

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXVII

1977

IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

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INSTRUCTIONS TO AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY COMMERCIAL TRAVELLER

DAVID H. KENNETT

IN 1716, Richard Tyler became the manager of a soap factory in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, and was still in this post when the available records of the concern, dating from 1722 to 1726, are extant.¹ This rural business seems to have flourished in a small way during the known years of its existence though it was not without its difficulties. Chief among these was fear of competition by London soap manufacturers,² alarmed at a company of its size capturing a large rural market, for principal among the documents relating to the company is a series of '*Instructions to the Rider for the Soap Company*'³ which this note seeks to draw attention to. These instructions show a wide appreciation of the area covered and also give a clear indication that in rural Cambridgeshire and the surrounding counties this company intended to hold its own against competition.

The scale of the company's business may be judged from the following, undated, memorandum:⁴

Suppose to make in one year 2816 barrels of soap [which] is 54 barrels a week and 8 over [and] suppose will gain 8s a barrel [which] is £1126-8s. For carrying on the trade requires £14000 [which] is £700 per annum, so that there will be gained £426 over and above paying 5% interest; with for bad debts £126, [there] remains £240 yearly.

The memorandum goes on to state the charges against making that quantity of soap:

Salaries (one at £100; two at £50)	£200
Expenses	£80
New casks and mending the old	£532-1-5
Old casks cost	£102-2-0
Covers	£50
Coals	£50
Repairs, taxes, expenses	£42
House Rent	£150

The total cost of the 2,816 barrels came out at £1,206-3-5, which is 8s 7d per barrel. The company's expenses in making the soap also included the very heavy costs of the raw materials:

Foreign potash	£2658
English potash	£462
Lime	£104

This gave a total of £3,224 for the potash and lime but at the time of the memorandum the company had a stock of potash valued at £945, giving a

cost of 16s 2½d per barrel of soap which came to £2,279 for all 2,816 barrels. The original estimate in the memorandum of the cost of casks may have been too high by as much as £150, for a codicil states:

Suppose to employ 6 men at £25 per annum	£150
Allow a master to look after them	£30
Beech	£110
Hoops, 112320 at 16d per hundred	£62-8-0
Suppose more for rent, nails, etc	£29-12-0

This gave a total cost of the barrels of £382.

However, we do not know how far these figures are actual rather than hypothetical, for no account book survives. The partners in the firm seem to have changed in 1725 for a Mr Wright agreed to serve for only ten years from Michaelmas 1716 and the others allowed him to leave.⁵ Much of the extant correspondence concerns this change of partners, which in the absence of a more detailed knowledge of the firm is somewhat without interest.

The marketing arrangements of the firm, however, display both its wide range of contacts and its intention not to be driven out of business by London soap makers. In this it may well have been successful, for a letter of 10 November 1725 feared the speedy dissolution of the company, but one written only three months later is much more hopeful and speaks of the re-establishment of the partnership without Mr Wright but with a new man. Unfortunately the papers are not extant beyond this date.

What is extant, however, is the '*Instructions to the Rider for the Soap Company*':⁶

At March send to the shopkeepers to the White Hart or go to the shops.

At Doddington call of Mr Boydon.

At Chatteris go to the shopkeepers and desire their company.

At Haddington send for the two principal shopkeepers or rather go to their shops and invite them to take a glass with you at the Three Kings.

Sell Oil oil for 3s 3d to 3s 6d; sell B B 5s 10d down to 5s 6d; sell B x S 5s 2d down to 4s 10d; B 54-14 at 4s 10d; note we now sell B S fish oil soap.

If you find the landowners have by their letters offered to sell under, abate accordingly.

Enquire of some substantial person in every town who are the best and safest dealers and go to their businesses accordingly.

Never ride after sunset when you have money or bills that are due.

Enter into your book copies of what bills you take and get them endorsed by them you have taken of.

If any be found of selling tallow at 39s delivered here either exchange for soap or take some for an answer from your principals and if any want to buy tallow may have some at Wisbech or Lynn at 41s ready money.

At Ely advise with Robert Lightfoot Esq, Receiver General; call of Mr Marsh and other best traders as he advises at their houses and desire their company in the evening at the Lamb if you stay there.

At Cambridge go to all our customers and if you are advised of any new ones there or elsewhere get their orders.

Go to Everard at Newmarket and desire his advice whom else you shall apply to there.
 Go to Bury to Mr Hannibal Hills at the Eagle and enquire of all the good dealers in Bury; go to their houses to get what orders you can either from shopkeepers or combers that are great dealers and note in your book who are combers.
 At Thetford take Mr Sharpes advice or Mr Cardells where you set up.
 At Brandon call of Mr Brewster and as also at Stoke of Mr William Brewster and set up at the White Hart in Brandon.
 At Downham call of Mr Jay and keep a diary.
 When you reckon with any customer compare their books with your account.
 Write every post night of what business happens direct to Mr Peter Hardisway.
 At Cambridge if you have money may pay to Mr Finch or Mr Patterson or Mr Whitting and take a London bill.
 At St Ives enquire of Mr William Bentley at the Crown and Mr Ephraim White who are the best dealers in the town.
 At Huntingdon advise with Mr Sethwell who are the best dealers.
 If there should happen to be any complaint of any soap already delivered take the number and what is the particular objection.
 If complain of B S soap not being so strong as they would have it tell them it is for want of fish oil which they shall have if desired but the other much sweeter and better for all household uses for linen but for combers not so good.
 If any bills longer due that six months make them ask for money.

First Journey:

To March, Doddington, Chatteris, Maypole, Ely, Haddenham, Cambridge, St Ives, Huntingdon, Newmarket, Mildenhall, Wallington, Bury, Herley, Thetford, Brandon (abide at the White Hart), Melvill, Stoke, Finden, Downham.
 If complain it is too hard and won't spread on their clothes it should be kept warm and will be as good in winter as in summer; frosty weather will make all second soap either heavy or hard; warm weather will bring it to itself if kept close.

We do not know if the journey was ever undertaken but it would seem probable that these instructions represent a standing arrangement and most probably drawn up when a new rider was engaged by the firm. Who he was, or the fate of the firm, is not known, but the document itself does throw some light on the marketing of a product in a rural area: in this case soap in Cambridgeshire and the adjacent counties.⁷

NOTES

1. The material on which this note is based is contained in a volume of transcripts made in the mid-eighteenth century by Luke Francklin of Great Barford, Bedfordshire. This volume (Beds C R O document FN 1255 pages 483-501) is one of a series of twenty-three such volumes. For the Wisbech soap factory no original documents are extant and so the transcript is our only source. The exact relation of the soap factory and a series of other Wisbech papers, principally a school subscription list of 1717 and a court roll of the early eighteenth century, is not clear. Six items exist for the soap factory: three are letters, one a memorandum, one the instructions to the rider and the sixth a meaningless account for £18264 as the total liabilities or assets (which is not clear) for the company.
2. Beds C R O document FN 1255 pages 493-496: Richard Tyler to John Thompson, Market Street, London, 10 November 1725.

3. Beds C R O document FN 1255 pages 488-491.
4. Beds C R O document FN 1255 pages 486-487.
5. Two items mention Mr Wright: Beds C R O document FN 1255 pages 483-485: Richard Tyler to Mr Thomas Stevens and Mr Edward Stevens, Botolph Lane, London; 22 December 1722; FN 1255 pages 498-501: Richard Tyler to Samuel Jerimiah, 14 February 1725/6.
6. Beds C R O document FN 1255 pages 488-491. The transcript follows the original but has modernised the spelling and the punctuation.
7. For access to the material on which this note is based, I wish to thank Bedfordshire County Record Office. Paper completed 1 April 1971.

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