

THE NEW OXFORD HISTORY OF ENGLAND

THE
MID-VICTORIAN
GENERATION
1846–1886

K. THEODORE HOPPEN



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General Editor · J. M. ROBERTS

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*For
Martha
Katherine
&
Theo*

General Editor's Preface

The first volume of Sir George Clark's *Oxford History of England* was published in 1934. Undertaking the General Editorship of a *New Oxford History of England* forty-five years later it was hard not to feel overshadowed by its powerful influence and well-deserved status. Some of Clark's volumes (his own among them) were brilliant individual achievements, hard to rival and impossible to match. Of course, he and his readers shared a broad sense of the purpose and direction of such books. His successor can no longer be sure of doing that. The building-blocks of the story, its reasonable and meaningful demarcations and divisions, the continuities and discontinuities, the priorities of different varieties of history, the place of narrative—all these things are now much harder to agree upon. We now know much more about many things, and think about what we know in different ways. It is not surprising that historians now sometimes seem unsure about the audience to which their scholarship and writing are addressed.

In the end, authors should be left to write their own books. None the less, the *New Oxford History of England* is intended to be more than a collection of discrete or idiosyncratic histories in chronological order. Its aim is to give an account of the development of our country in time. It is hard to treat that development as just the history which unfolds within the precise boundaries of England, and a mistake to suggest that this implies a neglect of the histories of the Scots, Irish, and Welsh. Yet the institutional core of the story which runs from Anglo-Saxon times to our own is the story of a state-structure built round the English monarchy and its effective successor, the Crown in Parliament, and that provides the only continuous articulation of the history of peoples we today call British. It follows that there must be uneven and sometimes discontinuous treatment of much of the history of those peoples. The state story remains, nevertheless, an intelligible thread and to me appears still to justify the title both of this series and that of its predecessor.

If the attention given to the other kingdoms and the principality of Wales must reflect in this series their changing relationship to that central theme, this is not only way in which the emphasis of individual volumes will be different. Each author has been asked to bring forward what he or she sees as the most important topics explaining the history under study, taking account of the present state of historical knowledge, drawing attention to areas of dispute and to matters on which final judgement is at present

difficult (or, perhaps, impossible) and not merely recapitulating what has recently been the fashionable centre of professional debate. But each volume, allowing for its special approach and proportions, must also provide a comprehensive account, in which politics is always likely to be prominent. Volumes have to be demarcated chronologically but continuities must not be obscured; vestigially or not, copyhold survived into the 1920s and the Anglo-Saxon shires until the 1970s (some of which were to be resurrected in the 1990s, too). Any single volume should be an entry-point to the understanding of processes only slowly unfolding, sometimes across centuries. My hope is that in the end we shall have, as the outcome, a set of standard and authoritative histories, embodying the scholarship of a generation, and not mere compendia in which the determinants are lost to sight among the detail.

J. M. ROBERTS

Preface

The approach I have adopted in writing this book is explained in the Introduction. As my work proceeded I became ever more aware of the high quality of the publications of my fellow historians and of my own heavy dependence upon the results of their labours. I have tried to give credit where it is due and hope that I will be forgiven for any unintentional lapses in that respect.

I also have some more specific debts to acknowledge. Without the support of the University of Hull—and more especially, over the years, of colleagues in the Hull History Department—I could never have completed the task. Three other institutions made it possible for me to devote uninterrupted periods to sustained writing and research. The National Humanities Center of Research Triangle Park in North Carolina appointed me a fellow for the academic year 1985–6. Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, elected me a visiting fellow for the Easter Term 1988. The British Academy awarded me a Research Readership in the Humanities for the years 1994–6. I am deeply grateful to them all.

C. H. Feinstein and W. D. Rubinstein were good enough to answer queries on particular points. Tim Blanning of Cambridge and four colleagues at the University of Hull—Rod Ambler, Howell Lloyd, David Omissi, and Michael E. Turner—read individual chapters in draft to my very great benefit. Michael J. Turner of the University of Reading helped with the Bibliography. The general editor, John Roberts, asked me to write the book and thereafter supplied perfectly calibrated help and encouragement as he reacted to the evolving text. Colin Matthew, with extraordinary kindness, also read the whole work in draft and provided just that combination of criticism and reassurance which nervous authors so badly need. It will be all too obvious that I have sometimes been too stubborn or too imperceptive to take the advice I so often sought and so generously received.

As with everything that I have written since the happy day of our marriage in 1970 this book owes an immeasurable debt to my wife, Alison, whose love, help, and scholarly sympathy have sustained me in bad times and good. The dedication to our three children recognizes their salutary talent for reminding me of the imperatives of a more recent generation than that of the mid-Victorians.

K. T. H.

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Introduction

Sir Robert Ensor's fine volume in the first 'Oxford History' series was simply entitled *England 1870-1914*. Though I think it is no longer possible to concentrate as exclusively as Ensor did upon England alone, I have emulated him at least in choosing a plain title. Books deliberately written to delineate past periods as, for example, ages of reform or revolution or reaction, as ages of rising middle classes or collapsing aristocracies, of expansion or contraction, of new regimes or of old, whatever they may gain in invigorating coherence, too often achieve their effects by a species of historical brigandage or (worse still) of historical myopia. An approach appropriate for monographs examining one comparatively self-contained topic imposes an unduly partial influence upon more general works such as this. To designate a whole period under a single word or phrase inevitably makes it necessary to render so many recalcitrant matters invisible—by distortions both subtle and unsubtle—that the resulting landscape can often seem grossly underpopulated, sometimes, indeed, hardly populated at all. C. S. Lewis wrote in 1954 (when the exclusive use of the masculine gender was more common than today) that

Some think it the historian's business . . . to grasp in a single intuition the 'spirit' or 'meaning' of his period. With some hesitation, and with much respect for the great men who have thought otherwise, I submit that this is exactly what we must refrain from doing. I cannot convince myself that such 'spirits' or 'meanings' have much more reality than the pictures we see in the fire . . . The 'canals' on Mars vanished when we got stronger lenses.¹

None of this means that the only alternative is that of an extreme empirical nihilism in which the 'facts' are somehow supposed to be able to 'speak for themselves'. In the first place, it should be possible to offer a

¹ C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), 63-4.

series of linked interpretations which do as little violence to the essentially ragged and confused nature of the past as is compatible with understanding and good sense. In the second, while the whole idea of 'periods' (let alone their staccato description) may well be a mischievous conception, it is also—as Lewis himself realized—a methodological necessity. Thus even the term 'mid-Victorian generation' suggests something more than a mere slice of time, and might, indeed, be taken to constitute almost a psychological category (though one best applied to different individuals in very different ways). For the historian, therefore, eternal vigilance is required, though it is easy to nod off during the dark watches of the interpretative night (as doubtless I have done more often than I should).

The four decades with which this book deals stretch from the repeal of the Corn Laws in June 1846 to the defeat of Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill in June 1886. In political terms it is tempting to see them as marking a high point of Liberal dominance with the Tories out of office for three years in every four. But because the Liberal administrations in power during these years owed so much to Peel's particular kind of Conservatism, it can, in fact, be highly misleading to denominate the governing political ideologies of the time in simple and straightforward party terms. Again, confident assertions of Liberal ascendancy can all too easily be coupled with arguments that see the Great Exhibition of 1851 as an unequivocal sign of growing confidence regarding the United Kingdom's role as a world power in economic, political, cultural, and imperial terms. And it is, of course, true that aristocrats, businessmen, clerks, skilled workers, and many others too flocked to the Crystal Palace to revel in the modernity of the age, in its progress, its enlightenment, its expansiveness. Yet the very same year also witnessed one of nineteenth-century Britain's greatest outbursts of anti-Catholicism, with the Protestant nation—worshippers and non-worshippers alike—united in a mighty orgy of nervous, worried, and entirely unconfident outrage against the threats posed by the 5 or 6 per cent of the British (and perhaps just over 20 per cent of the United Kingdom) population that could be regarded as adhering in some way or other to the Church of Rome. And just as the Great Exhibition attracted enthusiasm from almost all sections of society, so too did the anti-papist outburst of 1850-1, with the Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, leading the fray. Both of these public manifestations of private feelings were, however, equally 'authentic' as expressions of the manner in which members of the mid-Victorian generation saw themselves and regarded the world in which they lived. That, in retrospect, some might think the one pointed to the future and the other to the past—though even that is far from clear—should not disguise the historical importance of their close temporal juxtaposition.

This book is, therefore, quite deliberately not constructed around a single overarching thesis. None the less, it has, equally deliberately, been written with three very general themes or contexts in mind. The first might be called the context of 'established industrialism': that at virtually all levels of society men and women increasingly realized that factory life and manufacturing had come to stay (even though factories long remained small and many people continued to earn their living by other means) and that, as Peel put it in 1842, 'we cannot recede'.² In one way or another this theme informs a good deal of what follows, though here too there are exceptions—as Chapter 15 on Ireland makes clear.

The second context might be called that of 'multiple national identities': that, beneath the shell of a unitary state, there flourished separate and overlapping national traditions which make it necessary sometimes to speak of England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, sometimes of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, sometimes of Britain and Ireland, sometimes of the United Kingdom, sometimes of the British Empire. Not only that, but the ubiquitous use, then and since, of the word 'England' to mean any combination of these terms (not least in the title of the series to which this book belongs) says much about the location of power and wealth in mid-Victorian as in more recent times and about the attitudes which have been engendered thereby. This is not to deny that certain shifts had taken place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries towards the fashioning of something like a 'British' consciousness,³ merely to insist that this added to, rather than replaced, a whole series of existing and still developing allegiances of a Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and (by no means least) English kind—and, indeed, of a more restricted and regional kind also. This book is, therefore, not just about England, but about the United Kingdom taken both as a whole and as an aggregation of individual administrative units and national identities.⁴

The third context might be called that of 'interlocking spheres' or the manner in which the public culture of the period (as of almost all periods) was generated, not by a series of influences operating separately, but by

² To J. W. Croker, 27 July 1842, C. S. Parker, *Sir Robert Peel from his Private Papers*, 3 vols. (London, 1891–9), ii. 529.

³ L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation* (New Haven, 1992).

⁴ Acts of Union with Wales (1536), Scotland (1707), and Ireland (1800) had created a constitutional situation in which legally and (for most purposes) administratively England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland were treated as units. Legislatively, however, the Union parliament at Westminster controlled statutory acts. It also contained MPs representing the whole of the United Kingdom on a (roughly) equal basis. Scotland and Ireland (but not Wales) enjoyed an executive status of their own, each dependent upon whatever executive government was able to sustain a majority in the House of Commons.

means of developments resonating reciprocally—and perceived to be so resonating—between the spheres of politics, economics, science, literature, and art. But because these three contexts or themes do not, of course, illuminate or ‘explain’ everything, I have tried to apply them with a light touch. By the same token, I have written individual chapters on certain major topics, but not on all. In particular, the experiences of mid-Victorian women ranged so widely that I thought it best to discuss them at a number of different points.

The seventeen chapters that follow have been assigned to four larger ‘Parts’ in an attempt to make the book’s overall organization and arguments clearer and more distinct, without, it is hoped, blurring that sense of interconnectedness so necessary if historical writing is to be credible and interesting. The first three chapters in Part I constitute a kind of blueprint of the social architecture of the mid-Victorian United Kingdom. Architecture, of course, tends to presuppose upper and lower levels, basements and penthouses, but equally its constructs tend to contain staircases and elevators connecting such locations with one another in sometimes unusual and complicated ways. Thus, although mid-Victorian economic distinctions clearly were central to mid-Victorian social distinctions, to rely on economics alone as a determinant of hierarchy and ignore all other links connecting one body of persons with another obscures more than it reveals. While, therefore, the headings I have chosen for these three chapters carry distinct economic overtones, they are not exclusively economic in character or intent. The nature of the ‘agrarian interest’, for example, was determined more by place, tradition, kinship, and perception than by exclusively economic congruities. In some circumstances farmers and landlords acted together; in others they did not. Agricultural labourers, though clearly workers by hand, were so different from those employed in factories that—despite much justified distrust of their ‘superiors’—they, too, often seemed to see themselves, first and foremost, as countrymen and women with all that that implied. In towns things, unsurprisingly, followed different, though not totally distinct, paths. Neither the middle sort of people nor manual workers formed a single closely integrated and homogeneous social group. Both, however, were more and more obviously beginning to see themselves as members of broad social categories in which common interests could sometimes, though by no means always, overcome the fissiparousness characteristic of relationships at the personal and microscopic level. These three chapters attempt, therefore, to set down the broad outlines of a highly complex set of social structures, in particular by addressing such key questions as *Who?* and *How many?* (A third question—*What did they do?*—though more directly discussed in Chapter 10, also receives some

preliminary attention in Part I, especially with regard to standards of living and group relationships.) And because the middle sort of people, workers by hand, and the members of the agrarian interest all found themselves living under particular arrangements of government which clearly affected their everyday lives and because these arrangements were, in turn, influenced by the different degrees of power such groups were able to exercise, the fourth and last chapter of Part I examines the nature of the mid-Victorian state: what contemporaries thought it should do and what it actually did.

Part II is devoted to political and closely associated developments during what roughly amounts to the first half of our period, 1846–68. Chapters 5 and 7 consist essentially of political narrative interwoven with discussions of party relationships, political leadership, and imperial and foreign affairs. Because the political and administrative developments of the mid-1850s were so closely (if briefly) marked by two significant military outbreaks, I thought it proper to examine the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny in some detail in Chapter 6. In a rather different manner, the politics of the mid-1860s also turned much on questions of franchise reform. Chapter 8, therefore, seeks to place the whole matter of reform and the passage of the Reform Acts of 1867–8 both into a parliamentary context and into the broader electoral framework of the time.

The five chapters of Part III deal with fundamental economic, behavioural, and intellectual aspects of mid-Victorian life. Although the findings of economic history have not proved as conclusive as its practitioners might once have hoped, there can be no doubt that many of the most vigorous and important insights into modern British history have come from that source. These insights are, however, not always easy to understand and there is undoubtedly some truth in the jibe that economic historians have too closely followed the exhortation ‘If it moves, leave it out’. But difficulties are there to be overcome, and it seemed to me mere cowardice in the face of danger to omit the analysis offered in Chapter 9 of economic developments in the mid-Victorian years. This, then, leads to Chapter 10 which acts—as has already been indicated—as a pendant to Chapters 1 to 3 by examining the life experiences of those who did, indeed, ‘move’ and often in remarkably vigorous and impressive ways. Not least did an increasing number of mid-Victorians colonize what might broadly be called the field of ‘high culture’. This is always a difficult topic to deal with in books of this kind where limitations of space can easily turn any treatment of literature, painting, and the like into little more than breathless lists of the good and the great. In an attempt to avoid this, I have devoted Chapter 11 to an examination of the close relationships which existed in the

Victorian period between art and art producers of all kinds, on the one hand, and hard cash, on the other: How much were they paid? Who earned the most? Did relative rewards change over time? This will, I hope, provide a link between literary and artistic developments and those of a more general—and in this case predominantly financial—kind (without, however, implying that the former should be interpreted only in such terms). But if Mammon always played a large part on the mid-Victorian stage, so too did God. Chapter 12, therefore, explores the denominational landscapes of the time and tries to shed some light on the people who inhabited them. Closely related to religious beliefs—their rise, decline, rearrangement, and impact—was the growing mid-century importance of the natural sciences. In particular, the whole idea of evolution and Darwin's specific contributions to that idea furnished educated mid-Victorians with perhaps the most beguiling of all the analytical tools in their intellectual armoury. Not only did organisms of every kind begin more and more to be seen in evolutionary terms, but so, too, did human and natural history in general. This being the case, it is in Chapters 11 and 13 that the context of 'interlocking spheres' is most obviously and directly addressed.

Part IV, in turn, is substantially, though by no means entirely, devoted to the context of 'multiple national identities'. The experiences of mid-Victorian Scotland and Wales are set side-by-side in Chapter 14 and those of Ireland—the least integrated part of the United Kingdom—are examined in Chapter 15. The last two chapters return to a broadly political narrative, in this case of the years between 1868 and 1886, with Chapter 17 concluding with a discussion of the increasingly intrusive and important question of Irish Home Rule.

Finally, I am well aware that there are matters with which this book does not deal or deals with only in passing. Some have been deliberately omitted because no book can include everything: hard choices have to be made. Some have been deliberately omitted because I was—possibly not often enough—aware of my lack of relevant expertise. In this latter respect, I am especially ashamed of an inability even to begin to be able to engage with the work of Darwin's equal—perhaps more than equal—scientific contemporary, the physicist, James Clerk Maxwell (1831–79), whose profoundly important advances, above all the creation of the electro-magnetic theory of light, constitute achievements in pre-quantal theoretical physics comparable only with those of Newton in dynamics and Einstein in relativity. Some matters, however, have doubtless simply been overlooked: *mea culpa*.

PART I

Society and the State

CHAPTER I

The Agrarian Interest

I. AGRICULTURAL UPS AND DOWNS

Mid-Victorians were less dominated by the aristocracy and landed gentry than their forefathers had been. Equally, they were less subject than later generations to dictation from the upper middle-class gladiators of modern capitalism. Instead, they lived at a time when a variety of social and economic interests contended for mastery, sometimes overtly, often not. In this process, not only were all sections of society changed, but—just as important—the way in which each section was perceived by the others changed also. For none was this more true than those who owned the soil, the men (they were mostly men) who had long piped tunes for others to dance to.

Despite some exceptions, most mid-nineteenth-century landed families were becoming quite as Victorian as everyone else. In literary terms, the novels of R. S. Surtees, with their sometimes absurd, almost surrealist, portraiture of landowners old and new, represent a final genuflection to a fading world. Once feelings of real unease had begun to break the surface of events, then their particular kind of extreme and knowing comedy (Surtees was himself a landed gentleman) ceased to be possible. And although in a certain idiosyncratic sense Surtees may well have regarded himself as a kind of 'realist', the notion of what constituted realism was undergoing perceptible change during the quarter-century before his own death in 1864.¹ George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) is typical of this transitional phase during which rural communities tended to be represented, not as pastoral never-never lands, but as active societies engaged in the earning of livelihoods. Not that this invariably obliged contemporary readers to put sentimentalism entirely to one side. Indeed, Queen Victoria commissioned two watercolours by E. H. Corbould based on scenes in *Adam Bede* in which village life is portrayed as unproblematically wholesome, gentle, and—above all—

¹ For an interpretation of Surtees as, indeed, a 'very un-Victorian man', see N. Gash, *Robert Surtees and Early Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1993).

clean.² Only later, with Thomas Hardy, is the countryside subjected to unmistakably sombre visions, which, however partial and exaggerated, were at last capable of emphasizing the bleaker aspects of rural life with sustained power and effect (and, of course, in a manner especially congenial to modern minds). However, long before this occurred Surtees's bizarre characters had already given way to those of Anthony Trollope—worthy and plainly recognizable, slimy perhaps, but tediously mundane sinners on the whole.

By participating in, indeed, by helping to orchestrate, so signal a metamorphosis, the landed gentry and aristocracy of the United Kingdom not only succeeded in acquiring that most admired of all mid-Victorian virtues, respectability, they also helped to ensure that their own political power would survive (in however diminished a form) for longer than some at least of their enemies might have hoped. The Janus-faced nature of the processes involved in this complicated transformation were strikingly reflected in the character of the most impressive political personality of the age, William Ewart Gladstone. For, just as he was in many respects the great public icon of Victorian middle-class respectability, so Gladstone—though one of the very few prime ministers to die plain 'Mr'—was one of the greatest of all Victorian venerated of hereditary land tenure and of the social system that accompanied it. 'I am', he noted in 1878, 'a firm believer in the aristocratic principle . . . I am an out-and-out *inequalitarian*'.³

Such attitudes were the more possible because the social and economic arrangements of the nineteenth-century countryside stood apart from those of the towns. It was not so much that the men and women engaged in and dependent upon agriculture belonged to groups innocent of class distinctions, rather that the divisions between landowners, tenant farmers, and landless labourers, although they carried echoes of urban patterning, were in many respects unique.

The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 constituted the political and economic grid upon which subsequent agrarian developments were laid out. High fixed duties on grain imports had been imposed in 1815 and replaced by a more moderate sliding scale in 1828 which was itself lowered by Sir Robert Peel in 1842 as part of a move towards greater freedom of trade. Agriculturalists believed that protection was essential to rural prosperity. Peel, on the other hand, thought that high food prices increased the tensions within society and threatened the stability of power relationships.

² M. Laski, *George Eliot and her World* (London, 1973), 60–1 (where the paintings are reproduced).

³ H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1875–1898* (Oxford, 1995), 356; J. Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, 3 vols. (London, 1903), ii. 582.

This above all motivated his actions, though a belief in free trade as such, a contempt for the red-faced country gentlemen who provided the bulk of his parliamentary following, and the sudden appearance of famine in Ireland all helped to encourage them. The vociferous activities of the Anti-Corn Law League founded in 1839 were important as a model for later middle-class agitations, but had little impact upon the decisions made in cabinet or even in parliament. For Peel the whole business was undertaken to 'fortify the established institutions of this country, to inspire confidence in the equity and benevolence of the Legislature... and to discourage the desire for democratic change'.⁴ As in 1832, so in 1846, concessions were offered with the conservative aim of preserving the fabric of traditional authority. But, despite a certain appearance of stasis in the 1850s and early 1860s, as far as the agrarian interest was concerned—indeed as regards the rural world generally—things would never be the same again.

The story of British agriculture in the second half of the nineteenth century was one of relative decline at a time when the industrial and service sectors were assuming a growing importance. This did not necessarily signify 'decline' in any pejorative sense, since the change could well have resulted simply from greater specialization in international trade. Indeed, the value at current prices of agriculture's contribution to national income grew consistently from £76.0m in 1821 to £130.4m in 1871 (and thereafter never dropped below the level of 1841, when it stood at £99.9m). But in proportionate terms there was an equally steady fall, from 26.1 to 8.6 per cent over the seventy years ending in 1891.⁵ Although, therefore, the initial dramatic swing towards industrialization had taken place by the beginning of our period, the relative trend away from agriculture was to continue throughout the rest of the century. As regards manpower the process was also pronounced, though somewhat slower. As the population and the overall labour force continued to grow, so those employed in agriculture came to constitute a smaller and smaller proportion of the total. Yet the size of the British agricultural labour force did not reach its absolute peak of some 2.1 million until 1851 when almost twice as many people were still working in fields as in factories or mills. By 1891 numbers had fallen to about 1.6 million, though in percentage terms the reduction was far steeper, from 21.7 to 10.5 per cent of the occupied population as a whole.⁶ Thus,

⁴ *The Times*, 17 July 1847.

⁵ P. Deane and W. A. Cole, *British Economic Growth 1688-1959*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1967), 166. For developments in the century before 1850, see G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vi (Cambridge, 1989). At the time of writing, the volume dealing with 1850-1914 is still awaited.

⁶ Deane and Cole, *British Economic Growth*, 142-3.

while in 1851 agriculture was still the single most important British 'industry' from an employment point of view, twenty years later more people were finding work as domestic servants than as workers on the land. By the end of the century, if not a little earlier, countrymen and women had ceased to be the representative figures they had been since time immemorial.

All of this was of course closely related to contemporary shifts in the distribution of people between countryside and town. Although the distinctions involved are necessarily artificial, the best estimates suggest that the 'rural' population in England and Wales (those living outside settlements of more than 2,500 inhabitants) changed as shown in the table. Not only, however, was this rural population shrinking (at first in relative and later also in absolute terms) but the 'countryside' itself was steadily becoming less and less agrarian in character, in the sense that the proportion of its inhabitants directly employed in agriculture fell continuously from 54.2 per cent in 1851 to 45.4 per cent in 1891 and to even lower levels thereafter.⁷ Although to some extent this must have been caused by the rise of suburbia beyond civic boundaries, such figures cast doubt upon arguments which suggest that the decline in the number of rural artisans and craftsmen brought about by the economic difficulties of the late Victorian period was so great that eventually little save agriculture was carried on in rural areas. Certainly many mid-century villages boasted an impressive range of occupations—Binbrook in the Lincolnshire wolds had 109 craftsmen among its 1,269 inhabitants in 1851, as well as doctors, solicitors, architects, and surveyors.⁸ But trades such as those of the blacksmith, wheelwright,

	000s	% of total population
1801	5,883	66.2
1841	8,211	52.7
1851	8,240	46.0
1861	8,282	41.3
1871	7,910	34.8
1881	7,794	30.0
1891	7,402	25.5

⁷ C. M. Law, 'The Growth of Urban Population in England and Wales, 1801-1911', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (1967), 125-43; F. D. W. Taylor, 'United Kingdom: Numbers in Agriculture', *Farm Economist*, 8 (1955), 36-40.

⁸ F. M. L. Thompson, 'Free Trade and the Land', in G. E. Mingay (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside*, 2 vols. (London, 1981), i, 115; G. E. Mingay, *Rural Life in Victorian England* (London, 1977), 181; P. Horn, *The Rural World 1780-1850* (London, 1980), 226-7.

and saddler continued to flourish as long as horses remained predominant in traction and local transport (that is, until the Great War), while any decline that took place among tailors, shoemakers, and the like was made good by a growth in retailing and by the influx of prosperous people from towns anxious and now able to dwell in rustic surroundings. Indeed, by becoming in this fashion more closely intermingled with the economy as a whole, the agrarian sector in effect disguised its relative decline, delayed recognition of that decline, and ensured that its traditional preoccupations remained more central to national concerns than might otherwise have been the case.

Yet it cannot be denied that the repeal of the Corn Laws signified a defeat for the agricultural interest. While individual landowners remained politically powerful, landowners as a body were no longer able to determine the political agenda as they had done even during the early days of industrialization. Economically, too, the transformations that followed 1846 were to prove real enough. While the so-called golden age of British agriculture between the 1850s and the mid-1870s may have obscured the effects of repeal, the underlying character of agriculture began to undergo deep changes almost at once, in part at least in direct or indirect reaction to free trade operating within a context of changing consumption patterns among the people as a whole. Wheat prices remained relatively stable after 1852 (though stable along a gradually declining curve) only because rising consumption was able to absorb rising imports and because these imports were in any case held in comparative check by high transport costs, lack of full prairie exploitation in North America, and supply crises produced by wars in the Crimea and the United States. But with about half of domestic wheat consumption already being met by imports in 1873–5 as opposed to a quarter just after repeal, the traditional role of wheat cultivation had ceased to be secure.⁹ This was not in any case the kind of future that had been envisaged in 1846. Both protectionists like Disraeli and free traders like Bright had predicted an immediate and lasting fall in wheat prices, leading (by the former's analysis) to agricultural ruin and (by the latter's) to cheaper bread. Neither happened. Nor is there any evidence that repeal, by releasing domestic demand, stimulated manufacturing industry or that higher imports produced, through the foreign-trade multiplier, any direct bilateral additional demand for British goods from wheat-supplying countries abroad.

⁹ C. Ó Gráda, 'British Agriculture, 1860–1914', in R. Floud and D. McCloskey (eds.), *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, 2nd edn., 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1994), 166–70; J. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1930–8), ii. 3; W. Ashworth, *An Economic History of England 1870–1939* (London, 1960), 54.

The major agricultural consequence of repeal was that an existing price swing away from grain and towards animal products was sustained. Increasing prosperity led to a growing demand for proteins at the expense of cheaper starches such as bread. As a result, the prices of meat, butter, cheese, milk, and the like rose faster than those of grain in general and wheat in particular. Farmers began to move decisively away from 'corn' and towards 'horn'. Between 1846/50 and 1876/80 (when overall prices went up by about 7 per cent) prime beef and mutton recorded increases of 49 and 37 per cent respectively, but English wheat a fall of 8 per cent.¹⁰ Within the mixed farming system common in the 'arable' areas of the east and south of England more and more emphasis was placed on livestock (which could utilize the fodder produced by four-crop rotation and which also provided dung). Indeed, the prosperity of the golden age was built upon the twin pillars of rising animal prices and expanding wheat yields. With the pasture areas of the north and west being maintained and even extended, the overall result was a shift away from wheat. Because reliable British agricultural statistics only began to be collected in the late 1860s, the immediacy of these changes is difficult to demonstrate. Ireland, however, led the field in statistical matters and there the early appearance of the process is both obvious and unambiguous (Table 1.1).

TABLE 1.1 *Index of grain acreage and cattle numbers in Britain and Ireland, 1849-1893* (Ireland, 1849-51 = 100; Britain, 1867-9 = 100)

	Wheat acreage	All grain acreage	Cattle numbers
<i>Ireland</i>			
1855-7	82	85	128
1861-3	57	81	114
1867-9	46	69	128
1873-5	29	61	143
1885-7	12	50	145
1891-3	12	48	155
<i>Britain</i>			
1873-5	98	100	115
1885-7	66	87	125
1891-3	60	82	130

Source: Based on material in B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), 186-206.

¹⁰ A. Sauerbeck, 'Prices of Commodities and the Precious Metals', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 49 (1886), 642-3.

By the 1890s the animal sector had, indeed, come to supply the clear preponderance of gross farm output in England at current prices: 63.1 per cent for 1894–8 as opposed to 49.6 per cent for 1867–71.¹¹

Without Corn Law repeal certain branches of agriculture would have suffered more seriously than they did from the depression which began to intensify during the late 1870s as expanding grain imports pushed down prices at the very time when a series of bad harvests drastically reduced domestic output. Livestock producers, for example, were able to benefit from cheaper feed and to do comparatively well in an environment of generally falling prices throughout the economy as a whole. Some other farmers too proved adept in making the most of changed circumstances, either by moving into milk which was free from foreign competition or by extreme caution over the supposed benefits of mechanization. Those who had invested most heavily in capital-intensive arable farming did, however, suffer grievously, and many went to the wall to be replaced by less grandiosely ambitious operators (often from Scotland) who knew how to farm light and to skim the soil without too much risk to its essential qualities. What was new was the persistence of bad times after the mid-1870s, though as always different parts of the country were affected very differently. Indeed, behind the immediately visible and much-reported gloom the overall level of farm output at constant factor cost held up remarkably well, while output per head (given the shrinking agrarian population) actually recorded a modest rise.¹² Even so, an average annual productivity growth rate of 0.4 per cent between the 1860s and the 1910s, though very like that of 1700–1850, compared badly with those achieved by agrarian sectors in other countries such as the United States and Japan.¹³

2. RURAL SOCIETY

Such briefly was the economic context of the agricultural interest, a context heavily influenced by the abolition of protection in 1846. At the apex of that interest stood the landlords. Radical criticisms and tendentious census returns (which in 1861 purported to show that there were 30,766 'landed proprietors' in England and Wales, over half of them, supposedly, women) persuaded the government to mount an official investigation eventually

¹¹ T. W. Fletcher, 'The Great Depression of English Agriculture 1873–1896', *Economic History Review*, 13 (1961), 432.

¹² A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England: A Social History 1850–1925* (London, 1991), 150; C. H. Feinstein, *National Income, Expenditure and Output of the United Kingdom 1855–1965* (Cambridge, 1972), T118.

¹³ Ó Gráda, 'British Agriculture', 148–9.

published in 1873 and generally known as the 'New Domesday Book'. To the delight of some and the annoyance of others this showed that land was concentrated in remarkably few hands. Certainly no other rural élite in nineteenth-century Europe owned so large a part of their nation's soil. What is less clear is whether (as some claimed) there had been a trend towards increased concentration during the previous hundred years or whether things had more or less remained the same. Plain enough, however, were facts such as these: (a) that more than two-fifths of the land in England and Wales belonged to less than 1,700 persons while about 4,200 with more than 1,000 acres each owned well over half, (b) that in England 363 individuals owned over 10,000 acres each and almost a quarter of all the land, (c) that more than four-fifths of the surface of the United Kingdom belonged to some 7,000 proprietors.¹⁴ Broad indeed may have been the acres, but few were the gentlemen and ladies to whom they belonged.

Below them the NCOs and the privates of the agrarian army consisted, respectively, of farmers and labourers, with the former, if sufficiently successful, occasionally allowed to enter (though not to join) the lower end of the officers' mess. By 1831 there were approximately one million adult males engaged in English agriculture, with about 5.5 labourers for every farmer who gave employment.¹⁵ The remarkable stability in the number of farmers—there were 249,000 in England and Wales in 1851 and 229,000 sixty years later—suggests that it was above all the system of land tenure that helped to determine the size of farms. The dramatic fall in the agrarian population after the middle of the century was entirely brought about by a loss of hired hands. Their number in England and Wales shrank from 1,268,000 in 1851 to 650,000 in 1901, with the result that farmers became more and more prominent demographically as the ratio of workers to farmers declined: 5.1:1 (1851), 4.0:1 (1871), 3.6:1 (1891), 2.9:1 (1901). In Scotland (and in Wales taken alone) the trend was much the same, while in Ireland the Great Famine of 1845–9 so reduced the army of landless workers that there too the relative numerical and cultural importance of the farmer community was substantially enhanced.¹⁶

¹⁴ F. M. L. Thompson, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1963), 25–44, 109–50; J. Bateman, *The Great Landowners of Great Britain and Ireland*, 4th edn. (London, 1883; repr. Leicester, 1971).

¹⁵ E. A. Wrigley, 'Men on the Land and Men in the Countryside', in L. Bonfield, R. M. Smith, and K. Wrightson (eds.), *The World we have Gained* (Oxford, 1986), 305.

¹⁶ Taylor, 'Numbers in Agriculture', 36–40 ('farmers' relatives' and 'others' excluded). The addition of (mainly female) relatives and the like greatly increases numbers (E. Higgs, 'Occupational Censuses and the Agricultural Workforce in Victorian England and Wales', *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), 700–16).

Not that farmers as a group were economically or socially homogeneous. The line between men with little land, on the one side, and those with fifty acres or more, on the other, was clear enough. Above it, styles of life became steadily more comfortable until the wealthiest could afford to live like minor landed gentlemen. By continental standards English farms were large, though the trend towards enlargement came to an end in the 1860s. There were, however, wide regional variations, with farms in pastoral Lancashire and Cheshire much smaller than in arable Suffolk or Essex. What official statistics for England and Wales first revealed in 1851 was that, although most farmers were men of comparatively modest degree, the land as such was dominated by those who worked on an extensive scale. This was confirmed by more accurate data in 1885 which showed that, of 338,715 holdings above five acres in size, the 83,632 above 100 acres encompassed 71 per cent of all cultivated soil. And, because the very largest operators were few in number—only 573 occupied more than 1,000 acres—it was precisely those with ‘intermediate’ holdings who now formed a dominant economic core.¹⁷ Yet even within a single county the nature and income of the ‘typical’ farmer could vary dramatically from one district to another. While, therefore, in Lincolnshire as a whole the ‘average’ mid-century farmer was a man with about 120 acres of poorly drained clay soil, employing perhaps three or four workers, attending market once a week in his chimney-pot hat, and living in tolerable but plain comfort, in the Fens and the Marsh and in the Isle of Axholme ten-acre holdings were the norm and the families of many smallholders lived rough, hard, poverty-infested lives.¹⁸

The great majority of farmers were tenants standing in a direct financial relationship with the owners of the soil. Most held by annual agreements, the declining use of leases (something which urban radicals complained much about) being widely accepted because, when times were hard, leases made it difficult to obtain rent reductions or to escape quickly from complete financial collapse. By the end of Victoria’s reign the proportion of land held by owner occupiers amounted to less than an eighth, some of it in the form of landlords’ home farms, untenanted land, or parsons’ glebes. Owner farmers—or yeomen as they were often called—were in any case heavily concentrated in areas such as Cumberland, Westmorland, and parts

¹⁷ Clapham, *Economic History*, ii. 264–5; *Agricultural Returns of Great Britain*, H[ouse of] C[ommons Paper] 1870 [C 223], lxviii. 363–438; *Agricultural Returns of Great Britain*, HC 1886 [C 4847], lxx. 1–236; D. Grigg, ‘Farm Size in England and Wales, from Early Victorian Times to the Present’, *Agricultural History Review*, 35 (1987), 179–89.

¹⁸ R. J. Olney, *Rural Society and County Government in Nineteenth-Century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1979), 54–5.

of Lincolnshire. Mortgage rather than rentpayers, they found life especially hard during the difficult years after 1875.

In political terms farmers constituted the key group within rural county constituencies. In mid-century Lincolnshire, for example, though only a tenth of the population, they supplied half the electorate because, in so prosperous a county, enfranchisement began with holdings as small as thirty acres in the period 1832–67 and five acres thereafter. County politics were, as a result, predominantly farmer politics revolving around protection, local taxation, the malt tax, and similar matters.¹⁹ Although those with small farms relied exclusively on family assistance, and at the lower levels were sometimes (notably in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales) barely distinguishable from regularly employed labourers, the rest occupied a distinctive and middling position within rural society. And where landowners were thin on the ground, the more prosperous tenants did duty as leaders of opinion and local society, having, in some cases, been able to accumulate considerable fortunes, take up shooting, build comfortable houses, and educate their children at tolerable schools. Unlike the gentry, however, they tended to divide their property at death among all their children and to maintain political and cultural perspectives in which wider horizons counted for little. Above all, they stood apart from the bulk of the urban middle classes in their very different notion of capital and of the entrepreneurial ideal, in their protectionist Conservatism, and in their deep distrust of city life.

For their part, agricultural labourers—the countryside's working class—were comparatively slow to emerge as a coherent social group and retained longer than landlords and farmers a lingering sense of being involved in some kind of comprehensive rural community. Eventually, however, the increasing impact of the market and the decline of much of the casual paternalism of former times brought such misunderstandings to an end. In many areas their circumstances were no better than those of slum dwellers in the towns, as James Caird found when visiting Northumberland in 1850.

Wretched houses piled here and there without order—filth of every kind scattered about or heaped up against the walls—horses, cows and pigs lodged under the same roof with their owners, and entering by the same door—in many cases a pigsty beneath the only window of the dwellings—300 people, 60 horses and 50 cows, besides hosts of pigs and poultry—such is the village of Wark.²⁰

¹⁹ R. J. Olney, *Lincolnshire Politics 1832–1885* (Oxford, 1973), 78, 82, 243; id., *Rural Society*, 149.

²⁰ Mingay, *Rural Life*, 92.

Living conditions depended, however, not only upon the rewards provided by farmers but also on whether labourers lived in 'closed' villages dominated by one or two powerful proprietors or in 'open' villages where property was more widely distributed. Dwellings in the former were generally superior, but their availability was strictly limited by landlords as anxious to keep their rate bills down as to make their cottagers conform to deferential social disciplines of a generally rebarbative kind. Open settlements, on the other hand, though often overcrowded and dirty, allowed greater social, political, and religious freedoms. Although the distinctions between the two were not always as clear as this, they were widely recognized by contemporaries as real and significant. Different parts of the country sustained different patterns, with open villages commoner in the north-west and south-west than in the central districts, though even adjacent counties like Leicestershire (with more than half its townships open) and Lincolnshire (with only a third) could vary substantially.²¹ A notable sign of the 'modernization' of rural society and its increasing dependence upon the cash nexus was the decline in the number of so-called indoor farm servants, especially in England. These lodged and often ate with the farmer, obtained regular work and substantial fringe benefits, and tended, therefore, to enjoy some sense of affinity with their employers. They were commonly unmarried—many were female—and were most frequently to be found in Scotland and in counties like North Yorkshire. But in a period of only ten years after 1851 their presence among agricultural workers in England and Wales fell from almost a quarter to barely a sixth. Thereafter it declined further still.²²

Between 1851 and 1891—when the overall population of England and Wales rose by more than three-fifths—the number of agricultural labourers fell by almost two-fifths, not primarily because of the introduction of mechanized farming, but because urban employment became more attractive. Something approaching a labour shortage ensued, with the result that wages rose. And although national data disguise a host of regional variations, it is possible to indicate the orders of magnitude involved by means of indices of both 'money' earnings (including quantifiable non-cash benefits) and real earnings adjusted for the cost of living (Table 1.2).

Following the bad experiences of labourers during the decades immediately after 1815, the second half of the century witnessed undoubted improvements. The violent discontents of the 'Swing' riots of 1830–1

²¹ D. R. Mills, *Lord and Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1980), 77, 117; J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1976), 12–13.

²² Horn, *Rural World*, 244.

TABLE 1.2 Indices of earnings and real earnings of agricultural labourers in England and Wales, 1840-1889 (1830-4 = 100)

	Earnings	Real earnings
1840-9	99	99
1850-9	107	105
1860-9	116	109
1870-9	143	139
1880-9	123	139

Source: Based on A. L. Bowley's index in B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), 157-8, adjusted (for real earnings) by the Rousseau price index (*ibid.* 722-3).

eventually gave way in England to formal rural trade unionism and this in turn confirmed the simultaneous growth among labourers of greater group cohesion and of rising expectations. The processes involved in this transformation were, however, neither linear nor unambiguous. Rural crime did not, for example, suddenly disappear after 1831. Indeed, it reached its highest peak in the British countryside as a whole in the 1840s, remained at a high level until the early 1850s, and thereafter still experienced occasional sharp rises as in the late 1860s and early 1880s. Not only that, but crimes of violence (which formed between a tenth and a fifth of rural offences) continued to worry the authorities more or less persistently until the mid-1860s and from time to time in later years also.²³ The people most often targeted were farmers, land agents, gamekeepers, Poor Law officials, and policemen (landlords were too well protected). This was true of all parts of the United Kingdom. In Ireland, for example, though rural violence undoubtedly declined during the quarter-century after the Great Famine (only to rise again during the Land War of 1879-82), it neither vanished nor ceased to be primarily an expression of the tensions which had long existed between men with access to land (farmers) and those with nothing to offer but their sweat and their strength (labourers).²⁴ In East Anglia, too, the long local tradition of incendiarism—of setting a torch to the property of unpopular and exploitative farmers and landowners—continued well into the 1860s, with eight fires taking place in November 1870 alone, all of them in villages notorious for unrest and burnings for half a century and more.²⁵ And it is of course highly probable that some at least

²³ D. Jones, 'Rural Crime and Protest', in Mingay (ed.), *Victorian Countryside*, ii. 571.

²⁴ K. T. Hoppen, *Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland 1832-1885* (Oxford, 1984), 341-435 (though W. E. Vaughan takes a somewhat more sanguine view of rural violence in mid-century Ireland in *Landlords and Tenants in Mid-Victorian Ireland* (Oxford, 1994), 138-76).

²⁵ J. E. Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare: Incendiarism, Animal Maiming and Poaching in East Anglia 1815-1870* (Oxford, 1990), 119-25.

of the decline in crime after about 1850 had as much to do with better policing as with improvements in the relationships within rural society as a whole.

Certainly Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union and the various independent unions that sprang up during the prosperous years of the early 1870s still found much combustible material upon which to work. But while their activities helped to give collective vent to a good deal of pent-up rage—'England was a happy England when there was not a farmer in the land'—they achieved little in terms of hard cash save in the shortest of runs. None the less, their success in attracting, however fleetingly, the support of so many agricultural labourers (possibly 115,000 in England and Wales alone or an eighth of the male labour force) unquestionably helped to bring about gradual but significant changes in the outlook and behaviour of those who worked upon the land.²⁶

In absolute terms the farm workers' lot remained miserable. When the Earl of Yarborough died in 1875, his stock of cigars was sold for £850—or more than eighteen years' income for the agricultural labourers who lived on or near his estate. As late as 1892 regional wage levels ranged from as low as 14s. 9d. to no more than 19s. 2d. a week. Indeed, the whole of the cash increase gained by English labourers between the mid-1820s and 1898 came to the great sum of 5s. a week for those fully employed.²⁷ Although housing improved and men's work became more regular, hours remained long and women and children found it harder to earn money than before. Average real incomes never rose much above half those in industry throughout our period and farm labourers received a much lower proportion of the wealth they helped to create than ever their urban counterparts did.²⁸

Yet the reality of relative improvement cannot be doubted. While during the 1850s and early 1860s British farmers' incomes rose in percentage terms more than those of landlords and labourers, thereafter it was the labourers who recorded the largest proportional increase, though of course, in their case, starting from very low levels and almost entirely the result of continuing large reductions in the total number of those employed. Proprietors were the clearest losers on the agricultural merry-go-round of late Victorian

²⁶ J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural Discontent in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 1974), 75–6, 249; G. R. Boyer and T. J. Hatton, 'Did Joseph Arch raise Agricultural Wages?', *Economic History Review*, 47 (1994), 310–34.

²⁷ A. Armstrong, *Farmworkers: A Social and Economic History 1770–1980* (London, 1988), 133; C. S. Orwin and B. I. Felton, 'A Century of Wages and Earnings in Agriculture', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, 92 (1931), 231–57.

²⁸ J. R. Bellerby, 'Distribution of Farm Income in the United Kingdom, 1867–1938', in W. E. Minchinton (ed.), *Essays in Agrarian History*, 2 vols. (Newton Abbot, 1968), ii. 271; W. A. Armstrong, 'The Workforce', in Mingay (ed.), *Victorian Countryside*, ii. 505.

times, most of the (25 per cent or so) rent rise in England and Wales between the middle of the century and the onset of the depression being simply 'bought' by landlords spending unrealistic amounts on fencing, new buildings, and other improvements. Even in the prosperous mid-century decades arable land yielded no more than 2 to 3 per cent a year or about half that available in banking, commerce, and industry. Prestige clearly counted for more than the maximization of returns.²⁹ Rents reached their peak in the mid-1870s. By 1894-6 they had fallen back by 29 per cent on the levels of 1873-5.³⁰ While landlords, therefore, had made substantial permanent gains during the French Revolutionary Wars, increases after 1850 proved transient. As always, national statistics disguise local variations, especially after 1875 when rents in arable areas fell substantially while those in livestock and dairying districts either declined less or not at all. Although landlords too benefited from the deflation of the late nineteenth century, in the sense that they could obtain more for each pound spent, theirs was relatively an unhappy experience, made worse by a decrease in land prices and a shortage of buyers. Land values as measured in years' purchase (that is, the number of years' rent needed to equal the purchase price of an estate) moved roughly from about 25 in the 1830s and 1840s to 35-40 in the late 1860s and then down to 20-5 by the end of the century. Thus, while in 1870 an estate yielding an annual gross rental of £1,000 might have sold for about £40,000, by 1900 the price had virtually halved. Yet, partly by choice and partly because farmers, in turn, found it difficult to raise the mortgages required for purchasing land, most owners managed to hold on to their properties. Mansions and moors were let to businessmen with rustic tastes, but really big sales did not become widespread until just before the outbreak of the Great War.³¹

As their investment behaviour shows, British landlords were not in general 'economic' men. Farmers have greater claims to that distinction. In 1881 the Earl of Derby listed the five 'objects which men aim at when they become possessed of land': political influence, social importance, power over tenantry, residential enjoyment, and, very much last, 'the money return—

²⁹ Thompson, *English Landed Society*, 247-55. Some drainage schemes, however, gave reasonable returns, especially on large estates (A. D. M. Phillips, *The Underdraining of Farmland in England during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1989), 206-46).

³⁰ R. J. Thompson, 'An Inquiry into the Rent of Agricultural Land in England and Wales during the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 70 (1907), 592-5; H. A. Rhee, *The Rent of Agricultural Land in England and Wales 1870-1943* (1949), 37 ff.

³¹ F. M. L. Thompson, 'The Land Market in the Nineteenth Century', *Oxford Economic Papers*, NS 9 (1957), 294; id., 'Free Trade and the Land', i. 115; J. Habakkuk, *Marriage, Debt, and the Estates System: English Landownership 1650-1950* (Oxford, 1994), 662-70.

the rent'.³² 'Land', as Trollope had Archdeacon Grantly say, 'gives so much more than rent. It gives position and influence and political power, to say nothing of the game.' But much depended on the amount and value of the land owned, while outlook, temperament, and behaviour also helped render complicated and distinct the members of a group who, seen from afar, could present a picture of misleading uniformity.

Thus the marginal and mortgaged landlord limping along on a gross income of £1,000 a year inhabited a physical and psychological universe light years away from that illuminated by the Duke of Westminster whose balances increased by £1,000 a day.³³ And even if proprietors resembled one another by the mere fact of owning land and by a common (but by no means universal) interest in country pursuits, the differences between them could be as great as the similarities. As the reformer, Bernard Cracroft, put it in 1867,

A and B are cousins, landowners, county Members. Both are Etonians, both Oxonians, both Guardsmen, both have married daughters of peers. But one is a member of the Carlton [i.e. a Tory], the other of Brooks's [i.e. a Whig]. One is a Protectionist, the other a Freetrader. One hugs primogeniture, the other thinks it better that land should be as saleable as a watch. One is an enthusiastic defender of the Protestant faith in Ireland, the other thinks that the Irish Church would be best swept off the face of the earth.³⁴

Given that this was so, it is possible to slice up landed society in a multitude of kaleidoscopic ways. There were untitled squires who did almost nothing but hunt, some of them poor, some of them as rich as any earl. There were extravagant spenders who went down to ruin and insolvency. But there were also those who, like the 6th Baron Monson, scraped and saved to rescue their estates from bankruptcy and hand on an inheritance to their sons, who invested almost nothing in improvements, lived cheaply far away from their properties, and squeezed their tenants until the pips squeaked. And while Monson, for example, was a hater of parsons—indeed of organized religion generally—his close Lincolnshire neighbour, Sir Charles Anderson, was a High Churchman, an attender to local business of every kind, an improver, a resident landlord, and a passionate hunter of foxes and slayer of birds. Yet, Monson and Anderson also shared certain outlooks and traditions which, in turn, separated them from other landed proprietors. Because both, for example, belonged to families that

³² 'Ireland and the Land Act', *Nineteenth Century*, 10 (1881), 474.

³³ D. Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven, 1990), 22.

³⁴ B. Cracroft, 'The Analysis of the House of Commons, or Indirect Representation', in *Essays on Reform* [ed. A. O. Rutson] (London, 1867), 168–9.

had once been richer and more prominent, their great consciousness of rank and social position—as well as a joint interest in antiquarianism—sprang, to a large extent, from a touchy awareness of straitened circumstances. Both, as a result, distrusted ‘new’ money and made their distrust obvious to all.³⁵

Not only, however, did family and personal habits generate a widely divergent range of attitudes and behaviour, but the very patterning of landownership itself varied substantially between regions and even within individual counties. Thus, while half the land in Northumberland was held within estates of 10,000 acres and more, in Essex the proportion was less than a tenth. Equally diverse was the distribution of substantial country houses, their density ranging from 1 to 31,000 acres in Rutland to 1 to 449,000 acres in Westmorland.³⁶ Again, though many men possessed properties in Ireland, Scotland, or Wales as well as in England, the circumstances of landownership were far from uniform throughout the United Kingdom as a whole. Some Scottish estates covered enormous tracts of desolate land, the Duke of Sutherland owning 1,176,459 acres—or not far short of 2,000 square miles—in the county from which he took his title. In Ireland, where most landlords were Protestants and most tenants Catholics, tenurial relationships were often so tense, not to say violent, that the notion of a comparatively comprehensive and stable agrarian interest remained almost entirely a fictional one. And while landlords in England enjoyed a tolerably favourable image throughout most of the nineteenth century, those in Ireland (sometimes of course precisely the same men) were frequently pilloried as nothing more than bloodsucking exploiters of the poor. Indeed, it was symptomatic of the low esteem in which Irish proprietors had come to be held that during and immediately after the Great Famine there was much excited, if entirely unrealistic, talk to the effect that they alone should be made to bear the cost of relieving Irish hunger and distress.³⁷ Not only, therefore, did the agrarian interest of mid-Victorian times consist of broadly distinct groups such as landowners, farmers, and labourers, but each of these groups was itself composed of diverse individuals who, though held together by an affinity to land, differed greatly in numerous other respects.

What, perhaps more than anything else, drove proprietors of old lineage like Monson and Anderson into bouts of apoplectic rage was the belief—

³⁵ Olney, *Rural Society*, 22–45.

³⁶ Thompson, *English Landed Society*, 30–2.

³⁷ J. S. Donnelly, jun., ‘“Irish Property Must Pay for Irish Poverty”’: British Public Opinion and the Great Irish Famine’, in C. Morash and R. Hayes (ed.), *Fearful Realities: New Perspectives on the Famine* (Dublin, 1996), 60–76.

based more on apprehension than fact—that hordes of rich parvenus were throwing money about in an attempt to buy their way into local ‘society’. In reality, the British system of primogeniture and strict settlement³⁸ meant that estates tended to pass intact between generations and that it was difficult for large numbers of outsiders to enter the landed class. Of course there had long been some interchange between the worlds of landownership and of banking, commerce, trading, and professional life. But the view that the British landed class was especially open to fresh blood from below is in need of some qualification.³⁹ If anything, things became more exclusive during the half-century after Waterloo. Fewer fortunes were to be made in the law, strict settlement strengthened its grip, land prices made purchase an ever more expensive undertaking. At the very top, the peerage remained closed to manufacturers until 1885. Such direct contacts as did exist were based either on the downward drift of younger sons into the politer reaches of commercial life—though the church, the armed forces, and the civil and colonial services provided more congenial prospects—or on some form of involvement in mineral exploitation and urban development. But though minerals and town property were financially important to the landed super-rich (in the 1870s eighteen of the forty-odd families with gross valuations of £60,000 or more derived their chief revenues from such sources), they counted for much less among the generality of owners with more typical incomes.⁴⁰ In any case, even the commercial investments of the great, like those of the Duke of Devonshire at Barrow-in-Furness or Lord Bute in the Cardiff Docks, often proved unwise, being driven, as often as not, by that same search for prestige and popularity which induced other proprietors to join the costly agricultural improvement frenzy of the 1850s and 1860s. The fact that families like the Derbys, the Ramsdens, the Seftons, the Norfolks, the Fitzwilliams, the Bedfords, and the Westminsters owned large parts of Liverpool, Huddersfield, Sheffield, and London in no way diminished their essential ‘landedness’. Even Lord Cranborne,

³⁸ A general term used to describe legal and customary procedures designed to prevent the alienation of land outside families by turning each successive landowner into a ‘life tenant’ precluded from selling all or part of the land and required to pass it on intact to the next heir.

³⁹ W. D. Rubinstein, ‘New Men of Wealth and the Purchase of Land in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *Past & Present*, 92 (1981), 125–47; F. M. L. Thompson, ‘Life after Death: How Successful Nineteenth-Century Businessmen Disposed of their Fortunes’, *Economic History Review*, 43 (1990), 40–61; W. D. Rubinstein, ‘Cutting up Rich: A Reply to F. M. L. Thompson’, *ibid.* 45 (1992), 350–61; F. M. L. Thompson, ‘Stitching it Together Again’, *ibid.* 362–75.

⁴⁰ D. Cannadine, ‘The Landowner as Millionaire: The Finances of the Dukes of Devonshire, c.1800–c.1926’, *Agricultural History Review*, 25 (1977), 92.

who in 1866–7 impartially denounced Gladstone and Disraeli for weakening the agrarian interest, showed no objections to becoming a fully paid-up member of the urban property club on succeeding his father as Marquess of Salisbury in 1868.

Such comparative exclusiveness rendered the proprietorial class, whatever its differences, numerically small. All the more remarkable, therefore, was the comparative (though diminishing) success with which landowners kept their hands on the tillers of local and national affairs. In this respect there was a clear distinction between the lesser gentry, whose social and political influence was confined to their own neighbourhoods, and wealthier men with wider concerns. In most counties only estates of 3,000 acres of decent land guaranteed significant local standing, with 10,000 acres being required for ‘automatic pre-eminence’.⁴¹ Locally the magistrates’ bench (which exercised administrative as well as judicial authority) was the prime platform for landed solidarity and upon it the gentry and their allies maintained a strong grip well into the 1880s and beyond. By contrast, the parliamentary seats still controlled by patrons—some sixty-two in England and Wales as late as 1868 and rather more in the 1840s—were almost exclusively in the hands of larger magnates, though even in such places truly unpopular candidates could not simply be forced down the county voters’ throats.⁴² In the Commons of 1865 there were 326 more or less ‘aristocratic’ MPs and another 120 who belonged ‘substantially . . . to the same class’. More than two-thirds of the members shared, therefore, a ‘common freemasonry of blood, a common education, common pursuits, common ideas, a common dialect, a common religion, and—what more than any other thing binds men together—a common prestige’.⁴³ Indeed, since the Reform Acts of 1832 the proportion of MPs who were bankers, merchants, and manufacturers had hardly changed, remaining steady at a little over a fifth. And even when landed numbers did eventually begin to decline, landed men continued to form the most significant and stable element within the Conservative–Unionist alignment and to dominate all cabinets until 1905, perhaps even until 1919.⁴⁴ More tenaciously still did they maintain a grip upon the outlying citadels of power, as ambassadors and viceroys, generals and admirals, as bishops, as key members of the Civil Service. Not, however, that closeness of kinship necessarily entailed either

⁴¹ Olney, *Rural Society*, 22–3, 27.

⁴² H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the Time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (London, 1959), 412; N. Gash, *Politics in the Age of Peel: A Study in the Technique of Parliamentary Representation 1830–1850* (London, 1953), 438–9.

⁴³ Cracroft, ‘Analysis of the House of Commons’, 160, 171–2.

⁴⁴ Cannadine, *Decline and Fall*, 207, 711.

political harmony or party collaboration, unity being reserved for the hunting field and the magistrates' bench. Individual families were split over Corn Law repeal in the 1840s as they had been before and were to be thereafter. Several late nineteenth-century politicians like Harcourt, Campbell-Bannerman, and Edward Stanhope all had brothers on the opposite side of the Commons. But though both major parties received considerable landed support, the club affiliations of those with British estates worth at least £5,000 a year indicate that in 1880—that is, before the Home Rule split—less than one out of every three such men still thought of themselves as Liberals.⁴⁵

Yet despite their comparative success in holding on to the sweets of office, landed proprietors in general encountered deep-seated problems of various kinds long before the onset of agricultural depression in the 1870s, though a mortgaged Indian summer in the 1850s for a time persuaded many of them that all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds. That the political rhythms of mid-Victorian county constituencies still responded to landed influence now depended more upon the unthinking and transient survival of old habits than upon the tangible reality of power relationships and common identities. The enormous differences in wealth, outlook, status, and temperament long characteristic of the proprietorial class were beginning to exercise an increasingly splintering impact upon the political effectiveness of the class as a whole. Though some landowners remained electorally active, many simply gave up the fight. And even those who continued to exert themselves began to find that traditional conventions of deference were no longer sufficient by themselves to secure political conformity.⁴⁶ In large measure this was because English tenant farmers (the situation in Scotland and Wales was rather, in Ireland very, different) had always tended to vote more in a broadly geographical and communal than in a merely tenurial context. They voted, in other words, primarily for a local interest rather than simply for a particular proprietor.⁴⁷ The repeal of the Corn Laws, by removing the foundations upon which this state of things had chiefly become based, set in train the gradual erosion of those landlord-tenant congruities which only local interest had been able to generate and sustain.⁴⁸ In this sense 1846 marks the crucial 'point of no return', the sentence of death ready to be carried into execution when next agriculture experienced difficult times.⁴⁹ But already well before the late 1870s and the 1880s the deployment of those forms of paternalism upon which

⁴⁵ Hoppen, *Elections*, 127.

⁴⁶ Olney, *Lincolnshire Politics*, 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 44-5.

⁴⁸ D. C. Moore, 'The Gentry', in Mingay (ed.), *Victorian Countryside*, ii. 392.

⁴⁹ Thompson, *English Landed Society*, 272.

political influence depended far more than upon naked coercion was becoming increasingly patchy in nature and extent, as also was proprietorial involvement in the duties of rural administration and local government generally.⁵⁰ Landed control over borough constituencies had suffered a severe blow in 1832, landed influence in county constituencies began to erode after 1846.⁵¹ Electoral managers, once able to forecast the outcome of county elections with informed precision, from the 1850s onwards found themselves all at sea, as farmers no longer responded predictably to the political imperatives of those who owned the land.⁵²

This does not mean that the political community of rural England fell to pieces immediately on—or very soon after—the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Indeed, even in Ireland landlords succeeded in orchestrating a good deal of electoral success in the decade or so following the Great Famine.⁵³ What, however, it does mean is that landlord power was becoming a fading asset, occasional displays of firework effectiveness notwithstanding. If, therefore, the day of economic reckoning did not finally arrive until the mid-1870s and that of electoral reckoning not until the reforms of 1884–5, proprietorial overdrafts had been accumulating on both accounts for thirty years and more.

As the cohesion of the agrarian interest was slowly unravelling two things helped to keep a select number of landed men close to the centre of political influence. The first was a willingness to whistle at least a selection of the tunes favoured by the middle classes of the towns. The second was money, for, well into the second half of the century, landowners predominated among the ranks of Britain's really wealthy men. Indeed, until 1880 they constituted the great majority of those leaving half a million pounds or more at death and even between then and the end of the century they constituted well over two-fifths.⁵⁴

After 1846 the main thrust of radical attack on the wealth and influence of rural landowners took the form of land reform movements through which it was hoped to reduce proprietorial power, give increased rights to tenants, and break up the great estates by outlawing strict settlement. But though these started with brave salvos to the effect that the 'citadel'

⁵⁰ J. V. Beckett, *The Aristocracy in England 1660–1914*, revised edn. (Oxford, 1989), 360–1, 369, 374–402.

⁵¹ K. T. Hoppen, 'Roads to Democracy: Electioneering and Corruption in Nineteenth-Century England and Ireland', *History*, 81 (1996), 553–71; Beckett, *Aristocracy in England*, 428–35, 438–48, 460–3.

⁵² D. C. Moore, *The Politics of Deference: A Study of the Mid-Nineteenth Century English Political System* (Hassocks, 1976), 292–3, 320.

⁵³ Hoppen, *Elections*, 89–170.

⁵⁴ W. D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain since the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1981), 60–6.

(protection) having now been taken, 'the axe must be laid at the root of the tree'⁵⁵ and despite some modest parliamentary enactments, little was at first achieved. British farmers remained aloof and rarely translated frustration over the game laws into support for land reform in general. (Irish farmers behaved very differently.) Though the Settled Land Act of 1882—the most substantial piece of relevant legislation—did indeed follow hard on the heels of economic depression and farmer discontent, its passage was secured primarily because landlords, having themselves come to favour greater flexibility in estate management, now saw the measure more as a protective than a threatening device.

It was, in short, a combined process of economic and political change and internal loss of nerve largely set in motion by the events of 1846 that eventually reduced the power of the landed classes to a shadow of its former self, not—in any important sense—the pin-prick attacks of contemporary radicalism. From 1875 onwards the widening of the financial gap between the great magnates and the smaller proprietors brought about by the depression further reduced the ability and willingness of the latter to continue the political fight. It had, in any case, always been the wealthiest families that had shown the greatest commitment. For the bulk of the gentry, politics had been at best a casual pursuit and London more interesting as the annual home of 'Society' than as the location of parliament. Amidst the colour and excitements of mid-nineteenth-century electioneering it is easy to forget how difficult it often was to persuade suitable candidates to stand at all. By the 1880s estates needed closer management and the hunting field and grouse moor offered greater attractions than a parliament containing too many cultural and class enemies—uncouth Irish obstructionists, atheists, and Jews. Many, probably the majority, of landed gentlemen had always been narrowly self-centred in their interpretation of what was required to protect their interests.⁵⁶ A broader franchise, increasingly recalcitrant farmers, tensions over Home Rule, attacks on property, and the eventual imposition of death duties combined to make political commitment seem ever more tedious and unprofitable. And with the increasing shift in the 1880s of all kinds of property towards the Conservative Party, the gentry could now rely on tough-minded urban politicians to fight the good fight on their behalf.

It is clear, therefore, that between the 1840s and the 1880s the nature and importance of agriculture and of the agrarian interest experienced many

⁵⁵ J. Beal, *Free Trade in Land* (London, 1855), 64.

⁵⁶ F. M. L. Thompson, 'Landowners and the Rural Community', in Mingay (ed.), *Victorian Countryside*, ii. 458.

transformations. Surface continuities—generally the products of nostalgia rather than reality—veiled the extent of change. The continuing expansion of a mass industrial and urban society drove the countryside's economy away from the centre of the stage. The proprietorial class, though maintaining a remarkable grasp upon the political levers, was beginning to enter into real retreat. Agricultural labourers declined sharply in number, and, though registering an increase in earnings, still limped behind their industrial counterparts. Farmers—even though their troubles filled official reports in the 1890s no less than in the 1880s—consolidated their cultural as well as their demographic position. Their share of total agricultural incomes, having fallen between the 1860s and the mid-1890s, then began to rise very substantially indeed.⁵⁷ While at the end of our period tribulations and hard times certainly still lay ahead, in the longer run of all those belonging to the agrarian interest it was the farmers who were to prove the most successful masters of their fate.

⁵⁷ Ó Gráda, 'British Agriculture', 146; A. Offer, 'Farm Tenure and Land Values in England, c.1750-1950', *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), 17.

CHAPTER 2

The Middle Sort of People

I. NUMBERS, EXPERIENCES, ANXIETIES

The first inheritors of the new urban society were those who employed, organized, and sold, those who argued in the courts or tried (mostly without success) to cure the sick. They were, in other words, the great middle class. Despite much heated debate, it is perhaps most sensible to see class and class consciousness as phenomena of oscillating intensity. Like umbrellas during a shower they came out rapidly in times of hardship and were as rapidly put away again once economic sunshine reappeared.

Yet the obvious fact that people were not constantly at one another's throats cannot disguise the appearance of important changes within the deep structures of British society. With a growing realization among certain—but by no means all—groups connected with industry that aristocratic government had not always been sympathetic to their concerns, there came a growing sense of communal disadvantage. The manner in which a landed parliament had imposed the Corn Law of 1815 and resisted franchise reform until 1832 helped give political edge to economic and social discontents. As a result, the middle class was the first of all the classes to be discovered by those with contemporary axes to grind. Sir James Graham in 1826 hailed those 'removed from the wants of labour and the cravings of ambition' as constituting the 'seat of public opinion', while in 1831 Lord Brougham equated the 'middle classes' with 'the wealth and intelligence of the country, the glory of the British name'.¹ And, indeed, the campaign against the Corn Laws, which more than anything gave sections at least of the middle class a real sense of missionary identity, was profoundly constitutional. Cobden might denounce the 'citadel of privilege' and the Manchester Chamber of Commerce insist that 'the inalienable right of every man freely to exchange the results of his labour for the productions

¹ A. Briggs, 'Middle-Class Consciousness in English Politics, 1780–1846', *Past & Present*, 9 (1956), 65–74.

of other people' was an 'eternal principle', but behind such rhetoric lay landscapes of more limited ambition.²

Only on the surface did the business ideal of free trade and competition in everything have much reality, for even amidst the Corn Law battles of the 1840s there were to be found cotton manufacturers combining demands for cheap imported raw materials with opposition to the export of advanced machinery and the emigration of skilled operatives. In the world of action as opposed to that of words, industrialists displayed no impetuous desire to undermine the aristocratic constitution. Many were timorous and conservative, local in their interests, deferential to their 'betters'.³

Entrepreneurs and professional men, shopkeepers and clerks, were not all stamped out of identical moulds. They were not all thirsting for revenge upon the aristocracy and the agricultural interest. A significant minority of businessmen were either open protectionists or free traders in no extreme sense of the term. Many loved a lord and were happy, as 'one of the greatest industrialists' told a French visitor in the 1860s, 'to leave the government' in aristocratic hands.⁴ Professional men, in their turn, depended on a wide variety of face-to-face clients, and for this and other reasons stood a little apart from the economic nexus that bound industrialists together. That with all these differences and distinctions, the middle sort of people still formed a recognizable force in society constitutes perhaps their most remarkable and lasting achievement.

Who exactly they were and how many of them can be counted are of course key questions. For practical purposes it is, in the first place, most useful to be able to identify a large group standing just above the level of manual workers and excluding only the agrarian interest broadly interpreted, in other words, a long chain of propertied opinion stretching from the wealthiest financiers and industrialists down to modest shopkeepers whose incomes depended upon the erratic earnings of working people. Property in some form lay at the heart of the matter, even if, as lower white-collar occupations expanded, this defining mark can no longer be universally relied upon. In the end, however, despite a myriad of subtle gradations, not only did an undoubted gulf exist between workers by hand and workers by brain, but the social (if not always the psychological) interplay between successful industrialists and the landed élite was usually cool and always circumscribed.

² J. Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, 2 vols. (London, 1881), ii. 53; A. Prentice, *History of the Anti-Corn-Law League*, 2 vols. (London, 1853), i. 87.

³ A. Howe, *The Cotton Masters 1830-1860* (Oxford, 1984), 235; P. Adelman, *Victorian Radicalism: The Middle-Class Experience, 1830-1900* (London, 1984), 26-7.

⁴ [H.] Taine's *Notes on England*, ed. E. Hyams (London, 1957), 155.

Various methods exist for producing estimates of middle-class numbers, all of them defective, few of them valueless. It is possible to look at census reports and winnow out those occupations that might reasonably fall under the appropriate umbrella, an approach which makes it possible to establish the broadest limits of what might be called the 'inclusive' middle class, here taken to encompass shopkeepers and their assistants, clerks, administrators, professional men, as well as employers of all kinds (Table 2.1).

TABLE 2.1 *Number of males in England and Wales in non-agricultural middle-class occupations and the percentages these constituted of the total occupied non-agricultural population, 1851 and 1891*

	1851		1891	
	000s	%	000s	%
Professions and administration	183	4.0	289	3.6
Commerce, clerks, miscellaneous	121	2.7	514	6.5
Dealers and assistants	483	10.7	769	9.7
Other employers	129	2.8	190	2.3
TOTAL	916	20.2	1,762	22.1
Total occupied non-agricultural male population	4,526		7,967	
Increase in occupied non-agricultural middle-class males: 92.4%				
Increase in all occupied non-agricultural males: 76.0%				

Source: 1891 from A. L. Bowley, *Wages and Income in the United Kingdom since 1860* (Cambridge, 1937), 128; 1851 from rough estimates in C. Erickson, *British Industrialists: Steel and Hosiery 1850-1950* (Cambridge, 1959), appendix F, though the figure for total occupied male population in C. Booth, 'Occupations of the People of the United Kingdom, 1801-81', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 49 (1886), 314-435, is preferred. Male farmers and agricultural labourers have been 'removed' on the basis of figures in F. D. W. Taylor, 'United Kingdom: Numbers in Agriculture', *Farm Economist*, 8 (1955), 36-40.

These figures suggest that the non-agricultural middle class interpreted in its broadest sense constituted about a fifth of the population and was probably growing somewhat more quickly than other urban groups (though the bulk of this growth was clearly taking place among the ranks of clerkdom and lower white-collar employment generally). Fuller and more reliable data in the census for 1911 suggest that little had changed since the end of our period. Following roughly the same occupational categories—but this time for males and females in Great Britain—it emerges that an 'inclusive' middle class constituting 20.7 per cent of the non-agricultural population was made up of: higher professionals 1.1 per

cent, lower professionals 3.3 per cent, employers excluding farmers 5.9 per cent, managers and administrators 3.7 per cent, clerical workers 5.3 per cent, foremen and supervisors 1.4 per cent.⁵ In other words, the 'inclusive' middle class consisted of two broad components: a more affluent half made up of higher professionals, employers, and managers, and a lesser one of lower professionals, foremen, and clerks.

Another way of laying bare the divisions in society is to use income as the dissecting tool. By adapting the valuable (if speculative) estimates of the Victorian statistician, Dudley Baxter, it is possible to derive figures for all 'income receivers' in England and Wales in 1867, without, however, in this case being able to exclude the agricultural sector (Table 2.2). From this it is clear that those with about £100 or more a year probably corresponded fairly closely to the occupational groups already identified as making up a large and 'inclusive' middle class which reached much further down the income scale than stereotypical images of wealthy manufacturers and sleek lawyers might suggest. Indeed, even in 1911-12 (when more accurate information becomes available) only 2.0 per cent of all employees and professional persons in Britain were earning as much as £200 a year.⁶

There are, of course, yet other ways of trying to assess the size of the Victorian middle class. All cast light on certain matters while obscuring others. Contemporaries like Edward Baines argued that the borough elect-

TABLE 2.2 *Income recipients in England and Wales, c.1867*

	ooos	% of income recipients	Total income £000s	% of total income
£5,000 and above	4,290	0.3	90,384	23.4
£1,000-£5,000	25,200		75,544	
£300-£1,000	90,000	0.9	79,296	11.2
£100-£300	510,300	5.2	101,976	14.4
'Near' £100	1,422,860	14.5	106,715	15.1
Upper and middle class	2,052,650	20.9	453,915	64.1
Other income recipients	7,785,360	79.1	254,729	35.9

Source: Data in R. D. Baxter, *National Income: The United Kingdom* (London, 1868) recalculated by P. H. Lindert and J. G. Williamson, 'Reinterpreting Britain's Social Tables, 1688-1913', *Explorations in Economic History*, 20 (1983), 94-109. Baxter does not give equally detailed information for Scotland and Ireland, though what he does provide could be taken to suggest that similarly defined Scottish and Irish middle classes would have constituted just over and just under a sixth of income recipients respectively.

⁵ G. Routh, *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain 1906-79*, 2nd edn. (London, 1980), 5-7.

⁶ *Ibid.* 48.

orate and the middle class were more or less coterminous. If this was so, then in England and Wales between the first and second Reform Acts about 20 per cent of the population would have been middle class (the equivalent Scottish and Irish figures being 17 per cent and 15 per cent respectively), with the proportions in individual towns varying greatly—that for Leeds in 1841 would have been no more than 12.5 per cent.⁷ Less abstract criteria are supplied by two key middle-class imperatives—privacy and servants—neither as common as might be imagined at a time when ‘possession of an entire house’ was hailed by the Registrar-General as ‘strongly desired by every Englishman’.⁸ For example, the percentage of households in 1871 containing no lodgers, no one save the immediate family and at least one servant, fell as low as 4.9 and 6.0 in industrial towns like Bolton and Coventry, reached 6.6 in Lincoln, and rose to all of 14.9 even in genteel Hastings.⁹ With an income of £200 considered the minimum for engaging a single maid-of-all-works and with so few on such an income, the efforts of the less well-off to maintain appearances in this respect were as bitter as the wages they paid were low. The impoverished curate, Josiah Crawley, in Trollope’s *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867) struggled to keep a maid on £130 a year amidst ragged carpets and shabby furniture. And although England had relatively more domestic servants than any other major European country, their presence in particular places was less common than the overall size of the ‘inclusive’ middle class might suggest. In 1851 the percentage of households employing any servants ranged from 6.7 in Bradford through 11.7 in Nottingham to 20.0 in York. Thirty years later, while Bath could boast one servant to every nine inhabitants, agricultural Suffolk registered only one to twenty-one and industrial Lancashire one to thirty.¹⁰

National data do, indeed, assume a different aspect when measured against the state of things in particular towns. In 1850–60 the proportion of the 2.1 million adult males living in English and Welsh parliamentary boroughs who paid income tax (and thus enjoyed incomes of at least £100 a

⁷ K. T. Hoppen, ‘The Franchise and Electoral Politics in England and Ireland’, *History*, 70 (1985), 210; R. J. Morris, ‘The Middle Class and British Towns and Cities of the Industrial Revolution, 1780–1870’, in D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (eds.), *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London, 1983), 287–8.

⁸ *Census of Great Britain 1851: Tables of the Population and Houses*, H[ouse of] C[ommons Paper] 1851 [1399], xliii, p. xxxvi.

⁹ B. Preston, *Occupations of Father and Son in Mid-Victorian England*, Reading University Geographical Papers, 56 (1977), 11–12.

¹⁰ A. Elliott, ‘Social Structure in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, in D. G. Wright and J. A. Jowitt (eds.), *Victorian Bradford* (Bradford, 1981), 107–8; P. Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Dublin, 1975), 27.

year) was 20.6 per cent, a figure remarkably close to most other estimates of the size of the 'inclusive' middle class.¹¹ Locally, however, the picture was much more varied, with barely one-twentieth of adult males liable to income tax in Leicester but well over a third liable in London. Indeed, what such tax statistics above all demonstrate is the extraordinary importance of Victorian London for the middle sort of people, its lack of heavy industry and its chronic underemployment being more than made up for by the vast size of its white-collar and professional sectors. By contrast, boroughs with low proportions of middle-class taxpayers included most of the classic northern industrial towns, especially those which depended upon manufacturing to the virtual exclusion of all else and where class relationships were often at once bitter, direct, and uncomplicated. The proportion paying income tax in places like Oldham, Preston, Blackburn, Bolton, Bury, Stockport, Wigan, Warrington, and Sheffield was in every case less than a tenth. And even though centres like Manchester (15.3 per cent), Birmingham (14.2 per cent), and Leeds (10.3 per cent) seem to have been marginally more affluent, their social structures were very distinctly less bourgeois (in the sense of polite and well-heeled) than those of places like Brighton (23.1 per cent), Cambridge (22.1 per cent), and York (20.0 per cent).

A similar picture emerges from quite different statistics dating from the late 1840s concerning so-called 'assessed' taxes, which confirm that personal wealth was concentrated in those parts of the country with more traditional economies and was particularly thin on the ground in towns heavily dependent upon modern industry.¹² If, therefore, in some cities with comparatively diverse economies industrialists occupied the upper reaches of wealth (Birmingham, Bristol, and Manchester—though not Glasgow—are examples), in most single-industry towns (such as Bradford) the tax-paying élite was dominated, not by industrialists at all, but by professionals and rentiers of various kinds.¹³

¹¹ Calculated from information in W. D. Rubinstein, 'The Size and Distribution of the English Middle Classes in 1860', *Historical Research*, 61 (1988), 65–89, and on additional material kindly supplied by the author.

¹² A. D. M. Phillips and J. R. Walton, 'The Distribution of Personal Wealth in English Towns in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 64 (1975), 35–48. Assessed taxes were levied on luxury expenditure of various kinds.

¹³ H. Berghoff, 'British Businessmen as Wealth-Holders, 1870–1914: A Closer Look', *Business History*, 33/2 (1991), 222–40; S. Nenadic, 'Businessmen, the Urban Middle Classes, and the "Dominance" of Manufacturers in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Economic History Review*, 45 (1991), 67–74; T. Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban-Industrial Society: Bradford, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, 1990), 138–9.

What all this meant was that, in some quite substantial towns, the size of the business and professional élite could be remarkably small. Mid-century Oldham, for example, contained only 300 men (3 per cent of the total) who could realistically claim to be major businessmen or upper and middling professionals and of these 300 only seventy counted for much in political terms. And in Rochdale less than 550 adult males (again 3 per cent of the total) even lived in houses valued above the comparatively modest sum of £30.¹⁴

Really big wealth was, in any case, concentrated in the financial and commercial communities from which came the majority of non-landed millionaires, half-millionaires, and those leaving at least £100,000 on death in the period up to the 1890s.¹⁵ Already in the 1840s Joseph Pease had argued that the greatest fortunes were being made in trading rather than making, a view supported by probate records which show typically prosperous Victorian industrialists leaving fortunes in the £100,000 range—large certainly but modest compared to those bequeathed by their financial counterparts. For example, among well-known politician-industrialists W. E. Forster left £81,000 in 1886 and John Bright £86,000 in 1889, amounts which, though entirely representative of their order, were much lower than those accumulated by the metropolitan bankers and merchant princes of the time.¹⁶ But while, paradoxically, industrialists enjoyed great contemporary prominence, the financial and mercantile super-rich were generally invisible, especially in the political sphere.

Whether very wealthy or only moderately so, few Victorian manufacturers came originally from the world of manual labour, fewer still from the broad acres of landed property. During the century after 1750 perhaps four out of every five had been born to a father himself in business or active in that social borderland where shopkeepers, farmers, craftsmen, and small traders flocked together. The vaunted mid-Victorian notion (associated especially with the writings of Samuel Smiles) that self-made men ruled British industry was true only in the qualified sense that being an 'industrialist' was a more elevated thing than being a draper.¹⁷ While, therefore,

¹⁴ J. Foster, 'Nineteenth-Century Towns: A Class Dimension', in H. J. Dyos (ed.), *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968), 284; J. Garrard, *Leadership and Power in Victorian Industrial Towns 1830-80* (Manchester, 1983), 13-14.

¹⁵ W. D. Rubinstein, *Men of Property: The Very Wealthy in Britain since the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1981), 60-7; id., 'British Businessmen as Wealth-Holders, 1870-1914: A Response', *Business History*, 34/2 (1992), 75.

¹⁶ W. D. Rubinstein, *Elites and the Wealthy in Modern British History* (Brighton, 1987), 23. The umbrella-cloth manufacturer and political theorist, Friedrich Engels, left £25,000 in 1895.

¹⁷ F. Crouzet, *The First Industrialists: The Problem of Origins* (Cambridge, 1985), appendices.

the typical self-made man may often have been the 'architect of his own fortune', he was rarely the offspring of unskilled labourers or factory drudges. Although credit was easy to obtain, power generators and buildings easy to hire, and work could initially be done on commission, the costs of setting oneself up were not low. Even in the relatively 'cheap' cotton-weaving business they could amount to £28,000 for 800 looms, while an 80,000-spindle spinning undertaking required £100,000.¹⁸

For a variety of reasons industrial enterprises remained small. Of the 677 engineering firms making (admittedly incomplete) returns in 1851 only fourteen employed 350 workers or more, over two-thirds less than ten. The average number of employees per cotton mill was 188 in 1850 and 190 in 1878. In 1841, out of 1,105 primary process cotton producers in Lancashire only eighty employed over 500 hands, though from the workers' side things looked rather different in that almost two out of every five operatives laboured in mills of this kind.¹⁹ Steam power too spread slowly. By 1870 over half of it was still concentrated in textiles alone. All the evidence suggests that behind a few really wealthy manufacturers there marched a corps of smaller men whose businesses were subject to rapid rise and collapse, who made strenuous efforts to keep their firms under private family control, and whose profits were probably erratic and rarely—after the middle of the century—productive of riches beyond the dreams of avarice. Information about profits is scanty and difficult to interpret, though it seems that they were lower in the half-century after 1825 than in the previous half-century and that something around 10 to 15 per cent (taken to include a 5 per cent return on capital) was considered 'normal'. In the light of interest rates on consols or other safe securities, such figures—given the risks involved—are hardly dramatic. Not that comfortable livings were unavailable to men of enterprise. For example, two partners in a medium-size London building firm managed to increase their joint capital from £30,000 in 1877 to £56,500 in 1896 having each drawn £4,567 a year (or £182,680 in total) out of the business in net profits—a return far greater than would have been available from the secure investments of the time.²⁰

¹⁸ S. J. Chapman and F. J. Marquis, 'The Recruiting of the Employing Classes from the Ranks of the Wage-Earners in the Cotton Industry', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 75 (1912), 293–306.

¹⁹ S. G. Checkland, *The Rise of Industrial Society in England 1815–1885* (London, 1964), 134; C. H. Lee, 'The Cotton Textile Industry', in R. A. Church (ed.), *The Dynamics of Victorian Business* (London, 1980), 173; V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Labour, Power, and the Size of Firms in Lancashire Cotton in the Second Quarter of the Nineteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 30 (1977), 96–8.

²⁰ E. W. Cooney, 'The Building Industry', in Church (ed.), *Dynamics*, 158–9.

In many cases, however, bad years could seriously damage margins and it is clear that the rise in real wages towards the end of the century put a substantial number of employers under considerable strain.

Changes in the relative economic position of the higher sections of British society—amid which the smaller ‘exclusive’ middle class of merchants, industrialists, bankers, professionals, rentiers, and the like found itself—are not, however, easy to pin down accurately. A number of heroic attempts to demonstrate that the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic growth in inequality and the second half a gradual decline have been shown to rest on faulty foundations.²¹ Indeed, the best conclusion that can be drawn from the very imperfect evidence available is that the century after 1815 constituted, not a period of fluctuations in inequality, but one of broad stability in the ratio of skilled to unskilled pay and in the distribution of earnings as a whole, a pattern that conforms neither to Marx’s continuous drive towards inequality nor to the egalitarian optimism of Victorian statisticians like Giffen and Porter who believed that the industrial revolution was lifting more and more individuals towards closer economic relationships.

What is certain is that, in one way or another, almost everybody complained that incomes were rising too slowly to match expenditure. In the case of the lower middle class—the clerks, the white-collar workers of little status—arguments of this sort may well have been to the point: more people were entering such occupations, but their relative share of the cake was diminishing. But for prosperous business and professional men complaints probably had more to do with rising perceptions of what was ‘necessary’ than with relative movements in objective standards. Indeed, calculations with respect to the number of times fully occupied cotton-spinners and agricultural labourers would have had to multiply their earnings to equal those of Anglican clergymen or elementary schoolmasters in 1835, 1851, and 1881 suggest that income relativities changed little over these years.²² This did not stop the better-off from feeling sorry for themselves and in a famous article published in 1875 an essayist with a business background told sad tales, ‘the substantial truth of which cannot be denied’, to the effect that the life of the ‘vast proportion of the middle

²¹ C. H. Feinstein, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Williamson Curve’, *Journal of Economic History*, 48 (1988), 699–729. It is, however, possible that a rise in inequality may have taken place in the period 1750–1815 (P. H. Lindert, ‘Unequal Living Standards’, in R. Floud and D. McCloskey (eds.), *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, 2nd edn., 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1994), i. 381).

²² J. G. Williamson, ‘The Structure of Pay in Britain, 1710–1911’, *Research in Economic History*, 7 (1982), 48.

classes' was becoming 'more difficult and more costly' by the year. The prices of servants, rent, meat, and other necessary items had allegedly risen by 'a quarter' since 1850. Worse still, the pressure to spend money on the extravagant lifestyles demanded by new cultural imperatives was, it seems, creating an intense sense of being crushed 'between the upper and the nether millstones of a prosperous and well-paid labouring class and the lavish expenditure of the noble or ignoble opulent'.²³ In reality, prices since 1850 had probably gone up by about 18 per cent, for pretty well everyone. Two things, however, persuaded the middle sort of people of 1875 that something worse was in train: first, the fact that half of this rise had been generated during the recent and intense boom of 1868–73,²⁴ second, that manual workers had, during these years, managed to obtain better rewards. Unsurprisingly, the articulate were the first to complain, though their post-boom sufferings were by no means especially severe. Illusions, as so often, were doing sterling duty for reality.

2. PROFESSIONAL PERSONS

At something of a tangent to the business community, though undoubtedly belonging to the 'exclusive' middle class, stood the members of the professions. These were an amphibious group, gentlemanly and respectable in the main, but working for a living, handling dusty briefs, their patients' insides, other people's souls. As late as 1800 only the Anglican clergy and a few hundred physicians and barristers had counted as fully professional (army and, to a lesser extent, naval officers belonging more properly to the landed interest). By the second half of the nineteenth century a far wider range of occupations was coming to be marked by the presence of independent practitioners, qualifying and disciplinary associations, specialized knowledge, a self-conscious identity, and sometimes even legal monopoly over practice. Though, in truth, very much products of the industrial revolution, Victorian professionals, with their closed and restrictive practices, were among its least dutiful children. Small wonder that craft trade unions were sufficiently green with envy to declare their own desire—the words are those of the leaders of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers founded in 1850—to 'exercise the same control over that in which we have a vested interest as the physician who holds a diploma or the author who is protected by his copy-

²³ W. R. Greg, 'Life at High Pressure', *Contemporary Review*, 25 (1875), 623–38.

²⁴ A. L. Bowley, *Wages and Income in the United Kingdom since 1860* (Cambridge, 1937), 121–2. C. Feinstein offers an improved index (but only from 1870) in 'A New Look at the Cost of Living 1870–1914', in J. Foreman-Peck (ed.), *Essays in Quantitative Economic History 1860–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), 170–1.

right'.²⁵ By the middle third of the century many key professional bodies were already firmly in place and firing on all cylinders. The Inns of Court protected barristers and regulated entry. The Society of Apothecaries and the Royal College of Surgeons were creating a new class of general medical practitioners. Engineers of various kinds, as well as architects and veterinary surgeons, were extending their domains. Most striking of all, the Law Society and the British Medical Association were already well on the way to bringing off that sleight of hand by which what are, in effect, trade unions have long been able to pass themselves off as 'professional bodies'.

The numbers involved are, as always, difficult to pin down, for so much depends on who is to be included and who not. The Census Commissioners operated a lucky-dip by which the ancient professions of church, medicine, and law were casually augmented by the admission of schoolmasters, actors, musicians, and civil engineers in 1861, architects in 1881, but accountants not until after the Great War. If, instead, one picks out members of the three ancient professions, on the one hand, and then, on the other, all those who might reasonably be classed (and were so by the late Victorian social inquirer Charles Booth) as belonging to the 'public service and professional sector', the resulting picture is that presented in Table 2.3.

TABLE 2.3 *Male numbers in the professions in England and Wales, 1851-1891*

	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891
	Numbers (000s)				
Law	15.8	15.2	17.4	19.1	22.0
Medicine	19.2	18.0	19.2	21.2	20.8
Church [of England]	17.3	19.2	20.7	21.7	24.2
A: total of above	52.3	52.4	57.3	62.0	67.0
B: other public service and professional	148.6	330.9	372.0	397.7	496.0
A + B	200.9	383.3	429.3	459.7	563.0
	% of occupied male population				
A	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
B	2.6	5.2	5.3	5.1	5.6
A + B	3.5	6.0	6.1	5.9	6.4

Source: C. Booth, 'Occupations of the People of the United Kingdom, 1801-81', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 49 (1886), 314-435, as reworked and extended to 1891 in W. A. Armstrong, 'The Use of Information about Occupation', in E. A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge, 1972), 226-83.

²⁵ A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement 1783-1867*, 2nd impression (London, 1960), 405.

In relative terms, therefore, the ancient professions increased not at all, while the rest experienced, first a sharp rise, and then a period of stability. Thus, while the 900 or so engineers of 1850 had grown to 15,000 forty years later, the number of medical practitioners only increased from 14,415 in 1861 to 15,091 in 1881—an actual decline from 1 for every 1,392 potential patients to 1 for every 1,721.²⁶ Making all due allowances, it is, in any case, unlikely that the proportion of adult males engaged in what might be called the recognized professions ever exceeded 2 per cent or thereabouts. This made it easy for those involved to form small tightly knit élites: in 1861, for example, the half a million people in Birmingham and Leeds (together with those living roundabout) made do with the services of 275 lawyers and 232 medical men of all kinds.²⁷

As members of the 'exclusive' middle class most professionals shared that group's economic experiences. Enormous incomes for the top practitioners in law and medicine—between 1809 and 1899 ten professional men died worth more than half a million pounds—stood at the head of a long chain which moved down through the prosperous at £1,000 or more a year to the palpably hard-pressed. In general, professional earnings do not seem to have gone up dramatically during the second half of the century. At the bar real rewards rose only among leading men and much the same was true of medicine. Solicitors experienced something of an economic decline when late century incomes faltered as dips in the property and building cycles reduced the demand for conveyancing work. Not, however, until 1913 do we have tolerably reliable information on the incomes of particular professions as opposed to single individuals. By then the earnings of the top quarter and the averages for all those receiving professional fees were as shown in the table.²⁸

	Top 25 per cent	Average
Barristers	£680	£478
Solicitors	£790	£568
Doctors	£700	£395
Engineers	—	£292

²⁶ R. A. Buchanan, 'Gentlemen Engineers: The Making of a Profession', *Victorian Studies*, 26 (1983), 428.

²⁷ E. P. Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons: Ideal and Reality in Nineteenth-Century Urban Government* (London, 1973), 350–2.

²⁸ Routh, *Occupation and Pay*, 60–3. Figures are for males in Britain.

Such averages were of course dragged down by an army of less well-to-do practitioners. Books of advice to parents on their sons' choice of career talked dolefully of how the law was 'a sinking profession', how only 500 of the 4,035 barristers in the 1850s were prospering, how almost all professions were grossly overcrowded.²⁹ And certainly there were plenty of seedy doctors who scraped a thin living, obsessed by the size of their shilling fees, jealous of their consultant 'colleagues', and (as Booth found in late Victorian London) sending their children to local elementary schools. Many lawyers too had a hard time of it. However, as the same books pointed out, it was generally agreed that 'in pursuit of social position the professions have vastly the superiority over the business world' because their members formed the true 'head' of the 'great English middle class' and maintained 'its tone of independence [and] . . . morality'.³⁰

Not that high status was automatically accorded once a diploma had been obtained. Outside the consultant élite, Victorian medical men were not especially well regarded. Country surgeons in particular were looked down upon by rector and squire and usually found themselves obliged to enter the houses of better-off patients by the tradesman's door. In 1892 one angry Leeds alderman denounced the presence of 'publicans, licensed victuallers, architects, a doctor, members of other professions' on the benches around him, while in 1859 a witness before a select committee expressed the hope that rating qualifications would be kept high enough to ensure that 'the parish doctor . . . could not get on to the town council'.³¹ Though the wonderfully precise sentiments of Miss Marrable in Trollope's *The Vicar of Bullhampton* may have been a little dated by 1870, they probably reflected an outlook which had not entirely died away.

She always addressed an attorney by letter as Mister, raising up her eyebrows when appealed to on the matter, and explaining that an attorney is not an esquire. She had an idea that the son of a gentleman, if he intended to maintain his rank as a gentleman, should earn his income as a clergyman, or as a barrister, or as a soldier, or as a sailor. Those were the professions intended for gentlemen. She would not absolutely say that a physician was not a gentleman, or even a surgeon; but she would never allow to physic the same absolute privileges which, in her eyes, belonged to law and the church. There might also possibly be a doubt about the Civil Service and Civil Engineering; but she had no doubt whatever that when a

²⁹ H. B. Thomson, *The Choice of a Profession: A Concise Account and Comparative Review of the English Professions* (London, 1857), 29, 96, 162; F. Davenant, *What Shall my Son Be? Hints to Parents on the Choice of a Profession or Trade; and Counsels to Young Men on their Entrance into Active Life* (London, 1870), 16, 151, 196.

³⁰ Thomson, *Choice of a Profession*, 5, 16.

³¹ Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, 324–6.

man touched trade or commerce in any way he was doing that which was not the work of a gentleman.³²

But if such comments point out the important truth that there was a hierarchy of professions, they also highlight the still more crucial fact that in many eyes the most significant criterion of relative middle-class status was involvement or lack of involvement in 'trade'. And from any taint of trade, however remote, professional men tried hard to keep themselves aloof. Perhaps this is why the majority of them seem to have voted Tory whether they lived in metropolitan Manchester or provincial Exeter.³³ While, therefore, the professions also threw up many of the leading middle-class critics of Victorian society—the lights of liberalism, the denouncers of mass production, even a few worshippers of the proletariat—these were generally either maverick dissidents or second-generation rentiers, qualified perhaps as lawyers or the like, but lacking the need to earn their own livings.

Given the size of even the 'exclusive' Victorian middle class, there were surprisingly few openings available to those who aspired to dwell within its ranks. Between 1830 and 1900 about 600 ordinands entered the Church of England ministry each year, so that the number of clergymen—though it rose from 17,463 in 1851 to 24,374 in 1891—did not keep pace with the rising population. Commissions in the infantry and cavalry hovered around 300 a year between 1871 and 1885 and in the army as a whole no more than 600 were available annually in the period 1886–90.³⁴ Most clergymen and military officers were, in any case, relatively poorly paid. And though occasional positions with attractive remuneration were available (especially in the church), their existence merely confirms the 'jackpot' nature of professional life: high rewards for a handful, comfort for a minority, frugality for many more. In the 1860s few curates received above £100 a year. In 1891 more than 70 per cent of parishes were worth less than £300. As *The Times* put it in 1867

The Church will always remain more or less like the Army. The value of a living is like the value of a commission. The standing, the authority, the opportunities which are given by an incumbency or a captaincy are actually worth the sacrifice of

³² A. Trollope, *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870), ch. 9.

³³ V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Incorporation and the Pursuit of Liberal Hegemony in Manchester 1790–1830', in D. Fraser (ed.), *Municipal Reform and the Industrial City* (Leicester, 1982), 40; R. Newton, 'Society and Politics in Exeter, 1837–1914', in Dyos (ed.), *Study of Urban History*, 308; J. R. Vincent, *Pollbooks: How Victorians Voted* (Cambridge, 1967), 18–19, 73, 75, 84, 85 etc.

³⁴ A. Haig, *The Victorian Clergy* (London, 1984), 1–3; E. M. Spiers, *The Army and Victorian Society 1815–1914* (London, 1980), 3–4.

money... Officers do not expect to live upon their pay, and incumbents, in the same way, do not expect to live upon their tithes or stipends.³⁵

Yet there were plenty of aspirants for both careers. Almost two-thirds of ordinands in the 1860s were Oxford or Cambridge graduates. Between 1854 and 1899 all but one in seven senior army officers possessed a background of land, soldiering, church, or professional life, the abolition in 1871 of the commission purchase system having little effect in this respect because pay levels were not increased.³⁶

Nor did the reform of Civil Service recruitment procedures in the 1850s and 1870s have much immediate effect. The same kinds of people that had previously entered by patronage now had themselves drilled in public schools or cramming establishments for the new written examinations. Here too the number of openings with prospects of substantial remuneration was limited and rose only slowly, not least because total complements (including even lowly messengers) in key departments of state remained extremely small. In 1851 the Board of Trade managed with 103 men, the Foreign Office with 85, and the Treasury with 96. In 1868 one authority estimated that in the United Kingdom as a whole there were 1,173 Civil Servants of 'professional' standing earning average incomes of £831, 1,801 of 'superior' grade at £512, and about 10,000 in the 'general body of clerks' with something between £100 and £200.³⁷ The reforms of 1870, which introduced compulsory competitive examinations for the domestic Civil Service, did nothing to increase the number of positions. Indeed, between 1870 and 1881 only 117 posts in the new 'higher division' became available, less than a dozen a year. Of course the Indian Civil Service, which had pioneered competitive entry, offered additional openings and attracted highly talented candidates from a wider range of backgrounds. But its recruitment was also modest in absolute terms: eighty were admitted in 1860, but well under forty in most other years.³⁸ Hence the sense of worry and frustration increasingly to be found in certain middle-class households, the anxieties concerning income, status, and prospects, the fears that there were altogether too few loaves and fishes to go round.

³⁵ Haig, *Victorian Clergy*, 223, 294; *The Times*, 5 Sept. 1867.

³⁶ Haig, *Victorian Clergy*, 32; Spiers, *Army and Society*, 8.

³⁷ H. Mann, 'On the Cost and Organization of the Civil Service', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 32 (1869), 38–60. See also below Ch. 4, s. 3.

³⁸ W. J. Reader, *Professional Men: The Rise of the Professional Classes in Nineteenth-Century England* (London, 1966), 94–6; [Anon.], 'Effects of Competitive Appointments in the Civil Service of India', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 24 (1861), 586–9; E. Chadwick, 'On the Economical, Educational, and Political Influences of Competitive Examinations', *ibid.* 21 (1858), 18–51.

3. LOWER BORDERLANDS

Whatever the worries of businessmen about profits and professional men about prospects and incomes, anxiety was keenest and most pervasive among the lower middle groups whose substantial increase in numbers was so notable a feature of the period. The precise boundaries between them and the rest of the middle class and between them and manual workers are difficult to establish. Barristers were gentlemen, cotton masters were not, but both belonged to a recognizable 'exclusive' middle class. By the same token, while clerks shared attributes of respectability with many skilled artisans (and sometimes earned less), there were undoubted distinctions of outlook and perception between the two. In England and Wales the number of male white-collar workers (taken to include clerks, commercial travellers, office employees in national and local government, teachers, and so forth) rose very roughly from about 130,000 (plus 69,000 women) in 1851 to 500,000 (plus 194,000 women) in 1891 or from 2.3 to 5.7 per cent of all occupied men.³⁹ To be found especially in London and the larger cities, their rapid increase alone suggests that the majority must have come from working-class backgrounds helped on their way by the improving literacy and education of the times. Indeed, if social mobility (an escalator that went down as well as up) is to be found anywhere in this period it is to be found round and about the blurred but eagerly patrolled borders that separated white-collar workers from those who laboured with their hands. Although the majority of the lower middle class shared many things with manual workers—they went to the same schools, sprang from the same parents, spoke (despite themselves) in much the same kinds of accent—they, none the less, *felt* themselves to be very different indeed. Not only that, but a nagging sense of insecurity and comparative marginality rendered them perhaps the most concentrated repositories of so-called 'classic' Victorianism—a belief in respectability, merit, competition, money, hierarchy, privacy, and success. It also, however, seems to have helped to make them, and here, for reasons that remain obscure, they differed markedly from their counterparts in countries like Germany and France, politically characterless and submerged.

Clerks in particular were a defensive and far from optimistic breed. Male clerks in England and Wales numbered about 129,000 in 1871 and 461,000 in 1901. They were in general poorly paid. A few earned £200 or more a year, were able to keep a servant of sorts, and worked mostly in banking,

³⁹ W. A. Armstrong, 'The Use of Information about Occupation', in E. A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge, 1972), 226–83.

insurance, and the Civil Service. The majority struggled on sums that could easily fall below £100: in one firm of solicitors in the 1870s employing twenty-nine clerks twenty-one received less than £2 a week. Working in small groups they found it difficult to present a united front when it became obvious that supply was outrunning demand. 'Clerks as clerks', wrote one in 1870, 'are at a discount. There are swarms of them glad to engage at £180 a year and less. Clerks as clerks never will be in a better position.'⁴⁰ With women taking over many office functions (the 1,446 female clerks of 1871 had by 1901 become 57,736) male anxieties increased and good wages became harder to find. At the higher end of clerkdom—as George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892) inimitably shows—life could be pleasant enough: the Pooters enjoyed modest comfort, occasional bottles of 'Jackson Frères' champagne, and were eventually even able to afford the 'chimney-glass for the back drawing-room, which we always wanted'. But this was far from universal. Even if many other clerks, commercial travellers, and salesmen probably lived better than their parents had done, many also lived in that misery which only penury combined with aspirations to respectability can create. And almost all of them feared that things were likely to get worse.

Schoolteachers (apart from masters in public schools) fell into much the same category. Taking men and women together (and the latter were in a substantial majority) their numbers in England and Wales rose from 94,900 in 1851 to 218,000 in 1891. Although their salaries probably rose modestly over the same period, they too found it difficult to make respectable ends meet. After comparatively generous treatment beginning with the establishment of the 'certificated teacher' system in 1846, their pay suffered attrition after the introduction in 1862 of the Revised Code and 'payment by results'. In 1875 the average annual salary of male certificated teachers (and many were not so qualified) was £109, of females £65. They were all treated like docile automata, a government minister likening the notion of consulting teachers about what should be taught to 'asking chickens with which sauce they would be served'.⁴¹

Occupying a distinct middle-class niche of their own were those central figures of Victorian town and village life, the shopkeepers. Fixed-shop retailing has a long history and it is probable that the main expansion of shops per head of population occurred in the first half of the century. The ratio for six northern towns moved as follows: 1801 = 1 shop to 136

⁴⁰ Letter from a clerk in F. Davenant, *What Shall my Son Be?*, 188–201.

⁴¹ A. Tropp, *The School Teachers: The Growth of the Teaching Profession in England and Wales* (London, 1957), 18–40; A. M. Carr-Saunders and P. A. Wilson, *The Professions* (Oxford, 1933), 252.

persons, 1821 = 1 to 71, 1851 = 1 to 57, 1881 = 1 to 56.⁴² However, the actual numbers employed in 'dealing' (including shop assistants) never stopped rising: in 1851 it was 546,000 in England and Wales alone or 6.7 per cent of the occupied population, in 1891 it was 1,149,000 or 9.1 per cent.⁴³ Shopkeepers sat less completely within the lower middle class than did clerks or teachers. Their earnings covered a great range. The most prominent occupied positions of local—and in W. H. Smith's case even of national—influence. Those in dingy and temporary premises were poorer than any clerk. But though shopkeeping remained overwhelmingly the preserve of small operators, retailing in general became an increasingly complex business, wide enough to encompass, at one end, the department stores and multiples of late Victorian Britain and, at the other, the tiny hole-in-the-wall sweetie shops to be found at the corners of so many nineteenth-century streets. And even if as late as 1900 co-operatives, department stores, and multiples together were still probably generating no more than 10 to 13 per cent of all sales,⁴⁴ this was quite enough to persuade many shopkeepers that their own traditional skills were being rendered redundant by increasing standardization in the packaging, advertising, pricing, and presentation of goods.

It was, therefore, above all during the mid-Victorian period that comparatively well-to-do retailers standing above widow shopkeepers and below the advancing tycoons were able to make their most effective contribution to urban life. Known to contemporaries as the 'shopocracy', they owned substantial premises in the best areas, possessed distinctive values and attitudes, and were perhaps the most notable beneficiaries of the franchise reforms of 1832. Indeed, until 1867 retailers of all kinds constituted over a third of the borough electorate.⁴⁵ Characterized by a special kind of tight-fisted meanness, they fought their way on to town councils in order to restrain the 'extravagances' of other élites. Not themselves generally aspiring to office beyond their localities, they provided some of the key electoral shock-troops that helped make Gladstonian Liberalism a powerful political force. And in this respect at least they had perhaps more in common with the many labour aristocrats who responded so enthusiastically to Gladstone's particular mixture of retrenchment and

⁴² G. Shaw, 'The Role of Retailing in the Urban Economy', in J. H. Johnson and C. G. Pooley (eds.), *The Structure of Nineteenth-Century Cities* (London, 1982), 174; M. J. Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World 1830-1914* (Manchester, 1983), 13.

⁴³ Armstrong, 'Use of Information', 226-83.

⁴⁴ J. B. Jeffreys, *Retail Trading in Britain 1850-1950* (Cambridge, 1954), 18-29.

⁴⁵ T. J. Nossiter, *Influence, Opinion and Political Idioms in Reformed England* (Hassocks, 1975), 165-7; R. J. Morris, *Class, Sect and Party: The Making of the British Middle Class, Leeds 1820-1850* (Manchester, 1990), 133-7; Winstanley, *Shopkeeper's World*, 19-27.

rectitude than with some at least of those who stood above them in the urban middle-class hierarchies of the time.⁴⁶

4. URBAN CONTEXTS

If farmers are excluded, the middle class was of course predominantly urban. Towns provided the context for its members' political as well as economic and social experiences. Urban society, however, varied enormously. The dramatic appearance of large industrial centres should not obscure the fact that, until well into the third quarter of the century, places like York, Exeter, and Lincoln were as 'typical' of England (let alone anywhere else) as Oldham and Dewsbury. In cathedral and market towns small-scale industry survived and the atmosphere was one in which political tensions existed but class consciousness remained ephemeral, as Trollope discovered when he stood as a Liberal candidate in the East Riding market town of Beverley in 1868. While in 1871 two-thirds of occupied men in Coventry and Bolton worked in manufacturing and only one in twenty-five was a professional person, in Hastings and Lincoln the proportions were quite different—between a fifth and two-fifths in manufacturing and between an eighth and a twelfth in the professions.⁴⁷

One reasonably uniform system of occupational categorization has been applied to nineteenth-century towns. This divides the occupied population into five social 'classes', of which the first consists of professional and similar occupations, the second of 'intermediate' occupations between the first and the skilled workers of the third, with semi-skilled and unskilled workers consigned to the fourth and fifth. Its main defect is that almost all 'dealers' find themselves in Class III which, for this and other reasons, becomes unhelpfully large. However, various countervailing tendencies ensure that Class I emerges as something very close to the 'exclusive' middle class already identified, while Classes I and II taken together approximate roughly to the larger 'inclusive' middle class. Although various scholars have applied the system somewhat differently, the scattered results available give an unusually precise indication of the social architecture of mid-Victorian towns (Table 2.4).

What emerges most clearly from such data is that an inverse relationship seems to have existed between the extent of industrialization and the numerical presence of a middle class: York and Hull, therefore, had more middle-class citizens than Bradford and Wakefield. But not all differences

⁴⁶ E. F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992), 84–138.

⁴⁷ Preston, *Occupations of Father and Son*, 7.

can be so easily explained, not least the substantially divergent social structures that could exist in small towns situated only a few miles apart.⁴⁸ In such cases only detailed local studies can even begin to recover the truths which broadly based generalizations inevitably miss.

TABLE 2.4 *Heads of households and social 'classes' in nine English towns, 1851-1871*

	Heads of Household (%)		
	Class I	Class II	Classes III-V
Bradford 1851	2	12	86
Cardiff 1851	3	8	89
Chorley 1851		5	95
Hull 1851	5	12	83
Nottingham 1851	3	12	85
York 1851	8	14	78
Wakefield 1861	8	6	86
Liverpool 1871	1	15	84
Wolverhampton 1871		14	86

Source: R. J. Morris, *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution 1780-1850* (London, 1979), 35; A. Elliott, 'Social Structure in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in D. G. Wright and J. A. Jowitt (eds.), *Victorian Bradford* (Bradford, 1981), 105-6; R. Dennis, *English Industrial Cities of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1984), 189. A rather differently constructed set of five 'classes' has been applied to London and produces %s for 1861 (for working males in this case) in Class I of 8.3 and Class II of 18.8 (G. S. Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), 397).

The most untypical of all the nineteenth-century urban agglomerations was London, the 'infernal wen' as William Cobbett had called it in 1822. To an important—but by no means an exclusive—extent this was a function of its size. In 1841 the area that might best be called Greater London contained 2.24 million people or 14.1 per cent of all those living in England and Wales. By 1891 these figures had risen to 5.64 million and 19.4 per cent respectively. Yet, if anything, London's distinctiveness diminished rather than increased over these years, as much because other places began to achieve a critical urban mass and imitate the processes of suburbanization and occupational rearrangement which London had inaugurated as because London itself changed in any deeply qualitative way. Although, therefore, London's enormous growth continued to attract nostalgic complaints—like those of a writer in the *Builder* of 1870 who grieved that 'all before you, and

⁴⁸ S. A. Royle, 'Aspects of Nineteenth-Century Small Town Society: A Comparative Study from Leicestershire', *Midland History*, 5 (1979-80), 50-62.

around you, to a quadrant of the compass, were [once] fields, gardens, and farms, with breezy Hampstead up the hill on the right, and the pleasant village of Kilburn away on the left'⁴⁹—the place's essential character continued to retain many features inherited from former times. These, in almost every case, were themselves the products of London's long political and administrative importance.⁵⁰ No other Victorian centre depended so much upon the presence of old forms of capitalism, old institutions, old trades. What this meant was that a consciousness of status long remained more significant than a consciousness of class, especially so given the unique importance in London of a substantial body of persons dependent, on the one hand, upon employment in what might be called 'individual/familial' organizations such as banks, merchant houses, and shops, and, on the other, upon those professions drawing sustenance and profit from the proximity of central government, the lawcourts, the Civil Service, and wealthy clients of every kind.

Not the least remarkable characteristics of mid-Victorian London were its administrative confusions and political invisibility. Until 1855 there was no administrative authority (except, from 1829, that of the Metropolitan Police) covering the whole, or even a large part, of its population. Within the square mile of the 'City' the Corporation exercised unpredictable sway. Elsewhere a chaotic jumble of authorities—some mildly democratic, many completely undemocratic, some mildly efficient, most notably incompetent—grappled ineffectively with the giant problems of the greatest city in the world. And even when in 1855 the Metropolis Management Act introduced certain reforms, London's inhabitants were still left with thirty-eight different authorities covering some 74,000 acres, which, together with the City Corporation, were now made jointly responsible for a central Metropolitan Board of Works. That this board did, indeed, take less than twenty years to complete the first and greatest of its allotted tasks, the construction of a system of main sewerage, owed more to the dynamic genius of its chief engineer, Joseph (from 1874 Sir Joseph) Bazalgette, than to the local government structures laid down by parliament in 1855.⁵¹

There were two principal reasons why mid-Victorian London was accorded such fragmentary administrative machinery. The first was the fear of centralization so widespread among the contemporary political élite. Indeed, Sir Benjamin Hall, who was largely responsible for the legislation

⁴⁹ D. J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London, 1976), 196.

⁵⁰ See W. D. Rubinstein's thought-provoking essay 'Charles Dickens, R. Austin Freeman and the Spirit of London', in his *Elites and the Wealthy*, 304–38.

⁵¹ F. Sheppard, *London 1808–1870: The Infernal Wen* (London, 1971), 23, 279–84.

of 1855, thought himself dangerously radical in reducing the number of authorities to as low a figure as thirty-eight and had only been persuaded to do so by the manifest weaknesses of the existing system when faced with a cholera outbreak in 1854.⁵² The second reason was the extraordinary inconspicuousness of the capital's electoral profile. In 1861 the London parliamentary boroughs (which contained about two-thirds of all those living in the conurbation as a whole) returned only eighteen MPs (out of 656), each of whom 'represented' an average population of 118,668 and an average electorate of 6,870 as compared to averages of 42,390 people and 1,880 voters in the case of members sitting for constituencies elsewhere.⁵³ It was not, indeed, until 1885 (when fifty-seven seats were allocated to the London boroughs) that the capital of the empire even began to receive the electoral representation which its size, population, and wealth so clearly deserved. During our period the metropolis remained, for most politicians, a dangerous and, above all, a mysterious place, the only readily available guide-books to its secrets being provided by the at best intermittently reassuring novels of Charles Dickens. Though politicians of course lived in London for much of the year, its mercantile, banking, commercial, and proletarian worlds long remained too complicated and too idiosyncratic for ministers or back-benchers to comprehend. By contrast, the new industrial order of the northern towns and the old rural order of the countryside at least shared the merits of greater social simplicity and transparency. Best then, to leave London alone.

Although in some parts of the United Kingdom it was occasionally possible for those without the vote to influence the formal political life of their communities as rioters, customers, agitators, and the like, the public political class—in London as in the provinces—consisted largely of those admitted within the pale of the constitution by the various franchise acts of the time. The period during which the borough electorate was most closely—though by no means entirely—coterminous with the middle class was that between the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867–8. However, different social and economic circumstances and the vagaries of voter registration procedures meant that levels of enfranchisement varied from place to place. The fact that in 1846, for every 100 householders qualified to vote by a rate assessment of £10–£15, there were thirty-six with values over £100 in

⁵² D. Owen, *The Government of Victorian London 1855–1889* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 31–46.

⁵³ Calculated from F. W. S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1832–1885* (London, 1982), 3–21; *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book: British Election Results 1832–1918*, ed. J. Vincent and M. Stenton (Brighton, 1971), 1–344; B. Walker, 'The Irish Electorate, 1868–1915', *Irish Historical Studies*, 17 (1973), 356–406.

Manchester, but only twenty-five in Leeds, twelve in Birmingham, and seven in Blackburn, not only says something about economic relativities, but also clearly affected the size of the electorate in each place.⁵⁴ Official estimates were made in the mid-1860s of the proportion of borough voters in England and Wales that might then reasonably be described as belonging to the 'working classes', most of them skilled artisans, modest shopkeepers, and non-factory operatives. Although the data are not without their problems, it would seem that the working-class element within the borough electorate was somewhat larger (and the middle-class element somewhat smaller) in towns with middling populations than in either substantial cities or smaller and more traditional settlements (Table 2.5).

TABLE 2.5 *Electoral class representation in English and Welsh borough constituencies (excluding London), 1865-1866*

	Cities (n=11)	Large towns (n=18)	Medium towns (n=50)	Small towns (n=113)
Population	100,000+	50,000- 100,000	20,000- 50,000	Under 20,000
Total population 1861	2,211,075	1,321,667	1,615,323	1,048,069
<i>Total Electorate</i>	109,469	62,111	91,639	83,577
Average	9,952	3,451	1,833	740
Middle class %	78.0	72.0	68.2	79.0
Working class %	22.0	28.0	31.8	21.0

Source: Return of the Several Parliamentary Cities and Boroughs in England and Wales, arranged in order according to the Proportion of Electors belonging to the Working Classes, H[ouse of] C[ommons Paper] 1866 (170), lvii. 47-51; also Electoral Returns, Boroughs and Counties 1865-66, HC 1866 [3626], lvii. 215-532.

The precise reasons for this are unclear. Undoubtedly most of those working men who managed to obtain the vote before 1867 were not factory operatives but independent or small-workshop craftsmen. Yet many medium-sized towns were heavily industrialized, while pre-industrial artisans were not confined to London and continued to flourish in a variety of urban centres elsewhere. Whatever the cause, it is clear that the middle-class voters of the first Reform Act period were confronted by comparatively smaller groups of enfranchised working men in the largest cities and the smallest centres than in that spectrum of sixty-eight intermediate boroughs with between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants each.

⁵⁴ Gatrell, 'Incorporation', 20-1.

More detailed examination suggests that even such generalizations disguise a multitude of peculiarities, especially with regard to the urban middle class's own success in infiltrating the electoral registers. In other words, not only were working-class communities in certain towns more widely enfranchised than in others, but it is a mistake to rely too generally upon a belief that all adult male members of the middle class possessed the vote before 1867. Calculations based upon a comparison of the fivefold social categorization already discussed and the 1866 official *Return* of working men in borough electorates show how much things could vary from place to place. In the case of four boroughs with no freemen voters it emerges that, while almost all adult middle-class men in Bradford and Wakefield had the vote in the mid-1860s, in Oldham and South Shields the proportions were only about a half in each case. In four other boroughs, where freemen (and therefore working-class) voters were better represented, one finds Hull, Nottingham, and York in the higher category, but Cardiff clearly in the lower.⁵⁵ Why this should have been so remains to be discovered. That, however, it was so provides further evidence of the profound differences that distinguished individual towns, differences of social structure, employment, wealth, and political culture.

In almost all places, however, the socially similar middle-class groups which contended for control of town councils generally did so by clothing their disputes in language designed to appeal to working men, though to working men as spectators first and negotiators second. And because the municipal household franchise established in 1835, however generous in theory, was practically more restrictive than the £10 level set for the parliamentary vote in 1832, such groups had little difficulty in achieving their ends. As a result, businessmen, professionals, and rentiers ('gentlemen') imposed an iron control in most places, yielding from time to time only to the demands of retailing interests anxious to hoist cheese-paring banners yet higher still.⁵⁶ Although the precise nature of such oligarchies may have varied a little, they all shared a desire to combine politics with business (easier on councils than at Westminster) and a sense of localism so

⁵⁵ 'Middle class' has here been taken to consist of Classes I and II of the fivefold model used in Table 2.4. As regards electoral statistics, it is the remainder left after the removal of the working-class element recorded in the official 1866 *Return* cited in the source note to Table 2.5. For a more detailed discussion of franchise and electoral matters, see below, Ch. 8.

⁵⁶ A. Elliott, 'Municipal Government in Bradford in the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in Fraser (ed.), *Municipal Reform*, 142-3; Garrard, *Leadership*, 14-20; Howe, *Cotton Masters*, 144-5. A more 'negotiating' relationship is proposed in M. C. Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics, 1848-1874* (Cambridge, 1993).

intense that it rendered the upswelling of any single national middle-class consciousness a very halting and sporadic affair indeed.

By the 1850s large elements within the middle class had, in any case, begun to have enough of reform. Free trade did not seem to be producing the quick industrial bonanza some had expected. Changing patterns of trade in the cotton sector were making it easy for Lancashire businessmen to respond with enthusiasm to Palmerston's combination of bellicosity and liberalism. Gun boats, it was hoped, might find new markets where free trade had failed. The poor showing of Radical candidates at the general election of 1857 constituted the first fruits of this shift in opinion. Professional men as a group had never been Radical. Businessmen could be seen cooling in ardour by the year as they sought to defend the *juste milieu* baptized in 1832 and confirmed in 1846. 'I am one', wrote a Manchester free trader to Gladstone in 1852, 'of a considerable and daily increasing class who belong to the Liberal party by early connections, long and active association and by many surviving opinions also, who are yet decidedly conservative in all that relates to the further infusion of the democratic elements into our constitution.'⁵⁷ Of course not all felt this way: but the degree to which the middle class was prepared to undermine existing arrangements had always been limited. No longer was there any hard and fast line of demarcation at Westminster 'between aristocrats and others in respect of most of the issues Parliament was concerned with'.⁵⁸ Rather than raising high the roofbeams over triumphant structures of middle-class power, the removal of protection in 1846 had instead knocked down the wall separating land and trade and thus allowed the aristocracy, the farmers, and the middle sort of people of the towns to begin—slowly at first and then more rapidly—to coalesce in defence of property, whether that property took the form of acres, factories, warehouses, or professional monopolies. In the longer run the fires lit by Peel in 1846 consumed, not—as first seemed likely—the Conservative Party, but many of the rivalries which had once fragmented those with something to lose.

⁵⁷ D. Fraser, *Urban Politics in Victorian England* (Leicester, 1976), 262.

⁵⁸ W. L. Burn, *The Age of Equipoise: A Study of the Mid-Victorian Generation* (London, 1964), 319.

CHAPTER 3

Workers by Hand

I. NUMBERS, WORK, POVERTY

Four out of every five mid-Victorians were manual workers or the dependants of manual workers,¹ their lives for the most part shaped by two related influences: industrialization and urbanization. By 1851 about 54 per cent of the people of England and Wales lived in settlements with more than 2,500 inhabitants. Fifty years later over half lived in places with more than 50,000. Between 1801 and 1891 the urban population increased sevenfold, the rural only by a quarter. In no other country did as high a proportion of people live in towns as in England, Scotland, and Wales.² Urban conglomerations were beginning to form the conurbations characteristic of industrial societies. By 1881 Greater London had 4.77 million people, South-East Lancashire 1.69 million, the West Midlands 1.13 million. If some mid-Victorians mourned what had been lost, few denied the extent and permanence of the change. 'We cannot', a Birmingham manufacturer noted in 1869, 'revert to rural felicity, to green fields, to rough and manly and ignorant squires, to independent yeomanry, to ill supported and superstitious and serf-like hinds.'³

The move into towns and away from agriculture provided a greater variety of new occupational opportunities for manual workers than for the middle classes. Already by 1841 about 47.3 per cent of the British male labour force worked in industry and only 28.6 per cent in agriculture, with the balance in the service sector.⁴ Nineteenth-century 'industry', however, ranged wider than might be supposed. In 1851 slightly more

¹ See above Chs. 1 and 2.

² C. M. Law, 'The Growth of Urban Population in England and Wales, 1801-1911', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 41 (1967), 130. For Scotland and Wales, see also below, Ch. 14.

³ W. L. Sargent, *Essays of a Birmingham Manufacturer*, 4 vols. (London, 1869-72), i. 3.

⁴ N. F. R. Crafts, *British Economic Growth during the Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1985), 62-3.

men in England and Wales worked in the tailoring, shoe, and umbrella 'industries' (397,500) than in the whole of the woollen and cotton industries combined (393,500). And even if the two major textile sectors together employed the bulk of women *factory* workers (393,700), this was less than the number of women who worked as dress, shirt, and glove makers (471,200). Forty years later, though the relativities had changed, there were still 505,200 female dressmaking and tailoring workers as opposed to 526,800 women in cotton and wool manufacturing, while male tailors (119,500) still outnumbered men working to produce all kinds of woollen cloth (114,300).⁵

Textile mills apart, mechanization and the factory system did little to increase job opportunities for women, and even in textiles the best-paid jobs were reserved for men. Indeed, as a proportion of all women in England and Wales, those in waged employment probably fell from 28.5 per cent in 1851 to 25.4 per cent forty years later (if domestic service, much the largest female sector, is excluded, the figures drop to 23.4 and 20.2 per cent respectively).⁶ With the collapse of handicraft trades there was—apart from domestic service, agricultural work, textiles, stitching, and washing—little open to women of any class before the final decades of the century.⁷ The whole ethos of Victorian culture was antagonistic to the notion that married women with children should work for money at all, though (hidden from the statisticians' gaze) many of them augmented family budgets by means of part-time undertakings of various kinds. However, probably no more than a tenth of married women held waged jobs at any particular moment, and full-time female employment was dominated by those who were young or single or both at once.⁸

In what might be called the second phase of industrialization, economics and culture together combined to restrict the incomes of most families to those of a male breadwinner alone. As Henry Broadhurst—stonemason, union official, and from 1880 'Lib.-Lab.' MP for Stoke-on-Trent—told the Trades Union Congress in 1875, the goals of the labour movement included the creation of conditions where 'wives and daughters would be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition

⁵ W. A. Armstrong, 'The Use of Information about Occupation', in E. A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge, 1972), 255–81.

⁶ E. Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work in the Nineteenth Century Censuses', *History Workshop*, 23 (1987), 75. These figures are based on some rather heroic adjustments to census data.

⁷ E. Richards, 'Women in the British Economy since about 1700', *History*, 59 (1974), 349.

⁸ W. Secombe, 'Patriarchy Stabilized: The Construction of the Male Breadwinner Wage Norm in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Social History*, 11 (1986), 53–76.

for livelihood against the great and strong men of the world'. One simple device for preventing such competition was to keep female wages low. And as late as 1906 (when the first useful information becomes available) women in *industrial occupations* earned on average well under half (43.7 per cent) as much as men, while over the economy as a whole the proportion was probably lower still.⁹

Shrinking job opportunities for women increased the attractions of domestic service. According to the usually accepted sources, female domestics in England and Wales numbered almost a million in 1851 and 1,487,700 twenty years later when a higher proportion of occupied women (46.4 per cent) are known to have worked as servants than ever before or since.¹⁰ The great majority (more than nine in ten) worked in households with two servants or less, very few in plutocratic establishments. Most were young and single, but precisely because marriage (by generally bringing domestic employment to an end) made continuous recruitment necessary, the experience of service at some stage in life was widespread, touching (according to one estimate) as many as one in three of all adult women in our period.¹¹ The popularity of domestic service in the second half of the nineteenth century was not, however, merely a result of limited alternatives. Contrary to much received wisdom, not only did cooks and maids (save in the very meanest one-servant households) receive relatively attractive emoluments, but their rewards probably grew faster than those of women working in industry or of industrial workers generally.¹²

Clearly, then, industrialization had a distinctly patchy effect upon the occupational contours of society. The initial thrust lay in the direction of saving capital (which was in comparatively short supply) rather than labour (which was not). By 1841 less than one in five occupied males in Britain worked in industries revolutionized since 1760 or thereabouts. And though the proportions varied from one part of the country to another, they

⁹ S. Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement* (London, 1980), 16; A. L. Bowley, *Wages and Income in the United Kingdom since 1860* (Cambridge, 1937), 51; D. Levine, 'Industrialization and the Proletarian Family in England', *Past & Present*, 107 (1985), 179.

¹⁰ Higgs, 'Women, Occupations and Work', 74. Higgs (p. 75), however, produces much lower revised estimates of 'true' domestic servants and reaches a figure for 1871 of 714,100 (or 21.7% of all occupied females).

¹¹ M. Anderson, 'Households, Families and Individuals', *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), 427-8; T. McBride, "'As the Twig is Bent': The Victorian Nanny", in A. S. Wohl (ed.), *The Victorian Family* (London, 1978), 53.

¹² M. Ebery and B. Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain*, Reading University Geographical Papers, 42 (1976), 93; W. T. Layton, 'Changes in the Wages of Domestic Servants during Fifty Years', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 71 (1908), 515-24.

exceeded a third only in Lancashire (where, however, no less than 55,000 handloom weavers were still at work as late as 1851) and in the West Riding of Yorkshire.¹³ Even in 1861 only about 30 per cent of the labour force was employed in activities that had been radically transformed in technique over the previous eighty years.¹⁴

That by 1850 Britain had become the *workshop* of the world is, therefore, quite literally true. Manual power lay at the heart of the productive process, assisted often by only the simplest of mechanical equipment. Human beings were cheaper to install than steam engines and much more adaptable in their behaviour than a self-acting stamp or press. 'When they broke down, the master did not have to pay them for repairs; when they made a mistake he could fine them; when there was no work for them to do he could give them the sack.'¹⁵ Even cotton factories—the most advanced manufacturing units—were rarely very large. In 1841 only a third of Lancashire cotton operatives worked in firms with more than 500 employees, more than a fifth in the 714 firms (out of 1,105) with less than 150.¹⁶ And much the same was true of the other major textile sectors. In worsted production, the average number per factory only rose from 160 in 1850 to 175 twenty years later, while woollen mills remained smaller still, with, on average, forty-six employees in 1838 and seventy in 1871.¹⁷

The typical British worker in the mid-Victorian period was not a machine operator in a factory at all but a traditional artisan or labourer or domestic servant. And even the great majority of those who worked in manufacturing were employed, not by great capitalists in great factories, but by small-scale entrepreneurs in small-scale workshops. In 1898–9 the average British workshop still employed less than thirty male workers.¹⁸ One such place differed subtly, perhaps substantially, from another. A myriad of specialized activities was pursued in different kinds and sizes of factories and outside factories altogether. The extent to which the work-

¹³ Crafts, *British Economic Growth*, 4–5; G. Timmins, *The Last Shift: The Decline of Handloom Weaving in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Manchester, 1993), 109.

¹⁴ D. N. McCloskey, 'The Industrial Revolution 1780–1860', in J. Mokyr (ed.), *The Economics of the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1985), 58.

¹⁵ R. Samuel, 'Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain', *History Workshop*, 3 (1977), 58.

¹⁶ A. Howe, *The Cotton Masters 1830–1860* (Oxford, 1984), 5; V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Labour, Power, and the Size of Firms in Lancashire Cotton in the Second Quarter of the Nineteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 30 (1977), 98.

¹⁷ E. M. Sigsworth, 'The Woollen Textile Industry', in R. Church (ed.), *The Dynamics of Victorian Business* (London, 1980), 191, 197.

¹⁸ R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), 6.

force felt a sense of sameness, of unity, of being involved in one great coherent industrial culture is, therefore, likely to have been limited.

The complexities of class and class consciousness are also starkly revealed by the fact that one of the greatest divisions in Victorian society—that between the ‘poor’ and the rest—did not occur at any obvious point of class separation at all, but within the working class itself. As usual, problems of definition hover menacingly in the air. What is poverty? Is it an absolute or a relative concept? Does it differ from one district to another, as between town and country, as between those ‘born to’ and those ‘reduced to’ its embrace? One category almost all articulate Victorians recognized was that which John Bright in the late 1850s dubbed ‘the residuum’, though even here there was disagreement. Some talked of a substantial group of very poor people thoroughly broken by chronic distress, those William Booth (the founder of the Salvation Army) called the ‘submerged tenth’ (perhaps three million people in England and Wales). And, indeed, Booth’s estimate bears some relation to the numbers which the (inadequate) statistics of the period 1850–85 suggest were being relieved under the new Poor Law of 1834.¹⁹ But the Poor Law, however it functioned in practice, had been designed for the sick and aged and to force the unemployed back to work, not for a totally demoralized ‘residuum’ alone. This last, therefore, soon came to be regarded as consisting of comparatively small groups living in ‘badlands’ or ‘rookeries’ beyond the reach of law or civilization. And though it is now generally held that no rigid distinction can be sustained between a dishonest criminal class and a poor but honest working class, many at the time believed otherwise. Even the humanity of Henry Mayhew, the most brilliant social observer of the mid-century period, drew the line at criminals notable for their ‘high cheek-bones and protruding jaws’, while Thomas Wright, the famous self-improving ‘journeyman engineer’, was once, when down on his luck, shocked to see neighbours in bed at mid-morning, ‘loafing about street-corners during the afternoon, and in public-houses until a late hour at night’. In similarly superior vein, a Birkenhead Poor Law officer defined the residuum as consisting simply, if rather eclectically, of ‘thieves on the look out, low prostitutes, beggars of both sexes and all ages, hawkers of petty articles, . . . ballad singers, travelling tinkers, china menders, umbrella repairers’.²⁰

¹⁹ W. Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (London, n.d.), 17; J. H. Treble, *Urban Poverty in Britain 1830–1914* (London, 1979), 111; M. E. Rose, *The Relief of Poverty 1834–1914*, 2nd edn. (London, 1986), 15–16, 50.

²⁰ C. Emsley, *Crime and Society in England 1750–1900* (London, 1987), 61, 64, 133; ‘The Journeyman Engineer’ [Thomas Wright], *The Great Unwashed* (London, 1868), 137; G. K. Behlmer, ‘The Gypsy Problem in Victorian England’, *Victorian Studies*, 28 (1985), 233.