

Builders' Wages and Purchasing Power in Eighteenth-century Brittany.

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In his 'Voyages en France 1787-1789', Arthur Young estimated that the average wage for a day's work was 19 *sous*, an amount that had grown by 20 per cent in as many years.¹ Historians of eighteenth-century France have supported this figure and have argued that the evolution of the daily wage rate failed to keep pace with the price of foodstuffs in the same period. The work of Ernest Labrousse in the 1930s showed that the price of commodities rose by 45 per cent between the 1730s and the 1780s, while wages rose by 22 per cent in the same period; Michel Morineau further argued that wage increases of 22 per cent in the last two decades of the *ancien régime* fell in real terms by 25 per cent.² A decline in living standards was therefore one of the underlying causes of social tension in urban France in 1789.

Sonenscher's recent work has examined the nature of the artisanal wage and has challenged the theory of declining income among eighteenth-century French artisans. He argues that work in workshop trades was not for cash wages alone: a variety of non-monetary customs and rights were equally important in the remuneration of

¹ A. Young, *Voyages en France 1787-1789*, (Paris, 1931), p. 814.

² E. Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIII^{ème} siècle*, 2 vols., (Paris, 1933). Figures by M. Morineau, O. Hufton and others supporting Labrousse's thesis are presented and discussed in M. Sonenscher, 'Work and wages in Paris in the eighteenth century', in M. Berg, P. Hudson and M. Sonenscher (eds.), *Manufacture in Town and Country before the Factory*, (Cambridge 1983), p. 150.

labour. Further, payment in kind might therefore account for the unresponsiveness of wage rates to price increases in the late eighteenth century, because it shielded its recipients from inflation.³

Reconstruction of the nature and movement of wages of building craftsmen in Brittany during the eighteenth century allows for an examination of both arguments. The aim of this article is to examine the composition and transformation of payment for building work in eastern Brittany during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, through a study of the payment of masons, roofers and carpenters. The type and value of wages paid to construction workers changed in early modern Brittany as the organization of the industry altered. The type of wage paid, the movement of nominal rates and of purchasing power make interesting comparison with the rest of France, for while they mirror national trends, their timing and extent show regional variation.

1. In their classic study of wages in southern England, Phelps Brown and Hopkins characterized the daily, cash rate as the typical payment for skilled construction work; the series of Labrousse likewise took the daily, cash wage as the standard form of remuneration for paid work among artisans.⁴ Sonenscher has questioned the ubiquity of cash payments for craft work.⁵ He argues that the wage as a monetary transaction which allowed for the purchase of the 'necessities and conveniences' of life originated in the nineteenth century and that money wages were only one among many different means of remunerating labour in early modern France.⁶

The building accounts of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Brittany show that the daily, cash wage was important in construction throughout the early modern period. At the beginning

³ Sonenscher, 'Work and wages in Paris', pp. 147-9.

⁴ Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix*; E.H. Phelps Brown & S. Hopkins, 'Seven centuries of building wages', *Economica*, New Series xxii (1955), pp. 195-206; E.H. Phelps Brown & S. Hopkins, 'Seven centuries of the price of consumables compared with builders' wage rates', *Economica*, New Series xxiii (1956), pp. 296-314.

⁵ M. Sonenscher, *Work and Wages. Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades*, (Cambridge 1989), p. 188.

⁶ Sonenscher, 'Work and wages in Paris', pp. 150-1.

of the seventeenth century, it was the most commonly recorded form of payment of skilled building artisans by ecclesiastical and municipal clients of the industry. In September 1622, the Cordeliers of Rennes employed 8 masons, 6 stonecutters and 7 labourers at daily rates of 10, 11 and 7 *sous* respectively.⁷ The daily wage remained important throughout the eighteenth century. The refurbishment of Vannes cathedral after 1768 employed large numbers of craftsmen paid directly by the clerks of the fabric.⁸ Daily rates were paid for small jobs requiring few materials such as repairs to a chimney of the abbey of Saint-Georges, Rennes, employing one mason and an assistant for one-third of a day each in 1759.⁹ Finally, the master artisan who took on contract work paid his labour force at a daily rate at least some of the time, such as Jan Sevestre who employed a journeyman to repair the bell tower of Escoublac church in 1739.¹⁰

The daily rate was not the only time-based unit of payment for building work: monthly and annual wages were paid throughout the period. Monthly rates were paid to overseers and architects responsible for site management or consultation work. Germain Gaultier, architect responsible for the building of the new *Parlement* of Rennes in the 1620s, was paid 50 *livres* per month plus expenses.¹¹ Annual wages came in the guise of maintenance contracts, available to locally-resident craftsmen with established enterprises or reputations, involved in local community and credit networks. The roofing trades were particular recipients of such work, especially from ecclesiastical and seigneurial clients with large or numerous properties in a single location and thus extensive roofs to maintain. The annual maintenance of the roofs of the château of Vitré was worth 397 *livres* for six years after 1784, for

⁷ Archives Départementales d'Ille et Vilaine (hereafter A.D.I.V.), 17 H 27 Cordeliers de Rennes: Quittances 1611-1790.

⁸ Archives Départementales du Morbihan (hereafter A.D.M.) 73 G 2 Cathédrale de Vannes: Réparations 1760-80.

⁹ A.D.I.V. 23 H 167 Abbaye de Saint Georges de Rennes: Bâtiments 1628-1750.

¹⁰ Archives Départementales de Loire Atlantique (hereafter A.D.L.A.) G 389 Parish of Escoublac, 1442-1789.

¹¹ A.D.I.V. 1 Be 11 Palais de Parlement c.1610-1750.

which Ollivier had to provide all labour and materials for repairs and to renew 20 *toises*¹² of slate roof every year.¹³

The increased importance of contract work in the construction industries throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought important changes to the payment of craftsmen. The nature of the basic form of payment remained the cash 'wage' but it altered in form, to payment for a specific task, for both large-scale projects and for the work of some individual artisans. Building accounts for larger projects show a decline in the daily hiring and payment of individual craftsmen. They were replaced with building contractors responsible for the completion of a project as outlined in plans and estimates. The contractor provided a labour force, materials, tools, management skills and any legal costs incurred, for a monetary payment fixed in advance of the work. Cash payments continued but changed in form during the early modern period.

The construction of the new *Parlement* of Rennes began in the 1620s with the employment and payment of large numbers of individually-hired artisans under Germain Gaultier; after his death, large-scale contractors were sought to tender for the work, as was current on other royal sites in France. In 1636, the masonry was contracted to Mathurin, Hardy and Duris for 100,000 *livres*.¹⁴ General contractors were increasingly employed on public works sites from the mid-seventeenth century, their use coincident with fiscal difficulties in towns and the introduction of royal intendants into the province after 1689, symptoms of royal demands for increased taxation from the province. Greater cost effectiveness was called for in public works, which were a major expense. Financial advantages for clients of the building industries were great. The general contractor tendered competitively for projects; he was legally accountable for his work and obliged to keep to his tendered price. Contractors often guaranteed their work for a year and corrected faults at their own

¹² Six square feet.

¹³ A.D.I.V. 1 F 1534 Baronnies de Vitré: Entretien du Château 1784.

¹⁴ F. Leroy, *Le palais du parlement à Rennes*, (Rennes n.d.), p. 18.

expense. The use of contractors allowed municipal governments to cut down their works departments, eliminated the costs of hiring and administering individual artisans and workshops, and contractors provided the public institutions with credit as building work was paid in arrears, typically in three installments: for repairs to the church tower at Escoublac in 1740 at 3,950 *livres* the contractor was paid at the beginning, middle and end of the work.¹⁵ By the eighteenth century, the general contractor was common: the minutes of the municipal government of Nantes for 18 December 1784 record that the officers had decided 'de faire exécuter par adjudication tous les travaux de la ville à la seule réserve des menues réparations...ainsi que cela se pratique pour tous les travaux de la province et des autres communautés'.¹⁶

Ecclesiastical and private clients quickly adopted the use of contractors, for whole projects and for individual craft work within a larger design. Jean Harcher of Rennes contracted the carpentry work for an extension to his house to Michel Letailier, to be completed by Easter 1686. In January, the roofing was contracted to Jullien Cocault, to be laid within a month of the completion of the carpentry. Finally, on 31 March, Jan Lounel was hired to finish off and decorate the fittings of the new extension.¹⁷

Contractors themselves preferred to treat with small numbers of individual craftsmen by sub-contracting specific craft work and/or materials to named individuals or small associations of artisans, for a fixed sum. Increased use of larger-scale monetary transactions was met by the dissemination of building costs through the local artisan community, through sub-contracts. Gilles Pastel, contractor of work on a town house in Rennes in 1701 for 208 *livres*, subcontracted the finishing of walls and floors to Jacques Couille for 73 *livres*.¹⁸ Sub-contractors themselves further contracted supplies of materials and labour tasks for a fixed price, daily or piece rates. Sub-contracting

¹⁵ A.D.L.A. G 389 Parish of Escoublac 1442-1789.

¹⁶ A.D.L.A. C 376 Ville de Nantes: Salle de Spectacle 1786-88.

¹⁷ A.D.I.V. 4 E 106 & 107 Dépôt Bécherel, Rennes, 1684-5, 1686-7.

¹⁸ A.D.I.V. 4 E 112 Dépôt Berthelot, Rennes, 1701-2.

provided credit; sub-contractors carried at least some of the costs of materials and labour until final settlement of accounts in cash. Contractors and sub-contractors were thus bound together, which contributes to an explanation of the retreat from the daily rate in this period. The changing form of cash for wages was contingent upon increased use of credit and of community networks to supply materials and labour before final payment for a project was made.

A third form of cash wage paid throughout the early modern period was the piece rate. The piece rate was compatible with both daily hiring and contracted-out work. Piece rates were most common in the masonry trades where the setting of stone could be paid by the *toise carré* of six square feet. Artisans could supply labour, materials or both; cost depended on thickness, type of stone and the storey constructed. The *curé* of Saint-Clément, Nantes, paid five *livres* per *toise* for materials and labour in 1689 and one *livre six sous* per *toise* for labour alone in 1690.¹⁹ Stone-cutting was commonly paid by the piece. In 1635, Guillaume Thébault and René Raffay contracted to prepare 60 stone steps for *Sieur* Jan Barnis de Tréguel of Rennes at six *sous* per stone, for example.²⁰ Less frequently, the laying of slate roofs could also be paid by the *toise carré* and carpentry piece rates were paid for the preparation of wood, particularly by seigneurial clients who provided timber from their own estates: the Cordeliers of Rennes paid six *sous* per foot for the shaping of small and large timbers and 60 *livres* for each beam fashioned and installed in 1747.²¹ The variability of materials and products makes calculation of profit or remuneration of the artisan difficult: there was no standard unit of work.²²

Finally, builders were paid cash for a variety of short-term, irregular activities. While these were useful additions to income, they were neither standard nor regular and do not allow for comparability between artisans or over time. Craftsmen who were resident and

¹⁹ A.D.L.A. G 257 Parish of Saint-Clément, Nantes 1666-1789.

²⁰ A.D.I.V. 4 E 1100 Dépôt Pinot, Rennes, 1635.

²¹ A.D.I.V. 17 H 27 Cordeliers de Rennes: Quittances 1611-1790.

²² Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*, p. 189.

established in their communities might receive occasional employment as expert witnesses in estimations of building costs. Estimates of repairs to the properties of the heirs of Louis Villeboux in Mordelles parish in 1785 paid three *livres* each to a mason, a carpenter, a slate roofer and a thatcher for a single day's work, when the commonest daily rate in nearby Rennes was about 25 *sous*.²³ Religious institutions would give tips on festivals; in April 1606 the canons of Vannes cathedral gave 25 *sous* to the masons 'pour le vin de la feste de l'assention'.²⁴ Difficult tasks might also bring special rewards. In Nantes in August 1788, two *sous* were given to masons 'à boire pour descendre dans le puits'.²⁵

The documentary evidence from eastern Brittany shows that amongst the construction trades, there was a conception that the work of a building craftsmen 'naturally' equated with a cash wage. Masons, carpenters and roofers received cash wages from at least the fourteenth century in Brittany and continued to do so throughout the early modern period. Attempts to fix wages by the Lieutenant of Police of Vannes throughout the eighteenth century set an official cash rate, for both daily and piece rate work.²⁶ It is arguable that the nature of the wage underwent some 'capitalization' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: as contractors came to dominate the building industries in Brittany, the use of lump-sum payments of artisans increased amongst all sectors of the industry, particularly for whole project work but also for individual craft work, and there was some retreat from the daily rate. But there was no linear progression from one type of payment to another. By the second half of the eighteenth century lump sum payments predominated for contractors but below this level daily wages remained widespread although not ubiquitous; artisans undertook a wide variety of tasks and were remunerated in different ways and even in this industry, where the cash wage

²³ A.D.I.V. 4 E 1450 Notaire inconnu, Rennes, 1785.

²⁴ A.D.M. 74 G 23 Cathédrale de Vannes: Comptes de la Fabrique 1605-8.

²⁵ A.D.L.A. C 301 Ville de Nantes: Comptabilité 1780-89.

²⁶ A.D.M. B 434 Régistres de Police, Vannes 1751-2; B 436 Régistres de Police, Vannes 1758-61; 2 J 90 Papiers Gallo 1787.

predominates in the documentary record, non-monetary payments co-existed with wages throughout the early modern period.

The importance of non-monetary payments has recently been discussed by Sonenscher who argues that in urban, workshop trades, the relationship between work and wages was mediated by a variety of non-monetary customs and rights and that money was only one of the terms for which men worked.²⁷ For Gaston Martin, the importance of payments in kind is shown in trade disputes, where extra economic benefits, food, drink and accommodation, may have determined a journeyman's choice of employer as much as the wages he was to be paid.²⁸ Non-monetary payments acquired greater significance in times of price inflation, for they shielded artisans from some economic difficulties.

Journeymen employed in workshop-based crafts subsidiary to construction work, joinery, glazing and plumbing, and which formed craft guilds in Nantes and Rennes, received important non-monetary wages. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries these were typically food and board but by the mid-eighteenth century such payments were in retreat. The master joiners of Nantes complained of the burden of feeding their journeymen in the mid-century; by the 1780s the guild had forbidden the practice and paid journeymen double the cash wage instead. In the 1780s an attempt was made to stop the four annual feast meals given to journeymen joiners - *pâtés de veilles* - on pretence that they were troublesome to masters and to the general public.²⁹ The underlying motive of guild masters was the removal of control of hiring from journeymen but price inflation after 1770 also played a part. As the master nailmakers declared in 1786, 'la révolution que depuis cette époque ont éprouvée les denrées qui sont aujourd'hui sans contredit à un plus haut prix fait disparaître la

²⁷ Sonenscher, 'Work and wages in Paris', pp. 147-8.

²⁸ Cited in C.M. Truant, 'Independent and insolent: journeymen and their 'rites' in the Old Regime workplace', in S.L. Kaplan and C.J. Koeppe, *Work in France: representation, Meaning, Organization and Practice*, (Ithaca, 1986), p. 169.

²⁹ Archives Municipales de Nantes (hereafter A.M.N.). HH 147 Corporations de Nantes: Menuisiers. Règlements 1737-90.

proportion de ce tarif...' and masters sought to transfer some of the increased costs of living to journeymen, as cash wages increased at a slower overall rate than the cash price of food in this period.³⁰ Cash rather than kind as a mediator between artisan and employer was slowly gaining ground in the workshop trades.

The urban site-based building crafts were governed by different practices to those of the workshop trades. The systematic receipt of non-monetary payments was rare, although occasional 'gifts' of food and drink for builders employed on domestic sites may have occurred yet not recorded.³¹ In the seventeenth century, the urban carpenter, mason or roofer was rarely given accommodation either by either clients or master artisans: they were too numerous and too transitory a workforce. Journeymen employed in masters' workshops for a fixed period might receive some of their wages in kind. Guillaume Chevallier, carpenter, who worked for Jan Gerard of Rennes for eight months from September 1691, was to be paid a hat, jacket, breeches, stockings and shoes, worth 24 *livres*, and given his food and board. No cash wage was mentioned.³² This is, however, a rare example and there were few such employees. Most craft production took place on a construction site, their work was variable and short-term, there was no fixed place of work and no single, standard product. Clients, contractors and sub-contractors preferred to pay cash, as labour was required, on an informal and temporary basis.

The countryside did not always follow urban practices. Provision of meals remained an important part of the 'wage' of the rural builder throughout the period. In 1660, the *générale* of the parish of Clion contracted to pay André Martin, roofer, 28 *livres* for repairs to the church roof and bell tower, 'et pour son salaire et recompense il aura pouvoir et permission d'aller aussy partout ladite paroisse et bourg

³⁰ A.M.N. HH 116 Corporations de Nantes: Cloutiers. Règlements 1749-89; Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*, p. 194.

³¹ It is almost impossible to quantify income in kind for individual workers, let alone construct a series of the value of such wages over time, for the documentary evidence for this is fragmentary. As far as one can generalise, remuneration in kind was arranged on an individual basis, between client and contractor or master, and the latter and their individual workers.

recevoir les vollontez et liberalitez desdites habitants'.³³ Rural artisans received lower cash wages than their urban counterparts because they were fed. The Intendance inquiry into the rural trades of Brittany in 1767 recorded, for example, that in Bonnemain, the two resident masons were paid '6 sous par jour et la nourriture' and in Guenroc the building artisans 'vont à leurs journées pour leur pain et 4 sous par jour'.³⁴ There is no evidence of a move from kind to cash amongst rural workers; the countryside was only partially monetarized throughout the early modern period. Meals were easier to provide than full cash wages, which had to be gained through the marketing of produce. Thus a mixed economy and a mixed wage prevailed.

Payment of other types of non-monetary wage are occasionally recorded. Builders working in the countryside or for clients with rural properties occasionally received bulk foodstuffs as part of their 'wage'. Master mason Silvestre was paid cash and 'nombre de bledz' for repair of the garden walls and windows of the manor of the *Sieur de Querhérin* in 1656.³⁵ Artisans working in wood traditionally had the right to off cuts and old materials. When the canons of La Guèrche paid Halguen, carpenter, for six days' work preparing timber for a new cider press and shed in 1758, 'les branches et coupettes des susdits pieds de bois lui ont été abandonnés pour payment d'icelle'.³⁶ There are examples of abuse of this right; the entrepreneur de la Croix was told 'd'empescher ses ouvriers d'emporter soit rogneux ou coupeaux plus d'une fois le jour et n'y de les souffrir enfendre et préparer pour l'emporter outre ce qui se buche aux travaillant à la dite charpente', perhaps evidence of wives and children collecting the materials.³⁷ Such payments provided an addition to rather than a substitute for wages in cash and the impact of these rights and 'gifts' on an artisans income are unquantifiable. Sonenscher has shown that the right to

³² A.D.I.V. 4 E 109 Dépôt Bécherel, Rennes, 1691-4.

³³ A.D.L.A. 6 E 43 Parish of Clion: Travaux 1653-1772.

³⁴ A.D.I.V. C 1449 Intendance: arts et métiers 1767.

³⁵ A.D.M. 13 J 736 Châtelainie de Pontivy, c.1656.

³⁶ A.D.I.V. G 478 Collégiale de La Guèrche: Réparations 1750-90.

³⁷ A.D.I.V. 9 H 51 Grandes Carmes de Rennes: Travaux c.1678-1730.

such materials was not equal between all craftsmen; their taking was often as much symbolic as real, marking the boundaries between crafts and the status between different employees on a site or in a workshop.³⁸

It is clear that the 'wage' was understood in different ways by the building craftsmen of early modern Brittany. A range of types of payment co-existed and remuneration of artisans changed as processes, schedules of production and conditions of the local labour market changed. The wage was 'a bargain whose duration was limited by the amount of work that... needed to be done or that a journeyman could find at different times of the year'; once the work was over, journeymen were forced to strike other bargains, with other masters, on different terms'.³⁹ Amongst building craftsmen, the cash wage was the predominant form of payment throughout the period, however. There was change over time in urban centres, away from the predominance of the daily wage to the pre-arranged fixed sum, but this was not ubiquitous - the daily rate was frequently paid by a variety of employers up to 1789 - and the form of payment rather than the nature of the wage itself underwent change. Through the course of a year, craftsmen could receive income from daily wages, contract work and piece rates: in 1758, Morio, master mason, was employed twice by the Hôpital Saint-Yves of Vannes, firstly for fifteen days at a daily rate of 15 *sous* and secondly at a piece rate of five *livres* six *sous* per *toise carré* of masonry laid.⁴⁰

The importance of the cash wage to both employers and employees is illustrated in trade disputes in this period. The cash wage was an important bargaining counter between master and journeyman; it both reflected status within a trade and it was a crucial component of family income in an industry where most artisans were poor and often seasonal workers. The latter half of the eighteenth century witnessed numerous trade disputes in the construction industries. For

³⁸ Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*, p. 209.

³⁹ Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*, p. 184.

⁴⁰ A.D.M. 16 Hs 4 L'Hôpital Saint-Yves, Vannes 1748-59.

the on-site trades, the cash wage was the main focus of discontent: at Nantes in 1752, the stonecutters went on strike and formed a coalition to prevent workers newly entering the town from accepting lower wage rates than other workers.⁴¹ In the workshop trades, disputes between masters and journeymen occurred over cash wages, working conditions and hiring methods, the raising of the monetary wage being an important symbol of success or failure in guild-journeymen disputes. The Parisian glazier Ménétra was one of only three journeymen glaziers to work in Nantes during his eleven-month sojourn in the city in the early 1760s. The town was proscribed by journeymen of the Devoir association, who were dissatisfied with the pay and working conditions in the city.⁴² In 1759, the journeymen nailmakers of Nantes were in dispute with the guild over piece rates; the attempt to enforce officially-set rates in all of the city's workshops was an important symbol of the control of guild officials over both journeymen and the masters of the corporation, one which was never entirely successful.⁴³ The cash wage was also an important real and symbolic element in personal disputes: in 1696, for instance, journeymen carpenters Talmont and Bauchel took their employer, master Davet, to court for non-payment of wages of 6 *livres* 4 *sous* and 6 *livres* 8 *sous* respectively (approximately 10 days' wages at a daily rate), plus interest and legal costs, in a dispute which no doubt went beyond the court room.⁴⁴

Cash was never the sole source of remuneration for artisans, for it could be supplemented with drink, meals and the right to old materials. The composition of the wage was dependent upon place, time and individual. Young, single masons, roofers and carpenters and seasonal workers were more dependent on the daily rate than older, sedentary craftsmen established in a network of clients, contractors and suppliers who provided credit and labour, and who

⁴¹ C.M. Truant, 'Independent and Insolent', p. 168.

⁴² Jacques-Louis Ménétra, *Journal of my Life*, edited by D. Roche, (Transl. Arthur Goldhammer, New York, 1986), p. 46.

⁴³ A.M.N. HH 116 Corporations de Nantes. Cloutiers: Règlements 1749-89.

⁴⁴ A.D.I.V. 17 II 27 Cordeliers de Rennes: Quittances 1611-1790.

were better able to negotiate fixed rate terms, contract work, and piece rates. The poorer members of the trades were more likely to be wage earners than contractors, but all on-site workers, even established enterprise owners, would take on daily and piece work in times of low employment.⁴⁵ The large majority of poor, often seasonal, building artisans were the most vulnerable to changes in the value of the daily and piece rates, as was to occur in the later eighteenth century, but all construction workers were affected by devaluation because they were paid in cash.

2. The movement of wage rates over time is a useful if problematic indicator of economic trends. The variety of remuneration for building work makes difficult the calculation of their evolution over time. Historians have traditionally used the daily, cash wage to construct wage series but it is clear that this does not represent the total income of all building workers, who were paid a variety of monetary wages, some non-monetary wages and for whom the composition of income changed over time. But if the income of artisans is to be examined, a standard unit of calculation is necessary. Despite the limitations of the daily rate in an assessment of income, it was paid by all clients of the construction trades throughout the early modern period, it was received by all artisans for at least a part of their working life and it does provide a standard indicator of wages and their movement over time. For this reason, a series of daily rates paid to the roofers and masons of Rennes and Vannes was constructed, to examine the movement of wages over time and to assess their changing 'value', in terms of the purchasing power and thus standard of living of the artisan.

Series of wages constructed for roofers and masons of Rennes and Vannes show two marked features. Firstly, frequent short-term fluctuations and variations around a mean daily rate, which was a feature of payment down to 1789.⁴⁶ Secondly, daily rates show a

⁴⁵ J.R. Farr, *Hands of Honor: Artisans and their World in Dijon 1550-1650*, (Ithaca 1988), p. 109.

⁴⁶ There is evidence for this phenomenon from other French towns and amongst a variety of artisan groups. See Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*, p. 184.

permanent upward increase in the eighteenth century, the timing and significance of which has been the subject of much debate.

One important cause of short-term fluctuations in both the nominal and real value of daily wages was short-term increases in food prices. There is scattered evidence for this throughout the period and the province. For example, in Vannes in the early 1660s, carpenters' wages were increased by 1 *sou* following the poor harvest of 1661, to return to their previous level thereafter.⁴⁷

A second cause of regular fluctuations in the daily rate was seasonality: wages in the building trades were adjusted to account for day length and seasonal labour demand.⁴⁸ In Brittany there were two seasons, winter and summer, changing in March and November, although this varied according to weather, employer, location and even individual artisan. For Douerau, father and son a summer rate of 20 *sous* began on 15 February and a winter rate of 18 *sous* on 2 November in 1779.⁴⁹ In Nantes, on the building site of the *Chambre des Comptes* in 1767, quarrymen's wages changed four times, increasing in April and May, decreasing in November and January, while manual labourers' wages increased in May and fell in November.⁵⁰ Not all craftsmen experienced seasonal wages. Joiners on Vannes cathedral in the late 1770s were paid 20 *sous* all year for they were employed indoors in artificial light and the length of their working day did not vary.⁵¹ The size of the seasonal variation increased over time, although at different rates within eastern Brittany. In Rennes and Vannes, the difference between the winter and summer rates of masons and carpenters in the seventeenth century was one *sou*. By the eighteenth century this had increased to two *sous* in both towns. Roofers' wages took longer to change; in Vannes there was a still a

⁴⁷ A.D. M. 73 G 1 Cathédrale de Vannes: Réparations 1660-1700.

⁴⁸ Baulant found that on the building sites of seventeenth-century Paris there were four working seasons with different rates. See M. Baulant, 'Le salaire des ouvriers du bâtiment à Paris de 1400 à 1726', *Annales E.S.C.*, XXVI (1971), pp. 463-83.

⁴⁹ A.D.M. 81 G 12 Cathédrale de Vannes: Quittances 1775-89.

⁵⁰ Anon, 'Salaires et courbes des prix à Nantes', (unpublished Mémoire de Maîtrise, Université de Nantes, year unknown), pp. 111-2.

⁵¹ A.D.M. 81 G 12 Cathédrale de Vannes: Quittances 1775-89.

summer/winter difference of one *sou* on cathedral work in the early eighteenth century while in Rennes this had increased to two. The increased difference in winter and summer rates was a response to the rising monetary value of wages, which began their ascent in this period. To maintain a real difference between summer and winter, the gap had to widen.

Thirdly, at all periods but particularly in the eighteenth century, the daily rate varied amongst craftsmen according to the terms and conditions negotiated with an employer; there was no fixed rate of pay, even within the same town. In 1756, the building site of Saint-Clément, Nantes, employed 15 masons at five different rates of pay ranging from 17 to 21 *sous*, although a modal rate of 20 *sous* was paid to eight of the masons.⁵² In an unorganized market, with individual engagements, the wage paid to an artisan might rise or fall while one rate remained predominant, as Sonenscher points out. This was firstly a result of separate bargains between individuals or small groups and clients or masters.⁵³ After the fire of Rennes in 1720, when there was a shortage of skilled builders, workers flitted from site to site, tempted by offers of higher wages, despite official prohibitions under penalty of a fine.⁵⁴ A second reason for these differentials was the varying levels of experience and status between artisans of the same craft. Amongst masons, an overseer was paid more than an ordinary craftsman - an *appareilleur* of the *Parlement* of Rennes received 16 *sous* in 1635 whereas an ordinary mason received 12 *sous*.⁵⁵ Unskilled and partly skilled assistants received roughly one third less than craftsmen. Thirdly, the formal hierarchy of master/workshop owner and journeyman was marked by wage differentials, particularly amongst the craft guilds: in May 1744, the abbey of Saint-Sulpice, Rennes, paid the master joiner Lavigne a daily rate of 20 *sous*, his

⁵² A.D.L.A. G 288 Community of Saint-Clément, Nantes: Constructions 1748-56.

⁵³ C.M. Small, 'The builders of Artois in the early fourteenth century', *French Historical Studies*, 16 (1989), p. 387.

⁵⁴ C. Nières, *La reconstruction d'une ville au XVIIIème siècle: Rennes 1720-1760*, (Paris 1972) p. 207.

⁵⁵ G. Nitsch and X. d'Harcourt, *Le palais de justice de Rennes*, (Rennes 1932), p. 22.

journeyman 18 *sous* and an apprentice and servant, 12 *sous* each.⁵⁶ The difference between guilds and free trades was that the latter saw fluidity of movement between the different grades. Finally, different types of work merited different rates of pay within the same craft. In the roofing trades, slate roofers were paid higher rates than thatchers, reflecting the greater status accorded to slate and its technology and the low demand for thatchers in towns. Masonry was divided into laying and stonecutting, the latter receiving higher rates of pay. In 1756, the canons of Saint-Clément, Nantes, paid stonecutters 2 *sous* per day more than the rate paid to masons.⁵⁷ On the abbey of Saint-Sulpice, Rennes, the difference was marked by variety of payment; masons earned a daily rate of 18 *sous* whereas stonecutters received a piece rate, per foot of stone prepared, averaging out at 22 *sous* per day.⁵⁸ Individuals could move between these categories. Moulard worked on the new theatre of Nantes as mason for eight days in March 1788, returning in November to work for seven days as a stonecutter.⁵⁹ Short-term, enhanced rates of pay could be made for particularly arduous or dangerous work. The roofer Bernard Richon received a rate of 15 *sous* for work on the church roof and 20 *sous* for work on the bell tower of La Guèrche in 1758.⁶⁰

Sonenscher shows that for urban workshop trades, the variety of employers' needs were reflected in types of pay: in Paris the rate changed on a particular site as and when the craftsmen changed.⁶¹ No single workshop or unit of production was ever the locus of a particular system of wage payments; sedentism and mobility had different values; most workmen were engaged for a limited time, to meet a particular schedule of production so daily and other rates were constantly renegotiated between individuals.⁶² The short-term

⁵⁶ A.D.I.V. 24 H 34 Abbaye de Saint-Sulpice, Rennes: Constructions 1700-89.

⁵⁷ A.D.L.A. G 288. Community of Saint-Clément, Nantes: Constructions 1748-56.

⁵⁸ A.D.I.V. 24 H 34 Abbaye de Saint-Sulpice, Rennes: Constructions c.1700-89.

⁵⁹ A.D.L.A. C 301 Ville de Nantes: Comptabilité 1780-9.

⁶⁰ A.D.I.V. G 482 B Collégiale de La Guèrche: Réparations 1722-79.

⁶¹ Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*, p. 184

⁶² *Idem*, pp. 172-4.

character of most periods of employment in the construction trades, the lack of centralised hiring markets in the Breton towns, erratic schedules and demands of clients of the industry and workshop owners, meant that building craftsmen were paid at different rates.⁶³ These findings reinforce Sonenscher's theory of the functioning of early modern trades as a 'bazaar economy'. The wage was 'a bargain whose duration was limited by the amount of work that... needed to be done or that a journeyman could find at different times of the year. Once the work was over, journeymen were forced to strike other bargains, with other masters, on different terms'.⁶⁴ This was an economy in which the meaning of the wage altered as market relationships changed.

Finally, wage rates differed throughout the province. Daily rates were higher in towns than in the countryside and they were higher

	Dinan	Moncontour	Pontivy	Vitré
Masons	12-15	15	15	10
Roofers	15-18			
Carpenters	15	15		

A.D.I.V. C 1448 Intendance: Arts et Métiers 1750.

Town	Wages
Dol	4-6 sous, nourris
Landerneau	18 sous, 5 sous nourris
Nantes	24 sous
Rennes	16 sous, 5 sous nourris
Saint-Brieuc	24 sous

Source: A. Young, *Voyages en France*, p. 802.

⁶³ *Idem*, p. 183.

⁶⁴ *Idem*, p. 184.

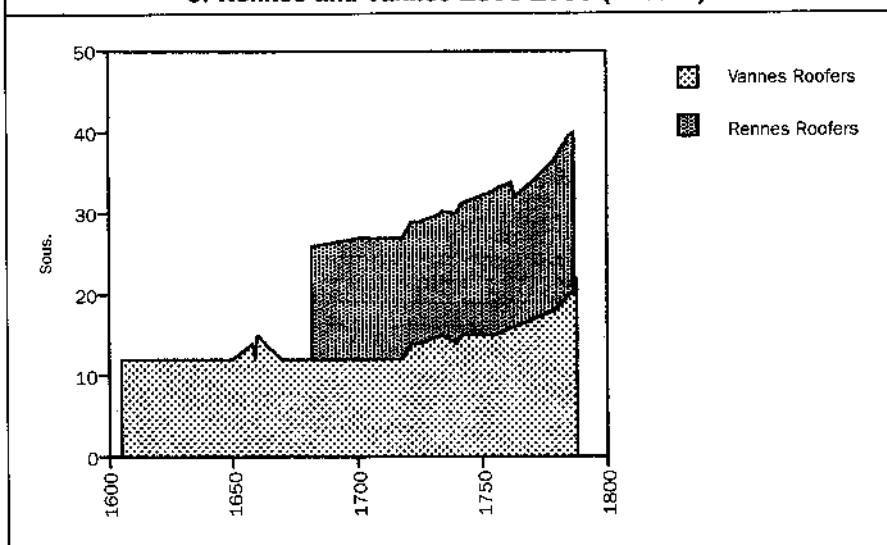
in Nantes than in other towns. There was regional difference in the early modern Breton economy, in food and commodity prices, labour demand and availability of craft skill differed, causing variation in the wages paid to craftsmen.

The most striking feature of nominal wages in eighteenth-century Brittany, no matter how they are calculated, is their upward movement.

	Rennes		Vannes	
	Roofers	Masons	Roofers	Masons
1600-9	—	—	12	12
1610-9	—	—	12	—
1620-9	—	10	12	12
1630-9	—	—	12	12
1640-9	—	—	12	—
1650-9	—	—	12	14
1660-9	—	—	12	14
1670-9	—	—	12	—
1680-9	14	—	12	—
1690-9	—	—	12	15
1700-9	14	—	12	—
1710-9	14	15	12	—
1720-9	15	18	14	15
1730-9	15	18	14	16
1740-9	16	22	15	16
1750-9	17	20	15	18
1760-9	18	22	16	20
1770-9	18	26	18	20
1780-9	21	28	20	22

Between 1600 and 1790, the nominal monetary value of builders' wages increased, although not at an even rate, as Graph 1 shows. During the seventeenth century daily wages were static, with little or no overall change, a pattern which continued into the 1730s. The second quarter of the eighteenth century was a period of general increase and from the 1760s, the nominal value of all daily rates increased rapidly in Brittany.

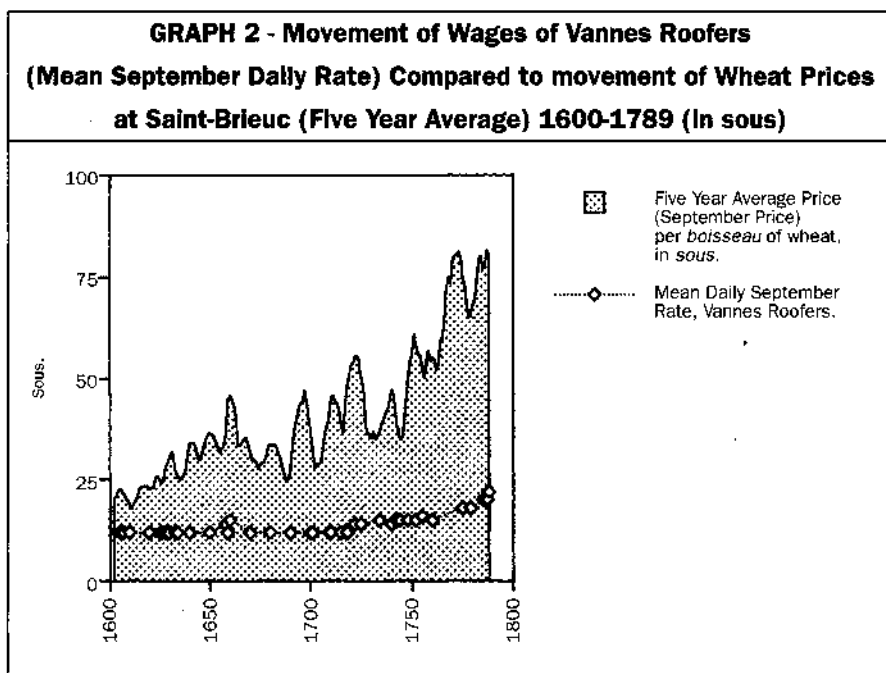
GRAPH 1 - Movement of Daily Rates (Mean September Rate) of Roofers of Rennes and Vannes 1600-1789 (In sous)



The main cause of the increase in the daily rate was long term price inflation of foodstuffs, notably cereals, throughout the eighteenth century. The best known price series for eastern Brittany, that of wheat at Saint-Brieuc, shows that the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries were periods of price change.⁶⁵ The upward movement of cereals' prices pulled up wages, rents and the costs of all other commodities. Between 1661 and 1690 prices fell, followed by a series of violent upward fluctuations until 1704. For the first third of the eighteenth century, prices declined although punctuated by poor harvests in 1719 and 1724 followed by a slow rise in the 1740s and 1750s. After the subsistence crisis of 1766 prices increased rapidly, by about 60 per cent, until 1775, occasioned by a long series of poor harvests. In the late 1770s wheat prices stabilized but rose rapidly from 1780. Similar movements are shown in the price series of wheat and rye from Vitré, where prices increased by 18.27 per cent and 12.56

⁶⁵ Grain series figures for Saint-Brieuc series are taken from J. Délumeau (ed.), *Histoire de la Bretagne*, (Toulouse 1969), pp. 300-1.

per cent respectively between 1780 and 1789, and Rennes, where wheat rose by 21.48 per cent in the same period.⁶⁶



The evolution of wages did not exactly mirror the movement of cereals, although there are correlations between them, as Graph 2 shows. The increased upward movement of wheat prices of the late seventeenth century and the fluctuating prices of the first quarter of the eighteenth century were not matched by rising nominal wages. But when wages did increase, it was usually in periods of price inflation. The increases in the daily rate of the 1730s follow slowly on a price inflation which began in the 1720s; wage rises of the 1770s and 1780s were stimulated by rapid price inflation. The slower rate of wage increases in rural areas was in part because of the use of non-monetary payment; the real value of this rose while that of cash wages fell.

⁶⁶ Price series for Vitre are given in D. Sutherland, *The Chouans. The Social Origins of Popular Counter-Revolution in Upper Brittany 1770-1796*, (Oxford 1982), pp.115-18.

Wage increases did not occur in a linear progression: there were short-term rises and falls directly affected by local harvest conditions. The wages of builders 'coped' with short-term price inflation through short-term changes. In 1768, the clerk of the fabric of Vannes cathedral wrote in his accounts that 'depuis quelques semaines les maçons et charpentiers demandent à être payés à raison de 25 sols par jour, on croît qu'on sera obligé d'y consentir tant à cause de la cherté des vivres qu'à cause de l'exemple des villes voisines'.⁶⁷ Wage levels dropped to 20 *sous* the following year. Contemporaries thus attempted to resolve subsistence crises by the expedient of temporary - perhaps only one season - raising of the levels of cash wages. During periods of price inflation, mean wages would gradually rise because the oscillating rate would not always return to its original level. Wage series curves do not therefore adequately reflect the response of wages to subsistence crises or periods of slow price inflation: they tend to 'flatten out' the real oscillations prevalent in the wage economy. The swing factor in wage rates was of critical importance - artisans paid largely in cash were sustained by rapid but short-term responses to immediate subsistence problems.

There were other contributory factors to rising wage rates. Firstly, currency fluctuations influenced wage oscillations in some regions of France, with gradual increases over time. Bardet observed that during the seventeenth century, fluctuations in the value of the silver *livre tournois* raised wages yet lowered their value. Between 1652-62 and 1694-9, the value of money fell and further problems occurred in 1718-24, with the *livre* falling to 42.3 per cent of its value of 1700. An *arrêt du conseil* of 28 May 1726 stabilized the currency until the Revolution.⁶⁸ Breton builders' wages remained stable in monetary value over these years, however. Secondly, population increase has been cited as a contributory factor to wage increases in France as a whole, as one cause of price inflation, an important factor in wage

⁶⁷ A.D.M. 73 G 2 Cathédrale de Vannes: Réparations 1760-80.

⁶⁸ J. Bardet (ed.), *Le bâtiment: enquête d'histoire économique du XIV^{ème} au XIX^{ème} siècles*. I. Maisons rurales et urbaines dans la France traditionnelle, (Paris 1971), p. 423.

increases. Yet population was slow to rise in eighteenth-century Brittany: that of 1789 was little higher than that of 1680.⁶⁹ In the Vannetais an increase occurred at about 0.1 per cent a year between 1740 and 1789 - hardly a motor for price increase.⁷⁰ But Brittany was still a relatively populous region with a large reservoir of underemployed workers. The large supply of labour reduced the extent of the upward movement of wages. After the fire of Rennes, nominal salaries increased up to 26 per cent between 1726 and 1749, although for labourers the rise was less than 11 per cent because of the influx of poor workers from the countryside.⁷¹ Demand for seasonal and temporary work on building sites was always high and increased with higher prices and rents in the later eighteenth century, keeping wages down.⁷²

3. The significance of the upward movement of nominal wages in eighteenth-century Brittany can only be assessed by its impact upon the purchasing power of the building artisan. Labrousse's suggestion that there was a serious erosion in living standards for wage earners in the latter half of the century has continued to receive widespread support. Sonenscher has recently challenged the theory of declining income, at least among workshop artisans, claiming that it is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the wage in urban contexts: payment in kind and other non-monetary remuneration might account for the unresponsiveness of wage rates to price increases in the late eighteenth century because it shielded its recipients from inflation.

The standard of living of Breton building artisans is difficult to reconstruct. The variety of wages received and their changing composition over time make calculation of annual income difficult. The increasing use of contract rates may have sheltered artisans from

⁶⁹ F. Braudel and E. Labrousse (eds.), *Histoire économique et sociale de la France*, (Paris 1977, 1970), II, p. 602.

⁷⁰ T.J.A. Le Goff, *Vannes and its Region*, (Oxford 1981), p. 294.

⁷¹ Nières, *La reconstruction d'une ville*, pp. 235-6.

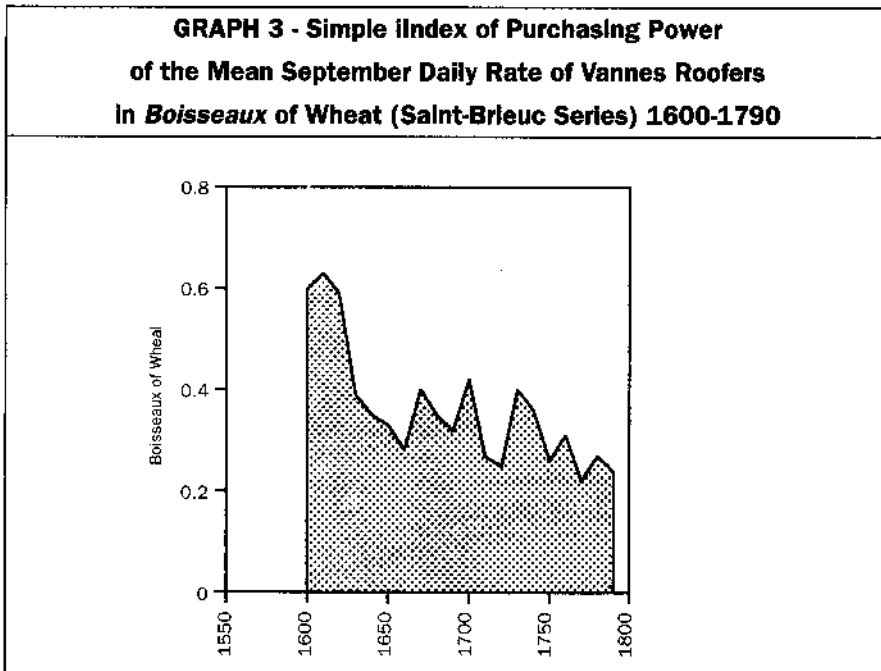
⁷² As D. Woodward has shown for northern England in 'The determination of wage rates in the early modern north of England', *Economic History Review*, XLVII (1994), pp. 38-9.

reliance on daily rates and there were some non-monetary payments, although these were irregular. The standard of living of an artisan was also a product of family income, which was diverse, the work of wives and children in other sectors of the economy, gardens and small plots of land both in and around towns, being as important as the craftsman's wage. In the countryside at least, building constituted only a small part of a family's yearly income; in 1767, the intendant described the builders of Baguet Morvan as 'simples journaliers et ... souvent faute d'avoir à travailler de leur métier ils sont obligés de se donner à toutes les besognes qu'ils peuvent gagner la vie'.⁷³

Reconstruction of consumption is also difficult. There are few published series of consumables other than cereals' prices for eastern Brittany, so calculation of purchasing power is limited to a few goods. A simple index of the purchasing power of cash wages can however be calculated in terms of the volume of cereals purchasable by the daily cash rate at a particular moment in time. If the mean September price of a fixed volume of wheat is divided by the mean September daily wage of an artisan, a simple index of purchasing power over time can be drawn. This is not a measure of standard of living; it does not include other foodstuffs, rent, clothing or fuel in its calculation of costs, nor non-daily wages and other aspects of family income in its calculation of receipts. It does, however, provide a broad indicator of movement over time and it allows for comparisons to be made between groups of artisans and between regions, over time.

The general evolutionary trend of the purchasing power of building wages is exemplified by that of the roofers of Vannes, shown in Graph 3. The purchasing power of the daily wage was at its greatest in the first half of the seventeenth century; between the middle years of the seventeenth century and 1730, purchasing power remained fairly constant over the long term, despite fluctuations in the short-term, as wage increases and price inflation remained comparable. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century, purchasing power improved, by approximately one third and the

⁷³ A.D.I.V. C 1450 Intendance: Arts et Métiers 1767.



1730s and 1740s were a period of prosperity for building artisans, compared to the previous third-century. After 1760, it fell rapidly, to the level of the 1720s. A new, 'standard' level was quickly achieved and maintained until 1790, punctuated by short-term falls and rises in the 1770s and 1780s. The purchasing power of Rennes craftsmen followed similar trends although there were some nuances; in the 1720s, Rennes masons had a rapid but short-term rise in the value of their wages with increasing demand for their skills during the rebuilding of the city after the fire of 1720. As at Vannes, the purchasing power of the Rennes building artisan was highest in mid-century, falling after 1760 to a new level which was maintained until the Revolution. After 1760, Rennes carpenters lost one third of their purchasing power of wheat and one half of that of rye, calculated on both Saint-Brieuc and Vitré prices. Masons and roofers saw an erosion of c.40 percent in the same period.

The purchasing power of artisans of wheat and rye certainly declined after 1760 and is an indicator of popular economic difficulties.

Meat, dairy products and rents also rose relative to daily rates in this period, a further indicator of hardship. Some of these difficulties may have been ameliorated by contract rather than cash rates for building work, which may have included disguised increases in real wages. Urban populations also began to use different foodstuffs to compensate for the increasingly expensive bread cereals. Buckwheat was increasingly used as a staple cereal in the towns of eastern Brittany as it was cheaper than wheat and rye. In the north-east of the province, in the towns of Vitré and Rennes, the price of buckwheat fell in the 1780s, by 20 percent and 19 per cent respectively. Rather than a simple fall in the purchasing power of grain, the second half of the eighteenth century led to shifts in consumption patterns: poorer town inhabitants adopted the gruel and pancakes of the countryside as a substitute for bread.⁷⁴ Le Goff suggests that the appearance of buckwheat on the official records of grain prices in Vannes after 1771 and the concomitant shift in diet is an indicator of increasing urban poverty, but is also shows the flexibility of rural production and marketing and the ability of urban consumption to adapt to changing economic circumstances.⁷⁵

The real problem affecting the cash wages economy in the later eighteenth century was not a steep and sudden precipitous decline in average levels of purchasing power in the period before 1789 causing sudden, mass poverty. A decline did occur after 1760 but in the late 1780s there was some small improvement in Rennes at least, where masons and carpenters experienced an annual increase in their purchasing power of wheat, as nominal wages rose. Wage increases in this town were beginning to compensate the artisan for price rises at the end of the *ancien régime*, supporting Sutherland's opinion that by the 1780s, the worst of the crisis had passed in Brittany.⁷⁶ The main problem was great annual and even seasonal fluctuations in

⁷⁴ Sutherland, *The Chouans*, pp. 117-8.

⁷⁵ Le Goff, *Vannes and its Region*, p. 95. Buckwheat was introduced into rural Brittany in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, originating from the Middle East (hence its French name or sarrasin or 'saracen' wheat). The potato was not introduced until the nineteenth century.

⁷⁶ Sutherland, *The Chouans*, pp. 92-3; 104. In the countryside around Vitré at least, the Breton population saw no marked deterioration in their position in rural society.

purchasing power in the decades after 1760. Violent, short-term crises were important in the popular perception of continuing decline in purchasing power and living standards, for wages followed rather than mirrored prices for much of the period. Further, each crisis eroded the limited capital and more importantly the credit resources of artisan families and increased the hazards of an already marginal daily existence.⁷⁷ Slowly increasing wages in the later 1780s could not make good the losses of difficult years. As Sutherland points out, 'reducing the fluctuations of the economy to smooth trends ignores the years of misery and tends to make us forget the appalling indigence which persisted into the 1780s'.⁷⁸

Two general conclusions can be drawn from this discussion. Woodward has recently shown that in the north of England, upward increases in the prices of basic foodstuffs was connected with a refusal on the part of labour to accept a significant reduction in their living standards; pressure was applied on the client or employer to raise wages over the long term to maintain a long term standard of living.⁷⁹ This phenomenon can be seen in Brittany in the eighteenth century, to some extent. While real wages declined after 1760, they did not fall continuously but achieved a new mean level, which was maintained until 1790: craftsmen were not in a sufficiently strong position to insist on rates which would improve their overall living standards until the later 1780s. Secondly, building craftsmen were particularly prone to fluctuations in wages as they were paid largely in cash. The building craftsman was not a workshop-based artisan; he lived and worked independently from the master builder, negotiated his own contract, daily or piece rate and was employed casually, for a cash sum fixed in advance. It was the value of cash wages whose purchasing power fluctuated and which failed to be maintained against other goods in this period. While journeymen of the workshop trades did receive non-monetary rights, the on-site craftsman rarely did so. It was the

⁷⁷ Le Goff, *Vannes and its Region*, p. 102.

⁷⁸ Sutherland, *The Chouans*, p.124.

⁷⁹ Woodward, 'Determination of wage rates', 32-3.

poorer, casually-employed, cash-dependent artisan who suffered the greatest erosion in his standard of living in the latter part of the eighteenth century: over the long-term the lot of the poorer artisan worsened.

4. Rétif de la Bretonne explained the urban unrest of the late 1780s by 'l'augmentation folle des salaires qui tourne la tête des hommes grossiers'; Kaplan, conversely, saw a fall in the real value of wages, by 20-30 per cent between 1725/41 and 1785/9, as the cause of disaffection in Paris.⁸⁰ Combined with rising food prices after 1765, the falling income of artisans provoked discontent throughout France. Sonenscher has disagreed with this 'orthodox' interpretation of eighteenth-century wage trends by questioning the premise that a decline in the real value of cash wages represents a lowering of income, at least among the journeymen of urban workshop trades, where wages could be non-monetary and whose value did not deteriorate.⁸¹

An examination of the wages of building artisans in eighteenth century Brittany shows that each of these theses has some validity. Nominal monetary wages rose in the eighteenth century but their purchasing power declined. This inflation was commented on by contemporaries; in February 1775, Even, royal engineer of the *Ponts et Chaussées*, wrote to the town council of La Guêrche that 'le prix de bois et de la chaux a considerablement augmenté depuis 1768, la chaux a même augmenté d'un tiers depuis 1773... il en est même des journées des ouvriers'.⁸² Some of this inflation was cushioned by non-monetary payments particularly in the countryside, and by the charging of a variety of types of cash payments for building work. Sonenscher's premise that the annual income of artisans was heterogeneous and incalculable is true for building workers, so an estimate of the evolution of their income and standard of living in the latter half of the eighteenth century is difficult.

⁸⁰ Discussed in S. Kaplan, 'Réflexions sur la police du monde du travail 1700-1815', *Revue historique*, CCLXI (1979), p. 72.

⁸¹ Sonenscher, *Work and Wages*, pp. 173-5, 178, 197-8.

⁸² A.D.I.V. C 409 Ville de La Guêrche: Travaux 1770-85.

But whatever the unit of payment, the most widespread form of remuneration for building work in eighteenth-century Brittany was a cash wage. It was the monetary value of labour which was eroded against cereals' prices in the second half of the eighteenth century: artisans paid in cash saw an erosion of their purchasing power after 1760. This was combined with uncertainty, for there were great short-term fluctuations in food prices which eroded already limited capital and credit holdings. There was less erosion of rural wages because of the continued use of non-monetary payments, usually food and drink, as well as the interaction of construction work with other occupations such as agriculture.

Above all, it was the poorer artisan, the most dependent on the daily or piece rate, who most keenly experienced the economic uncertainties of the late eighteenth century. The reduction in purchasing power of the 1760s was maintained by the economics of poverty: increasing numbers of seasonal and part-time semi-skilled builders flooded the urban labour markets in search of work, keeping wages low. In June 1739, during a period of slow inflation and occasional harvest failures, an appeal for workers on the Promenade de la Motte of Rennes attracted 286 workers on the first day, 469 on the second and 1,219 on the third day. The contractor therefore lowered the rates paid to unskilled and semi-skilled workers from 8 and 10 *sous* to 6 and 8 *sous* respectively.⁸³ The 1780s saw much greater influxes of rural poor into the towns of Brittany in search of seasonal and temporary means of supplementing their family budgets. The rapid upward movement of prices after 1785 and the unease that this fostered added to the public psychology of uncertainty created by the monarchy's political and fiscal difficulties and provides an important background to the events of 1789.

⁸³ Nières, *La reconstruction d'une ville*, p. 236.