WHITE TAWERS.

By ARTHUR BETTS.

A great diversity of opinion appears to exist among authorities as to the exact meaning of this ancient term.

I hope to be permitted in this paper, first to state and briefly comment upon the various definitions of the word which are to be found in dictionaries and glossaries, and secondly to discuss white tawers in regard to their position among the ancient crafts of England and their practices as such craftsmen from the thirteenth century onward. These I have gleaned from old law writers, a source from which frequently light is thrown upon the customs and manners of former generations of Englishmen.

So far as my knowledge extends glossarists have not touched upon this subject, but have confined themselves in their writings to little more than a bare definition of the word, and I think it well in the first place in a brief form to set out these definitions.

Blount's Law Dictionary (1691). Whittawarrii, whittawers (quotes the Welsh statute, Ed. I, hereafter referred to) and proceeds: "I find it elsewhere written whytaroyers and interpreted alutarii vel interpolatores albi corii [tawers or dressers of white skin]" (Hist. Oxon. fol. 158).

Kersey (1715). Taw: to tan or dress leather.

Bailey (1733). The same.

Jacob (1756). Tawers: it is ordained that collar makers, glovers, bridle cutters and others who dress skins in alum, etc. and cut the same into wares shall be accounted "tawers" and be subject to the penalties for frauds and concealments relating to the duty by Stat. 9 Anne, c. 11.

Bellamy (1760). Tawing is the art of dressing skins in white so as to be fit for divers manufactures, particularly gloves.

Fenning (1761). Taw: to dress white or alum leather.

Johnson (1778). Tawer: a dresser of white leather.

Bosworth’s Saxon Dict. (1838). Hwit-tawere: white-tawer, a dresser of white leather.

Teesdale Gloss. (Smith, 1849). Whitleather: leather made from horses’ hides and used for dyking mittens.


Halliwell (1868). Whit-tawer: a collar maker (North) anciently a tanner of white leather.

Munimenta Gildhallae Londoniensis, Liber Albus (Riley). Introduction, 90. Leather was dressed with tan and sometimes as in the Roman days with alum. The dressers of the latter kind were known as “tawyers” though under the term “alutarii” both tawyers and regular tanners would seem to be meant.

Wright’s Dialect Dict. Tawer: a maker of husbandry harness. Whittawer: also written whitawer (Notts.); and in forms whitall (Northampton); whitaw (Notts.); whitler (Lincs.); whittaw (Staffs. Notts. Northampton, Warwick, Beds.); whittire (Rutland); whittower (Lincs.); whittor (Leicester).

Wright then gives the meaning of the word as “a saddler, a maker or mender of harness, a collar-maker, a worker in white leather,” and quotes the following glossaries:

S. Notts. Properly a saddler who makes his own white leather.

S.W. Lincs. “We’ve the whittowers in the house, they mend the harness by contract.”

Rutland,¹ Leicester.² Speaking generally, a whittawer is to a saddler what a cobbler is to a shoemaker.

Northampton, Warwick. “We allus used to comb out the wove for the collars when the whittaw came to do the mending.”

Wright’s Prov. Dict. Tawe: to dress leather with alum, a process used with white leather. Tawer: a leather dresser.

In Cowel’s dictionary and others I find under White Rent that such was “a duty of 8d. paid annually to the Duke of Cornwall by every tanner in Derbyshire.” In my Glossary of Ancient Words, under “Alba Firma,” I have given some fifteen quotations from such authorities.

¹ Rev. Ch. Wordsworth. ² A. Benoni Evans.
as Skene's *Verborum*, Somner's *Gavelkind*, the glossaries and dictionaries of Spelman, Cowel, Jacobs, Du Cange, Carpentier, Whishaw, and Tomlin, and from the *Regiam Majestatem*, all showing that White Rent was really a payment in silver or white money, and not in work, corn, etc.

I think that this white payment by tanners was not confined to that trade and that the definition by Cowel is merely given as an example of a white rent and simply because the payment by these tradesmen happened to be in money and not in kind.

The above are the usual and better known definitions of the term White Tawer, but except in Blount I have not found in such dictionaries and glossaries any reference to the customs and malpractices of white tawers. These, however, appear to have been well known and recognised. They are stated in the works of ancient law writers, who give warning against white tawers as a body. No doubt these malpractices were their undoing and perhaps the reason for their ultimate disappearance as a craft, so that their very name is forgotten except by antiquaries.

White (or alum) dressing of leather was customary in Roman times. Pliny mentions it in his *Natural History*. And Cooper's *Thesaurus* (1573) under the word "alutarius, a white tawer," refers to Plautus. According to Bosworth, "Hwit taweres" were known also to the Saxons.

The earliest reference which I have found to the crooked customs and unlawful dealings of white tawers is in the Welsh statute of 12 Edward I (1284). I translate from the Latin in Wotton's *Welsh Laws* (Ed. 1730, p. 533). The statute gives a list of matters which "shall be enquired into" by judicial authorities "and the sheriff shall enquire . . . . . . of whittawers because they whiten ox and horse skins knowingly stolen, in such manner that they may not be recognised." So that as early as 1284 white-tawers were recognised evil-doers.

The London Guildhall letter book G. (A.D. 1365), folio 163, contains ordinances regulating the services rendered by tawers to pelleters. These are set out in Riley's *Memorials of London* (pp. 330-1) and amongst them is one forbidding any tawyer to cut off the head.

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of any kind of "werk" (coupe nul teste de nul manere de werk). The object of the ordinance appears to be the easier identification of the animal the skin of which was the "work" of the tawyer and it may be read in conjunction with the Welsh statute of 12 Ed. I as showing the manner whereby tawers strove to evade the statute.

In Manwood's *Forest Laws* (ed. 1598), p. 104b reference is made to the Assizes of Pickering and Lancaster which it was the intention of Manwood to incorporate in his book. These were included in later editions and in that of 1615, page 240b, ch. 24, the manner of holding a forest court is explained and amongst other things it is stated: "The lord justice in Eire, or some man learned in the laws of the forest, by his appointment, shall give unto the same jury a charge, which charge in effect doth comprehend briefly the whole scope of the laws of the forest, and is as followeth . . . . . . ." And on page 241b. (in such charge to the jury) is the following: "9. Also you shall enquire, whether any tanner or white tawer doth dwell within the precinct of the forest and do use their faculties there, yea or no." And at page 250 under "Notes of the Assizes and Iters of the Forests of Pickering and Lancaster" there is the following: "Itinere Lanc. fo. 7. Item, if any white tawyer do dwell in the forest he shall be removed, and make fine, for they are common dressers of skins of stolen deer."

It appears therefore that in the sixteenth century white tawers were still (at any rate in Lancashire) under the ban of dishonesty, and that white tawers only and not all tanners were thus branded.

Crompton's *Jurisdiction of the Courts* (ed. 1637) has several references to white tawers: at page 176 it is stated under the heading of: "Another form of enquiry before the Justices of the forest which I find in an old written book touching the forest of Sherwood in the county of Notts" (here follow various items of enquiry after which Crompton states on page 178b). "It seems that the following things are as laws ordained by the king." And on page 179a "45. Item, the king commands that no tawer or whitener of skins shall remain in his forests beyond the borough."
No actual reason is given here for this ordinance, the absence of which leads me to believe that in those times everybody knew and could say why the presence of these craftsmen was undesirable and forbidden in the forest.

On pages 188–190 Crompton records the reason in a quotation which he gives under the authority of Francis Rhodes who was Justice of the Common Pleas from Hilary, 28 Eliz. (1585) to March, 31 Eliz. (1588). The quotation is almost identical with that from the Lancaster Assizes by Manwood, and is as follows: “Things taken from the records of Pleas of the Forests, out of the book of F. Rhodes, late one of the Justices of the Common Pleas. Note: If any white tawer dwell in a forest he shall be removed and make fine, because they are the common dressers of the skins of stolen deer.”

On page 195 there is the record of a judgment which would seem to include bark tanners amongst the undesirables of the period: it runs as follows: “Court of the Justices of the Forest, Item, it was presented that A. B. had made a barcarie at N. and because it was builded too near the forest, it was therefore, by judgment, cast down, and the offender amerced” (Ebor. 35b).

It will be noted that the word “barcarie” is used. I think it probable that the malpractices of white tawers (who are specially mentioned by Rhodes and Manwood as receivers and dressers of stolen skins) led to the exclusion also of bark tanners from the neighbourhood of the forest. The summary methods of our ancestors therefore were used in this instance against the possibly innocent bark tanners: At anyrate I can find no other mention or suggestion that bark tanners were under the same suspicion of evil dealings as were white tawers, and although Manwood (p. 241b) includes tanners in the charge to the jury before mentioned, he does not (as in his later reference to white tawers) state that they were guilty of malpractices.

The Guildhall letter book does not always distinguish between “tawyers” and white tawers, but uses the general term “tawers” as do all the above quoted

glossarists except Blount, Grose, Bosworth and Halliwell, who say "White tawers."

Riley, in his introduction before quoted, appears to have some doubt on the point, for he says "The dressers of the latter kind" (alum) "were known as tawyers, though under the term 'alutarii' both tawyers and regular tanners would seem to be meant." He evidently inclines to the opinion that tawyers were alum (as distinguished from bark) tanners.

It is possible that this indiscriminate use of the terms at one time led to the suspicion above mentioned, somewhat to the injury of bark tanners. These had their own peculiar failings which were guarded against by other statutes (see Jacob before quoted), but the receiving and dressing of stolen skins were not amongst them.

It is probable that at a later period white tawers became in some districts a lower order of craftsmen; for Wright, on the authority of the Rutland and Leicestershire glossaries of the Rev. C. Wordsworth and Mr. A. Benoni Evans respectively, says that they were "as compared with a saddler what a cobbler is to a shoemaker." And from the definitions given by Bellamy, Grose, and Pegge, the Teesdale glossary and Halliwell, it appears that tawyers were makers of gloves, collars, etc.

Such lowering of the status of a trade or calling is not sufficiently peculiar to cause astonishment, e.g. the once learned calling of barbers and barber surgeons. Some of these became mere shavers of chins, while others from being blood cuppers rose to the status of surgeons. The surgeons asked to be separated from the barbers and the branches of what was formerly one profession soon became very differently placed in the social scale.

A similar degradation of this branch of the leather or tanning trade is suggested by the above quotations, and this is confirmed by Fitzherbert in his *Justice of the Peace* (ed. Tottell, 1559, 86) where I find the term mentioned in "The Charge of the Court Leet." It is used in a new sense, but confirms Manwood's and Crompton's definition of illegal, or rather unusual, buying. Fitzherbert says, "Also of all white tawers that sell not good chaffer as they ought to do reasonably, and buyeth the skins in any other place than in town or market ye
shall do us to wete" (shall cause us to know) and on page 144 under "What things be enquirable in the Sheriffs Turn"; "also they shall enquire . . . . . of them that wittingly make white the skins of beasts stolen."

The insinuation here is, that white tawyers not only bought illegally, but had to be looked after and punished at the Court Leet in the event of their trying to palm off inferior goods on the public.

In Kitchin's Le Court Leete (ed. Tottel, 1581, 13) under the head of "Le Charge en Court Leete" I find the following: "23, also if anyone by any way corrupt the common waters by 'whitawinge' . . . . whereby the waters are corrupted, is enquirable," so that Kitchin adds to the iniquitous practices of white tawers, the defiling of streams.

I have searched, in Rastall's and in Pulton's Statutes, the acts of parliament governing the leather trades, but I have not found any mention of white tawers, though both these authorities set out in detail the various things forbidden by statute to tanners; such as carrying on at the same time the trades of tanners and curriers, etc. These are well known to antiquaries whose studies have led them in this direction and do not enter into the subject under discussion, except perhaps to point to the distinction between white tawers and bark tanners to which I have already referred.

I have also searched Lambarde's Eirenarcha (ed. 1591). White tawers are not mentioned among the usual offenders with whom Justices of the Peace had to deal. Nor are they included amongst those stated by Crompton in his Justice of the Peace (ed. 1583). I conclude that the offences were punishable by the forest authorities, Courts Leet, etc. and did not come under the jurisdiction of ordinary Justices of the Peace.

To collect and distinguish under headings the above practices and definitions by glossarists, I may put them thus:


2. Makers of white or alum dressed leather only. Blount, Jacob, Bellamy, Fenning, Johnson, Halliwell, Riley
WHITE TAWERS.

(Liber Albus), South Notts. glossary, Bosworth, Wright’s Dialect Dic. and Wright’s Prov. Dict.

3. General leather dressers or curriers (as to the word “tawer” only), Coleridge, Wright’s Prov. Dic. Riley (Liber Albus), Kersey, Bailey.

4. Horsehide leather only. Teesdale Gloss. which specifies that it is used for “dyking mittens.”

5. Both ox and horsehide leather. Statute 12 Ed. I.

6. Illegal takers or purchasers of skins. Crompton, Manwood and Fitzherbert and statute 12 Ed. I.


The South Notts. definition seems to imply that they were not only saddlers but tanners also, and that this was unusual in that part of the country; or the fact that they made their “own whit leather” would not have been stated, but assumed.

By some glossarists, such as Jacob, Bellamy, Fenning, Johnson, Halliwell, Riley and Wright, “tawe,” without any prefix, was used in the sense of alum, or white dressing of leather and the craftsmen were both tawers and white tawers. In many districts the latter were even menders of leather or harness which “tawers” do not appear to have been.

On the whole it appears to me that the terms tawer and white tawer came to be used rather indiscriminately, and we may hope that the references to reprehensible practices in Crompton, Kitchin, Manwood, Fitzherbert and the statute of Edward I were only as to certain of the craft. One black sheep is in every flock, and we may charitably believe that at one time white tawers as a body were innocent of such malpractices. When the black sheep became so numerous as to tinge the white tawer branch of the trade to such an extent that they were included amongst the culprits against whom sheriffs, justices of the forest, courts leet and forest guards were warned, the respectable portion apparently dropped the prefix and under the general name of “tawers” became merged in the higher branch of the tanning trade. The “bad residue” was probably accounted for by the paternal attentions of the authorities of the period, whose methods of compulsion were usually effectual if occasionally brutal.