Chapter Forty-Four

INSTABILITY AND CHANGE

THE 'unexpected revolution' in fact settled nothing. It ushered in thirty years of political instability on such a scale that it is surprising that civil war was averted. Society was split from top to bottom, Whig or Tory, court and country, a polarisation decisively reinforced by the revolution. Those who were Whigs supported what was called the Protestant Succession. The Whigs also stood for religious tolerance of a kind, and certainly drew support from the dissenting community. They firmly backed William III's war policy, seeing the necessity of countering the might of France and attaining a balance of power within Europe. The Tories were also made up of those who had been forced to accept the 1689 settlement out of necessity. But they saw James II as the rightful king though they felt no loyalty to a Catholic. They believed in the old scheme of things, the king as God's vice-regent on earth, in the union of church and state as one, defending the monopoly of the Church of England against any erosion by dissent. And they did not warm to the engulfment of the country in a European conflict which drained England of men and money.

Sharp divisions of this kind would have been enough even without the exacerbation that followed. The pressure of the war, with its constant need for funds voted by Parliament, was such that William, in 1694, accepted a Triennial Act, which meant that Parliament now had to be re-elected every three years. The king, however, retained the right of dissolution. As a consequence of this, during the next twenty-two years there were no less than ten general elections. Election fever had no sooner subsided than it needed to be relaunched, so that both Whigs and Tories were in a constant state of animation.

That sense of being engaged in perpetual battle was heightened after 1695 when the Licensing Act lapsed, thus fuelling political debate on a gargantuan scale, for both parties indulged in a war of words. Even more important was the emergence of newspapers. By 1700 there were some twenty of them which meant that the electorate was better informed both on home and foreign affairs than ever before.

The late 17th century saw the development of more and more places of public assembly. The coffee house reached its zenith of popularity in the reign of Queen Anne, a fashionable meeting place where politicians, business and other professional people would gather: 'You have all manner of news there: you have a good fire, which you may sit by as long as you please; you have a Dish of Coffee; you meet your friends for the transack of Business, and all for a Penny, if you don't care to spend more.'

But, as yet, there was no question of a government being formed wholly by one party, either Whig or Tory. Both William III and Anne would have regarded this as an infringement of their royal powers, so a selected handful of aristocrats acting on their behalf took on the role of 'managers', somehow putting together a government which was made up neither completely of one side nor of the other. One ministry succeeded another in bewildering confusion. Within each, however, certain ministers continued to hold office, providing a continuity which at first glance seems absent. During this period the country was governed by what today we would describe as a series of coalitions.

On the surface, it would seem that such a way of running the country could have led only to a total breakdown. The fact that these frequent reversals did not result in breakdown or worse was due not only to the fact that the moderates on both sides of the political spectrum held very similar views but also to the profound changes which were taking place, ones which in the coming century were to give Britain its unique and enviable stability. Although ministers may have come and gone with rapidity, due to the pressures of the war, both sides realised that government had to go on. For this to happen there had to be a large and efficient machine staffed by people, civil servants, who would work on, regardless of who was in power. During the thirty years after 1689 the civil service trebled in size. New kinds of civil servant emerged, like career diplomats, and whole new departments were created: the Post Office, the Navy Office, the Customs and Excise. These developments increased the power of the crown which had an ever-growing army of official posts in its giving. The men who worked in these departments were professionals and were often properly salaried officials, unlike their predecessors who made their living through fees and perks. They also began to run the government in a way which reflected the advances in the sciences which were taking place, making use, for example, of statistics for the first time.

Government thus became a profession. If that was a change, an even bigger one was to contribute towards stability, the financial revolution. All through the century there had still lingered the old medieval notion that the king should 'live of his own'. Parliament was reluctant to vote any monarch a sufficiency of income because it would, they believed, erode its power. The war with France was responsible for finally changing that notion, so that at long last the basic principle that government had to be paid for was finally accepted. In 1698 Parliament swept away the age-old differentiation between ordinary and extraordinary expenditure. Instead the king was voted for life what was called the 'Civil List', which comprised the expenses of his household and the cost of civil government. All other expenses had to be met by taxes raised and voted for by Parliament. To meet the unprecedented sum of five million pounds which was needed annually for the war, the first high-yield tax in British history was introduced, the Land Tax, a tax on the rents and produce of land and real estate.

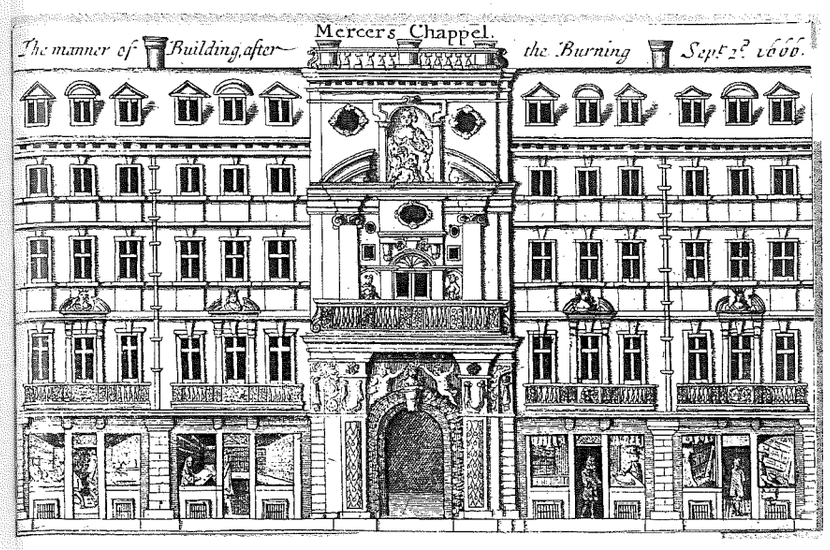
At the same time the royal debts were converted into the National Debt, a system whereby Parliament raised money from the public for loan to the king's government. It was raised through lotteries, the sale of annuities, and loans from the leading trading companies. If that became one method by which the war was financed, another was the Bank of England which was founded in 1694. Those who backed its

creation promised the loan of half its initial capital to the king in return for a royal charter. In this way the fruits of the Commercial Revolution supported, and in the end ensured the success of, the war. It was won on England's credit.

Both developments reflected the rise of the City in the way in which we know it today, as the nation's financial heartland, serviced, like government, by a new breed of professionals, money-men, bankers, brokers and stockjobbers, who practised new ways of handling and dealing with financial matters, such as fire insurance and bills of exchange. What the public still had yet to learn, however, was the difference between sound and unsound investment, a lesson which could only be learned through experience. That came in 1720 with what is known as the South Sea Bubble. The South Sea Company had held out the bait of substantial capital gains and attracted a stampede of purchasers of shares. The result was a financial madhouse, brought to a sudden catastrophic collapse in the autumn when foreign investors withdrew their capital. Panic set in, triggering off the company's ruin, and leaving hundreds of investors either with huge losses or bankrupt.

The emergence of the City signalled a shift in what people thought of as property. In the past that had always meant land which produced income. That definition, of course, continued, but the meaning was gradually extended to take in office-holding or an annuity, both of which guaranteed income, for instance, to army officers or urban professionals. The revolution of 1688 established the divine right of property owners; due to this redefinition and to the upsurge in national prosperity there were many more of them by 1720. That also meant that the electorate was expanding, and was now around 340,000 people, one in four or five of the male adult population, but after that date it was to decline in number. Elections after 1716 were in fact infrequent, and hard-fought contests the exception. The obsession with property caused a steady rise of offences against it and laws to protect it, which, if infringed, were punishable by death. As a consequence hanging, for instance, was a possible penalty for stealing goods worth only five shillings. Although the number of capital offences trebled down to 1800, the number of executions fell.

This growth in the propertied classes was one of the undercurrents which contributed in the long term towards stability. Other shifts within the social structure produced consolidation as against confrontation. Unlike earlier periods, there was a reversion to landowning on a vast scale, so vast in fact that it led to the number of dukes being multiplied to twenty-five to reflect the new reality. Their living style became increasingly grandiose, with country houses which were palaces of a hitherto unknown splendour, stuffed with treasures, and dedicated to display and to life in the grand manner.



The first home of the Bank of England, which opened its doors on 21 June 1694, was Mercers' Hall in Cheapside. By noon on the first day a loan capital of £1,200,000 had been deposited by those anxious to help the war against France and also obtain an 8% return on their capital. In 1734 the Bank built its own premises on its historic Threadneedle Street site where it remains to this day.

The gentry and the yeomanry meanwhile colonised the professions: the church, the law, the army and navy, and the civil service. At the same time population decline removed other pressures. That, combined with improvements in agricultural methods, ensured that the lower classes were better off than ever before. Britain had only a minute peasantry unlike any other country in Western Europe, except the Low Countries.

The Commercial Revolution begun earlier was both hindered and helped by the war. Hindered in the sense that it disrupted trading routes and markets, impeding the flow of raw materials. Helped in that, being victorious, trade with Spain, Portugal, Italy and the Levant was stronger than ever before. So too was that with the Spanish colonies. To these outlets were now added parts of Canada ceded by the French. Add to this the vast increase in size of the merchant fleet and the fact that the navy was henceforth never absent from Mediterranean waters, and the scene was set for commercial dominance.

The war engendered a far more widespread industrial base. Birmingham began its development, in response to its role in the manufacture of guns and swords for the army. The dockyards of Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth rapidly expanded as shipbuilding became a major industry. During these decades the foundations of the Industrial Revolution of the next century were firmly laid. Thomas Newcomen's steam pump, in use by the early years of the eighteenth century, was the most important technological advance of all, signalling the arrival of the age of the machine. Soon after, a Quaker ironmaster, Abraham Darby, discovered a method of

using coal in the smelting of iron ore to produce durable and workable iron, a breakthrough of huge potential. And all over the country industry was becoming better organised, bringing together onto one site processes which had previously been scattered in people's homes and workshops.

This gave rise to the prominence of towns whose identity was a particular industry or activity: Bristol, Liverpool and Whitehaven as ports; Plymouth, Scarborough and Sunderland for shipbuilding; Leeds and Halifax as new centres for the clothing industry; and Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley and, especially, Birmingham and Sheffield, for metalworking. Collectively, these towns embodied a geographical shift away from the south-east and the arrival of the industrial midlands and north.

These industries were to become some of the major energies of the new century, a startling contrast to the fate of religion which had so dominated the previous one. During these decades the Church of England

Broad Quay, Bristol, in the early 18th century. Bristol was a thriving west country port due to trade with America, Africa and the West Indies. The city streetscape is still basically medieval.

became disorientated and by 1720 politically marginalised. The Toleration Act officially recognised its failure to be comprehensive by allowing Dissenters, under licence, to build their own meeting houses for the first time. By 1700 over three thousand of these had been erected, making the schism all too publicly visible. Anglicans felt threatened by dissent seeming to flourish on every side. They were under threat again by the lifting of censorship, which opened the floodgates not only to debate between denominations but worse, literature which promoted ideas which were often heretical and anti-Christian, engendered by an age dedicated to the pursuit of the sciences and the rule of reason. The revolution itself had shaken the Church of England which had rested on the belief that church and state should be coeval and that the king was the Lord's Anointed. That world was never to return. Instead Anglicans were confronted with virtually an elected king who was a Calvinist and saw the man whom they regarded as the Lord's Anointed a Catholic exile. Some four hundred clergy including seven bishops could not accept William as king and left the church. Even those who remained often barely concealed their loyalty to the exiled Stuarts. It was inevitable that the church, particularly that part of it which was High, should fall into an alliance with the Tories, an association which was to prove fatal. William III understandably had little time for the church and refused to summon Convocation, the assembly of clergy of Canterbury and York. Under the first Hanoverian, George I, Convocation, which opposed the Whig hegemony, was finally suppressed. With traditional belief under attack, its hold over the laity dramatically weakened and its inability to respond to change, the Church of England felt dispirited and beleaguered. The strong reaction against forms of religious enthusiasm which had so dominated the century was also telling against it. Nonetheless, the pattern is not a consistent one. In many parishes the church retained vigour and the old view of a complacent, ineffective ministry lacking spiritual commitment cannot be sustained. The Georgian church had its saints. For the bulk of the population squire and parson were twin poles fixed in the firmament of life.

In Scotland the religious situation was very different, for as part of the revolutionary settlement Presbyterianism had been accepted as the country's official faith. Even though the monarch might style himself king of Great Britain the truth was that he remained king of three distinct kingdoms, England, Scotland and Ireland. The last could be discounted, becoming little more than a subject province, but Scotland retained its own system of law and government, including an active Parliament. The religious settlement of 1689 only increased division and faction and made William III determined to achieve full political union with England. In that he failed, but the idea remained on the political agenda to resurface later when the

Scottish Parliament refused to confirm the Act of Succession in favour of the House of Hanover. In 1703 it went even further, stating that a decision as to its future ruler would not be made until after Queen Anne's death. Such an act was viewed with dismay south of the border, for not only could it mean that the crown could pass elsewhere but, in addition, Scottish regiments could be withdrawn from the European conflict. In Scotland there was, however, a party in favour of the Hanoverians and this in the end led to negotiations. An Act of Union was eventually passed by both Parliaments and in October 1707 the Parliament of Great Britain met for the first time.

That was not to be the end of Scotland which retained its own legal system, nor could an act of Parliament wipe out centuries of separate political and cultural development. The pressures which had caused the union to happen in 1707 were at root economic. Scotland's economy was poor. Union with England was in the long run to reverse that, for, by abolishing the border between the two kingdoms, a new state was created which was to be the biggest free trade area in the whole of Western Europe.

The House of Commons in 1710. After the Union with Scotland in 1707 the old House had to be enlarged to take in the Scottish MPs. Sir Christopher Wren was called in to alter what had started life as St. Stephen's Chapel transforming it into an elegant galleried hall. 558 members were crammed into a space 60 by 26 feet but attendance was fortunately spasmodic. The picture records the time-honoured arrangement with the Speaker in his chair and visitors to the House confined behind a bar.

All of these diverse currents within society and the economy taken collectively were indicators of a stability to come, but that was not perceived at the time. The whole of the seventeenth century had been a long search for a new working relationship between the crown and its ministers on the one hand and the crown and Parliament on the other. Abroad, it must have seemed that other states had order, stability and tranquillity compared with the long sequence of civil war, revolution, rebellion and conspiracy that had punctuated the eighty years following the final breakdown of the old Tudor system of government. But, on the other hand, people valued the inheritance of those struggles: liberty, representative institutions, and the rule of common law, things virtually absent from the rest of Europe. The price that was paid was the constant change of government and fierce party warfare between Whig and Tory.

When Queen Anne died in 1714 those divisions were as bitter and as entrenched as ever and yet the succession went smoothly. That was partly due to the Act of Succession and the Whigs, and partly to the disarray of the Tory opposition. James II's son, recognised by Louis XIV as James III and known as the Old Pretender, had been urged to convert to Anglicanism but had refused. That refusal split the Tory party, leaving most of it inert as George I claimed Great Britain. A year later, however, the Old Pretender landed in Scotland and his supporters marched south as far as Preston before being finally crushed. Only with that defeat of what was a serious challenge to the new dynasty could the rule of the House of Hanover truly begin.

The arrival of George I saw a resolution within reach. Unlike both his predecessors, who felt their power would be eroded if ever they came down fully in favour of only one party or the other, the new king had no hesitation in cementing an alliance with one party, the Whigs. In 1716 there was another landmark, the Septennial Act, extending the life of Parliaments from three to seven years. This act contributed to the Whigs' ability to establish themselves firmly in power but took the heat out of party debate. Everything was in place for Sir Robert Walpole to perfect what was to be the most sophisticated patronage system ever constructed to ensure that the Old Corps of Whigs remained in power. The elements making for stability which underlay the turbulence typical of the three decades after 1688 were now at last to find political expression. The age of oligarchy was about to begin.