

**LIVE**  
BORDERS  
**MUSEUMS**  
**GALLERIES**  
**& ARCHIVES**

**Vikings**

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# Introduction to Loan Boxes

LIVE Borders Loan Boxes have been designed to expand people's experience and knowledge of history through object handling. All the objects in this Loan Box are designed to be handled. Fragile and heavy objects are marked accordingly on the [Hazards/Risks](#) page 21 of this Loan Box booklet.

People viewing the Loan Box objects will be very curious about them and where they came from, what they were used for, and how were they made. What we do know about the objects contained in this Loan Box is in the [Content Information](#) section of this booklet, Pages 4-16. We have also provided prompts for [Questions and Activities](#) to aid further learning and understanding of the objects in this guide - pages 17-19.

## What to do during a Loan Box session

- All the objects in this Loan Box have been checked and packed securely before being dispatched. Please inform us immediately if objects have been damaged in transit.
- All the objects should be handled with care - the most fragile/heavy have been marked on the [Hazards/Risks](#) page 21 of this booklet.
- Make sure the objects are in a safe, clean environment. Be especially careful of heavy, awkward, and/or fragile objects and supervise/display them accordingly.
- Handle objects with clean, dry hands, and keep away from potential damage hazards such as water, paint, and pens.
- Encourage handling of the objects for a better understanding of what they are.

# Viking - Content Information

## Viking Everyday Life

Most Vikings were also farmers. On a farm, everyone worked, even children. Scandinavian soil was sandy and not very good for farming, so it took a lot of work to grow crops. The Vikings built their homes near water because as well as having access to fresh drinking water, much of their food came from creeks and the sea. Boats were important, and time was spent building them and keeping them watertight and safe. Men hunted as well as fished. Women gathered food, like berries and mushrooms. Food was also stored for use during the worst of the winter months.

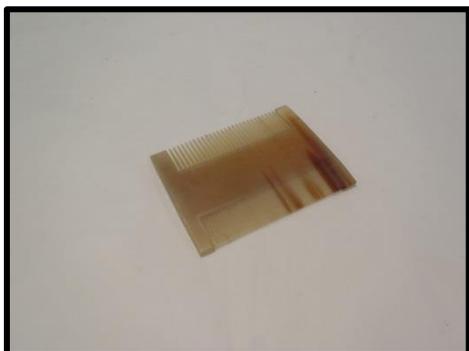
Vikings were clean and usually bathed at least once a week, even in the winter. Homes were simple, with little furniture, so cleaning was a relatively quick job in the summer, done mostly with a broom and a dust rag. In the winter, however, animals were brought inside at night to keep them safe and warm, unless the family had a separate barn.

There was no formal school to attend, so children learned from their parents at home and in the wider community. Boys learned how to farm, row, sail, hunt and fish. Girls were taught how to spin, weave, milk cows and goats, gather berries, and how to make colourful clothing with dyes, embroidery, and fancy stitches. If a parent had a specialized profession, such as a jewellery maker or blacksmith, they taught their children, both boys and girls, their craft.

As busy as they were each day, time was always put aside for some fun. Games of strength, agility and quick thinking were ways the Vikings kept themselves strong. At night, Viking families gathered around the fire in the centre of their homes and told stories of their gods and their victories. They often got together with neighbours and friends to enjoy music, festivals, market days, and sporting events.

Each Norse village was run by a village chief or king, assisted by a council. There was also an assembly composed of all freemen in the village, who made laws and voted on the outcome of a trial. Rather than a religious leader, it was the Viking Law that decided what people could and could not do. Everyone knew the law. The word "law" comes from Old Norse, the language of the Vikings.

## Horn Comb



Combs were in everyday use at every level of Viking society. They were used to brush wet hair which not only helped smooth and untangle the hair but also removed dirt or vermin such as lice or nits.

Bone combs are among the most common archaeological finds as Vikings were often buried with them. Two types of combs are found: single-piece combs and composite combs. Single-piece combs were made in one piece from a single piece of horn, bone, or walrus ivory. The majority of such combs have teeth on both sides of the spine. These were made from whalebone or imported elephant ivory. Composite combs were made from different pieces, and are more similar to modern combs and hairbrushes.

Graves show a slight difference between men and women. Men's combs are generally found with a comb case, protecting them from damage. Women apparently carried their combs inside a purse or pouch, and so did not need cases. Women's graves rarely include combs with comb cases, while men's graves that include combs almost always do.

## Bone Needles



Both bone and metal needles were used during the Viking Age. Different sizes and types of needles were better suited to certain tasks over others, so a chunky bone needle may be excellent for *naalbinding*, but poor for sewing. Naalbinding is a very old method of weaving similar to but predating knitting and crocheting. It is sometimes called Viking knitting. Slimmer needles were made for more delicate sewing tasks.

## Smoothing Board



These boards were often made of whalebone, and have been found mostly in western Norway, and occasionally elsewhere. The boards were usually found in rich female graves and may have been a prestige item. The most common pattern has animal heads at the top, but some designs could be very plain.

The definite function of these boards is unknown, but a common theory is that the boards were used as the surface for a smoother. Smoothers were hand-sized smoothed glass that was rounded on top and flat at the base and would help press folds and seams in linen, a common Viking textile. One such glass object has been found in the Orkney Islands, and both board and stone were found amongst many goods in a woman's grave in Sweden. However, boards and smoothing stones are not always found together.

Other suggestions are that the boards and smoothers were used in textile manufacturing. Some archaeologists suggest that these boards were serving platters for food at high-status feasts since cutting and chopping marks have been found on some.

The boards may have also had a symbolic function as whalebone was a prized material. Women have been buried with them and so perhaps used them in life. Because of this, it has been suggested that whalebone boards symbolised the central role Viking women played in the home: organising the household, caring for the family, preparing food and making clothing.

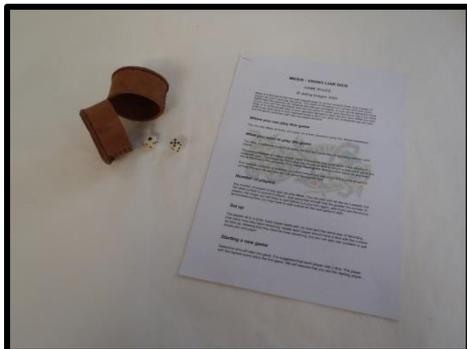
## Fire-Steel, Strike-a-Light



A fire-steel was a very common type of personal equipment for Vikings, appearing occasionally in female graves, but most commonly accompanying male burials. The fire-steel was a piece of personal equipment, which could be carried hanging from a belt or in a pouch with other fire-making equipment.

This type of fire-steel allows the user to hold it in the hand with the long, straight edge facing outward to strike the flint, while protecting the fingers and providing a good grip. This same basic type of C-shaped fire-steel continued in use until the development of matches, although the curled ends and the "hump" are distinctive features of the Viking Age examples.

## Meier Dice Game



Meier is a simple game which is also known as 'Liar Dice'. It uses two dice and a shaker that keeps the roll concealed. It is a very fast and compact game; a set would have been easy to carry around for a quick game.

Meier can be played by any number of players, each of which has 6 lives. You must roll higher than the previous player and then declare your score. Doubles score the highest, but the highest score of all is a 'Meier' 2/1. Each round continues until a player accuses the previous player of lying. If the player that was challenged was lying then they lose a life, otherwise, it's the accuser who loses a life! Play continues until only one player has lives remaining.

## Pewter Figures – Odin, Thor & Loki



Kings had a number of gods and goddesses they worshipped. Unlike other ancient civilizations, the Vikings had neither an organized priesthood nor a hierarchy of religious leaders. Temples or other religious buildings were also never used when the Vikings paid tributes to the Norse gods as they worshiped their gods in the open air, choosing natural landmarks such as big rocks, unusual trees, and waterfalls.

Their most important gods were Odin, the god of knowledge, Thor, the god of metalwork and thunder, Frey, the goddess of fertility, and Loki, a trickster with magical powers. After around 1000, Viking people became Christian.

It was always important for the Vikings to be on good terms with the gods. In order to ensure that this was the case they made an exchange in which people sacrificed to the gods in order to get something back in return. For example, this might mean the gods' goodwill regarding weather, fertility or luck in battle.

It is believed that there were four sacrifices a year for the winter solstice, spring equinox, summer solstice and autumn equinox. The Vikings also held additional sacrifices, for example, if a crisis arose that required help from the gods.

# Futhark Runes



The Germanic people, including the Norse Vikings, had developed a written alphabet as early as 100AD. This alphabet is known as the Futhark, named for the first six letters.

Runes were carved on stone, bone, antler, wood and metal. Over 3,000 runestones are located in Scandinavia. Runic inscriptions are found on grave markers, cenotaphs and memorials more often than on any other object. However, runic inscriptions are also found on artifacts, including jewellery, amulets, tools, and weapons. Knowledge of how to read the Elder Futhark was forgotten until 1865 when it was deciphered by Norwegian scholar Sophus Bugge.

Viking people did not develop a written culture until the arrival of the church. An excavation in Norway in the 1950s revealed that runes were often used for business and everyday uses as well. Runic inscriptions expressing prayers, love letters, jokes and personal messages were found in quantity there.

Runic inscriptions, however, are rarely found on manuscripts. While a runic alphabet can be used for writing a document, that wasn't their purpose, as the Viking culture was oral, and long works were remembered using poetry.

Vikings were not illiterate, as most people could understand the runes. While sagas, tales and songs were all memorized and unwritten, there were thousands of runestones, it stands to reason that most people could understand the runic inscriptions.

Because of their oral traditions, written knowledge of Vikings comes from other sources. One source is the Viking stories from the period, which were passed down orally and then written down through the generations and survive to this day. Stories and reports about Vikings were also written by their contemporaries, including trading partners (such as the Arabs), and victims of their raids (such as the Christian clerics who kept the historical records in Europe).

## What Vikings Wore

As with many aspects of Viking-age material culture, knowledge of clothing is open to interpretation. The Viking people left few images or written descriptions of their garments. Most Viking Age fabric has been found in graves and hasn't survived being buried very well. Sometimes traces of fabric are found on the underside of jewellery, and from this, details such as colour, weave, and thread count may be determined. In some cases, the fabric was coated with pitch to use as a torch but never lit. These pitch-coated fabrics have survived very well, such as a pair of men's trousers used in the process of building a ship. Because of this limited information and lack of surviving items, there are different ideas on exactly how fabrics were used and worn by Vikings. However, information on how clothes were worn before, after, and in different regions during the Viking Age in combination with the conditions Vikings lived and worked in means that some conclusions can be reached.

The general consensus is that men wore a combination of a tunic with trousers. Trousers could either be loose-fitting or tight and had no pockets and no fly. Some trousers had belt loops, and others were made with built-in socks. Women wore a long-shift under-dress with a shorter woolen overdress on top. Both wore a long cloak or a jacket to provide warmth and protection in cold weather. Clothing was commonly made from wool or linen. Making clothes involved processing fibers, spinning, weaving, cutting and sewing - all jobs undertaken by women.

## Belt



Viking Age belts were made of leather. Surviving buckles and strap ends show that 2cm was about the widest belt commonly used. There were no belt loops in a tunic, so any excess length was distributed around the belt and allowed to hang freely. The free end of the belt was weighted with a decorative strap end. Not only was the strap end decorated, so were the buckle and the belt itself.

Two essential items worn on the belt were a utility knife and a pouch of soft leather or fabric.

## Tunic



Tunics were a standard item of clothing for men. They were designed to be tighter on top with a broad, looser skirt at the bottom. The tunic skirt ranged from thigh length to knee length. The length was determined by the wealth of the owner - men would show off their wealth by using more material than was needed. Sleeves were probably longer than is typical in modern garments, reaching well past the wrists.

The tunic was pulled on over the head. There were usually no fasteners, although some tunics had a simple button and loop of thread to fasten the neck opening. Tunics of all but the poorest people were decorated with braid, at least on the neckline and cuffs. The tunics of the more wealthy were also decorated with braid on the hem of the skirt.

Under the tunic, it's likely that men also wore an under-tunic. This was made most commonly from linen, as even though it was more expensive than wool, it was more comfortable against the skin. The construction was similar to that of the overtunic, except that the sleeves and skirt were made longer. It has been suggested that the under-tunic was visible extending past the overtunic so that people could see that one was wealthy enough to be able to afford an under-tunic.

## Pouches



The lack of pockets in any Viking-era clothing meant that men and women had to carry their everyday items with them. Coins, a scrap of clean cloth (to wipe hands and face), a fire-starting kit, and other, smaller items would be suspended from the belt or a brooch either on their own or carried in a pouch.

Keys to valuable places or stored items were routinely carried around the neck.

## Shoes



Viking-age shoes probably didn't last long - perhaps lasting a few months to half a year before they wore out and were replaced. Because of this, worn-out shoes are common finds in Viking Age rubbish pits.

Because shoes didn't last, they were generally simply made, although they did include laces and toggles to close the shoe and adjust for comfort.

Some shoes were crafted with the stitching inside, so the shoe was less likely to leak on wet ground.

## Brooches



Both men and women wore jewellery, and brooches were both decorative and practical items in the Viking Age. Clothes would be fastened and items carried on brooches, which ranged from simple bone pins to elaborate gold jewellery. A common style was the Penannular brooch. The pin is held on a ring that has a break in it to allow the pin to pass through the ring after it has been passed through the fabric.

Oval brooches were typically worn by women. They were used to fasten dresses, aprons, and cloaks and were more detailed and ornate in comparison to Penannular brooches. Oval brooches would be worn singly or in pairs to fasten the wearer's dress, along with a chain of coloured beads for added visual appeal. Oval brooches are believed to have gone out of fashion at around 1000 AD and were replaced by more fanciful designs of brooches.

## Mjolnir Pendant



Mjolnir is the name of the hammer of the god Thor, who was a protector of humans in Viking mythology. The pendant was likely worn to represent strength, protection, and power. Pendants could be made from wood or metal and worn with other charms.

In some cases, pendants may not have been made to be worn. In Sweden, there was a custom of putting many amulets on a large, thin ring, not just hammers, but miniature sickles, fire-strikers, staffs, and axe heads too. These were often placed with cremation burials, and it's not clear whether these were ever meant to be worn by the living; they may have been gifts to the dead, or to whatever powers might help or hinder the dead person in the afterlife.

The majority of people buried with such amulets (and thus likely to have worn them during their lifetime) were female.

## Helmet



During the Viking age, helmets were a simple bowl design with a nose guard. Helmets were typically made from several pieces of iron riveted together. Making a helmet this way required less labour, which may be why it was used. Contrary to popular belief, there is little evidence that Viking-age helmets ever had horns.

Despite being made of metal, Even a sword could cut through a helmet if someone was strong enough.

There is little evidence for chin straps, but helmets both before and after the Viking age routinely used them, and one would be required to stop the helmet from falling off during combat. Something would also have been needed to lift the helmet off the head and absorb the force of a blow. A few surviving helmets and pieces of helmets have rivet holes which suggest that some sort of leather suspension system was used. It's also likely that a cap made from an absorbent material such as sheepskin was worn under the helmet, not only to absorb blows, but also to absorb sweat and help prevent the helmet from rusting.

# Shield



The Viking shield protected its owner from many angles and types of attacks. It absorbed the shock of a blow and could be used to push an opponent off-balance. Typical Viking shields were 80-90cm in diameter. Most likely they were built to fit their body size and fighting style, as a shield needs to be big enough to provide protection but not so big that it becomes unwieldy.

Later Vikings used kite-shaped shields, but most shields were large, round, wooden shields gripped in the centre. The use of shields was nearly universal in Viking combat as someone without one would be defenseless.

Shields represent one of several instances where the literary and archaeological sources do not agree on how Viking weapons were constructed. Surviving shields are made from spruce, fir, or pine. Literary evidence contradicts this and suggests that shields were made with linden wood.

The front of some shields may have been covered with leather. Some surviving shields show evidence of paint. Some colours Vikings used to paint shields were: black, yellow, red, and white. Even if a shield was not decorated, it is highly likely that it would be sealed with oil so that it repelled and resisted water. A shield that soaked up water from rain or sea spray could easily double in weight.

Shields were sometimes placed along the outside of a Viking ship, providing some additional protection from wind and waves to the crew. However, the shields would interfere with the operation of the ship, so some believe they were only placed on the outside to create an imposing appearance while entering or leaving a harbour.

## Eating & Drinking

The Vikings were hunters, fishers, and farmers, and ate a diet of meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables. The harsh Scandinavian weather made it difficult to keep animals and grow crops in the winter, limiting their meals to mostly pickled meat and vegetables. Their food was seasonal, so it was important to preserve and store foods for winter and spring. Although fresh foods were not as common in winter and spring, archaeological studies show that Vikings didn't suffer from vitamin or mineral deficiencies.

Vikings consumed a variety of vegetables including cabbage, onions, garlic, leeks, turnips, peas and beans. Viking farms included apple orchards and fruit trees such as pears and cherries. Cows were raised for meat, milk, and milk-based products such as cheese, curds, and butter.

The Vikings seasoned their food with salt, herbs, and spices. Local spices included cumin, mustard, horseradish, parsley, dill, cress, mint, marjoram, thyme, and wild garlic. Honey was the only sweetener the Vikings knew. To get salt, the Vikings boiled saltwater and collected the crystals after the water had evaporated. They drank beer, buttermilk, fruit wine, and mead.

## Horn Spoon



People ate meals with their fingers from wooden plates and bowls. They always carried a knife with them and would use it to chop food, using it as both a knife and a fork. Spoons would be made from metal, bone, or horn.

Some wooden spoons would have been homemade but others may come from workshops. Handles could be decorated with carved heads of mythical beasts and other designs.

## Pottery Goblet



As well as wood and horn, Vikings made objects such as pots, jars, cups, whistles, and lamps out of pottery.

Some items were decorated, and plain pottery items were coarse, simple and often burned black. These plain items were used for food storage and cooking.

## Wooden Bowl



In the Viking era, wood was used for homes, ships and buildings, as well as for farming implements and household objects. Some woodwork was very plain, others had decorations carved and painted on.

Woodworking would have been a common skill at least at the level of being able to execute simple repairs around the home. Some more skilled craftsmen would have been general "handymen". They used a foot-operated machine called a lathe to make wooden bowls and plates.

## Drinking Horn, Jug & Cup



Drinking horns were typically made of hunted or domestic cattle horns as well as glass or metal. Drinking horns from cattle held under half a litre of water, milk, beer or mead - all common Viking drinks. Drinking horns could be plain or decorated, and were used for ceremonial as well as daily purposes. Sometimes drinking horns had a stand or legs to make it more functional.

If a drinking horn couldn't be put down while it had liquid inside it, it had to be drained rather quickly or passed around a table. When the Vikings wanted to set down their drinks and sip over the course of a meal, they used wooden, horn, or pottery cups rather than drinking horns.

Traces of horns have been mostly found in female graves. The reason may be that women had the responsibility to brew mead and serve guests.

# What questions should I ask during a loan Box session?

The question prompts below can help you to get the most out of using the objects for learning.

Questions about the physical characteristics of an object		
What does it <b>look, feel, sound, smell</b> like?	How <b>big</b> is it?	What <b>shape</b> is it?
<b>What</b> is it made of?	What <b>colour</b> is it?	How <b>heavy</b> is it?
Is it <b>mass produced</b> or <b>unique</b> ?	Does it have any <b>marks</b> , which show us how it was made, used or cared for?	Is it <b>complete</b> or part of an object?
Is it in good <b>condition</b> or worn/used?	Has it been <b>altered, adapted, repaired</b> or <b>changed</b> ?	Does it <b>look like</b> anything modern?

Questions about the functions of an object		
<b>Why</b> was it made?	What is it <b>used</b> for?	What would it have <b>been like</b> to use it?
<b>How</b> might it have been used?	<b>Who</b> might have used it?	<b>Where</b> might it have been used?
What <b>skills</b> were needed to use it?	Might it have been used with <b>other objects</b> ?	Has its use <b>changed</b> ?

## Questions about the design and construction of an object

What <b>material</b> is it made of?	Why were the <b>materials</b> it was made of chosen?	<b>Could</b> different materials have been used to make it?
Is it <b>attractive</b> to look at?	<b>When</b> and <b>where</b> might it have been made?	Is it <b>hand-made</b> or <b>machine-made</b> ?
<b>Who</b> might have made it?	<b>How</b> was this object made?	How might this object <b>work</b> ?
Can it be <b>taken apart</b> ?	If it can be taken apart, then how is it <b>put together</b> ?	What do these tell us about the <b>people</b> who made and/or owned the object?
Is it <b>decorated</b> or <b>plain</b> ?	Are there any <b>marks or images</b> on the object?	What does this object tell us about the <b>period</b> we are studying?

## Questions about the value and importance of an object

What <b>difference</b> did the object make to people's lives?	What does the object tell us about the <b>people</b> who owned it?
How <b>important</b> was the object to the people who made it and/or the people who used/owned it compared to today?	Is it <b>mass-produced, rare</b> or <b>unique</b> ?
In what way is the object important <b>today</b> ?	Is the object financially, sentimentally, culturally or historically <b>valuable</b> ?
How much do you the object <b>cost</b> when it was made?	How much do you think the object is <b>worth</b> now?

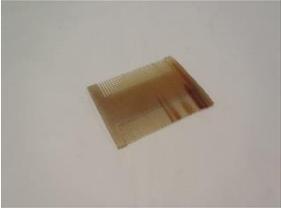
# Activity Ideas

Below are some ideas for activities that will help your students get the most out of learning from the objects in the Loan Box and the period they came from.

Before & After	
<p>At the start of a Loan Box session, place the objects either on general display or divide a few objects amongst smaller groups of students. Set a timer for 2-5 minutes, and get them to spend the time quickly looking at the objects and writing down guesses as to what they are. A rule can be set that objects are not to be handled to make guessing more difficult. Once the time is up, reveal the answers either in one go, or spread throughout the session as part of the introduction to that object. At the very end of a Loan Box session, return to the original answers to review what the students have learned about the objects since their initial guesses.</p>	<p><b>Skills developed:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Descriptive</li><li>• Observational</li><li>• Questioning</li><li>• Thinking Skills</li></ul>

Asking and Answering Questions about Objects	
<p>Get students to write down all the words they can think of that would be used to describe an object that they have with them (e.g. their school bag), then get them to write down the questions they would need to ask in order to identify the object. They could also prioritise the questions into categories (i.e. physical characteristics/descriptive, design and construction, function and value) and importance (i.e. pick five questions that are essential to understanding this object).</p>	<p><b>Skills developed:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Descriptive</li><li>• Questioning</li><li>• Thinking skills</li><li>• Categorising</li></ul>

# Object images at a glance - to check off

		
<p>1x Horn comb</p>	<p>1x Bone Needles in Pouch</p>	<p>1x Smoothing Board</p>
		
<p>1x fire-Steel, Strick-a-Light</p>	<p>1x Meier Dice Game</p>	<p>3x Pewter Figures in Pouch</p>
		
<p>24x wooden Runes in Pouch</p>	<p>1x Belt</p>	<p>4x Tunic photos</p>
		
<p>1x Leather Shoes</p>	<p>3x Metal Brooches in Pouch</p>	<p>1x Mjolnir Pendant</p>
		
<p>1x Metal Helmet</p>	<p>1x Wooden Shield</p>	<p>1x Horn Spoon</p>
		
<p>1x Pottery Goblet</p>	<p>1x Wooden bowl</p>	<p>1x Drinking Horn</p>
		
<p>1x Horn Jug</p>	<p>1x Horn Cup</p>	

# HAZARDS/RISKS

## FRAGILE OBJECTS

Horn comb

Bone Needles

Pottery Goblet

## HEAVY OBJECTS

Metal Helmet

Wooden Shield

## TO BE AWARE OF

Metal Brooch pins

Metal Helmet - Blunt edges, protruding Nose guard

Drinking Horn and Wooden Shield do not fit inside the Loan box. They will be delivered and returned in the bag supplied along with the Loan Box.

# What to do before returning the Loan Box

- Check the objects against the [Object Images at a glance](#) page, above. You can print this page out to help you ensure all pieces are present.
- Pack the objects securely into the box, making sure that fragile objects are protected and in original packaging.
- Please let us know if any items are damaged or lost by phone or email.
- Pack any damaged items separately with a note inside the box.
- Boxes can either be returned directly to St Mary's Mill in Selkirk, or left at your nearest library. You will already have arranged which library this is when you booked the loan box. For any queries please get in touch at [libstock@liveborders1.org.uk](mailto:libstock@liveborders1.org.uk)

## Feedback Form

Before returning the Loan Box, please fill in the feedback form with this pack.

This will help us to try and improve our services. Please send the completed feedback form to [libstock@liveborders1.org.uk](mailto:libstock@liveborders1.org.uk)

We hope that you have enjoyed your Loan Box experience. We have more in our collection! Please get in touch or see the live Borders website for more details. [www.liveborders.org.uk](http://www.liveborders.org.uk)