



YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST  
**finding** the future

**Wooden Writing Tablets from 12-18 Swinegate, York  
(YORYM: 1989.28)**

*An Insight* Report

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## ABSTRACT

*This report describes the woodworking technological aspects of a set of medieval writing tablets excavated in York.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Excavations in advance of redevelopment at the property aforementioned took place between October 1989 and July 1990. A summary of the excavations and their background has been written by J McComish (McComish 2015) and it is not proposed to repeat that text here.

In the course of the excavations a number of pits located in the back yards of the medieval properties fronting on to 12-18 Swinegate were excavated. One of these pits, dating to the mid-late 14th century, produced a small leather pouch from which protruded the ends of several thin wooden sheets. These proved to be wood and wax writing tablets. The wood elements of the find are described in this report.

## 2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The work carried out has been done in accordance with the ClfA Standard and Guidance for the Collection, Documentation, Conservation and Research of Archaeological Materials (ClfA 2014). The work requested was a woodworking technology report on the wooden elements of the find.

### 3. PROCEDURES

The pouch and tablets had been cleaned and consolidated by the conservation department at YAT very shortly after discovery. Wood species identification had been carried out but while the texts had been studied by several individuals and replicas of the tablets made, no description of the tablets themselves had been prepared.

The tablets had been in secure storage at YAT since conservation and had occasionally been brought out for study. The leather, cordage and tablets had been individually placed in small crystal boxes with hinged lids kept together in a snap lid storer. Each tablet had been sequentially numbered and this numbering is used in this report.

In turn, each tablet was examined visually, with the unaided eye and under an incident light microscope at x8 magnification. Notes on the wood were made of each element. The tablets have been subject to detailed photography in the preceding month and further photography for the current report is considered an unnecessary duplication of effort.

### 4. DESCRIPTION

The entire object, wood, wax, leather and cordage is referenced under the accession number YORYM 1989.28, SF 257. There are eight individual tablets. Wood species had previously been identified as *Buxus sempervirens* L (Boxwood) and this is confirmed from the current study. The tablets were placed face to face and contained within a small leather pouch with decoration secured with a short length of cordage. The individual tablets are as follows, all dimensions in millimetres:

Tablet 01. Radially faced conversion. One face has shallow sub rectangular recess mostly filled with dark brown wax bearing the impression of lettering written with a stylus. Other face has very fine saw marks present. All four corners rounded off with a bladed tool such as a knife. Overall dimensions 49 l, 30 w, 02 th. Recess 45 l, 24 w, 0.5 deep.

Tablet 02. Tangentially faced conversion. Both faces have a shallow sub rectangular recess mostly filled with dark brown wax bearing the impression of lettering written with a stylus. All four corners rounded off with a bladed tool such as a knife. Overall dimensions 50 l, 30 w, 02 th. Recesses face A 46 l, 25 w, 0.5 deep; face B 45 l, 25 w, 0.5 deep.

Tablet 03. Tangentially faced conversion. Both faces have a shallow sub rectangular recess mostly filled with dark brown wax bearing the impression of lettering written with a stylus. Ends of recesses slightly overscored. All four corners rounded off with a bladed tool such as a knife. Overall dimensions 50 l, 30 w, 1.5 th. Recesses face A 46 l, 25 w, 0.5 deep; face B 45 l, 25 w, 0.5 deep.

Tablet 04. Tangentially faced conversion. Both faces have a shallow sub rectangular recess

mostly filled with dark brown wax bearing the impression of lettering written with a stylus. All four corners rounded off with a bladed tool such as a knife. Overall dimensions 49 l, 29.5 w, 0.2 th. Recesses face A 46 l, 25.5 w, 0.5 deep; face B 45.5 l, 25 w, 0.5 deep.

Tablet 05. Tangentially faced conversion. Both faces have a shallow sub rectangular recess mostly filled with dark brown wax bearing the impression of lettering written with a stylus. All four corners rounded off with a bladed tool such as a knife. Overall dimensions 49 l, 29 w, 1.5 th. Recesses face A 45 l, 25. w, 0.5 deep; face B 44 l, 24 w, 0.5 deep.

Tablet 06. Tangentially faced conversion. Both faces have a shallow sub rectangular recess. Wax no longer adhering to recess- has been removed and packed separately. Surface of recesses very smooth with no evident toolmarks. Recesses overscored on both faces. All four corners rounded off with a bladed tool such as a knife. Overall dimensions 48 l, 29 w, 1.5 th. Recesses face A 44 l, 22 w, 0.5 deep; face B 44 l, 22 w, 0.5 deep.

Tablet 07. Tangentially, near radially faced conversion. Both faces have a shallow sub rectangular recess mostly filled with dark brown wax bearing the impression of lettering written with a stylus. All four corners rounded off with a bladed tool such as a knife. Overall dimensions 49.5 l, 28.5 w, 1.5 th. Recesses face A 47 l, 25 w, 0.5 deep; face B 46 l, 25 w, 0.5 deep.

Tablet 08. Tangentially faced conversion. One face has shallow sub rectangular recess mostly filled with dark brown wax bearing the impression of lettering written with a stylus. Other face may have faint impressions of script present. All four corners rounded off with a bladed tool such as a knife. Overall dimensions 50 l, 28 w, 1.5 th. Recess 47 l, 25 w, 0.5 deep.

## **5. DISCUSSION.**

Boxwood is a species native to north-west Europe and the British Isles. While the origin of a small portable artefact such as this tablet set cannot be determined there is no technological reason to suggest it is anything but a local product. The ring patterns of the tablets are so similar that they must derive from the same tree.

Whilst generically described as tangentially faced conversions, the orientation of the rings and medullary rays across all eight tablets is not uniform- one indeed is a radial conversion, another near radial. The tablets were not derived from a single thin strip of wood cut into lengths of approximately the same size. Comparing the conversions and placing them within an idealised cross section of a tree shows that the individual tablets probably began as part of a box quartered section of timber. The parent log (minimum diameter 96mm excluding any sapwood or bark) was either cut to a squared off cross section and then divided into four battens, or divided into four and then squared off to leave a sub rectangular cross section billet. This box quartered billet was cut to length creating a short wooden block. The fine saw marks still surviving on the unrecessed face of tablet 01 show that this block

was sawn into parallel slices- of which we have the eight that went to form this set of tablets. The diagram attached to this report shows the original relative locations of the tablets within the unconverted parent log.

The saw blade used would appear to have been at least 2mm thick- there is missing wood between the faces of the tablets which means they do not fit face to face and this would result from cutting with a saw blade of approximately this thickness. Unfortunately the removal of much of each face to create the recesses for wax has removed any evidence for toolmarks on the remaining tablets and we cannot be sure whether the surfaces of other tablets were pared down to a smooth surface before the recesses were cut.

The recesses were initially marked out on the surface of each tablet. This was done by scoring with a knife or similar to define the shape and size of the recess to be cut. In some cases this scoring went beyond the area of the actual recess as cut leaving marks on the unrecessed surface at the corners of the recess. The scoring was deep enough in all cases to sever the wood fibres at each end of the recess, allowing clean removal of the waste wood from the recess with a chisel or similar. Though the relevant surfaces of the recesses are now concealed by the wax filler forming the writing surface, those on tablet 6 are clear and there are no traces of a tool signature or stop marks. This suggests the chisel used was very sharp and clean and used to remove the waste in one push. Variations in the size of each recess show each was marked and cut individually.

The corners of each tablet are rounded off, perhaps to reduce the danger of snagging on the edge of the pouch they were kept in, perhaps to reduce the chance of a sharp corner catching and damaging the tablet itself. The profiles of these rounded corners are not uniform, showing that they were cut after the tablets had been removed from their parent timber. Slight faceting on the edges shows that this rounding off was done with a knife or similar blade, rather than with a file or an abrasive.

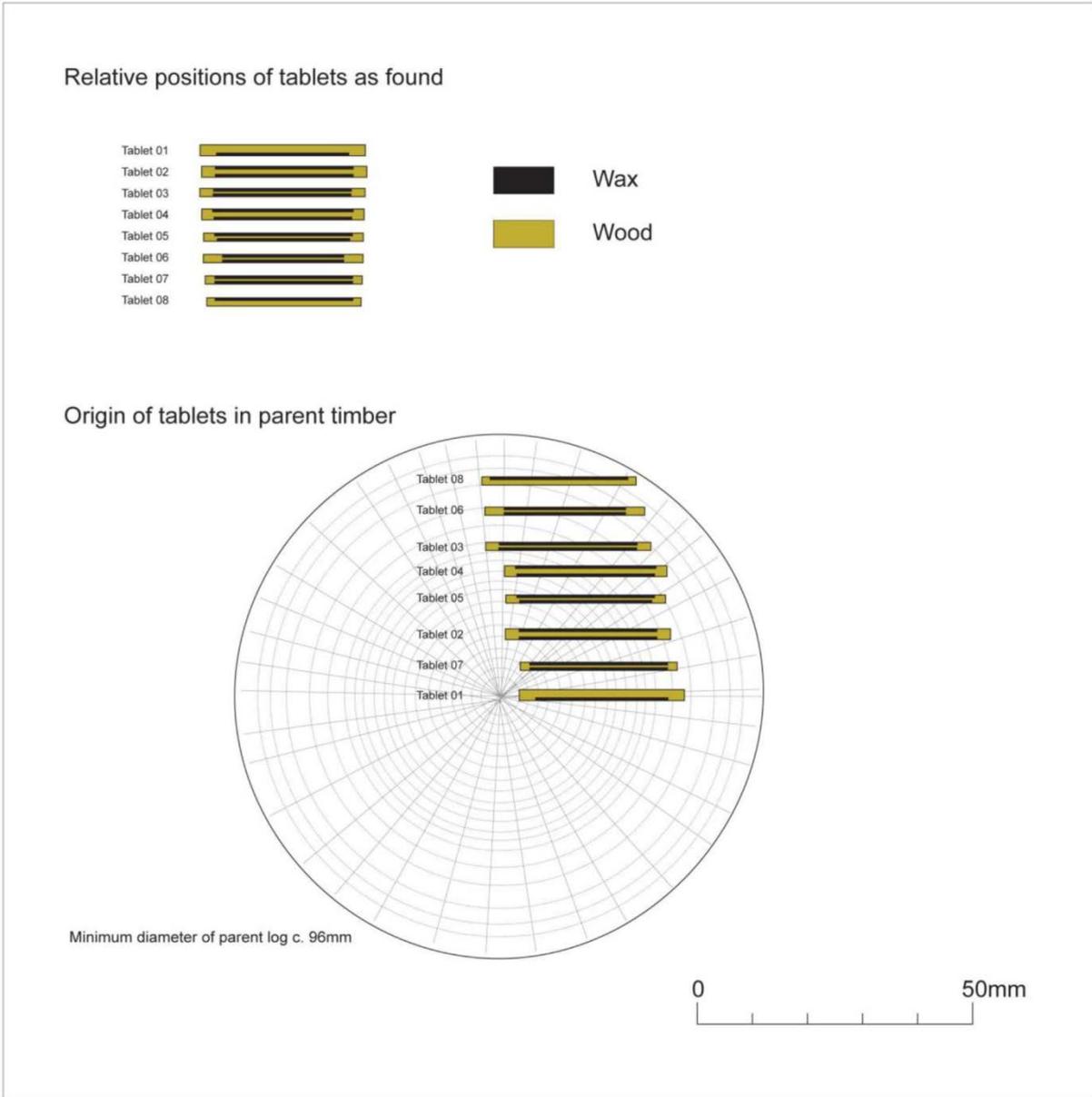
No evidence was found for any piercing of the tablets which would have allowed them to be laced, hinged or tied together. No metal fittings were observed and no mineral staining from lost metal components could be found.

No intrinsic dating is available for the wood. 14C dating would require a sample equivalent to one of the actual tablets and this was deemed an unacceptable level of damage to this practically unique artefact. Associated finds and internal evidence deriving from the scripts present suggest a date of loss in the mid- fourteenth century AD. The owner was evidently literate in written Middle English and Medieval Latin.

## 6. REFERENCES

CifA (2014) *Standard and Guidance for the Collection, Documentation, Conservation and Research of Archaeological Materials* Reading.

McComish, J (2015) *The wooden writing tablets from excavations at 12-18 Swinegate* Report Number 2015/45 September 2015.



**Figure 1:** Diagrams showing relationship of tablets as found (top) and their relationship to their parent log (bottom)



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