

## CHAPTER 3

### SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

THE England in which the Evangelical Movement arose was very different from England to-day, and if we are to understand its history this must constantly be borne in mind. For the social and economic conditions and tendencies of the time were more than a mere background against which the movement developed; they were a not unimportant factor in determining its course.

Perhaps the most striking difference was in the matter of population. Until about 1750 it was little more than an eighth of the present total, and for some time it had been stationary. Then it began to increase, slowly at first, but more rapidly after 1781; but when the first census was taken in 1801 it had not reached 9,000,000. This smaller population, moreover, was widely distributed. London was the only large town, and of the rest probably Bristol alone exceeded 50,000 in 1740. Many of the new towns still ranked as villages,<sup>1</sup> and their administration was parochial. Local government was a very tardy growth in England.<sup>2</sup>

Another important factor which requires notice is the poorness of the means of communication. The roads were quite inadequate and their upkeep neglected. Towards the end of the century there was a much needed improvement, but even this was confined to the main roads. In 1754 it took four and a half days to travel from London to Manchester; but the new roads enabled the journey to be accomplished by stage coach in twenty-eight hours. As late as October, 1787, Wesley records travelling from Hinxworth to Wrestlingworth "through such roads as no chaise could pass. So we had the pleasure of riding on a farmer's cart."<sup>3</sup>

Until the last quarter of the century it was transport by

<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the century Defoe had described Manchester as "one of the greatest, if not the greatest, mere village in England . . . including the suburbs of that part of the town on the other side of the bridge [Salford], it is said to contain 50,000 people"

<sup>2</sup> The ways in which the towns gradually sought wider powers is a social phenomenon whose significance is not always recognized: see Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 86

<sup>3</sup> *Journal*, vii, p. 338

water which showed the greatest improvement. The Duke of Bridgewater, with the aid of Brinkley, constructed the first canal in 1761, and others quickly followed. This lack of efficient transport was a handicap to industrial and commercial development; but its effects on the social life of the country must have been even greater. It meant that each community was in large measure isolated from its neighbours, and as a result its interests were confined to things near at hand. Villages were much more self-contained, and produced not only their own food, but almost everything else, apart from a few luxuries, which they required. Town and country were largely cut off from one another and had different tastes and preoccupations. The rustic squires who occasionally came up to London were objects of ridicule, and their amazing powers of eating and drinking aroused amused wonder. Horace Walpole, in his facetious way, said that he could hardly distinguish between a country gentleman and a sirloin. They retained their local dialect, and most of them were only too glad to avoid the metropolis and to remain in spheres where they were persons of consequence.<sup>1</sup>

Conditions in rural England, however, did not stand still during the eighteenth century. On the contrary, they experienced a revolution whose importance is apt to be forgotten owing to the even more spectacular changes in the industrial world with which it was contemporary. The agricultural revolution began as early as 1740, and though enclosing made steady progress half the country still retained the open-field system up to 1760. Enclosure was beneficial to the country as a whole (had it not taken place, it is doubtful whether England would have been able to maintain itself during the Napoleonic blockade), but individuals suffered in the process. Farming was conducted on more scientific lines, and large landowners gave themselves up to the cultivation of their estates with equal skill and enthusiasm; but the smaller men were squeezed out, and the labourers deprived of their holdings and of that stake in the soil which had been traditional. Before enclosure, many cottagers had worked half the time on their own strips and half for an employer: thus preserving a certain spirit of independence, the great characteristic of the English freeman. After enclosure, they were reduced to landless labourers. In consequence there was a flight from the land, and large numbers migrated into the growing towns where industry was ever demanding fresh labour.

<sup>1</sup> Earlier still, Congreve, in *The Way of the World*, had depicted the contrast

Poets, from the days of Theocritus and Virgil, have made it their business to idealize rural life, and those who read their works in the eighteenth century fondly imagined that they gave a true picture of their own times and country. False notions as to rustic happiness were further popularized by Goldsmith in *The Deserted Village*, but the realistic pen of Crabbe in *The Village* and *The Parish Register* revealed the actual conditions. Wesley, it may be noted, had a poor opinion of rural life, and affirmed that:

Our eyes and our ears may convince us that there is not a less happy body of men in all England than the country farmers. In general, their life is supremely dull; and it is usually unhappy too; for, of all people in the kingdom, they are the most discontented, seldom satisfied either with God or man.<sup>1</sup>

The revolution in industry which so fundamentally changed the face of England and so deeply affected its social and economic life is conventionally dated from 1760. In reality, it goes back much further and had long been coming to birth; even when it reached more rapid and noticeable stages its development was still gradual. The new methods, for one thing, were not immediately profitable, and much prejudice had to be overcome. It took two decades for the power loom to displace the hand loom;<sup>2</sup> the steam engine was not used in the cotton trade until 1785. Even the rural character of industry was maintained for a time, and village "slums" sprang up round mills and mines and factories. Towns only developed with the realization of the greater convenience of large centres.<sup>3</sup>

But if the industrial movement was slow in developing, it merits the title of a revolution, so drastic were the changes it wrought; and the flame and smoke of the ironworks were, for those who had eyes to see, beacons proclaiming the arrival of a new era and the collapse of the old. It was certainly a momentous achievement, and Disraeli could aver that "rightly understood Manchester is as great a human exploit as Athens";<sup>4</sup> but many of its effects were disastrous.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted Southey, *Life of Wesley*, ii, p. 67

<sup>2</sup> Macgregor, *The Evolution of Industry*, p. 39

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Morley, *Recollections*, i, pp. 3 f. "It took three quarters of a century or more before the factory system with all its opulent triumphs and all its strange new social perplexities had definitely established itself in the Lancashire cotton towns"

<sup>4</sup> *Coningsby*, Book IV, chap. i

The evils which would follow for the individual were clearly foreseen by Wordsworth when he wrote:

Our life is turned  
Out of her course, wherever man is made  
An offering, or a sacrifice, a tool  
Or implement, a passive thing employed  
As a brute mean, without acknowledgment  
Of common right or interest in the end;  
Used or abused, as selfishness may prompt.  
Say, what can follow for a rational soul  
Perverted thus, but weakness in all good,  
And strength in evil.<sup>1</sup>

As the factory system developed and crowds were drawn in from the countryside, the older towns began rapidly to expand, and new towns arose. To provide for the additional inhabitants houses had to be built. These were invariably cheap and ugly, and many of them were deficient in even the most elementary sanitary conveniences. The whole atmosphere, with its reeking thoroughfares, darkened by the perpetual drift of smoke from the factory chimneys, must have been intensely depressing. Whilst the houses, huddled together in long unlovely streets, added to the general squalor. To those whose younger days had been spent in the country they must have seemed a veritable inferno. Even when the country was still near at hand, as was the case at first, the dwellers in the towns can have had but little heart and but scanty leisure to return to it.

The social consequences were enormous. In their village homes the new-comers had been members of a community with a definite position in their own small society. Now they were but driftwood, with no centre of interest or unity, save the mill or factory which employed them. There thus grew up a kind of debased and novel feudalism; but the new "lords" had nothing of the kindly feelings of the old. Many had been artisans, who, by good fortune or superior energy, had raised themselves to be employers of labour. Such had no tradition of responsibility behind them and no care for the welfare of their dependants.

If individuals had thus to suffer, the country as a whole was reaping an abundant harvest. In spite of foreign wars, after

<sup>1</sup> *Excursion*, ix, 113 ff. A modern poet has exposed, in the spirit of Blake, the evils of the system; see Gordon Bottomley, *To Iron-Founders and Others*

the rising of 1745 the country was at peace at home, and this security gave the opportunity for great advance. Trade grew enormously, for whereas in 1720 imports amounted to a little over £6,000,000, by 1789 they had passed £37,000,000, and this in spite of the temporary setback when the command of the sea was lost during the American War. British ships, carrying their merchandise, sailed the seven seas, and British merchants gained concessions and planted factories in all quarters of the globe. Commerce was becoming the chief preoccupation of the country, and politics would more and more be dominated by the interests of trade.

The increase in trade and in the wealth of the nation naturally had important social effects. The standard of living was raised immensely—for those who were lucky enough to have their share of the increase. But for others conditions really deteriorated. Luxury and gross extravagance at one end of the ladder was accompanied by greater stringency at the other. As commercial and industrial operations were conducted on an ever growing scale the gap between masters and men was also widened. Even on the land this was noticeable, for though some better-class farmers still lived with their servants in the kitchen and only opened their parlours when entertaining a guest of higher quality, many of them, or at least many of their wives and daughters, were consumed with social ambitions and despised their dependants and servants.

Social and class distinctions were exceedingly rigid and were taken for granted as part of the natural order of things. This can be seen in the attitude of great artists such as Reynolds and Gainsborough; both had been bred in the country, and to the end of their days they painted the squire and the squire's lady as if they were the centre of the universe. Unless we grasp firmly the way in which the whole social structure was permeated by this notion, we shall be apt to condemn unduly the subservience of the various Evangelical leaders to Lady Huntingdon and other noble persons who took part in the movement. This subservience, however, was tempered by a high conception of their rights as ministers of the Gospel; none the less it was there. John Newton after speaking his mind very freely to Lord Dartmouth ended up: "I dropt the consideration of whom I was addressing from the first paragraph: but now I return, and subscribe myself with the greatest deference," etc.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Cardiphonia*, p. 18

The spirit of subordination extended to all ranks of society, and was perhaps strictest in the servants' hall. But there was nothing servile about it; if privilege was not resented, any approach to injustice or tyranny might cause trouble. The acceptance of a settled social status certainly made life easier and more natural; for where there is instability an atmosphere of strain is apt to be produced, and even of conflict. Dr. Johnson once gave it as his opinion that "subordination is very necessary for society, and contentions for superiority very dangerous. . . . Subordination tends to human happiness".<sup>1</sup>

One important change in social status was due to a growing prejudice against those engaged in trade. At the beginning of the century, trade was never despised, and Addison could write:

It is the happiness of a trading nation like ours that the younger sons . . . may be placed in such a way of life as may perhaps enable them to vie with the best of their family; accordingly, we find several citizens that were launched into the world with narrow fortunes rising, by an honest industry, to greater estates than those of their elder brothers.<sup>2</sup>

Such successful merchants, having rural tastes, followed a natural impulse and acquired country estates to which they devoted their ample wealth. Thus the land was being fed from the town. But as the scope of trade increased they tended to use their wealth in financing fresh ventures, and enterprising young men felt that business held out better prospects than agriculture. So a new type of merchant arose who had no interest in the land. This cut them off from the country gentry from whom originally they had come. The disappearance, too, of the smaller squires, as large estates became more common, also cut off a source of supply. But trade on a sufficiently large scale was still open to the landowner and even to the aristocrat. No one, one imagines, looked down on the Duke of Bridgewater because he possessed coal mines and canals.

One outward mark of class differentiation in the eighteenth century was the difference in dress, a distinction which persisted until quite recent times when mass production and other more economical methods have enabled the poorer classes to wear clothes which in style and general appearance are not

<sup>1</sup> Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson* (ed. G. B. Hill), i, p. 442

<sup>2</sup> *The Spectator*, No. 108

very dissimilar from those of their betters. As we have already noticed, a devotion to dress and fashion was typical of the aristocrat, and it was by no means confined to the gentler sex; men and women vied with one another in forms of senseless ostentation.

The years before the French Revolution were a golden age for English aristocracy. Just as mankind, until the Copernican era, had thought the earth was the centre of the universe, and sun, moon, and stars merely a means of illumination, so did they regard their own position. All things had been created for their benefit and enjoyment. As the chosen of the earth they held in contempt the plebeian herd of those who had to work for their living and to spend their lives in monotonous occupations. They gazed out loftily from their self-created paradise upon a world outside which blindly accepted their superior status. Gray, in the solitude of some rustic glade, might sing:

How vain the ardour of the crowd,  
How low, how little are the proud,  
How indigent the great!

but he would have found few to agree with his estimate.

The typical "fine gentleman" was not without his admirable qualities—he was, as a rule, witty, intelligent, a patron of art and letters—but these were offset by levity and a conceit which reached the verge of insolence. The rights and wishes of those who did not belong to his class were beneath his notice, nor was he afraid of public opinion, save that of his fellows. In him selfishness seemed to reach the pitch of perfection. Such was his outward aspect, though one may hope that Hannah More's young man of fashion had some counterparts in real life.<sup>1</sup>

Society was narrow and select, but it was also cosmopolitan. London and Paris were so closely linked that even the outbreak of the Seven Years' War did not interrupt their intercourse. (That was before war became "total".) The hero of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* ignored it, and only found difficulties when he arrived in France because he had forgotten his passport. So, too, Suzanne Necker could invite Gibbon, then a member of Parliament, to visit her and her husband in Paris during the American War.

The habit of the English aristocracy of making the grand

<sup>1</sup> He "studied to be cold and rude  
Tho' native feeling would intrude"  
*Florio*, I, 47 f.

tour of the Continent, so well described in *Dunciad*, Bk. iv, led to the formation of friendships with foreigners, though the welcome extended to Englishmen was sometimes only a preliminary to fleecing them at the card tables. These connexions introduced many new ideas and fashions; but they also did much to lower the standard of English morals and to corrupt English society. And so France gained the reputation of being the home of forbidden sins, and men could suggest that the inscription over the gate of Hell was not, as Dante had supposed: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here", but "Ici on parle Français". This influence, however, was strictly limited to the aristocracy and those who took them for models. To the solid mass of Englishmen everything alien was contemptible; and even Dr. Johnson could declare that all foreigners were fools.

Such was English society in the eighteenth century, "a society so agreeable that posterity is tempted to forget how little else it had to recommend it".<sup>1</sup> But if it was amusing and attractive, and free from the bondage of hampering restrictions, it still had its own conventions. To us these seem strangely inconsistent. If it scoffed at religion, it was careful about church attendance—doubtless to set a good example to the lower classes; if its moral tone was low, certain proprieties must be observed and vice masked behind a decorative screen; if the affectation of republican views was not thought amiss, at least until the French Revolutionaries ventured on regicide, these must not undermine the position of the aristocrat. Its fundamental weakness was a concern for mere externals, and a witty tongue and polished manners more than outweighed a weak or dissolute character.

The life of the ruling classes in the country was very different from that of London or Bath. There the great landowners were absolutely supreme, petty monarchs whose slightest wish had the force of law; and even the voice of public opinion weighed little with men who lived amid their own dependants. Often enough those who suffered most from their immunity were the members of their families to whom they acted as domestic tyrants. Those who chose to oppose them, or to adopt views of which they disapproved, had to suffer the consequences; there were cases of men being evicted from their farms because they became Methodists. As local justice and administration was entirely in their hands, there was no redress; a single magistrate could hold a court in his own house and administer

<sup>1</sup> G. O. Trevelyan, *The Early History of Chas. Jas. Fox*, p. 348



summary justice. Pamela said to her master: "You are a justice of the peace, and may send me to gaol, if you please, and may bring me to trial for my life. If you can prove that I have robbed you, I am sure I ought to die" (Letter XXIV). But though abuses may have been more common than they are to-day it would be an error to suppose that the landed aristocracy habitually regarded themselves as above all law, or that squires bullied or defrauded their tenants. On the contrary, they had a very high sense of responsibility towards those who depended upon them and made it their business to enforce standards of decency and to check vice and brutality. They and their ladies were ever most solicitous in caring for the sick and poverty-stricken. Landowners might even extend their feeling of responsibility to towns in their neighbourhood. Hartlepool, for example, rose "from obscurity to eminence . . . through the bounty of the neighbouring nobility and gentry, whose custom it has been to accept by turns the office of mayor, and to subscribe upon that occasion one hundred pounds towards the improvement of the town."<sup>1</sup>

The spaciousness and dignity of the age, a spaciousness and dignity which these islands will never again behold, is reflected in the great houses they built—many of them in the eighteenth century—and adorned so lavishly and magnificently. The stately homes of England had then real meaning. All this has gone, but the remembrance of it may do something to console us in the aridity and meanness of much in contemporary life, even if we have no wish that it should return. The price paid for such magnificence was indeed too high, and those who enjoyed it were far too few. It could only be achieved and maintained at an immense cost in human misery and subjection, and modern ideas, quite rightly, do not desire that so much sacrifice on the part of the multitude should be made for the selfish enjoyment of a small minority. But even then the process of decay had already begun, and here and there landowners (often through the gambling habits of their predecessors, or their taste for extravagant overbuilding) were finding it hard to maintain their position. Hannah More has described some of them as full of apprehension and as making the best of things:

Before our tottering castles fall  
And swarming nabobs seize on all.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cadogan, *Life of Romaine*, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, i, p. 61