

Corporate Management, Labour Relations and Community Building at The East India Company's Blackwall Dockyard, 1600-1657

ABSTRACT

This essay offers a social history of the labour relations established by the English East India Company at its Blackwall Dockyard in East London from 1615-1645. It uses all of the relevant evidence from the Company's minute books, printed bye-laws, and petitions to the Company to assemble a full account of the relationships formed between skilled and unskilled workers, managers, and company officials. Challenging other historians' depictions of early modern dockyards as sites for class confrontation, this essay offers a more agile account of the hierarchies within the yard to suggest how and why the workforce used its considerable power to challenge management and when and why it was successful in doing so. Overall, the essay suggests that the East India Company developed and prioritised a broader social constituency around the dockyard over particular labour lobbies to pre-empt accusations that it abdicated its social responsibilities. In this way, the company reconciled the competing interests of profit (as a joint stock company with investors) and social responsibility by - to some extent - assuming the social role of its progenitor organisations - the Livery Company and the borough corporation.

Early modern trading corporations were social institutions as well as commercial ones. As large employers, both at home and overseas, they sought to maintain positive labour relations with management practices that were responsive, adaptive and positioned the company as an integral and beneficial component of local communities. In doing so they were able to make the case for their corporate privileges with reference to the employment opportunities they provided and their positive contribution to society. Whereas social history has long invigorated the study of the early modern period, modern capitalist ideologies have sometimes distracted attention away from the ways in which one of the early modern period's signature institutions - the corporation - served and upheld social agendas.¹ But, in ignoring the social activities of the early modern trading corporation, the history of international capitalism itself remains incomplete. Positioning the corporation as an arbiter of orderly, stable social relations offers numerous avenues for re-assessing their relationships to early modern communities and states. This essay focusses on the English East India Company (EIC)'s Blackwall Dockyard (immediately to the east of the City of London on the northern banks of the Thames) to illuminate the ways in which the Company intermediated with its workers at the docks during

¹ For examples of this tendency see K.N. Chaudhuri, *The English East India Company: The Study of an Early Joint-Stock Company, 1600-1640* (London, 1965) and K.G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London, 1957). Other forms of corporate activity, such as urban corporations and livery companies, have received more attention from social historians, but rarely in reference to labour. See Phil Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2005) and George Unwin, *The Guilds and Companies of London* (London, 1938). Andrew Gamble and Gavin Kelly "The Politics of the Company", in John Parkinson, Andrew Gamble, and Gavin Kelly (eds), *The Political Economy of the Company* (Oxford, 2000), p. 27.

the company's very early history.² At Blackwall the EIC employed one of London's largest labour forces to build and maintain the shipping required for its extensive overseas activities.³ In managing this facility, the EIC was morally obliged and strategically inclined to assume a role in the community and uphold the social expectations of two of its precursor institutions – the livery company and the borough corporation. These bodies had, for centuries, nurtured their local economies, infrastructures, and the availability, health, and quality of the labour force. This essay surveys how the EIC managed this at Blackwall and the adjoining community of Poplar. In doing so, the essay suggests ways in which corporate history offers new directions for histories of labour, corporations and empire.

This essay places the internal social dynamics of these sites of social contest – the early modern dockyard – into their large social hinterlands and the deeply ingrained cultures that structured commercial and industrial activity. Operating in a period where social stability was ensured in part through government industrial regulations 'whose primary aim was the continuity of employment', the EIC was part of a corporate world where ensuring good relations with workers was a key aspect of their institutional purpose.⁴ London's history is, according to Mark Jenner and Paul Griffiths 'a history of the social relations and social practices of its inhabitants' and of the multiplicity of overlapping communities, interests and activities that made up the city.⁵ The role of parishes in policing these new communities was essential, and the officers charged with maintaining order were drawn from the neighbourhoods they oversaw.⁶ London's Livery Companies provided some means of controlling and managing the workforce in the early modern city. They operated by 'providing a framework within which the conditions of employment could be regulated, standards of production maintained, and legislations for the benefit of the craft promoted'.⁷ In addition to ensuring standards through the rigorous demands of apprenticeship and the role of masters, livery companies also maintained powers to inspect and search the property of members to ensure their quality of work.⁸ When the EIC – as a body both partly based upon and whose members were immersed within – the Livery and the Corporation of London itself – decided to build its dockyard beyond the City walls, they likely expected to free themselves from some of these regulations, but they quickly sought to replicate the protections of the regulated urban environment in the enlarged

² The history of the Blackwall dockyard has long been of interest to historians of London, of shipbuilding, and the docks. See Hermione Hobhouse (ed.), *Survey of London: Poplar, Blackwall, and the Isle of Dogs, the Parish of All Saints*, vols. 43 and 44 (London, 1999); Sir William Foster, *John Company* (London, 1926).

³ The Company's other large labour force, its sailors, has gained some attention from social historians. See Cheryl Fury (ed.), *The Social History of English Seamen, 1485-1649* (Woodbridge, 2012); Idem, "Good Wills Hunting": Tracking down the men of the first East India Company voyage, 1601-1603' in *International Journal of Maritime History*, 27, 3 (2015), pp. 506-527.

⁴ B. E. Supple, *Commercial Crisis and Change in England, 1600-1642: A Study in the Instability of a Mercantile Economy* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 245-6.

⁵ Mark S. R. Jenner and Paul Griffiths, 'Introduction' in Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner (eds.), *Londinopolis: Essays in the cultural and social history of early modern London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 8-9.

⁶ Jenner and Griffiths, *Londinopolis*, pp. 292-303.

⁷ Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 100.

⁸ Joseph P. Ward, *Metropolitan Communities: Trade guilds, identity, and change in early modern London* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 29-39; Maarten Prak, Catharina Lis, Jan Lucassen and Hugo Soly (eds), *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries: work, power and representation* (Aldershot, 2006).

communities around the dockyard as a means to ensure a good supply of local labour.⁹ The company's attempt to develop their workforce in a context where it would undertake the stabilising and monitoring roles of parish and guild depended upon forging a new community of labour around the docks who would maintain some loyalty to the company.¹⁰

While deriving much of their institutional structure and their practices from these institutional progenitors, corporations like the EIC added joint stock financing to this institutional mix, enabling the purchasing power of huge workforces on a scale not seen in European cities.¹¹ But this increase in size also simultaneously created a collective bargaining power for the labour force. How did early modern trading corporations reconcile this paradox? How did they satisfy the social imperatives of their guild-like predecessors by taking care of their labour forces at the same time as controlling labour costs so as not to disappoint investors? Did they use scale to control costs? Or were the skills of their shipwrights and mariners scarce enough for labour power to form and dictate corporate policy to company directors?¹² This focus on the ways in which the Blackwall dockyard shows the EIC as a community builder in London (rather than in India) offers a useful new perspective for corporate and company history.¹³ Company histories have not ignored the social bases of their operations. They have often highlighted the importance of labour to the self-justifications of corporations, but have rarely connected this posturing to the company's management of their own labour force.¹⁴ Others noted the ways in which corporations concentrated local labour forces but remained uninterested in the ways in which this concentration facilitated the creation of labour power that could influence the corporation itself.¹⁵ Historians of the EIC who have mentioned this important experiment in local infrastructure building have usually characterised the Blackwall dockyard as a commercial folly – judging the yard solely against financial criteria.¹⁶

Early modern dockyards have long been of interest to labour and social historians. As 'the only sizeable industrial centres in most European states' sites like the Venice Arsenal (which covered over sixty acres and employed up to two thousand men) created unique

⁹ For the development of other industrial communities outside London, see David Levine and Keith Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham, 1560-1765* (Oxford, 1991).

¹⁰ The 'all-encompassing presence' on the Company in this wider community effected more than its workers alone, but also their families, friends and neighbours. See, Pamela Sharpe, 'Gender at Sea: Women and the East India Company in Seventeenth-Century London' in Penelope Lane, Neil Raven and K. D. M. Snell, *Women, Work and Wages in England, 1600-1850* (Woodbridge, 2004).

¹¹ As Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude have demonstrated the Dutch East India Company (VOC) employed 4,500 people in Asia and 3,200 on board its ships in 1625. As such 'the VOC was by far the largest single employer in the Republic'. Jan De Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 462. The VOC had considerable support from the state in regards to its military development. See, Jan Piet Puype, *The Arsenal of the World: The Dutch Arms Trade in the Seventeenth Century* (Amsterdam, 1996).

¹² For convenience we use the anachronistic term 'director' to describe the members of the Court of Committees.

¹³ Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations for the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011).

¹⁴ Ted McCormick, "Population: Modes of Seventeenth Century Demographic Thought" in Philip Stern and Carl Wennerlind (eds), *Mercantilism Reimagined: Political Economy in Early Modern Britain and its Empire* (New York, 2014), p. 29. For the use of the poor as a labour resource see also Joyce Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth Century England* (Princeton, 1978)

¹⁵ Matthew David Mitchell "Three English Cloth Towns and the Royal African Company", *The Journal of The Historical Society*, XIII (2013).

¹⁶ Chaudhuri, *English East India Company*, pp. 89-108.

problems of planning, coordination, and costing.¹⁷ For Pepijn Brandon, the historian of the Dutch naval docks, shipyards were ‘the laboratories for historians of modernisation processes, the evolution of administrative cultures, and the development of capitalist relations’.¹⁸ Historians of these yards have focussed on what they can tell us about the state as a largescale employer.¹⁹ Labour historians have also concentrated on the ways in which mass employment within them assisted the development of ‘thoroughly self-conscious ... worker group[s] with traditions, privileges and status in the larger society’.²⁰ They have therefore preferred to document social hierarchy within these industrial communities.²¹ Such studies of social stratification have also focussed on tensions within these groups. The scale of these operations encouraged workers to turn to strikes and disruption as a means to negotiate more favourable working conditions and wages. But this focus on tensions between state employers and workers has often projected back onto authors who have either bemoaned prior historians depiction of ‘dockyardmen’ as deferential or have presumed that workers were persistently and inherently oppositional to their bosses.²² As Roger Morriss has explained, dockyards were deeply embedded in their wider communities and ‘were shaped by more than immediate issues’ with managers ‘influenced by prevailing attitudes in government towards their employees’ just as ‘artificers and labourers were influenced by feelings in the local community towards government’.²³ Using the history of the EIC dockyard at Blackwall, this essay challenges some of these depictions. It offers a more supple and nuanced depiction of the hierarchies at work within the dockyards. This depiction offers more room for the realisation of shared goals and compromises within the labour negotiations that emerged between skilled and unskilled workers, their representatives, managers, and the leaders of the company itself. Agendas and outcomes were not simply paternalist and oppressive or militant and liberating. Relations between workers and employers ought not to be characterised as trapped in a permanent class confrontation.

¹⁷ Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and workplace in the preindustrial city* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 7, pp. 3-4

¹⁸ Pepijn Brandon, *War, Capital, and the Dutch State (1588-1795)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 139 and Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day, ‘Introduction’ in Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day (eds.), *History of Work and Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards* (London: Mansell, 1999), p. xi.

¹⁹ Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day, ‘Introduction’ in Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day (eds.), *History of Work and Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards* (London: Mansell, 1999), p. xi. p. xii.

²⁰ Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and workplace in the preindustrial city* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

²² See Brandon. For a more nuanced view see Davis.

²² Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal: Workers and workplace in the preindustrial city* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 6 and pp. 54-9 and Roger Knight, ‘From Impressment to Task Work: Strikes and disruption in the Royal Dockyards, 1688-1788’ in Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day (eds.), *History of Work and Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards* (London: Mansell, 1999), pp. 1-2. This polarising tendency is also discernible among historians of the private, company docks who judged the labour practices of the English East India Company according to a sliding scale from benevolence to tyranny rather than on collaborative activities or the lobbying power of the labour force or viewed trading companies as catalysts for ‘proletarianization’. See Margaret Makepeace, “Business and Benevolence: The East India Company’s Management of its London Warehouse Labourers, 1800-1858” (D.Phil., University of Leicester, 2007), p. 187 see also Makepeace, *The East India Company’s London Workers – Management of the Warehouse Labourers, 1800-1858* (Boydell, 2010) and Jan Lucassen, “A Multinational and its Labor Force: The Dutch East India Company, 1595–1795”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 66 (2004), pp. 12–39, 33 respectively.

²³ Roger Morriss, ‘Government and Community: The changing context of labour relations, 1770-1830’ in Kenneth Lunn and Ann Day (eds.), *History of Work and Labour Relations in the Royal Dockyards* (London: Mansell, 1999), p. 21.

This essay therefore offers a systematic and comprehensive study of the evidence the EIC's dockyard provides social historians about the ways in which the corporate concentration of labour helped create an interest group both within and beyond the company's formal membership. It offers a full account of the ways in which the EIC management channelled its traditional, corporate instincts into creating a pool of labour for the docks in what would become an early example of a 'company town' at adjoining Poplar.²⁴ The essay analyses the social hierarchies at work within the docks and assesses when workers' preferences were and were not influential for the company as well as the means that each group within the hierarchy used to sustain their own and the company's ends. The essay also places the social and labour dynamics of the dockyard into the context of state employment at rival yards and into the broader context of the urban, corporate management of and support for local communities. A study of Blackwall as a crucible for early modern corporate labour relations offers an important insight into the ways in which corporations structured domestic labour disputes (and were indeed structured by them). It also offers recent debates about mercantilism some domestic focus to accompany a now-traditional focus on the transnational contexts for mercantilist thought.²⁵ But most important, exploring the social history of the corporation helps to place the social history of labour back into the trading corporation's early history in ways that may also compel more recent commentators on these much-misunderstood organisations to consider their intrinsically social roles and imperatives.²⁶ Although the company's employees did not always get their way with the company's management, the Blackwall case suggests how – at times – trading corporations (like their livery and borough forbears) were not distant, impersonal institutions but social organisations, whose members invested time and energy on behalf of the 'public' community that the corporation represented.²⁷ The essay begins by examining the rationales for building the dockyard at Blackwall and the relationship between their trade, state support and public opinion that was central to the company's sustainability. It then narrates the yard's rise and fall. The final section examines the organisational structure and culture of the yard to examine how the changing relationships between the labour force and the management of the company offer new insights about the history of the yard, the EIC, and early modern London.

The decision to build a private dockyard at Blackwall was based on four assumptions. First, the East India trade required ships with specific features that could not be hired cheaply. Access

²⁴ Blackwall and Poplar would therefore appear to be a very early example. For the more familiar later examples see: Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change Since 1800* (London, 2002).

²⁵ Nigel Worden, "Artisan Conflicts in a Colonial Context: The Cape Town Blacksmith Strike of 1752", *Labor History*, 46 (2005), pp. 155-184.

²⁶ Oliver E. Williamson, *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism, Firms, Markets, Relational Contracting* (London, 1985), ch. 10; Paul DiMaggio (ed), *The Twenty-First Century Firm: Changing Economic Organization in International Perspective* (Princeton, 2001); and Colin Mayer, *Firm Commitment: Why the Corporation is Failing Us* (Oxford, 2013).

²⁷ Anne Goldgar and Robert L. Frost (eds.), *Institutional Culture in Early Modern Society* (Leiden: 2004); Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: structures of life in sixteenth-century London* (Cambridge: 1989); Phil Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth: citizens and freemen in early modern England* (Cambridge: 2005).

to shipping was essential for the EIC and much of the company's trade was undertaken in large, often specially made, vessels that were capable of the East Indian voyage, defending themselves from attack, and safely carrying goods on the long journey from one continent to another. The average tonnage of ships conducting trade in the Channel in this period was only 50 to 100 tons, and those used for voyages to the West Indies, North America or Spain only reached around 200 tons at their largest.²⁸ However, the EIC required larger vessels, with a tonnage between 300 and 700 tons deemed the most effective.²⁹ For the first voyage east in 1601 the company relied on purchasing ships, but these were soon found wanting.³⁰ Building their own ships also allowed standardisation and ensured that ships would not be old, damaged or otherwise lacking the quality required.

The second insight that informed the decision to build the Blackwall dockyard was financial. Building their own bespoke ships for the East would be cheaper than hiring them or chartering them from other shipwrights. In 1607 the company sought to charter ships that had been constructed bespoke for the trade, offering to pay £30 per ton. But with no offers the decision was made for the company to establish its own shipbuilding facilities.³¹ William Burrell, a ship builder who would become the long-standing expert in shipping for the Company, estimated that by building their own ships they could construct an 800-ton vessel for £4,000, a price he claimed was six times cheaper than that offered by other shipmakers.³² It was also cheaper than buying ships from others, such as the £3,700 paid for the aged, 600-ton *Dragon* that had been part of the first voyage.³³

Third, the EIC's decision to build its own ships also helped the company impress its state backers. From its inception the company sought to ensure its access to the volume of shipping necessary for their trade, and the issue was included in their charter in 1600.³⁴ The state's price for granting monopoly privileges to the EIC was an understanding that the company would bolster the maritime strength of the nation. To ensure this, the company's charter imposed restrictions on the use of ships by the company, allowing the employment of up to six ships and six pinnaces for their trade. It also regulated the scale of the company's labour force and stipulated that the twelve permitted vessels be manned by a maximum of 500 mariners.³⁵ These numbers were tightly controlled and were offered on condition that if the Crown 'have just cause to arm our navy in warlike manner in defence of our realm or for the offence of our enemies' the ships of the EIC would not be allowed to depart on voyages east.³⁶ As such, the company's docks and fleet would be an important symbol of national maritime dynamism and would be carefully watched by state officials.

²⁸ Chaudhuri, *English East India Company*, p. 95.

²⁹ British Library [hereafter BL], IOR/B/5, 30th January 1615.

³⁰ Henry Stevens (ed), *Dawn of British Trade to the East Indies: As Recorded in the Court Minutes of the East India Company, 1599-1603* (London, 1886), pp. 6, 8, 27, 92.

³¹ BL, IOR/B/2, 19th May 1607.

³² This seems an improbably good deal, but his estimates may have included the costs of other shipwrights including the cost of developing new, larger facilities capable of building these ships. BL, IOR/B/2, August 1607.

³³ Stevens, *Dawn of British Trade*, p. 31.

³⁴ BL, IOR/A/2, 'Charter for the East India Company, 1600'.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The crown's concern regarding shipping was exacerbated by the comparative strength of its main rivals. In 1608, Noel de Caron – the Dutch ambassador to England - reported that the Dutch East India Company had access to forty-four powerful men-of-war, a navy that far outweighed the English company's shipping at this point.³⁷ De Caron also stated that this Dutch navy was 'as strong and well established in the East Indies as the King of Spain', suggesting that in spite of its significant investment in shipping the English company lagged behind their main European rivals in this respect.³⁸ The purpose-built docks would help the English Company to make up some of this difference. Doing so would help to maintain the support of King James I. Such support was critical for the continuation of the Company's privileges. In 1609, around the time that the EIC's charter was reaffirmed by James I, the King wrote to the Privy Council extolling the Company's activities and explained how through the 'continuance of their trade the greatest shipping of the realm is set a work, and much more great shipping built and is like to be than heretofore'.³⁹

Whereas the charter sought to limit the risk of losing ships and men to the East Indies, state subsidies offered generous inducements for naval construction and subsidies were offered that encouraged larger ships to be built. In 1616 the EIC received £736 10s in subsidy in return for building three ships.⁴⁰ Two years later, in 1618, two ships were built and the company received a subsidy of £515 5s.⁴¹ Through these subsidies the Crown sought to encourage the Company's shipbuilding without risking the defence of the realm. Larger ships could be more useful in times of war and enabled a greater volume of trade without breaking the demands to send no more than five per year to Asia. Over the next two decades, the Blackwall docks would form a central part of the company's domestic and international reputation as a commercial and maritime power. Later in its history, the docks became an international symbol of the company's commitment to trade that was deemed to be worth sustaining even after the financial benefits of the docks had declined. As one director put it when responding to calls to end work at the docks in the mid-1630s: '[it is] of considerable importance that work should not be stopped altogether in the yard, this having already occasioned much discourse, which doubtless will be carried into Holland and cause them to report to India that the company is dissolved.'⁴²

Fourth, the domestic employment that the EIC would provide at Blackwall made it easier for the company to depict its trade to a domestic audience as a positive social force. Criticised as a monopoly and an exporter of precious metal, the company turned its ambitions as a large employer into a central part of its public appeal. Sensitivity to the interests of the national labour force was amongst the company's priorities from the beginning. Early written objections to the conduct of the company often expressed concern about the effects that its

³⁷ Her Majesty's Stationary Office, *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, volume 20* (London, 1968), pp. 70-96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Her Majesty's Stationary Office, *Calendar of the Cecil Papers in Hatfield House, volume 21* (London, 1970), pp. 154-162.

⁴⁰ William Noel Sainsbury (ed), *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, East Indies, China and Japan, 1513-1616* (London, 1864), p. 1142; Mary Anne Everett Green (ed), *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, James I, volume 88* (London, 1858), pp. 378-389.

⁴¹ William Noel Sainsbury (ed), *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series, East Indies, China and Japan, 1513-1616* (London, 1864), p. 382; Mary Anne Everett Green (ed), *Calendar of State Papers Domestic, James I, volume 104* (London, 1858), pp. 599-614.

⁴² BL, IOR/B/17, 4th May 1635.

dangerous, long-distance trade was having on the nation's workforce. In 1615, Robert Kayl highlighted the huge loss of life of English labourers in the company's flagship, the *Trades Increase*, and scoffed at their claims of employing the poor.⁴³ In his response to this critique, company director, Dudley Digges rejected the assertion that the company depleted the nation's labour force by describing how the company prevented the 'Commonwealth' from having to support for the 'shipwrights, smiths, coopers, ropemakers, porters, lighter-men, &c. and such like infinite number of labourers which they have continually in pay' at Blackwall yard, therefore saving money for the public purses and stimulating employment.⁴⁴ By 1621, another EIC director, Thomas Mun, celebrated the importance of the company to shipbuilding by noting the social benefits of its employment at Blackwall.

Do not their yearly buildings maintain many hundred poor people, and greatly increase the number of those artsmen which are so needful for this common wealth?⁴⁵

Mun proposed that the trade:

will set to work five hundred men, carpenters, caulkers, carriers, joiners, smiths, & other laborers,

Mun added that the company's employment agenda at Blackwall was part of a broader social and charitable programme for the local community there:

And likewise, are not many poor widows, wives and children of Blackwall, Limehouse, Ratcliffe, Shadwell, and Wapping, often relieved by the East India company with whole hogsheads of good beef and pork, biscuit and dolls of ready money? Are not divers of their children set on work to pick oakum, & other labours fitting their age and capacity?⁴⁶

The Blackwall employment and social project served to help the EIC present itself in a positive light both to the Crown and the public. By the early 1630s, the social conscience of the EIC appeared on the London stage in Mountford's play 'The Launching of the Mary' which explained:

'The East India gates stand open, open wide
To entertain the needy and the poor'.
'Blackwall proclaims their bounty: Limehouse
speaks
(if not ingrate) their liberality.
Ratcliffe cannot complain nor Wapping weep,
Nor Shadwell cry against their niggardness.
No, they do rather speak the contrary
With acclamation to the highest heavens'⁴⁷

⁴³ [Robert Kayl], *The Trades Increase* (London, 1615), p. 31.

⁴⁴ Dudley Digges, *A Discourse on Trade* (London, 1615), p. 41.

⁴⁵ [Thomas Mun], *A Discourse of Trade, From England vnto the East-Indies: Answering to Diuerse Obiections Which are Vsually Made Against the Same* (London, 1621), pp. 30, 41/42, 43.

⁴⁶ See also McCormick 'Population', p. 29

⁴⁷ From British Library, Egerton MS 1994, ff. 318-348

Despite a clear rationale for the construction of their private dockyard at Blackwall, the building, maintenance and staffing of the yard proved challenging for the EIC. Requiring significant investment, these challenges were a major theme for discussion in the company's Court Minutes.⁴⁸ For example, during the earliest plans for the dockyard the validity of an extensive dockyard complex was questioned, and the company initially chose to build only a single large ship.⁴⁹ Another ongoing concern was the possibility that the EIC's charter would not be renewed, or might be invalidated by Parliament, a situation that would have lost the company a lot of money in what needed to be a long-term investment to be viable. In 1614 for example, the Court of Committees discussed the purchase of land in Blackwall for docks but were forced to concede that it was too much of a risk.⁵⁰ From their earliest development the docks were expected to save the company money, but the upfront cost was significant. They were not an asset that could be cut from the balance sheet with ease if they no longer served their purpose so the risks were significant.

Aside from costs and political uncertainty, the labour force provided a further challenge. The company needed to assemble a vast and skilled labour force capable of building large and state-of-the-art vessels. But they had to do so without diverting workers away from the naval yards and without exposing themselves to the labour power of other corporations like the Company of Shipwrights of London.⁵¹ Locating the yard at some distance from London also posed organisational questions, because the workforce and managers would need to travel from London or be supplied from the local population who operated outside the familiar labour market of the City.

In spite of these challenges Blackwall expanded rapidly throughout the later 1610s and 1620s. The company purchased more land around the docks in 1619 and again in 1621, when an area in the East March of Poplar was purchased at 5s per acre.⁵² Despite worsening commercial conditions for the company during the mid-1620s, it continued to expand its operation at Blackwall.⁵³ When news emerged of land becoming available around the Blackwall facility in 1624 the company was quick in agreeing to purchase the land to enlarge the facility further.⁵⁴ Expanding the facilities and careful management of the docks enabled the construction of over seventy ships between 1600 and 1640.⁵⁵ Not only does this demonstrate the scale of the EIC's ship building activities during this period but also that they were

⁴⁸ These were minutes from meetings between the Court of Committees (the company's managing body) and the General Court meetings (where all members of the EIC could attend) and are the main source for exploring the inner workings of the organisation. Accounts for the period do not survive. While we have used all available evidence relating to the Company's activities at Blackwall during this period, there is much that the records do not show.

⁴⁹ BL, IOR/B/2, 24th August 1607.

⁵⁰ BL, IOR/B/5, 29th April 1614.

⁵¹ Reginald R. Sharpe, *A Short Account of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights* (London: 1876).

⁵² BL, IOR/B/6, 30th July 1619; BL IOR/B/8, 19th September 1621.

⁵³ BL, IOR/B/9, 2nd September 1624.

⁵⁴ BL, IOR/B/9, 6th November 1624.

⁵⁵ Chaudhuri, *English East India Company*, p. 21.

operating on an entirely different scale from most ship builders in England where ships of more than 200 tons have been considered large.⁵⁶

<TABLE 1>

Through their investment in ship building infrastructure the EIC gained a reputation for proficiency in constructing the specialist ships required for long-distance trade.⁵⁷ The reputation of the company's shipbuilding prowess was not limited to England and in 1624 the King of Denmark sought to use their expertise during plans to launch his own trading voyage to Asia. On 8 September 1624, EIC director Thomas Stile reported the Danish King's request for the company to send carpenters capable of building these ships to Denmark. The company refused, deciding that they only had one man capable of managing the work and that he was required for their own needs.⁵⁸ However, a few weeks later the Court of Committees agreed to allow the King of Denmark to use their facilities for the construction of his ship.⁵⁹ This deal demonstrates the international reputation for excellence that the Blackwall yard had achieved.

In spite of an increasingly challenging trading landscape that dogged the EIC into the early 1630s, numerous members were still offering their encouragement to expand the yard further, but they were becoming more of a minority.⁶⁰ The rising cost of labour appears to have been a key feature in the decision to close the yard. From 1625 labourer's and craftsmen's wages had been increasing sharply and were 50% higher by the end of the 1640s.⁶¹ From this point onwards the docks entered a period of slow decline as the company sought to cut costs and improve the efficiency of their global operations. In 1635, alongside attempts to reduce the expense of Blackwall, the company considered the possibility of selling the yard or buildings attached to it – the dock's inventory alone was valued at over £10,000.⁶² From the 1640s, while the docks were still held by the EIC, their use was increasingly opened up to other parties.⁶³ By 1644 the condemnation of the docks as wasteful was increasingly common. The EIC's treasurer, John Massingberd, reviewed the company's accounts and concluded that 'their stock being but small, it were very fitting some way should be thought upon to lessen the Company's charge [...] particularly in the express expenditure of money weekly at Blackwall.' For the first time however, Massingberd wasn't advocating for money saving strategies, but instead encouraged the company directors that the docks 'were best to be sold and the money put into cash, and that for providing of shipping they might better freight then build'.⁶⁴ Although the company decided that they 'cannot be without their yard at Blackwall' simply for quick cash returns, they did agree that if it was demonstrated that 'freighting of ships was cheaper to the

⁵⁶ Davis, *The English Shipping Industry*, ch. 1.

⁵⁷ Ken. Edisbury to Nicholas, 17 October 1625, The National Archives, UK [hereafter TNA], SP 16/7, fo. 124.

⁵⁸ BL, IOR/B/9, September 8, 1624.

⁵⁹ BL, IOR/B/9, September 22, 1624.

⁶⁰ BL, IOR/B/15, 24th October 1632.

⁶¹ In southern England wages increased for each group from 8d to 12d and 12d to 16d per day respectively. Wages data is drawn from material rating to several crafts, but carpenters and masons (both employed at the yard) form the most substantial part of the data. Henry Phelps Brown and Sheila V. Hopkins, *A Perspective of Wages and Prices* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 4.

⁶² BL, IOR/B/17, 1st July 1635; BL, IOR/B/18, 27th July 1636.

⁶³ BL, IOR/B/19, 22nd May 1640.

⁶⁴ BL, IOR/B/21, 10th July 1644.

company than setting out ships of their own' then closing the docks would be an option. As this option was explored, it remained unclear whether freighting ships would be cheaper, but 'in respect of lessening the company's charges divers opinions were delivered, some conceiving it necessary to desert Blackwall, others not: some holding it fittest to freight ships, others thinking it better to build.'⁶⁵ While the docks at Blackwall had lost some of their allure, even in the later 1640s they retained support among the directors of the company – at least enough to keep them operational for a few years longer. By 1652, however, the company sold the docks and their role in the history of London and the Thames would pass into a new stage.⁶⁶

Why did the EIC turn its back on its Blackwall dockyard? Clearly, the relationship between the company and their docks was more complex than a simple question of costs. Indeed, the realisation that the company kept the docks going after they ceased to be cost-effective begs an alternative question: why did they sustain the yard for as long as they did? Although sections of the company wished to prioritise the non-financial benefits of the dock, rising costs meant that these benefits became harder to realise. In 1641 Sir Nicholas Crispe questioned the great costs of the yard, suggesting that they 'should be lessened' and that the company should have nothing to do with Blackwall so that it would 'not to look after magnificence, but profit'.⁶⁷ A less buoyant commercial and far less stable political context in the 1630s and 40s also made large-scale infrastructure within England more difficult to justify.

The rest of the essay examines the significance of this large-scale labour force in the history of the dockyard project and of the company itself during this formative period in its history. It assesses how its employees appeared to become a powerful constituency within the EIC that the Court of Committees could not simply dismiss as a resource to be managed. Careful examination of the role of the labour force in determining the future of the dockyard at Blackwall also reveals the extent to which the company sought to gather, structure, cultivate, and support its workforce at Poplar. This kind of community building – for so long a core activity of corporations in England – appears to have represented part of a long-term solution to its problem of labour supply that was both traditional for domestic corporations and pioneering for joint stocks. The EIC appeared to prioritise community building as a means of improving workers' loyalty, ensuring social stability and facilitating effective management at the docks.

The EIC was responsible for the control of a considerable workforce at Blackwall. Numbering in the hundreds, these workers ranged from skilled carpenters to unskilled labourers and their skills and effort were essential for the effective operation of the docks.⁶⁸ The company deployed a range of methods to manage their workers. At times, it proposed to manage a clear

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Survey of London vols 43 and 44 chapter XIX states that the working conditions at Blackwall in the late 18th century were very similar to those in the Company yard.

⁶⁷ BL, IOR/B/19, General Court, 6th October 1641.

⁶⁸ If we accept Mun's estimate that the dock's employed 500 people (see above), the daily charge for the EIC would have been around £20 before 1625, rising to £30 in the 1640s. Phelps Brown and Hopkins, *Perspective of Wages*, p. 4.

hierarchy from the Court of Committees to the labourer, but it also employed officers whose job it was to mediate between the Court of Committees and the employee in an arrangement that contested this hierarchy. The company proved – at times - responsive to formal petitions from both organised groups and individuals. But its most compelling, long-term labour management strategy involved investing in the fabric of the community around the docks itself, the growing hamlet of Poplar.⁶⁹

The most detailed account of the EIC's management structure can be found in the 1621 *The Lawes or Standing Orders of the East India Company*, which detailed the requirements of different roles within the company and codified its expectations of their employees.⁷⁰ These bye-laws were not meant to be prescriptive, but rather a guide to how the internal governance of the company should operate. The Court of Committees took a strong interest in the docks, and at least one director was appointed at all times to oversee operations at Blackwall. He was responsible for reporting to other directors about the docks, but also acted as an important conduit between the senior staff at the docks and the leadership of the company. Through the oversight of a director the company could more effectively manage their substantial workforce. For example, when the director responsible for Blackwall reported to the company in 1624 that a recently constructed alehouse in Blackwall was damaging productivity, the dockyard official, Mr Fotherby, was quickly instructed to restrict access to the 'tap house there in the yard at other times then at their meals to the hindrance of their day labour.'⁷¹ The presence of the director enabled the quick reporting and rapid response necessary for managing the working routines at the yard. Each year the Court of Committees held a meeting at Blackwall as part of a gesture confirming their oversight over the yard and expressing the site's importance to the company.

Alongside directors who oversaw the docks, the company was also regularly appraised through the Purser General, who received funds directly from the company treasurers each week and oversaw the payment of wages at the dockyard. He also undertook the accounting for Blackwall and was responsible to 'certify by him the particulars under their hands to the Treasurer in a book for that purpose.'⁷² Like the director responsible for Blackwall, the Purser General helped ensure a clear line of communication between the dockyard and the Court of Committees and enabled a fairly clear understanding of the day-to-day operation of the docks at the highest levels within the company. Another important figure in the company was the Ships Husband, who managed the outfitting of ships and updated the Court of Committees, which he attended regularly, on all matters regarding the company's fleet.⁷³ There was, then, clear line-of-communication between the company's corporate headquarters in the City of London and the Blackwall dockyard.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Where the history of labour has been discussed in relation to Poplar the focus has been on seamen, who made up a substantial part of the growing hamlet's population. See Fury, *Social History of English Seamen*; Richard J. Blakemore, "The Ship, The River and the Ocean Sea: concepts of space in the seventeenth-century London maritime community" in Duncan Redford (ed), *Maritime History and Identity: the Sea and Culture in the Modern World* (London, 2013).

⁷⁰ East India Company, *The Lawes or Standing Orders of the East India Company*, (London, 1621).

⁷¹ BL, IOR/B/9, 12th November 1624. The representatives of the workers disputed this explanation of the slow down see below.

⁷² East India Company, *Laws*, pp. 25-6.

⁷³ Chaudhuri, *English East India Company*, pp. 100-1.

⁷⁴ The meeting place for the Court of Committees – the East India Company's management board – changed throughout this period from Philpot Lane to Bishopsgate.

At the dockyard, the Clark of the Yard, Porter of the Lodge and Chirurgeon General each took responsibility for overseeing the workforce. In part, the role of these figures was to assist the management of the docks, but more importantly each of these individuals were also given the authority to assess the suitability of workers - physically but also morally. The Clark was responsible for monitoring 'abuses in the yards' that ranged from ensuring 'that no disorders be used in the said tap house by drawing of strong beer' and that they did not 'suffer more labourers to be at the carrying of a piece of timber or plank than are needful.'⁷⁵ The Porter took this monitoring a step further and had special privileges 'upon just suspicion' to stop and search workers that might be stealing iron or other materials from the yard. His role, then, was not just to ensure the productivity of the workforce, but to monitor for criminal activity.⁷⁶ Finally, the Chirurgeon assessed workers' suitability for work. This included establishing whether they were decrepit or lame, but also whether they were 'unclean' or had not attended their haircut, which was required every forty days.⁷⁷ In addition to instructions regarding their work, labourers' orders included the demand that 'they shall not commit or doe any riot, by fighting, swearing, breaking of pots'.⁷⁸ Part of the company's concern in this regard was that the reputation of the company was at risk and would be damaged if social stability was threatened by their employees, but there were also deep concerns that company employees were a risk due to their access to expensive materials that could be stolen. The company demanded that its employees were not only capable of hard work, but were also careful to try and ensure their workers were good, moral 'citizens' of the company who could represent the EIC in public and in the workspace. The managerial powers of these senior officers at the yard helped to achieve these goals.

These managers were not solely preoccupied with reporting fraud and indiscipline to the Court of Committees. As intermediaries between the Court of Committees and the workforce, these officials of the yard were essential for good labour relations. Workers could lobby the company with – at times - some success through their representatives. The chief carpenter was particularly important, and it was this individual who was usually called on by the company to explain issues relating to production at the docks and to represent the preferences of his highly skilled workforce to the Court of Committees. At a meeting of the directors in July 1621, the carpenter reported that employees resented being searched by company officials who feared that the labour force may be stealing valuable materials. Noting a bargaining opportunity for his staff, he added that the previous year he had been forced to hire men from outside London to undertake the work. He argued that the company should refrain from searching senior employees if they wished to retain good local staff. The Court of Committees reassured him, and instructed that senior employees be told, that the searches were not undertaken because they were suspected, and hoped that 'none should be offended'. They agreed however that searching would be stopped for a time except in situations where there was a particular cause for suspicion.⁷⁹ This example perhaps suggests that representatives of the skilled and loyal workers could at times lobby the management of the company to uphold

⁷⁵ East India Company, *Laws*, pp. 20-1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 26-7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 32-3.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 37-8.

⁷⁹ BL, IOR/B/11, 21st July 1626.

their interests. In the 1620s at least, the employees of the company were able – on occasion - to leverage the skills they developed through building the unique ships the EIC required, to improve their working conditions.

These officers also often represented the workforce and the EIC itself to other potential employees – often powerful ones. For much of the 1620s and 1630s, the chief carpenter at Blackwall wielded considerable influence within the shipbuilding community as a whole. Although understood to represent the skilled workers, the chief carpenter did not always force the company to accede to workers' interpretations of events, however. In 1624 when a delay in the production of ships was reported, the Court of Committees called on the carpenter, Mr Stephens, to explain why.⁸⁰ Stephens placed the blame for the slowdown away from the workers informing the Court that 'the work was begun late', 'the sickness that reigned everywhere has also seized upon his workmen', and that the King had ordered the company's carpenters to work on naval vessels.⁸¹ Unwilling to accept these delays, the Court immediately ordered 'that if about London there cannot be found workmen to serve the turn, they must be hired elsewhere' and also appointed a number of directors to go to the yard each week to ensure the construction of their ships continued uninterrupted.⁸² They also requested that access to the yard's tap house be more carefully managed.⁸³ So workers and employers formed contrasting explanations for the slow down with workers blaming external factors and the Court of Committees blaming the workers' thirst for alcohol. The control that the Court placed over representatives of skilled workers appears to have meant that the carpenters – at times - placed the interests of the company over the interests of the state. In 1635, the head shipwright of the company appears to have been more resistant to state requests and was accused of ignoring the Crown's order to send shipwrights to the royal dockyard at Chatham to conduct an inspection of hulls. He had instead prioritised that all shipwrights were present for shipwright company elections scheduled for the same day.⁸⁴ By the 1630s, then, the EIC had achieved greater control over the Shipwrights lobby than the state.

The EIC's management structure was designed to encourage the accountability of senior officers to their juniors. Officers were subject to the scrutiny of their staff before the Court of Committees. Workmen were encouraged to 'make complaint unto the Governor, Deputy and Committees, of all disorders, which they shall perceive or know to be performed in the Yard by any man, or of oppressions or wrongs which might be offered them, by any of the company's chief officers'.⁸⁵ Part of this statute was for workers to monitor their co-workers, but there was also a clear expectation and willingness for the company to receive complaints about senior officers within the company. When receiving complaints of this sort the company promised to seek that 'such courses may be presently taken for remedies'.⁸⁶ For instance, in 1643, Lucy Bearblocke and Margaret Coates petitioned the Company regarding a property purchased by their mother within in yard used 'for making of spun yard and twice-laid ropes'

⁸⁰ BL, IOR/B/9, 6th November 1624.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ See above

⁸⁴ Kenrick Edisbury to Nicholas, 28 August 1635, TNA SP 16/296, fo. 130; Nicholas, 1 Oct. 1635, SP 16/299, fo. 8.

⁸⁵ East India Company, *Laws*, pp. 37-8.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

which was under threat by other employee, Boatswain Ingram, who sought to expand his own properties within the yard and force them from the site. The Company sided with Bearblocke and Coates, declaring the property would ‘remain to them as formerly’ on condition that it was fully repaired and they continued to make ropes and yarn for the Company.⁸⁷ Even though in opposition to a more senior figure, Ingram, these two sisters were able to obtain a position response from the Company. The company sought to encourage a working environment where people in positions of authority were accountable to their employees just as much as they created a system whereby these same employees could be controlled and monitored.

The EIC was – at times - responsive to formal petitions and appeals from its workers. Relationships between the early modern trading corporation and employees were, therefore, affected by activities that went beyond the simple control of workers through rules and regulations. From its earliest meetings, the EIC was willing to receive, and often support, petitions from employees. Through petitions the company was able to offer welfare and poor relief. The motivations for these activities were wide ranging, including the civic humanist and religious imperatives of the company’s leaders who wished to ensure that the corporation sustained a reputation for good works. But these activities also helped to promote good relations with their workers. The EIC was not alone in its attempts to offer support of this kind to employees. The state also received similar petitions for support from workers at its docks in Woolwich.⁸⁸ However, the rare examples of petitions to the crown, or other trading corporations, were far less common than those received by the EIC. Between July 1624 and June 1625, the company received 166 petitions covering a range of topics – eighty-six of these related to payments and wages and nineteen directly requested charitable relief for employees or their families.⁸⁹ On the other hand, the Levant Company didn’t receive a single request for aid during the same period.⁹⁰ This combination of strict rules and regulations with responsive management was not, of course, unique to the Company, and other organisation would long maintain similar structures to ensure discipline.⁹¹ However, in the case of the EIC this approach was more than simply controlling employees and connects this innovative joint-stock enterprise with its preceding social-corporate organisations and demonstrates how we can do more to reflect on the company’s relationship to its employees to develop a better understanding of the social history of this emerging ‘company-state’.⁹²

The company often responded to appeals from individuals for redress of specific grievances. In 1624 the Company received a petition from the Clerk of General Stores at Blackwall, Robert Fotherby, asking for a raise in wages due to an increased workload without any additional assistance. The company considered his past service, decided that he was a valuable asset and doubled his salary.⁹³ In 1635, when Richard Limney petitioned to be

⁸⁷ Sharpe, ‘Women and the East India Company’, pp. 61-2.

⁸⁸ Henry Hall to the Admiralty, 26 Oct. 1631, TNA SP 16/202, fo. 64.

⁸⁹ BL, IOR/B/9.

⁹⁰ Levant Company Court Minutes, TNA, SP 105/148.

⁹¹ The EIC’s approach to labour wouldn’t have been too unfamiliar to those working in the eighteenth-century British navy, see N. A. M. Rodgers, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1986), pp. 205-236.

⁹² Stern, Company-state; and Stern, “‘Bundles of Hyphens’: Corporations as Legal Communities in the Early Modern British Empire’ in Lauren Benton and Richard Ross (eds), *Legal Pluralism and Empires, 1500-1850* (New York, 2013), 21-48

⁹³ BL, IOR/B/9, 22nd October 1624.

admitted to the company's Almshouse at Blackwall (which had been established in 1627 through an endowment provided in the will of a company member for the use of disabled seamen, their widows, and orphans) the company was 'pleased to admit him', in part due to their understanding that he was 'a poor aged seaman that went out with Captain Drake in 1601 and afterwards went in the *Hector* for the Indies.'⁹⁴ Similarly, in the same year, when Nash, the waterman at Blackwall, sought aid after 'his boat in this last frost was split and utterly spoiled in the service of the Company' the company was 'pleased to bestow upon him £3 for the building of another boat.'⁹⁵ Through these activities the workers could share their grievances with the company and it in turn could contribute in a number of different ways to the lives and the communities of their employees at Blackwall.

Petitions also came to the EIC from organised groups. These lobbies reflected the corporatist culture of the City of London and their pleadings proved to be of broader significance for the company. As shipbuilding became more important to London's economy with the expansion of overseas trade in the early years of the seventeenth century, so existing shipwrights began to organise. In 1613 a warrant for the incorporation of the Company of Shipwrights had been issued for the 'avoiding of many abuses and deceits formally used in the building of ships.'⁹⁶ Senior shipbuilders complained of the limited control they had over their apprentices. They sought to standardise the trade and limit the power apprentices could wield during disputes. But the employment opportunities presented by the EIC's new dockyard at Blackwall appears to have encouraged less-established workers to organise to challenge the supremacy of entrenched labour groups. In 1618 the company received a petition from 'poor men of Blackwall, Radcliffe and Limehouse' who sought work in the expanding docks but had been unable to do so 'because the porters of London do appose' them. The EIC took advantage of this supportive local labour force and decided that the authority of the porters to restrict workers in the City of London did not apply to Blackwall. The company proclaimed that they could employ any workers that they thought fit.⁹⁷ The emergence of a labour force at Blackwall therefore facilitated new alliances between the company and emergent, unskilled workers. These alliances depended upon the formation of organised labour groups and the submission of petitions to the company, which it could then take advantage of when recruiting and retaining its workforce.

But such labour groups could seek to challenge the company as often as work with it. At Blackwall the EIC experienced a number of disputes with groups of labourers who sought to influence the company's decisions. These often emerged from workers who did not identify with the company's emergent labour force at Blackwall and Poplar. In 1618 a petition was received from twenty-five salters employed at the dockyard 'desiring some augmentation to their wages in regard of their extraordinary pains taken by reason of their dwelling in London and work at Blackwall.'⁹⁸ They argued that they worked longer hours than they were paid for once consideration of their longer commute was taken into account. This request caused considerable debate among the directors of the company, some arguing that the additional

⁹⁴ BL, IOR/B/17, 18th February 1635.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ J. R. Dasent, *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, vol. 33 (London, 1890), pp. 125-127.

⁹⁷ BL, IOR/B/6, 19th May 1618.

⁹⁸ BL, IOR/B/6, 14th October 1617.

efforts of the salters made them worthy of consideration, while others claimed that it was a mistake to hire such men and that it would be preferable to employ men who lived in Blackwall. Finally, the decision was made to allow the continued employment of salters who would work for their previous wages, and for those that would not ‘mariners shall be appointed in their works’ instead.⁹⁹ In this case the salters were unable to make demands of the EIC as their skills were not understood to be prized. The company’s belief that they could replace the salters easily limited their bargaining position. The minute books suggest that the company hoped to nurture a loyal and local workforce closer to the dockyard.

Highly skilled workers – especially carpenters – whose work was in demand by the company and the state proved more effective at wielding influence when negotiating with their employers. In the mid-1620s, the demand for carpenters was so great that the Crown would seek to appropriate the EIC’s carpenters or even send their representatives to press carpenters into naval service.¹⁰⁰ Carpenters could wield considerable power by grouping together to demand better conditions. The company was keenly aware of this possibility and noted a tendency for larger workforces to grow unruly after receiving reports that ‘the carpenters of the King’s yard at Deptford and the company’s yard grew to a tumultuous head’ in 1619.¹⁰¹ It was reported that 200 to 300 carpenters had left their work, ‘violently taking and carrying certain apprentices out of the EIC’s yard at Deptford and Blackwall with a drum stroke up before them.’¹⁰² It was suspected that the riot had been caused by fears that the new Company of Shipwrights would bring about a decline in carpenters’ wages, but the EIC’s representative at Blackwall, Mr Burrell ‘denied it, affirming that there is no sure matter but that the cause of this tumult.’¹⁰³ Instead, Burrell suggested that it was caused by the cessation of the carpenters’ ‘former liberty of making and carrying away chips [discarded pieces of wood], of having daily wage not and day drinking time and the like.’¹⁰⁴ Burrell also suggested that the corporation, the Company of Shipwrights, was ‘the only cause of keeping all the carpenters in order, who would otherwise exact what wage they pleased [...] yet it is found that the carpenters wage at both the company’s yards are very reasonable.’¹⁰⁵ With this in mind, Burrell acquired the assistance of a Justice of the Peace ‘to cause some of the heads of this mutiny to be arrested and punished.’¹⁰⁶ However, while carpenters at the King’s yard were imprisoned the EIC took a softer line than that proposed by Burrell. The company negotiated a cessation of hostilities with their own carpenters, and the Governor spoke to ‘the chief of the mutineers and bound them to their good behaviour.’¹⁰⁷ Through this personal communication between employer and employee the company was able to manage their workers effectively, and only ten days after

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ken. Edisbury to Nicholas, 17th October 1625, TNA, SP 16/7, fo. 124.

¹⁰¹ BL, IOR/B/6, 4th May 1619.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. Carpenters were not the only workers who expected their role to provide opportunities to supplement wages. Sailors, too, were used to freighting small amounts of goods while working on merchant ships and would also respond negatively when attempts were made to remove this privilege. Richard Blakemore, ‘Pieces of Eight, Pieces of Eight: seamen’s earnings and the venture economy of early modern seafaring’ in *Economic History Review*, 70, 4 (2017), pp. 1153-1184.

¹⁰⁵ BL, IOR/B/6, 4th May 1619.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ BL, IOR/B/6, 14th May 1619.

the start of the dispute the Governor was confident to express that ‘the mutiny is pacified’ and all ‘will be well hereafter.’¹⁰⁸ The carpenters’ ire had been raised by threats to their working lives, either through declining wages or threats to their traditional liberties, but the company was able to negotiate in good faith and reassure them that their livelihoods were not under threat.¹⁰⁹ This episode perhaps suggests how important building positive relationships with their employees could be for the company, and why they took such care to undertake socially responsible activities and work with the wider community in Blackwall and Poplar. Through these activities the company bolstered its position when negotiating with groups that might otherwise have claimed greater support from a wider group of workers or been less willing to negotiate in good faith with the company following disputes.

This proved to be an enduring tradition as the company responded – from time to time - positively to appeals from organised groups. Working in the docks was dangerous, and protecting workers injured while employed by the company upheld the company’s responsibilities to its labour force. Two petitions received in December 1631 ‘under the hand of divers of the better sort of the company’s workmen and officers, as well sea and landmen, namely shipwrights, caulkers, joiners, sawyers, labourers and men of all sorts in pay’ requested the attention of a surgeon for employees injured in the company’s service.¹¹⁰ The company deemed ‘the request to be reasonable’ and ‘ordered that Mr Woodall or some surgeon by his appointment should from time to time attend this service and take care of them accordingly.’¹¹¹ This provision was valid for men ‘abroad every of the company’s ships in harbour, as also in or near their works in Blackwall yard.’¹¹² By supporting the petition the company suggested to their employees that they were not only willing to respond to suitable demands for support, but that employees themselves could influence the way the company supported them. This respect for the labour force continued, and as the costs of the dockyard became more difficult to bear in the mid-1630s it was communicated in the ways that the company prioritised labour over the management when it came to cost cutting and wage decreases.¹¹³ In 1635 the Treasurer argued that the docks ‘doth daily exhaust their treasure in a very great proportion’, but he proposed to target the wages of servants rather than workers: ‘there are divers of the servants both there and elsewhere which in his opinion may well be spared and the company freed of that charge’.¹¹⁴ The directors ‘took into consideration their officers and servants with their salaries as well at the East India House as at Blackwall’.¹¹⁵ Most of senior officers at Blackwall had their wages reduced by between 30% and 40% but the wages of workers were left untouched.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ The company had faced mutinies before by its sailors in response to changing wage regulation, and this too had led to the Company capitulating to the demands of its workers to ensure the continued operation of its business. See, Sharpe, ‘Women and the East India Company’, p. 53.

¹¹⁰ BL, IOR/B/15, 31st December 1630.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ In part this support for workers stemmed from their stronger negotiating position – in the mid-1630s labourers across England saw rising wages after the long negative impact of economic depression in the 1620s and early 1630s. Supple, *Commercial Crisis*, pp. 111, 122.

¹¹⁴ BL, IOR/B/17, 8th April 1635.

¹¹⁵ BL, IOR/B/17, 8th May 1635.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.; BL IOR/B/18, 7th October 1635.

While the company responded positively to many petitions, there were occasions when support for petitioners was not forthcoming. Naturally, as the profitability of the EIC declined so too did its responsiveness to the pleadings of its employees. In one case, in 1642, the company received a petition from ‘the watermen and others of the hamlet of Poplar and Blackwall wherein they desired that the Court would be pleased to bestow somewhat on them towards the repair of the bridge from the waterside near the company’s yard at Blackwall’.¹¹⁷ However, the company discussed the proposal and concluded that ‘the company have no reason to repair the same for ... they never or very seldom make use thereof having a wharf of their own to land their goods at’ and refused to assist the petitioners.¹¹⁸ This episode perhaps suggests that the company’s approach to their workers, and their local communities, welfare and social demands was constrained by a range of questions including access to funds and conflicting social priorities.

Alongside this increasing tendency to refuse employees’ requests for support, the company also began to question its support for traditional labour rights. What in May 1619 a company official at Blackwall would term the ‘liberty of making and carrying away chips’ would, in 1643 be called by the Court of Committees ‘the embezzling away of timber old or new or the cutting of timber into chips which may be fit for other services’ that would then be taken from the yard to be used, or sold to, inhabitants of the area around the docks.’¹¹⁹ As the company sought to curtail its employees’ traditional privilege of using these chips as a bonus, the directors received a petition from the ‘carpenters that work in Blackwall yard’ that requested they ‘may not be denied the privilege of their predecessors and themselves in carrying forth chips out of the company’s yard’.¹²⁰ On receiving the petition:

The Court called all the petitioners in being about fifteen in number, and told them that they had not only been informed, but some of them had been eye witnesses of the great abuse committed in this kind (not that the petitioners or any of them were charged in their particulars) and therefore the Court was resolved to continue the former resolution not to give any that work there any chips and if they would willingly and cheerfully work for their days wages they should be weekly paid as they are want to be and continued in the company’s work as long as the company had occasion to employ them, but if now they refused to work upon these terms then they were resolved to deny those that refuse to work now, if hereafter they shall proffer their service.¹²¹

The company therefore perhaps found itself, in the 1640s, that forced them to refuse the petition of their employees even if it meant deviating from the provision of a long-held privilege. While the expansion of the royal dockyard at Chatham and the increased demand for skilled carpenters that it produced had been enough to allow the carpenters to prevent search by company officials in the 1620s, the drastically worsened commercial and political

¹¹⁷ BL, IOR/B/21, 20th December 1642.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ BL, IOR/B/6, 4th May 1619; BL IOR/B/20, 19th April 1643

¹²⁰ BL, IOR/B/20, 27th April 1643.

¹²¹ Ibid.

circumstances of the 1640s prevented the company from having to honour the worker privilege of retaining chips.

Throughout the history of its operation at Blackwall, however, the EIC demonstrated a persistent interest in developing the social fabric of its prime recruitment space adjacent to the Blackwall docks – Poplar. As we have seen, the company prioritised the local labour force for tactical reasons as the dockyard was built to ensure that it could attract and retain workers without having to intercede with established and organised labour forces. Across the 1630s and 1640s, when the company’s responsiveness to special pleading from its skilled workforce declined, it continued to spontaneously support the broader interests of the local community to shore up workers’ support at Blackwall. In 1631 ‘it was ordered that the assessment for the relief of the poor for the company’s yard at Blackwall’ would be paid by the company. This meant that the company offered to finance poor relief in the vicinity of the docks. The company also ordered that ‘a great bible shall be bought by Robert Fotherby for the use of the Almsmen at Blackwall’.¹²² Similarly, in 1633 the company believed there was a ‘great desire of the inhabitants of Blackwall to have the company build a chapel in their hospital in Poplar’.¹²³ The directors considered this a very good work, but it was ‘conceived more proper and fit to endow the hospital with a competency of lands to maintain the poor before they expend more money in building’.¹²⁴ To achieve this, they decided ‘first to raise a stock for the buying of lands’ and sought to use a small proportion of profits from the next returning voyage to purchase land worth ‘£60 or 100 marks per annum’ to support the hospital.¹²⁵ Not only does this episode again demonstrate the EIC’s willingness to invest in social activities to improve local support, but also that they were confident that their investors would be willing to contribute a small share of their own dividends to achieve the same. Along with the foundation of the company’s Almshouse at Poplar in 1627, the company assumption of these basic social and religious roles within the community of its workforce represented a change of tactic. Rather than heed the narrow requests and preferences of interested lobbies, the company began in the late 1620s and 30s to nurture a more traditional corporate profile as the supporter of the welfare and spiritual needs of the community at large.

This alteration in approach can be witnessed in the company’s new policy on the provision of chips from the yard in the 1640s. Although the carpenters failed to retain their traditional right to the chips, the company instead proposed to promote a broader constituency. While the Court of Committees forced the carpenters into accepting that they enjoyed no rights to receive the chips from the yard, the company ordered that ‘the poorest sort of the hamlet of Poplar and Blackwall may especially be relieved with them’ during gathering days ‘every month or twenty days’.¹²⁶ On these days ‘care be taken that none come into the yard to gather chips but the poor of the said hamlet, and the wives and servants of such men as are employed in the yard or in the East Indies’.¹²⁷ The directors were clear that ‘the intent of the company that what chips are not expended in the yard by the pitch kettles, salting house and dwelling

¹²² BL, IOR/B/14, 11th March 1631; BL, IOR/B/14, ‘Meeting at Blackwall’ 9th June 1631.

¹²³ BL, IOR/B/15, 3rd May 1633.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ BL, IOR/B/21, 3rd July 1644.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

houses may be shared indifferently amongst the workmen and poor of the said hamlet.’¹²⁸ As this suggests, the company sought to ensure that their policy to reduce the theft of chips – which was strengthened by new powers extended to the porter at the same time – would not damage their relationship with their largest constituents, namely their employees and the communities on which they depended for labour. The company prioritised the community of labour over particular labour lobbies. They proposed to favour the indigent over the industrious. Such a move would clearly block any attempt by the representatives of their labour force to allege that they had abdicated their social responsibilities.

The EIC’s sale of the Blackwall dockyard in 1652 did not sever its ties with the community of Blackwall and Poplar that it had helped to create. In 1652, the EIC director, Maurice Thompson, provided the first £100 for the building of the company’s Poplar Chapel. The church would be completed two years later. Although the majority of its parishioners were no longer direct employees of the company (though it is likely many still owed their livelihood’s the company as employees of suppliers of the Company), the community was in no doubt about who their social patron was. The company had provided large numbers of skilled jobs in the area for almost forty years. Its decision to build the Blackwall dockyard was not altruistic, however. Cheaper ships, built to exacting company specifications were – in the buoyant commercial settings of the 1610s and 20s - built in large quantities. The yard became the toast of the company and the kingdom and became a crucial expression of the company’s reputation around the world. As an employer, the yard enabled the company to deflect constant accusations that its monopoly and trade depleted the nation’s human and environmental resources. Instead, the labour force at the docks was a source of constant pride to the company and helped the company to justify its privileges with reference to the scale of its workforce and the opportunities its trade provided to nurture and protect communities where it operated.

This social history of the Blackwall dockyard’s labour force has shown how the company was not an exclusively command and control employer. Although it thought carefully about its organisational structure and could and did manage its large-scale workforce effectively it operated a managerial culture that often welcomed and sometimes depended upon the input of the labour force. The relationship between the company and its employees depended on willing negotiation, effective communication, and trust. The EIC stuck doggedly to upholding the interests of its labour force long after the business case had ceased. Even as the financial benefits of the dockyard declined, the company continued to operate in ways that corporate bodies had been doing in London and other major commercial towns in England and throughout Europe for centuries - financing welfare and social provisions for their communities. The EIC was therefore an employer who proved responsive to and responsible for its labour force – in ways that historians of trading corporations have - on the whole – not acknowledged.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ The important exception is Makepeace

In 1657, the EIC would shift its infrastructural ambitions far from Poplar. A new ‘plenipotentiary’ charter created a permanent joint stock for the company. It also allowed the company to build fortifications and facilitated a new phase in the history of the company’s expansion in Asia. But the company did not forget about the community it had built in Blackwall and Poplar. In the same year, the company formally took responsibility for Poplar Chapel, because the people of the parish could not afford the upkeep. The company would continue to maintain this church (as well as the Poplar Hospital Almshouse) for the next two centuries.

Size of ship in tons	Number constructed
1000+	4
800-1000	6
700-800	9
600-700	4
500-600	10
400-500	8
300-400	8
200-300	8
Pinnaces	16

Table 1: Size of EIC ships built at their docks.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Data from Chaudhuri, *English East India Company*, pp. 232-3.