

The Non-Representation
of the Agricultural
Labourers in 18th
and 19th Century
English Paintings

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*An Exploration into the Artistic Conventions
followed by the Aristocracy and Landowning
Classes in Representations of the Agricultural
Labourers in the 18th and the First Decades
of the 19th Century in English Paintings of the
Period, which Rarely Depicted the True State
of Such People*

By

Penelope McElwee

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-8705-6

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-8705-2

DEDICATION

This book has evolved from a PhD Thesis completed in 2015 whilst studying with Warnborough College Ireland. The journey was often challenging, sometimes frustrating, but mostly a great learning curve and immensely rewarding.

I hope the work will allow those interested in the Social History of Art to understand why English paintings of the eighteenth and for most of the nineteenth century, look as they do. Also, to appreciate the hard life the agricultural labourers of the period were made to endure at the hands of the wealthy minority.

Many thanks are due to Dr. Julian Ng and Dr. Brenden Tempest-Mogg at Warnborough College for their support and interest in my subject. Above all, without the help, encouragement, advice and guidance of my very special mentor Jill Kiefer, who was always at hand when the going was rough and smooth, I would never have completed the thesis. Thank you Jill!

Thanks are also due to the input of David Randall Thomas who has supported me since day one and who read my first drafts.

At the coalface was my partner, Mark Jackson, who has always been there for me, and without whom none of it would have been possible. Through thick and thin, he has borne, with great patience, all the ups and downs associated with writing a PhD, and THE BOOK. Thank you MJ.

Finally, to sort out problems and find inspiration, the peaceful, beautiful and inspiring surroundings of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin was the ultimate space.

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PREFACE

British paintings executed in the eighteenth century, and for most of the nineteenth century rarely depicted the agricultural labourers who played an intrinsic part in the life of the contemporary wealthy landowner. The big house and its land could not be maintained, crops sown or harvests reaped without the backbreaking toil of these people. Yet, in the eyes of the rich, as individuals, they were non-existent. Consequently, most artistic commissions discharged by artists of the period omitted likenesses of the workers. This is reinforced by the fact that, for nearly all of this period, patronage of the arts lay in the hands of the aristocratic classes, whose tastes and social conventions dictated what was or was not acceptable for a contemporary audience to view.

Only recently has any investigation been made into why this situation prevailed. Or given any consideration as to how the rural changes of Parliamentary Enclosure and Industrialization caused adverse effects to the already meagre existence of the poor. As the century progressed, bringing in its wake these social and agricultural upheavals, the poor began to riot and protest at the unjust treatment meted out to them by their betters in the name of capitalization and progress.

The increasing resentment of the lower orders forced the aristocracy and wealthy landowners to consider and question the excessive power they wielded over these people. At stake, was a perceived “droit de seigneur”, which advanced their exalted stance in the class structure of society. With the dawn of the nineteenth century, poor rural workers would find it difficult to elicit sympathy for the supposed escalating pauperism they claimed was occurring. This was especially so when such conditions, their betters maintained, were due to an inherent laziness and lack of ambition to improve their lot in life.

As this century progressed, the artist still rarely depicted the labourer. Instead, there was an upsurge in the moralistic paintings, so enjoyed by the Victorians, images intimating that the only solution to dire poverty was betterment through hard work and self-help. If rural employment was unobtainable, emigration to the cities to find work in the newly erected factories was a viable alternative. This strategy would never be satisfactory, as it caused an exodus from country to city, the effects of which are still felt today. Many would die in the city slums, some would

emigrate and die before reaching foreign shores, but few images remain of their tragic ending. Not until the instigation of the trade unions at the end of the nineteenth century would they be given a voice and the injustices the workers suffered addressed to any degree of satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

POWER, INDIVIDUALITY: THE NON-RECOGNITION OF THE AGRICULTURAL LABOURER

For a long time ordinary individuality - the everyday individuality of everybody remained below the threshold of description. To be looked at, observed, described in detail....was a privilege.¹

Today, individuality is a trait many aspire to achieve, regardless of their social standing. In contemporary society, to be noticed is not a privilege reserved for the wealthy, as was the case in eighteenth century rural England. Nonetheless, in spite of a more egalitarian society, curiosity still prevails about the lifestyle of the rich, an interest furthered and realized by a tour of the many stately homes, which still today dominate parts of the rural landscape. When inside the chosen architectural edifice, the eager visitors will find themselves in the company of other interested parties. Now follows a shuffle from one ornately decorated room to another, with the latter eliciting either a gasp of envy or admiration at the opulence of the décor. In most instances, paintings in heavy gilt ornamental frames hang on the walls. For a fleeting moment, the trapped audience become the viewers. Even though not family members, they are briefly able to visually mingle with the painted figures staring out from the canvases. In addition, other themes will embody representations of the house itself, set in its verdant parklands, hunting scenes, and, inevitably, the highly popular visions of the idyllic golden English countryside.

At the end of the tour, after refreshments, it is back home to the city or foreign country where the majority of the tourists will have hailed from. A pleasant day's outing in the country—and that is that! Later, were any of the excursionists sufficiently interested to consider or notice the omission of certain factions of society from the paintings? Not only from these, but similar ones hanging in city Art Galleries, in rooms devoted to eighteenth century England. Where are the individuals who maintained the vast parklands? Who helped to erect the buildings? Who tilled the soil and

gathered in the harvest? None of these tasks simply happened. A huge workforce must have been necessary for their implementation but they are invisible! Yet, each member of the labouring class must have had a particular individuality, but their lowly place in society precluded any of them from being acknowledged by the wealthy landowners and aristocracy. It was of little consequence the former spent the duration of a doubtless short life toiling for a master they never saw. Their allotted place in society dictated this was how it was.

From today's perspective, it seems unbelievable that the agricultural labourer did virtually nothing, for most of the eighteenth century, to protest or rebel against the inequalities of his downtrodden role in society. Yes, of course, low key murmurs of discontent occurred throughout in the century, many related to bread shortages, with E.P. Thompson's "rebellions of the belly" being much quoted in relation to the disturbances.² Though, overall, there appears to be scant evidence of the beginnings of a full-scale revolution that would ensue in France. As so little is known about the life and thoughts of the "common man" of the period, it is impossible to conceive of his feelings in relation to this seemingly unjust treatment. Apart from an odd entry in the local Parish Records, a paucity of knowledge remains about this class. A situation not helped when most of the historical authors and researchers, use as a main source of reference, the archives of the aristocracy and landed gentry. The troublemaker or rioter may be noted in such tomes, but the labourer who toils in the fields has, as E.P. Thompson reiterates, been virtually airbrushed out of existence, despite a life of backbreaking effort to further improve and expand the interests of the master and his property.³

Above all, the absence of accurate likenesses of the labourers further ensures the impossibility of ascertaining their physical appearances. Nor would they themselves, unless servants in the Big House, have been aware of the existence of the actual paintings. These artefacts were objects of luxury, far beyond the workers range of comprehension, thereby making them completely unaware of any visual exclusion. Could there have been a logical reason for this omission? The explanation lies within the social mores of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which dictated both the content of paintings and the different classes of society to be depicted. It explains why, when examining British paintings from this period, the astute viewer must surely deliberate upon why the common man had been granted virtually no individuality or presence, in works of art. Factually, the contemporary artist had little freedom of choice when executing his canvases, especially those active in the first half of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, it must be presumed some, if not all, would have been aware

of the existence of the labouring classes, especially as many of these craftsmen would have remained in situ in the home of a patron whilst fulfilling a commission.

Consequently, as the contemporary artist's livelihood was dependent upon repeat assignments, they were both restrained and reticent to portray the labourers, when custom dictated they should not do so. Even if they felt empathy towards the class, they were reluctant to upset the sensibilities of the wealthy patrons and the possible loss of a regular income. It was only as the century progressed and patronage fell into the control of wealthy industrialists that images of this social class were slowly embraced as subject material. The gradual emergence of the labourer in art after the 1750s remained a contentious issue and an element still included with caution in any artistic production. Initially, this took an idealized form, before gradually acquiring a more realistic and moralizing character. The latter, a category that would eventually find favour with, and become the preferred choice of the Victorian patron.

The only time of the year the master was forced to acknowledge the absolute importance and necessity of his workers came at the end of the harvest when his crops were safely gathered in. For the labourers, it was a period, which allowed them a modicum of pleasure and appreciation. Elements rewarded amply by the largesse of their betters in the form of free victuals and beer. An occasion allowing them a few hours of escape from the year round toil and enabling family and friends, who had worked beside one another in the hot dusty fields, time together. J.M.W. Turner, in the early nineteenth century, would replicate this scenario in his painting *Harvest Home*. It is a work, which supports a premise dating from the early decades of the eighteenth century, that this was the only period of the year when indistinct figures of harvesters appeared briefly in paint. Inevitably, the latter were always depicted within the confines of the peaceful and fruitful golden English countryside. They never took centre stage, but were to be found, if the interested viewer looked carefully, on the periphery, in the shade. Accordingly, this position conformed to the basic rule of landscape composition in the eighteenth century. One, which demanded "the rich and their habitations be illuminated, whilst the poor should be left in the shadows on the dark side of the landscape."⁴

How then could the artist, when working under the auspices of an aristocratic patron, resolve the issue of the exclusion of the agricultural worker, especially if his sympathies lay with members of the "lower orders"? Allied to this, are the beliefs of several writers, including the Marxist social historian, T.J. Clark, who asserts "that a work must have an ideology," one, which, in this period, was redolent of the dominant images

and values of the political ruling classes, most of whom would have been prosperous landowners. It is therefore conceivable that an artist may have chosen to “work” his material if he had scant empathy with the views of his patron. By so doing, the work would have been given a new form, a form that is itself a subversion of the prevailing ideology.⁵

Nicos Hadjinicolaou further supports this premise by asserting that the function of an ideology is to hide “the contradictions in life by fabricating an illusory system of ideas that shapes people’s views.”⁶ In light of these two preceding hypotheses, and the views of contemporary poets and writers, there appears to be a dichotomy when visually referencing the existence of poor labourers between the years 1700 and 1870. Many of the British artists who dealt with this subject chose varying methodologies in the way they depicted both the aristocracy and the poor workers, their social inferiors, whom the former neither wished nor needed to acknowledge.

The opening paragraph implied many of the commissioned paintings were found in country houses, where they adorned the walls of the grand interiors. The contemporary audience for the canvases generally comprised the master, his family, and associates, all of who inhabited the same social strata, images that, up until the mid-eighteenth century, reinforced both the social and economic power inherent in the ownership of land. The rare inclusion of the workers and the central part they played in the smooth functioning of their master’s domains emphatically projected, to the contemporary viewer, the unspoken implication of the “contentment” of this class. Also reinstated was the importance of the place they occupied within an old established patriarchal system, at whose head sat the master. Any visual form of discord within the ranks of the labourers would have been undesirable and unsettling. The more so, given that, as the eighteenth century progressed, murmurs of discontent could be discerned. E.P. Thompson sums up the situation succinctly when writing about the eighteenth century’s gradual demise of patriarchy by saying “subordination is becoming (although between grossly unequal parties) negotiation.”⁷

Consequently, the early paintings strongly deny any changes in the structure of society. They remain the inherent celebration and visual record of the most prestigious of all symbols associated with the eighteenth century, the grandiose Big House, set within its expansive parklands. Initially, the works showed little evidence of the advancement of agricultural industry, which would later become a vital extra source of income for the landowners. Conversely, agricultural improvements were treated with derision by the agricultural labourer, who believed the former contributed to a decrease in job opportunities. Meanwhile, the importance placed upon the ownership of extensive rural properties was nonpareil.

The impressive landscaped gardens surrounding the buildings were constructed at a vast cost to the owner, but this outlay did not appear to be a negative factor for those determined to create the additional feature. Fortunately, the surrounding countryside would provide the readymade workforce needed to expedite the task, at the minimum wage.

The logic behind the urgency to acquire the country estate was determined by the social dictates of the eighteenth century, by criteria regarding it, not only as a place of leisure, but also as an untainted paradise from which the nation's leaders must spring. The house itself has been likened to a court that attracted the artistic talent of the age.⁸ The prestige assigned to the buildings indicates why numerous images were fabricated. The architecture itself contributed to scaled down versions for the less affluent sectors of society who wished to emulate the wealthy landlord. Furthermore, this activity would ultimately lead to a greater recognition of the builder and mason as an architect.⁹ An all-consuming predilection for bricks and mortar further indicates why so many facsimiles or visual documentations of like architecture were produced at the time. It helps to clarify why all traits of agriculture as a commercial venture were now considered an infringement upon the visual delight of the English landscape, and therefore not acknowledged.

The patron himself, who was the instigator in any change in the composition of a work, must have gradually become aware, as the eighteenth century progressed, that his supposedly preordained status at the top of the social ladder was slowly being undermined. The wealthy merchants and foreign investors now had sufficient capital to imitate the tastes of the aristocracy in architecture, manners and modes. As a result, the control and power the aristocrats and big landowners, maintained on all aspects of contemporary life, gradually diminished. Further change, benefitting both the established and new landowners, took the form of Parliamentary Enclosure, which grew apace in the last decades of the eighteenth century. The poor were most affected by this compulsory action. As a class, they considered the move to be an infringement of the age-old "traditional" right to use of common land to supplement a meagre income.

The landowner's greed for extra acres in the last decades of the eighteenth century was only achievable through enclosure. This was an action now considered as being a purely selfish financial measure, causing many of the labourers to lose their jobs and become paupers. It was a condition masked on canvases that now purposely displayed and promoted the alternative work generated by this deed—hedging and ditching. These occupations would later be the subject of paintings by J.W.M. Turner, who

similarly recorded advances in agricultural production, including those of turnip sowing and gathering. The work of Turner would indicate to the viewer, in a very subtle manner, the sheer drudgery and backbreaking toil involved in the implementation of such menial tasks. Seldom would a canvas commissioned by a wealthy patron inform an audience of the true condition of the poor. This latter aspect was, however, addressed in many of the engravings of Thomas Rowlandson, and in the graphic cartoons produced by *Punch* magazine, in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Regarding the life of the poor, it is salutary to note a tragic incident recounted by the pen of Philip Thickness (a friend of Thomas Gainsborough), a rare contemporary interjection of one class on behalf of another. The crusading action of Thickness informed the world, in words and image, of the horrific and gruesome demise of the Eaves family in 1769 whilst inmates of the Poor House of Datchworth in Hertfordshire. It would be interesting to ascertain the extent of the readership of this document, only lately discovered in the archives of the British Library, and the way it may have affected the sensibilities of any interested party. Did the latter feel any degree of remorse or pity about the treatment of these paupers who had been allowed to die in appalling conditions, as the result of the out of work father of the family being unable to provide for his wife and children? Or, would they instead, as John Aitkin wrote a mere four years later, experience a frisson of pleasurable excitement at the dreadful plight of the “under dog”, who counted for nothing in the minds of their betters

It is undoubtedly true, through a phenomenon of the human mind difficult to account for, that the representation of distress frequently gives pleasure; from which general observation many of our modern writers of tragedy and romance seem to have drawn this inference, that in order to please they have nothing more to do than paint distress in natural and striking colours.¹⁰

It would prove difficult, without research, to ascertain how wealthy members of society, when faced with the incident of the Poor House of Datchworth or identical human tragedies (of which there were surely many) would have responded to the intimations of Aitkin. Perhaps the substance of the words merely allowed this class to ignore the possibility it was the stance they took in regard to the treatment of the poor, one that considered the latter was always responsible for any misfortune that befell them.

When the eighteenth century drew to an end, the conditions of the poor agricultural labourer did not improve. An increase in the rural population resulted in more people competing for fewer jobs. Blame was additionally apportioned to the introduction of the much-reviled threshing machine. This latter artefact was believed, by many of the workers, to be the cause of diminishing employment, leading to more pressure being placed on Parish Relief. Still, this class received no sympathy from the people in charge, who considered the plight of the poor was of their own making, due to their laziness and immoral way of life! Only a series of well-publicized and occasionally depicted disturbances, including the Swing Riots, would help to change these current opinions. The former, which occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century, shook many of the rulers of England out of their complacency and forced them to take greater note of an increasingly disillusioned labouring class.

Visually, little changed. Scenes of pending emigration were still centred on visions of the golden English countryside similar to those executed by Richard Redgrave. Accounts of the horrendous conditions endured by those sailing to foreign shores were scant. Conceivably, one of the most moving images, a painting by Henry Wallis, entitled, *The Stonebreaker* belatedly acknowledged the excruciating physical effort required in the implementation of this activity. It was backbreaking toil, considered suitable for an inmate of a workhouse. Little thought was given to the poor physical condition of the man, a contributing factor to his eventual demise from sheer utter exhaustion. Ironically, the admittance of hardship came in the wake of the Great Exhibition, a vehicle used as a showcase for all that was positive in England, proclaiming the country to be the leading industrial nation of the nineteenth century.

The latter acknowledgement was the cause of the exodus to the cities from the country, as the rural worker was forced to leave his natural habitat to find work in the newly built factories. One form of drudgery was replaced by another, equally demoralizing, and carried out in more unpleasant spaces without the advantage of the fresh air of the countryside. Fortunately, the artists who worked for *The Graphic* magazine had, finally, by the end of the period under consideration, provided the viewer with realistic images of life “as it really was” in the horrendous slums of London. The subsequent chapters, together with the referenced art works, will hopefully help to demonstrate the extent of the social divide existing between the upper classes and agricultural labourers throughout the eighteenth and for most of the nineteenth centuries. It was an autocracy, peopled by the wealthy in a position to dictate how the poor must lead their lives, a God-given right rarely questioned or opposed by

the lower orders who “knew their place in life.” They were a people whom E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé derogatively name “Hodge,” “the secret people,” “brother to the ox,” about whom little is known due to “their inarticulateness, and our ignorance.”¹¹ A summation that disallows the agricultural labourer his rightful place in social history and the denial of his existence in paint. However, it was the arrogance and the power possessed by the upper classes that helped to prevent a disaster of the magnitude of the French Revolution occurring in England.

From a contemporary viewpoint, providing one belonged to the upper classes, the non-recognition of the poor was normal. Conversely, though this is impossible to fully verify, the labourers seemingly never complained and took for granted this was how their life should be. Only with the advent of the new working class and the Trade Unions would their situation improve and allow them the voice long denied. One, which cried out for “A Fair Day’s Wages for a Fair Day’s Work,” surely the universal right of the common man.¹²

Notes

¹ David H. Solkin, *Painting out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 111.

² E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Pontypool, Wales: The Merlin Press, 2010), 186.

³ E.P. Thompson, “Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture,” *Journal of Social History* 7, no.4, Summer (1974).

⁴ John Barrell, *The dark side of the landscape: The rural poor in English painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 22.

⁵ T.J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1999), 13.

⁶ Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Art History and Class Struggle* (London: The Pluto Press, 1979), 10.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, “Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture,” *Journal of Social History* 7, no.4, Summer (1974), 384.

⁸ Christopher Christie, *The British Country House in the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 1.

⁹ John Summerson, “The Classical Country House in the 18th Century,” *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts* 107, no. 5036, (1959).

¹⁰ *Miscellaneous pieces, in prose*: by J. and A. L. Aitkin, 94 (<http://ota.ox.ac.uk/id/4697>) by Aitkin, John, 1747 – 1822. Licensed as Creative Commons By-NC-SA (2.0 UK).

¹¹ E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London: Pimlico, 1993).

¹² A Fair Day's Wages for a Fair Day's Work. *Articles by Engels in the Labour Standard 1881*. 1. <https://marxists.anu.edu.au/archive/marx/works/1881/05/07/.htm>.

CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE STAGE: THE 18TH CENTURY DOMINANCE OF MONEY AND POSITION

The big house and the message it projected to 18th Century society—one completely excluding the labouring poor who toiled to build the grandiose buildings

For the English nobility, the country house in the period 1660-1880 was the ultimate status symbol.

—Wilson, Richard, Mackley, Alan.
“A Pleasure Not to Be Envied:”¹

Numerous English paintings executed in the eighteenth century used, as their main theme, images of the big house set in lush parklands. However, although invariably dominating the surrounding landscape, these spaces should not be considered merely as grandiose architectural buildings. In addition to being a rich man’s home, they served another purpose—as a proclamation of the acknowledged badge of authority and power of the aristocratic classes of England. All made possible with the toil of the unseen rural workforce.

It was crucial for the owners to have a visual record of their property for future generations. Providentially, this gives today’s interested viewer tangible evidence of the scale of what has been termed a building frenzy, which would reach its apogee before 1750. The extravagance of these feats further allows a greater insight into the minds of the people who aspired to build. They were a social group who virtually excluded images of the agricultural labourers from contemporary canvases, even though this class was an indispensable and vital sector of the rural workforce. Certainly, the latter, in most instances, would have been completely ignorant of both their exclusion from and the existence of these paintings. They would have no opportunity to view the images, unless they were servants in the big house, where the artefacts invariably took pride of place on the interior

walls. Here, the targeted audience consisted of a tight circle of family, friends and acquaintances, all of who possessed a similar mind-set regarding the treatment and acknowledgement of the poor worker.

Yet, behind the arrogance and self-confidence attributed to the character of the upper classes, was it possible to detect, in this insistence of a continual record of their prime possession, an element of apprehension and resentment? Especially, when, as the decades passed, self-made men attempted to emulate and compete with the lifestyle of the aristocracy. New wealth, gained in many instances from overseas trade, allowed these nouveau riche men to finance the purchase of land whereon to erect a large family house. The result signified that, by 1720, the number of builds had risen to approximately eighty.² As an architectural upsurge, it coincided with a return to a period of peace instigated by the signing, in 1713, of the Treaty of Utrecht. The latter came in the wake of many years of social unrest and conflict between warring factions in England.³ This fortuitous outcome, which bought with it a time of stability, additionally allowed any outlays of vast sums of money on building projects and extravagant lifestyles to escape adverse criticism.⁴

Large monetary investment in land, accordingly, enabled the merchant and industrial class aspirant to buy into a lifestyle similar to the one enjoyed by members of the highest ranks of society. Apart from the social element, ownership of a plot of land permitted governance over that particular area, allowing a complete and unimpeded view of the estate from any window of the new house built thereon. Unfortunately, the prohibitive outlay required for the acquisition of the picturesque estate, cultivated virtually up to the exterior walls, would, in a short time, create a lack of investment in agricultural improvements. All disposable income was now directed towards displays of “ostentation and comfort.” The latter elements gradually filtered down from the contemporary fashionable modes prevailing in the big cities, places to which access was becoming easier due to improvements in the road system of the country. The big house now stood as a symbol for “a machine for living the life of an English country gentleman,”⁵ buildings, which John Summerson has discussed in his book *Architecture in Britain, 1530–1830*, such as Houghton Hall in Norfolk. The author considers the latter was pre-eminent in the design and architecture of the houses and would act as a benchmark for many of the period’s architectural feats.⁶

Apart from the external characteristics of these grandiose buildings, which outwardly at least, reinforced and highlighted the importance of the occupants, the interior was additionally a symbol of their rank and finesse. Certain attributes were therefore considered essential when furnishing the

inner living spaces. Lining the walls would be the commissioned painted replicas of the house and its gardens, and shelves of books, which formed the now requisite library, the latter further identifying the owners to be literate and educated people, especially as printed material was gradually becoming more readily obtainable to any interested members of the upper classes.

William Hogarth, in *Portrait of a Family* (Fig. 1–1), places his sitters within a comparable room, whose opulence and decor announce to the viewer they are people of wealth and position. Their clothes are made of silks and satins, whilst damask covers the occasional table, on which sits a fine tea service. The heavy drapes at the window, the silver chandelier, the Chinese vase and the lacquer cabinet, the classical antique bust on the marble mantelpiece, were also desirable acquisitions of the period considered acceptable and necessary to furnish and grace the rooms of the big house. In all probability, many of the goods and furnishings on display would have been imported into England through its ever-expanding Asian and Atlantic trade routes. Hogarth cleverly lightens the exalted rarefied atmosphere emanating from the space by the action of a kitten placed in the centre foreground. This small pet has caused disruption to the staid family gathering by toppling a basket from the table. Hence the members of the group are forced to interact visually with one another.

Apart from the occasional inclusion of an African servant, who again acted as another sign of the wealth and prestige of a family, the viewer is never allowed a glimpse of the hidden workforce. A body whose toil, both inside and outside, was essential to the wellbeing of the master and his family, and to the maintenance of the façade of architectural perfection. Nonetheless, there were several exceptions to the non-representation of the workers in contemporary paintings. One took the form of the professional land agent, whose emergence and rise in status, coincided with the creation of house and lands. This was a person, inevitably a man, who played an indispensable part in the day-to-day running of the estate. His input allowed the owners freedom to indulge in their preferred pursuits of entertaining and sporting activities.⁷

Another was the men and boys involved with one of the favourite pastimes of the upper classes, hunting. John Wootton, in *Preparing for the Hunt* (Fig. 1–2), exhibits this aspect to the viewer. However, the scene, rather than exuding an English country quality, has an Italianate feel to it, further accentuated by classical elements in the form of a stone fountain topped by an enormous urn and the façade of a small pavilion to the right of the work. The grand ladies and gentlemen are dressed in fine clothes and preparing to mount their horses to take part in the hunt. At hand to

complete the manoeuvre are the indispensable huntsmen and stable boys. It must also be presumed the inclusion of the blackamoor on the steps is again a fashion/wealth statement.

The conspicuous wealth displayed by the groups of people in the paintings by Hogarth and Wootton respectively allowed them a choice to do and acquire whatsoever they desired, a luxury completely denied to the agricultural labourer! For him, the outside was, not a space for enjoyment, but where he toiled unremittingly, from dawn to dusk. The interior of the big house was a place of leisure, relaxation, a place to gossip and sip tea. The homes of the lower orders, in most instances, were hovels, with one or two rooms for the entire family to sleep and eat. The lighting would have come from rushes or candles of tallow and any window would have been covered with rags, rather than draped in velvet. There would have been no chandeliers, mirrors, panes of glass, or fancy items of furniture, and only a few rough homespun clothes.

Conversely, the ensemble in Hogarth's canvas would have had a copious wardrobe for use both indoors and outdoors. Strangely, the chairs upon which this group sits appear solid, and stand firmly on the carpeted floor. They could possibly be read as a reiteration of the family's unshakable position in society within the grand room of the big house. The confidence of the landowners at this time, c.1735, had not yet been disrupted by the repercussions of a rapidly growing Parliamentary Enclosure. This latter was an act that gradually eroded the perceived traditional right of the agricultural labourers' use of the commons to supplement their meagre wage. Soon, many belonging to the rural labouring class would lose even their humble homes, and have no shelter other than the hedgerow. The eighteenth century artist could only reference, in a very subtle way, the inequalities existing between the classes in contemporary society. The need to do this explains why so many of the works painted before 1770 hint of stage management. Figures are invariably dressed to impress in perfect clothes that make no allowance for manual activity.

The children are scaled-down adults, the gestures stiff, the faces virtually devoid of expression, the lands artfully landscaped, the house imposing. Arthur Devis encapsulates this motif in an eighteenth century vision of Utopia, where inhabitants are beautiful, and unrest and deprivation do not exist. In a work entitled *Robert Gwilym of Atherton and His Family* (Fig. 1–3), the proud owner of Atherton Hall has commissioned, for posterity, a record of the various members of his immediate family, arranged in front of their impressive mansion. Robert Gwilym would have undoubtedly employed the earlier referenced land

agent/overseer, whose duty was to immediately quell any form of local unrest among the unseen workforce of the countryside, should it arise. Consequently, the majority of the wealthy landowners, like Gwillym, would have been unaware of the rural disturbances taking place.

Nonetheless, despite the possible ignorance of this state of affairs, it may be presumed that the ruling and aristocratic classes were fully cognizant of other changes taking place. Changes, occurring from the early years of the eighteenth century, where people from outside the upper strata of society were eager to emulate the latter's privileged lifestyle. In the process, the need for and reclamation of more land was required for new builds, suggesting there was a considerable decline in the acres owned by the "smaller squires and the landed gentry." The new consumers, including persons from a trade, medical or law background, were a different breed of house builders and landowners, with different customs, a group who preferred to retire to the country only at the end of a career, as their main interests and income were centred in the big cities, especially London. The archetype, in contrast, chose to divide their time between the two.⁸

Charles Saumarez Smith has linked a number of the former class and their individual builds together, so it is helpful, when considering this facet, to identify three members of the group who were instrumental in bringing about this metamorphosis.⁹ Firstly, to note the early date of the 1730s, of an image that may be attributed to the purchase and re-build of *Redland Court* (Fig. 1–4). This "fashionable classical mansion" belonged to one John Cossins Esq. The building, given its design and size, indicates the prospective owner must have given his architect, J. Strachan, carte blanche in the erection, without due regard to the final cost. Cossins was undeniably a man of wealth, who, though cited as a "London gentleman", was affiliated with a wealthy grocer's family and married to the daughter of a Bristol merchant. Demonstrably, it was not a pedigree comparable to the lineage of the quintessential aristocratic landowner.

Possibly because of his background, Cossins chose to incorporate, into his own build, aspects of Houghton Hall, Norfolk (discussed by John Summerson) and built for Sir Robert Walpole, to a design by Colen Campbell. This was an action further demonstrating the attempt by the son of a grocer, to emulate the position, authority, and grand mansion of a Prime Minister. As there does not seem to be a portrait of the said John Cossins, it is likely he did not consider it necessary to commission one, but instead left *Redland Court* as a record of his rise in society. However, this was not the case with Ralph Allen, whose likeness was painted by William Hoare. Obviously, Allen considered a pictorial form of immortality significant, and one to be used in conjunction with his notable build. A

space that was created by a person, who climbed up through the ranks of the eighteenth century postal system; from the lowly position of post office clerk to one of Postmaster of Bath, and whose fortune was made through reform of the postal system.¹⁰

The munificence of Ralph Allen's vast home informs the viewer of the possibility of success, even if one's origin stems from relative humble beginnings. An engraving of the house *Prior Park* (Fig. 1–5) gives an indication of its size and design, with the additional surprise element of a railway on the periphery, the latter apparently arousing the curiosity of the general public who peer over the wall for a closer inspection. The fabric used in its construction is also relevant. Allen was obviously a very astute businessman and self-promoter, as the material used, Bath Stone, emanated from the quarries he owned, and was an additional element contributing to his fortune. It is an instance of a self-made man, initially portraying himself as a “gentleman”, whilst covertly advancing his business interests through the use of his specialist material. Furthermore, the latter was used to demonstrate its efficacy, for apparently the builders in London had an aversion to the stone. Not only was the Bath Stone championed, the design, as intimated by Christopher Christie, was influenced again by the work of Colen Campbell—Wanstead House.¹¹

The pattern of the copy and adaption of existing architectural designs, by contemporary architects, for specific clients, continued with the creation of repeated impressive structures. This may be noted in the build of a grand house for Francis Sykes, the third member of the aspirants to the eighteenth century upper class lifestyle. Basildon Park represented one of a series of houses built in the favoured Palladian tradition between 1766-1783 by John Carr.¹² However, unlike Ralph Allen, who used his build for self-advertisement, Sykes chose to eradicate all references to his humble beginnings and the source of his private fortune in the stones of his particular “big house”.

Francis Sykes was the son of a Yorkshire Yeoman, who wished to be remembered as the paradigm of a refined and educated gentleman of the landowning class. Any reference to the derogatory term of “nabob”, the appellation given to a person like Sykes, who had made his money in India as an employee of the East India Company, had to be obliterated. Yet, despite his wealth, and eventual elevation to the title of a baronet, his aspiration towards a political career was hindered by an element of scandal regarding financial corruption.¹³ Consequently, this aspersion illustrates the difficulties faced by a member of the non-aristocratic class when attempting a feat of upward mobility. It can be assumed the landowning

gentry, in general, resented such infringement of their privileged domain, but, in the face of change, could do little to halt its progress.

Laurence Stone, and his co-author Fawtier Stone, concur with this insinuation, but nevertheless believe more investigation on the subject is necessary, to better ascertain to what extent the territory of the landed elite was relatively closed to the business classes throughout the eighteenth century. The writers further surmise that many of the latter, who obtained their goal through the creation of a big house, with all the attendant trappings, were “merely transients” who retained their new property for one or at most two generations. This was contrary to the aristocracy who, in most instances, inhabited their dwellings for centuries.¹⁴ Perversely, this theory is questioned by Charles Saumarez Smith, who additionally believes more investigation is necessary into the subject. He suggests the introduction of a specific style of “architectural order” during the period in question, hid the class of any new house builder and so aided upward mobility.¹⁵ Does this supposition contain an element of truth? If so, who were the architects and what style of architecture did they champion for new clients?

A consideration of the rise of the architect, his buildings and his patrons

The first part of this chapter relates to the class of people for whom a country house was of the utmost importance, and to some of those with newly acquired wealth who wished to emulate their superiors. First and foremost, it is essential to appreciate that the prevailing social conditions of the time created an unequal bestowal of “income, wealth and power.”¹⁶ At the bottom of the social scale, the labourer led a life of mere existence and toil, unacknowledged, and always at the behest of the master who inhabited the top echelons of society. However, changes in this two-tiered structure were becoming evident and it was now possible to detect a burgeoning class of men, with newly acquired wealth obtained through investment and trade. They were able to “buy into” the lifestyle and refined tastes of the landed gentry, if they so desired.¹⁷

Even the characteristics expected of those belonging to the aristocracy were changing. Prior to the beginning of the eighteenth century, refinement was not a quality equated with the latter. Heretofore, members of this class were only expected to possess the essential qualities of bravado, splendour and an absolute awareness of their superior position. They were not required to be men of learning. However, in the wake of the Renaissance came new ideas, which, together with the advent of print,

would place greater emphasis on literacy. Accordingly, the more widely available printed word created an interest in the acquisition of books.¹⁸ Following on from this new trait (an element denied to the lower classes until well into the nineteenth century), it became important for a man of quality, and the landowner, to become associated with a display of culture and literacy. Both factors required shelves and hanging space when a collection of books and paintings became *de rigueur*. These were areas, which would become an integral part of the interiors of the newly designed and built houses of the eighteenth century, as illustrated in Hogarth's family group (Fig. 1-1).

The emphasis on a show of learning and knowledge of art led, in the latter instance, to new commissions for the artist. The works now inevitably assumed the form of a facsimile of a particular architectural building or the family group amid the visual display of possessions and wealth. This priority motivated members of the landowning class to assign and use their wealth for their own gratification and grandiose displays, rather than for agricultural improvements. These constituents would establish the "big house" and surrounding estate as an integral part of the countryside, and lead them to become a phenomenon of eighteenth century rural England.¹⁹ The upsurge of architecture was an element, according to R.G. Wilson and A.L. Mackley, which would not have gone unnoticed by the landowning class as they travelled around the countryside visiting acquaintances.²⁰ These journeys would have additionally provided an opportunity to note and compare the differing styles and scales of buildings for any perspective architectural owner.

From the outburst of building construction, emerged a new genre of architecture. One developed out of the Palladian style of the seventeenth century, whose main proponent had been Inigo Jones and his contemporaries. Reigning supreme for several decades, this element was the preferred style of building for the "second generation" of Whig Aristocracy. The members of this class would become its champions, and initially, its prime builders. Subsequently, from this design would evolve the Rule of Taste, which resulted in the inception of a specific set of ideas pertaining to all that was pre-eminent in contemporary building.²¹ Upholders of this form included the architects, Colen Campbell, James Gibbs, James Paine, and William Kent.

Socially, it was the cause of a shift from the centrality and importance of court life, which was pre-eminent around the turn of the century. Following in its wake, came a new acknowledgment of the countryside, rather than the city, as paramount in the lifestyle of its leaders. The former was now regarded, not only as an important refuge, wherein this class of

people could enjoy rural delights and leisure time, but also instrumental in forming the character of the “nation’s leaders.” Consequently, the country-house was now recognized as a court, which attracted a plethora of artistic talent, and was adjudged to be of “architectural, social, economic and artistic import.”²²

The number of houses constructed in the first half of the eighteenth century is put at approximately one hundred and fifty. Sheer necessity, given the high cost of such builds, demanded that the perpetrators be wealthy. This is reflected in the incomes quoted for the period of £40,000.00 per year for a rich aristocratic, against £20.00 for a male labourer.²³ Amounts indicative of the great divide between those who had and those who did not have, during this period. The big house now metamorphosed as a status symbol for the upper classes and a display of their munificence, both within and on the landscape. Therefore, it was considered appropriate for the owners to take a vested interest in their builds or, in many instances, the altering of an earlier prototype. Viscount Irwins and his wife, who were the owners of Temple Newsam in Yorkshire, were known to have run into excessive financial difficulties when attempting a “major remodelling” of the building. Consequently, they were forced to borrow heavily from William Milner, who was one of Leeds wealthiest merchants. However, it is believed Milner was always “careful to treat the aristocratic couple with great deference.” Obviously, he was aware of the social divide existing between him and the needful couple and chose to tread circumspectly in any dealing he had with them.²⁴

Another issue arises in regard to the supposed accurate representations of the big house, and brought into question with regard to *Atherton Hall* (Fig. 1–3). This latter is presumed to relate to an engraving by Colen Campbell in his tome, *Vitruvius Britannicus*, which bears a passing resemblance to the central part of the façade of Houghton Hall. The architect, William Wakefield, designed the house in 1723 for his client, Robert Atherton. Wakefield, according to John Summerson, was a Yorkshire gentleman “who from about 1713 built and altered houses in the north in a style close to Vanbrugh.”²⁵ It is possible this summation of the architectural career of Wakefield helps to further explain the disparity between the build and that shown in the Devis painting. To note also that the latter is dated 1745 to 1747, which, by this time, the house had passed to Atherton’s son-in-law, William Gwilym, who completed its build. Christopher Christie further asserts that Devis, at the time of painting, had to devise the façade for the image, further clarifying the structural discrepancies.²⁶