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The Autobiography of William Hart, Cooper, 1776-1857:

A Respectable Artisan in the Industrial Revolution

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THE autobiography of William Hart survives in typescript form, having been copied from the original by Hart's granddaughter towards the end of the last century.¹ It is an unusual contribution to literature of the industrial revolution – a rare survival from the small body of working-class writing of the time, and one of very few autobiographies of the period not undertaken specifically for publication and hence unaffected by publishers' dictates and expectations.² Hart's story of his own life, his religious development and beliefs, his work, his standard of living, his relationships with others and his attitude to contemporary social and industrial affairs are of considerable interest to students of literature and of social and economic development in this period.

The first half of Hart's autobiography is reprinted in full below and the remainder of his story will appear in the next issue. The following brief introduction and commentary concentrate on those aspects of the autobiography which are of interest to the economic and social historian. The second section will be prefaced by an analysis of the literary genre within which the work can be placed and the way in which Hart's changing view of the world is reflected in his style and expression.

For the historian, Hart's autobiography offers a valuable and rare taste of the life experience of the London artisan. It is the story of a deeply religious, often self-effacing and, at first, very diffident man who came to work as a cooper in London in the late 1790s and stayed there for the rest of his working life. Hart's religious and moral outlook and his intense sense of 'respectability' seem to have held him somewhat apart from the mass of his 'prophane' and often drunken fellows in the London cooperages. Brought up in the country by his grand-parents and radically influenced by Baptist preaching at an early age, Hart viewed the London scene refracted through his own rural and moral precepts and what he saw and felt was not necessarily typical of other members of his class.³

Furthermore, co-operation was only one of many hundreds of artisan trades in the capital at this time and all were affected differently by the gradual but fundamental changes in technology, in the organisation of work, and in demand which characterised the 'industrial revolution'.⁴ In the same period, the effects of Britain's protracted involvement in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were imposing themselves on the workings of the economy and on the living standards of the mass of the population. Some trades were very buoyant, particularly those, including many of the port trades, for which demand was swollen by government contracts. The demand for labour and wages was relatively high in these trades but other sectors were badly affected, especially after 1806, by disruption and loss of markets caused by the wars. At the same time the cost of living was rising very steeply to levels unheard of again in the nineteenth century.⁵

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Hart's is the story of one man viewing, interpreting, and reacting to his own specific environment and life experiences in this period of change. His autobiography is individual rather than collective in its scope and sentiment but, providing one bears this in mind, the historian can gain some interesting insights into working-class attitudes and experiences which must have been fairly characteristic of the artisan class of the time.

Three separate aspects of the autobiography contribute significantly to our understanding of life and labour in the period and are thus worthy of special note. Firstly, perhaps the strongest impression created by the story of Hart's life is the 'cycle' of his experience of material living standards.⁶ He progressed from being an orphan to a reasonably secure apprenticeship and thence to a well-paid, if arduous, job in a large London cooperage. In his lengthy bachelorhood, although the inflation of the war period must have eroded real incomes greatly, Hart was able to save considerable sums of money, to rent his own house and to live in reasonable comfort and privacy.

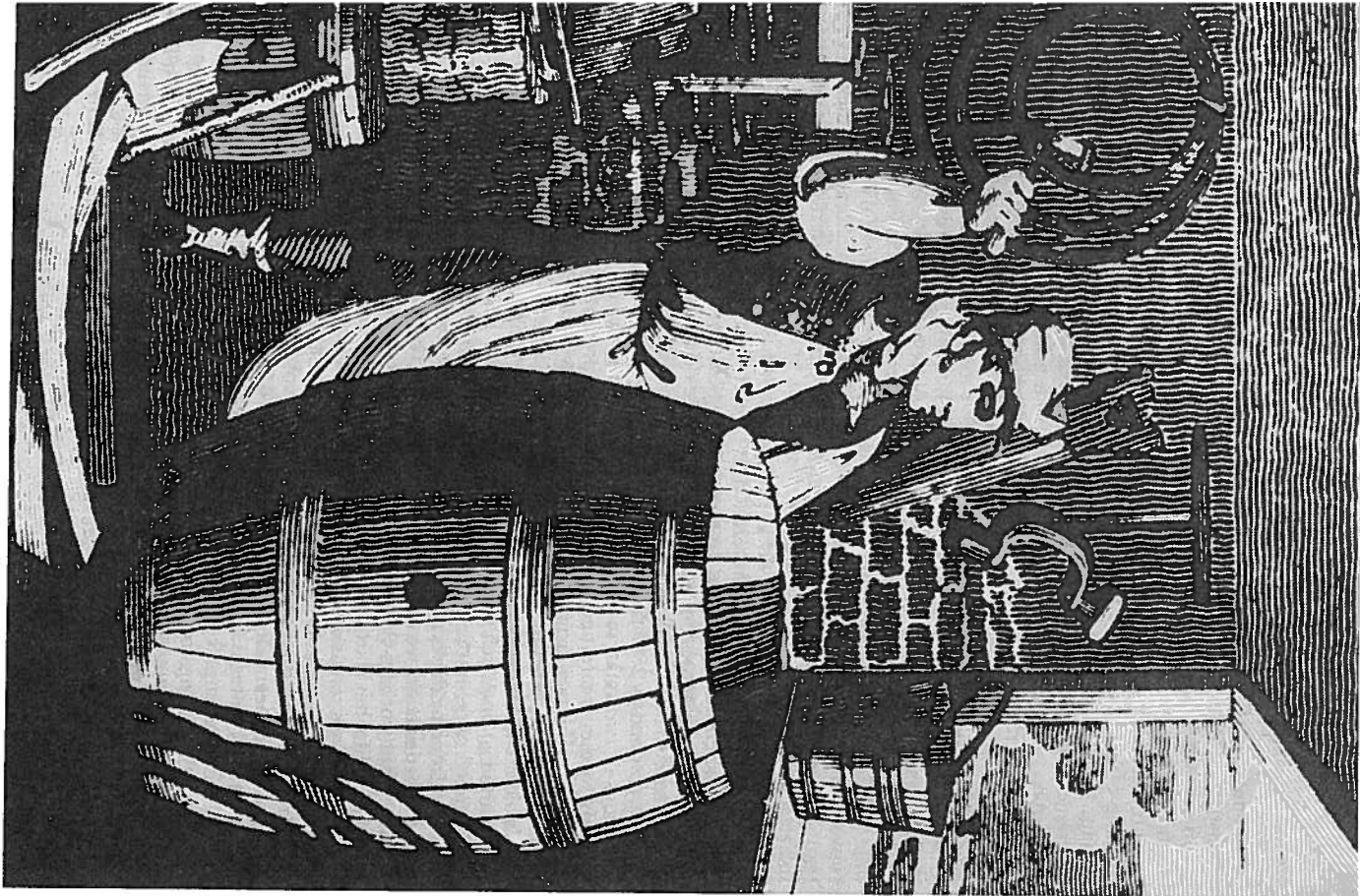
His marriage in 1804 initiated a period of declining living standards as his family rapidly increased (seven surviving children by the 1820s). Not only did this mean considerable and cumulative increases in family expenditure, but successive confinements debilitated Hart's wife, prevented her from working, and brought her near to death on at least one occasion. However the material standard of living of the family had been ameliorated by the fact that Hart, just before his marriage, had secured a better-paid job as underforeman on the West India Docks.

War-time business kept the docks pretty busy in these years and Hart had the opportunity to work overtime for several months of each year. However these developments were insufficient to compensate for the increasing costs of a growing family, especially as the prices of basic provisions and house rents were rising so rapidly at this time. Hart and his wife tried to run a small haberdashery business to improve their income but this failed within a year and by 1809 the family, with four young children, was living in the cramped conditions of two small rooms with kitchens 'underground'.

Only by the 'greatest economy' and by seeking promotion at the docks did the Hart family emerge intact from this difficult period. By June 1815 they had managed to purchase a house, possibly with the aid of a building society. Wartime inflation was over, Hart's older children were either placed in apprenticeships or had begun to earn, and his wife started a small school. Together these enabled Hart to begin to live 'tolerably comfortably' once more. This happier state of affairs lasted until 1832 when Hart was dismissed from the docks at the age of 57. Although he was allowed a pension of £30 a year Hart still had at least two dependent children and had been used to an income three times the size. Most working-class people would have been faced by dire poverty once more at this stage of life, but Hart was a little different. Not only did he have his pension but he had sufficient savings to cushion him in his retirement.

It was fairly common for artisans with sufficient means to remove from the capital on retirement and to settle somewhere with a lower cost of living. Like Hart, many London workers had not been born in the city and had close family links in rural areas. In 1833 Hart bought several cottages in Leighton Buzzard and moved to spend his later years there, taking his two youngest children with him.

Hart's fluctuating fortunes – relative prosperity being followed by privation after marriage while a young family was being brought up and easier times later on in life – provides a good example of the poverty cycle to which Rowntree was to draw attention at the end of the nineteenth century.⁷ It must serve as a warning to those historians who debate in such positive terms about the course of real wages and the standard of living



during the industrial revolution. Real wages, even if reliable data can be found, are quite obviously not the only, or even the best, medium through which to view the material standards and experiences of the working-class family through the course of its life. The family life-cycle and family earnings are the important elements to study.

The second area of Hart's autobiography which is of particular interest to the economic and social historian is the descriptions of his working life and the activities of his fellows. Early in Hart's story he is refused an apprenticeship by a cooper in Leighton 'lest I should set up against him'. This was a common fear which in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries must be seen against a background of the gradual demise of formal apprenticeship training in many crafts. Previously, artisans had had reasonably tight control over entry into the various trades but the decline of apprenticeship opened the floodgates to unqualified and only semi-trained workers. Trades became oversubscribed and the standards, status and income of the fully trained traditional craftsman were eroded. Refusing to train apprentices was the only means of restricting entry into the trade and it was becoming increasingly ineffective.⁸

Another point of interest in Hart's comments on his working life is the disparity which he notes on several occasions between London and 'country' wages. Money wages, especially for artisans, do seem to have been notably higher in the capital but so was the cost of living, especially of basic provisions and housing.⁹ Housing costs were radically influenced by urban redevelopment and the use of central city sites for industry and business as Hart himself notes concerning the building of the docks. It is thus likely that the disparity between London and 'the country' in living standards was less marked than was the case for money wages, especially when London was compared with some of the rapidly expanding industrial regions such as South Lancashire, Staffordshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. In areas such as St Albans, where Hart worked before coming to London, the low wages of the predominantly agricultural labour force would exert a downward influence on wages in the local artisan sector. However, the pull of high wages in London would be felt more strongly in St Albans than in the more distant Luton where Hart had served his apprenticeship.

One of the most interesting aspects of Hart's description of his working life is the difficulty which he found in adjusting to the hours and intensity of work in Messrs Dowdings' cooperage in Wapping. In both Luton and St Albans Hart had been used to working virtually alone and at his own pace in a task-orientated fashion.¹⁰ Dowdings employed 50 or 60 men and apprentices working long and rigid hours on piece rates.¹¹ It appears that there was considerable division of labour in this bigger cooperage with different coopers specialising in separate tasks. Some jobs paid better than others and Hart, being new, was 'kept on inferior work' at first. If one reads between the lines at this point Hart seems to have been sorely feeling the effects of the transition to factory-type production and the division of labour. He was also experiencing the effects of externally imposed work discipline and the regular strict hours of competitive capitalist production.¹² 'I worked hard and close 14 or 15 hours a day and fretted myself that I could not work so well as they did. I suffered much in my mind and this considerably weakened my nerves, so that I thought I was in decline - I was then about 22 years of age.' Hart had been attracted to London by higher wages but soon found that these could only be gained at the expense of independence and control over the nature and pace of work.

Plate I. The Cooper at Work. From *The Book of English Trades and Library of Useful Arts*, 8th edn 1846.

Hart's account of the clamp-down on pilfering in the West India Dock warehouses is interesting. Pilfering and embezzlement of materials was a matter of increasing concern to many different sorts of employers and employers' associations in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The line between the monetary wage and traditional perquisites in kind was becoming more clearly drawn both in custom and in the eyes of the law. This was naturally so in the increasingly competitive environment of the industrial revolution. The force of tradition was almost certainly an element in the inability or unwillingness of the foremen to intervene and prevent the practice.

Hart's later account of the cooper's strike of 1821 confirms what historians have discovered about the extent of illegal and undercover union organisation in the period.¹³ Four years before the repeal of the Combination Acts this group of London coopers had amassed sufficient funds to support their members on strike pay for at least two weeks. Hart's attitude in keeping his head down and out of trouble, his reluctance to handle the union's money and his fear of giving a character reference under oath, bear testimony to the lack of solidarity and cohesion between workers especially at a time when the price of such solidarity was high. Perhaps his lack of involvement with the union also stemmed from his position as overlooker and arose from a split between the ordinary coopers and the foremen.

It may well be, as E. P. Thompson and others have suggested, that deep religious convictions played an important role in diverting the energies and thoughts of many workers from any struggle against the established class hierarchy and authority.¹⁴ In Hart's case there seems to have been a strong link between his faith and his ideas about sobriety, thrift, and respectability which set him apart from the mass of his fellow coopers.

It is the importance of Hart's religious beliefs which must finally be emphasised. His religious and moral precepts radically influenced his attitude to life and work and provided the window through which he interpreted the world. Whilst nurturing a strong sense of the importance of individual self-help and respectability, Hart's religious beliefs were also instrumental in conditioning his ideas about the limits of his own free will and action and his identity with his fellows. A strong sense of righteousness bounded by humility provided a spur to Hart's search for individual self-improvement, both material and intellectual. But, at the same time, he was 'like a child' before God and his agents. This imagery of the child together with the 'mysterious' workings of 'overriding' providence created strict limits to Hart's perception of his independent role and influence in society. When so much of his life consisted of 'the mysteries of Providence [which] I cannot yet fathom', it would be out of place to expect him to have fully engaged in the struggle to better the material or political position of his class or even to perceive his own existence in class terms.

On the other hand, it is possible to see, at times, that Hart's concept of providence was didactic rather than authoritarian; as a child learns so also did Hart learn the importance and latitude of his independent role. He had a strong sense of moral responsibility, yet considered his role to be individual, apart from all but his immediate family, isolated from the collectivity of his fellows. One is forced to wonder again about the pervasiveness of these sorts of ideas and of their role in the making of the very fragmented English working classes.

NOTES

1 The autobiography was typed from manuscript (now lost) in 1952. The typescript is in the possession of Jean Emberley of Ancaster, Canada, who is the great-great-great-granddaughter of

William Hart. *Picture Post* 28 May 1949 contains a reference to Hart, incorrectly giving his date of death as 1834.

2 David Vincent has recently stressed that the vast bulk of surviving working-class memoirs were specifically written for publication. He examines some aspects of 104 such works written during the period 1790-1850 in 'Love, death and the nineteenth century working class', *Social History*, 5, 2, May 1980. See also *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth Century Working Class Autobiography* (1981).

3 A large proportion of London artisans and labourers originated outside the capital. The difficulties of transition to city life were thus a common element in the lives of the London working class. See E. A. Wrigley, 'A Simple Model of London's importance in a changing English Society and Economy, 1600-1750', *Past and Present*, 1967.

4 Although writing at the end of Hart's life, Henry Mayhew provides the most complete and interesting description of the London trades. See his Letters to the *Morning Chronicle*, 9 Oct. 1849-12 Dec. 1850. Letter LXIX, 12 Sept. 1850, on coopers, is reprinted along with the bulk of the *Chronicle* correspondence in Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851 and 1861).

5 See P. Deane, 'War and Industrialisation' in J. M. Winter (ed.), *War and Economic Development* (Cambridge, 1975); and E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).

6 See A. J. Taylor (ed.), *The Standard of Living in Britain in the Industrial Revolution* (1975).

7 See B. S. Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* (1899).

8 Coopers were probably less badly affected by this than some of the other trades. Mayhew mentions that the trade of cooper was still commonly acquired by a seven-year apprenticeship in the 1840s.

9 See R. S. Tucker, 'Real Wages of Artisans in London, 1729-1935', *Jnl of the American Statistical Assocn*, XXXI, 1936, reprinted in A. J. Taylor, 21-35.

10 For an analysis of the switch from task-to-time-orientation in work see E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present*, 1967.

11 The organisation of work in the London cooperages as well as the character, wages, and societies of the coopers, is described in detail by Mayhew. For the best overall account of life and work in cooperages of the capital in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Bob Gilding, *The Journeymen Coopers of East London*, History Workshop Pamphlet No. 4 (1971).

12 For the early factory system and the adaptation of the labour force see S. Pollard, *The Genesis of Modern Management* (1965), Ch. 5. On the economic and social implications of the division of labour see S. Marglin, 'What do bosses do?', in A. Gorz (ed.), *The Division of Labour* (1976).

13 E. P. Thompson has done much to trace this underground tradition. For information on cooper's combinations and the strike of 1821 see George Partison, 'The Cooper's Strike at the West India Dock, 1821', *Martinet's Mirror*, 55, 171-2; and Bob Gilding, *op. cit.*, pp. 75-85.

14 E. P. Thompson, Ch. 11.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My dear Children,

I have been impressed for some years past to write some little account of my own history. Although the history of an obscure individual is of very little account in Society, yet in the hand of the Holy Spirit it may afford you some instruction concerning the ways of God in his wise and mysterious Providence, and as to the paths he has been pleased to lead

me in. The preservation from evil, the deliverance out of trouble and directing me in cases of difficulty are so striking that I think it would be criminal towards you and awfully sinful in the sight of God not to take notice of them in the manner I have done by recording them to his honour and glory, and I think I am encouraged by the declarations and the commands in his Holy Word 'Remember all the way the Lord thy God hath led you'. 'Only take heed to thyself and keep they soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thine heart all the days of they life, but teach them thy sons and thy son's sons. Due 4.9.'

The pious Mr. Havil in his excellent book on Providence has the following lines:

'And it has been the pious and constant practice of the
'Saints in all ages and generations to preserve the memory
'of the more remarkable Provisions that have befallen them
'in their times as a precious treasure. I would persuade
'thee reader to record the ways of Providence from first to
'last throughout they whole course to this day, that thou
'mayest see what a God he has been to thee.'
'It is well to talk with our past hours.'

Young's night thoughts.

As for human applause or censure and blame, it will be of little account to me when this meets your eyes. I can truly say that God is the father of the fatherless and a guide to all those who are enabled to put their trust in Him. To His honour and praise and glory would I wish it all to be ascribed, and hope it may afford you some instruction while passing through your time-state to that life which never ends.

So prays your loving father
W. Hart

William Hart - Born 12th April 1776.

My Ancestors lived at a place called Fenny Stratford Buckinghamshire. One of them kept an Inn in that town, the Sign of the Bull, (which is still in existence) in the time of the Commonwealth, but of this you may see more in some accounts which I collected in the year 1824 called 'The History of the Hart's family'.

My father carried on the business of a Cooper in Mount Street, Grosvenor Square, London, where I was born April 12th 1776. I was his eldest child. He had two more who died in infancy. My mother died on 8th December 1780 of the Measles, and my father died on January 26th 1781 of Consumption.

Thus I lost father and mother, sister and brother in about eight months. This you may see in a leaf in the Bailey's Dictionary recorded in my father's hand writing.

I was left an orphan at little more than four years of age. I was taken down to Leighton Buzzard and brought up by my grandfather and grandmother, who gave me as good an education as the place afforded. My grandfather was awfully prophane, but was generally away from home all the week except on Sunday, at making Malt and husbandry. My grandmother was very fond of me, being the only child of her favourite son. She was a moral woman and bigoted to the Established Church. She made me go to the Church on Sunday and bring home the text, and inculcated on me to abstain from the grosser vices, but no other religious instruction I received.

I remember being taken to the Baptist meeting by a man who came to lodge at our

house, when I was very young, perhaps not more than ten or eleven years of age. I used to go there afterwards by myself though ridiculed and scoffed at by my school fellows as I went along with 'there goes the synagouge man'. I think my mind was seriously impressed by what I heard. This shows the duty of taking young children very early to a place of worship.

I was passionately fond of reading.

I think the Lord began his work with me at this tender age. I remember about this time retiring for secret prayer and used to write short prayers on bits of paper in my poor way; and though it was legal and arising from fear it must imply a belief that God was a God hearing and answering prayer, and we know that he does not dispise the way of small things.

I recollect about this time an answer to my prayers I and my cousin who was brought up with me played some tricks with the cat. We tied a piece of wood about her neck whereby she got caught in some faggotts we had in the barn and was lost some days. We were threatened with severe chastisement when my grandfather came home on Sunday, and he generally did. I prayed heartily that the cat might be found. A day or two before he came home she was found and I escaped the threatened punishment.

When I was about 12 years of age my relations would not let me go to school any longer.

I was therefore solely hanging about, having no regular employment. They were desirous of putting me to an apprenticeship, and applied to a friend in the town, a shoemaker, who offered to take me if they would find me board and lodging. My grandfather refused, saying I should not go backwards and forwards all weather. My grandmother was very desirous that I should be put to my father's trade, a cooper, and they applied to a man in the town of Leighton, who refused to take me lest I should set up against him. I was much disappointed. About this time a man came from Luton, my grandmother's nephew, of the name of Jno Sapwill, came to see them. I do not recollect seeing him before, and they told him about me. He said there was a man in Luton of the name of Wringrave a Cooper who was in the habit of taking apprentices. I wrote a letter to him and sent it by Jno Sapwill. He came to Leighton and agreed to take me on liking. I went with him directly, riding behind him on a horse to Luton (this is 12 miles) on July 15th 1788.

I stayed there till July 26th, when he brought me back to Leighton, and I was bound apprentice to him to serve six years.

I mention these seeming trivial affairs to show the overriding hand of a wise and merciful Providence in regard to our temporal affairs.

'He over rules all mortal things'
'and manages our mean affairs.'

When I was bound apprentice I was at the tender age of only 12 years and 3 months and very little for my age and weakly also, of a timid disposition and not one person in the place that I knew. I was away from all friends and acquaintances and very unfit for a business that required strength and energy.

I do not recall anything particular occurring to me during my servitude - the Lord put his fear into my heart which kept me from those vices common to youth at that age.

My master was an awful profane licentious character, whose conduct I used secretly to abhor. He was idle and negligent and given to drunkenness and lewdness, also I was frequently kept on short allowance owing to his misconduct.

However, I served my time out and was respected for my steady and moral conduct by many decent people in the town. Our house was in the middle of the town near the Market House where we were much seen.

I used frequently to attend at the meeting houses as they were then called, and was often seriously impressed by what I heard, but I knew nothing of the way of God's Salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. I used frequently to pray to him in my poor way but was unacquainted with the depravity of my nature.

Here let me mention a striking instance of Divine Providence. When the expiration of my apprenticeship drew near I did not know where I should get employment when I was out of my time. I think about six or seven weeks before that time a master Cooper from St. Albans came to Luton. His name was Mr. Gaze and he called at our shop (my master was out as usual) and he asked me to step over the way and take a little ale. I went over to the public house, when he asked me if I was not nearly out of my time. I replied yes I was and he said would I come and work for him. I agreed to this very willingly. He told me not to let my master know of this and I took care not to tell the secret. I was recommended to him by Mr. Foster a master Cooper in Luton who knew me.

Oh, let me wonder and admire the condescension, wisdom and goodness of the Divine Providence in this affair, considering my youth, only 18 years and 3 months old, unacquainted with the world and but small for my age, to be provided with a constant place of employment, and that with a respectable master, for he was as respectable a tradesman at that time as any in the town of St. Albans.

I was out of my time on July 26th 1794, and then informed my master that I was going to work at St. Albans, at which he was greatly surprised, and my Mistress wept bitterly.

I stayed with him one week and then took my leave and came to St. Albans on Sunday August 3rd. 1794.

My new master, Mr. Gaze, had provided me a decent lodging and paid me 14/- a week. I thought this good wages for the Country at that time.

I worked for him a few weeks and then went to London to see my Uncle, being only 21 miles distant. He lived at the time at Shadwell, near to several large cooperages. I went into one of them, and seeing so many men at work and getting great wages excited me to come to London too, and it being at the time of the French War there appeared to be plenty of work in the Coopers trade, as there were many hundreds employed in the Government service.

When I came home I told my master of my intentions of leaving him and going to London. At this he was very angry saying if he had known this he would not have engaged me.

But the Lord by his Providence hindered me, for in a few days I sickened with the Smallpox, which I had caught in London. In this dilemma I knew not what to do, as this disease was so terrific in the Country at that time for the Cowpox was then unknown. No one in the town could be found who would take me in. My master used every effort. The people where I lodged would not let me remain with them on any account. It was an old maiden woman who kept a shop and was afraid of losing her customers.

I was 20 miles from my grandfather's home, but if I had been much nearer I dare not go there, for he had not had the disease and was terrified at the thought of the smallpox.²

In this perplexity I recollected having heard that the town of Luton was visited with this disease a short time before I went to live there as an apprentice, and knowing one family that had had it (I believe all of them) I told my master he must take me there and perhaps I might find someone who would take me in. He immediately got a one horse chaise and take me there. The man set me down by my directions at that person's door and instantly let me. The house belonged to a Mr. Hall, a master RoperMaker whose account I used to keep when I was apprenticed.

I walked into the house and sat down in the chimney corner in a sorrowful state. Mrs. Hall asked me what was the matter with me and I told her that I had got the smallpox. They sent for my master who I served my time with. Mr. Wingrave, and they went to the Parish Officer who would not let me remain in the town for fear of communicating the infection.

As I was a Parishoner by my servitude they must provide for me. They therefore sent me to the Pest house, a place provided in those days for persons who had this disease. It was but a short distance from the town.

Here they provided me with two nurses (poor parish paupers) and every necessary for my recovery, and the Parish Doctor attended me. I had a very favourable sort of Pox which turned in seven days. I then rapidly recovered and was able to leave the Pest house in about three weeks.

My master at St. Albans hearing that I was like to recover sent to know if I would come to work for him again when I got well, as if I would consent to work for him he would not hire another man but would wait. I sent word I would come and serve him again.

I then returned to St. Albans, being only about three weeks absent, and to my old lodgings also.

Here my Soul stand still and wonder, reflect, meditate and consider well the merciful goodness and wisdom of my Almighty God and Father in this case. Here appeared a most dismal calamitous condition. I a poor lad only 18 years and a few months old in a strange place where I knew no one, no relations, no friends, no acquaintances near me. Seized with a dreadful and oft times a fatal disease and no home to go to. - Oh how valuable is a home - obliged to be removed 10 miles when the disorder was upon me, which might have proved fatal. I had several relations who died with it. Being myself naturally of a timid disposition, I might have been cut off, but the weather being warm and dry (it was in September) I got no harm. I was taken to the Pest House and provided with medical aid and nurses free of expense.

My grandmother sent me a little money, which enabled me to get some additional comforts, which was not allowed. My mistress who I served my time with was very kind in getting me these things, and a friend in the town of Luton, a Mr. Foster, Master Cooper, visited me and was very kind also.

Oh, how the Lord raiseth us friends when we stand in need of them.

But here let me recount the loving kindness of God in this affair. First it was a favourable circumstance (though it appeared a calamitous one at the time) that no person could be found to take me in at St. Albans, for if they had the expense would have been very great to me, and I had not much money, being out of my time only a few weeks, and I might not have been better taken care of, for I wanted for nothing.

The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Cowper.³

I returned (as I said before) when I got well to St. Albans and found my health and strength increase, and my constitution so invigorated that nothing of labour or toil seemed to hurt me. I do not recollect having one day's illness. I was very industrious and saving - I saved twenty guineas or more.

I then began to think of going to London again, having been to see my uncle several times and seen so much work and great wages earned in the Cooper's trade, it being still war time.

I came to a resolution to leave St. Albans. I had then been more than two years there. I

informed my master of it, but he was very loath to part with me and offered me more wages, but I was resolved.

So I left him, full of sanguine expectations.

My uncle procured me work at Wapping Wall, at Messrs Dawding's Cooperage, and I lodged with him.

Here I had a new set of tools to buy before I could go to work, and to put in order &c. In this Cooperage and premises there were at that time 50 or 60 men and apprentices employed, of all descriptions and many of them the most licentious characters. Oh what a scene was this to me, who had been used to work by myself quietly at St. Albans. I soon found my pleasing hopes vanish.

Not having been used to the London method of making casks I was much at a loss, and was kept upon inferior work. I was reproached and persecuted because I was different to them and moral in my conduct and would not follow their awful courses. I worked hard and close, 14 or 15 hours a day, and fretted myself because I could not work so well as they did. I suffered much in my mind, and this considerably weakened my nerves, so that I thought I was in a decline - I was then about 22 years of age.

But Oh the goodness and mercy of God appeared to me at this time. An old friend showed me a book he had and it was Dr. Buchan's Domestic Medicine. I soon purchased it and received it with great eagerness. Here I found what was the matter with me. I learned it was the weakness of my nerves, I followed the method he recommends and found benefit. I think the goodness and wisdom of God is to be praised for putting suitable and good books into our hands. I have found this book a blessing to me many times, for which I desire to praise His Holy name.

By this time I was much improved in my business, and began to assume some courage. I told my master that I would not stop with him unless he gave me the regular share of the Yard. To this he agreed, as there is a great deal of difference in the work. A man can earn much more money at some than others, for it is all piece work in the Cooperages in London.

About this time the Lord brought a man into this Cooperage to work and he was placed next to me. His name was Robert Gates and he was a most excellent workman. His father was a Preacher, but he was a prophane character. However, he seemed to feel a respect for me, for the sake of his father, and he assisted me much by giving me instructions in my business.

I then began to be respected in the Yard, and was chosen a Collector for the Coopers' Club. This I continued until it was dissolved in September 1799, when I received for my share £2.4.2.⁶

Oh, how striking was the hand of God seen in bringing this man into connexion with me, when I stood so much in need.

All this time I worked very hard and very close and was very saving.

This man (Rt. Gates) had such a respect for me that he recommended me to marry his sister, about my own age. He introduced me to her, but I was not much inclined to marry. I took my leave at the first visit and never went any more. I received a letter from one of her brothers, by desire of the father, inviting me to come again, but I wrote an answer declining it. She was not destined to be my wife.

Oh, the preventing care of a wise Providence that hindered me from being (perhaps) miserable for life, for I afterwards learned that she was not a very amiable character. The Lord removed me from my place of work (Messrs Dowdings & Co) and this put a stop to all attempts that might have been made to renew the correspondence.

About this time I entered into a Benefit Society held at Silver Street Chapel,⁷ consisting of serious characters. One article requires that the person must be recommended by some member, but I knew none. However, it not being full they advertised for members and thus dispensed with that article. At the time I think it was one of the best Societies in London, the payment so small 1/6d a month, and the benefit so great £1 per week when sick and £20 at the death of a Member. (This club broke up in February 1847.)

'Tis a good thing to belong to a good Club, and tis our duty to make provision for sickness, when in health, if possible.

I would notice the goodness of God in leading me to this Society, a stranger in London and having no friends to direct me, and though I have had but little benefit from it yet (1846) I have the more cause for thankfulness that the Lord has preserved me in tolerable health &c. for tis better to have health than illness, though we may have good assistance.

I entered into this Club June 1799.

Some time before this I attended at the Baptist Chapel where that venerable man of God was Pastor, Abram Booth. Here I strolled into it an entire stranger, there being several Chapel nearer me. I was introduced into that good man's company by a poor man (Danl Ross) who made it his duty to assist strangers.

As I hinted before, I left my employment at Dowdings' October 1799, having been there constantly more than three years. They were angry at my leaving their service and both the masters came and remonstrated with me, but I was determined.

I then went to work for Mr. Wm. Lawson, New Street, Shadwell, very near Messrs Dowdings.

Mr. Lawson was a religious character and would not employ any licentious men. This was a small snug cooperage, and he employed 8 to 10 men. Here I was very comfortable and earned great wages - sometimes two or three pounds a week, as may be seen in my work book.

During the time I worked for Mr. Lawson provisions were very dear. Bread at one time was 1/10rd the quarter loaf, but being single and earning good wages I did not feel it like those who had families, and I never was entirely out of work. I consider this a great blessing.

After I had worked for Mr. Lawson about ten months I left my uncle's house and went to lodge in Shadwell Market with one Mr. Frith, who had been a shopmate. This was July 26th 1800. Here I was very comfortable, having a room and a bed to myself, and very near work. This is no small matter when a man works by the piece, as much time is saved by walking backward and forward, but a great benefit than this was being so near my work I was sheltered from the danger of being pressed for a Sailor, as the French war was at the hottest all this time.

Surely all the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth to such as fear him.

I continued to lodge with Mr. Frith for about seven months, when he, having little property went into business in Whitecross Street.

Here I was put to my shifts. To go to lodge with strange people after being so comfortable was very disagreeable to me.

While I was at work one day thoughts suggested to my mind that I should like to take the house myself, it being a small one, having three rooms and a kitchen, and a bit of garden, and being in a decent neighbourhood, also very cheaply rented and taxed. The rent was £6 per annum, and taxes and water about £1.4.0 more.

This was very cheap at that time, as rents were rising owing to the pulling down of many houses for the London Docks. As I paid 2/- a week for my lodging, which was £5.4.0 a year,

and the house was £7.4.0 I thought I could not be a great loser. I could let two rooms and keep the best chamber for myself, and having some bed linen of my father's I could soon furnish it. Apartments were much wanted at that time for whole streets were pulled down to make the London Docks.

When I came home I communicated my thoughts to Mr and Mrs Frith, who highly approved of my plan, and Mr. Frith offered to go to the Landlord with me, which we did directly, and Mr. Frith told her he would be bound for me that I should pay the rent. The landlady was an aged woman, a Mrs. Clapton living in Ratcliff Highway. She accepted me directly without raising the rent. This I consider a blessing of God, as small houses were very much wanted, and several persons endeavoured to get it out of my hands. They would have given more money, but the old lady stuck to her integrity and would not let them have it.

Mrs. Frith lent me a bed for a few weeks and I soon bought some furniture and thus furnished my rooms.

I parted with these people with great reluctance, as they treated me with respect. I thus became a housekeeper.

As soon as I had taken the house enquiries were made to take my apartments by an old hopmate of mine Mr. Rbt. Gates. Hearing about them and as he was just going to the South Seas as Cooper of a ship, he wanted to take the apartments for his wife and child. I consented to let him have them - two rooms and washhouse for £5 a year. Another young man lived with her a short time and then left her.

Here I was left alone with another man's wife and child sixteen or eighteen months, and thus exposed to the temptation of the sin of adultery, and that unconsciously and unguardedly. But blessed and praised be the Lord for his preventing and restraining grace, for I do not recollect having any thought or desire tending to it, though she was a comely young woman, and I must say to the honour and virtue of Mrs Gates, that I never remember her giving me any hints of that nature.

I think that when the Lord leads us into temptation (if I may be allowed the expression) he grants his special grace and almighty power to prevent us being overcome. He has the parts of all in his hands and can turn them as the rivers of water.

I was somewhat slandered about this affair, but not much, and it was well I did not hear such, as it might have excited bad thoughts in me.

Here I desire to praise God for the preservation of my character. Oh let me stand still and adore and admire the goodness and mercy of my Heavenly Father in thus preserving me and in keeping in me a clear conscience. It might be to me even now wormwood and gall, for the remembrance of sin is always grievous.

Soon after I had taken my house a person next door had a very good bed &c to sell, and I bought very reasonably. I notice this as a Providential blessing, as Mr. Frith wanted one (which he had lent me) for his own use.

After Mr. Gates came home from his sea voyage I was often made uncomfortable by drunken conduct, but not knowing how to get rid of them (which I had prayed for) a circumstance happened which drove them away.

The lease of my house was out, and it fell into the hands of the ground landlord and I expected to be obliged to quit. Mr. Gates thinking he should be turned out got other apartments directly.

Thus my prayers were answered in a way I did not expect and in addition to this mercy the ground landlord accepted me as a tenant and only raised my rent 6/- a year making it 6.0 per annum.

After this I had two more different families as occupiers of my apartments, but I kept myself at the greatest distance towards them and I was treated with respect, and they paid me their rent, which I had raised, for I had let Mr. Gates have the apartments too cheap.

But here I must return to my employment, and trace the appearances of a kind Providence towards me. My master Mr. Lawson being overstocked with casks wished me to get work for a few weeks. Though it was a very slack time in the trade I got work directly through the recommendation of an old shopmate (Thos. Darley). It was at a Mr Mills's, Water Lane, in the City. His Cooperage was near Rosemary Lane. Here I did different kinds of work, making tubs for army accoutrements and City work etc. This was September 8th 1801. Here I worked about 5 weeks when Mr. Lawson sent for me back again. Mr. Mills wanted me to stop with him, but I did not. He sent to me afterwards and offered me constant work, but I declined it, as it was greatly to my advantage to work for Mr. Lawson. This was October 12th 1801. I worked for him till about March 16th 1802, when he wished me to get work elsewhere, as he said he thought of leaving off business at Christmas.

I got work directly at Westminster at Messrs Howis & Lyons on March 12th 1802, being recommended by a shopmate at Mr. Lawson's, who went with me, Jacob Southard by name.

I worked here for 6 weeks when Mr. Lawson sent for me back again.

When I left Mr. Howis's he said he would give me work again if I called and he had it. This was April 24th. I was very glad to return (to Mr. Lawson's) as I kept my little house on in Shadwell, but was obliged to have a lodging while working at Westminster.

I then worked for Mr. Lawson till February 19th 1803, when the lease of his premises being nearly out I was obliged to leave him. He said he would give me a character that would not hurt me.

I got work directly at Mr. Hy. Knight's, a Quaker, at Cock Hill, Ratcliffe, not far from my home, being recommended by two shopmates, almost strangers to me, having only worked with them a few weeks at Westminster. Their names were J. Cauderoy and Chas. Palmer.

Oh how the hand of God is seen in making use of any instrument to do us a service. Mr. Knight gave me a Protection (which I have now by me) to prevent my being impressed for a Sailor, as it was war time.⁹ The pressing some times was so hot that it was dangerous going about in that part of London which is near the waterside.

I continued to work for Mr. Knight till June 11th 1803. It being the time of the year when our business is slack, I thought it might be so where I was. I heard of a good job and told Mr. Knight who strongly remonstrated with me, and when I told him my reason said there would be plenty of work for me.

However, I went to my new job, where I was recommended by a shopmate (Mr. Edwards) who I knew only when working at Westminster. This place was below Blackwall for a great ship owner Sir Robert Wigram, who employed various tradesmen on his premises to fit out his ships.¹⁰ He paid -6d a cask more than the master Coopers in this trade did and -1d in the shilling for small beer money. This was a great inducement for men to work for him, and he gave me a protection to prevent my being impressed for a sailor (which I have now by me) but here I found the labour and fatigue too great, being 3 miles from home, thus having six miles to walk every day and working hard, sometimes making casks 180 gallon size and very stout for ships' water casks, and another great inconvenience being at a great distance from any house we were obliged to cook all our victuals. We could not even get a pint of beer brought to the shop, and I had not much comfort at home living in a room by myself.

I now worked hard indeed, which would soon have injured me. When I was at supper one evening, quite unthinking about my change, one of the foremen (Hy. Abot) belonging to the West India Docks, quite a stranger to me, came to my house accompanied by an old shopmate (Wm Orridge) who recommended me to him. He had worked with me at Mr. Lawson's.

They asked me if I would go to work at the Docks amongst the wines and spirits. I replied yes, if I could get the full pay of £1. 8. 0 a week. He promised to get it for me in a few weeks, but I must come in at £1. 4. 0 a week. I then consented and informed the foreman under whom I worked of my intention, who said it was a pity that such a man as I should go to work for so little wages. But I thought different, as the Dock hours were so short (only eight hours a day) and the work so easy compared with the labour at the block, and as Mr. Orridge observed, 'it was a favourable time to enter into the Company's service, as a man might stand a chance to get promotion!'

I entered into the service of the West India Dock Company September 27th 1803, little thinking that I should spend so great a part of my life there; near thirty years.

In this employ, which was almost new to me (for the Docks had only been opened about a year) I was associated with such persons as I have been a stranger to before, viz Revenue Officers, Merchantile men, Clerks and sea faring men of different ranks. Here I had much to learn, having been brought up from a child in an inland part of the County and when in London keeping so close to my work that I had new ideas to learn. My mind was very narrow and my understanding very little informed.

Here I worked at my trade amongst the wines and spirits. After I had been in the Docks two or three weeks I got work over time, that is before eight o'clock in the morning and after four in the afternoon, at a Mr. Edwards at Limehouse. This was through the recommendation of a shopmate R. Edwards who was his cousin. Here I earned 6/- 8/- or 10/- a week, which made my wages tolerably good in all.

Here let me admire and praise my glorious Redeemer for his wise and merciful Providence.

This kept me from idleness and bad habits, which I might have fallen into having so much spare time which I had never been used to, and also it kept my hands accustomed to my trade and likewise increased my earnings.

Oh, the goodness and mercy of God to unworthy me. He over rules all mortal things and manages our mean affairs.

It being war time most great bodies raised Soldiers amongst their servants. ¹¹ This was the case at the Docks. The Coopers were all had before the Chairman (who bore the title of Colonel) myself amongst the rest. Several of them prevaricated and said they were willing, though they declared some time before that they were not and that they never would submit to the drilling.

Some of them stated to the Colonel their unwillingness, and had their names set down as such.

Before going into the Colonel's presence I was strongly advised by the foreman (A. Davey) under whom I worked to offer some incapacity. This I rejected, saying I had not incapacity but was unwilling and therefore should state nothing but the truth, saying that 'the truth was able to bear me through', knowing that the God of truth was able to deliver me from all trouble.

My name was set down as 'unwilling'. When I was ordered before the Colonel he asked me if I was willing to be a soldier and I replied, 'Sir, I am willing to serve the Company in

the capacity of a tradesman, but no further'. He replied that 'they did not wish to force anyone'. This was on Saturday May 5th 1804.

In the latter part of the following week I was sent to Town to do some work at one of the Directors warehouses, and not being at the payable on Saturday night my name escaped being discharged when all those who had declared themselves unwilling were discharged and five of the foremen also.

Oh my soul stand still and wonder reflect on that God who is faithful to his promises. Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him. They shall never be ashamed nor confounded. World without end.

After this I worked for a few days in the Docks, when I was promoted and ordered to take charge of one of the cellars as an under foreman at Warehouse No. 7, with a promise of an advance in my wages. This was on May 13th 1804. I was recommended to this (in preference to another man who thought he had a strong claim to it) by one Samuel Saul, a man whom I knew but little about, who was an awful character. Oh the wisdom of God who makes use of what instruments he pleases to accomplish his own designs and to do us good.

In this capacity in the cellar I had very little labour to do, having men under me. After I had been a few weeks I applied for an advance of wages, but was checked by the principal cooper (Mr. Adams) but the Capt of the Warehouse stood up for me and told him I must have it and should have it. I then obtained £1. 11. 6 a week.

Oh, the goodness and faithfulness of the great Jehovah that one so unworthy as I am should be taken such care of and be the object of such special Providence, having no earthly friends that I knew of to recommend me: an entire stranger to the place and to the work.

NOTES

- 1 Baptists were the most populous Dissenting sect in Buckinghamshire in the late eighteenth century. D. Bogue and J. Bennett, *The History of the Dissenters from the Revolution to the Year 1808*, II (1833), 257.
- 2 Edward Jenner developed cowpox vaccine in 1796 and opened the first vaccine clinic in 1808.
- 3 William Cowper, *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, Hymn 409.
- 4 One of their 'course' to which he might have been referring was the apprentices coopers' footing, a £d. levy for drink for fellow workmen when the apprentice first began work. Those who refused to 'foot the bill' met with great abuse, as one contemporary observer recorded:
What! break thou the custom? at whose stern command
All blind the bully in this obsequious land;
Who, armed with terror, lay down stated rules,
That fatter wise men equal with weak fools.
- 5 In *Domestic Medicine* (1772), 532 William Buchan suggested that the symptoms of 'low spirits, want of appetite, weakness, weariness, after motion, watchfulness, deep sighing, and dejection of mind' be treated by keeping the patient calm and amused, with constant attention to 'diet, air, and exercise'. Another physician noted that Hart's affliction was common for apprentice coopers: 'When lads enter the employ, the stooping posture affects the head; and the noise, the hearing. This, indeed, is often permanently, though not greatly, impaired'. G. Turner Thackran, *The Effects of the Principal Arts, Trades, and Professions . . . on Health and Longevity* (1831) 13. A cooper quoted by Mayhew says, 'a cooper at large work is an old man, sir, at forty . . . his physical energies then are nearly exhausted', *Morning Chronicle Letter*, XXIX, 12 Sept. 1850.
- 6 The Cooper's Club was undoubtedly one of the many friendly societies flourishing among artisans

workers during the period. Their dissolution was a common occurrence. P. H. J. H. Gosden, *Self-Help* (1973), 16. They are also described by Mayhew.

Although no records exist of this chapel, there was by 1846 a Baptist Chapel on Silver Street at Blackwell, listed in W. T. Whitley's *The Baptists of London 1612-1928* (1928).

The harvest of 1799 was one of the worst for decades and that, combined with inflation caused by the Napoleonic Wars, produced bread riots in London and provincial cities. J. Steven Watson, *The Reign of George III, 1760-1815* (Oxford, 1960), 407.

From 1794 to 1810 the military was critically short of men and the navy made extensive use of 'its traditional right of pressing'. Watson concluded that the navy 'stole as much untrained manpower as it could', *ibid.*, 365.

Sir Robert's works were very close to the Bow Lane Church where Watts Wilkinson preached. In 1803, Addington called for volunteer companies to augment England's dwindling ranks, promising commissions for those who organised the companies. Watson, 416.

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