

FAMILY HISTORY DETECTIVE

Trade union records

People have always joined forces to fight for their rights. The records left by trade unions can tell us much about how they lived their lives

There can scarcely be an occupation over the past two centuries which has not at some time produced a trade union. Not just miners, engineers and shipbuilders, but pianoforte makers, life assurance agents, correctors of the press and trades now long forgotten have all united at some stage to seek better pay and working conditions.

The history of trade union organisation is a remarkable journey from illegality at the beginning of the 19th century to partnership in government by the middle of the 20th century, when the prominent trade union leader Ernest Bevin became Minister of Labour with the power to direct

much of industry in the wartime coalition government.

Fortunately for family historians, there remains a vast quantity of archive material in circulation, much of it well conserved and accessible to researchers. These minute books, union journals, membership records, and financial accounts of long-resolved disputes, are a treasure trove of detail on the working lives of millions of people.

LEADING LIGHTS

PERSONAL PAPERS

A collection of documents left by Ernest Bevin (1884-1951), the founder of the TGWU and eventual Foreign Secretary, can be found in Warwick Uni's Modern Records Centre - as can those of Tom Mann (1856-1941), a leader of the 1889 dock workers' strike and first president of the Amalgamated Engineering Union.

series of mergers and sometimes splits. As a result, when looking for records relating to an individual, it can be difficult to establish exactly which union they may

have originally joined. Some idea of the scale of reorganisation over the past century can be seen from the number of trade unions in existence. In 1900, there were more than 1,300 unions, of which 549 were formally on the books of the Registrar of Friendly Societies. Today there are no more than 204, and just 186 of these are registered.

The big general unions in particular have taken on increasingly diverse groups of members - and have often inherited the mantle of once-powerful organisations brought down by the slow death of the industries in which their members worked.

As the much simplified 'family tree' for Amicus at the top of the page shows, a union based principally on the foundations laid by the Amalgamated Society of

Trade union records

LEFT: The Amicus 'family tree' – the UK's largest technical and skilled persons' union with over 1.2 million members

Engineers also includes in its ancestry organisations representing bank clerks, factory foremen, and even older trade unions for print workers which themselves claim antecedents in the medieval guilds.

THE RIGHT UNION

To find your ancestor's union, you need to start by narrowing down your search to the industry they were involved with and a time frame. There are a number of resources that you can then use to find the right union.

The Modern Records Centre at Warwick University publishes a six-page A-to-Z list of occupations running from airline pilots to whitesmiths that shows the main unions associated with each job (www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/holdings/genealogy). But this barely scratches the surface.

The only truly comprehensive guide is a four-volume *Historical Directory of Trade Unions* (see the further reading section for more details on the four volumes). A typical entry includes the dates the union was active, its predecessor organisations and successors, and may also have some information on its leadership and activities.

A SHORT HISTORY...

Although some of the older craft trade unions claim roots in the medieval guilds, there is very little evidence of organisational

CASE STUDY

National Federation of Women Workers

At the beginning of the 20th century only an estimated 10 per cent of women workers were organised into trade unions...

The National Federation of Women Workers was set up in 1906 specifically, "to unite, for their mutual protection, workwomen who are engaged in unorganised trades," as the first of a list of objectives included in the rule book put it.

Documents held in The National Archives (in FS11/111) show the signatories to the first rule book of the union to have been Louisa Hedges, Helena Flowers, Rosa Hillary, Mary R Macarthur, Florence Eldridge, AJ Fairman and R Lloyd. A further 20 officials and executive members are also named in the application for registration.

The records show the union to have been growing rapidly. It started the year 1910 with 10,255 members, recruited 7,005, lost 5,108 and ended the year 12,152 strong. By 1920, after which it merged with the larger National Union of General and Municipal Workers (today's GMB), it had 39,735 members.

Some idea of the range of its activities can be seen from the accounts. In 1917, the Federation had balloted its members to create a political fund, and some of this was used each year to affiliate to the new Labour Party. A variety of other payments made in 1920 included:

MARCH: Women from the factory of C&F Morton Ltd, c1910, protest against the employment of 15-year-olds

- unemployed, travelling and emigration pay for 622 members of £281 7s 6d
- dispute pay for 2,106 members at a cost of £2,509 2s 8d
- sick and accident pay for 2,942 members of £3,469 17s 6d
- funeral benefit for 30 members at a cost of £132 10s
- victimisation pay for 104 members at a cost of £108 2s

The TUC Library has a number of the Federation's reports and other papers, and some copies of the journal can be found in the Working Class Movement Library. Some years' returns to the Registrar of Friendly Societies include the addresses of branch secretaries.

continuity. In fact, the trade unions that had emerged by the end of the 18th century were either driven out of existence, or underground into less formal ways of organising, by the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800. Those that survived – such as the London Typographical Society – did so by claiming to be friendly societies.

It was not until 1824 that trade unions ceased to be unlawful, and even then a

further Combination Act of 1825 made it a criminal conspiracy for unions to do more than bargain over wages. And when the small, local unions came together in a Grand National Consolidated Trades Union in the 1830s, the legal shutters came down again. Although unions survived, and thrived in the 1840s, most remained small and highly localised; often organising one craft or industry in one small town.

The first of the modern or new model unions was the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, formed in 1851. This set a trend for craft trade

COLOURFUL CARDS: A selection of Transport and General Workers Union membership cards from the 1940s and 1950s

unions in the latter half of the 19th century. Women and those who had not "served their time" as apprentices were excluded from membership – and from the skilled work that went with it.

As a result, the first Trades Union Congress, called by Manchester Trades Council in 1868, was an all-male affair. But the TUC survived, and in the wake of the Trade Union Act of 1871, which gave the Registrar of Friendly Societies the job of registering and later regulating unions, it became a permanent organisation.

It was not to be until the 1880s and 1890s, however, that unskilled workers and women poured into the unions in large numbers. A strike by matchgirls at Bryant and May in the East End of London in

Minute books, union journals and membership records are a treasure trove of detail on the working lives of millions of people



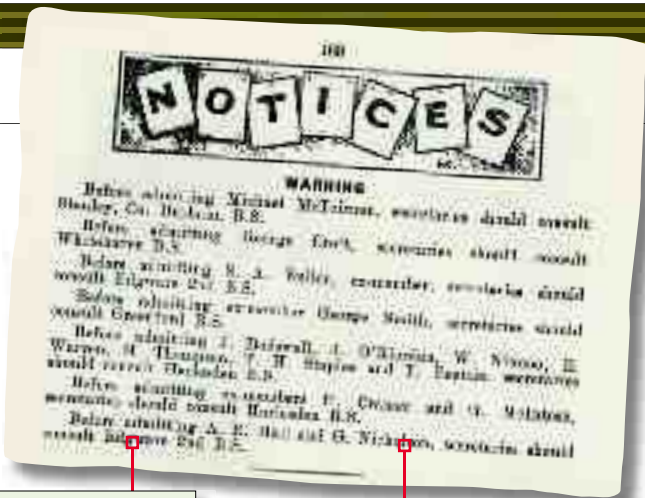


TRADE UNION JOURNAL

Aspects of union life

The ASW journal provides a snapshot of the lives of ASW members in March 1939

This edition of the *Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers' Monthly Journal* includes details of members awarded sickness benefits, obituaries and the names of employers involved in disputes with the union. The journal also has a great deal of information about union activities and wage rates in the district organisers' reports.



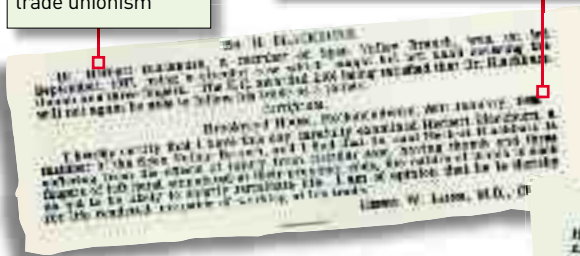
HEALTHCARE:

Sickness benefits were a major reason for the growth of trade unionism

DETAILS: Health case details were often published in union journals both to advertise the benefits of membership and to reassure members that their subscriptions were being spent wisely

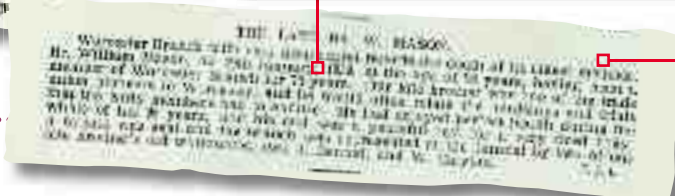
SANCTIONS: Workers who undercut union rates, crossed picket lines or fell foul of the union in other ways – maybe simply by failing to pay their union subscriptions – could expect to face continuing sanctions

UNION POWER: Where the union was strong, its members might refuse to work with non-members, and the lack of a union card could make it very difficult to find a job



PENSION BENEFITS: Their union branch was a focus of many people's social lives – and this continued well into retirement. Unions offered pension benefits, and were often represented at members' funerals

MEMBERSHIP: William Mason would have joined one of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers' predecessor unions in 1866 – two years before the TUC was officially founded



1888, followed by a London dockworkers' strike the next summer proved to be the turning points.

But the story is not just one of strikes. In the days before the welfare state, unions were an important source of sickness, accident and retirement benefits. By the turn of the 20th century, 11 per cent of those in work were trade union members, rising to 40 per cent by 1920. Trade union membership peaked in 1980, when more than half of all workers were members. Today the figure stands at just over one quarter of all workers.

OFFICIAL RECORDS

Government regulation of trade unions began in 1871, when the Registrar of Friendly Societies was given responsibility for listing unions that met certain basic criteria. To register, a union had to have seven members, and to submit annual returns of rule changes, membership numbers, and income and expenditure.

The Registrar's annual reports – and the unions' returns – survive in the care of The National Archives. Although Scottish and Irish trade unions were registered separately, the annual reports for all three jurisdictions can be found in a single volume for each year in Series FS32.

Registration was at first slow – although signing up had advantages in relation to the friendly society benefits that many unions paid their members. Just 68 unions registered in 1872, the largest of which was the Amalgamated Society of Miners in Manchester, with 80,138 members.

By 1900, 549 unions had registered. Of these, the largest 32 had 893,298 members, while the remaining 517 had 467,647 members between them. Together they could claim funds totalling £3,349,420 and an annual income of £1,996,080.

TUC ARCHIVES

Over the past 140 years, the TUC has amassed a considerable archive of material on its own activities and those of affiliated unions. The collection is based at the London Metropolitan University, but an impressive quantity of documents can also be seen at the Union Makes Us Strong website (www.unionhistory.info).

Among the most useful areas of the site for those looking for family members are: TUC Reports – which give the full text of each year's annual report since 1869, including the names of union delegates and

information about each affiliated union; Match Workers – including a strike register naming all 1,400 Bryant and May employees involved in the 1888 dispute, along with details of benefit payments received from their union; and General Strikes – an extensive collection of material dealing with the 1926 General Strike.

The collections hold much more, as the catalogue online shows. There is, for example, a filing cabinet of around 1,000 index cards maintained by the TUC between 1927 and the

1960s with brief biographical information on prominent trade unionists who might be called on to serve on public bodies.

There is also a large collection of trade unions' annual reports. In

some cases these can contain exceptionally helpful information. The

Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners' volume for 1883, for example, includes reports from each union branch showing not just its size and financial status, but lists of excluded members – those expelled for failing to pay their subscriptions, imposing on the society's funds or working contrary to the society's interests. It is interesting to note that the union operated internationally, with 31 branches in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Similarly, the United Society of Boilermakers and Iron and Steel Shipbuilders' annual report half a century later, in 1930, includes much the same information – and more. Most notable are: lists of new members; lists of members and members' wives who had died, with date and cause of death; and lists of superannuated members, with their membership number, the date they started to receive union benefits, and the amount they were receiving.

By this stage, too, obituaries and photos were common. A typical example from the boilermakers' annual report for 1930 contains a lengthy account of the life of John

UNION BENEFITS

MUSIC MAKERS

The Metropolitan and Provincial Piano-Forte & Harmonium Makers Union, founded in 1874, charged subs of 4d a week, plus 6d a quarter for management expenses. Union Members were promised 12/- a week when out of work, 21/- a week if they were "out of employ through a dispute of prices", and insurance of up to £10 for the loss of their tools in a fire.

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Fairclough of Bolton, who died aged 89. Fairclough had clearly been prominent in the union in his youth. The obituary recalls that, "On 28 December 1874, he was presented by Bro. R. Knight, our then General Secretary, with a splendid illuminated address and writing desk."

JOURNALS

In addition to these annual reports, the TUC holds many trade union journals – and having identified the correct union for your ancestor, these may be the best hope of finding some information about their activities. Such journals often have a great deal to say not just about members but about their working lives.

To give one example, *The Shop Assistant* (by the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks) includes in its May 1898 edition, a report of the union's annual parliament at which the findings of a survey of wages and working hours were presented to branch delegates. The survey had found that shop assistants typically worked a 66- or 67-hour week, while hourly rates varied from between 11s 2d to 43s 4d for grocers to as much as 7d for boot salesmen.

Journals also reflect the changing face of trade unions. The caption to a photo of an 1897 shopworkers' conference delegation notes, "It will be observed that the group includes one lady delegate – Miss Grace Dare, a popular contributor to our pages, who made her debut at a National Union Conference in Liverpool last year. We hope she will have the

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:
Members of the Municipal Employees Association, Stepney Branch Committee in 1901. Founded in 1894, the local government union was among the first formed by white-collar workers. It eventually merged into the General and Municipal Workers Union

company of other lady delegates at future conferences."

UNION ARCHIVES

Many unions had short lives and little remains of them. Beyond the few details recorded by the Registrar

of Friendly Societies, little survives of unions like the Metropolitan and Provincial Piano-Forte and Harmonium Makers Union.

Others have been more fortunate, living on through amalgamation and merger into modern trade unions. The most significant collection of records is at Warwick University's Modern Records Centre, which has acquired the papers of hundreds of trade unions. In addition to annual reports, trade union journals and similar materials, these often include minutes, account books and boxes of correspondence.

A full list of holdings, organised alphabetically by trade union, and with potted histories of the organisations involved, can be found online at www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/holdings/genealogy. Among the occupations represented are engineers, firefighters, teachers and clerical workers.

The Working Class Movement Library, now owned by a charitable trust, is also a major centre for trade union studies. The most significant of its sets of records is the GMB Collection, which includes archives from a diverse range of unions for gasworkers, boilermakers, council

employees and even professional footballers. Finally, the National Library of Scotland holds an important collection of records of trade unions operating there. Some of these are significant because they include the records of individual branches – which have rarely survived elsewhere.

WORKING LIVES

Large numbers of trade unions have gone into print with official versions of their own histories – often compiled by sympathetic historians, retired officials or merely knowledgeable researchers.

Although some early accounts can be dry and concentrate on the development of the industries in which union members worked, recent accounts tend to have more to say about union officials and about the workers they represented. If nothing else, they offer valuable background reading.

So many millions of people have been trade union members over the past 200 years that there can scarcely be a family outside the ranks of the aristocracy that has managed to avoid all contact – or perhaps even active involvement. By narrowing down your search to the right industry, the right era and the right union, you may well find out more about your ancestor's working life than you could ever have imagined. ■

BY MARK CRAIL

Mark is a journalist and researcher. He runs the Chartist Ancestors website (www.chartists.net) and for five years, he worked for the Confederation of Health Service Employees, now part of Unison, and has been going to TUC conferences since 1984.

CONTACT

TUC LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

Holloway Road Learning Centre, 236-250
Holloway Road, London, N7 6PP
[w] www.londonmet.ac.uk/services/sas/library-services/tuc
[e] tuclib@londonmet.ac.uk
[t] 020 7133 2260

Please book before visiting, as these archives are not primarily geared to family historians

WARWICK UNIVERSITY – MODERN RECORDS CENTRE

University Library, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL
[w] www.warwick.ac.uk/go/modernrecordscentre
[e] archives@warwick.ac.uk
[t] 024 7652 4219

WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT LIBRARY

51 The Crescent, Salford, M5 4WX
[w] www.wcml.org.uk
[e] enquiries@wcml.org.uk
[t] 0161 736 3601

NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SCOTLAND

George IV Bridge, Edinburgh, EH1 1EW
[w] www.nls.uk
[t] 0131 623 3700

WEBSITES

THE UNION MAKES US STRONG

[w] www.unionhistory.info
Extensive historical website based on the TUC Collections at London Metropolitan University

CERTIFICATION OFFICER

[w] www.certoffice.org
Government-appointed body which registers trade unions

CHARTIST ANCESTORS

[w] www.chartists.net
Discusses the relationship between Chartism and the unions

FURTHER READING

HISTORICAL DIRECTORY OF TRADE UNIONS

- Vol 1.** Non-manual unions
A Marsh & V Ryan, Scolar Press, 1980, ISBN: 0566021609
- Vol 2.** Unions in engineering, shipbuilding and minor metal trades, coal mining and iron and steel, agriculture, fishing and chemicals
A Marsh & V Ryan, Scolar Press, 1984, ISBN: 0566021617
- Vol 3.** Unions in building and allied trades, transport, woodworkers and allied trades, leather workers, enginemen and tobacco workers
A Marsh & V Ryan, Gower Publishing Ltd, 1987, ISBN: 0566021625
- Vol 4.** Unions in cotton, wool and worsted, linen and jute, silk, elastic web, lace and net, hosiery and knitwear, textile finishing, tailors and garment workers, hat and cap, carpets and textile engineering
A Marsh, V Ryan, J Smethurst, Scolar Press, 1994, ISBN: 0859679004

DICTIONARY OF LABOUR BIOGRAPHY

JM Bellamy (ed) and J Saville (ed), Macmillan, 11 volumes from 1972-2003

THE TYPOGRAPHICAL ASSOCIATION: ORIGINS AND HISTORY UP TO 1949

AE Musson, Oxford University Press, 1954

THE CLERKS: A HISTORY OF APEX 1890-1989

A Marsh & V Ryan, Malthouse Publishing, 1997

WORKING FOR HEALTH: THE HISTORY OF COHSE

M Carpenter, Lawrence & Wishart, 1988

SHARPEN THE SICKLE: A HISTORY OF THE FARM WORKERS' UNION

R Groves, Merlin Press, 1981, ISBN: 0850362849

