



Tanning in Swannington

Working with leather may have been one of man's earliest skills, but the clothes that our distant forefathers wore must have been extremely inefficient and excruciatingly uncomfortable. Over the centuries the techniques that could turn the stiff and short lived hide into soft and durable leather were learned. The work was hard and unpleasant; the immediate environs of a tannery would have been noxious and fetid. Thus the tanner, and his family, even into this century, tended to be regarded with some disdain by the community among whom they lived. Whether this was the case in Swannington we do not know but, if Edward Orton is any guide, the tanner could bear any disdain there might have been in considerable comfort. By the middle of the 17th century the tanning process required a very high degree of skill and the trade was closely regulated. The finished products were of a consistently high standard, a standard that the government were at pains to maintain. Anyone wishing to become a tanner had to serve an apprenticeship of seven years except that there was a dispensation for the wife, son or daughter of a tanner or "*such person who shall marry such wife or daughter to whom he shall leave a tan house and vats*". A tanner could not also be a butcher and butchers were subject to serious sanctions if they sold a hide that had been torn or nicked. Months during which oak could be cut for bark were restricted to April, May and June. Only ash bark and oak bark could be used as sources of tannin and other inputs were similarly controlled. Skins could not be artificially dried. At the time of which we write, say 1680 to 1750, the law stipulated that "*No tanner shall set the vats in tan hills, or other places, where the woozes or leather shall take any unkind heat; or shall put any leather into any hot or warm woozes*". This on pain of a fine of £10 and "*the pillory on three market days in the next market town*".

Lords of liberties, fairs and markets had to appoint honest and skilful men to search out illicit trade in unsatisfactory leather. Leather offered for sale had to bear an official seal. The sensitivity of the policing function was recognized, searchers could hold office for only two years and could not be reappointed for a further three years. The fine for bribery of searchers or sealers was £40.*

* The law relating to tanning in Edward Orton's time is taken from '*The Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer*' by Richard Burn published in 1772.