

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker investigates the two trades of his ancestor John Collins, as a woolcomber and a taxidermist

I recall my joy at first finding this photograph in the Leicestershire archives. It was taken in the early 1870s – a sunny street scene, captured at a time when photography was still a novelty. It shows St Nicholas Square in central Leicester, with Thornton Lane forking off to the right.



Study it in closer detail and you'll start to spot fascinating details. A woman stands with her hands in her dirtied apron. Teenage lads line up in serried ranks beside the row of shops. And on the cobbles of Thornton Lane, a man stands, grasping his coat lapels.

There's no record of who these people are. It's remotely possible that my relatives could be amongst them. But what really captures my interest is the sense of place it gives me for my ancestors, John and Catherine Collins. By dovetailing clues from old Ordnance Survey maps (www.alangodfrey.com) and trade directories (www.historicaldirectories.org), it's possible to figure out the house numbering on this section of Thornton Lane – the Collins family, living at No 79, were a couple of doors down on the left-hand side.

No portraits of John and Catherine Collins exist. There's not a gravestone to visit. So having such an evocative photo gives me a tangible connection with their lives in Victorian Leicester. Inspired by this, I was keen to find out more

about John Collins and in particular his work as a woolcomber and later a taxidermist.

Our story ends in Thornton Lane. But it starts elsewhere. A dip into the Ancestry website (www.ancestry.co.uk) helps me piece together John Collins' early years. Born in Bedworth 1810, he was the son of Charles Collins, a labourer and Hannah his wife. Whilst John was still a boy – some time between 1817 and 1820 – the family moved to Kidderminster, maybe attracted by the prospects of work in the carpet industry.

We can narrow down his arrival in Leicester to 1838-40. Relocating almost 70 miles from Kidderminster suggests that the family had moved in search of work, although it wasn't an auspicious time to arrive as the hosiery industry in Leicester was going through a rocky period. As historian Jack Simmons writes, "In 1838-41 ten [hosiery] manufacturers had given up business and sixteen had gone bankrupt. True, there were good times as well as bad; but the trade as a whole was in an unsound state."

However, it appears that work was still available, linked to the town's worsted trade. By the time of the census enumerator comes knocking on the door in 1841, 30-year old John had settled with his extended family – wife, three children, brother and grandfather – in West Street, a small turning off Braunstone Gate. All three men of the household are working as woolcombers.

To understand more about the day-to-day job of a woolcomber I turn to The Book of English Trades and Useful Arts (1818):

"The Wool-comber cleanses and prepares wool in a proper state to be spun into worsted yarn, &c. for weaving and other purposes. Each fleece consists of wool of different qualities and degrees of fineness which the wool-stapler, or the wholesale dealer in wool, sorts, and sells in packs, at different rates, to the wool-comber."

Leicester Longwool sheep were amongst the breeds favoured for their fine quality fleeces, with long fibres especially suited to worsted manufacture. The woolcomber's task was to produce long 'staples' of wool yarn by attaching wool to a pad comb secured to an upright post in the house, and then combing the wool with another warm comb.

The combs were rather like a short-handled rake with three rows of steel teeth. These teeth – or broitches – were heated in a charcoal-fuelled comb-pot and the hot combs were used to tease out knots and straighten the wool, which had previously been layered and splashed with a few drops of oil. The good quality wool was sold to worsted manufacturers whilst the short fibres – known as noyles – were removed and sold to manufacturers of baize of coarse cloth.

An 1837 sanitation report from Bradford – a major centre for woolcombing – adds further colour:

“These men sometimes work singly, but more often three, four or five club together and labour in what is called a shop, generally consisting of the upper room or chamber over the lower room of the house. The central apparatus in a combing room is always a fire-pot... constructed so as to allow three, four or five combs to be heated at it... the vessel being in these cases respectively called a pot o’ three, pot o’ four or pot o’ five.”

So in 1841, I can envisage the three Collins men – John, his younger brother Edward, and his 70-year old grandfather Charles – combing away side by side at West Street, warmed by their pot o’ three. But this is a somewhat romanticised vision. From the 1840s the process was becoming mechanised and woolcombing began to shift from being a cottage industry and moved into the mills. Whether he continued to work at home or signed up at one of the town mills is difficult to know, but for the next two decades John Collins is invariably listed as a woolcomber on census returns and BMD records.

Then in 1861 we get a glimpse of his new occupation, he’s now working as a ‘Preserver of Birds’, initially at 17 St Nicholas Square and later at 79 Thornton Lane. Throughout the rest of his life John is variously described as a taxidermist, a naturalist, a curator, or an animal and bird preserver.

He appears to have been one of the first animal preservers in the town. But some 15 years later, when taxidermy had become more popular, there were eight listed in the 1876 Post Office directory:

**BIRD & ANIMAL PRE-
SERVERS.**

Bird R. 89 Humberstone road, Leicester
Collins John, 79 Thornton lane, Leicester
Elkington W. 138 Church gate, Leicester
Sharpe Edward, John street, Oakham
Potter Thomas H. Billesdon, Leicester
Tilson Wm. 162 High Cross st. Leicester
Turner Thomas, 18 Harcourt st. Leicester
Widdowson Robert, Nottingham street,
Melton Mowbray

On first discovering this occupation, I eagerly contacted the Leicestershire Museums service, hoping that some of his taxidermy would be amongst the museum collection. Alas, they had no record of his work but their publication ‘British Taxidermists: a historical directory’ included mention of him and provided useful background to the burgeoning interest in taxidermy at the time:

“The Great Exhibition of 1851 helped in the development of the art [of taxidermy]. British workers learned a great deal from their more advanced French and German colleagues.”

The father of Victorian taxidermy however was an Englishman, John Hancock (1808-1890) who was noted for his depictions of animal scenes such as a heron holding an eel in its beak. From the middle of the nineteenth century taxidermy flourished, with activity reaching a peak during the 1880s and 1890s.

Explorers and hunters returning from Africa and India were keen to have their discoveries mounted. Museums were developing their collections of Natural History specimens. Cases of birds and animals were used as household decoration. And as a sideline there was the fashionable Victorian whim of anthropomorphic taxidermy, in which mounted animals were dressed and displayed in human poses.

John Collins' work was probably rather more mundane; preserving and mounting small birds and foxes heads, shot or hunted in the Leicestershire countryside perhaps, rather than big game shot on safari. Some sleuthing amongst the British Newspaper Archives (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) uncovered a couple of newspaper snippets about his work. On 13th May 1865, he's recorded as preserving the head of a Wolf-fish that has been presented to Leicester Museum:

TO THE EDITOR OF THE CHRONICLE AND MERCURY.
Sir, Among the various natural curiosities recently added to the Museum, may be noticed the head of the Wolf-fish (*Anarrhichas lupus*), presented by Mr. Geo. Wm. Allen, fish salesman, of this town, the preparation of the specimen having been entrusted to John Collins, of Thornton-lane, animal and bird preserver. This fish is closely allied to the Gobies and Blennies; in form it is elongated, slightly depressed at the sides, the dorsal or back fin extending in an uninterrupted line from the back of the head to the insertion of the caudal or tail fin. It attains a length of from six to seven feet.

And on 22 October 1870, the Angling Society reports that "The best roach this season was caught near West Bridge, last Friday, weighing 2lbs; this fish is now being preserved by Mr Collins, of Thornton-lane, where it may be seen."

By this time his son, John Collins junior, had established himself as a fish and game dealer at Market Place South, which might have provided a flow of interesting specimens to the workshop at Thornton Lane.

And so this brings us full circle. Looking again at the photograph of Thornton Lane, I have a stronger image of my ancestor; 60-year old John Collins, formerly a woolcomber and now an established naturalist, is welcoming visitors into his workshop. There's a whiff of camphor in the air and the room is dotted with animal skins, birds' eggs and display cases. He's delighted when people admire his latest piece of work, the specimen roach recently caught in the River Soar.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles – and for ideas on writing your own family history – visit www.auntiemabel.org or follow him on Twitter [@auntiemabel.org](https://twitter.com/auntiemabel)