

The Forgotten Career of the Knocker-Uppers

Imagine yourself in London, some two hundred years ago. Like many hundreds of others, you are of the poorer working class, doomed to a lifetime of work in a factory, keeping the machines that are the fuel of the newly emerging Industrial Age up and running. It's a tough life, one wrought with hardship, large and small. Like the perplexing dilemma of how to wake up early enough in the morning to get to work on time... An alarm clock is out of the question - only the very rich can afford such a luxury. And you live alone, so there's really no one you can ask to wake you up at the crack of daybreak when you must leave. So what can you do? Being late even just once could forfeit you your job.

That is where I would come in. As your local neighborhood's dutiful knocker-upper, it is my duty and privilege to make sure you are up and awake on time. As I make my rounds about the block, I stop at each house and will not leave until I am sure that its occupant is wide awake. And I have a variety of methods to choose from. Perhaps I'll just bang on your door with a stick or hammer until you are thoroughly roused. Or, if you live on a second or third floor, I may resort to my trusty peashooter, shooting the hard pellets at your window until you wake up and shout down at me to stop. Whatever I end up doing, I can guarantee you that it will get you up and ready to head to work on time.

Knocker-uppers (or knocker-ups) were a common sight in the mid to late nineteenth century, especially in the northern mill towns and London, where factories were popping up as fast as daisies in a field. They were "night owls" - sleeping during the day and waking up in the late evening or night, so as to not be late starting their rounds. They would head out early in the morning, armed with their rattles, hammers, sticks, and peashooters, ready to "keep the world from sleeping," as folk singer-song writer Mike Canavan put it in his song, "The Knocker-Upper

Man.” And although the rapid spread of electricity (and alarm clocks) in the 1940s and 50s drastically reduced the number of knocker-uppers roaming England, they could still be found in some pockets of the country until the 1970s.

And it now seems to be one of those forgotten careers - although it was important, it was probably slightly overlooked even in its own day; and, seeing how unnecessary it would be in our modern age, I doubt that nowadays many know that these diligent workers ever existed. But despite this unfortunate fact, I still think that I would have much enjoyment trying out this career. It was a useful position to hold in a neighborhood, and such an integral part of so many communities that the great novelist Charles Dickens even made mention of the knocker-uppers in the sixth chapter of his masterpiece Great Expectations. And a fun position it must have been, as well. Imagine being not only allowed but also paid to annoy people and bang on things and try to ping a window with a peashooter! It is for these reasons that, if ever I had an opportunity to try out a job from the past, the career of a knocker-upper would, I am sure, be high on my list of favorites.