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ENGLAND IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY (1714-1815)

J. H. PLUMB

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Dr J. H. Plumb was born in Leicester in 1911. He was educated at University College, Leicester, and subsequently at Christ's College, Cambridge. He began research under Professor G. M. Trevelyan on the social structure of the House of Commons in the reign of William III. In 1939 he was elected to the Ehrman Fellowship, King's College, Cambridge. During the war 1940–5 he worked in a department of the Foreign Office. On his return to Cambridge he became Fellow and Tutor of Christ's College and University Lecturer in History. In 1957 he was awarded a Litt.D. for his work on eighteenth-century history. In 1962 he was appointed Reader in Modern British History at Cambridge. He has written books on *Chatham*, *The First Four Georges*, and *West African Explorers*. His life of Sir Robert Walpole was acclaimed both in England and America. He is now editing a multi-volume *History of Human Society*. He was visiting professor at Columbia University for 1960. He is the European Advisory Editor for *Horizon*, and the advisory editor for history for Penguin Books.

EDITORIAL NOTE

England in the Eighteenth Century is the seventh volume of a series planned to form an intelligent and consecutive guide to the development of English society in all its aspects from the Roman invasion to the outbreak of the first world war. Each volume has been written by a specialist, and each author has been left to decide what he himself considers significant and interesting, in the period with which he deals, and to make his own balance between the claims of the sub-divisions of his general thesis, politics, economics, culture, religion, social life, colonial expansion, foreign relations. All have sought to emphasize the sense of period, and while some parallels are inevitable, the business of discovering comparison and conclusion, and of adapting the lessons of history to our own times, is left, for the most part, to the reader.

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J. E. MORPURGO

To

MY MOTHER

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THE AGE OF WALPOLE

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'I am no Saint, no Spartan, no Reformer.'

SIR ROBERT WALPOLE

CHAPTER ONE

THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIETY, 1714–42

ENGLAND in 1714 was a land of hamlets and villages: its towns, such as it had, were on the coast. In Lancashire, the West Riding, and West Midlands towns of some size and substance were beginning to grow, but the majority of the population was still in the south and still rural. Estimates of population vary because the evidence is unreliable. Until the last decades of the century, it is largely a matter of intelligent guesswork. The population was probably, in 1714, about five and a half millions, and from 1714 to 1742, after an initial spurt, there was only a very small increase, but there were important changes in its distribution; East Anglia had a declining population; the West Country and South and East Midlands were fairly static, so was the East Riding and all of the north but Tyneside, West Riding, and South Lancashire, where the increase was marked; so, too, was the increase in the West Midlands. Surrey and Middlesex grew with London, whose rapid expansion of the late seventeenth century was maintained. These changes were due to the growth of towns and industrial villages. London exceeded half a million; Bristol passed Norwich and may have reached its 50,000 in this period. Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds, Halifax, Birmingham, and Coventry all ceased to be the sprawling villages they had been half a century earlier, although, as towns, they were small by modern standards, none of them reaching 50,000. Small as they were, they ate up men, women, and children and their population was only maintained, let alone increased, by a steady immigration from the country and in the north-west from Ireland.

The first noticeable thing about these towns would have been the stench. There was no sanitary system; an open cesspool in the court often served the richer inhabitants; the poor, as with Eastern peoples today, made a public convenience of every nook and cranny. The unpaved streets were narrow, often only six feet wide; at Bristol they were too narrow for carts, and sledges had to be used for moving goods. The houses of the poor were one or two room hovels, frequently made only of weatherboard with a pitched roof, placed back to back; or they were the houses of the rich, deserted because their owners were seeking more salubrious suburbs – ramshackle warrens of filth, squalor, and disease. Most cellars were inhabited, not only by people but also by their pigs, fowls, sometimes even by their horses and cattle. All tradesmen and craftsmen used the street as their dustbin, including butchers who threw out the refuse of their shambles to decay and moulder in the streets. About London and one or two of the large towns, enterprising market gardeners bought the refuse and the night soil to manure their fields, and this helped the growth of cleanliness.

All houses and cellars were desperately overcrowded – ten to a room was common in Manchester. It was reported that often the rooms were without furniture and lacking even beds; the occupants slept close together on shavings for warmth. Disease was rampant and unchecked: smallpox, typhus, typhoid, and dysentery made death a commonplace. A contemporary describes, in 1721, the way the parish authorities disposed of paupers' corpses in Manchester:

> They dig in the churchyards, or other annexed burial places, large holes or pits in which they put many of the bodies of those whose friends are not able to pay for better graves; and then, those pits or holes (called the Poor's Holes), once opened, are not covered till filled with such dead bodies . . . How noisome the stench is that

arises from these holes so stowed with dead bodies, especially in sultry seasons and after rain, one may appeal to all who approach them.

In the early part of the century, only about one child in four, born in London, survived; and probably the infant mortality was higher in the mushroom towns of the north. In the midst of death, the people sought palliatives and found them in drink, gambling, and violence. The consumption of gin – drunk mixed with fruit cordials – was prodigious, but largely confined to London, where it may have affected the death rate in the thirties, although virulent influenza epidemics also took their toll. Gambling was an antidote favoured by all classes of society; the wealthy favoured stocks, cards, and lottery tickets; the poor, crown and anchor, pitch and toss, or bull baiting and cock fighting. Violence, born of despair and greed, belonged to the poor alone. Most of the new towns were still, constitutionally speaking, villages; and they usually had no more than two parish constables to keep order. London, Bristol, Liverpool, and a few other large corporate towns were better off because they had resident justices who could read the Riot Act, but even their forces for keeping order were pitifully inadequate, and burning, looting, and destruction by the mob were commonplaces of life. And yet these towns drew an endless stream of emigrants from the countryside.

In London, which drew the most, conditions varied considerably. The eastern suburbs, Westminster, and parts of Southwark were as bad as the provincial towns. The area controlled by the City of London was better administered, although the social amenities were negligible. An attempt had been made to light the city in 1684. The lamps were shaped like frying pans and the fat used was derived from animals' intestines. The experiment was not a success. In 1734 a new system of street lighting was introduced which dispelled some of the nocturnal gloom. To contemporaries,

especially provincials, it was a spectacular achievement. But it remained practically the only one of the period. Gay's *Trivia* and Johnson's *London*, as well as the accounts of travellers, English and foreign, show London to have been squalid and pestiferous, lacking the common amenities; a city of violent contrasts between luxury and elegance and poverty and ugliness. A city, above all, of crime and turbulence and hard living.

At the head of urban society were the merchant princes, with whom a few lawyers and high civil servants could associate on terms of equality both in wealth and social standing. Towards the end of their careers, these merchants often bought up great estates to endow themselves with the social prestige which went with land ownership and which would enable their sons and daughters to marry into the aristocracy or to acquire a title in their own right. These were the men who controlled the Bank of England and the great chartered companies and jealously protected their privileges. They had close financial ties with the government and it is not surprising that in politics they tended to support Walpole and call themselves Whigs; but of course to them Whiggery was not a radical creed. It meant, quite simply, the Hanoverian dynasty, with toleration to dissenters and the preservation of things as they were. In habits of life, the merchant princes differed little from the noblemen; they lived in equal state, built as grandly, and spent as prodigiously on furniture, food, and servants. But not all merchants were merchant princes. The great majority were middling people, mildly prosperous because of their industry and thrift which bred a distinctive ethos. Among these, the ordinary merchants and prosperous shopkeepers, the traditions of seventeenth-century life were stronger. They were still deeply attached to the puritan attitude; many were dissenters. They were also Whig, but it was an old-fashioned type of Whiggery which did not always see eye

to eye with Walpole, for they believed in plain, fair, and honest dealing, and the control of government by a Parliament – not the reverse, which was Walpole's way. They both envied and distrusted the great chartered companies and felt increasingly that they were a hindrance to trade. What loyalty they had to Walpole was strained by the opposition's frequent exposure of corruption in high places. Their natural suspicion was aroused by the talk of England's interests being sacrificed to Hanover. They were devoted readers of *The Craftsman*, the vigorous opposition newspaper, which played on their prejudices; some were taken in and voted Tory, most of them kept to the politics of their fathers. Their fervid isolationism and thirst for empire awaited the voice of Chatham, for the gulf between their world and Bolingbroke's – who attempted to turn them into Tories – was too great to be bridged.

The craftsmen and artisans – the journeymen and apprentices of the great livery companies of London – were the bridge between the rich and the poor. They worked long hours – fourteen was common – for a modest wage which, with the additions made by their wives and children, raised them well above the subsistence level, so long as trade was good. But trade was fickle and the chance of hunger and poverty threaded their lives with anxiety. Also, the changes in industrial organization – the decay of the guild, the spread of a free labour market, the introduction of labour-saving machinery – increased the feeling that they were being dispossessed. Until 1725 they still enjoyed a measure of political power in London, but this was diminished by Walpole, who disliked the spread of opposition views, both Tory and Radical, among them. He disliked even more their tendency to combine in order to insist on their rights under Tudor industrial legislation. It is true that Parliament believed that the artisan had a right to a fixed minimum wage and this it tried to uphold, but it condemned outright combination

in the two Acts of 1720 and 1744. Of course, combination went on; industries were small, often very localized, especially in London, and the journeymen met together in their friendly societies and taverns. Among them were many who were literate, and the violent press attacks on the government in *The Craftsman* or *Fog's Weekly* – the rabid Jacobite paper – first stimulated, and then focused, their sense of grievance with life. But again, the cheap food and good years of trade assuaged their animosity and kept it in bounds. The periods of most widespread public hostility to Walpole's government coincide with bad harvests or depressed trade. Nevertheless, the instability of their political opinions in a world without organized public order was a factor to be reckoned with, especially so as they still possessed importance in London politics. By their votes, they confronted Walpole with a hostile Lord Mayor at the most critical moment of his life – the Excise crisis of 1733.

Below the artisans and journeymen were the mass of London's population, the hordes of labourers whose livelihood depended almost entirely on casual employment and who were liable to be dismissed at will. Their lives were a chequered pattern of modest affluence and abject poverty. Their hard, lean faces and shrunken bodies gave a sense of bitter despair to many of Hogarth's prints of London life. Among them, philanthropists such as Coram and Oglethorpe laboured to save the children from crime and whoredom. Their plight stirred the heart of all benevolent men and towards them the mission of Wesley and his disciples was directed. But to the politician they were a nightmare. To the desperate poor, a riot was a clarion call to their instinct to survive, for in the burning and looting there was many a windfall. It mattered little to them what the riot was about and unscrupulous politicians never had difficulty in rousing the mob. Of course, the real poor had no political