

Skills and Crafts of Our Ancestors

A report of the talk given by Derek Palgrave
at the D&DFHS Monthly Meeting on 25 Feb 2009

After the AGM, Derek Palgrave, our President, entertained us with his interesting look at the skills and crafts of our ancestors. Derek's presentation was based upon a series of illustrations gathered from various archives. Some of the artists certainly had a sense of humour and still managed to raise a laugh from the audience today. We were amused to see our 14th century forebears weeding their crops. It did not appear to be back-breaking work. There was no need to stoop as the task was undertaken from a standing position using long-handled implements similar to those claimed to be a modern invention. Most of these drawings were not to scale and the implements being used were twice the size of the people using them.

The audience learned how their ancestors occupations were the origins of some surnames. Many occupations were linked to food production. Warreners managed rabbit warrens to provide meat. As there was no source of sugar in England, honey was used as the main sweetener and beekeeping was another lucrative occupation.

Derek explained how textile production was achieved by craftsmen who were carding, spinning, dyeing and weaving to produce woollen cloth, a prolific occupation from 1400 to 1700. The process of bleaching cloth was usually carried out outside when sunlight was combined with sour milk and urine. We heard how traditional dyes were made from woad (blue), cochineal (red) and even shellfish (purple). Mordants were used to fix colours. The dyers kept their colour recipes secret, a practice that continued until quite recently. Other craftsmen carried out each stage of the process such as teasing, pressing, shearing the nap and then tailors created the final articles. Leather production was extremely unpleasant and those living close to a tannery had to suffer the odour of dung and urine, which were used in the process. The people who worked there wouldn't have come home "smelling of roses" at the end of the day.

Our ancestors were very inventive, especially when faced with a need to transport water. Pictures of people carrying water illustrated a vessel that was large at the bottom and small at the top to prevent spillage, later giving way to wheels, troughs, bucket elevators and aqueducts. We saw illustrations depicting Wheelwrights, Stonemasons and Thatcher's plying their trade. The concept of "Health and Safety" did not exist. There was no finer example than the pictures of early coal mining being carried out by men with an open-flamed candle on their heads.

Many of our ancestors made a living obtaining salt from sea water by evaporation when heat was applied by burning peat. We were surprised to see that hundreds of salt works were listed in the Domesday Book.

*Karen Walker, Editor
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