

The 'Art and Myserie' of the Currier

With grateful thanks to S Drummond, the author of this article.

First published in the *Family Tree Magazine* Volume 11, No. 11 September 1995

Man has worn leather since the beginning of recorded history. Thousands of our ancestors were employed in the trade. Hats, gloves, shoes, boots, jackets, jerkins and trousers were popularly made of leather, particularly from medieval times until the 19th century. There was also a huge demand for riding and farming equipment made from the material. The trade changed with the arrival of synthetic fabrics and the decline of horse transport, but leather is still important in the luxury market today. Craftsmen developed skills associated with different aspects of the trade. Some still exist today, such as those of the tanner, cobbler and saddler. Other skills, such as those of the Cordwainer and Currier, do not. For many years they were all interlinked, each craftsman dependent on the skills of the others for his living.

The trade of currying was a vital part of the early leather industry. Currying was the name given to the process of stretching and finishing tanned leather, thus, rendering it supple and strong for the use of a saddler or cobbler.

The name Currier is believed to be taken from the Latin term 'corium'. The corium is the central skin layer between the outer epidermis and the flesh underneath, made up of a complex series of fibres. The make up of this layer dictates the difference in texture between leathers.

Traditionally, animal skins were cured by treating them with animal fat. This stage was followed by leaving them stretched out to dry, either in the sun or before a fire. In Britain, due to the climate, the skin was normally dried in front of a fire. This basic system was in use thousands of years before Christ and was still used on buffalo skins by North American Indians in the late 1800's. Medieval Europeans improved upon these methods and those tradesmen skilled in the methods of making skins into a flexible, durable material, grew in importance.

To understand the role performed by the Currier, it is necessary to look at the earlier stages in the leather-making process. An animal skin was first delivered to a tannery, generally located in a town. There it was soaked and cleaned of any remnants of animal tissue. The skin then underwent the "liming" procedure, where it was repeatedly washed and left in a solution of quick lime to increase absorbency. After being cut to a suitable size, the skin was placed in successive tanks of progressively stronger tanning solution. The solution used for tanning was traditionally made from oak bark.

The unfinished leather now passed to the Currier, whose craft was to transform the stiff material into a pliant, workable material for the final craftsman to transform into the finished product. Curriers were found in many villages, indeed sometimes the Currier was also the local shoemaker.

The art of currying leather was hard manual labour, needing great skill and a range of special hand tools. The Currier worked on a variety of hides, principally ox, cow, calf, goat, sheep, pig and deer. He may have occasionally dressed squirrel and rabbit. The hide was first stretched on a variety of different frames, depending on the type of leather to be curried. The Currier would gradually tighten the frame, notch by notch, from every direction until satisfied that the hide was as taut as possible. Another method of stretching the skin was by using an implement resembling a mangle or rack, where a handle was turned, gradually tightening the material.

Once stretched, the tanned leather was washed and scrubbed. This part of the process was demanding physical labour, to soften the hide. The Currier then went to work with a 'sleeker', a short bladed knife. The sleeker forced the remaining tanning fluid from the hide. The skin was then ready to be dressed, to make it smooth, waterproof, strong and flexible.

The inner side of the skin was made more even by the use of a currying knife or 'shave'. The blade of this knife ran at right angles to the handle, thus enabling it to be worked like a wood plane, shaving the surface of the leather. This part of the process called for great skill and judgement. Too steep a cut could render a valuable hide worthless. (*Four pairs of crossed shaves, and a single shave held aloft, now form prominent features on the coat of arms of the Worshipful Company of Curriers.*)

The currying knife was also used for the delicate task of splitting the leather into different widths. Of course, the thickness required was dictated by the purpose for which the leather was intended. The suppler split leather was used for the uppers of shoes and boots. The heavier leather from the 'butt' or backbone of the skin was used for soles.

Once it had been trimmed to a suitable size and thickness, the Currier actually carried out the process of currying. That is, massaging into the leather equal quantities of beef tallow and cod liver oil. Once curried, leather could be used for a wider range of purposes, and also stained or dyed. The work of British Curriers was held in high esteem throughout Europe.

Like most rural trades, currying often became a family tradition with skills passed from father to son. The finished product was frequently taken by other members of the family, living in the same village, for crafting into shoes, gloves, belts or some such.

The craft was practised in villages across the whole of Britain. When an ancestor is found showing his trade as Currier in a census return, it is likely that other family members will be engaged in the leather trade. Although places like Glastonbury in Somerset and the Northampton area developed into centres of the leather industry, smaller cottage leather treatment works could be found across the length and breadth of the country.

In London, at the end of the 16th century, there was a Currier's Lane off Fleet Street, another off Bristol Street and a Currier's Arms Inn Yard in Goswell Street. The majority of London Curriers appear to have resided in the Farringdon Road and Fleet Street area.

It was necessary to serve a seven year apprenticeship before following the trade. The apprentice Currier was bound similarly to those in other professions. It was stated that, Until a man grows unto the age of 23 years, he has not grown unto the full knowledge of the trade he professes. The apprentice lived with the family, being fed, housed and clothed by his master. He could not qualify until submitting a proof-piece of his work for inspection. Many of the apprenticeship records survive today, providing records of both master and apprentice Curriers.

The earliest record of currying in England is in the City of London Coroner's Roll for 9 February 1276. This covers an inquest into the death of a Currier's wife living off Newgate Street, London. She apparently died as a result of a broken leg after falling down drunk in the street!

By the 14th century, Curriers were men of importance, but had no independent trade guild. Their prosperity was due in part to the demand for leather from soldiers engaged in wars with France and Scotland. Leather was used to link plates of armour, as well as for items of soldier's clothing.

The earliest rules of the trade were recorded in 1300. These laid down the maximum prices a Currier could charge a skinner for the dressing of skins. Four 'searchers' were empowered to enforce these rules, one of whom was a Currier. Any Currier charging too much would have a fine imposed by these four men, according to the degree of transgression. As an example, the Currier could not take more than 7 pence for dressing the skins of a hundred 'scrimpyns' (a skin of inferior quality to that of the rabbit).

In 1485, during the reign of Henry VII, further laws for the trade were laid down. Leather discovered improperly 'tanned, sealed and curried', could result in the Currier facing five days in jail and a 20-shilling fine - 10 for the King and 10 to the wronged party. If a Currier should carry out the tanning of a skin, he faced a fine of 6 shillings and 8 pence for each skin so treated.

In 1559, Parliament passed an Act affecting the leather industry, designed to improve standards and stop some improper practices. Curriers were forbidden the use of 'stale uryne or any other deceipfull or subtill mixture' to cure hides. No leather was to be stripped too thinly or sold with a blemish. Fines and forfeits were entered on the statute book.

The Curriers had to wait until 1583 before they were granted arms, which, not surprisingly, featured the curry knife as the centrepiece. Then, in the 17th century, James I incorporated the Currier's Guild. This gave the trade powers of search and inspection within the City of London, thus enabling it to enforce craft standards. The Curriers formed their own City of London Livery Company. The original charter, dating from 30 April 1605, is preserved at Guildhall. This lays down rules and regulations for Curriers belonging to the Livery Company, including such statutes as

a 'fine of 4 pence a day with meat and drink from the Master, if a Journeyman be unemployed through the Master's default' and a fine of 6 pence for the journeyman if he should absent himself from work. The charters, books and records of the company, appertaining to London Curriers, were deposited with Guildhall Library for safekeeping in 1950.

The Company published bye-laws on 4 June 1605. These imposed fines for poor workmanship, and standardised regulations for premises where currying may be carried out. They should be 'fitting and convenient for the use of the said art.' Work on leather had to cease at noon on Saturday and the afternoon had to be employed in cleaning houses, sharpening tools and 'grayning and shaving of boote legges against the next working day'.

The early history of the Curriers can be researched at Guildhall Library, the Public Records Office and the British Museum. Names are listed in letterbooks, journals, coroner's rolls, Plea and Memoranda Rolls, Wills of the Court of Husting and Court Minutes of the Livery Company.

The trade steadily declined in the early part of this century. In Suffolk, for example, White's Directory listed 40 Curriers working in 1844. By 1922 only eight remained. At the start of the Second World War there were none.

The process of currying still takes place today. Leather still needs to be supple, durable and the right texture for the finishing process. However, today currying has been largely incorporated into the tanning stage and no separate trade exists. The heavy physical task of treating the skin is now carried out by machine, except in the case of certain high value goods, which are still hand finished. Generally speaking, the arrival of the machine age effectively killed off the trade.