

Wapping'86

A PHOTO ESSAY BY NIC OATRIDGE



THE STRIKE THAT BROKE BRITAIN'S NEWSPAPER UNIONS

ColdType

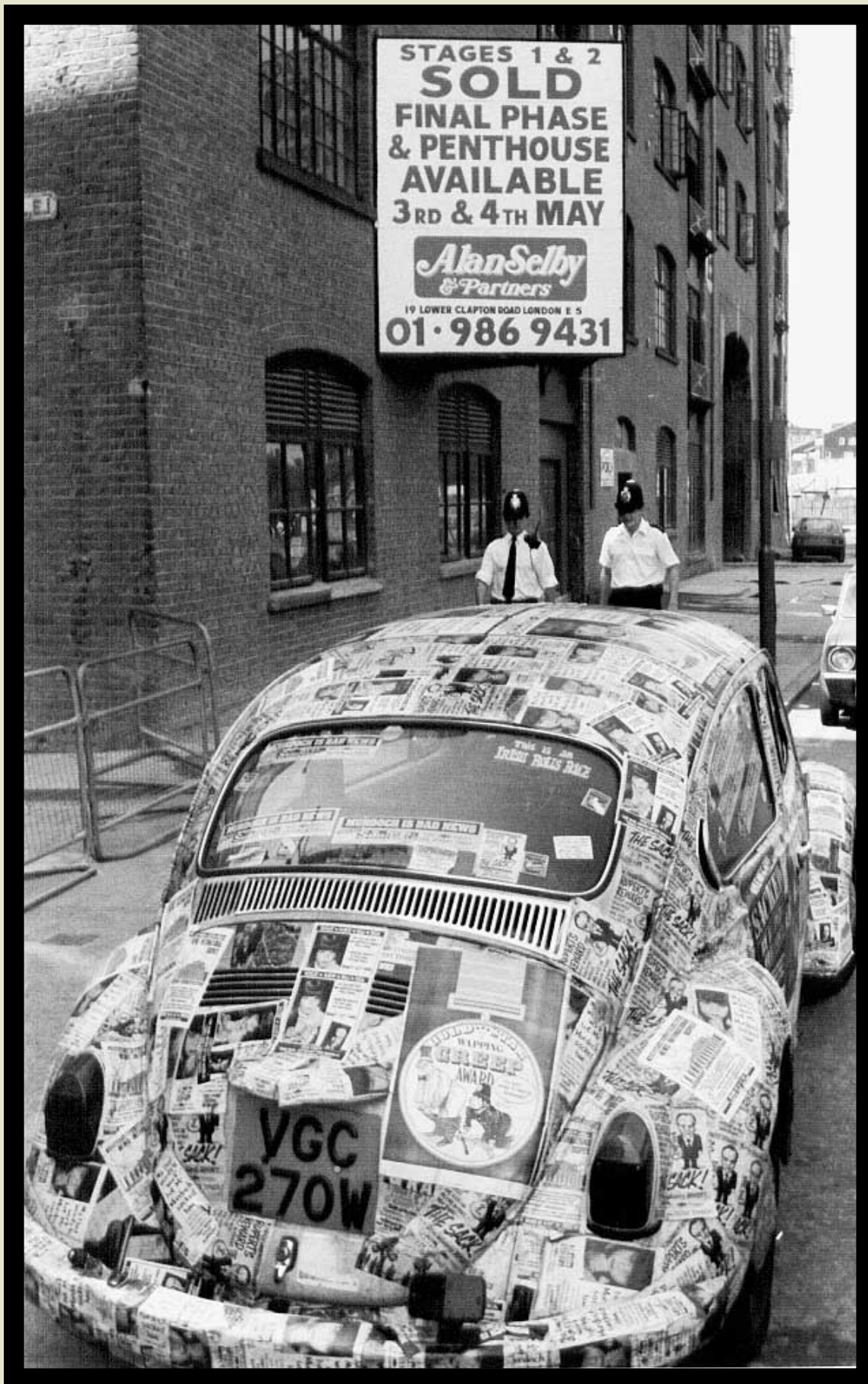
“Three times the number of jobs at five times the level of wages” ...

Fleet Street in London had, at the beginning of the 1980s, been the centre of the British print industry almost since its origins in the 15th Century; and throughout the 20th Century the street and its newspapers had become dominated by charismatic proprietors and increasingly powerful trades unions. But the relationship between bosses and their workers was becoming increasingly volatile and exceedingly acrimonious. When the Australian media magnate, Rupert Murdoch, acquired the London papers, *The Sun*, *News of the World*, *Times* and *Sunday Times* through his News International organisation, he became the most powerful newspaper baron of his generation.

Unlike his peers, however, his motivation was largely the opportunity to unlock the money-making potential of the newspaper industry in the UK and the titles were revitalised under his management. Murdoch was also willing to take risks to play for high stakes. In 1985, Murdoch borrowed £670 million from New York's Citicorp to buy the Metromedia TV stations which formed the basis of the Fox network. He could barely afford the loan and, needing cash, realized his British newspapers provided the best opportunity to generate the revenue required to service the huge debts he had amassed to build a media empire in the USA – but that would mean greater production efficiency and reliability.

Murdoch loathed the restrictive working practices and the challenges to his editorial control from the workforce in his newspapers. Linda Melvern in her book, “The End of the Street,” quotes him as characterising Fleet Street as “three times the number of jobs at five times the level of wages” compared to other countries' print industries.

**STRIKING
BODYWORK.**
A picket
uses his car
to promote
the cause of
the striking
printworkers.
Here, parked
near the New
International
plant, the
For Sale board
suggests
that in future
Mercs and
BMW's
will more
frequently
be parked
in the area.



The miners' strike showed how far the government was willing to participate on behalf of employers ...

Fleet Street had originated as a concentration of the skilled workers needed to produce newspapers using the 'hot metal' typesetting and production process. A proliferation of trade unions arose to organise the workforce and negotiate on pay and conditions, combining to form a few powerful unions, organised into "chapels" – Journalists belonged to the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), skilled workers were organised by the National Graphical association (NGA), and semi-skilled and unskilled workers were largely organised by the Society of Graphic and Allied Trades (SOGAT) or the maverick electricians' union, EETPU.

Over the years, Fleet Street had acquired a reputation for poor labour relations and had a history of industrial disputes over everything from wage levels to the editorial views of the newspapers. After the Conservative election victory in 1979, Margaret Thatcher introduced the Employment Acts of 1980 and 1982 and the Trade Union Act of 1984 which restricted the powers of unions. The coalminers' strike and other industrial disputes in the early 1980s also showed how far the government was willing to intervene on behalf of employers against unionised workforces.

Loss of production on Fleet Street wasn't solely caused by industrial disputes, however, for presses were antiquated, resulting in the loss of many newspaper runs. Between 1983 and 1985, for example, there were 60 plate breaks at *The Sun's* headquarters in Bouverie Street, where one press had been in use since 1936.

Meanwhile, "new technology" had made significant inroads in the United States, where "cold type" was first introduced in the early '70s, with job losses as high as 50% as, in the face of declining readership and intense competition, staff rationalisations and no-strike agreements were widely negotiated in attempts to secure a "habit factor" among readers.



STRIKING PAGE 3 MISS. A widely promoted campaign to boycott News International titles received support in ironically-prominent places.

IN THAT NUMBER. Twice a week throughout the dispute a demonstration began at the News International plant, often passing by the nearby Tower of London.

“What Rupert Murdoch did was break the log jam and bring us into the 20th Century” ...

One of the leading suppliers of technology to the newspaper industry – with 500 customers and a 50% market share – was Kodak subsidiary Atex, which produced systems for everything from layout and word-processing to classified advertising. In the UK, most publishers were experimenting with new technology but were nervous about the technological risks and the impact on labour relations. Only Eddie Shah with his brand new *Today* newspaper had tried to use it extensively, with mixed results.

Murdoch bought Atex equipment for a plant to be built in Wapping in East London, supposedly to produce a new newspaper called *The London Post*. The Atex system was installed in secrecy, giving Murdoch confidence that he could take on the print unions and win. He didn't actually introduce leading edge production techniques to Britain, but simply took advantage of widely-used technology and practices established in other countries and other sectors of British publishing. Andreas Whittam Smith, founding editor of *The Independent*, said, "Until 1986 nothing had changed in newspaper publishing, The industry was in a time warp. What Rupert Murdoch did was break the log jam and bring us into the 20th Century."

On January 24, 1986, 6,000 employees went on strike after months of protracted negotiation with News International and Times Group Newspapers. The company's management had ostensibly been seeking a legally binding agreement at their new plant in Wapping which would incorporate flexible working, no-strike clauses, new technology and the end of the closed shop, but it had long since determined not to settle and instead sought to provoke a strike. Then, when industrial action was announced by



SIX MEN AND THEIR DOG.
The main entrance to the Wapping plant was only allowed six pickets at a time as a result of legislation introduced by the Thatcher government.

STREET PROTESTS.
At times printworkers were able to blockade The Highway, usually resulting in dozens of arrests.



The police maintained a substantial presence, with at least 130 officers on duty each night ...

the unions, dismissal notices were served on all those taking part. As part of a plan that had been secretly developed over many months, the company replaced the striking workforce with members of EETPU, the electricians' union, and transferred its four major titles (*The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Sun* and *News Of The World*) to the Wapping plant.

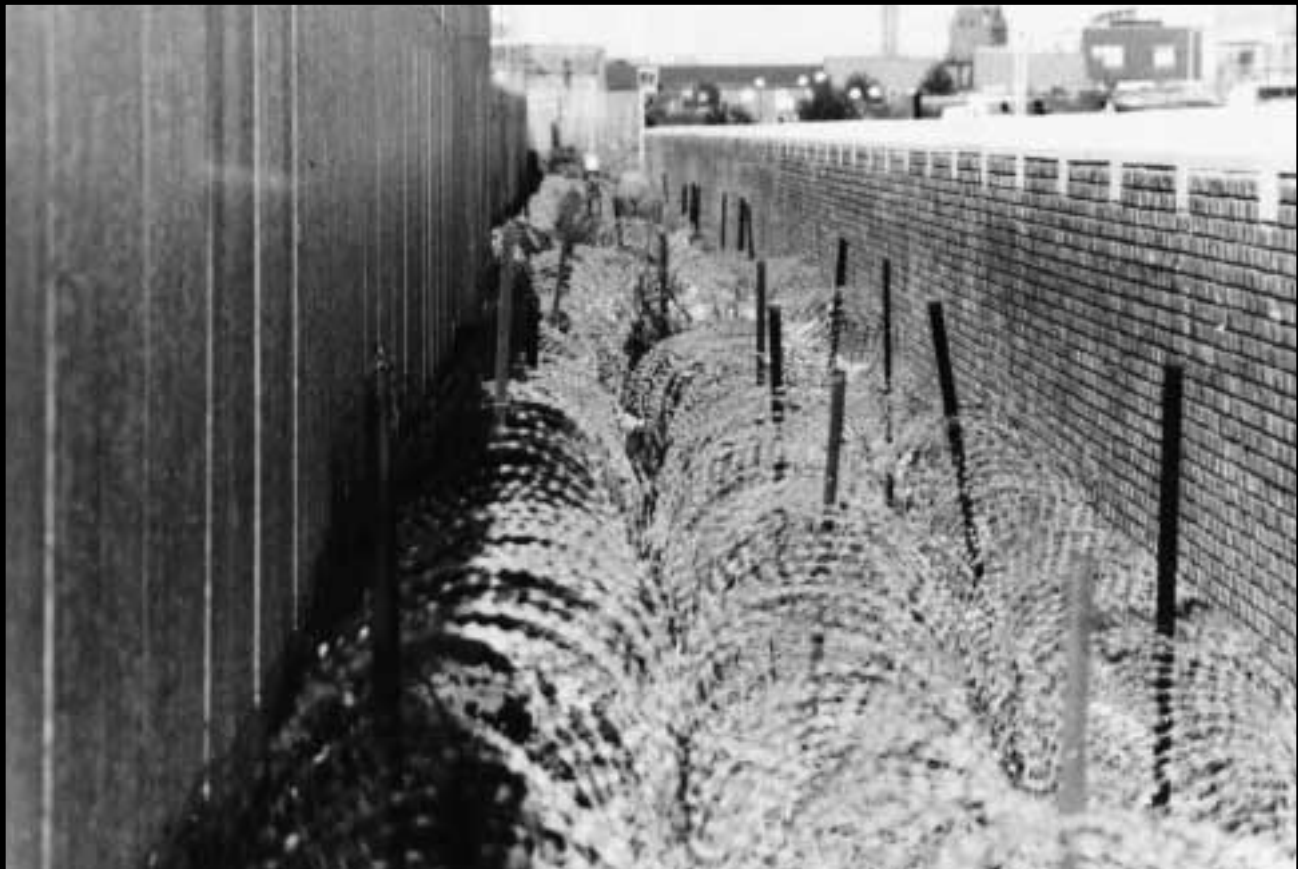
To head off the expected industrial action against its titles, News International had meticulously planned how it would operate in the face of union hostility. The Wapping plant was dubbed "Fortress Wapping," so extensive were its security measures. The trade union movement was compromised, with EETPU providing a large proportion of the new workforce and many NUJ members choosing to cross picket lines rather than jeopardise their careers, while the workforce was bussed in from secret rendezvous points to ensure they did not have to confront pickets. Traditionally militant rail unions were marginalised when Murdoch contracted the non-union TNT road haulage company to distribute newspapers throughout the country from Wapping, using articulated lorries and vans which became known as "white mice."

Pivotal to the success of the plan was a police operation to ensure the free movement of buses, lorries and vans to and from the plant, and to protect the plant's perimeter. Although recent legislation only allowed for six pickets at the gates of the plant on Virginia Street, regular demonstrations by printworkers and their supporters terminated in an area opposite the plant around Wellclose Square. Separating the plant from the demonstrations was a thoroughfare called The Highway, while behind the plant was the largely residential riverside community of Wapping. The police maintained a substantial presence throughout this area, with at least 130 officers on duty each night, with a peak of over 1,800. Nearly one-and-a-quarter million police hours were worked in



COACH TRIP. Workers were bussed in and out of the Wapping plant using security-enhanced coaches from secret rendezvous points throughout the South-East of England.

SOMME-WHERE IN WAPPING. The security around News International's plant included rolls of razor wire and state-of-the-art surveillance equipment.



The response of the police in the area was often to deny free movement to local residents ...

connection with the dispute in the first year, at an estimated cost of £5.3 million.

The unions representing most of the sacked printworkers – The NGA, led by Tony Dubbins, and SOGAT, led by Brenda Dean – sought public support for the cause of the printworkers and initiated a campaign to boycott News International's titles. In practice, however, the most effective tactic by printworkers and their supporters was to disrupt the movement of newspapers from the plant, and their regular demonstrations outside the plant sought to prevent vehicles using Virginia Street to access The Highway.

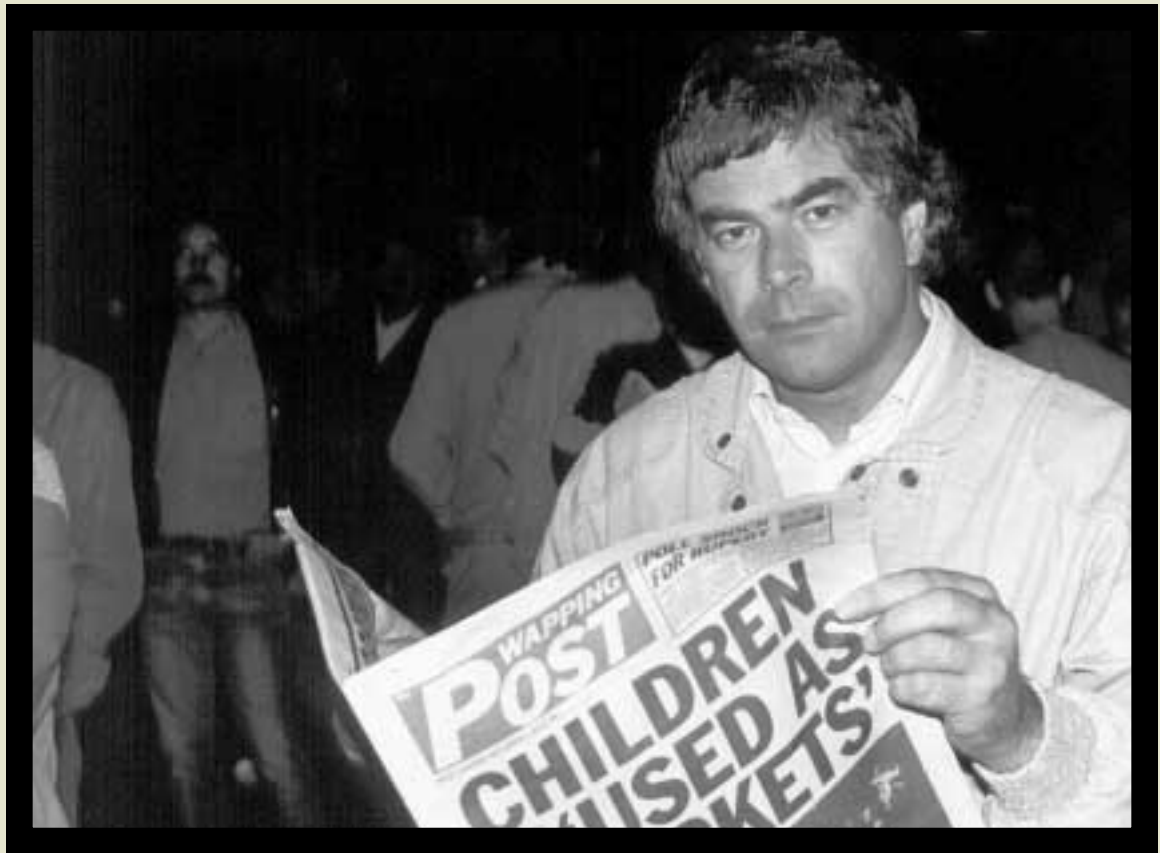
Increasing numbers of police were drafted in to ensure that at least one route was available for the free movement of vehicles to and from the News International plant, often through the narrow residential back streets of Wapping, an action that resulted in at least one fatality. As a result, the area between The Highway and the River Thames became a no-go area for printworkers and their supporters, who were subject to arbitrary arrest if found in the locality. Many local roads were closed by the police for extended periods to all but vehicles accessing the News International plant.

To enable articulated lorries to move at speed round local roads and avoid demonstrations, local residents often found their cars towed away from on-road residential parking or were denied vehicular access to their streets. Many residents of Wapping were themselves printworkers or trade unionists and sympathetic to the cause of the sacked printworkers, and led a number of demonstrations in support of the printworkers.

The response of the police in the area was often to unlawfully deny free movement to local residents, preventing them returning to their own homes and subjecting them to abusive behaviour and arbitrary arrest. The National Council for Civil Liberties, (now known as Liberty) comprehensively documented the police abuses of power at the time

LEADING ARTICLE.
Tony Dubbins, general secretary of the NGA, reads the strike newspaper on the picket lines.

WAPPING LIBERTY.
Local residents would often find their legitimately parked cars impounded to allow juggernauts from the News International plant to navigate the narrow streets at high speed.



Some photographers were physically assaulted to prevent photographs of police activity ...

in their publication "No Way in Wapping." Reading it now, it is hard to believe that such a widespread abuse of civil liberties occurred so recently in the heart of London.

Police abuses were not restricted to local residents and printworkers. Photographers and cameraman were subject to verbal and physical assaults for recording events at the time. The BBC lodged a complaint that a "number of BBC staff covering the Wapping dispute was continually harassed by a small group of police officers and equipment belonging to camera crews was damaged" (*Wapping Post*, 18/5/86), while some photographers, myself included, were physically assaulted to prevent them photographing police activity.

The policing of Wapping attracted significant public debate at the time, most significantly after a demonstration on January 24th, 1987, when the police attacked demonstrators, legal observers, first aid workers and journalists, raided public houses and private homes, and damaged a number of vehicles. Although agents provocateur had certainly incited the police, the response was disproportionate and misdirected.

In the first year of the dispute, more than 1,000 people were arrested for offences allegedly arising from the Wapping Dispute. I can testify to perjury by members of the police force and was fortunate to fight criminal proceedings brought against me on trumped-up charges. Others were not so lucky.

The government refused all calls for a public inquiry into abuses of power during the dispute. The Labour Party response was ambiguous, although many union sponsored and local MPs such as Peter Shore were passionate in support of printworkers and local residents. The Police Complaints Authority proved largely ineffective, despite a high-profile investigation by Northamptonshire Police.

Aided and abetted by government support and a revised legislative framework, the



CLOSING TIME.

On the night of January 24, 1987, police entered a local pub, damaging property, throwing out locals and printworkers and attacking and arresting indiscriminately.

HIGHWAYMEN.

The Highway, was contested by printworkers and police alike, with the police often wearing anonymous uniforms that masked their identity.



Not a single night of production was lost by News International as a result of the dispute ...

Wapping Dispute finally petered out in February, 1987, when the NGA, exhausted by litigation, lacking funds to continue the dispute and facing increasing defections, reluctantly recommended that its sacked members accept a redundancy package from News International.

Not a single night of production was lost by News International as a result of the dispute, and the power of the print unions was irrevocably broken. Within two years all national newspapers had adopted the technologies News International had introduced and adapted their working practices accordingly, leading to the demise of Fleet Street as the centre of the UK newspaper industry.





BAND ON THE RUN. The area around Wellclose Square, where printworkers and their supporters gathered, often had an almost carnival atmosphere, with market stalls and entertainment.

PAPERBOYS. Hundreds of police were drafted in to police the Wapping Dispute, forming human walls to keep at least one route clear into the Wapping plant.



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REVOLTING LOCALS. Working-class Wapping organised frequent marches in protest at heavy-handed policing of the area.

TIMES A-CHANGING. Wapping had the eerie quality of an occupied town with conspicuous surveillance, arbitrary road closure, curtailment of civil liberties and constant police presence.



THE AUTHOR

Nic Oatridge lived in Wapping during the Wapping Dispute and worked as IT Manager for a publishing company. He was a guest photographer for the *Wapping Post* and a contributor to the *The Picket*, both publications sympathetic to the cause of the print workers. During the dispute he was the subject of substantial police surveillance and intimidation. He now lives in Twickenham, works as IT Director in the pharmaceutical industry and is studying for a doctorate in Business Administration at Kingston University.

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POLITICAL SUPPORT. Lord Shore, then MP for Wapping, was a supporter of the printworkers and the local community.



News International plc, Virginia Street, Wapping.

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