

Bark Mills, Tanneries and Donkeys.

Following the RFS visit to the Tannery at Colyton in Devon, I came across these notes on 'interesting things of the past' in my late husband, Michael Legg's, collection on Dorset. They were written by the Dorset artist J. B. Clark (1857-1938), who was born and brought up in Cerne Abbas (see the cover of the *RFS Newsletter* 40, Spring 2004) and were included in a small booklet, *Concerning Cerne*, written and published by Eleanor Frances Hall in 1926. She notes that Cerne was famous for tanning leather; her analysis of an 1851 Directory includes six boot and shoe makers, three saddlers and four Tawers and parchment makers (Taw was white parchment). I hope other members will also enjoy the additional context the notes give to the working of local tanneries.

Polly Copperwheat

Notes on Cerne Tanneries by Joseph Benwell Clark

Within the memory of older inhabitants of Cerne today, there were two bark mills working in the tan-yards, one driven by water power at the Lower Yard, near the corner of the lane by the footbridge over the stream, this was Norman's – and the other, Hellyar's – a one-horse-power machine in Acreman Street. The horse attached to a large beam, walking round and round the interior of an outbuilding, turned the mill, which was built on the lines of a coffee-mill suitable for the Giant.

Oak trees grown in the Vale of Blackmore provided the bark, which was made into large stacks. When dry and curled up like cinnamon, it was ready for the milling process. It was then thrown into the top of the machine and torn to a fibrous condition. Fanny Hicks fed the mill. When it was ready for the pits, it was taken up from the foot of the mill in large wooden shovels to be borne away in large baskets by two men. Placed through the handles at the top of the baskets was a pole which the bearers rested on their shoulders, on their return journey bringing back more to the mill.

One remembers that a fine dust pervaded these mills making a golden haze where the slanting rays of sunlight shone in at the open door.

There was a legend that these tanner's men were so well tanned during life that after death they did not, like baser mortals, decompose.

In the Lower Tan-yard, after the tan had been used in the pits and had become a sodden mass, it was spread on the ground and trodden into a paste by walking a horse over it for a considerable time. It was then pressed into an iron frame, square in shape, perhaps eight inches across. When moulded, these cakes were carefully placed in rows on a wooden rack and left to dry. These brown cakes were known as 'turves' and were sold to the villagers for fuel. They were, no doubt, inexpensive and of use for keeping a fire going, as they smouldered rather than flamed. The dried 'vuz' bush added to it provided the flame for the boiling of the pot. The furze was cut on Black Hill when it was dry, and it was rolled down to the bottom in bundles. In the autumn many a person's occupation would be described as 'gone up vuzzen'.

A by-product of the tanneries was the wool scraped off the skins. It was packed into large sacks and when a load was completed, it would be sent down to Dorchester in a waggon. The horses of the waggon wore bells, and when it was starting, the children would run out to see, calling to one another: 'The bell-horses, the bell-horses'.

(An illustration of the extraordinary thoroughness of the tanning of those days is supplied by the discovery in the present saddler's stock of leather marked 'Ten Years' Process').

Water was carried to the cottages on Black Hill in four-gallon wooden barrels slung on a donkey's back. The barrels were filled from the water under the little trap-door by the roadside at the top of Long Street. Blackbird was a donkey noted for sagacity. Making three journeys on weekdays, he was only required to make two on Sundays, and nothing would induce him to make a third trip on the day he heard the Church bells.

John Curme, the lime burner, had twelve donkeys, with wooden box panniers to carry lime to the fields, a sight that always suggested Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.