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A Sociological Study of Worker's Responses
to Change in the Organisation of the Gas
Industry

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Philosophy in the University of Warwick

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the Department of Sociology

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Declaration

I would like to indicate that the following material, contained in my thesis, has been used previously: Harris, D. (1984), CHANGE AND SURVIVAL - Worklives of a group of gas meter readers and collectors(COVENTRY: University of Warwick Working Papers).

List of terms used in the text

- ATTACHMENT - The part of a coin slot meter that takes the coin plate.
- BACKS - Return calls made the following day when the consumer is out on the first call.
- BOX - The tin carrier that holds the coins after insertion in the slot meter.
- BOX FULL - A slot meter coin box that will not hold further coins.
- CREDIT - A meter that is read on a quarterly basis and the consumer is rendered with a bill for the gas burnt.
- CALLS - A list of the slot meter collectors planned daily calls that they keep on a separate sheet of paper.
- CONNER(S) - A colloquial term used to refer to natives of the nearby town of Conton.
- CALL BACK - A term used by credit meter readers when consumers call them back in the street.
- CARDS - Alternative term used by slot meter collectors for a computer call sheet, the term dates back to the days when Gilbert cards were actually used, pre-1968.
- DIGITAL - A meter with a digital read out as opposed to individual clock dials.
- DOTTING - The process of placing pencil dots in numbered boxes on the computer sheet.

- FOUR DIAL - Old design of meter with four small clock dials.
- GILBERT CARD - A stiff card, used prior to 1968, with individual consumers' records listed; the cards were manufactured by the Gilbert Company.
- LOCK/KEYLOCK - The coin box lock on a slot meter.
- PLATE - The detachable part of a slot meter (housed in the attachment) which accepts coins and shows the volume of gas supplied for each coin.
- READERS - Quarterly credit meter readers.
- RUN - The particular sequence of streets where a slot meter collector or meter reader is working.
- SHEETS - Computer generated paper sheets introduced in 1968 upon which are printed details of credit meters to be read or slot meters to be emptied.
- SETTING - The volume of gas supplied through a slot meter for each coin inserted.
- SLOT - A meter operated by coins as opposed to one where a quarterly bill is rendered.
- SLOTTERS - Coin slot meter collectors.
- VIRGIN WORK - Premises where no first call has been made.
- VOIDS - Premises which have no occupants.

Summary

Ethnographers of the workplace have concentrated their attention upon workgroups at the microscopic level - social interaction at the workplace - often involving little discussion of the macroscopic context of the economic and the political. My objective in this study is to give the working lives of the workers studied a context deriving from the situational aspects of the ethnography, and to highlight the dynamic historical processes through which those working lives proceed in the workplace, at a time of significant social change.

Much traditional academic sociology of the workplace, in particular, interactionist studies, have given too little attention to ongoing historical processes, structures of power, and material interests which provide a context for the social activity of individuals and groups at work. This study attempts to go some way towards rectifying the deficiency.

The study is about the worklives of the gas meter readers and slot meter collectors of a large city conurbation in the southern half of England that I call Eastborough. I joined the meter readers on a temporary basis and even before I became a meter reader I kept a diary of daily events, thereafter I recorded my workday experiences, conversations with the public, and with other meter readers and collectors. I became, almost imperceptibly, a 'covert' participant observer, spending several subsequent years sharing the daily work experiences, first of the meter readers, then the slot collectors.

Part one introduces the conceptual framework of the study, linked to the historical and organizational changes outlined in chapter one. The difficulties and problems of studying isolated workers is also raised. Part two consists of a detailed discussion of the daily worklives of the meter readers and collectors. The experiences of the author as a meter reader, and later a collector, is used to demonstrate the ways in which the problems of studying isolated workers were handled.

Part three examines the experiences of work intensification related to the introduction of different working methods and the themes of contestation and acceptance of the changes. Part four continues on the topic of organizational change introduced in part three, but debates it within the context of a substantial shift in political and economic circumstances.

Finally, the conceptual themes raised in part one are evaluated within the framework of the historical and organizational changes, and the impact of these upon the workers degree of individualism or collectivity in confronting them. They are assessed in the light of differences in the labour process which resulted from the introduction of the new working methods discussed in part three.

INTRODUCTION

The subjects of this study are the gas meter readers and slot meter collectors of Eastborough, a large city conurbation in the southern half of England. It has a long history stretching back to the middle ages, with periods of major industrial growth both in the inter-war years and during the immediate post war period.

Eastborough has a more cosmopolitan population than most English districts of similar size, large migrations took place during the periods of industrial expansion in the twentieth century. Like most English towns and cities it contains a wide range of social classes, but with a higher proportion of semi-skilled and skilled industrial workers. The streets, which are the daily workplace of the meter readers and collectors, consist of a large number of privately owned terraced houses and a few large post-war council estates, some of which have become rather run down in the last decade or so; additionally, there are a considerable number of inner city and suburban Victorian dwellings. By contrast a few tree lined streets in the older part of town contain very large houses in secluded grounds, mainly built by industrialists and merchants at the turn of the century.

The depot, from which the meter readers and collectors operate, was established, in common with many others around the country, as a privately owned gasworks and opened in 1821. Prior to the installation of domestic gas meters, from 1850 onwards, gas was charged for by the number of gas

jets used to light a dwelling and which could only be burned between specified hours. In these early days 'Gas Inspectors' would make spot checks to see if gas was being burned outside the specified hours¹. Meter readers were employed following the introduction of the domestic gas meter after 1850, they have continued to walk the streets of Eastborough over the following 130 years.

Slot meter collectors did not make an appearance on the streets until almost 40 years later, from 1888 onwards. The introduction of the slot coin meter followed extension of gas supplies into the homes of working people at the turn of the century, there followed a major expansion of the slot meter from 1928 to 1940². With a decline in gas consumption after 1940, the slot meter outnumbered credit gas meters until the discovery of North Sea gas in the early 1960s. From 1965 onwards, the number of credit meters grew rapidly with the increase in gas consumers. At the time of writing slot gas meters represent barely 5% of the total meters installed whereas, in the mid-1960s, they had exceeded 50%.

The job and its context

The work of gas meter readers and slot meter collectors lies 'uncomfortably' between that of a manual worker on the one hand, and a clerical worker on the other. It therefore does not fall neatly into the sociologist's categories of white or blue collar work, see Westergaard and Resler (1975). This rather ambiguous status is reflected not only in their informal workplace relationships with the manual grades of gas fitter or alternatively office clerks, both of whom they

encounter at the depot - this 'uncertain' position is also enshrined in the history of their status within the bureaucratic structure of the industry, especially following nationalisation.

Until the early 1960s, when a new headquarters opened at Valemere, a considerable distance from the Eastborough depot where they worked, they had manual worker status and were paid weekly like the others. Contact with the other manual grades was closer then because a gas meter workshop existed at the Eastborough gasworks. This meant closer contact with the fitters who worked in the section. Following the opening of the new Valemere headquarters staff status was, as slotter Jack Whitehead put it: 'forced on us', from then everyone was paid monthly and shortly afterwards the meter repair shop was moved to Conton, some 20 miles away, 'symbolically' severing the remaining link with the manuals. Despite their new status, the meter readers and slotters have never been assimilated into the 'office culture' during the twenty years that followed even though they were transferred to the clerical grade of their union.

Though the past decade has seen a number of studies of small work groups³, many in the service sector or featuring women, very few have really close parallels with meter readers and collectors, however, there are at least some similarities with each of the groups studied. Though there is little published material available⁴, perhaps postmen and postwomen are the closest group of workers to the meter readers, both in terms of their daily experience of working the streets and of the type of organisation for which they

work. In addition to the similarity with postmen and women, the work of slot meter collectors has similarities with that of milkmen in their relationship with the public, see Bigus (1972) and Harris (1985), and also, loosely, with bus conductors⁵ in the ways they handle cash.

A central feature of meter reading in particular, is the isolated nature (in terms of colleagues) of the work. Other important aspects include 'flexibility' in the length of the working week and the constant changes in working environment, spent partly in the open street, and partly in visiting an enormous variety of domestic dwellings and commercial premises. In his study of traffic wardens, Richman (1983, pp. 13-15) concentrates his attention upon what he calls 'the sociology of the street' in which he includes, in addition to traffic wardens, postmen, sweepers, refuse collectors, newspaper sellers and window cleaners. All of the groups he mentions appear to participate in what is described as a 'sociology of the street', they know and speak to each other and collectively they sometimes have a perspective of 'the street', which arises from that culture. Though meter readers could loosely be included in that 'culture', a vital difference is that additionally, they have links with the culture of the people who actually live in the street having personal contact with them through entering the 'sanctum' of the home when reading or emptying meters so, unlike most of the other street workers, they are often privy to another, and sometimes very different perspective of the street.

Having given a brief outline of the nature of the relationship of meter readers and collectors to the hierarchy of the organisation in which they work, their relationship to other groups of workers at the local depot from which they work, and the nature of their job, similarities with other workers who work outdoors in isolation from colleagues, I would now like to briefly touch upon the structural context in which they operate.

In this study of meter readers and collectors, the importance of the structural context became evident early on. There was the historical development where control over the meter reading function of the local gas works had moved away to a distant site and came under the control of a corporate management and the importance of this change in explaining the different relationship to gas consumers, of meter readers on the one hand, and slot collectors on the other. There was also the economic context of the post-war 'long boom', Mandel (1980), Glyn and Harrison (1980, pp. 7-9), which goes some way to explaining how women came to be recruited.

The coming of women has to be viewed in the context of 'tight' local labour markets of the 1960s, and why this changed the work-place priorities of the meter readers, in particular 'accumulated time' at the end of the day or week and the ways in which that time was used. Lastly, there is the political context, specifically, the indirect demand by Whitehall for increasing intensification of labour to create extra income for the treasury in the form of the 'gas levy'. The importance of this covert drive for higher productivity

is amply demonstrated by the introduction of one call meter reading and attempts to develop ways of reading meters remotely.

The ethnography

The gas meter readers and slot collectors who work at a depot I call Eastborough are the subjects of this ethnography. It is based upon my work with them as a full participant observer, first with the meter readers and later with the slot meter collectors covering a total period of just over five years, from 1978 to 1984. The years covered by the study proved to be a period of fundamental and far-reaching change in which the author was fully involved. My own recruitment, first as a temporary meter reader, was, as I was to learn later, part of a scheme to eventually introduce radically new working methods involving a substantial reduction in permanent jobs. The offer of a job as a meter reader at the time was doubly fortunate for me since it provided a means of subsistence in an increasingly difficult jobs market, but also fulfilled an important and long held wish to experience a working class job at first hand.

No neat decision to become a participant observer was taken. Obviously I was a 'participant' from the start, and certainly an 'observer' even before I began work as a meter reader, keeping a diary of events during the weeks preceding my involvement. Extensive notes I kept in a journal detailing everyday events, conversations, and the activities of the meter readers and later the slot meter collectors, meant

that an ethnographic account of the workgroup looked the most appropriate. The point I want to stress here is the importance of the nature of my own involvement, and the sequence of events which led up to it, for the subsequent development of the study, an aspect which is not always given the consideration it merits.

The meter readers and collectors are, in the formal sense, part of an organisation and a specifically defined work group - this contrasts with street gangs,(Whyte 1955) drug cultures, (Becker 1953) or football supporters,(Harre' 1972) the chief characteristic of these latter examples being their loose definition and organisation. The sometimes rigid division between organisational and loosely defined groups in research settings can be overdrawn. In some situations, even within formally well defined organisations, certain groups of workers are occasionally more loosely knit. Such occupations are those where individual workers, or rather small groups, work semi-independently from other colleagues, or from the organisation; examples of these being commercial travellers, road sweepers, postmen, window cleaners, traffic wardens, and to a certain extent, teachers. The meter readers and collectors of this study are also examples of such groups. The implications for a participant observer, working among a more loosely organised group, are that the situation places fewer constraints on the research activity. This contrasts with more structured settings such as production lines, hospitals, or prisons where the research activity constantly has to be negotiated and re-negotiated on a more formal basis often with a wide variety of 'gatekeepers' and 'officials'.

Some of the early post-war ethnographies came under increasing criticism, particularly in the late 1960s, as being 'romanticised accounts', particularly of the lives of 'deviants' or 'underdogs' in their 'natural' surroundings. Alvin Gouldner (1968), criticised Howard Becker (1963 and 1964) on this point, claiming that his particular approach neglects the ways in which deviance is: 'generated by the master institutions of society', that the deviant is seen as a 'passive victim' and that they fail to acknowledge deviance as opposition. However, a rather different approach, with its roots in the Manchester shop floor ethnographies of the late 1950s, has seen a more recent revival. This approach concentrates less on deviance but instead, upon the more 'commonplace' work situations and those occupations with which most people have at least some passing acquaintance. My own study falls broadly within this tradition and also attempts to broaden a hitherto somewhat neglected area of the ethnographic study of the sociology of work.

As well as examining in detail the workplace culture of the Eastborough meter readers and slot collectors, I have also directed attention toward wider issues of job control, work effort and payment, and to the more controversial one of 'work orientations'. In addition, the importance of macroscopic issues became increasingly apparent as political constraints and economic crisis began to impinge upon the running of the industry. These aspects could be related back, both directly and indirectly, to the microscopic context of the workplace. A number of more recent studies, those of Pollert (1981), Willis (1977), Nichols and Beynon

(1977), have brought out the relevance of the macroscopic and historical context of their studies and have linked them to issues at the microscopic level of the factory floor or school classroom. My own study attempts at least to address some of these important questions.

Organisation of the chapters

The substantive study divides up into four major areas. The first part, chapters two and three, introduce the conceptual framework that arose from the reflexivity between the author and the workers. Chapter three details the research methods, from my entry into the field, to the conclusion of fieldwork in 1984. This chapter also assesses the methodological problems encountered, including the difficulty of doing participant observation among those who work alone, and that of eliciting further information from them.

Part two, chapters four and five, discuss in detail the daily worklives of the meter readers and slot collectors out on the streets of Eastborough. In chapter four the working day is examined in detail and this is based partly upon my own experiences and partly upon those related to me in conversations with the other meter readers. Chapter five covers the time I spent working with the slot collectors; their personal biographies are used to throw light upon the motivations of a group of workers whose work situation is more interdependent than is the case with the readers.

Parts three and four, chapters six to nine, examine important changes, both historical and structural (from the

early 1960s to the mid-1980s) which began to have a marked impact from the mid-1970s to the conclusion of fieldwork in 1984. Chapter six discusses the impact of the historical changes and their subsequent effects on the workforce of work intensification during the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter seven highlights the contestation and acceptance of change whilst focusing upon the period over which a new 'one call' meter reading system was introduced.

Chapter eight takes up the theme of work intensification introduced in chapter six, but also includes the important changes in the political context which coincided with the alteration in working methods featured in chapter seven. The contestation and acceptance of change during the 1970s, which was the subject of earlier discussion, are brought up to date in chapter nine with references to the ways that they were confronted from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s. Present struggles and the possibilities for the future are debated towards the end of chapter nine.

In chapter one I set the study in a historical context of organisational and management changes during the period 1965 to 1975, and which were to have a major influence upon the specific developments that took place during the period of the study. The final chapter pulls together the historical themes and theoretical concepts and assesses them in the light of changes in the labour process, brought about by the new working methods introduced during the time covered by the study. Finally, I offer some thoughts on the scope for future studies of areas of work which, hitherto, have been under researched.

Footnotes. Introduction

1. These 'Gas Inspectors' became the subject of a famous satirical music hall song of the time, called 'I am the Gas Inspector'.
2. Source: 'Report on the Gas Industry in Great Britain', Political & Economic Planning, London, 1939, p. 46.
3. Traffic Wardens, Richman (1983), Waiters, Mars and Nichod (1984), Women on production lines, Cavendish (1982), Policemen, Van Maanen (1981), Cocktail Waitresses, Spradly and Mann (1975), Bakers, Ditton (1977), Milkmen, Bigus (1982) and Harris (1985).
4. A notable exception is the Diary of Edward Harvey (1858-61), edited by Richard Storey, published by University of Warwick, 1982, and called 'A Postman's Round'.
5. At least two had previously had experience as bus conductors.

Chapter 1.

The Historical Context

This ethnographic study of gas meter readers and slot meter collectors examines the links which exist between historical developments both within the gas industry and outside at the structural level, and how they relate to the workplace experience of these particular workers. Those links are particularly strong in the gas industry as Hobsbawm (1964, pp. 158-79) has shown; the industry is capital intensive and labour is, to a greater extent than in many other industries, closely allied to the technology.

Firstly, I would like to say something about the wider structural changes that affected the way in which the industry was run and organised. Though these broader structural changes may at first sight appear rather remote from the subsequent events that occurred at the local Eastborough depot where we worked, I hope to demonstrate their interdependence. Work experiences and organisation at the workplace cannot, as Rose (1975, pp.241-42) reminds us, be isolated from 'the socio-economic order as a whole'.

Historical and structural changes

Arguably, one of the most significant changes of the post-war period for the gas industry was the enactment of the clean air legislation in 1956. The most noticeable effect was a sharp decline of the open coal fire traditional to the British living room, between 1958 and 1964, and its substitution, chiefly by the gas fire. During the period from 1956 to 1965

coal production fell by over 30m tons whilst gas production increased by 900m therms (Williams, 1981, pp. 290-93).

The first effect of the large increase in domestic gas consumption was to bring about a steep decline in the number of slot meters in use during the period 1960 to 1967. The domestic slot meter simply could not hold the large increase in the volume of small coins that had been used hitherto: as a result the credit meter began to be substituted in large numbers. In addition to this effect, the increase in new domestic gas consumers further increased the proportion of credit meters in use since most new consumers chose these in preference to slot meters.

Changes in the pattern of gas consumption, which began during the late 1950s, brought a considerable increase in the demand for gas meter readers during the early 1960s and a gradual decline in that for slot meter collectors. During this time it was mainly women who were recruited as meter readers. It became difficult to attract men to the work due to the high demand for labour from local factories during the peak years of the 'post-war long boom' (Gamble 1985, pp.4-10). The few women who had done slot meter collecting opted for full time meter reading instead, even though it meant a lower pay grade. The average age of the existing male slot meter collectors was quite high, so a number retired during the 1960s as the slot meter began its long decline.

It was only around five years after the considerable changes brought about by the Clean Air Act that the next dramatic upheaval occurred, the discovery of natural gas

under the North Sea. Although the major change in the pattern of domestic consumption occurred as a result of the 1956 Clean Air Act, natural gas contributed to the continued expansion of gas as a household fuel, especially with the spread of domestic central heating after 1970. Natural gas was first introduced in 1965 but the peak years for conversion were between 1969 and 1974. This was the very time when the number of credit meters in use expanded most rapidly.

The conversion to natural gas was an enormous operation involving almost all those employed in the industry, not least the meter readers and collectors. Their chief task was to read and empty meters just prior to the introduction of natural gas into the local mains. This often entailed moving considerable distances around the region to where they were needed.

During the mid-1960s many of the regional gas boards began to move their accounting and administration into large single sites rather than at a diversity of offices, often associated in the past with local town gasworks. This regional focus to administration was given impetus following the McKinsey report in 1967 (Williams 1981, pp. 233-36), and the setting up of regional management service units thereafter. Local autonomy was further undermined with the installation of powerful computers in new regional offices to handle most of the accounting and administrative work and, during the early 1970s, the large scale closure of local town gasworks as they became redundant following the arrival of natural gas. The relocation of administration and management away from local districts and the expansion of job evaluation, work study,

and computer controlled accounting, represented a major structural shift in the way the industry was organised and run.

With the arrival of North Sea gas the government felt that 'a transfer of power to the centre' (Williams 1981, p. 236) was called for. Thus a public corporation was formed called the British Gas Corporation, which had a chairman who was answerable to the Minister of Power. The effects of the changes, from 1965 to 1975, were considerable at the Eastborough depot where I later worked. At the same time as the transfer of local records to a new headquarters at Valemere, and the conversion to North Sea gas, the Eastborough site was also being developed. This re-development entailed the demolition of the clubhouse at the depot and the destruction of the bowling green, developments that were to have a considerable effect, not only on workplace organisation, but also on social relations at the depot.

After 1975, with gradual completion of the conversion to natural gas, there developed a 'quieter' less hectic spell. With the new organisational structure in place and the decline of gas manufacture, the changed patterns of working gradually became the new normality. With the formation of the industry into a public corporation, and the changes in organisation following an investigation by the American management consultants McKinsey and Company, the industry began to be run on more corporate and commercial lines not dissimilar to that in many large private firms. Management became tighter and the drive for productivity

greater. There now existed a structure at local level - the Regional Management Service Units, and the associated Productivity Services Departments - to implement and monitor policy laid down by higher management on raising productivity.

The important organisational developments and changes that occurred during the late 1960s, and especially those during the 1970s following the establishment of corporate status in 1973, gradually made their impact upon the East-borough depot. There was the increasing use of time and method study of the meter readers and collectors, which was something of a novelty for them at first. Later, there was the decision to introduce a 'one call' meter reading system where no back call was made if the occupant was out on the first call. Associated with this was the new productivity bonus scheme, plus a pay re-grade in exchange for fewer jobs. Plans to introduce this new scheme were initiated as early as 1977 and proved to be the forerunner of more extensive changes involving reduced reading frequencies, token slot meters and the very real possibility of remote meter reading.

During 1979 a marked change of political philosophy took place when a new right wing Conservative government took office under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher. It became widely acknowledged that such a political change represented a radical break with what had become known as 'consensus politics' (Gamble 1986, pp. 24-32), in which the two major parties, though essentially different in outlook, were nevertheless in accord on some basic aspects of policy, for example the pursuit of relatively full employment and public

ownership of a narrow range of major utilities and services. The chief impact of the new government's policy for the gas industry was its decision to privatise.

During the early years of the Conservative administration, relationships between the corporation's chairman Sir Denis Rooke, the energy minister and the treasury, became quite strained, mainly due to Rooke's insistence that the corporation should not be broken up if privatisation was to be on the agenda. As a preliminary to privatisation and under the initiative of the government, a firm of city consultants, Deloitte, Haskins and Sells, were commissioned to undertake an efficiency study of the corporation's operations. This was just sixteen years after the first study, by McKinsey and Co, from which much of the tighter management regime had developed.

The latest study recognised that British Gas was already involved in 'a significant efficiency drive', which had begun in the 1970s following McKinsey. Of importance to metering was the recommendation of a continuation and intensification of the efficiency bonus schemes being implemented, or of those under consideration. The effect was to give impetus and encouragement to management to further intensify labour by extending already existing schemes.

This then was the overall structural context in which the events discussed in the ethnography took place. I now want to turn to the changes and developments which occurred at the Eastborough depot where I worked from 1978 to 1984.

Developments at the workplace

As was later to become evident, the engagement of temporary meter readers from 1978, to cover for readers who left or were on holiday, was the first stage in running down the number of permanent meter readers by creating a pool of temporaries who could readily be disposed of when a new 'one call' meter reading system was introduced in 1981.

After I had been working as a temporary for just over twelve months a general meeting was called to introduce plans for a new one call meter reading system. The new system involved the dropping of a second call when the consumer was out at the first. This measure reduced the number of jobs by about 30%, by what was described as 'natural wastage'. In practice the main burden was borne by the temps who were later dispensed with at short notice without the need for statutory redundancy compensation. The one call meter reading system was to be only the first stage in a series of future changes in work organisation; plans for further changes however, were left very vaguely worded in a document submitted to workers and unions at the outset of negotiations.

The introduction of the new one call system corresponded with the retirement of the long serving Metering Controller and his deputy who were based at the distant Valemere headquarters. A new controller, Mark Weatherall, was appointed, thus ending a long tradition of controllers rising through the ranks by being the first 'outsider' appointed to the job. In fact, it was to prove significant that Weatherall had come from the Productivity Services Department (work study) where he had been a junior manager.

A further significant event was the retirement of the local Eastborough supervisor, Bill Tatam, and his succession by a colleague of Weatherall's from the Productivity Service Department, Martin Howe, once again an unprecedented break with the tradition of coming up through the ranks. By late 1982 a more 'hard line' management style was becoming apparent throughout the industry and followed the radical change in political philosophy which occurred during 1979 and the attitude of the new government towards the gas industry.

After a six months trial period, the new one call meter reading system became permanent after an enforced secret ballot vote in February 1982. Just over two years later, in April 1984, the possibility of reduced meter reading frequencies was first mooted by management. Possibly due to the great length of time it had taken management to get the one call system introduced (resulting from strong resistance by the workforce), they attempted to enforce reduced frequencies by dictat accompanied by threats, during June 1984. This action led to a momentous first ever strike by the meter readers and collectors throughout the region during July 1984.

It is these events, and the structural and historical context in which they took place, and the links between the two which are the subject of the ethnography.

PART ONE

CONCEPTS AND METHOD

Chapter 2.

Analytical Concepts

My arrival at the Eastborough depot corresponded with the beginnings of a period of important changes which were to have an increasing impact as the months and years passed and, like the others, I too became caught up in the changes and developing struggle which occurred at the very end of my fieldwork, culminating in a major strike. Though the themes that emerged from my fieldwork were not directly linked with these important struggles during the latter period in the field they were symptoms of issues in the everyday work-lives of the meter readers, especially those concerning the 'time/effort bargain' which were closely tied to the important question of job control, of which autonomy, distance from supervision, regulation of output and accumulated free time were subsidiary but contingent issues. I was fortunate in that many of these issues came into sharp focus as a result of the upheavals that we all lived through during my time as a participant observer. Yet despite the period of instability and change we went through, the lasting impression is one of resistance (especially in the latter months) and a creative attempt by the workers to 'open up space' in which, as far as possible, they could maximise their control over the working day and carry on much as before, despite an increasing 'invasion' by management - it was the culmination of this 'resistance' coming into confrontation with an increasingly confident management that led to a walk-out during the summer of 1984.

An analysis of the field data suggests four broad areas of discussion in the context of this study. First, orientations to work: the issues here are tied up with the individual's personal circumstances, especially the 'family role' of women, the idea of working on your own, distancing yourself from supervision, and the significance of instrumentalism. We also perhaps need to ask whether or not the concept of 'orientations to work' is a useful or appropriate one. Secondly, work culture: here relationships with supervision and one's colleagues have to be examined, the isolated nature of the work and its effects upon work culture, and the significance here of the structural context. Thirdly we need to look at the central issue of job control, the various recent factors that have affected it, and the differences in its significance for both the women and the men. Lastly bonus and wages will be discussed: this is especially significant in the context of recent developments such as the introduction of the new one call meter reading system which entailed a salary re-grade and the bonus element becoming a greater proportion of total income and more closely related to effort. This division into four topics is not meant to be rigid since each of the four inter-relate and I hope their interdependence will become clear as we proceed despite their demarcation for the purposes of detailed analysis. Following the discussion below, I hope to show how the four topics relate to the broader areas of historical change in the industry and to changes which occurred at the workplace.

1. Orientations to work

The concept of 'orientations to work' among workers has been widely debated by sociologists of industry over the past twenty years though it has become increasingly controversial over recent years, especially so since the publication of a study consisting of a variety of manual workers in the Peterborough area, Blackburn and Mann (1979). Perhaps the most important study to focus attention upon the concept was that of Goldthorpe and Lockwood (1968), who attempted to show that the personal biographies and the structural location of particular groups of workers in the motor and associated industries of Luton were important in fostering what they called an 'instrumental orientation' to work. Many of the workers they studied had loosened or severed their connections with traditional working class communities, due to their geographical mobility in search of work, mostly by migrating from north to south.

The pattern of migration south became established during the 1930s (cf. Branson and Heinemann 1971), gaining further impetus in the post-war years from 1945-1965, as the decline of the traditional heavy industries of the north and of central Scotland continued and the newer light engineering and motor industries expanded in the Midlands and Southeast. These post-war changes in migration and industrial structure, which Goldthorpe and Lockwood found were significant for Luton, were similarly a characteristic of the Eastborough area where the meter readers and slot collectors lived and worked. Only 32% of the meter readers and slot collectors were born locally,

the remainder originated from the North of England, Ireland and Scotland and had mostly migrated south with their husbands since 1950.

Though the Eastborough area has been a centre of manufacturing for over a century, its industries were not the traditional heavy industries of the North; also, it had seen a considerable expansion of the newer industries since 1945. In view of this background Eastborough, like Luton, has few 'traditional' working class communities¹ but instead consists of a mixture of public and private housing estates with a large proportion of more isolated migrant families similar to those described by Goldthorpe and Lockwood (1968, p.3) at Luton.

Having shown that the historical and economic context of the lives of the meter readers bear some resemblances to those of the workers in Goldthorpe and Lockwood's study, it is now necessary to attempt to see whether, and in what ways, that might affect their 'orientations to work'. They suggest (p.77) that the orientations to work of the 'affluent workers' in their study are rooted in the experiences of the 'privatised nuclear family', and in their class, social, and family backgrounds, rather than in the workplace. This suggestion was by no means new or unique, indeed Cunnison (1966) in her study of Manchester garment factory workers, had indicated the importance of factors outside the workgroup and even the factory itself, though the subjects of her ethnography were closer to the 'traditional working class' of the Bott study (1957), rather than the affluent workers of Luton.

Cunnison found a less marked division between home and work life and posited a series of overlapping roles, some of which shared common values with the community of origin. In addition to the concept of a variety of roles, Daniel (1973) suggests that workers' orientations also have a contextual dimension in which 'orientations' change; different priorities applying to different contexts. In view of the findings of Cunnison and Daniel, it would appear that Goldthorpe and Lockwood give inadequate consideration to the possibility of a wider variety of orientations based upon the individual employees' definition of their work and personal situation; the notion that work can have a variety of meanings for individual workers.

It is only the more recent studies, notably Spradley and Mann (1975), Pollert (1981) and Cavendish (1982), that concentrate upon the position of women workers. The orientations of women to work, their position in the 'nuclear family', the financial contribution they make (cf. Gail 1968), and just as important, the non-financial, appear to have received scant consideration prior to these more recent studies. The meter readers at Eastborough were comprised of a majority of women (over 80%) during the time I worked at the depot, this proportion tending to fall as mass-unemployment became a feature of the 1980s and men were increasingly employed to take the place of those who retired or died. In view of the predominance of women - which has occurred as the slot meter declined, and under the combined influence of low pay and tight labour markets in the area during the 1960s - it is important to attempt to uncover the different orientations,

if any, that women, and these women in particular, might have to work by comparison with those of the men.

In terms of understanding the orientations of women to work, we perhaps need to look at the contribution women make to their family, other than the purely financial ones. Important debates on the role of women workers are those of Willis (1977, pp.147-55), Pollert (1981, pp.117-20) and Cavendish (1982, pp.70-5). Of particular relevance to this study are the ways in which Pollert (1981) examines the notion of women's responsibilities at home and the importance of 'time' to women, the biological fact of being a woman, and how the hassle of having time off usually results in being 'repaid' only by more time at home for housework. A comment by Steven (chargehand, p.117), "if they've got homes to see to, they should find a job that fits in with both", perhaps better than most, encapsulates why female meter readers endure the hard daily slog of walking the streets in all weathers, and why they value working on their own at a distance from the supervisor. The added flexibility it gives them means that they can 'fit in' a little extra domestic work for the family. By contrast the activities that the small minority of men fit in are watching the races on T.V., putting in some badminton practice, or simply sitting with your feet up and a cup of tea.

As I suggested at the beginning, support for the concept of orientations to work is both controversial and qualified, especially so in more recent work on the subject. For example, Blackburn and Mann (1979, p.281) found that 'support for the existence of orientations of any sort was not impressive',

only just over 50% of their sample had a 'persistent preference' of reasons for liking or disliking a job (p.137). Hill (1981, p.120) suggests that although workers' 'dominant' orientation to work may be instrumental, other aspects of work could be important too. He gives as examples work content or the quality of social relations at work and, like Daniel (1973), Hill emphasises the importance of changing contexts as contributing to variations, and even to changes in orientation. Recent contributions to the debate, especially those of Pollert (1981) and Cavendish (1982) have shown how the domestic demands upon women in patriarchal society affect their attitudes and priorities at work. I have also suggested how the domestic role of women, among the other structural and economic considerations, may have an important effect upon their attitudes or orientations to work of the predominantly female meter readers, and the very different outcome where the minority of men are concerned.

2. Work culture

When discussing the advantages or positive aspects of both the meter readers and slot collectors jobs, the aspect that is most frequently mentioned, and usually mentioned first by both men and women, is the 'freedom' of working by yourself; 'without the boss's breathing down your neck' is the way it is most often put. In some ways the job involves an ambivalent existence, on the one hand a continuing if fleeting relationship with large numbers of the public each day of the working week usually in their own homes, and a

slightly less fleeting relationship with your colleagues and the boss, usually for less than half an hour at the end of the week in the depot office. Working the streets as a meter reader or slot collector brings with it an extremely wide range of contact with the public, working perhaps one week in a run down and vandalised inner city estate, having daily contact with deprived and often unemployed people living in very difficult conditions, and perhaps the next week tramping long drives leading to secluded mansions of suburban wealthy and being shown to the meter in a wine cellar by a housekeeper or general factotum. The impression one gets is encapsulated by Howard Newby in his 'Reflections on the Study of Suffolk Farm Workers' (1977), when he says:

I would be less than human if I were not occasionally touched by an unforgivable voyeurism. Some farmhouses were positively palatial - including a sprinkling of national monuments and stately homes - and a lifestyle I had never before seen, let alone experienced, was opened up to me. On the other hand, I observed scenes of almost Dickensian squalor, not the less so for being in a rural location, which were equally alien to my own experience. Travelling from one end of the British class structure to the other in the space of a few hundred yards was certainly unnerving, (p.119).

The meter reader is not only faced with the experience of working in a wide range of very diverse districts in and around Eastborough, but similarly, though mostly fleeting, with an equally wide range of its inhabitants. In his study of taxi drivers, Davies (1959) shows similarities with some of the fleeting contacts of the meter readers day. He says:

The fleeting nature of the cabdriver's contact with the passenger at the same time also makes for his being approached as someone to whom intimacies can be revealed and opinions forthrightly expressed with little fear of rebuttal, retaliation, or disagreement, (p.160).

The relationship of the slot meter collector with his public is rather different from that which the meter reader experiences, the chief differences being that it is less fleeting and has the added dimension of a cash relationship. For the slot meter collector the establishment of good relationships with the consumer is high on the agenda of priorities. The complexity of the method of metering gas arising from the old fashioned mechanical design of the slot meter, combined with their higher density in 'deprived areas' and the homes of the elderly, could readily lead to disputes over what is being charged for the supply or the amount of the refund due. In addition to avoiding arguments arising from mystification, there is the possibility of a tip from the combination of a 'good' refund and a rewarding relationship between collector and consumer.

As Bigus (1972) points out in his study of milkmen, the activity of 'cultivating' his customers was of central importance to the milkmen he studied to enable them to maximise their sales. The ways in which the slot meter collector 'cultivates' is by having a clear understanding of the workings of slot meters or at least to be able to give plausible answers to consumers' questions on the subject. A further crucial point is that the refund given should as nearly as possible correspond to 'expectations', otherwise

arguments will arise and the possibility of a tip will be reduced. Meter setting is central to the level of refund given, therefore periodic struggles with supervision occur over the implementation of re-setting instructions received from the Valemere headquarters. There are parallels here with policemen out on the streets. Manning (1977) describes this as resulting from the contradictory nature of the policeman's role in 'applying general rules to particular situations'. This is the essence of the slot meter collector's dilemma over re-setting meters, the slotter will know from long-term knowledge of particular families who live on the frontier of poverty at what particular setting they are most likely to break a meter open. Subtleties such as these are meaningless to headquarters computer or its staff.

The meter reader's contact with colleagues at work is minimal, limited at most to between ten and forty minutes at the end of the week when they call in at the depot to hand in their weekly report sheet and collect a new consignment of work for the following week. As a meter reader, I never encountered a colleague out on the streets - the chief reason for this is that one is always separated from the next person by at least 500 premises since the run issues are consecutive. As you work through your issue, your nearest colleague is doing the same, so as you work towards her she is working away from you. Meeting colleagues out of work time is not generally common, though a small number of the women meter readers sometimes called at each other's homes, but where this did occur it was on the basis of living fairly near to a colleague. However, as most of the readers lived a considerable

distance from each other this may have accounted, at least to some extent, for the lack of social contact.

From the discussion so far, it is evident that contact with colleagues and the supervisor is very slight by comparison with many other jobs; the nearest similarities are probably postmen, policemen, taxi drivers, milkmen, traffic wardens, window cleaners, and in the case of slotters, with bus conductors. The meter readers' contacts with the public, though fleeting, are considerably greater than with the groups mentioned above, perhaps up to 30,000 separate contacts each year. Industrial sociologists have devoted much attention to the relationship between the amount and the nature of contacts at work, and the presence or absence of group solidarity as a result. Nichols and Beynon (1977, p.109) in their study, discuss the effects of differential shift patterns and contact between employees in the acid and zap plants, and report that many workers in the plants never knew each other. It is suggested that this has advantages for the management insofar as it tended to break down the workers into small isolated groups.

The kind of isolation described by Nichols and Beynon was particularly a feature of the meter readers' job in their relationship with the male supervisor Bill Tatam, or his deputy Mike Maguire: this was quite often on an individual basis as they drifted in and out at the end of the working week to collect their new work. As the supervisors controlled the allocation of meter reading routes (the 'runs'), and the issue of a 'bad run' would slow you down thus meaning a choice between spending longer out on the streets or losing

bonus, the meter readers perceived the maintenance of a 'sweet' relationship between them and the supervisor as important. The implications of this for the development of a 'power relationship' between the male supervisors and the predominantly female meter readers is clear. Though their shop steward, Avril Smith, did much to promote collective action and a collective approach to management over most other issues, the question of run allocation was not one of them since she, like the others, was firmly caught up in the process.

The degree of collective solidarity in opposing those management decisions that affected individuals, or the meter readers and slot collectors as separate groups, did vary between the two groups. It is difficult to differentiate whether, or in what proportions, the differing degrees of solidarity were due to work culture or to gender. The meter readers were predominantly female and worked on a very independent basis, whereas by contrast, the slot collectors were all male and had much more contact with each other - meeting collectively every day when they came into the depot to cash up in the late afternoon. If a decision was taken, for example to oppose management's attempts to instruct them to do some meter reading in the mid-1970s, once they made the decision to oppose they stuck together and enlisted the support of the union at district secretary level, (the outcome from their point of view was successful). On other issues, even when one or two slotters opposed a 'stand', they nevertheless all stuck together solidly if the majority favoured a stand.

Prior to the election of Avril Smith as shop steward, in the spring of 1979, the readers had dealt with supervision on a very individual basis with no recognised collective representation. Gwen Barlow, who had 'initiated' me into meter reading, often said that she thought it would be better if the meter readers got together as a group with a proper representative to put their point of view to management. She said that she had tried to act as such herself on behalf of the others but when it came to a 'showdown' with supervisors they often didn't support you, or claimed that they had said something different. Joan Farren from the nearby Wheatmill depot made much the same comment during an informal conversation I had with her several months later. She said: "they set you up in the car park then, when you get inside, it's a different story". Several authors of recent studies of female workers from a feminist point of view have remarked upon the lack of women's solidarity at work, Cavendish (1982, p. 138) commenting upon the reluctance of the women to become representatives says: "some of them thought you would stick your neck out, and then be let down by everyone else; they didn't really trust the others to back them if it came to the crunch".

Both Cavendish (1982, p.165) and Pollert (1981, pp.149-50) comment upon the importance of collectivism at work for the organisational potential of the women they studied. Both of these studies suggest that an isolated work situation can lead to what Pollert (p.149) calls 'fragmentation and personal hostilities which can develop among isolated groups or cliques on the shop floor down to individual machine

crews'. Prior to the spring of 1979, this sense of fragmentation could not only be said to exist between individual meter readers but also, prior to the strike action of summer 1984, between the meter readers on the one hand, and the slot collectors on the other. The election of Avril Smith in 1979 arose from a series of meetings about the management's intention to introduce a one call meter reading system.

The strike of 1984, was precipitated by management's determination to 'enforce' new working methods based upon estimating consumers' consumption every fifth quarter. Management admitted that fifth quarter estimating would result in a reduction of the number of permanent posts. This serious threat to their jobs, external in its origins², combined with management's new 'direct approach' to the workforce was the final straw which drew together the previously disparate groups of meter readers and slot collectors at the Eastborough depot. Special inspectors, a third group, who deal with disputed meter readings, full slot meters, and other queries, also have an isolated work situation similar to that of meter readers, but they did not actively support the strike - they would benefit from the change which would make their own jobs secure and they would gain a few extra posts as a result of increased queries from the consumers.

Emmett and Morgan,(in Frankenburg 1982, pp.140-65), suggest that Lupton (1963), in his stress upon the importance of external (macroscopic) factors, is 'unconvincing', and cite the Hawthorne studies as an example. By contrast, my own study would seem to suggest the opposite, insofar as

macroscopic issues³ did bring isolated work groups together in a collective solidarity when their individual interests were 'collectively threatened'. The continued isolation of the special inspectors during the dispute adds further weight to the proposition.

3. Job control

The opportunities for the workers to have some degree of control over the way they do their job or the ways in which they use their time at work, is likely to vary considerably across the spectrum of working class employment. It will usually depend upon the way production is organised, the degree of managerial control, the level of supervision, extent of workplace organisation, and the nature of union participation. Other, less obvious and more subtle considerations, may also play a part. These might be: the nature of the relationships between work groups and even individual workers, gender, and closeness to, and relationships with supervision. Many of these latter considerations will depend, to a considerable extent, upon the nature of the workplace culture discussed in section two above. Workplace culture in its turn is often closely dependent upon the way production is organised and the level of supervision.

Generally, though not exclusively, production lines in medium and light engineering industries probably have a rather lower level of opportunity for job control, though Beynon (1973, pp.129-50) has shown that even on a motor car production line there can still be considerable scope for

some forms of job control be they less 'visible'. On the other hand, outdoor workers usually have rather more scope for some measure of job control, especially if they work at a remote distance from supervision, see Blackburn and Mann (1979, pp.66-87). However, the position of some of these categories of worker is changing with the greater use of work measurement, productivity bonus schemes, and method study - these developments have the effect of reducing workers' scope for job control because they tend to be 'self policing'⁴.

Levels of job control, as well as being dependent upon the considerations discussed above, can also vary over time in the same work situation. These variations with time are dependent upon structural changes, changes in the economic climate, ownership and control of the workplace, and upon local changes within the work environment such as new management or supervision, or changes in the type of workforce. Important changes at the Eastborough depot which affected job control began in the early 1960s when the predominantly male labour force in the metering section began to be superseded by women (cf. Bruegel, 1979). This change can be best explained in the context of the tight labour markets of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Cavendish (1982, p.95) comments upon the gradual shift in gender composition of the workforce in the motor components factory in which she worked as a participant observer.

Another, more significant change, was the computerisation of metering records and their transfer to a new headquarters at Valemere some fifteen miles away in another town. This had the unfortunate effect, for management, of reducing

considerably supervisory contact with the meter readers since, following computerisation, they were issued with a week's work which they despatched themselves to the new headquarters on a daily basis, only calling into the Eastborough depot for a short time at the end of the week.

The competition for labour with the much higher wages of the local factories during the temporary 'boom' of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and also with the electricity board who paid higher wages to their meter readers⁵, meant that men could not easily be recruited. The combined effects of low wages and severe competition for labour meant that supervisors found that they had to 'go easy on the girls'⁶ in terms of the closeness of the supervision they perceived they could reasonably impose. The computerisation and centralisation of local records, in the late 1960s, not only opened up a limited space for enhanced job control for the meter readers, but also irreversibly altered the 'balance of power' for local supervision. The transfer of the local Eastborough records office removed from supervision their control over 'local data' and vested it in 'specialists' a considerable distance away who were part of the head office bureaucracy (for a discussion of these aspects of computerisation, see Crompton and Reid 1983, p.163).

Following the opening of a new regional headquarters at Valemere, and computerisation in the late 1960s, the work of the meter readers began to come under the scrutiny of the work study department. Many of the meter readers found the experience of having a 'work study bod' out on the run with them rather novel and sometimes quite amusing, especially

when he became exhausted from all the walking and complained of blistered feet. Initially, the effects of work study upon the way the meter readers did their job was minimal, but by 1972 it led to the introduction of a new incentive scheme for the slot meter collectors, based on job evaluation and work measurement. A similar scheme, 'one call', which involved a reduction in jobs, was introduced almost ten years later for the meter readers.

Braverman (1974, pp.85-151) focusses his attention upon the role of work study and job evaluation in the extension of managerial control over the work process, and to reduce management dependance upon worker co-operation. This is achieved by reducing the 'skill' content of the work and so curtailing the autonomy of the individual, at least in theory (the process has come to be known as 'deskilling', see Elger 1979, pp.58-99). In addition to deskilling a separation of mental labour from shop floor manual labour occurs and managers assume a 'monopoly of knowledge' once the separated knowledge comes under their direct control. A number of important critiques of the rather functional model Braverman posits have recently been developed, these include those of Elger (1979, op.cit., above) and of Hill (1981, pp.106-08). These critiques suggest that Braverman over-estimates the increased managerial control that is in practice achieved by these methods, commonly referred to as 'Taylorism'⁷; further they suggest, the potential for workers resistance to 'work degradation' is seriously underestimated (Hill 1981, p.113). In short, the effectiveness in practice of management strategies directed to the goal of raising profits, improving

quality, and increasing market share is at best dubious.

The introduction of a one call meter reading system, which I discuss in detail in the text, provides a good opportunity to test to what extent this important change affected the meter readers' degree of job control, and those workers' ability to resist some of the more significant consequences of the new working methods that the system entailed. Both Taylor (1911) and Lupton (1963) have observed restriction and speeding up of output among the workers they studied. A number of possible reasons were found for the practice among the more significant were the stabilisation of bonus earnings, of which I will have more to say in the following section, and to smooth out peaks and troughs in work volume. A number of more recent studies have observed control of output, especially on production lines, Cavendish (1982, pp.107-18), Pollert (1981, pp.52-68) and Beynon (1973, pp.129-50). Studies of job control involving outdoor workers include those of Richman (1983, pp.65-81) and Newby (1977, pp.301-09): both of these latter studies, the first involving traffic wardens, the second farm workers, show the rather greater scope and variety of job control. Opportunities to exercise a range of job control strategies in the case of meter readers falls somewhere between those of the production line worker and the outdoor groups mentioned above.

A limited scope existed among both the meter readers and slot collectors to control the volume of work completed each day. Under the old system, where the reader called back on the following day if the consumer was out on the first call,

the supervisor tended to issue a set amount of work depending upon the individual's historical performance, but was within a fairly narrow range. I subsequently found that a loose norm existed about what level of output ought to be achieved based upon what was thought to be a reasonable amount of accumulated time at the end of the day. In principle, the new one call scheme gave a slightly wider choice of work volume, and thus bonus earning potential.

The election of a shop steward and the prolonged negotiations over the introduction of the new scheme had led to a more collective approach than previously, so a weekly work norm was now high on the agenda of workplace priorities. Another worry was the possibility of future redundancies if the meter readers worked too fast (there were no longer any temporaries to fall back on). It was found that a way of restricting the number of call sheets you had to take out to achieve a given level of bonus, was to resume doing a few call backs each day even though they had been discontinued under the new scheme. The two new men employed⁸ in the early 1980s consistently took out more work and earned higher bonuses than the women, though both of the new recruits were single men. Conversations with the women meter readers and the male slot collectors revealed, to my surprise, a consensus that justified the idea that men should want to earn more bonus than women - their personal circumstances did not seem to enter into their reasoning.

At about the same time as the introduction of the new one call meter reading system, a number of management retirements took place at the Valemere headquarters, and the local

Eastborough supervisor retired. The successors appointed were young men who had not 'risen through the ranks', as had been traditional, but came from the Productivity Services Department (work study). The new scheme had been designed to tighten up on timings, and within the context of easier labour markets (from the employers point of view), the new management team began a policy of closer checks on starting and finishing times. As far as the meter readers were concerned, the essence of what was going on is well summed up by Cavendish (1982, p.117) in her study of women production workers when she says: "fights over clocking off were of more than symbolic importance - they were real attempts by them to encroach on our time and, by us, to resist such encroachments". The considerable difficulty the supervisors always have in precisely locating where a meter reader is to be found at a given time made 'time policing' extremely problematic, thus making resistance by the meter readers a realistic possibility.

Attempts at other forms of tighter control were made. An important issue was that of control over dress: new clothing was supplied at more frequent intervals and checks made on whether or not it was being worn in the prescribed manner. The slot collectors were particularly successful in avoiding this form of intimidation, especially so in the summer months, they would wear regulation jackets only when they came into the depot in the late afternoon and were most likely to be spotted by the supervisor. Having observed them, he evidently assumed that they always wore the regulation jacket so did not trouble to make further checks. Having obtained agreement that the slotters should also do meter reading as part of the

new one call arrangement (something the slotters had fought off under the old system), the management made a point of seeing that some meter reading work was allocated to the slotters⁹. The slotters' response to this enforcement of managerial authority over work allocation was firstly to cause the supervisor tremendous aggravation by claiming, on one occasion, to have misunderstood an instruction to go out meter reading - they had gone out slot collecting instead. In addition to this tactic they also took out more work when instructed to meter read, thus raising their bonus payment above what it was on slot collecting. The slotters remarked to me: "if they want us to read, it'll cost um!" In the case of this group of workers I think the claims of both Elger (1979) and Wood and Kelly (1982, p.77) that Braverman "deflates the level of autonomy and control exercised by post-Taylorian workers", and further, that it fails to fully acknowledge workers' resistance and struggle in the face of managerial initiatives, is substantially vindicated.

4. Bonus and wages

The idea of working in modern industrial society has a fundamental link with the necessity to provide the means of existence in the form of a wage payment in exchange for labour. At the same time there exists a multitude of occupations which provide the worker with this essential means of existence. The distribution of occupations in terms of the level of reward for labour and intrinsic satisfactions at work varies considerably but is basically hierarchical (cf. Watson 1980, pp.149-58).

Access to particular kinds of work will depend, in a number of important and interlinking ways, upon social class position which is often the key variable in the determination of access to particular types of social networks, education, to wealth, which in turn, often determines type of occupation and level of income. Within these class parameters, there exists a wide variety of further divisions of income and occupation. As the sociologist studies a narrower and more defined stratum of the class hierarchy, a wider variety of motivations, orientations, values and specific reasons for taking up a particular occupation is opened up. It is the aspect related to income to which I now want to direct attention in the specific case of the gas meter readers and collectors, a perspective which slowly opened up to me during my years as a participant observer.

The question of the length of the working day (time spent at work) and the relationship between this and income - the 'income/effort bargain' - was an important topic which regularly surfaced during the course of our worklives together. Other aspects were also quite central to us, these included autonomy at work and the related question of the degree of intrusiveness of supervision - all of these aspects were in various ways quite closely interdependent. Despite the difficulties of conceptualisation and analysis separately of these different elements, the concept of instrumentalism seemed to be a potentially fruitful framework for analysis. An early study which attempted to address the subject was the now widely debated work of Goldthorpe and Lockwood (1968) in their study of affluent workers at Luton, which I discussed earlier

in relation to orientations to work, from which they claim instrumentalism largely derives. In the case of the Eastborough district, and the similarities of its industrial structure with that of Luton and a number of other areas in the southern half of England, I attempted to show the possible existence of somewhat similar orientations to work (at the same time demonstrating the limitations of such a concept as 'orientations') at the Eastborough depot among the meter readers and collectors who worked there.

The fact that the Eastborough meter readers were mostly composed of women who 'accumulated time' at the end of the day or week - the accumulated time being largely used to accommodate domestic tasks for the family - complicates any analysis based upon the accepted concept of an instrumental orientation; after all, those studies which claim to support it mostly involve male workers. Blackburn and Mann (1979, pp.199-200) found that what they described as being the most instrumentally orientated workers attempt to maximise income and to minimise time spent at work (p.200), they claim further that this accords with the findings of Goldthorpe and Lockwood (1968), who say that the most instrumental groups in their study worked less overtime. These findings appear to show that minimising time spent at work is at least as important as maximising income, for instrumental workers. In the case of the female meter readers, their special opportunity for minimising time spent at work was used to benefit their family and their home, whereas for the male slot collectors and the two male meter readers employed after 1980, the time accumulated was used for rest or to pursue personal interests

or recreational pastimes. The historical evidence I gathered from long serving employees and those of advanced age who had retired, and comparing it with data from conversations and observation of present workers, indicates a shift towards greater 'home centredness' and a falling off of social interaction with workmates in the years since approximately 1960. Goldthorpe and Lockwood (1968) suggest 'home centredness' as being an important characteristic of what they term an 'instrumental orientation'.

Goldthorpe and Lockwood found that instrumental workers in their study neither looked for close social relations at work nor for a supportive supervisor, but for one who left them alone. However, Daniel (1969) has argued that workers' favourable attitude to a supervisor who left them alone could reflect a desire for autonomy rather than an instrumental orientation. In the case of the Eastborough meter readers and slot collectors, a supervisor who left them alone would not only fulfill a desire to avoid close social relations at work as Goldthorpe and Lockwood suggest but would also enhance their autonomy as Daniel suggests, the increased autonomy being used to minimise time spent out on the streets, thus fulfilling a major requirement of instrumental orientation namely, minimising time spent at work.

As I have indicated, the slot meter collectors, when constrained by supervision to read meters under the new one call system, did not follow the meter readers' restriction of output 'code' to correspond with a particular bonus level under the new payment scheme, but instead broke that covert agreement on output and maximised their bonus earnings as the

'price' management had to pay for them to read meters. Lupton (1963) found, in one of the garment factories he studied, that where social groupings at work did not correspond with task groupings an attitude of 'looking after number one' developed. This claim appears to be borne out in the case of the slot meter collectors when they moved out of their usual task grouping to become 'temporary meter readers'. This effect also lends weight to the notion that orientations are not always fixed, but as Daniel (1973) suggests, will often depend upon context, different priorities applying to different contexts.

Most of the male slot meter collectors demonstrated what might be described as a more transparent and less complex form of instrumentalism than the women meter readers. They limited their time out on the streets more rigorously than the meter readers, earned a higher pay grade, and chose to earn higher bonuses, thus maximising their incomes. The slotters were always more overtly conscious of the 'time/money bargain'. A slot meter collector Jack Whitehead, speaking of the historical changes in bonus level, said to me:

when we used to earn so little bonus
why spend more time out on the streets
than absolutely necessary? But now
the bonus is more worthwhile it's a
bit different, you are tempted to stay
out longer if essential, to meet your
target.

Following an especially low wage settlement in 1984, another meter collector, Bill James, remarked:

it was diabolical settling for that
tiny rise, it was less than half what
most private firms got, we'll just have
to work a bit faster and go onto a
higher bonus band to make up for it.

Going onto a higher bonus band is exactly what they did, but not by working longer out on the streets, just working a little faster. At home the slotters spent a good deal of time with their families, on 'do it yourself' or decorating work, on leisure and sporting interests. Forexample, they were all keen on, and played a good deal of golf in their spare time but they never played together. This could be explained by their 'home centredness', associated with instrumentalism, resulting in the lack of what Blauner (1960) described as an 'occupational community'.

The new one call meter reading system introduced in the summer of 1981, entailed a pay re-grade and an entirely new bonus system based on a 'measured day work' arrangement¹⁰ where a standard performance is arrived at based upon a detailed study of all the components of the job. Standard performance, in this case called the 'stint', is considered to be 75% of an 'optimum' 100% performance, anything above 75 begins to earn bonus and the actual bonus level paid is divided into 'banded performances' from one to five. The introduction of such schemes appears to have become much more widespread in the decade from 1970, both Pollert (1981, pp.174-76) and Cavendish (1982, pp.125-33) comment in detail on how these bonus systems worked in practice at the workplace. Both of these authors discuss the extremely complex nature of the new bonus systems, Cavendish comments (p.125): 'even supervision found it incomprehensible'.

The system introduced for the meter readers was as incomprehensible to them as it evidently was to the women in the Pollert and Cavendish studies. In the case of my own study,

even junior managers admitted an inability to fully comprehend it. The slot collectors had been operating virtually the same system since 1972 and though, over time, they had been able to grasp certain of the more essential elements of its practical operation insofar as it affected their bonus, it still baffled them. But as slot collector Jack Whitehead remarked:

at the time we didn't worry too much about how it worked, all we knew was that it gave us a much better bonus than the old system, and then, see, it seemed like a big step forward because our wages and bonus were so low.

Discussion

The first of the four concepts discussed above, 'orientations to work', needs to be located within a changing social and historical context. Blackburn and Mann (1979) found, in their study of Peterborough workers, that the evidence for orientations to work (p.178) was limited. My own study suggests, like Cunnison's (1966), that work orientations have to be located within a particular social and historical context which takes at least as much account of constraints outside the workplace as it does those inside.

In this study, orientations such as the preference for 'accumulated time', are related to the social context and gender of the predominantly female workers. The reasons for the particular constitution of the workforce were found to be related to the pattern of migration into Eastborough during

the 1950s and 1960s, and the nature of the local labour market at the time. Shifting work orientations were associated with changes not only in personal circumstances, but also in management priorities arising from the introduction of a new bonus system and the dramatic transformation of labour market conditions during the period from 1977 to 1984. Priorities at work changed from a preference for accumulated time towards greater financial instrumentalism mainly because, after 1981, there was little alternative due to the combination of a harsher management regime and the new bonus incentive scheme.

A central feature of the work of meter readers in particular, is its isolation from colleagues and the supervisor but, conversely, a close association with the public and with street life. Most meter readers like the superficial freedom their work provides. For the female workers, it also offered an opportunity for greater (unofficial) flexibility of weekly working hours.

During most of the early period of my study, the reality of the work situation led to a rather isolated and individualistic work culture. For the slot meter collectors the same individualistic work culture applied, reinforced by the cash relationship involved, but this was occasionally challenged by their necessary dependence upon each other and the senior collector who periodically relieved them of the heavy coins they had collected.

The nature of the work fostered the development of the rather individualistic and isolated work culture referred to

above. This did not rule out the possibility of strong collective action under a particular set of circumstances. It was certainly the case when a new and confident management team attempted to force in longer meter reading intervals ('fifth quarter estimating') in the summer of 1984, which led to a two week long strike.

Though the summer strike was precipitated by the perceived threat to jobs from the possible extension of increased meter reading intervals, it also had something to do with the curtailed job 'freedom' following the introduction of the one call meter reading system and the incentive bonus scheme in 1981. A reduction of job control on the part of the meter readers had resulted from greatly increased management surveillance of the workers, and the self policing imposed by the rigours of the new incentive scheme. This gradual erosion of job control resulted from perceived curtailment of freedom on the job, partly through greater intrusion by supervision, and partly by the creation of a climate of apprehension about what might ensue if you were discovered using your 'accumulated time' at the end of the day or week. It was an issue of the partial re-taking of the high ground of job control by a new and increasingly truculent management.

An important issue which regularly surfaced during my fieldwork was that of bonus and wages. It is not easy to disentangle it from the categories of analysis already discussed. However, it does seem to be related to questions of job control. It is influenced by orientations to work and may well also influence the orientations themselves. Different priorities appear to apply at different times, according to

the circumstances.

Mass meetings called during 1981 to vote on whether or not to accept the introduction of one call meter reading overwhelmingly rejected the proposal - even though the new scheme would involve a pay re-grade and the prospect of higher bonuses. It became clear, from conversations with the women meter readers, that the new scheme would seriously threaten their perceived high level of job control and their ability to accumulate time through the week. For two junior union representatives and the shop stewards, combatting the long term threat to jobs was a clearly expressed priority, at a time when mass unemployment was beginning to set in. Superficially at least, this argument, together with the threat to job 'freedom', appeared to have won the day.

A senior union official, who was shortly to retire, sensed either that the decision of the mass meetings was 'suspect' or that any industrial action that may result from a rejection would be difficult to sustain. A secret postal ballot subsequently resulted in a majority in favour of acceptance, giving credence to the idea that the decision for rejection of the mass meetings was indeed 'suspect'. An important consideration is the reality that the 'secret' vote was taken at home, possibly in the presence of husbands, a number of whose jobs were under threat.

It came to light, later on, that the husband of one of the women meter readers had telephoned management to find out why his wife had not been paid the six months accumulated pay re-grade and bonus that management had held during the trial period, pending acceptance of the scheme. He was reputed

to have told management that she accepted the new scheme and when could he expect the back pay? It transpired that he had recently been declared redundant.

The results of the votes clearly demonstrate the ambivalent position of these women workers. The relevance of their changing personal and family circumstances, the 'trade off' between accumulated time (mostly used to fulfill tasks for the family) and the prospect of higher wage and bonus earnings at a time of severe economic constraints and rising unemployment - especially of 'male breadwinners', proved decisive. It seemed, for the moment, that the cash nexus and the constraints of personal and family circumstances had won the day, as the result of the secret ballot had demonstrated. Management had, at long last, been given its mandate for a prolonged period of substantial change, which would result in fewer jobs, a mandate that they had worked doggedly towards for several years, now with a younger and more vigorous management team. This renewed and re-invigorated activity had its roots in the McKinsey report of 1967, and had been given fresh impetus with the new political climate that had developed in the late 1970s, and led to the Gas Efficiency Study of 1983. This latest report gave management priorities their final 'seal of approval'.

The discussion so far, and what follows, suggests that the individual or group at work, cannot be studied in isolation from their whole situation in society, nor can they be separated from the past, the present, or future changes in the economic, social or political spheres. Marx illustrated this

well when he wrote:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. (K. Marx; The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, from Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Works, Lawrence and Wishart, 1973, p.96.)

The notion of a continuous interaction between structure and workplace and of workers as active agents in response to the exigencies of capital is a recurrent theme running throughout the discussion in chapters six and seven, and is addressed more fully in chapter eight.

Footnotes, Chapter 2

1. 'Traditional working class communities'; see Bott (1957), for a discussion of this type of community based on tightly knit local family networks.
2. This came as a result of the efficiency study undertaken as a result of questioning by government of the level of 'efficiency' in the industry; the study was undertaken by a firm of private consultants and published in June 1983.
3. Op. cit., note 2, above.
4. 'Self policing' means, in this context, that the individual worker is now working to a 'standard performance' and a payments system which depends upon exceeding this standard performance in order to achieve 'average wages'.
5. At the beginning of the 1960s, several of the male meter readers moved to the electricity board in search of higher wages.
6. This is the way the local Eastborough supervisor, Bill Tatam, described his attitude to the supervision of the women meter readers at that time.
7. Work measurement and 'scientific management techniques' are concepts associated with the work of F.W. Taylor, published in 1911.
8. As some of the female meter readers retired, and within the context of mass unemployment in the early 1980s, they were replaced exclusively with men. In conversations, the supervisors had consistently shown hostility to the idea of a female labour force where a 'choice' existed between employing men or women.
9. Beynon (1973, p.134) remarks upon a similar struggle with management over work allocation at the Ford motor plant.
10. Based on a method of breaking down each activity into its individual components and allotting them a 'standard time' for performance under normal conditions after allowing for 'contingencies' (such as restraining dogs etc.). The method is far more complex than simple piecework where times are given for the completion of whole operations.

Chapter 3.

Research Methods

Discussion of research methods employed in a majority of sociological studies of industry or of work groups, particularly the more recent ones, those of Beynon 1973, Nichols and Beynon 1977, Newby 1977, Pollert 1981, Cavendish 1982, have contained scant discussion of the research strategies and methods employed. It is therefore necessary not only to take the results of the work very much on trust, but also for the reader to attempt to guess how the links between various facets of the research were drawn. The discussion of research methodology is often thought to be more problematic in the case of studies involving a high degree of personal involvement in contrast to those of the more structured survey research kind.

Whilst it is true that research methods and strategies used in qualitative studies differ considerably from those regarded as appropriate to more structured research with its greater concentration on modelling and statistical procedures (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1968, Blackburn and Mann 1979), this does not mean that the former lacks any strategies, but usually, though they do have things in common, they are not perceived in the same way. Qualitative studies involve a closer and often more emotionally demanding commitment from the researcher so that the reciprocal impact of the researcher and researched upon each other is an important factor in the course and outcome of the study. Research methods and strategies develop and change as the enterprise progresses

and areas of interest open up and others close off, often unpredictably. Despite the differing and contingent nature of many research studies involving work groups at their workplace, there remains every reason to discuss the research methods as they relate to the study.

This study of gas meter readers and slot collectors is an ethnography of a work group and involved an extended period of participant observation by the author from 1978 to 1984, working first as a meter reader and then as a slot meter collector.

1. Origins and development of the study

The conventional way a piece of research or a specific study come into being is through the submission of a research proposal to a sponsoring agency; having sought, and been allocated a research grant based upon whether or not the sponsor considers the proposal worthy of support, the project then proceeds. In contrast to this relatively well trodden route there are a much smaller but increasing number of studies undertaken by individuals who are more 'marginal' to the process. Researchers who, for a variety of reasons, take on a project by a more unusual route, either by electing to do so (Cavendish 1982), or by what might appear at first to be chance (Hilbert 1980). I include myself as being among this more marginal group of researchers.

The development of my own study was rooted partly in chance¹, and like Cavendish, partly in a perceived need to 'get my feet on the ground', and by a complex mixture of

necessity (to earn a living), unsatisfied curiosity (sociological), and a need to gain experience (of doing research). In her research, 'Women on the Line', Cavendish clearly spells out her own motivation when she says:

Trying to keep one's feet on the ground and have a concrete grasp of ongoing working-class struggles has always seemed to me an antidote to a middle class lifestyle, essential if we were to understand the people on whose behalf we were supposedly theorising (Cavendish 1982, p.2).

Like Cavendish, I did not have any specific ideas about writing or researching the job when I began work in that summer of 1978 but, unlike her, and taking the advice of C. Wright Mills (Mills 1970, p.216), I decided to keep a journal. My journal contained an account of my days at work - experiences while working the streets reading meters, notes of conversations with the public, other meter readers and supervisors, and observations on the varied districts in which we worked. Though my own journal contains few references to the exhaustion I felt, my blistered and often bleeding feet at the end of the day, the sheer effort of forcing myself to write up the day's events each evening, it is certainly engraved upon my memory, if not upon the page.

My initial entry into the 'field' was fortunate from the start. Though I did not realise it at the time, it was to become a more extensive study. Gwen Barlow, with whom I spent my first days out on the streets 'learning the ropes', was, as we shall see, a crucial 'first informant' as well as being a splendid companion with whom I had an instant rapport. The initial training period of a

couple of days was extended to a week by mutual agreement and after Gwen had a word with supervisor Bill Tatam. She proved to be an invaluable asset over that week, introducing me to a number of the other meter readers. When I apologised for the incessant questions I had bombarded her with she assured me that she had thoroughly enjoyed it and that it had made a welcome change in the weekly routine.

My encounter with Gwen at this early stage of what was to become a research study would have been fortunate had my efforts begun as such, but was doubly so since they had not. Gwen might well be regarded as a 'gatekeeper' (Burgess 1984, pp.48-50) but perhaps more accurately as a 'befriending' (Whyte 1955), which in this case was mutual. In reality it was often a mixture of both, in my early contact with supervisors and workers alike.

My initial contact and early working relationship with Gwen Barlow provided me with the opportunity to widen my circle of key informants at a later stage, following the introductions to other meter readers which she had provided. The metering supervisor Bill Tatam, with whom I had also established a good relationship from the start, was unknowingly to prove crucial for the continuation of my study when he eventually recommended me for a permanent post. I subsequently learned that he was regarded by his colleagues as somewhat of an 'anti-establishment' figure in his dealing with gas board hierarchy². He was also a prolific writer of short stories in his spare time and claimed to have 'friends in the literary world'. Both he and Gwen offered me invaluable advice and support in reading and commenting on

drafts of my study following their retirement and my declaration of a research interest in the work of meter readers and collectors.

From the discussion of the origins of my own study above, it is clear that its beginnings and subsequent development were by no means a neat chronological set of 'textbook' steps, but instead were rooted in a series of complex personal motivations set in a specific cultural, social, political and economic context. The various stages of the research were sometimes messy, sometimes neat and straightforward as various opportunities opened up and others closed off. Finally, a chance meeting in a railway carriage provided a crucial input of enthusiasm and encouragement for the continuation and development of the study.

2. Ethnography and participant observation

My arrival on the scene at the Eastborough gas depot in the summer of 1978 was as an ordinary if temporary meter reader, with no specific thoughts of undertaking a sociological study in this particular workplace. In the words of Burgess (1984,p.92) 'the participant observer needs to blend into the situation if observations are to be made of the participants in their natural settings'. Because I took the job as a 'legitimate' worker, rather than as a participant observer, it does not follow that I 'blended' into the situation as Burgess advocates. However, I think my chances of doing so were probably almost as good as anyone else's even taking into account my recent student career. At that time, from

the mid-1970s onwards, it was not unusual for people with similar backgrounds to apply for such work; as Cavendish (1982, p.160) remarks: "in the 1950s and 1960s London Transport had relied heavily on immigrants recruited directly in Barbados, but by 1978 there was nothing odd about ex-teachers applying for work on the buses", nor in my own case, graduates for jobs as gas meter readers.

The way in which I entered the field largely determined the research methodology that I subsequently employed, though as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggest, all methods of social research take the form of participant observation insofar as they involve participating in the social world and reflecting upon the products of that participation. Cavendish (1982, p.6) also remarks that the fact of observing and reflecting upon her work in the factory made her different from the women ('an outsider') with whom she worked on the line. Even though I was employed as an ordinary employee and did not have any specific plans to study this particular workplace at first, I suppose it was unusual to begin by keeping a daily journal, to have a 'sensitivity' to what was going on around me, to ask so many questions of Gwen Barlow. Clearly, studying sociology must have changed the way I saw the world.

Ethnography as a method of sociological research has its roots in anthropology and is particularly associated with the work of Bronislaw Malinowski and his studies of the Trobriand Islanders in the early 1920s. Other anthropologists who made notable contributions were H. Junod (1912), A. Van Gennep (1909) and M. Mauss (1923), however, all of their

studies were of 'foreign' societies in an age of colonialism and conquest as were some of the earliest reports of field research, those of the Peloponnesian wars in 431 BC discussed by Wax (1971). During the 1930s and 1940s interpretive methods in sociology became rather more marginalised, probably under the influence of 'logical positivism' (Kolakowski, 1972) which developed out of the work of Russell and Wittgenstein leading to the formation of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s (Ayer 1973).

Although some 'interpretive sociology' did proceed during the 1930s, notably the Hawthorne plant studies of 1927-32, it was not until after the Second World War that a revival occurred. An important series of studies of workplaces were those of the Manchester School in the early 1950s under Professor Gluckman and called 'The Manchester Shopfloor Ethnographies'. Ethnographic studies, especially of work cultures, have grown steadily during the 1970s and 1980s covering a wide range of workplaces: these include Milkmen (Bigus 1972), Car Workers (Beynon 1973), Cocktail Waitresses (Spradley and Mann 1975), Bakers (Ditton 1977), Women Workers (Pollert 1981, Cavendish 1982, and Westwood 1984), Teachers (Burgess 1983), Traffic Wardens (Richman 1983), and Waiters (Mars and Nichod 1984).

The underlying feature of most of the post-war ethnographies, especially those discussed above, is that they contain an interpretation of a specific cultural perspective. These perspectives may be more or less detailed in their observation of patterns of social interaction and may vary according to whether they are predominantly descriptive or

theoretical. A succinct description of the 'act of ethnography' is well formulated by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p.2) when they say:

the ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned.

I think it is important here to emphasise the notion of 'an extended period of time'- both Van Maanen (1981, p.475) and Cavendish (1982, p.3) acknowledge its importance, the former using the term 'considerable time' and the latter 'over the long term'. In my own study the importance of being in the field for over five years proved to be of considerable value, especially in terms of gaining access to knowledge from older and long service workers such as the slot collectors, with whom it took a considerable time to build up a relationship where such information is freely conveyed especially, as Van Maanen (1981) observed: "when the ethnographer is younger and less experienced", as I was myself. Of importance for my own study was the centrality of changing structural conditions, which were to have long term effects on the work process and the future course of the meter readers job. Here again the importance of an extended period in the field is evident if these changes are to be properly observed and reported. As Anderson and Lee (1982, p.288) suggest:

observation of persons over time enables the student to focus upon issues of process and social change, rather than his obtaining a statistically reified, structural account.

Ethnographies such as my own, which involve an extended period in the workplace as a participant observer, depend for their progress not only upon methodical and routine writing of field notes, observations, and the writing of a diary or journal. They also depend vitally upon the development of relationships at work with a variety of different people who will provide you with essential 'inside information' not only about the workplace as it is, but also about historical changes and activities outside the workplace that are relevant to those going on inside. Most recent studies have stressed the importance of 'cultivating' informants (Bigus 1972), whilst others have referred to it less directly (Nichols and Beynon 1977, Beynon 1973), though its importance in the latter studies is implicit in the context in which the authors discuss their material.

A number of writers on research methods have referred to the importance of establishing good relationships in the field, especially those with potential informants. Blum (1970) discusses the ways in which the 'outsider' might best elicit information from potential informants, demonstrating not only the importance of conversation and small group discussion, but also of being tuned in to the language of informants. The notion of 'key informants' goes back at least to Nadel (1939), but has received fresh attention in recent years by a number of writers on research methods, most notably Tremblay (1982), and Burgess (1984, pp.73-5). Van Maanen (1981), in discussing the role of key informants in his study of the police in America, emphasises the importance of talking to a wide variety of different types of people

in the same workplace, and Burgess (1984) adds a further dimension of involving people of different status levels in the school that he studied (Burgess 1983).

In my own study I found the cultivation of key informants of particular importance in gaining alternative perspectives on the same sets of events in the work situation. This is of special significance with workers in this category since they share, with postmen, policemen, teachers, commercial travellers, and social workers the circumstance of working independently, mostly in isolation from colleagues, and often in changing geographical or isolated workplaces.

My first key informant, Gwen Barlow, demonstrated the significance of cultivating a wide variety of informants since she raised some concerns which were not of great significance to other meter readers. Indeed, the importance of gender differences³ were revealed when I later worked with the slot meter collectors who were all men. Many of the female meter readers, and Gwen Barlow most of all, admitted to considerable anxiety over the possibility of attack by the then rapidly increasing population of fierce dogs lurking in people's gardens⁴. By contrast, I found at first that the men would not admit to even being aware of such a threat, it was only by persistent observation and probing conversations that I found the threat from dogs was, if anything, even greater than with the women. In fact it was only in moments of anger at being unexpectedly attacked that the full importance of the problem was revealed. I found, by contrast with the women, that the men were much more ready to confront the owner of

the animal, often resulting in quite heated arguments, whereas the women tended to say very little, or report the matter to the male supervisor who generally took no further action.

In view of the claim of Van Maanen (1981) on the importance of a wide range of key informants with an equally wide range of different perspectives, I made a careful examination of my own informants quite early on in the research. I wanted to determine the distribution of informants in the workplace hierarchy, but also the pattern in terms of their perspectives, not only of the workplace, but on the other wider issues outside. The really important key informants with whom I had worked for considerable periods of time, both continuously, and at various stages as I moved from one workgroup to another, numbered twelve, but in addition there were those who were more peripheral but nevertheless important - these were almost double the number. There were many others, including the general public who provided me with a great deal of background information upon which I could make cross-comparisons, for example conversations with people in their homes could be included to gain corroborative information about the way other meter readers and collectors organised their day, the times of day after which they seldom called, for example, after approximately 3.0 p.m. I would occasionally 'work late' (up to 4.0 p.m.) myself, this would often elicit surprise and even suspicion from the public, thus enabling me to confirm my previous assumptions about 'time accumulation' at the end of the day or week. This could be cross checked by involvement in conversations with the meter readers, especially with comments about time keeping,

following the arrival of a new supervisor.

The ways in which conversations are used to elucidate the differing perspectives of various informants is skillfully demonstrated in a detailed analysis of those conversations by both Burgess (1984, pp.112-17) and Willis (1977, pp.11-48). I think that some ethnographers, like myself, who extensively use conversations as a research tool, would readily recognise this process in their everyday fieldwork and so clearly articulated by the latter two authors.

Some recent debates have revolved around the question of whether substantive links can be established between structural issues (the 'macroscopic dimension'), and workplace relations (the 'microscopic dimension') see: Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p.205) and Glaser and Strauss (1967, passim). Whilst the former think that ethnography can be used to develop and test macro theories, as they claim Willis (1977 and 1981) has done, they feel it is better suited to micro theories. However, they see it as 'positively misguided' to seek to link the two (p.205). If Burgess (1984, p.212) is correct in suggesting that a Marxist might want to relate micro studies to macroscopic analysis in an industrial setting this would, according to Hammersley and Atkinson, make Marxist analysis a 'misguided project' (p.205). Whatever the theoretical correctness, or 'desirability', of seeking to link macro and micro issues at the workplace, the influence of the former upon the latter can hardly be overlooked in this ethnography of gas meter readers and collectors (see chapters 7 and 8).

Though ethnographic studies entail close involvement with those who are its subjects, the degree of involvement varies considerably across the spectrum. Some studies entail relatively short periods in the field and minimal participation, whilst others consist of extended spells as a full participant. My own study like those of Cavendish (1982), Van Maanen (1981), Bigus (1972) and Mars and Nichod (1984), most resembles the latter type. In my own study I found it took a considerable length of time and close involvement as a full participant to gain an extensive knowledge of the workgroup and the way it operated - this was especially the case with the slot meter collectors (the 'slotters').

Patrick (1973) stresses the importance of learning the 'language' of the group. In my own case the significance of 'runs' and the intricacies of 'meter setting' were things that could only be discovered over long periods in the natural setting in which the two groups operated. Ditton (1977) found that he needed close involvement with the bread salesmen over time in order to fully appreciate the nature and extent of fiddling and pilferage, similarly Nichod (1984) needed to spend a considerable time working in hotels of different types as a fully participating waiter to understand the significance of various aspects of the waiters' work. In his case this involved learning a highly elaborate language of different terms and of social etiquette (see pp.50-64), in order to appreciate what was going on in the various hotel dining rooms and restaurants.

3. Research problems

One of the most difficult problems confronted in this study was that of access to the daily worklives of the meter readers in particular, and to a lesser extent, the slot meter collectors. A number of recent studies, which have dealt with those who work alone for a large proportion of the working day, have encountered a similar range of difficulties, these include Newby (1977), farm workers; Blackburn and Mann (1979), outdoor workers at Peterborough; Richman (1983), traffic wardens; Bigus (1972) and Harris (1985), milkmen; Holdaway (1982) and Van Maanen (1981), policemen; and Burgess (1983), schoolmasters.

A number of these studies have used interviews or questionnaires, others working alongside the subjects of the study, whilst some have used full or partial participant observation and a few, a mixture of all these research methods. My own study used a blend of full participant observation, structured and unstructured conversations and some participation in outside social activity.

Initially, I kept a detailed diary of day to day events in the field without any clear cut ideas about the particular form the study would eventually take. As I began by taking the work on a temporary basis, my note-taking and diary keeping were, by necessity of circumstance covert, since I had not discussed the activity with those with whom I worked. The central problem of studying those who work alone is that of access. My own difficulty in this respect was greatly eased by encountering early on, very knowledgeable and communicative

'informants'. My experience was similar to that of Newby (1977, p. 116), where he describes his good fortune in encountering the Hector family when he began his study of Suffolk farm workers.

The following are just three examples of informants I encountered early on in the study with a wide range of different perspectives. Firstly, there was Gwen Barlow, who possessed a very broad knowledge of the meter readers and of the depot built up over 25 years, and an exceptional ability to recall and communicate that knowledge. Secondly, there was Bill Tatam, the local supervisor, with over 35 years local experience of the depot and the meter readers. Later I met a work study man, Jack Batsford, who became a further key informant and provided another perspective. Jack had a very wide contact with meter readers and collectors from many depots across the region. Nine other key informants, from diverse backgrounds, were contacted, together with many others, some more peripheral, others less so.

As well as having conversations with a broad range of key, and other informants, I was at the same time working as a meter reader myself. I was not participating alongside individual meter readers all the time, but did so during my early 'initiation period' of two weeks. The combination of the initiation, the conversations, and doing the job myself - experiencing the difficulties and frustrations, and occasionally some enjoyment - I believe got me as close as possible to the work as the meter readers experienced it.

To have permanently accompanied another meter reader, for the purposes of research, would have so altered the dynamics

of their work that it would have distorted the work pattern to an extent that would have been unacceptable for an ethnographic study of those who work so much on their own.

After eighteen months working as a meter reader, I moved into slot meter collecting. Following another initiation spell, working alongside collector Ron Wild, I became van driver and periodically relieved the collectors of their cash and visited the bank to deposit it. In addition, I allocated the computer sheets for the meters that were to be emptied that particular week. This work role gave me a unique opportunity to observe the work of slot meter collectors from the centre of a 'web' of workplace relationships.

My objective, from the outset, was to write an account of the working lives of the meter readers and collectors from their viewpoint, and of the way in which external constraints affected their working lives, whilst at the same time avoiding the label of partisan. So I was particularly keen on being regarded as an 'ordinary' worker just like the rest. As I had joined the gas board on that basis from the beginning, perhaps my position was more credible than if I had been specifically seen as a sociological researcher. My position improved further when, after eight months, I became a permanent meter reader rather than continuing as a temp. My permanent status allowed me to integrate even more into the workplace culture and to play a more active part in trade union affairs.

When I joined the slot meter collectors, I had been a meter reader for a lengthy period and with permanent status became more closely involved with the workplace culture and union activities. The slot meter collectors had always

regarded the 'Senior' as another member of the team despite my predecessor's distinctive personality - in fact he was covertly referred to as "the taxi driver". My own more informal approach, my age and workplace activities, especially in union affairs, minimised the potential for 'distance' between me and the collectors. This was helped by the authority structure in the industry which appears much less authoritarian and more diffuse than that suggested in studies of, for example, the armed forces or the police, and somewhat less hierarchical than that prevailing in prisons or schools.

An important problem in ethnographic studies involving participant observation is that of accumulating authentic and reliable information about the subjects of the study. I found that the two most important factors in assuaging this difficulty for my own study were those of time and patience. In his study of police organisations, Van Maanen (1981) stresses the importance of "an extended period of time in the field".

A prolonged period of time in the field allows one to observe the varying frequency with which particular issues are raised and talked about in conversations to which the researcher is party, or that are overheard. It also gives time to cross check by verbal triangulation (making an assessment of an event by cross-verifying a variety of accounts) the validity and significance of particular events in, or outside, the workplace. An example from my own study was how the management instruction to the slot collectors to initial coin bags was interpreted by individuals, and how these individuals perceived the reaction of other collectors

to the instruction. This involved a great deal of time and patience in developing conversations on the subject with each of the collectors over several months. A further example was the reaction to the introduction of one call meter reading; this involved numerous conversations with the meter readers spanning almost two years.

A major advantage of covert ethnographic research is the greater informality which usually surrounds it by comparison with the more formally declared projects where interviews, and often questionnaires, are involved. If time is not at a premium informal conversations with individuals can be effectively 'steered' when a particular topic arises, or it can be initiated into a conversation if the ethnographer needs to probe further. This was especially the case where I needed additional information about priorities between bonus earning or a desire for 'accumulated time'. The ways in which informal interviews can be structured are demonstrated by Burgess (1984 pp.112-17) from his study of a comprehensive school. An informal process of 'interview' through conversation took place in my own research -Burgess describes the process in detail, with examples from his own study.

An important consideration that soon became apparent was the extent to which my own background, beliefs and attitudes affected the way the subjects of my study reacted towards me, and what they said in my presence or what got back to me more indirectly. My background was known to most of those with whom I worked, and usually I did not go out of my way

to hide my views when racist or sexist remarks were made during some conversations. There were occasions though, when I remained silent; this was at times when I particularly wanted to collect data on the extent of particular beliefs and attitudes. An example of this was the case of male supervisors' paternal and sexist attitudes towards the female meter readers. In particular circumstances, where I had difficulty in obtaining such data, I would sometimes make a specific remark or crack a 'joke' in order to test reaction to certain ideas.

An unexpected incident, which enabled me to gain important insights into the four concepts that had emerged from almost five years of field work data, was the summer strike of 1984. The close contact and relationships which developed during the course of the strike gave me a deeper understanding of the workplace culture among the meter readers, their personal biographies and orientations, and an insight into their priorities in relation to earnings and job control. Though the strike period itself was not a decisive one for the study, it did give important insights into the concepts that had already emerged. It was fortunate in this respect in coming, as it did, towards the end of my active fieldwork.

Having, with reluctance, decided to call a halt to the gathering of further field data, came the time to assess and select data for the purpose of analysis and writing up. In fact, rudimentary analysis had been going on from quite early on, though on an ad-hoc basis. The fact that the study had begun at all, was related to important structural changes that had been going on in the industry for some years. The

changes, which aimed to intensify labour and cut costs, were beginning to be felt in the metering department during the late 1970s. The key change was the proposal, made in the period 1977-1978, to introduce a 'one call' meter reading system, which involved dropping the traditional call back when the consumer had been out on the first call. It was to be followed by reduced meter reading frequencies, and in the long run, changes in slot meter procedure.

So it was that these historical changes became the initial focus of interest to me, and the four categories of analysis emerged gradually from the fieldwork over three years. The issues of job control, earnings and time were given sharper focus as a result of wider structural changes associated especially with those organisations in the public sphere (cf. Ferner, 1987, p.197). The categories of orientations and workplace culture developed as subsidiary to the first two, but were crucial in understanding their interdependence. It was on this basis that data selection and analysis proceeded. The early identification of these themes and categories of analysis were vital if the research was to remain upon a purposeful course. They gave direction for further data collection and the means to evaluate the significance of events, and of conversations, as my career as a participant observer proceeded.

Conclusion

In chapter two we considered the theoretical concepts that were addressed through the ethnography and which emerged during the fieldwork. In this chapter the focus has been upon my own role as a participant observer, a role that was mostly covert but disclosed to certain individuals during the course of fieldwork. I have shown the importance of my role as a meter reader in establishing contacts and cultivating informants. Gold (1969) comments on the importance of the way in which the observer role is managed, the dangers of going completely 'native' and forgetting that one's task is primarily that of observer and recorder. The fact that I was in the field for a long time meant that I had to constantly remind myself of the pitfalls of 'going native', and the importance of maintaining the research role.

Continuing the theme of the role of the participant observer I went on to discuss the ethnographic tradition and examined how other ethnographers have handled the research process. I highlighted common threads in their work and my own: of particular relevance was my extended period in the field, coming as it did at the beginning of substantial changes in working practices. The considerable length of time spent as a participant observer greatly assisted in focusing my attention upon specific issues of process and change in the making, the outcome of which would not have been nearly so comprehensible in the short term.

Finally, we examined the research problems encountered, and the ways in which the theoretical issues raised in chapter two arise from, or are addressed through the fieldwork.

As far as the meter readers were concerned, the chief difficulties were of access to work which is essentially solitary in relation to colleagues. I show how I employed a variety of strategies to overcome this difficulty, including the use of a range of key informants. The discussion, in chapter four, of working the Eastborough streets, arises from a subtle combination of my own experiences and lengthy conversations with the meter readers.

When I moved on to working with the slot collectors I was able to observe and experience the work from the centre of a 'web of workplace relationships' which produced insights into the labour process very different from meter reading. The slotters' work situation was much more interdependent - with colleagues, consumers and supervisors - than that of the meter readers. The greater informality of the participant observer role, by comparison with more structured research roles, enabled me to make considerable use of conversations as a research tool and to 'steer' these when I needed to probe for further data.

Although I had some definite ideas about the importance of the interdependence of structure and action in the workplace and wanted to empirically observe it, nevertheless the chief theoretical categories, discussed in chapter two, emerged as particular issues were raised many times in the varied workplace activities and encounters that I discuss in detail in later chapters.

In part two, I discuss the work of readers and slotters both through the eyes of the workers, and as I experienced it. I will show how the specific theoretical issues raised in chapter two emerged through my involvement as a participant observer in the labour process at the Eastborough depot.

Footnotes, Chapter 3

1. By taking a 'temporary' meter reader's job in the summer of 1978.
2. This may well have stemmed from a feeling of betrayal when he was 'passed over' for two promotions in the past.
3. At the time all of the meter readers were female with the exception of two of the temps.
4. This concern was well founded in view of the increasing number of injuries sustained from the mid-1970s onwards, most of which were not officially recorded.

PART TWO

THE JOB AND THE WORKERS

Chapter 4. Gas Work: Meter Reading on the Eastborough Streets

Introduction

A central feature, throughout the discussion that follows, is the positive attitude of the meter readers to the daily reality of their remoteness from supervision, 'working on your own' as they see it. As we shall see this fact has important implications for the ways in which they can regulate and control their working day - especially important to the 'working housewives'. It is necessary though, to report to the depot once a week to collect your next week's consignment of meter reading sheets. This occasional contact with the supervisor has its roots in the centralisation and bureaucratisation of administration at a new distant regional headquarters opened in the mid-1960s, and in the computerisation of metering records.

Meter reading sheets are now issued automatically on a weekly basis and in a quantity that ensures the three monthly reading cycle is met. Previously the records had been kept on cards at the local depot, more frequent issue meant that supervision had regular contact with the meter readers, and that they had more direct control over their work. As Edwards (1979) has suggested though, under a more bureaucratic system of control (that which now pertains), management too are subjected to supposedly 'objective' rules and procedures.

This chapter focusses upon the ways the meter readers plan and control their work over the working week, on the predominantly fleeting relationships with the people they

visit, and the ways in which their overall quantity of work - meter reading sheets taken out - is regulated by the issue rate of the computer at the Valemere headquarters.

We also see how the brief weekly contact with supervisors is structured; the importance of the power relationship between the male supervisors and the female meter readers over the issue of 'runs'. At the same time though, it is necessary for supervisors to win consent (cf. Burawoy 1979). One of the ways this is typically done is by the supervisor turning a blind eye when readers leave postcards (if the consumer is out) at the end of the week, for them to post the card rather than leave it out for collection on Mondays, saving a little time for next week.

Eastborough and its meter readers

Gas meter reading in the Eastborough district, from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, has been predominantly carried out by married women, mostly between the ages of 35 and 55. Between the wars, and immediately following the second world war, slot meter collectors greatly outnumbered meter readers and was mostly a male preserve. A number of those who were slot meter collectors before the war returned to the job following its ending, but a significant number came into the job during the early post-war years¹. During the 1950s, with alternative job opportunities increasing as the 'long boom'² developed and at the same time the gas industry declined, some left for jobs outside the industry; also, as the 1950s drew to a close, some of the male slot meter collectors approached retirement age. With the 'tight

labour market' that developed during the 1950s and early 1960s, recruitment of men to meter reading became increasingly difficult, particularly as wage levels were very low by comparison with other local industries in the Eastborough district³.

During the mid-1960s and throughout the 1970s, women were increasingly recruited as gas meter readers for the reasons discussed above (cf. Bruegel 1979). The 'precedent' for employing women had been established during the second world war when, as in many unprotected industries, women replaced men who were conscripted into the armed forces. From the mid-1960s onwards, women began to predominate as slot meters declined and only a small number of men remained, so that by the early 1970s, of 23 meter readers in the Eastborough district, only four were men, and of these, three were over the age of 55. The only section which retained a predominantly male workforce was slot meter collection. Some women had been slot meter collectors but as slot meters declined they were given the opportunity of becoming solely meter readers at a lower pay grade, and they all accepted.

As gas fires replaced coal, the weight of cash in slot meters increased substantially, also slot meters were seen as carrying more responsibility and involved a lot more hassle. These drawbacks, together with fewer job opportunities, due to lower labour turnover, seem to have conspired to deter women from becoming slot collectors. Unlike meter readers, slot collectors operate on a more interdependent basis and with a senior collector who relieves them of their collected cash at regular intervals, banks the cash, and co-

ordinates the collection sequence. These, and other features of slot meter collection create their own special problems, as we shall see later when I discuss their work.

The married women who now predominate as meter readers vary widely in their social backgrounds. Some have husbands in well paid occupations such as surveyor, self employed builder, depot manager, but most do not, relying on their income to maintain the family budget, and two (a single parent and a widow) rely solely on their income from meter reading. Although the work is arduous and demands a strong constitution, at least half the female meter readers are over the age of 45, while around 12-15% are over 55. The youngest is over 35 and the only meter reader under 40⁴.

Very recently, the trend towards all female gas meter readers is slowly being reversed, with the recruitment of three men. Two of the men were victims of the severe recession having been made redundant. Both had held white collar jobs previously, and one was the husband of a gas board senior office supervisor at the Valemere headquarters: he claimed that his wife had heard of the job on the 'internal grape-vine' shortly after he had been made redundant from his previous job. Both of these readers were over 45. My own recruitment to meter reading had firstly been as a temp at the Eastborough depot.

Organisation of Eastborough gas meter reading

The actual physical process of reading meters is organised at area offices under the direction of a Metering Supervisor (considered by the gas board as a 'first step' post on the 'managerial ladder'). For the individual gas meter reader or slot collector, the metering supervisor is the focus of managerial power and the figure with whom they have their immediate dealings. Although, as we shall see, the deputy supervisor is often the 'mediator' through whom, in turn, both the supervisor and supervised operate.

The area depot at which I worked for two years employed eighteen credit meter readers (of these seven were temporaries⁵) and five slot collectors, the latter including one senior slot collector. A metering supervisor and his deputy were effectively the 'overseers' of the meter readers and slot collectors. The slot collectors operate differently from the meter readers, working as a much more closely co-ordinated team under the direction of a senior collector. The main reason for this closer co-ordination of the slot collections is the additional complication of collecting cash, often in quite substantial amounts, and the more geographically scattered location of slot meters, entailing the use of motor van and bicycles.

Both credit and slot meters have always been read or emptied on a rotating basis, at quarterly intervals. 'Rotating' consists of starting at a given point in a town or city and working around in an anti-clockwise direction, arriving at the starting point three months later where the

'cycle'⁶ is begun again. Originally, before computerisation, 'Gilbert Cards' were used to store the reading details and were kept on file in the local office. With the arrival of the computer, in the early 1960s, all the consumer information was transferred to the new regional headquarters and stored on magnetic tape. This meant a major break with the past, removing for good a great deal of local control and autonomy, weakening the commitment of staff on the one hand, and meter readers and collectors on the other. As one slot collector remarked:

You had everything at your fingertips with the old Gilbert cards, you could see how much gas they'd used over a long time, whether there was a debt, and who was the last collector to call. If there was a problem you could sort it out on the spot. With these computer sheets you can't tell a fucking thing, you look stupid if they (the consumer) asks you anything, I'd retire tomorrow if I could, all we've got up there now (regional H.Q.) is a load of fucking comedians, they know nothing about the job, not like the bosses in the old days.

These remarks contain similar sentiments conveyed to me during 'conversations'⁷ with long service meter readers and collectors. Newer recruits are only familiar with computer output and the new 'corporate ideology' introduced during the mid 1960s.

Each week of the current cycle a quantity of sheets are called off the computer, sufficient to supply the needs of the readers working that particular week. This is done automatically, allowance being made for holidays - these will have been notified on appropriate forms some weeks earlier. Sickness obviously cannot be planned for (a major source of

irritation for the supervisor), and any surplus sheets resulting must be 'made up'. This provides a powerful incentive on the part of the supervisor to view sickness as 'deviant', and tends to provoke a strong sense of guilt in some of the more compliant meter readers if they fall sick. These latter feelings are greater in those readers who have closer contact with the supervisor in the area office; conversely, in the more outlying sub-regional offices, sickness is occasionally used as a silent bargaining lever against 'bad runs' or, as is not uncommon in a wide range of industries, when job conditions become very unpleasant. An example in meter reading would be during extreme weather conditions, fatigue or irritation following a very bad run. Bad runs are a fairly common source of discontent: these consist of areas of very low housing densities with long gardens or drives, semi-rural locations, town centres, or buildings with high proportions of cellars⁸.

'Changeover Day', contact with colleagues and the boss

Changeover day is the one time during the working week when the meter readers have the opportunity to meet up with each other and the boss. Changeover is also the time when the previous week's work is completed and the new batch of computer reading sheets are issued for the next week's work. Usually it is the one time in the week when the meter reader encounters the supervisor in person⁹ since meter reading is one of the few working class jobs where supervision can be kept at arm's length over such a large proportion of the working week¹⁰. Changeover days are on different days of

the week at each of the sub-regional offices. This arrangement makes it possible for the supervisor in the regional office to visit personally the sub-regional offices on changeover day¹¹. It was thought that a personal visit by the supervisor was an important morale booster and fostered a 'team spirit'¹².

During the brief period when meter readers and supervisor meet on changeover day (this usually lasts about 1-1½ hours as the meter readers drift in and out).. A 'readers report sheet' is handed to the supervisor, on this is set out the meters read each day, the number of calls with no one in ('outs'), and any details of overtime worked and sheets (if any) carried forward to the next week. In practice (irrespective of working conditions during the week) the supervisor will expect all the week's sheets to have been completed, though officially this is not demanded by the gas board rules. Any sheets which might be left unfinished mean that the current cycle will fall behind. The meter readers (predominantly female) never challenge this 'unwritten law' of the supervisor that all sheets be completed by the end of the week, and it seems, perhaps surprisingly, never used as a bargaining counter, whereas going off sick is.

A great deal of intensive and earnest talking goes on during the changeover. It is the only period throughout the working week when information and instructions can be exchanged and, perhaps more important, it gives the opportunity to chat to colleagues, exchange experiences, and discuss any matters related to the job. Usually, the first thing to look at are the sheets you've been issued with for the next week,

either the heart will sink or there will be a sigh of relief that you haven't got that 'terrible run'¹³ you had last time round. Obviously, the type of area, density of housing, position of meters, number of consumers who are usually out are of crucial importance to the meter reader - these considerations can make the difference between a sheer hard and unremitting slog with lots of hassle, or just another week's strenuous work perhaps in rather pleasanter surroundings.

In the 'old days', before re-organisation and computerisation (one of my key informants told me during a conversation on the slot collector's van) the procedure for collecting a week's work from the yard office was:

In the old days you always picked up a day's supply of cards only - the gaffers liked to keep a check on you every day then. The woman in the card office was a 'bastard', if your face did fit you fell for all the crap runs every time, you could tell who had the card last time because they had to be initialled then, see? At first, when we were green on the job, we used to go in too early to collect our issue of cards, till we got wise to it, the older hands used to know the 'runs', what was due out, and they would hang back, or go in earlier as the case may be, so they got the best runs. There was collusion between the 'blue eyed boys' and that bloody woman in the office. The gaffer at that time was very strict and wanted an explanation if your quantity of reads dropped - if you handed any cards in at the end of the week you'd be fined a shilling from your wages for each one.

Complaints to the supervisor, or more often his deputy, about being allotted 'bad runs' are still a common feature of changeover day banter in spite of elaborate systems involving lists and rotas intended by the new supervisor to avoid these very complaints. Town centres, with the added

complications of shops, offices, half closing days and the inevitable delays, are the runs most contested. Sometimes the complaints of being given bad runs become heated. The supervisor, Bill Tatam, a stocky cockney in his early 60s and nearing retirement, has a 'short fuse' and occasionally 'blows his top'. His assistant, Mike Maguire, a fast talking Irishman who thinks he 'has a way with the girls',¹⁴, usually moves in quickly with a bit of charm to smooth things over.

It is during the changeover period that issues relating to the job are raised with the supervisor. They are usually peripheral, being confined to those few which are under the direct control of the supervisor, such as the issue of runs (already referred to) to individual readers, and being moved around to unfamiliar districts for the purpose of covering shortages brought about by sickness¹⁵ or holidays. Debate, argument or negotiation over the broader questions of hours worked, employment conditions, and work procedures are not on the 'agenda' since these are dealt with in a different forum, and at a distance, by management and union officials and take the form of lengthy official manuals of rules and procedures drafted by 'experts'. Negotiations over the peripheral issues are usually minor and infrequent, for the reasons discussed above. When, on rare occasions, an issue which demands a collective approach does arise it is put to the supervisor by an 'informal representative' nominated by the meter readers themselves. The representative is selected very informally through 'buttonholing' by the other meter readers, on the basis of her perceived courage

in facing the male supervisor who is invariably intimidating. These informal representatives always complain that, when the 'chips are down', the others will not overtly back her up; as one said to me: "They set you up in the car park, putting words in your mouth, but when you bring it up with the supervisor they pretend they don't know what you're talking about, no, from now on it's number one".

On changeover day, when the meter readers meet each other and see the supervisor, they come into the regional office. This is situated on the site of the old town gas works, which was cleared of all the old gas manufacturing plant when town gas production ceased in the late 1960s. A large block of ultra-modern offices were erected on the site which now accommodate the administrative sections of the service and fitting department, pipelines and supply for the local area, and the marketing function for the region. The desks from which the metering supervisor and his assistant operate are situated uneasily¹⁶ in a corner of this large open-plan air conditioned office. Rather than collect their week's reading sheets from windows in a downstairs sub-office, which are also used by the gas fitters, they go up to the supervisor's desk in the top office¹⁷. The main reason for this arrangement, it is claimed by the assistant supervisor, was that Bill, the supervisor, has a weak heart so making it inadvisable for him to climb the stairs too often.

The nature of the new meter reader's job is a rather solitary one in relation to contact with colleagues and bosses as it involves only brief contact once a week, on changeover day at the depot, though there is ample contact

with the public even if this only usually on a rather fleeting basis. The brief encounter with colleagues may explain why many readers take the opportunity to have a fairly intensive chat when they do meet - usually conversations take place at the side of the office block, on the steps or in the car park. The predominant topics of conversation during these brief encounters usually revolve around some aspect of the job, perhaps experiences out on the street during the past week, criticisms of the supervisor particularly in relation to the run they were allotted, or perhaps remarks about a colleague.

Criticisms of colleagues (these are not uncommon) often take the form of references to the quantity of meters read by colleagues. I often found that those who, in the view of the critic, had been reading too many meters were just as much castigated as those who had read too few¹⁸. There seemed to be a 'norm' which most readers considered 'reasonable' for a week's work. Curiously this norm corresponded to the median level of bonus which, in turn, corresponded to the amount of sheets the supervisor issued automatically each week. As we shall see, this cosy arrangement was to be shattered when a new bonus system was introduced. However, the readers' 'core perceptions',¹⁹ about the amount of work that should be done remained, or were if anything, strengthened.

Changeover day occurred on different days of the week at different depots. At the depot where I was employed the changeover day was Friday. Most readers agreed that this was a very convenient arrangement as it meant a 'neat' end

to the week's work prior to the weekend and a fresh start on Monday morning, on the new run.

Since computerisation the meter reading sheets have been programmed on to the computer in a similar sequence to that of the previous Gilbert Card system, that is in 'walking order'. Walking order simply means that each street comes off the computer in the order which management think a meter reader would naturally walk it on a 'run'. The runs progress anti-clockwise in a radius from the town or city centre. The total weekly consignment of reading sheets is split between the individual meter readers by the supervisor or his assistant. A book of the 'worst runs',²⁰ is kept for the purpose of ensuring that no reader is allocated such a run more often than about once in eighteen months.

The meter reader's job control strategies

Each meter reader collects their consignment of meter reading sheets and sufficient dial postcards (these are used if consumers are out and are placed through the letter box) for the week's work. The next job is to prepare for the first day's work, which in this case begins on Monday morning. The 'preparation work' consumes a considerable amount of time, and though not mentioned in the gas board's written instructions, nevertheless practical experience has taught the meter readers that it is essential if the work is to be carried out without unnecessary hassle. This 'preparation work' has to be done at home using the meter readers own facilities and time. Of course these aspects

are not taken into account by the supervisor when (as often happens) he checks on the individuals' starting and finishing times, out on the run. Perhaps surprisingly, this extra time and effort, used in preparation, is rarely used by the meter readers in defence against the supervisor's criticisms over individual starting and finishing times.

The first task for most meter readers, when beginning preparation for Monday morning's work is to check, using a street guide, the exact location of the day's work. Some readers, if they are in unfamiliar districts or are working away from their home area, will physically go and check the exact location for themselves, in their own time, and at their own expense. A batch of meter reading sheets, for the first day's work, are taken off the top of the pile (about 300 to 350) and each sheet is dated. This saves time doing it on the doorstep, which would be a difficult task with so much going on, people talking, dogs barking and jumping, uneven foot-paths, people shouting and asking questions. Predating the sheets reduces the chance of forgetting. The same applies to the predating of dial postcards, which are used when householders are out.

The total issue of sheets for the week's work are not divided up equally between the five days of the week. The reason for this is that on the first day of the new week there are no 'back calls'²¹ to pick up so a proportionately higher number of visits can be made²², or, as I was told when I was initially trained by an 'old hand' (and later found in practice): "your energy and morale is highest on Mondays, after the weekend break". In addition to this consideration

there is also the question of 'unforeseen contingencies' such as very bad weather, the possibility of not feeling up to par (this frequently occurs around mid-week), or an exceptionally bad part of the run (meters in very awkward positions, large numbers of very fierce dogs, high proportions of infirm people who are slow to answer doors).

Though the amount of work the meter reader planned to complete each day appeared to be on the basis of the contingencies discussed above, I soon realised, after doing the job myself, that the practice adopted was rather different. After many conversations with other meter readers, over a year or more, it gradually became clearer to me how the working week was actually divided up in practice²³, and perhaps not surprisingly given the external constraints of the job, it corresponded very closely to the way in which my own working week was organised.

It turned out in practice that the possibility of completing a large amount of work on Mondays (due to having no back calls) meant that the extra work completed on Mondays would eventually bear fruit at the end of the week, i.e., on Friday, when up to half a day could be accumulated to use as the reader wanted. This 'accumulated time' was mostly used by the predominantly female and married meter readers to catch up on domestic chores like shopping or housework (cf. West, 1980 and 1982), or occasionally something more 'frivolous' (to them) such as going to the hairdressers. Alternatively, the accumulated time could be spread more evenly through the latter half of the week, again usually mostly used to accommodate domestic tasks such as collecting

children from school or shopping²⁴.

The ability to 'make time' during the working week depended crucially on not having 'back calls' on Monday mornings. Once established, the process whereby this was achieved was self perpetuating. With a high proportion of the work completed early in the week, especially on Mondays, meant that a smaller proportion had to be completed towards the end of the week. By the time Friday came there were only a small number of reads left to be completed, obviously this would proportionately generate only a small volume of back calls. These could be 'carded'²⁵ 'please post', and since they would generate only a small number of cards being returned to the head office, they would not draw undue attention. This would dispense with the need for any back calls on Monday mornings of the following week. The small amount of reads completed on Fridays obviously could not be shown on the individual meter readers weekly summary sheet which was ultimately returned to the head office via the supervisor. This difficulty was overcome by carrying forward sheets done from the previous day to the succeeding day. This method of 'making time' was not overtly acknowledged by the supervisor, but was well known to him, as were the reasons for doing it²⁶; after all he had come 'up through the ranks' himself²⁷.

We see demonstrated here the interplay between structure and workplace, the way in which the centralisation and computerisation of meter accounting records at a new and distant regional headquarters had led on the one hand, to a greater degree of 'computer pacing' in the issue of work

(meter reading sheets), what Edwards (1979) refers to as 'a technology that paces and directs the labour process', and on the other hand, serves to further distance and reduce the direct power of supervision. As I have shown, the idea of working on your own and not seeing too much of the boss is a positive aspect of the work mentioned by all of those with whom I worked.

An important aspect of the meter readers' situation at work is the way they organise and plan the week's meter reading. A crucial factor in the way you plan your week's work is the 'run' you are allocated by the supervisor (the area in which you are to work) since this can make or break your working week in terms of difficulty and speed. For women in particular²⁸, fostering a good relationship with the male supervisor appears to be important because they undoubtedly use the power they possess over the issue of runs to reward compliance and good conduct, and to win consent (cf. Hill 1981, ch. 2).

In the discussion above we see that further bureaucratisation - the centralisation and computerisation of metering records at a new regional headquarters - has made supervision a little more remote and provided additional freedom for meter readers to organise their time during the week. But tacit bargaining with supervisors is limited to marginal issues concerning the allocation of meter reading 'runs' and the 'turning of a blind eye' to strict finishing times in the afternoons; this would be difficult to police in any case. Finally, we also see examples of limited shifts towards collective action; this occurs mainly during changeover day

when the meter readers come into the depot at the end of the week. It is at this time that a collective approach to supervision becomes most feasible.

My own recruitment as a gas meter reader -
the interview

On the morning that I arrived at the gas board offices for the interview, I found these were situated on the site of the old Eastborough city gas works. The old works had been completely cleared apart from the imposing lattice work of the Victorian gas-holder and storage tank of the type that used to be a common feature of many town gas works. The old works itself had been replaced by a car park of black tarmac and white lines. Names were painted in matching white in one corner close to a large office block of an architectural style best described as an inverted plastic egg box.

I entered the 'avant-garde' office block and was directed to the desk of the metering supervisor. He was a short stout man in late middle age, with a very red face. He seemed unduly nervous and had a visible hand-tremor. His assistant, an altogether thinner man, also in late middle age, seemed to me 'fussier' and a little domineering. It appeared that there had been few applicants for the job, for they gave me the impression that they were relieved to see a potential candidate.

I was ushered into a small interview room at the side of the main office. The interview was a little traumatic at times, the supervisor seemed nervous and occasionally rather

at a loss for words. His assistant interjected from time to time to help out. Despite these difficulties the supervisor appeared to be a kindly and amiable man. Towards the end of the interview he seemed anxious to confirm my appointment, hastily saying that I could start the following Monday morning. He emphasised the strenuous outdoor nature of the work. During the course of the interview he said to me: "Are you sure you won't mind going into people's homes, all kinds of homes, some of them will no doubt be much more unpleasant than perhaps you've been used to". He added: "I hear that you've studied sociology. I hope going into poor homes won't affect you too much", he stressed: "You will have to remain 'detached' not get too involved or too upset when you come across cases of severe poverty".

Confirmation that I would be taking the job was speedily concluded, on the spot. The next step was to make sure that I was capable of reading 'four dial meters'²⁹; the deputy supervisor said to me rather sarcastically: "You shouldn't have any difficulty with that". I was given a dial face that had been removed from an old meter and asked to give some readings after he had set and re-set the dials several times. When I had done this to his apparent satisfaction, I was shown how to complete the official paperwork and various documents associated with the job. The emphasis was on accuracy in reading meters and completion of the paperwork. He stressed: "If you get it right first time it cuts down on the aggro we get from headquarters"; the supervisor nodded agreement.

Some of the difficulties and drawbacks of the job had been put to me during the interview but, as I later found, most of the more unpleasant ones were not mentioned, only those which related to my perceived ability to carry out the work with minimum of 'comeback' for the supervisor (i.e., those related to the outdoor nature of the work, the considerable amount of walking involved and the need to enter all kinds of districts and homes).

It was only slowly, whilst on the job, that I discovered the other, 'less desirable' aspects of the work, such as regular harassment by a vastly expanded population of unruly and sometimes ferocious dogs which occasionally produced alarming and unexpected encounters (cf. Sparrow, 1982). It was only after a fortnight's work that I was told of slot meter collector Ron Wild, who had bent down to open a meter cash box in one house where children had let him in and ended up in hospital with 15 stitches in his face resulting from the bite of a fierce alsatian. I gradually discovered that the 'dog problem' was very widespread, affecting most of the meter readers at some time I found that between two and three incidents a month were reported. It was not long before I became a victim myself necessitating time spent visiting first the doctor then the hospital, to receive anti-tetanus injections.

Becoming a meter reader at Eastborough

I arrived for work for the first time on a hot Monday morning in June. There were uniformed security men on duty at the entrance in a small lodge beside sturdy steel gates. I remember thinking to myself: "I cannot imagine what anyone would want to pinch unless they fancied a gas main or valve" but, as I was later to find out, the odd gas meter could prove very useful for someone wanting to reduce their gas bill³⁰. Despite the 'apparent' security I entered the depot and office block without hindrance or challenge.

My first day's work consisted of familiarising myself with the lengthy rule book for meter readers³¹ and, of perhaps more relevance to the job, learning how to complete the rather tedious paperwork, consisting of summaries of the work completed each day, also how to complete 'dial postcards' if the consumer is out on the first call. There were also cards for taking down the consumer's address if the word occupier appeared on the meter reading sheet. Additionally, there was a form known as the PX 7- this was quite lengthy and had to be used in the event of anything untoward being found such as gas escapes, or faulty or broken meters necessitating a request for a meter change. I found that most of these forms were known by their serial number and index letter, rather than being referred to descriptively or by name.

Finally, there were the computer generated meter reading sheets: these were sent into the Eastborough office each week and distributed to the meter readers on changeover day³². I was given blanks of these to study and complete as

practice. The sheets consisted of a space at the top for writing in the meter reading and a series of boxes across the sheet with numbers 0-9 down each vertical column; the meter reading was subsequently 'dotted'³³ with a soft pencil, in the appropriate box. The completed sheet was therefore in a state which could be readily committed to tape for feeding into the computer data bank. I had read all the material and familiarised myself with it by early afternoon, the supervisor said I could finish then, and added that when I reported for work the next morning I would be assigned to an experienced meter reader, and would go out on the streets to experience the job at first hand. I was looking forward to the prospect when I left that evening.

Out on the streets for the first time

I arrived for work at 8.00 a.m. on Tuesday morning, Gwen Barlow, a meter reader of some 12 years experience, was waiting to take me out 'on the run'³⁴. Gwen was a pleasant, rather quiet spoken woman in her mid-50s. She seemed to have all the attributes one might expect from a person who predominantly works outdoors. A fresh healthy complexion and an upright posture, she was kitted out with suitable clothing - a lightweight summer jacket and open sandals. We got on well right from the start, and quickly developed a harmonious working relationship: we had a similar sense of humour and chatted easily. Gwen turned out to be not only a friendly and cheerful colleague but also a valued 'key informant'.

Though I had been issued with the basic equipment, a ring binder to hold the meter reading sheets, some dial postcards, some PX7 forms and a sharp pencil, I was soon to learn of 'other' essential equipment and perhaps more important, how best to use the equipment. Gwen thought that the most valuable item for a meter reader was an efficient torch as most meters were located under dark staircases or in similar dingy places, and sometimes in dank cellars. She insisted that it was most important that the torch be reliable and as small and lightweight as possible. After a long search she had found one particular type which fulfilled these essential requirements—it was the only one on the market with a switch strong enough to be operated 100 to 150 times a day (33,000 times a year!). I purchased one without delay—I had to finance it myself but the board paid a small battery allowance, an expense that far outweighed the cost of the torch itself, and which the allowance barely half covered.

The next most important item was a rubber which, to save fumbling, should be of a type that fits on to the blunt end of a pencil and is always ready for use. Of equal importance was a pencil sharpener and two spare pencils - it is surprising how many times a pencil is broken, stepped on, dropped down drains or into inaccessible places, or just lost. All of these items must be strategically placed in the appropriate pockets so that they can be brought to hand with the minimum of trouble. Finally, the ring-binder, containing the day's meter reading sheets, should only have in it the minimum number of sheets necessary for a day's work to minimise the

weight. It is crucial that the binder of sheets be held in one particular position, otherwise a very painful shoulder would develop by the end of the day.

Armed with this information and at least some of the suggested equipment, we set out for the day. It was a hot June day with cloudless blue skies and almost no wind. The area which we worked this first day consisted wholly of the inner city, a mixture of old Victorian terraced houses, tall multi-storey flats, a mixture of shops and offices, and the fish market. Gwen described it as: "One of the worst runs in the book"³⁵. She felt sure that she had done this same run more than once in the past two years and thought that the supervisor had 'favourites' who were allotted the bad runs less often than they should have been³⁶.

The first place we visited was a tower block of flats near the city centre that had been built as luxury flats during the building boom of the 1960s. However, the letting agent had been unable to find tenants at the astronomical rents asked so, like the Centre Point development in Soho, it had stood empty for two years, finally being taken over by the Eastborough City Council for occupation by people high on their housing list. Gwen said we would find what she described as "a motley collection" of tenants. Some of the flats are very dirty or disorganised, and a number according to Gwen, occupied by well-known local prostitutes. As it turned out, and much to my new colleague's annoyance, all but one of the occupants were either out, or would not answer the door.

The only flat we did get into was, as Gwen had predicted, very dirty and disorganised. A grey haired woman, probably in her middle 50s, answered the door wearing a long nightdress, she was rubbing her eyes as if she had just risen from bed. Without a word she pointed to the kitchen and disappeared into the bedroom. We went into the kitchen which was also very disorganised and smelled pungently of stale food and cigarette smoke, the sink was piled high with unwashed crockery and blackened saucepans. Gwen opened the cupboard where she knew the meter was situated, out fell a pile of stinking clothes and old shoes, she looked at me and shook her head whispering: "Now you know why she's disappeared". Finally, after much foraging, we located the meter. Gwen asked me to read the meter saying: "This one will be good practice for you". It was of the four dial type so I had to kneel right down to face the dials squarely and concentrate hard, she then checked for herself and was satisfied that I had obtained the correct reading.

The next place we visited was a very short street of no more than a dozen Victorian terraced houses. They looked strangely out of place as most of the surrounding area had been re-developed leaving just this part of the street, isolated. The first two houses we called at produced no reply, so a dial postcard had to be completed with the consumer number written in. Writing the number was quite a performance in itself since it consists of a number with no less than fifteen digits³⁷, this has the effect of rapidly wearing down the pencils. Gwen also took the opportunity to offer important advice on how to post the card:

Always lift the letter-box flap with your pencil, it's a favourite trick of 'guard dogs' to leap up to the letter box and snap at your fingers, there have been several cases of readers having their fingers badly bitten in this way. The worst dogs for this always keep silent until you've made the fatal mistake of putting your fingers through.

Another 'trick' I quickly picked up from Gwen was to rattle gate latches well before entering gardens with tall hedges or trees. The fierce dogs that inevitably seemed to lurk in this type of garden were roused to hysterical barking on hearing the rattle thus alerting the potential victim.

We eventually found a house with an occupant. A very elderly couple lived there whom Gwen seemed to know quite well (she later told me that she had come to know them after calling there for a number of years). The couple slept in the front room, which opened directly onto the street, because they were unable to climb the stairs, something which I later found true for many elderly people. Typically, for a house of this type (late Victorian terrace) the meter was situated under the staircase, access to which was gained by drawing a door curtain just off the living room. As I drew the heavy wool curtain it promptly fell to the floor - it was precariously suspended upon a garden cane tied with twine, forming a makeshift curtain rail. It took several minutes to reposition the curtain, an occurrence which I later found was to be by no means a novelty. I eventually reached the meter after removing a carpet sweeper, an ancient rusted lawnmower, and an overcoat and scarf which had been hung over the meter as a temporary coat-peg. The meter was a very old model, made in 1937 according to the maker's plate³⁸, but the dials

were very faded and, together with a fading torch battery, obtaining a reliable reading was very awkward. After we had left, Gwen told me that the couple had lived in the same house since their marriage over 50 years ago.

Having completed the street, Gwen thought it was time for a drink, so we sought out a small street corner café, one that she often visited. Gwen, unlike the 'newcomers' to meter reading (a majority of the meter readers), likes to take her time, breaking off for a drink and a chat in the local street cafés. Most of the women now, she tells me, seem to prefer to work 'flat out' and get home early, rather than enjoy a less hurried pace.

Changes in the job over recent years

We chatted at some length, for it was a warm day and a relief to take the weight off sore and aching feet. I asked Gwen how things had changed over the twelve years she had been a reader. She replied that when she had started the job male slot meter collectors predominated, but that during the 1960s more women had been taken on as meter readers following a growth in the number of credit meters that were being installed, first with the arrival of gas fires in the living room then following the arrival of North Sea gas in the late 1960s. Secondly, there was a decline in the old style disciplinarian management. This occurred during the 1960s and, with the opening of a new headquarters at Valemere, local meter records were transferred to the computer there, and the freedom of the local supervisor declined. Thirdly,

workloads had increased, from a weekly issue of 450 meter reading sheets to one of 750 sheets. She thought that this increase had corresponded with the spread of credit meters in the mid-1960s and the novel feature of the application of work study to meter reading following the establishment of the new Valemere headquarters, also in the early 1960s.

We next discussed the changes she had observed in the community over those years. She thought the most noticeable were an enormous increase in the number of fierce and unruly dogs they encountered during the day's work and the associated increase in attacks suffered, not only by meter readers, but also by others who did jobs involving visiting private houses. Postmen and milkmen she knew had sustained injuries resulting from dog attacks. This view was supported by numerous incidents reported in the local press. Another change which affected meter readers more than the other groups of workers, was the considerable increase in the number of people who were out (referred to by meter readers as 'outs') when they called. Gwen thought this was connected with the increased number of younger married women who now worked in contrast to twenty years ago. She had also noticed a considerable increase in student accommodation, especially since the mid-1960s. She found this to be more evident in certain areas of Eastborough where, as Gwen put it "Older 'genteel' people had died or moved out of the larger Victorian terraced houses". The presence of students increased the number of 'outs' and often presented difficulties in locating who was responsible for which meter. I later found that these problems were especially acute for

slot meter collectors since landlords often favoured slot meters for student tenants.

Gwen thought that all the changes mentioned above have had a considerable influence upon the meter reader's job, but, she added: "Though most of the changes I have mentioned have made the job less easygoing and enjoyable than it once was, the decline of the old style strict supervisors has been the only really positive improvement". With these interesting insights in my thoughts we drank up our tea and set out once again into the hot sunshine, temporarily refreshed and ready to go.

Meter readers and street life

In his discussion of the street life of traffic wardens, Richman (1983) suggests that the majority of street workers (among these I would include meter readers) 'merge with the landscape' due to the interconnectedness between institutions and street life but, he says, traffic wardens tend to interrupt this 'interconnectedness'. The meter reader on the other hand, is a part of the street scene and very much connected to the street and its inhabitants in the particular area where they happen to be working. This daily contact, though undoubtedly 'fleeting' (cf. Davies 1959), makes the meter reader more conscious of many of society's dominant values (cf. Liebow 1967), and especially aware of the class structure of the U.K. by moving through highly contrasting residential areas (cf. Newby 1980). It is within this context that I discuss issues which immediately confront the meter

readers as they move around the districts of Eastborough. These are examined, with particular examples, under two broad categories: neighbourhoods, and encounters with the public.

Neighbourhoods and encounters

Following my spell of 'training' with Gwen, which can perhaps be at least as well described as an initiation, I embarked upon my own career out on the streets of Eastborough. The job entails working in a very varied and constantly changing work environment and an equally varied range of social encounters with the public, mostly in their own homes. In the discussion that follows, of neighbourhoods, encounters, and the way we go about our work, I draw upon my own experiences and numerous conversations with other meter readers on how this practical reality is comprehended and understood.

Neighbourhoods

Discussion of the following contrasting neighbourhoods in the Eastborough district not only provides examples of the varied nature of the meter readers' daily workplace, but also demonstrates some of the difficulties we have to contend with in terms of confusing layout of estates and problems of access to meters.

Brickiln estate, built in the early 1950s, and sandwiched between two busy main roads, consists almost entirely of maisonettes built onto a northwesterly facing hill which, when a strong wind is blowing, makes it very uncomfortable to dwell on the doorsteps. Front doors are in passages at

the side and seem to serve as wind tunnels, adding to the discomfort. The occupants, when they can be found at home, constantly complain of lack of storage space and small restricted rooms, a common complaint made to meter readers about Eastborough homes and is often made to justify the gas meter being partially buried by domestic items of furniture and clothing stuffed into the small cupboard, or space under the staircase.

A very new housing estate at Westlake, lying in the shadow of a vast new district hospital (a creation of the 1960s re-organisation of the N.H.S.) consists mostly of high density semi's built in the early 1970s. Residents, many of whom seem to be geographically mobile types, moving on within two or three years, say the houses were erected quickly by speculative builders to meet the high demand of the late 60s and early 70s, that materials and construction are of minimal quality and that visitors constantly complain of the confusing layout.

Being a meter reader not only entails working in long streets of residential areas in the middle and outer suburbs, and the back to back housing of the inner city, but also visiting the places where people work. Workplaces in and around Eastborough vary widely in size and character despite the popular image of large scale automated factories of a modern industrial city like Eastborough. On the contrary, very many are small, noisy, potentially dangerous and often very dirty. This type of small factory seemed to become more numerous as the multinational firms closed some of their larger modern factories when the recession speeded

de-industrialisation and many of the smaller industries employ a large proportion of women and many are black, Irish or Scottish (cf. Cavendish 1982). Such factories are most numerous in the older declining areas, with many being set up within the past ten years. The declining number of larger modern factories are to be found in the relatively newer outer suburbs.

During my early days as a meter reader I worked in the commercial quarter of the city centre. These first days were a punishing slog, resulting in blistered feet, aching limbs and a bodily tiredness compounded by long hours in the open air in all weathers. The city centre is a place of 'women in offices', modern brightly lit stainless steel and glass offices, but there were also the genteel Georgian offices with thick pile carpets, narrow staircases and hushed voices. The modern offices were staffed by neat busy looking middle aged women, while the older office buildings of the traditional professions seem to operate in a bygone manner of gentility and slower pace; these are populated by younger, rather languid girls with a more confident attitude and 'posher accents'.

A couple of miles down the road are the large leafy gardens of the detached houses where an air of quiet tranquility prevails. It's a strange feeling, but in these enclaves of the middle class the way your day's work goes seems to match the surroundings - less 'hassle' quieter and calmer, not so much tension and headache at the end of the day. Most of the occupants of the houses seem to speak with a lower, softer voice, lacking the pressure and staccato urgency of events

which is a common feature of some council estates.

In many older parts of the city, there are neighbourhoods of terraced houses, some with front doors opening directly onto the street, others with tiny front gardens. The work in this area is not too much of a burden, mostly because the people are generally friendly and easy going—this makes a very positive difference to the day's work. Similar streets in the nearby towns of Pittam or Wheatmill would often mean confrontation with vindictive and argumentative people who, together with the snappy breeds of dog they keep, combine to make life difficult for the meter reader. One of the ways in which they create antagonism (idiosyncratic to the area) is by refusing to admit you through the front door of the house. They invariably beckon you to go around the back by standing in the front room window and gesticulating vigorously — compliance usually entails a considerable detour up dark side passages where ferocious terriers are concealed, and seem to lie in wait for unsuspecting callers.

In retaliation against meter readers who have, according to residents, refused to go around the back, or have surreptitiously pushed a card through the letter box in order to avoid the hazards mentioned, the occupiers often peer around the front room curtain when they hear the knock, wait for the reader to get several doors up the street, then call them back on the pretext of not hearing the knock. Some readers have 'cottoned on' to the irrationality of this claim since there can clearly be no logical grounds for answering the door if, as the occupant always claims, they did not hear the knock in the first instance. A variety of strategies are

employed to avoid returning when called back - looking in the opposite direction, pretending not to hear, or hiding behind a tall hedge or fence. These 'cat and mouse' games are almost entirely confined to rather older people in the small towns of Pittam, Wheatmill and Wefton, to the northeast of Eastborough.

Other neighbourhoods, mostly in the inner city, have quite a high proportion of Asians and almost none of the 'vices', from the meter reader's point of view, exist where Asian communities predominate. In these areas, I knew from experience that there would be very little hassle, few arguments or occasions when you were subjected to a tirade of staccato chatter of complaints and grumbles on the latest 'fashionable' topic, but above all, few dogs. In these communities it is invariably the woman that the meter reader has immediate contact with. They usually say little, move about calmly and silently, and they always precede the meter reader, clearing away any boxes, clothing or other items that may be obscuring the meter. Asian men never do this, British men occasionally do so, but when they do they almost always blame their wives or children for the mess, occasionally swearing under their breath as they grudgingly move the offending articles.

A visit to read the meter of a woman in her 90s is illustrative of the circumstances of many elderly people visited during the course of a day's work. Every encounter is unique and differs from the next if only in detail, but the situation of this old person is not untypical. After knocking the door of a terraced house, with doors opening onto the

street, the door slowly opened to reveal first, the aluminium leg of a walking frame and slowly, painfully slowly, the bent figure of a very elderly woman with thin white hair and wasted limbs appeared. Despite her difficulties she had a friendly and cheerful disposition. The meter was situated in a tiny cupboard under the window of the front door, the door of which opened directly onto the street. The room, as is common in such small houses, was filled with 'over-sized furniture', making movement around the room a hazardous and irritating business for a meter reader, especially if time is pressing. A large armchair lay directly in front of the cupboard containing the meter. In view of the advanced age and infirmity of the woman there was no alternative but to move the furniture myself, which presented some difficulty since alongside the chair stood an ancient cane table with an aspidistra and small wireless set upon it which, when I moved the chair, promptly fell over against a sideboard causing a 'domino effect' to ornaments on the sideboard. After reading the meter I re-positioned all the furniture and upset ornaments, for which she thanked me, presenting an opportunity to find out a little more about her and her circumstances.

Prompted by the question "how are you keeping?" she replied: "Well, I'm not too bad for 92 I suppose, I've got this arthritis that makes it a job to get about, but I manage somehow, all my friends have gone now, my last friend round here passed away last month, and so there's no one now", and added with a sigh of resignation: "I've lived long enough, I'll be glad when my time comes now".

The following example of neighbourhoods vividly illustrates some of the difficulties of access to meters which readers encounter and how they cope with the situation. The particular household discussed here consisted of a couple in late middle age and living in particularly poor conditions in a run down area of the inner city.

The man let me in and cheerfully asked how I was indicating that the meter was in the kitchen. On entering the kitchen I was confronted with what appeared to be years of encrusted grease and dust, cobwebs festooned the ceiling and the sink was barely visible beneath a mountain of blackened saucepans and unwashed crockery, piles of stinking clothing was strewn across the floor. As in other houses in the street it was very likely that the meter would be situated under the sink. As is occasionally the case, when a meter is extremely difficult to reach, the tenant will 'conveniently disappear' or 'otherwise occupy themselves'. I somehow thought it doubtful whether this particular couple practice such a degree of deviousness, but in the event they remained firmly out of sight. To reach the sink would have entailed considerable difficulty - removal of piles of stinking clothing, the inevitable crash of crockery and clatter of saucepans as they cascaded down following the collapse of the delicately balanced piles that surrounded me. Since I did not relish the prospect of such a trauma, particularly at this time of the day, I decided to 'cook' the reading.

Every meter reading sheet is a direct computer print out and contains a 'state', an estimate, usually about 150 therms either side of what the meter actually reads, which is

based on historical consumption records of the consumer plus a minor adjustment for current weather conditions (gas consumption is especially closely related to changes in air temperatures). It occurred to me, after a short time on the job, and with some knowledge of statistics, that the reading could be fairly reliably guessed by using the 'state' as a guide, without the necessity of actually reading the meter. This, I decided, was what the board used when sending out estimated accounts. I subsequently found that a number of other readers had, over the years, also reached the same conclusion and had used what came to be known in their vocabulary, as 'cooking'. The secret here is only to 'cook' on rare occasions in case, by chance, a special inspector is called out to verify a reading following a query and may detect the cooking. I think this would be very unlikely in practice as I found the cooked figures to be very close indeed to the actual reading (I tested this proposition in practice by 'cooking' a reading experimentally and checking its reliability against the meter reading, it invariably worked out to within a few therms either way).

Encounters and sociability

As well as experience of many and varied neighbourhoods; some good, and others difficult to work due to confusing layout and poor access to meters, readers also have contact with a very large number of people in their homes. These contacts, around 33,000 a year, are largely fleeting. However, among the mosaic of contacts, some are less superficial and the meter reader occasionally takes on the role of confidant

(cf. Davies 1959) providing a sympathetic ear in a way only a relative stranger can. The following are examples of such encounters which happened to me during my career as a meter reader. From my own experience and extensive conversations with other meter readers, workers whose jobs take them into people's homes predominantly encounter women at the places they visit.

For women, being at home usually involves doing some form of work there. Many, I found, were involved with looking after children, but also not uncommon were those who tend the elderly and infirm. A typical encounter was with a well spoken woman, probably in her early 50s, living in a semi in a tree-lined road which seemed to have an air of 'jaded gentility' about it. She told me that she had lost both her parents who had been in their late 70s, just over eighteen months ago. She had looked after them for a number of years and I noticed that the house seemed unusually neat and tidy. She said: "It's like having a weight lifted from my shoulders, now I can take a holiday free from worry about my parents back home".

Another different district, this time a hard day's walk up and down the leafy drives of the 'well to do' I come upon a block of council flats, neat and tidy, but strangely 'out of place'. It's a bright early spring day and I climb to the top flat, cursing the echoing concrete steps as I climb. A young woman answers my knock and I go in, after an irritating dig in a kitchen cupboard through what seems like a mountain of old clothes, dirty washing and piles of muddy shoes I find the meter. It has been sealed for debt, but the seal is broken and the supply has been restored. In the

sparsely furnished flat a small pale child crawls on the living room floor. When I mentioned the broken seal, she replied:

I had no alternative, my child had just come out of hospital and we'd had that cold spell in March, his chest was terrible, you see they only allow me £18 a week as a single parent and my rent for this awful place has just gone up to £11, so I got behind with my gas and they cut me off.

She may be prosecuted for illegal re-connection and I may get the sack if I do not report the matter, a dilemma which is increasingly part of the job, 'at the sharp end'. A so-called 'left wing' energy minister had given an assurance publicly, just six months earlier, that no one in need would go without a supply³⁹. It looks as if the good news has not reached this particular household yet. She says that she has been to the Citizens Advice Bureau, but they can't help until she has paid her bill!

A frustrating day in an area of quiet roads of semi detached 'mock tudor' houses with large gardens produced the predictable crop of houses with no one at home. These 'middle-range' houses always involve a large number of return visits. A knock on the door of a house with neat lawns and flower beds brought a contrasting encounter with a rather fierce woman of imposing stature. She seemed agitated and in a hurry - she had to get to a training course for a part-time job she told me she had been lucky enough to get. She was rather critical of the Gas Board and kept muttering under breath about how the 'nationalised bureaucracies' were slowly taking us all over, and how the country was 'going to the dogs'.

She told me with vehemence: "Everything is deteriorating, people ought to protest and resist". It transpired that her husband was a schoolmaster - she complained of how hard his job had become recently: "It's made much worse by the 'liberal' ideas of his younger colleagues, what is needed is the restoration of discipline", she exclaimed bitterly.

After a hard slog in hot weather, on the opposite side of town, I was beginning to feel exhausted. Halfway down a row of semi's I encountered a young woman who I judged to be between 25 and 30. She offered me a welcome soft drink, which I readily accepted. She seemed eager to talk, something I found often, especially among women. She told me she had recently been widowed, her husband had died suddenly during a severe attack of asthma. She felt that his treatment had been neglected, but she found a 'screen of silence' when attempting to complain. Since her husband's death, she told me proudly, she had run the house by herself, doing most of the interior decorating and some of the necessary exterior structural work on the house. As we talked she began to reveal more details about herself, she told me of her interest in the occult and astrology - she said she had made a study of the subject at some length. She claimed, to my surprise, that 'consultations' provided important additional income to supplement her inadequate social security benefit and widows pension. She added: "I like gardening and would like to become self-supporting in food". With a look of resignation on her face, she added: "I think people just want to escape now" (this was at a time when, for several weeks, the press and television seemed to have a preoccupation with such

issues as 'law and order' and 'industrial conflict', 'crisis and breakdown' being the fashionable phrases). On a more personal note, she said that she felt 'very depressed and left-out at times'.

The following encounter, like the previous one, places the meter reader in the role of confidant. Whilst the encounter discussed above demonstrates the ways in which personal tragedy is confronted and coped with by a woman living alone. By contrast, the following concerns the death of a friend and neighbour - this time the meter reader's confidant role consists of being told the unreported details which lie behind a tragedy widely reported in the media.

I am working in a tree lined street of neat terraced houses with well kept gardens. At one house a young woman, possibly in her 30s, asks if I would like a cup of tea. As I have accumulated a little time, due to having a lot of 'outs', I readily accept the welcome offer. As we chat over the steaming tea she tells me that she is separated from her husband, and that her two children live with her. I noticed that her house was amply furnished and appeared very tidy and well ordered. She said that she felt she had coped reasonably well on her own, bringing up two children. A neighbour who she had known quite well, recently ended her life tragically by going out one night to a nearby common, soaking herself with petrol and setting light to it, she told me:

It was horrible at the time, previously her husband had left her unexpectedly and she had to bring up the six children, even so, it was a terrible shock that she should do such a thing. Mind you, she was a very deep thinking sort of person, always taking the burdens of the world on

her shoulders, many times I told her that she was too serious, but I suppose she must have been finding life difficult financially - that's the root of it, it's such a bloody struggle to keep your head above water.

Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter we discussed the constitution of the workforce and the way in which gas meter reading is organised in the Eastborough area. We next examined details of the relationships with the supervisor and colleagues during 'changeover day' when the meter readers call in at the depot to collect their fresh work for the following week. Within the context of an isolated work situation and increased centralisation of records, I illustrated ways in which various job control strategies were developed and put into practice through examples of work planning and organisation by the meter readers themselves. Finally, I discuss my own recruitment as a meter reader, my initiation into the work, and my experiences on the streets of Eastborough over two years.

Central to the discussion in this chapter is the issue of job control; the ways in which the working day is organised to achieve maximum flexibility, and to accumulate a little time during the working week. Important considerations are the 'run' that the supervisor issues to you each week, and the establishment of a 'loose norm' with colleagues about the amount of work that should be completed. These two considerations give 'changeover day' at the depot a high

priority in achieving the aim of accumulated time during the week. Relationships with the supervisor are believed, by the readers, to have an influence on which run you are issued with, and interactions with colleagues during change-over can convey important information about work norms, especially work intensity.

The dichotomy between interaction with the supervisor and colleagues on changeover day, and the reality of an isolated work situation out on the streets of Eastborough, makes learning the 'tricks of the trade', through initiation, crucially important. In the final part of this chapter I focussed discussion upon my own initiation as a meter reader, and my experiences of working the streets. The importance of job control strategies in achieving the management of time, and the place of initiation has to be fully acknowledged. However, it is important to remember that over 90% of the meter readers' working day is spent in isolation from colleagues and supervision. The difficulty of access to this working day by the ethnographer was referred to in chapter three, and the way it was coped with is the subject of the second half of this chapter.

The meter reader's time spent out on the streets and their contacts with the public should not be underrated and, like most street workers, their daily experience of diverse neighbourhoods and people makes a major contribution to the ways in which their perceptions of the social and spacial world are structured and modified over time.

Conversations with the meter readers suggest that these experiences at work can have the effect of reinforcing prejudices about people and society, but alternatively, can also radicalise those perceptions. Experience has shown, as in the summer strike of 1984 and subsequent disputes, that isolation at work is no barrier to collective action under certain circumstances, and that first hand experience of social stratification can have important effects on belief and action. In the following chapter we will go on to examine the rather different work situation of the slot meter collectors.

Footnotes, Chapter 4

1. Three slot collectors and a meter reader joined the gas board at Eastborough after leaving office, factory, and decorating jobs. Most of these claimed that they could not stand being cooped up after the 'relative freedom' of the armed forces.
2. See: Dobb 1963, pp.390-92; Glynn and Harrison 1980, pp. 5-13; and Mandel 1980, pp. 62-96.
3. The basic wage for a gas meter reader in 1954 was £7 a week, compared with averages of £12-£18 in most of the large local assembly plants.
4. The male supervisors covertly admitted to me that they 'prefer women out of the child bearing age range'.
5. Temporaries were taken on during the introduction of a new bonus scheme following the 'run-down' of full timers so avoiding the necessity of declaring redundancies afterwards.
6. 'Cycle' - this term is well recognised by all concerned, since to achieve regular three month readings it must be strictly adhered to as a result all activities are directed towards completing the cycle on time.
7. Conversations as 'unstructured interviews' a research tool extensively used here; see, Burgess 1982, pp. 107-10.
8. Buildings with cellars invariably have the gas meter located in the darkest and most inaccessible part of the cellar (at the front nearest the street). The cellars are often neglected or filled with obstacles (decaying furniture, etc.) and sometimes rat infested or partially flooded.
9. Though the supervisor might encounter the meter reader covertly during the working week when they are out 'on the runs' checking whether the readers are working and the times they start and finish.
10. Discussion of this aspect of remote supervision see: Blackburn and Mann 1979, p. 74.
11. Since re-organisation following the introduction of North Sea gas, ONE regional office supervisor has responsibility for the sub-regional offices which previously had their own supervisors.
12. The notions of 'team spirit' followed from the McKinsey report on the gas industry and its associated ideological commitment to the 'human relations' school of management fashionable in the early 1960s.

13. 'Run' is a word used by the meter readers to describe the area or streets issued to them in any particular week. The sheets are always issued in the same order, with both the computer and, in the 'old days' from the Gilbert card files. The data from the cards was programmed into the computer.
14. 'The girls' is the way the supervisor and deputy refer to the predominantly female meter readers.
15. Some of the 'sickness' is that which arises from resentment over the issue of bad runs and is sometimes used as leverage against supervision.
16. The working class 'earthyness' of the metering supervisor and his deputy seem to coexist uneasily among the grey pin stripes of the marketing men.
17. 'Top office' is the term used by the meter readers themselves.
18. A bonus system operated on the basis of the number of meters read over a basic quantity, called 'the stint'.
19. These 'core perceptions' seemed to originate from some vaguely perceived moral code about the amount of work it was thought 'reasonable' for their colleagues to perform. Coincidentally the volume of work was also what the employers thought 'reasonable' and was reflected in the setting of the bonus system.
20. This book was reluctantly started by the supervisor following complaints from some meter readers who felt they got more than their fair share of bad runs. As has been discussed, the allocation of bad runs in the past seems to have been used as leverage on the part of the supervisor.
21. 'Back calls' is the term used by the meter readers. It refers to the second call, next morning, after the consumer is found to be out on the first call. A 'dial postcard' is left, and if the consumer is out the second time the card is left on the doorstep by the consumer, or, alternatively completed by him and posted.
22. In a case such as this, when there are no back calls to pick up, the meter readers refer to having 'all virgin work' or, occasionally, as 'all untouched'.
23. The job of a meter reader, being a rather solitary occupation viz: one's colleagues, makes the research process into the way they spend their working week rather prolonged and often convoluted.
24. The opportunity to 'make time' was eventually drastically curtailed by management with the introduction of a new bonus scheme which involved the intensification of work during the working week.

25. 'Carded' was a term used both by meter readers and supervisors when a dial postcard was placed through a door for completion by the consumer. Please post, meant that the consumer should post the card to the gas board, rather than left out on the step for collection by the meter reader.
26. This 'making time' is regarded by the meter readers as an acknowledged, and by the supervisor as an 'officially unacknowledged' perk, one which was perhaps of more importance during the 1950s and 1960s when, coupled with low pay and quite strenuous outdoor work, it was much more difficult to recruit meter readers, especially at a time of relatively low unemployment.
27. He was on the brink of retirement and was the last of a long line of supervisors to come up through the ranks, he was replaced with the new generation of 'careerists' using the post as a first stepping stone to junior management in a new 'corporate set up'.
28. In their relationship with the male supervisor the women would collude in their own subordination by acting in ways regarded by men as specific to women; that they were less able to tackle the 'difficult' districts or 'rough' areas, whereas the male meter readers or slot collectors would occasionally show apprehension among their male colleagues, they would never mention it in front of the women or the supervisor.
29. 'Four dial meters' are those with four tiny separate dials (resembling a clock) - each move in the opposite direction to its neighbour. They can prove very difficult to read accurately for the uninitiated. Four dial meters are often old, some having been in service for up to 50 years. They are gradually being replaced by 'digital' readouts. Direct reading digital meters comprise approximately 45-55% of the total.
30. After the original meter is read, a substitute is coupled to the supply then switched back to the original just before the next meter reading, thus, only a small consumption will have been registered on the original meter.
31. The rule book covered most aspects and contingencies of the work. But I found in practice it had limited relevance to what actually happened on the job. Its chief purpose was use by supervisors for enforcing arbitrary discipline.
32. 'Changeover day' is the day of the week when meter readers gather at the Eastborough office to collect next week's work.

33. Meter readers used the term 'doing the dotting': most did this later in the day at home or in a café rather than stay out on the streets longer than necessary.
34. 'Run' - the term used by meter readers for the issue of meter reading sheets upon which they are currently working.
35. A book is kept by the supervisor of all the 'worst runs' in the area. It was started following numerous arguments about the frequency with which various readers were allocated these 'bad runs'. The book serves as a 'token' that the supervisor is allocating the runs on a fair basis. Arguments about run issues date back to when records were kept at the Eastborough depot in the 1950s - the issue clerk was then thought to have 'blue eyed boys' who were always given the best runs.
36. I subsequently found that it was customary for the supervisor to allocate new recruits the more difficult and depressing runs on the assumption that if they could cope with these they could cope with all of the others and thus minimise hassle for the supervisor.
37. The 'consumer reference number' does not identify the consumer as an individual, but instead, gives the exact location of the premises using a map reference, street number, and individual house number in the street - all this information is stored in the computer data bank.
38. The older meters have a plate on the front giving the maker's name (there used to be several different makers, many now defunct) and the date of manufacture. Some of the old meters are of ornate design and the solid brass plates occasionally bear the words Eastborough Corporation Gas Department; these meters pre-date nationalisation when most gas undertakings were run by local authorities and some by private joint stock companies.
39. A. Wedgewood Benn, Energy Minister in the Callaghan government of 1978.

Chapter 5.

Slotters and Slotting

Introduction

Slot meter collectors operate as a separate entity from the meter readers. The collectors have traditionally been predominantly male, though in the past a few women have been briefly involved. Women's perceptions of slot meter collecting, both among those who have experienced it and those who have not, is overwhelmingly negative. They see it as having too many complications, too much 'hassle' and as involving heavy lifting. On the other hand, the men who do it at Eastborough, perceive it as 'a different job altogether', more skilled, and as involving a much higher status relationship with the consumer.

The relationship between the consumer and the slotter is very central, as is the cash relationship involved. In many ways it is close to a proprietorial relationship. The slotters regularly emphasise the notion of working on your own, 'the freedom', not having the boss breathing down your neck. Their priorities at work tend to be very calculative. They see a close relationship between intensity of work, length of the working day, and levels of bonus and wages - 'the effort bargain' (cf. Baldamus 1961).

There is at least some evidence for 'orientations to work' (cf. Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1968, and Blackburn and Mann 1979), though these orientations are not always strong. I look in some detail at the individual biographies of the

slot collectors to see what evidence there might be for orientations. A common strand appears to be an inability to fit easily into work that is at all closely supervised or highly structured. Their distancing themselves from supervision as much as possible, and their attempts to manipulate the senior collector provide further evidence for the notion of slot collectors as individualistic and instrumental at work. The case of the slot collectors is a good example of what Lupton (1963) described as a weak task grouping and lack of social grouping leading to an attitude of 'looking after number one'.

Historical changes that have affected
slot gas meters

Pre-payment (slot meters) were first introduced in the 1880s. Coincidentally, their introduction corresponded with the depression years of 1873-1896, but also, to the connection of gas supplies to the homes of working men, whereas in the early part of the nineteenth century piped gas had been the prerogative of the 'well to do'. During most of the 1920s the ratio of slot gas meters to credit meters remained fairly constant at 1.2 to 1. However, from 1928, and throughout the 1930s, the ratio of slot meters increased substantially till, by the outbreak of the second world war in 1939, the ratio of slot meters to credit meters was almost 2.0 to 1.¹

Following the war, the ratio of slot to credit meters remained fairly constant as the gas industry faced severe competition from electricity. Following the introduction

of the Clean Air Act in the late 1950s many domestic consumers changed over to gas fires, replacing the traditional open coal fire in the living room². From the early 1960s, the spread of gas fires led to the decline of the slot meter and a corresponding growth of credit meters. Sometime in late 1965 slot and credit meters were equal in number, and between 1962 and 1969, the number of slot meters halved and credit meters doubled. By 1970 the ratio of slot meters to credit meters was 0.35 to 1, back to the position as it was at the turn of the century, just after the introduction of the slot meter.

After the changeover to natural gas, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, its then competitive price led to a big increase in the overall consumption of gas in relation to other fuels. The decline of the slot gas meter has continued throughout the 1970s, but, at the time of writing (in 1982-83), their decline is slowing, corresponding with the 'second great depression' of the 1980s. There is evidence that the fuel boards, both gas and electricity, are being forced to substitute pre-payment meters for credit meters where the poorest families are having difficulty in meeting their fuel bills. As we shall see later, the impact of these various historical changes on the working lives of the gas meter readers and collectors has been considerable, not only on working practices, but inevitably, on the way they perceive their job.

Up to the mid 1960s the number of slot meter collectors ('slotters') greatly exceeded the number of credit meter readers⁴ since it was in the early 1960s that the changeover

from slot to credit meters began. Even when the number of slot and credit meters were roughly equal, in the mid-60s, the number of slotters was a larger proportion of the workforce because the rate at which slot meters can be emptied is obviously much slower than the rate at which credit meters can be read, therefore making slot meter collection more labour intensive.

Though a few women were employed as slot collectors, it was nevertheless an overwhelmingly 'male preserve'. This seems due, partly at least, to it being perceived as a traditionally male job, and partly due to its very strenuous nature - especially in the days of low denomination coin meters a collector could very soon collect half a hundredweight of coins. The work is also seen, by most women I spoke to who have experienced it, as involving too much 'hassle' with the public. As an experienced 'old hand', Lil Haswell told me: "Slotting entails too much complication, a lot of extra paperwork, responsibility for cash, and too many disputes with consumers, no, I'd sooner have reading any day". This is not the way experienced slotters see it. They have a fiercely independent attitude towards the job, as Jack Whitehead, a slotter with 27 years experience told me: "I wouldn't have reading at any price, it's too boring, no skill in it, it's a woman's job"⁵.

The big switch to credit meters, during the 1960s, saw an influx of women into the credit reading workforce. The expansion of the credit reading force corresponds with that period, in the mid 1960s, when there was a marked influx of women into the labour force generally. So, with a greater

degree of 'unofficial flexibility'⁶ of hours that meter reading offered, coupled with relatively low male unemployment, it was perhaps not surprising that the new credit reading jobs were taken exclusively by women, leaving slotting as a predominantly male preserve.

From the mid 1960s the fall in the number of slot meters gathered momentum and as a consequence the number of slot meter collectors also declined. A high proportion were in their mid fifties or older, so from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s, a number retired and were not replaced. One went to the electricity board and another joined the local authority as a rent collector. Two of the women meter readers who had done slotting on an occasional basis went over exclusively to meter reading. Thus, the slotting team fell from nine full timers and two part timers⁷, in the mid 1960s, to four full timers in the early 1980s⁸, but the remaining four full timers covered a much larger area, taking in five neighbouring towns previously covered by their own independent teams.

The slot meter and the system of collection

The basic organisation of slot meter collecting does not differ greatly from that of credit meter reading insofar as all the details of individual consumers are stored on computer tapes at the board's regional headquarters. This followed centralisation of administration in the 1960s on a regional board basis⁹.

In the same way as for credit meters (see fig. 1), a sheet is issued from the computer for each individual consumer, but in the case of slot meters the sheet shows many additional

details (see fig. 2). These include the previous meter reading, collection date, special columns detailing the cash taken from the meter, setting of the coin plate¹⁰, details of the refund given and a duplicate statement, the top copy of which is given to the consumer.

Slot meter reading sheets are not issued automatically, in given quantities, like credit meter sheets. The senior collector¹¹ issues an 'indent', on a weekly basis, which the metering supervisor passes to the computer section so that collection sheets can be issued, this is known as 'calling off'. The senior collector bases the indent on the number of collectors working that particular week and the number of meters remaining to be cleared in the area where the slot team are working. The allocation of sheets to the individual collectors is also made by the senior collector. As we shall see later, this has a more direct effect on him in terms of the collector's perceptions of whether they have been allocated 'bad runs'¹² or not, since he works directly, day to day, with them.

The slot team members operate using bicycles and a motor van. The individual slotters cycle to each of their calls, emptying the meter, then proceeding on to the next call. At roughly hourly intervals the senior collector collects the cash from each individual slotter and then, after each collection, banks the cash collected. As slot meters declined in number, during the 1960s and 1970s, they inevitably became more spread out geographically. As a consequence the slotters found that the only practical way of getting around was on a bicycle. Cars were tried but

found impractical, due to the constant stopping and starting leading to burnt out starter motors, excessive fuel consumption, and increased repairs and maintenance. Similarly with motor cycles, the same drawbacks arose, but with the added problems of more difficult starting and the statutory necessity of repeatedly taking off and putting on a crash helmet.

Prior to the formation of the regional boards¹³, when the gas undertaking was under the control of the local authority, heavy duty bicycles of a standard design were provided for the use of a wide variety of employees including meter readers, slotters, inspectors, lamp cleaners and lighters. The bicycles were maintained in a special cycle workshop, all parts and workmanship being provided free of charge. These facilities, together with the bicycles themselves, were withdrawn when the regional boards were formed. The employees concerned were given the opportunity to purchase the bicycles for fifty shillings each.

Some of the equipment needed for slotting is provided by the gas board, but much essential equipment which, over the years, slotters have found indispensable, is provided by themselves. This 'essential' equipment includes: screw-drivers, levers, hacksaw, a piece of board for counting cash on, and, most essential of all, a flashlight. The gas board provides a ring binder¹⁴, pencils, tables for calculating charges and refunds, special forms for pilfered meters, chits for making appointments to call back if the consumer is out, cash summary sheets, and a large 'Gladstone bag' to carry it all in. The slotters have to fit a strong carrier, at their own expense, on the back of their bicycles to support

the bag when full of coins. Obviously, balancing such a weight when cycling is an acquired, but essential art, if the slotter is to survive the hazards of modern traffic. A major difficulty has arisen with the carrier on the bicycles (they use only one make, which is the only type strong enough to support the weight of a full bag of coins), due to poor design. One slotter, Jack Whitehead, summed up the 'hassle' created by the carrier like this:

It took me an hour to re-set that fucking spring on me carrier, it takes only a second to dislodge, the cause this time was rushing to catch that bloody woman at number eight, she's always out when you call, I couldn't believe it when I spotted her at the bedroom window.

In order to keep costs to a minimum, slotters purposely use very old bicycles, with the scruffiest possible appearance. Not only does this save on initial purchase cost and subsequent maintenance, but serves the most important purpose of preventing theft when parked, especially in the more 'risky streets',¹⁵. As a woman once commented to me over a garden gate when she spotted a slotter's bike: "I shouldn't think there's much chance of that bugger being pinched, it's more like a museum piece". A common problem with bicycles is the repeated punctures they sustain. Among four slotters a puncture to at least one bike will occur, on average, once every two or three weeks. These punctures affect, almost invariably, the rear wheel, caused by the heavy collecting bag repeatedly placed over the rear wheel, causing very close contact with sharp objects in the road. Riding over an increasing number of large pot-holes in poorly maintained roads

and over broken kerbstones are other important sources of trouble.

Having sustained a puncture, mending it presents another major problem. Apparently, during recent years, makers of innertubes no longer use pure rubber in their manufacture but have gone over to synthetics, making it almost impossible to get patches to adhere permanently. The consequence is regular trouble with leaky patches leading to soft tyres and further punctures. One slotter claims he has found a fool-proof way of coping with the problem, but since he will not reveal it to the others, it provides fertile ground for jibes and ribbing. As Jack Whitehead said to me: "He'll even offer to do it for you, but he won't tell you how it's done, I don't like to let him do them for me, I'd feel small".

We have seen, in outline, the historical context in which slot collectors operate on a day to day basis, hinting at some of the drawbacks and constraints they face, I want, by way of a 'case study', to focus upon how I became involved with slotting myself, and the perspectives I developed on the job.

New directions - slot meter collecting

After spending about six months as a temporary meter reader it was suggested to me, by the supervisor, Bill Tatam, that I take on the job permanently. He had previously suggested that I might like to do something different during the rest of the year taking on meter reading during the summer on a temporary basis, indefinitely, if I wished. I did not feel any great enthusiasm for the arrangement since,

I reasoned, temporary summer jobs would only be a transitory feature - I was right, as it turned out. Unemployment was beginning to show a sustained rise in the late autumn of 1979 and looked like worsening, thus I was only interested in a permanent post and, in January 1980, was taken on as a permanent meter reader.

I spent the spring and summer of 1980 reading meters, then, in the autumn of that year, Gwen Barlow, with whom I trained initially, approached me saying that the senior slot collector was due to retire in late October. It seems that the supervisor, Bill Tatam, had asked her if she thought any of the readers would be possible candidates - she said she thought I would be capable of taking it on. The supervisor then approached me asking whether I would be interested, I replied that I may well - so he gave me an application form, which I completed and sent to the personnel department. I gained the impression that it was only a formality, and that the job was mine if I wanted it¹⁶.

I was invited for 'formal interview' and much to my surprise one of the interviewers, from the personnel department, had been a fellow undergraduate. He was taken by surprise to see my application, he asked me rather sceptically whether I had thought of taking up teaching instead!¹⁷ I replied that I had not seriously considered it and asked if he was aware of the large numbers of teachers already unemployed - he gave me a knowing smile. I was told that they would be writing to me in due course. Within 48 hours the reply came saying that I had got the job, and could start within the week. I was later to discover that I was the only

applicant for the job (the reason will become clear later) and it seemed to me, as when I first took on temporary meter reading, I was being 'set up' for the job¹⁸.

My last days out on the streets as a meter reader were a strange mixture of regret that I was leaving behind the outdoor 'freedom',¹⁹ the interesting and varied daily situations, and the multitude of contacts (though fleeting), with people in their homes. The other feeling was one of great relief to be free of the tedium, the backbreaking daily slog in all weathers, calculated at an average walk of twelve miles a day, it felt like fifty on some days. But on other days, much rarer, in glorious spring sunshine, not too hot, not too cold, like being on paid holiday. It was with these mixed feelings that I finally put away (though not permanently, as it turned out) my pencil, torch, and comfortable walking shoes.

The slot team

It was on a Monday morning, in the late autumn, that I finally joined the slot team for the first time, we had to make an early start (7.30 a.m.) as we were working 'out of town',²⁰. I had previously briefly met the senior collector, John Foster, whose job I was taking over. He was a surprisingly sprightly and energetic man for his 65 years, and quite a character into the bargain. John stood out somewhat awkwardly from the others, chiefly by a rather exaggerated middle class accent and bearing he had developed. This, together with a rather abrupt but optimistic attitude, made him seem rather like an army officer. He had worked for the

gas board for over twenty-five years, starting as a lamp cleaner, after a spell as a bus conductor. He had come to Eastborough from Wales in the late 1930s. John eventually became a slot collector and then the senior collector, a job which, in the end, he admitted he was glad to be leaving²¹.

I was next introduced to the collectors. There were now four (1979), two nearing retirement age, and the other two in their early fifties. Jack Whitehead, who is 52, is a short squat figure with sharp piercing eyes. He is always very precise with his money, always 'working to the book' especially in his dealings with the senior collector. Jack was born into a very poor area of the inner city, his father was unemployed for most of the 1920s and 1930s and his mother had to work in service to support the family. His first job was in the wholesale market as a porter and general factotum, later he was called up for national service and spent his time in the army catering corps. When he was de-mobbed, in the early 1950s, he took a training course in painting and decorating after which he was recruited by the local authority as a decorator, working on the then rapidly expanding public housing schemes. Eventually, he was sacked from the job for refusal to repaint a window frame and 'insubordinate behaviour' towards the foreman.

Jack fostered a belief in his workmates that he is tough and will stand up to the bosses. In view of this, it is perhaps not surprising that he is rather proud of the sacking incident and makes no secret of it in front of his workmates. He joined the old corporation gas undertaking in 1954 as a slot collector. This was at a time when gas, as a source of

fuel, was facing severe competition from electricity and cheap oil, and the gas industry, as a consequence, was in a dilapidated and run down state. As it turned out, the subsequent years were to see large increases in gas consumers (up to 30%), and the transformation of the industry with the arrival of North Sea gas²². Obviously Jack's perceptions of his working life as a slotter, will to some extent be shaped by these structural considerations.

Next, I met Bill James, a slightly taller and thinner man in his late 40s, he looks slightly younger than his years, wears an open neck shirt and has a short haircut giving him a rather 'boyish' appearance. He goes to bed early, has a concern for his constitutional fitness, goes to church regularly, votes Tory, has a tough attitude on law and order and the 'deteriorating standards' of the country. He does not give any material or moral support to his trade union and is very opposed to 'militant trade union leaders', as portrayed in his daily newspaper, the Daily Mail. Despite the apparent 'working class Tory' image he flamboyantly displays to his workmates, he almost always vehemently opposes management initiatives which he perceives as threatening his personal objective position.

Bill was originally born in London, but the family moved whilst he was still very young, to Wefton, a small town about 15 miles to the northeast of Eastborough, where his father tried to find work. They lived in a pre-war council house on an estate with a local reputation for being 'rough'. Today, when he occasionally works in the area slotting, he often refers to the fact that these were his 'humble

beginnings' and 'how far he has come' since those days - he now owns his own house (all but one of the other slotters live in council houses). Later, the family moved to south Belshire, and when Bill left school, just after the war, his very strict father sent him to work in a local engineering factory, which he disliked intensely. He said: "I couldn't stand the noise and smell, and most of all, the foreman, always breathing down your neck". After a couple of years of that, like Jack Whitehead, was called up; he described it like 'being liberated'.

During a conversation once, on the slotting van, Jack Whitehead asked him why he had done four years service instead of the usual three. He had volunteered, so that he could get into the air force, rather than be seconded into either of the other two services²³. It was during his time in the air force that Bill became a friend of the son of a furniture store owner, and used to visit their large house near Manchester when they were on leave together. Bill told me once that when he was a lad he had read a book about a boy from the Gorbles in Glasgow, who had 'bettered himself', escaping from the Gorbles by working in a shop - he told me that this book had as great an influence on him as anything in his early life.

After he left the services he had a couple of jobs in factories, but after the 'freedom' of the forces he could not settle, "it spoils you", he said. Eventually he tried slotting at the gas and met John Foster (the senior collector) who persuaded him to stay; "on reflection", he said to me once, "it was the best compromise, the open air, more

mobility, and no bosses breathing down your neck", and he has stayed on in the job for another twenty years.

The third collector on the team is Ron Wild. Ron is a tall healthy looking 63 year old with a tanned face and silver grey hair. Though Ron is a rather dominant figure his voice is soft and manner deferential. However, as I came to know him better, I found he could be rather rigid and domineering in his attitude, but despite this he had an endearing personality, and in addition proved a valuable informant. Ron's was to be the third retirement I personally experienced during my relatively short working life as a 'gasman'.

Ron's working life began in a foundry after living in an orphanage for a good deal of his childhood. He hated the job and told me:

I stuck it for seven years, eventually I could feel my lungs giving out, the smoke and fumes were terrible. I went for what seemed a better job at Jessops, in the machine shop, setting up and that, but it wasn't that much better, a noisy and smelly atmosphere, still, it was fairly skilled. It was at that time I became interested in photography, it was through a chap who worked there, it was cheap then, see. I worked at Jessops through the war, it was a protected job see, but in 1943, I was eventually called up. I went out to the Middle East and India, that's when I went to Hiroshima, just after they dropped the bomb. 24

I was surprised by the wide range of experiences of an ordinary working man during these momentous historical episodes, unsung and rarely discussed with anyone, even his workmates, who I later found knew nothing of his experiences in Hiroshima.

When he had returned from the war, Ron told me:

The army was the big break, I mean, I couldn't settle when I got back to civvy street - after all that 'freedom' and travel. I joined the Post Office first, as a pole erector, it was terrifically hard work in all weathers, for only £7 a week! I stuck it for 14 months then Jim Allwood, at the gas, asked me to go there, and I've been here ever since (28 years). The great thing about being on the gas, is the freedom from the bosses, all the lads will tell you that, being your 'own boss', I think everyone wants that - it's the variety too, not working in one place, under one roof.

Ron's final comment though, let me down with a bump, a contradiction, or reality surfacing through the 'golden haze'? "I shall be glad to retire, I've had enough after all these years, I'll be able to stay in bed in the mornings instead of having to get up at the crack of dawn in the winter".

Finally, I was introduced to Louis Roule, a man of 'uncertain' origin who had come to England from America after a spell in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. He is short and thin and always wears a beret when the weather turns cool. He rides a sixty year old bicycle and has the distinct appearance of a Frenchman, in fact he is occasionally confused with the onion seller by people in the street, who will ask if he has 'sold out'. In addition to these qualities he has also a parsimoniousness, never spending a penny unnecessarily if he can avoid it. If he sustains a puncture to his bicycle he will continue to patch the inner-tube until no longer feasible, and will always attempt a repair, however intricate, if a part should fail, rather than

go to the expense of a replacement. His workmates rib him constantly about it, and also about his apparent skill at finding things in the street. Almost every day he will pick up some trivial item which he thinks can be made use of in some way, quite often it will be a small cycle part (nut, washer, or even an old cycle chain), but sometimes a button, pencil or elastic band. Louis appears to talk about himself to a similar extent to his colleagues, but when reflecting on what he actually said it usually amounts to very little²⁵.

Louis came to Eastborough after a spell in London, in the late 1950s. He got a job as a stoker at the old City gas works, but demand for 'town gas'²⁶ declined and its manufacture eventually ceased, making many gas workers 'surplus to requirements'. It was at this time that Louis transferred to slot meter collecting, and has remained in the job ever since. He has always worked at a very leisurely pace, emptying a much smaller proportion of meters than the remainder of the slot team. His workmates often joke about this usually saying: 'Ah well, he doesn't need any bonus, he's rich anyway'. I had never taken this to be more than a joke, but one day Jack Whitehead told me that Louis once owned several oldhouses in town, which he split up into multi-occupation flats for students. Later, he sold them for re-development, realising a large sum in the process. It was at this time that he moved to a larger house in a 'better part of town'. This was later confirmed by Ron Wild and also in a conversation with the deputy supervisor, Mike Maguire. At about the same time the senior collector, John Foster, inherited a legacy. In the years that followed who

was the wealthiest was, it seems, a regular source of covert antagonism between them.

The individual biographies of the slot collectors discussed above contain the seeds of important insights into personal and collective motivations which I was to observe at closer quarters when I began working with them in the autumn of 1979. It is the development of this working relationship that I now want to discuss.

Initiation into 'slotting'

I worked with the slot team for just a fortnight before taking on the senior's job. I experienced most aspects of the senior's work, which included collecting cash from the individual collectors on the streets, 'weighing and bagging' the coins and periodically depositing them at the bank. Unlike the credit meter reading sheets, the senior collector has control over the number of meter sheets to be called off the computer each week, and is responsible for their allocation to the individual slotters, at the beginning of the week. The greater degree of control exercised by the senior collector, combined with the greater autonomy of the slot team, proved a source of covert antagonism to the more senior metering supervisor. The senior slot collector was able to plan his collecting programme several weeks in advance and to keep a detailed record of his clearances. All these data were kept locked away in a desk, in a ground floor office, which was separate and some distance away from the metering supervisor.

The metering supervisor, Bill Tatam, took every opportunity to try to subvert the precarious and subtly maintained 'quasi-independence' of the senior slot collector, and of the slot team too. He would regularly call into question the number of slot meter sheets the senior had asked to be called off the computer, revising it if he possibly could. The outgoing senior, John Foster, would short-circuit the rigmarole by periodically over-ordering sheets, when the opportunity presented itself, thus building up a stock of sheets and frustrating the supervisor's crude attempts to undermine this aspect of the senior's precarious and limited job control. In fact, from the supervisor's point of view, it was the only real control he could exercise over sheet issues, since the sheets for credit meters were issued on an automatic basis, to correspond with a set reading cycle of thirteen weeks²⁷.

In addition to doing these aspects of the work I also went out with a collector, on the streets, to experience the job at first hand. The senior decided that I should go out with Ron Wild, who had the longest service (though the others all had over 20 years service each) and because he worked most closely to 'the book'²⁸. As I was subsequently to find out, though idiosyncratic, he was the least so of the team members²⁹. On the first occasion I went out, it was to a block of flats. There were lots of stairs and no lifts, this meant humping the heavy leather Gladstone bag up many flights of stairs. When we got half way up Ron said: "Here you are, have a go at carrying the bag up these stairs", the

weight was tremendous, it seemed as though there was an imaginary magnet in the stairs, pulling the bag and its heavy load of coins downwards. Eventually, puffing and blowing, we reached the first flat.

After what seemed a long wait an elderly woman, obviously suffering from very stiff joints, slowly opened the front door. She led us, at snail's pace, into a small kitchen where I set the cash bag down on a table with some relief. He opened the folder at the appropriate sheet after flicking through the pile. I noticed that Ron discreetly spat on his finger to enable him to turn the pages³⁰. He gave me the meter keys, asking me to remove the coin box, read the meter, and check the setting³¹. The meter was situated under the stairs, obscured by a pile of clothing and an old sewing machine. It was pitch dark at the point where the stairs reached the floor and there were about 18 inches in each direction in which to manoeuvre. Eventually I managed to get the key into the padlock, at first it would not turn (being opened twice a year and situated in a damp atmosphere the locks frequently become corroded) but after much difficulty and cursing under the breath it gradually turned. However, even more irritation was to follow, the box clasps are of awkward design making it a nail splitting exercise to turn them. Having eventually freed the clasp, the cash box jammed - it was full to brimming over with coins, which had become entangled in the meter mechanism. The secret here, was to vigorously shake the coin box till the coins settled and, with luck, the entangled coins drop away from the mechanism. At last I emerged from the understairs

'tomb' very frustrated and with a strained back muscle, Ron's comment was: "Where have you been all this time?" glancing at his watch in a rather sarcastic gesture.

I emptied the cash box onto the table and we both began counting, I was all 'fingers and thumbs' dropping coins on the floor occasionally, but Ron was very well organised and fast, having counted and 'bagged'³² fifty pounds worth of coins to my twenty pounds worth. When we had counted all the cash from the meter, the amount was entered on a small detachable receipt, the amount of refund due³³, calculated from tables provided, was entered and then subtracted from the total cash found in the meter. Ron said to the old woman, with a broad smile: "Here you are darlin, eight pounds this time", pressing the coins firmly into her hand. She smiled back at him saying: "Oh, thanks very much", as if being given a valued present rather than her own money back³⁴.

Before we left, the final job was to replace the coin box, this was a reversal of the irritating performance of getting it out in the first place. The box had to be manipulated back in - in a very confined space, in almost total darkness - the clasp re-positioned, and finally the padlock hooked through the clasp ring and snapped shut. The final closing of the padlock, due to stiffness and corrosion, is almost as tricky as the initial opening.

We visited a further four flats, two of which brought no response to our knocks³⁵, one contained a very young mother and child and another a frail and elderly man. Just

before we left the old man told us that we may not find his neighbour at home because, although he was unemployed he was on his own (his wife, it appears, had left him) and usually went shopping at this time³⁶. We knocked. Despite the old man's prediction the door opened almost immediately, a tall heavily built man, probably in his late 20s, answered. When we said who we were, he looked rather surprised and a little irritable, he pointed to the stairs without a word. When, at last, I reached the meter, which lay under piles of smelly clothing and shoes, the lock was broken and, on pulling out the cash box, found it empty. Ron mentioned this to the man, who just shrugged his shoulders saying that he had had a break in during which the money from the meter must have been taken. Ron made out a special slip which gave details of the missing cash and an additional charge for fitting a new lock. We set the meter down (to supply less gas for each coin inserted), the new setting being marked on the slip and the copy handed to the consumer³⁷.

As we left, Ron told me that the vast majority of meter breaks were 'inside jobs', though the consumer often blamed a break in. I subsequently found that this claim was substantially true, since when a break in did occur the gas board fitted a new meter or parts immediately following the police report, so in any case, the chances of a slotter arriving to make the bi-annual collection immediately following a break in, were very remote. From my own experience as a meter reader, and from local knowledge, I subsequently found, from the slips the slotters handed in, that

most meter breaks were limited to areas of the highly mobile, the unemployed, or those living in poor conditions. An area with a combination of all three was the most vulnerable. Ironically, these 'internal thefts' were futile since, effectively, setting the meter down increased the price of the gas supplied until the debt was cleared, without the necessity of 'messy court proceedings' for the gas board.

It was with some relief that I re-joined John Foster on the slotting van: it had been quite a strenuous day out, pounding the streets again. Despite the additional 'hassle' over cash relationships with the public and the carrying of a heavy cash bag, a rather slower pace³⁸, and the greater involvement with the consumer had its compensations, though the novelty, and the relatively short time spent doing slotting, may have produced a 'halo' effect. Although I took care not to mention to any of the slotters and most of the readers, that I had come from university to the job, nevertheless this fact about my background annoyingly 'seeped out'³⁹. Ron Wild had said to me, while out on the streets, "I can't understand you wanting to do this type of job, I'd have thought teaching or something like that would have been more in your line."

Being new to slot meter collecting, and not having come to it through the traditional route of a permanent post, usually from a semi-skilled job, I must have seemed very much of an 'unknown quantity'. My new role being rather pivotal to the successful operation of the individual slotter, I guess they saw it as vital to 'test me out' and then to

'socialise' me into the job the way they expected it to be done. The discussion that follows contains elements of this 'socialisation' process.

The following day was spent working on the slot van with John Foster, the senior collector, whose job I was taking over⁴⁰. The senior collector makes cash collections from the slotters who are out on the streets, at roughly hourly intervals. The cash collected has to be weighed, agreed, and recorded on a summary sheet, and also by the slotter on his chit, which the senior has to sign. John Foster had very firm views on the way the job should be run. This I found tended to differ somewhat from the 'official' view. However, he usually ignored the rule book and any attempts to bring his methods 'into line'. He said he always got away with it, he thought, because of his team's reputation for high productivity. For instance, he never met the individual slotters at pre-determined times and places, as outlined in the official rule book. The way he worked was to get the slotters to write on a list the streets they would visit during the day. He would look for them in the appropriate streets, after calculating where they would be most likely to be found, based on the rate per hour at which each emptied meters. He believed, justifiably, that this arrangement minimised the time slotters spent waiting around. This was a view also held by the slotters themselves, since they were motivated by the desire to earn bonus, and to minimise the time they spent out on the streets, during the day. This arrangement could work both ways though. The slotters would occasionally use it themselves to antagonise

the senior⁴¹ if he had failed to turn up when expected, or had done something which upset or annoyed them.

The hourly contact with the senior on the van seemed to be of importance to the slotters, not only from the point of view of relieving them of a heavy bag of coins, but also to have a brief chat, a grumble, or to exchange a joke. When I began to take over 'paying in' at the van, I found that the first contacts with the slotters while doing this proved to be fairly reliable indicators of their individual approaches and attitudes towards the job, and towards the senior. Jack Whitehead, for instance, is usually very predictable in where he can be found, and very precise in presenting and counting his cash, always passing over his chit for signing (the others don't do this). He is also very rapid in all his movements. He subsequently proved to be the fastest and most accurate of the team. He is a very 'quick thinker' having an instant reply to most questions, but in addition to these characteristics, he has a 'short fuse' and would 'blow his top' from time to time if things did not go his way.

Bill James is very different from Jack. He is more muddled in his thinking, and makes by far the most mistakes in his cash and with his calculations. His mind often seems to be elsewhere, and in addition, he is very critical of the shortcomings in others and has a knack (which greatly amuses Jack Whitehead) of making life seem complicated by offering very obscure explanations to simple problems. Rather than use the term enigmatic, Jack would say: "He fucking baffles me at times".

Ron Wild, who is due to retire soon can, despite his advancing years, occasionally be very impetuous. He will for example, move very erratically sometimes, deviating from his route, unpredictably speeding up or slowing down. When he gets a notion in his mind he will hold on to it rigidly, to a set view or dogma, arguing fiercely that it is the correct one. Usually disputes with other collectors revolve around details of procedure, whether meter settings should be entered in a particular column on the meter sheets, or not. As Jack Whitehead said to me: "Ron's calm now to how he used to be when he was younger, if he'd not 'got his day in',⁴² and he called at a house where the people were out, he would kick the flowers in the garden, honest, I'm not joking, he's been reported for it by neighbours who happened to spot him".

Louis Roule, the final member of the team, strikes the uninitiated as a rather remote and to some, an unfriendly character. Perhaps due to his apparent eagerness to be friendly towards me, I seemed to get on well with Louis, at least initially. However, I subsequently found he could be rather devious, especially with the other collectors when they had ribbed him about his work pace or perceived meanness. I think the senior, John Foster, was rather surprised by the way I got on with Louis, since his own dealings with him had always been 'stormy' - he said to me: "it's strange, he's the kind of man who either takes to you or he doesn't, he's obviously taken to you from the start".

Louis has a simple 'easy going' and philosophical

approach to life - he always seems to see a certain inevitability in what happens day to day and he never changes his way of working. Whatever time the other slotters finish working in a particular location, and we go to collect him in the van, he will always still be working, never finished and waiting, yet he will never be behind with his work.

On one occasion I had collected the other slotters and, as always, we went to pick up Louis last of all. His old cycle was parked in a street of Victorian terraced houses, with front doors opening out onto the street. It was not outside any particular house, but was near a piece of waste ground. We waited for him at least fifteen minutes, by this time the others were getting restive. Jack Whitehead (always the most restive) said: "We'd better try to find him", Jack looked up and down the row of houses and eventually called: "we'd best try these two, this one with the aspidistra in the window, and the other with the lace curtains, they both look 'likely bets'"⁴³. A knock at one brought no response, and at the other a short stout woman, probably in her 70s, she said he had called some twenty minutes before. Much to the consternation of the others, Jack finally discovered him up a narrow entry some doors away, sitting on his collecting bag 'doing his dotting'⁴⁴, he seemed quite unperturbed and eventually came back to the van without comment on the incident.

The outgoing senior collector had a very individualistic way of running the job. He adhered to few of the board's rules on the conduct of the slot collecting work, though

attempts had been made by the supervisor and security man to 'bring him into line'. One example of this was the occasion when a security officer went out with him one day and made several suggestions to John on following procedures more closely. He retorted:

Look, I've been doing this job for 25 years with no trouble at all, I tell you it's the only way to do the job, you've only got to look at the figures to see that we're far and away the best team in the region.

(I corroborated the story with the deputy supervisor later, in conversation.) Nothing further was said, and the job carried on as before. John's manner and approach to people seemed unassailable, no one ever seemed to challenge him. As the deputy supervisor once commented jokingly: "Nobody ever contradicts John, he just baffles them with science, and when they hear that posh army major's accent, that's it". From the beginning I found it rather strange that John had never gone for promotion, for he seemed to have the 'bearing and image' expected of a supervisor or manager⁴⁵, and I would judge him to be an intelligent and 'quick thinker', more so indeed than some I had met in supervisory roles in the gas board hierarchy. On several occasions, when the opportunity arose, I questioned John more closely on this topic during conversations. His view was that his team was so good (meaning they earned high bonus, of which he was paid an average) that his wages, together with bonus overtime and expenses, was nearly as high as some of the supervisors. But the chief attraction of the job for him was that he felt he had a great deal of 'freedom' - he was

virtually his own boss as he saw it, since he worked away from the office and so had little contact with the supervisor. His outlook seemed to me to most closely resemble that of a small entrepreneur. He said that he enjoyed whatever he did (always an optimist), and left to his own devices, he would make a success of anything.

Despite his self confidence though, it did not take long for me to realise that he was also very much constrained by the way the slotters in the team worked. Their capacity to earn high bonuses, in which he shared, made them able to make demands on him too. Examples of these are their insistence that he search for them when collecting cash, rather than them waiting for him at a pre-determined time and place. Their power to demand prompt, and more regular cash pick-ups than required by the regulations, and above all their insistence on finishing early⁴⁶. All this meant that John had to rush around, as he put it, 'like a bat out of hell', at certain times of the day. As Louis Roule said to me once: "I heard Jack Whitehead say the other day, 'the senior, he's only the chauffeur'",

As the day of John Foster's retirement approached the endemic antagonism in the working relationship between the slotters and the senior surfaced. The slotters had not shown any willingness to contribute towards a retirement present for him, despite over twenty years working together as a 'team'. I discovered this by enquiring of Ron Wild (he was the eldest of the team, and therefore in some ways seen, by the others, as the senior member) whether any

arrangements for John's retirement had been made. Ron said the lads had not shown any interest, but he thought their attitude was not very generous, especially as they had worked together for so long. John himself had admitted to me that he would be glad to see the back of the slot team and looked forward to retirement. I thought this rather contradictory in view of his apparently enthusiastic attitude towards the job, but did not say anything.

After some conscience jerking by Ron Wild, the slotters decided to make a contribution towards a retirement present for John Foster. John had made it very clear throughout the office⁴⁷ that he did not want any fuss when he left, but just wanted to 'fade away quietly'. There had been a rumour, originating from the supervisor, that the Metering Controller from the regional office, would like to attend any gathering to say goodbye to John. Having got wind of this, John made it clear that he did not want the controller to attend. He felt it would be hypocritical and false for him to do so, he said: "They care nothing for me really, it's just a front they put on, a meaningless routine they go through, and as far as I'm concerned, it's mutual"⁴⁸. I personally felt, as an 'outsider', that his workmates for so many years should at least buy a bottle of sherry and have a brief drink, just the slotters, in the canteen at the end of the day. They reluctantly agreed.

The day arrived for John's retirement. Typically, he treated it just like any other day, and when the end of the day came, I think he was a little surprised when I suggested that we go to the canteen for a drink with the 'lads'. He

came along with good grace though, and after a drink and good wishes for his retirement, Louis Roule presented him with the gift, a table lamp. He thanked the slotters and said, jokingly, that he would be delighted to be able to stay in bed a little longer on winter mornings. He added, laughingly, but rather earnestly: "and above all, I'll be glad to see the back of you lot". It was several weeks later, while talking to Jack Whitehead at the van, that he said to me with a serious look: "You know, John really meant that, when he said he'd be glad to see the back of us"- I thought I expect they now realise they gave John a hard time over the years⁴⁹.

Working with the slot team

Following the retirement of John Foster, I was effectively 'on my own' in the senior collector's role. It did not take me long to realise that he had made rather more of a meal of the job than was strictly necessary. I was able to simplify certain things, such as devising a properly laid out and printed list for the slotters to put their calls on, so that I could time more accurately where they could be found, and write down the times I rendez-voused with them. This, together with a map, in a plastic sleeve, on which routes could be marked with a special pen and erased at the end of the day, I hoped, would make 'losing' slotters less likely. I had found that losing trace of individual slotters, while working with John Foster, gave rise to frequent, and somewhat heated arguments.

I had always thought John's rather casual approach to route planning, and not working to set collection times for each cash pick-up a source of potential trouble. It took some months of working to my own more precise system, to realise that this was not where the problem lay, but I gradually came to realise that it was the slotters themselves who frequently played 'cat and mouse' with the senior collector, using their long years of local geographical knowledge to take short cuts. They would cut across estates using narrow passages as a sort of covert bargaining counter to demonstrate to the senior that, if need be, they had the power to frustrate him. As Bill James once said when I first met him: "We can really put a 'spanner in the works' if we want".

In the early months I found that Jack Whitehead and Bill James were particularly fond of the 'cat and mouse' ploy. Jack Whitehead would occasionally lose his temper when I was able to frustrate his attempts to 'lose me', due to my more precise method of following slotters routes. A further source of frequent contention I found was with the amounts of cash paid over to the senior at cash collection times. John Foster had told me never to worry unnecessarily about this because, at the end of the day, when the total cash collected was finally balanced by each collector, any discrepancy would show up. Despite my scepticism about this arrangement, in practice it provided mutual benefits to both slotters and senior if a mistake did arise, by eliminating one of its possible sources. Of course, it depends on mutual trust between the team members and the senior, since

the opportunities for 'sharp practice' are obvious. As Bill James commented to me: "One 'bad apple' in the barrel would totally knacker the job up". Though I would not want to suggest that scrupulous accuracy necessarily prevails in all aspects of the slotters' relationship with consumers, it is nevertheless crucial within the slot team itself, if they are to operate as a credible entity⁵⁰.

As the weeks and months went by, it became clearer that the role of the senior collector, as far as the slotters were concerned, was a central one. Operating as they did, using bicycles, it was essential to them to have the back up of the senior collector with the van, to collect the heavy weight of cash at regular intervals and prompt times, to supply them with the necessary stationary when they ran out (cash books, money packets, cash shortage slips, and pencils), to transport them to more distant locations, and to drop them close to home at the end of the collecting session⁵¹. Above all, the contact with the senior in the van gave them the opportunity for a chat, and a grumble about the awkwardness of the consumers, or less often, about a kindness they had encountered during the morning's collecting.

The emotional and physical strain of the senior's role I found, was considerable as the months passed. It consisted mostly of a high level of fatigue, induced by being continually on the move, often in heavy traffic in congested town centres in a vehicle, which while fairly new, was of atrocious design from the drivers point of view, noisy, uncomfortable, and prone to regular breakdown. These

difficulties, compounded by those of trying to search for elusive bicycles in heavily congested streets, trying to arrive to time and regularly having to listen to emotional stories about obdurate consumers, led on some days to severe headaches, lumbago, and other less tangible symptoms of stress (cf. Cavendish 1982, pp. 118-20).

Despite my initial puzzlement at why I had been the sole applicant for the job of senior collector, it did not take long actually doing the job to realise why. I was now rather less surprised by John Foster's remark, "I'll be glad to see the back of you lot"⁵². Taking into account the drawbacks, the job nevertheless presented an excellent 'vantage point'⁵³ for undertaking an ethnographic study among this particular group of workers. Conversations between myself and individual members of the team and between slotters themselves (especially on the van) proved to be valuable research tools. An early interest was to try to throw some light on why there had been no other applicants for the senior's job, especially from among the collectors themselves⁵⁴. As Jack Whitehead said: "There's too much aggro in your job, you're the 'meat in the sandwich' between us lot and the fucking bosses, besides, if you go home early it's bound to be noticed in that office, or by the bloke on the gate"⁵⁵. The slotters themselves obviously suffered none of these drawbacks. Attempts to discover why the senior readers from nearby areas had not applied revealed similar explanations, but other reasons were important too. As one said to me: "That slot team are too bloody awkward,

they're all very old hands, they have too much control over the senior".

After many months working with the slotters and, I believe, gradually gaining their confidence, they slowly revealed more crucial pieces of information which explained why they remained as they were, and did not have any strong motivation to move to any other job. During the course of several conversations on the van a very significant event which occurred during the changeover to decimal currency was revealed to me. It seems that Jack Whitehead had always had an interest in coins (perhaps not entirely surprising in view of his job), and realised that the value of certain old coins, especially those being phased out, had substantially increased. This applied especially to those with a high silver content. Jack was taking these coins, when he found them in the meters, and substituting less valuable ones from a float that he carried. He would take them, periodically, to a local coin dealer who he knew, and sell them to him⁵⁶. Bill James interjected: "It was all very nice for him, but none of us knew about it till the local paper got hold of it and published an article about it". Jack replied: "Yes, if it hadn't been for that press story I wouldn't have had to cut you fuckers in!". It appears that just before the press story broke the senior had got wind of the coin dealing and, unknown to Jack, had his own float and would sort through the other slotters coins after they had paid them in. Obviously, when the story was revealed, the other members of the team also became 'coin dealers'. Jack said that

during his best year, 1971, he made over £1,000, out of which he bought a motor bike. The others made similar sums, and Bill James claimed that he was able to purchase built in furniture at home and spend a fortnight in Spain. John Foster purchased some Kruggerand with his share, just before the huge rise in gold prices during the 1970s.

It was only gradually that the full extent of the 'coin dealing' was revealed to me, and knowledge of it neatly brought together two pieces of separate information which on their own were interesting, but brought together, they explained each other, and a lot about the nature of the slotters job over the past ten to fifteen years.

During the early 1970s a fierce struggle had taken place between the slotters and the management about recognising the slotters as being exclusively slotters, and not occasional readers⁵⁷. This insistence on being employed only on slotting had been initiated by Bill James and most ferociously fought for by him and especially Jack Whitehead, who at the time, unknown to management and the other slotters, had a lucrative sideline as a 'coin dealer'. It becomes clear why, at this vital time, it was important for him and later the other slotters, to maximise their time collecting coins. It was fortunate, from their point of view, that a young and ambitious district secretary of the union vigorously fought their case at face value. Jack often says proudly: "When we were at the meeting with the gaffers, at head office, he (the district secretary) turned round and said to them: 'If you don't accept this one, I'll bring out the whole region'"⁵⁸. Eventually the board conceded and the slotters remained

exclusively on slotting from then, till the introduction of a radically new one call scheme⁵⁹ covering both slotters and readers, in 1982.

It was with great reluctance that the slotters had no alternative but to accept the new scheme which, by a small margin, the readers had voted for. The chief motivation, which they had back in the 1970s, for rejecting reading, had now gone with the exhaustion of the coin market. But there still remains the other aspect of reading, as the slotters perceive it - that it is a boring and less skilled job. When called upon to do reading now, they 'retaliate' by striving to earn higher bonuses than they are content with on slotting. They see it as making the board pay the price for forcing their hand.

A recent change of management (due to mass retirement of the 'old guard') has brought a group of men into these posts who, for the first time, have not come up through the ranks, but have been promoted from other departments, mostly from finance and Productivity Services (work study). Their approach to the job is more instrumental, their not being embedded in the ethos of metering, that is, as it was traditionally practiced. These events have led to decisions being taken which have resulted in greater antagonism, especially among the slot team. A major focus of antagonism revolves around the issue of settings⁶⁰.

Since standing charges have recently been introduced on slot meters, this now has to be subtracted from any refund due to the consumer. As the rate of consumption is greatly

variable between different consumers, the new management have devised a system of differential settings for each individual consumer based on their consumption so that sufficient refund is produced to cover the standing charge, from which it is deducted. The main effect of this procedure is to considerably reduce the overall refund the slotter pays to the consumer. This creates a great deal of confusion, especially among the elderly (the majority of those with slot meters) naturally increasing the 'hassle' slotters have to contend with from consumers. The outcome of the changes, apart from making the slotters job even more difficult, tends to jeopardise the slotters income from tips⁶¹. Jack Whitehead and Bill James have countered this drawback by setting meters contrary to instructions, thus providing a larger refund, from which a tip is much more likely to be forthcoming. Of course, the beauty of setting down is that it does not involve any dishonesty, since it gives slightly less gas for the coin inserted, but is returned to the consumer in the form of a larger refund, thus enhancing the chance of a tip.

Few of the supervisors understand the finer points of meter setting (quite complex, even for the initiated), as Jack Whitehead puts it: "Them fuckers up there don't know what day of the week it is!" Unfortunately, there's only one problem with this 'neat arrangement', Louis Roule. He has much greater difficulty following the finer points of setting and frustrates the whole enterprise by re-setting the meters according to instructions, much to the consternation

of the others. As Jack says: "I can always tell when I'm following that bastard". I sense that their minds are already working on ways around this; they've covertly suggested to me, once or twice, that he's issued with nearly similar runs each time, preferably the more spread out ones!

Conclusion

As we saw in chapter four the issue of gender was raised in relation to the female meter readers dealings with the male supervisors. Again gender issues emerge in the sphere of slot meter collecting, for women collude with a common view of slotting as 'men's work', both among the women meter readers and the slotters themselves. Women are seen by the slotters as potentially disruptive of a comfortable male world of slotting work and as 'unreliable' in terms of punctuality and time off. These views are part of a wider set of sexist perspectives by the slot collectors on the role of women more generally⁶².

Slotters' perceptions of their work situation are fundamentally driven by individualism and self-seeking competitive instrumentalism based upon a 'cash nexus' relationship with slot meter consumers in which the slotter is seen as the bringer of 'bounty', especially when a 'good' refund is due. Each individual slotter subordinates his workmates and the senior collector to his own interests, where he can get away with it. A clear example of this self-seeking instrumentalism is seen in the case of 'coin dealing' at the time of

decimalisation in the early 1970s. The limits of slotters' individualistic instrumentalism is precisely when it is threatened by management actions: under such an assault their 'solidarity' knows few bounds. An example was their reluctant support for the meter readers' strike in 1984: this can be seen as partly submission to strong union leadership, and partly as 'paying back' management for introducing the one call system which required them to read meters when called upon to do so (cf. Hyman, 1984, chapter 5; and Hill, 1981, chapter 7).

Footnotes, Chapter 5

1. P.E.P., 'Report on the Gas Industry in Great Britain', 1939, pp. 46, 73.
2. Emission of smoke, U.K., 1951, 2.36m. metric tons, 1968, 0.93m. metric tons; Source: Social Trends, H.M.S.O. No. 1, 1970, p. 66. See also: The English Climate, H.H. Lamb, 1964, p. 85.
3. The fuel boards have always covertly resisted fitting slot meters, claiming that they represent a security risk (pilferage rates are however, very small). The true reason for their reluctance is more likely to be the greater cost of administering and collecting from slot meters.
4. The data for Eastborough in 1959 were: nineteen slot meter collectors, and four credit meter readers, 23 in total.
5. See Westwood, 1984, p. 11, on relationship between 'segregation' and 'women's work'.
6. Working at a remote distance from supervision, not clocking in or out each day, meant that sometimes a little time could be 'accumulated' at the end of the day, or week, by working a little faster than the job timings allowed for. For a discussion of 'autonomy' and outdoor work see, Blackburn and Mann, 1979, pp. 63-9.
7. The two 'part-timers' were female meter readers who did slotting when the need arose.
8. In 1957 there were 19 slot collectors and four meter readers at the Eastborough depot.
9. All records, which had previously been stored in local offices on traditional 'Gilbert Cards', were centralised in newly created regional offices and stored on computer tapes.
10. The 'setting' is the amount of metered gas for each coin placed in the meter: i.e., 80, 108, or 120 cu feet for each coin.
11. The senior collector is effectively the team leader who plans and organises the collecting sequence, and is responsible for the cash collection from the individual collector.

12. The 'run', as with credit meter reading, is the area in which the individual slotter is working. Whether the run is seen as bad or not will depend on several factors, with slotting the decisive factor is increasingly, how 'spread out' the calls are.
13. In 1948, following nationalisation, 12 Area Boards were formed.
14. These are of poor quality and need regular replacement. The main problem is poor quality buckram covers which fall apart, and weak springs which allow the sheets to spew out on the road if caught unawares.
15. These 'risky streets' are in areas, known to the slotters to have a high risk of pilferage for cycles. These are not necessarily the 'rough' or 'slum' streets which policemen often seem to associate with petty theft (cf. Holdaway, 1983, pp. 36-48).
16. I felt that the job would make a change. By this time I was beginning to be both mentally and physically exhausted by meter reading. I had also collected extensive field notes and felt that seeing another aspect of metering would open up 'fresh pastures' for observation.
17. Something I was also asked spontaneously, by a member of the slotting 'team', when I later joined them as the 'senior'.
18. When I took the job of temporary meter reader, I was 'covertly' encouraged to apply, and subsequently found that the gas board had difficulty in filling the post. Again, with the post of senior collector, they had difficulty finding applicants, in fact, it turned out that I was the only one.
19. Blackburn and Mann, 1979, p. 191, 'one of the main aspects of outdoor work is autonomy, especially from supervision'.
20. The slot team was based in their home town, being officially known as an 'inner team'; i.e., based in a large town or city. But, as slot meters have declined, they have gradually taken over the smaller surrounding towns and villages which once had their own slot collection arrangements.
21. The role of senior collector, like many jobs of a very junior or quasi-supervisory level, contains a multitude of contradictory forces operating on him, both from more senior supervisors on the one hand, and the team of slot collectors on the other. In this case the collectors all have long service and are very individualistic in their approach to the work, in one sense making the notion of a 'team' an anathema.

22. John Huxley, in November 1981, discussing changes in the gas industry during the 1950s and 1960s said: 'By that time (1971) the gas industry had been transformed dramatically. From being a music hall joke with a cast of thousands it had become a by-word for big profits, big spending', Sunday Times, 8/11/81.
23. It appears from conversations with middle aged people that the air force at that time had a rather higher 'status' than the other two services for the conscript. It was also thought to be a slightly 'easier life'.
24. Ron proudly brought wartime maps he had collected in Japan, to show me one day, together with a most fascinating collection of photographs he took on reaching Hiroshima, following the dropping of the atomic bomb.
25. It took many months of patient conversation and diligent note-taking to gain insight into the social biography of Louis Roule; he tended to say a good deal but to reveal very little.
26. 'Town gas' is the term used in the gas industry for gas manufacture in a traditional gasworks in contrast to the 'tapping of natural gas'.
27. For a discussion of these aspects of the role of computers in 'deskilling', see Crompton and Reid, 1982, pp. 163-78.
28. Slot collecting, like almost all other aspects of the gas board's work, is governed by a lengthy and detailed 'book of rules', hammered out over many years through the dialectic of management initiatives and union reaction.
29. Each team member, over a long period of years, has developed a very individual way of working. This developed from the often very difficult working conditions, i.e., in the face of the dialectic between their own methods of controlling a difficult relationship between the consumer, involving a 'cash nexus', and management initiatives aimed at subverting that limited control the slotters have developed.
30. As a reader I used to damp my finger on my tongue (an automatic response) to enable me to turn the pages, but after a week of doing this I noticed my tongue becoming very sore and a persistent bitter taste in my mouth. It seemed that the computer sheets were coated with some kind of chemical - I soon resorted to a rubber finger cone.
31. The setting is a small engraved figure on the coin plate which governs the volume of gas that is metered for a given coin, placed in the slot and 'wound in'.

32. 'Bagging' is the placing of previously counted coins into small plastic bags of predetermined capacity, which are provided by the commercial banks.
33. Since the coin plate on the meter can only be set to discrete variables (say, 36, 60, 108 and 120 cu ft) for each coin, the volume of gas supplied rarely relates exactly to the coin value, so the difference is given in the form of a refund, since the meter setting usually supplies slightly less gas than is paid for in the value of the coin.
34. It was not until many months later that the full importance of the refund, in the relationship between the slotter and the consumer, was to be fully realised. It was a relationship of great subtlety which, in the eyes of the consumer, gave the slotter enhanced 'power and status' as he is seen as the 'liberator' of these enforced savings, often much needed.
35. Slotters are generally burdened with a much lower percentage of 'outs' than meter readers. People with slot meters are usually older (often retired) than the general population. Also, they seem to anticipate the visit of the slotter, possibly looking forward to the refund to come. Slotters, having slightly more time, tend to be more persistent in their knocking, and sometimes also try the back or side doors of the houses.
36. I found that neighbours are always very keen to speculate as to whether their neighbours are in or not. Despite their usually confident predictions, they invariably proved false.
37. The consumer is responsible for the missing cash, plus damage, when a meter is broken into, irrespective of who is responsible for the theft. To recover the debt the slotter simply re-sets the meter to supply less gas for a given coin until the debt is recovered. Since most meter thefts are 'internal jobs' (perpetrated by the consumer themselves), the system, from the gas board's point of view, is foolproof and avoids the rigmarole of police involvement and court appearances.
38. The 'average' slot collector makes about 45 calls a day compared with 250 for a meter reader.
39. Though I was not doing 'official' funded research, from the early days of being a gas meter reader, it seemed obvious to me that the life and work of meter readers would be a very fruitful field for research. From the start, though, I wanted to play the role of just another meter reader since, I thought, remaining 'covert' would yield the best opportunity to gain valuable insights. This, to some extent, proved

unrealistic both from a practical and moral point of view (see Van Maanen, 1981, *Urban Life*, Vol. 9, pp. 469-94; and Hilbert, *Urban Life*, 1980, pp. 51-77).

40. From the research point of view, the job of senior collector turned out to be very useful, since he was at the 'hub' of a set of working relationships of which both the slotters and supervisors were the 'spokes'.
41. After apparently having this 'trick' pulled on myself, I confirmed its authenticity by pre-listing all the house numbers from the computer sheets then, when a slotter became impossible to locate, I would call at the houses in the street on his list to see whether he had called. I was, by this means, able to trace his movements. The process occasionally became quite amusing (like a 'cat and mouse' game) when I would observe a slotter hiding by a large wall, or up a passage. These antics were never referred to by the slotters, and if I mentioned it they would pretend I had missed them concentrating on the traffic.
42. 'Getting your day in' - a term used only by the slotters, refers to a personal conception they have about the number of meters they should empty each day. It seems to refer to notions they have about what is a 'fair day's work'. (See Campbell Balfour, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 4, 1953, pp. 257-65; and Littler, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 29, 1978, pp. 185-201.) These notions of a fair day's work may also be influenced by the old bosses (retired) idea of the number of meters they should empty each day, which he tended to rigidly enforce.
43. 'Likely bet', in a slotter's terminology, meant a house in which one might typically expect to find a slot meter. The general appearance of the house, the artefacts in the front room window, and the style of curtains, appear to be decisive factors to an experienced slotter, i.e. (one with at least 20 years on the job).
44. 'Doing dotting' consists of placing small round dots in rectangular boxes on the meter computer sheet, representing the meter reading and the cash in the meter. The 'official' procedure is to do this on site. But all the slotters prefer to complete it later, when they have finished for the day.
45. In addition to these subjective qualities, John Foster also overtly supported 'establishment' views of the management role, had a conservative view of the world, and was politically right wing on his own admission.

46. As with meter readers, the job, of necessity, has more flexible work routines than most jobs. So the length of the working day can be, to some extent, 'manipulated', whilst seeming to the uninitiated to conform to the 'standard working day'.
47. The District Service Office was where the senior collector had a desk and kept his papers. But these facilities were used only briefly, so he remained marginal to the office culture, which, in this case, was fairly closed.
48. This wish of John's was indirectly relayed back, and complied with. When, later, Ron Wild retired, a similar request was ignored because, it turned out, a new supervisor wanted moral backing from the controller for new working practices he was determined to enforce. When Ron departed the gathering, he used the opportunity for his own ends, and the controller as the visible symbol of power.
49. I subsequently learned that, over the years, there had been many bitter arguments, mostly about losing collectors or failing to turn up when expected. On one occasion John Foster had even come to blows with Jack Whitehead.
50. These workers' involvement with cash inevitably attracts a great deal of attention from supervision, in the form of covert spot checks. Rather like coal miners facing external danger, it becomes necessary to survival (in the job) for slotters to develop internal solidarity, in order to cope with possible 'external assault' by management agents.
51. The length of the day spent out on the streets was kept as short as possible, essential paperwork and 'dotting' being done in the comfort of their own home (at their own expense), later in the day.
52. Op. cit; p. 186.
53. Being at the 'hub' of a network of workplace relationships.
54. For a collector taking the job it would have meant a pay re-grade, but, since all the slotters were on the top band of their grade (due to long service) their basic pay would have been only slightly higher and without their present opportunities for tips and bonus they would probably have been worse off. Certainly it would entail less 'flexible' hours (they would be more closely tied to the depot).
55. 'Clocking in' had been abandoned some years before. Since the gas board had to pay a vigilant security guard on the gate, why duplicate the policing costs of the yard?

56. Apparently, the dealer would ship the collected coins to Belgium where they would be illegally melted down for their silver content.
57. Occasionally, management had used the slotters when they were behind with reading. However, their job title implied that they were exclusively employed as slotters.
58. The 'whole region' being all the readers and slotters in the board's total area, covering approximately 1,800 sq. miles and 200 workers.
59. An important clause (for the slotters) was inserted in the agreement for the new scheme which committed the slotters to do reading when required, in exchange for re-grading.
60. The volume of gas in cu. ft. that is supplied for a given coin, op. cit., note 33, p.169.
61. It took some time to uncover the existence of tips paid to the slotters. It is difficult to get any firm data on the extent of tipping, but with an average of 200 clearances (meters emptied) per week, even 40-50p from, say, every third consumer would amount to a considerable sum, it is not uncommon to hear tips of £1 to £1.50 mentioned.
62. Westwood (1984), Cavendish (1982), Pollert (1981), all refer in their own studies to specific instances of sexist attitudes on the part of male shopfloor workers, as well as by management and their agents.

PART THREE

THE LABOUR PROCESS IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

Chapter 6. Work Intensification in the 1960s and 1970s:
 Experiences in the Labour Process

Introduction

As Thompson (1983) suggests, the subjective and objective features of relationships at work and, more importantly, their interrelation, are still under-researched. It is with this in mind that we will consider the issues raised in this chapter. We will do this within the context of three significant events: the introduction of the Clean Air Act, restructuring of the industry, and the arrival of North Sea gas. These events had a major effect on the work process during the 1960s and 1970s and served to highlight themes of conflict and consensus within the workgroup, and between unions and management.

The first section examines the important historical changes in the industry after 1948. These set the scene for the specific events of the 1960s and 1970s which were to have such an impact upon experiences in the labour process during those two decades.

The restructuring and bureaucratization of the industry during the 1960s, the introduction of 'scientific management' (Taylorism) on a wider scale, and attempts to homogenize the labour force on a regional basis, are discussed in section two. We also examine the consequences of the Clean Air Act and the arrival of North Sea gas. As Hobsbawn (1964) reminds us, many of the major changes in the history of the

industry have resulted from large technical advances being made in the manufacture of gas. It is from these changes that the restructuring of the industry has developed and so they form the context within which the themes of conflict and consensus at the workplace are discussed in section three.

Section four covers the workplace experiences of change during the 1970s when the rapid expansion of credit meters, and a steady decline in slot meters, resulted in the employment of more women in the lower paid activity of meter reading, and a concentration of men in the more skilled and better paid area of slot collecting. Consensus and conflict within the workgroup which resulted from these changed structural conditions are highlighted.

Finally, in section five, the profound changes brought about by recession and a new political philosophy, are discussed in relation to the implications of these for work intensification through the reinforcement of managerial authority. The conflicts and struggles which resulted at the workplace are addressed within the context of the introduction of a new 'one call' system of meter reading, and the implications of this development for the labour process in the future.

Historical changes

To appreciate the developments that have occurred since 1981 and are still having a significant impact on the working lives of the men and women who earn a modest living by daily walking the streets, in all weathers, reading and collecting cash from gas meters, it is, I believe, necessary to view these developments in historical context. Whilst official and unofficial documents¹ have been used to provide an overall framework for the major changes and developments within which these particular workers' lives are constrained, much of the material originates from the workers themselves. The sources are primarily conversations, both direct and overheard, informal discussions, and from everyday involvement with the work and the workers out on the streets, and at the depot.

Usually, in the gas industry, changes are wrought by major scientific or technical developments which have their origins within the demands and logical necessities of a market system which relentlessly calls for cost reductions in order to reproduce itself. These events set the context in which the workers operate day to day, though, as we shall see, by no means completely dominate their daily lives at work. These workers can often mitigate and deflect some of the more unpleasant consequences themselves, though, as time passes, and when economic conditions worsen, their scope for some degree of 'job control' invariably becomes more problematic.

Prior to, and for a short time following the second

world war, the British gas industry consisted of a large number of relatively small undertakings, some of them privately owned, but many were under the control of local authorities, especially in the large provincial towns and cities. Between the wars the industry faced increasing competition from electricity, especially for domestic and commercial lighting² and, after the end of the second world war, the industry was in a rather run-down and dilapidated state³. Following the July election of 1945 in which the Labour Party won a landslide victory, there followed a programme of nationalisation of the major public utilities which included the gas industry.

In view of the dilapidated state of the industry, the nationalisation proposals met with little opposition⁴, especially from big business. In 1948 an act of parliament brought into public ownership the entire industry. Under the 1948 act the industry was to be re-organised into twelve area boards based on geographical regions. These area boards were to have a high degree of autonomy and were able to fix their own prices. Nationalisation, and later, the discovery of North Sea gas, were to have the most far-reaching consequences on the structure of the gas industry⁵ and consequently on the working lives of all its employees, not least the gas meter readers and collectors.

It was unanimously acknowledged that setting up the area boards in the late 1940s fundamentally and irredeemably changed the industry and working relationships within it. The general consensus, among those retired and nearing

retirement, who could recall the old 'corporation days', was that bosses were now more remote and bureaucratic, and that the close local community ties and loyalties have weakened, that work intensity has increased and supervision become more obtrusive.

A retired gas worker, who I met while reading meters on an Eastborough council estate, had worked in the industry all his life until his retirement ten years before. My meeting with him was a piece of good fortune since he was a lively and intelligent man who was very willing to talk about his work. He told me:

It used to be great in the old days, we did our work, yes, we had a pride in the job, but it was an easy-going atmosphere. After about an hour of work in the mornings we'd stop for our breakfast, get the old billy can on the braiser and frizzle a rasher or two of bacon, you know, in the shovel, and afterwards we'd smoke our pipes and chat. All that changed after nationalisation, it was never the same again, always some stooge or work study bloke breathing down your neck.

Perspectives on the ways in which working life had changed since the setting up of the area boards, following nationalisation in 1948, were given to me in conversations with two long-serving meter reader/slotter from an 'out of town' district⁶. They both thought that working life was not so enjoyable now, that they worked more intensively, were under more pressure, and were more closely monitored, though they admitted the bosses were not quite so strict now. John Macintosh told me:

Of course, in the old days, before nationalisation, all the 'out of town' districts were run separately by the local gas company, or by the corporation. I came to the job first as a 'temporary measure', but stayed on another 35 years! I had several offers of clerks jobs, but I couldn't have stood being cooped up indoors. In the old days you worked at a much more relaxed pace, you took out your day's 'Gilbert Cards' 7, and that was it, when you'd finished you went home - no bosses breathing down your neck - you had time to talk to customers in those days. 8

A long-serving reader/slotter, Joan Farren, from another out of town district, told me:

The job's not like it used to be in the old days of the 'Gilbert Cards', I remember they used to stink terrible, no, it was much more enjoyable then, not the pressure on you, the bosses were stricter but you didn't see them so often.

A conversation with the local trade union organiser, Jim Wheeler, who had over forty years service at the depot, revealed much about those years immediately following the second world war. His recollections cover the old 'pre-nationalisation days' when the local corporation ran the gas service, the act of nationalisation, and the early years of the newly formed 'area boards', up to the discovery of North Sea gas in the mid-1960s, Jim told me:

Nationalisation in 1948 created very few 'raised eyebrows', you see the industry was in severe decline, run by hundreds of local authorities and some private firms, and, in any case, we faced stiff competition from electricity, it was the days of 'cheap oil' then see. Apart from the setting up of the area

boards, after nationalisation, things changed only very slowly at first, it wasn't until the mid-1950s that we began to feel the effects of the changes. The new gaffers at the regional offices were determined to try and fight back at the competition see, they kept prices down, and with the 'two-part tariff' 9 gas looked quite cheap. The Clean Air Act in the late fifties was just what they needed, during that time, and in the early sixties, people began to have gas fires fitted in a big way - they replaced the open fire in the living room see. I think it was about this time that the slot meters started to go out, and they first began to employ women as meter readers. With all the increased work, fitting fires and that, the fitting side began to change as well. In the old corporation days, management was rather paternalistic, strict but fair, and union organisation was weak. Then, everything seemed to happen at once, I mean, people changing to gas fires, slot meters going out, street lights going electric, 'posh' new regional headquarters opening at Valemere, and then, to crown it all, 'bang', North Sea gas started to come on stream - all this lot happening throughout the sixties. Things began to happen at the depot here as well, loads of new work study bods sniffing around from the new H.Q., they began to change work practices, put in new bonus schemes, they were really chasing productivity. It was with these changes, and the introduction of the new bonus schemes, that union organisation began to take off and became stronger.

As far as the meter slotters and readers were concerned, changes from the old corporation days, following nationalisation, were gradual at first also, but then gained momentum. One of the first effects to be noticed was the imposition of staff status, slotters Jack Whitehead and Bill James told me that it was 'foisted' on them in the late 1950s.

The newly set up area boards spawned large numbers of bureaucratic jobs (a process which continued unabated during the 1960s, following the opening of a huge ultra-modern administrative centre) and especially, as far as the manual were concerned, an 'army' of work study people. It was following a work study programme on the meter readers and slotters that staff status was introduced. The chief effect of this was to change the basis of payment from a weekly cash payment to a monthly salary paid by cheque¹⁰. In addition to the usual minor fringe benefits, such as paid holidays and sickness. these 'benefits' have gradually become insignificant though, following their extension, over the years, to almost all workers. As one of the slotters, Jack Whitehead said:

Though we had staff status the fucking pay didn't change, we took home about £10 a week then, compared with £18 to £20 in some of the factories. Now, with bonuses and expenses added we were probably within about 10 quid of the factory blokes, them that's got a job that is, no, we've got a lot of catching up to do for all those years of crap wages!

This period (the late 1950s and early 1960s) was a time of temporary high employment and relative prosperity for the industrial workers of Eastborough as the 'long post-war boom' reached its peak in 1959.

Though area boards were set up soon after nationalisation in 1948, it took some years to become fully established, and even longer for the effects to be felt at local level. This was particularly the case at Eastborough. The regional headquarters were set up in Conton, over 20 miles away, and

were on a relatively modest scale¹¹. Though the regional office took control of all the local gas undertakings in its area, it had only a modest impact upon working procedures, certainly during the early 1950s. For the undertaking at Eastborough, and indeed many others in the area, the real turning point occurred in the early 1960s when the very large purpose-built headquarters opened in Valemere. The entire administration, service, work study, personnel, accounts, management services, marketing, and, of course, all senior management were 'centralised' at these ultra-modern offices.

The new Valemere headquarters were on an enormous and ostentatious scale¹², very much in keeping with the priorities of the time (the early 1960s) for building office blocks on the grand scale. As time passed, the new headquarters, with its 'army of experts' and new computer gradually, towards the mid-1960s, began to have a very real impact on the ways in which the workers at the local depots (as they then became known)¹³ perceived and carried out their work. The coming of the new regional headquarters and the consequent creation of large numbers of new 'semi-professional' administrative and managerial jobs, meant the possibility of expanded horizons for aspiring staff workers at local depots. As Bill James, an Eastborough slotter, remarked:

A good number of the gaffers from here, and some of the 'creepers' found 'cushy numbers' at Valemere, mind you, we had a lot of 'conners',¹⁴ come here as well, a load of dim-witted bastards some of them were too! Didn't know their arse from their elbow.

Developments at the beginning of the 1960s

The influence of the growing numbers of administrators and work study specialists who proliferated following the opening of the new Valemere headquarters, gradually increased their grip even on the more remote depots. One of the methods most commonly employed in the attempt to create greater homogeneity between all the hitherto diverse working groups (whose previous identification had been with their local area and corporation undertaking) was to organise courses and talks. All the diverse working groups could gather together, and presumably, it was hoped, form a stronger 'corporate identity'.

One such gathering took place in the early sixties. The entire slotting and reading force, including the supervisors, were taken to a hotel in a pleasant market town several miles away from Eastborough, for a weekend of 'training and socialising'. A couple of senior managers from the new regional headquarters also joined the 'weekend party'. The slotting senior, John Foster, told me:

The hotel used to be old Lord Fothergill's country place, well over two hundred years old you know, can't think why the board chose it really, most of the slotters and readers were 'out of place' there, you'd understand what I mean, they mostly drank pints and played skittles. As for myself, I sat by the log fire with Simon James (manager from headquarters, who had previously been at Eastborough), we drank gin and tonics and had a most interesting conversation about the old days.

In addition to the 'socialising' they had short training sessions on how to empty meters and count coins and the

correct method for reading meters. This was based on a method study exercise carried out by the newly formed work and methods study section at headquarters¹⁵. Preceding some of the sessions local supervisors were called upon to give short talks about their particular districts, and about the metering procedures. These 'old time supervisors' were unaccustomed to this new more formal approach to their workers, and evidently found approaching them on such a basis somewhat unnerving¹⁶. As Jack Whitehead commented:

Old Ray Melton (local supervisor at the time) was fucking tongue-tied, standing up like that in front of us all, he'd never done it before, his voice was trembling and his fucking hands shaking like a lily, when it came to the money, he knocked the bloody lot on the floor, honesty, we felt for him. Still, we had a good time at night, playing skittles till the small hours, as much fucking beer as you could drink, and that 'high up' gaffer with the big house at Westerby, he was down there with us - never thought I'd see it! Then, next day, back to the crap, fancy trying to teach us how to empty fucking meters, we'd been doing it for years, NOT in a posh hotel like that, but sometimes up to our fucking ears in shit, with a bloody Jack Russell at your ankles.

The discussion so far covers the period up to 1960, a time when the gas industry had become rather run down, with dilapidated plant and modest levels of investment from 1945 to 1960. It was also a time of little widespread application of work study in the industry and both the production and distribution system were labour intensive.

The recollections of some of the long serving employees are often nostalgic for a past where the pace seemed slower and the atmosphere easygoing, but at the same time they

demonstrate ambivalence (cf. Newby, 1977, pp. 340-51) acknowledging the existence of some strict supervisors and of very low pay. The following section deals with the accelerating changes brought about during the 1960s, firstly by the consequences of the Clean Air Act and, during the early 1970s, the arrival of North Sea gas.

Major technical and organizational
changes during the 1960s

As I have suggested, it was not until the late 1950s that the re-organizational effects of nationalisation began to have any real impact on the working lives of those at the local depots. Even then, changes were gradual and the influence of the newly formed area boards was minimal at first: local work patterns and culture tended to persist. For the workers in this study the pattern of their daily lives began to change with the establishment of the large new regional headquarters at Valemere - these are referred to locally as Valemere and are perceived as an 'irritant' in the working lives of the slotters and readers at East-borough and surrounding towns. As one slotter, Bill James, remarked to me on one occasion, following an instruction from Valemere about a minor mistake in completing his computer sheets¹⁷: "That's bloody Valemere putting a spanner in the works again".

A much more immediate and effective change in the working lives of the local slotters and readers was the complete re-development of the local depot site. Gas manufacturing

ceased at the site, which had become 'uneconomic', and was substantially re-developed. The traditional local residential and road patterns radically changed and this, together with the changes at the old depot, transformed the area beyond recognition, at the same time as disrupting established social networks. A slotter, Ron Wild, remembered this period very clearly, and his recollections were subsequently confirmed in conversations with other slotters and readers. He commented:

We had a beautiful bowling green, smooth as velvet, just in front of the old offices it was, and the social club at the side. All the wives and children used to come on fine summer evenings, and at the weekend, to sit out on the benches and watch the bowls, with their glasses of lemonade and stout. All that went by the board when they put up this lot. That block there, is where the green used to be. Tragedy really, all the old spirit seemed to go after that.

The 1960s were to be years of 'revolutionary' changes, from a run down state in the late 1950s, to a greatly expanded and, according to 'market criteria', a successful and profitable modern industry. The three features which played the major part in the transformation and which certainly had an important impact on the working lives of this group of workers, were: the introduction of smoke control zones, following the smogs of the 1950s - the effect of this was to replace the open coal fire with other appliances, chiefly gas. The second, and perhaps the most important, was the discovery of natural gas beneath the North Sea, and the third, the oil crisis of the early 1970s - this occurring just as natural gas was coming on stream.

These events led to a vast increase in both the numbers of new gas customers and in the volume of gas supplied. The run down of the traditional town gas works led to the displacement of many workers¹⁸, especially those in technical, engineering, and some managerial posts. As Jim Wheeler, the local shop steward, said to me:

A lot of the engineers and gaffers at Hillford¹⁹ found their jobs 'evaporating' overnight, but they soon dropped into new ones when the regional headquarters opened at Valemere, your own guv'nor over there was once chief engineer at Hillford, now he's head of finance, very 'adaptable' they were!

These changes, during the 1960s, placed considerable pressure on the ramshackle structure of the industry as it was in the late 1950s and, as the 1960s progressed, a corresponding pressure on the industries' rather parochial management. From the mid-60s, the regional boards were beginning to examine their organisation and methods. But in the summer of 1967 the Gas Council asked the then 'fashionable' firm of McKinsey & Co to examine and advise on management and organisation. As T.I. Williams remarked: "These were the years in which British industry was becoming aware of the new techniques of management being developed in the U.S.A."²⁰. It was a time when the newly formed business schools were beginning to turn out their 'graduates' onto the labour market, Williams goes on to say:

The area boards established their own management service units embracing staff responsible for operational research, organisation and methods, and

statistics. Schemes were introduced for job evaluation, staff appraisal, and investigation of job satisfaction, in short, the gas industry climbed aboard the new band-wagon of management as eagerly as the rest of progressive British industry. 21

Shop steward Jim Wheeler, commenting on the changes which most affected the local work force as he saw it, said:

A lot of changes in organisation were made, one of the main ones was taking away decision making from the local depot here, to the new H.Q. at Valemere. I remember as well that there was a lot of 'chasing productivity', a new bonus scheme was introduced for the fitters and, I think, later, for your lads (the slotters). Up to then, management in the gas industry was 'local' and very paternalistic, but, with all the changes, introduction of the bonus schemes and then North Sea gas, union organisation became stronger and more developed.

The really big changes which were taking place throughout the industry and continued during the 1960s, began to have an impact on metering from the early 1960s, reaching a climax at the turn of the decade. The first effect to be felt was a large increase in the volume of cash collected from slot meters as the public began to move away from open coal fires to gas. Collector Bill James described it like this:

It was bloody fantastic the amount of cash you were collecting, you could hardly lift the fucking bag, sometimes after only emptying half a dozen meters, it was all tanners and pennies then see, it got to the stage where we were having to use 'safe houses'²² to deposit the terrific weight of cash we'd collected.

It was from this time (1962/63) that the long decline of the pre-payment (slot) gas meters set in. As Bill said:

"They (consumers) found that they were for ever feeding the bloody meter with coins, so they started to have them taken out and changed to 'ord's'²³. Eventually the money got lighter, because the bigger consumers went over to ord's, and a new 'two bob' plate came out"²⁴.

From 1960 to 1970, the total number of domestic gas meters in use (slot + credit) had increased by almost 13% overall, reflecting the big increase in demand for domestic gas following the conversion to North Sea gas from the mid 1960s, through to the early 1970s. Once again, the labour process in the industry was being driven along by scientific and technical exigencies, this time brought about by a new distribution system and the wholesale closure of town gas-works.

The search for North Sea gas had been given impetus by the perceived need for cheaper and more secure sources of energy. Sources which, at the time, were probably seen as less dependent upon 'unstable political regimes' abroad, and at home more independent of an increasingly confident working class, especially the miners and power workers.

As suggested earlier, the influence of the new headquarters became stronger during the remainder of the 1960s. A very important milestone in this process for the local depot at Eastborough, and for the surrounding out of town depots, was the introduction of a large central computer facility at Valemere in 1968. The most consequential effect of this innovation was the ending of local records (for slot meters the 'Gilbert Cards', and in the case of credit

meters, spiral binders) and with them, local autonomy and control over the records.

The Eastborough offices, where the records were housed and maintained, were closed down, the clerks being displaced and moving to other works. This event represented a very significant break with the past, and a final realisation that local identity had been radically undermined. The local office, and those workers who operated the records section, were an important focus for issues over job control and were a point of daily contact for slotters and readers alike. As slotter Jack Whitehead remarked:

That bloody woman in the office, she had her 'blue eyed boys', they used to get all the best runs, mind you, she was a bit of a 'cracker', beautiful pair of 'knockers', know what I mean (he nudges me with his elbow).

The position of the Eastborough records office (prior to computerisation in 1968) as an important locus of power, is clearly demonstrated in the remarks of Jack Whitehead quoted above. The particular districts ('runs') allocated to individuals were of crucial importance if time out on the streets was to be successfully minimised and bonus earnings maximised. As the quote clearly demonstrates, abusive sexist remarks about the clerk were readily resorted to over the issue of run allocations.

I now want to discuss the implications of the considerable changes that took place following computerisation of the records and the transformation of the old Eastborough gas works site after its clearance and the erection of a

new office block and motor vehicle workshops. The removal of the old 'Gilbert Cards' system with its wealth of detail on individual gas consumption led to subtle changes in the slotters' relationship with the public. The issue of run allocation began to centre more upon the supervisor rather than as previously, the office clerk. Thus, the former locus of power, in this respect, shifted decisively in the direction of supervision.

The closing down of the old manual card system at Eastborough almost coincided with the clearance of the old gas works site, of which the metering offices were part, and the erection of the new ultra-modern office block, together with the completion of a new road system nearby, transformed the old site beyond recognition. Most of the depots in the gas region were altered and updated during the 1960s—this was no doubt a much needed improvement of the existing run-down sites, but was also part of a new managerial philosophy, then fashionable, of improving the image of the industry, at the same time giving the new 'managerialists' and assorted specialists free reign to practice their newly acquired skills²⁶.

The arrival of the computer accounting system at Valemere meant a complete change in the way details of meter readings and slot meter collections were recorded by the meter readers and slotters. Flimsy sheets for each individual consumer were issued, direct from the computer, in the form of a 'print-out'. Details from the meters were entered on the sheets and they were then 'dotted'²⁷ by the

reader or slotter, bringing them to a condition in which they could be read by a piece of computer hardware and fed back into the computer system itself. From the point of view of the regional board, and its increasingly centralised administrative and management structure, the new computerised accounting methods would no doubt, at least in the short term, show savings on labour costs.

A short one day training course was organised to familiarise the slotters and readers with the new system. According to slotter Bill James:

It was pretty straightforward really, nothing to it, we were using the Gilbert Cards one day, and the new computer sheets the next, mind you, it was much better really, we dropped from about 60 clearances a day to around 45 to 50, we dropped down because of the dotting see, we had to spend more time dotting each sheet, we just dropped down and nobody said anything, so we carried on.

The metering supervisor, Bill Tatam, had a slightly different perspective on the changeover to computerised sheets from that of the slotters, he commented:

It was very difficult at first, the new procedure and the new sheets got most of us in a flat spin, except for Jack Whitehead, he seemed to grasp it straight way, I must admit, he was much better at it than me.

However, the introduction of the computer sheets and the closure of the local record offices did mark the end of an era for the readers and slotters, and the comments of Jack Whitehead himself seem to encapsulate the perceived 'loss of control' at the local depot level:

The old Gilbert Card system was much better, you had everything at your fingertips, if there was a query about a meter supplying 'gas without coin'²⁸, you could see it straight away, and sort it out on the spot. These days, with the computer sheets, you can tell fuck all, consumers seem to be able to get away without paying for their gas! Everyone just passes the buck now, they don't seem to take any action - I'd retire tomorrow if I could!

The discovery of North Sea gas in the early 1960s and the gradual construction of a nationwide distribution network, changed the nature of the gas industry more radically than any previous event since the inception of the industry, in the early nineteenth century. Discovery of, and conversion to, North Sea gas, marked a change from the rather old-fashioned and run-down industry of the 1940s, to one where the emphasis changed from production/distribution, to that of distribution/service. It changed radically during the 60s, from an essentially production orientation to a bureaucratic one.

The period, from the early 1960s up to the mid 1970s, when conversion to North Sea gas was undertaken, was a decade of the most fundamental change in the industry. These changes, during the time in which they occurred, had a considerable effect on the working lives of the meter readers and collectors. However, following the 'upheavals' of the changes themselves the work of the meter readers and collectors remained fundamentally similar to what it had been before, except for greater work intensity on the part of the readers, and more female involvement with the work than previously.

It was in the years 1969 to 1974 that the process of 'conversion' was to most effect the working lives of the readers and slotters. It was also, during the period from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, that the other, parallel, changes were taking place. These included: the increased demand for gas fuelled living room fires following the Clean Air Act²⁹, the increasing influence of the regional management structure following the opening of the new Valemere headquarters in the early 60s, the computerisation of the metering records in the late 60s, and the corresponding demise of the local records office. On top of all these fundamental changes came conversion to North Sea gas. The major impact of conversion fell upon the engineering, and particularly, the fitting sectors. All domestic appliances had to be converted and much work done to supply mains in addition to coping with the greatly increased demand for gas from the many new consumers. The meter readers and slotters came into the picture when the old 'town gas' was burnt off and the new North Sea gas introduced into the pipelines feeding individual homes³⁰. Their task was to read or empty meters, just before changeover, so that appropriate billing and charges could be arrived at in relation to the differing calorific values of the two types of gas³¹. The conversion operation reached its climax during the early 1970s so this was the time when the meter readers and collectors were most involved.

The changes already discussed, which occurred from the early 60s to the early 70s, brought big adjustments to work

routine for the meter readers and collectors, for example, the reduction in the number of slot collectors, and corresponding increase in the number of meter readers. The latter change resulted in the introduction of women to the work, in quite large numbers, from the mid 1960s onwards. But conversion brought a disruption of the day to day routines, built up over many years, for both readers and slotters.

Together with the other changes mentioned, it is a time which most of the readers and slotters look back upon with a degree of nostalgia. As Gwen Barlow, a reader who joined in the early 60s, commented: "It was a really great time, everyone working together, just like wartime, we had some good 'laffs' when we used to go out of town on the van with the blokes". A then newly recruited female reader, Joan Farren, from a neighbouring town depot, in conversation with an 'old time' Eastborough slotter, commented:

We used to go out to Banwell, on conversion, it was great fun, we used to sit on the floor of the van, back to back, with the lads from Eastborough. Len, the senior, was a bachelor, we used to pull his leg terrible, especially if we wanted to slow him down - he always drove slower if we pulled his leg. We used to tease him something wicked, asking him if he'd ever 'had it', you know, he had a nervous head shake, we always knew when his head began to shake he'd slow right down.

An Eastborough slotter, Jack Whitehead, talking about his team involvement with conversion says, with enjoyment:

We used to go right down to Southwold (this was almost 60 miles), we'd start off early in the van, stop half way, at

a place we knew, and have a leisurely cup of coffee, arriving at Southwold at 10, we'd leave before fucking three, old John (the driver) used to say, 'we'll go back by the scenic route', all round the fucking countryside we went, it was smashing cos' it was the summer see.

Conversion entailed considerable disruption of the usual work routine and a good deal of time spent travelling. But, despite the obvious drawbacks, both the slotters and readers speak of the period with affection and enthusiasm. From my own experience on the job and through conversations with others, there seem to be two likely explanations of the obvious popularity of conversion. Firstly, any break from the monotonous routine of meter reading and slight reduction in the slog of walking long distances makes the job that little more bearable, and secondly, the greater comradeship involved in the rare event of coming together as a social group, and the slightly greater 'job control'³². This was a 'one off' and relatively short lived event, and coming as it did, on top of all the other changes at the time, made for a more 'eventful' working day. But it was not to last and eventually the more routine and isolated³³ nature of the work resumed once conversion was completed.

The gradual run down of the conversion programme during the early 1970s, in a sense marked the end of the era of substantial upheaval in the industry which the act of nationalisation, slowly at first, had set in motion as the 1950s dawned³⁴. These big changes, mostly during the 1960s, were consolidated in the 1970s. A radical change of

political climate at the beginning of the 1980s brought fears of break up and 'privatisation' of certain of the industries more profitable operations, and the encroachment of a more authoritarian and repressive management style. The threat of privatisation of gas showrooms brought the first solid, industrywide strike, in 1982, action which was more of a plea for maintaining the status-quo than challenging it.

Experiences of change in the
labour process during the 1970s

The changes, both internal and external to the industry which occurred during the 1960s, brought a considerable overall increase in the number of gas consumers. These changes resulted in a corresponding increase in the numbers of workers employed in the metering department at Eastborough, and surrounding towns. But, perhaps more important, were the changes in the structure of employment in metering. A considerable decline in the number of slot meters in use, and a corresponding increase in the use of credit meters, but in addition, the new consumers, almost exclusively, had credit meters installed in preference to slots.

During the 1960s low pay in gas meter reading and slotting, and much higher pay in local factories, attracted away many of the younger men with families. At the same time a substantial proportion of the slot collectors were nearing retirement age giving rise to manning difficulties. The convergence of these two major pressures and the in-

crease in credit meter consumers led to a significant development in the early 1960s, the coming of women to meter reading. They seemed willing to work for the lower rates of pay, and were perhaps attracted by what they had picked up about the more 'flexible' (unofficial flexibility) working hours³⁵. A significant proportion of the new women recruits 'fell by the wayside'. As Gwen Barlow, one of the first women to be recruited, told me:

They thought it was a nice easy little number, just walking about in the sun-shine all day, but they had a rude awakening when they found out it meant blistered feet, aching limbs, frequent dog bites, occasional falls, and being alternately soaked or frozen to the marrow, and to top it all tension and fatigue at the end of most days. The result was that only about a quarter of those taken on stuck it out after initial training.

Table 1. Comparative take home pay between Eastborough slot meter collectors and local factories 1954 to 1985

	1. Slot meter collectors	2. Local factories	$\frac{\text{Col 2}}{\text{Col 1}} = \%$
	£	£	%
1954 -	6.75	11.00	163
1958 -	10.00	14.50	145
1968 -	17.50	23.80	136
1972 -	28.50	33.10	116
1975 -	42.50	49.00	115
1980 -	86.70	99.85	115
1985 -	125.00	147.00	118

Source: Up to 1968, Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Economics & Statistics, Vol. 33, No. 1. February 1969, from 1969 to 1985, Social Trends, No. 5, 1974, table 70, p. 116.

At first there was also some resentment from the traditionally all male workforce. For a brief period, an 'out of town' team at Oakleigh refused to work with the first woman recruit. The Oakleigh supervisor at the time, Mike Maguire, remembers it well:

No, they wouldn't work with her at first, it got into the local paper at the time, but of course, they had to work with her in the end. Worst thing that ever happened, bloody women - more trouble than they're worth, always sick or moaning about something.

Like the previous comments of Jack Whitehead about the female office clerk, this was yet another example of abusive sexist remarks directed against women workers, but this time by a male supervisor.

In common with all the large inner city areas, Eastborough traditionally had a distinct division between slot meter collecting teams and meter readers, and they were always seen by each as distinct working groups. This division though did not exist in the smaller towns, and, as I shall explain later, came to have important implications for subsequent management initiatives in 'manipulating' the workers during a dispute in the early 1980s.

Some of the newly recruited women in the early 1960s at Eastborough occasionally did both slotting and reading, to suit management, but eventually elected to do reading only but had to accept a downgrading of pay scale. Most said they did not like carrying the very heavy loads of coin, nor the added 'complications' (as they saw them), of slot

collecting work. In any case, the amount of slot collecting work was diminishing as credit meters relentlessly replaced slot meters. By the beginning of the 1970s slot meters were only 46% of what they had been at the beginning of the 1960s, and in the same period, credit meters had increased by just over 120% ³⁶.

Table 2. Conton and Eastborough districts:
gas meters in use

	<u>Slot meters</u> 000's	<u>Credit meters</u> 000's
1952 -	280	170
1962 -	686	402
1965 -	562	581
1970 -	316	909
1975 -	193	1,085
1980 -	104	1,204

Source: Gas board archive

The fact that slot meters had decreased in number substantially during the 1960s, falling by over a half, meant that the work of the slot collector became more difficult as the meters were gradually becoming much more spread out geographically. Whereas there had been perhaps 60 or 70 meters in many streets (almost a day's work for one collector), by the early 1970s this had fallen to an average of 4 or 5 to a street, with none at all in many streets. As a result of these developments it was becoming increasingly difficult to earn a satisfactory level of bonus despite the use of bicycles, as Jack Whitehead said: "We were cycling

round like 'blue arse flies', yet your bonus was dropping - we relied on that piffling bit of bonus to bring our crappy wages up a bit - the wages were terrible then see". A slotter's basic wage in 1970 was £19.50 a week against an average of £28 a week in local factories.

With the introduction of computer sheets in 1968, management had allowed the amount of work required to fall a little, partly on account of the extra time needed to complete the new computer sheets, yet the bonus scheme was left unchanged. Though the amount of work required before bonus was earned (called the 'stint') was lowered on the introduction of computer sheets, the advantage of the lower stints did not persist for long since the geographical density of the slot meters continued to decline. The point came, in the early 1970s, when a new bonus scheme had to be considered.

Work study 'engineers' were sent out with the slotters on the streets, to time and method study their work. This was something of a novelty at the time, since metering had not been previously subject to work study, as slotter Bill James said: "By the time the fucker had chased after me for a couple of hours he was knackered, when I said to him here's the collecting bag, try it for weight, he very near collapsed on the spot".

Following the completion of the work study exercise a proposal for a slot collectors bonus scheme was put forward some months later, in early 1971. The document ran to some 40 pages, with just over three pages devoted to explanation

and proofs of the mathematical equations used in arriving at the 'standard working times' for various operations, and in calculating the level of bonus itself. Following conversations with the slotters, supervisors, and trade union representatives who were involved at the time it soon became obvious that only a small group of 'specialists' from the work study department and trade union headquarters actually understood the document!³⁷

Despite the considerable complexity of the new bonus scheme, the fact that it offered rather lower 'stints',³⁸ combined with higher bonus rates. The slotters had little alternative but to accept in view of the difficulty now of making a worthwhile bonus, due, as we have seen, to the fall in the geographical density of the slot meter.

Apart from any other apparent advantages, the new scheme made slotting seem a more securely distinct enterprise, as there was no corresponding change in the meter readers bonus scheme. The remaining two females, who also did occasional slotting in addition to meter reading, asked to be relieved of the slotting element, and were quite prepared to forego the salary re-grade which the new slotting scheme involved. The slotters were now an exclusively male team, higher paid (both in terms of basic pay and bonus), and saw themselves as securely 'distinct' from the now predominantly female meter readers.

Slotting is seen as a more skilled job than meter reading, both by the meter readers and the slotters themselves. Undoubtedly, the rapidly increasing weight of coin

carried during the early 1970s³⁹ made the job harder, in terms of the sheer effort required to carry the heavy coin bags. However, the claim made by the slotters themselves and the supervisors, that these contingencies make slotting an unsuitable job for women conceals some strong, but covert, sexist attitudes on their part. As deputy supervisor Mike Maguire commented to me:

The women started to come in to the job in a big way in the early 60s, (cf. Cavendish, 1982, p. 95), and they've been a fucking nuisance ever since - unreliable and always ill. The gaffer won't take young un's on you know⁴⁰ they leave and have kids see, no, I reckon men are better all round, they've got to stick to the job see when they've got commitments⁴¹ a family and that, the women just come for 'pin money'. The gaff'as got a list of names for when Mrs Barlow retires, they're all men you know.

Sexist attitudes and comments are also very common among the slotters themselves, they frequently arise in conversations on the slotting van when travelling to work. One morning Bill James commented: "I firmly believe a woman's place is in the home, having all these women readers has spoilt the job, they mostly do it for 'pin money', anyway, they've all got husbands in good jobs". Louis Roule's wife also works as a meter reader, and this fact often draws adverse comment from Bill James and Jack Whitehead, both of whose wives do not work. Jack taunts Louis by saying: "There's two of you working, bringing in a fat wage, surely one's enough (winking at Bill), he's rich anyhow, all them houses he used to own". Louis retorts: "Everyone has to live" - although, paradoxically, on

several occasions Louis has commented to me privately: "A woman's place is in the kitchen, I firmly believe that".

The removal of local meter collection and meter reading records from Eastborough following computerisation in the late 1960s, and their centralisation on computer tapes at the regional headquarters at Valemere, led to entirely new working procedures and methods. In the jargon of work study and computer specialists these new working methods "necessarily generated a good many teething troubles"⁴². These 'teething troubles' invariably seemed to stem from the very essence of the exercise and the policy of 'centralisation', that is, the inability to gain rapid personal access to consumer records in order to be able to deal with consumer problems which, of course, arise locally. The concrete manifestation of this process, out on the job, was neatly summed up by slotter Bill James:

In the old days see (i.e., prior to 1968) we had all the details of past consumption, going back over many years, on the Gilbert Cards we carried with us, we could answer any question the consumer put to us about their consumption, or even when they moved in, any queries could be dealt with, on the spot, you had it all at your finger tips, but now, you've got fuck all.

The solution to the mounting backlog of unanswered problems and queries from consumers to which the introduction of the new centralised computer system gave rise, was to increase the number of 'Special Inspectors'⁴³. These inspectors, though they had always existed prior to 1968, were rather shadowy figures, few in number, and not well

known to the readers and collectors. From 1968 more were recruited and their existence became more obvious; indeed, insofar as their rise to visibility could be seen as a result of the relative 'de-skilling' of that part of their job entailing the solving of queries and answering consumers' questions, the slotters viewed these developments with a tinge of resentment. Now, when faced with a query which could be sorted out on the spot, a frequent retort from the slotters is: "let the special sort it out, that's what he's paid for".

The perceptions which slotters and readers have of the job of special inspectors⁴⁴, and the special inspectors' own perceptions of their job is often greatly at variance. The slotters in particular, often see the specials as incompetent, lazy and interfering. A slotter, Ron Wild, commenting on a special inspector, Geoff Beesley, said: "He's a lazy bastard, that Beesley, whenever I've been by his house the car is nearly always outside, he can't have much work to do", Jack Whitehead interjects: "No, whenever he's called to empty a 'box full'⁴⁵ he'll ask the woman for a basin or plastic bag, and he just tips the fucking money in and says to her: here you are missus, keep it safe till the collector calls"⁴⁶. As a meter reader, I called once myself at Geoff Beesley's house to read his meter. During a conversation with his wife, she talked about how, in the old days, he used to have to cycle everywhere on the job: "Sometimes a twelve mile round trip", she told me. When I mentioned this to Jack Whitehead he retorted: "Rubbish, that lazy fucker

wouldn't ever cycle to the top of the street if he could help it, no, I never remember him having a bike".

The job of special inspector assumes a very different perspective when seen from the point of view of the specials themselves. They are perhaps, almost more than anyone else save the snatch or cut off men⁴⁷, in the 'front line' between the gas board and the consumer. They often have to confront, face to face, the endemic contradictions⁴⁸ experienced by some consumers, out on the streets. I think it worthwhile here, to quote at length a conversation I had with a Special Inspector during a day working in a particular deprived and run down suburb of vandalised high rise flats and council houses at Eastborough⁴⁹. Commenting on her day's work here, Joan Shanks who was herself a single parent mother, told me:

I really dread working up here, we're getting more and more meter breaks all the time, it's something to do with all the unemployment I suppose. That woman up there (pointing to a high flat), she's just told me to 'get out', I was instructed to 'set the meter down' for debt. You see her husband doesn't work now, he's mostly in bed when I call now. I hate having to do this work, but I need the job⁵⁰, I've got to support myself and my son, he's at the tech now, he doesn't get any grant see, so I have to support him.

I called on a woman the other day, had to set her meter down for debt, she swore and called me a 'little Hitler', I felt so depressed I could have cried. I do have sympathy with the difficulties people have to make ends meet, after all I've been in the same position myself, still am come to that, I rely on this job to support myself and my son - though I sometimes wonder, is it all worth it?

Joan does, I think, have real sympathy with some of the people in this run down area⁵¹. In the following conversation, to some extent, she belies her previous sentiments, but I think what follows represents an ideological perception of society increasingly held by some working people, a model which is being strongly reinforced in the changing political and ideological context of the late 1970s⁵². Joan goes on to say:

The trouble with people around here is that they don't plan for the future, they just sit back and hope the state will help them out when they're in trouble. Take that woman the house over there, she's got four children and another on the way, her husband's been out of work for over a year now, why didn't she stop having more children? She could have gone on the pill after the first or second. Mind you, her husband's a bit of a layabout, but he's a real turn on (nudging), know what I mean? No, I've often thought I'd like to go back to reading, life's so much simpler, not so much 'aggro' as on this job.

The 1970s were a period of 'consolidation' of trends which were established during the 1960s, following an initial period of very slow and gradual change after nationalisation in 1948. It was during the 1960s that the really major changes were set in motion, being given particular impetus by the discovery of North Sea gas. As far as metering was concerned the late 1960s, and in particular, computerisation and decline of local control after 1968, were the really important milestones. This included greater centralisation of organisation and control from the new regional headquarters at Valemere, and its associated

concentration on work study and work measurement. The 1970s by contrast, was a quieter period, a time of routinisation of the new procedure established in the previous decade, a time when the new jobs which were created in the headquarters bureaucracy became established with a new breed of people with work study and administrative training and a firm underpinning of 'business methods'. The hegemony of the old style gas men was finally broken.

Work intensification and reinforcement
of managerial authority

Inevitably, when, during the mid-1970s, the slotters were asked to do a spell of reading, and found their incomes falling by over 30%, then the 'balloon went up'. One of the slotters, Bill James, wrote out a detailed analysis of how their income dropped when they were forced to go out reading⁵³ and sent it to their trade union representative. A subsequent meeting with management representatives was held at the Valemere headquarters. Management were adamant that the slotters could, under the terms of their employment, be called upon to do occasional reading. However, under the leadership of a young and ambitious district secretary and a threat by him to bring out the whole region on strike, the point at issue was conceded and the slotters remained, at least for the time being, exclusively slotters⁵⁴.

The stand which the Eastborough slotters made during the mid-1970s and, for the time being, upheld, probably was the last time such an initiative, on the part of the workforce,

could have been successful. The economic and political climate which had prevailed during the 'long boom' from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, had temporarily very slightly tipped the industrial 'balance' in favour of organised labour. This doubtless influenced, at least to some extent, the success of the slotters' initiative.

From the mid-1970s the so-called long boom came to an abrupt end, partly precipitated by the oil crisis of 1973-74. The recession that followed, and the resulting rapid rise in unemployment, brought about a substantial change in the relationship between management and workers. A subtle shift in the balance of power on the shopfloor was evident at the gas board. It began slowly, from the top, and gradually spread downwards as the 1980s came in. It is within this markedly changed climate that we have to follow the events and working lives of those in the metering department.

I now want to examine in detail an event which signalled the beginning of a sustained period of labour intensification and with it a relentless reinforcement of managerial authority. The event was the introduction of a new one call meter reading system in which an estimated account would be rendered if a consumer was out, instead of the meter reader calling back the following day. As we shall see, the one call system was to affect all workers in the metering department, not just the meter readers.

During the closing months of 1978 it had been rumoured⁵⁵ that an entirely new system for meter reading was being considered which would entail making only one call at premises to read the meter, whereas currently, if the occupier was out at the first call a 'dial card' was left⁵⁶ for the consumer to complete if they were unlikely to be in when a second call was made. This one call system was said to be operating in one other test region and had been reported in the press there as: 'do it yourself gas meter reading'.

A little while after the rumour of one call meter reading had begun circulating a meter reader brought into the depot, on 'changeover day'⁵⁷ a press cutting which she had obtained while away on holiday in the area where the one call system was being implemented. The press article focussed on the difficulty for elderly people who might be distressed at having estimates sent, probably because they could not reach the door quickly enough when the reader knocked⁵⁸. The newspaper article also made much play of the apparent paradox of a reduction in service at a time of rapidly rising gas prices.

Finally, the rumours were laid to rest when the local board announced, in the summer of 1979, its intention to introduce one call metering in the entire region. A 'presentation meeting' was arranged in which management representatives (who turned out to be work study people) would explain the whole scheme, and following this, a vote would be taken on whether or not to accept it.

A copy of the new bonus scheme together with a pay re-grade, which would operate only if all the proposals on the new working practices were accepted, was circulated to the slotters and readers. The one call system was left very 'open ended' and it was clearly indicated that its introduction would only be the first stage (a feature not everyone noticed) in a process which may result in the preparation of consumers bills by the reader, on the doorstep, using a micro-chip device.

The proposed new bonus scheme for the readers was, in principle, very similar to that of the slotters, which had been in operation since the early 1970s, though with one major difference, the upper limit of bonus which could be earned had been reduced. The new bonus scheme was set down in an almost identical way to that of the slotters which had come into operation almost a decade earlier, and was equally incomprehensible to the readers as it had been to the slotters.

The meeting, which took place in the local depot's staff canteen, was attended by union representatives as well as work study people and senior management from metering. The new scheme was described by two speakers, in turn, from the work study department at Valemere, who had drawn up the scheme following similar principles to those used in devising the slotters scheme a decade earlier. It was quite a 'polished performance', though at times rather patronising, the two work study men very obviously trying to use what they took to be the vernacular of the meter

readers. Perhaps they thought this would assist them in 'selling the package'? The emphasis was almost exclusively instrumental - on how much extra they might expect to earn under the new scheme. It was obvious that most of the readers, and indeed the management, were equally baffled by the technicalities of the bonus scheme. Two or three questions followed: these, somewhat to the annoyance of the work study men, concentrated upon the reduction of service to the consumer that would be likely to result⁵⁹. As one might expect, these were rapidly 'skated over' with reference to the facility provided for the consumer to challenge any estimated reading made.

As is customary within institutionalised industrial relations practices the management and their representatives politely, but self-consciously, withdrew. It was the same young and ambitious district secretary who had previously fought the slotters battle over reading, who addressed the meeting. He said:

Of course you must reject the scheme in its present form, it will need a great many modifications before we could even consider it. After all, what it boils down to is squeezing a lot more work out of you with less people, though they've given us an undertaking that there will be no redundancies⁶⁰, no, they stand to save a packet.

The subsequent vote was a formality, but it was surprisingly solid, with 100% for rejection. Following the meeting, as I passed among informal groups chatting together, most mentioned that the new scheme would involve

doing far more reads in a day, and what they already did was physically punishing. The extra cash was not mentioned - it was at this point (though it had occurred to me before) that the 'flexible' length of the working day was of central importance to the predominantly female workforce.

After four weeks had passed, a second meeting was held to hear proposals for amendments to the scheme from the employers in the light of the demands made by the union for review of a number of the details. All of the details (mostly minor in nature) were conceded by the management, but it subsequently transpired that the management would not move on one important point - the question of 'call backs'.

Union representatives had drawn to their attention, by the readers, the circumstances where an occupier was slow to answer the door, or spotted the reader in the street after she had called: as it was a one call system, what should the reader do in this case? The unions had tried to negotiate an allowance for these call backs, in which the 'stint'⁶¹ would be reduced in proportion to the number of times in a day a reader was called back. However, management had stood firm over this point, no doubt deeply suspicious that readers may abuse it if conceded, as obviously there is no reliable method of policing it. The union representatives, sensing the widespread hostility to the new one call system among the workforce, knew that if it remained determined over this point, they could carry the workforce with them. An older stand-in district secretary⁶² vehemently emphasised that the system was one call and that the readers

would not be prepared to call back when asked by a consumer, unless some recognition of the fact was made in the form of a 'stint' reduction.

Management withdrew while a vote was taken on the proposals as they stood, with the union representatives confident which way the vote would go in view of management's refusal to move on the call back provision. Their confidence was justified, the vote was again 100% for rejection. Circulating among groups of readers after the meeting, I found hostility to the one call system was still considerable. I noticed that two 'activists', Gwen Barlow, whose husband was prominent in the local Labour Party, and shop steward Avril Smith, had all along emphasised to the readers that ultimately, the introduction of a one call system meant each reader covering more consumers than before, so it followed, as they put it: "As night follows day", that in the end there must be fewer jobs⁶³.

A further three weeks brought a circular from the trade union saying that management had conceded the demand for a call back allowance on the basic stint. The individual local representatives were asked to convene local meetings to ascertain the feeling of the membership now that the last major hurdle had been overcome. A meeting was called by Avril Smith in the canteen to discuss the matter and reach a conclusion. Both she and Gwen Barlow were still firmly against the whole scheme and most people at the meeting seemed to agree, so the vote was taken - this time slips of paper were marked, dropped into a tin,

and counted on the spot. Once again, a 100% NO vote! With a look of satisfaction, Avril said she would convey the result to the union representatives when she and the stewards from the other districts, met at the Valemere headquarters a week later. When that meeting took place at Valemere, the result from the other districts, though not as decisive as that at Eastborough, was nevertheless a large majority no.

A week after the meeting at Valemere each employee, much to their surprise, received a circular from the union, saying that management had agreed to most of the union claims, and so they recommended the membership to vote in favour of the scheme. A secret ballot paper was enclosed (printed on board stationary) so that the membership could vote. A fortnight later it was announced that a substantial majority had voted in favour of the new scheme, as recommended, on a six month trial basis, with a final commitment at the end of the six months. The secret ballot had very effectively undercut the decisions of the local meetings and the local activists. From the management's point of view the remaining resistance had been overcome and the way seemed clear to press ahead with implementation as soon as possible.

Conclusion

During the interwar years and up to the late 1950s, the gas industry was associated with gas production at urban gasworks supplying relatively small areas, and usually run by local councils. However, from the early 1960s, after the introduction of the Clean Air Act, the industry experienced a considerable increase in demand.

Following the discovery of North Sea gas, production and supply methods were transformed during the 1970s, and this was accompanied by a great expansion of the industry and its formation into a public corporation in 1973. As Huxley (1981) remarked: "the gas industry had been transformed dramatically from being a music hall joke with a cast of thousands to a by-word for big profits, big spending".

The extensive changes brought about by these events led to similar changes in the labour process at Eastborough and surrounding depots. The effects of these changes are crucial to the issues that have been discussed in this chapter. During the late 1960s the management was preoccupied with attempts to homogenize the industry and its labour force on a regional basis. This was achieved by re-structuring and bureaucratising, between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, mainly through shifting power and control to a new and very large regional headquarters. "Scientific management" (Taylorism) was extended on a wide scale into new areas, including meter reading. Incentive bonus schemes were introduced and performance closely monitored: the result was increasing work intensification during the two decades from

1960. At the same time, homogenization of the labour force was accompanied by increased trade union activity and the rise of an active shop stewards movement across the region as it became more centralised.

Throughout the period when these changes occurred, we saw the ways in which the workgroup came to terms with them through detailed discussion of important events such as the removal of local records, changes in the role and power of supervision, and the increasing numbers of women meter readers. The gradual homogenization of the workforce through management led courses and socialising was to prove counter-productive, from the management point of view, since it led to invigorated trade union involvement throughout the workforce.

Finally, we saw how a radically changed political context and an economic recession, in the late 1970s, brought the prospect of remote meter reading closer. The rapid change in labour market conditions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was accompanied by increasing fragmentation and sectionalism among the workforce thus making effective resistance to management initiatives more problematic.

The particular structural changes in the industry, and more recently the drive towards greater commercialism in the public services, are central to the ways in which these workers have experienced conflict and consensus in the labour process. In the following chapter we shall go on to examine, in more detail, the contestation and acceptance of these changes.

Footnotes, Chapter 6

1. These documents include published and unpublished texts, but also documents from the gas board archives which are unpublished, and were found in odd corners under a thick coating of dust. Much of this data was cross checked by conversation with long service employees who could remember the particular events from first hand involvement with them.
2. P. Chantler, 1938, The British Gas Industry.
3. "In the early 1950s, few would have given the gas industry much chance of survival, let alone expansion", T.I. Williams, 1981, p. 113.
4. "Hardly anybody outside the industry seemed unduly concerned at the outcome (nationalisation", T.I. Williams, op.cit., p. 113.
5. "Nationalisation was the greatest single event in the history of the gas industry in the first century and a half of its existence, it provided the framework (organisational) for the remarkable renaissance of the industry that followed the discovery of North Sea gas". T.I. Williams, 1981, op.cit., p. 103.
6. An 'out of town' district is one of the small towns surrounding Eastborough which have their own reading/slot teams, but which are now effectively controlled by the Eastborough supervision.
7. 'Gilbert Cards' were small rectangular cards on which all the details of slot collections were recorded.
8. Subsequently, during a conversation with the deputy supervisor, Mike Maguire, I was told that John Macintosh was always very conscientious and pleasant in his dealings with the public. In all his 35 years there had never been a complaint about him.
9. 'Two-part tariff', consists of a standing charge for the meter and associated services (the fixed costs), and a charge for the amount of gas used. The two-part tariff was first introduced in 1934 following complaints from 'affluent middle class consumers' who objected to small consumers (mostly the poor), not being subject to a minimum charge for gas supplied, so, as they saw it, shifting a disproportionate percentage of the necessary, fixed charges to them. See 'Report on the Gas Industry', P.E.P., 1939, p. 102.

10. The prospect of saving on administrative costs has, in recent years, made the idea of payment by cheque once a month, very fashionable among employers. However, it has not been so popular among manual workers, making its extension only very limited in scale.
11. The first regional office, after nationalisation, was established at an old, already used premises, and was on a modest scale by comparison with the later headquarters.
12. According to publicity handouts at the time, the new regional headquarters boasted the largest open plan office in Europe.
13. That is, known by the workers in the localities. The gas board had rather grander ideas, designating them 'regional' and 'sub-regional' offices.
14. Local 'nickname' (a colloquial term of abuse) for people from Conton.
15. I had later confirmed, during a conversation with Jack Batsford, a work study man, that a method study of the metering procedure had been carried out during the early 1960s, on which the formal training sessions were based.
16. Though no one I spoke to was able to confirm it, in formal terms, the inspiration behind this 'weekend' shows every sign of being motivated by the then popular 'human relations and communications' school of management theory, a notion which would doubtless have been incomprehensible to the local supervisors in those formal 'pseudo-academic' terms; for a detailed discussion of Human Relations school of management theory see: S.R. Parker, R.K. Brown et al., 1972, pp. 90-105, M. Rose, 1978, pp. 103-72, and S. Hill, 1981, pp. 86-90.
17. This involved putting a dot in a particular place on the computer sheet after emptying a meter. To do this meant bending down twice to the meter, placing the dot on the sheet seemed, to the collector, no advantage and it saved work by not doing so. The practice had gone on for some time, with no come-back, but the reinstatement of the dot was seen as essential to the new, and more rigorous supervisor at headquarters.
18. 'Town gas' was that traditionally manufactured in gas works, located in most towns and cities, usually close to railway coal sidings. Gas manufacture being a typical process industry the volume of manual workers was not as great as in most industrial processes. However, the effect on jobs was nevertheless considerable. As Williams says: "the number of works operating fell from 428 in 1960 to 5 in the early 1970s". T.I. Williams, 1981, p. 295.

19. Hillford - the local town gas works, then serving the whole of the Eastborough area. It was one of the larger and most advanced gas works in the country.
20. T.I. Williams, 1981, pp. 223-36, op.cit.
21. T.I. Williams, 1981, p. 236, op.cit.
22. 'Safe houses'; those which were known to the collectors to be safe and reliable, places where they could deposit some of the collected cash until the senior collector turned up to take it to the bank.
23. 'Ord's'; the term, extensive in the industry between the wars and up to the 1950s, for credit meters (i.e., an ordinary meter). The credit meter had historically preceded the slot meter, this fact probably explains the use of the term 'ordinary' meter.
24. The 'plate' on a slot meter is the term used for the circular dial which mechanically meters the volume of gas supplied, and contains the coin slot.
25. Source: Gas Board archives, maintained by the regional librarian at the Valemere headquarters.
26. "Some of those in the industry felt that the zeal of the converts (to 'managerialism') was excessive; so much time was spent on studying and applying new management techniques (ideology) in the short term, actual production tended to be impaired". T.I. Williams, 1981, p. 234, op.cit., my brackets.
27. 'Dotting' consisted of placing round pencil dots in small numbered boxes, which correspond with the details from the meter itself, plus, in the case of slot meters, details of the cash collected and any rebate given.
28. Occasionally, a faulty meter will continue to supply gas without the need to insert coins, this, in the vernacular, is known as 'gas without coin'.
29. The Clean Air Act was introduced in 1956, but its impact did not become extensive until the early 1960s.
30. 'Town Gas' (that manufactured in a conventional gas works), was burnt off in flare pipes (a familiar sight on street pavements during the period) and, when burnt off natural gas was released into the system.
31. 'Calorific value' is, in effect, the heating power of the particular gas supplied.

32. Greater 'job control' took the form of having slightly less work to do in a given time and being even further removed (geographically) from the depot and the boss (cf. Blackburn and Mann, 1979, pp. 66-87), Newby, 1977, pp. 301-09, and Richman, 1983, pp. 65-81.
33. 'Isolated' from work mates, this is especially the case for meter readers.
34. The formation of the British Gas Corporation on 1st January 1973 was an attempt to give the industry a 'corporate identity' and to centralise control, but it was finally decided not to dispense with the area boards, "in view of their strong local roots", T.I. Williams, 1981, pp. 236-40.
35. As the time taken to complete a day's work can vary a good deal, according to the nature of the district being worked, and the greater remoteness of the supervisor, the working day is necessarily more 'flexible' - this has clear advantages for married women with children, but also for their husbands, who often directly benefit from the additional workload shouldered by their wives as a result. Significantly, the male slot collectors, and temporary male meter readers employed at the time, predominantly used any 'accumulated time' for either recreation or rest.
36. Source: regional gas board archives.
37. All the work study 'engineers' at the 'Productivity Services Department' were young men who had, at that time, recently completed or were completing, technical college courses in work study. It certainly looked as if their newly acquired skills were being rigorously employed in the new bonus scheme proposals, it was a document 'by experts, for experts'.
38. The 'stint' - the number of meters that have to be emptied before the slotter can begin to earn bonus.
39. Coin weights carried by slotters increased markedly during this period, due to rising gas prices, increased usage, and the continued use of small denomination coins for slot meters.
40. This could partly explain my initial observations regarding the older age range of women meter readers when I first joined them.
41. There is evidence that 'having commitments' is also important to the personnel department of the gas board. At an interview I attended, the fact that I had not indicated my own marital status was made much play of. A young personnel officer eventually, rather irritably, asked me directly whether or not I was married. He made

furious notes when I replied no. Of course, I did not get short listed: how important the marital factor was can only be speculated upon.

42. A necessary relationship between new working procedures and 'teething troubles' were phrases which were regularly emphasised in conversations with work study engineers and supervisors.
43. Special Inspectors are people employed exclusively to deal with queries and problems involving the consumers. The title derives, in part, from that of 'Gas Inspector' a term used in the early days of piped gas, and celebrated in the music hall song: 'I Am The Gas Inspector'.
44. Slotters are much more conscious of 'Special Inspectors' since they are often called out to empty slot meters which are full up. Slotters sometimes criticise the 'Specials' for setting meters incorrectly. This gives rise to some antagonism between them, especially if the Special has set the meter 'strictly according to the book'.
45. A 'box full' is a slot meter with a full coin box which will not take further coins.
46. The correct procedure here would be for the Special to take away the cash for banking, issue a receipt to the consumer, and re-lock the coin box.
47. The 'snatch men' (colloquial term) are those charged with re-possession of appliances (often essential items such as cookers or fires) after default of payment. 'Cut off men' similarly, have to cut off supplies of gas and sometimes attend court hearings for default on payment of gas bills.
48. An example here would be the apparent contradiction (to the consumer) of the promise of 'cheap' gas following the discovery of North Sea gas, and a government policy of increasing gas prices 10% faster than the inflation rate (a form of 'hidden taxation') and the consumer's inability to meet such bills, due often, to unemployment or similar circumstances.
49. A few weeks later, a government minister, on visiting the area, described it as: "a bloody awful place to have to live in".
50. n.b., a parallel comment by an electricity man called to cut off power to the home of 'Yozzer Hughes'; "sorry mate, I hate doing this, but I need the job", 'Yozzer' replies: "I could do that". 'Boys from the Black Stuff', Alan Bleasdale, B.B.C.1, T.V., 1/2/83.

51. Though it is difficult to judge exactly how much her remarks are influenced by the fact of talking to me.
52. For a debate on working class perceptions of the political circumstances of the early 1980s, see Newby et al., 1984, and of the ideological dimension, Eccleshall, 1980, and Levitas, 1986.
53. Naturally, the 'income on the side' from coin dealing was not included in the analysis so the declared drop in income was obviously severely understated.
54. Strangely, this did not seem to apply to the slotters in other parts of the region, nor did they take the point up, probably because they were not aware of it. So the curious situation arose where slotters from other parts of the region were called in to read meters at Eastborough, whilst the Eastborough slotters did their slotting!
55. The 'rumours' appear to have originated from the local supervisors, probably from preliminary meetings they had, or perhaps more importantly, from press speculation.
56. 'Dial card'; a postcard on which a replica of the meter dials are reproduced so that these can be marked with the position of the pointers, to obtain a reading. This can either be posted to the gas board, or left on the step for collection.
57. 'Changeover day'; a day in the week when all the meter readers collect their 'new work' from the supervisor at the depot.
58. The new scheme involved very tight timings for waiting on the doorstep for a reply.
59. On reflection, this is perhaps not surprising in view of the concentration on this aspect in the press coverage. But it is also likely to be strongly influenced by their much closer contact with the public, face to face on the doorstep, every day of the week.
60. The union representative was able to claim smugly no redundancies, but what was not mentioned was the fact that temporaries had been taken on over the previous two years as permanent readers had left or retired, and that, in the event, these temporaries would be given a week's notice when the new scheme was finally implemented.
61. 'Stint'; the basic number of meters which must be read before bonus is earned.
62. The 'young and ambitious' district secretary, op.cit., p. 207, had, by this time, left for 'higher things' as the stand in put it.

63. Long spells of working with Gwen Barlow convinced me that she is probably one of the few with a real concern for the workers and their long term future. It must be said that Avril Smith has an ex-student son who was unemployed until obtaining a job as a temporary reader, this group stood to lose their jobs if the one call system was adopted.

Chapter 7. The Contestation and Acceptance of Change:
 The Labour Process in the 1970s

Introduction

In Chapter six we saw how major developments in the demand for gas and in the production process affected the way in which the industry was organised. Throughout the 1960s these changes had important implications for the labour process that became consolidated during the 1970s. The key determinants were gradual homogenization of labour and regional organisation, a process that was accompanied by work intensification and closer monitoring of individual performance.

In this chapter we will examine in greater depth the contestation and acceptance of change during the 1970s. This will involve focussing our attention upon developments leading up to, and including, the introduction of a new 'one call' meter reading system. The new working methods entailed a considerable departure from those that had prevailed since 1948 but, more importantly, marked the beginning of a series of further changes, the implications of which only began to emerge during the 1980s.

The new working methods were conceived and planned during the mid 1970s when temporary meter readers began to be employed as permanent workers were not replaced. Part one of this chapter examines the prolonged negotiations preceding the introduction of a trial period for the one call

system. The early stages of the negotiations highlight the ways in which divisions opened up between the aspirations of the workers at the local depot, and what the unions were willing to recommend.

At the top of the agenda of the local workforce was the preservation of jobs and the defence of limited job controls, the chief of which was the ability to 'accumulate time' during the week. This was threatened by increased work intensity and the prospect of greater time policing under the new scheme. The workforce were eventually enticed to accept the new one call system by a subtle combination of carrot and stick: the promise of a pay re-grade, and the 'recommendation' to accept from the union officials.

Part two is concerned with important changes in management and local supervision which coincided with the lead up to the introduction of the new system. The appointment of the Eastborough supervisor represented a significant break with the past tradition of 'recruiting from the ranks'. The new supervisor, Martin Howe, was a 'careerist' who had moved from the work study department. He had the task of monitoring the performance of the meter readers, and of time policing the new working methods. Contestation of management power by the meter readers, and particularly by the slotters, is highlighted and examined in relation to the new supervisors' lack of knowledge of their traditional working practices.

Finally, section three discusses contestation and acceptance of change within the context of further managerial

initiatives, attempted during a period of rapidly deteriorating labour market conditions and economic recession in the late 1970s. Subtle ways of holding back bonus payments, of cutting overtime, and of re-directing consumers complaints against the new system back to the meter readers, are seen to result in the development of a 'fatalistic' attitude among the workforce about prospects for the future.

'One Call' meter reading: Management initiatives and workers' responses

Discussion about the introduction of a 'one call' system of meter reading first began in mid-1979, a few months after I had been taken on as a permanent meter reader; a 'blessing in disguise' as I was later to discover when all the temporary meter readers were sacked on the implementation of the one call system almost two years later.

The existing bonus system had been operating for almost thirteen years. In fact it was introduced about three years after the opening of the large regional headquarters at Valemere with its growing numbers of work and method study 'experts'. In essence, it was a fairly straightforward system in which a weekly bonus was paid in relation to the number of meters read above a given basic number, called the 'stint'. In practice, the number of meter reading sheets¹ that most meter readers took out each week was between 750 and 850. After calling back on those consumers who were out at first, approximately 650-700 meters would

have been read by the end of the week.

Though bonuses were not high under the piece work scheme existing up to the end of 1979 (bonuses averaged about 12-15% of the final wages, whereas, under the subsequent 'one call' system this proportion of 'variable wages' increased to 25-30% of gross wages) did mean that the individual reader had greater 'flexibility' than under the proposed one call system. Under the existing scheme the readers attempted to get all their 'virgin work'² completed by Thursday afternoon, so that on Friday, they had only their 'back calls'³ to complete. This served a dual purpose: first, it meant that they would not need to return to their old area of work on Monday morning (their new run may be a considerable distance from the old, which would mean re-locating half way through the day, when their back calls were completed) and second, it meant that a little time could be 'saved up' for Friday, from late morning onwards, to do some shopping, or perhaps, even visit the hairdresser. I used mine to meet a friend for a pub lunch and drink. The old supervisor, Bill Tatam, was aware of this 'time saving' but turned a blind eye to it so long as the week's work had been satisfactorily completed. Subsequently, when a younger supervisor took over, much more rigid enforcement of times and rules began. The small amount of 'relative freedom' which the time saving gave the readers was soon under attack.

Apart from the substantial cash savings which would be achieved following the introduction of the 'one call' system, it would in essence give the employers much greater control

over the traditional working habits of the meter readers. The effect would be to tie them to an invisible 'treadmill' in which they would need to keep up a constant weekly effort in order to maintain their bonus. Under the old piece work system, which it was to replace, the reader was able to reduce, or increase, their individual weekly performance according to how they felt⁴ without any long term effect on the bonus. The new one call scheme would effectively eliminate the potential of the reader to control, on a weekly basis, the effort they put into the work⁵, though the effect of the work study report was to mystify this by suggesting that the new system would eliminate the effect of changing weekly working conditions, which, in turn, determined the weekly level of bonus earned. The report stated: "this bonus scheme therefore sets out to offer a steady amount of bonus for a steady amount of effort, in spite of all the changes which happen in reading work"⁶. What the new scheme actually did was to link each week's performance to the next on a 'rolling' four week basis. As we shall see, though this allows for the occasional week where performance falls below the reader's norm, without appearing to affect the four weekly trend, but does affect it in the longer term. So the outcome of the new scheme is to tie the individual reader to a 'treadmill' of constant performance whilst at the same time superficially appearing to allow for short term variations, (cf. Cavendish, 1982, pp. 125-35).

The one call meter reading system had two major changes associated with its introduction. The first, as already

briefly discussed, involved the use of a new bonus system closely tied in with the operation of the one call system; the second entailed a pay re-grade to the next grade above that current for meter readers, this amounting to about a 10% increase (this compares with average wage increases of a little over 15% up to then). The effect of the pay re-grade was, as we shall see, to serve as a form of 'carrot' to encourage acceptance of the new one call system, the application of which would save the employer a very much larger sum than it would cost in re-grading and higher bonuses.

The effect of re-grading and improved bonus was to increase slightly the wage for what was generally considered a job requiring hard work, and rewarded with low pay. Subsequently, management were able to use this enhanced pay package, as they saw it, for more rigorous application of rules and time keeping. With the arrival of mass unemployment in the U.K., for the first time since the war⁷, they were also able to utilise it to attract more men back into the job⁸ which, under the previous wages and conditions had failed to attract any at all (see table 1, p. 197).

The new bonus scheme, which was central to the effective operation of the one call system, was based upon the extensive application of work study, or 'scientific management'⁹, to the job of meter reading. The principles of work study and its application now seem to be spreading far beyond their original 'home ground' of the production line¹⁰. At the heart of the scheme lay the notion of imposing a constant

level of effort, relentlessly, week in week out. Using almost the same words Beynon comments on the management at Fords when they say: "we're simply asking for good continuous effort"¹¹.

The specific way in which continuous effort or, as the employer more delicately described it, "a steady amount of effort" was to be ensured by making each week's effort dependent upon the preceding four week running trend. The current week's performance would be calculated according to a formula based on a number of meters read, over and above the stint quantity - the latter being determined by the time taken to perform the various elements which, according to the work study people, were involved in reading a meter. The individual week's performance was given a weight of 33% (i.e., it was multiplied by 0.33) whereas the 'trend' performance (in essence a running mean) was given a weight of 66%, the two resulting figures were added, to produce the new trend (see figure 3, p. 231). Bonuses were paid according to a band of performance within which the trends fell. They were allowed to fluctuate, on average, by about six points within the band. If the individual's trend fell above or below their regular band for more than four consecutive weeks they would then move up into a higher, or down into a lower band. Whilst giving the appearance of one week's poor performance not making too much difference, the reality was that it tied the reader to a treadmill of regular performance. More important though, from the employer's point of view, is the element of 'self policing' involved.

Figure 3. Showing how stints and trend performances for meter readers are calculated

EXAMPLES OF ADJUSTED STINTS, WEEKLY PERFORMANCES, WEEKLY TREND PERFORMANCES & BONUSES

Reader Working In One Locality

Meters Read 750
 Stint for Area 635
 Weekly Performance $\frac{750 \times 75}{635} = 89$
 Last Trend Performance 101
 This Weeks Performance 89
 New Trend Performance $\frac{89 + 2 \times 101}{3} = 97$

Stint Adjusted for Overtime

Meters Read 800
 Stint for Area 635
 Allowed Time per Meter 3 Minutes
 37 Hour Basic Week
 Overtime Worked 1 Hour (60 Mins)
 Extra Stint for Overtime $\frac{60}{3} = 20$
 Total Stint $635 + 20 = 655$
 Performance $\frac{800 \times 75}{655} = 92$
 Last Weeks Trend Performance 89
 This Weeks Performance 92
 This Weeks Trend $\frac{92 + 2 \times 89}{3} = 90$
 Bonus For 37 Hour Week £10.00
 Bonus for Week Including Overtime $\frac{£10 \times 38}{37} = £10.27$

Reader Working In More Than One Locality

Stint for Area A 635
 Days Worked 2
 Stint for Area B 750
 Days Worked 3
 Meters Read in Week 800 (Both Areas)
 Adjusted Stint Area A $\frac{2 \times 635}{5} = 254$
 Adjusted Stint Area B $\frac{3 \times 750}{5} = 450$
 Total Stint for Week $254 + 450 = 704$
 Performance $\frac{800 \times 75}{704} = 85$
 Last Trend Performance 90
 This Weeks Performance 85
 This Weeks Trend $\frac{85 + 2 \times 90}{3} = 88$

Figure 4. 'Simplified' example of bonus calculation provided for the use of meter readers

STINT - Is the number of meters which have to be read before a reader begins to earn bonus. Each Team Area has its own Stint. Every six months the Stint is adjusted for Ours and also Density.

i.e. If the Ours increase the Stint is adjusted downwards. If the Ours decrease the Stint is adjusted upwards.

N.B. Bonus is only paid on meters read.

PERFORMANCE - Each week a performance is calculated:-

i.e. $\frac{\text{Meters Read}}{\text{Stint}} \times 75 = \text{This Weeks Performance}$

TREND - Each week a new trend performance is also calculated:-

Take:- $(1/3 \text{rd of this weeks performance}) + (2/3 \text{rd of last trend performance})$
= New Trend Performance (this is the performance on which you are paid).

BANDS - Your Bonus depends on which band your new trend performance falls into:-
e.g. Your new trend performance is 89*

Band	Range of Performance
1	76 - 80
2	81 - 87
3	88 - 95*
4	96 - 103
5	104 - 112 1/2

(In this case the new trend performance falls into Band 3 (and this is the band on which you are paid).

CHANGEOVER OF BANDS

If you move out of your Band for more than 3 consecutive weeks, you will be paid in the new Band in the 4th week.

i.e.	Week	Trend Performance	Actual Band	Pay Band
	1	89	3	2
	2	91	3	2
	3	93	3	2
	4	94	3	3

BONUS - Bonus is only paid on the time spent on reading - not on travelling time, end of day work or changeover time.

Having established your Band, now refer to the Bonus Rate tables to find your exact bonus earnings. To do this, read off the Band against the appropriate step on the salary scales.

The introduction of one call meter reading was the first phase of a major change in meter reading procedure which may, as we shall see, prove to be the most far-reaching since the introduction of gas meters in the middle of the nineteenth century. Publicly, the employers appeared to treat the change as being of no great significance, though, I suspect to their considerable annoyance, the 'popular' press got hold of the story and with the approval of the trade unions and pensioners organisations, were very critical of the scheme. A good deal of the criticism took the form of objections to the short space of time which the new system allowed for the reader to wait on the doorstep after knocking. A press cutting from the Sunday Mercury dated 27th July 1980 was typical when it said: "this system is diabolical, one minute is nothing like long enough for some old people to get to the door"¹². The actual time allowed for waiting on doorsteps was in fact closer to fifty seconds¹³. In practice, waiting for doors to be answered is the largest single time element in the meter reader's working day and therefore the one with the greatest potential for cutting down the length of the working day, from the reader's point of view. If the time waiting for doors to be answered can be reduced from the standard time allowed (i.e., 0.85 of a minute, or 51 seconds), this gives the individual reader the potential scope to reduce the time spent on the job, or to increase their income through higher bonus earnings. Most women seem to adopt the former tactic, and most of the men the latter, for the reasons discussed in Chapter 4.

The central feature of the one call system of meter reading was, as the name implies, the elimination of the return visit, or 'back call', as it was referred to by the meter readers. The advantages of the new system to the employers were, as we shall see, many and varied, but obviously, removing the necessity to call back at consumers' premises would save a substantial amount on the wage bill. As the number of 'outs' on the first call varied between 25% and 60%, with a mean of between 30% and 40%, calling once could potentially eliminate up to 30-35% of the labour needed if calling back was not undertaken after a first visit. Long before one call meter reading was seriously discussed by the employer, they embarked upon a policy (in the mid-1970s) of not replacing meter readers who left or retired. Instead, they recruited, for the first time in any major scale, temporary meter readers. This is how I came to meter reading myself, although a number of other ex-students, most of whom left or were 'dispensed with' when one call meter reading became a reality, first as a trial period in mid-1981.

Apart from the considerable attraction, to the employer, of obtaining over 30% more work from the meter readers, the one call system would pave the way for even more far reaching changes in the future, such as longer term reading cycles, on the doorstep billing, and ultimately, 'remote reading': I shall discuss these later, as they arise. The development of the one call system also depended heavily on a more intensive break down and time study of all the various operations involved in the job of meter reading. It provided a

unique opportunity for management to gain a much more direct control over the working day of the meter readers and, as it turned out, came at a very opportune moment politically, from the management point of view¹⁴.

Those most directly affected by the one call system were undoubtedly the credit meter readers so the discussion leading up to it, and the change itself, would have a major impact upon them, their jobs, and the way those jobs would be carried on in the future. There was also the possibility (hardly referred to at all in the employers official discussion documents) of even more significant changes in the future, once the one call system had been accepted. The employer's literature, which referred to further 'phases' being introduced later on, were, perhaps not surprisingly, absent from any informal conversations with the readers, or for that matter any of the more formal discussions. Certainly, the employers' representatives did not go out of their way to raise the topic.

Only two groups would be directly and adversely affected by the change, these were a small number of clerical staff at the Valemere headquarters whose jobs were directly involved in clerical work associated with the old system¹⁵, and of course, the substantial numbers of 'temporaries' taken on over a period of time, to operate the old system as and when permanent readers retired or left, and who would be 'dispensed with' when the one call system became operational¹⁶. One group, the slotters, would be re-graded, but on condition that they would have to read meters as well when the need

arose (something they had bitterly fought against for years), and accept all the conditions of the new reading bonus scheme. This effectively undercut their most powerful argument, namely, that they were much worse off financially if they had to read meters under the old system. But, under the new one call system, bonus rates would be compatible with slotting, which had been operating in similar form for over ten years.

Another group who would benefit from re-grading would be Special Inspectors, whose main job is to 'tie up loose ends'; which is, to take final readings when people move house, check disputed readings or accounts, empty full slot meters ('box fulls') and take individual readings for very large consumers. Special Inspectors could expect increased workloads from the one call system, mostly from disputed readings arising from the larger number of estimated accounts.

Supervision would also benefit from re-grading, but it would be hard to see any direct disadvantages or increased workload for them. However, the board made re-grading of all these other groups conditional upon acceptance of the 'whole package' by the readers. Obviously, the other groups interests would be served by subtle pressure for acceptance upon the meter readers. This would be especially so in the case of junior supervision, though to be fair, the local assistant supervisor at Eastborough, Mike Maguire, did say to me once: "they (the readers) don't know what they're letting themselves in for, they'll be chasing around like 'blue arse flies'".

Neither the special inspectors nor the slotters attended any but the meetings called by the employers, though the slotters especially would be affected by the new scheme, which would call upon them to do what they had most forcefully and successfully resisted for so long, namely, meter reading. Though I attended all the meetings (formal and informal) myself, it was noticed that the slotters did not attend any. Jim Wheeler, the local shop steward, remarked to me: "I haven't seen any of your lads at the meetings, I suppose they think it doesn't concern them and all they have to do is pick up the re-grade"? I replied that I had urged them to attend but had been told that they did not think the new one call system would affect their working arrangements at all. I do think they really believed this at the time, and, with the hard won victories of the past 'under their belt', they felt (mistakenly, as it turned out) that they would be unaffected by the changes and so had no need to bother about meetings.

Following the defeat of the 'dissidents',¹⁷ in the official union ballot (it will be recalled that the trade unions officially recommended acceptance), the new one call scheme became operational in the spring of 1981 and so had to be reluctantly accepted by the Eastborough meter readers. The chief disadvantages, at least as they voiced them, were the increased work speed and the larger geographical area they would have to cover. Almost everyone agreed though, that not having to do back calls would be to their advantage, but they certainly did not think that all the other disadvantages

were compensated for by not having to do back calls. As it turned out, it was generally accepted that having to do back calls was not such a disadvantage as it had seemed at the time. This was because a high proportion of consumers left out their readings on the dial cards provided on their front steps, which, by the end of the week, would reduce a reader's outs (those consumers who could not be contacted at all) to around 12%, a much reduced figure from the 35-45% on the first call.

During the early weeks of operating the one call system it became clear to the readers that the 'name of the game' was to work fast (something the employers had, no doubt, intended when they introduced the scheme) otherwise there was no possibility of earning a bonus or being able to accumulate 'free time' at the end of the week, as had been customary. One thing was certain, it would not be possible to do both, you would have to make a choice. Working faster than before, it soon became clear that the crucial factor was indeed the length of time spent waiting on doorsteps after knocking. It was the length of time spent waiting that would make the vital difference between achieving that which the individual preferred, bonus or 'accumulated time' at the end of the week.

Following the first weeks of the 'trial period'¹⁸ it did not take long for antagonisms with the public to surface because you called only the once. At first, complaints were received by the supervisor, routed via the Valemere headquarters, about readers knocking doors but not waiting long

enough for the occupant to answer. The old supervisor, Bill Tatam, would mention this in passing when the reader involved came in on changeover day. He would say to them: "Look, I know you're under pressure on this new scheme, but watch out for those awkward cusses who are prepared to report you at the 'drop of a hat', they're on the war-path now". Bill had once done the job himself, like all the old time supervisors, and knew what it was like tramping the streets in all weathers, trying to do your best, but inevitably getting some stick from someone, sooner or later. As we shall see, this accommodating attitude on the part of the supervisor¹⁹ was to come to an abrupt end after he retired.

Out on the streets, as I soon discovered for myself, public hostility towards the one call system not only manifested itself overtly on the doorsteps, but also covertly, behind living room curtains. Confrontations with the public on the doorsteps came swiftly. Comments such as: "Someone was saying you don't call back now then?" to which you would reply, as unobtrusively as possible, "No, I'm afraid not", to which the instant retort (in provocative tone) would be: "Well, what if I'm out then?" Rather than be tempted to say 'tough', one had to enter into a convoluted technical explanation about an estimate being sent, or, provision being made on the bill for a 'do it yourself' reading to be submitted for correction if they were not satisfied with the estimate²⁰. No provision, in terms of the work study man's 'time allowed', was made by the employer for this time consuming public relations job which, in the end, could only

be done by the reader facing the consumer, who was often fiercely irate, on the doorstep. I found this aspect of the work especially distasteful when you were faced with someone (usually women) in their 70s or 80s, with a distressed look on their world weary faces, worried about what they should do if they failed to get their meters read regularly as they always had done in the past²¹. Though I knew, especially in these cases, that the sacrifice of the two call system couldn't be worthwhile, I found myself 'bound into' furthering the employer's will, by inevitably trying to console the elderly person and explaining that the new system (though I had serious doubts) would not be too bad after all. This was the common experience of all the readers, and indeed had been foreseen, when they had strongly argued against the introduction of the new scheme on these very grounds at the so-called 'discussion meeting'.

If you were not confronted directly, on the doorstep, a subtle 'cat and mouse game' would develop, something that was a common feature of particular districts, but which became much more widespread with the introduction of one call metering. It usually took the form of the meter reader knocking the door, receiving no reply and, after knocking a second or third time, you would (when you 'cottoned on' to it) glance at the front room window, usually the ground floor ones, but occasionally the bedroom windows, to observe a slight movement of the curtains as you walked down the garden path. If you spotted a face or eyes peering beside the curtains and your eyes met, 'the game was up', and they

would come to the door either sheepishly, or, apologetically. However, most people became much more skilled at the deception with practice, and as time passed, would make sure they were well out of sight until you had left by the garden gate. Mostly, they would wait, until ideally, you were six or seven houses away, not quite out of sight, but within calling distance. Unless you could anticipate the moment, and hide or 'otherwise get out of range', they would call you back claiming (often in condemnatory tone) that they did not hear the knock (which left you baffled as to why they had come to the door at all if such was the case) or, that they had been in the garden when you called. Often, this 'game' would be repeated many times in a particular district, or would sometimes be grouped in a certain street or among a specific age or class, usually the middle aged or elderly in working or lower middle class districts. It hardly ever seemed to occur in outer middle class suburbs, where there was much less close or earnest contact with people.

It was quite common to be faced with hostile or derogatory comments, not only about the new one call system itself, but also about the gas board in particular, and more widely and vaguely, about the nationalised industries in general²². It was a time when the gas industry had announced several years of high profits, and after 1979, when gas prices had been forced up by government policy following speculation, in the early years of North Sea gas, that there would be an infinite supply of cheap gas. The adverse comments you heard out on the streets greatly increased in scale and

vehemence following the trial period of one call meter reading. There were even isolated reports of physical violence to meter readers. In Conton a consumer was reported as having broken a chair over the head of a meter reader there for failing to return to a house when called by the occupier.

During the six-monthly trial period the meter readers were certainly taking a great deal of stick, not only from irate consumers directly, but also from the management who were 're-directing' blame back to the meter readers for the official complaints which it received from consumers. The causes of such complaints however, were endemic within the nature of a work method which management themselves were intent upon imposing on consumers and workers alike.

Apart from the fundamental contradiction between some meter readers' desire to earn bonus by working faster (an aim completely compatible with that of the employer) and the consumer's desire for the meter reader to dwell longer on the doorstep, other difficulties began to emerge. Whether these additional difficulties had been foreseen or not by the employer must remain an open question, though it is extremely difficult to understand why they were not foreseen since every other conceivable contingency had been covered in the extensive 'method study' report issued by the employer, prior to the introduction of the one call system. Specifically, they consisted of what to do about obtaining an actual meter reading after the passage of nine months (after three separate visits), how to obtain actual meter

readings for those consumers on monthly budget accounts, or obtaining details about new consumers when premises changed occupation. These difficulties were dealt with by gradually 'slipping-in' postcards of various colours (on an ad-hoc basis as the problem emerged) for the meter readers to partially fill in and push through doors. This procedure constantly increased the work load and things to think about for the meter readers out on the streets. The encroachment by coloured cards was carried on over several months without a murmur of protest from either the meter readers or their union representatives. It seemed to me that, with so many changes going on at the time, and with the appointment of a new Metering Controller (I will say more about this important change later) it was, perhaps, due to apathy or oversight on the part of the Controller.

As I had been working with the slotting team for about six months before the first trial of the one call system and also during the early weeks of its introduction I was only able, at first, to gain an insight into what it was like in practice, by talking to the readers and listening to their conversations, on changeover days at the depot. Everyone I spoke to agreed that not having to do back calls was a benefit. However, they had experienced surprise, and some anger, from many consumers when dial cards were not being left when they were out. This was especially the case among the elderly, and in working class areas. It was only in subsequent weeks and months that the full force of public disapproval at not being left dial cards to fill in was felt,

as the meter readers gradually came face to face with consumers on the second, and later cycles²³.

Despite the time saved by not having to do back calls, the sheer volume of work, well over 1,000 calls to make against around 750 under the old piece work system, seemed daunting to most people. Two readers, Gwen Barlow and Avril Smith, remarked that the job seemed much more monotonous. Gwen said: "It seems more like being on a production line now, you're driving yourself all the time, not so much time to stop for a chat like we used to, this gets to you, especially with the old people". Another meter reader, Joan Bushell, said to her friend: "You have to move so fast now to keep up, you've no time to have a chat with people, you're just in and out and on to the next one". Someone else added: "Those ruddy houses at Wilton, the ones with the meters right at the bottom, under the stairs, you're knackered after crawling under 300 of those on a Monday". Most readers usually tried to do 50 or 100 extra calls on Mondays to get off to a good start, because, as the week progressed, some unforeseen circumstance inevitably arose to slow you down. For example, bad weather, an awkward district or feeling 'off colour'.

Much play was made, by management, of the extra bonus that was being earned by meter readers under the new one call scheme. This was set out, in great detail, in a circular resulting from a meeting held to discuss the operation of the new scheme, in July 1981, which was attended by both union representatives and management. The circular contained

a very impressive looking table showing the distribution of bonus bands earned by the various proportions of the meter readers throughout the entire gas region. However, no money totals were shown except the average bonus earned by comparison with the old system. Nevertheless, as the distribution of 'bands' achieved was heavily skewed to the lower levels (the top band giving a bonus almost 13 times greater than the lowest) the 'average' bonus shown gave a false comparison with the old system. In practice, both the median and modal bonus levels were considerably lower than the 'average' shown in the circular (almost 17% lower).

The old bonus, with which the comparison was being made, had also not been corrected for the relatively large percentage annual wage increases at the time (this was a period of high inflation, 1979-1981, and, as a consequence, higher percentage wage increases than subsequently) and, obviously, the new bonus rates for 1981/2 had been subject to these increases pro-rata. In addition, a salary re-grading, which was a part of the new bonus scheme, had not been allowed for, this would make the bonus earned (as a percentage of the basic wage) not that much greater than under the old scheme. But, of course, the savings to the employer through employing less meter readers and getting more work done by those remaining, were to prove considerable, even allowing for the re-grading and slightly higher bonuses.

Despite extravagant management claims (fostered by the work study people, who had responsibility for devising the details of the new bonus scheme) about the 'much higher'

bonuses being earned, the reality was that the readers were surprisingly modest in the level of bonus aimed for. Most appeared to be taking out around 1,100 sheets a week²⁴ (almost the same number of total calls, including 'back calls', as under the old 'piece work' system). Had they taken out 1,300 sheets (18% more) they could have earned 59% more bonus! The not inconsequential additional amount of bonus available for extra effort and the failure of the women readers in particular²⁵ to take advantage of it, demanded further explanation.

It soon became clear to me that, under the old piece work system, the more flexible hours ('unofficial') worked by the meter readers was one of the job's aspects that made it marginally more attractive than some others, despite the many drawbacks: quite hard physical effort, monotony, adverse weather conditions, a high incidence of personal injury, particularly from dog bites, and the stress associated with direct contact with the consumer. It seemed, even taking into account the more 'steeply graded' bonus opportunities²⁶, that the readers had decisively rejected those so-called 'opportunities' in favour of the traditional accumulation of time which they had achieved in the past under the piece work system. The reasons why they preferred the time to money bargain are perhaps rather more complex. An important consideration here was what the extra time might be used for. Partly, it was consumed to satisfy personal wants, such as going to the hairdresser, but more often to fulfill 'family commitments', like collecting children from school,

necessary shopping or doing housework. It was noticeable that those women with fewer 'family commitments', especially those without children, took out slightly more reading sheets improving their chance of a higher bonus, even though the immediate financial demands upon them may be slightly less than those with children.

I found that the women were taking out relatively modest quantities of meter reading sheets each week. Although, under the previous piece work system, the quantity they took out allowed for 'time accumulation' at the end of the week, the old supervisor, Bill Tatam, seemed to have more control over the weekly issue of meter reading sheets and tended to allocate a set amount each week to each reader. It is perhaps ironic that under the previous piece work system, the 'steady work pattern', enforced officially under the new one call system, had tended to be enforced 'unofficially' by the supervisor. The essence of the new scheme was that it enforced a 'steady work pattern', but in doing so it had to be seen to offer more initial choice by allowing the individual reader to 'self select' the bonus band she wanted, so making the weekly sheet issue inevitably more flexible, at least initially, when the individual reader would be deciding which bonus band to aim for. This gave the readers an opportunity, which in practice they had not had before; more self determination over the amount of work they took out each week. I think it possible that management did not realise²⁷ that there was a possibility they would opt for maintenance of their traditional 'time

accumulation' practice rather than being more overtly instrumental, and opting for a higher bonus. However, in view of the considerable saving of labour, and the extra work done by a smaller workforce I think such a consideration unlikely to cause them sleepless nights.

It was not universally the case that everyone was motivated in the same way, or even in a similar way in some cases. It appeared to depend, to a considerable extent, on individual economic and life circumstances. Usually, those who had working husbands in reasonably well paid jobs, or those who had grown up children who were working or who had left the parental home, were the ones who opted more decisively for time accumulation at the end of the day, or end of the week. In addition to these were that small group of women who had young children at school. They, overwhelmingly, preferred 'accumulated time' almost irrespective of their financial circumstances. On the other hand, those women who depended solely on their incomes for support (a widow, one with an invalid husband, and a single parent) preferred to work longer and earn a higher bonus.

Among the women, those who were more outspoken, whom the others seemed to look to for advice and encouragement, were predominantly those who preferred accumulated time to extra bonus. These were the wife of slotter Louis Roule, Gladys, and the readers' elected shop steward, Avril Smith. It was the views of these two which seemed to get most airing whenever contentious issues were raised, not only at meetings, but especially informally, when the readers spoke

together in small groups. As one might expect, their strategy consisted of attempting to influence the other readers to take out that quantity of reading sheets which best approximated to the number they themselves wanted, so as to optimise 'accumulated time' during the week. Of course, this arrangement did not always appeal to those who were, mostly of necessity, more interested in boosting their income by way of extra bonus.

Additional bonus was especially important to Jill Squires who was a single mother - she depended on her income for the maintenance of herself and her daughter. She lived in a tough area of town and told me: "For the sake of Sharon I must find somewhere better to live than where I am now". Jill had always tried hard to earn a little extra bonus under the old piecework scheme. She would always go out extra early, even before her official starting time at 8 a.m., to enable her to get a few extra reads before people went out to work in the morning. She was reported a few times by people from middle class suburbs for calling too early²⁸, occasionally, it was claimed, before 7 a.m. I was also told this by consumers when I called: of course I knew who the person concerned was even before they had the chance to describe her; I always pleaded ignorance. The new scheme gave her a chance, at least at the level of appearance, to earn a tempting little extra bonus.

Avril and Gladys, during the early months of the 'one call' scheme, would often remark about the extra work which

some of the others were taking out, but they were especially critical of Jill Squires. Though it was quite open to the individual to select what bonus band they wanted to aim for, they somehow seemed to feel it would reflect upon them if some people took out more²⁹. It was also said that: "If the supervisor saw one person doing more work than the others, he might think they ought to be able to do the same". I suspect the thinking may be that the supervisor might wonder what the others did with the surplus time they were bound to be able to accumulate. This seemed to me to be a weak argument as he already knew, and what is more, most of them knew that he knew! This particular issue became much 'hotter' when a new younger supervisor took over. They probably thought he would be green regarding the weekly time accumulation, especially as he had not come up through the ranks like all the previous supervisors.

The meter readers commented on the greater fatigue they experienced resulting from more routinisation, greater boredom felt and the faster work pace of the new 'one call' system. This was something I immediately noticed myself when I came back to some occasional meter reading together with the slotters, this being part of the new working arrangements. The pace at once seemed much more intense, there was little time to talk to consumers making the job seem much more routine and less interesting than when I had done it before. Slotter Jack Whitehead said to me: "You don't seem to have any time to talk to anyone, you just go around like a 'blue arse fly' all the time". Much the same

impression was given by John Macintosh from the Oakleigh depot: "It's not like the old days now, you had time to talk to customers then, it was altogether more leisurely".

It was not long before the readers' sickness rates began to increase. Though this trend was general, it was particularly noticeable at the nearby Norbury depot, where some readers had often gone off sick before when they were allocated a particularly bad run. With the increased speed at which they covered their area, those who used this tactic had to do so more often as they got those 'bad runs' at inevitably closer intervals. The new supervisor soon noticed the increasing rates of sickness. I overheard his comment one afternoon, to Mike Maguire: "I can't understand all the sickness we're getting recently". He never really did.

New managers, new working practices:
Contestation and change

During the two years 1981-82, three major retirements took place in the metering department. These were to have a far reaching effect upon the meter readers and slot collectors at Eastborough and the adjacent towns of Oakleigh and Norbury, whose metering operations were controlled by the Eastborough depot, from the Valemere headquarters. In the normal course of events these retirements, occurring singly, and over a period of time, though they consisted of heads of department and a supervisor, would have been little more than routine. However, as far as what followed at the

Eastborough depot and adjacent towns, they were of considerable significance in two ways. First, in coming together (within nine months) and second, they represented a complete break with the past tradition in that they were to be the last to have been promoted through the ranks.

The first time we met the new Eastborough supervisor was on changeover day when we all came into the depot at the end of the week to collect the new week's work. The recently appointed Metering Controller from Valemere brought along the new supervisor, to introduce him to us. We were told that his name was Martin Howe and he would be joining the district from next Monday. He asked the names of each of us and shook hands, introducing himself as Martin, emphasising the informality of the christian name. I think this seemed rather awkward to some of the readers, especially the older ones, who had always been used to the formality of surnames. However as we were to find out later, the 'mateyness' belied a rather harder authoritarianism beneath the friendly exterior. Martin was a man of medium height, but stocky with an aggressive stance and piercing eyes, he had a very firm handshake, 'short back and sides' haircut, balding slightly, and looked at least ten years older than the early 30s we later found him to be. He was a complete contrast to the 'lightweight' metering controller who had brought him to meet us. Despite the 'informality' and christian name terms, most of the readers agreed (as we went home afterwards) that he looked as though he might turn out to be 'a wolf in sheep's clothing'.³⁰

After he had been installed for about a fortnight Martin Howe became a little more talkative. I think at first he was completely 'in at the deep end' since he had no previous experience of the metering work at all. However, as one might expect of such a man, he soon picked it up or more likely, gave the impression that he had. One of the first things he asked me was to: 'talk him through my day'; the next day he was out with me observing in practice whether what I had told him corresponded to what actually happened. Though I did not see much more of him out on the job, for the time being at least, over subsequent months many of the statutory checks³¹ and a good many 'unofficial' checks were made on the working procedures of both the slot collectors and the meter readers.

After Martin Howe had been in the job for only about a month, the first minor confrontation took place between him, and me as organiser of the slot team. It related to the slot team's out of town work in which they emptied slot meters in the surrounding small towns and villages. Previously, these out of town areas did their own slot meter clearances, but since the decline of slot meters, during the 1960s, there had been barely enough work to justify doing their own. In any case it was obviously more efficient for the specialist team from Eastborough to do the job and allow local teams to concentrate on reading. There had been additional impetus towards this arrangement following the slotters' battle, in the 1970s, to avoid doing reading in addition to slotting, and to concentrate their effort on slotting.

Due to some 'quirk' in the bonus system (which nobody seemed to fully understand), the slotters did not receive any allowance for travelling time to get to the town or village where they were due to work. In view of this, and seeing the injustice of it, the previous supervisor, Bill Tatam, had allowed for the travelling time by paying an hour's overtime instead. Most of the out of town work, being more rural and therefore spread out, had lower stints (the total amount of work that had to be done before bonus was earned) therefore proportionately less meters had to be read when working out of town. Martin Howe either had some other motive or did not fully understand procedure. It would be difficult to justify the argument that he did not understand the procedure, since he had worked as a work study man previously. With a bewildered look he asked me why the slot collectors did not empty as many meters out of town as they did at Eastborough. When I offered a thorough explanation of the bonus system and the different stints, due to the lower density of meters per square mile, he seemed quite taken aback and a little agitated. To my surprise he started to 'heavy up' saying that he expected them to empty as many meters as they did at Eastborough. I did not think he expected to be taken seriously nor, I think, did he really. When I half jokingly said: "We'll be working ourselves out of a job at that rate", he became fanatical and shouted angrily: "There will be no redundancies, you must know that has been agreed as part of the new system" (one call). I was quite puzzled at first, but soon realised

that the management line at the recent negotiations on the one call system, had been an absolute refusal to sign a no redundancy agreement requested by the unions, it was obviously a tender spot.

Management begins to make the running:
Fatalism and acceptance

A generally hostile public and press response to the introduction of the one call system continued, following the start of the six months 'trial period'. The new metering controller, Mark Weatherall, had hinted at the considerable difficulties being experienced, and doubts about whether they (management) should proceed with its introduction. Many of the problems with the new system seemed to turn on the production of accurate computer estimates of consumers' consumptions. As no back call was now being made, the proportion of, and frequency with which meters were being physically read was obviously falling, making it much more difficult to produce reliable computer estimates of consumption for those consumers who had been out when the reader called. The result was widely variable estimated bills which, needless to say, undermined the possibility of consensus, thus considerably compounding the other antagonisms. The response of management, under the new metering controller, Martin Weatherall, was to introduce an almost 'panic measure'; a series of various coloured post-cards to be used for different types of account and different levels of urgency in obtaining a reading for those who were

out when the reader called previously.

The introduction of new coloured post-cards, four in all, obviously created additional work for the meter readers, but was accompanied by a deafening silence from management. In practice, these additional cards, all of different colours, made life very awkward for the reader who, in addition to the cards, also carried a ring binder of 200-300 reading sheets, 10" x 8" in size, and weighing over two pounds, pencils, torch, raincoat, map and keys. All of these items together were very cumbersome to handle—to make matters worse the binder and sheets were of atrocious design; occasionally the whole lot would burst open spewing the sheets all over wet or snowy streets, more often than not, it seemed, in gale force winds.

The coloured cards were introduced 'quietly and casually', one by one, on changeover day when the readers came into the depot at the end of the week. They were treated as just another irritation, but accepted in the course of all the other matters which had to be dealt with in a short space of time, on Friday afternoons. Some months later, when chatting to the deputy supervisor, Mike Maguire, he said to me: "I could never understand why the readers accepted all those extra cards we foisted on them, with hardly a murmur of objection". Neither the union representatives nor the local shop steward, Avril Smith, seemed to show any concern at all. It seemed that once they had won the minor concession over call backs they lost interest.

The concealed job losses and faster work pace appeared to be of little significance to them, and once the trial period had begun the official union representatives especially, seemed to 'melt away'.

As far as the slotters were concerned, the more assertive management style which came with the arrival of the new metering controller at Valemere and supervisor at Eastborough, was soon to affect them. It was not long after my minor confrontation with Martin Howe over the number of meters emptied by the slotters out of town, that he began to 'drop hints' that the work pattern of the slotters was to be changed. He obviously also mentioned it to his deputy, Mike Maguire, who took pleasure in constantly mentioning it to me whenever he saw me. He would say: "Ah, you'll see, this new bloke is going to 'sort out' the slotters, he won't stand any nonsense". It is difficult to be certain exactly what went on between him and the new supervisor, but it seems evident that he was encouraging the new supervisor, Martin Howe, to disrupt the slotters' work routine and to 'break their power' as he perceived it³². In view of the past confrontation with the slotters, there were seen to be 'old scores to settle', not only as Mike Maguire saw it, but almost certainly, as those at more senior level also saw it.

The previous supervisor, Bill Tatam, had harboured considerable resentment against the slotters over their stand against having to do reading. He had always felt that it had reflected upon his ability as a supervisor in

the eyes of the Valemere management. He said to me, when I took the job with the slotters: "Watch those bastards, they'll have you over a barrel if you give them half a chance". I also discovered that he and Mike Maguire met quite frequently at lunchtimes for a drink following Bill's retirement, and would discuss the way the new supervisor was going about his job.

It was just about two weeks before the retirement of slotter Ron Wild, that the supervisor, Martin Howe, casually mentioned to me that he intended to get the out of town teams to do their own slotting. His argument was that they were being paid a higher pay grade because they had traditionally done slotting as well as reading. However, 'tradition' was not to enter into it when the inner teams slotters at Eastborough were called upon to do both under the one call scheme, whereas previously, they had done slotting only, which is what the confrontation had been about. He said he would have a word with the slotters about it after Ron's retirement on the Friday after next. Presumably he was counting on my 'leaking' the news out to the slotters beforehand, so it would not come as too much of a surprise to them and might possibly 'soften them up'. Despite my irritation at being set up to do some of his dirty work for him, I nevertheless felt that I owed it to my workmates to put them in the picture. Despite an initial show of anger, I got the distinct impression that an air of fatalism about the future was beginning to settle upon them. Louis Roule, always antagonistic towards Jack Whitehead and Bill James

said: "I can see it coming, this new chap is going to get his way, they (Jack and Bill) are going to have their 'wings clipped', they won't find it so easy to fight back now there are so many out of work"³³.

Ron Wild said to me a couple of days before his retirement that he was looking forward to having a farewell drink with 'the lads' before he left on the Friday night. He stressed that he hoped there would be no fuss and that none of the bosses from Valemere would come, he commented: "after all they're not really 'us' are they? We never see them very much - not that we would want to, of course". We had all contributed to a kitty from which we bought him a wall barometer for his retirement present, something we knew he had always wanted. I asked the canteen supervisor, who I knew to speak to, if she could provide us with about half a dozen glasses, and a corner of the canteen with a few easy chairs and a small table. She said she would be pleased to do this, and would arrange it for three-thirty on Friday afternoon.

On the morning of Ron's retirement I was told, quite bluntly by Mike Maguire that the new metering controller, Mark Weatherall, had decided to come to Ron's retirement to wish him all the best. It did not occur to me until much later, what was the true nature of his visit, in fact, not until the proceedings were well under way that afternoon. I knew Ron would be disappointed when he heard about the unwelcome intrusion on his retirement send off. He was, bitterly. When I told him later that morning, he said

simply: "the bastard".

At the end of the day's work we strolled along to the canteen. No sooner had we arrived and poured out the drinks, when the supervisor, the metering controller, and a few minutes later, the local shop steward, Jim Wheeler, arrived. With their appearance, the friendly informal atmosphere changed, became 'stiffer and more formal'³⁴, the spontaneity of the gathering was completely lost. There was, of course, 'polite conversation' and 'mandatory good wishes', but it was patronising in the extreme. After about twenty minutes of small talk and artificial pleasantries, from the bosses in particular, Jim Wheeler discretely left wishing Ron 'a happy and well deserved retirement'. This gave the cue to Martin Howe to ask if the slotters would remain behind for a few minutes afterwards, so that, as he put it, he could 'have a word with them'.

With Ron suitably despatched after 30 years of hard graft, the 'real work' could (in their eyes) proceed³⁵. Martin Howe, sitting in upright and forward thrusting posture, with hard and piercing eyes, began by saying that he intended the out of town teams should take over slotting in their own areas because, he argued, they were paid a higher pay grade to do the work, in addition to reading meters. He emphasised the injustice as he saw it, of the traditional practice of the Eastborough slot team doing work for which the outer teams were themselves being paid. The way he put it made his intentions sound justified, which was obviously what he intended. The slotters could do

little else than agree with his 'logic'. However, as we shall see, his argument proved to be spurious.

The question of the out of town slotting was used as a sort of introduction (a logic, which as he saw it, they could hardly challenge) to the central controversy, that of the slotters doing meter reading, when required by the management. Again, as he saw it, he could apply an indisputable logic here. It was that the new one call system contained a clause to that effect³⁶, with which the slotters could hardly disagree. The way he put it was that they had no alternative, and that was the way he wanted it, with the meter controller sitting beside him, following the 'superficially friendly' retirement gathering. The whole set up was fundamentally intimidating. But, despite the apparent balance of power in favour of the supervisor, Jack Whitehead in particular, was not going to let it rest there (though he must have realised the situation of the slotters was now hopeless). He said, much to the annoyance of Martin Howe: "We'll need the weekend to think it over". To avoid what he had been trying to avoid for weeks (a confrontation) Howe had no alternative but to reluctantly agree.

After the meeting had broken up, I happened to bump into the shop steward, Jim Wheeler. Naturally I mentioned the strategy that Martin Howe was adopting towards the slotters. Though he did not say so directly, he seemed familiar with it and showed little surprise when I mentioned what transpired at the 'meeting'. He seemed uninterested in the fate of the slot team, saying that what was being proposed

"was inevitable from the start" (from when the new scheme was first talked about). When I suggested that the union negotiators had not done a particularly good job on behalf of the slotters (they would now be effectively used as part-time 'de-skilled' readers, picking up work that had not been completed on schedule) he became visibly agitated, and tried to side-step the criticism by saying that the slotters had not attended all the meetings on the grounds that the new scheme was really for the readers and not their concern. Because of this he seemed to be implying that he had little sympathy for them.

During the week following Ron's retirement I had a week's holiday to come. I told the slotters I would abide by whatever majority decision they came to over what had transpired at the meeting. I gave them copies of the new 'job proposals' and the 'job descriptions' to refresh their memories as to what was at stake and suggested they read it very carefully before coming to a decision. When I called at the depot the following Friday to find out if the slotting sheets had arrived from Valemere, and where we would be working, I saw the deputy supervisor Mike Maguire. He just gave me the information I wanted and made no mention of the slotters, who had by then left. I knew that he would be certain to mention it if they had not agreed to do what the supervisor was demanding, or, on the other hand if there had been a 'confrontation' with him. I left rather confused. I had been prepared for some 'action' in view of the slotters' past record of resistance to management initiatives.

When we gathered on the Monday morning for work, I asked about what they thought of the supervisor's proposals, and what they had decided to do. I was very surprised by their mild and fatalistic attitude (cf. Westwood, 1984, and Purcell, 1982), it was difficult to get any direct answers from them on the subject, but they appeared to have acquiesced to his 'proposals'. When I hinted that unless more of us in the industry were prepared to resist this type of pressure we might find our jobs in jeopardy in the end³⁷, Jack Whitehead replied: "Well, that's it, they know you won't find another job now, they've got us by the short and curlies".

In the two or three weeks following the announcement of this disruption of the slotters' work routine, both Jack Whitehead and Louis Roule, uncharacteristically, sustained quite bad cuts and bruises in separate accidents on the job. It would be hard to prove any direct connection, but it is perhaps significant that the readers were also beginning to suffer higher rates of sickness and accidents than usual. The new supervisor commented to Mike Maguire about the fact that the rate of sickness had almost doubled in recent weeks. I knew from conversations with other readers that 'sickness' was being used as a weapon by some readers, particularly those from outer teams, as a protest against the greatly increased pressure of work.

Not many weeks passed before Martin Howe was starting to undertake checks on the working procedures, starting and finishing times of the readers, and cash security of the slot collectors. This latter involved the supervisor and

assistant going around to houses with slot meters, on the day before the slotter was due to call, emptying the meter and counting the cash it contained, replacing the cash and locking the meter. On the following evening, when the slotters' sheets had been handed in, the meters singled out for checking would be pulled out and checked to see whether the cash the slotter had recorded corresponded with that which had been counted by the supervisors. The rules governing meter cash checks were quite strict, the supervisor must always be accompanied by an assistant who must verify all the details which were entered on a special sheet and countersigned by the overseer. This procedure had always been vaguely embarrassing to the old supervisor - having to check furtively on the honesty of slotters who had been doing the work for over 20 years without a hitch - so the slotters were always warned indirectly through the assistant supervisor 'leaking' the information to the senior collector. When the new supervisor began his cash checks he remarked: "Of course, we don't tell the blokes, or it will defeat the object of the exercise". Meter checks were largely a ritual, since the consumers always made a point of telling the slotters that: 'someone had called the day before to check the cash in the meter', so they always knew well in advance when a meter had been checked.

In addition to these statutory cash checks, other checks involving procedure and the condition and range of equipment carried, both by the slotters individually, and also on the slotting van, were now being carried out with fresh rigour

under the new supervisor. At first this regular checking was a source of amusement, to the slotters in particular, but after a while, when it did not seem to abate, as was expected, it began to be viewed with considerable irritation. Bill James remarked: "This new geyser doesn't deserve a conscientious team of blokes, always checking up on us like this". When I saw the retired senior slotter, John Foster, one Saturday in the High Street, I mentioned this to him—he replied: "Well, what do you expect, he's only an office wallah looking for promotion".

A very short time before the end of the six month trial period for the new one call system, in addition to the series of coloured cards, craftily introduced, there followed one final deceit. It consisted of a white paper slip, on which appeared a long-winded statement saying that the meter reader had called, was unable to gain access to the meter, and that an estimated account would be sent. It was claimed by management that they had been receiving so many complaints from the public, saying they had not realised the meter reader had called, they argued that it was necessary to introduce such a slip. The truth of the matter was that the public were extremely hostile to the whole one call idea, and especially about receiving estimated accounts which, they insisted, were always 'over estimates'.

The ferocity of public hostility fell upon the readers themselves, day by day, out on the streets. It did not take long to emerge that the main purpose of the white slip was so that supervisors could check up on whether readers had

actually called at all the premises for which they had sheets. Naturally, there was a tendency for readers to occasionally miss a house where there was known to be a particularly fierce dog, a very unpleasant consumer, or some other avoidable obstacle, but these only represented a very small fraction of the total in most districts.

Some people, particularly the middle aged and elderly consumers, would complain to you that the previous reader had been observed missing out whole blocks of houses. When one probed this further, they usually admitted that it was hostility to the one call system being imposed upon them that lay behind the complaint. In any case the irrationality of the reader missing out houses, when you were paid only for meters read, soon became self-evident when you pointed it out to irate consumers.

Following the introduction of the white slips, many of the readers became very annoyed, coming as they did, on top of all the other coloured cards that had been gradually and stealthily introduced. But the white slip was a much more serious matter, since it had to be put through every letter box where people were out (35-40% on average). The difficulties were compounded by the fact that the slips were flimsy, so great irritation and many sore and cut fingers resulted from trying to push them through stiff or double flapped letter boxes. In addition to these difficulties, unbelievably, they were actually glued together at the top so that each one had to be ripped off a pad, with your hands

full of the normal equipment and binder this slowed things down drastically. Though work study was supposed to have allowed a small reduction in the stint, following complaints by shop stewards, we really didn't notice any difference.

Discontent over the introduction of the coloured cards, and more recently the white slips, continued to grow. It reached a point where many of the readers were in favour of refusing to use them. However, this possibility was effectively undercut, because they were 'strategically' introduced towards the latter couple of months or so of the trial period. Payment of the new bonus back money was craftily held up to the end of the trial period, and would only be paid then. More importantly though, the re-grading was conditional upon acceptance of the new one call package. Obviously, the 'carrot' of all this accrued cash and the prospect of more to come, in the form of the re-grade, acted as a powerful lever for the management.

Our elected representative, Avril Smith, reported to the Eastborough depot at a mass meeting on January 22nd 1982, that all the other depots in the region had overwhelmingly accepted the one call package. She said: "It seems inevitable now that the scheme will be imposed on us (Eastborough) in the form the board wanted, but they still refuse to sign a no redundancy agreement, even though they gave us a verbal assurance of no redundancies". Avril reported that the readers at the other depots now generally appeared only interested in receipt of the back bonus pay and the re-grading back pay. One reader's husband (she had been off

ill), we were told, had phoned to ask when his wife would receive her back pay as he himself was now on the dole³⁸.

The Eastborough readers were still very reluctant about accepting the new scheme as it stood. Their mood seemed one of resentment, but at the same time, resignation. They were defeated and thought they could go no further in resisting the imposition of the one call system. They had been out-flanked by management and 'sold out' by their trade union. When Gwen Barlow commented that she wished they could go back to the old back call system, a murmur of agreement ran around the room. She said that they were covering much more ground, and that the work was now more routine and boring and also much more exhausting³⁹; this brought nods of agreement from everyone. Avril Smith also suggested there was plenty of evidence that the new meter controller, and especially the new local supervisor, would be much more strict on time keeping. This suggestion brought a sigh of frustration, especially from those few younger women (mostly the single parents) with school age children and a home to run. It would obviously mean disruption of carefully worked out domestic arrangements, and more aggravation all round, if time keeping were to be rigidly enforced. However, much to my surprise, I overheard Avril Smith and Louis Roule's wife in conversation after the meeting saying that they thought the previous supervisor, Bill Tatam, had been too 'soft' on time keeping: "He knew what was going on", said Avril. Both of these women had grown up children and working husbands, but even more remarkable, Avril Smith was the elected shop steward!

The six month trial period for the one call system had dragged on, through lack of agreement and 'teething troubles', into the eighth month. The prospect of the pay re-grade and the back pay then accruing had created the carrot that the employers thought would enforce acceptance. The delaying tactics brought about, as we have seen, the desired effect of acceptance of the package. The keenness of management to get the new scheme into operation was confirmed by the local supervisors' constant remarks that they could not understand why the readers did not accept it straight away in view of the potential earnings they lost by delaying. This was also the view expressed by the work study men in 'informal conversations' with readers and slotters, when they came to do a work study exercise. When I suggested to the deputy supervisor, Mike Maguire, that the management may be regretting the new scheme in view of the large number of complaints from the public, he replied: "No matey, they've saved thousands in wage costs, they'll never go back to the old scheme now". Avril Smith had also mentioned, at the January meeting, that the one call scheme was only 'stage 1' of the proposals, 'stage 2' contained much more radical proposals (on the doorstep billing by readers) for future introduction. Most of the readers and slotters had either forgotten this, or had chosen to ignore it.

Following the 'pressured' decision to accept the new one call scheme, it did not take long for management to pursue a policy of closer and more stringent supervision of the meter readers and slotters. The increasingly

oppressive supervision arose within the context of the now very large number of complaints resulting from the introduction of the one call system itself which, as we have seen, was very unpopular with the public from the start⁴⁰. A good many of the complaints related to the readers working too quickly, as the public saw it. Typical of these complaints were: 'the reader did not wait long enough for me to reach the door', or, 'I did not hear the door being knocked'. It would be worthwhile here, to quote a letter published in the local Eastborough paper, it was typical, according to trade union officials, of those being received generally:-

'six people were in the house when the gas meter reader called, but no one heard the bell.

I saw her five doors away, but she would not come back, I also had a neighbour's key, so that was another meter not read.

I think it's awful to be treated like this, but I guess it's what we have to stand these days.

I suppose I shall get an estimated bill, which I shan't accept'.

As I have argued, it was a common tactic for people to lurk behind curtains, not answer the knock, but wait for the reader to move some distance away, then call her back, otherwise it would be very difficult to explain (as in the letter quoted above) why the occupier came to the door when they claimed, often vehemently, they had not heard the knock in the first place. Though this was extremely frustrating for the meter readers one could under-

stand some consumers seeing the tactic as their only direct way of 'getting back' at the gas board, though in practice, it rebounded back on the meter readers, rather than those for whom it was vaguely intended.

In addition to complaints about readers working too fast, there were also frequent claims from a hostile public that the flimsy white call slips had not been put through their letter boxes. Though most of these complaints, following rigorous investigation by supervisor, were found to be unsubstantiated, the new supervision nevertheless undertook a 'crack-down' on the readers. In the case of the reader cited in the consumers letter quote above, I was told by shop steward Avril Smith, that the supervisor, Martin Howe, had unofficially warned the reader concerned without the presence of a trade union representative⁴¹. I later found that most of the readers did not know that they were entitled to the presence of such a representative as part of a procedural agreement. Since the supervisor was well aware of the procedural agreement he was clearly trying to intimidate the reader without the 'fuss' of following the agreed procedure.

The 'crack-down' continued with the issue, a few weeks later, of a circular originating from Martin Howe, in which it was tersely stated that 'action' would be taken against readers who did not follow the rule book (he had all the rule books renewed or up-dated). He added: "readers are required to wait on doorsteps at least three minutes after knocking" - obviously this was completely 'plucked out of the air', since simple arithmetic would have shown that in

excess of twice the readers working day would have been spent just standing on doorsteps! Needless to say, after reference to trade union representatives this circular was not heard of again, but no apology was given or any further remarks made on the subject. Regular checks on the readers continued and a security man (who was an ex-police officer) was called in to investigate the cash procedures of the slotters, on the pretext that this was routine. Soon after a work study man was sent out to check on the timings of the work procedure of the slotters. At the same time as this charade was going on it still remained, as always, a major task to obtain essential pens and pencils which the slotters needed to carry on their work.

In addition to imposing a more disciplinarian regime, the new supervisor also seemed intent upon reducing costs at the expense of the workers. One of his first projects was to remove an insignificant amount of travelling expenses, amounting to £2.98 a week, from the senior collectors - this had been paid for many years. It was found, after some 'research' by him that because they had the use of a board vehicle they were not entitled to the expense - so it was withdrawn at once. The supervisor had the gall to announce that the board had 'been persuaded' by union representatives not to insist on the collectors paying back the money.

Another major blow came when the supervisor allowed information to 'leak out'⁴² that he was going to stop all overtime payments for readers and slotters who worked out of town away from their home depots when required by management.

This overtime payment had been traditionally paid because travelling time was not allowed for 'officially' by work study because, they claimed, meters could not be read or emptied whilst readers or slotters were being transported. The effect, had the overtime not been allowed, would be to make those working out of town (for the convenience of the board) worse off in their pay packets. Since a good deal of the slotters' time was spent working out of town, this made a substantial difference to their wages (about 5% of yearly wages), so with very small annual wage increases during 1983 the removal of this payment will almost certainly result in an actual net wage reduction for the year. However, such was the general state of demoralisation amongst the workforce, readers and slotters alike, no one seemed inclined to attempt to fight it.

The events I have described, which took place from the time the one call system was finally and reluctantly accepted, marked a real 'sea-change' in the objective conditions in which not only meter readers and slotters sell their labour, but perhaps many other workers too?

Conclusion

This chapter has focussed on managerial strategies employed to introduce major long term changes in working methods, of which one call meter reading was the first stage. The response of the workforce to these changes was a complex dynamic of contestation and acceptance - the visible manifestation of an underlying structure of conflict, characteristic of the labour process at this particular workplace, during a specific period in its history.

Changes in management succession can be seen as a crucial factor, coming as they did, just prior to the introduction of significantly different working methods. The new management team and the local Eastborough supervisor were younger men, and mostly came from other departments. They gave the appearance of being committed to implementing the new methods and were prepared to monitor closely performance. There was also evidence of a co-ordinated policy over such issues as the threat of redundancy perceived by many of the workers. A variety of managers and supervisors frequently took the opportunity to emphasise, often quite strongly, that there would be no redundancies. As we have seen, supervisor's responses over a range of similar issues was always remarkably consistent.

Once the new working methods had been agreed, by a small majority in a secret ballot, a 'fatalism' became established which led workers to conclude that resisting particular aspects of change would be fruitless. This fatalism was often endorsed, or even promoted, by trade union officers. In the

late 1970s, as labour market conditions deteriorated and economic recession deepened, management and supervision became gradually more assertive. There were frequent checks on time-keeping, and complaints received from consumers (which were rooted in dislike of the one call system) were re-directed back to the meter readers in the form of personal criticisms about the way they carried out their work (cf. Habermas, 1976, pp. 128-29).

The discussion central to this chapter has been the detail of major changes in working methods which affected the labour process during the 1970s, a decade which was to have an even greater impact upon the labour process than the technical developments of the 1960s. I have shown how the important changes in management succession, which coincided with the introduction of the one call system, were to be of considerable significance for the balance of power between management and labour, especially towards the end of the 1970s. However, I believe that this change in the balance of power cannot be understood properly without reference to the major political and economic changes that were occurring at the end of the 1970s, and at the beginning of the 1980s. The subject of the following chapter is an examination of these changes, and their significance for the work intensification of which the one call system was a manifestation.

Footnotes, Chapter 7

1. These are the 'flimsy sheets' issued from the computer at the Valemere headquarters on which details of each individual consumer's meter are shown, and on which numbered boxes are provided for 'dotting' the meter reading with a lead pencil
2. 'Virgin work' are fresh computer sheets for premises which had not had a first visit.
3. 'Back calls' are the second visit paid to addresses where the consumer had been out on the first call.
4. This aspect is especially important since the strenuous outdoor nature of the work has a very direct effect on the health and feeling of stamina which each individual reader experiences.
5. Although the supervisor, Bill Tatam, tended to intimidate the predominantly female labour force by issuing a set amount of work each week, this nevertheless allowed for some 'flexibility' in the actual length of the working week, from the readers point of view.
6. Work study report; Sec. 2, para. 7.
7. Between 1979 and 1984, U.K. unemployment increased from 1.22m to 3.08m, Source: Department of Employment Gazette, May 1979, p. 524, Table 2.1, and May 1984, p. 524, Table 2.1.
8. The deputy supervisor, Mike Maguire, admitted to me that they preferred men as they "were more reliable and less trouble than the girls".
9. For detailed discussion of 'scientific management' or 'Taylorism' see: H. Braverman, 1974, pp. 85-121, S. Hill, 1981, pp. 24-31, S. Wood, 1982, pp. 77-85, and M. Rose, 1978, pp. 31-62.
10. 'Learning to Labour', P. Willis, 1977, p. 134.
11. 'Working for Ford', H. Beynon, 1973, p.134, in quoting a conversation with a senior Labour Relations executive at Fords (emphasis in original).
12. Quoting a statement by the National Federation of Old Age Pensioners.

13. Following numerous complaints about time spent waiting on doorsteps, especially from the elderly, a new supervisor caused some embarrassment by sending out a circular to the meter readers insisting that they wait on the doorstep for at least three minutes, without realising this would entail waiting for over twelve hours a day on doorsteps, without reading a single meter!
14. 'Thatcherism' - a monetarist political doctrine the effect of which is to constrain employers to intensify labour in order to survive under intensive market competition, for a discussion of this see Glyn and Harrison, 1980, pp. 138-42, Jordan, 1982, pp. 157-61, Gamble, 1985, pp. 136-46; 1986, pp. 25-54, Ed., Levitas.
15. These were clerks who dealt with 'dial postcards' sent in by consumers who were out when the meter reader called.
16. The purpose of the 'temporaries' was to get around the 'no redundancies' agreement insisted upon by the union.
17. It was later revealed that those 'dissidents' objecting to the one call scheme came mainly from the inner city areas of Conton and especially Eastborough, where resistance to the scheme had always been solid - the outer county areas always had a minority 'core' who were in favour.
18. 'Trial period'; this lasted for six months, at the end of which there was a review by both sides and a decision on whether each side wanted to continue on a permanent basis. In the interm there were to be regular meetings to review progress.
19. Though the old 'traditional' supervisor had an understanding attitude towards the problems the ordinary reader faced on the job because he had done it, he could nonetheless be extremely rude at times, especially to the women.
20. The Board made no effort to circulate consumers about the new procedure prior to its introduction but, as it turned out, relied upon press reports to do the job for them, which actually had the effect of causing heightened antagonism in the public.
21. Elderly working class people especially, often became distressed if they missed the meter reader and would stay in, often for hours, if they heard you were in the district, or would go around knocking neighbours doors if they spotted you at the beginning of the street.
22. This was following a change of 'political ideology' going back to the mid-1970s, and confirmed by a change of government in 1979. This 'changed ideology' resulted in a great upsurge of open criticism of all public

sector activities. This vehement anti-public sector criticism was not only widespread where one might expect it in Fleet Street, but also in broadcasting and on T.V. For further discussion on this anti-public sector rhetoric see: Jordan, 1982, pp. 44-48.

23. 'Cycle' - a complete rotation of a given town, when the whole area had been read, and the readers were ready to start at the beginning again.
24. The largest number of meter reading sheets being taken out was 1,300, by one of the new male meter readers, whereas the smallest quantity, only 1,000 sheets, was taken out by two of the female readers.
25. There were two male readers (both recently recruited), one married with children, who took out significantly more sheets than any of the women, and the other, who was single, and lived with his parents, took out only slightly more than the other women readers.
26. Bonus 'opportunities' were one of the major points of emphasis when the new bonus scheme was put to the readers by management (through the work study people) at the first meeting.
27. Management decisions seemed heavily influenced, at the drawing up stage of the new scheme, by the almost universal belief (by work study 'engineers') that workers are, in the end, always solely interested in the size of their wage packets.
28. This was quite a common complaint to the readers themselves, even when they called after 8 a.m., the 'official' starting time.
29. This may well be a 'carry-over' from the old days when the supervisors were very strict about any particular individuals' work pace falling behind the others. Apart from giving the reader more apparent 'control' over the supervisor, it was thought that it would play havoc with the 'reading schedules' if some readers could please themselves what volume of work they did.
30. Though my academic training and personal instincts tell me that it is unacceptable to make personal assessments so prematurely, this group of women workers seemed to have an uncanny instinct for it and turned out to be vindicated by the facts, as we soon found out to our cost.
31. They were mostly 'procedures' whilst out on the job. They were contained in a rule book consisting of over 50 pages, covering every minute contingency of the work.

32. I am not suggesting here that the impetus for this was coming solely from the deputy supervisor. It was obviously a move that had been planned by Martin Howe, possibly originating at higher level, and based on information left by the retiring management at Valemere, who had been involved in the previous confrontation with the slotters.
33. Jack Whitehead often complained about Louis Roule not being around when there was a confrontation with 'the gaffer', and of being 'over friendly' with the deputy supervisor Mike Maguire.
34. The relationship of 'power' and 'formality' to 'informality and lack of power' and the possibility of demystifying it is appropriately referred to by Paul Willis when he says: "to have begun to unravel the power of the formal over the informal", Willis, 1977, p. 192.
35. I am suggesting here that they, especially Martin Howe, but also Mark Weatherall, see the main purpose of this retirement gathering as a vehicle for furthering management authority in the form of disrupting and changing the long established work routine of the slotters, following the confrontation.
36. The insertion of this clause was undoubtedly connected with the dispute over whether the Eastborough slotters should do reading when requested. The new one call system had as one of its most basic elements the ending of all demarcation, essential if greater 'labour flexibility' was to be achieved and labour costs reduced as a result.
37. When a change of government occurred in 1979, the then Prime Minister of the incoming administration was particularly interested in the possibility of both the gas and electricity meters being read by one reader.
38. For a discussion of the possible emergence of a fierce 'instrumentalism' on the part of workers under conditions of slump, see: 'The Rediscovery of the Cash Nexus', J.H. Westergaard, Socialist Register, 1970, pp. 111-35.
39. The time allowed for each meter read, including walking between houses, up and down garden paths, was 1.8 minutes.
40. This unpopularity has to be seen within the context of a wider hostility towards the nationalised industries, in a radically changed political climate of the early 1980s. This manifest hostility began to show itself to the meter readers on the doorsteps about this time, related not only to the one call meter reading system, but also to a new pricing policy for the gas industry,

in which it was required by government to increase its tariffs by 10% above the then rate of inflation. The resulting super profits were then directly 'creamed off' by the government. As meter readers soon found out on the doorstep, this policy was not popular with consumers.

41. 'Fear Stuff, Sweet Stuff, Evil Stuff', D. Roy, 1980; see, pp. 397-405.
42. 'Leaking out' of this type of information was the chief strategy used by the new supervisor, rather than direct confrontation with the workers on important or 'delicate' issues.

PART FOUR

THE LABOUR PROCESS IN THE LATE 1970s AND 1980s

Chapter 8. Work Intensification into the 1980s:
Experience in a Changed Political Context

Introduction

In order to demystify and place in context the events that occurred in the gas and many other industries from the mid-1970s, it is essential to take into account the development of a new political and economic ideology which began to emerge in the early 1970s (though with intellectual roots in an old tradition) that of 'free' market and monetarist economics. These liberal market beliefs stemmed from a revival of the ideas of the Austrian school, the chief modern revivalists being Von Mises and Hayek (Clarke, 1984, pp. 19-26; Gamble, 1985 and 1986).

The election of the Thatcher government in 1979 saw the beginnings of a major change of political direction and the implementation of a collection of policies which were associated with what came to be called the 'New Right' (see Levitas, 1986 for a discussion of New Right ideology). An important element in this new set of political policies was the idea of 'privatisation' of large publicly owned industries and services. The gas industry with its high profits became an early candidate for such treatment. However its chairman, Sir Denis Rooke, had a stormy relationship with the new government and particularly the treasury because he did not want to see the corporation broken up. Despite successful attempts at increasing labour intensity and a series of

efficiency drives, a new study of the corporation's operations was commissioned in the 1980s. This recommended a continuation and intensification of the measures already in hand.

It is within this context that I discuss the significance of the introduction of new more 'flexible' working arrangements and bonus schemes, both for meter readers and slot meter collectors; management's attempts to 'manufacture consent through the concealment of class relationships based on the extraction of surplus value' (Thompson, 1983, p. 160); and workers' responses to this assault on their limited job control.

We now turn to a more specific examination of these workers' experience of the implementation of change. I also investigate the structural context, political and economic, in which management policies developed during that decade, and the ways in which these developments had a major impact upon workers in the street and at the depot.

The context of decisions about policy

As we have seen in Chapter 6, the circumstances of the recent past for those working in the gas industry have been of large scale and rapid change, brought about by the arrival of North Sea gas in the early 1960s. The industry changed, in the space of half a dozen years or so, from being old fashioned and declining to one of confidence and rapid expansion by the end of the decade. Despite the rapid

change in scale and 'image', the traditions and practices of the workplace did not always correspond so closely to the public face. Despite management attempts to impose new methods of working the local loyalties and traditions still remained strong, even into the late 1970s, but by the early 80s these began to look distinctly shaky.

Participatory planning for a stable future, with at least some hope of fulfillment, would be at odds with a belief in the operation of a 'free market system', an ideology which gained fresh political impetus during the early 1980s¹. It is within this context that we have to view workplace relationships which are based upon the outcome of the current balance of power within the political and industrial sphere.

With a substantial change in the direction of political thought and a new monetarist economic theory towards the end of the 1970s and during the 1980s, a corresponding change in the relationship between the gas industry and government energy chiefs also occurred. A widely acknowledged deterioration in the relationship between government and the industry ensued². As David Thomas commented: "Nigel Lawson, Walker's predecessor, thought that energy policy consisted of occasional lectures on the virtue of the free market. As a result, coal, gas and electricity are operating in a vacuum, without guidance on their central objectives, pricing policy or long term plans"³.

It was probably with the new political climate in mind, including a government policy of substantially raising gas prices and imposing a 'gas levy' on profits, that British

Gas chiefs decided upon a drive for efficiency in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Evidence of the corporation's thinking was contained in a paragraph of a bulletin to employees commenting on the publication of the Gas Efficiency Study commissioned by the government, and published in June 1983. This said: "It is acknowledged that British Gas is already in the course of a significant drive to reduce operating costs"⁴. It was as if the corporation wished to preempt what it perceived might be an 'onslaught' against the nationalised industries, possibly taking the form of persistent and severe questioning of their operating methods. In view of the subsequent commissioning of the efficiency study in 1982/83, at the initiative of the government, it appears their intuition was well founded.

The re-election of the Thatcher government with a substantial parliamentary majority, in the early summer of 1983, meant the continuation and reinforcement of the new and vigorous political ideology stressing the supremacy of the market place, private enterprise and individual responsibility. At the same time the government imposed strict control of the money supply, and operated a very tight fiscal policy, which had direct ramifications for pricing and investment in nationalised industries.

The present chairman of British Gas, Sir Denis Rooke, is almost always portrayed by the media in particular, as a 'staunch defender of his industry, and those who work in it' against political interference. John Huxley, writing in The Sunday Times⁵ put it like this:

Who runs the nationalised industries?
Is it the government, whose determination to slim down and sell off the state sector makes it an unsympathetic boss? Or is it the industry chairmen, caught in a no-man's land between businessman and bureaucrat and jealously protecting themselves from interference?

Huxley may well have put his finger on it when he talks about the businessman/bureaucrat jealously protecting himself from 'interference', especially so in the case of Rooke. Indeed, long before Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1979, British Gas was well under way with cost cutting measures⁶: these measures were chiefly in the form of 'exercises in raising productivity' (through the intensification of labour). The major change in meter reading (a 'one call' system) was a concrete example of the policy for the meter readers and slot collectors. In this respect what was happening at British Gas was similar to that occurring across a wide spectrum of British industry both private and public, and was well under way during the preceding Callaghan government.

The 'breakdown of relationships' between the Department of Energy (representing the government of the day) and the British Gas hierarchy, which I have already referred to, involved two main issues. The first, and most publicly visible, was the argument over the setting of prices, which intensified towards the end of 1983, with the electricity industry also involved. The second, much less widely visible, particularly in the public arena, was that of the way in which the industry should be organised and run.

As the new government consolidated its position in the early 1980s, its political ideology was gradually being converted into firmer 'plans for action'. The notion of breaking down public sector enterprises into smaller 'packages' and selling them off to the private sector (privatisation), became transformed from belief to reality. They concentrated first on those enterprises (e.g., British Airways, British Telecom) which would most readily lend themselves to commercial principles or, as in the case of British Telecom, had a large growth potential from new technologies. Though with less of these potential advantages, the public utilities were not to escape their attention. With this in view the energy department under Nigel Lawson began to press British Gas with the notion of breaking the corporation down into smaller more manageable units, 'units' which would undoubtedly be more attractive to a likely entrepreneur from the private sector. This idea of splitting up the industry met with fierce opposition, especially from Rooke, the British Gas chairman, who claimed that it would lead to a deterioration in efficiency. As we shall see later, this idea of breaking up the corporation into smaller units was also a central argument of the efficiency study carried out during 1982/83, though in the study they were specifically referred to as 'business units'.

As has already been suggested⁷, the British Gas executive, and particularly Rooke, were very concerned to see the corporation preserved as a whole so as to reduce the threat of privatisation, which, no doubt, they saw as being

facilitated by the breaking up of the corporation in the way the politicians wanted. At the same time as the British Gas chairman was fighting against breaking up the corporation, the nascent politicians took every opportunity to publicly discredit the nationalised industries generally, and at the same time to extol the 'virtues' of private ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. However, the gas industry was not especially in the limelight since it produced substantial surpluses; the government swiftly introduced a special 'gas levy' to sequester a sizeable proportion of the surplus to feed into the treasury coffers. The only part of the industry upon which government did focus attention was the gas showrooms, which they proposed to 'sell off' to the private sector. Such a proposal was to have a direct effect upon everyone in the industry, including the Eastborough meter readers and slotters who became involved in a one day strike among the entire national gas workforce.

With major new political constraints and increasingly hostile economic climate, both Rooke and the British Gas executive no doubt felt that if they were to preserve their relative autonomy they would have to leave no stone unturned in their efforts to stave off public criticism which would inevitably follow the election of the new right wing Thatcher government in 1979. Although the profits of British Gas were considerable (over £500m in 1979), this would be unlikely to free them from criticism. Even though the chief criterion for success was the maximisation of profit, it

had to be appropriated by private agents - that is where the ideological dimension came in. Public enterprise was an anathema in this ideological climate, whether or not it filled the narrow profit criteria.

When publicly owned industries fulfilled criteria of profitability and were therefore not open to criticism on those grounds, they became a prime target for privatisation as in the case of Cable and Wireless or British Telecom. However, for British Gas this would not be an easily achievable objective due to its high level of interdependence and integration - something which Denis Rooke was well aware of. This lent force to his argument to keep it that way. As one might expect the government remained unconvinced, so, perhaps inevitably, an 'efficiency study' was commissioned jointly by British Gas and the Department of Energy, under Nigel Lawson. British Gas, probably anticipating this outcome, had, some time previously, embarked upon the cost cutting efficiency measures already referred to. But, perhaps equally predictably, the Department of Energy were not especially looking for what they knew they were unlikely to find, namely, great inefficiencies. Thus they concentrated their attention upon finding justifications for breaking up the corporation into smaller business units⁸. The result of such a policy would be to facilitate privatisation, something Rooke had vigorously tried to head off for so long.

The transformation of ideology into practice

The ideological struggle, fought under the cloak of party politics, during the late 1970s and early 80s, was between opposing ideas about how to restore vitality to an ailing and arguably obsolete economic system upon which, it was claimed by at least one major faction, our 'basic freedoms' depended⁹. The 'restoration theory' and the radical measures needed to achieve it appeared to be in the ideological ascendancy after the 1979 general election, and decisively so following the June poll of 1983. The new right wing government of 1979 had argued that our economic survival depended upon improving productivity and particularly intensification of labour. The result, it was hoped, would be that British industry would improve its competitiveness in the market place. For the desired improvement to occur, it was thought necessary that a 'decisive shift', away from public ownership to private ownership and control should be encouraged. It was within this political context that the struggles over the structure and running of British Gas evolved.

The future prospects of the gas workers generally, and the meter readers and meter slotters in particular, will crucially depend upon the outcome of this ideological and political battle of wills. But whatever the eventual outcome, the foundations have been firmly laid for the further intensification of labour in future years. It is the introduction of new work methods for achieving these ends, and the subtle challenges to them by the metering workers, that I will now discuss.

The 1980s: Labour intensification in process

The introduction of the one call meter reading system and the abandonment of the piece work incentive scheme are the initial moves, not only in the drive to intensify labour, but also on the road towards a fully automated meter reading and billing system. These schemes are not 'science fiction' or strictly for the distant future, as local management claims, but are already under advanced development and could well be operating by the early 1990s. One call meter reading was only the first stage in a radical re-organisation of the entire metering and billing system. The second stage of the new proposals was left much more open and vague by the board. As I mentioned earlier, when these new proposals were put to the meter readers not everyone noticed the 'second stage' clause.

The introduction of one call metering soon had the desired effect from the management point of view, the greater speed with which the smaller number of meter readers could complete the readings in a particular district¹⁰. The numbers of meter readers in the smaller satellite districts surrounding Eastborough, those of Wheatmill and Oakleigh, were not allowed to 'dwindle through natural wastage', because management wanted to force them back into doing their own slotting on the spurious grounds that they were being paid a higher pay grade than the Eastborough readers¹¹. From the early 1970s the Eastborough slot team had become exclusively slotters, but this role changed with the introduction of one call metering, for this demanded that they

become 'interchangeable' with meter reading as one of their conditions. The outer teams going back to their own slotting, in place of the Eastborough team, this meant that the Eastborough men were slotting their own district at a much faster rate, leaving them with 'slack time' at the end of their cycle. In contrast to the outer teams, the numbers of Eastborough readers was kept to a minimum, so that the slotters could fill in with reading.

The new supervisor at Eastborough, Martin Howe, was very keen on promoting what he described as 'flexibility'. This was something he had told me he wanted to pursue, when he first took up the job in the autumn of 1981. Very soon after the one call metering 'package' had been accepted, Martin Howe put into practice what he and the metering controller had insisted upon, namely the outer teams did their own slotting, and most contentious of all (in view of past 'struggles'), the Eastborough slotters did reading. The management must have congratulated themselves, for they had at last restored their control over the workforce in the way they wanted the job done. This was eventually achieved after at least a decade of successful resistance by the work force with the support of their trade union. The economic tide had turned, and the political climate was right for a successful outcome to their initiative. As slotter Jack Whitehead put it: "That's it now, they know they've got you where they want you, there's a queue waiting to take your job".

Ironically, the Eastborough slotters were asked to give a refresher training course in practical slotting to the Wheatmill and Oakleigh readers. Though most of the predominantly female meter readers in the outer districts were unhappy at having to do slotting, one said she thought it would 'make a change' from constant reading. This remark caused Jack Whitehead considerable irritation because, if it spread, and became a popular view, it would further reduce the already remote chance, as they saw it, of the Eastborough slotters getting back what they thought of as their speciality, for as Jack Whitehead had often remarked: "Reading, that's woman's work". The slightly less pressure, more varied, skilled and interesting nature of slotting work were seen as advantages by the slotters themselves, but were viewed as involving too many complications by a majority of the female meter readers.

The Eastborough slotters and myself gathered at Wheatmill to meet up with the readers there. The arrangement was that each of the Wheatmill readers should go out with an Eastborough slotter to work alongside him. This would go on for a day, then each of the Wheatmill readers would take out about a dozen call sheets and go out by themselves the following day. Whilst the 'training' was proceeding the new metering supervisor, Martin Howe, would 'drop in' on the proceedings periodically to check on 'how things were going' as he put it. The Wheatmill readers were then allocated to each of the Eastborough slotters and proceeded on their rounds. The Wheatmill readers were used to using

their own cars when moving to their reading areas (for which they bore the costs themselves), so it was decided that the Eastborough slotters would go around with them in the cars. This was quite a luxury for them since they always cycled everywhere when slotting.

As usual, I would visit them at hourly intervals to collect the bulk cash they had gathered for banking. When I made the call they would almost always have a brief chat, crack a joke, or relate some incident that had occurred during the morning's collecting. With the Wheatmill readers on the job these conversations were even more profuse than usual. Perhaps predictably, the women complained about not being used to the weight of a full bag of coins. The only man, Barry Evans (a new relief) did not complain at all and Jack Whitehead, with whom he was paired, congratulated him on how well he was taking to the slotting.

Joan Farren, who was paired with Bill James, also complained of the weight of the coins. She had just returned to work after undergoing extensive treatment for breast cancer. When she was told she had to do slotting work again, she said she had asked if she could be 'down graded' and just do solely reading like the Eastborough readers. She said she thought her doctor would not be happy about her lifting heavy weights but she was told that she could not be down graded since this would create a precedent and others may want to follow suit. She said that she did not want to make a fuss because she needed the money and could not afford to lose the job, so she carried on. Soon after,

Mike Maguire, the assistant supervisor at Eastborough, confirmed what Joan had told me. He said: "Management would not hear of it" (being down-graded to a reader only). Mike also told me that, during the early 1960s, the Eastborough metering staff were given the opportunity to be slotters as well as readers, in exchange for an 'up-grade', but all of the women opted for reading only, and most of the few remaining men opted for slotting. He said: "The women didn't want the job of carrying the heavy coin bags, nor did they like the extra complications involved in slotting". Subsequent conversations with some of the longer serving women confirmed this view, though in the case of Gwen Barlow, a stormy working relationship with senior collector, John Foster, played an important part in her decision.

The supervisor at Eastborough had often complained about the high level of sickness at the Wheatmill depot, something which I thought he may well have had a tendency to exaggerate due to the close deadlines he had to work to in order to complete the meter reading cycle. However, during the week of 'refresher training' we gave the Wheatmill readers, I found that it was not an exaggeration. During a conversation with Joan Farren and Bill James, I found that 'going off sick' was a common form of retaliation used by the Wheatmill readers. It seems that their senior reader, a rather stout easy going Irishman in his mid-50s who had joined the Wheatmill team after being made redundant from a television rental firm, used to 'cream off' the best runs for himself, leaving the 'rubbish' for the other readers¹². As Joan

herself said: "Why the hell should we accept all that rubbish he gives us without fighting back? No, we just go off sick when he tries it on too often".

After we had finished the day's training at Wheatmill and travelled back to the Eastborough depot in the afternoon, the slotters, as usual, chatted to each other during the journey. Jack Whitehead said that the bloke he had been out with, Barry Evans, though in his late 50s, had just started on the job a month previously after being made redundant from another job. Jack said:

He's been thrown in at the deep end really, doing slotting straight away, but I will say this, he's good and very conscientious, picked the job up in no time. Do you know what he told me? He's got a big house at Valemere with an acre of garden and a fucking tennis court, mind you, his missus has got a good job at Valemere H.Q., quite high up she is, I suppose that's why he got this job when he got the push, nobody gets a job that easy at his age, especially now. He travels fifteen miles a day to Wheatmill, still that's no problem, he's got his own car see.

Despite the completion of the refresher training for the outer teams by the Eastborough slotters, they still felt convinced that the outer teams would not do slotting on a long term basis and that they would get 'their slotting' back again. When I had questioned the supervisor about the new slotting arrangements after the idea was first mooted, he gave the reasons as a need for greater 'flexibility', but did not elaborate apart from the often repeated cry that the outer team readers were being paid

the slotters' grade without ever having to do slotting. In the absence of anything more substantial than these vague comments from supervision, the Eastborough slotters became increasingly suspicious, and a wide variety of explanations were put forward in conversations with me when they paid in their cash at the van. Jack Whitehead said: "I reckon he's (Howe) just trying to show us that he can move us from slotting to reading now that the new scheme is in. I can't see the outer teams doing slotting permanently, they'll never be able to earn any bonus at it, they haven't got the experience". Though this may have been wishful thinking on the part of the Eastborough slotters, it did turn out that the outer teams could only manage about 60% of the output of the Eastborough team. Though this shortfall would be likely to be largely due to lack of experience, there may also have been some element of 'go slow' about it, in order to attempt to deter the supervisor from persisting with the idea.

Ever since the Eastborough slotters had progressively taken on slot collecting in the outer districts of Wheatmill, Oakleigh and Rosewood, from the early 1970s onwards, when the sharp decline of slot meters occurred, they had been paid average bonus when collecting in outer districts. The average amount paid was calculated on the basis of what they earned when working in Eastborough - they had forced the board to agree to this in order to get them to move out of district¹³. The number of meters that had to be cleared before bonus was earned (the stint) was slightly lower in

outer districts, and since a 'grateful supervisor' did not analyse too closely the numbers cleared in a day, the slotters were satisfied with the arrangement as it meant they could finish a little earlier too. When out of town they would cash up on the van in the afternoon, thus avoiding the necessity of being spotted if they went into the depot. Thus the supervisor would not be aware of their exact finishing time. The opposite was the case when working their own patch at Eastborough. They made a point of coming into the depot office to complete their final cashing up at special windows normally used by the gas fitters.

In the past, when they had used 'Gilbert Cards' it was the tradition to come into the office and cash up at the windows, paying in the money to a cashier. When the new Valemere headquarters opened and metering was computerised the whole job was method studied and the new work method required cashing up at the slotting van, and after this was completed they were expected to proceed home. However, from the start, the slotters refused to do this, saying they preferred to continue the old method on the pretext that it offered more security. The true reason though, was that they would be 'seen' by management to come into the yard just before the official finishing time, whereas, in fact, they had been at home in front of the fire since about 2 p.m., doing their dotting¹⁴ with a pot of tea and a sandwich beside them¹⁵. As we shall see, this way of working (taking at least some degree of control over their working day) came increasingly under threat as the economic

recession of the early 1980s deepened and management began to attempt to 'take back' the initiative over what happened during the working day. This trend, on present evidence, seems at least likely to continue, if not intensify, as resistance becomes increasingly problematic in a deteriorating economic climate of high unemployment.

Towards the end of 1982, the Eastborough slotters were going out slotting to outer districts at noticeably less regular intervals. This pattern continued and increased throughout 1983, as the outer teams were gradually given more of their own slotting. During 1983, the new supervisor, Martin Howe, began to move around the new outer team slotters and 'scramble' the slot collecting schedule in a more erratic way. In fact, much to the annoyance of the Eastborough slotters, one particular week found them being assigned to reading meters at Oakleigh, whilst the Oakleigh team came in and did 'their slotting' at Eastborough. The Oakleigh team were equally angry since, due to a combination of lack of slotting experience and going slow in protest at having slotting forced upon them, they could not earn bonus thus reducing their total income. They also realised that the Eastborough slotters were paid average bonus (irrespective, as they saw it, of the volume of work they did) when they slotted in outer districts. It later became evident that this was part of a management 'ploy' to put pressure on the Eastborough slotters to accept a new slotting bonus scheme, which would entail the ending of the average bonus concession when they worked out of town. Evidently,

management thought the moving around of the teams between districts, especially bringing in the Oakleigh team to Eastborough, would be likely to lead the outer teams to put pressure on the Eastborough slotters, and also put pressure on the outer teams themselves to accept the new slotting bonus scheme. Management would interpret this as entailing the removal of the average bonus 'privilege', enjoyed by the Eastborough slotters when working out of district, but they did not say so specifically.

As the Eastborough slotters were going out of town less often by the beginning of 1983, it meant, as a consequence, that they were getting around Eastborough itself at a faster rate. The result of this was that the amount of cash in each meter began to decline, due to the shorter emptying interval. Since the level of bonus paid depended in part upon the amount of cash in each meter, the pace of work had to be increased in order to maintain the same level of bonus, which would eventually become self-defeating as they would move around at an even faster rate. In practice it was just possible, for the time being, to maintain the same level of bonus because the density of slot meters was still declining up to then, and the bonus scheme did not fully take account of this¹⁶. So to increase the number of meters visited beyond a certain limit would make impossible physical demands due to the excessive amount of cycling it would entail, and the advanced age of the Eastborough slotters (average age was 57). As a result, when the average cash per meter began to decline they, not unnaturally, felt a good

deal of resentment against the supervisor, Martin Howe. However, there was no direct confrontation with him on the subject, since his supervisory style was to adopt a low profile, dropping hints on what he wanted through his deputy, Mike Maguire, and so avoiding direct contact with the slotters, especially on controversial topics.

During 1983, Martin Howe was at last able to take full advantage of the new found flexibility which the one call meter reading system had given management, especially in relation to the Eastborough slotters. It was now possible, very obviously to break the slotters' 'monopoly' on slot collecting which had been so hard won during the early 1970s. With the encouragement of Mike Maguire (he had been, together with the previous supervisor, Bill Tatam, directly involved in the other confrontation with the slotters) Howe was able to switch the slotters between reading and slotting on a regular basis, and often at very short notice. This had been facilitated by the decision to return outer district slotting to the outer teams on the seemingly plausible pretext that it appeared to both supervision and workers alike to have a 'moral' foundation because as they were receiving a higher pay grade, this meant that they felt they 'ought' to do it.

The slotters had consistently voted against the introduction of the new one call meter reading system, but for different reasons from those of the readers. As I have argued, the predominantly female meter readers were firstly interested in maintaining the 'unofficially' flexible hours

of their job - overwhelmingly because of family and marriage commitments - but also, they could see that the new one call system would increase the already considerable physical demands of the job, compounding the process of being house-keeper, mother and wife as well as that of semi-skilled manual worker. The slotters' rejection of the one call scheme had slightly different motives behind it, namely, the avoidance of meter reading, which they saw as less skilled 'womens work', and which they had fought off during a fierce struggle with management in the early 1970s because at that time they lost bonus as a result of doing reading.

Even though the slotters had no alternative but to accept the result of a secret ballot, they nevertheless did not take kindly to it. Following 'pressure' from the union, and financial pressure from management, when a small majority of the readers had reluctantly voted in favour of one call following two years of wrangling over it. In fact they bitterly resented the way the vote had gone, though they admitted among themselves that the readers, though under much greater physical pressure, would be a little better off financially with the re-grade and slightly higher bonus opportunities¹⁷. Though the slotters realised they had no alternative but to accept the fact of having to do reading, they still felt like attempting some form of retaliation, though they found it difficult to see what form it might take.

Retaliation and responses

Going off sick was one retaliatory possibility. As this was a tactic the Wheatmill readers had often used, I wanted to see what the reaction to this possibility would be among the slotters, so, although it would rebound back on me (having to re-schedule the routes, collect the sheets from those off sick) I tentatively suggested it when the question of retaliation was raised. Much to my surprise, it was rejected out of hand. Bill James said: "It's alright for the women, they go off sick at the slightest thing, but not us, we have a reputation for not being sick to think of, I reckon most men are the same, look at me, I've only been off sick twice in 25 years". The reaction of Jack Whitehead was a little different, for he replied: "I used to go off sick a lot in the old days, when we were paid a pittance and the bonus was so poor, but to-day you can't do it. If you go sick it costs a lot of bonus, it means more to you see". As usual, Louis Roule said little he occasionally went off sick, but, as Jack Whitehead put it: "He goes off when he has 'a little bit of business' coming up". He sometimes obtained a little casual work, 'on the side', such as delivering bulk newspapers, driving a motor coach at the weekends, or collecting cars on which H.P. debts had not been met.

Thus, for the time being it seemed, little could be achieved from this form of retaliation, at least visibly and in a form which would directly effect the supervisors. In view of this impasse it was decided, at the suggestion of

Jack Whitehead, that we should take out the maximum amount of meter reading sheets when we were instructed to go out reading. This would mean that their bonus would increase by 40% compared with the slotting bonus. As Jack Whitehead said: "this will 'make them pay' for putting us back on reading".

This response of the slotters to management initiatives surprised me at the time, as it was not something I would personally have thought of, at least not at first. Although it would involve some extra effort, it would perhaps be more sustainable than if you were permanently on reading, since it would have to be applied probably only about one week in six or eight, on average. But, at first, when it came to actually going out on the streets again as a reader, we all very soon realised what an *exhausting* and repetitive job it was. As Bill James commented: "All this walking, it really knackers up your social life I went to my old-time dancing at the club last night, the M.C. asked me what was wrong, I tell you, I was so tired that I kept making wrong steps, it was really noticeable".

Although the ability of the workers to respond to management initiatives has sometimes not been fully acknowledged by some industrial sociologists¹⁸, I personally experienced it early on in my participation with the meter readers and particularly with the slotters, as a positive, even if limited, form of response to working conditions. The deliberate earning of extra bonus when being forced to undertake work they had fought against, even though in relatively

insignificant form, did frustrate management intentions on a limited scale. The significance of this action became more apparent following a conversation with the deputy supervisor, Mike Maguire, in which he told me that the new 'ambitious' supervisor resented the sums the slotters could earn in bonus payments. He had no experience of meter reading or slotting himself, so could not realise the considerable physical effort involved in earning the bonus.

Though there was undoubtedly some resentment by supervisors of the levels of bonus that slotters could earn, it seems unlikely that the decision to remove out of town slotting from the Eastborough team was primarily to cut overtime earnings. As there was a constant constraint upon supervisors to maintain and even raise the productivity of their sections, it seems more likely that the new supervisor, Martin Howe, was opposed to the tradition of paying average Eastborough bonus when the slotters worked out of town, without any particular regard to the work they performed. This seems a much more plausible explanation for the allocation of out of town slotting to out of town teams, rather than the one given by management, namely, that they were paid a slotting grade. It would mean that out of town slotting would be more securely tied to direct payment by results, as the outer teams would have to work the usual stint for the area.

It seems very likely that Martin Howe would have noticed, early on, the slotters tactic of earning high bonus when put on to meter reading. Observing individual

productivity is a high priority of supervision since the 'efficient' use of manpower is a fundamental objective of higher management to whom they are answerable. His future prospects of promotion undoubtedly rested upon his ability to maintain high productivity and his keenness to comply was directly related to a strongly positive motivation for promotion and the higher standard of living he believed that would lead to. The slotters' decision to 'make the board pay the price', as they saw it, for putting them periodically back on reading presented Howe with somewhat of a contradiction. It would, on the one hand, raise productivity - something he wanted - but on the other, it would bring the slotters that much nearer to his own level of earnings (to within 75-80% of his basic salary). Whether or not this lay behind the decision to switch the slotters more regularly backwards and forwards between slotting and reading is difficult to say, but as 1983 wore on this is increasingly what he did. If the slotters worked for less than three days on reading, the rule was that slotting bonus predominated and vice-versa.

The supervisors tactic of increasingly switching the slotters backwards and forwards between reading and slotting was like rubbing salt into the wound of being forced to do reading at all. As the spring of 1983 came and went the alternation between reading and slotting increased, often at very short notice, and the irritation the slotters felt relentlessly built up. It was especially noticeable to me because seeing them each in turn when I collected their cash

throughout the day, they would remark to me about the way in which he (Martin Howe) 'was making monkeys of them' or, 'fucking them around'. I did not disagree, especially as it affected me as much as it did them. The slotters had adopted the tactic of aiming for higher bonus when they went out reading, but the supervisor's tactic defeated their objective by frequently requiring them to read for less than three days, so that the lower slotting bonus predominated and they lost money.

During July 1983 there arose, unexpectedly, a 'golden opportunity' for the slotters to retaliate against the antics of the new supervisor. It was nearing the peak of the holiday season and several of the regular meter readers were taking their annual holidays. As it was approaching the end of the cycle (the time when the last meters of the current quarter had to be read before starting all over again for the next quarter), the holidays had caused a shortfall to develop - the cycle could not be finished without extra labour. Meanwhile, the supervisor had been adopting his tactic of regular 'switching' at short notice, much to the slotters' anger.

On Tuesday of the second week in July, the slotters were unexpectedly switched to meter reading, for the third time in succession during the past four weeks. This time it involved doing just one day's work in what was, from the meter readers point of view, one of the worst areas of Eastborough: a large spread out semi-rural area on the edge of town, with long drives and large distance between the

houses. The supervisor had been up to his usual trick of leaving out four piles of meter reading sheets, sufficient for one day's work, accompanied by a brief note saying that we may be required for reading again the next day and possibly the day after, but would we report back to his deputy Mike Maguire. Both he and Maguire had made themselves scarce, and the slotters were convinced that the reasoning which lay behind these crafty methods was, as in the recent past, to avoid a confrontation and obviate any need to engage in argument. During the late afternoon I collected my pile of sheets and noticed that Louis Roule had collected his, but Bill James's and Jack Whitehead's were still there. I thought little more of it and went off home assuming they would collect their sheets later, or first thing in the morning.

As expected, we had been allocated 'terrible runs'. This was inevitable because the cycle was near its end, and the latter part of the cycle consisted of these semi-rural suburbs and large houses with long drives. I had spoken to the supervisor about this on several occasions, asking if we could be brought in to do reading earlier in the cycle occasionally - the 'better runs' were in the earlier part of the cycle near to the inner city door to door terraces. He had always maintained that this was impossible, since he could not call off sheets from the computer before they were due out. It was only when readers went off sick during the cycle that sheets accumulated towards its end. I later found this to be spurious, and that extra sheets could be called off if required. In any case, if they could not have

been, readers 'ought' to go off sick at random throughout the cycle - not just towards the end¹⁹. There seemed more than an even chance that the supervisor was using the 'technique' as a weapon against the slotters' strategy of resistance to reading²⁰.

After spending an exhausting day meter reading, using a combination of bicycle and van to reach remote rural properties and negotiate long drives, I arrived back at the Eastborough depot in the late afternoon. Louis Roule was already there and told me that there had been a terrific panic on because Jack Whitehead and Bill James had gone out slotting due to some kind of misunderstanding. Almost at the same time as Louis said: "They knew perfectly well what they were doing, they did it deliberately", I knew at once what had happened. It struck me that it was the most effective action they had yet been able to take against the intimidations of their devious supervisor. I knew it would cause severe aggravation for the supervisor and his deputy as they would have to sort out the mess.

For the slotters it had been a stroke of luck for their opportunity to occur at the precise time that they were simultaneously working near home and near the depot. This meant that they would not have far to go once their collecting bags were filled. Bill James was working just outside the depot and so was able to call in and tell the supervisor that he had not been relieved of his cash. Similarly, Jack Whitehead was close to his home, so was able to go there and 'await developments'.

When I went up to the supervisor's office to find out what had occurred (though I already had a good idea) he maintained his usual calm and composed attitude, but I could see that underneath the calm exterior he was really quite rattled. He told me that Bill James had called in with his cash bag at about 11.30, so he had to give him his reading sheets, take him out to where he was working (about six miles away) and then bring him back in the evening. They had no van as I had gone out in it to do my own work, so they had to leave Bill's bike behind at the depot. Later in the day, the supervisor eventually had to go out to Jack Whitehead's house to find out what had happened, and to collect his cash. Jack had knocked off and gone home as usual, at about 12.30 p.m. The new supervisor did not realise that this was his usual practice, though it had been a source of contention with other supervisors for years. The deputy, Mike Maguire, was of course aware of the practice, but told me later that he did not mention it to the supervisor because he thought he would 'go bananas' if he knew. As it was, Jack was asked to report to the office at 3.30 p.m. that afternoon. He told me that the supervisor had 'torn him off a strip' for not wearing the regulation summer jacket, and added that if he spotted him not wearing it again there would be serious trouble.

Jack told me that he would continue to wear his old summer jacket because it was much cooler than the new 'trendy' design. But, he said, he would wear the new one for a time when he came into the depot in case Howe should spot him

from the window. The age-old controversy over wearing regulation clothing often surfaced when disputes arose between the slotters and supervision, and was used by supervision to intimidate them. This was particularly the case with supervisors who originated from Conton, or the Valemere headquarters. The Eastborough slotters had often been told this by the slotters in Conton whenever they had been working over there. Bill James had said to me on a number of occasions: "I can't understnand why they just accept it and wear what they are told, we'd stand up to the gaffers and wear what we're most comfortable in. After all, we're doing the job, not the gaffers".

When I had seen the supervisor that evening, it was obvious that the incident involving Jack Whitehead and Bill James had been very effective in 'getting back' at him. He was visibly agitated and barely kept his anger from showing through, but at the same time tried to appear unruffled. He told me to inform the slotters that he would call a meeting for the end of the week to seek to establish what had gone wrong, and to ensure that it did not happen again.

Next morning, when I called on Jack Whitehead with the van to collect his cash, I knew by the broad smile on his face that the contention of Louis Roule that 'they knew perfectly well what they were doing' was substantially correct. Jack said: "well, we had them running around yesterday, didn't we?" I just grinned in agreement. When, on my next call I visited Bill James he was as usual, more guarded; he gave his normal convoluted account of what had happened, keeping a straight face and attempting to pretend that some

sort of mistake had happened. He was as inscrutable as ever. When I told him about the meeting on Friday, he replied: "I can see that the 'gloves will be off'; we'll have to have it out with him, the way he's been messing us around recently". Jack Whitehead simply saw the purpose of the meeting as a 'good old-fashioned bollocking'. Louis Roule's view was that: "Certain irregularities would gradually come to light", a remark he made with a broad smile on his face. By this he meant Jack and Bill's custom of never working to the book, and being a 'rule unto themselves'; these were phrases he often used to chide them. But whether they, or Louis himself, were the most 'independent' had always been a source of covert rivalry between them.

When the slotters came into the depot on Friday afternoon they were full of anticipation about the meeting with the supervisor. However, just before they came in I found a short note on the paying in counter, which had been left for our attention. It read: 'I'm sorry I will have to postpone our discussion as I have been called out unexpectedly'. I had never known a supervisor be called out on a Friday before: it was always a very busy day as it was the change-over day for the readers and he always stayed glued to his desk until four. I guessed that he was playing the waiting game. When I saw the slotters I told them of the note, and without any prior prompting, they immediately reached the same conclusion as me. Jack Whitehead said, half jokingly: "Well, if the fucker can do this so could we, I'll arrange an appointment at the dentist next week". I thought the idea

was quite imaginative, but in view of the smile on his face, I guessed that he was unlikely to go through with it. Experience has shown that his defiant rhetoric against the bosses is rarely turned into action. After a further 'postponement' on the following Friday, the meeting was eventually arranged for a week on Friday. I think that these delaying tactics were undoubtedly seen by the supervisor as heightening the drama and tension of the occasion²¹. When I saw the slotters individually, while collecting their cash on the morning of the meeting, Bill James repeated his belief that the 'gloves will be off' this afternoon. Louis Roule said to me: "I think this meeting will just be a pantomime", adding that he thought the supervisor had: "Put the wind up 'Bill and Ben' (as he called Jack and Bill) when he insisted on them wearing their 'proper' jackets".

As I had anticipated, the meeting itself was not of great significance. I think it was more a showpiece, a ritual intended to make the power relationship between supervisor and worker more transparent. The topics that were not on the agenda were more significant than those that were. The meeting itself can only be seen as something of an anti-climax, the gloves were kept firmly on, but much more significant was the 'build up' to the meeting and the context of power relations within which it took place. The delaying tactics by the supervisor, and the way in which they were perceived by the slotters, rather than any real intention by the supervisor, were more significant factors. The context of the meeting is of central importance in under-

standing these events in terms of 'power relationships': the meeting was held in a purpose built conference room. These rooms are situated around the periphery of the main upstairs offices and were designed not only for management meetings, but also for disciplinary sessions with subordinate workers. The whole layout and design of these rooms was intimidating and formal, especially so to those below supervisory level. They were carpeted, the walls distempered in 'standard flake grey', and contained a superficially impressive looking simulated timber topped table and office swing chairs, the room seating about ten people in total.

When we arrived at the room the supervisor was there, sitting on a small side table, and somewhat to my surprise, his deputy, Mike Maguire, sat rather stiffly at the large table with some papers in front of him, looking like a secretary about to take minutes. Much to my surprise the supervisor, Martin Howe, did not tackle the slotters head on, as his predecessor Bill Tatam would have done by entering into a fierce confrontation and verbal slanging match early on in the proceedings. Instead he began by 'defusing' the situation somewhat - chatting in a soft voice about some trivial arrangements over the slotting cycle - trying to create the impression of being 'one of the lads' even adopting the less elaborate speech, which he no doubt thought the slotters would use in their everyday transactions with each other.

The ensuing discussion was eventually 'steered' onto the subject of the meeting, namely 'what had gone wrong'

when Jack and Bill had gone out slotting instead of reading. Jack Whitehead, again demonstrating his 'quick thinking' said: "It was the desk being moved, that was the trouble, we came in to collect our sheets but didn't see any on the desk. We didn't know that the desk had been moved". It was a surprising stroke of good fortune that the desk had been moved a short distance away by two labourers. I knew that Jack knew this beforehand, and in any case that the sheets were on the original desk only a few yards away. Martin Howe seemed as 'relieved' as the others at the slotters explanation, and willingly accepted it as such.

I was not surprised when, after rapidly disposing of the central topic of the meeting, Bill James raised the question of constantly being swapped around from slotting to reading, and back again. His emphasis was on the inconvenience of having to break his slotting run to go out reading. Jack Whitehead immediately retorted: "Look Bill, I ain't worried about that, it's losing money that concerns me. Each time we swap over it costs me money"²². Martin Howe replied, barely concealing a streak of anger: "Surely you don't think I sit at my desk working out whether you'll lose money or not when I issue some reading for you to finish?" Jack did not reply to this rhetorical question but just gave Howe a cynical frown.

Martin Howe seemed keen to turn the spotlight of attention onto me and away from the slotters. He asked why the slotters did not go with me on the van when once we were reading at Castlebury, a small town about five miles from

Eastborough. Louis Roule 'came up with the right answer' this time: he said "It's because he starts half an hour later than us and finishes half an hour later". I now knew why they had left me waiting at the depot one Friday morning when I had offered to take them once before. They had claimed that it was also a 'misunderstanding', but I later found they had only about two hours work left and so they cycled home when they had finished at about 10.30 a.m. Martin Howe got around this one very neatly (probably suspecting what they had done) by saying that I could adjust my hours to suit: "It's O.K. by me", he added.

His final 'broadside' at me came when, towards the end of the meeting, I had been arguing the slotters' case as to whether the local T.U. branch were aware of the constant method study and security checks we were recently being subjected to. He half jokingly turned towards me and said: "Well, you weren't even a paid up member of the union at first, were you?" This had been due to some administrative 'mix-up' when I first became a meter reader, and due to my temporary status, registration had not been completed during my first 18 months of work. The unions did not seem keen to recruit people who would be 'got rid of' at a week's notice later on, thus indirectly colluding with the management policy in this area. However, when I was later taken on full time, the local shop steward, Jim Wheeler, took great interest in me and membership papers were soon completed. I had always suspected a 'cosy' relationship between Jim Wheeler and the supervisor since they could often be seen laughing

and talking together at the supervisors desk. Indeed, it could only have been Wheeler who had told Martin Howe that I was not a fully paid up member of the union at one time, without fully explaining the circumstances. I think this particular weapon was used by Howe at the meeting as an attempt to discredit me in front of the slotters because of my suspected solidarity with them. Some months later he asked me a veiled question about 'who I sided with, the workers or management'.

The meeting between the slotters and the supervisor seemed to represent something of a climax in the slotters' attempts to undermine the new managerial strategy, following the introduction of the one call meter reading system. It seemed to act as a kind of safety valve in which, however partially, they were able to air a small number of their grievances, while at the same time 'not giving too much away'. I personally saw the meeting as something of a watershed since, in the weeks and months following, the slot team seemed to turn in on themselves, beginning to articulate grievances about each other - to some extent, through me.

Louis Roule had always been the one member of the Eastborough slot team who emptied less meters than the rest. Usually it was around 35-40% fewer than the others and it had always been a bone of contention with them as they said he had been doing second jobs for years, and his wife also worked as a meter reader. The other slotters contended that he did not need the bonus, so he did not need to work as hard

as those who had to keep their families on one income. In addition, they thought Louis had an additional private income from some property dealing he did in the early 1960s. Louis himself always maintained that if you did more work than absolutely necessary the gaffers would always expect you to do more. His wife was also instrumental in fostering this view among the meter readers, in her case accumulating time at the end of the day or week. The preference for 'accumulated time', as I have pointed out, was especially strong among those women from families with more than one income (the majority)²³.

It seemed there was a belief that the volume of work done by each individual should correspond to some 'norm' for the group as a whole (cf. Watson, 1980, p. 254). In this case, for the majority of slotters, unlike the readers, the volume was rather higher - probably due to most of the slotters being sole breadwinners. Following the summer meeting with the supervisor, this disparity of work volume between Louis and the others became one of the focuses of the internal antagonism which arose within the slot team. Jack Whitehead commented to me: "The old gaffer would have had him (Louis) 'upstairs' in the office and told him to do more meters, otherwise he'd have to go, yes, he would have sacked him". In the new situation following the introduction of the one call system, this represented something of a 'turn-around' in Jack's attitude compared with that which he had expressed to me a year before. He had said: "You've always been able to get away with murder on this job,

there's loads of passengers, if they worked for private industries, they'd have been out on their ear".

From the time of the introduction of the new one call meter reading system, and, closely following it, the appointment of the new Metering Controller at Valemere and metering supervisor at Eastborough, there followed a policy of greater managerial assertiveness and firm but subtle close monitoring of the work activity of the meter readers and slotters. The predominantly female meter readers offered little resistance to the new assertiveness of the exclusively male supervision, but instead turned to self criticism and criticism of each other. Typical of the comments bandied around were: "She got away with murder under Bill Tatam", or, "Bill was too easy, he knew what was 'going on', didn't he?"

In contrast to the readers, the all male slot team demonstrated at least some token resistance to these management initiatives. They did this by maintaining their traditional work practices, and by using the financial weapon, as they saw it, by intentionally maintaining their former bonus earnings when told to go out reading. They also successfully pulled off an attempt to create a great deal of disruption for the new supervisor by going out slotting when they should have been reading. But despite their limited success in using these tactics, they, like the meter readers, began to 'turn in upon themselves'. They became increasingly easily irritated, and above all, began criticising each other more vigorously than previously.

Bill James would constantly complain about Jack Whitehead's undoubted selfishness. Jack would not go to 'out of the way' meters, thus leaving a double collection if Bill called next time, or he would go off home and leave me looking for him, resulting in my call to relieve Bill of his cash being delayed. Jack himself would complain about the way Bill spoke in 'riddles', about his vagueness when you asked him a concrete question, and express annoyance at his apparent willingness (as he saw it) to conform to the boss's instructions. Louis Roule would complain of both Jack and Bill's blind eagerness to earn bonus, of how their only interest was in earning money, without appearing to care that by working too fast they could be working themselves out of a job. Bill and Jack both complained about Louis's meanness, how he would never spend any money unless absolutely compelled to; and that he would pick up anything in the street he thought might be useful. One afternoon, in late August 1983, when we dropped off Louis near his house, after returning from Oakleigh, Bill and Jack noticed an old cycle chain in the gutter, and they knew Louis had spotted it too. They watched out of the back of the van as we drew away to see if he would pick it up, and they both broke down in hysterical laughter when they saw him pick it up after he thought the van was out of range. Next day, and for several days after they pulled his leg over the incident.

Structure, strategy, and the labour process

The discussion above highlights the practical consequences for the workers at the Eastborough depot of the subtle changes in management strategy, characteristic of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which were accompanied by shifts in political ideology and economic policy. Underlying the workplace developments were not only changes in government policy, but also shifts in corporate strategy. I now want to say something about the political issues, and comment on the effects of these within the structural context.

The struggles between the government and the British Gas Corporation management over policy, and later the government's openly declared belief in 'breaking the monopoly' of public corporations, and where possible, hiving parts of them off, became a serious possibility. These attacks, though actively fended off by British Gas, nevertheless began to have a positive effect on the running, and inevitably, the management objectives and style of the whole undertaking. These changes, as I have attempted to show, emerged in the ethnographic account of the working lives of the meter readers and collectors at Eastborough. Though management were successful in pushing through new working methods, in the form of the one call meter reading system, the workers themselves were by no means wholly intimidated by the new methods and the management style. As we have seen, this was despite the management onslaught, and the increasing inability of the unions to counter it, and even in some instances, their collusion with management in initiating the changes. The

workers at Eastborough, particularly the slotters, did put up, and continue to put up, resistance to local supervision and its initiatives, which in turn, arise from the structural and ideological changes of the early 1980s.

Conclusion

In chapter eight I have turned the spotlight upon the structural context in which the developments discussed in the previous chapters have taken place, and which may provide a pointer to future prospects, not only for the industry generally, but in particular for the meter readers and collectors at the Eastborough depot who lie at the heart of this study.

I try to stress the continuity of events over a number of years, going back to the formation of the industry into a public corporation in 1973. With its formation, and the arrival of North Sea gas, the industry re-orientated itself along more commercial lines, emphasising marketing and service (cf. Williams, 1981, chapter 18). The growing 'new right' ideology of 'free' markets and monetary controls gradually gained ground from the mid-1970s, and became a political force to be reckoned with after 1979 (cf. Levitas, 1986). I attempt to show how this improved the prospects for managerial initiatives and the popularity, among certain sections of the public, for the ideas behind the popular slogan 'the right to manage' which was used widely in the

popular press and even in the more prestigious journals. It is within this developing ideological context, over a number of years, that I set the events which most affected the labour process at the Eastborough depot during the period of my study.

We saw how ideas involving greater commercialism and, after 1979, the emphasis on 'free markets', invigorated management and led to the implementation of change in the direction of labour intensification. In this workplace the employers offensive on job controls, mainly through the pursuit of greater flexibility, was not passively accepted by the workers. The more overt forms of industrial action were perceived as increasingly problematic in conditions of recession and deteriorating labour market conditions. However, as we have seen, these circumstances did not preclude more subtle forms of response, especially by the slotters.

In the following chapter we will examine in detail those more subtle struggles which were possible during the early 1980s, the outcome of which was continued contestation, whilst others resulted in reluctant acceptance. Finally, we consider the future security of the work in the face of further labour intensification and the application of new technology.

Footnotes, Chapter 8

1. Intellectually, it is rooted in the 'conservative liberalism' of the Austrian School of economists, in particular of Hayek and Von Mises, for a discussion of this see Clarke, 1982, especially p. 240, more recent manifestations of conservative liberalism stem from the Institute of Economic Affairs, founded by Harris and Seldon, and most recently, the Adam Smith Institute. See, Levitas, 1985, 'New Right Utopias', passim.
2. Various media reports, in particular, the Sunday Times, 20th November 1983. Also referred to in, 'Gas Efficiency Study', published in June 1983.
3. From an article by David Thomas, entitled: 'Who's King Coal', published in New Society, dated 8th September 1983, p. 356.
4. Bulletin No. 98, August 23rd, 1983.
5. Sunday Times, 8th November 1981, John Huxley.
6. See note 4, op.cit.
7. John Huxley et al.; op.cit., note 5.
8. 'We recommend a study be undertaken to identify the separate business units within BGC and to develop a more decentralised organisational structure', Para: 2.14, British Gas Efficiency Study, June 1983.
9. Jordan, 1982, pp. 44-47; Eccleshall, 1980, 'Ideology as Commonsense: The Case of British Conservatism', ibid, pp. 157-61. Hodgson, 1984, 'Now is the Time for all Right Thinking Men', Levitas, 1984, op.cit., note 1.
10. Temporary meter readers taken on to cope with transition to one call meter reading were 'paid off' when it became fully operational.
11. This dates back to the days of the independent gas districts when their readers were interchangeable between meter reading and slotting.
12. 'Creaming off' was the expression used by the readers about the senior, who had control over the allocation of reading districts to the meter readers.

13. This was in a period (mid to late 1960s) when wages of meter readers and collectors were very low, and also, there was a great deal of competition from local factories for labour, at much higher wages, 'a tight labour market'.
14. 'Dot marking' the computer sheets with the collection details.
15. Their explanation to me was that they felt they had earned this brief respite in the early afternoon by foregoing the official breaks during the early part of the day.
16. It was based on the number of meters per square mile, and so did not take account of the way slot meters were historically 'clustered', mainly in working class districts. Whereas now (partly due to pricing policy) much more spread out, and tend to linger on in the homes of elderly people in lower middle class and some middle class districts.
17. What had actually happened was that the bonus element now represented approximately 15% of total earnings, whereas before it amounted to only about 8%, so total earnings were becoming ever more closely linked to performance.
18. The work of Braverman, 1974, has been criticised in this respect, see especially the criticisms by Wood and Kelly, 1982, and Elger, 1979, in *Capital and Class*, Vol. 7, pp. 58-99.
19. Though there was evidence of readers using sickness as a 'weapon' at the Wheatmill depot when bad runs were issued, there was (from personal observation) no evidence that this was the case at Eastborough.
20. Their 'tactic' of earning higher bonus when having to do reading.
21. See: D.F. Roy, 1980, for a discussion of intimidatory tactics used by management, especially the section entitled, 'Fear Stuff'.
22. This remark has to be seen in the context of much lower pay rises after 1980, and the withdrawal of overtime payments in early 1983. For a perceptive discussion on these points, see: 'The Rediscovery of the Cash Nexus', J.H. Westergaard, 1970.
23. It needs to be stressed that, though the majority of women came from this type of domestic background, some were in families where incomes were more modest, and a minority were single, or were single parents in these cases earnings often took priority over 'accumulated time'.

Chapter 9. The contestation and acceptance of change:
The labour process in the 1980s

Introduction

The early 1980s witnessed a period of deepening economic recession and increasing unemployment in the Eastborough community. These realities, accompanied by rapidly rising gas prices, and the fact that meter readers were not calling back the following day when consumers were out, under a new one call system introduced in 1981, led to a considerable deterioration of relations with the public. At the same time, a new younger management team had taken over in the metering department and began an 'offensive from the top' on the limited job control that the meter readers and collectors had built up over many years (cf. Hyman and Elger, 1981). Under this new management regime (phrases such as 'the right to manage' were often heard), the greater flexibility of labour demanded under the new one call system was eagerly pursued, more frequent security checks were made, especially of the slot collectors, and petty discipline more rigorously enforced (see Roy, 1980, 'fear stuff' sic).

Despite the 'managerial offensive' which began in 1981, and built up relentlessly over the following five years, workers did not, as we shall see, meekly comply despite the hostile economic and ideological circumstances. As Elger (1982) implies, in criticising Braverman (1974) (over the issue of deskilling) the meter readers and collectors of

Eastborough did develop strategies of resistance to the management initiatives, which, as we shall see, were successful to varying degrees in a variety of circumstances. The slotters, not noted for their group solidarity in the majority of cases, proved to be cohesive under special circumstances, an example being their support for the meter readers during the 1984 strike. Despite occasions of external threat, when solidarity was relatively strong, the more regular pattern was one of internal individual antagonisms and regular criticism of each other.

Finally, in this chapter, I consider the possibilities for the future, the application of micro-electronics to the process of meter reading, the introduction of token slot meters (Hill, 1986) and the ways in which the present political and economic developments may effect and influence their application.

Working and living in the 80s

The economic recession that developed following the threat to oil supplies in 1973, was beginning to have a serious effect on the western economies between 1974 and 1975¹. The cost of energy increased dramatically, oil prices rose by 400%² during the winter of 1973-74 and in the following year industrial production fell by 10% in the western economies³. As a result of the rise in the cost of oil, the prices of other forms of energy began to move upwards too, including gas. During the mid 1970s inflation

became a feature of the British economy and, from the late 1970s unemployment began to rise strongly, reaching 1.4m by 1979 and 3m by 1982.

The steeply rising cost of living, and especially the increase in fuel costs, continued during the latter half of the 1970s except for a minor respite in mid 1978. They continued their upward spiral during the first two years of the 1980s before abating somewhat after 1982. However, gas continued to rise in price at a greater rate than inflation right through the early 1980s. Gas tariffs were being used by government at this time to raise a levy in excess of £500m in 1982 which effectively amounted to 'hidden taxation'. During this period, and in the three years previously, the treasury had paid over similar credits to what remained of the ailing British motor industry for re-structuring and re-equipment.

It was during 1982 that I visited the home of an engineering worker who said to me, when I read his gas meter: "How the hell am I going to pay these sky high bills, my job's had it if the government doesn't give the firm more assistance, but in any case we're on three days now". I felt that I could not add insult to injury by pointing out that the government's claim, much discussed in the media, that the engineering workers should receive no increase in pay (though inflation was in double figures by then) because it was 'pumping' so much money into the firm, was in fact partly their own money, derived from his high gas bills! Contradictions such as this surfaced frequently during those

first years of the 1980s at my place of work, out on the streets and in people's homes⁴. The public seemed to be less friendly towards many of us from the gas industry who they came face to face with. Those who remarked most upon it were fitters, showroom staff, meter readers and slot collectors.

In view of the gas industry's mounting impotence when fixing its prices (due to government's demand for the levy), the British Gas chairman, Sir Denis Rooke, could do little more than embark upon a public relations exercise, entitled 'Gas People Care'. It was expected that those in the 'front line', fitters, showroom staff, and especially meter readers and slot collectors, should be particularly courteous to the public⁵.

Following the introduction of one call meter reading, public hostility towards the meter readers had continued unabated, not only on the doorstep, but also in letters to the press and to management. Where the complaints could be re-interpreted as being more generalised and not directly related to the new system (such as not standing on doorsteps long enough) they were rigorously pursued by supervisors, but where they were more transparently related to one call they were not specifically referred to. Indeed, the resentment and irritation felt by the meter readers over the deterioration in their relationships with the public over the one call issue, had reached quite a high pitch by the end of 1982. Undoubtedly, in an effort to reduce the conflict and restore some degree of self confidence in the meter

readers, the management produced a major article in the house journal just before Christmas 1982. It featured a 4½" x 6" photograph of a smiling elderly woman letting in an equally cheerful looking meter reader, with the caption, 'meter lady Jenny - a real joy'. The article was entitled 'caring for the customer' and the prose projected the importance of positive attitudes towards the public; it quoted Jenny as saying: "People judge the gas board by the officials they meet, and so it is important always to be pleasant".

By the end of 1982 the number of slot meters in use stopped falling, the first time since the early 1960s. The beginning of 1983 saw a very gradual rise (about 2½% a year by the end of 1983), a similar increase had not occurred since the 1925-1937 period⁶. The most recent increase coincided with the culmination of the economic recession which began in the early 1970s, leading to the high unemployment discussed earlier. Almost all of the new slot meters installed, from early 1983, were for the purpose of recovering debts on credit meter accounts. These latter debts began to increase substantially from early 1982 as the economic recession and the arrival of mass unemployment began to bite. Several gas fitters who knew us, actually sought us out to tell of the big increase in slot meters that they were now fitting. As one fitter, Ron Liggins, said: "It's fucking fantastic the slots I'm putting in, some days it's more than a dozen". Ron's comments were typical of those we were receiving almost daily during early 1983. But the figure of 2½% overall increase was rather misleading since the vast majority of

people with slot meters already installed were of advanced age. So due to the higher mortality rates among this group, the level of attenuation continued unabated. I think one can assume therefore, that the numbers of slot meters coming into operation at the time was considerable even though they represented a small proportion of the overall total in use.

The districts where the increase in slot meter usage was most noticeable were the very areas where they had declined rapidly during the 1960s and early 1970s; namely, the large council estates in deprived areas, and also, though to a lesser extent, some of the inner city areas. Many of the inner city districts we visited had Asian families and it was very rare for them to have slot meters, and almost unheard of for them to have had slot meters fitted for the recovery of debts. Among the inner city population slot meters were to be found in significant numbers only in the homes of elderly residents of long standing in the area, and the few West Indian families there. On the dilapidated council estates of Eastborough where substantial numbers of new slot meters were going in ('new fixes') were those with high proportions of Scots, Irish and Geordies, who moved south during the 'boom years' of the 1950s and early 1960s, only to feel the dead hand of recession in the 1980s.

As we moved around the city during the summer of 1983, we found a large increase in the number of meters that had been broken open and the contents wholly or partially stolen. The vast majority of these broken meters were what the slotters referred to as 'inside jobs', that is, they had

been broken open by the occupant. Often, the occupant would admit they had done it, otherwise they have a variety of bogus explanations. The commonest of these was, 'the children had done it' (frequently blaming a child of less than 6 or 7), occasionally husband blamed wife or vice-versa. Sometimes 'the deed' was carefully and cleverly concealed, locks expertly picked or hacksawed through, filed and super-glued back together again. A few people, possibly newcomers to meter breaking, would invent elaborate explanations as to why they should not admit the collector when he called. A particular example involved a couple in early middle age where Jack Whitehead called. He told me: "She wouldn't let me in at first, said they had had a credit meter fitted recently in place of the slot, but I told her that I had to have the new meter number, so she let me in. But I said to her, 'this is a slot meter missus' so she called her husband down. He had to admit he'd knocked it off, there was no cash there see. He reckoned he couldn't manage on his social. Couldn't manage my arse!" When I pointed out that maybe he had a point, with the very basic level of benefits and high council rents now being charged, Jack readily agreed - probably recalling the 'solidarity' with working people he had so often expressed to me personally⁷.

Like those consumers who were being given slot meters because they were in debt, those who predominantly broke them open to take out the cash or 'feed' the meter with the same coin, lived mostly in the same areas of the city - those large dilapidated council estates previously described.

During the preceding two years, many people in social service departments up and down the country had campaigned for the gas boards to fit slot meters so that consumers could pay for the gas as they used it. This was fine as far as it went, but did not take into account the pressing exigencies of the poor for ready cash - the meter being an excellent source. But, as some of the more perceptive commentators remarked, "slot meters are a first class 'built in policeman' for the consumer, since they cut off the supply 'automatically' - when the coin runs out!" This avoided the need for the rigmarole of gas board officials going to cut off the supply formally.

Though the number of slot meters being broken open almost doubled during 1983, by comparison with 1981-82, the total number of 'meter breaks' was nevertheless very small as a proportion of all slot meters in use, approximately 1-2% of the total, but in the estates described this could rise to between 5-7%, while in most areas it was almost nil. Another feature that we noticed was the increasingly large sums of cash involved in individual breaks. From discussions with the other slotters, the reasons for this seemed to be generally two fold; one, repeat meter breaks resulting in an accumulated debt and, two, those who had recently become unemployed and who had a number of young children or had central heating installed⁸. In a few cases debts resulting from meter breaks were well over £500, these being predominantly in the most deprived areas. As always, a substantial proportion of the slot meters which had been

broken into were installed in the homes of single, separated or divorced women⁹. Separate conversations with each of the slotters revealed that, overwhelmingly, it was lodgers, boyfriends or ex-husbands who were behind, or had performed the meter breaks, almost never the woman herself, yet invariably it was the woman who had to face the slotter when he called.

The deepening economic recession of the early 1980s which was beginning to have a marked effect upon the unemployed and those on low wages, coupled with the new more authoritarian management style at the gas board, was also having a marked effect upon the nature of the readers and slotters working days. Apart from the feeling that now the new supervisors were constantly 'looking over your shoulder', there were also frequent heated comments from the public, resulting from the one call system, that you had deliberately avoided calling or had knocked hard enough. Explanations about losing bonus if you did not obtain a sufficient number of readings failed to convince most people.

For the slotters there was a more direct deterioration of relationships with the public resulting from the large increase in gas prices. Price levels were much more transparent with slot meters since you had a very 'visible' representation of how your money was being spent when that heavy 50p coin dropped into the box. This fact, together with the practice of 'setting down' the meter to recover debts¹⁰ put the slot collectors very much in the firing line, especially as debts were increasing in view of the economic crisis.

The struggle over meter settings

The 'setting' of slot meters (the volume of gas metered for each 50p coin) became a central issue following the introduction of standing charges in 1982. Management followed a policy of 'differential setting' for the slot meters, whereas, up to this time, meters had a common setting, related to the gas tariff at the time. The exception to this common setting was where the meter had been set lower to recover a debt. The new policy of differential setting was, according to management, for the purpose of producing sufficient refund so that the standing charge could be deducted from the refund before it was paid to the consumer. If consumption was very low on any individual meter, the basic refund would be insufficient to cover the standing charge (a fixed charge based on a one year period) making it necessary to set the meter down in order to produce a large enough refund to comfortably cover the standing charge. In practice, management calculated the settings so finely (whether on purpose or not must remain an open question) that almost no refund remained following the deduction of the standing charge. Had the slotters followed management instructions over settings the resulting very small or non-existent refunds would have given rise to severe aggravation with consumers who relied on the refund as a form of 'piggy bank', not to mention (as discussed in chapter 5), the threat to the slotters tips resulting from a 'good refund' to the consumer.

The imposition of standing charges for slot meters, and the resulting differential settings, brought the question of meter settings into the spotlight of controversy during 1982 and 1983. In addition to this, the question of 'setting down' to recover debts (a board policy), also became a central issue with the slotters as debts and meter breaks increased during late 1982 and throughout 1983. The attitude of the slot collectors, despite their quite widely differing political beliefs, towards those in debt or who had broken open their meters was, perhaps inevitably, somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand they were aware of the 'scrounger' label affixed by some right wing back benchers in the government, and by large sections of the popular press and the media. On the other hand, their daily contact with 'ordinary people', often very much like themselves, but who were in difficult economic circumstances, or those unemployed through no fault of their own, mostly very 'reasonable' people, made them sympathetic towards the difficulties of many of them. The cash refund, which is given to the slot meter consumer after the meter is emptied, is of central importance to her since, as we have seen, the meter is often perceived as a sort of 'piggy bank'. The refund can be used to 'feed' the meter, treat yourself, or, of growing importance, to settle another bill. To have a generous level of refund is seen by the slotters as being very much in their own interest because it enhances their 'power' in the eyes of the consumer as the bringer of bounty, and at the same time provides the possibility of a tip.

Despite clear instructions on the slot computer sheets to set meters in a particular way; at 36, 60, 108, or 120 cubic feet for each 50p coin, from the time of the introduction of differential settings in 1982, the Eastborough slotters nevertheless persisted in setting meters according to their own discretion. This 'discretion' was based on years of experience working in and around Eastborough, of visiting the same families or elderly people, year after year. They each visited over 5,600 homes twice a year, and had done this for over 25 years, so I think it would be fair to say that they knew both the consumers and the districts rather better than their remote and changing bosses at the Valemere headquarters, more than 15 miles away.

The slotters' chief concern when setting meters according to their own discretion were firstly, to reduce 'aggro' with consumers to the minimum, and secondly, to enable them to pay what they, and the consumer, perceived to be a 'reasonable' refund. It was an enterprise which, by its very nature (a cash relationship) depended on subtle judgements of individuals, their circumstances and their expectations. As we shall see later, the subtlety of judgement became even more important as the economic recession deepened through the early 1980s and more people came onto slot meters for debt, or in desperation broke open their slot meters and took the cash. To avoid arguments developing over the latter, the slotters would set meters slightly higher than instructed in order to try and avert a meter break.

It did not take long before a circular was sent round to all the depots from the new metering controller at Valemere, Mark Weatherall, saying that meter setting instructions must be strictly adhered to. This did not surprise me in view of the new style of management he was adopting and the comments of the new Eastborough supervisor, Martin Howe, during a conversation I had with him in which he said: "Ah well, Mark's a man who sticks to the rule book". From my early experience of working under Howe he did not particularly strike me as being a 'rule book man' himself, although he was undoubtedly ambitious, and enforced the rules with zeal when in receipt of instructions from Weatherall¹¹. Howe spoke to the slotters personally on the subject of setting meters. He said:

I know you've all used your initiative in the past when judging the setting a meter should be on, and I can understand why you've felt that you have the experience, on the ground, to do it properly, but I've had a directive that they must be set according to the instructions on the sheet, regardless.

Though Jack Whitehead and Bill James forcefully reiterated the reasons for using their judgement, and Howe acknowledged this, he still insisted on the sheet instructions being used. They just pulled a face and did not reply. I had a feeling they would just ignore the 'instructions', and so it turned out.

Though Jack Whitehead and Bill James continued to 'use their discretion' over settings, as I suspected they might, Louis Roule, and before he retired, Ron Wild, told me and

each other that they would stick to instructions regardless. Jack and Bill had argued the case with them for continuing to use their own discretion, vehemently pointing out the 'aggro' it would cause all of them if they did not continue. Ron tacitly agreed, but Louis, as usual, said nothing. However, Ron, when he saw me later, said: "No matter what they say (Jack and Bill) you can't ignore the bosses instructions, they're bound to find out in the end". Louis, when I saw him, did not mention the subject. I knew from experience that he would do whatever he thought would most annoy Jack and Bill. In this case, to set meters according to instructions. In a conversation with Jack Whitehead just over a week later, I discreetly raised the topic of settings, Jack said to me:

Why should I take any notice of what them 'conners' say at Valemere, it just causes me trouble, all these high settings, them fuckers up there don't do the job like we do, they just sit on their backsides all day dreaming up new settings.

A combination of doing little out of town slotting work and being kept on slotting for long periods at Eastborough, the latter following complaints to the local press by some residents that their meters had not been emptied for over seven months¹², meant that the collection cycle had fallen to four months, resulting in a serious fall in the volume of cash in the meters. This looked like threatening the bonus, since it depended in part, on the volume of cash in the meters. We had decided to challenge the supervision on this point asking to be sent out of town for a while, so that the

cash in the meters could be given a chance to build up again. When we discussed the matter together Bill James said: "Well, if he doesn't take us off Eastborough for a while, we'll just have to reduce the settings, that's the only way"¹³. However, this 'solution' was never put to the test as we were sent out of town shortly afterwards.

Each afternoon, when the slotters came into the depot to pay in their final cash for the day, they would tell me how many meters they had re-set that day. These 're-sets' had to be entered on a sheet so that the slotters could be paid (payment for re-sets was made at the rate of 8p per meter re-set) at the end of the month. With between 8-15 meters re-set per day, this could mount up by the end of the month to a worthwhile extra. When the re-set totals were being quoted at the end of the day, Jack and Bill noticed that Louis always gave higher totals than they did, this despite having emptied little more than half the meters that they had. When they ribbed him about it as usual, he did not reply. However, after they had gone I decided to check to see why there was such a marked difference between them and him in the number of meters re-set. It turned out that Jack and Bill did not make any record on the sheet when they set a meter contrary to instructions, this was done to prevent its detection by head office. When Louis went round he would re-set the meters back to the original setting called for on the sheet, thus frustrating Jack and Bill's 'discretionary settings' and earning himself 8p in the process. It did not take long for Jack Whitehead to realise what Louis

was doing. He said to Bill James: "The cunning bastard, he's doing half the work that we are, and claiming double the re-sets, what with his savings and investments and his missus working as a reader, no wonder he doesn't bother about bonus, he must be rolling in it".

The undermining of some of the slotters' 'job control' by a new management team, changes in working arrangements - one call, curtailment of out of town slotting and closer supervision - had, on occasions, caused the slotters to 'turn in on themselves', taking the form of ribbing and veiled criticism of each other, often through me. This antagonism among the slotters re-emerged again over the issue of meter settings. Both Ron Wild, who was about to retire, and Louis Roule, who would retire in two years, were not doing nearly so much work as either Jack Whitehead or Bill James, each, I think, for different reasons.

Ron Wild, despite his belief that being a slotter had many advantages over other working class jobs he had experienced, was looking forward to: "hanging his boots up" as he put it. During his last year he had become somewhat less concerned with his esteem among his workmates or his standing with the supervisor, and had also greatly slowed his work-pace. As a result his bonus had dropped and he seemed to accept, if fatalistically, the new management initiatives, so he was setting meters 'to the book' - presumably he thought he would not have to face consumers much longer. Louis Roule, on the other hand, had always worked at a slower pace than the others: this had been the case even before the

present bonus system was introduced in 1971. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but it probably amounts to a combination of his outlook on life - a belief in not over-working himself, and the possibility of working himself out of a job, as the slot meters were declining - and his 'relatively' secure financial position, as he saw it.

Both Jack and Bill, being about 12 years younger than Ron and Louis, had rather different motivations. They had mortgages and family responsibilities and had always expressed a belief in working hard and being well paid for such effort. I believe that these ideas, together with the particular life and concrete circumstances of the workplace (cf. Rose, 1978, pp. 237-40), combined to produce the antagonisms which arose between them during 1982 and 1983.

Whilst working out of town at Oakleigh, shortly after the introduction of differential meter settings, antagonisms surfaced again, Jack and Bill complained to me about the high settings that were being instructed on the meter sheets. They also ribbed Louis and Ron about 'sticking to the book', since, as Jack Whitehead said to me: "When I'm following them¹⁴ they've fucked up the settings, but it's marvellous when I'm following myself, they're set just right".

During this particular week at Oakleigh, Ron and Louis got back at Jack and Bill by slowing down. Though Jack and Bill always emptied more meters than either Ron or Louis, they always finished first. As we were out of town at Oakleigh, it was too far to cycle home 'under your own steam'

when you had finished, so everyone relied on being taken back to Eastborough on the van together with their bicycles. This being the case it depended on everyone finishing at the same time - usually a little earlier than the 'official finishing time'. When we were out of town Ron and Louis usually made an effort (well within their capability) to finish at the same time as Jack and Bill so that we could all arrive home at Eastborough a little earlier. At the end of each day though, during one particular week, Ron, and especially Louis, were spinning out their work so as to keep Jack and Bill waiting. As we waited for them on the van, Jack and Bill became more and more frustrated. Bill, though he must have been aware of what was going on, suggested that we follow Louis's route from the sheet, calling at the addresses he had written down. We traced his movements to the last but one call, but he was nowhere to be seen. We went over the latter part of his route again, and when we reached the same address once more, much to our consternation, there he was. He claimed, as usual, that he had been in the street all the time, however on the way home Jack noticed, but mentioned it only when we had dropped him off in Eastborough, that he had all his 'dotting',¹⁵ done. We came to the conclusion that; as often observed previously, he had found a quiet draught free passage, hiding out of sight to do his dotting whilst we searched for him and had returned briefly to his calls in the street as he spotted us going around his route for the second time.

From the late spring of 1983 and into 1984, the struggle over control of meter settings between the slotters and management continued, and it intensified as the year wore on. Management, through supervision, began to turn its attention to this aspect of the work more and more throughout 1983. It came to my attention, through the new Eastborough supervisor, Martin Howe, that management at the Valemere headquarters were taking samples of the slotters' meter sheets on a daily basis, to check whether meters were being set according to their instructions. The slotters themselves were continuing - as they said they would - to use their own initiative when setting meters (to minimise 'aggro' with consumers, and to optimise tips resulting from refunds). However, supervision remained adamant that meters should only be set according to instructions, even though they acknowledged it would be likely to cause problems for the slotters, out on the streets.

Following the report on the sample of sheets that had been checked at the Valemere headquarters, the Eastborough supervisor, Martin Howe, asked me for my views on the subject. When I suggested that what the slotters were actually doing by re-setting the meters as they did, was to reduce hassle with the consumers - when meters were set too high so that they had little refund, and may even owe the board money, or, alternatively, when set too low, would involve counting large amounts of money, thus wasting time - the reply he gave was: "Well, the computer staff at Valemere are

getting 'hassle' too by having piles of reject sheets from the computer, because meters are not set according to instructions, so sheets and cash could not be reconciled". At this point, it seemed to me that a stalemate had been reached because management itself did not have the time or did not wish (possibly under instructions from higher management) to confront the reasons why slotters set meters in the way they did. All they seemed interested in was to reduce the incidence of rejected computer sheets so as to 'smooth' the working day for those involved at the Valemere headquarters and as a result, pushing the contradictions faced by those with slot meters in their homes (an increasing number for the purpose of debt clearance, or as a result of low incomes) back down to the point of consumption - the slotters having to 'face the music' of these policies on a daily basis, out on the streets. This explanation seemed to the Eastborough slotters just another example of how the Valemere headquarters reinforced its power and control at their expense. It brought to mind a comment made by Avril Smith, a local meter reader and shop steward, she said that: "Valemere headquarters is like a club, everything is run to suit them, they live off the backs of the rest of us, up there".

Towards the end of September 1983, Jack Whitehead started to complain to me that some of the last meter readings recorded on the slot meter sheets did not make sense as they were almost the same as the present reading (being taken some 4-6 months later), suggesting that little or no gas had been used, so there should have been almost no cash in the

meters. However, in most cases there was a considerable amount of cash in the meters involved. It seems what had been happening was that the Valemere accounts section could not reconcile the cash in the meters with the readings and meter settings. They had assumed that the meter setting indicated on the sheets was correct, since it had not been amended by the previous collector (in these cases Bill James - according to Jack) it had been assumed that the meter readings must have been in error, so these were adjusted to correspond with the amount of cash collected from the meter. It was suggested by Jack Whitehead that what had actually taken place, was that Bill James had set the meters, 'using his judgement', for the reasons set out above, without properly recording that he had done so on the meter sheet. This resulted in the meter setting shown on the sheet failing to correspond with the actual setting of the meter itself.

From the introduction of differential slot meter settings in 1982, the question of meter settings became a subtle 'battle of wills' between the slotters and the management. It was a central issue at 'the frontier of control' between worker and management¹⁶. Not only this, but it was also an issue of contention between the slotters themselves. Both the meter readers and also the slotters increasingly began to 'turn inwards' with carping and criticism of each other. This followed more vigorous managerial initiatives over job control during the early 1980s, coinciding with the arrival of the new, younger, local supervision. A good deal

of this self criticism among the slotters during 1982 and 1983 also involved the question of meter settings. As Jack Whitehead told me: "I know why Bill (James) sets meters up in cases where they're set low for debt and doesn't record it on the sheets, it's because it saves him counting a lot of money, but it then means it takes the consumer longer to clear the debt". However, I remembered that Jack had told me, some six months before, that he did the same himself, for exactly the same reason; however, in view of his volatile personality I did not risk pointing it out. When I asked Jack how the previous Senior Collector, John Foster, would have handled the constant purges over re-setting, he replied: "Ah well, he'd just have kept quiet, or, 'mislaidd' the paperwork, the old school couldn't have given a monkeys, mind you Dave", he told me: "You're in an entirely different ball game these days, I mean, with these new blokes at Valemere, know what I mean?"

The rigid enforcement of meter settings by the new meter Controller, combined with rising levels of debt and meter 'breaks' during 1983 inevitably resulted in adverse publicity in the local press. It was the third occasion in eighteen months that such publicity had occurred. First, there was the antagonism over meter readers allegedly not dwelling long enough on doorsteps, following the introduction of the one call system. Second, complaints about delays in emptying slot meters (this was due to the provocative management policy of moving the Eastborough slotters to do out of town reading) and finally, in February 1984, complaints from the

local authority welfare workers about the meters of poor tenants being set too low by the Gas Board. The local welfare workers, in a report in the Evening Advertiser, claimed 'Heartless treatment of people who owe money'. It was the first time the board's policy of setting meters low to recover debts (in effect, increasing the cost of the gas consumed, by over 200% in some cases) had received a public airing.

Very occasionally, the debts had arisen through tenants' meters being broken open by a burglar, but much more often it was due to an 'inside job' (tenant breaking into their own meter and taking the cash and, in addition, sometimes feeding the same coin through repeatedly). In other cases, a slot meter would be installed to recover a previous debt on a credit meter, the slot meter then being set low to recover the debt. Either way, if the meter was set low, the tenant would have to 'feed' the meter at much more regular intervals than previously.

During the 1970s and early 1980s many local authorities began programmes of modernising its housing stock. Invariably, as part of such a programme, properties would be updated by the fitting of full central heating. Since most of the modernised houses would usually be in areas with older housing ('deprived' areas), the central heating would automatically put a greater burden on the already low income families who could just about afford to fuel the open coal fire it replaced, but now found the extra burden of central heating too much to bear. Towards the end of the 1970s, with

rising unemployment, especially among this group, the cost of central heating was just too much to cope with, forcing many into debt. A slot meter, 'set low', was then installed to recover the debt. The possibility that tenants may not be in a position to afford the up-rated standard of heating appears not to have been considered when the local authority planned the housing modernisation schemes.

Prior to the newspaper article, the slotters had repeatedly complained of the low setting instructions they were getting from the Valemere headquarters. The slotters had always argued that using their own initiative on the question of settings was a far better way to proceed, as they were in the best position to assess the most appropriate setting for an individual family, taking into account their particular circumstances¹⁷. Over 20 to 30 years experience of particular districts the slotters could often predict, with considerable accuracy, at what particular setting an individual family would be most likely to break open a meter. When I first began working with the slotters I used to be very sceptical of this claim, but after two years experience of their predictions I developed much more respect for them.

When a newspaper reporter asked for the Gas Board's reply to the criticisms of their settings policy, the reply was: 'It would be impossible to take personal circumstances of customers into consideration when setting meters for the recovery of debts'. Jack Whitehead, when he saw this in the paper, simply laughed and said, with emphasis: "Bollocks". If only the gas board had realised it, the slotters, by

careful assessment of an 'appropriate setting', were helping to reduce the 'criminal tendencies' (breaking open meters) of those who were trying to get by on inadequate incomes! If the Gas Board were ungrateful then surely the government would not be. In fact the article went on to say: 'Councillor Hodges says the Gas Board has refused to listen to appeals for leniency, and now he has asked local MPs to raise the question in parliament'.

A wider struggle over 'job control'

I have discussed in some detail the important question of control over the setting of slot meters, the new management teams' attempts to bring meter setting more in line with their wishes and instructions, and the slotters' endeavours to retain some control over meter settings. I now want to examine other aspects of the struggle to maintain some degree of 'job control' by the Eastborough slotters despite vigorous attempts to curtail it by an increasingly confident management, especially after 1980.

The emergence of defensive attempts at job control by the meter readers, and especially the slot collectors, moved to a higher position on the 'agenda of the workplace' following the introduction of one call meter reading in 1981. In parallel with this was the retirement of the Metering Controller and his deputy from the Valemere headquarters, was the appointment of a new Controller, Mark Weatherall, the first to come from a non-metering background. From the way

he operated, when he first came into the job, it seemed that there would be pressure for greater efficiency and more 'job discipline'. Though there is no firm evidence from which level of management this new attitude arose, in view of the outside pressures, especially from politicians, and the 'difficult relationship' between the gas board chairman and the Department of Energy, it seems almost certain that it arose at high level. However, the impact of these changes in managerial priorities at the local Eastborough depot, can only be satisfactorily explained by the conjunction of changes at the centre, with the local changes of management at Valemere, and the new supervisor at Eastborough. It is within this structural dynamic that the events which I describe must be viewed.

The increasing emphasis on issues of job control need to be seen within the context of a re-invigorated 'managerialism'. The new managerial perspective is succinctly illustrated by a conversation I had with the new Eastborough supervisor, Martin Howe, in the autumn of 1983. I remarked on the large number of retirements we had seen recently, at both the Valemere headquarters, and here at the Eastborough depot. Howe replied:

Yes, things really changed when the old Controller and his deputy retired, Mark Weatherall (the new Controller) sticks to the book, he kicked me in the balls the other day for not doing this bloody pre-checking business on the slot meters. Bill Tatam (the old supervisor) used to get away without doing it occasionally, but it's an altogether different 'ball game' now.

The board has changed a great deal, from the top, all younger men in the top positions now, yes, there's much more pressure for efficiency these days.

Howe's own position however, seemed to be hedged around with contradictions in its own right. His career pattern, moving from 'staff' to 'line' management, through a move into supervision at no greater salary, indicated an ambition to rise through the managerial hierarchy¹⁸. Though he often spoke admiringly of 'tough actions' by others especially the police and some politicians, and gave an impression of toughness himself ('squaring up' to you, and looking at you straight in the eyes), he nevertheless demonstrated considerable unease when having to do meter pre-checks¹⁹, or confronting workers over matters of discipline. When I remarked to the deputy supervisor, Mike Maguire, about these aspects of Howe's approach to his job, he replied: "Ah well, in the end he's just like the rest of us now, even he has to do as he's told, especially if he wants to get on".

On one occasion I went out with Howe doing meter pre-checks (the Board rules stated that the checker must always be accompanied by a second person, presumably to check upon the checker) he soon became agitated when faced with the inevitable indignation of the public. One consumer, a man in his sixties, said to Howe: "Fancy checking up on blokes who have been coming here for over 20 years, with no trouble at all, it's a bit much isn't it?" Later, Howe said to me: "If someone came to my house like that I wouldn't let him in I'd phone the head office and complain". Despite his

usually 'tough' attitude this rare drop of his guard I think indicated a less than total commitment to carrying out the clear instructions to undertake regular pre-checks issued by the new Controller, Mark Weatherall.

The removal of outer district slotting (see chapter 7) from the Eastborough slotters following the arrival of the new metering Controller at Valemere and a new supervisor at Eastborough, brought this aspect of job control very much onto the 'political agenda' of the workplace. At first, both Jack Whitehead and Bill James thought that the new arrangement would only be a temporary affair, and that they would soon revert back to 'their' out of town work. However, over the course of the next 12 months they gradually became reluctantly resigned to the reality that they may not get it back. At first, Louis Roule said little as usual. But later on he remarked to me that: "I could see it coming, being paid average bonus and knocking off early, it's been just another 'rip off'". It was often the practice of Louis to advocate ideas, or put forward views which were the exact opposite of those put forward by Jack or Bill, or to offer veiled criticism of them. He would say it not only to me and others, but occasionally to them as well. He regularly accused them of working too fast and earning too much bonus - of being too 'avaricious'. He would often say to me: "Those two would take the sugar out of your tea if they could".

As the number of slot meters began their long decline, from the early 1960s (they halved between 1961 and 1971; see Table 2, p. 199), it struck me as rational that the specialist

team of Eastborough slotters should have gradually taken over slotting in the outer districts. Indeed, my predecessor, John Foster, had told me that the Eastborough team had gone over to slotting in all the outer districts about a year before my arrival. However, it was not until the unexpected reversal of this trend by the new supervisors in 1982, that it was gradually revealed to me in conversations how the Eastborough slotters first came to do slotting in the outer districts in 1972-73.

As slot meters declined throughout the 1960s, credit meters increased at an even faster rate, as more households came back on to gas (see Table 2, p. 199). As a result, the outer districts found it more difficult to complete their reading cycles on time, so slot meter collection was given a lower priority and as a result got badly behind. The difficulties were compounded because the outer teams only slotted periodically, between long spells of meter reading, so never gained sufficient practice to work at a speed that would earn them a 'reasonable' bonus, that is by comparison with what they could earn when reading. So it was at this time that the then supervisor asked the 'specialist' Eastborough slotters to help relieve the outer teams on their slotting. But in order to get them to agree, the supervisor had to offer average Eastborough bonus, irrespective (within 'informal' limits) of how many meters they actually emptied²⁰. This was at a time when competition for labour from local industries was high and demand for gas supplies was growing rapidly. As Bill James put it: "They had no option but to

offer us average bonus, because they wanted us to do something for them". In a separate conversation on the subject, Jack Whitehead told me: "With a queue waiting to take your job, the boot's on the other foot now, they (the management) can do what they like with you, it's a different 'ball game' now, see".

Despite the undoubted inroads made by management during the early 1980s into workers self confidence and subsequently their solidarity, some were still prepared, given certain sets of circumstances, to confront management over issues of job control - and occasionally, to achieve their ends²¹. A notable example was that of the marking of coin bags by the Eastborough slot collectors. It was clearly stated, in the management rule book issued to every reader and slotter, that the plastic coin bags (each containing £10 worth of 50p coins) should be marked with the individual collector's initials. The purpose of this, according to the supervisor's interpretation, was to be able to trace any mistakes or shortages back to the individual collector. The initials were required despite the fact that the cash was rigorously weighed, checked and counted, when it was handed to the Senior Collector when he called, and a chit signed when both agreed that the cash was correct. The idea of signing the bags, in addition to the checking and weighing procedure, struck the slotters as being absurd, and always had been. They made the telling point that a bank clerk would 'laugh out of court' the idea of a customer returning, some days later, to complain of a shortage in his cash and claiming redress.

In subsequent conversations with Jack, Bill and Louis, it seems that the subject of bag initialling had a pattern of being in the 'limelight' especially during the early months of a new supervisor's tenure. However, on each occasion, the Eastborough slotters had either resisted the demand to initial the bags, or they would stop doing it after a very short while. As Bill James told me: "They've all tried it on at first, but we've always made sure it didn't last long". Louis Roule, whilst telling much the same story, gave it a slightly different twist, he said: "The old gaffer insisted that it was most important to initial the bags, then suddenly, a week later, it wasn't important any more".

In the case of the new supervisor's purge on bag initialling, I felt sure that it was originating from Mike Maguire, his deputy, since he repeatedly mentioned its importance when I was in the office in front of Martin Howe, who, being a 'new boy' would not have been so acutely aware of it. It seemed to me that Maguire's harping on it, both covertly and overtly, was to do more with having 'old scores to settle' with the Eastborough slotters over their refusal to do meter reading in the mid-1970s, causing the supervisors serious logistical problems locally and a crisis of credibility with the Valemere management.

The issue of cash bag initialling reached a climax during the early autumn of 1983 when the new supervisor, Martin Howe (following his now well established pattern of 'remote communication'), left me a brief note asking if I would let

him know whether the slotters were initialling the cash bags. The issue, it seemed, would not go away - he had been pursuing it relentlessly for at least six months before issuing what seemed to be this final ultimatum.

When I met the slotters on the morning following the issue of the note, though I knew the bags were not being initialled, I asked how they expected me to respond to Howe's note. They 'automatically' turned towards Jack Whitehead who did not disappoint them, giving a characteristically spontaneous reply. He said: "Tell him we're initialling them, but of course we won't". It occurred to me at once that I was being, perhaps inadvertently 'set up', since if I replied in the way suggested, I would be knowingly misleading Howe on their behalf. If they considered that I might personally carry the can for this deceit, then I must say it did not show in any visible concern on their part. Later, when I called on Louis Roule to collect his cash, he told me, in a rather arrogant tone of voice: "You tell Howe what Jack Whitehead says, we're signing the bags". But, I said, you're not signing them. He replied: "I was, until the others stopped".

Louis Roule was very friendly with the deputy supervisor, Mike Maguire, and tended to side with supervision over some issues, except those which affected him adversely. He would often infuriate Jack and Bill by saying that management should cancel the bonus system (this would not affect him since he worked so slowly). However, on major issues which threatened the 'team' as a whole, he would always be loyal

to the others. The initialling issue was such a case. Later in the day, I told the slotters that I could not be a party to such a deceit - they unanimously agreed! So when, at the end of the week, Howe asked me if the bags were being initialled, I replied that they were not. He commented: "Oh well, I'll have to report it to Mark Weatherall". Nothing further was heard on the subject, and the bags continue not to be initialled.

Though the issue of bag initialling was seen as a matter of principle with the Eastborough slotters (an important issue of 'job control'), it was not the whole story. Having to initial bags not only brought their integrity into question as they saw it, but perhaps even more importantly, it considerably slowed them down, having to write on up to 15 slippery plastic bags at each call. This would have implications, not only for finishing times, but also on potential bonus earnings. As Jack and Bill were relatively high bonus earners, I think management may have realised the implications for work pace on the enforcement of this rule. A new bonus scheme, which was put forward in early 1984, removed the possibility of earning high bonus rates, but very slightly improved the lower rates. Considerable resentment developed among the outer teams over this as they were slotting themselves from early 1983 as a result of the new supervisor's initiative²². They were being required to initial cash bags themselves. As they were not used to slotting they did not perceive, at first, its potential for slowing them down, until they found it was one of the

contributory factors in their inability to earn bonus. It reached a point where the outer district teams would press the Eastborough slotters over whether or not they were initialling cash bags whenever they saw them.

A further issue which the new management team attempted to influence soon after they were appointed, was that of 'factory books'. These were binders containing special reading sheets (these were not dissimilar to the old style 'Gilbert Cards')²³ for premises with very large gas consumption, for example, factories, schools, office blocks, hospitals, fire stations, and local authority premises. These meters had to be read on a monthly basis, usually as near as possible to the first of the month, rather than on the usual quarterly 'cycle'. Each of the meter readers had one or two books to complete, mostly spending a day on each one and making between 10 and 20 visits per book. Doing factory books entailed visiting premises which were mostly very scattered across a large densely populated urban area. The sheets for the various premises to be visited were invariably very badly routed involving a great deal of unnecessary travel. Repeated attempts to get them re-routed on a more rational geographical basis by readers always fell on deaf ears. Unless you knew the ropes reading factory books could be a nightmare; it was a major task to find the meters in these large buildings or to find anyone who knew where they were. However if you knew the ropes, had a vehicle, and re-sequenced the reading cards yourself, doing these books added variety and made a break from the relative monotony of ordinary house-

hold meter reading.

Traditionally, the slotters had never been involved with factory books. However, the new Eastborough supervisor, Martin Howe, indicated that he wanted them to 'shadow' a number of the books. Shadowing entailed gaining some familiarity with the routes, so the slotters could be called upon in the event of sickness among the usual readers who covered them. When the subject was subtly broached by Howe (leaked through me in the first instance), the slotters offered immediate resistance by saying to Howe that they only had bicycles and some of the books involved a 30 mile round trip, which they justifiably claimed would be out of the question on a bicycle. Howe did have some sympathy with this objection (but probably only on account of their relatively advanced ages) and said he would select books on the basis of their having visits which were closer together. This confirmed the general view that those with their own vehicle were given the more spread out routes (travel expenses were not paid at first).

Despite Howe's assurances about minimising travelling for the slotters, they were far from convinced, and continued to raise objections whenever the topic arose. Howe persisted in raising it periodically, over several months during late 1982 and early 1983, but it was mostly raised through his deputy Mike Maguire, who, for the reasons already indicated, made a big issue of it whenever he saw me - less so when he saw the slotters in person. Towards the Easter holidays in 1983 a tentative arrangement was made for the slotters to be allocated their shadow books. However, this

did not materialise, and during the following months, much to the surprise of the slotters, no more was heard of the idea. It still remains a mystery, but of course it was never mentioned within earshot of Maguire or Howe!

The various incidents discussed above, illustrate the importance to the meter readers, and particularly the Eastborough slotters, of the attempts at winning, however limited, at least some 'job control' in their everyday work. In particular instances they sometimes succeeded in their attempts and at other times, only partially so, but the outcomes are never clear cut as in the case of factory books or out of town slotting. Even in what appear to be more decisive 'victories', such as the issue of coin bag initialling, the employers rules still demand that it should be done. So the management could, if they wanted to, 'take the slotters on', insist upon rigid application of the rules at any time.

Viewing the Eastborough slotters as a 'team' (as the management wanted to, both by using the term, and in their own narrow interests - they often took the opportunity to emphasise the notion) was something of a myth in as far as they actually operated in practice. They only really came together as a team (if such a concept is valid at all) when facing management initiatives, or issues of job control. However, as we have seen, they operated very independently of each other in their everyday work, so their internal cohesiveness as a work group was always problematic, except when they faced external threat, almost the opposite to what

has been observed in the case of miners or fishermen. The following short conversation I had with Bill James illustrates well some of the conflicting dilemmas which face them daily, especially since the new management team took over:

- B.J. "Can't understand Jack, moaning so much. What does he want? It's a nice easy job, less than a full day's work and you're as good as your own boss, nobody bothers you, and the wage isn't a bad average, for today".
- D.H. "Don't you think the situation might change now with the new bosses, I mean the 'freedom' and the feeling of being your own boss?"
- B.J. "No, I don't think so, we've had these types before, like old Newman, but they haven't really affected us much, not in the long run".

There was a widespread air of confidence that, despite whatever schemes the new bosses could dream up, the way the readers and slotters carried on their jobs on a daily basis would, at worst only amount to a temporary if irritating disruption. I found this to be a popular view following conversations with both readers and slotters from widely spread districts throughout the region. Most seemed to feel that they were sufficiently remote from supervisors on a daily basis to be able ('within limits') to carry out the job in the way that suited them best. History, so far, had shown their confidence was not entirely misplaced. However, developments that were already progress, and to which I now want to turn, have a potential not so much to the way they carry out their work, but to the very existence of the work itself.

The labour process: Prospects for
the late 1980s and beyond

When I became a gas meter reader for the first time, in the late 1970s, it was during the final months of the Callaghan government. The end of the 'long boom',²⁴ and subsequent development of the economic recession following the Middle East war of 1973. With the adoption of broadly 'monetarist' economic policies from late 1975²⁵, unemployment continued to rise sharply but, even so, had not broken the 1.5m level by the time I became a meter reader at the Eastborough depot. Finding work, for many people, though not as hard as it would become over the following five years, was none the less becoming increasingly difficult as some employers shed labour and others severely reduced their recruitment.

I started work as a summer temp to cover, I was told, for those on holiday. The gas board had, during the mid-1970s, kept its meter readers to a minimum and, as I have shown, embarked upon a policy of employing temps to cover for holidays - that is what they claimed. As it turned out, this had been done well in advance of an announcement, in the late summer of 1979, that a new bonus scheme was being considered. It transpired that many of the temps were kept on as people left or retired until, in the late spring of 1981, they were 'paid off' when the new one call system was introduced, thus removing the need to go through the rigma-role of official redundancies procedure and associated financial costs.

The work practices and bonus system (a simple 'piece rate' system) had been in operation since the mid-1960s. In fact it had been introduced shortly after the opening of the new Valemere headquarters, with its newly set up productivity services (work study) department. Despite a couple of changes of supervisor at the Eastborough depot, the general pattern of the working day had continued to be much the same apart, of course, from the massive upheaval of North Sea gas in the early 1970s. But from the mid-1970s, things began to settle back to what most readers regarded as a normal pattern²⁶. So, from this viewpoint, I took up the work towards the end of a period of relative stability. The then supervisor, Bill Tatam, was within three years of retirement and his deputy, Mike Maguire, would be due for retirement about two and a half years after that. In addition, to this, the Meter Controller and his deputy, at the Valemere headquarters, were due to retire just before Bill Tatam. As it turned out, I was to experience the job for a couple of years before what can only be described as 'the end of an era' arrived. Not only that, but I lived and worked through a period of considerable upheaval and change during the early 1980s, the outcome of which still remains uncertain, but could well result in the final demise of gas meter readers and collectors in the Eastborough area after over 125 years of walking and cycling its streets.

Despite the perceived stability of the local work pattern, various significant changes had taken place over the years. First, there was nationalisation in 1948 and the

subsequent formation of the area boards. Then the opening of the new Valemere headquarters in the early 1960s and the associated extension of a 'corporate management ideology'²⁷, a rapid expansion of the use of work and method study, the introduction of incentive and bonus schemes in the mid-1960s, and staff status for the meter readers and slotters. These events were discussed in detail (see Chapter 6, especially the comments of Jim Wheeler, on p. 187, are particularly relevant to the discussion at this point). Then, in 1972, the new 'Gas Act' enabled the setting up of the British Gas Corporation in January 1973. The effect of this development was to give the industry a more central focus for the co-ordination of policy and standardisation of operations. Not only this, but it also meant that government departments, such as energy and the treasury, had more direct dealings with, and potential control over, the chairman of the Corporation.

With a new political ideology in the ascendancy following the election of 1979, relationships with government deteriorated (see chapter 8). The new government eventually (with the agreement of British Gas) supported an investigation by a firm of private consultants into the efficiency of the industry. When they reported, in June 1983, overall they seemed satisfied with the operation of the industry, though they made a number of relatively minor recommendations. The report was chiefly critical of the state of relations between government and the corporation. However, the important point as far as the meter readers and collectors were

concerned, was the finding that the corporation were already pursuing new working methods to improve efficiency, and it was hoped that this would be pursued further²⁸. On the publication of the document in the summer of 1983 rumour circulated at the Eastborough depot that it would mean big changes, and possible redundancies, in the metering section. However, the rumours could be seen to be somewhat behind events, since changes (for example, one call reading) were first talked about even before the 1979 election, let alone the publication of the 1983 report.

During 1981 (see chapter 7 for a detailed discussion) the new one call metering system was eventually introduced on a trial basis, following the imposition of a secret ballot of all the metering workers. Meanwhile the industry was facing external threats from the government, who were making plans to sell off (privatise) an important part of the industry, namely, the gas showrooms. The threat to privatise the showrooms brought an angry response from the gas workers, taking the form of a one day strike. the strike was supported by the entire workforce and the gates of the Eastborough depot were immediately barricaded with vans. About twenty of us turned up to picket, but this was only really 'token' and the scene was good humoured. In fact I met and chatted with people I had never seen before, or hardly knew. Some of the office staff turned up to brew tea for us.

During the morning a senior manager turned up with the idea of attempting to enter the premises, but very quickly

changed his mind when he saw the strength of solidarity among the workers on the picket and the solidly barricaded gates. A little later the board doctor turned up at the gates - it was the first time I had seen him apart from a compulsory examination when I was taken on as a full time meter reader. The doctor and the depot nurse who was with him approached the picket and asked, rather earnestly, whether emergency provision had been made for call out: he was assured that it had. However, he persisted for a while, attempting to verbally intimidate those on the picket by saying: "How will you feel if an old lady is blown up as a result of the strike?" He was again given assurance that emergency provision had been made, with a voluntary team standing by. After about fifteen minutes of rather patronising banter on the part of the doctor he went away giving us a rather doubting smirk as he left.

Following the show of strength by the gas workers over the threat to the showrooms, the government eventually 'backed down' on its proposed legislation. But it did not end there. During 1982 the Government introduced the Oil and Gas (Enterprise) Act 1982, which would enable it to sell off any of the Corporation's assets at a future date if it chose. The Corporation responded by putting into operation a plan to close down its less profitable showrooms, presumably in the hope that this will be seen by the government as a 'sweetener' so as to avoid any further harsh treatment under the Act.

Towards the end of 1981 there had been sporadic rumour

circulating around the region about a revolutionary new form of meter which could be read without the need for a meter reader to call. As I have pointed out, few meter readers noticed that the introduction of one call meter reading was only 'phase 1' of an entirely new approach to the metering of gas use. In fact, 'phase 2' related to the later possible adoption of doorstep billing. This would entail the use of a special electronic device which was then under development, and into which the meter reading could be keyed and a printed bill automatically produced and would be put through the letter box. The device was featured in a popular T.V. science programme towards the middle of 1981 just before the one call system was voted upon by the workers. Following the vote and associated pay re-grade little more was heard of the device.

At the beginning of 1982, just as the new one call system was being accepted on a permanent basis, there came to the notice of the media trials of a new meter that could be remotely read. This new system of 'remote meter reading' was being developed by a large conglomerate electronics firm, well known in the U.K. In the months before the meter trials I had noticed that on a few of the very latest meters the electronics firms' name had appeared alongside the usual meter manufacturer's name, quite a coincidence as it turned out. The remote meter trial was announced in the trade press²⁹, and interestingly, was reported as being supported by the Department of Industry - the new Prime Minister had herself, suggested the possibility of gas and electricity

meters being read by one person soon after coming to office in 1979. The trade press article went on to say: 'the possibilities for the future really are wide ranging, not only for British Gas, but for all other utilities too'.

The official trials of the new remote meter reading system began towards the end of 1982 at two major sites in the southeast of England. The system, called Credit and Load Management System (CALMS) uses either telephone or mains electricity cables as the signal carriers. There are several variations of the system currently under consideration and field trials on these were well advanced by the end of 1983. From the time the possibility of remote meter reading was first discussed in 1982, local supervisors immediately 'played down' its significance, telling readers who asked: "It will be years before it comes, if it ever does at all". However, by the beginning of 1984, it was being widely discussed by the media, especially the press. One paper positively welcomed the idea that: 'the days of the meter reader with his torch and notebook are numbered'³⁰, the paper, a keen supporter of the new government, made much of the point that: 'criminals would no longer be able to pose as meter readers to get inside houses'.

During late 1983 a new bonus scheme was announced for the slot meter collectors on the pretext that it was long overdue, with which the slotters themselves would not have disagreed. The problem was that it was very little different from the previous scheme, apart from the provision that it would run for only two years, a fact which some saw as

significant in view of the latest technical developments.

As Bill James commented:

I noticed an article in my paper (Daily Mail) last week where the electric are experimenting with tokens for slot meters, they say the gas may follow suit, I didn't mention it to my wife, it would have worried her to death, none of us would stand a chance of another job.

Bill has a teenage son and daughter at home, both of whom have been unemployed for over two years. He is an ardent supporter of the Conservative government and the prime minister Mrs Thatcher, despite the contradictory consequences of that support for his own job prospects and those of his family.

During the spring of 1984, the employers announced their intention to move towards the dropping of one meter reading in five, sending out estimated accounts for that quarter instead. They admitted that fewer meter readers would be required as a result but, it was hoped, that the surplus numbers would be lost through 'natural wastage' - though they would be prepared to listen if anyone wished to take 'a redundancy package'. A mass meeting was called and this time workers gave a majority vote to resist the proposals, even if it entailed strike action. Though a small number (about 4%) said it would be difficult to see this happening because they were not 'militant' and had never gone on strike before, a couple of men shouted: "What about me mortgage, who's going to pay that?" Later, Jack Whitehead

remarked to me: "Well, I reckon we've got to make a stand somewhere along the line, it's no good just sitting back and moaning". But, much to my surprise, in a conversation a few days later, he remarked:

I'd take redundancy tomorrow if
I had to, anything to get out of
this rat race, I could do a bit
of decorating on the side, to
keep me going. The trouble now
is the bosses have got it all
their own way, look at the miners,
they'll never win!"

Despite these sentiments, Jack fully supported the strike that followed, and he joined the picket line with the rest of us. The outcome of the strike was successful since it achieved its limited aim of delaying any further changes for four years. Its success was beyond what most people had expected, and although its aims were limited, it nevertheless demonstrated a potential.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have concentrated attention upon the struggles that occurred over the 'contested terrain of the workplace' (cf. Thompson, 1983, pp. 122-52) from approximately early 1981 when the combined impact of new working methods (one call system) and a new management team gradually began to be felt, resulting in increased conflict and struggle.

The previous chapter examined work intensification in a changed structural context, and in this chapter the contestation and acceptance of change in the workplace.

Obviously, it would be taking the argument too far to suggest direct connections between wider scale structural changes and those in the labour process at a particular workplace. Nevertheless there are undoubtedly some links, and even the most sceptical would have to accept that there are many at the ideological level, especially those relating to the perceived priorities of management. These are rooted in the idea of a search for greater productivity and efficiency in an endeavour to restore a positive rate of return on capital employed (see Gamble and Walton, 1976, p. 139). An essential first step to achieving these objectives is the establishment of the notion of management's 'right to manage'.

As we have seen the struggles at the workplace over what Hyman (1980) describes as: 'negotiation of order at the frontier of control' consisted of attempts by supervisors, using a more authoritarian management approach, to enforce petty disciplines (styles of dress, strict observation of hours of work) and in relation to slot collectors, the relentless pursuit of instructions over meter settings, and abortive attempts to enforce coin bag signing. These activities, far from having the desired effect (compliance), actually promoted the opposite - greater resistance and promotion of group solidarity, culminating in a first ever region-wide strike of meter readers and collectors in 1984.

Footnotes, Chapter 9

1. For a discussion of this significant period, see Glyn and Harrison, 1980, pp. 20-6.
2. *ibid*, p. 21.
3. U.N. Yearbook of Industrial Statistics, Vol. 1, 1983, pp. 622-31.
4. For a discussion of the public and private domains see: Margaret Stacey, 1981, pp. 185-87.
5. The way it was put in the house newspaper was: 'the coming months will see the rapid build up to an intensive, industry-wide drive to sharpen every aspect of gas service to our customers' - it was placed under the banner, 'Gas People Care'. House Journal, March 1983.
6. 'Report on the Gas Industry in Great Britain', P.E.P., 1939, p. 46 (fig. 4).
7. In Jack's case it is difficult to know to what degree these sentiments genuinely represent his views, and to disentangle them from my own influence on him, since I did not lie about my own views, when asked.
8. 'Officially', slot meters were not allowed where central heating was fitted, for safety reasons. However, in practice, they were fitted in a number of houses, probably as a result of debt - the central heating being a major factor in the accumulation of a debt in the first place.
9. This was determined by conversations with the slotters, by personal observations, and by analysis of names on the meter sheets.
10. 'Setting down' entailed reducing the amount of gas metered for each coin inserted; say, from 60 cu. ft. to 36 cu. ft. This was done by moving the 'meter plate' around upon which the settings were engraved.
11. Weatherall and Howe were work colleagues when they worked in Productivity Service (Work Study) department at the Valemere headquarters. They were also friends outside work, playing squash together at the weekends.
12. We had been moved to outer districts 'to do their reading' whilst they were doing what we considered to be our slotting.

13. The effect of reducing the settings would mean more cash being put into the meters, but would also produce larger refunds. But this would not matter since the bonus was calculated on the gross cash found in the meter, so 'setting down' would have been the ideal solution, from the slotter's point of view.
14. 'Following' means visiting the same addresses as those you last visited on the previous cycle.
15. 'Dotting' - putting pencil dots on the computer sheets to prepare them for analysis at headquarters.
16. See A.W. Gouldner, 'Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy', 1954, for a discussion of the struggle between workers and management at what Gouldner calls 'the frontier of control', at shopfloor level.
17. This usually amounted to using a setting which would recover the debt, but at the same time minimise the possibility of them breaking the meter open.
18. This 'manoeuvre' was perceived, by most who I spoke to, as a manoeuvre in the bid for further promotion.
19. Checking slot meters prior to the slotter's visit to see if any cash was subsequently missing.
20. Despite an obvious opportunity to take this situation for all it was worth, there seemed to be operating some unspoken notion of 'what was reasonable' (cf. Baldamus, 1961). The slotters, in practice, rarely fell below the stint for the specific area in which they were working.
21. In criticising Braverman on this point, Elger (1982, p. 24) remarks: "he (Braverman) forgets that the working class remains an active agency in the capital relation".
22. op.cit., see above, chapter 7, pp. 261-2.
23. For a discussion of 'Gilbert Cards', see above, Chapter 6, pp. 188-9.
24. For a discussion of the post war 'Long Boom', see E. Mandel, 1980, pp. 62-96, and M. Dobb, 1963, pp. 387-93.
25. For a discussion of the historical and political context in which 'monetarism subsequently developed, see Glyn and Harrison, 1980, pp. 100-08, and Gamble, 1985, pp. 188-97.
26. From a conversation with Gwen Barlow.

27. McKinsey and Co., a 'fashionable' firm of management consultants, were called in in 1967 to advise on new management techniques being developed in the U.S.A. See also: T.I. Williams, 1981, pp. 233-36.
28. Taken from paragraph 2.136 of the consultants report, 'Gas Efficiency Study', 1983.
29. 'Gas World', March 1982, p. 131.
30. Daily Mail, 22nd January 1984, p. 17.

Chapter 10.

Conclusion

An Ethnography of Gas Workers: Worklives
in Process; Change and Conflict in a
Structural Context

The publicly owned industries and services were undergoing major changes during the time I worked as a participant observer with the gas meter readers and collectors at East-borough. These changes date back to the mid-1960s when successive governments developed policies aimed at encouraging organisations in the public sector to adopt a more commercial approach to their activities.

Greater commercialism in the gas industry was pursued following the report from McKinsey management consultants in 1967 and the formation of a public corporation in 1973. The aim then was to run the industry more independently, but with an ethos and, it was hoped, a motivation more like that of a limited liability company in the private sector.

Analysis of the interconnectedness of state policy and the labour process at the workplace is a central theme of this ethnography. The study provided the opportunity to examine and analyse this issue at first hand by way of an empirical work situation during a period of significant change, which was to have a direct impact upon this particular workplace locale.

Rose (1975) reminds us that studies of specific workplace activity need to take into account wider social analysis including economic and political questions. Before going

on to discuss those wider structural questions I would like firstly to examine and evaluate some of the major themes of the workplace ethnography.

Themes in the ethnography of an occupation

The two predominant themes that are specific to both meter readers and slot collectors are, isolation on the job from colleagues and, in contrast, widespread contact with the public, mostly in their homes. This activity takes place for a substantial part of the working day in the open air and in all weathers. Meter reading in particular entails considerable physical effort involving long spells of walking, and strenuous bending and stretching in dark and confined spaces. A greater degree of interaction with the public prevails in the case of the slot collectors, combined with a considerable amount of cycling over increasingly widespread meter locations.

Isolation from workmates and supervisors is a central feature of meter reading in particular. This has increased following the transfer of metering records to a new regional headquarters in the late 1960s. I had expected to find the isolation regarded as a disadvantage in view of the positive way comradeship at work has been reported in a number of studies of workers who work in close proximity (for example, Beynon, 1973; Dennis, Henriques and Slaughter, 1969). On the contrary, isolation was never mentioned negatively to me. During conversations with meter readers, I found that

remoteness from the supervisor was regarded as an advantage in view of the greater flexibility it provided in terms of how you organised your day and, more importantly, the time when you could finish in the evening. The district where you worked, whether or not you stopped for a drink and the detailed order in which you did the run, were all contingencies that had a crucial effect upon your finishing time at the end of the day. A further advantage of isolation was the limited contact with supervisors. This had the benefit of enabling you to achieve your main objective: accumulating time, by the optimum organisation of your working day without the constraints of a meddling supervisor.

Although isolation from colleagues and supervisors was a feature of the work, this was not the case in other aspects of the job. In practice contact with the public was widespread and varied, though usually rather fleeting. Most of the meter readers saw contact with the public and working in many and varied districts as a positive feature of the job, creating variety and interest. Although working in different districts was seen as giving welcome variety some areas were perceived as less desirable than others. The chief criteria were seen as the distance between houses and the length of gardens or drives.

A third important feature of the work is the high level of physical effort required. This is not immediately apparent either to the outsider or the novice meter reader. As one householder once said to me on a sunny June day: "it seems a pretty nice job just strolling around in the sunshine

all day". In reality it entails a daily walk of several miles in all weathers, alternately roasting in a July heat-wave, being frozen to the marrow in a January blizzard, or soaked in the autumn rains. The physical effort required can be punishing, for example: clambering under a restricted staircase not once, but repeating the operation 200 times a day gives some idea of the effort expended, not just for a day but sustained day after day, often over a number of years.

The repetitive physical effort required of the slot meter collector is not nearly so dominant as that experienced by the meter reader. Due to the greater number of operations needed to empty a slot meter and the time consuming counting of cash and completion of receipts, fewer than 50 calls a day are made by comparison with the 250 of a meter reader. Though the slotter is not under quite the same physical pressure, a great deal of cycling is required and constant lifting of a heavily laden coin bag.

Having discussed the key features of the meter readers' and slot collectors' daily work pattern, I want to examine a little further, by way of comparison, the distinctive character of each of the two groups. A detailed discussion of their workplace experiences takes place under two separate chapters in the text, an approach which was appropriate because, though the readers and slotters work have some broad similarities, the ethos and characteristics of the two groups contains subtle but important differences.

As we have seen, the most noticeable difference between readers and slotters is the greater isolation of the readers from their colleagues, and from supervision. Potentially, this gives the meter readers greater regulation and control over the way their day is organised, and consequently, time spent out on the streets. The important feature of the job enabling them to achieve this degree of job control is undoubtedly their isolation from colleagues, but particularly from supervision.

By contrast with the readers, the enforced interdependence of the slotters and their reliance on the senior collector, curtails individual job control. Management like to foster the idea of the slotters forming a 'team', but the slotters themselves perceive their interdependence as 'a necessary evil'. The fact of needing to be periodically relieved of cash and finally, at the end of the day, having to balance up the cash collected together with colleagues and reconciling cash banked by the senior collector, means that collectors are inevitably tied to a more rigid time regime. The meter readers constitute a much more fragmented workgroup than the slotters. Their isolation from each other and the fact that the readers are predominantly women, with rather different priorities from the men makes them, under normal circumstances, a less cohesive group. However, as we saw in the 1984 strike, this was no barrier to radical industrial action, led by the female shop stewards.

The slot collectors meet regularly each day and come together to present a much more unified front when confronting

management over the range of workplace issues. Their approach to supervisors is usually more robust and can be quite aggressive, depending upon the state of the power balance between them at the time. The approach of the meter readers is more integrative and deferential towards the male supervisors. As I have suggested in chapter four, the allotment of runs by the supervisor was a key issue in the perceived need of the women to cultivate a good relationship with him.

As well as the subtle differences outlined above, which give the two groups their distinctive character, there are also variations in individual and group orientations to work, and in the degree of instrumentalism between the two groups. It is clear from this research that worker orientations and instrumentalism are in no sense static or unchanging, indeed they are regularly being re-evaluated, not just in accordance with workers subjective assessments of their situations at work or within the family, but also depending upon the objective reality in which they find themselves, a reality which is itself in constant flux (cf. Cunnison 1966, Blackburn and Mann 1979, and Pollert 1981).

We saw, in chapter two, that the majority of meter readers were women and the slot collectors men. In addition to this, most of the women had migrated to Eastborough from more closely-knit working class communities in the North of England, Scotland and Ireland. Before the 1984 strike social encounters among the women outside work were not very common. Together with the isolation at work that I have described, the meter readers' work situation at that time

can be described as at least featuring an important degree of instrumentalism. However, the instrumentalism was rather subtle insofar as it did not directly revolve around a cash nexus: in fact it was an instrumentalism involving time accumulation. Less rigidly enforced starting and finishing times and greater remoteness from supervision ensured that 'accumulating time' during the week was a realistic proposition. This was not crudely related to the nature of the work (time policing could be, and eventually was, made more effective) but was, as I have argued, rooted in the historical development of the local labour market, particularly during the 1960s, when most of the women were recruited.

As I demonstrated in chapter two, the chief purpose that the women's accumulated time was used for was to undertake domestic tasks for the family. The ability to control the length of the working day in this way was covertly seen as a very positive advantage and made the discomforts of the work seem worth enduring. The priority of the male slot collectors was for a rather different form of accumulated time. Their greater contact with each other and the senior collector who relieved them of the cash they had collected, meant that control over the working day had to be based upon co-operation with the rest of the group. Since they all had wives the brief time that they accumulated during the afternoon was used, not for domestic tasks, but to relax at home and complete purposely delayed paperwork in comfort. Final balancing of cash was then completed at the depot in

the late afternoon making it appear to the supervisor that you had not long finished your collecting on the streets.

In addition to the regulation of time, the slotters were always more interested in their earnings, especially the bonus element which, until the introduction of the one call system, represented a greater proportion of their total earnings than it did of the readers. Though I would not want to claim that their association with money at work was a primary reason for their greater interest in earnings, their regular handling of cash, plus a cash relationship with consumers, made them very aware of the implications of monetary transactions. In short: 'money is their business'.

The features of the work and the orientations of the meter readers and collectors give the effort bargain its distinctive character. Invariably it was based upon the notion of what constitutes a 'fair day's work'. In the gas industry, in common with many others, this is largely determined by the employer using the techniques of 'scientific management' (time and method study) which were discussed at length in chapter seven. But the eventual outcome of the effort bargain is not as simple as it may appear at first sight. The conclusions reached by the work study department, based upon observation, are not totally rigid but are usually the subject of argument and bargaining with worker representatives, following consultation with the workers themselves. In addition to this formal level of negotiations there are also the whole series of tacit agreements and informal bargains at the workplace about what level of effort constitutes

a 'fair day's work'.

Baldamus (1961) has argued that a process of socialisation at work leads to common definitions among employers and employees about what constitutes a 'fair day's pay', whilst Brown and Brannen (1970) have shown that this notion extends beyond the workplace and into the communities from which workers come. Behrend (1957) suggested that an implicit contract is seen to exist between employers and employees at all levels upon what constitutes an acceptable amount of effort. These authors share a common recognition that the concept of a 'fair' day's effort is anything but 'scientific' in its determination, a view that would undoubtedly ring true with the meter readers and slotters of Eastborough, in their case from shopfloor experience.

The distinctiveness of the effort bargain on the part of the majority of female meter readers is the centrality of time regulation. A key factor in time regulation is some yardstick as to what constitutes a 'reasonable day's effort'. This is arrived at, as we have seen, by the establishment of a 'norm' resulting from what purports to be the 'scientific' study of work but actually results from a complex series of negotiations, arguments, and tacit agreements (cf. Littler 1982, pp. 117-45). The outcome is the establishment of a 'standard performance' with a nominal base number of 76 (cf. Grant 1983, pp. 107-09), the starting point of a series of possible performances ranging between 76 and 138. We can see immediately a recognition of a range of possible acceptable levels of effort by employer and employee, though

with the employer making the running. The considerable difficulty of enforcing rigid time policing under these isolated working conditions is covertly recognised by supervisors and meter readers alike. Supervisors were therefore content, until the early 1980s, to say: "I don't mind how you organise your day, so long as you complete your quota of work and I don't get too many comebacks".

The impending introduction of the new 'one call' meter reading system in 1980, marked an important turning point in terms of a shift towards increased collectivism among the workers. The local shop steward organisation became more visible and active at most of the depots throughout the region, as well as at Eastborough. The relative autonomy and individual isolation that had been the norm, prior to 1980, underwent a substantial transformation following structural changes which many of the workers saw as a potential challenge to their autonomy, of which time control was an important outcome. The newly activated shop stewards and others grasped this potential threat early on in the negotiations. They saw not only the challenge it posed to autonomy at work and therefore to job control, but also the longer term threat to job security. The one call exercise was, in the longer term, fundamentally about buying out workers' jobs in exchange for short term financial inducements in the form of a pay re-grade and improved bonus package. Whilst initially the longer term view of preserving autonomy and jobs prevailed as a result of a local ballot of union membership, a regionwide secret ballot saw the short

term financial inducements win the day. This was in a family context of rising unemployment and the paternalist viewpoint dominating the decision to accept the short-term financial inducements of the new one call proposals.

The effects of the new one call system proved to be far less direct for the slot collectors than for the meter readers. As we saw, the slotters had been operating a similar bonus scheme since 1972 and so enjoyed higher bonus earnings already. In addition, they would benefit by receiving the same one step pay re-grade as the readers. However, a crucial disadvantage to the slotters was the clause that they would have to agree to read meters when the need arose - something they had successfully struggled to resist for so long. This fact, together with the likely effects they could see the new scheme would have on jobs in the longer term, led them to join forces with the readers and vote for rejection at the local branch meeting.

The slotters had always perceived themselves as distinct from the meter readers in terms of skill and inherent job satisfaction, but also in more complex ways deriving from their gender position. There could, nevertheless, be times and circumstances when they saw their interests as coalescing with broader considerations, and in this case, with those of the meter readers. The attempt by management to intensify labour (improve calculability of output through wider application of time study and the introduction of new incentive schemes) was correctly seen, by the meter readers and slotters alike, as being a wider threat to the security of

employment of both groups of workers. It was at this juncture that reaction and resistance became collective, culminating in the 1984 strike action.

The discussion so far has raised a number of important themes that arise clearly in the ethnography of the two occupational groups, so at this point I would like to summarise, conceptualise and evaluate some of those central themes.

Isolation from fellow workers and from supervisors is as we have seen, basic to the work, particularly for meter readers. Although slot collectors have greater contact with the others in their 'team', nevertheless most of their working day is spent in isolation from them. Surprisingly perhaps, this isolation was viewed as having more positive advantages than disadvantages. The isolation was seen to provide greater freedom to organise and plan your day free from the prying intervention of overseers. Other authors have commented upon the positive aspects of isolation at work, notably in the case of farm workers, Newby 1977b, cabdrivers, Davies 1959, lorry drivers, Hollowell 1968, postmen, Storey 1982, and outdoor workers, Blackburn and Mann 1979. Central to these studies is the concept of being able to exercise more control over the way in which work tasks are ordered and carried out. The real level of control that can actually be exercised is sometimes limited and may be illusory; this was found to be the case in occupations where working for small proprietors was common,

Newby's farm workers being one example and Hollowell's lorry drivers another. On the other hand, large organisations and state monopolies provide a little more scope for job control through isolation, postmen and meter readers being important examples. In this study we have also seen how the less rigid starting and finishing times made accumulating time, for one's own use throughout the week, a real possibility.

The slightly more restricted freedom of the slotters to control time was balanced by the perception of a greater level of skill required for the job, less repetition, and not such a high level of sustained physical effort. For these reasons the slotters resented having to undertake reading work when required and, as we saw, fought and resisted it until constrained to do so under the new one call arrangement introduced in February 1982. The greater contact with fellow workers had led to the development of a higher degree of collective solidarity when confronting management over shop floor issues, the refusal to undertake meter reading during the 1970s being an important example.

The tacit backing of the slotters for the meter readers' strike action in the summer of 1984 had something to do with a creative leadership from the women shop stewards and solidarity with colleagues, but a great deal more to do with the 'settling of old scores' for being forced to accept occasional reading under the new one call scheme introduced in 1982. This then was the logic of their position and explains why they stood together with the

readers during that very successful summer strike of 1984.

We have now summarised some major themes which are specific to this occupation and examined the subtle differences which give a distinct character to each of the two groups of workers who are the subjects of the ethnography. We have also discussed some important variations in their orientations to work, manifestations of instrumentalism, the issues of gender which arise between the two groups, and the implementation of managerial policies by local supervision. We have seen the nature of the effort bargain and how concepts of 'a fair day's effort' are mediated by a complex and changing set of priorities that are specific to workers whose working day is so much less rigidly time structured than is the case in many other occupations. Finally, we have seen how a high level of worker solidarity and collectivism can emerge within two specific and isolated groups of workers, one of which consists almost entirely of women, and the other exclusively of men.

Up to this point I have focussed upon the emergent themes from the ethnography. If the discussion were to stop there it would reinforce one of the limitations of much ethnography as a research method. An important weakness of ethnography is the difficulty in revealing the contingent nature of life on the shopfloor, to bring into sharp focus ways in which the labour process is located in a social and economic structure, and a significant aspect of this was a political ideology of introducing market relations. It is with these limitations in mind that I now want to turn to a

discussion of the structure of social relations in which this ethnographic study of process is embedded. But before doing so I would briefly like to draw together the themes that have emerged from the preceding discussion.

A central question, that of job control, has to be viewed within the context of a major shift in state policy, resulting from an equally large movement in political ideology from the late 1970s onwards. The impetus towards 'public sector commercialism', beginning in the late 1960s, received a considerable boost during the 1980s following the election of 1979.

Revised working methods were introduced as a result of the new priorities of the government and management, but such methods did not result in the wholesale acquiescence of the workforce. The often creative but occasionally crude ways in which the workers challenged and re-defined the managerial interpretations of the new working practices had an important impact on the labour process at this workplace.

The quite high levels of job control that persisted - despite the challenges from management - were made more feasible by the isolated nature of the workers jobs. Challenges and acquiescence at particular junctures were

complex and sometimes related to changing work orientations governed by factors external to the workplace (cf Cunnison 1966). Though the methods of 'scientific management' were increasingly employed, the final outcome of the 'effort bargain' and the levels of instrumentalism displayed, were very much determined by implication and by tacit bargains between workers and supervisors on what constitutes acceptable effort. However, more radical challenges by the workforce were still on the agenda under a certain combination of circumstances, as occurred during the 1984 summer strike.

Of particular note in this context were the differences (and also the relationships) between the experiences and actions of the readers and collectors. The isolated working routines of the readers coupled with their particular orientations to work encouraged a distinctive pattern of job control focused on time, but made collective mobilisation quite difficult, though as we saw, by no means impossible.

By comparison the collectors who were more central figures in collective action, exhibit an apparently more paradoxical dynamic, for their working practices

appear to facilitate a strong individualism whilst also justifying a notable collectiveness in the face of external pressures.

Structure and Process

As we saw in chapter one, technical change has always had an important effect upon the ways in which the gas industry has developed (see Hobsbawm 1964), being especially significant since the late 1950s. The two most important developments were the Clean Air Act of 1956, and the arrival of North Sea gas from 1967. As we have seen, the significance of these two events for the Eastborough depot was a large scale shift away from slot to credit meters between 1962 and 1972, accompanied by a considerable expansion of the industry during the decade from 1965 to 1975. Consequently, the pattern of employment in the metering department also changed, with a decline in the number of predominantly male slotters and a gradual expansion of the number of meter readers, women being recruited in the tight labour markets of the 1960s.

Although the changes I have mentioned had an important long term effect in the decades following the second world war and help to explain the pattern of labour that existed when I became a meter reader, other organizational changes were beginning to take effect from the late 1970s and it was these that were significant for the period covered by the ethnography. The implications of changes at the structural

level, especially those relating to management policy which affected the labour process at the Eastborough depot, are complex and therefore not easy to disentangle, not least because of the degree of discontinuity between the intentions of those policies developed at the macroscopic level, and the nature and extent of their implementation at the workplace. However, I now want to move towards an attempt to trace the development of policy issues through a particular political ideology and how those policies were mediated through the corporate power of the gas industry.

The important organisational changes that began to have such an impact upon the meter readers and slotters during the period of the study are rooted in a much longer term shift towards commercialism, which can be traced back to the report of the American management consultants: McKinsey & Co., in 1967. As I argued in chapter one, the industry began to re-organise along corporate lines, gradually re-orientating itself towards a more commercial approach than had been the case immediately after nationalisation in 1949 when public service had been its priority. In the years following McKinsey a shift towards commercialism prevailed and culminated in the formation of the industry into a public corporation in 1973.

The intention behind the formation of a public corporation was to foster the more commercial and marketplace approach that I have suggested. The intention was to sharpen the drive for profit and higher productivity that was thought

to prevail in the private sector (cf. Nichols 1986, *passim*). In a discussion of the railways, Anthony Ferner gives important insights into the more general 'politics of commercialism' following the International Monetary Fund loan of 1976 which featured a \$3bn reduction in the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement (see Glyn and Harrison 1980, p. 112). Ferner says:

In Britain, the pressure for public sector commercialism was felt significantly from the mid-1970s, with the introduction of external financial limits and government austerity measures that cut investment in public enterprises. But it was only with the development of the post-1979 Conservative government's public sector strategy that the pressure coalesced into a coherent political programme for addressing the 'problem' of the public enterprises.

A. Ferner, 1987, pp. 179-203.

As I have indicated, throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, work study and organisation and methods departments had been established and strengthened across the industry (see Williams, 1981, pp. 234-36). During the 1970s in particular, the Eastborough meter readers and collectors had come increasingly under the scrutiny of the Valemere work study department. In 1972 a new incentive bonus scheme was introduced for slotters, similar to that which would be applied to meter reading just a decade later as part of the new 'one call' meter reading scheme. The new one call system can be seen as part of a longer term plan that began to be discussed at management level in the mid-

1970s, with the aim of considerably reducing the number of meter readers. These moves on the part of management, which were being repeated in most other departments of the regional board, can be seen as resulting from the longer term shift towards commercialism which the formation of the industry into a public corporation, in 1973, had initiated.

As negotiations over the introduction of the new one call meter reading system were reaching their climax in late 1980, a number of significant retirements of managers and local supervisors were about to take place. These retirements all occurred during 1981, the most important being those of the metering controller and his deputy, who oversaw the whole region. Although I had no direct formal access to management information, it seems entirely plausible that these retirements were significant for the timing and implementation of the new working methods. What was certainly true at the Eastborough depot was the hostility of the retiring supervisor to the new commercialism and the new management style associated with it; this was because he had been committed to nationalisation on political grounds from its inception in 1949.

I have stressed the significance of the longer term shift towards commercialism from the late 1960s, but of more recent importance was the much more rapid shift towards assessment of market performance. This began to set in during the early 1980s following the election of a new right wing government in 1979. It was the medium-term aim of the new government to privatise a number of selected state owned

utilities, and with this in view a study of the gas industry was commissioned. The organisational changes which began to take effect in the 1970s were inevitably embedded in a shifting political climate and in state policy, especially from 1976. Following the economic crisis, intensified commercialism was, as I have suggested, not a simple reaction to structural and political shifts, but was part of a longer term strategy.

A further complication in the discussion of the importance of structural and political change is the remarkable way in which British Gas P.L.C. - the newly privatised company - has avoided some of the more severe consequences of Thatcherism. This was achieved by a combination of the exercise of corporate power and the political agility of the chairman, Sir Denis Rooke. He appeared to 'manage' the changes in such a way that the corporation emerged from privatisation almost unscathed and intact; but this time as a private monopoly. Rooke was keen to preserve the corporation in its existing form, but his relationship with the Department of Energy and its Minister, Nigel Lawson, had been notoriously 'stormy' (see Huxley 1981). Despite an attempt to hive off the gas showrooms by the government, the industry was privatised in its entirety on August 24th 1986. The ability of Rooke to succeed in his aims may have had something to do with his long term stewardship of the corporation towards greater commercialism, criteria of market performance and increased labour intensity. These were all declared to be 'worthy objectives' by the new Prime Minister following the 1979 election.

The coincidence of policy shifts at the political level and those within the corporation, and also with management succession locally, make teasing out the independent impact of each extremely problematic. It is possible for example, that the retiring supervisor at Eastborough would have subverted or subtly altered the application of the new corporate policies at the local level. What is certainly true is that the new younger supervision and management, eager for further promotion, actually facilitated the new policy shift. This was especially so in the case of the new Metering Controller Mark Weatherall, who was prepared to risk a widespread strike in the summer of 1984 in order to extend, by ultimatum, the new one-call productivity scheme into fifth quarter estimates of gas consumption at consumers premises.

Despite the undoubted ability of local supervision to facilitate, or alternatively frustrate, the imposition of corporate policy, the powerful controls and sanctions that senior management exercise over middle management and supervision, and their scope to create succession, ensures that ultimately, corporate policy will prevail (cf. Littler 1982, p. 143). The ascendancy of corporate policy is more likely to be assured under certain political and economic conditions which narrow the possible range of strategic options within which corporate activity is constrained (cf. Hyman 1987, *passim*). Under such conditions some leeway in which supervision can operate is likely to continue, but its scope is limited and the position of any remaining 'subversives' becomes progressively more precarious.

Summary

In the first part of this discussion I have attempted to draw out particular themes that have emerged from the ethnography of a specific group of workers: the meter readers and collectors of Eastborough. These themes: regulation of time, the effort bargain, orientations to work and instrumentalism, gender, recruitment and management policy, and changes in the degree of individualism and collectivity at different junctures were all central to the labour process at this workplace.

In the second part of the debate I have raised those issues which are the other essential part of the total labour process, namely: the developing structural conditions at the macroscopic level which give some meaning to, and explanation of, the often seemingly chaotic daily workplace experiences highlighted in the ethnography. It is within the broader context of public service commercialism, during this period in its history, that gives coherence to the specific shifts I have described in the daily experience of these workers.

Some thoughts on future research

In looking at one example of public sector workers this study has emphasised the need to provide further insights into non-manufacturing areas of work, not only in the state sector, but also in the expanding private service occupations, especially those employing increasing numbers of women. In particular it has underlined the need for such studies to examine and explore effort bargaining at the workplace in all its varied manifestations.

Secondly, my discussion of the structural context of these workers experience underlines the need to theorise the role of the state in the corporate policy link, especially in the context of the nationalisation/privatisation debate, and this clearly needs further attention than I have been able to give it here.

Finally, gender divisions and their significance for occupations are especially clear in such areas as these and need to be analysed further. Specific examples that I have identified in this ethnography, but which deserve further investigation include, the gendered character of preferences in terms of time budgeting, husbands' influences on wives' collective union activity and the significance of family pressures on such activity. However, the account of certain shifts in occupational experience, within the context of public service commercialisation and privatisation which I have provided, should serve as a point of reference for further inquiry.

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