



YORK ARCHAEOLOGICAL TRUST
finding the future

Comb making industry in York during the 19th century

An Insight Report

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1. The making of combs

The comb making industry in the nineteenth century involved the cutting of horn material and shaping it into a comb. The process from start to finished object would take approximately two months for white horn, three months for buffalo and four months for a tortoiseshell style comb. Horn was also used by bookbinders to cover manuscripts and some horn was turned into low quality crockery.

2. Who could trade in the city of York?

In 1415 the horn works joined with the cutlers, blade smiths, sheathers, scalers and buckle makers to perform a mystery play (L.T Smith. York Plays performed by the Crafts or Mysteries of York 1885 p. xxiii). Comb making was recognised as a craft when the formation of the Livery Company of Comb Makers was given its charter in 1635.

To be allowed to sell goods in the city of York the purveyor had to be a freeman. To become a freeman in the 19th century it required a payment of £25 or goods to that value, or serving a seven year apprenticeship to a freeman. In 1835 the Municipal Reform Act effectively rendered the office of Freeman as an honorary role, with only control of the areas of open land in and around the city. The earliest record of a Freeman of the city is a Samuel Fountiane listed in 1706 as an ink-horn maker and comb maker.

The Register of Freeman 1680-1986 (transcribed by John Malden in 1989) lists the apprentices who become freemen and who they were working for. The following table shows that the apprentices in the register are concentrated within five firms:

Company	Number of apprentices in the Freeman Register	Dates (first and last apprentices listed)
C.Forbes and J. Fothergill	27	1781-1802
Henry Lund	8	1807-1843
G Steward and sons	16	1826-1867
John Pole	7	1826-1846
Messrs.Rougier	5	1846-1853

Table 1: Number of apprentices in five firms, as listed in the Register of Freeman 1680-1986

This does not take into account those workers who did not become Freeman and who were producing items for the comb making manufacturers as staff members or home workers.

3. Trade Directories

The trade directories from 1781 until 1930 indicate the addresses of comb workers in the city. As a fee was charged to be included in to appear in these directories it can be seen by comparing the listings with the census that not all the people working in the comb making industry are listed in the directories.

Many of those missing from the directories were just employed workers who appear on one census, but have disappeared on the next. The 1881 census has a huge number of workers in the comb industry. The jobs listed include: comb maker, cutter, grinder, polisher, presser, stainer and a steward in the comb works.

4. The manufacturers in the city

A small number of manufacturers were listed as manufacturers in the directories, they include: Rougier, Pole, Thompson, Steward, Nutt and Lund. The locations of these manufacturers are Tanner Row, Micklegate, Trinity Lane, Micklegate Bar, Blossom Street and Low Ousegate/Fetter Lane. In fact, many of the comb manufacturers are based in around the Micklegate area.

The trade directories for 1816 list two comb manufacturers on Micklegate, the Steward family and Fothergill J and Co. The first reference to the Fothergill works is in the 1781 trade directory, the last in 1818. The death of John Fothergill in 1807 resulted in the training of apprentices passing to his son also named John. The elder John's death is recorded on the Quaker Birth, Marriage and Death records but has a note by his name as not being a member when he died aged sixty-four.

John Pole was listed on the 1841 census as living on Coney Street, and being a comb maker, not a manufacturer. He was born in 1818 to a John Pole who is listed as a comb manufacturer living on North Street. His birth record is from the Non-Conformist registers. By 1861 he appears to have changed trade to become a linen draper.

George Lund appears in the trade directory in 1805 as a comb manufacturer and by 1848 it is his son Henry Benjamin at 7 Fetter Lane. George Lund is aged 75 on the 1841 census, and his son Henry is 40. Their occupation was listed as comb makers, not manufacturers. On the 1851 census Henry was listed at Fetter lane as a manufacturer employing three men, but his birthplace is listed as Granada in Spain. The Lund family were Non Conformists. Henry died in 1881 and left £2444 13s 1d. [National Probate Calendar 1858-1966]

The Nutt family of John and his son Charles, who lived on Trinity Lane, were both listed as comb makers in the 1841 census and do not appear in the trade directories after 1843.

The Steward family works on Blossom Street was operated at first by George, John and then Edward and Henry Steward. George Steward was apprenticed to Charles Forbes in 1807. George Steward is in the 1818 trade directory and listed as being at Micklegate Gate Bar Without. By the last reference in a trade directory, in 1895 the address is Blossom Street. This could be the same location with a new street name.

Joseph Rougier is recorded in 1861 as employing sixteen men, five women and four boys. In 1881 Joseph's son John William was employing fourteen men and five girls. John Henry, grandson of the original owner Joseph is recorded as a manufacturer on the 1911 census.

Many of the Rougier family were made Freeman of the city, the last one, John Henry, being registered in 1910. The Rougiers' were appointed ornamental horn shaving supplier to Queen Victoria in 1837.

The Rougier family factory was on Tanner row until 1927 when it was demolished. The contents of the factory were donated to the Castle Museum. They made a reconstructed comb makers workshop as one of their displays.

John William Rougier died in 1908 and left his son John Henry, his daughter Bertha Matilda and Charles Wilson (chart publisher) effects of £8529 7s. 8d and was resworn (revalued) at £9287 0s. 5d. The Rougier family tomb is in the churchyard of St Mary Bishophill Senior Church.

On the 1911 census, some of the households listed showed who the resident worked for. Five of the eighteen comb workers listed had recorded that they worked for the Rougier family, two had listed that they worked for a comb factory. The residents were mainly scattered across the city, with one grouping in the Hungate area, the other around Tanner Row.

5. Excavations in the city

Horn Pot Lane in York city centre has been considered as the site of horn working due to its name. During an excavation - by Peter Wenham, in 1956-7 at 65-66 Low Petergate - he found a deep lined pit with numerous horn cores, which was interpreted as a retting pit for the soaking of horn. (Wenham 1972, pg 65). In Yorkshire dialect the name "pot" means pit. This could mean that Horn Pot Lane was originally Horn Pit Lane. There was an excavation on Tanner Row that produced a collection of horn and items made from horn, some horn cores were dated to the 13th Century. The deposits from the 18th -19th century produced a considerable amount of tortoiseshell, from the Rougier factory.

The comb industry eventually declined due to the changing fashions and the introduction of Celluloid combs. This can be seen in table 1, as the last apprentices are seemingly only taken on by 1867 at the latest. A fashion for shorter hair also reduced the demand for fancy hair combs.

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