CHAPTER ONE

The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-century England

There was a consumer boom in England in the eighteenth century. In the third quarter of the century that boom reached revolutionary proportions. Men, and in particular women, bought as never before. Even their children enjoyed access to a greater number of goods than ever before. In fact, the later eighteenth century saw such a convulsion of getting and spending, such an eruption of new prosperity, and such an explosion of new production and marketing techniques, that a greater proportion of the population than in any previous society in human history was able to enjoy the pleasures of buying consumer goods. They bought not only necessities, but decencies, and even luxuries. The roots of such a development reach back, of course, into previous centuries but the eighteenth century marked a major watershed. Whatever popular metaphor is preferred—whether revolution or take-off or lift-off or the achievement of critical mass—the same unmistakable breakthrough occurred in consumption as occurred in production. Just as the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century marks one of the great discontinuities in history, one of the great turning points in the history of human experience, so, in my view, does the matching revolution in consumption. For the consumer revolution was the necessary analogue to the industrial revolution, the necessary convulsion on the demand side of the equation to match the convulsion on the supply side.

We are only just beginning to realize how pervasive were the social and economic effects of that change, and how considerable were the pressures needed to bring it about. For the results were such as to bring about as great a change in the lifestyle of the population as was brought about by the neolithic revolution in agriculture which began some eight thousand years before the birth of Christ.

Changes of that order do not occur without comment, and contemporaries were eloquent in their descriptions and explanations of what Arthur Young in 1771 called this 'UNIVERSAL' luxury, and what Dibden in 1801 described as the prevailing 'opulence' of all classes.¹ Foreign commentators were astounded by what one called 'the inveterate national habit of luxury

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of the English", and almost invariably recorded their amazed reactions to it. The Göttengen professor Lichtenberg said of England in the 1770s that the luxury and extravagance of the lower and middling classes had 'risen to such a pitch as never before seen in the world'; the Russian writer Karamzin said of England in the 1780s 'Everything presented an aspect of... plenty. Not one object from Dover to London reminded me of poverty'; the historian von Archenholz said of the 1790s 'England surpasses all the other nations of Europe in... luxury... and the luxury is increasing daily'. 'All classes', he concluded, 'enjoy the accumulation of riches, luxury and pleasure.' One does not have to take all such hyperbole literally to realize that something momentous was thought to be happening. By the end of the eighteenth century there was a despairing chorus of comment—full of wonder or, more often, complaint at the manifold signs of this great change in consumer behaviour.

The rich, of course, led the way. They indulged in an orgy of spending. Magnificent houses were built reaching a crescendo of building in the 1760s and 1770s when the brothers Adam designed so many memorable Georgian houses to replace Elizabethan and Jacobean mansions ruthlessly demolished to make space for them. Superlative furniture was commissioned from the published directories of Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton. Porcelain and pottery of a quality unparalleled in English history appeared, including Chelsea, Bow, Worcester and Derby for the few, and Wedgwood for the many. Silver ranged from the sturdiness of the early Huguenot silversmiths to the characteristic elegance of a Schofield candlestick to the feminine delicacy of Hester Bateman. Mirrors came from the great master Linnell; cutlery from the master smiths of Sheffield; 'toys' in protein variety, from the costly 'exquisites' of Matthew Boulton to the cheap buttons for the mass market. Wonderful new gardens were created with orangeries bursting with the latest 'exquisites' like pineapples and camellias. Whole estates were replanted for posterity with trees chosen from nurseries offering an unprecedented number and variety of species. Collections of aristocratic pets resembled menageries or private zoos. In all these areas there flourished the unmistakable signs of conspicuous consumption. In all a desire for novelty—so all-consuming that Dr. Johnson complained that men were even 'to be hanged in a new way'. In fashion novelty became an irrepressible disease. In possessions for the home, new fashions were insisted on—in pottery, furniture, fabrics, cutlery, even wallpaper. Even their animals must be new, and improved breeds of horses, cattle and sheep, dogs, fishes, birds and plants, were all deliberately pursued with a new intensity and a matching success.

It is alarming to think of how many trees, flowers and animals which we take for granted they bred or imported for the first time.

In imitation of the rich the middle ranks spent more frenziedly than ever before, and in imitation of them the rest of society joined in as best they might—and that best was unprecedented in the importance of its impact on aggregate demand. Spurred on by social emulation and class competition, men and women surrendered eagerly to the pursuit of novelty, the hypnotic effects of fashion, and the enticements of persuasive commercial propaganda. As a result many objects, once the prized possessions of the rich, reached further than ever before down the social scale.

Forster in 1767 neatly encapsulated all the features of the new demand stressed by modern historians when he wrote:

In England the several ranks of men slide into each other almost imperceptibly, and a spirit of equality runs through every part of their constitution. Hence arises a strong emulation in all the several stations and conditions to vie with each other; and the perpetual restless ambition in each of the inferior ranks to raise themselves to the level of those immediately above them. In such a state as this fashion must have uncontrolled sway. And a fashionable luxury must spread through it like a contagion.

These characteristics—the closely stratified nature of English society, the striving for vertical social mobility, the emulative spending bred by social emulation, the compulsive power of fashion begotten by social competition—combined with the widespread ability to spend (offered by novel levels of prosperity) to produce an unprecedented propensity to consume unprecedentedly in the depth to which it penetrated the lower reaches of society and unprecedentedly in its impact on the economy.

Both commercial activity and the consumer response to it were feverish. Uncontrolled by any sense of commercial decorum men advertised in unprecedented numbers—whole newspapers were taken over by advertisements, and a very large proportion of all newspapers was filled with advertising. And the customer had plenty to choose from. For, spurred on by rampant demand, designers produced both fashions of outrageous absurdity and styles of lasting elegance. Fashion in hats and hairstyles, dresses and shoes and wigs and such like, arguably reached even greater extremes than ever before, and certainly changed more rapidly and influenced a greater proportion of society.

As early as 1711 we find Addison writing ironically of 'the ladies' that 'the whole sex is now dwarfed and shrunk into a race of beauties that seems almost another species. I remember several ladies who were once near seven foot high that at present want some inches of five.' He comforts himself that most are of the opinion that they are at present like trees lopped and pruned that will certainly sprout up and flourish with greater heads than before.

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11 J. H. Plumb below, pp. 316-34.
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They did. Men and women's wigs were caricatured as needing special openings in the roofs of their carriages in the 1770s. Women with enormous swollen hoops found it difficult to negotiate narrow doorways, and announced their presence through wide ones with several feet of swollen skirt before they arrived themselves. Hats spouted upwards and sideways, and such was the rage to follow fashion that even labourers in the fields were recorded by Stubbs and Blake in graceful wide-brimmed picture hats. Styles in furniture, silver and pottery and the like were (by the nature of their market and the nature of its demand structure) less susceptible to annual or even monthly change in taste, and they achieved an enviable serenity which we still cherish two centuries later. Despite the conflicting claims of Gothic, Chinoiserie and Neo-Classical, some designers managed to impose a remarkable uniformity of style on all classes in the last decade of the century—the rich had Adam and the rest had Adamesque. Even Gothic and Chinoiserie were adapted to classical proportions (apart from occasional extravaganzas like Beckford's Fonthill or the Pagoda at Kew). But within those limits objects of the most marvellous quality and variety were produced for the higher ranks of society. Unworrying by any sense of the impropriety of ample profits, manufacturers were able to exploit what they called this 'epidemical madness' to consume, this sickness to buy even at inflated prices, this 'universal' contagion to spend. They felt such 'infections should be cherished'. They felt that the compulsive power of fashion should be pandered to. They made sure that this obsessive need to consume was constantly titillated and encouraged.

So although the dominant style was neo-classical, the designers produced endless fashionable variations on the prevailing theme. Prolific inventiveness found an encouraging market response. So long as the inventor could make his new product fashionable, make it accessible, and could disperse it through a wide enough 'secret army' of commercial agents, it would sell. Given these helpful 'introductions' and 'distributions', unprecedentedly large sales to an unprecedentedly large market were both possible and achieved. Temporary infidelities to the prevailing 'Greek' style allowed the market to be refreshed with such novelties as the sphinxes and crocodiles of the Egyptian style, as well as the variations on the Chinese and the Gothic; but in the main the neo-classic would suffice for the English market. In clothes the kaleidoscope of fashion almost obliterates any prevailing style in a confetti-coloured snowstorm of rapidly changing costume. But the neo-classical dominated pottery, brass, silver, furniture, cutlery, glass and so much more which made up the incidentals of Georgian consumption—clocks and door furniture, window frames and fanlights, cameos and cuff buttons, wallpaper and ink wells, and all those myriad other productions whose style still proclaims their late Georgian origins.

Many needed 'a proper and noble introduction'. Many were made fashionable through judiciously placed presents. Many others were announced to the public through exhibitions, auctions and special sales, directed initially at the 'taste makers who led the fashion'. Even more were heavily advertised in the press, and heavily 'sold' by shopkeepers, pedlars, hawkers, scout drapers and the like. Traditional outlets were multiplied in number, new sales techniques developed to reinforce the old, and amongst the leading elite a remarkable battery of commercial skills was deployed to capture and expand the market for consumer goods.

It is with the methods being used, and the attitudes being inculcated and exploited, that much of the following chapters will be concerned. But before one explains the growth of consumer behaviour and describes the many influences which brought it to such a pitch of excitement, one should perhaps, justify one's initial claims of the importance of the phenomenon being explained, and explain some of the barriers which have stood in the way of that importance being fully recognized.

It will be one of the major burdens of this book to show that consumer behaviour was so rampant and the acceptance of commercial attitudes so pervasive that no one in the future should doubt that the first of the world's consumer societies had unmistakably emerged by 1800. But to claim that the eighteenth century saw the birth of a consumer society or that many aspects of that society were imbued with a new commercial attitude should not be misinterpreted as a belief that by 1800 England had achieved all the features of modern consumer society. Nor should it be assumed that the birth occurred without a long period of gestation.

Events of this kind of magnitude do not happen without long periods of preparation, development and growth. The consumer revolution, like most revolutions had its roots deep in the past. It occurred in eighteenth-century England because of a happy combination of many circumstances. Like the industrial revolution, it was a multi-causal phenomenon, and many of the causes were shared by the twin industrial and commercial developments. But it could not have occurred without the pre-existence of many preparatory conditions dating back to the seventeenth century, and some even deeper into the past.

Intellectually, for instance, the eighteenth century was well prepared for a consumer boom, but once again the foundations for that advance were laid during the seventeenth century. If we seek the intellectual origins of the revolution in consumption we will find them in the 1690s. If we seek the widespread acceptance and application of these ideas we have to move into the second half of the eighteenth century.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century prevailing economic idioms were trapped in the mercantilist balance-of-payments explanation of how a
nation's wealth grew. Writers like Mun, Malynes, Mistelden and Vaughan remained largely blind to the benefits of increased spending. Luxuries were equated with foreign 'exotics' and were therefore a danger to the balance of trade. Domestic consumption, or home demand, was at best a necessary evil, which grew, if at all, in response to population growth. To them 'total demand appeared inelastic. The rich were expected to buy their luxuries, the poor to have enough to subsist. The possibility that at all levels of society consumers might acquire new wants and find new means to enhance their purchasing power which would generate new spending and produce habits capable of destroying all traditional limits to the wealth of nations was unthought of, if not unthinkable. It was not until the 1690s that what had been for so much of the century 'mere consumption' lost its pejorative meaning.

But as the range and variety and amount of English manufacturing developed, as the evidence for increased domestic consumption of the products of these manufacturers grew, so some writers 'responding to the obvious, if uneven economic growth, began to speculate upon the dynamic effects of increased demand. The word "markets" in their pamphlets subtly changed from a reference to the point of sales to the more elusive concept of expandable spending.'

It was, in fact, one of the first examples of the unleashing of latent home demand (in the face of suddenly prolific cheap calico and muslins from India) which stimulated the new recognition of both the elastic nature of domestic consumption and its benefits. As a result many of the underlying causes of the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century were explicitly recognized for the first time. For in the 1690s the taste for the cheap, colourful fabrics imported by the East India Company reached 'epidemic proportions'. It was then 'when the maverick spirit of fashion revealed itself in the craze over printed calicoes [that] the potential market power of previously unfelt wants came clearly into view. Here was a revolutionary force. Under the sway of new consuming tastes, people had spent more, and in spending more the elasticity of demand had become apparent. In this elasticity, the defenders of domestic spending discovered the propulsive power (and the economic advantages to the nation) of envy, emulation, love of luxury, vanity and vaulting ambition.'

By the turn of the century it is possible to marshal an impressive array of contemporary writers who now saw the constructive and beneficial aspects of progressive levels of spending. The increased propensity to consume, what modern economists call 'the Veblen effect' of imitative spending, the indulgence in fashionable consumption, all found their theoretical justification.

Dudley North wrote in 1691 that 'the main spur to Trade, or rather to Industry and Ingenuity, is the exorbitant Appetites of Men, which they will take pains to gratify, and so be disposed to work, when nothing else will incline them to it; for did Men content themselves with bare Necessaries, we should have a poor World.' Even earlier John Houghton wrote that 'our High-Living so far from Prejudicing the Nation, it enriches it', and anticipated Manville in finding economic virtues in the sins of the moralists.

For in his view pride, finery, vanity, and luxury, caused 'more Wealth to the Kingdom than loss to private estates.' Nicholas Barbon was even more explicit, writing that it 'is not Necessity that causeth the Consumption. Nature may be Satisfied with little; but it is the wants of the Mind, Fashion and the desire of Novelties and Things Scarce that causeth Trade.' These preachers in praise of prodigality were not of course universal. The standard disapproval of self indulgence was still the prevailing orthodoxy, but it was being vigorously challenged for the first time.

The economic advantages of competition, envy, emulation, vanity and fashion were more and more explicitly stated: fashion, said Barbon, 'occasions the Expence of Cloaths before the Old ones are worn out'; envy, said North, is a good to industry and ingenuity even among the meaner sort who 'are spurred up to imitate this Industry' by the example of the rich; the man who ruined himself, even to the point of bankruptcy in pursuit of social emulation added to the national good by 'the extraordinary Application he made, to support his Vanity.' As Professor Appleby has demonstrated 'The idea of man as a consuming animal with boundless appetites, capable of driving the economy to new levels of prosperity, arrived with the economic literature of the 1690s, but the idea presented too many political as well as moral threats to gain immediate widespread acceptance. Not until the 1770s did the idea of the increased propensity to consume assume its rightful place in models of economic growth which recognized the vital contribution of the elasticity of demand. In 1776 Adam Smith could state 'Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is... perfectly self-evident.'

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9 The pejorative vein can be found in the writings of Culpeper, Petty and Cary.
10 Appleby, op. cit., p. 532.
12 Appleby, op. cit., p. 505.
13 Appleby, op. cit., p. 506.
14 Appleby, op. cit., p. 509.
Such views were not acceptable at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The unleashing of the acquisitive instincts of all classes still posed too great a threat: 'the idea of self-improvement through spending implied genuine social mobility. The assertion that “the meaner sort” could and should emulate their betters suggested that class distinctions were based on little more than purchasing power. The moral implications of growth through popular spending were even more suspect. Unlike the work ethic which called upon powerful longings for self-discipline and purposive activity, the ethic of consumption... offered nothing more than a calculating hedonism'.

What Professor Appleby calls ‘the democratization of consumption’ threatened to undermine a class discipline and a system of social control previously bolstered up by the patriotic and ascetic elements in orthodox mercantilist theory.

The remarkably hostile reception of the economic rationalism and moral cynicism of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* gives some indication of how great the threat was held to be.

Few read Mandeville now. But in the early eighteenth century the effects of his famous insect allegory of English society could hardly have been greater if he had tipped his ‘grumbling hive’ straight into the pulpits and libraries of educated England. The sting in his subtitle—*Private Vices, Publick Benefits*—was alone sufficient to provoke moral outrage. For it presented in epigrammatic form his argument stressing the national, social and economic benefits that could, and in his view did, spring from luxury, avarice, prodigality, pride, envy and vanity. And for saying this he was held to rival Machiavelli and Hobbes as the Father of Lies. To John Brown, Hobbes and Mandeville were ‘Detested Names! yet sentenced ne’er to die, Snatched from Oblivion’s Grave by Infamy.’

Until John Wesley read *The Fable of the Bees* he had ‘imagined there had never appeared in the world such a book as the works of Machiavel. But de Mandeville goes far beyond them in wickedness’. To an anonymous contemporary poet Mandeville was Anti-Christ himself:

And, if GOD-MAN Vice to abolish came,  
Who Vice commends, MAN-DEVIL be his Name

He was the target of a furious onslaught in the press, the pulpit and the courts, as incensed moralists competed to denounce him. In the five years after the appearance in 1724 of his final version of *The Fable*, which included ‘A Vindication of the Book’, no less than ten books attacking it were published.

In France the book was ordered to be hanged by the common hangman, and Mandeville was burned in effigy.

What gave most immediate offence was the apparent championship of luxury, the cynical justification of the benefits which accrued from vice. In *Vice and Luxury, Publick Mischiefs*, John Dennis wrote in outrage in 1724 that ‘a Champion for Vice and Luxury, a serious, a cool, a deliberate Champion, that is a Creature entirely new, and has never been heard of before in any Nation, or any Age of the World’. Such hyperbole was typical of Dennis, but it was common to many others who read with fury Mandeville’s description of the luxurious hive in which

These Insects lived like Men, and all  
Our Actions they perform’d in small.

For in Mandeville’s metaphor for society, the entire population is addicted to luxury, and its prosperity stemmed directly from its self-indulgence—

‘... every Part was full of Vice,  
Yet the whole Mass a Paradise.’

The whole hive was

Slave to Prodigality,  
(K.) That Noble Sin, (L.) whilst Luxury  
Employ’d a Million of the Poor,  
(M.) And odious Pride a Million More.

Envie it self, and Vanity  
(N.) Were Ministers of Industry;  
Their darling Folly, Fickleness  
In Diet, Furniture and Dress,

That strange ridiculous Vice, was made  
The very Wheel, that turn’d the Trade.  
Their Laws and Cloaths were equally  
Objects of Mutability;

For what was well done for a Time,  
In half a Year became a Crime;

Thus Vice nursed Ingenuity,  
(O.) Which join’d with Time, and Industry  
Had carry’d Life’s Conveniences,

It’s real Pleasures, Comforts, Ease,  
To such a Height, the very Poor  
Lived better than the Rich before;’

The alphabetic accompaniment to Mandeville’s barbed doggerel referred in his Prose remarks in *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue* which

William Law, John Dennis, Frances Hutchinson, Archibald Campbell and Isaac Watts all wrote books in criticism.

John Dennis, *Vice and Luxury, Publick Mischiefs* (1724), pp. xvi-xvii.


act as an explication of the text of the poem: His explication was intended to explain and to justify his 'Moral'. In it he spelt out the economic logic of his moral message. Here he pointed out that 'Mercers, Upholsterers, Taylors and many others ... would be starv'd in half a Year's time, if Pride and Luxury were at once to be banish'd the nation.' Here he asked what use is 'a Plumb' (by which he meant 'a man worth £100,000') if he did not lavishly spend his wealth and stimulate the economy through employment and consumption? Here he argues that even highwaymen encourage trade by spending lavishly what they have stolen; and since even 'a poor common Harlot ... must have Shoes and Stockings, Gloves, the Stay and Mantua-maker, the Sempstress, the Linnen-draiper, all must get something by her, and a hundred different Tradesmen dependent on those she paid her Money out with, may touch part of it before a Month is at an end.' Here he sings the praises of conspicuous consumption and emulative spending, writing 'The Labour of Millions would soon be at an end if there were not other Millions ... Employ'd, To see their Handy-works destroy'd.'

The 'Prodigal' he writes, 'is a Blessing to the whole Society,' whereas 'Frugality is, like Honesty, a mean starving Virtue, that is only fit for small Societies of good peaceable Men, who are contented to be poor so they may be easy; but in a large stirring Nation you may have soon enough of it. 'Tis an idling dreaming Virtue that employs no Hands, and therefore very useless in a trading Country, where there are vast numbers that one way or other must be at all set to Work.'

It was hardly to be expected that such ideas would be accepted without controversy. The ideas that 'consumption was the logical end of production', that the 'latent consuming capacity of the public at large might become an engine for sustained growth', that 'society was an aggregation of self-interested individuals tied to one another by the tenuous bonds of envy, exploitation and competition' were new and, to many, alarming. 'Dangerous levelling tendencies lurked behind the idea of personal improvement through imitative buying.'

Inevitably those, like the merchants, who espoused these novel views of the nature of heightened domestic consumption were sharply attacked. The Tory landowners and their allies even demanded new sumptuary laws for the immediate suppression of bare-face'd Luxury, the spreading Contagion of which is the greatest Corrupter of Public Manners and the greatest Extinguisher of Public Spirit. Jonathan Swift, for instance, argued that to prevent 'all Excesses in Cloting, Furniture and the Like' it would be necessary to 'enact and enforce sumptuary Laws against Luxury'. Others, however, increasingly accepted the 'necessary Evil', and by the late eighteenth century the value of a heightened propensity to consume was widely accepted—it was the linchpin of The Wealth of Nations. The 'doctrine of beneficial luxury' had taken over from the doctrine of the 'utility of poverty'. It was increasingly admitted that the increased 'availability of the comforts and conveniences of life as well as the necessities of life could operate as a powerful stimulus to industry by all ranks of society'. The pursuit of luxury could now be seen as socially desirable, for as the growth of new wants stimulated increased effort and output, improved consumption by all ranks of society would further stimulate economic progress.

Such views had been accompanied by a changing attitude to the wages of labour: 'the doctrine of the social utility of hard times' gave way to the view that high wages were both socially and economically desirable. As a contribution to greater equality in the distribution of wealth, and more specifically as a stimulus to increasing effective demand, a raised standard of living for the mass of the population found increasing justification. Higher real wages would act as an incentive to greater effort for the workforce, and would allow the workers to benefit from the growing output of consumer goods. Their increased consumption would further boost demand and the results of this 'benign circle' would be in the interests of the workforce, the entrepreneurs and the economy.

Socially England was as well prepared for a consumer boom as it was intellectually. Indeed English society provided an ideal breeding ground for
those commercially intent on exploiting new consumer wants. The structure of English society, the potential it offered for social mobility, the social competition bred by its closely packed layers, all offered exciting opportunities for the entrepreneur. For England had experienced more markedly than anywhere else in Europe what has been called ‘the compression of the socio-economic spectrum’ or ‘the narrowing of social distance’. When Adam Smith wrote that ‘the accommodation of a European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant as the accommodation of the latter-exceeds that of many an African King, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages’, his generalization must have been heavily influenced by his knowledge of English society. French society, in which Arthur Young’s words ‘you go at once from beggary to profusion’ or, in Harold Perkin’s words, from ‘a large mass of consumption-resisting peasants’ to ‘a small class of luxury consumers’, was held to be very different from English society with its closely packed social strata—many observers, like Joseph Harris in 1757, referring in England to ‘that gradual and easy transition from rank to rank’. From Gregory King to Patrick Colquhoun, the social analysts had depicted a multi-layered society in which vertical mobility was both possible and greatly coveted. Malthus had specifically identified ‘the hope to rise or the fear to fall in society’ as the cause of ‘that animated activity in bettering our own condition which now forms the master spring of public prosperity.’

The importance of such a social structure for the rapid transmission of new wants, for the rapid spread of new fashions, for class competition, social emulation and emulative spending is obvious. In a society in which the social distance between the classes is too great to bridge, as say between a landed aristocracy and a landless peasantry, or in which the distance is unbridgeable, as in a caste society, then new patterns of increased expenditure on consumer goods are extremely difficult if not impossible to induce. In such societies the consumption of luxuries is limited to an exclusive market at the apex of society, beyond the reach or the interest of the mass market and, therefore, very limited economic significance. In England where there was a constant restless striving to clamber from one rank to the next, and where possessions, and especially clothes, both symbolized and signalled each step in the social promotion, the economic potentialities of such social needs could, if properly harnessed, be immense.

England possessed another prime advantage for the creation of a consumer society in the size and character of its capital city. The remarkable growth of London from some 200,000 inhabitants in 1600 to 900,000 in 1800 was unique in Europe. Towards the end of the seventeenth century London had already become the biggest European city and had, of course, no serious rival in England. Paris was the only comparable capital city but there were important differences, for where the proportion of Frenchmen living in Paris remained at about 25 per cent—the same proportion in 1750 as in 1650—London housed 7 per cent of the population of England in 1650 and 11 per cent in 1750. No other city in Europe could match that proportion (only Amsterdam came close to it). In addition, Professor Wrigley has estimated that when one allows for the effects of population movement in and out of the metropolis and for the effect of the London season, one in six of the total adult population of England had experience of living in London at some stage of their lives. With 16 per cent of the total adult population being exposed to the influence of London’s shops, London’s lifestyle and the prevailing London fashions, its potential for influencing consumer behaviour was enormous. It served as the shopwindow for the whole country, the centre of forms of conspicuous consumption which would be eagerly mimicked elsewhere, the place which set the style for the season and saw the hordes of provincial visitors and their retinues of servants carry back those styles to the rest of the country. There were many important allies in this process (as the next chapter will show) but without the existence of London it would have been much more difficult for commercial manipulation to achieve the ephemeral conformity of taste which so suited the standardized production of the new factory system. Entrepreneurs needed to ring the fashion changes in order to keep up and inflate even further the buoyant home demand of the late eighteenth century, but having set their production machines to meet such needs, they needed to be able to control and ‘fix’ its fugitive character for long enough to profit fully from its potentialities before its successors were, in turn, allowed their fleeting fashion life-cycle. All those tiny London satellites to the Lancashire cotton mills—the tailors, dressmakers, milliners and mantuamakers—would produce enough minor variations on the prevailing fashions to satisfy the market, keep its interest alive and allow the fashions to churn out stripes or muslins or whatever was required—whether prevailing material or dominant colour—until the next major change was introduced—if possible, carefully stage managed and timed to suit the needs of commerce.

The domestic servant class was a further vital link in this chain of fashion and social emulation and increased spending. Domestic service was probably

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43 Arthur Young’s Travels in France, 1787–89.


45 Joseph Harris, An Essay upon Money and Coins (1757), 1, p. 70. A. W. Coats, loc. cit., p. 49, indicates how widespread such comments were.


still the largest single employment for women at the turn of the century and as the group closest to the spending habits and life style of the upper and middle classes it acted as a very important channel of communication for transmitting the latest styles and spreading a desire for new commodities. 

One of the weaknesses, however, in arguments drawing attention to the domestic servant class, or the role of London, or the character, structure and mobility of English society as explanations for increasing home demand and rising levels of spending is that critics can promptly point out that none of them were new to the eighteenth century. Servants mimicking their masters are an age-old phenomenon, one rank in society being eager to join a higher group is just as old, and London as a centre of conspicuous consumption was by no means new. Giovanni Botero had written of great cities as early as 1606 that

Experience teacheth that the residence of noblemen in cities makes them to be more glorious and more populous, not only by cause they bring their people and their families into it, but also by cause a nobleman dispends much more largely through the access of friends unto him and through the emulation of others in a Citty where he is abiding and visited continually by honourable personages than he spends in the country where he liveth amongst the brute beasts of the field and converseth with plaine country people and goes appareled among them in plain and simple garments.

London certainly produced all of Botero’s effects long before the eighteenth century and, as to its disproportionate size, every schoolchild knows James I’s opinion that ‘Soon London will be all England’.

The answer to such criticism is partly the change of scale—London had swollen to an even more disproportionate dominance, English society permitted greater social mobilities, domestic servants were even more given to emulation. But more is needed to convince one of the distinctive change in the quality of English habits of consumption. And something more was required to turn a potential for change into achieved change. London needed to develop the commercial capacity to exploit its fashionable dominance more fully, its shops needed to develop commercial techniques to exploit its custom more regularly and systematically, its marketing, distribution, and advertising had to grow in sophistication to export the consuming behaviour of the capital to the rest of the country. The long-felt desire of so many members of English society to ape their superiors had to be given a fresh impetus to do so, a new spending ability to enable them to do so, and easier access to a greater variety of amply available new commodities. A mass consumer market awaited those products of the industrial revolution which skillful sales promotion could make fashionably desirable, heavy advertisement could make widely known, and whole batteries of salesmen could make easily accessible.

The process of commercialization is described in the following chapters, but the process would not have achieved such significant results without some important accompanying changes. For although advertisement, sales promotion and the exploitation of fashion can influence the market’s propensity to consume, can intensify its need to possess new products, can make its desire to ape its better more insistently felt, that process will be greatly eased if the increased desire to spend is accompanied by an increased ability to do so. Fortunately this too occurred in the eighteenth century.

Different historians have advanced a variety of reasons why sufficient sections of the working classes could enjoy the substantial increases in income which would explain the growing democratization of consumption which, together with the spending of the middle ranks, could usher in a mass consumer market. Elizabeth Gilboy showed that wage rates increased gradually for much of the century, more rapidly between 1760 and 1780, and most rapidly in the industrializing areas where the demand for labour was strongest. A.H. John has suggested that money wages rose as a result of the fall in food prices during the extraordinary run of good harvests in the second quarter of the century; and it has also been suggested that family unit earnings rose substantially when wives and children joined the wage earning labour force employed in industry. Those family earnings could be further inflated as a result of the long hours of work insisted on by the new factory discipline. Where whole families were employed for long hours at rising wage rates in the rapid growth sectors of the economy, the increased take-home earnings could increase dramatically—easily carrying working class families into the class of consumers willing and able to afford not just the necessities but the niceties of life. With more wives employed, there would be an increase in demand for goods previously made at home (clothes, boots, shoes, clothes instead of rush lights, manufactured cutlery and pottery instead of home made treen, furniture etc.). With women having command of earnings of their own and access to a greater total family income, one would expect a greater demand for goods dominated by female consumer choice—clothes, curtains, linens, pottery, cutlery, furniture, brass and copper for the home; buttons, buckles and fashion accessories for the person. With more income in cash and less in kind (for those who gave up living in as agricultural workers, and for those in domestic service who received higher

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money wages as a result in the rising competition for labour) working class consumers would have greater personal choice and a greater opportunity to follow their own tastes—spending on those inessential fripperies, so condemned by middle-class moralists, if they so wished.

There is not space here to do justice to the scholarship which supports those arguments, nor to the criticisms which have refined and qualified them. But it is not unreasonable to suggest that there was an agriculturally-induced increase in home demand before 1750, that between 1750 and 1780 the proportion of the population with family incomes in the £50 to £400 per annum range increased from something like 15 per cent to something approaching 25 per cent; and that these extra households made a major contribution to the market for the mass consumer products of the early Industrial Revolution.

There are many assumptions built into this model of explanation. There are many regional variations (in some areas a far higher proportion of the population would have joined the new consumer market, in other areas far fewer would have done so), but this model is consistent with the commercial development described elsewhere in this volume, it is consistent with the best available aggregate statistics, and it is certainly consistent with contemporary reactions to the growth of the home market. For contemporaries were by now convinced of the value and importance of the home market. David Macpherson in his Annals of Commerce wrote at the beginning of the nineteenth century "The home trade is with good reason believed to be a vast deal greater in value than the whole of the foreign trade, the people of Great Britain being the best customers to the manufacturers and traders of Great Britain." By 1805 he was merely echoing the views of a whole catalogue of contemporary commentators making the same point. As early as 1750 Fielding had spelt out the impact on society.

Nothing has wrought such an alteration in this order of people, as the introduction of trade. This hath indeed given a new face to the whole nation, hath in great measure subverted the former state of affairs, and hath almost totally changed the manners, customs, and habits of the people, more especially of the lower sort. The narrowness of their future is changed into wealth; their frugality into luxury, their humility into pride, and their subjection into equality.  

The motive in Fielding's view was social emulation. As he wrote in 1750 "while the Noblemen will emulate the Grandeur of a Prince and the Gentleman will aspire to the proper state of a Nobleman; the Tradesman steps from behind his Counter into the vacant place of the Gentleman. Nor doth the confusion end there: it reaches the very Dregs of the People, who aspire still to a degree beyond that which belongs to them." By 1763 the British Magazine felt that the process had proceeded so far and so fast that "The present rage of imitating the manners of high life hath spread itself so far among the gentlefolk of lower life, that in a few years we shall probably have no common folk at all".

The process which Mandeville had so controversially prophesied at the beginning of the century was increasingly accepted as being undeniable underway. Some parts of Mandeville's arguments remained unacceptable, but as the behaviour of English society was seen to come more and more to resemble that described in The Fable of the Bees, many were forced, however reluctantly, to concede that Mandeville's intellectual justification of emulative spending and the elasticity of home demand had 'very much' opened their eyes to the behaviour of 'real life'. It was increasingly accepted that man was a consuming animal with boundless appetites to follow fashion, to emulate his betters, to seek social advance through spending, to achieve vertical social mobility through possessions. To enjoy the act of purchase was no longer seen as the prerogative of the rich.

This was not simply an intellectual recognition of the constructive and beneficial aspects of progressive levels of spending. The intellectual justification of materialism was matched by a recognition that the democratization of consumption was actually taking place. When Dr. Johnson wrote 'Depend on it, sir, every state of society is as luxurious as it can be. Men always take the best they can', or argued that 'you cannot spend in luxury without doing good to the poor', he had seen ample practical evidence to that effect in the society around him.

What Mandeville described in predictive allegory in the first quarter of the century was being described in detailed fact in the last quarter. Compared with previous generations the English were said to be buying more than ever before, compared with other nations they were said to own more than anyone else, compared with both a greater proportion of English society was said to be involved in buying an unprecedented range of household goods. 'Were an inventory to be taken' wrote Josiah Tucker, 'of Household Goods and Furniture of a Peasant, or Mechanic, in France, and of a Peasant or
Mechanic in England, the latter would be found on average to exceed the former in value by at least three to one. Although Tucker spelt out the implications for English consumption patterns and for demand for particular goods, when he went on to say that English manufacturers are more adapted for the demands of Peasants and Mechanics, in order to appear in warm circumstances, for Farmers, Freeholders, Tradesmen and Manufacturers in Middle Duty, and for Wholesale Dealers, Merchants, and for all persons of Landed Estates to appear in genteel life, than for the Magnificence of Palaces or the Cabinets of Princes. Thus it is that the English of those several denominations have better Conveniences in their Houses, and affect to have more in Quantity of Clean, neat Furniture, and a greater variety, such as Carpets, Screens, Window Curtains, Chamber Bells, polished Brass Locks, Fenders etc. (Things hardly known abroad among Persons of such Rank) than are to be found in any other country of Europe.

Without the detailed quantitative work that is required on English and European inventories, such judgements cannot yet be confirmed. What work has been done suggests that whereas the pre-industrial world was characterized by extremely modest possessions, the people of late eighteenth-century England welcomed an increasing flow of 'blankets, linens, pillows, rugs, curtains and clothes'; along with 'pewter, glass and china; and brass, copper and ironware' into their homes.

The decencies owned by the poorest man who figures in the probate inventories of Sedgley in Staffordshire included the following:

- Fireshovel, coal hammer, toaster iron, house bellows, a copper can, wooden furniture, a tin dish, scissors, a warming pan, a brass kettle, two iron pots, one pail, a search (stove), two old candlesticks, glass bottles and earthenware, linen of all sorts in a chamber, a pair of bedsteads, a 'coverlid', a rug, a blanket, a kneading tub, two barrels, two coffers, a box, some tureens, pewter, a brass skimmer, a brass basting spoon, an iron flesh fork, a tin calender, and so on.


47 Josiah Tucker: A Selection from his Economic and Political Writings, ed. R. L. Schuyler (1931).

48 The admirable work of de Vries is an example. The records exist and could be made to yield invaluable evidence on consumption patterns. Much local work of value has been done by Owen Ashmore, P. Beards, F. G. Eminson, W. G. Hoskins, J. A. Johnson, P. A. Kennedy, G. H. Kenyon, J. D. Marshall, J. S. Moore, T. Munckton, F. W. Steer, J. Thirsk. As de Vries says: 'No effort has yet been made to use inventories for interregional or international comparison', and English historians have chiefly used probated inventories to describe farm production methods and trends.


Wainwright's total possesions were valued at £10. When one moved up to £20, the value that John Atwood left, there were more imposing decencies—a clock and case, four brass pans, table linen, even books to the value of 25s. In the more prosperous wills the appearance of new products—obviously the result of personal purchase rather than inheritance—is striking, and when one reaches a vicar's will for £284 the evidence of personal consumption of newly manufactured goods becomes unmistakable. As household possessions became more commonplace in the eighteenth century the practice grew of giving a general account of all goods, and a total value, but there were many examples of families at the end of the century owning immense lists of varied household goods in dramatic contrast to those left by their forebears. The pre-industrial home was marked for men and women by simplicity, an austerity, a sheek lack of possessions, which can still handle one when one reads the probate inventories. John Demos gave a vivid picture of the possessions of pre-industrial society in his Little Commonwealth. The charming picture of poverty evoked by the inventory of one James Chishman in 1648 can be conveyed by the contents of his kitchen: 'one small pot, a small scullib', and 'one small brass scimer'. The poorest families owned no table linen, little pottery and less cutlery. Spoons were the one essential, knives turned up more rarely, forks were non-existent. Furniture was sparse and simple: 'a single fully fledged chair' seems to have sufficed for many families. Feather beds were a mark of wealth, and bedsprads too appear only in the inventories of the wealthy. Even for the more prosperous members of the community who mustered a more impressive inventory, few of the possessions were new and 'much of the crudely made cookware ... served a family through two or three generations'.

It is important to distinguish between new purchases and prized possessions, however humble, which are passed on by inheritance, because inherited goods obviously do not register as effective demand. What was distinctive about the consumer behaviour of the late eighteenth century was that those who had possessed little bought more, those who had inherited ample possessions bought new ones, and those born to superfluity seemed eager to add to the excess with every passing fashion.

One of the things which critics like Cobett most disliked about the new middle-class patterns of consumption was the fact that their households were now monuments to novelty and fashion in the sense that where once they had inherited their furniture, now they bought it new:

- Everything about the farmhouse was formerly the scene of plain manners and pleasant living. Oak clothes-chests, oak bed-sheets, oak chests of drawers, and oak tables to eat on, long, strong and well supplied with joint stools. Some of the things were many, hundreds of years old.

51 See, for example, John S. Moore, ed., The Goods and Chattels of Our Fathers (1976), inventory 409, p. 269.

Now everything was new. 'some showy chairs and a sofa (a sofa by all means): half a dozen prints in gilt frames hanging up: some swinging book-shelves with novels… many wine decanters and wine glasses and a dinner set and a breakfast set and desert knives… and worst of all a parlour! Aye, and a carpet and a bell-pull too! One end of the front of this once plain and substantial house had been moulded into a ‘parlour’; and there was the mahogany table, the fine chairs, and the fine glass."

Cobbett was appalled by the social competition in ‘show and luxury’, the new ‘consumption’ and ‘carryings on’, the ‘constant anxiety to make a show’. But here was proof of the persuasive power of the new commercial arts. Such families had long been in command of income sufficient to acquire new possessions, but now they felt compelled to do so. Fashionable mahogany must replace traditional oak, showy chairs must replace well-jointed stools, whole sets of pottery—a different set for each meal or even each course—must be acquired, together with changes of cutlery for dessert, new decanters, new glasses, new prints, new book shelves, new novels—all of which betokens a whole new approach to buying by a part of the traditional prosperous middle class. Those farmers’ wives who had so startled Pehr Kalm in 1748 by being dressed like ‘ladies of quality’ were now responding just as surely to the wiles of those selling pottery and glass and carpets and cutlery and furniture as they had first done to those selling fashionable clothes. When John Foster used the Countess of Bective to give snob appeal to his carpets and Wedgwood used the Duchess of Devonshire to give social cachet to his pottery, this was the kind of latent demand they were attempting to release. These were the customers who caught ‘from example the contagion of desire’.

Here is one explanation of the spectacular success of the Gillows of Lancaster and the Seddons of London with their massive furniture stocks. They produced and sold furniture on an unprecedented scale: Seddon and Son of Aldersgate Street had stock worth more than £100,000 in 1790, and in 1796 the firm had over 400 employees—gilders, mirror workers, locksmiths, carvers, seamstresses as well as the sawyers and joiners.

The same pattern of increased consumption can be seen in a whole array of commodities. Tea was ‘singly out by such as Jonas Hanway as the apotheosis of luxury spending on needless extravagance by the poor. He was shocked to find that even labourers mending the road demanded their daily tea’. Hanway blamed this habit, too, on the downward spiral of fashion and social emulation, ‘it took its rise by Example, and by Example it was supported’. And such contemporary views were born out by the statistics—during the course of the eighteenth century the per capita consumption of tea increased fifteenfold.

Such statistics are likely for many to be the ultimate proof of the growth of demand, the democratization of consumption and the arrival of a consumer society. The fact that during the last fifteen years of the century the consumption of excised commodities in mass demand, such as tobacco, soap, candles, printed fabrics, spirits, and beer, was increasing more than twice as fast as the population, makes acceptance of rising patterns of consumption difficult to avoid. While the population increased by 14 per cent in this period, tea consumption increased by 97.7 per cent and that of printed fabrics by 141.9 per cent. After a period of rising money wage rates, says Professor Mathias, such figures ‘surely tell their own story’.

In fact the figures provided by Schumpeter, Deane and Cole, and Mitchell and Deane provide the statistical underpinning for the growth of a new consumer market. Obviously there are great regional differences, but if we accept that industrial output trebled in the course of the eighteenth century, as Mrs. Schumpeter’s figures suggest, export of manufactured goods accounted for only a small proportion of the total, and if the bulk of manufactured products were of the mass consumption type, then the acceptance of a substantially larger market is difficult to avoid. The rich simply cannot have drunk all the beer, worn all the cheap cottons, bought all the cheap pottery, buckles, buttons and so on. If, too, as Eversley suggests, the home market accounted for about £10 million or a notional £10 per household per annum at the end of the seventeenth century, by 1770 it accounted for more than £30 million or perhaps £25 per household, and by 1801 it accounted for about £90 million or about £40 a household. Even allowing for inflation, these figures suggest a significant increase in per capita consumption of home products, and although obviously all householders did not reach this average, it is extremely improbable that all this extra consumption could be absorbed by the top layers of income. In view of the handsome margin between income and expenditure for minimum subsistence indicated by contemporary family budget estimates, this seems even more improbable.
revolution and the role of commercialization in producing it, one has to ask why so many historians have been so reluctant to proclaim their importance. The simple answer is that ‘economic history is a supply side subject’ which takes market expansion to be a straightforward reflection of, and automatic response to, increased supply. But there are deeper-seated reasons which help to explain the traditional historian’s lack of appreciation of the expansion of the consumer market and the role of commerce in expanding it. There are deeply influential beliefs incorporated in the prelapsarian myth (the idea that once there was a just and organic society in which men lived comfortable lives, with work and job satisfaction and supported by a sufficiency uncorrupted by commerce and industry), in the pessimistic interpretation of the Industrial Revolution (the fact that many suffered during the late eighteenth century, and even more in the later stages of industrialization, has prevented some historians from recognizing those who gained); in the adverse literary verdict on industrialists and all their works (which produces a mental block in many which prevents them, for instance, seeing any benefits in the employment of women and children in the factories); in the low status of men involved in selling (‘It would be next to impossible to apply to a well dressed man in the street a more offensive appellation than shopman’, it was said in 1843), which placed them at the bottom of the business hierarchy and caused them to be further underestimated and understudied. 

Even theory has seemed against the recognition of the importance of the expansion of the home market. Economists like Berrill deny one to find an example of rapid economic growth produced by a sharp increase in demand, as the grounds that home demand is unsustainably elastic to do so and that one must seek the explanation in exports. Here the effect of the empirical evidence has almost swung opinion too far in the opposite direction, so that exports are now in danger of being dismissed as ‘a mere reverberation of home demand’ in the eighteenth century.

The prelapsarian myth has been shaken, too, by our increasing appreciation of the texture of poverty in the pre-industrial world. When we read that ‘the poor in the towns and countryside ... lived in almost complete deprivation’, or that ‘the average man’s income was 60 to 80 per cent of that income ... in good times ... After having bought their food, the mass of the people had little left for their wants, no matter how elementary they were. In pre-industrial Europe the purchase of a garment, or the cloth for a garment, remained a luxury the common people could only afford a few times in their lives’, when we hear that even the clothes of plague victims were eagerly sought by their relatives, and when we learn of the low expectation of life, the high infant mortality, the sickness which threatened their lives, the poor diet and few comforts they had to sustain them, then the gains made in the eighteenth century look all the more impressive.

If there is, then, some evidence of the tide beginning to turn in favour of a willingness to accept the extension of the market in the eighteenth century, there is still too little appreciation of the richness of the commercial response, the fertility and ingenuity of entrepreneurial ideas, the extent to which society accepted consumer attitudes. The consumerism and commercialism had not, of course, yet reached the mature stage of a modern consumer society. It already had many elements in common with that later stage of economic development, but what strikes one most as one leafs through the advertisements of provincial newspapers, or reads the correspondence of eighteenth-century manufacturers, or reads the contemporary descriptions of their consumer purchases, is the variety of small scale enterprise. The lesser tradesman, who have been forgotten, are even more apparent there than the giants whose entrepreneurial brilliance has glittered brightly enough for them still to be remembered. There were profits—even small fortunes—to be made from very modest artefacts indeed. It is no accident that Adam Smith’s famous exemplar of the division of labour was taken from the manufacture of pins, or that T. S. Ashton found the modern study of business with his work on Peter Stubbs the nail maker, or that Birmingham’s prosperity was built on the manufacture of buttons and buckles and candlesticks, or that Sheffield grew on the profits of cutlery, or that Staffordshire owed its prosperity to crockery, or that Manchester mushroomed on the cotton that provided the mass market for fashionable prodigality at the end of the eighteenth century. Other areas thrived on hats and gloves, and belts, and wigs, and shoes and dresses, and saucepans and brass and copper, and chairs and tables and cloth.

All of these small items of household consumption offered the lure of profit for those who flocked to make and sell them. There was a vast and growing market clamouring to buy. For those with the skills to manufacture and to market, the opportunities were legion. It was not for nothing that the first

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89 Carlo Cipolla, Before the Industrial Revolution (1976), pp. 29-33. Little wonder in such a deprived society that dress should acquire such important symbolic values and that men and women should develop such powerful if at that stage unsatisfied desires to acquire them.
industries to blossom in the Industrial Revolution were more characteristically to be found in the consumer sector than in the heavy industrial sector. The beauty of smallness had not been recognized as such in the eighteenth century, but the profitability of such unrecognized trifles as pins and nails, buttons and forks, knobs and knockers, pots and pans, hats and coats, gloves and shoes certainly had.

The market opportunities were protean, the possibility of profit high, the fortunes made legion. The names of those who made them are so famous that it has sometimes concealed how modest were the consumer objects they made: Joseph Bramah and locks, Josiah Wedgwood and pots, Matthew Boulton and buckles and buttons, the Pilkingtons and glass, not to mention the great cotton magnates who built their fortunes on the clothes and underclothes of our Georgian predecessors. And for every Wedgwood there were hundreds of lesser potmakers crowding the potbanks of the five towns, and surviving only in the contemporary lists of commercial directories and the collections of trade cards—the production of which fuelled further demand for ephemera from printers and booksellers and print makers and the like.

One should, however, resist the facile assumption that success was in any way assured even in such favourable long-term demand conditions. The eighteenth-century economy saw its full share of failures. Even the boom periods encompassed years of black depression, and even the boom years saw disaster for some. The eighteenth-century bankruptcy courts kept their grim count of those who responded to economic opportunity and met only financial disaster there. Spectacular success for the few must be measured against relative failure of the many, and complete collapse of an uncomfortably large number of business enterprises. The prospect of profit attracts the reckless, the adventurous, the over-confident and the unlucky, just as it attracts the bold, the gifted and the fortunate. Three hundred and ninety eight bankruptcies in the depression year of 1772 shows what a bad year could do in the midst of rampant demand; six hundred and twenty three bankruptcies in 1773, when the market for some was already picking up, shows what the post depression year could do when the creditors insisted on their bills being finally met. As T. S. Ashton once wrote it was not for nothing that November became known as the month for suicides because that was the time of year when men's debts were finally called in. It was the annual peak for bankruptcies.

The mortality rate in business fluctuated with the irregular ebb and flow of demand—surging up from 471 in 1777 to 623 in 1778 as depression struck late that year and reaching 634 in 1779—but even in 1761 and 1762 the Gentleman's Magazine recorded 184 and 171 failures which reached the bankruptcy courts. There were many reasons for failure. Not even buoyant demand was proof against some businessmen's incompetence, and in the years of black depression it required a very considerable range of skills to survive. The level of commercial skill needed to excel was very much higher than is often realized.70

So the commercial hierarchy at the customer's service was long and varied. It led from pedlar to packman, from the higgler to small shopkeeper, from market to fair, from auctions to seasonal sales and exhibitions. The experience of buying could vary from haggling at one's doorstep to helping oneself from a self-service counter in London, from hiring a dress for a Saturday night dance from a Georgian forerunner of Moss Bros. in the 1760s to buying from international showrooms or sharing the company of the gentry, the aristocracy and even royalty at the elegant showrooms of one of the great manufacturers. The great chain of enterprise included a vast range of ability, ingenuity, profitability and magnitude. They were all competing for the custom of a newly affluent society, eager to consume the (by the standards of the time) uniquely wide range of products, and, for the first time in their history for most of them, possessing the wherewithal to do so.

The hierarchical metaphor is apt not only for stressing, in terms of the commercial response, the different layers of expertise and achievement, the different levels of success and failure, but also for stressing on the consumer side the fact that there were those who gorged on material objects (the lords of the social jungle), those who got more than they needed in the middling ranks of society, those who enjoyed a decent sufficiency (a large and multi-layered section of society), those who scraped a bare sufficiency, and those who just survived.

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By 1700 the embryonic development of a consumer society had certainly begun, but the pregnancy had still had some way to go. By 1700 the barriers to retail trade were certainly coming down, but there were still too many in place to prevent the protracted birth pains of a nation giving birth to a consumer society from being seen to be over.

By 1800, however, those barriers had given way and the consumer society had been announced by so many observers (not all of them wishing it well) with such a wealth of eye witness reports, such a mass of supporting evidence, that its arrival should no longer be doubted. In Braudel's words 'the future belonged to societies which were trifling enough, but also rich and inventive enough, to bother about changing colours, materials and styles of costume'.

The next chapter endeavours to show that England was just such a society.
