The TIME TRAVELLER'S GUIDE to REGENCY BRITAIN



IAN MORTIMER

This is the age of Jane Austen and the Romantic poets; the paintings of John Constable and the gardens of Humphry Repton; the sartorial elegance of Beau Brummell and the poetic licence of Lord Byron; Britain's military triumphs at Trafalgar and Waterloo; the threat of revolution and the Peterloo massacre. In the latest volume of his celebrated series of Time Traveller's Guides, Ian Mortimer turns to what is arguably the most-loved period in British history – the Regency, or Georgian England.

A time of exuberance, thrills, frills and unchecked bad behaviour, it was perhaps the last age of true freedom before the arrival of the stifling world of Victorian morality. At the same time, it was a period of transition that reflected unprecedented social, economic and political change. And like all periods in history, it was an age of many contradictions – where Beethoven's thundering Fifth Symphony could premiere in the same year that saw Jane Austen craft the delicate sensitivities of *Persuasion*.

Once more, Ian Mortimer takes us on a thrilling journey to the past, revealing what people ate, drank and wore; where they shopped and how they amused themselves; what they believed in and what they were afraid of. Conveying the sights, sounds and smells of the Regency period, this is history at its most exciting, physical, visceral – the past not as something to be studied but as lived experience.

£20.00

The Time Traveller's Guide to Regency Britain

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The Time Traveller's Guide to Regency Britain

A Handbook for Visitors to the Years 1789–1830

IAN MORTIMER



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For my cousin, Stephen Read, and his wife, Edori Fertig,
with much love

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My largest debt of gratitude is, of course, to my wife, Sophie. There must have been times when she despaired this book would ever be completed, like an early nineteenth-century reformer wondering whether the Reform Bill was ever going to be passed or slavery was ever going to be abolished. But like Lord Grey and William Wilberforce, she stuck at it and continued to support me until the job was done. I am enormously grateful to her for all her encouragement.

Ian Mortimer
Moretonhampstead, Devon
6 April 2020

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The most ordinary articles of domestic life are looked on with some interest, if they are brought to light after being long buried; and we feel a natural curiosity to know what was done and said by our forefathers, even though it may be nothing wiser or better than what we are daily doing or saying ourselves. Some of this generation may be little aware how many conveniences, now considered to be necessaries and matters of course, were unknown to their grandfathers and grandmothers.

James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1869)

Memory is not a book where things and events are recorded but rather a field where seeds grow, come to maturity and die.

Louis Simond, *Journal of a Tour and Residence in Great Britain* (1815)

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Author's Note

This book is about the island of Great Britain – England, Wales and Scotland – between 1789 and 1830. I refer to the whole of this period as 'the Regency', in line with most other historians, literary critics and antiques experts. Readers should be aware, however, that the official Regency lasted only from 1811 to 1820, when Prince George ruled instead of his mentally ill father, King George III. The starting date for this longer Regency is set by two factors. First, the prince's interim rule was initially proposed in Parliament in February 1789, and although on that occasion his father recovered his senses, the prince was thereafter the Regent-in-waiting, in case the king fell ill again. Of course his influence only grew when he succeeded to the throne as George IV in 1820. The second reason to begin in 1789 is that the French Revolution broke out in the summer of that year, raising profound questions about constitutional reform in Britain as well as on the Continent. As for the end of the period, this is also marked by the question of reform. George IV hated the very idea of constitutional change, largely as a result of the fate of the French royal family. He thus did all he could to thwart it. It was only after his death that the government of the day was free to draft the much-needed Reform Bill and set about tackling some of the social issues raised by the French Revolution. Hence the terminal point of the period is set by the king's death, on 26 June 1830.

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Introduction

On Thursday 28 January 1790, the Reverend Thomas Puddicombe brushed the dirt from his hands and returned to his vicarage in the village of Branscombe, on the South Devon coast. The ceremony at which he had just officiated was, in many ways, a routine one. The words of the burial service were time-honoured and familiar; the sombre dress of those attending was prescribed by custom, their grief unsurprising. No less ordinary was his final duty that day, which was to record the date and the name of the deceased in the parish register. However, when he sat down at his desk and dipped his quill in the ink, he did not write an ordinary entry. He added the cause of death, as follows:

> White, John, aged 77. This man lost his life by a very trifling accident: paring his toenail with a penknife a little too close, so as just to draw blood: it rankled, and a mortification coming on, carried him off in a few days.

Anyone who is familiar with English parish registers will be surprised at this level of detail. But Mr Puddicombe often wrote something about the manner of his parishioners' deaths. After Joseph Hooke, the thirteen-year-old son of a local farmer, met with an accident in 1803, the vicar felt obliged to record that the lad 'was run away with by a spirited horse, fell at the corner of the lane by Hangman's Stone; was dragged the distance of half a mile and found dead in the lane a little way above Higher Watercombe'. And when Jane Toulmin, a twenty-five-year-old woman, drowned herself in May 1798, he wrote three-quarters of a page about the last two days of her life, ending with a description of how:

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> Before she quitted her sister's house, she put out what money she had, and left it in her bedroom and, in this state, without a sixpence in her pocket, she wandered about till Tuesday morning, the day on which, it is to be feared, she put an end to her existence. She was seen at Beer walking very fast up Common Lane between three and four o'clock; and about a quarter past 5 o'clock she was discovered in the water by one John Parrett, a carpenter.

When you read such passages, the world they create doesn't quite chime with our picture of the Regency – the fine houses, the costumes and the carriages. But, of course, country churchyards, horse-riding accidents and young women in a state of distress are also part of the period. And every detailed entry in Thomas Puddicombe's burial register raises questions. Was it usual for people to pare their toenails with a penknife in 1790? Were riding accidents like Joseph Hooke's common? As for poor Jane Toulmin, did people in the 1790s have an understanding of mental illness? You won't find the answers in the pages of a Jane Austen novel: yet they are as revealing of the real world in which she lived as the complex interplay of the characters in her books.

Mr Puddicombe's descriptive burial-register entries abruptly come to an end in 1812. From then on, he was officially prevented from composing them. This was not because he had done anything wrong but because in that year the government imposed a printed form for recording the details of a burial. Each page consisted of a series of boxes in which the officiating minister was required to write the deceased's name, age, place of residence and date of burial – and nothing else.

This shift, from effusive individualism to government-imposed standardisation, is indicative of wider changes. For many people in the 1860s the Regency seemed like the last age of true freedom before the regulation of society started in earnest. The Great Reform Act of 1832 signalled the beginning of the end of the political domination of the aristocracy and landed gentry. In 1833, the Factory Act set limits on the number of hours that children could work each day. That same year, slavery was abolished throughout the British colonies. In 1834 the gibbeting of murderers came to an end. The once-common sight of public executions became rare as abolitionists argued against the death penalty with increasing success. Cruel sports such as cock-fighting and bear-baiting were outlawed in 1835. The compulsory state

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registration of births, marriages and deaths began in 1838. The standardisation of the screw thread by Joseph Whitworth was introduced in 1841, paving the way for mass production. From the mid-1840s, the telegraph enabled messages to be sent instantly over long distances. Trains replaced the regular mail coaches and stagecoaches, rendering highwaymen a thing of the past. Photography started to rival painting as the most common means of recording scenes and portrait images. On top of all these things, a new morality swept across society in the early Victorian period, limiting people's freedom of behaviour. Attitudes to adultery, gambling and unpaid debts especially hardened. You can see why those who looked back from the 1860s saw their Regency forebears as an unfettered and wild bunch, among whom Lord Byron was not the only man who was 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'. It had been a time when gentlemen and ladies, beggars and clergymen, soldiers and tramps, employers and courtesans could all pretty much behave as they saw fit, in a world that gleamed with gold and heroism, drink and sex, excitement and opportunity.

Our own impressions of the years from 1789 to 1830 are not that different. Today, the period is still seen as a time of exuberance and unchecked bad behaviour. Indeed, we consider the conduct of the upper classes to have been particularly immoral, on account of the self-indulgence of the Prince Regent and his companions. The inscription on the Ancient Greek temple of Apollo at Delphi might have instructed the wise to do 'nothing in excess' but the classically educated English upper classes appear to have taken it as a challenge – to do *everything* in excess. Hence you have a royal court of rakes, dandies and hellhounds, all stuffing themselves with rich food, drinking huge amounts of port and gambling away fortunes until the early hours, at which point they would either go to bed with their mistresses or collapse untidily around their mansions – 'snoring in boots on the sofas', as Princess Caroline put it – before waking up to escort their hangovers down to the Houses of Parliament, where they would make speeches about the future of the country. To the ranks of these privileged scoundrels you can add a wide range of other dubious characters: dashing highwaymen, cunning smugglers, gentlemen pugilists and political duellists of all ranks and persuasions. In short, for many of us today the Regency period simply was *the* Age of Excess. Sandwiched between the slightly dull elegance of the eighteenth century and the prim moral superiority of the early Victorians, it all seems licentious,

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naughty, dazzling, dangerous, shocking, offensive and yet, oh, *so* entertaining and attractive.

Hang on a minute, you might say: was this not also the period in which John Nash laid out Regent Street and Regent's Park in London, with their magnificent houses? Was this not the time when George Stephenson built his pioneering steam engines and Michael Faraday developed the electric motor? And have I forgotten that the early nineteenth century saw the establishment of the National Gallery, the decipherment of hieroglyphs and the installation of the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum? Are not the riotousness of the period and these cultural refinements at odds? They are indeed. And you could go further with this line of argument. With regard to the new houses up and down the country, it was precisely in these stately homes, urban squares and crescents that the most riotous people lived. Think of the landscaped gardens of the great houses laid out by Humphry Repton and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. Picture their furniture, made from designs by George Hepplewhite and Thomas Sheraton. Remember the rugs, the paintings, the ornaments, the sculptures, the porcelain, the musical instruments. Many still consider Regency design to be the height of good taste and elegance. To think that it was also associated with the rakes, reprobates and riotous members of society is more than a little surprising.

But herein lies our key to understanding the time. It is only when you find the apparent contradictions in a subject that you begin to appreciate it fully. As the wealthy seemed determined to do everything in excess, it is hardly surprising that their exuberance extended also to spending money, as they sought to demonstrate their place in society by building ever more magnificent houses and commissioning ever finer furniture. As for the intellectual and cultural innovations of the period, can you be surprised that artists and manufacturers went to such extraordinary lengths to please their patrons when there were enormous financial rewards on offer? With the upper classes determined to spend as much money as they could, they created an environment in which the most brilliant artists, architects, scientists and innovators were able to flourish, thereby leaving the impression that this was a golden age. Although the labourers who helped create those fortunes saw only modest improvements in their own living standards and rose up in protest on more than one occasion, that is another matter. After two hundred years, the riots are much less obvious to

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the modern eye than the splendid, well-furnished houses that the wealthy left behind.

The tensions in Regency society were not limited to the contrasts of privilege versus penury, and individualism versus state control. They were also the result of profound social and economic changes. The population of Britain was increasing at a faster rate than it had done at any point in history (and faster than it has done ever since, for that matter). It was also rapidly becoming more urban. Herein we have another contradiction. Did the artists of the time celebrate the growth of the industrial towns? No. They did exactly the opposite: they celebrated the natural world that was being lost. John Constable's most famous painting, *The Hay Wain*, completed in 1821, shows two men chatting leisurely on a cart in the middle of a river. They seem to have all the time in the world, apparently unconcerned about the changes around them. Theirs is an environment shaped by the rhythm of the seasons and a river that will always flow. No columns of smoke cloud the sky; no urban back yards confine their world. John Clare's poetry similarly harks back to a rural idyll, surrounded only by nature and the village life of his childhood. Where artists and poets directly addressed the forces reshaping the landscape, they hardly ever did so in a positive, glorifying way. William Blake's 'dark satanic mills' belched fumes over 'England's green and pleasant land': there was nothing here to delight an artist. The old biblical image of fire coming down from Heaven had been reversed: now the fires reached up to Heaven from Earth. Perhaps the most brilliant artistic evocations of the era are to be found in music, most notably in the universally popular works of Ludwig van Beethoven, but even here we find a cultural conflict. Beethoven's famous Fifth Symphony thundered out like a colossal engine in London for the first time on 15 April 1816. It is difficult to reconcile the majestic, strident, four-note theme with the delicate sensitivities of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, written that same year.

It is a truism to say that the reality of the past is always more complex and varied than our image of it. In this case the very word 'Regency', with all its grand connotations, is part of the problem: it makes everything sound luxurious. Victorian romantics looking back to what seemed a time of greater individual freedom tended not to see how few opportunities were open to *Regency* labourers and their families in the expanding industrial towns. When we look at the

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handsome coins and banknotes from the period it is a salutary thought that most working people never handled gold or paper money. Mention Nelson's navy to them and they would have thought of pressgangs and the conditions aboard those heaving wooden ships, the ear-splitting explosions of cannon and shocks of splintered wood during battle, the cold wind whistling through the rigging and the prospect of a watery grave. But say the words 'Nelson's navy' to a late-nineteenth-century Englishman and he would probably have pictured a print showing the dramatic moment of Nelson's death aboard the *Victory*. The lesson to us is obvious. In order to understand this extraordinarily varied and contradictory period we must detach ourselves from past attempts to romanticise it or to celebrate it as the last age of 'true freedom' or Britain in its bucolic bliss. We must do more than simply look at the waters of time passing from the riverbank: we must dive in and immerse ourselves.

'Immersing ourselves' is easier said than done, however. How do we go about it? The answer lies in accessing sufficient evidence and, just as importantly, in understanding its context and relevance. This is not difficult for the Regency: huge numbers of documents, books, images, objects and buildings survive. One particularly useful text in this respect is *Letters from England by Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella*, first published in three volumes in 1807. This is purportedly a travel guide to England in the years 1802–3 by a Spanish gentleman but is actually by the English poet laureate Robert Southey: its conceit is thus not so different from this present book and, being composed by a knowledgeable contemporary, I have used it as a general guide. However, gathering and assessing evidence only gets us so far. To assume that it is synonymous with reconstructing the past is like thinking that, if you could reconnect all the bones, sinews and muscles of Admiral Nelson's body, he would somehow walk and talk again. While analysing historical information is a science, reconstructing the past in a meaningful way is an art. We need to draw on our own experiences to blow life into the evidence, and the way to do this is to focus not on the documents, paintings and buildings themselves but on the actions, needs and ideas that lie behind them. If, as a historian, you regard a physical document as the limit of the knowable truth, without trying to imagine what it was that made people cry, scream and pray, then you are simply undertaking an academic exercise. Don't get me wrong, academic exercises are hugely valuable: they are essential for

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a proper understanding of the past. But they have their limitations. Nelson's bones could tell us many things about the man but not necessarily what we most want to know. Indeed, you would never guess just from a skeleton that a human being could smile.

Herein lies the essence of a time traveller's guide. You can see the life that lies behind the evidence, complete with all its contradictions. How should you cut your toenails in 1790 if you want to avoid dying of blood poisoning? How can you get help if a member of your family is suffering from a mental disorder in 1798? How are you going to travel around safely? What are you going to wear; where might you stay; what should you eat; and what might you do for fun? While I cannot predict what Jane Austen might make of you, if you were to knock on the door of number 4 Sydney Place, Bath, in 1803, I can suggest what you would see if you visited the town in that year, and what you might make of the standard of living that she and her family enjoyed, and the spirit with which they and their contemporaries faced the world each day.

Here, then, is a guide to four of the most exciting and culturally important decades in British history. It was an age of elegance and violence, of freedom and protest, of old-style heroism and increasing urbanisation. It was also a time of war: more than half of the period was spent fighting the French, heralding such household names as Lord Nelson, William Pitt and the duke of Wellington. It saw campaigns for liberty, political and social reform, and greater compassion towards the less-fortunate members of society. It was an age of industrialisation, when Britain emerged as the prime economic power in the world. It was also a great age of invention, from the steam locomotive to the electric clock and the earliest photograph. And, of course, it was an age when millions of ordinary people lived ordinary lives – including those named in Mr Puddicombe's burial register and, indeed, the vicar himself, as the sun finally set on his world.

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I

The Landscape

> My living in Yorkshire was so far out of the way, that it was actually twelve miles from a lemon.
>
> Sydney Smith[1]

As your ship approaches the south coast of England, you'll be looking out for land. If you are sailing from France, the white cliffs of Dover may be in your sights for most of the crossing. If you are travelling from America, you will be staring at the horizon for days, searching in vain for that rising blue ridge of the south-west peninsula, and seeing nothing but the dreary waste of white foam on heaving grey-green water. However, the tedium will not be your main concern. Sailors as well as passengers feel anxious when entering the English Channel, particularly after dark. Often you have no warning before a sudden thud sends you sprawling across the deck, accompanied by ear-splitting creaks as the ship's hull is wrenched apart. At night your eyes scan the blackness for any visible feature, with the wind buffeting the canvas sails and the waves constantly crashing against the bow. Then, at last, you see a pair of lights in the distance. A crew member assures you that they are the twin beacons of the Lizard lighthouse, on the south coast of Cornwall. The next light you'll see, he tells you, will be from the Eddystone, built on a remote rock 13 miles from shore. 'If we were to sail closer in,' he explains, 'you'd see the lights of Falmouth and Looe. To the east of them, there'd be Plymouth. And further up the Channel you'd spy Teignmouth, Dawlish, Exmouth and Sidmouth. It's as if someone's lighting all the lamps to greet you.'

This lighting-up of the coastal towns is something new. In the mid-eighteenth century you'd have seen just occasional pinpricks of light from the few large houses near the coast. Now there are sea-facing

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town houses with chandeliers burning in their drawing rooms. Even where these are obscured by curtains or shutters, you may see the bright lanterns above the front doors. Carriages wait outside with their mirror-backed glass lamps alight. What's more, by 1800 almost every large town has oil-fuelled street lights. They may only be visible individually from a mile or two away, but a cluster of lights can be seen from a much greater distance.[2] By the mid-1820s, some places on the south coast are even illuminated by gas – Brighton, Portsea and Dover among them. If you could make a time-lapse film of the south coast of England at night between 1789 and 1830 you would see tens of thousands of lights coming on, and growing brighter, as the coast gradually emerges from the darkness.

You may well think about those lights while your ship lies safely at anchor. They have more significance than simply allowing people to find their way around. They mean that men and women are no longer huddling around their fires in their homes after dark but are happy to go out and socialise, drink, gamble and dance, or listen to concerts and attend plays. A way of life that previously could only have been enjoyed in the larger cities is now spreading to many small towns up and down the country. People are no longer beholden to daylight. Many more are working at night too. The drivers of those horse-drawn carriages will be waiting to carry tired concert-goers to their homes. Proprietors and staff at the assembly rooms must be prepared for the carousing to carry on into the early hours. Street vendors selling hot pies and other snacks now have queues of late-night customers. And the once-dangerous streets are safer because there are more people circulating. The country you are about to visit has literally been 'enlightened'.

Brighton and the Coastal Resorts

You can't help but smile as you ride into Brighton on a summer's morning in the mid-1820s. First there are the bright-red jackets of the Grenadier Guards officers coming and going between the town and the barracks on the Lewes Road. Then you'll see the Pleasure Gardens on your right, with their gothic tower, aviary, promenades, bowling greens, grotto, maze, tea gardens and assembly rooms. Next you'll see the cricket pitch, where the king and his friends used to play in

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their younger days. Adjacent to that is the Hanover Arms, which, unusually for a public house, has an open-air fives court attached. A little further on you'll see a huge building site where the great church of St Peter's is steadily rising from the ground, on schedule for completion in 1828. Already you'll feel that you are entering a modern town characterised by ostentation, entertainment and expansion.

Ride on a little further and, to your left, you'll see Richmond Place: a terrace of elegant four-storey houses. Directly ahead of you is a long public lawn, enclosed by a low wooden railing and overlooked on both sides by tall houses with sash windows and canopied balconies. You can hear your horse's hooves on the gravel-covered road, the excited shouts of children playing with a hoop nearby, and the music from an open window as a young lady perseveres with her piano lesson. There's the distant knocking of hammers from the houses under construction in the side roads, and the occasional call of command as a servant exercising his master's dogs tries to restrain their pulling. Gentlemen in top hats and tailcoats discuss business as they walk by. Ladies in long dresses stroll along the pavement in front of the houses. A mail coach arrives, speeding around the other side of the lawn with rattling wheels. Custom says you should drive on the left but there is no law on the matter. In Brighton there is enough space that people can go whichever way they please, especially in a street as wide as this.

A few hundred yards on, the lines of houses open out even further, embracing another wide public lawn. On your left is the Grand Parade. These four-storey luxury dwellings are all different in design: some are faced with flint; some with stucco or brick; and some with 'mathematical tiles', designed to look like brickwork. Most have bow-fronted windows, each one incorporating a dozen or so panes of glass. Several of these houses are still being built: men are climbing ladders to platforms on wooden scaffolding poles, hauling up buckets of mortar with winches and pulleys. Despite the hotchpotch of designs, there is an elegance to every one of them. They give the impression of so many wealthy onlookers behind the railings at the finish of a race, all eager to see what is going on.

The 'finish line' in this case is the Royal Pavilion, on the other side of the wide lawn. It is an extravagant confection of cream-painted stucco and minarets, tent-like roofs and onion domes, with Indian-inspired parapets, gothic arches and Moorish arcades. From its Mughal

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gatehouse to its classical pillars, it is quite unlike any other building in the world. It looks like a chaotic mixture of the best and worst styles of three continents – but, at the same time, every part looks exactly as if it was intended to be that way. Nothing about it is slapdash, utilitarian or complacently traditional. It does not sprawl but confidently dominates its grounds, announcing to everyone who sees it that its owner is rich, powerful, eccentric, extravagant and utterly immoderate in his tastes. At night the exterior is lit up by gas lights, making it feel both modern and outlandish at the same time. It looks out of place in Brighton – it would look out of place anywhere – but that is exactly what George IV wants. Not everyone loves it, of course. The German prince, Hermann Pückler-Muskau, who visits in February 1827, declares that 'it would be no great subject of lamentation' if it were to be demolished.[3] Nevertheless, it is the very epitome of all that is exotic in British architecture.

Unusually for a British town, the heart of Brighton is not the town hall or a castle, marketplace or great church. Rather it is this irregularly shaped patch of flat grass where you are standing now, called the Steine. Just look around you: not only does the Royal Pavilion face it but so do many houses belonging to the nobility and gentry. A wide road runs around the perimeter, where men and women are walking or riding in their best clothes. You can tell from the way everyone looks at the other promenaders that this is *the* place to be seen. Military officers eye up the young demoiselles out with their watchful chaperones. Well-dressed young rakes catch the attention of ladies, who quietly hope one of them will have the boldness to invite her to a ball. Here you'll also find many of the amenities that cater to the rich and well connected: coffee houses, bathhouses and the best libraries. Then there is the roll call of celebrity mansions. One with a charming balcony and veranda is where Mrs Fitzherbert, the king's unofficial spouse, has lived since 1804. The whole area feels like a village green populated entirely by the rich and famous, with the odd fashionable adventurer and fortune-seeking seductress thrown in.

Two hundred yards further on is the source of Brighton's prosperity: the sea. When you arrive at the seafront, you'll see a carriage drive closed by elaborate iron gates. This is the entry to the Royal Chain Pier, which opens in 1823 and extends out over the waves for more than 1,000 feet.[4] The 30ft-wide deck is suspended from four tall cast-iron towers and ends in a landing stage of stone, from which you may

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embark on the steamships that leave daily for Dieppe. Even if you are not travelling abroad you can visit the pier, for an entrance fee of tuppence (2d), and I recommend you do so. Walking along its length, you'll see booths in the towers where you can buy prints of the town, exotic seashells and a *camera obscura* image of yourself. But when you reach the end of the pier and turn round to look back at the seafront, your amusement at this fledgling seaside souvenir industry will give way to amazement. The lines of houses facing you extend along the coast for a mile in each direction and they are as architecturally impressive as the finest London squares. To the right of the pier you'll see Marine Parade, which begins with a series of charming guesthouses and continues with a row of very impressive residences, including the Royal Crescent and, further on, Lewes Crescent and Sussex Square. This is where you will find the Brighton homes of the marquess of Bristol, the duke of Devonshire and the countess of Molande. To the left of the pier is another long line of noble houses, including Brunswick Square and Regency Square and their adjacent magnificent terraces. Here are the homes of the duchess of St Albans, the countess of Aldborough, the earl of Munster and a whole string of knights, ladies, baronets and retired admirals and generals.

It will probably seem perfectly natural to you that most of these grand houses face the sea – even those that do not tend to have bow-shaped fronts, so that residents may catch at least a glimpse of the horizon. However, not that many decades ago this would have been the very last place where the rich and fashionable wanted to live. The sea was perceived as a threat, bringing invaders and harsh weather, and not as a thing of beauty. People only lived on the coast if they had to. Most ports were home to merchants and dockworkers, fishermen and net-makers, shipwrights, labourers and their families. But in the eighteenth century things began to change. Physicians started to recommend bathing in the sea and even drinking sea water. The wealthy accordingly packed their bags and headed off to the coast to cure their ailments, gathering at a few favoured spots where they could socialise while undergoing a sea-water treatment. The first such resort, gaining popularity in the 1730s, was Scarborough in Yorkshire; it was soon followed by Brighton, Hastings, Margate and Weymouth. In 1750 Dr Richard Russell published a surprise bestseller entitled *A dissertation on the use of sea water in the diseases of the glands*, in which he drew particular attention to the health-giving properties

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of the sea water at Brighton. Three years later, he built a large house and consulting room near the seafront, and patients began to flock to him. Even now, long after his death, they keep coming. Visit in 1789 and you'll find that Brighton's population has doubled since Dr Russell's time, to about 4,000 people. Come back in 1801 and it will have almost doubled again, being 7,339 in the census of that year. It continues to grow at this rate for another three decades. In fact Brighton is proportionately the fastest-growing town in the whole of Regency Britain. In 1830 it is home to more than 40,000 people, ten times as many as in 1789. We have come a long way from a society in which the upper classes did their best to avoid the sea: now they are desperate to live facing it – to the extent that only the very wealthy can afford to do so.

The Old Town – the original 'Brighthelmstone', as it was known before the wealthy arrived – still stands, boxed in by its original perimeter roads: North, East and West Street. Here the houses are of a very different construction from those noble structures facing the Steine or forming the seafront terraces and squares. Whereas the new parts of the town are all open, light and spacious, the Old Town is narrow, dark and cramped. The lanes are mostly lined with small timber-framed houses with a shop on the ground floor and living accommodation for the family upstairs and a small back yard. Among them are tailors, woollen drapers, boot-makers, cabinet-makers, tea-dealers, coal merchants, chemists, butchers, pie-makers, grocers and many more tradesmen. Some upmarket businesses are located here too – bankers, jewellers and gunsmiths. Put them together with the old fishermen, net-makers and labourers, and about one-third of the population still lives in the Old Town in the 1820s.[5]

As you may have begun to realise, whatever you fancy, it is available in this town. Fancy a Turkish bath? You'll want to pay a visit to Mahomed's Warm, Cold and Vapour Baths by the seafront.[6] Fresh fish? Head down to the beach, where there is a fish market every morning, supplied by about a hundred boats drawn up on the pebble shore. What about a flutter on the horses? At the top of the hill to the east of the town you'll find Brighton Racecourse. If you're feeling energetic, there is a tennis court in town – for real tennis, of course, the traditional, walled-court version of the game. Maybe a swim is

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more to your fancy? There are plenty of bathing machines for hire. These are wooden cabins on high wheels, which are drawn by horses out into the chest-high water. You change inside the cabin and then, when you are out deep enough and your 'dipper' tells you it is safe to do so, you plunge into the brine in your bathing suit, which will resemble a large dress for women and a pair of drawers for men. If dancing is more your sort of thing, then you may go to a ball at the Old Ship Assembly Rooms at the bottom of Ship Street; they have card tables there too, if you are the gambling type. Those seeking sexual thrills will find women of affordable virtue in the streets around Upper Furlong to the north of the Old Town. As for high culture, a fine new theatre stands between North Street and Church Street, with two tiers of boxes and a large gallery. Plays are put on here from the end of July to the end of October: performances take place on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays; tickets cost five shillings (5s) for a seat in a box, 3s for the pit and 1s for the gallery.[7]

With its large number of aristocrats and royal patronage, Brighton is not your typical seaside town. However, it sets the pattern for many others. By the 1820s, in addition to the original five resorts, you might choose to visit Ramsgate in Kent, Worthing in Sussex or any one of several 'watering places' on the Devon coast: Sidmouth, Teignmouth, Exmouth and Dawlish, to name just the most prominent. Some of these have been quietly growing for decades. The Reverend John Swete travels through South Devon in 1795 and remarks that 'Sidmouth is the gayest place of resort on the Devon coast, and every elegancy, every luxury, every amusement is here to be met with – iced creams, milliners shops, cards, billiards, plays [and] circulating libraries'. With regard to Dawlish he writes that:

> about twenty years ago the price of the best lodging house per week was not more than … half a guinea, but so fashionable is Dawlish in the present day that, in the height of the season, not a house of the least consequence is to be hired for less than two guineas per week, and many of them rise to so high a sum as four or five.[8]

Despite these early seaside developments, it is the final defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 that heralds the heyday

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of the seaside towns. Many of them are developed to accommodate the great influx of wealthy Londoners who come down to the sea each summer. The seventy-four small round forts built along the south coast to protect the country from a French invasion in the first decade of the century – commonly called Martello towers – suddenly seem to belong to a bygone age. People love the sea now, they no longer fear it. And that love grows ever stronger. By 1830, the centre of Brighton has subtly shifted away from the Steine to the seafront itself, the 'New Steine'. When the good people of the town want to celebrate a grand occasion such as a royal birthday, they head to the seafront, where they can see the night sky set ablaze with brilliant fireworks and the Royal Chain Pier lit up with thousands of oil lights, visible from far out at sea.

Large Towns and Cities

When the young German philosopher Karl Philipp Moritz comes to England on a walking holiday in the 1780s, he writes in his journal that 'of all the towns I have seen outside London, Nottingham is the loveliest and the neatest'.[9] This will perhaps come as a surprise to some readers. I suspect that, if you were asked which town you think the 'loveliest and neatest' in the Georgian period, you would say Bath, Brighton or Edinburgh – and only those in the know might suggest Buxton (for its Crescent) or Liverpool (for the area around Abercromby Square and Rodney Street). But you could pick practically any town in Britain and praise its Regency architecture. Quite simply, *every* town is expanding at this time. The seventy-seven largest places in 1801 – those with a population of 7,000 or more – see an average increase of 83 per cent over the next thirty years. Twenty-two of them double in size and all but two grow by at least one-third.

As you can imagine, the expansion of all the major towns and cities has a profound effect on the landscape. Great Britain has always been a relatively rural island but, from the late eighteenth century, massive population growth results in a heavy swing towards urban living. If you include all the small towns – those with at least 2,500 inhabitants – then 44 per cent of the population is urbanised by 1831.[10] A Regency town is thus a work in progress, with a mass of new streets and

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building sites popping up between and around older properties. Hundreds of thousands of acres of fields are sacrificed to facilitate this growth and the infrastructure needed to support it. Of course all these growing communities now want their assembly rooms, theatre, post office, concert hall, workhouse, infirmary and library. Whereas previously one large church might have served the whole population, that is hardly practical when the town is home to more than 10,000 people. In 1818 the government passes the Church Building Act, granting £1,000,000 to a commission to provide new churches for the expanding towns. At the same time, growing religious tolerance gives an impetus to many nonconformist congregations to build their own places of worship. Bristol in 1830, for example, has its cathedral and twenty-one other Anglican churches and chapels; four Baptist, seven Independent and six Methodist chapels; plus individual chapels for the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, the Moravians, Seceders, Unitarians and Whitfieldites; a Welsh chapel, a Roman Catholic chapel, a Friends' meeting house and a synagogue.[11]

Alongside all the new houses, churches and chapels, the urban landscape is changing as a result of many towns obtaining an Improvement Act. This enables a town corporation to appoint local commissioners to improve its sanitation, paving, policing and lighting, and in some cases to pull down houses in order to widen the streets. In Birmingham the commissioners purchase the manorial rights so they can relocate the main market. After all, if you've just bought a handsome new house in the centre of town, the last thing you want is hundreds of grunting, lowing and bleating animals outside your front door, with all the smells, dung and piles of straw that go with them. At the same time, the growing population sustains more specialist shops, such as milliners, opticians, booksellers and jewellers, and these businesses begin to push the traditional market traders out of the town centres. Visitors increasingly expect that a high street will be a wide, straight thoroughfare open to coaches, carriages, horse-riders and pedestrians, where they will find a range of shops selling genteel and manufactured items. They do not want to be confronted with ramshackle stalls and pens of livestock.

Towns that still have their crooked streets, narrow lanes and central markets are considered old and dirty. City fathers thus

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The largest towns and cities in Great Britain, 1801–31[12]

	Town or CITY	1801	1831	Growth
1	LONDON	865,845	1,471,069	70%
2	Manchester	84,020	182,812	118%
3	EDINBURGH	82,266	162,156	97%
4	Liverpool	79,722	189,242	137%
5	GLASGOW	77,385	202,426	162%
6	Birmingham	73,670	146,986	100%
7	BRISTOL	63,645	103,886	63%
8	Leeds	53,162	123,393	132%
9	Plymouth	43,194	75,534	75%
10	Newcastle-on-Tyne	36,963	57,937	57%
11	NORWICH	36,832	61,116	66%
12	Portsmouth	32,166	46,282	44%
13	Sheffield	31,314	59,011	88%
14	Paisley	31,179	57,466	84%
15	Nottingham	28,861	50,680	76%
16	BATH	27,686	38,063	37%
17	Hull	27,609	46,426	68%
18	ABERDEEN	27,608	58,019	110%
19	Dundee	26,804	45,355	69%
20	Sunderland	26,511	43,076	62%
21	Bolton	18,574	43,396	134%
22	Greenock	17,458	27,571	58%
23	EXETER	17,398	28,201	62%
24	Leicester	16,953	39,306	132%
25	YORK	16,145	25,359	57%
26	COVENTRY	16,034	27,070	69%
27	CHESTER	15,052	21,363	42%
28	PERTH	14,878	20,016	35%
29	Great Yarmouth	14,845	21,115	42%
30	Stockport	14,830	25,469	72%
31	Shrewsbury	14,739	21,227	44%

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	Town or CITY	1801	1831	Growth
32	Rochdale	14,491	26,404	82%
33	Wolverhampton	12,565	24,732	97%
34	Oldham	12,024	32,381	169%
35	Blackburn	11,980	27,091	126%
36	Preston	11,887	33,112	179%
37	OXFORD	11,705	20,434	75%
38	Colchester	11,520	16,167	40%
39	WORCESTER	11,300	18,610	65%
40	Tynemouth	11,136	16,926	52%
41	Wigan	10,989	20,774	89%
42	Derby	10,832	23,607	118%
43	Warrington	10,567	16,018	52%
44	Chatham	10,505	16,485	57%
45	Ipswich	10,402	20,454	97%
46	Walsall	10,399	15,066	45%
47	CARLISLE	10,221	20,006	96%
48	Dudley	10,107	23,043	128%
49	King's Lynn	10,096	13,370	32%
50	Cambridge	10,087	20,917	107%
51	Dunfermline	9,980	17,068	71%
52	CANTERBURY	9,791	14,463	48%
53	Reading	9,742	15,595	60%
54	Lancaster	9,030	12,613	40%
55	Halifax	8,866	15,382	73%
56	Falkirk	8,838	12,743	44%
57	Macclesfield	8,743	23,129	165%
58	Whitehaven	8,742	11,393	30%
59	Inverness	8,732	14,324	64%
60	Wakefield	8,131	12,232	50%
61	South Shields	8,108	9,074	12%
62	Kilmarnock	8,079	18,093	124%
63	Montrose	7,974	12,055	51%
64	Merthyr Tydfil	7,705	22,083	187%

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	Town or CITY	1801	1831	Growth
65	Bury St Edmunds	7,655	11,436	49%
66	Southampton	7,629	19,324	153%
67	Durham	7,530	10,125	34%
68	Whitby	7,483	7,765	4%
69	LINCOLN	7,398	11,892	61%
70	Brighton	7,339	40,600	453%
71	Dumfries	7,288	11,606	59%
72	Huddersfield	7,268	19,035	162%
73	GLOUCESTER	7,261	11,933	64%
74	SALISBURY	7,126	9,876	39%
75	Dover	7,084	11,924	68%
76	Bury	7,072	15,086	113%
77	Northampton	7,020	15,351	119%
	Average growth 1801–31			**83%**

embrace modernity by demolishing alleys and building eye-catching grand architecture. All seven of Exeter's medieval city gates are demolished between 1769 and 1825, allowing the widening of the principal roads. The mayor and council also demolish the great conduit in the centre of the city that has supplied water for centuries. They replace the open sluices that run down the middle of the streets with gently cambered surfaces that drain to the sides. They encourage the building of Bedford Circus, Barnfield Crescent, Baring Crescent and the elegant terraces of Southernhay, Northernhay and Pennsylvania. With the exception of its great cathedral, Exeter turns its back on its past and prides itself instead on its modern public buildings: its assembly rooms, ballroom, card room, hotel, libraries, post office, bathhouse, prison, law courts, hospital, public dispensary, eye hospital, lunatic asylum, grammar school, military barracks and theatre.

By 1800, most towns have oil lamps installed at regular intervals along the main roads. The best streets in a fashionable place like Bath have glass globes on iron stands set up at regular intervals, all burning colza or rapeseed oil.[13] Glasgow starts to illuminate its

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streets in 1780 when nine oil lamps are mounted in the Trongate; by 1815, the total number of lights maintained by the city authorities has risen to 1,274.[14] Thereafter, gas is the key to the spread of street lighting. By 1830, more than half of the largest towns in Britain have at least one gas company to illuminate the streets, public buildings and commercial premises.[15] Those that don't, like Plymouth and Newcastle-on-Tyne, continue to depend on oil lamps suspended from iron frames projecting from street corners until the 1840s.

Look beneath the surfaces of these large towns and you will realise they differ enormously. Consider Liverpool, for example. Like Brighton, it is situated close to the sea, being on the east side of the Mersey estuary. Also like Brighton, it has grown extraordinarily over the last century. In 1700 it had only about 5,000 inhabitants but since then its population has doubled every twenty-five years. The reason is the expansion of trade across the Atlantic, especially in sugar, cotton and tobacco. This has led to considerable investment in the docks, which now command the respect of all who visit them. The town hall in Dale Street in the centre is a magnificent building constructed in the mid-eighteenth century by John Wood – the man responsible for building the Royal Crescent and the Circus in Bath. Behind the town hall is the Exchange: a large court with an arcade running around it for merchants to meet and trade. Here too are the assembly rooms and council chamber. Such is the booming prosperity of the town that the Bank of England opens a branch here in 1827. By this time the fields to the south-east of the centre have been built over with long lines of elegant town houses and squares. Walk along any of the wide avenues here, or through Abercromby Square or Falkner Square, and you will think that Liverpool is as wealthy as Brighton. However, if you stray away from this quarter, you will soon discover that the two towns have very little else in common. For while Brighton is a place of entertainment, health and luxury, reflecting the predilections of the rich, Liverpool is a place of commerce and labour, reflecting the ambitions of businessmen and the mundane struggles of the poor.

Nothing you have seen in Britain at any time in its history is likely to prepare you for the sheer squalor of the poorest parts of Regency Liverpool. Almost half the population here live in cellars and courts

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or 'back houses'. These are terraces of small dwellings crammed in behind the houses facing the streets. A narrow passage runs from the street through the house at the front into an alley or 'court' between 10 to 12 feet wide. Two rows of brick houses face each other here, one on either side of the court, with communal latrines at the far end. We will see later what it is actually like to live in such places – in chapter 8, 'Where to Stay', although in this case it might better be called 'where *not* to stay' – but for the sake of describing the urban environment, this is what you will hear, see and smell when you walk through Liverpool and enter one of these courts.

The first thing you'll notice is the noise. The extreme density of housing and the almost complete lack of privacy in the courts and streets mean that the air is constantly rent with shrieking and laughing, babies wailing and children crying, with curses, insults and threats shouted through windows and across the streets. What a contrast to the Steine in Brighton, with its piano rehearsals and servants walking their master's dogs! Many of the road surfaces are still unpaved, the mud or gravel strewn with dung from the horses of delivery wagons. They remain in this state until the weekly visit of the street sweepers or 'scavengers' who clear away the muck to a manure depot.

From a pedestrian's viewpoint, the streets of Liverpool are quite wide, even in the poorest areas. It is when you turn off them into the courts that you will plunge into darkness. The tunnels are as long as the front houses facing the street are deep. When you emerge into daylight again, you will feel like you've crept through a cave. And this is where the stench will hit you.

The sea breezes that Liverpool's wealthy classes associate with the healthiness of the town never stir the foetid air here. The courts aren't paved. Nor are they swept by the town scavengers. Drains are rare, because both the developers and the town authorities expect the rain to wash anything noisome down the tunnel and back into the street. However, as one medical investigator, Dr Lyon Playfair, notes:

> In numberless instances, courts and alleys have been formed without any declination for the discharge of surface water. Many are laid without channels, and while the solid refuse thrown upon them rots

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> on the surface, the liquid matter is absorbed, and much of it finds its way into the inhabited cellars of the courts. The north end of town is full of pits of stagnant water, which form so many receptacles for the putrid matter that is constantly thrown into them, such as dead animals and the drainage from starch and other manufactories; and in hot weather, the stench from these places is frequently intolerable.[16]

Rain pours into the cesspits too, and after a heavy downpour the levels rise, causing the excrement, rotting offal and other disgusting things to spill out. Normally a court containing sixteen houses will have two privies for the accommodation of eighty people or so, but it is not unknown for twenty to share a single dwelling, so two privies might serve two or three hundred people. Then the single cesspit beneath them ends up containing an enormous amount of filth.[17] Moreover, as Dr Playfair observes:

> The privies, frequently without doors, and common to both sexes, must outrage modesty, if they do not lead to licentiousness. It is not uncommon to find necessaries built without doors, the excuse given for this deficiency being that if these were attached, they would be broken up for firewood …

In 1790 there are already 1,608 such court houses in Liverpool, mostly built to house immigrant labourers from Lancashire, Ireland and Wales.[18] That number continues to grow, so that by 1830 there are about eight times as many, accommodating more than 70,000 people in a squalid mass of Stygian dimness and breath-stopping stench. In Crosbie Street in 1790 there are sixty-one front houses and eighty-four court dwellings, with a further forty-two cellars beneath them. The front houses are occupied by 360 people, the court houses by 434 and another 181 live in the cellars. That is a total of 975 people living in 145 houses – which equates to a population density of 777 per acre. That is one of the most densely settled places on earth. Incredibly, it continues to increase, reaching an extreme of 1,300 people per acre.[19]

In general, very little infrastructure is provided in the rapidly growing industrial towns. In Liverpool there are libraries and assembly

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rooms for the rich, and there are newly built churches for the pious, but there are no public parks. The large communal gardens are privately owned, managed for the benefit of subscribing key-holders. The only public amenity areas are the streets, which are crowded with horse-drawn vehicles. Small wonder, then, that so many working people spend their time in public houses. You won't see any public fountains here; nor is there a public bathhouse. If you wish to bathe, then you must resort to 'the shores of the river at the north and the south ends of town'.[20] The River Mersey might be large but it is where all the sewers empty out and where all the industrial pollution ends up. Talking of sewers, although the authorities levy a rate to pay for sewerage in the town, this is only extended as far as wealthy people's addresses. The same goes for the water companies: almost all the courts are without a piped supply. It is a dreadful state of affairs – and a severe lesson in what happens when town planning is left to profiteers.

What do contemporaries think of Liverpool? Most affluent residents will tell you it is a forward-thinking, progressive, modern town; they have probably never been to Crosbie Street, let alone into the courts there. Opinion among visitors is divided. The Reverend Nathaniel Wheaton, visiting from America in 1823, remarks that Liverpool is a 'city of docks, fat men and fat women, coal smoke, dirty streets, cast iron, mammon and mud'.[21] Robert Southey similarly notes that 'the outskirts of Liverpool have an unsightly appearance: new streets of houses for the poorer classes, which bear no marks either of cleanliness or comfort, fields cut up for the foundations of other buildings, brick yards, and kilns smoking on every side'.[22] Others completely overlook the dirt and poverty. The Frenchman Louis Simond, who comes here in 1810 after spending twenty years in America, compares the town favourably with New York.[23] To him, Liverpool's public buildings are both more numerous and more pleasing in their architecture and he is impressed with the warehouses, some of which are thirteen storeys high. He doesn't remark on the living conditions of the labourers. Likewise the Swiss industrialist Hans Caspar Escher notes only positive things about the 'fairly well-planned' town in 1814.[24] It just goes to show that people's impressions are more often formed by what they want to see than by what is actually there to be found.

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Moving away from Liverpool to other industrial towns, you will find the environment increasingly blighted by manufacturing processes during the period. This includes industrial waste. At the smaller end of the scale, there are no limits on what activities can be carried on in the courts of developing towns, so people keep animals there and slaughter them on the same premises. In Birmingham, the engineering capital of Britain, there are 1,600 pigsties.[25] In Bristol the low standards of hygiene are illustrated by a shopkeeper's comment to a medical inspector about the yard behind his house, where his neighbour slaughters pigs imported from Ireland:

> Often the pigs, in coming over in the packet [ship], die, and I have seen as many as thirty dead pigs at a time brought into the yard. They are thrown under that shed there, until there is time to cut them up, and by that time, I have seen the maggots fairly dropping out of them. Then they are cut up and, I believe, are made into salt bacon or sold for sausages. The entrails of such pigs are generally too far gone to be of use, and they are thrown into the dunghill. When the dunghill is stirred up to be taken away, oh! Sir, the smell is awful. We are forced to shut our windows and doors, and stuff pieces of cloth into the keyholes, but all this does not keep it out. The entrails of the live pigs killed in the yard are boiled and sold, and give out a very bad smell, but nothing like the others.[26]

At the top end of the scale, industrial pollution can be overwhelming. In 1802, Robert Southey records the following view of Birmingham:

> A heavy cloud of smoke hung over the city, above which in many places black columns were sent up with prodigious force from the steam-engines . . . Everywhere around us, instead of the village church, whose steeple usually adorns so beautifully the English landscape, the tower of some manufactory was to be seen in the distance, vomiting up flames and smoke, and blasting everything around with its metallic vapours. The vicinity was as thickly peopled as that of London. Instead of cottages we saw streets of brick hovels, blackened with the smoke of coal fires, which burn day and night in these dismal regions. Such swarms of children I never beheld in any other place, nor such wretched

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> ones, in rags, and their skins encrusted with soot and filth. The face of the country as we advanced was more hideous than can be described, uncultivated, black and smoking.[27]

You will find similar scenes in many other industrial towns. The whole area around Swansea is suffering from the 'copper smoke' belched out by the coal-burning furnaces. The locals don't know why it happens – and I don't suggest you try to explain to them that the smelting process gives off sulphur dioxide and hydrogen fluoride, which react with moisture in the air to form sulphuric acid, or 'acid rain' as we know it – but they know the copper works are the cause and it stops anything from growing in their gardens.[28] People who live near gas works say they can't dry their washing out of doors because soot keeps raining down. The sulphurous stench when it 'lets off' is more disgusting than that of putrid carcasses, they say. Then there is the lime-water released by the purifiers. When gas companies allow this to run into the rivers, it kills all the fish.[29]

Mention of smoke brings us face to face with one of the most striking features of the age: the shift to steam power. It is an extraordinarily rapid transformation. In 1789 Manchester has a dozen mills, all of which are powered by water. In 1801 there are still only forty-two large mills, and they are all still water-driven. The first successful steam-powered cotton factory is not built until 1806. But then more than 2,000 steam-driven cotton mills are constructed in just twelve years.[30] In the 1830s, Manchester and Salford are home to 6,000 cotton-spinning and weaving mills, 1,200 bleaching and dyeing mills, 700 foundries and industrial mills, and almost 2,000 other mills of varying descriptions – all of them powered by steam. Picture a tall chimney for every single one of these 10,000 mills, and imagine the smoke rising from them into a great glowering cloud that hangs in the air. Some factories along the Rochdale Canal are immense eight-storey brick buildings, more than 100 feet high and 300 feet long, swarming with workers. More than 1,000 people are employed in the McConnel & Kennedy Mills alone. Artificial lighting – including 1,500 gas lights installed in a single building in 1809 – means that the *thud, thud, thud* of the steam engine keeps going all night. Any romantic idea that these buildings are 'the cathedrals of their age' soon disappears when you experience the noise, the smells and the pollution that attend

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them. They might be awe-inspiring but the great churches of the Middle Ages were built for the glory of God and the benefit of the souls of the worshippers who entered them: they promised redemption and everlasting peace. These huge edifices have been built for profit, not glory, and although they provide many men, women and children with employment, they certainly don't benefit the bodies of those who labour in them for fourteen hours a day, let alone their souls.

Small Towns and the Countryside

Just as large towns vary according to their levels of elegance and effluence, so too do small towns. Some expand massively and acquire all the amenities of large towns, such as a theatre, assembly rooms and a private library; others hardly alter and remain steadfastly rural in character. Axminster in Devon has 2,154 inhabitants in 1801 and still only 2,719 thirty years later: an increase of just 26 per cent. Its buildings are old and its lanes awkward for coach travel. Ironically, this under-development gives rise to more criticism than is generally levelled at the expanding towns billowing out smoke and pollution. When the London surgeon George Lipscomb passes through on his way to Cornwall in 1798 he declares: 'Axminster is a most miserable town. The houses are extremely mean and many of them covered with thatch ... All the streets are narrow, crooked, and in the highest degree inconvenient and disgusting.'[31] With somewhat greater diplomacy, the compiler of *Pigot's Directory* describes Axminster in 1830 as 'respectable but irregularly built'.[32] The problem is not so much the dirt as the antiquity. The only things that are praised are the inns, the parish church and the carpet factory, established in 1755. But do not be put off by such reports: small towns are essential to the well-being of the people who live in rural areas. Axminster, for example, has:

3 auctioneers
5 bakers
3 banks
3 blacksmiths
1 bookseller
6 boot-makers and shoemakers
1 butter seller
2 cabinet-makers
4 carpenters and joiners
3 coopers

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