

# ***Pre-industrial Production in the Countryside: the Breton Building Industries in the Late Seventeenth and in the Eighteenth Centuries***

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*The relationship between town and country has been a major focus of historical debate, especially with respect to the early decades of the industrial revolution. By studying the Breton building industries, this paper calls into question many of the standard ideas about crafts in pre-industrial France and provides insight into the neglected world of the rural artisan.*

*The first part of this article examines the structure and organization of the rural domestic construction trades in Brittany during the last century of the Old Regime. Subsequently, the paper describes growth and change within the industry, including differences which emerged between the hinterland around Nantes and the rest of the province.*

*Les rapports entre la ville et la campagne ont suscité d'importants débats historiques, surtout en ce qui a trait aux premières décennies de la révolution industrielle. En étudiant l'industrie de la construction en Bretagne, cet article met en question nombre d'idées reçues sur les métiers qui se pratiquaient dans la France pré-industrielle et permet de mieux comprendre l'univers des artisans ruraux trop souvent ignoré.*

*Dans sa première partie, l'article traite des structures et de l'organisation des métiers de la construction au sein des familles rurales bretonnes au cours du dernier siècle de l'Ancien Régime. La suite du texte fait état de l'essor et des changements qui sont survenus dans l'industrie, notamment des écarts qui se sont manifestés entre l'arrière-pays nantais et le reste de la province.*

It is usually thought that the eighteenth century in France was a time of preparation for the great change called the "industrial revolution". Part of this preparation was supposed to be the way in which urban entrepreneurs and

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capital increasingly dominated rural industrial output, marketing and labour, bringing country trades more actively under urban supervision.<sup>1</sup> This model is derived from studies of manufactures of portable items such as textiles and iron goods, which were shipped away for sale on markets some distance from where they had been made.<sup>2</sup> The history of the rural building industries in eastern Brittany during the eighteenth century offers a challenge to this model. Rural labour practices differed from those of the towns throughout the period and the forms of ownership and production thought of as “industrial” or “proto-industrial” did not apply there.

The rural building trades were an important industry. They provided an essential service, were widespread and employed large numbers of people. Rural construction is estimated to have represented from 80 to 90 percent of all building in France at the end of the eighteenth century, and much of it would have been commissioned and used by the lower classes.<sup>3</sup> Despite this pre-eminence, there are few studies based on original documents and dealing with the structure and development of the early modern rural construction industries.<sup>4</sup> Sources are not readily available: because illiteracy was widespread in the countryside, and often, too, for reasons of convenience, most transactions were agreed orally. Consequently, the existing, and limited, literature on the subject has concentrated on the more easily researched urban building trades. This article aims primarily to identify the structure and organization of rural construction trades in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, using the example of domestic building in eastern Brittany. The products of this industry were “traditional domestic buildings...of traditional form, built in traditional ways with traditional materials and [which] use traditional ornament”, built for people closely concerned with tilling the soil.<sup>5</sup> They contrast with “high status” cathedrals, *châteaux*, town

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1. This article is primarily based on Chapter 2 of E.C. Musgrave’s “The Building Industries of Eastern Brittany, 1600-1790” (Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1988); some of the original ideas have been revised and modified in the light of further archival research. A general introduction to these trades can be found in H. Sée, *Les classes rurales en Bretagne du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle à la Révolution* (Paris, V. Giard SE. Brière, 1906); two more recent bibliographies on Breton social history are in T.J.A. Le Goff, *Vannes and its Region: a Study of Town and Country in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1981), and in J. Meyer, *La noblesse bretonne au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N., 1966).

2. The literature on “proto-industrialization” is vast; one convenient bibliography, with a critical view of the theory involved, is in G.L. Gullickson, *Spinners and Weavers of Auffy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

3. J.-P. Bardet, ed., *Le bâtiment, enquête d’histoire économique XIV<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, Mouton, 1971), p. 13.

4. The study of domestic architecture has been immensely popular in Brittany. For a complete bibliography of work up to 1982, see G.I. Meirion Jones, *La maison traditionnelle, bibliographie de l’architecture vernaculaire en France* (Paris, C.N.R.S, Centre de Documentation des Sciences Humaines, 1982).

5. E. Mercer, cited in G.I. Meirion Jones, “The Lesser Rural Domestic Buildings of Brittany” (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1978), p. 22; for a general discussion of domestic architecture in Brittany, see also Meirion Jones, *Architecture vernaculaire*.

halls and parish churches, designed by professional designers, according to rules accepted nationally or internationally.<sup>6</sup> Where possible, the growth and transformation of rural building during the eighteenth century, and the presence of urban capital and capitalist development, will be examined, providing some insight into the neglected world of the rural artisan in this part of western France. As we shall see, many of the standard ideas about crafts in pre-industrial France do not fit this trade and therefore must be called into question.

The examination of the rural building trades in eastern Brittany forms part of a more extensive study of construction in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in a large portion of the present-day Départements of the Ille-et-Vilaine, the Morbihan and the Loire-Atlantique, covering eastern and south-eastern Brittany. Because most contracts were concluded orally, documentation is sparse, but enough material subsists for the purposes of this enquiry. Three main types of document were examined. The first sort were written contracts, 124 in number, from rural notarial archives of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in series E of the departmental archives. The second were accounts from notarial sources and building records of their tenants' activities kept by the regular and secular clergy and preserved in Series E, G and H. Finally, there were inquiries by the intendant of Brittany into the state of rural industries, particularly a general survey conducted in 1767.<sup>7</sup>

### **I — The structure and organization of rural building and its development in the eighteenth century**

Although the construction industry in towns during this period is relatively well known, not much is known about the situation in the countryside. The first aim of this article is then to identify the structure and organization of rural construction. In eastern Brittany, the evidence suggests that the rural labour force and its methods of operation were frequently different from construction practices in the towns, and showed little tendency to adopt urban practices.

#### *A. The structure of the rural building industry: masters and independent artisans*

The sources indicate that the structure of the rural building trade was identical throughout eastern Brittany and that it changed little during the period under study. Most building artisans were independent craftsmen working alone, for their own account, hiring themselves out as and when work became available. This was true of both skilled craftsmen and unskilled labourers. The "unit" of employment could be the day, the task or the contract. These artisans had little capital to invest in their trades and few possessions.

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6. R. W. Brunskill, cited in Meirion Jones, "Lesser Rural Domestic Buildings", pp. 22-23.

7. Musgrave, "Building Industries", pp. 25-32.

A survey by the Intendant in 1767 stresses this situation. In Bagger-Morvan, the four carpenters were “simples journaliers sans atelier ni boutique...ils sont gens de bras travaillant à tous les ouvrages où ils trouvent à s’employer”, and in Ros-sur-Couesnon, the four joiners were described as “simples journaliers et [qui] n’ont point d’atelier souvent faute d’avoir à travailler de leur métier ils sont obligés de se donner à tous les besoins qu’ils peuvent [pour] gagner la vie.”<sup>8</sup>

Workshop owners with a fixed base who hired journeymen were not common among “mainstream” building crafts such as masons, carpenters and roofers. Where they existed, they were to be found generally in country towns and *bourgs* rather than in the countryside itself. They were also almost always confined to crafts using stable and expensive means of production — trades like glazing, locksmithing and nailmaking, the least common rural occupations. Thus in 1767, it was a nailmaker who was the only artisan in St-Sauveur-de-Montrelais to employ journeymen and maintain a proper shop.<sup>9</sup> Such workshop units as existed were not always profitable or stable, however. In St-Pierre-de-Plesguen, in 1767, there were two glaziers; one of these worked regularly as a master, but the other, Widow Houillier, “ne peut rien faire sans le secours d’un compagnon, souvent elle en manque et souvent aussi elle n’a pas de pain pour elle et pour grand nombre d’enfants tous petits.”<sup>10</sup> Probably, the widow had inherited her husband’s business, but could not run it without a tradesman’s help.

This is not to say that rural artisans who did not have workshops could not employ journeymen or servants from time to time. Several artisans of the parish of Vern-sur-Seiche are mentioned in the *capitation* rolls between 1769 and 1790. Pierre Poupin, a carpenter, had between one and two journeymen throughout the period.<sup>11</sup> Jean Guinfain, another carpenter, had had one journeyman in 1774 and 1776, and Jacques Clermont, a mason, had a servant in 1775. However, all other artisans in the parish appear to have worked alone, though of course they may have hired assistants on a casual basis.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the Breton building craftsmen were independent, self-employed workers engaged to make things on the spot which required little off-site preparation of materials. Anyone with a little capital, even if it were only just

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8. Archives Départementales d’Ille-et-Vilaine (hereafter ADIV), C 1449; this is the record of a survey or rural artisans carried out for the Intendant of Brittany in 1767. The enquiry was made by the *syndic* in charge of the *corvée* in each parish; it was intended as a complete list, but in fact, was undertaken only in parishes of over 250 households (*feux*); in many cases, the *syndic* gave only details about the central *bourg* and not the outlying hamlets and settlements in the parish.

9. ADIV, C 1449.

10. *Ibid.*

11. One in 1769, two in 1774-1776, one in 1778 and 1781, but none in 1786.

12. ADIV, G Vern 1, *capitation*, 1769-1786.

enough to buy the tools needed, could set up as a craftsman, contracting or expanding his operations as demand allowed.

### B. *Site organization: day labour and contract work*

When a client intended to employ these artisans on a building project, the first thing was to get an estimate of costs. This was done informally for small tasks, but for larger projects, the estimates were made before a notary. The process of choosing artisans to do the estimate, swearing them in and carrying out the examination of the project was called the *procès-verbal*; the procedure does not seem to have changed between the early seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries. The experts chosen swore to tell the truth and were generally well paid for their work.<sup>13</sup> When the costs were known, a client could employ a general contractor who would himself organise all the building, or pick trade contractors who offered their specialist skills, or else, oversee day-labourers himself. All these craftsmen came from the “pool” of labour provided by the workshop owners and independent artisans.

#### 1. Contract work

The evidence shows that much new building and repair work was performed by one or more artisans who bid publicly for a contract outlined in a *procès-verbal*. A written or verbal agreement would then be made between artisan and employer before witnesses, laying down conditions of work, terms of payment and the expectations of employer and artisan. The witnesses would act as arbitrators should the parties concerned dispute a particular clause of the agreement. A tradesman would work to the end of a project in return for either a piece-rate or, more often, a pre-arranged lump sum. The same procedures were followed regardless of whether one or several different trades were engaged on a project and changed little throughout the period.

Although frequently called “entrepreneurs” in written contracts, the artisans employed in domestic building were in fact tradesmen: masons, carpenters, roofers and excavators. Of 124 written contracts examined, all were with artisans of this kind. Glaziers, plumbers and locksmiths do not appear at all in contracts because their expensive products were so rarely used in ordinary construction. These specialists were found only in towns.

A proportion of rural contract work was carried out by partnerships between artisans: 16 out of 124 written contracts examined for the eighteenth century, or 13 percent. Five of these were between brothers, and family co-operation must have been common on projects. Occasionally, these groups included artisans from different crafts, as when the Le Fay brothers, masons, joined in an association with a carpenter, François Legouallec, in 1737, for a

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13. For example, a mason paid 30 sols for an ordinary day's work in Rennes in the 1780s could expect about 3 livres for a day spent on a *procès-verbal*; see Musgrave, “Building Industries”, p. 306.

contract of repairs to the mill of Kerbastard in the parish of Pluvigner.<sup>14</sup> However, these temporary partnerships were more common among artisans of the same trade. Thus, in 1749, two masons associated to build a granary in the parish of Ligné and in 1678, Hamonne and Claignaret, roofers “se sont jointement solidairement l’un pour l’autre et un d’eux seul pour le tout obligés d’entretenir bien et dûment de réparations les couvertures d’ardoise” of the *métairie* of Sainte-Foy, in the parish of Toussaints.<sup>15</sup> There are no known examples of financial associations between rural artisans and sureties who put up the cash for a contract, but contributed no technical expertise, as was common in towns; all rural partnerships seem to be for “trade” purposes, between people who did not command the necessary financial resources to complete a project by themselves and so had to associate with others.<sup>16</sup> Artisans were jointly responsible for the project and the association was transient, the relationship terminating when the construction was complete.

In all of the 124 contracts studied, the employer provided some, if not all, of the necessary raw materials. Rural employers almost always supplied wood. A contract of 1725 for repairs to a house at the Pâtis de la Drouais, in Vern-sur-Seiche, is typical. Jan Morel, the contractor, was enjoined, “de fournir tous matériaux à ce nécessaire fors le bois pour faire des coyaux et quelques chevrons...le bois ledit adjudicataire prendra aux endroits qu’on lui indiquera et le fera travailler et charroyer à ses frais.”<sup>17</sup> Earth and stone were commonly supplied, while iron products and other finished goods were commonly furnished by the artisan. In 1777, a carpenter was paid 39 livres for making and furnishing four doors, a ladder and parts of a dormer window to a house in Kerligenec and in 1778, Jan Bonnor, joiner, supplied the miller of La Poissonnerie in the parish of Toussaints with the wooden fittings for two millstones.<sup>18</sup>

This practice contrasts with urban projects where many artisans were obliged to supply their own materials, although high-status employers, particularly ecclesiastical institutions, had always been wont to supply materials from their own estates rather than go to the expense of purchasing them.<sup>19</sup> It was simply much easier for a rural employer to find raw materials than his urban counterpart. Even the rural poor had a right to exploit local supplies of stone and some wood, occurring on common land, particularly on common

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14. Archives Départementales du Morbihan (hereafter ADM), E<sup>n</sup> 8081, contract of association between Guillaume and Jean le Fay, and François Legouallec, October 1737.

15. Archives Départementales de la Loire-Atlantique (hereafter ADLA), E II 64, contract between Pierre Chevreuil and François Ganacheau, masons, and widow Renée Hervy, April 1747; ADIV, 4E 1, contract between Jan Hamonne, Artur Claignaret and a *laboureur* of the *métairie* of Sainte-Foy, July 1678.

16. Musgrave, “Building Industries”, pp. 91-102.

17. ADIV, 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaire D’Avoust, 9 September 1715.

18. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 8169, contract for repairs to a house in Kerligenec, parish of Quistinic, with Jean Tanguy, carpenter, May 1777; ADIV, 4E 1, contract between Jan Bonnor and Jullien Autray, December 1778.

19. Musgrave, “Building Industries”, pp. 259-262.

heath (*lande*). Many small landowners owned some timber, even if it was of poor quality, and it was always easy for rural inhabitants to purchase materials locally and relatively cheaply from their sources of production. Few luxury materials such as lead and glass, involving long-distance trade, were employed. In most of eastern Brittany, rural building remained locally self-sufficient in building materials throughout the period under consideration.

This model of supply does not hold true for all of eastern Brittany: regional differentiation did occur. The exception to the rule is found in the countryside around Nantes, the most developed of the Breton towns. Firstly, rural artisans more frequently supplied their own materials in this area. Secondly, both artisans and employers supplying materials relied heavily on the Nantes market rather than on local suppliers. Thus, when Louis Galleran and his wife employed François Moreau, mason, to build two small houses in the village of Basse-Indre in 1749, they provided materials, but Moreau was obliged to use a day of his time to go to Nantes with them and choose the supplies.<sup>20</sup> Basse-Indre is approximately 10 km from Nantes, along the Loire. Thus, artisans and their employers in those districts with good communications and/or proximity to Nantes bought their materials there. Only further research can tell whether this was for the sake of convenience or if powerful urban merchants had monopolized trade in the town's hinterland, and also whether the practice, already firmly established in the eighteenth century, was of more remote origin.

In an economy where little was wasted, it was common to recycle used building materials or make certain that new material was taken from the most appropriate source. Stone was not infrequently taken from the part of the building to be repaired or from derelict structures nearby. Thus, in 1747, René Feillais was warned to “conserver les pierres de taille de lad[ite] fenêtre et celle de la chambre en les démolissant” when rebuilding the Croix Rouge tavern in Vern-sur-Seiche.<sup>21</sup> In 1732, Guillaume Le Fay, a mason, was directed to cut the stone himself for a new house which he was to build in the parish of Languidic.<sup>22</sup> To avoid waste, one artisan was sometimes hired to prepare material for the builder. In 1697, Sébastien Fleury, a mason and stonecutter, received 12 livres for rebuilding a supporting wall of a house in the parish of Noyal, while a certain Cabiron, ploughman and stonecutter (*laboureur et tailleur de pierre*), was paid 4 livres 10 sols “pour avoir tiré la terre et la pierre pour la construire et faire à neuf”, while in 1777, Yves Le Bourlat was paid 82 livres for as many days' work extracting stone for a mason hired to build a granary at Kerligenc.<sup>23</sup> However, it was usually the contractor who was responsible for hiring day-labourers or for subcontracting work to specialists when necessary.

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20. ADLA, E XV, p. 140.

21. Examples are numerous: see ADIV, 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaire Desnos, 1747-1752.

22. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 8081, contract with Louis Nicot, 28 November 1732.

23. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 1014, 3 March 1697; E<sup>n</sup> 8169, May 1777.

## 2. Day-labour

The employment of casual labour, skilled or unskilled, by the task or by the day occurred widely in rural building. Casual short-term employment was seldom recorded in a notarial contract and workers so hired could be fired without notice or penalty. Contractors used labour in this fashion, and so did many clients of the rural construction industry themselves. It was the easiest way to take on tradesmen for many repair jobs which required little or no new material, using the limited skills of only one kind of worker, and which were too small to warrant a costly notarized agreement drawn up before witnesses. There are few records of these hirings; it must be surmised that such artisans contracted for their jobs orally, were paid and supervised by the employer, and came from nearby. An enormous amount of rural building required no more complicated organization than this. Such workers may be the ones who appear in accounts as people paid by the day. Thus, in 1641, in La Chapelle-Basse-Mer, the costs of repairs to a wine-press for the cathedral Chapter of Nantes included “4 journées de charpentiers à 15 sols par jour...et...pour un homme qui aida aux[dit]s charpentiers 2 jours à 10 sols.”<sup>24</sup> A similar reference, to carpenters paid 25 sols a day, occurs in accounts concerning repairs to a wine-press in Thouaré, in 1736.<sup>25</sup>

General contractors needing a range of skills hired other craftsmen as needed. They had various ways of doing this. One was to subcontract work to other artisans. In 1747, Louis Bellon, a contractor of Vern-sur-Seiche hired a mason for foundations and masonry work on houses as La Maronnie for a sum of 200 livres.<sup>26</sup> Another was to hire craftsmen of the same status as the contractor himself, at comparable rates. Thus, François Legouallec, a carpenter, was paid 32 livres 5 s on 1 October 1738 “pour 43 jours qu’il a été occupé lui et ses compagnons à travailler aux réparations du moulin de Hayo.”<sup>27</sup> It was also possible to hire subservient and unskilled labour casually, by the task or by the day, according to need. Finally, while delicate and skilled tasks had to be given to trained artisans, the contractor’s customer himself and his family would frequently provide unskilled labour in order to keep down construction costs: “on se réserve les travaux qui ne demandent aucune habilité particulière et spécialement les charrois”, specified one contract.<sup>28</sup> All four methods continued into the nineteenth century.

## 3. Non-professional building

Some buildings were erected by peasants themselves, without the use of skilled artisans. As one historian points out, “Le cas extrême est représenté par l’activité familiale analogue à celle des fronts pionniers lorsque le futur

24. ADLA, G 202.

25. ADLA, G 238.

26. ADIV, 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaire D’Avoust, contract with Mathurin Petitbois, 1747.

27. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 8081.

28. P. Gouhier, “La maison presbytérale en Normandie” in Bardet, *Le bâtiment*, p. 124.



utilisateur est à lui-même son propre entrepreneur aidé par la main d'œuvre familiale."<sup>29</sup> In Brittany, such buildings were only rarely dwellings, and more usually simple farm outbuildings, built and used by peasants for storage, livestock and other agricultural functions.<sup>30</sup> This practice continued well into the twentieth century and standing examples can still be seen throughout the Breton countryside.

### C. *Relations between employers and employed*

Another way in which rural and urban building differed was in the hiring of artisans. Studies of the Paris building trades have shown the importance of the hiring-fair and daily wages in employer-employee relations.<sup>31</sup> In Brittany, especially in the countryside, practices were different.

#### 1. Hiring building craftsmen

The methods of hiring day-labourers are difficult to determine as there is no relevant written evidence. There was almost certainly no hiring fair, even in the towns; when nearby craftsmen were needed for work on a building, they probably learned of it by word of mouth. The evidence shows that most contract work was cried in front of the local church door after High Mass and at markets in the area, which were the two usual arenas of public transactions. This was normal, indeed essential, in a population where literacy rates were low. Once advertisements had been published, competing artisans bid for the contract in the presence of the employer and witnesses, and in the case of written contracts, before a notary. The contract for a given task would be awarded to the craftsman offering the lowest price. When the notary J.J. Lemonq needed artisans to repair his mill at the hamlet of Kerbastard, "il avait fait bannis [tant] en ce bourg [de Languidic] qu'en celui de Pluvigner à tous ceux qui pour moins auraient voulu entreprendre les ouvrages et réparations utiles nécessaires et lucratifs"; the contract was awarded (for 120 livres) to the Le Fay brothers, a pair of masons.<sup>32</sup> Thus, there was no set method of hiring labour; it was formal or informal, according to the task to be performed and the employer concerned. This continued to be the characteristic way of hiring contractors in all of eastern Brittany throughout the eighteenth century.

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29. Bardet, *Le bâtiment*, p. 16.

30. Meirion Jones, *Architecture vernaculaire*.

31. M. Aubert, "La construction au Moyen Âge", *Bulletin Monumental*, CXVIII-CXIX (1969-1970); C. Beutler, "Bâtiment et salaires : un chantier à Saint-Germain-des-Prés de 1644 à 1646", *Annales : Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, XXVI (1971), pp. 484-517; Y. Durand, "Recherches sur les salaires des maçons à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale*, XLIV (1966), pp. 468-480; see also the full bibliography of works on building in Musgrave, "Building Industries".

32. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 8081.

If we want to know whether certain people dominated the local trades, we have to find out whether the artisans involved in drawing up the *procès-verbaux* were also prominent bidders for the contracts. Typically, in a *procès-verbal*, three artisans were called upon to estimate the cost: a mason, a carpenter and a roofer, although other combinations were not unknown. These craftsmen had certain advantages, as they knew in advance the real value and profit margin of the proffered task. A small sample of thirty-three matching *procès* and final contracts from eighteenth-century Vern-sur-Seiche shows that 65 percent of these contracts were bid for by artisans involved in the valuation of the work, 39 percent by one of the three artisans, 18 percent by two artisans and 6 percent by all three evaluators. Of the twenty-one contracts bid for by these artisans, nine were won by them; they withdrew from the contest when the tender dropped below a certain level, perhaps because it fell below a certain acceptable profit margin.

The same results can be used, at least tentatively, to examine changing patterns in bidding for contracts (Table 1). Although this sample is too small to allow firm conclusions about changes in contracting across the century, we can speculate from these data that the number of bidders for contracts in Vern did increase slightly over time.

**Table 1** Mean numbers of artisans bidding for contracts  
(parish of Vern, eighteenth century)

Year	Mean bidders	Number of bidding lists
1720-1730	3.1	9
1731-1740	2.5	2
1741-1750	3.7	18
1751-1760	6.4	5
1761-1770	4.8	6
1771-1780	4.4	5
1781-1790	3.5	6

The period of increased competition, beginning in the decade 1741-1750, coincides with a period in which grain prices rose: slowly at first, in the 1740s, and then, more quickly, in the 1760s. It was in the period after 1740 that the wages of builders in Rennes and Vannes began to fall behind food prices: while grain prices rose by 168 percent in the period 1721-1790, the wages of building craftsmen in these two cities rose by only 40 to 60 percent. Rural building workers earned less than these urban rates and their remuneration was slower still to catch up to food prices; in 1787, a carpenter of St-Méen was paid 6 sols a day, while his counterpart in Rennes earned 22 sols;<sup>33</sup> in the region around Vannes, rural builders' wages remained virtually stable until they finally rose, in the 1770s.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps, it was this belated increase and the

33. Musgrave, "Building Industries", pp. 309, 318, 321 and 323.

34. Le Goff, *Vannes*, p. 301.

relative stability of grain prices after 1770 which explain the subsequent slackening in the number of bidders for contracts in the 1780s.

It is possible, therefore, that the economic crisis of the mid-eighteenth century had two effects on the rural builder. First, rising population (down to the 1770s), some failures in agricultural production and rising food costs may have forced a larger number of artisans to seek work in the industrial sector, where payments were in cash. Second, the consequent increase in competition among artisans would have served to keep wages low in both town and country. The model of "starvation migration" to the towns in search of jobs holds true in the building industry, but towns were not the only arenas of employment; a job near one's home was preferable, and this is why there was more competition for rural contracts.

## 2. Payment of craftsmen

Of major importance to all construction workers was remuneration for their labour. Methods of payment varied, but patterns do emerge that show rural and urban practices were not always the same. In both town and countryside, day labourers and a large proportion of contracts were paid by the task or the day. This was possible where others provided artisans with most of their raw materials and had to invest little in the project on which they were employed. The wage could be paid daily, weekly, or even as a lump sum after the work was finished; examples of each method exist.

All work was performed for a pre-arranged sum. Both oral and written rural contracts would state the amount to be paid and the terms of payment. For written contracts, payment was always in cash. At least 70 percent of the rural artisans appearing in the 124 contracts examined were paid in instalments, thus showing that entrepreneurs did not usually have enough ready capital to finance an entire building project. Although craftsmen rarely had to buy their materials, they sometimes had to pay other workers and support themselves. It was common to withhold final payment until a task was finished, thus ensuring that it would be completed and any mistakes remedied. Most payments were made "à portion du travail". About a third of the sample of 124 contracts were paid in three instalments, "le tiers en commençant autre tiers à mi-œuvre et le dernier tiers lors du renable rendu", and another third were settled in two instalments, either at the beginning and end, or at the mid-point and the end.<sup>35</sup> Other contracts were paid upon completion, which was feasible in cases where small-scale repairs involved a few days' labour, little capital outlay on materials and the skill of only one man. In rural areas, some contracts were arranged to be paid, not in cash, but as a *rente*, over a number of years. This was particularly common when the properties involved belonged to

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35. ADIV, 4E 1610, contract between a roofer and a priest, parish of Cesson, 20 May 1685. *Renable* was a formal process of surveying building work upon completion of a contract, before final payment, to ensure that all specified tasks had been carried out.

minors. In this case, the artisan was investing considerable capital in a project with no prospect of immediate gain. It may be that only wealthier artisans took on these jobs.<sup>36</sup> The proportion of artisans paid in each of these ways does not appear to alter over time, nor was one method favoured over another in particular localities, as far as can be told.

Occasionally, artisans would be paid a piece rate. In an early example, in 1649, a mason agreed with a merchant to build a new wine-press, for a payment of 33 sols per *toise* of masonry walling, “payable à mesure qu’il travaillera fin de besogne fin de payement.”<sup>37</sup> As with other forms of contracts, only labour was supplied, all other materials being provided by the client.

Day labourers were commonly, and contract workers occasionally, paid in kind as well as in cash. For both groups, the usual form of payment in kind was to grant the artisan waste or old materials from demolition work. Thus, it was specified that for repairs to a house in Vern-sur-Seiche, in 1788, the contractor “aura et disposera des rognés & copeaux du bois qui sera employé aux dites réparations.”<sup>38</sup> More traditional forms of payment rarely seen in towns by the eighteenth century involved food and drink. During the building of a wine-press at Thouaré, in 1736, the carpenters were lodged, fed and given wine which cost the employer 10 sols a day; the Intendant’s enquiry of 1767 showed that in the parish of Bonnemain, the two masons listed were paid “6 sols par jour et la nourriture”, and the historian M. Rault, describing conditions in early nineteenth-century Normandy, noted that for rural building repairs, “le fermier s’oblige au transport des matériaux et à la nourriture des ouvriers.”<sup>39</sup> This was just as common in all of the eastern part of Brittany throughout the eighteenth century.

### 3. Disputes

Disputes between artisans and employers were doubtless common, but the evidence only hints at their existence. A few general comments can be made, but detailed analysis requires further research. Artisans and employers could withdraw from contracts, but only after paying compensation to the other party. In 1766, Jan Savin of the parish of Vern-sur-Seiche withdrew from a contract with Jan Tesniere, a mason, as he lacked the means to pay for the work. The craftsman received 9 livres in compensation.<sup>40</sup> Disputes requiring

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36. See, for example, ADIV 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaire D’Avoust, contract with the minors of Louis Maunoir of Launay, Vern-sur-Seiche, for repairs to various properties, 14 September 1727.

37. ADLA, E II 291, contract between Jacques Brodeur, mason, and Jan Tavail, merchant, to build a wine-press at Chaebus, parish of St-Aignan, 1649.

38. ADIV, 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaire R. Bouinain, 1785-1788.

39. ADLA, G 238; ADIV, C 1449; M. Rault, “Construction d’une maison rurale au Pays d’Auge en 1822”, *Annales de Normandie*, VII (1957), p. 336.

40. ADIV, 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaire J. Bouinain, 1766-1768.

arbitration by notaries or peers usually resulted when employers failed to pay for tasks performed or when artisans failed to complete contracts.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, rural construction was carried out by mainly independent artisans bidding for contracts, hiring and being hired by others according to the availability of work. But so far, little has been said about the structure of the trades themselves. Rural artisans had different training and work experiences from their urban counterparts.

## II — The components of the rural building industries: rural craftsmen and their trades

### A. *How were craftsmen made? The training of artisans*

As with urban artisans, the training of rural builders took the form of a formal apprenticeship, whether they learned their trade in a workshop or, more commonly, on building sites. A trainee was attached to an experienced craftsman, travelled with him from job to job, acted as his servant and learned the trade through practical experience. The two parties were bound by contract, but, unfortunately, few of these agreements were written down. One example from late in our period, in 1773, shows Jean Guinfain, carter and carpenter of Vern-sur-Seiche, taking on Pierre Gaude as an apprentice and agreeing “de le mener avec lui travailler à ces métiers chez les particuliers qui le requerront”, during which time the apprentice was to work solely for the master’s profit, not his own.<sup>42</sup> The social origins of apprentices and their training remained the same over the whole of eastern Brittany during the eighteenth century.

The model of apprenticeship was simple and similar for all crafts. A youth was taken on for a fixed time, usually one year, during which he became part of his master’s household. This term was shorter than that required in urban crafts.<sup>43</sup> On 4 July 1734, Gilles Riau, a master-carpenter of Guérande, took on François Chottard as an apprentice for a year, agreeing “de lui fournir à boire et manger pendant led[it] temps de le coucher blanchir et généralement de le traiter humaine[men]t en bon pere de famille” — for which Chottard was to pay him 30 livres. Yves le Brucher, aged 17, from the parish of Berné, was likewise to be trained by Yves Mahé, a joiner, this time for two years.<sup>44</sup> It is not known whether these apprentices were ready and able to work for their own account when they left their masters after their training, or whether they renewed their contract with their former master or a new one.

The training of rural artisans often took place in small towns and *bourgs* rather than in the countryside itself, largely because it was in these centres that professional, full-time artisans were to be found. Thus, Jean Berceguay

41. Musgrave, “Building Industries”, pp. 131-140.

42. ADIV, 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaire J. Bouinai, 1773-1775.

43. Musgrave, “Building Industries”, Chapter 3 contains many details on urban apprenticeships.

44. ADLA, E 1509; ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 9353.

travelled from his country home to La Roche-Bernard to train with Jacques Annezo, a carpenter, and Jullien Poroir moved to Josselin in order to learn joinery.<sup>45</sup> Many also went to the large towns of Nantes, Rennes and Vannes.

The background of these youths was largely agrarian; they came from farming families and either owned or had worked the land at some point in their lives. Louis Hervy, an apprentice carpenter, was the son of a *laboureur*; Jacques Annezo, an apprentice carpenter, sold 12 *sillons* (about one-third of a hectare) of plough land to buy clothes and to pay for his training. Mathieu Le Priellec, who went to train as a joiner and carpenter with Pierre Le Normand of Theix, in 1700, was described as a “laboureur demeurant en qualité de valet chez Sébastien le Guenegau, village de Ros Kervicel” in the parish of Theix.<sup>46</sup>

When his apprenticeship ended, an artisan did not have to work as a journeyman before being allowed to set up on his own account. Firstly, trades in the countryside were “free” and not governed by guild practices; secondly, the vast majority of artisans who trained for short periods as craftsmen, returned to agriculture, only working part-time or seasonally as builders. Few apprentices became full-time professional craftsmen; it may be surmised that those who did underwent longer periods of training than those in the examples just given, perhaps migrating temporarily or even permanently into the towns to do so.

### B. *Craft specialization*

Another difference between town and countryside was the extent of craft specialization. Artisans in towns trained to be craft specialists. This was not always so in rural areas. When an artisan undertook a rural construction project, he generally agreed to perform all the tasks necessary to complete the work, no matter what his professed craft was. For example, in 1748, Mathurin Tavenand hired a carpenter called Priou to rebuild two houses “tant de maçonnerie que de charpente”.<sup>47</sup> Most craftsmen did not perform all of these tasks, however, for subcontracting or hiring day-labour was common. The bulk of rural artisans were “specialists” in that they only practiced one craft and would hire other specialists to perform functions that fell under the jurisdiction of another trade.

An unquantifiable minority of artisans did practice several crafts. The most common combination was that of carpentry and joinery, for both trades used similar skills and techniques. Yves Tanguy, a joiner and carpenter who undertook to repair a house at Kerligenek in the parish of Quistinic in 1777, is

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45. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 4887, 9353; J.-Y. Kerbois, “Les apprentis nantais au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle” (Mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Nantes, 1975).

46. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 4887; one *sillon* = 1/20 *journal*; one *journal* = 0.49 ha.

47. ADLA, E II 64, August 1748.

one example.<sup>48</sup> Another common double craft was roofing in slate and thatch, which allowed a roofer to work on both humble and more elaborate buildings, in town and country. A further paired occupation was that of mason and excavator, which combined digging and building foundations, masonry, floor-laying, whitewashing and other tasks, both inside and outside of buildings. Combinations of stoneworking and woodworking crafts are much rarer. In 1734, Guillaume Le Fay, a mason and carpenter, undertook repairs to a mill; but from other contracts, it is clear that he specialised in masonry most of the time.<sup>49</sup> We may well wonder about the quality of work performed by such jacks of all trades, but in the countryside, where most building would have been small-scale, indeed mostly repairs, a multiplicity of skills would give an artisan greater employment prospects. Even if he were not very able, he could work effectively on a wide range of small repairs. An artisan who concentrated on a single skill would, no doubt, be more adept, but perhaps fewer jobs would be open to him, although larger construction projects and contracts would most likely favour the more skilled worker. The frequency of multiple skills in the country contrasts with the situation in the towns, where doubling-up was virtually unknown, even in the free crafts, no doubt because of greater chances of employment and the higher standards and expectations of employers.

But no matter how specialised they were, few rural artisans worked full-time as craftsmen. For many, construction was a subsidiary activity to agriculture, an occupation carried out as and when the agrarian cycle permitted them to take time away from the fields.

### C. *Agriculture and the building worker*

Though there must have been several thousand rural building artisans scattered through the eighteenth-century Brittany, these workers were relatively rare at the parish level. In each of the country parishes around Vannes, there were only a couple of carpenters or joiners, one or two masons, perhaps a roofer, even in parishes comprising several hundred households.<sup>50</sup> Employment opportunities were thus not all that common. But independent craftsmen often had subsidiary occupations, notably farming, either on their own property or on others' lands, as agricultural labourers. According to the architectural historian, Berger-Levrault,

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48. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 8169, May 1777.

49. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 8081, contract with Guillaume Le Fay of Commalo, parish of Languidic, 23 May 1734.

50. Le Goff, *Vannes*, pp. 179-181; more people listed with agricultural professions could have also been tradesmen; even so, their part in the parish population must have been relatively small. But as there were many rural parishes in the province, there must have been several thousand rural folks employed, at least part-time, in the building trades.

Beaucoup d'entre eux devaient en complément avoir une petite exploitation vivrière ou même travailler comme ouvriers agricoles pendant la belle saison. Il n'était pas rare de voir les couvreurs ou des maçons pratiquer le « kermanant kost » (embaucher pour la moisson).<sup>51</sup>

The Intendant's survey of 1767 illustrates better than anything else the ties between rural artisans and agriculture. When sending a list of artisans in reply to this enquiry, the *syndic* of the parish of St-Brieuc-de-Mauron echoed many others when he wrote, "Je vous envoie la liste des artisans, gens de métier et marchands de notre p[aroi]sse..., mais qui n'exercent presque pas leur métier, s'occupant plutôt aux labourages de la terre", while that of Brignac explained that

Il est de notoriété publique qu'il n'y a en cette paroisse aucun ouvrier en chef tenant boutique. Chaque particulier laboure la terre qu'il a en propre ou à ferme ce qui lui demande bien du temps en les différentes saisons de l'année...ils vont en les intervalles faire l'ouvrage des laboureurs...en le temps de la récolte les uns sont métiviers les autres valets d'août d'autres courent et va [sic] mettant les dîmes. Le peu de temps qui leur reste est employé à exercer le métier qu'ils ont appris en leur jeunesse. Ainsi ils n'exercent point continuellement leurs arts et métiers.<sup>52</sup>

In Herbignac, as early as 1662, we find Pierre Berner, *laboureur et charpentier*. In Trémoré, in 1767, of one joiner, three carpenters and six roofers, nine were artisans and *laboueurs*.<sup>53</sup> These are but a few of many hundreds of similar examples.

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of agrarian tenure and land transactions, for these problems have been studied elsewhere, but a few comments in relation to building artisans can be made.<sup>54</sup> Two facts are clear. Firstly, the amount of land worked by artisans varied widely. Secondly, whether they owned or rented the land, building craftsmen, just like other tillers of the soil, worked small plots of varying quality, widely scattered throughout a locality. Unfortunately, not enough documents survive to permit a systematic comparison of the amount of land owned to the frequency with which workers accepted building contracts. In 1719, a joiner of Vieillevigne and his son rented a house, 12 separate plots of plough-land ranging in size from 6 to 80 *sillons*, 2 tracts of heath (*lande*), 3 pieces of meadow and a garden, scattered around the parish. In 1733, a carpenter in the hamlet of Penhara bought up half of a house, a tract of garden, 2 portions of plough land, 2 *cinquantes* of meadow and 3 *cinquantes* of pasture for 81 livres.<sup>55</sup> Artisans

51. Berger-Levrault, ed., *L'architecture rurale française : la Bretagne* (Paris, 1985), p. 35.

52. ADIV, C 1449.

53. ADLA, E 1529; ADIV, C 1449.

54. Considerable information on land tenure in Sée, *Les classes rurales*, and Le Goff, *Vannes*.

55. ADM, E<sup>n</sup> 5032, *rente* contract drawn up for Jean and Jacques Hidou, father and son, of Vieillevigne, parish of St-Dolay, 12 May 1719; E<sup>n</sup> 3345, contract for Marie Mouterin of Penhara, parish of Cuent, 9 September 1738.



and their wives not only purchased, but rented and sold land; they also inherited it — another indication of their rural social milieu. Other agrarian pursuits included harvest labour and sharecropping livestock, just like almost all other rural people at this time. Whatever the nature of agrarian practice, the conclusion is clear: the rural building industry was mostly composed of artisans practicing two trades, agriculture and their craft. For many, it was building, and not agriculture, that was the subsidiary occupation. Craftsmen worked on construction projects when they became available, in order to get extra revenue, particularly at the low points of the agrarian year.

#### D. *The geographical distribution of artisans*

According to the traditional model, building craftsmen were itinerant workers, moving from town to town in search of casual employment, particularly in the summer months.<sup>56</sup> Rural building in Brittany was not carried out by itinerant builders, but by local artisans who travelled only short distances to take up jobs; of course, they may have migrated elsewhere at some times of the year and for other reasons as well.

##### 1. The distribution of artisans in the countryside

The overwhelming impression gained from the sources, particularly from the survey of 1767, is that throughout eastern Brittany and during the period considered here, there were large, although unquantifiable, numbers of building artisans scattered throughout the countryside. If we look at the *subdélégations*, the subdivisions of the province for which the intendant's subordinates, the *subdélégués* were responsible, we can see that, although there was a clear concentration of artisans in the central town of each *subdélégation*, they are also to be found in almost every other parish as well. Out of 11 parishes inspected in the *subdélégation* of Montfort during the survey of 1767, 3 had no recorded resident building artisans, and in the *subdélégation* of Châteaubriant, only 1 parish out of 21 was without craftsmen.<sup>57</sup> Some parishes had larger numbers of artisans than others; why this was so can only be surmised. Apart from the vagaries of the sources, other reasons may include the size of the resident population, the presence of active "high-status" employers such as the *châteaux*, priories and large churches, and the existence of easily available and transportable raw materials.

Within a parish itself, there was a concentration of artisans in the central *bourg*, as one would expect in a centre of population, but many were also found in the surrounding hamlets (Table 2). Two joiners, one locksmith, three

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56. See A. Poitrineau, "Aspects de l'émigration temporaire et saisonnière en Auvergne à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle", *Annales de Démographie Historique* (1970); J.-P. Poussou, "Les mouvements migratoires en France du XV<sup>e</sup> au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècles", *Annales de Démographie Historique* (1970).

57. ADIV, C 1449.

carpenters, two roofers and one mason were to be found in the parish of Romillé, but only one of the joiners and the one locksmith were living in the *bourg*.<sup>58</sup> Breton parishes were large, frequently over 30 km<sup>2</sup> in size, thus making it essential to have artisans near to hand, particularly those in the “mainstream” building trades.

**Table 2** Localization of building craftsmen in *bourgs*

Parish and date	Trade	Residence	
		in bourg	elsewhere in parish
Questembert, 1767	nailmaker, locksmith, blacksmith	7	6
	carpenters and joiners	14	9
	roofers	3	—
	masons	2	9
Broons, 1767	locksmith	2	—
	joiner	1	1
	carpenter	1	5
	roofer	2	4

It is clear that of the different trades, it was the men in the “mainstream” crafts (roofers, masons, carpenters and joiners) who were the most numerous and geographically widespread.<sup>59</sup> Glaziers appeared rarely and were always found in the central town of a *subdélégation*, or perhaps in a large *bourg* with an active “high-status” employer such as a large church. Glass was not a material used in simple domestic architecture. Other crafts requiring fixed means of production and making relatively costly products — nailmakers and locksmiths — were distributed in much the same way. In the *subdélégation* of Montauban, in 1767, from a total of eight recorded locksmiths, two lived in the abbey town of Saint-Méen, two in Broons and the remaining four in the *bourgs* of other parishes. Likewise, nailmakers in the *subdélégation* of Ancenis were found in the town itself and in three of the larger *bourgs*, La Chapelle-Saint-Sauveur, Montrelais and Maumusson.<sup>60</sup> The “mainstream” craftsmen were more numerous, both because they were more in demand — domestic building requiring above all masons, carpenters and roofers — and because it cost much less to train in those trades than in a line requiring an expensive workshop and tools. Men in these elite trades were concentrated in larger population centres, where there was more wealth and more demand for their services.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

## 2. How far did artisans travel to take up contracts? The case of Vern-sur-Seiche

Studies of medieval and early modern building artisans, particularly masons, have portrayed them as itinerant workers, moving from job to job as employment possibilities arose, often over long distances in order to compensate for unsteady employment in any one area.<sup>61</sup> Linked with the problem of the geographical distribution of artisans within Brittany is that of determining how far they travelled to find employment. It would be interesting to examine how far rural artisans moved to take up day-work, but the sources do not permit an answer to this question. However, something can be said about how far some rural craftsmen were travelling to take up rural domestic contracts in the eighteenth century, at least in the area to the south of Rennes.

An examination of building transactions in the parishes of Vern-sur-Seiche and Nouvoitou in the eighteenth century, for which an exceptional forty contracts mentioning both place of employment and artisan's residence survive, shows that low status, domestic building was performed by local artisans. Over the whole of the eighteenth century, the mean distance travelled to work on a project was 1.86 km. While there are some minor fluctuations, Table 3 shows that the distance travelled barely changed over the century:

**Table 3** Distance between an artisan's home and place of work

Period	Mean distance travelled (km)
1720-1730	1.75
1731-1740	1.5
1741-1750	2.3
1751-1760	2.0
1761-1770	1.0
1771-1780	1.0
1781-1790	2.5

Only two artisans mentioned in the contracts come from outside the immediate vicinity of these two parishes. In 1747, repairs to a house at La Boisardière in Noyal-sur-Seiche were carried out by an artisan of Rennes, 9.25 km away and in 1775, a house at Motay in Vern was repaired by an artisan from St-Helier parish in Rennes, 9 km away.<sup>62</sup>

The limited data available hint that there was an optimum distance over which an artisan could travel and still make a reasonable profit. A contractor would have to transport materials, tools, and himself, and supply a labour force to a building site, so the nearer it was to his home, the less time would

61. Musgrave, "Building Industries", pp. 406-428.

62. ADIV, 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaires D'Avoust, 1739-1747, and J. Bouinaiis, 1771-1775.

be wasted and the more cost-efficient such a process would be. More than 70 percent of building sites in eighteenth-century Vern were within 3 km — or three-quarters of an hour's walk — of the artisan's home, which was often his workshop or store as well. Beyond this distance, an artisan would need other forms of transport apart from his feet, a store for his materials and tools, and a good deal of time for travel, unless he stayed on site overnight. Distance of habitation may thus have bulked large in an artisan's decision to bid for a building contract.

3. Did urban contractors increasingly dominate the rural industry in the eighteenth century?

One of the salient features of proto-industrialization theory as applied to the eighteenth-century textile industry is the increasing domination of production by urban entrepreneurs.<sup>63</sup> This was not so in the rural building trades. The example of the neighbourhood of Vern (Table 4) shows that domestic construction was dominated by local men throughout the period. In no sense did urban artisans begin to control the local industry in this period.

**Table 4** Origins of artisans for building contracts in Vern and Nouvoitou

Parishes	Numbers of artisans in the periods		
	1715-1730	1731-1760	1761-1790
Vern	10	12	12
Nouvoitou	4	1	2
Noyal-sur-Seiche	—	8	4
Amanlis	—	1	1
Corps-Nuds	—	1	1
Bourgbarré	—	2	—
Rennes	—	1	—

The results from the earliest period are incomplete, but for the years after 1730, the pattern is clear. The industry in and around the parish of Vern was dominated by its own craftsmen and, to some extent, by those of neighbouring Noyal and Nouvoitou. As mentioned above, only two artisans came from Rennes in the entire period. When urban artisans do appear, they do so either because the employer paying for the building work lived in the town and advertised the contract there, or because they came to the country to take up high-status building work there. From the employer's point of view, only very special tasks were worth the expense of bringing in outside specialists. From that of the artisan, only a lucrative contract could draw him far away from his

63. This notion was pioneered in the works of Sée, *Les classes rurales* and *Economic and Social Conditions in France During the Eighteenth Century* (New York, F.S. Crofts & Co., 1935); E. Tarlé, *L'industrie dans les campagnes en France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris, E. Cornély, 1910); more recent developments and applications of it are summarized in Gullickson, *Spinners and Weavers*.

home. An interesting follow-up to this exercise would be to see if high-status building was dominated by urban capital. In general, however, few contractors had the material resources to travel far for work, and so construction was dominated by people from the local community. However, what was true in Vern may not have been the case in the rest of the province. The countryside around Nantes had been penetrated to a greater degree by urban capital than elsewhere in the province, and may have had more urban artisans there as a result, but the present state of research does not permit further speculation on this point.

### III — Capitalism in the countryside: was the rank-and-file building industry increasingly dominated by a small group of powerful, wealthy artisans?

The second aim of this article is to assess whether the rural building trades were affected by urban entrepreneurs or urban capital during the eighteenth century. In the traditional model of the economy, capitalism, at least in its commercial form, began from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries to “control” rural industry more closely. This model is derived from detailed studies of regional textile industries, where urban merchants managed to bring under their domination formerly independent workmen, now changed into salaried employees. The means by which the transformation was achieved was by the putting-out system, by which town capitalists monopolized the supply of raw materials and tools.<sup>64</sup>

It is true that the towns could have a direct effect on rural building when the urban demand for labour spilled over into the countryside. Artisans went to work in towns at various times and high-status builders operating in country areas recruited local labour. In 1656, the sieur de Querherin hired two masons from the parish of Le Guerno to rebuild a manor house; in 1680, the sieur de La Roche Montbucher hired a carpenter of La Lande Margueritte to repair a mill, and the cathedral chapter of Nantes took on a carpenter called Bourmand to repair a granary at La Chapelle-Basse-Mer, in 1722.<sup>65</sup> These are three of many hundreds of similar examples. A few people in each locality even set themselves up to meet the needs of high-status building projects with a regular demand for labour. One such was Joseph Auger, “entrepreneur des travaux d’Indret” who, perhaps a little better off than most local artisans, was able to make a living from contracts for the *Ponts et Chaussées* and from contract work for the owner of the *Château* of Indret.<sup>66</sup>

But these are more examples of urban dependence on the countryside than of rural dependence on towns, and they do not fit comfortably into the

64. See, for example, Sée, *Economic and Social Conditions*, pp. 121-122.

65. ADM, 13J 736, contract between Raoul Allame, sieur de Querherin, and Jean Bernard and Mathurin Senester of Le Guerno, 1 October 1656; ADIV, 13J 5, contract with Gilles Gaultray, carpenter of La Lande Margueritte, parish of Coglès; ADLA, G 202.

66. ADLA, E XXV 19.

“putting-out” model. In any event, the pertinent question is whether a small group of entrepreneurs gained greater control of the building industry, winning the bulk of contracts in a given locality and thereby reducing erstwhile independent artisans to the level of hired tradesmen. We can follow the process of change in the good documentary records of Vern-sur-Seiche, where 64 building contracts survive for the period 1715-1790.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, it is clear the industry was open to a large number of artisans. In the decade 1720-1730, the twelve contracts put out to tender were taken by nine different tradesmen. The pattern is similar in 1741-1750: the nineteen contracts surviving for that decade were taken by fifteen different craftsmen. At the end of the century, in the period 1781-1790, the documents are more scanty, but of eight contracts, seven were held by different men. Thus, in every decade, at least 70 percent of contracts went to people who never again appeared in the records. This did not mean that they ceased to operate as builders, but they probably only took verbal contracts. In each decade, up to 30 percent of contracts went to men who appeared more than once. This relationship fluctuated, but did not change significantly over time.

Despite the large base of artisans winning contracts, there is no doubt that throughout the century, in Vern, a small group of contractors bid for and won more contracts than other artisans. In the decade 1720-1730, of twelve surviving contracts for Vern, four were taken by Jan Chauveliere and in 1741-1750, of nineteen contracts studies, Joachim Allieux and Louis Bellon won three each.<sup>67</sup> We can go further than this and see how often they bid for contracts (Table 5).

**Table 5**                      **Bidding for building contracts in Vern-sur-Seiche**

	1720-1730		1741-1750	
	Bid	Won	Bid	Won
Jan Chauveliere	4	4		
Jacques Rouxin	3	1		
Jacques Chauveliere	3	1		
Louis Bellon			5	3
Joachim Allieux			6	3
René Feillais			7	2

This pattern continued throughout the eighteenth century. The roles of the *capitation* for the later part of the century show that the men who appeared frequently in bidding lists were the wealthier artisans of the parish (Table 6).

67. ADIV, 4E, Dépôt Perrot, notaire D'Avoust, 1739-1747, 1748-1751; notaire B. Bithauld, 1744-1747, 1748-1752; notaire Desnos, 1747-1752.

**Table 6** Relation between bidding and capitation rates in Vern, 1771-1780

	Number of bids 1771-1780	Number of wins 1771-1780	Capitation (in livres) 1774
Pierre Poupin	4	4	15
Jacques Guinfain	1	0	2.5
Jacques Guerin	1	0	2.5
Jacques Clermont	1	0	2
Jean Tesniere	1	0	2

That these men were predominant in the local industry is not in doubt, but they did not demonstrate it by monopolizing the winning of contracts. Bidding appears to have been a genuinely open way for builders to win contracts throughout the period, and the predominance of particular people did not increase over time. If anything, the range of people winning contracts increased in the later period; maybe this phenomenon was related to the economic problems of the later *Ancien Régime* and a need for rural inhabitants to look for ever more varied sources of work. Perhaps artisans with skills such as builders turned to rural rather than urban sources of revenue, as Olwen Hufton has suggested.<sup>68</sup>

The example of Vern seems to show that the rural building industries, at least in the countryside to the south of Rennes, were not dominated by a small group of men in this period. This model may not be true for all parts of eastern Brittany, however. The region around Nantes, in particular, where capital concentration and urban penetration may have been greater owing to the more developed economy of the town, may well be a significant exception. Further work needs to be done on the economic differences between the various regions of the province.

#### IV — Conclusion

The building industries were an important part of the rural economy in pre-industrial Brittany. Along with textiles, iron-smelting and ceramics, they were great employers of men and of local raw materials.

The first aim of this article was to identify the structure and organization of the rural domestic construction trades in Brittany during the last century of the Old Regime. It is apparent that workshop owners and single artisans constituted a pool of labour from which employers drew general and trade-specific contractors and day-labourers. Day-labourers were used directly by employers for simple repair work and by both types of contractor when they had to provide a labour force for a given project. These craftsmen — independent artisans, day labourers and contractors — were not static groups; men assumed all three roles according to available employment opportunities and

68. Olwen H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford University Press, 1974), Chapters 3, 5 and Conclusion.

personal capital. These artisans shared a common tradition of formal training away from their homes, a limited mobility when seeking contract work and a greater or lesser involvement in agricultural employment. This model holds true for all of eastern Brittany across the whole period, as far as can be told.

Secondly, growth and change within the industry were examined. The basic organization of the industry changed little. There do seem to have been more artisans competing for employment, certainly for contracts, towards the end of the period, if the evidence from Vern is typical. This increase appears linked to rising grain prices and a decline in real wages. The distance travelled to take up contracts changed little; construction remained the preserve of local men and was not increasingly dominated by urban capital or labour. Urban demand for labour did spill over into the countryside at times. Nevertheless, the rural building trades remained underdeveloped and “pre-industrial”. Large-scale capital investment was absent, construction was undertaken by an agrarian work-force and labour remained the most important factor in production. The level of technology and mechanization within the industry remained low, at least until the end of this period.

A third pattern that begins to emerge from this study is the economic difference between one part of Brittany, the hinterland around Nantes and the rest of the province. Capital formation and industrial activity in Nantes were among the most advanced in eighteenth-century France, and the city was considerably more developed than the other Breton towns. As we have seen, building artisans from the Nantes region participated in the town market more than their counterparts in other regions, and it has been surmised that the level of urban capital and personnel penetration may have been greater in the domestic industry of this area than elsewhere, though more research is necessary to support this proposition.

A fourth observation was the close link between building work and agriculture. An essential characteristic of rural construction was that it allowed a combination of agricultural and industrial work; as with textile production, peasants trained as building craftsmen because agriculture on its own did not offer them sufficient means for subsistence.<sup>69</sup> Some rural workers, particularly those taking on larger building contracts, may have been full-time craftsmen, but they were in a minority. Artisans worked as part-time builders during the low points of the agrarian year.<sup>70</sup> Construction drew upon the large reservoir of underemployed labour in the countryside and may in fact have prevented some from migrating, seasonally or permanently, to the towns.<sup>71</sup>

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69. H. Sée, “Remarques sur le caractère de l’industrie rurale en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle”, *Revue Historique*, CXLII (1923), p. 847.

70. H. Kellenbenz, “Industries rurales en Occident de la fin du Moyen Age au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle”, *Annales : Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, XVIII (1963), p. 847.

71. Hufton, *Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*, Conclusion.



Finally, few artisans made more than a tiny amount of money from their endeavours. They were poor agriculturalists who became poor artisans. As Erich Masche suggests, it was the poorer classes, day-labourers and small holders, for whom subsidiary employment was attractive, because such tasks “donnaient la possibilité de surmonter les difficultés saisonnières ou créées par des mauvaises récoltes.”<sup>72</sup> The poverty of most rural artisans is amply illustrated by the survey of 1767. Comments such as “pauvre” and “peine à vivre” were frequent; in Monthoix, of two carpenters and four masons, no artisan paid *capitation* tax higher than 3 livres, most paying 1 livre 10 sols or 1 livre and the *subdélégué* of Malestroit noted that even in his small town, “plus de trois quarts des habitants de notre ville seraient obligés de mettre boutique bas, la plus grande [partie] ayant déjà bien de la peine à vivre.”<sup>73</sup>

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72. Kellenbenz, “Industries rurales”, p. 879.

73. ADIV, C 1449.

