

APPRENTICES AND APPRENTICESHIP OF CHILDREN OF THE POOR

by John Bright

Brief references to apprenticeship are made in Babylonian times (2100 B.C.) but the English Guilds of the Middle Ages provide the richest history of apprenticeship practice. In the 12th century the craftsmen of English towns were associated in guilds in which masters were those skilled in an art, a science or a craft, and the apprentice was one who was learning its mysteries. Under guild rules, no masters was allowed to take more apprentices than he could train properly and the method of training was rigidly prescribed, usually in a written contract or indenture.

As is well known the word 'indenture' is a legal term for a special form of deed executed between two or more parties. The copies were all drawn on one piece of vellum or paper divided by a toothed or indented line. The copies when separated along this waved line could be identified as 'tallies' when brought together. Deeds executed by one party had a smooth or polled edge whence the name "deed poll". The term indenture is now used generally of any sealed agreement between two parties and specifically of a contract of apprenticeship whence the phrase 'to take up one's indentures' on completion of the term.

The apprenticeship of parish children was regulated by the Act of 1601, which enjoined that they should be bound by the parish officers with the consent of two justices, boys till they were twenty four and girls till they were twenty one or on marriage. Under this Act the occupation was at first either farm labour or domestic service and the children were compulsorily billeted upon one of the rate payers of the parish. When the Act of 1601 added to other ways of gaining a settlement - that of at least forty days in the parish-it became the general custom on many places to apprentice parish children in another parish. In this case the master could not be obliged to take the child and a fee was given as an inducement, thus putting the parish child on a level, financially, with those who benefited from apprenticing poor children or those whose parents could afford a small fee. There were thus two kinds of parish apprenticeship. In one, compulsion was applied, to the master, to the parents (if there were any) and to the child; in the other, only the parents and the child.

Parish apprentices, then a form of parish relief, differed legally from ordinary apprenticeship in the longer term of servitude and the compulsory binding by the overseers with the consent of two justices. Moreover, in the indentures the master or mistress undertook 'to save the parish and parishioners harmless' from any charges for the child's maintenance. Till the latter part of the eighteenth century the apprenticeship of parish children was the most generally approved part of the poor laws. The children to be apprenticed by the parish included foundlings and illegitimate children, any children in the work house and also the children of those receiving parish doles. Apprenticeship in one of its many forms was still, in the eighteenth century, the most general way of giving a child a start in life.

The 1601 Act of Queen Elizabeth I made it necessary for Overseers of the Poor of every Parish, township or place to maintain a register of all apprentices who were bound out by them respectively. This is shown by a notice which appears on

the inside cover of one such register for the parish of Leigh in Gloucestershire, even though the register contains only three names of apprentices. The period covered was at the beginning of the 19th century and all three were apprenticed as glove knitters in the town of Tewkesbury nearby.

The Act stipulated that failure to keep a register would result in a fine of five pounds to be paid by the appropriate officers. This famous Act was incorporated into later legislation. 'Whereas by an Act passed in the forty third year of the reign of Queen Elizabeth intituled an Act for the relief of the poor, the Overseers of the poor of every Parish are enabled to bind out poor children as Apprentices until every such poor male child shall attain the age of twenty four years and until every such female child shall attain the age of twenty one years, or the time of her marriage. . .That the Overseers of the Poor of every Parish, Township or Place appointed by virtue of the said recited Act shall from and after the first of June and they are hereby required to provide and keep a book or books at the expense of the said Parish, Township or Place and to enter or caused to be entered therein the Names of every child who shall be bound out by them respectively as an apprentice together with the several other particulars in manner and form required by this Act. . .and every such entry when made in the said Register shall be laid before two Justices of the Peace who shall signify assent to the Indenture of Apprenticeship of every such child at the time when such Indenture shall be laid before such Justices for their Assent'. An Abstract of an Act of Parliament passed 7 May 1802 for Registering Parish Apprentices. (G.R.O. P199a OV4/1).

In 1747 the special difficulties of the poor apprentices were first recognised by the law in an Act providing that any parish apprentices, or any other apprentice with whom a binding fee of not more than five pounds had been paid, could complain to any two Justices concerning any misuse, refusal of necessary provisions, cruelty or ill-treatment. The Justices might summon the master or mistress to appear and, on proof of the complaint by oath, might discharge the apprentice by warrant for which no fee was to be paid. In a similar way the apprentice might be discharged for misconduct.

An example is given here of a Judgement made at Quarter Sessions for the county of Wiltshire in 1764.

'Wilts, To wit. Be it remembered that at the General Quarter Sessions of the Peace of our Lord the King held at Devizes in and for the said county of Wiltshire on Tuesday the first day of May in the fourth year of the reign of our sovereign Lord George the Third, by the grace of God of Great Britain, France and Ireland, King Defender of the Faith and so forth before Sir Robert Long, Baronet, Thomas Hodges and others, their fellow Justices of the said King in the County aforesaid and also to hear and determine divers felonies, trespasses and other misdemeanours done and committed in the said county. It is ordered as follows. That is to say: On motion made this day to this court to discharge Mary Scott Nicholls from apprenticeship to Henry White and it appearing to the Court that the said Henry White had frequently beat, abused and cruelly treated his

said apprentice. This Court doth therefore order that the said Mary Scott Nicholls be discharged from the said master and that he be discharged from his said apprentice.

Witness the Hands and Seals of us four of the said Justices present at the said Sessions.'

Some examples of apprentice indentures are given which illustrate a variety of situations in which masters and apprentices found themselves.

- 1) In an indenture of the reign of James II and dated 22 May 1685 the officers of the parish of Wotton-under-Edge placed a poor child Thomas Walker as an apprentice to William Andrews of Hawkesbury, a broad weaver, to learn the art and mystery of that craft. William Andrews was to allow and deliver unto the said apprentice 'double apparel of all sorts good and new. That is to say a good new suit for Holy days and another for working days fitting and convenient.' The Apprentice was to receive the sum of four pounds quarterly and the term of apprenticeship was for twenty four years.
- 2) Thomas Williams was indentured to a broad weaver on 2 March 1705 for a term of seven years. His wage was to be paid in ready money of four pounds quarterly and receive double apparel.
- 3) An apprentice in his indenture of 1 June 1733 was to receive 'during the said term sufficient wholesome and competent meat and drink, lodging, working apparel and all other necessaries meet for such an apprentice and at the end of the said term shall have provided and delivered to him the said apprentice apparel meet for him to have as well on the Lords Day as on a working day, both of linnen, hose, shoes and all other necessaries meet for such an Apprentice to have and wear.'

It would seem that an apprenticeship could be transferred for an indenture dated 18 December 1685 bears on the reverse an endorsement to the effect that Ann May, apprentice to Thomas Allen, yeoman, had her apprenticeship transferred to a George Howes. This is dated 25 March 1693. The reason for this transfer is not known.

Something similar to a status enquiry seems to have been made in respect of George Hall, for the Churchwardens and Officers of Acton Turville certified to the Justices that 'He is qualified to take an apprentice one Isaac Hopkins, a poor male child about ten and a half years old and has sufficient in this world to provide for such an apprentice in every respect and that we also do like and consent and approve of the same.'

There is evidence that consideration money was sometimes paid. For example, Samuel Lucas aged nine years old was apprenticed to Timothy Lacey for a period of twenty four years to learn the art and business of cordwainer. His indenture is dated 1774 and bears the endorsement 'Received the day and year of the within written indenture of and from the within named Edmund Roach, Overseer, the sum of three pounds and ten shillings being consideration money given to me the within named Timothy Lacey, the master with the within named Samuel Lucas the apprentice aged about nine years.

I say received,
The mark of Timothy Lacey, and witnessed.'

This money may well have been paid to guarantee that Samuel Lucas would not be a charge on his parish poor rate.

Indentures provide us with many examples of various trades to which the young people were apprenticed. In the cloth industry area, broad weaving and narrow weaving appear as does druggut weaving. The latter refers to a coarse woven fabric used for floor covering. Another is a scribbler connected to the weaving trade and woollen trade - not a writer as one might imagine - but one who scribbles wool or tends a scribbling machine. Other trades included a cordwainer, barber, peruke maker, tailor, staymaker and blacksmith. Housewifery and husbandry were often the subjects of apprenticeship and in actual fact were really forms of domestic servitude for the poor, apprenticed children.

EVIDENCE OF WAGES

The wages paid to apprentices were quite meagre. On many indentures the amount of wages to be paid are stated. For instance on an indenture dated 25 January 1879 an apprentice to a Pastry Cook and Confectioner for a term of four years was to be paid: 1st year at 1/- per week. 2nd year at 1/6d per week. 3rd year at 2/- per week and for the 4th year 3/- per week.

An apprentice aged 17 years in 1859 to learn the trade of a coach smith in Bath for a term of 4 years was to be paid for the 1st year at 5/- per week, for the 2nd year at 7/- per week, for the 3rd year at 9/- per week and for the 4th year 12/- per week.

HUSBANDRY & HOUSEWIFERY

It is usual to expect in apprenticeship that a wide range of masters - coopers, tanners, butchers, maltsters, brushmakers and surgeons - took on youngsters but in Newnham parish, of 48 poor children set to be apprenticed, 23 boys were apprenticed to husbandry and 21 girls to housewifery. The remaining 4 boys were apprenticed to a tailor, a brushmaker, a mariner and to an inn holder! The average age of these children was 12 years.

The indenture of Hester Meredith, a poor child of about 11 years at Newnham to James Sutton Oliver, gentleman, to learn housewifery is endorsed; 'not executed. Mr Oliver being a bachelor, the magistrates did not deem it proper to place a girl where there was no mistress'. Obviously the magistrates had some regard for the young girl's moral welfare.

Another example of an endorsement was on the indenture of Ann Bodnum, aged 13 years and apprenticed to Phoebe James, dated 25 January 1809 and was to the effect that 'the within named Ann Bodnum about 12 months since, with my consent went to live with her Aunt near Bristol and never afterwards came into my service so that the last forty days of her apprenticeship were served out of the Parish. Signed P. James 24 June 1812'. (The term of this indenture was for 16 years or marriage).

One final endorsement, to the writer seemingly quite Dickensian and reminiscent of Mr. Bumble. 'Mr Church have received the boy and the fee of two pounds with him.' This was on an indenture dated 15 March 1824.

Thus variation in indentures occurred but in an act of 1791 an important change was made in the regulation of Parish apprentices. An Act was passed which stated that should the master of an apprentice die during the term of the indenture,

then, for a period of three months after the master's decease, the apprentice would be clothed and fed by his master's executors and would not become a charge on the parish or its Parishioners. This can best be seen in the illustration included in this article.

INEQUALITY AT DYMOCK ?

Among the indentures at Dymock was an interesting paper showing how six apprentices in one parish could be equitably put out at the same time to masters with varying rateable values. The exercise is shown below.

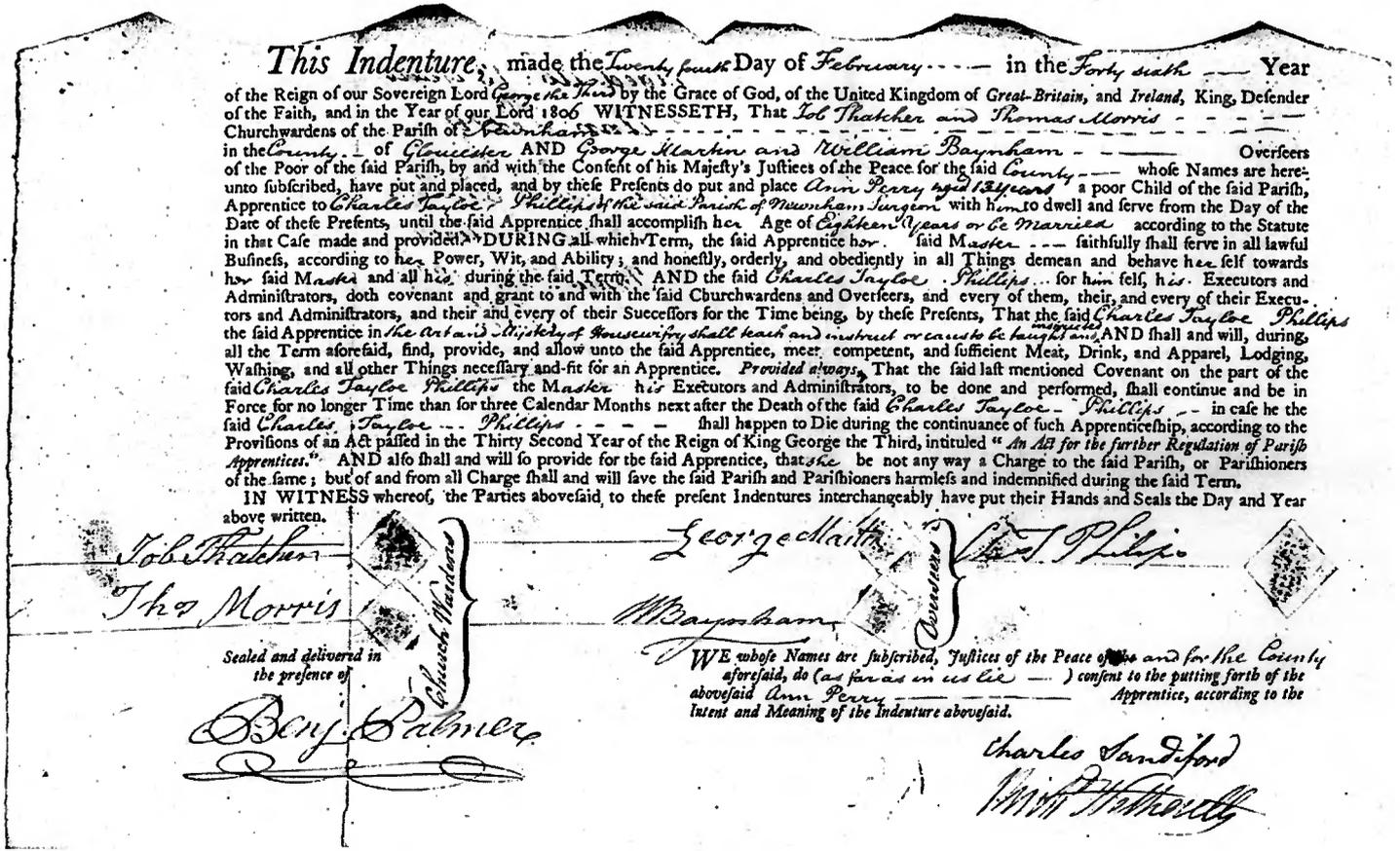
Six Apprentices	Aged	Six Masters	Occupation
Robert Jones	12	William Edwards	£146
John Thomas	11	Thomas Evans	£130
William Arkell	10	Edward Hall	£120
Mary Bell	12	John Hart	£87
Elizabeth Watts	10	Robert Adams	£80
Briget Jones	9	Thomas Miles	£65

'According to his plan Thomas Miles will have the first choice and select the Apprentice Robert Jones as being the oldest boy.

Robert Adams will take John Thomas the next oldest boy. John Hart will choose William Arkell, and the three Girls will be left for the three greatest Occupiers and of course Bridget Jones would fall to the Lot of William Edwards. Comparing the case of Thomas Miles occupying £65 per annum and taking a boy aged 12 with that of William Edwards occupying £146 per annum and taking a girl aged 9, the seeming inequality will in a great measure be corrected.

From an examination of apprenticeship records it would appear that the poor young children of those days were very often exploited and one wonders how many completed their long years of apprenticeship. Guild (or domestic) apprenticeship rapidly declined during the 18th century. The Act of 1814 marked the end of compulsory apprenticeship and although it was not appreciated at the time, of domestic apprenticeship also.

Sources: W.E. Tate. *The Parish Chest*.
M. Dorothy George. *London life in the 18th Century*
Parish and Township papers. Gloucestershire County Record Office.



Ann Perry (aged 13) apprenticed to 'Housewifery'
(Reproduced by kind permission of the Gloucestershire County Record Office)