

## **Traditional Tanning & Currier Processes**

There were about 120 tanneries in Scotland in the early 1800's and the main leather trades were: boot & shoes; saddlers & harness makers; and gloves. The two principle branches of leather making were tanning and currying – these were sometimes different trades because of the various excise taxes levied.

### **Tanning**

- 1 The hides arrived either fresh or, if imported, salted or dried.
- 2 All hair was removed by steeping in pits with a solution of lime & water, and then scraped on both sides.
- 3 They were then cleansed for grease & other impurities by soaking in a mixture of pigeon dung.
- 4 They were then softened, by beating for 20 minutes.
- 5 Careless butchers who had removed the hides cause great difficulty for tanners with cuts etc
- 6 The quality of the leather depends highly on the tanning process. The objective of the tanner is to destroy any chance of putrefaction and render them impervious to normal risks of decomposition. This is achieved by steeping them in pits /tanks of tannic acid (from bark or mustard seed) – it is a slow process.
1. Note: Before the arrival of the steam pump many 'pumpers' and 'water beaters' were required
- 7 The bark is ground in a bark mill and then infused with water. First the hides are steeped in a weak solution for about 4/6 months, with regular increases of the strength of the solution.
- 8 Then they are spread out over each other with oak bark between and steeped in a strong solution for about 4/6 months. The whole process above could take as much as 2 years for heavy hides, with these traditional methods. Many attempts were made to accelerate this process.

### **Currying**

- 1 The business of the curriers was to dress the hides for use. Apart from splitting the hide all work was done by hand. It is no pleasant and very heavy work. Splitting can take place before or after tanning - this is done by machine with a knife moving fast between two rollers.
- 2 The hides are weighed, inspected and classified by quality. Cuts or flaws (from the butchers work) cause many hides to be rejected. The currier begins by steeping the hides in water.
- 3 Hides are trimmed according to their potential use and uneven thicknesses are shaved – which requires great skill. He then scours them to remove any wrinkles and superfluous matter.
- 4 They are then left in a solution of shumac and water to brighten the colour.
- 5 They are then 'stuffed' – rubbed on the hair side with oil, and on the flesh side with oil & tallow. This makes the leather pliable and prevents it from getting hard.
- 6 The leather is then finished in a variety of ways depending on its use – rubbing, polishing, blackening, graining, enameling, japanning.