

A Demand Fulfilled: Analysis of an industrial dispute between the Admiralty and the civilian work force employed in the naval dockyards of southern England, 1833-41

Philip MacDougall

In the autumn of 1833, the 5,500-strong work force employed in the six naval dockyards of southern England took their first step in a long drawn out and bitterly contested dispute with their employer, the Board of Admiralty.¹ The immediate cause of discontent was the introduction of a scheme of classification which, for purposes of payment, separated the work force into three distinct divisions. However, several additional changes, such as the recent ending of a generous scheme of pension allowances and the removal of most overtime opportunities, also aggravated dissatisfactions prevalent within the naval dockyards.

Effectively, the ensuing dispute was not completely resolved for some eight years. During that time the labourers and artisans of the six yards maintained constant pressure on the Admiralty, using a variety of approaches to ensure that grievances were brought to the attention of the First Lord. That those employed in the dockyards were eventually successful must relate, in part, to their high degree of solidarity and commitment (irrespective of trade, skills and status). Indeed, those appointed to the first and highest class were as vocal in their opposition as those who only achieved second or third class status.

The existence of such a high level of inter-trade solidarity stemmed initially from the twin factors of a common employer and of working in close proximity to one another. These helped create an important bond that was often lacking among differing artisan groups employed outside

the dockyards. Whereas various efforts between 1818 and 1834 to form a general union ultimately failed,² cross-trade unison within the dockyards had a continuous history traceable to the mid-seventeenth century.³ Yet, and this is of equal significance, such solidarity scarcely went beyond the dockyard walls. Seldom does evidence appear of those employed within expressing a generalised interest in supporting trade groups not employed within the yards. Primarily, this resulted from the nature of the employer; few outside the dockyards were in a position to pressurise the Admiralty during a period in which the dockyard worker was demanding improved working conditions. As a result, Admiralty employees would but infrequently see a reason for uniting with labourers and artisans outside the naval yards. In addition, as Dougan points out, such support would be adamantly rejected by the Admiralty, as nothing less than 'inteferece' in matters directly concerned with national security.⁴ Yet, despite all this, trade groups within the yards, acting in concert, did occasionally provide some form of assistance to those groups outside to whom it was felt they owed some special form of allegiance. In 1802, for instance, the caulkers of the yards nearest to London refused an Admiralty instruction to volunteer to work in the private shipbuilding yards of the Thames. At that time, the caulkers in the latter were in dispute with their own employees and the Admiralty wished to use royal dockyards caulkers to help break the strike.⁵ Furthermore, and drawing upon the research of Roger Wells, it will be shown later that Plymouth yard artisans used their industrial muscle to support the local populace control spiralling market prices. But examples of concerted action on behalf of those outside the yards must be considered extremely rare. Furthermore, they were not a feature of the period examined here.⁶

Central to the whole process of engendering inter-trade co-operation within the naval dockyards was the approach taken by the Admiralty in determining wage levels. Using a carefully worked out formula, the Admiralty traditionally took into account the status and value of each trade. Any change in the remuneration received by one group stood the risk of upsetting the relevant position of workers in each of the other trades. The result was a realisation, on the part of those employed within the yards, that any campaign for the improvement of wages, would entail every group simultaneously making unified demands. From such an arrangement stemmed an organisational infrastructure which allowed groups to agitate other issues that affected them jointly. While this structure was of an 'ad hoc' nature, the workers had a clearly entrenched belief in its value, willingly re-instating the structure to meet any serious threat to their combined well-being.

As introduced by the Board of Admiralty, the scheme of classifying

the dockyard workers into three divisions was primarily aimed at ensuring that members of the work force who consistently achieved the greatest output of work received the highest rewards. As such, it completely overturned the existing system of wage payment and was seen as distinctly unfair by employees. Previously two factors had governed wage rates. First and foremost was the distinction between workers of different skill levels or trades. Within each of the yards a shipwright, the most skilled of all dockyard workers, was guaranteed a higher wage than that of either a caulker or an anchor smith. Similarly, the anchor smith earned more than a rigger or yard labourer. However, the precise wage earned was further determined by whether the worker concerned was paid by the day or by the piece. The former was not determined by the amount of work performed but only by hours of attendance; the latter was dependent upon a measured rate of output, and to ensure fairness, a book of prices was maintained and frequently updated, thus indicating the monetary reward attached to items of work agreed and completed. For those working around the docks and building slips, piece rates might be paid either under the denomination of 'task' (when work directly involved construction work of a new ship) or 'job' (when connected with a ship under repair).⁷

Classification, restricted piece-work and distorted pay differentials based on skill. For example, it became possible for a labourer appointed to the first class to receive earnings equal to those of skilled workers in other classes. Similarly, a lesser-skilled artisan might find himself in receipt of earnings considerably exceeding those of a large proportion of shipwrights. However, it was not the partial ending of the pre-existing differential wage structure to which the dockyard work force was primarily opposed. Instead, it was the divisive nature of the scheme that permitted only a small select group of workers to earn the highest possible wage. While the right to work 'task' and 'job' had, under the old system, been strictly limited as to numbers, it at least operated on a 'turn and turn about principle'.⁸ In other words, within any given year, most would have participated, with annual earnings more or less equitable between those of the same trade.

Classification's introduction derived directly from the November 1830 change in government, when a Whig-led coalition – committed to a substantial reduction in public expenditure – replaced the Tories. In reality, the opportunity of making any real impact upon government expenditure was limited. The Tories had made considerable savings since the end of the Napoleonic wars, while their successors had to accept the continuance of a number of fixed areas of expenditure.⁹ Only a few departments, such as the Navy, were still available for real financial savings. To this end, Prime Minister Grey appointed the economy-

minded Sir James Graham as First Lord, instructing him to identify areas of wastefulness.

He began with the abolition of the Navy Board, a government appointed body that acted as an intermediary between the Admiralty and those appointed to manage the dockyards at local level. In removing the Board, the Admiralty gained undisputed control of the dockyards, with Graham free to undertake a further range of economies. Among these, was an immediate 14% reduction in numbers employed and the ending of retirement allowances to all artificers and tradesmen who entered the yards after 1 May 1833.¹⁰ However, it was not to be expected that Graham would be content with such a small range of savings. Instead, he began to look at the possibilities of creating a more efficient work force.

In April 1833, the Board communicated with the Surveyor of the Navy Sir William Symonds, whose responsibility, under their authority, was that of overseeing and directing all work performed within the royal dockyards. Specifically, he was asked to 'lay before' the Board a scheme for,

a more regular and uniform system of labor than has hitherto prevailed . . . and so arranged that each man may reap the benefit of his skill and industry, and not be called upon to contribute any portion of his Earnings to the less active and more incapable workmen.¹¹

Here, the particular target was the method of payment when work was undertaken either by 'task' or 'job', with shipwrights and other artisans divided into gangs of twenty and paid, not as individuals, but as members of these gangs. As a result, so it was noted, the hardest working member of such a gang would automatically be subsidising those either unable or unwilling to work at the same level of industriousness. Despite this management reservation to the system of paying the gang rather than the man, the men themselves were not unhappy with the situation. They fully approved of having the older and less efficient joining each of the gangs, it being an important means by which they could offer support and ensure overall mutuality. The gangs, themselves, were selected annually by a method that was known in the dockyards as 'shoaling'. A management appointed 'leadingman' to each gang would choose, in turn, those he wished to work with. As in a school playground selection of a football or netball team, each 'leadingman' would have one choice whenever it was his turn to select. Thus, no gang would be markedly better than another, for in this process of selection, all would eventually be entered into one or other of the gangs.¹²

The proposed classification of the work force resulted from the expected proposal of the Navy Surveyor to place greater emphasis upon

the yard work force receiving a standard daily wage rather than a remuneration based on a measured amount of work completed. While Symonds did not wish to totally abandon piece rates, proposing their retention for smiths and ropemakers, together with shipwrights when employed on new construction work, he wanted its use curtailed. However, Symonds was doubtless aware that, prior to the mid-eighteenth century dockyard pay was based entirely on hours worked rather than actual output. Its many failings however, had led to the introduction of payment by results. In particular, artisans and labourers, when paid by the hour had been inclined to work at a slow and effortless pace. If extensively reintroduced, some form of insurance would be necessary, to prevent a return to a lethargic and less productive regime.¹³

As proposed by Symonds, dockyard artisans would be placed into one of two classes, with one class receiving a lower rate of pay than the other. Entry into the first class would be allowed only to artisans with a proven record of efficiency and enthusiasm. Furthermore, they would retain their exalted position only by continued high standards. In all, so Symonds proposed, only one-third of all artisans in each yard would be allocated to the first class. The majority, and new entrants into the yard would be placed in the second class, with all eligible for promotion when vacancies occurred.

Once in receipt of these proposals, the Board decided that they should be circulated to the dockyard superintendents so that they, together with their principal officers, could make any pertinent comments. Overall, these senior managers were sympathetic to the proposals although a number questioned having only two classes. From Portsmouth four classes were suggested. This was the idea of John Peake, the yard's Master Shipwright and the officer primarily responsible for overseeing the vast majority of employees. According to Peake, four categories would provide the opportunity of 'rewarding deserving men more frequently', while ensuring that 'no very great injustice in the selection of men to the various classes would take place.' Peake's scheme was supported by F. W. Maitland, the Portsmouth superintendent, on the grounds of 'creating more emulation and preventing the great distinction in the remuneration of a first class man'. Furthermore Maitland, drawing upon his thirty years naval experience, went on to state:

We have many classes in the navy as 1st class Petty Officers, 2nd class Petty Officers, Able Seamen, Ordinary Seamen and Landsmen, each of which looks forward to advancing by improvement and steady good conduct.

William Stone, the Master Shipwright at Chatham, favoured three classes:

May I be permitted to suggest that I think three classes will be preferable to two and will more meet the general character of the people – say

1st class	5s od per day
2nd -do-	4s 6d
3rd -do-	4s od

By having three classes there will be less difficulty in placing the People in their several classes.¹⁴

The Board carefully evaluated these observations and were persuaded to the extent of finally deciding on a three-class system.¹⁵

The instructions, as finalised, were dispatched to each of the yard superintendents on 21 June 1833. In the preamble It was simply stated that:

All task work shall cease and in lieu thereof a moderate rate of day pay, to be the same in Winter and Summer, that shall be established for the several descriptions of artificers and labourers in the yards, who shall for the future be classed and arranged in such manner, as their lordships will ensure to each man the fruits of his good conduct, skill and industry.

The 'moderate rate' of pay represented a great simplification of that produced for the original scheme. Instead of each trade having an independent pay scale within the scheme of classification, it was now determined that there should be only two separate pay scales for artisans. Thus shipwrights, caulkers, block, treenail and oar makers, together with certain others, were to be paid at the rate of 4/6d. 4/- or 3/6d depending on the class to which they were allocated, while joiners, wheelwrights, coopers and smiths were paid 4/6d, 3/6d or 3/-d. Leading men, who were expected to work with their gangs, were awarded an additional 6d per day over and above that of a 1st class workman of their respective trade. Yard labourers, who in the original scheme were not to have been classified, were now also divided into three groups, with their rates set at 3/-d, 2/6d and 2/-d.¹⁶

Selection was left to the individual superintendent's discretion. As a result, there was considerable variation between the yards, although most superintendents leaned heavily upon the advice of their principal and inferior officers. At Sheerness, all officers were called upon to evaluate all individuals within the yards, and according to Superintendent King, this worked well as 'their several ideas' were 'closely assimilated'.

However, he indicated problems over the selection of 3rd class men as there were none who could be so designated on the basis of being 'idle' or 'careless'.¹⁷ At Devonport on the other hand, Superintendent Ross did not restrict himself to making a single evaluation. Instead, he called upon the officers to provide him with a weekly report of the 'efficiency and exertion exhibited' by the workmen and then allowed 'such alterations in the list as the positive execution of the men justified'.

The workmen of the various dockyards were finally shoaled into three classes on 1 August 1833. Despite the hopes held out by the Admiralty, the scheme was not well received by the men. To an extent this should not have surprised Board members. Any changes in working conditions had, in the past, always brought about a degree of hostility.¹⁸ However, official concern was doubtlessly caused when opposition was not simply limited to those who received the least benefits, but extended to the first class in receipt of a not unreasonable guaranteed wage.

This discontent was first brought to the attention of the Admiralty in September 1833 when Sir James Graham and other members of the Board of Admiralty made their annual inspection of Devonport Dockyard. A petition, signed by most classes of artisans and labourers, was presented to Graham. Mustering the workmen of the yard, and clearly angry at the temerity of the men in taking this course of action, he proceeded to lecture them upon the merits of classification. The gist of his words were carried in the London based *United Services Gazette*;

the Lord Commissioner's had well considered the subject, and were convinced of its correctness in principle. They considered that there must be some superior workmen and had given them a higher rate of wages. They were also of opinion, that there were inferior workmen, who were entitled to less in proportion.

The workers were far from happy with their treatment. According to one,

Never did an eastern potentate – never did a Dey of Algiers – dismiss the prayer of the most wretched slave in his dominion with more disdain and arrogant bearing than this reforming liberal First Lord of the Admiralty evince towards the freemen who stood before him, to ask but for justice. His memorable words still ring in their ears, and are re-echoed even by their lisping children. 'If you don't like it, leave it' was indeed an answer of so absolute a chief; but Sir James Graham should reflect when the time may come when the service of these men cannot be dispensed with, and when he will not be able 'to replace them with others' equally as he now so feelingly threatened to do.¹⁹

Those final words proved prophetic. Over the next few years fear of losing highly-skilled men eventually drove the Admiralty to review the situation.

In the immediate context, the campaign against classification was taken in a different direction from that initial petition by the Devonport men. Instead of campaigning as a united body, petitions received by the Admiralty on classification came only from artisans placed in the third class, and requested promotion to a higher class. This was much to the Admiralty's liking as it indicated a willingness to work within the imposed system. In each case the Admiralty indicated that promotion was certainly possible but would depend entirely on their future endeavours.

A more concerted campaign, directed specifically at the abolition of classification was launched early in 1835 during the brief tenure of Peel's hundred-day Tory government, with a series of petitions from the mass of artisans and labourers employed at Portsmouth, Sheerness, Devonport and Woolwich. The petitions were fairly general, all of them listed a range of grievances that included the general depression of wages, brought about by the loss of piece work and classification. The latter was stated to be inherently unfair, men in the second and third classes carried out identical work within the same period of time, for approximately 12% less pay.²⁰

Both the timing of these petitions and the similarity of content show they were the result of considerable organisation. Contact of either a direct nature or through written communication must have been made. Possibly some sort of *ad hoc* committee might have been formed, but, there is no direct evidence. From earlier industrial actions, also encompassing the dockyards of southern England, it is clear that the use of messengers was common. Such contact was also eased by the movement of groups of workers between yards, who were able to directly convey feelings current in one yard to another.²¹

To comply with required procedure, petitions during the spring of 1835 were submitted to the Board of Admiralty through the Captain-Superintendent of each yard. Members of the workforce, unless requested, were specifically banned from making a direct approach to the Board. Thus, safely cushioned from the dockyards, members of the Board would be unable to gain any real impression of their employees' feelings. Despite this isolation, members did show some sympathy, instructing the Captain-Superintendent of Woolwich to inform petitioners that their memorial had been laid before the Board, which was 'no means insensible to the complaints that have been made by the artificers not only in Woolwich but in other dockyards.'²² An even more promising reply appears to have

been made to Devonport petitioners. According to *The Devonport Telegraph and Plymouth Chronicle*,

their Lordships have acquainted the Captain-Superintendent that, as the subject is one of great importance, affecting the feelings of that meritorious class of public servant, neither the experience nor the time which they have been in office would justify their Lordships in coming to an immediate conclusion either in condemning or maintaining the system; but they intend at a favourable opportunity to inspect all the dockyards, when they will be ready to hear and weigh the complaints of the men themselves.²³

Effectively, in making this reported promise of hearing and weighing 'the complaints of the men themselves' the Board was buying time – even hoping that the men would settle down and accept the system. On the other hand, it also gave the workforce reason for continuing their campaign despite the re-installation of the Whig ministry.

The workforces at Devonport and other yards submitted a further series of petitions during the following summer. These tackled the combined grievances of low wages and classification. The following responses from the Admiralty reflected its return to Whig control. The men of Portsmouth were informed through their Captain-Superintendent that

My Lords have given the subject most full consideration . . . and did not see any reason for altering that system, which decision was communicated to the workmen of the yard in answer to a petition from them addressed to the Admiralty and that every subsequent enquiry has only confirmed the grounds upon which that decision was formed, My Lords therefore cannot hold out to the workmen any hope of any alteration being made in the system of classification

Their Devonport counterparts were told that,

Whilst therefore My Lords lament that in some instances the necessity of the men, particularly those with large families, should press too closely upon their earnings they cannot feel themselves justified in the view they take in their present duty in holding out to them expectations of an increase in wages. With regard to the present system of classification my lords cannot admit, that, whilst the great body of workmen in the second class earn wages at least equal to those in merchant yards, the payment of the extra sum to those who have long and faithfully served in the yard have been raised to the first class and to which every workman may look in due succession.²⁴

This rejection of the petitions was not going to be accepted, because

under the classification system, only about 15% of the work force were in the first class. It was therefore divisive, allowing only a small number to earn the highest wages.²⁵ The correspondent 'Indicator', wrote to the *Naval and Military Gazette* during the Spring of 1835:

I would recommend that the system of classification should certainly be continued, but with this difference, viz., that all the classes should be thrown open to deserving characters. At present the first is a limited class, and herein is the great source of grievance; open that to merit and all complaints against classification will cease.²⁶

With these petitions rejected, it seems strange that over the next twelve months the work force failed to resort either to strikes or some other form of militancy. Throughout the preceding two centuries, the artisans and labourers of the yards had developed the strike as an effective means of bargaining. When deemed appropriate, each of the six dockyards of southern England was disrupted by a centrally planned and unanimously supported strike.²⁷

Often accompanied by large scale parades and picketing of the dockyards, these demonstrations occasionally escalated into full scale riots. With the grievances of the nineteenth century just a pressing as the eighteenth,²⁸ the decline of militancy is of even greater significance. Rejection of the strike is noted by Galliver in his thesis on the Portsmouth dockyard worker during the later years of the nineteenth century. Referring to strikes and riots earlier in that century, he notes that by mid-century 'such behaviour became unknown', which he correctly asserts reflected workers' reluctance to jeopardise the advantages of job security and long term benefits of a pension, through dismissal of those organising any form of militant activity. However he fails to give any real explanation as to why the change should have occurred in the first place. Instead, he simply suggests that it was tied to 'the increasing regulation of the dockyards through the development of new management structures and the creation of a new industrial environment'.²⁹

Royal Dockyard workers customarily received lower wages than their counterparts in private shipyards. Of the mid-eighteenth century Haas states, 'the dockyard rate was forty per cent less in the dockyards than the London shipyards'.³⁰ In 1800, when the London shipyards were paying caulkers as much as 18/- per day, those in the naval dockyards were averaging less than 5/3d.³¹ Similarly, in 1805, the Admiralty reported merchant yards along the River Medway paying wages double those received in the Chatham dockyard.³² Nor were these years unique. Galliver demonstrates that after 1880 'dockyard men were invariably working for at least 2/- a week under the rate' paid in the private yards on the

Thames, Mersey, Clyde and Tyne.³³ Despite this, those employed within the naval dockyards usually chose to remain. They preferred to offset the disadvantage of lower wages with that of job security. Whereas the private yards employed their work force only while they had ships to build or repair, this was not the case in the naval yards. Instead, the Board of Admiralty was a permanent employer, retaining the bulk of the work force even when demand was limited. But by so doing, the various naval yards were maintained in readiness to meet any sudden emergency. From 1764 those employed in the yards also gained from the benefits of pensions and the right to medical benefits when either ill or injured as a result of their dockyard service.³⁴ In this situation, the strike became a two edged weapon. Should the Navy Board or Admiralty determine to punish the ringleaders, then they not only lost their permanent job but forfeited any possibility of superannuation.

Even the most successful strikes of the eighteenth century had frequently resulted in either dismissal or threatened dismissal of a number of those involved. Normally, the numbers sacked were fairly small and any threats of mass dismissals usually tied to a specific date by which time anyone on strike must have returned to their work station.³⁵ The threat of dismissal however, was brought home much more forcibly at the turn of the century; several hundred artisans and labourers were summarily dismissed for their part in a threatened strike over declining real-wage values during a period of extreme inflation. In the summer of 1800, all strata of the work force, labourers, shipwrights, caulkers and scavellers, elected representatives to local yard committees. These in turn elected delegates to a meeting in London where a massive campaign was planned and co-ordinated. Originally begun during a period of war, the bulk of these activities coincided with negotiations that would eventually result in the Treaty of Amiens. This was to prove a crucial factor, the dockyard worker possessing a considerable bargaining position when the nation was at war, but having little strength in times of peace.

In a meeting with the Navy Board held on 1 April 1801, the delegates of the central committee were offered temporary additional payments for artisans and labourers who had families. Although accepted by the delegates, a subsequent vote taken within each of the dockyards led to the rejection of this offer. However, thoughts of any strike action, which were clearly mooted at the time, were immediately terminated by a decision, which emanated from the office of the First Lord, that members of the Navy Board should visit each of the dockyards for the purpose of dismissing all those who had been involved in the dockyard committees whether at a national or local level. The first to be visited was Plymouth, throughout the most militant. Here, the combined work force had

extended its actions well beyond the dockyard wall, uniting with the local populace in their efforts to control rocketing food prices. According to Wells, the locality was 'on the verge of starvation', a situation exploited by food retailers.³⁵ Members of the elected central committee at Devonport were certainly involved in negotiating fixed prices, and reached agreement with a number of Plymouth bakers. However, this had only limited affect, with the aggrieved local populace resorting to more violent methods during the late spring. A series of arrests followed, with the yard workers on two separate occasions marching out of the yard and forcing magistrates to release these prisoners. The subsequent dismissal of 103 artisans and labourers (representing 3.6% of the entire dockyard work force) by the visiting committee of the Navy Board destroyed this carefully nurtured organisation. As the committee visited each yard in turn, further dismissal notices were issued; a total of 340 were eventually discharged. In addition, some of those at Plymouth, together with another group at Sheerness, were also prosecuted for involvement in riots.³⁷

The dismissal of such a large number of leaders from among the work force doubtlessly created a deep and memorable scar. While workers outside the naval yards might have treated sackings as temporary setbacks, such an occurrence within the dockyards was of a much more serious nature. Those employed in the yards accepted lower wages, looking towards the long term benefits of job security and a reasonable pension; should strike action threaten these advantages, then the majority of those employed within the yards would resist this particular weapon.³⁸

Admittedly, other dockyard historians have looked elsewhere for an understanding of why the strike should have been so dramatically rejected during this period. In a valuable contribution to the history of the dockyards during the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, Roger Morriss writes,

Reports of discontent, demands for changes in working conditions and strikes occur less frequently [after 1801]. This may be related to the expansion in the size of the work force during the Napoleonic Wars, the improvement in the frequency and the calculation of payments, and the continuity of work procedure resulting from the sustained and seemingly interminable demands placed on the dockyards . . . From the artificers' point of view, in terms of their pay and conditions, the dockyards were more satisfactory places of employment by the end of the Napoleonic Wars than they had been 20 years earlier.

However, Morriss also says of the years 1801 to 1815 that the 'artificers' repeated use of their bargaining power ensured that conditions of work in the yards did not on the whole deteriorate'. This, most surely, conflicts

(given that he offers no measurable yardstick) with the statement cited above.³⁹ From such a viewpoint, an assumption has also arisen that much of the rest of the nineteenth century was witnessed a reduction in dockyard workers' grievances. The continued lack of visible concern for any possible deterioration in general work conditions and wage levels is explained by the lengthy period of peace that followed the Napoleonic Wars. Waters typically states of the dockyard worker that, 'it is not surprising that the long period of peace 1815-1852 brought quiescence'.⁴⁰

Neither viewpoint is strictly correct, although Morriss's 'repeated use of their bargaining power' statement has considerable validity. Throughout the post-1801 period, the yard workers were just as concerned about their working conditions as they had been previously, but the only difference was their understandable reluctance to strike. This reluctance, for its part, also reflects the existence of an alternative, albeit less forceful, mediating tool, that of the petition. Used throughout the eighteenth century, it not only lacked the impact of the strike, but relied entirely upon the goodwill of those who governed the yards. However, it was not without occasional success, although the time scale from first submission to any success, was much extended. On the other hand, and this was the real point, those involved in organising and submitting a petition, providing no threatening or abusive language was used, knew that there was little chance of dismissal.

It was for this reason that the petition took on such importance. Whenever the work force had a grievance they produced a document, signed by as many employees as possible, and submitted it either to London (latterly through the offices of the Captain-Superintendent) or to members of the annual committee of visitation. During the 1830s, and over the important issue of classification, workers might have turned to a more militant form of action if previous petitions had always failed. But this was not the case. Petitions were responsible for bringing about a number of improvements. During the 1830s alone, petitions had resulted in several adjustments to individual trade pay scales.⁴¹ More important was the success of a series of petitions submitted during 1822 and 1823, to restore a 20% pay cut in the wages of all artisans, imposed by the Admiralty to reduce the overall naval expenditure estimates. In December 1823, one of these petitions, from Chatham resulted in the restoration of the earlier pay scales.⁴²

As regards the campaign over classification, it must be admitted that despite persistence, the use of the petition had by mid-1835, proved singularly unsuccessful. But, in terms of pressurizing the Admiralty, there was really no alternative. Instead, a more imaginative and forceful means of presenting the petition had to be devised. For this reason, in 1836,

important allies were recruited into the campaign. These were the local communities that thrived within the shadows of the dockyard walls. Following considerable contact between the various yards, public meetings were held in Chatham, Woolwich, Portsmouth and Devonport towards the end of that year. Each of these meetings, all of them well attended, resulted in lengthy petitions being signed, either at the meeting or during the following week, by the many thousands of local inhabitants. These petitions called upon the Admiralty to both abolish classification and enhance the amounts paid in wages.⁴³

During the public meeting held at Chatham, one of those present questioned the petitioning campaign. He felt that little would be gained in continuing as it would result only in the Admiralty saying that classification 'should not be done away with, and no further notice would be taken of it'. However, most of those present disagreed, *The Rochester Gazette* reporting that this speaker was widely 'hissed'. From another of the artisans present came an eloquent and simple explanation as to why the dockyard worker was so opposed to classification:

He [a Mr Evenden] would put the question to any gentlemen present, on the supposition that they employed two men of equal ability. Would they be justified, for instance, in giving one man sixpence more than the other, and would not the one who had the least pay consider it a great hardship. Again, was it right that they should be called upon to labour under such distress when they boasted of an increase in the revenue. He would leave it to the sense of the meeting. No master, he was convinced, would feel himself justified in giving to two men of equal ability a difference in pay. The first and second class men worked together in the yard, and did anyone feel a desire to inspect the work of each, they would not and they could not perceive the least difference. Therefore it was on the score of justice that they sought for its abolition; it was on this score that they sought an increase in pay.⁴⁴

The meeting at Portsmouth was held on 7 December. It was chaired by Dr William Cooper, mayor of Portsmouth, and the son of a former dockyard worker. He not only intimated his full support for the campaign, but also read out a letter from the Borough M. P., John Bonham-Carter, who stated that he 'should be devoted most cordially towards obtaining a full and fair enquiry into the system complained of, with a view to a correction of its evils.' Of the yard artisans called upon to explain the background to their grievances, Richard Hobbs, is of particular interest. Cooper stated that he was 'one of the favoured first class', while the newspaper reported him to be 'somewhat advanced in years'. On both

counts he appears to have been an unlikely supporter of the campaign. As one who gained from classification he might have been expected to have supported it while his proximity to superannuation might have determined him to remain in the background, to prevent any possibility of losing his pension. However, given that Hobbs did support the campaign, then it can be taken as further evidence backing our earlier indications that opposition to classification was widespread throughout the work force, and not simply restricted only to those placed in the lower classes.⁴⁵

Despite the apparent optimism of many of those attending these meetings, the petitions had little influence on the Board of Admiralty. There was neither an abolition of classification nor an increase in wages. But this failure does not appear to have undermined the general faith of dockyard artisans and labourers in the value of petitions. Over the next three years petitions continued to be submitted on a regular basis, some of them from artisan groups, while others carried signatures drawn from the wider community. In addition, MPs were increasingly involved, attending at public meetings, and also accompanying delegations of workmen to the Board in their London offices.

That the campaign to abolish classification eventually met success, was only partly due to the on-going petitioning campaign. More important was increasing Admiralty awareness of the difficulties involved in both retaining and recruiting skilled artisans into the yards. During the latter part of the 1830s increasing numbers had chosen to leave, preferring employment in the private yards. At one time, those already employed in the naval dockyards would have thought twice before making such a move. While the private yards had always paid a higher rate of remuneration, the levels of difference had become exaggerated by the removal of 'job' and 'task' work. In addition, classification provided a further obstacle to recruitment and retention, if only because it created an area of tension between management and worker. From the Admiralty's point of view, the situation reached crisis level by about 1839. Aware that something had to be done, Lord Minto, First Lord since March 1835 took an increasing interest in the actual demands put forward. Having a great deal of faith in classification, he first attempted to placate the work force by the re-introduction of superannuation, through an order-in-council in May 1839, restoring it to all those employed within the yards, except those hired on a temporary basis or those with broken service.⁴⁶

By conceding one of the demands that had been expressed in several petitions and also highlighted by visiting delegates, the work force was encouraged into the continuance of their campaign to abolish classification.

Further petitions were submitted during the latter part of 1839 which the Admiralty seriously considered. Eventually, towards the end of April 1840, a decision was announced. The hated third class would be abolished. Those currently rated to this class would, upon its abolition in January 1841, be raised to the second class. While it was not a complete, it represented a partial victory. In May 1840 a delegation comprising two shipwrights from each yard, accompanied by thirteen MPs, all of them representing dockyard towns, visited the Admiralty. Although a wide range of matters was discussed, including that of low wages, the system of classification was very much at the heart of the meeting, 'the deputation strongly protesting against its continuance'. One critical consideration was rammed home to the Board by one Portsmouth delegate, who in support of the urgency of a definite answer, revealed that

he represented a body of six hundred of excellent workmen as could be found; and added that he did not wish to hold out anything in the shape of a threat, but he would tell his Lordship that 70 of them, and he was amongst the number, had resolved – unless something satisfactory was done – to quit the service, and they could at once obtain employment in a foreign country at double the rate of wages they were now receiving.

If they were given no definite promises, the delegation 'left the Admiralty with full expectation that something will be done for them'.⁴⁷

At the beginning of September 1840 the Admiralty finally announced an end to classification. For the men at Chatham, the news was given to a deputation of artisans who had waited upon visiting members of the Admiralty during the annual inspection of the yard:

The deputation was most courteously received, and their Lordships stated, that with respect to classification, they should accede to the wishes of the workmen. As vacancies occurred in what is now the first class they would not be filled up, but those now receiving the pay would continue to do so.⁴⁸

Although a limited victory, as it still left the dockyard worker without a pay increase, it helped ensure that the petition would remain the chief weapon in any further dispute with the Admiralty. Once again, those employed within the dockyards had seen its careful application gain victory, though the more sophisticated may have believed that the expressed willingness of others to leave the service had been the decisive factor.

This aside however, the supposed success of the petition, especially when weighed against the dangers of a failed strike, appear to have been

paramount in the mind of the dockyard worker when mounting subsequent campaigns over grievances. Even during the mobilization at the time of the Crimean War, when strike activity to bring about an improvement in low wages would have carried less of a threat to continued employment, the petition remained the only means by which the work force notified grievances. Both Waters and Galliver, two dockyard historians of the later part of the nineteenth century, cover this aspect of industrial relations. Indeed, Waters detects a further development in the process by characterising the period 1860 to 1889 as 'a period of co-operation and goodwill' between management and employees.⁴⁹ Given the continuing feature of lower pay and national security considerations, it is impossible not to agree with Waters when she asserts that this was 'very different from the state of relations in large scale private industry'. Later, she declares this 'absence of militancy' to have 'its roots in the dramatic period which centred around the building of the *seventh Achilles*', a vessel launched at Chatham in 1863.⁵⁰

It cannot be denied that *Achilles* played a crucial role in the restructuring of dockyard management relations, but the absence of militancy goes back much further as we have seen. However, it is worth re-considering the *Achilles* factor, as events at that time strengthened the resolve of the traditional craftsmen of the yards to avoid strikes at all costs. During construction of this particular vessel, the first ironclad battleship to be built in any royal dockyard, large numbers of iron workers had to be brought into Chatham; many of them displaced shipwrights and others involved in the traditional trades in the building of wooden warships. Immediately the iron workers revealed a very different work place attitude, reflected in their membership of national trade unions, and a refusal to accept the dockyard practice of being paid in arrears. Furthermore, the Admiralty, in having to recruit from outside the dockyard towns, found it necessary to pay them a daily rate of seven or eight shillings as opposed to the 5/6d paid to shipwrights.⁵¹

If the Admiralty compromised over wages in the context of the need to build the new warship, they were not prepared to accept the iron workers' militant posturing. In July 1862 many iron smiths laid certain complaints before the Captain-Superintendent, only to be peremptorily informed that they must return to work within fifteen minutes or be sacked. Upon refusing, those involved were driven out of the yard by the dockyard police and refused re-entry under any circumstances. The continuation of building work on *Achilles* was placed in the hands of the shipwrights, who were now trained ironworking skills by the small number of iron workers who had not joined the recent strike. In many cases, these were the same shipwrights who, only a few weeks earlier, had been

displaced by those whose skills they were now learning. This was the origins of what Waters refers to as 'a period of alliance between Admiralty management and dockyard shipwrights'.⁵² That the alliance was possible in the first place was due to that long term rejection of strikes, and the willingness of dockyard artisans and labourers to work within the system as laid down by the Admiralty, namely expressing grievances through a deferential and politely worded petition.

This compact was to continue into the 1880s, with an apparently comfortable relationship existing between management and men. Throughout the intervening period, the majority of those employed refused to associate with the wider union movement, the workforce continuing to rely upon their own internally organised friendly societies, and the 'ad hoc' combinations that continued to spearhead the sophisticated petitioning methods developed during the earlier campaign against classification. In 1883, a more permanent organisation exclusive to the shipwrights but embracing all the royal yards, was created in the form of the Ship Constructors Association (SCA). Outside there was the rival Associated Shipwrights Society (ASS), open to all shipwrights irrespective of employment in government or private yards, but few in the former chose this society over the SCA.⁵³ As a result, it was the SCA, working with other trade groups within the naval dockyards, that continued to spearhead a number of petitioning campaigns.

The national trade union movement eventually secured a foothold in the naval dockyards during the final years of the nineteenth century. For Waters, the most important event was the numerous redundancies deriving from the 1887 economy drive. This was interpreted by the workforce, particularly that at Chatham, 'as a major betrayal', with these discharges seeming indiscriminate and occasionally vindictive.⁵⁴ As a result, many shipwrights and other artisans transferred their loyalty away from purely dockyard organisations towards the wider trade union movement, aware that their influence was infinitely more powerful than that of an isolated group of workers restricted to the public sector of the economy. This growth of outside unionism, initially resented by the Admiralty, was given official sanction in 1892 as a result of new legislation by a recently-elected Liberal government.⁵⁵

Galliver, on the other hand, believes that the emergence of the national trade union movement into the dockyards came about as a result of the reintroduction of a scheme of classification not dissimilar to that which had been rescinded in 1841. As in that earlier period, the shipwrights spearheaded a campaign of opposition, organising petitions, public meetings and delegations of MPs to the Admiralty. On this occasion however, they received the additional help of the ASS. This

alternative body of shipwrights, whose membership within the dockyards, as confirmed by Waters, had been gradually increasing, seized this opportunity to extend its involvement with government workers. Joint protest meetings were held in the dockyard towns and the campaign peaked between 1891 and 1893, before the Conservative-imposed scheme was substantially modified by its Liberal successors.⁵⁶ For the ASS however, this proved to be a watershed in its relationship with the dockyards, recruitment among government-employed shipwrights rapidly spiralling. By the end of the century, the national union could boast over 2000 naval dockyard members; the SCA finally dissolved in 1908.⁵⁷

During the post war period the dockyard workforce was also re-examining its traditional deferential approach that characterised the earlier petitioning campaigns. While shipwrights, in particular, still preferred to cling to the petition, other trades which once supported such action, now began to move away. Among the latter were the sailmakers who, in 1907, called the procedure 'a farce', while the engineers, through their national union, referred to the system as 'undignified'. Much of this attitudinal change within the yards partly reflected the massive trades union recruitment drives in the years immediately preceeding World War One. As numbers employed in the yards expanded, from both orthodox dockyard and newer trades, they diluted the traditions. The latter however retained sufficient momentum to underpin a combination of old and new methods of industrial campaigning in 1913. In that led by the engineers of the yards, through the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, they backed a demand for improved conditions of service not only by petitioning, but with an outright overtime ban. Furthermore, the Admiralty, intent upon restoring harmony, quickly acquiesced with a series of across the board pay rises.⁵⁸

Notes

1. The six naval dockyards of southern England were Portsmouth, Devonport, Chatham, Deptford, Woolwich and Sheerness. A seventh existed at Pembroke.
2. G. D. H. Cole, *Attempts at General Union 1818-1834* (London, 1956), *passim*.
3. Evidence from the seventeenth century shows that yard workers had already developed the notion of combining together during periods of hardship. See P. MacDougall, *The Chatham Dockyard Story* (Rainham, Kent, 1987), p. 39; P. MacDougall, 'Refusing to do the Stint: An Early Industrial Dispute at Chatham Dockyard', *Bygone Kent* 16,1 (1995), pp. 45-53.
4. D. Dougan, *The Shipwrights* (Newcastle, 1975), p. 73.
5. R. A. Morriss, *The Royal Dockyards during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic*

- Wars (Leicester, 1983), 125. The outcome of this refusal was the dismissal of a hundred caulkers from dockyard service.
6. R. Wells, 'The Revolt of the south-west, 1800-1801: a study in English popular protest' in *Social History*, 6 (1977) pp. 713-44. In concentrating upon mass industrial action, it would be easy to create an impression that the naval dockyard worker, as an individual, was immune to events taking place outside of the yards. During our period there is considerable evidence of these workers involving themselves in a range of causes that included parliamentary election campaigns, their own election to vestries, support for Chartism and the Anti-Poor Law Movement. Yet, such activities, in themselves, were restricted, involvement being that of individuals rather than a concerted inter- or intra-yard movement. John Field confirms this at Portsmouth; 'despite its size, the public influence of the Yard workforce was relatively limited.' See John Field, *Portsmouth Dockyard and its Workers 1815-1875* (Portsmouth, 1994), pp. 17-18.
 7. For background information on the use of piece rates within naval dockyards see J. Haas, *A Management Odyssey: The Royal Dockyards, 1714-1914* (New York, 1993), esp. pp. 34-7.
 8. P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice] ADM[iralty]1/3394, 31 July 1833.
 9. Among these fixed payments was the need to service the national debt.
 10. Pensions had first been introduced 1764 but restricted to shipwrights and caulkers. Those in other trades were eventually drawn into the scheme, most in 1771, with a residue excluded until 1801. Those eligible had either to have been injured while employed in the yards or had completed thirty years unbroken service.
 11. PRO ADM/3391, 25 April, 7 May 1833.
 12. For a general review of the role of the leadingman in each gang see Haas *op. cit.*, pp. 71-5.
 13. Haas *op. cit.*, pp. 31-5 and J. M. Haas, 'The Introduction of Task Work into the Royal Dockyards, 1775', *Journal of British Studies*, VII (1969), pp. 44-68. Haas devotes much attention to the origins of working piece rates in the dockyards as well as the various eighteenth-century methods of payment. He notes that the worker was paid a 'day' rate but might also receive more for working additional hours, in the form of 'tydes' (an additional ninety minutes) or a 'double tyde' (five hours). In exceptional circumstances, 'nights' might be offered, allowing part of the workforce to be employed from 5pm to 8.30am. The point however, is that in all of these circumstances, an inadequate level of supervision ensured that workers were not (even if physically capable) making efficient use of this time.
 14. *Ibid.*
 15. N[ational] M[aritime] M[useum] CHA[tham] H/6, 21 June 1833.
 16. *Ibid.*
 17. PRO ADM1/3394, 31 July 1833.
 18. An early example of a strike over a changed work situation occurred at Chatham yard in 1675. On that occasion the ropehouse spinners objected to a work scheme that required them to increase their daily output. Further examples of such disputes occurred in 1775, over the introduction of piece rates, and in 1795, when joiners were ordered to undertake work normally

reserved for shipwrights. MacDougall, 'Refusing to do . . .', pp.45-53. Haas, *Management Odyssey*, pp. 31-5. P. MacDougall, 'A Social History of Chatham Dockyard, 1770-1801' (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, Open University, 1984).

19. *United Services Gazette*, 28 Sept. 1833.
20. PRO ADM1/5136, 1 Feb. 1835 onwards.
21. As early as 1675, when the spinners of Chatham yard were on strike, there is evidence of a messenger being sent to Woolwich yard to coax the spinners of that yard into supporting the strike. See PRO ADM106/309, May-June 1675. For further details of this dispute can be found in P. MacDougall (1995), *op. cit.*, pp. 45-53.
22. PRO ADM1/5136, 1 Feb. 1835 (appended note).
23. *Devonport Telegraph & Plymouth and Stonehouse Chronicle*, 7 Mar. 1835.
24. PRO ADM1/3486, 21 July 1835. *Naval and Military Gazette*, 6 June 1835.
25. PRO ADM1/3394, 30 and 31 July 1833; ADM1/3395, 1 Aug. 1833.
26. *Naval and Military Gazette*, 6 June 1835, p. 360.
27. Strikes among naval dockyard workers took place from the early seventeenth century onwards. At first, strikes involved one trade group and were restricted to just one dockyard. Over the years, the value of unity was learnt. Trade groups in one yard formed links with those of the same trade in others, while on occasions inter-trade liaisons were formed on an inter-yard basis. Given the extensive existing documentation and the long term development of industrial disputes within the naval dockyards, a general overview is much needed. To date, attention has generally been given to a number of individual disputes or precise periods. Among those who have contributed to this aspect of the yards are: B. McL. Ranft, 'Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards, 1739', *Mariner's Mirror*, XLVII, No. 3, pp. 281,ff.; R. Morriss, 'Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards' in *Mariner's Mirror*, LXII, No. 4, pp. 337,ff.; Haas, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-68; MacDougall thesis, pp. 341-441; D. Wilson 'Government Dockyard Workers in Portsmouth, 1793-1815' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1975); A. V. Coats, 'Portsmouth Dockyard and its community, 1660-1800' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Sussex, 1997); M. Waters, 'Social History of the Chatham Dockyard Workforce, 1860-1906' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 1979).
28. Among more pressing grievances of the eighteenth century were inadequate pay and opposition to changes in established procedures, including a series of strikes when 'task' work was first introduced. In the mid-nineteenth century grievances included similar permutations over pay and further changes to work procedures.
29. Peter Galliver, 'The Portsmouth Dockyard Workforce, 1880-1914' (unpublished M. Phil. thesis, University of Southampton, 1982) p. 22.
30. Haas, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
31. I. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics* (Folkestone, 1979), p. 47; NMM ADM BP 21a, 28 Feb 1801. This latter document, also reproduced in P. MacDougall thesis, p. 244, indicates the average daily wage earned by all classes of workers in each of the naval dockyards in that year.
32. PRO ADM106/2236, 25 Feb. 1805.

33. Galliver, *op. cit.*, p. 74.
34. The superannuation of elderly and infirm dockyard workers had first been introduced into the yards in 1764. See Haas (1995), *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30.
35. During the 1775 dispute over the introduction of task work, the dockyard at Chatham witnessed approximately fifty dismissals; twenty-three were reinstated after the lapse of six weeks. Haas 'The introduction of Task Work . . .', pp. 44–68. With other strikes, such as that by shipwrights opposed to the use of housecarpenters in their place (1795), and a demand to carry timber out of the yards over the shoulder rather than under the arm (Chatham, 1756), the Navy Board threatened all concerned with dismissal if they had not returned by a given date. P. MacDougall, thesis pp. 359 and 414.
36. Wells, *op. cit.*, pp. 713–44.
37. NMM ADM BP21A. May 1801.
38. MacDougall thesis, pp. 419–26.
39. Morris, *Royal Dockyards ...*, pp. 125–6.
40. M. Waters, 'Changes in the Chatham Dockyard Workforce, 1860–90' *Mariner's Mirror*, 69, 1 (1983), p. 55.
41. The years 1833–40 saw pay revisions for smiths, messengers, the founders and leading men of mills.
42. PRO ADM3/206, 18 Dec 1823.
43. *Rochester Gazette*, 13 Dec 1836.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*, 28 Apr. and 15 Sept. 1840.
47. *Ibid.*, 2 June 1840.
48. *Ibid.*, 15 Sept. 1840.
49. This is a markedly different trend from that witnessed in the 1830s when petitioning at that time was certainly not accompanied by goodwill as evidenced in the earlier part of this paper. Waters, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
53. In 1886 membership of the SCA stood at 4000, a figure that represented virtually all dockyard shipwrights. Galliver, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
54. By the end of 1887 Chatham alone had seen over 1000 discharges, leading to fearful distress throughout the town. Waters, *op. cit.*, p. 171.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 172. Apart from the shipwrights who were now increasingly joining the ASS, the sailmakers of the yards (who had at one time formed an organisation similar to the SCA) affiliated with the national Federation of Sailmakers; yard labourers (who at one time formed the Dockyard Labourers' Society) were joining local branches of the Government Labourers' Union. Outside of the traditional dockyard crafts, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers had a large dockyard representation. Galliver, *op. cit.*, pp. 135–6, 165–6 and 182–3; M. Waters, 'Dockyard and Parliament: a Study of the Unskilled Workers in Chatham Dockyard, 1860–1900', *Southern History*, 6 (1984), pp. 123–38.
56. Galliver, *op. cit.*, p. 87. Strangely, he says nothing of the introduction of

classification in 1833, this being a period generally ignored by dockyard historians. Even Haas, in his recent overview of dockyard managerial practice, devotes a mere 18 lines to the subject. Haas, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-1.

57. Galliver, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 149-60.