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## *Chapter 1*

### **Setting the scene**

In the 1790s Georgian Britain was changing at a great pace. War went hand in hand with technological and economic change to affect great swathes of the growing population, and the impact was profound across the whole country and in every aspect of life. This book is concerned, however, with one small area of England over one short period, and looks at the effect of just one of the many economic innovations of the time: the area is western Hertfordshire, the period is from 1791 to 1841, and the innovation is the Grand Junction Canal.

But, having set those limits, the broader picture, the context in which the detail is set, should first be considered. The area being studied here was neither unique nor detached: it was an integral part of the country, and what was happening elsewhere had an impact here that needs to be understood. Hertfordshire has been famously characterised as ‘a county of small towns’; but it was also an agrarian county. It had some industry – and it was close to, and much affected by, the great metropolis of London.<sup>1</sup> Like the rest of the country, it changed during the fifty years of this study, and we will try to chart how it changed: but by no means all of the changes are due to the coming of the canal, and we should look first at what was happening elsewhere in England at this remarkably dynamic time – in economic, industrial and social development, and in both towns and the countryside around them.

#### *Agriculture in late eighteenth-century England*

At the end of the eighteenth century notable features of English agriculture included strong tenant–landlord relationships, an easy exchange of influences between town and countryside that provided both capital and a commercial

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1 T. Slater and N. Goose (eds), *A county of small towns* (Hatfield, 2008); Nigel Agar, *Behind the plough* (Hatfield, 2005); William Branch Johnson, *The industrial archaeology of Hertfordshire* (Newton Abbot, 1970).

outlook to farming, and a technologically innovative group of farmers and landowners. It was also relatively difficult to break up family estates but easy to invest in them, so they tended to remain commercially viable; and the owners of the land generally recognised that it should be used for production and not simply to demonstrate their wealth and prestige. The result was that English farming was able to respond to its market in terms of both farm size and the use of farming techniques best suited to the area. The market was highly volatile and under increasing pressure from a growing population, and farming became particularly flexible and productive in response.<sup>2</sup>

Until about 1775 England had been self-sufficient in the products required to feed the nation, and indeed was exporting in most years to mainland Europe. The Corn Laws had been in place for many years, controlling the flow of grain exports and ensuring that the home market had preference. They worked, particularly after 1773, by paying a bounty to exporters when stocks were high and prices low, and by reducing the import duty when stocks were low, especially after a poor harvest, and prices high. The aspiration was to balance the interests of consumer and farmer by keeping prices relatively stable, and while the overall effect was probably to raise prices somewhat, they did ensure that the home market was supplied with (principally) wheat in most years – a vital consideration, since bread formed the staple diet to a remarkable degree.<sup>3</sup>

Until the early eighteenth century local requirements had to be met locally, with a mixed system of farming in most areas and consumption limited to what was available. Little could be done to change the conditions for farming: naturally poor soils, heavy clays and rich loams remained so, with the types of farming practised on them changing little and serving a largely local market.<sup>4</sup> But as techniques improved there was an increasing degree of regional specialisation of product and a widening of markets, helped by transport improvements that allowed produce to be moved more easily from source to market and thus production to concentrate on what best suited the conditions. Thus, in very broad terms, arable crops came to be found south and east of a line roughly between Peterborough and Worcester, with pastoral farming to the north and west and sheep very important in, for example, Yorkshire: in the sandy and dry East Anglian conditions, the fens having been drained from the seventeenth century, wheat was a major crop.<sup>5</sup> Over time, light-soil farming in the south and east came to have

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2 J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The agricultural revolution* (London, 1978), pp. 200–2. Note that the situation in Scotland and Ireland was different, and is not included in this analysis.

3 M.J. Daunton, *Progress and poverty* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 546, 547.

4 Daunton, *Progress and poverty*, pp. 26, 27.

5 G.M. Trevelyan, *English social history volume three: the eighteenth century* (Cambridge,

distinct advantages over that on the wet and heavy soils of the Midlands and north. The addition of sheep dung to the thin soils made them more suitable for arable farming, with wheat for bread, oats for horse feed and barley for malting becoming important crops. The heavy soils further north supported a different mix, but all types of farming were able to increase their output and so meet the growing demand. Techniques were improving and organisation, not least in marketing and trading, developing quickly: farming was becoming steadily more efficient, more so in some regions than others, but nonetheless measurably so everywhere.

There was, however, a steadily emerging problem in most parts of the country. The population was increasing in both countryside and towns, but the amount of agricultural work available to the rural inhabitants was not keeping pace: more efficient farming was producing more but needed relatively fewer people to do so. The overall number employed increased, certainly, but the population as a whole was growing more quickly. The resulting surplus population responded in quite different ways in different parts of the country, and the interaction of industry and agriculture is important for this study. But it was inevitable that those dependent on agricultural work, especially in the south, would have their incomes severely restricted, and rural poverty became both widespread and endemic.<sup>6</sup>

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1950), pp. 82, 83.

6 Pamela Horn, *The rural world* (London, 1980), pp. 32–4.