

CHAIRMAKERS AND APPRENTICES: REMINISCENCES OF WORKING CONDITIONS AND TRADITIONS IN HIGH WYCOMBE

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When in 1981 my younger son David became apprenticed to be taught the craft of the spindle turner at the firm of Ercol Furniture Ltd, he was following in the footsteps of many hundreds of similar lads who left school in the town over the previous one hundred and fifty years. I was at the time amazed when he came home with his first pay packet, to find his first weekly wage amounted to £44. I was reminded at the time of the rather less affluent days of James Hopkinson, who in 1834 started down the same path in Nottingham at the age of fifteen.

His parents had been unsuccessful at the first workshop, so 'they inquired at another cabinet shop in the market place, kept by Mr Jones, the leading cabinet and upholstery shop in the town. He said he could do with me if I suited and we could agree about terms. He had a good look at me and I had at him. I took to him I think my eyes said so, for a bargain was struck that I was to go a month on trial, and if we suited each other at the end of that time, my parents should give him 20 pounds premium, and that I should receive no wages the first year but five shillings per week for the second years, 6s. for the third year, 7s. for the 4th and 8s. for the last nine months. Making altogether 5 years and nine months'.

An indenture of Wycombe for Henry Hayes dated 1824, lays down the rules to be observed by the apprentice during his period of training: 'He shall not commit fornication not contract matrimony within the said term, he shall not play cards or dice tables or any other unlawful games, whereby his masters may have loss with his goods or otherwise, he shall neither buy nor sell, he shall haunt taverns nor playhouses'. As a form of compensation for such strict code of behaviour we find that the master promise to 'find, provide the allow the said apprentice, competent and sufficient meat, drink, apparel, lodging, washing and other things necessary and fit for an apprentice'. This of course lay the onus on the master to decide himself what was fit, and this did not always meet with the agreement of the apprentice. James Hopkinson recalls an 'indoor apprentice' where the master's wife was inclined to make a good number of meat-and-potato pies in a dish. He was of the opinion that there was frequently too much potato and too little meat, so on one occasion he took a long board and laid out on it the contents of his pie, ten pieces of potato to one piece of meat all the way along the board. On being asked what he was doing, he told his master he was 'counting out my ten to one sir' and he didn't have many more such pies after that incident.

Quite often a Parish Vestry might try to get orphan children out of the workhouse by paying the premium themselves and the Lady Jane Boys Charity placed a poor boy with Thomas Widginton of Chipping Wycombe in 1809 in this way. But, as a master could demand a fairly heavy premium, the children of poorer parents could not become



1. Apprentices at work in Gomme's factory c. 1918

apprenticed, and so were forced to take such menial jobs as were available in the trade. This problem was highlighted by William Parnell in the *Sweating Shops Enquiry* of 1888 when he said: 'There is scarcely a legally bound apprentice in London now at the present moment. Boys go in the shops as errand boys, to sweep up the shavings and run errands for the men, and in a little while as they get bigger and stronger they get a jack plane put into their hands, they would assist that man on any particular job he may be working on'.

This comment raises another source of resentment in the trade. One carver complained bitterly of the time spent teaching youngsters coming into the business. 'I never had a halfpenny out of the boys, the Boss had all the profits'. But as one indenture promised, the master would 'teach and instruct *or cause to be taught or instructed* in the art of Windsor chair framing'. My own son joined his firm in July 1981, and worked in the Apprentices Workshop until September, when he was sent to Buckinghamshire College of Further Education on a year's full-time course of instruction, with full pay during the period. The workshop in which James Hopkinson worked was much more down to earth . . . 'having cut out the wood for a table, I was told that I must pay a shilling for them to drink my health, and also that they expected my father to pay a sovereign towards a binding supper . . . and every fresh job that I had not made one like it before, I had to pay a shilling or I should not have been allowed to make it'. Bearing in mind the uncertainty of help when an older workman was laid off, a skilled elderly turner, with a remarkable ability for turning the open barley sugar turnings refused to train any young turner in this art, for fear of being 'turned-off' himself. The master of the factory had no hesitation in drilling holes in the ceiling above the turner's head, and stationing several boys, one at a time, to watch secretly his technique, and so get to learn this particular aspect of his craft.

Hours of work and mealtimes were of particular importance, and Mr Barnes of Stokenchurch would expect to adze two dozen seats before breakfast in the summer when work started at 6.30am. Breakfast was a well earned and greatly enjoyed break, even when my son started work. About 9.30 they would troop into the canteen and enjoy large platefuls of fried breakfast, moistened with large mugs of tea, and then back to the workshop. The opportunity in the past was not so open, as James Hopkinson recalls . . . 'one time the master came in just as we were frying kidneys and mutton chops about 11 o'clock. The door was fastened on the inside and no one could get in . . . when we heard a strange knock we were in a fix to know what to do with the frying pan. At last one of the men opened his (tool) chest and popped it in frizzling away' . . . so when the master eventually came in, all the men were busily at work. Hours were always a matter of discussion and argument; in medieval times the winter hours were from 5am to 7pm, but in the summer from 5am to 8pm. There were however generous allowances for 'nonschenes' (the midday meal) for 'drinkynges' and in the summer months, a period in the early afternoon was provided for 'sleepynges', so this, with the lunch period could occupy up to the three hours; the equivalent of a siesta.

The mens' approach to work could also influence their interpretation of the working day. One chairmaker recalled that they were 'at our benches at six o'clock and did not leave off work till eight o'clock pm, including Saturdays' while another remembers 'work started anything from 5.30 to 6.0am, breakfast being taken at 7.30 to 8.0am, then



2. Workmen loading a waggon with chairs in Walter Skull & Son's Factory c. 1875. The chairs on the waggon are wrapped in straw to protect them against damage



3. Chairframers wearing wooden breast bibs, outside the factory of John Williams of Richardson St., High Wycombe, c. 1901

at 10.0am, those who were not teetotallers took ten minutes for beer and bread and cheese, accompanied by a good strong onion. From 12.0 to 1.00 we had dinner, and at 3.30 to 4.0 tea, after that work would go on until 7.0pm'. Beer drinking was a habit of the times, and when a workman had been particularly obstructive a kangaroo court would be called together by striking a holdfast with a hammer. The men would come in from the various rooms and try the 'case' by a jury consisting of all the men on the premises; and which ever side was found to be of blame, had to pay a fine of not less than one shilling, but if it was a very hot day and the men were thirsty, it could be up to four or five shillings and one of the lads would be sent out to buy beer.

Monday morning in Wycombe was known locally as St Monday, and few workers, save apprentices, worked after dinner on Monday, the majority of the men formed gangs and visited the local pubs, playing games and dice. The frying pan was put on the stove about 4.0pm and a great fry-up of bacon, eggs and liver was produced at the cost of one shilling per portion. One polisher recalls that a man with a shilling in his pocket wouldn't be seen dead at work on a Monday. Indeed if they didn't have a shilling of their own, it didn't stop them borrowing one. One 'chapel' chairframer told how he worked next to a man who got drunk every Saturday and Sunday, and when he came in on Monday morning would say 'Ah Bill! never no more, never no more, lend me two shillings' and off he would go again. But from Tuesday to Saturday evening he worked like a Trojan, and then on Monday again it was 'Ah never no more'. Indeed one wife complained of the late payment of wages on Saturday evening, when the men would have to stand around and drink their future wages while waiting to be paid. She wrote to the local newspaper of the bad example set by her husband and his mates to their twelve-year-old son, when they would all come home tottering, having drunk a good part of their pay packet. Several chairmakers started up in the yards of public houses in High Wycombe and area, as there were often sheds or outhouses and some open land which could accommodate them. In the centre of the town were the Spread Eagle, the Golden Fleece, The Van, and the Red Cow, while in the surrounding countryside was the Crooked Billet at Stoke Row, the Fox and Hounds at Christmas Common, and the Hit and Miss at Penn Street.

A particular grievance of the chairmakers was the 'light money'. The windows of many of the workshops were not glazed, but were covered with oiled calico or hessian which made the use of artificial light necessary quite early in the day. The chairmaster made a charge of 8d. a week to cover the cost of oil for the lamps, and even when gas was introduced, would still make a charge of 6d. a week. Another added cost was the payment for benchroom, which could be up to two shillings a week, a cost which hit many of the workers. Another cost was made by the workers themselves when they demanded a new man should pay his 'footing', a sum of two shillings which he had to produce before they would allow him to commence any job; a payment which fell hard on a man who had been out of work for some time. A good worker might be 'poached' by another Master, as Frank Williams says: 'if a man was offered an extra farthing an hour, he would dance, if he had a halfpenny an hour rise, he would jump with joy'.

The weekly wage of apprentices at the age of 15 held their level until the arrival of decimalisation, when they seem to rise sharply:



4. Edwin Skull's broadsheet c. 1865/6 showing 141 chair and stool types produced by the firm

1951	£2.8s. per week	1968	£3.14s. per week
1971	£12.50 per week	1981	£46.00 per week (£50.83 gross @ £1.25 ¹ / _p per hour)

The men's ability to work of course varied, and although the general public have exaggerated views on 'hand-made' furniture, Manfred Bale, writing in 1880 felt that 'the great cost and in some cases, the inferior quality of work turned out by hand, have rendered the increasing introduction of labour-saving machinery absolutely necessary, to keep pace with the general prosperity of the times . . .'. The attitude of the men themselves was not always helpful; Edwin Skull, writing of the 1860s commented on attempts to re-train the workmen on the new machinery. 'In many cases they were unable to alter their method of work, and in others they flatly refused to have anything to do with work they were not used to'. He adds, somewhat wryly, 'our other difficulty was in persuading the leading houses of London that we could make good chairs, I well remember the credulous laugh and the sarcastic remark "What? Wycombe make anything but cheap chairs?"' This was deeply hurtful, as some very fine work was also coming out of Wycombe but the reputation was continued when the Sweating Shop Commission of 1888 also noted 'the third class work is done in Wycombe and Bethnal Green and the East End of London for Working men's homes, comprising of common chairs, sold 2s. 6d. all ready stuffed . . . that is the lower class of trade'. He added that there was not much dovetailing done in these items, only what we in the trade call "Birmingham Dovetails"; that is nailed together'.

Some of the work could be unpleasant, and some could be downright dangerous. Mr Barnes of Stokenchurch, who expected to adze two dozen chair-seats before breakfast was dicing with limb-injury, as the adze was razor sharp, and the action was frequently made in a stroke towards the feet. Billy 'No-Toes' Neville, as he was called, was a local Primitive Methodist Lay-Precacher, who lost several toes while adzing chair-seats. When Thomas Glenister of High Wycombe introduced his first seat-adzing machine, he christened it 'Billy Neville' remarking that it wouldn't cut off anybody's toes in future. Another task was the staining of wood used in chairs to the rich Venetian red which was very popular in the 1890s. Each piece of a chair had to be dipped in a tank containing a diluted solution of nitric acid which 'burned-in' the colour. The only protection for the youngsters who did this work was a supply of sacking to wrap around their hands, and one chairmaker who did this in his youth recalled the action of the acid under his fingernails saying 'I laid abed and cried more than one night with the pain'.

For the chairmaker's family, work on the side was important, a child could earn a penny a week for chair-packing, while another task was working after school from 4.30 to 7.30pm making wooden wedges. These were split with the grain and dried on the stove, and he was able to make a gross an hour for a penny a gross. The woodcarver had a particular moan, as besides having to supply his rather more superior tools, he also had to pay two-pence a week towards the use of the factory grindstone and halfpenny a week towards the services of an errand boy who fetched and carried for them. No carver worth his while would even think of using a grindstone to sharpen his tools, and as they were doing such fine work at a slower rate than many other workers, their need of an errand boy was minimal. The tools each man had were his livelihood and it was vital to join some form of worker's society in order to insure them against the frequent



5. 'Butts' being split into 'billets' using a 'beetle and wedge'. In a Wycombe workshop, 1922



6. Adzing the seat with a chairmaker's adze, known locally as 'bottoming'

fires which took place in the industry. In a fire at Cox and Barretts in High Wycombe, the workers lost all their tools and equipment. A fund was established to help them, and this raised sufficient money to buy new tools for the men and also give a shilling to each of the caning children who were thrown out of work by the fire. Not only the workmen suffered, for Benjamin North of West Wycombe was on business in the Midlands when he received a telegram 'Shops all on fire, come home as soon as possible' and when he returned he found damage to the tune of £4,000 and he writes 'I was insured for £1,500 only!'

The tools in use in the mid to late-nineteenth century, were largely the same as those which had been used for several hundred years. The pole-lathe, a vital piece of equipment for both the rural and factory woodturner was introduced in the thirteenth century, and a similar pattern was in use as an occasional lathe as late as the 1920s. Inventories and wills are a great help in dating the use of tools, with mentions of the adze appearing in 1343, the two-handed pit saw mentioned in 1444, saw-pits in 1535. Sand paper is known in 1355, and the glue pot is mentioned in 1386, and those basic tools of the bodger, the beetle and froe are listed in 1477 and 1440. In Thomas Vyle's will of 1472, he left his son . . . 'my splitting saw, broad axe, luggung belt (adze) his

falling belt (falling axe), a twybull (pole axe or mattock), a square, mortys wymbyll (auger), a drawte wymbyll (auger with guide), a compass, handsaw and kytting saw (cross-cut saw).

The introduction of the wheel-lathe was a great innovation in the trade, especially as, by using the foot pedal, it was possible to have a continuous action, instead of the reciprocating action of the pole-lathe. Samuel Rockall of Turville Mandeville started work in the 1890s using the pole-lathe, but wished to own a wheel-lathe, and so, out of his meagre wages, he saved up six sovereigns which was the current price and in order to learn how to use it, he worked for fourteen days with his uncle. Luckily for Samuel, they liked their partnership so well that he stayed. Tools often had local names, the Wycombe name for the frame saw was the 'Dancing Betty', or the 'Up-and-Down Saw', and, because of its awkward action, as the 'Jesus Christ Saw' because 'you did always be a bowing to him'. One of the more energetic jobs was working the hand-operated band saw. Bert Mullet, who spent sixty years in the trade, recalls that it took three people to turn it besides the man actually sawing the wood. Bert was sometimes on this job for an hour or more and by that time he felt like collapsing.

The blame for lack of work was frequently laid at the door of the foreigners, which in 1517 was described by a 'poore carpenter'. 'In this season, the Genoese, Frenchmen and other Strangers, said and boasted themselves to be in such favour with the king . . . and the multitude of Strangers so great in London that the poor English artificer could scarcely get any living'. In the smaller town such as High Wycombe, a foreigner was someone who lived outside the Borough in what were termed 'the foreigners' of the parish, and the Mayor of the Borough would happily accept a annual payment from any group of craftsmen to prohibit others of the same craft from practising it within its boundaries. In the past, craftsmen worked within the rules of their Guild, who guarded their rights jealously, and demarcation disputes were frequent. In 1632 the Joiners of London, whose charter was granted in 1570, soon issued an order that 'no forrener using the art of Joinery shall from hensforth be sett on worke within this citey until they have submitted themselves to the reasonable orders of the Joiners'. In 1632 they also stipulated that 'all work that had mortesses or tennants or that was duftailed pynned or glued, and all sorts of wainscott and sealing of homes (panelling) also all carved workes either raised or cutt through or sunk in with the grounds taken out being wrought and cutt with carving tools without the use of plaines . . .' came into their hands. The Worshipful Company of Turners retaliated when they stated that they had the exclusive right of 'making thrown chairs, stools, wooden bowls, trays, measures, spinning wheels and all kinds of ship fittings such as deadeyes, blocks and sheaves'. However, the joiners, the turners and upholsterers were confounded at the Restoration when the Court returned to England in the 1660s, and they brought some very foreign habits with them, in particular the growing use of the cane chair. In 1689 the upholsterers of Bedford put their case: 'since cane chairs have been in use, the trade hath decayed and is lost, now the said poor, that used to be employed, beg their bread; and the town and others near it without some redress will come to ruin'. The cane chair went in and out of fashion numerous times between the 17th to 19th centuries, but really came into its own in the production of 'chamber chairs' in the mid to late Victorian period. This branch of work embraced the use of the 'cane girls', many of them sixty to seventy years of age who had



7. Caning girls in the workshop c. 1900, High Wycombe

started work at the age of twelve and spent some three years learning their craft until they could earn good money on 'good best' cane work. The rate for caning a chair seat in 1900 was 2½d. whilst a rush-matter could get one shilling for the same work. Wages varied, one caner started on 4s.6d a week, yet another doing best work managed to earn £4-£5. The rushing was a very damp and dirty job, the rushes had to be dampened to make them sufficiently flexible to work; there was a saying that you could 'smell a rusher a mile off!' In some cases the caning was done in the factory, in others in the home, I can recall a retired teacher talking of her early years in High Wycombe, when the children would call in at the factories on the way home from school to pick up the chair seats and the split cane, and then return the finished cane seats to the factory when they went to school first thing in the morning. In 1857, the mixture of men and women in the factory was a matter of concern for the clergy and 'proper' folk of the town, and we find the Chairmasters being approached by the local Vicar 'to consider what measures could be adopted to correct a growing source of depravity from the constant association of young persons of both sexes in our manufactories . . .'. The matter was hotly debated in public and the decision was made that the women should go home from work half an hour earlier than the men to avoid such disastrous contact . . . but of course, instead of the men hanging around for the girls, instead the girls hung around until the men came out!

James Hopkinson was 'very pleased when the Master gave me my Indentures and said that I had given him satisfaction, and that I should remain as journeyman. Accordingly I began to work with a will, and told the Master I should like to take a holiday later on about August or September'. Holidays in the trade were always a problem, but in the medieval times the Holy Days were of course the holidays of later times. As early as 1279, the Vale Royal workers had 27 holidays, but these were not paid for; however by 1337 as many as 47 Holy Days were the right of the workmen, of which 15 were paid for, with royal workers given a further 11 paid days. Holidays nowadays are considered a right, but in the 19th century at least, this was not so, and in the early 20th century they had to be fought for. In 1938, E. Rolph the NAFTA union organiser could say 'We have not any factory in Wycombe which has a recognised holiday, anytime of the year . . . not 10% of furniture workers go on holiday, they cannot afford to do so. We urge all workers to join their respective Trade Unions to bring about payment for all holidays'.

According to J. L. Oliver, High Wycombe 'throughout the entire period 1801-1960s has produced more chairs than London' but between 1801-1870 was second to London in furniture manufacture. The High Wycombe Directory of 1875 lists the output of the fifty firms working in the town as:

Principal firms	2000 chairs per day
15 secondary firms	1500 chairs per day
20 smaller firms	1200 chairs per day
	<hr/>
	4700 chairs per day.

Such a number grossed-up over about fifty years totals a large output. Some of the orders were large in themselves; 8,000 chairs in 1851 for Crystal Palace, or 19,200 chairs in the 1870s for the Moody and Sankey Revival Meetings, give some indication of their possible size. So to handle the transport of such loads required a fleet of waggons and many willing loaders. Not all were willing: 'When a load of timber was brought into the yard, the men used to have to set down tools and get the timber in and they weren't paid for that either; we used to be the same with the loading of chairs up, they used to have to send so many out, so many in a gang; well, all wasted time! and if there was a lot of turned stuff from the country, you would have to go out and do you share. They used to occupy sometimes one of these loads of chairs, about six layers all done up in straw'. Luckily not all felt that way, for another view held was 'as to unloading, well, you wanted to work indoors and that chair stuff wouldn't get up and walk in to you, and when your chairs were made, they were precious little use to the master or you till they were up on the van and away'. The waggon train of chair-loaded vans would plod in a very surefooted way out of Wycombe on the London Road about eight or nine o'clock in the evening on a return trip which would take up to thirty-six hours in all. The drivers would start in earnest after a final drink at the 'King of Prussia' on the outskirts of the town, for when they were ready to go there might be thirty or forty waggons lined up ready to go to London, thirty miles away. The horses had made the journey so often that only the driver of the first van needed to stay awake, the rest sleeping amid the furniture and straw while their horses followed patiently through the



8. Chairwaggon of Worley & Sons, Carriers to the Trade. Here two horses were used and a bag of hay stuffed in the shafts to 'bate' them when they stop, c. 1905



9. Thomas Glenister's own chairwaggon, loaded up and ready to move off, c. 1910

night. Other carriers were required to deliver the chair-parts to the factories for making-up. Harry Langford of Northend, Bucks. was also a general carrier who, when travelling around, would also do shopping for the villagers, delivering parcels and sometimes passengers as well. Some of the travellers worked an area of their own, and Benjamin North of West Wycombe travelled for Mr Randell of Thame, a chair-turner, for a shilling a day. His journeys allowed him to travel through Witney, Burford, Cheltenham and on to Tewkesbury, and he often carried extra items: 'everybody knows that Royal Bucks, is celebrated for lace-making, and people on my journey would ask me for it. I saw in this another way of turning an honest penny and opening a little branch of business'. Having the chairs on the waggon was a good incentive for customers to buy them whilst the van was there, but often a traveller would come back some weeks when he hadn't sold one! 'He left them away and gone back Monday to sell them again'. In another case Mr Haines recalls his father travelling down to Southampton and getting an order for 300-400 chairs at ten shillings and sixpence a bundle of six. When he settled down to work it out, he had to tell the purchaser it would be necessary to raise the price 3d. a dozen (a farthing a chair), the order was immediately torn up and thrown on the fire, and he got no more orders from that quarter. The workmen back at the factory were dependent on the successful return of the waggons, as their wages for the week would be paid out of the profits. When the chair-van didn't come home for the weekend, it would be necessary for the wives to visit the local shop, get their goods on the slate with the usual comment 'Master's sure to pay on Monday'.

The determination of men to work hard and rise above the factory floor meant that they were prepared to carry on with the 'hard-nosed' approach of many of the nineteenth century Chairmasters'. 'I drove my men to the very limit of what experience showed me that they would stand but no master could have driven me to work the way I did. Only ambition and a determination to made a go of it and escape the drudgery of the chair shop could do that . . .'. Although the nineteenth century factory employers are often pictured as grinding the faces of their workmen this was not always the case. Sophie von la Roche, writing in 1786, spoke of one owner who 'employs four hundred apprentices on any work connected with the making of household furniture – joiners, carvers, mirror-workers, upholsterers, girdlers who moulded the bronze into graceful patterns and locksmiths. All these are housed in a building with six wings. Seddons, foster-father to four hundred employees, seemed a man who has become intimate with the quality of woods, has appreciated the value of his own people's labour and toil, and is forever creating new forms'. It must be admitted that few of the customs of the trade seemed to favour the workman, but one did, which was the practise of allowing a workman about to be married to make his own 'marriage chair'. It was made with timbers chosen with care for which a nominal charge was made, and worked on and completed in the factory in work's time. When this custom was mentioned to a group of retired chairmakers, they were most scornful, adding that in their early days 'Gaffer never gave 'owt away'. Perhaps the practice continued or was reviewed at a later date, as when my son David was married, an invitation to visit the showroom of Ercol Furniture Ltd, enabled him to select an expanding round table, which although he didn't make it, he certainly watched it go through the various processes of production, and was able in the end to choose the one where the style of grain and finish were to his satisfaction.



10. Inside Glenister's factory, High Wycombe, 1902. The firm was established by Thomas Glenister in 1839

It is easy to forget the outworkers, known as the bodgers, who in the woods around High Wycombe prepared many of the parts of the chairs to order, to ensure the factories continued to work. Theirs was a hard life, George Dean recalls: 'it was a problem in the winter getting enough work prepared outside by daylight for the "evening lighting" as we called it'. The Chairmasters in the town would beat them down in price until there was hardly any profit to be found in the work they did. Yet it was a way of life they could not reject. 'The thatched workshops were quite picturesque during the various seasons, the white shavings on the walls and the yellowish thatch showing up amid the sombre beech trees. The jays would always shriek a warning of strangers approaching. Once a flock of pigeons descended on the trees around our shops after dark. The noise of their flapping wings was alarming as they settled in the tree-tops, too exhausted to heed us very much as we worked by candlelight in our primitive way'.

By the end of the nineteenth century, education was beginning to find its place in the training of young craftsmen. Originally at night school, then on day-release, and finally by full-time college courses. The Town of High Wycombe was able to establish a new Technical and Arts School in Frogmoor in 1893 with the help of a grant from the Science and Art Department, South Kensington, and the training in draughtsmanship and design as well as furniture manufacture has continued to the present day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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