

Letter written by Benjamin Smart Junior of Rock Mills, Milverton

DR362/50/3

The Document of the Month for October is this letter written by Benjamin Smart Junior, the owner of a mill located in Milverton, Warwick. It is taken from the collection DR362 which contains records from the parish of Our Blessed Lady in Halford. The letter, dated 1814, demonstrates the efforts of a local employer to secure young workers for his business in the early 19th century.

Built by the Smart family in 1792, Rock Mills, a water-powered mill on the river Avon, was primarily a cotton spinning enterprise, but it also milled corn. Benjamin Smart Junior (1766-1839), a Quaker, oversaw the cotton-spinning side of the business and specifically sought girls to become apprentices in his mill.

Friend
 DR 362/50/3 near ^{to} Warwick 31st 1814
 In reply to thine I have now a vacancy
 for a few girls and if the one thou mentionest is
 healthy, Active and free from any natural or
 accidental defect will take her with two new
 dresses and an extra article usually washed weekly
 and 5^s premium — or which has generally been
 adopted by the Overseers an extra allowance of 5^s
 taking her as she is (clean & free from vermin) and pro-
 vide the dresses myself — she will be bound until
 2^d Year of Age and gain a settlement here by re-
 siding 40 Nights after the indentures are executed —
 if your parish is in Warwickshire she may be bound
 by the Warwick Magistrates without any difficulty
 I can receive her any day and shall expect the 5^s
 to provide her Cloaths when she comes the remainder
 when bound — should your people determine to place
 her with me must request an early intimation as
 I am at this time in treaty with several parishes
 but from the indecision generally attached to Parochial
 business I can depend upon nothing until the
 Children are brought here — respectfully believe me
 thine — Ben: Smart Jun^r

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No. 7. it is not my intention to take Boys - but, if those mentioned are adapted to the Iron Foundry or Watchmaking - I know of a situation for two or three, which may be suitable - for the first they must be stout and active & 15 or 16 years old for the latter light made and active with slender fingers.

J. W. Turbitt
Hallowford Bridge
near Shipston

WARWICK
OCT 17 1871

I expect a larger premium would be required -

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The letter on display is handwritten in black ink, over two sides of paper. It is addressed to a 'J H Purbitt' at '5 Halford Bridge, near Shipston', and in it, Smart refers to a vacancy that he has for a 'few girls' and sets out his conditions for acceptance. He explains that girls will be 'bound until 24 years of age' and that a suitable candidate would need to be 'healthy, active and free from any natural or accidental defect', as well as being 'clean and free from vermin'¹. For him to take on an apprentice, he asks for a premium, or payment, of £5 (£232.63 in today's money²) and for a girl to be provided with two new dresses or, for a further payment of £5, he would provide two dresses himself.

Evidence within his letter and from newspapers at this time show that Smart directly conversed with parish overseers of the poor to source his apprentices. In his letter, he tells his correspondent that he is 'in treaty with several different parishes'³ and an advert for girl apprentices placed in the Gloucester Journal in 1811, directly addresses, 'overseers and the industrious poor'⁴. At this time, the church took responsibility for extremely poor children and orphans within their parish.

Apprenticing children to local industries was mutually beneficial to both the parish, where impoverished children would be provided with a place to live and work and sometimes learn a trade, and to local business owners, who could secure cheap labourers. Research undertaken by Jane Lane shows that the girls apprenticed at Rock Mills were 'fatherless, orphaned or illegitimate' and 'most aged 16'⁵. It is not clear why Smart specifically requested girls to be apprenticed, but this may have been due to their smaller and slender fingers which could better thread the machinery.

Rock Mills

We know a little about the conditions the apprenticed girls faced at Rock Mills, thanks to an inspection made by a Birmingham magistrate in 1815. The magistrate noted the employment of around 40 children, who each worked 12 to 13 hours a day. He remarked on an 'unpleasant closeness of the air and the lack of open windows

¹ Details and quotes taken from the letter written by Benjamin Smart Junior of Rock Mills, Milverton, Warwickshire County Record Office, DR362/50/3

² Converted using The National Archives Currency Converter 1270–2017, available at <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result> (accessed 30/08/24)

³ Details and quotes taken from the letter written by Benjamin Smart Junior of Rock Mills, Milverton, Warwickshire County Record Office, DR362/50/3

⁴ 'Overseers and the industrious poor' Gloucester Journal, 14th January 1811, found via the British Newspaper Archive: <https://britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000532/18110114/016/0002> (accessed 30/08/24)

⁵ Lane, J (1979). *Apprenticeship in Warwickshire Cotton Mills 1790-1830*, reprinted from *Textile History Volume 10*, available at Warwickshire County Record Office Library, reference C.331 LAN (P)

on a warm day' and as a result the children had a 'hectic appearance'⁶. A large playground was observed before the lodging house, but the magistrate understood that the children had no recreation time. He, however, also reported that the food was good, the children were comfortably clothed and that they had clean and comfortable beds⁷.

Factory legislation

The magistrate's findings were reported to a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1816, whose aim was to examine the state of children employed in factories in Britain. Legislation to improve conditions for children followed in the form of the Cotton Mills Act of 1819, which prohibited children under the age of nine from working and limited the working hours of children aged between nine and thirteen to 12 hours a day. The Factory Act of 1833 continued to prohibit children under nine from working and restricted the working day to 8 hours for children aged nine to twelve and 12 hours for children aged thirteen to eighteen. The Act also required children under thirteen to attend 2 hours of school per day and established an inspectorate of factories to ensure the regulations were followed.

With the increasing regulation of child employment in factories and faced with stronger competition from the cotton industries of the north, the cotton spinning side of Rock Mills saw a decline in the early 1820s. It was subsequently sold by the Smart family, as they looked to invest their money into other local business ventures.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid