

*The Market for Skill: Apprenticeship and Economic Growth in Early Modern England*

Patrick Wallis

Princeton University Press, 2025, 480 pp., £38

ISBN: 9780691265315

This book examines the ways in which apprenticeship operated in early modern England, arguing that the impact of human capital not just on production and commerce but also on the expansion and diffusion of knowledge has so far been underestimated.

Wallis demonstrates that apprenticeship grew rapidly during the period, and that although it was concentrated in London, youths travelled to the capital and the other growing cities looking for training and later moved out to the provinces taking their knowledge and expertise with them, at least until the eighteenth century. This second claim relates to one of the most interesting findings of the book – that training large numbers of apprentices was unusual and that only a relatively small number of master craftsmen were responsible for training apprentices. As these masters were usually both socially and economically successful, Wallis reasons that they were ‘the best’, and because they invested in innovative new techniques, their position as educators had a significant impact on the spread of ideas and methods.

Another key finding is that many apprentices were absent from their masters’ households for large portions of their contract. Furthermore, despite their fame as the chief mechanism by which apprentices were admitted to a trade, Wallis shows that guilds had only a modest role in enforcing standards. The rules of apprenticeship were largely fixed by the state, albeit not always effectively enforced, and it was law courts and civic officers who most often policed the system.

The book is liberally illustrated with graphs, charts and portraits, and it contains several substantial appendices. Unsurprisingly for a work of this type, the book is full of facts and figures; even so, the writing style is at times quite dry, especially in the main body of each chapter. Still, the book sheds new light on the mechanisms of apprenticeship and corrects some long-held misconceptions, such as the belief promulgated by the likes of John Stuart Mill that sons usually went into their father’s trade. As such, it is a welcome addition to our knowledge of training men for the tradesman’s life in early modern England.

*Jenni Hyde*