

Brabin's Charity Apprentices

The Charity founded in 1683, by the will of John Brabin of Chipping, helped poor boys in Chipping, Thornley with Wheatley and Bowland with Leagram, by giving them the opportunity to become apprentices. The apprenticeship system was the usual way for boys to learn a trade, but the cash payments required by the master tradesmen, who trained boys, were often burdensome for families. For nearly two centuries the Brabin's Charity contributed greatly to the skills of over two hundred poor boys and the livelihood of their families. This Charity apprenticeship system lapsed following the Education Acts of the late 1860s and early 1870s, and formally ended in 1878 when the Charity's constitution was changed.

Boys selected for apprenticeship were required to have attended Brabin's School as "blue boys" --- ie. poor boys who had received free education and blue clothing under the terms of the Charity. About two boys a year were selected, normally aged fourteen, and the apprenticeships lasted for seven years. Boys from all denominations benefitted.

The Brabin's Charity Trustees interpreted "poverty" in various ways. Many apprentices were the children of labourers, but boys at risk of falling into poverty were also selected --- where families were large, or where one or both natural parents were dead, or the child illegitimate. For example:---

1801 Richard Ellison, "a poor boy" sent to John Coates of Chipping to be a cordwainer (shoemaker).

1845 Thomas Pye, an illegitimate son of Margaret Pye, cotton factory labourer, sent to Osborne Scott of Clitheroe to be a boot and shoe maker.

1846 Richard Bleasdale, orphan, son of Henry Bleasdale, deceased, of Chipping, sent to James Corbridge of Thornley to be a blacksmith.

1854 Richard Walmsley, son of Agnes Walmsley, of Little Bolland widow, sent to George Walmsley of Thornley to be a blacksmith. Richard was the youngest of nine children and his father, Richard, had died ten years earlier.

Sometimes, as in the case of Richard Walmsley mentioned above, the boy had to be reassigned to another master before the term of the apprenticeship ended, usually because of the illness or death of the master. Richard continued his apprenticeship with George Whittle of Alston, a cotton manufacturer employing blacksmiths.

Apprenticeships were legally binding but in exceptional circumstances could be cancelled. In 1848 an apprenticeship ended when Henry Martin, son of Henry Martin of Thornley, who had served two years with John Whittaker of Bacup as a cabinet maker, was declared "unhealthy and not of sufficient strength for business".

In several cases families had already moved away from the area when boys were selected for apprenticeships. In 1843 for instance, Thomas Singleton, son of Elizabeth Singleton of Rochdale, widow, was apprenticed to John Blakey, a Rochdale shoemaker. Presumably the boy qualified for the funding having attended Brabin's School as a "blue boy" earlier.

The Brabin's Charity Trustees chose labour intensive trades for the apprentices. The most common trades were tailors, shoemakers and cloggers, blacksmiths, and wheelwrights. Some boys went into the building and furniture trades becoming stonemasons, plasterers, upholsterers, cabinet makers etc. Only in the last few years of the system were boys more frequently put to factory work when some trained to make rollers for textile machinery at Bleasdale's Goose Lane foundry in Chipping.

The Charity accounts indicate that the Trustees spent much time and money "conditioning" with likely masters to persuade them to take boys, sometimes without success.

For example --- 18 June 1768, 7½d was spent "purposing to bind the late John Eccles son apprentice to Henry Wells but he did not, he insisting on £10". On 18 Aug 1771, 1s 7d was spent when negotiating "to bind Chris Goodgeon's son apprentice to a joiner but could not agree". Probably a few pots of ale and some dinners were consumed during the negotiations.

In the mid 19th century the average fee paid to a master for a seven year apprenticeship was £10, (a hundred years earlier about half that amount). The Brabin's Trustees usually paid the fee in two instalments.

Once a deal had been struck, the expensive business of employing lawyers began. Candlemas Day, February 2nd, was the usual day chosen for the signing of indentures and the binding of boys to apprenticeships.