

Chapter Fifty-Nine

VICTORIAN BRITAIN: THE CLASSLESS SOCIETY

QUEEN VICTORIA reigned for over sixty years, from 1837 to 1901, and gave her name to an age which continues to make an indelible impression upon the imagination. And yet her unique imprint was achieved when the political power of the crown had finally gone into eclipse, never to recover, making the royal family in the long run seemingly redundant. That that did not happen owed as much to the nature of the woman as to the circumstances which once again made the monarchy needful to both government and people.

Victoria started her life as a headstrong, passionate young woman devoid of political sense. Her educational maturity she owed to her consort, Prince Albert, never a popular figure with the British, who began to carve out a new role for the monarchy. Returning to George III, the royal family once again became a model for private probity, indeed the court was almost middle class in its dedication to mind-improving pursuits. Interest in the arts and the sciences, in national achievements, and in good works now became the touchstone of royal activities. None of these foundations for the future popularity of the monarchy brought immediate success and, when the Prince Consort died of typhoid fever in 1861, any achievement was undermined by the twenty years of gloomy seclusion of his widow. Victoria became the familiar rotund figure encased in black, subject to attack for not fulfilling her public role as queen. That devolved on to the Prince of Wales, the genial future Edward VII, whose womanising and proximity to scandal actually damaged the royal image. But, by the time Victoria died, all of this had gone into reverse with the monarchy emerging sacrosanct as a national symbol, as potent as it had been in the days of Gloriana.

The irony was that this revival was made possible precisely because the monarchy had withdrawn from its political role. By the 1870s the queen was beginning to be viewed in a different light due to the longevity of her reign, her practice of the domestic virtues, her role through the marriages of her many children as the

matriarch of Europe, as well as that of being the focus of the world's greatest empire. Indeed in 1876 she was made Empress of India. At home the extension of the franchise and the ever-increasing urban masses called for a unifying symbol whereby to hold them together and this was to be provided by a startling revival in the fortunes of the monarchy, one which was to last for a century. To the grey world created by the Industrial Revolution the crown was now destined to purvey pageantry and splendour, and that was to be deliberately built up. The process began with the celebration first of Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 and then her Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Both of these were occasions for magnificent carriage processions through London of a kind which were to be multiplied by her descendants. The success of these went hand-in-hand with the advent of mass circulation newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* aimed at the newly literate. For the first time, due to railways and then trams, people could travel to enjoy spectacles, but even more they could read detailed accounts and, through photography and new reproductive processes, see pictures. This alliance of the press and the crown was only to collapse in the 1980s.

If political power had all but vanished from the monarchy, the aristocracy and gentry's hold only weakened after 1870. Both remained unassailable in terms of wealth and power, their members held together by a shared education and culture as well as by interconnection through marriage. Ownership of land was still the basis of status and social acceptance. Those who rose to join its ranks from the professions, the army, the law and commerce, all subscribed to that belief, investing heavily in estates and country houses. In 1873, 80% of the land in the United Kingdom was owned by an élite of seven thousand, out of a total population of 32 million. This élite not only dominated politics and government but every aspect of life, setting taste and style in the arts and in fashion. But they were also responsive to the new ethos of domestic probity, public duty and philanthropy, winning thereby the applause of the classes below, who accepted that such an élite was there as of right to rule them. What bound the aristocracy and gentry to the middle classes below was the possession of property and their mutual involvement in capital investment in industry. The upper classes were active in fields as varied as mines, brickworks, ports and property development. Their life-style, however, varied little from that of the previous century, centring on a large house in the country set amidst gardens and parkland and a house in London for the season. Railways made such houses accessible for weekend parties and the comfort within them far eclipsed that of the Georgian age. Some, like the Duke of Westminster at Eaton Hall, had three hundred servants. The great

The keystone of the arch of Victorian Britain, the Queen and the Prince Consort, Albert, recorded by Roger Fenton. Their domestic probity set the tone of an age.



London houses amazed every visitor to the country by their opulence and the sheer lavishness of the entertainment within them.

Aristocracy, gentry and the middle classes together embodied propertied opinion and collectively therefore were worthy of the franchise as having a stake in the security of the state. Unlike the aristocracy and gentry, however, the middle classes were a shifting indefinable kaleidoscope, embracing everyone from the entrepreneur to the skilled worker. Certain things they had in common. Two of them were that the wife did not work and that the household had at least one servant. In the main the middle classes were urban, and involved in the production and distribution of manufactures, raw materials and consumer goods: between 1850 and 1870 the number of shopkeepers rose by 54%. Together this amorphous mass of people, who formed between a fifth and sixth of the population, controlled the destiny of a country whose future was to depend heavily on the quality of its professional men. This indeed was the age of the professions, proclaimed by the roll call of organisations they formed, such as the Royal Institute of British Architects (1834), the Institute of Mechanical Engineers (1847) or the British Medical Association (1856). These bodies reflected the needs of an increasingly complex society which called for more doctors, lawyers, apothecaries, civil engineers, architects, and many other specially qualified people to meet its needs.

It was the professional and middle classes who lived in the detached and semi-detached villas built by the thousand in the suburbs of the towns and cities, each with its front and back garden, its basement and attic rooms for the servants. Within, there was the hitherto unknown clutter of the consumer age of mass manufacture together with more significant comforts, running water, indoor lavatories and bathrooms, gas light and gas stoves. Such houses were to reflect the infinite gradations within the middle classes. Moving downwards there was the terraced house, its status sharply defined by elements such as bay windows and porches and the amount of decoration on its façade.

Whereas there was more common ground binding aristocracy, gentry and middle classes, the latter firmly distanced themselves from the classes below. The working classes were also made up of a widely disparate group of people, fierce in their maintenance of an intricately graded pecking order. At the top of this highly complex hierarchy stood the skilled worker and at the bottom the unskilled labourer. There was no feeling of solidarity between them, indeed there was more to divide than to unite them. The irony was that it was the upper echelons, aspiring to practise the middle class virtues of hard work and self-discipline, which also produced the political radicals. Much of the work people were involved in was noisy, dangerous,

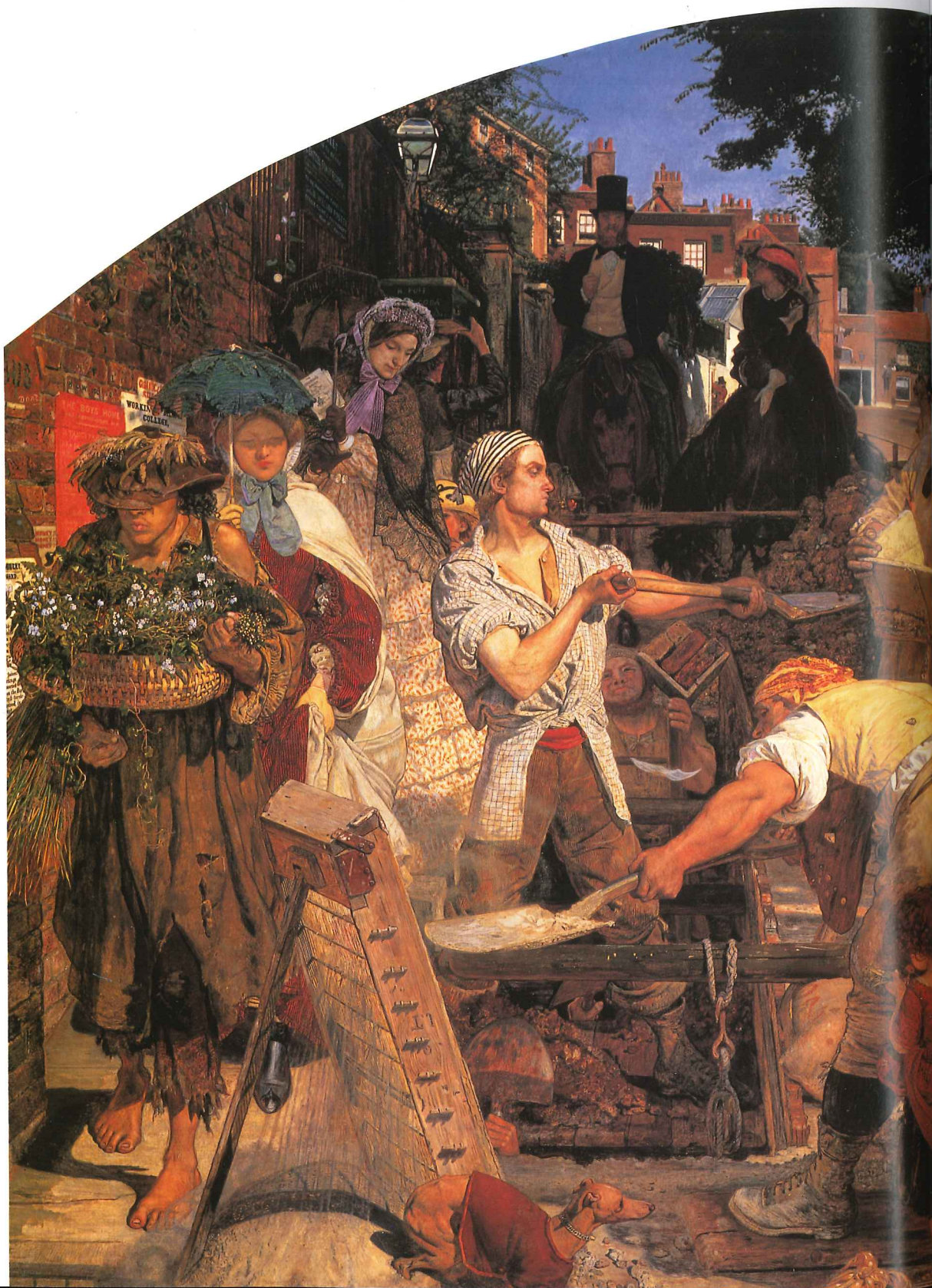
monotonous and arduous. There was no lack either of accidents, from pit disasters to maimings by machinery. Life was hard, hardest of all between the birth of a first child, when the mother stopped working, and when that child could earn. The houses they lived in were 'two up and two down' terraced houses, often with more than one family crammed within them. There was no decoration and although there might, towards the end of the century, be running water, the lavatory was an outside closet. Inside the house, heating was by coal and lighting was by means of candles, oil or paraffin. Gradually the advent of cheap wallpaper and linoleum added some feeling of domestic comfort to the bleak interiors. Sometimes workers lived in flats called 'model dwellings', but wherever they lived it had to be within walking distance of their place of work.

At the lowest level of all was a seething unnumbered mass of the poor, unemployed and unemployable. No one knows how many there were, but the fact that three million people emigrated between 1853 and 1880 is one indication of the tide of humanity which had found no place in the social hierarchy and who wished to escape a life of destitution and state and private hand-outs. Every Victorian city and town had its slum areas where these people eked out an existence. No respectable person would ever enter such a ghetto without a police escort. Victorian society was rough at the edges but people did not actually go in fear of their lives. Whereas in the previous century and up until 1830 it had been the task of the army, as a last resort, to disperse by force of arms any unruly masses on strike or demonstrating, now it was the task of the police, bearing only truncheons. The fact that towns were divided up into living areas in this way greatly facilitated their task. Any incursion of the poor into the better-class neighbourhoods was firmly discouraged. The rich lived secure within gated and railing streets and squares. The middle classes were a journey out to the suburbs. The turbulent and deprived elements of society were thus firmly ghettoised.

Every age has its winners and losers, the result of the ethos of the period, good

Work was apotheosised by the Victorians as being the essence of the virtuous life. The Pre-Raphaelite painter, Ford Madox Brown's *Work*, begun in 1852, was finished finally in 1863. It was inspired by the writings of Thomas Carlyle and by the latest sociological works of Henry Mayhew. The setting is Heath Street, Hampstead, and its focus

is an excavator 'as the outward and visible type of Work'. To the left there is a wretch who has never learnt to work while behind are the rich who have no need to. In the foreground ragged children represent those at the bottom of the social heap. To the right stand the brainworkers, including Carlyle.



luck or ill fortune, both won or lost through hard work or fecklessness. Outside the seamless robe of the tiered classes stood the harsher facts of age and sex, which crossed all barriers. Victorian Britain was above all a sternly patriarchal society in which women at every level were subordinate. In the case of the lower classes women were looked upon as a reservoir of cheap labour, being paid only a third to two thirds of what a man was paid. Until the 1880s opportunities for women remained circumscribed, confined almost wholly to domestic service or the textile industry, plus piecework at home. To those occupations could be added serving in a shop, tailoring, being a milliner, a governess or a teacher. But the overwhelming majority of women were in service, indeed by 1881 one in every twenty-two of the population of England and Wales was a servant, 16% of the entire labour force. From the middle class upwards no women worked, her role being that of running the home as a dutiful wife and mother, directing the household servants and, occasionally, undertaking charitable work. By 1900 fewer women were at work, an index of aspirations achieved, for it reflected the rise in income of their husbands rendering their need to work unnecessary, thus raising them to middle class status.

But change was in the air. In 1857 judicial divorce became possible, albeit the circumstances favouring the man. The Married Women's Property Act provided some independence for women in respect of their own property. This signalled the huge alteration in legal status to come. By the 1880s women could go to a university, become doctors, and take part in competitive sports such as tennis and golf. Some could vote at local elections and were also eligible to be members of School Boards or Poor Law Guardians. The suffrage movement was already under way and in 1897 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was formed. Women's magazines and sections in newspapers also reflected a new collective identity and recognition.

Increasingly, intelligent women could shift for themselves. That was not so in the case of children at any level of society. They remained virtually unprotected against exploitation or physical abuse, and continued to be used in all branches of industry, sometimes with cruel effects on their physical wellbeing. Their disappearance from the factory floor was achieved less through government intervention than the fact that technological advance rendered what they did superfluous. The 1870 Education Act for the first time laid down that all children should receive compulsory education until the age of ten. That was far from welcomed by the working classes, who lost thereby a source of income. At the opposite end of the social ladder, upper class children were brought up as exhibits handed over at birth to a small army of nurses, maids, governesses and tutors, based in a separate part of the house from their parents. But, as in the case of women, change was also in the air. The foundation in



AN "UGLY RUSH!"

MR. BULL. "NOT IF I KNOW IT!"

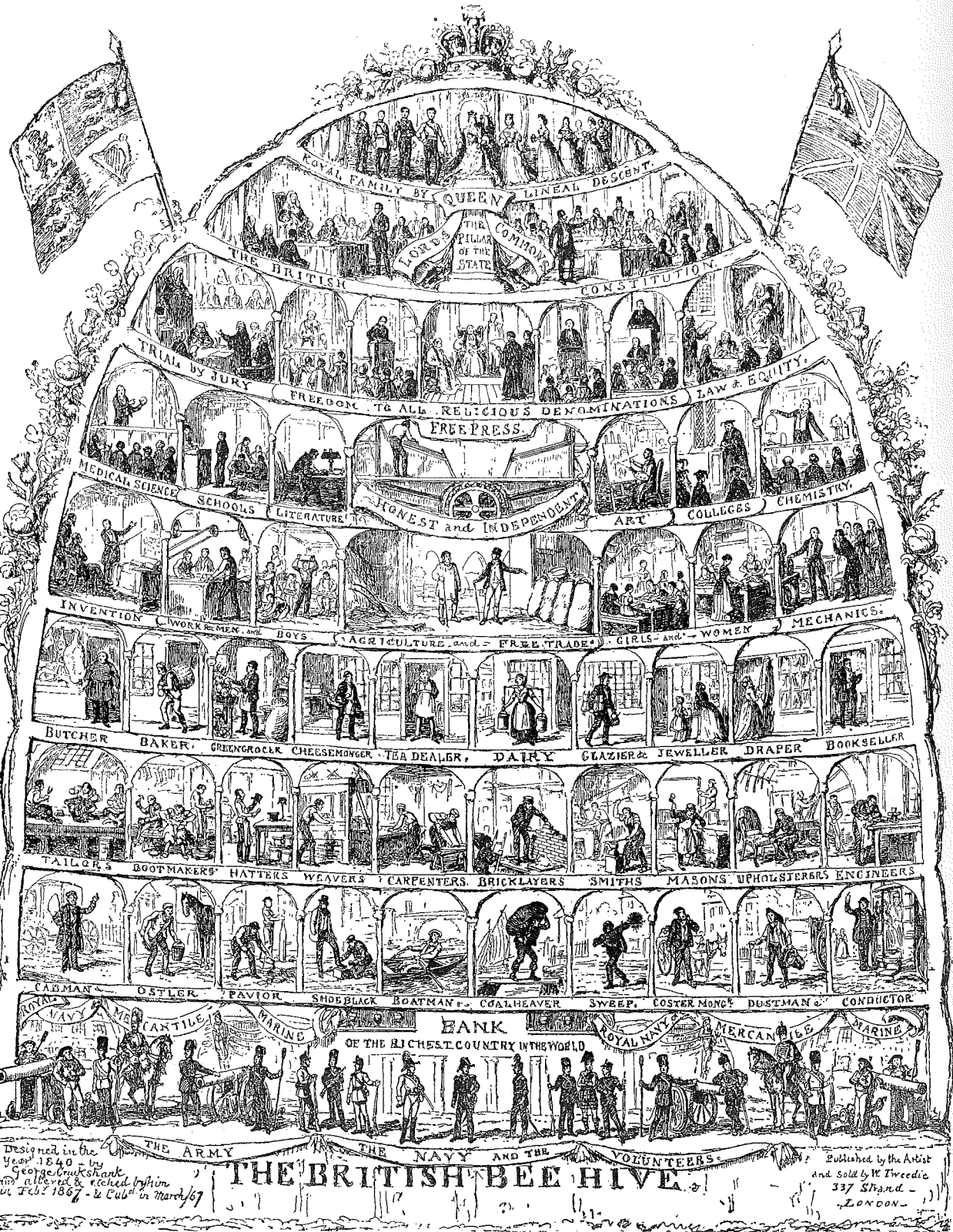
A *Punch* cartoon, *An Ugly Rush*, caricatures a bid in May 1870 to extend the franchise to women. Women's rights were in the air but the cartoonist, Tenniel, cruelly depicts those who

demand such things as ugly harri-dans. 'John Bull', the embodiment of traditional Old England, resists their pressure on the door.

1889 of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children is concrete evidence of a new awareness of the vulnerability of the young.

The eighteenth century thought and wrote in terms of the 'lower orders' or 'the middling ranks' but by 1850 the terms 'middle class' and 'working class' had become the accepted way of referring to the various strata of society. Such terms imply, however, a polarity and rigidity which did not exist. There was no group confrontation of classes in the Victorian age. The idea of hierarchy was universally accepted, nowhere more keenly than the lower down one went. The effects of the Industrial Revolution held people together as much as it seemingly divided them. But that was not the only factor which acted as cement holding this fast-changing and dynamic society (numbering by the year of the queen's death some 41.6 million) in some kind of coherence with no signs of dangerous fragmentation.

Deference held society together, meaning the acceptance by each rank of its place



within a ladder which had its summit in the monarchy, itself a symbol of national unity. Society was equally bound by the belief that a government could not pursue any moral policies which were not firmly based on Christian dogma. The basic tenets of Christianity were accepted at all levels of society, even by those who never went near a church. Christianity was woven into the fabric of the institutions of state. The fact that the various denominations waged intensive warfare did not impede this. The Church of England was split in two between the Evangelicals or Low Church and the new ritualistic High Church movement. Both streams were full of missionary zeal. So too were the dissenting churches and the Roman Catholics who re-established their episcopate in 1850, much to the alarm of Protestants. The year after that event a census revealed that 40% of the population never went to church, a blow which fuelled the missionary endeavour of every denomination towards what they saw as the pagan urban masses. Their impact was minimal. Meanwhile Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Natural Selection* (1859) challenged the creation story and divided the educated classes. None of these things could remove the fact that the prevailing ethos of the age was a deeply religious one, expressed in the practice of daily prayers and Bible readings and by strict church attendance on Sunday. Government reinforced the façade by legislation creating the universal gloom of Sunday, one which amazed foreign visitors, for all shops and places of business and entertainment remained firmly shut. Only in the years following 1870 was religious fervour to begin to subside.

If the Christian religion was common ground so too was an aspiration universally shared by Victorians, that for respectability. Respectability embodied financial independence achieved through one's own efforts, self-discipline, and self-help. It brought with it a cult of work, hard work, and a veneration for home and family as a shrine. A good respectable man was a concept which cut across all social boundaries. He was the kind of man who paid his way, was never in debt, kept out of trouble and bore life's many burdens stoically. Those who were not respectable were the extravagant, the feckless, the unreliable, the drunkard, the promiscuous and those who sponged off the state. But respectability also called for a certain front which could only be achieved by those with a modicum of financial means. As a consequence, its demands could take a heavy toll on the middle classes and skilled workers who struggled to maintain such a front and avoid the slip downwards. Respectability really excluded the poor and it could also bring hypocrisy and double standards. In the context of the

Victorian Britain at its apogee encapsulated by George Cruikshank in *The British Bee Hive* published in 1867. Descending downwards from the royal family it celebrates above all the virtues of free trade resulting in the 'Bank of the Richest Country in the World'.

age it had much to say in its favour for it must have carried many people through what was still a hard life, with fortitude giving them a set of values and standards to cling to.

These values were enshrined in the home. Up and down the country there were conglomerations of small homes as never before, offering the only shelter, comfort and delight to inmates away from the workplace. For the middle classes home was sacred, a domain over which the man ruled and in which his family learnt the virtues of respectability and the moral code. Home was held together by religion, and by the common life shared within its walls of meals and sober recreation, amidst an increasing clutter of household possessions signalling the consumer age.

If the queen, deference, religion and respectability drew classes together, so too did philanthropy and good works. There was a universal horror of state provision and charity was an obligation laid by convention on every class that possessed the means whereby to practise it. In the countryside the landowners provided for their tenants. In the towns there was a never-ending proliferation of new hospitals, orphanages and asylums. By the middle of the century care was being extended to animals with the foundation of the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals (1824). The philanthropy of Victorian Britain was in excess of that of any other European country. But it was charity with an edge, for its recipients were carefully sifted in search of the deserving, nor should it obscure the fact that in one sense it implied social subordination by the recipient. By the end of the century there was increasing support for some kind of state pension.

Such were the sober principles that motivated society, but there were others of a more carefree nature. Leisure, which in the previous century had been the prerogative of the few, now extended, however sparsely, to the many. This was a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution which sharpened the division between work and other time. By 1850 a pattern had set in, that of the five-and-a-half day week with a half-day on Saturday, Sunday off, and set holidays once a year. In the early 1870s came Bank Holidays and by 1875 there was Boxing Day, Easter Monday, Whit Monday and the first Monday in August. In the country, of course, this precipitated little change and the year remained punctuated still by age-old festivals, shearing suppers, Whitsun walks, tithe feasts, fairs and markets. But in the towns the story was a very different one. Initially those who migrated to the towns brought with them many of the crueller pastimes which the middle classes regarded with horror: cockfights, bullfights, prize fights or attending executions. Added to that there was drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Fear of the uncontrollable violence which such pursuits might unleash led the middle classes to set about the suppression of fairs as

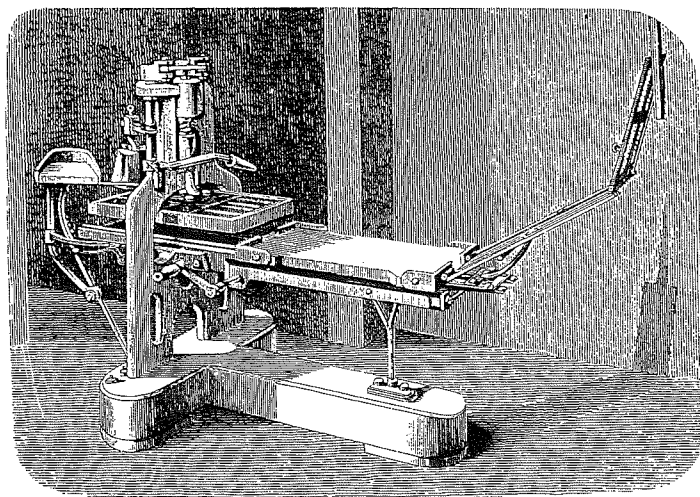
dens of vice, and the introduction of restrictions on things like opening hours. More particularly they promoted what was called 'rational recreation'.

Within every city and town sprang up public parks in which to stroll and study nature, libraries in which to read, museums in which to learn about art and history, and mind-improving exhibitions of every kind. The Mechanics Institutes provided meetings and lectures, giving the lower classes basic scientific instruction. Factory outings began, paternalistic gestures by employers aimed at encouraging a loyal workforce. Cruel sports were driven underground and new ones emerged, above all cricket and football. The Football Association was founded in 1863. Football was initially patronised by all classes, but by the 1880s it took on its working class patina proving to be a healthy and harmless means of engaging the enthusiasms of those who could easily take on the character of an uncontrollable urban mob. Local patriotism was instilled into the supporters, and the railways meant that both they and the team could travel to 'away' fixtures. Cricket in contrast maintained its upper class adherents, a sport fit for gentlemen but also appealing to a broad spectrum of the population.

Set periods of factory closure engendered the novelty of the holiday. From the point of view of the factory owner this was far better than employees just deciding not to bother to turn up. The railways meant that the holiday could develop, and the turning-point came with the cheap excursions to London in 1851 to see the Great Exhibition. Thereafter, cheap journeys to London, the seaside or some other place of interest, led millions of Victorians to move around in a way hitherto unknown. By the 1870s and 1880s what had begun as a middle class practice, a stay at a seaside resort, quickly spread down the social scale. The working classes took over certain places such as Morecambe, Blackpool and Ramsgate, and made them their own. By then, however, the upper classes were exploring the Continent in far greater number, under the aegis of the new travel company, Thomas Cook.

Most classes shared in the delights of a burgeoning urban entertainments industry. The theatre embraced all classes, which within its walls were segregated from each other both by price and by architecture. Concerts and choral societies also had universal appeal. The Henry Wood Promenade Concerts in the Albert Hall began in 1895, with the large central area filled with those who for a modest sum stood throughout the concert. Music hall, an expression of working class culture, took shape in the 1870s and 1880s attracting audiences across the social divides. And for the working classes there was the gilt and glitter of the pub and the dancing saloon, plus the pleasures of that male preserve, the Working Men's Club.

With the increasing literacy of a large proportion of the population there came a



Charles Earl Stanhope's first iron printing press paved the way for the steam-driven cylinder presses which increasingly enabled mass editions and popular literacy during Victoria's reign.

shared literature beyond that of the Bible and Prayer Book. By the 1850s the middle classes were hungry for reading matter. Taxes were progressively removed from advertisements, newspapers and, finally in 1861, from paper itself. The result was a printing explosion, and a barrage of newspapers, books and periodicals. By 1880 there were no less than ninety-six dailies in the regions and the national papers also sped their way across the country. There were cheap editions of the classics and of contemporary novels. This indeed was the heyday of the serial novel, in the case of Charles Dickens holding a nation in suspense as the fate of his characters unfolded week by week. The novels of Dickens, Trollope, Thackeray, George Eliot and later Hardy, Meredith and Henry James represented to a large degree a shared culture. Only after the 1880s came the great divide between writers who received critical acclaim and those, like Ouida, whose work epitomised the rise of cheap fiction pandering to a mass audience in search of romance and sensation.

The myth of Britain, whose foundation had been laid earlier in the century, was another binding force as a national mythology was projected through best-selling history books. Macaulay's *History of England* (1849-61) and J. R. Green's *Short History of the English People* (1875) were two works which ran into edition after edition. During the 1830s history began to be taught in the public and some of the grammar schools, in order to prepare the children of the newly enfranchised classes for political responsibility. After 1870 the teaching of history was extended to the working classes with the aim of cementing national identity. History was presented as progress, as the exaltation of a political freedom which had descended from the Anglo-Saxons, was re-secured in Magna Carta, reprieved through the Civil War, and was reaching

fruition in their own time. History was made to serve as the collective genealogy of the newly literate masses. Or, as the historian John Lingard put it in 1849: 'Our annals are fraught with animating scenes of national glory, with bright examples of piety, honour, and resolution, and with the most impressive and instructive lessons to princes, statesmen, and people.'

There was much indeed which held the peoples of Victorian Britain together and in their place, but mobility was not excluded. Mobility however, was complex and access to its paths was unequal. The skilled manual workers fiercely guarded, for example, any incursion into their ranks from below. The middle class expanded continually by one means or another. Ways up could be any number of means: education, family connection, money, talent, the shared membership of an organisation. Such things accounted for the shifting composition of those who entered the middle classes but the real barrier to cross was that from the middle class into the upper reaches of society. That journey hung on the passenger being deemed a gentleman and much agony attended the definition. Until the 1880s who was, or was not, a gentleman remained the decision of the classes above the aspirant. Riches, land and talent, as well as social accomplishment, were helpful attributes. Certain people could never qualify, those directly connected with factories, shopkeeping or farming, but that changed in the 1880s when an accommodation was reached that anyone who had been educated at a public school was a gentleman. That removed a possible source of conflict for it meant that even if a man failed to achieve entry himself he could achieve it for his sons. The legacy that resolution created was a hardened élitism, which was not to be undermined until after 1945.

It remains extraordinary that Victorian society held together at all, when the pressures and changes are taken into account. Britain was the first country in Western Europe to undergo such a radical transformation which others were only to begin to emulate in the 1880s. What is astonishing is how such a vast explosion and migration of population within a small island had occurred without any major social confrontation; indeed, there was instead remarkable economic and social progress. Society by 1901 was infinitely more varied and volatile, but yet it remained coherent, in spite of the fact that it was a more anonymous society. In earlier ages men had known the suppliers of their daily needs, such as transportation and fuel and water. Now people depended for such needs on small groups of workers they would never meet. Increasingly after 1870 these groups became aware of that fact, and began to realise the pressure they could exert not only on government but also on the rest of society. Increasingly, too, deference came under fire, once status could be achieved not by birth or riches but by competitive examination.