

# J. & F. J. Baker & Co. Ltd: The Last Oak Bark Tannery in Britain

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It is a curious coincidence that two of our Spring 2017 events should be to rare survivals of once common crafts in Britain: bell-founding and leather tanning.

Colyton is a small town picturesquely grouped around a handsome church situated in the fertile vale of the river Coly close to the Devon coast, a countryside once abounding in elms. It was a Roman and early Saxon settlement on the road linking Exeter and Dorchester to which King John granted a seven-day fair, which led to it becoming one of the largest towns in Devon, shipping large quantities of wool to the Low Countries. The unusual octagonal lantern crowning the church tower was probably inspired by the Cloth Hall in Bruges.

On a sunny May afternoon, the town was a sleepy delight, with streets of regency shops and cottages set on winding slopes around the churchyard bounded by the 16th-century vicarage and the grammar school built by the Feoffees, a group of local men who clubbed together to buy the confiscated manor of Colyton from Henry VIII. A short walk past high walls sheltering hidden manors took us down to the rambling Tannery by the river.

Our host, Andrew Par, explained that until the railway age enabled almost anything to be transported long distances, every town in England would have had one or more tanneries. Until the sixties, self-sufficient Colyton had several sawmills, corn-mills, tanneries and a small iron foundry. The surviving tannery, founded in Roman times, has been owned by five generations of his family since 1862 and is now the last in Britain using the traditional oak bark tanning process. Our party were then escorted on a fascinating tour of the slow and gentle process of turning cattle skins into the finest bridle and shoe leather, within a factory using techniques learned by trial and error over hundreds of years. The highly skilled staff had only stopped work an hour before we arrived, but from the ghostly emptiness of the buildings and their lack of modern machinery, it appeared everyone had departed years ago.

Hides from local Charolais and Hereford cattle arrive from abattoirs folded and preserved with salt on pallets – Frisian cattle have bony hips and shoulders, making their skins unsuitable for large hides of consistent thickness. The hides are soaked in tanks of weak sodium sulphide to loosen the hair, then to lime baths to open up the skins to allow the tanning process to work. They are then de-haired and the fat, which later becomes tallow, scraped off in a

Andrew Par inspecting a hide in one of the clay-lined pits in the tanyard (Photo Jeremy Bate)



Ironing out the creases in the hide (Photo Jeremy Bate)



fleshing machine – both machines looking like giant mangles equipped with knives. The Pelts, as they are now called, weighing about 70 kilos each are washed to remove the lime before they are carted on trolleys down to the tanyard.

Tanning displaces water from the hide's protein fibres and cements these fibres together. Modern, less durable but

more pliable leathers are cured using mineral tanning processes which shorten the process to days or even hours, whilst traditional vegetable tanning uses extracts from roots, bark, leaves and seed husks rich in tannin. In Southern France and Italy bark from the plentiful chestnut forests was traditionally used for tanning, whilst in Russia and the Baltic birch bark was used to make 'Russian

leather'. In Britain the tanning process generally used oak bark. We learned that the bark was more valuable than the timber in days when much of our oak for furniture and joinery was imported from the Baltic. Today the best bark comes from coppices on the Welsh Marches and the Lake District where it is cut in Spring and early Summer. Arriving at Colyton it is dried and stored in pieces about eight inches long for two or three years, then ground down and soaked in cold water in alternating pits to extract the acidic tannin – 'rather like making tea'. The pits are fed by water from the river flowing alongside raised by a waterwheel and delivered to the pits by movable wooden sluices. We were invited to inspect the overshot waterwheel which we could hear long before we found it after climbing perilous ladders in near darkness within an 18th-century timber-framed building.

The liquid (the tan) is pumped to the tanyard: a long low building with a sloping floor, the few unglazed windows keeping it cool and dark since sunlight would damage the hides. What must it be like to work here on a cold winter's day? Here the tan enters a network of seventy-two clay-lined pits separated by treacherously narrow stone paths, working like a flight of canal locks on a shallow decline. The strong liquid is released through the pits becoming weaker until reaching the lowest pit where the hides are introduced to their nine-month tanning process. The hides are hung from oak poles, like a suspension filing system, ensuring an even colour. They move up from pit to pit every week until they reach the final pit with the strongest liquor. After this three month process they are taken off the sticks and layered into deeper pits in stacks of forty interleaved with handfuls of oak bark, like a giant sandwich, for some months longer. Until recently this layering was the method for the entire tanning process, the heavy sodden hides being removed weekly from the pits by hand and being re-layered – a herculean task!

After draining and naturally drying, the hides, now flexible and water resistant, are cut by hand into a pelt comprising shoulder, belly, bend and butt. Andrew assembled a complete pelt on the floor allowing us to appreciate what a large animal the Charolais is when reduced to two dimensions. He described the application of the parts of the pelt. Soles for shoes require the thickest 'bend' leather from the flank of the animal – less flexible yet pleasantly lightweight for the wearer, whilst bridle will require thinner, softer and more pliable hide from the 'shoulder', usually naturally creased by the movement of the animal's neck. We were then given a demonstration of a worn but highly efficient 19th-century cast-iron machine operated by a giant foot pedal which sent a brass roller travelling backwards and forwards across the hide to iron

out the creases – ‘slower but more effective’ we were told, than the modern Italian machine standing alongside. Manoeuvring the hide under the roller and turning to us to explain the process, Andrew avoided crushing his fingers under the roller by a whisker!

Finishing the leather with natural colours and blends of fish oils and greases pounded into the hides to replace the natural moisture of the original skin is traditionally the work of the curriers, once a separate guild: the aristocrats of the tanning world. We were told that within living memory the curriers demanded to work behind closed doors to keep the secrets of their work escaping. The finished product takes fourteen months to produce and is much sought by traditional Northampton shoemakers and equestrian harness makers worldwide. Apart from soles for the shoe trade, cut to size in the tannery before shipment, all leather is supplied untrimmed to order, priced by the square foot, with a lead-time of a year, which must leave some clients bemused. We learned that whilst these hides tend to be too heavy for traditional upholstery, some are now being used on innovative modern furniture and even as floor covering.

The Society is indebted to the generosity of Andrew Par who gave up an afternoon of his valuable time to give our group an unforgettable insight into historic tanning processes and to Frances Allhusen who suggested and arranged the tour on our behalf. So often the best Society events are those inspired by our members’ enthusiasms and personal contacts.

*Jeremy Bate*