Recent economic interpretations of British industrialisation have emphasised its gradualism. In this stimulating article Dr Rule analyses the extent of economic, social and cultural continuities and discontinuities between the pre-industrial and industrial male, adult labour force. Were protesting artisans trying to 'roll back the wheel of history' as Marx and Engels suggested? And, in the creation of a proletariat, how distinctive was this British experience?

Labour
in a changing economy, 1700-1850

The Industrial Revolution is often associated with a 'transformation of work'. So far a, the British economy is concerned, many of the suggested changes were already well developed by the mid-eighteenth century. Several others had hardly proceeded very far even by the mid-nineteenth century. By 1700 the British economy was already distinctive in the extent to which the proportion of the employed population primarily dependent on agriculture had declined. By the time of the first census in 1801, the first official measurement, little more than one-third of the occupied population remained in agriculture. By 1851 it was little more than one-fifth. Before 1801 workers frequently combined agriculture with manufacturing or mining: 'weaver-husbandman' or 'timber-husbandman', for example, are commonly found given as joint-occupations in parish registers. [6] Arguably, by 1700 agriculture was providing only around half of total employment. The Industrial Revolution in this important respect did not mark a rapid and radical shift in the structure of employment; rather it accentuated one which had already come to distinguish Britain from her European rivals.

An earlier interpretation
In a popular textbook, Industry and Empire, E. J. Hobsbawm offered four reasons why 'labour in an industrial society is in many ways quite different from pre-industrial work:[2] In the first place, in an industrial society it became 'overwhelmingly' the labour of proletarians: that is of those who had no real source of support other than a wage. This dependency changed the employment relationship. The old language of 'master' and 'servant' described a complex of mutual obligations. The new vocabulary, using terms like 'hand or operative' was de-humanizing. It offered only an economic relationship - the 'cash-nexus' - as the link between employer and worker. Secondly, industrial labour imposed a new rhythm of work. Work-time was no longer determined by the task in hand, by the length of daylight, or by the varying dictates of the seasons. It became routinized, regular and monotonous. In the factory the pace was not 'natural', but was dictated by the ceaseless motion of the powered machine.

Thirdly, Hobsbawn argued that labour increasingly took place in the large town or city. This environment, it can be argued, contributed to a deterioration in the standard of living. Whatever the compensation in the form of higher money wages and more regular employment, the jerry-built, overcrowded, slum-ridden towns of the early nineteenth century brought bad air, pollution and the rapid spread of disease. The contrast between the town and the country narrowed over the eighteenth century, but widened again in the nineteenth, with the new industrial towns being especially unhealthy. It was not just health which suffered. The social relations of the countryside were destroyed. Contemporaries saw the industrial town as the negation of 'community'.[8] The new urban working class was a 'class apart' - literally so, as in the industrial towns the social classes lived segregated existences. A class apart was a class to be feared. The question of how it could be 'controlled', once the old village 'order' of squire and parson no longer applied, exercised the minds of the middle and upper classes. They proffered a range of remedies from religion through schooling to the new urban police forces of the 1830s.

Finally, Hobsbawn argued, ‘pre-industrial experience, tradition, wisdom and morality, provided no adequate guide for the kind of behaviour which a capitalist economy required’. The new society, based on a market economy, dispensed with what, following E. P. Thompson, historians have come to call the moral economy. [11] The food riot had been the commonest form of protest in the eighteenth century moral economy. Then the poor had taken matters into their own hands by seizing and selling bread at ‘just’ price. There were other popular notions of what was ‘just’. It was believed that a man had a right to employment, and that any one who had served as apprenticeship had a special right to, even a ‘property’ in, his occupation. It was not easy for labourers to accept the new view, that employment and wages should simply be determined by the ‘laws of the market’, or that, in the interests of costs and productivity, men should be replaced by machines. Such customary expectations, not unreasoning instinct, lay behind protest movements like machine-breaking Luddism. If work was unavailable or a person unable to work, then under the Old Poor Law there had been the ‘right’ to sufficient relief from the parish-based pour law. By contrast, the harsh intention of the New Poor Law of 1834 was to restrict the right to be relieved in the dignity of one’s own home, and offer instead, the hated workhouse.

Hobsbawn’s framework is generally useful, but each of the four aspects of labour transformation needs closer examination if we are to understand the changing condition of labour. This is the more necessary since recent scholarship has tended to stress continuities and play down both the pace of industrialisation and the completeness of its impact. In this article the concern is only with adult male workers; women’s work is treated elsewhere in this issue.

The creation of a proletariat
The prime process in the making of a British proletariat was not the peasantry entering the factory, as it was often to be elsewhere. In Britain the peasantry had largely disappeared and the factory was only the last scene in a lengthy drama. In his pioneering exposition of the market economy, The Wealth of Nations, published in 1776 and thus pre-dating the ‘factory system’, Adam Smith already accepted that...
wage-labour was widespread and that the separation of capital and labour was normal. The wages of labour are everywhere understood to be, what they usually are, when the labourer is one person and the owner of the stock which employs him another.

The wage-dependent fraction of the population probably exceeded two-thirds by 1800. Why had Britain become so unusual in this respect? The spread of the factory system had played only a very slight role by then and, even during the early nineteenth century, the growth in mining and in iron making were more important developments in terms of male employment. It could even be argued that in historical sequence the growth of a wage-dependent, British proletariat was a cause, rather than a consequence, of early industrialisation - It supplied not only a more mobile labour force, but a growing one, since demographic historians have demonstrated that the proletariat married younger than did settled peasant populations. [4] It was also a labour force in which the division of labour and the distribution of critical skills were well developed. The lower orders in Britain also offered a wider and deeper market in demanding the kind of simple goods that were mass-produced in the first industrial revolution.

A Yorkshire Collier, 1814

Part of the explanation for Britain's unusual experience lay in the spread of manufacturing employment into the countryside. Merchant capitalists 'put out' materials to cottage-based workers, for example, taking spun wool to weavers, and then collecting the woven cloth, which they paid for by the piece. It was a system which, although most widespread in textiles, was also to be found in nail-making, cutlery manufacture and other branches of metal manufacture. This form of manufacturing, labelled by historians proto-industrialisation [see ReFresh 10] was on the increase in many parts of western Europe. But in Britain it was especially important and seems to have been marked by an earlier and more complete separation from agriculture. Weavers, framework-knitters, cutters and nail-makers constituted, an industrial labour force dwelling in the countryside, rather than a manufacturing peasantry dividing its time between fanning and manufacturing. Although the work was carried out in the cottage and based on the labour of the family, the typical rural manufacturing worker in Britain neither owned the material on which he worked, nor sold the product. In short, he was wage-dependent.

To their number needs to be added an urban proletariat which was increasing in size. Over most of Europe the eighteenth century was one of urban stagnation. England was an exception. Her towns grew in fulfilment of a variety of functions, but important among them was an increase in urban manufacturing. This was to be found in Birmingham and the towns of the metal-working Black Country; in Sheffield, the great centre of cutlery manufacture; in the textile towns, older centres of wool production, like Leeds, Halifax and Norwich as well as later in the new cotton towns like surging Manchester and its neighbours in South Lancashire and in the royal dock-yard towns like Portsmouth, Chatham and Plymouth which concentrated labour to an unusual degree. London was the largest centre of urban manufacturing with many thousands of tailors, shoemakers, silk-weavers, watchmakers, print workers and hatters, as well as building workers of all kinds. A large proportion of these urban manufacturers were skilled artisans, the possessors of a 'trade', who thought themselves above 'common' labour. Only a minority of them, however, by the mid-eighteenth century were independent in the sense of being self-employed, purchasing their own raw materials, and dealing directly with customers. Most had come to comprise a class of permanent journeymen (the usual term for waged workers in the trades). They may have sold skilled labour and at times of advantage in the labour market sold it at a high price, but critically they still depended on selling their labour. 'it is a fact that it is the journeymen, and not the masters, who are the artificers as well as labourers in that trade', remarked a tailor. He went on to describe his fellows as 'a multitude of poor laborious men', who were 'previously oppressed' by a 'few purse-proud idle pretenders, either to ingenuity or labour'. [6]

Although all these tendencies were found to some degree in other countries, the unique occupational structure of eighteenth-century Britain was the outcome of their greater development there. There was, however, yet another distinguishing feature which lay, not in manufacturing or mining, but in agriculture. The parliamentary enclosures of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries provided only the last act in the creation of a landless labour force, which contrasted sharply with the predominantly peasant-based agriculture of the Continent. In some regions peasant small-holding persisted, notably in Scotland and in Wales, as well as in parts of Northern England. Over the midland and southern counties and East Anglia, farms were mostly worked by farm labourers hired by tenant farmers. Forms of hire varied. Living-in service and payment in kind gave way only slowly to day hire. However, the tendency was clear and it was characteristic only of Britain.

A Sheffield Cutler, 1814

The character of industrial labour

The industrial revolution came at the end of extended and varied processes which formed the waged labour force. It was nevertheless responsible for changing the form of a substantial part of the working class into the classic 'urban industrial proletariat' on which Marx and Engels conferred the revolutionary role of overthrowing capitalism. Two phases of formation were distinguished by Marx. The expropriation of the product whereby the workman ceases to own the materials on which he works, or the finished product of his labour, has already been described. The second, the expropriation of nature, leads to Hobsbawm's second characteristic of industrial labour in that it describes the process of alienation through which the worker loses any real degree of control over his labour process, that is the way in which he works, when he comes under supervision and has to adapt to the dictated rhythms of modern machine production.

In a seminal article, Edward Thompson wrote of the old pattern of 'alternate bouts of intense labour and of idleness, wherever men
were in control of their own working lives.\textsuperscript{[10]} That a man could control his own pace when working in his cottage is clear. But the pattern was also characteristic of small workshops, where men paid by the piece came and went with an irregularity which did not pose too many problems for employers with little investment in fixed capital. The survival into the mid-nineteenth century of such work rhythms, epitomised by taking ‘Saint’ Monday as an unofficial weekly holiday, in the small metal workshops of Birmingham has been demonstrated.\textsuperscript{[5]} While its persistence at Sheffield is captured in a song of the 1790s, The Jovial Cutlers, which describes a cutler relaxing before the fire in his small forge on a Monday. His wife enters and berates his laziness. He compares her rapid tongue to his ‘boring stick at a Friday’s pace’. Here is the weekly rhythm of the outworker, which was as familiar to weavers as to metalworkers. Monday was a holiday, Tuesday a slow day, then a quickening pace until a hectic Friday made up the output needed to secure adequate wages.

The factory system with its costly running machinery could not tolerate such attitudes. Disciplining workers was a major concern of the early factory managers, who developed clocking-in systems and imposed large fines for casual attendance and for lateness. For the most part they were successful and after all the second generation of factory workers were accustomed to the required time-discipline. By the 1830s, factory workers in agitating for a shorter working day were revealing an acceptance of its rigid division into work and non-work time and were seeking to influence its length, rather than instinctively reacting to its imposition. It has been suggested that to some extent the regular working day and week were already present in the eighteenth-century town before the arrival of the factory system, but the evidence for this is inconclusive and based only on a study of Bristol. It is obvious from the very nature of factory production that its regularity which did not pose too much investment in fixed capital.

...poisoning, as in the case of lead-using potters, plumbers and paint-makers and also in that of the hat-ters, driven mad through their use of mercury. The cotton mill brought its own peculiar illness, by-synososis, a lung condition caused by the fine particles of lint with which the air in the low-ceilinged ill-ventilated factories was full. But, in general, the greater mortality and morbidity (sickness) of urban workers was as much due to the atrocious living conditions in the industrial towns, as to the poor quality of the diet. The comparative mortality figures were well known, following Edwin Chadwick's \textit{Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain} in 1842. They may be flawed by the standards of modern statisticians, but the story they tell is clear enough. A labourer born in Manchester had a life expectancy of 17 and one born in Leeds of 19. A labourer born in Truro, on the other hand, had one of 28 and one born in rural Rutland of 38. It was the environment of the nineteenth century town, as much as the nature of the work carried out in it, which was responsible. This is suggested by significant differences which existed for gentry and tradesmen, and also by the fact that life-expectancy in a non-factory town like Liverpool, was - at 15 for labourers - worse even than Manchester.

\textbf{Working-class culture}

Presenting the new industrial towns as bleak in more senses than those covered by the material conditions of life, came easily to contemporary critics of industrialisation like Frederick Engels. But it is not entirely clear just what was being argued. Is it that large urban industrial centres by their nature have no ‘community’ in the old village sense of face-to-face relationships and mutual assistance and support? Or is it that, historically, the early industrial revolution represents a phase when new urban populations had not as yet had time to build community? In reality, work-comradeship, neighbourhood, kinship and association in chapel or trade union, created a distinctive urban-working class culture in nineteenth century Britain.

Hobsbawm suggested, as his fourth difference, that a pre-industrial outlook gave ‘no adequate guide for the kind of behaviour which a capitalist economy required’. He pointed to the conflict between the ‘moral economy of the past’ and the ‘economic rationality of the capitalist present’. The mentalité of customary rights and traditional expectations was faced with an erosion of the paternalist regulation of the economy associated with the Tudor and Stuart era and with changing attitudes on the part of employers. It has been shown that there was much that could still be described as ‘paternalist’ in the relations between mill-owners and their workers, but there was a tendency to depart from older notions.\textsuperscript{[41]}

The London saddlers in the late eighteenth century were still celebrating in verse the \textit{Memory of Queen Elizabeth}, ‘still dear to journeymen’, for ‘her glorious rules’ had checked ‘tyrannic masters’ and protected ‘workers’ rights’. E. P. Thompson has written of the ‘crisis point ... in the imposition of the political economy of \textit{laissez faire} upon and against the will and conscience of the working people'\textsuperscript{[9]} which came in the early nineteenth century. He had the Luddite attacks on knitting frames in the East Midlands hosiery.
districts in 1811-13 specifically in mind. These took place alongside an unsuccessful petitioning campaign to persuade parliament to 'regulate' the trade and prevent employers cutting wages rates and overstocking the workforce by taking on unlimited numbers of apprentices. The same decade, however, saw the repeal in 1813 of the clauses of the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers which had allowed magistrates to fix wages and, in 1814 of the clauses restricting trades to those who had served apprenticeships to them. Around this time a number of trades recorded their disillusionment as petitions to parliament failed. The cotton workers did so in 1811 when they failed in their attempt to secure a legal minimum wage:

'We are only mechanics, of course ill acquainted with the reason why some measures are frequently opposed at one time, by the same arguments by which at other times they are vindicated and supported... [we] are utterly at a loss to conceive on what fair ground legislative interference can be improper under circumstances so necessitous.'

Government by then had become largely convinced that 'interference' in the economy by the state was to be avoided. In 1806 a House of Commons Committee declined to recommend regulation of the employment conditions of the journeymen calico-printers, even though it accepted that many employers were forcing down wages by taking on large numbers of so-called apprentices. Instead, they preferred to stress 'the salutary effects of leaving the masters and journeymen to settle their affairs between themselves'.

Combinations and unions

Left to themselves, common labourers had little choice but to take whatever the labour market offered in terms of employment and wages. In the early nineteenth century a rising birth rate and the growing influx of the unskilled Irish ensured that employment was usually more irregular, and wages lower than might otherwise have been the case. Generally, skilled workers had some ability to protect their standards. But some, like the handloom-weavers, found that their skills were first made less valuable through too rapid an increase in their numbers, and then were made redundant through the introduction of powered machinery. From the late seventeenth century and with a noticeable spread and increase in the early eighteenth, man-) skilled workers had been uniting in organisations then known as 'combinations'. These used collective action for the protection of their interests, or even, if the time was right, to improve their wages. 'Strike' in its modern sense is at least as old as the 1760s, when we know, from evidence at an Old Bailey trial, that it was used by London's tailors.

Trade unionism clearly pre-dated the industrial revolution in Britain: its craft origins characterise it to this day. Adam Smith in 1776 recognised that workers commonly combined against their employers both for 'defensive' and for 'offensive' purposes. It has been suggested that urban artisans regularly engaged in collective bargaining to secure wage increases from their employers. [2] However, early trade unions were just as often defensive in their aims and sought to protect existing standards of living and conditions of work and hire. That is why their rhetoric often looked back to 'better days'. Innovation was the enemy, whether it involved the use of new machinery, or simply a new Organisation of labour. Research now suggests that the early trade unions were sometimes effective in securing wage advances and in imposing a degree of constraint on employers. [8] But they were hardly ever so unless the economy was prospering, labour was in demand and employers were anxious not to lose output. In trade depressions their actions were usually defensive and likely to fail given all the difficulties they faced. These included that of funding lengthy strikes, and a precarious legal situation even before the Combination Acts generally proscribed trade unions in 1799 and 1800. These acts remained in force until 1824. Although their level of enforcement and overall effect is disputed, they undoubtedly hindered trade union formation and operation in the industrial Midlands and north, even if they had slight impact on the well-established combinations of London artisans. After 1824 trade unionism developed in a more favourable, although far from comfortable legal situation. It was able to take hold among new groups of skilled workers like engineers and cotton mule-spinners, whose positions became more secure, while those of older displaced skills like handloom weavers declined. In the Communist Manifesto of 1848 Marx and Engels placed protesting artisans among those who tried 'to roll back the wheel of history'. It was a valid point. To a marked extent the purpose of early trade unions, shared by political movements like Owenism and even Chartism, was resistance to the dynamic force they increasingly came to identify as 'capitalism'. As they articulated their opposition, they began to present themselves as 'labour' and developed a consciousness which, although it was restricted in its own time, extended further as the nineteenth century progressed and helped form the ideologies and perspectives of wider working-class movements.

Our knowledge is deficient on several major aspects of this subject. We know more about the articulate artisans and their organisations than we do about the unskilled workers, who significantly outnumbered them. We know surprisingly little about the recruitment and related migration patterns which brought the first generation of factory workers into the new industrial towns. Far more working-class men were members of friendly societies than were members of trade unions, but we know far more about the latter than the former. Sometimes what historians know is a reflection of what, in terms of the records which survive, it is possible to know, but one feels that it is as much the outcome of the questions they think to ask. There are many questions about the labour supply; about the stratification of labour in terms of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled and about its gender deployment, which are of concern to social scientists and which historians have hardly begun to address.

References