Chapter Seventy-One

THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

THE twentieth century has been a period of enormous change but nothing approaching that lived through by the Victorians, who visibly saw the surface of the island change far more dramatically in response to the Industrial Revolution. Then, the population had quadrupled. In this century it had only doubled, reaching 54 million in 1981. That is due to a number of factors from falling fertility rates to the decline in infant mortality, from the practice of birth control to the lack of need for children as wage-earners. Nonetheless, Britain still remains the third most populous country in Western Europe. And, as in the previous century, the population has migrated. One person in three now lives in the south-east, and as long as the economic orientation of the country looks towards the European mainland that shift seems likely to remain for the present, reinforcing developments already taking place in which towns like Felixstowe boom and those like Liverpool become heritage centres, handsome historic monuments to an era which has gone. Indeed the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994, providing a direct link both by road and rail with the Continent, can only emphasise that geographical swing of the pendulum.

Urbanisation has been replaced by suburbanisation as cities sprawl outwards in what are conurbations, forming vast built-up areas like Birmingham and Tyneside and, in the case of London, an overall expanse of 610 square miles with some 7 million inhabitants. New modes of transport enable people to travel unheard-of distances to work, by road and rail. Car ownership trebled in the decade following 1958, leading to the huge road-building programme of M-motorways criss-crossing the country, with major consequences for accessibility, commerce, and the environment, besides sounding the death knell of the railways. By 1985 nearly 65% of households owned a car. To meet the pressure of this massive increase, the centres of cities and towns were sacrificed to the automobile as ring roads and fly-overs were constructed. This went hand-in-hand with what was supposed to be inner city renewal, schemes which were firmly in the hands of the planners as the hearts of cities were torn out, and replaced by tower blocks of flats and shopping centres. By the middle of the 1970s the results of this were already seen to be catastrophic. To add to the problem the 1980s were marked by the arrival of the out-of-town shopping mall and leisure complex, rendering the city centres ever more redundant. Immigration also added to the urban problem for, unlike earlier immigrants, those who came from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh wished to form their own communities without integrating into the cultural habit of their adopted country. As a result certain cities became ghetto-ised.

The end of the island, 1994. The Waterloo terminal of the Channel Tunnel providing a daily train service linking Paris, Brussels and London.

If the country was increasingly at the mercy of the town, the face of Britain itself was visibly altering under the impact of a renewed wave of industrialisation in the 1960s. The landscape, which had last been formed in the eighteenth century in response to an earlier Agrarian Revolution, now had to respond to farming methods

in which new types of machinery demanded the removal of hedges, footpaths and woods, and in which an abundant use of chemical fertilisers multiplied the yield. Factory farming of chickens, eggs, pork and bacon was introduced providing in abundance products previously thought of as luxuries. Farming boomed, but at the cost of destroying the inherited environment, which led to protest movements in the 1980s against both the methods and the visible result. Although 60% of the land was held by only 0.5% of the population, the owners in the main were no longer individuals but institutions. They, of course, had no desire to live there, but merely to exploit the land as a source of revenue. As a consequence country houses were demolished or converted to institutional use, while the élite landscapes around them disintegrated. Occasionally estates passed into the hands of conservation bodies such as the National Trust, to be preserved as time-capsules from other centuries, still sometimes housing the descendants of the families which had built them. As rural buildings such as barns and labourers' cottages ceased to relate to the new economic reality, they were colonised by the newly affluent middle classes, who restored and prettified them in accord with a romanticised view of times past. Land, however, no longer bestowed status. But a house in the country still could, a fact reflected in the spread of second homes in the 1980s.

This reflects the fact that despite the appalling economic saga since 1945, on the whole most of the population now lived in a style undreamt-of by their grandparents. The average national income doubled between 1948 and 1976. During the 1950s a car, a holiday abroad, and a raft of consumer domestic comforts like central heating gradually became commonplace. In 1986 no less than 20 million people went on holiday abroad. By the 1990s house ownership was the rule rather than the exception, followed by an ever rising share-ownership. As a result British life is now dominated by a consumer-led white-collar middle class, within which the pecking order is as complex as at any other time in the country's history. It is a society of integrated inequality, whose dominant force is the professional person. The old landed upper classes have virtually vanished, to be replaced by a new upper class, recruited as much from above as from below, of employers, businessmen, politicians, administrators and academics. Status within society is no longer determined by birth or wealth so much as by education, intelligence and cultural aspiration.

The result is a very complex, fluid society in which families can rapidly rise and fall. The stabilising function of a defined hierarchy which had governed earlier ages has gone, even though the cosmetic of the earlier realities is sustained in the bestowal of peerages and titles. The decisive move therefore is not only away from an aristocratic society, but from a proletarian one too. That is caught in the decline of the

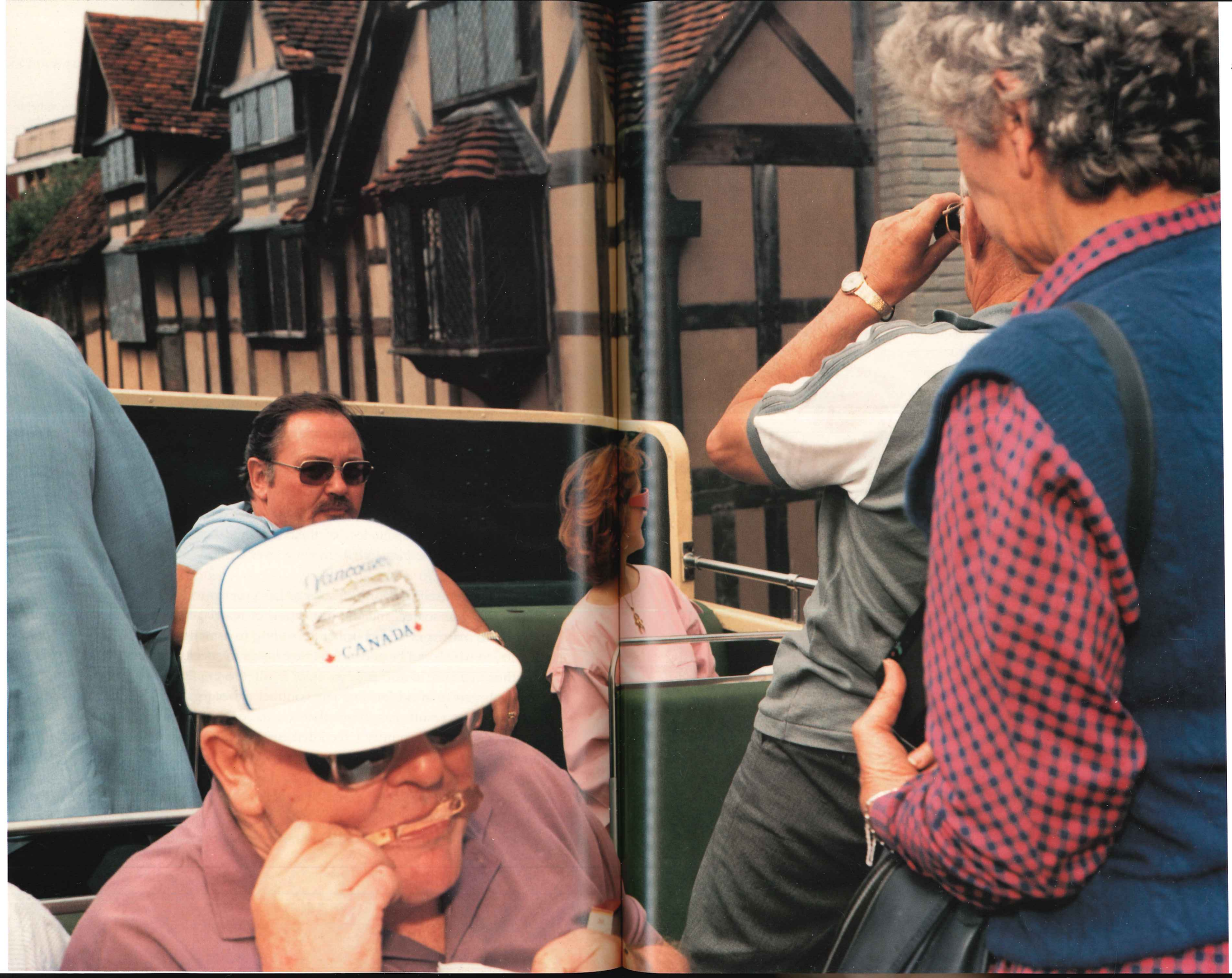
The consumer society of the 1980s in action. This was the golden age of the shopping mall and the galleria.

manual worker. By 1985 only a third of the workforce was manual and even within that group there was a skilled élite which would think of itself as middle class. That shift to non-manual work opened up jobs to women, whose change in status remains crucial to any understanding of the transformation of late twentieth century British society. By the mid 1960s over 38% of women worked and by 1990 they were moving up the ladder of professional achievement, aided by the feminist movement of the 1970s. Women now spent less of their life child-bearing and running the home, which ceased to be patriarchal, moving over towards equality of the sexes in its structure.

The family itself, as a unit of society, has progressively demanded redefinition as the divorce rate soared and the institution of marriage began to be abandoned. A third of all marriages ended in failure adding to a rising under-class of one-parent families, to which can be added the other losers in society: the old, the unemployed, and those caught in the poverty trap. With the ever-pervading libertarian ethos, couples began to avoid forming any contract either legal or religious, and just lived together. The result has been that births out of wedlock present a statistic unparalleled in the country's recorded history. If the disintegration of the family

Britain becomes a heritage theme park. Visitors ride through Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon in 1987, catching a glimpse of the playwright's birthplace.

The Conservative government saw future prosperity as depending on service industries such as tourism.


CANADA

presents an ongoing problem, so too does the burden of the multiplication of the old. In the 1990s over 20% of the population is over sixty and to live beyond eighty is now common. Segregation of a new kind has arrived, one in which the old are no longer integrated in the community.

This seemingly more equal society, however, masks all kinds of divisions. Education is divided between private and the state. In spite of the fact that education has largely been a disaster area, and that Britain has fewer people being educated beyond the age of sixteen than any other country in Western Europe, it still remains the prime agent of social mobility. Those who aspire for their children understand this, and will make any sacrifice in order to advance their chances through education. Although the dominance of the university intellectual on government thinking has passed, a degree remains an essential attribute for any form of social advancement. But not only is education divided, so too is health care. For the more affluent, insurance schemes to make provision for private medical treatment have become increasingly attractive. Inequalities in terms of income, capital, and social opportunity are still inevitably there, but not on the scale of earlier periods, although perhaps slightly more so since the 1980s. Such inequalities are disguised by a new classlessness of dress, speech, and social manner by the young. It is no longer easy to place someone by their speech and dress. But the age has also seen the emergence of new self-inflicted inequalities, like those between swathes of the working class who smoke, take no exercise and eat the wrong foods, and the middle class health fanatics who live off organic produce and dedicate themselves to exercise.

It has become an age of universal leisure. People spend as much time looking at television as they do working. Television itself binds society together in its way far more than radio; it was virtually universal by the middle of the 1970s and its greatest effect has been to privatise domestic life and make it more isolated. Entertainment and information are within the four walls of the home. Television was revived by the BBC in 1946 but the real turning point came with the advent of commercial television in 1955. This had a salutary effect on the BBC but an even greater effect on the viewers, for it took into every home a view of society which was orientated firmly to the marketplace and the ownership of things. Children no longer made toys, they consumed them.

By 1980 the average hours of work came down to 43 a week. Paid holidays of up to four weeks became normal and mass tourism exploded. Greater affluence, bringing more disposable income and along with it greater mobility, has engendered a gargantuan entertainment industry from theme parks to pop concerts.

That obsession with consumerism and the pursuit of pleasure, with no moral

One of the new cathedrals of the financial services era, Richard Rogers' Lloyds insurance building which opened in 1986.

overtones attached, epitomises the secular materialism of the period. The infra-structure of universally accepted Christian ethical values has vanished, with philosophers providing no new moral structure. By 1980 only 5% of the population regularly attended a place of worship. Religion became marginal and churches began to close or be demolished. Gradually any restriction on a person's behaviour, especially sexual, now had to be justified, as values became privatised. Indeed the age of the minority interest arrived with ever-escalating provision made to meet the needs of groups in society as discrepant as the disabled and witches. All kinds of social behaviour, which once put people beyond the pale,

were now accommodated. Only outright violence and extreme forms of perversion were regarded as reprehensible. In this way society could be said to have become more unsettled and fragmented than in previous ages when there had been a firm structure and definite boundaries beyond which no one should overtly trespass in the wider interests of coherence and stability.

Despite Mrs Thatcher's call to roll back the state, its presence continued to mark every stage of life, from birth certificate, through enforced schooling, the health service, finding and training for a job, insurance against illness, accident and unemployment, maybe a council house and welfare allowances, winding up with the old age pension and the death certificate. All of this was looked upon less with a sense of gratitude, which had marked its inception, than as a right. This was an age of bitter disillusion with the state and those who guided it, first with the patrician planners of the 40s and 50s, then with those who ran the quangos and unions of the 60s and 70s, and finally with the businessmen who called the tune in the 80s. A social hierarchy was dismantled in the 1960s, deference and status going along with it. This happened at every level, until it finally eroded any authority a parent or a teacher might have over a child. A chain of command had disappeared but no new source of authority was put in its place.

From the 1960s onwards every established institution, one by one, was held up to ridicule and derision. Nothing any more was untouchable, until by the 1990s even the monarchy was deconstructed. The monarchy had survived remarkably intact as a symbol of national unity around which the country could rally, as indeed it did on the occasion of the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977, and on that of the Prince of Wales's marriage in 1981. But the behaviour of the younger generation of the royal family began to bring it into disrepute, and the long-held mystery was subjected to the scalpel. The monarchy found itself increasingly isolated, as the political creeds of both left and right espoused either equality or meritocracy as the basis for society, neither logically accommodating monarchy.

If the monarchy remains in place with some of its senior members still held in respect, so too do the age-old institutions of Lords and Commons. By 1990 the presence of hereditary peers and the bishops in the Lords was a glaring anomaly offset by the arrival of over three hundred life-peers, either political appointees or people of real distinction in the life of the nation. Members of Parliament, now paid, were much diminished in status, their role largely confined to trotting into the appropriate lobby whenever the party whip was cracked. As the century draws to its close the power of Parliament can be seen to have been gradually reduced, not only by adhesion to the European Community with its own Parliament but due to the new pattern of things.

The House was once the focus of major debates but now they are rarely of significance, the real issues being debated in the press, on radio and television. The politician as statesman and hero has become a figure of the past. Difference in background of members has also narrowed. All parties are now largely made up of members of the professional classes, most are graduates. Although Labour members tend to be state educated and Conservative private, their class background can often be identical. Politics and class are now further apart than they were in 1890 or 1945. Efforts to reform the system have all failed, whether it be to change the structure of the upper house, obtain a Bill of Rights, or go over to a system of proportional representation.

The real seat of power resides in the Cabinet which consisted in the Victorian period of about fifteen, and is now made up of some twenty ministers heading the great departments of state. It is the Cabinet which dictates legislation, although even that role can be eroded by a dominant Prime Minister such as Mrs Thatcher, who made extensive use of outside advisers. Nor should the power of those in control of the enormous government machine at the centre be underestimated. Although local government is much diminished, there remain thousands of civil servants, and beyond them 5 million workers in the public sector. No party which wishes to remain in power can afford to ignore controlling the major appointments in that machine, or alienate its overall voting potential.

But late twentieth century Britain lacks the energy of earlier ages. The initiative and ambition that changed not only the island but, in some instances, whole parts of the globe, is absent. There is an exhaustion, a weariness, and an almost visible yearning for the quiet life. And that in spite of the fact that most British people have yet to come to terms with their greatly reduced status in the world. Apart from short distant conflicts like the Falklands war, the country has enjoyed since 1945 a prolonged period of peace almost unparalleled in its history. Dreams are now realised not in the next world nor in the world of empires, but in that of more and more material things. Real income has trebled since 1900 and the average Briton is better fed, better clothed, better housed, longer-lived and more leisured than at any time in the nation's history. On the positive side it can be said that this, more than any other previous century, is truly the age of the common man.