

# Who Made the Canes?

Authored July 2024

So who made school canes? This article is based on a substantial number of sources from around the internet. It turned out that one of the best ways to answer this question was to understand the commercial aspects of corporal punishment up to the 1970s and 1980s.

## **The design and use of canes:**

Canes came in two basic styles. The first was the 'swishy cane', like the ones that feature in the schoolboy stories of Billy Bunter. This style was thin and bendy, intended to leave a burning sting. It was typically a straight stick with a wrapped handle added to one end, making it easier for the teacher to control. The second style was stiffer and thicker, usually fashioned into the shepherd's crook handle that has come to be thought of as a 'Headmaster's cane'. This style had a wider diameter, up to the width of a thumb, which landed with a kind of thud. It left a deeper reverberating pain, rather than the burning sensation of the swishy cane.

They were made of rattan and cut to various lengths. The most common were 24, 30, and 36 inches. Longer canes designed to generate in more pain while still minimising any real damage to the flesh.

How were canes used? Strokes, or 'cuts', are usually delivered to the bottom. They typically numbered between one and six, although there are stories of twelve or more traditionally being delivered for very serious matters such as theft or pulling a knife or openly homosexual behaviour. Strokes were applied after the miscreant is told to 'take the position' of bending over a desk, chair or, alternatively, leaning forward to touch their toes. Generally, pupils were allowed to remain clothed, but some schools, for some misdemeanours, instructed them to lower their trousers or raise their skirt. Sometimes they were even required to lower their underpants, resulting in a caning on the naked bottom. Most teachers delivered strokes while standing still, although there are plenty of stories of teachers absurdly trying to add force by running up to the canee, mimicking the swing used in a game of cricket. Caning was intended to leave red marks, welts and even bruises, but never permanent damage.

By the 1970s, schools were often issued with official guidance about

how caning should be carried out. The aim was to standardise practise, even though the specifics differed across regions. This codification addressed issues such as the maximum number of strokes that could be delivered; was it three or six or twelve? Should the caning of girls differ from that of caning of boys? At what age should children be graduated from the smaller 'prep cane' to the 'senior cane'? Was it only headmasters who were allowed to administer canings or were other members of staff permitted to do so? Was it necessary to have a witness present? Should a caning be delivered soon after the offending act, or should there be a cooling off period? Should pupils be required to say 'thank you' afterward? Sometimes guidance didn't address caning at all. It simply stated what teachers were not allowed to do, such as slap a pupil's head or box their ears. Written guidance from local authorities applied only to state schools. In private schools, there was no requirement for such standardisation. Each institution made its own rules.

Members of STOPP (the Society for Teachers Opposed to Physical Punishment) began to campaign for the abolition of corporal punishment in 1968, and encountered intense resistance from many teachers, unions and parents. It would be nearly 20 years before the ban that they sought was achieved. It came into force in 1986 in state schools and in 1998 in private schools. So who were the companies that manufactured and sold punishment canes? How did schools submit their requests?

### **Coopers of England:**

This company was a stalwart and, perhaps best known, supplier of punishment canes, even though that wasn't their primary activity. Fundamentally, they were a gentleman's accessories outfitter, with a reputation for tradition and prestige. First established in 1850, on a country estate in Surrey emblematic of the Victorian age, Coopers came, over time, to be regarded as Britain's oldest and biggest walking stick maker. An article published in May 1994 in *The Observer* describes their beautiful, high-quality products, fashioned from any type of wood (or other sturdy plant, like rattan) into any style of cane one wished. A single sentence in the article captures the unexpected intersection of privilege and punishment, when it describes Coopers in this way: "Purveyor of walking sticks and umbrellas to the gentry, and of canes to schools all over Britain, for the last 150 years".

The *Observer* article interviews Mr Stan Thorne, a Cooper employee for fifty-two years. He remarks that during the 1950s and 1960s, the company's sales to schools were in the region of six thousand canes a year. "Eager headteachers were asking for dozens of canes at a time.

Some of the Heads were very enthusiastic. They went through canes like nobody's business." The article includes a photograph, accompanied by a caption that reads: "Stick maker Stan Thorne, who disapproves of corporal punishment, demonstrates the swish in a Coopers' cane". Yes, well.

How frequently were Coopers' canes employed in acts of corporal punishment is hard to determine. It is estimated that the Scottish tawse (Aka: Belt, Strap), manufactured by the leading leather company, John Dick & Sons, was administered at least seven million times during the forty years between 1945 and 1985. That estimate was based on a small set of records, given that punishment records were not generally kept in Scottish schools. However, its use was wider than Scotland. Walsall, a leather goods producing town which banned it in 1987, Liverpool and Gateshead, amongst others, used them as well. However, the tawse is heavier, making it prone to inflicting more permanent damage, which made it relatively unpopular with administrators of corporal punishment.

In English and Welsh schools, headteachers were expected to keep records of canings, often accompanied by signatures of the pupil and a witness, and some statistics are available. A 1985 article in the Guardian reported that official education records, collected shortly before the 1986 ban took effect, revealed an average of 4.7 "beatings" per 100 pupils in English secondary schools each year. In primary schools, the rate was one beating per 100 pupils. These figures were extrapolated at the time by the Advisory Centre for Education to arrive at an estimate of "250,000 officially recorded school beatings in each year in England and Wales - or one every nineteen seconds".

And how many of these strokes were administered by Coopers canes? Well, if the proportion of the cane market held by Coopers were as high as 70%, which is the figure that applied to John D Dick & Sons in Scotland, then Coopers' total might have been as high as seven million canings between 1945 and 1985. We'll never know if that's correct, but that doesn't really matter. We do know something about customers who were particularly fond of Coopers canes. The 1994 Observer article surmised that headmaster Anthony Chevenix-Trench fell into this category. He was headmaster of three elite boarding schools -- Bradfield, Eton and Fettes -- between 1955 and 1979. Trench had a reputation for vigorous application of the cane. Indeed, he was invited to 'retire early' from his headship at Eton, in 1969, due to the rumours of his affection for "flagellomania" and alcohol. Two years later, he was offered the headmaster's post at Fettes, in Edinburgh, where he died in 1979.

Perhaps Coopers of England only sold their canes to elite private schools? Perhaps their market never extended into state schools, with their lower social status? Maybe their first foray into the education sector came from King Edward's School, built in 1867 right next to the village in which the Coopers walking stick factory was based. It was only the expansion of the railway network that allowed the school to relocate to a bucolic rural England. It is easy to imagine a casual business enquiry during a gathering of eminent men in the area. If this was the case, then the deal was a lucrative development, given that the schools market was a steady one for Coopers, lasting until the 1998 ban in private schools. Only a few years after the ban, the Coopers factory itself closed, just after the turn of the century.

### **Bognor Cane Company**

A second supplier of punishment canes was the Bognor Cane Company. Established in the early 1970s, the company carried a very different provenance from Coopers. Its reputation was dubious and controversial, and its founder, Eric Huntingdon, was regarded by critics as "eccentric". It was reported that, by the 1980s, the company was selling 300 - 500 canes per week to schools, all of which were "made for Huntingdon by a pensioner, out of cane about the thickness of a pencil". Customers could choose from eight different styles, ranging from the 34-inch "senior cane" to the 20-inch "nursery cane". The canes sold at the price of 50 pence each (plus packing), equivalent to about £2.50 today. Thus, 500 canes would have yielded Huntingdon an income somewhere in the region of £1,250 per week, in today's money. Not a bad living – even if he did have to pay over some of it to his "pensioner" assistant.

Bognor Cane Company came under fire in April 1981 for an advertisement that its woner, Eric Huntingdon, had placed in the monthly journal published by the National Union of Teachers. The STOPP campaign, intent on impeding corporal punishment, argued that the photographs he had chosen for the advertisement were "lurid" and "salacious" and that they "encouraged sadomasochistic activities". The campaign group regarded it as "intolerable" that one of the country's leading teaching magazines should be boosting sales for such an unsavoury firm. Mr Huntingdon's outraged defence was that "he only sold canes for purely legitimate purposes," adding that he was a "God-fearing sort of dad". Stories about the row appeared in a range of mainstream newspapers, including The Times, The Daily Express, The Guardian, The New Standard, and The Sun.

Michael Horsnell, staff writer for The Times, defended Mr Huntingdon's

intentions, arguing there was nothing shocking in the material which he had published. Horsnell considered the teenage girls depicted in the photographs as “no more scantily clad [than] the average underground train traveller in summer”. He endorsed Huntingdon’s plan to seek legal advice because he viewed STOPP’s accusations as “utter unmitigated rubbish”. He pointed out that STOPP did not have adequate proposals for dealing with “child crime and violence”, so he was of the view that they should stop expressing derogatory views about those who could offer effective means of control.

The tenor of this row, which took place in April 1981, was heightened by the fact that only three months previously, in January, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) had taken the decision to ban corporal punishment for all inner London schools, both primary and secondary. It was the fourth education authority in Britain to have taken such a radical decision (following in the footsteps of Brent, Haringey and Waltham Forest). Whilst the Labour-led ILEA was pleased to be taking action against what they branded “uncivilised punishment”, many headteachers were strongly opposed, including members of the National Association of Schoolmasters. It is important to understand that any stories about suppliers of punishment equipment, such as Eric Huntingdon, would have been printed within the context of a highly charged, politicised dispute. Forty years on, we have forgotten just how pugnacious the debate to end corporal punishment became.

### **The Seedy Mr Brown**

One final supplier of punishment canes for which there is documentation is the mysterious Mr K Brown. Operating in the 1970s, he turned out to be “a Canadian-born immigrant...living in lodgings in Leeds”. Mr Brown was, effectively, what we would today call a sole trader, running a small business from his home.

Mr Brown worked with imported Indonesian kooboo rattan, from which he fashioned his merchandise. Kooboo is a highly regarded form of rattan -- light, durable, dense and flexible, without the tendency to fracture under pressure, as is a risk with poorer grades of rattan and bamboo. He offered customers a choice between two styles of cane, twenty inches for primary pupils and twenty-eight inches for senior pupils, which he was able to supply “at very favourable terms”. By the time Mr Brown came to the attention of the press in October 1977, he had held a contract with Greater London Council for three years, having supplied the Council with approximately 4,000 hand-crafted canes during this period. He had outstanding orders for another 1,000 canes in the UK and 2,000 more in America. If he, like Bognors, had

charged a fee of 50 pence per cane, then that means his income over those three years would have been £2,000 pounds, equating to over £16,000 today.

Trouble emerged for the Council only when it emerged that Mr Brown was using an 'accommodation address' in Leeds, rather than providing his full mailing address. All his post was delivered through the newsagent 'R&M Ingram', who, alongside the sweets and tobacco they sold, offered an accommodation service to a large number of individuals. Why? Because they were all involved in the business of mail-order pornography and sex aids. This discovery was highly embarrassing for the Council. How had they not realised?

The Council explained to the Daily Telegraph that they had been having "great difficulty in securing suppliers for canes". They had taken the decision to advertise in a London evening newspaper as a means of "inviting tenders for the supply of punishment canes". Mr Brown had written to say he would be able to supply rattan canes on "very favourable terms". In fact, his terms were so "low" that the Council considered there was no need for "special inquiries" to be made. Mr Brown was able to supply his canes so cheaply that normal bureaucratic checks could be evaded.

Once the discomfiting circumstances came to light, the Council suspended the contract because they "did not really want to appear to be fishing in this particular pond". While the seedy nature of this transaction may seem astonishing by today's standards, all one has to do is watch an episode of the 1950s children's television series 'Whacko!' to realise how ingrained caning was in British society.

One final detail of interest that emerges from this incident underlines the haphazard way in which punishment canes were sourced by professional bodies. The Director of Supplies at Greater London Council remarked to journalists that he had no "trade directory" to which he could turn when placing an order for punishment canes. The Council was responsible for "doing their own research into the supply markets". The Yorkshire Post journalist confirmed that statement by contacting the Department of Education and Science, who oversaw national education policy, and who was quoted as saying that "the choice of supplier for items such as punishment canes was entirely a matter for local education authorities." In other words, Councils were left entirely to their own devices in meeting their punishment equipment needs. No regulation, no assistance, no guidance was necessary.

The woke world claims the abolition of corporal punishment in schools one of their great victories. This in turn largely destroyed the cane production industry that flourish up to the 1990s. Nowadays, it still exists to supply erotic caning enthusiasts and the BDSM culture. But modern suppliers are now small private concerns or one man bands. Ironically, at least in public schools, it was the preferred punishment by boys. Writing lines wasted a lot of time, and gating caused other problems, especially if a boy was due to go out with his parents one week-end. A beating was primarily seen as punishment for getting caught, not for the misdemeanour in question. It also had the effect of giving him fifteen minutes of fame with his peers. For some boys, especially those who had never been caned, it must have been a deterrent to misbehaviour. Nevertheless, the physical punishment of children under ten was somewhat questionable. The hitting of children's hands with a cane was very questionable. But for teenagers, it is sorely missed. Why this was so terrible to the woke community is a bit of a puzzle. A person does not hit their thumb with a hammer because it hurts. A boy did not misbehave because the consequence might hurt, his rear end in this case!