

BUILDING THE BARBICAN 1962 – 1982: TAKING THE INDUSTRY OUT OF THE DARK AGES



Cover image: **Workers on the Turriff Barbican site, 1965**
Source: Communist Party of Great Britain

PREFACE

This pamphlet is the second to be produced as part of a two-year University of Westminster research project, entitled 'Constructing Post-War Britain: Building Workers' Stories, 1950 – 1970', which began in August 2010. The project is funded by the Leverhulme Trust and aims to collect oral history testimonies from construction workers who were employed on five of the highest profile sites and developments of that era: Stevenage New Town; Barbican development, City of London; South Bank arts complex; Sizewell A power station; and the M1 motorway. The aim of the research is both to gain a greater understanding of the processes of change within the construction industry during these decades and to highlight the role that construction workers played in the creation of the post-war built environment.

For more information see project website buildingworkersstories.com

The researchers on the project are:

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The research for this pamphlet was conducted during August 2010-April 2012.

Ten ex-workers were interviewed:

Vic Heath

former scaffolder

interviewed in Luton on 31 January 2011

John Steeden

former crane erector

interviewed in Stevenage on 10 May 2011

William Milne*

former carpenter

interviewed in London on 7 March 2011

Tony McGing

former crane operator

interviewed in London on 16 June 2011

Pat Bowen

former plumber

interviewed in London on 22 March 2011

Clive Morton

former civil engineer

interviewed in London on 9 August 2011

Michael Houlihan

former scaffolder

interviewed in Cornwall on 22 March 2011
and 27 June 2011

Richard Organ

former plumber

interviewed in London on 15 August 2011

Noel Clarke

former carpenter

interviewed in London on 22 March 2011

Jim Moher

former bricklayer's labourer

interviewed in London on 6 February 2012

*Sadly, William Milne died in December 2011

INTRODUCTION

Designed by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, the Barbican re-development embodied new ideas about living and working. But although innovative in concept and design, the re-development was also notable for the many difficulties that accompanied its construction. The workers engaged in this process faced a wide range of problems, including major design flaws, an outdated industrial relations framework, a relatively untried payment system, and health and safety hazards. Although engaged in the construction of a celebrated landmark of modern architecture they were subject to the most backward and dangerous of conditions. Many who built the Barbican responded to these difficulties with imagination and integrity. And in an industry that was notorious for its casualised, non-union nature, they tried to fashion a new way forward for trade unionism; one that was based on the principle of greater unity between all building workers; and one that was capable of providing for all building workers decent levels of pay, stable employment and good working conditions.



Noel Clarke



Michael Houlihan



John Steeden



Jim Moher



Clive Morton



William Milne



Pat Bowen



Tony McGing



Vic Heath



Richard Organ



Crane erectors on Laing Barbican site
Source: Courtesy of John Steeden.

THE BARBICAN

The Barbican re-development was one of the show-case, publicly-funded projects of the 1960s. Designed by the architectural practice Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, which had previously won the competition to design the adjacent Golden Lane estate, the plan was for an innovative combination of housing and landscaping, as well as a school, business centre, pond and major arts centre, all spread out over forty acres and constructed of in situ concrete. The three architects visited urban developments in Italy and Sweden to gather inspiration, and their design includes many of the features characteristic of Le Corbusier's architecture: towers, terraces, walkways separating pedestrians from wheeled traffic, gardens, open spaces and concrete as the main construction material ¹. The result is an exemplary Brutalist building complex, which nevertheless, as some authors point out, has something medieval about it ², physically mirroring the etymology of the term 'barbican', a fortification outside the city. Located in Cripplegate, an area that had been destroyed by the Luftwaffe during World War Two, and home to just 48 people, the idea was to create a tranquil and spacious city within the City of London and to re-populate a district that had been in serious decline for over a century by housing 6,500 mainly middle-class professionals ³. The Barbican began in 1962 and was completed in six phases, the first being the development of Milton Court, which included various public service buildings. The main housing developments were phases II, III and IV, built by Turriff Ltd, John Laing and Sons, and Myton (a subsidiary company of construction giant Taylor Woodrow) respectively. Phase V, the Barbican Arts Centre built by Laing, and phase VA, the final residential tower built by Robert McAlpine Ltd, commenced in the early 1970s.

The Barbican stands today as an important architectural achievement, which has been awarded grade II listed status as a result of its architectural interest, scale, plan and cohesion. But the development also attracted attention and became famous, or infamous, for the serious difficulties that accompanied its construction. In many respects, the building of the Barbican encapsulated many of the deeper problems that were developing in the construction industry in this period, including tensions in the relationship between the design and execution of these vast projects; shortcomings in the ability of construction companies to effectively manage such projects; flaws in the tendering process; the over-concentration on the traditional craft occupations, including in terms of trade union organisation, employee representation and for training purposes, despite the ever growing importance of newer occupations, such as concreting, plant operation, scaffolding and crane driving; the impact of labour-only sub-contracting and the often chaotic and arbitrary bonus systems that operated on large sites; and the unitarist industrial relations approaches of many large building firms, who often viewed site activists as deviants who should be drummed out of the industry altogether. This led to massive delays in the completion of the project; a huge escalation in costs; attempts by two major contractors to quit the site altogether, one of which was successful; strikes and a year-long lock-out, which resulted in a government Court of Inquiry and the blacklisting of many building workers. Few who worked on the Barbican will ever forget it. And this is the story of how it was built, in the words of some of those who carried out the building work.

¹ Herbert Wright, *London High: A Guide to the Past, Present and Future of London's Skyscrapers* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2006), p102.

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

THE CONTRACTS BEGIN

The first contractor on the Barbican was Robert McAlpine. Before any work could begin, the site had to be cleared of over 150,000 cubic yards of bombed ruins. Using tractor shovels, it was possible to clear over 4000 square yards per day.⁴ After the site was cleared, building began, on phase I. The contract was won in April 1962 by J Jarvis and Sons, who submitted the lowest tender of £467, 250. This contract ended up running over and was subject to industrial relations problems, including a bonus dispute. In May 1963, Chamberlin, Powell and Bon reported to London Corporation's Barbican Development Committee (BDC) that there had been several meetings between themselves and the contractor, Jarvis and Sons, which was blaming 'labour problems' for the delays and indicating that the site might eventually run over by 6 months.⁵ Looking to avoid penalties, Jarvis and Sons argued that the clause in its contract, which allowed for extensions to be granted in the event of delays caused by 'combinations of workmen', should be invoked, as it covered the 'go slows' blamed for the delays.⁶

Phase II of the Barbican included the 43-storey Cromwell tower and the City of London Girls School, as well as a number of other, smaller maisonette blocks and car parks. There were 629 flats in this phase. The tendering process began in late 1962, as did London Transport's tendering process for the rail line work. Twelve contractors were contacted and asked to submit tenders, with eight agreeing to do so. Preliminary discussions with the eight began soon after.⁷ In the event, seven tenders were submitted, the lowest of which was Turriff's at £6,180, 000, almost £1.5 million lower than the highest tender, that of Trollope and Colls, but with less than £3,000 separating it from John Laing's. After some negotiation and delay, caused also by the fact that the Barbican Committee could not make a final decision on phase II until the railway line contract

was decided, Turriff was awarded the contract for a price of £6m.

The closeness of the two bids for phase II encouraged BDC to dispense with selective tendering for phase III and to seek a negotiated contract with Laing, on the basis of its phase II tender. The suspension of the Committee's own standing orders was justified on the grounds of the similarity of phases II and III, so that similar price rates could be expected for phase III. BDC also cautioned against the possibility of one contractor dominating the development as the only company which could match Laing in a tender for phase III would be Turriff, given the substantial gap between these two contractors' bids and the rest for phase II. The Committee also pointed to continually rising building costs, arguing that to wait for a new tendering process to be completed in 1964 would entail higher prices. The fact that there was already a tender from Laing meant that any increases in costs would be, in the BDC's own words, 'authentic' increases.⁸ Finally, the Committee considered that the Laing tender would allow for an earlier start to be made on phase III, leading to earlier completion and receipt of rental payments from tenants. Negotiations began and in March 1964 Laing was awarded the five-year contract, worth just under £6m.

⁴ Labour News, 4 May 1961

⁵ London Metropolitan Archives, (LMA), BDC Minutes, 13 May 1963.

⁶ LMA, BDC Minutes, 23 September 1963

⁷ LMA, BDC Minutes, 19 November 1962

⁸ Ibid



Flats on the Barbican Estate, Photograph 1960s by John Gay. © English Heritage. NMR Reference Number: AA098616.

Phase IV of the Barbican development went out to a selective tender in the summer of 1964. This phase was similar to phases II and III, minus the 43-story tower, and contained 573 flats, commercial showrooms, a hostel, car park, two pubs, a petrol station and a restaurant. Mowlem won the contract to clear and pile the site, worth £220,801, but did not enter the bidding for the building work, which was awarded in November 1964 to Myton, a subsidiary of Taylor

Woodrow, on a tender of £5,581,022 to be completed in three years.⁹ Myton's bid was the lowest of six, drawn from a select list of contractors, well below the highest tender of £6,360,640 and almost £300,000 lower than that of its nearest competitor, Trollope and Colls.¹⁰

⁹ LMA, BDC Minutes, 30 April 1964

¹⁰ LMA, BDC Minutes, 5 November 1964. Taylor Woodrow owned around 85% of Myton.

STARTING WORK ON THE BARBICAN

At the peak of the building process, the Barbican sites employed around a thousand workers. It was a diverse workforce, including workers from all parts of Britain, large numbers of Irishmen, Jamaicans and others from different parts of the West Indies, Sikhs from India and Eastern Europeans. Vic Heath was a scaffolder from Camden Town in North London. In his early thirties at the time, he had worked previously on major sites such as the Shell Mex building on the South Bank. Like most workers, the route that took him onto employment at Turriff's Barbican site in 1965 was fairly informal:

I'd finished the job in Waite's in Edgware Road, and I was out of work for about a week. I was just punting around, and somebody told me the site had started on the Barbican — it might have been Max Bayer — and he said they were looking for scaffolders. So I went down there to the timekeeper's office on the gate and said I was applying for a scaffolder's job. I went through some sort of a silly bloody interview with somebody who knew nothing about scaffolding, but asked me a lot of questions about everything, and I got the job.

Another scaffolder, 31-year old Michael Houlihan, originally from County Kildare in Ireland, had been working on sites in London for several years. He had also recently been employed on the South Bank development and recalled how the pub was often the way that news about new jobs spread:

The pub was the Labour Exchange at that time. You meet blokes in the pub and say, oh, there's a good job, so and so. You would just go down there on the off-chance and you'd get in.

Dubliner Noel Clarke, who worked on Laing's Barbican site, also remembered the importance of the pub:

When the job would be coming near a finish, they'd come round and they'd say to you, "We've got to finish up so many this Friday." Thursday, they'd say "You're down for tomorrow," they're letting you go like, you know — there's about six going tomorrow. Hop over the fence and go out and have a look, have a look round. You might be gone half an hour and you'd have a job — you might have two jobs! That's how plentiful work was. Or else, if you wanted to take pot-luck and you didn't bother, you went to a couple of pubs at the weekend, up around Holloway, the Archway, all around Holloway. You wouldn't have to go very far. They'd be actually tapping you on the shoulder — "Are you busy?" you know. "How much a shift do you get?"

Teenager Jim Moher, from County Tipperary in Ireland was looking to save some money to go to university. He got his start as a bricklayer's labourer on the Barbican courtesy of a cousin, who worked in a bar frequented by building workers.

So, I was about 19 when I came to London, and I arrived first of all in Clapham North, and my cousin had a job in a pub in Clapham called the Plough. His name was David Sherlock. And I woke him up one Saturday morning [laughing] and said, "Any jobs?" and he fixed me up with this foreman bricklayer who used to come into the Plough, so I got this job, assisting the bricklayers.

William Milne was a twenty-five year old carpenter from Aberdeen. He had never worked in England before and owed his start on the Barbican in 1967 to the fact that his employer—who was sub-contracted to install all windows and doors on the main Barbican contracts—was a fellow-Scot who held particular views regarding the alleged merits of Scottish workers over their English counterparts:

A friend of mine says, "There's a job – do you fancy going down to London?" Now, this friend of mine was a married man with four kids. So I says, "Why not?" He's English – the boss is a guy from Peterhead, further up from Aberdeen, but he'd moved to St Helen's in Lancashire. He actually lived there, and he preferred Scotsmen working to him than Englishmen, because we worked harder. There was a few Geordies and Glaswegians as well, but dole offices were applying for men for the Barbican.

Plumber Richard Organ, from North London, was in his early twenties and working for Audrey Plumbing. He owed his start on the Laing's site to the fact that he was one of the few in that company who was a member of the Plumbing Trades Union (PTU).

I was working on a block of luxury flats in Swiss Cottage in 1966, and the reason why I really remember it is because it was the year we won the World Cup. And one of the mates we had on the job had an accident, and he wasn't in the union – I wasn't in the union at the time – and was off work for a time. Anyway, when he came back, and he was saying he would have to go to a solicitor to make a compensation claim, and one of the plumbers, who came from Ealing actually, said, "If you'd have been in the union, the union solicitors would have taken up a case for you". Nothing of the union had ever been mentioned beforehand, so I said to him, "Well, you know, how do you join and what is

the contributions?" and he said, "Oh, I'll get you an application form," and so I joined the union, the old plumbers' trade union in 1966. Then the company started a contract on the Barbican and they were having to employ new staff because it was such a big contract. It got unionised, and so they came round to their workforce, asking who's in the union, because they wanted their regulars that they knew to be sent down there. They didn't want militants, but unfortunately, they didn't realise, I became a militant!

The scale of the Barbican also had an impact on the newly employed workers. Again, Richard Organ explains:

Well, it impressed you, the size of the contract, because Laing's probably had the biggest part of the contract because they had the one tower block and I think it was four smaller blocks that went round in a square, with like a lake in the middle, and they also built the Barbican Centre, the Theatre and that. That was all part of Laing's.

Early stages of the Barbican scheme, photograph c.1963 by John Gay. © English Heritage.
NMR Reference Number: AA099222



WORKING CONDITIONS

The Turriff site was the first of the major contracts to get going. Vic Heath recalls the grim conditions faced by the workers in the early days and the struggle to improve them:

Absolutely appalling. There were no toilets, no proper toilet facilities, the site was quite a big site, an enormous site really. It was covering a lot of ground, a lot of mud, and set in three different places on the site were toilets. That was wooden boxes with a toilet inside, with a chemical in the toilet, so you didn't have a flush. You had nowhere to wash your hands, nothing like that. There was no canteen as such. We was expected to have our tea sitting on the scaffold or wherever and bring it with you. In a very short period of time, we decided that we needed flush toilets, that was the first thing, and management said they weren't prepared to, at this stage in the job – the job had to be two storeys high before they'd [do that]. So we said, well, alright then, if we're not going to have flush toilets, what we'll do is use the toilets at St Paul's. St Paul's Cathedral was a fair little walk up the road, and they had public toilets there. So, the management said, oh, you can't do that. I said, well, that's what we're going to f...have to do because we're not going to use these toilets anymore. So the men started walking up towards St Paul's to go to the toilet, set up by us. So one lad would go off up the road towards St Paul's, and then one, after a short interval, would go behind him and so on, and so, within half an hour, near enough half of the men on the site was walking up towards St Paul's, and as they finished in the toilet and walked back down again, there was somebody to take their place.

Michael Houlihan had similar recollections of the Myton site, where he started work at the beginning of January 1966:

It was right in the ground. They were still doing the groundwork levels and the crane wasn't even erected when I was there and... I was there quite a while before there was a crane. We were just doing the columns and all that kind of stuff. Obviously, when you go on a new job you've got to establish certain conditions and wages and if you don't do that in its infancy, you're lost like throughout the whole of the thing. You've got to establish certain bonus schemes, canteen facilities, changing room facilities – these things. Well, mostly, at that time, it was a very primitive kind of set-up that you had in building. They had a big hole in the ground with quick lime for a toilet and a bit of galvanise round it. Well, I helped, having become shop steward and giving them their due, they accepted that what I was saying was correct. We had a changing room. We had the correct number of toilets for the amount of employees that were on the job, and I got some roller towels and things.



Close up of Turriff tower block.
Source: Construction News, 27 April 1967

THE WORK

Some of the work at the Barbican posed challenges, and led to workers learning new skills.

I'd never done hanging scaffolding in my life, never thought much about it, but I had taken some instruction on that, and on the Barbican level, which is all based on the Roman thing, 30 foot from the ground, I suppose, and we put hanging scaffolds there, all the way along the podium level. So you'd build a scaffold up, on the inside, then put your tubes out, and then you'd drop your standards down, and you'd put something on the bottom, you know, you'd fix...the fittings on the bottom, and then you'd put braces up, so the scaffold could come down below the podium level, and they could scabble it and do whatever they wanted to do..On the Barbican, I learnt and I went on to use that hanging scaffolding several times, worked in the docks and different places, where you couldn't put a scaffold down basically, or over a glass area – so that was very useful, knowledge to have, and I daresay I could do it now if I had to! It was the first time I'd done it, on the Barbican. (Vic Heath)

Vic Heath also recalled a major flaw in the design of the towers:

The tower block, on the corner, that had gone up four floors, and the engineers said that it couldn't go any further, and so they had to underpin it all, 40 foot down, and build a big steel structure underneath it, and they poured hundreds and hundreds of tons of concrete into that, as an anchor, otherwise, if it had gone up any further, it would have fallen over.

The Barbican was built using poured concrete, which was later worked up to provide a rugged finish. The use of in-situ concrete meant that a lot of the work revolved around the construction of shuttering. Dublin carpenter,

Noel Clarke remembers:

You kick-off just gone eight o'clock, none of this lolling around. You had to be on your marks. It was donkey work; to be honest with you had to be strong. You were humping these across and the boxes, big boxes. It depends on the height of the floors. Sometimes, you might have to get the crane. It was big walls. You'd have to hook the crane on. And then drop them into place, and then you'd have to bolt them. There was big strong backs on them, metal backs. They were all made on the floor, on the deck, and then the crane would hook them up on the bottom. As you come up the building, the walls decreased. Say you'd done a floor, and the base, there might be three foot [at] the wall, to support, and then, as you went up higher and higher, because less weight on – it was taking the weight on the basement, from the basement up, and then columns got smaller and things like that. Not necessarily the columns, but the decking – you might get a slab that might be two foot, or, about 18 inches. As you went up, it decreased... You'd never get any less than a 12-inch slab, and then there was beams, dropped beams, to support. It was complicated, to a degree, but if you done a crash-course in the shuttering, as they used to call it, it just became easy enough.

William Milne was employed installing finished windows and doors and did not work on the shuttering, but recalls the large number of carpenters who did this job and, on the Laing site, one worker in particular who appears to have had come up with a quicker way of building it.

There'd have been an awful lot of carpenters, because there was a lot of the shuttering. The tower blocks are all shuttered, and the eight-storey buildings, they were all shuttered, so that would be carpenters. But I remember meeting a Russian guy there as well, and he'd

done something with the shuttering to make it quicker. And I can't remember the sum he got from John Laing, but he got quite a few bob, because they put up a floor every week, the shuttering. One floor a week, that's good going.

Some of this shuttering work on the Barbican was done by Sikh carpenters. Vic Heath recalls them as an exceptionally skilled group of workers and solid trade unionists:

They were brilliant carpenters! They used to make their own tools. And they were really, really clever. I remember my brother worked on the Barbican, Fred, who unfortunately is also not here with us anymore, but he was one of the site agents on-site, and he'd lived and worked in Africa, West Africa, for a good many years. And I remember one of the pricks, the foreman carpenter, saying to him, "What the bleeding hell are these blokes doing on here? What do they know about carpentry?" Fred said, "You ever seen the Taj Mahal?" The bloke didn't even know what he was talking about! They quite obviously built buildings long before we even thought about building. Another guy, he got the firm to give him all the scrap ply. You know, when the shuttering's been used, there's three-quarter ply, they used to invariably discard it, and it'd usually go off, off the site, and be burned somewhere. This Sikh said could he have four sheets, and they said, "Of course you can, – take it away." He got a van and took it home and all that lark, and I went round his house, oh, months afterwards, say four, five months afterwards, and he'd made all of this wood, all of this filthy, dirty, bloody three-quarter ply, he'd cleaned it all up, and he'd made a complete suite, like a chest-of-drawers, shelves and all that. He'd made them all out of this bloody scrap ply. Just really clever carpenters and they were great union guys.

The number of apprentices working on the Barbican appears to have been low, but among some of the specialist trades, such as plumbing, there were a few. Pat Bowen was a second-year apprentice on the site and recalled the type of work he did as involving skills which plumbers today would not have learned:

I learnt a lot of skills which were almost becoming obsolete, you know, in one sense. I mean, they're still used now for, you know, for heritage stuff, but they would be probably seen as too labour-intensive and you wouldn't do it like that now. But it made the whole thing much more interesting, in a sense, because it's much more skilful. For instance, if you cut copper – if you had a three-inch copper pipe, you used to have to open a hole in it and then bend the pipe to go into it, and then sort of weld it up, You got to know, by the colour of the copper when you were heating it, there was a point where it was going to melt and there was a point where it was just right, but over time, you got to recognise that colour. It's one of those things you couldn't teach somebody, just say, when it gets to that colour, do that, because you can only learn that by doing it.

There were also a large number of Irish workers on the various Barbican sites, including crane operator Tony McGing, from Westport, County Mayo. He recalled his work on the Turriff site, which involved the careful lifting and positioning of the shuttering and concrete and some of the problems he had with the tower crane that Turriff had hired for the job.

Crane erectors on Laing Barbican site
Source: Courtesy of John Steeden



The people that hired the cranes in the beginning had no idea about cranes. They hired them in – they were called Kroll. You could have your lunch while you waited for the lift to come up, 44-storeys up. They were very, very, very slow. Well, they wouldn't be 44-storey when I was driving. They'd probably be up 30 or something like that. It was so slow. So they eventually took it down and put up a Potain, a fast crane, you know, to do it, to finish it off, because they were in the middle of the lift shaft.

And before that, were you always with the same banksman?

No, when you went on to the different cranes, you had different banksmen, but mostly, when you were driving the crane, the cranes along the blocks – I think they were only about seven floors high – you could see the banksmen. You didn't need radio. But when you went on to the 44-storey block, you couldn't see anybody!... Totally dependent on the radio then.

It was unbelievable! You just couldn't imagine! It doesn't happen today. Because, Sir Robert McAlpine's...you had Myton's just on this side, and you had Sir Robert McAlpine's on that side, and they had a 50HB, which was... whistled down! You could hear it whistling, it was so fast!

And why didn't you have one like that?

Because probably, in the beginning, this company went in and convinced them that this was a fantastic crane, which it wasn't, so they hired all Kroll – they're absolutely useless! But the Laing's site was also 44, and in the morning, in the frost and that, you could hear [makes noise], flying down, while Turriff's was going [makes slower noise]!

So the work was much slower!

Oh yeah! If they were earning a pound, McAlpine's should have been earning £2 per hour, because they were way faster, and I don't think there was a lot of pumps either, you know, concrete pumps like you have now, pump the concrete up. It was going up by skip.

Two well-known Irish workers on the Barbican were John Dawson, a shop steward on the Turriff site, and John Maher, the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives' (NFBTO) steward on the Laing site. Limerick man Dawson was recalled by Jim Moher:

Johnny was a firebrand, but he was a great, militant negotiator. I can still see him coming back from meetings with the managers and saying, you know, "They offered us a ha'penny an hour extra," a penny an hour, "which was ridiculous and we threw that out, and, you know, I want you to reject this and take action." And then he'd go back in and he'd come out with tuppence. He was a very temperamental guy, but he was good... they were emotional times, because there was lots of disputes.

Meanwhile, John Maher was rumoured to have been responsible for an unexpected sight during the 'topping out' ceremony on that particular site, which was the first of the main Barbican contracts to be completed:

They'd set up this topping out ceremony on the Laing site, and the day before, they'd put the flags up, and they'd put the City of London flag up, and the Union flag, you know, Union Jack, stuck it up on the top. Of course, the majority of the men building there were Irish, so, during the night, I don't know who done it, but it's alleged that Johnny Maher was an instigator, they took the Union flag down and put the green, white and gold up! And the next day, the topping out ceremony was halfway through when somebody twigged the green, white and gold was up there! (Vic Heath)

William Milne also recalled this event:

Well, John Laing, it was mostly Irish doing the shuttering there, because I know when they were coming to open it, somebody stuck the Tricolours up and there was one of the royals I can't remember what one was coming to open it, and they're "Get that flag down – get the flag down now!"

The architects' specification demanded that all visible concrete was finished by bush and pick-hammering to expose the aggregate. Thus, when the shutters were struck, the concrete was worked with hand-tools to provide the rugged finish that became a distinctive characteristic of the Barbican scheme. This job was extremely labour-intensive, dusty and dirty, and was carried out by a group of black workers:

It was all poured and then they bush-hammered. It was black men that done that. Yeah, muscular-looking men because they're holding up like a kango, all day long. They call it bush-hammering. Instead of being smooth, you come up with a rocky sort of surface. It makes it look better than a plain slab of concrete.

That must have been a really time-consuming job, the bush-hammering.

Oh it was, it was to a certain extent, but, mind you, there wasn't a lot doing it. I mean I remember probably about half a dozen coloured guys on it. (William Milne)

Clive Morton was a graduate civil engineer, employed by Laing. He remembered the bush and pick hammering process.

You can't do that until the concrete is really absolutely cured, otherwise you'd start damaging further in than you would wish to,

so none of it could be attacked before 28 days. Then, it was done progressively as it went up, but it was a horrible dirty job and, again, people weren't given the amount of protection they would have been given today. The bush-hammering is three heads, which go like that, and you've just got to hold it. So, there was lots of problems of white finger vibration and so on...For pick-hammering, it's literally a point or a chisel. What they were trying to do was just to take the surface concrete off, to expose the aggregate, because you couldn't go deep, you didn't want them to go too deep, but you didn't want them to go too shallow either. And, in a way, it looked a crying shame because, you went to enormous lengths to make sure you produced a beautiful fair-faced bit of concrete and then you ruined it. Some people could say, well, you didn't have to worry too much about the shuttering. That's not true, because, if you had any leaks in the shuttering, from a join, you would then get a line in the concrete because that fluid grout would have been seeping out and would leave a line, even when you pick-hammered into it. So, you couldn't afford for that fair-face concrete to be at all below par.

Pat Bowen also recalled the high building standards evident in other aspects of the construction:

In those days, all the pipes were still cast-iron and the Barbican itself, all of the risers there, all of the pipes that go up the 40 floors, or 35 floors, were all six inch copper pipe. When they knock that down, it'll be worth a fortune, but it is untypical, you know, for buildings to be so elaborate material-wise. And all of the run-outs to the basins were all copper and welded. It was a very high quality sort of building.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Health and safety was a major concern of the workers. The year 1964, when work on the main phases of the Barbican began, had seen 271 deaths in the construction industry, building and civil engineering, and over 40,000 reported accidents. Vic Heath recalls a particularly serious incident, which fortunately did not injure anyone:

They used to have these giant shutters – 20 foot long, and steel-lined and three-quarter ply on the outside, and they used to swing them over our heads on the cranes. Well, they used to just put cleats across the supporting timbers, and of course, on one particular occasion, the bloody cleat came undone and the shutter fell down 40 foot to the area where we were working and smashed all the scaffolding, smashed up some of the shuttering as well, and we demanded then that the shutters be bolted, that they have proper bolts, because, normally, they used to put bolts right through, with a steel bolt holding it, so it couldn't possibly fall off. They wouldn't do it! A stupid thing like that was reasonably cheap to do, in comparison to the sort of things they were using, and they completely refused to do it, so the scaffolders, we walked off the site.

Tony McGing also recalled another near-miss:

I remember one morning when the Myton building started. We were going for breakfast, by the Red Cow pub – there's a restaurant down there. And the crane was up, and they were just finishing it off, and apparently, they didn't put in the bolts, and we came out and the crane had fallen over.

But there were fatalities on the Barbican:

All the scaffolders on the Barbican were fairly well skilled scaffolders, although there was a lad killed who fell off the scaffold onto a

tarpaulin sheet and then went through there. He was a young lad, somebody had said he was a scaffolder in Ireland, and he came over to this country and they employed him and let him go to work, and of course he hadn't been a scaffolder in Ireland, at all, and was killed. He was only 23. Quite a lot of that went on, particularly Irish families coming over and bringing their youngsters over with them, and getting them jobs on sites, and they had no experience of working on a building site. Might have been working in a field in Ireland, but when you go onto a building site, you've really got to know what you're doing.

Vic Heath

Pat Bowen and William Milne remembered another fatality:

I didn't see it actually, but I heard one guy got his head taken off because they had counterweights in the...it was an external hoist, took up John Laing's block. Well, there shouldn't have been a hole there, but he stuck his head through to see if the hoist was coming up, and the counterbalance come down and, poom.

Pat Bowen

Somebody, as the external lift came up, put his head through to see if it was coming, and had got hit by the weights, and was decapitated. That was I think the very worst thing I've ever been in. The site was shut down because, you know, there was that death. *William Milne*

Crane erector John Steeden was employed by John Laing and Son, on its phase III site. He was a highly-trained worker, who had served a five-year apprenticeship in plant mechanics with Laing. He recalls a health and safety system that was inadequate and a lucky escape from what would have been a fatal fall off one of the high towers:

We only had overalls, no harness. They wear harnesses nowadays, gloves, protection, ear protectors. We got some gloves eventually but seriously dangerous. I could have fallen off. I got close to falling off, once, not on the cranes, but on that hoist at the Barbican. We'd finished with it and they wanted to bring it down, we had to bring it down with the scaffolders, because the scaffolders needed to get their material down. So there was plan, simply that they would put all their material in the hoist, and it would be brought down, taken out, back up, bit by bit, and so we had to then, as they came down, we had to bring the top of it, the cathead down, every two storeys, or whatever it was, two floors, fix it up again, because that means that the ropes had to be re-rigged and put right because it was coming down lower and lower, fit it all up, obviously test it, and then they took their scaffold down. We used to have to be there but not work – the scaffolders, we'd chat to them or stay out the way. And I was standing talking to one, and he said to me, "John, you're in the "f" way, would you move out the way?" and I stepped out of the way onto a plank, and this plank wasn't supported. It shot up in the air, and I went – it was in the middle of the [square], and I went through. Now, I'm on my way from there to the bottom, but by luck of god, I landed on two planks which were put down below, which they were moving, and I came straight down onto these two planks, right in the middle of them, and the board that I was on came past me and finished up at the bottom. So yes, it was close. That was the closest I ever got to it. It never got reported either. It was just, "Oh Christ, you alright John?" "Yeah, I'm fine." You know, and I'd have walked off and sort of got into the building and then they just carried on and I went down for a cup of tea.

These deficiencies in health and safety provisions on the Barbican would continue throughout the long re-development process. Despite the links that existed between asbestos and a variety of fatal lung diseases, which were known long before the Barbican was designed, the material was still included in the specifications. In May 1976, work on the Barbican arts centre was halted after the main contractor, John Laing, ignored requests from workers that piles of asbestos material be removed from the site. Expressing the view that the workers were not thinking about the 'number of people it saves in a year', Laing project manager H Denning wrongly argued that it was only the blue variety of asbestos that was dangerous, and that if the workers kept the floor wet when sweeping the material up, everything would be ok.¹² The refusal of Laing to remove the asbestos led to an all-out strike involving over 500 workers. Their position was summed up by Alf Reid, who was one of the shop stewards on the site: 'Our strike to get the dust out is not just about the building of the centre now but about the people who move in as well. They are planning to use a lot more of it here, on a suspended ceiling, for fireproofing a cafeteria and for insulation'.¹³ The strike lasted two weeks and was recalled positively by convenor steward Jim Franklin 'When you were completely ignored as to the using of asbestos on the site before the dispute, we did achieve something'.¹⁴

¹² Alan Dalton, *Asbestos Killer Dust*, A worker community guide on how to fight the hazards of asbestos and its substitutes, (London: British Society for Responsibility in Science, 1979), p96

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ Alan Dalton, *op cit*, p97





Crane erectors on Laing tower block
Source: Courtesy of John Steeden

WORKING TIME

The normal working day at the Barbican generally began at 8 o'clock in the morning and finished at 4.30, with a couple of breaks in between times.

It was an eight o'clock start there...just work right away and then we'd go to Bruno's – it was an Italian café where they've got that market, John Laing and Turriff's and all, they had canteens there like, you know, but with the amount of men, we found it better to go to Bruno, – I always remember that was his name, Bruno. So that would be at 10 o'clock, half an hour break, back, worked till 12.30, half an hour break, and then worked till 4.30, and home.

William Milne

Some of the Barbican workforce did work overtime and Saturday mornings. Concrete pours could go on until well into the night, which meant long shifts for carpenters and concrete workers. Those installing the windows and doors often had deliveries at the weekend, which meant they would be on-site then. Much of crane erector John Steeden's work had to be done at the weekend:

Well, sometimes, they would only like us to work the weekends. They would give us Saturday and Sunday, and expect it back working Monday, at the height, that we'd climbed it to. We'd have to put it up there, and test it of course. Every time you move it, you test it. We had to bring in test weights and an inspector or a man who's qualified to test and pass over cranes.

But many of the other workers on the Barbican refused to do overtime, on a point of principle:

I never done it. In fact, I think I only worked overtime, in the whole of my lifetime, about once or twice. I always stuck by the rulebook. I always said that we fought for a 40 hour week and that's what I'm going to work...a lot of men were like that. They was principled in the sense that they weren't going to do what the management wanted them to do. The management were always looking for people to work overtime and by doing that, you're obviously cutting the rates of other people.

Vic Heath

Barbican tower under construction

Source: Courtesy of Richard Organ.



Barbican tower under construction
Source: Courtesy of Richard Organ



THE TURRIFF DISPUTE, 1965

The Barbican was built at a time of change in the building industry, some of which impacted negatively on industrial relations. One such change was the sharp rise in labour-only sub-contracting and the attempts by building contractors to introduce more and more casual non-union labour onto major sites. This provoked a strike at the Turriff site in September 1965, following the refusal of a small number of sub-contract carpenters to take part in a union card check. All 380 workers were promptly sacked, with the company announcing that they would be replaced by non-union labour. Turriff then proceeded to resurrect one of the most notorious practices of the building industry employers by insisting the new workers sign the 'Document', a declaration stating that they would never strike, ban overtime or engage in a work-to-rule.

The 'Document' had first appeared during a strike in London in the 1830s and variations of it had been used from that point on by employers during strikes and lock-outs until the early decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Its re-appearance in the 1960s on one of the highest-profile sites in London clearly enraged building workers and set the scene for an extension of the dispute. Within a week over 2,000 building workers, employed on four of the biggest sites in London, had struck in sympathy.¹⁶ Pickets were placed at the entrance to the site, preventing Turriff from sending in the replacement workers.¹⁷ Further pressure was added when a regional disputes commission, a type of arbitration board made up of employer and union representatives, found in favour of the workforce and instructed they be re-employed. However, Turriff project manager, John L. Justice, tried to tough it out, arguing that the company could not re-employ the sacked men as it had already recruited new workers.¹⁸

The situation turned violent at the beginning of October, when lorries trying to take in non-union labour were confronted by a large number of pickets and a hail of missiles. Vic Heath has vivid memories of this:

They brought non-union labour on, tried to bring it onto the site. They brought this bus on, and there was hundreds of us, either side of the car park, quite a big car park, loads of the Old Bill, you know, and we pelted these coaches with rocks, you know, and every coach – every window in the coach was smashed to bits.

¹⁵ For more on the 'Document', see Raymond Postgate (1923), *The Builders History*, NFBTO, p88

¹⁶ *Daily Worker*, 2 October 1965. The four sites were: Laing's Paternoster site; Sunley's, Horseferry Road; Higgs and Hill, South Bank; and Wimpey's Euston development.

¹⁷ *Daily Worker*, 29 September 1965

¹⁸ *Construction News*, 14 October 1966

There was dents all over the coach and it really got a hammering, I'm not kidding you. The coach went in, and they got out, and unfortunately, the scabs, as you'd like to call them, they were all ex-Hungarian freedom fighters. Or quite a lot of them, and that wasn't in very good taste either, and a number of us went on site, we knew how to get onto site and off again without being spotted basically, and we put the frighteners on these guys and told them that if they didn't leave, they'd be the worst for it really, basically, it was our jobs and stuff like that. And they left, well some of them left, and they went off the site.

The police came to see me, police inspector and some sergeant, and said to me "We know you're responsible for this". I said, "What are you going to charge me with – threatening behaviour or what?" So they said, "Oh, you're a regular barrack room lawyer, ain't you, you know it all?!" I said, "I don't know it all, no," I said, "but," I said, "what are you going to charge me with? I ain't done anything! You can't accuse me of doing anything. I haven't touched anyone or anything like that." But, obviously, it worked. I mean, there was a lot of us there and we worked together in conjunction with each other, and they left.

Vic Heath

Protest march in support of Turriff workers, including Lou Lewis (far right), October 1965

Source: Courtesy of Vic Heath.



Six pickets were arrested by police. Later that day, hundreds of workers from several large sites joined a march to the headquarters of the London Master Builders' Federation, chanting slogans such as 'scabs out'.¹⁹ In the aftermath of this, the London management committee of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers (ASW) met and urged the national leadership of the union to declare the strike official. The committee also met with 30 shop stewards from sites all over London and agreed that the site be blacked until Turriff accepted the decision of the disputes commission.²⁰ The arguments in favour of this were made clear:

Behind this dispute is Turriff's decision to bring in labour-only sub-contractors — groups of men without plant or materials — who contract to do the job at a specified price and are not party to trade union agreements... trade union conditions go by the board as the gangs work round the clock to finish a particular job at piecework rates and then move onto another job.²¹

Eventually, the various unions involved and the NFBTO declared the strike official. Turriff's efforts to keep the site open with scab labour appeared even closer to failure, when, following a meeting with local district trade union officials and shop stewards, the replacement workers walked off the site. The pressure was kept up with a large march, involving several hundred building workers from various London sites, to Conway Hall, where a rally in support of the Barbican workers was held. With their position steadily weakening, Turriff changed tack, indicating that they might re-employ the sacked workers, but not the shop stewards. This was rejected by the unions, who continued to press Turriff to accept the decision of the disputes commission.²² Eventually, following a meeting between the company and union representatives, Turriff conceded defeat and offered to re-employ all sacked men. The 'Document' was withdrawn and it was accepted by Turriff that all employees must either be union members or be 'willing to join one.'²³

¹⁹ Daily Worker, 2 October 1965.

²⁰ Daily Worker 4 October 1965

²¹ Ibid

²² Daily Worker, 9 October 1965

²³ Daily Worker, 12 October 1965

BONUS PAYMENTS

Another issue that caused severe problems for industrial relations on the Barbican was that of bonus payments. The basic pay for a building worker in the mid-1960s, working the 40 hour week, was lower than that of many other industrial workers. In fact, the building industry had moved from second place in the wage rates by industry in 1938 to 12th place in 1963.²⁴ Bonus or incentive payments had been part of the national working rule agreements since World War Two and were seen increasingly as a means by which a worker could earn a decent wage. On the Barbican, bonus payments made up a considerable percentage of all workers' wages. Vic Heath was a scaffolder shop steward and chair of the works committee on the Turriff site. Along with health and safety considerations, negotiating bonus was an important duty of the site stewards:

Well, the general sort of thing was to try and ensure that the lads were working in safe surroundings, and it was very difficult in them days because there was no real serious Health & Safety at Work Act at that time. You'd represent the lads if they didn't get their bonus right or any sort of problems they had with management, you would go and represent the lads for almost virtually anything – protective clothing, canteen facilities, everything. When in most cases, you'd go in, as Federation steward, you'd go in with, say, a carpenters' steward, because the carpenter obviously knew his trade, and he'd lay out the differentials and stuff like that, as far as the trade was concerned, and I'd back him, as the Federation steward, and that was the way usually. And usually, we didn't meet management, as such, senior management. We usually met bonus clerks and stuff like that, so they'd argue, obviously, on behalf

of the company, what sort of bonuses they thought, you could achieve, and we'd argue against that, saying that, that their targets are not realistic, and that's the way it went, and generally speaking, from my point of view anyway, because I'd become quite good at negotiation with scaffolding in particular, we was usually the top earnings on most sites.

William Milne and his fellow carpenters installing the windows and doors were also among the top earners on the Barbican:

We could make a pound an hour bonus, three weeks' wages, every week. It was like piece-work. In other words, you got so long to do that window, and all the things involved in it, and I found I could make a fortune at it, a few of us could. But there was a lot of them just wouldn't bother trying. But then there was a pooled bonus. If I recall rightly, the fall-back bonus was something like four and sixpence.

So what would you be coming out with at the end of the week?

10 bob, that's 4 quid a day isn't it? Say six days, 24 quid and another two 24s on top of that. Of course you're taxed then, heavier.

Jim Moher also recalled the importance of bonus to his wage:

We would get a lesser bonus, but it would be linked to their [the bricklayers'] rate.

Was the wage more than the £7 a week you were getting in Dublin?

Oh yeah! We were up into...15...I would say...I made some money there.

²⁴Jan Druker, (1980) 'One Big Union: Structural Change in Building Trade Unionism', PhD thesis, University of Warwick, p419

There were numerous different types of bonus systems. These could include site bonus systems, where all workers got an equal bonus, regardless of individual occupation or measured output; gang bonus, where all workers in a particular group, who worked together, would pool their bonus and share it equally; trade collective bonus, where all workers in a particular trade or occupation would share an equal bonus; individual bonus, where each worker would earn a bonus level based on a measurement or estimation of his output. Those building employers who operated recognised bonus systems tended to favour the site bonus least, as it reduced their control over the workforce and the labour process itself. Individual bonus systems offered the greatest degree of managerial control, as it undermined solidarity and collectivism amongst the workforce. On the Barbican, there were several different types of bonus system in operation, some of which could cause friction amongst the workers:

I think I was on the third floor for Laing's and then, this is where all the trouble started about bonuses, some of the workers was getting gang bonus. Then there was an argument over the gang bonus, because somebody else was getting the individual bonus. Then the union, you had the union meeting whenever they called it, which was regular. It was always about the bonus, bonus, bonus. And then, you might have a union meeting, say of a Tuesday, and then, Thursday, there was a safety meeting, a safety-first meeting. So the meeting say was booked for an hour, but it never lasted an hour. It lasted an hour and a quarter, an hour and a half. They'd stop you two hours off your money. You were paid by the hour then because there clock-in, clock-out. Then, if you, like say you put up a load of columns in the day, they'd start pouring concrete about four

o'clock, so again, you got to acro it up and plumb them all up and then, and then they'd put the staging in, and there was a bloke up there in the crane would come around, and you were on stand-by then. Now, it might not finish pouring till about half-past five, six o'clock, but then, what you'd put up in the day time, you had the opportunity of staying back to plumb them up, check them to make sure that they were all plumb. They might need a tighten of the acro here and there. They might have got a knock with the bucket and knocked them out of plumb and things like that, but that's what you were there for, and then, the row started there because, when you stayed back for plumbing up the shuttering and that, you might be there till eight o'clock, half-past eight, maybe nine o'clock of a night-time, with halogen lamps and everything like that. Then, when you got your bonus, your bonus was the same as the person that left at six o'clock, and then there was a row over that. And then they were onto the Federation steward as to why – he was supposed to be the daddy to solve all the problems as to why you were getting the same bonus as the other person. Then this other gang might be getting individual bonus, and you were getting gang bonus. The bonus clerk used to come around about Wednesday or something like that. It was always a week in hand with the bonus, or something like that, and then he'd put the word out. They'd say, "What's the bonus this week?" and he'd, by the way, leak it, say, "Well, don't say nothing to anybody else – your bonus is..." say it was £12 this week, as the gang bonus. The individual bonus was about £18. That's one against the other. So, they'd get wind of that and, oh, the trouble there used to be!

Noel Clarke

The type of situation outlined by carpenter Noel Clarke is one that trade union activists on the Barbican challenged. The Barbican shop stewards argued that individual bonuses were unfair, and, as can be seen with the examples quoted by Clarke, could often pit worker against worker. As an alternative, they proposed collective bonuses, where all workers in a particular trade or job would get the same bonus payment. Output would be measured, pooled, and divided equally among workers, irrespective of personal productivity. As Vic Heath showed, this was the system that the scaffolders on the Turriff site operated:

The scaffolders were one of the only sections on the Barbican that had a collective bonus scheme. So everybody in the scaffolders' gang got the same bonus, say 15 pairs – that's how you work it really. You work in pairs....

Everybody's total then got pooled together?

That's right, and then ...that's split between all of you.

On the Barbican, bonus disputes were becoming more frequent. There were other problems. Myton appeared to be less and less tolerant of the activities of rank-and-file trade unionists. In May 1966, steelfixer Des Warren, who had been active in trade union struggles in the North-West, was sacked²⁵. Myton also canvassed the NFBTO, successfully, for the replacement of A. Dodd, from the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), as federation steward. Carpenter and ASW activist Rolph Langdon was sacked after four days, ostensibly because he was unsuitable. Following protests by shop stewards, Langdon was then offered a job on the site as a foreman. He refused this, but the fact that he had been offered such a post completely undermined Myton's case that he was an unsuitable worker and the company was forced

to re-employ him as a carpenter.²⁶ Langdon soon became the federation steward. The workers continued to fight, in order to defend the principles of union organisation:

Now, there was a crane driver on the site who wouldn't join the union. He said he didn't agree with the union in principle. So I said, fair enough, so I went up to the office. I said, "If this man isn't removed by four o'clock, we'll be removing ourselves." I said, "We'll be outside that gate tomorrow morning on picket. This is a closed shop. We can't allow non-union members on the site." So anyhow the management, Bill Pidgeon was his name, the foreman. Bill went down, got him up in the office and spoke to him, and eventually, he agreed to join the union. And Bill came to me and he said, "Well, he's agreed to join the union." "Well," I said, "I wouldn't want to come between the man and his principles, because, on principle, he's against unions and he didn't want to join the union." So I said, "It still applies – either he's off the site or we're off the site." So, he was off the site, obviously. So, you know, that was the kind of rigidity that prevailed at the time. We were determined. I mean, there's no good having a man against his wishes on the job. We wanted people that was willing to be union members and that would support any action we took.

Michael Houlihan

²⁵ Michael Houlihan papers, Written Statement to Court of Inquiry into the circumstances and causes of the dispute at Messrs. Myton Ltd, for an on behalf of the trade union members dismissed by Messrs Myton Limited on the Barbican Development Scheme, City of London, 4 November 1966, p3. We are obliged to Michael Houlihan for a copy of this statement.

²⁶ Ibid, p2

Myton made an attempt to bring in subcontract steelfixers, which led to a further deterioration in industrial relations on the site. Twelve steelfixers were sacked, with ten being reinstated a short time later. The problems on the site came to a head in the summer of 1966. All workers on the Myton site withdrew from the various bonus schemes and were paid a reduced, standing rate of 3/- per hour for eight weeks, whilst negotiations took place for replacement schemes. New schemes were eventually agreed, but problems remained. Lou Lewis attempted to introduce a collective bonus for carpenters, but this was rejected by Myton. Scaffolders also remained in conflict with the Myton management over bonus. The most common bonus system for scaffolders was one based on linear yards. It was easy to measure and easy to understand, for all parties. This was the system in operation on the Turriff site. However, Myton used a different system, which was complicated and difficult to operate. According to the scaffolder shop steward, Michael Houlihan, it was a system that operated solely in the interests of management:



Well, we had a very complicated and to the uninitiated it was an unworkable kind of a system. Well, it was workable for the management because it was so complicated that they could interpret the targets as they wished, and which they did, and which I put a stop to eventually. Each item had a different target. You had to reach a certain target, and then there was a saving rate, say, of 50 per cent. You had to complete so much work in an hour, and then, if you completed that and if you doubled that, you'd get your basic rate plus 50 per cent bonus. Now, nobody previously had been able to work out the amount that was required and whatever, and when the bonus was posted, every Thursday or Friday or whatever the day was, they'd just accept it. But when I started on the job, I asked the foreman to give me a copy of the work he submitted. I took it home, over the weekend, and I spent the whole weekend calculating the values of each task, and its monetary value. So when the bonus was posted on the following week, I went in and I challenged the bonus clerk to substantiate the figure he'd come up with, So, he went through it, blah, blah, blah, oh, he'd say he'd made a mistake – it was a few pence more. Well, I said, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to go through this again because my figures here, which I think are correct, I said we'll compare each item, and it took us an enormous amount of time to do this, and the old foreman, the scaffolder foreman was quite alarmed as well because he'd given me the copy of the figures he was a little bit frightened about losing his job, etc. as you can imagine. But anyhow after long comparisons were made my figures proved to be the correct ones, and the bonus clerk admitted that they were.

Lou Lewis (with loudspeaker) and other workers at a meeting on Barbican site.

Source: Morning Star, 17 June 1966.

But following that then, of course, the repercussions of that were that the foreman's submissions were challenged in many ways, measures were taken and he was much more active in coming out on the site, but as a result of this, and as a result of harassment, which it amounted to, we went on a work-to-rule.

Failure to resolve the scaffolders' bonus dispute led to a work-to-rule being initiated, involving all Myton workers on the site. Myton finally agreed to a new bonus scheme based on linear yards. But the company's refusal to draw up a preamble to the scheme, led to a further deterioration in the situation:

Ultimately, we came to an agreement on the bonus scheme. Then, it was at this stage that ...they thought that was it. No, I said, we'll have to have a preamble to this. Of course, then, it was uproar, you know, on the management side, and they thought I was being bloody-minded. I tried to explain to him that the scheme was...not worth the paper it was written on unless we had these other things. If you've seven scaffolders standing because they were incompetent enough not to supply the material to do the work with, then we wanted a pro rata bonus during that. We didn't want to be losing out as a result of their inefficiencies. And, of course they'd never come across this before, and they were ill-equipped to deal with this kind of a situation. I particularly was branded as all sorts of troublemaker and all the rest of it, but I mean, I thought I was being quite reasonable and I thought any reasonable person would admit that to be the case. But, unfortunately, for them, in their lack of understanding and their lack of knowledge about this situation, they didn't have any real personnel person there who would sit down and talk these things through, agree on their legitimacy or otherwise, and this was part of the thing that led to...the eventual lockout.

Myton's response to the work-to-rule was the sacking of three steelfixers. This led to a walkout of the entire workforce. Following meetings with trade union officials, the workers agreed to return. However, as Michael Houlihan points out, the company decided upon a lock-out and entire shut-down of the site. The timing of the shut-down seemed strange, given that the workers had been on strike for just a couple of days and had agreed to return. However, Myton was experiencing quite severe technical and financial difficulties on the Barbican and, as we shall see below, some months later, the company would claim that contradictory and late instructions from the architects had caused serious problems, and that the designs were more complex than the outline drawings had appeared when the tenders were placed. Some among the Myton workforce felt that they were being used to deflect attention away from the real source of the problems the company was facing on this contract:

But their architects at the time...there were many changes being done. The architects had submitted their drawings, etc. etc. but, as you will appreciate, things required changing, because of circumstances. Architects had to be on top of things all the time. But the architects, apparently, were six weeks behind with their drawings, which meant that they would be paying a labour force on the job, and the job wouldn't be progressing as intended. But we discovered that at a later stage, that what they wanted was lock us out for six weeks, allow the architects to come up to speed with their presentation of the drawings, get rid of the so-called troublemakers, myself included, and everything will be hunky-dory. But, the thing was, they didn't anticipate the feeling among the workers who had been dismissed that they would continue not only for six weeks but for six months and a year and up to 14 months later were still out on the road and nothing, not a brick was laid on a brick. *Michael Houlihan*

THE MYTON LOCK OUT

As Michael Houlihan pointed out, this lock-out would continue for over a year, making it one of the longest-running and protracted labour disputes in British industrial history. Myton soon made it clear that it was willing to re-open the site and re-employ the workers, on the basis that the six works committee members be excluded and remained sacked. This was not acceptable to the Myton workers and the site remained shut. A key figure in this dispute was the late Lou Lewis. Originally from Liverpool, the twenty-eight year old carpenter was a member of the ASW but also a leading light in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Lewis started on the Myton site in the spring of 1966, following a three-year stint on the nearby Paternoster development, and was soon elected as both the ASW and NFBTO steward, replacing Langdon. The question of how Lewis, by this stage a well-known site activist, managed to get a start on this site was one that puzzled Vic Heath:

When the Myton site started, Ralph Langdon was the Federation steward. Lou was still working at Paternoster. Lou finished at Paternoster and he came round and got a job on the Myton site. Why they didn't operate the blacklist at that time, or why he wasn't caught in the net, I don't know, but he started work on the site.

Tony McGing reckons he knows the answer to this puzzle, contending that Lewis entered the site disguised as an elderly worker, and remained like this for a week, taking him past the point where he could be dismissed by Myton:

Everybody felt so sorry for Lou, this poor little man coming along – "Give him a hand with his tools!" You know, little white coat. I was driving the crane just right inside the gate, and they said, "Do you know who's

just gone down there?! Lou!" But they kept it quiet, you see. And he'd sort of limp. The guy in the labour office took all his details and everything, but because he was known as a different name, I can't remember what it was, but his name was Lou Lewis, but that's not what he was known as in the union. They were all waiting for him to come along. Of course, he came in there and slipped right through. "Give him a hand with his case...!" Down through the mucky sites and up onto the building, working away with his hammers and tools for about...I think it was six or seven days. You've got to be on site I think for a certain time.

Leaflet produced by Myton strike committee in March 1967
Source: Courtesy of Vic Heath

WOULD YOU SCAB

For the past 22 weeks the lads on Myton's Site, Barbican Re-Development, have conducted a struggle in defence of Trade Union organisation and against victimisation.

On the 14th February an agreement was made between the employers and National Officers of the Unions involved for the Site to re-open on 20th February. Re-employment was offered to all operatives with the exception of the Works Committee. The Myton lads who had been offered re-employment voted unanimously against returning to work without their Shop Stewards.

The Myton Management, with the help of certain Trade Union Officials, are now proposing to re-open the Site on 29th March with a new labour force, including non-unionists, if this can be found.

We the operatives of the Laing's & Turriff Sites, Barbican Re-Development, on which approximately 1,000 Trade Union members are employed, have taken a unanimous decision to support Myton's pickets in the event of a NEW LABOUR FORCE being introduced.

Building workers will refuse to break this 22-week-old dispute on the Myton's Site, and where possible we call on you to support a mass picket at Myton's gate on Wednesday, 29th March, from 7 a.m. onwards.

Express your opposition to a sell-out by forwarding resolutions through the branches to the E.C.'s and District Committees.

VICTORY FOR MYTON'S WORKERS WILL SAFEGUARD YOU FROM SIMILAR ATTACKS!!!

Published by: Unanimous Decision of Trade Union members.
Turriff & Laing's Sites,
Barbican Re-Development, E.C.1.

The dispute was officially supported, for a short period, by two of the three unions involved—the TGWU and the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers (AUBTW)—mainly through the efforts of the local district organisers, who had the authority to declare strikes official. By early November, however, the national leaderships of both of these unions had intervened and withdrew this endorsement. The ASW, more centralised, did not support the strike at any point. This lack of official union support cut the Myton workers adrift and shaped the tactics they would use to win the struggle:

Our little group of stewards had a meeting, and we decided that we'd just have a skeleton picket, allow all those other men to go off and find other works, because there were a lot of family men and they just couldn't possibly exist. Now, if we kept it down to a small number, we could then say, well, lads, if you get work, make a little

donation or whatever, we'll go to other sites, and we'll get funds from there, union branches, etc. Well, Lou and I and anyone capable of speaking, of putting our case to other workers in canteens, and especially those that were, semi-unionised, we gave a spiel there and asked for their support, and if there were stewards on the job, we asked them to put the hat out on a Thursday evening, when they got paid. In that way, we got a good degree of financial support.

Did you get support from other parts of the country?

Oh yeah, all over, union branches, – the Post Office Workers Union, the Dockers... They all helped us financially.

Michael Houlihan

Picket on Myton site

Source: Morning Star, 21 February 1967.



Lack of official support from the trade union leaders quickly turned into outright opposition, and even collaboration with employers against the workers. In February 1967, the union leaders and the employers agreed a settlement to the dispute that would see the site opened and the workforce re-employed, minus the six works committee members. This was rejected by the Myton workforce but between February and April the company tried, with union leadership blessing, on three occasions to re-open the site with a scab workforce. On each occasion, a mass picket was called of all the sacked workers and the workers on the other two Barbican sites. Vic Heath recalled one of these occasions:

When the company tried to bring scab labour in, on Myton's site, we stopped the Barbican, we stopped on our side of the road, and Laing's as well, and we all went over to the Myton site. It was a comparatively small site, and so you can reckon there were about 700 or 800 men on the other side of the road when the scabs tried to drive in the coaches. Although the Old Bill was in large numbers, they weren't in large enough numbers to control us! And all the lads all sort of surged forward and then, all of a sudden, one of the blokes, who I can remember him to this day, to look at him, can't remember his name, he run out into the road and laid down in front of the coach. So the coach driver had to stop, which is the most, the worst place in the world to stop, and all the crowd surged forward and they was rocking the coach backwards and forwards. All the guys that was in the coach was getting out and running away, you know! So the site never started. And everybody was cheering this guy, and he just got up and walked away.

Richard Organ also recalled these attempts to break the strike, and the response by the workers on the other Barbican sites:

Well you know, Myton's tried to bring in what we say is scab labour, and the word got about. I didn't quite agree with what some of the lads done, but, from the tower block that I worked on, they would lob bits of masonry, parts of bricks and what have you, down onto the site, and you'd see these, you know, workers running off it. But there was a few occasions when ...they were trying to bus in people, and we got the word, and basically we downed tools and went over and picketed the gates to stop, you know, bussing in scab labour. You might be there like half a day and they'd try to get...the police would be there, and they could see there was a mass picket, and they'd just turn away and off they'd go, and then we'd go back into work, after lunch or something.

The site was also visited by NFBTO general secretary Harry Weaver and its London regional secretary, Len Eaton. At these meetings, both men urged the workforce to return to work, but failed to find any support. On one occasion, the pair were barracked and jeered, and had mud thrown at them, before they bade a hasty retreat. The Myton workforce was clearly behind the works committee leaders, but the hostility of the trade union leaders would worsen and would have a significant bearing on the eventual outcome of the dispute.

Regional and national disputes commissions were held, but failed to find a solution. At the national meeting held on 7 March 1967, Myton, the three unions involved, and the strike committee all gave evidence.

Myton pinned the blame for the strike firmly on the shoulders of the strike committee and justified its decision not to re-employ them. They had, it was claimed, taken part in 'unofficial picketing' engaged in 'intimidating' behaviour and 'repeatedly brought the constitutional machinery of the industry into contempt'.²⁸

Represented in the main by divisional or local officials, most of whom were to varying degrees sympathetic to the strike, the three unions rejected Myton's arguments. The TGWU claimed that the sacking of the three steelfixers was a move designed to frighten the rest of the workforce and weaken their organisation. The transport union also focused on the earlier attempt by Myton to introduce subcontract scaffolders onto the Barbican as a further example of the firm's 'provocative' behaviour.²⁹

The AUBTW took up the question of the alleged disruptiveness of the stewards, arguing that its main steward on the site, Michael Houlihan, had been accredited since January 1966, with no complaints or problems. According to the union, the real problem was the decision by Myton to impose an inadequate bonus scheme on the scaffolders.³⁰ The ASW dismissed Myton's attitude towards labour relations as pitiable, pointing out how the firm had not appointed a labour relations officer until just before the strike had started and criticising its alleged intransigence.³¹ However, the decision of the panel was one that broadly accepted

²⁸ National Archives, (NA) LAB 10/2960, Record of Proceedings of a National Disputes Commission, 7 March 1967

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

Headline. Source: Daily Mail, 22 February 1967

This smiling man...

WHO HALTS THE BUILDING OF A VILLAGE WITHIN A CITY

THREE AMONG THE SIX

By JOHN TILLEY

TO HIS workmates, 28-year-old Mr. Lew Lewis is almost an idol.

To a building firm he is just too troublesome to be given a job.

The result of this difference of opinion over one carpenter and five other men that the firm refuses to employ is a standstill on the site of a new £5,500,000 "village" in the City of London.

The firm, Myton's, closed the site at the Barbican on November 4 after a long history of disputes.

On Monday, the firm agreed to reopen the site and give jobs to 38 men.

The 30 claimed that the other six were victimised and decided unanimously, and in defiance of their leaders, not to return.

Contractors on this and other big London sites, say Mr. Lewis is the man behind the growing influence of the workers.

He is captain of the London Joint Sites Committee, which builders concede to be subversive and Communist-controlled.

One shop steward said of

MR. LEWIS— My workmates are my family.

the Communist Party London district committee.

the original hand



Pickets at Myton site, including: Michael Houlihan (far left), Rolph Langdon (second from left), and Lou Lewis, (second from right)
Source: Morning Star, 31 March 1967.

Myton's case. It ruled that the six strike leaders had acted 'contrary' to the building industry National Joint Council regulations and had also 'defied' their own organisations by continuing to picket the site after a deal to reopen it had been made. As a result, there was 'no possibility of reasonable labour relations' on the site if they were to be re-employed. The recommendation was that the site be reopened on the basis of the 15 February agreement and that the six were to remain sacked.³² In response, the Myton workforce continued to support the picket, and turned up en-masse whenever the company tried to introduce a scab labour force.

Tapping into the saloon bar narratives concerning the causes of industrial relations problems generally in this era, the press also condemned the strike and began to vilify the works committee. The London Evening News ran a series of articles on the strike, blaming it on a small group of communist agitators who had 'infiltrated' the sites,³³ whilst the Daily Mail published a full-page article on Lou Lewis, complete with photograph, under the headline 'This smiling man, who halts the building of a village within the city'.³⁴ The remaining five committee members, Mick

Houlihan, Chris Taylor, Rolph Langdon, Kevin Synott (a strong catholic and not sympathetic at all to communism) and Chris Noble were also named and blamed for causing the strike. Attention began to focus on the London Joint Sites Committee, which was an important network of stewards that had been established during the Turriff strike but which, the media claimed, had been set up by communists as a means purely of provoking mayhem on sites all over the capital. The committee was described as a 'mysterious, shapeless organisation', with a secret leadership, the aims of which were 'to usurp the authority of the trade unions; to undermine the government's economic policy; and to re-ignite left-wing attitudes towards employers'.³⁵ Displaying the hostility and unease felt among the trade union leaders for such rank-and-file bodies, ASW leader George Smith, described the committee as no more than a 'front' for 'amateur' politicians, but a dangerous and 'serious problem for the amount of trouble it can cause'.³⁶

³² Ibid

³³ See, for example, Evening News, 1 March 1967

³⁴ Daily Mail, 22 February 1967

³⁵ Evening News, 1 March 1967

³⁶ Ibid

Those who were actually part of the London Joint Sites Committee had a completely different take on it. To them, its main purpose was simply to improve and strengthen trade union organisation and solidarity on the sites:

There was a feeling that sites should really be organised basically before they started or that when a site started, that union members would be allowed to go on it and organise it, because most times, you would have to kind of creep in under the radar, work on that, for that company or that site for a period of time, before you could start organising it, because I think... I can't quite remember, but you had kind of a probationary period. So, if you went in there, and on the first week, you tried to get people to join the union and all that, they could just sack you, and say, right your work's not up to standard or what have you, and get you off the site. You know, most of the employers in the building trade did not want organised sites.

Richard Organ

Well, the Joint Sites was set up as a solidarity organisation, basically. Wherever there was industrial action on any of the sites in the London region, we'd offer our assistance, in most cases. If it was an organised site or not, we'd go over and we'd offer our assistance, if they needed help, you know, raising money for strikes and stuff like that, and basically, that's what the Joint Sites was about...we weren't going round setting people up or anything like that.

Vic Heath

At the end of the day, you can have all the troublemakers you like, but if they don't get the support from the rest of the employees on the job, they're on their own, and if they're these madmen, as somebody described them...They wouldn't last and nobody would follow them. It's only when you have reasonable, legitimate

grievances which you want addressed, and go about in the way that...then, you'll get the support...Men aren't bloody sheep...!

Michael Houlihan

The Myton workers received a great deal of backing, not only from other sites and building union branches, but workers in other industries. It was support which meant a lot to the men on strike:

Well, I remember...a little incident. I went outside my door on Christmas Eve, and there was a case of spirits, mixed – brandy, whisky, rum, etc. from the Dockers, from the local Dockers branch, and I thought that's what kept us going for so long. You couldn't possibly go on for the length of time we did without... I mean, the hostility of the press, you expect, and the Dockers had been subjected to that as well, so they knew. If we weren't being subjected to that, they'd have said there's something wrong here. I mean, these are our sworn enemies and the more this hostility by the press, by the right-wing press, and even the Daily Mirror was part of it and to a lesser extent, the Guardian, but we didn't get any...real support from any paper. Well, of course, the Morning Star, they gave us space to present our side of the argument as well, so we appreciated that.

Michael Houlihan

THE COURT OF INQUIRY

With little prospect of a settlement of the dispute, the government decided to act. A Court of Inquiry, convened under the auspices of the Industrial Courts Act, was set up, charged with the responsibility of investigating the background to the strike and formulating recommendations for its solution. The lock-out at the new government buildings site on nearby Horseferry Road was also subject to investigation by this court. That particular dispute had started around the same time as the Myton strike, following a conflict between contractor, Bernard Sunley and Sons, and shop stewards on the site. Like the Barbican site, there had been a whole succession of small disputes, on issues relating to bonus, site organisation and victimisation, before a major confrontation blew up. Sunley's attempt to have workers clocking on to the site, along with its determination to end a collective bonus scheme in operation on the pre-cast concrete yard, was the final flash-point for a major show-down and the sacking of the entire workforce.

Mass picket at Myton site, following attempt to break strike.
Source: Morning Star, 4 April 1967



It was later alleged by Sunley that the NFBTO President, James Mills, had met with the firm on 17 October 1966 and indicated that these terms be presented to the men, in order to provoke a strike deliberately. This would then provide the grounds for the sacking of the works committee, which was led by two well-known activists, Hugh Cassidy and Jack Henry, who, according to this view of events, Mills presumably also wanted to be rid of. Mills allegedly assured Sunley and Sons that, if the case went to a disputes commission, there was a fair chance that he would be on the panel and would ensure that the firm would obtain a favourable outcome.³⁷ These were shocking allegations, which Mills later denied. Unusually, there were no minutes taken at the meeting, which makes it difficult to verify what did actually happen. But what cannot be doubted, and what was later admitted by Sunley and Sons director, George Avery, is that the company, one year behind on the completion date, and facing a penalty cost of around £180,000, as well as a doubling of its estimated wage bill, from £700,000 to £1.4 million, did provoke strike action at Horseferry Road in an attempt not only to provide a fig leaf for the sacking of the works committee but also to provide the grounds for a possible termination of the contract altogether.³⁸ The inquiry into the Barbican and Horseferry Road disputes took place in June 1967. But it was one to which the works committee itself had not been invited:

³⁷ Financial Times, 8 June 1967; Morning Star 13 June 1967

³⁸ Avery said this under cross examination from both Les Kemp of the TGWU and Bill Lewis of the AUBTW at the Cameron inquiry in June 1967. For more on this see the Financial Times, 8 June 1967. Hugh Cassidy also wrote a series of detailed articles on the Horseferry Road lock-out, which repeated the allegations about Mills. See the Building Workers Charter, Volume 1, nos. 3, 4 and 5, 1970.

When the Cameron Inquiry was mooted and it was going to be set up and all those who were submitting evidence to the Cameron, we were not included. We were the main people who should have been asked to give our evidence on why we did what we did. And yet, it was the unions, the management and so on. So I wrote to the Inquiry Chairman, or Secretary, and asked that we be allowed. Now, I think it was two days or three days prior to that that the letter came to my house. I happened to be at a trade union conference down in Paignton in Devon. So I got a phone call, I had to come back home, I stayed up all night, on an old typewriter, to put our side...I think it was about seven o'clock at night I started, and I finished at half-past 11 the following day. I had to have that down at Clapham or somewhere like that by four o'clock. That was the cut-off point. I got on the tube and went and handed it in, physically.
Michael Houlihan

At the hearings, the scale and nature of Myton's difficulties on the Barbican were soon aired publicly for the first time. In an echo of the arguments made by the workers on site, Myton claimed that the construction designs were more complex in reality than they had appeared on the outline architects drawings upon which they had based their initial tender. These drawings had to be revised and far greater detail inserted. In his interview, Richard Organ alluded to this, pointing out how the initial drawings often had to be changed, in line with the work that was actually being done:

We plumbed in the first floor, and that would be working off drawings and always the pipework doesn't go in quite as it should do because there's been some problem that hasn't been foreseen. So, you're going to run a pipe along a wall, and then you find there's

Lou Lewis and Ralph Langdon (right; second right) and supporters on their way to ASW disciplinary meeting, where the two were expelled from the union. Michael Houlihan is also in picture. Source: Morning Star, 4 May 1967.



something in your way, you can't quite do it, though it says on the drawing you should be able to do it, so you have to adapt. So once we [set up] the first floor and sorted out all the problems, then all the floors after were all partitioned, the same, and so you could just, you know, set up your pipework and in it would go... as I say, when we'd done the first floor, and there was some alterations to the way the plumbing had been shown on the drawings, then the architects would come in and have a look, and then redo it, to how we'd installed it.

In addition, contradictory and late instructions and numerous changes to the designs had also been passed down from the architects, disrupting the work programme considerably. This had often resulted in completed work being taken down and replaced. The implications of this for industrial relations on the site were obvious: if the pace of work was slowed up as a result of these delays, then the workers' bonus levels would be affected. The three architects disputed that they were to any degree responsible for the mess at the Barbican, but the argument being made here by Myton was similar to that outlined by John Justice just a couple of months earlier. Justice by this stage had left the Turriff site, but, in an interview with *Construction News*, he pointed out that, whilst the company's original tender had been based on a provisional Bill of Quantities and just fifty or sixty drawings, they now had to deal with thousands of drawings from the architects and a continuous procession of building instructions.⁴⁰ Justice highlighted the complexity of the building process when he pointed out that there were tolerances of just one-eighth of an inch on walls 30 feet in length and that, as the door frames were all pre-made with no architraves

around them, there were no tolerances at all on them. Window frames were also said to have 'very small' tolerances.⁴¹ Turriff by this stage had been on the Barbican for three years, but was only half-way through the work of a contract that was supposed to be finished the following year. It also emerged that Laing were already 30 weeks behind on its phase 3 contract and that the Myton site, in the 18 months or so that it had been in operation, had only just begun erecting the superstructure.

The analysis offered in 2011 by former quantity surveyor Geoff Trickey on the difficulties that accompanied the construction of phase V might also be applied in part to the earlier phases of the development that were struggling in the 1960s:

If you go into the Arts Centre, at a lowish level, and get into a lift, and there's a button in the concrete, and the button is that shape, isn't it, as everything – not everything, but lots of things in the Barbican are that shape... those arches between what I used to call Block 13 and the button for the lift. Now, that button goes into a concrete structure which is built from day one, and somebody's got to know where the lift button goes?! That's what people totally mistook in those days about building concrete – building structures that were self-finished, because the whole process of the industry up to that time was you'd throw something up and you'd cover it with plaster or with some facing or, in the case of brickwork of course, it is its own facing, but if you're pouring concrete and you're not going to cover it up, because Chamberlin, Powell... felt, if you're building in concrete, it's got to look like concrete, and I can understand that, but they didn't understand the implications of

⁴⁰ *Construction News*, 27 April 1967

⁴¹ *Ibid*

that, because the building industry, you know, isn't geared up to acting like a brain surgeon on a building site. So, if you're going to build something where you need to know the shape and size of the lift button before you can put in the ground floor— normally, you'd just leave a chase – [it's a] totally different approach to building!

However, the Cameron team, which included shipbuilding and engineering union leader Danny McGarvey, appeared to take none of the more fundamental factors into account when issuing its report on the dispute two months later. Instead the blame was placed at the door of the works committee. Finding that there was no good reason for such a body to exist, Cameron concluded that it was both 'mischievous and subversive not only of good labour relations on the sites in question, but of the authority and influence of the unions concerned'.⁴² The two major concerns to Cameron were the 'degree of ignorance which apparently obtained amongst union officials as to what in fact was occurring on these sites' and 'the extent to which power and real authority had passed into the hands of the shop stewards and the works committees without effective union control'. The report recommended that the NFBTO and the National Federation of Building Trade Employers (NFBTE) alter the National Working Rule Agreement regarding election of the works committees and the federation stewards. The NFBTO in particular was advised to take greater control of the electoral process and to initiate regulations that would make it more difficult for a rank-and-file body to hold a position of power. This included a greater willingness on the part of the NFBTO to prevent and disqualify from holding office those who had breached the working rule agreement.

It was suggested that new works committee be appointed by union leaders at the Myton site, pending new elections, which would be under NFBTO supervision. Minutes of works committee meetings were to be supplied under penalty to the NFBTO regional secretary within 48 hours. The powers of shop stewards were also to be limited and laid out more clearly. Finally, the refusal of Myton to re-employ the six works committee members was endorsed by Cameron and a recommendation was made that the site be opened inside four weeks.

The outcome of the Cameron Report came as no surprise to the Barbican workers:

We knew, you've only got to look at previous situations. I don't think there was an exact precedent for our situation, but you've only got to look – these people can make blue seem red if they want to do it, by their verbal abilities and you're on a hiding to nothing when you go in front of these people! Their minds are made up. It's just a question of justification – they justify what they're doing and the previous actions make them all seem legitimate to the public. The newspapers, of course, will then support that position, the noble lord and the whatever. It's the great English system at work. Perfidious Albion!
Michael Houlihan

⁴² Ibid, p58

But, although rejected by the workforce, the Cameron Report can be seen as the beginning of the end of the dispute. It paved the way for an even closer collaboration between employers and trade union leaders. This eventually took the form of a remarkable full-page advertisement, published in several national newspapers, signed by the leaders of the three unions involved, along with the NFBTO and NFBTE leaders, which denounced the strike and the strike leaders. The advertisement stated that there 'was no strike' at the Barbican, that agreements between management and the unions on all outstanding issues had been reached, that the site was open, and that trade union members were free to work there with the support of their organisations. The pickets were condemned as a 'few unrepresentative individuals' whose actions were 'disgraceful' and whose real agenda was the 'undermining of the authority of the properly-elected trade union representatives'.⁴³ A couple of weeks before this both Harry Weaver and Len Eaton had been ejected from the Turriff and Laing sites following their attempts to persuade the workers there to accept the Cameron Report.⁴⁴ On 16 October, a major effort was made to re-open the site, and was accompanied with a huge police presence, in order to protect strike-breakers. Violence erupted and saw many workers beaten and arrested by police,⁴⁵ with one, a young plumber named David Leadbetter, allegedly suffering a broken arm in the back of a police van.⁴⁶



Front page. Source: Morning Star, 17 October 1967.

⁴³ See for example the Evening News, 26 October 1967

⁴⁴ Construction News, 12 October 1967

⁴⁵ Morning Star, 17 October 1967

⁴⁶ Barbican: Police Go Berserk , Advance News Bureau and the Irish Internationalists leaflet , October 1967



Mass meeting at Barbican, following police violence of previous day. Source: Morning Star, 18 October 1967

The strike leaders attempted to struggle on and called a protest march for 2 November, which was the day that the 24 pickets who had been arrested were due to appear in court. However, this would prove to be something of an anti-climax. Around 500 workers and supporters turned up, including two coach loads of building workers from Liverpool and Manchester. The demonstration was held in the pouring rain, but the main development that dampened the spirits of the men was the unexpected announcement by Lewis that the picketing of the site was going to end and that the dispute was effectively over. In his speech, Lewis said they had achieved as much as was possible against the combined forces of the employers, trade union leaders, police and government. He argued that support for the strike had not waned and that the 'connivance and collaboration' of the union leaders with the employers had not broken the resolve or the determination of the workers. Taking aim at the union leaders, Lewis argued that their true character and role in the dispute had been

'exposed', and that it was a leadership that must be 'destroyed'.

Michael Houlihan regarded the union leadership collaboration with employers during this dispute as 'the most blatant sell-out imaginable'⁴⁷ but agreed with the decision to end the picket, as did all of the works committee members. He felt that no more could be achieved by continuing it.

The hostility was of such a nature that it was affecting our families. It was affecting everybody, and we just had to say, 'well look, we'll go out of here as dignified as we started. We'll go out with our heads held high'. We fought the good fight, and because the forces arraigned against us were of such, you know, power and influence, that we just couldn't withstand it, I mean, anymore.

⁴⁷ Michael Houlihan papers, Letter by Michael Houlihan to AUBTW executive, (n.d., 1967?). We are grateful to Michael Houlihan for a copy of this letter.



Final rally on 2 November.
Source: Morning Star, 3 November 1967



Leaflet for 2 November march
Source: Courtesy of Vic Heath

THE BLACKLIST

Myton's Barbican site re-opened fully in November 1967. But the six stewards who led the struggle remained sacked. In the short term, the outcome of the dispute strengthened the hand of both the employers and the trade union leaders. Sir Frank Taylor and Barton Higgs, the managing directors of Taylor Woodrow and its subsidiary Myton, respectively, had both attended the march held on 2 November, where they had been jeered and challenged by workers. Interviewed later that day, they declared that none of the six would ever work for Taylor Woodrow again, on any site. This public blacklisting, a statement made all the more remarkable given that Taylor Woodrow was regularly awarded publicly funded contracts, was repeated by

most of the large firms in the industry, making it exceptionally difficult for the sacked men – and many others who were associated with the dispute – to gain employment. In January 1968, Lewis was hired and then quickly fired, once his identity became known, from the £5 million Isleworth tower block development site in London⁴⁸. The same month, Rolph Langdon was also sacked shortly after starting on the building of a swimming pool in Tower Hamlets.⁴⁹ Michael Houlihan was unemployed for around two years following the Myton strike. He recalls the clerk at Poplar labour

⁴⁸ Morning Star, 25 January 1968

⁴⁹ Morning Star, 12 January 1968

exchange phoning dozens of scaffolding firms on his behalf, but being unable to find anyone willing to hire him:

He phoned this firm, that firm. He phoned Taylor Woodrow and they said quite openly "Not only will we not employ Mr Houlihan in London, but nowhere in the United Kingdom".

Sackings of prominent trade unionists also took place, with union approval, from the Brunel University site.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, on the Barbican, the federation steward on the Turriff site, Max Beyer, and the chairman of the works committee, Vic Heath, also had their credentials withdrawn by the unions, following their involvement in picketing of the Myton site. When he left the Turriff site in 1968, Vic Heath would find it very difficult to get any kind of work in the building industry. When he did so, he had to rely on the solidarity and support of his fellow workers to keep him there:

I worked on Leadenhall Street. I'd got a job on there as a result of an Irish guy I used to know. He got me a job on there, and the management found out who I was in a very short period of time and tried to sack me, and the site struck and it went on strike. Taylor Woodrow's was the company, and the site went on strike for...two or three days, and all went back to normal, and I was the scaffolders' steward as soon as I walked on-site basically and also the chairman of the works committee, and Jim was the... Federation steward. Callaghan I think his name was.

Vic found that even a change of industry did not prevent attempts to blacklist him:

I ended up going to work for London Transport, first to Acton Works. The convener at Acton Works was a bloke named Don Cook, who was quite famous in his own right in later years. He led the rent strikes in Camden. He was the convener at Acton Works, and he was also a Party member of course. I went up there for a job, and they give you a lot of tests – eyesight, for obvious reasons, working on the line, and hearing – you've actually got to hear the train coming – and they asked me a lot of questions and stuff like that. First, they weren't going to allow me to start because the blacklist, and...Don said, well, you know, "If you can't give me a legitimate reason why he can't start work here, I'll stop the Works," Acton Works, which was a big place! It was fantastic. So, they just let me start, and I started work – ...I worked in the blacksmith's shop for a while, and ...then...they asked me to be the NUR steward, so I was holding a dual card. I'd still got my own card.

Work resumed at the Myton site in November 1967, but the situation was far from normal. William Milne started on the site at this point, and recalls a heavy police presence on the site.

Myton's, when I arrived there, they'd just went back to work after 15 months' strike...I was quite amazed to see a stationary policeman about every 20 yards around the site...And mounted police as well, circling the site.

⁵⁰ The Times, 21 October 1967. Mick McGowan, the NFBTO steward, being one such example

The deeper problems regarding the tendering, design and organisation of the building process, which had been noted by the Cameron commission but played no part in their report, continued to dog progress. In 1968, Myton threatened to leave the Barbican if more money from the City of London was not forthcoming. Again, the workers on the site were used as pawns by the company and redundancy notices were handed out. The City of London eventually agreed to a 25% increase and the redundancy notices were withdrawn. In 1970, McAlpine attempted to introduce non-union labour onto their site, but this was beaten back by the workers.

Plumber Richard Organ recalled a bonus dispute with his subcontractor employer, on the John Laing site:

Laing's workers had negotiated with Laing's that, when they went on to what they call snagging work, towards the end of the job, they would be paid an average bonus. And anyway, we approached our company for the same and they wouldn't pay it. They said, no, there's this retention money, and any snagging money has got to be paid out of this retention money, and so we argued against it and there was a proposal put to the shop that, because the company had dug in their heels, that we'd take industrial action, and we went out on strike, over this average bonus scheme. Our officials came in and negotiated with the company. They wouldn't wear it at all, so our official in London at the time said, right, I'm going to make this strike official, and once that word was mentioned, that it was going to become an official strike. He used the arguments because the main contractor, Laing's men, the window-fitters, the plasterers, they were all getting this average bonus for this snagging work, and the plumbers were the only ones that weren't getting it on the site and it was kind of unfair. And anyway,

they...said, "Right, we'll have to think about it," and he said, "Well, you know, as from now, as far as I'm concerned," he said, "I've got to go back to my executive," he said, "but I think they'll back me – I'll make this strike official." And anyway, it was made official, and I became the first plumber in the new amalgamated union to have an official strike made. Because the PTU had amalgamated with the ETU in '69, and so we became the EEPTU.

But although the plumbers won this particular strike, Richard Organ, who was only in his mid twenties at this time, would soon suffer the same fate as many other trade union activists on this site, once the contract began to wind down:

They paid everybody off?

No, some of them, they would transfer onto other jobs. As the jobs were winding down, they were taking on new contracts or were involved in new contracts, and some of them would be made redundant, the ones that weren't up to their normal standards, but all of the regular men, apart from me and John were transferred off the job, you know, in stages, as it was winding down.

But in your case, they sacked you?

Oh yeah.

Even though you had worked with them for quite a few years?

Oh yeah, but I'd been a thorn in their side, I got an average bonus system brought in, which they didn't want it to be brought in. It cost them a bit of money. They weren't making as much profit as they wanted to, obviously.

In the period that followed, he would find it very difficult to get a job on the sites in London:

I'd had a bit of redundancy, I'd worked for the company about 10-odd years or more, and so I'd gone round to different companies that were advertising for plumbers, and some of them, you'd ring up, you'd give your name, and they'd just say, "Oh, hold on a minute...oh, no, them jobs are gone now." Sometimes, you'd go down for an interview and between the times you'd phoned them and went down for an interview the jobs had gone.

The union leaders appeared to be uninterested:

I went to my union and said, look I'm on the blacklist, and I said you've got to do something about this – for being active for the trade union movement, then you're getting blacklisted and you're not able to get employment and you should be doing something about it, basically. If we're working on your behalf, you should be protecting us. But as I say, Frank Chapple was the General Secretary then and for whatever reason, he didn't particularly like activists – we was all communists, though him and Les Cannon, who was the President of the union at the time, had both been communist members.

Richard Organ eventually got a plumber's job on the Post Office tower, and was employed by the General Post Office (GPO). He later worked on the newspaper presses in Fleet Street and today is active in the Greater London Pensioners Association.

Smaller scale strikes and disputes continued to occur. Pat Bowen recalls the incredible lengths employers went to try and introduce scab labour during some of them:

The one thing really stands out in me is when they were trying to bring scab labour in – this was to our site, not to the Myton site. And ... they were bringing in ready-mix lorries – you know the big lorries which they have? About three or four of those sort of came in, and they'd gone through the picket, obviously, and they'd got a bit of stick from the picket, but, you know, not a lot, but actually, when they got onto the site, they actually had people inside the wheelie bit – it wasn't turning, obviously, but there was about 10 people inside each of these cement bits, and they got out, you know, to work on the site. And that was the most sort of radical sort of bit of, if you like, crossing the picket line I'd ever seen, that actually people would climb inside there, the risk involved in doing that, if somebody turned the bloody thing on – you'd get churned up! But no, they came in and that was the worst sort of picket-breaking I'd seen actually.

TURRIFF PREPARES TO LEAVE THE BARBICAN

In 1971, the building process was again halted as a result of severe problems between one of the major contractors and the City Corporation. Once more it was the workers on the site who suffered as a result. Towards the end of March 1971 Turriff cut bonus payments to its workforce, claiming that responsibility for this lay with the City, which, Turriff claimed, had fallen behind on its payments.⁵¹ The average bonus payment was reduced from 32p per hour to 7½p per hour. The issue went to regional and national disputes commissions, both of which found in favour of the workers, but Turriff continued to refuse to pay the previously agreed bonus rate. In a letter to its 300 employees, Turriff claimed that the average wage on site since June 1970 had been £29.41, £13.33 of which was bonus. Over the same period, the company claimed that the comparable payment from the City of London was only £6.82.⁵² The company also released figures alleging that between July 1970 and January 1971 it had paid out £443,000 on labour costs but received only £65,000 from the Corporation.⁵³ Shortly afterwards, Turriff requested an inquiry into alleged contact between the BDC and John Laing and Sons, regarding the taking over of Phase II by that company. Laing stated that it had not been 'officially' approached by BDC on this matter.⁵⁴ On 21 April, workers on the Turriff site walked out in protest at the company's refusal to accept the decision of the disputes commissions, and were supported by several hundred workers from the other two Barbican sites. The Turriff workforce held a meeting and passed a number of resolutions, including asking all other unions to cease co-operation on the conciliation panels 'which Turriff had ignored', the 'blacking' of all Turriff sites and the establishment of a direct labour organisation by the Corporation, to complete the contract.⁵⁵



Richard Organ and daughter on one of the Barbican towers under construction in the late 1960s.

Source: Courtesy of Richard Organ.

⁵¹ LMA, BDC Minutes, 22 March 1971

⁵² TheTimes, March 25 1971

⁵³ NA, LAB 43/632, Notes for the Record, Barbican site

⁵⁴ The Times, 14 April 1971

⁵⁵ Construction News, 29 April 1971

Turriff warned the BDC that the position might 'deteriorate' and that the 'militants' might seize control 'at the expense of the union officials'. The NFBTO leadership considered that this was wishful thinking on behalf of Turriff, arguing that the company was doing its best to provoke a strike, in order to declare a 'force majeure', which would allow it to renegotiate its Barbican contract 'for an extra £1 million'.⁵⁶ This view was broadly shared by top civil servants; Ministry of Labour official, C.F. Heron, commented that the decision by Turriff to cut bonus payments may well have been designed 'to precipitate a situation which would bring pressure on the City, possibly as a result of government intervention, to ease the terms of the contract'.⁵⁷ In the event, the stoppage was for only a half-day and work resumed the following morning. The City agreed to provide more money to Turriff, but this did not solve the deep financial problems of the company. In June, it cut bonus payments again, accusing the Corporation of having paid only £6.5 million for £15 million of work.

By November 1971, Turriff had left the Barbican and was replaced by John Laing. The City of London agreed a contract price of £1.4 million with Laing for the completion of phase II but, despite the fact that Turriff had already finished about 80-90% of the work, Laing eventually received over £4 million at the close of the contract in 1974. By the mid-1970s, most of the Barbican phases were trundling towards completion, all of them massively late and well over budget. Phase II eventually cost the City of London over £14 million and Phase III over £11.5 million. But these spiralling costs pale into insignificance when placed next to phase V, the Barbican Arts Centre, which was eventually completed in 1982. Laing's original tender was just under £14 million, which was revised up to £16.7 million by the time the job was started in 1971. By 1976, it had escalated to £55 million and two years later had risen to £80 million. January 1980 saw the estimated figure break through the £100 million mark, rising to £120 million by May the following year. February 1982 saw yet a further revision, to £153 million, and final figure was reckoned to be around £159 million, a ten-fold increase.

⁵⁶ NA, LAB 43/632, RT Morris to DB Smith, 27 April 1971

⁵⁷ NA, LAB 43/632, CF Heron to DB Smith, 13 May 1971

CONCLUSION

The completion of the arts centre in 1982 marked the final conclusion of the re-development scheme. The Barbican is a project that has immense significance because it captured many of the emerging problems in the industry, particularly on large sites, in the areas of design, tendering, management, site organisation, wage relations, non-traditional occupations, health and safety and workplace relations. It exemplified all the difficulties experienced in accommodating to a changing labour process, which included the dominance of non-traditional occupations, new technologies and materials. In this respect, it is no accident that many of those interviewed who were active shop stewards in the works committees came from occupations such as scaffolding, concreting, cranedriving, shuttering and steelfixing. They were confronted by professionals struggling to design the details of such a complex and innovative concrete structure, but paying little heed to the difficulties their designs might entail for the workforce responsible for construction; a management schooled more in traditional methods, including in its approach to industrial relations, which remained adversarial when what was required was clear and respectful negotiation on all the untried health and safety, payment and contractual issues arising; and national trade unions, still embedded in traditional trade structures and failing to represent and accommodate to a very different labour force.

From the workers' perspective, the Barbican flagged up the negative consequences of some of the sharpest of the post-war changes in the industry's wage and employment relations, such as the rise of labour-only subcontracting and the widespread use of bonus systems that were often chaotic and arbitrary. Both of these issues, and in particular the latter, provoked an industrial relations crisis on the site of quite historic proportions. This in turn exposed shortcomings in the trade union movement, highlighting the scale of the gap that existed between national officials and the rank-and-file members. By examining the disputes on the Barbican, it is possible to see the close relationships that existed between some trade union leaders and employers, which at times descended into downright corruption, and the manner in which many of those working in new occupations in the industry, or in occupations classified as non-craft, such as the scaffolders on the Myton site, suffered from severe inadequacies in trade union representation. Those scaffolders were part of the AUBTW, but this was still very much a bricklayers' union, totally dominated by officials who had been in that occupation. In response to these shortcomings, and in an attempt to map out a trade unionised future for all building workers, regardless of occupation or ethnic background, the Barbican activists helped to develop the London Joint Sites Committee, which played a seminal role in the formation of the Building Workers' Charter in 1970. These organisations would impact deeply on industrial relations in the industry in the 1970s, eventually pressing for revolutionary measures such as nationalisation of the industry and the formation of a single building workers union, and leading the 1972 national building workers' strike. It can be argued that, had the Barbican disputes not occurred, the degree of organisation among rank-and-file building workers might well have

been weaker in the early 1970s. Analysing the lock-outs on the Barbican, we can also see the role of ideology and appreciate how the apparently timeless narratives which dominate the British media and popular culture and seek to fix the blame for industrial disputes on 'undisciplined' shop stewards are ideological constructions, erected to defend the economic interests of employers and to block any real investigation into the workers' grievances. In reality, the shop stewards on the Myton site were after little more than a stable wage system and better working conditions. That this fairly modest demand could provoke such intense hostility and criticism and lead to a thirteen month lock-out, followed by the blacklisting of many of the workers involved, shows the pervasive nature of such ideology.

For the construction industry, the Barbican leaves a bitter if impressive legacy. How would the industry look like today had more heed and respect been shown to the concerns of the workforce, whether about health and safety, working conditions, pay or representation? Indeed, how would it look like today had those who showed such an intense commitment to its improvement not been often permanently excluded? From an architectural point of view, the Barbican represents an important and critical monument of the post-war era, one of the unique twentieth-century landmarks in the city of London. The architects who designed it and the engineers who planned its construction are now regarded as among the most famous and significant figures in their professions in the post-war era. The workers who built the Barbican are never referred to and their opinions vary on the nature of the project that they brought to life. Some appreciate the quality of the development; William Milne described it as 'clever, clever stuff', whilst for Richard Organ there is a sense of pride in the work he completed:

As I said to you, worked on the tower block... I've told people, the majority of the plumbing work that went into that... I did, so I feel quite proud about it. And I've been down there and walked round the complex after it was finished, when they had fish in the lake and all the gardens done, and it's quite an impressive site, or complex. I've been into the Barbican Theatre, which is quite impressive.

Others saw it simply as another job, albeit one that was different from most others, but regardless of the differences, it is clear that for many of the workers their views on the Barbican reflect the struggles that took place on that site and the price that they sometimes paid as a result:

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I learned a great deal about human nature and everything like that, but the most effect that I had most concern about in my later years was the effect it had on my family. They were the ones who suffered as a result. I could see, in my children, and ex-wife now, I could see that it affected them in a way that... you couldn't calculate the effect that it had on them. And not for the best not for good, so I never forgive that. That's something I won't forgive both employers and unions for.

Michael Houlihan

So what do you think now then, when you see the Barbican?

I don't really...I don't even take any notice of it, don't even think about it.

Vic Heath

Well, I look at it, because my office is near there, my head office in London, and I think...I worked there, I think the Barbican was...a good site, and, as I say, I think a lot of people cut their sort of political teeth on it, and I bet, if you looked closely enough, you'd find loads of people who got their first sort of experience of trade unionism militancy on that site...some for good and some for bad.

Pat Bowen

Yeah, I would say I talk about it with fond memories...It was basically where I learned my trade unionism.

Richard Organ

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- p.6 Crane erectors on Laing Barbican site. Source: Courtesy of John Steeden.
- p.9 Flats on the Barbican Estate, photograph 1960s by John Gay.
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- p.11 Early stages of the Barbican scheme, photograph c.1963 by John Gay.
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- p.13 Close up of Turriff tower block. Source: Construction News, 27 April 1967.
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- p.23 Barbican tower under construction. Source: Courtesy of Richard Organ.
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- p.26 Protest march in support of Turriff workers, including Lou Lewis (far right), October 1965. Source: Courtesy of Vic Heath.
- p.31 Lou Lewis (with loudspeaker) and other workers at a meeting on Barbican site.
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- p.33 Leaflet produced by Myton strike committee in March 1967
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- p.36 Headline. Source: Daily Mail, 22 February 1967.
- p.37 Pickets at Myton site, including: Michael Houlihan (far left), Rolph Langdon (second from left), and Lou Lewis, (second from right).
Source: Morning Star, 31 March 1967.
- p.39 Mass picket at Myton site, following attempt to break strike.
Source: Morning Star, 4 April 1967.
- p.40 Lou Lewis and Rolph Langdon (right; second right) and supporters on their way to ASW disciplinary meeting, where the two were expelled from the union. Michael Houlihan is also in picture. Source: Morning Star, 4 May 1967.
- p.43 Front page. Source: Morning Star, 17 October 1967.
- p.44 Mass meeting at Barbican, following police violence of previous day.
Source: Morning Star, 18 October 1967.
- p.45 Final rally on 2 November. Source: Morning Star, 3 November 1967.
- p.45 Leaflet for 2 November march. Source: Courtesy of Vic Heath.
- p.49 Richard Organ and daughter on one of the Barbican towers under construction in the late 1960s. Source: Courtesy of Richard Organ.

Back cover image (top):

The Barbican re-development

Source: Morning Star 9 September 1966

Back cover image (bottom):

Victorious Barbican building workers show union cards after strike on Turriff site

Source: Daily Worker, 15 October 1965



The Barbican re-development was a major construction project, which began in the early 1960s and at its peak employed around a thousand workers. Designed by Chamberlin, Powell and Bon, the re-development was a combination of housing and landscaping, a business centre, school, and one of the largest arts centres in Europe, built across 40 acres in the heart of the City of London. But the Barbican was also infamous for the problems that accompanied its development. This pamphlet tells the stories of some of the men who built the Barbican—it reveals how they built it, the nature of the problems they faced during the building, the manner in which they tried to overcome these problems, and the way in which, for some, their lives were changed forever as a result.

