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Abstract: This article examines the social role of literacy in a period of rapid commercial development and growing economic inequality. It shows how tradesmen and others of similar rank used reading and writing to create a powerful identity that cut across some of the sharpening divisions in wealth in England from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. Growing numbers of precariously positioned 'middling' men and women took advantage of the spread of literacy to construct social roles for themselves based on godly work, vocational knowledge and occupational fraternity. Using a uniquely voluminous collection of notebooks produced by one Essex tradesman as a foundation, the article draws on other examples of non-elite writing and cheap print to reveal a broad literary culture that was emerging in provincial towns at this time. Through this, it connects the historiography of social structure and economic change to the growing research on non-elite literacy and life-writing. Taken together, these findings suggest that the existing narrative of early modern 'social polarisation' should be revisited.

The Essex town of Coggeshall was not known for literary genius. It inspired no *Hamlet* nor *Paradise Lost* nor even a *Pilgrim's Progress*. Its only published authors were two clergymen who spent a few years there in 1640s.¹ As will be seen, it gave the world at least one writer worthy of further attention, but the town did not have a reputation for poetry or prose.

Instead, it was famed for making cloth, the celebrated Coggeshall baize or 'bays'. This popular fabric was sold in the London market and far beyond, bringing huge sums to the town and funding the construction of many fine merchant's houses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.² The industry also brought profound economic inequality and sometimes deep misery. Home to around 2,000 people by 1670, the social structure here was highly polarised and the textile trade was dominated by a small elite, where a single clothier might employ hundreds of combers, weavers and spinners.³ It was a town beset by the harsh cycles of boom and bust caused by changing fashions and fragile trading networks. Coggeshall was reportedly 'a very poore towne and unruly' during the export crisis of 1629, suffered similarly due to 'the decay of trading' in 1637, 1640, 1652 and 1675, and witnessed two food riots during the hungry 1690s.⁴ Here, even well-established tradesmen frequently 'broke' due to sudden insolvency.⁵ As a result, it was a town of highly skilled workers, enterprising employers and sharp extremes of wealth and poverty.

It was, then, a place lauded for looms rather than literature. Yet, to call it unlettered would be a mistake. Over a third of Essex men could sign their name by the 1640s and this had risen to almost half by the 1690s.⁶ Although we lack figures for Coggeshall itself, the literacy rate in towns was usually higher than the county average. Clergymen informally 'kept a school' here in the mid-sixteenth century and an endowment funding 'a school-house there for teaching 20 or 30 poor children, grammar, reading and writing' was confirmed in 1658.⁷ Many, if not most, of the town's clothiers, combers and weavers were able to read and perhaps even write by the later seventeenth century. Coggeshall offers, therefore, a promising site for investigating the intersection of work, literacy and identity.

Such an opportunity is especially valuable in light of recent scholarship. It is now well known that major economic and cultural shifts meant that the social order in early modern England was neither stable nor simple. Decades of research have demonstrated that new groups, differentiated by both wealth and education, were emerging in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Since the work of Margaret Spufford, Keith Wrightson and David Levine in the 1970s, scholars have debated the role of literacy in an age of growing 'social polarisation'.⁸ More recently, Alexandra Shepard and other

I am very grateful to Sarah Birt, Henry French, Mark Hailwood, Jonathan Healey, Charlie Taverner, Susan Wiseman, the anonymous reviewers and the editor Matt Karush for their comments and suggestions.

¹ Obadiah Sedgwick, *The Doubting Beleever* (1641); John Owen, *A Vision of Unchangeable Free Mercy* (1646).

² Eileen Power, *The Paycockes of Coggeshall* (1919).

³ Catherine Furguson et al., *Essex Hearth Tax Return: Michelmas 1670* (2014), pp. 42-7, 509; Henry French, *The Middle Sort of People in Provincial England, 1600-1750* (2007), pp. 32-48; John Walter, *Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: The Colchester Plunderers* (1999), ch. 7.

⁴ Walter, *Understanding*, p. 256; The National Archives at Kew (hereafter TNA), SP 16/344, f. 34; TNA, SP 16/355, f. 116; TNA, SP 16/475, f. 92; TNA, SP 18/25, f. 79; Essex Record Office (hereafter ERO), Q/SO 2, f. 107; ERO, Q/SO 3, p. 7; Brotherton Library University of Leeds (BLUL), MS 8, pp. 71, 75.

⁵ BLUL, MS 8, pp. 70, 75, 76, 84. On the prevalence of 'breaking' (informal bankruptcy), see Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (1998), ch. 9.

⁶ David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (1980), pp. 73, 100.

⁷ Bryan Dale, *The Annals of Coggeshall* (1863), pp. 116, 140, 244.

⁸ Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villages in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1974); Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700* (1979). It

historians have begun to provide systematic analysis of court depositions to reveal how ordinary men and women described their own place in society, finding that they often had a very specific and finely-grained notion of their status, defined by their possessions, livelihood, gender, family and age.⁹ Unfortunately, far fewer sources survive showing how common people expressed their social identity through reading and writing. Yet, if we hope to understand how they made sense of their world, then reading the texts that they produced themselves is essential. Innumerable studies have examined the ‘life-writing’ of elite men and women.¹⁰ A much smaller number of scholars have offered close analysis of the narratives of a handful of English artificers and people of similar rank, which has proven that literacy was crucial to their sense of self.¹¹ Still, these two scholarly approaches – the first focused on questions of social and occupational structure, the second focused on questions of individual writing and reading practices – have only rarely overlapped. A recent study by Tawny Paul of three eighteenth-century men from the lower end of the ‘middling’ ranks offers an invaluable analysis of how they dealt with their occupational ambiguity in their writings, but much remains to be learned.¹²

Thanks to a man named Joseph Bufton and a bit of archival good luck, Coggeshall is unique among the small towns of seventeenth-century England in the opportunity it presents to the historian to pursue such questions. He was born here in 1651 and spent his whole life working in the cloth trade in this part of Essex, dying in the nearby village of Castle Heddingham in 1718.¹³ What made Bufton truly exceptional among his fellow tradesmen was the fact that he filled dozens of volumes of notebooks with his own tidy script, eleven of which have survived the ensuing centuries.¹⁴ It is therefore possible to get a much better sense of the relationship between his economic life, literary practices and social identity than for almost any other working man or woman from this period.

would be impossible to list all subsequent work on this topic as it would encompass almost the whole field of early modern English social history, but particularly important to my own thinking have been Susan Dwyer Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England* (1988); Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (2001); French, *Middle*; Steve Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, c.1550-1640* (2000); Margaret Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (1996); Andy Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict: The Peak Country, 1520-1770* (1999); Keith Wrightson, ‘Estates, Degrees and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England’ in Penelope Corfield (ed.), *Language, History and Class* (1991), pp. 30-52.

⁹ Alexandra Shepard, *Accounting for Oneself: Worth, Status and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (2015). See also the important ongoing research projects on work and occupational structure at Exeter (earlymodernwomenswork.wordpress.com) and Cambridge (campop.geog.cam.ac.uk/research/occupations).

¹⁰ For a recent summary of the scholarship, see Adam Smyth, *Autobiography in Early Modern England* (2010), pp. 7-14.

¹¹ Margaret Spufford, ‘First Steps in Literacy: The Reading and Writing Experiences of the Humblest Seventeenth-Century Autobiographers’, *Social History*, 4:3 (1979), pp. 407-35; Paul Seaver, *Wallington’s World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (1985); Patricia Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility in Early Modern England* (2006), ch. 5-7; Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers, 1660-1800* (2009), ch. 3-4; Matthew Kadane, *The Watchful Clothier: The Life of an Eighteenth-Century Protestant Capitalist* (2013); Brodie Waddell, ‘Writing History from Below: Chronicling and Record-Keeping in Early Modern England’, *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), pp. 239-64. For useful overview which draws on sources from across Europe, see James Amelang, *The Flight of Icarus: Artisan Autobiography in Early Modern Europe* (1998).

¹² Tawny Paul, ‘Accounting for Men’s Work: Multiple Employments and Occupational Identities in Early Modern England’, *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), pp. 26-46.

¹³ BLUL, MS 10, f. 39; ERO, D/P 36/1/1, p. 110; ERO, D/AMW 12/129; ERO, D/P 48/1/2. For previous work on Bufton, see French, *Middle*, pp. 244-50; E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (1991), pp. 58-63; Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism* (2000), pp. 28-31; Brodie Waddell, *God, Duty and Community in English Economic Life* (2012), pp. 199-202; Waddell, ‘Writing’.

¹⁴ ERO, D/DBm Z7-Z14; BLUL, MS 8-10.

Through a close analysis of Bufton, his manuscripts, and his town, this article shows how writing served as a powerful tool in his attempts to find his place in a community distinguished by harsh inequalities and commercial instability. As will be seen, 'godliness' offered one answer but so too did notions of 'credit', 'skill' and 'the trade' itself. In addition, this article sets Bufton and Coggeshall in a much broader context by examining him alongside other men and women in comparable circumstances. While he may have been extraordinary in the volume of his writing, his experience was far from unique. In some ways, Bufton's life exemplified the huge social and cultural shifts that shook early modern society.

1. Clothier or comber?

Joseph Bufton did not come from the top or bottom ranks of English society. He was not a gentleman or a clergyman, and he lacked a grammar school education, much less a university degree. Yet he was also not an illiterate pauper or an unskilled labourer, unable to even sign his own name. Beyond this, much ambiguity remains. Two very different stories could be told about Joseph Bufton and his social position in the town of Coggeshall.

In one story, he is a man of substance and status. His father, John Bufton the elder, certainly occupied an influential economic position as he was among the twenty 'Clothiers of Coggeshall' who petitioned the Protectorate's Council for Trade for the right to establish a self-governing company in 1652.¹⁵ By 1671, he had a large house on Church Street with five hearths, placing him in the top ten percent of householders in the town, and he repeatedly served in parish office as a questman, overseer of the poor, surveyor of the highways and churchwarden.¹⁶ Moreover, John was listed as a 'clothier' in at least four documents over the course of his lifetime, including on a £50 land conveyance.¹⁷ This occupational title was usually accorded to the wealthy men in the upper levels of the cloth trade's hierarchy who 'put out' – sub-contracted – the actual production process to spinners, combers and weavers.¹⁸

One might assume that Joseph simply followed in his father's footsteps. After all, he too was described as a 'clothier' when he served as a trustee for a local charity in 1695 and again when he made up his will in 1717.¹⁹ Even before his father's death, he could be seen riding around Essex as part of the 'putting out' process. At the end of a *Goldsmith's Almanack* he lists his itinerary from 7 April 1690 to 1 April 1695. Over these five years, Bufton recorded making 58 journeys from Coggeshall 'to Spinners' who presumably lived in nearby villages, 54 to the large town of Colchester where much of the county's cloth was first sold, and 18 to London which hosted the most important

¹⁵ TNA, SP 18/25, f. 78-79.

¹⁶ Ferguson (ed.), *Essex Hearth Tax*, pp. 445, 503; ERO, D/P 36/25/31 (property on Church Street in 1676); ERO, D/P 36/8/1 (questman in 1636; overseer in 1644, 1659 and 1675; surveyor in 1650; churchwarden in 1653 and 1671). Only 47 of Great Coggeshall's 460 households had five or more hearths.

¹⁷ ERO, D/DQ 48/1; ERO, D/P 36/25/17, 18, 31. Joseph's elder brother, John Bufton junior, was likewise a 'clothier' in 1671 and 1695, though as he spent almost the entire period 1678 to 1708 in Ireland, his economic position is even more elusive than his sibling's: ERO, D/P 36/25/30; ERO, D/P 36/25/32.

¹⁸ For the wealth of 'clothiers' compared to others in the cloth trade (clothworker, weaver, comber, etc.), see Eric Kerridge, *Textile Manufactures in Early Modern England* (1985), pp. 193-5; French, *Middle*, pp. 42-4; Shepard, *Accounting*, p. 74; K.H. Burley, 'An Essex Clothier in the Eighteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 11:2 (1958), pp. 291-2.

¹⁹ ERO, D/P 36/25/32; ERO, D/AMW 12/129.

cloth market of all.²⁰ In the years that followed, some of Bufton's jottings hint at rising wealth and authority. In the later 1690s, for example, he paid his sister Rebecca 'Thirty shillings for a yeares wages', presumably for keeping house as a servant, and he was able to lend his future brother-in-law Samuel Sparhawk the sizable sum of £50.²¹ By the end of his life, he had amassed enough wealth to make ten bequests to various kinfolk including £45 in money, £10 in cancelled debt, the title to an unspecified property in Stoneham Street, and the remainder of his 'estate be it ready money, bedding, linen, pewter, books, a cupboard, wearing apparel, &c.'. ²² He was, then, apparently an enterprising and successful trader.

However, one might instead use many of the same records to tell a very different story. In this narrative, Bufton is a painstaking labouring man who failed to escape from the subservience of service to a master. For example, his family's position was not necessarily as strong as it first appeared. Although his father was undoubtedly a well-established householder, his wealth and influence may have been declining. John Bufton was not important enough to be elected as one of the scores of 'Wardens' and 'Feoffees' chosen by the freemen of the Company in his lifetime, nor did he serve in a parish office in the last two decades of his life.²³

In this respect, Joseph followed his father all too closely. Despite living in Coggeshall until nearly age fifty, he was never elected to any position in the Company nor to any parish office. Indeed, his extensive documentation of 'the Combers purse' might lead one to conclude that Joseph Bufton was not a master clothier at all, but rather a mere journeyman wool-comber. A comber's days were spent preparing raw wool for spinning through a hot, strenuous process that required skill and strength; endlessly pulling the oiled wool through heated metal combs in order to straighten the fibres and remove imperfections.²⁴ Such hard manual labour had little in common with the more managerial and commercial role usually attributed to the 'clothier'. In one document that Bufton transcribed, the Coggeshall combers described themselves as 'we poor labouring men' and hoped for encouragement from 'our good masters', so they were clearly skilled manual workers rather than prosperous middling traders.²⁵ Tellingly, Bufton himself more than once acknowledged his status as an employee. When describing his working life in Colchester in 1700-2, he referred five times to the wealthy clothier 'Mr. Hedgthorn' as 'my master' and incidentally revealed that 'I lived with him'.²⁶ Even at the end of his life, Bufton remained in a similarly subordinate position as can be seen in fact

²⁰ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 76r-77r. He also made two journeys to Bocking and one to Chelmsford.

²¹ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 27r-32r. For the common practice of employing family members as servants, see Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (2003), pp. 150-1.

²² ERO, D/AMW 12/129. In 1703, he made an account of his linen and pewter, which -comprised 12 sheets, 6 pillowbeers, a cupboard cloth, 2-3 tablecloths, 12-13 napkins, 6-7 old towels, 7 small dishes and a plate, a chamber pot, a pot with lid, 2 porrigers, 2 saucers, a candlestick, and a salt seller: BLUL, MS 10, fol. 55v.

²³ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 15r-17v; ERO, D/P 36/8/1. Nor was John listed among the 22 men who registered the initial 'orders' of the Company, presumably in 1659: BLUL, MS 10, fol. 6v. He also does not appear in the records of the manor court from at least 1684 onwards: ERO, D/DDC M69-M71; ERO, D/DDc M136/1.

²⁴ For the work and earnings of combers, see Kerridge, *Textile Manufactures*, pp. 3, 200-2, 207; Craig Muldrew, "'Th'ancient Distaff" and "Whirling Spindle": Measuring the Contribution of Spinning to Household Earnings and the National Economy in England, 1550-1770', *Economic History Review*, 65:2 (2012), pp. 503, 505-7. Although combing was similar to carding, the latter was considered both less skilled and less dependent on physical strength, thus deemed suitable for women or children.

²⁵ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 18r.

²⁶ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 58r-61r. According to Bufton, Abraham Hedgthorne (d. 1702) had about eight combers and 60 weavers working for him at this time. He was also a tax commissioner for the town, possessor of the manor of Tolleshunt D'Arcy and accorded the title 'gent' when serving as trustee in 1700: *Statutes of the Realm: Volume 6, 1685-94*, ed. John Raithby (1819) at *British History Online* <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/statutes-realm/vol6/pp104-142>>; ERO, D/DHt P1; ERO, D/P 30/25/86A.

that he left 40s to the poor of Castle Hedingham 'to be paid at the Discretion of *my Master* Joseph Unwin'.²⁷ In this respect, he was no better than a 'hireling' whose livelihood depended on his social superiors.

Both these stories are plausible enough, but in the cloth towns of Essex the gulf between a master clothier and a hired journeyman was seemingly immense. There are two ways we might try to make sense of this apparent paradox.

The first is to acknowledge that social and economic status was often fluid in the early modern period, even in the most polarised communities. For example, social mobility was a constant possibility for people of this era. Over the course of a lifetime plenty of yeomen became gentlemen and small traders became merchants.²⁸ The reverse was also common, leading to a deep fear of decline among men and women of all ranks.²⁹ This was probably the fate of the Buftons of Coggeshall. Although the precise reasons are unclear, it seems very likely that his father's business was already in decline by the 1680s and that when Joseph took over in 1695 he could only maintain it for a few more years before abandoning the workshop to take a post with a wealthy clothier in Colchester. Equally important was the impact of the life-cycle. Tradesmen and others of this rank often needed to work as apprentices, journeymen or servants for long periods before stepping into their own independent roles. In particular, many men served their fathers long into adulthood, leaving them in a position of social subservience even though their paternal 'masters' were substantial householders.³⁰ Likewise, some people who attained a middling social status in their prime were forced to accept waged work or charitable support in their old age.³¹ Bufton certainly faced this problem for much of his life. He was over forty years old before his father's death gave him the opportunity to run the family workshop himself and, although we know little of his final years, it is notable that he was again serving a master when he died at age 67.

Finally, we should not underestimate the range of social positions available in England's largest industry. There was a profound distance between the wealthiest merchant-clothiers and the poorest weavers and spinners, but in between them were many skilled workers and small-scale masters. The official list of wage rates for 'all manner of Artificers, Labourers and Servants' set by the Essex magistrates in 1651 offered some details about this elusive group. Under the heading of 'Clothiers, with other men of Science or occupation', they included 'the best Servant Clothier being Journeyman', to be paid £3 10s per year; 'the best Journeyman Weaver ... in Cogshall, and such places, where fine Clothes are made', £3 16s per year; 'the second Journeyman Weaver and Clothier', £1 10s 8d per year; 'a Journeyman Kember [comber] in Coxall', £2 10s per year; and 'a Journeyman Tucker, or Fuller, and Sheerman, and Dyer', £2 10s per year.³² As this shows, a 'Servant Clothier' might be a wage worker earning an income comparable to a journeyman weaver and only somewhat higher than a journeyman comber. Bufton must have found himself among this diverse middling group for most of his life.

²⁷ ERO, D/AMW 12/129. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Andrew Hopper, 'Social Mobility during the English Revolution: The Case of Adam Eyre', *Social History*, 38:1 (2013), pp. 26-45; J.D. Marshall (ed.), *The Autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster, 1665-1752* (1967), p. 25.

²⁹ Craig Muldrew, 'Class and Credit: Social Identity, Wealth and the Life Course in Early Modern England' in Henry French and Jonathan Barry (ed.), *Identity and Agency in England, 1500-1800* (2004).

³⁰ Shepard, *Accounting*, pp. 205-8; Paul, 'Accounting', pp. 36-41.

³¹ Shepard, *Accounting*, pp. 77-9, 131-3.

³² *The particular Rates of Wages* (1651). These labels align reasonably well with the occupational descriptions of 'wool-comber', 'clothier' (i.e. 'properly a weaver') and 'fuller' in R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (1747), pp. 200-1. I am grateful to Sarah Birt for the latter reference.

The organisation that governed the town's cloth industry also shows the social breadth of the freemen of the trade. It was officially 'the whole Company of the occupation trade & mistery of the Clothiers, Fullers, Baymakers, & new Drapers in the towne of Coggeshall', thus including four distinctive occupations in its title alone.³³ It was probably already operating in 1614 when there is a stray reference to an unspecified 'Company' there, with 'Wardens' who had some sort of jurisdiction over clothiers and their journeymen.³⁴ They sought official incorporation in 1652 and had a formal structure established by the end of the decade, electing two Wardens every year.³⁵ The Company was still active in 1710, when the county justices confirmed its by-laws, and it continued to elect officers and hold processions into the 1780s.³⁶ As we shall see, it was a broad institution that included a wide range of men active in the wool and cloth industry there, from the combers who cleansed and prepared the wool to the prosperous traders who sold the finished product to London merchants.

However, Bufton himself provided an alternative – or at least complementary – way to understand his working life and occupational identity: eleven volumes of notebooks. In the account so far, I have used these notebooks alongside other records for information about the biographical facts of Bufton's life. But these texts were not neutral stores of information for the future historian. They were the product of a process of reading and writing which can provide real insight into how a literate tradesman developed and expressed his social identity.

2. A tradesman on the page

The uniquely varied collection of texts that Joseph Bufton left to posterity allows us to glimpse the value of literacy in the social, economic and religious life of people in decidedly 'unliterary' occupations. Through his reading and writing, he developed a sense of himself as a tradesman pursuing spiritual improvement, possessing vocational expertise and embracing fraternal culture.

The very earliest of his surviving writing – sermon notes³⁷ dating from 1663 – was pious in intent.³⁷ It is thus hardly surprising that one of the ways that Bufton used his literacy to fashion a social identity was by engaging with questions of economic morality. One of the few published books that we can be certain he owned, *The Compleat Tradesman* (1684), touched on such issues when, for example, it advised accepting God's providence in commercial concerns by leaving 'the whole success to him that doth dispose all things as he will'.³⁸ It also stressed the need for conducting business within 'the Pail of Integrity', not breaching the 'Fence of Equity', and reminded readers that charity was essential because they owed 'a debt' to the needy, for which God would 'make Repayment'.³⁹ Taken as a whole, the book provided more practical tips than spiritual advice, but the ideal tradesman that emerged from its pages was nonetheless a godly, dutiful individual. This was, however, not enough for Bufton, who drew on a much wider range of sources to create a more clearly pious identity.

His notebooks reveal a constant search for 'practical divinity', the sort of concrete guidance necessary to live virtuously among others in a fallen world. On one occasion he noted that he had copied edifying extracts from '18 books which came into my hand' through lending among

³³ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 0v, 7r, 7v, 10v, 16r, 17v; ERO, Q/SO 3, p. 439.

³⁴ ERO, Q/SR 206/105.

³⁵ TNA, SP 18/25, f. 78; BLUL, MS 10, fol. 0v-6v, 15r-17v.

³⁶ ERO, Q/SO 3, p. 439; *Chelmsford Chronicle*, no. 840 (4 May 1787).

³⁷ ERO, D/DBm Z7.

³⁸ N.H., *The Compleat Tradesman* (2nd edition, 1684). Bufton's copy of this edition is ERO, D/DBm Z13.

³⁹ *Compleat Tradesman*, pp. 7, 15.

acquaintances and this was merely a fraction of the scores of religious texts that he cited in one form or another.⁴⁰ Although the content of this spiritual reading was eclectic, one of the most common themes was the danger of worldliness. He even used the margins of *The Compleat Tradesman* to copy out some verses from Francis Quarles, including a striking epigram ‘On God and Gold’:

My God & Gold cannot possess one heart
My God and I, or Gold and I must part.⁴¹

So, in a handbook devoted to teaching its readers how to succeed in business, he decided to reaffirm his belief that God – not lucre – must come first. This was a much sterner tone than that of the anonymous ‘Merchant of the City of London’ who had authored *The Compleat Tradesman* and it reflected Bufton’s commitment to the notion that piety was central to working life.

His literacy was a key part of this commitment, because he not only strove to read as much godly advice as possible, he also carefully selected and inscribed into his own notebooks the passages that fit most clearly into his self-conception as a godly tradesman. This process of constructing spiritual commonplace books informed and probably inspired him to go still further by composing his own verses. Two stanzas from one of his longer poems – written c.1710 – are indicative:

Greatly Some men do riches Strive to gain
Others seek after pleasures which are vain
And in meantime God and their souls neglect
Who justly do deserve the most respect
Slothfull and negligent them we may See
About concernes which of most moment be.

Let none of us their folly imitate
For then we shall repent when tis too late
Let us from them learn to beware
And danger shun with greatest care
And labor hard whilst life doth last
Lest into hell we should be cast.⁴²

Here, the command to ‘labor hard’ was more than just a warning against idleness in the workshop. It was also a call to embrace *spiritual* toil by constantly seeking repentance and rejecting the narrow pursuit of wealth. While this was partly about finding a pious middle way between riches and poverty, or between greed and idleness, his overriding concern was with inner rather than outer behaviour. For Bufton, the truly godly tradesman should devote himself first and foremost to spiritual improvement, with working life as an essential but necessarily secondary concern.

Yet, to focus exclusively on his godliness would be misleading. Literacy was also a crucial practical tool for Bufton and he used it to strengthen his livelihood. This pragmatic use of literacy can be seen most obviously in his financial recordkeeping. He mentioned five account books in his inventory in 1716, including ‘one for Lond[on], 1 for Colc[hester]’, one ‘of household stuff’, and two unspecified others.⁴³ Unfortunately none of these volumes have survived, but he also put his numeracy to work elsewhere. In the early 1690s, for example, he used several blank pages in a *Goldsmiths Almanack* to

⁴⁰ ERO, D/DBm Z9, unpaginated (after 40th sermon of John Boys); French, *Middle*, p. 248 n. 261. A number other his volumes were composed primarily of pious extracts: ERO, D/DBm Z11, Z12, Z13.

⁴¹ ERO, D/DBm Z13, p. 192 (dated 25 April 1698). This comes from Francis Quarles, *Divine Fancies* (1632), p. 199.

⁴² BLUL, MS 9, pp. 83-96.

⁴³ ERO, D/DBm Z9, unpaginated back flyleaf.

keep track of the cost of maintaining or refitting the family's workshop, with entries such as 'Isaac Wilbore mended our Tainter & had 4s for work & stuff & drove in 600 of hooks cost 2-6', 'new bobbins from Colchester ... & they cost 4-0 that is 8d a score, but they were small ones and short', and 'Isaac Wilbore made the warping bars half a yard longer & made a cover for the Scouring copper & we found Stuff & he had a shilling'.⁴⁴ In the same volume he recorded quarterly payments of wages to his sister Rebecca and various reckonings of debts.⁴⁵ Although none of these miscellaneous notes were as tidy and well-organised as one would expect to find in his formal ledgers, they nonetheless show that he regarded financial recordkeeping as an important part of his vocation as a tradesman.

Other kinds of occupational knowledge were also built on literacy. Later in the same notebook, for example, Bufton filled nine pages with details of the structure and productivity of the large cloth-making operation where he worked when he was at Colchester. He carefully recorded the names of the six combers and sixty weavers working for Abraham Hedgethorn in 1702 as well as dozens of other manufacturers who 'had work of my master since I lived with him'. Moreover, he included further information about their equipment and efficiency, noting that 'severall of these weavers sometimes did some other work & did not weave constantly & some of them were lazy sometimes & some were slower at it than others'. Bufton even recorded the weekly number of 'pieces' produced by the weavers over the three years he worked there and drew on his familiarity with the enterprise to note selected figures for earlier years too. Yet, throughout this text, his own occupational position was never mentioned explicitly. Instead, he crafted a document in which he was the expert who 'set down' his deep knowledge of the trade through his pen.⁴⁶

Writing could be combined with well-chosen reading to cultivate a strong social identity. The presence of *The Compleat Tradesman* in his collection shows this plainly.⁴⁷ Authored by an anonymous 'Merchant in the City of London' and first published in 1684, the book was addressed to 'Merchants, Wholesale-men, Shop-keepers and Handycrafts-men' and it provided readers with the sort of knowledge seemingly valued by all those groups. Much of the volume consisted of unquestionably practical information about price calculations, accounting conventions, rudimentary mercantile law and similar topics. However, the author also devoted almost half the book to discussing why 'England is properly a Nation of Trade', how to be both 'cunning and honest', what benefits come from having 'all those of a Trade' in 'the same Company', and many other topics of contention.⁴⁸ Readers thus not only acquired information with immediate practical applications but also equipped themselves to join in the conversations that swirled through the worlds of trade and manufacture. For Bufton, this pocket-sized storehouse of vocational knowledge must have been highly valued, so valued in fact that he augmented it by using his own pen to add a table of contents at the beginning and extracts from other books in the margins. His literacy allowed him to draw on the vocational expertise of distant authors and adapt it to suit his circumstances.

The Compleat Tradesman offered Bufton and its other readers a further reason to take pride in their work: occupational self-government. It lauded 'the Corporations of London' and included a whole chapter on how this system might be perfected. The Livery Companies were 'Bodies Politick' with a

⁴⁴ BLUL, MS 10, fols. 53-55.

⁴⁵ BLUL, MS 10, fols. 26-33.

⁴⁶ BLUL, MS 10, fols. 57-61.

⁴⁷ ERO, D/DBm Z13. Notes at the beginning of this volume show that Bufton also had access to another practical guide: *Arthmetical Questions* (1663) by 'John Le Duke, French School Master in Colchester', from which he copied the conversions of different units of weight.

⁴⁸ *Compleat Tradesman*, pp. 2, 7, 26.

structure of governance in ‘harmony’ with the civic polity, supported by ‘Clerks and other Ministerial Officers’ and based at ‘Assembly-places’ where ‘they meet to consult about the Regulation of their respective Societies and for promoting publick Good, and advancement of Trade and Wealth’.⁴⁹ According to the handbook, the only problem with the Livery Companies was the fact that their strength had become diluted by the increasing number of members who practiced different trades. If this could be eliminated, these ‘Bodies Politick’ would be better able to ‘make some By-laws for the good of their Trade’ while maintaining ‘it in a right and good order’.⁵⁰ The book therefore promoted the idea of ‘Societies’ of tradesmen in each craft or industry, advancing their collective interests through corporate unity.

Bufton probably read this advice for the first time not long before turning his own hand to the task of supporting the unity and strength of his trade through his writing. Although the local cloth guild had been established in the town since at least 1659, it was only in around 1686 – just two years after *The Compleat Tradesman* was published – that Bufton began acting as an unofficial and presumably self-appointed clerk to the group. Notably, the texts he chose to copy or compose for the company often came from very different sources within the industry, united only by their shared commitment to the good of the trade. He began with the company’s ten foundational ‘ordinances’ which regulated masters, journeymen and apprentices alike, but which were signed only by 22 of the leading clothiers.⁵¹ He followed this with copies of two later warrants from the Essex magistrates addressed ‘To the Wardens of the Company of Fullers’, empowering them to apprehend ‘such persons as intrude themselves into your said Occupation or Mistry’.⁵² However, many of the voices he recorded did not come from the most powerful men in the industry. Bufton also set down a narrative of the ‘proceedings’ of the Coggeshall combers in the 1680s, including much material written by the workmen themselves. For example, he copied out – and may have helped to compose – their ‘Account drawne up in writing’, wherein they justified gathering funds to prosecute unlawful workers ‘for the good of the trade’. Likewise, he included the whole text of ‘the Articles of the Combers Purse’, voiced by ‘we poor labouring men’ who pursued mutual aid to ‘shew that love we have to our trade & one to another for our trade sake’.⁵³

In the same notebook – alongside the ‘ordinances’, ‘proceedings’, ‘articles’ and other practical texts – Bufton inscribed several striking examples of occupational poetry. As with the other material, these simple rhymes came from a variety of sources, but they were united in their call for fraternity and solidarity within the cloth trade. The first of the poems was the broadest in scope. It was a set of ‘Verses of Blase from Colchester’, dated 17 April 1688, which praised the sainted ‘founder of our art’ and the ‘curious fabrick’ that gave a ‘livelyhood to thousands’. This forty-six-line panegyric particularly stressed the artfulness of the ‘stuffs’ and ‘bays’ produced in this region, suggesting that it may have circulated further in manuscript around the cloth towns of Essex and East Anglia.⁵⁴ After this introductory poem, Bufton added ‘some verses of my owne making’, more closely focused on the circumstances of the industry in Coggeshall. Here he wrote admiringly of the recent initiative of the combers ‘to promote the publick good’ and ‘the good of this our fulling trade’ by ‘keeping out

⁴⁹ *Compleat Tradesman*, pp. 20-1. It also included the London freeman’s oath: *ibid.*, pp. 21-2.

⁵⁰ *Compleat Tradesman*, pp. 26-8.

⁵¹ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 1-6.

⁵² BLUL, MS 10, fol. 7-8.

⁵³ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 10-13, 17-24. It is notable that, as part of this, the combers had ‘agreed to send to Colchester for a Coppy of their articles belonging to their Purse for the better directing them how to proceed therein, which Coppy having procured, By the help thereof they had drawne up the following articles’: *ibid.*, fol. 13.

⁵⁴ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 8-9. Bishop Blaise was the patron saint of the wool trade, especially combing.

Intruders'. He similarly commended their new plan to show 'love unto their trade' by establishing a stock to 'releve all that in need do stand'.⁵⁵ Even more carefully aimed were the lines composed by 'one of the Company' to give 'better incouragement' to the men in their campaign to create a common purse. The anonymous author of this poem spoke directly to his fellow combers, demanding solidarity rather than sympathy:

Come on brave noble hearts
Behold & take a view
Lets bravely act our parts
In what doth here insue
For now we do intend
A purs there shall be made
On purpose to defend
And help the Combing trade.

It was time, he wrote, to 'play the men' and establish a fund that would support any man impoverished by sickness or unemployment, without the condescension of 'a frowne or a curse'.⁵⁶ The strikingly combative and deeply gendered language shows how this poem, unlike the previous ones, was a direct call to action, written by and for the combers themselves.

Each of these three sets of verses emerged from different places in the industry and this was reflected in their tone. The Colchester author defended the trade as a whole, while the unnamed Coggeshall comber hoped to inspire courage among his fellow workers. Bufton's poem was no less topical but it contained a telling slippage between '*our* trade' and '*their* trade'. He was very much part of the broader fraternity and may have worked alongside the combers in the 1680s, yet he was also the son of a master clothier and would soon become one himself, if only temporarily. He therefore sought to support his brethren through his pen, as when he noted that 'I wrote these verses of Blase [from Colchester] in a Book for the Combers' and then added the 'verses of my owne making'.⁵⁷ Bufton's literacy allowed him to draw on these wider regional currents of occupational culture, record and share the words of poorer workmen, and contribute his own encouragement, all within a discourse that represented the trade as a single united fraternity.

When we consider Bufton's collection of notebooks as a whole, their importance to his identity is unmistakable. This was not, of course, limited to his occupation. He also wrote extensively about life in his parish and briefly chronicled national political events.⁵⁸ However, the way he used reading and writing as a tool to solidify his status as a tradesman is striking. His circumstances put him in an uneasy position – neither truly a master nor truly a workman – which might have left a less literate man anxious or isolated. Instead, Bufton embraced a textual culture that gave him the opportunity to find his place. Through his literacy, he was able to construct a pious pathway for his worldly work, cultivate his expert knowledge of the industry, and integrate himself into the fraternal culture of the trade.

⁵⁵ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 9-10. Bufton also wrote a more broadly aimed short piece specifically 'for the Guild day morning' that celebrated the customs of fraternal feasting and of self-government through the 'voice of those that of the Trade are free': *ibid.*, fol. 57.

⁵⁶ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 10-11.

⁵⁷ BLUL, MS 10, fol. 9.

⁵⁸ Waddell, 'Writing'.

3. Beyond Bufton

Joseph Bufton was hardly an ordinary tradesman. His prolixity on the page was matched by only a tiny number of others of his rank. Nonetheless, Bufton and his notebooks encapsulated some important trends that unfolded over the course of the early modern period, spurred by rising literacy, the expanding availability of printed texts, and the changing regulation of skilled trades.

The author of *The Compleat Tradesman*, marvelling at the growth of the postal service under the Stuarts, remarked that even ‘the meanest People have generally learnt to write’.⁵⁹ As David Cressy, Rab Houston, Peter Earle and Eleanor Hubbard have shown, the proportion of men and women who could write enough to sign their name increased substantially from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries.⁶⁰ These rising rates of literacy were especially concentrated among people like Bufton. While only a minority of provincial tradesmen and craftsmen could sign their name – rather than leaving marks or initials – in Elizabethan England, a clear majority signed in the later Stuart period.⁶¹ Similarly, women’s literacy rose too, with notably high proportions among wives of tradesmen.⁶² Meanwhile, the publishing industry produced ever-greater quantities of reading material, often sold at prices that even an artisan could afford. The number of new printed titles rose almost every decade, with an explosion of publishing in the 1640s as well as more steady growth through the rest of the century.⁶³ As Adam Fox has shown, oral culture was vibrant throughout this period, but it overlapped with an ever-growing textual one.⁶⁴ However, more important than the mere growth in literacy and print was how it was used.

Bufton was certainly not the only one who drew on pious print culture to grapple with the tension between ‘God and Gold’. The growing numbers of literate tradesmen had access to an expanding corpus of godly printed advice directed specifically at their calling. In 1620, for example, one London clergyman published a sermon called *The Godly Mans Guide*, offering directions to ‘Merchants and Tradesmen’, because their business is like ‘the highway ... from Jerusalem to Jericho, full of theeves and robbers, of inticements, and occasions to sinne’.⁶⁵ In the 1680s, Richard Steele, another dissenter, published *The Trade-man’s Calling*, providing a set of directions ‘to guide the honest-minded Tradesman in the right way to Heaven’.⁶⁶ Written in an accessible tone, Steele’s book proved popular enough to be chosen by the Society for Promoting Religious Knowledge as a text to be given away for free, and one copy was inscribed ‘Mary Anne Cooke hir Booke’, suggesting it was read by tradeswomen as well as men.⁶⁷ Such texts were part of a wave of publications that offered godly advice to readers from specific occupations, such as weavers, seamen and husbandmen.⁶⁸ While the

⁵⁹ *Compleat Tradesman*, p. 166.

⁶⁰ Cressy, *Literacy*, ch. 7; Rab Houston, *Scottish Literacy and the Scottish Identity: Illiteracy and Society in Scotland and Northern England, 1600-1800* (1986), ch. 2; Peter Earle, ‘The Female Labour Market in London in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries’, *Economic History Review*, 42 (1989), p. 335; Eleanor Hubbard, ‘Reading, Writing and Initialling: Female Literacy in Early Modern London’, *Journal of British Studies*, 54:2 (2018), pp. 569-70.

⁶¹ Cressy, *Literacy*, p. 146; Houston, *Literacy*, pp. 33, 38, 40.

⁶² Cressy, *Literacy*, p. 144; Houston, *Literacy*, p. 60; Earle, ‘Female’, p. 335; Hubbard, ‘Reading’, pp. 569, 574.

⁶³ Fox, *Oral and Literate*, pp. 15-16.

⁶⁴ Fox, *Oral and Literate*, pp. 409-10.

⁶⁵ Immanuel Bourne, *The Godly Mans Guide* (1620), p. 2. For a more denunciatory text, see that of the Quaker George Fox, *The Line of Righteousness and Justice stretched forth over all Merchants, &c.* (1661).

⁶⁶ Richard Steele, *The Trades-mans Calling* (1684), sig. A2.

⁶⁷ E.C. Vernon, ‘Steele, Richard (1629-1692)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *ODNB*), online edition (2004). The inscription is in the British Library copy.

⁶⁸ John Collinges, *The Weavers Pocket-Book* (1675), sig. A5 (‘all my worthy Friends, whether Masters or Journey-men, employed in the Art and Mystery of Weaving’); John Flavel, *A New Compass for Seamen* (1664);

exact nature of their guidance varied considerably, all these texts acknowledged the social value of each 'particular calling' even as they impressed upon their readers the dangers of pursuing worldly work at the expense of prayer and meditation.

The many artisans, traders and others of this rank who read guides to godly living often used them much like Bufton, copying out suitable passages or simply borrowing ideas to inform their own spiritual writing. In the 1660s, an apprentice shopkeeper named Roger Lowe regularly noted buying or borrowing various pious publications, despite his location in rural Lancashire. He not only read them but also extracted some 'psalms in meeter' from an instructional book by a local Presbyterian minister and 'composd' some 'verses' of his own after reading Edward Gee's *Treatise of Prayer*.⁶⁹ Moreover, he used his diary-writing as an opportunity to reflect on his economic position and God's role in his working life. In February 1663, for example, he recorded making a short trip to buy something from a neighbour and 'when I came home I was very pensive and sad in consideration of my povertie', but felt better after reminding himself that 'God will comfort and suply the wants of his poor servants'.⁷⁰ Later that year he wrote of his 'desire to blesse God for it' when he calculated his shop accounts 'and it answered my expectation' and for restoring his back after a 'tedious stitche' made him 'unable to stay shop'.⁷¹ As well as serving as a record of the divine mercies he experienced as a novice shopkeeper, Lowe's diary attests to his more elaborate attempts to use writing to 'spiritualize' his working life. Thus, in October 1667, he resigned from his 'shop effaires in Ashton' and hired himself to a new master, but soon found that his employer's wife was a harsh mistress and this 'occasiond me to write these verses' on his 'troubled condition' in the form of a prayer to God:

Show me such favour as the world may know
That Thou esteemeth of Thy servant Lowe,
That such as have no reason, not yet faith
May learne to live in peace and not in wrath.

...

Providence sees it good I tossd should be
Upon the waves of worldly miserie,
And tho I be thus fetterd in world's grieffe,
Providence will att last yield me reliefe.⁷²

By turning his complaints about ill-treatment into a self-reflective poem, including even the heavy-handed pun on his surname, this provincial tradesman crafted a providential narrative that could both explain his current circumstances and set out the prospect of a divine remedy.

Others were more radical in their attempts to transform the events of their working lives into godly lessons. In some cases, their writing practices seem designed not merely to keep their worldly

idem., *Husbandry Spiritualized* (1669); Steele, *The Husbandmans Calling* (1668). On the broader corpus of printed works focusing on godly economic behaviour, see Richard Grassby, *The Business Community of Seventeenth-Century England* (1995), pp. 36-9; Waddell, *God*, ch. 1.

⁶⁹ William Sachse (ed.), *The Diary of Roger Lowe of Ashton-in-Makerfield, Lancashire, 1663-74* (1934), pp. 101, 54. For further examples of Lowe's godly reading, see *ibid.*, pp. 15, 25, 28, 99, 109. The metrical psalms were printed in Isaac Ambrose, *Media: The Middle Things* (1649), p. 405.

⁷⁰ Lowe, *Diary*, p. 15.

⁷¹ Lowe, *Diary*, pp. 21, 22.

⁷² Lowe, *Diary*, pp. 118-19. The poem is 38 lines in total. Similarly, a Quaker shopkeeper at Lancaster named William Stout wrote of his attempts to follow 'the golden rule' and 'plaine dealing' in his business: Stout, *Autobiography*, p. 90.

occupations under control but to elide them altogether under their pious identities. John Dane, a Hertfordshire tailor who later wrote a manuscript autobiography after migrating to New England in the 1630s, only mentioned his work in short parable-like stories of providential resistance to sinful temptation. For example, he described once finding a gold coin in a pair of breeches which he was repairing. He nearly took it, but remembered that God is always watching and so returned it to the customer: 'I cant but take notes of gods goodnes in then giving me Restraining grace to presarve from sutch a temptation'.⁷³ Similar practices can be seen in the extensive spiritual writings of other dissenters such as the London wood-turner Nehemiah Wallington and the Leeds clothier Joseph Ryder.⁷⁴

Nor was this process confined to men. Mary Gray seems to have been the daughter of a London tobacco pipe maker and served an apprenticeship to a freeman of the Broderers' Company before marrying a wealthy Merchant Taylor named Thomas Clissold in 1706.⁷⁵ She was a devoted Presbyterian and very ready to rebuke 'leud' customers who 'stood about her Shop and blasphem'd God'.⁷⁶ After her 'conversion' at age nineteen, she kept 'a short Diary' for 'daily Observation' on the state of her soul and later wrote a set of 'Spiritual Breathing and Meditations', both of which were edited and published by her minister shortly after her death.⁷⁷ The printed version of her writing includes only the barest hints about the innumerable worldly duties involved in her work as a tradeswoman and wife. For instance, she composed one meditation 'upon entring on a new State of Life', perhaps at the time of her marriage, in which she wrote of her hope that she could maintain her covenant with God 'in time of Prosperity as well as in Adversity; and my God can make the one a mean to knit my Heart more firmly to himself, as well as the other a Lance to let out my Corruption'.⁷⁸ Such passages show the constant efforts she made to minimise and subordinate her worldly work through her devotional writing.

Zealous men and women such as Dane, Wallington, Ryder and Clissold were all primarily writing for the benefit of their souls, at least in the surviving texts we have from them. This was part of a never-ending search for providential signs and an equally ceaseless struggle against the sins of idleness, avarice and worldliness. Their literacy thus served to support a state of mind which Matthew Kadane has called 'watchfulness'.⁷⁹ So, even if their worldly calling was an essential element in these narratives, it was ultimately secondary to their deeper spiritual purpose. By subordinating work in their writing, they sought – often consciously – to also subordinate it in their daily lives. As such, we could interpret their autobiographical texts as contributing to a 'discourse about un-work, or even

⁷³ New England Historic Genealogical Society, MS A1076, p. 63. For a providential anecdote about facing sexual temptation from a maid while he worked, see *ibid.*, p. 65. Like Bufton and Lowe, he also wrote a significant amount of pious poetry.

⁷⁴ Seaver, *World*; Kadane, *Clothier*.

⁷⁵ Cliff Webb, *London Apprenticeship Abstracts, 1442-1850* at <<https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=ORIGINS/LONDONAPPRENTICE/60060/149017>>; *Boyd's Marriage Index, 1538-1850* at <<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=GBPRS/M/752681081/1>>. The Mary Gray apprenticed in 1697 is not certain to be her, but it fits with her biography as she was resident in London and about age 15 at the time. For her husband, see TNA, PROB 11/533/202; Thomas Reynolds, *A Funeral Sermon Upon the Death of Mr. Thomas Clissold* (1713).

⁷⁶ Thomas Reynolds, *Practical religion exemplify'd* (1712), p. 37

⁷⁷ Reynolds, *Practical*, pp. 26, 47.

⁷⁸ Reynolds, *Practical*, pp. 60-1. Elizabeth Jekyll (1624-53), wife of a rich haberdasher, seems to have followed a similar logic in her diary: Susan Wiseman, *Conspiracy and Virtue: Women, Writing and Politics in Seventeenth-Century England* (2006), ch. 7.

⁷⁹ Kadane, *Watchful*.

anti-work'.⁸⁰ Yet, while this model fits some of these manuscripts extremely well, Bufton's archive provides a counterpoint. For him, as with Lowe, godly watchfulness was only one of the many aims of his writing practices. The fact that the spiritual aspect of 'artisan autobiography' has received so much attention from scholars is surely partly due to the long-running debates about 'religion and the rise of capitalism'.⁸¹ Moreover, this focus has been reinforced by biases in the archival record, as non-conformist spiritual narratives are precisely the sort of texts mostly likely to be preserved, and often published, by unusually fervent denominational communities.⁸² The miscellaneous manuscripts of pious conformists like Bufton, despite being far more numerous, are much less likely to have survived the ensuing centuries. The persona of the godly tradesman was a very real and powerful one, which Bufton was not alone in adopting, but it was neither as common nor as exclusive as might first appear.

Much more popular were pragmatic modes of writing that supported the 'credit' of the tradesman and the 'honour' of the trade itself. This was closely linked to the very strong tradition of didactic printed literature that emerged in early modern England. Mercantile advice books, godly conduct books, 'improving' farming manuals, recipe collections, and more specialist guides for other 'particular callings' could be found on many booksellers' stalls by the early seventeenth century.⁸³ Manuals addressed directly to 'tradesmen' – however ill-defined – began appearing in the 1620s, though these initially contained little more than 'necessarie and compendious tables' for calculating prices and interest.⁸⁴ However, *The Compleat Tradesman*, which Bufton used as a notebook, was first published in 1684 and exemplified some of the new reading and writing practices emerging at this time. It cost a shilling, which was a substantial sum, but it proved popular enough to run through three editions in its first year and another two in 1720-1. The title – and some of the advice – was borrowed and reworked by Daniel Defoe for his *Complete English Tradesman* in 1725, an unapologetically moralistic instructional volume which also went through many editions.⁸⁵ As noted in the previous section, these oft-printed titles offered readers like Bufton very practical advice alongside a broader sense of occupational identity.

The traders and artisans who read such vocational literature – even if only the simplistic manuals of financial recordkeeping – put this knowledge in work in their own manuscripts. Another Coggeshall clothier, Bufton's brother-in-law Samuel Sparhawke, maintained a receipt book from the 1660s to the 1690s that shows how valuable such scribal practices could be to an ambitious tradesman. It is

⁸⁰ Amelang, *Flight*, p. 122.

⁸¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (orig. 1905; 2002); R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926); Margaret Jacob and Matthew Kadane, 'Missing, Now Found in the Eighteenth Century: Weber's Protestant Capitalist', *American Historical Review*, 108: 1 (2003), pp. 20-49.

⁸² It is worth noting that Bufton kept a diary ('I keep [it] on my board and write in dayly'), which was probably spiritual in nature but it has not survived: ERO, D/DBm Z9, unpaginated back flyleaf.

⁸³ Natasha Glaisyer, *The Culture of Commerce in England, 1660-1720* (2006), ch. 3; Natasha Glaisyer and Sara Pennell (eds), *Didactic Literature in England: Expertise Constructed* (2003); Michelle DiMeo and Sara Pennell (eds), *Reading and Writing Recipe Books, 1550-1800* (2013).

⁸⁴ James Warre, *The Merchants Hand-Maide ... for Merchants, Gentle-men, Trades-men and all such as buy, sell, or deale* (1622), quotation on title page; anon., *The Treasurers Almanacke, or the Money-Master* (1627); John Carpenter, *A most excellent instruction ... most usefull for all merchants, factors, and tradesmen* (1632); Noah Bridge, *Vulgar arithmetique ... peculiarly fitted for merchants and tradesmen* (1653); John Hayes, *The Complete Trades-man* (1656); Edward Hatton, *The Merchant's Magazine: or, Trades-man's Treasury* (1695); Charles Snell, *The Tradesman's Directory* (1697).

⁸⁵ For more on the economic attitudes found in such books, see Nancy Cox, *The Complete Tradesman: A Study of Retailing, 1550-1820* (2000), ch. 1; Glaisyer, *Culture*, ch. 3.

filled with very rough memoranda itemising the sums that Sparhawke was paid for delivering cloth to his customers. Alongside these, it also includes notes in other hands certifying purchases:

Recd: August the 20 1667 of Mr. Samuell Sparo: twelfe pounds foretean shillings in ful for fouretean score of wool for the use of my master Samuell Lewinisay

Recd By me Ben: Herry.⁸⁶

Through this process, his accounts became a social mode of writing in which the manuscript not only *recorded* the financial ties between tradesmen but also *constituted* them by enabling multiple individuals to directly inscribe their commitments into a single volume. Of course, men were not the only ones who used their pens to support their livelihoods. Just as Samuel Sparhawke's suppliers wrote out receipts in their own hands, so too did some tradeswomen serving aristocratic households.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, in Lancashire, Roger Lowe also used his literacy and numeracy to advance his social role as a skilled trader. He regularly worked with his master or his fellow apprentice to 'help cast up shop' to calculate its annual profits.⁸⁸ In addition, his expertise was sought out by his neighbours, ensuring that he spent much of his time doing their accounts, writing their indentures or even 'teaching' a young man 'to endite letters and to cast account up'.⁸⁹ As Adam Smyth and others have argued through analysis of elite writers, these sorts of manuscripts show how autobiographical modes of writing could intersect with seemingly dry financial records.⁹⁰ In the case of Bufton and his fellow tradespeople, the rise of account-keeping and other practical writing created an opportunity for them to demonstrate their occupational expertise to themselves, their neighbours and their fellow traders. They thus affirmed their 'credit' as expert tradesmen, giving them an honourable vocation even when their actual financial position was less certain.

In Coggeshall, as has been seen, Bufton interwove his practical recordkeeping with the promotion of fraternity and collective identity. This placed him firmly within an occupational culture that was becoming increasingly literate over the course of the early modern period. The rising importance of reading and writing to skilled trades was partly due to legal and political shifts, such as the passing of the Statute of Artificers in 1563 and the wave of new urban 'corporations' granted charters by

⁸⁶ ERO, D/DBm Z14, p. 1. For other examples of clothier account-keeping, see Burley, 'Essex'; J. de L. Mann, 'A Wiltshire Family of Clothiers: George and Hester Wansey, 1683-1714', *Economic History Review*, 9:2 (1956), pp. 241-53.

⁸⁷ Carline Bowden, 'Women in Educational Spaces' in Laura Knoppers (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing* (2009), pp. 85, 87-88. For other tradeswomen's use of occupational literacy, see Amy Froide, 'Learning to Invest: Women's Education in Arithmetic and Accounting in Early Modern England', *Early Modern Women*, 10:1 (2015), pp. 3-26; Hunt, *Middling*, 84-9; Anne Murphy, "'You do manage it so well that I cannot do better': the working life of Elizabeth Jeake of Rye (1667-1736)", *Women's History Review*, 27:7 (2018), pp. 1190-1208. As Sarah Birt has demonstrated in her ongoing doctoral work, literacy was very important to London milliners by the late seventeenth century.

⁸⁸ Lowe, *Diary*, pp. 21, 60-1, 92-3. See also the evident pride with which the shopkeeper William Stout recorded that 'by my industry I made good progress' in learning 'arethmatick' as a child in the 1670s: Stout, *Autobiography*, p. 74.

⁸⁹ Lowe, *Diary*, pp. 26, 53, 76.

⁹⁰ Smyth, *Autobiography*, ch. 2; Jason Scott-Warren, 'Early Modern Bookkeeping and life-writing revisited: accounting for Richard Stonley', in Liesbeth Corens, Kate Peters, and Alexandra Walsham (eds), *The Social History of the Archive: Record-Keeping in Early Modern Europe* (2016), pp. 151-70. For the practicalities of account-keeping in this period, see Muldrew, *Obligation*, pp. 61-9; Froide, 'Learning'.

Queen Elizabeth and her Stuart successors.⁹¹ Places like London already had long traditions of guild regulation and, as a result, substantial company archives built on the labours of their clerks.⁹² In contrast, many provincial communities began creating or re-establishing formal trade guilds and enforcing seven-year apprenticeships from the late sixteenth century.⁹³ Hence, the tradesmen of township of Ashton-in-Makerfield, which lacked any official corporate structure in this period, nonetheless participated in the apprenticeship system by having their indentures written up and sealed, often by the shopkeeper Roger Lowe. The 'white smiths' there went further, meeting with Lowe in 1665 to have him write up 'an agreement For them to goe to councell with about their trade', suggesting that these artisans wanted a formal document to support their collective legal position.⁹⁴

Like the men of the Coggeshall cloth industry, numerous groups of tradesmen in England's small towns began to establish or strengthen their institutions of self-government and, as part of this, filled growing numbers of 'guild books' through their attempts to assert their collective power. At Bridgnorth in Shropshire, for example, the men of the metal trades united as 'the company of Smiths, Cowpers, naylers, shinglers, &c.' in 1595, whereupon they immediately began recording their elections, freedoms and other key acts in 'the bookes' held by the wardens.⁹⁵ Writing this all down was crucial to the strength of their fraternity, though of course the fellows did not all engage with these literate practices equally. In 1613, they paid 6d. to George Farr, who had previously served as a warden, 'for keeping the boke' and later 'for beinge our Clarke'.⁹⁶ Their semi-official clerk presumably fulfilled the bulk of the company's writing needs, whereas a substantial minority of members on lists created in 1616 and 1691 could not even sign their names.⁹⁷ Still, this brotherhood could not have maintained its role in the town's economic and social life without its frequent recourse to pen and ink.

Over the same period, England's printers were producing more and more texts devoted to promoting occupational fraternity. Although most were authored by well-educated metropolitan writers with no direct experience in the trades they described, this would not have stopped many tradesmen from eagerly reading and embracing them. Artisans able to buy or borrow a ballad, chapbook or printed play could have found there a celebration of 'the worthiness of artisanal identity' which bound together apprentices, journeymen and masters.⁹⁸ Moreover, at least a few of the authors of what we might call 'occupational panegyrics' were tradesmen themselves. As Mark

⁹¹ Phil Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (2005), esp. ch. 2. It is notable that the Coggeshall combers cite 'the law Queen Betty made' (i.e. 5 Eliz. 1 c. 4) in their complaints against those who 'intrude into our Trade': BLUL, MS 10, fol. 11.

⁹² Jennifer Bishop, 'The Clerk's Tale: Civic Writing in Sixteenth-Century London', in Corens, Peters and Walsham (eds.), *Social History of the Archive*.

⁹³ In addition to the example from Brignorth cited below, see also the new trade guilds established c.1560-1700 in Alnwick, Bristol, Daventry, Devizes, Gateshead, Hull, Newcastle, Sheffield and Worcester: Tom Hoffman, 'Guilds and Related Organisations in Great Britain and Ireland: A Bibliography' (2011), Part II, at <<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/library/downloads/guilds-part-2.pdf>>.

⁹⁴ Lowe, *Diary*, p. 87. For examples of him writing apprenticeship indentures, see *ibid.*, pp. 88, 120.

⁹⁵ British Library (hereafter BL), Add. MS 38834, fol. 1.

⁹⁶ BL, Add. MS 38834, fol. 13, 15.

⁹⁷ BL, Add. MS 38834, fol. 16, 102. For more on the company, see Caroline Skeel, 'The Bridgnorth Company of Smiths', *English Historical Review*, 35:138 (1920), pp. 244-8.

⁹⁸ Ronda Arab, *Manly Mechanics on the Early Modern English Stage* (2011), p. 50. See also Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), pp. 64-72; Mark Hailwood, 'The honest tradesman's honour': occupational and social identity in seventeenth-century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 24 (2014), pp. 79-103.

Hailwood has noted, some ballad-writers were very close to the trades they lauded.⁹⁹ Thomas Deloney, 'the balleting silk-weaver' from Norwich, produced perhaps the most famous and widely-read examples of this genre: *Jack of Newbury* (1597) and *Thomas of Reading* (c.1600).¹⁰⁰ Both celebrated clothworkers as industrious, generous and of course patriotic. Deloney also incorporated elements of pseudo-reportage, though the purpose of such passages was not to convey actual economic information. In *Jack of Newbury's* massive manufactory, for example, there were 100 women 'merrily' carding, 200 'pretty maids' spinning and singing like nightingales, 150 poor children gratefully employed in picking wool, 50 'proper men' using their 'skill and cunning' as shearmen, 80 rowers 'taking pain', and 260 more men labouring at the looms, the dye-works and the fulling mill.¹⁰¹ Though this narrative explicitly discusses the clothmaking process and the workers involved, all these elements in Deloney's texts serve primarily to give an impression of a united social group – stretching from master clothiers to lowly spinners and wool-pickers. As such, it gave a rousing message to the tradesmen who read it, perhaps reaching some spinners and carders too. It undoubtedly proved popular, running through at least sixteen editions by 1700.

More difficult to find is direct evidence of a reciprocal relationship between these two aspects of fraternal literacy – the practical and the literary. The London Livery Companies offer one example, for they often sponsored the writing and performance of occupational panegyrics.¹⁰² The same process almost certainly unfolded in provincial towns in a more informal way, but proof of this is limited. For this reason, the value of Bufton's manuscripts cannot be underestimated. They demonstrate this relationship conclusively. As has been shown, his writing practices moved easily between the two genres, mixing semi-formal corporate recordkeeping with exuberant versifying. The other authors quoted in his notebook – the anonymous Coggeshall comber who wrote in 'incouragement' of his fellows and the equally anonymous Colchester tradesman who produced the 'Verses of Blase' – suggest that this was not uncommon. The survival of a manuscript that shows all this happening may be unique, but the culture that produced it was probably present in numerous towns across England by the time he began recording it.

4. Conclusions

The literary world of the clothiers and combers of Coggeshall could not match London, Oxford or Cambridge in productivity or renown. It was, however, a lively environment in which metropolitan print, occupational recordkeeping and local authorship were woven together into motley manuscript culture. For people like Bufton, it provided a chance to set out a social identity as a skilled, godly tradesman despite his ambiguous position in the deeply unequal economy of his home town. Thanks to the waves of social, economic, cultural and legal change that swept through the country, such provincial cultures became increasingly common in the seventeenth century.

The reading and writing habits of Bufton and his fellow tradesmen cannot stand in for those of all the other literate workers in early modern England. Even within the same trade, some journeymen ended up using their literacy in much more radical and confrontational ways. At Bristol in 1707, for

⁹⁹ Mark Hailwood, 'Broadside Ballads and Occupational Identity in Early Modern England', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 79:2 (2016), pp. 193-7.

¹⁰⁰ Paul Salzman, 'Deloney, Thomas', *ODNB*. Deloney also wrote *The Gentle Craft* (c. 1597-98) lauding the honour of shoemaking, though there is no evidence of that he worked in that trade.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Deloney, *The pleasant historie of John Winchcomb in his yonger yeares called Jack of Newbery, the famous and worthy clothier of England* (1626 edn.), sig. D2-D3.

¹⁰² Hailwood, 'Broadside', p. 198.

example, the weavers formed a ‘Confederacy’ to put pressure on their masters, demanding that every new apprentice had to be ‘inrolled in their Books’ and that every journeyman who arrived from outside the city had to show ‘a Certificate’ proving ‘he is confederated at some other place’.¹⁰³ This contrasts strongly with the Coggeshall combers, who wrote warmly about their masters and focused on strengthening the trade as a whole.

Outside the world of artisans and shopkeepers, the differences were sharper still. In the 1730s, two ‘natural poets’ published semi-autobiographical verses which presented their work as profoundly alienating. Stephen Duck, a farm labourer, foregrounded sweat and pain, rather than focusing on providence or skill. He also defined his laborious work against the supposed idleness of women harvesters and the cupidity of his stern master.¹⁰⁴ Mary Collier, a labourer, charwoman and unpaid housewife, also emphasised the intensity of her toil and the severity of her employers. Moreover, unlike Duck or Bufton, she used her poem to challenge the patriarchal assumptions that derided and devalued the labour of ‘poor Woman-kind’.¹⁰⁵ The writing practices of Duck and Collier – much like the Bristol journeymen – show the limits of the foregoing analysis. The texts read and written by tradesmen such as Bufton reveal broader trends, but there were increasing numbers of working people who used literacy in rather different ways by the early eighteenth century.

Yet the approach here may still be useful more widely. While these texts can still be mined for hard facts about early modern work and trade, they can also be analysed as attempts by their authors to give seemingly unremarkable events a deeper purpose and meaning. They not only provide information *about* their work, but also *shaped* their work and turned it into a key element in their social identity.

For Bufton and others like him, literacy could help to bridge the stark economic gap that was pushing rich and poor further apart. For decades, many historians have tended to interpret the uneven rise of reading and writing ability in early modern England as part of a broader process of ‘social polarisation’, through which ‘local worthies’ were ‘distanced’ from their poorer neighbours and ‘assimilated’ into a national culture of authority.¹⁰⁶ However, while this was undoubtedly true in some cases, the large number of contrary examples suggest that expanding literacy could also contribute to new identities that elided obvious differences in income. The individuals examined in this article, especially when considered alongside the evidence presented by Hailwood and Paul, show that many men and women in working households used their rising rates of literacy to counteract the precarity of their economic position.¹⁰⁷ It gave them a chance to develop solidarities that did not depend on landholding or wealth, instead emerging from shared participation in economically diverse communities such as the cloth trade.

Rather than reinforcing the ongoing process of ‘social polarisation’, new reading and writing practices could offer an identity as skilled, godly tradesman which was accessible to combers and clothiers alike. In Bufton’s case, it still had sharp limits, largely excluding women and other

¹⁰³ Waddell, *God*, pp. 211-213.

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Duck, *Poems on Several Subjects* (1730), pp. 17, 21, 24. For many more examples of eighteenth-century working-class poetry and autobiography, see Jennifer Batt, ‘Laboring Class Poetry’ in John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan (eds), *A History of British Working-Class Literature* (2017); Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (2010), pp. 14-24, 374-409.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Collier, *The Woman’s Labour: An Epistle to Mr. Stephen Duck* (1739), p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty*, p. 184. For a recent restatement, see Paul Griffiths, ‘Local Arithmetic: Information Culture in Early Modern England’ in Steve Hindle, Alexandra Shepard and John Walter (eds), *Remaking English Society: Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England* (2013), pp. 115-16.

¹⁰⁷ Hailwood, ‘Honest’; Hailwood, ‘Broadside’; Paul, ‘Accounting’.

'intruders' who did not fully belong to the trade. But the identity that emerged from such literacy created new bonds could that help to hold together even a deeply divided and 'unruly' Essex cloth town.