



Devon Family History Society  
Joint Project Publication with  
Devon Record Office



**DEVON RECORD OFFICE**

## **RETURNS OF APPRENTICES' ATTENDANCE AT CHURCH**

**1802-1803**

**DRO Reference – QS/73/1-14**

**DFHS Book Reference – D109**

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 independently. 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. The more well-to-do inhabitants of the parish would take pauper apprentices on a rota system, or by drawing lots for them. There were penalties for refusing to take an apprentice. Children would be apprenticed at the age of nine. The churchwardens and overseers would obtain a binding order from the magistrates, allowing them to bind a poor child an apprentice to someone in the parish. The contract between the parish and the new master or mistress were drawn up and are known as indentures because the top edge is wavy, or indented. Two copies of the indenture were made and the parish filed one copy in the parish chest, while the master or mistress kept the other. Neither the child nor the child's parents had to give their consent to this agreement. The child was expected to work hard for his or her master until the age of twenty one and in return the master had to feed and clothe the apprentice and not ill-treat him or her. Making sure that the apprentice attended church on Sunday was one of the master's obligations and refusing to let the apprentice go, counted as 'ill-usage'.

Churchwardens and overseers were obliged to make returns, on printed forms, of the apprentices who attended church, and these were delivered to the local magistrates. For some reason, this small set of returns has been passed on, by the magistrates, to the justices at the county Quarter Sessions. The returns cover the parishes of Abbots Bickington, Black Torrington, Bradford, Bradworthy, Bridgerule, Clawton, Hollacombe, Holsworthy, Luffincot, North Petherwin and West Putford and are all dated 1802/3. It is not certain why only returns from a small area of north west Devon, on the border with Cornwall, have survived in this way. It is possible that it was due to a misunderstanding of the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act, passed in 1802, which aimed to improve conditions for pauper apprentices in factories

and which stipulated that apprentices should receive an hour of Christian instruction on Sundays.

The returns list the names of the masters and of their apprentices and also indicate the Sundays when each apprentice has attended church. They are useful for family historians in providing evidence of apprenticeship which might not have survived in parish records and in doing so, they fill in the gap in the lives of young people during the period between childhood and marriage which is not written about anywhere else.