

CHAPTER 2  
*Apprenticeship:  
 Who were the Boys?*

The author is anxious to declare her detestation of the newly broached doctrine that the poor have no right to a sufficiency of necessary food to sustain the life that God has given them. . . .

FRANCES TROLLOPE (1780-1863), *Jessie Phillips*

The poor raised families as an insurance policy for their old age, so that they might have a roof over their heads when they were old. The rich were interested in the continuity of their family line and estates. . . .

*Punch on Children - a Panorama 1845-1864,*  
 published 1975 by David Duff

What was the meaning of apprenticeship in the period 1773-1875? The idea has been the same throughout the centuries; it means a training, a learning of a trade, with responsibility on the part of the master to teach and of the pupil to learn. The fact that, once he was in the chimney, a boy would have to make his own way without anyone's help did not invalidate the indenture.

A typical indenture is that of John Batty, aged eight: in 1825 he was apprenticed "to John Ives of Newark to learn the trade and mystery of chimney-sweeper". The word "mystery" used in indentures derives from the Latin word *ministerium* which explains itself; but John Batty and his friends would have chosen to derive it like the other word "mystery", which comes from a Greek work for "close lips or eyes", and meant, among others things, "hidden matters, obscurity". John Batty was certainly going to find hidden matters and obscurity in his work. John Ives undertook to provide John Batty with a second suit of clothes, and to have him cleansed once a week; he agreed that he might go to church, that he would not force him up chimneys actually on fire, and would treat him with humanity and care as far as the employment would permit. John Batty was forbidden "to call the streets" between 7 a.m. and noon in winter, and 5 a.m. and noon in the summer; but there was



WILLIAM HALL,  
 Chimney-Sweeper and Nightman,  
 No. 1, SMALL-COAL ALLEY,  
 Near SPITAL SQUARE,  
 NORTON-FALCATE.

no restriction on the boy's working hours.

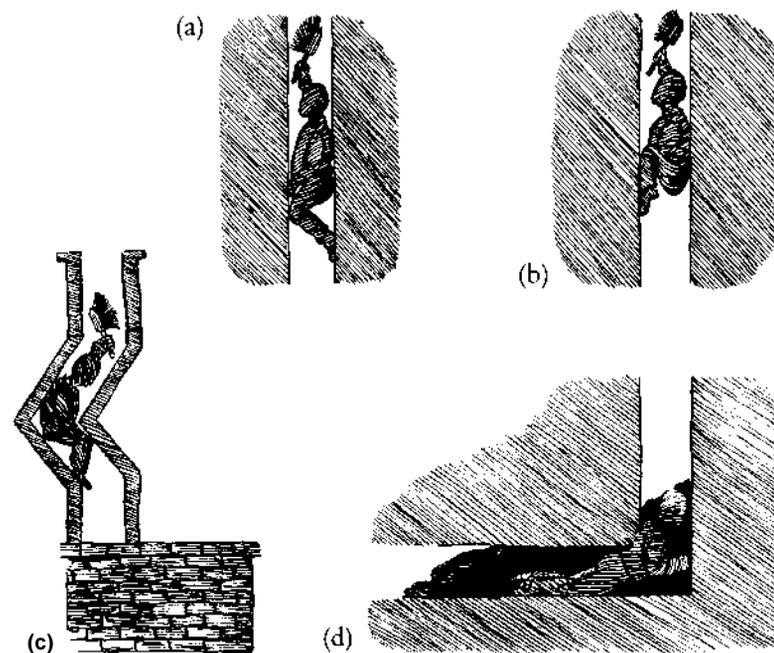
The words "treat him with humanity and care" admit of varied interpretation according to the interpreter: the humane and inhumane master-sweeps would have differing views. In the absence of inspectors and social workers, who was there to translate the wording of the indenture to the advantage of the boy whom it was intended to protect? Who was there to supervise Ives's method of carrying out his promise?

An indenture to be found in the Bristol City Archives is between a boy, Thomas Coles, and a sweep, William Lane. Thomas and his father sealed the document with an X and a thumb-print, William Lane wrote his signature and added his thumb-print. In some five hundred words of legal

verbiage the indenture bound the boy to seven years' apprenticeship from the year 1826. By this deed, the boy would serve his master, keep his secrets and gladly carry out his commands. He would not waste or lend his master's goods, hurt his master in any way, nor haunt taverns and gaming-houses, nor "from the service of his said master day nor night . . . absent himself." For his part of the deed William Lane, having received £4 from the overseers of the poor of the parish of Pitminster, would have the boy instructed in the art of chimney-sweeping, and would allow him enough meat, drink, washing, lodging and other necessities.

Inserting a number of legal words with which few people except lawyers could have been familiar, G.P. Hinton, Attorney at Law, Bristol, certified that he had read and explained the Deed to Thomas Coles and his father and William Lane, and they "appeared perfectly to apprehend the same."

As soon as a sweep and his new apprentice left the attorney's office they probably forgot all about the indenture. A lot of sweeps certainly did not keep the promises they made. A law had been passed as far back as 1793 providing for the punishment of masters who ill-treated their apprentices - not just climbing boys. The Newgate Calendar records great numbers of prosecutions for cruelty (there is no suggestion that master-sweeps had the monopoly of it) but obviously much cruelty was overlooked and not brought to the courts. Parliament does not terminate ill-treatment by passing an Act. One Nottingham master-sweep, called before the magistrates on a charge of cruelty, did not deny it; he took the line that some cruelty was essential and summoned one of his apprentices to confirm this. The boy did so and seemed to bear no resentment against his master. Another master-sweep, John Cook, gave evidence to the 1817 Select Committee. He had been a climbing boy at the age of six but would not use boys himself for climbing chimneys; he was an advocate of the machine. He gave instances of cruelty and when asked if boys showed great repugnance to climbing said that they did, and that some of them could be forced up by being told that otherwise they would go back to their parents, which might mean starvation and other hardships created by



Four diagrams of boys in flues.

poverty. Another master-sweep, John Fisher, gave evidence of boys having the soles of their feet pricked to make them climb, or of having hay burnt under them.

A sign of the apprenticeship was the brass cap badge which the boy, after the Act of 1788, had to wear; it showed his master's name and address and was intended to be of some use to authority. One of these badges can be seen in the Kirkstall Abbey House Museum, Leeds.

There are numerous records setting out the practical details of "the trade and mystery of chimney sweeper". *The Climbing Boys' Advocate* of October 1856 gives the following description, explaining that this was the work before the Chimney-Sweepers' Act of 1840:

In sweeping chimneys, the boy finds his climbing cap indispensable. He draws it over his face below his chin. It protects his eyes, nose and mouth by preventing the entrance of the soot. The cap is made of coarse cloth, and is double or threefold.

While the man is fixing the cloth (i.e. in front of the opening to the flue) the boy takes off his shoes, if he has any, and his clothes, retaining only his shirt and trousers. He passes behind the cloth and begins to ascend. With his right hand he holds his brush over his head; with his back and feet he presses the side of the flue behind him, and with his knees the side of the flue before him, and with his left arm and hand the side of the flue on his left hand, when, after the manner of the caterpillar, by successive movements, he hitches himself to the top. (a) If the chimney is fourteen inches by nine throughout, the boy can pass through with facility. On coming down, the boy slightly presses the sides of the flue, and slides down rapidly. . . . (b)

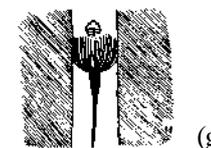
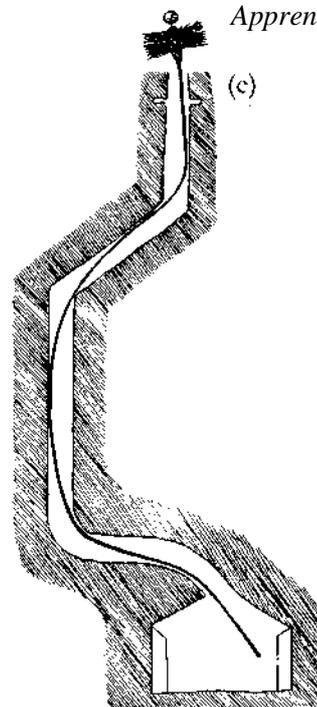
The writer continued with information as to how the boy had to manage extra wide flues, then extra narrow ones, and how to get past angles, soot blockages and other obstructions. The job sounds impossible: (c) and (d).

An even more vivid description of apprenticeship was given by a master-sweep, Ruff of Nottingham. In a statement to the Children's Employment Commission (1863) he said:

No one knows the cruelty which a boy has to undergo in learning. The flesh must be hardened. This is done by rubbing it, chiefly on the elbows and knees with the strongest brine, as that got from a pork-shop, close by a hot fire. You must stand over them with a cane, or coax them by a promise of a halfpenny, etc. if they will stand a few more rubs.

At first they will come back from their work with their arms and knees streaming with blood, and the knees looking as if the caps had been pulled off. Then they must be rubbed with brine again, and perhaps go off at once to another chimney. In some boys I have found that the skin does not harden for years.

The best age for teaching boys is about six. That is thought a nice trainable age. But I have known two at least of my neighbours' children begin at the age of five. I once saw a child only 4½ years in the market-place in his sooty clothes and with his scraper in his hand . . . he began when he was four.



Three diagrams of brushes being used to clean chimneys.

Ruff told the Commission that he was losing customers because he would not employ boys: "I did for a time try to bring up one of my own children to it, but my wife and I felt that we could not stand it any longer, and that we would sooner go to the workhouse than suffer what we did from it."

Another master-sweep of Nottingham, Thomas Clarke, also gave some valuable information to the Commission:

It [apprenticeship] is as bad as the Negro slavery, only it is not so known. . . . I had myself formerly boys as young as 5½ years, but I did not like them; they were too weak. I was afraid they might go off. . . . They go off just as quietly as you might fall asleep in the chair, by the fire there.

I have known eight or nine sweeps lose their lives by the sooty cancer. The private parts which it seizes are entirely eaten off caused entirely by "sleeping black", and breathing the soot in all night.

He added that machines could do the work well and that he had never come across a chimney which a machine could not clean: (e), (f) and (g).

Another report on apprenticeship came from Richard Stansfield of Manchester; he himself had been a climbing boy from the age of five. He had been so cruelly treated that he ran away; his master tracked him down, and the report continues:

And then he nearly killed me. . . . In learning a child you can't be soft with him, you must use violence. . . . We slept 5 or 6 boys together in a kind of cellar with the soot bags over us, sticking in the wounds sometimes; that and some straw were all our bed and bedclothes; they were the same bags we had used by day, wet or dry. I could read and we used sometimes to subscribe for a candle. . . .

They are filthy in their habits, lads often wear one shirt right on till it is done with. I have been fifteen months without being washed except by the rain; why, I have been almost walking away with vermin.

When Henry Mayhew was preparing his book on *London Labour and the London Poor* he obtained his information direct from the workers. Here is a chimney-sweep living in Bethnal Green sometime in the 1840s:

"Yes, I was a climbing boy and sarved a rigler printiceship for seven years. I was out of my printiceship when I was fourteen. Father was a silk-weaver, and did all he knew to keep me from being a sweep, but I would be a sweep, and nothink else. . . . I niver thought of anythink but climbing: it wasn't so bad at all as some people would make you believe. There are two or three ways of climbing. In wide flues you climb with your elbows and your legs spread out, your feet pressing against the sides of the flue, but in narrow flues, such as nine-inch ones, you must slant it; you must have your sides in the angles, it's widest there, and go up that way."

Here he threw himself into position — placing one arm close to his side, with the palm of the hand turned outwards, as if pressing the side of the flue, and extending the other arm high above his head, the hand apparently pressing in the same manner.

"There," he continued, "that's slantin'. You just put yourself in that way, and see how small you can make

yourself. I niver got to say stuck myself, but a many of them did; yes, and were taken out dead. They were smothered for want of air, and the fright, and a stayin' so long in the flue; you see the waistband of their trousers sometimes got turned down in the climbing, and in narrow flues, when not able to get it up, then they stuck."

Did the lawyers who prepared the indentures with so much legal solemnity ever find out that apprenticeship was not as set out in the indentures, but as described by the Bethnal Green sweep?

It was the master-sweeps who provided much of the general information about chimney-sweeping. Here is George Ruff of Nottingham again:

Twenty-five years ago I was the first agent in this town of an association formed to prevent the use of climbing boys. At one time soon after the Act (1840) their number in this town was brought very low. But lately they have very much increased. A few months ago I made out a list of 14 men here employing between them 21 boys; one employed three. The boys are, I should say, between the ages of 8 and 14, with a few perhaps of 6 and 7. . . . There is competition here between those who use boys and those who will not. . . . The law against climbing boys is a dead letter here. . . . Many householders will have their chimneys swept by boys instead of by machinery. I have myself lost a great amount of custom which I should otherwise have. . . . I have been sent away from magistrates' houses, and in some cases even by ladies who have professed to pity the boys.

Ruff went on to say that a kidnapper had "stolen" one of his boys once, in order to supply an order from France. He described also the astonishment of two journeymen whom he employed and provided with lodging: they did not expect sheets on their beds nor were they prepared to wash, but having got used to these arrangements they agreed that they liked them; three washes a year - at Whitsuntide, Goose Fair and Christmas - had sufficed them in the past.

The Commission had heard something of sooty cancer from Thomas Clarke, who had said it was caused by "sleep-

ing black" and breathing soot in all night. Mr H.W. Lord, a member of the Commission, asked what "sleeping black" meant. It was Richard Stansfield who undertook to let him know, and we have Mr Lord's description of his visit to a sweep's house:

I followed Stansfield down some broken stone steps into a dirty and ill-drained area in a district of Manchester, where a dense population is closely packed in small and crowded dwellings. He entered a door, and after some delay returned and took me in with him to a low-pitched unsavoury cellar, the only occupants of which appeared at first to be a woman and two little girls in ragged clothes.

After some little time I discovered by the fire-light, there being no candle, a small bedstead, which with the wooden three-legged stools and a table constituted all the furniture of the place; on it was a mattress, and on the mattress a black heap, which ultimately proved to be a young man who was sleeping underneath the blanket which he used to catch the soot in his trade of chimney-sweeping.

He and his blanket were both quite black, and that blanket I was told was the only bed-covering for his wife and two daughters who were then preparing to join him; I certainly could see no other.

Simpson (a witness) told me that the stench there at times was enough to knock him down, and that he would never go inside, but kicked at the door and smoked his pipe outside till someone came.

All these reports, and others, show that information about the boys' employment was not withheld from those who wanted to know it. Statistics about the numbers of boys affected was also available. For instance, in 1785 Jonas Hanway estimated that in London and Westminster there were a hundred master-sweeps who employed two hundred journeymen and four hundred climbing boys, as well as fifty itinerant sweeps with their hundred and fifty boys. Seven years later David Porter, master sweep and friend of Hanway, estimated that there were two hundred master-sweeps, two hundred journeymen and five hundred boys in the same area.

In 1817 William Tooke, secretary and treasurer to the

London Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys, in evidence to the Parliamentary Commission, estimated that there were about two hundred master-sweeps in London, and about five hundred apprentices. He gave the opinion that only about twenty of the masters were reputable men who conformed to the provisions of the 1788 Act. The Commission learned that the total number of boys taken on by sweeps might be two thousand, most of them from workhouses.

When Tooke was questioned about the boys, he said that it was impossible to state how old the boys were, but that many were below the prescribed age and that the youngest and weakest were in the service of the worst type of sweeps. He confirmed that he had heard of parents selling their children, and of master-sweeps employing their own children for climbing, without apprenticing them.

By 1841, according to a statement by Henry Mayhew, author of *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), there were 619 male and 44 female sweeps over twenty years of age, and 370 apprentices under twenty, all these in the area of London. In 1854 Lord Shaftesbury referred to "the four thousand wretched children who were at that time engaged in this disgusting and unnecessary employment". In Leicester in 1856 there were more than a hundred boys.

In 1862 the Children's Employment Commission, making investigations about the violation of the Chimney-Sweeps' Act of 1840, received reports that there were several thousand children between the ages of five and fourteen, many of them girls. It was reported to this Commission that any number of children were obtainable in Liverpool — because there were "lots of bad women there". Much of the evidence given to this Commission bore a resemblance to what had been reported to Parliament before. In addition to reports of death, hardship and degradation there were statements from different parts of the country of magistrates and police condoning the employment of boys, of the law concerning construction of chimneys being ignored, of sweeps being pressured to employ boys in order to improve their trade. It was clear, too, from statements made that, where Societies for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys were active, the employment of boys decreased noticeably.

But *who* were the boys? From newspapers such as *The Times*, the *Leeds Intelligencer*, the *Sheffield Iris*, the *County Herald*, the *Liverpool Mercury* and other local papers, from journals such as *Notes and Queries* and the *Annual Register*, from city archives and literary allusions, from inquiries set up by Jonas Hanway and Parliamentary Commissions, much information is obtainable about many of the boys, some of them named, some of them nameless. In many cities people formed organizations calling themselves "Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys" and one of their purposes was to collect and disseminate information about the boys employed as climbing boys. *The Climbing Boys' Advocate* was a four-page monthly periodical published from May 1856 for several years; it was produced by Judd and Company of Gray's Inn Road, London, and aimed to give publicity to all circumstances concerning climbing boys. Each issue contained articles, correspondence, accounts of meetings and proceedings in various parts of the country, including information about towns where the machine had superseded the boys.

For the most part climbing boys came from the working class, from "the lower orders"; some were no doubt the illegitimate children of middle- and upper-class people. The story of the boys is bound up with the Industrial Revolution and its aftermath.

When Pitt as Prime Minister said that children could earn their keep from the age of five years he was not alluding specifically to climbing boys; but he was referring to children of the working class only. It was stated in the Parliamentary Register of 12 February 1796 that: "Experience had already shown how much could be done by the industry of children, and the advantages of early employing them in such branches of manufacture as they are capable to execute."

Pitt was carrying responsibility for the Poor Law Amendment Bill at the time. When another Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, was carrying heavy responsibility, in March 1943, his reference to children was a different one: "There is no finer investment for any community than putting milk into babies." "Or five-year-olds" he might have added. "Milk? What's that?" I can hear the climbing boys ask.

Valentine Gray has already been mentioned: he was one of many who were "obtained" from the workhouses. Inmates of workhouses were for the most part tucked away from the rest of the community; and so were the graves of a high proportion of them. John Bate and Thomas Coles and their indentures have also been mentioned. Here are some facts about some others whose lives are on record.

In 1794 John Brewster was suffocated in a flue in Stradishall, Suffolk.

In 1795 a baby of three and a half years was articulated in a public house to a master-sweep.

In 1801 it was reported in the *County Herald* that the cry of someone in distress led two passers-by to enter a house. They found a boy hanging by one wrist from a beam, the other wrist tied to one of his feet; he showed signs of having been flogged. The Superintendent of the Watch was summoned and the boy was "conveyed to the humane care of the Master of Newington workhouse". The master sweep was traced and sent to trial; he was put in a pillory and given six months' imprisonment.

In 1808 a boy died of exposure on a bitterly cold February day; he had started work at three in the morning. In the same year a boy got stuck in a chimney in Walthamstow; the house-owner obtained assistance and extricated him from above, having removed several rows of bricks. The master-sweep returned to the house, struck the boy, then sent him with a bag of soot to clear another chimney, although he was weak with hunger and fatigue.

In January 1811 a boy in Wakefield fell down a flue on fire; "his flesh being completely burnt from his toes to his chin. In that state he survived the excruciating agony for five days." Also in 1811 the death of a boy was reported in the *Annual Register*: he came out of a chimney in Orchard Street, Westminster, and by mistake tried to return by one which had a fire at the bottom; he got stuck fast and was suffocated to death.

In 1812 Charles Barker was charged with enticing away two boys, William Bellamy and Charles Hinchcliffe, and selling them to Rose, a chimney-sweep at Kingston; the boys' age: nine years; their price: seven shillings each.

In the *Irish Farmers' Journal*, June 1813, a correspondent from County Westmeath wrote of a boy who had been sold

by his mother to a sweep for three years; she had received a guinea. He reported on a County Tipperary boy who had been forced up a chimney too narrow for his body so that a wall had to be pulled down to extricate him; servants complained about so much trouble taken "about a bit of a sweep".

In 1813 a sweep named Griggs sent his boy, Thomas Pitt, about eight years old, down a brewery chimney in Upper Thames Street. The flue was "of the narrowest" and the fire barely extinguished. When the boy did not return a hole was made into the flue to pull him out - but too late, he was dead.

In 1814 George and Elizabeth Clarke of Cottingham, Yorkshire, bought a boy of about eight years old from a tinker and treated him with continual cruelty. For instance, they hung him from his wrists in a stable, and tied his leg to a horse's leg. The sweep was charged with cruelty and the Beverley Court sent him to prison and hard labour.

In 1816 a boy was forced up a chimney but could not get down. He was pulled down by the master-sweep, who dashed him on the hearth, breaking a leg; the boy died, and the sweep and his wife were charged with murder.

In 1816 the *Liverpool Mercury* reported that a boy was taken out of a flue, apparently dead; various attempts to revive him were made but without success until "two or three smart (electrical) shocks were applied to the breast", and the boy recovered.

The death of a climbing boy was reported at length in *Bell's Weekly Messenger* of 12 May 1816, under the heading: CRUELTY TO A SWEEP BOY. John Hewley, a boy of six years old, was the subject of an inquest held at the London Hospital. A witness gave evidence of extreme cruelty suffered by the boy, who was lame and could not mount the chimney; the sweep and his wife told this witness that the boy was their apprentice and that they had a right to do as they pleased with him. A student at the hospital reported on a severe blow on the head and an extensive mortification of one leg and foot.

Reports of deaths in chimneys in Scotland are rare, but the *Aberdeen Chronicle* of August 1817 gave over two columns to a report of the High Court of Justiciary at Edinburgh. The details concerning a boy stuck in a flue so

horrified the reporter that he said: "the particulars are too shocking for us to repeat". One wonders what these could have been, as he did report the following: that an apprentice witnessing to the apprenticeship of the dead boy, John Fraser, aged about eleven, said that Joseph Rae the master-sweep had been known to strip the boy, tie him, gag him, flog him till he bled, then put salt brine into the wounds. It was further reported that the boy, having been stripped naked and beaten, had been forced up and down a chimney for hours for no purpose. Another apprentice reported that John Fraser had often been kept hours in a vent, on one occasion from 7 p.m. to near 3 a.m. The occasion that was being reported, because of the boy's death, showed in great detail that John Fraser had stuck so fast in a chimney that he could not extricate himself. His master had tied a rope to his leg to pull him out, and used so much force, a crowbar serving as lever, that the rope broke and the boy remained immovably fixed.

Three doctors reporting on the dead boy to the court said his death was caused either by severe pressure on the neck and spinal marrow, or by suffocation caused by his clothes getting wound round his head, or by strangulation. The Lord Justice made an impressive speech in his verdict. Joseph Rae was convicted of "culpable homicide" (not murder) and was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation. A second master-sweep, Reid, had "lent" the boy to Rae and was to be tried the following month for his participation.

In 1817 Parliament was to learn some of the answers to the question: "Who were the boys?" In that year evidence was brought before a Parliamentary Commission set up to inquire about the working of the 1788 Act. Such evidence, together with evidence at subsequent inquiries set up by Parliament (1818, 1840, 1860), bears a pathetic resemblance to the examples from other sources quoted already in this chapter. The Committee received and published reports consisting of evidence from master-sweeps themselves and from ex-climbing boys, from doctors and from men of influence who were known to have made careful investigations before giving their reports. The same subjects crop up: reports of the enticement of boys, of the sale and hiring out of boys, of floggings and other physical brutality by

some masters, of the inevitable cruelty of the work, of the evasion of the law and of the efficiency of machines properly used, of the narrowness of flues and decay of chimneys, of the extreme youth of some boys (and girls) and of "sleeping black" under soot-bags; the list could go on. The Commission of 1819 heard of two girls, daughters of Morgan, who swept the chimneys at Windsor Castle, who worked for their father. There were other girls at Uxbridge, Brighton, Whitechapel, Headley in Hertfordshire, Witham in Essex, and elsewhere.

In January 1818 an eight-year-old boy of Sheffield was forced up a chimney at a very early hour, having walked four miles without food. He could not move in the chimney, which was broken just in time to save his life.

The *Irish Farmers' Journal*, ever watchful for reports about climbing boys, referred to a leaflet by S. Porter of Wallbrook, entitled: *An Appeal to the Humanity of the British Public*. This quoted statements about deaths, burns and suffocation of six boys in 1816 and eight in 1818. One report was about a child of five years old, another about a boy who was "dug out - quite dead" from an Edinburgh flue: "the most barbarous means were used to drag him down". This journal reported in March 1819 that the Bill to do away with the employment of climbing boys had been lost; the editor in spite of his humanity would not have recommended total abolition of climbing because he was of the opinion that some chimneys were impossible to clean by machines.

A climbing boy got wedged in the flue of a baker's oven in a building next to the Bank of England, where building alterations were affecting the baker's chimney. A second boy was sent down the chimney to try and release him but both became jammed and died of suffocation.

On 17 May 1818 *Bell's Weekly Messenger* reported on a boy named William Bluman. His master was summoned to appear before the Hatton Garden magistrate for having hired out his apprentice. The indenture of 1814 showed the boy to be at that time eight years of age - but in 1818 he was certainly not yet ten. He was so weak that he could hardly stand in court. The court doctor examined him and said his highly inflamed ankles and knees needed washing, poulticing, and rest, to restore them to a fit state. The boy

was intimidated by his master to speak well of him, but admitted to the magistrate that the day before he had worked from 4 a.m. and had swept twenty-four flues. He wore little clothing and no cap badge to show apprenticeship. Mr Tooke, attending on behalf of the Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys, recommended that the boy's indenture be investigated as to its authenticity, and agreed to take the boy to the Holborn workhouse for care and nursing. The court doctor agreed to visit him there and report back to the magistrate.

In the *Morning Post* of Saturday 4 December 1824 is a letter, signed "X Y Z", setting out the sufferings of climbing boys and the defiance of the law by chimney-sweepers. After stating that few boys were obtained for the work without being *purchased*, *given away* by parish officers, or *stolen* (italics in the newspaper) the writer instanced eleven cases of extreme cruelty and death, including the two boys who died in the Lothbury baker's flue. The Coroner's



The death of two climbing boys in the flue of a chimney.  
Frontispiece to *England's Climbing Boys* by Dr George Phillips.

Inquest, reported X Y Z, returned the verdict: "Accidental death." The *Morning Post* inserted further reports in their issues of 7 and 10 December 1824 and gave good publicity to James Montgomery's *Chimney-Sweeper's Friend and Climbing Boy's Album* as well as a long account of the sufferings of the boys, of the efficiency of sweeping machines, and of the obstinacy of master-sweepers.

Mary Taylor, as reported in the *Sheffield Iris* (April 1826) sold her six-year-old son to a chimney-sweep, then regretted it when she saw the open sores caused by his climbs. The parish authorities said that the trade could not be learned without this physical ordeal - and did not release him.

The *Oxford University and City Herald*, dated 14 July 1827, quoting from the *Leeds Mercury*, gave a report of a boy who died while attempting to sweep the chimney of Joseph Knowles, woolcomber. The newspaper account is as follows:

The deceased was employed to sweep the chimney of Joseph Knowles, of Thornton, woolcomber, about 10 o'clock in the forenoon of Tuesday se'cnnight, and went up very cheerfully, but from some cause or other (he himself alleged from having lost his brush) he durst not come down. Finding this, Holgate twice sent up another boy, whom he told he would be down soon enough, and then got up higher, to prevent the boy taking hold of him. He was not fast, but merely stupid. This so enraged Holgate, that he swore he would cut him in pieces, and that, when he came down, he would "give him his dinner"; he also used several other similar expressions.

Holgate then lighted a fire, to bring him down, which had not the desired effect, and he at length sent up another boy, with a rope, which he fastened to the leg of the deceased, and with which Holgate pulled him down about two yards, and then fastened the rope to the bars of the grate, to prevent his ascending again. Shortly after this, Holgate went up to the deceased himself, and staid with him about five minutes, and when he came down he said he had nipped him, and felt his feet, and thought he was dying. He then shortly after went up again, and untied the rope, and on his return said he was dead

enough. The chimney was then pulled down, and the deceased taken out quite dead. That part of the chimney in which he was found was only one foot by ten inches.

When taken out it was three o'clock in the afternoon. The body, chest, and head of the deceased were opened by Dr Outhwaite, and Messrs Sharp and Trotter, of Bradford, surgeons, who found considerable fullness of blood in the vessels of the head, in all probability arising from suffocation; and on the head and body of the deceased several bruises, but none of which bruises were, in the opinion of the medical gentlemen, quite sufficient to cause death. The jury returned a verdict of manslaughter against Holgate, and he was committed, on the Coroner's warrant, to York Castle.

A reported headed POLICE appeared in *The News* on 28 September 1828. Many sweeps attended a court case where a master-sweep was summoned on a charge of assaulting one of his apprentices. The boy had been "walloped" till blood issued from his ears. The sweep explained that the boy had assaulted a smaller boy so he wrung his ears to punish him. After long questioning the magistrate said that the sweep had exceeded moderation and censured him.

In a brochure published by the Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys in 1829, examples were given of thirty boys who had suffered severely or had died in the course of their work. John Anderson, nine years old, was forced to climb a flue which was so hot that he fainted in it and died; his "master" was a woman, Ann Wilson. The apprentice of T. Young could not extricate himself from the flue which he was climbing, so Young lit straw and powder beneath him, and eventually pulled the boy down the flue by a rope tied to a leg. He was dead. The apprentice of George Fountain was lifted from the ground by his ears and flung down violently. A parish officer examining a hovel where two climbing boys slept - their total bedding consisting of soot-cloths and soot-bags - asked the sweep why pigs were allowed to be in the same small place. The answer was simple: the pigs were ill and might have died of cold elsewhere.

James Dodd's application for apprenticeship when he was eight was reported in *The Times* of 1829 and was repeated in

1929 as a subject of historical interest.

In 1830 a sweep was charged with maltreating a boy of eleven years of age; but the apprentice was found to be a girl who had worked for the man for four years.

In 1831 *The Times* reported that John Pavcy, aged ten, climbed the flue of a high stack of chimneys in the Minories, London. The brickwork was decayed and gave way, causing him to fall on the parapet below, breaking his skull. The boy died. Robert Steven, the vigilant secretary of the London Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys, sent a fierce letter to *The Times* (24 January) about this boy's death. He stated that at the inquest a verdict of accidental death was brought in, and he added: "which verdict could not be otherwise so long as the law permits the barbarous custom of using children instead of brushes. . . ."

In 1832 *The Times* of 19 July reported that a six-year-old boy, a parish apprentice, was sent up a soot-filled chimney by his master, Brown of Fox Court, Gray's Inn Road. The chimney pot being crammed with soot, the boy tried to force it out, but "while enveloped in the pot" it gave way and the boy was hurled to the ground three storeys below and was seriously injured. He was taken to St Bartholomew's Hospital without hope of recovery.

In an anonymous pamphlet of 1836 it was reported that a ten-year-old boy was ordered to climb a flue at the Talbot Inn, Gloucester. As he did not descend, the master-sweep sent another of his apprentices up the flue to tie a cord round one of his legs and pull him down. This failed and the master lit brimstone matches in the flue and ordered buckets of water to be poured down from above. Next a pole was pushed down, injuring the boy's neck. After twelve hours the boy was pulled out through a hole made by a mason.

In *London Labour and the London Poor* Henry Mayhew reported that at an earlier date a sweep's boy went to the Serpentine to wash — as many London boys did — but was drowned. His fate discouraged many sweeps' boys from washing.

In 1840 Lord Shaftesbury came across a boy of four and a half years who was working for a sweep.

In 1847 Thomas Price, aged seven, was forced up a hot chimney of a chemical works in Manchester and screamed

with pain. His master said: "The young devil is foxing," but the boy, having been pulled out of the flue, lost consciousness and died of convulsions within an hour. His master, John Gordon, was tried for manslaughter and sentenced to ten years' transportation.

In 1850 Samuel Whitt, a ten-year-old boy, was jammed in a hot chimney in Nottingham and died, badly burnt. There was no inquest and no one was punished. In the same year a Manchester boy of eleven died of suffocation in a heated flue.

In the *Climbing Boys' Advocate* of 1 October 1856, several reports were given, including the following. In 1848 a boy was stolen from Nottingham and sold to a chimney-sweeper at Hull. A boy often years of age was sold to five different sweeps at five different times and was eventually brought before the magistrates by a Mrs Chapman. He could not walk and a surgeon examined him in court. The magistrates were shocked at his appearance when the surgeon removed his bandages, and still more shocked when they learned that this enfeebled boy had been carried by his master from place to place and made to climb twelve chimneys on the previous Saturday. The Mayor called out: "Talk about slavery: there is no slavery in the world like that."

The *Advocate* reported about another lad who had been sold by his mother and was constantly maltreated by his master. On one occasion when he dropped one of his ill-fitting shoes in a ditch his angry master took him up by the leg and foot and flung him on the ground.

The Editor of the *Advocate* quoted the report of a medical officer of the Nottingham Union. The subject was James Hart, a very small boy between five and six years of age. He "was in a deplorable state. He had ulcers on his elbows, both his knees, back, fingers, toes, instep, and other parts of his body; swellings at the back of his head, ulcers arising from burns, which appeared to have been produced by putting him up a chimney. He had also scratches on his back, and contusions on his head, produced by blows. If I had not known he had been a sweep's boy, I should have thought he must have been pushed up the chimney to murder him . . .". The Editor then quoted the boy's mother: "He came home every Sunday for the first month. . . . The boy told me the defendant had made a fire at his own home



and put him up the chimney and burnt his feet. He told me his master had put him in a puncheon of water, and would drown him if he did not do as he ought to do. . . ."

The Editor of the *Advocate* questioned the lot of the climbing boy:

In order to accomplish his purpose, he must, as the case requires, toe and heel, cape and corner, recede, advance, and try again and again; and not unfrequently, in a state of nudity, have to cope with difficulties by turning and twisting in rough and angular flues, and, to add to the horror of his condition, immured in soot - contending against suffocation and death. . . . And will the community prove indifferent? Is the climbing boy to toil with unwonted exertion, and expose his life for the public good, and the community render him no assistance? The thing is impossible.

The readers learned what could be done: a resident of Exeter met a climbing boy in the street at Topsham and explained to him that he need not climb unless he pleased; he was delighted and left his master. In Birmingham sixty machines had just been supplied gratuitously to the chimney sweepers. The Inspector for the Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys had recently summoned two master-sweeps to court for employing boys and they were fined. Sweeping-machines were used in Dublin and other Irish towns: "the late Admiral Oliver extensively aided the cause in that country".

Jackson's *Oxford Journal* for 13 May 1865 reported a Petty Sessions case in which a sweep was discharged. He had been brought before the court charged with allowing his apprentice to climb a chimney. The reason for his discharge was that he was not "with the boy at the time" - thus was the law mocked, for how could the master accompany his apprentice?

In the 1870s Lord Shaftesbury and others had their attention drawn to the death of a ten-year-old Leeds boy by suffocation in a flue; and to similar deaths of a Durham boy and of a Staffordshire boy. In 1872 Christopher Drummond died at the age of seven-and-a-half; he met his death climbing the flue of a fernery at Washington Hall, Gateshead.

And at last George Brewster in 1875: an eleven-year-old

boy who could not know that he was to earn the title of the last boy to die as a result of climbing a chimney. *The Times* reported the Assize Court trial of Brewster's master, William Wyer, on 24 March 1875, and on 25 March gave a column and a half of editorial comment in a leading article. The *Cambridge Chronicle* of 27 March gave a full report, and other papers publicized the death of the boy and the trial of his master.

One of the comments in *The Times* article was that at the Fulbourn Hospital where the boy died there was:

one of those scenes of fatal, deliberate and inexcusable cruelty which for more than half a century have been among the worst and the most obstinate, though still the most universally recognized, public scandals of this Kingdom.

Lord Shaftesbury once again presented a Bill to Parliament: this was passed. The Act was enforceable and so no more boys climbed flues.

The circumstances of George Brewster's story are these. His parents lived in London. His mother became ill and his married brother, William, adopted him and subsequently passed him to another married brother, John, who allowed him to be apprenticed to William Wyer. A third brother, Bernard, testified in Court that George was eleven years ten months old: according to the sweep he was fourteen. Wyer had the contract to sweep the flues of three boilers at Fulbourn Hospital, Cambridge, three times a year. In court the stoker reported the method of cleaning the flues and stated that on this occasion George took off his coat, put on a cap covering his face, and went into a flue of which the door was twelve inches by six. In about a quarter of an hour the boy was pulled out by Wyer in an exhausted state. A doctor was summoned. He found the boy alive and he removed "soot and stuff from his mouth. The doctor gave him brandy and put him in a warm bath, but he died in a short time. A *post mortem* examination revealed that the arms were abraded, the head congested, and there was much black powder in the lungs and windpipe. The cause of death was given as suffocation.

An architect was called as a witness. He showed plans of the flues and boilers and revealed that the flue in question

was over eleven feet long. A detective sergeant reported that he had served Wyer with a notice eleven years earlier for contravening "Lord Shaftesbury's Acts". Some local people of influence testified to Wyer's normally kind conduct towards his apprentice.

The jury took one minute to find the sweep guilty. The Judge sentenced Wyer to six months' hard labour. He spoke forcibly about the infraction of an Act which had been passed for humane purposes, and asked that other chimney-sweeps be informed about this case. He added that if in future similar cases came before him the sentence would be more severe.

Of course, some boys gave up climbing. Having grown up in the underworld of a city they were able to drift into the world of crime. One boy landed in Newgate Prison whence, thanks to his early skill in climbing, he escaped, climbing virtually unclimbable walls and negotiating un-negotiable *chevaux-de-jrise* surrounding the prison.

As we shall see in the chapters on The Campaigners, some boys were befriended: Lord Shaftesbury and Robert Steven went to great trouble to rescue a boy from his apprenticeship: arrangements for him to be brought up and educated were made. He was, according to Lord Shaftesbury's diary of 19 September 1840, "gentle, and of a sweet disposition; we all know he has suffered . . .". A boy was befriended by Joseph Johnson, printer, another by Robert Southey, poet. There are stories of boys being kidnapped and being found by their parents. A well-to-do couple in Yorkshire became interested in a boy who fell down one of their chimneys; they recognized him as a boy of gentle birth but could not trace his family. They arranged for his upbringing. Parson Woodforde recorded in his diary that his sweep Holland had a new boy who nearly lost his life by getting stuck in one of the parsonage chimneys; the Parson gave him sixpence, and perhaps his kindness went further than that.

The mortality rate of all children in the period of this book was high compared with today's rate. The mortality rate of climbing boys was very high indeed. What chances had boys who were "stunted in growth, blear-eyed from soot, knapped-kneed from climbing when the bones were soft" of becoming grown men?

Yet some climbing boys did survive and live to old age. One, Joseph Lawrence, swept flues continuously from his apprenticeship in 1755 till his retirement as master-sweep in 1816. History records him as a humane master who taught his assistants to read and write and insisted on a weekly scrubbing so that they could attend church service in a reasonably clean state. Another boy of the same name was apprenticed at the age of twelve in 1857 to a sweep named William Specie, of Henley. It was already illegal under the 1840 Act for a boy under twenty-one to climb flues, and under sixteen to assist master-sweeps. However, Joseph completed his apprenticeship, took up other work, and died at the age of 104 in 1949 in Surrey.

Peter Hall, born in 1804 at Stockport, had been a climbing boy at the age of six and a half. At fifty-eight he acted as agent for the North Staffordshire and Birmingham Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys. He travelled round the country and in 1862 gave evidence on the violation of the law concerning climbing boys. As he had himself taken master-sweeps to court and had obtained four hundred convictions he was justified in his claim that violation of the law was on the increase. He reported also that there were more violations in those towns where Societies for Superseding were not active.

History records too that William Harris died as an old man in 1920 at Leighton Buzzard, having been one of the last of the climbing boys; and that Daniel Dye lived till 1940 - he was then ninety-three years of age and had been a climbing boy some eighty years earlier.

Perhaps Edward Montagu deserves mention: he had what was described as "a variegated career". He ran away three times from Westminster School, and on one occasion, according to the Annual Register of 1776, he exchanged clothes with a sweep and followed that occupation for a time. If he did in fact climb chimneys he must have been one of the few boys to have voluntarily chosen that career.

There exist many photos of splendid old sweeps wearing their top-hats with great dignity: if they had been climbing boys they must have been either very tough or lucky enough to have worked for humane masters.

A boy named James Seaward deserves recognition in this chapter. Born in 1863 at Wokingham, Berkshire, he started

climbing chimneys at an early age and there is no record that he came to any harm. There is a strong tradition that it was he who climbed the chimneys of Charles Kingsley's Rectory at Eversley, Hampshire, and that he was the model for Tom in *The Water Babies*. He was elected to the Town Council of Wokingham in 1892 and became an alderman, a position he held until shortly before his death in 1921. He was a member of the Baptist Church and having voluntarily taken on the annual cleaning of the flues of his church he continued to do so for over fifty years - a generous gesture for which he was publicly thanked.

And so, who were the boys? Only a small proportion of them have been singled out for mention in this chapter. Most climbing boys were ignored by the majority of the population of their day, but just a few were brought out of their black backgrounds by the humanitarians who campaigned for them for a hundred and two years.

## CHAPTER 3

### *The Early Campaigners*

We are constantly reminded of the hard battle that always has to be fought, whenever the dictates of humanity come into conflict with motives of self-interest.

EDWIN HODDER, *Life and Work of the 1th Earl of Shaftesbury* (1886)

Now I have introduced a number of boys - named and unnamed - to represent the hundreds and thousands who swarmed up and down chimneys in the hundred and two years ending in 1875. If the introductions have been painful may I add that I have omitted many descriptions which were too distressing to repeat: descriptions for the most part given at the Parliamentary inquiries of 1818 and 1840.

How did the boys' plight first come to light? How and when did it come to an end?

The importance of Jonas Hanway (1712-86) in the campaign against the boys' climbing conditions cannot be overestimated. It was he who provided the basis on which the campaign started, and he created publicity which others were to develop. As a young man he travelled far. In the part of China which he visited he learned that no questions were asked of parents who killed a new-born baby. He thought his own compatriots were kinder than that, and on returning to England he investigated conditions in workhouses in 1765. He was horrified to find that in one London workhouse 64 out of 78 children admitted in a year had died; in another, 16 out of 18 died, in another not one child survived in fourteen years. He published his findings. A committee was set up by the House of Commons to check his figures, for Parliament was sensible of its responsibility for workhouses.

Members of the Committee found to their dismay that out of 100 children admitted to orphanages, only 7 survived. Hoping to improve conditions, Parliament passed an Act: it was ruled that children must be boarded out and kept no longer than three weeks in workhouses. On inquiring ten years later if the Act was being enforced, Parliament learned that the mortality rate for "parish infants" had fallen