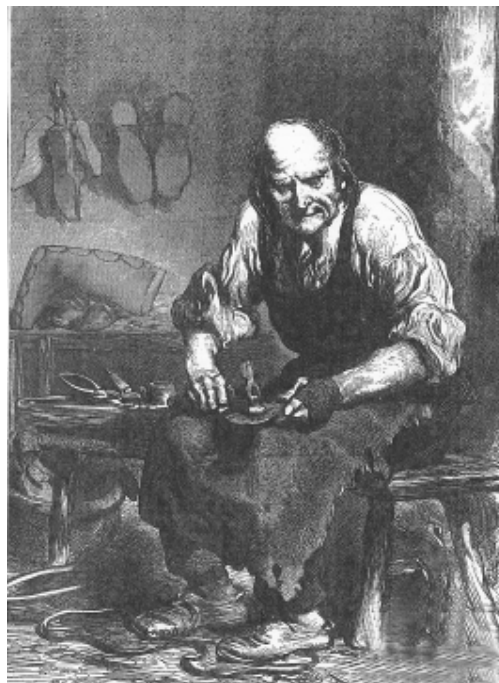


What is a cordwainer?

Different terms have been used to describe those whose trade is to make and repair boots and shoes — cobblers, cloggers, cordwainers or shoemakers are the commonest ones found in census records. One important distinction is described below:

The term "Cordwainer" is an Anglicization of the French word *cordonnier*, introduced into our language after the Norman invasion of England in 1066. The word itself is derived from the city of *Cordoba*, in the south of Spain, a stronghold of the mighty Omeyyad Kalifs until its fall in the 12th century. Moorish Cordoba was celebrated for two staple trades in the early Middle Ages, silversmithing and the production of *cordouan* (cordovan) leather, called



"cordwain" in England. Originally made from the skin of the Musoli goat, then found in Corsica, Sardinia, and elsewhere, this leather was "tawed" with alum after a method supposedly known only to the Moors. English Crusaders brought home much plunder and loot, including the finest leather the English shoemakers had ever seen. Gradually *cordouan*, or cordovan leather became the material most in demand for the finest footwear in all of Europe.

The English term *cordwainer*, meaning shoemaker, first appears in 1100. By the late 13th century a distinction grew in England between Cordwainers, proper, called *alutari*, who used only alum "tawed" *cordwain*, and another class of shoemakers called *basanarii*, who employed an inferior "tanned" sheepskin which was prohibited for footwear apart from long boots. Since this period the term *cordouan*, or cordovan leather, has been applied to several varieties of leather. Today cordovan leather is a "vegetable tanned" horse "shell," and like the Medieval *cordwain* is used only for the highest quality shoes.

Since the Middle Ages the title of *Cordwainer* has been selected by the shoemakers themselves, and

used rather loosely; however, generally it always refers to a certain class of shoe and boot-makers. The first English guild of shoemakers who called themselves "Cordwainers" was founded at Oxford in 1131. "Cordwainers" was also the choice of the London shoemakers, who had organized a guild before 1160, and the Worshipful Company of Cordwainers has likewise used this title since receiving their first Ordinances in 1272.

One distinction preserved by Cordwainers since the earliest times is, that a Cordwainer works only with new leather, where a Cobbler works with old. Cobblers have always been repairers, frequently prohibited by law from actually making shoes. Even going so far as to collect worn-out footwear, cut it apart, and remanufacture cheap shoes entirely from salvaged leather, Cobblers have contended with Cordwainers since at least the Middle Ages. Whenever shoemakers have organized, they have shown a clear preference for the title "Cordwainer," conscious of the distinguished history and tradition it conveys. In 16th century London the Cordwainers solved their conflicts with the Cobblers of that city by placing them under the powerful authority of the Cordwainer's guild, thus merging with them.¹

¹ The Honourable Cordwainers Company, <http://www.thehcc.org/backgrnd.htm>