

THE MORNING CHRONICLE SURVEY OF LABOUR AND THE POOR

The Metropolitan Districts
Volume 6

Henry Mayhew

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HENRY MAYHEW



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LETTER LXIX

Thursday, September 12, 1850

I now come to describe the numbers, state, and earnings of the Coopers of London. In 1841 there were 18,379 persons belonging to this trade in Great Britain, 13,550 of whom were resident in England, 3,825 in Scotland, 812 in Wales, and 192 in the British Isles. As regards the age and sex of these, 16,012 of the number located in Great Britain, of twenty years and upwards were males, and 121 females, while of those under that age, 320 were males and 55 females.

Such was the number belonging to the trade at the time of taking the last census. In 1831 the coopers were more numerous in some counties and less numerous in others. By referring to the Occupation Abstracts for the two last decennial periods, we find that the greatest increase amongst the coopers of twenty years of age and upwards, over and above the increase of the population of the same age, occurred in the following counties, in the proportions below stated. The county in which the greatest increase took place was Lanark, where the trade was augmented 50 per cent. more than the cotemporaneous increase of the population. In Stafford the increase was 38 per cent. above that of all other classes in the same county. Kinross showed an augmentation equal to 32 per cent. Bucks and Flintshire each 31 per cent., Durham 30 per cent., Lancaster 29 per cent., and Forfar 21 per cent., over and above the other inhabitants of those districts. The counties in which the greatest decrease occurred were the following:—

In Carnarvon (taking into consideration the increase of all other classes in the same locality) the coopers diminished, from 1831-41, as much as 49 per cent., in York city and Austy 40 per cent., in Brecon 39 per cent., in Renfrew 37 per cent., in Ayr 38 per cent., in Roxburgh and Selkirk each 30 per cent., in Hertford, Denbigh, and Merioneth each 29 per cent., and in the North Riding of Yorkshire 27 per cent. The number of coopers in all England increased 3 per cent. over and above the population generally, whereas in Wales there was a decrease of 12 per cent., and in Scotland an increase of 37 per cent. In the whole of Great Britain, however, the coopers, in comparison with the rest of the population, decreased one per cent. In the metropolis, with which we are here more particularly concerned, there was an increase of 13 per cent. over and above all other classes. The number of

London coopers at the time of taking the last census was as follows:— Twenty years of age and upwards – males, 3,098; females, 22. And under twenty years of age – males, 369; making together a total of 3,489. Considering the trade to have increased since that period at the same rate as formerly, there must be very nearly 4,000 coopers at present located in London. Of this number about 300 may be said to be employers (the “Post-office directory” gives the names of 291 coopers in business for themselves), so that it would appear that the Metropolitan Operative Coopers amount to somewhere about 3,700.

The trade of the cooper is divided into wet, dry, white, and general coopers. The wet (or tight) cooper makes every kind of vessel used for the reception of liquids – such as wines, spirits, beer, vinegar, oil, and water. The dry cooper, on the other hand, makes the casks used to contain dry goods – such as sugar, bottled wines, cement, linens, biscuits, and for dry packages generally. The white cooper forms tubs, pails, churns, and similar articles; while the block, or general cooper, is practised in all of these branches.

The wet, or tight, work, is that which requires the greatest exercise of skill in the cooper’s art. Oak is the material which the “wet cooper” forms in to the wine, spirit, beer, vinegar, or water cask. Five kinds of oak are used – Quebec, Virginia, Dantzic, Hamburg, and English. For vessels to contain spirits or any liquid not liable to fermentation, Quebec and Virginia oak is used, Quebec being the best on account of the closeness of its grain. The other three kinds of oak are of a more porous and more durable quality, and are used for the manufacture of beer casks, or whenever fermentation is likely to ensue. English oak is by far the best and hardest, and requires in its working such an exercise of strength and skill, that the cooper receives about 30 per cent. higher wages for making an English oak barrel than for any other. For molasses hogsheads a very porous American timber, called “reed” or “red,” oak, is employed. This oak expands, or, as is technically said, “gives” to the treacle; and yet even with this quality there must be two vent holes by the bung-hole to allow the molasses to work through, and to admit air, so as to check fermentation, or the cask would assuredly burst. Molasses cannot be contained in a tight cask. These hogsheads, however, are now seldom made in this country; they are usually sent from the United States to the West India islands.

The manufacture of wine casks in this country is but an inconsiderable portion of the cooper’s trade. All foreign wines are imported in casks made in the country whence the importation has taken place. In the French, Spanish, and Portuguese vineyards the cooper’s establishment occupies an important position. Madeira, however, is an exception to the rule, that island supplying no timber altogether suitable for wine casks, which are consequently sent out ready made from this country; sometimes, however,

Quebec oak staves are exported, and put together by Portuguese coopers at the Madeira vineyards. The Spanish sherry “butts” and the Portuguese port “pipes” are good specimens of the cooper’s art; they are as well made by native workmen as they could be in London, little advanced as the people of the Peninsula may be in industrial arts of manufactures. The port pipes are of a peculiar form, being narrower at the ends and higher at the “bouge” (the bulge, or centre) than any other casks; they are made of a native oak, resembling English, but more open in the veins, less knotty and more easily worked, and the staves are not sawn, but hewn. The sherry butts are wider than the port pipes, and have less “bouge.” The Portuguese cooper is a superior workman to the Spanish. The French brandy casks are well made, and their wine casks are of indifferent workmanship. Rum puncheons, molasses hogsheads, sugar hogsheads, and tierces (the tierce being a smaller hogshead) used to be sent out in great quantities from this country. They were, and, to a small extent, are, exported “in packs;” that is complete, with the exception of the hooping, which is done in Jamaica or whatever island has the consignment. Changes in the tariff, however, opened this trade to the Americans, and it is now almost monopolized by them; as they have the advantage of cheap timber close at hand, and can undersell the English tradesman. The Canadas, although possessing equal advantages as regards timber, send very few puncheons or hogsheads to the West Indies. At one period 500 working coopers were engaged in London solely in the West Indian trades, while now there are not 60. The cooper’s goods which are at present exported to these colonies are sent chiefly as packages, containing soot or some dry article, and thus a double purpose is subserved. The loss of the West India trade is a source of great loss to the London coopers, as it supplied them with a regular and lucrative winter employment. Oil casks are made both in London and Sydney, but the London trade, as regards the oil from the whale fisheries, is very inconsiderable to what it was formerly. American whale oil (now admitted free of duty) is brought over in American-built casks; these casks are often used for the re-exportation of oils, or for the home trade, and are frequently made smaller for that purpose.

Coarse oak, beech, and ash, are woods greatly in use by the dry coopers. The huge currant butts are made in the Ionian Islands, Zanute, Cephalonia, Patras, &c., whence the currants are brought. They are made very roughly and in an unworkmanlike way, the material being a coarse oak. The Smyrna raisins are brought in barrels, made by the Turks, also of rude workmanship. The rice barrels are made in Carolina, and are very badly made of pine wood, clove the reverse way to the grain; on these, slave labour is not unfrequently employed. The tallow casks are made in Russia, and are very fairly put together as requires skill; they are of fir.

The principal material used by the white cooper in the country is ash, but

any straight-grained wood, provided it be of the hardness of ash, answers the purpose equally well. In London, however, the ends of oak staves sawn off by the cooper who makes the "large work," are used by the white cooper. This branch of the trade is the worst paid of all, owing to causes which I shall hereafter explain.

The wet cooper's work is very laborious, and requires practice and a quick and accurate eye; for it is by the eye that the cooper chiefly works. His eye, indeed, may be said to be his sole guide; he derives no help from the rule or the square, measurement being only resorted to for obtaining the due lengths of the staves prior to a commencement. The first process observed in making a wet or tight cask is to "list" the staves as they come from the saw yard or the pile. To "list" is to shape the staves with the axe, so, as to render them suitable for "jointing," the ends being made somewhat narrower than the middle. "Backing is next performed; that is the stave is more minutely and carefully formed to the shape required by means of a two-handed "drawing knife," which the cooper holds with both hands, and "backs" or draws towards him so as to cut the stave rapidly, guided by a skilled and practised eye. "Jointing" is the next, and nicest stage, constituting, so to speak, the "high art" of this very nice craft. To joint is to prepare the sides of the staves in such a manner that they shall not only fit closely, but be adapted to ensure the perfect form of the cask, both as regards bouge and curvature. One stave is adjusted to another simply by fitting, that is to say, by the nicest adjustment, as there is no groove nor any such means of connecting the staves one with another. Nor is this all. The cask, when completed, must not only prevent the oozing of a single drop of the subtlest fluid, but must be made to contain a certain quantity; it must hold so many gallons and no more; and when we find that, to effect this, the artificer's eye is the chief guide and surety, the cooper's art — or, as it is called in ancient records, the "mystery" — certainly appears to partake far more of skilled labour than is usually supposed. The staves being thus "jointed" or prepared, are fitted one to another round a block; a "head hoop" afterwards encircling them, and holding them all in one round. "Truss hoops" are then applied, which are strong wooden hoops, holding the staves firmly together until the iron hoops can be affixed. Before affixing the iron hoops, however, a fire made of chips and shavings lighted in a cresset, or small iron grate, is placed within the staves, so as to make them tough by warming the sap, and thus get them to bend without cracking. To this "firing" the closest attention must be given, for if it be prolonged beyond the exact time, the staves are rendered brittle instead of tough. As soon as the cask is sufficiently fired, and "overrunner" is put round the staves; this overrunner is a very strong wooden hoop, and is driven down by the cooper's "trussing adze," the upper part of the cask being first bent close together. The lower ends of the staves distend, through the action of the heat, but the

overrunner is driven gradually down to the "bouge;" to effect this in large and strong work the cooper calls out "Truss, oh!" and immediately two or three of his fellows come to his aid, and drive the overrunner down so as to compress the staves sufficiently and reduce the distention. The cask is then prepared with tools called "chimes," used for "sloping" the ends of the staves, and gooves are made for fitting in the heads; this being done, the hoops are affixed, and the cask is then complete. All "wet" casks are made in the same way, and are iron-bound as a rule; vinegar casks, however, are an exception, for they are bound with "twigged hoops," that is to say with hoops twisted round with twigs, the hoops being of hazel, and the twigs, or overlapping part, of willow.

Regarding the skill displayed in cooperage, Mr. Cox says:— "Some few coopers there are who are exceedingly ingenious and skilful in giving a high degree of finish to their work when making model casks. One especially we may mention, whose name is Shaw, now an aged man, formerly employed for many years in the docks as a wine cooper, who is known to the whole trade as a most exquisite workman. His model casks are made of mahogany, and hooped with silver and cane hoops, the latter bound with silver wire. Two of such casks have recently been presented to Mr. Capel, of Tower-street, to the Coopers' Company, and are intended to ornament their hall. No cabinet work can be more highly finished than these casks; and when it is remembered that these beautifully-formed and finished models have been, in common with all other casks, made entirely by the accuracy of eye and by the perfect judgment of the workman, without measurement, square, or model to work by, they certainly present a striking illustration of what may be done by patience, care, and a diligent cultivation of the natural faculties of man."

Some of the technical terms of the trade are curious enough. To smooth the head of a barrel is called "smuggling"; and it creates no little surprise for a person to hear, on his first visit to a cooper's yard, directions given to the workmen to be "careful about that smuggling." If a cask when finished does not stand perfectly firm, that is to say, if it be at all lop-sided or top-heavy, it is called "a lord."

The dry cooper's work is carried on in the same way as that of the wet; but it is a less nice art, as so perfect an exactitude of adjustment is not required.

"White work," says Mr. Cox, "is chiefly distinguished from other kinds of work by the form of the articles that are made, and the manner in which they are made, and the manner in which they are finished off. The form of white work is *splay*, instead of *bouge*; or, to drop the technical terms, white work is all of the same form as a pail, small at one end and large at the other, while casks are small at both ends and large in the middle."

At the docks the trade of the cooper is still further classified into wine, block, oil, dry, and molasses coopers. The explanations I have already given

show the nature of these further sub-divisions; the block cooper, who has not hitherto been mentioned, is the general cooper. It must, however, be borne in mind that the block cooper deals, as a general rule, with *full* casks only. At the St. Katherine's Dock there are employed about twenty "permanent," with a usual addition of from thirty to forty "preferable" hands, and all of them must be experienced coopers. Those employed at dry work are paid by the day, receiving 4s. 2d. per diem; while the wet coopers work by the piece, and average about 4s. 8d. a day. In the summer season, which is the busiest, about fifty more hands are employed; but in the slack season, only two or three extra hands are taken on. The additional men are known as "ticket men," in contradistinction to the "permanent" men. They have tickets duly numbered, and among them are the distinctions of "preferable" and "extra" men. They are employed by rotation (the preferable having the first turns), and if a vacancy occur among the "permanent" men, a preferable man is appointed to fill it, and an "extra" man thus becomes a preferable. The "extras" are appointed by the head of the department, and the men so appointed must be good workmen and of good character. This, however, is the system adopted concerning all labourers at these admirably conducted docks. The labour of the coopers at the docks depends upon the consignment of goods, and they average, according to the nature of the year's business, from six to nine months labour in the year; the "extra" men obtaining, of course, the lower amount, the "preferable" the higher, and the "permanent" men being employed the year through. Among the permanent men are the "bond" coopers. They have the charge of all the casks of wine, or spirits, or whatever the wet casks may contain bonded in the dock. The bond cooper must report any deficiency he may find in the contents of a cask. It is common enough, I am assured, for sailors to "tap" a wine or spirit cask during the voyage, but all such pilfering is made good before the cask is deposited in the vault of a dock. The deficiency then occurring is through leakage or the bursting of a hoop. The acid of the wine not unfrequently rots the hoop; "it eats right through, sir." I was told. There are four bond coopers at each of the three wine vaults, and at this dock "preferable" hands do the same work as the permanent bond coopers when the state of dock business requires it. It is also in the department of the bond cooper to draw samples of wines and to wait upon and supply those who have orders for "tasting." "I have seen," said a highly respectable dock cooper to me, "very temperate gentlemen – aye, and ladies too – very queer indeed after tasting wines at our dock. In the atmosphere of the vault the wine goes down so mildly; but it is served in very big wine glasses, so that when the 'tasters' get into the open air, so that heads go round like whirligigs." The permanent men in the wet department have all 28s. a week. The dry coopers have 25s. The casual hands, or the ticket men, are paid by the price as regards the wines, as a rule, and earn

from 3s. to 4s. 10d. a day, according to the demand for their services, averaging on the week something near the payment of the dry cooper. The prices paid for piece work are 8d. for trimming both ends of sherry butts or port pipes, or 4d. an end; port or sherry hogsheads are 5d. each; the quarter wine casks are 2d. and 2½d.; brandy puncheons are 3d. an end, or 6d. the cask; brandy pieces (the next size) are 4d. the cask, and the quarters 3d. These things comprise the whole of the piece work. The most efficient hands at coopering on piece work who are at the St. Katharine's Dock, limit their earnings, by an understanding among themselves, to a certain sum a day, to enable them to assist older and slower hands to a better day's earnings. "In my opinion," said a gentleman familiar with the matter to me, "this very praiseworthy arrangement does away with much the inequality, and therefore the mischief, of piece work."

The dock cooper is the repairer, re-adjuster, or re-fitter of the full casks unshipped at the dock. This labour requires not little practice and no little skill. The re-adjustment of the "wet" goods seldom extends beyond the refitting and renewing of the hoops, but with "dry" goods it is different. After a stormy voyage, sugar casks, for instance, are landed in all possible shapes. Some have been compared to an old hat which had just been subjected to the operation known as "bonneting;" they are crushed into irregular flatness. Some are rudely triangular, others are as rudely quadrangular; indeed, they present every shape except their original rotundity. Yet these "crippled nondescripts," as Mr. Cox calls them, are restored to a proper form by the dry cooper, and without loss of the sugar. This is done by the renewing or re-adjusting of the hoops, and by inserting new staves in the room of those that are bent or broken. The dock coopers, then, are principally employed in the charge and repairs of the casks. But some of the good and experienced hands selected from the body of dock coopers do occasionally make casks, and that chiefly by reducing larger casks that have been damaged into smaller dimensions.

I had the pleasure of hearing very high commendations of the management of the St. Katharine's Docks from all the coopers I saw; and the most respectful and even in some instances grateful mention of Sir John Hall and Mr. Tomlins, for their attention to the well-being of the working men generally. I wish I could say the same for the superintendents of the London Docks. The St. Katharine's Dock coopers have no superannuation or burial funds. They have what is called "the gift," to which it is optional to belong. This "gift" has generally from 20 to 30 members, and each contributes 6d. a week to a sick member. The dock coopers are, on the whole, intelligent men — sober men they must be, as drunkenness is certain dismissal. Their hours of labour are from eight to four, only a quarter of an hour being allowed for luncheon, which is of course the men's dinner. At that meal a pint of beer is allowed to each working cooper, and that is all he can drink during his work

at the dock, for each man is searched upon entering, and is not allowed to leave the dock until the regular hour. I heard also many acknowledgments (from the working men) of the system of graduation and advancement – as respects the “permanent,” and “preferable,” and “ticket” men – working well, and being an incentive to good conduct.

In the London Docks, there are 50 working coopers permanently employed at day-work, for which they receive 28s. a week, and generally 20 first-class and 150 second-class recommended men, who earn at piece-work about 27s. a week. Here the cooper’s work is done chiefly by contract; and such has been the practice for a considerable time. But the coopers were not materially injured by it until about twelve months ago. The contractors are men who have been well recommended to the company, and are, therefore, equivalent to the preferable workmen of the most respectable docks. The contractors usually consist of a gang of seven or eight men, who work together, without any foreman over them, and share all alike. They contract with the company to make all the casks in a particular ship, sound, and fit for housing. The prices at present paid to the contractors by the company are, for sugar hogsheads, 4d. each; molasses puncheons, 4d.; coffee tierces, 3d.; barrels, 1½d. Formerly the Company paid to the contractors for sugar hogsheads and molasses puncheons 1s. each, coffee tierces and barrels not being done then by contract. In the course of last year, a gang of seven (casual) men took a contract of the Company to make all casks and barrels, fit for housing, at the low prices above mentioned, to the injury of the recommended men, seventeen of whom remained idle from December to March, owing to the contractors monopolizing all the trade. The recommended men then made known their grievances to the superintendent, which ended in the company granting them the privilege of taking contracts at the same prices as the other parties, to which the recommended men agreed. They then formed themselves into two gangs, one of eight men and the other of seven. The contractors are not paid till they have done working the ship, though if the men stand in need of a little money – as is sometimes the case – and have a portion of their work done and housed, the company will advance them a few pounds, according to the quantity of work executed. The hours of labour among the contractors are the same as with the other men, viz., from eight till four, but I am told that the men at contract work do treble the amount of work they would do if employed by the Company in the regular manner. The contracting coopers earn, upon an average, £2 per week during the brisk season, but during the slack very little more than one-third of that amount. Under the contract system the men work very hard. “Indeed,” said one, “it is downright slavery, and brings old age upon a man before he is in his prime.” Sometimes only a portion of the gang of contractors is employed in “working a ship,” then the remainder of the gang are engaged upon some other cooping work. “I

have known (said my informant) a ship of 600 tons burden worked out by four men in five days; whereas, if the men had been employed by the company in the regular way, it would have taken 16 men a week to do the same amount of work." The average amount received for working a ship of 600 tons burden by the contractors is about £13, but if the men were employed in the regular way by the company, at 4s. 9d. per day, their wages would come to about £20.

I have before pointed out the evils of the contract system, and shown how it always is found to flourish in those docks where the least regard is evinced for the working men. This contract system, I am assured on excellent authority, makes the men so contracting hurry recklessly through their work, careless of what property is destroyed, so that they can complete their undertaking and hurry to another job, as they get the same remuneration whether the ship be "worked out" in a week or in two days. "No one who hasn't seen it would credit the destruction of property," said an experienced London Dock man to me. "I have seen it, and have been sometimes a party, and forced to be a party, to the destruction. Both the merchant's property and the Company's material, such as hoops, staves, and nails, are consumed needlessly in the hurry of the contract work. The worst lot of coopers generally go to this work; many of them are men that have been turned out of the other docks. I'm sure of that. Much as I hate an Union house, I would rather be in one that work on such contracts at the London Docks." This refers only to dry goods. The wine-cooper's trade used also to be done by contract at this dock, but it is now done by piece work. The employment of the wine-coopers is left to the discretion of the principal wine-cooper, who, I am assured, exercises a wise and honourable discretion in this particular. There are at the London Docks no such regulations as at the St. Katharine's Docks as regards "permanent" men, &c. The wet coopers are paid for this piece work less than at the St. Katharine's Docks; in brandy pieces a farthing an end less, and other work in proportion. The established men working at the London Docks, of whatever calling, are enrolled in a benefit society under the direction of the company.

When a cooper is employed permanently by the company, from 4d. to 6d. a week (according to his age) is stopped out of his wages, and when he reaches sixty years of age he is superannuated, and receives 10s. a week for the remainder of his life. If, however, the man be guilty of the least misdemeanour, he is immediately discharged, whereupon all the money he has previously paid in to the superannuation fund is forfeited. One man, who had been in the company's service upwards of twelve years, was found intoxicated, and he was instantly cashiered. The consequence was, that he lost all the money he had contributed to the superannuation fund during that time, or upwards of £40. I am told that many instances of this kind occur. "Indeed (said my informant) such circumstances are a pleasure to the

company, as they are benefited thereby.”

At the West India Dock the classification and the payment are nearly the same as at the St. Katharine's Dock. Indeed, the same “ticket-men” ply alternately, or rather as the state of business requires, at the St. Katharine's and the West India Docks. The number and pay of the coopers employed at this dock are as follows:

Ten permanent working coopers, day-pay, 4s. 6d. Forty first-class, who are subject to be out of work by slackness of business, but during the past year (1849) the business admitted of their being constantly employed, and it has been the same this year up to the present time; these are partly employed at day-pay, and part at piece-work. The pay per day is 4s. 6d.; the piece-work averages 5s. There is also a “preferable” second-class of coopers (sixty-four), who have a preference of employment over the “extra coopers;” but they are frequently unemployed at the dock – day pay, 4s.

These are the only docks (with insignificant exceptions) in which coopers are employed.

The journeymen coopers in the general trade are paid almost entirely by the piece. The distinctions of work which I have noticed are becoming less and less regarded; general hands, or men practised, however superficially, in all branches, are more sought after than they were. The work for the brewers is still, however, kept distinct. At a great brewery, inferior cooperage is detected in a moment. In the very best shops – which, however, are now exceptional establishments – the men can earn, by working long hours, £2 a week. The average earnings in the honourable trade are from 26s. to 30s. the year through, when fully employed, at twelve hours a day, deducting two hours for meals; and the majority are so employed nine months in the year, and perhaps one-tenth of the whole body are so employed for twelve months. The summer is the brisk and the winter the slack season, and in winter very many are out of employment. There is nothing to class precisely as slop work in the cooper's trade, for every “wet” cooper's work is tested. The cask is “quarter filled” with boiling water; this generates a powerful steam which will ooze through any slight flaw in the work (which the journeyman must then make good), or even through a worm hole, or any petty defect in the timber. Thus slop work is not so easy among coopers as in some trades. “Our work, sir,” said a man to me, using a professional joke, “*must* hold water.” Even in the lowest priced yards the foreman closely tests and examines both the wet and dry work, and nothing bad passes, lest it should be sent back from the purchaser. There is not among them even a technical term for under-paying or slop employers.

In all shops, wages have been reduced. Twenty years ago a cooper on the best work could earn £3 where he now earns £2, and the fall in inferior work is greater still. The society men's prices are regulated by themselves, and printed. A rum puncheon made of “single imported” staves, is now 3s. 6d.;

and within ten years was 3s. 10d. and 4s., and yet that is the article which has declined the least. Oil butts have fallen from 15 to 20 per cent in journeymen's wages in the last seven years, and all other goods in proportion. The coopers find their own tools, a kit for a general workman being worth £12. These tools are the axe, adze, backing, heading, hollow and drawing knives, jiggers, crows, and saws. The wear and tear of his tools costs the workman 1s. a week. The masters find the jointers (tools for striking and fixing the joint of the staves). The wages of non-society men are from 15 to 20 per cent less than in the honourable trade, but the price of the material used for casks and tubs varies little, so that this per centage in the lowering of wages does not enable the slop master greatly to undersell the honourable trade.

As a body the coopers are an intelligent class of mechanics. I met among them some superior men, and heard of several who had saved a little money. Hard drinking, I regret to say, though not drunkenness, prevails among the majority of the men employed in large cooperages. "I seldom see them drunk," said one cooper to me, "and I think it's not in the drink to intoxicate some of the seasoned hands." This addiction to continuous drinking, rather than to drunkenness — and the coopers drink principally beer — was accounted for to me by their work being very laborious, while heat is often so great that they acquire a distaste for solids during the hours of labour, and stay the cravings of the appetite with draughts of beer. In a shop where "large work" is made, and where the timber is the stoutest and the fire the hottest, a moderate drinking cooper, as he is accounted, drinks two pots of beer a day; some will drink three pots and upwards, but in such circumstances two pots is the average drinking. The most moderate coopers, I am told, expend not less, on the average, than 4s. a week on beer. The coopers become prematurely old, suffering greatly from pains in the chest and across the back, attributable to their bending over their hot work. "A cooper at large work is an old man, sir, at forty," said one of them to me; "his physical energies then are nearly exhausted."

Coopers are generally fond of manly exercises, such as cricket. There are very few skittle-players among them. Cards are played sometimes in the public-house on Saturday night, but not generally. "Had the coopers a taste for cards, it would be very easy to introduce them into the workshops," said one of them to me, "by making a card table on a barrel head. Often for days together a master never enters a shop, and the foreman, when he has given a man the stuff, leaves him almost entirely to himself." The theatre and the public gardens, I am told, are, however, the principal recreations of the coopers.

The coopers are mostly married men, living in unfurnished lodgings (generally two rooms), at about 4s. a week rent. They usually reside as near to their work as possible; consequently the majority are to be found in

Whitechapel, where the largest sugar-houses are situated; whilst some of the men, for the same reason, are located in St. George-in-the-East. A few have houses at £25 a year rent, letting off part of them, but this is the exception rather than the rule. The operatives have generally from two to five or six in family, and only some of the children are put to school. "I don't consider," said an intelligent member of the trade to me, "that coopers' children are properly looked after, or that they are as well educated as they ought to be. I believe that it is owing to the drinking habits of our trade that the men's families are neglected as they are; perhaps another reason for this is, because during the slack season it takes all the men can earn to procure even food for their families. Upon an average in the slack season, which lasts about four months in the year, I think the coopers' earnings are not above 10s. a week. In the brisk, however, they make about 30s. a week; and I have no doubt it is this great fluctuation in their incomes that makes the men less provident and less attentive to their homes than they otherwise would be. I think the majority of the operative coopers' wives take in slop-work, and many of their daughters do so. This has been the custom as long as I can remember. Some of the wives were formerly employed in winding silk for the Spital-fields weavers; but now that's all knocked on the head. The cause of the coopers' wives taking to slop-work is partly owing to the slackness of the trade at certain times and partly to their living in the neighbourhood of the slopsellers. Lately there has been a great reformation in the drinking habits of the men. There are two causes for this, in my opinion. One is the closing of the public-houses at twelve o'clock on Saturday night, and not allowing them to be opened until after church time on Sunday; and the other is the cheapness of railway travelling, so that the men are induced to go a little way into the country on a Sunday, instead of wasting their money and ruining their health in taverns." The usual time of labour among the coopers is from six in the morning till eight o'clock at night (fourteen hours a day). This is generally considered in the trade to be two hours too much, and is looked upon as a great evil, it being considered one of the principal reasons why so many are out of employment. The hours of labour, however, have always been the same. The coopers are not very partial to piecework, though this is their usual mode of payment. They consider it makes men do more work than they ought, and thus deprives others of their fair share of employment. They are never employed at day work in shops, but I am assured that they would prefer this mode of working to all others. Most of the coopers are London men, having served their time in the metropolis. About half, I am told, are the sons of former workmen.

The coopers in large establishments work in lofty brick sheds, with large open frontages; these are usually well ventilated, which indeed is indispensable, on account of the fires, where there is the slightest regard for the health and comfort of the workmen. They work singly, each man being engaged

on his own cask. When it is finished, it is rolled into an adjacent yard, and there awaits the testing or inspection of the foreman or master.

Nearly all the working coopers can read and write, and some are educated men. Their moral standard is quite equal to that of the generality of trades. They were described to me as rough but manly. Some years ago, "strikes" were common among the coopers, and tended to promote idleness and foster the love for drink; but within the last twenty years strikes have been few and partial, and the men are now opposed to them as to a bad policy.

If any disagreement arises between master and men, the president of one of the societies to be presently mentioned, waits upon the master in a friendly manner, nor in one solitary instance has there been a failure, the grievance being always amicably settled.

The trade of a cooper is usually acquired by an apprenticeship of seven years. The little masters take very many apprentices, and take them for the fees, but they have very few from the parishes. Some of them get a premium with their apprentices of from £10 to £20, and in some instances keep the boy, finding him board and lodging for one or two years, allowing him one-third of the regular wages when he has completed a piece of work, which he is seldom able to do in less than three years' training. For the last two years of his apprenticeship, he has two-thirds of the regular wages of the trade. This system unquestionably tends to increase the number of hands willing to work for inferior wages, and so to perpetuate inferior handicraftsmen.

The Coopers have four societies in connection with their trade. One is the Parent Society and the other three are Branches. The branch societies are called the "Local Trade Societies." The Parent Society is termed the "Philanthropic," and is held at the Tower Shades, Tower-hill. The local trade societies are designated the "Hand-in-Hand" – the "Brewhouse Coopers" and the "Runlett Coopers." The first of these is held at the Old Commodore, Montague-street, Whitechapel; the second at the Queen's Head, Blackfriars; and the last at the Eight Bells, Bermondsey.

The White Coopers have no trade society, but many of them are connected with Friendly Benefit Societies of various kinds.

The following table will show the number of society men and non-society men in the Cooper's trade, exclusive of the white and the dock coopers:

	In Society	Out of Society	Total of Society and Non-Society men in each Branch
Philanthropic Coopers	460	..	460
Hand-in-Hand Coopers.....	100	70	170
Brewhouse Coopers	70	70	140
Runlett Coopers	60	40	100
	690	180	870

The objects of the trades societies in connection with the coopers are twofold – first, for the purposes of trade; secondly, for philanthropic objects.

The trade purposes consist of the upholding of such prices as the operatives consider a just remuneration for their work, and of the maintenance of their members when out of employ; while the philanthropic objects are the support of their aged and helpless members, and the allowance of a certain sum at the death of a member or a member's wife. These objects are carried out by assembling at their society houses weekly, monthly, and half-yearly, and contributing a portion of their weekly earnings in aid of the funds. The affairs of each society are placed in the hands of a president, secretary, two auditors, four stewards, and six committee-men. If an individual wishes to become a member, he is proposed at one of the monthly meeting nights, and admitted by a show of hands on the following night of meeting.

The society houses are not houses of call, but simply "trade societies." However, when any of the members are out of work, they make it known to the president, who, being acquainted with the trade generally, can tell whether there are any fresh hands wanted; and, if there be an opening, the president sends such individuals as are qualified to undertake the job. The non-society men call at the various cooperages and solicit employment.

The amount of contribution varies with the "society." The members of the parent society contribute a per centage of their earnings – one forty-eighth part, or a farthing in every shilling they obtain by their labour; those belonging to the branch societies pay 1s. per month. The "benefits" of the societies are 6s. per week to the unemployed members during the season of slackness, £5 at the death of a member, and £3 at the death of a member's wife. There is a superannuation fund in connection with the parent society, from which an aged or infirm member is allowed 3s. per week. There are at present seven members in receipt of this fund. The wages of the white coopers have been reduced full two-thirds within the last twelve years, and this, I am informed, is mainly owing to the Irish under-working the rest of the trade. Machinery has not in the least affected the coopers' art, as at present, to use the words of the operatives, "it cannot touch it." The coopers having no connection with country societies, they entirely discountenance all relief of tramps; they are firmly persuaded, they say, that it merely fosters idleness and vagabondism. The coopers' trade, like other trades, ebbs and flows. Their brisk season continues generally from May to Christmas, and is then slack from Christmas to May. During the slack time the unemployed cooper; repair to the different docks, where they generally obtain two or three days' work during the week. As to the cause of these fluctuations in trade, the coopers cannot assign any particular reason. The present season has been the best that they have realised for many years past, there having been a great quantity of new work required.

A tall spare man, looking much older than he represented himself (a common case among coopers), whom I found in a comfortable home, gave me the following account of his earnings as a wet cooper:

“I have worked in London about seventeen years as apprentice and journeyman, and am now thirty-one. I lived at home during my apprenticeship, but my master was a relation of my father’s, and they were very friendly, so my apprenticeship is not just a sample of what others may be. It was an understanding between the two. I have always worked for the best shops, and so I suppose I may reckon myself a good workman; but for all that I found great difficulty in learning the business when a boy. It was five years, or thereabouts, before I could ‘joint’ tolerably; and to know how to grind the tools well and quickly, is not an easy thing to learn, and many coopers who have mastered it don’t like to let others see them grinding. Ours is hard and difficult work. There’s no help with tools or colours for a cooper to regulate his work, or hide the faults of it. He must depend upon his eye. I have been always very fortunate in getting work, and that has allowed me to get a little on in the world. I think I have averaged from 30s. to 32s. a week for five years past, and rather more before that, though then I seldom worked on a Monday, as it was very little the custom of that shop. I consider it impossible to work without beer, but I very seldom care to taste it when I’m not at work; the heat and smoke causes such thirst when at work. There is still a good deal of drunkenness among the men certainly, but I think the journeymen have greatly improved of late in their habits. They are more temperate and more saving, perhaps more intelligent than was the case. They have become so gradually, I think, and within these eight or ten years. I am paid good wages, and work all the year through. My health is now pretty good, but many in my trade suffer greatly. When I first began I had bilious headaches, and flying pains about my back. We have so much stooping, you see, and perspire a good deal, some of us – it’s not often you see a working cooper very fat – and go heated into cold air; and those things affect our health. I am a society man. I know of no grievances to complain of in the shops I have worked in. I can keep a wife comfortably, but I haven’t been long married. I dare say my beer, when at work, doesn’t cost me less than 3s. 6d. a week, and I’m one of the moderate ones. In many places a block cooper, or general hand, has a better chance of employment, than a man who wants to confine himself to one branch. In the great shops, especially for brewer’s work, there’s still a proper division of labour observed. I work by the piece, but I think if we were put on by day work, masters would be better served, for a man would take more time. To be sure a master might have *rather* less work done, but then a man not up to the average quantity of work in a day wouldn’t often get regular employment, and so it might be all the same that way. I fancy, however, some men prefer piece work. It doesn’t tie them so to time – they think they are more inde-

pendent at it than at day work.”

Concerning the dry-coopers, I had the subjoined statement from one of the most intelligent of the body. He was a society man:

“I am a dry-cooper,” he said; “I have been twenty years in the trade. I served my time in the country, and ever since that I have been in London, in the ‘dry’ branch. I have always belonged to a society. The rate of wages was much better when I first came to London than it is now, but the quantity of work was much about the same. The men were paid by the piece, as at present. The decline in our wages has been in these ways. In the first place, we used to have what was called beer-money – that is a penny on every shilling that we earned was paid to us extra. This was termed ‘beer money,’ though it was part and parcel of our wages. Among the ‘new (or brewers’) coopers’ there was always a cask on tap for the men to go to; but among ‘the dry coopers’ it was usual to pay in money only. At the time of the Income-tax Bill being brought in by Sir Robert Peel, the employers took off the beer money so as to meet the new tax. Since that time, cement casks have been reduced from 1s. to 10d., and bottle-porter casks have been lowered also, but I can’t exactly state how much. Twenty years ago, I could earn five shillings a week more than I can now, working the same hours. After Christmas, my work is always very slack for three or four months. During that time I am employed on an average about four days a week, and so I think are most of the dry coopers. It was always the same as long as I can remember. About this time is, and always has been, our busiest time, in consequence of the ships going out to the West Indies, and the ‘dry’ – or, more properly speaking, ‘the molasses – coopers’ are busiest then. The main dependence of the dry coopers, however, is the sugar refiners’ work. A large sugar house will keep eight men fully employed in the season, which lasts about six months in the year. There are about ten or twelve such large sugar houses in London. Altogether, I should say there are from 80 to 100 dry coopers in London employed in this way. I think a dry cooper’s average earnings are about 24s. a week all the year round. Mine, perhaps, may be a little more than that; but then I am not a fair criterion, for I am considered a very quick hand. Most of our men would be glad to give up piece work, and take a constant situation at day work for 24s. a week. In the slack season we have nothing to depend upon but the sugar-house work, such as making puncheons for treacle, and casks for sugar. The small masters have already had a very injurious effect upon the dry branch of the trade, and I have no doubt they will injure us still more. To them only is to be attributed the decrease of our wages in the cement and bottle-porter cask work. The small masters cannot interfere with our sugar work, or our West India work; They have neither premises nor capital sufficient. They can only manage the small work – such as can be done in cellars and small premises.”

The “slop” part of the coopering trade consists in what are called

“cutting shops,” and the “small trade-working masters.” But these are confined solely to the “dry and white work.” The cutting shops usually employ non-society men, with a number of apprentices, and are enabled to undersell the more honourable tradesmen by this cheaper labour. Many of these cutting masters are engaged in the manufacture of one article alone, and I was informed of one such master who had a number of hands continually engaged in converting old American flour barrels into bottled-porter casks, at 1d. a piece. One of the small employers whom I visited, lived at the corner of a low, dirty street. His premises were entered by means of what was literally a hole in the wooden wall, on which swung a small door. In the interior of his shop were heaped hoops, staves, and all the requirements of the coopers’ trade. In an inner room, four men were at work. “I make only colour kegs,” he said, “and have been in the trade many years. My men work by the piece, and the best and quickest hands make from 32s. to 33s. a week. Inferior hands get from 22s. to 25s. I used to employ fourteen hands, where I now employ half that number. Nearly all colour kegs, more than nineteen-twentieths of those made, are for exportation. For the home trade, a colourman will make the same casks go backwards and forwards fifty times. There used to be 800 hands employed in the wood keg trade for colourmen; now there is not half that quantity. The falling off is owing to the demand for sheet iron kegs, made under Brown’s patent by steam machinery. They now make from 300,000 to 400,000 iron kegs every year, and have done so for five or six years past. They are much neater casks than the wooden to look at. I don’t know about their durability, but that’s little looked to in the export trade. I make every kind of style, kegs from two to twelve quarts; all those used for colours, white lead, &c. A two-quart sells at 6d., a twelve-quart of 14d. The iron are 20 to 30 per cent higher. It’s not the hawkers that have injured the trade of masters like myself; it’s only the introduction of iron kegs.”

A man working for another small employer (after many praises of his master’s keeping on men, when he merely worked on speculation to supply the colour factories) told me that he earned 24s. a week. His hours of labour were from seven in the morning till ten at night. “We shall all come to be mere labourers soon,” he said.

Another man, working for a small master, was a smoke-dried old man, apparently between 70 and 80. He had served under Admiral Duncan, and was concerned in the mutiny at the Nore. He could only make 4s. a week. Besides this he had a pension of 1s. a day.

The small employers in the neighbourhood of St. George’s-in-the-East now number about thirty or forty, whereas a few years back I am credibly informed there were from 100 to 120 located in that neighbourhood. The little trade-working masters consist principally of the casual hands working as coopers at the docks. There appear to be two or three reasons for the dock

coopers taking to make up small articles on their own account. One is, the early hour at which their labour at the docks ceases, so that a man, if in any way industrious, on returning home in the early part of the evening usually sets to work for himself, and makes up in his over-time tubs, pails, or kegs, which he either sells to the country hawkers, or his wife carries them around town for sale to the houses of shops. Another reason why the journeymen coopers become small trade-working masters, is owing to the uncertainty of all kinds of dock labour. Of this I have before spoken at considerable length. The "extra coopers," therefore, when not wanted at the docks, employ their spare time in manufacturing small articles on speculation, for which, as in the cabinet trade, they are obliged to find a market as soon as made, whether there be a demand for them or not. The third and principal reason is the small capital required for journeymen coopers to begin labouring for themselves in the white branch of the trade, as well as upon the smaller articles appertaining to dry work. The majority of the small masters are Irishmen, living in the neighbourhood of the docks, whom 'I saw, residing in a court at the back of Rosemary-lane. In the centre of this place stood clothes-props supporting lines laden with yellow-looking shirts and brown blankets, which swung backwards and forwards in the wind. Seated on the stones outside of each of the doors, were small groups of fuzzy-haired Irishwomen, all engaged in chopping wood and talking to one another across the court. The working cooper himself was a good-looking intelligent man, with the handsome grey eye and long sweeping lash peculiar to the natives of the Emerald Isle. He was very proud of the neatness of his sitting-room, and took me upstairs expressly to show it to me. It was decorated with portraits of Mitchell, Meagher, and Father Moore, together with a picture of the Siege of Limerick dedicated to the women of Ireland. Down stairs, amid the shavings, lay a copy of the *Nation* newspaper, in which my informant told me there was "some sublime poethry."

"I am a small master," he said, "though I don't know exactly that you can call me so rightly – I don't employ any one. You can put me down a manufacturer, if you please. I can make up things on my own account. I have been at coopering now I dare say 26 years. I was about 14 when I first went to it. It was in Ireland I learnt the trade. I used to be engaged in my own unfortunate counthry making provision casks, but now that trade's entirely done away with. I came over here – let me see – fourteen years last May. Then I got my name on at the West India Dock as an extra cooper, and I have worked there in succession every year since. I got a number, and have kept at it all along. After working in the docks, if I don't feel too much fatigued, I do a bit of work for myself when I get home at night; or if I have an order for my customers that requires speed, then I stop here and work at it altogether. You see I am not obligated to go to work at the docks unless I please. I should say that, take it the year through, I am employed at the

docks about three months out of the twelve. After October, the season is looked upon to be over, and it begins again about April. I don't always go to work after coming from the docks; but the most of the small masters works after their dock labour. When I work at home, I begin about seven and keep on till nine at night, that's fourteen hours. One small master I know begins often at four or five in the morning. You see it all depends upon the industrial habits of men. If you're at work for an employer, you must leave off at a certain hour, but if you're your own master, you can work all night, if you've a fancy. I've often worked all night myself. I feel more pleasure doing a bit for myself here by candlelight than if I was wandering about the streets. I sell the goods I make to hawkers, and they make a living of it by hawking them to the public and to shops. I am in the habit of making oval tubs of different sizes – that's the principal branch that I'm employed in. Other small masters are engaged in making flour kegs, colour kegs, oyster barrels, mustard kegs – but that's all dry work. The small masters never do any large work. Some of the small masters will take round a sample of their work to a colour or mustard factory, or to a merchant, and so get an order; and many make up goods on speculation, and then take them round to sell. As simple a trade as oyster barrels is, still there's hundreds made up on speculation, and taken round to be sold. I've made them up myself. A man does this because he can't get other employment. May be there'll be a slackage at the docks, and a man will rather do that than be idle and starve. If he's out of work, he can make a dozen of oyster barrels for three shillings. The material will only cost him that much. It won't take him a day to make them, and when he had done them, perhaps his wife, or may be his daughters, if he have any, will take them out to sell – to Billingsgate Market, may be. At oyster barrels the men frequently work all night, and some of them on the Sunday as well. Seventeen years ago, oyster barrels were nine shillings a dozen, and now they're four shillings and sixpence – that will show you how such work knocks up a trade. Many of the small masters lives about here, some in ground cellars, cobbling up old tubs and what not, to get a crust."