

# North Mayo Heritage Centre Mayo Heritage

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Newsletter

YouTube



The ancient craft of  
**COOPERING**  
that still has a place  
in the modern world



Cooper Ned Gavin, Co. Cavan, shaping a churn and (inset) various items made by the cooper  
*(images: David Shaw-Smith©)*

Are you interested in

## TRACING YOUR MAYO ROOTS?

If you are interested in professional help to research your family history or are curious about your ancestry, why not contact us?



The  
North Mayo  
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Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

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# Coopering

Coopering is the craft of repairing or making casks and barrels.

In Ireland this was once one of the most sought after careers, with over five hundred coopers working in Dublin alone at its peak. However, the craft has declined over the decades and now there are only a handful of active coopers left.

The job of a cooper was kept within families and an apprenticeship took up to seven years to complete. The profession also gave rise to the surname Cooper. The skill of the cooper can be further subdivided, depending on the type of vessel or container being made.

The dry cooper made casks for storing dry goods such as flour and tobacco, the white cooper made dairy and domestic containers such as those used in butter making and the wet cooper made watertight containers used in the fermenting process of brewing.

The craft flourished and huge numbers of coopers worked in the cities and towns with brewers, distillers, as well as provision merchants and butter merchants all employing coopers. Each product needed a specific container depending on what materials were being stored, be they liquids or solids.

Country coopers catered for different customers, mainly farmers who required churns for butter making, butter tubs, piggins (small wooden pails), buckets, washing tubs and a variety of other vessels.

Coopers also travelled around the country, working in different places, until they decided to move on, or work became scarce.

The cooper would use different types of wood and would modify his vessel design to regional variations.

A good deal of the wood used was recycled from old vessels. Old whiskey barrels were often used as they would give a pleasant flavour to the butter made in the churn. The Schools' Collections from [Dúchas.ie](http://Dúchas.ie), a collection of stories from schoolchildren in Ireland in the 1930s details a story by a child from Gallagher, Co. Galway on his local cooper.

*"There is a cooper in this district and his name is Pat Staunton. He makes dash churns and tubs and he lives about two miles from here and the name of his village is Ballinalochy. He lived in Caltra once, his brother was also a cooper.*

*The tools he uses are:- a saw, a hammer, a hatchet, a chisel, a plane, a spoke sheaf.*

*The sort of timber he uses for churns is oak and it takes him about two days to make one of them.*

*Then he brings them to the market and sells them and he gets about £1: 5 for each churn. He uses any kind of timber in tubs. He gets about 7/6 for a full size tub and half the price for small tubs. His Father and Grandfather were also coopers and he learned his trade from them".*

Today, coopering is at the heart of Ireland's drinks industry and has given rise to a renewed interest in taking up this ancient profession. A small cooperage has recently been established, Dair Nua, in Foxford, County Mayo where this ancient craft will be used to meet the needs of the Irish whiskey industry.

Resources: Mayo News, Askaboutireland, Tipperary Museum of Hidden History and [Dúchas.ie](http://Dúchas.ie).

## Coopering - From past to present



A cooper at work, Co. Galway, 1950s  
(image: [dúchas.ie](http://dúchas.ie) B057.01.00020)

Darren and Ian of Nephin Cooperage, Foxford de-charring a barrel, 2021  
(image: Nephin Whiskey)