

'THE FREEDOM OF ELECTION'
THE COMPANY OF CUTLERS IN HALLAMSHIRE
AND
THE GROWTH OF RADICALISM IN SHEFFIELD
1784-1792

JULIE MACDONALD

VOLUME ONE

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History, The University of Sheffield

August, 2005

CONTENTS

VOLUME ONE

Abstract		(ii)
Acknowledgments		(iv)
Abbreviations		(v)
Figures and Appendices		(vi)
Introduction		1
Chapter One	Sheffield in the late eighteenth century	22
Chapter Two	The ‘Little Mesters’	75
Chapter Three	‘The Freedom of Election’	118
Chapter Four	The campaigns to amend the Act of Incorporation	168

VOLUME TWO

Chapter Five	Sheffield in 1790	203
Chapter Six	The Act of 1791	248
Chapter Seven	The Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information	291
Conclusion		334
Appendices		340
Bibliography		356

'THE FREEDOM OF ELECTION'

THE COMPANY OF CUTLERS IN HALLAMSHIRE

AND

THE GROWTH OF RADICALISM IN SHEFFIELD

1784-1792

JULIE MACDONALD

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History, The University of Sheffield

August, 2005

In the early 1790s, societies were formed in towns and cities across Britain with the aim of persuading the government to institute a wide-ranging and radical programme of political reform. Whilst political reform organisations were in themselves not new, these societies differed from their predecessors because they were, in the main, organised by and for men who contemporary society did not consider to be part of the political process: small tradesmen, artisans, journeymen, and labourers. Arguably the most radical and certainly one of the most popular of these new societies was the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information.

Historians have long sought to explain this surge of popular interest in political reform. They have pointed to the influence of earlier reform movements, the war with the American colonists, the campaigns to secure the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and to the influence, most importantly, of the French Revolution

and the popular debates that it inspired. But none of the existing historical scholarship adequately explains why radicalism emerged with such vigour in Sheffield, a town not previously noted for political activism. This thesis will attempt to fill this gap in our historical knowledge by looking at what was happening in the town in the seven years immediately preceding the formation of the S.S.C.I., years during which its principal industry, the manufacture of cutlery, was riven by a bitter and acrimonious dispute. It will show how under the influence of both external events and of radical and articulate leaders this dispute, which emanated from traditional economic grievances, became increasingly politicised and how, in the process, the working men of Sheffield came to believe that the only way to solve these economic grievances was through radical political reform.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to express my immense gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Robert Shoemaker: his help, advice and gentle constructive criticism over the last five and half years has been invaluable.

I would also like to thank the Cutlers' Company who appointed me as their first archivist in 1990 thus giving me unparalleled access to their treasure trove of records.

I particularly wish to acknowledge the support given to me by the late Raymond Douglas, Master Cutler 1992-1993.

Finally, I would like to thank my children, Robert and Rachel, and most especially my husband, Neil: without your love, support and encouragement, none of this would have been possible. Thank you.

ABBREVIATIONS

CCA	Archives of the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire
NA	The National Archives
S.C.I	The Society for Constitutional Information
S.S.C.I.	The Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information
W.W.M.	Wentworth Woodhouse Muniments
<i>J.H.C.</i>	Journal of the House of Commons
<i>T.H.A.S.</i>	Transactions of the Hunter Archaeological Society

FIGURES AND APPENDICES

- Figure 1* Samuel Worth, The Cutlers' Hall (1725-1832).
- Figure 2* Apprentices and Freemen in each decade, 1630-1789.
- Figure 3* Numbers of apprentices in each decade, 1630-1809.
- Figure 4* Places of origin of apprentices to the cutlery trades, 1650-1674.
- Figure 5* Places of origin of apprentices to the cutlery trades, 1700-1724.
- Figure 6* Places of origin of apprentices to the cutlery trades, 1750-1774.
- Figure 7* Map showing the central part of the town of Sheffield,
circa 1780.
- Figure 8* Numbers of enrolled apprentices, 1773-1784.
- Figure 9* New Freemen, 1773-1784.
- Figure 10* Numbers of apprentices and numbers of new Freemen,
1773-1785.
- Figure 11* W. Botham, Campo Lane, 1802.
- Figure 12* Decade in which signatories took out their Freedom.
- Figure 13* Numbers in each trade who signed the petitions.
- Figure 14* And eighteenth century Sheffield master manufacturer in
his workshop.
- Figure 15* W. Botham, Lady's Bridge, 1802.
- Figure 16* Background of the 1,389 who became Free between June and
December 1791

- Figure 17* Year of apprenticeship who became Free between June and
December 1791
- Figure 18* Graph showing the predicted and actual numbers of new Freemen.
1792-1813
- Appendix A The Freemen's Petition, 1785
- Appendix B Joseph Mather, *Stevens' and Lastley's Execution*
- Appendix C Joseph Mather, *Hallamshire Haman*
- Appendix D *To The Freemen of Hallamshire, 1790*
- Appendix E *Address from the Society for Constitutional Information in Sheffield to
the Public, December 19th 1791*

INTRODUCTION

During the early 1790s, Britain was swept by a wave of popular enthusiasm for political reform and in towns and cities throughout the country societies were formed with the aim of persuading the government to institute a radical and wide-ranging programme of parliamentary and electoral reform. Political reform societies were, in themselves, not new in late eighteenth century Britain: the Wilkite Society of Supporters of the Bill of Rights (established in 1769), Christopher Wyvill's Association Movement (established in 1779) and the more radical Society for Constitutional Information (established in 1780), for example, had campaigned for shorter parliaments, more equitable representation, and a reduction in the number of placemen and pensioners. But these organisations had been formed by and for disgruntled Members of Parliament, merchants, country squires and other members of the propertied class who believed that their position in society, and their wealth, entitled them to an active role in the governance of their country, whereas many of the reform societies of the early 1790s were formed by and for men who contemporary society did not normally consider to be part of the political process: small tradesmen, artisans, journeymen and labourers. Foremost amongst these new societies was the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information (S.S.C.I.).

The S.S.C.I. was formed in the autumn of 1791 by, in the words of one of its members,

Five or Six Mechanics, who by their Conversation about the enormous high Price of Provisions, the unbounded Authority of the Monopolists of all Ranks, from the King to the Peasant, and the Waste of public Property by Placemen, Pensioners, Luxury and Debauchery, they concluded that nothing but Ignorance in the People could suffer the natural Rights of every Free Man to be thus violated.¹

Their aim was ‘to enlighten the people, to show the people the reason, the ground of all their complaints and sufferings’, complaints and sufferings that they believed would only be resolved and alleviated if the natural right of the people both to choose and to cashier those by whom they were governed was restored.² The way to restore this supposed lost right, the S.S.C.I. believed, was through political reform.

The people of Sheffield proved to be not only willing to be so ‘enlightened’ but also eager converts to the Society’s ideals: between autumn 1791 and January 1792, membership of the S.S.C.I. increased from five or six to approximately

¹ NA/TS24/1/5, letter from the secretary of the S.S.C.I. to the secretary of the Society for Constitutional Information, January 15th 1792. Unfortunately, the identities of the ‘Five or Six Mechanics’ are not known.

² Evidence of William Broomhead, cutler, at the trial of Thomas Hardy in 1794, quoted in Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty* (London, 1979), p. 167. Broomhead was a leading member of the S.S.C.I. and may have been one of its founders.

1,500 and by March of the same year, to about 2,000.³ The majority of these members were, in contemporary eyes, ‘of the lowest order’.⁴ This alone was sufficient to concern the authorities, both locally and nationally, but what really alarmed them was the S.S.C.I.’s wholehearted adherence to the radical reforms advocated by Thomas Paine in his book *Rights of Man* (London, 1791-2). In June 1792 Colonel de Lancey, who had been appointed by the War Office to assess the reliability of troops in the North and Midlands, reported that in Sheffield ‘the seditious doctrines of Paine and the factious people who are endeavouring to disturb the peace of the Country, had extended to a degree very much beyond my conception, and indeed they seem with great judgement to have chosen this [town] as the centre of all their seditious machinations’.⁵ Sheffield’s reputation, or notoriety, as the epicentre of political radicalism in the 1790s was further confirmed in April 1793 when 5,000 local people signed a petition, organised by the S.S.C.I., demanding radical parliamentary and electoral reform, including the extension of the franchise to ALL adult males.⁶

³ Sheffield Archives, W.W.M., F44/5, anonymous to Henry Zouch. January 31st 1792; *House of Commons, Select Committees: Reports Misc.*, vol. 14. no. 113, quoted in John Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats: Sheffield in the French Revolution, 1789-97*, (Sheffield, 1989), p. 54.

⁴ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. M-2652-Z. Joseph and Winifred Gales, ‘Recollections’, unpublished manuscript, p. 32.

⁵ NA/HO/42/20, Colonel de Lancey to Secretary at War, June 13th 1792. quoted in Stevenson, *Artisans*, pp. 52-53.

⁶ *Sheffield Register*, April 5th and April 12th 1793.

The S.S.C.I. continued to thrive until the summer of 1794. But in May of that year, following the government's decision to clamp down on radical organizations and the discovery of evidence suggesting that at least some members of the S.S.C.I. were preparing for an armed uprising, warrants were issued for the arrest of a number of its leaders. One, Joseph Gales, fled to America. The others were arrested and taken to London. Although charges were not pressed, they were subpoenaed to appear as witnesses at Thomas Hardy's trial for treason and did not return to Sheffield until December 1794. Despite these arrests, the S.S.C.I. continued to organise meetings but by the end of 1795, the combined impact of the loss of its leaders, government-backed repression by the local authorities, severe food shortages as a result of a series of poor harvests, and the economic depression that followed war with France had all taken their toll and the last mass meeting was held on November 17th 1795.

The enthusiasm for reform, however, continued to thrive in Sheffield. Some former members of the S.S.C.I. turned their energies to trade societies, others became active members of Methodist chapels and many became involved in popular education schemes, particularly the Sunday school movement. Some continued to be involved in radical politics, albeit 'underground': in 1801, for example, at least four former members of the S.S.C.I. were committee members of the ultra-radical United Englishmen, a group that was implicated in Colonel Despard's plans for armed insurrection. There is also credible evidence to

indicate a continuation of S.S.C.I. personnel in radical politics until at least the 1830s when mass popular agitation for political reform re-emerged in Sheffield with the Chartists.⁷

Historians have long acknowledged the prominent role played by the S.S.C.I. in the history of popular political radicalism – Albert Goodwin described it as ‘the first working-class reform association of any consequence’ – and it is frequently cited in books and articles on the subject.⁸ But, few historians have examined its activities in any great detail. In fact, to date, there has only been one book, or rather pamphlet, specifically about the S.S.C.I.: John Stevenson’s *Artisans and Democrats: Sheffield in the French Revolution, 1789-97*, published in 1989 by the Sheffield branch of the Historical Association as part of series of Sheffield History Pamphlets.⁹ Although this gives much detailed information about the Society’s activities, as its title suggests, its main emphasis is the impact of the French Revolution and Stevenson made no attempt to examine, in any great detail, the socio-economic context in which the

⁷ For more on this and on the existence of a revolutionary “underground” in the Sheffield area, see John Baxter and F. K. Donnelly, ‘The Revolutionary “Underground” in the West Riding: Myth or Reality’, *Past and Present*, LXIV (1974); and F. K. Donnelly and John Baxter, ‘Sheffield and the English Revolutionary Tradition, 1791-1820’, in *Essays in the Economic and Social History of South Yorkshire*, ed. S. Pollard and C. Holmes (Sheffield, 1976).

⁸ Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 159.

⁹ Stevenson also published an amended version of this pamphlet as an essay entitled ‘Sheffield and the French Revolution’ in *1789 The Long and the Short of It*, ed. David Williams (Sheffield, 1991). The only other publications specifically about the S.S.C.I. were articles: G. P. Jones, ‘The Political Reform Movement in Sheffield’, *T.H.A.S.*, 4 (1937); J. Taylor, ‘The Sheffield Constitutional Society 1791-1795’, *T.H.A.S.*, 5 (1943); and A. W. L. Seaman, ‘Reform Politics at Sheffield 1791-1797’, *T.H.A.S.*, 7 (1957).

S.S.C.I. arose. Consequently, we do not know why such a radical organisation of profound national importance emerged in Sheffield, a relatively insular town not previously noted for political activism. Nor do we know why the radicals were able to attract so many of the ordinary working people in the town to their cause. This thesis will address both of these fundamental questions.

This lacuna in historical knowledge is not confined to the S.S.C.I. Very few of the popular radical organisations of the period have been studied in the context of their localities, an omission lamented by Stevenson himself.

Of the 28 provincial corresponding societies listed in the index to Thompson's *The Making [of the English Working Class]*, only a handful have been seriously studied, either for lack of source material or simply because they await their historians. In addition we still know very little in many cases about the antecedents of the popular societies in the years before the French Revolution ... it is still difficult to appreciate the milieu out of which these societies sprang. As a result historians have been forced to turn to the impact of the French Revolution and, above all, the writings of Paine ...¹⁰

¹⁰ John Stevenson, 'Popular Radicalism and Popular Protest 1789-1815', in *Britain and the French Revolution 1789-1815* ed. H. T. Dickinson (Basingstoke, 1989), p. 71.

Those historians who have looked for factors that may have encouraged popular interest in political reform *before* the outbreak of the French Revolution have concentrated on national and international influences and have largely ignored, or at least underestimated, the impact of local issues. Some historians, for example, have pointed to the influence of earlier reform movements. E. C. Black has argued that the Society for Constitutional Information's (S.C.I.) campaign to educate 'the commonalty at large' about the nation's political history and about their 'lost' rights and liberties through pamphlets and tracts that they distributed, free of charge, throughout the country enabled that organisation to contribute 'out of all proportion to its numbers, to the formation of modern English radicalism'.¹¹ Edward Royle and James Walvin have pointed to the influence of the earlier Wilkite campaigns arguing that they marked the beginning of a new era in British radicalism and that it was during this time that 'the seeds of a political sensibility' were planted that were 'to flower' in the reform movements of the 1790s.¹² Albert Goodwin, however, disagreed, arguing that Wilkes and his supporters 'evoked little interest or sympathy outside the metropolitan area, except in remote industrial or commercial centres such as Norwich or Bristol'.¹³ He pointed to the influence of the Dissenters, particularly during their campaigns to secure the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, arguing that it was their emphasis on the rights and liberties, both natural and

¹¹ E. C. Black, *The Association: British Extra-Parliamentary Political Organization 1769-1793* (Harvard, 1963), p. 61.

¹² Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (Brighton, 1982), p. 20.

¹³ Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 45.

traditional, of all free-born Englishmen that awakened popular interest in political reform: ‘the vital significance of the Dissenting interest in the history of the British democratic movement at this period [the late eighteenth century] also lies in its formative impact on the evolution of provincial radicalism at the ‘grass-roots’ level’.¹⁴ James E. Bradley has also emphasised the influence of Dissenters, particularly ministers who, he has argued, ‘put the pulpit to much the same use as radicals put the press’.¹⁵ It was they who expounded the views of leading radicals like Richard Price and Joseph Priestley to their congregations and who encouraged them to see similarities between national, and even international, problems (and the solutions to those problems) and their own.

More recently, H. T. Dickinson has highlighted the impact of Britain’s dispute and subsequent war with the American colonists on popular attitudes towards reform.¹⁶ He has argued that it encouraged ‘a major revival of radicalism’ in Britain and that people from all socio-economic classes were drawn into the political debate that emanated from the colonists’ claims by their concern about the financial repercussions of the war, notably increased taxation and loss of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7.

¹⁵ James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth Century Politics and Society* (paperback edition, Cambridge, 2002), p. 184.

¹⁶ H. T. Dickinson, ‘The Friends of America’: British Sympathy with the American Revolution’, in *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain 1775-1848: Essays in Honour of Malcolm I. Thomis*, ed. Michael T. Davis (Basingstoke, 2000).

trade.¹⁷ It was this concern, he has argued, combined with the desire for political reform that enabled Wyvill to raise support for his Association movement, which in turn encouraged the formation of the more radical Society for Constitutional Information. And it was the American colonists' successful fight for religious freedom, enshrined in the Federal Constitution in 1787, that helped to galvanize the Dissenters into campaigning for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Kathleen Wilson has also argued that the parliamentary opposition's argument that the loss of the American colonies was part of 'a larger political problem, one that stemmed from the corruption and non-accountability of the British state' caused a widespread crisis of confidence that led many 'to question the much-vaunted excellence of British political institutions themselves'.¹⁸

Wilson and Hannah Barker are amongst the more recent historians to have highlighted the importance of print media in encouraging popular interest in all of these issues.¹⁹ They have argued that books, pamphlets, copies of sermons and ballads, broadsheets and newspapers, particularly provincial newspapers, helped both to educate people about the machinery of government and to shape popular ideas about how government policies impacted upon individuals and their local communities. They also informed and inspired popular debate on a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 439.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and English Society 1695-1855* (Harlow, 2000).

wide-range of socio-economic and political topics, debates that were further encouraged by their editorial columns and letter pages and by the fact that many people read newspapers, or had newspapers read to them, in public - in workshops, taverns and coffee shops, for example. And because news and political arguments were thereby available to all, people at all levels of society were not only able to participate in these debates but encouraged to believe that they had the right to do so.

In her book, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England 1715-1785*, Wilson characterised the growth of popular political radicalism as a product of parliamentary opposition arguing that, throughout the century, those who were excluded from power made direct appeals to the people to help them to regain office. As a result, the people increasingly saw themselves as part of the political process with the right to question and, when necessary, to cashier those who were in power. Their political views were, consequently, predominantly oppositional. The emergence of this vibrant extra-parliamentary political culture, she believes, was predicated upon both the growth of print media and the development of a distinctive urban culture. The eighteenth century was a period of substantial economic and demographic growth that in many areas saw towns both economically and socially transformed. In Wilson's words,

As regional and local economies became more complex and specialized, urban society more intricate and cultural amenities

more sophisticated, economic and social relations became organised as much by market forces and competition as by aristocratic and gentry patronage, by cultural aspirations and the pursuit of status as by vertical ties and dependencies.²⁰

The period's "urban renaissance" saw the opening of a multitude of cultural venues - theatres, assembly rooms, coffee shops, libraries, newsrooms, spas, and pleasure gardens, for example - that in turn stimulated the establishment of countless associational organisations.²¹ These encouraged people to come together for both social and cooperative activities, provided ideal fora for discussion and debate, and, as Wilson has argued, 'furnished some of the crucial formal and informal venues for middling and artisanal involvement in civic and political affairs'.²² They 'enabled "the people" to transform themselves into citizens through their actions in the public sphere'.²³

But does any of this historical scholarship help us to understand why Sheffield became the epicentre of popular political radicalism in the early 1790s? Whilst there is no evidence to indicate that there was any local interest in Wilkes or the reform campaign that he inspired, it is known that a number of the town's

²⁰ Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 11.

²¹ For more on this see Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989), and Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000).

²² Wilson, *Sense of the People*, pp. 11-12.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

leading citizens (including its Vicar) were actively involved in Wyvill's Association and that some of these men subsequently became members of the S.C.I. These, however, were both organisations for the wealthy and propertied classes. However, it is probable that some of the ideals that they espoused would have filtered down through society, particularly as one of the S.C.I.'s avowed aims was,

... to revive in the minds of their fellow citizens, THE COMMONALTY AT LARGE, a knowledge of their lost Rights; so that, knowing the value of their inheritance and the absolute necessity of exercising their Election Rights as extensively and as constantly as our sacred Constitution and its great Founders intended, they may restore Freedom and Independency to that branch of the legislature which originates from, represents, and is answerable to THEMSELVES.²⁴

There is also local evidence to support Goodwin's theory about the influence of Dissenters in the growth of popular political radicalism. Although the level of regular church attendance in Sheffield was low, nonconformity was the principal mode of religious observation and it is known that in the late eighteenth century the local Dissenting chapels were ministered by some

²⁴ John Cartwright, *First Address to the Public* (London, 1780), quoted in Black, *The Association*, p. 178.

eloquent and radical preachers. Whilst there is no evidence to indicate that local Dissenters were discriminated against, there was, nevertheless, considerable support in Sheffield for the campaigns to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts.

There was also considerable local interest in the war with the American colonies. This was initially inspired by widespread concern about the adverse impact that it was having on trade, but under the influence of local proponents of reform, including both members of the Association and a number of Dissenting ministers, it soon expanded to include debates about the rights and wrongs of the colonists' claims and the relevance of those claims to people in Britain.

Finally, there can be no doubt about the influence of the press in the emergence of popular political radicalism in Sheffield in the late 1780s and early 1790s. Until 1787, Sheffield had just one newspaper, the *Sheffield Advertiser*, dismissed by one contemporary as a 'poor Tory supporting rag'.²⁵ But in June of that year, Joseph Gales launched the *Sheffield Register*, acknowledged to have been one of the most radical and popular provincial newspapers of the period. Gales was, unquestionably, a radical who used the pages of his newspaper to champion, amongst other causes, political reform, the anti-slavery campaign, and the campaigns for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.

²⁵ Arthur Jewitt, 'Passages in the Life of Arthur Jewitt', unpublished manuscript, Wigan Archive Services, DDZ-EHC 172/M964, p. 78.

His principal journalistic skill lay in his ability to relay information about international, national and local events and about contemporary debates in language that was easily comprehended by people at all levels of society. However, he was a businessman as well as a radical. He launched his newspaper confident in the belief that it would find an audience – and his confidence was proven by the fact that within a relatively short time, the *Register* had a circulation of about 2,000 copies a week. Such a level of local interest in the type of radical ideas espoused by Gales cannot be adequately explained by existing historical scholarship. Nor can this scholarship adequately explain why popular political radicalism emerged with such vigour in Sheffield in the early 1790s. To do this we must follow the advice given by both Wilson and Adrian Randall and examine the situation at a specifically local level. As Randall has argued,

The ideology of radicalism has to be examined in the cultural and customary context of the community into which it was being introduced if we are to make sense of the reception accorded to it. For the radicals had to *sell* their ideas to their prospective audience ... The radicals needed to be able to offer not just an explanation of current ills which married with the experiences of their audience. They had also to offer a solution which would fit within the cultural heritage of that community.²⁶

²⁶ Adrian Randall, *Before the Luddites: Custom, Community and Machinery in the English Woollen Industry 1776-1809* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 280.

Wilson herself looked at two local communities in her study of the emergence of extra-parliamentary politics, *The Sense of the People*. But the two towns that she chose, Newcastle and Norwich, were very different from Sheffield. 'The people' in her study were, in the main, members of the middle classes, whereas most of the political radicals in Sheffield came from lower down the social scale. Newcastle and Norwich were both corporate towns with their own representation in Parliament and both had been the scenes of numerous political battles. From her study, it is clear that political radicalism in those towns was fuelled by local political conflict. This was not the case in Sheffield.

Sheffield was not a corporate town and it did not have its own representation in Parliament. There were no members of the nobility or gentry living in close proximity to the town and consequently there was no vying for patronage. It had never been the scene of political battles and there is no evidence to indicate any great sense of political awareness amongst the majority of its population before the formation of the S.S.C.I. So how and why had its population become so politically radicalised by the early 1790s? To answer this question, we must look at what was happening in Sheffield during the 1780s, and when we do we discover that Sheffield's political radicalism was the product of economic conflict. For seven years, between 1784 and 1791, the town had been riven by a bitter and acrimonious dispute within its core industry, the cutlery trades, a dispute that one contemporary would later describe as a 'war':

No war not even that which since took place betwixt England and the French Republic or the Emperor was ever carried on with more acrimony than the dispute betwixt the parties just mentioned [the Cutlers' Company and its Freemen]; nothing was talked of nothing thought of but the suit at law commenced against the Cutlers' Company; every person was a partisan of either one side or the other and the Press teemed with squibs, satires and songs to the detriment of the opposite party.²⁷

And when we examine both the reasons for and the progress of this conflict, we find that it provides a model for the theory expounded by E. P. Thompson in his influential book *The Making of the English Working Class*: when men begin to 'feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs', they begin to develop a sense of belonging to a socio-economic class and with this comes an increasing sense of political self-awareness.²⁸ This invariably happens when people feel aggrieved against a particular group, usually one that has power over them, and in such circumstances it becomes relatively easy for those who advocate radical solutions (particularly when the radicals are also charismatic leaders) to convert others to their cause.

²⁷ Jewitt, 'Passages', p. 76.

²⁸ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (third edition, London, 1980), pp. 8-9.

Thompson's work had a profound influence on John Baxter, the only other historian to have commented upon the dispute in the cutlery trades and to have realised its relevance to the emergence of political radicalism in Sheffield. He touched upon it in his 1976 doctoral thesis, 'The origins of the social war in South Yorkshire: a study of capitalist evolution and labour class realization in one industrial region c.1750-1855'.²⁹ However, the title of this thesis is a clear indicator not only of the subject of Baxter's research but also of his Marxist sentiments, sentiments that did colour his interpretation of events. And whilst I do agree with him that the dispute between the Cutlers' Company and its Freemen marked the beginning of the transition from the 'vertical consciousness of the Trade' to the 'horizontal consciousness' of socio-economic class within Sheffield, the discovery of new documentary evidence has revealed that the situation was far more complex than Baxter's portrayal of a stereotypical class struggle between the downtrodden proletariat and the capitalist bourgeoisie of the town.³⁰

Baxter based his research on a number of sources: the *Sheffield Register*; the published songs of the contemporary balladeer, Joseph Mather; the reminiscences of another contemporary, Arthur Jewitt junior; and miscellaneous documents discovered in various collections held in Sheffield

²⁹ J. L. Baxter, 'The origins of the social war in South Yorkshire: a study of capitalist evolution and labour class realization in one industrial region c.1750-1855', University of Sheffield Ph. D. thesis (1976).

³⁰ The terms 'vertical association' and 'horizontal association' were used by E. P. Thompson in an article entitled 'Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class?', *Social History*. 3 (1978), p. 145.

Libraries. But he did not have access to the archives of the Cutlers' Company and had instead to rely upon a history of the Company that had been written at the beginning of the twentieth century by the antiquarian, R. E. Leader.³¹ This was not a particularly critical history of the Company. It had been commissioned by the Company itself whose members, at the time, included some of the most successful and influential men in the area who, in turn, entertained some of the most powerful men in the country.³² Leader's book consequently reflected the Company's glorious history and its rise to economic and social dominance. It also contained few references to original source material. Baxter, consequently, was unaware of the wealth of relevant material that the Company's archives contained. Fortunately, these archives have recently been catalogued and this thesis will draw extensively upon them. They have not only provided considerable information about the Company's actions during the dispute but they have also helped to explain the role that the Cutlers' Company played both in the cutlery trades and in the community at large. They were also found to contain some documents compiled by the other side in the dispute, the Freeman. This was fortunate because, generally, very few records compiled by artisanal movements and organisations during this period have

³¹ R. E. Leader, *A History of the Sheffield Cutlers' Company*, 2 volumes. (Sheffield, 1905).

³² Guests at the Cutlers' Feasts between 1870 and 1905, for example, included numerous peers of the realm; the Prime Minister, Lord Rosebery; Arthur James Balfour who at the time was First Lord of the Treasury; four Secretaries for War; three Chancellors of the Exchequer; the First Lord of the Admiralty; at least three eminent Generals, Lords Robert, Kitchener, and Wolseley; and numerous foreign ambassadors. Sheffield, in the second half of the nineteenth century, was known as 'the armaments capital of the world'.

survived – the records of the S.S.C.I., for example, were deliberately destroyed following the arrest of its leaders in May 1794.³³ These surviving documents have revealed the depth of opposition to the Cutlers' Company and the extent to which the Freeman, and their supporters, were willing to push the dispute. The Company's archives have also pointed to a previously unknown collection of records in the archives of the Court of King's Bench which detail the Freeman's economic grievances and the legal establishment's reaction to them.

Another valuable and largely unknown source of information has been the 'Recollections' of Joseph and Winifred Gales, currently stored in the library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.³⁴ Although these were written many years later and with the inevitable benefit of hindsight, they have nevertheless provided much historical information about events in Sheffield in the late 1780s and early 1790s and about local reaction to these events. The same criticism, and compliment, can be levied at one of the sources used extensively by Baxter: the reminiscences of Arthur Jewitt junior, whose father was one of the Freeman's leaders. This and all Baxter's other sources have been re-examined and in the process I have discovered relevant documents in other collections held by both Sheffield Local Studies Library and Sheffield Archives.

³³ Evidence of William Broomhead at the trial of Thomas Hardy, quoted in Baxter, 'The origins of the social war', p. 136.

³⁴ I am grateful to the librarians of this institution for providing me with a microfilm copy of these 'Recollections'.

This thesis will trace the progress of this bitter and divisive dispute within the Sheffield cutlery trades; a dispute that was borne of traditional economic grievances but which under the influence of both internal and external events and, more importantly, charismatic and radical leaders fuelled the growth of popular political radicalism in Sheffield. Chapter one will consist of a general survey of Sheffield in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, concentrating particularly on the cutlery trades and on the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire. It will show how and why the Freeman's economic grievances originated. Chapters two to four will detail the Freeman's attempts to seek redress for these grievances between the years 1784 and 1790, and the reaction of both the Cutlers' Company and the principal inhabitants of the town to their actions. These chapters will also show how the Freeman began to come together as a cohesive body in opposition to the Members of the Company and their supporters, and how in doing so they learnt valuable organisational lessons that would subsequently be used so effectively in the S.S.C.I. They will also chart the transfer of leadership from men whose principal objective was the restitution of what was commonly believed to be the *status quo* to men who were proponents of radical reform and the consequent, albeit gradual, politicisation of the Freeman's campaign, a politicisation that was greatly influenced by the launch of the *Sheffield Register*.

Chapter five will examine the impact of both local and national events on the attitudes of and relationships between the people of Sheffield in the year 1790.

It will show how, by the early autumn of that year, the community was on the verge of crisis and how the realisation of this fact encouraged some of the town's wealthier cutlers, men who had not previously been involved in the dispute between the Cutlers' Company and its Freemen, to intervene as arbitrators between the two sides. The sixth chapter will show how these men, known locally as the master manufacturers, persuaded the Company and the Freemen to accept a compromise settlement that was subsequently enshrined in an Act of Parliament passed in June 1791. But, in reality, this compromise settlement benefited very few people and chapter seven will show how the frustration and anger that had been aroused in many people in Sheffield, cutlers and non-cutlers, by both the campaign and by its unsatisfactory outcome enabled the more radical members of the community to persuade the people that the solution to their grievances lay in political reform – and hence, the success of the S.S.C.I. This chapter will conclude with a brief survey of the activities of the S.S.C.I. itself.

Finally, the concluding chapter will draw all the strands of the story together proving the validity of my thesis that popular political radicalism in Sheffield in the late eighteenth century was borne of and fuelled by economic grievances.

CHAPTER ONE

Sheffield in the late eighteenth century

By the late eighteenth century, Sheffield had become the principal centre for the manufacture of cutlery in Britain. It had also become a leading centre for the manufacture of other metal goods and its markets were expanding across the world. Inevitably, this economic growth had resulted in an increase in both the population and the physical size of the town and, by the end of the century, Sheffield's transition from a 'large market town, most noted for its knives, scissors and iron-work' to a city of international repute for its cutlery, steel and engineering was well under way.³⁵

This chapter will examine the reasons for and the effects of this growth on the town and on its principal industry: the cutlery trades. It will also show how changes in traditional working patterns impacted upon social relationships within the town and how, as a result, many began to harbour feelings of dislocation, resentment and even fear.

³⁵ *The Diary of Ralph Thoresby (1677-1724)*, quoted in 'Damned Bad Place, Sheffield': *An anthology of writing about Sheffield through the ages*, ed. Sylvia Pybus (Sheffield, 1994), p. 44.

Sheffield's industries

During the late medieval and early modern periods, Sheffield was one of a number of provincial towns that were renowned for the manufacture of cutlery.³⁶ But Sheffield had an important advantage over its rivals - local availability of three of the requisite natural resources: coal, sandstone and, most importantly, water. Two major coal seams outcropped, or were close to the surface, within the vicinity of Sheffield: the Alton seam was worked at Millhouses, Ringinglow, Upper Hallam, Crookes, Stannington and Loxley; whilst the Silkstone seam lay close to the surface in the town itself.³⁷ The Duke of Norfolk was the principal owner of the collieries that mined the Silkstone seam and the combination of increased demand and the appointment of an innovative manager, John Curr, in about 1777 saw a dramatic rise in production during the 1780s and a consequent increase in the Duke's profits from £673 15s 2d in 1781-2 to £2,973 15s 8d in 1791-2.³⁸

Locally quarried sandstone was used to make grinding wheels and it was common practice for knife cutlers to sell on their wheels when they became too small to pen and pocket knife cutlers who, in turn, sold them on to razorsmiths thus ensuring maximum usage of the resource.

³⁶ Two other renowned centres were Salisbury and Thaxted.

³⁷ Neville Flavell, 'The Economic Development of Sheffield and the Growth of the Town c.1740-1820', University of Sheffield Ph. D. thesis, 1996, p. 91.

³⁸ Ian R. Medlicott, 'John Curr, 1756-1823, Mining Engineer and Viewer', in *Aspects of Sheffield 2*, ed. Melvyn Jones (Barnsley, 1999), p. 73.

The most important natural resource, however, was water. There are five rivers running through Sheffield – the Don, the Sheaf, the Porter, the Rivelin and the Loxley – and since at least the sixteenth century their energy had been harnessed to power wheels and mills for grinding cutlery, milling corn, forging iron and smelting lead.³⁹ By 1660, about forty-nine sites had been developed along the approximately thirty miles of riverbanks; by 1740, there were ninety sites; and by 1790 all of the available sites had been developed and some were in multiple occupancy.⁴⁰ Although Bailey and Proctor, manufacturers of lenses, became the first local company to utilise steam power in 1786, it was not widely used to grind cutlery until well into the nineteenth century.

Sheffield also had a man-made advantage over its rivals: the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire (the Cutlers' Company). The Company, which comprised ALL of the cutlers (masters, journeymen and apprentices) in the region of Hallamshire and 'sixe miles compasse of the same' – an area of approximately 320 square miles – had been incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1624.⁴¹ Only Freemen of the Company were allowed a trademark and it was illegal to sell unmarked cutlery. To become a Freeman, men had to

³⁹ *Water Power on the Sheffield Rivers*, ed. David Crossley (Sheffield, 1989), p. vii.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. viii; David Hey, 'The Establishment of the Cutlers' Company', in *Mesters to Masters: A History of the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire*, ed. Clyde Binfield and David Hey (Oxford, 1997), p. 14.

⁴¹ CCA, B1/1/2b, certified copy of 21st James I, cap. 3.

serve a minimum seven-year apprenticeship under an existing Freeman and their indentures had to be enrolled at the Cutlers' Hall. The Company itself was governed by a body of thirty-three Freemen known as the Members or, collectively, as 'the Company': the Master Cutler, two Wardens, six Searchers and twenty-four Assistants, all of whom held office for one year. They were empowered to enforce the Act of Parliament and to issue byelaws which the body of cutlers ('the Commonalty') were obliged to obey.

From the start, the Company was proactive in its efforts to protect and promote the local cutlery trades. Rules relating to apprenticeship were strictly enforced, for example, thus ensuring that the numbers employed were maintained at a manageable level. Similarly, by ensuring that only those who had been trained for a minimum of seven years became Freemen, the Company was able to maintain standards of craftsmanship and, through the marks, identify, and if necessary punish, anyone whose goods were of poor quality. During the 1680s, they operated a warehouse where scissor-smiths could deposit their goods and buy raw materials. A similar scheme, but one that was open to all cutlers, was established in 1734 and continued to operate until the early nineteenth century. The Company rented sandstone quarries from at least 1683 and throughout the eighteenth century. From 1759 until 1772, it ran a small steelworks and in the 1670s and 1680s, it spearheaded the successful campaign to exempt smithy hearths from the Hearth Tax. In fact this campaign was so successful that in

1676 the awlbladesmiths placed themselves under the jurisdiction of the Company followed, in 1682, by the scythesmiths and the filesmiths.⁴²

Despite these advantages, however, Sheffield's economic growth had been hampered by its poor transport links and the significant improvements that were made in these during the course of the eighteenth century were both a cause and an effect of its growing economy. Until the mid-eighteenth century, the main export route for Sheffield goods was via Hull and to reach there they had first to be transported about twenty miles by road to Bawtry, the nearest river port. Local manufacturers were aware of this handicap and in 1697 and again in 1704 the Cutlers' Company and Town Trustees jointly petitioned Parliament for an Act to make the town's main river, the Don (or Dun as it was usually called by contemporaries), navigable - but these proposals were defeated because of opposition from the town of Doncaster.⁴³ Finally, in 1726, the people of Doncaster were persuaded of the benefits of the scheme and a joint petition was submitted. The subsequent Act of Parliament appointed the Cutlers' Company as the principal undertakers and the project was finally completed in 1751 by which time goods could be brought by river from Hull to Tinsley, just three

⁴² For more information on this see David Hey and Joan Unwin, 'The Company, its Freemen, and its Apprentices 1624-1860', and Sidney Pollard, 'Early Economic Ventures of the Company', both in Binfield and Hey, *Mesters to Masters*, pp. 26-39 and pp. 50-62.

⁴³ Mary Walton, *Sheffield: Its Story and Its Achievements* (Sheffield, 1948), p. 96.

miles from Sheffield's town centre.⁴⁴ The rapid extension of the canal network in the final decades of the eighteenth century, especially the opening of the Trent and Mersey (Grand Trunk) Canal in 1777 and the Dearne and Dove Canal in 1793, enabled Sheffield traders to transport goods directly to the Atlantic ports, notably Liverpool, and from there to North America and the West Indies.

The Cutlers' Company was also at the forefront of the campaigns to improve the town's road network and in 1756 were founding members of its first turnpike trust, established to turnpike the road from Sheffield to Derby via Chesterfield, where it then joined the Manchester to London road. It was followed in 1758, by the roads to Barnsley and Wakefield (and thus to Leeds), to Chapel-en-le-Frith (and thus to Manchester) and to Buxton via Tideswell. In 1758, the River Don Navigation Company improved the road from Sheffield to Tinsley and, the following year, extended it to Bawtry. By 1781, the roads to Doncaster (via Rotherham), Worksop, Halifax (via Penistone and Huddersfield), Mansfield and Hathersage had also been turnpiked.⁴⁵ In May 1760, Samuel Glanville, the landlord of the Angel Inn, established the first coach route from Sheffield to London - though the journey took three and half days.⁴⁶ By 1787 there were three daily coaches to the capital and the journey

⁴⁴ Unfortunately, due to pressure from the Duke of Norfolk, who was concerned about the water supply to his dams and forges, the Act stated that the navigation was to end at Tinsley, three miles short of the town centre.

⁴⁵ Howard Smith, 'Sheffield's Turnpike Roads', in *Aspects of Sheffield 1*, ed. Melvyn Jones (Barnsley, 1997), p. 72.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

time had been reduced to twenty-six hours.⁴⁷ There were also coaches to Birmingham, Carlisle, Doncaster, Edinburgh, Hull, Leeds and Manchester and carriers went to Ashbourne, Bakewell, Bewdley, Birmingham, Cambridge, Gainsborough, Halifax, Kendal, Leeds, Lincoln, London, Manchester, Mansfield, Tideswell and York. Post arrived from the north every morning and from the south every evening.⁴⁸

Throughout the eighteenth century, the cutlery trades remained under the control of the Company, which continued to enrol apprentices and grant Freedoms and marks. The Searchers retained the right to enter any property belonging to any member of the Company (Freeman, journeyman or apprentice) to search for ‘deceitful wares’ and for those who worked, bought or sold goods contrary to the rules and regulations. In late 1779, for example, they entered, or attempted to enter, the warehouse of Thomas and Ebenezer Parker at least six times to search for illegally made cast metal forks.⁴⁹ Sanctions, usually in the form of fines, were imposed on those who contravened the byelaws. In 1766, for example, seven men were fined for breaching the laws relating to apprentices and in 1773 John Hartley was fined £6 for stamping another cutler’s mark on his knives.⁵⁰ But, as the trades grew and the numbers that they employed rose, the system of government that had served the industry well

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴⁸ *A Directory of Sheffield*, ed. Joseph Gales and David Martin (Sheffield, 1787), pp. 85-6.

⁴⁹ CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, October and November 1779.

⁵⁰ CCA, D1/1, the accounts of William Birks and the accounts of George Brittain.

during the seventeenth century began to appear increasingly inadequate and whilst the Company struggled to maintain its control and impose its will, its protectionist and paternalistic policies began to be regarded, by some, as a hindrance rather than a benefit to trade. At the same time, consumer demand combined with innovations and new technology, led to the growth of other, non-corporate metal industries that were not under the Company's jurisdiction and, as the century progressed, the Company's control of the town's industrial economy was increasingly undermined.

Two of the most economically influential of these new industries were the production of steel and the manufacture of silver and plate. Steel had been made in the region since at least the mid-seventeenth century, and, in the early years of the eighteenth century, a number of cementation furnaces were erected in the town itself. These produced blister steel that could be forged into blades and tools and it is probable that, between them, the local furnaces were able to produce sufficient steel to fulfil most of the local demand.⁵¹ Because of its inconsistencies and imperfections, however, blister steel was not suitable for fine work, and experiments by Benjamin Huntsman, a Doncaster clockmaker, to find better steel for his springs and pendulums led to his discovery, in about 1742, of crucible, or cast, steel. In this process, the steel was heated in clay crucibles at a very high temperature in order to burn off impurities. When

⁵¹ Flavell, 'The economic development of Sheffield', p. 48. Some steel was also imported from Newcastle.

cooled, this purified steel was ideally suited not only for clock and watch springs but also for rolls, dies, and stamps. Huntsman moved to Sheffield in 1742 and, in 1751, established the first crucible steelworks. By 1787 there were nineteen steel converters and refiners in the town of whom at least eight are believed to have been making crucible steel.⁵² By 1828 the number of general steel converters and refiners had risen to fifty-four.⁵³

The ability to make high-quality rolls, dies and stamps helped to stimulate another new industry: plating. In about 1743, Thomas Boulsover, a cutler, found that when silver and copper were fused together they could be worked as a single metal. He developed a method of fusing a thin sheet of silver to a much larger ingot of copper that could then be rolled into a plated sheet and cut and crafted into items that had the outward appearance of silver. The commercial potential of this new metal was first realised by Joseph Hancock, a former apprentice of Boulsover, who, in the 1750s began to manufacture candlesticks, teapots, and all types of holloware. Hancock became the Master Cutler in 1763.

The plated industry, in turn, stimulated the growth of the silver trade. Silver and gold items had been manufactured in Sheffield for many years, mainly by cutlers or those who had been trained as cutlers, but these goods had to be sent elsewhere to be assayed, usually to London. In the early 1770s, the Sheffield

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵³ John Blackwell, *The Sheffield Directory and Guide* (Sheffield, 1828).

silversmiths and platers joined with their Birmingham counterparts to petition Parliament for local assay offices and although the Cutlers' Campaign had no formal role in this campaign, it was their Clerk, Gilbert Dixon, who presented much of the evidence to the Select Committee. The relevant Acts were obtained in 1773 and Assay Offices were established in Sheffield and Birmingham. Six of the nine founder Guardians of the Sheffield Assay Office were Freemen of the Cutlers' Company of whom four either had been, or were to be, the Master Cutler.⁵⁴

Huntsman's and Boulsover's discoveries, combined with growing consumer demands from all classes, led to the discovery of another new metal: Britannia or white metal. Britannia metal was predominantly tin combined with a small amount of antimony and it was discovered by James Vickers (who had also been trained as a cutler) in 1769. He applied the rolling processes used in the plating industry to produce teapots, tankards, candlesticks, etc., that retailed at a much lower cost than those that were plated.

The production of crucible steel encouraged the growth of a further ancillary industry: the manufacture of edge tools. Although files had been made in Sheffield since at least the seventeenth century (filesmiths, as was noted above, were accepted into the Cutlers' Company in 1682), crucible steel allowed the

⁵⁴ The six were Thomas Law (Master Cutler in 1753), Joseph Hancock (1763), John Winter (1775), John Rowbotham (1780), Matthew Fenton, and John Hoyland.

production of higher quality tools and this, combined with increased demand, encouraged the industry to grow dramatically during the eighteenth century. Meanwhile, the introduction of rolling mills enabled the production of steel suitable for other tools, most notably saws, and, from the mid-eighteenth century, this also became a significant local industry.

Buttons had also been made in Sheffield since at least the seventeenth century. This trade had originally been a sideline of cutlers who had used the excess horn and bone from the manufacture of hafts (knife handles) but by the eighteenth century it was an independent industry. Changes in fashions combined with technological developments such as fly presses and plating led to phenomenal growth during the second half of the eighteenth century and one of the more successful companies was that of Holy and Newbould. This company had been founded in 1771 by Thomas Holy, button maker, George Woodhead, merchant, and Thomas Newbould, a shearsmith who had been the Master Cutler in 1751 and whose son, Samuel, was to be the Master in 1800.⁵⁵

Small box making, usually for tobacco or snuff, which had also developed as an offshoot of the cutlery trades, also experienced significant growth in the eighteenth century in the wake of increased consumer demand and

⁵⁵ Dennis Smith, 'The Buttonmaking Industry in Sheffield', in Jones, *Aspects 1*, p. 91.

technological innovations. Other notable local industries included the manufacture of sheaths, inkpots, paper, lead and snuff.

The Cutlers' Company and the cutlery trades

Throughout the eighteenth century, however, the manufacture of cutlery remained Sheffield's principal industry, possibly employing as many as half of the male workforce. In a petition in 1785, the Freemen of the Cutlers' Company claimed that prior to 'the late Disseverance of America from Great Britain upwards of ten thousand masters, journey men and apprentices' were employed in the trades, a figure that was probably not too much of an exaggeration.⁵⁶ All of these men were under the jurisdiction of the Cutlers' Company. Theoretically at least, the thirty-three Company Members, and particularly the Master Cutler, wielded immense power. Company business was transacted in the Cutlers' Hall which was located directly opposite the town's parish church and diagonally opposite to the small Town Hall. Company meetings were held at least once a month when business was discussed, apprentices were enrolled, new Freemen were admitted, marks were granted, complaints were heard and misdemeanours were punished. The Cutlers' Hall was the venue for the annual Cutlers' Feast, the dinner that was held on the day of the Master Cutler's installation and to which the great and good of the area were invited. The local magistrates held

⁵⁶ E. J. Buckatzsch, 'Places of origin of a group of immigrants into Sheffield, 1624-1799', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 2 (1950). p. 303: CCA, S11/1.

court in the Hall and it was the venue for numerous public meetings. It was also used as a schoolroom, for dancing lessons and cookery classes, and, from 1739 to 1761, as a tavern. It was, unquestionably, one of the focal points of the town's life.



Figure 1: Samuel Worth, The Cutlers' Hall (1725-1832)

(Source: Author's Collection)

The Company's Act of Incorporation had stated that the incorporated trades included the makers of knives, blades, scissors, shears, sickles, cutlery wares and 'all other wares and manufactures made or wrought of Iron and Steel' within Hallamshire and 'Six Miles Compasse of the same'.⁵⁷ However, from the outset only the makers of knives, blades, scissors, shears and sickles were considered to be under the Company's jurisdiction. These were divided into three main groups: knifemakers (usually called, confusingly, cutlers),

⁵⁷ CCA, B1/1/2b.

scissorsmiths and shearsmiths – sicklesmiths were included with the shearsmiths. Awl bladesmiths were admitted as a separate group in 1676, followed by filesmiths and scythesmiths in 1682. Boys were apprenticed to one branch of the trade only and Freemen were only allowed a mark for the branch in which they trained. Furthermore, in 1662, a Company byelaw had stated that no one was allowed to make wares for a trade other than their own.⁵⁸ These rules encouraged separatism within the industry with each branch developing a strong sense of its own trade identity and pride in its individual craft skills.

The manufacture of cutlery was comprised of three main processes - forging, grinding and hafting – and although many cutlers did undertake all three, specialisation had been practised from the earliest days.⁵⁹ As the industry developed and the numbers employed grew, however, fragmentation increased as cutlers strived to establish a market niche by specialising in a particular skill. Traditionally, for example, cutlers had rented space at one of the riverside grinding wheels in order to grind their own cutlery, but increasingly this was done by specialist grinders and by 1740, grinding was recognised as being a separate craft. By the 1770s, the craft of grinding had been sub-divided into knife-grinding, scissor-grinding, and razor-grinding. Sub-divisions also occurred in other branches of the trades. For example, the 1787 *Sheffield Directory* lists seven categories of knifemakers or cutlers: pen and pocket

⁵⁸ CCA, B3/2.

⁵⁹ Hafting is the technical term for fixing the handle.

knives; common pen and pocket knives; stamped brass, white metal and metal framed knives; spotted knives; silver and plated table knives; table knives; and common table knives. The titles given to each of these seven sub-divisions illustrate the manufacturing hierarchy that had developed and, in many instances, there were further hierarchies within the sub-divisions themselves – the makers of table-knives with round tangs, for example, were considered superior to those who made table-knives with scale tangs.⁶⁰ It is also interesting to note that the majority of the manufacturers of the ‘common’ knives were in the surrounding villages, not in the town. There were 90 manufacturers of pen and pocket knives in Sheffield, for example, and just 6 in ‘the neighbourhood’; the numbers for the manufacturers of ‘common pen and pocket knives’ were 34 and 114 respectively.⁶¹

The manufacture of cutlery was not suited to the skills of small children and consequently boys were not apprenticed until they were at least twelve years old.⁶² The normal practice was for them to have a maximum three months’ trial in a workshop (known locally as ‘a likeing’) after which their master would bring them to the Cutlers’ Hall where their indentures were formally enrolled.⁶³

Apprenticeships were for a minimum of seven years and could not be

⁶⁰ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, p. 19.

⁶¹ *Sheffield Directory* 1787, pp. 12-22.

⁶² The minimum age was formally established in 1728 but the wording of the minute indicates that this was a long-established custom. However, this rule did not apply to boys who were trained by their Freemen fathers and whose indentures did not need to be formally enrolled. CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, April 27th 1728.

⁶³ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, p. 15.

completed until the boy had reached the age of twenty-one after which they could become Freemen providing that they could prove that they were 'owners of their own work' – in other words, that they could buy raw material and market their finished goods. And because the capital needed to set oneself up in business and be able to do this was relatively small, Freedom was a realistic goal for most apprentices.

Workshops in the cutlery trades were small and they were usually attached to, or close by, the home. Few employed more than four people: the master, one or two apprentices and, possibly, a journeyman. This was in marked contrast to many of the workshops in the 'new' industries where, because of the equipment (e.g. rolling mills) and materials (e.g. silver) involved, large numbers of workers had to be gathered together in one place. Again, because of the nature of the manufacture, many of these larger workshops attempted to establish formal working hours whereas in the cutlery trades each master set his own hours, further emphasising each workshop's sense of individuality and independence.

Because of the raw material involved, cutlery was prone to rusting and therefore stockpiling was not possible.⁶⁴ Consequently, goods were usually made to order. Merchants or factors placed orders on Saturday evenings, often

⁶⁴ Until the early twentieth century, cutlery was made from carbon steel or precious metal (silver or gold). Stainless steel was not discovered until 1913 and was not used for the manufacture of cutlery until the 1920s.

in a local tavern, and delivery and payment was made on the following Saturday. The tradition of 'St Monday' (and in some weeks 'St Tuesday' also) was well established in the Hallamshire cutlery trades and it was common practice for most of the contracted work to be done, in a rush, at the end of the week. This ability to set one's own work pattern, using one's own tools in one's own workshop further emphasised the sense of independence that was such a characteristic of the Sheffield cutlery trades. It also encouraged a sense of solidarity within each trade – E. P. Thompson's 'vertical association of the trade' – and as long as small master status remained a realistic expectation for the majority, there was no necessity for 'horizontal association' between those who were in a similar economic position.⁶⁵

Traditionally, Sheffield cutlers had sold their wares through chapmen, local markets and fairs, or through merchants, most of whom were based in Hull or London and who usually operated through agents, known locally as factors. However, as the cycle of increased consumer demand, improving transport networks, product innovation, and technological developments began to develop early in the eighteenth century some local cutlers sought to establish themselves, as individuals, in the market place by increasing the demand for their own goods and by taking control of their production and marketing. In order to do this, they had to be able to raise enough capital to increase their levels of production and to be in a position to give credit. Many did this through

⁶⁵ Thompson, 'Eighteenth-century English society', p. 145.

loans and recent research has shown that these were primarily from local financiers. Elizabeth Parkin, for example, a local heiress, made numerous small loans of between £10 and £50 to cutlers in the middle decades of the eighteenth century and among her more regular clients was Leonard Webster, Master Cutler in 1748.⁶⁶ Other regular moneylenders included the merchant families of Broadbent, Roebuck, and Shore and the attorneys James Wheat, Samuel Dawson and Joseph Banks.

Another way of raising capital was through partnerships. Often these were formed between cutlers in different branches of the trade – knifemakers with forkmakers, for example – and they served the dual purpose of raising capital and enabling the participants to diversify without breaching the Cutlers' Company law of one man/one trade/one mark. As trade began to boom, the cutlery industry also began to be viewed as an attractive investment by non-cutlers, or foreigners as they were usually termed. Not all of these foreigners were from outside Sheffield. Many were local tradesmen who recognised the mutual advantages of combining allied or associated trades: cutlers with steel refiners, for example, or filesmiths with toolmakers. Cutlers also became involved in the plating and silver trades.

⁶⁶ Flavell, 'The economic development of Sheffield', pp. 226-236; B. A. Holderness 'Elizabeth Parkin and her investments 1733-66: Aspects of the Sheffield money market in the eighteenth century' *T.H.A.S.*, 10 (1973), *passim*.

However, from its earliest days the Cutlers' Company had sought to protect the trades by issuing numerous byelaws prohibiting Freemen from dealing with non-Freemen (foreigners). They were prohibited from working for foreigners, for example; from assisting them in any of the crafts of a cutler; from selling blades and hafts to them; and also from buying blades or hafts from them.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, during the early to mid-eighteenth century, the Company appears to have been content 'to turn a blind eye' to these partnerships, probably because they were aware that they were, in the main, benefiting the trades. Their lack of action was also, undoubtedly, influenced by the fact that many of these partnerships involved Members of the Company. The Freemen, 'the Commonalty', however, were not so accommodating. They recognised that these partnerships gave the participants an economic advantage and they felt that their traditional way of life was under threat. During the late 1760s, they began to complain to the Company 'that they, who had borne the burden and heat of the day, should be injured in their trade and business by persons who had not served an apprenticeship to the same trade'.⁶⁸ Matters came to a head in 1769 over the partnership between Joseph Shemeld, Jonathan Hague and Jonathan Parkin.

This partnership had been formed in the mid 1760s with Joseph Shemeld, a Freeman cutler, and Jonathan Hague, a Freeman filesmith, providing the skills

⁶⁷ CCA, B3/1 and B3/2.

⁶⁸ Quoted in Leader, *History*, vol. 1, p. 73.

and Jonathan Parkin the capital. Parkin was the son of a cutler but had been apprenticed as a clerk to a merchant and hardwareman and not to his father - consequently he was not entitled to his Freedom. However, once he was in partnership with Shemeld and Hague, he carried on business as if he were a Freeman. The Company attempted, unsuccessfully, to impose the proscribed fine of £2 for every month that he had been illegally practising the art of a cutler and finally, in 1769, they took him to court. Parkin immediately counter-sued by seeking legal backing for his demand to be admitted as a Freeman. The case lasted for two years. Neither side was successful and the Company incurred costs of over £300.⁶⁹ The following year (1772), they issued a new byelaw imposing a fine of £10 per month on any Freemen who entered into partnership with a foreigner.⁷⁰ Whilst this draconian and considerably retrograde measure would, undoubtedly, have appeased many of 'the Commonalty', there must have been considerable opposition to it amongst the Members of the Company, especially as at least two of them were in such partnerships.⁷¹ The following year it was modified: the fine would be imposed on anyone who allowed 'a foreigner or non-Freeman personally to carry on any of the trades of the Corporation, or act or direct therein'.⁷²

⁶⁹ CCA, K4/1. Papers in the case *Beely v Parkin*; C9/1. Company minute book; D1/1, accounts of the Masters Cutler.

⁷⁰ CCA, B3/5.

⁷¹ Joseph Kenyon was in partnership with a sawmaker and John Winter with a silverplater. Kenyon was to be the Master Cutler in 1774 and Winter in 1775.

⁷² CCA, B3/6.

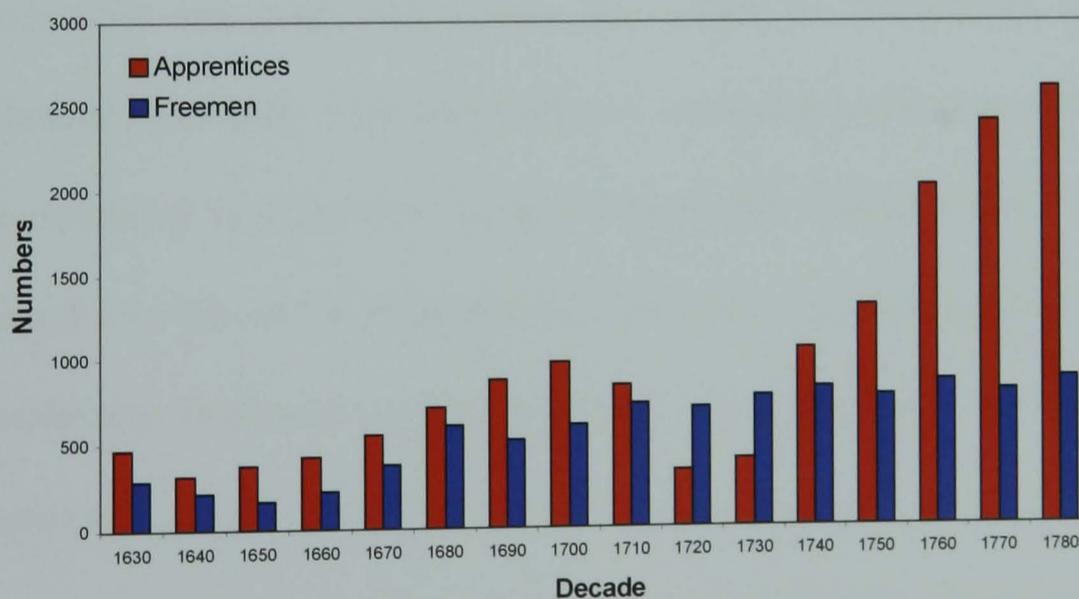
Initially, the capital that these fledgling entrepreneurs raised was not used to increase the capacity of their own workshops but to extend credit to others who would then manufacture goods on their behalf. At first, these men, who became known locally as master manufacturers, continued to view themselves as working cutlers and, consequently, they remained socially indistinguishable from the cutlers to whom they sub-contracted.⁷³ But, as they began to exert more economic control over the trades and as their financial dominance grew, the social divisions between them and the rest of the cutlery community began to widen. They became the *nouveau riche* of Sheffield, eager to advertise their wealth and status through their possessions, dress and social circle. They sought to distance themselves from their origins and to adopt the ways of 'polite' society. In order to do so, they often shunned the traditional customs of the local community – throwing at cocks at Shrovetide, for example, and dog whipping on the feast day of Saints Simon and Jude.⁷⁴ They also sought to distance themselves from their workers in the workplace and many started to employ 'middle men' such as bookkeepers and warehousemen. More importantly, some also started to shun the traditional Saturday night camaraderie of the tavern when orders were given and payments were made by using managers or agents to act on their behalf.

⁷³ This was similar to the situation in other burgeoning industrial areas. See, for example, John Smail's study of textile workers in the Halifax area - John Smail 'Manufacturer or Artisan? The relationship between economic and cultural change in the early stages of the eighteenth century industrialization,' *Journal of Social History*, 25 (1991-2).

⁷⁴ Baxter, 'The origins of the social war', p. 48.

The economic strength of these master manufacturers and their dominance of the local credit networks frustrated the ambitions of many cutlers who found, on completing their apprenticeship, that they were forced to work as journeymen for longer than they would traditionally have expected because they were unable to raise the small amount of capital necessary to set themselves up in business and prove that they were owners of their own work. During the seventeenth century approximately two thirds of cutlery apprentices went on to become Freemen, but during the eighteenth century this figure dropped to approximately 50% and in the 1770s and 1780s it fell to about 40%.⁷⁵ In 1789, it was claimed that journeymen cutlers outnumbered masters by ten or twelve to one.⁷⁶

Figure 2: Apprentices and Freemen in each decade.
1630-1789



(Source: The Freedom and Indenture Books of the Cutlers' Company)

⁷⁵ Based on figures in the Cutlers' Company's Indenture and Freedoms books. These figures can only be approximate as the Indenture books do not contain any records for boys who were apprenticed to their fathers and also because some men spent many years as journeymen before becoming Freemen. Poor record keeping by the Company's Clerk in the 1720s and 1730s partly explains the low number of apprentices in those decades.

⁷⁶ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, June 4th 1789.

Some journeymen were contracted to work for a particular master manufacturer, often in a workshop owned by that master and sometimes even using his tools. The majority, however, were semi-independent and worked in their own shops, using their own tools. This was a system that suited the master manufacturers. By contracting out, they could increase their levels of production without incurring too many capital costs and when demand was low, workers could be laid off with little or no inconvenience.⁷⁷ Some masters increased their potential units of production by encouraging their journeymen or newly-qualified apprentices to establish their own shops through loans that were contingent upon them working only for them, loans that were often transferred between master manufacturers.⁷⁸

When trade was good, this system also suited the journeymen who could command high wages – the best workmen, reputedly, could earn up to 10s 6d a day compared to a labourer's wage of about one shilling a day.⁷⁹ But when demand was low and work scarce, the position of journeymen was, of course, considerably weakened and it was at these times that many decided (or were forced) to try and support themselves and their families by selling their goods rather than their labour. But, in order to do this they had to become Freemen and take out a mark because it was illegal to sell unmarked cutlery and

⁷⁷ A similar system was used in the Birmingham metal trades. See Marie B. Rowlands, *Masters and Men in the West Midlands Metalware Trades before the Industrial Revolution* (Manchester, 1975).

⁷⁸ Jewitt, 'Passages', pp. 28-9.

⁷⁹ Arthur Young, *A six months tour through the North of England* (London, 1770), quoted in Pybus, 'Damned Bad Place, Sheffield', p. 60.

throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there is a noticeable correlation between dips in the economic cycle and a sudden influx of new Freemen.⁸⁰ When these small-scale craftsmen (known locally as ‘little mesters’) found that they could not maintain their families in this way, they had to resort to once again selling their labour by working as journeymen for more successful masters. As a result, the market place was flooded with small masters who often had to resort to undercutting each other in order to survive and whose existence kept down the wages of journeymen.⁸¹ It was not uncommon in the Sheffield cutlery trades in the late eighteenth century for a man to be an independent master in one year, or even one month, and a journeyman the next.

Nor was it uncommon for journeymen and the Freemen who worked as journeymen (for convenience, I will refer to both groups, collectively, as Freemen) to find themselves trapped in a cycle of debt and dependency. Almost all bought their raw materials on credit. Some were fortunate and were paid for the finished goods in cash, which if sufficient was used to pay off the debt and buy the necessities of life. Many, however, were given loans by individual master manufacturers on condition that they bought all their raw materials from him and that they made goods only for him.⁸² These contracts were sometimes

⁸⁰ G. I. H. Lloyd, *The Cutlery Trades* (London, 1913), p. 193.

⁸¹ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, p. 39.

⁸² For examples of these contracts see Sheffield Archives, Wheat Collection 1181-1185.

transferred between masters thus trapping the cutler in a widening circle of debt and dependency.⁸³ Some of these contracts even specified the retail establishments that the cutler could use and some men were paid in tokens that could only be redeemed at those establishments – a system known as ‘truck’ or, in Sheffield, as ‘stuffing’, that was encouraged by the chronic lack of circulating currency in the late eighteenth century.⁸⁴ It was also a system favoured by some of the master manufacturers because it strengthened their control over their workers - Joseph Bailey, Master Cutler in 1802, had the reputation for being one of the most notorious perpetrators of ‘stuffing’.⁸⁵

A frequent complaint of the Freemen during the late eighteenth century was that their financial position was further undermined by the practice of master manufacturers taking more apprentices that they were legally allowed.⁸⁶ The purpose of the Cutlers’ Company’s numerous laws concerning apprenticeships was to maintain stability in the trades by restricting the numbers admitted so as to guarantee employment for the majority. Only Freemen were allowed to take apprentices and they could not take a second until the first was in his fifth year. though they could take any number of their own sons or the sons of other

⁸³ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, p. 29.

⁸⁴ Sheffield Archives, Wheat Collection 1181-1185. During the local food riots in 1756, the rioters had announced that they ‘would destroy all the mills, and afterwards pull down the Houses of the Factors’ and ‘they publickly told the Factors that they would not be used also in the manner as before with half stuff’. R. E. Leader, *Sheffield in the Eighteenth Century* (second edition, Sheffield, 1905), p. 111.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, p. 39.

Freemen. In 1768 this was reduced to four years because of 'the great Increase of Trade and demand for the Manufacture of Cutlery Wares made in this corporation' whereby 'it has been found by Experience that the aforesaid Restraint to five years is too narrow and confined to keep up a sufficient supply of Workmen in the said Corporation'.⁸⁷ An examination of the Indenture Books reveals that this law was frequently broken and that some of the most frequent offenders were Members of the Company. At one time, for example, Thomas Law (Master Cutler in 1753) had ten apprentices, John Winter and Thomas Settle (Masters Cutler in 1775 and 1785 respectively) each had five, and Jonathan Watkinson (Master Cutler in 1787) had nine.

As the cutlery trades grew, so, inevitably, did the number of apprentices. In the 1650s, approximately 40 boys were apprenticed each year. By the first decade of the eighteenth century the numbers had risen to almost 100; by the 1760s, this figure had doubled, rising to approximately 240 a year in the 1770s and 330 in the 1790s. And these figures did not include boys who were apprenticed to their own fathers whose indentures did not need to be formally enrolled. (The low figures for the 1720s and 1730s, as shown on the graph below, are due to poor record keeping by the Company's Clerk during those decades.)

⁸⁷ CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, February 27th 1768.

Figure 3: Numbers of apprentices in each decade, 1630-1809



(Source: the Indenture Books of the Cutlers' Company)

Where did these boys come from? The popular conception was that many of them were 'outsiders' who were taking work away from Sheffield boys.⁸⁸ However, based on a survey of three 25 year periods and using figures in the Indenture Books and data compiled by E J Buckatzsch in 1950, it is clear that the majority came from either Sheffield or from villages that were less than five miles from Sheffield – well within the borders of Hallamshire (see figures 4 - 6 below).⁸⁹ The most noticeable difference between the periods are the numbers involved: in the period 1650-1674, 1,029 apprentices were enrolled of whom 867 (84%) were from Sheffield or nearby villages; between 1700-1724, the equivalent figures were 1,818 and 1,470 (81%); but between 1750-1774, they were 4,316 and 3,252 (76%).

⁸⁸ Jewitt, 'Passages', p. 39.

⁸⁹ Buckatzsch, 'Places of origin', p. 304.

Figure 4: Places of origin of apprentices to the cutlery trades, 1650-1674

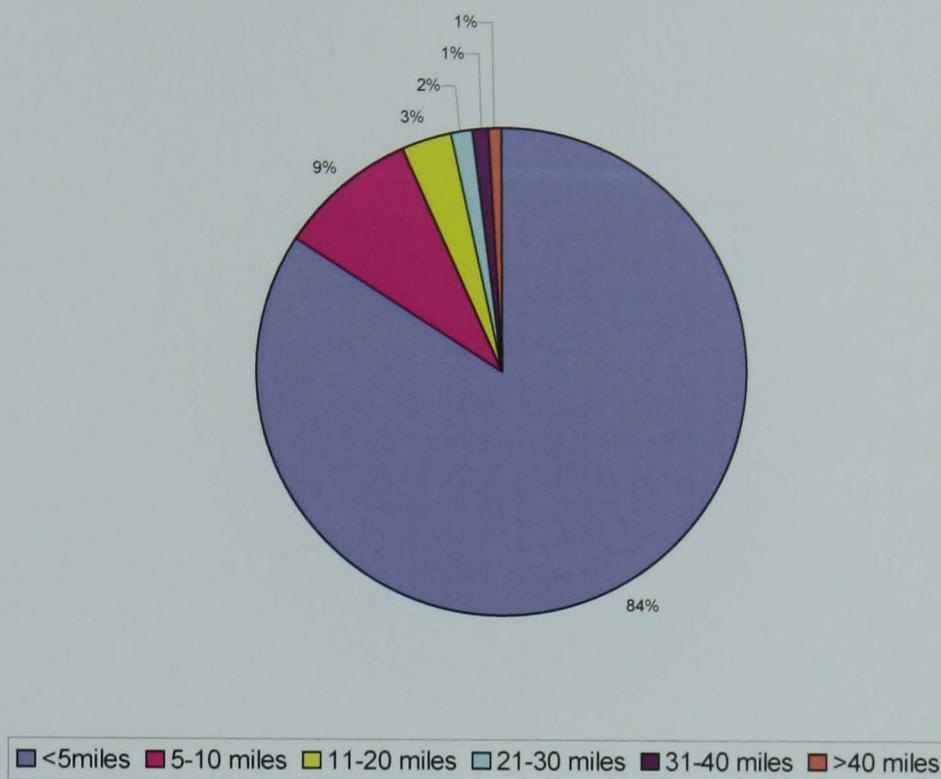


Figure 5: Places of origin of apprentices to the cutlery trades, 1700-1724

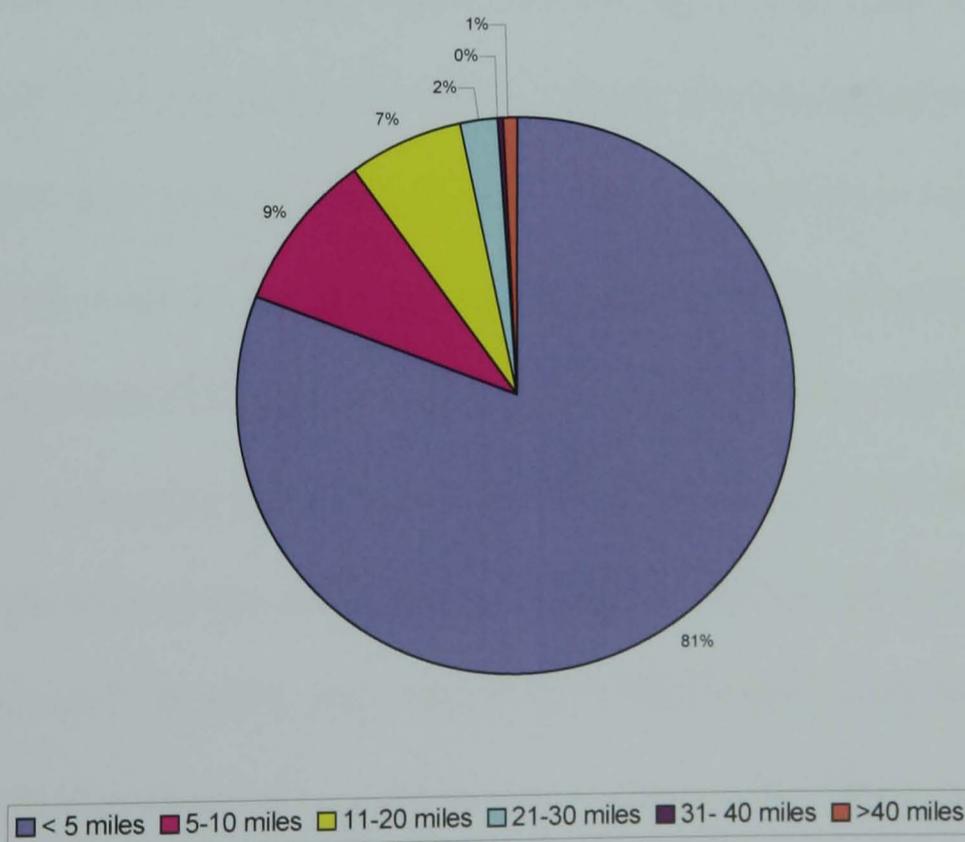
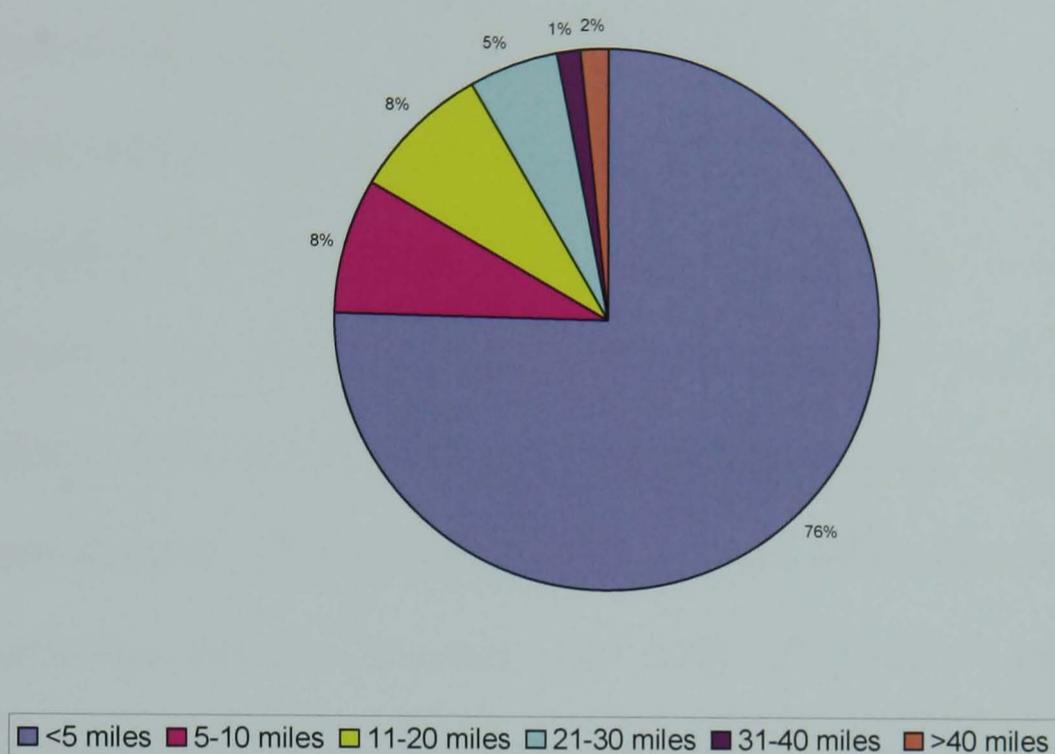


Figure 6: Places of origin of apprentices to the cutlery trades, 1750-1774



As has been noted, the figures quoted above do not include sons who were apprenticed to their Freeman fathers. Nor do they include many of the parish apprentices who were assigned to cutlers. Parish apprentices had been a source of concern since 1624: if a cutler already had an apprentice but then had a boy apprenticed to him by the churchwardens before his first had served five years, he was in breach of Company regulations and liable to a fine; but if he refused the parish apprentice, he was in breach of the Poor Law. In 1652, the Company had sought legal advice and were told that there could be no exception to the five-year rule.⁹⁰ In 1712, they went back to the courts to ask if a poor boy whose indentures had not been enrolled was entitled to his Freedom after seven-years' servitude. The judge replied that he was not, but suggested that the

⁹⁰ CCA, K1/1, the opinion of William Allestrye.

Company should show some leniency.⁹¹ In 1736, they asked if the forty shillings fine should be enforced if a Freeman was assigned a parish apprentice before his first apprentice had served five years. The reply was 'no' providing that the indentures of the parish apprentice were not enrolled until the five years had elapsed.⁹² The consequence of this was that the indentures of many parish apprentices were never enrolled and, therefore, the boys could not become Freemen. They remained, however, a source of extra labour - and a potential source of capital. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Company was complaining that poor Freemen, who could not afford to keep or train apprentices, were being 'enticed' to take them by offers of payments from churchwardens or from other masters, often in different trades, who did not want to take them themselves.⁹³

As early as 1687, the Company had attempted to restrict the numbers of apprentices by ordering, in contravention of its own Incorporating Act, that Freemen had to be of three years standing before they could take their first apprentice. In 1741, in a further illegal and ill-conceived move, they announced that new Freemen could 'advance' their Freedom by a payment of £4 10s on their admission thus gaining the right to take an apprentice within their first three years – though it is probable that the purpose of this last move was as

⁹¹ CCA, K1/2, the opinion of William Jessop.

⁹² CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, 1736.

⁹³ Leader, *History*, vol. 1, p. 67.

much about raising money as restricting the numbers of apprentices.⁹⁴ This scheme ended in 1748 after yet another court case in which its illegality was proved. However, based on complaints made by the Freeman in 1784, it appears that the three-year rule continued to be popularly accepted as one of the Company's laws.⁹⁵

The involvement of cutlers in the non-corporate trades, especially silver-plating, raised a number of problems with regard to apprenticeships, most notably the fact that many enrolled their apprentices under the rules of the Cutlers' Company but taught them skills that were not necessarily pertinent to the trade of a cutler. Many of these boys, subsequently, applied to be Freeman and in 1776 the Company was forced to seek legal backing for the right to refuse such requests.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, some cutlers who are known to have been primarily involved in the silver trade continued to enrol apprentices at the Cutlers' Hall – Thomas Law, for example, one of the founder Guardians of the Sheffield Assay Office and Master Cutler in 1753, enrolled nine between 1777 and 1782.

The Company's byelaws of 1662 had stated that apprentices had to live in their master's house and that every master who allowed his apprentice to be absent

⁹⁴ This three-year rule is referred to in the accounts of John Webster (CCA, D1/1), but there is no evidence that it was ever enacted as a byelaw; CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, January 31st 1741.

⁹⁵ CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, November 26th 1748: affidavits made by the Freeman before Josiah Beckwith, October 26th 1784, NA/KB1/24/2.

⁹⁶ CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, February 1st 1776.

for more than fourteen days, without just cause, would be liable for a fine of 3s 4d per day.⁹⁷ But, by the second half of the eighteenth century, an increasing number of boys were living not in their master's homes but in communal lodging houses. The social consequences of housing large numbers of adolescent youths together do not need to be elucidated. Many were apprentices of the more successful master manufacturers who wanted to emphasise their superior social status by separating their homes from their workshops. William Wilberforce complained in his diary that 'an increasing evil at Sheffield is that the apprentices used to live with the masters and be of the family; now wives are grown too fine ladies to like it; they lodge out, and are much less orderly'.⁹⁸ By 1776, the situation was of sufficient concern to the Cutlers' Company that they, once again, sought legal advice. In a foretaste of the forgetfulness that was to characterise both sides in the subsequent dispute between the Company and the Freemen, they asked if they had the legal right to enact a byelaw to force masters to house their apprentices, despite the fact that just such a byelaw had, in fact, been enacted in 1662. An unidentified member of one of the Inns of Court informed them that they could not, as the purpose of apprenticeship was instruction. The 1662 byelaws had also stated that any apprentice who did not live in his master's home would be forever barred from being a Freeman.

⁹⁷ CCA, B3/2.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Leader, *Sheffield*, p. 180. Leader dates this quote as 'at the close of the last century', i.e. the end of the eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, in 1776 the Company asked if it could make an identical new law, and were told, again, that they could not.⁹⁹

In the late eighteenth century, the bulk of Sheffield cutlery was marketed either directly by the larger manufacturers or through locally based factors and merchants. As was noted above, many of these ‘houses’ began to employ middlemen (warehousemen, bookkeepers, etc.) and many also began to employ travellers. Some appointed ‘out-of-town’ and even overseas agents to work on their behalf – in May 1794, for example, one such agent placed an advertisement in the *Sheffield Register* seeking employment ‘with a house of respectability’ claiming that he was ‘conversant with the cutlery and hardware business’ and that he had ‘a thorough knowledge of all the town [London] shopkeepers in the above branches’. He also stated that he ‘should be happy to take orders in London by commission’.¹⁰⁰ An increasing number of local businessmen also began to travel abroad – Samuel Norris (Master Cutler 1777) established lucrative contracts with customers in Germany, for example, and Joseph Bailey is known to have travelled to America in search of new markets during the early 1760s. Some established members of their family, often one of their sons, as their agent in a foreign country – Jonathan Moore, for example, son and grandson of past Masters Cutler, acted as his father’s agent in New

⁹⁹ CCA, B3/2; C9/1, Company minute book, February 1st 1776.

¹⁰⁰ *Sheffield Register*, May 2nd 1794.

York in the 1770s.¹⁰¹ Others appointed foreign clerks and bookkeepers to assist their trade in overseas markets – Roebuck’s, for example, appointed a German, Johann Valert, as one of their clerks in 1777.¹⁰² By the end of the century, Sheffield merchants and manufacturers were trading in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Russia, America, and the West Indies and, according to the *Register*, Sheffield hardware was even being sold in China and Japan.¹⁰³

The growth of overseas trade inevitably meant that the industry was adversely affected by war. During the Seven Years War (1756-63) the temporary loss of access to the German market, and especially to the international fairs that were held there, had a detrimental effect on the local economy and this was probably a contributing factor in the search for markets in the ‘New World’. As was noted above, Joseph Bailey is credited as being the first Sheffield cutler to travel to America in search of new markets and improved access to the Atlantic ports as a result of canal building encouraged others to follow his example.¹⁰⁴

The fact that, a decade later, war with America ‘created much alarm in the town’ is indicative of how quickly this market had grown.¹⁰⁵ When the news

¹⁰¹ CCA, B4/2. Jonathan Moore junior applied for his Freedom in 1772 and again in 1783, but on both occasions was refused because, although he had been apprenticed to his Freeman father, he had been trained as a clerk and not as a cutler.

¹⁰² P. C. Garlick, ‘The Sheffield cutlery and allied trades and their markets in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, University of Sheffield M. A. dissertation (1951), p. 48.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-97; *Sheffield Register*, June 4th 1790.

¹⁰⁴ R. E. Leader, *Reminiscences of Old Sheffield* (second edition, Sheffield, 1876), p. 136.

¹⁰⁵ *Sheffield Local Register*, vol. 1 (Sheffield, 1830), p. 53.

reached Sheffield in July 1784 that a peace treaty had been signed between Britain and America there were widespread celebrations.¹⁰⁶ Trade recovered quickly thereafter and in July 1787 the editor of the *Sheffield Register* reported that the town's 'commercial hemisphere is more than usually illumined at this time by the bright rays of increasing trade'.¹⁰⁷

The town of Sheffield in the late eighteenth century

In the second half of the eighteenth century Sheffield was, undoubtedly, a boomtown. Between 1736 and 1755 its population rose by about 2,000 (from an estimated 10,121 to 12,001), but over the next thirty years it more than doubled and by 1788 it had risen to an estimated 25,141.¹⁰⁸ By 1801 it was just over 31,000.¹⁰⁹ Unlike many of the other growing industrial towns of the period, however, Sheffield did not attract a mass influx of unskilled adult labourers because its core industries demanded a highly skilled workforce. But it did attract apprentices, many of whom settled in the town after they had finished their time. Improving economic conditions encouraged earlier marriage amongst these young men and, in turn, this led to the birth of more children. As was shown above, the majority of these immigrant apprentices came from villages that were within a relatively short distance of Sheffield. However, research by

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁷ *Sheffield Register*, July 14th 1787.

¹⁰⁸ David Hey, *A History of Sheffield* (Lancaster, 1998), pp. 57 and 91; *A Directory of Sheffield*, ed. John Robinson (Sheffield, 1797) p. 24.

¹⁰⁹ Hey, *History*, p. 91.

David Hey has shown that the exodus of young men from these villages did not have an adverse effect on them because their populations also grew during the late eighteenth century.¹¹⁰

Sheffield was not a pretty town. The streets were narrow and crowded, with houses and cutlery workshops side by side. Contemporary visitors always commented upon the dirt and the noise of these workshops and, most of all, on the cloud of smoke that permanently enveloped the town. In 1779, Charles Burlington wrote:

The town is about a mile in length, and half a mile in breadth; but the streets are narrow, and most of the houses appear black from the great clouds of smoak constantly issuing from the forges. Indeed, elegance is not to be expected in a town where there are so many employed in useful manufactories; for although very great fortunes are acquired by those to whom they sell the fruits of their labour, yet all the houses are contrived for utility only.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ David Hey, *The Rural Metalworkers of the Sheffield Region* (Leicester, 1972), *passim*.

¹¹¹ Charles Burlington, *The Modern Universal British Traveller* (London, 1779), quoted in Pybus, 'Damned Bad Place, Sheffield', p. 63.

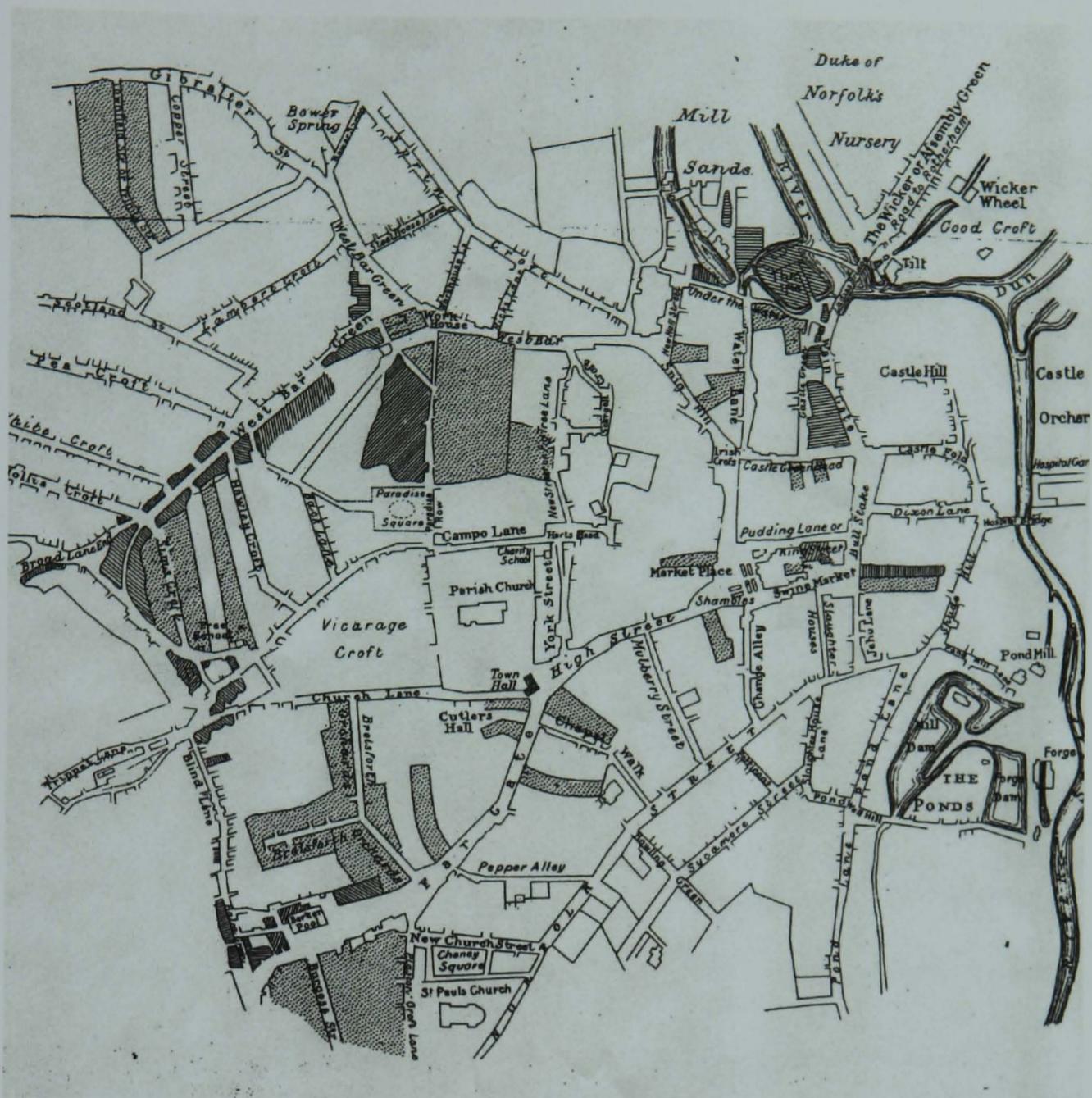


Figure 7: Map showing the central part of the town of Sheffield, circa 1780.

(Source: Cutlers' Company Collection)

It was not a corporate town and there was no single authority to instigate or coordinate building programmes. Much of the responsibility for its physical maintenance was divided between two bodies: the Town Trust and the Church Burgesses. The Town Trust, which had been established in 1297 by the Lord of the Manor, consisted of thirteen Trustees who were, in theory, elected by a majority of the freeholders but who were, in practice, a self-perpetuating

oligarchy. They were responsible for the causeways, highways, the Lady's bridge over the river Don, and the water supply. The Church Burgesses were established in 1554 and consisted of 'twelve reputable men of the town'. They were also a self-perpetuating oligarchy and were responsible for the maintenance of the Parish Church and the highways and bridges around it.

Sheffield had no attractions for the local aristocracy and there were no resident gentry. The social elite of the town were predominantly men whose wealth was dependent, either directly or indirectly, upon trade. These men were late converts to the benefits of 'urban renaissance' and for many years the only public building of note in the town was the Baroque-style church of St Paul's which had been built in the 1720s to ease congestion at the Parish Church (though, due to a dispute over patronage, it was not consecrated until 1740). The Parish Church itself, parts of which dated to the thirteenth century, was in a poor state of repair and its interior was chaotic and dark. The Town Hall, which had been built in 1700, was entered via an external staircase and underneath, at ground floor level, were prison cells. By the end of the eighteenth century, this building was considered to be small and inadequate. The Cutlers' Hall, the second on the site, was built in 1725 and, although it was a substantial and imposing building architectural historians have subsequently described it as 'domestic rather than palatial' in appearance, 'an important town house

perhaps, but not yet a public hall'.¹¹² The only elegant area was Paradise Square, a square of three-storey Palladian style brick houses that had been built in the middle years of the eighteenth century. At the end of the century, this was the home of attorneys, factors, grocers, furniture makers and Sheffield's first Masonic hall.¹¹³

As the wealth of the town increased, so its inhabitants aspired to some of the attributes of the 'urban renaissance' that they had seen, or heard of, in other places. These were, predominantly, social venues. Assembly Rooms were opened in 1762 and were re-furbished in 1773 when a theatre, with seating for eight hundred, was opened next door. In 1785, the Tontine Inn, built with money raised by 500 subscribers, was opened and in 1797 this inn had stabling for 90 horses. In 1792, a four-storey Coffee House, complete with a billiard room, opened on George Street. The most ambitious and grandiose public building, however, was the General Infirmary, built by public subscription on the outskirts of the town and opened in 1797. Within a very short time, all of these fine new buildings were covered in a thick layer of soot.

The rapid growth in the population meant that more houses were needed and the last three decades of the century saw a flurry of building with an estimated

¹¹² Roger Harper, 'An Architectural History of the Cutlers' Hall', in Binfield and Hey, *Mesters to Masters*, p. 117.

¹¹³ David Flather, 'Summer Outing 1922 - Sheffield', *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, XXXV (1922), p. 212.

3,000 houses being built, mainly on land that had previously been open fields.¹¹⁴ A few of the more successful businessmen built homes in the countryside on the outskirts of the town. Thomas Broadbent, a member of a well-established local family of merchants and bankers, was the first to do this when he built Page Hall in 1773 and Benjamin Roebuck, another merchant and banker, built his country residence, Meersbrook, shortly afterwards. The majority of manufacturers, however, preferred to remain close to their place of business and the first cutlers to build 'country' residences were John Henfrey (Master Cutler in 1792) and Joseph Bailey (Master Cutler in 1801) who built homes at Highfield and Burn Greave respectively.

The increasing consumer demands of the growing population meant that by the early 1780s the old medieval market had long outgrown its original location. By that time, the market itself contained 108 shops and stalls and a further 76 stalls were spread along the adjoining streets. In 1784 an act of Parliament was obtained for the building of a new market and this was opened in August 1786. It housed 215 shops and stalls, of which about one third were allocated for the sale of non-food items.¹¹⁵ The later decades of the century also saw a rise in the number of shopkeepers in the town: there were 21 grocers listed in the 1774 Directory, for example, 48 in 1787 and 68 in 1797. The growing consumerism of the people of Sheffield is shown by the increase in the number of 'fancy'

¹¹⁴ Flavell, 'Economic Development', p. 346.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214; Hey, *History*, p. 49.

goods sold: the 1787 and 1797 Directories list an umbrella maker, a manufacturer of looking glasses, a manufacturer of cut glass, a dealer in music and musical instruments, a corkscrew maker, and the exotically named Signior Petro who was ‘a firework maker’.

When trade was good, wages in the town were generally high, a fact noted by many contemporary commentators including Arthur Young who reported that ‘the manufacturers of Sheffield make immense earnings’.¹¹⁶ Cutlers could earn up to 10s 6d a day, grinders up to twenty shillings a week and men in the silver and plate industry from nine shillings a week to £60 a year.¹¹⁷ Whilst labourers’ wages ranged from six to twenty shillings a week there were few opportunities for unskilled workers and, as, Arthur Young noted, ‘their number is very small’.¹¹⁸ In 1797 F M Eden reported that ‘the tradesman, artisan, and labourer all live well’ and that beer, meat and wheaten bread were included in the diet of all ranks.¹¹⁹ Eden also noted that almost every manufacturer in the town was a member of a friendly society.¹²⁰ The first society was formed in Sheffield in 1728 by John Hancock, a scissormith, and by 1786 there were fifty-two. In the year 1785-86, they paid out a total of £3,670 15s 8d to their members.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Young, *A six months tour*, quoted in Pybus, ‘*Damned Bad Place. Sheffield*’, p. 61.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹¹⁹ F. M. Eden, *The State of the Poor: A History of the Labouring Classes in England, with Parochial Reports* (1797), ed. A. G. L. Rogers (London, 1928), p. 363.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

¹²¹ Sheffield Local Studies Library MP145L.

Writing in 1905, R. E. Leader stated that, in the eighteenth century ‘the tone of the town [Sheffield] intellectually was low’.¹²² This was an unfair criticism. A basic understanding of reading, writing and arithmetic was a necessary skill for success in an economy built on a proliferation of independent and semi-independent craftsmen and many boys would have received a rudimentary education before they were apprenticed. Many would have attended one of the town’s numerous ‘dames’ schools – Arthur Jewitt, for example, who was born in 1772, attended Mistress Ellis’ school from about the age of three and then went to Mr Henfrey’s writing school before entering his father’s cutlery workshop.¹²³ A number of cutlery indentures even included stipulations relating to education, usually requiring the master to teach his apprentice how to write or allow him to attend a writing school for a set period of time. In 1729, for example, Samuel Haslam’s indentures stated that he was to attend a ‘Writeing School in the whole Term’ and in 1763, William Batty’s master agreed to give him ‘Instructions in Writing at Nights’.¹²⁴ This acceptance of the benefits of education, amongst both parents and children, undoubtedly explains the rapid success of the Sunday school movement in Sheffield. The first Sunday school was established in the town by James Vickers in 1789; by 1797 about 800 children attended a Sunday school each week and by 1813, there were 3,186 children registered with 397 teachers.¹²⁵ The sons of the slightly wealthier

¹²² Leader, *Sheffield*, p. 113.

¹²³ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, pp. 47-8.

¹²⁴ CCA, C5/2/1 and C5/2/3.

¹²⁵ *Sheffield Directory 1797*; Caroline Oldcorn Reid, ‘Middle class values and working class culture in nineteenth century Sheffield’, University of Sheffield Ph. D. thesis (1976), p. 171.

families attended the Free Grammar School, which had been established in the mid-sixteenth century, and whose headmaster from 1758-1810 was John Eadon, author of a number of well-known books on mathematics.¹²⁶ There was also a Boys' Charity School, which had been established in 1706 and a Free Writing School, established in 1721. A Girls' Charity School was founded in 1786 with places for thirty girls by which time the boys' school had fifty pupils.¹²⁷ In 1787 Mr Raymundo announced that he planned to open a school where pupils could learn French, Spanish and Italian, though it is not known if he actually did.¹²⁸

The first known book printer in Sheffield was John Garnet who set up in business around 1736. He was followed by Francis Lister who in April 1754 began the publication of the town's first newspaper, *The Sheffield Weekly Journal*. Following Lister's death in 1755, this paper was taken over by Revill Homfray who incorporated it in his Doncaster newspaper which was renamed *The Sheffield Weekly Register and Doncaster Flying Post*. In May 1760, shortly before Homfray's death, William Ward started the *Sheffield Public Advertiser*, and in 1787 Joseph Gales began publication of the *Sheffield Register*.¹²⁹ London and other provincial newspapers were also available. A subscription library was opened in 1771.

¹²⁶ Leader, *Sheffield*, p. 126.

¹²⁷ John Roach, 'The Sheffield Boys' and Girls' Charity Schools 1706-1962', *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 31 (1999), pp. 115-116.

¹²⁸ *Sheffield Register*, September 22nd 1787.

¹²⁹ *Book printing at Sheffield in the eighteenth century*, Sheffield City Libraries Local History Pamphlet No. 12 (n.d.), *passim*.

Throughout the eighteenth century, nonconformity was the dominant form of religious observation in Sheffield. By 1784 there were seven nonconformist chapels in the town: Upper Chapel, built in 1700 and reputed, in 1715, to have had the largest membership in Yorkshire; Nether Chapel (1715); Scotland Street Chapel (1765); Coal Pit Lane Chapel (1774); Lee Croft Chapel (1780); Garden Street Chapel (1780); and Queen Street Chapel (1784).¹³⁰ The Methodists built their first meetinghouse in the town in 1741 but, two years later, while Charles Wesley was attempting to preach, it was destroyed by a mob. A subsequent house was also destroyed by a mob in 1746. However, when John Wesley visited the town in 1779 he recorded that he had preached an open-air sermon to the largest congregation that he had ever seen and when the Methodists opened their new chapel on Norfolk Street in 1780 it had seating for 1,300.¹³¹ The Quakers had built a small meeting house in the early years of the eighteenth century and, in 1800, this was replaced by another that had seating for 1,200.¹³² There was also a small, but prominent, Roman Catholic congregation in the town that was supported by the Lord of the Manor, the Duke of Norfolk, who was himself a Catholic. Masses were held openly in the home of his steward and, in 1767, the Duke was paying the stipends of two priests who served a congregation of just over three hundred.¹³³

¹³⁰ 'John Evan's List of Dissenting Congregations', quoted in David Hey, 'The Changing Pattern of Nonconformity 1660-1851', in Pollard and Holmes, *Essays*, p. 208; Malcolm Mercer, 'Reverend James Wilkinson and the Church in Sheffield 1754-1805', in Jones, *Aspects 2*, p. 41.

¹³¹ Leader, *Sheffield*, pp. 330-2.

¹³² Blackwell, *Sheffield Directory*, p. lvi.

¹³³ David Hey, *The Fiery Blades of Hallamshire: Sheffield and its Neighbourhood, 1660-1740* (Leicester, 1991), p. 272.

Unfortunately, to date, very little research has been done on the social life of the people of Sheffield in the late eighteenth century. As noted above, Assembly Rooms were built in 1762, prior to which assemblies had been held in the Boys' Charity School. Prior to the building of a theatre, plays were performed in the yard of the Angel Inn. By the late 1780s the theatre had semi-permanent companies and a varied programme that changed each week – the plays of Shakespeare and Sheridan were particularly popular. The town was regularly visited by travelling showmen who performed feats of horsemanship, acrobatics, and circus skills. Musical festivals were also popular and of the 100 instrumentalists and 160 choristers who performed at the festival held in St Paul's church in August 1787, 44 and 118 respectively were 'inhabitants of Sheffield'.¹³⁴ During the latter part of the century public lectures were also popular – in 1781-2, John Warltire gave a course of thirteen lectures on natural and experimental philosophy, for example, and a Mr Long gave several on astronomy in 1785. In 1789, John Booth, a noted mathematician, gave a course of fifteen lectures on chemistry that was repeated in 1790. In 1789 he opened a coffee house on Howard Street that soon became the venue for many scientific activities and in 1791 he founded the Society for the Promotion of Mechanical Knowledge.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ *Sheffield Register*, August 25th 1787.

¹³⁵ Ian Inkster, 'The development of a scientific community in Sheffield, 1790-1850', *T.H.A.S.* 10 (1973), pp. 100-103.

In common with much of the rest of England, horse-racing was a popular sport and the town had its own racecourse from 1711 until 1781, although the course does not appear to have had the social *caché* of the one at Doncaster, perhaps because Doncaster had other facilities to attract the gentry and aristocracy.¹³⁶ Sheffield also had its own hunt and from the number of advertisements for lost dogs, especially greyhounds, placed in the *Sheffield Register*, it would be reasonable to assume that hunting and racing with dogs was also popular. Many sports were associated with specific holidays – dog whipping on the feast of Saints Simon and Jude (18th October), for example, the day on which the Statute Fairs were held.¹³⁷

Whilst the people of Sheffield may have been slow to embrace the eighteenth-century passion for urban renewal, they were not so tardy in accepting one of the period's other passions: clubs and associations. As we have seen, by 1786 there were 52 benefit or friendly societies in the town. Some of these were obviously trade based (the twelve Grinders' Societies, for example); others were named after the landlords in whose taverns the meetings were held; whilst the names of others (the Half Boot Society and the Humane Society for example) give no information about their origins or membership. All, bar one, met in taverns – the venues for so much of Sheffield's social and economic

¹³⁶ A new racecourse had been built in Doncaster in 1779. Doncaster was also a corporate town with a fine Mansion House and Assembly Rooms.

¹³⁷ Leader, *Sheffield*, pp. 42-3.

business.¹³⁸ There is no evidence to show that, prior to the late 1780s, these societies played any role other than that of helping their members in times of unemployment, sickness or death.

The Freemasons established a lodge in Sheffield in 1761. Surviving membership lists from this lodge for the period 1767-1785 include the names of master manufacturers, master silversmiths and platers, steel makers, attorneys, and doctors.¹³⁹ A further lodge (no.72) was opened in 1772 but, unfortunately, no membership lists have survived. However, in 1793 several members seceded to form the Royal Brunswick Lodge. As this was a time when political tension was high both in Sheffield and in the country at large, it is possible that the secession and the naming of this lodge is indicative of the political affiliations of both its founders and the masons who remained in the original lodge.¹⁴⁰

At the upper end of the social scale was the Monthly Club, a dining club that was founded in 1783. Its members included Thomas, 3rd Earl of Effingham; Benjamin Roebuck, merchant; James Wheat, attorney; Vincent Eyre, the Duke of Norfolk's agent; and James Wilkinson, the Vicar of Sheffield.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Sheffield Local Studies Library MP145L. The one exception was the Union Society which met in Scotland Street chapel.

¹³⁹ David Flather, 'Freemasonry in Sheffield in the eighteenth century', *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* XLIV (1931), pp. 166-7. This Lodge was originally called the Rose and Crown Lodge and subsequently the Britannia Lodge.

¹⁴⁰ Douglas Knoop, *The Story of the Royal Brunswick Lodge, Sheffield 1793-1943* (Sheffield, 1943), p. 7.

¹⁴¹ Leader, *Sheffield*, p. 117.

Historians have tended to view Sheffield prior to the 1790s as a town where politics played very little part, a town that 'was relatively free of political tension, for it had no prizes to fight over'.¹⁴² In common with most of the other growing industrial towns of the eighteenth century, it did not have its own Member of Parliament and its only representation was through the two MPs who sat for the county of Yorkshire. The minority of townspeople who were freeholders had to travel to York in order to vote and, consequently, few did. But, the fact of being disenfranchised, whether in actuality or in theory, does not equate with a lack of interest in politics.

Sheffield was a town dependent on trade, and increasingly on foreign trade, and there was, consequently, great interest in any government actions that might affect that trade. This was especially apparent during the war with the American colonies. In a letter to Edmund Burke in September 1774, for example, the Marquess of Rockingham wrote that at the recent Cutlers' Feast 'the Master Cutler [Joseph Kenyon] of his own motion filled a bumper and toasted conciliation between the Mother Country and its Colonies, and all the Cutlers were sharp enough to see how much their own interests were concerned, and drank their bumper very cordially'.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Hey, *History*, p. 83.

¹⁴³ Charles Watson Wentworth, 2nd Marquess of Rockingham, to Edmund Burke, September 13th 1774, quoted in Pybus, *Damned Bad Place, Sheffield*, p. 62.

The American War also aroused much discussion about the rights and wrongs of the colonists' claims and Samuel Roberts recorded in his *Autobiography* how the townspeople were divided in their support for one side or the other:

I wished to think my father in the right; but my heart was disposed to side with the Americans, whom I could not but consider as the suffering part. In the workshops I was led to be a little more talkative and active. *Keppel* and *Palliser* for a while occupied much of the public attention, and produced a strong party spirit. The workmen in the room where I was employed were all on one side, but I do not, recollect which: I of course was on the same side. Those in the adjoining room were on the other. Each had their separate flags, songs, and abusive appellations.¹⁴⁴

The war re-invigorated the arguments surrounding the concept of the rights and liberties of freeborn Englishmen and these will be discussed in greater detail later in this thesis (see chapter 3).

A number of Sheffield's leading citizens, most notably the Vicar, the Revd James Wilkinson, and Samuel Shore, a member of one the leading merchant

¹⁴⁴ Roberts, *Autobiography*, pp. 34-5. Augustus Keppel had been the Commander of the British fleet during the American War of Independence and Sir Hugh Palliser was one of his admirals. After an inconclusive battle with the French in 1778, both men blamed the other for failing to pursue the enemy. Their supporters conducted a bitter campaign through the press and, in 1779, both faced a court-martial. Both were acquitted.

families, did become politically active through their involvement with Christopher Wyvill's Association Movement. In January 1781 Shore was nominated as one of the Yorkshire delegates to the Association's second Convention and in early 1783 he and Wilkinson obtained the signatures of 471 freeholders in and around Sheffield for a petition for parliamentary reform.¹⁴⁵

Samuel Shore was also an early member of the Society for Constitutional Information and, in 1788, was elected as one of its two vice-Presidents.¹⁴⁶ Their activities would not have gone unnoticed and would, undoubtedly, have formed the basis for discussions in homes, workshops and taverns throughout the town.

These debates and arguments were fuelled by information gleaned from travellers and from newspapers. By the late 1780s Sheffield had road or water access to most parts of Britain. It also had trade contacts throughout the country, in the colonies and in many parts of Europe. And it had one of the most important and influential newspapers of the period, the *Sheffield Register*. Founded by Joseph Gales and David Martin in June 1787, with Gales as editor, the *Register* was a very different type of paper from its rival, the *Advertiser* which was edited by William Ward. Unlike Ward, Gales did not simply re-hash reports from the London papers but gave as much coverage to local events as he did to national and international ones. He rarely commented on the events he reported but indulged in a certain oblique criticism by the very nuances of his

¹⁴⁵ Black, *The Association*, p. 73 and p. 99.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

style' and, as a result 'the implications of his news penetrated far deeper than a direct assault on the understanding would have done'.¹⁴⁷ *The Register* quickly found an eager audience and, at its peak, 2,000 copies were being sold each week – its readership would have been five to ten times greater. Gales also published numerous books including works by Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine.

Conclusion

The eighteenth century was one of considerable change for Sheffield. It saw the beginning of the town's transition from a small market town to a city of worldwide industrial repute and its population trebled. The physical size and appearance of the town were transformed to such an extent that on August 4th 1787 Joseph Gales wrote,

The improvements that are daily making at Sheffield, in the buildings, in the regulations, and in the manufactures, promise fair to render it, at some future day, as conspicuous in the appearance of the town, as it has heretofore been for the superior excellence of the goods manufactured in it.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ W H G Armytage, 'The editorial experience of Joseph Gales 1786-1794'. *The North Carolina Historical Review*, XXVIII (1951), p. 339.

¹⁴⁸ *Sheffield Register*, August 4th 1787.

Economic growth encouraged improvements in transport and communications that, in turn, encouraged further growth. Improvement of the transport and communications network fostered greater contact with the wider world and this, in turn, increased the townspeople's knowledge and understanding of both national and international events and of contemporary debates on numerous subjects – economic, social, and political. This was further enhanced by the establishment of local newspapers, especially the *Sheffield Register*.

The manufacture of cutlery remained the principal industry but technological innovations, increased demand and improvements in transport and communications had encouraged diversification both within the cutlery trades themselves and into 'new' industries. The format of these new industries was, in many cases, quite different from that of the cutlery trades and required the acceptance of new working conditions and practices. They were also not subject to the authority of the Cutlers' Company and were able to develop without corporate restraint. Their growth, inevitably, led to a diminution of the Company's power. This was further compounded, and complicated, by the involvement of cutlers within them. Changes had also taken place within the cutlery trades themselves as increased demand led to increased specialisation and diversification and the development of distinct hierarchies within the trades. One of the most significant developments was the emergence of locally based 'merchant capitalists' who controlled the distribution of both raw materials and finished goods and whose appearance made it increasingly

difficult for journeymen to make the transition to master.¹⁴⁹ These entrepreneurs, the majority of whom were Freeman of the Cutlers' Company, strained at the Company's protectionist regulations – as, at the other end of the scale, did many of the journeymen who were prohibited from taking apprentices and whose potential for economic growth was thus restricted. In the middle were the countless small masters who looked to the Company for protection but who saw it increasingly dominated by the type of person whom they sought to be protected from. It was against this background of economic and social change and growing political awareness that the conflict between the Cutlers' Company and its Freeman was played out.

¹⁴⁹ Donnelly and Baxter, 'Sheffield and the English Revolutionary Tradition', p. 91.

CHAPTER TWO

The 'Little Mesters'

Introduction

During the latter decades of the eighteenth century, the dramatic changes that had occurred within the cutlery trades – diversification, specialisation, changes in working practices, growth in the numbers employed, and, most importantly, the fact that the trades were increasingly controlled by locally-based entrepreneurs – had caused serious fractures to develop in the relationship between the Cutlers' Company and the cutlers at large. These fractures were compounded by the economic downturn that followed the outbreak of war between Britain and America in 1775 and the subsequent loss of an important market.

The Freemen believed that their precarious economic situation was primarily the result of the Cutlers' Company's failure to impose its rules and regulations – rules and regulations that, they believed, had been established for time immemorial to protect the rights of ALL cutlers in Hallamshire. In 1784 their anger erupted and, at a mass meeting, they elected a committee to act on their behalf to try to persuade the Cutlers' Company to re-establish the *status quo*.

This chapter will examine the actions of this committee and the Cutlers' Company's responses to them. It will show how the Freemen's attempts to turn back the clock and re-establish an economic system of patriarchal protectionism set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the formation of the Sheffield

Society for Constitutional Information and establish Sheffield 'as one of the strongest centres of popular radicalism in Britain'.¹⁵⁰

The catalyst

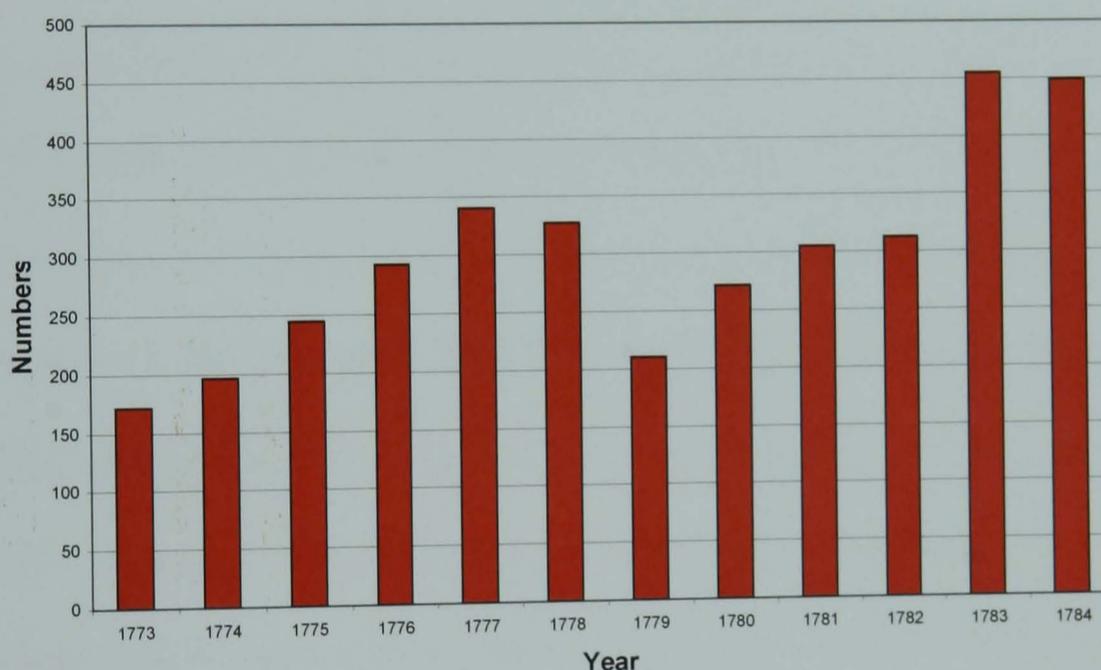
The second half of the eighteenth century saw significant growth in both the domestic and foreign markets for Sheffield cutlery and, consequently, any disruption in those markets had an adverse effect on the local economy. The economic impact of the war between Britain and its American colonies, which began in April 1775, was particularly severe because not only did it result in the loss of access to the lucrative American market but it also affected access to the markets in the West Indies. The situation was further exacerbated when access to the European markets was disrupted following the declarations of war by the French, the Spanish and the Dutch in 1778, 1779 and 1780 respectively. Faced with an economic recession, many of the larger cutlers sought to reduce their overheads by cutting the number of journeymen that they employed and turning instead to cheaper labour, namely unskilled workmen ('foreigners') and apprentices.

Unfortunately, there are no surviving records to show how many 'foreigners' were employed in the industry but the Cutlers' Company's records do indicate a dramatic rise in the number of apprentices. In 1773 and 1774 the indentures of

¹⁵⁰ Stevenson, *Artisans*, p. v.

172 and 197 apprentices, respectively, were enrolled at the Cutlers' Hall; in 1775 the number rose to 245 and by 1777 it had risen to 341. Following a dramatic fall in 1779 (which probably indicates the year in which the economic depression caused by the war was at its most severe), the numbers began to rise again and in 1783, 455 apprentices were enrolled. These numbers did not include boys who were apprenticed to their Freemen fathers.

Figure 8: Numbers of enrolled apprentices, 1773-1784



(Source: the Indenture Books of the Cutlers' Company)

As was noted in the previous chapter, the Act of Incorporation (1624) had stated that a Freeman could not take a second apprentice until his first was in his fifth year. In 1768, the Company had reduced this restriction to four years and on September 28th 1781 they reduced it further to just one year.¹⁵¹ However, neither of these rulings was formally enacted as a byelaw and there is

¹⁵¹ CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, February 27th 1768 and September 28th 1781.

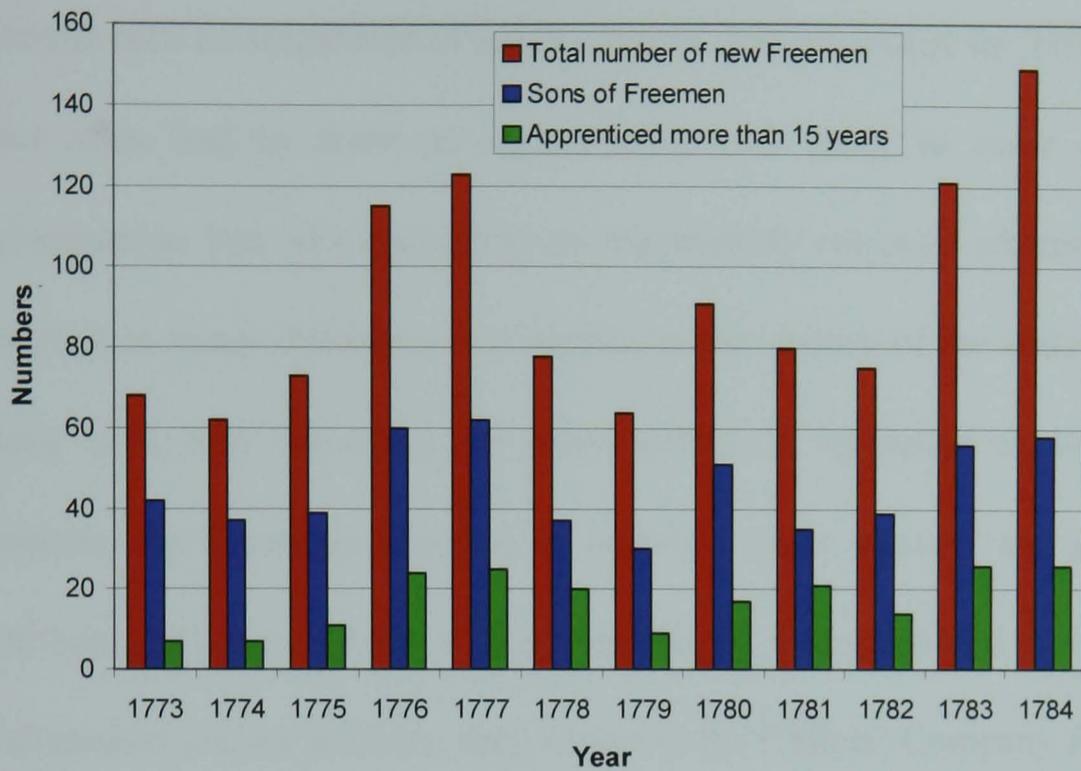
no evidence to show that they were ever publicised. In fact, subsequent comments made by the Freeman (see below) indicate that the majority of them were completely unaware of the changes. These modifications in the apprenticeship laws were made by and for the Members of the Cutlers' Company and their immediate circle of acquaintances to help their businesses, irrespective of the effects that they would have on those lower down the economic chain. A brief survey of the records reveals that many Members took full advantage of the changes: Matthew Jepson, for example, (a Member of the Company from 1783 until 1787) took five apprentices between 1780 and 1783 and Peter Spurr (a Member from 1769-1786 and Master Cutler in 1781) took four between 1778 and 1782. This same survey also reveals that at least two Members - William Fowler (a Member from 1772-1786 and Master Cutler in 1783) and George Wood (a Member from 1776-1794 and Master Cutler in 1791) – openly abused even this modified system: between 1777 and 1785 Fowler took twelve apprentices and Wood thirteen. As will be seen later in this thesis, Wood was, and would continue to be, the source of much anger and resentment amongst the Freeman.

The dramatic increase in the number of apprentices can partly be explained by the equally dramatic increase in the number of new Freeman during this period. Faced with the competition created by the employment of apprentices and unskilled workmen ('foreigners'), countless trained journeymen were forced to accept lower wages or unemployment. Under these circumstances, many chose

to make the transition to become Freeman.¹⁵² To do this, they had to show that they were ‘owners of their own work’ and many achieved this by taking out restrictive loans. But, as Freeman, they gained the right to manufacture and sell goods in their own name and to take apprentices. Throughout the 1760s the number of new Freeman had averaged about 86 per annum. Between 1770 and 1775 the number fell to around 70 per annum but in 1776 and 1777, the numbers rose to 115 and 123 respectively. In all of these years the percentage of new Freeman whose indentures had not been enrolled at the Cutlers’ Hall (and who, therefore, must have been trained by their Freeman fathers) remained fairly constant at about 50%. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know how many of these men had previously been working as journeymen, either for their fathers or for others, but the percentage of those whose indentures had been enrolled and who had been apprenticed more than 15 years earlier rose from approximately 30% in 1774 and 1775 to 43% in 1776 and 1777. Some of these new Freeman had, in fact, been apprenticed more than thirty years earlier, the oldest being John Bartholomew, who had been apprenticed for eight years in 1733. Thereafter, the figures levelled off but rose again, dramatically, in 1783 when there were 121 new Freeman followed by 149 in 1784. Approximately 42% of these new Freeman had been trained by their fathers, whilst 38% of those whose indentures had been enrolled had been apprenticed more than fifteen years earlier.

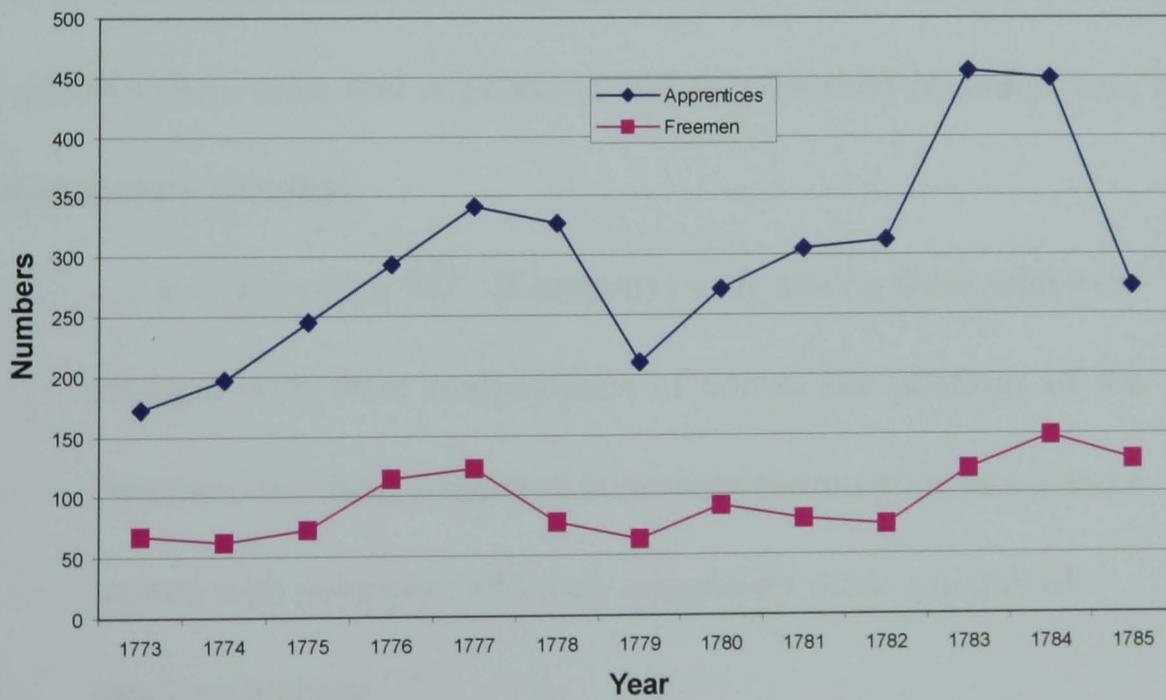
¹⁵² A similar pattern can be discerned in the period of the Seven Years War.

Figure 9: New Freeman 1773-1784



(Source: the Freedom Books of the Cutlers' Company)

Figure 10: Numbers of apprentices and numbers of new Freeman, 1773-1785



(Source: The Indenture and Freedom Books of the Cutlers' Company)

The consequence of this sudden influx of new Freemen was that the market was flooded with an abundance of small masters (known locally as ‘little mesters’) who often had to resort to undercutting each other in order to survive. Inexperience, lack of training and an eagerness to cut costs wherever possible resulted, in many instances, in a decline in the quality of the cutlery that was being sold, thus damaging the local industry’s reputation in its surviving markets. The economic situation of countless ‘little mesters’ and journeymen was becoming increasingly difficult and, in the time-honoured tradition of the Hallamshire cutlery industry, they turned to the Cutlers’ Company for help and support.

The early stages of the dispute

The Freemen made numerous complaints to the Cutlers’ Company asking them to enforce their rules and regulations and to prosecute offenders but, as one contemporary recorded,

.... as many of the *th* [Company] were among those who were charged with these malpractices of course the petitions of the Freemen like those presented at another certain great house were treated with disrespect and their complaints made a matter of mockery and jest.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, p. 39. These reminiscences were written many years after the events recorded and the reference to petitions to ‘another certain great house’ refers to petitions for electoral reform that were sent to the House of Commons in 1793 which will be discussed later in this thesis. The significance of the symbol is not known.

And then, probably in late 1783 or early 1784, the cutlers at large learnt, from an unnamed informant, that the Cutlers' Company was governed by an Act of Parliament.¹⁵⁴ This was something of which they had been completely unaware and, from comments in the Company's accounts and minute books, it is probable that the Company Members, and even their Clerk, were also unaware of the existence of a governing Act. The Company's rule over the Hallamshire cutlery trades was accepted without question as a time-honoured custom and right. Few, if any, were probably aware that it had only been established in 1624 because many of the rules and regulations that were enacted by the Act of Incorporation had been in force for centuries. The Company had, in fact, existed in all but name since at least 1590 when the Lord of the Manor, the Earl of Shrewsbury, had established the Cutlers' Jury as a sub-court of his manor court. Prior to this, the trades had been regulated through the manor court, and the records of its proceedings for the year 1564-65 describe many of the rules and regulations that were still in force at the end of the eighteenth century as 'aunncyants customes and ordainces'.¹⁵⁵

The cutler who was told about the existence of a governing Act was Arthur Jewitt. Jewitt (1750-c.1805) was a moderately successful 'little mester' whose grandfather, father and numerous uncles had all been cutlers. His father had

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁵ 'Proceedings of the Court with a View of Frank Pledge of the most noble George, Earl of Salop, 1564-1565'. British Museum, Add. Charters 7.210 (copy in the possession of the Cutlers' Company).

also spent some time serving as a soldier and had fought abroad, possibly in the War of Austrian Succession (1740-8), where he was wounded and captured by the French.¹⁵⁶ His life was saved, according to the story that he told his family, by a French surgeon who had treated his head wound by inserting a silver plate in his skull. He was subsequently repatriated as part of an exchange of prisoners-of-war and returned to Sheffield where he resumed his trade as a cutler, becoming a Freeman in 1754. He died sometime before 1760 and his widow maintained herself and her two sons by brewing beer and was employed by numerous local gentlemen including Joseph Broadbent, a wealthy Quaker merchant, who obtained places for both of her sons at the Boys' Charity School. In 1760, at the age of ten, Arthur was apprenticed for eleven years to Edward Windle, who had been the Master Cutler in 1747. Theoretically, the Company's rules forbade the apprenticeship of boys under the age of twelve unless they were being trained by their Freeman fathers, but exceptions appear to have been made if the boys were deemed to be paupers or from poor families. Three years later, Arthur was joined by his brother, William, who was also apprenticed for eleven years and who was also only ten years old. By that time, the workshop had been taken over by Edward Windle's son, Edmund, who was described by his apprentices as 'an austere and severe master; a rigid Presbyterian. possessing all the unforgiving and all the intolerant prejudice of [that] sect'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ For biographical information about Arthur Jewitt see Jewitt, 'Passages', pp. 9-20.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

After completing his apprenticeship, Arthur Jewitt spent some time working as a journeyman for John Green, a cutler and factor. In 1776 he became a Freeman and he took his first apprentice in the same year. He does not appear to have suffered too greatly from the economic downturn that hit the cutlery trades following the outbreak of war with the American colonies because in 1779, contrary to the rules that he was later so vociferously to uphold, he took a second apprentice. He was subsequently to take four more (in 1784, 1791, 1803 and 1804) and he also trained at least three of his own sons.¹⁵⁸

Arthur Jewitt's career typified the progress that many Freemen believed should be attainable by all those who were apprenticed to the cutlery trades: a fatherless boy from a poor family who had succeeded because he was a good craftsman. But many Freemen also believed that this goal was becoming increasingly unobtainable. Jewitt was, undoubtedly, a determined man whose desire to succeed surfaced at a very early age – in an attempt to avoid the common cutler's disability of knock-knees, for example, he slept every night whilst he was an apprentice with a log tied between his legs.¹⁵⁹ His gratitude to Joseph Broadbent for enabling him to receive a few years' education is shown in the reminiscences of his son and he, perhaps, also retained a certain amount of gratitude towards the French for saving his father's life. He was also.

¹⁵⁸ The eldest, Arthur, was the author of 'Passages'. He subsequently abandoned the cutlery trade and became a teacher and writer. Two of his sons were Orlando Jewitt, the famous wood engraver, and Llewellynn Jewitt, a noted antiquary and engraver, both of whom have entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. See also Frank Broomhead, *Orlando Jewitt* (Pinner, 1995).

¹⁵⁹ Jewitt, 'Passages', pp.17-18.

reputedly, a brilliant orator.¹⁶⁰ However, he developed a great deal of bitterness towards the Cutlers' Company who he believed were promoting their own interests over those of the majority. He believed that by doing so, the Company were not only thwarting the ambitions of men like him but were also damaging the trades as a whole. Jewitt was also a man who believed that he had been deprived of his rightful inheritance, a property known as Hall Carr Mill that had been forfeited during his great-grandfather's lifetime. This man, John Jewitt, had been forced to accept a Poor Law certificate and move into the town. As Arthur's son recalled:

I have often heard my father lament [the certificate] prevented him [his great-grandfather] from obtaining a settlement in Sheffield; and though he paid all rates, dues and demands, he could not be considered a parishioner nor have a right to attend meetings or be elected to any office.¹⁶¹

Unfortunately, there is no definitive evidence to prove the identity of the unnamed informant who told Jewitt about the Incorporating Act, but it may have been John Jervis, a successful pen and pocket knife cutler (a master manufacturer) who was a freeholder and a noted local antiquarian.¹⁶² This theory is supported by the fact that Jewitt's son recorded that his father was

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5. There is some evidence to support the family's claim: when Arthur's grandfather was apprenticed in 1707, his father, John, was described as a weaver in Brightside Bierlow which included the area of Hall Carr.

¹⁶² Charles Dixon, 'Recollections and reminiscences of the Dixon Family and other Families, unpublished manuscript, Sheffield Archives MD362, p. 105.

given a copy of the Act of Incorporation by a local antiquarian, but more significantly by the fact that Jervis was to play a leading role in the later stages of the dispute between the Freemen and the Cutlers' Company.¹⁶³ If he was the informant, then it indicates that from the outset there were men supporting the Freemen whose aims may have gone beyond the re-enforcement of old protectionist systems.

Having made copies of the Act, Jewitt attempted to have handbills printed informing the cutlers at large of the discovery and calling them to a public meeting. But there were no printers in Sheffield who were willing to undertake the commission. In the context of the Sheffield cutlery trades, the actions of Arthur Jewitt and his supporters were akin to rebellion: they were challenging the Cutlers' Company, a body whose authority had rarely, if ever, been questioned before. And such was the power and influence of the Company that the local printers were reluctant to alienate them. Jewitt, however, was able to obtain the services of a printer in Chesterfield and on Easter Monday 1784 (April 12th) the cutlers held their meeting at the Ball Inn on Campo Lane.¹⁶⁴

At the meeting, Jewitt was asked to take the lead and he recommended that those who wished to join the campaign to try to persuade the Cutlers' Company to enforce its rules more rigorously should pay a weekly subscription of 1d and

¹⁶³ Jewitt, 'Passages', p. 40.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-1.

that a committee of twelve should be appointed. He himself was chosen to be president and the other eleven members were probably Stephen Thompson, John Law, Edward Smith, Paul Fletcher, Robert Wilkinson, John Moor, Thomas Colley, William Peniston, Richard Foster, William Parramour and William Hardy.¹⁶⁵ The formation of this committee marked a significant turning point in the history of the cutlery trades in Hallamshire: as far as can be ascertained, no such committee had ever existed before and it was also the first time that the ‘commonalty’ had united against the Company. The members of the Freeman’s Committee, as it became known, represented both ‘little mesters’ and journeymen and, more importantly, different branches of the trades – Jewitt, Thompson, Law, Smith and Fletcher were Freeman cutlers; Wilkinson and Moor were Freeman forkmakers; Colley was a Freeman scissorsmith; Peniston, Parramour and Hardy were journeymen cutlers; and Foster was a journeyman scissorsmith. Only Jewitt, Thompson and Smith had apprentices.

It is not known what model, if any, Jewitt was using when he proposed the establishment of the Freeman’s Committee, but it could have been based upon a club, society or even religious sect of which he was a member.¹⁶⁶ The decision to have a relatively large number of members, twelve, may have been because they were to represent different workshops or groups of workshops; or, in view

¹⁶⁵ This is based on the assumption that the twelve men who attended the Cutlers’ Company meeting on May 20th 1784 and who made sworn depositions before the Court of King’s Bench on May 21st 1784 were the members of the Committee. CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, May 20th 1784; NA/KB1/24/4.

¹⁶⁶ There is some evidence in Jewitt, ‘Passages’ to suggest that Jewitt senior may have been a Methodist. See also chapter three.

of the religious overtones in some of the Committee's subsequent statements, the number could have been chosen simply because there were twelve Apostles. Of greater significance, however, is his suggestion that supporters should pay a weekly subscription because this not only formalised the Committee but also indicated that he knew that they would incur financial costs. It is probable that their subsequent course of action had already been agreed.

The Freeman's Committee

On May 28th 1784, the Freeman's Committee, accompanied by numerous Freeman and journeymen, attended the Cutlers' Company's monthly meeting to voice their grievances. Unfortunately, this meeting was not recorded in the Company's minute book, but based on comments made by Company Members in their later statements to the Court of King's Bench it is obvious that the proceedings descended into chaos. A month later, on June 24th 1784, the Freeman published a handbill, entitled *An Appeal to the Public on the present Contest betwixt the Association of Freeman of the Corporation of Hallamshire, and the Master Cutler, Wardens, &c of the same* in which they argued their case in language that presaged that that would be used by the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information (S.S.C.I.) eight years later when they put forward the case for parliamentary reform.¹⁶⁷ The Freeman stated that both parties were agreed that the Company of Cutlers, including all the Freeman, were 'one Body

¹⁶⁷ Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP421M.

Politic, Incorporate' and that they, the Freemen, understood this to mean a body of men legally united together under a code of laws that were constituted for the benefit of all and that these laws should be administered impartially by those who were chosen to lead the body. If this was the case, they argued, then the Members should be willing to appear before impartial judges to answer the Freemen's complaints, but they would not because they knew that the Freemen could prove numerous examples of their partiality and injustice. In fact, far from being impartial, the Members punished or pardoned at will:

If this is not a Mark of Tyranny and unjust Government, we must deny Truth and Reason to be any Judge of the Matter; invert the Meaning of the English Language, and infer Men's superior Intellects and Understanding by the Fashion and Size of their Wigs, and their Honour and Honesty by their Jack-boots.

They concluded their *Appeal* with a verse:

Let our rejoicing through the Nation ring,
 While we are govern'd by a British King;
 To lawless Tyranny we'll ne'er submit,
 If there's a Court that will our Plea admit;
 Stand forth like Champions t'obtain our Right,
 Whenever Pomp and Pow'r united bite;
 Undaunted stand! Nor fear to win the Day,
 For Truth and Honesty will bear the Way!

The author of this *Appeal* is not known. If it were Arthur Jewitt, or another member of the Freemen's Committee, then it would suggest an education and knowledge of contemporary political ideas that had not previously been apparent amongst working men in Sheffield. Whilst this is, of course, quite possible it is more probable that the author was someone of a slightly higher social rank. It could have been John Jervis about whom, unfortunately, little is known, though his subsequent actions suggest that he may have been a supporter of Wyvill's Association and that he was probably one of the 471 freeholders from in and around Sheffield who had signed the Association's petition for parliamentary reform in early 1783 (see chapter one). There is, however, another possible candidate: Joseph Gales.

Joseph Gales was to be one of the most influential people in Sheffield in the late 1780s and early 1790s. An acquaintance of Joseph Priestley and Thomas Paine, he was an ardent supporter of parliamentary and electoral reform; of the theory of the natural rights and liberties of free-born Englishmen; of education for the masses; of the campaigns for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts; and of the campaign for the abolition of slavery. He argued for all of these causes, and many others, through the medium of his newspaper, the *Sheffield Register*, which was published between June 1787 and June 1794. Between 1792 and 1794, Gales also published and co-edited *The Patriot*, a fortnightly newspaper whose aim was to put politics and political thought within the reach of the ordinary reader. His many publications included Sheffield's first trade

directory, published in 1787, and *Historical facts relating to the Revolution*, which was published to commemorate the centenary of the Glorious Revolution in 1788. He was to be a member of the S.S.C.I. and is credited with writing most of that Society's notices and letters.

Gales was born in 1761 in Eckington, a village part way between Sheffield and Chesterfield, where his family had lived for generations and where his grandfather had been the local schoolteacher and a noted classical scholar and where his father was a brewer.¹⁶⁸ At the age of thirteen he was sent to live with Jude Parr, a family acquaintance, in Manchester and shortly after was apprenticed to a Mr Prescott, a bookbinder. After enduring three years of ill-treatment at the hands of both his master and his master's wife, he complained to an uncle, who also lived in Manchester, and the matter was taken before the local magistrates who, eventually, released him from his indentures. Gales returned to Eckington and was shortly afterwards apprenticed to James Tomlinson, a printer and bookbinder in Newark.¹⁶⁹ Between 1782 and 1784, the two men published *The Lady's and Gentleman's Scientific Repository*.¹⁷⁰ It was once believed that Gales moved to Sheffield during 1786, but it is now known that he came to the town and established his business as a printer, bookseller and stationer shortly before his marriage to Winifred Marshall on

¹⁶⁸ Gales, 'Recollections', pp. 24 and 192.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 194-200.

¹⁷⁰ P. J. Wallis, 'A further note on Joseph Gales of Newark, Sheffield and Raleigh', *The North Carolina Historical Review*. XXX (1953), pp. 561-2.

May 4th 1784.¹⁷¹ This was probably in late April 1784 because, as he was subsequently to print many of the Freeman's notices, it is unlikely that he would have refused their commission if he had been in business when they were looking for a Sheffield-based printer for their handbills.

The style and phraseology of the language that was used in the *Appeal* and in many of the Freeman's subsequent notices and publications are very similar to those used by Gales in his editorials in the *Register* and also in notices published in the name of the S.S.C.I. The theory that Gales at least helped the Freeman with the composition of their publications is given further credence by a comment made by his wife in her 'Recollections':

Even the Master Cutlers were not offended at the Printer [Gales], but many expressed themselves pleased at his independence – indeed it was an advantage to both parties, for the Memorialists were gratified at the opportunity of pleading their own cause, and their Employers were glad to find their grievances so moderately stated, and so respectfully submitted, and the Printer was credited by both parties – the first for putting their demands into good language, and the latter for the propriety with which they were addressed.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Armytage, 'The editorial experience of Joseph Gales', p. 332; Gales, 'Recollections', p. 27.

¹⁷² Gales, 'Recollections', p. 28.

The Court of King's Bench

Throughout the summer of 1784, the Company continued in its refusal to address the grievances of the Freemen. In the early autumn of that year, the Freemen decided to take advantage of a clause in the 're-discovered' Act of Incorporation that gave them a right of appeal to the Court of King's Bench.¹⁷³

But, in order to do this, they needed an attorney and it was probably through the intercession of John Jervis that they were able to enlist the support of the attorney and antiquarian Josiah Beckwith of Masbrough. Beckwith (1734-1793) came from of a family of attorneys and had himself been articled, probably to his father, in Leeds in 1752. He had moved to Masbrough, near Rotherham, in about 1777 and thereafter, apart from acting on behalf of the Freemen, does not appear to have practised as an attorney, preferring to spend his time pursuing his interest in antiquities. He was elected as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1777 and in 1784 he was to publish a revised edition of Thomas Blount's *Fragmenta Antiquitatis* (first published in 1679) under the new title *Jocular Customs of Manors and Singular Tenures of Land*.¹⁷⁴

On October 26th 1784, sixteen cutlers and one scissorsmith swore affidavits before Beckwith accusing the Cutlers' Company of failing to enforce the rules and regulations that were imposed by the Act of Incorporation, principally those

¹⁷³ Jewitt, 'Passages', p. 39.

¹⁷⁴ This publication subsequently earned Beckwith an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. John Henry Cockburn, *Rotherham Lawyers During 350 Years* (Rotherham, 1932) pp. 35-6; *The Sheffield Miscellany*, ed. William J. J. Glassby (Sheffield, 1897), p. 152.

relating to marks and the employment of apprentices, and by five subsequent byelaws, namely that Freemen were not to employ foreigners, were not to assist foreigners in any of the mysteries of a cutler, were not to buy hafts (handles) from foreigners, were not to make blades for foreigners, and were not to take an apprentice until they themselves had been free for three years unless the boy had previously been the apprentice of a Freeman who had died.¹⁷⁵ They claimed, incorrectly, that these byelaws had been approved at York Assizes on July 21st 1681 – a mistake that further emphasises the fact that, for generations, the Cutlers' Company's authority had been accepted without question.¹⁷⁶

The Freemen then proceeded to accuse twenty-eight named individuals of specific breaches of these rules. Four of the accused - Benjamin Blonk, Thomas Nowell, Jonathan Watkinson and Matthew Jepson - were serving Members of the Company and another, Samuel Fowler, was the brother of the previous year's Master Cutler. Unfortunately, it is not possible to prove the guilt, or innocence, of those accused of employing foreigners, assisting foreigners, buying hafts from foreigners and/or striking illegal marks, but, based on the information contained in the Cutlers' Company's indenture books, the four

¹⁷⁵ NA/KB1/24/2. The seventeen included Arthur Jewitt, Edward Smith and six other members of the Freemen's Committee, five other Freemen and one journeyman. It has not been possible to positively identify the remaining three.

¹⁷⁶ The byelaw that forbade Freemen from employing foreigners was approved at York Assizes in 1690 but the byelaws relating to the buying of hafts and blades from foreigners had been enacted in 1662, whilst the one forbidding Freemen from divulging the secrets of the trade was enacted in 1625. There were no byelaws forbidding Freemen from taking an apprentice until they themselves had been free for three years.

accused of keeping too many apprentices were guilty. By the end of 1784. Samuel Fowler had at least six apprentices, William Kirke had seven, and Thomas Hall and William Fox each had eight. Similarly, William Patten, who was accused of having taken apprentices before he himself had been Free for three years, was also guilty.

The Freemen further stated that they had complained to the Members of the Company on numerous occasions about ‘the great Injury and Injustice done to the Body of Freemen’, but the Members had refused, and continued to refuse, to act. In language designed to awaken two of the great fears of late eighteenth-century English authorities – the fear of an increase in the numbers of the poor and the fear of a decrease in tax revenue - they claimed that, consequently, hundreds of Freemen

... are greatly prejudiced and impoverished, the Poor of the said Company are defrauded and many deceitful and unworkmanly Wares are made and put to Sale not only in divers Parts of this Kingdom but in several Parts beyond the Seas ... to the great Deceit of His Majesty’s Subjects as well as Foreigners, the Scandal of the Cutlers in the said Lordship and Liberty, where a very great and extensive Trade in Cutlery Wares both for foreign and Home Consumption is carried on, the Disgrace and Hindrance of the Cutlery and Iron and Steel Wares there made and to the great impoverishing Ruin and Overthrow of

Multitudes of poor Artificers who having served lawful Apprenticeships to the said Trades and taken their Freedoms of the said Company cannot meet with Suitable Employment for themselves and their Children ... And also to the Detriment of His Majesty's Revenue of the Stamp Duty by the permitting and suffering of Numbers of persons to work at the said Trades who have not been bound by Indentures to serve as Apprentices thereto, nor have taken their Freedoms.

Josiah Beckwith used these affidavits, and an additional one that was made by five of the claimants on November 16th 1784 repeating the accusations, to obtain a writ of *Mandamus* from the court of King's Bench that compelled the Members to hear the Freemen's complaints and prevented them from using Company funds to finance their defence.¹⁷⁷

This was not the first time that the cutlers of Hallamshire had turned to the Court of King's Bench. For reasons that are not known, it had become an accepted custom by the end of the seventeenth century that Freemen could not take apprentices until they had been Free for three years. The custom, however, was never formalised through a byelaw. In 1740, in what was, undoubtedly, an attempt to boost their funds, the Cutlers' Company decided that they would allow Freemen to 'advance' their Freedom through a payment of £4-10s, thus

¹⁷⁷ NA/KB1/24/2.

enabling them to take apprentices within their first three years. But, once again, this was not formalised through a byelaw. Eight years later, in 1748, a number of Freemen, led by a man called Joseph Chambers, brought a case before the Court of King's Bench questioning the legality of the £4-10s payment. The court appointed arbitrators and, although their decision has not been preserved, it is known that the illegality of the scheme was proven and the Company was forced to return the money that had been paid.¹⁷⁸ Nevertheless there is compelling evidence to suggest that this case was brought with the Company's consent, and even assistance, as a test case.¹⁷⁹ The case that the Freemen brought before the court in 1784 was different: not only was it the first time that Freemen had independently challenged the authority of the Company but it was also the first time that they had done so claiming that they were acting on behalf of ALL of the Freemen.

At this stage, the dispute within the Cutlers' Company was primarily the result of the Freemen's economic grievances. They wanted the re-establishment of what they perceived to be the *status quo*, a 'level playing field' on which all Freemen could compete as equals and where, in the words of Adrian Randall, 'an avaricious few were not permitted to manipulate or monopolise systems of exchange in such ways as threatened to undermine the entire social and

¹⁷⁸ Leader, *History*, vol. 1, pp. 70-1.

¹⁷⁹ CCA, D1/1, the accounts of George Smith.

economic fabric of the community'.¹⁸⁰ The Company Members and their supporters, they alleged, were prospering because they were able to use their influence to manipulate the system by imposing or ignoring customary laws for their own financial advantage. In this respect, the dispute within the Cutlers' Company was similar to many of the disputes that occurred amongst other corporate trades during the eighteenth century as factors such as increasing demand, technical innovations, and changes in working practices caused the old patriarchal system of guild control to break down. In 1749, for example, the journeymen of the Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers of London had united against their governing body in a dispute over the employment of foreigners – a practice that, although illegal, was, according to the masters, commonplace because of the shortage of workmen.¹⁸¹ In 1756 the Gloucestershire weavers had united on a countywide basis in a dispute that was triggered by the decision of some clothiers to reduce piece rates, but that was exacerbated by the employment of foreigners.¹⁸² And, in 1760, there was a dispute within the Worshipful Company of Curriers of London when, following an attempt by the journeymen to increase their wages, the Court of Assistants decided to allow master curriers to employ more apprentices.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Adrian Randall, 'The industrial moral economy of the Gloucestershire weavers in the eighteenth century', in *British Trade Unionism 1750-1850: The Formative Years*, ed. John Rule (London, 1988), p. 46.

¹⁸¹ C. R. Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen: A Pre-history of Industrial Relations 1717-1800* (London, 1980) pp. 51-5.

¹⁸² Randall, 'The industrial moral economy', *passim*.

¹⁸³ Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen*, p. 56.

In all of these disputes, when the immediate authorities failed to act those who felt aggrieved appealed to a higher authority - the painter-stainers and curriers to the Court of Common Council, the weavers to Parliament, and the cutlers to the Court of King's Bench - to re-establish the *status quo* and what they believed to be the morality of the market place.¹⁸⁴

The Cutlers' Company

The fact that there are no references to the Freeman's grievances or to the various meetings in the Company minute books until January 1785 is indicative of the dismissive, and perhaps contemptuous, attitude of the Members. They must have been alarmed, therefore, when they learnt that the Freeman had taken their case to the Court of King's Bench. Such an action could not have been kept secret when discussions about the dispute and about the plans of the Freeman's Committee must have been rife in workshops and taverns throughout the small compact town of Sheffield, a town where possibly as many as half of the male workforce were employed in the cutlery trades. The Company was, no doubt, conscious of the fact that economic hardship was the root cause of dissatisfaction amongst many of the Freeman and this may explain an entry in the accounts on December 21st 1784: 'Cash given to Poor Freeman at the Town

¹⁸⁴ E. P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, (Penguin edition, London, 1993), p. 188.

Hall by Order of the Company £42 12s 6d'.¹⁸⁵ Whether this was an act of philanthropy or an attempt to weaken support for the Freeman's cause by bribery is not known but it was a considerable donation, representing 10% of the funds that had been handed over to Benjamin Broomhead when he had become the Master Cutler four months earlier.¹⁸⁶

On January 13th 1785 the Members of the Company formally responded to the accusations made by the Freeman when they swore affidavits before Jonathan Ellis of Sheffield denying that the Freeman had brought their complaints before them.¹⁸⁷ However, they did concede that the complainants could have been amongst the 'tumultuous Body of Men' who had attended several of the Company's meetings and who had 'in a Noisy Irregular Manner made several Complaints against divers Persons' that they could not substantiate. They assured the court that they always prosecuted those against whom a case could be proven but that they had searched the Company's books and, of course, they could find no laws forbidding Freeman from taking an apprentice until they themselves had been free for three years. They also claimed that they could find no byelaws forbidding Freeman from making goods for foreigners or from assisting foreigners in the trade of a cutler despite the fact that the first had been

¹⁸⁵ CCA, D1/1, the accounts of Benjamin Broomhead.

¹⁸⁶ The Cutlers' Company's year began and ended on the Feast of St Bartholomew, August 24th, and the retiring Master Cutler was responsible for preparing an income and expenditure account for his year of office and handing over the balance to his successor. Until the late 1780s when the Company opened its first bank account, this was in cash.

¹⁸⁷ NA/KB1/24/3.

prohibited by a byelaw approved in 1662 and the second by byelaws approved as recently as 1772 and 1773. This example of collective amnesia reveals how, in reality, it was custom and practice that had developed and been accepted by the majority over many generations that governed the cutlery trades. The restrictions on taking a second apprentice had been reduced to just one year in 1781, they said, due to ‘the great increase of Trade and Demand for the Manufactures of the said Company’ and yet still, they claimed, there was sufficient work for any Freeman ‘who were disposed to work’ and ‘any good workman might and may easily acquire from ten shillings to Twenty shillings per Week as a Journeyman’. They admitted that they had, sometimes, failed to prosecute Freeman who had employed ‘foreigners’ but this was because of the poverty of the Freeman or because the ‘foreigner’ was employed ‘in the most Laborious Parts of it [the trade] such as the Freeman and Complainants refuse to perform’.

As part of the preparations for the court case, the Company had asked their Clerk, William Hoyle, to search ‘out Writings belonging to the Company’.¹⁸⁸ What he found, or more likely what he did not find, must have shocked him because he suggested that the Company should seek counsel’s opinion about the scope and legality of their authority.¹⁸⁹ Accordingly, the Company turned to

¹⁸⁸ CCA, D1/1, the accounts of Benjamin Broomhead.

¹⁸⁹ CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, January 21st 1785. It is probable that the Company did not possess a copy of the Incorporating Act – the copies that are currently in its archives were acquired in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Thomas Davenport of Lincoln's Inn and his reply, on January 31st 1785, revealed the proverbial can of worms that the Freeman's actions had opened. Davenport advised that the Company did not have the authority to prevent foreigners from working as cutlers in Hallamshire but he believed that anyone who did work as a cutler in the area was subject to the Company's regulations.¹⁹⁰ He further advised that the Company's authority to seize forfeited goods was questionable but as this was a commonly accepted practice it could be defended. However, they had no authority to seize unmarked goods. This undermined one of the principal safeguards of the industry's reputation: the long-established belief that the sale of unmarked goods was illegal. In his opinion, in order to legally maintain its control over the local cutlery industry, the Company should apply to Parliament for a new governing act.

Mr. Davenport's reply reflected the pre-dominant contemporary legal attitude towards the powers, both legally granted and assumed, of guilds, an attitude that had itself been very much influenced by the findings of a Parliamentary Committee of Enquiry in 1753. This Committee, which had been established to investigate the London-based Company of Frame-work Knitters, had declared that a number of byelaws that had been enacted by the Company, including those relating to the seizure of goods and the employment of foreigners, were 'illegal and contrary to the Liberty of the subject', 'tending to a Monopoly', and

¹⁹⁰ CCA, B4/2.

‘discouraging the Manufacture and destroying the Trade of the Kingdom’.¹⁹¹

This last criticism was one that was endorsed by many contemporary economists, most notably Adam Smith who, in his influential book *Wealth of Nations* (1776), had condemned the restraints imposed on trade and, by default, economic growth by guilds and corporations. As will be shown later in this thesis, it was a point of view that was subsequently to be aired by a number of people in Sheffield during the public debate that developed around the dispute between the Cutlers’ Company and the Freemen.

On April 19th 1785, writs were served on all thirty-three Members of the Company ordering them to appear before the Court of King’s Bench to answer the charges that had been brought against them.¹⁹² A flurry of activity ensued and on May 20th, just before the case was to appear before the court, a meeting was held between the Company, the Freemen’s Committee and Josiah Beckwith. This meeting must not have gone well because, on the same day, five Members, including the Master Cutler and Wardens, and the Company’s Clerk were instructed to go to London ‘to advise with Counsel’.¹⁹³ On the following day, the twelve members of the Freemen’s Committee made depositions before Josiah Beckwith which he forwarded to the Court of King’s Bench. In these, they accused Thomas Hall and Samuel Fowler of keeping too many

¹⁹¹ *J.H.C.*, April 19th 1753, quoted in J. R. Kellett, ‘The breakdown of gild and corporation control over the handicraft and retail trade in London’, *Economic History Review*, second series, X (1958), p. 392.

¹⁹² NA/KB1/24/3.

¹⁹³ CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, May 20th 1785.

apprentices; Thomas Nowill, Robert Kippax, and Benjamin and George Blonk of using marks other than the one that they were assigned; Thomas Hoyland and Joseph Clarebrough of buying hafts from foreigners; and James Makin and Matthew Jepson of employing foreigners.¹⁹⁴ In each case, they stated the evidence for the ‘crime’. Once again, the court decided that there was a case to be answered and between June 21st and August 10th 1785, writs were again served on the Members ordering them to appear the following November to answer ‘certain Trespasses Contempts and Misdemeanours where of they are impeached’.¹⁹⁵

These summonses appear to have galvanised the Company into action because, on September 9th 1785, they announced their intention ‘to hear such Complaints of the Freemen of the Trade as shall be brought before them and as far as in their Power to redress the Grievances that may be complained of’.¹⁹⁶ On September 20th, they ordered that handbills should be published and advertisements placed in the local newspapers informing Freemen that anyone found guilty of employing a foreigner after November 1st 1785 would be

¹⁹⁴ NA/KB1/24/4. Thomas Hall was a cutler; Samuel Fowler was a scissorsmith and his brother, William, had been the Master Cutler in 1783; Thomas Nowill, who was to serve as the Master Cutler in 1788, and Robert Kippax were in partnership as cutlers and hardwaremen; Benjamin and George Blonk were brothers and in business together as scissorsmiths – Benjamin had resigned from the Cutlers’ Company in November 1784 due to ill health; Thomas Hoyland and Joseph Clarebrough were cutlers and partners; James Makin was a fork maker; and Matthew Jepson was a cutler and a Member of the Company.

¹⁹⁵ NA/KB1/24/5.

¹⁹⁶ CCA, C9/2. Company minute book, September 9th 1785.

prosecuted.¹⁹⁷ In theory, this was a significant victory for the Freeman but there is no evidence in the Company's records to show that anyone was ever, in fact, prosecuted. It is probable, however, that these attempts to hear and redress the grievances of the Freeman persuaded the Court of King's Bench to adjourn the hearing that was scheduled for November because there is no evidence to show that it took place.

Meanwhile the Company had had another meeting with Beckwith and the Freeman's Committee at which both parties made the momentous decision that they should meet again 'to treat about settling the Terms of a new Act of Parliament'.¹⁹⁸ The Clerk was instructed to prepare an abstract of the Incorporating Act and of the byelaws and to have copies printed.¹⁹⁹ On October 28th 1785, the Company published a handbill informing the cutlers at large and the general public that an application would be made to Parliament to amend the clauses in the Act of Incorporation that prevented journeymen from taking apprentices and that prohibited the employment of a second apprentice until the first was in his fifth year.²⁰⁰ Two months later, at their meeting on December 21st 1785, the Company resolved that they would also seek to have the Act amended to allow them to ordain byelaws 'to correct Fraud and Abuses' in the trade and to give them the right to seize and, if necessary, destroy poorly made

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 20th 1785.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, September 14th 1785.

¹⁹⁹ CCA, B4/4/1a.

²⁰⁰ Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP312M.

or illegally marked goods. ‘From the great Increase of Trade’ they said ‘and from the Scarcity of Workmen’ it would be advantageous if masters were allowed to take an apprentice every two years and if a committee of five Members of the Company were empowered to licence foreigners to work at the rough and laborious parts of the trade. They also wanted the power to prevent Freemen from striking marks other than the one that had been granted to them. The cost of obtaining these amendments, they resolved, should be paid from the Company’s funds. Copies of the draft bill were to be made available to the Freemen prior to their meeting with the Company on January 5th 1786.²⁰¹

The response of the Freemen’s Committee

This announcement must have created alarm within the Freemen’s Committee – if the Company’s proposed amendments were accepted by Parliament, the economic prospects for the majority of the ‘little mesters’ would be considerably worsened. The wealthier masters would be able to employ more apprentices and if journeymen were to be allowed to take apprentices, there would be little advantage in becoming a Freeman. They were also greatly concerned that, ultimately, they would have to pay for the amended Act. They decided, therefore, to counter-petition Parliament.

²⁰¹ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, December 21st 1785.

During the eighteenth century, petitioning the King and/or Parliament had become a popular means of expressing discontent, even amongst those who could not vote.²⁰² However, although it is known that a large number of local freeholders had signed the Yorkshire Association's petition for electoral reform, there is no evidence of petitioning by the non-freeholders of Sheffield before this date. Petitioning Parliament was a radical and innovative move by the Freemen because although the appeal to King's Bench had been both bold and brave, the court was the designated final arbitrator under the Act of Incorporation. By appealing to Parliament, both sides had moved the dispute into a different league altogether. The petition also marked the beginning of a shift in emphasis from a dispute that was primarily about traditional economic grievances to one that was to mirror the demands for political reform, at all levels, in the country at large.

Five copies of the Freemen's petition of 1785 have survived and it is possible that there may have been more.²⁰³ All of the copies have been written by the same hand and all have blank spaces where the numbers of masters and journeymen were to be added (see Appendix A). They were signed by a total of 1,862 cutlers of whom approximately 60% were journeymen. Of the 745 signatories who can be identified as Freemen, 200 had taken out their Freedom

²⁰² Linda Colley, *Britons – Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1992), p. 55.

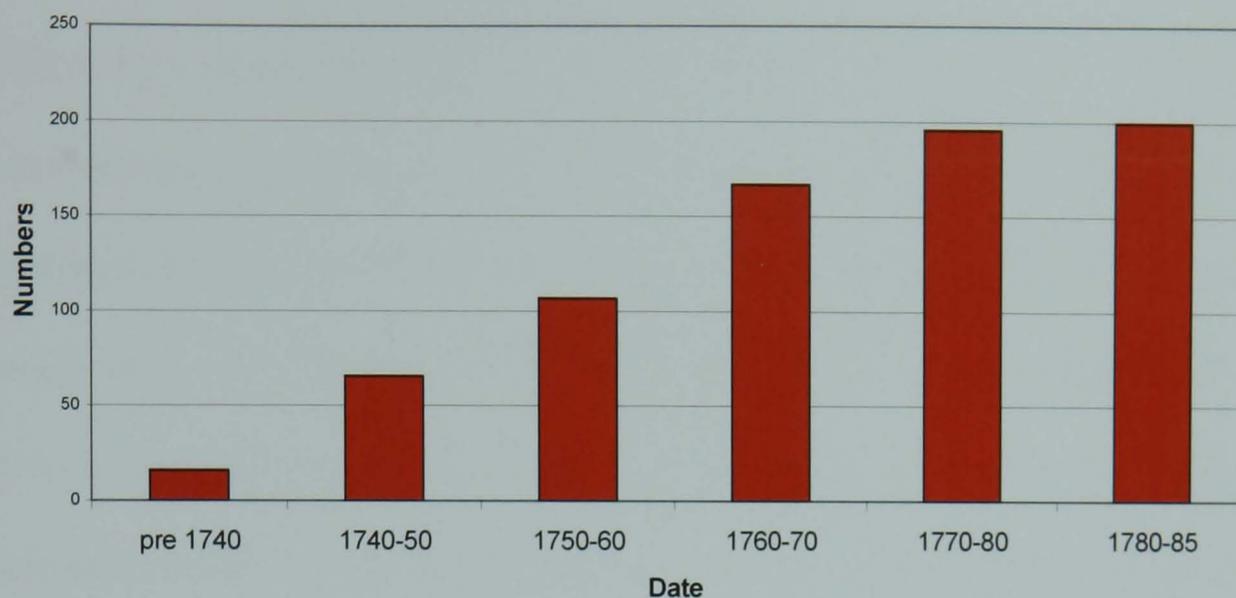
²⁰³ Four are in Sheffield Archives (Sheffield Archives, MD571-574) and one is in the Cutlers' Company's archives (CCA, S11/1). The Cutlers' Company was given its copy in the 1920s.

in the previous five years, many after a prolonged period working as journeymen. It is probable that these were among the hundreds (and possibly thousands) of ‘little mesters’ who were finding it difficult to survive in the current economic environment and who were particularly angry about the Company’s failure to enforce its existing rules and regulations.

The signatures are in neat and ordered columns and are headed by those of the Freemen followed by those of the journeymen. All of the Freemen’s signatures are followed by their cutler’s mark indicating the importance that was attached to these personal symbols of status and skill.²⁰⁴ This, combined with the fact that there is no particular craft or location bias on any of the petitions, suggests that they were kept at a central place for signing and it is possible that, because of the relatively short period in which they were compiled, they were, in fact signed at a mass meeting. Whilst the majority of the signatories were cutlers, reflecting their dominant role within the industry as a whole, there were also a significant minority of signatories from other trades (See *figure 12* below).

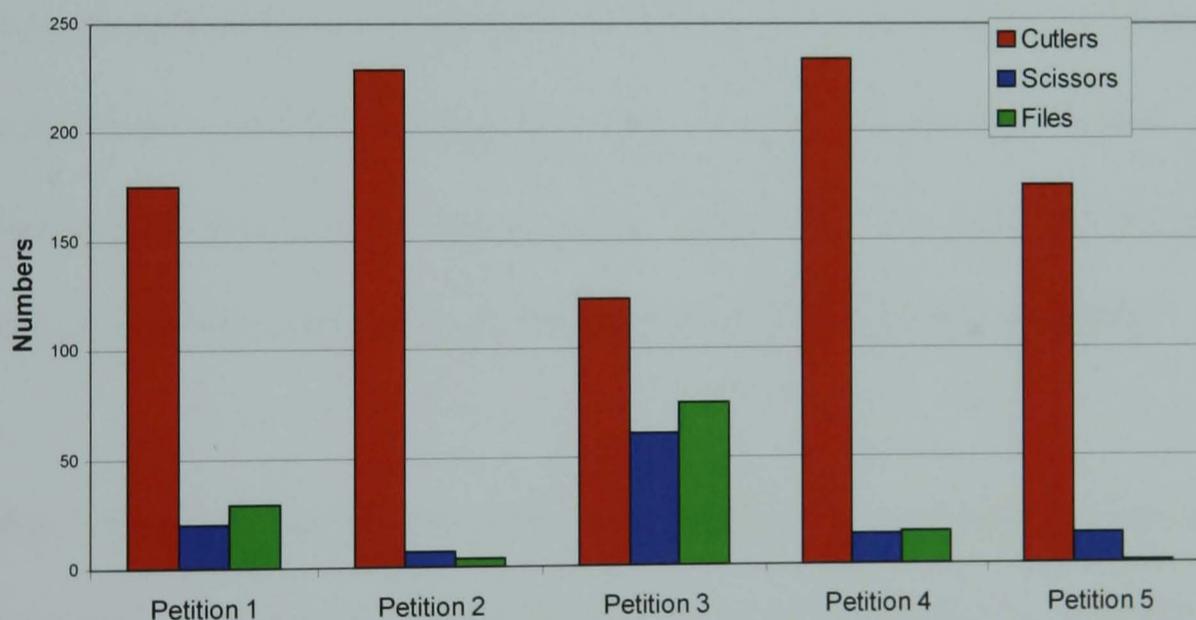
²⁰⁴ From documents in the Cutlers’ Company archives it is apparent that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was not unusual for those who could not write to sign with their cutler’s mark.

Figure 11: Decade in which signatories took out their Freedom



(Source: The petitions and the Cutlers' Company's Freedom Books)

Figure 12: Numbers in each trade who signed the petitions



(Source: The petitions and the Cutlers' Company's Freedom Books)

In the text of the petition, the Freemen claimed that 'before the late Disseverance of America from Great Britain, upwards of ten thousand masters, journeymen and apprentices' were employed in the trades, 'seven thousand of whom were Freemen, or entitled to their Freedoms'. In language that illustrates

the economic and social gulf that had developed and is redolent of class division, they complained 'that several of the most opulent of the said Masters' were keeping too many apprentices and/or employing non-Freemen 'because to apprentices they pay no Wages, and to those whom they employ that have been brought up to other trades or to no trades at all, lower wages than they usually pay to journeymen Freemen'. As a consequence, many journeymen were being deprived of work or were forced to work for low wages, poor quality goods were being made and sold, and 'industry and genius are discouraged to serve the selfish Views of a few wealthy Individuals, who are thereby endeavouring to keep the trade in their own Hands'. They also complained that the same masters had recently made a practice of striking 'the mark of any person whose goods were in the best Estimation, to the detriment of the fair Traders' – in other words, they were stamping goods with marks that they had not been granted in direct contravention of clause eight of the Act of Incorporation.

After 'repeated peaceable but fruitless Applications' to the Cutlers' Company, the petitioners stated that they had applied to the Court of King's Bench for redress and, as a result, the Members had been subpoenaed to appear before the court to explain why they had not been enforcing the regulations that had been imposed by the Act of Incorporation and subsequent byelaws. The petitioners believed that it was in order to avoid the consequences of this and of any investigation into the Company's finances, that the Members had decided to petition Parliament for amendments to be made to the Incorporating Act

amendments that they believed would 'be detrimental to the Cutlery Trade in general and to the town and neighbourhood of Sheffield in particular'.

Whilst it is not known who suggested that the Freemen should petition Parliament, it is clear that were receiving encouragement and support from some of the more economically successful cutlers, the 'master manufacturers'. It is generally accepted that these were the cutlers who were listed in the 1787 *Sheffield Directory* and of the 745 Freemen who signed the petition, sixty-five were in the *Directory*, including the aforementioned John Jervis. Thirty-one lived within the town of Sheffield of whom six are known to have taken more than one apprentice in a given year – John Oates took two in 1780, the same year in which Joseph Binney took three; George Greaves took two in 1781; John Jervis two in 1782; William Brookfield two in 1783; and John Timm two in 1784. John Jervis and Joseph Binney, who were both manufacturers of metal-framed knives, were also freeholders and are listed in the local poll book for the 1784 elections.²⁰⁵ In many cases, the aims of these 'master manufacturers' were diametrically opposed to those of the 'little mesters' – whilst the latter wanted the old protectionist policies to be reinforced, the former felt restrained by those policies and were more inclined to support the principles of free trade. Many of them, for example, would have shared in Adam Smith's belief that some of the main hindrances to the growth of trade were the restrictions placed upon

²⁰⁵ Sheffield Archives, SYCRO/181/21/1.

apprenticeships.²⁰⁶ Why they supported this petition is unclear, but it is possible that they may have hoped to use the groundswell of dissatisfaction amongst the ‘little mesters’ to undermine the authority of the Cutlers’ Company and to weaken the control of the self-perpetuating oligarchy of the Members, many of whom would have been their business rivals.²⁰⁷

The author of the petition was probably Joseph Gales. As a printer and engraver, he would have been well qualified to prepare the numerous copies and, once again, the style and phraseology is very similar to those used in his known works.

There is, however, no evidence to show that either the Freeman’s or the Company’s petitions were ever presented to Parliament.

Compromise

The Company’s minute book for January 5th 1786 records that at the public meeting to discuss the proposed amendments to the Act of Incorporation

A great number of Freeman appearing and expressing their

Dissapprobation of the Application to Parliament, particularly on

²⁰⁶ Maxine Berg, ‘Political Economy and the Principles of Manufacture 1700-1800’, in *Manufacture in Town and Country Before the Factory*, ed. Maxine Berg *et al* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 50.

²⁰⁷ The Act of Incorporation stated that if a Member retired or died, his replacement was to be chosen by the remaining Members.

Account of the present Deadness of Trade and Want of Employment for the Journeymen, the Officers of the Company agreed to defer the application to a future Session, and until there should be a greater Demand for Workmen in the Trades of the Corporation.²⁰⁸

Why the sudden change of heart? Arthur Jewitt subsequently claimed that the Company had adopted a technique of ‘divide and conquer’ and that the majority of the Freeman’s Committee had been ‘persuaded’ to agree to a compromise solution: on condition that the Freeman abandoned their case in the Court of King’s Bench, the Company would agree to enforce its rules and regulations more rigorously and would give the Freeman £500 to cover any expenses that they had incurred.²⁰⁹ Jewitt later claimed that he had held out against this and that, for a time, he had felt so threatened that he had armed himself with a pair of pistols until he too was forced to concede – though whether he felt threatened by Members of the Cutlers’ Company or by disillusioned Freeman and journeymen is not clear.²¹⁰

Whilst there is no evidence to prove, or disprove, Jewitt’s accusation that the Freeman had been ‘persuaded’, it is known that the Company had had private meetings with at least some members of the Freeman’s Committee on

²⁰⁸ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, January 5th 1786.

²⁰⁹ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, p. 44.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*; NA/KB1/24/5.

December 29th and again on January 3rd and 4th 1786 and that rumours of bribery were to persist for many years.²¹¹ The Company's generous payment of £42 12s 6d to 'Poor Freemen' in December 1784 has already been noted and when the £500 was paid over in March 1786, the entry in the Company's accounts books notes that it was to 'various Freemen' and not to the 'Freemen's Committee', the term that the Company had always used previously.²¹² Theoretically, the Freemen had been raising funds since April 1784 through the 1d per fortnight subscriptions (see above) and, if this was the case, they must have incurred legal costs substantially greater than those incurred by the Cutlers' Company in order to need a further £500 to cover them.

In reality, the compromise was probably reached through a mixture of 'persuasion' and pragmatism on both sides. Many of the Company Members were, after all, those who sub-contracted orders to the 'little mesters' and they were also the major employers of the journeymen. Consequently, it would have been relatively easy for them to apply economic pressure to 'persuade' men who were dependent on them for work to withdraw their support for the Freemen's Committee. December and January were also, traditionally, 'slack' months in the cutlery trade; they were also cold months when the local rivers regularly froze over which meant that the wheels could not be used for grinding. The Company, for its part, would have wanted to avoid the costs of a

²¹¹ CCA, D1/1, the accounts of Thomas Settle; Baxter, 'The origins of the social war', p. 61.

²¹² CCA, D1/1, the accounts of Thomas Settle.

legal case and of an application to Parliament and probably hoped that, eventually, the crisis would ‘blow over’. Pragmatism, undoubtedly supported by a heavy dose of economic realism, finally prevailed and on January 19th 1786, nine Freemen signed a *Nolle Prosequi* asking the Court to halt all legal proceedings against the Members.²¹³ Seven of the nine had been members of the original Freemen’s Committee: Stephen Thompson, Arthur Jewitt, Edward Smith, Thomas Colley, John Law, Robert Wilkinson and William Hardy. The other two were John Haslam and Joseph Bradshaw, both cutlers.

Conclusion

During the late 1770s and early 1780s, the economic and social impact of the changes that had occurred within the Hallamshire cutlery industry over the previous two to three decades were compounded by the recession that resulted from the war with the American colonists. The majority of Freemen and journeymen, however, believed that their precarious economic situation was caused primarily by the Cutlers’ Company’s failure to impose its rules and regulations and that this, in turn, had allowed the industry to become dominated by a small group of ‘opulent masters’. In April 1784 they found a spokesman in Arthur Jewitt, a moderately successful Freeman who was also a fluent orator. He was able to channel their frustrations into an organised campaign to make the Cutlers’ Company enforce its rules and thus re-establish the *status quo*. But,

²¹³ NA/KB1/24/5.

in the course of this two-year campaign lessons were learnt by both sides that were to have long-term consequences not only for the participants but also for the town of Sheffield itself.

The most important consequence of the 'little mesters' campaign for the Cutlers' Company was the realisation that its control over the Hallamshire cutlery trades was based on dubious legal authority. Whilst the powers that it had been given by the Incorporating Act may have been sufficient to control the industry in the early seventeenth century, they had proved to be totally inadequate for the way that it had grown and developed during the course of the eighteenth century.

The Freemen and journeymen, the 'commonality', meanwhile, had matured as a body during the course of the two-year campaign. For the first time since 1624, they had joined together in a mass movement that transcended the traditional trade divisions. They had formed committees and elected representatives to act on their behalf. They had organised meetings, published handbills, and discovered information about the legal framework in which the Company operated that had, hitherto, been either unknown or long forgotten. They had appointed a lawyer to take their case to the Court of King's Bench and, ultimately, they had drawn up a petition to Parliament that had received almost two thousand signatures. And, although the journeymen and 'little mesters' had initiated the campaign, it had also been supported by some of the more

economically successful Freeman - men like John Jervis, a member of a well-established cutlery family and also a freeholder.

Superficially, the 'little mesters' campaign was successful in that it extracted a commitment from the Cutlers' Company to enforce its rules more rigorously but it had also opened a proverbial Pandora's box and set in motion a sequence of events that would, eventually, lead to the formation of the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information.

CHAPTER THREE

'The Freedom of Election'

Introduction

Whilst it is impossible to know how many of the Freemen and journeymen at large supported the actions of the Freemen's Committee during 1784 and 1785 (although the fact that 1,862 of them were willing to put their names to a petition indicates that support was, probably, widespread), it was the first time in the Company's history that they had come together as a body, and across all of the trades, to try to redress their economic grievances. In doing so, many of them had gained valuable experience in organising and working in committees and in acquiring and disseminating information. They had also gained legal experience by working with lawyers and the courts. The majority of them continued to believe that their grievances would be resolved if the Company re-established what they, the Freemen, believed to be the *status quo* by reinforcing its traditionally accepted rules and regulations but, in reality, this could not be done. The Freemen's *status quo*, if it had ever existed, might have worked well for the cutlery industry in the mid-seventeenth century, but it was totally inadequate for and, in many cases, detrimental to the industry at the end of the eighteenth century. Their actions, however, had encouraged many to consider, probably for the first time, the role that the Cutlers' Company played within the local cutlery trades and they had also revealed a great deal about the legal

framework in which the Company operated and caused many, not least the Company Members themselves, to question the legality of its authority.

The economic and social changes that occurred in Sheffield in the second half of the eighteenth century mirrored those experienced by towns and cities throughout the country as England struggled to adapt to life as an increasingly urban and industrial society. This chapter will examine how national debates about the causes of and solutions to social, economic and political grievances were interpreted at a local level and how local reformers encouraged the gradual politicisation of the Freemen's dispute and fostered the belief amongst the Freemen that their grievances could only be resolved if they too had 'the freedom of election'.²¹⁴

Rights and Liberties

Despite having reached a compromise settlement with the Freemen in early 1786, the Cutlers' Company knew that their position remained extremely vulnerable. The events of the previous twenty months had revealed that their authority rested on very shaky foundations and they realised that if they were to maintain control over the local cutlery trades an amended, or even a new, governing Act was necessary. Consequently, they decided to seek further legal advice – this time about the validity of the forty-five byelaws that had been

²¹⁴ *Sheffield Register*, January 3rd 1789.

passed since 1624. The reply that they received from Mr. E. Wigley of the Temple on February 2nd 1786 that he believed that twenty-two of these byelaws were 'not good' must have both increased their sense of alarm and also strengthened their realisation that something would have to be done.²¹⁵ Crucially, the byelaws that Mr. Wigley deemed to be 'not good' included some that were considered by both the Company and the Freemen to be crucial to the management of the local cutlery trades: the laws that restricted Freemen to just one craft and those that forbade Freemen from selling and buying blades and hafts to and from foreigners, from working for or employing foreigners, from entering into partnerships with foreigners and from striking marks other than the one that they had been assigned. He also said that, although the Act of Incorporation had forbidden anyone who was not a Freeman from taking an apprentice, if such a person did take an apprentice and then asked the Company's Clerk to enrol the indentures, the Clerk would be obliged to do so, but the master should be warned of the penalties for which he would be liable and the Company would be entitled to prosecute him.

Meanwhile, the principal concern of the 'little mesters' was that the Cutlers' Company should abide by the agreement of January 1786 and strictly enforce their rules and regulations and thus restore what they believed to be the *status quo*. Accordingly, on March 31st 1786, sixteen Freemen and journeymen, including Arthur Jewitt, petitioned the Company 'by and with the order and

²¹⁵ CCA, B4/2.

advise of the Commonality of the said Corporation'.²¹⁶ The use of the word 'commonality' is significant. Since 1624 the term had been used to encompass ALL Freemen, journeymen and apprentices who were NOT Members – the petitioners were now openly claiming to speak on behalf of all of those belonging to the Company who were not members of its governing body.

Once again the Freemen's grievances were of an economic nature. They asked the Company 'to take into consideration the ill-consequences' of the continued employment of non-Freemen in the trades, of the manufacture of polished cast iron forks and of the practice of using cheaper, soft woods to make table knife handles. As a result of these practices, they claimed:

... numbers of the publick are dayly imposed upon but then once their eyes are opened and they see clearly the imposition and defraud which they are served with they immediately go to another market such as Birmingham which place now flourishes by reason of using the best hard wood and making better goods than we do and although the pig iron forks are many of them cast at Birmingham yet they don't use them their knowing it would greatly disintrest them.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Sheffield Archives, TC416. The sixteen signatories can all be identified: eleven were cutlers, two were scissor-smiths, two were filesmiths and one was a razorsmith. Nine had signed the Freemen's petition.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

In other words, the Company's inaction was causing economic damage to the cutlery trades and this, ultimately, affected the whole town. The manufacture of knives and forks from pig or cast iron had become a particular problem over the previous two decades. These goods were cheaper to produce than steel knives and forks and, when polished, could be made to resemble steel. But they were of an inferior quality and their sale had done much harm to the industry's reputation. In July 1780, after a protracted battle with Ebenezer and Thomas Parker, the Company had passed a byelaw imposing the substantial fine of 10s per blade on anyone found guilty of manufacturing cast iron blades or forks.²¹⁸ But the practice continued. On May 13th 1783, for example, Richard Kent was fined £51 for selling 102 cast-iron blades and in November 1785, whilst the Company was in the midst of settling the case brought before King's Bench by the Freemen, they were summoned to appear before the same Court to answer a case brought by Kent over the seizure of his cutlery.²¹⁹

On April 1st 1786, the Committee of Freemen published a handbill, addressed to 'the Freemen in General', reporting that they had presented the petition to the Company but the Company had told them that they 'had no *Power* (as they had been advised by their Counsel) to carry any of those Laws into *Execution*'.²²⁰

The Company also said that they had been advised that any person living within

²¹⁸ CCA, C9/1, Company minute book, October 19th and 30th 1779; November 2nd and 6th 1779; December 15th, 17th, 21st, and 24th 1779; July 31st 1780.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, May 13th 1783; C9/2, November 2nd 1785.

²²⁰ Sheffield Archives. TC416-4.

Hallamshire had the right to follow any of the cutlery trades and that if they did so for seven years, either as a master, journeyman or apprentice, then they would be entitled to the same rights as anyone who had served a legal apprenticeship.

The Freeman's Committee knew that if the Company's claim was correct, then the whole *raison d'être* of the Cutlers' Company was severely undermined: if anyone could work at any of the incorporated trades and then, after seven years, claim all the rights of a Freeman 'there can be no Occasion ... either to bind any one Apprentice, or for any Person to be at the Charge of taking his *Freedom*'.²²¹ And if this was the case, then the Cutlers' Company would lose control and a free market would ensue. But the Freeman were 'not satisfied that these *Assertions* are to be considered as *Law*' and they asked the Freeman to meet at their 'respective Committee Houses' on the following Monday (April 3rd) 'to consider of the most proper Method to be taken to put the *Laws* of the Corporation into *Execution*, and to prevent the present and future *Infringement* of your *Liberties*.'

This reference to 'committee houses' is the first evidence that there was some sort of formal organisation amongst the Freeman and journeymen beyond that provided by the Freeman's Committee. Whilst it is known that benefit societies had existed within the trades since at least the 1730s, there is no evidence of

²²¹ *Ibid.*

separate trade committees before 1786.²²² It is probable that the committees referred to in this handbill were, in fact, representative committees of the various branches of the trades and that they were probably the same committees identified in a notice in the *Sheffield Register* in October 1787: the spring knife and razor makers' committee, the table knife cutlers' committee, the scissor-smiths' committee, the filesmiths' committee, and the grinders' committee. They may have been formed in the wake of the April 1784 meeting to represent the various branches and it would seem likely that their 'committee houses' were taverns – as has been discussed earlier, taverns played an important role in the local cutlery trades, especially on Saturday nights.²²³ If, as also seems likely, representatives of these trade committees formed the Freeman's Committee then they are indicative of a quite sophisticated degree of organisation amongst the Freeman. These committees may also have provided the model on which the S.S.C.I. was subsequently based (a series of sub-groups known as tythings which each sent a delegate to a group meeting, which would then send a delegate to a higher group, from which delegates would be chosen to form the Grand Council) and whose organisation set the pattern for urban popular movements throughout the country.²²⁴

²²² A Cutlers' Benefit Society and a Filesmiths' Society are both known to have existed in 1732.

²²³ *Sheffield Register*, October 20th 1787. The spring knife and razor makers met at Thomas Marshall's, the table knife cutlers at George Dore's, the scissor-smiths at John Hinchliff's, the filesmiths at Whittington Sowter's, and the grinders at David Naylor's – all known taverns in the town.

²²⁴ Stevenson, *Artisans*, p. 54; Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 159.

However, of far greater significance is the language that was used in this handbill, particularly the phrase '*Infringement of your Liberties*', because it indicates that the Freemen were beginning to view their dispute with the Cutlers' Company in the context of the national debate about the rights and liberties of freeborn Englishmen. It is also the first of the Freemen's publications in which Joseph Gales is openly identified as the printer.

As dissatisfaction with factionalism and corruption within government had grown during the eighteenth century, political reformers, like Gales, had increasingly espoused the popular tradition of the rights and liberties of freeborn Englishmen. This tradition was based on the belief that until 1066 Englishmen had 'lived as free and equal citizens, governing themselves through representative institutions' and that this freedom had been lost with the arrival of William the Conqueror and the establishment of what became known as 'the Norman Yoke'.²²⁵ Reformers believed that the way to restore true democracy to England was by restoring the rights and liberties of its people through parliamentary and electoral reform because, they argued, power was bestowed by the people and was held on trust and, consequently, the people should have a right to judge those who held power and to remove it from them if they felt that their trust had been betrayed.²²⁶

²²⁵ Christopher Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution* (London, 1958), p. 57.

²²⁶ Dickinson, 'The Friends of America', p. 22.

The debate, however, was not merely confined to those who were wealthy, educated or enfranchised: improvements in travel and communications, the growth of clubs and societies, the impact of new provincial institutions such as theatres and assembly rooms, and, most importantly, the expansion of print media all helped to foster 'an exuberant out-of-doors political culture' in which arguments such as these were widely discussed.²²⁷ Newspaper editors educated their readers about politics by reporting government actions and parliamentary debates and by printing political commentaries. By doing this, they also helped their readers to understand how the actions of government affected them and encouraged them to believe that they too had the right to be involved in the nation's political life.

The people of Sheffield were not immune to these debates. They lived and worked in a manufacturing town with an expanding market and would have had contact, either directly or indirectly, with people from all over the country, including London. Whilst the local newspaper, the *Sheffield Advertiser*, was, reputedly, conservative in outlook, its editor, William Ward, did reprint articles from the London papers, albeit without comment. And, of course, London and other provincial papers would have been circulated in the town. This was also a town where a significant number of the leading citizens, including the Vicar, James Wilkinson, had been directly involved with Christopher Wyvill's Association Movement. These men would have discussed the Association's

²²⁷ Wilson, *Sense of the People*, p. 19.

aims and ideals with their friends and neighbours, with the inevitable result that these aims and ideals would have come to the attention of a much wider audience. At least two of these men, Samuel Shore and John Payne, had subsequently become members of the Society for Constitutional Information (S.C.I.), whose aim was ‘to diffuse throughout the kingdom, as universally as possible, a knowledge of the great principles of Constitutional Freedom, particularly such as respect the election and duration of the representative body’.²²⁸ In order to do this, the S.C.I. produced vast numbers of political tracts that were distributed by their members and, once again, through discussions and group readings in workshops, coffee shops, taverns and homes the ideas promulgated by the S.C.I. would have been disseminated to a wider audience.

The national debate about rights and liberties was further enlivened by the dispute, and subsequent war, with the American colonists which, as has already been noted, was a subject of much interest, and dispute, amongst the people of Sheffield. The colonists claimed that certain rights and liberties were, in fact, *natural* – the God-given ‘universal and inalienable rights of a man to his life, liberty, [and] property’.²²⁹ This argument particularly resonated with Dissenters who believed that their natural rights and liberties were being curtailed by the strictures imposed by the Test and Corporation Acts and many

²²⁸ The quotation is taken from the preface to a volume of tracts that was published by the S.C.I. in 1783, quoted in *British Working Class Movements: Selected Documents 1789-1875*, ed. G. D. H. Cole and A. W. Filson (New York, 1965), p. 36.

²²⁹ Dickinson, ‘Friends of America’, p. 22.

of them became active campaigners not only for the abolition of these hated acts but also for parliamentary reform. Amongst the more prominent national figures were Joseph Priestley, John Jebb, and Richard Price whose publications, including printed sermons, were widely read and discussed (Price's *Observations on the nature of civil liberty* [1776], for example, went through fourteen editions and sold sixty thousand copies in London alone). Their arguments were propounded to an even wider audience by Dissenting ministers, who, it has been argued, 'put the pulpit to much the same use as radicals put the press'.²³⁰ They interpreted matters of national debate through local issues, and in so doing they not only helped to educate their congregations about national politics but also encouraged them to believe that their local grievances mirrored those of the nation at large. The radicals' demands for equal representation and the right to 'cashier' those by whom they were governed would have had an obvious appeal for many small tradesmen and artisans who felt that their ambitions and opportunities were threatened by their dependence on those with greater access to capital and influence.

By 1785, a significant percentage of Sheffield's population were Dissenters. There were seven Dissenting chapels in the town and, unlike their Established Church counterparts, the ministers of these chapels were appointed by representatives of their congregations, the trustees, and they were dependant

²³⁰ John Seed, 'Gentlemen Dissenters: The social and political meanings of rational dissent in the 1770s and 1780s', *The Historical Journal* 28 (1985), p. 319; Bradley, *Religion*, p. 184.

upon the support and approval of these trustees for their positions. Consequently, the views of the minister were often indicative of the views of the leading members of his congregation. The most prestigious chapel in Sheffield in the late eighteenth century was Upper Chapel. Its minister from 1758 until 1780 was John Dickinson, who was described as ‘a man of considerable popularity, of a strong and ardent mind, and particularly active in his opposition to the principles which occasioned the American war’, whilst his co-minister, Joseph Evans (minister from 1758-1798), ‘had the most cordial hatred of the ministry and measures of Mr Pitt. His dislike was extended to the Crown and he would gladly have seen a Revolution at home’.²³¹ Both men were friends of Joseph Priestley and, in fact, there had been an attempt to have Priestley himself appointed as minister in 1758.²³² When Dickinson died in 1780, he was replaced by Benjamin Naylor, who had been educated at the Warrington Academy, where Priestley had served as a tutor.

The trustees of this chapel included members of one of Sheffield’s leading families, the Shores. This family dynasty had been established by Samuel Shore (1676-1751), a hardwareman who became an ironmaster, steelmaker and merchant. His son, also called Samuel (1707-1785), married the daughter of a wealthy Liverpool merchant and bought a small estate in Meersbrook, just outside of Sheffield. His sons, Samuel III (1738-1828), John (1744-1832) and

²³¹ J. E. Manning, *A History of Upper Chapel* (Sheffield, 1900), p. 75 and p. 78.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 79 and p. 82.

William (1752-1822) were typical of the ‘gentlemen dissenters’ described by John Seed: wealthy, well-educated and active reformers.²³³ Despite the restrictions of the Test and Corporation Acts, Samuel III had been elected as High Sheriff of Derbyshire in 1761, a position his son was also to hold in 1832. All three brothers had been supporters of Wyvill’s Association and, as was noted earlier, Samuel was one of the three men nominated to represent Yorkshire at the Association’s second Convention in London in January 1781.²³⁴ In 1783 he, together with John Booth, collected the signatures of 471 local freeholders on a petition supporting Pitt’s motion for parliamentary reform and, when the motion failed, he was one of those who wrote to Wyvill urging him to recall the Association.²³⁵ He was a member of the S.C.I. and, in 1788, was elected as its vice-president.²³⁶ In 1787, he was a member of the Application Committee that applied to Parliament for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Act and when that motion was defeated, he resigned from his post of High Sheriff in protest.²³⁷ He was a founder trustee of Theophilus Lindsey’s chapel in London, one of the most notable centres of rational dissent in the country, whose regular attendees included Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Brand Hollis, John Jebb and William Wilberforce.²³⁸ He was also the brother-in-law

²³³ Seed, ‘Gentlemen Dissenters’, p. 299; Lady Stephen, ‘The Shores of Sheffield and the Offleys of Norton Hall’, *T.H.A.S.* 5 (1943), *passim*.

²³⁴ Black, *The Association*, p. 75.

²³⁵ Christopher Wyvill, *Political papers chiefly respecting the reformation of the Parliament of Great Britain*, (York, 1804), vol. 2, p. 250 and p. 257. The other letter writers included James Wilkinson, Vicar of Sheffield.

²³⁶ Black, *The Association*, p. 208.

²³⁷ Goodwin, *Friends*, p. 82; Bradley, *Religion*, p. 83.

²³⁸ Seed, ‘Gentlemen Dissenters’, p. 305. Samuel visited this chapel when he was in London. He had a house in Clapham.

of Thomas Walker of Manchester, a wealthy cotton merchant, chairman of the Manchester anti-slavery committee, and a founder member of the Manchester Society for Constitutional Information.²³⁹

Joseph Gales was also a member of Upper Chapel. Although he had been brought up as an active member of the Church of England, he was drawn to the Unitarian Church after reading a sermon that had been delivered by John Disney in 1782.²⁴⁰ In this sermon, which was published by Gales' master James Tomlinson, Disney explained that he was resigning from his livings and leaving the Church of England because he could no longer accept the doctrine of the Trinity.²⁴¹ After further reading, Gales also decided that the doctrine was 'unscriptural', but he did not join a Unitarian Church until he arrived in Sheffield in 1784.²⁴² It is possible, therefore, that this was when his passion for reform was first kindled.

Somewhat lower down the social scale from Upper Chapel was the chapel on Scotland Street that had been founded by Thomas Bryant in 1765. Bryant was

²³⁹ Walker was married to Samuel's sister, Hannah.

²⁴⁰ Gales, 'Recollections', p. 193 and p. 202.

²⁴¹ John Disney, *Reasons for resigning the rectory of Penton and vicarage of Swinderby, in Lincolnshire; and quitting the Church of England* (London, 1782). No copies of the version of the pamphlet printed by Tomlinson have survived. However, one of the few Tomlinson publications that has survived is another of Disney's sermons: John Disney, *A spirit of industry recommended, in a sermon, preached in the parish church of Swinderby, in the county of Lincoln, on Sunday February 18th 1781* (Newark, 1781).

²⁴² Gales, 'Recollections', p. 202.

an itinerant Methodist preacher who had been appointed to the Sheffield Circuit in 1763, but who, almost immediately, appears to have been the cause of a serious rift amongst the local Methodists – in 1764 John Wesley wrote ‘I am fully convinced that Thomas Bryant’s staying another year in the Sheffield Circuit would be neither good for him, nor for the people’.²⁴³ In January 1765, he was discharged as a preacher and left Sheffield. But in May of the same year, he was persuaded to return by his supporters and with them established an Independent chapel on Scotland Street. Whilst the reasons for the rift are not known, it is known that Bryant subsequently became a supporter of those who were campaigning for reform and it may have been that he had an independent, and maybe even radical, spirit that Wesley and his supporters could not tolerate. Bryant was also to become actively involved in the anti-slavery campaign and was an acquaintance of Gustavus Vassa, the freed African slave who published his autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oloudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* in 1789. Three years later, when Thomas Hardy of the London Corresponding Society was trying to make contact with the S.S.C.I., he wrote to Bryant, whose name he had been given by Vassa.²⁴⁴ It is indicative of the political as well as the religious outlook of his congregation that when Bryant was forced to resign his ministry because of ill health in 1797, they chose Alexander Kilham as his replacement and, with him, became

²⁴³ John Wesley to Sarah Moore, July 1764, quoted in William Parkes, *Thomas Bryant – Independent Methodist. A Look at the Rise of the Methodist New Connexion*, Sheffield Local History Pamphlet vol.19, no.9 (n.d.), p. 7.

²⁴⁴ *Memoir of Thomas Hardy*, in *Testaments of Radicalism: Memoirs of Working Class Politicians 1790-1885*, ed. David Vincent (London, 1977) pp. 45-6.

founder members of the Methodist New Connexion, the ‘Tom Paine Methodists’.²⁴⁵ It is also worth noting that Arthur Jewitt lived on Scotland Street and although there is no evidence to prove his religious affiliations, the views that were attributed to him by his son suggest that he may have been a Methodist.²⁴⁶

Sheffield was a town dominated by thousands of semi-independent tradesmen who believed that they were entitled to the same rights and liberties as their forefathers. The countless debates that must have buzzed around the town in the wake of the Freeman’s unprecedented actions would have been informed and enlivened by the debates that had resulted from the dispute with the American colonists, the political activities of men like Shore and the Revd. Wilkinson, radical publications including those produced by the S.C.I., and, perhaps most importantly, the opinions espoused by dissenting ministers. By 1786, the Freeman had begun to see parallels between their grievances and those that their mentors perceived in the nation at large, especially the idea that their rights and liberties were being infringed. And if the root cause of both theirs and the nation’s problems were the same, then, perhaps, so too was the solution.

²⁴⁵ Mercer, ‘Reverend James Wilkinson’, pp. 42-3.

²⁴⁶ Jewitt, ‘Passages’, *passim*.

The Freeman and Thomas Blake

Unfortunately, there are no records to show what decisions, if any, were made at the Freeman's meeting on April 3rd 1786. However, amongst the papers of the Company's clerk, William Hoyle, is a small collection that reveals that throughout that year the Freeman continued to make numerous complaints about breaches of the Company's regulations.²⁴⁷ This could be interpreted as indicative of the fact that they retained a naïve faith in the Company's willingness and ability to address their grievances, or it could have been a strategic ploy: if the Company did succumb to pressure and begin to punish offenders and implement its rules more rigorously, then the majority of the 'commonalty' would be happy; if it did not, then the Freeman's Committee could prove that the Members were in breach of the orders of King's Bench. As the complainants included two prominent members of the Committee, Arthur Jewitt and Edward Smith, the latter scenario would seem the more likely.

One of the other regular complainants was Benjamin Damm, who was not a cutler but a tailor. As far as can be ascertained, this was the first time that a non-cutler had become directly involved in the internal management of the cutlery trades. His involvement suggests that the growing sense of solidarity amongst the Freeman and journeymen was beginning to spread amongst workers who were in a similar economic position in other trades and that a sense of class consciousness was beginning to emerge. Damm was also clerk of the Friendly Union, a benefit society based at the Methodist chapel on Norfolk

²⁴⁷ Sheffield Archives. TC415.

Street, and was therefore almost certainly a Methodist himself.²⁴⁸ As we have already seen, Methodism was beginning to gain a foothold in Sheffield (although its real period of growth was in the early nineteenth century) and much has been written about its role in encouraging a sense of self-confidence amongst the lower classes and also in teaching them organizational skills.²⁴⁹ Its system of class meetings, organized and managed by members of the congregation, and its penny subscriptions and ‘tickets’ gave its members a sense of democracy and self-determination and provided the blue-print for many radical and trade organizations. As early as 1820, one historian of Methodism lamented,

Perhaps the manner in which Methodism has familiarized the lower classes to the work of combining in associations, making rules for their own governance, raising funds, and communicating from one part of the kingdom to another, may be reckoned among the incidental evils which have resulted from it

...²⁵⁰

Much has also been written about the role of Methodism in preventing revolution in England in the 1790s, but, as has already been noted, there was a radical element amongst the Methodists in Sheffield who, in 1797, not only became founder members of the New Connexion but also invited its founder, Alexander Kilham, to be their minister. That Benjamin Damm was one of these radical Methodists is confirmed by the fact that he became a leading member of

²⁴⁸ Sheffield Local Studies Library. MP 145L.

²⁴⁹ See, for example, Thompson, *Making*, pp. 45-8.

²⁵⁰ R Southey, *Life of Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, (1890 edition), p. 571, quoted in Thompson, *Making*, p. 46.

the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information and, in 1792, the Society published one of his speeches: *An Address to the Public, on True Representation and the Unity of Man. Being the substance of a Speech, delivered at the FREE MASONS LODGE, in SHEFFIELD, On Monday February 27th 1792. By Benjamin Damm, Member of the Constitutional Society.*²⁵¹

Of all of the complaints that were brought before the Cutlers' Company in 1786 and early 1787, however, one stands out from the rest: the complaint that was made against Thomas Blake, a master filesmith, by Jonas Dawson, on behalf of the Filesmiths' Committee.²⁵² It is notable firstly because it demonstrates, once again, the lack of communication between the Company and the Commonalty and the fact that, for the majority, it was deeply embedded customs and practices, rather than any written laws, that governed the cutlery trades; secondly because it was the first verifiable occasion that the filesmiths, as a group, had become involved - and they were to play a key role in the later stages of the dispute between the Company and the Freemen; and thirdly because it provides further proof that master manufacturers were working with the Freemen and journeymen against the Company.

²⁵¹ British Library, 8007.bbb.10. I am grateful to Professor Andrew Prescott for bringing this to my attention.

²⁵² Sheffield Archives, TC415-23.

Thomas Blake was the son of a collier, had been apprenticed in 1771 and became a Freeman in 1782. By 1787, he was a master filesmith who was trading in Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham and London.²⁵³ He was accused, with justification, of taking a second apprentice before his first had served for five years.²⁵⁴ But, as has already been noted and as the Company had explained to the Court of King's Bench, this five-year restriction had been reduced firstly to four years in 1768 and then again to just one year in 1781. Nevertheless the Freeman still seemed to be unaware of these changes, a fact that is further confirmed by a petition that had been sent to the Company on January 26th 1786 by the cutlers of Heeley, a village on the outskirts of Sheffield, in which they had asked for the restriction to be reduced from five to three years.²⁵⁵ Blake was also accused of having his second apprentice's indentures drawn up by the above named Benjamin Damm in direct contravention of the byelaw that stated that all indentures were to be drawn up by the Company's clerk.²⁵⁶ It is highly unlikely that Blake was unaware of this regulation and one can only assume that he used Damm, a tailor and probably a known agitator, to draw up the indentures in order to deliberately provoke the Cutlers' Company and to test their reaction.

²⁵³ 'An Account of the Blake Family'. unpublished typescript, Sheffield Archives, MD2103, pp. 6-8.

²⁵⁴ Sheffield Archives, TC415-23.

²⁵⁵ Sheffield Archives, TC416-2.

²⁵⁶ CCA, B3/1.

The Cutlers' Company was now facing a joint assault by two opposing factions – on one side were the little mesters, the journeymen, and the Freemen who worked as journeymen (collectively known as 'the Freemen') who felt threatened by men like Blake and who wanted the Company to enforce its old protectionist rules; and on the other were master manufacturers, like Blake, who believed that those self-same rules were restricting their economic growth and who were using the Freemen's grievances as a means of questioning not only the Company's authority, but also its willingness to impose that authority.

When Blake was found guilty and fined by the Company, he refused to pay because, he said, filesmiths were not included under the terms of the Incorporating Act and were therefore not subject to Company law.²⁵⁷ He was, in fact, partly correct because the preamble to the Act had stated that it had been made for 'the good order and government of the Makers of Knives, Sickles, Shears, Scissors and other Cutlery Wares in Hallamshire' – at the time files, scythes, and awls were not perceived to be cutlery wares. But their makers had chosen to join the Company, over fifty years later, when it was spearheading a campaign to have smithy hearths excluded from the Hearth Tax – the awlbladesmiths had joined in 1676 and the file and scythesmiths in 1682.²⁵⁸ In 1690, a byelaw had been passed stating that awlblade and filesmiths (but not

²⁵⁷ CCA, B4/2, case for Mr Chambre's Opinion.

²⁵⁸ The scythesmiths left the Company in about 1728 mainly because they objected to the Company's restrictions relating to the employment of 'foreigners'.

scythesmiths) were comprehended as being included under the terms of the Act and were therefore bound by its regulations and by the Company's byelaws.²⁵⁹

This was one of the byelaws that had been examined by Mr Wigley in February 1786 and he had stated that he considered that filesmiths were included under the terms of the Incorporating Act and therefore that particular byelaw had been unnecessary.²⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the Company was sufficiently concerned by Blake's claims that it, once again, decided to seek legal advice, only to be informed by Mr. Chambre of Grey's Inn that he disagreed with Mr. Wrigley and that he believed that filesmiths were not subject to the Company's laws.²⁶¹ This must have been very disturbing news to at least two of the current Members, Samuel Bates and James Cam, and to one recent Master Cutler, Joseph Hawksley (1782), all of whom were filesmiths.

Joseph Gales and the Sheffield Register

At this point it is necessary to digress from the dispute within the cutlery trades to comment upon the launch of the *Sheffield Register*, which was not only to become one of the more radical and influential provincial newspapers of the period but is also one of the principal sources of information about the activities of the Freemen and, subsequently, the activities of the S.S.C.I.

²⁵⁹ CCA, B3/3.

²⁶⁰ CCA, B4/2.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*; CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, March 30th 1787.

As has already been demonstrated, there were many people in Sheffield, including those who were not amongst the educated elite, who were interested in a variety of economic, political and social issues. But, since May 1760, their only local newspaper had been William Ward's *Sheffield Advertiser*. The *Advertiser* was typical of many provincial papers of the period in that it primarily carried news that had been 'cut and pasted' from the London papers, usually without any further comment, and it gave very little coverage to local events. After twenty-seven years, its format, and its editor, appeared to be dated and old-fashioned and there must have been many who longed for a vibrant new paper. Joseph Gales saw the gap in the market. His business as a printer, bookseller, stationer and auctioneer had prospered and in late 1786 or early 1787 he and his young family had moved into larger premises on Hartshead and it was from here, on June 9th 1787, that he published the first edition of the *Sheffield Register*.²⁶² That he received encouragement and help from others in this venture is without doubt. Publishing newspapers was an expensive business, even for someone who already had the machinery to do so. There was, for example, a tax of three pence halfpenny on every paper that was published and this had to be paid in advance, and, if the newspapers were delivered rather than sold directly by the printer, the messengers, as they were known, had to be paid a set amount for each paper. However, newspapers could be sent free of charge through the mail if they were franked with the name of a Member of Parliament. Gales was able to elicit the support of William

²⁶² Gales, 'Recollections', pp. 29-30.

Wilberforce, one of the two Members for the county of Yorkshire, who allowed him to use his name and thus take advantage of this loophole.²⁶³ Whether Gales contacted Wilberforce directly or if the request was made through the offices of someone like Samuel Shore is not known.

Gales' financial partner in the venture was David Martin, an engraver with whom he had collaborated before.²⁶⁴ Unfortunately, little is known about Martin other than that he had been apprenticed in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and that he too was a member of Upper Chapel. In her 'Recollections', Mrs Gales stated that her husband had had to seek a financial partner to cover the initial start-up costs and this may explain why the partnership was dissolved in March 1788. It was certainly not because of a disagreement between Martin and Gales because of the latter's radicalism, as claimed by R. E. Leader, because Martin was to be involved in the S.S.C.I. and was called as a defence witness at Thomas Hardy's treason trial in 1794.²⁶⁵

In his first editorial, Gales outlined the principles of his paper:

The Printer of a Newspaper is entitled to some small share of the
praise which is due to those who are serviceable to their species,

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁶⁴ Martin provided the frontispiece for Gales first major publication: a folio edition of the Bible published in sixty parts and sold for 6d a part. Gales, 'Recollections', p. 28. The two men also published *A Sheffield Directory* in 1787 that included illustrations of the marks that were used by the cutlers who were listed.

²⁶⁵ Gales, 'Recollections', p. 28; Leader, *Sheffield*, p. 291; Alan Wharam, *The Treason Trials 1794* (Leicester, 1992), p. 174.

as his endeavours have a tendency to promote trade and commerce, convey useful and desirable information, and rescue from oblivion acts and events which would be lost to the world, but for such Registers and means of communication, as the press furnishes, and the industry of man avails himself of. It makes known the wants and necessities of individuals and forms a link in the vast chain which connects mankind to each other.²⁶⁶

Gales believed that education was the key to social, political and economic reform and, from the start, he reported in a concise and comprehensible style on a wide range of topics of local, national and international interest. He published extracts from the works of men like Priestley and Price and used his editorials to support, amongst others, the Sunday school movement (which was also championed by Thomas Bryant) and the campaigns for the reformation of manners, the abolition of slavery, and the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts.

The *Register* immediately found an eager audience and, within a short time, it 'was to be found in every house of respectability ... and one at least was taken in every manufacturing Shop'.²⁶⁷ Sales of its rival, the *Advertiser*, slumped to such an extent that in September 1787, William Ward was forced to reduce its

²⁶⁶ *Sheffield Register*, June 9th 1787.

²⁶⁷ Gales, 'Recollections', p. 32.

price and he even resorted to publishing handbills disputing Gales' claim that the *Register* carried the latest London news - the acrimonious dispute that ensued was conducted through the channels of their respective editorial columns.²⁶⁸

Joseph Gales, through the medium of the *Sheffield Register*, was to have a profound influence on the people of Sheffield. He knew that there were many in the town ready for his kind of newspaper, who shared his views and his ideals. He was suffused not only with the enthusiasm and idealism of youth (he was only twenty-six years old when he began publication of the *Register*) but also with that of a recent convert. In common with many Nonconformists, he believed that the root cause of many of the nation's socio-economic problems was the lack of democratic representation and accountability at both a national and local level and one of his goals was to educate his readers, to show them the cause of their problems, and to help them to understand that they too had a role to play in society and that they deserved a voice.

The Freemen and Joseph Gales

On September 22nd 1787, the Freemen's Committee placed a notice in the *Sheffield Register* informing the Freemen that, following the example of the

²⁶⁸ *Sheffield Register*, September 1st 1787; *Sheffield Advertiser*, September 7th 1787.

Cutlers' Company, they too had sought legal advice and had been informed by their Counsel, Mr. Edward Law, that filesmiths were included under the terms of the Incorporating Act; that the Master Cutler had no right to prevent journeymen from taking apprentices and that if he refused to enrol their indentures, he could be compelled to do so; that any apprentice taken within the five year limit could not be legally bound and therefore would not be entitled to his Freedom; and that only indentures that had been sealed in the Cutlers' Hall and before an officer of the Company would entitle a boy to take out his Freedom.²⁶⁹ The Freeman's Committee also informed the Freeman at large that they had sought advice over what action could be taken against the Company who, they said, had broken the promises that had been made before King's Bench. Finally, they asked all of the Freeman to meet on their respective meeting nights at which times 'subscriptions are to be taken in for prosecuting and defending the Just Rights and Privileges of the injured Journeymen-Freemen of the said Corporation'.²⁷⁰

Unfortunately, there is no evidence to show if the Freeman had paid for this legal advice from funds accumulated from the weekly subscriptions or if, as seems more likely, they had received financial support from another source, possibly from one or more of the master manufacturers. They had also incurred considerable expense by enlisting the services of a London-based attorney, John

²⁶⁹ *Sheffield Register*, September 22nd 1787; CCA, B4/2, the opinion of Edward Law, September 4th 1787.

²⁷⁰ *Sheffield Register*, September 22nd 1787.

Parker of Chancery Lane, who accompanied Edward Smith to the Company meeting on September 28th 1787 to discuss proposed amendments to the Incorporating Act.²⁷¹ Parker was not only a more experienced attorney than Josiah Beckwith but would have had contacts in London and his appointment suggests that, by this stage, the Freeman's Committee were beginning to realise that the problems within the trades could only be resolved by an amended or even a new governing Act.

The Company were alarmed and angered by the Freeman's actions and the following week, again through the medium of the *Register*, they announced that they were always willing to listen to the Freeman's grievances, but that they were 'not to be directed by Opinions which they have not seen, nor influenced by Publications founded in Falshood [sic] and Misconception'.²⁷² Their anger was also directed against Joseph Gales who they believed should not have published the Freeman's notice and they instructed their Clerk to investigate the possibility of a legal prosecution.²⁷³ Gales justified his actions in his editorial column:

On deliberate Consideration we are induced to say, that the Advertisement signed by Order of the Committee is fully answered by that of the Master Cutler, &c. and as our Paper is

²⁷¹ Bodleian Library, MSEng. misc. d231, the papers of John Parker: CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, September 28th 1787.

²⁷² *Sheffield Register*, September 29th 1787.

²⁷³ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, October 1st 1787.

open to the latter, we cannot acknowledge ourselves culpable for the Insertion of the former. As Englishmen, we rejoice in the glorious Liberty of the Press – and, as Printers, we are doubly tenacious of it. It is our Wish, and certainly our Interest to please all Men. If we offend, the Fault lies not in our *Intention* – and the Candid and Unprejudiced we trust will acquit us, if, through our *Impartiality* we inadvertently give Umbrage.²⁷⁴

It is evident that, over the next few weeks, the Cutlers' Company mounted a propaganda campaign against the Freemen because, on October 13th 1787, the Committee placed another notice in the *Register*:

Lest, from our Silence, you should be induced to believe Reports and Advertisements that have been industriously circulated, insinuating that our Complaints and Assertions are founded in Falshood [sic] and misconception (though they contain no Proof of the same) we think proper to repeat what we before assured you of.²⁷⁵

They repeated what they had said in their notice of September 22nd and ended with the somewhat surprising comment,

²⁷⁴ *Sheffield Register*, September 29th 1787.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, October 13th 1787.

The Committee wish to inform their Brother Freemen, that they have met with the greatest encouragement among their Friends at Manchester, for enabling them to redress the Grievances complained of.²⁷⁶

Who were these 'Friends at Manchester'? The most likely answer is that they were Joseph Gales and his family and/or friends. It is known that in late September 1787 Gales went to Manchester to visit his only brother who had been taken seriously ill whilst on a business trip and who died shortly after Joseph's arrival in the town.²⁷⁷ If this was the case, then, despite his protestations of impartiality, Joseph Gales was actively supporting the Freemen.

'The Freedom of Election'

Unfortunately, Company minutes were not kept between October 1787 and May 1788 and there are no other records to indicate the activities of either the Company or the Freemen during this period. However, in June 1788 the Filesmithe's Committee published a handbill which suggests that the Company, or its supporters, had continued their propaganda campaign to denigrate the actions of the Freemen. In this handbill, the filesmithe's announced that they were not 'as common Fame says, dead, or inactive' but that they wished

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Gales, 'Recollections', pp. 25-6.

Leave to address ourselves to all such malignant Characters as Loyola and his sycophant Emissaries, who, by their evil Surmises and false Insinuations, endeavour to make us appear contemptible in the Eyes of our Fellow-Workmen and the Public: we hope ere long that our Conduct will convince them how little we deserve and how much we are above such mean Treatment.²⁷⁸

Because of the lack of evidence, it is not clear if ‘Loyola’ was the pseudonym used by the author of the ‘insinuations’ that had so upset the Filesmiths or if they themselves were using it as a term of derision. ‘Ignatius Loyola’ they helpfully explained ‘was created by the Devil ... and placed upon Earth, in the Form of an Angel of Light, to be a Plague and Scourge to Mankind’.²⁷⁹ In many ways it is surprising that either side should use the name of Ignatius Loyola because although he and the society that he founded, the Jesuits, had long been hated, and feared, by English Protestants there is no evidence to suggest that there were ever any outbreaks of anti-Catholicism in Sheffield. It should also be remembered that the Lord of the Manor, the Duke of Norfolk, was a Catholic and that he paid the stipends of the priests who openly celebrated Mass in the home of his steward, Vincent Eyre. It is possible that if Loyola was being used

²⁷⁸ Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP422M.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

as a pseudonym, it was as a play on the word 'loyal' and was meant to indicate the author's loyalty to the Cutlers' Company.

Joseph Gales' close involvement with the Freemen is further confirmed by a small comment in the middle of his editorial column on July 26th 1788 when he noted that a few Freemen were planning to meet 'to take something into consideration respecting trade' and that any Freemen who were interested should attend the meeting.²⁸⁰ A month later, he placed a notice from the Committee of the Journeymen Freemen Filesmiths in prime position on the front page of his newspaper. The notice was addressed 'to all the Corporate Trades of the Township of Sheffield' and it invited 'one sober steady Journeyman' from each branch to attend a meeting to discuss the Act of Incorporation and the way of procuring 'by such lawful Means as they shall be advised, the yearly Election of all the Officers of the said Corporation by the Voice of the Majority of the Freemen and the Commonalty of the Company.'²⁸¹

This was a completely new and revolutionary demand. The Act of Incorporation had established 'the Company', the thirty-three Members, as a self-perpetuating oligarchy – the Freemen had never had a say in choosing those by whom they were governed. Now they believed that they should have that right, that the Company should no longer 'have a Continuance independent

²⁸⁰ *Sheffield Register*, July 26th 1788.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, August 30th 1788.

of the whole Body for whom they are instructed to act, and be left under Inducements to advance their own Interests at the Expence of the Community whose welfare they ought at all times to protect and promote'. They also believed that if the officers were made truly answerable, on an annual basis, to the Freemen and Commonalty, then they would 'have one common Interest with them; and at the End of each Year be liable to return among the Generality of the Trades, to feel, in common with them, their Difficulties, and be personally concerned to prevent or remove them'.²⁸² The Filesmitths, who had now taken the lead in the campaign, were using the same arguments as those used by the people who were campaigning for parliamentary reform: governors should be answerable to those whom they governed, authority should be conferred by the consent of all the people and used for the good of the people, and whenever it was deemed to be no longer fulfilling that purpose, it should be removed.

The publication of the Filesmitths' notice was undoubtedly timed to coincide with the announcement of the new Company and the unsurprising news that only two of its Members had not served before: David Cadman who was related, by marriage, to Peter Spurr who had been the Master Cutler in 1781 and Joseph Fletcher Smith, the grandson of John Smith who had been the Master in 1722.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

The Filesmiths' notice is also important because, for the first time, it includes the names of the fourteen committee members, indicating the growing confidence of the journeymen and Freemen who not only knew that support for their cause was widespread but who also felt that they could no longer be intimidated by threats of economic repercussions. Of the fourteen, nine can be positively identified, five as journeymen and four as Freemen. The journeymen included the aforementioned Jonas Dawson and at least three of the Freemen, Enoch and James Trickett and William Wragg or Ragg of Heeley, were master filesmiths. Wragg was named as the 'President'.

On September 13th 1788, another equally prominently placed advertisement in the *Register* announced that public meetings would be held by each of the branches of the cutlery trades so that each could elect six representatives to form a General Committee. This General Committee would then 'chuse, appoint and nominate proper Persons, by the Voice of the Majority of Freemen, to serve the Corporate Offices, that the Laws and Ordinances of the Corporation may be administered with Impartiality and Justice'.²⁸³ By October 21st 1788, the candidates for election had been chosen and the Freemen were informed that the poll books would be opened over a three-day period for them to cast their votes. They were asked to bring their marks with them when they came to vote 'in Order that the same be affixed to his Name, thereby to prevent, as far as may be, any Injury or Inconveniency that might arise by their Marks being re-

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, September 13th 1788.

let'.²⁸⁴ This not only reflects the importance of marks and their use as a means of personal identification but also suggests that the Freemen may have been planning to compile their own Mark Books – the Mark Books, together with the Indenture Books, were one of the most vital tools in the Cutlers' Company's armoury of trade protection and control.

The following week, in line with the spirit of egalitarianism that was sweeping through the trades, the journeymen were also invited to cast their votes.²⁸⁵ In order to do this, they had to bring with them evidence to show that they had served an apprenticeship. Over the first three days of polling the votes cast were 1,083 for the officers nominated by the Freemen and 2 for the 'self-electing' officers.²⁸⁶

Unfortunately, once again, minutes were not kept of the Company's meetings in the period September to December 1788 and consequently we do not know how the Members reacted to the Freemen's plans to elect their own officers. Perhaps the scarcity of minutes during 1788 is indicative of the crisis that had befallen the Members who would undoubtedly have been angry, frustrated and fearful of the consequences of the Freemen's actions. They may even have been divided amongst themselves. On December 27th 1788, the Company placed a notice in the *Register* expressing their concern about notices that were circulating in the

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, October 25th 1788.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, November 1st 1788.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

town accusing them of mismanagement, of failing to enforce the laws, and of refusing to listen to the Freeman's grievances. They denied all of these charges. and even claimed that no complaints had been brought before them! However, they stated that they were willing to meet with the Freeman on January 2nd 1789 when they would listen to any grievances and also discuss the possibility of applying to Parliament for an amendment to the Incorporating Act.²⁸⁷

This meeting cannot have gone well because, on the following day, notices from both the Company and the Freeman appeared side by side on the front page of the *Register*.²⁸⁸ The Company reiterated much of their previous notice and said that they were willing to meet with the Freeman again but they threatened the 'divers ill-advised Persons' who had 'pretended to proceed to a new Election of Officers' with the loss of their Freedom and possible prosecution by law. The Freeman stated that several complaints had been made to the Company, most notably against Thomas Blake, but, when he had refused to pay the fine that had been imposed, the Company had refused to pursue him through the courts. They said that they would not join the Company in seeking an amendment to the Act until they had been shown which of the 'Restrictions and prohibitory Clauses' were 'such Cramps and Fetters upon Trade as would induce many Persons to lament that they were ever included in or Subject to the Corporation Laws' and that they would continue to elect their officers annually.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, December 27th 1788.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, January 3rd 1789.

They also suggested that if every Freeman and journeyman contributed one penny a week into a common fund then there would be sufficient funds 'to support them against all Opposition, and secure to them the Privilege that hath ever been held most dear by Englishmen, and by them preferred before all other Privileges, and is the great Bulwark of all the Blessings they enjoy, to wit, The Freedom of Election'.²⁸⁹

The phraseology and style of the Freeman's notice, and especially of this last sentence, is so redolent of Joseph Gales' editorials that he must have been its author.

Enoch Trickett

For reasons that are not entirely clear, the elections that were underway in late October/early November 1788 were either cancelled or declared void because on January 31st 1789 the General Committee of Freeman announced that new elections would take place on February 9th and 10th.²⁹⁰ It is possible that, once again, many Freeman and journeymen had been intimidated by threats of economic repercussions. In this notice, the General Committee invited any Freeman who wished to submit himself for election to do so and informed the public that forty-four men had already done this. Their names were subscribed

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, January 31st 1789.

to the notice. Twenty-two of those named were listed in the 1787 *Sheffield Directory* and would, therefore, have regarded themselves, and been regarded by their contemporaries, as being master manufacturers.



*Figure 13: An eighteenth century Sheffield master manufacturer
in his workshop.²⁹¹*

(Cutlers' Company's Collection)

Master manufacturers were Sheffield's 'middling sort' and both economically and socially would have been indistinguishable from many of those who were Members of the Company. Many of them would have been in favour of a free,

²⁹¹ The Cutlers' Company's collection also contains portraits of two other eighteenth century master manufacturers: William Trickett and John Henfrey, both of whom served as the Master Cutler. However, none of these portraits were commissioned by the Company, which only acquired them in the twentieth century. Their existence indicates that at least some of the master manufacturers were not only affluent enough to commission such paintings but also considered themselves to be worthy subjects.

or at least a freer, market and thus would probably have supported what the Cutlers' Company had been trying to do, albeit surreptitiously, for a number of years rather than wanting the reinstatement of the traditional protectionist policies as favoured by the 'little mesters'. Whilst many of these men would have been keen advocates of 'the freedom of election', at both a local and national level, it is also significant that none of them had ever served as a Member of the Company. They, like the Members, were dependent on complex networks of credit and trading contracts for their continued success and would, undoubtedly, have felt threatened by those within their own community who they believed had greater access to outside influence and capital. In a period when membership of an association or club allowed men such as these to raise their social standing and thus to gain access not only to those outside their immediate circle but also to those of a higher social ranking and, potentially, greater influence, Sheffield's ultimate club had become a self-perpetuating oligarchy. One only has to look at the guests who attended the Cutlers' Feasts in the 1780s and 1790s to note the personal contacts that the Members, and particularly the Master Cutler, could make: magistrates, High Sheriffs, the local gentry, the local nobility, and even the County Members of Parliament.²⁹² The master manufacturers of Sheffield did not live in isolation. They traded with the world outside of Hallamshire, they talked to their neighbours and business associates, they read their newspapers, and they were familiar with the political debates that were current at the time. Their frustration at being denied access to

²⁹² CCA, P8/1.

this elite club made them more keenly aware of the relevance of these debates to their lives and, consequently, sympathetic to demands for accountability, independent consent and equal representation at all levels.

On February 10th 1789, Enoch Trickett, a master filesmith, became the first, and only, elected Master Cutler in Hallamshire. He was the son of a Freeman and had been born in Eckington in 1729, where he would almost certainly have known the Gales family. He had been trained as a filesmith by his father and had become a Freeman in 1750. Five of his paternal uncles had also been Freemen and he was probably related to the William Trickett who had been the Master Cutler in 1771.²⁹³ His sons, Enoch and James, who were also filesmiths, were contemporaries of Joseph Gales.

Although there are no known portraits of Enoch Trickett, it is easy to conjure a picture of the man from the description left to us by Charles Dixon:

... few persons in the Town was may be called such an Old Shevvilder as Enoch was his speech was the Broadist I ever knew a person that had so broad a provincial Dialect – if you had seen him engaged in business you would justly have considered his Whole Mind as well as body was using their utmost exertions

²⁹³ As noted above, William Trickett's portrait is in the Cutlers' Company's collection. Enoch, however, was most definitely not William's brother as claimed by Charles Dixon in 'Recollections', p. 218. This mistake was regularly repeated by R. E. Leader.

nearly always in his shirt sleeves doubled up his Waistcoat open in front with a Leather Apron with the Bib up to his neck generally without Neck Kerchief – one time a person came to him and asked where he could see the Master – he says ‘Wa Lad are chaps call me t’mester on a Setterday neet when they wantent Brass on me’.²⁹⁴

Enoch Trickett was a very successful master manufacturer. By 1789 he was in partnership with his brother, James, also a filesmith, on Coalpit Lane in what must have been a profitable business because since becoming Freeman, the two men had taken twenty-four apprentices - there were at least six in their workshop when Enoch was elected. He also owned some land because, in 1786, he was assessed as being liable for three shillings poor relief and, in 1790, he was one of those who benefited from the enclosure of Hallam Moor.²⁹⁵ He and his brother were also subscribers to the Association for the Recovery of Absconding Apprentices and Prosecution of Felons. This Association had been formed following a meeting in August 1787 to discuss what actions could be taken to prosecute those who retained or aided runaway apprentices.²⁹⁶ Whilst the problem of ‘runaway’ apprentices was not unique to the cutlery trades, it did become a subject of increasing concern to the cutlers of Hallamshire from the

²⁹⁴ Dixon, ‘Recollections’, p. 218.

²⁹⁵ Carolus Paulus, *The Manor and Parish of Ecclesall* (Sheffield, 1927). p. 69 and p. 82. For a discussion of the enclosure of Hallam Moor, see chapter 5.

²⁹⁶ *Sheffield Register*, August 11th 1787.

mid-eighteenth century onwards. Of particular concern were the number of apprentices who enlisted in the army and the Cutlers' Company's accounts are littered with references to meetings with both the judicial and military authorities in an attempt to reach some form of compromise. The meeting in August 1787 and the subsequent formation of the Association for the Recovery of Absconded Apprentices suggests that some master cutlers had lost faith in the Cutlers' Company's ability to deal with the problem.²⁹⁷

In March 1788 the members of this Association announced that they were extending 'their Object to FELONIES committed upon the premises of any of the Subscribers' and, as was common practice, they identified themselves as a further deterrent against potential criminals.²⁹⁸ All of the thirty-one members can be identified. Twenty-four were Freemen of the Cutlers' Company: ten cutlers, eight filesmiths, four scissormiths, and two forkmakers. Three – Enoch Trickett, James Trickett and William Wild – were to play a crucial role in the latter stages of the Freemen's dispute, and one, Joseph Hawksley, who was also a filesmith, had been the Master Cutler in 1782. The remaining members were a

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 1st 1787.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, March 15th 1788. Prosecutions associations, such as this one, had existed since the late seventeenth century but their numbers increased dramatically during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Changes in society, population growth, increased mobility, urbanisation, and a media that reported events in other parts of the country had encouraged an atmosphere of mistrust and fear and a belief amongst many that the existing systems were failing to protect honest citizens, a situation not dissimilar to the one that some people believe exists in Britain to-day. See David Philips, 'Good Men to Associate and Bad Men to Conspire: Associations for the Prosecutions of Felons in England 1760-1860', in *Policing and Prosecution in Britain 1750-1850*, ed. Douglas Hay and Francis Snyder (Oxford, 1989).

manufacturer of white metal goods, a brazier and tinman, a victualler, Joseph Gales and his partner David Martin, and James Watson, landlord of the Tontine Inn where the committee met.

Enoch Trickett had been a member of the Filesmiths' Committee and whilst he may have been frustrated at being excluded from the inner circle of the Cutlers' Company, his principal motivations for becoming involved in the dispute were his belief that all Englishmen were entitled to 'the freedom of election' and his desire to make the Members accountable to the commonality - he had been one of the fourteen men who had signed the notice that was published in August 1788 demanding that the Company should be elected annually.²⁹⁹ Unfortunately, it cannot be proven that he was also, at this stage, an advocate of parliamentary and electoral reform, though it would seem probable. However, what is known is that both he and his sons were to become active members of the S.S.C.I.

One of Trickett's first actions as the 'elected Master Cutler' was to start an account book. Fortunately, this book has survived and it has proved to be an invaluable source of information about the activities of the Freeman's Committee between 1789 and 1791.³⁰⁰ For a successful businessman, opening an account book was an obvious and sensible thing to do, but Trickett was also

²⁹⁹ *Sheffield Register*, August 30th 1788.

³⁰⁰ This book is now in the Cutlers' Company's archives, D22/1.

undoubtedly motivated by a desire to demonstrate the transparency of the Freeman's financial activities when compared to those of the Cutlers' Company. There was a widespread belief amongst the Freeman that not only was the Cutlers' Company wealthier than it claimed but also that much of its income had been used for the benefit of the Members and not for the relief of the poor as ordered by the Incorporating Act. The first entry in the Freeman's account book is dated February 23rd 1789 and it shows that the Freeman's Committee had funds of £21-4-6d collected from subscribers – if these were mainly the Freeman and journeymen who had agreed to pay 1d a week a month earlier, then support for the Committee was truly extensive. By the end of March, they had received a further £146-12s including a loan of £50 from a Mr. Marsden.³⁰¹ Their expenditure in the same period included trips to York, Beverley, Hull, Lincoln, and London, presumably seeking legal advice and support for their cause. Over £66 was paid in fees to their attorney, John Parker.

On March 2nd 1789, Enoch Trickett published an Address in which he and the Freeman's Committee asked for the support of the Freeman, the Members of the Company, and, significantly, of the 'Gentlemen and principal Inhabitants of the Town and Neighbourhood' in an application to Parliament for an amendment to the Incorporating Act,

³⁰¹ This may have been the William Marsden who is listed in the 1787 *Sheffield Directory* as a fellmonger and glue maker.

To declare their [the Freeman's] right to make Choice of the future Officers of the Company, and to require them to give an account of all Money received and paid for the Use of the same, at the End of every Year, to the Freeman at Large; and also to direct all the present Property, and the Future Savings of the Company, to be laid out in relieving such poor and decayed Freeman, their Widows, or Children, as may be unable to maintain themselves.³⁰²

He also asked the Company to provide an account of its property and of the receipts and payments made by and to the Members.

Two days later, the Company held an extraordinary meeting at which it was decided that whilst they were willing to join with the Freeman in a joint application to Parliament they were determined that the right of election should remain with the Officers and that only monies raised through penalties and fines and not the Company's capital should be used for the relief of the poor.³⁰³ They also agreed that they would not give the Freeman details of the Company's property but that they would allow Enoch Trickett, his attorney and two or three friends to inspect the accounts providing that it was done in the presence of the Master and a select group of past Masters.

³⁰² *Sheffield Register*, March 7th 1789.

³⁰³ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, March 4th 1789.

Trickett's Address was printed on the front page of that week's edition of the *Sheffield Register* and, as a further indicator of the newspaper's importance as a means of disseminating information, particularly to the Freemen and journeymen, the Cutlers' Company paid to have it printed again on page three together with copies of Trickett's accompanying letter to the Master Cutler, their reply, and Trickett's subsequent reply that because the Freemen's attorney, John Parker, had left town, it was not possible to fix a day for the deputation to come to the Cutlers' Hall to inspect the accounts. The Company ended their notice with the comment that,

The resolution of the *numerous* body of Freemen stated in the above mentioned address, being conceived in a mistaken idea of the value of the property of the Company of Cutlers, the Freemen in general would do well to consider, before any application is made to parliament for the above purposes, what they are about; and to turn their attention to such amendments of the act as are really wanted, and would tend to the benefit and advantage of the trade, and of the whole body corporate; to which the Officers of the Company would readily give their concurrence.³⁰⁴

They were now seriously concerned that the Freemen might decide to act independently and, as a precaution, they wrote to one of the clerks in the House

³⁰⁴ *Sheffield Register*, March 7th 1789.

of Commons asking him to give them ‘the earliest notice of any petition that may be presented for an amendment to the Act’.³⁰⁵ Three days later, their fears were confirmed when they learnt that the Freeman had indeed sent a petition to Parliament.³⁰⁶ The battle for control of the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire had begun in earnest.

Conclusion

In its early stages, the dispute within the Hallamshire cutlery trades was similar to the disputes that took place within many other guilds and trade organisations during the eighteenth century as workers struggled to adapt to the rapidly changing economic and industrial environment. The men who signed the petition in 1785 were predominantly men who were either journeymen or Freeman who worked as journeymen and their leaders were men who were of a similar economic and social standing (see chapter two). Their grievances were, primarily, of an economic nature and they believed that they could only be resolved if the Cutlers’ Company enforced its rules and re-established what they, the Freeman, believed to be the *status quo*. But by 1789 leadership of their campaign had been transferred to a man whose economic and social standing was more akin to that of the Members of the Company and the Freeman had come to believe that their grievances mirrored those of the nation at large and

³⁰⁵ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, March 6th 1789.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, March 9th 1789.

that the solution to their problems was, therefore, the same as that being advocated as the solution to the nation's problems: namely that they should have the right to choose, and to cashier, those by whom they were governed. How had this transition come about?

Sheffield was not immune to the popular debates about reform that were raging in England in the 1770s and 1780s - for example, there had been much local interest in, and discussion about, the rights and wrongs of the war with the American colonists. It was also a growing, and thriving, town that did not have its own Member of Parliament but instead was represented by the two Members who sat for the county of Yorkshire. The majority of its citizens did not have a vote, and those who did, had to journey to York if they wanted to exercise their right. The desire for reform had encouraged a number of the town's leading citizens to become actively involved in the Association movement and they would have openly discussed its aims and ideals with their friends and neighbours, with the inevitable result that these would have come to the attention of a much wider audience. In the early 1780s, some of these men had become members of the more radical Society for Constitutional Information (S.C.I.) whose aim had been to foster popular support for reform by educating the general public about 'the great principles of Constitutional Freedom, particularly such as respect the election and duration of the representative body'.³⁰⁷ They did this by distributing vast numbers of political tracts – tracts

³⁰⁷ Quoted in Cole and Filson, *Selected Documents*, p. 36.

like the one written by Dr Joseph Towers that included the observation that 'as ... many superiors and employers are but too prone to make an ill use of their power, I venture to maintain that the people have also a right to the use of a ballot in the elections'.³⁰⁸ Through discussions and group readings in workshops, coffee shops and taverns the ideas promulgated by the S.C.I. were disseminated to a wider audience.

Sheffield also had a large nonconformist community led by some influential, and articulate, preachers. Amongst many within this community, as amongst nonconformist communities throughout the country, there was a *perception* of discrimination because of the restrictions imposed by the Test and Corporation Acts, despite the fact that, in reality, discrimination in Sheffield was virtually non-existent. The vicar, for example, was a noted religious liberal and not only had numerous nonconformists served as the Master Cutler but one of the leaders of the community, Samuel Shore, had been elected as High Sheriff of Derbyshire. Nevertheless, local nonconformists were acutely aware of the debates surrounding 'rights and liberties' and were sensitive to other perceived examples of discrimination at all levels of society. Foremost amongst these was Joseph Gales whose newspaper, the *Sheffield Register*, had a readership that was probably in excess of 10,000 a week.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Quoted in Black, *Association*, pp. 191-2.

³⁰⁹ At its height, about 2,000 copies of the *Register* were sold each week and its readership would have been between five and ten times that number.

There were also a significant number of successful cutlers who believed that they were subject to economic discrimination as a result of being excluded from the tightly knit circle of Members, and potential Members, of the Cutlers' Company. Enoch Trickett, the new leader of the Freeman's campaign, was a member of this group, but he was also a man who believed that the Members would be more inclined to act for the benefit of the cutlery trades as a whole if they were accountable to the Freeman – and the way to do this was by giving every Freeman 'the Freedom of Election'.

CHAPTER FOUR

The campaigns to amend the Act of Incorporation

Introduction

After almost five years of conflict, the Cutlers' Company and the Freeman's Committee were able to agree on only one thing: that the Act of Incorporation, in its original 1624 form, was no longer an adequate instrument of government for the Hallamshire cutlery trades. However, although they had voted on five separate occasions to petition Parliament for the Act to be amended, the Members of the Company had continually prevaricated and delayed and had done nothing.³¹⁰ Frustrated, in March 1789, the Freeman, under the leadership of their elected Master Cutler, decided to take the initiative and to petition Parliament themselves.

Meanwhile, the dispute was having a profound impact on the town as a whole. The manufacture of cutlery was Sheffield's core industry and any crisis that affected it affected a significant proportion of the town's workforce, including many who were not directly involved in the cutlery trades but who worked in supply or service industries. It had also encouraged many, perhaps for the first time, to consider the arguments surrounding the contemporary debate about the advantages and disadvantages of an economic policy of free trade as compared

³¹⁰ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, February 10th 1785, September 14th 1785, October 28th 1785, December 21st 1785 and October 1st 1787.

to one of protectionism and to contemplate how the respective policies would impact upon their lives. More importantly, especially in the light of subsequent events, it had encouraged popular debate about the right of those who were governed both to choose and to cashier those by whom they were governed, irrespective of whether the governors were at a local or national level.

This chapter will chronicle the continuing conflict between the Cutlers' Company and the Freemen as they independently campaigned to persuade Parliament to amend the Act of Incorporation and it will examine the impact of these campaigns not only on those who were directly involved, but also on the people of Sheffield in general.

The first phase, March – June 1789

The Freemen's petition asking for an amendment to the Act of Incorporation was presented to the House of Commons on March 20th 1789. In this petition, the Freemen claimed that many of the benefits that had been intended by the original Act had been lost because the Members of Cutlers' Company were allowed to appoint their own successors and had consequently formed a faction: 'a separate and distinct interest, always independent of the whole Body for whom they act, and frequently adopting and countenancing Measures for their own Advantage at the Expence of the Freemen at large'. They asked for leave to bring in a bill to amend the Act and to give the Freemen at large the right to

choose the officers of the Company. The Commons agreed that the petition should 'lie on the table' to be considered again at a later date when the Freemen had formulated a draft bill.³¹¹

On April 27th 1789, the Freemen's Committee, under the chairmanship of Enoch Trickett, met to decide upon the amendments that they wanted to be made.³¹² They voted, unanimously, for the re-establishment of the five-year limit before taking a second apprentice; for the strict enforcement of the rules that stated that each man should use only one mark; that all manufactured goods, whether finished or not, should be marked; and that non-Freemen should not be allowed to work in the trades unless they were apprenticed to a Freemen – all things that they had been campaigning for since 1784.³¹³ They also wanted journeymen to be allowed to take apprentices, something that the Company had first proposed in October 1784 but which had not previously featured amongst the Freemen's demands. Although, if granted, this would have negated one of the principal advantages of Freedom, its inclusion in the Freemen's proposal reflects their growing acceptance of the economic realities of the time. As has been discussed previously, by the end of the eighteenth century, many journeymen found themselves trapped in a cycle of debt and dependency, beholden unto a master manufacturer (or a group of master

³¹¹ *J.H.C.*, March 20th 1789.

³¹² Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP33L.

³¹³ It was becoming an increasingly common practice amongst some of the leading master manufacturers and factors to outsource the manufacture of blades and for them to undertake only the finishing processes (e.g. polishing or hafting). The finished items would then be stamped with their mark.

manufacturers) and unable to raise sufficient capital to become owners of their own work – the fundamental prerequisite of Freedom. If they were allowed to take apprentices, they would be able to take on more work and, hopefully, raise sufficient funds to break out of the cycle. And it was this desire to help journeymen, and a significant number of poorer Freemen, to become independent that, undoubtedly, lay behind another of the Freemen's proposals: the abolition of the notorious system of truck, or 'stuffing' as it was known in Sheffield, by making it illegal to pay workers in anything other than money.

The Freemen also sought to weaken the control of the Cutlers' Company by making it legal to bind apprentices at places other than the Cutlers' Hall and before reputable people other than the Company's officers. They also wanted every Freeman to have the right to sell or bequeath his mark – under existing Company rules, when a Freeman died, his mark had to be returned to the Searchers who had the right to allocate it to whomsoever they chose. And they wanted the establishment of a law court, complete with a law officer and an elected jury, to try all disputes that arose under the Act - this, in fact, would have meant a return to the pre-Cutlers' Company days when the industry had been regulated by the Cutlers' Jury (see chapter two). Anyone who successfully prosecuted a case in this court was to be allowed half of any penalty that was imposed, and the other half was to be given to the poor of the Company. They also wanted each Master Cutler to publish his accounts at the end of his year of office and any surplus income to be distributed to poor Freemen, their widows

and children. The names of those who received such relief were to be published.

However, their most controversial proposal related to the election of officers. In the handbill that the Freeman's Committee published outlining the amendments that they hoped would be made to the Act, they declared that their preferred method of election was that the trade committees should nominate the men whom they wished to serve as the six Searchers from amongst the Assistants who had been in post for at least two years.³¹⁴ They were also to nominate a Junior Warden from the previous year's Searchers. The names of those nominated by the various committees would then be submitted to the Chairman of the General Committee who would announce the 'winners'. The previous year's Junior Warden would then progress to become the Senior Warden and the previous Senior Warden would become the Master Cutler.

This was as near to the 'freedom of election' that the Freeman could hope but, having dangled the proverbial carrot before them, the Committee announced that this system was unlikely to be accepted by the Cutlers' Company. Therefore, they proposed a more moderate alternative: the new Act would name eight of the Freeman's Committee members as Assistants and each year the Master Cutler would resign from the Company along with four other Members nominated by him. These five would be replaced by five Freeman, chosen by

³¹⁴ Sheffield Local Studies Library, MP33L.

the remaining Officers, from a list of ten submitted by the new Master Cutler. Officers who resigned from the Company could not be re-nominated for three years.

The Freeman's Committee must have realised that if this latter system was implemented it would have only taken a short time for the clique of Company Members and their friends to rid themselves of the interlopers. Nevertheless, by suggesting it they had shown themselves to be willing to compromise. They also knew that the Company was unlikely to accept any form of election, and if that were the case, then the Committee promised to champion their, and probably most of the Freeman's, preferred method.

Two days later, on April 29th, the Cutlers' Company met to discuss the Freeman's proposals.³¹⁵ Whilst they were happy to support some of the Freeman's less radical amendments they were adamant that the Company should retain control over the enrolment of apprentices and the granting of marks. Nor did they believe that all manufactured goods should be marked with the maker's mark or that Freeman should be prohibited from striking 'foreign' or out-of-town marks. After all, if these restrictions had been implemented, they would have severely curtailed the businesses of those who employed outworkers and also the businesses of those who made goods that were stamped with the marks of merchants or retailers. They also expressed puzzlement over

³¹⁵ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, April 29th 1789.

the Freeman's proposals for a law court: was there a precedent for such an authority, they asked, having obviously forgotten about the Cutlers' Jury? Their real concern, however, was how, if such a court were to be established, officers of the Company would be protected from malicious prosecutions before the magistrates or even in the county court.

Unsurprisingly, the Company completely rejected the Freeman's proposals for the election of officers. 'The present method of election' they opined 'has served the Corporation and trade, both foreign and at home, well for almost 160 years and does not need to be changed'.³¹⁶ But this dismissive comment hid the Members' increasing alarm about growing support for the Freeman's cause, especially amongst some of the master manufacturers – men who, both economically and socially, would have had more in common with the Members than with most of the Freeman and who the former would have previously considered to be their natural allies.

For five years, the Company had prevaricated and done nothing; now they knew that unless they counter-petitioned Parliament, there was the real possibility that the Freeman's proposals would be enshrined in law, the management of the Hallamshire cutlery trades would be changed forever, and they would lose their power base. They felt threatened and in need of moral support and so, on May 1st 1789, they held a meeting with a number of the

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

town's leading cutlery manufacturers who resolved that William Wilberforce should be asked to present a petition on their behalf to the House of Commons opposing the Freeman's bill.³¹⁷

Meanwhile, the growing radicalism of the Freeman and their demands for electoral reform, albeit only within the Company of Cutlers, was causing concern amongst some of Sheffield's leading citizens and, on May 2nd, the 'Gentlemen, Clergy, Merchants, and principal Inhabitants of the Town' held a meeting to discuss the situation – it is probable that this meeting was also attended by many of those who attended the previous night's meeting because they would have considered themselves, and would have been considered by others, to be amongst the town's 'principal Inhabitants'. It should be remembered that a significant number of these men had been supporters of Christopher Wyvill's Association and the meeting was, in fact, chaired by one of its founder members, James Wilkinson, the liberal Vicar of Sheffield. But, despite arguing that all men were equal, very few political reformers of the period advocated true universal manhood suffrage, believing that it was the educated propertied classes who should have the right to choose the governors, whilst the poor and uneducated should merely follow. Enfranchising the latter group, they believed, would be a recipe for social and economic chaos and this sentiment was reflected in the resolutions that were agreed at the meeting of Sheffield's principal inhabitants: that the present mode of electing the officers

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, May 1st 1789.

of the Cutlers' Company's was the best 'for preserving the Peace and good Order of the town of Sheffield' and that if the right of election was extended to all Freemen 'it would very much tend to disturb the Peace of the Town of Sheffield; to produce Disorder and Confusion, and would in its Consequences be greatly injurious to the Trade and Manufactures of the said Liberty and that any Attempt to procure such Alteration ought to be opposed'.³¹⁸

Just as the Freemen's dispute was helping local people to understand and engage with the national debates about parliamentary and electoral reform, so it was helping to focus local attention on contemporary economic arguments surrounding free trade, protectionism and, particularly, the role of corporations and guilds like the Cutlers' Company. Some believed that the Company's regulations were hampering the economic growth of not only the cutlery trades but of Sheffield in general and that the Freemen's proposals, if implemented, would exacerbate the situation. One, signing himself 'A Votary of Freedom', argued in a letter published in the *Sheffield Register* that if the cutlery trades were deregulated, entrepreneurs would be encouraged,

... to join in the Manufacture of Iron and Steel Wares here as well as at Birmingham, or of Cotton at Manchester; indeed it is my Opinion, the former and this Place would shortly become as one Point of Consequence. By a Spirit of Commerce and Industry, many Articles which are now exclusively

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, May 2nd 1789.

manufactured there, would be brought here, with some of their best Workmen.³¹⁹

If Sheffield were to prosper in such a way, he suggested, its citizens would be inspired and enabled to improve its physical appearance and its amenities and this, in turn, would encourage more people to invest and to settle in the town. In language that was bound both to inflame the Freemen and to appeal to those who believed that the lower orders were feckless and lazy, he argued that if the Freemen's 'cramps' were imposed, 'Idleness and Debauchery' would be encouraged and men would continue 'to abuse their Masters with Impunity, and get into their Debt at Pleasure, because they are *Freemen*.' He concluded with a plea that those who supported his point of view should stand together and petition Parliament because 'it is a Truth well known in that House that Commerce shall be unconfined – should be free as the Air we breathe'.³²⁰

The following week, 'A Votary of Freedom' was derided by 'A Friend to Freedom' as being the 'Champion of the Philistines' who had acted 'like the chief Captain of a desperate Gang of Highwaymen ... or like a Pirate who has discovered a large Booty, and summons up all his Strength to attack and take it away from the rightful Owners.'³²¹ 'A Votary' should have signed himself 'A Votary of Slavery' not of Freedom, he continued, because the aim of men like

³¹⁹ *Sheffield Register*, May 9th 1789.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ *Ibid.*, May 16th 1789.

him, who regarded themselves as ‘Men of Consequence’, was to ruin all honest masters and journeymen by making them their slaves. These ‘Men of Consequence’ boasted that,

... if they [the journeymen] leave us, they must leave behind them all their Improvements, which is the Booty we want, besides they must be obliged to come to us again ... for have we not conquered the Silversmiths and Button Makers by taking a greater Number of Apprentices than ever the national Law would admit? That even when the Apprentice is out of his Time, we send him about his Business, or he must work for less Wages, for we have another in his Place; if he goes to another Shop, he cannot find Employment, for we all follow the same Rule. These Cutlers shall be even like unto them.³²²

It is unfortunate that it has not been possible to identify either of these authors because they would appear to have been early representatives of the two classes that were to play such an influential role in the economic, social and political history of Sheffield during the nineteenth century and, arguably, much of the twentieth century as well. The views expressed by ‘A Votary’ suggest that he was typical of the capitalist entrepreneurs who were later to be epitomized by men like the steel magnates John Brown and Mark Firth, whilst those expressed by ‘A Friend’ indicate that he would probably have sympathised with the

³²² *Ibid.*

socialist warriors who were later to have such a profound influence on Sheffield's working classes – men like the Chartist Samuel Holberry and the trade unionist William Dronfield, for example.

The Freemen, meanwhile, under their elected Master Cutler, were beginning to act as an independent body and to take on roles that would previously have been undertaken by the Cutlers' Company. For example, they organised a petition to Parliament in support of Wilberforce's campaign for the abolition of slavery – a petition that Wilberforce was to quote from in his landmark speech on the subject on May 12th 1789.³²³ They were also continuing to attract considerable financial support. In the month of May alone, for example, they raised almost £300 from subscriptions and donations. Donors included the Young Men's Club, the Masons' Club, the Button Makers' Committee, the Union Society, the Humane Society, the United Society, the Tailors' Society, the Independent Society, the Compassionate Society, the Careful Society, and the Benevolent Society.³²⁴ These were primarily benefit, not trade, societies who had chosen to use their members' savings to support the Freemen in their 'fight' with the Cutlers' Company. Why did they do this? Of course, many of their members would have been cutlers, or in some way connected to the

³²³ In his speech, Wilberforce drew the House's attention to the statement in the Freemen's petition in which they stated 'That the Obligations that they [the petitioners] are under to Consider the Case of the Natives of Africa as their own is so much greater than any inducements of Interest they can have in a Trade so much the Aversion and Dread of the People who are carried away by it'. *J.H.C.*, April 27th and May 12th 1789; Bodleian Library, Wilberforce MS b.2.

³²⁴ CCA, D22/1.

cutlery trades, but they would all have been aware of, and probably affected by, the dramatic economic and social changes that had taken place in Sheffield over the previous two to three decades. In economic terms, the battle being waged by the Freemen was the age-old battle of the little man versus big business and there were many in Sheffield who could identify with the former. By supporting the Freemen, these benefit societies were defending the traditional rights and opportunities not only of their own members but also those of all working men. They were also helping to foster a sense of solidarity amongst the labouring classes of the town against the employer classes.

The Freemen received one other donation that is worthy of comment: two guineas from 'a Birmingham Club'.³²⁵ How this was elicited and by and from whom is not clear. Sheffield had many trading links with Birmingham, a town that was also dominated by the metal trades which, though never subject to corporation or guild control, were organised along very similar lines to those in Sheffield. In Birmingham, as in Sheffield, small masters proliferated but, during the second half of the eighteenth century, they too had increasingly come under the control of a group of locally based capitalists and entrepreneurs and this may have encouraged a sense of empathy between the metalworkers of the two towns. However, whether this donation came from metalworkers or not, it does

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

suggest that there was a certain amount of brotherly solidarity between the cutlers of Sheffield and at least one Birmingham club.³²⁶

Whilst the Freemen undoubtedly hoped that the Cutlers' Company would accept all of their proposed amendments, they must have known that in reality most of them would be rejected. Consequently, the Company's resolutions on April 29th would have come as no surprise. This probably explains why the Freemen's new attorney, Michael Burton, was ready to go London just two days later to seek support for their petition. Michael Burton was, undoubtedly, one of Sheffield's 'principal inhabitants'. He and his brother, William, a surgeon, were co-lords of the manor of Wadsley, a village on the outskirts of town, though both men and their families shared a house together in Sheffield's recently constructed and fashionable Paradise Square.³²⁷ His appointment as the Freemen's attorney, in place of Josiah Beckwith, was probably as a result of the involvement of master manufacturers like Enoch Trickett and their desire to have an attorney who they knew and who also lived locally.³²⁸ It also suggests that Burton may have sympathised with the Freemen's economic and political aims.

³²⁶ Maxine Berg, 'Workers and Machinery in Eighteenth Century England', in Rule, *British Trade Unionism*, p. 62. For more information on Birmingham and its industries during the late eighteenth century see Rowlands, *Masters and Men* and Eric Hopkins, *The Rise of the Manufacturing Town: Birmingham and the Industrial Revolution*, (revised edition, Stroud, 1998).

³²⁷ Leader, *Sheffield*, p. 192.

³²⁸ As was noted earlier, although Beckwith had qualified as an attorney he rarely practised preferring to devote his time to his antiquarian interests. He may also have been having financial problems because in late 1790/early 1791 he was declared bankrupt. *Sheffield Register*, January 14th 1791.

Whilst in London, Burton sought the support of the Duke of Norfolk, who was the Lord of the Manor of Hallam, and the Earl of Effingham, who was chairman of the West Riding Bench and a regular visitor to the Sheffield area. Both men were also known sympathisers of electoral reform. He also entertained numerous Members of Parliament.³²⁹ He was accompanied throughout his stay by two Freemen, Heaton Cadman and William Dewsnap, both of whom were 'little mesters'. The Freemen's Committee, however, knew that men like Cadman and Dewsnap could not afford to be out of work and, consequently, they were each paid 14s a week to compensate them for their loss of income – another sign of the organisation and financial viability of the Committee.³³⁰ A few days after their arrival in London, the three men were joined by another Freeman, Thomas Greaves, a successful master scissormith, who brought with him £52 10s from the Committee and a further £11 4s from Enoch Trickett and who, for the rest of the trip, acted as the accountant.

On May 7th 1789, the Freemen's petition was again read before the House of Commons who ordered that the matter should be referred to a committee.³³¹

This committee, which included William Wilberforce and Henry Duncombe.

³²⁹ CCA, D22/1. Burton's detailed accounts for this period make interesting reading: his journey to London in the mail coach, for example, cost £2 12s 6d and he spent another 15s 6d 'on the road'; on his arrival, he paid 5s for tea, sugar, bread, butter, etc. in his lodgings; he had a brandy and water most afternoons, for which he normally paid 6d, and his dinner usually cost 2s 6d; and when he returned to Sheffield on June 17th 1789 he paid cumulative bills of 12s 10d for washing and shoe cleaning and 17s for hair dressing. He also hired coaches for his visits to the Duke of Norfolk and the Earl of Effingham.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *J.H.C.*, May 7th 1789.

the Members for the county of Yorkshire, immediately sent for at least two Freemen, Arthur Jewitt and William Wragg, to give evidence.³³² The impact of these summons on them and, in fact, on the whole town of Sheffield should not be underestimated: the Members of the Cutlers' Company had been accused of damaging the town's principal industry by mismanagement and the House of Commons believed that these accusations were worthy of investigation.

Jewitt and Wragg left Sheffield on May 11th for what may have been their first visit to the capital. London, at that time, was the largest city in the world with a population of almost one million. It was cosmopolitan and politically, financially and socially the nerve-centre of the country. Its streets and inhabitants reflected every point from extreme poverty to obscene opulence. It was noisy, it was crowded and to the men from Sheffield it was probably overwhelming. They also arrived at a time when major historic events were taking place: the King, for example, had only recently recovered from his illness; the trial of Warren Hastings was underway and, only a few days before Jewitt and Wragg's arrival, Edmund Burke had made a famous speech on the behalf of the prosecution (May 7th); Henry Beaufoy's motion proposing the abolition of the Test and Corporation Acts was about to be narrowly defeated; and, on May 12th, William Wilberforce made his first major speech in favour of the abolition of slavery in which he specifically quoted the petition supporting

³³² William Wragg had been the president of the Filesmiths' Committee in 1788 when they had made the revolutionary demand that the Freemen should have the right to elect the Members of the Company. See chapter three.

his motion that had been presented by the Freemen of the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire.

In his evidence to the Commons' committee, William Wragg said that the Act of Incorporation had been of great benefit to the cutlery trades in Hallamshire but that in recent years difficulties had arisen because of the Company's Officers' refusal to punish those who broke the rules, particularly those relating to apprentices. Arthur Jewitt corroborated this and, in the kind of language that was used by eighteenth-century workers throughout the country when they wished to draw the attention of society at large to their economic grievances, he added 'that the excessive Number of Apprentices had been the Means of throwing the Journeymen out of Employ, to the great Injury of their Families and Prejudice to the Parish to which they belong'.³³³

There are no references to the Cutlers' Company's objections in the Committee's report and it is not known if the Company and the town's leading cutlery manufacturers carried out their resolution of May 1st 1789 to ask Wilberforce for his support. In fact, the Committee's report is remarkably one-sided, which may indicate that the majority of its members were sympathetic to the Freemen's complaints. Some of the Committee members may also have sympathised with the view that organisations like the Cutlers' Company were

³³³ *J.H.C.*, May 27th 1789; John Rule, *Albion's People: English Society 1714-1815* (Harlow, 1992), p. 120.

detrimental to economic growth and they may have believed that the Freeman's actions would, ultimately, provide them with an opportunity to restrict the Company's powers. When the report was presented to the House on May 27th, the Commons ordered that a bill should be brought in to amend the Act of Incorporation. The following day, Wilberforce presented a bill containing the amendments proposed by the Freeman and it was ordered that it be read for a second time.³³⁴

Wilberforce, however, was becoming very concerned about the damage that this one-sided solution might have not only on the cutlery trades but also on the social fabric of Sheffield. In this he was undoubtedly influenced by the views of his more articulate constituents, particularly those who had attended the meeting of Sheffield's 'principal Inhabitants' on May 2nd. He suggested that he himself should act as an arbitrator and that the Cutlers' Company should send a deputation to London to meet with the Freeman to see if an 'accommodation' could be agreed.³³⁵ This they did and meetings were held between the two sides throughout the early weeks of June. Unfortunately, no details of these meetings have survived but, in the light of subsequent events, it would be reasonable to assume that it was agreed that the Freeman should withdraw their bill and that it should be replaced by one to which both sides could agree.

³³⁴ *J.H.C.* May 28th 1789.

³³⁵ *CCA, C9/2*, Company minute book, May 18th 1789. Unfortunately, there are no references to the affairs of the Cutlers' Company in Wilberforce's diary.

The second phase, December 1789-May 1790

Over the next few months, the Company slowly pondered and debated the amendments that they wanted to be made to the Act of Incorporation. The fact that it took them so long to do this may indicate that they still hoped that the whole crisis would somehow sort itself out and that the Freemen would lose interest, although it is more likely that it was because there was considerable disagreement amongst the Members themselves. When they finally reached consensus, it was obvious that the conservatives had triumphed. They proposed that the restriction on taking a second apprentice should be reduced from five to three years but that only Freemen, and not journeymen, should be allowed to take apprentices and that the obligation to record apprenticeships at the Cutlers' Hall before two Members of the Company should remain. They also proposed that the individual trades should remain independent and distinct and that no-one should be allowed to exercise a trade unless he had been apprenticed to it. And, unsurprisingly, they remained adamant that the existing mode of choosing Officers should continue, though they were willing to concede that at least four should retire each year.³³⁶ They also resolved that,

... it would be of Public Utility, and tend much to the Improvement of the Morals of the rising Generation, if every Freeman taking an Apprentice within the said Liberty, should be obliged to board and Lodge such Apprentice in his own House, and with his own Family, unless such Apprentice should be

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, September 25th to December 11th 1789.

actually boarded and Lodged with his own Parents or Guardians during the Term of his Apprenticeship.³³⁷

On the surface, this would seem to be a strange and somewhat retrograde proposal, but it reflected the concern of many of Sheffield's citizens, particularly those who considered themselves to be representative of 'polite' society, about the large numbers of adolescent youths and young men who were now living in the town. Traditionally, most apprentices had lived in their masters' homes but over the previous two or three decades, Sheffield, like many other eighteenth century industrial towns, had seen a phenomenal increase in the number of apprentices. Between 1779 and 1789, for example, over 2,800 boys had had their indentures enrolled at the Cutlers' Hall.³³⁸ There had also been a significant increase in the number of masters who had more than two boys under their charge and these were often men whose social ambitions made them unwilling to house apprentices in their homes. These apprentices were placed in communal houses, often in the poorer parts of the town, where, out of working hours, they did what groups of adolescent boys continue to do to-day: they gathered in groups, they were noisy, they jostled, they fought, and they intimidated the townspeople.³³⁹ But at no point since April 1784 had the Company or the Freemen ever expressed a desire to deal with the situation

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, October 9th 1789.

³³⁸ CCA, C5/4/1-5. The numbers of apprentices had been increasingly steadily for at least fifty years: between 1740-9, 1055 indentures were enrolled at the Cutlers' Hall; 1750-9 – 1310; 1760-9 – 2020; and 1770-9 – 2402.

³³⁹ Leader, *Sheffield*, p. 180.

through an amendment to the Act of Incorporation.³⁴⁰ One can only assume, therefore, that during the second half of 1789, the situation, in the minds of the Company Members at least, had become acute. The question is, why?

There was, undoubtedly, considerable concern amongst the Members, and men like them, about the spread of radical ideas amongst these young men and amongst the lower orders in general. Although many of Sheffield's 'principal Inhabitants' had campaigned for electoral reform, they, like most of the reformers of the 1770s and 1780s, were not advocates of equal rights for all, believing that it was men like themselves who should be the governors, or at least the ones who chose the governors, whilst the lower orders should remain as the governed. It is probable that the spread of, and outspoken support for, radical proposals for reform accelerated during the second half of 1789 in the wake of the outbreak of the revolution in France. One of the revolution's most ardent and vociferous supporters was Joseph Gales who, on July 11th 1789, announced that,

The French have struck the first blow for FREEDOM. A civil war is certainly begun. This their government have to thank their treachery for, in the business of the American war; the French soldiers there caught an itching for liberty which all the

³⁴⁰ The Cutlers' Company had last expressed concern about the problem in 1776 – see chapter one. It is, perhaps, significant that this was also a time when radical ideas were being propounded – on this occasion, by the American colonists and their supporters.

brimstone in France will not be able to allay, even though the flower of it – the Queen – should administer it.³⁴¹

He gave extensive coverage to the revolutionaries' activities and was particularly enthusiastic about the French National Assembly's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in August 1789. This stated that all men were born free and with equal rights - the rights to liberty, property, security and the right to resist oppression - and that every citizen had the right to hold those in authority to account. These sentiments had a particular appeal for men who had been encouraged to believe that their local grievances mirrored those of the nation at large, and now also those of the French nation, and that they, as citizens of Britain, were free men and entitled to the same rights as every other citizen. And whilst there are no surviving references to pro-French street demonstrations in Sheffield during 1789, this does not mean that they did not take place. It is unlikely that the mass rallies that took place in the town in 1792 were a new phenomenon: they were recorded by contemporaries because they were attended by thousands of demonstrators and because of the growing alarm amongst the governing classes about the potential threat of revolution in England. It is quite probable that there had already been a number of demonstrations since July 1789 and that it was these recent outbreaks of public

³⁴¹ *Sheffield Register*, July 11th 1789.

disorder that lay behind the Company's desire for masters to exert greater authority, and control, over their apprentices.³⁴²

However, despite these concerns and despite the months of discussions, on January 6th 1790 the Company decided that they would defer their petition to Parliament for a bill to amend the Act of Incorporation. Officially, this was because they had been told that Parliament might be dissolved in the near future, but in reality it was probably because they knew that their bill was unlikely to succeed because they did not have the support of the Freemen.³⁴³

A few weeks later, on March 1st 1790, Enoch Trickett announced that the Freemen intended to re-submit their original bill to Parliament. He rejected the Company's accusation that 'as Bribery and Corruption in all County Elections are the Seeds of Disorder and Violence, serving to change and heat Men's Minds' so the Freemen's proposals for electing the Officers would lead to disorder in Sheffield, arguing that because the interests of masters and men were the same, any man who attempted to bribe the electorate would be quickly identified and rejected. He urged all cutlers and 'every Inhabitant of Sheffield, whose Prosperity depends on the Welfare of our Manufactory' to support the bill through subscriptions, as 'the most noblest Institution, The CLUBS' had already done. Trickett described these clubs as 'the poor Man's Store House'

³⁴² For more information on these rallies, see Stevenson, *Artisans*, p. 19.

³⁴³ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, January 6th 1790.

and he answered the anonymous author of an article that had been published in the *Sheffield Register* (which may, possibly, have also been circulated as a pamphlet) who had argued that clubs should only use their funds to support their members in times of sickness or death, with the comment that

... if the Members of these Societies are greatly oppressed by a despotic and arbitrary Power, would it not be just to join their spare stocks, and to deliver Themselves from every Degree of Despotism and arbitrary Power?³⁴⁴

This was truly inflammatory language. By describing the Cutlers' Company as a 'despotic and arbitrary power', Trickett was equating them with the now despised and derided French monarchy. And he did this just a few months after the famous Dissenting preacher Dr Richard Price had argued that two of the fundamental principles of the ancient English constitution had been the right of the people to resist power when it was being abused and their right to choose their own governors and to cashier them for misconduct.³⁴⁵ Effectively, Trickett was arguing that the Freemen had the right to remove power from the Cutlers' Company – and in the context of Sheffield, this was a revolutionary suggestion.

³⁴⁴ Sheffield Archives, JC1396; *Sheffield Register*. March 5th 1790.

³⁴⁵ Price outlined his argument in the sermon that he preached at the London Revolution Society's commemorative dinner on November 4th 1789. The sermon was subsequently printed and widely circulated.

On March 12th 1790, Gales reported that the Freeman's petition had been presented to the House of Commons and that it had, once again, been referred to a committee. He also tacitly gave it his support by printing a full transcript in his editorial column, thereby ensuring that its contents were widely known.³⁴⁶ After another short and one-sided enquiry during which only supporters of the petition were called to give evidence, the committee reported to the House who again ordered that a bill to amend the Act of Incorporation be brought before them.³⁴⁷ This was done on March 26th 1790.³⁴⁸

The Cutlers' Company reacted to these events by seeking support from those whom they considered to be their natural allies: the master manufacturers and the town's principal inhabitants.³⁴⁹ The Freeman's dispute was now not only encouraging a sense of association amongst the town's labouring classes, but also amongst its employer classes who were uniting in the face of a potential threat to their power and position. At meetings held in the Cutlers' Hall on March 29th and April 1st 1790, both the master manufacturers and the principal inhabitants, once again, expressed their concern about the Freeman's bill which, they claimed, would introduce 'dangerous innovations'. The most dangerous of these innovations, they said, were the Freeman's proposals for electing the Company's officers, which they believed were complicated and liable to fraud.

³⁴⁶ *Sheffield Register*, March 12th 1790; *J.H.C.*, March 4th 1790.

³⁴⁷ *J.H.C.*, March 18th 1790. Only two Freeman, Arthur Jewitt and Samuel Linley, are recorded as having given evidence.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, March 26th 1790. The bill was presented by Henry Duncombe.

³⁴⁹ CCA, C9/2, Company minute book, March 29th 1790.

disorder and confusion and which would ‘deprive the Master Manufacturers of any Power or Authority in the Appointment of the Officers of the said Corporation (there being in our opinion ten or twelve Journeymen to one Master)’.³⁵⁰ Both the Company and the principal inhabitants decided to counter-petition Parliament.

There was also considerable alarm about the Freemen’s bill amongst the manufacturers of saws and edge tools because it included a clause which stated that the manufacture of ALL items made of steel should be subject to the Company’s jurisdiction. As was discussed in chapter one, these trades had flourished over the previous three to four decades but, with the notable, although disputed, exception of file making, they were not subject to the Cutlers’ Company’s control, nor did most of them want to be. They also decided to counter-petition Parliament.³⁵¹

The Freemen’s proposals that the Company’s protectionist policies should be reinforced was also causing considerable concern amongst those who believed that it was these policies that were hindering Sheffield’s economic growth. One of their number suggested in a letter to the *Sheffield Register* that the metal

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, March 31st and April 1st 1790. The resolutions of these meetings were printed in the *Sheffield Register* on April 2nd and 9th 1790.

³⁵¹ *J.H.C.*, April 12th 1790. Ironically, seventy years later, the manufacturers of saws and edge tools were to join the steel-makers in their successful campaign to gain admittance to the Cutlers’ Company.

trades had flourished in spite of the restrictive control of the Cutlers' Company because of the area's natural resources:

And will it not clearly appear to any impartial and accurate observer, that this increase of the manufacture has been chiefly, if not solely, owing to local advantages of Fire and Water, which have in part counterbalanced the injurious restrictions of the Act, and prevented its total ruin? Any one may be convinced of this, who will only take a view of the superior progress, for the last forty years, of other manufacturing towns, which had no such local advantages, but were happily not crippled with the narrow policy of corporation shackles.³⁵²

The author of this letter, 'M.F.', may have been Matthew Fenton, one of the town's leading silver-platers.³⁵³ Like many of those who were involved in Sheffield's non-corporate trades, he had been apprenticed as a cutler and had become a Freeman, but had prospered in an industry that was not restrained by the restrictions imposed by the laws of the Cutlers' Company.

When the counter-petitions were presented to Parliament on April 12th 1790, the Commons declared that they would be willing to hear representations from both

³⁵² *Sheffield Register*, April 9th 1790.

³⁵³ Matthew Fenton's company, Fenton, Creswick & Co., was one of the first manufacturers of plated goods in Sheffield and also one of the first to register a hallmark with the Sheffield Assay Office. He was one of the Assay Office's founder Guardians.

sides before the Freeman's Bill was read for a second time.³⁵⁴ However, in the meantime, William Wilberforce had, once again, written to both the Freeman and the Cutlers' Company suggesting arbitration.³⁵⁵ His actions were, undoubtedly, influenced by representations from those in his constituency who were increasingly concerned about the economic and social damage that this long running dispute was having. There may also have been concern in government circles about the spread of radical ideas amongst the labouring classes in Sheffield and a consequent desire for the situation to be returned to 'normal' as quickly as possible.

Both parties agreed to Wilberforce's suggestion and on May 3rd 1790 they signed a joint memorandum:

It is agreed by the Agents for the Journeymen Freeman of the Company of Cutlers to withdraw their Bill now before the House of Commons and that a new Bill shall be prepared and settled by two Gentlemen to be named by the Officers of the Company of Cutlers, by two other Gentlemen to be named by the Journeymen Freeman, and by another Gentleman to be chosen by the four Gentlemen to be named as aforesaid, and that such Five shall all be Gentlemen of Character and Property in the Neighbourhood of Sheffield.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ *J.H.C.*, April 12th 1790.

³⁵⁵ *CCA*, C9/2, Company minute book, April 12th 1790.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, May 3rd 1790.

The arbitrators chosen by Company were the Vicar of Sheffield, Reverend James Wilkinson, and John Parker of Woodthorpe, a wealthy local attorney.³⁵⁷

Both men had been founder members of Wyvill's Association. The Freemen chose Robert Barnard and John Jervis. Robert Barnard was a member of one of Sheffield's leading Quaker families and a partner in a successful pen and pocket knife company on Scotland Street, the same road on which Arthur Jewitt lived.

He was well known as an ardent abolitionist and as the 'Poet-Laureate of Sheffield' whose poems were regularly published in the *Sheffield Register*.³⁵⁸

His sister, Deborah, was the wife of Abraham Darby of Coalbrookdale. John Jervis was also a successful pen and pocket knife cutler and a renowned local historian.³⁵⁹ More significantly, he had been one of the signatories of the

Freemen's Petition in 1785 (see chapter two) and so it would be reasonable to assume that he was a long-time supporter of the Freemen's cause. Whilst the surviving records do not reveal the identity of the fifth arbitrator, he *may* have been the Lord of the Manor, the Duke of Norfolk, or his local steward, Vincent Eyre.³⁶⁰ This hypothesis is based on the fact that documents summarising the

resolutions of the Cutlers' Company between late 1789 and early 1790 have been preserved amongst the Duke of Norfolk's papers and, more importantly,

the fact that when the amended Act was eventually passed in 1791, both the Freemen and the Company thanked the Duke for his help in resolving the

³⁵⁷ Not to be confused with the Freemen's attorney, John Parker of Chancery Lane.

³⁵⁸ Glassby, *Sheffield Miscellany*, p. 107.

³⁵⁹ Dixon, 'Recollections', p. 105

³⁶⁰ The Duke of Norfolk's principle residence was Arundel Castle in Sussex. He rarely visited Sheffield.

matter.³⁶¹ If it is true, then the direct involvement of one of the country's most senior peers (or by proxy, his steward) in an attempt to help the two opposing parties reach a compromise is testament to how serious, and potentially dangerous, contemporaries believed the situation in Sheffield had become.

After almost exactly six years of conflict, the publication of the joint memorandum and the appointment of arbitrators must have raised the hopes not only of those involved in the cutlery trades but of everyone in the town that this increasingly divisive and acrimonious dispute might, at last, be resolved.

Conclusion

By 1790 there cannot have been many people in Sheffield who did not have a view on the conflict that had been dividing the local cutlery trades for the previous six years. Arthur Jewitt junior, who was an apprentice at the time, recalled in his memoirs that 'every person was a partisan of either one side or the other and [that] the Press teemed with squibs, satires and songs to the detriment of the opposite party'.³⁶² What had started as a traditional economic dispute, confined to the cutlery trades, had become a conflict that was affecting the whole of Sheffield and one that was causing people to reassess many

³⁶¹ Sheffield Archives, Arundel Castle Muniments, S476/3; CCA, C9/2. Company minute book, June 13th 1791; *Sheffield Register*, July 1st 1791.

³⁶² Jewitt, 'Passages', p. 76. Arthur Jewitt junior was born in 1772 and was apprenticed to his father in 1786.

contemporary economic and political debates in the light of their own experiences. It was also causing serious and long-term rifts in the fabric of local society and these became apparent between early 1789 and early 1790 as relationships between the two parties became increasingly acrimonious – Arthur Jewitt junior was, in fact, later to claim that ‘no war not even that which since took place betwixt England and the French Republic or the Emperor was ever carried on with more acrimony than the dispute betwixt the parties just mentioned [the Company and the Freemen]’.³⁶³

At the beginning of the dispute, in 1784, support for the Freemen’s cause had predominantly come from those at the lower end of the economic and social spectrum – men who were reliant upon others for employment. But since 1788, they had been joined by some of the more economically independent cutlers who believed that they could use the groundswell of popular opinion in favour of reforming the Company to reform it in the way that they wanted. Because of their economic and social position, these men were more adept at dealing with Members of the Company, attorneys, and even Members of Parliament than the majority of ‘little mesters’ would have been. However, more importantly, these were men who were politically aware, who believed that they had both the right to a voice in the government of their trades and in the government of their country. Through them, and others of a like mind (men like Joseph Gales, for example), the Freemen, and indeed many of Sheffield’s labouring classes, had

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

come to believe that they also had the right to say how and by whom their trades were governed and therefore, by default, the right to vote upon economic policies that would affect them and their town. And if they believed this, then it was but a short step for them to believe that they also had the right to a vote upon all decisions that affected them – and the only way that they could achieve that was through electoral reform.

But as the dispute dragged on and their proposals were constantly resisted, the Freemen had become increasingly frustrated and, particularly in the wake of events in France, radical. Nowhere are the Freemen's feelings more eloquently expressed than in *The File Hower's Lamentation*, a song written towards the end of the eighteenth century by the popular balladeer, Joseph Mather:

Ordained I was a beggar,
 And have no cause to swagger;
 It pierces like a dagger –
 To think I'm thus forlorn.
 My trade or occupation
 Was ground for lamentation,
 Which makes me curse my station,
 And wish I'd never been born.

 In Maryland or Guinea,
 Like them I must continue –

To be both bought and sold.

While Negro ships are filling

I ne'er can save one shilling.

And must, which is more killing.

A pauper die when old.

At every week's conclusion

New wants bring fresh confusion.

It is but mere delusion

To hope for better days.

While knaves with power invested.

Until by death arrested.

Oppress us unmolested

By their infernal ways.

A hanging day is wanted.

Was it by justice granted.

Poor men distress'd and daunted

Would then have cause to sing –

To see in active motion

Rich knaves in full proportion.

For their unjust extortion

And vile offences swing.³⁶⁴

In an atmosphere where the Freeman and their supporters were describing the Company as ‘knaves’ and ‘a despotic and arbitrary power’ and singing that ‘a hanging day is wanted’, it is not surprising that there was considerable alarm amongst the Members and many of Sheffield’s principal inhabitants. Although their views on the benefits and disadvantages of the Cutlers’ Company’s powers were quite varied, they were united in their fear of the increasing radicalism of the Freeman’s proposals and of the social chaos that they believed would ensue if those proposals were implemented. They were aware that serious and damaging rifts were developing amongst the people of Sheffield and they were fearful of the long-term consequences of these rifts. But, most of all, they feared the threat to their own power and influence.

By May 1790, it was apparent to many, both within the town and without, that the ‘war’ being waged in the cutlery industry was causing considerable damage to the economic and social equilibrium of Sheffield. It was also apparent that the dispute could no longer be settled internally and the news that both parties had agreed to arbitration must have been greeted with relief in many quarters.

However, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, the rifts that it had

³⁶⁴ Joseph Mather, *The File Haver’s Lamentation*, in *The Songs of Joseph Mather*, ed. John Wilson, (Sheffield, 1862), pp. 1-2, verses 1, 4, 6 & 7. Joseph Mather (1737-1804) was a filesmith and a popular composer and singer of satirical ballads. He was described by one contemporary as ‘a Jacobin’, *ibid.*, p. ix.

caused would not be easily healed – and nor would the ideas that it had fostered be easily subdued.