

# Work conditions

*‘They were good to work for.’*

*‘They had this reputation of being awfully good to their workers.’*

**T**he comments opposite from former employees acknowledge the reputation which Thomas Nelson and Sons had as an employer. For some families, employment in Nelsons was a hereditary occupation. Family members from a number of generations and members of a single generation were employed in the firm, sometimes in a number of different departments and trades. Nelsons was a firm that fostered loyalty: workers spent much, if not the entirety, of their working lives with it.

## Entering the trade

The employment conditions in Nelsons formed part of a wider pattern of work that existed in the Edinburgh and Scottish printing and publishing industry. Entry into the firm was controlled by the number of apprenticeships laid down by trade unions. On the trades side, entrants went through the Printers’ Exam. Their apprenticeships lasted seven years for males (later six) and four years for females, after which they became journeymen.



*Inspecting casing in the New Factory in the early 1960s*



*Working on the three-knife trimmer in the Old Factory in the early 1960s*



*Nelsons compositors in 1959*



*Nelsons office workers in the 1950s/1960s*

Throughout the firm, males and females each had their own distinct work roles. Men had the highest status jobs which included composing and printing. Women generally undertook a range of tasks that were described as ‘laying on and taking off’. These included feeding sheets into printing presses, folding and stitching. The trades also had a hierarchical structure. At the top were the process workers followed by the lithographers, compositors, printers and then book binders. Each trade had its own work conditions, hours of work, and rates of pay.

## Unions

Central to many aspects of employment and work conditions in the industry was the trade union. As Nelsons undertook a range of trades, the workers were represented by a number of unions, one for each trade or a group. At the lowest level of union organisation, at a departmental level, was the Chapel. This was headed by the Father of the Chapel (FOC), usually a male, elected by the workers to act on their behalf. Relations between the chapels and Nelson management were favourable. For many of the workers, the only strike action they were involved in took place in the summer of 1959, a period of general action throughout the Edinburgh printing industry.