**Reading and writing between the Conquest and the Reformation**

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There a number of commonly held beliefs about the extent of literacy in the medieval world; who could read and write, how much schooling there was and the extent of reading required by the common person. Over the next 20 minutes or so I will attempt to throw some light on these assumptions and possibly change your view on some of these stereotypes.

This exploration will take us back to an unfamiliar world where reading and writing were public events achieved by teams of artisans working together. We will also look at what was taught and how much schooling an ordinary child might have received and what levels of literacy might have existed within the ranks of the rural and urban poor.

**Linguistic culture**

For much of this period, England was not the mono-linguistic country we now take for granted. For over 200 years after the Conquest England was a multilingual culture. English was the dominant spoken language of the peasantry, but was supplanted by Anglo French – or French as I shall term it - in other social groups. Since French was the language of court, this was the language which carried social cache and was the language of choice. Latin, however, was the language of the Church and which all people heard during worship. Latin was the predominant language of writing for the early period, and remained dominant in the Church until the reformation, and for record keeping until the fourteenth century.

Successive wars saw the English landholdings in France diminish, and this led to the elites feeling less ‘French’ and more ‘English’. From the end of the twelfth century French began to decline and English slowly became the common language of the English, leaving French solely as the language of literature and of the Royal Court. This emerging English, however, was very regional with different dialects often unintelligible to strangers.

Nonetheless, an educated trader in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries would certainly have been well versed in French as well as English, would have a smattering of Latin picked up from Church, and would be able to converse to an extent in many European languages, particularly the Germanic dialects of the low countries and the German trading centres, and perhaps some Italian as well. English was just one of a range of useful languages for those with international contacts.

**Litteratus, and the illiterate literate**

Put simply, to be literatus meant to have a **knowledge** of Latin. This did not necessarily include the ability to read Latin or write Latin. Given that Latin was largely the preserve of the clergy, being literatus became synonymous with being a cleric, with the obviously synonym being that the laity were not literatus. An educated layman who could read and write French or English but who did not understand Latin was not a literatus while poorly educated clerics who had memorised large amounts of biblical Latin were literatus.

Writing was a craft in its own right, and understanding what was being written was not a necessity. A writer, or perhaps more correctly an author, was often a dictator, as in giving dictation to scribe(s) who did the writing. Margery Kempe is a good example of an illiterate literatus. The Book of Margery Kempe was written in the vernacular in the early fifteenth century, and is a mystical work of personal devotion written by its eponymous author. In the book Margery tells us that she is unlettered. Not only does she need to find someone to write her story down, we learn that her encyclopaedic knowledge of biblical texts is all memorised. Unfortunately for Margery, her first ‘writer’ hailed from Germany and was not a native English speaker. After his death, she showed her work to a priest who declared that ‘the book was so evil written that he could little skill thereon, for it was neither good English nor Deutsch, not were the letters shaped or formed as other letter were.’ Margery was writing in a primarily oral culture, and the book was probably understandable when read aloud by the scribe. But to an educated scribe, it was not understandable and the labour had to start again with another scribe.

As a mystical woman Margery was something of a liminal character, but more powerful authors could call upon much greater resources in terms of professional assistance. Thomas Aquinas, writing a hundred years before Margery was very much a literatus. Early in his career Thomas was accustomed to write a rough shorthand of his texts which he then read out loud to professional scribes. Several of these ‘autograph texts’ survive. But none survive from this later period perhaps because he had trained his memory sufficiently not to need his own notes.

Even for the most literatus of people, the importance of the oral culture and ability to memorise remained important. Gerald of Wales recounts a meeting with Innocent III in 1200 where he presented the pope with a document to read, he handed it to another Cardinal to read aloud. An early comment mentions the pope scouring registers for a reference to Gerald’s own bishopric of St Davids, so we know the pope could read comfortably, but in this case he preferred to have the text read aloud.

This was not at all unusual. While perhaps over much has been made of the medieval tendency to read text aloud, it remains the case that this was the general way of consuming the written word. The Nun of Barking in her French translation of Ailred’s *Life of Edward the Confessor* asks that “all who hear, or will ever hear, this romance of hers’ not despise it because the translation is done by a woman.” Again in the *Estoirede Waldef* the author writes “If anyone wants to know this history let him read the Brut, he will hear it there.” The author of *Romance of Horn* begins “Lords, you have heard the lines of parchment”, clearly seeing the words as aural despite their written form. All three ‘writers’ clearly expect their audience to hear rather than read their text

The above three examples are of vernacular text, but reading in monastic settings was customarily oral. Readings, most usually conducted during meal times, were designed to allow the monks to ruminate and consider divine wisdom. That such readings may not necessarily have been suitable is suggested by Alcuin, who told to the Bishop of Lindisfarne in 797 that he should not allow the reading of aloud of the poems of the heathen to his clergy, but instead promote the reading of the word of God and the fathers.

Despite this tendency to read aloud and listen to books, letters and documents, some people did read to themselves. It may be, however that this was not ‘silent’ reading. It is thought that even experienced readers were slow and ‘muttered’ the words as they read them This led to designs of libraries and cloisters where monks could have semi-secluded cells for their reading so as to minimise the disruption for others. This may have been because for most readers, reading was an auditory rather than a visual experience and words had to be heard to be fully recognised.

The 13th century saw the beginnings of university education in the West. Thousands of students descended on the great university towns, such as Paris and Bologna to learn through the systems of disputation and scholastic method and created a huge demand for books in French, rather than Latin. Translators set to work creating vernacular editions of many great works, with the Bible first appearing in French in 1235.

Books remained an expensive luxury, but from this time onwards demand seems to have always outstripped supply. In university towns the demand was for books on law and theology, not books monks were likely to produce or copy. Independent book producers had to submit their copy to university authorities to have it certificated as accurate and correct and they would fix the price for sale. Poor students would pay to ‘rent’ books they could not afford, providing the bookseller with a sustainable income stream. Producers of books of poetry, drama and literature had no such controls.

**Remembering rather than reading**

Just as people actively preferred to be read to or to read aloud, there was no common assumption that a paper record was superior to memory. A very good memory remained a necessity for academic writing, and even for the most able and well-resourced readers, an important skill. The ability to easily recall key passages from the bible made discourse, spoken or written much easier. It seems that everyone had a greater capacity to remember than we do today. Monks were routinely required to memorise the first 150 psalms, though many memorised more.

Different techniques appear to have been used for memorising, depending on whether the practitioner was able to read or not. Oral memorisation, simply listening to poems or texts being read aloud depended purely on that memory of the spoken word, while those that could read and write might use memory of text to assist them. However, while a prodigious memoriser such as Leofgyth (who. According to Rudolf of Fulda “…became most erudite by the double gift of nature and industry…. with a keen mind she went through the volumes of the Old and New Testaments, and committed diving precepts to memory” may have been an object of wonder and delight, in many cases memorisation did not have to be absolutely accurate. Memory might be ’good enough’ for most purposes. The balladeer need only keep in mind the nature of his story, and even the cleric might not need the exact words to deliver an effective sermon.

**Writing, scribing and dictating**

Writing was a skill of its own and in the medieval period there was no assumed connection between reading and writing. The most usual pairing of skills was of reading and dictating. Writing was distinguished from composition because the act of actually writing on parchment was a separate activity.

An account of writing from the 12th century lists the equipment needed by the scribe; a knife or razor for scraping the parchment, pumice for cleaning and smoothing it and goat or bear tooth to polish the surface and stop the ink running. For writing the scribe requires stylus, pencil, a straight ruler and a plumb line and an awl for pricking holes to mark the beginnings of lines. Finally of course there are the items of writing equipment, quills and penknife, inkhorn and various coloured inks. Then there is something with which letters can be cancelled and it is recommended to have hot coals in the heating container so that the ink may dry more quickly in wet weather.

This description refers to the final product. For those composing directly or receiving dictation, the wax tablet was the main writing surface. The scribe would make notes in the wax before finalising his text and only then committing it to parchment.

It is clear that the arts of writing had emerged from the monastery by the middle of the 13th century. In university towns scriveners, professional writers, made a good living either working directly for the university or writing for students, poets or administrators. By the late 14th century both York and London had a guild for scriveners.

**Extent of literacies**

The common belief is that during the centuries after the Conquest reading was an activity which was restricted to the Church in general, and the monastic communities in particular. However, this is to forget the burgeoning bureaucracy which even in the twelfth century was rapidly expanding the need for literate lay people - civil servants, lawyers, and secretaries. Very simple agreements, to modern minds at least, such as agreeing a pension, or guaranteeing ownership of land or use of royal lands for certain activities, all required charters, letters and writs of agreement. Clanchy details how in order to secure an annuity Master David of London needed to procure over 11 documents. England was famous for its centralised monarchy and highly organised government, and it led the way in the medieval period in the production of bureaucratic records. Behind any royal charter lay a raft of documentation – petitions, drafts, transcripts, writs to officials, letters and other correspondence. Even a commercial transaction with a bank, for instance, required bonds, letters obligatory, acquittances, vouchers and warrants, both sealed letters patent and informal bills.

By the early13th century it was common for knights and larger property owners to own and use seals, and the statute of Exeter (1285) required bondsmen to have seals to authenticate their written evidence when, for instance, they sat on inquests. By 1300 most landowners, however small, would have possessed seals and made the claim to be able to read and understand written documentation.

Clanchy also gives the example of a jury called in Norfolk in 1297 to decide if a man was aged 21 and so could be released from wardship. Unusually the case revolved around a written record. Of the jurors, ten claimed the ability to read and two did not, while a mysterious thirteenth gives ambiguous evidence.

Moving down the social scale, we know that by the thirteenth century bailiffs and reeves were customarily writing records, lists, tables and making calculations. Analysis of records in Durham show many different hands in the estate records before they were audited, suggesting that many reeves were able to write. While the bailiff was a professional job, requiring some formal education, the reeve was usually a servile tenant, very much a member of the peasantry.

The amount of Latin in these records is small, and could be considered as ‘jargon’, with the text being largely in French or English. A handbook of the period on husbandry recommends that the bailiff should list everything that remains in the manor such as tools and horseshoes so he knows what to buy the following season. There are many treatises on estate management from the late thirteenth century onwards, collections which include husbandry, accounting, legal terms, conveyancing and definitions of technical terms.

If the reeves could read and write and use tallies to keep records, then the villagers would be at a severe disadvantage if they could not do so as well; the old tested methods of memorizing no longer work successfully once one side has access to written records. It seems likely therefore that at least the elders of the village had some knowledge of the written vernacular. The same logic suggests that freemen at least would need some knowledge of the written word in order to understand writs and charters that might be laid upon them. They may not, and indeed would not have been considered *literati*, but rather capable of pragmatic reading, that which was needed for the individuals to pursue their lives.

Another role which require literate laymen was the law. By Henry III reign the tendency was to appoint judges from the lay bar of barristers, and notable judges such as Thomas Malton and Roger Thurkelly were examples of important judges who rose from common birth. Again, from the thirteenth century onwards we find increasing numbers of books which collect legal precedents, treatises and references. The most important was the Year Book, an account of the doings of the Kings Courts which would have been a regularly used reference book for practicing lawyers.

The familiar law texts known as the Paston Letters make it clear that household servants often kept household accounts. Even at the lowest level, vagrants were expected to carry written records testifying to their good character. Clanchy recounts examples from the mid thirteenth century of vagrants being sent back to their home areas to produce written ‘testimonials of trustworthiness’. He concludes that it would have been imprudent for anyone to wander far from their own village without written evidence of their identification and anything they had in their possession.

Not everyone saw the rise of literacy amongst the lower orders as a good thing. Walter Map, writing in the late twelfth century voices his concern that the lower orders show more enthusiasm for letters than the nobility:

…the highborn of our country disdain letters… .[peasants] on the other hand… are eager to nourish their base-born and degenerate children in these arts unfitted to their station. (Walter Map’s Book, Tupper & Ogle, 1924 p8)

By 1500 an educated Englishman would have been familiar with a variety of writings over a lifetime, charters to safeguard his property, royal writs for litigation, homilies for devotion, romances for entertainment. Reading had become so commonplace by 1489 that ‘benefit of clergy’ was scrapped as so many laymen could read you could not draw a distinction between them and the ordained clergy. The lower orders, far from being ignorant of letters as we once assumed, were increasingly able to read some practical texts, and compile records and accounts as needed.

**Schools in the medieval period**

There have been schools in England since the Roman period. We have no reason to suppose that the number of these schools changed substantially over long periods of time, but given that our sources are few, we must be careful not to make too rash judgements, either suggesting that schools were either ubiquitous or rarely present. Although schooling was naturally associated with the ecclesiastical authorities, it has never been the case that only ecclesiastics could teach or be taught. Throughout the period there was a mixed market in schooling. In general there were schools associated with monasteries and large households, which were private by nature and freestanding schools associated with cathedrals and major towns which were, to an extent at least, open to all. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries these were often subdivided as Song schools which taught reading and song and grammar schools which taught Latin grammar. These were soon supplemented by higher education, universities and specialised schools teaching the more vocational skills associated with Common and Roman law, bookkeeping and maintaining written records.

Education was never restricted to boys with some girls going on to receive advanced Latin lessons. The twelfth century poet Marie de France is an obvious example, as is one of these (Holmes, p229) Heloise, who met Abelard though their lessons together.

Although the church authorities struggled to keep control of schooling, and the record of many schools have come down to us through the church’s attempts to close them down, there were also many private schools, generally run by clerics for a fee. It is harder to find records of schools in rural towns and villages but there is no reason not to think they were not there in some form, perhaps simply two or three boys gathering in a church with a clerk.

Song schools were perhaps the most familiar in the early part of the millennium. Their prime purpose was to teach boys how to sing the antiphonals and hymns in Latin. Latin would have been an unfamiliar language to most of the students at these schools and, if we believe Chaucer in the Prioress’s Tale at least, there was little attempt to teach them the meaning of their reading. Grammar schools were generally associated with cathedrals and large towns. This involved the study of Latin words and phrases and was considered a more sophisticated mode of study. In general most cathedral cities had at least two schools, the song school mainly (but not exclusively) for the cathedral choristers and the grammar school which was open to the general public. The former was run by the cathedral precentor and latter was run by a cleric, often a member of the cathedral foundation. If the cathedral was monastic rather than secular (run by monks as opposed to cannons) then the cathedral school would have been exclusively for those who were in holy orders or training to be.

Orme helpfully provides maps of known schools at various times and even in the twelfth century we can see that the country has a fairly even coverage of schools. (Orme p190) As well as Cathedral cities, centres of local government had recorded schools and a reasonable number of market towns, such as Norham, Pontefract, Brecon and Colchester among many others. By the following century we have evidence of at least twice as many schools including places such as Cockermouth, Plympton, Arundel and Newark.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century, there is a significant shift in school organisation. William Wykeham founded Winchester College and New College Oxford with an endowment of lands in a similar way to endowing a monastery or chantry. These institutions may not seem to us much like a school, being primarily religious houses with a school attached. William’s endowment supported a warden, ten priest fellows, three chaplains, three clerks and sixteen choristers. The school within the college however had two fully paid staff and scholarships for seventy pupils which included free board and lodging as well as education. The scholars were intended to be ‘the poor and needy’. The aim was for pupils to remain at Winchester until moving on to New College at the age of eighteen.

On a more modest scale around the same time Lady Katherine Berkeley endowed a ‘house of scholars’ in Wotton-under-Edge, Gloucestershire with land and rents. This supported the schoolmaster and two poor scholars who received free board and lodging and education. The schoolmaster was also a priest who split his duties between singing masses for the soul of the foundress and her family and teaching grammar to the two scholars and anyone else who wished to attend. This latter model, a small school based round a chantry, became an increasingly common one. Given that the master was being paid to teach the scholars, in general they provided free education for other pupils, though not the board and lodging which those from further away may have needed.

As we have seen, while in general reading was taught at a ‘song’ or elementary school, students could then progress to Grammar school to study the higher status subject of grammar. This was not always the case. While some grammar schools demanded students were already able to read Latin before entry, many of the new endowed schools, particularly in more rural areas, accepted a mixture of already educated students and those with no existing reading skills.

As noted above, the gentry and nobility were increasingly educated, and this was through home schooling. The largest home school was, of course, that run by the royal family. The King educated both the choristers of the royal chapel and the youth of the court officials. Edward II founded the first royal university college, Kings Hall Cambridge, to allow for the higher education of the pupils from the royal school. This pattern was followed by the elites to a greater or smaller extent across the country.

**Schools in Surrey**

There is no list of schools from any time during this period. We can find some references to schools, schoolhouses or teachers. Using this evidence schools in Surrey are centred on what we might call the usual places. Croydon Grammar school is first recorded in 1393 and has run continually since. Guildford had a school in 1299, but the endowed grammar school was not founded until 1509. This has run continually and is now the Royal Grammar School Guildford. There are records of a reading, song and elementary school in Kingston in 1377 and a grammar school in 1364. This latter school may well have been based on the Lovekyn Chapel. Although the original school disappeared during the reformation it was refounded in the chapel in 1561. The chapel is still used by Kingston Grammar school. Malden had a boys school run by the Collegiate Church in 1264 and Southwark had a reading and song school in 1365. For reasons outlined above, these only represent a tiny fraction of the actual number of schools that existed in Surrey during this period.

There was charitable support available for poor scholars in many towns which together with the free places at endowed schools allowed a revolution in social mobility; many of the poor rose up and take up positions beyond those expected of them both in secular and clerical world. William Langland, writing in 1380 complained bitterly that:

*…bondsmen’s bairns have been made bishops,*

*And bastard children have been archdeacons. (Langland C.vi.61-83)*

Given the prominence in the Tudor period of those ‘self-made men’, Wolsey and Cromwell, it is clear this process continued. By the sixteenth century we can confidently assume that around half the population had some ability to read and write. This is confirmed by Sir Thomas More who, in his Apologye (1533) asserted that nearly half the population was illiterate[[1]](#footnote-1), Leach suggests that there were more schools in proportion the population at the end of the fifteenth century than in 1864.

It seems likely, therefore that by the dawn of the reformation, most children in England had access to education to some extent and had some ability to read either Latin or English.

1. People forre moare than foure partes of all the whole divided into tenne coulde never reade Englisch yet…Works of Sir Thomas More, London 1557, p854 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)