

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Sarah Doig, A Job for Life – The History of Apprenticeship and Guilds

Sarah Doig gave a fascinating talk about the history of apprenticeship and guilds to the June meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. It was based upon her extensive research of local and family history.

Sarah explained that people specialised in trades to meet the needs of communities from earliest times. Skilled workmen provided transport, food, drink and housing. This is often reflected in modern surnames, such as Thatcher, Taylor and Miller. Apprenticeship began in the Middle Ages as the way in which mainly boys were trained in the skills for a certain trade. In 1563 the Statute of Artificers regulated apprenticeship and made it compulsory for entry into a trade as a means maintaining standards. Prior to the Act, there had been private arrangements made between masters and parents. After 1563 apprenticeship was formalised by a written indenture which bound the child, who was usually aged about 14, to the master craftsmen. Most apprentices were boys. It appears that only 3% of indentures were given to girls although this could rise to 7% in towns because of the prevalence of the clothing industry.

The 1563 Act allowed the payment of a fee, the premium, to the master by the parent. This amount was negotiable and varied according to trades. One apothecary was paid £60 and given 400lbs of cheese, whereas a dressmaker was given £5. In return, the boy went to live with the craftsman to learn the trade, and was given food and lodging. Many apprenticeships were arranged through the family or friends but newspapers from the 18th Century often advertised posts, such as an apprentice to a draper in Botesdale in 1794.

The 1563 Act bound apprentices to their masters until the age of 24 but this was reduced to 21 in 1768. It seems that only 50% completed their full apprenticeship. Some boys ran away because of ill-treatment or the restrictions of apprenticeship. Some masters became ill, died or became bankrupt. The parish tended to use apprenticeships to reduce the burden of pauper children on the rates. It also acted as a method of social control to stop boys roaming, begging and joining gangs. However, the positive aspect was that poor boys were given an education, including basic literacy and numeracy, as craftsmen had to submit customer bills.

The talk continued with a review of guilds. These began in towns in the Middle Ages where groups of craftsmen created monopolies and regulated various trades. They set prices for products and the wages for tradesmen. They oversaw the system of apprenticeship. A major concern was to ensure that standards were met and maintained. A craftsman could only practice a trade if he was a freeman and belonged to the guild. Consequently, guilds dominated the social and economic life of the towns. The guilds gradually evolved into local government as boroughs where officials monitored the quality of food and other products. As the most prominent citizens, they gained the titles of councillor, alderman and mayor. Eventually, the post of magistrate emerged to resolve disputes between guild members and to levy fines for shoddy work, but in time it took on a broader role for local justice.

Apprenticeships began to decline at the end of the 18th Century when population growth meant that more opportunities for work became available. It was argued that the 1563 Statute of Artificers only applied to listed trades and so could not be applied to new trades. Similarly, the seven year apprenticeship became regarded as inflexible and the charges of a premium expected of parents were seen as excessive. In addition, the treatment of apprentices brought the system into disrepute. By 1906 only 20% of young males were apprentices and the number has steadily declined with changes to the education system since then.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on 26 July when David Berwick will give a talk entitled *Nuggets of History* – the secrets of Norwich Cathedral as told by a cathedral guide. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy