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‘I was just the boy around the place’: what made apprenticeships successful?

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This article seeks to add to current policy and debate on apprenticeships and youth transitions more widely by reflecting back upon the historical experience of the apprenticeship model. The research comprises in-depth interviews with 30 people who undertook apprenticeships in a range of trades in Great Britain in the period 1944–1982. The discussion focuses upon the socialisation aspects of apprenticeship and concludes that a key feature of good apprenticeships in the post-war period was that they offered a sheltered and extended period in which the young person was able to grow up and become job-ready. Reconstructing the social, industrial, familial and community conditions that made this possible is very difficult in the contemporary period, although further work in oral history has considerable potential.

The resilience of this institution [apprenticeship], and its ability to adapt itself in a typically British way, to the changing technical and economic requirements of the times is remarkable (Ministry of Labour and National Service (MLNS), 1956, p. 10).

Some 50 years later, it seems that we are no less appreciative of this institution: the UK government has a target of 28% of young people entering an apprenticeship by the age of 22 (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005a, p. 8) and the Leitch Review of Skills published in December 2006 calls for a dramatic increase in apprenticeship volumes (Leitch, 2006, p. 5) as the ‘crucial method for delivering work-focused intermediate skills’ (p. 21). After a period of significant decline in apprentice numbers from the 1970s to the 1990s, the government launched the Modern Apprenticeship scheme in 1994 confirming the preferred status of apprenticeship as the vehicle for intermediate skills development. There has been a considerable increase in the numbers starting apprenticeships, up from 75,000 in 1997 to 225,000 in 2005 in England (Leitch 2006, p. 97). However, this attempted reinvention or rejuvenation of apprenticeship has in other respects made faltering progress. Major problems with the current apprenticeship system include very weak

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success rates (for 2004/2005 a rate of 40% across all apprenticeships in England, but in some sectors much lower than this (LSC, 2006); concerns about the quality of some programmes; continuing gender stereotyping of occupations and underrepresentation of ethnic minorities (Apprenticeships Task Force, 2005; Fuller *et al.*, 2005; Miller, 2005); and the difficulties of persuading employers outside sectors with a history of apprenticeships that this route is relevant for their skills strategies (DfES/LSC, undated, p. 39; DfES, 2003, p. 80; Spielhofer & Sims, 2004; Ryan *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, government has recommitted itself to the policy: 'Apprenticeships are a well understood and widely recognised brand' (DfES, 2005b, p. 25).

In addition to current research on the progress of the apprenticeship, it seems worthwhile to consider whether recent past history has anything interesting to tell us about what makes apprenticeship, as a type of vocational education and training and a particular form of the transition from school to work, successful. This article seeks to add to current policy and debate on apprenticeships and youth transitions more widely, by reflecting upon the historical experience of the apprenticeship model in Great Britain. The discussion focuses upon the socialisation aspects of apprenticeship as a route into adulthood, rather than on the specifics of the training or instruction that apprentices received. It is based primarily on in-depth interviews with 30 people who undertook apprenticeships in a range of trades in the period 1944–1982, 28 men and 2 women. Through the accounts of ex-apprentices, gathered in biographical interviews, the article assesses the post-war experience of apprenticeship and considers whether there are any lessons that can be meaningfully transferred to the very different labour and educational market conditions of the new century. It also makes use of policy documents and research from the post-war period.

The article makes the methodological point that, for different reasons, research on apprenticeship in the past and now has suffered from the lack of nationally collected, robust statistics and records and a paucity of accounts by those who underwent apprenticeship. As a result, our picture of how apprenticeship worked in the past is heavily dependent upon a limited number of government reports and independent accounts of the training system. The article considers the advantages and pitfalls of supplementing this source material with information derived from oral history interviews.

The article is in four sections. The first considers what is known about the post-war period of apprenticeships up to the decline in the 1970s. The second explores the methodological issues raised by the study. The third looks at the experiences of the apprentices in this research and the final section critically assesses whether the accounts given here can tell us anything useful for the present day.

Post-war apprenticeships

Towards the end of the World War II, along with ideas about the reshaping of secondary education there was concern about the position of young people in industry. In 1945 a consultative committee of the National Joint Advisory Council to the Ministry of Labour issued a report on the recruitment and training of juveniles,

recommending the establishment of joint employer and trade union apprenticeship councils in each industry. The 1948 Employment and Training Act established the Juvenile Employment Service (Sheldrake & Vickerstaff, 1987, pp. 26–27), which functioned locally to offer career guidance, study employment trends and help place young people in apprenticeships and employment. By 1953, some 70 industries had adopted nationally agreed training schemes, a figure that had risen to over 100 by 1956 (MLNS, 1956, p. 10). At this time it is estimated that in the region of just over a third of school leavers went into apprenticeships, the overwhelming majority being boys (Croft, 1960, p. 1; MLNS, 1956, p. 9). However, due to the devolved nature of apprenticeship delivery in industry there were no nationally collected figures on apprenticeships as such. The Central Youth Employment Executive derived statistics from the issue of National Insurance cards to young people, though they admitted that the figures were subject to errors. The Carr Committee, charged in 1956 to look at training arrangements for young people in industry, lamented in its report this absence of statistics (MLNS, 1958, p. 10)—a problem still being remarked upon in a later report (Wheatley, 1976, p. 8). As a Senior Assistant Youth Employment Officer commented in 1960, ‘nobody really knows how many apprentices there are’ (Croft, 1960, p. 2; see also Liepmann, 1960, p. 47).

Nor was much known about the experiences of apprentices, the picture we have, rather like the statistics, being patchy. There was a flurry of interest in the late 1950s and early 1960s because of the upcoming ‘bulge’ in school leavers and the ending of National Service in 1962 leading to concerns about whether there would be enough opportunities for young people. The picture that emerges is of a very varied and largely unregulated system. It was acknowledged that, although schemes existed in a large number of industries, the application of these frameworks was variable. A study by the Central Youth Employment Executive of the local delivery of craft apprenticeships in six industries, completed in 1954, concluded that although the standard of training had been raised by the national frameworks, ‘the local implementation of the schemes still left much to be desired in some areas’ (MLNS, 1956, p. 11). For similar conclusions some 20 years later, see Wheatley, 1976, p. 8). Many industry frameworks included periods of study at college but in the absence of an overarching legislative framework, for example giving a right to day release, there was no standard as to whether apprentices got day release or, if so, how much (Hale, 1963, pp. 4–10; Williams, 1963, p. 8; Venables, 1967; Singer & MacDonald, 1970). This, like many other aspects of the apprentice experience, tended to vary depending upon the size of firm the young person was apprenticed to (Williams, 1963, pp. 181–182; Venables, 1967, pp. 96, 154–155; Ryrie & Weir, 1978, p. 39).

As late as 1974, the difficulty of obtaining reliable figures notwithstanding, it was estimated that 43% of male and 7% of female school-leavers under the age of 18 entered apprenticeships (Wheatley, 1976, p. 8; see also Fogelman, 1985). So, for much of the 30 years following the end of the World War II, roughly a third of all male school-leavers went through an apprenticeship of some sort (significantly higher proportions in some regions), suggesting that this represented an institutionalised, expected and respected route, especially for boys. This is attested to by the persistent

refrain throughout the period of there not being enough apprenticeships for young men that wanted to do them (Liepmann, 1960, p. 64). The current government target of 28% aims to get back to a similar proportion of young people undertaking apprenticeships. It is, perhaps, therefore all the more remarkable that we know relatively little about the apprentice experience. This was the starting-point for the study reported here, a small attempt to fill the gap by interviewing people who had done apprenticeships in the period.

Methodological considerations

In addition to the role of historical analysis in comparing policy regimes and the institutional architecture of intermediate skills training from one period to another, it is contended here that it is also important to investigate the individual experiences of particular institutions and to reflect upon how outlooks and expectations compare across time. The interviews discussed here, as will be seen, give us a picture (albeit partial and selective) of what it was like to be an apprentice in this period. As such, it is argued that they add something to our historical understanding of apprenticeship, but also raise issues of relevance to evaluating contemporary apprenticeship.

The accounts we do have of the apprentice experience in the post-war period focus on a very limited number of sources: a study by Venables (1967) of a technical college, which focuses on the experience and success rates of engineering apprentices at college; Liepmann's book (1960), which reports a study undertaken from 1954 to 1956 into three industries (engineering, printing and trowel trades in the construction industry) in the Bristol area; and Ryrie and Weir (1978), a somewhat later Scottish study focused explicitly on the apprentice experience using a longitudinal study tracking just under 400 young men who entered apprenticeships in engineering and motor vehicle trades in 1972. In addition, there are a number of autobiographies that give accounts of particular apprenticeships, for example on the railways (Gibbs, 1986; Taylor, 1995) or on the docks (Carpenter, 2003). More recently the rediscovered data from Norbert Elias's early 1960s study of young people making transitions into work in Leicester, although not specifically focused on apprenticeship, has boosted the empirical material available, and has served to increase our understanding of the period (see for example, Goodwin & O'Connor, 2005a, 2005b; O'Connor & Goodwin, 2005).

These accounts concentrate on various aspects of apprenticeships but, with the exception of Ryrie & Weir (1978) and the autobiographies, do not focus primarily on the apprentice's experience. An oral history method therefore seemed available and suitable as a way to try to get more material on these neglected apprentice stories. As Thompson comments: 'Oral history provides a source quite similar in character to published autobiography, but much wider in scope' (Thompson, 1978, p. 4). The advantage of an oral history study was that it provided the opportunity for targeting and interviewing a specified group. As a two-way interaction the oral history interview, as used here, provided an opportunity for the researcher, who had already researched a lot of documentary evidence and existing research on post-war apprenticeship, to

pick up on and structure further questions around known issues or themes arising from previous historical research. Thus the interviews were seen as loosely structured but focused discussions and as a way of 'gathering [further] information about historical and social structures' (Lummis, 1987, p. 25). In addition, oral history interviews arguably provide a privileged means for exploring in detail the experience of work and the nature of the social relationships in which it is embedded (Thompson, 1978, p. 73; Strangleman, 2002).

As the study was to be relatively small, it was decided to seek a self-selecting sample that would respond to an advertisement in the local *Thanet Gazette*. The newspaper's catchment area has an older-than-average population, is relatively homogeneously white British in ethnic terms, and of a primarily working-class character (ONS, 2007). It was, therefore, expected that a significant number of the target population (those who did apprenticeships between 1945 and 1980) would see the advert.

This methodology was immediately subject to a number of constraints. As Lummis has commented: 'The validation of oral evidence can be divided into two main areas: the degree to which the individual interview yields reliable information on the historical experience, and the degree to which the individual experience is typical of its time and place' (Lummis, 1998, p. 273). As a self-selecting group, it might be expected that the respondents to this study had definite feelings about their apprenticeships, either positive or negative, and/or that they were generally outgoing characters. Those for whom their apprenticeships now appeared as a minor interlude in their youth, or an irrelevance to what they went on to do, were unlikely to see the point of talking about it. The oral history method of lightly structured interviews, where the interviewee is encouraged to talk freely about their memories and experiences, is, of course, subject to the problems of the nature of memory and recall. However, as the effort here was to get a sense of the experience and enduring legacy of the apprenticeships people did, the failure to remember things or the tendency to have reconstructed memories in the light of subsequent experiences mattered less. A measure of triangulation was possible in the sense that respondents' accounts could be set against historical materials about apprenticeship and, to some extent, against each other's accounts. It was also the case that many respondents had found copies of indentures, pay-slips, exam certificates, photographs and other artefacts relating to their apprenticeships, which served both as *aides-memoire* and as sources of confirmation for details of past events.

All of the respondents were interviewed in their own homes (with the exception of one, who was interviewed at work) in November and December 1998. They all lived in the south-east of Kent, although some had undertaken apprenticeships in other parts of the country. The respondents were encouraged to talk broadly about their experiences as apprentices. The interviews were taped and varied in length from one and a half to three hours. (Where the respondent gave permission, a copy of the taped interview has been lodged in the National Sound Archive.) More by luck than judgement, the spread of respondents across trades is not untypical of the picture characteristic of the post-war period. The majority were in engineering trades (43%). Construction trades formed the second largest group (26%) and the rest were spread

across a wide range of industries and sectors. The sample was dominated by men but, again, the two women interviewed, representing 7% of the sample, were in proportion to the gender breakdown of apprentices in the period (see Appendix A for a list of respondents). As a group, the respondents can be seen as providing individual experiences indicative of the apprentice make-up in the period. The repetition of certain experiences and themes in the respondents' accounts chimes with other source material from the post-war era and does, in the author's view, yield interesting detail about the 'lived experience' of being an apprentice. In the discussion that follows, quotations from the interviews are used as representative of certain views common to many respondents or as examples of recurring themes in the accounts given (see Miles & Huberman, 1984, pp. 215–221, on drawing conclusions from qualitative data).

A successful apprenticeship?

The interviewees in this study talked broadly about their apprenticeships and experiences as young people. It is not possible here to do justice to all of the themes and issues that arise from their accounts. To focus specifically on their perception of what the apprenticeships gave them, four interrelated themes are concentrated upon: the attractiveness of an apprenticeship; the role and influence of their families; their status as young people; and their relationships with the skilled men and women they worked with and learned from. (For other aspects, such as degree of choice about the trade they entered and the on-the-job training and college tuition they received, see Vickerstaff, 2003 and 2005).

The attractiveness of apprenticeship and the role and influence of families

Traditional apprenticeships involved an agreement between an employer and an apprentice (and sometimes the apprentice's parents or guardian). The reciprocal rights and duties on both sides were often expressed in the indenture. This agreement, in effect, allowed the employer and apprentice to balance the negative and positive aspects of a sustained period of training. The employer faced immediate costs whilst the apprentice was relatively unproductive, and the apprentice forewent earnings in the short term in expectation of receiving high-quality transferable skills.

In the old days, the customer paid for the apprentice because if I did a job on a man's car, he wasn't charged apprentice prices, he was charged fitter's prices you see. So it was a form of cheap labour. But having said that, it was beneficial to the apprentice. It was a two-way thing. (Motor fitter, 1947–1952)

For many working-class families in the post-World War II period getting a trade was a key aspiration for their male children. Jobs and apprenticeships were relatively plentiful for young men in the period up to the mid-1970s but there was very little guidance or preparation for work (Carter, 1966). In the mid-1950s, the Youth Employment Service estimated that about 40% of school leavers obtained their first

jobs with the help of the service (MLNS, 1956, p. 8). Many approached the end of school life with few concrete ideas about what they wanted to do. The influence of the family was therefore very significant in seeking an apprenticeship, 'choosing' a trade and getting a position. Research throughout the period 1945–1980 indicates that the supply of apprenticeships never satisfied the level of demand from young men (Ferguson & Cunnison, 1951, pp. 9, 107, 132–137; MLNS, 1956, p. 1; Veness, 1962, pp. 64–65; Carter, 1966, pp. 134–141; Maizels, 1970, p. 90; West & Newton, 1983, pp. 80–81).

The possible pathways or transitions from school to work were less varied, and much more taken for granted than than now. The attraction of an apprenticeship, despite the presence of higher-paid starting jobs for school leavers, was the traditional one of getting a trade, with the assumption of employment security and enhanced wages in the future:

But, to become a craftsman, a journeyman, you had to take up an apprenticeship. And if you were a craftsman, or if you were a journeyman, you were respected. But, course, the thing was at that time you had a choice. If you went into an apprenticeship, your wages were quite low for the first two or three years. Where[as] if you chose to go—especially into the pits, as my mates were doing—they was earning big money and they were laughing at me saying 'What you want to do that for...?'. But my parents, especially one of them—my father—he used to say 'Think of the future. In the future you're going to be earning more than them.' (Painter and decorator, 1948–53)

Apprenticeship was seen by many parents, young men and those advising them as a good route for a working-class boy (see also the Ryrie and Weir study of apprentices in the early 1970s: Ryrie & Weir, 1978, pp. 16–17). This structuring of the youth labour market had been given a strong push by the 1944 Education Act, based as it was on the assumption that there were broadly three types of children in terms of ability and aptitude: the academic, destined for grammar school, possibly university, and professional or managerial jobs; the technical, who would go to a technical school and become an engineer or draughtsman; and the ordinary, who went to secondary-modern and who would do more or less skilled manual work. In practice, as we know, not many technical schools were established (see McCulloch, 1995), so for the secondary-modern boy an apprenticeship was an 'appropriate' aspiration. As a book on the apprenticeship system in 1963 commented, the bulk of skilled men in industry would continue to be made up 'of the secondary modern school boy who will be quite content to do a job requiring a moderate degree of intelligence and an acquired manual dexterity' (Hale, 1963, p. 13).

This sense of expected pathways is clearly expressed in many of the interviews and often related to schooling and, by implication, class:

And it was decided at 15, not having gone to a grammar school—went to a secondary-modern... to take an apprenticeship out. (Carpenter and joiner, 1950–1955)

[What were other schoolmates doing at that time?]

Well, they were going into gas works, and the Southern Electricity Board in those days. And there were a few that really were more interested in going into the air force and the

army. A lot of them did that. But I think the main concern was to get an apprenticeship, because without that, you didn't go anywhere. (Motor fitter, 1947–1952)

And also I went to Dane Court [a local grammar school] and I didn't do very well in the last sort of year, and my headmistress sort of said what had I intended to do? Because it was the beginning of career development interviews, I said 'Oh I'm looking at hairdressing'. And they all sort of said 'Oh no. You're not doing that. We're not going to allow you to do that because you've got the potential to take five 0-levels' and that sort of provoked me into doing it. (Hairdresser, 1975–1978)

Although the pathways into apprenticeships were well worn, it is also interesting to reflect on the extent of choice that young people had and how they obtained their apprenticeships. Of the group interviewed here, just under half can be said to have followed a trade that they had always been interested in; 3 continued in the family trade; and 13 largely ended up in what was available (for further discussion of the issue of choice, see Vickerstaff, 2003, pp. 273–275).

I wanted to be a commercial artist, and my old dad said 'No'. He said 'I think you'd better come to the trade'. (Sheet metalworker pattern maker, 1951–1956)

Well, I suppose my family goes back several generations in the construction industry. I had an uncle who was an apprentice plumber at Lockwoods at Westgate, in the early '20s I suppose. My father was a bricklayer with his grandfather's firm in Birchington. My grandfather, who died soon after the First World War, was also a bricklayer, which was my father's father. And even before that, they were in the building trade... My first choice was to have gone into the forces, but my parents wouldn't entertain that. (Plumber, 1952–1957)

Well my father really didn't want me to go into the motor trade: he didn't consider it a very good prospect, so we had an awful fight over it. And he insisted that if I wanted to finally go into it he would decide who I went to work with. And he arranged with the then foreman of Invicta to take me on and look after me. And give me a clip if I didn't do as I was told! (Motor fitter, 1947–1952)

The last quotation alludes to two other dimensions of the apprentices' experience that recur in many of their accounts: the importance of social capital, that is using family or other connections to get into a trade (see also the account by Carpenter [2003, p. 16] of getting his marine engineering apprenticeship in the London docks; and the discussion in Goodwin and O'Connor, 2005a, pp. 462–464) and, secondly, the refrain of just 'being the boy' and doing what adults told you.

One day my father said to me, 'Look. Come on. If you can't think of what to do, then let me give you two options.' First of all, he knew somebody who worked, I think as a sub-editor, at the *Warrington Guardian*, which was the local paper. And the offices in Warrington were two miles away from where I actually lived. 'Or', he said, 'I can probably influence somebody at the firm into giving you an apprenticeship or at least an interview for an apprenticeship...', at the firm, not where he worked, but a joint apprenticeship firm which was between the firm he worked and the firm next door. (Engineer, 1952–57)

I became a journeyman electrician through a friend of mine who recommended me. I was living with my widowed mother in London at the time, in Stoke Newington, and he recommended me for this and I took it up. (Electrical installation engineer, 1950–55)

And my father got interested in discovering what I was interested in doing and purely because I'd been on a couple of visits at school, through the school—one being a retail and one being in advertising—and the fact that I'd always liked to make toffee apples and caramel and stuff in the kitchen at home, I thought catering was an option. I loved food and I thought the easiest way to gain food was to cook it. And my father—purely because I'd said catering first—he took me to the best hotel in Leicester, which was the Grand Hotel—a four-star hotel—at that time part of the Ind Coope hotel chain—and went to see the head chef. And without me really saying a great deal, I walked out of the chef's office an hour later—this was at the age of 15... with a job to start in a year. (Chef, 1973–1977)

The status of apprentices and their relationships with adult workers

The junior or 'rookie' status of the young new apprentice is emphasised in many of the accounts: 'Skivvyng—because the apprentice is always the boy. He does all the clearing up, sweeping up' (Wood machinist, 1946–1951).

This lowly status was double-edged. On the one hand, it meant that no one expected that much of you at first. You weren't expected to be 'job-ready'. On the other hand, it meant you could be bossed about, given the worst and most boring jobs and, in the worst cases, bullied. What is striking from the interviewees' accounts is that this is largely seen as normal and what was expected. The account by Carpenter of his marine engineering apprenticeship in the London Docks in the 1950s is also littered with accounts of how cheeky apprentices, i.e. those who didn't show due deference to the established men, were brought down a peg or two.

This points us to another very important aspect of post-war apprenticeships for young men: that it was also an apprenticeship in masculinity, learning to handle oneself, and coming out the other end 'a man'. The tricks and jokes played on young apprentices served to toughen them up, but also to test their 'willingness... to be part of the male group and to accept its rules' (Collinson, 1988, p. 188).

You learnt it—it's not as easy as it is today. You learnt the hard way. I made an aquarium. I asked that old foreman that you see at the back of me [in a photograph] if I could make an aquarium, and he said 'Yes'. And I made this aquarium (during my dinner hour)—made this aquarium, and I showed it to him. And he said, 'Let me have a look at it', he said, because everything had to be spot-on. And he lined it up, and he said 'Have you got a hammer?' And I said 'Yea', and I got a hammer and he smashed it to pieces. He said 'You make it properly, or not at all', he said. (Sheet metal pattern maker, 1951–1956)

Discipline on the site was really sorted out by your teammates, because we were all reliant on one another. So if there was a lad who was particularly belligerent, well quite honestly, let's face it, they made his life hell for him. You came into line. So discipline wasn't a big problem because it was administered by your compatriots rather than a boss. (Carpenter and joiner, 1950–1955)

On a more positive note, many of the apprentices emphasize how one of the key things their apprenticeship taught them was how to get on with other people:

Well, I would sum it up by saying it provided you with basic engineering skills: both craft skills and technical skills, which have held you in good stead for the whole of your life. And

it provided you with a tremendous experience of life. And I think probably that as much as, or equally as much as, the skills that you were taught, and the expertise that you were taught, was the experience, at that age, of the experiences that it gave you of life, was also very important. (Engineering draughtsman, 1952–1957)

You had some great... men who were in exactly—who were from a working-class background same as myself, who had progressed through a system. They were no better to start with than us, but they had progressed through a system and came into teaching. But they were like, all the time, pushing us on. They pushed. And they were brilliant men. They had character about them. (Carpenter and joiner, 1978–1981)

David Carpenter makes the same point in his account of his London dockland apprenticeship:

In hindsight, the five years of my apprenticeship were probably the best years of my life. Not only had I learnt all the basic skills that would stand me in good stead for the rest of my working life as a marine engineer, I had also unconsciously learnt how to get on with my fellow workers, and respect other people's points of view. (Carpenter, 2003, p. 187)

For most of the apprentices, who were in larger firms and/or took classes and examinations at their local technical college (the majority in this study), they went through their apprenticeships as part of a cohort. Being an apprentice was a recognised and a respected category, albeit one sometimes taken advantage of at work. In the construction trade, for example, there were local competitions:

I took the various different exams at various different times, and there was an association at the time, called the Institute of Master Builders, and they had prizes which were issued... And the Area Trust Prize was the be-all and the end-all. Which in those days was a considerable amount of money. Several weeks' wages. So it was quite a nice prize. And the apprentice that got that obviously, his firm... It was an honour for the builders. A good drinking point, if you like, for the bosses to sort of say 'Our lad's got the Area Trust Prize this year', sort of thing. And of course, there was quite a large do over at the Winter Gardens actually, ours was, each year. The annual prize giving from the tech. Building Department, and the Margate Winter Gardens was full. And undoubtedly it was a very prestigious arrangement. (Carpenter and joiner, 1950–1955)

For the most part, the apprentices were part of a local community, which took some responsibility for them:

Quite obviously, most apprenticeships are in areas where the parents had been in the trade and it was a follow-on situation. But mine was a little different in that regard, but nonetheless, the warmth that was extended to the young person starting in engineering, or whatever apprenticeship, was real. And you can't invent inner warmth, it has to be spontaneous. (Boilermaker, 1956–1961)

Ryrie and Weir, in the study of apprentices in the middle 1970s, asked the young men whether they thought their apprenticeships could be shortened. They concluded that:

The reason why the apprentices favoured a long apprenticeship was not because they wanted more instruction but because they wanted an extended period of time during which they were able to do the work of the trade, but were sheltered from the full responsibility (Ryrie & Weir, 1978, p. 46)

This sense of the apprenticeship as a sheltered transition into adulthood was also common in many of the accounts of the respondents in this study, but not all:

And really it was the worst six years of my life. Every morning I used to dread getting up and going into this place. But, as I say, we didn't have the choice and it was a job, and we had to do it... The bullying... it was name-calling. Taking the Mickey—'Long streak of piss'—and all this sort of thing, because I was only about 10 stone and already 6' 3". I became a nervous wreck in a way. And I never told my mum and dad about it, because you didn't do. I used to come out in the lunch break to cycle home and the bike would be turned upside-down, the tyres let down, two or three times a week. The general treatment was awful. (Bookbinder, 1952–1958)

Turning to the experience of the training received, this varied considerably and, of course, was the source of much criticism of the apprenticeship system in the period of the 1960s (for example: Williams, 1963 and Donovan Commission, 1968, paras. 357–359). All but two of those interviewed here had a college element to their apprenticeships; the two that didn't—the bookbinder and the tailor—worked for very small firms. For those who did engineering apprenticeships in large companies, or for those in the dockyards or public utilities, their on-the-job training was more likely to be clearly structured and involve a systematic process of development through different aspects of the trade:

After 18 months you moved down into the dockyard structure and you moved... They were split into different sections. If we were fitting out boats that were in for a refit you'd be on there for so long. You had obviously the nuclear complex side, on the nuclear submarines. The various workshops like weapons, electronics and motor shops and things like that. And you basically spent your time going round them three months, six months, at a time. You'd be assigned to a fully trained electrician and the nickname then was a 'skipper', That's what you called your—when you was apprenticed to him—that was your skipper and you went with them for that time. (Electrical fitter 1978–1982)

Well—some fitters didn't want apprentices, and that showed very clearly in the way they would treat an apprentice. Other fitters were smashing. They liked to have an apprentice with them. On the day release side, or the day you went to the training centre, that was very good as far as the professional side of it... everything was there for you. The bays had all the materials. The classroom and everything that we needed. There was nothing lacking there. (Gas fitter, 1955–1961)

So you done everything. It's a good thing when you work your way up. So when you get in charge you know how everything works. (Draughtsman, 1961–1965)

Those in construction were apprenticed in the period when medium-sized local firms of general builders carried all the trades, so they had direct experience of working with other crafts.

All sorts of work. All in all, I suppose, you couldn't have had a better grounding because you did something of everything virtually. Or you worked with other trades and then saw their point of view, which today you don't. (Plumber, 1952–1957)

However, it can only be concluded that the breadth of experience gained was closely related to the size of firm but was also, to a large degree, dependent upon the willingness and interest of those around the apprentice. As one of Ryrie and Weir's apprentices,

commenting on the explanations of work processes that he got from the men, eloquently put it: 'Some can't be bothered, some don't know and some don't have time' (1978, p. 39).

Nevertheless, for many of those interviewed in this study their time as an apprentice marked a special period. It launched them into adult life:

I'd always got a practical bent, and I think it equipped me to get more fulfilment out of my interests and whatnot, than ever I could have done without it. And I think it taught me to—what shall we say—to rely on others and to have them rely on me, sort of thing. So yeah, really I think at that age it was wonderful, because it taught me to, well, get along with other people, I suppose. (Carpenter, 1950–1955)

But I would like to think it formulated a form of morality for me: an understanding of the fellows I work with, and a love of the fellows I work with, that goes hand-in-hand with that. It gave me some concept of what actually working is all about, so that one gets an understanding of economics, if you like. (Boilermaker, 1956–1961)

Conclusions

It is clear from the discussion that the pattern of apprenticeship in the period 1945–1980 was very varied and there was more than an element of luck for many of the young men (and the few young women) as to the experience they had. It is not credible to look back and conclude that it was in anyway a golden age in terms of how the apprenticeship system as a whole was organised. However, it is equally apparent from the accounts here that the ex-apprentices in the main put a great value on the experiences they had. Perhaps the most striking theme that recurs in the apprentices' accounts is their sense of development and transition as a young person: growing up, learning to get on with people, learning to stand up for yourself. It meant something to be an apprentice: it was an expected, respected and structured path to adulthood. The key to a successful apprenticeship seemed to be a complex interplay of individual motivation, family help, community backing and intergenerational support, as well as the obvious locational and labour market forces which made the opportunities available. Apprenticeships were most likely to be successful in the past when they were strongly embedded in the social relations and occupational structure of a local community, and when the approach to training developed participants' ownership of, and commitment to, the attainment of substantive skills, vocational knowledge and work habits (see Fuller & Unwin, 2001; Vickerstaff, 2003 and 2005). To replicate such conditions in the contemporary labour market will be difficult and will require an understanding of the apprenticeship model as offering something more to youth transitions than simply the acquisition of intermediate skills and their related economic benefits.

In exploring how young people came to do apprenticeships in the past, we saw the importance of family traditions and 'being spoken for' by family members or friends with connections to local employers (see also Roberts, 1984, p. 37). Beyond the family, the community was also important in supporting the apprenticeship system, especially in construction, trades where local building firms vied for the best

apprentices, but also in the institution of day release at the local college, where generations of families would attend to study for their City and Guilds (the leading vocational qualification awarding body in the UK). Apprenticeship was traditionally seen as a process that went beyond merely learning how to do a particular job. It also typically involved wider aspects of the world of work and membership of a specific work culture. Traditionally, there were paternalistic, moral and social control aspects to apprenticeship. These were reflected in written indentures, in an expected sense of mutual obligation between employer and apprentice and in a sense of obligation between them and the community in which they were based (Snell, 1996). This tradition of mutual obligations was eroding in the post-war period, but is still apparent in many of the accounts given here.

It is argued by writers such as Kelly and Kenway (2001) that globalisation of the economy has had the effect of undermining such family and community networks that young people could rely upon in the past to smooth their transitions, and that networks are now reconfigured, requiring the more active management of youth transitions by schools, government agencies and the whole vocational education and training industry. In addition, young people today are seen to have far more apparent choice in terms of staying on at school or going to college to continue their education beyond compulsory schooling. Indeed, the aspiration of parents, young people themselves, their teachers and the government is that the gold standard to aim for is a degree-level education. Accompanying this are contradictory signals given to young people about the relative desirability of different routes into the labour market, and apprenticeship struggles to look anything other than a second-best option. This is in marked contrast to the period under study here. Apprenticeship has slipped from its status as part of the intergenerational family heritage, wider collective memory and a respected and trusted route in the labour market and adulthood. Many young people reaching 16 years of age now will have parents who were born in the 1960s and who entered the labour market when apprenticeship was in rapid decline. Contrary to government assertions, apprenticeship has lost its shine as a 'brand' (DfES, 2005b, p. 25).

In this discussion we have not addressed the important question of the extent to which contemporary work in many service and knowledge industries does or does not lend itself to an extended period of apprenticeship-style, intermediate skills training at the outset of working life. Rather we have tried to address the different question of whether the apprenticeship model of skill acquisition and youth transition offered a distinctive approach to growing up. In the post-war period, a little over a third of young men leaving school took this route to adulthood; if we want to return to such numbers and include significant numbers of young women as well, we can usefully ponder whether the traditional role and future potential of apprenticeship lies in the social obligations contained in the apprenticeship model. In that model young people, parents, guardians, employers, government and the community at large recognised the benefits of apprenticeship not merely as a means for learning how to do a particular job, but also as a means of investing in young people and providing a relatively sheltered and managed transition from school to work and into

adulthood. Since the late 1970s, governments have increasingly acceded to the view that the education system was failing to produce 'job-ready' school-leavers (and increasingly, now, 'job-ready' college or university-leavers), and that responsibility for addressing this 'problem' falls squarely on the state through the education system, rather than on employers employing young people (for a discussion of educational policy in this period see Tomlinson, 2005 and Wolf, 2002). The traditional apprenticeship system, as attested to here, was built on the assumption that school-leavers were not 'job-ready' but rather it was the employer's job, through the institution of apprenticeship, to bring young people on and so invest in the next generation of skilled workers. Similarly, adult workers were often willing to support young entrants to their trade because they had themselves come through the same system. The lesson of this exploration into the history of apprenticeship would seem to be that reinvigorating apprenticeship today requires rather more than an exclusive focus on the hoped-for economic benefits of intermediate skills training. We need to reconsider the socialisation aspects of apprenticeship and the wider social obligations—of family, community and employer—in helping young people to construct effective transitions into work.

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Appendix A. Details of the research

Respondents and period of apprenticeship

1. Motor fitter, 1947–1952.
2. Sheet metalworker pattern maker, 1951–1956.
3. Boilermaker, 1956–1961.
4. Bricklayer, 1959–1964.
5. Electrical technician, 1966–1971.
6. Shipwright, 1956–1961.
7. Engineering draughtsman, 1942–1947.
8. Chef, 1956–1961.
9. Plumber, 1952–1957.
10. Painter and decorator, 1948–1953.
11. Motor mechanic, 1965–1970.
12. Engineering, 1952–1957.
13. Gas fitter, 1955–1961.
14. Toolmaker, 1963–1968.
15. Engineering, 1962–1967.
16. Carpenter and joiner, 1950–1955.
17. Bricklayer, 1948–1952.
18. Electrical power engineer, 1957–1962.
19. Carpenter and joiner, 1948–1953.
20. Bespoke tailoring, 1967–1972 (female).
21. Electrical fitter, 1978–1982.
22. Engineering draughtsman, 1952–1957.
23. Engineering, 1956–1961.
24. Bookbinder, 1952–1958.
25. Wood machinist, 1946–1951.
26. Carpenter and joiner, 1978–1981.
27. Draughtsman, 1961–1965.
28. Hairdressing, 1975–1978 (female).
29. Electrical installation engineer, 1950–1955.
30. Chef, 1973–1977.