

# Edwart Orton of Swannington - Bill Hale



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Denis Baker's article on the tanning process shows it to have been an unpleasant labour intensive process at the end of the 17th century but, in industrious and skilled hands, it could certainly be a very lucrative trade to pursue. Edward Orton was a tanner in Swannington at just that time. He was born at Twycross in 1665, the son of Thomas and Eleanor Orton. Edward's mother, before her marriage, was Eleanor Muggleston, a member of the most important of Swannington Quaker families. Details of the children of Thomas and Eleanor were later entered in the record books of the Society of Friends, for Thomas on his marriage, had become a Quaker and their records confirm the date of Edward's birth showing it in the form of 21st of the 2nd Month 1665\*\*.

Thomas Orton with other Quakers from Swannington was imprisoned in "*that hell-hole, Leicester Gaol*". They subscribed to a moving letter about the conditions there on 20th of the 12th month 1660: "*It lieth upon us to give an Account of our Sufferings, we being in number twenty five, which are imprisoned because we cannot Swear ... We be, under the Oppression of a cruel Gaoler, who refuseth to let us have necessary Provision brought to us ...*" The first of the signatories was Thomas Orton's father-in-law, Edward Muggleston, who after five long years of suffering under this harsh regime died in the prison on 4th November 1661 and "*laid down his Life in sweet Peace with the Lord, to the Testimony of whose Truth he had been faithful and obedient*".

\*\* Edward Orton was born on 21st April 1665. Until 1751 the English year began on Lady day (25th March). When the change was made to 1st January the names of the months did not change so that *September, October, November* and *December* are now the 9th to the 12th not 7th to 10th as their respective names suggest. The interpretation of Quaker records is a particular trap for the unwary because Quakers never used the names of the months of January to August; they saw the use of these names as ungodly, tracing them back to pagan origins. In 1752 the calendar was again changed from the Julian to the Gregorian and 11 days were lost between 2nd and 14th September, thus 25th March became in effect 6th April. That is why the tax year still starts on that date (old New Years Day) and why, until Ken Clarke and then Gordon Brown started tinkering, the traditional time for the budget has been in the Spring.

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Records show that in 1688 Edward, by then 23 years old, was, like his parents, a Quaker. He does not seem to have remained a Friend much longer, for his name does not appear in the lists of those whose crops and animals were seized due to their refusal to pay tithes, nor does his name appear in the Minute Books of the local Quaker meetings which start in the early eighteenth century.

Edward undertook a variety of parish offices between 1693 and 1736 being once Constable and on several occasions Overseer of the Poor or Surveyor of the Highways and serving the village eleven times in all.

His wife's name was Dorcas but the record of his marriage has not been found and we do not know her maiden name. His will gives the names of members of his family and shows that he was a great grandfather by the time he signed the will a few days before his death in February 1746 at the age of 80.

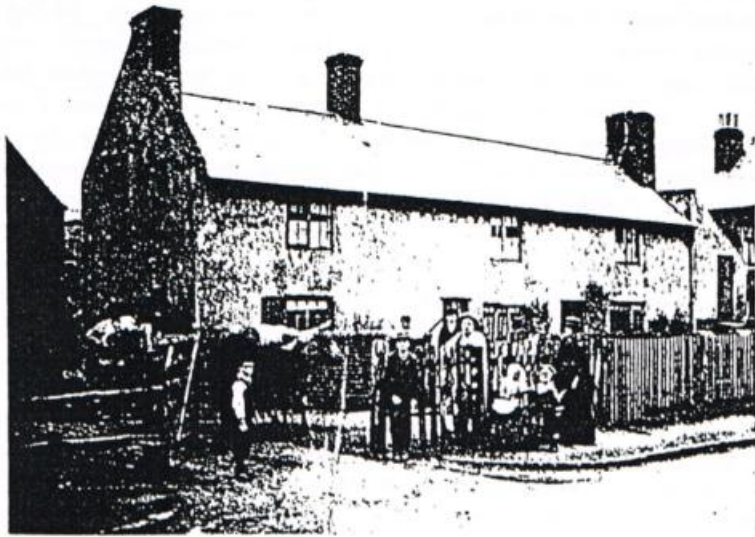
As we shall see, at least four tanners were working at that time in what was little more than a hamlet. There was, of course, extensive coal mining in the immediate area employing the most advanced techniques. There was therefore a great deal of oak being used as pit props (possibly brought in from Oakthorpe) and so there must surely have been plenty of oak bark which was needed in the tanning process. There were also reliable springs and a number of slaughter houses in the village. Swannington, the family home of his mother, was an ideal place for Edward to flourish as a tanner.

Had he remained a Quaker, Edward's death would have been followed by a simple ceremony in the Friends' burial ground at the corner of Church Lane and Main Street opposite the Smithy. In fact his funeral was quite an elaborate affair. The main item was the coffin which cost 12s., the customary gift for the Vicar of Whitwick was 10s., and then gloves for the funeral from James Bate came to £1 16s, and crepe, flannel and other small things from John Jesson added a further £2 4s 6d. There were bread and cakes from Samuel Grundy for £2 10s and five shillings' worth of ale from Robert Palmer and 10s for more ale from George Howe. In all this, Thomas Jesson was overlooked and later 1s 6d. had to be paid to him "to buy himself a pair of Gloves on account of the Deceased's death he being a relation & by mistake not having a pair of Gloves at the Funeral". But the big expense was the payment to the Apothecary for attending the deceased in his last illness - for this Mr. Mould had £8.

Edward Orton left a detailed will and from it and other documents we see that he was a farmer in a substantial way of business as well as a tanner. He occupied land as a tenant, as a lessee and as a freeholder although it would appear that most if not all the freehold properties were mortgaged. He had a valuable leasehold interest in White Leys Farm, a substantial property, near what is now Gutteridge Street in Coalville, occupied by his grandson John Orton. In Swannington his freehold holdings included ffullyloves Close, Cross Hedges Close, Windmill Close and part of Western Ditch Close. He was the holder of an eighty year lease from John Wilkins, the squire of Ravenstone, in Bareflat, Bareflat Heath, Broomy Husk, Whitwick Meadow, Arms, and Small Heath. As a tenant he had an interest in Snibston Farm and Snibston Close. Also on lease from John Wilkins was a property called Swannington Farm, it seems likely that this was his home and the site of his tanyard, where in the village it was situated we do not know.

There are signs that there must have been some friction within the family in Edward's lifetime\*\*\*, and the administration of the estate was just the occasion to fan the flames of any discord that existed. Although the will, itself, was reasonably straightforward it must have been a nightmare for the executor to account for all the work in progress in its various stages. Be that as it may, a dispute arose between the sole executor, Edward Orton's son in law, James Boulton (himself a tanner) and some members of the family who were among the beneficiaries. Boulton in accordance with the terms of the will took over the operation of Edward's tanyard and had therefore acquired, at valuation, the large stock of leather and hides that was being processed. On 7th December

\*\*\* One clause in the will was as follows "I do hereby declare that my said son Thomas Orton hath not any right or title to my stock in trade or other part of my personal estate notwithstanding his name may be made use of in the Kings Books of Excise". Again in leaving his son £100 the testator specifies "...If my son Thomas .....shall not ratify and confirm unto my wife and son in law the estate and title hereby intended for them then my mind and will is that the said legacy of One Hundred pounds to him .... shall cease and be void". One final indicator of significant friction is this further clause in Edward's will "I also order and direct that my executor shall pay off The Twenty pounds owing from my said son Thomas Orton to John Barnett for which my said Son in Law James Boulton stands engaged".



White Leys farm at the end of the 19th Century

1747 an ecclesiastical court issued a summons requiring "James Boulton of Swannington, Tanner, to appear at the Parish Church of St Martins (in Leicester) on Thursday 17th December betwixt 8 and 12 to answer Thomas Orton of Twycross and Jane Saddington of Foxton Spinster, two of the residuary legatees to render just account and make distribution". Thomas Orton must have been Edward's son and Jane Saddington one of his granddaughters.

What this meant was that a further, particularly detailed, inventory had to be compiled again with the assistance of four assessors two of whom, Robert Hall and John Burgess, were Swannington tanners.

The inventory gives an indication of the substantial scale of Edward Orton's tanning operation listing as it does the work in progress. In the tanyard there were 396 hides valued at up to a pound each, there were 27 kipps (probably

sheep skins), 6 horse hides, 74 skins (not particularised), 2 dog skins (1s 6d each), 3 pig skins and 460 calve skins valued on average at 3 shillings each. There was also an unspecified number of hides and skins in 14 tanning vats, called handlers, valued together at £93 5s 6d. In the store room there were skins and leather and still more leather, valued at £20, in the leather dressing shop at Ashby. In all the valuation for skins, hides and leather came originally to £591 13s 0d. There were other tanning items, bark was valued at £36 0s 0d, 748 horns were sold for £7 4s 0d, "All the short hair and tails" was valued at £2 5s 0d and finally "The old woozes in ye yard" was also valued at £2 5s 0d. The woozes, or ouzes, was the tanning liquor.

In the second inventory prepared in answer to the summons Boulton rather shamefacedly increases the valuation for these items:

*"The exhibitant declareth that the values above mentioned were respectively set upon all the said leather by Robert Hall and John Burgess, of Swannington aforesaid, Tanners, soon after the death of the said Edward Orton deceased, being employed as Appraisers thereof; but that the Exhibitant being solicitous to do everything in the fairest manner he is capable of lately desired them to consider*



An 18th Century French Tannery

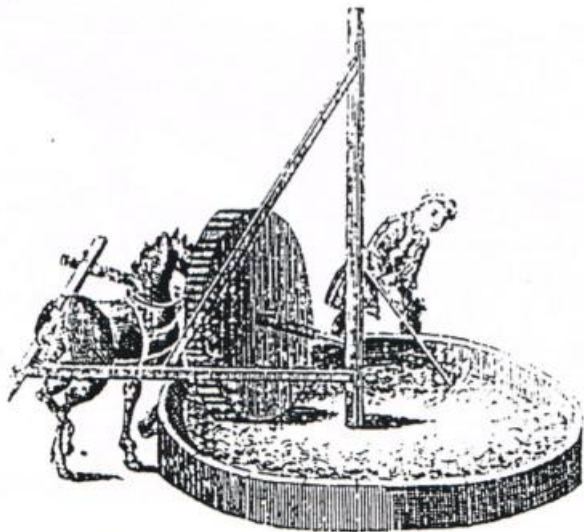
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*the value of the said Stock and in consequence of their opinion and judgement upon reconsideration the Exhibitant charges himself for the said stock with the further sum of.....£50. 0. 0d".*

The inventory of hides and leather in stock is followed by a note of current accounts, outstanding at the time of death, from £36. 0. 0d due from John Bagshaw for a parcel of leather bought from the deceased down to £1. 0. 0d owed by Lord Ferrers for Tan Muck. There are pages recording the sale of stored and harvested grain and other materials for the benefit of the estate and again familiar names crop up. Among the purchasers we find Daniel Fewkes, Robert Palmer, Richard Winters, Edward Toon, Joseph Mee, Thomas Walker and others with names still well known in the village and in the area.

While the grain, pease, straw and similar items seem to have been sold locally some of the cattle went some distance one cow was sold in Loughborough, two heifers went to Ashby and another heifer was sold at Ashby fair. A colt was sold at Burton and another prime colt was ridden all the way to Nottingham to find the best possible price at £4 14s 0d.



A 19th Century, horse, operated bark pulverising mill

Money owing in the form of longer standing debts amounted to some £344 from more than fifty people. Some of these debts dated back more than 30 years and were far from easy to collect. Boulbee notes his problems with one in particular: " .....

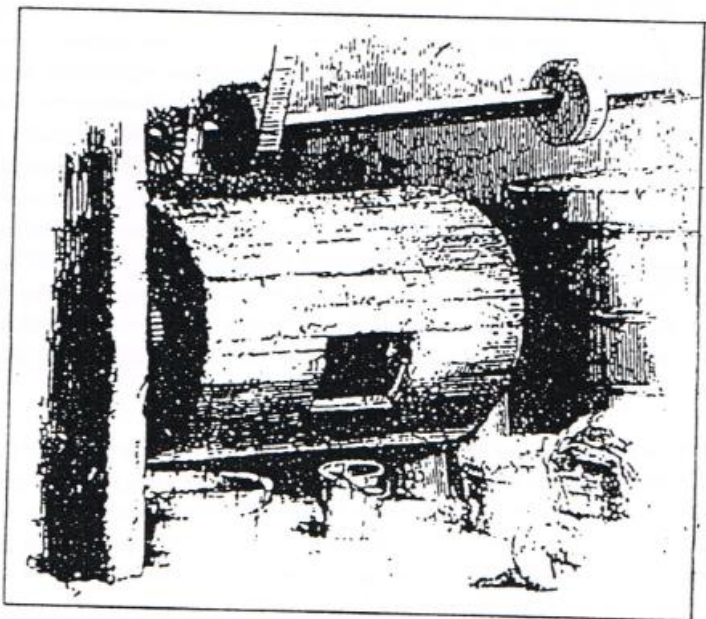
*It appears by the Deceased's debt book that George Gillever of Whittick in the County of Leicester was indebted to the Deceased in the Year 1734 in the sum of nineteen pounds and eight Shillings but soon after the time of the Deceased's death altho' there was not any evidence of the said debt besides the said Book the Exhibitant applied to the said George Gillever for the said money who objected against the payment thereof as the Debt was barr'd by the Statute of Limitations but the Exhibitant with great care and pains prevailed upon him on or about the twenty third day of September last past to promise to pay to him the Exhibitant the sum of twelve pounds at four equal payments in discharge of the said Debt in the following manner, to wit, three pounds for the first Payment on September the 23d in the year 1748 and so three pounds more every 23d day of September following 'till the twenty third day of September 1751 inclusive for which money as the same shall be received by the Exhibitant he will be answerable and not otherwise".*

Because collection of all the assets was not complete at the time that the second detailed inventory and accounts (running to twelve closely typed sheets) was drawn up we cannot say how much Edward Orton was really worth at the time of his death. In any event the multiplier to allow for inflation is grossly misleading so suffice it to say that, for his time, he was a very wealthy man indeed; he seems to have made a killing out of tanning.

Edward left his wife a legacy of £50, a life tenancy in their home and an annual income of £12. Dorcas survived her husband by only six years, dying intestate in 1751. The value of her estate, was in stark contrast to that of her husband, it amounted to only £27, made up of £1 for her clothes and £26 in savings.

Edward's grandson John continued to farm at White Leys until his death in 1792. By that time his eldest son, another John, had acquired local fame as Dr Orton of Welford, and another son, Edward, was attending the Hospitals and Lectures in London to qualify himself to practice the same profession. Most

unusually for the period when Dr Edward Orton died in Earl Shilton in 1824 a tribute to him was written in the Burial Register saying that he was "particularly noted for his great skill as M.D." He, in turn, fathered a line of general practitioners who were similarly valued in their community.



The period during which Edward Orton of Swannington flourished was perhaps the heyday of the craftsman tanner. Soon after his death the tanning process began to become increasingly mechanised, increasingly scientific and less economic for the comparatively small scale operator. Nevertheless village tanneries continued in business. The remains of a tanning drum of the type illustrated above, introduced to the industry in the 19th century, was recovered from the Tanyard next to Swannington Post Office some years ago; hundreds of horns were also found. Incrustations of tanning salts can still be seen when some of the foundations are uncovered.