

THE KNOCKER-UP OF BALDOCK

What's a Knocker-Up?

A Knocker-up (sometimes called a knocker-upper) was a job that began during the Industrial Revolution when few people owned alarm clocks. A knocker-up would begin sometimes as early as 3a.m. to rouse sleeping people so they could get to work on time. Usually, the knocker-up was a man and most often used a long and light stick, often bamboo, with pieces of wire or a small knob attached at the end.

He used this device to reach up to bedroom windows and wake his customers at whatever time they had requested. The knocker-up would not leave someone's window until he was sure they were awake.

Some knocker-ups worked freelance - their clients would either post the time they wanted to be woken next to their doors, in their windows, or verbally, in advance. In return, they would pay the knocker-up a few pence per week. Many knocker-ups were employed by mills or bigger factories to wake their large workforce on time.

Baldock's Knocker-Up

Knocker-ups usually worked in larger cities like London or Liverpool. However, Baldock had its own knocker-up. In "Baldock Voices" a local resident, recorded twenty years ago, described what happened. *"The brewery employed a man to knock up the draymen at 3a.m. every morning so that they would be at work for 4 a.m. He had a long pole with a large solid ball at the top that he used to knock on the two bricks nearest the small bedroom on each cottage. In South Road, until recent restoration, you could see the resulting damage to the brickwork on the six cottages where the draymen lived."*

Another possible example of the knocker-up's work can be seen in the photograph of a cottage in Orchard Road. The brickwork is defaced next to the small bedroom window, just as described for South Road. You might think that the damage to the brickwork is unremarkable in a cottage of this age and could be due to any number of causes. However, the cottage next door-but-one shows exactly the same damage in the same place by the window. Also, the cottage in between appears to have had the same sort of damage repaired. This seems unlikely to be random deterioration due to age as the rest of the brickwork on all the cottages is relatively good. Has the knocker-up been at work here?

Further evidence comes from the 1901 census which shows that two brewer's draymen, Benjamin Wood and Thomas Webb, lived in Orchard Road as did a brewer's traveller, a brewery engine driver and four labourers for the brewery. They might have worked for Simpsons in the High Street or for the Baldock Brewery Company in Pond Lane.

It would be interesting to know something about the man who was the knocker-up. Did he have trouble waking up by 3a.m. so he could go out and wake others? Perhaps he was the Margaret Thatcher type who only slept for a few hours each night and was naturally awake early. One thing seems certain – it was not a job that would suit most of us!



ABOVE: The Knocker-Up at work in Blackburn. He uses a long stick with a knob on the end to knock at bedroom windows and wake the resident ready for work.



ABOVE: The Knocker-Up in Baldock. Are these damaged bricks evidence of his work?