ENGLISH DOMESTIC MEDICINE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY—V

From the Letters of Josiah Wedgwood

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Masters and Workmen

The invention of the flying shuttle by John Kay in the year 1733 is generally accepted as marking the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, while Richard Arkwright, who in 1771 built his first mill on the banks of the Derwent at Cromford near Derby, is regarded as the founder of the factory system. At this time pottery manufacture was essentially a craft industry in which each master employed a few hands who assisted in all the processes. Such was the position when Josiah Wedgwood in 1759 commenced manufacture at the Ivy-House Works, Burslem, but by 1770 when he extended production to the new factory at Etruria, so great was his trade in useful and ornamental wares that he employed 150 workmen. From allusions throughout his correspondence with his partner Bentley we may glimpse a little of masters and men.

These were the days of child labour in industry, and in the exploitation of this the reputation of the pottery industry is indeed black. To some extent this situation was induced by the almost complete absence of education for poor children. In Burslem a Free School had been established by subscription in 1749, but it was quite inadequate so that two children out of three were put to work without any learning whatsoever (Meteyard, 1865). Wedgwood, always a man of high public spirit, was as keen as any to remedy this grievous state, and in 1760 he subscribed £10, then a very considerable sum, to assist in erecting another schoolhouse.

Doubtless he employed young children in his factories at Burslem and Etruria, but on this no comment occurs in his letters.

The training of boys as modellers and decorators is recorded and from time to time reference is made to the engagement of new apprentices. A glimpse of this system as it existed then is revealed in Wedgwood's own indentures of apprenticeship.

THIS INDENTURE made the Eleventh day of November in the Seventeenth Year of the Reign of our Sovereign Lord George the Second by the grace of God King of great

Brittain and so forth and in the Year of our Lord one Thousand seven Hundred forty and four Between Josiah Wedgwood son of Mary Wedgwood of the Churchyard in the County of Stafford of the one part and Thomas Wedgwood of the Churchyard in the County of Stafford Potter of the other part WITNESSETH that the said Josiah Wedgwood of his own freewill and Consent to and with the consent and Direction of his said Mother HATH seat and doth herby Bind himself Apprentice unto the said Thomas Wedgwood to Learn his Art Mistery Occupation or Employment of Thrower and Handleing which he the said Thomas Wedgwood now useth and with him as an Apprentice to dwell continue and serve from the day of the Date hereof unto the full end and term of five-Years from thence Next Ensuing and fully to be Compleat and ended: DURING which said Term the said Apprentice do his said Masters will and faithfully shall serve, his secrets keep, his Lawfull Commands Every were gladly do: Hurt to his said Master he shall not do or wilfully suffer to be done by others, but the same to his Power shall let or forthwith give Notice thereof to his said Master, the goods of his said Master he shall not imbezil or waste, nor them Lend, without his Consent to any, at Cards Dice or any other unlawfull Gamees he shall not Play, Taverns or Ale Houses he shall not haunt or frequent, Fornication he shall not Commit—Matrimony he shall not Contract—from the service of his said Master he shall not at any time depart or absent himself without his said Masters Leave; but in all things as a good and faithfull Apprentice shall and Will Demean and behave himself towards his said Master and all his, During the said Term, and the said Master do learn his Apprentice the said Art of Throwing and Handleing which he now useth with all things thereunto shall and will Teach and Instruct or Cause to be well and sufficiently Taught and Instructed after the best way and manner he can, and shall and will also

find and Allow unto the said Apprentice Meat Drink Washing and Lodging and Apparell of all Kinds both Linen and Woollen and all other Necessaries, both in Sickness and in Health, Meat and Convenient for such an Apprentice During the Term aforesaid, and for the true performance of all and Every the said Covenants and Agreement either of the said Parties Bindeth himself unto Each other by these presents in Wittness whereof they have Interchanged and set their hands and seals the Day and Year as before Mentioned.'

Wedgwood instructed, supervised and worked alongside his workmen, and in establishing his fame and fortune they must have played a considerable part. Undoubtedly he and others such as Flaxman and Hackwood were responsible for the original designs and models, but the craftsmen were the actual makers. Even so he seldom has a good word for them.

'I must be content with *fashioning my clay* at a humble distance from such company and live, breathe and dye amongst animals but one remove above the Earth they are teazing,' and again:

'I am just teased of my life with dilatory, drunken, Idle, worthless workmen.'

During his convalescence following the amputation of his leg the mood is more kindly:

'I am pleas'd with your feeling so much for the poor Morter maker, and will endeavour to set his mind at rest. Mr. P. has much of the Bashaw in his treatment of workmen, and does not seem to consider their having any feelings at all, I have seen a great many instances of it, and may perhaps sometime or other find out a mode of conveying a lecture to him upon a proper treatment of our inferiors, and to prove that, *our humble friends* as somebody beautifully calls them, have like passions with ourselves, and are capable of feeling pain, or pleasure, nearly in the same manner as their Masters.'

In their attendance at work the men were very casual and permitted nought to interfere with holidays.

'Our men will go to the Wakes's one day if they were sure to be carried to the D—l the next. I have not spared them in threats and I would have thrashed them right heartily if I could.'

The masters, however, in periods of slack trade were not averse from adopting a similar course.

'We are laying by for Xmas at our works the men murmur at the thoughts of play these hard times, but they can keep wake after wake in summer when it is their own good will and pleasure and they must now make a few holidays for our convenience.'

Nevertheless in bad times individual employers had to be circumspect and take a long view:

'I believe we must discharge some of our hands, and I am very sorry to do it, as new ones are not easily made fit for our purpose.'

In the construction of the canals his friend Brindley seems to have had similar experience, for to him was attributed the maxim that 'where application is expected, "Half bred things are the best".'

To Wedgwood with his numerous production problems, business preoccupations and frequent illness affecting himself or his family, the management of his workmen was a continuous source of difficulty and annoyance:

'To keep 150 hands of various professions and more various tempers and dispositions in *tolerable* order is no easy task even when the mind is otherwise free and in full vigour. Daniel does pretty well when at work and I am here every day but he often leaves the works and drinks two or three days together, and has no taste to direct, at anytime, and for the warehouse I have nobody at all.'

Potters he found more easy to manage than painters who, with modellers, considered themselves a superior class and tended to be 'cox-comical' in dress and behaviour.

On Monday, July 22, 1776, 'all the men at the Ornamental work were assembled to meet me at half-past six, on the outside of the Gates, in order to expostulate with me about their prices, some of which I had told them were exorbitant and must be reduced.'

'A young man seemed to take the lead for the rest, talked very pertly, and asked why I would not turn him away if I did not like his work.' But Wedgwood was adamant and ironical:

'I told him I did not set so light by any servant I employ who was willing to do his duty, as he seem'd to set by his place. That the reason I had not parted with him before was my hopes that he would, as he had often promised me, do better, but as I was now convinc'd that he would rather leave his place than mend his work, he was perfectly at liberty to leave our place. This stopp'd his mouth and seemed to have a good effect upon the rest for they all went quietly to their work and thus the matter rests at present.'

So a threatened strike collapsed and a lock out was avoided.

One of the London workmen approached Bentley for an increase of his weekly wage, and when consulted, Wedgwood recommended that 'if he has more money he must do more work for it by working some over hours.'

For the workman, however, advancing years brought difficulties which necessitated a rather more accommodating approach to the master.

'A Porter has offer'd himself who I think is likely, he is about 50, can write, is a stern morose or rather resolute character, and wants a fix'd situation for the remainder of his days. The worker in metal I mentioned to you in my last has try'd various schemes but never could succeed as a Master, he is pretty well stricken in years and will now be content with a place that will procure food and raiment for life.'

On wages paid to workmen information is meagre. London rates were higher than those in the country.

'I have this moment engaged one of my hands to come to London. I have hired him for three years to have 16s. per week in London and 13s. when in the Country.'

One, Thomas Mier, a London employee, had £13 a year, meat, drink, washing and lodging, and when he sought an adjustment so that he could 'live out' Wedgwood comments:

'I am sorry to find he does not know when he is well, and that he is getting into a way of trifling with a good place till he loseth it.'

Transfer of workmen from Staffordshire to London was not successful.

'I do not think it answers any good purpose to send our County People up to Town. The Change is so great that not one in ten can stand it without being ruin'd or spoil'd or being siezed with the Swiss disorder.'

As to the food of the labourers there is only one casual reference, which relates to an occasion when Wedgwood, out on a journey on a hot summer day, failed to find a public house:

'All we could meet with was a little mouldy oatcake, cheese fill'd with caraway seeds and some small beer, all which we begged from a workman.'

On festive occasions, however, they were wont to celebrate grandly. Thus in April 1770 to mark the release from prison of that popular hero John Wilkes, there was 'great rejoicing in the Country, Ringing and roasting sheep, Drinking, Dancing etc.'

Among Wedgwood's outstanding achievements was the introduction of new 'bodies' and new forms of ornamental ware. Workmen accustomed only to make common ware were very conservative and some refused to work in the Black (basalt), while others would not apply themselves to learn the new methods for they did not 'relish the thought of a second apprenticeship.'

The older craftsmen were usually skilled in all processes which many a master, no doubt, valued as an asset, but Wedgwood feared that if this practice were continued, workmen who left his employ might use secrets of his inventions to their own benefit or convey them to his competitors. For this reason he instituted the separation of processes into trades and to assure secrecy 'every different class should if possible be kept by themselves and have no connection with any other.' At the same time he was shrewd enough to foresee that specialization would probably result in better quality of production.

The value of good working conditions did not escape his notice, for to ensure a true outline of vases he records:

'I propose to set the Lathe so that the turner shall have an *end light* instead of a *front one*.'

Moreover, he himself supervised the details of the lay-out of the Etruria works to attain the highest degree of efficiency in making, firing and handling of raw materials and finished ware. The canal, when constructed, was routed close alongside the factory buildings.

Although from other contemporary sources we know that lung disease due to the inhalation of flint dust was common among mill labourers, no reference occurs in the letters. That he was familiar with consumption and its treatment by Sir Richard Jebb's regimen is evident from his observations on the death of his niece, Kitty Willett, and the threatened attack on her sister Sally.

The occurrence of lead poisoning among workmen also receives no mention, but it is clear that Wedgwood was familiar with this malady as revealed by his comments on the published papers of Dr. Percival of Manchester and Dr. Gouldson of Liverpool on 'The dangers of eating off Earthen wares Glazed with Lead.' His approach to prevention is the ideal:

'I will try in earnest to make a Glaze *without* Lead and if I succeed will certainly advertise it.'

The fame of Josiah Wedgwood endures in his works of art and in his contributions to ceramic science. Likewise the fame of Dr. Erasmus Darwin, his beloved physician, also endures as a scientist and as the author of *Zoonomia*. The genius of both is reflected in their grandson, Charles Robert Darwin, the son of Robert Darwin and Susannah Wedgwood.