

FREEDOM AND APPRENTICESHIP RECORDS AS A SOURCE FOR BOOK TRADE HISTORY

John Hinks
Loughborough University

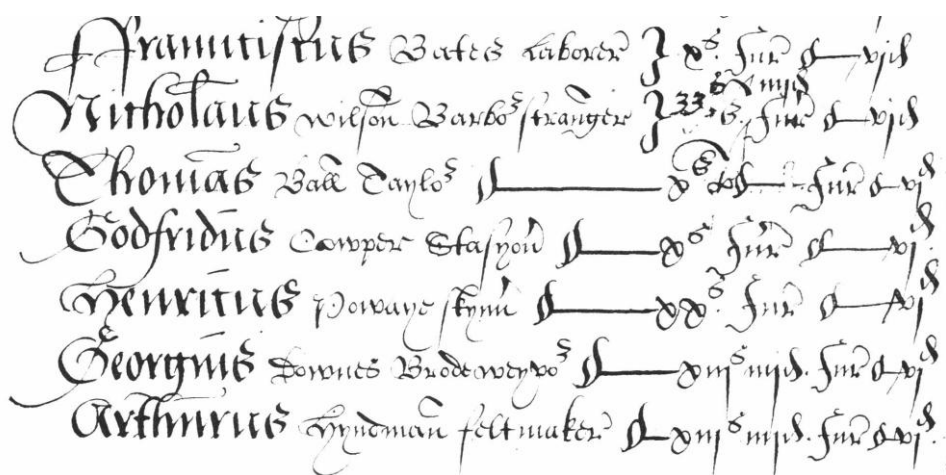
A revised version of a short paper presented to a Study Day of the Book History Postgraduate Student Network, held at St Bride Printing Library, London, on 19 March 2001. Some examples are given from Leicester, which has been the subject of the author's PhD research.

Local records of Freedom and Apprenticeship (F&A) form an essential source for the history of the book trade (or most other trades for that matter) in the old 'incorporated' towns of England. Their usefulness depends, however, on the degree of enthusiasm and efficiency with which the system of apprenticeship was applied in the particular locality. My research on the book trade in Leicester has benefited greatly from the Corporation's vigorous application of the rules: an apprentice would be bound to his master in the presence of the Mayor and upon completion of the agreed term (usually seven years) he would be formally made a Freeman, both events being diligently recorded in the registers. Even in Leicester, though, it is known that some people managed to bypass the system and traded without being made free.

The primary use of F&A records is, of course, the identification of trade participants. In the case of Leicester more than three hundred names, both masters and apprentices, were identified from the records in the period up to c1850. Many of these names are unrecorded elsewhere. However, F&A records have considerably greater potential than a mere listing of names, important though such evidence undoubtedly is. Careful analysis of local F&A records, and their use in combination with other evidence such as parish registers or, for the later period, trade directories and newspaper advertisements can reveal details of family relationships, including important book-trade 'dynasties', as well as links between masters and apprentices, sometimes extending over several generations.

F&A records can be a useful source of information on where people came from. In Leicester, for example, many of the important book-trade practitioners had been born and bred outside the town, so were made free as 'strangers'. This provides important data on patterns of migration – evidence of skilled individuals making conscious choices, for whatever reason, to set up business in a particular town. Also of considerable interest is the socio-economic background of those entering the book trades, which can be traced in part from F&A records which usually indicate the occupation or status of an apprentice's father (or mother if widowed).

Important though F&A records are in relation to individuals, it is instructive occasionally to step back, as it were, and take a reflective look at the bigger picture. The Leicester records approached in this way have proved to be a rich source of data on (a) social mobility within the book trade, (b) regional and sub-regional trading networks, (c) the position of women in the trade and (d) changes in the trade over a period of time. F&A records seen as a whole, compared and contrasted, can provide at least part of an informed overview of these sometimes neglected aspects of book trade history.



Franciscus Bates laborer J. d. Jun. d. vj. 1577
Nicholaus Wilson Barbo/stranger J. d. Jun. d. vj. 1577
Thomas Bad Daylo J. d. Jun. d. vj. 1577
Godfridus Cowper Stasyon J. d. Jun. d. vj. 1577
Henricus Downe fenne J. d. Jun. d. vj. 1577
Georgius Downe Brudewryce J. d. Jun. d. vj. 1577
Arthurus Wyndman feltmaker J. d. Jun. d. vj. 1577

Freedom entry for 'Godfridus Cowper Stasyon' (1577/78)

(Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

Regional trading links are both interesting and important but the English provincial book trade was always connected, in a variety of ways, to the metropolis. When local F&A records are used in conjunction with those of the Stationers' Company, information can sometimes be traced on the important topic of trade links between London and the provinces. No fewer than sixty-nine Leicestershire youths were apprenticed to members of the Stationers' Company between 1605 and 1640 but as book-trade skills became more abundant in Leicester during the eighteenth century the number of Leicestershire entrants to the trade being bound to London masters declined considerably. Such statistics are relatively easy to compile, thanks to the excellent published records of Stationers' Company apprentices.¹

Leicester benefits from extensive surviving Borough Records; other towns may be less fortunate. Leicester's records – said to be the oldest and best-preserved of any English town – date from 1196.² The earliest book-trade entry records the admission of Gervase, a parchment-maker, to the Merchant Guild in 1199. The first bookseller recorded was Godfrey Cowper (or Cooper) freed as 'stasyon' (stationer) in 1577/78. It is fortunate that Leicester's F&A registers have been accurately transcribed and published.³ Although the registers of freemen have survived with only a few gaps (the worst being 1380-1465), the lists of apprentices are incomplete until after 1718. Unfortunately the registers are not indexed by trade, so that a line-by-line search is necessary, though this does yield interesting background information on the local economy, including the emergence and decline of certain fashionable trades such as that of periwig-maker.

There were (in Leicester at any rate) four ways of becoming a Freeman⁴

- *By Patrimony:* as the 'freeborn' son of a Freeman (i.e. born after the father's freedom date)
- *By Apprenticeship:* service with a master who was a Freeman
- *By Purchase:* as a 'stranger' (not born in Leicester) paying a 'fine'
- *By Order of the Assembly or Common Hall* in one of two ways: (a) as an honour to a person of distinction, (b) as a means of benefiting the Borough by admitting a trader not otherwise eligible (e.g. to introduce a new trade or improved methods). Both of these are very rare and no book-trade examples have been found.

Research on the book trade in any locality necessitates diligent searching in records of many kinds. However, in those towns that have the benefit of surviving registers of

freedom and apprenticeship, the researcher has a valuable resource for the identification of individual trade participants. Moreover, as this brief note has attempted to indicate, such records can be made to work harder by being used as, at the very least, a starting-point in further areas of research into the social and economic history of the book trade.

Some examples from the Leicester Registers⁵

Freedom by patrimony:

John Marten [Martin] (8 Oct 1728): ‘eldest freeborn son of Simon (Mr Mayor)’ [bookseller].

George Ireland (13 Aug 1795): ‘eldest and only son of George, bookseller, bookbinder and printer, deceased’.

William Brown (11 Feb 1814): ‘second son of John, bookseller, who was second son of Thomas, hosier’.

Freedom by apprenticeship:

Anthony Groce (9 Oct 1663): ‘prentice of Charles Robinson, fellmonger and parchment-maker’.

William Evans (26 May 1826): ‘printer, prentice of Benjamin Storer Chamberlain who was eldest son of William, woolcomber’.

Thomas Warwick (28 July 1832): ‘printer and bookbinder, prentice of John Fowler who was prentice to Mr. George Ireland’.⁶

Freedom by purchase as a ‘stranger’:

John Allin [Allen, Alleyn] (21 Aug 1629): ‘stationer, a stranger, £13.6s.8d.’⁷

John David Jackson (27 Sept 1813): ‘paper merchant, a stranger’.

An example of a woman in the book trade:

Samuel Adams (12 June 1790): ‘prentice of George Ireland, late of Leicester⁸, bookseller, and afterwards with his widow’. [*i.e.* when Ireland died, his apprentice was assigned to Mrs Ireland; Ann Ireland became an important printer and bookseller in her own right.]

An example of book-trade data from an entry which initially appears irrelevant:

William Baxter of Lutterworth (19 June 1826): ‘warehouseman, prentice to George Ireland, hosier, who was first son of George, printer’. [*i.e.* a member of the Ireland family – a large and important book-trade dynasty – has entered the hosiery trade rather than the family printing and bookselling business.]

¹ D. F. McKenzie (ed.), *Stationers’ Company Apprentices*. 3 vols. covering 1605-1800. (1961, 1974, 1978.)

² Extensive transcripts of the Borough Records were published between 1899 and 1974. The original records are held at the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.

³ Henry Hartopp (ed.), *Register of the Freemen of Leicester... including the Apprentices sworn....* 2 vols. 1197-1770, 1770-1930. (1927, 1933.)

⁴ Hartopp, 1, xv. (There were a few Freewomen and an occasional female apprentice, though no book-trade examples are known.)

⁵ These are summaries, not verbatim transcripts. (Dates are when made free.)

⁶ ‘Mr.’ is usually only used, as here, to refer respectfully to a Mayor or Alderman.

⁷ The amount of the ‘fine’ is not always shown. Allen’s is unusually high.

⁸ ‘Late of Leicester’ is used inconsistently. It may indicate that someone has left the town, or has died, sometimes both.