

From Bunnies to Factory Gates

Stockport Hats

Stockport's hatting industry was unique because it specialised in making hats out of fur felt, not wool felt. Other local towns, such as Denton and Hyde, also made a lot of hats, but they made more wool felt hats. In hatting's heyday (about 1875 to 1935) there were about thirty major hat factories in Stockport. A large factory could produce about 5000 felt hats a week. And because Stockport was the fur felt hatting town, most of those hats would have been made out of rabbit fur. That's a lot of rabbits!

Why Rabbits?

Originally, a high class hat would have been made out of beaver fur. Beavers were hunted nearly to extinction, first in Europe, then in North America. Other furs were tried - muskrat and coypu made acceptable hats - but rabbits are fast breeders and they were local. Eventually, as hatting became big business, locally caught or bred rabbits were not sufficient to supply the trade, and hatters imported vast quantities of pelts (rabbit skins) from around the world, especially Belgium and Australia.



Stockport furriers, WH Taylor: sorting rabbit pelts, December 1933. STOPM:1995 2804



Stockport furriers, WH Taylor: clipping rabbit pelts, December 1933

The Furriers

Not many hat works prepared their own fur from scratch. They bought their supply of fur from furriers. To prepare the fur, the furrier would first grade the pelts according to their quality. A wild rabbit would yield better fur than one bred in captivity, as it grew fluffier fur. The furrier then flattened the pelts, and cut off the the tail and legs. They then treated the pelts with a mixture of acid and mercury. At this stage they also removed the coarse 'guard' hairs. These outer hairs did not make good felt. Finally, they ripped the soft fur from the skin, leaving the fur in one velvety piece, but ripping the skin to shreds. Women then packed the fur into paper bags, each full bag weighing about a pound. These operations were all originally carried out by hand, but by the mid-nineteenth century furriers used fur cutting machines.

Waste not, Want Not

The pelts themselves were the by-product of rabbit dinners and furriers often got them from local butchers. They would sell unwanted coarse hairs to upholsterers for stuffing furniture, and ripped-up rabbit skins to glue makers.

As Mad as a Hatter

The mercuric nitrate applied to the pelts by the furriers was highly toxic. When inhaled, it found its way into the bloodstream. Sufferers began with shaking, slurring and forgetfulness, which led eventually to confusion, mental distress and death. Please refer to the information sheet *It Made them Mad* for more information on this topic.