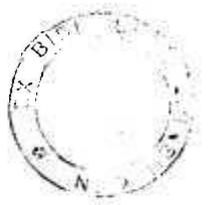


England's Apprenticeship

1603-1763

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LONGMANS

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Introductory Note

Interest in economic history has grown enormously in recent years. In part, this interest is a by-product of ~~twentieth-century~~ preoccupation with economic issues and problems. In part, it is a ~~facet~~ of the revolution in ~~the study of~~ history. The scope of the subject has been immensely enlarged, and with the ~~enlarge-~~ment has come increasing specialization. Economic history is one of the most thriving of the specialisms. Few universities are without an economic historian. New research is being completed each year both in history and economics departments. There are enough varieties of approach to make for frequent controversy, enough excitement in the controversy to stimulate new writing.

This series, of which Professor Wilson's volume is the third, is designed to set out the main conclusions of economic historians about England's past. It rests on the substantial foundations of recent historical scholarship. At the same time, it seeks to avoid narrow specialization. Economic history is not lifted out of its social context, nor are the contentious borderlands of economics and politics neglected. The series is described as 'a social and economic history of England'.

The bracketing together of the two adjectives is deliberate. Social history has received far ~~less~~ scholarly attention than economic history. A child of the same revolt against the limited outlook of the political historian, it has grown less sturdily. Its future depends on the application of greater discipline and more persistent probing. Developments in recent years are encouraging, and many of them ~~will~~ be reflected in these volumes. So too will developments in historical geography and, where they are ~~illuminating~~, in demography and sociology. There is hope that just as the economist has provided useful tools for the study of economic history, so the sociologist may be able to provide useful tools for the study of social history and the demographer valuable quantitative data. There is no need, however, for economic and social historians to work in separate workshops. Most of the problems with which they are concerned demand co-operative ~~effort~~.

However refined the analysis of the problems may be or may become, however precise the statistics, something more than accuracy and discipline are needed in the study of social and economic history. Many of the most lively economic historians of this century have been singularly undisciplined, and their hunches and insights have often proved invaluable. Behind the abstractions of economists or sociologists is the experience of real people, who demand sympathetic understanding as well as searching analysis. One of the dangers of economic history is that it can be written far too easily in impersonal terms: real people seem to play little part in it. One of the dangers of social history is that it concentrates on categories rather than on flesh and blood human beings. This series is designed to avoid both dangers, at least as far as they can be avoided

in the light of available evidence. Quantitative evidence is used where it is available, but it is not the only kind of evidence which is taken into the reckoning.

Within this framework each author has had complete **freedom** to describe the period covered by his volume along lines of his own choice. No attempt has been made to secure general uniformity of style or treatment. The volumes will necessarily overlap. Social and economic history seldom moves within generally accepted periods, and each author has had the **freedom** to decide where the limits of his chosen period are set. It has been for him to decide in what the 'unity' of his period consists.

It has also been his task to decide how far it is necessary in his volume to take into account the experience of other countries as well as England in order to understand English economic and social history. The term 'England' itself has been employed generally in relation to the series as a whole not because Scotland, Wales or Ireland are thought to be less important or less interesting than England, but because their historical experience at various times was separate from or diverged from that of England: where problems and endeavours were common or where issues arose when the different societies confronted each other, these problems, endeavours and issues find a place in this series. In certain periods Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Australia must find a place also. One of the last volumes in the series will be called 'Britain in the World Economy'.

The variety of approaches to the different periods will be determined, of course, not only by the values, background or special interests of the authors but by the nature of the surviving sources and the extent to which economic and social factors can be separated out from other facts in the past. For many of the periods described in this series, as in the period covered by Professor Wilson, it is extremely difficult to disentangle law or religion from economic and social structure and change. In addition, facts about 'economic and social aspects' of life must be supplemented by accounts of how successive generations thought about 'economy' and 'society'. The very terms themselves must be dated.

Where the facts are missing or **the** thoughts impossible to recover, it is the duty of the historian to say so. Many of the crucial problems in English social and economic history remain **mysterious** or only partially explored. This series must point, therefore, to what is not known as well as what is known, to what is a matter of argument as well as what is agreed upon. At the same time, it is one of the particular excitements of the economic and social historian to be able, as G. M. Trevelyan has written, 'to know more in some respects than the dweller in the past himself knew about the conditions that enveloped and controlled his life*.

ASA BRIGGS

Preface

' 'Tis opportune to look back upon old times, and contemplate our Forefathers.' *Sir Thomas Browne*

Men study history from a variety of motives. Not the least is a simple but compelling curiosity about the past. As a great Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, has said:

The direct, spontaneous, **naïve** zeal for antiquated things of earlier days which animates the dilettante of local history and the genealogist is not only a primary form of the urge to historical knowledge but also a full-bodied one. It is the impulse towards the past. A person thus impelled may want to understand only a small bit, an insignificant interrelationship out of the past, but the impulse can be just as deep and pure, just as gravid with true wisdom as in the person who wishes to encompass the heavens and the earth in his knowledge.¹

No century offers a richer mine for this kind of searching, antiquarian curiosity than the seventeenth. And this is not only because it is rich in human genius, in human achievement, in social and political crises, in innovations and the **like**; but also because, standing at the end of the Middle Ages, it was itself rich in the instinct of curiosity. Its antiquarians — Coke, **Spelman**, Cotton, Selden, Browne, Aubrey — gathered abundantly **from** the rich storehouse of their past, preserving it for their descendants and transforming their contemporaries' outlook on their own world. To them we owe much of our heritage of knowledge.

Another impulse towards the past, and one more professionally regarded in our day, is **the need to** understand our **own world**, to **see** how it is related to what happened in history. In this sense too, the century and a half that form the subject of this book **have** a strong claim on the student's attention. For it is **a** time of preparation, economically and socially as well as **politically**, for the changes and convulsions **that** were to revolutionize society in Britain in **the** late eighteenth and nineteenth century. From there, the inventions and institutions of this Industrial Revolution were to be transmitted overseas until, in our day, they have encompassed and transformed the world.

The economic and social history of our period has been written many times. The justification for writing it again is that research is continually modifying, even revolutionizing, our ideas about it. Like summer visitors to the sandy beaches by the North Sea we return to find that since we were here last the beating of the tides has altered the contours of the sand beyond recognition. New views have emerged regarding the alternating phases of depression and

¹J. Huizinga, *Men and Ideas*, 1960

prosperity, stagnation and growth. Closer examination of the probable movements of population has suggested new explanations of price movements and industrial change. Behind the overt economic conflicts of the times over taxation, historians using the sociologists' tools have discerned longer, deeper changes in the social structure and the fortunes of social groups. Such new accessions of knowledge are reflected in the boundaries of the period I have chosen and the way the period has been subdivided for study. The divisions are not sacrosanct. To have left it undivided would have risked obscuring all but the longest-term changes. To have subdivided more would have risked losing the real continuity that runs through the story. To preserve continuity I have occasionally repeated a fact or comment. The boundary posts — 1603, 1660, 1700, 1763 — are placed at dates familiar in political history. This has been done partly because there is still something to be said for reminding ourselves that history is a unity when we can conveniently do so, partly because our statistical evidence is still capable of such differing interpretations that it would be pedantic to claim that any particular year marks a turning-point on economic grounds alone.

Broadly, this century and a half was a time when commercial enterprise, often closely allied with state power and aided by legislation and military or naval force, was changing the face of the old agrarian customary economy. Agriculture remained the source of income for by far the majority of the people, but it was itself increasingly marked by the application of capital, enterprise, novel methods and the quest for markets. The dynamic of the time was commercial. The economic legislation of the day was concerned increasingly with trade, foreign trade especially, and it was crowned by the Acts of Trade of the Restoration. Most of the economic literature of the day likewise turned on problems of trade: and though they did not intend the word to exclude industry (or what they still called 'manufactures') most writers would have regarded manufacturing processes as inferior in economic importance to the business of exchange and distribution by merchants, manufacturers as the social inferiors of merchants. James I's best economic adviser, Cranfield, was a merchant by training. The period ends with Pitt, the son of an East India merchant, denouncing the Peace which (he said) betrayed Britain's trade, security and future to France. In between, the national destiny was powerfully influenced by a score of merchants and advisers on trade policy who ensured that in due time a Britain moving towards industrialization was already equipped with the commercial skills and financial institutions that she needed for the next great phase of expansion.

Economy and society alike were poised between medievalism and modernity. The economy was, in important respects, still a congeries of local or regional economies rather than a genuinely unified whole. Some areas, in the North and West and the Fenland, were still virtually enclaves with their own peculiar economic and social customs, often isolated from what we discern as the national trends of development. Yet a growing fleet of coastal shipping, inland navigation

and a network of mapped roads of a sort, increasingly gave reality to the idea of an economic nation state. And this was strengthened by the dominant influence of London as a centre of import and export trades, manufactures, government, administration and fashion. Customary rule, whether represented by lordship or gild, was everywhere being eroded by the combined forces of centralized government and individual economic initiative. Yet the social, political and legal system as yet did not become one of freedom in the full or modern sense. Serfdom had gone. The last recorded case about villeinage was heard in 1618. The plaintiff, one Pigg, was declared free. For more than a century the royal courts of law had been enforcing manorial custom. Yet law and government were still inextricably entangled with property rights. The landed classes and the recruits from trade and the professions who joined their ranks enjoyed the greatest privileges society could confer. But they also bore heavy responsibilities. They paid the heaviest taxes, discharged unpaid offices like those of Sheriff and J.P. and generally bore the burdens — no light matter in these years — of preserving law and order. The freeholder on the land and the free-man of the town were the 'accredited elements in society'.¹

The classes below them were inferior, less a part of society than one of its problems. 'Freedom' in legal language still meant special exemption from a general rule of compulsion; 'liberty' still implied a special privilege to do something forbidden to others. Yet the rapid rise of the 'free' elements in society had forced a change in such conceptions. When a law dictionary defined 'liberty' in 1729 it gave the old meaning, 'a privilege held by grant or prescription by which men enjoy some benefit beyond the ordinary subject', but it added that the word could also be used in a different sense: the power to do as one thought fit unless restrained by law.² Poets, divines and politicians had been familiar with this broader conception since the late Middle Ages. Parliamentary 'freedom' might still be identified with landed freehold, but the possession of property by M.P.s was seen as a defence of Parliament's independence against royal attempts to manage Parliament by bribery. This was the main forum where the conflicts of interest great and small were fought and settled. Such conflicts were a major dynamic of a freer society and a creative force moulding the larger conception of liberty.

Economic progress in a society still heavily trammelled by custom could be neither smooth nor uninterrupted. The first of our periods — from the accession of James I to the Restoration — was not marked by conspicuous growth: on the contrary, it was a time of painful economic readjustment in a darkening European context. The historian's task, with regard to this period, as Professor Fisher has written, 'is less that of demonstrating the expansive force of economic ambition than that of examining the impediments which contained it, less that of proclaiming its successes than that of recording the strains and

¹ See the penetrating chapter 'Freehold and Status' in David Ogg's *England in the Reign of James II and William III*, 1955.

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

stresses to which it gave **rise**.¹ The impediments — lack of skill, lack of money, lack of transport — are examined here. So are the ambitious attempts at improvement and the correspondingly disastrous failures — failures to learn and apply the skills of finishing and dyeing woollens so vital to the export trade, to build and handle shipping and exploit the coastal fisheries. Meanwhile the stresses that arose from the efforts of government and individuals to adapt themselves to the changed economic conditions that were the aftermath of the great price inflation of the previous century were revealed. Those who did best in such times were those who adapted themselves most swiftly and ingeniously, spreading their risks and seizing their opportunities. The grand climax to this era of problems came with the Civil War. This was the explosion of many forces besides the economic: but recurrent economic troubles and in some sectors an almost chronic state of economic depression were among the factors which contributed powerfully to the deepening political confusion and frustration.

Yet not all was loss and regression in these years. The country's major manufacture, cloth, was painfully adjusting itself to the new techniques of worsted production and to new markets. The coastal shipping fleet was expanding as the Newcastle-London coal trade developed. The colonial trades, small and often unprofitable as yet, were to prove the source of great wealth and **power** later in the century. Finally, the Civil War **was** to sweep away the old monarchy, with its concomitants of irrationalism, paternalism and monopoly, and substitute a new and earthier conception of government. This was in time to pave the way for a new economic regime that combined industrial freedom at home with commercial regulation of overseas and colonial trade that was hardly conceivable in the conditions of earlier times.

The second of our periods, from **1660** to **1700**, opened as the preceding period had done, with a burst of economic optimism. Once again it looked as if these early gains were to be lost in depression, war and confusion. Yet, in spite of the wars which broke out in **1664** and recurred periodically throughout the period, these forty years were to prove one of the most fertile and progressive periods in English history down to this time. Cradled in a protective covering of legislation enforced by naval power, the nation's trade and shipping expanded. Its geographical extent was no longer bounded by Europe though inter-regional trade in Europe **remained** of major importance. Its flow was no longer focused (as it had been earlier in the century) on the Dutch market nor channelled through the hands of Dutch middlemen and shipowners. England was becoming a world entrepôt on its own, and though 'England' in the context of foreign trade still meant to an overwhelming extent London, there were already signs that the Western ports were stirring. These were the most obvious and striking signs of growth. Less spectacular movement was also present, though often **semi-concealed**. Home production of food was steadily increasing.

¹*Essays on the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England, in honour of R. H. Tawney*, ed. F.J. Fisher, **1961**, p.3.

Britain was, through the extension of cultivated acreage and a slow, modest, but widespread improvement of agricultural skill, turning from a corn importing to a corn exporting country. This, with the continuing export of coal, helped to create a bulk demand for shipping, giving a new dimension to an economy that had previously equated the greater value of its export trade with cloth. It is possible that the later decades of the century **also** saw population numbers on the increase **again**. Certainly men continued to move into London and to a lesser extent to smaller cities and towns. **Scientific** curiosity gave a renewed impetus to manufactures and new technologies. Increasingly rational tariff arrangements offered protection to home industries as varied as paper-making and shipbuilding. **Commercial** and financial booms alternated with depressions. Not least in importance, the machinery of both public and private credit became more sophisticated and confident. Thus, the formative age of the so-called 'mercantile system', was one of impressive, perhaps unique, growth in the **pre-industrial** age. It does not yield itself easily to conventional explanations of economic growth that rest on price inflation, population increase, freedom from war or **fertility** of invention and innovation. But growth, visible and measurable, there was. It was a time when (as Mr Davis has said) 'the English merchant class was able to grow rich, to accumulate capital on middleman's profits and on the growing shipping industry which was needed to carry cheap sugar, tobacco, pepper and **salt-petre** on the ocean routes'. Maybe, as he has added, we should look 'with a little more favour on those historians of the past who dubbed this century with the title of "The Commercial Revolution"'.¹ Yet the commercial revolution does not stand alone as a *deus ex machina* that of itself 'explains' the other phenomena. That it was a source of wealth and capital is true, but it was also obviously the response to demand for the goods it provided. Dim and unsystematic as our knowledge is of the growth of urban population and of agricultural wealth, these must have been the major source of the growing demand for colonial imports.

Comparison with the more varied fortunes of the next period strengthens this assumption. From **1700** onwards, until the end of our period, the movements in the economy are less marked and more debatable than in the previous forty years. The **impression of bustling growth goes out of the economy**. For a time the people of England seem to be marking time, digesting their earlier spectacular gains. Population grew little, if at all, in the first half of the eighteenth century. Prices were pretty stable. So, in many places, were wages. The growth of London slowed down, and with it metropolitan demand, and perhaps thus accentuated those difficulties experienced by the agricultural community: agricultural production, though not growing in any spectacular fashion, may well have overtaken demand, precipitating the agricultural distress of the **1730s** and **1740s**. Foreign trade, on the other hand, showed more movement. Exports

¹Ralph Davis, 'English Foreign Trade **1660-1700**', *Economic History Review*, vol. VII (New Series).

grew until 1715, stagnated for another fifteen years, recovered until the mid-forties. Then followed an advance 'almost as spectacular, if not nearly as regular, as in the years after 1780'.¹ The period 1745 to 1760 was likewise a landmark in the history of the import trade, where growth had been slow since the start of the century. These movements in foreign trade probably reflect and contain similar movements in manufacturing industry — a modest growth from 1700 to 1725; then a check for another two decades before the momentum is resumed after 1745 to last until the 1760s. It is in this last fifteen years or so that general progress is once again identifiable. Paying for expensive wars in its stride, the economy creeps forward. In field and workshop technological change begins to offer answers to shortages of labour and of profits. Here in the middle years of the eighteenth century we seem to be within sight of spectacular, economic progress of a truly modern kind. What in 1603 had been 'the Manor of England' was ready by 1763 to become the workshop of the world.

The society which was the human aggregate owning, operating and benefiting from this economy was roughly stratified by contemporaries into the nobility, gentry, merchants, professions, yeomen, freeholders, customary tenants, leaseholders, shopkeepers, craftsmen, labourers and that great mass — perhaps a third or more of the total — they called 'the poor'. Yet, nobles apart, these labels did not imply legal definition of social status, though a man might be labelled knight, esquire, gentleman, yeoman or husbandman, in order to be assessed when a direct tax was being raised. Throughout the period there was a remarkable degree of social mobility, especially between the middle and top ranges of society. Many families contained representatives of the peerage, gentry, merchants, and professions, to say nothing of poor relations, at the same moment in time. The man of enterprise who made money by luck, good management or good marriage could move upwards. The number of men who did so probably never represented more than a small proportion of the total, but they were enough to influence powerfully the character of English society, and of English economic and social policy. The social categories invented by nineteenth-century historians — feudal, bourgeois, working class — do not sit happily on such a society. The simple idea of large and more or less solid social 'classes' distinguished from each other by different interests is not only unhelpful in interpreting the course of events; it can be positively misleading. Society was not revolutionized. It evolved, and its rich and complex evolution eludes — just as it constantly invites — the snap judgement. Even over purely economic affairs, each large 'class' — nobility, gentry and City merchants — is found to be divided into quarrelling factions. There are Court factions, Country factions, ins and outs, haves and have-nots. New Merchant Adventurers battle against Old Merchant Adventurers, London Companies against interlopers, the New East India Company against the Old, the Russia tobacco contractors against the

¹ P. Deane and W. A. Cole, *British Economic Growth 1688–1959, 1962*, chs. I and II for these and other measurements.

Old Russia Company, fundholders against taxpayers: and so on. More important, the turning-points in the nation's political development — especially 1642 and 1685–8 — revealed that the 'ruling classes' were sharply divided amongst themselves over non-economic questions, especially the attitude towards religion and the nature of government. No attempt to analyse the relation between economics and politics in this age will get far unless it begins by recognizing that in the Civil War and the Glorious Revolution men of similar economic interests and social class were prepared to fight each other for reasons that had little or no connexion with economics. Down to the great Reform Bill of 1832, the same two classes that were the focus of opposition to the Stuarts — the country gentry and the City merchants — continued to provide the main recruiting grounds of opposition to Ministries.

To guide us through the economic problems of the times we have nothing that can strictly be regarded as statistics. But in recent years the work of scholars like Sir George Clark, Professor T. S. Ashton, Mrs Schumpeter, Professor Harper, Mr Ralph Davis, Miss Phyllis Deane, Mr W. A. Cole and others has enabled us to convert to statistical purposes the residual labours of customs clerks, excise men, parish clerks and tax gatherers of several kinds. The picture of our economy and society that emerges is one of epic contrasts of opulence and poverty, of economic gains precariously won and easily lost, of wide fluctuations between periods and wide differences of fortune between one locality and another, of a society still frighteningly at the mercy of the weather, of the good or bad harvest that meant prosperity or ruin for many, heavily dependent on competition in overseas markets (for late in the century perhaps a third of our total manufactures went abroad),¹ and on the outcome of the wars which were in part wars for trade. Yet for all the fluctuations and backslidings, the outcome was a material increase in living standards for a sizeable proportion of a slowly growing population. This increase is, still, conveyed more vividly by observable facts — the new and grander houses that rose throughout England, by the novel additions to the clothes men and women wore and the new foods, drinks, and luxuries they consumed — than by calculations of national or *per capita* income in these early stages of growth. I have tried therefore to use social history from time to time to supplement our meagre 'statistics', as a means of looking at consumption, at the way men enjoyed the fruits of their labours.

Throughout, the English economy has been placed in a broader European and world context. For Britain was already closely linked by trade, technology, migration and the flow of ideas with a wide world beyond her own shores. In this period more perhaps than in any other she owed much to these economic energies that seem to be the peculiar distinction of refugees and 'displaced persons'. References to British colonies and settlements make no claim to be an adequate account of their development. They are only intended to explain their economic impact on Britain.

Finally, since history — not least economic history — was made by men, and

¹ Deane and Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

in turn helped to make men what they were, I have tried to give examples of those men, representative and sometimes unrepresentative, whose qualities, good and ~~less~~ good, contributed to economic progress. They were the men who seized their economic opportunities, responded to economic challenges. Economic history is compounded of their actions.

The historian can never 'explain' history precisely or finally as a scientist can explain the working of the internal combustion engine or the thermometer. As G. M. Trevelyan once ~~wrote~~: 'The causes that produce genius in individual men, and outbursts of activity in nations, are mysteries which only become more impenetrable as one theory after another is flung out to account for that which ~~is~~ beyond knowledge.'¹ But if we can never achieve final explanation in history we can, and must, go on trying to enlarge and deepen our ~~understanding~~ of it. Economic history is one means, and a fairly new one, of doing that. It demands to be studied separately, for it possesses its own inner rhythms and dynamics that help us to understand the nature of change itself. Economic history ~~cannot~~ therefore be understood merely in terms of other kinds ~~of~~ history; equally ~~it~~ does not itself provide any total 'explanation' of other kinds of history. Yet in separating it for study we must never forget that it forms part of the ultimate unity of history; we must always be aware of this unity even if we cannot always explain or analyse the complexity of human and social motives that compose it. 'Of all varieties of history', Sir John ~~Clapham~~ wrote, 'the economic is the most fundamental. Not the most important: foundations exist to carry better ~~things~~.' With the material wealth created by economic activities, an increasing proportion of mankind has been enabled 'to practise high arts, organize great states, design splendid temples, or think at leisure about the meaning of the ~~world~~'.²

The bibliography will make it clear that this general study owes a heavy debt to many scholars whose specialized labours have helped to describe, measure and explain the change and growth of the period. It owes another to colleagues and pupils too numerous to mention with whom I have discussed ~~its~~ problems over the years. Two special debts, however, I must acknowledge. To Asa Briggs for his penetrating editorial advice and suggestions, and especially for encouragement to face the hazards of what is now Ch. 6; and to David Joslin of Pembroke College, Cambridge, who read the manuscript, generously shared with ~~me~~ ~~his~~ ~~own~~ deep understanding of the period and gave me wise ~~counsel~~ on a number of problems. To both I am deeply grateful.

CHARLES WILSON

¹ G. M. Trevelyan, *England under the Stuarts*, 1904, p. 51.

² J. H. Clapham, *A Concise Economic History of Britain*, 1949 Introduction.

The Lean Years, 1603-1660

The Seventeenth-Century Setting: Social Degree and Social Mobility

WHEN John Aubrey, the antiquarian and biographer, tried to gather his scattered memories and observations together in the years after the Restoration, he saw history dividing at a point somewhere between the times of Henry VIII and Elizabeth. Until King Henry's reign was the 'olden time', when government was 'like a nest of **boxes**: for the **copy**-holders (who till then were villains) held of the Lords of the Manor, who held perhaps of another superior lord or duke, who held of the King'.¹ This was a world still nostalgically remembered in many a country house in the early seventeenth century, a world of established feudal rank and order, based on the possession of land. Its antecedents seemed to stretch back beyond Tudor times to the ancient Britons. Then, great lords had reigned in their counties 'like petty Kings', with *jura regalia*, and gallows within their liberties where they could try, condemn, hang and draw. Only an annual visit to London, to sit in Parliament or do homage to the King, had taken them away from their broad acres and armies of retainers, from the feasting and jollification that seemed to Aubrey to compete for their energies only with fighting — either against each other or, more lawfully, for the King. This still-remembered world was above **all one of** a caste society organized for warfare. 'Upon **any** occasion of bustling in those **dayes**', wrote Aubrey, 'one of the greate lords sounded his trumpet (all lords then kept trumpeters, even to King James) and summoned those that held under them: those again sounded their trumpets, and so on downwards to the **copy**-holders.' And (as an afterthought): 'Old Sir **Walter Long**,³ grandfather to Colonel Long, kept a trumpeter: and rode with thirty servants and retainers to Marlborough and so for others of his ranke and time.'

Within living memory, this military society, deeply rooted in local

¹ John Aubrey, *Wiltshire Collections*, Introduction (1862).

² Whom Aubrey knew of Draycot in Wiltshire.

soil, stratified into peers, knights, esquires, yeomen, retainers and customary tenants, had crumbled and decayed. In the Civil Wars a commander like the Marquis of Newcastle still rode to battle at the head of a force largely his own tenants. But this was the last echo of military feudalism. The war itself destroyed many of the great castles like Basing and Latham House. Others, like Rockingham, were 'slighted' after the war was over. With them went the great armouries and the stables of great horses for the armed men. The petty manors had been disintegrating from Henry VII's time. With all these had gone the pilgrimages, the revels. The times when 'all things were civil and without scandal' had given way to a more relaxed age, the severity of parents towards children to looser discipline and morals - or so it seemed to Aubrey. The country, then 'a lovely *campania*', with few enclosures 'except new houses', and 'a world of labouring people maintained by the plough', had mostly been replaced by enclosures ('for the private not for the public good') and England swarmed with paupers.

In this conception of a lost Golden Age, there was an element of picturesque exaggeration, a natural feeling of nostalgia that sprang from current reflections on the troubled age by which the 'olden time' had been replaced. Yet Aubrey was not the first to see the preceding century as the hinge of change. The same consciousness of profound economic and social change permeates the earlier survey called by its author, Thomas Wilson, a versatile if disappointed antiquarian, *The State of England Anno Domini. 1600*.¹ Here again is a picture of changing customs, changing relationships between social classes, above all the rising fortunes of the Tudor yeoman and farmer class, a churning, restless society where established ideas of 'degree' had been disturbed and perhaps destroyed for ever by forces beyond human control. To Wilson, the sequence of events was clear. The low prices and sluggish demand for land of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries had encouraged the landowning gentry to lease land out at low rates for long periods. Then, to finance his wars, Henry VIII had debased the coinage, prices had risen steeply, to the great benefit of the active, commercial, farming class and the corresponding disadvantage of the rentier landlords. Hence the King had 'weakened the ability of his nobility and thereby clipped the wings of their insolencies'.² To this (as Wilson suspected) half-conscious policy, the Tudors had added policies designed

¹ Edited by F. J. Fisher, *Camden Miscellany*, 1936, vol. LXVI.

² Wilson, p. 39.

for the mutual enrichment of great merchants and traders; charters for the monopoly of trade to this company 'to trade into such a part of the World and for such and such Commodities, to another Company another, the 3^d a 3^d and so on. Statutes to protect artisans and encourage local trades and fishing were added to others designed to stop the export of treasure and coin, 'by reason there is little store of silver and gold mines in the land'. As these and other solvents eroded and destroyed the ancient local sovereignties and privileges, they had been replaced by a new national authority; that 'supreme and awful authority which the Prince hath over all subjects great and mean, no man, not the greatest in the whole land, having more authority than the meanest but as he deriveth it from the Prince by Commission . . .'¹

Wilson and Aubrey were only two out of many who speculated on the nature of contemporary social change. The peculiar fascination of the times is, indeed, not merely the rate at which old habits and institutions were giving way to new; it is also the self-conscious awareness of change widely spread among contemporaries. That most of them found such change disturbing is hardly surprising. Their dislike of it was not merely snobbery, nostalgia or irrational conservatism, though no doubt it contained an element of all these things. They knew no living society based on any principle but that of rank; they could not conceive of one that could be based on anything else. The view of society as essentially hierarchic was almost universally held in the sixteenth century and was still powerful in the seventeenth. Shakespeare's history plays abound in its imagery, and from *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) comes the classic statement of the social function of what men called 'degree':

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre
Observe degree, priority and place,

...
O! When degree is shak'd,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick. How could Communities
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenitive and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels
But by degree, stand in authentic place.

Such was the orthodox Elizabethan view of society. It had developed through the Middle Ages. Statutes had attempted to devise a common

¹ Wilson, p. 41.

measure for the status of knights, esquires and gentlemen against merchants, citizens and craftsmen by a kind of points system based partly on rank, partly on wealth: so that an esquire with £200 a year was equated with a merchant worth five times as much. Dress was taken to indicate calling and station. Such outward signs continued into the seventeenth century and the conception of degree itself remained strong. The hierarchical principle is as central to *Paradise Lost* as it is to *Troilus*. Milton not only accepted the principle; he was (as Professor C. S. Lewis has written) 'enchanted' by it.¹ To him, as to Shakespeare, freedom could only be achieved within a society made stable and secure by a discipline of a divinely ordained and permanent kind. He would have echoed the Elizabethan query:

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark, what discord follows. Each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy.
This Chaos when degree is suffocate,
Follows the choking.

Characteristically, such thoughts were evoked most often, and with a wealth of poetic imagery drawn from astronomy, astrology and anatomy, when the feudal stratifications were breaking down most rapidly. Not the least important witness to the social and economic transformation of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England is the growing band of antiquaries — Spelman, Stow, Cotton, Coke, Selden. Mostly lawyers, they were in part the product of the social changes that went with the metamorphosis of land from being a source of power into a source of wealth. A vigorous land market meant more litigation, more legal fees and in time lawyers turned landowners once more. But the lawyers' curiosity about change seemed to some as dangerous as change itself. What disastrous precedents might be sought, and therefore found, in the obscurity of the past which they alone could penetrate? In 1604, James, 'suspecting their loyalty and attachment to his government', closed down² the Society of Antiquarians. When an attempt was made ten years later to revive it, the members were still informed that 'His Majesty took a little Mislike to our Society'.² James might hinder the scholars. He could not stem the tide of change.

From Bacon to Defoe, there is a steady change in the attitude of writers towards technical innovations, from reluctant and suspicious acceptance towards a positive welcome. The world conceived in

¹ Preface to *Paradise Lost*, 1942, pp. 78-9.

² H. Butterfield, *The Englishman and his History*, 1944, p. 37.

Bacon's Essay 'Of Innovations' was a world slowly deteriorating from a Golden Age now past. Innovation is for Bacon 'a medicine' to arrest decline in conditions where a 'forward retention of custom could become as turbulent a thing as innovation'. But the mistrust of change lingers. Innovation should not be cataclysmic or indiscriminate: it should be 'quiet innovation' — 'innovation by degree'. A later pamphlet, *The Discovery of a Projector* (1641) by Thomas Brugis, a Hertfordshire physician, reveals a similar mixture of suspicion and approval. Projectors, drawn from amongst lawyers, merchants, mongers, craftsmen and especially foreigners, were half dreamers, half technocrats, 'begotten on a faire Faggot pile between the man in the Moone and Tom Lancaster's Laundresse'. Their curse was to try and apply their theories in practice prematurely and thus bring themselves and others to disaster. The projector was 'the very Corne-cutter of the age when he lived and had a notable fault in the unsteadiness of his hand, by reason whereof he [did] often thrust his knife into the tender parts of the Common wealth to the quicke and never [left] untill he had brought out the very Coare of their purses'. Thirty years later, *The History of the Royal Society* by 'Fat Tom Sprat', Bishop of Rochester, had as a main theme the duty of the Society to ensure that 'men of Knowledge' guided the innovators aright, so that 'the Production of Necessity will be amplyfy'd and compleated' and scientific vision brought to check fraud and exalt 'the flegmatick imaginations of men of Trade'. Defoe's *Essay of Projects*, twenty years later, marked another phase. Projects were 'in general of public advantage, tending to improvement of trade, and employment of the poor, and the circulation and increase of the public stock of the Kingdom'. The wheel had turned, and public opinion had steadily become favourable to technological inquiry and change. This changing opinion was shaped in the context of a steadily changing relationship of political power, property and law.¹

In the middle ages, land law was the basis of all public law. The later middle ages and the sixteenth century particularly had witnessed the first stages of the metamorphosis by which landholders had been peacefully transmuted into a society of landlords and tenants. The villein had been gradually freed from his praedial services. Villein status was abolished so that he survived as a copyholder, more or less secure in his rights according to the nature of the copy of court roll by which his land was held. Coke thought that about one-third of English

¹ See below, p. 188.

land was copyhold in the early seventeenth century;¹ but this in turn was subject to the steady process of erosion as lords, by amicable negotiation or by pressure, substituted terminable leases — commercial contracts on economic terms — for the old customary arrangements. Similarly, the fief, 'The right which a vassal has in some lands, or some immoveable thing of his lord's, to take the profits thereof, paying the feudal dues', had slowly evolved into freehold. Those dues had been rigidly enforced under the early Tudors, and much land continued to be held theoretically by knight service. In practice, the enforcing authority, the Court of Wards, that 'great bridle of feudality' as Aubrey described it, had become merely a source of profit to the Crown. Its activities were not the least source of friction that drove land owners into opposition in the Civil Wars and its abolition in 1660 has been called 'probably the most important single event in the history of English landholding'.² This was the last stage in the emancipation of the fief. Landholders were now free not only of obligations of service to the Crown, but of monetary substitutes for service, and of the burdensome relics of feudal theory by which, at the death of a tenant, land reverted to the lord. One after another, the barriers to hereditary tide were broken down and abolished. Yet the manorial structure, though weakened, did not wholly disappear. Here and there a manorial franchise compelled tenants to grind their corn at the lord's mill. A lord could seize the estate of a convicted felon or a suicide, as the Duke of Somerset seized the house of a tripeman hanged for false coining. Sanctuaries from justice, like the Savoy, the Mint and Scodand Yard, were continued reminders of the survival of medieval custom as well as a perpetual nuisance to neighbours. But generally the social and economic purposes and consequences of landholding were changing, and with them its political significance. By the sixteenth century, even more by the seventeenth, an enterprising landlord stood to gain more from the wool, corn, timber and sometimes coal and iron on his estates than from squeezing out of his tenants his ancient rights to the profits of justice and lordship. He did not, as a rule, exploit his potential riches in person, though he might and often did keep a sizeable home farm that supplied his household with necessities and sometimes served as a model to tenants. Increasingly, the work and business of farming was

¹ *Lex Customaria or a Treatise of Copy Hold Estates* by S. C. Barrister at Law. London, 1701, Preface.

² David Ogg, *England in the Reign of James II and William III, 1688-1702*, p. 55. See Chapter III, 'Freehold and Status', for an admirable account of this process of change.

carried on by a growing class of tenant farmers who paid rent to a landlord according to the terms of a terminable contractual lease. Their substantial farm-houses still bear witness in many parts of England to their 'modest prosperity'.))

The changing character of landed property, far from extinguishing its social and political significance, actually broadened and increased it. For though no longer the basis of public law in the feudal sense, landed property continued to be the basis of politics. The House of Lords was still an assembly of landed magnates, but now the Commons began to include a larger landed element. The possession of land by an M.P. was seen less as an outward sign of prestige — though it certainly was that — than as the best insurance against subservience to the Crown. So that when finally in 1711 the Act of 9 Ann. 05 made high landed qualification compulsory on all M.P.s, its preamble claimed that it was 'securing the liberty of Parliament'. Similarly with jury service: only freeholders, it was assumed, could be relied upon to be impartial and independent. Full citizenship, in fact, was open only to the property owner. Now, however, neither political privilege nor social rank was indefeasibly attached to any specific unit of freehold. Both had become the natural perquisite of 'property' and property was now freely bought and sold, without hindrance, other than lawyers' delays, by anyone who could afford it. Alongside the political change by which a 'liberty' or a 'freedom' were transmuted from a feudal privilege into a general right to do as a man saw fit, subject only to the rules of law, went a closely associated process by which successful men of enterprise from the trades and professions bought their way into landed property.

The rising, socially successful merchant was no novelty in the seventeenth century. The wealthy medieval merchant had been regarded as of more or less equal social status with the rural knight, and the two classes had frequently intermarried. London merchants (like the famous Frowick family) had combined trade with their position as manorial lords in Middlesex over a long period of time. The Earl of Suffolk was descended from the de la Poles, merchants of Hull. The merchant class of London was recruited to a considerable extent from the younger sons of country families like the Greshams of Norfolk, the Cloptons and Cokaynes of Warwickshire and Derbyshire.¹ There was, therefore, already an element of mobility between social classes and occupations. Contrariwise, even in the seventeenth century the proportion of men who improved (or lost) social status was probably only a fraction of

¹ A. Wagner, *English Genealogy, 1960*, pp. 137-48.

those who stayed roughly where they were. But it was this moving minority which gave English life its peculiar flavour, and its size, though still small in relation to the total population, was increasing significantly.

Nothing is more characteristic of the continuity and flexibility of English institutions than this steady marriage of town and country, of merchant and landed wealth. Everywhere along the seaboard of western Europe and the Mediterranean, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw trade grow, and with it, important merchant communities come into being. Everywhere, some men broke through the social barriers and improved their status. But in general the obstacles to social mobility seem to have been more formidable than in England. In the Low Countries, where a loose form of feudalism had combined with land reclamation to create prosperous trading cities and ports, the successful merchants tended to remain an urban patriciate. Likewise in Venice. In France, the noble who invested in trade faced the penalties of 'derogation' — the loss of noble privileges which was justified by the doctrine that the status of nobility was incompatible with participation in trade. Only very reluctantly in seventeenth-century France was protection against such penalties granted in special cases where investment in overseas trade (the East India trade in particular) was thought to be in the national interest. But generally the division persisted. In England the landed proprietors ceased to be a closed caste. Not only in the Home Counties but also round towns and ports, and wherever desirable estates offered, successful merchants and lawyers were to be found moving in. Eminent lawyers like Bacon, Brownlow, and Coke (rumoured to have made £100,000 in one year from fees as Attorney-General), administrators like Cranfield, Ingram, George Downing and William Blathwayt, rich merchants like William Cokayne, Josiah Child and Gilbert Heathcote, goldsmith bankers like Richard Hoare and Charles Duncombe — all bought large estates, acquired knighthoods, baronetcies and even peerages, married their daughters into the gentry and aristocracy, and sometimes founded dynasties.) Contrariwise, the younger sons of old gentry families commonly took to trade to make their fortunes. Cranfield, Hugh Myddleton, promoter and engineer of the New River,¹ Heathcote, Duncombe, the Morses of Woodperry² and many others were typical of the social process by which such younger sons came to London, made a fortune in trade or finance and later reverted once again to their traditional status as country gentlemen. The Ishams of Lamport by Pytchley were descended from John, the fourth

¹ See below pp. 48-9.

² See below p. 330.

to

of five sons of an Elizabethan gentleman. John became a City merchant, returning home in his affluence to buy back the family estate and found a long line of baronets who still live at Lamport. It was no accident that the legend of Dick Whittington dates from 1605. Variations on the theme of social mobility thereafter became the familiar stock in trade of the dramatists. The poor but virtuous apprentice aspiring to marry the rich master's daughter, whose socially ambitious mother is selling her to a raffish and poverty-stricken country squire — such themes abound in the Jacobean theatre.¹

This constant mingling of blood, class and occupation, the traffic between town and country, was of supreme importance to the economic and social evolution of England. Like all ages of innovation, it bred twisters like Sir Arthur Ingram, sharp monopolists and usurers like Sir Baptist Hickes and Sir William Cokayne, cranks and charlatans like Nicolas Barbon, whose adventures have caught the eye and wounded the moral sense of historians. But social intermixture did more than that. It gave assurance and influence to trade, it reinforced the declining fortunes of hundreds of landed families, and it brought intelligence and social influence to bear on the economic policies of governments which might otherwise have been swayed, as rulers in Continental Europe often were, simply by considerations of royal income and dynastic interests. The steady evolution of a national economic policy owed much to the common interest in prosperity shared by the English landed and business classes. Merchant interests were constantly consulted by successive seventeenth-century governments; so that while Cavaliers and Roundheads might disagree on many things, merchant opinion was consistently sounded both before and after the Civil Wars, by governments of all types on the merits and demerits of proposed policies on taxation, protective duties, navigation laws and the like.) Even in war, economic objectives were rarely lost sight of and were often dominant, as they were in the Second War against the Dutch in 1664. By contrast, French policy was more dominated by political and dynastic objectives.²

The effect of this continued influx of business men into estate management is more difficult to assess. Capital it certainly brought, and, in some cases no doubt, more efficient accountancy and improved methods of management. When Cokayne foreclosed on the

¹ Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) is a good example.

² See P. W. Bamford, 'Entrepreneurship in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France', *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, April 1957.