

LONDON APPRENTICES IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: SOME PROBLEMS¹

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Apprentices play a key role in the study of social structure and demographic development in seventeenth-century towns. Large numbers of young men were bound usually for seven years, they were not permitted to marry, and they might well dominate the group between fifteen and twenty-five years of age. Many towns depended upon continued immigration in order to expand their population at all, and apprenticeship was the major channel for male immigration, as service was for females. Nowhere in the country was this more the case than in London, with a substantially higher death rate during the seventeenth century than the rest of the country, and a voracious appetite for immigrants. They came, they were apprenticed, and many eventually left London again. It has been estimated that during the century after 1650 about one in ten of the inhabitants of England and Wales were living in London at any one time, but as many as one in six had, at some time in their lives, experienced living in London.² For many men this experience would have been through the medium of apprenticeship. It is, therefore, of some importance to form an estimate of the number of apprentices residing in London at any one time, as well as the proportion that they formed of the capital's population. This also enables us to test the frequent statement that apprenticeship 'declined' during the seventeenth century.

Studies of London's demographic development during the seventeenth century are comparatively few, and Dr Finlay's book and Dr Elliott's thesis — apparently soon to be published — are outstanding contributions to the field.³ Dr Finlay shows, among other things, how males formed a majority of the capital's population during the early seventeenth century: Dr Elliott demonstrates that this was to a great extent because of the institution of apprenticeship, which brought very large numbers of young men to London, often from a considerable distance. By the end of the century the migrants came from much less far — largely the home counties. Their numbers are supposed to have declined, at least proportionately to London's population, and the capital came to have a majority of females in the population.⁴

Taking the 1600 figures on the number of apprentices from the painstaking researches of Dr Elliott, and the 1700 figures from the equally painstaking researches of Professor Glass, Dr Finlay produces the following table, bearing out this argument.

Table 1. Estimates of the proportion of apprentices in the population of London, 1600 and 1700⁵

	1600	1700
Total population	200,000	575,000
Annual number of apprentices bound	4,000—5,000	3,400—4,080
Apprentices serving a minimum seven-year term	28,000—35,000	23,800—28,560
Total apprentices	32,000—40,000	27,200—32,640
Depletion, 85% survivorship during term	27,200—34,000	23,120—27,744
Percentage of total population	13.6—17.0	4.0—4.8

The problem with figures such as these is that they give a highly misleading impression of accuracy. They do not close a debate — rather they change the terms of the debate. The purpose of this article is to seek out some of the implications of these statistics.

First of all a detail: the source of the 1700 figure is not altogether clear. In one of his publications, Glass appears to be speaking of 1,600 apprentices a year completing their indentures.⁶ Assuming that this is 85 per cent of the total that took up indentures, it produces a total of 13,176 apprentices, or 2.3 per cent of the population. The lower figure will be referred to as 'London (2)', to distinguish it from the higher figure. The general argument about the decline of apprenticeship is not greatly affected. However, if we take the figures for 1550, produced by Ramsay and modified by Rappaport,⁷ then it is the figure for 1600 that appears as an aberration. In the mid-sixteenth century, and a century and a half later, apprentices formed between 2 and 5 per cent of the population: they were forming between 13 and 17 per cent in 1600. Apprenticeship 'declined' during the seventeenth century because it expanded so remarkably during the later sixteenth century.

Table 2. Estimate of the proportion of apprentices in the population of London, 1550

Total population (say)	100,000
Annual number of freemen	577
Apprentices to produce this (7 x 577)	4,039
If 85% survive, total number of apprentices	4,752
Apprentices as % of total population	4.75

On the other hand, if one takes not the total population of London, but the population of the City — the records after all, refer to admissions to City Companies — then, as Table 3 shows, apprentices increase in importance very rapidly during the later sixteenth century, but do not fall back to the 1550 level in 1700, and if the Finlay figure for 1700 is taken, they do not fall at all.

Table 3. Apprentices as a proportion of the population of the City of London, 1550, 1600, 1700

	1550	1600	1700 (1)	1700 (2)
Population of City ⁸	70,000	140,000	113,000	113,000
Apprentices as % of population	6.8	19.4—24.3	20.5—24.6	11.7

It can, of course, be argued that some apprentices would not have lived in the City: on the other hand many apprentices must have been bound in the suburbs, without appearing in the City records at all.

However, there is some reason to doubt the figure for 1600. It is necessary at this point to advance a few generalities. If we take a town where two thirds of the population are over the age of fifteen — which is what Gregory King suggested for London at the end of the seventeenth century,⁹ and was the case in London for most of the nineteenth century, then if the balance of the sexes is equal, adult men will form a third of the population. If in this situation we have a sudden influx of apprentices — adult males every one of them — to the extent of, say, 10 per cent of the total population, then the number of adult males rises from 33 to 43 per cent — a full third — and nearly a quarter of these males are apprentices. Should adult males form less than a third of the total population, the effect of a sudden influx of apprentices is, of course, enhanced. Table 4 demonstrates this for London, taking the data already given.

Table 4. Proportion of apprentices to adult males in London, 1550, 1600, 1700

	1550	1600	1700 (1)	1700 (2)
1 Population of London	100,000	200,000	575,000	575,000
2 Aged over 15, say 67%	67,000	134,000	385,000	385,000
3 Of whom male apprentices	5,000	30,000	25,000	13,000
4 Leaving adult, not-currently apprenticed	62,000	104,000	360,000	372,000
5 Of whom male, say 50%	31,000	52,000	180,000	186,000
6 Apprentices as % of adult males	16%	58%	14%	7%
7 (6) rewritten as not-currently apprenticed males 100 apprentices	620	173	720	1431

The figure for 1600, suggesting that apprentices formed 58 per cent of adult males, is difficult to accept. It becomes even more difficult when the sex ratio of the population is taken into account. If we assume that half the children in London are female and — purely for the sake of argument — that half the adults not actually serving an apprenticeship are female, then we obtain the figures of Table 5.

Table 5. Sex ratios in London, 1550, 1600, 1700

	1550	1600	1700 (1)	1700 (2)
1 Females aged 0-14	16,500	33,000	95,000	95,000
2 Females aged 15 and over	31,000	52,000	180,000	186,000
Males per 100 females				
3 Total population	111	135	109	105
4 Population aged 15 and over	116	158	114	107

Of course, if we assume that less than half of those not being apprenticed were female, then the sex ratio for 1600 rises from its already remarkable level of 158: if we assume that more than half were female then apprentices come to form more than 57 per cent of the adult male population. The sex ratio also, incidentally, produces a problem for 1700, when there is supposed to have been a surplus of females buried in London.¹⁰ It is difficult to see how this was possible unless we postulate that many of the men who had completed their indentures proceeded to leave London. While this is — at the least — extremely probable, it inevitably means

that the male: female ratio is greatly exacerbated, and that the proportion that apprentices formed of the population is increased.

Perhaps the solution to the dilemma rests in the assumption that 85 per cent of the apprentices bound served for a full seven years. If Rappaport is correct, the figure for the second half of the sixteenth century is less than half this — only 40 per cent. 15 per cent died, 45 per cent simply left.¹¹ Recalculating Tables 4 and 5 on this assumption produces more creditable results.

Table 6. Revised proportions of apprentices to adult males and sex ratios in London 1550, 1600, 1700

	1550	1600	1700 (1)	1700 (2)
No. of apprentices bound	1443	4,000—5,000	3,400—4,080	4,000
No. completing indentures (40% of above)	577	1,600—2,000	1,360—1,632	1,600
Total no. of apprentices ¹²	7,071	19,600—24,500 (say 22,000)	16,660—19,992 (say 18,000)	19,600
Population of London	100,000	200,000	575,000	575,000
Aged over 15 say 67%	67,000	134,000	385,000	385,000
Adult, non-apprenticed	60,000	112,000	367,000	366,000
Of whom male, say 50%	30,000	56,000	183,500	183,000
Apprentices as % of non-apprenticed adult males	24%	39%	10%	11%
Not-currently apprenticed adult males for every 100 apprentices	424	255	1,020	933
If 50% of children are female:				
Females aged 0—14	16,500	33,000	95,000	95,000
Females 15 and over	30,000	56,000	183,500	183,000
Males per 100 females				
Total population	115	125	106	107
Population aged 15 and over	124	139	110	111

But they are still suspicious for 1600, when the ratio of apprentices to other adult males is 2.5: 1 — and even less creditable when only the population of the City is counted. Clearly there is a problem here, with considerable implications for the study of London's social structure during this period. Do we have to assume that three-quarters or more of the population of London at the beginning of the seventeenth century were adults? If so, the implications are considerable.

Perhaps it is not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that until we know more about the drop-out rate of apprentices the study of London's overall social structure cannot advance very much further than it has done. Any information that Dr Elliott — or anyone else — can produce would be of considerable value.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Prof. David Palliser and Dr Richard Wall for commenting on earlier drafts of this argument. Of course I alone am responsible for gross errors of judgement.
2. E. A. Wrigley, 'A simple model of London's importance in changing English society and economy, 1650-1750', **Past and Present**, vol. XXXVII, 1967.
3. R. Finlay, **Population and Metropolis. The Demography of London 1580-1650**, 1981; V. B. Elliott, 'Mobility and marriage in pre-industrial England' unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Univ. of Cambridge, 1978.
4. Finlay, **Population**, pp. 140-1; Elliott, 'Mobility and marriage', p.153.
5. Finlay, **Population**, p.67.
6. D. V. Glass, 'Socio-economic status and occupations in the City of London at the end of the seventeenth century', in A. E. J. Hollaender and W. Kellaway (eds), **Studies in London History**, 1969, p.385.
7. G. D. Ramsay, 'The recruitment and fortunes of some London freemen in the mid-sixteenth century', **Economic History Review**, vol. XXXI, 1978, p.528; S. Rappaport, 'Social structure and mobility in sixteenth-century London: Part 1', **London Journal**, vol. IX, 1983, p.117.
8. Rappaport, p.113 estimates the City's population in 1551 as 70,000; Ian Sutherland, 'When was the Great Plague? Mortality in London, 1563 to 1615', in D. V. Glass and R. Revelle (eds), **Population and Social Change**, 1972, p.310 gives estimates for the size of London's population starting 1565: 141,000 is the midpoint of the various estimates for 1600. The figure for 1700 is from A. V. Judges and P. E. Jones, 'London's population in the late seventeenth century', **Economic History Review**, 1st ser. vol. VI, 1935-6, p.61.
9. G. King, 'L. C. C. Burns Journal', in P. Laslett (ed.), **The earliest classics: John Graunt and Gregory King**, 1973, p.61: 'Natural and political observations upon the state and condition of England (1696) in *Ibid.* p.39.
10. Finlay, **Population**, pp.140-1.
11. Rappaport, pp. 116-17.
12. On the assumption that 10 per cent of the original number dropped out each year, for the first six years. If most apprentices left after two years, their total numbers would obviously be less.