**Gloving**

The Wychwood Forest became an ideal site for the production of gloves and the trade may have begun as early as Anglo Saxon times with a crude hand protector made of skin. The Royal Manor at Woodstock and the visits of King John may have created the first cottage industry as riding gloves were used for hunting and heavy-duty gloves were used for forest management. The area was rich in raw materials deer, sheep and pig skin were readily available and fresh water was available from the Rivers Glyme and Windrush and local springs and streams created by the areas geological structure.

By the 17th century Woodstock was becoming the centre of the gloving industry in Oxfordshire and by the 18th century was a major national centre of gloving. The exact date at which the factory owners of Woodstock actively engaged out-workers in large numbers in the area is uncertain. There is no doubt that the decline in agricultural incomes led farm-worker's wives to take on gloving at home to supplement the family income some time ago, quite possibly as early as the late 18th Century in line with the Woodstock expansion. Undoubtedly by the end of the 19th century in most local villages including Leafield virtually every cottage contained a gloveress. The quality of hand sewing in the area was internationally renowned at 8 stitches to the inch.

The gloves were despatched in bundles to the cottage workers either by carrier or by a specialist village 'pack woman' as evidenced by the 1871 Census Return for Stonesfield (one woman gave her occupation as glove carrier). Even in the first half of the 20th century women from Leafield would walk through the forest every week to Charlbury, Woodstock and Chipping Norton collecting cut skins and delivering sewn gloves.

Mary Howse of Leafield quoted in an interview with Pamela Horn on 12th May 1988 said, "one of the cottages within the village of Leafield served as a depot. Here a "Bag woman" received a bundle of cut skins each week via the carrier, and these were taken in dozens to the out-workers, to stitch and complete in their own homes. She stored finished articles and distributed new orders. She personally was responsible for the distribution to the village gloveresses and wielded great power as she chose who got work. " It is certain that when contracts were small, difficult decisions as to who got the work had to be made. In the times before Social Security and with inadequate "Poor funds" no work meant no food, especially if the farm labourer had been laid off through lack of work or bad weather. This practice continued into the early 20th century.

Also at Leafield "The Old George Inn" was used as a training centre to teach gloveresses although unfortunately all records appear to have been destroyed and I do not know exactly during which period this took place. It would seem to be at a time when gloveresses were starting to use machines at home and buying the machines by deductions from their wages. High-class hand-sewn gloves were and still are very much in demand and local gloveresses still work in Leafield sewing for glove manufacturers in Yeovil, Martock and Worcester .

Acknowledgements:

Victoria History of the County of Oxford 1907 Vol.2 pp225 et seq.  
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