

A dirty job, but not to be sniffed at

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Outside of working hours you probably don't think about dog faeces, other than to scoop up after your pet. Indeed, it's even more unlikely you've ever considered dog poop as an untapped revenue stream.



IMAGE: © Freeimages/fcl1971.

But in one of those quirks of history, in Victorian London the streets were not so much paved with gold as littered with the equivalent in "brown gold".

In the 19th century, dog droppings had commercial value. Wealthy and middle class Victorians read voraciously and cultured gentlewomen whiled away their leisure hours with leather-bound novels. But although they may have chosen not to think about it, the covers of those same books had unsavoury beginnings, because the tanning process relied on dog droppings to soften the raw leather.

Tanning process

Of course, in the 1880s tanning had a completely different connotation to nowadays. It was nothing to do with a golden skin and everything to do with softening leather. Before the creation of synthetic fabrics and waterproof materials, leather was a most excellent solution. Not only was it strong and protective, but when properly treated it was waterproof. Hence, leather was a crucial material for

everything from harnesses to footwear, book binding to vellum.

From a raw hide to workable leather took several steps. First, the tanner rubbed salt into the hide to preserve it, then it rinsed clean. Next, a soak of lime or urine weakened the hairs, which were then scraped off. Now for the dog faeces (or, at a push, pigeon droppings would do) which broke down stiff elastomer fibres to make the leather flexible. The final steps were to preserve the piece by soaking in progressively stronger solutions of tannin, then oiling or waxing to make it waterproof.

With leather being such a crucial textile (just think of all the tack and harnesses used in a largely horse-powered world), there was a thriving market for those ingredients key to the tanning process – enter the pure-finder.

Urban recycling

The heyday of the pure-finder was between the 1830s and 1930s. The early adopters of this trade started out as “bunters” or rag-gatherers, who collected fabric scraps to sell on (the Victorians were arguably the consummate recyclers). These enterprising individuals spotted a need and diversified into picking up dog faeces.

Pure-finders haunted the streets where populations of stray dogs lived. They collected their “booty” in a handled bucket, which they kept covered to conceal the contents. Some collectors wore a black leather glove to harvest their finds and protect their hands, but others dispensed with the glove, saying it was easier to wash their hands after work than to keep the glove fit for use.

Pure competition

However, this job was not to be sniffed at and in the early days it proved satisfyingly lucrative as many people made a good living at it.

By the 1850s, men, women and children joined the hunt for pure and competition lowered prices, making it more difficult to make a living. They sold their “brown gold” to tanners, mostly located in Bermondsey, London. By 1860 there were approximately 30 tanneries, with around 10 pure-finders supplying each leather business. The Victorian philanthropist Henry Mayhew interviewed an elderly pure-finder who bemoaned this downturn in profitability. “If we only gathered a pail-full in the day, we could live very well, but we could do much more than that, for there wasn’t near so many at the business then and the pure was easier to be had.”

The pure-finder goes on to relate how competition was ruining trade, although it kept the newcomers from starving: “For my part I can’t tell where all the poor creatures have come from of late years; they have pulled down the price of pure, that’s certain, but the poor things must do something, they can’t starve while there’s anything to be got” (Mayhew).

As if rivalry between pure-finders wasn't bad enough, in some areas of London there were also street cleaners to contend with – a sore challenge to the perceived right to collect this free canine bounty. Indeed, far from being seen as helpful for keeping the pavements clean, such street orderlies were described in terms of social betrayal: “Being an unwarrantable interference with the privileges of their class” (Mayhew).

Even so, some pure-finders had good connections to a local kennels and were granted permission to clean the kennel – earning 10 to 15 shillings a week in the process.

But the majority had to seek their raw materials on the street. To eke out a living, some were not above adulterating their product. Tanneries preferred dry, white faeces as being more alkaline and astringent, and were prepared to pay more for it. Not to lose this opportunity for profit, some pure-finders scraped the lime mortar out of old stone walls, rolled it into balls and mixed it with the dog faeces to give it a more chalky appearance and command a higher price.

Pure enterprise

Why was “pure” so called? The name derives from the properties of dog faeces to purify leather. But if you think the pure-finders had it bad, then consider the leather workers, not only did they work with vats of urine, but they also rubbed the pure by hand into the hide – both into the flesh (originally the interior) and the grain (the external surface) and then hung it out to dry.

The pure smoothed and removed moisture, which would otherwise have caused an unpleasant smell in the finished product, and it increased the suppleness of the finished product. Indeed, leather buyers used all their senses when it came to assessing quality – including smell and taste.

And finally

During the existence of this profession it was well recognised in popular culture and a number of ditties, or songs, were heard on the lips of pure-finders as they went about their work:

*I am an old pure-finder, yes pure is the word
What I find, me and my kind, you might find absurd
I searches out what lurchers left, it's a strange kind of job
Picking up a job or two, to pick up just two bob.*

Or indeed, this cheerful little ditty that puts a positive spin on the job:

*I am an old pure-finder, when folks say 'How d'ya do?'
Says I, 'Well, I do doodoo and do do well don't you?'
I do doodoo so well, when the doodoo I do sell,
But could do doodoo better if the doodoo didn't smell.*

References

- Mayhew H (1851). *London Labour and the London Poor*, OUP Oxford (reprinted 2010).