

TANNING AND ASSOCIATED TRADES

As early as 1669 there is reference to a John Powell, fellmonger, buying a 'house with a hemp-plot between the highway leading through Whately towards London on the north and a little brook on the south'.

Hemp was used for rope making. It was also used in the manufacture of paper.

Both paper and parchment were used for documents. As early as 1672 Wolvercote Mill had ceased grinding corn and was being used for paper making. There was a huge demand for both products by the University.

It is probable that there were fellmongers here at the east end of the village for generations before John Powell and certainly until the mid-19th century. The processes connected with fellmongering required a source of water and so the stream coming through the back yards of the properties was essential. As it was a rather messy business, there was the likelihood of contamination of the water. Being at the bottom end of the village meant that this would be less of a problem.

Associated trades seem to have been concentrated in this area. It is not clear if the different premises were used for a stage of the tanning and currying process or if each were independent.

Many Crook family members appear to have been engaged in the trade, certainly from the beginning of the 19th century, but probably before. There were two Noahs of about the same age, one living 1757-1825 and the other 1763-1826. In the next generation there were George, William and James. The family were also involved in parchment making.

Large quantities of dried oak bark would be delivered to the local tannery. Here the bark's tannin would be extracted ready for use by soaking the bark, now finely ground, in tanks filled with cold water. These tanks were called leaching pits. The tanning of raw animal hides using oak bark could take up to twelve months or more.

Before the hides could be tanned they had to be prepared. They were washed and cleaned and then placed in lime baths to loosen the hair roots and lower layers of epidermis so that both could be removed. The length of time that the hides remained in the lime baths depended on the quality of leather required. Soft shoe leather could need up to six weeks. After removal the hides were scraped clean (the job of the fellmonger) and finally placed in the pits containing the tanning liquor before being, at a later stage, hung to dry.