

Chapter 1



The British Isles in 1714

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Map 1.1 British Isles

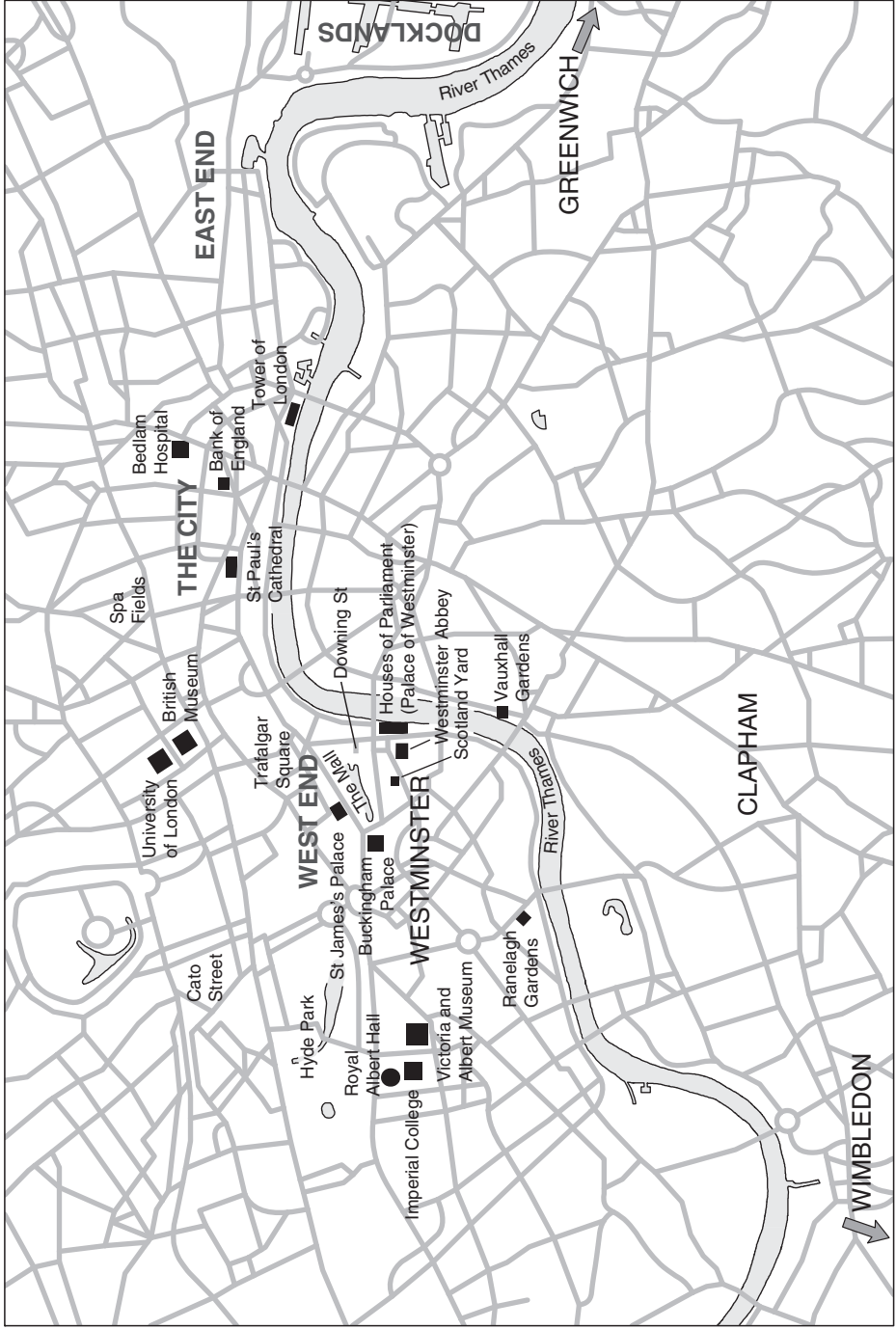
History is about change. Rises and falls come naturally to peoples and states. Wars and revolutions have convulsed the modern world. Britain was not isolated from these events and was often a prime actor in them. Big changes place enormous stress on societies, and only those that have powerful and resilient cores survive rapid innovation or decline without losing their balance. Strong institutions and deep traditions allow countries to transform themselves without extreme breaks with the past that usually end in disorientation and great suffering. Britain is the only major European state not to have had a revolution in the last three centuries. Most of its neighbors have undergone traumatic episodes that have produced terrible self-inflicted wounds under the rule of tyrants who rejected the constraints of law and morality that protect us from the abuse of power. Britain has been a center of innovation and change in the modern world but also stable and peaceful. Patterns of behavior, attitudes of mind, conditions of living, and seemingly anachronistic institutions have persisted over the centuries at all levels of society. Some argue these continuities have caused a kind of societal constipation, making it harder for the country to achieve a fair distribution of healthcare, education, and wealth. On the other hand, Britain was spared the Terror, gulags, and the Holocaust.

Before we begin to look at the narrative of British history over the last three centuries we need first to study the underpinnings: the geography, the economy, the social order, religion, and ways of life. Herein lie the origins of stability and the engines that drive change. Over time these forces helped shape national identity, the class structure, and empire.

Geography and History

Remember above all else that Britain and Ireland are islands (see Map 1.1). The archipelago which they form on the northwest coast of Europe is cut off from the Continent by a narrow strait that is often unpleasantly rough. Once an heir to the English crown drowned in it, and a large modern ferry sank without a trace during a storm in the Irish Sea as late as 1953. Northerly winds driving the Atlantic into the shallow and confined waters of the North Sea create huge waves that can make it dangerous to venture out of port. Over the last thousand years mainland armies intent on invasion have only succeeded in making the crossing to England twice. A threat always lingered that Spain, France, or Germany might land men or arms on the remote west coast of Ireland where only seals stood guard. Britain was vulnerable to attack from the rear. Ireland's tragic fate was that England came to associate oppression in Dublin with safety at home.

The second most important fact to remember about the archipelago is the fortunate proximity of the Gulf Stream, a warm current originating in the tropical Caribbean that flows northeastwards across the Atlantic passing close to the southern and western coasts of England and Ireland. Palm trees can be seen in Cornwall and Cork, and the general climate is so mild that pipes were often attached to exterior



Map 1.2 London

walls when modern plumbing came to be installed in old buildings because there was little chance of sustained deep freezes during the winter. Aside from the mountainous areas in Wales and Scotland and some of the higher elevations in northern England snow is comparatively rare and usually disappears quickly. Even though the islands lie in the same latitude as Labrador, Britain and Ireland are encased in a thermos-like oceanic environment that keeps the weather cool in summer and temperate in winter. Winds from the Atlantic push a steady flow of rain across the islands, which makes drought infrequent.

The third striking characteristic of the archipelago relates to size. Britain is tiny compared to Russia. England is half the area of the Italian peninsula and one-fourth that of France and could be fitted within the borders of a number of US states. Once roads had been surfaced with durable materials in the eighteenth century and railroads were built in the nineteenth, people and goods could move and be moved around the place with remarkable rapidity. Almost all the important population centers came to be connected by trips of a few hours. Even northern Scotland could be reached from London in less than a day. No one lives more than 70 miles from the sea. Once outside London visitors from North America often feel they have tumbled into Lilliput. Edinburgh and Dublin seem like miniaturized versions of what one expects capital cities to be. In the countryside, narrow lanes linking quaint villages with names such as Lower Slaughter and Steeple Bumpstead lead one into a world that even today appears taken from a storybook. Rivers are small in Britain, but there are many of them. They are often navigable for lengthy stretches, and provided a natural system of transportation for heavy goods that eased the movement of food and manufactured items even before the water courses were connected by a man-made network of canals.

The feel of a miniature world can be misleading. Forty years ago, before the decline in industrial output became precipitate, a train journey between Manchester and Sheffield impressed on the traveler the giant scale of what was once the workshop of the world. The sea entrance into the ship channel of the port of Liverpool, now largely abandoned but once the center of the Atlantic passenger and cargo trade, still conveys the impression of penetrating a nodal point on the globe. The Scottish **Highlands** remain one of the most awe-inspiring landscapes in Europe. London (see Map 1.2) exudes the feel of an imperial city, vast in size, with some of the most grandiose and elaborate royal and civic architecture in Europe. It has no single building to match the Forbidden City of Beijing or the ensemble of structures found along the Mall in Washington, but the sum of museums, palaces, concert halls, processional routes, riverscapes, churches, government offices, and sprawling suburbs is unique. Dotted around the countryside in all parts of the archipelago is a remarkable collection of medieval cathedrals, lovely market towns, splendid regional capitals, and enormous aristocratic palaces surrounded by far-flung walls and thickly timbered parks that have no equal in their numbers, continuity of ownership, and beauty anywhere.

If being an island has been central to the development of England, the greatest single fact in the histories of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales was their proximity to England. Four distinct peoples inhabited various parts of the archipelago. They in

turn encompassed numerous further divisions and fragments. The Highland Scots were very different from their brethren in the **Lowlands**; Cornwall, a peninsula at the southwestern tip of England, had distinctive traditions and even its own language; before 1922 Ireland was ruled by a Protestant elite largely recruited from Scotland and England, while the native population was Roman Catholic among whom Gaelic speakers were once predominant. The diversity of peoples and cultures within the confines of such a small physical capsule makes it hard to write a single narrative about their development over the last three centuries. The relative size of England skews our perspective. There is no doubt that it was a Goliath among a much smaller and weaker collection of entities. Yet, a Scottish army invaded England in 1640, and subsequent incursions reached deep into the south in 1715 and 1745. The English repeatedly suppressed rebellions in Ireland that threatened, or at least were imagined to be the harbingers, of mortal danger.

The royal family of Scotland, the Stuart dynasty (spelled Stewart in Scotland), inherited the English throne in 1603 and ruled jointly over the two countries, although increasingly this proved to be like having one leg each on the backs of two unharnessed horses. A constitutional merger took place in 1707, which opened up a golden age of economic and intellectual expansion for the smaller partner. On the other hand, the fragile Union between Ireland and Britain, concluded in 1801, never “took.”

Much of the time the smaller nations were required to cooperate only at a grand strategic level, leaving the decisions of everyday life largely to local governors. Nevertheless, the overwhelming nature of English prosperity and its eventual global hegemony had a subtle, undirected homogenizing force that gradually drew the disparate cultures closer and closer together. The Welsh preserved their own language, though most of them eventually came to speak English as well, while Cornish died out and Irish and Scots Gaelic have largely disappeared. The English were glad to see traditions that encouraged independence evaporate and sporadically attempted to stamp them out, but, in the case of native languages, for example, the gravest danger to survival was not London-inspired campaigns to eradicate difference. English was so convenient and valuable to learn that its adoption became impossible to halt. People voted with their tongues.

The physical geography of the British Isles shaped the direction that events took and channeled economic, social, and political forces. Britain was thrust into the Atlantic as a launching pad for seaborne exploration, trade, and empire. The rich seams of coal and iron ore, the navigable waterways, the abundance of ports, and the location of the islands are fundamental to this story.

Readers also must keep in mind “negative space” in the historical record that arises from geography, the things that did not happen because of the physical environment. For example, the existence of the moat-like Channel meant there was no need for a large standing army that would have endowed the central government with the means to crush opposition. This allowed challengers to whittle away royal power. The difficult terrain of the remoter parts of Scotland and Ireland meant that English authority became stretched quite thinly as one traveled farther from London. On the

other hand, lack of significant physical barriers within the core areas of England and lowland Scotland explain the absence of local customs and laws inhibiting trade that plagued the economic development of France, Italy, and Germany. These and other aspects of the archipelago that will become evident as the story progresses were as much a part of modern British history as inventors, politicians, or the workforce in factories.

One note on a delicate point of nomenclature requires mention. The term “Britain” is generally accepted to apply collectively to the island on which England, Scotland, and Wales are located. For much of the period under review here it also more or less included Ireland. In this book, for the sake of clarity, Britain and Ireland will be used as separate designations.

The Economy – Agriculture

By modern standards the population of Britain in 1714 was miniscule and thinly scattered. No official census was conducted until 1801. Thus, data for the eighteenth century are based on assumptions, extrapolations, and guesses. The population of England stood at about five million, Wales between 300,000 and 500,000, Scotland one to one and a quarter million, and Ireland two or two and a half million. Within a few years the British Isles as a whole would pass the 10 million mark. The combined white and black population of British colonies in America was about half a million in 1710.

For the first time in history the average age people could hope to attain rose consistently over the three centuries under review except in Ireland. Political and economic disturbances had kept living standards low in the seventeenth century. On the other hand, after 1666 the plague no longer made terrible visitations. Famine remained a problem in parts of Scotland, and hit Ireland both in the 1740s (when it was estimated to have killed up to 400,000 people) and the 1840s, but otherwise ceased to harrow the British people. In the 1720s England was able to feed itself and export wheat. Infant mortality remained high, which kept the *average* age of death low. In fact, people did not all keel over while still young. If they made it past the vulnerable early years, a normal lifespan could carry them into their sixties. Of course dangerous microbes lurked everywhere, and temporary setbacks still occurred.

The majority of people lived in the countryside and worked in agriculture or related employment. New agricultural techniques were developed. Farmers and landowners sought increased yields to offset falling agricultural prices. In England 15 to 20 percent of the land was owned by the **grandees** (**peers** and greater **gentry** who were known collectively as “aristocrats”), 45 to 50 percent by the middling and lesser gentry, 25 to 33 percent by small owners, and 5 to 10 percent by the Church and state.

The tripartite English land tenure system was a unique and critical factor in economic growth during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Large landed estates



Figure 1.1 Agricultural laborers – *Reapers* by George Stubbs, 1795

that could reach 100,000 acres or more in size were subdivided into units rented out to rural entrepreneurs called “farmers.” By 1700 a system of traditional holdings tended by families had been largely replaced in much of England by agrarian capitalism.¹ Landless wage laborers, a rural proletariat, carried out the physical tasks of raising crops and tending animals (Figure 1.1). The surplus income left over after paying the rent allowed the “farmer” to live in comfort. Large landowners employed stewards or agents to coordinate relations with the tenant farmers. Lesser gentry acted as their own managers. Big estates operated like rural corporations designed to increase the profits of both landowners and farmers. Large farms ensured that tenants could achieve economies of scale. Good tenants were not always easy to find. Landowners were willing to be moderate in their demands so long as the farms were well managed and the rents paid on time. Aristocrats and gentry focused on maximizing output, which often included the production of bricks and lumber or the extraction of mineral resources such as coal or tin. Ireland was economically and socially the most backward of the three kingdoms. An alien ruling class with little legitimacy ruled over the confiscated land of a subject people by force. Subsistence farming was practiced by peasants who rented small plots from grasping middlemen, who in turn were the tenants of subdivided big estates.

The agricultural system in England and Lowland Scotland not only encouraged expanded food production but also social stability. Paternalistic practices lingered.

Many landlords took some responsibility for the welfare of laborers, who except on “home” farms were not usually their direct employees. Opportunities to appear beneficent and to avoid direct confrontation over wages and conditions of employment helped the elite escape dangerous resentment. Cottages were rented at below market rates; ladies from great houses would distribute charity to the sick and needy; projects such as building walls around parkland were designed to provide employment in times of dearth. Special arrangements were made for rebates of rents to tenants in years with poor harvests. The mutually beneficial relationship between the aristocracy and gentry on the one hand and the farmers on the other was the foundation of England’s and southern Scotland’s social peace and security. Farmers and landowners participated together in rural recreations, and social occasions were arranged for the entertainment of both tenants and laborers with the roasting of whole oxen and oceans of beer.

The Economy – Business

Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733) published his famous *Fable of the Bees* in 1714. He doubted that the pursuit of material success was compatible with virtue. This challenge to unrestrained greed was largely swept aside and forgotten in a rush towards prosperity. The British landed elite’s strong sense of self-interest was a key to economic growth. The energy and ingenuity of the middle classes expanded commercial wealth to unprecedented proportions. Great merchants became landowners. Both groups were represented in Parliament and devoted the resources of the state to plunder the riches of the world and protect their own interests. While England still derived approximately 37 percent of national income from farming during the first half of the eighteenth century, it had developed a more complex mixed economy than its close neighbors. A fifth of its income came from industry, 16 percent from commerce, and a fifth from rent and services.²

During the seventeenth century local industrialists supplied regional needs. They were small-scale operators such as millers, shoemakers, weavers, and metal workers. Consumption increased slowly but inexorably. Manufacturing was still primarily rural. Fast-flowing water and surplus seasonal labor made the countryside attractive. Centers of production were distributed all over, although what were to become the great industrial hubs of modern Britain – Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, and Belfast – were emerging as important manufacturing cities. Liverpool and Glasgow were on their way to serving as the key ports in the Atlantic trade. Wool had long been the major product of England’s manufacturing system. To remind politicians of this fact the presiding officer of the upper house of Parliament sat on a sack of wool that looked like a mutant purple beanbag. Production of woollen cloths and clothing continued to play a major role in the economy until overtaken by cotton textiles and iron production in the age of coal and steam. Much of the English woollen manufacture took place in the southwest and the eastern areas.



Figure 1.2 London and the Thames, 1760. Compare with the illustration of London in Chapter 11

Gradually, as wool declined in importance and manufacturing shifted north, these regions lost population and prosperity. Like the skeletons of huge dinosaurs, cathedral-size churches still loom over what are now modest villages that were once able proudly to proclaim prosperity with richly embellished stained glass and stone towers.

Historians have questioned whether the designation “revolution” is appropriate when discussing the transformation of industry that took place in the eighteenth century. We will reserve the discussion of this question for Chapter 4. What can be said is that pottery was already being manufactured on an industrial scale, and English coal production had outstripped the combined output of the entire rest of the world by 1750. Steam pumps helped drain mines as early as 1699. Abraham Darby (1678–1717) discovered a means of smelting iron with coke rather than charcoal in 1709. The industrial growth rate remained slow, however, and there was little or no increase in the number of workers engaged in manufacturing during the second half of the century, when the traditional “revolutionary” advance in industry was supposed to have taken place.

The growth of urbanization in England was rapid. “Heightened specialization in and interdependence between ... economic regions, greater agricultural productivity, and the willingness of people to abandon traditional ways of life” drove the expansion forward.³ Exchange, production, ideas, and fashion met in towns. The proportion of the English population living in centers with at least 5,000 people rose from c.8 percent in 1600 to 17 percent in 1700 to 21 percent in 1750. The number of cities with at least 10,000 in population increased from five in 1670 to 20 by the middle of the eighteenth century.

The size and growth of London was extraordinary (Figure 1.2). During the seventeenth century it had doubled its share of the national population from 5 to 10 percent. At half a million people in the early eighteenth century, 675,000 in 1750, and 1,000,000 by 1800, it dwarfed all other cities in Britain, and was in the process of surpassing Paris as the largest metropolis in Europe, a position it has retained to the present day. Daniel Defoe described it in the 1720s: “New squares and new streets rising up every day to such a prodigy of buildings, that nothing in the world does, or ever did, equal it, except old Rome in Trajan’s time.”⁴ In the rest of the isles, the Scottish and Irish capitals of Edinburgh (*c.* 30,000) and Dublin (*c.* 60,000), London’s only competitor in size, also grew, but few other Scottish, Irish, or Welsh towns were of much significance in 1714.

The Economy – Trade and Empire

European merchants from the time of the Renaissance triggered what C. A. Bayly has called “a continuous chain reaction of commercial innovation.”⁵ The first half of the eighteenth century was a period of quickening growth. The Dutch retained primacy in European seaborne trade until the 1740s, but Britain’s rapid expansion outstripped them. The French remained a world-class mercantile power longer, but the rise of the **Royal Navy** and military victories in Canada and India discussed in the following chapters placed Britain in the lead. The most dynamic sector of the economy was overseas trade.

The expanding empire was crucial to the British economy. By 1732 almost half of all imports came from the colonies and nearly a quarter of exports went there. The English had arrived in the West Indies at about the same time as they colonized the North American mainland. The Caribbean islands, however, were of far greater commercial importance than the Thirteen Colonies even though the latter were much larger in population. The range of products flowing into Bristol, Liverpool, London, and Glasgow was phenomenal: coffee, chocolate, rice, furs, fish, spices, and textiles. What had once been luxury goods were enjoyed by a wider and wider range of people. Sugar was the key commodity. The British rapidly developed an insatiable addiction as prices dropped. Consumption rose one thousand times between 1660 and 1753.⁶

The dark side of this prosperity was the nature of Caribbean agriculture. Growing, harvesting, and processing sugar cane was labor intensive. The indigenous populations of the islands had been largely wiped out by disease in the early stages of European conquest. Slaves imported from Africa were the essential element in making sugar cheap. The trade in human beings also brought further profits. Between 1662 and 1807 nearly three and a half million Africans came to the New World as slaves transported on British ships. That was over three times the number of white migrants during the same period. Only a comparatively small portion of slaves went to the mainland colonies. A “triangular trade” evolved whereby English manufactured

goods were shipped to Africa to pay for the purchase of a human cargo; the slaves then crossed the Atlantic; and plantation sugar went on to North America and Britain. Accounts of the slave trade are often horrific. The death rate during the “middle passage” averaged up to 20 percent. However, this was not much worse than the fate suffered by white prisoners being “transported” to the colonies from Britain or the crews of the ships that carried them. Even paying passengers died at rates that would put an end to air transportation if they were sustained by today’s transatlantic fliers.

Trade with Asia was on the increase under the aegis of the East India Company, a peculiar entity established in 1600 as a joint-stock enterprise given a monopoly on trade in the region. Cottons, silks, spices, and porcelain came from India and China. The British people added to their lengthening list of addictions that included gin, tobacco, and tea, the beverage with which their culture would become most famously associated. The Company’s territorial base was not large. In India it was able to operate due to the sufferance of local rulers; attempts to use military force often met with resistance and failure. China was so huge and powerful that it was not until 1840, after the Royal Navy acquired the advantage of steam-powered vessels, that Britain could begin to challenge the authority of the Qing emperors.

Trade across the Irish Sea expanded greatly in the eighteenth century. Claims that the Irish economy was restricted by England have been exaggerated. Not being able to trade directly with the American colonies was inconvenient but did not stop considerable exchange through British ports. Trade with Britain in textiles and foodstuffs prospered. Later exports of agricultural products boomed.

The state was an active agent in promoting the commercial growth of the British economy. The establishment of the Banks of England in 1694 and Scotland in 1695, the Act of Union with Scotland, enactment of laws favorable to business, charters enforcing monopolies, encouragement of expanded communication and infrastructure development, and even the waging of commercial wars helped promote investment and knock out the competition. England tied colonial trade to its own interest through a series of Navigation Acts passed in 1651, 1660, and 1696 and subsequent legislation. (Scotland until 1707 and Ireland until 1801 were kept outside this system.) The colonies were rarely allowed to trade with any country other than England, and commerce had to be conducted in British ships with British or colonial seamen.

Not all was right with the British economy. Consumption taxes were too widespread and too high. The Royal Mint failed to keep sufficient silver coins in circulation for everyday transactions. The slow and costly legal system required reform. Laws to prevent profiteering in foodstuffs and price fixing, regulations governing the production and sale of bread, beer and other basic commodities gummed up the works. Poor relief provisions discouraged the free movement of labor. Yet, from the late seventeenth century onwards, leading officials demonstrated an understanding of the importance of allowing market forces to operate freely. Growth was sustained.

The Shape of Society

Belief in the Great Chain of Being, a medieval system of hierarchy that was part of God's plan for the world, had been shattered twice in the seventeenth century: by the execution of King Charles I in 1649 and by the overthrow of King James II in 1688. Yet, in 1714 Britain remained a society in which everyone had their place. People thought in terms of "orders," groups with rights and responsibilities, and not yet in terms of "class" with its economic focus. The king and queen headed the royal family in a carefully defined line of succession. Beneath them stood two hierarchical systems. One was the leadership of the state Church with archbishops followed by bishops, archdeacons, vicars, and curates. The other hierarchy was topped by the peerage, who stood at the head of civil society. They, too, were elaborately graded from **duke** down to **baron**. Within that system each titleholder had a place depending on the date of the family's first elevation to high rank and on whether their title was English, Scottish, or Irish.

The English and Welsh peerage was tiny: 173 in 1700 rising to 267 by 1800. No more than 1,003 persons held titles during the whole eighteenth century.⁷ The Scottish nobility was larger, but members had lost an automatic right to sit in the Parliament after the abolition of the Scottish legislature in 1707 (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3 A Scottish grandee: John Ker, third duke of Roxburghe by Pompeo Batoni, 1761

Some magnates and a good number of substantial landowners were not lords. The Irish peerage retained its own **House of Lords** in Dublin.

Few legal privileges accompanied a title, certainly not the exemption from paying taxes so fondly cherished by foreign noblemen. Peers did have the right to be tried in criminal cases by the House of Lords, and, if condemned to death, they were launched into eternity by a silken rope, a privilege last exercised by **Lord Ferrers** in 1760. Yet, to be a lord was something special, and to gain a title remained the supreme goal for most men of affairs in British life until the twentieth century.

Peers held automatic access to the royal court. Peeresses set fashion and regulated social functions in the capital cities. Usually, **county** societies were headed by the resident nobles, and untitled gentry looked to local magnates to protect and foster their interests in London, Dublin, and Edinburgh. Peers understood that social and political leadership required them, however much this might necessitate dissimulation, to be open and agreeable to people much below them in rank. For every instance of aristocratic arrogance, tales often told because of their rarity, one finds dozens of instances of what the eighteenth century called, approvingly, “condescension.” They lived amphibiously, moving back and forth between rural and urban environments to which they adapted with equal interest and skill.

Social boundaries remained important but became blurred below the peerage. **Baronets** and knights enjoyed titles, but what were once prestigious categories of people became very mixed in social status. Knighthoods came to be given automatically to civic office holders even if they did not own a yard large enough to walk a dog. The social gradient in England and Ireland was measured by the amount of land somebody owned. Distinguished ancestry counted for little without wealth. In Wales and Scotland lineage carried some weight, even if the family had seen better days, but great names tended to fade into insignificance if bankruptcy loomed.

The greater gentry were easy to identify. Like the nobility they lived in enormous houses, extended lavish hospitality, were memorialized with heraldic tablets and tombs in their local churches, attended Parliament (as **MPs**), and partied with the peerage. Tribes of servants, sometimes 100 or more indoors and outdoors, catered to their every whim. The houses were not built to evoke the awe of yokels, who were taught to pull their forelocks by the realities of their employment and dependency. The grand houses were meant to impress the lesser gentry, political clients, professionals, clergy, and others who had to scuttle down long corridors enriched with gilt furniture, family portraits, and precious possessions in order to pay homage to the owner. About 1,000 families constituted the English governing class who were regularly represented in Parliament.⁸

Social navigation got trickier as one descended the scale into the lesser levels of landownership. The “county” gentry might be modestly endowed but still rich enough to attend important political and social gatherings. “Parish” gentry, or in Scotland lesser “lairds” (lords), tended to be confined by low incomes to their comparatively humble homes and near neighborhood. No official body succeeded in regulating who was in and who was out. For this reason it is almost impossible to estimate the size of landed society accurately. Counts in England range from 5,000 to 25,000 families.

The younger sons of landowners, even of peers (or at least their grandsons), merged rapidly into an amorphous mass of “gentlemen” who might own little or no landed

property. The practice of primogeniture (in which the bulk of an estate was given to the eldest son at the expense of his siblings) among the landed elite meant that younger sons drifted into occupations where they had to earn a living in some form of business. This might be the more “genteel” profession of the law or socially less elevated commerce. In either case they sank or floated according to luck and ability. The lower borders of this category became more and more ragged as the century progressed and the mass of gentlemen became larger and larger. Someone who spoke reasonably grammatical English and dressed to look the part generally passed muster unless other evidence emerged of depraved character or employment as a manual laborer. Most bankers, merchants, doctors, and attorneys came to be accepted as “gentlemen.”

The tiny Welsh elite clung longer to traditional practices and met with fewer members of the middle class attempting to gain access. They numbered no more than 500 or 600 families with about 50 regularly represented in Parliament. Bards still wandered from mansion to mansion as late as 1720 and some gentle families did not adopt a surname until the same period. There was a sharper division between a handful of remote, Olympian magnates who rose like high rock formations out of the flat plateau that constituted the rest of the elite. The more gentle, sloping effect in social pyramids found elsewhere was absent.

In Scotland a core group of about 1,500 families held much of the land in the kingdom of whom 175 to 200 were regularly represented in the **Westminster** Parliament. Fifty or so magnates of ancient lineage such as the Campbells, Douglasses, Hamiltons, and Stewarts composed a group of “national” families whose histories were in a real sense the story of the country.

Three to five thousand families formed the **Ascendancy** in Ireland, of whom perhaps 350 were regularly represented in Parliament. The top elite lacked the vast resources of the great English and Scottish families. To be well-to-do in Dublin was equivalent of holding a modest social position in London. Later, the Irish would fall further behind as British magnates profited from the mineral and other resources on their estates that helped fuel industrialization. The Ascendancy formed a mongrel elite with far more mixed origins than elsewhere. The origins of the O’Neills may stretch back to the fifth century AD, but most families rose as English and Scottish immigrants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They lived as “a garrison in a hostile land,” in fear of a seething mass of dispossessed Roman Catholic natives beneath them.⁹

The “professions,” as traditionally defined, included the better-bred clergy, military officers, and upper-level lawyers and judges. By 1700 the clergyman ranked second to the squire in the parish and even lived on friendly terms with greater landowners and peers. An increasing number came from landed families themselves. The many substantial rectories and vicarages built in the eighteenth century attest to their status. From about 1680 university-educated doctors (though not barber surgeons) gradually established professional status.

Lawyers in England, Wales, and Ireland were divided into three groups: barristers (called “advocates” in Scotland) who argued cases in court (at the bar), solicitors (in Scotland “writers”), who advised clients, drew up documents, and managed cases, and attorneys, local purveyors of legal advice of varying quality. Outstanding barristers and advocates promoted to judgeships could gain excellent incomes and



Figure 1.4 Even a middle-class artist such as William Hogarth could afford to maintain a large household. *Heads of Six of Hogarth's Servants* by William Hogarth, c. 1750

in some cases found great aristocratic families through accumulation of fees and prerequisites. In the Church, bishops sometimes had incomes as large as important landowners. Making a career in the army, and to a lesser degree the navy, became more and more fashionable in the eighteenth century. The navy required more brains and more difficult living conditions, but a system of rewarding captains and admirals with prize money raised by the sale of captured ships could make them rich.

The professions stood on the border between landed society and the “middling orders,” an expanding body of families in the eighteenth century. This category was immensely varied and ranged from great merchants to modest businessmen. Successful farmers and tradesmen were entering from below and aspired to social recognition and comfort. The middling orders were increasingly assertive and entrepreneurial in outlook. As incomes rose, they also became consumers of material possessions on a grand scale and adopters of Enlightenment values.

Lesser farmers, shopkeepers, and tradesmen remained among the “lower orders” in the company of artisans and other skilled manual laborers. These men were literate and held responsible offices, like Thomas Turner (see Biography 1.1), in the localities. Upper servants such as butlers and housekeepers were quite superior people. Like farmers and shopkeepers, they were themselves waited on by servants (Figure 1.4).

Biography 1.1



Thomas Turner

1729–93

Thomas Turner kept a modest shop in the village of East Hoathly in Sussex in the south of England. He also wrote down his thoughts and cares in a rare instance of an eighteenth-century diary kept by a modestly situated citizen. It is probable that Turner went to school. His reading – from sermons and history to classics such as Homer’s *Odyssey* and the plays of Shakespeare – suggest considerable intellectual development. In addition to running his shop Turner acted as a middleman in the sale of sheep wool. He wrote letters for the illiterate, drew up wills, and intervened on behalf of villagers with the local peer in the distribution of patronage. Regular income was provided by serving as undertaker at funerals. He was a druggist, stationer, and dispersed personal loans. He made periodic trips to London and regional towns to purchase goods and conduct financial transactions. For a time he served as the village schoolmaster, was a conscientious member of the local church vestry, and occupied offices such as churchwarden, overseer of the poor, collector of window taxes, and surveyor of the highways.

Turner’s interests and activities constitute a unique window into the lives of ordinary people in the eighteenth century. He was an assiduous churchgoer and connoisseur of preaching. He visited country houses, military fortifications, cockfights, and concerts. He loved to play **cricket** and would travel considerable distances to witness matches. “Curiosities” such as five-legged sheep and two-headed turtles delighted him. He went to the horse races, smoked tobacco, and had a distinct partiality for the bottle, often coming home drunk. He was regularly thrown off his horses. He loved to play cards, especially cribbage, and gambled.

Turner’s diary described a society participating actively in self-governing institutions that managed local affairs. The villagers celebrated military and naval victories with bonfires and services of thanksgiving. They followed the doings of the royal family and Parliament in newspapers. They lived lives largely free from overt oppression, usually in comfortable enough circumstances to avoid hunger. They delighted in small luxuries, pub crawls, gossip over garden fences, and the emotional attachments that made life both bearable and rich.¹⁰

Below this category, the servantless world began. This included footman and scullery maids, farm laborers and ditch diggers, gardeners and the mass of propertyless people who survived on wages. Regular soldiers were often seen as bad and dangerous, ranking below paupers. In Ireland and Highland Scotland peasants lived in the most harrowing and squalid conditions, largely unseen and ignored by those above them, little better than slaves.

Joseph Massie, who in the late 1750s attempted to update Gregory King's famous 1688 table of data on social categories and income in England, believed some 81 percent of all families had annual incomes of less than £50 (50 **pounds**). It has been suggested that £40 to £50 was the absolute minimum annual income required by those aspiring to respectable "middling sort" status.¹¹ The number of people who described themselves as Mr. or Mrs. increased substantially. A noted historian observes: "This debasement of gentility is one of the clearest signs of social change in the eighteenth century."¹² They aped the manners and morals of the gentry as soon as they possessed the means to do so. The aspirants sought incorporation in the class above them, not collaboration with those below them. This kept society stable and growth dynamic.

Paul Langford notes, "in a modern consumer society, things are cheap, people are expensive. In the eighteenth century, the reverse was true."¹³ The lives of the common people were rarely easy and often grim, full of hard labor with modest protection against accident, illness, old age, or bad luck (Table 1.1). However, they came to enjoy little luxuries such as tea and sugar imported from halfway around the globe. Many had some education, were alert to the world around them, and took pride in the accomplishments of their country. Unjust prices or attacks on customary rights could provoke violent protests. If they lived in or near a county town or parliamentary **borough** they followed the course of elections and went into the streets to register their discontent or approbation. It did not occur to most people that any significant change in the social structure was possible.

Table 1.1 The annual expenditure of an Oxfordshire laborer with three children near the end of the eighteenth century

Bread	13 pounds 13 shillings
Tea and sugar	2 pounds 10 shillings
Butter and lard	1 pound 10 shillings
Beer and milk	1 pound
Bacon and other meat	1 pound 10 shillings
Soap, candles, etc	15 shillings
Rent	3 pounds
Coats	2 pounds 10 shillings
Shoes and shirts	3 pounds
Other clothes	2 pounds
Total expenses	31 pounds 16 shillings

As a carter and digger he earned 8 or 9 shillings a week. His expenses thus exceeded his income by over eight pounds a year. Contributions from the parish partly made this up; but he was five pounds in debt.¹⁴

Social Mobility

No fixed barriers stood in the way of movement up or down the social scale in British society except religion and gender. Non-**Anglicans** and women were for all practical purposes excluded from holding civic office, a key means of social ascent. In Ireland harsh penal laws aimed at the destruction or at least containment of the Catholic population, although these rules were often not enforced or could be evaded. However, discrimination against the majority of the population by the Protestant elite constrained the careers of able men who otherwise would have risen in rank and wealth. In England it was largely **Dissenters** who were held back. However, as in the modern world, forces such as lack of educational opportunities, dysfunctional families, cultural prejudices, ignorance, and bad luck injured many people. Being in the right place at the right time was critical. One ducal family began its ascent when a young apprentice jumped into the Thames to save the life of his master's baby daughter. Notable instances of rags to riches stories tended to delude people then as now into believing social mobility was more real than it actually was. Downward flows, on the other hand, tend to be neglected because people who sink rarely wish to advertise their adversity. It is also worth noting that our knowledge about social mobility in comparable Continental societies is primitive.¹⁵

That said, much traffic up and down took place in British society. New blood entered even the upper reaches of the elite and many younger sons of the gentry, failed merchants, and unsuccessful artisans tumbled downwards. The dynamic quality of British politics, culture, and economic growth during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the product of social fluidity.

Lawrence Stone argued that most new families entering the upper elite came from landed backgrounds or via the traditional routes of office, law, and military service. He believed that businessmen did not buy as much land nor aspire to the trappings of gentility in the way that men from more genteel backgrounds did. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did business entrants become more "than a thin trickle."¹⁶ According to Stone, social mobility cannot be used to explain the unique experience of modern Britain. Analysis of Stone's data has demonstrated that he misinterpreted some of his own statistics. The most serious flaw, however, is that he did not include new entrants from business to the lesser gentry. For a majority of families this was the first step on the way up. Commercial wealth had been flowing into the elite since the Middle Ages. This legitimated the existing social order and kept the relationship between land and capital a close and harmonious one.¹⁷ Stanley Leighton, who descended from an ancient and broad-acred dynasty, wrote in 1901: "It may be said, without fear of contradiction, that every landed family is indebted to commerce for some of its wealth, and every family which has existed for three hundred years has some of its members enrolled on the Trade guilds of our towns."¹⁸

Some historians have argued for very rapid turnover. That underestimates, however, the continuity of landed families. In England at the very pinnacle were a core

group of 140 or so grandee dynasties largely impervious to decay and rarely added to. A tiny dense apex stood at the top, but it had fluid flanks. In Ireland many members of the Ascendancy rose rapidly in the seventeenth century, but further entry grew more difficult as the eighteenth century progressed. The landowning elite in Scotland turned over more slowly and in Wales hardly at all.

Poverty

A majority of British people in the early eighteenth century experienced poverty at some point in the lives. The country “was full of the spectacle of pain.”¹⁹ There is evidence that destitution was becoming more prevalent in towns. The slow growth in population during the first half of the century, however, meant that more resources were available to society due to improvements in industrial and agricultural production and commercial growth, so a modest rise in the standard of living for the poor was likely. However, significant regional variations existed in wages and prices. A lot depended on weather and good harvests.

The poor were believed by those above them to be idle, improvident, and undisciplined. Yet, provision was made for the elderly, infirm, and destitute. England was the only country in Europe with a system of poor relief financed from taxation, although private charity also contributed support. Perhaps a quarter of households had some relief in the course of a year. Payments were made to cover periods of ill health and provide medical treatment. It was not necessary to fall into extreme poverty before turning to the parish for assistance. Poor Law payments were relatively high compared to workers’ wages, but this situation deteriorated over time.

In parts of Wales no public system of support for the poor existed in spite of English legislation, though charity picked up most of the slack. In Scotland each parish or town had responsibility for their own poor funded by fines and collections taken at **Kirk** services, fees, and endowments but not direct taxation. The system served the poor in a reasonable way, though after mid-century **outdoor relief** was increasingly eliminated. In Ireland there was no state provision for the poor, and they often wandered the country looking for work or begged. Much was left to private charity. A visitor from Europe in 1732 was appalled by the condition of the Irish peasantry, and thought them “as great slaves to the Irish lords and gentry as the Russians are to the [nobles].”²⁰ However, this condition was not reserved just for Roman Catholics. The large majority of Protestants in Ireland were also poor.

Crime

Poverty was likely to breed crime. Illegal activity was severely punished, if the perpetrators could be caught, but no general police force existed. Rates of indictments for crimes were very low by modern standards. The disorderly were whipped or given

short jail terms. The list of capital crimes, many relating to property not personal violence, grew longer and longer as the eighteenth century progressed, but in fact many among the condemned were reprieved. Judges and juries often mitigated the severity of punishments or mercy was recommended to the king based on the character and circumstances of the prisoner.

English law also developed a wider range of options for sentencing. “Transportation” to the North American colonies (and, when that became unworkable after the War of Independence, to Australia beginning in 1787) was increasingly adopted by the government as a new alternative to hanging. The condemned were shipped off, usually for seven or 14 years. This provided underpopulated colonies with labor. The chance to start life anew actually began to erode the deterrent effect of the punishment. This may have contributed to a renewed spate of laws creating more capital crimes and to the 1752 Murder Act that allowed a condemned corpse to be hung in chains or given away for medical dissection, which frightened people and made them uneasy.

The Scots took pride in the preservation of their legal system based on Roman/Dutch ideas rather than the common law of England and Ireland, although they shared the practice of using juries. Both the Scottish and English legal systems contributed greatly to the formation of national identities. At the heart of both, social equality before the law became a revered principle that made Britain unique in eighteenth-century Europe.

Local Government

The governance of Britain largely depended on amateurs. Kirk sessions composed of elected community leaders regulated schools and morals in Scotland. The church vestries in England and Wales oversaw the poor and mundane matters such as sewers and roads. Parish offices were filled by “respectable” people like Thomas Turner: shopkeepers, farmers, and artisans. The churchwardens, elected on a regular basis, were responsible for collecting national taxes. Local taxes (called **rates**) were levied upon the better-off members of the parish, though the statutory labor to maintain roads (traditionally six days annually) fell heaviest upon the poor. Above the parish stood the county, at whose pinnacle was the lord lieutenant.²¹ He nominated justices of the peace (**JPs**) and took command in emergencies, but otherwise day-to-day management fell to the JPs. They constituted “the bench” of the quarter sessions held four times a year to deliberate about county-wide projects and serious crimes. Sheriffs supervised elections and conducted county meetings. The size of the commission of the peace (the bench) grew during this period, more than tripling in number in some counties between 1688 and 1727. Many viewed the office of JP as honorific and not participatory. The lack of active JPs led to the appointment of less prosperous men to undertake the donkey work of ordering and regulating local society. Property qualifications were set low and gradually clerics were also appointed

to help pick up the burden. Local government was idiosyncratic and paternalistic but yet remarkably flexible, democratic, and efficient. David Eastwood has shown how historians have been too ready to swallow uncritically the invective against the old system by radicals bent on its reform or overthrow.²² There was much in it that was vibrant and responsive.

After 1747 the Scottish landed elite had their legal powers curtailed. JPs and quarter sessions played a much less important role there than in the rest of Britain. The burden of local government was distributed among sheriffs, **burghs**, Kirk sessions, and the central government. The Irish aristocracy was less present in the countryside than was the case in England and Scotland and gave less leadership, although that began to change somewhat later in the eighteenth century. Authority rested on a very narrow foundation. With 75 percent of the population debarred by law from holding office, not enough qualified Protestants were available to fill all the jobs. Much of rural Ireland had no Protestants at all. The few resident property owners were obliged to carry many burdens.²³ Nor were the 12,000 or so troops stationed in the country a formidable force to rule the whole island. It is testimony to the determination of the Ascendancy to retain control of their property that the country remained largely at peace for as long as it did.

Men, Women, and Children

The nuclear family was the fundamental unit of eighteenth-century British society. Lawrence Stone argued that parents in the early modern period remained psychologically detached from their children due to high rates of infant mortality. The pain of frequent loss of babies was so great, his reasoning went, that adults had to insulate themselves from nearly continuous grieving. This situation was supposed to have changed beginning around the middle of the seventeenth century due to the rise of more companionate marriages based on free choice, warmth, and intimacy which spilled over into enhanced affection showered on children.²⁴ Recent research suggests that human emotions are too deeply imprinted in the core of our beings to be easily overridden by circumstance. Parents loved their babies even though the infants faced frighteningly high rates of death. That did not mean, of course, that children avoided harsh conditions. Among the poor they might be set to work earning their keep by age seven. Being from a family prosperous enough to afford schooling did not protect the child from savage discipline and mind-numbing recitations. The notion that children were not merely miniature adults whose moral and spiritual failing should be treated accordingly gained acceptance only late in the eighteenth century.

Evidence of the new style of companionate marriage can be found in the records of the time. For example, a 1779 letter from an Irish landowner to his heir contains admonitions about how to treat his spouse: "Endeavour to make Home agreeable to each other by making your amusements domestick. Two people who really love each

other can never be at a loss for amusement together. Time can never lye heavy if you wish to employ it to each other's satisfaction."²⁵ Stone may be right that family composition and interactions change significantly over time, but most historians are now more cautious than he was in making generalizations, especially for the lower orders about whom few records survive. Many observers believe that patriarchal and companionate marriage were not successive stages in the development of the modern family. Rather these were, as Keith Wrightson has argued, "poles of an enduring continuum in marital relations in a society which accepted both the primacy of male authority and the ideal of marriage as a practical and emotional partnership."²⁶ Co-dependency was probably the prevailing condition of most happy unions. Unfortunately, there was also much incompatibility, unhappiness, and violence. No doubt members of the upper levels of society demanded more personal privacy, cleanliness, and delicate manners as the eighteenth century wore on. Whether this was a product of greater emphasis on rational thought and behavior, the whims of fashion, or a larger body of people who could afford the luxury of elaborate sets of cutlery, lice-defying wigs, and corridors rather than enfilades of rooms in their houses remains open to debate. The rise of sensibility led to more respect for women and redefinitions of femininity and masculinity.²⁷

Another belief that prevailed among scholars for a time was that large family sizes were the norm in the days of high infant mortality. In fact the number of children was smaller than has been previously assumed. We now know that fertility was significantly limited by late marriage and sexual abstinence as well as by the large numbers of babies who died. People waited to marry until they could afford to establish their own households. Most people in the eighteenth century married for love. Even among the elite, where the transmission of property and titles made alliances of great economic and political importance, parents increasingly exercised vetoes rather than force their children to marry incompatible partners. Occasionally, the daughters of dukes would run off with men judged unsuitable by their parents and get away with it, although the rare elopements with servants or actors almost always ended in tears.

Understanding of sexual knowledge was shaky at best. Many believed it was possible for a pregnant woman to produce rabbits rather than human progeny. It was long thought that females had to enjoy sex in order to conceive. Prostitution and a homosexual sub-culture existed in London and some provincial centers, although various organizations led by puritanical "do-gooders" waged war against commercial sex and "deviancy."

Most women worked. In the country this meant both farm labor, tending family plots, spinning and weaving, as well as maintaining the household and raising the children. Later, factory work employed large numbers. For many thousands of unmarried women domestic service was their fate. Generally wages were two-thirds or less of what men earned. Women in the middling and upper orders found expanding opportunities to take the lead in the public sphere by organizing concerts and social assemblies. Educated women achieved prominence in the arts, and many aristocratic women were influential in politics. On the other hand, women were excluded

from government and judicial service, university educations, apprenticeship in most trades, and the vote.

In spite of its being a “man’s world,” women were more valued for their intelligence and abilities than is sometimes supposed. The inscription on a funerary monument for a woman from a gentry family suggests a complex picture of respect and condescension.

She was an Woman of Excellent Sense and Spiritt
 Prudent and Frugall
 As well as a true friend To the family She married into.
 And was moreover endued
 With all Those Graces and Virtues
 Which distinguish and Adorn
 The good Wife The good Mother and the good Christian²⁸

Religion

Religion remained a dominant element in the lives of British people and a central concern of politicians, scholars, and monarchs. Church buildings were the centerpieces of most villages and towns. The great landmarks of life – baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial – were conducted and recorded by its ministers. The notable celebrations of the year such as Christmas and Easter were high points in people’s lives. The universities were citadels of clerical and religious life as were the numerous cathedral hierarchies dotted around the country. Religion was a central theme in the arts, music, and literature. Western Europe was emerging only slowly from an age when thousands of people were killed for their religion. It is essential to keep in mind the centrality of spiritual beliefs and religious practice in daily life, political activities, and national identity during the eighteenth century.

Each kingdom had a state Church. The large majority of people in England, Scotland, and Wales were members of the established Protestant Church. In Ireland about one in five was. Because of England’s separation from Rome in the sixteenth century and the disruption of civil war in the seventeenth, beliefs within the “broad” Anglican (a term that only entered common usage in the nineteenth century) Church had become variegated, the “high” church remaining nearer to Catholic practice while the “low” church approached Protestantism most closely. The king appointed the bishops of the **Church of England** and the Church of Ireland. First among equals was the Archbishop of Canterbury. Bishops sat in the House of Lords in London or Dublin and so were political decision makers as well as shepherds of their flocks. Convocation, the assembly of the established Church, ceased to meet between 1717 and 1852, leaving theological decision making moribund.

In Scotland Protestantism was Calvinist, although a much smaller “Episcopal” Church also existed. Religious practice and architecture were austere. Emphasis in

services was on the sermons not ritual. An annual General Assembly determined theology and governance. The Scottish Kirk was fundamentalist, but gradually shook off its most bigoted and vengeful habits as the eighteenth century progressed. Comparative “moderates” gained control of church governance. Kirk discipline in the parishes crumbled slowly. Interference in areas not directly connected with sexual license or keeping the Sabbath progressively dwindled although clergy and elders remained influential moral arbiters in their communities. Civil law was progressively ascendant over religious regulations in parts of Britain and Ireland.

Roman Catholics were despised. They were associated both with attempts to establish despotism and the “papist” powers of the Continent, especially the evil French. Much hostile legislation was passed against them not only in Ireland but also in Britain. However, the tiny numbers of the Catholic community that had survived in the latter island gradually made prejudice towards them seem unfair, especially once the threat of a Stuart restoration passed. Pressure from the London government anxious to win loyalty or at least civil peace also ameliorated their condition in Ireland, over the objections of the Protestant minority. Nonetheless, hostility to the religion of the mass of the Irish people constantly provoked irrational fear across St. George’s Channel. The Anglican clergyman Sydney Smith noted in 1807: “The moment the very name of Ireland is mentioned, the English seem to bid adieu to common feeling, common prudence, and common sense, and to act with the barbarity of tyrants and the fatuity of idiots.”²⁹

In 1689 limited toleration was granted to Protestant Dissenters in England and Wales. These were people who objected to governance by bishops and felt that even “low” church theology was not genuinely Protestant enough. The Dutch prince who came to the throne in 1688, King William III (1650–1702), was a Calvinist and the subsequent German “**Hanoverian**” monarchs Lutherans (see Chapter 2), so the established Church had to be flexible. In England and Wales the Test and Corporation Acts (1661 and 1673) restricted civil and military office holding to communicants of the established Church. This meant that many Dissenters and all Roman Catholics were excluded from power and position in society. Some Dissenters took the Anglican communion annually (“conformed”) in order to hold municipal offices, and a few Catholic lawyers made nominal conversions in order to practice at the bar. No official accommodation was offered to Jews (readmitted to England in 1656) and Quakers. Some wealthy Jewish financiers and merchants were received at the royal court but anti-Semitism continued to exist.

Historians long thought that the Church of England slumbered through the eighteenth century. Revisionists have demonstrated that, in fact, it was alert and lively. New religious societies were founded to promote morality and missionary work. Their members threw themselves into charitable activities and the persecution of vice. Much attention was paid to upgrading the qualifications of the clergy and building more churches. Sermons poured off the presses by the hundreds of thousands to be read with earnest pleasure. Many members of the Church, even among the leadership, were undogmatic. Enlightenment ideas wore off some of the sharp edges of orthodoxy, but core beliefs remained strong.

Manners, Knowledge, and the Arts

Eighteenth-century written English was often ponderous, wordy, and convoluted. In polite society, however, methods of thought and understanding were becoming recognizably modern. Free speech grew to be an accepted right, and the thirst for knowledge and the critical spirit of its pursuit led to a rapidly expanding understanding of nature and human behavior.

Literacy had spread fairly widely in England, with nearly half of the men and a quarter of women able to read, though fewer could write. The rate was higher in Scotland and much lower in Ireland. Many towns and charitable organizations offered schooling for a wide range of students, some of it free, but only children of the middling and upper orders could afford more than a short period of education. English Dissenters and Scottish Calvinists always put a high value on schooling in order to promote religious goals. Increasingly through the century elite children (mostly boys) were sent off to boarding schools. A few institutions gained a national reputation such as Westminster, Harrow, and Eton. The curricula of these schools concentrated on the mastery of Classical languages. Schools serving the middling orders sought to offer more “practical” subjects such as mathematics, geography, and science.

Higher education was largely the preserve of the well-to-do, especially those preparing for the professions. In the past, English and Welsh landed gentlemen had “finished” their studies with time spent at one of the law schools (inns of court) in London, which was a good preparation for their role as magistrates. During the eighteenth century they tended to go to a university. England had only two such institutions, Oxford and Cambridge, although these were federal organizations with many constituent colleges. Young magnates were likely to take a “grand tour,” a lengthy stay abroad seeing the world. Scottish universities, where teachers relied on fees paid by students rather than endowment income for their salaries, were livelier and more seriously academic.

Boys in Scotland with modest economic resources were far more likely to gain access to a university education than anywhere else in Britain thanks to low fees and scholarships. There were no confessional tests for admission, which meant Englishmen and Dissenters from Northern Ireland frequently attended. Edinburgh became a key center in Europe for the study of medicine, drawing students even from North America. At the summit of the Irish educational system stood Trinity College in Dublin, a bastion of Ascendancy pride and bulwark of Anglican doctrine.

Literary life in eighteenth-century Britain was turbulent, fecund, and brilliant, matching the dynamism of the urban culture developing in towns and cities around the country. Reviews, magazines, and pamphlets were produced in increasingly large numbers. London newspapers were widely disseminated around the country, and local ones arose in the provinces. The press was largely unbounded by censorship unless the editors slipped into blasphemy. Governments repeatedly tried to restrict

circulation by imposing taxes that raised the purchase price, but copies were always available in public places such as coffee-houses, taverns, and inns, and the papers were read aloud so that even the illiterate could follow events.

Literary publications found a wide audience as more and more prosperous families enjoyed the funds and leisure for recreational reading. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* of 1719 was arguably the first English novel. He also produced works on economics, history, and travel. Satire reached a high point in the early eighteenth century with Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1719–28) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Romances and adventure stories became popular. The romantic novel was first mastered by Samuel Richardson in *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747). Feelings and emotions were unbuttoned. The famous critic Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709–84) noted: "Why, Sir, if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much fretted that you'd hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment."³⁰ A glittering train of novelists followed, ranging from Henry Fielding (1707–54) to Jane Austen (1775–1817). The Scottish Enlightenment and the work of many great masters of new methods of analysis, such as Edward Gibbon's (1737–94) historical treatises, added luster to British literature. Shakespeare was revived and raised into place as a great national icon. Theater life was vibrant in London. Italian opera, combining music and drama, became popular.

The arts embraced the values of neoclassicism: balance, order, restraint, and complex simplicity. In architecture the work of the Scottish Adam family contributed magnificent public buildings and country houses. The rural "seats" of magnates were rebuilt, embellished, and surrounded by enlarged parks. Palaces such as Stowe, Blenheim, and Wentworth Woodhouse were comparable in grandeur and size to medieval cathedrals. The austere magnificence of the **earl** of Leicester's Holkham Hall required 2.7 million bricks and more than 30 years to build (Figure 1.5).

Culture became more rational and organized. For example, Dr. Johnson's dictionary of the English language was completed in 1755 and the British Museum opened in 1759. The Royal Academy, sponsored by George III in 1768, gave shelter and order to the world of painters and sculptors. William Hogarth (1697–1764) was the great artist of the first half of the century, and Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92) reigned supreme in the second half. The master of music was the German immigrant Georg Friedrich Handel (1685–1759). His oratorio, *Messiah*, is one of the masterpieces of the eighteenth century and was immediately recognized as such. He was much patronized by the royal family. His coronation anthem "Zadock the Priest," which raises the hair on the back of one's neck, has been played at every coronation since George II's in 1727.³¹

The propertied classes suffered fewer and fewer moral and cultural restraints on enjoying themselves. Fashion ruled; prostitution and gambling flourished. In London great pleasure gardens at Vauxhall and Ranelagh emerged and prospered in the 1740s and 1750s. Assemblies for socializing and dancing were more personal and private and could be managed by local groups. They arose all over the country and new rooms were built to accommodate them. In some places both tradesmen and gentry intermixed.



Figure 1.5 Holkham Hall, Norfolk, built 1734–60

Gin for the lower orders and wine and brandy for the rich flowed copiously. Accounts of heroic drinking bouts flavor contemporary diaries, although bottles were smaller in size than now. One elderly country gentleman advised another who was ailing: “It is not fit for you and me at our Time of Life to drink Water. ... I beseech you not to drink less than a Bottle of good Claret [red wine] in condition after your Dinner and a Pint of old Port [fortified wine] after your Supper.”³²

Time for leisure was generally sparse among the lower orders, although the rhythm of the agricultural year produced periods of comparative ease. Religious traditions and celebrations of national events such as the birth of a prince or great naval victory provided even the poor with occasions to enjoy themselves. Local traditions, often involving unique rituals or games, some of which survive down to the present day, added spice to rural life. Horse racing attracted the elite, but ordinary people also liked a day out at the racetrack. Some of the most famous stakes races were established in the later eighteenth century, including the Derby in 1780.

Among the elite organized fox **hunting** was of growing significance, indeed on its way to becoming the quintessential activity enjoyed by English and Irish (but not Scottish) landed society. Fox hunting is exhilarating and dangerous, “the image of war without its guilt and only five and twenty per cent of the danger.”³³ It served well as training for soldiers. Young members of the elite were brought up to take

risks, endure pain, and compete. Another preoccupation of landed society was shooting, a sport that became more enjoyable as technology improved. In 1671 a Game Act limited the shooting or capture of wild game to gentlemen with substantial property. These rules remained in place until the nineteenth century. However, much poaching went on. The poor resented the Game Laws, and they became a serious source of social tension in the countryside.

Travel was easier to undertake as roads improved. Spas, seaside resorts, and watering places thrived. Though fashion and wealth contributed to this trend, it was the need to escape clogged and smoke-filled London and the inability of eighteenth-century medicine to cure most ailments that stimulated the growth of Bath and its many lesser satellites. Later, the fashionable Gothic revival that harkened back to more romantic and effusive ideas and feelings promoted journeys to remote and previously unvisited areas. Tourists sought scenes that were totally different from ordinary life – wild and simple.

Science

Britain had produced outstanding scientists in the seventeenth century such as Francis Bacon, Robert Boyle, and Robert Hooke. Two English geniuses bestrode the world of Western thought. The philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) put emphasis on the importance of acquired knowledge rather than innate ideas and applied this concept to all aspects of life and government. The physicist and mathematician Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) was among the first uncommon commoners to be buried with special ceremony in Westminster Abbey, the coronation church. In the early eighteenth century the astronomer Edmond Halley (1656–1742) made a series of remarkable predictions concerning heavenly events, most famously about the return of the comet that now bears his name.

These men were working out the achievements of the previous century or often were cataloguers and describers of stars or plants. The age was more curious about the mechanisms of the natural world than previous times. More and more people could appreciate the achievements of science and technology and the usefulness of empirical research. Many of the achievements of the eighteenth century were practical and commercial, from charting oceans to making steam engines. The importance of seagoing trade was emphasized by the passage by Parliament in 1714 of an Act establishing a prize of £20,000 for discovering a reliable means of measuring longitude. The adoption of the **Gregorian calendar** was enacted in 1752. Gradually science moved away from mathematics, physics, and astronomy in the direction of the study of the organic world.

Superstition was increasingly condemned. Laws against witchcraft were repealed. The last conviction took place in 1712, though old-fashioned beliefs lingered among the lower orders later than this. Even educated people did not always find it easy to draw a clear line between the rational and irrational. Newton took alchemy seriously.

When the parson James Woodforde (1740–1803), who had been educated at Oxford, suffered from a swelled and inflamed eyelid, he recorded in his diary the following nostrum. “As it is commonly said that the Eye-lid being rubbed by the tail of a black Cat would do it much good if not entirely cure it, and having a black Cat, a little before dinner I made a trial of it, and very soon after dinner I found my Eye-lid much abated of the swelling and almost free from Pain ... Any other Cats Tail may have the above effect in all probability – but I did my Eye-lid with my own black Tom Cat’s Tail.”³⁴

Medical care was administered, mostly to those who could afford the fees, by a phalanx of apothecaries, barber-surgeons, midwives, and university-trained physicians, none of whom knew much about how to assist patients other than through what they learned by experience. Much was known about anatomy but nothing about microbes and viruses. The great breakthrough of the eighteenth century was inoculation for smallpox. In 1717 **Lady** Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), wife of the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, brought the knowledge of Turkish practice in combating the disease back to England. In 1721 some criminals condemned to death were used as guinea pigs for the new treatment, and the **Princess of Wales** lent her support. The father of King George III was among the first to be inoculated, but it was not until the 1760s that the practice became widespread.

Otherwise diagnoses were based on a false science of “humors” that involved “bleeding,” “cupping,” and other gruesome treatments. Surgery was performed, and people survived amputations, removal of gallstones, and even the removal of cataracts, but because sterilization of instruments was not practiced patients often perished due to infection. Many also died of shock caused by pain that could only be partially relieved by copious imbibing of brandy or gin before the cutting began. Hospitals existed, but were dangerous places to stay. If you did not die of your original complaint, there was a good chance you would catch something else that was fatal. Mental illness was not understood. “Bedlam” (officially the “Bethlehem”) hospital in London was really a prison where the public could come and gaze openly at the demented in their chains.

An English Empire?

On the Continent conglomerates of nations held together by dynastic bonds have been called by historians “composite states.” The British archipelago and its dependencies in 1714 were at best an unequal partnership. The English watched their neighbors and colonies with a distrustful eye, anxious about internal and external security. Enemies abroad sought to exploit rebellion and the Scots and Irish were only too happy to oblige. Highlanders still looked to their clan chiefs for leadership, not the alien German king. The colonies were seen as valuable but vulnerable.

The English regarded the Welsh as generally cooperative. Concern about the Scots and Irish was more serious. From time to time virulent anti-Scottish feeling erupted.

Hostility towards the Irish was more akin to racism. Unreasoning hatred of Roman Catholicism contributed greatly to this, as did Irish nationalists looking to France and Spain for succor. The Irish were seen as superstitious, untrustworthy, lazy, and liable to breed like rabbits. Yet, talented Scots and non-Catholic Irishmen who moved to London could rise high in English society.

Many people in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales did not speak English. Ireland retained a separate Parliament and Scotland an independent Kirk and legal system. Both Dublin and Edinburgh, capital cities that were genuinely independent cultural, social, and political centers, had begun to undergo extraordinary transformations in design. The New Town in Edinburgh, as a single ensemble of buildings, has few equals in grandeur anywhere in Europe, while the new squares, rows of houses, and public buildings in Dublin asserted a strong sense of separate identity.

The aristocracies were superficially becoming more alike, but this was patina and not at the native cores. Most historians too readily assume the idea of a merger of elites at the top of society.³⁵ Homogenization did not take place quickly. Diverse interests remained a powerful prophylactic to inclusion. Alternating belief in their “British” identity and fear of betrayal left the Irish Ascendancy in a kind of love–hate relationship with their English counterparts. The great Scottish magnate, the third duke of Argyll (1682–1761), was a strong supporter of the Hanoverian dynasty and delivered Scots MPs as **lobby**-fodder to the London government, but he demanded in exchange that Scottish interests be looked after and promoted. Highland chiefs were still going to the Tower of London to be beheaded for treason as late as 1747. Eighteenth-century Scottish MPs saw themselves more as a representatives of their families than of their constituencies.³⁶

Wales continued with its own language and culture even though it was closely connected with England and possessed no separate capital city, parliament, or laws. The Welsh elite had strengthened their position by leading their country into the world of English speech and accepting the Reformation, but this advantage began to dissipate as they detached themselves from the values and language of the national culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some continued to speak Welsh but education and marriage became increasingly an English experience for the aristocracy and gentry. The growing strengths of **Nonconformist** religion created a wide gulf of misconception and ultimately made communication between the elite and the people difficult.

In the seventeenth century Scotland had already been limited in its independence. Foreign policy had been directed from London since 1603, often pursued exclusively in England’s interest. The nation was virtually bankrupted by a hare-brained scheme of colonial development in Panama. After the Union of 1707 all existing Scots laws remained in force. The legal system and Kirk were held sacred. The country retained its own banking system. The common Scots dialect was gradually converging with English, though pronunciation to this day remains distinctive. Gaelic survived in the north and west while poets of the south such as the great Robert Burns (1759–96) still wrote in the Scots vernacular. The division and mistrust between Highland and Lowland Scots remained significant throughout the eighteenth century. Unlike in

Ireland all of the chief posts in the Kirk and state remained in the hands of natives. On the other hand, Scotland was allocated fewer seats in the Westminster Parliament than their proportion of the British population justified. In addition, from 1711 until 1782 the House of Lords excluded Scottish peers who also held English or British titles from taking their seats. This act of discrimination was deeply resented.

Ireland was even more distinct an entity than Scotland. The majority of its population remained Catholic and many were Gaelic speakers. The kingdom was connected to England by the rule of a lord lieutenant who became known as the “**viceroy**” (almost always an English grandee) and the appointment of Englishmen to high positions in the established Church and civil administration. The Ascendancy elite still gathered each year for the meeting of Parliament in Dublin and owned large urban residences there. Even after the Union in 1801 the viceroy’s court held balls and functions attended by many aristocrats, who formed a separate social circle from the London elite.

The Protestant Ascendancy was an odd mixture of cruelty, venality, prejudice, courage, and culture. They built some of the most lovely buildings of the eighteenth century and seemed to have an instinctive taste for the chastely beautiful. The Irish playwright J. M. Synge called them a “high-spirited and highly-cultivated aristocracy.”³⁷ Others, less friendly, saw them as oppressors. The alien elite monopolized law, politics, and society. Like slave owners in the American South, even decent people were so deeply immersed in evil that many could not see it. They were, however, conscious of living on top of an active volcano. The harsh penal laws against the Catholic majority were deeply resented by the victims. Reliance on force to protect their property made the elite more militaristic, more rigid, and less confident than the Scots and English landowners. They were also conscious that their Parliament wore an English collar and leash. Edith Johnston-Liik observes: “The confident British MPs looked pragmatically to the future, while their Irish counterparts remained shackled by the past.”³⁸

The Irish elite had a tendency to “go native,” at least to the extent of adopting a distinct Irish identity along with their British one. They increasingly thought of themselves as “Irish patriots.” The earls of Kildare, who headed the premier aristocratic family in Ireland, “encouraged recollection of the past when they had ruled the kingdom and resisted meddling English politicians.”³⁹

Shared imperial interests did not produce identical aristocracies. Nor did the colonies in North America grow closer to the motherland as the century progressed. Part of the problem was that they were filling with African slaves, Huguenot refugees, Dutchmen, Swedes, and Germans. The British and Irish inhabitants had often fled the archipelago for reasons that did not endear it to them such as religious persecution and economic deprivation. Convicts “transported” there may have held no fond memories. The colonists were left much to their own devices. The isometric threat of the French to the north in Canada helped keep them securely under England’s wing. These peoples did not develop a sense of Britishness of the kind that emerged in the archipelago.

The ramshackle arrangements that held together the distant empire and the near abroad of Ireland and Scotland suggest serious and fundamental weaknesses. Britain

was a disunited kingdom with dangling dependencies and a ruling elite opposed to strong standing armies. Opportunities abounded for invasion forces to land on remote shores. The exiled royal Stuart family, with considerable claims to legitimacy and foreign support, was bent on overthrowing the “usurper” Hanoverians (see Chapter 2) and placing themselves back on the throne.

Integration and Stability

In 1714 the three kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland and the principality of Wales were by no means welded together as a single unit. They preserved separate cultures and identities. The colonial populations overseas began to mature into unique societies with interests distinct from the mother country. Britain was like the “Tin Man” in the *Wizard of Oz*, with a new Hanoverian head bolted onto a clanking and squeaking English-Irish-Scottish body. What forces drew these disparate entities together? The requirements of the great century-long struggle with France for global mastery required Britain to maximize unity to achieve victory. Political and military integration was essential. The shared prejudice against, and later fear of, France among large segments of the population helped keep the Hanoverian head in place.

After the abolition of the Council of Wales in 1689 institutional harmony between England and the principality was achieved, and the end of the Edinburgh Parliament obliged the Scots to focus their political life at Westminster, tied by language, the Protestant religion, and a common commercial structure after 1707. Economic integration helped. The removal of all barriers to trade with England and the colonies was an enormous boon, as was the opportunity to link directly with the agricultural and industrial revolutions and be part of the empire with opportunities in military and commercial service.

The state was active in promoting the Irish economy, setting up the Linen Board in 1711, backing canal ventures and colliery schemes, and founding the Bank of Ireland in 1783. Immigration of Scots and Irish looking for opportunities began to lead to a sloshing around of populations in the isles, although relatively few English people moved to the other kingdoms. The Irish constituted the largest group of foreigners in England and Scotland. Many originally arrived as seasonal harvest workers. Their Catholic religion combined with a willingness to undercut prevailing wage rates, however, made them unpopular with English laborers.

Judged by the moral standards of the time, Britain was humane and just, and Ireland not worse off than many other eighteenth-century societies where alien elites lorded it over subject peoples. The ties holding British society together were strong. That strength ensured that the bubbling pot of innovation and change did not boil over. The social and economic systems were flexible but rested on a foundation of exceptional stability. This pattern of core continuity combined with dynamic change became the hallmark of modern British society.

Signs of a “British” identity or at least a sense that everyone was in the same boat together emerged, although this could be weak or even non-existent in remoter areas. Historical anniversaries and royal birthdays were celebrated widely. Efforts to create a patriotic spirit can be seen in the figure of John Bull (the equivalent of Uncle Sam), first drawn to represent a “British” persona in 1712. The Scot James Thomson’s poem “Rule Britannia” was put to music around 1740.

When Britain first at Heav’n’s command
 Arose from out the azure main*;
 This was the charter of the land.
 And guardian angels sung this strain;

Rule Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves:
 Britons never will be slaves. (Chorus)

The nations not so blest as thee,
 Shall in their turns to tyrants fall;
 While thou shalt flourish great and free,
 The dread and envy of them all.

To thee belongs the rural reign;
 Thy cities shall with commerce shine;
 All thine shall be the subject main*,
 And every shore in circles thine.

(*ocean)

Despite corruption and elite control Parliament was willing to distribute the tax burden more rationally than any other country in Europe, and with its rollicking, public, and competitive electoral system achieved consensus on the big issues of war and peace, religion, and kingship. The royal house produced three reasonable kings who ruled in succession for over a century. They were not brilliant or flashy, they were sometimes stubborn and crazy, but British monarchs worked to achieve good government at low cost.