

Guild Records

The concept of trade guilds or companies to support and control tradesmen in similar professions dates back to medieval times, if not before.

Guilds were a feature of life in many towns and cities and often a person could not set up in business in a trade unless they were member of the appropriate guild. Such controls required records, many of which have survived to this day and provide a useful but under used resource for family historians. The oldest records in the Tyne and Wear Archives collection are the order books of the Skinners and Glovers which date from 1437-1958, a range of over 500 years.

The number and type of guilds in each town or city varied according to its size and the businesses which went on there. For example, Sheffield, Yorkshire, was dominated by a single guild: The Company of Cutlers, whereas Newcastle-upon-Tyne had many guilds, 28 of which are still active today.

Each Guild had its own rules on membership – being a Freeman of the Company, but generally this could be gained in one of three ways:

- Servitude: serving an apprenticeship, usually of at least seven years
- Patrimony: being the son or eldest son of a Freeman
- Redemption: payment of a fee

Types of Guild Record

The Guild Organisation

- Charter and Acts Books
- Articles
- Ordinaries
- Orders and Rules
- Minutes

Members Records

- **Admission certificates**
- **Members' rolls**
- **Admissions, Enrolment books**
- **Lists of members, Registers of members, Membership registers**
- **Attendance registers**

Apprentice Records

- **Apprenticeship indentures**
- **Apprentice enrolments, Apprentice and admission books**
- **Lists of apprentices, Registers of apprentices**

Financial records

- Order books
- Deeds
- Plans
- Accounts: Rental accounts, Stewards accounts, Subscription Accounts
- Company books
- Fines books
- Cash Books, Bank books, Ledgers
- Receipts and payments

Miscellaneous

- Correspondence
- Petitions
- Lists of grievances
- Letter books
- Charity papers

Of these, the two sets of records most likely to be of interest to a family historian are the Apprentice records and the Members records.

Apprentice Records

Indentures were the agreements between the Master and the parent or guardian of this apprentice. Generally a premium was paid to the Master when he took on the Apprentice.

Apprentice Books and such like include a summary of the information in the indenture, for example:

- Date of enrolment
- Name of the apprentice
- Apprentice's father's name
- Apprentice's father's place of residence,
- Apprentice's father's trade
- Master's name
- Master's trade
- Term of the apprenticeship
- Date of apprentice agreement (indenture)

The Register for the Durham Company of Joiners notes that Robert Burlison was sick from 1819-1829 and then “Died May 27th 1830 aged 95”⁶. Robert was the only member for which such an entry was made – perhaps in recognition of his great age and long service to the Company, of which he was a member for over 66 years.

Other Records

These can include all sorts of material depending on the Guild or Company and what survives. There can be details of charitable donations, property records, financial records and correspondence. Whilst not necessarily containing information on individuals these records can provide context for the world in which our ancestors lived.

That said, the correspondence records of the Newcastle Company of Barber Surgeons includes an unsigned letter detailing an episode in the life of William Thornton, apprentice to Thomas Johnson in 1774, which gives us an insight into his life⁷. See Annex 2.

Finding Guild Records

Records of the various North East Guilds and Companies are found in one or more of the following:

- Berwick-on-Tweed Record Office
- Durham Record Office
- University of Durham, Special Collections
- Tyne and Wear Archives
- Northumberland Archives

The majority of the Durham Guild records are at the University of Durham and their holdings for each company are detailed here: http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ark/32150_s1h415p954d.xml&toc.id=#dcg-1. The records for each Guild includes a PDF index of apprentices and freemen.

The primary location for the Newcastle Guild records is the Tyne and Wear Archives. A user guide to their holdings is available via the following link: <https://twarchives.org.uk/collection/user-guides-and-information>

Women in the Guild Records

Up until very recently, the Guilds and Companies were an exclusively male preserve. However, women are mentioned in the records in a number of ways. For example:

- If a Freeman died, then his widow could carry on his business and his apprentices could stay with her. Alternatively, they may be turned over to a new Master. Both of these events could leave a record.
- Widowed mothers could pay the premium for their son’s apprenticeship and so will appear in the apprenticeship records.
- Charitable donations might be made to the families of deceased members.
- Members could be expected to attend the funeral of a fellow Freeman’s wife – absence could be noted in the minutes
- The Newcastle Barber Surgeons Company paid £6 towards the funeral of the (first) wife or widow of a member.

⁶ University of Durham Special Collections. Palace Green Library. DCG 9/5

⁷ Tyne & Wear Archive. *GU.BS/24. Correspondence concerning apprenticeships, 24 September 1783 - 10 August 1840*

Hint & Tips

- If you think your ancestor was in a trade, particularly in Newcastle or Durham, then the Guild records are worth checking out
- Since trades tended to pass from father to son, you may be able to trace several generations of your family in the records
- In some cases, Guild records may predate surviving parish registers or, because they can contain information on parentage, they can be used to validate relationships and other information from the very brief early parish registers
- Unfortunately, the records discussed in this article are not available online – you will need to visit the archives to study them.

Disclaimer: This document is intended as a guide to get you started with researching your family history. It is not intended to be comprehensive and Cameo Family History does not accept responsibility for errors and omissions.

Annex I – North East Guilds

The following Guilds have surviving records at one or more North East archives.

Berwick

- The Guild

Durham

- Barbers
- Barkers and Tanners
- Butchers
- Cordwainers
- Curriers
- Drapers
- Dyers and Litsters⁸
- Fullers and Feltmakers, Clothworkers and Walkers
- Joiners
- Masons
- Mercers
- Plumbers
- Saddlers and Upholsterers
- Skinners and Glovers
- Smiths
- Weavers and Websters

Gateshead

- Dyers, Fullers, Locksmiths, Blacksmiths, Cutlers, Joiners and House Carpenters
- Drapers, Tailors, Mercers, Hardwaremen, Coopers and Chandlers
- Freemasons, carvers, stone cutters, sculptors, brickmakers, glaziers, painters, stainers, founders, nailors, pewterers, plumbers, millwrights, saddlers, bridlers, trunkmakers and distillers

Hexham

- Weavers
- Tanners and Shoemakers
- Skinners and Glovers
- Hatters

Morpeth

- Weavers
- Tanners
- Skinners, Glovers, and Butchers
- Fullers and Dyers
- *Merchant Taylors*
- *Smiths, Saddlers and Armourers*
- *Cordwainers*

Surviving records of the last three are in private hands.

⁸ An old term for dyers

Newcastle-upon-Tyne

- Anchor Smiths
- Bakers and Brewers
- Barber Surgeons, Wax and Tallow Chandlers and Periwig Makes
- Blacksmiths
- Booksellers
- Bricklayers, Wallers and Plasters
- Butchers
- Cabinet Makers
- Colliers, Paviours and Carriagemen
- Coopers
- Cordwainers
- Curriers, Feltmakers, Armourers and Hatters
- Drapers
- Fullers and Dyers
- Glassmakers
- Glovers
- Goldsmiths
- Grocers and Spicers
- Heelmakers
- Hostmen⁹
- Housecarpenters, Millwrights and Trunkmakers
- Joiners
- Masons
- Merchant Adventurers (incorporating Boothmen, Drapers and Mercers)
- Merchants
- Mettors¹⁰
- Millers
- Plumbers, Glaziers, Pewterers and Painters (originally part of the Goldsmiths Guild)
- Porters
- Ropemakers
- Sadlers
- Sailmakers
- Scriveners
- Shipwrights
- Skinners
- Skinners and Glovers
- Slaters and Tylers
- Smiths
- Tailors
- Tanners
- Trinity House - The Fraternity of Master Mariners and Seamen

⁹ The Hostmen controlled the export of coal from the River Tyne

¹⁰ The Mettors were responsible for the measuring or weighing of commodities carried by the keels and boats on the River Tyne. A card (or table) of rates for metage was drawn up at the same time as their ordinary of 1611.

- Upholsterers, Tinsplate Workers and Stationers
- Weavers

Records of these Guilds and Companies are found in one or more of the following:

- Berwick-on-Tweed Record Office
- Durham Record Office
- University of Durham, Special Collections
- Tyne and Wear Archives
- Northumberland Archives

The majority of the Newcastle records are at Tyne & Wear Archives (<https://twarchives.org.uk/collection/user-guides-and-information>) whilst for the Durham Guilds, the bulk are at held by Durham University (http://reed.dur.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=ark/32150_s1h415p954d.xml&toc.id=)

Annex 2 - The Story of William Thornton

William Thornton was apprenticed by indentures to Thomas Johnson, surgeon, on the 21 November 1774 for 7 years. By devious means Johnson tricked William out of his half of his apprenticeship indenture and despite various efforts on William's part he refused to return it. This meant that Johnson held both parts of William's apprentice indenture.

On 20 May 1779, at a public meeting of the Company, Johnson signified that he was going aboard, which he subsequently did. As was customary, William offered to complete his apprenticeship with any other member of the Company. However, at that meeting there was only one surgeon present, and he did not choose to take William.

The head (=main) meeting of the Company was held a few days later on the 31 May 1779 and this time most of the surgeons of the Company were present. However, again, none chose to take him as apprentice.

As a result, William was given leave by the Company to go to London or elsewhere for improvement in his profession for the remainder of his time. In accord with this, he went as surgeon's mate to the Huntingdon Militia and completed his 7-year term.

In Newcastle at that time there were only three guilds a year at which public notice could be given of petitions for admission to the Freedom. Apprentices had to be called at three meetings prior to admission and so, to save time, it was normal for them to be called at the last two Guilds before they completed their 7 years.

When William came to request his Freedom in line with the rules and customs, his petition was rejected on the grounds that he could not produce his indenture - the one that had been stolen by Thomas Johnson - even though there plenty of other evidence that he had correctly completed his apprenticeship.

At this time, it was normal for the Barber Surgeons to allow their apprentices to travel in the final year of their apprenticeship to improve their skills - for example to travel to London or Edinburgh to attend the lectures of the leading surgeons of the day.

On the 20 January 1783, and following the case of William Thornton, the Common Council of the Incorporated Companies of Newcastle upon Tyne changed the rules to forbid any Master or Company to allow this type of travel without the permission of the Common Council.

The letter concludes with a plea that this rule should not be retrospectively applied to William and that he should be granted his Freedom.

The document concludes with a note in a different hand and signed by Th. Fawcett, 24 September 1783. This says that the rule could not be applied retrospectively and that "Thornton the apprentice appears to not have been wilfully guilty of any default. On the contrary he seems to have done everything which he had any notion was requisite for him to do"

Mr Fawcett then recommends that the Common Council permit William's Guilds to be called.