Chapter Forty-Seven

THE RICHEST COUNTRY

AS WHEN Walpole fell from power, a period of flux followed the death of Henry Pelham. William Pitt was his obvious successor as leader of the House of Commons but, as had been the case with Pelham, the king loathed him, regarding Pitt as factious and irresponsible. The other candidate was Henry Fox, friend both of Walpole and Pelham. The king liked Fox but unfortunately he had fallen foul of the man George II had asked to put together a new administration, the Earl of Hardwicke. As a consequence of this Hardwicke advised the king to follow the disastrous course of putting the government into the hands of the major Whig aristocratic grandee, Henry Pelham's elder brother, Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle. Once again there was a refusal to recognise what by 1754 had become a fact, the impossibility of running government without its leading minister in the Commons able to control a majority.

Newcastle was a great political fixer, whose admirable qualities included shrewd commonsense, disinterestedness, generosity and a wide knowledge of foreign affairs. But the country was fast heading towards a major global conflict with France, one which Newcastle was incapable of leading, as he was subject to bouts of depression, jealousy and hypersensitivity, adding up to paranoia on a grand scale. His appointment was soon realised to be unworkable, which threw Pitt and Fox together. They launched a virulent attack on Newcastle, so much so that within a year he was forced to buy out Fox by admitting him to the Cabinet as Secretary of State and making him leader of the Commons as a last-ditch attempt to keep Pitt out.

On 15 May 1756 war was declared on France. Its initial phase went badly, the French taking Minorca. Then the conflict spread to the Continent when Frederick the Great of Prussia began what was to be known as the Seven Years' War by invading Saxony. The war continued to go badly, so much so that the king was ultimately forced to bring Pitt into the administration. With characteristic arrogance, Pitt would only agree to this on condition that both Newcastle and Fox were excluded from office. The war went no better, so that George II, in April 1757, dismissed Pitt and called once again on Lord Hardwicke to put together another administration. Pitt's

Against a distant view of a Cornish copper mine Thomas Daniell, merchant and mining entrepreneur, holds a lump of ore and meets Thomas Morcom, who worked in the Polperro mine of St. Agnes where the artist, John Opie, came from.

increased demand for tea, coffee, sugar and tobacco, followed by rice, pitch, tar and timber. These commodities in their turn were re-exported to the Continent.

In response to this the mercantile marine grew from 280,000 tonnes in 1695 to 609,000 tonnes in 1760. The ports servicing the westward routes, Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and Whitehaven, also expanded. They, in their turn, stimulated industrial development in their hinterlands, the Severn Valley, the West Midlands, Yorkshire and Lancashire reinforcing the shift of the country's industrial base away from the south and east.

By the 1750s everyone realised the importance of these colonial markets and the necessity to cancel out the French. Future British prosperity was seen to hinge on stemming French advance in America and in India. And this is precisely what was achieved as a result of the Seven Years' War. In India, Robert Clive routed Saraj ud Dowlah at the Battle of Plassey in 1757, bringing Bengal and Orissa under the control of the East India Company. Two years later General Wolfe took Quebec in Canada. Guadaloupe was also taken, and a French invasion of England was thwarted by a bombardment of their fleet at Le Havre. Admiral Boscawen destroyed one French fleet in August and Admiral Hawke a second in November. The same year Prince Ferdinand defeated the French at the Battle of Minden. In 1760 Montreal was taken, and French Canada passed into British hands. Although peace was to be three years away what in effect was the first British Empire had been created. It owed much to William Pitt, whose stupendous energy, vision, and capability to inspire, had taken a

nation with him to undreamed-of victory. But that coincided with a new sense of national unity arising from the dissolution of the Tories, the drawing together of the Whigs, and strong collective resentment of the French. Pitt, for all his genius, was a man who ruled by fear rather than affection. He was an unpleasant man, ruthless, arrogant and inconsistent, with all the symptoms of what we now recognize as a manic-depressive. In Pitt's case, his genius had luck as its firm ally. The navy had brilliant commanders, such as George Anson, and was about to enter its golden age. And Pitt did not have to cope with lingering Jacobite impulses.

Pitt was something of a new political phenomenon for he built up popular opinion outside the House. His ability to attract outside support was such that it was said of him that he was the first 'minister given by the people to the king', although the reality was the king reserved his right both to choose as well as dismiss and popular support proved all too often to be shifting sand. Henceforth that involvement of the world outside was not to diminish but grow, and any politician who ignored it did so at his peril. What was to be more sinister was that such forces could equally be cultivated by those whose aim was to destabilise existing society. And that was precisely what happened in the new reign. The unexpected death of George II on 25 October 1760 was to usher in a very different era.

During these decades of the rule of the élite, the Whig oligarchy, society began to change at a far quicker pace than ever before. Change had, of course, gone on since the sixteenth century but what was new about it in the eighteenth century was its accelerating rate. For the first time there was a sense of everyone living amidst the pressure of continuous change. And that is a feature which signals the arrival of the modern age.

In spite of this, on the surface much must have seemed unchanged. English society was still rural, with 75% of the population involved in the land. This was an era of contradictions for agriculture, for, on the one hand, it was passing through a long depression, and on the other, it was that very depression which provided the spur to innovation of a kind which was to set in motion after 1760 a new prosperity for farmers. Experimentation with new techniques had begun at the close of the previous century, but now it became far more widespread. Heroes like Jethro Tull and 'Turnip' Townshend are symbols of a general movement which developed new skills in land management, introduced new metal tools, experimented with crop rotation and new ways of fertilisation, and grew new crops. These moves forward were pioneered on the lighter soils of the south and east of the country which in the past had been given over to pasture farming but now, through the introduction of crop rotation, went over to mixed farming. The changes were aided by the sharp increase

in enclosures. Enclosure not only doubled the value of the land but created far more compact farms, resulting in greater efficiency and a far better balance between arable and pasture farming. At the same time the rapid expansion of the urban population due to incipient industrialisation meant an ever-rising demand for foodstuffs, leading to regional specialisation: cheese and bacon from Gloucestershire, turkey and geese from East Anglia, hops and fruit from Kent and cider from the west country.

This was a period when the future industrial towns of the midlands and north rapidly took shape: Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Sheffield, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, Derby and Leicester. The Industrial Revolution lay ahead but by the 1780s the pattern of production was already there, with steel making, metalworking, the production of woollens, worsteds and cottons at the top, followed by hosiery, pottery, brewing, linen and silk. From the mid-1740s onward there was a steady small annual growth. Government firmly believed in non-intervention, seeking only to create the right conditions for expansion by freeing industry from the burdens of old-fashioned guild protectionism, internal tolls or class barriers. There was an intense interest in every form of technological innovation which would improve quality or productivity. A long series of inventions revolutionised the manufacture, above all, of textiles: John Kay's flying shuttle (1733) which increased the output of handloom weavers, James Hargreaves's spinning jenny (1768), Richard Arkwright's water frame (1769), and Samuel Crompton's mule (1779), all of which radically changed the processes of textile spinning. In 1769 James Watt patented a more energy efficient use of the steam engine. With all this dynamism, there soon emerged the men who made their fortunes from the new entrepreneurial spirit. Matthew Boulton built his Soho works just north of Birmingham. It employed five hundred men turning out a vast range of iron, bronze, copper, silver and tortoiseshell goods, using water-powered machinery. Richard Arkwright, a former barber with a sharp nose for invention and a gift for organisation, built textile mills to exploit his water frame in Derbyshire, Lancashire and Nottinghamshire. By the 1780s he was providing work for hundreds of people.

These developments called for a far more efficient transportation network to meet the demands of both passenger and freight traffic in what was a new consumer-oriented age. The roads had always been the responsibility of the parish, but before 1730 there were already a handful of what were called turnpike trusts. These took over a section of highway and maintained and improved it, but with access only by the payment of a fee, a toll. The four middle decades of the century witnessed this movement accelerate, effecting a communications revolution. The actual experience of travelling changed beyond recognition. In the 1720s it had taken over three days to

reach York or Exeter. By 1780 both could be journeyed to in twenty-four hours. Four years later the Royal Mail coach began offering a national postal service. And in the 1770s came canals, providing an alternative network for freight.

By 1760 the population was rising again. From 1660 to 1740 it had been static but then it suddenly began to go up sharply, reaching a peak in the last fifteen years of the century. This was the result of a whole complex of circumstances, increasing fertility, earlier marriages, the decline in the death rate and the absence of major epidemics. Cheaper and more plentiful food ensured a burgeoning population and one which was shifting across the country. The areas which benefited most were those of the future Industrial Revolution: the lowlands in Scotland, Yorkshire, Lancashire, and the midlands in England, and the north-east and south in Wales. More and more people lived in cities and towns. London, with half a million inhabitants, was the largest city in Western Europe. Expansion elsewhere reflected economic developments. Bristol, for instance, rose from 20,000 to 100,000 by 1760. Virtually new towns like Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham rapidly acquired populations of between 20 and 50,000 while an old industrial centre like Norwich remained with only 20,000.

Visitors from the Continent much admired what they saw of British society. There was a degree of fluidity but the social structure as a whole remained hierarchical, male-dominated, heritable and dependent on deference. Everything from education to prevailing social attitudes reinforced the status quo. That is not to say that there was no room for movement up and down. The enterprising, intelligent and energetic could still climb upwards while those who were feckless or just unlucky slid down. Nothing was to shift the fundamental view that it was land and property which alone bestowed status. As a consequence, those who made their fortunes in either trade or commerce naturally purchased land, and along with it a position in established society.

At the top of the social pyramid stood the four hundred greatest landowners whose incomes were above £3,000 p.a. Half of these were gentry, for many gentlemen were richer than peers of the realm. Indeed the peerage increased in size very little under the first two Georges. Those who joined its ranks were from politics, the army and navy, and the law. No-one who belonged to the world of either industry or commerce received anything beyond a knighthood or a baronetcy. Together, this interconnected group of four hundred people dominated the political scene. They controlled the House of Lords through what were called 'pocket boroughs' where they were able to

Sir Richard Arkwright, the pioneer industrialist, sits with a set of cotton-spinning rollers on the polished table beside him. They not only made his fortune but transformed the industrial face of the country. The painter was Joseph Wright of Derby whose works record the early Industrial Revolution.

Commercial success brought untold riches. Sir Lawrence Dundas made a fortune as a merchant-contractor and as Commissary-General of the Army during the Seven Years' War. He became a baronet and had four splendid houses. Here he sits in the library of his London house designed by Robert Adam with furniture by Thomas Chippendale, the walls hung with some of his finest pictures. The heavy curtains and wall-to-wall carpeting catch the increasing comfort of upper class life.

control the few electors to do their bidding, thus ensuring that their younger sons sat in the Commons. Their income came not only from their estates but also from the fruits of office-holding, marrying rich heiresses, and profiting from rents from urban property. By 1780 this group of families had incomes of between £5,000 and £50,000 p.a., an 80% increase on the average peer's income in 1688. And, of course, they spent it. All over the country houses were rebuilt on a grand scale with forty rooms or more, the surrounding grounds being transformed into idyllic landscape parks. The lavish life-style was sustained by numerous servants. Monuments to conspicuous consumption, their position at the apex of society seemed unassailable.

The gentry class as a whole, of course, was far larger, some fifteen to twenty thousand of them, with incomes ranging between £200 to £3,000 p.a. According to their resources they aped the life-style of their superiors. Below them came some hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand freeholders with incomes of less than £100 p.a. These were men who were the backbone of parish administration acting as churchwardens, surveyors, overseers of the poor and constables. All of them shared in the increased general prosperity, enlarging and improving their houses. The landowning classes, in short, got richer, for there was as yet no such thing as a system of taxation which redistributed wealth within society.

The gentry overlapped with the strata below, 'the middling sort', for their younger sons made their way into the professions during the period in which that class doubled in size. They included people like attorneys, solicitors, surveyors, apothecaries, physicians and the services as well as, for example, those engaged in cultural occupations such as painters or musicians. The growing demand for professional help vividly reflected not only the advent of leisure but also the increasing complexity of day-to-day finance and administration. Professionals serviced a society which was more sophisticated, more status conscious, more comfort and amenity oriented, and more cultured than ever before. And the fees for such services could be huge. The 'middling sort' also embraced wealthy capitalists and small businessmen, people who invested their labour and profits in entrepreneurial activities. As a class they were obsessed by technological discovery, and all over the country clubs and societies sprang up dedicated to scientific advance and investigation. These were the classes whose approach to life was essentially practical and pragmatic. They had their own educational establishments outside the old-fashioned grammar schools and the slothful universities. With these people we touch Georgian society at its most dynamic.

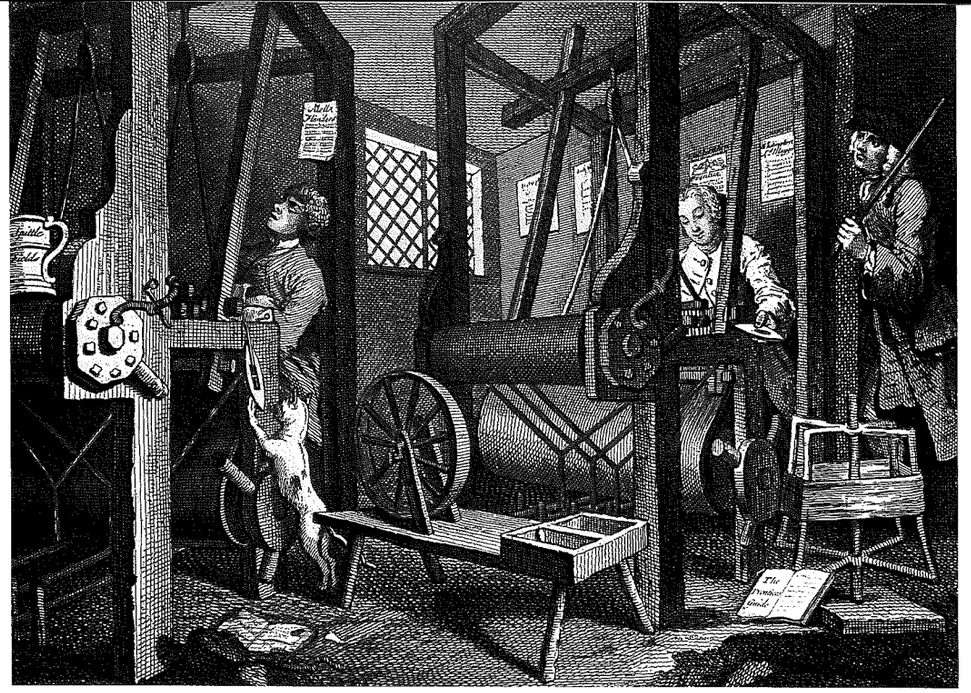
Below all of these lay the remaining half of the population for whom not even political rights existed. They were viewed by those above them as illiterate rabble. And

indeed illiteracy was rampant, particularly in the case of women and in the rural areas. This was a vast, varied, shifting and shiftless part of the population, made up of agricultural and industrial labourers, cottagers, domestic servants, ordinary soldiers and seamen, and the poor. Their conditions of life fluctuated widely but were often extremely primitive. The new mobility made possible through improved communications meant that the glaring gap between the rich and the poor was only too visible. For the lower classes life depended on their employers, and such work as they had could be temporary, seasonal or piece-work. It was inevitably subject to variations in the economy. Nonetheless until the middle of the century they too benefited from the general upward trend of the country's economic fortunes. After 1750 a steady rise in the cost of living began to threaten that, but in general diet, clothing and housing improved, and the boom meant ample work not only for men but for women and children too.

This was a society without a police force where fear of one kind or another was never far beneath the surface. The mass of the population was superstitious and prejudiced. Every so often the mob erupted and vent its wrath on unpopular groups: Roman Catholics, Jews and, above all, Dissenters and Methodists. This was accepted as a norm of life, but most riots were well-organised and well-behaved, reflecting the strong hold which deference had, as well as Christian reverence for authority. Only later in the century did the mob take on a face which began to alarm the upper classes and that was in the aftermath of the French Revolution, which violently swept away an aristocratic society. The mob then began to be viewed as dangerous, especially when under the influence of a demagogue, and increasingly the army began to be sent in.

With no police force, petty crime, and theft in particular, escalated in this first consumer society. There were simply more things to be stolen. Government fell back on extending the death penalty and transportation for more and more offences. Indeed by 1775 some 50,000 convicts had been shipped to America. After the thirteen American colonies were lost, a convict settlement was started in the new colony of Australia. But these penalties were self-defeating, for the number convicted was minimal compared with the number of cases tried.

For all its faults eighteenth century society was at heart deeply moral. The best-selling prints by the painter William Hogarth were dedicated to stories extolling virtue and condemning vice. It was a sturdily Protestant society whose common identity was still largely that forged in the reign of the first Elizabeth by such things held in common as the *Book of Common Prayer*, the *Authorised Version of the Bible* and festival days in commemoration of the monarchy: Oak Apple Day, 29 May, celebrating the



A scene from William Hogarth's moralising series of prints, *Industry and Idleness*, published in 1747, tracing the fate of two young apprentices, one idle and the other industrious. Here, in the opening scene, they are depicted at their looms, apprentice weavers in Spitalfields, the centre of the silk-weaving industry. Weavers worked in small, crowded surroundings often from twelve to sixteen hours a day.

restoration of Charles II; 1 August, which marked the Hanoverian succession; and 5 November, the Gunpowder Plot. The common reading was still Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, casting the island's people as a new Israel, a vision celebrated in his oratorios by the great court composer, George Frederick Handel. Foreigners were still regarded with deep suspicion. Most, if not all, were Roman Catholics and that by definition cast them as enemies, a fact which was to be heightened by a hundred and thirty years of war on and off with France. That war, and the creation of an empire, were to be crucial in the gradual superimposition on to the two islands of the new identity of Great Britain. This was reflected during these decades by an ever-increasing emphasis on all things indigenous being the equal of any abroad. There was a new-found pride in every native achievement, which was to find for the first time institutional expression whether in the Society of Arts (1754), founded to encourage the 'Arts, Commerce and Manufactures of Great Britain' or the Royal Academy (1768), 'a Society for Promoting the Arts of Design'. It was an all-pervasive aura of optimism, confidence and achievement that was only to be brutally shattered by the American Revolution.