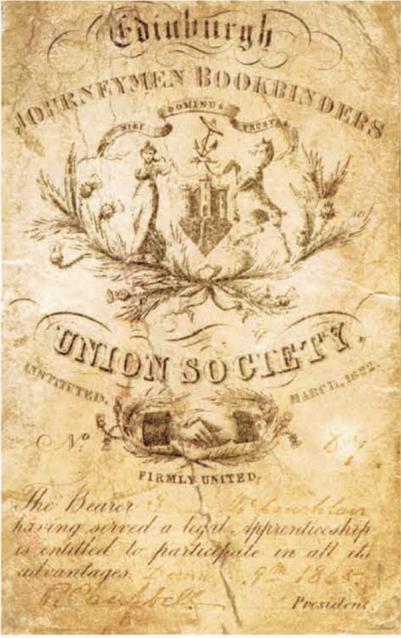# Apprentices & Printers

F rom the early sixteenth century the printing industry operated a 'closed shop', which meant that those working in printing houses had to belong to a trade guild. These guilds were run by employers and monopolised their particular trade within a town or region and imposed strict trade practices that dictated how, when and where a man might be employed.

The printing workforce consisted of apprentices, journeymen and master printers. Apprentices would enter the trade and 'serve their time' of between two and five years in the service of a master who would provide training, food and board, clothing and occasional payment. The apprentice would clean the workshop, run errands, prepare ink, pull the press and ultimately learn the more skilled jobs from journeymen. A journeyman was a specialist – an apprentice who had graduated to the role of compositor, corrector, type designer or press operator. He would move from town to town honing his skills and establishing contacts. Compositors, who were responsible for setting the type for a printed manuscript, were frequently the most skilled journeymen since they needed a good level of literacy to do their job. A journeying compositor would hope to rise to a position of head compositor in a large firm before establishing himself as a printer in his own right. Tension between workers and masters centred on disputes over pay, meals, long hours and the overuse of unskilled apprentices by masters trying to reduce costs. Strikes were not uncommon.

The onset of the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s brought an element of resistance on the part of workers who formed themselves into unions to protect their interests in the midst of all the changes brought about by Industrialisation. Unions took over in agreement with management many of the earlier functions of the guild structure, limiting the number of apprentices, for example, and creating a strong sense of belonging to the local 'chapel' (or works-based union branch) presided over by the 'Father of the Chapel'. A close-knit community survived in printing as it disappeared in other industries and trades.