

The strange case of Shadrach Eynon; or the cautionary tale of a Pembrokeshire Pewterer.

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It is often thought our ancestors stayed in the same places for centuries and had the same occupations from one generation to another, but life in the past was not so settled. For sons and some daughters who had no hope of inheriting a family business, their future was uncertain. One way it could be secured was by sending them away to learn a trade or profession. Apprenticeships were a significant factor in social advancement and migration.

From the 1670s to the 1720s twenty to thirty apprentices a year were sent from Wales into Bristol out of a total of around two hundred boys entering the city annually to be bound. The majority went into the port, food and drink, and textile trades, with only 4.2% entering metal trades. Of these Welsh boys a quarter were from gentry backgrounds, a few had fathers from the professions, and the rest had textile or rural backgrounds.

There were only two apprentice pewterers known of, who left Pembrokeshire for Bristol in the eighteenth century, and by a strange co-incidence they did so within months of each other in the year 1754. They were Thomas Cornock and Shadrach Eynon.

Thomas Cornock was from Haverfordwest, his father was Daniel Cornock whose occupation is not recorded. He was apprenticed to Gregory Ash and his wife Ann on 20th May 1754. Ash was a recently established pewterer whose premises were on the St Thomas's parish end of Bristol Bridge. Daniel paid Gregory Ash a premium of £50 for his son to be bound to him as an apprentice. This was at the higher end of pewterers' premiums and apprentices from the Bristol area paid less than those from further away. Apprentice pewterers had higher premiums than other metalworking crafts, with the exception of goldsmiths. This was because a successful apprentice, given access to capital of between three and five hundred pounds, could set himself up in a potentially lucrative business on completing his training. However, Thomas did not open his own shop. There is no record of Thomas Cornock taking his freedom, this may be because he did not complete his apprenticeship, drop out rates among apprentices of all kinds were high, or he may have become free and continued in the trade as a journeyman once he had completed his seven year term. A journeyman worked under contract to a master and was paid more than apprentice but still bound by similarly strict rules and forbidden to deal in pewter in his own right. This made building up enough capital to set up in business extremely difficult.

On the 7th December 1754 Shadrach Eynon, the son of a deceased butcher from the Pembrokeshire village of St Florence was bound as an apprentice pewterer to Allen Bright and his wife Ann for a period of seven years. The premium is not recorded but was probably £50, the sum charged by Bright for non-local apprentices. His family must have had some link with Bristol to find him a place with the Brights who were very successful and well established pewterers. Shadrach did not take the obvious course of continuing the family butchery business, probably because he had an older brother who took his father's place.

His apprenticeship record reads:

Shadrach Eynon son of Owen Eynon late of the parish of St Florence in the County of Pembroke Butcher deceased bound apprentice to Allen Bright pewterer and Ann his wife for 7 years. Friends to find apparel and Washing.

It was usual for apprentices to be clothed by their masters, the Brights, it seems, did not count this amongst their duties towards their young charges.

It must have been a shock for the young Shadrach arriving in Bristol to work in the noisy bustling city from a Pembrokeshire village. Allen Bright's premises were also on Bristol Bridge, thus Shadrach was a few doors away from Cornock, the other newly arrived Pembrokeshire apprentice who would certainly have made his acquaintance.

The life of a pewterer's apprentice was arduous involving much carrying about of heavy wares and involved working in a hazardous environment. A general description of all Trades published in London in 1747 gives an insight into the work:

Making of Pewter consists chiefly of two parts:- 1. Melting, casting and turning which is one person's business, the harder work and not so healthy.
2. Hammering or planishing, which is another's, one workman but seldom doing all the operations. It is an ancient useful trade, most of them are large shop keepers and very considerable dealers which and the planishing part is reckoned a very pretty employ for a smart youth, with whom must be given as an apprentice not less than £20, whose working hours are from six to eight at which a journeyman can get 15, 18 or 20s. a week.

When Shadrach joined the Brights they had four other apprentices in more advanced stages of training. An apprentice's living conditions were basic and in cramped establishments the apprentice would sleep on a bed made up in the shop or workshop. He worked for his education, what payment he received was a pittance, though the opportunities to spend it were few. Even the apprentice boy's time outside his six till eight o'clock six day week was not his own. He was required to accompany his master to church on Sundays and holy days, and subjected to strict discipline.

The ideal apprentice worked hard, showed deference to his master and proved himself trustworthy. Many ambitious apprentices aimed to marry their master's daughter on achieving their freedom thus gaining a permanent place in the business. An apprentice was forbidden to frequent ale-houses, be drunken, gamble, waste or steal his master's goods and materials, sleep off the premises, fornicate, be irreverent or disobedient, nor might he marry during the time he was bound. Sadly Shadrach did not follow this strict moral code.

Twenty three months into his apprenticeship, on the 21st November 1756 in St James church Bristol, Shadrach Eynon married Shallionel Seykell. Marriage for an apprentice was almost unheard of and would have required his master's permission. It broke the terms of his apprenticeship and was tantamount to throwing away his family's trust and investment, his education, his own reputation and his labours. It is highly likely that Shadrach was forced to marry after having somehow found an unsupervised opportunity for dalliance and so made his strangely named bride pregnant.

There is no record of Shadrach either completing his indenture or obtaining his freedom. Punishment for apprentices included fines and extensions of apprenticeship terms as well as flogging, but nor is that recorded in his case. He certainly did not become a rich and successful pewterer but he did somehow manage to remain in the trade. The Bristol apprenticeship records for January 18th 1772 reveal 'George, son of Shadrach Eynon late of Bristol pewterer apprenticed to Ed. Bird Hair Merchant.' This shows that despite his apparently disastrous short apprenticeship, Shadrach did continue his work and earned the title pewterer, even if only as a journeyman pewterer, and that for a short time. The phrase 'late of Bristol' in this context suggests Shadrach was already dead rather than he had left the city. His son George, the cause of his rare apprentice marriage, was bound to a lesser trade than he himself had entered.

Little is known about the lives of the men and women who worked in the pewter industry in Britain. The sad tale of Shadrach Eynon, the wayward Pembrokeshire pewterer, throws some light on the background of those who worked to make the antique pewter we so enjoy, and whose hard work in producing it we perhaps forget.

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The Pewter Society Database

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