

Deference and Defiance: The Changing Nature of Petitioning in British Naval Dockyards

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INTRODUCTION

Petitioning as a method of expressing grievances in British history was not peculiar to any particular set of individuals, but was widely used by all sections of society for a range of issues. Given its origins, however, it became ritualized as the means of labour negotiation for workers who were employed by the state, and, by the nineteenth century, by municipal authorities. This was before the institutionalization of trade unions and their recognition as representative agencies for industrial bargaining. One of these groups of workers in the state sector were naval dockyard employees, engaged in the construction, repair, and maintenance of British naval ships. For these workers, the nature of labour relations, and the importance of petitioning as an instrument of negotiation between employees and employer, was both complex and dynamic.

It was the state as employer which characterized the context of work in the Royal Dockyards. Although it is the case that the yards never had a monopoly on the building of the nation's ships – commissioning in private yards was always an element, particularly in times of impending conflict – it was the unique nature of the employment relationship in these yards which set them aside from private shipbuilding concerns and gave the petitioning system a particular set of meanings. This system, tying workers into “the service of the state”, contributed, therefore, to forms of bargaining which were peculiar to national and local government employment.¹ The hierarchy of “management” and the concept of being a worker for the state gave a particular relevance to the use of petitions. Rates of pay, conditions of service and levels of employment were seen, from the very early days of the dockyards, as in the domain of the monarch and/or his or her representatives within the structures of dockyard government. This meant that, whilst the yards were directly controlled by the Navy Board, which was answerable to the Board of the Admiralty, the ultimate authority was the monarch. The particular nature of the British parliamentary system, one which has effectively retained the medieval

1. For examples, see M. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office since 1840* (London, 1985), and P. Beaumont, *Public Sector Industrial Relations* (London [etc.], 1992).

concept of “the Crown” at the apex of the system of government, contributed, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to stamping dockyard workers as ultimately responsible to the monarch, and impacted significantly on forms of defiance, particularly when resorting to strikes as a method of resistance. Although, as will be shown, strikes were used at various times alongside the petition system, many dockyardmen and their governing officers viewed this type of action as a treasonable offence, even in the twentieth century.

The discussion that follows will focus on the key symbolic role played by petitioning in the changing dynamics of labour relations within the dockyards. In this way, patterns of both deference and defiance to authority and, in particular, to the state, can be identified. Notions of “moral economy”, legitimation, and resistance are all revealed by the analysis of the petitioning process. The historical legacy of petitioning, long after it had ceased to be a formal part of the bargaining process in the twentieth century, will also be demonstrated.

“A PRIVILEGED COMMUNICATIVE SPACE”

The origins of petitioning in the British context date back to medieval times, when public discussions of overtly political issues were disallowed. Parliament met as high courts to receive grievances, in the form of petitions, and to make decisions on appeals.² Given these origins, the language and means of presentation of the petition were couched in deferential terms which symbolized the hierarchical relations of subject and monarch (or monarch’s representatives). The granting of petitions indicated the bestowal of favour, as petitioning was deemed to be entering “a privileged communicative space”.³ Zaret has argued that such an approach was a conscious choice, presenting the petition as a spontaneous reaction to a specific situation, not a “factious”, premeditated, or organizational grievance. The latter was deemed to undermine the validity of the appeal and to lessen the chances of acceptance. It was the rhetoric of deference in petitions which defined them as ostensibly apolitical and therefore less challenging to the authority of the monarch.⁴

Although petitioning was seen as an inviolate right for all subjects, its use was necessarily defined and redefined through the centuries. At the time of the English Civil War, “petitioning became a device that constituted and invoked the authority of public opinion as a means to

2. D. Zaret, “Petitions and the ‘Invention’ of Public Opinion in the English Revolution”, *American Journal of Sociology*, 101 (1996), pp. 1497–1555.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1512.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 1513–1515.

lobby Parliament".⁵ The state responded to this more openly political style of petitioning by introducing the Act against Tumultuous Petitioning in 1661. This sought to curb forms of mass petitioning from politicized groupings formed in taverns and coffee houses.⁶ Thus, whilst the ritual of deference in the language of petitions was maintained, its use as a quasi-political tool developed considerably. The late eighteenth century saw the beginnings of a huge upsurge in petitions to parliament, such that, by 1832, changes in procedure were required to limit once more the rights to present and debate petitions which effectively restricted their usefulness in broader political decision-making.⁷

The nature of petitioning had thus shifted in the nineteenth century, with a focus more on ways of "creating and measuring a necessary condition of success, namely, bodies of organized opinion".⁸ Towards the end of the century, petitioning as an effective means of expressing grievances began to decline as other methods of formulating demands and seeking redress emerged. The slow evolution of parliamentary democracy, representative political parties and access to legal procedures all came to have an increasing role in the mediations between "the people" and "the state". These changing patterns of petitioning in the wider British context can be clearly demonstrated in the development of labour relations and administrative structures in the Royal Dockyards from the eighteenth through to the twentieth century.

PETITIONING AS INDUSTRIAL BARGAINING: THE CASE OF BRITISH NAVAL DOCKYARDS

Before the fifteenth century, British monarchs had relied on private merchant ships for their sea-based strategies in times of war, and it was not until the time of the first Tudor king, Henry VII, that a permanent navy was established,⁹ with the subsequent need for bases where the state's ships could be constructed and maintained. In 1495, Portsmouth, on the south coast, was chosen as the site for a purpose-built dry dock, making it effectively the first Royal Dockyard in Britain. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were seven British dockyards, three of which had already been in existence for over 200 years: Portsmouth, Chatham (on the Medway) and Sheerness (on the Thames).¹⁰ What makes the British

5. *Ibid.*, p. 1499.

6. M. Knights, "London's 'Monster' Petition of 1680", *The Historical Journal*, 36 (1993), pp. 39–67.

7. C. Leys, "Petitioning in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries", *Political Studies*, 111 (1955), pp. 45–64.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

9. P. MacDougall, *Royal Dockyards* (Newton Abbott, 1984).

10. For details see *ibid.*

Royal Dockyards remarkable is not so much their existence as large-scale industrial complexes (as by the late eighteenth century there were also a number of large manufacturing sites elsewhere in Britain), but that they were among the first locations specifically established by the state for its own needs, and this factor influenced the shaping of employment strategies and forms of deference and defiance undertaken by dockyard workers.

DEFIANCE AND DEFERENCE

The first significant development of the petitioning process, which was established as a form of individual negotiation for dockyard workers, came at the start of the eighteenth century. The Board of Admiralty introduced a system of formal visitations to the yards, providing an identifiable physical presence to the representational monarchical authority which dominated employment relations.¹¹ This heightened the sense of importance that petitions held in the presentation and redress of grievances. Not only were these now constructed by individuals but also saw the coming together of groups of workers to voice their common grievances. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, this form of protest and claim against the state as direct employer became more dramatic. Knight notes that, in the 1770s, petitioning by dockyardmen increased 300 per cent. The main grievance was the decreasing purchasing power of the established wage rates, as the cost of living rises of the 1750s and 1760s began to have an effect. It was essentially the inequality of the state sector, which seemed to be failing to keep up with what might be termed “market forces”, which was the main grievance. Whilst other trades outside the dockyards had seen wage increases, and most relevantly in this case, the private shipyards, wages for the dockyards had remained the same and thus, it was argued, were contributing to hardship.¹² What is noteworthy from these petitions is this sense of relationship with the state, the monarchy and the difficulties of its distancing from the market economy. Although the Board of Admiralty might argue that security of employment was virtually guaranteed in the Royal Dockyards through the system of establishment,¹³ and that this was

11. Visitations were initiated by Lord Sandwich (First Lord of the Admiralty) in 1749 as part of a move to make the dockyards, and their workforces, more efficient. See R. Middleton, “The Visitation of the Royal Dockyards, 1749”, *Mariner’s Mirror*, 77 (1991) p. 21.

12. R. Knight, “From Impression to Task Work: Strikes and Disruption in the Royal Dockyards, 1688–1788”, in K. Lunn and A. Day (eds), *History of Work and Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards* (London, 1999), p. 17.

13. In the Royal Dockyards, workers were employed either as “established” or “hired”. Established workers were virtually guaranteed “a job for life” and a pension on retirement, whereas hired men could be taken on or dismissed at any time and only received a gratuity for some years of their service, with no pension rights.

adequate compensation for wage rates which might not always match those for skilled craftsmen elsewhere, the tone of petitions suggested a responsibility which the Admiralty held to ensure adequate payment and provision for workers' families, particularly since their employment was in defence of the nation-state. This particular form of moral justification for wage demands was to be a central feature of the later petitions and of more direct action.

Knight notes that, in 1739, a large number of shipwrights at Chatham Dockyard went out on strike over the withdrawal of what they saw as a traditional right; the right to take small pieces of wood, or "chips" out of the dockyard for their own use. In the same year, smiths at Deptford and Woolwich combined to petition and went on strike briefly, after which the Navy Board approved their demands. Their show of solidarity was a clear factor in the success of the petition, but may also have alerted the Lords of the Admiralty to the power of workers' collaboration. Further strikes followed at Deptford and Woolwich Dockyards in 1742 and 1744 and in 1745 at the ropeyards over the same issue. However, the most significant strike occurred in 1775, with the introduction of task work instead of day rates, a system which was opposed so vigorously that the Admiralty had to abandon it and reintroduce it years later. As Knight points out, "it illustrated very definite limits upon government control and discipline administered by the Navy Board", limits that were defined by a sense of moral economy and personal rights.¹⁴

Morriss's studies of dockyard labour moves on to the turn of the eighteenth century and into the period of the Napoleonic wars and their aftermath. Closer scrutiny of the petitions in these years shows demands for higher rates of basic pay, as food prices rose. The 1790s had seen considerable rises in earnings, as a system of piecework was introduced to encourage the necessary output. However, a dramatic rise in prices, culminating with the bad harvests of 1799–1800, saw the cushion which had protected dockyard workers and their families disappear.¹⁵ It was then that the agitation for improved basic rates of pay, the subject of the petitions in the 1770s, was renewed. Since many of these rates dated from the 1690s, increases were clearly an overdue issue for many of the skilled tradesmen in the yards. However, it was here that some of the specific significance of dockyard petitions emerged. The British state was becoming particularly concerned about the threat posed by groups of workers organizing the protests. The introduction of the Combination Acts (1799–1800) were specifically designed to prevent these forms of organized strikes or other types of industrial and political action, and to

14. Knight, "From Impressment to Task Work", pp. 9–10. See also B.M. Ranft, "Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards in 1739", *Mariner's Mirror*, 47 (1961), pp. 281–291.

15. R.A. Morriss, "Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards, 1801–1805", *Mariner's Mirror*, 62 (1976), pp. 337–346.

strengthen existing legislation against union activity.¹⁶ This had a particular resonance within the dockyards, where overt resistance could so obviously be defined as treasonable activity.

Interdockyard forms of petitioning seen in the late eighteenth century, and culminating in the petitions for higher basic rates of pay at the time of national food riots in 1801, were viewed by the Admiralty as an alarming precedent, and representatives from the Navy Board visited six of the main dockyards to dismiss those men who had led the strikes and riots. These discharges in 1801, followed by reductions at the end of war in 1802, resulted in an overall 10 per cent reduction in the total dockyard workforce.¹⁷ From 1815 onwards, the economic impact of the postwar depression and the decline in the need for ship construction and repair brought a range of particular hardships. Both Morriss and MacDougall have noted the upsurge in petitioning,¹⁸ although there is some disagreement as to the longer-term implications of this action. For Morriss, it would seem to represent, by 1830, the reduction of the dockyard workforce to “an emasculated factor of production”,¹⁹ at least in comparison to the militancy of the eighteenth century. MacDougall opts for an interpretation which favours a pragmatic switch of tactics from the strike to the petition and the associational culture which could be seen by the middle of the nineteenth century, a culture which could cross the various trades and link the different yard workforces.²⁰ A detailed analysis of the different forms of petition and the language used suggests a rather more complex picture, one which reveals both the wide range of attitudes displayed by dockyard workers and the broad sweep of grievances which were deemed worthy of petitioning.

As has been suggested, one of the most significant features of the postwar petitions was the severity of the economic difficulties following the end of the wars. Rising prices, shortages of food, reduced wages and discharges from work all contributed to distress of varying degrees in dockyard towns. As a group of shipwrights from Pembroke Dockyard begged in May 1817:

That your Petitioners are in very Great distress occasioned by the Dearth of provisions and house rent, That your Petitioners are Destitute of Necessaries of Life. We therefore have Ventured with Humility to lay our Distress Cases before

16. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963, repr. 1970), p. 174.

17. R. Morriss, “Government and Community: The Changing Context of Labour Relations, 1770–1830”, in Lunn and Day, *History of Work*, pp. 21–40.

18. Morriss, “Government and Community”, and P. MacDougall, “The Changing Nature of the Dockyard Dispute, 1790–1840”, in Lunn and Day, *History of Work*, pp. 41–65.

19. Morriss, “Government and Community”, p. 35.

20. MacDougall, “The Changing Nature”, pp. 56–57.

you Humbly Praying your Lordships will Consider our Distressed Circumstances and allow us to Get a Little more wages what your Lordships may please to think proper.²¹

Such an appeal demonstrated very graphically the deferential language of the petition and it represented the most basic aspect of dockyard petitioning, the appeal for “a little more wages”, couched in terms which indicated the crucial economic necessity for an increase and not one which was in any way assertive of the skill and bargaining power of militant workers. Pembroke Dockyard had only been established in 1814, at a strategically-placed location on the western side of Britain (Pembrokeshire in west Wales).²² This petition clearly indicated the hardships experienced by what was a very new dockyard, with many workers living some distance from the newly-established site. It was likely that these dockyardmen had had little chance to establish themselves before the downturn in the economy and, thus, their petition reflected a degree of tentativeness in its approach.

Other petitions around this time, however, demonstrate rather different attitudes and concerns. As might be expected in the difficult times of the 1820s, they do not display the solidarity of earlier periods. Indeed, often their concerns lie with the distinctiveness of one group of workers from another, with an emphasis on status and craft differentials, and with the fear of social and economic decline. For example, in 1822, Chatham Dockyard shipwrights petitioned against the proposal to redeploy them as sawyers and scavelmen. The main complaint was the lower wages, which they claimed “entirely renders them incapable of paying taxes and puts many of them to the greatest straits to maintain their numerous families”.²³ However, it was clear that, at least in the language of the petition, that part of the appeal was to do with the loss of respectability and status which would accrue. The shipwrights were keen to identify themselves a “respectable Class of Mechanics” and emphasized that “all without exception paid their quota of the Assess’d Taxes”.²⁴ Similar sentiments, even more exaggerated, came from the Woolwich Dockyard shipwrights the same year. They too had found their hours cut and wages reduced. Some had to take on the duties of other mechanics, which entailed difficult

21. Petition of shipwrights, Pembroke Dockyard, 23 May 1817, Public Record Office [hereafter PRO], ADM1/5132.

22. A. Day, “‘Driven from Home’: The Closure of Pembroke Dockyard and the Impact on its Community”, *Llafur*, 7 (1996), p. 79; P. Carradice, *The Book of Pembroke Dock* (Buckingham, 1991). A later petition of 1820 suggested that rates of pay at Pembroke were 20 per cent less than other dockyards, and rising prices, travel costs, and housing shortages in the new dockyard town were illuminating this discrepancy; 27 April 1820, PRO ADM1/5132.

23. Petition of shipwrights, Chatham Dockyard, 26 September 1822, PRO ADM1/5132.

24. *Ibid.*

work and the purchase of new tools. The worst experience, and “one most degrading in its character and tendency” was being forced to work as scavengers and labourers, some of whom were deemed to be felons “hardened in guilt, and [...] of the worst description”. The skilled shipwrights begged to be spared “The disgrace, which must attach to mixing with Felons” and to be retained in their appropriate work and status.²⁵

Petitions in this period could also reflect the concerns of higher-ranking officials in the yards and those officers who found that their anticipated “pensions” and allowances were not materializing. Again, apart from financial concerns, it was loss of status which featured strongly. Quartermen (supervisors) from Portsmouth Dockyard, on being retired from service, sent a particularly heartfelt statement to the Admiralty, indicating that their situation was:

[...] at one blast reduced from respectability and comparative affluence to a state bordering on starvation and to be the scorn of our neighbours – Whole families, who heretofore through the munificence of the Government enjoyed every comfort, are now doomed to linger out a miserable existence upon the very inadequate stipend of £32 per annum [...].²⁶

A similar group of workers, from Sheerness Dockyard, were even more eloquent in their pleas:

Your Memorialists hoping their late responsible situations would have been permanent, during their *capability* of performing the several duties annexed thereto, had buoyed up themselves, with the pleasing hope, of reaping a competent remuneration, when *Age and Infirmity* should *disable* them from filling their respective Stations.²⁷

The Admiralty papers show petitions from these groups of workers from every British dockyard, indicating a common grievance and some degree of cooperation across the dockyards to make their difficulties known. What seems most apparent, overall, is the disgruntlement not simply with their financial situation, but also with what is seen as the state’s refusal to recognize the nature of their service and their loyalty to the British nation. For some, this was expressed in pride in their artisanal skills – Woolwich Dockyard shipwrights proclaimed the acquisition of “knowledge of an art and mystery universally allowed to be of the highest importance to this great maritime (sic) nation which throughout a protracted contest for naval ascendancy has fully proved the superior

25. *Ibid.*

26. Petition of quartermen, Portsmouth Dockyard, 18 December 1822, PRO ADM1/5132.

27. Petition of quartermen and foremen, Sheerness Dockyard, 28 October 1822, PRO ADM1/5132.

character of their workmanship, which has materially contributed to the safety of the Country".²⁸ The quartermen of Portsmouth Dockyard had been expecting more in the way of superannuation, and felt they were owed more because of the "long and efficient services, upon our former respectability in the Community, and upon our faithful discharge of the Trust and Confidence reposed in us".²⁹ The Woolwich Dockyard shipwrights had "cherished the expectation that services so often acknowledged in cases of emergency, would secure for them protection".³⁰

What this study of the period immediately following the Napoleonic Wars indicates is the ways in which petition appeals had become formulaic, but also that within such expressions a complexity of situations and attitudes can be discerned.

By the 1830s, many of the petitions had become much more sharply focused on limited issues and the apparent minutiae of industrial relations negotiations through the only available agency. Different groups of workers from different locations raised questions about rates of pay and tried to negotiate equality of conditions between established and hired men, debating, in particular, the problems raised by the "classification" system, where men in the same trade were paid at different rates according to their ability.³¹ One major dimension, revealed through a petition in this period, draws attention to conflict between dockyardmen and their self-help organizations and the dockyard communities, particularly traders, "outside the walls". In May 1837, a group of bakers, flour dealers, and millers from the "three towns", which at that time constituted the hinterland of Plymouth Dockyard, petitioned the Admiralty for intervention against a cooperative venture established by dockyardmen. Their target was the Dock Union Mill Society, set up in 1817, to supply workers and their families with flour and bread. The substance of the complaint was the success of this enterprise, and its expansion into trade with superior officers, clerks, and even those who had no connection with the yard. An earlier complaint, in 1830, had produced an Admiralty directive that the Society confine its sales to its existing members (c.600 people). This, it was claimed, had now been ignored: membership had doubled and sales to the general public had become commonplace.

It is the language of this petition which is so revealing about the sentiments behind the attack on the cooperative venture and about the perception of the Royal Dockyards as an enterprise. As a study of early nineteenth-century petty bourgeois notions of *laissez-faire* and state intervention, it offers much to reflect upon. The Society was seen as,

28. Petition of shipwrights, Woolwich Dockyard, 22 August 1822, PRO ADM1/5132.

29. Petition of quartermen, Portsmouth Dockyard, 18 December 1822, PRO ADM1/5132.

30. Petition of shipwrights, Woolwich Dockyard, 22 August 1822, PRO ADM1/5132.

31. MacDougall, "The Changing Nature", pp. 58–62.

[...] pregnant with the greatest evils to the Trading Community – for it cannot be denied that the Founders and active Managers are composed of Persons who receive their support from the Public, through your Lordships, and are able to supply part of their *surplus income so derived* to this profitable speculation – whilst on the other hand it must be admitted that your Memorialists (who are not maintained from the Public Purse but obliged to apply both their Labour and Capital to earn a frugal livelihood) cannot fairly compete in their *lawful* callings with their Opponents [...].³²

The petitioners went on to argue that they paid taxes to the state without any support in return and argued that the Society be declared a monopoly and abolished, or at least that its trade be limited only to the artificers and labourers who were currently members. What is interesting from this particular instance is the growing sense of hostility towards the state enterprise, the perception of it as a drain upon financial resources and its eccentricity located within the “free market forces” notion of mid-century British capitalism, at least from the small-scale producers of southwest England. Although, as state enterprises, and unlike the commercial sector, the Royal Dockyards were not tied to a profit-making ethos, the Board of the Admiralty was nevertheless answerable to the state for its level of expenditure and to ensure efficient production, particularly as public opinion became a greater force.

These concerns with costs saw the Admiralty tighten both its administrative processes and its responses to petitioning demands in the first half of the nineteenth century. The absence of strikes in the dockyards in the first six decades has been taken by some commentators as a sign of the emergence of a deferential and passive workforce. A more subtle interpretation would recognize a perceptive tactical shift by dockyardmen. As MacDougall notes, by mid-century, the petition as a negotiating tool had been “carefully honed”³³ by the workers and, when appropriate, employed to voice quite militant demands. These surfaced quite dramatically in the second half of the century.

TOWARDS TRADE UNIONISM

By the 1860s, it was becoming clear that both the nature of work, as characterized by the shift from wood to iron in shipbuilding technology, and the system of labour relations were changing. There were a number of differing influences, ones which were to change fundamentally the petitioning culture that had developed over the previous centuries.

The petition continued to be the chief agency for the negotiation of

32. Petition of Bakers, Flour Dealers and Millers of Devonport, Stonehouse and Plymouth, 18 May 1837, PRO ADM1/5137.

33. MacDougall, “The Changing Nature”, p. 62.

grievances but its symbolic nature became increasingly divorced from economic and political “realities”. Predominant among the new influences was the growth of trade unionism. Although, as already indicated, dockyard workers had demonstrated many of the characteristics of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trade associations seen elsewhere in British manufacturing, unions were not formally recognized by the Admiralty for the purposes of negotiation. As will be shown, there was also an unwillingness to ease their presence within the yards. What can be seen, therefore, in the period leading up to the First World War, is an increasing use of petitions in the contestation of wages and conditions, but also a growing pressure to challenge the system of bargaining symbolized by the petitions themselves and their replacement with a more “modern” system of labour negotiation and recognition.

The 1862 strike at Chatham dockyard, ostensibly about rates of pay for platers brought in to construct the hull of HMS Achilles (the first ironclad battleship to be built in a Royal Dockyard),³⁴ demonstrated the ways in which trade-union attitudes were coming to influence labour relations. In part, this was due to labour mobility between public and private sectors. This had always been an aspect of dockyard history: workers with experiences outside the state sector were drawn in to more secure employment in the Royal Dockyards and brought with them a work culture which was perhaps more confrontational. In addition, the changes in technology – essentially the shift from wood to iron – also drew in new workers and different expectations and patterns of labour representation and consciousness. The conventional historical wisdom, too, of trade-union growth percolating down from the skilled artisanal limitations of mid-century to the “semiskilled” and “unskilled” sectors of the workforce, applied to the dockyard as much as anywhere else. These broader trade union developments, and their impact on the yards, was “a subject much on the Admiralty’s mind in this period”.³⁵

Overall, the second half of the nineteenth century is a period of considerable industrial unease within the Royal Dockyards. The late 1850s and early 1860s saw discontent swelling, with the number of petitions increasing, peaking in 1865, by which time the shipbuilding boom had diminished. The following year, the Conservative government cut construction, closed the establishment list for dockyard workers and there were layoffs of hired men. By 1870, the dockyard workforce had slipped to just over 11,000 from its 1865 total of over 18,000.³⁶ Nonetheless, petitioning was still the predominant form of labour negotiation, not only

34. M. Waters, “Changes in the Chatham Dockyard Workforce, 1860–90”, *Mariners’s Mirror*, 69 (1983), p. 55.

35. J.M. Haas, *A Management Odyssey: The Royal Dockyards, 1714–1914* (Lanham, MD, 1993), p. 102.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

from male workers, but from a growing number of women who were also employed in the Royal Dockyards, mostly as flagmakers in colour lofts or as ropemakers in spinning rooms. Petitions were received by the Lords of the Admiralty in 1875 from a number of women workers in Chatham and Portsmouth Dockyards about decreases in their hours of work and the hardship this would place on their families.

The first record of female employees in the nineteenth century can be found in the papers of Commissioner Cunningham in 1816:

Having determined that in future the Signal Flags required by His Majesty's ships and vessels shall be made in the Dock Yards by women entered for the purpose, We desire that you will inform us, after a sufficient (*sic*) store shall have been provided, what number of women it will be proper to continue to meet the demands for these Flags.³⁷

Four women were taken on for the work and, according to the files, they were paid "two pence per hour" and started work at six o'clock in the morning. These first women employees worked in the colour loft and in the 1860s women were also taken into the roperies, when steam-powered machines were brought in for ropemaking and the work was less heavily manual.³⁸ Both these types of employment, in the colour loft and spinning room, were initially given to the widows of sailors or dockyardmen, as a way of enabling the Admiralty to carry out its responsibilities in providing for the wives and children of seaman and dockyardmen beyond the grave.

Thus, the employment of women was extended as a privilege rather than as a right, and the language of deference seen in a petition brought before the Board of Admiralty in 1875 by women workers aptly illustrates their supplicant status. Under the 1874 Factory Act, the Admiralty was required to make changes in the hours of work of women employees. The amended hours would allow a break of four and a half hours between meals; four whole days leave in addition to Christmas and Good Friday; and working hours not to extend beyond 6am or 6pm or after 2pm on Saturdays. The Admiralty's system of amending the working day according to the season resulted in a contravention of these requirements, and, in order to comply with the Act without incurring any loss of working time, it was proposed to extend the summertime working hours for female employees in the spinning rooms and the colour loft. In response, women workers at the ropery in Chatham and in the colour loft at Portsmouth sent a memorial in 1875 to the Lords of the Admiralty, via their Captain Superintendent, protesting at these changes in their hours of work.

37. Chatham Letter Book, January–December 1816, National Maritime Museum, CHA/F/29.

38. B.H. Patterson, "*Giv'er a Cheer Boys*": *The Great Docks at Portsmouth Dockyard, 1830–1914* (Portsmouth, 1989), p. 21.

We the undersigned beg most respectfully to state that we have heard with regret and alarm the alteration of working time that is about to take place in the Spinning Room, and we beg you most seriously and earnestly to use your powerful influence in preventing the same from being carried out, for the following reasons. A great portion of us are widows, with families and would be injured in a pecuniary point by a longer absence from our families than at present, for we shall be compeled to pay more for the care of our children. Many of us take them to nurseries for the day but then we should be prevented, for they would not be open early enough in the morning and they are closed before six at night, besides the money received for our day's work is not sufficient for the maintenance of our families, and we are compeled to work at night. And if retained in the Yard until a quarter to six instead of a quarter past five o'clock it will deprive us of the money we should earn in the time, hence starvation would exist and the Workhouse would follow [...].³⁹

At the same time, the colour women complained about the longer hours and the reduction of the dinner break from one hour to half an hour, stating that "our absence all day must in a measure be detrimental to their wellbeing [of their children]".⁴⁰ The memorial from the ropery workers was signed by eighty-eight women and there were twenty-five women in the colour loft at this time. The Admiralty decided that, under the Factories Act of 1874, the new summer hours would stay in force but that the women could come in half an hour later in winter and have an hour dinner break. The Admiralty's response was clearly aimed at recognizing the need to adhere to the regulations laid out under the Factory Act, but also to save themselves any loss of working time. It is ironic that the 1874 Act was introduced to improve the working conditions of women and juvenile workers, but that, because of the nature of dockyard working practices, the changes required worked against the best interests of women employees, necessitating a petition to rescind the required changes.

Although appeals can be found in the 1820s and 1830s from male workers, which also refer to the Admiralty's moral responsibility in ensuring that levels of pay did not result in starvation and the workhouse, there is an interesting, and significant, difference with these memorials from women workers. The concern is focused on their roles predominantly as mothers and their domestic responsibilities rather than their role as workers. Disputes about wages and working conditions continued throughout the 1870s, as the transition to iron shipbuilding developed, and issues of demarcation and pay amongst male workers were again high on the petitioning agenda. Arguments about a growing gap between rates in private yards and those paid in the state sector became more powerfully

39. Petition from women in the spinning room, Chatham Dockyard, May 1875, PRO ADM116/159.

40. *Ibid.*

articulated by the workforce. In return, various Admiralty committees began to articulate the notions that the dockyards were inefficient in comparison with the public sector and that idleness was a key feature of the dockyard workforce. Graham's Committee of the 1880s also wanted to see harsher powers of dismissal allowed to individual Admiral Superintendents, delegating authority away from the Board of the Admiralty itself.⁴¹

By 1892, the figure for annual petitions had risen to 252, and in that year a committee was set up under Rear Admiral Fane (Admiral Superintendent at Portsmouth Dockyard) to look into the whole issue of wage levels, working conditions, and objections to the system of classification which had been reintroduced in 1891.⁴² The rise in petitions was undoubtedly related to the establishment of a Royal Commission on Labour in 1891, and the Admiralty's reaction was to set up the Fane Committee, which included a representative from the Labour Department of the Board of Trade. On giving evidence before the Commission, the Director of Dockyards expressed his views on classification, stating that,

[...] where gradations of pay have not existed in certain trades [...], I have frequently felt that I was perpetrating an enforced injustice to the best and most conscientious workmen, because I could only pay them the same wages as I paid to the least skilled and lazy men of their class.⁴³

He also stated that, although classification had been introduced for some trades in private shipbuilding yards, "the shipwrights in private yards have always set their faces against what is known as classification", and that in the dockyards, "the trades unions stepped in and said that all men were to be paid alike", with most trades objecting strongly to graded levels of pay. There is clear evidence here that some trade unions were able to influence decisions on certain aspects of dockyard work and, despite the Director of Dockyards's viewpoint, the Lords of the Admiralty decided to abolish the system of classification in 1893 because it was felt that the "men's discontent is justified and that the system must be abandoned".⁴⁴

Confrontation continued into the 1890s, when there were rumours of a strike threat, although it came to nothing. The articulated issue was wages, although the underlying tensions about the whole system of employment were apparent. To defuse the situation somewhat, there were concessions over pay, classification and over aspects of superannuation. In addition, in 1894, the eight-hour day was introduced into the dockyards, long before it

41. For details see Haas, *A Management Odyssey*, pp. 129–156.

42. Reports of Fane Committee on Dockyard Wages, 1893–1894, PRO ADM116/374.

43. Extracts of Director of Dockyard's Evidence Before the Royal Commission on Labour, Appendix A, May 1893, PRO ADM116/374.

44. Reports of Fane Committee, PRO ADM116/374.

was an agreed working period in private shipyards or elsewhere in British industry.⁴⁵ Whilst it appeared that the Admiralty were conceding to the demands in dockyardmen's petitions, there was often a price to pay. In the case of the introduction of a forty-eight-hour week, a number of privileges were withdrawn, such as a half day's holiday on the annual visitation of the Lords of the Admiralty, or when ships were launched. Women in the colour loft and the roperies also had their hours of work reduced, so that during the summer months they only worked for nine hours a day instead of twelve.⁴⁶

There was also a massive expansion of the dockyard workforce from 1895 onwards, and Haas argues that there was thus a "long quiet" until 1912–1913.⁴⁷ Certainly numbers rose dramatically – from the 1895 figure of 19,000 to nearly 34,000 in 1905. However, this "long quiet" disguised many of the inherent tensions noted above. It also ignores the massive lay-off of hired men, begun in the autumn of 1905, which eventually saw 8,000 hired workers discharged (one-third of the total workforce). This action of a Conservative government had considerable political impact in the dockyard towns and contributed to the election of Liberal MPs in those constituencies (and a Liberal government nationally). It also meant that, when issues came to a head in the immediate prewar years, the challenges and the force of the arguments produced quite dramatic changes within dockyard labour relations.

PETITIONS: AN OUTMODED SYSTEM?

There were a number of ways in which dockyardmen were beginning to pressurize employers beyond the system of petitioning. In some senses this was again due to the wider processes of political development within Britain. The extension of the male franchise in 1867 and 1884/5 had given small, but significant, elements within the dockyard workforce a degree of political influence. Those who stood for dockyard constituencies had to take account both of the significance of the yards to the local economy and, now, the "dockies" vote.⁴⁸ By the late nineteenth century, the lobbying of dockyard MPs and their consequent representations in parliament were clear indications of the alternatives to conventional petitioning within the Admiralty framework.

There were also internal pressure groups being created, ones which linked across trades and the barriers of skill and sectionalism. In 1911, a

45. Haas, *A Management Odyssey*, pp. 160–167.

46. Introduction of Forty-Eight-Hour Week, 1894, PRO ADM116/382.

47. Haas, *A Management Odyssey*, p. 166.

48. K. Lunn, "Labour Culture in Dockyard Towns. A Study of Portsmouth, Plymouth and Chatham, 1900–1950", *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis*, 18 (1992), pp. 275–293.

Dockyard Grievances Committee was formed in Portsmouth from the local Trades Council, as the Admiral Superintendent of the yard was informed that, "The Dockyard Grievances Committee is representative of the organized men in the dockyard. The Portsmouth Trades Council has thirty-nine branches affiliated to it, twenty-six of which have members who are employed in the Dockyard".⁴⁹ Around the same time, a Chatham Dockyard Workers Committee had been formed. In an exchange with their Admiral Superintendent, this committee began to raise grievances directly with him. Most of them were dealt with in an uncontentious fashion. One issue, that of provision for workmen on the floating dock, seemed more complex, and the Committee were asked to refer it through the usual channels, i.e. a written petition from the workers concerned. The Admiral Superintendent's Secretary referred them to the existing regulations "complaints from the men must be made by them in this manner", and suggested that the Admiral Superintendent was "unable to take any notice of complaints raised by any outside agencies: but has made a special exception as regards your letter on this occasion".⁵⁰ This attempt to channel grievances back into the conventional petitioning mode met with a sharp response from the Committee. The secretary "respectfully" pointed out that it was hardly an "outside agency", since all its members were dockyard employees. It saw petitioning as relevant for individual cases, but clearly wanted a more collectivist agency for general grievances: "This method would prevent frivolous and vexatious matters troubling the Yard Officers while, inter alia, proving the need for investigation of any questions submitted through the Committee."⁵¹ A curt response from the Admiral Superintendent, saying that all issues of principle affecting all the Royal Dockyards must be by petition to the Admiralty, indicated a closure of further debate: "I am to add that the Regulations promulgated by the Admiralty defining the method to be adopted by the Yard Workmen to secure redress of grievances are exhibited in prominent positions throughout the Yard."⁵² The Committee then sought to broaden the discussion and seek clarification of its legitimacy by sending all the correspondence to the Admiralty in May 1913. The question of "outside agency" and alternatives to petitioning were clearly coming to a head by this time.

One of the major changes which reshaped the format of negotiation and, consequently, was instrumental in undermining the power of the petition,

49. G.W. Porter, President of Portsmouth Trades Council to Admiral Superintendent, Portsmouth Dockyard, 30 August 1911, PRO ADM116/1129A, cited in P. Galliver, "Trade Unionism in Portsmouth Dockyard, 1880-1914: Change and Continuity", in Lunn and Day, *History of Work*, p. 116.

50. C.R. Sayers, Secretary to the Admiralty Superintendent, Chatham Dockyard to P.W. Terry, Secretary of Chatham Dockyard Workers Committee, 3 January 1913, PRO ADM116/1216.

51. Terry to Sayers, 19 January 1913, PRO ADM116/1216.

52. Sayers to Terry, 22 January 1913, PRO ADM116/1216.

was the introduction of trade-union representation, albeit obliquely, into the petitioning process. In 1905, it was decided by the Admiralty that delegates from the various dockyards were allowed to travel to London, without loss of pay, in order to present their grievances. Each delegate had to be selected by the employees, usually two per trade, and these representatives had to attend the Admiral Superintendent's office in their respective dockyard in order to identify themselves. By this time it was clear that petitions were being used in a far more collaborative way by dockyardmen. The 1905 and 1906 petitions from Portsmouth, Chatham and Devonport outline almost exactly the same demands from each yard on specific issues, indicating a level of joint action and the desire to present a united front. The grievances in these petitions clustered around demands for increases in the rates of pay, but were accompanied by concerns about pensions, parity of pay within trades and payments to relatives on death.⁵³ The majority of the delegates elected were members of trade unions, although the Admiralty insisted that they were employed within the dockyards and trade unionists from outside could not act as workers' representatives.⁵⁴ Women colourmakers from Chatham Dockyard were also represented in the 1906 petitions, requesting higher rates of basic pay.⁵⁵ The signs were clearly there that the petitioning system was seen by dockyard workers as increasingly outmoded and ineffective and that direct workers' representation was the way forward, although the Admiralty insisted on maintaining it as a formal method of negotiation where they could continue to exert the state's authority.

TOWARDS THE WHITLEY SYSTEM: THE END OF PETITIONING?

What developed from this point was a sustained, and often quite fierce, campaign for more direct involvement of trade unions, whether or not delegates held positions within the dockyard, and for a more effective system of negotiating which ceased to rely upon the petition. Committees, such as those formed in Portsmouth and Chatham (as noted above) were part of that process, but it also involved activities which sought to challenge the legitimacy of the petition. A.G. Slaughter, an official of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, wrote in 1913, "The style of application is slavish in the extreme, the form of the petition requiring the workmen to acknowledge themselves as 'the humble servants' of 'My Lords'. An emotion which they are far from feeling in these days of

53. Abstract of Petitions from Workmen, 1905 (Chatham, Portsmouth and Devonport Dockyards), PRO ADM116/374.

54. Regulations on Obtaining Grievances 1906, PRO ADM116/1029.

55. *Ibid.*

democratic control.”⁵⁶ With a widening of the parliamentary franchise, there was no longer the need for a style of language which served to camouflage any overt political objective, as Zaret has pointed out existed in the earlier periods. One of the ways in which the framework of the petition could be challenged was by the “abuse” of the system. In the early years of the twentieth century, it becomes increasingly clear that the same petitions are being submitted every year, that arguments are being restated despite their rejection, and that the whole machinery of negotiation is becoming overwhelmed and hugely unproductive. The agreement to allow union officials as part of a delegation had, by 1911, caused the Admiralty to try and reform the system. The previous year, in the various deputations, John Jenkins, a shipwright official and former MP for Chatham,⁵⁷ described himself thus – “I am somewhat in the position of a Methodist preacher; I operate throughout the whole of the Dockyards and preach the same sermon wherever I go”.⁵⁸ He represented many of the delegations to the Admiralty and, because the petitions were often virtually identical for each group of workers from each dockyard, repeated the points on each occasion. Essentially what was becoming more apparent was a resentment at the constant rejection of claims within the petitions, and also at the antiquity of the system itself. Speaking on behalf of the Portsmouth Dockyard shipwrights, Jenkins made this very clear.

I should like to say at the outset that so far as our members are concerned they are keenly disappointed. Evidently for all practical purposes our petitions are useless. And although we have ventured to sign it again this year it is in the hope that you will give it more favourable consideration than hitherto.⁵⁹

Elsewhere, he wondered at the point of petitioning, since little positive response ever seemed forthcoming and most petitions were returned bearing the Admiralty reply, “cannot be acceded to”. It was this resentment, and its impact on negotiations, which caused doubts within the Admiralty about the viability of continuing. As Galliver has suggested, the “impending demise of the petitioning system was imminent”.⁶⁰

Eventually, in 1914, the Admiralty agreed that an annual London conference should be established as the main vehicle for the exchange of views and negotiations between dockyard workers and the employers. The delegations of dockyard worker representatives could constitute up to half nondockyardmen, that is, full-time trade-union officials. This effectively ended the petition and its concomitant apparatus, a process which seemed

56. *Portsmouth Evening News*, 26 February 1913.

57. For details see Lunn, “Labour Culture in Dockyard Towns”, pp. 283–287.

58. Extracts from Minutes of 1910 Deputations, PRO ADM116/1179.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Galliver, “Trade Unionism in Portsmouth Dockyard”, p. 120.

to be enhanced with the introduction of a more “democratic” system of state bargaining after the First World War.

THE LEGACY OF THE PETITION

The origins of the Whitley system go back to problems raised by the industrial unrest of the First World War, but also to some of the prewar pressures and conflicts. A committee, headed by J.H. Whitley, MP for Halifax, came up with a plan for joint councils of employers’ associations and trade unions, with a committee structure which operated right down to factory level. Initially, its proposals were meant to refer to the private sector alone, but pressure from civil-service unions and industrial workers employed in the state sectors led to a second report in October 1917, which suggested that state and municipal authorities form joint councils.⁶¹

Initially, dockyard workers seemed to have been impressed by the Whitley system. In 1925, H. Berry, secretary of the trade union side of the Shipbuilding Trades Joint Council, publicly praised the new system,

The day has passed away, I hope for ever, when Petitions to “My Lords” setting forth the burden of one’s complaint and praying for redress thereof [...] it is not my purpose to say whether the Whitley Council is the best machine for improving “Rates and Conditions”, but it has given the men, at least, a good opportunity of having their claims presented, listened to, and redressed in many cases.⁶²

However, a closer evaluation might suggest that it took much longer for the impact of petitioning and its surrounding ideology to fade away. No significant study of industrial relations in the dockyards for this era exists as yet, but some tentative examination suggests a powerful echoing of previous centuries. Scanning the minutes of the committee proceedings in the later 1920s and 1930s, what comes across is the formality of proceedings, which in many ways reflected the old patterns of negotiation and of authority. The trade-union side would raise issues, ask for improvements to wages or conditions, and the employers’ side, including Ministry of Labour officials, would make a consideration. This would often involve lengthy breaks between formal meetings, internal discussion and, on return, usually rejection of the trade-union requests. The system allowed for formal arbitration: the trade-union side could ask for issues to be sent to an Arbitration Court. However, very few decisions were in favour of the union argument. Ultimately the language and bearing of the employers’ side seemed to symbolize an inheritance of petitioning, the

61. For details see, K. Lunn and A. Day, “Continuity and Change: Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards, 1914–50” in Lunn and Day, *History of Work*, p. 133.

62. *The Dockyard Industrial Review*, 1(2), 2nd quarter, 1925.

refusal to negotiate directly around a table. Positions were stated, there was a brief discussion and responses were delivered as set pieces at the next meeting. Disagreements then went to arbitration. “Whatever the formal intentions of the JSTC and its wider framework of Whitleyism, it seems clear that old attitudes and entrenched positions were powerful factors in inter-war industrial relations.”⁶³ Whilst Whitleyism may have provided a useful safety valve at a local level, and for a limited range of grievances about conditions, the essential points about pay and the nature of dockyard employment were left to the top-level committees. In these, it was apparent that real decision-making was still very much in the control of the Admiralty and other state agencies. The legacy of petitioning persisted well beyond its formal application.

CONCLUSIONS

At the end of the twentieth century, the Royal Dockyards had ceased to exist in their historically recognizable format. Privatization, the overall decline of British naval strength and the switch to “heritage” has seen dramatic physical and ideological shifts. Privatization has seen the effective end of the Whitley system and a move towards more direct union/management bargaining.

In looking back at the changing patterns of industrial relations over the centuries and the symbolic importance of the petition in that history, what becomes clear is the lack of any simplistic pattern. Notions of deference and defiance are woven throughout the whole gamut of labour relations in the Royal Dockyards. The conventional notion of servility and deference engendered and developed through the use of petitioning does, of course, have some validity. A great number of dockyard workers were unquestionably loyal to the Crown and to the state and accepted their authority and control, with the ultimate reward of job security and a pension. Alongside this, however, there are instances of more militant behaviour, of strikes and the slow growth of trade unionism, challenging what was seen by some workers as the heavy hand of the Admiralty and the British state. Above all, petitions demonstrate the many and varied aspects of dockyard workers’ culture – the solidarity between trades but also divisions of status and skills resulting in the elitism of some workers, contrasted to the more egalitarian demands of some trade unionists. That history cannot be easily compartmentalized or chronologically divided. The impact of the petitioning system, even after its demise, has been identified and it was, arguably, its long history which has contributed to the particular nature of dockyard labour relations over the centuries.

63. Lunn and Day, “Continuity and Change”, p. 134.