



Devon Family History Society
Joint Project Publication with
North Devon Record Office



PARISH APPRENTICESHIP REGISTERS

MERTON PARISH REGISTER OF APPRENTICES, 1805-1843

DRO Reference - 2044A/PO345a

DFHS Book Reference - B297

Children who came from a poor family or could not be cared for by their own family because they had no parents, were a problem to the poor law administrators in their parish, as they frequently lacked any means of support, and were too young to earn their own living. From 1597 the Poor Law Acts gave Overseers of the Poor and Churchwardens of each parish the power to set these children to work, and so a large number of pauper children were put out as apprentices by these parish officers. When a parish wanted to bind a poor child, the parishioner they had chosen as master or mistress had to take the boy or girl, or pay a fine to be excused. Apprenticeship was sometimes organised by rotation, or drawn for, as in a raffle. Relatives sometimes took an orphaned or illegitimate child or a poor member of their family as a parish apprentice. The parish paid the apprenticeship fee, and the terms of apprenticeship contracts were written up in a document called an indenture. Two copies of the indenture were written – one was kept in the parish chest, and the other by the master or mistress of the apprentice, until the apprenticeship ended, when it was presented to the apprentice. This system of apprenticeship was separate to that of private apprenticeship, where a parent or guardian paid a premium to a master or mistress to have a child apprenticed to a trade or craft.

Overseers of the Poor were directed under an Act of 1801-1802 to keep an **Apprenticeship Register** for their parish. Some parishes had already kept records of parish apprentices long before this, but the new legislation formalised the information to be recorded for each apprentice. Those apprenticeship registers which survive are usually found among the parish records. Those which were commenced under the new legislation usually begin in 1802 or 1803, and some of these record details of parish apprentices right up to 1844, when compulsory apprenticeship was abolished. These Apprenticeship Registers usually have a standard printed format, and give more details than the Apprenticeship Indentures do, including the names of the apprentice's parents. They record information about all the parish apprentices in a particular parish, even though a full series of the Indentures themselves have usually not survived. Note that these registers do not record apprenticeships arranged and paid for privately, nor those organised through a parish or town charity.

Children were usually bound as parish apprentices at between 7 and 10 years of age. Later, in the early 19th century, the minimum age was increased to 9 years. In earlier centuries, children were apprenticed to trades such as butchery, tailoring, tanning,

weaving or bootmaking. However, over time, pauper children in rural parishes were increasingly apprenticed to learn husbandry or housewifery on farms, or in private houses and shops. Many parish apprentices were simply used as unpaid servants in the houses of their masters. In effect, an apprentice became like a member of the master's family, and was fed, clothed and housed at his expense. If a master owned or leased land in a particular parish but lived elsewhere, the apprentice had to move away and live there too; if the master moved from parish to parish, the apprentice moved with him. If the master died, the apprentice could stay with his widow, or be assigned to another master. Some landowners who were allocated apprentices assigned them to their tenants.

Apprenticeship was only supposed to be cancelled by mutual agreement of the three parties involved. However, in practice many parish apprentices did not stay with their masters. They were often badly treated, and some cases of abuse were brought before the Quarter Sessions Court. Sometimes parents refused to allow their children to be bound as parish apprentices; others were disobedient or ran away. When this happened, masters sometimes put advertisements about runaway apprentices in the newspaper. In other cases enforcement was lax, and an apprentice went home, or took up employment with someone else.