

TRAVELLING BROTHERS

The six centuries' road
from craft fellowship to
trade unionism



R.A.LEESON

More than a century before the Welfare State and comprehensive social services took shape, the early trade societies and unions had worked out an elaborate method of coping with the unemployment that the Industrial Revolution made a constant feature of working life. This was the 'tramping' or 'travelling' system under which craftsmen who were out of work were sent off to tramp the country. En route they were greeted by their fellow members, given bed and board in 'society' inns, and offered help in finding a job.

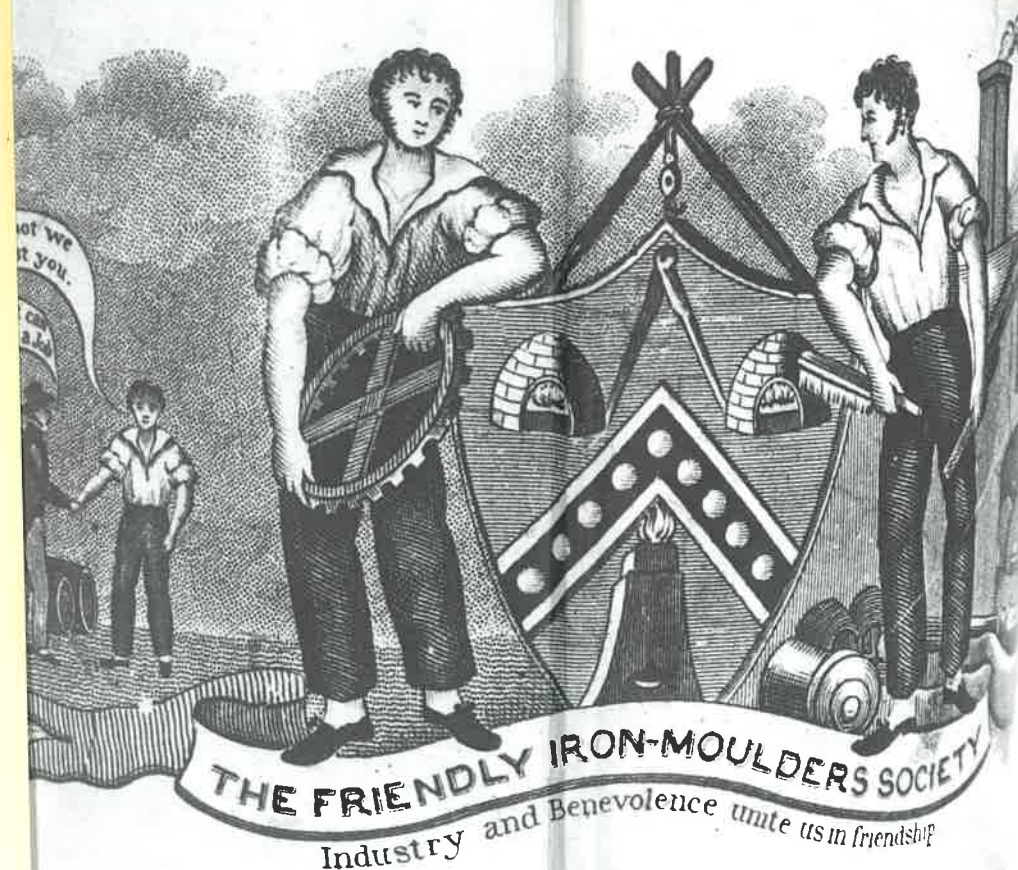
This system, which only died out with the 1914-18 war, often saw thousands of men (and sometimes their wives) 'on the road'. Hitherto it has remained an obscure area of trade union and industrial history. *Travelling Brothers*, however, the first full study of the subject, describes it in detail, drawing upon a wealth of craft lore and tramping custom. This includes the tramp's 'blank' or passport; the 'house of call'; the rise of the 'good' tramp in the days when strikers left the workshops one by one to take to the road, bundle on back; and the fall of the 'bad' tramp when unions sometimes disciplined men who left their work too readily or stayed away too long, thus bringing into disrepute organisations which were seeking public respectability.

Travelling Brothers seeks also to pinpoint the origin of the tramping system, and finds it in the development of the organised crafts of centuries earlier. Mr Leeson, with the fine grasp of his subject which only deep research can create, traces the system forward through the transformation of artisan gild and craft company to the break-up of the old organisations under the shock waves of the industrial era, the journeyman's clubs and the trade and friendly societies.

As a result of his pioneering study, the author can assign to the tramping system a crucial place in the history and the creation of trade unions. He offers controversial new ideas on the origins and development of early union organisations and challenges received orthodoxies. His book is of special interest therefore to historians and students; it is also attractively and persuasively written to appeal to historically-minded readers in general and to members of the labour movement in particular, part of the history of which is enshrined in these pages.

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A drinking 'pot' showing the detail of the Ironmoulders' coat of arms illustrating a travelling craftsman being greeted by a shop-mate

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By the same author
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Strike : A Live History 1887-1971

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London George Allen & Unwin Ltd
Ruskin House Museum Street

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First published in 1979

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ISBN 0 04 309011 7

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Leeson, Robert Arthur

Travelling brothers.

1. Migrant labor - England - History

I. Title

331.5'44'0942 HD5856.G7 78-40627

ISBN 0-04-309011-7

Record No. 39006006892
Dewey No. 331-88
Date Input 13/08/1999
Price:

Typeset in 10 on 12 pt Ehrhardt by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd
Printed in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford, Surrey

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Contents

Acknowledgements	10
Author's Preface	11
Introduction	13
Part I: The 'Tramp' Arrives 1300-1850	21
1 If a stranger comes . . . 1300-1450	23
2 The serving men called yo'men 1450-1550	41
3 Queen Betty's Law 1550-1700	59
4 'The Liberties of the Subject' 1700-1800	79
5 'Association . . . the malady of our times' - the Combination Acts and after 1800-1850	100
6 Bread, Cheese and Beer - How the Tramping System worked	122
7 The Craftsman's Lighthouse - inns and pubs	132
8 Travelling Delegates - the Tramps at their best	148
9 Duthie's <i>Wanderjahr</i> - Tramping on the Continent	157
Part II: The 'Traveller' Departs 1850-1914	169
10 'Grinding the Wind' - the 1840s Depression	171
11 'In Every English-speaking Country in the Globe' - Emigration	183
12 Respectability and Reorganisation	193
13 Flying Brethren and Common Cadgers - the Tramps at their worst	211
14 'The sooner the system is dead the better'	223
15 Who? How many? How good? How bad?	240
16 An Old Argument - the Webbs and the unions	252
<i>Appendices</i>	277
The Tramping Pubs	279
Bibliography	284
Notes	297
Index	337

List of Illustrations

PLATES

- 1. Membership Card, showing the detail of the Iron-moulder's coat of arms, illustrating a travelling craftsman being greeted by a shop-mate. *Courtesy AUEW, Foundry Section* Endpapers
between pages 96-7
- 2. The tramping hatter signs in, 1820 (*Courtesy Mansell Collection*)
- 3. Emblem of the Brushmakers, 1840 *between pages 128-9*
- 4a. The Brushmakers' tramping 'blank', 1845
- 4b. Tramping shoemaker and his wife, from J. H. Crawford's *The Autobiography of a Tramp*
- 5a. Simon the Tanner public house
- 5b. Simon the Tanner inn-sign *between pages 240-241*
- 6a. Boilermakers' emblem, late 1830s
- 6b. Boilermakers' emblem, late 1870s
- 7-8. Two centuries of change from the emblem of the Worshipful Company of Tinplate Workers (1670) to that of the General Union of Tinplate Workers (1867)
- 9. Emblem of the Gas Workers (1889)

DRAWINGS IN TEXT

Greeting the tramp, 1850s style	17
Hazards of Tramping (after Bewick)	93
Poor Man evades toll (after Bewick)	94
The White Hart, Witham, the Brushmakers' headquarters in the 1820s (<i>Courtesy Truman Taverns</i>)	138

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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements and thanks are due to the following:

For permission to reproduce extracts from texts, or illustrations:

Mrs Beryl Aspinall (*The Early English Trade Unions*), The Amalgamated Society of Boilermakers, Shipwrights, Blacksmiths and Structural Workers (*A History of the Boilermakers' Society*), the British Library of Political and Economic Science (The Webb Collection), The National Union of Brushmakers (*The Old Trade Unions*), Jonathan Cape, Ltd (*Rolling Stonemason*), Cassell and Co. (*The London Compositors*), Professor W. H. Challoner (*The Reminiscences of Thomas Dunning*), The Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (*Our Society and Foes to Tyranny*), J. Fyrth and The Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (Foundry Section) (*The Foundry Workers*), the Felt Hatters' and Trimmers' Union of Great Britain (*The Hatters*), Professor E. J. Hobsbawm (*The Tramping Artisan*), the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (*Men of Steel*), James Klugmann (The Klugmann Collection), Lawrence and Wishart (*The Story of the Engineers*), the London School of Economics and Political Science (The Webbs' *History of Trade Unionism*), the University of London (W. McLaine's unpublished thesis on 'The Engineers' Union'), The Mansell Collection (hatters' emblem), The Merlin Press (*The Unknown Mayhem*), A. E. Musson (*The Typographical Society*), A. Plummer (*The Weavers' Company*), The Quattuor Coronati Lodge (*The Medieval Mason*), the National Union of Sheetmetal Workers, Coppersmiths and Heating and Domestic Engineers (*History of the Tinplate Workers*), the Transport and General Workers' Union (Vehicle Building and Automotive Section) (coachmakers' emblem), Truman Taverns, Ltd. (The White Hart, Witham).

For Providing Facilities for research and access to documents:

Librarians and staff of the British Library, the Guildhall Library, the Marx Memorial Library, the Library of the Grand Lodge of Freemasons, the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, who kindly assisted with hospitality and other matters, the Nuffield Library, Oxford, the University of London Library and in particular the Goldsmiths' Library, the Research Department of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers, Librarians of the City of Westminster, Stockport, Denton and the Curator of Stockport Museum, the Working-Class Movement Library, Manchester.

For the Loan of precious books, copying of documents, guidance on sources:

Ted Brake, Gary Brain, George Barnsby, Sid Brown, Dr J. G. Dony, John Foster, Eddie and Ruth Frow, Jim Fyrth, Ron and Anita Gray, Phil Leeson, Pat Mantle, Ken Sprague, G. E. Tapp, Angela Tuckett, Ray Watkinson, Mrs D. Wilson.

For editorial advice and encouragement:

John Bright-Holmes, Peter Sommer, Victor Thorpe