

The Tudor apprentice

Today we call young workers apprentices as the word apprentice means learner. In Tudor times there were many apprentices in the towns. Townsmen were not supposed to take up a trade or even a craft unless they had trained as an apprentice, usually for seven years. Many children left home as young as six to begin work although there is evidence to suggest that apprenticeships could start at any age up to sixteen.

It tended to be boys who were apprentices but girls worked as maid-servants or in crafts like dress-making. Apprentices would work up to 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. Their only day off was a Sunday when they were expected to attend Church.

Apprentices could work in all sorts of trades. Butchers, cobblers and bakers all had apprentices. Craftsmen in complicated trades like shipbuilding and clock-making produced more money than trades like making bread therefore only boys from well off families were likely to be apprenticed in these workshops.

John Shakespeare. William Shakespeare's father, worked as a glover. It is likely that he would have had apprentices and it is possible that William helped his father in the workshop or even served all or part of an apprenticeship.

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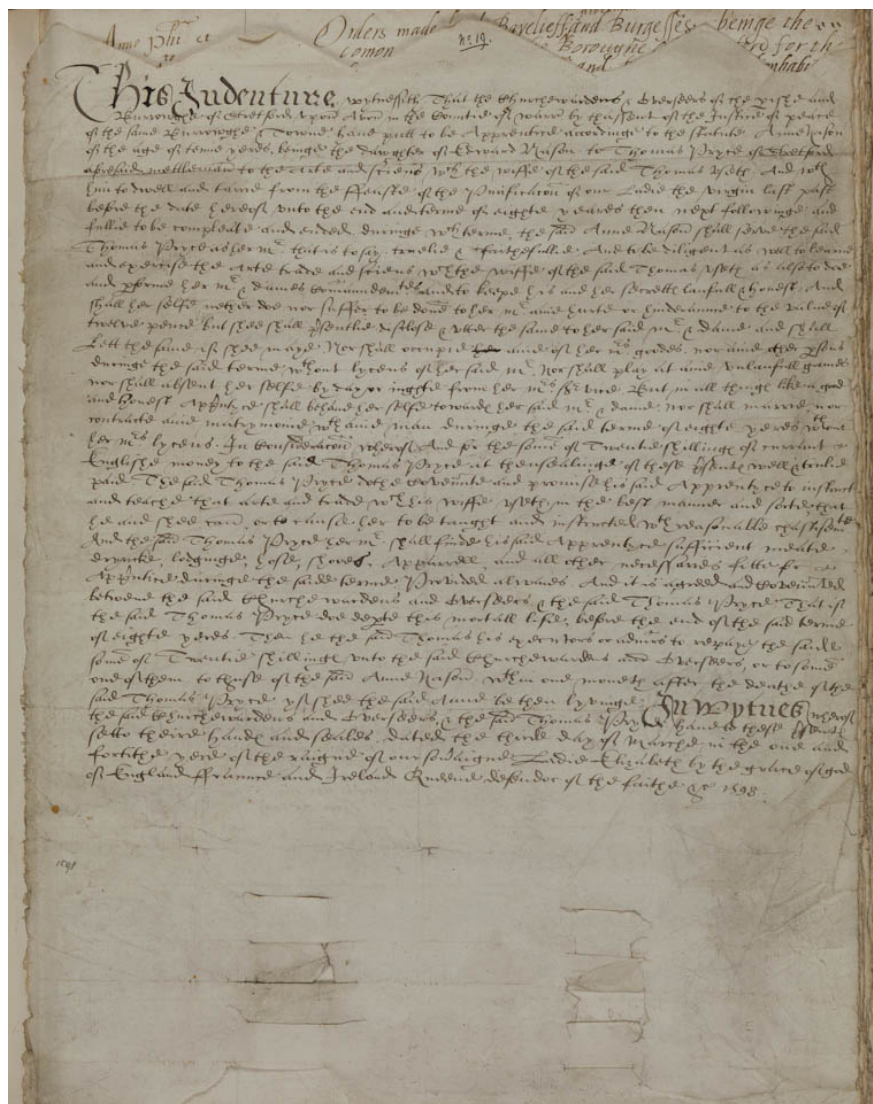
William Shakespeare shows a knowledge of glove-making in his plays. In 'The Merry Wives of Windsor', Mistress Quickly asks whether Slender wears a great round beard like a glover's pairing knife.

An apprentice lived with his or her master. The master would feed him, give him clothes and train him in a trade. Some apprentices were reared well by their masters and almost became part of the family. Many apprentices stayed on to work for their masters after they had completed their apprenticeship.

If the master did not have a son to take over the business, an apprentice could inherit it. Not all apprentices were this lucky. Some of them were treated badly by their masters. In the worst cases they were fed scraps, made to sleep on the kitchen floor and given old clothes to wear. Girls and boys were beaten regularly. They often ran away and if they were found they were forced to go back.

Those who wished to learn a craft were 'bound apprentices' to their master. This agreement to serve an apprenticeship was carefully written down and was called an indenture. There are many Tudor indentures in the Collections at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust like the one on the next page.

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Daughter of Edward Nason, and was apprenticed "to Thomas Pryce of Stretford aforesaid, mettlemann, to the arte and sciens which the wiffe of the said Thomas useth."

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The apprentices were forbidden from marrying, gambling, drinking and selling anything they had made. They often managed to get into trouble. In 1600 many of the guilds had rules to stop the apprentices from playing cards and dice. They were also not allowed to act in plays, or to dance in the streets, and swearing and the wearing of fancy clothes were strictly forbidden.

In 1603 rules were made forbidding Newcastle apprentices to:

*Weare their haire long nor locks at their eares like
ruffians...
weare any indecent apparell but plain ... nor to weare
any velvet or lace ... neither any silk garters.*

Rules of 1697 forbade apprentices:

*To get fencing or dancing schools, not to music
houses, lotteries or playhouses, neither to keep any
sorts of horses, dogs for hunting or fighting cocks.*

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Living away from home at a young age and working long hours would not have been easy for apprentices. However, many young people successfully completed their apprentices and then paid to become a member of the guild.

In Shakespeare's day you had to pay to join a guild (a bit like a club) at the end of your apprenticeship. The guilds looked after their members and set rules to follow to ensure that the products made were of a high quality. Members of the guild would take on their own apprentices and so the cycle would continue.

Tudor apprentice activities

- As a part of your work in Drama or History, you could ask your children to take on the role of Tudor apprentices. Ask a child to sit in the hot-seat. Can the rest of the class question them to find out details about the daily lives of an audience? How would they feel about moving away from home at such a young age? What would it have been like to work such long hours? Would they have been able to obey the strict rules?
- Ask your class to write a diary entry as an apprentice or a letter home to parents telling them about their new life learning a trade.

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- As you class to complete some of the tasks undertaken throughout an apprenticeship: the cobblers might cut patterns for shoes, the weavers might tease wool, the glovers might design their masterpieces (the final piece of work completed as part of an apprenticeship).
- Hold a debate about Tudor apprentices. Consider the viewpoint of a parent, an apprentice, the tradesmen, a school master and the guild.
- Hold you own version of 'The Apprentice' television show, 'The Tudor Apprentice'. Ask you class to write job descriptions for a Tudor apprentice. Hold a mock interview for the apprentice.. Will they be hired or fired?

