

## SHOE-MAKING FIFTY YEARS AGO AND NOW.

BY A PRACTICAL MAN.



O trace the history of the manufacture of boots and shoes would be to trace the history of civilisation. When man began to protect his feet from contact with stones and dirt, he commenced to have higher aims, and as he has gone on perfecting himself in intelligence, so has he gone on perfecting his boots and shoes.

It can be truly said that in regard both to the covering of his feet and the general capacity of his mind, he stands upon a much better footing now than he did ten or twelve centuries ago.

Shoes are, to a great extent, a token of "respectability." I would not, of course, wish to assert that, because the labouring man wears a clog or a *sabot*, he is morally a less worthy individual than the person who has his "understandings" made of real leather, but merely that they are the index or sign of the outwardly respectable man. Englishmen are far less particular as to the appearance of their boots or shoes than either Frenchmen, Germans, or Italians; but of late years we have made wonderful progress in shoe-making and shoe-wearing. Fifty years ago machinery was scarcely used in their manufacture, consequently the trade in ready-made boots and shoes was very limited. In the shop of the local boot-maker there might occasionally be found a few pairs of misfits from which the urgent purchaser might, if he could, select a pair to his size and taste; but otherwise the "bespoke" boot-maker was content to fetch out his size-stick and measuring tape whenever a customer entered his quiet little shop, which usually contained little more than a few dozens of packets of blacking, a gross or so of boot-laces, a skin or two of leather, a chair, and a piece of carpet some two feet square, on which the customer placed his foot whilst being measured. In a few days, or sometimes weeks, the boots were made; in a few weeks, or sometimes years, they were paid for. The price was certainly high, but the quality was good, and the workmanship strong, and though perhaps not very elegant in style or neat in finish, like the Irishman's horse, if they were "rum 'uns to look at," they were "good 'uns to go."

The introduction of machinery, however, completely overturned this state of affairs; but it, like most other good things, met with a great amount of prejudice at the outset. The members of the "gentle craft" assaulted the enterprising men who purchased, broke their machines, and steadfastly set their faces against having "the bread taken out of their mouths," the result which they firmly believed would follow the general use of machinery. However, the bread was not taken out of their mouths. Machine-work gradually increased, and now by far the greater portion of boot-making is done by means of machinery.

Almost every process in the manufacture of boots can now be performed by machinery. The soles are first manipulated from sheets of leather by knives or "cutters," which are shaped like a sole; these are forced through the leather by a press. The top portions, or uppers, are cut by hand with a knife from zinc or paper patterns, the operation being known as "clicking," and a considerable amount of judgment has to be exercised by the "clicker" in order to cut the largest quantity of uppers from a skin, while at the same time avoiding any holes or flaws that may occur in it. The parts which constitute the upper are then sewn together by wax-thread machines. The upper is next stretched over and tacked on to a last, and for this operation there is a magnetic lasting machine, which cleverly picks up the tacks by the head, pierces the hole and hammers them in, thus of course doing away with the practice shoe-makers have of holding the tacks in their mouths. A cobbler of the old school, when seeing this machine for the first time, gravely remarked, "Ah! yes; it's all very well, but what do you think a cove's mouth's for if it ain't to hold tacks?"

The upper and sole are next sewn together by a sole-sewing machine; the latter is then rolled or levelled by a machine, or hammered by hand by the "putter up." The heel is made either by hand or machinery, and is "sprigged" or riveted on. The boot has now a very rough appearance, the edges of the heel and sole have to be pared, and the latter has to be rubbed with sand and glass paper to smooth its surface; the sides of the heel and sole are then blackened or "burnished" with a hot iron and burnishing ink; but for all these operations machinery can be used, which performs the work much better and faster.

Many materials have been tried as a substitute for leather, but all have failed, proving the truth of the old adage that "there is nothing like leather." The best leather used for the soles of boots is English, which is light in colour; next comes the American, a good, sound, red leather, but which often has its surface scraped and whitened to meet the prejudice of the public against a dark-coloured sole. A third leather much used is Australian, a white leather, spongy and porous. If I may here give a word of advice to the public, it is, Don't discard a boot because it has a red-looking sole; it will wear as long as the best English leather of lighter colour, will resist water equally well, and is generally a much cheaper leather.

There are no less than 52,000 wholesale boot manufacturers and retail boot-makers in the United Kingdom, without counting the operatives employed by large firms, many of whom have as many as 2,000 hands working either in the factories or in their own homes.