

UK Data Archive processing notes

The original essays were handwritten and are stored in the Albert Sloman Library Special Collections, University of Essex. The collection was transcribed into a digital format in 2010 and is now available for download. The essays originally contained students' and teachers' names and these have been retained in the original files but removed in the downloadable dataset.

Essay 83 (4867ess082) contained the student's name in the body of his essay so this sentence has been removed and replaced with [name omitted]. Original (often poor) spelling and grammar has been retained throughout all of the essays to keep a sense of authenticity.

The original Essay ID has been retained in the headers of each file although this is slightly out of synch with the file names due to the fact that in the original essays 10, 88, 116 and 121 are mislabelled. There are two essays labelled 88 so these have become Essay 88(a) (4867ess87) and Essay 88(b) (4867ess88). Essays 1-89 are all boys but 4867ess87 and 4867ess88 are girls. Essays 90-141 are all girls except for 4867ess123 and 4867ess124.

26/06/12

Living without a job: how school leavers see the future

R. E. Pahl reports on his study into how teenagers are learning to cope—the girls better than the boys

You know I was never very clever at school. Being fat, people took the micky, but I took no notice of them. People, when we did a test, laughed at me when I got near bottom marks.

I remember like it was yesterday. I went for an interview three months or thereabouts before I was due to leave school. This was for the merchant navy, but failed the entry test. It was quite a blow for me. I felt rejected yet again.

I left school and onto the dole with thousands of other people.

I didn't want people to talk about me and how I was on the dole. They thought it was disgraceful, but what else could a reject do?

Yes, I left school about 1978 when I was 16. I had my whole life in front of me, knowing that it was only then that I was really going to live. All I wanted to do was to be considered a "woman." And I soon was. I got the job of working in the local supermarket: it only paid £26 a week, but I enjoyed what I was doing, but it was better than being at school or on the dole.

I made lots of new friends (girls and boys) and that was where I met my late husband Steve, we courted for two years and soon became married. . . . Steve had a steady job as a labourer, I kept my job for about three years after we were married, that is until I fell for our first child.

At the end of May, the day I leave. All excited and proud. In the morning I get up all tired and have something to eat. Then, dressed, I step out the door. In the dole queue, embarrassed, I sign. In the paper shop to buy a paper, looking for vacancies. No hope, yet one. I'll have a go at that. Home I run, straight to the phone. Hello, is the job still going? Yes, the man said. Can I have an interview? Come straight away. Off I go for the job, happy and pleased. I approached the factory, straight in the manager's office. I was in there for some time, in fact two hours. I stepped out and shouted, plus jumping in the air. I rushed home and sat there all day and waited for my parents to arrive to tell the good news.

How do young people view the prospect of leaving school when the likelihood of finding a job is slim, and many of them are going to be unemployed for the following months if not years? What sort of a transition is it? Do boys differ from girls in their hopes and expectations for the future? How realistically do they face their prospects and how much are they burdened by what they understand? As part of a wider study into the effects of unemployment in an isolated

community with one of the highest levels of unemployment in the south east, I have started to look at these questions.

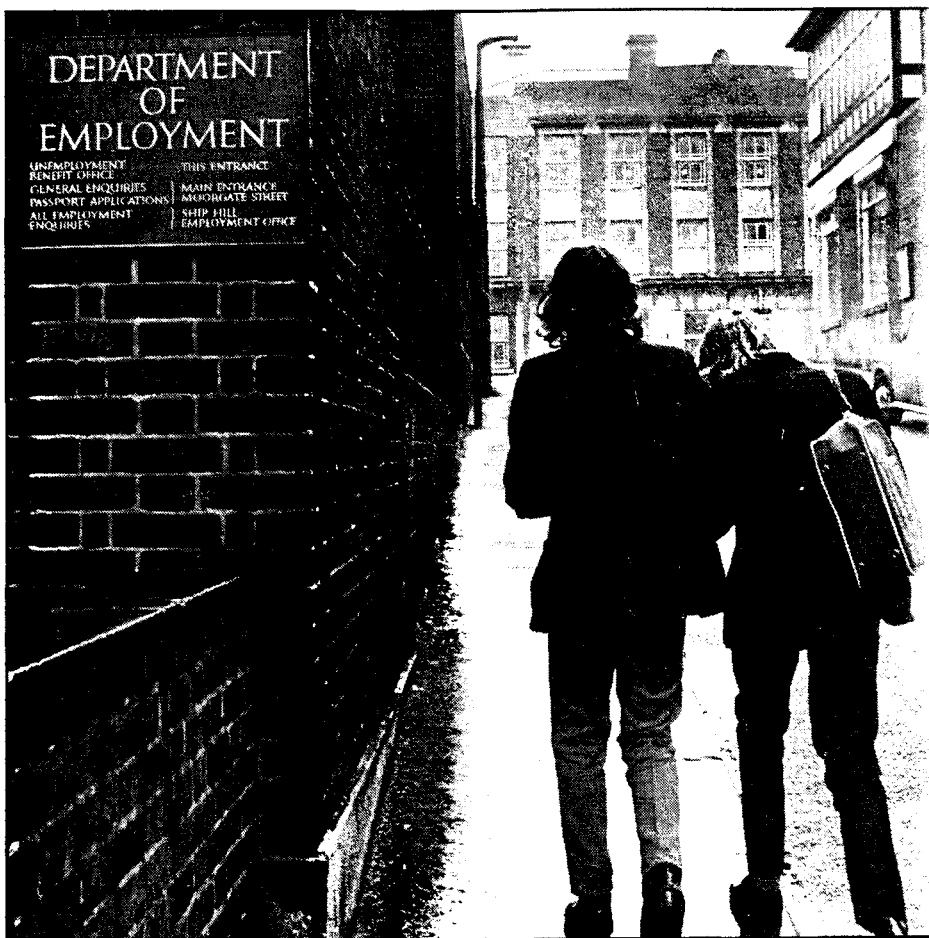
Following a technique used by Thelma Veness, I asked teachers in a comprehensive school to set an essay to all those who were in English lessons about ten days before they were due to leave school last May. The youngsters were asked to imagine that they were nearing the end of their life, and that something made them think back to the time when they left school. They were then asked to write an account of their life over the next 30 or 40 years. One teacher made them imagine they were sitting at their window in retirement watching teenagers walk by; another suggested they were telling their grandchildren the story of their life. The results came out much the same whichever way they started off.

I was given 90 boys' essays and 52 by the girls. When I asked the teachers to set the essays for me, I did not ask any further background information on the pupils concerned. It occurred to me that it might be useful to know the sex of the writers, but I

was assured that I would have no difficulty in determining the difference. (The first is from a boy; the second, obviously, from a girl.)

The chances of 16 year old school leavers in this particular area doing anything more than unskilled work are very low. Last year only about 10 per cent got apprenticeships or went into further education. This year the proportion is unlikely to be higher. The overall rate of the registered unemployed fluctuates between 8 and 12 per cent, for youngsters it is evidently very much higher, particularly in the summer when it may reach up to 30 per cent.

Clearly, finding a first job was upmost in both the boys' and the girls' minds. Of the boys, 78 out of the 90 gave some indication of what it would be: 31 of them said they would start as an apprentice, only 16 imagined themselves going directly into unskilled work. However, it would be wrong to imagine that these boys had an unrealistic or romantic notion of what to expect in life. I think that the difficulty



David Kilpatrick

finding employment is so widely known and discussed in the community that all the youngsters were aware of it. The acute sensitivity of many of the boys in particular was striking: it is on their essays that I shall focus first, turning later to those of the girls.

These were youngsters who were unlikely to get many CSEs (which would certainly be at low grades anyway), and who would most likely remain as unskilled manual workers:

"I remember the conflicts between my parents and I, and how they thought I didn't care about my future. They were so very wrong. They couldn't understand how much I worried about getting a decent job, and the stomach pain that you had when you failed that test for the career you had been counting on."

"Mum found me a nice little office job. I took it without a word of protest. Jobs were scarce. It was the done thing to take whatever came. Parents were glad. They had married me off to the system, and I said 'I do' without giving it a second thought. One morning when I was 18, I looked in the mirror to see I was turning into a nice office person, so I chucked the job in. I divorced the system, for a little while anyway."

"I was 16 and faced with nothing, only a

Which is the rosier prospect? For the boy below, work means local-authority sponsored painting and decorating, to keep him off the jobless valley. For the girls opposite, it means the routine clatter of the modern "mill": a typing pool.



hearse of a life that would eventually lead me to the cemetery gates. I didn't want to go, and I fought time in vain and I was shoved into the big bad world that called me . . . My first job was meaningless and obscure, but I tolerated its meagreness for my own sake because it offered a hint of salvation from the obscurity of my inner self. Packing crates, that was it. Hundreds of them, day after day. Straw, cups, straw, saucers, and my hands wept with the sweat of my labours and the offensiveness that surrounded them."

The pleasures of home

While for some boys life was not an exciting challenge but frightening, harsh and oppressive, for others the chief pleasures were home, family life and various hobbies and interests. Of those boys who mentioned marriage in their essays, all wrote of having children. They divided roughly between those boys who wanted their wives to have just two and those who wanted more than two. Both boys and girls who mentioned their home nearly all assumed that they would own it. Many boys expressed great pleasure and joy at being a father:

"In August 1989 we had our first child, a boy. That was probably the happiest moment of my life. I couldn't get over that there was another Williams in the world and I was responsible . . . My wife had to stop work through the child, and things started to look bad again. It seemed that every penny I was bringing in was going to bills, food and clothing. I had a lot of

pleasure in watching my child grow up was always boasting about him 'Oh little 'un is walking now!' I would everyone. I was the proudest man in world when it came to him."

Inevitably, there were some who fixated about sexual conquests, private licences, and trips round the world. Forever, some of these were balanced with sort of self-mocking humour:

"At the age of 36 I had become one of the randiest managers going. I was on sixth secretary, when I found it to be more than just an elongated one-night stand she became my second wife."

However, these were the exceptions: majority without doubt would prefer to work hard. The fact, as one boy put it, that there are 150 applicants for one job can be an incentive, and some responded by studying and working long hours. This often made them think that they should have done more at school. Curiously they often switched from, as it were, the contemporary style at the start of their essay to a rather rueful and regretful person at the end:

"I had two more babies after that worked for another 35 years. Boy, it was my life a bore. I wasted so much that I regret it. But I got three wonderful children."

"A man works all his life, he retires, and they want to get him in an old people's home and knock down his home. It's not worth it. Life is it."

When an eight year old grandson came to one boy at the end of his life, asking for advice, the boy wrote that:

"I couldn't give him any advice because my life had been a failure. I only warned him to take care and think. When he left everything went quite dark, and time stood still."

I found the general level of awareness and introspection impressive and alarming. I had to keep reminding myself that these were 16 year old lads, writing of their wasted lives. The rest of the society classifies them as the least desirable labour power. Their question back to society deserves an answer: "Is it me, society, or is it just the way life goes?"

With this devastating self-awareness and understanding of the worthlessness and futility of contemporary life comes an inevitable scepticism. The lad who trained himself as an electrician "never used it except round the house," and 15 out of the 90 boys planned to start their own little business at some time. Working for yourself, or with friends, was considered to be more worthwhile than working for an employer.

There was an overwhelming commitment to parents, wife, children and friends, and a distrust of, and indifference to, employers and larger institutions. Mostly, this came out in touching and sensitive concern with family matters. They wrote of their worries when their wife had a difficult birth, and the great pleasure of the companionship with their wife as they get older together. Evidently these close and warm ties are something of a "haven in a heartless world"

in Christopher Lasch's words. However, the distrust of the wider society was most elegantly expressed by one boy whose prose is reminiscent of Francis Bacon:

"If you ever have to choose between a friend, say, and the state when it comes to a clash of loyalties, always choose the friend, because to the state be you servant, informer or whatever you are, still a statistic, a mark on pieces of paper to be stored, accounted for and classified. To a friend, you are a person."

It seemed as though the girls were characteristically different from the boys in some respects. They faced the same problems to be sure, but these were more wide-ranging than simply the concern about employment which dominated the boys' lives. They worried and grieved about sickness and death. For some, the death of their parents was the most overwhelming trouble of their lives.

Overall, the 52 girls had a remarkably clear-headed view of their future. They expected to get low-paid factory or clerical work, which they had to give up to have two or three children. Nearly all expected to go back to paid work when the youngest child started primary school. Only the few who said they would stay on at work until their thirties, and have their children late, accepted the likelihood that they might not be able to return to employment.

Many recognised the inevitable financial hardship which would come when their young children prevented them working for the second wage. They worried about the same things that their mothers would be

worrying about: how their children would get on at school, cope with boyfriends and girl friends, and find employment. They looked forward to grandchildren. Many devoted up to half their essays to the time when they themselves would become a grandmother.

I get the impression that the girls had a more varied range of satisfactions open to them than the boys have. Times may indeed be hard; it may be difficult to find work, either when leaving school or when their children are older. But there were other troubles unconnected with the economic situation which, perhaps, made them more accepting. The inevitabilities of becoming a housewife, of facing birth and motherhood and of facing the death of her parents, and also her husband, at a relatively early age, made the difficulties about money and about employment just another facet of life's struggle.

It may be that the boys were less prepared for trouble than were the girls and hence found the economic uncertainties more overwhelming and disturbing. Perhaps the pride and solicitude in being a good father and husband is a reflection of a shift from work to the family as a main source of identity.

For the girls to despair, they would have to despair of life itself. They could not conceive of any way of avoiding the burdens of elderly parents. "My mother suffered a great deal. I nursed her until she finally came to live with me. It wasn't a strain as she was no bother." The girl who exactly

followed the stereotype I mentioned earlier—copy typist, secretary, marriage, two babies, grandchildren—was able to conclude: "I feel contented that my life served its purpose and was not one of sheer tragic disaster."

Somehow the girls had the rich tapestry of life as a source of satisfaction. The boys were more dependent on their work. Managing life under tight constraints is a challenge the girls seem ready enough to face. There's nothing new or novel about the situation for them. Certainly, when I have been talking to some of the wives in this same community, I find they are more likely to be busy and to be coping, even if their unemployed and inarticulate husbands show signs that life is getting on top of them.

An unromantic world

Perhaps working class life equips the girls better than the boys to deal with hard times. Their tasks and roles are more varied. There is no doubt that, in their own small worlds, many will get respect for their family and neighbourly work. As they frequently say, there's always the opportunity for a good laugh, to help life on its way. Any suggestion that teenage magazines befuddled the girls' minds with romantic dreams would be hard to substantiate from the evidence of these essays. Many had a cruelly correct perception of what life would present.

Certainly there were a few years when they could have the conventional "good



time." But the problems of being a wife, mother, daughter and employee would soon overwhelm them.

While I found their accounts of their roles as mother, daughter or grandmother rang true, they seemed less perceptive about their husbands. Few showed any real understanding of the tensions and worries revealed in the boys' essays. Of the 29 who mentioned their husbands' work only six seemed to be in any financial difficulty. Typically, the girls moved away from their home communities, and evidently married well. Most expected to own their own homes. Quite clearly, they are not owning up to the fact that they will be marrying many of the boys who are leaving school with them.

My impression, from reading these essays, is that the boys are facing something new and frightening, and are turning to a closer conjugal relationship as something of a support or compensation. The girls, on the other hand, were socialised in female-dominated families, in which more segregated roles are a characteristic pattern, and are perhaps less prepared for their husbands' troubles.

The accounts of their lives were more prosaic than those of the boys. It is more difficult to find striking quotations which may reflect deep feelings. Yet there was still a strong current of authenticity in much that was written:

"In 1992 we had the first of our two children. It was a very wet day in January; it had been raining all day non-stop. Peter was born at 10 o'clock in the evening. It wasn't a difficult birth, though I was sad because I wanted twins."

Managing without husbands

So the girls may be well prepared for being mothers and daughters but less well prepared for being wives. Only three out of the 52 mentioned divorce, though a quarter of all the girls were on their own in their old age because their husbands died early. Some mentioned a "second youth," when they travelled with their son after their husband's early death. I suspect that unemployment will impose burdens on these girls through their husbands' difficulties.

I doubt that they will be prepared simply to see a man about the house for long periods. Their experience with their own fathers is likely to be that, apart from weekends and holidays, they are out at work or at one of the many working men's clubs which flourish in the community. "Good husbands" provide well, don't drink one put it when describing life in her late forties:

"There was only my husband at work now. It was a bit much for my husband but he never complained. He was a good man."

If the good men start to complain, will the marriages survive? From these girls' essays, it would seem to me that they could manage pretty well without husbands. I predict a pattern in the future in those working class communities with high levels of unemployment, where female-headed households become increasingly common. Sup-

ported by supplementary benefits, help from relatives, and a few pounds from a job on the side, these women will manage not badly.

A further conclusion would be that there is a switchover in traditional roles. The girls show much more interest in the kind of job they will do, and the problems of phasing paid employment with domestic activities. The boys concern themselves more with their roles of husband and father. Increasingly, the home and domestic activities become the central binding element in working class marriages.

This is not a new tendency. Empirical studies for the past quarter of a century have been making the point more and more clearly. However, in a context where work is hard to find, training is difficult to achieve and not likely to be rewarded, and many youngsters have experienced being "on the dole" for months, if not years, before they get married, the whole conception of becoming a grown-up becomes much more ambiguous. The boys fear unemployment and lack of respect. The girls fear the trap of being a housebound mother. They will surely survive: that is not an issue. They will not starve. But they have to carve out a meaningful human identity in a world where the fixed landmarks are becoming increasingly blurred.

Both boys and girls pick on crucial life events as the most important markers. They write of their wedding, the births of their children, the deaths of their parents and their spouse. I must emphasise that the essays were written in an isolated and very traditional working class community, where the ties of kinship are strong. I admit that I was staggered by the warmth and sensitivity which the youngsters revealed despite the rough and rather coarse first impression one gets from meeting them in a classroom. Few emphasised possessions, apart from owning their own home. Indeed it was striking how little attachment to the physical aspects of home life there was. Warmth in personal relationships was emphasised far more than the rewards of a consumer society. As one girl put it:

"Me and my husband moved into a smaller house in town. I was on a old aged penchern. We had a good time in our life time. 60 my legs and other parts of my was not the same. It was very hard to get around, years went past. I was 60, all my family came down and they gave me a big 60th birthday. It was so nice of them I can remember blowing the candells out, ties roll-down my chin. That was one of the happiest days of my life."

Similarly one of the lads described how his wife got a rare stomach disease, and how he looked after her:

"I spent every hour with her I could, in hospital till she recovered, and now we have both retired . . . Yes I must say we made a go of our lives, and it paid off well. 'Hmm' I sighed, as I nodded off to sleep hand in hand with Stephanie."

Now quite evidently there is a kind of naive romanticism in much of what the youngsters wrote about their lives. More

boys than girls were cynical and see about the problems of life. No girl was bitter as some of the lads who res being "married to the system." For work was a liberation from being trapped at home with the children:

"There I was, walking out of the gates for the last time, out into the world to find a job and start in the working class. I took a few weeks writing letters, going to interviews and so on. Mum would tell me not to worry about it, a job would come along soon. But you do worry, anyway. A few weeks passed and a job did come along working in a shop dealing with all sorts of different things. It may not seem much, but I enjoyed it, I was meeting people and generally enjoying myself."

The women are dominant

I think that in areas such as the one I am working in, women will play an increasingly dominant role in employment. Talking to the adults, the women seem much more ready to commit themselves to a life of employment. The men tell me that they soon intend to pack it in. They don't like their work; they are bored and frustrated. If it is poorly paid, they calculate the advantages in terms of early starts, short hours, the cost of the journey to work, the noise and dirt in the factory, the amount of tax they pay, the way they are treated by their boss. "I'd be better off on the dole" seems objectively accurate if everything is taken into account. For those who are committed, there again seems to be a sense of commitment. The work is described as boring and undignified.

They have to do it because they want money; but when they've saved enough they'll leave. In my view, levels of unemployment will surely stay high, but much of it will be voluntary. This forced labour is not the way the women seem to prefer paid employment now, though they change.

I am still at a very exploratory stage in my research, and the essays about work have been writing could doubtless be interpreted in different ways. Perhaps if teachers in schools in other areas attempted the same exercise, the results would be quite different.

My material would be extremely difficult to interpret without some knowledge of the local context. As this improves, I may have to modify my present interpretation. I have been misguided in distinguishing between the sex of the authors of the essays since there was undoubtedly much in common amongst all the youngsters. But I am certain that endemic unemployment will affect the relationship between the sexes and the nature of marriage.

At the moment I admit that I am blowing at straws in the wind. It will take time for the real effects to emerge. It may be that a high level of unemployment supports the emancipation of working class women and sensitises and softens working class men. Certainly the situation for the unemployed is different in some important respects from what it was in the 1930s.

*For the people of the
Isle of Sheppey*

Divisions of Labour

R. E. PAHL

Basil Blackwell

© R. E. Pahl 1984

First published 1984
Basil Blackwell Limited
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, England

Basil Blackwell Inc, 432 Park Avenue South, Suite 1505,
New York, NY 10016

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Pahl, R.E.

Divisions of labour.
1. Industrial sociology
I. Title
306'.36 HD6955
ISBN 0-631-13273-2
ISBN 0-631-13274-0 Pbk

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Pahl, R. E. (Raymond Edward), 1935-
Divisions of labour.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Labor and laboring classes. 2. Division of labor.
3. Work. I. Title.
HD4901.P18 1984 306'.36 86-11092
ISBN 0-631-13273-2
ISBN 0-631-13274-0 Pbk

Typesetting by Katerprint Co. Ltd, Oxford.
Printed in Great Britain by T. J. Press Ltd, Padstow

The endpapers show women's informal work
in an industrial city c.1900.

Contents

<i>Illustrations</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
Part One: Past and Present Ways of Work	15
1 Households, Work and Ideology in Pre-industrial Times	17
2 Patterns of Work before the Dominance of Wage Labour	41
3 Women, Work and Social Change	63
4 Work Outside Employment	86
5 New Ways of Looking at Work	114
Part Two: Household Divisions of Labour	141
Introduction	143
6 Portrait of an Industrial Island	152
7 Myth and Reality in Sheppey in the 1980s	185
8 Class, the Domestic Cycle and Sources of Labour	198
9 The Divisions of Labour of Households	232
10 The Domestic Division of Labour between Partners in Households	254
11 Polarization of Workers' Lives: Jim and Linda; Beryl and George	277
Part Three: Work in a Wider Context	311
12 Households, Work and Society	313
Appendix: Getting By in Everyday Life: Two Case Studies	337
<i>Map of the Isle of Sheppey</i>	342
<i>References</i>	343
<i>Index</i>	356

Introduction

This is a book about work. It is not simply about employment, although that is often what people mean when they talk about work. Focusing on a shifting target is always difficult, and it is surely incontrovertible that in the last years of the twentieth century we must approach the notion of work in new ways. No longer is the 'right to work' an unproblematic political goal; no longer can 'women's work' be referred to without some awareness of the wider implications of what is being assumed. In the late twentieth century, industrial societies have been thrown into confusion as patterns of work have changed in unexpected ways, owing to such elements as the fluctuations of economic expansion and recession, a new consciousness associated with the development of the women's movement and new developments in technology.

In an attempt to come to terms with these problems and confusions, a popular literature has arisen in which certain aspects of the contemporary situation are seized upon and then extrapolated to make unwarranted conclusions about the overall pattern of change. In a turbulent environment, soothsayers are not lacking in encouragement. These 'exagger-books', as they have been called,¹ frequently have counter-productive results: if all futures are possible and 'work' will never be the same again, yet everyday life is evidently not changing in any overly dramatic way, then perhaps we can all muddle through, with no great changes in our attitudes or behaviour. Fatalistic regard for the wider forces of change that some now detect may be one response to the cacophonous clamour of the conflicting cries. 'A plague on all your houses', says the member of the queue at the supermarket checkout and the local farmer at the stockbroker's dinner party.

Whatever is happening to work in these last decades of the century,

¹ In an article in the *Wall Street Journal* in the summer of 1983, Anthony Downs attacked authors such as Alvin Toffler whose books (e.g. *Future Shock* and *The Third Wave*) reach a very wide public. Downs argued that such exagger-authors have raised the art of pseudo-scientific hyperbole to new heights. Exagger-trends, Presumptive but Plausible Inter-relatedness, and Revelation by Relabelling are the ingredients of exagger-books, which, Downs claimed, 'continue to outsell carefully researched studies of the same subjects by stupendous ratios'.

there is widespread tacit acceptance that things were different in the past. Writers as diverse as Braverman, Illich and Seabrook postulate a 'Golden Age' of work which follows on a long, romantic tradition encouraged in their different ways by Marx and William Morris.² As with similar myths referring to past times, the precise period that is held up for approval is always some time before a given author is writing: for some, the Golden Age is the post-war era of 'full employment'; for others, some vague and unspecified medieval period provides the context for work as an ideal of integrated living. Furthermore, the past may provide clues for the future: if de-industrialization is, in some sense, the reverse of the process of industrialization, then by, as it were, running the film of history backwards, we may discover a guide to the future. There may be possible parallels between what happens in the 1980s and 1990s and what happened two hundred years earlier. Our notion of what is unusual must depend on our notion of what is usual or normal. And if our knowledge of the latter is confused, then so too will be our conception of the former. It is impossible to escape the grip of the real or imagined past upon the present; so also is it difficult to escape from seeing the present as a point on a piece of graph paper. There may be straight lines that rise or fall or there may be various more or less symmetrical waves, but invariably 'the present' can be given appropriate coordinates and a latent evolutionism is tacitly accepted. Typically, a situation is 'getting better' or 'getting worse' at the highest or lowest points of some cycle or other. It is hard to escape from such domain assumptions.

We can avoid the constraints of a benign or a malign historicism by adopting the kaleidoscope theory of social life. The coloured pieces can form a variety of patterns: the pieces are the same but the pattern can change dramatically depending on the severity of the knock. Alternatively, the kaleidoscope can shift imperceptibly, so that we do not notice that the pieces are shifting until the new pattern jumps into our view. This book arose out of a sense that I had in the early 1970s that the pattern was starting to shift and that a world I had got used to for twenty-five years would never be the same again.³

The final form of this book is substantially different from the plans and ideas that I began to formulate in the mid-1970s. Inevitably, the interaction between ideas and contexts is constantly changing. By the time the book is published, my ideas will quite likely have developed further — whether in some linear or curvilinear fashion or as the result of

² H. Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974; I. Illich, *The Right to Useful Unemployment and its Professional Enemies*, Marion Boyars, London, 1978; J. Seabrook, *Unemployment*, Quartet Books, London, 1982; B. Ollman, *Alienation*, Cambridge University Press, 1971; A. Clayre, *Work and Play*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974; William Morris, *The Collected Works*, Longmans Green, London, 1910-15; S. Wood (ed.), *The Degradation of Work?* Hutchinson, London, 1982.

³ Perhaps I, too, am in danger of creating a 'Golden Age' for myself?

a shake of the kaleidoscope will be for others to judge. The interaction between ideas and contexts, theory and practice or contemplatives and activists is a never-ending dialectic. There is not a single set of uncontroversial facts 'out there' to which one fits the best theoretical explanation. Rather, there is an iterative process between ideas and actions that cannot be divorced from each other.⁴ I hope I have no false illusions about the role and force of ideas, but nor do I subscribe to a nihilistic scepticism, which sees little point in the men and women of ideas concerning themselves with the practical problems of the society in which they live. Very often the recognition that certain kinds of information, hitherto disregarded, have a substantial bearing on the issue in question is considered innovation enough. Relating social statistics to social policy should be part of the research responsibility of the civil service.

It is hard to be sure how one arrives at a particular intellectual position, but since I think there is a pattern to my 'line' of thought, it may be helpful for me to make this explicit. In giving various talks and seminars over the past five years, I have been surprised by certain responses that have imputed to me points or ideas that I do not recognize as my own, but that I may have raised and put down in passing. My attempt to describe something of my intellectual trajectory is not, I trust, mere self-indulgence but does serve a purpose in putting this book into context. It also enables me to move on beyond it in good faith.

In the intellectual climate of 1975 and 1976, certain issues and questions had a salience that no longer existed seven or eight years later. In the early 1970s I became more and more uneasy about the disjunction between different forms of knowledge about ordinary working people, and, in particular, about the assumptions concerning the pervasive influence of male employment. The fashion of the times was for higher-level theorizing, and many of those best able to comment in general terms about working-class people and their work were more concerned to engage with the abstract theorizing of the French structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser than in doing empirical research.⁵ In the period from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, very little field research in Britain was done by sociologists and social anthropologists, yet this was a time in which

⁴ It is possible, although I hope unlikely, that some of the ideas I discussed in the past, for example my concern with corporatism in 1974, affected in some very minor way the context some years later with which I had come to terms.

⁵ I think that courses of action and trajectories of work are often triggered off by chance happenings that somehow stay fixed in the mind. I remember that, about this time, I was sitting in a pub chatting to a colleague about his lecture course and he was somewhat mockingly outlining the various 'debates' on the nature of industrial societies that he was expounding that year. He then broke off and, with a laugh and in a different tone of voice, went on to describe the informal work practices of his cleaning woman. That same disjunction came up in a variety of contexts where there was a marked difference between personal experience and anecdote and general formulations.

there was quite substantial discussion about working-class (male) images of society stimulated by a lecture given by David Lockwood in 1966.⁶ The fruits of this discussion appeared in a book published in 1975,⁷ and students in higher education read and wrote about the issue until the early 1980s.

This example is worth exploring in greater detail. In his 1966 paper, Lockwood was attempting to draw up a heuristic typology of the images of society held by ordinary working people, based on a few available studies of working-class life. In the case of what he described as 'the traditional worker' — of course, male — he referred to only two studies, one on Liverpool dockworkers and the other on Yorkshire miners.⁸ Both of these studies were carried out in the early 1950s, and Lockwood draws from them an ideal-typical account which epitomizes the 'Golden Age' view of the traditional male worker:

workmates are normally leisure-time companions, often neighbours, and not infrequently kinsmen — the existence of such closely-knit cliques of friends, workmates, neighbours and relatives is the hall-mark of the traditional working class community. The values expressed through these social networks emphasize mutual aid in everyday life and the obligation to join in the gregarious pattern of leisure, which itself demands the expenditure of time, money and energy in a public and present-oriented conviviality and eschews individual striving 'to be different'. As a form of social life, this communal sociability has a ritualistic quality, creating a high moral density and reinforcing sentiments of belongingness to a work-dominated collectivity.⁹

Whether such a traditional community ever did truly exist continues to be a matter of debate. Even the evidence on which such a stereotype is based has been questioned. Dennis Warwick has returned to the Yorkshire village that was the subject of *Coal is our Life* and the source of so much working-class mythology, and has talked to some of the men who were informants some thirty years earlier. They claimed that many of the stereotypes in the book were brought to the mining village by the researchers themselves, who looked for support for their own preconceptions.¹⁰ Certainly, the neglect of any serious consideration of the employment of women in working-class life for some twenty-five years now appears extraordinary, although the study in question was completed before the rapid growth of married women's employment.

⁶ D. Lockwood, 'Sources of variation in working class images of society', *Sociological Review*, 14(3), 1966, pp. 249-67.

⁷ M. Bulmer (1975), *Working Class Images of Society*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

⁸ These were: University of Liverpool Department of Social Science, *The Dock Worker*, Liverpool, 1954; and N. Dennis, F. Henriques and C. Slaughter, *Coal is Our Life*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1956.

⁹ Lockwood, 'Sources of variation', p. 251.

¹⁰ D. Warwick, *Talk of the Village, Introduction to a Contemporary Study of the Social and Cultural Organization of Featherstone*, University of Leeds, 1984.

Furthermore, even if the account had been more accurate, it was clearly a mistake to fossilize it for ever as it was in the early 1950s. Even if the pattern of male employment did colour all aspects of collective and private life for a period, the nature of the work was itself changing. The coal mining industry itself continues to change, so that the experience of one generation is not the same as that of the next. The way in which certain researchers appeared to project their own socio-political goals on to the working class has been noticed by John Goldthorpe, who referred to 'wishful rather than critical thinking' and 'a tendency to assert that what was desired was already historically in train'.¹¹

Despite the fact that one of the most widely-quoted studies of the traditional working class was limited, partial and outdated, it was still assumed to be among the soundest evidence for linking male employment experience with behaviour in the traditional working-class community. Only very recently are sociologists making up for past lapses by reconstructing the life of other traditional working-class communities by means of oral history. Thus, it is now possible to contrast the stereotypical Yorkshire mining village with, for example, an East Anglian fishing community. Here, the work experience was individualistic for the men and notions of collective solidarity came from the women in the community. Women's social attitudes were more salient than the work experience of their husbands in generating distinctive community attitudes and behaviour.¹² This empirical evidence was not, of course, available in the mid-1970s. Very little field research was undertaken during the decade, and it was easy to echo Colin Bell and Howard Newby, who summarized some of their discipline's troubles and asked, 'should sociology's epistemological anomie be more accurately described as epistemological anarchy?'¹³

So, pity then the students. In the second half of the 1970s they were discussing the relationship between male employment and working-class attitudes and behaviour, based on an ideal-type drawn from few, and perhaps partial, studies carried out well before they were born. The disjunction between the students' personal experience, gained from the places where they lived or had worked during vacations, and what was said in their lectures must have been marked. Even some of those who were concerned about the lack of distinction between male employment and work were initially concerned more with the issue of whether women's domestic work was 'productive labour' than with doing field

¹¹ J. H. Goldthorpe, *Intellectuals and the Working Class in Modern Britain*, University of Essex, 1979, p. 28; H. Newby, *The State of Research into Stratification in Britain*, Social Science Research Council, London, 1982.

¹² P. Thompson with T. Wailey and T. Lummis, *Living the Fishing*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983.

¹³ C. Bell and H. Newby, *Doing Sociological Research*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1977; R. E. Pahl, 'Sociology's conflicting tradition', *New Society*, May 1974, pp. 504-7; reprinted in Paul Barker (ed.), *The Social Sciences Today*, Edward Arnold, London, 1975.

research on ordinary women's working lives inside and outside the home.¹⁴

Between 1968 and 1976 I had been persuaded to take various jobs that involved working inside government as an Adviser or Assessor.¹⁵ I was obliged to immerse myself in official statistics rather than textbooks in sociological theory, and so my view of what was happening in British society was given a different colour. In 1969 I formulated an approach to the social structure that was substantially at variance with what was being taught in sociology courses. I distinguished between the senior salariat, the middle mass and the underclass; sensitive civil servants later persuaded me to re-name the underclass 'the less privileged'. My concern was mainly with London and the South East, and the data I worked with made me very sceptical of the optimism about the future that was then currently fashionable. In our report, published in 1971, we suggested that in the middle mass 'men may take on second jobs in order to maintain the high consumption style they feel impelled to achieve.'¹⁶ We noted that in London the low-paid jobs appeared to be on the increase, and we concerned ourselves with the likely dangers of social polarization. 'Low pay, insecurity, unemployment and lack of skills characterize a large number of wage earners.'¹⁷ My work on the South East of England in the late 1960s enabled me, perhaps, to get a clearer view of what was happening to most ordinary working people.

A few years later I returned to material that I had gathered for other purposes: in the winter of 1975-6 I looked ahead to the next fifteen years. As I said then,

the typical image of the factory worker attending meetings of his union at the workplace is increasingly outdated. Those living in many inner city areas are increasingly service workers, who do not conveniently gather in easily organizable production units. Rather, they are scattered in many varied locations, working shifts or unusual hours. Part of their wages may be earned in tips, they may have various 'dirty pound note' arrangements for earning extra by doing 'extra' and so on . . . the view from the kerb level is unlikely to get any better in the years ahead. There will be other economic matters to attend to rather than channelling new employment into declining urban areas.¹⁸

¹⁴ Anna Pollert's excellent and vivid study of female workers in a Bristol tobacco factory was carried out in the early 1970s, but was not published until 1981: A. Pollert, *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives*, Macmillan, London, 1981.

¹⁵ R. E. Pahl, 'Playing the rationality game: the sociologist as hired expert', in C. Bell and H. Newby (eds), *Doing Sociological Research*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1977.

¹⁶ South East Joint Planning Team (1971), *Strategic Plan for the South East Studies*, vol. 2, Social and Environmental Aspects, HMSO, London, 1971, p. 16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁸ R. E. Pahl, 'Patterns of urban life in the next fifteen years', *New Universities Quarterly*, 30(4), 1976, p. 414.

I concluded by pointing to:

the possible importance of the informal, the personal, the small scale and the slightly illegal as the basic ingredients of a new style in the next decade. People are becoming increasingly practised at getting work done by men 'out of work time' for straight cash. Income Tax and VAT officials could never possibly cover such activities 'done for friends' in 'spare time' and repaid with 'a gift'. With statutory wage controls, increasing state intervention and the proliferation of rules and procedures, the development of this subsidiary economy is likely to flourish. . . . It may not take long for a nation of shop-keepers to turn into a nation of hustlers. However, it is perhaps worth considering that a society based on *whom* you know rather than what you know, may be a more humane, pleasant and happy society in which to live.¹⁹

I was convinced that the nature and experience of work was changing, but I was unsure how to formulate an appropriate research project at that time.

In this attempt to reconstruct the context out of which the idea for this book emerged, I am fortunate in that I have published various articles that do much to remind me of past sets of ideas. One such piece, written with Jack Winkler, on 'The Coming Corporatism' aroused much interest and was republished in France, the United States and elsewhere.²⁰ I remember being asked what ordinary people thought about living in a corporatist state. Of course, I had no idea. Nor had I any idea of how ordinary people were coping with the then very high levels of inflation. I was readily lecturing about public issues without any knowledge of how, in practice, these created private troubles for ordinary people. I remember being something of an Ancient Mariner, stopping one in three at conferences and bemoaning the lack of detailed ethnography of ordinary people's lives.

In my main concern to focus on the connections between public issues and private troubles, I was very anxious to understand social processes and the dynamics of change and I was reluctant to fall back on the snapshot approach of the social survey. Fortunately, I was at a university in which sociologists and social anthropologists worked together, where I could be influenced by the style of research and assumptions of the latter. I remember that I was considering a new programme of research that would be sure to get me much closer to ordinary people's experiences than most sociologists had managed to do in the 1970s. In a memorandum written in the winter of 1976-7, I said:

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 416-17.

²⁰ R. E. Pahl and J. T. Winkler, 'The coming corporatism', *New Society*, October 1974, pp. 72-6.

In the interwar period, Mass Observation attempted to make contemporary documentation more systematic, and observers such as Orwell and Priestley made lasting contributions, with their own individualistic accounts of their journeys and experiences. In the postwar world, the more widespread use of the social survey and the development of sociology as an established university discipline have produced a new social knowledge of a different kind from that produced in the 1930s, but not necessarily any better. Indeed, it is unlikely that a future historian of the 1970s, writing in 2077, will make much use of the work of sociologists. The shift in fashion has directed many able minds away from the limited empirical studies of particular occupations, residential areas or work places to the higher levels of abstract theory or the niceties of day-to-day talk. As a result, many sociologists fall back in private on gossip and journalism to tell them what is 'really' happening in contemporary society. There seems to be a gap between the world as perceived by the media and the world of people round the corner.

I then went on to discuss the problems involved in doing good ethnography: how does the sociologist get an advantage over the good investigative journalist? Two books, published a year or so before I wrote, each included a substantial number of photographs:²¹ should I attempt to follow their example? How much should I depend on a tape recorder? What is the most appropriate way of expressing the reality of ordinary people's lives? I was extremely puzzled about how to proceed and I felt that the tools of sociological investigation were coming between me and the people whose everyday lives I was trying to understand. I was still concerned with the question of public issues and private troubles, and my plan was to allow the public issues of a given year to determine my research agenda. I intended to write my own personal, sociologically informed account of a particular year based on press cuttings, official statistics and so on. I would then see how these national issues were reflected in the everyday lives of the families I had selected.²² I spent considerable time in 1977 considering how many households I could manage, how they should be selected in terms of occupation and area of residence, and so on. The logistic problems were substantial, as, at the time, I was planning to base the study on East Kent, North London, Dorset and Prescott, Lancashire. The work would be costly and time-consuming. By the time I had decided what I was going to do, the period I had been given by the university to do it in was half over. I was also kindly but firmly told by the Assistant Director of the Nuffield

²¹ J. Berger and J. Mohr, *A Seventh Man*, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth, 1975; D. Marsden and E. Duff, *Workless: Some Unemployed Men and their Families*, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth, 1975.

²² In 1983, BBC TV broadcast a series of television programmes called *Voxpop* which did exactly what I had in mind. The producer and his team settled in the town of Darwen in Lancashire and reported each week, through a group of informants, how they individually and collectively coped with the public issues that impinged upon them. The series was excellent, and future historians will surely be grateful.

Foundation that it all seemed very expensive and I would do better to talk to the people at some convenient place in Kent. She also encouraged me to sharpen my focus on a more limited problem.

Thus it was that I found myself, in the autumn of 1977, talking to unemployed people in Rochester about their lives. I sat around in cafes and visited people in their homes. Many of the people I was introduced to were unemployed but were working illegally or were petty criminals. I said I wanted to see how people without jobs in the formal sense were getting by, since, at that time, I had a rather confused idea of a separate, underground economy. The people to whom I spoke were very varied and many had a spirited and aggressive view towards the world. Some of them ended up in gaol before I had learned much about them. (I felt particularly sorry for the one sent down by the judge whose house he had recently re-wired 'for cash'.) I felt I was sharing a Dickensian, rather colourful stage where the 'characters' lived in a world of second-hand cars and bikes and stalls at the market, and flitted from one semi-derelict house to another.

Talking to these individuals in Rochester was giving me plenty of variegated ethnography and I was in a good position to write a paper on 'The Urban Pirate — A Contemporary Style of Getting By', but I felt uneasy about so doing. First, I had no idea of the general context, the local labour market of the Medway towns, into which I could place my ethnography. Second, I was being accused by my colleagues that I was implying that it was fun to be unemployed and working illegally — as long as you didn't get caught. I paused to think.

I decided that I would concentrate my efforts not in the Medway towns, but on the Isle of Sheppey, for reasons that I outline in the Introduction to Part II. In January 1978 I submitted an application to the Nuffield Foundation to get some modest resources to do a pilot study on issues that I judged would be of increasing importance during the next decade. I wrote:

First, I see relatively high levels of unemployment continuing; second, I see a continued growth of the informal economy as a source of income; and, finally, I see changes occurring in how the work of sustaining the domestic unit gets done. I am interested to find out how people get by in a number of specific circumstances — such as being unemployed each winter or being involved regularly in undeclared work. I want to know how the ordinary routines of life and the sexual division of labour within the domestic unit may be changing, as a result of the growth of a wide range of economic activities outside the formal economy. . . .

I have become increasingly dissatisfied in recent years with a type of sociological analysis which discusses 'industrial society' or 'capitalism' in broad terms without specifying or demonstrating very precisely what the direct effects on ordinary people are likely to be. Two main tendencies, which it hardly needs sociological analysis to reveal, are the growing levels of unemployment —

connected with the restructuring of manufacturing industry and our changing position in world markets — and the increasing intervention of the state, in all its forms, to regiment and guide its citizens from the cradle to the grave.

Yet, paradoxically, it is also now possible for people to get by without necessarily engaging in formal employment. A man can own his own tools — power drills, chain saws, welding equipment; he can control much of his time, whether or not he is formally employed: and the state provides a long-stop to prevent starvation with its unemployment and social security benefits. Far from the immiseration of the workers which Marx predicted, welfare capitalism may have handed back to some the ownership of the means of production: there is a market demand for craft skills, and there are ways of avoiding paying taxes. I have done some preliminary interviews with 'unemployed' men which have led me to think that the incentives for some skilled workers to remain unemployed in a formal sense outweigh the advantages of a regular wage.

The idea that all normal domestic units should have one 'breadwinner' and one 'housewife' is hard to sustain when opportunities for male employment are low and domestic tasks are shared. With the growth of single-parent households, increased opportunities for female employment in some localities and a range of private and public services and facilities that can handle domestic tasks, the traditional ways of getting work done within the home may be changing. Certain tasks have to be done — cooking, cleaning, repairing — and over a year a certain amount of money is necessary. This money need not come in every week, nor need it be provided by the same person. Tying one person to a low-paid job for most hours of the day may be seen as one of the less satisfactory ways of getting money, particularly if a sizeable proportion of the money earned must be compulsorily donated to the government.

This book shows the limitations of my early assumptions. Happily, however, the Trustees of the Nuffield Foundation were persuaded, and I started my pilot research in March 1978. As I explain later in the book, I was introduced to a variety of working-class households and I opened the conversation simply by saying that I was interested in understanding how ordinary people were managing in these difficult times. I interviewed thirty people in depth, and most of the interviews were recorded and transcribed. One household's experiences are reported at length in Chapter 11 and two case studies that appeared in an article published in 1980 are reproduced in the Appendix. A number of other articles were published arising out of this pilot study.

Since there had been so very little detailed ethnography done in Britain in the 1970s, my little study on Sheppey, which I carried out in 1978 and 1979, received an embarrassing amount of attention. The 1980 article has been translated into German and Italian and has been reproduced in other collections. The other articles have also been widely noticed and reproduced.²³ In the winter of 1979-80, I was awarded a grant from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) to convene a series of linked workshops on local labour markets and informal economies (see p. 115 below), and I was asked to give many seminars and public lectures in

Britain and elsewhere in Europe. The idea that 'the informal economy' was a positive alternative to an ailing capitalism was the kind of good news people wanted to hear.

By early 1980 I felt like a character in a Greek drama who has unlocked something he cannot control. As I wrote in my end-of-grant Report to the Nuffield Foundation in 1979, 'I cannot stop now.' What began as a modest exercise in working-class ethnography, exploring how people were managing during an economic recession, escalated very quickly into a large-scale, multi-faceted research project. In order to respond adequately to these and other questions, it was no longer possible to rely on the more qualitative and exploratory research style of the pilot project. Much more precise quantitative answers were required on the social and economic history of the Sheppey labour market. Employers' strategies had to be explored systematically, and details of the Island's land and labour markets precisely documented. Claire Wallace was appointed as a full-time research worker on the Sheppey project, and, later, three postgraduate students linked their research to the enterprise. A large-scale social survey was commissioned that provided precise documentation on all types of formal and informal work carried out by household members and their internal domestic division of labour. A Work Strategies Research Unit was established at the University of Kent, and premises were found on the Island. Informal qualitative work continued: at times four researchers were engaged in various activities on the Island at the same time.

This book is, in part, a product of three years' intensive research in the field and does much more than develop the pilot work. In large measure, we engaged with the earlier work and used that as a base from which to build a new set of ideas. Other work published in the late 1970s was also influential, particularly that of Stuart Henry, Jay Gershuny and Sandra Wallman, all of them friends who were generous with their ideas.²⁴ Probably the most influential study in terms of methodology was that by L. A. Ferman and his team on 'The Irregular Economy', published in 1978.²⁵ The development of a broader notion of work owes much to social anthropologists and historians, and I am glad that I was in an intellectual environment in which I could learn from Marshall Sahlins or

²³ The two most quoted and reproduced articles were J. I. Gershuny and R. E. Pahl, 'Work outside employment', *New Universities Quarterly*, 34(1), 1979, pp. 120-35; and R. E. Pahl, 'Employment, work and the domestic division of labour', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 4(1), 1980, pp. 1-20. As late as 1984 I received requests to republish the latter article. Even though this book is largely a refutation of the article, I rather fear that many people will prefer to believe the article.

²⁴ S. Henry, *The Hidden Economy*, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1978; J.I. Gershuny, *After Industrial Society?* Macmillan, London, 1978; S. Wallman (ed.) Introduction, in *A Social Anthropology of Work*, Academic Press, London, 1979.

²⁵ L. A. Ferman, L. Berndt and E. Selo, *Analysis of the Irregular Economy: Cash Flow in the Informal Sector*, University of Michigan/Wayne State University, Chicago, 1978.

John Davis in the former field and E. P. Thompson or Krishan Kumar in the latter.²⁶ I am quite sure that if I had approached work in a more traditionally sociological way I would have had greater difficulty escaping from established categories.

I began the study of all forms of work on the Isle of Sheppey in 1981, having just completed a study with Dr N. H. Buck on the historical demography of the Admiralty dockyard at Sheerness in the mid-nineteenth century. Because we had access to the Census Enumerators' books, I knew more about some aspects of the Island's social structure in the past than I was likely to learn in the present. For this and other reasons, I was very conscious of the importance of placing my empirical study in historical context — not just in terms of the actual locale, but in terms of the way forms of work in general had changed and developed. There did seem, initially, to be a parallel between the forms of work more common in eighteenth-century households and the pattern found in certain Sheppey households. One must be careful not to push such apparent convergences too far, but I found that seeking such connections encouraged lateral thinking and helped me to see all forms of work in a better perspective.

Many who are happy to accept my emphasis on history and social anthropology may be less sure about the quantitative style in some of the later chapters of the book. Those who enjoy the case studies in Chapter 11 and Appendix 2 may wish there were more of such qualitative material elsewhere. I may even get attacked for distancing myself from my respondents and for losing the authentic voices of ordinary people. That would be truly ironic. I have spent many years interviewing people on the Isle of Sheppey, and so too has my colleague, Claire Wallace. However, in the light of the criticisms of some of my earlier work, I am very wary about attempting to convince my readers with anecdotes or memorable phrases. There are indeed some respondents whose household work strategies epitomize precisely certain of the themes and arguments I develop. Nevertheless, it is much more important to avoid the trap that researchers — including myself — sometimes fall into: that is, of finding what one expects to find. Many of the conclusions of this book are at variance with the conventional wisdom about the nature of the so-called 'informal economy'. Some of those who hold to conventional views — economists, geographers and social psychologists, as well as sociologists and perhaps civil servants — will not be convinced of the force of my arguments unless they are very solidly buttressed.

²⁶ M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1972; J. Davis, 'Gifts and the UK economy', *Man*, 7(3), 1972, pp. 408-29; J. Davis, 'The particular theory of exchange', *European Journal of Sociology*, 1975, pp. 151-68; E. P. Thompson, 'Time, work discipline and industrial capitalism', *Past and Present*, 38, 1967, pp. 56-97; Krishan Kumar, 'Unemployment as a problem in the development of industrial societies', paper prepared for the EEC-FAST programme, Marseilles, 23-26 November 1981.

I am more confident now about presenting some material in the second half of the book in quantitative terms because it is based on years of informal and qualitative interviewing and observation. Claire Wallace lived on the Island for periods of several months at a time, and the more we learnt, the less sure we were, in one sense, about our capacity to distil understanding that we acquired in a relatively unsystematic way. I have become more suspicious of social research methods that purport to be able to generalize from unsystematic observation and interviewing: it is simply not possible to check on the validity of much of that kind of social reporting. Very few researchers who rely on a very few informants publish the field notes on which they base their generalizations and conclusions. Given the importance and urgency of the theme of this book, I did not want its conclusions to be open to criticism for being too subjectivist. The data set in the ESRC Survey Archive are available for analysis by others.

As I explain and discuss throughout this book, while my ideas in 1980 were, I was told, plausible, sociologically interesting and challenging. I have since had to modify them substantially. My earlier ideas were based on partial ethnography which served a very useful heuristic purpose at the time. Notwithstanding such modifications, I believe that the overall *focus* of the work was absolutely right, and so was the shift towards a more historical analysis in Part I. The household continues to be the basic social unit around which people conduct their lives, and my assumption that, as finding employment becomes more difficult, the household, with its distinctive set of work practices, becomes of greater salience still stands. We began in October 1980 with a more basic question than I had considered in the pilot work: namely, how do all forms of work get done? 'Whose work?' was the underlying question, and how is it changing? The focus shifted away from separate economies and towards all forms of work and the distinctive divisions of labour that are involved.

In the chapters that follow, I try to keep the focus consistently on work, and, since I am trying to develop new ideas about the subject, I have to use old words in new ways. This may create a potential confusion, since, although the words are familiar, the concepts to which they refer will be less so. This is an inevitable problem in social science. If we use familiar words in fresh ways, we are liable to be misunderstood; if we invent new words for new notions, we get scorned for our clumsy neologisms. I will keep to the old words wherever possible and I will endeavour to make clear what new nuances of meaning I wish to suggest.

The first part of the book is not specifically about Sheppey and reflects my growing interest in historical sociology. The second part is dependent on the first part — particularly Chapters 8 and 9, where the analysis is based on the distinctions made in Chapter 5. Finally, in Part III, I take up some of the implications of the Sheppey study for concerns of both theory and practice. Thus, Chapter 12 is not really a conclusion to the

book but is an essay in its own right. However, for those who seek the nub of a book in two sentences, I can offer the following. Work has to be understood both historically and in context; it has changed in the past, it is changing now, and it will continue to change in the future; above all, work done by members of households is the central process around which society is structured. In different periods and contexts some work becomes of greater significance: women's waged work is of particular importance for ordinary middle-mass households in Britain in the 1980s.

Part I
Past and Present
Ways of Work

Introduction

The Isle of Sheppey

In Part I I emphasized the importance of households as working units and described their patterns of work and how these have changed over the centuries. This was inevitably highly generalized, and the evidence I adduced came from a variety of sources, some of which, by their nature, were unfortunately not very substantial. In this part of the book I provide much more detailed and solidly based empirical evidence about all forms of work in the Isle of Sheppey in 1981.

Inevitably, households and individuals who adopt different practices and strategies for getting by must do so in a specific context. The way in which all work is done is substantially determined by the opportunities available in a relatively restricted milieu which, in the case of formal employment, is generally assumed to be a local labour market. How local it is and whether the term 'market' has any empirical significance are matters of continuing academic debate.¹ It is generally accepted that labour markets are segmented to some extent so that certain jobs are almost entirely filled by men, whereas others, particularly certain forms of part-time employment, are almost invariably held by women. The particular mix of employment opportunities will obviously vary from one part of the country to another and so, too, will the opportunities for doing other work outside employment.

At present there are no good surrogates for measuring the opportunity structures for work outside employment in particular milieux. Probably the strongest candidate would be housing tenure: in areas of local authority and rented housing, particularly if it is high-rise, there are far fewer opportunities for self-provisioning than in areas of owner-occupation. However, there are probably more subtle indicators that have yet to be developed. No doubt Sheppey will be able to take its place

¹ R. M. Blackburn and M. Mann, *The Working Class in the Labour Market*, Macmillan, London, 1979.

on a continuum of 'getting-by potential' yet to be devised. Certainly, in order to put all forms of work in context, I felt that it was necessary to do more than simply provide a conventional account of the demand and supply of labour on the Island.

In order to explore the interconnection between these different forms of work, I focused my research on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent for a period of nearly six years from January 1978. It is reasonable to ask why I chose that area as the locale for this case study.² From the very beginning there was absolutely no attempt to justify working on the Isle of Sheppey in terms of its typicality. However, there were a number of features relating to the Island that initially made it appear very suitable. First, it was more self-contained than many alternatives: it is connected to the mainland by only one bridge, which can be raised and lowered to allow ships to pass up the Swale to docks on the mainland side. When the bridge is up, the Island is truly cut off, and if the lifting mechanism fails then nothing can be done, short of an airlift by helicopter, to get across to the mainland. This has the advantage that people are evidently aware of their distinctiveness of being Islanders and recognize that there are common problems and opportunities. This distinctiveness may be more apparent than real, but, in terms of the sociological truism, 'where people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.' One of the first things I was told about Sheppey was that there were some people still living there who had never been off the Island. It is not, of course, a completely self-contained labour market — between 25 and 30 per cent commute off the Island each day, and there is a reverse flow of about 14 per cent, mainly managerial and professional workers.³ There are some from Warden Bay at the far eastern end of the Island who commute as far as London, leaving at 6 in the morning and returning at 8 at night. In so far, therefore, as being self-contained in terms of employment provided some kind of unity, it made it easier to perceive the interconnections between the different forms of work which were the focus of this study.

Second, it was common gossip among those I talked to in the mainland towns that the Island was a seething heap of informal work. Long-established and traditional links with London's East End had perhaps encouraged a kind of notoriety, and it is true that murderers and kidnappers are flushed out from time to time after they have taken cover in the chalet land of Leysdown. The Island had the totally undeserved image of being unruly and somewhat violent. With 120 licensed premises for a population of 33,000⁴ and with a reputation for petty crime and deviance, I was made to feel that I was entering dangerous territory when

² A note on 'The Case Study as a Method' appears on pp. 146–7.

³ These figures are approximate and derive from Kent County Council Survey data relating to 1976–7, the time when the Island was first being considered as a site for research.

⁴ There are thirty-five pubs and clubs in Sheerness High Street alone.

I went there. In the early days I remember checking each time I came back to my car that someone had not taken the wheels off while I was away.⁵ The docks at Sheerness were said then to be the source of many 'cheap goods' circulating in the area and, given my interest in the hidden economy at the time, I was assured that I would have no difficulty in gathering information. The inference, which later turned out to be false, was that most of the work on the Island was done 'for cash'.

This notoriety, based on external labelling, encouraged me on to the Island in the belief that I would find what I was looking for: with hindsight, I recognize that I was well directed; if informal work is not flourishing in Sheppey it is unlikely to be flourishing anywhere, and by choosing what appeared to be a seething centre of fiddles, I had provided myself with a test case. Almost by definition, one could be directed to centres of informal work only through hearsay, gossip and informal sources of information: in the mid-1970s these all pointed to the Isle of Sheppey.

The third main factor that drew me to the Island was its pattern of unemployment. As an Admiralty dockyard from the late seventeenth century and also a military garrison, Sheerness had almost three hundred years of industrial history which might have produced a mature working-class culture. The dockyard had closed twenty years before the fieldwork began, but it was in the front of the minds of all those who had been living on the Island at the time. There were other traditional industries, such as glass and pottery manufacture, and more modern plants making pharmaceuticals and electrical components. A very wide range of manufacturing industry made the Island a more attractive area in which to explore the implications of de-industrialization than any other alternative town within reasonable radius of my home university. Furthermore, its level of unemployment was between 10 and 14 per cent in the early stages of the project, rising above 20 per cent in the autumn of 1983. In so far as other forms of work could serve as a compensation for the decline in employment, Sheppey seemed an appropriate choice to explore such a pattern.

In addition to its discreteness, isolation, relative self-containment, distinctive history of employment and apparent potential for deviance, Sheppey was also a marginal area, as was mentioned above, not well served with public facilities: many of the roads are unadopted and unmade-up, many of the industries are dirty and polluting, and much of

⁵ I needn't have worried. Data kindly made available for Sheppey from the Chief Constable of Kent and for Kent as a whole from the Chief Constable's Report for Kent, 1982, Appendix I, enable a comparison to be made between Sheppey and Kent as a whole. The results show that Sheppey is *safer* than the rest of Kent. The rate per 100,000 population for thefts from vehicles was 474 in Sheppey and 656 for Kent as a whole. Similarly, for the theft or unauthorized taking of motor vehicles, the ratios were 542 for Sheppey and 564 for Kent as a whole.

the Island seems to have escaped planning control and regulation. Glibly referred to by one of the senior local government officers of the district as 'that sceptic Isle', it was perceived by the various 'agencies' — the police, the probation service, the educational service and the health and social services — as a 'problem' place.⁶

A Note on the Case Study as a Method

It is perhaps useful to draw attention to the methodological distinctiveness of the case study approach, seen as 'a way of organizing social data so as to preserve the *unitary character of the social object being studied*'.⁷ Clearly, case studies can serve a variety of purposes which may be more or less theoretical in intent. First, they may serve as a simple descriptive device, showing how various elements in a situation interrelate. The emphasis here is likely to be on the *unique* nature of the event or circumstances. Second, such studies, although evidently unique or ideographic, are nevertheless interpreted in terms of general patterns, and it is these generalities that are emphasized and underlined. Third, a case study may be chosen in order to develop theory. Generalizable relations are deliberately sought out, giving such studies a clear heuristic purpose. Then, fourth, case studies may be seen as what have been referred to as 'plausibility probes' — rather like a pilot study before another stage of empirical research is launched.

Finally, there are crucial case studies which allow the investigator to disconfirm some hypothesis or argument or perhaps to support it when circumstances may appear to be loaded against it. This is rather like the crucial experiment in the natural sciences. However, as J. C. Mitchell concludes in his discussion of this issue,

In reality no case study can be presented in isolation from the corpus of empirical information and theoretical postulates against which it has significance. . . . The single case becomes significant only when set against the accumulated experience and knowledge that the analyst brings to it. In other words the extent to which generalization may be made from case studies depends upon the adequacy of the underlying theory and the whole corpus of related knowledge of which the case is analyzed rather than on the particular instance itself.⁸

⁶ In October 1982 an Inter Agency Conference focusing on Sheppey was held at Broadstairs, organized by Kent County Council, bringing together representatives from the police, the probation service, the social services and education. It was assumed that the Island had 'special problems' and there was a need for more inter-agency co-operation and more facilities on the Island. It was agreed that the Island should serve as the locale for an experiment in new ways of working together.

⁷ W. J. Goode and P. K. Hatt, *Methods in Social Research*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1952, p. 331.

⁸ J. C. Mitchell, 'Case and situation analysis', *Sociological Review*, 31(2), 1982, new series, p. 203.

Given such considerations, it becomes clear that there is absolutely no advantage in going to a great deal of trouble to find a 'typical' case: 'concern with this issue reflects a confusion of enumerative and analytic modes of induction.'⁹ Obviously, all case studies are related to a specific context, and some account of this context is crucial to enable readers to judge how far the generalizations that are drawn from case studies, qualified with a *ceteris paribus* condition, can be accepted as such. Evidently, it is up to the investigator to help the reader see how far particular circumstances or events obscure, reflect, reinforce or reduce the general processes being considered. As one of the great pioneers of humanistic sociology put it, 'it is not the exception that matters, but our attitude toward it.'¹⁰ The point is reinforced by Mitchell, who claims that the case study 'provides the optimum conditions in which the general principles may be shown to manifest themselves even when obscured by confounding side effects'.¹¹ That is, as long as the observer knows a great deal about the circumstances and conditions surrounding given events.

It is important, therefore, not to draw false parallels between two very different inferential processes. First, in the case of sample surveys, it is possible to make a statistical inference that what may be observed for the sample relates also to the population from which the sample is drawn. A second process claims that the logical connections perceived among the features observed in the sample relate to the parent universe. For case studies, the first process is clearly not relevant; rather, the inferential process turns on the theoretically necessary linkages in the case study. Here the validity of the extrapolation rests on the cogency of the theoretical reasoning. 'The rich detail which emerges from the intimate knowledge the analyst must acquire in a case study if it is well conducted provides the optimum conditions for the acquisition of those illuminating insights which make formerly opaque connections suddenly pellucid.'¹²

Outline of Part II

A more systematic portrait of the Island is presented in Chapter 6 and the results of the 1981 social survey are presented in Chapters 8-11. Chapter 8 explores the overall balance of work between the formal, informal and domestic spheres and focuses first on the relative importance of the material conditions of households, as determined by the occupation of the chief earner or the numbers of earners, and second on the demographic and life-cycle characteristics of households. Chapter 9 explores in more detail the divisions of labour of households and Chapter 10 the division of labour within households.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁰ F. Znaniecki, *The Method of Sociology*, Rinehart, New York, 1934, p. 306.

¹¹ Mitchell, 'Case and situation analysis', p. 206.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 207.

The two kinds of division of labour are based on an important distinction. Divisions of labour of households refers to the specific sources of labour that are drawn on to get work done. The division of labour *within* households relates to the question of which of the partners, in households with couples, does a range of tasks. Precise information on these matters involves formidable problems of measurement, and Chapters 8-10 are intended to provide a more accurate account of the divisions of labour than has hitherto been available.

When I was planning the research in the late 1970s, conceptions of what the 'informal economy' comprised were necessarily rather vague and tended to include under one heading a variety of distinct forms of work, which have been described in this book as self-provisioning, shadow wage labour, occupational easements and so on. In the early years of my research, I focused on a relatively small number of households and built up a picture in each case of all the forms of work in which members of those households were engaged. This was, inevitably, very time-consuming and involved establishing considerable trust among respondents. One family that I interviewed regularly over the full period of research is reported on in detail in Chapter 11.

However, I well understood, as reports on the earlier, more informal and impressionistic research were published,¹³ that, however revealing and insightful such work might be, its credibility was severely limited. Critics could quite reasonably claim that respondents were untypical, that they were simply misleading me, or that I was being highly selective in the material I chose to report. Furthermore, with so few cases I could not make connections between the distinctive work practices of households and their other social and political characteristics.

A number of interesting questions relate to the sociological significance of work outside employment. How far, for example, does work outside employment serve as an alternative source of identity and a practical means of getting by? While one or two unemployed households were shown to be getting by successfully by — almost literally — hunting, shooting and fishing, I needed to know how *widespread* that pattern might be. Similarly, very little was known systematically about the interconnections between divisions of labour: was there any relationship between the way household members allocated their efforts between different forms of labour outside the household and how the work inside the household was distributed? Was there a division of labour by gender in the informal work done outside the household and, if there was, how did this affect the internal division of labour in the sphere of self-provisioning? Do households who are better placed in getting income

¹³ R. E. Pahl, 'Employment, work and the domestic division of labour', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 4(1), 1980, pp. 1-20.

from the formal economy, either by a highly paid single wage earner or through multiple earners, do less work in other spheres? There has been some interest in how far women's employment affects their involvement in domestic tasks, but very little attention has been given to how far that involvement in formal employment affects their involvement in other informal work, or to how involvement in informal work affects levels of domestic self-provisioning. If, for the sake of simplicity, three spheres of work are described as A, B and C and partners in a household are referred to as M and F, there would, on these limited assumptions alone, be 49 different potential household work strategies (see figure). Since M's involvement in one sphere of work, employment, is itself structured into a hierarchy of positions through the occupational structure, the possible range of relationships between household work practices and various divisions of labour becomes quite unmanageably huge. Evidently the 49 combinations of the matrix refer to the different pattern of involvement of two household members in three spheres of work: it does not say anything about the sources of labour that the household uses and the relative balance between these. It may be helpful if I now list the distinctive elements that are to be analysed in Part II.

		F						
		A	B	C	AB	AC	BC	ABC
M	A							
	B							
	C							
	AB							
	AC							
	BC							
	ABC							

A = formal work F = female
 B = self provisioning M = male
 C = informal work

- 1 The involvement of household members in particular *forms of labour* inside and outside the dwelling. This is the work they do for others such as employers or relatives. There are two divisions in this

work: (a) that based on how households and distinctive categories of households distribute their labour between distinctive spheres of work; (b) that based on how individual members of a household distribute their labour within and outside the household.

- 2 The *sources of labour* that a household draws on to get a whole range of tasks done. Households may use their own labour, they may pay others or they may receive labour which has to be reciprocated in more subtle ways. Households will have distinctive balances or mixes of sources of labour on which they draw. There are also two divisions in sources of labour: (a) that based on the sources of forms of labour that a household uses; (b) that which reflects the different pattern of labour used by different household members.
- 3 It is evident that the divisions under the heading 1 relate to the household as a producer, as a working unit, and under heading 2 the divisions relate to the household as a unit of consumption. But members of the household do work for themselves and hence appear in one sphere under both headings. This work done by household members for themselves provides the basis, in households with more than one member, for the household division of labour.

There will clearly be distinctive mixes between the household's division of labour as producer and consumer. In the last phase of empirical research reported in this book, which began in 1980, I focused specifically on how household work strategies — that is 1 and 2 above — related to the domestic division of labour (3) and other social and political attitudes and behaviour. My assumption was that social consciousness was shaped largely by a household's economic circumstances but that these were infinitely more complex than appeared to be generally understood. The occupational characteristics of the male chief earner was simply one element in determining a household's economic position: it was not necessarily the most important.

People living in distinctive milieux have, as it were, inside knowledge which colours their conception of the options and opportunities that are available to them. Before exploring households' work practices in detail, therefore, I put considerable effort in an attempt to get to a position where the respondents already were. They knew, or they thought they knew, much about the context in which they lived. They knew where there were jobs, what it was like to do them; they also were highly sensitive to how they were treated by employers, state officials, friends and neighbours. Options are defined in a context that is explored in Chapters 6 and 7. Three years of preliminary fieldwork showed that housing location and tenure were crucial elements in the development of distinctive household work strategies. This informed our understanding

when constructing the formal research instrument.¹⁴ Similarly, it was important for us to know that geographical factors made it virtually impossible for women in certain parts of the Island to engage in formal employment and also to maintain their family responsibilities at the same time.

Chapters 6-11, therefore, explore the divisions of labour on the Isle of Sheppey from a number of perspectives. Chapter 6 is historical and necessarily so, for the sharp contrast in the periods before and after the closing of the dockyard provide the key to various homespun theories that exist in the area which are used to explain contemporary material and social circumstances. These theories are discussed in Chapter 7. The resource options of the Isle of Sheppey were as much socially as geographically or historically constructed. While the portrait that follows is unique, the processes that produced the distinctive pattern have wider significance. This is a theme to which I return in the final chapter, although the account of the process of de-industrialization on the Isle of Sheppey will surely prompt the reader to consider whether what the smaller Island faces in the 1980s its larger neighbour will face, in increasingly acute form, towards the year 2000.

¹⁴ In discussing the results of the field survey in Chapters 8 and 9, I use the first person plural on occasions; this part of the research project was very much a collaborative effort with Gill Courtenay of SCPR and with Claire Wallace, the Research Fellow on the project.

6

Portrait of an Industrial Island

Introduction

The next six chapters are based on material gathered in the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. Inevitably, readers will want to have some idea of what the Island is like; however, as is shown below, to provide such an account is not entirely a straightforward exercise.¹ To understand the present situation it is necessary to know something of how that situation has developed, yet all historical accounts have to be partial and selective. The position adopted here is to acknowledge that the basic problems of getting by, of forming households and of caring for the young and the old have remained remarkably similar for centuries. Most people experience life as a struggle: they compare their own life with that of their mothers or fathers and perhaps gain some comfort that their life is better, but they might equally feel that things are getting worse. In the case of the Isle of Sheppey, those with long memories will almost certainly perceive the present as a sad and ugly decline from a better-ordered and more attractive past. Some attempt must be made to match 'scholarly' history with 'folk' history, recognizing that the latter may have more salience for contemporary attitudes and behaviour than the former.

Visually the Island has undoubtedly declined. When William Hogarth visited Sheppey in 1732, he and his friends walked through pleasant countryside to Minster, a little village on the highest part of the Island on which Minster Abbey stands, said to be founded in the seventh century by the wife of Ercombert, King of Kent. Old prints and drawings and even postcards dating from as recently as the early years of this century show a wooded countryside more reminiscent of villages in the more fashionable parts of the county today. Queenborough was a flourishing little borough in the seventeenth century, and Sheerness developed in the nineteenth century as garrison, Admiralty dockyard and seaside resort. So much was built between 1850 and 1900 that people's memories of a

¹ A map of the Island may be found on p. 342.

much cleaner town are likely to be substantially true. It is understandable that many islanders cannot see the present except in terms of its decline from the past.

Certainly, a contemporary visitor to the Isle of Sheppey is likely to be dismayed by its lack of visual character.² The road to the Island may well be clogged with huge lorries weighted down with containers, Japanese cars or steel rods from the mill. On one side, acres of marshland appear to be sinking under the weight of thousands of Toyotas and Mazdas; ahead, there is a pall of black smoke over the Sheerness Steel Mill with the Isle of Grain oil refinery towering in the background and appearing to be on the Island itself. On the other side, treeless marshes and sheep pasture stretch away for ten miles or so. The village of Minster in the middle of the Island is now overwhelmed by private housing development, put up in a seemingly chaotic way in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of the earlier development along unmade roads makes one forget that any Town and Country Planning Acts have been passed. Queenborough High Street has many of its period houses boarded up in bad repair, and turning off down Rushenden Road, past the industrial estate, the impression is of a northern industrial town. Heavy traffic has pitted the roads; factories making fertilizer, lavatory pans or glass bottles make little attempt to look presentable to visitors. Railway tracks cross the road; huge metal objects lie outside the rolling mill and iron foundry, and the horizon is again dominated by the endless sea of Japanese cars. Eventually, at the very end of the marshes where the Swale does a loop back before entering the Medway, there is the Rushenden Road Estate, an all too obvious machine for workers to reproduce themselves in. Remote from shops, privately built housing and such amenities as the cinema and swimming pool at Sheerness, visiting state officials or university researchers are viewed here with suspicion. Some of the houses look smart, with new front doors and obvious double glazing, indicating clearly that they have been bought from the council; others have the characteristic scuffed door and concrete path, with a scattering of broken toys and odd bits of wood that may or may not be rubbish in what was once a front garden.

The High Street of Sheerness, the town that houses about a third of the Island's population of 33,000, is the standard mixture of discount carpet stores, Tesco's, Boots and tawdry boutiques, interspersed with pubs and indeterminate shops selling sweets, greetings cards, cigarettes and newspapers. It could be transferred to New Cross, Kilburn or Wood Green in London and no one would notice the difference. Behind the shops, in the areas known as Marine Town and Mile Town, another

² In 1983 Swale District Council launched an 'Economic Programme', much of which was concerned with 'environmental improvements' on the Island. A new concern with the image of the area was based on the assumption that new investment would be clean and that industrialists would be attracted by physical appearances.

pattern of owner-occupied working class housing can be seen. Here, terraces built in the mid-nineteenth century front straight on to the street. Corner shops and pubs punctuate the scene and little alleyways criss-cross the areas, full of running children at 3.30 as they come home from school. Mothers and married daughters go shopping together. In summer elderly women put wooden chairs on the pavement to sit and chat and a group of lads strip a motorbike on the pavement. 'For Sale' signs appear permanently in all the streets and every front door is painted a different colour. One little terrace house with green interlocking tiles, pink pebbledash and a frosted glass front door adjoins another looking much as it did a hundred years ago. The roads are lined with elderly Fords and chrome Datsuns. Women cross the street in carpet slippers. A large Ford van with a 'J' registration, painted entirely black, has the words 'Funeral Service' on the side, but further information has been covered in with more black paint.³

Following the coast road from Marine Town to Minster, views of the sea are hidden by the huge new concrete sea wall, recently built to avoid flooding. The road has to turn inland at Minster Cliffs, which are gradually sliding into the sea, although a contractor is struggling hard to shore it all up. The clifftop land from Minster to Warden is a jumble of unmade roads, riding stables, little smallholdings and caravan sites. A determined driver with little regard for his car can zigzag his way over potholes, past home-made bungalows with goats grazing in the front garden and the odd run-down farmhouse.⁴ One can emerge at Warden Bay into a new estate of houses, being a mixture of neo-Georgian and south-coast Spanish. Then more holiday camps, overblown pubs offering live entertainment (male strippers on hens' evenings), before one reaches Leysdown-on-Sea. Bingo halls, a disco, amusement arcades and gift shops are the focus for acres of holiday chalets, caravan sites and holiday camps. In winter it is hard to find anywhere to get a cup of tea; in summer the place is awash with the highest priced beer in Kent. Returning by the main road along the spine of the Island, one passes through the agricultural village of Eastchurch with nothing but Eastchurch Open Prison and a few farms on the pastures sloping away to the Swale. At Minster there is a hospital and the comprehensive school. Some larger houses in the best positions on the high land have paddocks for ponies, power boats on trailers and two or more cars in the drive. A small elite of red-faced men with large stomachs, large Fords and tinselly wives with long fingernails patronize the Playa Club on Minster Cliffs and drink many gins before their steak or scampi and chips.

³ See plate 8. This is perhaps truly the black economy on wheels. I am grateful to Jim Styles of the University of Kent Photographic Unit for the sympathetic way he helped in providing this and other vivid documentation.

⁴ On one safari trip with Colin Ward, I slipped a disc heaving my car out of the mud. Anthropologists in far-away places are not the only ones with hazards to face.

A perceptive observer visiting the Island would see and understand much by travelling about — the pub where the managers who live off the Island congregate for lunch, another pub (not always the same one) the centre for drugs and prostitutes, the fisherboats on Queenborough Creek, the light aircraft bringing in one of the farm owners from over the estuary in Essex, the Regency terraces, once the homes of officers in the dockyard and much the same as they were when first built, the apparently uncountable chapels and working men's clubs, the fish and chip shops, the markets on Tuesdays and Sundays, the truant teenagers in the coffee bars. Having spent six years visiting and doing fieldwork on the Island and spending time in particular factories, streets and communities, I feel daunted at times by the overwhelming wealth of information.

Nevertheless, it is important to try to make sense of the context: people's real or imagined knowledge of the past colours, to a degree, their present attitudes and pattern of behaviour. Newcomers to the Island have different traditions, to be sure, but Sheppey is a distinct milieu with its own distinctive traditions, experiences, possibilities and constraints. People have to grapple with the material circumstances of their existence, and because the Island is so relatively small and insular, in more than one sense, people can readily have a consciousness of its distinctiveness. Working-class culture is not an ahistorical response to existential circumstances — rather, it is an intensely conservative and traditional set of household practices for grappling with difficult material circumstances. In order to understand more of the complexity of the material context, it seemed necessary to gather a substantial amount of data on the historical development of the dockyard, the pattern of employment from 1960 to 1980 and a detailed analysis of housing development in the twentieth century.⁵

The Historical Development of the Sheerness Naval Dockyard⁶

Contemporary studies of local labour markets need to be seen in context, since present expectations and strategies may depend significantly on the experience that members of the family may have had in the past.

⁵ Each of these themes provided the basis for separate reports, only the main points of which are referred to here. See N. Buck, *An Admiralty Dockyard in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: Aspects of the Social and Economic History of Sheerness*, Final Report to the SSRC on a research project funded by grant no. HR6939/1, 1981; R. E. Pahl with J. H. Dennett, *Industry and Employment on the Isle of Sheppey*, University of Kent at Canterbury, part of the Final Report to the SSRC of project no. G00230036, 1981; and C. Wallace with R. E. Pahl and J. H. Dennett, *Housing and Residential Areas on the Isle of Sheppey*, University of Kent at Canterbury, part of the Final Report to the SSRC of project no. G00230036, 1981.

⁶ This account is based on the report to the SSRC by Dr N. H. Buck on the project directed by me. The research was carried out almost entirely by Dr Buck, assisted by Ms Theresa Sliney.

Particular styles of behaviour may be built up gradually over generations, and these expectations and strategies may become, as it were, fossilized, so that a given labour market may come to have distinctive attributes. This seemed a very relevant consideration in the case of Sheerness, since dockyard workers were said to be a special category of worker. This suggested one source of distinctive consciousness. Another possible consideration was simply the very isolation of the Island: being so self-contained and dominated by one employer for so long, there might have been grounds for making some connection between past circumstances and contemporary behaviour.

The isolation and self-containment of Sheerness provided a methodological advantage, making it a good context for the intensive use of mid-nineteenth-century nominal records, particularly the Census Enumerators' Books. This enabled very complete information on the dockyard workforce to be collected, and an intensive analysis of its characteristics and changes over time was carried out by linking households between censuses in order to illustrate recruitment and turnover.

On 18 August 1665, Samuel Pepys, secretary of the Board of the Admiralty, wrote in his diary: 'To Sheerness, where we walked up and down, laying out the ground to be taken in for a yard to lay provisions for cleaning and repairing of ships, and a most proper place it is for the purpose.'⁷ Pepys was right: the Medway Port Authority, which now runs Sheerness Docks, boasts that it has the deepest harbour between the North of Scotland and Wales. Clearly, Sheerness's position at the confluence of the Thames and the Medway, on the sea approaches to both Chatham and London, gave it immense strategic importance for the Navy: it was an inevitable site for a garrison and battery. Unfortunately, only two years after Pepys's visit, the Dutch fleet bombarded the fort and Sheerness and destroyed much of what was there, landing and capturing it on 11 June 1667. The following day the Dutch took Queenborough, the mayor having raised the white flag on the Town Hall — the only Town Hall in England, which, since the Norman Conquest, has ever had the flag of a foreign invader floating over it. The Isle of Sheppey, thus humiliated, was wholly at the mercy of the invaders, who held possession of it for a period of eleven days, plundering the inhabitants, looting for stores and provisions, and carrying away thousands of head of sheep and cattle unmolested.⁸

These events had a number of important consequences. First, the memory lived on that Sheppey had been conquered by a foreign power

⁷ *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Vol. VI, transcribed and edited by R. Latham and W. Mathews, G. Bell and Sons, London, 1972 edn, p. 194.

⁸ A. A. Daly, *History of the Isle of Sheppey*, Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co. Ltd., London, 1904, p. 224.

and the enemy had withdrawn, rather than being driven out by forces from the mainland. The local historian of the Island, writing at the turn of the century, claimed that 'even the lapse of two centuries scarcely effaced the recollection of it on either side.'⁹ Today, with a regular twice-daily service from Sheerness to Vlissingen operated by the Olau Line, and a substantial flow of Dutch tourists through the town, one still senses a certain resentment, sometimes expressed in the reasonableness of 'ripping off the Cloggies'.¹⁰ The second consequence was that landed families felt that their lives and properties were not safe on the Island, so they left to become absentee landlords and the houses of substance, such as they were, declined. This must have had social consequences for those who worked the land for the next 250 years. This truncation of the social hierarchy at the end of the seventeenth century doubtless contributed to the sense of apartness felt by Islanders and mainlanders alike. It has also been suggested that the area was severely afflicted by malaria in the seventeenth century.¹¹

The third consequence of the conquest was the rapid expansion and strengthening of the fortification directly encouraged by Charles II who inspected the completed works in 1669. The development of the Admiralty dockyard in the last years of the seventeenth century was hindered by the unfavourable marshy hinterland: expensive foundations were necessary before building, water was a problem in the early days, and its exposed position meant that it was often threatened with inundation. As a protection against floods, old hulks were used as a form of breakwater, and these were also used to house the dockyard workers. This may have been the source of the myth of the Islanders being escaped convicts.¹² But it is true that other heavy labouring work *was* done by convicts held in other hulks in the Medway and, by the early nineteenth century, conditions in some of the hulks were very bad.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the numbers employed in the dockyard development varied between 300 and 600 and the period was

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁰ However, the economic recession that began in 1979 has encouraged the forging of more friendly links between the Netherlands and Sheppey in the hope of developing trade and commerce. A party of fifteen 'leading citizens' of The Hague visited the Island in October 1983, partly arranged by the Olau Line, and further economic and social developments are likely. The Island is twinned with Brielle and regular exchanges take place.

¹¹ P. Macdougall, 'Malaria: Its influence on a North Kent community', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 95, 1979, pp. 255-64.

¹² Given the damaging nature of such current misconceptions, it is perhaps worth quoting the impressions of John Wesley, who visited Sheerness in 1767 and recorded in his Journal for 16 December: 'Such a town as many of these living in is scarce to be found again in England. In the dock adjoining to the fort there are six old men of war. These are divided into small tenements, forty, fifty, sixty in a ship with little chimneys and windows, and each of these contains a family. In one of them, where we called, a man and his wife and six little children lived. And yet all the ship was sweet and tolerably clean; sweeter than most sailing ships I have been in.'

marked by corruption, inefficient organization and a system of recruitment based directly on dockyard families. The dockyard officers were old and inept and accounts were sometimes five years in arrears. There was substantial corruption in the supply of materials and pilfering from the yards.¹³ This led to a long-running conflict over the issue of men taking 'chips', off-cuts of wood up to 12 feet in length, which was a traditional occupational easement. These were being used to construct houses in the area immediately adjoining the dockyard known as Blue Town — so-called, apparently, on account of the Admiralty paint used to decorate the wooden houses.¹⁴ The dockyard authorities attempted to prevent the 'chips' from getting too large and in 1753 a regulation specified that no more could be taken than could be carried untied under one arm. This provoked a riot at Chatham.

This early militancy and solidaristic power of dockyard workers could be strengthened during threats or periods of war, but by the nineteenth century the Admiralty had all but tamed the workforce, having taken steps to increase its control over them. For example, dockyard officers had considerable discretion in awarding apprenticeships and pensions; and the pay of apprentices was made entirely to their instructor, which in practice meant that the instructor was invariably the father.¹⁵

Sheerness in the Nineteenth Century

The dockyard was reconstructed between 1815 and 1826, and Sheerness expanded as an independent town. In 1854 a steam engine factory was opened and building activity, associated with the Crimean Wars, increased. New skills were required and metalworkers, particularly engine fitters, engine smiths and boiler-makers, came into the town, many of whom had served apprenticeships in private shipbuilding firms or railway workshops. In the 1860s, the development of the iron ship

¹³ M. Oppenheim, 'Maritime history' and 'The Royal dockyards', in W. Page (ed.), *The Victoria County History of Kent*, St Catherine Press, London, 1926, pp. 243-388.

¹⁴ It is certainly still possible to see the dockyard timbers inside some of the few older properties still remaining. Thus was established the tradition of the Islanders building their own homes with their own materials and their own labour. Some of the work I have seen looks decidedly rough, but the materials were good and the dwellings lasted well enough.

¹⁵ In her companion study of the Chatham Dockyard, M. Waters remarks that 'apprenticeship appears as an important part of a system of reward and control and also as a means of providing support for the old and widows' (M. Waters, 'The social history of the Chatham dockyard workforce 1860-1906', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Essex, 1979, p. 5). Oppenheim similarly notes that up to 1764 many infirm and incapable dockworkers were kept on the establishment because they had no other means of support (Oppenheim, 'Royal dockyards', p. 376). A superannuation fund was set up in that year but this relationship between father and son continued and, in general, families and the dockyard officers were highly interdependent. Households were bound together and bound in by the dockyard.

brought in more metalworkers. However, some shipwrights trained in woodbuilding were retrained and ended up doing the work of boiler-makers and riveters in private yards.

This expansion of metalworkers and shipwrights in the mid-nineteenth century was based on substantial immigration, significantly from other dockyard towns. The proportion of shipwrights born in Sheppey declined from 40 per cent in 1851 to 34 per cent in 1861 and to 31 per cent in 1871. About three-quarters of the labourers were born on the Island or in the rest of Kent throughout the period. Detailed analysis of the birthplaces of dockyard workers at the three Census dates shows that a high proportion of those workers who moved long distances came originally from towns that had occupational links with Sheerness or industries containing similar types of workers. Up until 1834, much of the heavy labour in the yard was carried out by convicts — up to about 300; however, between 1851 and 1861 ordinary hired labourers increased from 307, or 22 per cent of the dockyard workforce, to 653, or 25 per cent.¹⁶

Table 6.1 shows in detail how recruits to the yard — that is, workers not recorded at the previous Census — came from well beyond the local community. Even in the decade 1861-71, when the dockyard declined slightly, 67 per cent of recruits came from off the Island. This meant that 970 dockyard workers, or about 40 per cent of the total workforce, had migrated to Sheppey in the decade 1861-71.

Table 6.2 shows the population distribution of the Island in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sheerness grew rapidly at the very beginning of the nineteenth century; there followed a period of stagnation until it grew again between 1851 and 1861. The population was then relatively stable to 1891 and then grew until 1911 as the town gained popularity as a holiday resort. Queenborough developed as a small industrial centre in the early years of this century.¹⁷

For Sheerness, the dockyard dominated the employment structure.¹⁸ In

¹⁶ It is difficult to judge whether, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a turnover in employment in an isolated dockyard of 55 per cent over ten years and 70 per cent over twenty years should be regarded as a sign of stability or change. The fact that the dockyard was relatively stable as a unit of employment did not necessarily imply that the population of the town of Sheerness was stable, given that there were no other employment opportunities for those who did leave the dockyard.

¹⁷ The Sheppy Glue and Chemical Works, established in 1883, still exists as Sheppy Fertilizers; a cement works opened in 1882 but was abandoned in 1916; and in 1910 Johnsons opened a pottery introducing sanitary ware in plaster of Paris moulds to Britain. The Queenborough site was found by Mr Johnson when travelling on the Queenborough-Flushing steamboat service between his factories at Stoke on Trent and Wesel in the Rhineland; 'a considerable number of skilled operatives came . . . from Wesel and Stoke to the newly erected plants' (K. R. Macdonald, 'The Isle of Sheppey and the Swale', MA thesis, Kings College, London, 1949, p. 81). In 1905 a glass bottle works was established and a sheet glass works was started in 1928.

¹⁸ See plate 7, which shows relics of the old dockyard in today's docks.

Table 6.1 Birthplace of dockyard recruits

	Sheppey %	Rest of Kent %	London %	Rest of South East %	South West %	Dockyard towns* %	Other %	Total N
1861 recruits								
All	27.9	14.3	10.2	11.4	9.4	17.7	23.1	1999
Shipwrights	28.0	5.0	4.8	7.1	16.3	29.7	22.9	336
Metalworkers	8.2	9.1	26.4	10.2	10.5	16.2	34.6	352
Labourers	36.1	27.4	7.0	15.0	3.0	8.4	11.3	559
1871 recruits								
All	32.7	16.2	14.2	8.9	10.2	21.5	14.7	1445
Shipwrights	23.2	8.1	12.2	11.1	15.1	31.4	21.4	271
Metalworkers	27.2	11.7	31.8	10.0	8.8	25.5	19.7	239
Labourers	46.2	22.2	6.4	7.6	4.9	8.4	12.3	405

* Dockyard origins include Chatham, Deptford and Woolwich, Portsmouth, Devonport and Pembroke. The figures in this column are also included within the appropriate regional figures in the preceding columns.
 Source: Census Enumerators' Books 1861 and 1871.

Table 6.2 Population distribution for the Isle of Sheppey and Sheerness, 1801-1971

	Isle of Sheppey	Sheerness Census	Sheerness Resident	Ships and Barracks	Blue Town	Mile Town	Marine Town	Minster	Queenborough	Remainder
1801	6,639							5,561*	545	533
1811	8,392							7,003*	805	584
1821	10,221							8,414*	881	926
1831	9,934							7,983*	786	1,165
1841	10,858		7,046		2,829	4,217		8,341*	634	1,540
1851	13,385	9,776	7,888	1,873	2,814	5,074		1,306	772	1,531
1861	18,494	14,552	12,015	2,537	3,386	6,236	2,468	1,412	973	1,557
1871	18,595	14,641	12,519	2,122	2,971	6,368	3,180	1,323	820	1,635
1881	18,204	14,286	12,197	1,759				1,372	982	1,564
1891	18,607	14,492	12,549	1,943				1,619	1,050	1,445
1901	22,275	18,179	14,317	3,862				1,306	1,544	1,246
1911	24,382	17,487	15,460	2,027				3,207	2,468	1,220
1921	26,344	18,673							3,081	
1931	25,464	16,833						3,687	2,941	2,003
1951	28,384	15,796						7,338	3,137	2,113
1961	27,211	13,691						7,860	3,044	2,616
1971	31,590	13,139						12,328†	3,102†	2,815†

* Whole parish, including Sheerness

† Estimates, owing to boundary revisions

Source: published censuses for the years given.

1861, two-thirds of male employees were in either the dockyard or HM Forces, and there was very little employment for women — nearly four-fifths of whom were classified as 'unoccupied'. By 1931 60 per cent of employed males were still employed in the dockyard or in the Forces. There was no alternative manufacturing employment.

The main outlines of the town of Sheerness were determined in the nineteenth century. Blue Town was mainly eighteenth-century, but Mile Town, built on the landward side of the fortifications, was largely completed by 1841. Marine Town was built during the period of expansion from 1850 to 1870 and the intervening land was developed from 1870 to 1890, with larger, three-storied houses to cope with the holiday trade. The houses in Marine Town were of a considerably better quality than in Blue Town or Mile Town and attracted the better paid dockyard workers. Shipwrights and metalworkers in particular were concentrated in Mile Town. Segregation by social status existed at a very local level.¹⁹

Impact of Cuts in Public Expenditure

After the expansion of the dockyard in the late 1850s, associated with the Crimean War, there were calls for economy in the later 1860s. Sheerness was thus faced with cuts in expenditure in the dockyard from 1867 and also with the threat of its complete closure. In 1868 an editorial in one of the Sheerness newspapers complained:

The inhabitants of Sheerness have recently seen that utterances of opinion respecting the dockyard have been heard in the House of Commons which threaten as it were its existence. . . . The Liberal MP for Pontefract, has filled up the measure of condemnation by declaring that a more extravagant yard in a more wretched place could not be conceived.²⁰

¹⁹ Different streets of Marine Town had greater concentrations of distinctive types of workers: thus, in 1871, while there were on average 22 per cent of shipwrights distributed around the town, James Street in Marine Town contained as many as 40 per cent. For labourers, on the other hand, while the average for the town was 23 per cent, the same street had only 11 per cent, whereas parts of Blue Town had well over 40 per cent and one area had 64 per cent. Clearly, Blue Town was in decline from early in the nineteenth century. Analysis of residential mobility in the town from 1851 to 1871 showed that the new residents of Marine Town who came from other parts of Sheerness came disproportionately from Mile Town. There did not seem to be much mobility to other parts of the town from Blue Town: residents of that low status area were more likely to move in and out of the town as a whole.

²⁰ *Sheerness Times and General Advertiser*, 18 April 1868. These and other quotations from the 1860s and 1870s are taken from reports prepared by Gary Harding and Tessa Ovenden as part of an undergraduate course in local history taught by Dr John Whyman of Rutherford College, University of Kent at Canterbury. Their research on the back numbers of newspapers was very time-consuming and I am glad to acknowledge their efforts.

A week later, 204 discharges at Sheerness were announced. There was a suggestion that all men over the age of 55 should be retired and the cuts caused a dramatic variation in the number of apprentices taken on. The other Sheerness paper responded to the cuts in much the same way as its equivalent contemporary would today. 'The value of prosperity in the locality is tangibly depreciated, business credit and general commercial confidence is unsettled.'²¹

Unemployment meant that the men had to leave. In August 1870 there is a reference to a farewell meeting of between 70 and 80 discharged smiths 'preparatory to their leaving Sheerness'.²² Two troopships left for Canada carrying discharged dockers and their families from the four Kentish yards. In the winters of 1869/70 and 1870/71, soup kitchens were opened in the town. At about this time the suggestion was put about that Sheerness should be developed as a seaside resort. In tones echoing almost precisely those of editorials in the early 1980s, one written in July 1871 urged the people of Sheerness out of their apathy:

Surely the time will come when Sheerness people will be cured of this listlessness and go in for helping themselves. With a fine healthy locality and a beach second to none in Kent, a judicious effort of public spirit might make the future of Sheerness and rescue the place from being a mere government 'hanger on'.²³

At about the same period there were suggestions for attracting other employers to take advantage of the surplus of unemployed women and young people. Certainly, efforts to attract more people to the Island as a holiday resort and to the growing industries at Queenborough were moderately successful.²⁴ By 1904 the Sheppey Light Railway was running from Queenborough across the middle of the Island to Leysdown and electric trams ran to make a connection from Sheerness to Minster East. Picture postcards provide glimpses of a modestly flourishing Edwardian seaside town.²⁵ Reports in local newspapers in 1871 provide substantial evidence of the wide range of voluntary organizations and social activities in Sheerness in that year. Musical entertainments were particularly popular. Attendances at meetings and concerts were often quite large. A literary institute reading in February 1871 was 'as thinly attended on Tuesday evening as any we should think during the season there not

²¹ *Sheerness Guardian and East Kent Advertiser*, 13 February 1869.

²² *Sheerness Times and General Advertiser*, 6 August 1870.

²³ *Sheerness Times and General Advertiser*, 29 July 1871.

²⁴ In 1874, for example, Macdonald has suggested that steamers landed 115,000 persons at Sheerness pier (Macdonald, 'The Isle of Sheppey') and various guides and brochures were produced encouraging visitors and housing development. The regular service from Queenborough to Flushing has already been mentioned, and a branch of the Chatham and South Eastern Railway with a spur up to the pier provided 'easy access to the mainland and the metropolis'. For a time this was, indeed, one of the fastest routes to the continent.

²⁵ See Michael Thomas, *A Picture Book of Old Sheppey*, Meresborough Books, Rainham, 1983.

being more than 350-400 persons present'.²⁶ Later meetings recorded 600 and 700 present. Musical entertainments brought out the larger numbers.

According to one informant, whose memories go back to the First World War, the Island generated its own social life since there was a toll of a penny to leave it. After the first bridge was built in 1860, 'you had to pay to go off the Island and you had to pay to come back.' Mr Sears came to Sheerness to train in the First World War and married a local girl. He then got a job in the dockyard as an upholsterer. He has taken a great interest in the community and has a collection of old photographs and other memorabilia.

The town was, er, one of the most marvellous towns in the whole country. In so far that you had a cooperative society — the oldest one in the country founded in 1816 — you had a medical society — you had a penny a week for the head of the household, I think it was an 'alfpenny for the children, and then a free doctor. You had a building society — one of the oldest in the country — you had a working man's club, you had a Conservative Club — Conservative working men's club if you like. You had what was known as the Ivy Leaf Club, which was the old Social and Literary Club. Not much literary about those clubs today, but there was years and years ago when it started. And you had your — the Services Club, that's still running, but it's just a club — no Services. . . . And so the whole town was a community on its own. Their whole world was Sheerness — or the Isle of Sheppey. They'd go off perhaps once a year. Mind you, they had no week's holiday in the old days. . . . We only ever had four days a year. . . . People were so poor that they couldn't go anywhere you see.²⁷

In the period before the First World War there was little employment for women on the Island. As Mr Sears again confirmed:

Very few women worked in Sheerness before World War I. They just stayed at home and almost every other house in these streets would have 'Bed and Breakfast' in the window in the summer time. Earn a little extra money that way. Oh yes, that's quite right, women didn't go out to work then and it wasn't the thing for women anywhere really. Up in the north they did it in the mills, and in London they would go working, but in a place like Sheerness it was frowned on for a woman to work if she was a married woman. Single women would be in the shops, but a married woman — her place was in the home and that's where she — you'd find her.

However, Mrs Unwin remembers a deviant pattern in Queenborough before the First World War. Her memories of everyday life were unusually vivid and she could describe events in great detail. The Sheppy Glue and Chemicals Works, known as 'the chemicals', was well known for creating a disgusting smell and for its dirty and unpleasant work.

²⁶ *Sheerness Times and General Advertiser*, 11 February 1871.

²⁷ From the transcript of an interview with Mr Alfred Sears, one of the dockyard workers.

Local people would not work there and it is remarkable that women had to come in from as far away as Sittingbourne to do this, as it were, low-caste work. Mrs Unwin recalls coming back from a music lesson:

I know I should't'a done it . . . I'd never *seen* a woman in trousers and she'd got them tied round 'ere, you see. 'Cos they used to get rats and goodness knows what over there — it used to be terrible — and of course being young and silly, I turned round to look, you know, and I thought 'Oh, doesn't she smell 'orrible' — and she *swore* at me for looking at her.²⁸

This confrontation with the outcaste women of the glue works clearly frightened the respectable young girl, whose grandmother had come to the Island as a school teacher from Wales. There are still plenty of rough, tough working women on the Island today, but in 1913 Mrs Unwin, perhaps mistakenly, thought them exceptional: she was at pains to emphasize how clean everyone kept their homes in those days.

The Decline and Closure of the Dockyard

Some general conclusions can be drawn about the impact of the dockyard on Sheerness. Perhaps the best starting point is to consider the needs of the Admiralty. There was a need for a reliable and highly skilled workforce, since the quality of the product was of considerable importance. The Admiralty had to produce ships at a price competitive with private shipbuilders, who formed a powerful lobby against the dockyards in Parliament. Second, they needed to be able to maintain their workforce cheaply at times of slack demand, and expand it rapidly when the need arose. These needs were met by two strategies. First, the workforce was isolated from the rest of the labour market to reduce competition from other employers paying higher wages. In Sheerness there was virtually no other source of employment, apart from services, until the 1960s. This had very serious implications for women's employment possibilities. Furthermore, by keeping the shipwrights as the general constructors of the ships — a group with no parallel in private industry — they helped to reduce the potential for unionization and militancy. The second main strategy was to offer the dockyard workers considerable non-monetary compensations for wages which were low by comparison with the private sector — pensions, security, prospects of promotion, perhaps a higher level of control over the immediate production process than private workers, a slower pace. The Admiralty also offered the prospect of regular work for established men, and created

²⁸ From one of the follow-up interviews to the main Sheppey Survey. This informant has been given an assumed name.

a division between this group, which was the permanent workforce, and the hired men, whose employment depended on the amount of work — though even this group was in general more regularly employed than private sector workers.

These points may be illustrated by interviews with retired dockers whose memories cover the period from the First World War to the closure of the dockyard in 1960.²⁹ They emphasize the leisurely pace of work, the indulgency patterns whereby the dockyard authorities kept only modest control over the traditional occupational easement of making 'rabbits' — private jobs done with dockyard tools and materials — and the overwhelmingly Conservative political ideology. Talking to the shop steward who had developed the Sheerness Labour Party in the 1920s, it was clear that the dockyard had little latent radicalism:

You see, the working men's club in the dockyard, it was then, every man practically. Perhaps and in the Conservative Club too. . . . The dockyard came first. Well you see the feelings in the dockyard are this — that the Tories are the people for war, they support that kind of thing and they were the people for a big navy, big army, you see, so you'd have a job to get the people in the dockyard to vote Labour, because they'd close the dockyard.³⁰

In the event, of course, it was, ironically, the Conservatives who closed the Sheerness dockyard in 1960 and then twenty years later made the same decision for Chatham. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, workers had no way of resisting cutbacks in employment and there were regular discharges. 'You stood there and you listened and you waited and you heard. It was last in and first out.'³¹ Because the dockyard was the dominant source of income and the dominant employer in the town since its establishment as a community in the early nineteenth century, it dominated many other aspects of life. It promoted attitudes that stressed individual mobility and instrumental collectivism, which may not seem to some to be the basis for the ideal-typical traditional working-class community.

The Rise and Fall of Casual Work

Parallel with this formal, hierarchical, relatively well-documented world of the dockyard, there was another, rougher and less well-documented working-class culture more typical of Samuel's quarry roughs or White's Campbell Bunk. Even the pious and deferential Augustus Daly, who

²⁹ The argument is also very thorough documented for Chatham (Waters, 'Social history of the Chatham dockyard').

³⁰ From an interview I conducted as part of the pilot work for the main project.

³¹ *Ibid.*

generally paints Sheppey in a very rosy hue, acknowledged that in the early nineteenth century 'the morals of the Sheppey islanders of this period were apparently, somewhat lax, for smuggling was not only exceedingly rife but was accounted an honourable vocation to pursue. The whole populace, it was said, were more or less addicted to this profitable pursuit.'³² In common with other parts of East Kent, smugglers saw themselves as 'free traders'. This swashbuckling free-trader spirit flourished again in the 1970s, when large quantities of the goods imported into the docks found their way all round the Island. The peak of this activity was in the mid-1970s, before fieldwork on the Island began and a fierce crackdown by the police led, so it is consistently claimed, to piles of transistors appearing at the bottom of Minster Cliffs.³³

Obviously, many Islanders go fishing and shoot and trap duck and rabbits on the marshes. Much of the Island gives a remote and desolate impression and, until recently, wildlife was abundant. For nearly a century, holiday-makers have doubled the population of the Island in the summer, bringing money and the opportunity for quick-witted entrepreneurs to make small fortunes out of food, drink and 'amusements'. Leysdown-on-Sea attracted hustlers and cowboys and provided apprenticeships in mild crookery for generations of school leavers who, in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, went 'down Leysdown' to work as cheap labour, cleaning the chalets in the holiday camps, serving in cafes and bars and minding stalls and (later) machines in the fairgrounds and amusement arcades. The holiday trade provided a myriad opportunities for small business enterprises to start with little capital, and the regular flow of new clientele prevented the build-up of bad reputations: fiddles could be perpetrated all summer; prices could be exorbitant; and high labour turnover prevented possible protest but spread bad practices. Some parents refused to let their sons and daughters go off in the summer to pick up bad ways. However, such seasonal employment also had the useful function of providing independence, some pocket money and the experience of a number of bosses, without any opprobrium resulting from having 'changed jobs too frequently'! Being unemployed for a spell in the winter, 'helping your dad' or 'looking after your sister's baby' is perhaps more acceptable when there is a very strong likelihood of finding temporary employment at the beginning of May.

³² Daly, *History of the Isle of Sheppey*, p. 264.

³³ On my very first visit to the Island in the winter of 1977-8 one of my early informants was recovering in a pub after claiming much of a jettisoned cargo of timber, which had been washed up on the beach in the heavy seas. Getting it on to an inadequate truck in the dark was not easy work. On another occasion, during the same winter, driving down a remote track in the marshes opposite the Island late one very dark, wet night, I came across two heavy lorries loading by an isolated cottage. The tone with which I was told I had taken the wrong road convinced me that some fieldwork situations are best left unexplored.

Unfortunately, by the late 1970s there had been a drastic reduction in the number of summer visitors. Debate raged on the Island about whether it was the lack of facilities or cheaper package holidays abroad.

For many years, Sheppey has been the haven for the poorer section of the south-east London communities. They have relied on the Island to provide them with holidays. Many have bought caravans, some older and more rundown than others, or chalets, on the many sites in and around the Leysdown area. The huge number of vans, chalets and villas has meant a constant flow of people to that end of the island and a constant flow of income to the arcade, shops, stall and entertainment owners.

Thus, an editorial in the local newspaper justified the development of underdevelopment and attacked a report of the South East England Tourist Board and the Department of Environment regulations that demanded hard standings, electricity and main drainage.³⁴ Few facilities and little surveillance were seen as positive attractions. More organization would reduce the desirability of Leysdown to 'the less affluent holiday maker from this side of London'. In the heyday of Leysdown's prosperity in the 1950s, there was a regular bus service from there to Leytonstone in East London.³⁵ While to officials in Maidstone and Sittingbourne, Leysdown was seen as 'a real planning disaster based on too-local decision-making',³⁶ it at least had the merit of attracting regular spare money which could circulate in the local economy.

The holiday trade was blamed by the school for generating an ideology of dishonesty and rule-bending, and in 1978 the truancy rate for the fifth year at the comprehensive school was said to be 20 per cent. Bobby Wilson, the Rolls-Royce-driving owner of the amusement arcade at Leysdown, was a regular recruiter of school leavers.³⁷ However, the possibility of leaving school early to get regular money was rapidly declining in the late 1970s.

³⁴ *Sheerness Times Guardian*, 24 April 1981.

³⁵ This service ceased in the early 1970s.

³⁶ It would be indelicate to reveal the precise source of this remark.

³⁷ Bobby Wilson was killed in a car accident in October 1983. His death provoked many warm tributes and it was reported that 600 people came to his funeral at Minster Abbey. Wilson came to Sheppey in 1961 and was often referred to as 'Mr Leysdown' since at one time he owned most of the place. It is interesting that this rather swashbuckling entrepreneur should appeal so strongly to the Islanders.

Employment on Sheppey 1960-1980

There is no question that the closure of the Admiralty dockyard in 1960 was, in the words of the Chief Planning Officer for the District, 'a hammer blow to the economy of the Island' (even though, a few weeks later, the *Sheerness Times-Guardian* was describing 'Sheppey's most important occasion of the century . . . when momentous history was made' when the new Kingsferry Bridge was opened by the Duchess of Kent). More than 700 dockyard workers were put out of work. Although many left the Island, and the Admiralty paid the fares for some to work in the Chatham yard for a short period, in 1960-61 local unemployment reached 11 per cent when the national rate was just over 2 per cent. The dockyard was bought by Building Developments Ltd for £750,000 as an industrial site. The industrial structure of Sheerness has developed entirely since 1960. The Navy playing fields provided the location for one industrial estate, and the Army playing fields provided the site for the steel mill in the early 1970s.

The development of Sheerness docks happened almost casually. In the early 1960s the odd vessel was being unloaded there and while other ports were moving into new technology, containerization and so forth, Sheerness was not in a position to do so. At a time, therefore, when few ports wanted conventional ships and the London docks were clogged up, Sheerness could unload faster and could get fruit and vegetables up to Covent Garden in two hours. A Stevedores Union was formed in the early 1960s and a distinctive element in the local labour market soon became firmly established. There was no tradition of labour militancy, and since dockers soon became among the highest paid workers on the Island, there was little reason for the situation to change. Furthermore, the dockers could easily get home for lunch: if there was no work they could simply go home and, in the words of the chief executive, 'upset the local decorating market'. In the late 1970s it might cost the owners of a ship £2,500 a day to keep a ship in the docks: in the desire to get ships away owners would pay almost anything, and therefore, in practice, the extra costs of overtime were paid without question and fiddles to extend the amount of permissible overtime were accepted with little argument. From the early 1960s to the late 1970s, registered dockworkers in Sheerness increased to between 360 and 380. The 'official' reason why Sheerness developed rapidly and effectively as a port was its 'good labour relations'.

However, there is another, darker side to the post-1960 development. Most workers on the Island in the early 1960s were largely unskilled and had no tradition of collective organization, shift work or hard industrial discipline. Somewhat unkindly, one official claimed that the workers in

the dockyard had been provided with a legalized form of national assistance. More radically, another official claimed that the workers had been dispossessed from their own labour market as new, skilled workers had to be imported from outside to work in the new factories. There was no established union pressure to ensure that incoming employers hired local labour.³⁸ In the case of the steel mill, 90 per cent of the most skilled workers came from outside the area. However, some of the new firms that were attracted to the Island recognized that its isolation and tradition of low wages were substantial resources. Factories in the clothing industry in particular were attracted by the availability of women workers, whom they could train and expect to keep. Some firms exploited the local labour force by paying low wages, while others paid more, knowing that the differential would ensure that their workers would not leave. The steel mill, which was established in 1972, employed more than 800 workers eight years later. Young, tough, stable, married men were needed who could stand hard, hot work, including shift work, and recruitment never posed a problem.

A detailed study of the industrial structure of the Island was undertaken in 1981,³⁹ demonstrating how top-heavy it was: of the 39 manufacturing enterprises, 15 employ more than 50 workers, a further 10 employ between 21 and 50 workers and a mere 14 firms employ up to 20 workers. Even if these 14 each had 10 workers, which it is known they do not, that would mean only between 100 and 200 jobs in the small-firm sector on the Island. Inevitably, this makes the Island extremely vulnerable, should the giants of the labour market get into difficulty. Typically, in a healthy labour market, a seedbed of infant industries produces growth, providing, as it were, an inflatable cushion should the main employers be obliged to shed labour. Also, the service sector is very poorly developed. There is a striking lack of any office employment of any scale whatsoever: the largest employers are simply the local branches of banks or building societies.

³⁸ The General and Municipal Workers' Union (now the General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union) is the largest union on the Island, being at least twice the size of its nearest rival. Office holders change only on the death of incumbents and hence there have been only three branch secretaries at Queenborough since the Union was founded in the 1920s. The GMWU offers a whole range of facilities to its members and was at one time jokingly referred to as 'the funeral union' because of the generous funeral benefits it offered. Most of its members treat it as a convenient private club. Union officials have a secure, highly respected lifetime job, which can be combined with chairmanship of the local Conservative Party with no sense of incongruity. Members regard the Union as a source of service provision and social security more than as a political and campaigning organization. As one union official remarked, 'In Queenborough you feel a sort of loyalty to the firm anyway because it's only a small firm. It's not so much a factory as a way of life after twenty years. The hours suit me and the money is good. It's a way of life, a local job and a very secure job.' Since he said that, the firm has twice been taken over by international corporations.

³⁹ Pahl with Dennett, *Industry and Employment*.

This dramatic skew in the structure of employment on the Island implies that the twenty-seven employers with more than fifty workers are more important than might be the case elsewhere. For good or ill, the future of the Island's employment is overwhelmingly dependent on them. This small group of the largest employers had about half of the workforce between them, and a representative of each of the main employers was interviewed at length between February and June 1981. As Table 6.3 shows, women comprise 20 per cent of the workforce of the twenty-five largest companies, and their relative proportion of the workforce of individual firms is, by and large, inversely related to their size. Most of these firms have come to the Island since 1960 and half of them are ultimately owned by organizations based outside the United Kingdom. Four of the six largest employers are owned by multi-national firms. At the time of the survey, it was estimated that these twenty-five companies generated an annual turnover of about £100 million and those with the highest turnover are foreign-owned. The rolling mill at Queenborough and the steel mill at Sheerness were partly encouraged to come to Sheppey by the established shipbreaking yards on the Island. The post-war government granted a licence not only to break up ships but also to smelt them into raw material for the UK steel industry. The scrap from a de-industrializing Britain has helped to bring some new investment to Sheppey. The Queenborough rolling mill has moved from ships to old track and wagons from British Rail. It owns the old line which ran to Queenborough jetty in the days when it was a packet post. Owned and managed by an Italian, using an Italian rolling process and employing between twenty and fifty skilled Italian workers at different times, the mill employed about ninety workers in 1981. The rapid expansion was possible through finance from Swiss banks and the chance to buy 6 acres of industrial land adjoining the railway line for a mere £25,000.

Table 6.3 *Isle of Sheppey firms, by size of workforce and proportion of women workers*

<i>No. of workers in firm*</i>	<i>No. of firms</i>	<i>Average no. of workers per firm</i>	<i>% of women in workforce</i>
Over 750	3	800	11
300-749	3	325	17
100-299	2	150	43
Under 100	17	56	39
Total	25	185	20

* Total number of workers = 4,635

Many employers mentioned the advantage of Sheppey's 'green labour' — people who could be trained and also had the 'right attitudes'. Wages were not high, and many managers who took part in the survey

recognized that it would be very hard to bring up a family on £100 a week in 1981. They would prefer to employ fewer, more highly paid and more skilled workers.

Perhaps the most striking finding from an analysis of the wage rates of Sheppey workers was the glaring discrepancy between what women were paid for semi-skilled work and what men earn for the same category of work. In one company, the lowest paid semi-skilled worker was the maintenance fitter's mate: he earned £2.25 an hour in 1981, which is £90 for a 40-hour week. If this was his minimum wage, it was substantially above the rate that most women on the Island were paid. Women's rates varied from around £1.50 to £1.89 an hour and they generally worked a 37-hour week. In one firm no overtime was possible, so almost the complete female workforce earned a maximum of £55.50 a week. In other firms there was a range from £55 to £75 or £80. When asked about the rates for semi-skilled men and women in the same firm, the discrepancy would be explained by the fact that all the women were on piecework but that such work was not available to men. The fastest women on piecework in a number of factories could earn up to £80 or £90, and in two, exceptional, cases, women were earning over £100 for piecework. In one case that involved very long hours (54) and in the other, where women could rise above the basic rate of £80 to over £100 'easily' on piecework, 70 per cent of them were in their appropriate union.

Ten companies employed at least thirty women as semi-skilled workers, but the opportunities for women to become trained further so as to earn skilled workers' wages seemed very small. One employer claimed that, while there were opportunities for women to become skilled workers, they did not choose to do so. Another said that one woman was following the formal training procedures to become a skilled worker, but because of age considerations she was unlikely ever to become skilled.

Despite their low rewards, the women workers of Sheppey were highly valued and in many ways appeared to be better workers, from the employers' point of view, than the men. Many of the companies who employ a high proportion of women came to the Island specifically because unemployment was high and the women, perhaps more than the men, were trapped on the Island. Those who employed both men and women and who were prepared to make disparaging remarks about the men (about which more later) frequently made it clear that they exempted the women from these remarks. Typically, women workers are loyal, reliable and do not make trouble. Those employers who were seen to be fair and reasonable (and that does not seem to involve paying high wages) got a very loyal response. In one case, a rush of work led management to ask for extra work in the evenings and weekends, and half the staff volunteered to do this. In another instance, a firm found itself short of work and the managing director explained that if the workers insisted on keeping their existing hours of work, he would have to make some

redundant. However, he was prepared to devise a work-sharing scheme to keep everyone on, but with reduced hours and earnings. This was accepted, even though this meant a low ceiling for the highest earners and a mere £40 a week for the lowest earners, with two-thirds of the workforce getting less than £50 per week. It seemed clear that the extra effort and complications that these arrangements created could not be justified on strict profit and loss criteria. 'It's a case of making a profit or coming out of it maintaining your staff. I always think that we must look forward to the time when we can employ all the staff full-time.' The idea was to keep the business going as a collective enterprise, partly because that was a decent thing to do. 'If I was ruled by a board of directors, I couldn't do it.'

The Island being a small community and with relatively few alternative wage-earning possibilities for women, some employers saw their future involving a few men to keep the machinery going, with women to do the packaging and boxing. Such work is always classified as semi-skilled, but, of course, it does not have to be done by females. Nevertheless, the wage rates ensure that it is. Employers have been flexible by, for example, allowing women to leave early on Friday to do the shopping and, in general, have been willing to take a woman back after she has left to have a family. As one manager remarked, 'often the wildest ones when they're young become the most reliable ones when they come back.' Since many of the factories are close to the council housing areas of Sheerness and Queenborough, women can even get home at lunch-time if they want to. This must be relatively unusual.

According to one employer, women have become relatively stoical about their marginal position in the labour market and see themselves as something of a reserve army of labour to be taken on in good times and the first to be discarded when times get difficult.

It certainly suits employers to imagine that redundancy causes less distress to women. As one manager remarked, 'we have got people here who are the breadwinners, who are single-parent families who'd obviously take any smashing of their income very hard. But the one who's been working in a family, even though their husband has been unemployed, doesn't regard herself as the breadwinner. You know, it's sort of "oh well, it was fun while it lasted".'

It would be extremely surprising if these two conflicting views of Sheppey women workers were equally true. Some employers see them as *more* loyal and committed than the men, whereas others see them as *less* committed. Some who take the former view are prepared to reciprocate with a similar commitment to their workforce. But one company, which employs 600 workers to assemble parts in their own homes, has been criticized for the low wages paid to these outworkers; according to the rate set by a time and motion study, the homeworkers might be expected to earn 60p an hour, although, of course, many manage to earn much

more. This particular company can readily silence its critics by pointing out that it has a turnover of one in six of its outworkers a year and never has a problem of recruitment. The waiting list of those wanting to become homeworkers is as long as those actually on it. This must be clear evidence of the demand of the women of Sheppey to earn money. When wage rates are low, the need for a second wage earner may become a necessity.

All employers were asked how long it would take to replace a skilled manual worker (implying, of course, a man), assuming that they had to do so. The answer was always measured in days or, at most, a few weeks. Thus, in one small manufacturing company which employed no tradesmen, 'two weeks on the job' was said to be adequate to get enough skill to do the work. In another larger company, it was claimed that many of the workers could be trained in a day, although, exceptionally, some workers doing a particularly skilled operation would need three months' training. More typical, perhaps, was the reply that the time for training for both skilled and semi-skilled workers was 'about a fortnight for anything'.

Given these modest demands on male workers' capacities, it was difficult to know precisely what a good worker was. Most employers very generously spent time showing me round their works, and my subjective impression was that those exercising the most complex manual skills were more likely to be women. Indeed, women doing what is defined as semi-skilled work, say as machinists, would require up to six months' training — which is substantially more than the men doing what is called skilled work. Thus, despite the protestations of employers, it does seem that men do not necessarily have great demands put upon them. It is, of course, paradoxical that women who are expected to do relatively demanding and meticulous work are paid by piecework and get lower wages than the men.

When employers are talking about good workers, they do not really mean good workers: they mean good *employees*. That is to say, they want disciplined and reliable workers who accept their pay and conditions without protest or who respond in a very direct way to the stimulus of more income. There is an interesting contrast here in the way employers approach women: generally there is a strict limit on the amount of money they are prepared to pay, but there is more emphasis on their being decent, understanding and reasonable in order to bind the women with ties of loyalty. For the men, the pecuniary nexus was frequently held to be sufficient.

When managers were asked about the distinctiveness of the Sheppey workforce, they mentioned the isolation and 'rural' nature of the Island, the ready availability of seasonal or casual employment until very recently, the family nature of social relationships on the Island, and a

value system that expects bosses to be bosses and is suspicious of attempts to share responsibility. It is evident that these factors are interrelated, and it is also clear that previous experiences help to colour contemporary consciousness and understanding. The best bosses are not necessarily those that pay most or believe in power-sharing — rather, the best bosses are those who provide certainty, security and stability, are not too demanding, allow a degree of absenteeism and do not expect the work to be an all-enveloping life interest for the worker.

One manager, in attempting to put his finger on what was most distinctive, thought that the dockyard had created a particular style of worker: 'it gave employment with dignity.' The new employment that came onto the Island in the 1960s and 1970s demanded different qualities from the Sheppey workers. It demanded regular hours; it introduced all kinds of controls and disciplines. There was little concern for the workers' dignity, and, very frequently, firms closed or workers were made redundant as a result of takeovers, mergers or the rationalizations of larger companies which decided that they could dispense with their Sheppey plant. No longer was there a clear and obvious boss — whether of the dockyard, the bottle works, the potteries or the glass factory. As the manager of one of the older companies, which has a long association with the Island, commented: 'they're good workers but suspicious — and rightly so when they've been taken over three times in ten years.' Now, he admits, despite attempts to explain to the shopfloor about the takeovers, there is still confusion: 'they don't even know who owns them!'

There was nothing, it seemed, that many workers could do to avoid being made redundant from some of the companies that came and went in the 1960s. It was not lack of workers' efforts that led to closures and redundancies in the late 1960s; it was under-capitalization, changing markets or some other factor over which they had no control whatsoever. Given this utter powerlessness in the face of forces based largely outside the Island, it is perhaps not surprising that their time-scale should be foreshortened and their attitude to work should be ambivalent. Without exception, employers agreed that on occasions workers would rally round and give of their best when there was a clearly perceived need to do so. They *could* work hard, but did not always *want* to. An unusual comment, made by one of the most thoughtful managers on the Island, was that Sheppey had a 'very middle-class workforce'. By this he meant that there was a distinctive kind of individualism on the Island. Unlike the workers in the North of England from where he came, Sheppey workers show 'a variety of different forms of individualism' and he referred to their opinions, their leisure, pursuits and so on. Certainly, there is an unusually high proportion of home owners on the Island: overall, 69 per cent of the Islanders own their own homes and 61 per cent of manual

workers do so. This compares with 45 per cent of manual workers in Britain as a whole who own their own homes.⁴⁰

It seems likely that some of the larger and firmly established employers on the Island have managed to build up a committed workforce. By paying higher wages, they have encouraged their employees to raise their style of consumption so that they become more dependent on higher wages. In time, it is possible to buy in labour as long as working conditions are not too bad. One of the largest employers on the Island was able to claim that there is 'no such thing as bad troops, only bad management': few others were able or could afford to agree with such a sentiment. Most managers felt slightly baffled and beaten by 'the Island's mentality', the Island pace of work and the problem of motivating men to do noisy, repetitive, dirty and sometimes dangerous work for a wage that, as some managers admitted, was little better than the dole for many married men. I suspect that most managers would prefer not to have to employ people at all under these conditions, and many had plans to introduce more machines and to get rid of the worst jobs. A future pattern of factories in which machines are maintained by a few men and most other tasks are done by women seems likely in Sheppey.

A casualized secondary labour market could also be readily observed on the Island: youngsters in the amusement arcades, women behind the bars and pensioners filling in for everything from cleaning to skilled craft work, provide a very varied and fluctuating workforce. Wages for by-employment are always low: either the supply is short or the demand is great or both. By-employment can be hard, exhausting and demoralizing, especially perhaps for those with skills and experience. To see this kind of shadow wage labour as some kind of solution to the problems of a de-industrializing society is dangerous romanticism.

Before leaving this discussion of employment, two examples of other styles of waged work may be mentioned, which illustrate aspects of employment not obtainable from the formal survey. One 'employer' did not appear in the survey because he 'did not employ anyone'. However, he manufactures a product that requires substantial labour, and he has a milkman and several pensioners working for him. The milkman comes to the factory for three hours, four times a week for which he gets 80p an hour, paid monthly. He uses this as a compulsory form of savings to pay his electricity bill. In the afternoon he does voluntary work, caring for the lawn of a bowling green. Another worker is a pensioner whose first job of the day is to open a newspaper shop and mark the papers. After he has been home for breakfast and walked the dog, he does three hours at the factory for £1.50 a day. Then, after a nap in the afternoon, our pensioner does his third job between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. as a sort of night watchman at £3 a day. His total weekly income in 1979, on top of his pension, was

⁴⁰ *Social Trends*, HMSO, London, 1981.

about another £50. According to the owner of this factory, there was a network of spry old age pensioners ready to do these regular, relatively undemanding jobs at low salaries. For them it provides a distraction and a little extra money. Younger people, he claimed, would not accept the low rewards and the discipline of keeping regular hours. Somewhat fancifully, perhaps, I was told that these pensioners living centrally in Sheerness all had telephones and could be called up as an instant reserve army to deal with rush orders, a job of cleaning on the boats or whatever. With their pensions as a long-stop, a tradition of self-help and early rising, they were following the pattern of by-employment that has been described in previous chapters as part of the traditional pattern of getting the work done.

In April 1978 I talked to women on the Warden Bay estate at the east end of the Island, where the time and cost of commuting and the heavy burden of a mortgage put severe strains on married life. In one small close, five husbands out of thirty were unemployed. Opportunities for casual work were limited and competition was intense. Women who had skilled jobs before marriage, working for computer companies and the like, were obliged to accept 50p an hour serving in greengrocers or in the pubs. One woman, in desperation, worked at a day job seven days a week for which she got £21 and then served behind a bar from 7 p.m. till midnight. She worked days and nights for two months, earning less than £40 a week. She had two children aged 5 and 6 and simply never saw them. Some women will have a third weekend job but still not earn much more money. Buses to Sheerness run once every two hours in winter and in 1978 it cost £1 return. Prescriptions of Valium to the wives on the estate doubled during the year before fieldwork began.

The Political Economy of Housing in Perspective

We have seen that members of households engage in different forms of work to get by. Paid employment is generally necessary to buy the hens, but feeding them, shutting them up and letting them out and all the other work necessary before eggs or chicken can be eaten is generally unpaid work by household members. The provision and maintenance of housing is on an altogether different scale. Ordinary working people were, perhaps, more effectively dispossessed by the enclosure movement and their forced migration to the towns, where they were obliged to rent whatever industrialists and speculative builders provided for them.⁴¹

⁴¹ The miseries and problems associated with housing the workers in nineteenth-century towns have been well documented and discussed (for example, J. N. Tarn, *Five Per Cent Philanthropy*, Cambridge University Press, 1973; A. S. Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, Edward Arnold, London, 1977). The 1901 Census showed that 45.2 per cent of Finsbury's population lived in one- or two-roomed flats, and Stepney, Shoreditch, St Marylebone and

Middle-class entrepreneurs and philanthropists were much concerned about housing the urban workers, and the more respectable and aspiring tradesmen and white-collar workers recognized that their position in society was centrally linked to where and how they 'built their home'. The idea of working collectively for the family home implies, of course, more than just the physical dwelling and its location: it includes also the way it is furnished and used — the whole style of life of domestic respectability. One strand in this ideology had direct implications for the development of Sheppey — and certain distinctive household work strategies — namely, the development of plotlanding in the early years of this century.

Following the severe agricultural depression in the 1870s, agricultural land prices declined steeply after 1878, so that in certain coastal areas, where land was not in great demand for farming, there was some potentiality for speculative housing development. Entrepreneurs bought land very cheaply in parts of South Essex, Kent and Sussex, divided it into plots 20 ft by 150 ft and sold them for as little as £5 a plot at the turn of the century. Purchasers could construct their own dwellings or simply keep the land as an investment. C. Ward and D. Hardy have documented this process in their research on plotlands: they concentrate on the larger development of such places as Jaywick Sands and Canvey Island in Essex and Peacehaven in Sussex. In areas where the holiday trade was also expanding in Edwardian times, speculators would seem to be in a lucrative enterprise. Opening up land ownership to new social categories appeared to fit in with strong social and economic tendencies. Very little initial capital was required — perhaps a 10 per cent deposit followed by sixteen quarterly payments. Given the Isle of Sheppey's aspirations to develop as a holiday resort, its poorer quality agricultural land and its overall marginal social and economic situation, it was clear that it seemed to be a good candidate for such development.

Before 1890, as I mentioned above, most of the land on the Island was owned by absentee landlords, and the very low returns on grain encouraged them to put their land back into grazing. Its exposed and windswept position made it unsuitable for the traditional Kentish crops, fruit and hops. Larger and more substantial and particularly shrewder investors were less likely to find the Island attractive. The cliffs at Minster and Warden were slipping into the sea and, as Macdougall suggests, 'marsh fever', or malaria, had been a problem in long, hot summers. Indeed, as late as 1917 136 cases of malaria were recorded in the

Holborn all had over a third of their inhabitants packed into one- or two-roomed flats (Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p. 310). The housing problem was, inextricably and inevitably, a problem of poverty and, as the Chairman of the LCC's housing committee, Sir J. P. Dickson-Poynder, recognized in 1907, the housing problem 'provokes the vexed question of the relations between rent and wages, which easily slides into that of capital and labour' (quoted in Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p. 312).

Sheppey/Grain areas.⁴² Whether or not this was widely known, it did not deter a number of entrepreneurs from buying land on the Island from about 1900. The Shellness and Leysdown Estate Company was placing advertisements in the local newspapers and was based at Mussel House in Leysdown. In 1904 another advertisement advertised freehold land at £12 a plot 'within 300 yards of Halfway Houses. High, Dry and Healthy. Reduced prices to builders taking a number of plots. The Land Company, 68 Cheapside, London EC.'⁴³

Detailed evidence from title deeds suggests that speculators sold land more to each other than to individual ploholders. The Land Company was founded by Frederick Francis Ramuz, JP, who had been Mayor of Southend and had made a fortune from property speculation in south Essex, where plotlanding was more successful. Advertisements were placed in *The Evening News* and brochures were produced and circulated in London. Handbills were distributed in certain streets and posted in selected railway stations, claiming that Sheppey was the 'nearest ocean frontage to London on the Kent coast'.⁴⁴

Ramuz gave his son George 2,000 acres of land at Minster in Sheppey, together with the responsibility for paying off an £11,000 mortgage. George Ramuz never became very wealthy, spending most of his life paying off the debt, but he became an influential local figure, donating playing fields and open space to the community. He set up six little estates on the Island and marked off the estates with kerbstones, still to be seen today. One of these estates stretches from Minster Abbey to the sea cliffs, and 441 plots are set out in the Estate Plan, along Kings Road, Princes Avenue and Imperial Avenue.

In 1961, when interviewed by the local newspaper, George Ramuz described his marketing strategy: 'If we hadn't induced London shopkeepers, tradesmen and publicans, and a few builders who had got some money to invest, I don't think development would have taken place at all. . . . I was working in the City at the time, I had been for some years. I had that connection with them. I had been in the City from 1891 when I was 14.'⁴⁵ Very shrewdly, he had focused on the rising class of skilled artisans, clerks and bookkeepers, the people George and Weedon Grossmith describe in *The Diary of a Nobody*. The Land Company brochure was spattered with little couplets designed to appeal to and to foster petit bourgeois values of independence and property ownership:

⁴² Macdougall, 'Malaria'.

⁴³ *Sheerness Guardian and East Kent Advertiser*, 2 January 1904.

⁴⁴ Ramuz had his friends among London journalists; an article entitled 'An Unknown Paradise' described Minster as 'sitting on the memorial sea. One could live here, one could see the children grow straight and strong and healthy here. Unlike London, it is a place to make one's home. And next best to that, it is a place to take one's summer rest. Here on the nearer coast of Kent is the ideal holiday home' (*The Morning Leader*, 20 June 1903).

⁴⁵ *Sheerness Times-Guardian*, 16 June 1961.

Clerks and mechanics, commence now to save
Remember the landless man is a slave

With all investors let maxim stand:
He ventures safely who invests in land

Parliamentarians, philosophers agree
The Great Towns' workers ought to be free

Everything was done to encourage would-be purchasers. Ramuz offered free return rail tickets from Holborn and Herne Hill with lunch and champagne before the plot auction in a marquee.⁴⁶ There were even specially chartered trains. Any kind of building was encouraged in the handbills:

Cheap iron or wooden bungalows allowed
No arbitrary building restrictions

The Land Company built specimen wooden bungalows to encourage potential buyers. In these six-monthly auctions, Ramuz claimed to have sold 3,000 plots to over 1,000 Londoners. In his word, he was 'distributing' the land.⁴⁷ So effective was he in this 'distribution' that many plottolders never claimed or developed their land, and there was confusion over title until very recently. In some cases this held up development and in other cases it encouraged squatting or just plain annexation. The chaotic pattern of land ownership defeated the planners. Ramuz probably did more to hinder than to encourage development by scattering the land in this way. Nevertheless, Minster did grow steadily from 1901, particularly in the first decade of the century, when it grew by 146 per cent. This soon posed problems in the provision of infrastructure. Ramuz began by selling water at a halfpenny a bucket from a horse and cart before establishing an inadequate Water Company in 1902. Frequently water had to be rationed; the roads were unmade and there was no sewerage.⁴⁸

However, it was not until the 1960s that the local council took action and 380 plots on Minster Cliffs Estate were acquired by compulsory purchase order on 5 August 1965.⁴⁹ In 1980 the council still owned just

⁴⁶ *The Observer*, 29 October 1967.

⁴⁷ When Ramuz died in 1966 his estate was valued at only £16,587.

⁴⁸ As one exasperated visitor put it in a letter to the local paper in 1925; 'What can I say bad enough about the mud and the water? . . . Roads there are none, drainage none, lamps none, shops none, and post office — such a palatial building! — a mile or so away. Why do people live here?' (*Sheerness Times Guardian*, 1 January 1925).

⁴⁹ Despite the Council's efforts, many plots remained unclaimed. The intention was to amalgamate and resell the plots, with the council providing better infrastructure and facilities out of profits. Plots that were bought for £600 in 1965 were sold in the first council auction of forty plots in 1973 for between £3,000 and £6,500 mainly to private individuals or

over 8 acres, and, inevitably, as time goes on, sales have gone increasingly up-market. The council has, therefore, encouraged a shift to more affluent home owners, since, under the now more stringent planning regulations, architects and builders must submit professional plans. However, they still favour the individual, and plots are sold through 'informal tender', which, officials claim, helps to ensure that most buyers are still local people. Certainly, this method of land allocation would not appeal to any but the very smallest builder, and the larger developer, responsible for most of the private house building in Kent, went elsewhere.

Housing on Sheppey, 1960-1980

Four main developments in the housing of the Islanders have taken place: the expansion of Sheerness for the dockyard workers; a similar development at Queenborough for the early industrial development there, often built by the factory owners themselves; the plotlands of Minster; and the chalet development at Leysdown. All these types of development offer considerable scope for individual domestic refurbishing and improvement, positively encouraged by the council. In the mid-1970s, for example, the council focused on a cluster of streets in Marine Town, Sheerness, built between 1857 and 1865 — Alma Street, James Street, Richmond Street, Clyde Street and Unity Street. This small area, typical of working-class Sheerness, had within it two general stores, a newsagent, a fish and chip shop, two hairdressers and a second-hand furniture shop. There were also three pubs. Most of the 296 dwellings (77 per cent) were owner-occupied, but 12 per cent were unfurnished, privately rented.

Overall, the council found considerable poverty, environmental dereliction and a striking lack of amenities in the houses examined. In just over half the houses, of which many were occupied by elderly people often living alone, the head of the household had no earned income. It was decided to designate the area as a Housing Action Area in January 1977. This allowed substantial funds to be made available, which had the inevitable effect of encouraging the younger occupants to benefit from the grants, often by doing much of the work for themselves. At the time of the council survey in 1976, it was found that the average length of occupation of houses in this area was seventeen years, and thirty-two houses had had the same occupiers for more than forty years. Clearly, an

small builders. Since then the Swale Borough Council has been releasing plots in a steady flow: thirty were sold in 1979-80 and at that time the price was between £9,000 and £10,000 for a site on an unmade road. Plots are sold with a 40 ft frontage, twice as wide as those Ramuz sold, but the pattern of piecemeal individual development remains.

area such as this can change very quickly in its social composition as a high proportion of the population die or move to residential homes in the space of a few years.

Such an intensive survey of a few streets was not attempted in the programme of research reported here. As is shown in Chapters 8 and 9, the sample survey provided a detailed snapshot of the whole Island in 1981 but could not pick up the contours of small, relatively self-contained social worlds. Nevertheless, it is most important to emphasize that these distinctive residential areas very often have different cultural styles and traditions which affect fundamentally the level of informal communal work that can be supported.

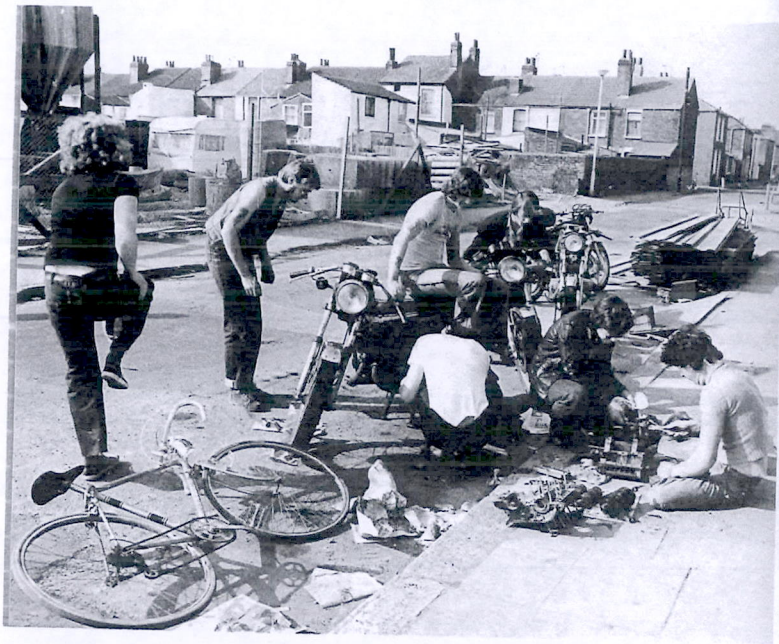
In 1981 there were 13,250 dwellings on the Island, of which 2,870 or 22 per cent had been built by the local authority. These are mainly in the Rushenden Road area of Queenborough and on the West Minster side of Sheerness. Smaller clusters of local authority housing are at Minster and Halfway. These two main clusters adjoin the two main industrial areas of the Island, providing an opportunity for women living there to get to and from work easily and for all workers to get home for a midday meal if necessary. But this is offset by the disadvantages of pollution and a bad environment. Thus, in July 1981 the dust and fumes from Sheppy Fertilizers were stripping paint from cars and causing sore throats, coughs and watery eyes. Residents claimed then that the dust had been falling on and off for three years but that the last few months had been particularly bad. Complaints led to more thorough tests and the plant was shut for a time. Although the firm was registered with the alkali inspectorate, this occasion was said to be the first they had heard of a problem.⁵⁰ Later in the month the firm pleaded guilty to using a wrong chemical mix and was fined £75 in the Magistrates' Court. Similar complaints were regularly made against the steel works and a chemical plant in Sheerness, which is now closed. Certainly, it was the common experience of the researchers coming from the clean air of Canterbury that collars and cars soon got very dirty in the industrial areas. More washing and cleaning would be necessary in working-class Sheppey. The compensation of being able to walk to shops and most facilities relatively easily, which may encourage neighbourly meetings, applies more in Sheerness than Rushenden, but, as will be shown later, these two areas do typify in many respects urban working-class industrial communities. Most local authority housing was built before 1968 with only 14 per cent of the stock built since that date. Perhaps the most striking element in the housing development on the Island in the 1970s was the new private development at Minster and Warden Bay. Between 1965 and 1979 some 2,000 private houses were



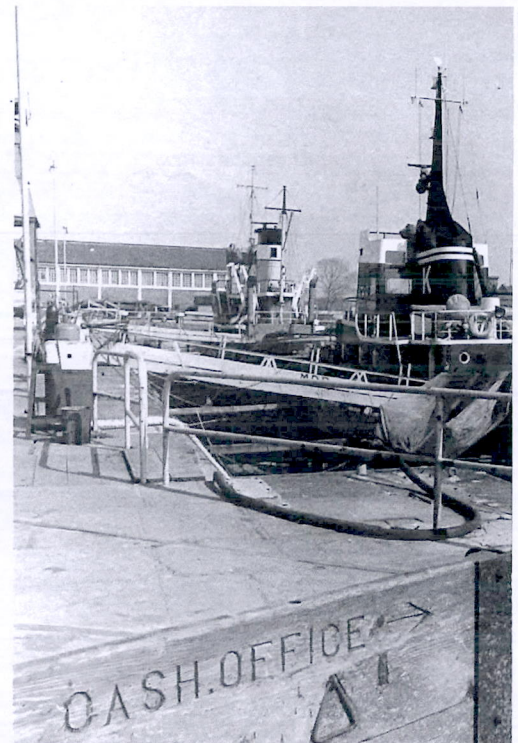
1 (Above, left) Digging for lug worms can provide a substantial part of an eleven-year-old's income. 2 (Above, right) Alleys, behind the nineteenth-century houses of Sheerness built for workers in the Admiralty dockyard, provide continuity with the past. 3 (Below) By contrast, it can be seen from the front that many of the houses have been modernized. Often the skilful use of a reinforced steel joist (RSJ) has made the living area more spacious.



⁵⁰ Reported in *Sheerness Times-Guardian*, 17 July 1981.



4 The collapse of the apprenticeship system means that some young people learn their trade in the street.



6 (Above, left) Trade in secondhand goods of little or no value is largely for the poor and the old. 7 (Above, right) Relics of the old Admiralty dockyard coexist with a variety of modern uses. 8 (Below) Informal trade can take many forms – the black economy on wheels?



5 A transporter train returns to shift another load of Japanese cars from the depot in the Sheppey marshes.





9 Canadian capital finances the steel mill which recycles the scrap metal from Britain's industrial past.



10 Many Sheppey people value living on an island. The Isle of Grain oil refinery dominates less obviously on a hazy summer's day.

built there. Such properties are between 20 and 40 per cent cheaper than on the mainland.⁵¹

However, it would be wrong to assume that newcomers in privately built houses contrast with established Islanders in the local authority estates. It is a common aspiration on the Island for a self-improving family with upwardly mobile aspirations to move to Minster, or at very least to Halfway, when money for the down payment and mortgage charges has been saved. Just over half the survey respondents had lived in three or more houses on the Island and 15 per cent had lived in five or more houses.

This high level of intra-Island dwelling mobility reflects a particular kind of household work strategy, which depends on home renovation and improvement as a means of raising the value of the property, selling with a capital gain and gradually moving up the housing market and acquiring capital at the same time. The very varied housing stock, the peculiar structure of the land market at Minster and the policy of Swale District Council to sell local authority houses provides a diverse opportunity structure. Older, three-storey houses in Sheerness, once the basis of the boarding house trade, can be converted into flats; the smaller terrace houses can have bathrooms added at the back and the two downstairs rooms made into one with a reinforced steel joist; and the early plotland bungalows can be extended over the years from very modest dwellings to substantial detached houses if adjoining plots are later acquired. At the bottom end of the market there are some 4,900 caravans and 2,000 chalets, which can always serve as temporary accommodation if there is no relative willing to put up a family moving between a house already sold and another in the process of conversion.

Housing is, therefore, a crucial element in the Island's political economy. While the unemployed man in a council house who owned his 'second home' round the corner which he was refurbishing with the income from his wife's employment and his own labour was exceptional, he illustrated nicely a household work strategy involving both housing and employment.

⁵¹ This figure was derived from comparing prices of equivalent housing in Faversham and Sheppey advertised by the same estate agent on the same day (18 July 1981) in a local newspaper. The cheapest home in the paper for Sheerness was £9,500 for a three-bedroom terrace in the town centre in need of 'modernization'. In Faversham, the cheapest was £16,500 for a two-bedroomed equivalent house, some distance outside the town. Similar houses with full modernization and central heating cost £15,500 in Queenborough and depending on facilities and construction, whereas in Faversham the lowest price was £26,000, and the highest £65,000. The prices for virgin land are just as disparate, since in Minster it costs just £9,000-£10,000 for a plot on an unmade road with a 40 ft frontage, whereas in Sittingbourne, an equivalent plot costs £20,000-£25,000. Faversham is about fifteen miles from Sheerness, and Sittingbourne about eight miles from Sheerness, and they fall under the same local authority area.

The different areas of the Island are to a degree polarized politically, with Conservative members of the local council more likely to represent Minster and Warden Bay, and Labour councillors representing Queenborough and Sheerness. Before the local Island council was formed in 1968 there were three separate councils, each with its distinctive political style. Local action groups are typically community-based rather than focused on wider issues. The separate identities of the different areas of the Island have deep roots. The trade unions are also locality- rather than industry-based, even though members could be working in any part of the Island or even on the mainland.

7

Myth and Reality in Sheppey in the 1980s

When I started research on the Isle of Sheppey I assumed that people's consciousness must have deep roots. They must surely pick up taken-for-granted ways of behaving and responses to their current situation from their early experiences in their childhood homes. The actual work practices of their parents would surely colour their perceptions of the nature and meaning of work and much else besides. I doubted that the material conditions of existence that faced those who lived on the Isle of Sheppey in 1981 would be the overwhelming determinants of how they thought and behaved. Such a simple and direct link between material base and social consciousness seemed offensive to me, implying an unacceptable degree of pliancy which appeared dehumanizing for the people involved. While given existential circumstances are clearly important in determining work practices — unless, for example, there are employment opportunities for women in the local labour market, there is not much that they can individually do about it — people can nevertheless hold sets of latent beliefs and values that have emerged out of their own and their parents', and perhaps grandparents', experiences.

It was on the basis of this line of thought that I was encouraged to dig deeper into aspects of the social and economic history of the Island reported in Chapter 6. I confidently believed that, the more I understood about the Island's past, the more I would be able to share the experiences of those whose families had been on Sheppey for a number of generations. At that time I had been led to believe that most Islanders were long-term residents, a notion the sample survey of 1981 demonstrated to be quite false. However, not then knowing the facts, I spent many evenings simply talking generally to people about the Island, as I met them in their homes or in the cafes or pubs.