

AN ARTISAN ELITE IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY

Kentish London 1840–1880

Geoffrey Crossick

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

1	Introduction	13
2	The Growth of Kentish London	24
3	Occupations and Industry	37
4	The Impact of the Workplace	60
5	Elites and the Community	88
6	The Artisan Elite. I. Stratification	105
7	The Artisan Elite. II. Ideology and Values	134
8	The Co-operative Movement	165
9	Friendly Societies	174
10	Political Ideology and Action	199
11	Conclusion	243
	List of Sources	255
	Notes	263
	Index	294

LIST OF TABLES

2.1	Population of the Principal Districts of Kentish London, 1801-81	30
2.2	Rateable Value per Head of Population: Kentish London, 1867	32
3.1	Female Employment in the Borough of Greenwich, 1841-61	39
3.2	Occupational Structure of Greenwich, Lewisham and London, 1841-61	41
3.3	Employment Structure: Borough of Greenwich, 1841-61	43
3.4	Survival of Firms in Principal Industries of Kentish London	48

3.5	Housebuilding in Kentish London: Relative Contribution of Local and Non-local Builders	55
3.6	Size of Kentish London Housebuilders	56
4.1	Dockyard Employment	69
4.2	Employment at the Royal Arsenal	83
5.1	Kentish London Social Elites: Honorary Committees	93
5.2	Kentish London Social Elites: Office-holders	95
6.1	Weekly Earnings in Specific Occupations, Deptford, 1887	110
6.2	Number of Rooms Occupied by Workers in Specific Occupations, Deptford, 1887	111
6.3	Admissions to Greenwich Workhouse: Occupations	112
6.4	Inter-generational Occupational Change, 1851-3	115
6.5	Inter-generational Occupational Change, 1873-5	116
6.6	Marriage and Social Distance, 1851-3	122
6.7	Marriage and Social Distance, 1873-5	123
6.8	Marriage and Social Distance: Summary Table	124
6.9	Marriage and Social Distance, 1851-3: Specific Trades	125
6.10	Marriage and Social Distance, 1873-5: Specific Trades	126
7.1	Place of Marriage: Social Composition by Confession	141
7.2	Social Composition of Nonconformist Congregations	143
8.1	Membership of the Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society: Occupational Analysis	167
8.2	Occupations of Officers of Selected Co-operative Societies	168
9.1	Ancient Order of Foresters, Woolwich: Occupations of New Members	183
9.2	Occupations of Trustees of 29 Registered Friendly Societies in Kentish London, Principally 1860-75	186
9.3	Rates of Discontinuation and Mean Size of Kentish London Friendly Societies in 1880 Abstract	188
9.4	Ancient Order of Foresters, Woolwich: Occupational Composition of Selected Courts	191

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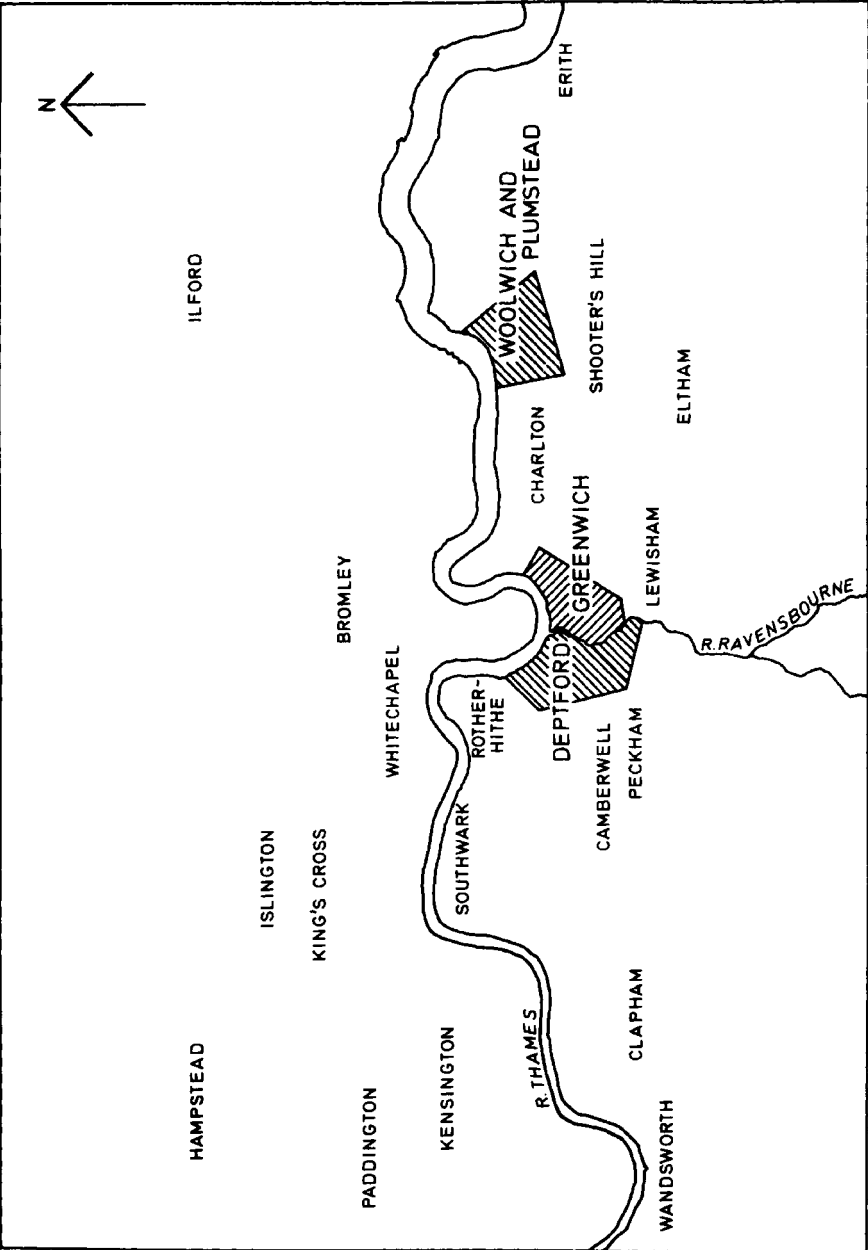
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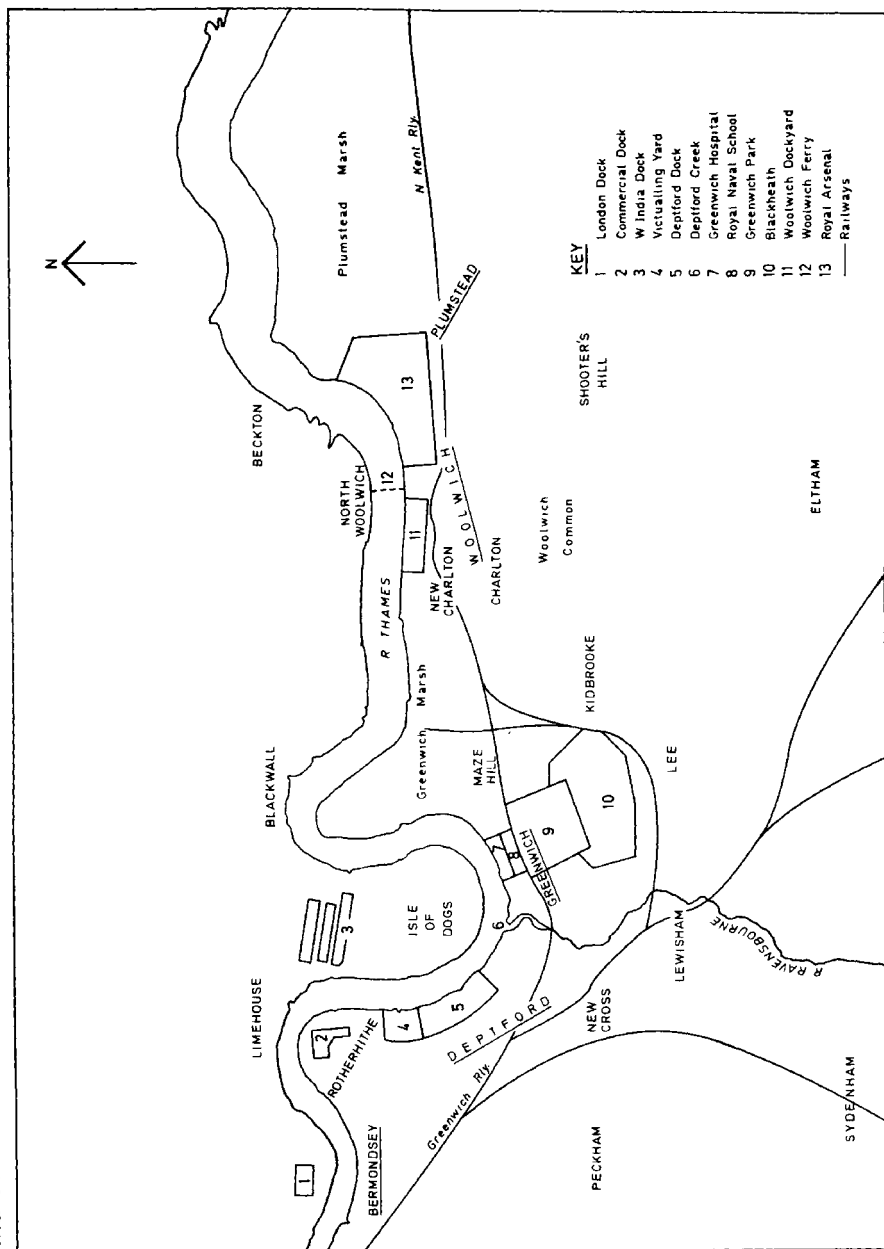
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The jacket illustration shows a view of Messrs Penn and Son's Works, Greenwich and Deptford. (By courtesy of the Greenwich Local History Library.)

The Position of Kentish London within the Metropolis



Mid-Victorian Kentish London



1 INTRODUCTION

This book is an argument about the nature and the origins of an artisan elite and its ideology in the mid-Victorian period. At the level of discrete chapters, many can be read as separate studies of aspects of artisan life in a particular set of mid-Victorian communities. This is especially true of the latter part of the book, where individual artisan-dominated institutions and the nature of working-class politics are examined at length. Friendly societies, where a substantial quantity of pliable data has been uncovered of a kind little explored by historians previously, building societies, co-operatives, political organisation and ideas, religious participation, marriage patterns, and occupational mobility between generations – all these areas are covered in a way which it is hoped will be helpful to historians interested in those specific topics. Yet it must be emphasised here in the introduction that more is intended than that. The book is offered as an argument whose chapters tie closely together as a contribution to the debate on specific historical problems concerning the Victorian period.

These problems coalesce around the place of a labour aristocracy, an elite of the skilled working class, within the political economy of mid-Victorian Britain. At one level the existence of that elite is in dispute, but beyond that problems appear that I consider more complicated and interesting, involving questions about the content of value systems, and their changing functions within specific social situations. They demand an examination of the relationship between those values and the society in which they develop. These are the issues with which this book concerns itself, as it focuses upon the formation of an artisan elite in a set of mid-Victorian communities, its composition, institutions and ideology.

Between the 1850s and the 1880s, the temper of working-class political and social organisations began to change in ways that have appeared striking to both contemporaries and historians. The emergence of an elite of relatively well-paid and secure skilled workers has been seen as a central element in explaining that change. Gillespie's pioneering and still unsurpassed survey¹ of working-class politics in the period lays out the territory most fully, but Royden Harrison's more recent exploration of the theme has presented the emergence of a labour aristocracy as the key setting for his essays on mid-Victorian

working-class politics.² This theme has also been explored in relation to specific institutions, in which a dramatic change of ideals is often presented. Pollard's essay on co-operation is a good example.³ Biographers of leading figures in the labour movement have pursued this apparently clear transformation of mood, though Leventhal's characterisation of George Howell's political and social views as typical of mid-Victorian labour aristocrats is excessive.⁴ Howell became far too isolated from his working-class past as he aspired to a thoroughly bourgeois respectability, and the way in which this differed from the aspirations of most labour aristocrats is a central argument of this study. Other political historians have correctly stressed the importance of the labour aristocracy for an understanding of mid-Victorian politics. F.B. Smith in fact sees its visibility to middle- and upper-class eyes as a prime condition for the making of the Second Reform Bill and, if the evidence of Kentish London is anything to go by, his argument on this point is correct.⁵ The apparent slackening of class tensions and the growing quiescence of working-class organisations have thus been recurring themes in the historiography of this period, and the growing importance of a labour aristocracy has been a central feature of such studies.

Until the last two or three years, however, only Hobsbawm's pioneering article⁶ has sought to offer a concrete examination of that labour aristocracy in Britain. A number of studies have recently appeared, though, that focus more centrally on the labour aristocracy and its ideology than those works referred to above which tended to assume rather than examine it. Tholfsen's study⁷ of the origins of mid-Victorian working-class radicalism locates it within a developing radical tradition that derived from the relationship between eighteenth-century rationalism and the British intellectual and social experience of the intervening years. The broad outlines of his depiction of mid-Victorian artisan ideology are convincing, and represent a substantial alteration of his earlier position,⁸ but his mode of argument and explanation are far less persuasive than his conclusions. The book is fundamentally idealist in its analysis of ideology and consciousness, explaining them in terms of the interplay of ideas. The essential relationship of ideological formation and transmission to economic and social structures and experience is neglected.

Foster's discussion of the labour aristocracy⁹ is anything but idealist, for he presents its creation as the conscious and manipulative work of Oldham's bourgeoisie in order to achieve control of working-class institutions and defuse working-class consciousness. It was not just the creation of the stratum which was the work of the ruling class, but also

the instilling within it of what was in effect bourgeois ideology and values. My disagreements with Foster on these matters will emerge clearly in the argument of this book. His interpretation of the way in which the labour aristocracy came to 'collaborate', the extent and nature of that collaboration, the definition of labour aristocratic ideology, and the way in which a version of bourgeois ideology was diffused more widely, are all areas where this study of Kentish London diverges fundamentally from Foster; not just in its conclusions, but in its mode of argument and presentation of the processes involved. Foster's rigid economic determinism, positing a far too direct relationship between economic and ideological change, and the Leninist structure of his argument, require the simplistic version of the mid-Victorian period that emerges.

I shall argue, on the contrary, that the relative mid-Victorian stability was not simply the outcome of one class's victory over another, but the result of a process of continuing struggle, in which the features of a class society determined the outcome in only the most generalised sense. Whatever the consequences of that class domination, the specific process was in no way the result of one-way imposition. The labour aristocracy achieved its position through struggle and conflict, not capitulation.

Gray's study of the labour aristocracy in Edinburgh¹⁰ implicitly rejects many of Foster's key propositions, and interprets the formulation of a labour aristocracy and the construction of its ideology in a way far more sympathetic to the arguments that will be presented in this book. In particular, his insistence that culture and values do not passively reflect economic structures, and that 'the key question is that of the cultural mediation of different economic experiences',¹¹ stresses the ideological complexities of the mid-Victorian stability and of the process of change that produced it. Gray joins Foster, however, in seeing the formation of a labour aristocracy as the primary explanation for the specific direction of working-class activity and consciousness in Britain between the decline of Chartism and the First World War. The main concern of this study of mid-Victorian Kentish London is not to offer a reinterpretation of the whole of British working-class history during those years, but to study the specific local formation of a labour aristocracy, its institutions and its place within its own communities; to examine closely the sources and nature of its ideology, and to refine our definitions, explanations and understanding of that elite and its place in the social formation. All this must contribute to such an interpretation of the working class in the Victorian period as a whole, but I

would not argue that the emergence of a labour aristocracy is the key component of an explanation of the stabilisation of Victorian society. Stabilisation is itself a complex notion, assuming a relationship to the classic period of industrialisation and the social instabilities that went with it. It refers not to some absolute social calm, but to the way in which the areas of conflict between *all* classes, and their ideological scope, were narrowing during these years.

The relationship between any two groups, especially if that relationship is presented simply as one of domination, cannot adequately explain the way in which the exercise of power shifts during these years from coercion to a deepening dependence on cultural and ideological forces. The development of the whole of the working class, as well as of class relationships outside the working class, must be analysed if the overall stabilisation of the period is to be understood. If the existence of a fragmented working class, with a labour aristocratic elite, is one component of that explanation (and my case in this book clearly points that way), it must remain only that. A satisfactory explanation must draw in economic and cultural developments that cover a much wider area than could be encompassed in the study of an artisan elite.

At the base of all this analysis is the expansion of the British economy during the quarter century from 1848 to 1873. To Ashworth it was a period of 'striking economic growth'. Whatever the problems and the fluctuations, 'it is its astonishingly dynamic quality that is the outstanding economic characteristic of the mid-Victorian period'.¹² This view has been echoed elsewhere. Economic historians may develop it with their own, often major, qualifications, yet for Hobsbawm, Checkland and Hughes the dynamic expansion of the British economy during these years is undisputed.¹³ A recent survey has qualified this picture more precisely. Church points out that although the secular rate of growth did reach its peak in this period, the difference in the rate achieved was relatively modest.¹⁴ Yet one must turn to quality not just quantity of growth. Accelerating demand abroad, free trade, the fruition of cost-reducing developments of earlier decades, and the major expansion of the capital goods industries, produced a broadening and deepening of industrialisation. Whether or not 'the British economy had reached maturity',¹⁵ it had certainly achieved a restructuring and a stabilising of capitalist industrialism to the extent that the new political economy took on a sense of permanence. The pricking of the over-excited investment bubble in 1857 provoked a financial crisis, but one from which the economy emerged reasonably quickly and with astonishingly few distortions.¹⁶

Exports rose at an unprecedented rate in what seems to have been a demand-inspired expansion, for with other European countries beginning their own industrial revolutions, Britain's growth occurred with no adverse movement in the terms of trade. The declared value of exports rose from £53m in 1848 to £122m in 1857, and after faltering through the 1857-8 crisis, doubled again in the next decade.¹⁷ When terms of trade calculations are taken into account, Britain's export gain from trade, which had risen by 130 per cent between 1821-5 and 1846-50, rose by 229 per cent between the latter quinquennium and 1871-5.¹⁸ This was the period when trade's share of national income reached its peak.¹⁹ Growth abroad, free trade and international developments in railways and shipping provided the basis for this success.

The broad pattern is clear, certainly up to the commercial crisis of 1866, from which recovery was much slower than in 1857. There was in 1866 a more pervasive sense of depression and uncertainty than at any time in the preceding two decades. It is those twenty years, most of all, that laid the foundations for the developments that this book explores. The real development, which is of particular importance for this study, was the new significance of the heavy industries. Output of coal, iron and steel rose with the expansion of both workforce and productivity. With them, and with the wider extension of mechanisation and steam-power, came the heavy assembly industries of metal-working, engineering and shipbuilding. The doubling of the number of employees in these last two industries between 1851 and 1881 had two effects that will be developed in the chapters that follow. The first was the substantial increase in numbers and importance of the labour aristocracy, the second was the expansion of just those industries that were dominant in Kentish London. At a national level employment continuity improved, though unemployment levels did not change much between then and the years of the Great Depression, and there was also a transfer of labour from worse to better paid jobs. This was part of the broadening of the industrial base with the extension of capital goods industries that were as yet facing little serious competition from other countries.

Church's 'qualified affirmative' to the notion of a mid-Victorian boom²⁰ derives from his precise probing of trends in prices, growth rates, investment and trade patterns and so on. At the level of restructuring of the British industrial economy, however, he is in no doubt. This was the period when manufacturing, mining and building increased markedly their share of the national product. It represents 'the emergence of an urban industrial economy and society'.²¹ It is that solidifying and

deepening of British industrial capitalism that is the key to the developments studied here. The late nineteenth-century problem of the narrowness of the British industrial base was yet to come. Major diversification of employment of both labour and capital was still under way in the mid-Victorian period, and it underpinned the economic expansion of those decades. In terms of economic expansion, if not of income distribution, and with whatever qualifications as to fluctuations, over-investment, periodicity and the like, the mid-Victorian period represented a major advance for the British economy.

Explanations of the relative quietening of class tension in these years have tended to centre on a fairly straightforward link between relative economic prosperity and the political and social climate. These economic developments, however, were a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for the formation of the labour aristocracy. An analysis that centred exclusively, or even predominantly, upon this economic expansion, or even the economic restructuring that went with it, would dangerously elevate an economic basis for other structural and ideological developments into a sole determining cause. Economic progress alone leads to no particular ideological or behavioural consequences. The effects of the mid-Victorian expansion can only be interpreted within the wider framework of social relationships and ideological forces; these determined the consequences of the economic developments, in specific places, at specific points in time.

That is the focus of this study, which examines a major element in the lessening of social tensions, the emergence of a labour aristocracy taking up a particular stance in relation to the society in which it lived. It is concerned with the formation, ideology and significance of that labour aristocracy in particular mid-Victorian communities. National studies have of necessity been limited to a generalised characterisation of labour aristocracy activities and values, as well as a very generalised explanation of these developments. By examining the three towns on the edge of south-east London, Deptford, Greenwich and Woolwich, I hope to study these themes within a local setting. The intention is not to argue that what happened in Kentish London also occurred elsewhere, that Kentish London was in some ways 'typical' – though the study will shed light on processes elsewhere. People lived and experienced their lives as individuals within families, communities, work-places. All of these were subject to fundamental national forces. Nevertheless, attempts to penetrate the meaning of values and ideologies, and to penetrate them within a social environment, must at some stage seek an analysis that takes account of one irreducible fact – that if we wish

to study and explain human behaviour, we must at some point attend to the level at which people experience their lives.

One aim of the book is to demonstrate the existence of an elite of skilled, relatively well paid, and relatively secure workers who came to dominate so much of the politics and the organised social life of working-class Kentish London. One approach might be to accumulate earnings information, but the absence of wages data beyond the generalised material presented in chapters 4 and 6 renders this impossible. In any case, there is more to a labour aristocracy than high earnings. There is no necessary reason why high wage-earners should form an exclusive social group with aspirations and values distinct from others. If this happened, then it must be demonstrated. In other words, we have to look for the formation of a social stratum, not just an economic elite, for evidence that this elite of skilled men actually took on exclusive values, patterns of behaviour and social aspirations that effectively distinguished it from other sections of society.

The second aim is to examine the ideology of that labour aristocracy, and the nature of the institutions that it created or developed. There was certainly a middle-class view of the labour aristocracy, one that was central to the debate around the Second Reform Bill. At its best it was seen, in the words of F.B. Smith, as 'the living proof that, while the improvident masses might be irredeemably dangerous and depraved, the artisan class was capable of aspiring to middle-class standards of Christian observance, sobriety, thrift, orderliness and cleanliness'.²² Middle-class reformers and liberal politicians pressed upon the working class a particular set of values that we recognise today as peculiarly Victorian – domesticity, industry, thrift and respectability were their catchwords. Attempts to reach and reform the working class seemed, in the post-Chartist period, to be bearing fruit. In many ways this was true, though any easy equation between what reformers thrust upon them and what the labour aristocrats took would be dangerous. Words have meanings, and meanings can change. More important, words take on meanings in social situations, and those situations were different for the various strata of mid-Victorian Britain. For that reason, I have sought to establish and then to interpret the values of labour aristocrats in Kentish London through their own institutions and words in as far as that is possible. This is not due to any purist belief that only working-class sources hold the truth about working-class history,²³ but because ideas and values are illusory things, whose content can change subtly but meaningfully between actor and observer. What did artisans mean by self-help? What were these values? In what ways did the value system

espoused by labour aristocrats in this period constitute a process of 'embourgeoisement', instilling bourgeois ideology and bourgeois aspirations into the elite of working men? These questions will be tackled in the latter part of the book. It will be argued that the differences of meaning and of situation were such as to conflict with the idea of embourgeoisement. Yet, objectively, much of the ideology developed by these workers demonstrated an acceptance of the broad contours of the political economy in which they lived. In consequence, the book implicitly examines the way in which a degree of ideological hegemony was established by the ruling classes of Victorian England. What is fascinating about that process is that so much of it proceeded not through indoctrination, not through capitulation to middle-class ideals, but through the development, out of working-class traditions and the labour aristocrat's social and economic experience, of a set of values which represented historically a new degree of integration into the existing social and economic system. The development of these values, and the examination of their content, will be one aspect of the latter part of the book, which will at the same time look at the membership and functions of those institutions of artisan life which expressed these values.

This study goes further than this, and while establishing artisan ideology and activities, labour aristocracy formation, and differentiation within the working class, it also tries to locate them within a firm explanatory framework. This context is the particular focus of the early chapters. The activities and values of the labour aristocracy in Kentish London derived from the perceived experience that they drew from their own lives and traditions, and from the forces operating upon and around them. It is the reconstruction of the dominant features of that situation which is the continuing context of this whole study. It is based on that explicit argument, that the ideology and behaviour of the skilled elite derive from particular forces, of which the crucial ones were those in their own workplace, their own employment situation, their own community and their own institutions. The economic and social system of industrialising Britain was not seen by the workers within it as a totality, but only as they themselves experienced it. This is especially true with reference to the London working class in the mid-nineteenth century, for we are dealing with people who are still learning to live in an industrial society. Their history, their families, their culture and their ideology are only beginning to embody an assumed understanding of industrialisation and of industrial capitalism. In that situation, especially, local social structure and local situations are crucial to any attempt to understand working-class behaviour. This should not be

read as the elimination of the national economy and national society, merely an assertion that we must examine the way in which national and international developments were transmitted to the working class by local circumstances.

The early chapters are concerned with establishing the basic relevant features of the economic and social structure of the area, while the later chapters examine the main artisan institutions, working-class politics, and the nature of artisan ideology. Chapter 2 describes the area of study, its physical development and relationship to London, while also sketching some of the broad features of the process of residential segregation that took place during the period. The next chapter examines the employment structure and the principal industries in Kentish London. The character of that industry is emphasised, particularly the nature of the workforce it employed and the structure of firms within it. The purpose is to see how far industrial capitalism appeared from the local economic structure to be a permanent phenomenon that effectively shut off economic opportunity for various sections of the working class. From that basis, chapter 4 focuses upon the specific relationships within the workforce, as dictated by the industry and job structure and the trade unionism that went with it, and the extent to which these industries encouraged differentiation and fragmentation within the working class. The other side of this picture is to establish whether the social structure of the community itself was such as to encourage this fragmentation or to discourage it. A situation where the local social structure did not mirror the local economic structure, that is where local status, power and wealth were not seen to derive from the work of the town's working class and its industry, was one which increased the logic of social stratification within the working class. In the same way, a community where wealth and power lay in the hands of big permanent employers might encourage perception not of the group but the class position. This is the subject of chapter 5.

The rest of the book is concerned with some of the results of this situation. A number of working-class institutions are examined, first to see the extent to which they reveal the separation from the rest of the working class of a status-conscious elite of stable skilled workers, with its own life style and aspirations. Secondly, to deepen our understanding of the activities and ideology of that labour aristocracy. Finally, a lengthy examination of working-class political activity is undertaken to see the way in which the specific elitism, and the ideology and traditions which it embodied, can explain the nature of working-class politics in the area. In addition, the absence of a politically conscious and ideo-

logically aggressive middle class distinguishes Kentish London from certain other towns in this period, and has a particular and continuing effect on the style and the ideological position of popular politics in the area. Chapter 6 draws together the threads of the argument in the early chapters, and presents additional analyses of differentiation within the working class on the basis of a variety of material such as a social survey from the 1880s, and an extensive analysis of marriage registers. It discusses the whole concept of a labour aristocracy and its relationship to other social strata. Chapter 7 outlines the main threads of the artisan value system that emerges from subsequent chapters, incorporating additional evidence on aspects such as mechanics' institutes and religious participation.

The unskilled section of the working class, especially numerous in a riverside area such as Kentish London, are not the primary focus of this book, concerned as it is with the labour aristocracy. Yet any analysis of one social stratum and its ideology must of necessity relate it to others. It is thus that unskilled workers appear, in terms of their relationship with skilled workers in the workplace, in marriage and in institutions. The position of unskilled workers was not static. The book notes the improving opportunities enjoyed by them at various points — their growing membership of friendly societies is one example, but chapter 9 demonstrates the way in which this was carefully circumscribed to protect the labour aristocrats' superiority. Their prospects for marriage contacts outside the unskilled stratum also improve. In other words their position was not static, though the interesting changes were in a context that did not effectively damage the elitism of the labour aristocracy. No claims are made, however, to examine fully what unskilled workers were specifically doing in terms of activities, life style, culture, values and so on. That would be a valuable project — we know all too little about the situation of such workers in Victorian society.²⁴ Yet it is a task of great difficulty. Establishing the characteristics, situation and values of the organised and collectively articulate artisans has proved difficult enough. Problems of studying the unskilled must be far greater. No wonder that so many historians have been deterred, at least until unskilled unionisation presented the labour historian with a wealth of accessible sources.

Trade unionism was for skilled workers the basis of so much of their strength that emerges through this study. Two basic aspects of this will be examined, and they will be divided between two chapters. In chapter 4 the size and scope of trade unionism in Kentish London will be examined in the course of looking at differentiation within the work-

place. The role of trade unionism in artisan life will be analysed in chapter 7, its functions in bargaining and craft defence, the way in which its conflict situations could have been incorporated within the broader artisan ideology. It might have been worth presenting a fuller analysis of trade unionism, but source limitations have made it impossible systematically to uncover evidence about the questions that relate to this study. The problems would have been less in a town with its own trade union structure and, more important, its own surviving records. For Kentish London, however, I have been unable to find any local records, any information as to local experience. One is left with the entries in national union reports, which tend to be brief, limited and bureaucratic in content; and newspaper reports, which rarely go beyond an intermittent coverage of strikes and occasional local celebrations. The continuing questions of local trade unionism cannot be answered from the sources available, beyond the degree presented here. The existence of local and metropolitan unions that have left no records at all, and which proliferated in the London area even into the period of amalgamations, only made the sources problem more serious.

With these points out of the way, we shall turn to examine the geographical area that is the focus of attention, mid-Victorian Kentish London.

2 THE GROWTH OF KENTISH LONDON

The segregation of social classes on a large geographical scale was a matter of social concern to many residents of mid- and late-Victorian London, and has been of analytical concern to later historians. This process was not segregation into separate parts of a still cohesive town, for this was evidently proceeding elsewhere, but into what might almost be described as separate towns. London became fragmented in the second half of the nineteenth century by a multiplication of local communities that were increasingly unbalanced in their internal social composition. This phenomenon has come to be well understood, and no attempt can be made to wrestle with the difficulties with which the metropolis confronts the modern historian that does not allocate a central role to the problems of social relationships that it creates. Edward Denison and the Charity Organisation Society each recognised that problem as early as the 1860s, and sought to create either a surrogate or a real 'resident gentry' to fill the void.¹ The danger in giving excessive weight to such analyses, however, is that the characteristics that are most important in studying major areas of London come to be transferred as a generalisation to the whole of the metropolis. The riverside area that stretched from Deptford to Plumstead, an area that was principally composed of the three towns of Deptford, Greenwich and Woolwich, was one exception to the general social developments of London as a whole in this period, and it is likely that areas of south-west London were similarly distinctive.²

The towns of Kentish London were separate and identifiable communities, more self-sufficient in their social relationships and more complete in their social composition than most other parts of London. Only at the very end of our period can we detect the beginnings of a mass exodus of the more prosperous strata of local society, although from the 1850s the towns were very slowly losing some of their 'old and respected inhabitants'.³ This argument of relative completeness is not meant to deny a process of residential segregation within the towns, but to suggest that what was taking place was more an internal reorganisation involving the development of new residential areas within the existing districts, rather than the movement of certain strata away from the towns altogether. Deptford, Greenwich and Woolwich grew as real communities with their own middle class, their own industries, their

own internal social relationships. This 'completeness' of the area had caused confusions in the debate on whether to enfranchise Greenwich in the First Reform Bill. Peel's opposition was on predictable criteria. He could see no peculiarity in its trade, population or commerce especially entitling it to that prestige. Other speakers feared that the voters of the new borough would return 'low' men, while Hodges disagreed, convinced that the large number of respectable citizens, including many wealthy merchants, would make it 'a most unobjectionable constituency'.⁴ The peculiarity of Kentish London was thus already creating confusion. It had a substantial working class, much of it dependent on government works in shipbuilding, munitions and engineering. It had a substantial bourgeoisie and professional elite. Yet what often united them was not an economic relationship based on employment but a social relationship based on community.

There had long been significant settlements at these locations along the south bank of the Thames, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century the only places around London that were larger than villages were Greenwich, Woolwich and Croydon. Deptford and Greenwich, separated by the River Ravensbourne, had long been an important shipbuilding centre, probably from the late Middle Ages.⁵ Historical as well as economic reasons can thus explain why the shipbuilding works were the traditional focal point of Deptford. Local legend held that Alexander the Great worked in the town as a common shipwright, but there is more authenticity in the story that Peter the Great was a ships' carpenter in the Dockyard.⁶ Shipbuilding can also help to explain the growth and permanence of Woolwich as a population centre. With the river deeper there than at Deptford, Woolwich Dockyard was constructed in the sixteenth century.⁷ The expansion of the town was assured with its choice as a location for the national munition works and for permanent army barracks. When Daniel Defoe visited Woolwich in the 1720s he found it 'wholly taken up by, and in a manner rais'd from, the Yards and publick works, erected there for the publick service'.⁸

Fashion rather than industry was the main support of Greenwich until the nineteenth century. To Defoe it was 'the most delightful spot of ground in Great Britain'.⁹ Its great natural beauty, its location on the river and the absence of heavy industry brought it royal patronage from the sixteenth century, and the Palace, Hospital, Park and Observatory assured it visitors and fame. If the town could attract visitors, it could also offer much to wealthy inhabitants, and Defoe felt that the residence there of gentlemen, businessmen and naval gentlemen had resulted in the fact that even in the early eighteenth century 'the Town

of Greenwich begins to outswell its bounds'.¹⁰ Greenwich was thus well established before its industrial development.

Long before our period, then, Deptford, Greenwich and Woolwich had taken on separate existences. They were not part of London, and through much of the Victorian period they resisted absorption. That resistance could be local and self-conscious, and literary sources for such detachment must be treated with the scepticism that local chauvinism must always arouse. There will always be local people eager to claim the distinctiveness of their own patch of a town, especially in the context of Victorian civic consciousness. Nevertheless, the same picture emerges from more reliable evidence on the extent to which the towns of Kentish London were integrated into the London labour market. The degree of daily movement between the area and inner south-east London seems small, and it was not common for workers who had their employment in London itself to choose to live in Deptford or Greenwich, certainly not in Woolwich. Transport deficiencies and the powerful forces for inertia in inner-city living that so resisted decentralisation of working-class residence clearly prevented that. The most straightforward indicator of labour markets is to be found in trade union branch and district organisation,¹¹ and the clear distinctiveness of Woolwich in this respect, and the more ambiguous distinctiveness of Deptford and Greenwich, emerge from examining the extent to which Kentish London branches were within the London districts of their union, the involvement of those branches in London trade disputes, and local wage rates and hours of work. Woolwich branches of major unions (especially in the building trades, a sensitive indicator of this) were generally outside the London district, and in both pay and hours of work the town constantly lagged behind London as a whole. The same type of evidence points to Deptford existing firmly within the orbit of Greenwich in terms of branch organisation and consequently conditions of work. Greenwich's own separation from London was more ambiguous than that of Woolwich, but the branch evidence that does exist, the tendency of wage rates and hours to lag behind those of London, and an only hesitant involvement in London trade movements, suggest that it was very much on the margins of metropolitan influence.¹²

Identifiably separate from the metropolis, Kentish London was also clearly internally divided between the three towns. Deptford was cut off from London by the broad, undeveloped land of the docks, railways and market gardens, and as late as the 1880s Ellen Chase found it to be a self-contained area. 'Deptford', she wrote, 'was uncommonly like a small country community in some ways.'¹³ Frederick Willis's memory

of the turn of the century is in accord with that. 'Despite its trim neighbours,' he claimed, 'Deptford made no attempt to become suburban. It was a town in its own right.'¹⁴ Throughout the period of this study the town had considerable farmland on its highly fertile borders. This was mainly market gardens and nurseries, but there was also some intensive farming, with mixed arable to the south. That farmland, together with the flood plain, Hatcham Park and the slopes of Telegraph Hill, enclosed the town and gave it a tightness that it only slowly lost.¹⁵

The River Ravensbourne separated Deptford from Greenwich, and the penny toll on each crossing of the bridge at Deptford Creek provided a surprisingly strong barrier to the mixing of the two towns. When men crossed the bridge for work their wives would bring lunch to the bridge and pass it across, thus saving twopence on midday tolls.¹⁶ The local press repeatedly affirmed that the toll was a serious obstacle to social intercourse between Deptford and Greenwich,¹⁷ but it was not removed until 1880.

Finally, the Greenwich Marshes and Woolwich Common meant that Woolwich and Plumstead formed a town by themselves. In 1840 the Woolwich vestry petition against the extension of the Metropolitan Police to the town stressed how isolated it was, miles from Greenwich and Blackheath.¹⁸ This was true, for though an occasional chemical or rope works made use of the open land and cheap rents between Greenwich and Woolwich, there was little else there. In the 1840s the area had been little more than meadow and pastureland. Of 600 acres, only 56 were developed, even as market gardens.¹⁹ In Alfred Bennett's youth in the 1860s 'the path along the river to Charlton and Woolwich . . . was . . . a desolate embankment overgrown with wild vegetation'.²⁰ The riparian settlement at Woolwich, founded entirely on isolated chalk bluffs, thus grew alone.

This broad division within the area, and separation from London, were characteristics of which the local press and middle-class political leaders were very conscious. It was not only an identifiable sub-area of London, it was a somewhat isolated sub-area, and one which was itself divided. There is no single explanation of Kentish London's development in relative isolation from the rest of the metropolis. During the mid-Victorian decades the area failed to fill up as a dense and expanding part of London, in contrast to central south London which responded to the pull exerted by Croydon and the south coast. This neglect of development towards Woolwich is all the more unexpected when it is remembered that the town shared with Croydon a uniqueness of size and proximity to the metropolis. Yet it was the Surrey town which saw

London reaching out to meet it, through ribbon development along lateral roads followed by the even more important railway link to Croydon itself and beyond to Brighton and the south coast. These transport developments made the intervening land ripe for the construction of residential housing. The Thameside location of Woolwich, on the other hand, meant that a road or rail link with it opened up no fresh territory but merely passed through the marshes and claylands which had long resisted settlement. In fact, it was not until the twentieth century that the substantial area between Greenwich and Woolwich was filled by the major expansion of Charlton and Kidbrooke. One consequence was the failure of the region to the south of riverside Kentish London to develop extensively.

Communications were partially a response to demand, but studies of the growth of London stress how the supply of transport facilities was itself a spur to the creation of residential areas and peripheral centres.²¹ Coaching roads were of great importance at first, with new estates filling in the gaps between the roads, and this lateral form of development was emphasised by the increasingly important role of trams and omnibuses. The actual direction of the growth south of the Thames is therefore initially explicable in terms of road development. Until the early nineteenth century the Thames had proved a strong barrier to the southward expansion of London beyond the ancient settlement at Southwark. The construction of new bridges at Vauxhall, Waterloo and Southwark changed all this, and were followed by new turnpike roads to Kennington, Newington Butts and Camberwell and new coaching routes to the coast. These stimulated prosperous middle-class property development beyond the older areas. By the 1820s, many short-stage coach routes were running to Clapham and Camberwell.²² For these reasons, both south-west London and the central southern areas formed an increasingly solid block adjoining the central areas north and south of the river, and neither followed the pattern of development that characterised Kentish London. The neglect of Kentish London in transport services may be seen as the major reason for the slow suburban build-up of the area.²³ The great attraction of the principal areas of Kentish London was the river, and although it was undoubtedly put to great use for transport, it was an unreliable means of regular communication. Problems were repeatedly caused by uncertain weather conditions and accidents on the river, not to mention more bizarre hazards such as the whale sighted off Deptford in 1842.²⁴ The Thames came to be limited to holiday traffic, as Greenwich reached its heyday as an excursion centre. Water transport was nevertheless Kentish London's only advan-

tage. In other spheres of communications the area lagged, being poorly provided with omnibus and coach services. Woolwich was especially isolated. In 1870 there was just one service to Deptford and Greenwich from Gracechurch Street, while Lewisham enjoyed only one coach a day.²⁵ Trams served the area well, but developed only at the very end of our period, and they tended to cover short journeys.²⁶

If roads and omnibuses provided the initial impetus, it was the railway that was the major force in extending the metropolis. This was especially true to the south, where railways, with little lucrative freight and long-distance traffic, encouraged residential settlement to a greater degree than their counterparts on the other side of the river. Here again Kentish London was neglected, in spite of the fact that the first passenger railway in the London area was that from London Bridge to Deptford, which was opened in 1836 and extended to Greenwich in 1838.²⁷ If we look to the south of the three riverside towns, the area whose slow development we are trying to explain, we find a relative neglect by railway companies in terms of both services and lines. In 1849 the North Kent Line was opened, running to New Cross, Lewisham, Blackheath and Woolwich. No further major line into Kentish London was constructed during our period. This stands out in comparison with the very extensive network of lines and services that was built in other parts of London, notably in the 1860s.²⁸ Furthermore, in spite of the lack of heavy industry, mineral traffic and provincial cities in its region, the South Eastern Railway Company was slow to develop its passenger traffic,²⁹ and its lines were always expensive ones on which to travel. The *Deptford and Greenwich Chronicle* saw this as a major reason for the lack of demand for better-class housing in Deptford around 1870.³⁰

This case must not be overstated. There certainly was development in the area to the south of Deptford, Greenwich and Woolwich. As the traditional suburbs came to be threatened by the growth of estates on the outskirts of inner London, Blackheath, Lee and Brockley became increasingly popular for suburban residence, but to a lesser extent than other suburban areas. The main areas of growth in Kentish London remained the old riparian industrial zone until the 1860s. Then only Deptford continued to grow and the main increases now occurred in the peripheral areas to the south. By now, however, the development of that area lagged behind other parts of London. The transport deficiency and the consequently slow pace of suburbanisation must have been an important factor in reinforcing the sense of isolation that pervaded Kentish London during the nineteenth century.

This study is thus concerned with a riparian development building up around three existing town nuclei and retaining, during that development, the structure of three separate communities. It is in this context of developing heterogeneous social communities that working-class development during the period must be understood, rather than that of the overwhelmingly working-class districts that characterised inner south London. The details of population growth illustrate this picture. Table 2.1 shows the population for both the main core of Kentish

Table 2.1: Population of the Principal Districts of Kentish London, 1801-81

	1801	1841	1851	1861	1871	1881
Core areas						
Deptford	18,282	25,617	31,970	45,973	60,188	84,653
Greenwich	14,339	29,595	35,028	40,002	40,412	46,580
Woolwich*	9,826	25,875	32,367	41,695	35,557	36,665
Plumstead*	1,166	2,816	8,373	24,502	28,259	33,250
Charlton*	747	2,655	4,818	8,472	7,699	8,764
Peripheral areas						
Lee	376	2,360	3,552	6,162	10,493	14,435
Kidbrooke	58	597	460	804	1,865	2,166
Lewisham	4,007	9,361	10,560	12,213	17,460	26,989
Eltham	1,627	2,186	2,437	2,867	4,064	5,048

*Woolwich, Plumstead and Charlton must be seen basically as one town.

Source: Printed Census Tables.

London and the peripheral areas. The expansion of the three main foci took place as accretions to an existing core. This is not a quirk of the registrar-general's divisions, for the peripheral areas existed as separate communities and developed as such. There were, of course, close relationships in terms of work, labour markets and other forms of contact between the areas, but the main centres appear through the literary and newspaper evidence as separate towns that were experienced as such.³¹ One example was in 1859 when the *Kentish Mercury's* Deptford reporter bid farewell to Mr T. Veness who was leaving the area, and leaving the local community affairs in which he had been prominent. He was going to live in Lee.³²

A brief description of these peripheral areas will give a picture of the geographical and residential context into which the specific growth of the three towns has to be set. In the early nineteenth century the scattering of small settlements from Lee to Eltham was composed of