



Alice Massey, Project Support Officer, delves into the medieval origins of apprenticeships and the work of stone masons

Masons in Medieval England were responsible for building some of England's most famous buildings. Masons were highly skilled craftsmen and their trade was most frequently used in the building of castles, churches and cathedrals.

Masons tended to lead nomadic lives. They went where there was employment. Other tradesmen could effectively stay where they were as there was enough trade for their skill to allow them to settle. However, masons had to move on to their next source of employment once a building had been completed – and that could be many miles away.

There were three classes of stonemasons: apprentices, journeymen, and master masons. Apprentices were bound to their masters as the price for their training, journeymen were qualified craftsmen who were paid by the day, and master masons were considered freemen who could travel as they wished to work on the projects of the patrons and could operate as self-employed craftsmen and train apprentices.

The system of apprenticeship first developed in the later Middle Ages and came to be supervised by craft guilds and town governments. A master craftsman was entitled to employ young people as an inexpensive form of labour in exchange for providing food, lodging and formal training in the craft. Most apprentices were males, but female apprentices were found in crafts such as seamstress, tailor, cordwainer, baker and stationer. Apprentices usually began at ten to fifteen years of age and would live in the master craftsman's household. Most apprentices aspired to becoming master craftsmen themselves on completion of their contract (usually a term of seven years), but some would spend time as a journeyman and a significant proportion would never acquire their own workshop.

"The English apprenticeship & child labour, a history; with a supplementary section on the modern problem of juvenile labour" by O.J. Dunlop & R.D. Denman,¹ gives a really useful overall account of apprenticeships. This describes:

"in early medieval times, a strong bond between the master and the youth, who worked under his personal supervision in the workshop, and lived in his house as a

¹ English apprenticeship & child labour, a history; with a supplementary section on the modern problem of juvenile labour by O.J. Dunlop & R.D. Denman, available online through Hathi Trust Digital Library at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ien.35556038534939&view=1up&seq=1>

member of his family. The close personal bond between the young people and their employers kept constantly before the notice of the latter their responsibility for the rising generation and the workmen of the future. It was a twofold responsibility: the master was answerable for the health and moral development of the lad while in his employment, and for his service to the State and career as an adult, since this service and his career depended on his physical, moral, and technical training as a boy. When, with the growth of capitalism and the expansion of trade in the eighteenth century, large businesses developed, the bond became looser.”

We find out about the Newcastle upon Tyne Masons Guild² in the *“Guilds and Related Organisations in Great Britain and Ireland: a bibliography (Part II)”* by Tom Hoffman³:

“Origins and Constitution. In 1581 the Masons were incorporated with perpetual succession, with power to sue and be sued in the courts of Newcastle, and to make bye-laws. They were always to play “The Burial of our Lady St. Mary the Virgin” in the Corpus Christi plays. Apprentices were required to serve seven years, and no Scotsman was ever to be apprenticed or taken into the Company on any account whatever. The Company was required to attend the marriages and burials of brethren, and their wives. One half of all fines were to go towards the maintenance of the Tyne Bridge, and the other half to the Company.

Meeting Hall. The Company met in the White-Friar-Tower, with the Wallers, or Bricklayers and Metters. In 1742 the Masons were granted by the Corporation of Newcastle, the Cutler’s Tower, in the Carlel-Croft.”

Another reference to the guild at this time is in “The Arcane Schools” by J Yarker⁴:

“The north is in evidence in the year 1581: “The Ordinary of the Company of Masons of Newcastle upon Tyne”, dated the first of September of this year, constituted a body Incorporate of themselves, with perpetual succession, and enabled them to meet yearly to choose Wardens, & Co.

That whenever the general plays of the town called Corpus Christi should be played they should play the burial of our Lady St. Mary the Virgin, every absent brother to pay 2s. 6d., and that at all the marriages and burials of the brethren and their wives, the Company should attend to the church such persons to be married or buried.”

² “The Order of the Mayor and Aldermen of Newcastle to the Company of Masons”, Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, *Archaeologia Aeliana*; New Series, Volume III, page 26. This reference gives details of the powers of the officers over the guild and is available through to download at <http://www.newcastle-antiquaries.org.uk/index.php?pagelid=565>

³ “Guilds and Related Organisations in Great Britain and Ireland: a bibliography (Part II), Tom Hoffman available online at <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/library/archives-and-special-collections>

⁴ “Arcane Schools”, by John Yarker, 1909. The full text is available online at https://archive.org/stream/The_Arcane_Schools_-_J_Yarker/The_Arcane_Schools_-_J_Yarker_djvu.txt or available to download a PDF copy free at <https://www.globalgrevebooks.com/arcane-schools-ebook.html>

The Arms are -- On a chevron between three towers a pair of compasses extended.
“Crest” -- A tower.
“Motto” -- In the Lord is all our trust.”

In “*Aspects of sociability in the North East of England 1600-1750*” by R.F. King⁵ she described trade guilds as important for social occasions as well as central economically and culturally important. King states:

“Their research shows how the middling sort of people relied on trade guilds to mediate the differences that sometimes arose in the urban community, and to soften the destabilising effects of immigration. Urban households also depended on the charitable services of the companies in times of trouble. Apprenticeship, the system of training administered by the guilds, educated succeeding generations of young men in important civic values, and association within the guild bound householders into this same value system.

“*The Mediaeval Mason*”, in 1933 by Prof. D. Knoop and G.P. Jones gives a slightly different account in that it concluded that it was unlikely that a stonemasonry guild existed in England outside London until the sixteenth century. As Newcastle had a guild in this timeframe, this questions their conclusions or at least the timing of when mason guilds started to regulate qualifications and the interaction with authorities and clients, plus ensuring members observed the traditional culture of stonemasons. It is however useful to read their reasoning as explained on a rather interesting website on stone masonry and churches⁶:

Guilds were town-based institutions that governed the trades within their towns. Masons were freemen as opposed to serfs. Studying the freemen rolls that still exist, they noticed the startling absence of masons. That, they felt was hardly surprising: the fact was that homes in mediaeval England were not made of stone. The only stone structure in a medieval town was likely to be the church. Masons could not make a living in a town. They had to follow the work and that legislated against belonging to a town-based guild.

1. The few extant records of payments to masons show great inconsistency in rates. Guilds, amongst their many other activities, standardised rates of pay.

Knoop and Jones found no references in any records to “journeymen” and hardly any to “apprentices” which they saw as reinforcing the notion of a guild-less trade. They presented that as the apprentices were so scarce and they were paid considerably more than ordinary masons that they were training not to be ordinary jobbing masons, but to be master masons. They already had mastered the basic masonry crafts.

They argued that an apprentice was owed board and lodging and as an ordinary mason could not provide this in a travelling craft with their earnings being paid on a daily basis by

⁵ This PhD thesis is available to download through Durham University at <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1247/>

⁶ This is referenced at https://greatenglishchurches.co.uk/html/the_stonemasons_and_their_world.html

the Master Mason or those that commissioned the building project. A journeyman would therefore have no interest in paying for trainees.

What does appear to be the case is that the trade was very much a family affair. The Master Mason would probably employ his sons or nephews as soon as they were old enough to handle a hammer and chisel. The ordinary mason might likewise try to teach his own sons and nephews the basics as part of their upbringing in the hope they could find work as a general mason. The training was oral and informal, and records are therefore limited.

Changes in Modern Stone Mason Apprenticeships

Modern apprenticeship by comparison only lasts three years and now incorporates college work to on-site learning working with experienced tradesmen to gain knowledge and understanding of the building, hewing and theory work involved in masonry.

Those wishing to become stonemasons should still have little problem working at heights, possess reasonable hand-eye co-ordination, be moderately physically fit, and now they also must have basic mathematical ability to work on pulleys, levers and the like.

In the past we can assume that injury and death were not taken lightly. Incidents affected the master mason directly and those who were careless over their men's safety would not have the pick of the masonic workforce, nor is it likely they would advertise in the local newspaper for a replacement! There are also now mandatory training units in general health, safety and welfare in the workplace and hard hats, goggles and reinforced toe caps are required personal protective equipment.

Alice Massey, CGISS Project Support Officer, Newcastle Cathedral
With thanks to listed sources.