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0521403650 - London in the Age of Industrialisation: Entrepreneurs, Labour Force and
Living Conditions, 1700-1850
L. D. Schwarz
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Introduction

London was the largest of the great cities of the European *ancien régime*. Historians of the period invariably mention it, frequently describe it, and occasionally analyse it. But, despite their efforts, very little is known about London during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We have some knowledge of how the national economy adapted to the growth of London, of how the growth of London affected the specialisation of agriculture, industry and mining far beyond London, of London's role in banking and international trade, of the patterns of migration caused by the size and attractions of the capital. But we know much less of the reverse situation – how the national and international economy affected London, how developments in banking and trade, in law and government affected the developing economy and society of the capital. 'The capital cities', wrote Braudel when describing the eighteenth century, 'would be present at the forthcoming industrial revolution, but in the role of spectators. Not London but Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Glasgow and innumerable small proletarian towns launched the new era.'¹ But the nation's capital could hardly be irrelevant to the new industrial era – it was far too large and important to be 'isolated' – and much of this book will be seeking to analyse the connections. Industrial revolution or not, late eighteenth-century London had more steam engines with more horse power than Lancashire;² mid nineteenth-century London remained by far the largest manufacturing city in the country. It was also the largest port, even if not the fastest

¹ F. Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800* (1974), p. 440.

² A. E. Musson, 'Industrial motive power in the United Kingdom, 1800–1870', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., 29 (1976), p. 426; J. Kanefsky and J. Robey, 'Steam engines in eighteenth-century Britain: a quantitative assessment', *Technology and Culture*, 21 (1980), pp. 175–6.

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growing: during the course of the eighteenth century England's trade quadrupled, but the trade of the Port of London trebled and the capital's shipbuilding industry expanded accordingly. Throughout the eighteenth century, over two-thirds of England's foreign trade passed through the Port of London.³ Both at the beginning and at the end of the eighteenth century, well over four-fifths of those who lived in towns with populations of 10,000 and over lived in the capital; one in ten of the population of England and Wales lived there; it has been estimated that one in six of the population had lived there at some point of their lives.⁴ For those with ambition, it was always 'the place to be'. It had more doctors than the rest of the country put together, and more lawyers. Few writers with any pretensions, few aristocrats in search of a dowry, nobody aspiring to national influence could stay away from it for too long. Dr Johnson's famous remark that a man who was tired of London was tired of life because there was in London all that life could afford was true if one was, like Johnson, much attached to tea and conversation and little attached to the virtues of clean air or a quiet environment. In the mid 1730s, London had nearly nine-tenths of the nation's dealers in tea and coffee.⁵

Yet, most of this period marked a lull in the explosive growth of London. The first heroic age had been between 1500 and 1650, when its population increased fivefold and London was the forcing house of urban-led change. It was the 'shock city' of the time: not only by far the largest, but also one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, accounting for most of the urban growth that took place in England. During the second half of the seventeenth century it overtook Paris to become the largest city in Europe. At the start of the sixteenth century one in fifty of the population of England lived there; two centuries later one in ten lived there and one person in six may have spent a part of his or her life there.

By the last third of the seventeenth century London's growth was slowing down, and it slowed down more during the first half of the eighteenth century. At the start of the seventeenth century, 59 per cent of those living in towns with populations of 5,000 or more were living in London; by the end of the century this proportion had risen to two-thirds. Then it fell: on an optimistic projection of the capital's population in 1750 the figure had fallen to 56 per cent of the total,

³ P. J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 71-2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8; Jan de Vries, *European Urbanization, 1500-1800* (1984), p. 64; E. A. Wrigley, 'A simple model of London's importance in changing English society and economy, 1650-1750', *Past and Present*, 37 (1967), pp. 44, 70.

⁵ L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (1988), p. 62. Out of a national figure of 3,817, 3,415 were in London, in 1736-7.

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while it was 40 per cent by 1801 and less than a third in 1851. London was no longer the forcing house for urbanisation. It would never be so again, even though by the start of the nineteenth century it was well into its second heroic age of expansion and well over four-fifths of those who lived in towns with 10,000 or more inhabitants were living there. During the succeeding century the population of London would triple. In 1851, with a population of more than two and a quarter millions, London was some six times larger than its nearest rival, Liverpool, and still the largest port.⁶

The century and a half that this book covers comprises, therefore, two periods of London's growth. The first great boom, the boom that preceded the eighteenth century, had defined the two poles of growth in London: the City and the Port. During the succeeding century and a half, the outline that had been sketched earlier was filled in and the definitions of such areas became clearer. The City and Westminster were joined up, the ring of suburbs surrounding them thickened; on the south side of the Thames the ribbon of development was lengthened, and more suburbs developed. There were many changes – in wealth, in trade and the structure of power, in the role of services – but these did not overturn the order of things that had already been established.

Such an overturning was to take place during the nineteenth century, with the explosive growth of London far beyond its eighteenth-century boundaries and the merging of the City and Westminster to form a central business district, the whole forming the 'great wen' of Cobbett's nightmares. The London magistracy was strengthened, the Home Office made sure that it was kept well informed, but London ceased to be a town known to its rulers. 'What can be stable with these enormous towns?' lamented Lord Liverpool in 1819. 'One serious insurrection in London and all is lost',⁷ a cry far removed from an eighteenth-century prime minister, used to having his windows broken regularly by the London mob, a mob that – at any rate before the Gordon riots – went to work frequently enough, sometimes aggressively, sometimes destructively, always assertively, but usually within careful bounds.

But, far into the nineteenth century there were many respects in which London had not changed fundamentally. The classic study of eighteenth-century London, Dorothy George's *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* – which, despite its title, encroached liberally into

⁶ B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 26–7.

⁷ Quoted in E. Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century: II The Liberal Awakening* (1961 ed.), p. 103.

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the first third of the nineteenth century – insisted that conditions were slowly improving but did not consider that there had been marked structural changes in the composition of the capital's population and economy. Like innumerable smaller towns in Western Europe that historians once considered to have been by-passed by the onward march of progress, industry and coal, London adapted itself to change that took place elsewhere and profited from such change. It remained a city of artisans, of trade, of doctors, lawyers and government. In the eighteenth century it had more lawyers than the rest of the country put together and also more doctors. It maintained its large service sector, with its role as a centre of government and empire, of shops and fashion, of sailors, of merchants and of servants. Nor was the absence of structural change in its manufacturing sector surprising – manufacturing in the capital tended to be in the finishing trades, and these did not undergo extensive mechanisation until the 1860s. Ship-building awaited the onset of steamships, which did not arrive on a large scale until the mid nineteenth century, while the wealth of the capital's upper and middle classes continued to grow, and with it the demand for servants as well as for other suitable services.

Under the apparently stable surface, however, change was constant. The first part of this book examines the structure of this economy, its occupations, its importance as a national centre for manufacturing as well as for services, and the distribution of wealth within the metropolis. The start of the eighteenth century is perhaps as good or bad a starting point as any other, but the 1850s are a good point to stop, with the old artisan economy – the traditional labour aristocracy – enjoying its Indian summer, yet under pressure, partly from new levels of mechanisation and partly from the ever growing weight of services in the City of London and in Westminster. The pyramid of wealth was steep. Few had much wealth, but most of those that did were in the service sector.

The second part of this book examines fluctuations in the economic activity of the metropolis during this century and a half. Fundamental structures may not have changed, but everything else fluctuated and usually grew. The impact of incipient trade cycles was, in the eighteenth century, much compounded by the drastic effects of the outbreak of war – and sometimes also by the outbreak of peace: crises in credit and production occurred regularly. But that should not obscure the longer-run trends. There is much evidence that conditions in London were difficult during the second third of the eighteenth century, more difficult than in much of the rest of the country. The metropolitan economy was also growing more slowly

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for a while from the late 1820s. Yet, all these longer-term fluctuations took place within a strong pattern of seasonality, with the annual cycle of production heavily influenced – often dominated – by the weather, the winds and the predictable peaks of London demand. It was these seasonal fluctuations that had such drastic effects on the structure of the London trades, on the attempts by the more fortunate trades to preserve a precarious gentility, on the meaning of that excessively vague term ‘the standard of living’, and on the composition of the labour force. Seasonality was the major influence, wars and trade cycles – so far as they can be distinguished from each other – came next.

For the lower three-quarters of the population, the experience of seasonal fluctuations did not change much during this period, but their life expectancy did. Chapter five examines this experience – more important, after all, for the populace than relatively minor changes in wage rates, while also being of considerable importance for understanding the role that London played in the national pattern of migration and doing a great deal to explain the economic stagnation of the second third of the eighteenth century. The death rate did fall during the eighteenth century, but not until quite late in the century, while the pattern of mortality and the incidence of different diseases changed drastically. For the first time, London was no longer a town that devoured the lives of an enormous proportion of its infants and children and cut deep into its rural hinterland. By 1840 its crude death rate was close to the national average: high by twentieth-century terms, but less than half that of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

At the same time – and this is examined in part three – the conditions of life and the standard of living for the London artisanate were constantly being modified. Wage rates for a number of fairly representative London trades are presented in chapter six together with various price indices, but it is dangerous to assume that the series of real wage rates so produced gives a clear picture of some notional ‘average standard of living’. Quite apart from obvious problems of unemployment, there are more serious questions, relating to the number of people who earned a money wage and depended on nothing else, which are also discussed in chapter six. A further problem, which has exercised the attention of historians to a certain degree, is that the environment of enterprise was not the same in 1850 as in 1700, even for small-scale artisan enterprises. One of the fundamental problems in the study of living standards is that the histories of living standards, as given by the indices of real wage rates, give one story; the histories of trades frequently give quite a different story. Rarely do the two coincide. This is especially true for the

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semi-skilled trades: benefiting from the cheap bread of the early eighteenth century, and not being affected as much as most of the other London trades by the price rise from the mid century onwards, they entered into a complex relationship with other London trades. The relationship of wage rates, earnings and the situation of trades within a mutual hierarchy is a complex matter. Average earnings mean little during a period of rapid change, they mean little during a period of industrialisation, and London was feeling the impact of industrialisation, even if only indirectly. The first half of the nineteenth century was an age of pressure for the semi-skilled trades – the less skilled among the tailors, the shoemakers, the furniture makers and others. The defence of the precarious gentility of many in the semi-skilled trades was as noticeable and as typical a feature of the eighteenth-century trades as was their degradation in the nineteenth century. For much of this time qualitative changes and changes in status within these trades were far more important than changes in wage rates, since many experienced a change in status for the worse. Traditional means of control, such as apprenticeship regulations, guilds or the magistracy, had done little to restrain competition; during the first third of the nineteenth century these restraints finally disappeared, as they were bound to do. The altering exchanges between the capital and the provinces were at the core of the changes in the modes of production in the capital, just as they were at the core of the growth and continued predominance of the service sector.

Inevitably, this book draws heavily on Dorothy George's *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*. First published in 1926, and frequently reprinted, it will remain a classic of its kind. The labour that went into its production was prodigious; time and again one begins to write about something only to find that Dorothy George has already dealt with the subject, and done so with more authority. It is only on population that she can be seriously faulted. Nevertheless, the book reflects the interests of the time: it has many scattered figures but few tables or series of figures; its insistence that the nineteenth century was better than the eighteenth relies rather heavily on Francis Place and leads to a socially somewhat undifferentiated picture, while it does not distinguish sufficiently between different epochs within the period studied. Stressing the general awfulness of life for the eighteenth-century poor, and the discomforts of life for the less poor, may well have been necessary in 1926 but is necessary no longer. But it is because of Dorothy George that this book contains so many tables and graphs. They are not inherently superior to prose, but they point the way to the path that she left open.

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PART I

Wealth and occupations in London

Seventeenth-century London was a town with two centres. The 'old' London consisted of the City, the centre of trade and finance, flanked by the Port and by the manufacturing suburbs of the Tower, Clerkenwell and Southwark. The 'new' London was in Westminster, with its Court and Parliament, with its developing squares, its aristocratic Season, its large glass-plated shops, its luxury trades and craftsmen.¹ During the course of the eighteenth century the two centres were joined together – a geographical reflection of a unity that existed economically if not always politically.² But at the start of the nineteenth century this duality – the different economic, administrative and geographical roles of the Port and the Court – was still clearly recognisable. The inner City, or 'City within the Walls', with a population of around 70,000 – a seventh of the capital's population – at the beginning of the eighteenth century, which fell to 56,000 – a twentieth part – in 1821, was far wealthier than the outer City, the 'City without the Walls', which had some 50,000 inhabitants in 1700 and about 65,000 during the first half of the nineteenth century. Westminster, in the meanwhile, had a population of perhaps some 70,000 in 1700, which had risen to over 150,000 by 1801 and was up to 237,000 half a century later.³ During the eighteenth century Westminster was

¹ E. Jones, 'London in the early seventeenth century: an ecological approach', *London Journal*, 6 (1980), pp. 131–2.

² The classic description is J. Summerson, *Georgian London* (Harmondsworth, 1962), pp. 18–23. For the nineteenth century, F. H. W. Sheppard, *London 1808–1870. The Infernal Wen* (1971), pp. 9–17. A brief account in H. Clout, 'London in transition', in H. Clout and P. Wood (eds.), *London: Problems of Change* (1986), pp. 23–32, with a map of the built-up area, updating the map in O. H. K. Spate, 'The growth of London, A.D. 1600–1800', in H. C. Darby (ed.), *An Historical Geography of England* (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 529–48.

³ The figures for the City are taken from P. E. Jones and A. V. Judges, 'London's population in the late seventeenth century', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 1st ser., 6 (1935–6),

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expanding as rapidly as any of the London suburbs. During the first half of the nineteenth century it grew by over 50 per cent, but the nineteenth-century population explosion took place largely in the new 'outer' London, the ring of parishes surrounding the City, Westminster and Southwark. From Marylebone to Hackney in the north, from Richmond to Lambeth in the south, this ring contained some 300,000 inhabitants in 1700, over half a million a century later, and nearly 1,900,000 in 1851. After 1800, when the population of London was increasing at the rate of 20 per cent a decade, Westminster's expansion of some 50 per cent during the first half of the century paled by comparison with St Pancras, which expanded more than fourfold, Marylebone, which grew from 64,000 in 1801 to 158,000 in 1851, or Paddington, which increased from less than 2,000 to over 46,000.

In the eighteenth century, however, this explosion had yet to occur. Not only were the 'Port' – the City – and the 'Court' – Westminster – recognisable entities, but the Port, taken literally, and the Court, taken in the sense of London Society, were the two largest centres of employment in the capital for both skilled and unskilled labour. They were both microcosms in their own right. 'The seamen here are a generation differing from all the world', wrote Sir John Fielding in an early tourists' guide.

When one goes into Rotherhithe and Wapping, which places are inhabited chiefly by sailors, but that somewhat of the same language is spoken, a man would be apt to suspect himself in another country. Their manner of living, speaking, acting, dressing, and behaving, are so very peculiar to themselves.⁴

By the standards of its time, the Port was enormous. Defoe noted three wet docks, twenty-two dry docks and thirty-three yards for laying up, repairing and building merchant ships.⁵ It was responsible for many of the food-processing trades that handled the produce imported into London, such as sugar refining and distilling, not to

pp. 45–63. R. A. P. Finlay and B. Shearer, 'Population growth and suburban expansion', in A. L. Beier and R. A. P. Finlay (eds.), *London 1500–1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (1986), produce a figure of 103,000 for the City Within and Without combined in 1680, which is rather low, and then have the City's population falling to 85,000 by 1700, which certainly seems too low, although it does not affect the basic argument of this chapter.

⁴ J. Fielding, *A Description of the Cities of London and Westminster* (1776), p. xiii. Admittedly, when Boswell visited Wapping in 1792, ten years after Johnson suggested that the exploration was worth making, he was disappointed, but after a tour of the Highlands he may have been expecting too much: *London Life*, p. 78. Also, sailors may have formed a lesser proportion of the capital's population by then, which may help to account for his disappointment.

⁵ D. Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 317.

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Wealth and occupations

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mention shipbuilding, coopering, ropemaking, innkeeping and an infinity of other trades. Professor Ralph Davis has guessed that during the early eighteenth century, a quarter of London's population depended on the Port 'directly or indirectly'.⁶ Some contemporaries believed the figure to be far greater. Patrick Colquhoun, a police magistrate as well as a self-proclaimed and highly creative statistician who managed to achieve a remarkable degree of credence both at the time and subsequently, stated in 1800 that 120,000 men were directly employed on the riverside.⁷ The 1801 census had not yet appeared, or he might have reconsidered including nearly half the capital's adult males. Nevertheless, the fact that he produced such a figure shows how important he considered the river to be. Equally importantly, people believed him and it is true that a very large proportion of Londoners must, at some time during the year, have worked on the riverside.⁸

The 'Court' was the other large employer of labour. Like the Port, it employed an immense service sector, especially in transport. To a considerable degree the demands for labour of the Port and the Court overlapped and for all we know many people may have spent different seasons of the year in each of them. The West End required its share of porters, carriers and chairmen and received its share of housebreakers. Unlike the riverside, it was also a profligate employer of women.

Apart from the Port and the Court there was a large number of other trades and much manufacturing, usually in the suburbs. Silkweavers were concentrated in Spitalfields, watch makers in Clerkenwell. The more noxious trades, such as tanning, were banished south of the Thames. Potters were in Chelsea, Lambeth and Bow, brewers were in Southwark. Examples could easily be multiplied. The recent histories of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London refer to them at some length,⁹ and such descriptions are essential to a proper understanding of the metropolis. But inevitably they fail to provide criteria for comparing London with other towns. Something more systematic is required and this is provided in chapter one.

⁶ R. Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1962), p. 390.

⁷ P. Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Commerce and Police of the River Thames* (1800), pp. xxx–xxxI. See appendix one of this book for a critical assessment of Colquhoun.

⁸ In fact the parishes directly on the riverside and directly involved with the Port had a total population in 1801 of 89,733, a tenth of the total metropolis. This takes the parishes east of the City and Southwark and includes St Katherine Tower, Wapping, St George's-in-the-East, Shadwell, Ratcliffe, Limehouse, Poplar and Blackwall, St John Horsleydown, Bermondsey and Rotherhithe, giving a total population of 89,733.

⁹ G. Rudé, *Hanoverian London, 1714–1808* (1971), pp. 1–19; Sheppard, *Infernal Wen*, pp. 7–17, 158–201.

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Chapter two develops the conclusions of chapter one by examining the role of manufacturing and services within the metropolitan economy, their relationship with the production of goods and services elsewhere in England and their relationship to each other within the capital. The stress is not on the impact of the capital on provincial production¹⁰ but on the impact of the provinces on the capital. London manufacturing existed within a national context and needed to adapt itself to changing provincial costs; since this was the age of industrialisation, these costs were changing rather drastically. Within London itself, however, manufacturing was competing with services. The relationship of the capital's manufacturing and service sectors to provincial competition and their relationship to each other were the crucial factors influencing the nature of economic activity in London during the years between 1700 and 1850.

Chapter two also examines the social structure and the distribution of incomes within London, mainly, but not only, during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Discussions of the social pyramid in pre-industrial English towns have tended to confine themselves to extremes, pointing out the wealthiest and the poorest strata of the population and dismissing the remainder. Historians of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England have worked a great deal on the economic backgrounds of individual towns and on the development of their economies. While there has been some work on the economic background of urban England and on the contribution of towns to economic growth, there has been rather less investigation of the occupational structure of towns and less still on the overall distribution of incomes and social classes within towns, a surprising omission when the volume of publications on this topic for the seventeenth century is borne in mind, though less surprising when the paucity of eighteenth-century sources is considered.¹¹ However, for the last quarter of the eighteenth century there are some sources – tax returns of 1798 and insurance policies for the years between 1775 and 1787 – which make it possible to reach reasonably reliable conclusions on income distribution, on social segregation and even on the distribution of wealth within trades.

Essentially, part one of this book deals with structures – employment, incomes and social structure. Through all the uncertainties of life, trade and war, and the fivefold expansion of London's population, many of these structures remained unchanged.

¹⁰ Wrigley, 'A simple model'; A. L. Beier, 'Engine of manufacture: the trades of London', in A. L. Beier and R. A. P. Finlay (eds.), *London 1500–1700* (1986), pp. 141–67.

¹¹ L. D. Schwarz, 'Social class and social geography: the middle classes in London at the end of the eighteenth century', *Social History*, 7 (1982), references on pp. 179–80.