudding). In the bating stage, tanners worked animal dung or brains into the skins either by beating with sticks or kneading them in a vat of feces and water. The combination of bacteria enzymes found in animal waste and the beating or kneading action fermented the skin and made it supple.

Understandably, ancient tanneries were always found on the outskirts of towns.

With the malodorous preparatory work complete, the hides were ready for tanning. From ancient times and through the 18th century, tanners used a chemical compound called tannin, derived from tree bark and certain plant leaves. Hides were stretched out on frames and immersed in vats concentrated amounts of tannin. Tannins bind to the collagen proteins in the hide and coat them, causing them to become less water-soluble, more bacteria-resistant, and more flexible.

### **Honing the Craft**

Leather craft was further developed in the Medieval period to produce the newly-invented turnshoes and welt shoes. New classifications of leather such as suede and nubuck also emerged during this time, pushing the boundaries of what leather could achieve.

Artifacts from Medieval Europe include leather chairs, bottles, buckets, ink wells, shoes, belts, sheaths, satchels, bridles, and coins - many intricately embossed with abstract patterns and imagery.

### **The Industrial Revolution and Beyond**

The Industrial Revolution brought new advancements in technology and chemistry, which helped increase efficiency and diversify the leather-making process. Patent leather, known for its glossy, varnished surface, was invented in 1819. Chromium tanning, which involves one of the most efficient tanning agents, was developed during the 1850s and could replace vegetable tanning. Synthetic leather was developed after World War II, and became a cost-effective, ethical alternative to genuine leather.

The ancient craft of vegetable tanning is still practiced today, with some improvements that have made the process hygienic and efficient. At the same time, many leather manufacturers are seeking to deepen their environmental commitment. Reducing and diverting waste being a major priority, major purveyors of leather, like Blackstock, have developed magnetic adhesion tiling systems to promote reusability of their wall and floor leather tiles.

To learn more about how leather is used today, visit [www.blackstockleather.com](http://www.blackstockleather.com).