

Stringmaking in 18th century Newcastle

Given the perennial interest in stringmaking in this publication, readers might be interested in one more little-noted account of early string manufacture. It is found in *R. R. Angerstein's Illustrated Travel Diary 1753-1755, Industry in England and Wales from a Swedish Perspective* translated from the original Swedish and published by the Science Museum (2001). Angerstein's diary contains many accounts and lists of factories and their output, and looks a bit like early industrial espionage! The neat version of the diaries made on his return to his native land are now housed in the archive of the JerKontoret in Stockholm. Under Factories in Newcastle, pp. 197-8 of the original diary (p. 255 of the Science Museum's edition) he says:

'Strings are also produced here from intestines of sheep, for braiding to horse-whips or for the thicker strings of violins and double-bass violins. The intestines first lie three days in water and are then scraped and scoured on the inside. Old hags and other poor women are employed in this work and sell the strings when dry for 1 shilling a gross. A gross is 12 dozen and each string, of which there are 12 in a dozen, is 8 ½ yards long'.

So that is 144 strings, each 8 ½ yards long for one shilling, that is 12 for one penny! Not very expensive even by the standards of the day; and no sign of guilds or quality control, or highly trained craftsmen; this sounds like piecework for marginalised people who could not find anything else to do – perhaps they were not very good strings!

