

4

APPRENTICES

Introduction

During the 13th century, people of similar occupations and religious beliefs joined together and formed guilds. At first, the children of guild members were taught by their parents. Then an early form of apprenticeship evolved whereby a child was 'bound' to a master craftsman and the guild supervised instruction.

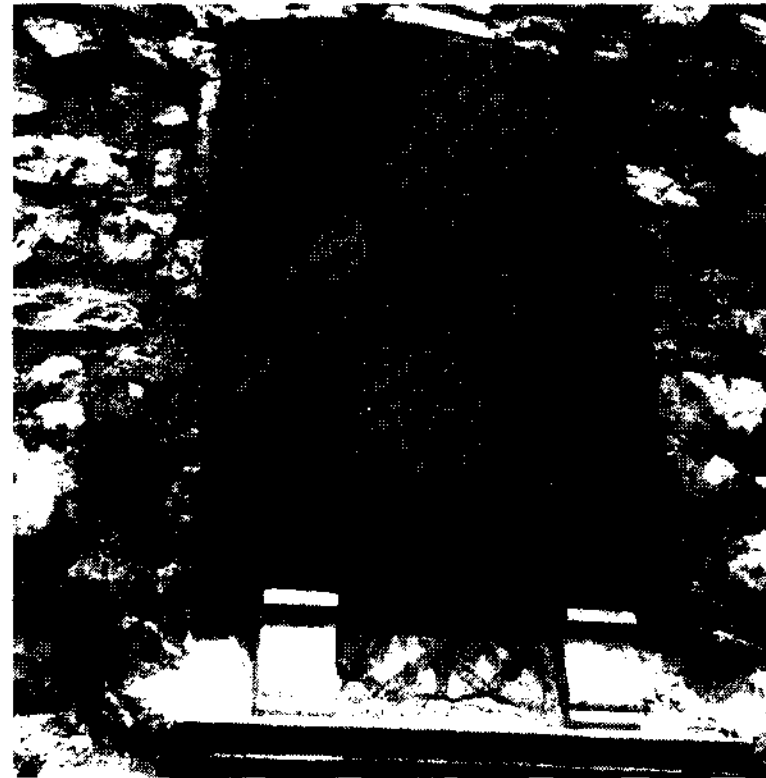
Apprenticeship was firmly established by the 15th century and the apprentice paid a master for his indenture. In 1562 Elizabeth I's *Statute of Artificers* made a seven-year term of apprenticeship compulsory for all industrial workers. (The system remained more or less unchanged until the late 18th century.) Chimney sweeps had no guild but were subject to the same regulations as other trades.

Towards the end of the 16th century, Justices were given power to apprentice the children of the poor. Small undernourished children were perfect for narrow chimney flues and young sweeps often served a longer term of apprenticeship. In 1747, *The London Tradesman* compiled a list of information about the trades. Of the chimney sweepers it stated:

The proper Business of this black Fraternity is expressed by their Name, and may be seen in their face; it is true they all take Apprentices, and the younger they are the better fit to climb up chimneys; but I would not recommend my friend to breed his Son to this Trade, tho' I know some Masters who live comfortably.¹

Apprenticeship indentures

An indenture was an agreement made between two parties; the master sweep and his apprentice. Signed in the presence of several appointed witnesses it was binding by law. On 5th July, an agreement² was made between Thomas Carter and Master Sweep William Owen from Liver-



Commemorative plaque to Bryan Turberville at St Mary-at-Lambeth Church, who bequeathed one hundred pounds towards the apprenticeship of boys, as long as they were not to be put to chimney-sweepers.

pool. Thomas, a poor boy from the parish of Dean on the outskirts of South West Bolton, agreed to serve his master faithfully, keep his secrets and obey his commands. He had to refrain from unlawful games, cards and dice, and keep away from evil company, alehouses and taverns. Fornication and adultery were forbidden and permission had to be obtained before he could get married.

In return, William Owen agreed to teach Thomas the trade of chimney sweeper and provide for his welfare. The indenture was signed by James Higson, overseer of Middleton, Lanes, and several witnesses. Although William Owen completed the indenture with his mark (a cross) there appeared to be no provision for Thomas Carter's signature.

On 2nd October 1799, William Booth, Overseer of the Poor at Werneth, Chester, arranged for 10-year-old Samuel Gee to be appren-



Made the

... Day of July in the Year of our Lord, One Thousand Seven Hundred and Seventy Seven

... that the said Church Wardens and Overseers by and with the Content and Allowance of Two of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace (One of the Quorum) of the County of ... have Put, Placed, and Bound

... who is a Poor Man ... as an Apprentice to the said ... with him to co-habit and dwell after the Manner of an Apprentice ...

... shall faithfully Serve, his Masters keep, his Lawfull Commands obey; at Card Dice, or any unlawful Game, he shall not Play, or Exercise himself therein; Ale-Houses, taverns, evil Company ...

... Fornication or Adultery (he shall not commit, nor Matrimony contract, during the said Term; neither shall he Conforte, Waite, or Lend the Goods in his said Knowledge and Consent: DAMAGE ...

... In Consideration whereof, and of the Sum of ...

... doth for himself, his Executors, Administrators, and Assigns, Covenant, Promise and Grant to and with the said Church-Wardens and Overseers of the Poor, and their Successors, that the said ...

SEALED and DELIVERED ...

... according to the Indenture above written ...

Handwritten date: The 6th of July 1777

The indenture of 1777 between Thomas Carter (apprentice) and William Owen (master sweep).

ticed to Master Sweep Robert Baxter of Manchester. The master sweep agreed to provide 'for climbing, one whole and compleat Suit of Clothing with suitable linen Stockings & Hose and shoes', and pledged 'at least once in every week' to cause his apprentice to be 'Honourably washed and cleansed from Soot and Dirt'. Furthermore, his apprentice should attend church on Sunday but not wear his 'sweeping dress' on that day.

The indenture also stated that an apprentice should not be forced to climb any chimney while it was 'actually on Fire'. Apprentices were to be treated with as much humanity and care as the nature of the employment of chimney sweepers allowed. Both the master sweep and apprentice signed the indenture with a cross (See Appendix for other indentures.)

Welfare

Apprentice sweeps lived with their masters. Life was hard and discipline severely enforced. Nevertheless, there was much kindness and often close bonds with the employer's family. The poorer class of sweep lodged in a boarding house. He hired two rooms; one for himself, wife and children, and the other - either an attic or a cellar - for his apprentices, soot and equipment. For bedding, the boys slept on straw or their sootbag. Apprentices with wealthier masters had their own quarters away from the soot and slept on truckle beds. This was a small bed made to run under a larger one (mostly for servants or attendants).

Food

Country sweeps lived off the land during the fruitful season. When work was slack, they earned a wage harvesting or gleaning - gathering leftovers in the cornfields. At other times, food came from the larders of clients. When sweeping the homes of the wealthy - though covered in soot - the boys and their master were welcome to sit in the servants' hall and 'partake at breakfast'.³ This generally included hot hashed venison, cold roast beef, tea, coffee or ale. Such hospitality was found at Haverholme Priory, the seat of the Earl of Winchelsea, Raunceby Hall and other great houses around Sleaford.

Sometimes breakfast consisted only of ale. It was contained in a large tankard, 'the liquor black as night and mouldy on top with age'. The boys were expected to drink it down quickly on their master's instructions: 'Now, lads, open your shoulders and let it down.'⁴ They obeyed in case they did not get anything the next time.

In London, food was mostly bought on the streets. Hot spiced gingerbread was a great favourite, so were oysters at four for Id. An illustration from Harris's *Cries of London* (1804) shows mischievous chimney sweeps making fun of a gingerbread seller. Another favourite among the apprentices was the saloop-stall (soup), which in time was succeeded by the coffee-stall. On bleak winter mornings the earliest clients were young chimney sweeps, who gathered round the stall until the charcoal under the grate heated the saloop smoking hot.

Mid-day meals consisted of hot eels and a baked potato or hot pea soup, followed by assorted pastries and cakes, or fruit (oranges and nuts). A sandwich was popular for supper, or a meat pudding, or trotter (foot of sheep etc). In his *Praise of Chimney Sweepers*, Charles

Lamb mentions 'a cup of sassafras⁵ which a sweep's boy would sniff like a cat sniffing valerian.'

Clothing

In the first half of the 18th century, London climbing boys wore special clothing made from sheepskin. The waistcoat was laced on and tucked under the breeches, and though some soot penetrated, it served as a great protection.⁶ The practice was discontinued because the 'dress' cost 7s 6d and needed renewing twice a year. It was also found impracticable: 'When a boy went up a chimney on fire, it was apt to parch and break the leather.' Until the mid-19th century, climbing boys' dress varied according to the status of their masters. Regardless of seasons a shirt and trousers were worn, though it was prudent to remove trousers when descending narrow chimneys as too much soot collected in the pockets.

Feet became hardened when no shoes or stockings were worn. Moreover, walking was preferable to riding a donkey on frosty mornings, as piercing winds caused chilblains or frostbite. When this happened, climbing into a hot chimney was a pleasure. If the mistress of a household was tender-hearted, the sweep's boy was told to beg for shoes. There was not the slightest chance of wearing them, as they would be sold to the rag and snotcher (bone) man.

A country sweep's only protection against the elements was his soot sack. The sack was large and adaptable. It could be used as a cloak, a head covering, mattress, pillow, or blanket, as well as a screen in front of the open fireplace (while sweeping the chimney). It also served as a weapon or as protection against attack: swung when full, or twisted and knotted when empty. Often used as a handy container for personal goods, it could become a hiding place, either for its owner or any stolen booty - all in addition to its main function, the storage of soot. Considering its many uses it is no surprise that contemporary illustrators always depicted young sweeps with their sacks.

According to an account in the *Wensleydale Advertiser* (1845),⁷ several chimney sweeps and their boys lived in Middleham Castle, Yorkshire. It was rumoured that the boys practised various tricks to avoid the Id toll when crossing the bridge to Leyburn. A group would dash over together before the toll-keeper could catch them, or a journeyman or master sweep would conceal a boy in his soot-sack.

Poor London masters dressed their apprentices in any rags their wives could find. Clothes were picked up second-hand in places such as Rosemary Lane. If their wives could sew, then garments resembling sacks were made. Sometimes a friend who was more skilled, or a poor



Cries of London, 1850. A sweep partaking of his regular fare of a baked potato from a street seller. (Reproduced by kind permission of Guildhall Library, Corporation of London)



The CHIMNEY SWEEPER'S BOY!

Some BOYS delight in Wood-pigeon-baiting
 - Ho! Ho! Men in Women, and in 'Tinkling'
 Just as the 'Pipions' move the 'Mind'
 - In this-or that Amusement find;
 - Nor EARNESTLY painful Voice,
 - Could make the Boy so much rejoice.

Aspiring of the Kittens' Head
 - to make itself 'Hew upon the Head'
 - The Foible of the Boy here
 - Be, speaks a Pleasure
 - And hence may
 - From little things

tailor was 'called in' and paid one shilling a day and 'the grub'. When a poor tailor went to work at a customer's house, this was known as 'whipping the cat'. The 'whipped cat's' meals cost about 1s 6d, including beer. The cost of new clothes varied from 3s 6d to 6s 6d (sewing extra). One boy remembered that one Sunday his mistress had bought him a 'werry tidy jacket' for 1s 6d in Petticoat Lane. The jacket had probably been made for a gentleman's son.

Prosperous masters provided their apprentices with trousers, tunic or tight-fitting shirt with sleeves, and a small waistcoat and jacket. A well-dressed apprentice (in the eyes of the more discerning householder) signalled a well-run business. Clothes were made from dark hardwearing cloth known as 'chimney-sweeper's cloth'. One apprentice recalled that when he was sweeping the church flues with his master, he noticed that the dark cloth hanging in the church as mourning for Princess Charlotte of Wales (1817) resembled his own clothes. On Sundays, the boys wore either a clean climbing suit or ordinary dress. Shoes and stockings bought secondhand were usually kept at the Sunday school (see later).

When sweeping chimneys a 'climbing cap' was worn. Made of unbleached calico it was drawn over the head and tucked in at the neck. In a good sized chimney it was possible to breathe adequately through the cloth, hear distinctly, and distinguish daylight when nearing the chimney top. It also kept the head warm in winter. However, a climbing cap was not always practical. Breathing became difficult in hot narrow chimneys where there was little draught, and body perspiration became a 'source of anxiety and trouble'.⁸

Clothes became completely black. So did exposed skin, especially when sleeping under soot bags at night. Ingrained soot was difficult to remove. London apprentices used to wash in the river Serpentine, until a sweep boy was accidentally drowned.

Two sketches by satirical artist James Seymour bring out the humour of the apprentices' predicament. In one sketch (1st August 1835), two apprentices in black rags are shown in contrast to their donkey, which they are decorating with colourful garlands:

"Wot a beauty! Missus says theres a great deal in dress."

"To be sure there is Bill, if ve had blue coats with gold buttons, & red ves-coats and vite trowsers ve should look quite swell."

The second sketch with its ironic twist shows two thin, bow-legged, knock-kneed apprentices with brushes, scrapers, full bags of soot and miserable faces, leaving a well-to-do house. A rotund well-dressed black flunkey stands in the doorway, his face beaming with contentment. The boys are talking to each other:



Apprentice climbing boy, 1840. (Acknowledgements, Armley Mills, Leeds.)

"Bob, arnt you glad you aint a Black-emoor?"

"I should think so, they're sich ugly warments, Master's daughter wot's come from boarding school, says the sight of em's enough to frighten one into convulsions!!"

Perhaps the final word on apprentice sweeps' appearance should go to a black woman from the West Indies:

A Mrs P arrived at Bristol from the West Indies and brought

with her a female Negro servant, mother of several children left in that country. A few days after their arrival and they had gone into private lodgings, a sweep-boy was sent for by the landlady to sweep the kitchen chimney. This woman, being seated in the kitchen when little *soot* entered, was struck with amazement at the spectacle he presented; and with great vehemence, clapping her hands together, exclaimed, 'Wha dis me see! La, la, dat buckara piccaninny! So help me, nyung Misse,' (addressing herself to the housemaid then present) 'sooner dan see one o'mine piccannies tan so, I drown he in de sea.' The progress of the poor child in sweeping the chimney closely engrossed her attention, and when she saw him return from his sooty incarceration, she addressed him with a feeling that did honour to her maternal tenderness, saying, 'child! come yaw, child,' (and without waiting any reply, and putting a sixpence in his hand;) 'who you Mammy? You hab daddy, too? wha dem be, da la you go chimney for?' and moistening her finger at her lips began to rub the child's cheek, to ascertain, what yet appeared doubtful to her, whether he was really a buccaree (white). I saw this woman sometime after in the West Indies; and it was a congratulation to her ever after, that *her* "children were not born to be sweeps."⁹

Orphans (18th Century)

In etchings featuring apprentice chimney sweeps, the London Foundling Hospital is often shown in the background. A popular print published by B. Phillips in *Modern London* (1805) portrays a young sweep by the hospital gates. A metal apprenticeship badge is attached to the front of his cap and he carries a large sack over his shoulder. The boy is well clothed and wears stockings with buckled shoes.

It was during George II's reign that Thomas Coram, a retired Merchant Navy captain (aged over 70 years) followed up a suggestion that abandoned children be cared for in some form of hospital. He managed to involve a number of influential 'names' in the scheme and the hospital received its first 'foundlings'- 19 boys and 11 girls – on 25th March 1741.

When children reached the age of 12, they were apprenticed to different trades and services. In 1770, out of a total number of 1666 children, 963 became apprentices. The following account of apprentices' progress was drawn up in May 1798:



The popular image of an apprentice sweep shown outside the Foundling Hospital. (William Marshall Craig. Reproduced by kind permission of Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.)

In 1795 lawyer Sir Thomas Bernard became particularly interested in the climbing boys. He gave up his profession and became treasurer of the Foundling Hospital, remaining in this capacity for 23 years (see Chapter 6). In the 1830s, chimney sweeper Mrs Molloy was engaged to sweep the hospital chimneys. Mrs Molloy professed to sweeping flues with the new machine, but was later found to be to using climbing boys (see Chapter 7). There is no evidence to suggest, however, that foundling children were used in the hospital chimneys. The Foundling Hospital finally closed in 1953. Today the Thomas Coram Foundation Trust is housed on part of the original site at 40 Brunswick Square.

Orphans (19th Century)

At the time of the 1834 Act (banning the apprenticing of boys under the age of 10) local administration was carried out by parish unions. Every union had a workhouse controlled by a Board of Guardians. Parish overseers paid master sweeps £3-£4 to take an orphan apprentice.

Charles Dickens's fictional account of *Oliver Twist* was published in the first year of Queen Victoria's reign (1837). It was sub-titled *The Parish Boy's Progress*.¹⁰ Dickens was familiar with the working conditions of apprentices, as, aged 12 years, he had been removed from school by his mother (when his father was imprisoned for debt), and sent to work in a blacking warehouse. Dickens's portrayal of Mr. Gamfield, a master sweep who is hard up and in need of £5 to pay 'certain arrears of rent'¹, is memorable:

Mr Gamfield had stopped to read a bill posted on the workhouse gate. It informed the public that Oliver Twist was TO LET for the sum of £5. Mr Gamfield, addressing 'the gentleman in the white waistcoat who was standing beside it, said:

"This here boy, Sir, wot the parish wants to 'prentis ... If the parish would like him to learn a right pleasant trade, in a good 'spectable chimbley-sweepin' bisness. I wants a 'prentis, and I am ready to take him."

When Mr Gamfield stated his wish before The Board a short while afterwards, its members were less than enthusiastic. After some discussion, £3 15 was settled upon. However, later that afternoon when Oliver was taken before the Magistrates to have his indenture approved, he appealed so effectively not to be sent away 'with that

Doing well ...	166
Have turned out ill ...	15
In different situations, well apprenticed, no complaint ...	27
Apprenticed to relations ...	23
Not free from blame but requiring judicious management ...	2\
Total	252

dreadful man', that the indenture went unsigned, and Oliver was returned to the workhouse.

Payment

Reader, if thou meetest one of these small gentry in thy early rambles, it is good to give him penny. It is better to give him twopence, if it be starving weather ... the demand on thy humanity will surely rise to a tester (sixpence).

Charles Lamb, 1822

There were no set fees for chimney sweeping. Apprentices were mostly loyal to their masters, often going out unaccompanied to sweep chimneys, yet returning with their earnings. A young sweep in 1792 was paid 9d a chimney and he cleaned about four chimneys a day.¹¹ In 1817, the average fee, exclusive of soot, was 10d.

Alfred Wiseman from Norwich climbed his first chimney in Trafalgar Street when he was 9 years old (1857). His master, Mr Finch of St Miles, paid him 'A few coppers a week according to the state of his business and his behaviour.'¹² In his employ, Alfred and another boy achieved the distinction of being the first sweeps to climb the chimneys of the Norwich poorhouse. The boys were paid 3d each. When Alfred was 12, he worked for a different master sweep in Hingham. He was paid 6d a week (also food and clothing - no boots or stockings; they were too expensive). He swept up to 21 chimneys before breakfast. Later Alfred's wages were raised to 1s 6d when he went to work for Mr Sainter in Mileham.

Cruelty

The chimney sweeping trade - in common with other trades during the Industrial Revolution - had an abundance of masters who ill-treated their apprentices. Evidence is not difficult to find. Parliamentary reports and court cases were fully documented and misdemeanours and cruelties were read about avidly, just as they are today.

Thomas Allen had been 'articled in a public house in 1795 at the age of three and a half,¹³ and James Dunn from Knightsbridge, recalled being 'bound at 5 years of age.'¹⁴ He was frequently ill treated and was once sent up a chimney, which had been on fire for 48 hours. As a result, he had fallen, and his burns had crippled him for life. He was 10 years old at the time. Dunn claimed that boys were rented out to

masters for 6d per day. Masters could have any number of boys, and although 4 or 5 boys were generally thought sufficient, he knew one master who had 24 boys.

Poverty-stricken parents could be accused of cruelty when, driven by family circumstances, they sold or gave away their children to chimney sweeps. The smaller the child the better: different sized heads to fit different sized flues. It was common practice for parents to 'Dispose of them to the best Bidder, as they could not put them apprentice to any other Trade, at so young an age.'¹⁵

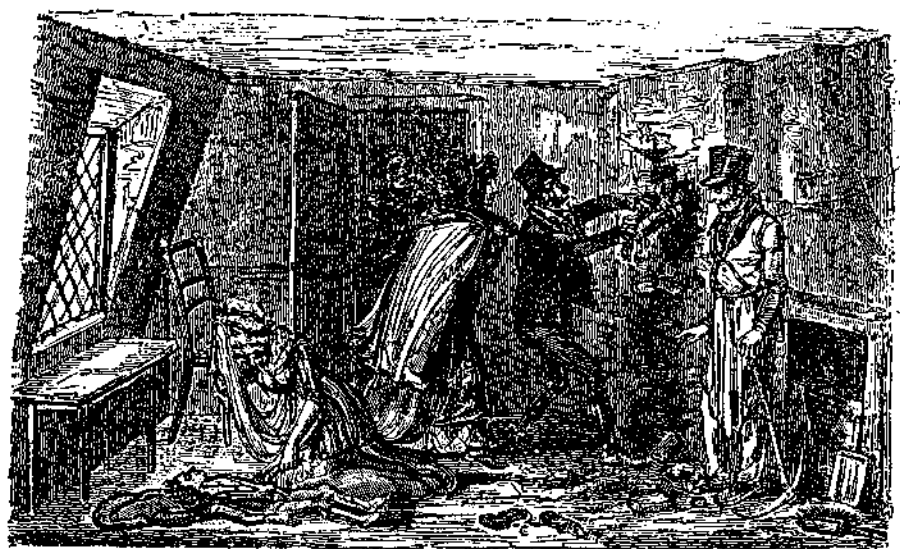
On Tuesday 24th August 1809, Bow Street Magistrate Court heard that a Mr Miller had sold his five-year-old son to Master Sweep Henry Doe for the sum of three guineas. Miller, a plumber by trade, had sold the child while his wife was 'out of town'. The case ended happily, however, as the mother, helped by a kind solicitor, managed to get her child returned, and Henry Doe, for having purchased a child 'under age' was fined the sum of £5.

The following cases, selected at random throughout the country, detail instances of extreme cruelty. One of the most publicised cases was that of 10-year-old Valentine Gray, a destitute child from Alverstoke workhouse. There were 122 children at Alverstoke, and Valentine was one of 64 boys. Conditions in the workhouse were reasonable and children were provided with adequate food, clothes and schooling. In 1821, Valentine was apprenticed to a master sweep called Davis from Newport on the Isle of Wight. Shortly after Christmas, both Davis and his wife were brought to court. Their young apprentice had died. When surgeon Dr Bucknell examined Valentine's body, he found the boy filthy, emaciated and bruised. He also had a severe scalp wound. Davis and his wife were convicted of manslaughter and imprisoned for 12 months. The circumstances of Valentine's death were so distressing that the residents of Newport raised a 'Id fund' and used the proceeds to erect a monument in Newport churchyard:

VALENTINE GRAY, THE LITTLE SWEEP
INTERRED JANUARY 5th A.D. 1822 ... a testimony
to all innocent children who suffered.

On 7th July 1827, the *Leeds Mercury* reported the death of a sweep in a chimney at Thornton. At about 10 am on Tuesday morning the young boy had been cheerfully employed sweeping a chimney, when his brush became lodged in the flue. Fearful of his master's anger he remained in the chimney. His master, J. Holgate, sent another apprentice up to get him, but the boy climbed out of reach. The enraged Holgate swearing he would 'cut him to pieces', lit a fire in the grate -

to no effect. The apprentice was sent up again with a rope, which he tied to the boy's leg. Holgate tugged the rope down a few feet and secured it to the grate. He then climbed up to the boy himself and stayed with him about five minutes. On returning, he declared that he had felt the boy's feet and thought he was dying. The chimney was dismantled around 3 pm but it was too late. The boy had stuck fast in a narrow section of the flue and died. Holgate was tried, found guilty of manslaughter and confined to York Castle. At the next Assizes, Holgate was acquitted. Medical opinion had decided that his apprentice had died of suffocation and not through any wounds or bruising found on his body.



George Cruikshank's portrayal of an incident at Lothbury where two climbing boys lost their lives. (From *The Chimney Sweeper's Friend and Climbing Boys' Album*)

Another fatality through ill treatment occurred on 11th July 1847. Readers of *The Times* learned that Thomas Price, aged seven years, had died of convulsions following a beating, after being taken out of a hot flue. His Master John Gordon had declared that the young devil was 'foxing', when the boy had become half-asphyxiated in the hot flue of Tennants' Chemical Works in Manchester. His master had twice forced Thomas up the flue. Gordon was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to transportation for 10 years.

Religion and Education

Charity schools at the beginning of the 18th century were mostly associated with the church. In 1733, St Albans Church School, Cheapside, had 75 pupils; 50 boys and 25 girls. The children were taught, clothed, and 'put out in apprentice and service'.¹⁶

Sunday schools where apprentices were taught after the Sunday service were introduced in 1780 by Robert Raikes, owner/editor of the *Gloucester Journal*. Credit also goes to another Gloucester boy, William Fox, who founded a 'Society for the Establishment and Support of Sunday Schools throughout the Kingdom'. William Fox became a wealthy London merchant. His Society founded six schools in its first year, and nine years later 65,000 pupils had benefited from books supplied by the Society to 1,012 schools.

An anonymous writer, 'Eusebia', wrote in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1794:

I know some Master Sweeps dress their boys very decent on Sunday: in particular one whom I employ who takes his to church. He told me he wished he could read himself and then he could instruct his boy, who, he said was a forthright lad and would take anything he was taught.

The writer, (probably from the Sheffield area) had tried in every way he could to encourage a Sunday school for chimney sweeps, suggesting that every ward in the city should maintain one. He reasoned that if every house contributed 'Is (5p), this would amount to £10 a year. It would pay 'some elderly man' a small allowance for his trouble, as well as lodging (in one room), half a caldron of coals for firing, two or three benches, and a few cheap books.

Four years later, a lady in the neighbourhood of Kingston upon Thames (believed to be the Countess of Kingston) undertook to supply climbing boys with clothes so that they could attend Sunday school. Each apprentice received:

One jacket and pair of trousers of coarse blue cloth ...	10s 6d
Two shirts ...	7s 0d
One pair of trousers ...	4s 0d
A hat ...	2s 3d
Total	£1 3s 9d

She also sent to each chimney sweeper's house, a weekly allowance of a quarter of a pound of soap, and the following items:

A straw paillasse [mattress]	£1 2s Od
A pair of blankets ...	17s Od
A washing tub ...	6s 6d
<hr/>	
Total	£2 5s 6d

The idea of teaching apprentice sweeps to read and write appealed to leading Christian philanthropic societies as well as individuals. In August 1798, a Sunday School was started in Brick Lane, Kingston upon Thames, where apprentice sweeps were instructed by a master and mistress appointed by a special committee. Approval came from the Bishop of Durham who reported to the Society for Bettering the Conditions of the Poor in 1799 that the chimney sweepers' boys were 'Improving in their reading ... some beginning to read the New Testament'. They were also 'acquiring habits of cleanliness and attention' and their 'manners and morals' were greatly improved.

On 13th March 1818, a Parliamentary Committee asked William Tooke (see Chapter 6) if he knew, in general, whether master sweeps took care of the educational needs of their apprentices. Mr Tooke replied that although an association had been formed in 1800 with this object in view, little progress had been made and that apprentices had no education whatever; 'out of a total of 750 journeymen and apprentices only about 20 were able to read and most were illiterate'.

Nine years later, W.H. Pyne pointed out that there were more public institutions for the relief of the poor in Great Britain than there were in any other country. In almost every town there was a 'free-school and a charity school'.¹⁷ However, during a Parliamentary Inquiry in the 1850s, Lord Salisbury stated that although there was a great deal of 'professional zeal' at a time when 4,000 children were employed in sweeping chimneys, the results of a survey into the trade showed that, among 482 boys in 170 establishments, only 21 had acquired the rudiments of reading and only two could write.

Chimney Climbing

At the beginning of the 17th century when land was scarce in large towns and cities, architects constructed buildings several storeys high. Fireplaces - already reduced in size for burning coal - became even narrower. Flues, placed within walls to save space, frequently travelled

horizontally or zigzagged. This was sometimes necessary to avoid obstacles and so as not upset room decor (see Chapter 9). An average flue measured 9" x 4" or 8" square, and could only be climbed by children.

Historians believe that the art of climbing narrow chimneys was learned from the agile children of Piedmont and Savoy, who came to London as émigrés during the reign of Charles II. Children from the mountainous areas of Northern Italy supplied all Germany and France with climbing sweeps. A once highly esteemed German travel book by Johann George Keyser (1740) records that an old man used regularly to collect children from villages and take them abroad. This exodus of children may have been the inspiration for Robert Browning's narrative poem *The Pied Piper of Hamlyn*, and would explain why much of the 'reported' speech attributed to chimney sweeps in previous centuries was heavily accented, i.e. vot (what), ve (we), etc.

Young children climbed our tortuous flues for more than 200 years. There is no denying their courage and skill.



The Little Sweep's Christmas. A climbing boy from France.

Techniques

Large chimneys and stacks were easily climbed. They were often built with stepped sides, iron rungs, metal pegs or protruding bricks, inserted inside the flue to aid the sweeper. Evidence of this could be seen until recently at The Buck's Head, Little Wymondley (Hertfordshire). This small 17th-century inn has a central chimney stack with four flues. Two inglenook fireplaces on the ground floor contain iron rings set at intervals up the interior of the chimney. Basement chimneys in Knightsbridge were fitted with ladders.

Narrow chimneys, however, required considerable skill. Novice sweeps practised on straight flues. They climbed with elbows and legs spread out, feet pressing against the sides of the flue. An older boy or journeyman hoisted the younger boy up the chimney, remaining below him as he climbed. Apprentices learned quickly; often being more afraid of the journeyman than the master.

Reluctant climbers – children with no natural ability or those who were afraid of enclosed dark spaces – were harshly disciplined. A severe beating with a rope or brush on bare skin soon persuaded them. One master sweep¹⁸ calculated that a chimney should be 12" square for a boy of seven to go up with ease, and when properly taught, flues that were 9" x 14" could be climbed effortlessly. Humane masters provided their apprentices with padding for knees and ankles, and waited for their sores to heal, though it was usual to harden the skin by rubbing with brine.

When seven-year-old George Elson climbed his first chimney - a straight one - his master rewarded him with 2d. As George became more experienced, he claimed flues of 14" square could be 'run up and down'. Young sweeps had their own 'climbing terms'. A large chimney was called 'wide hole'. Small flues 9" square (which could be upwards of 60 feet in length) were either called 'bare nines' or 'notchy holes'. They had to be climbed 'cape and corner', that is, crosswise; with the face in one angle, the back in the angle behind and an arm in the angle either side. If a flue was unclimbable the only resort was to 'pike it'. That meant sweeping up as far as possible and leaving the remainder untouched. A flue in which a great deal of soot had collected was termed a 'foggy hole'.

When cleaning narrow flues, one arm remained close to the side of the body with the palm of the hand turned outwards, pressing against the side of the flue, while the other arm was extended above the head, holding the scraper. The descent was accomplished by 'scotching' in turn with knees and elbows.

Charles Lamb recalls how, in his childhood (c1780) it gave him

a 'mysterious pleasure' to see the young chimney sweeper in action:

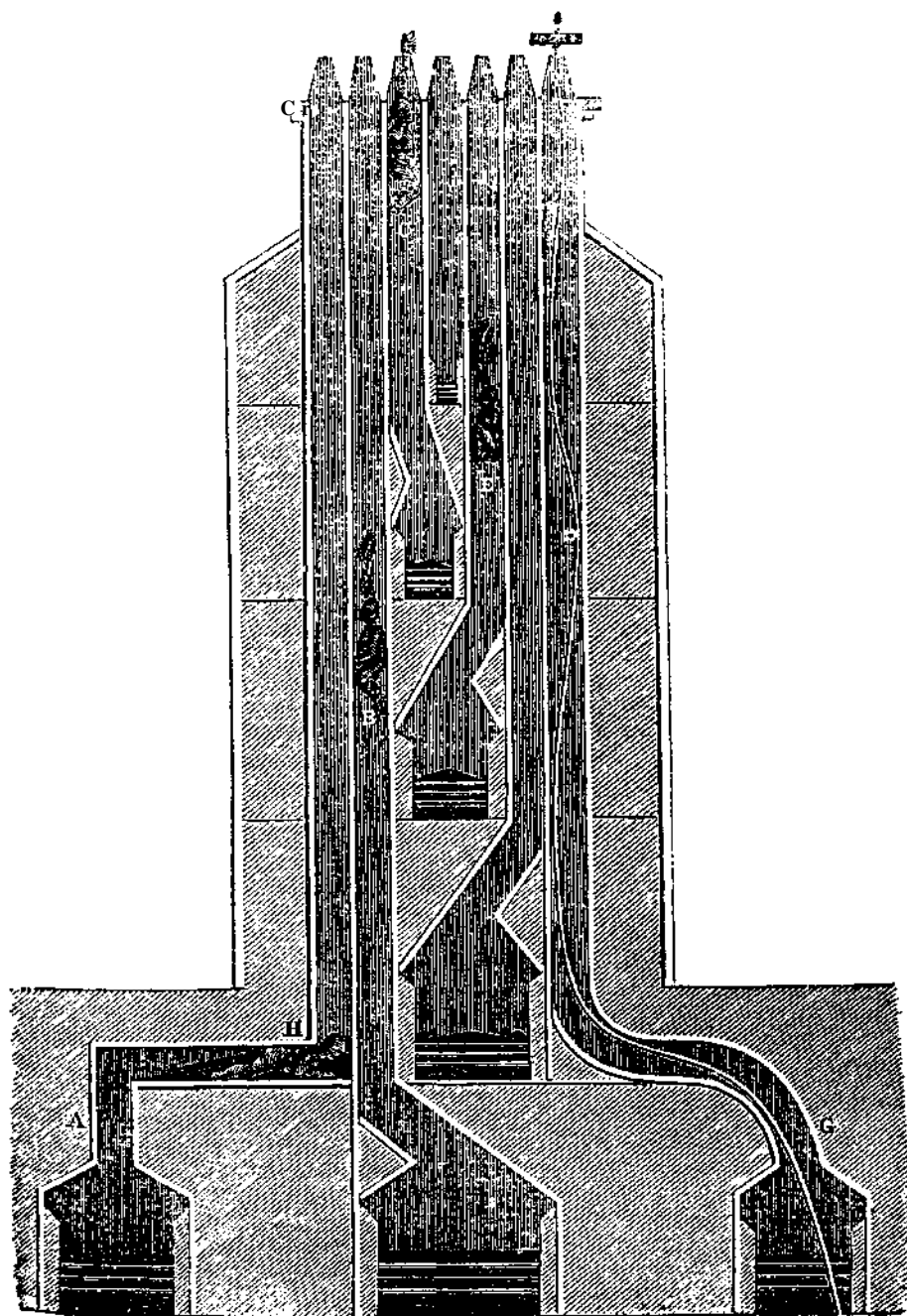
To see a chit no bigger than myself enter, one knew not by what process, into what seemed the fauces Averni [furnaces of hell], to pursue him in imagination, as he went sounding on through so many stifling caverns, horrid shades! - to shudder with the idea that "now, surely, he must be lost for ever!" - to revive at hearing his feeble shout of discovering daylight – and then ... running out of doors, to come just in time to see the sable phenomenon emerge in safety, the brandished weapon of his art victorious like some flag waved over a conquered citadel!

In 1818 kitchen chimneys where stoves had been installed contained flues that were 7", and in some cases, 6" square. Only very young children could sweep these flues. Worthing Vyse (see Chapter 8) describes some of the problems:

The box of the smoke jack, which contains the oil, is leaky, which is frequently the case, consequently the works of the jack are covered over with a thick coat of oil and soot; but as I have no time to lose, I endeavour to pass by the jack as well as I can, but with all my care, a quantity of the oil and soot wipes off on the back of my shirt, which soon penetrates and sticks fast to my skin: now this, if I only stood in need of it, would form a most excellent strengthening plaster, and as it is, no doubt it prevents me catching cold, as I am exposed alternately to excessive heats, and to a keen and frosty atmosphere.

Hazards

Flues with sharp drawn-in bends or flues that ran parallel and turned back on themselves were death traps to inexperienced climbers. This was because soot accumulated in hidden ledges and crevices. Joseph Glass (see Chapter 9) gave the following description. After passing up through the chimney then descending to the second angle from the fireplace, the boy finds it completely filled with soot, which he dislodges from the sides of the upright part. He tries to get through, and succeeds, after much struggling, as far as his shoulders, but finding that the soot is compressed so hard round him by his exertions that he can recede no further, he tries to move forward: but the sharp angled stone covering of the horizontal flue presses down on his shoulder and prevents him from moving. His face covered by the



Joseph Glass's illustration of possible positions for climbing boys, c 1814.

climbing cap is forced into the soot and stops him breathing. He struggles, and in a few moments is suffocated.¹⁹ One way of avoiding this predicament was to send two boys up the chimney. While one went to the top, the other cleared away the soot that fell into the slant. Then the first boy could return safely. In most instances this arrangement worked. There were, however, tragic accidents.

On Wednesday 5th March 1817, Master Sweep Edward Gay, No 3 Park Lane, Baker Street, (Mary-le-bone) sent his journeyman and two apprentices to sweep the chimneys at the house of Mr Buck, No 13 Cumberland Street. The two apprentices, Robert Tinson and Thomas Gainham, entered the library chimney. As it was known to be a troublesome one, the smaller boy, Thomas, went up the chimney ahead of Robert. It was a very long shaft. Robert called out to Thomas to come down, and the younger boy descended halfway down the upright. He stopped when he heard Robert groaning beneath him. A large amount of soot had piled up between them. When Thomas reached him, Robert 'moved two or three times', and Thomas tried to speak to him, but Robert 'could not hear'. The frightened boy climbed to the top and called to the journeyman. The journeyman rescued Thomas from the roof then went to find their master. Edward Gay sent for a bricklayer who broke into the chimney. Robert Tinson was found 'suffocated and dead', his head surrounded on all sides by soot.

Chimneys often contained hidden flues exposing the unsuspecting climber to additional danger. The following account concerns the death of George Topham. On Friday 16th February 1855, Master Sweep William Topham sent his young son George up a chimney flue at the Sydney Hotel, Goole. The boy soon came down complaining that the soot got in his mouth. His father made him ascend again but the boy returned. This time his father beat him. He then tied a cloth over George's mouth and forced him up the flue. After some time, when he failed to come down, an alarm was raised. The chimney wall was broken down and George was found suffocated in a different section of flue. A diversion of the original flue had been made in the same room. But no covering had been placed over the flue which descended into the old fireplace.²⁰ The chimney had been on fire and George, overcome by heat, had fallen down the old flue and suffocated in a pile of accumulated soot behind the fireplace. William Topham was consequently found guilty of manslaughter.

Inexperienced sweeps sometimes stuck fast in perpendicular flues. This was likely to happen when a flue branched off (see Appendix). The flue, instead of being the same width throughout its length, contained wider sections. Problems arose when the climbing boy descended. He unconsciously allowed his knees to rise in the enlarged

section of flue, and in that position slid down into the more constricted part and became wedged, remaining for many hours with his knees and back pressed against the sides of the flue. Extraction was painful; another boy had to tie a rope to his ankles and draw his legs down, or pull his arms up from above. If this failed, then a portion of brickwork was removed. Master Sweeper H. Chidlow²¹ reported that when he was young he had stuck fast in a flue for seven hours and that his brother had lost his life in a flue at Wolverhampton.

Chimney Pots

Other major hazards were ill-fitting or cracked chimney pots. Soot and other debris collecting inside the pots had to be removed. When pots were wide enough the sweeper passed his body through, waved his brush, and shouted loudly to show he had completed his climb. At other times the inside of the pot was swept clean with an arm and brush, then the side of the pot was rattled in testimony.

In Oxford market (1776) when a young sweep was trying to clear soot from a pot on the back parlour chimney, the pot, with the boy inside, fell down into the back yard. Fortunately, his fall was broken by a heap of rubbish. The boy, at first feared dead, was taken to Middlesex Hospital and he eventually recovered. But a maidservant who was washing in the yard when the pot landed was so terrified that she 'fell into fits and continued ill for some time'.²²

Another sad case was that of 10-year-old John Pasey. The boy was cleaning a decayed pot in the end flue of a zigzag stack of chimneys at No.60, in the Minories, London, when the pot broke in pieces and the boy fell to the ground breaking his skull.

Although these cases were horrific, a careful study of child labour during the Victorian era shows that fatalities among children in the chimney-sweeping trade were no higher than those recorded for other trades.

Coring and the 'Mysterious Art'

When new chimneys were built, they had to be 'cored', before a fire was lit. Loose rubble such as brick chippings, mortar, cement, or pieces of pargetting, everything that fell down inside the flue, had to be removed. Only climbing children could do the task. George Elson remembered going with his master to St Bernard Monastery, in the Charnwood Forest, to core the new Priory chimneys. George had to climb through all the flues to make sure there was no mortar in the

bends. His master met him at each chimney stack to help him out of one chimney and down into the next, in case there was a blockage and George became stuck.

Concerning the 'mysteries' attached to the 'art' of sweeping chimneys, climbing boy Sam Sharp explains:

One day I went with my master to call the streets. In passing through the Strand a person called us in, and said that the chimney in her room up stairs was on fire. We hastened up, and to our surprise found it was the sun which partly shone in at the top ... My master, however, said it was dreadfully on fire, and I was immediately thrust up. I swept the chimney well ... the charge was five shillings: the money was immediately paid, and all parties well pleased.²⁻³

Sam's second revelation concerned a kitchen chimney. He had swept it on many occasions and each time his master had ordered him to "pike it". After some time, the servant complained that it still smoked.

Sam's master (who had anticipated this) gave Sam the following instructions: 'When I take you there you must go partly up the chimney, and, after being there some time, come down and say there is a large hole in it.' Sam's master would then send another apprentice, Jack, for several large bricks and mortar. Sam next had to sweep the chimney thoroughly and 'stow away' the bricks and mortar, (probably in his soot sack). Five shillings was charged for the job and as the chimney drew well, all parties were satisfied.

Apart from extinguishing chimney fires, scraping, sweeping, coring, and repairs to the flue, a climbing boy was frequently called upon to remove more than soot from chimneys. Pigeons and magpies; swarms of bees, and even cats have been recovered. George Elson confessed that he hated being asked to remove swallow's nests from chimneys. Feeling sorry for the birds, he would leave the eggs or the young birds up on the top bricks, and just bring down the nest.



Climbing boy Sam Sharp, c 1830. From *The Climbing Boys' Advocate*.

Fun in Flues

There were even occasions of hilarity in climbing. Many a time when in good spirits, I have sung at my work; I and another boy in an empty house have raced each other up and down a pair of chimneys out of fun, and I have dared to ascend when even the chimney-stack has rocked with my weight and movements.

George Elson remembered one particular chimney at Mount Sorrell (four miles from Loughborough), where the house had been pulled down but the chimney remained. He had mischievously climbed it, though it rocked from side to side.

Chatteris, 'the town of treacle chimneys'¹, was the name given by climbing boys to chimneys on the Isle of Ely. Skilful climbers could only attempt the slippery narrow interiors of the chimneys. They were climbed as quickly as possible without stopping, to avoid slipping down with the soot.

Other peculiar chimneys were those contrived with a single shaft for two or three fireplaces. Smoke ascending from a flue that was not being swept caused confusion, particularly when the sweeper returning from the top was unsure which flue he had taken. Descending the wrong flue could sometimes be to their advantage; as a means of escape, for instance, or an unexpected chance to marvel at the cleanliness and wealth of the gentry, either in the dining-room, the parlour, or the upper bed-chambers. Because furnishings were covered or removed when chimney sweeps called, such wonders were rarely seen.

Attitude of Other Children

Other children regarded chimney sweeps their own age with a mixture of fascination and fear. Children working a 16-hour day in the potteries, carrying moulds from the potters to the stoves where temperatures reached over 120°F, no doubt envied the chimney sweeps' comparative freedom and variety of work. Apprentice sweeps might climb more than 20 flues before breakfast but their day ended at around 3 pm. And Monday was usually a slack day, when masters were busy with new contracts.

The young climbers' black appearance was generally scorned, but apprentices from other trades envied the gaily-dressed young sweeps who received alms and special suppers during May Day celebrations (see Chapter 10). And to some children, the climbing boys were heroes. J.C. Hudson (1823) wrote the following account:

I remember well seeing the boy. I never missed getting up at the same time as the servant to witness the horror. In winter I could not help remarking that the atmosphere of the fireplace kitchen, whilst making me shiver, seemed to be a relief to the poor boy just come in from the street. He slipped off his upper garment and drew on his sooty cap all over his face. The mysterious cloth was appended to the mantle-piece by means of two forks, and the boy, with a scraper in his hand, and brush in the other, slipped behind it and disappeared. I used to listen for the sound of his body rubbing against the sides of the chimney, and catch with eagerness every sound of his half-stifled voice, as it answered the gruff call of the Master below, and when I thought him near the top, I used to run out into the Street to see him emerge. At first the rattling of his scraper was heard against the sides of the chimney pot, and then his shrill voice announcing the success of his achievement. Then appeared the brush, and immediately afterwards the little hero himself waving it victoriously and shouting. Resting himself a minute I have seen him take off his cap and take a refreshing draught of cool and wholesome air.²⁴

George Elson and his brother were treated with a respect and much kindness after venturing into a village church in the 1840s. One Sunday, while the boys were floating sticks in a stream, two labourers approached them. The men wanted to know why the boys were not at church. After explaining that they wouldn't be let in because of the way they looked, the men good-naturedly supplied them with soap. 'Nothing loth, yet somewhat stricken with the idea', the brothers washed their faces and hands, but having no towel 'produced little better than a smear'. Even so, with bare feet and soot-begrimed clothes they arrived at the morning service. George explains what happened:

Timidly we entered, to the evident surprise of the whole congregation. We stood up and sat down at the proper moments, and followed the service as best we could, at the close of which we stole quietly away.

That evening they decided to return. Once again their appearance aroused great interest and afterwards quite a crowd watched them go. They were followed by a number of children. Consequentially, the barn where George and his brother were living was shortly afterwards

invaded by a deputation of young people bearing in their hands hot tea, milk, bread and butter, and cakes for us to eat and drink. The eagerness with which we accepted these welcome gifts ... was much to their delight.

The children (who were all well dressed) stayed for some time, asking many questions and showing 'much sympathy'. On their departure they bade the brothers 'an affectionate good-night'.

When the brothers arrived in the village early next morning, word of their coming had spread. They were given many chimneys to sweep, including those at the vicarage, where they were provided with shoes and stockings. George fondly remembers that they fared very well indeed and 'ever bore grateful recollections of Ashby Folville'.

It was fashionable among the nannies and nursery maids of the wealthy to teach their carefully brought-up young charges to live in fear of chimney sweeps. During her childhood at Hunstanton Hall, Jamesina Waller (1849) remembers the periodic chimney sweeping and the foolish nurse's threat, 'the black man will get you if you are not good'. She recalls

the half terror of seeing the poor sooty boy standing on a dust sheet on the floor, & mother holding my hand while she led me up to him & obliged me to put a thick piece of bread & butter in to his hand - then to my astonishment at his thanking me & devouring it.²⁵

Similarly, Lord Frederic Hamilton, *The Days Before Yesterday*, remembers that in the 1860s 'in common with most other children', he was

Perfectly terrified when the chimney sweep arrived with his attendant coal-black imps, for the usual threat of foolish nurses to their charges, when they proved refractory was, "if you are not good I shall give you to the Sweep, and then you will have to climb up the chimney." When the dust sheets laid on the floor, I used, if possible, to hide until they had left the house...

Lord Hamilton goes on to say that despite all his precautions he sometimes met little sweeps 'in the passages', who could not have been more than eight or nine years old, and were 'inky-black, from head to foot' except for their eyes. When he was older he 'summoned up enough courage' to ask one of them 'whether he had disobeyed his nurse very often in order to be condemned to sweep chimneys'. The

'black urchin' gazed at him, uncomprehending, then with a cheerful grin replied that on the whole he rather enjoyed climbing chimneys.

Notes

¹*The London Tradesman*. R. Campbell, 1747, 1969.

²indenture, Bolton City Library, Lancashire.

³George Elson, *The Last of the Climbing Boys*, 1900.

⁴George Elson, (*Ibid.*)

⁵"Small North American tree: the dried bark of its root was used as an aromatic stimulant.

⁶*Sentimental History of Chimney Sweeps*, Jonas Hanway, 1785.

⁷The same paper reported that Charles Kingsley visited Middleham in 1845.

⁸George Elson (*Ibid.*)

⁹Anecdote, J.W. Orderson, Examiner, from *Every-day Book* Vol 1, William Hone, 1825.

¹⁰Printed in *Bentley's Miscellany*, in instalments (1837-1838).

¹¹*Criers & Hawkers of London*, (Chapter 20), Shesgreen, Scolar Press 1990.

¹²*Reminiscences of a Norwich Man*, *Eastern Evening News*, 16th January 1925.

¹³Evidence, Parliamentary Committee, 1817.

¹⁴Evidence, David Porter, House of Commons Committee, 1788.

¹⁵Evidence, James Dunn, House of Commons Journal, 1st May 1788.

¹⁶*18th Century London*, Sir Walter Besant, 1892.

¹⁷(*Ibid.*)

¹⁸*House of Commons Journal*, 1st May 1788.

¹⁹*Chimney Sweeping Described*, Joseph Glass, 1815.

²⁰Minutes of evidence before Parliament. 1817.

²¹*The Climbing Boys Advocate*, 1st July 1856.

²²*Construction & Building of Chimneys*, Robert Clavering, 1779.

²³*The Adventures of Sam Sharp*, 1815. Derby Library.

²⁴J.C. Hudson, letter to Mistresses of households, in order to promote the idea of sweeping machines.

²⁵*Hunstanton Hall, Recollections*, Jamesina Waller, 1910.