

Naval Imperialism in Portsmouth, 1905 to 1914

K. LUNN and R. THOMAS

The dominance of imperialism in Portsmouth politics in the Edwardian era, to the exclusion of most other important national issues¹, needs to be explained by more than simply referring to the particular sensitivity of dockyard towns to the appeal of jingoism.² Whilst it is the case that Portsmouth's economic base had depended on the navy and military presence and on dockyard employment, it is also necessary to explore the other dimensions of imperialistic values which were dominant, culturally, within the city. Indeed, they remain significant politically and economically. Involvement in the Falklands War and the celebrations of victory have recently reinforced many of these values. In historical terms, work on other towns in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries has identified various aspects of popular culture, of education and of youth organisations, for example, which helped to promote and sustain notions of empire and racial superiority.³ This particular paper will concentrate on three themes, separate but related. First, the role of military displays and ceremonies generating nationalistic fervour will be discussed. Second, the intervention of imperialist candidates and issues in parliamentary politics is analysed and finally, attention will be focussed on the structures of a major source of employment, the navy dockyard. All of these aspects can be seen as inhibiting the development of an effective labour movement before 1914 by developing and reinforcing imperialist attitudes throughout Portsmouth society.

Militarism is symbolically and spatially commemorated in Portsmouth through the battles, generals, monarchs and admirals 'honoured' by pub and street names. It is also to be found in the military relics on the sea-front and in Victoria Park, and in the postcard vistas of forts, barracks, gun batteries, fortified walls, H.M.S. Victory and other warships.

Its bludgeoning presence was felt throughout the city. Marines, soldiers and sailors packed out the pubs, cinemas and music-halls; they were always prominent among the crowds at the railway stations and in the dance-halls. The local newspapers were full of adverts

offering rented rooms to 'quiet' sailors and the naval columns of *Evening News* combined debates between Lionel Yexley, the champion of the ordinary sailor and the 'lower deck' movement, and Fred Jane, the leading naval strategist and campaigner for a stronger navy. Civilian life was also influenced by the navy's presence. Sailors' wives frequently undertook outwork making naval uniforms, the respectable Anglican churches organised naval parades and boatmen on the seashore spent their summers taking visitors to 'see the ships in port'.

These almost inexhaustible variations of the forms and styles of social militarism were prominent amongst the elderly; the veterans of the Crimea war were commemorated on royal birthdays, and a former comrade was praised at his funeral – such historical incidents invariably were given column space in the local newspapers. And it could also be seen among the young middle class children who naturally wore sailor suits when they were taken out walking on the common by their nannies. Local shoppers probably chose 'Senior Service' or 'Navy Cut' at their tobacconist and newsagent. There were hundreds of such shops in Portsmouth and Southsea and virtually all decked out their counters and windows with postcards – some of these cards showed the piers, or the new canoe lake development, but others reproduced images of naval heroes and the sailor kings, Edward and George.

The local and national dimensions of militarism combined most emphatically when the city and its environs were the site for the demonstration of that most powerful form of national force, the mighty British navy. For it was primarily through pageantry that imperialism was revealed and militarism revered. Navalism involved the laying of a keel plate, the launch of a Dreadnought or the funeral of the commander-in-chief of the home fleet, Admiral Curzon-Howe. The parades, reviews and launches were public events involving many thousands of people. Navalism, however, had affectionate moments as when Lady Meux, wife of the acting commander-in-chief, treated the 'dockies' building the Queen Elizabeth to a night out at the music-hall; it also stressed the bond of friendship between the town and navy through the banquets and ships' dinners given in the Guildhall. There was even a personal quality, an intimate style to navalism, for young midshipmen were taught the manly virtues of English officership through explicit reference to the Nelsonian code of behaviour. Individual and corporatist values were thus enshrined in the cult of the navy's hero since young gentlemen and the officer cadre in general were expected to read the writings of Mahen, a famous naval historian and tactician, whose biography of Nelson

emphasised the link between control of the seas and world domination. The young officers were also expected to display the appropriate qualities of leadership, loyalty and patriotism – these values all having an explicit class dimension. On a lighter note the distinction between ‘Jack’ and ‘an officer’ was reflected in the distinct images produced for prints and post cards on the theme of ‘every girl loves a sailor’. And even if the dockies traditionally adopted hostile attitudes towards the more chauvinist forms of naval elitism they were also equally vulnerable to or approving of the more public forms of epic naval pageantry.

Almost approximately forty per cent of the dockyard labour force was exclusively concerned with new ship construction and it was the product of their collective labour – ‘The Great Ship’ – which featured in the most impressive annual ceremony associated with navalism, the launch of a capital ship in the British Empire’s senior dockyard. During the 1850s dockyard maties had built important wooden ‘first’ and ‘second rate’ (according to the number of guns) warships. Their launches had brought thousands of people into the Victorian dockyard. This practice was continued throughout the 1880s and 1890s. Thus by the 1900s the launch of a battleship was a long-established public ceremony. However, the launch of H.M.S. *Dreadnought* on 10 February 1906 brought with it all the excitement of the novel and revolutionary nature of the design and fighting capacity of a supposedly unique warship. On this occasion the area of the dockyard around the hull was densely packed with many thousands of dockies and townspeople. There was an enclosure for privileged ticket holders and the VIPs’ balcony opposite the bows of the vessel seated the elite of senior Admiralty staff, dockyard management and local politicians. Immediately prior to the christening of the *Dreadnought*, a series of prayers were given with the dockyard choir leading the hymn-singing. King Edward then cut the cord which restrained the dog-weights with a chisel and hammer made from the wood of H.M.S. *Victory*. As the hull began to move down the slipway the Royal Marines Artillery band played ‘Rule Britannia’ amid tumultuous cheering which rolled and echoed around the slip and the nearby sheds. With the ship launched the platform led the way in the singing of the national anthem. The ceremony almost over, Rear-Admiral Barry proposed three cheers for the King.

The pageantry of the launch day was undeniably impressive. The central themes were carefully revealed in each of the subsequent eight launches of the new *Dreadnoughts*, as this class of ships was known: the enormous crowds of visitors and dockyard workers, the VIP visitors including royalty, senior aristocrats and admirals; there

was always the moment of expectancy, then the thrill of watching the big ship move down the slip rapidly gathering momentum with the roar of the chains; the wailing of the ships' sirens in the harbour when the launch had occurred; the dockies in their rowing boats netting the grease in the harbour when the ship was towed away. This public ceremony always produced a spontaneous demonstration of English national pride, but it was a sentiment which appeared in a familiar and ritualised event, an event that was sanctified by the religiosity of the blessing of the ship and all those who were to sail in her.⁴ On these days the people, the navy and the Empire were entwined symbolically and irrevocably.

The Spithead naval reviews which were such a feature of the years before the First World War also brought enormous crowds to the city for a period of several days when Pompey people, visitors, marines, soldiers and sailors thronged the sea-front around Clarence pier.⁵ Out at sea were the line upon line of British warships. In the parliamentary reviews the MPs and cabinet ministers were brought down by train from Westminster and Windsor and then ferried out to board selected warships within the assembled fleet. The senior position at the head of the lines of warships was usually occupied by the Dreadnought battleships, with the Portsmouth-built warship of each class being in the van because they were the nameship. All the ships were rigged with the flags of the Empire. On the day of the King's visit the battleships had the royal marines in full dress uniform drawn up in formation on top of the gun turrets. The sailors manned the rails of the warships and gave three cheers as the royal yacht steamed through the lanes of the fleet. These occasions were graphically described in the press although the political points the journalists concentrated upon were sea-power, the navy as shield of the Empire and the argument that the overwhelming nature of British naval strength preserved world peace – it proved difficult to disagree with or challenge this form of navalist rhetoric in Portsmouth.

The 'great days' of the launches and the naval reviews were intended to – and probably did – invoke a fusion of patriotic emotions and to reveal a fervour for what was called the British way of life. In the Edwardian era English people were highly conditioned by inherited ideologies which emphasized a common citizenship, the fairness of society and the class neutrality of the armed forces and the monarchy. 'Nation', 'Empire', 'Seapower' were concepts which elicited national pride and were usually accepted uncritically by the public. These imperial and navalist ideas were especially concentrated in Portsmouth, for while there were tensions between the city

and the navy such matters were not for public hearing. The great occasions with their accompanying pageantry always unified the reciprocal relationship: Portsmouth needed the navy and was proud to serve, for the navy had made the town what it was.

Another significant aspect of the reinforcement of a strong pro-imperialist ideology can be detected in the parliamentary politics of the town. Sections of the population in the city-wide constituency had always been seen as susceptible to a jingoistic appeal and a succession of Tory candidates had played the 'imperial card'. In the 1885 election, Admiral Charles Beresford, who was later to play such a significant role in Portsmouth politics, came fresh from his involvement in the Nile Expedition, where he was mentioned in despatches, to address a Conservative meeting on the need for rearmament.⁶ In 1895, the year before he launched the *Daily Mail*, Alfred Harmsworth stood as a Conservative candidate. The previous year, the local paper had been taken over by the Harmsworth family and it was used to the full in this campaign. A sensational serial story, 'The Siege of Portsmouth', featured prominently, the intention being to emphasise the alleged lack of preparation of the British navy to prevent enemy (i.e. German) attack. Posters advertising the paper showed illustrations of 'victims' of enemy shelling lying in the Town Hall Square.⁷

However, the late nineteenth century saw the city's parliamentary representation following broadly the national trend, alternating from Liberal to Conservative with relatively small majorities. It was only in the ten years or so before 1914, in the increasing tension of naval rivalry with Germany, that a specific Tory rhetoric of chauvinistic imperialism began to reap dividends.

In the 1906 election, three particular issues dictated the emphasis of the local campaign. The Conservative government's action the previous year in discharging 1500 men from the dockyard incensed many locals of all political persuasions and made dockyard employment a significant election issue. Secondly, it was announced on New Year's Day, a few weeks before the election date, that the launching of the first Dreadnought was planned for February and that the King was to attend. This served as a timely reminder of the continued importance of British naval supremacy, of the issues involved with that supremacy and of the national and royal splendour likely to herald the launch. Finally, the intervention of Fred T. Jane, the original author of *Jane's Fighting Ships* as a candidate brought the question of the navy even more to the fore in the campaign. He stood as a 'Naval Interest' candidate, claiming to campaign solely for things naval and promised, if elected, to have no dealings with party politics. 'The maintenance of the navy at full strength was the only

way that Portsmouth could be kept going. In seeking election he appealed for votes to all who manned our ships, or built our ships or lived by providing things for those who did.⁸

Jane's involvement appears to have shifted the whole focus of the campaign away from major national issues such as education, protection and tariff reform in general.⁹ Although these, and other themes, were touched on,¹⁰ the main emphasis of debate and argument was on a strong navy and empire. This created some problems for the Liberal candidates, Baker and Bramsdén, since, nationally, Liberals made much capital from criticising aspects of Conservative imperialism, for example the employment of Chinese labour in South Africa. In the circumstances of the Portsmouth campaign, they found it difficult to challenge major aspects of imperialism or of what sustained imperial dominance, the British navy. Thus, they were forced to make certain priorities, as their newspaper advertisement on election day showed:

A vote for Baker and Bramsdén is a vote for A Strong Navy, A Well Equipped Army, Efficient Volunteers, Maintenance of the Dockyard, Rights for Workers, Govt. Work for Govt. Men, Religious Equality, Improved Education, Better Housing, Land Law Reform, Temperance Reform, Sound Finance, British Work for British Men and Cheap Food.¹¹

The outcome was a Liberal victory, but with the same vote as the previous election, despite the 'Liberal Landslide' nationally. All kinds of explanations need to be considered here. The intervention of Jane accounted for over a thousand votes. For the first time, a Labour candidate stood, and, to the surprise of many, he polled over 8,000 votes, relegating the Conservatives into fourth and fifth places in the two-member constituency. There is considerable evidence that the shift to Labour reflected working-class discontent over the dockyard discharges. 'It seemed that the Conservative working man has apparently thrown over his party in disgust and joined the ranks of Labour.'¹² However, although the Labour movement had made some impact in Portsmouth, with branches of the ILP and Fabians emerging, with strong Trades Council involvement, the 8,000 Labour votes did not signify a sustained challenge to the ideology of chauvinist imperialism, as the subsequent election showed.

In fact, January 1910 reemphasised how vulnerable the city was to the jingoist appeal and how entrenched the attitudes of imperialism were within its politics. It was Admiral Charles Beresford who made the running this time. Selected in preference to some long-established local candidates, he was at this time a leading figure in the Navy

League and in national prominence due to his criticism of Admiralty readiness against German naval expansion.¹³ He dictated the course and direction of proceedings in January 1910. Virtually every speech he made was on the same topic – the threat to British naval supremacy. The issue was framed with a sense of imperial crisis and voters were urged to discard traditional political loyalties to preserve Britain's status (Beresford did, however, stand as a Conservative!). As the *Hampshire Telegraph* put it:

Tariff Reform, Free Trade, the Budget, the Land Tax – however much the Liberals may sing their 'Land Song' – and Socialism are now matters of second-rate importance . . . Lord Charles had placed before the electorate the plainest possible proofs that Germany is now this very day spending more on guns, more on new construction, than we are.¹⁴

Beresford had no doubt about the superiority of the British race and the importance of maintaining military dominance over the rest of the world. 'Owing to holding command of the sea the British Empire had done more for the civilisation, liberty, freedom, and well-being of the world than all other countries put together.'¹⁵ This sentiment was reinforced at well-attended Tory meetings. At the Connaught Drill Hall, an audience of 6,000 preceded the speeches with the singing of 'Land of Hope and Glory', 'They All Love Jack', 'Rule Britannia' and 'Red White and Blue'. The chairman, Colonel Holbrook, built upon the rhetoric of these songs.

England, the land which they all loved, and the land of which they were all so proud, had less than a fortnight to make up her mind whether she would continue to hold her place among the great nations of the world, or whether she would sink to a fifth rate Power, and her voice in the Councils of Europe would have no weight.¹⁶

Beresford also appealed to the former glories of empire in his newspaper advertisements.

Twenty-five years ago on Monday, trying to relieve the heroic Gordon, basely abandoned and left to his fate by a Liberal Government, Lord Charles Beresford carried out a magnificent feat of arms, when at Abu Klea, his column won the day.

The fight on next Monday will be for Britons and Empire. It rests with Portsmouth then to win a magnificent victory on that day!!¹⁷

The two Conservative candidates won a sweeping victory, with a swing to them over four times the national average.¹⁸ The Labour

candidate, Sanders, who had taken 8,000 votes in 1906, won less than 4,000 and had been forced to concede many specifics of Beresford's campaign. The local paper saw it as a victory for the navy and for Empire. 'The turnover of votes has been amazing, and Southsea has vied with Landport, the rich with the poor, in telling England and the world that Naval strength and national safeguard must precede social reform.'¹⁹ To understand more clearly the power of the imperial image in the city and the lack of any alternative challenge, it is necessary to turn to the final theme, the role of the dockyard.

The Royal Navy Dockyard in Portsmouth was the premier naval base in the country. The total acreage of the yard was more extensive than that of the largest private naval shipbuilder, Armstrong Whitworth on the Tyne. The dockyard featured three basins, eighteen locks, three building-slips, although only one was suitable for capital ships, and had its own foundries, plate-shops, smithies, factory and stores. However, it was still reliant upon the armament firms for its supply of armoured steel plate, guns, turbines, boilers and most of the bending, shearing and cutting machines used in warship construction.

The nine battleships completed in the yard during the period 1905–1916 represent the peak of the city's ship-building tradition. Their construction coincided with a large capital outlay by the Admiralty on docks, workshops and harbour improvements. These new projects included the electrification of the yard's power supplies, the building of an extensive docking complex at number three basin and the construction of a new coaling station. The Admiralty also purchased two cranes of 240 tons and 150 tons and a floating dock from Cammell Laird of Birkenhead. In addition a new engineering factory was built, the boiler and joiners shops were extended, the slip was broadened and lengthened on two occasions and finally a new shipwright shop was completed during 1914.²⁰

Within the city and its hinterland, the yard monopolised the male labour market. By 1904 the number of dockyard employees had risen to 11,914.²¹ However, in the following year, the Conservative government, acting on the advice of Lord Fisher, then First Sea Lord, pushed through a series of dismissals among the hired men. Subsequently the construction of the Dreadnoughts and the increased fleet maintenance work brought regular work and allowed the number of dockyard employees to stabilise at approximately 11,500 for the four main departments and 15,000 for the yard in total.

The yardmen completed the construction of H.M.S. Dreadnought in the record time of one year and a day. Her keel plates were laid on 2 October 1905. The hull was launched after fifteen weeks' work. The battleship was completed in October 1906. Although the usual period

for the completion of a battleship had been three to five years, the Portsmouth dockies in those momentous weeks created a world record in battleship construction, a building feat that remained unsurpassed. The rapid momentum of the work was sustained throughout each of the nine capital ship-building programmes and the platers and riveters were publicly praised at the launch of *Iron Duke*, 12 October 1912, for being able to complete the hull four months ahead of the original Admiralty schedule. However, the men periodically resented the methods of labour management and work organisation which the yard officers laid down in order to meet the Admiralty's schedules. Between 1910 and 1912 the city's Trades Council made representations to the TUC on behalf of the yard workers, complaining of unfair work practices and the very lengthy daily and weekly hours that were being demanded in the yard.²²

For their part, both the Admiralty and the dockyard management were anxious to restrict trade union membership, thereby avoiding the forms of local militancy which began to characterise the engineering and ship-building industry from 1910 onwards. From the official point of view there was the fear that if the yard workers became organised at the point of production, and militant trade unions became firmly established among the dockies, then general or sectional disputes were likely and a withdrawal of the men's labour could have potentially undermined the Dreadnought programme. Their lordships felt that such loss of production in the Portsmouth yard might have seriously imperilled the lead the British had over Admiral Tirpitz's Imperial navy in new capital ships.²³ It was therefore vital to the Admiralty that the dockyard management clearly subordinated the interests of labour to the stated national interest. The yard's administrators therefore chose to continue with traditional yard practices, while undertaking new initiatives in 'scientific management' through the importing of work practices pioneered in the major ship-building and engineering firms.²⁴

Within the yard, as with the private ship-building yards, the labour process associated with ship construction and maintenance reproduced sectionalism and divisions among the men.²⁵ The Dreadnought programme of 1905-16 was specifically responsible for a further proliferation of trades, in particular amongst the metal crafts including the engineering trades. There was also a simultaneous general move by the dockyard management to dilute the skilled men's craft autonomy.

The complexity of the relations at the point of production in the yard created a plurality of work situations. In general among the dockies, there was a hierarchy of labour that existed across all the

trades, while each particular trade was subject to wide internal differentials. Work situations were dispersed and localised; construction gangs were preponderantly confined to the number three basin, storemen kept to their own itineraries, dockies in the smithies and plate shops worked there on a daily basis and had little contact with the maties in the factory or at the armourers' and boathouses. Distinct groups of men became used to being concentrated in separate gangs at the pattern makers' or the slip. The work experience related to the sectionalisation associated with the Admiralty's broad administrative divisions of construction, engineering and electrical departments. In the factory the work routines of the machinists and fitters were routinised and largely restricted to their machine tools and work benches. At the sheds which stored the armoured plate, gangs of drillers assembled and drilled the plate in the standardised sections according to the work planners' schedules. On the slip the shipwrights retained overall control of both the construction of the frame and the shell. They were assisted by gangs of riveters using pneumatic hand tools as well as the traditional hammered methods. In both the assembly of the frame and the shell, accidents were a frequent work hazard; the pressure on a man or gang with the emphasis on the speedy completion of the task in hand meant that a slip or a misjudgement was ever the more likely, especially towards the end of a twelve-hour shift.

After the completion and the launch of the hull, the ship was moved into the dock for the fitting-out phase. It was here that the armoured belt of between 5 and 13 inches on the hull, turrets, and bulkheads was finally worked into the ship. Sections of the decks and the bulwarks had to be taken out since they had only been there to stiffen the hull for the launch. These now had to be removed to allow the fitting of the boilers and gun-mountings. This work required a variety of skills – the crane men on the heavy crane, the plumbers, carpenters and painters, the electrical and engineering fitters.

Throughout the yard, work gangs were usually distinct, with their own supervisor. Some of the work just required a skilled man and a couple of helpers; other forms of labour required teams of men. However once on board the ship, there was little contact between those riveting bulkheads and those who were fitting the rack and pinion gearing in the turret's barbet. A Dreadnought battleship was a big work location, one that had hundreds of subdivisions, alleyways and distinct levels. On some of the jobs, for instance, engineers undertaking refits would work more closely with naval artificers than with dockies. In this situation of intense labour activity, the demarcation

of job tasks was periodically confused by the Admiralty. There was general disquiet among the tradesmen over the extent of the work given out to the skilled labourers. The latter constituted a peculiar dockyard category and were increasingly involved in different kinds of work such as riveting and iron caulking. Others were employed as hammermen, working machinists or in galvanising. The Admiralty argued that such men were freed from the risk of discharge but of necessity were moved on from week to week through the distinct classes of work. They were not paid trade rates for such work. Many craft workers thought flexibility was a form of deskilling and a means of keeping wages low.

Traditionally the yard's labour hierarchy had revolved around the shipwrights.²⁶ During the Dreadnought era, technological change steadily weakened their position because the crafts required by the yard's officers often lay with those classified by the Admiralty as semi-skilled – the engineers, electrical engineers, boilermakers and engine-fitters. By 1910, there were 3,000 engineers on the yard payroll, virtually equal in numbers to the shipwrights. There had also been a simultaneous expansion of the metal trades in the yard until the number of blacksmiths, non-ferrous metal workers, platers, riveters and boilermakers also matched the numbers of employed shipwrights. This broadening of the base of the yard's craft skills allowed the Admiralty and the dockyard management to intervene in a forceful and aggressive manner. Where disputes arose, the administrators purported to represent the national interest against the interests of a particular group of craft workers.

A constant Admiralty strategy was the effort to limit expenditure on wages, for it was commonly stated in elite naval circles that the most expensive item on a Dreadnought was the men's wages. The men argued that dockyard wages lagged significantly behind those paid out in the private yards. This differential was consistent right across the trades: smith, shipwright, plater and riveter. The harshness of the Admiralty's wages' policy was evident at the start of the Dreadnought programme, for Fisher's 1905 memorandum explicitly declared the intention of saving monies by reducing overtime payments.²⁷ The vagaries of the memorandum on the duplication of chairs and material in dockyard stores only obliquely disguised the intention of slimming down the labour force and upping the length of hours required from those who had regular work. The men who worked on H.M.S. Dreadnought completed a sixty-hour week, some sixty-nine hours. It was said they did so because the fear of dismissal still lingered on among the hired men.

In 1906, several months after the launch of the Dreadnought, the

Admiralty introduced a series of pay rises, said to cost £60,000 per annum, while continuing to develop in the yard a premium bonus scheme based on the Rowan system. The scheme worked by giving a standard time for each piece of work; if the worker completed his task in less time than the standard, then he received a proportional bonus from the saving, the other portion going to the management.²⁸ If he lost time, his debt accumulated. Each further increment accrued through more intense labour and was always less than the previous one. The system soon became regressive for the workmen and wages, after an initial increase, failed to respond to the increase in his labour power for, no matter the effort the dockie put in, he could never earn double his time rate. Trade unionists in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers stated that the system created jealousy among the workers, which they argued was the management's intention in introducing the scheme.

It was the reduction in manning levels and the accompanying rise in productivity which had attracted the Admiralty to the Rowan system. However, the agreed time at the heart of the scheme was not negotiated between the men and the Admiralty, but between rate-fixers and the foremen, whom the trade unionists said competed among themselves to get the lowest time possible. By 1912, the Rowan system was nationally unpopular with the workers throughout the ship-building and engineering trades. However, dockyard shipwrights were successful in getting their own exclusion from the scheme in 1911.

Although the shipwrights had been able to exert their sectional privileges in resisting the premium bonus system, they were still subject to the archaic Admiralty practice of shoaling. Each year, on a nominated Saturday, all the 3,000 shipwrights were technically dismissed. Their re-employment took place on the same day in the form of the senior charge hands taking a pick from among the shipwrights. The most senior man had first pick for his first man, the next senior charge hand then had his first pick. After the first pick had been completed, the senior man had his pick of the second man. This went on until the last of the established men had been picked, and then it moved on to the hired men with the hierarchical picking still continuing. Dominant charge hands obtained the better work and, of course, the better pay for their gang. Rank and status were quite explicit in this process, which was bound to encourage oligarchism and nepotism. Traditional dockyard families occupied the better positions in the well-paid squads; newcomers had to start at the bottom in a system where access to regular wages required more than a degree of conformism to the yard's traditional ways. Shoaling

remained primarily a powerful form of potential discipline. It weakened the bonds of casual friendship; it broke up the work gangs which might be acquiring a degree of cohesion and possible trade union activity. Shoaling was an easy means to outlaw militants and a way of intimidating other sympathetic men. It was an archaic practice that was convenient to the Admiralty because it inhibited trade union organisation within the yard. The yard men could achieve a degree of individual economic advance through familiar contact with the reliable charge hands and, for a few, the foremen. Such deals or favours were struck in local pubs or masonic rooms.

The trade unions which recruited from among the dockyard men were seriously impeded by the Admiralty's administrative procedures.²⁹ Although union officials accompanied deputations of men, the Admiralty refused to negotiate with either the mens' elected representatives or the full-time officials. Instead, the yard's management sought to dilute the influence of the trade unions by insisting that the men follow the traditional yard procedures of the annual petitions and deputations. All wages negotiations, disputes over work conditions and hours were therefore kept strictly within the autonomous institutions created by the Admiralty, whose interpretation, although often delayed, remained authoritative. The Trades Council representative of the shipwrights branch and honorary secretary of the Portsmouth Independent Labour Party, J.A. Mathews, referred in the Trades Council annual report of 1912 to the farcical nature of the system of dealing with the mens' grievances.³⁰ He pinpointed the source of the problem in the aloof officials who used the traditional methods in order to delay and to prevaricate. Mathews wanted to see the setting-up of a dockyard conciliation board which would represent the men at a national level, for wages and hours, and at a local level, for grievances. Like other Portsmouth ILP activists, Mathews felt the situation could only really be improved 'when working men were elected to parliament in sufficient numbers to gain control of the machinery of government.'

Within the yard, the men regarded the preservation of the distinction between 'established' and 'hired' men as one of the most pernicious of the Admiralty's traditions. This institution cut across all the trades and the proportion of established men even among the elite of the labourforce shipwrights, was rarely higher than thirty per cent. In other occupations, the proportions were even less favourable, sometimes being under twenty per cent. An established man was assured of work during the slack periods, a hired man might be laid off. The Admiralty had consistently argued that although established men received less monies than hired men, they would

earn more in a lifetime's work than the skilled man in the private yard, for it was claimed that the latter was laid off when there were no orders. This naval viewpoint was steadily undermined from 1912 onwards by the national shortage of skilled craftsmen in the engineering and ship-building industry. The dockyard authorities eventually had to place job adverts for craftsmen on the dockyard gates and at the city's labour exchanges.

Despite the altered situation in the labour market the Admiralty persevered with its lists of 'hired' and 'established' men. The establishment list remained divisive for it excluded the majority of dockies, who were nevertheless dependent upon the yard for work. The recommendations for those to be established came from the charge hands and the foremen. The listing could also be used as a punitive measure against militants. Since the economic advantages which establishment gave were real, 'a ticket for life', the anxiety and desire for recognition by the yard officers obviously inhibited a pursuit of labour politics by many hired men. Dockyard ways came to be accepted by so many because it was felt that there was no alternative.

The weakest group of workers in the yard in terms of employment prospects were the general labourers. Casualisation was a feature of all dock workers lives but, in Portsmouth, the men's bargaining position was further worsened by the presence of so many ex-sailors in the yard. Most Pompey working-class families had a brother or a son serving in the navy; many heads of families were ex-navy men. When the time arrived for coming out, their families were already established in the city. Like so many others, they had to turn to the yard. The navy barely taught craft skills to its able seamen and so former 'jacks' had to take up painting, cleaning and especially the labouring jobs associated with the construction of the number three basin, the unloading of ships and the movement of stores. Since life on the lower deck was notoriously subject to bullying and excessive punishment³¹, former seamen were inclined to keep quiet. Looking after yourself first, keeping your nose clean, head down etc., loyalty to 'yer mates', a fear of authority were all negative values learnt through years of service. Such habits lingered on in the yard. While they were caught economically at the bottom of the male labour market, the political instincts of former 'jacks' was towards a rough and populist form of Toryism.

The complexity of the engineering and technical work undertaken in the yard, the introduction of timed work and piece rate bonus systems gave an increased role for the supervisory staff. In Portsmouth there was a plentiful supply of men well capable of undertaking

dockyard supervisory work – the ex-petty officers.³² Well-practised in handling men, used to going by the book, former petty officers found their niche as the yard's NCOs. The yard proffered positions associated with security, the stores and as messengers. The administrators' emphasis on quicker work and increased productivity lead to an extension of supervision in the factory, on the workbench, in the smithies and various shops. With their naval pensions, ex-petty officers were unlikely to join the common cause of depressed yard wages. They constituted yet another sectional stratum within the yards, working-class aristocrats who stuck to navy ways, a clique who were drawn to the naval imperialism of Fred Jane and Admiral Beresford.

The yard's administrators were in the position of being able to bring people in from the navy to be the yard's supervisory staff and of using the position of inspector as a career post for the established men. Because so much of the work on the ships was undertaken by gangs and squads, there was a profusion of positions for charge hands and inspectors. An inspector's position could be obtained by a charge hand on the basis of his experience without recourse to written examinations. The higher position of foremen did require a proven academic skill in English language and maths.

One group within the workforce which could look forward with better prospect of advancement to the position of foreman and the offceships were the former dockyard apprentices. Access to the apprenticeship was through a city-wide competitive examination – an annual event which produced much coaching and worry. The successful few were allowed to choose a major trade. With his knowledge of maths, English language, mechanics, engineering, naval architecture and technology and his practical skills developed by a senior craft yard man at the slip, workbench or shop, an apprentice could hope to move upwards after the completion of the probationary period as a hand – first to become established, then to be a charge hand, after that possibly an inspector and, for a few, the prized position of foreman. The yard apprenticeship system thus created a social and technological elite, who co-existed with other hands in the trades, but were knowingly picked out for preferential advancement. The inherent bias of the yard structure thus conferred seniority and privilege upon those who had passed the initial competitive exam.

This avenue of advance for a privileged stratum of the Portsmouth working class did not require any intervention by trade unions. Indeed support for radicalism, trade unionism or the ILP was considered by dockyard senior officials to be a form of deviance – a potential blot on the promising career of a former apprentice. The inspectorate and especially the foremen in the yard were educated to

understand the form of their patronage and the necessity for a reciprocal relationship between the yard and the navy.

It was the semi-skilled metal crafts which remained potentially the most receptive towards trade unionism and radical politics. The trades were less insular than the shipwrights, for they had not occupied the elite positions within the yard for decades, their loyalties to the navy were weaker and their work was comparable to that undertaken in private engineering and heavy industrial firms. They constituted the majority of workers in the yard, but usually had not completed dockyard apprenticeships, nor were the majority of them on the established lists. Moreover, it was among these workers that the new recruits to the yard congregated. Admission to the yard had become more open as the Dreadnought construction programme got underway and the concentration of the fleet increasingly in home waters meant that more ship maintenance was undertaken in Portsmouth. An entry to the trade of engine-fitter or boilermaker was achieved on the showing of a trade certificate and the completion of an elementary examination and practical trade test. It certainly seemed to those newcomers who had come from private yards where the trade unions were prominent that there was the potential for working-class politics in the dockyard; it was merely the question of picking the right issue, of preparing the ground by pointing out the advantages of labourist politics. Such views turned out to be naive. The life of an activist was a disheartening one. The shift of the dockies away from the Tories in 1906 was not the moment of the rise of labour that so many activists took it to be.

Because of the particular nature of dockyard employment, it is possible to offer some explanation of the somewhat inhibited aspects of working-class or labour consciousness. Small-scale working outside the dockyard, and the predominance of non-industrial employment, an area notoriously slow to unionise, also plays some part in that explanation. And, as has been shown, the military and naval presence had broader social and cultural implications. Writing about Woolwich and the influence of the government dockyard in a slightly earlier period, Crossick explained that jobs depended not so much on the variations of the trade cycle but upon the vagaries of British foreign policy.³³ Something similar, but with more pervasive overtones, could be said of Portsmouth in the period leading up to the First World War and even to the present day.

Notes

¹ For a recent discussion of these national themes, see D. Read (ed.), *Edwardian England* (1982).

² N. Blewett, *The Peers, The Parties and The People: The General Elections of 1910* (1972), p. 128.

³ See, for example, M. Blanch, 'Imperialism, nationalism and organised youth', in J. Clarke, C. Critcher and R. Johnson (eds.), *Working Class Culture: Studies in history and theory* (1979), pp. 103–120.

⁴ See accounts in *Portsmouth Evening News*, 12 February 1906; *Hampshire Telegraph*, 17 February 1906.

⁵ For a collection of programmes of these reviews, see Naval Collection, Portsmouth City Library.

⁶ S. Peacock, 'The Parliamentary Representation of Portsmouth 1885–1918', in J. Webb, N. Yates and S. Peacock (eds.), *Hampshire Studies* (1981), p. 278.

⁷ J. Camplin, *The Rise of the Plutocrats: Wealth and Power in Edwardian England* (1978), p. 235.

⁸ *Hampshire Telegraph*, 6 January 1906.

⁹ See A.K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906* (1973).

¹⁰ For details, see Peacock, *op. cit.*, pp. 283–6.

¹¹ *Portsmouth Evening News*, 17 January 1906.

¹² *ibid.*, 18 January 1906.

¹³ For details, see Ann Summers, 'The Character of Edwardian Nationalism: three Popular Leagues', in P. Kennedy and A. Nicholls, *Nationalist and Racist Movements in Britain and Germany Before 1914* (1981), pp. 68–87.

¹⁴ *Hampshire Telegraph*, 8 January 1910.

¹⁵ *Portsmouth Evening News*, 7 January 1910.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 13 January 1910.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 15 January 1910.

¹⁸ Blewett, *op. cit.*, p. 410 suggests most naval towns suffered similar fates in 1910 – e.g. Chatham, Devonport, Plymouth.

¹⁹ *Hampshire Telegraph*, 22 January 1910.

²⁰ See Department of Environment, Photographs of Portsmouth Dockyard, Royal Naval Museum, H.M. Naval Base, Portsmouth. The map and a brief description of the yard can be found in 'Visit of His Majesty King George V to H.M. Dockyard, 5th February 1913', Naval Collection, Portsmouth Central Library.

The nine Dreadnoughts built in Portsmouth dockyard were: *Dreadnought*, laid down 5 October 1905, launched 10 February 1906; *Bellerophon*, laid down 3 December 1906, launched 27 July 1907; *St. Vincent*, laid down 30 December 1907, launched 10 September 1908; *Neptune*, laid down 19 January 1909, launched 30 September 1909; *Orion*, laid down November 1909, launched 20 August 1910; *King George V*, laid down 16 January 1911, launched 9 October 1911; *Iron Duke*, laid down 12 January 1912, launched 12 October 1912; *Queen Elizabeth*, laid down 21 October 1912, launched 18 October 1913; *Royal Sovereign*, laid down 15th January 1914, launched 29 April 1915.

For further reading see J. Goss, *Portsmouth-built Warships 1497–1967* (1984); R.A. Burt and W.P. Trotter, *Battleships of the Grand Fleet: A Pictorial Review of the Royal Navy's Capital Ships in World War One* (1982); and the appropriate volumes of *Jane's Fighting Ships*.

²¹ For general statistics on employment in this period, see *Atlas of Portsmouth* (Department of Geography, Portsmouth Polytechnic, 1975); R. Jackson, 'The De-

velopment of Manufacturing in Portsmouth', in J. Bradbeer (ed.), *Portsmouth Geographical Essays* (1975), pp. 24–31.

²² A. Clinton, *The trade union rank and file: Trades Councils in Britain, 1900–40* (1977), pp. 26–7.

²³ See A.J. Mardar, *From Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* (1961); H. Herwig, 'Luxury Fleet': *The Imperial German Navy 1888–1918* (1980); P.M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (1983).

²⁴ For details, see S. Pollard and P. Robertson, *The British Ship-building Industry 1870–1914* (1979); C. Trebilcock, *The Vickers Brothers: Armaments of Enterprise 1854–1914* (1977).

²⁵ For a good illustration of such processes in the Harland and Wolff yard, Belfast, see A. Reid, 'Skilled Workers in the Shipbuilding Industry 1880–1920: a labour aristocracy?', in A. Morgan and B. Purdie (eds.), *Ireland: Divided Nation, Divided Class* (1980). A good general outline of trends in the 1880's is K. McClelland and A. Reid, 'Wood, Iron and Steel: technology, labour and trade union organisation in the shipbuilding industry, 1840–1914', in R. Harrison and J. Zeitlin (eds.), *Divisions of labour* (1984).

²⁶ See J. Field, 'Labour Sectionalism and the Skilled Trades of Portsmouth Dockyard', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No. 40 (Spring 1980), p. 10. For private yards in Scotland see Alastair Reid, *The Division of Labour in British Shipbuilding Industry 1800–1920* (1980).

²⁷ Parliamentary Papers, *Admiralty*: programme of new construction for 1905–1906, 1906 Cd 3048 LXX415; memorandum on recent and further changes in the administration of His Majesty's Dockyards 1906 Cd 2861 LXX75; Admiralty statement of policy 1906 Cd 2791 LXX, 6, 7.

²⁸ J.B. Jefferys, *The Story of the Engineers, 1800–1945* (1946), pp. 129–34, 152–5.

²⁹ A.S.E. numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, S.E.M. numbers 22, 107, Boilermakers, Iron and Steel Ship Builders, Shipwrights, (Ship Construction and Shipwrights Association), A,B,C, Naval, Auxillary, Smiths and Hammermen, Coppersmiths, Ironfounders, Government Labourers Union, Riggers, Sailmakers, Patternmakers, Workers Union.

³⁰ Trades Council Annual Report 1912, Portsmouth City Records Office.

³¹ See A. Carew, *The Lower Deck of the Royal Navy 1900–1939* (1981).

³² For these trends in engineering, see J. Melling, "'Non-Commissioned Officers': British employers and their supervisory workers 1880–1920", *Social History*, vol. 5, no. 2 (May 1980), pp. 183–221.

³³ G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London 1840–1880* (1978), p. 50.