THE DOCKYARD WORK-FORCE: A PICTURE OF CHATHAM DOCKYARD *c.* 1860

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Within the boundaries of the county of Kent in the early nineteenth century there lay one of the largest industrial complexes known to the world at that time, that of Chatham dockyard. Although only one of the seven public dockyards which the British Government maintained to build warships for the royal navy, Chatham in 1860 extended over 97 acres, surrounded by a wall and eighteenth-century fortifications. Situated on the Medway below Rochester bridge, along the shore of the reach known as Gillingham Water between the town of Chatham and the village of Gillingham, it had at that time six dry docks, one of them newly built after 1855, and six building-slips, three of them large enough for the construction of first-rate line-of-battle ships, two of them devoted to third-rates, and the sixth to small vessels only. Large purchases of land in 1820 and 1854 had been made on the adjacent St. Mary's Island, which remained undeveloped apart from some work on the embankment of the island. Ships as yet still were built of wood, which made for the importance of the timber-yard and saw-pits within the walls. In addition to these building facilities Chatham yard already had a cluster of twenty-seven auxiliary workshops, any one of which might have counted as a factory of normal size for the day. Some of these were of ancient tradition, such as those for the manufacture of masts, boats, oars, sails, etc., and the great ropery in its handsome building, which manufactured one-third of the rope for the Navy and all of that for overseas yards. The lead, paint, cement, and putty used in all the home dockyards were also produced at Chatham. Most important, however, for future developments were the metal mills, which provided the more innovative materials. Chatham since the foundation of its copper mill in 1864 had provided the Navy with the copper sheets, which were used for sheathing the bottoms of the ships, and more recently had begun the

forging of iron-plates for the armouring of iron-plated ships – wooden ships covered with armour-plate – which were the latest naval experiment. The *Royal Oak* which was the principal ship on the stocks in 1860 was being constructed in this way. So great was the pressure on the metal mills that they worked with three shifts around the clock at this time, and were beginning to create a new 'engineers' or 'factory' department, alongside the central occupation of ship-construction.[1]

All these operations were controlled and organised by a central management into one highly co-ordinated system, linked moreover with the parallel complexes in the other dockyards. At Chatham a Captain-Superintendent of naval rank stood at the head of affairs; below him the Master-Shipwright, first of the shipwright officials, answered for technical matters on the construction side. A Chief Engineer had just been appointed, owing to the growth of the metal mills, to head the factory side, though as yet there was no steam-factory as at Woolwich and Sheerness.

In 1860, Chatham dockyard was about to embark upon a new phase of development consequent upon the introduction of iron-building proper to the public dockyards – an innovation for which it was chosen to play a pioneering role. The Crimean War had indicated the need for building iron battleships; one dockyard was selected as the experimental base for the new techniques and skills and that one was Chatham, where the metal-foundries were already developed. In 1860, consequently, the full iron-built warship, the *Achilles,* was laid down attracting much debate, conflict and local attention. The Act for the Extension of Chatham dockyard passed through Parliament in 1861; it proposed to enlarge the total area by 380 acres and to spend £3 million on converting the landscape and adding the necessary machinery and workshops for an arsenal of the modern era.[2] St. Mary's Creek was to be converted into three huge communicating basins and four new drydocks were to be built. After this conversion, Chatham dockyard was a different place – it became a crucible for the development of government policies in naval engineering and naval design, in the training of a specialised workforce and in works education.[3]

[1] M. Oppenheim, 'The Royal Dockyards' in *History of the County of Kent*, VCH, ii, 387–8; Patrick Barry, *Dockyard Economy and Naval Power,* London, 1863, 87.

[2] Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates,* 3rd series, vol. 161, col. 324 (11 February, 1861).

[3] See M. Waters, 'Changes in the Chatham Dockyard Workforce' in forthcoming issue of *Mariners Mirror.*

It is the proliferation of parliamentary reports and pamphlet literature attendant upon this development which enables us to form a clear picture of Chatham dockyard just before it happened – at the moment that is, which signifies the high point of its development as an early modern workshop before its move into the industrial age. The existence of such an organisation, dating back into pre-industrial times and deploying large numbers of manufacturing workers, merits attention to its nature, recruitment and deployment.

Work-place and Work-force

It appears from the more literary accounts that the dockyard, being a centre of Admiralty residences, had greater dignity and pleasantness as a work place than most private shipyards. R.G. Hobbes, Patrick Barry and Charles Dickens, memoirist, pamphleteer and essayist, respectively, are agreed on the calm front and tidy aspect which Chatham yard presented to the world. 'Everywhere, as I saunter up and down the Yard,' wrote Dickens in 1861, 'I meet with tokens of its quiet and retiring character. There is a gravity upon its red brick offices and houses, a staid pretence of having nothing worth mentioning to do, an avoidance of display.'[4] Yet, adds Hobbes who worked many years as a clerk to the paymaster's office, a vast amount of labour went on there,[5] and Dickens himself was impressed by the dramatic scene where the new iron ship was building, its hammers clanging, its rivet-heads glowing.

To the hostile pamphleteer, however, 'the tout-ensemble of open ground and building' compared unfavourably with the economical crowding of the private workshop. 'A private shipyard is a hive of industry, with every foot of depth and breadth filled with sheds, shops, furnaces and working-places . . . in a dockyard workshop, on the contrary, one is less likely to be inconvenienced by hamper or lost among machines than to be lost in space and worn out by walking.'[6] It is possible, however, that the tidiness he ridiculed was a recent feature in the 1860s, for the dockyards had improved enormously in this respect since the abolition of canteens and tap houses on the premises in 1833. In defence of the dockyard a correspondent of the local paper asserted that order was indispensable for the large public establishment. The feeling of orderli-

[4] Charles Dickens, *The uncommercial Traveller,* London, 1865, chap. 24, 'Chatham Dockyard'.
[5] R.G. Hobbes, *Reminiscences and Notes of seventy Years,* London, 1895, 125.
[6] Barry, *op. cit.,* 8–9.

ness and respect for the service was for him bound up with good workmanship, 'men would no more think of slighting their work than of quitting it.'[7]

In 1860, the work force numbered 2,782 of whom 1,000 were shipwrights and 605 were labourers. 1735 of these – a majority – were 'established' workers, which meant that they were permanently appointed with job security for life (upon good behaviour).[8] The Superannuation Act of 1859 added the benefit of a retirement pension for them after the age of 60, but compelled them to work at a slightly lower wage than the 'hired' men to help pay for it.[9] 'Hired' men had no security; the theory was that they would be discharged at the end of an emergency period, leaving only those workers whose 'established' numbers were considered necessary to the smooth working of the dockyard. By this device the Admiralty controlled the numbers of shipwrights and labourers employed according to its needs at any one time. In practice, however, there was always a considerable number of 'hired' men, most unskilled labourers falling into that category.

The dockyard men were paid by the day, and the essential factor of personal accounting, therefore, was that they should be present within the dockyard wall for the requisite number of hours, (10 in summer and 8 in winter), duly counted in and out four times each day, by the system of the muster, controlled by the ringing of the dockyard bell. In time of emergency, however, large numbers of men would be put on piecework which enabled them to earn about one-third more than day-work.[10]

Workmen in the dockyards before industrialisation were divided into two fairly distinct groups – an artisan corps, dominated by the shipwrights, for the construction of ships, and a very large body of unskilled labourers whose essential function was the maintenance of the dockyard itself. Work on the ship was very much in the hands of artisans. The shipwright officers at this time, the Master Shipwright with his assistants, the Foremen of the Yard and Inspectors, were gentlemen-shipwrights, trained as gentlemen-apprentices under previous officers of the Yard, or else in the Portsmouth School. They were paid by salary and drawn from educated, if impecunious families. Between them and the working-shipwrights of their craft there was thus a gulf in experience, background and even in

[7] Quoted in *Chatham News,* 25 May 1860, p. 4.
[8] *Parliamentary Papers,* 1860, vol. 42, p. 279.
[9] *Parliamentary Papers,* 1859, (2), vol. II, p. 389.
[10] *Parliamentary Papers,* 1859 (2nd session), vol. 18, 429–51. Qu. 1963–66.

training, since the workmen apprentices, often bound to a father, uncle or brother for the sake of the family economy, would be trained mainly in practical work.

The working gang in 1860 was headed by a senior workman, called a leading man, with rather low status, earning only 1*s.* a day more than the others. He carried out the instructions relayed to him by an inspector who was a salaried official and thus remote from the gang. Inspectors at this time supervised three gangs each and were themselves subordinate to the shipwright foreman (or foreman of the Yard as his full title ran) who presided over the area in which they were working. There were five of these foremen in 1860, directly responsible to the Master Shipwright for *all* the work going on under them, not only that of the shipwrights.[11]

For beside the shipwright gangs, working on the ships and in workshops on the shore, under the Master Shipwright, were small groups of those who belonged to the more ancient of the 'minor trades' – joiners, plumbers, painters, sail-makers, caulkers, etc. They had their own leading men and sometimes their own inspector (for instance the 79 joiners were organised under 6 leading men, controlled by an inspector) but were subject to the shipwright foreman. These smaller bodies of workmen had a relatively high rate of established to hired men (e.g., 72 out of 79 joiners, all the coppersmiths).[12] It seemed to be the plan to keep small tight bands of these peripheral skilled men attached to the dockyard service, in contrast with the ebb and flow of shipwright labour at the convenience of naval policy.

The unskilled Labourers

After the shipwrights, however, the most numerous body of workers in the yards were the labourers. They, too, posed a problem in terms of supervision, since they were required to be here, there and everywhere. The man ultimately responsible for their work was the Boatswain of the Yard, often, as in 1858, an ex-warrant officer of the Navy. Robert Beeman, Boatswain of the Yard, gave in his evidence in 1858 one of the few existing accounts of the recruitment of these unskilled labourers.

> 'There are abundance of applicants for entry into the yard as labourers but that abundance does not consist solely of men brought up as labourers but of shopmen

[11] P.R.O. ADM 116/84 (1896–9), especially D548/98.

[12] *Parliamentary Papers,* 1859 (2), vol. 18. 'Committee on Dockyard Economy'. Qu. 2050, Qu. 2042.

> and pensioned soldiers as well. When a large number are to be entered, the men are drawn up in a line; then the Captain Superintendent, Master Shipwright and myself select from them the strongest-looking men; they are questioned as to character, and where employed; the names are then taken of more than are required, lest there should be any rejected by the surgeon on his examination. Those that are reported fit by the surgeon are entered to the number required. At the end of the month the inferior ones would be discharged if there were any. When there are one or two men to be entered, they are sometimes entered by Admiralty order, and sometimes by the Captain Superintendent's order; in either case I have nothing to do with the men's admission, but I report on them at the end of the month.'

The men entered by this method were an important constituent of the labour force of the Yard; and their opportunities, once entered, were quite varied and not hopeless by any means, though the miserable starting wage of 13*s.* a week was universally commented on in the reports as inadequate.[13]

For instance, we may look at the way in which labourers were used in the sawmills and the storehouse, little sub-empires of their own. In the sawmills, the timber inspector was a shipwright officer specially assigned to the task and the 'timber testers' boring the timber for survey were also shipwrights specialised in knowledge of wood (3 in 1858). However, the men who worked at cutting the timber were sawyers or 'pitmen'; and it is clear from the evidence of John Williams, timber inspector, that sawyers were recruited from unskilled labourers of the Yard who were anxious to better themselves and obtain a more secure position.

> 'The pit sawyers would be selected from the Yard labourers, from men that have been employed sawing for some years, principally in the service. They get their experience – from being casually employed as sawyers from (vacancies caused by) sickness, leave, and deaths. In the event of two pitmen being absent, the custom would be to employ two Yard labourers during their absence . . . and the labourers would be paid as pit sawyers during that time.'

When the pitmen returned the replacement would fall back to the status of labourer, but when a real vacancy arose he might be considered for it, and obtain employment as a 'hired' sawyer. In time, with good service and conduct he might qualify for establishment; he would then become an established sawyer with pension rights and job security. 'Top sawyers' would be selected from the established men. In 1859 there were 22 pairs established, 33 hired pairs, and 41 labourers on the job (the extra one being retained as the spare man). This represented considerable expansion over

[13] *Ibid.*, qu. 2053, and pp. 53–4.

previous years and Williams explained that he had been expressly ordered to recruit 'from the strength of the Yard', so that reduction would be simple and technically irreproachable, 'the topmen will fall back to pitmen and the pitmen to Yard labourers'.[14] Reductions, of course, were expected here as a result of the metal-building policy.

Since sawyers often worked on piecework a good sawyer could earn 19*s*. to 28*s*. a week where the labourer still earned only 13*s*. This was a ladder up which the unskilled man could climb to respectability and security, and there was a number of such ladders available to the dockyard labourer. Another of them was through the storehouse. This area was headed by an elite of Civil Service clerks; under them were some 'writers' (shipwrights acting as junior clerks and account-keepers) who kept the manufacturing accounts and helped to cope with excessive responsibilities. 'I do not consider', said the acting storekeeper, however, in 1858, 'that the present establishment is sufficient to comply with regulations'. Consequently, the clerks and writers often did not see the actual issues of stores but merely confirmed the reports of the storehousemen under them. Storehousemen were labourers, selected for their ability to read and write, and general alertness. Donald complained that he had difficulty getting men of sufficient intelligence for his purposes from the labourers, and the Committee asked him sympathetically if a higher rate of wages would not attract 'a superior class of men, such as men brought up for journeymen in ironmongers' and ship-chandlers warehouses?' It is worth noticing that Beeman, the Boatswain of the Yard, testifying on the intake of ordinary labourers, mentioned that there would be 'shopmen' among them,[15] so perhaps such men might enter in the hope of this kind of specialisation. Storehousemen had leading men appointed from among them.

It was in view of this kind of opportunity that the Yard administration later made a distinction between 'ordinary' and 'skilled' labourers (confusingly so-called). Ordinary labourers were those working at 13*s*. a day on fetching, carrying and cleaning; skilled labourers (recognised officially from 1876) were those who after entry at the ordinary level had picked up a semi-skill or a special position, who had a few shillings extra and better career prospects. The term was not in use in 1860; however, there is reference in the Committee's report to 'single-station labourers' – those attending

[14] *Ibid.*, qu. 1974.
[15] *Ibid.*, qu. 2057; qu. 2082; qu. 2084–2093; qu. 2053.

kilns, marking timber, attending chip carts and cranes, acting as messengers, lamplighters and gardeners, taking charge of the timber in the mast-ponds, or of the working horses, a few working as mechanics' helpers, especially with painters.[16] The leading man of painters, George Cheshire, complained in fact to the Committee that not enough properly qualified painters (like himself, who had served seven years' apprenticeship in London) were being taken on. There were only twelve painters (one of them 'hired') and a grinder and, since they could no longer keep pace with the shipwrights, they were compelled to carry twelve labourers along with them. He objected to this because labourers used too much colour and spread it unevenly, unless they had been very long on the job. Surprisingly, his evidence revealed that these labourers might sometimes turn out to be painters after all. 'We have painters who have been raised from labourers, but these were men who had served their time as painters', i.e., they were painters who had entered the Yard as labourers.[17]

The Workshops and Factories

Given such a pool of diversely oriented and adaptable labour, it is not surprising that the metal mills should seek to recruit in the same way. 'Our best labourers' said Beeman, 'are taken away for sawyers, for the engineers department, and for hammer men'. As the place of wood in construction was taken over by metal, unskilled labour was moved into metal handling much as it had been moved into wood preparation.

The system of promotion from the ranks of unskilled labourers in the smitheries and metal shops was as prevalent as in the dockyards generally. For instance, in the smitheries men were entered first as hammermen (from Beeman's reservoir of labour) at 3*s.* 9*d.* a day and promoted from that to be firemen. So

> 'the opinion is prevalent in the yards that a vacancy for a fireman of any one of the higher classes cannot be filled up by the entry of a skilled man from the private trade, but that a man from a lower class must be promoted.'[18]

Blaxland, Civil Engineer at Sheerness Yard, was one who spoke of this in more specific terms: "During the war,' he said,

[16] *Ibid.*, Report of the Committee, para. 545.
[17] *Ibid.*, qu. 2022.
[18] *Ibid.*, Report, para. 60.

> 'we had great difficulty in procuring skilled mechanics, more particularly in the boiler and coppersmith departments. In the boiler department we have taken on men as labourers, and as they have shown skill, industry and perseverance, I have advanced them to holders or assistant boilermakers; some of them now are as good as the rivetters. I think these men might be raised to boilermakers . . . the rivet boys in the boiler shop do come forward as boilermakers.'

Cotsell, the Master Smith at Chatham, complained he could not get good forgemen at 8*s*. a day and so was compelled to recommend labourers to take over as assistant furnacemen.[19]

But when we come to the evidence of Thomas Baker, Chief Engineer at Chatham, we are aware of having struck a rock. The dockyard factories in the 1860s had a kind of labour organisation closer to that of the nineteenth-century norm than was usual in the dockyards, and Baker was against the dockyard system of recruitment from below, 'I am decidedly opposed,' he testified, 'to placing labourers to do mechanics' work, on economical grounds, the work being frequently spoiled and you cannot attach blame to the operator . . .' The problem as he saw it was that the Admiralty would not pay the usual rates for the job; and so he was forced to employ inferior men, because good workmen would not come at the low rates of wages.

> 'In my department artificers are tested before entry . . . the men that do offer are not the class of men required; they are generally an inferior class of mechanics. I take the best men who offer.'[20]

All the labourers in his department were supplied by the Boatswain of the Yard; but he seems to indicate that they were used only for labouring work. Baker's recommended solution to the problem was to raise wages and abolish the pension system, running the factories upon the lines of private industry.

The significance of all this was that Baker was making a stand for the status of the engineering department over which he was to preside and for the quality of the men who worked in it. Later the engine fitter apprentices were specified as one of the 'major trades' (the other major trade being that of the shipwrights, from whom in the twentieth century the electricians branched off as a third). In the period then beginning there would be much rivalry between engine fitters and shipwrights and much heart-burning on the part of the former because the shipwrights always seemed to get the preference and the upper hand. Baker's refusal to take his men from the

[19] *Ibid.*, Qu. 1928; qu. 1779.
[20] *Ibid.*, Qu. 1991–2002.

labouring pool, his insistence on trained artisans and his willingness to jettison everything else to get them, can be seen as an early stage of this rivalry – since shipwrights were always men who had served an apprenticeship, engine fitters should be also. At this point, then, we see the beginnings of a counter-élite, based on the new applications of iron and steam, as the shipwrights' pre-eminence was based on that of wood and sail, and later, on the adaptability of his craft.

The Shipwrights

After considering what was new in the dockyard system at this time we are in a better position to look again at the older element – the shipwrights.

These shipwrights were all craftsmen, who had served a seven-year apprenticeship to their trade, either in the dockyard itself or in an outside yard. (In 1860, many of them were men who had come in from the outports to fill the needs of the Crimean War.) Apprentices worked with the gangs; thus, though every apprentice was bound to the Master Shipwright and assigned by him to a specific journeyman as an instructor, he might profit from the working knowledge of the gang as a whole. The gang was chosen by the junior officers by the method of the shoal, which persisted down to the 1930s. This means of selection, somewhat akin to the picking up of sides in a cricket team, helped to ensure an even distribution of skill and strength over all the gangs.

Just as at one level the labourers formed a pool of originally undifferentiated labour which might develop in many directions, so also at another level did the shipwrights. Originally, the workmen *par excellence* of the Yard, they had been accustomed to turn to any activity that was necessary. In 1858, they were still building their own scaffolding for support while working on ships; the Committee suggested that this should be delegated to special gangs of 'scavelmen' (recruited from labourers). Shipwrights were sometimes used as caulkers, always for boat building and mast making. Once they were on board ship they did all their own labouring – fetching stores, clearing chips, fitting copper sheathing, and they were accustomed to 'chip, rivet and cut iron work for knees, bolts, etc.' Their job was to turn their hands to anything that needed doing about the hull of the ship.[21] In addition, some shipwrights always functioned in a managerial and accounting capacity. They rose from

[21] Barry, *op. cit.*, 140.

the ranks to become leading men, measurers, timber surveyors (in view of the shipwright's special knowledge of his building materials) and 'writers', which meant acting as technical clerks for purposes of accounting and keeping records on the job rather than in the office.

At the period under consideration an effort was being made to extend the uses of the shipwrights in an upward direction, so that they should be a reservoir from which to fill the technical, managerial and administrative posts previously the privilege of the gentleman-apprentice, and which, more recently, had been staffed by the gentlemen graduates of the Portsmouth School of Naval Architecture. The new generation of officers was to rise from the ranks recruited by competitive examination,[22] under the terms of the Civil Service Act of 1857.

From the argument that centred about the elevation of working men, we get some idea of the prejudices activated by the policy. The Committee members of 1859 were in favour of preserving a distinction between officers of the yard and the ordinary workmen, so they wanted to admit 'a superior class of young men' to the training schools, such as could be identified with the employers of labour rather than the employed. They were prepared to see working men rise to the rank of Foreman at £250 a year ('far above the chances to men in a similar position in private trade') but, above that, they wanted to see the line drawn and the field preserved for gentlemen – bearing in mind the fact that only about 20 such officers were needed who between them would have control of some £1½ million of public money. For these positions practical deserving men were not suitable 'on account of their close connection and association with the workmen.'[23]

It is clear that there was a strong feeling in favour of reintroducing the gentleman-apprentice, especially on the part of the older officers. Oliver Laing, Master Shipwright at Chatham in 1860, complained that though he had no objection to 'a considerable infusion of the working class' he objected to 'the shutting out of the sons of gentlemen from the service entirely, no gentlemen can put his sons into it.'[24] Laing was himself the son of a Master Shipwright, and had been apprenticed to his father, but he was not prepared to bring in any one of his sons under the new dispensation. On this issue, however, rational and democratic policies were to triumph

[22] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852–3, vol. 60, 543–51.

[23] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1859 (2), vol. 18. 'Dockyard Economy' Report, para. 346.

[24] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1861, vol. 26, 'Royal Commission on Control and Management of Her Majesty's Naval Yards'. qu. 5166.

and the dockyard shipwright apprentices were to be a new departure in technical education and recruitment after 1859.

The Problem of Patronage

In spite of these innovations the pattern visible to any knowing eye in 1860 must still have been that by which family influence and political patronage governed recruitment and promotion. As late as 1887, Lord George Hamilton called it a peculiarity of the dockyard establishments that the same families had been employed there for generations and stated that more consanguinity was found there than among any similar number of work people in the world.[25] The network of family relationships was, in fact, still officially recognised and countenanced in 1860. The joiners, for instance, complained in 1893 that their trade had been retained as an area in which deserving Yard workmen could get their sons apprenticed, and asked (successfully) for recruitment by examination in the future. Cotsell, the Master Smith in 1858, said that most men in the smithery had been able to get their sons apprenticed, if they wished.[26] William Owen, inspector of shipwrights, said that most leading men preferred to have their sons and relations with them in their gangs and would ask the inspector to conduct the shoal accordingly. Owen thought this was in the interest of the service since 'they take more interest in bringing them forward in knowledge.' And sometimes a good mechanic would take a relation less competent than himself as his mate to the benefit of all. However, Cheeseman, Foreman of the Yard, thought that the practice encouraged idling and favouritism to relatives with respect to workloads.[27] Family participation was only marginally affected by the rationalisation of the apprenticeship system in 1859 since in practice it was always the local boys who put their names on the list for the examination, but the enormous expansion of the work force after 1860 had the effect of diluting the network of family relationships with much new blood.

Very different was the matter of political patronage. This was a serious matter rising out of the power of appointment vested in the First Lord and exercised through the Secretary to the Admiralty; it became particularly noticeable after the Reform Act of 1832 gave

[25] Hansard *Parliamentary Debates*, (3rd series) vol. 317, col. 1211, 18 July, 1887.
[26] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852–3, vol. 60, 543–551. *Parliamentary Papers* 1859 (2) vol. 18, qu. 1784.
[27] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1859 (2) vol. 18, qu. 1921 and qu. 1908.

the vote to many dockyard workmen. Patronage ran far down the ladder after this and even very minor appointments were used to influence local elections. Chatham in fact was a borough where dockyard appointments and promotions were used to buy votes on an astonishing scale. 'The public service at that time', says Hobbes, writing specifically of Chatham Dockyard 'was like a great reservoir, into which drained the unemployed of all classes who had friends in power, but especially those who had, or were connected with such as had, Parliamentary votes.'[28] In 1852, 318 Chatham voters were in the government employ, double the number by 1866,[29] and many more were tradesmen with extensive clientele connections who wanted dockyard jobs.

It was in that year that the Liberal electors of Chatham brought a petition against the return of Sir Frederick Smith (Conservative) on grounds of corruption, whereupon a Select Committee on the Petition took the lid off a seething cauldron of local parliamentary activity which revealed the connection between dockyard patronage and support for the local M.P.s; between the shopkeepers of the town and the parliamentary agents on the one hand, between dockyard men and tradesmen on the other. Smith is said to have bribed fifty-four persons including the Master Smith. One man was promised a job as a messenger in the Yard and another bargained for a job as a yard bricklayer for his son.[30]

The usual thing was for the patronage at this level to be dispensed before the election, hence the candidate of the government in power was always elected. Hence also the fact that promotion and position in the dockyard were cynically regarded by all. 'If a vacancy occurs on the establishment for painters,' said George Cheshire, leading man of painters, 'they have usually been filled from local or political interest, with reference to their merits.' However, he added, in amelioration, the last vacancy was filled by the Captain Superintendent with an old shipmate of his![31]

Against this whole system of political patronage the Admiralty resolutely set its influence. After 1859, apprentices were only admitted by public examination, and in 1860 a proclamation was pinned to the dockyard gate, stating that all promotions and advancements of the future would be similarly determined. Their lordships would select from the lists, on the recommendations of the

[28] Hobbes, *op. cit.*, 33.
[29] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852–3, vol. 8, 447, and 1866, vol. 57, 43.
[30] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852–3, vol. 9, 223, qu. 57.
[31] *Parliamentary Papers*, 1859 (2), vol. 18, qu. 2022.

officers, those who were considered to be best qualified. Attempts to obtain promotion by political or other direct influence would be punished by reprimand, reduction and dismissal, progressively.[32] Though this regulation later exercised something of a check on the growth of trade unionism, it nevertheless carried considerable immediate advantage for the workmen in freeing them from pressure upon their parliamentary vote of the kind that was often felt in private workshops.

An occasion of 1868 shows that the workmen knew how to use the regulation to protect themselves. Before the election the foreman-smith brought a petition into the yard against Gladstone's measure for the disestablishment of the Irish Church. He gave it to George Garnett (a fitter) who collected ten signatures in his dinner-hour before somebody sent for the gentlemen of the press. The communication which brought them hot on the trail survives: 'The smiths in the Yard today have been requested to leave the shop and go into the square outside to sign a memorial against the Disestablishment of the Irish Church, what do you think of that for a bold dodge!!'[33] Not only the *Chatham News* but the Chatham Liberal Committee busied itself in protest, and with these outside allies the men who had organised anonymous protest carried their point and compelled the Captain Superintendent to reiterate the Admiralty ruling that dockyard officers should not use their position to propagate their own political views.

Social Organisations

A feature of the collective life of the dockyard which passes from the political to the social is the activity of the dockyardmen around relief funds to help those less fortunate than themselves. The tradition of passing round the hat in cases of individual distress is frequently mentioned in the press. One such case occurred during the building of the *Achilles,* when a man of 39 called Savage was 'struck near the heart with an iron plate' and died, leaving a widow with six children. The man had only three years' service in the Yard and no pension rights; however, after much toing and froing the widow was granted the usual death gratuity of £10. His fellow-workmen had already taken up a collection to relieve her immediate distress. In 1864, when a shipwright, Monk, and a labourer, Sherwood, were killed on board the *Achilles* their workmates

[32] *Chatham News,* 11 February, 1860, p. 4.
[33] P.R.O. ADM 1/6065 (Chatham Yard) 17 August, 1868.

collected £27 7*s.* 6*d.* for each widow.[34]

But in the winter of 1865 a club was formed 'among the dockyard people' to provide against accidents and death occurring in the Yard. One thousand two hundred men were enrolled, each member to pay 4*d.* entrance fee and 3*d.* on the death of a member. The amount paid out to the family was to be £12.[35]

Iron building meant an increase in the hazards of the dockyard, for not only was there greater danger from the increased height of the scaffolding, but a completely new category of accidents was opened up in the damage done to men's eyes by sparks and iron filings. For treatment of these injuries they were given an allowance to travel to the Maidstone Opthalmic Hospital. The workmen of the Yard contributed about £33 a year to the hospital funds by subscriptions, a burden which the government was urged to take over in 1865.[36]

There was also considerable activity around the funds for relief of distressed textile workers in Lancashire during the American Civil War – probably considered an appropriate cause since the shipbuilding industry throve on the conflict for which the textile workers suffered. The first appeal comes from a blacksmith, John Prickett, in a letter to the press which urged the example of the 73 smiths engaged on the building of the *Achilles,* all of whom had subscribed nobly. In fact, in a subsequent letter it appears that all the workmen of the *Achilles* held a meeting during the dinner-hour on 24th October and passed a resolution to subscribe 1*d.* per man per week.[37]

Recreation on a work-place basis was and remained quite usual in Chatham Dockyard, but it seems to have been changing its nature at this time. The smiths kept up to a surprisingly late date the celebration of their patron-saint's day, St. Clement's, on the 23rd November. On this day one of the smiths was dressed up in a long grey beard as 'Old Clem' and was chaired around the town by torchlight collecting 'largesse' for a beanfeast. In later years the procession was confined to the Yard itself and the saint was dressed in something that sounds very like a naval officer's uniform with spectacles (perhaps in commemoration of the individual who left a

[34] P.R.O. ADM 1/5881 (Chatham Yard) 22 January, 1864; *Chatham News,* February 13, 1864, p. 4.
[35] *Chatham News,* 11 November, 1865, p. 4.
[36] P.R.O. ADM 1/6200, no. 1.
[37] *Chatham News,* 22 October, 1859, p. 4; 8 November, 1862, p. 2.

fund for celebration of the day?). He stopped at each of the blacksmith's fires to shout 'quaint lines which had been handed down.' The custom was finally suppressed in 1876.

The ropemakers also used to celebrate in similar fashion the festival of St. Katherine, when a pretty boy among the apprentices would be dressed up as 'Queen Kate' and do the rounds of the town.[38] But by 1859 the *Chatham News* reports the ropemakers half-holiday at the Napier Arms very tamely, and adds that they went afterwards to play cricket on the Lines (the open heath-land used for military drill). At the same time parts of the 19th and 27th and the whole of the 28th company of shipwrights assembled at the Star, for cricket, bowls and quoits. The same issue reports an outing of 'leading-men and single-station men' (the superior unskilled workmen congregating together).[39] Reports of these outings and celebrations become regular features in the local press, the usual form being a buggy ride to a country inn, games and dances, tea or lunch, and a ride home by a different route. The basis is no longer the trade, which would probably have been too cumbersome by this time in any case, but the work-group or status-group.

The graduating class of apprentices usually celebrated their passing out of their time by a dinner and a convivial evening, with addresses from senior officers, toasts to 'parents and instructors', and hired musicians. On February 11, 1865, the nine graduating apprentices, with five from the previous year, sat down at the Sun to a meal which consisted of a 'haunch of mutton, legs of port, legs of mutton, beef, hams, tongues, hares, turkeys, fowls, ducks, fruit pies, mince pies, custards, plum puddings, etc.' with several steaming bowls of punch. If not exactly an orgy, it seems to have retained some of the characteristics of one.[40]

The dockyard in 1865 was already in process of transition from a universe of freshly-scented wood to one of clamorous iron. Hobbes it was who identified the growing point of the dockyard at this time in the romantic gloom of the smithy. 'The blazing fires . . . glowing amid the smoky gloom all over the vast 'shop' – the toiling workmen at the innumerable forges, moving among the Rembrandt-like lights and shadows; and the din and clang of falling hammers'[41] though pride of place was now usurped by the Nasmyth, the mighty steam hammer. It is a fitting place to leave these shadows at work.

[38] Hobbes, *op. cit.*, 146 (footnote); *Chatham Observer*, 9 December, 1876, p. 2.
[39] *Chatham News*, 6 August, 1859.
[40] *Chatham News*, 18 February, 1865, p. 4.
[41] Hobbes, *op. cit.*, 116.