Blocking

the Museum of Hatting · Stockport · Hat Works

Toppers, bowlers, trilbys, fedoras, homburgs, pork pies and Anthony Edens – the blocker had blocks in every fashionable shape.



Machine blocking at Christys, about 1955

Blockers stretched felt hoods (see Hat Works Information Sheet 4: *A Hood is Born*) over wooden blocks to make hats. They needed nine different sized blocks in the same shape to make nine different sizes of hat in the same style. Nine was the usual range of sizes for men's hats. They stretched each hood over a block, pulling it down, tying it and shrinking it with steam. Often the blocks they used came in five sections that slotted together.
This was because when felt shrinks over a block with a crown that is wider at the top it is impossible to get the block out again without taking it apart. If the style of hat had a brim, then the blocker shaped the brim over a second brim-shaped block, always one complete piece of wood.

No Power
The first thing you notice about machinery used for blocking is that it is not powered: it has no attachment to a line shaft or electric motor. It was found to be impossible to mechanise this sector of the industry so the traditional hand blocking methods persisted until the industry in Stockport finally folded in 1997.



Blocking shop at T.W. Lees factory, about 1910

continues



Blocking at Christys, about 1980

Hard on the Hands

This made blocking very hard and labour intensive. A lot of heat was involved. A machine piped steam from the works' boiler to soften the shellac in the hat body (see Hat Works' information sheet Proofing, or the Best of Both Worlds). This meant that it was soft enough for the blocker to pull it over the wooden block. Buckets of water were kept all over the workshop to cool hands. But blockers' skin still suffered: 'My dad sat by the kitchen fire with the blisters hanging off his hands', remembers one blocker's daughter.



Blocking at Carrington's hat factory, about 1930. The blocker is using a tight string to make a sharp crease between the crown and brim

No Women

This is one of the reasons given for there never being any women blockers. It was traditionally an all male sector of the industry. In fact, women workers could block every bit as well as men but the blockers' powerful trade union kept women out of blocking. Women received only half the rate of pay of men. Therefore men feared that if they let women learn to block, they would be used as cheaper labour, and the men would be out of a job.

Blockmakers

The blockmakers were an important industry dependent upon hatting. They made blocks out of sycamore or alder wood which withstood the heat, moisture and pressure without splitting. In later years they tried aluminium blocks as a cost-cutting strategy.