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Non-Simultaneity in the Building of Somers Town from the End
of the Eighteenth Century**

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Contradictions between Artisan and Wage Labour Production: Non-Simultaneity in the Building of Somers Town from the End of the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

The chapter, focused on the development of Somers Town, a small area of London lying between what are now St Pancras and Euston Railway Stations in London, is about the synchronous contradiction between the social relations involved in different forms of building production and their visual manifestation. It shows how the early stages of building activity from the 1780s were predominantly associated with artisan production, as reflected in the form of the early streets and houses. Simultaneously, however, the Town, surrounded by building activity of various kinds and itself a hive of building and building material (brick) production, became the home for wage earners, many arriving from the surrounding countryside. Side by side, intermingling and interchanging, wage earners and artisans co-existed in the same environment in which they worked and often lived, together with radicals and refugees in search of cheap accommodation. Alongside the artisan housing were built tenements, suited for housing wage earners, and the long courts of the earlier artisan housing were built over to house the growing workforce. And, whilst small artisan builders still took on individual plots, at the same time ever-larger contractors employing wage labour came to dominate the construction of infrastructure – the roads and pavements – and of housing tenements. The contradictions between these two forms of production are evident, first, in the dramatic halt to development in the 1790s and the subsequent class-divided commodity form of the housing. And, second, they are apparent from an analysis of wages as the artisan day rate, from being higher than the hourly rate of the building wage earner in the 1780s, gradually declined to become lower.

Introduction

The French Revolution had a significant impact on the intellectual, social and economic life of London, an impact only too evident in early Somers Town, the area now situated north of the Euston Road, originally the New Road, between Kings Cross and Euston Stations in London. Here, more than anywhere, in the few streets that had been developed by the 1790s, we can begin to grasp what Bloch described in the

Principle of Hope as “the New as something that is mediated within existing in motion”¹ and how “the rigid divisions between future and past so themselves collapse, the unbecoming future becomes visible in the past, avenged and inherited, mediated and fulfilled past in the future”². Bloch’s simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*) is most evident from the inhabitants of the few streets in the early development, who included strong supporters and proponents of the Revolution, looking forward to a society of equal rights for all, living alongside refugees from the Revolution, clinging on to a more feudal aristocratic world.

It is difficult, and indeed a puzzle, to imagine Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), William Godwin, author of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), and William Wordsworth, author of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) living side by side, cheek by jowl, in the same few streets as the exiled Prince and Princess of Condé, the Bishop of St Pol de Léon, and the Archbishop of Narbonne, especially when we see from a map of 1799 (**Figure 1**) how few houses had been built. Why did they settle here? Their opposing approaches to life suggest a radically diverse community, indicative not just of cultural non-simultaneity but of disparities in the social relations associated with the consumption or use of the houses in which they lived. Were disparities then also likewise evident in the social relations associated with their production, exchange and distribution?

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1 Somers Town in 1800, showing in population in 1801 and the brickfields

Source: M. Emily Cooks, *A Geographical Study of a London Borough: St Pancras* (London: University of London Press, 1932), Map. 6

1 Own translation of “*das Neue als eines, das im bewegt Vorhandenen vermittelt ist*” in Ernst Bloch, *Gesamtausgabe 5: Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 1.

2 Own translation of “*Die starren Scheidungen zwischen Zukunft und Vergangenheit stürzen so selber ein, ungewordene Zukunft wird in der Vergangenheit sichtbar, gerächte und beerbte, vermittelte und erfüllte Vergangenheit in der Zukunft*” in Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 7.

To begin to answer this question, we need to look beyond the physical appearance of the small town at the social relations involved in the production of its houses and streets, which appear almost as abstractions once these have been rented and inhabited. This chapter therefore begins by identifying differences in the nature of urban development in the eighteenth century, between, on the one hand, the developer as agent of the landowner, who directly invested in the development and maintained control over the letting of leases, as on the estates of the Duke of Bedford, and, on the other hand, the developer responsible for capital investment, as in the case of much of Somers Town, with the landowner Lord Somers' interest confined to raising ground rents. The implications of this are evident in the subsequent relatively uncontrolled building of the town, which contrasts with developments on estates to the south and on the part of Somers Town owned by the Duke of Bedford, which are more in tune with the London Building Act of 1774. What is also evident in the construction process is a growing disparity in the building labour process, between, on the one hand, small artisan builders and, on the other, contractors employing wage labour, as well as in materials production, between brickmaking for use on site and producing bricks as commodities. These disparities or non-simultaneities are increasingly evident in the built form, in so far as this reflected the labour process, the increasing commodification of the housing and the emerging divisions within society. Though they exist at the same time, they derive from different epochs and reflect the sharp and growing contradictions of the period. They suggest too that, for each period, including our own, we should search not for homogeneity or unity but rather for such disparities in order to try to understand the present direction of development.

The Historical Process of Transition

Somers Town eventually came to cover an area to the east of Tottenham Court shown in **Figure 2**, from the Roque Map of 1756, bordered to the west by the extension of the street dividing Lambs Conduit Fields, with the New Road to the south, Fig Lane to the north, Pancras Wells on the north east corner, The Brill (Bruel) and the Small Pox Hospital in the south east. Its development began in the 1780s and continued through to the 1830s and beyond, thus covering a period of early capitalism sometimes referred to as the 'Industrial Revolution' and constituting part of the rapid extension of London to become by the nineteenth century the largest metropolis in the world. This was in a stage described by the Webbs as representing a transformation from "the settled population of yeoman cultivators, peasant copyholders,

domestic handicraftsmen and small masters owning the instruments and product of their labour...into a migratory swarm of propertyless wage-earners, crowded together into the labyrinths of houses characteristic of the Metropolis".³

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 The area of Brill Farm in 1756 shortly after the building the New Road

Source: Part of 1756 Roque Map

Before the 1780s Somers Town did not exist; it was the outcome of productive activity. Instead Brill Farm occupied the fields on which it was built and was farmed by Thomas Rhodes, 'cowkeeper', grandfather of Cecil Rhodes and for many years Overseer and Director of the Poor in the parish of St Pancras, whose father had in turn been a member of the Workhouse Committee and Trustee of the New Road – built in the 1750s⁴. The development of the town can perhaps be regarded as following on from the long process of transition from feudalism to capitalism, whose drivers have been much debated, from Paul Sweezy's association of the rise of capitalism with the extension of trade and the market, and hence with the profits of merchants, to Rodney Hilton's, Maurice Dobb's and Robert Brenner's with changing social relations of production as artisans become producers.⁵ The questions nevertheless raised are whether

3 Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government: Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes* (London: Longmans, 1922a), 416.

4 For more details of Thomas Rhodes and his activities in Somers Town, see Linda Clarke, *Building Capitalism: historical change and the labour process in the production of the built environment*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 90, 93, 100, 101, 165, 177–9, 261.

5 Sweezy P, "A Critique" and "A Rejoinder", in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. R. Hilton (London: Verso, 1978);

R. Hilton, "Feudalism and the Origins of Capitalism," in *History Workshop Journal* 1, (Spring 1976) 9-25;

M. Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 1963);

artisans can really be regarded as a class bearing out change and whether artisan production is not separate from production with wage labour. Whilst artisans are, by definition, bound to their means of production, wage labour is, by definition, separated, so each signifies a different relation between productive activity and the means of production. For our purposes, therefore, the case of building, whilst artisan production and production by wage labour can co-exist, each implies a different relation between building labour and the building materials, tools and machinery required.

If a coincidence of different contradictory forms of production can be observed at any one time or simultaneously, this does not mean that one form is not dominant or underpinned by statutory regulations, dating back to another time. Until the repeal in 1813 of the 1562 Statute of Artificers, the official regulation of building wages was by Justices of the Peace (JPs) and premised on the artisan day rate. And until the 1828 public inquiry into the pros and cons of measure and value and contracting in gross, building developments were also overseen by JPs with the aid of the different price books produced by the trade corporations, as well as by means of the London Building Act of 1776. Thus, even at the end of the eighteenth century, the statutory regulations underpinning the wages of building workers and the price of building materials could be traced back a few hundred years to a period when landed interests remained strong. Many of the building occupations named in the Statute, including brickmakers, bricklayers, sawyers and limeburners, were not, however, attached to trade corporations, whilst even those that were, such as plumbers and paviours, had no royal charter. After the Great Fire of London of 1666 too the building trade corporations of the City of London lost their traditional controls over building activity in London and ‘forrens’, those journeymen and wage labourers who were not ‘freemen’, were regularly employed in the City.⁶

R. Brenner, “The origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism,” in *New Left Review* 104 (1977): 25-92

6 T.F. Reddaway, *The Rebuilding of London after the Great Fire* (London:Jonathan Cape, 1940), 115–116;

J. Janssen, “Disparities Constituting the Dynamics of Modes of Production: Middlesex and London Building Production in the Transition to Capitalism,” *Bartlett International Summer School Proceedings* 7 (1986): 175.

Measure and value developed into a sophisticated costing system for carpentry, masonry, brickwork, roofing etc. towards the end of the seventeenth century as a result of greater variability in labour and material costs and constant bargaining over estimating. Through price books, published and constantly updated by the different City trading companies, a Bill of Measurement could be produced with the total quantities and values of each trade listed separately.⁷ The problem was that the system rested on fixed prices, unchanged methods of production, and after measurement. Up to the 1770s there was relative stability, but after this time, as the system of separate trades contracting broke down, there were ample opportunities for overcharging and exaggerating measurements and it was impossible to know what price tradesmen had paid for materials.⁸

The London Building Act of 1774 was intended to help control the type of housing built by setting minimum standards for dimensions, building materials and prices, establishing four main grades, ranging from the first, valued at £880 and consisting of 900 square feet and four storeys, to the fourth valued at £150 with 350 square feet and one storey above ground level.⁹ It represented a counterpart to measure and value and to the leasehold system, facilitating the use of price books and lump sum building contracts for different grades of housing and to the benefit of materials manufacturers. It was in effect a system that assumed prices and wages did not fluctuate and the input of each trade could be clearly defined for each standard grade. District surveyors, appointed by JPs in Middlesex, were responsible for enforcement, though this was ineffective and their powers often misused. The main houses built to the south of Brill Farm from the 1770s all came under the London Building Act, including on the Southampton and Bedford Estates.

An alternative to measure and value was the system of the all-trades contract or 'contract work', which became especially apparent in house-building during the French Wars whilst in public works 'contracts in gross' were used. This was a time when many new materials manufacturers were established

7 J. Nisbet, *Estimating and Cost Control*, (London: Batsford, 1961), 8.

8 F.M.L. Thompson, *Chartered Surveyors: The Growth of a Profession*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 70, 81.

9 C.C. Knowles and P.H. Pitt, *The History of Building Regulations in London 1189-1972*, (London: Architectural Press, 1972), 51.

and materials production was an important part of the operations of the new 'merchant' or 'finance' builders. Fluctuations in the price of materials contributed to the breakdown of the measure and value system, which was seen to open up opportunities for over-charging. Indeed, after the repeal of the mercantile laws in 1814, when the system of regulated prices ceased, there ensued a sharp fall in the costs of materials. It was not, however, until the 1828 public inquiry that general contracting was officially accepted as against measure and value.¹⁰

In terms of labour, wage labour represented 'a class of labourers who live only so long as they find work and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital' (Marx and Engels).¹¹ Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a significant increase in wage labour, partly as a result of Enclosures but mainly due to changing agricultural labour processes, especially new intensified agricultural practices associated with, for instance, the use of wage labour in hedging and ditching.¹² The contradictions between wage labour and artisan production were especially apparent in the 1787 London carpenters' strike, organised by a financially independent carpenters' journeyman association and based on local taverns. 4,000 journeymen carpenters brought a halt to much building work, arguing for an increase in the rates due to rising costs.¹³ The following year an unknown number were indicted and in 1789 four journeymen carpenters were put on trial for 'Combination'.¹⁴ As masters failed to prevent wage increases

10 *Select Committee on the State of the Public Building in the Department of the Office of Works* (SCOW), vol. IV, PP, 1828.

11 K. Marx and F. Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Selected Works Vol. 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 114.

12 ¹² See J.D. Chambers, "Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution," in *Economic History Review* 5 (1953): 328-332;

and A. Redford, *Labour Migration in England* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1964), 63.

13 ¹³ H.K. Houldsworth, "Changing Practices in Labour relations: the Society of Master Carpenters, London 1783-1799," *Construction History* 2 (1986): 36.

14 Houldsworth 1986, 36;

and JPs were reluctant to protect old practices, the strike can be seen to symbolise the growing disparity between, on the one hand, masters confined to their own trade and bound to trade corporation traditions and, on the other, contractors, employing wage labour (non-freemen), irrespective of trade.¹⁵ A similar change in the position of masters is evident in brickmaking as, even in the 1780s, master manufacturers sought through the Bricklayers' Company to set and adjust brick prices and wages through price books, whilst the journeyman 'workman' employed wage labourers or 'hands', whose wages showed a steady increase relative to the craftsman.¹⁶

Data in the Francis Place Collection show that during the years of the French wars (1793-1816) wages for journeymen in London were raised by successive strikes to 25s per week in 1795, 17s in 1802, 33s in 1810 and 36s in 1813.¹⁷ Journeymen carpenters were especially prominent in disputes following the 1787 carpenters' strike despite the Combination Laws in place from 1799 to 1824, prohibiting trade unions from attempting to collectively bargain for better terms and conditions at work and suppressing the right to strike. In 1796, for example, the carpenters accepted 2s per week rise; in 1803, following a further dispute and given rapidly rising food prices, a wage of 25s was awarded by the Justices; and by 1810 their wages were increased through a further strike to 30s, though reduced in 1816 to 28s. Nevertheless, day rates for building artisans during this period diverged very considerably, between 2s and 4s6d in 1786, even just for bricklayers, and between 3s3d and 6s in 1806, though rates given in contract hire rates vary according to

C.R. Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen: A Prehistory of Industrial Relations 1717-1800* (London: Croom Helm, Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 128;

R.W. Postgate, *The Builders' History* (London: NFBTO, 1923), 11.

15 ¹⁵ Clarke 1992, 73;

E. Cooney, "The Origins of the Victorian Master Builders," in *Economic History Review* 8 (1955): 170.

16 Clarke 1992, 74;

E.W. Gilboy, *Wages in Eighteenth Century England* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1934), 255.

17 Houldsworth 1986, p. 41

the source used.¹⁸ Such divergence is not surprising given that rates sometimes refer to those given in price books, which represent rates charged to customers by building masters or employers, sometimes to artisan day rates as in the case of the striking journeymen carpenters, and sometimes to a mixture of day, hourly weekly and even annual rates.¹⁹ Some sources too assume a uniform working day of ten hours, though hours varied and building workers might be idle for several months of the year, especially with inclement weather.

Wage differences are nevertheless informative precisely because of the differences they express between different forms of building production, between the artisan form of production, based on the ‘accustomed wage’ historically set by JPs and wage rates agreed - as in the Francis Place Collection - between wage labourers and employers. The hourly rate represented a time-based wage, whilst the day rate given in price books increasingly represented a piece-rate, as bills submitted for day work were converted into measured work. As well as day rates, from 1786 price books list hourly rates for carpenters (4d), bricklayers (5d) and bricklayers’ labourers (2½d). A comparison of the differential between these rates from 1786 to 1831, assuming a ten-hour day for hourly workers and a six-day week for day and hourly work, reveals a marked tendency for improvement in the position of the hourly relative to the day rate, signifying an improvement in the position of the wage earner relative to the artisan.²⁰ In 1786 the hourly rate for carpenters, bricklayers and bricklayers’ labourers was very much lower than the day rate equivalent, but from 1811 it is consistently higher. Similarly a comparison between comparable day and

18 See, for instance, the differences to be found between A. L. Bowley’s rates (in *Wages in the United Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900) and those of E.H. Phelps-Brown and S.V. Hopkins, “Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables Compared with Builders Wage Rates,” in *Economica*, New Series, Vol 23, No. 92 (1956).

19 See for example, P. Lindert and J.G. Williamson, “English Workers’ Living Standards During the Industrial Revolution: A New Look,” in *Economic History Review* 36 (1983): 3.

20 Bowley 1900, 82;
Clarke 1992, 63–65.

weekly rates for carpenters and craftsmen shows also a steady decline in the day rate as a percentage of the weekly rate, which suggests too a steady deterioration in the position of the artisan.²¹

This deterioration reflects a significant change in the regulation of wages and in the status of wage earners as magistrates were less and less prepared to define the accustomed wage so that collective bargaining with individual masters was the almost inevitable solution, even though the Combination Acts were not repealed until 1824. This change in wage regulation was evident, too, in the instability in rates for other occupations. Immediately after the 1762 Paving Act set on foot road and pavement improvements for Westminster, for instance, rates given in 1763 for paviours for Westminster Abbey rise from 3s to 3s4d; in 1775-6 these rise again to 3s6d, where they remain until the early 1780s after which time paviours' rates in the Builders' Price Books fluctuate between those for labourers and craftsmen and remain volatile through to the 1820s. Such volatility is likely to be attributable not only to exploitation of the differential between craftsmen's and labourer rates, but also to the collapse in the paviours' trade organisation, and the influx of Irish labour to London in the early 1780s, following the road improvement programme in Ireland.

These disparities in wage rates – between the day-rated artisan and the hourly paid wage earner, the craftsman and the labourers – reflect different categories of labour, each referring to a different labour process and, at the same time, a different means of subsuming labour. They form a background to the changes to be observed in the development of Somers Town.

The First Stage of Development: Artisans vs Wage Labour/Contractors

St Pancras Church, dating back to fifth century, formed one of the main features of what became Somers Town. It was the church in which Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin married on 29 March 1797. By the church ran the Fleet River, tributary of the Thames, whose wide bed consisted of damp clay lands interspersed by Taplow or Middle Terrace gravels. Opposite the church lay a plague pit, stemming from after the 1666 Great Fire, and adjoining an important burial ground. Encroaching on Brill Farm to the south was London, the largest city in Europe, whilst to the north much land was turned over to hay, as still recorded in 1796, when Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter Fanny planned to "make hay in the fields" with

21 Clarke 1992.

her new rake.²² **Figure 2** gives a more realistic indication of the general character of the Brill Farm area, however, with the Small Pox Hospital in the south and the Workhouse in the north, housing up to 500 of those recorded in 1800 for St Pancras as ‘workhouse poor’, whilst a House of Correction was built to the south east near Bagnigge Wells in the late 1780s.²³

The building of the New Road from Paddington to Islington and east coast in the 1750s gives another indication of the character of the area, as this required many thousands of cartloads of gravel, so that it is not surprising to see a ‘Gravel Pit Field’ to the south on a map of 1800 (**Figure 1**). In 1772 a commentator described the ‘long burning rows of fetid bricks’, ‘nauseous dunghills’, ‘stagnant pools’ and ‘dusty plains’ of the Fleet River area, referring to the brickfields also evident in **Figure 1**, as well as the dust heaps of cinders and ashes used in the burning of bricks, and old gravel and clay pits.²⁴ Brickmaking was one of the main industries in London by the eighteenth century and an important activity of the Rhodes family, which began from the 1770s to determinedly purchase brick-earth land, with the fields eventually being converted into building sites and laid out with houses.²⁵ Bricks were increasingly burnt on clamps on site, unlike tiles, which were burnt in kilns as also apparent from **Figure 1** in the brickfield to the south east of Somers Town. An acre of ground yielded roughly 4 million bricks, the equivalent of about thirty-three houses, assuming around 30,000 bricks per house. One house required about sixty man-days of brickmaking, about the same as for bricklaying, and brickwork constituted about one-third of the building work necessary to build a house. We can therefore begin to imagine the degree of productive activity and the size of the labouring force congregating in and around Somers Town at the time of its development, especially given the increasingly encroaching developments on the Bedford and Southampton Estates to the south.

22 Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: a revolutionary life* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 423.

23 ²³ Clarke 1992, 92.

24 Anonymous, “St Pancras in Song, Charles Jenner, Town Eclogues 1772,” in *St Pancras Notes and Queries*, (London: North-Western Printing and Publ. Assoc., 1903), 140.

25 Anonymous 1903, 2.

As apparent from **Figure 3**, landownership in the area of what became Somers Town was mixed, with fields to the north, bordered by Fig Lane belonging to the Duke of Bedford, whose main holdings were to the south of the New Road. Brill Farm itself consisted of about fifty acres and had by the eighteenth century passed to the Somers family, which as well as farms owned the merchant bank Biddulph-Cocks. Charles Lord Somers of Evesham settled on his son John his estates in Middlesex in 1783 in order to increase his income and help further his political ambitions, becoming himself tenant for life and giving John the power of sale over the estates. To the north of Fig Lane lay the estate of the Pratt family, Charles Pratt having been created Earl of Camden in 1786, and to the west the estate of the Earl of Southampton, including the vast manor of Tottenham. Of increasing significance to developments were, however, the tenant farmers and principal occupiers of the land, above all Thomas Rhodes, whose rent payments constituted a considerable part of Lord Somers' annual income of over £1,000 by the 1780s.²⁶ Thomas Rhodes Junior became Churchwarden and Overseer and Director of the Poor and claimed in 1801 to be the largest landholder in St Pancras parish, with over 282 acres.²⁷ He fought a long campaign for a select vestry for St Pancras aimed at excluding the ordinary inhabitant and based on self-election and co-option rather than election of the traditional officers. However, until 1819 political accountability in St Pancras was maintained through an open vestry, answerable in turn to JPs, presided over by the Vicar and Churchwardens and attended by a large number of parishioners who elected the parish committees but were not the principal inhabitants.²⁸ Over a thousand ratepayers attended a vestry meeting in the early 1780s and the vestry was renowned for its turbulence.²⁹

[Insert Figure 3 here]

26 Clarke 1992, 101.

27 Anonymous, "The Rhodes Family in St Pancras," in *St Pancras Notes and Queries*, (London: North-Western Printing and Publ. Assoc., 1903), 2.

28 ²⁸ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act* vol. 4 (London: Longmans, Green, & Co. 1922b), 445–6.

29 ²⁹ M.G. Liddall, *The St Pancras Vestry: A Study in the Administration of a Metropolitan Parish 1760–1835* (New Jersey: Rutgers, 1981), 19–22.

Figure 3 Landownership in and around Somers Town in 1834. Note: 7 Agar; 8 Skinners; 9 Southamptton; 10 Camden; 11 Somers; 17 Brewers

Source: Part of John Britton's map of St Pancras, 1834, BL Map 4105(1)

With the failure of John Somers' attempts to sell Brill Farm, the Somers family advertised a scheme for building, envisaging a relatively high-grade development for the professional and middle classes. Jacob Leroux came forward, recommending himself as a magistrate and an architect, and an agreement was drawn up between him and the Somers family in 1788.³⁰ Leroux was a JP for Middlesex from 1777 and was responsible for building – and certifying! - houses to the south west of Somers Town, adjacent to Tottenham Court Road. Whilst Middlesex JPs may have had powers related to building and to wage regulation, they were reluctant to use them, especially as many had their own private interests in developments. This was apparent in the 1787 carpenters' strike when master carpenters tried to get magistrates to act against journeymen refusing 'to work for the settled and accustomed wage'.³¹ In other respects though JPs, whose position rested on landed interests and who were directly appointed officers of the King, had important powers, including: authorising and administering the Paving Commissions; certifying houses; and appointing the overseers of the poor, surveyors of the highway, district surveyors and parish constables. As the Webbs claimed: 'at no period did the landed gentry enjoy so large a measure of local autonomy and irresponsible power as between the accession of the House of Hanover and the close of the Napoleonic Wars.'³² The Middlesex Bench represented the most notorious example of the extent to which JPs powers were out of tune with prevailing conditions, being a regime renowned for its corruption as, under the chairmanship of the banker William Mainwaring from 1781 to 1816, JPs used their office to further their own interests.³³ This was a political regime founded on the landed gentry and the needs of a

30 Final agreement between Charles Cocks/John Somers and Jacob Leroux, Eastnor Castle Archives, D1, 20 December 1788.

31 ³¹ Houldsworth 1986, 37.

32 ³² Webbs 1922a, 389.

33 Webbs 1922a 373;

stable land-based society, and inadequate to deal administratively with all the problems developing in an area where wage labour was increasingly congregating.

Brill Farm represented a more ambitious scheme than Leroux had undertaken on the Southampton Estate, above all because he was responsible for all the capital investment, including “making proper and common sewers under and through the said grounds and streets to be so finished at his and their own costs and charges”.³⁴ The estate was to be surveyed twice a year and any defects identified to be made good but otherwise Lord Somers took no control and covenanted himself out of any responsibility for the upkeep of the estate, though he had the power to seize the property back on default of the lease and it anyway reverted to him at the end of the ninety-nine years.³⁵ The standard envisaged by Lord Somers for the development was relatively high, Leroux being required to expend “£400 by measure and value” on most of the houses, representing Grade 3 under the Building Act, though at least eight Grade 2 houses to a value of £850 were also required. Nevertheless, it was impossible for Lord Somers to ensure that these sums were expended and the family’s intention anyway was to disinvest by selling as quickly as possible once a higher overall income was obtained, rather than sustaining a long-term reversionary value. Rental accounts show an increasingly large part of the family income from 1782 to 1805 dependent on Somers Town ‘urban’ rents.³⁶

The estate was divided into three lots, with Leroux taking on the first in 1783, with the option to lease the remaining two within fourteen years, allowing the farm land leased to Rhodes to be released gradually. Each lot let to Leroux was subdivided into different leases at varying ground rents depending on the size and situation of the plot. To obtain credit, Leroux relied on a form of mortgaging, as did individual builders where they could not obtain advances or credit from material manufacturers. Like many developers, Leroux was also a brickmaker and given rights over brickmaking in the leases offered by Lord

George Mingay, *Georgian London* (London: Batsford, 1975), 104.

34 ³⁴ Agreement between Charles/John Somers and Jacob Leroux, Eastnor Castle Archives, D1, December, 1788.

35 ³⁵ Heal Collection, B2, 114.

36 ³⁶ Clarke 1992, 105, 128.

Somers on the condition that bricks produced were not sold “or carried off from the said lots”.³⁷ Having acquired the brick-earth, Leroux would have brickmakers, working at piece-rates or according to contract at so much per thousand bricks, produce green bricks that would be dried in hacks and then burnt on clamps, which required less fixed capital than kilns. Completed bricks would then have been provided to builders as part of the condition of awarding the lease, on a credit basis or similar. This meant that brick manufacturing and housebuilding had to keep roughly in pace. Cellars under pavements and basements were convenient means to make use of differences in the levels produced once the brick-earth was removed, as evident from the early houses built along Chalton Street (**Figure 4**). Though production was slow to begin with, activity increased in 1787 with at least ninety houses completed, and by 1792 it was reported that 300 houses had been produced, including the more brick-intensive Evesham Buildings (**Figure 5**). If cellars, vaulting, garden walls etc. are taken into account as well as bricks kept in stock, this implies that about 17 million bricks or 2 million annually were produced.

As houses were being built on the plots demarcated, all the facilities involved in running the district were needed: sewerage, paving, scavenging, lighting, watching, cleansing and water provision. Much of their provision was through contracts let out to contractors, including also for materials, and was facilitated through Paving Acts, which established Paving Commissioners responsible for paving, cleansing, lighting, watching and repairing streets. The building interests of Commissioners were often transparent, as in the Tottenham Court Road Paving Commission set up in the 1770s, which included Jacob Leroux and Thomas Rhodes, and the Somers Town Paving Commission set up in 1789, which also included Leroux – who usually chaired the meetings - and Rhodes as well as: Lord Somers, the ground landlord; Thomas Harrison, James Haygarth, and William Weston, all brickmakers and landholders; and Alexander Hendy and Joseph Kirkman, builders, both of whom were prominent on the Southampton Estate and suffered eventual bankruptcy. Though elsewhere this might be controlled partly through leases, the Somers Town Paving Commission had wide-ranging powers to borrow and levy a rate on individual properties “upon all and every person and persons who shall inhabit, hold, use, occupy, possess and enjoy any land, house, shop,

37 ³⁷ Clarke 1992, 132.

warehouse, coachhouse, stable, cellar, vault, building, tenement or hereditament within the limits of the town” in order to defray the costs incurred in carrying out its duties.³⁸

One of the first paving contracts let out in 1789 was won by a Lambeth mason to pave the streets with Purbeck squares, filling up the vacant parts of the carriageways, specifying stones, paving footways with Yorkshire stone, supplying and laying Yorkshire curb and cleansing the streets.³⁹ Paving contractors became an increasingly important group, many also taking on scavenging and cleansing contracts. James Haygarth was, for instance, accepted as scavenger for the Somers Town Paving Commission in 1789 on offering without payment, indeed later paying, to take ashes and dust away presumably for use in his brickworks.⁴⁰ This meant that the most important functions of the parish were increasingly carried out not by the vestry but bodies such as the Paving Commission over which the vestry had no control, representing a significant shift in political power, away from the vestry based on landed interests and accountable to JPs towards select public administrative bodies governed by Acts of Parliament.

Brickmaking, gravel pits, road construction and the collection and sifting of dust and rubbish were hardly conducive to the development of middle- and upper-class housing, not to mention the unhealthy state of the Fleet River, the Smallpox Hospital and the Workhouse. Where landowners maintained strict controls, themselves invested thousands in infrastructure and fostered building at every stage through mortgages and credits, developments were more regulated, as on the Bedford Estate. But in Somers Town, this was not the case and it fast became a very mixed community, attracting many wage earners migrating to London in search of employment. Net migration to Middlesex in the second half of the eighteenth century totalled over 450,000 and the population of St Pancras alone increased by over 14,000 between 1801 and 1811.⁴¹ Many too were displaced from areas around the City of London through road improvements or dislodged from previous settlements, and able to gain settlement in St Pancras by paying parish rates. Rather than traditional lodgings with or through a master, the wage earner depended on rented

38 ³⁸ *Somers Town Paving Commission*, 6th June 1792.

39 ³⁹ *Somers Town Paving Commission*, 2nd September 1789.

40 *Somers Town Paving Commission*, 5th January 1791, 4th July 1792.

41 ⁴¹ Phyllis Deane and W.A. Cole, *British Economic Growth 1688-1959: Trends and Structures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 103-9.

accommodation, becoming an under-tenant or independent lodger. Thus, instead of the customary accommodation of the tradesman, consisting of a shop or workshop on the ground floor, family accommodation on the first and lodging for servants and labourers on the second, tenement housing was more and more in evidence or the tradesman and his family slept in the garret and let the middle stories to lodgers to help pay the house-rent.⁴²

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the early development of Somers Town, as the earlier Grade 3 houses along the New Road, in one of which, 16 Judd Place West, Mary Wollstonecraft settled in 1796, quickly gave way to lower Grade 4 houses along Chalton Street (**Figure 4**), in one of which (number 25) William Godwin had lodgings from 1793 to 1797 and in another (number 15) William Wordsworth in 1795. The uneven window heights and number of storeys in these Chalton Street houses are products of different builders and reflect the differing size plots, lack of adherence to standards and inability to conform to the measure and value system at a time when wages and prices were fluctuating. This traditional artisan housing form at the southern end of Chalton Street, with a shop or workshop front on the ground floor with one or two stories above and a long yard at the back, soon gave way to tenements in Evesham Buildings (**Figure 5**), where Leroux himself moved in 1791 and Godwin lived (number 17) in 1797. In the surroundings, however, the increasing number of carcasses, or part-erected houses, in evidence by the early 1790s was indicative of difficulties in financing and sustaining the development. Nevertheless, supervised by the Paving Commission, the construction of infrastructure proceeded apace, with sewers, paving, crossings, curbs and lamps erected.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Figure 4 **The early development of Chalton Street (west side) in 1927**

Source: Greater London Council archives 77/0326

[Insert Figure 5 here]

Figure 5 **Evesham Buildings in 1927, with Leroux's own house on corner**

Source: Greater London Council, 77/0329

42 ⁴² Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* vol. 1 (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1910), 106–7.

Leroux's earlier developments relied on artisan builders, often originally bricklayers or carpenters, who had a small workshop, employed journeymen and labourers at day rates, and might build just one or two and at the very most six houses per year in the same locality. However, in Somers Town, it was not long before there were signs that this traditional system was breaking down as builders took on larger plots and became like contractors as Leroux promised to lend money on security of the houses. In 1787, for instance, Jonathan Mitchell, a St Pancras carpenter, agreed "at his own costs and charges" to build as many as nineteen "good new brick messuages" in six months "in a substantial and workmanlike manner...and without any manner of delay".⁴³ This implied a different building process and larger building workforce as the scheme had to proceed as a whole rather than one or two houses being completed by different trade gangs before the next pair began. All in all, about half of the houses built between 1785 and 1787 were built by just three such "contract builders" whilst the remainder were completed by small traditional builders, building between two and six houses each.⁴⁴ In this way Somers Town became a "builders" town, accommodating those involved in building and providing the tenements and occasional workshop space necessary for further building in the outskirts to proceed.

Ironically, but in accordance with Bloch's non-simultaneity thesis, the building of the Evesham Building tenements, though reflecting a different form of housing, was largely the work of artisan builders, just as their financing followed traditional patterns, through advancements and release of leases once these had been repaid. Leroux's residence, at the corner of Evesham Buildings in Chalton Street (**Figure 5**), which was being paved in 1791, faced what was to become the Polygon (**Figure 6**), later the residence (number 29) of Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and their daughter Mary Shelley. Unlike Evesham Buildings, the construction of the Polygon, a sixteen-sided complex of thirty-two houses, was let out to just one builder, Job Hoare, a carpenter, paving commissioner, and familiar builder in the area, who agreed to building twenty four-storey houses in one year and the remaining twelve within the following six months. Leroux promised to pay Hoare £250 "by way of a mortgage" on each of the houses in clearly defined

43 Middlesex Land Registry, 1787/6/417.

44 ⁴⁴ Clarke 1992, 142.

stages, floor by floor.⁴⁵ Hoare therefore could no longer be classed as an artisan builder because of the scale of organisation and the speed of operation needed. By 1792 sixteen of the Polygon houses had been erected, paving was underway, and Lord Somers, optimistic that, with 300 houses already erected, the estate would be complete by 1795, began negotiations for its sale to Leroux for an estimated price of between £20,000 and £24,000.⁴⁶

[Insert Figure 6 here]

Figure 6 The Polygon, Somers Town, in 1850

Source: Swains, from an original sketch, reproduced in E. Walford, *Old and New London* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1887), vol. V, p. 343

From the account above, we can identify many of the contradictions in social relations of the time, between artisan and wage labour production, between the measure and value system and a free market for materials and labour, and between landed and capitalist interests. These are all reflected in the form of the housing, the changes in tenancy relations and the different social classes of residents of the new town. By 1793, as war was declared with France and a financial crisis set in, marked by a recall of credits, there were increasing signs of a clash in relations as bankrupt builders are recorded on this and surrounding developments.⁴⁷ The worst set-back to Leroux's scheme occurred with the default of the agreement made for the building of the Polygon, where Leroux had already advanced £2,200, and the subsequent declaration of Job Hoare's bankruptcy.⁴⁸ As a result, in 1794, Leroux attempted to sell his own house, together with finished and unfinished houses in the Polygon, Chalton Street, Upper Evesham Buildings, and Phoenix Street, attracting an annual rent of £625.

45 ⁴⁵ Middlesex Land Registry, 1793/5/352.

46 ⁴⁶ Eastnor Castle Archives, Letters, Kent to Somers, 19th and 27th July, 13th and 15th August, 7th September 1792.

47 ⁴⁷ C.W. Chalkin, *The Provincial Towns of Georgian England: A Study of the Building Process* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), 89, 96.

48 ⁴⁸ Middlesex Land Registry, 1794/3/667.

Regulated Landed Interests vs Capitalist Building

With the virtual halt to building in 1794, Leroux looked not just to the sale of houses, whether unfinished or not, but also to the sale of bricks, which were increasingly surplus to requirements. To sell these was contrary to the original agreement but, rather than let the 2.5 million bricks half-ready lie idle, Leroux asked Lord Somers for rights of sale in return for 1s 6d brick rent for every thousand bricks sold. An agreement was subsequently drawn up and the first sales recorded in 1795.⁴⁹ As a result, brick rents recorded in Lord Somers' accounts constituted an increasingly important part of his rental income into the 1820s and he even encouraged the extraction and sale of as many bricks as possible.

As with other building materials, the price of bricks fluctuated considerably during the closing years of the eighteenth century; in 1795, grey stock bricks could still be bought for £1s 8s per thousand but by 1800 they could be £2, and by 1805 as much as £2 9s.⁵⁰ The more prices varied, the more the measure and value system was undermined and a different market for materials and houses emerged, no longer regulated through the grades set down in the London Building Act, which rested on stable prices and regulated day rates. At the same time, the interests of builders shifted from realising long-term improvements in ground rents for the landowner and leaseholder at regulated prices to reducing their prices of production. In turn the success of the developer who, in the case of Leroux, was also a manufacturer depended more and more on realising the value of materials produced by the direct sale of houses built.

Just as fluctuating material prices undermined measure and value, so too did fluctuating wages and changes in the nature of labour and the organisation of the labour process. From 1794, a growing disparity is evident between the traditional artisan form of organisation and the new builders, contractors and material manufacturers employing their own large labour forces in different trades. One indication of this was that the real wages of many journeymen employed on piece rates declined, as regulated piecework could not accommodate to price fluctuations and when these occurred many anomalies arose. In 1795, journeymen carpenters in the London United and Westminster Societies of Journeymen Carpenters,

49 ⁴⁹ Eastnor Castle Archives, D1, Agreement Somers and Leroux, 10th June 1795.

50 ⁵⁰ Lord Beveridge, *Prices and Wages in England from the Twelfth to the Nineteenth Century* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1965), 298.

representing nearly 4,000 carpenters, petitioned masters to persuade the Society of Surveyors, responsible for measuring work and drawing up the price books on which the measure and value system rested, to allow rises in standard prices for building work on the grounds that increases in the cost of living had not been matched by wage increases.⁵¹ Their general failure to maintain rates through the 1790s as the cost of living rose reflected the decline in their position; indeed, journeyman, as a formal and legal category, ceased to exist after 1813 with the abolition of wage fixing by JPs, which had referred directly to their rates. Journeymen became instead building workers and the trade-based division of labour (master, journeyman, apprentice, and labourer) came to be increasingly replaced by a new hierarchy of foreman, skilled workers, semi-skilled workers and labourers.

Long before the repeal of Apprenticeship clauses of the Statute of Artificers in 1814 the enrolment of apprentices had ceased to be a condition for securing the privileges of a company, builders employed trades in which they had no competence, and large numbers of poorly paid apprentices were to be found.⁵² This was nowhere more evident than in Somers Town, following the collapse of the development in 1794, when “any person who could obtain the means became builders” and “each contrived to raise his house or houses and every street was lengthened in its turn”.⁵³ In a break with the regulated market, passages and courts were developed behind houses and tenements, in the back yards originally intended for artisan workshops, with no heed to the long-term value of the estate. Up until the division and sale of the estate in 1802, consequent on Leroux’ death in 1799, fewer building leases were transferred than before the collapse and the craftsman-builder virtually disappeared. Only when building activity resumed in 1802 on the undeveloped plots were small builders to be found, taking on about a dozen houses each in any one scheme and themselves residing in Somers Town. The price obtained for the estate, however, despite all Leroux’s improvements was only £18,925, representing less than 21 years purchase, with net improved ground rents of only £879. As Malcolm described: “Leroux’s large property being submitted to the hammer a number of

51 ⁵¹ Houldsworth 1986, 40–1.

52 T.K. Derry, “The Repeal of the Apprenticeship Clauses of the Statute of Apprentices,” in *Economic History Review* 3 (1931): 67–8, 70–74.

53 ⁵³ J.P. Malcolm, “Origin and Gradual Increase of Somers Town,” in *Gentlemen’s Magazine* (November 1813): 428.

small houses at rents of £20 per annum were sold for less than £150 and others in proportion”.⁵⁴ By 1803, after the sale, most of the large houses of the Polygon and streets to the south were, however, completed and occupied, though interspersed with vacant and half-completed sites.

As controls became laxer and builders came to operate in a kind of ‘nowhere land’ of industrial and civic administration, the Somers Town Paving Commission remained the only authority which continued to oversee the scheme as a whole, including the provision of sewers, increasingly taking over the old responsibilities of the vestry with respect to roads and cleansing. Paving was the most expensive responsibility of the Paving Commission and a vital building process if houses were to be sold and rented; it was a process also hampered by the continual carting of heavy building materials, which caused immense damage to roads, whilst surplus clay and rubbish caused constant obstructions. In 1796 and again in 1797, for instance, the Commission granted a contract for Phoenix, Ossulston and Marson Streets to John Johnson, a paviour from Westminster. Johnson was at the time undertaking contracts for the Westminster Paving Commission, including replacing pebble with new granite from his quarries in Dartmoor, Devon, brought to London via his Wharf in Westminster. It is highly likely that the old pebbles taken up in Westminster were than laid in Somers Town, where paving was of poorer quality.

The single most important purchaser of leases in the 1802 sale was John Johnson, who for £2,905 took on undeveloped plots to the north of the Polygon, comprising Grenville, Sidney, Bridgewater, Clarendon and Johnson Streets (**Figure 3**). Johnson took over the plots on the same terms as Leroux and also inherited the agreement to produce bricks on sites, paying 1s for every thousand bricks extracted and 2s 6d for every thousand bricks sold off site. For his Somers Town plots, building leases were also in the main assigned to relatively substantial builders. Johnson represented a new kind of builder developer, with his many ‘contracts for prices’ from the Westminster Paving Commission for paving and cleansing, based on proposals consisting of unit prices at which he was prepared to execute works. His annual turnover on Westminster and Somers Town paving contracts alone between 1793 and 1802 was £820, which increased nearly 200% between 1803 and 1813 to average £2,375 per year, peaking at £5,000 in 1808, and averaging £3,774 per year between 1813 and 1822.⁵⁵ The primary interest of such a contractor was not renting as

54 ⁵⁴ Malcolm 1813.

55 ⁵⁵ Clarke 1992, 202-3.

such but to extend building production and in so doing to generate and concentrate more surplus value, effectively dividing the process of producing buildings from their consumption. The deteriorating position of the artisan is apparent from the standard of housing produced, as builders were often willing to build only if there were no vigorous specifications. It is hardly surprising that, by the 1820s, journeymen were complaining of the “illegal monopoly” of the new general contractors.⁵⁶

Conclusions

We can well begin to imagine the town in which Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin lived, alongside the French aristocratic refugees, a town full of carcasses and empty buildings sites, burning clamps and rows of hacks, half-paved and damaged streets scattered with building materials, with saw pits and surplus clay lying by the side and dense badly lit and drained courts filled with the occasional dung heap, not to mention dust heaps and pigs! In the vicinity new establishments had been set up, a slaughterhouse, soap boiling works, and House of Correction, which, together with the burial ground, Smallpox Hospital, Workhouse, kilns and numerous water-filled pits, only added to the town’s disadvantages. It was hardly surprising that John Nash expressed dismay at the ‘houses of such a means stamp as have been built in Somers Town’ and sought, as did the Duke of Bedford on his Figs Mead plot in the north and estate to the south (**Figure 3**), to physically block off the streets, in attempts to separate the different class of residents.⁵⁷ As Bloch expressed this: “Not all people exist in the same Now!”⁵⁸

In other respects, through the work of the Paving Commission, Somers Town had begun to function in a regular way, with lamps in the various built-up streets, watchmen employed and boxes established, and fire engines and a stage-coach serving the estate. Underneath the surface of its infrastructure and built environment, however, we can see Bloch’s “polyrhythmic formation” with its different spatial and

56 ⁵⁶ R. Price, *Masters, Unions and Men, Work Control in Building and the Rise of Labour 1830-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 34.

57 John White, *Some Account of the Proposed Improvements of the Western Parts of London* (London: Lloyd; W. Reynolds, 1815), Appendix III, ‘Report of Mr. John Nash, architect at the Department of Woods on Plans for the improvement of Mary-le-bone park: 1810.

58 ⁵⁸ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 97.

temporal spheres.⁵⁹ What we see are the contradictions between production by wage earners and artisan production, between a built form attuned to the artisan way of life and one accommodating wage labour, between building materials manufacturing for use and for free market exchange, between small artisan builders and contractors, between development geared to maintaining the long-term value through improving ground rents and one all about houses as commodities, between wages set by JPs to wage negotiation between workers and employers, and between local administration by the vestry accountable to JPs and bodies such as the Somers Town Paving Commission established by Act of Parliament. Above all the contradiction is between landed and productive capital interests.

59 David C. Durst, "Ernst Bloch's Theory of Nonsimultaneity," in *The German Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 77:3 (2002): 171-194.

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