

## Apprenticeship and Blacksmithing

Lane, Joan. *Apprenticeship in England, 1600-1914*. University College London Press, 1996.

Apprenticeship mirrored the change from handicraft, domestic skills to mass-produced, factory goods, it indicated new consumption patterns and above all it failed in responding to England's population growth from the eighteenth century onwards. Its early status of near-fostering, individually arranged, to provide a worthwhile livelihood for a minority was converted into the "cartloads" of very young children transported to distant factories, still, however, called apprentices. The basic faults of apprenticeship changed little. It was inflexible, taking seven years to produce a skilled worker; the child's choice was minimal and parental choice was limited by finance; it was highly traditional, with few opportunities for innovations, and when there were rapid changes in the economy or society, it virtually collapsed, to be replaced by formal education. [...]

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However, the advantages of apprenticeship when it worked well were considerable. Traditional apprenticeship provided stability for a child, a secure future, with guaranteed employment and limited competition. There were also social benefits for the adult in belonging to a trade or craft organization, including welfare provisions for members and their dependents. Access to charity funds and franchise rights existed in some of the great English trading centres for those who became freemen by right of apprenticeship, both substantial privileges. A good apprenticeship enabled the talented to rise economically and socially, as it was predicted that popular education would do in the present century, and parental sacrifices to secure an indenture are widely reported. Its importance can be seen in the number of laws made to control both the institution and the participants.

When the Statute of Artificers was formulated in 1563 one of the main clauses was the control of "artificers, labourers, servants of husbandry and apprentices": its strength, tenacity and comprehensive nature are reflected in the fact that it was not repealed until 250 years later. Even in 1814 its critics considered the statute a "poisonous insect" and "venomous reptile" which, though crushed, was not dead but still had "power to sting". Thus a Tudor promulgation, originating as it did from the rules of the medieval craft guilds, created a national system of technical training, which controlled occupational entry, standards of workmanship and trade secrets, as well as influencing adult wage rates and profits for qualified, skilled workers. The population expansion of the later eighteenth century meant that what had been effective for an England of 5.5 million in 1695 functioned with difficulty for nearly double that number by 1801.

Undoubtedly the intentions of the Tudor act were to control apprentices' status, training and personal freedom until the term was complete; they were to be dependent on their masters for the essentials of life (food, shelter, clothes) and to live with the master as part of the family. Clearly this style of apprenticeship meant that the child learned the way of life of the future occupation as well as craft skills, which might be particularly important if a change of social status were involved, as for example, from a tradesman's background to a career in a minor profession.

An apprentice has been defined as "a young person bound by indentures to a tradesman or artificer, who upon certain covenants is to teach him his mystery or trade". The legal theory of apprenticeship was that the master became for the time of the apprenticeship the parent of the apprentice; he exercised the same rights and was liable to the same obligations as a father, and the apprentice became a member of the household. A deed or written contract was essential (an oral

agreement was not sufficient) and a premium was characteristic although not vital. In response to the master's personal obligation to teach, the apprentice's primary duty was "duly and truly to serve". The master was entitled to exercise "moderate" personal correction to the apprentice, but the most noteworthy feature of an apprenticeship indenture (distinguishing it from a contract of service) was that the master could not summarily dismiss apprentices from misconduct, or be rid of them by paying wages in lieu of notice. [...]

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Once child and master had found each other, three basic details about the binding were recorded-- the child's age, term and premium. The child's age was the most erratically noted, invariably in pauper apprenticeships, as required by an act of 1708, but seldom in charity and very rarely in normal indentures. In the prosperous occupations the "seven long years" were generally served and the child was usually 14 when indentured. The more exclusive, traditional or profitable the trade, the more likely the apprentice was to be 14 when beginning the term; a child indentured for ten years or more was almost always younger than 14 when bound. In some occupations, in any decade, the older apprentice was an asset. In trades requiring physical strength (tanner, baker, butcher, bricklayer, farrier or blacksmith) the older boy, aged 15 or 16, was far more useful than the younger child. [...]

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In the early eighteenth century, the social status of the blacksmith, "one of those workmen whose assistance becomes necessary even in a rude state of society", was

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among the upper ranks of skilled craftsmen. However, as the century progressed, while the blacksmith remained just as essential to society, his status within the community, reflected in both the premiums charged and the proportion of pauper to non-poor boys he apprenticed, seems to have deteriorated. The blacksmith's skills were as necessary to urban as to rural life, and this importance was emphasized in their very wide distribution throughout the whole community. The heavy physical work of the blacksmith's craft meant that the young, small or weak boy was of little use, and the majority of apprentices were 14 or more with a seven-year term predominant. The numbers of blacksmiths at all periods and in all area indicate the importance of their services. The craft had seven men listed in London in 1696, typified by John Harris, whose household consisted of his wife, daughter, two "inmates" and his apprentice. The social standing of blacksmiths can be judged by the same criteria that applied to other crafts, the size of the premium, the social level of the parents putting sons to trade and the numbers of pauper and charity children indentured. Blacksmiths' premiums, especially in the eighteenth century, had an enormously wide range, including the very high sum of £47 in 1720 to a Sussex master. Of this, £6 a year was for seven years' board and £5 "in money", paid by the boy's father, a Chichester carpenter. The sum of £5 was most commonly recorded (28.2 per cent in Sussex, 25.7 per cent in Warwickshire, 24.8 per cent in Wiltshire and 32.8 per cent in Surrey) but £10 was paid quite often. Perhaps a typical example of an eighteenth-century blacksmith was Thomas Rose of Newbold Pacey (War.), apprenticed in 1763 to William Gilkes of Ashborne, a neighbouring village. Rose was bound for seven years with a five-guinea premium. He

settled in his home village as a blacksmith, married and had 11 children, the second of whom, James, he apprenticed to an unqualified veterinary surgeon in Warwick about 1808. James Rose later took over the running of the Warwick practice when his master died, but even then his weekly wage was only about 15s a week for four years and 17s for the next three years, in addition to his board and lodging. Later the family's status rose in the nineteenth century, with three qualified veterinary surgeons among them, one of whom was commissioned in the Fifth Lancers. It seems inevitable that blacksmiths had always been secondary in status to farriers, the emergence of college-trained surgeons at the highest level of veterinary medicine proportionally diminished the status of farriers and blacksmiths below them. [...]