The Art and Ideology of the Trade Union Emblem, 1850–1925

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Annie Ravenhill-Johnson
Edited by Paula James

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Cover image: Emblem of the Brass Founders, Turners, Fitters, Finishers and Coppersmiths Association, designed and printed by Blades, East & Blades, 1890s. Working Class Movement Library, Salford; and Plate 50 of this volume.

This title is also available as an eBook.

To John Gorman and R. A. Leeson,
pioneers in the study of trade union art

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Paula James

How This Book Came About

This book has been a labour of love and would not have been accomplished without the dedication and expertise of Dr Annie Ravenhill-Johnson who began her study of trade union emblems in her prize-winning undergraduate thesis, *Gender Issues in Trade Union Imagery 1850–1925*, followed by an MA dissertation covering the same historical period on *Themes and Influences in Trade Union Imagery, 1850–1925*. Annie Ravenhill-Johnson's chapters, which form the bulk of the book, build upon her earlier research to reveal the array of cultural influences that gave the emblems their form and meaning.

A classicist by profession, I became intrigued by the Greco-Roman iconography of the New Unions when teaching mid-Victorian Britain at an Open University residential school in the 1990s. I was put in touch with Annie by the Manchester People's History Museum and a friendship and collaboration began, which has never wavered despite the obstacles of distance and the usual pressures of life and work making plans for a sustained project a real challenge in recent years.

Annie contributed a fascinating lecture on the Bricklayers' banner to the Open University DVD, *Four Faces of Rome*, part of the Classical Studies Department's course Experiencing Rome: Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire (presented 2000–2010), introducing thousands of part-time students to the rich iconography of this surviving emblem housed in the Manchester museum. We have given joint and solo presentations on aspects of emblems at seminars and conferences run by classicists, the Society for Emblem Studies, art history departments, spoken to audiences at galleries and museums and at Open University day schools to students of the Roman Empire and classical myth. The images of labour always surprise and delight audiences whatever their discipline or ideological standpoint.

I am proud to have facilitated and encouraged Annie's research, which has culminated in ten chapters of detailed analysis of key banners and certificates. Very little editing has been required and my contribution to *Art and Ideology* has developed into a dialogue with Annie's findings as her research raises a number of issues for classicists and for those of us wrestling with the conundrum of cultural hegemony

past and present. Figures, forms and mottoes from antiquity have filtered through the visual motifs of medieval guilds, Renaissance art and architecture, and the emblems of Freemasonry and friendly societies permeate trade union banners and certificates. These artefacts were newly forged for a recently industrialized world; the message of modernity was carefully couched within an artistic template that suggested continuity and tradition.

It seems as if the working-class leaders who commissioned the banners and the membership 'plates' (miniature works of art for their proud owners) had not just appropriated Greek and Roman culture from purely decorative considerations but also understood its potential (as did the British ruling classes) for symbolizing the strength, power and ingenuity associated with an empire-building nation. However, the use of classical figures and features to enhance the prestige of a trade and its toilers was not a new phenomenon. The prevalence of allusions to the ancient world is a complex and challenging aspect of the emblems.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Open University Arts Faculty has been particularly generous in financing short-term consultancies for Annie Ravenhill-Johnson and helping out with the costs of conference attendance and visits to museums and archives. The Arts Faculty research team has also awarded £850 from the additional funding budget towards the copyright costs of plates and paintings and provided a short-term consultancy for image searching; indeed this book has only been possible because of their consistent and generous support. We are grateful to Dr Amanda Sandiford who located a number of images and started negotiations for their use. The Lipman-Miliband Trust contributed £500 towards image payments and the Lancashire and Cheshire Historical Society donated £400. We very much appreciate these contributions as the book has been enriched by the inclusion of 90 illustrations across a range of visual media. We are indebted to our indexer, Dave Cradduck. We would also like to thank conference and seminar audiences, friends, colleagues and comrades who have commented upon work in progress and especially our peer reviewers whose input has enhanced our understanding and improved this volume's critical edge. We were lucky to have the patience and support of long-suffering spouses, Brian Johnson and John James. Any infelicities are the responsibility of the authors.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Annie Ravenhill-Johnson (neé Curtis) comes from a working-class family of Channel Island refugees who left Jersey two days before the arrival of the German occupying forces and who returned to Jersey in 1945 as soon as the island was liberated. She was not able to pursue her grammar school education beyond the age of 16, due to family pressures, and was required to find paid work as a secretary and clerk. When she embarked upon an Open University degree in 1989, aged 47, her day job was at a slate mine in North Wales. She eventually managed to complete her studies as a full-time BA (Hons) art history student at Warwick University (1993–96). Her undergraduate dissertation was awarded the Association of Art Historians' annual prize for the best BA or MA thesis from a British university. She gained a distinction for her MA taken at Birmingham City University whilst she worked full-time as a clerk for Lunn Poly. Annie completed a PhD (part-time) at the age of 62 on the metamorphoses of Vulcan/Hephaistos in Renaissance and Baroque art. Annie chose Vulcan because he was a working-class god, labouring away in the soot of the forge whilst the rest of the gods were having a jolly good time. She has acquired a well-deserved reputation in academic circles for her knowledge of British banner and certificate history and has published in the *Journal of the Social History Curators' Group.*

Paula James (neé Deahl) was born in 1950, the youngest of five children, on what was then the largest council estate in Britain (Millbrook, Southampton). She benefited from a culturally stimulating environment as her father (one of ten children and forced to leave school at 14) was widely read, had taken night schools in art and architecture and had also been a violinist by profession (taught by his father whose own family were musicians originally from Bavaria). Paula thrived in an intellectual household as her dad, a lifelong socialist and a loyal union man, was determined that all his children would receive the formal education he had been denied. However, she abandoned her degree when her mother became terminally ill and returned to higher education at age 27 with two daughters of 7 and 3 in tow. After gaining a degree in 1977 in Latin with Greek and a PhD (on Apuleius' Latin novel, *The Golden Ass*), Paula had a variety of teaching and lecturing posts before joining the Open University Classical Studies Department in 1993. She has taught, researched and written widely on Latin literature and the refashioning of mythical narratives in film and television.

As mature students with family commitments, neither Annie nor Paula could ever have contemplated college on credit and they both support and where possible participate in the current protests against the privatization of education.

LIST OF PLATES

Note: Whilst every effort has been made to locate original certificates, in some instances those reproduced are of a later reprint or issue, but to the original design.

The majority of banner and certificate images were obtained from the People's History Museum (PHM), Manchester and the Working Class Movement Library (WCML), Salford. We are especially grateful to Phil Dunn (PHM) and Tara Sutton (WCML) for their assistance and for reducing costs. Fine art and sculpture reproductions owned by art galleries and museums were also purchased by the authors.

1. Photograph, late Roman mosaic floor, room of the ship owners and merchants of Cagliari, Sardinia, in the Forum of the Corporations, Ostia. Courtesy of Professor Mary Sullivan, Bluffton University, Ohio.
2. Certificate of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, 1866, A. J. Waudby. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
3. Banner of the Friendly Society of Sawyers, Whitehaven, 1838. Courtesy of the Beacon Collections, Copeland Borough Council.
4. Renaissance drawing from a medieval copy of a title page of codex, circa 354 CE. Featured in H. Stern, *Le Calendrier de 354*, Paris, 1953, plate 1.2.
5. Cremorne Gardens playbill advertisement, c. 1850. Courtesy of Kensington Central Library, photograph by John W. Rogers.
6. Print of the Confraternity of Farm Labourers, woodcut, 1771, Raynaud Sc. Musée National des Arts & Traditions Populaires, Paris.
7. Banner, Transport and General Workers' Union, Export A.12.C. Branch, post-1922. People's History Museum, Manchester.
8. Frontispiece, Workes of Beniamin Jonson, engraving, 1616. William Hole.
9. Certificate of the Order of Friendly Boiler Makers, 1844. Featured in J. E. Mortimer, *History of the Boilermakers Society, Volume 1, 1834–1906*, 48.
10. Certificate of the Stone Masons' Friendly Society, 1868, A. J. Waudby. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
11. *Penrhyn Quarry in 1832*, oil, 1832, Henry Hawkins. National Trust.
12. *Work*, oil, 1852–63, Ford Madox Brown. Manchester City Art Gallery.
13. *The Forge*, oil, 1844–47, James Sharples. Blackburn City Art Gallery, courtesy of the Sharples family.
14. Certificate of the United Society of Boiler Makers and Iron and Steel Ship Builders. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
15. Certificate of the London Society of Compositors, 1894, Alexander Gow. Featured in Leeson, *United We Stand*, 67.
16. Certificate of the United Machine Workers' Association, 1880s, Blades, East & Blades. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.

17. Emblem of the United Society of Brushmakers, 1839, J. Shury. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
18. Certificate of the Woolcombers' Union, 1838. Featured in E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, plate 111.
19. Frontispiece, *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition*, 1851, Mason Jackson after John Tenniel.
20. Frontispiece of the King James Bible, 1611, Cornelis Boel.
21. Certificate of the Friendly Society of Iron Founders of England, Ireland and Wales, 1857, John James Chant, engraved by John Saddler. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
22. Co-operative emblem (unfinished), pencil on paper, undated, James Sharples. People's History Museum, Manchester.
23. Certificate of the Amalgamated Union of the Operative Bakers and Confectioners Association, 1890s, engraved by J. M. Kronhein & Co. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
24. Certificate of the Amalgamated Society of General Toolmakers, Engineers and Machinists, c. 1892, Percival Jones. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
25. Certificate of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, 1916, designed and engraved by Goodall & Suddick. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
26. Photograph of well dressing, Tissington, Derbyshire, 1899. Courtesy of the Archives and Heritage Section of Birmingham City Library.
27. The chimneypiece in the Van Dyck room at Hatfield, Hertfordshire, c. 1610, attributed to Maximilian Colt. Featured in Whinney, *Sculpture in Britain*, 59. Image reproduced courtesy of Hatfield House.
28. Double tomb of Antonio Orso and Cardinal Michiel, Church of San Marcello al Corso, Rome, c. 1520, Sansovino.
29. Certificate of the Durham Miners' Association, 1890s, Alexander Gow. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
30. Emblem of the National Amalgamated Tin and Iron Plate Sheet Metal Workers and Braziers, 1900s. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
31. Banner of the No. 6 Branch of the United Order of General Labourers of London, c. 1911, manufactured by H. Bosworth. People's History Museum, Manchester.
32. Certificate of the Amalgamated Society of Operative Cotton Spinners, 1882, Gow & Butterfield. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
33. Certificate of the Amalgamated Association of Card and Blowing Room Operatives, 1890, Alexander Gow. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
34. Certificate of the Associated Carpenters and Joiners, 1880s, Alexander Gow. Featured in Leeson, *United We Stand*, 41.
35. Certificate of National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland, 1890, Alexander Gow. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
36. Certificate of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1891, Blades, East & Blades. Trades Union Congress Library.
37. Banner of the Operative Bricklayers' Society, c. 1865, A. J. Waudby. People's History Museum, Manchester.
38. Certificate of the Manchester Unity of the Operative Bricklayers, 1887, A. J. Waudby, printed by J. S. Dutton, engraved by C. H. Jeens and J. H. le Keux. People's History Museum, Manchester.

65. Banner of the National Union of General Workers, Tottenham Branch, c. 1919. Featured in Gorman, *Banner Bright*, 125.
66. Banner of the Durham Miners' Association, Witton Lodge, c. 1915. Courtesy of Kate Reeder, The Beamish Museum, The Living Museum of the North, Durham.
67. Advertisement, National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies' Procession, 13 June 1908, Caroline Watts, published by the Artists' Suffrage League. Courtesy of Diana Carey at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
68. 'Cartoon to celebrate May Day', Walter Crane, *The Sun*, 1903. People's History Museum, Manchester.
69. Suffrage poster, 1912, Louise Jacobs. Courtesy of Jenna Collins, Museum of London.
70. Anti-Suffragette poster, 1912, Harold Bird. Museum of London.
71. *Triumph of Labour*, 1891, Walter Crane, engraved by Henry Scheu. People's History Museum, Manchester.
72. Banner of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, Plymouth Branch, c. 1915. People's History Museum, Manchester.
73. *A Garland for May Day*, 1895, Walter Crane, engraved by Carl Hentschel (*Clarion*). People's History Museum, Manchester.
74. Banner of the National Union of General Workers, Chelmsford Branch, c. 1915. People's History Museum, Manchester.
75. May Day poster, *Socialist Reconstruction versus Capitalist Constriction*, 1909, Walter Crane. People's History Museum, Manchester.
76. Banner of the Dockers' Union, Export Branch, early 1890s. People's History Museum, Manchester.
77. *La Marseillaise, The Departure of the Volunteers of 1792*, Arc de Triomphe, Paris, 1836, François Rude.
78. Banner of the Electrical Trades Union, 1899, Walter Crane. People's History Museum, Manchester.
79. *Icarus*, 'Transport' frieze, 1896–97, Walter Crane. Courtesy of Worth Abbey. www.worthabbey.net
80. Banner of the Electrical Trades Union, 1899, Walter Crane. People's History Museum, Manchester.
81. Emblem of the United Pattern Makers' Association, 1897, Blades, East & Blades, Walter Crane and G. Twist. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
82. Banner of the National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers, Bristol District No. 1 Branch, after Walter Crane, 1893. People's History Museum, Manchester.
83. Banner of the National Builders', Labourers' and Construction Workers' Society, Shamrock Branch, c. 1915, George Tutill. People's History Museum, Manchester.
84. Emblem commemorating the opening in 1830 of the Steam Engine Makers' Society, Rochdale Branch No. 3, c. 1865. Working Class Movement Library, Salford.
85. Banner of the Workers' Union, Witney Branch, c. 1920. Featured in Gorman, *Banner Bright*, 134.
86. Banner of the National Union of Railwaymen, Stockton Branch, 1914. Courtesy of Stockton Museums.
87. *A Distinguished Member of the Humane Society*, oil, 1838. Sir Edwin Henry Landseer. British Museum.

INTRODUCTION

Paula James

This is the first comprehensive analysis of trade union emblems to address the genre, the designers and the social history at the heart of the images. These banners and certificates are very much part of an industrial and union heritage, as the emblems were the art of and for the toiling masses. *Art and Ideology* celebrates working-class culture and shows how it could be both innovative and derivative. Annie Ravenhill-Johnson's exploration of the artistry of the emblems sets these images of labour in their historical, cultural and ideological context. Practically and intellectually this has not been an easy task. John Gorman did wonderful work promoting research into the banners, and then writing about them in his volumes *Banner Bright* and *Images of Labour* in the 1970s. R. A. Leeson produced a marvellous and succinct book on the certificates in 1971. However, these visual records present significant challenges for historians of working-class culture.

Nick Mansfield (2004) argued cogently for the value of these emblems as insights into the material conditions and political movements of the Victorian working class. His chapter 'Radical Banners as Sites of Memory' in *Contested Sites: Commemorative, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* describes the documenting of surviving emblems in the National Banner Survey held at the People's History Museum. Yet Katy Layton-Jones (2008) notes in *Visual Resources* (vol. 24) that such artistic resources are still underused for the purposes of historical research. In the introduction to her 2008 article 'Visual Collections as Historical Evidence', she writes of the many practical obstacles to locating and using artefacts of this type.

Layton-Jones (2008) also argues that categorizing them under the heading of 'cultural history' tends to detach them from mainstream historical research and to reinforce the notion that 'visual history is fundamentally more fictionalized, and therefore less credible, than the written word' (106). Annie Ravenhill-Johnson's synthesized methodological approach to the artistic and ideological layers of the nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century trade union iconography should dispel any lingering doubts about the value of the banners and certificates for cultural and historical studies. The compass of her chapters is broad and yet there is still painstaking but exciting research to be done, as the conclusion to this book, 'Reprise and Review', indicates.

The Historical Narrative

In her introductory chapter, 'The Genre', Annie Ravenhill-Johnson explores the resignification of Greco-Roman, medieval and Renaissance architecture, figures and symbols in the emblem tradition, and analyses how these images served the representation and developing self-awareness of the growing industrial workforces during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Freemasonry and friendly societies had adopted and adapted classical, biblical and medieval depictions of crafts and craftsmen to illustrate the antiquity of their trade and to lend solemnity and legitimacy to the tradition of forming associations for protection and benefits.

The essay is a summary of the strategies employed by the trade clubs or corporations of the ancient world, the medieval guilds and, later in the seventeenth century, the friendly societies (representing a cross-section of professions) to promote their existence in pictures as well as in words. (The visual representations espoused by the friendly societies have inspired a good deal of literature and Daniel Weinbren produced useful reviews of these in his 2006 articles for *Social History* and *Cultural and Social History*.)

In short, there is a wide cultural and chronological range of artefacts depicting manual crafts, from mosaics, stained glass windows and sculptural reliefs, to (with the advent of printing) moralizing Books of Trade. The emblems of organized labour followed these traditions. Renaissance art, architecture and sculpture, the conventions of landscape painting and the more prestigious genres of mythical and biblical subjects all provided settings and structures that sanitized working conditions and idealized the workers themselves. A detailed account of the emblem's origins is given in the following chapter, 'The Emblem within the Emblem'. Many of the vignettes within the banners and certificates of the nineteenth century were inspired by classical, biblical and contemporary scenes of men plying their trade.

However, as Annie Ravenhill-Johnson demonstrates in these first two essays, the history of influences and trends is by no means straightforward. Gorman (1986) assumed that fairground canvasses had a direct influence upon the large pictorial designs of the banners produced by George Tutill (48). It seems likely that the traditions of trade association imagery and the visual delights of travelling shows, fairs and carnivals were intertwined and harked back to a common provenance. Trade bodies had a long history of enacting biblical and mythical scenes loosely connected with their crafts at public processions, pageants and festive occasions in general. Certainly, classical legends and legendary figures did not spring fully fledged into nineteenth-century emblems but were part of the artistic fabric of labour associations and popular culture throughout the centuries. Aspects of the staging and scenery of such performances as well as the stories they told were preserved in artefacts associated with both leisure and labour, and a commonality of themes blurred the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' art.

Fairground artists are not well documented but their banners shared an agenda with the trade union emblem, being forms of communication that Gorman (1986) saw as uniting the familiar and the elevated for general consumption (48–50). The National Fairground Archive based at the University of Sheffield has a companion

website tracing the colourful history of the travelling show, where it is noted that the academies and salons of Europe did not have the monopoly on 'heroic, monumental, passionate and often violent subject matter' (2009).

At the fairground, large-scale representations of historical and mythological scenes were intended to stir up interest and excitement in the casual viewer and entice them into a wondrous world of *trompe l'oeil* (the National Fairground Archive has a fascinating survey of its changing fashions and aesthetics). The art and architecture of the fairground continued to reflect the shifting shapes and technologies of town and country and marry up such features as classical carving with the contemporary and even the avant-garde.

The banners of organized labour aimed to invite the viewer into mythological and biblical scenes as players in a distant past. It reinforced a sense of belonging, a personal identification with a collective and its history. The notion of purposeful art is 'predicated upon skills of looking and interpreting', writes Kim Woods in her 2012 introduction to the Open University art history module. She observes that 'medieval thinkers seem to have assumed that ordinary people too were capable of thoughtful looking' (2). This is an important point because although the context of this statement is the dissemination of religious art of the sixteenth century, we should not dismiss the communicative power of the emblems however culturally complex their motifs and messages may have been.

The expectation that mythological figures and motifs might be familiar, even if their full import and 'back stories' were grasped only by the cognoscenti, is an issue underlying Chapter 3, 'Depicting the Worker' and will be revisited in the conclusion with a discussion of the Hercules (Greek: Herakles) figure. In this chapter, Annie Ravenhill-Johnson discusses the artistic ingenuity involved in constructing a positive visual narrative around industrial toil through the use of classical figures and motifs, recalling Marx's recognition that the Industrial Revolution called upon workers to manage machines of terrifying power and to tame the technological forces of factory production in his 1856 speech on the fourth anniversary of *The People's Paper.*

In his 1840s painting *The Forge*, James Sharples ennobled the toilers and altered the perception of the workplace as a fiery furnace, a purgatorial place or a gateway to hell, by portraying the white heat of the factory as a bright and heavenly portal. Sharples, a Bury blacksmith working in the Phoenix forge, played a seminal role in emblem iconography. His design for the newly formed Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Machinists, Millwrights, Smiths and Pattern Makers won the union competition for an official certificate of membership.

Sharples's *The Forge* featured in Jeremy Paxman's informative 2009 series for the BBC, *The Victorians*, along with other illustrations that celebrated the craft of ironworking such as Godfrey Sykes's *Sheffield Scythe Tilters*, painted a decade later. Paxman's book of the series (2009) summarizes Sharples's remarkable life (88–91), but the blacksmith's winning design and indeed the whole area of trade union art are not mentioned – and yet the Sharples certificate clearly influenced a number of middle-class artists who were commissioned to design new emblems for trade union executives and local branches.

Sharples followed an established tradition in high art with his positive portrayal of the blacksmith as a lofty hero albeit dressed in his workaday clothes. James Sharples elevated the worker in the forge by placing him high on the celestial ziggurat structure. His imaginative use of the flattened pyramid was taken up for subsequent banners and certificates across a sustained period of certificate production and the ziggurat as well as other aspects of the Sharples design influenced the Iron Founders, the Bakers and Confectioners and the Locomotive Engineers, whose colourful imagery is reproduced in the plates accompanying Chapter 4.

Annie Ravenhill-Johnson persuasively argues that this visual medium, the art of the certificate, which Sharples used to affirm the presence, power and identity of organized labour, took on its own cultural momentum. The foregrounding of the worker may even have found reflection in the composition of Ford Madox Brown's painting *Work*. It would not be surprising to discover that the art of the people, like their literature and music, contributed to and inspired middle-class cultural forms that might then reconfigure the collective identity of labour to their own purpose.

Annie Ravenhill-Johnson illustrates the monumental influences at work in the designs in Chapter 5, 'The Development of the Architecture of the Emblem'. The triumphal arch and the tomb façade, particularly the capitals and colonnades that framed Renaissance altarpieces, clearly inspired the impressive structures A. J. Waudby designed for the Bricklayers, Carpenters and Stone Masons. The classical tripartite arch formed a backdrop to allegorical tableaux during the medieval and Renaissance periods. Another important architectural structure was the portal, a secret and solemn gateway that kept the unskilled at bay. The depiction of the commemorative tomb also persisted in trade union emblems, a clear indication of a core aspect of these combinations, namely that they provided for working people in sickness and in health. The banners provided backdrops at burials as well as branch meetings. In this respect, Gwyn A. Williams's phrase 'cathedrals to labour' (Gorman 1986, 20) for the more splendid banners is perhaps more appropriate to their figurative content than to their structural form.

Annie Ravenhill-Johnson's unravelling of these significant strands in the artistic history of the emblems is important for classicists because banners and certificates reveal a cultural continuum in which Greek and Roman motifs stand out in the representation of the toiling classes. She demonstrates how frequently the principles of Roman monumental structures were referenced in the design of the banners and certificates although Gothic architecture also featured in the emblems. Their coexistence (sometimes within the same emblem) is a complicating factor, as the religious and political timbres of these opposing cultural trends cannot always be neatly aligned to particular trades and associations.

What appears on the nineteenth-century flattened canvas or the framed membership card reaches back across the centuries to a time when heroic figures of pagan and Christian iconography gave the gravitas of antiquity to a whole collective. Chapter 6 focuses upon the artist Arthur J. Waudby and the symbols of Freemasonry, and the decorative fancy of the visual narratives in such emblems is treated to a detailed exegesis. The pictorial allusions range across the historical, the classical, the biblical and the mythological.

As Annie Ravenhill-Johnson demonstrates in Chapter 7, 'Men, Myth and Machines', Waudby and like-minded emblem designers were operating within a common cultural framework as Sharples had done before them. The emblems display a sacred centre (the worker, or the patron saint of his trade, sometimes its legendary founder) that is the fulcrum of a master fiction about the continuity of labour across the centuries. Eventually machines became the central 'figures', and female abstractions, whilst human in form, could be viewed as statements about the alienation of labour in an age of industrial technology.

The Greeks and Romans provided the inspiration for deified abstracts such as Virtue, Justice and Truth. Female figures, when they do appear in the emblems, are predominantly classically garbed and sometimes scantily clad statues embodying these noble qualities. These finely robed 'classical women' lend nobility to the emblems but also could spice up their visual sermons on the benefits of unity, transparency and truth in the labouring classes' collectives. The moral high ground was left intact in much the same way as provocatively garbed girls were sanctioned in Victorian high art because they were semi-mythological creatures of a distant past.

In her following chapter, 'The Classical Woman', Annie Ravenhill-Johnson offers a more detailed discussion of the presence of the idealized female form to proclaim the eternally noble ethics of the working classes, and to express classical continuity sitting side by side with the newfangled men and their newfangled machinery. The emblems could transform the toilers into the modern heroes and gods of an industrial (and vulcanized) world. Just occasionally women at work are incorporated into the iconography but more usually they are shown as ideal and anonymous or appear in a variety of scenes as passive wives in receipt of union benefits.

European artists depicted women side by side with men as workers in industry and toilers in the fields. With the birth of the Soviet state and the emergence of a conscious and orchestrated revolutionary art (the banners and posters of nascent socialism), the regular portrayal of women as equal in labour entered the proletarian art form. Walter Crane, whose emblem designs (and related works in the traditions of agitational art) are analysed in Chapter 9, seems to celebrate the female figure as a socialist icon paving the way for a future of equality and plenty with an end to oppression and exploitation. However, she is invariably a saintly creature handing down liberty and benefits from on high. Annie Ravenhill-Johnson produces a trenchant critique of Crane's utopian vision and the part women play within his romantic aesthetics, but his images of rural merry England – very much at odds with 'its bleak industrial reality' (Spencer 1975, 157) – persisted in trade union emblems well into the twentieth century.

The final chapter, 'The Art of Copying', deals with the creative imitation that characterizes the designs of trade union banners and certificates, which are masterclasses in the art of copying for the discerning viewer. Victorian artists were trained to copy before being allowed to draw from life and working-class artists were given art primers, engravings and books as their resources. Those commissioned by the unions to design new banners developed formulaic frameworks for the emblems. Middle-class and

working-class artists copied freely from each other as well as from famous painters to produce a completely new hybrid genre in the history of visualization.

This brief navigation through the ten chapters does not do justice to the interpretative layers Annie Ravenhill-Johnson has incorporated into her detailed descriptions of the rich imagery that characterizes the emblems in all their variety. Her analysis of persistent motifs, messages, forms and themes certainly strengthen Gorman's promotion of the banners and certificates of organized labour as a genre well worthy of study for its political as well as its aesthetic implications.

Art and Ideology

We may find that we are battling with a many-headed hydra of issues that have so far resisted intellectual and theoretical conquest. In the conclusion, I rather rashly take on the role of 'respondent' to this research, not just as a classical commentator on the iconography but with the goal of deepening my own understanding of Marxist (and Leninist) views on art and revolution, although art in the service of socialism may seem a far cry from the predominantly reassuring discourse Annie Ravenhill-Johnson reveals in the Victorian and Edwardian images of labour.

In the Open University Art Foundation course, Joan Bellamy (1986) writes:

> Trade union certificates have an obvious utilitarian function: they are also rich in cultural significance. Through them, different sections of the working-class movement expressed a view of their role in society, their claim on it and their contribution to it. They created the means of expressing and reinforcing their own identity even if the forms of expression carried uncritically elements of the dominant culture of the time. (58)

The classical symbolism the working-class leaders adopted in the banners and the certificates certainly played its part in enhancing the image of the new unions. The creative and imaginative, sometimes humorous, borrowing from the artistic output of Greece and Rome, not to mention the use of Latin *sententiae* in the emblems, was a flattering imitation of the culture of the ruling classes. Reid argues in his 1992 book, *Social Classes and Social Relations in Britain 1850–1914*, that these ruling classes were, even well into the industrial nineteenth century, predominantly composed of the landed aristocracy. The bankers and merchants played their part but the manufacturers were quite parochial in their political activity and both sectors became stakeholders in the existing culture. The early emblems of unionism were not confrontational. However, Bellamy is surely right to view skilled labour's proclamation of presence and strength through references to the classical past as a statement of power and a claim to the familiar cultural insignia of that power.

Annie Ravenhill-Johnson identifies the persistence of a nonthreatening and accommodating message in the emblems and this seems to characterize Sharples's influential ASE design, but she also acknowledges that the ASE certificate ennobled

the worker by means of classical iconography. However, the very same structure (the flattened pyramid or ziggurat) that elevated him also leaves us a visual record of his gradual demotion. Whilst the worker continued to find a niche in the architecture of the banner, he could be ousted from the highest places by the founders of the craft (historical, biblical and mythical) and the leaders of the union. This was not necessarily a universal trend within the more elaborate banner and certificate designs but it is an indication that the union branches that commissioned emblems from middle-class artists were comfortable with their representation of working men's associations as bastions of tradition and conservatism.

Both Adam Smith in his *Wealth of the Nations* (1776) and Karl Marx in *Capital* (1867) recognized that the division of labour reduced the status of skilled workers and that they would be engaged in regular battles (in the march of capital towards mechanization and modernization) to retain and regain the dignity, respectability and independence their tools bestowed upon them. The role of Greek and Roman features and figures in the banners and certificates of the period is an aspect of the conservatism that characterized the unions of the skilled, but we should not downplay the potential of classical culture to empower the working classes generally.

When a new wave of union organization embraced the manual labourers, the Dockers' strike banner displayed a Herculean hero strangling the snake of capitalism. The figure of Hercules has a long history in pagan iconography and the culture of Christian nations. His proletarianization during the French Revolution was by no means straightforward (more of which in the final pages). For this reason, the shifting attributes of mythical and legendary figures that appear on the Victorian emblems deserve more attention from classicists working in the reception of the ancient world. Bradley (2009) explores representations of Roman rule in popular culture as well as treading the more familiar ground of the high culture of academic scholarship and political commentary; but here as elsewhere the genre of trade union art seems to have slipped out of sight.

Marx, Engels and, later, Lenin all championed the role of education and access to the totality of human culture as a part of the revolutionary development of the oppressed. However, the creative artistry of the emblem could simultaneously reflect and reinforce the ideological colonization of working-class consciousness. Other banners during the Great Strike for the Dockers' tanner proclaimed that workers and employers should labour together to make the British Empire as great as the Roman Empire.

This identification sends a rather bleak message to left-wing classicists: even in the later and more militant trade unions of the unskilled and the skilled, the acquisition of Greek and Roman culture by organized labour ultimately served the interests of capitalism. In short, classics corrupts, or did in this historical context; but, of course, this intentionally provocative statement is bound to be a simplification of both the aesthetics and the politics of the emblems under study. Certain key classical figures become multifaceted signifiers. Symbols can never stand alone. Any symbol can and should be extracted and examined for its cultural properties; but then these existing

properties have to be reappraised in the context of the artefact in which it appears and the historic circumstances of that artefact's production. According to Mansfield (in Pickering and Tyrell 2004, 32–3) during discussions amongst labour historians from 1999 to 2000 Dorothy Thompson suggested that Union Jacks and crowns on radical banners should be seen as 'icons of contested loyalty in a fluid political discourse'. Linda Colley observes, 'Crudely, but also fundamentally, class and nation in Britain at this time were not antithetical but two sides of the same historical process' (1986, 100). This approach may offer a less ideologically stark way of interpreting the allusions to the Roman Empire in the agitational banners born out of bitter struggles with the bourgeoisie.

In the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx writes,

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language. (Padover 1971, 245–6)

In his judgement on the revolutionary struggle in France of 1789 and its brief resurrection in 1848, Marx goes on to comment in this same section on the way in which the artistic expressions of the conflict could cloud the fact that the real winners were the bourgeoisie:

> But unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and battles of peoples to bring it into being. And in the classically austere traditions of the Roman republic its gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to keep their enthusiasm on the high plane of the great historical tragedy. (244–6)

Marx contrasts these classical symbols with 'speech, passion and illusions from the Old Testament' employed by the much earlier English bourgeois revolution of the seventeenth century spearheaded by Oliver Cromwell (246). He concludes that the social revolutionary movement of the nineteenth century could not draw its poetry from the past but only from the future. We should not be surprised if the aesthetics of the organizations of labour in Victorian Britain that did not constitute a social revolution continued to draw their visual poetry from the past, combining biblical and classical symbols and signifiers to claim their right to recognition. The banners and

other emblems are beset by a trade union consciousness and this is expressed in the iconography they adopted, even in times of great militancy.

In Britain, as Annie Ravenhill-Johnson observes, socialism and trade unionism were never happy bedfellows. Her chapter on Walter Crane highlights his ultimately revisionist message of utopian socialism sold to the working classes through the deceptive filter of agitational art. Crane transformed Marx and Engels's vision of a future communist society with a socially integrated and nonalienated workforce in full possession of technologically advanced forces of production into an idealized medieval age with happy toilers sporting peasant garb – and once again classical images kick in. The male workforce is disempowered and, as previously noted, a feminine Liberty does not so much lead the people (as she did in the imagery of postrevolutionary France) as hover over them like a classical deity (Nike or Victory) or as a remote and beneficent angel.

Of course, we have to recognize the pitfalls of viewing the emblems as a social barometer as they cannot capture the various ideological moods of the labouring masses in the rich range of all their manifestations. Their lives and attitudes emerge from reports and surveys, for instance the nineteenth-century investigations of Henry Mayhew and then Charles Booth (see Englander and O'Day (1998) for a sound and informative critique of Mayhew's and Booth's research and its historical and sociological significance). Friedrich Engels's *Conditions of the English Working Classes* (1844) remains essential reading for scholars of the first half of the century and has been cited in Annie Ravenhill-Johnson's essays.

There were plenty of pamphlets and pictures in circulation in which satire and social comment would provide an antidote to the more conciliatory discourse of many trade union emblems. As for militancy in the factories, at one end of the spectrum there might be small individual acts of defiance and, at the other (particularly among women workers), walkouts, spontaneous strikes and threats of violence towards strike breakers, which indicated a keen understanding of capitalist society as one of irreconcilable differences.

Important research is being done by Catherine Feeny at the University of Manchester on the dissemination of Marx's *Capital* in the British Isles from 1881 to 1940. Although this bulky and difficult treatise had a limited impact on socialist theory in the labour movement, Marx's shorter and more accessible writings did reach and influence portions of the working classes; in times of economic crisis they looked back to agitational works, especially *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Even without exposure to communist ideology, there were those ready to reject the royalist attitudes and patriotic poses of trade union iconography and to counterpose the pride in empire and commonwealth it might display.

There have been two distinct schools of thought among historians (the Mackenzie and Porter divide), one of which claims that images of empire steeped in notions of the racial superiority of the colonizers permeated children's books, popular entertainments and education at all levels, whilst the alternative picture is of an empire that belonged to the middle and upper class, at least up until the 1880s, with a working class largely

indifferent to its rhetoric and reality. Frank, Horner and Stewart's 2010 collection, *The British Labour Movement and Imperialism*, comprises essays on the key issues of the interaction of the working classes with empire and popular imperial culture. On the overarching conundrum of the class-consciousness of the British workforce, it is worth revisiting Gorman's comments about the radical leaders of the new unions who were contemptuous of the older corporate craft unions as 'coffin clubs for cowardly and constipated "labour aristocrats"':

> In many ways these 'new model' unionists were in fact more coherently class conscious than their predecessors; at the crunch their class commitment was apparent – as the occasional sharp and swinging banner broke the general pattern of resolute 'good intent'. But it was a class-consciousness which was essentially corporate, integrated into the system which they largely accepted and tried to work to the benefit of their class. (1986, 18)

By the end of this volume, the reader may with some justification conclude that, although the British banner and certificate genre as developed through the nineteenth century was the first visual representation of the working people as a class *in* itself under capitalism, the creators (and many of the consumers) of this distinct art for organized labour in Victorian Britain were not developing the necessary consciousness (identified by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* as a prerequisite of revolutionary change), i.e. that of the class *for* itself. This question will be revisited in the concluding chapter.

Chapter 1

THE GENRE

Annie Ravenhill-Johnson

There are many excellent books in existence dedicated to trade unions, their histories and their outward form of display – banners, certificates, posters, regalia, medals, pottery and ephemera. The intention of this book is to cover a previously neglected field – how the artists who devised the emblems of the Victorian and Edwardian eras conceived their ideas. Our inspiration lies with the groundbreaking work of Joan Bellamy, who opened up this field of exploration in the Open University Art Foundation course.[1]

Little exists on the commissioning of banners and certificates. Minute books and monthly records of the unions and friendly societies, if they record the matter at all, often merely state that a particular artist has been contracted to perform the work for a given amount of money. In some cases, the printers themselves (who also produced commercial advertising posters) designed the certificates. Sometimes the certificates were issued with a 'key' in order to explain the intricacies of the iconography to the union members. The key was a separate sheet of paper on which was reproduced a scaled down version of the emblem and an explanation beneath. Sometimes the explanation described the scenes above and why they were included, but others printed a number beside certain figures or scenes with a list of the numbers beneath and a very basic identification or explanation of what was portrayed.[2] Keys also appear in trade journals of the period. However, it is often only by studying the emblems embodied in the certificates and banners that we are able to deduce from the iconography what the union set out to portray about itself, the identity that the artist (often of the middle classes) chose to confer upon on it or the unwitting testimony it reveals about prevailing social conditions.

The purchase of a certificate by a union member would often be a major outlay, to be framed and proudly displayed in the home as proof of the wage earner's standing within the family, the workplace and the community. The more intricate and detailed the certificate, the more prestigious it would seem, the more value for money it would appear to embody and the more time and attention could be given in perusing and examining it. Similarly, the larger, the more colourful, the more elaborate the banner,

with its gilded poles, fringing, ropes and tassels, the greater the importance it would achieve in a march, the greater would be the pride of those bearing it and marching with it and the greater would be the impact on the viewing audience. Some banners were so huge that they were too large to be carried and were mounted on specially designed wheeled frameworks that were pushed along. Size really mattered! So banners, great painted silken sails, formed a major focus moving through a choreographed procession. But, unlike certificates, they needed to be easily read and understood from a distance, so their designs are frequently less complex, bolder and more striking.

The roots of trade union membership are embedded deep in social history. In ancient Greece and Rome, trade clubs existed into which members paid subscriptions and from which they received hardship benefits. Plutarch mentions the *collegia opificum* instituted by Numa Pompilius, which included guilds of tradesmen.[3] Usually associated with the goddess Minerva/Athena, her temple in Rome on the Aventine Hill was both a religious space and a business meeting place,[4] and throughout the Roman Empire tradesmen met in their *schola* in towns, for trade protection, socializing and for funerary grants to cover the costs of burial in the *collegium* or in a public *columbarium*. Elected officials administered the finances.

In second-century Ostia, grain was imported from Roman colonies and stored in warehouses for onward distribution. The Forum of the Corporations was a large, colonnaded square containing the offices of some seventy merchants and ship owners who conducted their business in the forum. Each room was paved with a floor mosaic identifying the particular type of business carried out there. The room of the ship owners and merchants of Cagliari, Sardinia, for example, was paved with a black-and-white tesserae mosaic depicting a merchant sailing vessel flanked by two *rutellae* or grain measures (Plate 1), and from this type of trade emblem we see the origins of later trade union emblems.

During the Middle Ages, guilds – either religious fraternities or trade fraternities – provided sickness benefits and financial assistance for widows and orphans. The growing power of the medieval guilds resulted in the depiction in high art of the urban craftsmen. Forty-seven of the stained glass windows of the twelfth-century Chartres Cathedral were donated by the guilds and illustrate the occupations of their donors. Vincent of Beauvais, the great Dominican theologian who died circa 1262, author of the *Speculum Maius* (the 'Great Mirror'), an encyclopaedia and history of the world, believed that the *artes* were a means of mitigating Adam's Original Sin, the consequence of which was manual labour. Crafts became symbols of the *arts mécaniques* and appear, for example, in reliefs by Andrea Pisano and his workshop on the campanile of Florence Cathedral. With the advent of printing, moralizing Books of Trade were published in Britain until the middle of the nineteenth century, offshoots of this tradition.[5]

From the seventeenth century, friendly societies were founded. Victoria Solt Dennis, in her excellent book *Discovering Friendly and Fraternal Societies: Their Badges and Regalia*, relates how members, drawn from a cross-section of trades and professions, paid into a fund that provided sickness benefit, superannuation benefit and burial monies and how, after 1793, friendly societies were legalized under the Rose Act as corporate

bodies. She describes how these societies adopted the outer forms of ritual and secrecy of Freemasonry with initiation ordeals, sworn oaths, passwords and gestures of recognition, and how each meeting ended in dining and drinking. They covered a variety of interests from serious debating clubs to riotous drinking clubs and, by the nineteenth century, women were forming their own societies.[6]

Workers in a particular trade also joined together in trade clubs to air grievances, to make demands such as shorter working hours, to protect their interests by controlling admission to their trade and to protect ancient privileges guaranteed by Parliament. Prior to the nineteenth century, the movement was limited to a very few skilled workers in the larger conurbations, meeting usually in public houses, some of which still bear their names today, for example, 'The Bricklayers' Arms'.

The Enclosure Acts (1770–1820) ended traditional rights such as the collecting of wood for fuel, the grazing of livestock and the mowing of hay on common land. These were major blows that, together with the loss of the few acres villagers farmed for themselves, resulted in whole communities being forced off the land. The result was the creation of a new landless class now entirely dependent upon wages. They moved in to swell the labour forces of the growing industrial cities where they were confronted with long hours, low wages and appalling housing conditions.

The journeyman craftsman found himself working with many others of his own kind in the large industrial complexes, where the chances now of his ever becoming a master himself had become minimal. It is at this time that trade unionism really took hold. It begins in groups of workers banding together to protect their interests, to restrict admission to their trade or to fight against a particular injustice. However, the activities of these trade clubs and societies became illegal under the Unlawful Oaths Act of 1797, the Unlawful Societies Act of 1799 (not repealed until 1967) and the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, when it was feared that revolutionary influences in France and republican ideas from America (promoted in popular books by authors such as Tom Paine)[7] could cause the British working classes to rise in a revolution for democracy and political reform. The acts also applied, of course, to trade combinations by employers but were not enforced in that regard. Freemasonry was also exempt, due to its large number of aristocratic and royal members but, even so, every lodge was forced to register with a magistrate, pay a fee and produce a list of members.

Peace with France had coincided with widespread unemployment, not only for the many thousands of out-of-work fighting men but, due to the expansion of factory mechanization, for domestic hand loom weavers as well. The power loom, the steam hammer and the spinning machine took away work from the individual working at home, and relocated this work in the factory or mill. This new organization of labour brought with it the division of labour in order to speed up production and turn out cheaper goods.

Before the acts, any 'conspiracy to raise wages' was already punishable in law.[8] However, during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the Luddite Movement of 1812–15, led by the mythical 'Ned Ludd', revealed that these acts were not effective in preventing the joining together of workers who saw their livelihoods threatened

by the new steam-driven machines. In Nottingham, for example, in March 1811, the riots there resulted in the destruction of 60 of the new mechanized stocking frames. Reprisals against the Luddites were harsh, with transportation, imprisonment and even the death penalty. In Manchester, workers meeting at St Peter's Fields in 1819 were cut down in the 'Peterloo Massacre'. In 1815, employers such as the Lancashire firm of Butterworth, Brooks and Co., were able to advertise employment for boys and women as journeymen who were 'independent of combination'.[9] But in reducing workers to starvation wages, capitalism ruined its own home market and became reliant upon export markets.

The restrictions imposed by the Combination Acts resulted in the growth of friendly societies, which remained legal because they existed ostensibly not for the improvement of wages or working conditions, but for insurance purposes and for the provision of social gatherings such as annual family outings and dinners. However, in defiance of the Unlawful Oaths Act of 1797, which could inflict seven years' transportation on anyone convicted, some of these societies, such as the Agricultural Friendly Society set up by the Tolpuddle Martyrs, still defiantly employed sworn oaths of secrecy in their ritualistic admission, initiation or 'making of members' ceremonies, with the threats of severe injury or even death to anyone who revealed them. It was dangerous for any trade union records to be kept so we know little of the unions during these years. The Iron Founders, for example, met on dark nights out on lonely moors and kept their records buried in the ground. Postgate describes the rituals of the Stone Masons in which the lodge was opened by the singing of an anthem, followed by a prayer. The Inside Tyler brought in the new recruits, the Doxology was sung[10] and the new recruits were told to kneel and read the Ninetieth Psalm,[11] after which the President addressed them and a further hymn was sung. In darkness, the President requested that they be given light, then pointed to a skeleton and delivered a sermon on how death was every man's destiny. Candidates were then sworn in on the Bible, and swore on their own lives to keep all rituals secret.[12]

In 1824, the Combination Acts were repealed (largely due to the efforts of Joseph Hume and Francis Place, and also the negligence of MPs in reading the actual wording), making trade union membership legal. Employers were outraged, and lobbied for the restoration of the acts. However, even half a century after the repeal of the Combination Acts, the records of the unions still reflected those years of fear of discovery and trade protection. In 1873, the *September Monthly Report of the United Society of Boiler Makers and Iron Ship Builders* records that the Secretary had difficulty each quarter sending out 'the pass-words'. As some lodges received many reports, the one containing the quarterly password was falling into the hands of 'private members' (i.e. ordinary members), with the result that the lodge officers were not receiving them. To overcome the problem, a key to the passwords would thenceforth be printed in the Initiation Book, with a copy sent to all lodges, featuring the 'Hebrew alphabet' with the 'English alphabet' printed directly above it. A key, of course, is itself symbolic of the unlocking of something such as a door that has been locked to keep people out or secrets in. In future, the password printed 'in Hebrew'

would be sent out each quarter in the *Monthly Reports*, and by comparing the letters to the 'English alphabet', the new password would be revealed.[13]

The union, with its social strata and hierarchy, was a class system in itself within the broader class system of Victorian society. Much of its new imagery referred to the secrecy of its clandestine years and its links with Freemasonry, which had also evolved from a medieval craft guild to a society of brothers engaged not in manual labour, but in philosophical work. Trade unions organized themselves along lines of the infrastructure of Freemasonry, with passwords, officers, regalia, rituals, lodges and grand lodges. In their lodges, the skilled craftsman and the factory worker alike bonded together for mutual protection, but almost as a by-product of membership they also learned organizational and leadership skills that would eventually lead to the formation by the working classes of their own political party. The history of the developments of trade unions after the repeal of the Combination Acts is well documented and no purpose is served by reproducing it here. Suffice to say that by the middle of the nineteenth century, new membership certificates for the home and banners for public display were being produced, the large majority of which were formed in terms of the classical, which, from the 1820s, had been undergoing an immensely popular revival in architecture, art and sculpture. The classical speaks of rationality, Roman Republican values and democracy. However, there was also a minority of unions and friendly societies who employed the Gothic as their way of representing themselves, influenced by the Gothic Revival. The great Victorian architect Pugin saw the Gothic as the expression of religious values embodied in British medieval architecture, but of course its roots are French, originating in the Church of St Denis of Abbot Suger.

Chartism entered the political field in 1837, originating in the London Working Men's Association. It proposed a radical charter of 'universal' suffrage (by 'universal', however, it meant for men only), annual parliaments, secret ballots, no property qualifications for Members of Parliament, salaries for MPs and equal electoral districts. The movement was divided into those who wished to achieve these aims by force and those who merely advocated moral reform. These internal rifts, along with stiff government repressive measures, eventually resulted in the demise of Chartism in the 1850s, but not before London had been so intimidated by a Chartist rally held there in 1848 that the city was fortified and armed, anticipating rioting and revolution that did not happen.

Benefits first offered by the savings clubs of friendly societies became more and more important in the nineteenth century when the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 abolished parish relief for paupers in their homes and brought in the cruel conditions of the workhouse. The Anatomy Act of 1822 allowed the bodies of those who died in the workhouse to be collected by medical schools for dissection, saving the cost to the parish of burial. Under their 1839 Rule Book, when a member of the Order of Friendly Boiler Makers was thrown out of work, every man in his branch was required to claim an extra shilling a day from their employer to donate to him. If an employer refused, members in other workshops or yards were informed and expected not to take up any future employment there. Men also charged employers double