



TANNING AND TANNERS

A local leather industry has been in evidence for several hundred years. Hats, gloves, shoes, jackets, jerkins and breeches were probably made from locally-tanned animal hides; as well as leather bottles and buckets, saddles and harness, which were everyday necessities in the farming community.

The area has an abundance of oak trees, cattle hides from local and distant farms, water from various tributaries of the River Eden and local lime production; the four essentials in the tanning process.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several generations of the Underhill family are known to have been tanners; the family lived at White House Farm, Baldwins Hill, Lingfield (now known as Cromwell Hall).

A map of John Gainsford's lands in Crowhurst, dated April 1679, shows that Gateland Farm (later Gatlands Farm) in Crowhurst was previously known as Tanners Farm; '*John Gateland holdeth a small farm (12 acres) called Tanners Farm*' (Ref. 1 below). The farm was later the home of Robert Boreman of Crowhurst, tanner, who died in 1715.

Before the large scale organisation of the tanning industry in the seventeenth and later centuries, the most likely method of tanning was the use of natural, and or, man-made ponds as tan-pits. Ponds can still be seen adjacent to Cromwell Hall, Baldwins Hill, and Gatelands Farm, Crowhurst.

The building opposite to Lingfield Racecourse was until the end of the nineteenth century known as Lingfield Tannery. The site was in use as a tannery in the seventeenth century, if not earlier. The Mansion House of Batnors, otherwise Battners, together with the Tanyard, Drying Sheds and Mill thereto adjoining was bought by James Farindon in 1684. The tannery building was rebuilt and developed by J T Kelsey in about 1840.

Tanning process

Oak Bark: The solution used for tanning was traditionally made from oak bark. L A Clarkson has estimated that 90% of all leather was tanned with oak bark. The best bark came from the young trees of twenty years growth, cultivated in coppices. Stripping was mainly done in the spring when the sap was rising. The bark was levered off, and then stacked in the dry before being ground at a local mill.

Sawyers, Carpenters and Peelers were hired to fell and remove the bark. The easiest way of peeling was to take the bark from trees that were still standing. The peelers used an iron 'spud', consisting of a rod about two feet long, with a handle at one end and a point shaped like the ace of spades at the other.

Strips of bark were propped up to dry in the sun and the wind. Drying was usually complete in about a fortnight then carted to the tan-yard.

The bark was ground into pieces, two to three inches long, and packed into sacks. Bark-grinding mills were introduced in the eighteenth century. The grindstone had a toothed rim. In their simplest form the grindstone was propelled by horse power around a circular trough. The grindstone in the picture below was found on site at Lingfield Tannery in 1980. It was part of the mechanism of Kelsey's purpose-built mill and sited within the semi-circular wall on the road-facing facade of the building. The floor at first floor level was especially strengthened to support the mill post. Water was diverted from the Eden Brook, controlled by sluice gates, then by a series of conduits used to supply the tan-pits and the mill.



Oak bark from this region was highly prized by tanners because of its high tannin content. Much of it was grown in the traditional iron-making districts in the Weald, where it was used for manufacturing charcoal. The combination of the tannic acid of the oak bark with the gelatine of the hide slowly tanned the hide. J T Kelsey soaked his hides in oak bark solution for up to two years.

Animal hides The most important influence on the location of tanning was the supply of hides. Local grazing provided hides and skins and supplies were supplemented from elsewhere.

The animal skins were graded into three categories:

Butts: the thickest and best quality part of a hide or skin, principally used for the soles of stout shoes

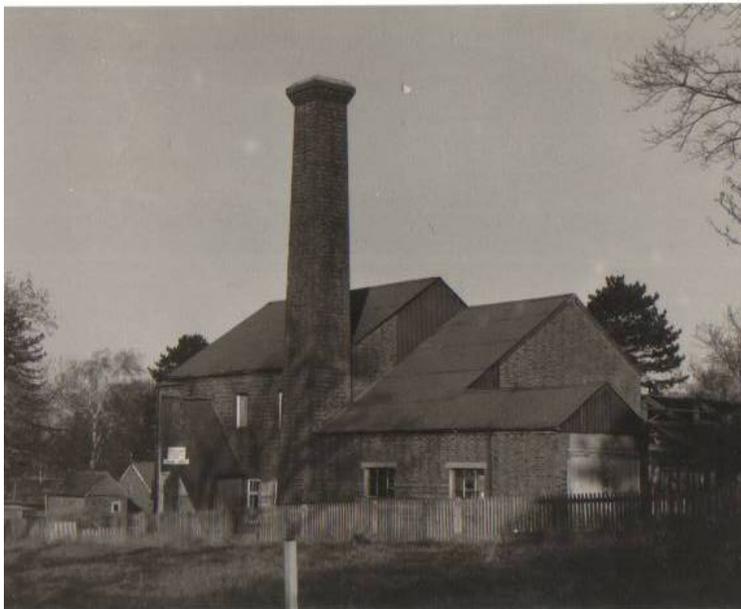
Hides: generally made of cow-hides or ox-hides, also called **crop-hides**

Skins: the skins of calves, seals, hogs, dogs etc.

The animal skins were first soaked and cleaned of any remnants of hair and flesh. The skin then underwent the 'liming' procedure, where it was repeatedly washed and left in a solution of quick lime, for about 12 hours, to increase absorbency. After being cut to size, the skin was placed in successive tanks of progressively stronger tanning solution.

The Currier Currying was the name given to the process of stretching and finishing tanned leather, thus rendering it supple and strong. The trade of 'currying' leather was hard manual labour. The tanned hide was first stretched on a variety of different frames. The Currier would gradually tighten the frame, notch by notch, from every direction until satisfied that the hide was as taut as possible.

Once stretched, the tanned leather was washed and scrubbed. A range of special hand tools were used. A 'sleeker', a short bladed knife, forced the remaining tanning fluid from the hide. A Curry Comb', or knife, was used on the inner side of the skin. The blade 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: too steep a cut could render a valuable hide worthless. Edward Linfield (*sic*) who had property in Lingfield including a house at Felcourt until his death in April 1741 had a 'Curry Comb' listed in the inventory of his possessions (Ref 2 below). Traditionally, animal skins were massaged with equal quantities of beef tallow and cod liver oil. This stage was followed by leaving them stretched out to dry before a fire.



Batners Tannery, Lingfield

On 13th March 1820 John Turner Kelsey purchased land including the Manor House of Batners and the various Tannery buildings from James Farindon, descendent of the James Farindon who purchased the property in 1684



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This map clearly shows the extensive buildings that existed to the north and north-west of the present building. A sluice gate allowed water from the Eden Brook to be drawn to supply the pits in the Tan Yard.

John Turner Kelsey built the present building in about 1840, from local bricks made in the brickyard in Bakers Lane, Lingfield.

The tannery became so successful that J T Kelsey exhibited at the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all the Nations, which was held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park between 1st May and 15th October 1851.

The Exhibition Catalogue shows that Mr Kelsey 'put forward 1 crop hide of North Wales runt of the great weight of 82 pounds, tanned with Sussex oak-bark; used for boot and shoe soles and for machinery'.

The Jury made 'honourable mention of KELSEY, J T of Lingfield, Sussex (sic) for a well-tanned crop hide'. The process of tanning – that is, of the combination of the tannic acid of the oak bark with the gelatine of the hide - is generally a slow one; in the present instance remarkably so. New methods of hastening it forward have been introduced; but it is said that the leather thus produced is not equal in solidity and durability to that obtained in the ordinary slow manner'.

On Thursday 12th June 1851 a party of 780 people from Lingfield, Crowhurst, Felbridge and Limsfield set out to visit the 'Great Exhibition' of 1851. The excursion was organized by the Reverend Thomas Palmer Hutton, then incumbent of Lingfield Church. The cost including travel was 3 shillings and 2d each; local landowners and employers contributed to the cost, some provided transport to the Railway Station at South Godstone.

The party travelled by a series of carts to Godstone Station, then train to London Bridge, boat down the River Thames to Westminster Bridge, they then walked across Hyde Park to the Crystal Palace. The Morning Chronicle of June 13th, 1851 reported the arrival of the party in the Great Hall of the Exhibition:

'Between twelve and one o'clock a very striking and gratifying incident occurred – the entrance of a body of nearly 800 yeomen and agricultural labourers, all looking clean and comfortable, most of them in smock frocks, each bearing on his breast a small rosette of coloured ribbon; and evidently in some degree organized ...many of whom were accompanied by their wives and children...It was amusing to observe how they seemed almost to stand in awe of the building; its greatness paralyzed them... [the] leaders had prepared sticks on which were fixed cards with their names which they held up, in order to 'rally their men'...Before they had been in the building ten minutes the cry was raised – 'the boy Saunders is lost!' But the good people were assured that the boy would not be in any peril.'

They surely must have taken great pride in seeing there, the great hide from their own local Tannery. It is very likely that a few, if not all, of Kelsey's employees and their families would have been in the party that day.

According to the Census of 1851, 'the boy Saunders' was four-years-old Thomas Sa[u]nders who lived with his parents, Amos and Elizabeth and baby brother James at Puttenden. Amos Sa[u]nders was an agricultural labourer.

Unfortunately records of Kelsey's business have not survived in the public domain. Nevertheless nineteenth century Trade Directories and Census Returns give some details of the business and its workforce. On the night of Sunday 6th June, 1841 (when the

Census was taken) John Turner Kelsey, then aged fifty, described as 'Tanner and Farmer', lived at Batners with his wife, three sons and two daughters. He also had five domestic servants living with his family, and employed four tanners and one agricultural labourer. The agricultural labourer, and one of the tanners, lived with their families in the two cottages behind the Tannery.

There were sixteen shoemakers living in the parish in 1841 who most likely obtained their supplies of leather from J T Kelsey, as too did the two local saddlers and harness makers in Lingfield and Blindley Heath.

By 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, six tanners, in addition to John Kelsey, were included in the Census, which that year was taken on Sunday 30th March. The number of shoemakers and cobblers had risen to twenty.

The number of tanners continued to increase to a maximum of seventeen in 1881, by that time John Kelsey's youngest son, Anthony was the proprietor of the Tannery, although he no longer lived in Batners Hall. By 1891 Anthony Kelsey employed nine tanners. The tannery continued to produce leather for shoemakers, harness makers and for machinery until about 1897.

The premises were then used for other industrial purposes, including a later forge. The chimney remains a local landmark. In the 19th century the unmistakable smell from the tannery must have travelled a considerable distance!

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Sources:

¹ Surrey History Centre, Ref 6960/1. A copy of the map of John Gainsford's lands in Crowhurst is held in Lingfield Library

² The National Archive [PROB 3/40/53]

The Morning Chronicle, Friday June 13th, 1851

The English Bark Trade, 1660 – 1830 by L A Clarkson

The Leather Crafts of Tudor and Stuart England by L A Clarkson

The 'Art and Mysterie' of the Currier by S Drummond

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Kelly's Directories (microfiche copies available in Lingfield Library)

Census of the Population, Returns for 1841 – 1901 (microfiche copies in Lingfield Library)