

Apprenticeships in Britain c. 1890 – 1920

An overview based on contemporary evidence

**Prepared by Professor Krista Cowman, Professor of History and Director of Research,
University of Lincoln**

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Introduction.

Apprenticeships in Britain can be traced back to medieval times, to the guild system and skilled artisanal trades.¹ Numerous local regulations were common until the reign of Elizabeth 1 when the Statute of Artificers (1563) drew various schemes and customs together under unified legislation. Apprentices were to serve for a fixed term, at least of seven years, ending when they reached 24 years of age (this was reduced to 21 in the eighteenth century). The expectations on apprentices and their masters or employers were legally binding and were laid out in an indenture that stipulated the reciprocal duties owed. Apprentices would work for a defined period of time during which they would live in the house of their employer or master and receive board and lodgings. In return they would receive training in a particular craft. As well as their labour apprentices were liable to a fee, known as a premium, which would be paid to the master or employer, usually on behalf of the apprentice by his or her parents or by a charitable institution. The length of an apprenticeship and the requirement to 'live in' meant that the training offered went beyond transferring the skills of a particular trade or craft to a young worker. They covered a broader range of knowledge and behaviours including literacy, morality, domestic skills and religious instruction, hence the relationship between a 'live-in' or 'indoor' apprenticeship and his or her master went beyond an economic one. Apprenticeships became an important form of social control inducting young people into responsible adulthood.² This view of apprenticeships as a valuable bridge between school and the adult world persisted into the 20th century.

The apprenticeship revival – early 20th century attitudes

By 1814 when the Statute of Artificers was repealed, the Elizabethan model of apprenticeship was already starting to break down. As the legislation only covered trades that were in existence and hence identified in 1563 it was not difficult for different systems to develop alongside the earlier one as industrialisation gave birth to new trades which established their own patterns of training. Apprenticeship did not disappear at this point, but it altered significantly to become a free contract with no universal restriction on its length or

¹ For overviews of the system see O. J. Dunlop & R. Denman, *English Apprenticeship and Child Labour: A History* (London, 1912); B. & S. Webb, *A History of Trade Unions* (London, 1920); C More, *Skill and the English Working Class, 1870-1914* (London, 1980); W. Knox, 'British Apprenticeship 1800 – 1914' (unpublished PhD. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1980); J. Lane, *Apprenticeship in England 1600 – 1914* (London, 1996).

² See K. D. M. Snell, 'The apprentice system in British history: the fragmentation of a cultural institution', *History of Education* 25, 4, 1996, pp. 303-321, p.305.

on the number of apprentices permitted in any one workplace.³ Apprenticeship did not die out altogether after the 1814 repeal, however. Indeed, by the beginning of the twentieth century many philanthropic and social reformers could be found calling for the revival of apprenticeship schemes. Advocates of apprenticeships argued that they were the most efficacious way of providing training and providing a skilled workforce. They were also proposed as an antidote to more exploitative forms of child labour and to the problem of what were termed 'blind alley' jobs that promised comparatively high wages for youngsters just out of school but offered no skills or long-term job security.⁴ Blind alley jobs included errand, van or messenger boys and unskilled factory work and usually ended with the young workers' dismissal at the age of 18 or 19 when they would be replaced with cheaper school leavers. At this point they were usually considered too old for training, so were restricted to unskilled, low paid jobs or to unemployment.⁵ One report from Glasgow suggested that boys from 'non-educational occupations' such as messengers and van boys were disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system, making up 87% of youths aged between 14 and 21 'charged with offences inferring dishonesty.'⁶ A London headmaster laid out the problems in his district in 1904:

My boys, on leaving school, almost invariably recruit the army of errand boys and van guards at wages of 8s to 10s a week but without prospects for their future... I am met in nearly every case by the plea that the lad's wages are immediately required to assist in maintaining the home while the low commencing wage in skilled trades and frequently the necessity of paying some small premium form insuperable obstacles.⁷

Contributors to the 1909 Royal Commission on the Poor Laws iterated these concerns. The Commission's Majority Report concluded that the lure of 'occupations which offer no opportunity of promotion to employment as men are disastrous. The boy, thrown out at 16, 17, 18 or 20 years of age, drifts into the low-skilled labour market or the army of unemployables.'⁸ Comments such as this reinforced a shift in opinion and fed demands for a more systematic approach to training young workers to guard against blind alley jobs and a growing number of unskilled workers.

Against the background of these discussions a number a number of philanthropic societies with the object of promoting apprenticeships to young working-class school leavers emerged. Some came from committees inside existing societies such as the Jewish Board of Guardians (which largely worked in East London) and the Women's Industrial Council.⁹

³ *Ministry of Labour Report of an Enquiry into Apprenticeship and Training for the Skilled Occupations in Great Britain and Northern Ireland 1925-6 Part 7: General Report* (London 1928) pp. 12-13.

⁴ Dunlop & Denman, *English Apprenticeship*, p. 326.

⁵ For detailed cases see Cd. 4632 Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress Appendix vol. XX. Report by Mr. Cyril Jackson on boy labour together with a memorandum from the General Post Office on the conditions of employment of telegraph messengers.

⁶ Cited in E. J. Tawney, 'The economics of boy labour,' *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 76, (Dec 1909) pp. 517-37, p. 533.

⁷ *Standard* n.d. 1904 cutting in Women's University Settlement papers Cuttings Book 5 WUS/1/H/01, The Women's Library.

⁸ Cited in Dunlop & Denman, *English Apprenticeship*, p. 321.

⁹ G. Williams, *Recruitment to Skilled Trades* (London, 1967); D. Singer, *Margrieta Beer a Memoir*, (Manchester, 1955); H. Winifred Jevons, 'Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Committees' in M.

Their efforts received further co-ordination with the formation of a central Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Committee in 1905 to promote apprenticeships and offer advice to young people and their parents as to how to procure an apprenticeship and what to expect from it. There was some enthusiasm for their schemes. The Industrial Committee of the Central Bureau for the Employment of Women reported that it had placed 400 girls as apprentices in London in 1904 while the London committee of the Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Association placed 100 boys and 159 girls in 1906.¹⁰ Although the numbers were small in comparison with the overall numbers of school leavers, contemporary commentators noted the 'real value' of the work of apprenticeship societies in illuminating the problems facing young workers and in persuading parents to take a more active role, prioritising training over immediate wage earning.¹¹ Pro-apprenticeship organisations pointed out that while comparatively high wages were tempting for poor families it was better to train their children on a lower wage and so ensure them a higher rate of income and better job security later on. Local societies and committees worked closely with headteachers and parents of school leavers to identify suitable openings, often paying the premium, where applicable, in the form of an interest-free loan so that poorer families might be encouraged to allow their children to take up apprenticeships. Many of the apprentice societies took an active interest in how apprenticeships progressed, visiting young workers at work and checking on their progress. The minutes of the apprentices' committee associated with the Women's University Settlement at Blackfriars describe regular and detailed discussions over apprentices' conduct including whether certain boys were 'too talkative.'¹² Committee members informed parents of their children's failings. When one young apprentice 'got up on a bench in the shop without permission and began dusting a pane of glass' which he then broke, his father was requested to contribute to the cost, and informed that the accident was not the first time that his son had been found 'meddling with what did not concern him....He is making poor progress with his trade and proving troublesome.'¹³ Close surveillance helped to ensure successful apprenticeships and charitable schemes reported low rates of failure with most of their placements resulting in the successful completion of apprenticeships.¹⁴ Through active monitoring and intervention committees thus attempted to bridge the gap between education and skills training and the more general moral tuition that it was thought had been lost with the decline of indoor apprenticeships.

Working life for apprentices before the war

With no single legislation governing the terms and conditions of apprenticeship across the country working conditions and experiences varied in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were now several routes into apprenticeship; some young workers found their own apprenticeships or were helped by their parents (often in trades where large

Sadler, ed., *Continuation Skills in England and Elsewhere*, Manchester, 1907, pp. 454-460; Dunlop & Denman *English Apprenticeship*, p. 327.

¹⁰ London County Council Education Committee Report of the section appointed to consider the question of apprenticeships.' (London, 1906), p. 3; Jevons, 'Apprenticeship and skilled labour.' p. 460.

¹¹ Dunlop & Denman, *English Apprenticeship*, p. 327

¹² Women's University Settlement Apprentices Cuttings Book WUS 1/H/01 8 Jan 1902. The Women's Library.

¹³ WUS 1/H/01 7 Feb 1902

¹⁴ 'Apprenticeship and Skilled Labour,' *Spectator* 7 January 1905.

numbers of apprentices were drawn from the children of the existing workforce) and others found places with the help of philanthropic organisations. As noted above, 20th century apprentices tended to live at home although there were variations, especially in rural areas where indoor apprenticeships persisted in trades such as horse collar making.¹⁵ The Apprenticing Charity associated with the Saddlers' Company in London also reported some indoor apprentices in its supported trades of saddle-making, harness-making and coach-making persisting into the twentieth century, but stated that these were 'rare exceptions.'¹⁶ One consequence of the decline of indoor apprenticeship was that apprentices now received a low wage, set at the start of the apprenticeship and increasing annually as the apprentice became more skilled, whereas previously their labour had been repaid in the form of board and lodging. The growing independence of waged outdoor apprentices provoked concern amongst fin de siècle commentators. An inquiry into conditions among fishing apprentices in 1894 found that in Grimsby, 'a frequent cause of complaint against the apprentices is that they spend their money and their time at the theatres and music halls connected with the public houses.'¹⁷ To combat this some employers connected to the fishing trade set up special lodging houses for their younger or orphaned apprentices with managers, often women or married couples, who could act *in loco parentis* but in most cases outdoor apprentices divided their time between their employer's workshop and the parental home, demanding 'the independence of a wage-earner' and 'under the control of neither.'¹⁸ Seeing themselves more as workers, apprentices in the shipbuilding and engineering trades participated in the wave of industrial unrest immediately before the First World War in a number of strikes in 1912 in protest against low wages (and in some cases the new National Insurance Act that demanded a contribution from them).¹⁹

Length of apprenticeship, premiums and wages.

Early 20th century apprenticeships did not stipulate a fixed length of time to be served across all trades and districts. Some trades retained the longer training periods in use under Elizabethan law. An investigation by the economic historian and adult educationalist R. H. Tawney published in the *Economic Journal* in 1909 found that in Glasgow the trades of painting, plumbing, printing (for compositors) and iron moulding still insisted on a seven-year apprenticeship but that 'most other industries take boys for five years.'²⁰ Clementina Black's investigations into the working conditions of tailoresses four years earlier concluded that 'two years...[was] a very usual time.'²¹ A larger government survey of more than 120 specific trades carried out just before the war but not printed until 1915 found numerous occupational and regional differences in the length of time to be served. In the Boot and Shoe trade, for

¹⁵ Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Association, *Trades for London Boys and how to Enter Them*. (London 1908 / 1912).

¹⁶ London County Council Education Committee 'Report on apprenticeships.'

¹⁷ Report by M A D Berrington & J S Davy on an Investigation of the Fishing Apprenticeship System The National Archives MAF 12/15

¹⁸ Dunlop & Denman, *English Apprenticeships* p.330.

¹⁹ On this see W. Knox 'British Apprenticeships'; W. Knox, 'Down with Lloyd George: The apprentices strike of 1912,' *Journal of the Scottish Labour History Society* 19 (1983); A. McKinlay, 'From industrial serf to wage-labourer: the 1937 apprentice revolt in Britain', *International Review of Social History* vol. 36 no. 1 (1986) pp. 2-18.

²⁰ Tawney, 'Boy Labour,' p.520.

²¹ Black, 'London's Tailoresses,' *The Economic Journal* 14, 56 (1904) pp. 555-567. p.556.

example, 'half [of the firms responding] state that the usual length of training is 4 years (with a few instances of shorter periods), about one quarter give 5 years and about one quarter 6 to 7 years.'²² Some employers responding to Cyril Jackson's 1908 survey into boy labour carried out in connection with the Poor Law Commission suggested that the periods traditionally stipulated were too long for a modern industrial society, with one engraver suggesting 5 years and not the required 7 would be sufficient in his trade.²³ What actually took place during training also varied. The first year of work, which generally included a trial period of between 1 and 4 weeks, frequently included menial tasks such as running errands or cleaning tools. The 1915 report included descriptions from particular employers showing how training was shaped. At a court dressmaker's firm girls began their two year apprenticeship acting as 'runners' moving materials between the workshop and stockroom and were not given a seat at a table until the end of their first year. After this they did a variety of tasks 'one day...beginner's work on bodices, the next on skirts, the third on sleeves.'²⁴ Girls in another clothing factory served a three-month trial after which they 'begin by doing little odds and ends, sewing on buttons, cutting threads etc.' before being taught to use the machine, then to work on skirts and bodices, by a forewoman. In this case the apprenticeship was for 3 years, and girls showing aptitude for a particular part of the trade had the opportunity to specialise.²⁵ Instruction on the job was given by a qualified worker, or sometimes by a foreman. On top of this it became common practice in many trades in the 20th century for apprentices to spend a proportion of their time engaged in further training at a technical school. The combination of 'practical (workshop) training with theoretical (school) teaching' was taken up across a number of trades including Engineering, Metalwork and Shipbuilding as well as lighter industries such as brewing, gas-working and cocoa manufacture. Such training could be in day schools, in which case the employer would facilitate attendance (indeed, would insist on it) as a condition of the apprenticeship, or in evening classes which it was felt would 'make no excessive demand' on the average young worker provided that 'eight hours is the length of the working day and the labour...is not physically exhausting'.²⁶ Schools attached to certain trades including baking and watchmaking provided other training opportunities.

The fee for training was usually covered by the apprentice's premium. Trades requiring special clothing such as fishing sometimes provided these as part of the premium, but in most instances tools would need to be bought by the apprentice out of their small wage. Although the decline of indoor apprenticeships reduced the need for a premium in many trades by shifting maintenance costs onto parents, they persisted. Premiums, where charged, were now a fee to cover the costs of training. There were significant differences across trades and firms in both the cost of premiums and the amount an apprentice could expect to receive as a wage. Cyril Jackson's report on boy labour suggested that the average premium in 1908 was £17, 7s 8d but individual trades showed wide variations.²⁷

²² *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship and industrial training in various trades and occupations of the United Kingdom* (London 1915), p. 221. The report was printed but not published. A copy can be found in LSE library special collections Coll Misc 0645.

²³ Jackson p. 132.

²⁴ *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship* p.207.

²⁵ *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship* p. 211

²⁶ *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship* p.vi.

²⁷ Jackson, 'Report on boy labour,' p.148.

Examples for London collected by the Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Association in 1912 suggested £20 for a 5-year apprenticeship in carpentry and the same amount for a 7-year apprenticeship in gunmaking while an apprentice florist, who would usually train for only 1 or 2 years, might be expected to pay between £3 and £10.²⁸ Different firms could demand different premiums in the same district. The Henry Smith charitable fund set up to support apprentices in the parish of St Luke East Finsbury made two awards for the premiums of girls to be apprenticed as dressmakers in 1895, one of £25 and one of £20, both for 3 year terms.²⁹ Wages also differed. The leather glove making trade, centred in Worcester, Yeovil, Barnstable and Woodstock, retained premiums but was unique in deducting the amount payable from an apprentices' later (higher) wages rather than being paid in advance. Apprentices to this trade received 'a wide range' of wages across firms, with cutters (who served a 5 or 6 year apprenticeship) receiving 4s to 6s a week in their first year rising to 12s to 30s in their last.³⁰

Indentures

Early 20th century apprenticeships were governed by several different systems rather than a single agreement across all trades. While indentures persisted they were no longer a requirement after 1814 and were supplemented by a variety of different agreements, written and verbal. Different agreements (especially verbal ones) were common, especially when trainees were described as 'learners' rather than 'apprentices' but in many instances they offered no guarantee of training. Investigators from the London County Council looked at a number of small charities funding apprenticeships in the early 20th century, most of which had been established under the Statute of Artificers and so were based on assumptions of common costs and standards and found that in at least one case the (non-indentured) apprentice received 'no advantage other than those which are open to any boy or girl employed in the workshop, and that the money paid for apprenticing was practically a gift to the master.'³¹ Indentures were one way of ensuring more systematic training through laying out expectations on both parties, and were promoted by apprenticeship charities. A handbook for would-be apprentices in London produced by the Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Association in 1908 suggested that written bindings of this type were preferable to verbal ones and explained their common features. As well as committing the employer to teach and the apprentice to work, indentures stated the length of apprenticeship and laid down the wages and hours of work for its duration. This offered apprentices a larger degree of security than other young workers as they were assured of work and income in the face of fluctuating trade. Other clauses might include the rate of premium to be paid, as well as certain safeguards relating to this in the event of the death of either party. To be valid

²⁸ Apprenticeship and Skilled Trades Association, *Trades for London Boys* See also its companion volume *Trades for London Girls* (London, 2nd edition, 1912).

²⁹ London County Council Education Committee Report of the Section Appointed to Consider the Question of Apprenticeships, London, 1906, p.12

³⁰ *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship.*

³¹ London County Council 'Report on apprenticeship' (1906) Appendix A, Bread and Cheese Lands [Charity] Paddington. p.20

indentures had to 'be stamped with an impressed Inland Revenue stamp for 2s 6d.... legally payable by the employer' within thirty days of their being signed.³²

The advice given to young workers by the Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Association reflected contemporary concerns that indentures were becoming less common leaving apprentices vulnerable and offering insufficient guarantees against their exploitation. The government's pre-war survey found that their use varied widely.³³ This identified 18 broadly defined areas of trade where indenture remained common ranging from building to leather trades but its detailed entries were less certain. Hairdressing was cited as 'one of the few trades in which existing conditions continue to favour indentured apprenticeship' with a strong National Federation of Hairdressers imposing regulations on its members 'prohibiting the teaching of the trade to any persons other than an apprentice indentured for a minimum of four years.'³⁴ Variations could be regional, as in the ready-made boot and shoe trade where 'indentured apprenticeship....appears to be restricted to the Midlands and a few scattered districts' or found only in certain parts of a trade such as brewing where it was now 'practically confined to the coopering and engineering departments'³⁵ Employers' comments suggested mixed feelings about the decline of indentures. One employer from a bespoke bootmaking firm in Bolton felt that indentures ensured that 'both apprentice and master....take a greater interest in the work,' and so produced a 'better craftsman' but another from the same trade in Bolton favoured the shift to a less rigidly binding system with 'the boy being able to leave if dissatisfied or dismissed if incompetent.'³⁶ Critics of indenture also cautioned that it could lead to dissatisfaction over wages through fixing annual amounts in advance 'irrespective of the progress and conduct of the boy.'³⁷

Working practices revealed through employer/apprentice disputes

One advantage of the formal indenture was that it allowed both parties to resort to law if the behaviour of an apprentice or employer was not what had been promised. By 1914 law was becoming the last resort for employers, and at least one observer felt that the 'time, expense and publicity involved' deterred formalising complaints in this way.³⁸ Nonetheless, it remained an option. 'Idle' apprentices still occasionally appeared before the Chamberlain's Court in London where the maximum punishment for this crime remained a term of three months in the Bridewell, although by the early 20th century sentences, if used, were shorter.³⁹ Elsewhere in the country a small number of disputes around indentures continued to come before the local Police Courts, offering further insights into the working lives of apprentices before the First World War. Lateness was a common cause of complaint by employers with outdoor apprentices failing to arrive on time or at all. Edgar Statham, an apprentice turner at the firm of Alfred Herbert Ltd in Coventry 'lost 90 ¾ hours' for his

³² Apprenticeship and Skilled Employment Association, *Trades for London Boys* p.185. Similar advice is found in the companion volume *Trades for London Girls*.

³³ *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship* (1915).

³⁴ *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship* (1915) pp.392-3

³⁵ *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship* (1915) p.220, p.312

³⁶ *Report of enquiry by the Board of Trade into the conditions of apprenticeship* 1915 p. 226, p. 224.

³⁷ N. B. Dearle *Industrial Training with Special Reference to the Conditions Pertaining in London* (London, 1914) p. 174.

³⁸ Dearle, *Industrial Training* p. 170

³⁹ City Press nd Dec 1904 Women's University Settlement Papers Cuttings Book

employer between mid-February and mid-May 1914 'chiefly in the early morning' and had also taken 160 hours off sick.⁴⁰ Cases in the Police Courts show that in an era when young apprentices were no longer living with their employers and were free to develop their own interests some had difficulty in balancing their work with social activities. Joseph Gondeket, an apprentice printer, was taken to court in a dispute over a holiday. Gondeket wanted a fortnight but was told he could only take a week; he produced a dubious sick note and was later found to have 'gone to Deal to join the Lads' Brigade Camp there' for a fortnight.⁴¹ First-time cases could result in a reprimand but punishments might be severe. Leonard Addicott, an apprentice sculptor, said in court to be a 'nervous' boy was sentenced to 14 days in gaol for repeated absences with no reason, his father explaining that he 'would take long walks one day as far as Dawlish; other days he would stay at home all day.'⁴²

Bad behaviour and poor attitudes towards work could also end in the Police Court. Rupert Shaw, apprenticed to a hardware manufacturer in West Bromwich was summoned as 'he would not work and hung about the shop injuring himself, other people and the firm.' His employers 'had written to his parents and promises had repeatedly been made that he would improve, but these had not been kept.' The Stipendiary magistrate ordered Shaw to 'perform his duties in accordance with his indenture deed,' and threatened him with gaol if he didn't comply.⁴³ One Exeter printer took two of his apprentices to court when they ignored an order to remain at work rather than attend the high-profile Exeter v Swindon football match on Saturday afternoon. Describing their behaviour as 'mutinous' he explained that he had 'had a great deal of trouble' with the young men and had resorted to court 'for the sake of the discipline of his establishment, where there were a number of young men' employed.⁴⁴ Discussion around Police Court cases shows the persistence of a more paternalistic attitude on the part of some employers towards their young apprentices. The failure of James Turner, an apprentice with the Great Northern Shipping Company to carry out the terms of his indenture, was blamed on his 'keeping company and living with a certain woman.' By the time the case came to court, Turner had 'given her up' and his employers were happy with his promise to work as they expected.⁴⁵

Court rulings show the delineation of employers' rights over their apprentices in the early 20th century. Mr W. Alfred Keep, a Battersea barge builder was told that he 'could not force his employees to undergo vaccination' when one refused his wish to see his entire workforce vaccinated.⁴⁶ Other cases reveal the harshness of daily working life for some young apprentices. Gilbert Hallam, an apprentice builder from Sparkbrook was charged with failing to fulfil the conditions of his indenture due to persistent lateness. The court heard that he was expected to work from 6.30 in the morning until 5.30 at night, but had started to arrive at 8 and leave at 5. Hallam was studying in the evening. The Magistrate said that while he thought 'the hours are very long' it was not 'my duty to interfere with them,' and threatened a

⁴⁰ *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 17 June 1914.

⁴¹ Unidentified Press Cutting 20 August 1901 Women's University Settlement Papers Cuttings Book.

⁴² *Western Times*, 23 March 1903

⁴³ *Evening Dispatch*, 5 January 1914.

⁴⁴ *Plymouth Gazette*, 24 March 1909.

⁴⁵ *Hull Daily Mail*, 2 December 1909

⁴⁶ *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 8 March 1902.

custodial sentence if the boy did not arrive for work on time in the future.⁴⁷ Anxiety over the quality of training on offer is also evident. Apprentices were clearly expected to join in with a number of jobs, regardless of their feelings about the level of work. Herbert Smith, an apprentice plumber from Leamington Spa, complained of being 'put on jobs at the shop such as moving goods, painting spouts, making wire trellis work etc.' as there was not always a plumber on hand to instruct him. Although Smith's father supported his complaint, his employer was clear that tasks such as 'cleaning tools...[were] part of an apprentice's duties' and representatives from the charity paying his indentures agreed that his broad training was appropriate so no action was taken against the employer. Magistrates did take training seriously as an issue, however. When East London tailor Charles Bean attempted to make his apprentice Kate Gibbs comply with her indentures she explained that her instructor had left work following an accident and that far from being trained she 'had to sit at the machine all day "like a fool" because there was no-one to instruct her.' The Magistrate found in her favour, and cancelled her indentures.⁴⁸

Apprenticeships during the war

The outbreak of war in 1914 posed further challenges to the maintenance of a systematic scheme of apprenticeship⁴⁹. Before the introduction of conscription some employers released their apprentices to the forces while a growing number of apprentice boys broke their indentures to enlist. Reports of police court proceedings show how employers who sought legal redress were torn between the demands of their industry and the pressures of patriotism. Magistrates were often unsympathetic to what they interpreted as obstructive actions by employees attempting to enforce the terms of indentures in wartime. One of the earliest cases in October 1914 concerned Bernard Spencer, apprenticed to an electro-plate manufacturer at Sheffield, who joined the Royal Army Medical Corps despite only having served three of a five-year indentured apprenticeship. His employers explained that 'they did not want it to be understood that they wished to interfere with the recruiting of soldiers at a time like this,' but that they had 12 other apprentices to consider and that Spencer's unannounced departure had 'put them in a bit of a fix.' The Magistrate was unsympathetic and dismissed the case, stating that the summons 'ought never to have been issued, particularly in the present state of affairs.'⁵⁰ In other cases employers did not demand the return of their apprentices but sought to make a point. When Mr M Clarke, a Northampton builder, won an order from local magistrates to compel the military authorities to return his apprentice to him in January 1915 he explained that although 20 per cent of his employees were now serving but 'he wished to show the lad, who had defied him, that the first duty of a soldier was obedience to authority.'⁵¹ Edward Unwin, a printer whose apprentice broke his indentures to enlist explained to the Mansion House Police Court that procedures should be upheld despite the unusual circumstances. 'We are at war', he observed, 'but that is no reason why masters should not be consulted before their agreements are treated as "scraps

⁴⁷ *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 17 February 1914.

⁴⁸ *Daily Mail*, 12 October 1905.

⁴⁹ See the brief summary paragraph 'Apprenticeship During the Great War,' *Ministry of Labour Report of Enquiry into Apprenticeship* (1928) pp. 12-13.

⁵⁰ *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, 18 Nov 1914.

⁵¹ *Daily Mail*, 12 January 1915.

of paper” by boys. The masters have shown their loyalty by raising no protest where lads over eighteen are concerned but under that age I suggest it is the duty of any court to say that it is not right for the War Department to take away lads by subterfuge, and that an agreement between a master and an apprentice is binding in the present circumstances up to the age of eighteen.⁵² The court concurred and cancelled the indentures.

Conscription caused further tensions between employers and apprentices and between employers and the state. The status of apprenticeships was raised in the debate on the Military Service Bill with one MP, J Whitehouse, calling for their exclusion. Whitehouse admitted that the system was ‘not as extensive as it was a few decades ago’ but noted it as ‘a very considerable element in the organisation of the trade and business life of the nation.’ The Attorney-General, Sir Frederick Smith, believed that this would only interfere with ‘a dwindling number of apprentices’ and reminded the House that appeal to a tribunal was always possible on the grounds of national interest.⁵³ The Military Service Act laid down grounds for exemption including education and training if continuing this was deemed to be in the national interest. Surviving records from local Military Exemption Tribunals where appeals against conscription were heard suggest that apprentices or employers pleading on behalf of apprentices were seldom given a sympathetic hearing. An initial claim for exemption by David Goldston, an apprentice furrier who had 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ years of his 5 year training to run was described as ‘presumptuous’ and dismissed although a subsequent appeal permitted him a temporary discharge six months providing that he enlisted in the Volunteer Force and undertook regular drilling classes in the interim.⁵⁴ Other appeals failed to achieve even a short deferral.

In cases where apprentices were too young for conscription or when they were classed as exempt due to the nature of their trade, wartime conditions still caused problems for the system. By 1915 concern was expressed in Parliament about the impact of munitions work on apprenticeships. Mr Molteno MP offered an example of an anonymous case that had come to his attention where ‘a two and a half years’ apprentice, about 18 years of age, left his work for munitions work and is now getting 33s per week for assisting in one of the contractor’s stores...’ This, and similar cases, raised concerns for the post-war era when it was feared that ‘young lads, after receiving such high pay for six months or more, may be ruined for life, for they will never return to their apprenticeship or occupation for a few shillings a week...’⁵⁵ There were also concerns that too few adults remained available to train younger apprentices. A post-war survey showed that ‘the proportion of boys to adults normally employed and also the early promotion of boys to men employed increased between July 1914 and April 1917 from 5.9 per cent to 10 per cent in the building industry and from 13.9 per cent to 20.8 per cent in engineering’.⁵⁶

The declining numbers of young men available for work led to some new employment opportunities for women during the war but these often involved inadequate training below the level offered by pre-war apprenticeships. The official history of the Ministry of Munitions

⁵² *Daily Mail*, 16 February 1916.

⁵³ Hansard 18 January 1916.

⁵⁴ Middlesex Military Service Appeal Tribunal, The National Archives MH 47 case number M4479 David Goldston.

⁵⁵ Hansard 20 December 1915.

⁵⁶ *Ministry of Labour Report of Enquiry into Apprenticeship* (1928).

reported that although 'some remarkable work was done by women...[who] might become skilled mechanics, given the necessary training and experience' their training was 'precluded by the conditions under which munitions were manufactured. Intensive training sufficed to meet the emergency of the moment but it was no substitute for a thorough apprenticeship.'⁵⁷ In a paper read to the Institution of Mechanical Engineers in Liverpool in May 1918 Ben Morgan guarded against a growing 'false' assumption that women had 'become fully skilled workers in a few weeks.' Although wartime conditions had shown that it was possible to 'speed up the training of engineers by better teaching and apprenticing...neither a man nor a woman can become a fully-skilled fitter or turner under a period of, say, four years'.⁵⁸ A short government investigation into what was happening to apprentices in National Factories after the war revealed that although the employment of boys and girls under 18 was not uncommon there were very few formal apprenticeships in place.⁵⁹ At the Gunpowder Factory at Waltham Abbey, for example, although 120 boys were employed only 6 of these were counted as apprentices and kept on under the interrupted apprenticeship scheme. The remainder were discharged. Prospects were slightly better for the 65 apprentices at the National Projectile Factory as they were 'working under a proper scheme...signing agreement to serve 5 years' and were likely to transfer to other firms. 333 boys were employed in this factory; those without apprenticeships were not as well protected and had little help in finding new positions.

Post-war apprenticeships

At the end of the war there were a number of initiatives aimed at bolstering up apprenticeships across the country. A report on Juvenile Education and post-war employment echoed late-nineteenth century concerns that unskilled workers being trapped in 'blind alley' jobs, noting that apprentices 'are employed, not for their immediate commercial utility, but in order to maintain or increase at a future date the supply of skilled workmen in their industry.'⁶⁰ Rising wages during the war compounded the problem and it was felt that young men who had left apprenticeships to join the forces would come back as adults, unwilling to accept lower wages. In 1919 government approval was given to a short-term scheme from the Ministry of Labour to encourage demobilised apprentices to return to their training. The Interrupted Apprenticeships Scheme recognised that while demobilised soldiers might have 'no greater skill and knowledge than when they enlisted' they would return 'with the needs of men, and often of married men' so could not be expected to return to a boys' wage. Employers, on the other hand, would have men 'improved in health, physique and self-reliance' but with no greater technical skill than that of 'youths of 18 or 19' and could not afford to pay 'the increased wages [needed] to attract them back.' Under the scheme apprentices would also receive a 'wage allowance' from the state 'at the rate of one-sixth of the standard journeyman's rate' for up to 104 weeks to supplement the employers' wage. The scheme was limited to those who had more than a year of an apprenticeship to run, and was open to women as well as men although it anticipated that 'the number of

⁵⁷ Official History of the Ministry of Munitions p.82

⁵⁸ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 20 May 1918

⁵⁹ National Factories: Memorandum as to those employing apprentices and any information as to their disposal since the armistice. The National Archives LAB/2/753/EDJ513/23/1920.

⁶⁰ London County Council Education Committee 'Report on apprenticeships' (1906)

women affected....should be very small.’ It took a loose definition of apprenticeship to include those under indenture or written agreement but also where training was ‘given under less formal conditions’ as long as there was evidence that the apprentice ‘was actually learning a skilled trade’ before enlistment.⁶¹ 45,000 apprentices were accepted under the terms of the scheme including 16,000 in engineering, 7,500 in building, 6,000 in printing and 2,000 in shipbuilding.⁶²

Alongside the Interrupted Apprenticeships Scheme, the government supported initiatives in various trades aimed at ensuring that good opportunities for apprenticeship remained in the post-war period. Trade Boards were encouraged to devise new schemes for apprenticeships. One result of this, identified by a government investigation into apprenticeship in Britain for the year 1925-6, was that in certain trades such as building apprenticeship had increased although it appeared to be diminishing in other trades such as printing. The investigation offered aggregate data for the first time revealing that the average length of an apprenticeship was now 5.6 years. Although its main tables of findings concerned boys’ employment more attention was paid to that of girls than in the pre-war survey. Although falling birthrates in the 1920s would affect the numbers of young school leavers available for work between 1931-4 there were ‘large numbers of girls available for employment among those who at present do not normally enter industry at all.’ The report found that some industries such as engineering were looking at ‘extending the scope of the work on which girls may suitably be employed.’ Girls remained less likely to be apprenticed under indenture or formal agreement and to serve shorter terms than boys, on lower wages.⁶³ Although their terms and conditions were very different from those in earlier centuries, apprenticeships remained an important feature of British industrial life in the inter-war decades.

Krista Cowman

University of Lincoln

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⁶¹ Ministry of Labour Training Department Apprenticeship Interrupted by War Service: Memorandum Describing the Scheme The National Archives.

⁶² *Ministry of Labour Report of Enquiry into Apprenticeship (1928)*

⁶³ *Ministry of Labour Report of Enquiry into Apprenticeship (1928)* p.59, pp. 155-6