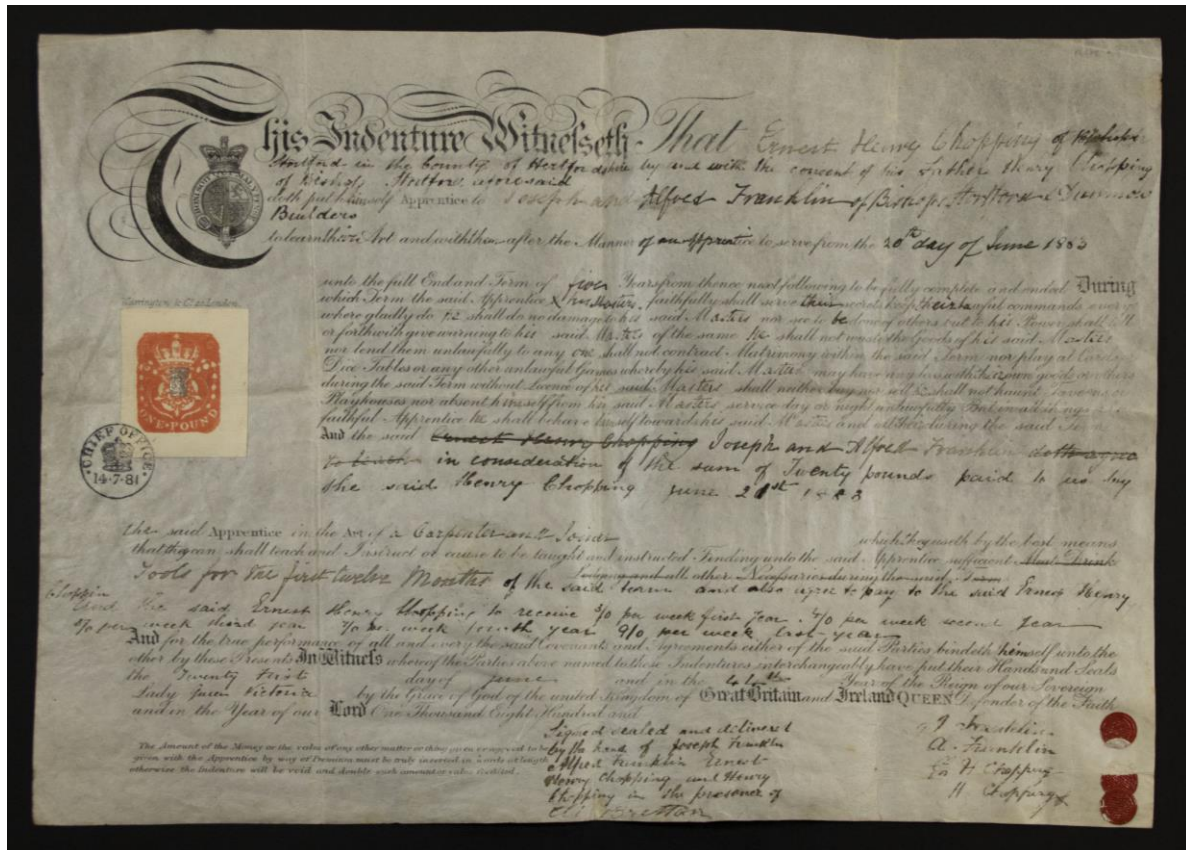


Apprenticeship Victorian style.

By Roy Fletcher



At the Museum we have a document, called an Indenture, which is an agreement for a young man called Ernest Henry Chopping of Bishop’s Stortford to be an apprentice carpenter to a local builder, Alfred Franklin also of Bishops Stortford plus Dunmow. The apprenticeship was for five years. The document has been printed on parchment (for permanence) which is animal skin, usually sheep or goat. The words that have been machine printed are assumed to be the standard apprenticeship text, with space for the completion, by hand, of words unique to this particular apprenticeship.

A number of interesting points within the document reflect what life was like for a lad undertaking an apprenticeship in Victorian times.

The document is dated 14th July 1881, although Ernest was not due to “serve” until 20th June 1883, so we can but wonder what age the boy was when he was signed up for the apprenticeship. It also cost his family £20, which roughly equates to over £2000 in today’s values so clearly the Chopping family were not poor. The Indenture also bears what appears to be £1 stamp duty. Her Majesty’s Treasury of the day were going to benefit from apprenticeships. The document is signed by both Ernest and his father, together with the two members of the Franklin business. The fact that Ernest, who we guess was probably in his early teens, was able to write is another indicator that the Chopping family were unlikely to be poor working class.

By signing this document Ernest agreed that he would not waste the “goods of his Master”. He would not contract matrimony nor play at cards or dice tables nor any other unlawful games. Neither could he frequent taverns or playhouses nor absent himself from his Master’s service.

In return for his training he was paid 3/0d (15p or the equivalent of £17 in today’s value) for the first year rising to 9/0d (45p or £53 in today’s value) in his final year. What Ernest found to spend his money on given the restrictions placed upon him we can only guess. On the upside, as his family and place of work were both in Bishop’s Stortford we can assume that he did not have to find lodgings, although, no doubt, his parents took some of his salary for housekeeping.

Research has found a newspaper article detailing how this Indenture came to be found. It would seem that a local lady was working as a home help to another lady, Miss Gladly Chopping whose father had been the young apprentice.

Miss Chopping died in the early 1970s but had no relatives. A box containing various artefacts was given to the former home help which included this document.

J and A Franklin were first mentioned in a Bishop’s Stortford street directory dated 1885 with premises in Hadham Road. They remained there until 1917. In 1928 Franklin’s Garage opened on Stansted Road, before moving to the Causeway, and then later to Dane Street. We don’t know if the names are related – a query for local historians.

Researched and written by Roy Fletcher.

Roy has been a volunteer at the museum for six years, spending his time cataloguing the museum’s collection. Roy has an interest in the local history, particularly the last 200 years.