The rebellion of 1688 and the subsequent Revolution Settlement set the stage for the golden age of the English landlords. As we will see, the landlords still had to bring stability to the party system and to fend off further resurrections of Jacobitism; nevertheless, the foundations for their preeminence were laid. Having secured the rule of law (which they wrote and enforced), the rights of property (which they defined and enjoyed), and the power of Parliament (which they monopolized and wielded), the English landed magnates surveyed Britain from a pinnacle of wealth and power. The society over which they ruled by all appearances seemed one of stability and cohesiveness, whether viewed in terms of the culture, the social order, or the economy. The landed elite’s serene domination of the nation resembled Caesar Augustus’ rule of the early Roman Empire; hence, eighteenth-century England has long been labeled “the Augustan Age.”

In fact, however, the eighteenth century was a time of contrast and paradox—between the majestic stability of the social hierarchy and the unseemly scramble of people for higher rungs on the social ladder; between the warmth of paternalist social relations and the naked lust for power; between the breathtaking wealth of a few and the heartbreaking poverty of the many; between the rituals of deference given by inferiors to superiors and the startling frequency of riots; and above all between the stately calm of agricultural England and the bustling aggressiveness of towns and commerce. The problem for the historian of eighteenth-century England is not to find “the truth that lies in between” these contrasts but to see how all of them can have been true at once.

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE: AN OPEN HIERARCHY

The key feature of eighteenth-century English society was that it was arranged as a status hierarchy, not as a class society. In the sense that a historian or sociologist can assign the people he or she is studying to predetermined pigeonholes called “classes,” then all societies are and have been class societies. But in the historically more important sense of how people actually related to each other and identified themselves in their social order, then eighteenth-century English men
and women ordered themselves in a status hierarchy. The basic sets of relationships should be envisioned as vertical, not horizontal. Each person was thought to have been ascribed at birth a position in the natural—indeed, divinely established—pecking order, and each felt that his or her loyalty was to social superiors, not to fellow workers. Hence the social structure was like a status ladder, or rather a number of parallel ladders, each rung being a status gradation with its own generally accepted duties and privileges. If a person moved up or down the ladder, it was off one rung and onto another, the ladder itself remaining unchanged. Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great wit and man of letters, remarked that the English people were set in their hierarchical places “by the fixed, invariable rules of distinction of rank, which create no jealousy, since they are held to be accidental.” Thus, when the English talked about social position, they spoke in terms of “degrees,” “order,” and “ranks”—gradations of status, not of class.

“Mankind,” Dr. Johnson observed, “are happier in a state of inequality and subordination.” Such was the view unanimously held by those at the top of the hierarchy and ceaselessly preached to those below them. This is not surprising, since the distance in wealth and prestige from top to bottom was enormous. On the highest rung of the hierarchy stood the titled nobility, consisting of fewer than two hundred families. All the nobles were great landlords who dominated their counties in near-majestic splendor. They lived in palatial country homes, often gigantic edifices of close to one hundred rooms, and enjoyed on average £8,000 a year. A few, like the duke of Bedford and the duke of Devonshire, raked in more than £30,000 a year from rentals alone—the equivalent of many millions of dollars today. Just below the nobility came the ranks of the big landlords—baronets, knights, esquires, and

![Mr and Mrs Andrews, by Thomas Gainsborough (1748). This painting reflects the comfortable self-assurance of the English country gentry in the eighteenth century.](image)
gentlemen—more than fifteen thousand families, each enjoying upward of £1,000
a year and each living in a stately country house. Together, these landlords and
their families—the nobility and the gentry—amounted to less than 3 percent of the
population, but they enjoyed 15 percent of the national income. All also enjoyed the
vitally important status of “gentleman”—a position of honor, to be fought for if
necessary, assigned to the lucky few born into “good” families, and displayed by
badges of status like genteel education, graceful deportment, and conspicuous con-
sumption. Gentle status was defined as the ability to live well without working for
a living, or, as the novelist Daniel Defoe put it, gentlemen were “such who live on
estates, and without the mechanism of employment.”

In the countryside, below the gentlemen (and ladies) came those who actually
worked the land—freeholders, tenant farmers, and farm laborers. Freeholders were
owner-occupiers, distinguished from the gentry in that they managed their farms
themselves. Freeholders still claimed the traditional label of “yeomen,” but this was
a dwindling order. Most farms were worked by tenants, some of them well-off, oth-
ers struggling, all of whom leased land from the landlords for cash. Their access to
a tenancy and the terms of their leases were normally set by custom, though some
landlords simply rented to the highest bidder. Together, the freeholders and farm-
ers of England numbered about 350,000 families, most earning between £40 and
£150 a year. They employed large numbers of farm laborers and domestic servants,
who were themselves ranked in distinct hierarchies—husbandmen, stableboys,
milkmaids, housekeepers, cooks, butlers, gardeners, and scullery girls.

Some of the farm laborers and domestics were hired on a yearly basis and “lived
in” the farmer’s household. Most worked on a daily or seasonal hiring, having
offered their labor for sale at a local market. The latter were the “cottagers,” who
rented a cottage and a scrap of land on which to grow vegetables, who usually had
customary rights to the use of village commons and waste lands, and who with
their wives undertook some craft like weaving, glove making, or straw plaiting in
slack times. In good years, cottagers and their families could scrape together a mea-
ger living; in bad years, they had to look to the parish for assistance. The leading
statistician of the day made no distinction between “cottagers” and “paupers”—
400,000 families with an average of only six or seven pounds a year. In rural En-
gland, the laborers ranked above only those with no claim on the society at all—
vagrants, beggars, thieves, and the like.

The rural laborers formed part of the “laboring poor”—the base of the social
hierarchy that comprised almost a quarter of the population. The other segment of
the laboring poor lived in the towns. The urban laboring poor, like those in the
countryside, were often in need of assistance from the Poor Law or private charity;
they included vagrants, beggars, criminals, soldiers, sailors, and unskilled male and
female workers.

Above the urban laboring poor came the wide range of the “middling sort,”
who constituted a dynamic and growing element in English society, amounting to
about 15 percent of the English and Welsh population in the early seventeen hun-
dreds. The middling sort did not fit neatly into the traditional social hierarchy. At
the lower end of the middling scale stood artisans, shopkeepers, tradesmen, and their families, earning perhaps £50 a year. Artisans had their own hierarchies: apprentices, journeymen, and masters, most of whom were male, though women sometimes did become apprentices and learned the trades. Some master artisans owned their own shops and employed apprentices and journeymen. The London Tradesman in 1747 listed more than 350 different crafts and trades: butchers, bakers, and candlestickmakers; but also jewelers, goldsmiths, shipwrights, carpenters, joiners, shoemakers, saddlers, harnessmakers, tailors, lacemakers, weavers, cutlers, printers, chainmakers, spurriers, gunsmiths, hatters, clockmakers, and all the rest of a world of manufacturing now largely gone.

Above the artisans and shopkeepers in incomes and standards of living were the merchants and professional people. Rich businessmen could earn anything from hundreds to thousands of pounds a year. Professional men—women could not enter any of the professions until the late nineteenth century—included clergymen, lawyers, and doctors; they earned a wide range of incomes and improved their status throughout the century. At the beginning of the century, professional men were regarded, like tradesmen and merchants, as overly ambitious and therefore not genteel. By the end of the century, however, they had gained considerable respectability and were even thought of as satellites of the landed orders. The middling sorts would eventually form the germ of the middle class, but in the eighteenth century their main desire was to make enough money to buy an estate and join the elite circle of landed society.

Eighteenth-century society, then, was a finely graded hierarchy in which status distinctions were carefully defined, observed, and protected. Yet England was not a caste society. While there was little movement at the top level, the titled aristocracy, none of the rungs on the social ladder was legally closed to outsiders. Landowners enjoyed privileges, but the privileges defined by the law were surprisingly few in number: the titled nobility sat in the House of Lords and were entitled to trial by their peers; otherwise, nobility and gentry were subject to the same body of law as everyone else and theoretically opened their ranks to newcomers. These concessions composed the social price that the landowners paid for the preeminence they won in 1688. In eighteenth-century England, property determined status, and property could be purchased. In medieval society, property followed status, but this rule had now been reversed. It was possible for a person to acquire a fortune, buy property, and move up to the appropriate rung on the social ladder. At the same time, it was possible for a family to squander its fortune and its estates and thus to find itself reduced in status. Rich businessmen tried to marry daughters of the gentry so as to acquire status; younger sons of landed families often had to marry mercantile wealth or to find positions in the professions. In sum, there were numerous opportunities for social mobility in eighteenth-century England.

There was also an often unseemly scramble as people jostled for positions in the social hierarchy. Barons sought to become earls, squires to become knights, farmers to become squires, merchants to become gentlemen, and shopkeepers to become merchants. Money was the key, and Englishmen impressed foreigners with
their love of money. The most significant aspect of the upward scramble was for wealthy merchants and financiers to buy estates and so cross the all-important line into gentle status. The society was full of men who had achieved privileged status: Sir George Dashwood, a London brewer; Sir Josiah Child, a banker; and Sir George Wombwell, a merchant of the East India Company. The most famous example was Thomas (“Diamond”) Pitt, the son of an Anglican clergyman who became a sea captain, an interloper in the trade of the East India Company, and finally a merchant and governor in the Company—a poacher turned gamekeeper. Pitt made so much money in Indian trade that he was eventually able to buy more than ten estates in England and set himself up as a member of Parliament. His grandson William became earl of Chatham. (Pitt also brought home from India a diamond of 410 carats, which he later sold for £135,000.) Such businessmen usually lacked the social graces to be fully accepted by landed society, but one or two generations later the family passed as the genuine article. As Defoe put it, “After a generation or two, the tradesmen’s children, or at least their grandchildren, come to be as good gentlemen, statesmen, parliament men . . . bishops and noblemen as those of the highest and most ancient families.”

The upward and downward flow of people did not destroy the status hierarchy but rather preserved it. Each person and family assumed the style, the duties, and the privileges of their new position as they moved up the rungs. Social mobility thus provided a safety valve for the economic dynamism of the country. It marked off England as very different from Wales, Ireland, and even Scotland, where the social hierarchies were comparatively petrified. In England, as long as everyone recognized and accepted the hierarchy itself and behaved according to the prescribed forms and standards at each level, then the structure itself was stable.

**SOCIAL RELATIONS: PROPERTY, PATRONAGE, AND DEFERENCE**

Property was one of the pillars of eighteenth-century society because it provided a person or family with the means of survival, because it formed the basis of power, and most of all because it determined social status. “The great and chief end . . . of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government,” John Locke had written, “is the preservation of their property.” The central features of social relationships were closely related to property: patronage and deference. Property enabled a person to disburse patronage—gifts, jobs, appointments, contracts, favors—and the ability to act as a patron was the crucial measure of property and status. To be a great man or lady was to be able to dispense patronage to clients, called in that day one’s “friends” or “interest.” From the recipient’s point of view, to have a niche in life, a means of survival and advancement, required being within the circle of some patron’s friends. According to the essayist Joseph Addison, “To an honest mind the best perquisites of place are the advantages it gives a man of doing good”; by “doing good” he meant being helpful to one’s friends.

Patronage played in eighteenth-century England the role that merit and achievement play in modern societies. Almost all government offices, clerical (that
is, church) appointments, tenancies on landed estates, jobs for laborers, apprenticeships for boys, commissions for artists and architects, assignments for writers, military and naval posts, and the vast array of positions in domestic service were distributed by patronage. No one took entrance or civil service exams or had to show certificates of qualification. Furthermore, few looked on patronage as corruption, for it was simply the way that the political (as we will see), economic, and social systems worked. Nor did English men and women believe that seeking help from a patron was degrading or that receiving such help was unfair. Here is a prime example of an unashamed request for patronage: the archbishop of Tuam in the 1740s wrote the duke of Newcastle on the death of the archbishop of Armagh: “The death of our late primate happening when I was at Dublin, I am later than others in my application upon that event; but as the race is not to the swift . . . I hope it will not be too late for me to lay my small pretentions . . . before yr. Grace.” From the patron’s side, we have the word of Sir Robert Walpole, great landowner and politician, who declared that “while he was in employment, he had endeavoured to serve his friends and relations; than which, in his opinion, nothing was more reasonable, or more just.”

In return for their patronage, patrons demanded deference, which included postures of gratitude, loyalty, service, and obedience. If a man felt entitled to claim assistance from his superior, he also felt it right to defer to that patron’s opinions and wishes. Laborers were expected to move aside and pull their forelocks when the landlord or members of his family rode by; tenant farmers to vote the way the landowner wished; sons and daughters to defer to their parents; artists to render their patrons (or even their patrons’ prize animals) beautiful in portraits; and clergymen to preach on the lines preferred by their patrons. Deference was not regarded as servile, but as honorable. As one late seventeenth-century guide for husbandmen put it: “A just fear and respect he must have for his landlord, or the gentleman his neighbour, because God hath placed them above him, and he hath learnt [in the Fifth Commandment] that by the father he ought to honour is meant all his superiors.”

There were plenty of occasions, as we will see, when deference broke down in the eighteenth century, for people, even the common folk, also had a strong sense of traditional rights and privileges, and sometimes the sense of rights clashed with that of obligations. Nevertheless, patronage and deference, more than force, held the society together. This was made possible by the fact that people were connected to each other by face-to-face relationships up and down the social hierarchy. It would be a mistake to think of those personal relationships as necessarily loving or friendly. The relationship was harsh if the patron was unfair or abusive, a situation for which there was no end of opportunities. The connection between patron and client was always unequal, and exploitation was an inevitable feature of such an inequalitarian society. To see the inegalitarian attitudes, one need only to look at the prevailing view toward the poor. As one observer wrote toward the end of the century, “Poverty is . . . a most necessary and indispensable ingredient in society, without which nations and communities could not exist in a state of civilization.”
When, however, a patron was moved, like the novelist Henry Fielding's Squire Allworthy, by decency and generosity, and above all when a patron allowed himself or herself to be regulated by custom, then the face-to-face connections took on something of the warmth and trust of paternal relationships.

The face-to-face relationships could exist only because the “scale of life,” as Professor Harold Perkin called it, was small. As late as 1760, 75 to 80 percent of the 6.5 million people in England lived in villages or small towns. It remained true that few people outside the elite ever traveled beyond the parish or the nearest market town. Few people ever saw more than several hundred others gathered at one time—church services, markets, fairs, and traditional celebrations at the manor house being the main occasions. Each of these moments reinforced the local community. In rural England, everyone knew everyone else. Even the units of production were small. The greatest noble households may have numbered a hundred servants and laborers, but most farm households were much smaller. Even in the towns, most work was done in households by the master or journeyman, his wife and family, and his apprentices and laborers. A large shop consisted of fifteen to twenty people. Peter Laslett has written: “Time was when the whole of life went forward in the family, in a circle of loved, familiar faces, known and fondled objects all to human size.”* This observation perhaps sentimentalizes the small scale of life, but it touches on the very different quality of human relationships in preindustrial England from those of the modern world.

**LAND, MARRIAGE, PATRIARCHY, AND THE FAMILY**

Landed property was the foundation of the social hierarchy. Land produced much of the nation’s wealth and gave employment to most of the laboring force. Land was the source of prestige and therefore the key to status. To own an estate placed a man at the top of the social ladder and gave him political power. But the size of estates grew throughout the century, and the number of estates was small; hence land was expensive, and increasingly so during the century. Two features of the society followed from these facts: (1) there was severe competition among the wealthy to buy (or to add to) estates; and (2) the object of all landowners was to keep their estates intact.

The landowners used several devices for these purposes. The first was the principle of *primogeniture*, or inheritance of the property by the eldest son. Younger sons and daughters might be given a lump sum of money or an annuity, but the estate as a whole passed to the eldest son, or in the absence of a son, to the designated heir. Landowners did everything possible to avoid and prevent sale of an estate or parts of it. Primogeniture was largely a matter of custom and operated in law only when a property owner died without a will, which no competent landowner would ever allow to happen. Hence the most important device for ensuring the passage of an estate intact was the *strict settlement*. These settlements, wills

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carefully drawn up and defended by the law, provided that each inheritor got the land under severe restrictions: he must not alienate (sell) any of it; it was thus *entailed*. By the principle of entailment, therefore, strict settlements turned the owner of an estate into a sort of life tenant. A squire might settle his land on his son, but on legal condition that the son in turn pass the estate to the grandson. And the son, by powerful social custom, resettled the estate on his son by making the same sort of will, and so on down the generations.

This desire to keep estates intact had heavy consequences for other sons in the family and for all daughters. Because only the eldest son would inherit, different means of support had to be found for all the other offspring. Here is where patronage, “friendship,” and “interest” came into play. With proper connections, younger sons could be sent into the professions—the clergy, army, navy, or medicine. Entry into business was much less favored, since work of a self-interested sort was thought to be tainted by “trade” and therefore to some degree was dishonorable and thus ungentlemanly. But no landlord opposed money itself; hence the typical landlord would be delighted if his sons married wealthy heiresses, regardless of the source of their fortunes. Marriage to a rich banker’s or merchant’s daughter might provide a financial base for a second or third son from which he might launch an effort to buy an estate. In this way, there was an important flow of noninheriting sons downward into the professions, which over time helped to elevate the professions in status and which raised the status of mercantile daughters upward into landed society. This upward and downward mobility helped bond landed and commercial wealth together.

Daughters provided a major problem for landowning families, for they had to be married off well, without loss of status; yet the daughters rarely brought an estate with them. Women could own landed property, and a significant number (mainly widows) did; but the custom in landed families generally was to keep the estates in men’s hands. Thus to find and secure suitable marriages for their daughters was a matter of ceaseless calculating and campaigning for the landowner and his wife. To make his daughter attractive on the marriage market, a landowner customarily bestowed a dowry on his daughter at the time of her marriage. These dowries might amount to thousands of pounds, and everyone thought it perfectly proper if the prospective groom (or rather his family) bargained to get the dowry increased. Thus, having a bevy of daughters was a serious drain on a family’s resources and was regarded by most landlords as at best a mixed blessing.

These circumstances made marriage arrangements within the landowning orders a matter of delicate negotiations and bargaining between families, not unlike diplomatic negotiations between countries. Family fortunes and the status of the lineage were at stake, so parents played a major role in choosing partners for their children. The precise weight assumed by parental opinion varied from family to family, depending on the particular mix of personalities involved. Moreover, the balance between parental choice and the young person’s preference was shifting during the century, as individualism, reason, and eventually romantic sensibility grew in cultural importance. As the decades passed, young people expected to play a bigger role in their own matchmaking and the parents a lesser role. In the sev-
enteenth century, the parents largely arranged the marriages; in the eighteenth century their role slowly moved toward one of exercising a veto over their children's choices.

Nowhere are these familial tensions better shown than in Henry Fielding's great comic novel, *Tom Jones*. In it, the dashing, handsome Tom and the lovely, maidenly Sophia Western love each other. Alas, Tom is illegitimate and thus an unsuitable match for Sophia, whose aunt expresses to her the traditional view:

> So far, madam, from your being concerned alone [in your marriage], your concern is the least, or surely the least important. It is the honor of your family which is concerned in this alliance; you are only the instrument. Do you conceive, mistress, that in an intermarriage between kingdoms . . . the princess herself is alone considered in the match? No, it is a match between two kingdoms rather than between two persons. The same happens in great families such as ours. The alliance between the families is the principal matter.

But Mr. Allworthy, Tom’s excellent guardian, has a more modern view: young people should marry if they love one another, provided that their families are consulted and have the right of refusal. This is also the honorable Sophia’s view and
clearly that of Fielding: Sophia vows never to marry without her father’s consent, but she also refuses to marry his choice (in this case the sniveling Mr. Blifil), since she does not love him.

Such issues reached to the heart of marriage and family life themselves. What was the nature of the relationship between husband and wife, or between parents and children, in eighteenth-century England? The surviving evidence sheds most light on the families of the landowners and the well-to-do people of the middling sorts. The law was clear: as the famous legal philosopher Sir William Blackstone put it, “In marriage husband and wife are one person and that person is the husband.” In the gentry and aristocracy, a woman was supposed to be under the care (and the control) of a man all her life—first her father, then her husband. But here, too, actual behavior was changing. Family life, like the social structure itself, had long been authoritarian and patriarchal. For many centuries, the father had ruled the roost; the husband demanded absolute obedience from his wife; the parents together demanded obedience from the children; and the lineage itself was more important than the individuals of any one generation. In the seventeenth century, Puritanism had accentuated patriarchal control in the family and had intensified the parental desire to subordinate the will of the children to their own, as well as to close the nuclear family to the claims of the lineage as a whole. That peculiar Puritan intensity tended to diminish during the eighteenth century. The reasonableness and tolerance advocated in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century thought mitigated some of the harsh intensity of the Puritan-style family and led to more companionable relations between husbands and wives as well as to more affectionate concern by parents for their children. For this reason, toys and children’s books emphasizing fun and pleasure became important consumer items for the first time in the eighteenth century.

Of course, not all English families became warm and affectionate. Among the wealthiest landed families, the great fortunes still allowed parents to neglect their children. In the eighteenth century, the English custom emerged of sending the children away to school as early as possible. For example, Robert Walpole, who was later to become prime minister, was sent away at age six to boarding schools and later to Cambridge, and he returned only at age twenty-two, rarely having spent more than a few weeks at home. Among the poorest families, poverty ensured that parental attitudes toward children remained erratic and unpredictable, alternating among warmth, cruelty, and indifference. Young men and women among the lowest levels of the laboring poor could marry without fearing that their parents would punish them through disinheritance, because there was no property to be inherited. They also found all too often that they could not feed all the children they produced. Among these families, brutality born of ignorance and frustration sometimes stood at a high level. Finally, Puritanism kept its hold on many families. Cotton Mather, the colonial Puritan divine, wrote of childrearing:

First I beget in them a high opinion of their father’s love to them and of his being able to judge what shall be good for them. Then I make them sensible ‘tis folly for them to pretend unto any wit or will of their own; they
must resign all to me, who will be sure to do what is best; my word must be their law.

THE AGRICULTURAL SYSTEM

The social hierarchy, the village community, and the patriarchal family were central features of a world we have lost. The agricultural system was another feature of this world. It is clear, as we have already noted, that English agriculture had been changing at least since the sixteenth century and that the estates had been integrated into a market economy. Some landlords from the late 1600s on had been enclosing fields, planting improved crops, and adopting new techniques of cultivation. However, because the most intense period of innovation in England came after 1760, this chapter will focus on the more traditional sector of the agricultural system. This sector remained significant to the English economy as a whole: agriculture was still the largest industry in England, the income of landlords and tenants alone composing half of the national income. Farming directly or indirectly employed more than half of the English people. Over 25 million acres were cultivated, of which about half—including the rich grain-producing land of the Midlands—were farmed using the traditional methods.

This traditional system originated in medieval agriculture, though it had become much altered by the eighteenth century. Instead of lords of manors who held their land from their feudal superiors in return for military service, and who farmed the land by both free and unfree labor, eighteenth-century England was dominated by estate owners, who leased parcels of land to tenant farmers, all of whom were legally free. The tenants and their wives worked the land with the assistance of hired farm laborers, both male and female. Feudal duties and labor services had long disappeared, but certain elements remained from the medieval system: (1) the three-field (or “open-field” system); (2) common rights; (3) cooperative management; and (4) relatively low yields. Estates in the traditionally farmed areas normally included a manor house and one or more villages, surrounded by several kinds of fields: first, the small “home farm,” near the manor house, farmed directly by the landlord’s steward; second, large unfenced (“open”) fields divided into strips; and third, common land (or wastes). Each of the large fields was allowed to lie fallow every third year so that it could restore itself naturally; therefore, an estate typically had one-third of the fields in wheat, one-third in barley, and one-third in natural grasses. Each small owner and each tenant farmer held strips—the number depending on the size of the ownership or tenancy—in each of the three fields, and with his hired laborers went out each day from the village to work his strips. Because not all small owners and tenants could afford an expensive plow team, plowing usually had to be cooperative among tenants. Similarly, certain seasonal activities like haymaking and harvesting required a communal effort.

The common land or waste was an important part of the system, especially to the cottagers. By custom, tenants and cottagers had certain rights to the common land: to pick up fallen branches or to cut peat for fuel; to turn a few pigs and geese
onto the common to forage; to graze cows and sheep; or to dig clay for making
bricks. Such rights often were decisive for cottagers and their families between sur-
vival and starvation; thus, the customary rights governing the common or waste
land were carefully defined and zealously defended.

The system as a whole was inefficient. Not only did millions of acres lie fallow
each year but also tenants and laborers had to go long distances from strip to strip.
One Buckinghamshire farmer, for example, held 2 1/2 acres, which were divided
into twenty-four strips scattered among different fields. It was difficult to experi-
ment with new crops or techniques, to carry out systematic fertilizing of the fields,
or to improve the quality of the livestock. Indeed, it was difficult to keep the cattle
out of the fields or to keep a large number of livestock alive over the winter. Yields
were therefore low—perhaps two bushels per acre in wheat. Nevertheless, agricul-
tural production increased during the first half of the century, partly because of
advances in the more modern sector of farming (see Chapter 10) and partly because
of two decades of excellent harvests in the 1730s and 1740s. England for a time had
a surplus of wheat for export. Food prices thus were relatively low, and this fact left
thousands of British consumers with money after their food purchases to spend on
other goods. This happy circumstance would eventually prove to be of enormous
significance. Meanwhile, to most observers, the green fields of England seemed
unusually prosperous and productive. As the novelist Tobias Smollett wrote: “I see

The Warrener, by George Morland. In this drawing we have a glimpse of the rural labor-
ing poor—in this case a rabbit hunter and his family.
the country of England smiling with cultivation: the grounds exhibiting all the per-
fection of agriculture, parceled into beautiful enclosures, corn fields, hay pasture,
woodland and commons.”

COMMERCE

Successful as agriculture was, commerce composed the growth sector of the Eng-
lish economy. By the early eighteenth century, England was well into the com-
mercial revolution. Dr. Johnson observed: “There never was from earliest ages a
time in which trade so much engaged the attention of mankind, or commercial
gain was sought with such general emulation.” This was an age of commercial cap-
italism, for capitalist practices (rational investment of money in commercial enter-
prises for the purpose of increasing profits) had emerged in the 1600s, a century
before industrialization began. The middling sorts provided a substantial num-
ber of men with the rational outlook and the commercial skills to direct the expan-
sion of trade and take the necessary risks. As the historian Roy Porter wrote, “En-
gland teemed with practical men of enterprise, weather-eye open, from tycoons to
humble master craftsmen.” Hence, although official policy remained that of mer-
cantilism, the state did not plan or direct English commercial expansion. It did,
however, respond to the needs of powerful commercial interests in promoting and
protecting foreign trade (by war if necessary), in chartering exclusive commercial
and financial companies, and in avoiding both the heavy taxation and the internal
tariffs that would have dampened trade. The state tried to protect manufacturing
by tariffs and other regulations. But mercantile houses, banks, shipping firms,
turpentine trusts, woolens companies, and countless shops across the country all
were established by individual initiative.

Commercial expansion could be seen in both domestic consumption and for-
eign trade. England enjoyed what has been called a “consumer revolution” during
the eighteenth century. Landlords, tenant farmers, and people of the middling sort
all indulged their desire for luxury, fashion, and convenience by consuming goods
of all kinds. Shops providing the consumer goods sprang up in even the small cities
and towns. Not only did the landlords build, reconstruct, and redecorate their great
houses with marvelous furniture and objects of art, but also professional and other
middling sorts with less ostentatious wealth enjoyed consumer products like tex-
tiles, tablecloths, china services, pottery, cutlery, ceramics, prints, books, and newspa-
defies to a degree that was entirely new in any European society. Refinement of
manners usually accompanied the goods. Some aristocrats became anxious about
the consumer pretensions of their social inferiors; and many traditional moralists
denounced society’s growing taste for luxury. But the desire for consumer goods
could not be quashed, for the intent of the landlords to impress each other and
overawe those below them in the hierarchy only inspired the desire among the less
wealthy to emulate them.

*Roy Porter, English Society in the Eighteenth Century (Harmondsworth, Middlesex:
Foreign trade continued to grow in all its branches—exports, imports, and reexports. The “new trades,” such as the importing and reexporting of tobacco, sugar, linens, calicoes, and slaves, grew steadily in comparison to the old staple export, finished woolens. The basic pattern of English trade was shifting, for while the proportion of English imports from northern Europe still stood at over 30 percent in 1750, the English over time imported less from Europe and more from the East Indies, the West Indies, and North America. Similarly, exports and reexports to Europe (especially to Spain and Portugal) remained of great importance, but shipping to North America and the East Indies won a larger share. Overall, English overseas trade doubled between 1700 and 1760, accelerating from a growth rate of about 1 percent a year in 1700 to 2 percent a year in 1760—a remarkable performance for a preindustrial society. England in the early eighteenth century was no Third World economy.

This foreign trade, as well as the coastal trade in coal and foodstuffs, made shipping a formidable business. In the 1740s, for instance, more than two hundred ships (most of them English) worked the tobacco trade alone. Because of the Navigation Acts, more than four-fifths of all ships calling at British ports were British owned; and British shipping tonnage more than doubled between 1700 and 1770. London continued to be the largest port by far and to grow in size—to more than 700,000 people in 1760, probably a quarter of whom worked in the port trades. London’s insatiable demand drew in goods from most of the British Isles: cattle from Wales and Scotland, fruits and vegetables from the Thames Valley and the West Country, grains from the Midlands and East Anglia, coal from Newcastle, and iron from Sussex, the western Midlands, and eastern Wales. The new trades also stimulated the expansion of other cities, Liverpool, Bristol, and Glasgow in particular. Liverpool, the center of the slave trade, grew from about five thousand people in 1700 to thirty thousand in 1750. Thus, London’s share of England’s expanding trade declined as provincial wealth grew.

London was the hub of an internal market that incorporated most of the regions of England, as well as parts of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. This market was to be a key force in integrating the economies of the British Isles. The degree of commercialization in England and the average Englishman’s love of cash and profits must not be underestimated. This was true of landowners and farmers as well as townsfolk. The sinews of England’s market economy were becoming tougher. London’s financial institutions grew in size and number: in addition to the Bank of England, the East India Company (1709) and the South Sea Company (1711) were chartered in part to finance the national debt. A craze for joint-stock companies and speculation in their stock soared until 1720, when the South Sea Company’s inflated stock collapsed. Thereafter, laws severely restricted joint-stock company foundation, but the commercial sector found its own ways of raising capital and facilitating transactions, as private merchants and attorneys in growing numbers performed banking functions. The notoriously poor roads began to be improved by means of private turnpike trusts that financed their construction and maintenance by tolls. Water transport—slower but cheaper than road haulage—
improved as well, again by private efforts that added to the mileage of navigable rivers and began in the 1750s to construct a system of canals.

To get a sense of commercial development in the first half of the century, one can look at the example of Abraham Dent, who ran a general store in the small town of Kirkby Stephen in Westmorland. In the 1750s and 1760s, Dent sold a remarkable variety of items to customers from the town and nearby villages: tea, sugar, wine, beer, cider, barley, soap, candles, tobacco, lemons, vinegar, silk, cottons, woolens, needles, pins, books, magazines, paper, ink, and a great many other goods as well. Eggs, butter, and cheese he left to the village markets. His supplies came from a surprisingly wide area, including Halifax, Leeds, and Manchester in the North, Newcastle in the Northeast, Coventry in the Midlands, and Norwich and London in the East. He financed his operation in a sophisticated way—by handling bills of exchange and by extending credit to his customers and receiving it from his suppliers. He bought stockings knitted locally for retail to his customers and soon was having thousands made on order. Increasingly, then, he became a small capitalist, ordering goods made to sell to large-scale buyers, usually wholesalers in London. Almost inevitably, as he dealt in more complex financial transactions, Dent became a banker.

Not all shopkeepers were as successful as Abraham Dent, but his case illustrates the integration of the market economy and the connections between commerce and industry. Most manufacturing continued to be done by the “domestic” or “putting out” system. By this system, manufacturing remained decentralized, located in the cottages of hundreds of villages and small towns and devoted to processing native raw materials like wool and iron. An individual capitalist, often a merchant like Abraham Dent, bought raw materials and supplied them to the village craftspersons, paying each a piece-rate for his or her work in finishing the product; then the capitalist collected and sold the product himself. Such was the mode of production in woolens, the metal trades, nailmaking, watchmaking, leather goods, and many others. This system was of great advantage to the capitalist, whose investment was limited to the raw materials. Little initial investment was required. Further, when demand declined, the supplier reduced production simply by laying off workers: none of his own machines or tools stood idle. Finally, the system left problems of labor relations and work discipline to the laborers themselves.

The domestic system provided no golden age for its laborers. True, the nailers, weavers, and other craftsmen and craftswomen worked in their own cottages, alongside their families, and usually on machines they had purchased themselves. In many instances, there was a strong pride in independence that was later to be remembered with powerful longing. Many, however, went into debt to buy their looms or other tools and in effect had nothing to sell but their labor itself. In any case, while many farm families supplemented their incomes by doing one of the steps in the production process, other families found that poor soil in their locality or the increasing demand for textiles drew them, and their whole villages, into full-time spinning or weaving. In such areas, like the Northwest or the Pennines, the laborers left their work to help in the fields only at harvest time. The domestic
workers were able to control the rhythm of labor themselves—typically slow early in the week and rapid toward the end—but they worked very long hours and were subject to abrupt layoffs as the market demanded. Many habitually were indebted to the master; if so, the domestic worker may have been an artisan but he had to struggle to maintain his independence. Most domestic workers depended as heavily on the merchant capitalist as the tenant or farm laborer depended on the landlord.

CUSTOM VERSUS CONTRACT

The commercial sector and the commercial spirit were principal factors making the eighteenth century in England an age of contrasts. They were like fast-running streams relentlessly eroding the massive hills of traditional England. In traditional English society, the hierarchical social structure, the face-to-face relations, the ideal of paternalism, and the power of custom combined to make a world very different from our own. The impersonal, hurried, bureaucratic, and competitive qualities of modern life were much less important then. Everyone except the very poorest had a place in the social system, with privileges and duties attached. Face-to-face relations meant that people lived their lives amid known, if not loved, faces. Paternalism may have been abused, but its claims were not easily ignored, and it provided that members of the elite felt a personal responsibility for those within their circle of clients. Custom was stultifying for the ambitious man, as it was for many women, but it taught rich and poor, landlord and tenant, farmer and laborer, journeyman and apprentice what their rights and responsibilities were.

During the eighteenth century, however, all these features of an earlier way of life were slowly being altered by commercial attitudes: the “cash nexus” or the relations of “contract” conflicted with custom in countless ways and in a myriad of localities. The commercialization of English life was not uniform in its effects in every place or in every set of relationships, nor was its work complete by the end of the century. Nevertheless, the desire for profit and for maximizing the return from every parcel of property unceasingly worked to shift the basis of relationships from customary arrangements to contractual bargains. This shift was as true for the agricultural world as for the commercial. Landlords enjoyed luxurious consumption and the requisite making of money just as much as the merchant or banker. Everyone among the propertied elite maneuvered to improve or consolidate his or her position on the status ladder. Given the power of the landlords and rich merchants, the customary rights of the poor came under constant pressure—a tenancy taken from the customary family and rented to the highest bidder; or rights of foraging on the wastes denied by new landowners; or customary prices for an artisan’s work rejected in favor of a market price.

The inner social history of eighteenth-century England can be written in terms of this sporadic but often desperate struggle. One example, eloquently described by the historian E. P. Thompson, will have to suffice.* In about 1720, in the Windsor

Forest area on the border of Hampshire and Berkshire, a continuing conflict of such ferocity occurred that a stringent law called the Waltham Black Act was passed in 1723. This act added about fifty items to the already long list of capital crimes on the books, including such offenses as deer poaching, going about the forest at night with face blacked for disguise, and breaking the dams of landlords’ fish ponds. The origins of the conflict that occasioned the act lay in the desire of new landlords in the area to exploit the economic opportunities of the forest more efficiently; in the enthusiasm of the “forest bureaucracy” (rangers and gamekeepers) to carry out the landlords’ will; and in the efforts of the small owners, tenants, and laborers of the forest to maintain their traditional means of survival in the forest ecology. Thus, the customary “use rights” of property were disputed. The common people of the forest could eke out a living only if they could supplement their earnings from farm or craft by taking a deer occasionally, fishing in the streams, collecting “lops and tops” of felled timber, and cutting turf for fuel. None of these customary use rights squared with either the landlords’ newly established absolute rights of private property or their lust for money. Paternalism in this case meant that the landlords tried to force the ordinary people to give up their customary sense of right. The landlords naturally had the power of both Parliament and king at their disposal, but the Forest people had resources of their own—secrecy, stealth, intimidation, and violence. In the short run, at least, the struggle was a standoff.

It seems clear that the fight in Windsor Forest was exceptionally dramatic. After all, there was only one Waltham Black Act during the eighteenth century. Yet this episode also seems representative in that it pointed to the main trend in eighteenth-century social history—the shift from an old to a new kind of society, from one based on custom to one based on contract.

Suggested Reading