The Qualifications of a Mediaeval Gildsman

During the period included between the thirteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the would-be merchant or craftsman, was subjected to certain examinations which were practically the same in England and on the continent of Europe.

Before a man could become a merchant, a trader, a shopkeeper, or an artisan, he must be a burgess of the town. Before he was an apprentice he must show that he was a native of the town, he must be registered, and when he had completed his apprenticeship, must be enrolled a burgess before he could work independently as a journeyman, or master. Over every trade the mayor, or burgomaster, stood as the source of authority, and the ultimate referee in cases of dispute or complaint. Even the companies which had obtained a royal charter were, to a degree, dependent upon him. Strangers wishing to become tradesmen must first settle with him and pay a fine more or less heavy, for the trade of the town was the right of the townsmen and none other. This organization, however, was in reality based upon a system which was analogous to that of the realm. Just as Lords, Churchmen and commoners formed distinct "estates"—deliberated apart under one head, while the whole formed the Constitutional Government—so was it in each town by itself. Each trade had its gild, fraternity, society, or company.