

A NOTE ON THE BRITISH LEATHER TRADE IN 1851

Alan S. RAISTRICK*

CLARKSON (1971) observed that 200 years ago the whole leather industry, including shoemakers and saddlers, was about the same size as the iron industry. Local historians (of the last two centuries) have a tendency to claim special importance for the trade in their area, but are usually writing without knowledge of the trade outside their area. Clarkson's observation would explain any local importance, because the leather trade was important everywhere, but only more detailed country-wide research can illuminate the relative importance and regional variations in the distributions of the prime producers (the tanners), the middlemen (the curriers), and the retailers (the shoemakers and saddlers).

From a purely practical view, one would expect a tannery within a day's journey by horse and cart from anywhere where animals were slaughtered for meat, as the hide or skin starts putrefying as soon as the animal is dead. Short term preservation may include drying and/or salting, but these may be impossible because of the climate, or be too expensive because of the cost of salt.

Nationwide statistics on the state and distribution of the leather industry are available from the 1851 Census summaries⁽¹⁾. In 1851, despite the near-completion of the railway network, which had a major effect on communications and transport, there was still a countrywide spread of tanners, fairly evenly distributed, but with concentrations in the major ports, where imported hides were processed. Northampton and Walsall, both regarded as traditional centres of the industry, were of only average importance and in no way different from the rest of the country; their later importance was yet to develop.

The Victorian Parliaments were extremely interested in what was happening in the country's trade, and imports and exports are recorded in the Parliamentary Papers. The papers for 1852 record that in 1851 Britain imported 1.25 million cattle hides, principally from Argentina and Brazil, but also from British India and Australia, and c. 47,000 tanned hides

were also imported from Australia. It appears that in South America cattle were being raised solely for their hides, a most unusual occurrence. This practice was also found in California for a short period before the trans-continental railways were in place, but in this case the supply was to the American East Coast leather industry.

Unfortunately figures for British hide production are not available, and figures for the numbers of British cattle raised are not available until 1867, when there were about 5 million. We may perhaps estimate that domestic production of hides would be roughly equivalent to, or slightly less than, the number of imports.

Sheepskins were used principally for gloves and for parchment, but unfortunately the Census summaries do not differentiate between Master Glovers, who processed their own skins, and Glovers, who were poor outworkers sewing gloves for a pittance. Sheepskin tanners and dressers are a late development. To supplement home production, Britain imported nearly 2 million lambskins from Italy.

Goat skins were used for best quality gloves and for ladies' shoes. Kid skins were imported from France, and adult goat skins came principally from the U.S.A., but also from India, South Africa, and Holland, with the Dutch trade almost certainly supplying skins from the East Indies. The volume of trade amounted to around 0.5 million kid skins, and a similar number of adult goat skins. Britain also imported 3.5 million pairs of gloves to supplement the home manufacturing trade. The luxury market was also catered for, with the import of 2.5 million fur skins, varying in size from bearskins to ermine.

In order to tan and dye all these imported hides and skins 19,000 tons of bark, mostly oak-bark, were imported, mainly from Belgium. Some of the 12,929 tons of sumac (from Italy), and 12,526 tons of valonia (from Turkey), listed as for dyeing, would also have been used for tanning.

⁽¹⁾ Parliamentary Papers for 1853 and 1854

* 10 Orchard Way, Chinnor, Oxford OX9 4UD, UK.

During the hundred years after 1851, there was a steady reduction in the number of small town tanneries and a concentration of the industry in large tanneries that were able to take advantage of technological advances, and the economies of scale made possible by much easier and cheaper transport.

Bibliography

CLARKSON, L.A. (1971) : *The Pre-Industrial Economy in England, 1500-1750*
