

The Tanning Process - Denis Baker



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The presence of a Tan Yard within the village indicates the local operation of a significant leather treatment industry in the past, a not unusual feature in mediaeval times for there was a leather worker in most villages.

Conditions hereabouts must have been right for the industry to flourish for by the latter part of the 17th and into the 18th century there were a number of tanners operating in Swannington. A good supply of water from the springs of Redhills, a reliable running stream nearby, a ready supply of hides from local butchers, quantities of oak bark, urine, hen and pigeon droppings all ensured promise of good trade.

Trimmed hides were taken after washing and were suspended in lime pits to loosen hair and fatty tissue for periods up to several weeks. The soaking time was critical so that, when the hides were laid hair-side up on a beam, they could be scraped with a double handled blade to remove hair and dirt. They were then scraped on the under side to remove fatty tissue.

A process known as "mastering" followed, this involved treating the hides with a warm liquid paste made by soaking hen and pigeon droppings and dog dung in water. This process required great skill. For very fine leathers only dog muck, collected by puer pickers,



A German tanner at work in the 16th Century

was used in a process called "puering" and for hard sole leather fermented barley or rye was used in a process called "raising". The hides were then ready for tanning.

Tanning liquor was made by soaking bark, from coppiced oaks about 25 years old, in cold water. The hides were suspended in pits containing these fluids, being moved successively through solutions of gradually increasing strength. The hides were then laid flat, interleaved with chipped bark, in further pits again being progressed through to stronger solutions before being finally rinsed with weak tannin liquid. The leather was then washed and dried. The whole process could take up to two years according to the type of leather being produced. In 1563 parliament declared that sole leather should take a minimum of 12 months and upper leather at least 9 months.

Leather, other than that used for soles, was further treated by "currying" i.e. skiving it down after soaking in urine. It was then treated with oil and tallow and hung out to oxidise (a very smelly process) to make softer, more pliable leather. This was the work of the currier, a tanner was not permitted to undertake this work himself.

In the later 18th and into the 19th century it became important to reduce the time it took to produce the leather because so much money was held up in hides being processed. It was possible to speed up the process by heating up the liquids, but in view of the earlier legal ban on the use of heat one has to wonder whether quality was being sacrificed. Heat was applied by installing steam pipes through the treatment pits and our locally produced coal would have helped in this process. At the same time steam driven machinery became available which allowed both the knife dressing of hides and the subsequent currying to be carried out more efficiently.

By the middle of the 19th century small village tanneries were becoming uncompetitive as hides became more expensive and oak bark was increasingly in short supply. As transport improved, with the development of the railways, the setting up of large tanneries was encouraged near to the ports to handle imported hides and oak bark from the developing empire and from other countries. Cheap imports of tanned leather from other parts of the world also began to arrive in quantity.