

Virtual Reality model of a late medieval tanning district: Spon Street Coventry.

Leather was used for belts, purses, shoes, boots, gloves, saddles, tents and for carrying liquids. The process of turning an animal hide into leather was known as ‘tanning’ (for cattle hides) or ‘tawying’ (for other hides such as sheep and goat). Tanning was a noxious process which, in most towns in the 15th century, was banished by regulation to the outskirts.

By c 1500 in Coventry, 70 per cent of Coventry’s tanners worked in the North Western part of the city, around Spon Street, Hill Street and Well Street. Using a mix of documentary and archaeological data, together with an analysis of the existing standing buildings in Spon Street, it is possible to build a picture of tanning and other crafts and industries in the area in the late medieval period.



Scraping the cattle hides – the first stage of the tanning process

The tanning of cattle hides was a labour intensive and smelly activity. After the hooves and horns had been chopped off the animal skins from butchers, the skins were immersed in pits filled with dog dung or lime, scraped and then sprinkled with urine and left to rot in a warm environment. Finally the hides were soaked for up to twelve months in a tanning liquid to achieve the desired quality of leather. To fully appreciate the medieval tanning process, any virtual recreation needs to be multisensory: the sites of the skins in various stages of processing, the shouts of the workers, and the pungent smells.

Using the latest multi-sensory technologies, usually used in the motor car industry, it is possible to create a Virtual Reality model of Spon Street in this period. The project is being created in conjunction with the Department of Visualisation, University of Warwick. VR offers the possibility of recreating environments which no longer exist. This is particularly valuable as VR can allow people to experience cultural heritage sites which have long since disappeared. The real world is multisensory with sights, sounds, smells and feelings, including motion, temperature, combining to provide richness to any real experience. The aim is to create an authentic experience of a medieval tanning district as possible.

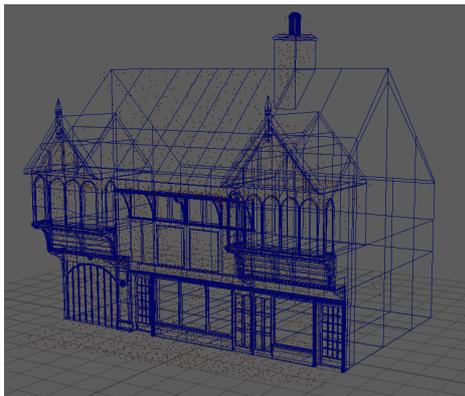
We have already laser-scanned Spon Street and modern features such as street furniture cars and buildings from the 16th century onwards have been eliminated from the model. The model will show Spon Street as it would have looked in the later medieval period.



Initial scan results of Spon Street, showing St John the Baptist Church



The model will allow VR visitors the opportunity to walk down Spon Street as it would have appeared in around 1500, encountering medieval craftspeople, and entering buildings to hear the sights sounds and smells of medieval industries.



Scan of the tanning house that VR visitors will be able to enter

Future work will include medieval dyeing and weaving, which were also major industries in the area. The finished model will be available for the public to enjoy.

Mark Webb, 30 May 2017