

# Changing practices in labour relations: the Society of Master Carpenters, London 1783-99

by H.K. Houldsworth

The subject of industrial relations in the eighteenth century building industry and the development of trade unions and employers' associations has received comparatively little attention from historians. This is unfortunate as the period was a transitional one which witnessed the gradual demise of medieval concepts of industrial relations and the emergence of new concepts in which the market place was identified as the principal arbiter in the determination of wages and prices. While manufacturing industry demonstrated impatience with ancient restrictions imposed by 'accustomed' wages defined and regulated by local authorities, the building industry was slow to abandon traditions that had been hallowed by centuries of practice.

Recognition of the reluctance of builders to enter into a new competitive spirit has been hampered by the paucity of evidence surviving from the period. Odd fragments of evidence about the existence of eighteenth century trade unions, employers' associations and about the occurrence of strikes in the building industry have been occasionally uncovered, but they have rarely provided a basis for a comprehensive understanding of events.

Sydney and Beatrice Webb stand out among historians who made early reference to the existence of the London-based Society of Master Carpenters in the late eighteenth century and to the fact that a strike by journeymen carpenters occurred in London around 1787<sup>1</sup>. Raymond Postgate, in his *Builders' History* (1923), also noted the trial of four journeymen carpenters at the court of the Old Bailey in 1789, but he could not discover information on the circumstances leading up to the trial<sup>2</sup>. More recently, C.R.

Dobson has identified in his excellent book 'Masters and Journeymen' (1980) the case in 1788 when an unknown number of journeymen carpenters were indicted at the court of the King's Bench on a charge of conspiracy arising out of a labour dispute<sup>3</sup>.

This paper links these events and provides further information.

Overall, the paper has two objectives: to advertise the existence of a collection of documents held by the Chartered Institute of Building, and to outline and comment on the principal contents of this collection.

The collection in question was presented in 1899 to the then Institute of Builders by the first president of the Institute, Colonel Stanley G. Bird. This package of documents was re-discovered recently during research into the origins of the Chartered Institute of Building.

The contents of the Col. S.G. Bird Collection deal with the period 1783 to 1799 and the activities of the Society of Master Carpenters, a Society which was based in and around London and functioned at the time as possibly the most important employers' and trade association in the London building industry.

The existence of the Society of Master Carpenters may be explained partly by the decline of the Carpenters' Livery Company as an active trade association connected specifically with the day to day regulation of the carpentry trade.

Included in the Col. S.G. Bird Collection are the minutes of the Society of Master Carpenters for several months of the year 1787 and for the period from 1792 to 1799. Membership data for the Society and treasurer's accounts are also included and cover most of the period from 1783 to 1798 (Figure 1). Several letters and bills from the solicitor to the Master Carpenters are also in-

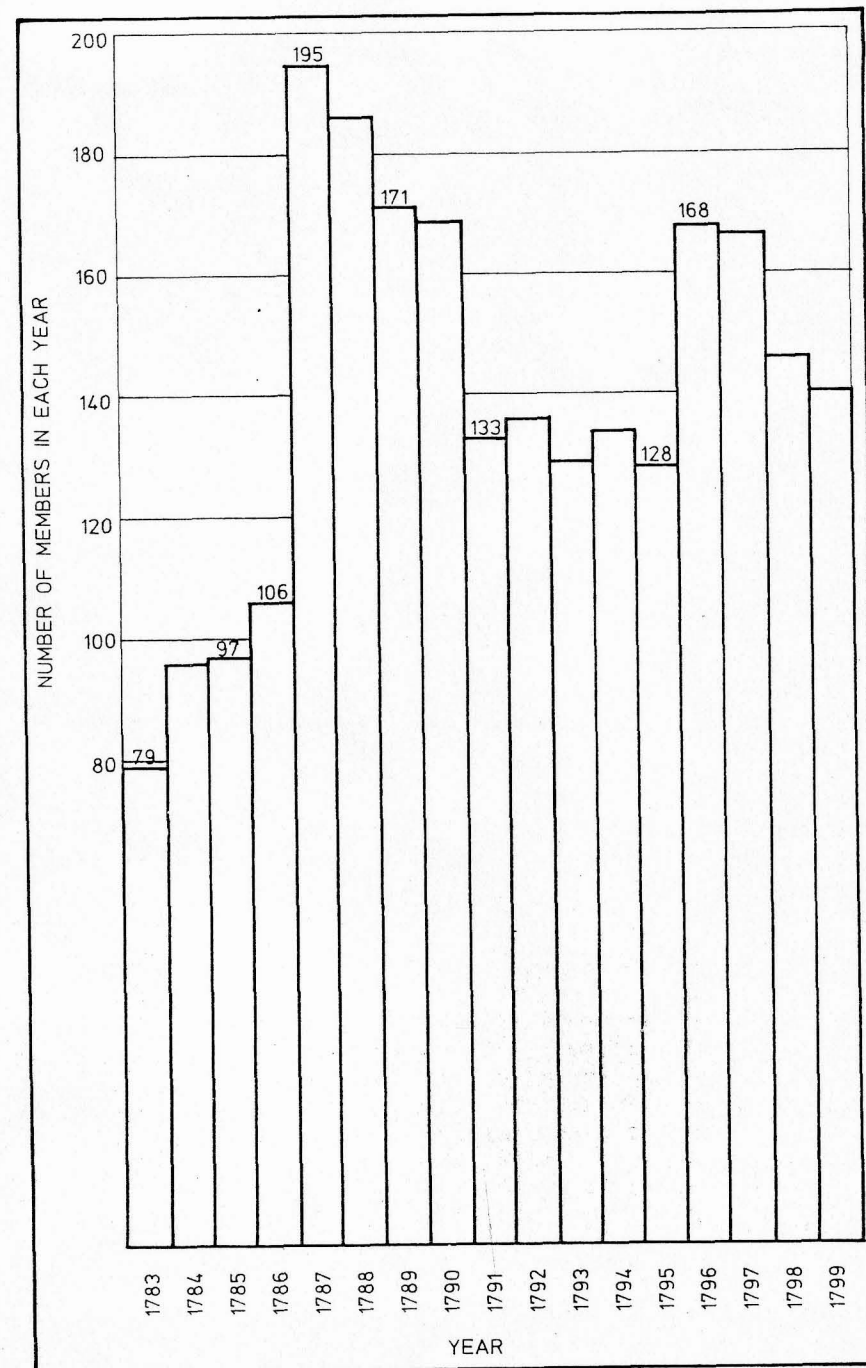


Figure 1 Estimated membership of the Society of Master Carpenters, 1783 to 1799

cluded, in addition to other letters, receipts and cuttings from contemporary newspapers. Much of the material in the collection is connected with action taken by the members of the Society of Master Carpenters following the industrial relations crisis which affected the London building industry during the course of 1787.

#### The 1787 dispute

The early developments in the carpenters' dispute of 1787 remain obscure. However it is known that during the spring of 1787 journeymen carpenters in and around London conveyed to selected employers a request for an increase in wages<sup>4</sup>. Their request was for a rise of sixpence per day, from the existing rate of three shillings per day to a new rate of three shillings and sixpence.

A variety of communication media appear to have been employed by the journeymen carpenters, the principal one being the use of advertisements placed in local newspapers<sup>5</sup>. Other means included the use of signed or unsigned petitions, including petitions handed possibly to the landlord of the Globe Tavern, Fleet Street, where the Society of Master Carpenters held monthly meetings. A round robin was presented to at least two employers, probably via site or workshop foremen<sup>6</sup>. Posters and placards may also have been used to advertise the wage claim and the case of the journeymen carpenters.

The journeymen carpenters were themselves organised into a number of societies, each being financially independent and based at a local tavern or meeting house<sup>7</sup>. Such societies were formed initially as benefit or friendly societies and appear to have developed a trade union function as a response to a specific grievance<sup>8</sup>. Alternatively referred to as 'box' clubs after the locked chest into which their weekly subscriptions were placed, the societies provided the elementary organisational structure which facilitated communication among the diverse groups of journeymen scattered throughout the metropolis.

Principally, the journeymen carpenters justified their wage claim on the grounds of

the continued inflation in the costs of the 'common comforts of life'<sup>9</sup>. However they also saw themselves as a special case among building tradesmen and supported their request by emphasising that journeymen carpenters were compelled to spend a proportion of their wages maintaining their own tools. This, they pointed out, was not reflected in any differential between the wages of carpenters and the wages of other craftsmen in the building industry.

By the beginning of July 1787 a crisis atmosphere had developed in the London building industry and a number of journeymen carpenters were attempting to bring pressure to bear on employers by either adopting strike action, or by deserting selected employers who were not prepared to advance wages by the required amount<sup>10</sup>.

At a meeting of the Society of Master Carpenters held at the Globe Tavern, Fleet Street, on 11 July 1787, the wage claim was discussed<sup>11</sup>. Evidence survives to indicate that a number of members were in favour of paying the advanced wage requested by the journeymen carpenters; indeed it is probable that a number of employers were already paying the three shillings and sixpence rate to their own employees. However at the end of the meeting the Society of Master Carpenters declined to endorse the payment of an increased wage to journeymen.

Given the standing of members of the Society of Master Carpenters as prominent employers in the metropolitan building industry, the refusal to endorse a wage rise represented a major set-back to the journeymen. The journeymen responded by calling for an immediate strike of all journeymen carpenters in and around London; by 14 July 1787 over 4000 journeymen and other workmen are reported to have stopped work and to have brought to a halt much of the building work being carried out in London and Westminster<sup>12</sup>. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine how long this strike lasted.

Within this context of strike action, the name of Peter Banner assumes a certain prominence, as he was the first master carpenter

to adopt legal action in an attempt to resolve the dispute<sup>13</sup>. Acting prior to the commencement of the main strike, Banner is known to have given instructions to one Mr. Chetham, a solicitor, to prepare a bill of indictment against a number of journeymen carpenters for either leaving or threatening to leave work because he (Banner) would not pay higher than the usual and accustomed wages. Unfortunately for Banner, this move was rapidly thwarted when a grand jury declared the bill of indictment 'not found'<sup>14</sup>.

At this stage the Society of Master Carpenters took the matter in hand and approached a different solicitor to act on the employers' behalf. The second solicitor was a Mr. Anthony Steventon of Ely Place, Holborn — and his appointment is significant, as it is mainly through his extant bills of costs that we are now able to follow later events in the 1787 dispute<sup>15</sup>.

Steventon first attended a meeting of the committee of the Society of Master Carpenters on 13 July 1787. He had further discussions with the masters that same evening and next morning, prior to attending at the Whitechapel Rotation Office and speaking to several magistrates about the possibility of warrants being granted for the arrest of several journeymen '... who had deserted'. However this move was not successful as the magistrates were reluctant to act and requested time to discuss the matter with Mr. Mainwairing, who was chairman to the Middlesex magistrates<sup>16</sup>.

Following this further set-back, Steventon attended once more at a meeting of the Society of Master Carpenters, where he was requested by the committee of masters to:

'... abstract all the Parts of the different Acts of Parliament respecting Labourers, Handicrafts, Men, and Servants and produce and read the same to the General Committee ...'<sup>17</sup>

It is clear that at this or the following meeting the master carpenters were advised and decided that a suitable course of action was for them to send a petition to the King asking for a proclamation directing magistrates to punish offending journeymen

in a summary way.

The list of abstracts, which Steventon prepared, has not survived, but in the subsequent petition to King George III reference was made to a statute of 17th George II and to:

'... other Statutes respecting idle and disorderly persons and such as refuse to work for the settled and accustomed Wages'<sup>18</sup>.

Later Steventon also referred to Statute 5 Elizabeth, Cap 4, Section 15, as providing the authority enabling the rate of the journeymens' wages to be settled at the London Sessions<sup>19</sup>.

Reference to these statutes explains the stand of the Society of Master Carpenters. The issue was not so much the amount of the basic wage paid to a journeyman, but the principle that it should be a regulated wage for good craftsmen, rather than one determined by petitions or the threat of strike action.

Later a petition to the King was drawn up and signed by members of the Society of Master Carpenters<sup>20</sup>. The petition was presented to a Mr. Napin, who was the secretary to Secretary of State Lord Sydney, by a delegation of senior members of the Society of Master Carpenters. The delegation included Messrs. Adam, Banner, Wyatt, Gibson and Howell<sup>21</sup>. By the 23 July 1787, Mr. Adam assured a committee of Master Carpenters that the petition had reached the hands of Lord Camden, the President of the Privy Council. Beyond this date, however, the minutes of the Master Carpenters are unhelpful and we have no information as to the outcome of this move.

The Society of Master Carpenters did not rely entirely upon the success of the petition to King George III. A second 'Memorial' was prepared by Anthony Steventon and addressed to the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Sheriffs of London, praying that they would issue a proclamation for apprehending all journeymen who had left their work under the influence of the combination of journeymen carpenters, unless those journeymen would return immediately to work<sup>22</sup>.



This petition was presented at the Guildhall on the 17 July and Steventon spoke, on the following day, to Sir Watkin Lewes (who had been Lord Mayor in 1780) and requested him to arrange for a Court of Aldermen to be summoned to consider the Master Carpenters' petition. Again, the outcome of this move is unrecorded.

In the case of both the petition to the King and the memorial to the Lord Mayor, the masters' objective was to persuade the authorities that they had a statutory obligation to involve themselves in the current industrial dispute. The masters stressed the medieval concept of an 'accustomed' wage above which no employee had a right to demand or an employer a right to pay. The problem for magistrates in 1787 was that they found it difficult to define an 'accustomed' wage, as it appears that the wages of journeymen carpenters had not been rated officially for many years.

This explains why, as early as the 16 July 1787, Messrs. Bailey, Banner, Haggard, Naish, Rose and Saunders, were nominated by the committee of Master Carpenters to wait with Anthony Steventon upon the Recorder of the City of London. Their object was to:

'... point out to (the Recorder) the several Acts respecting Servants, Workmen, Labourers, Etc., for the purpose of getting their Wages settled by the present Sessions'<sup>23</sup>.

The committee failed to see the Recorder that evening and the final result of the move is unrecorded.

The information given above illustrates a number of the early moves of the members of the Society of Master Carpenters in response to the industrial action organised in July 1787 by the journeymen carpenters. The information suggests the business-like manner of the master carpenters, their determination to mobilise official support for their cause and their view that wage levels should be determined by the representatives of authority, rather than by collective bargaining. These moves were but the initial ones in the attempts of the Society of Master Carpenters to solve the crisis in industrial

relations.

Each further step taken by the masters is recorded in the Colonel Stanley G Bird Collection, either in the minutes of the Society meetings, or in the details to be found in the extant bills of costs eventually provided to the Society of Master Carpenters by their solicitor, Anthony Steventon. These later moves may be followed in some detail<sup>24</sup>. However, in this paper it is only possible to summarise the later reactions of the Master Carpenters and to add that the following list defines an overall strategy which evolved over several weeks after the middle of July 1787 and represented reactions by the masters to changing circumstances.

The later actions of the Society of Master Carpenters in the 1787 dispute involved the following steps.

1. The master carpenters attempted to prevent the journeymen carpenters from advertising their case in newspapers, by advising the respective editors of the illegality of the advertisements of the journeymen. They had little success<sup>25</sup>.
2. The masters sought to re-organise the Society of Master Carpenters and establish a more effective sub-committee structure which would permit easier communications with
  - (a) master carpenters (including those who had given the increased journeymens' wages);
  - (b) local magistrates (in order to get them to take action against local societies of journeymen);
  - (c) other members of the building trade who were willing to contribute money to support prosecutions of journeymen<sup>26</sup>.
3. The master carpenters took steps to prevent non-freemen, who were paid advanced wages from being employed in the City of London. The steps involved
  - (a) discovering how many non-freemen there were and by whom they were employed;
  - (b) informing their master that they were non-freemen (in the hope that

the master would dismiss them);

- (c) prosecuting non-free journeymen for working in the City of London without a licence to do so;
  - (d) opposing applications to license non-freemen where such applications were made by master carpenters who paid the advanced wages<sup>27</sup>.
4. Attempts were made to persuade all master carpenters to sign a declaration that they would not pay advanced wages or employ unionised labour (ticket men)<sup>28</sup>.
  5. The master carpenters advertised in newspapers offering rewards for information leading to the arrest and conviction of
    - (a) union stewards and receivers of monies to be used by societies of journeymen (to be charged with conspiracy to raise wages);
    - (b) any publican who permitted conspirators to hold unlawful assemblies on their premises (the masters had limited success here)<sup>29</sup>.
  6. The masters attempted to persuade local magistrates to take away the licence of any publican who was known to permit journeymen societies (box clubs) to meet on his premises<sup>30</sup>.
  7. Principally, the Society of Master Carpenters hoped to assist individual master carpenters who were prepared to prosecute journeymen for offences connected with the current industrial relations dispute<sup>31</sup>.

Following the journeymen's strike of July 1787 the Society encouraged its members to resort to actions in the courts as a means of defeating the attempts of the combinations of journeymen to secure an increase in wages. The Society encouraged its members to take this action because most masters believed that it was right that they should so do and because they believed that such measures would solve their problems without an excessive investment of either their own time or their own money.

A summary of the actions in the law courts initiated by master carpenters, between Ju-

ly 1787 and November 1789, as a result of the events in 1787, is included as an appendix to this paper<sup>32</sup>. In total, nine separate actions were contemplated. These included four groups of indictments of journeymen on various charges of conspiracy. E.G. and G. Saunders, Peter Banner and George Slaton were named in the bills as the employers taking action against a total of forty journeymen carpenters. Five other groups of actions were considered by employers — Adam, Beer, Hesketh, Johnson and Naish — but these actions were either abandoned at an early stage or are cases where the outcome is obscure. These lesser cases included actions against eight journeymen for conspiracy, an unspecified number of cases of desertion and one case of assault.

The history of the attempts of the master carpenters to arrest and bring to trial the journeymen is a story of set-backs, frustrations and failures at almost every stage of the proceedings. This picture reveals the difficulties facing an employer who attempted to invoke the law to solve a workplace dispute prior to the Combination Act of 1799, and tells us a great deal about the problems of trade unionists in the late eighteenth century building industry. Only about one third of those referred to in the original indictments were ever arrested and those that were arrested often eluded detection for months. One journeyman died in goal and so embarrassed the prosecution of a second journeyman that the second defendant was discharged in an 'amicable' way<sup>33</sup>. Actions against a few journeymen had to be abandoned because of the excessive time, trouble and cost involved in the actions and possibly because of the unreliability of the witnesses for the prosecution. Only after many months, in two major trials, were ten journeymen persuaded to change their pleas to 'guilty' on the understanding that they would not be brought up for judgement unless they became involved in a new conspiracy<sup>34</sup>. The final trial ended in court of the Old Bailey on 4 November 1789, over two years after the incidents referred to in the original indictments<sup>35</sup>.

It is not possible to say with any precision

to what extent the official stand of the Society of Master Carpenters met with the approval of master carpenters at large in London, Westminster and the surrounding district, of whom there would have been hundreds.

With respect to the rank and file members of the Society of Master Carpenters the most enthusiastic support for the actions of the Society of Master Carpenters came during the earliest weeks of the conflict, when members believed that a firm stand would defeat the efforts of the journeymen to force the masters to grant a general rise in wages. The peak of this wave of support may have occurred in late August 1787, for on the 28th of that month over sixty master carpenters demonstrated that they were prepared to sign a copy of a Society resolution not to comply with the 'unreasonable' demands of the journeymen and to discharge all journeymen who were contributors to the combination of carpenters<sup>36</sup>.

Support by Society members for the actions of the committee started to wane following the resolution of the immediate crisis, and as the members were asked to dig deep into their pockets to support the indictment of a number of journeymen carpenters. As the months passed, and more delays occurred in the attempts to bring the journeymen to trial, many master carpenters may have begun to question the determination of committee of the Society to carry on with the prosecutions. Some may have become particularly alarmed by the effect of the delays on the eventual legal fees, which trebled from an early estimate of around £300 to a final bill of over one thousand pounds<sup>37</sup>. In addition, the fact that the indicted journeymen worked for only four or five master carpenters must have made some members feel that they were ultimately subsidising the individual problems of another employer.

#### The 1795-6 dialogue

Between 1787 and 1795, the surviving minutes of the Society of Master Carpenters include no references to relations between the master carpenters and their employees.

However, on 25 November 1795, two petitions from journeymen were brought to the attention of the members of the Society of Master Carpenters<sup>38</sup>. One of the petitions was unsigned and this was put to one side as unworthy of consideration. The signed petition was accepted by the master carpenters and was written into the minutes of the meeting.

Central to the theme of the signed petition was the effect which the war with France was having on commodity prices and the fact that increases in the cost of living had not been matched by an increase in wages for journeymen. In the petition the journeymen acknowledged that the master carpenters had only limited freedom to adjust their prices as the masters were controlled to a degree by the Society of Surveyors. (For those who are unfamiliar with eighteenth century contract procedure: surveyors measured completed building work on behalf of clients and assumed the role of experts in deciding whether the builders charges were fair). The journeymen carpenters adopted a very respectful tone in the petition and simply asked the master carpenters to consider the current plight of journeymen and endeavour to persuade the Society of Surveyors to allow certain rises in the standard prices allowed by surveyors for building work. The journeymen indicated that they anticipated a sympathetic response from the master carpenters and gave no hint that there might be a conflict between the interests of employers and employed.

As in 1787, the journeymen backed up their petition by advertising their viewpoint in a selection of local newspapers. They may also have contacted individual employers, or their foremen, and involved the aid of placards and posters.

In the event, the master carpenters adopted a cautious approach and permitted a number of journeymen to attend the masters' monthly meeting. Nonetheless the masters questioned the journeymen delegates on the extent to which they represented the general body of journeymen carpenters in the metropolis. To this query, the journeymen provided two distinct replies. The first was an immediate reply, to the effect that the delegates

represented two main societies of journeymen carpenters: the London United Society and the Westminster Society of journeymen. The men explained that the societies corresponded with one another and suggested that the London United Society consisted of nine 'societies' or divisions, while the Westminster group had seven divisions. One assumes these represented sixteen financially independent 'box' clubs or friendly societies, each based at a local tavern or other meeting place. However, at a second meeting with the masters, held several weeks later, the representatives of the journeymen carpenters were able to demonstrate that the journeymen were then organised into a single society composed of thirty-nine divisions, having a total membership of about 3700 and a principal meeting place at the Swann Eating House in Fish Street Hill<sup>39</sup>. Most of the thirty-nine delegates attended in a nearby tavern, in order not to inconvenience the place at which the master carpenters were holding their own meeting!

It is clear that the well organised response of the journeymen surprised the committee of the Society of Master Carpenters and placed the masters in a position where they felt an obligation to satisfy the journeymen in some way. The masters, perhaps with some reluctance, agreed to discuss the question of prices with the Society of Surveyors and they asked the journeymen to await the outcome of these talks.

By February 1796, discussions had been held with the Surveyors and an offer of some two shillings per week rise in wages was offered to the journeymen<sup>40</sup>. The offer was half that which the journeymen said they were hoping for, but it appears that the offer was later accepted by the main body of journeymen carpenters.

From an historical perspective, the significance of these deliberations lies less with the specific terms of the offer, than with the fact that masters and men communicated with one another through the agency of representative associations. It is perhaps important to stress that the communications did not involve collective bargaining in the

modern sense of the term. Indeed, the nature of the contemporary relationship between master and servant inhibited the development of effective collective bargaining. The discussions that took place were limited to those which concerned the presentation of a petition and a response to a series of questions put by the masters. The solution involved the simple acceptance of the offer made by the employers. No hint was given by the master carpenters that the offer was negotiable and no suggestions were made by journeymen that industrial action might be resorted to in the event of the employers' offer being rejected by them.

For the journeymen, the events of 1795-6 created a precedent which might be exploited usefully at some future date; to the master carpenters the same events represented a special reaction to very unusual circumstances created by the war with France. Given their interest in price and wage stability, the masters did not desire or expect a repeat performance in the foreseeable future. Thus when in 1797 the journeymen made a further attempt to establish a dialogue between their own Society and the Society of Master Carpenters, the masters were quick to refuse even to receive a delegation of journeymen, regardless of the subject to be discussed<sup>41</sup>.

#### Towards the Combination Act

The Col. S.G. Bird Collection includes the minutes of the meetings of the Society of Master Carpenters until February 1799. In July 1799 the first Combination Act was passed, creating a situation where the Society of Master Carpenters and the various societies of journeymen became potentially illegal combinations. For both masters and men the date marked the end of an era in industrial relations, although not the end of their respective societies.

Although examples of conflict have been referred to in this paper, it has not been my intention to give support to the view that industrial relations are essentially conflictual in nature. However the paper may provide evidence that many causes of industrial con-



flict are deep rooted and very long term in their effects.

The conflicts described in this paper are, I believe, best viewed as the result of changes which were affecting the building industry during the latter half of the eighteenth century and which were little understood by those involved in the conflicts and, in any event, beyond their individual control. The principal causes were the combined effect of a century-long breakdown of the medieval system of wage regulation and the gradual effects of price inflation on the value of accustomed wages.

Employers in the building trade were often trapped by existing systems of contracting which committed builders for long periods ahead against agreed measured rates. It was difficult for individual, or even small groups of master craftsmen, to adjust their prices without running the risk of not being awarded contract work. The role of the eighteenth century measuring surveyor as an arbiter in these matters needs to be borne in mind. This was in addition to the restraints on the development of any collective bargaining imposed by contemporary views on the nature of the master-servant relationship, which made it difficult for masters and men to discuss many issues on the basis of mutual understanding and respect.

Journeymen in the building trade understood the difficulties facing employers who individually put up wages; this was why they contacted the Society of Master Carpenters. Neither did journeymen question existing systems of authority and control, or see any fundamental conflict between the interests of employers and employed; they merely wanted the existing system to work and to redress their justifiable grievance over the falling value of their wages. When the existing system failed to respond to their needs they were forced to organise themselves, formally and informally, and move towards adopting various forms of direct action. The case of 1796 illustrates one situation where a modest response by the employers was able to prevent such a drift occurring.

During the period 1787 to 1797 wages did

rise. However, one might question whether it was the effects of war on supply and demand or the threats of strike action which most influenced this trend.

In the run up to the passing of the 1799 Combination Act, certain master millwrights described to Parliament the many difficulties which faced employers who attempted to deal with trade unionists by indicting them for conspiracy at the Quarter Sessions or Assizes. The millwrights also identified the delays and costs associated with this process<sup>42</sup>. This case study of the experience of the Society of Master Carpenters provides further detailed evidence of these difficulties which employers faced, and which the 1799 Combination Act was designed to alleviate.

*Trent Polytechnic*

## Appendix I

The draft petition to the King, as agreed by a sub-committee of the Society of Master Carpenters at a meeting held at the Globe Tavern, Fleet Street, on the 16th. July, 1787, at noon<sup>(43)</sup>.

'To the King's Most Excellent Majesty

The Humble Representation and Petition of the several Persons whose Names are hereunto subscribed being Master Carpenters and Builders residing in and near the Cities of London and Westminster on behalf of themselves and others in the same way of Business

Most humbly Sheweth

That a Combination hath been lately entered into by your Petitioners Journeymen and Workmen to suspend their Labor as well for their several Masters as all others who will not consent to raise the Wages of each such Journeymen and Workmen three Shillings Weekly in Addition to their Usual and accustomed Wages.

That your Majesty's Petitioners are credibly Informed that near 5000 Persons of the above description have formed themselves into Societies particularly one Intitled 'A Friendly Society of Carpenters and Joiners' and for that purpose (by private Articles among other Things) having offered Support out of a Fund (mentioned to be subscribed) certain Allowances to such Journeymen who should leave their Employ, in pursuance of such Offer, the Journeymen and Workmen who so combined have received and are daily receiving support from such Society.

That by an Advertisement in the General Advertizer of the 14th. of July Instant the said Journeymen appear to have no less than nine Public Places of meeting and Your Majesty's Petitioners are Informed that there are almost numberless other Places of Meeting for the Support of the said Combination.

That your Majesty's Petitioners as well as

sundry other Builders are now under considerable Contracts for Building as well at certain Prices as at fixed and stated Times which by means of the several Workmen absenting and combining as above stated your Petitioners will not be able to perform.

That the above mentioned Combination unless speedily stopt is likely to be of a dangerous tendency to the internal Peace of the Kingdom and to the State in General as It is daily expected that not only the Bricklayers, Plaisterers, Masons, Plumbers, Painters, Glaziers and others concerned in Buildings who have necessarily been obliged to discontinue their Work on account of the said Combination but sundry other Handicraft Tradesmen are also expected to follow the Example of the present unhappy and deluded Combinators and who of course being soon divested of their present means of supporting their Imprudent Measure may become desperate and lost to their late industrious and honest Feelings.

That your Majesty's Petitioners having been advised that such Combination were liable to be apprehended under the Statute of 17th of his late Majesty King George the 2nd and other Statutes respecting Idle and disorderly Persons and such as refuse to work for the settled and accustomed Wages applied to several Magistrates as well in the Cities of London and Westminster as of the County of Middlesex who have expressed doubts of being authorized to punish the said Offenders in a summary Way unless specially directed by your Majesty's most gracious Proclamation.

Wherefore your Majesty's Petitioners most humbly pray that your Majesty will deign to take the Premises into your Royal Consideration and grant unto your Petitioners such Relief as Your Majesty of your wonted wisdom shall see meet.

And your Majesty's Petitioners as in duty bound shall ever pray...

(To be 'Ingrossed' and be read to the Society of Master Carpenters on the same day: the evening of the 16th July, 1787.)

## Appendix II

Nine actions in the law courts, considered by or undertaken on behalf of the members of the Society of Master Carpenters, 1787-9, arising out of the industrial relations dispute of 1787.

### CASE 1<sup>44</sup>

**Employer** E.G. & G. Saunders  
**Men Involved** Stephen Eames and others including Whitaker  
**Charge** Common Conspiracy to raise wages and striking and refusing to work at Carleton House  
**Work Place** Carleton House  
**Remarks** Eames died in goal 26 October 1787. Whitaker discharged in an 'amicable' way 23 June 1788 not being brought to trial. Case of Whitaker removed by certiorari into King's Bench on 6 November 1787 from Middlesex Court (by defence). Motion made at Nisi Prius to put off trial, 29 November 1787

### CASE 2<sup>45</sup>

**Employer** E.G. & G. Saunders  
**Men Involved** Littleton Rowley, Thomas Aitchison, Charles Pen-sent, John Johns, George Cheshire, William Garner, Richard Stevens, John Connelly, Benjamin Hourth. Also Penny, Edmunds, Ross.  
**Charge** 1. Conspiracy to raise wages  
2. Conspiracy and refusing to work unless Saunders would dismiss Thomas Wood and Richard Stone, two journeymen, from his ser-

### Work Place Remarks

### CASE 3<sup>46</sup>

**Employer**  
**Men Involved**

**Charge**  
**Work Place**  
**Remarks**

vice (because they would not join the illegal combination) (round Robin case) Not known. Rowley and five others changed their pleas to guilty on 31 October 1788, on the understanding that they would not be brought up for judgement unless they became involved in a new conspiracy. Removed into the Kings Bench Court as with Eames' case. Prosecution moved for special juries, February 1788. It is not clear whether Penny, Edmunds, Ross and Johns were among the six who eventually pleaded guilty.

**Employer** Peter Banner  
**Men Involved** Edward Bevan and others including Philip Clare, Henry Alderman, Earle, Foster, Joseph Parkinson, James Ainsley, Burton, John Button, Thomas Wright (otherwise John) For a conspiracy Not known Clare and Button pleaded misnomer (December 1787) Case later abandoned. Burton and Parkins pleaded misnomer (January 1788). Burton's outcome unknown. Parkinson re-indicted with Wright (September 1788) Parkinson, Wright, Ainsley and Bevan changed their pleas to guilty on 2 November 1789 on the

understanding that they would not be brought up for judgement unless they became involved in a new conspiracy. Trial at Old Bailey ended 4 November 1789.

### CASE 4<sup>(47)</sup>

**Employer**  
**Men Involved**

**Charge**

**Work Place**

**Remarks**

George Slaton Benjamin Prady with three others Included: quitting Mr. Slaton's service when he refused to advance their wages and/or refusing to work when Mr. Slaton would not dismiss some men who would not join the combination. Norwood. House being built for Lord Thurlow (Lord Chancellor) Defendants withdrew their pleas of not guilty and suffered the judgement to stand as security for their good behaviour. The change of plea appears to have been agreed as early as 3 April 1788, but the defendants did not give notice of withdrawing their plea until the Micklemas Term 1788 and the final judgement was not drawn up until the Hilary Term (February) 1789.

### CASE 5<sup>48</sup>

**Employer**  
**Men Involved**  
**Charge**

**Work Place**

John Johnson Thomas Read and 4 others Sending Mr. Johnson a round Robin (or to his site foreman). Contents not known. Not known.

### Remarks

### CASE 6<sup>49</sup>

**Employer**  
**Men Involved**  
**Charge**

**Work Place**  
**Remarks**

### CASE 7<sup>50</sup>

**Employer**  
**Men Involved**  
**Charge**

**Work Place**  
**Remarks**

A Bill of Indictment was prepared but Mr. Johnson failed to acquire the necessary evidence and the matter did not proceed.

Mr. Beer 3 of Mr. Beer's workmen Conspiring to increase wages and endeavouring to seduce other workmen from his employ unless he would advance their wages Not known Mr. Steventon did attend, with Mr. Beer, before local magistrates in order to take out warrants. No further details known.

Mr. Hesketh Thomas Mellish Assault (occasioned by Mr. Hesketh's refusal to increase his wages) Not known Nothing known beyond the fact that Mr. Hesketh was reported to be prosecuting Thomas Mellish for assault in connection with his request for an increase of wages.

### CASE 8<sup>51</sup>

**Employer**  
**Men Involved**

**Charge**

**Work Place**

Mr. Naish Several of Mr. Naish's men Desertion from their employer. (Presumably because he would not advance their wages) Not known



**Remarks** Outcome unknown. One journeyman was located working for another employer. Steventon wrote to the new employer threatening to prosecute him (for enticing away journeymen by paying more than the legal wage) unless he suffered the journeyman to return to work for Mr. Naish.

CASE 9<sup>52</sup>

**Employer** Mr. Adams  
**Men Involved** A 'number' of Mr. Adams journeymen  
**Charge** Leaving Mr. Adams (for an unknown reason)  
**Work Place** Not known  
**Remarks** Mr. Adams decided not to proceed because of pressure of business.

## References

- 1 British Library of Political and Economic Science, Webb Trade Union Collection, E, Section A, X1, p. 173: reference to evidence of Martin to the Select Committee on Artisans & Machinery, 1824.
- 2 R.W. Postgate, *The Builders' History* (1923), p. 11.
- 3 C.R. Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen: A Prehistory of Industrial Relations, 1717-1800* (1980), p. 128.
- 4 'Notice to the Public' in the *General Advertiser*, 19 July 1787.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Chartered Institute of Building, Colonel Stanley G. Bird Collection (hereafter S.G.B. Coll.), Volume 1, Document GB, pp. 13 and 35.
- 7 *General Advertiser*, 19 July 1787.
- 8 D.C. Barnett, 'Friendly Societies, 1780-1834' (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Nottingham, 1961), p. 88.

- 9 *General Advertiser*, 19 July 1787.
- 10 Ibid; also, S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Document GB, pp. 2 and 22.
- 11 'Notice to the Public', *General Advertiser*, 19 July 1787.
- 12 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. I, Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 14 July 1787.
- 13 S.G.B. Coll. Vol. 1, Document GB, pp. 1-4.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. I, Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 16 July 1787.
- 18 See Appendix 1 above, which gives the full text of the masters' petition to King George III.
- 19 S.G.B. Coll. Vol. 1, Document GB, p. 3.
- 20 See Appendix 2, above.
- 21 S.G.B. Coll., Volume I, Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 17 July 1787.
- 22 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Document GB, p. 6.
- 23 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 16 July 1787.
- 24 H.K. Houldsworth, 'The Society of Master Carpenters, 1783-1799' (unpublished study (1983); copy held by the Chartered Institute of Building).
- 25 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 16 July 1787.
- 26 Ibid. 3 Aug. 1787.
- 27 Ibid. Also S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Document GB, p. 11.
- 28 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 1 Aug. 1787.
- 29 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Document GB, pp. 15 and 23; also Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 10 Oct. 1787.
- 30 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Document GB, p. 21.
- 31 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, *Receipts*, inside front cover. A total of £977.16s.0d. was raised eventually by the Society of Master Carpenters and paid to their solicitor, Anthony Steventon, in connection with the prosecution of journeymen.
- 32 See Appendix 2 above, giving details of nine separate actions.

- 33 Ibid. Case 1.
- 34 Ibid. Cases 2 and 3.
- 35 Ibid. Case 3.
- 36 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Document GB, p. 21.
- 37 See reference (30) above.
- 38 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 25 Nov. 1795.
- 39 Ibid. 30 Dec. 1795.
- 40 Ibid. 10 Feb. 1796.
- 41 Ibid. 28 Feb. 1797.
- 42 A. Aspinall, *The Early English Trade Unions* (1949), p. xvii.
- 43 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Society of Master Carpenters, *Minutes*, 16 July 1787.
- 44 S.G.B. Coll., Vol. 1, Documents A and H.
- 45 Ibid. Documents GB, C, J and K.
- 46 Ibid. Documents GB, D, F, L, N, G, R, Q.
- 47 Ibid. Documents GB, GR, E and M.
- 48 Ibid. Documents GB and P.
- 49 Ibid. Documents GB, pp. 17 and 18.
- 50 Ibid. Documents GB, p. 20.
- 51 Ibid. pp. 19, 20, 31, 33.
- 52 Ibid. p. 32.