

## **SESSION FOUR –**

### **APPRENTICESHIP**

What are the origins of [The Guild of Freemen of Berwick-upon-Tweed?

In the Middle Ages, most boys and girls of all social levels, would leave home and spend much of their adolescence and youth in the house of a master.

This could be as a domestic servant, a servant-in-husbandry or as an apprentice.

Apprenticeship could be the route to employment in a trade or craft, of ultimately to becoming a master of a business in your own right.

Girls would be more likely to be taken on as domestic servants, but some became apprentices. A few became masters through their own progression while rather more married their masters or their master's son and inherited the business on their husband's death.

The introduction to a master was normally made through kinship connections, a neighbour or friend who acted as the child's "sponsor". Often this would involve the payment of a fee to the master to cover some of his expenses in caring for the apprentice.

Usually a young man became an apprentice at the age of seven and the apprenticeship would last from seven to ten years.

His parents would enter a contract, or "bond" that gave the master the rights and responsibilities of a parent while their son was serving his apprenticeship. In return, the master would teach the boy the "secrets of the mysteries of his craft" and provide board and lodging.

There were cruel masters, of course, and some who just took advantage of the "free" labour, but most were genuinely interested in training someone who could provide skilled help in his business.

Apprentices lived in their master's house or shop. They usually ate with the master's family, often wore clothes provided by the master, and were subject to the master's discipline.

Apprentices were not allowed to marry during their apprenticeship but emotional relationships were often formed between the apprentice and his master's family. Sometimes the apprentice married his master's daughter, or even his widow, and inherited the business.

### **JOURNEYMAN**

If the young man completed his apprenticeship successfully, he became a journeyman – or day-labourer (from the French "journee").

The journeyman had to work in his own time to produce his "master-piece" - his passport to the rank of "master". He must use his own tools and raw materials which required a capital outlay.

The master-piece was presented to the masters of the Guild. If the quality satisfied them and if there were not already too many masters in the town, the journeyman was accepted as a master and was able to set up in business "free of the Guild".

## **WHAT DID THE GUILDS DO?**

Guilds were trade associations created by the granting of a charter by the landlord – the King could create royal boroughs and local lords a borough of barony.

The charter gave the Guild members, or burgesses, a monopoly of trade in the borough and the right to regulate the quality of workmanship and the prices of goods and services.

In Berwick they controlled all buying and selling and the movement of goods in and out of the port.

Guilds had a charitable role, providing funeral expenses for its poorer members and aid to widows and children, offering dowries for poor girls and covering its members with a type of health insurance and provisions for the care of the sick.

They supported education by setting up schools to educate their own children, such as the Corporation Academy in Golden Square, which is now the Wetherspoon's Leaping Salmon pub! Guilds or individual freemen often established grammar schools for the brighter sons of non-freemen.

The Guilds had close connections with the Church, building chapels and endowing altars and windows in local churches or cathedrals. Each year, on the 8<sup>th</sup> Thursday after Easter, the Guilds organised a Corpus Christi Day procession comprising pageant scenes or playlets performed on wagons depicting stories from the Bible.

Guildsmen met regularly in halls, often provided by one of the religious houses in the town.

The Guilds played a central role in the governance of the town and the burgesses elected their own officers including the Mayor, bailiffs and aldermen.

Their charter often required them to pay for and maintain public buildings and town defences, and help with the policing of the streets and keeping them clean.

## **BERWICK'S GUILD**

Like most other boroughs of Scotland or England in the early Middle Ages, Berwick had several guilds, each representing one of the main crafts or trades in the town. There were, for example the baxters (bakers), the fleshers (butchers) and the salmon fishers.

In 1249, in the last year of the reign of Alexander II of Scotland, the rules governing trade in Berwick were codified in the Statutae Gildae, which amalgamated all the existing guilds to create one "super-Guild".

The Statutes covered all kinds of matters from the banning of lepers entering the burgh to compensating customers who were duped by guildsmen, from preventing "engrossing" (where one trader might corner a market by buying up most of the available stock of an item for sale) to regulating the hours when trading could be carried out.

There were rules requiring all seaborne food to be carried away by sunset and banning married women from buying wool.

The surviving records of the Guild of Berwick date from 1506 onwards.

## **CHARTER OF JAMES VI/I**

The Guild held considerable power in Berwick during the Middle Ages and through the Tudor period, but the ultimate administration was in the hands of the military.

This changed with the Union of the Crowns. Soon after King James' triumphant entry into the town in March 1603, the garrison was reduced, the cannons removed from the walls and a new Charter was promised for the Guild of Berwick.

To ensure the new king's promises were kept, a deputation of the Mayor and two freemen made the long journey to the Court in London, paid for by a levy made on all the households in the town.

The journey proved worthwhile as the ancient rights were confirmed and the town's peculiar status was recognised. No statute of Parliament was to be lawful unless Berwick was mentioned specifically along with England and Scotland.

The Guild continued to govern Berwick with the powers of a Town Council from 1603 until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835.

The Guild had its own prisons and gallows, appointed its own justices to its own court which was independent of both the English and Scottish courts.

The King's new Charter also gave physical benefits to the freemen in the form of: "all that Seignory, Manor, Borough, Town and Soc of Berwick-upon-Tweed ... and all our Houses, Edifices, Buildings, Stables, Storehouses, Lands, Tenements, Cottages, Wastes, Grounds and soil within the Town ... and also the Lands and Fields to the said Borough adjoining commonly called the Bounds and Fields of Berwick."

This amounted to some two thirds of the land between the town walls and the Scottish Border.

This land-holding was further extended in 1657 when the Freemen were granted the sequestered estates of the royalist Lord Mordington in the manors of Spittal and Tweedmouth, which included salmon fisheries, a colliery, several quarries and 100 acres of moor.

The Charter imposed duties, too. For instance, the Guild was responsible for the upkeep of the quay and the new bridge constructed in James I's reign.

Added to all of this, the burgesses comprised the great majority of the franchise holders in parliamentary elections for the borough.

With the removal of the authority of the garrison in governing the town, there was no rival power to restrain the Guild.

## **THE CHARTER IN PERIL**

Towards the end of the reign of Charles II, the town's Charter came under threat. The King's brother the Duke of York, the future Catholic King James II, was given a role in governing the north. He took advantage of this to place his own supporters in positions of authority.

Charles and James were keen to ensure the subservience of the Parliament and used a form of blackmail to gain the support of corporations in boroughs throughout the country by threatening to call in their Charters on any flimsy pretence if they did not comply.

Berwick's Charter came under the spotlight in 1680 when one Charles Jackson, youngest son of the late Stephen Jackson of London, who had been a freeman of Berwick. Charles' elder brother had become freeman on the death of their father, but Charles was determined to gain the status too. Until 1783, it was very unusual for the right to be extended to another son, especially if the applicant was not Berwick-born, so the burgesses refused. Jackson took his case to the High Court and turned to the King's counsellors to have Berwick's Charter called in.

The King's aim was to remove most of the existing burgesses and replace them with "foreigners" who would do his own bidding.

Not only did this proposed "packing" of the burgesses threaten the authority of the Guild to run the affairs of Berwick, but increasing the number of burgesses would mean that the division of the income from the Guild's estates would be spread much thinner.

Naturally, the Mayor and corporation refused to conform to the King's wishes.

While the case was being argued, James II came to the throne on his brother's death. He was not likely to look favourably in the cause of the Berwick burgesses.

The Mayor was replaced on the grounds of misbehaviour. More than 140 burgesses were removed and 332 "foreigners" were made freemen.

At this crucial moment, James II was overthrown by the Glorious Revolution and the proposition of a new Charter collapsed. The old Charter was renewed and the Mayor and officers were re-instated.

The Guild had survived to rule the borough for another two and half centuries, the power held almost exclusively by burgesses who were self-elected.

## **18<sup>th</sup> CENTURY HEYDAY**

With the rise in demand for agricultural produce on the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the value of the Freemen's land increased considerably.

Improved drainage, new methods of cultivation and new types of crops introduced during the Agricultural Revolution of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries all improved the Freemen's income.

The Freemen exacted tolls from all goods coming through the port and at the toll-houses at each entrance to the town.

The twice-weekly grain market in Berwick was considered the greatest in the north of England.

Although usually used to protect the interests of the guildsmen themselves, on some occasions, the Guild wielded its power in favour of the ordinary towns-folk. When the bakers refused to bake bread for the price set by the borough officers, the Guild paid out £200 for corn to be ground and sold, the profits being given to the poor.

The increasing wealth of the Guild allowed the Freemen to erect a magnificent new Town Hall in the 1750s.

The Guild fulfilled many of the functions of a modern local authority. They required all householders to pave, clean and light the area in front of his house but the Guild paid for the removal of waste and employed a common scavenger to clear all places that were not household frontages.

Pipes were laid to carry water to houses, for the payment of 5 shillings per year. The Guild provided fire engines, maintained several schools and supported the church and its vicar.

The town's 66 public houses were inspected during Sunda Service to ensure they remained closed and the Shambles and the Exchange where meat and dairy produce were sold were regulated by the Guild.

The Freemen also paid for musicians, the town waits, to play for all kinds of civic occasions, from balls to funerals of freemen, from military victories to celebrations of annual festivals. The last town wait was dismissed in 1806.

There was even a corporation mole-catcher.

Many of the services provided by the Guild were reserved for the freemen and their families. One peculiar benefit of being a freeman was that, if you ended up in gaol, you became entitled to a special allowance!

Although the Freemen were a self-electing bunch, the Guild was not a cabal for the social elite. The burgesses included traders, shopkeepers, ale-house keepers, lawyers and the majority of householders in the borough. Probably more than half the population of Berwick was represented in some way. Of course, that left the other half!

## **THE END OF THE CITY STATE**

Despite its increasing income from various sources, the Guild managed to spend substantially more than it received. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was effectively bankrupt.

The chief administrative organ was the Common Hall, which comprised all of the burgesses and freemen, enacted by-laws, managed the Freemen's lands and property, set tolls and voted expenditure. Common Hall also elected the corporation's officers such as the Mayor, the coroner and the four bailiffs, who acted locally with powers equivalent to the King's justices.

While in office, they were immune from arrest.

The numbers of burgesses and freemen grew over time.

In 1597 only 68 burgesses were named, by 1689 there were 260, by 1726 there were 482, 950 by 1781 and 1,100 by 1833, less than half of whom were resident in Berwick. However, more than a third of Berwick households were still represented in Common Hall.

Unlike other boroughs, there was no constitutional requirement in Berwick to have a "Cabinet" of the mayor and a few colleagues to lead the administration. Berwick had escaped the reform of town government elsewhere in the country. Therefore, reforms could always be frustrated by a majority vote, especially as meetings of Common Hall were frequently poorly attended.

The absence of a small executive body in the Guild meant it failed to function properly and was unable to cope with the looming financial crisis.

Part of this increased expenditure resulted from the need to provide municipal services for the increasing urban population and the obligation to provide support for the Poor.

There was increasing corruption in the system, too.

The solution came in 1835 with the Municipal Corporations Act that finally swept away the powers of governance from the Guild replacing it with an elected Corporation – elected by freeholders – who were almost entirely Freemen!