

PRIZE WORK

June Swann, UK ICOM Committee, Northampton

Abstract:

This article will share examples of Prize work boots and shoes from a variety of countries. Often these exquisitely stitched examples of the shoemakers' art are in poor condition and undervalued. This article also calls for the importance of prize work to be recognized and better treated.

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Introduction

In February during a visit of the 'Independent Shoemakers' group to Northampton Museum stores, I saw a row of about ten men's knee boots with fancy decoration and odd shapes, which would puzzle most costume people. They are part of a collection given in 2005 by the Reverend Brian Shackleton from a tiny village in North Yorkshire, a long way from the highly skilled boot and shoemakers who made them. But his gift of some seventy examples of this incredible work certainly deserves to be known: he realised their importance. I call them as a general term, Prize work, though it is rare to find prize-winners' names matched with surviving shoes.



Figure 1

Terminology

Over the centuries words change meaning: just as the medieval cordwainer changed to shoemaker in the sixteenth century, so there are variants on 'prize'. The earliest, about 1580, is 'abling piece', for the shoe made 'in the presence of searchers' to judge if the applicant was good enough to be termed Master. By then the power of the guilds in England

was declining, overwhelmed with mass production in London and towns like mine, Northampton. Most Europeans know them as Masterpiece/chef d'oeuvre, made by the apprentice at the end of his term, usually seven years (or to the age of 21). In 1474 Stockholm's shoemakers' guild regulations mention 'the master shoes to be made from one cattle hide are: two pairs of women's shoes, a pair of high boots (for men) and a pair of 'bond' shoes' (probably ankle boots). Their 1541 test included a pair of the comparatively new, double-soled shoes. The next development in 1625 was 'shoes with heels'; four years later, shoes without the open sides, which were becoming too large, impractical during the Thirty Years War; then belatedly in 1639 the knee boot 'without top', that is without the extension over the knee, which would be cheaper. Changes were only slowly accepted; the emphasis was always on being wearable, but in the general fashion.

Somewhere between these dates, a unique, extreme shoe was made with the sole reinforced by an oblique strut from heel base to back of tread, now in Skokloster, Sweden; it shows no sign of having been worn: always check if bizarre shoes have been worn. It is very revealing, as both sexes wear the strangest shoes. But when they became too fanciful, the masters did object.

In Britain the alternative to masterpiece was 'proof piece', with 'prize' mentioned in John Bagford's notes (written 1684 to 1716). It shows that applicants to the Worshipful Company of Cordwainers made 'their prize work in the sight of eminent masters' before they were allowed to keep a shop. The shoes which passed the test were kept by the Guild, sadly all lost in the Great Fire of London in 1666. Two 1660s-style shoes were made with the 1720s-style toe, one now in the Shoe Museum in Zlín, Czech Republic, the other in Dresden, the latter has '1725' white-stitched on the red sole-cover, for all to see: this is a warning that prize work rarely uses the current fashion, which makes dating difficult without other evidence than the object.

It was a continuous struggle between practical shoes and makers wanting to show off their skills: in 1609 in William Rowley's play *A Shoemaker a Gentleman*, a shoemaker says: 'We'll teach you to...last to the 12' (that probably means the number of stitches to the inch (2.54 cm). 12 would be routine work. There are a number of probable masterpiece shoes depicted with the shoemaker inmates in the Nürnberg House Books (each man retiring to the home was painted on entry, with a brief biography alongside). See for instance Mr. Schalck, altmaker/cobbler, showing in 1687 the boot he had altered to make something wearable. In 1717 Mr. Kauffmann, shoemaker, at the age of 54 the youngest shown, and very smartly dressed. He holds aloft an elegant painted boot with golden heel. There are three mid eighteenth century portraits of cobblers holding a 'puzzle' shoe with apparently no entry for last insertion and removal; Mr. Herold's is dated 1754 and stands on three brass knobs. Once you knew the secret (the 'last' used was made of something that would turn to powder and disappear through a tiny hole), it required little shoemaking skill.

There is also the word 'occasioning'. Though it goes back to the 1760s, I have only heard it used once, in 1959 when the owner of a slip-on shoe gave it to Northampton Museum. It is of black leather with a front gusset of early 'elastic' (seersucker with a latex coating, the only one I have seen on a shoe). It dates to about 1830s, and we would be very pleased to learn if textile specialists know of other examples and their dates. She called it an 'occasioning shoe made in Northampton by my grandfather'. The last mention of the word I found is on a drawing about 1905: a man stands at the counter in Manfields' outwork department asking

“Any occasion for a laster ?” (lasting is pulling the upper onto the last before the outsole is put on). From the 1830s there is a steady increase in mass production of shoes, but in 1833 ‘many prize fancy boots etc’ were carried by the officers in at least one procession of The Amalgamated Shoemakers Society in Nantwich, Cheshire, the sort of society which later would become a trade union.

James Devlin (1800-c.1863)

The next year James Devlin (1800-c.1863) published the first of his pamphlets and books (the most useful for costume is the 1839-40 2-volume *Guide to Trade: The Shoemaker*). The would-be author was the finest boot closer (that is sewing the parts of the upper together) from the early 1820s; and still famous in the 1850s for doing 60 stitches to the inch and his shamrock tongue (he was Irish: their symbols the colour emerald and the shamrock plant). Northampton Museum has a boot with shamrock tongue, but made by W.D. Attewell about 1840 (black patent golosh foot with emerald-green leg). Devlin, always itinerant, worked for George Hoby (‘Hoby the Great’, London’s best bootmakers). But on p.30 in his 1852 *Critica Crispiana* (80 pages of strong criticism of boots and shoes in the 1851 Great Exhibition, ending in mid-sentence) he writes that Hoby’s were ‘now not equal.. to some of the other houses’. The writing (mostly short-lived newspapers) and family problems took over Devlin’s life and the trade lost a genius. The extreme fine work was probably reacting to the mechanisation that shoemakers saw in other trades (it had yet to reach shoemaking). It meant all were learners, with newcomers, unemployment, wage problems and most importantly, a different way of life. So the emphasis for most of the Boot and Shoe exhibitors in the 1851 Exhibition was work machines could not do. It demanded long-honed skills, choosing the right leathers (Devlin was critical of some chosen for the Exhibition’s fine work), and special tools: I have only seen prickers to mark for up to 32 and 36 stitches to the inch.

Nineteenth-century Exhibitions and Prize Work

The 1851 Exhibition catalogue lists footwear in Section III, Class 16, ‘Leather, Saddlery, Boots and Shoes’. About a hundred makers are listed (and five slipper and foot muff makers, four clogmakers). The addresses are given, and a description of what was exhibited; sadly too many are just ‘Boots and Shoes’. Only four give more detail, plus J. Sparkes Hall who showed mostly reproductions of historic styles, and the 1791 Duchess of York’s 5¾” long shoe (she married very young)). There is some emphasis on revolving heels and on the waist of the shoe: patent elastic, steel spring shanks, which had been tested on the army from 1838. Three or four mention the specialities found in Prize Work which might help to identify it, such as a shell heel; the 4½ ounce jockey boot would require the boots to be weighed, a tool not found in museum offices. The ‘seemless legs and top’ ought to be recognisable, but I did not find them in this collection. So there follows a selection of the more spectacular: an impractical, pillar heel is included in the catalogue, but it is not the one in the Museum which has a different number of pillars; presumably made in imitation about the same date. More recognisable, for those familiar with nineteenth century women’s shoes, are two very similar side-lace ankle boots, textile upper, no heel. There is also a patent leather, wrinkled hessian knee boot, which may be the one from the Exhibition,

investigated 'to find out how it was done', which ruined it. The only illustration of the footwear is three views of the 'elastic waist', obviously *the* new practice that year, on a button ankle boot, made by Taylor & Bowley, but again not the example in the Museum.

With this good precedent, another International Exhibition was held in London in 1862, the boots and shoes now in the Industrial Department, Class 27, Articles of Clothing, Sub-Class D: 93 makers in alphabetical order, but the detail remained poor. The elastic waist is still there, shown by Cremer. But times had changed: there are three mentions of machines for uppers (only!), including Derham of Bristol, noted for heavy work boots with riveted sole; and there are riveted boots too from Tewkesbury and Leicester makers, probably newcomers to the trade reviving a simpler construction, merely knocking in nails against an iron last. But was this how S.W. Norman made a 'boot without a stitch in the sole'? There are new materials: Pannus-corium ('leather cloth'); composition soles; and from the Patent Plastique Leather Company of Ipswich, 'boots with sole and heel moulded solid', like the 1960s. The list ends with Yapp, later a familiar maker of children's shoes. There is only one mention of the top boot, quite common in 1851, but a York (the nearest city to the Reverend Shackleton) maker did show 'Fancy boots': Northampton has a smart, girl's lace boot in brown and white leathers, a new revival then, as well as my favourite, if I had to choose: a ghillie shoe, still on its last which had a thistle knob when sold in London in 1994, which the Royal Museum of Scotland wanted for their collection.

In 1869 the *St. Crispin* periodical began running Competitions every year. The first had three prizes: Bespoke Dress Wellington Boot; Gent's Walking Boot, both of patent leather with three centimetre heel; and a ladies' light dress Wurtemberg heel boot, with two inch heel (the Wurtemberg heel is stacked leather, incurved round the middle). This is the first mention I have found for it, though whether named after the German or American city, or the Duchess who was briefly step-mother of Prince Albert, consort to Queen Victoria, I have yet to discover. Suggestions please. The three winning boots were to be the property of *St. Crispin*; and the rest returned to the makers. Hence so many prize boots survive (it degenerated into 'Pin Point' work done by cobblers decorating soles, as mechanisation by the 1890s left fewer workers skilled in fine hand work).

In 1873 Northampton Leather Trades Exhibition was mostly boots and shoes, inspired by M.P. Manfield, who had walked from Bristol in 1844 to learn our secrets, built the first 3-storey factory in town in 1857, then the first single-storey shoe factory in 1892, with shops on the Continent, by 1873 the town's most respected makers. As Manfield saw prize-winners' boots being bought by Americans, he insisted a man's ankle boot with a mere 44 stitches to the inch went to the Museum, when our reputation was for 60. Americans, please keep looking for the 72 stitches said to have been made.

One Sunday I was cataloguing shoes in Los Angeles County Museum of Art, somewhat weary on the eighth day, and the next boot looked ugly: a hessian knee boot, the gold oval at the top with two red-coated huntsmen; I thought 'I'll just do this and take a break'. But I saw tiny stitches in the sole seam, took two magnifying glasses, counted three times: 64 to the inch; so was the next boot; the next only 50, all confirmed by the curator when I told him. They came via a widow from the east, with no information. One has the label Laird Schober & Co., Philadelphia, a name well known in England and America. I dated them about 1895, contemporary with the high-heeled exhibition shoes Northampton bought then for the Museum, and some Shackleton women's shoes with fine sole finish. All branches of the

craft showed their skills, now that the work was divided into departments in factories. In France pride in fine work survives: a man was convinced the Paris ladies making exclusive handbags could do sixty stitches to the inch; after many attempts over years, he finally decided it needed special tools and they gave up. So much knowledge has been lost in my lifetime; sad it took so long to think of the tools, when the nineteenth-century men made their own for special jobs. The men who made these boots and shoes took pride in their work. It is time to recognise skills and wear quality again. Northampton makes fine shoes for men, but where are the women's?