Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

STRAW & BASKET SELLER H203



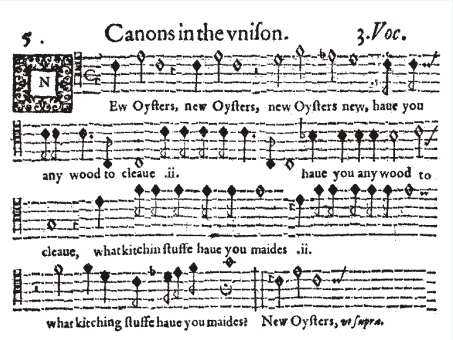
For centuries London streets were thronged with street sellers trying to persuade people to buy their goods. This was what the streets looked like in about 1400, according to John Lydgate(1370-1451) in his poem 'London Lyckpeny':

Then to the Chepe I began me drawne,
Where mutch people I sawe for to stande;
One ofred me velvet sylke and lawne,

An othere he taketh me by the haunde,
Here is Paris thred the fynest in the launde,
I never was used to such thyngs in dede
And wanting mony I myght not spede.

Then went I forth by London stone,
Throughout all Canwyke street;
Drapers mutch cloth me ofred anone
Then comes me one cryd hot shepes feete;
One cryde makerell ryster grene, other gan greete
One bad me by a hood to cover my head,
But fore want of mony I myght not be sped.

There were so many street sellers partly because people lacked fridges to store food vegetables, butter, eggs, fish, bread etc. Also, although horse traffic could be heavy, it was far easier to travel by foot and to conduct business in the street than it is today, when the motor car rules. The coming of fridges and motor cars has destroyed this way of life.



The sight and sound a street filled with all sorts of traders came to symbolise the bustling variety of city life. In the seventeenth century, for example, several English composers - Thomas Weelkes, Thomas Ravenscroft and Orlando Gibbons - being the most famous, set the cries of these street traders to music. Such people made their living writing music for church, so the challenge of turning the cacophony of street sounds into beautiful song provided both a challenge and a humourous break from their usual devout texts. The music on the right is a simple round by Thomas Ravenscroft which uses the words of a street oyster seller - have a try singing it!

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In the seventeenth century there also began the tradition of drawing and painting the various street sellers and their wares. This tradition lived on until the nineteenth century, when the street sellers eventually disappeared. The illustrations on the right show just a few of the sets of prints and paintings of this kind which were produced. They are (from the top) a pin seller, a crab-meat seller, a gingerbread seller and a strawberry seller. Such subjects allowed artists to escape from the endless round of high society portraits and to explore the vibrant (but sometimes wretched) lives of lower class people. Perhaps the most famous example of a painting in this tradition is William Hogarth's *Shrimp Girl* (below), in which an anonymous girl who would otherwise have been forgotten is shown as both lively and beautiful.









A list of street cries from a broadsheet published in the reign of Charles II (1660-85):

Cabeches ! Kitchen stuff !
Glasses ! Cockels ! Hartti Chaks !
Mackrill ! Oranges, Lemens !
Lettice ! Place ! Olde Iron ! Aqua vitæ!
Pens and Ink ! Olde bellows ! Herrings !
Bui any milke ? Olde Dublets!
Mussels ! Tinker! Pippins !
Bui a matte ! Coales ! Chimney swepes!
Bui brumes ! Camphires !



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Clothes and hat sellers occasionally feature in 'Cries of London' picture sets. Clothes sellers (right) usually look like Charles Dickens' character Fagin and are clearly intended to be Jewish - the second-hand clothes trade in London appears to have been dominated by Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe in the nineteenth century. Such figures are usually shown with several hats piled on their head, as with the model in the box.



The image on the lower right is from a sequence showing the 'Cries of York'. This time the clothes seller is a female but, again, she has a pile of hats on her head.



Making hats, baskets and other goods from willow and straw was a craft widespread in the English countryside until the end of the nineteenth century. Making things from willow, for example, was widespread in the villages around Reading. This was because willow could be grown along the swampy valleys of the Thames and the Kennet.



For example, until the coming of the railway in the early 1840s the village of Twyford, a couple of miles from Reading, was surrounded by a watery landscape. Osiers were often grown on little islands in the river Loddon called eyots to keep the new growth out of the reach of rabbits, cows and horses.



The willow shoots were cut in February and March, then placed in water till they started to bud. Young girls and women were employed to remove the bark. In this area this was done in a field adjoining the west side of the bridge on the Twyford-Hurst road. Several workers worked with 'V' shaped knives, through which the osiers were drawn to peel off the bark.
The resulting 'rods' were used mainly for basket making. Baskets were produced locally, but many bundles of rods were sent down the river, and later by rail, to the markets in London. The rods were also used for making wattle fences and for walls of buildings.

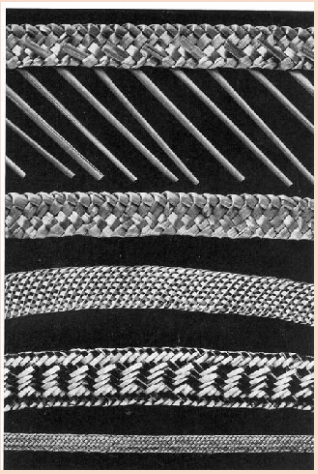
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Plaiting straw for hats was more common in Bedfordshire and north Essex. It was often done by the wives and children of farm labourers to earn a little extra money.

After the corn harvest, straw was collected and clipped into lengths, bunched loosely together, damped and then bleached to a clear golden hue by fuming it in sulphur. It was then split using a small instrument called an engine or splitting machine, which divided the straw into even strips.



The plaiter would hold a bundle of damp, prepared straws under her left armpit and as she worked she would bend her head and pull out the new splints, moistening and working them round with her tongue to keep them pliable. This would often cause scarring at the right-hand corner of her mouth, as a result of removing the splints.

The resulting split straws were plaited into lengths which were then flattened out and wound round an eighteen-inch measuring-board and taken to the village depot to be collected by the hat manufacturers of Luton and Dunstable. A photograph of some of the different kinds of plaiting produced in Bedfordshire can be seen on the left. The rolls of plaited straw were made up into hats in factories in London and then passed to shops or street sellers to be sold.



By 1871, there were nearly four thousand people in north Essex engaged in the straw work. Cheap imports, mechanisation, changes in fashion and the discouragement of the use of child labour caused the decline of the craft. By 1900, there was not a single straw-plaiter left.

Top: Straw plaiting near St Albans from the 'Illustrated London News' 1853.
Left: Straw plaiting at home at night.