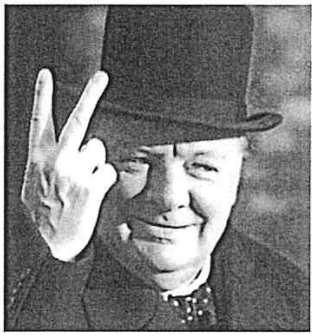
RGS History

British History A-Level

Summer Preparation Pack



Instructions:

Please ensure you do the following before our first lessons in September:

1. ***Read*** the introductory chapters attached of *Two Nations: Britain in 1846* by Stephen Bates. They provide essential introduction and background to the course and the fact that you have read them will be very important (and obvious!);
2. ***Consider*** buying or borrowing (visit your local library or use its online search engine) one or more of the books in the suggested reading guidance (and reading it);
3. ***Explore*** the possibility of visiting some of the many local and regional historic sites with direct relevance to the topics studied*
4. ***Bring*** this pack with you to your first history lessons in September.

*E.G. Ripon Workhouse Museum (and, to a lesser extent, its sister museums); York Castle Museum (with its indoor Victorian street); Saltaire, Bradford (a model village designed for textile workers by their employer, Titus Salt, in the mid-19th century); Beamish Folk Museum (a fantastic day out and a chance to learn a lot about everyday life in the 19th and early 20th centuries).

What we study:

AQA Specification: 1G Challenge and transformation: Britain, c1851–1964

This option allows students to study in breadth issues of change, continuity, cause and consequence in this period through the following key questions:

- How did democracy and political organisations develop in Britain?
- How important were ideas and ideologies?
- How and with what effects did the economy develop?
- How and with what effects did society and social policy develop?
- How and why did Britain's relationship with Ireland change?
- How important was the role of key individuals and groups and how were they affected by developments?

Part one: Victorian and Edwardian Britain, c1851–1914

Reform and challenge, c1851–c1886

- The political system: parliament and the workings of mid-19th century democracy; ruling elites; prime ministers; parties and party realignment to 1867
- Political developments under Gladstone and Disraeli; liberalism, conservatism and the bases of their support; the extension of the franchise
- Economic developments: agriculture, trade and industry; economic ideologies; boom and 'the workshop of the world'; the onset of Depression
- Society and social changes: class and regional division; prosperity and poverty
- Social movements and policies; self-help; trade unions; education and social reform legislation
- The condition of Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations: land agitation and the political response; Home Rule

Challenges to the status quo, c1886–1914

- Political developments: the reasons for Conservative dominance to 1905; the problems of the Liberal Party; socialism, Fabianism and the emergence of the Labour Party
- Politics 1906–1914: the ideology of New Liberalism; political crises and constitutional change; development of the Labour Party
- Economic developments: the Great Depression and its aftermath; problems of British industry and agriculture; staples and new industries, foreign competition; invisible exports; debates over protectionism, tariff reform and free trade
- Social change; trade unions and new unionism; syndicalism; the issue of female emancipation; the growth of the urban population; the expansion of service industries; standards of living
- Social policies: government legislation and local initiatives; taxation and welfare reform by 1914
- The condition of Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations: the Home Rule movement, opposition and the Home Rule Bills

What we study:

Part two: The World Wars and their legacies: Britain, 1914–1964 (A-level only)

The Great War and its impact, 1914–1939 (A-level only)

- The impact of war on British parties and politics: coalition government; the decline of the Liberals; position of Conservatives and influence of Labour
- Political developments in the interwar years: electoral reform; Conservative and Labour governments; National governments; the abdication crisis and emergence of radical political movements, including the BUF and Communism
- Economic developments: increased state role in wartime; problems of the staple industries and mines; the General Strike; government finances and the Gold Standard; the Depression; economic realignment
- Social developments: changes in the role of women during and after war; the condition of the working classes; regional divisions; changing attitudes in the twenties and 'the hungry thirties'; the growth of the media
- Social policies: legislation and reforms in housing; education and welfare
- The condition of Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations: the Easter Rising; the Anglo-Irish War; Government of Ireland Act and Anglo-Irish Treaty; divided Ireland before the Second World War

Transformation and change, 1939–1964 (A-level only)

- The impact of the Second World War on British politics: Churchill as wartime leader; 'the Labour landslide' of 1945; Labour ideology and policies
- Political developments: Conservative dominance from 1951 and political consensus; division within the Labour Party; Conservatism and the Establishment; Labour victory in 1964
- Economic developments: mobilisation of resources in wartime; post-war boom; balance of payments issues and 'stop-go' policies; changes to British industry and trade; new technology
- Social changes and divisions: austerity and the impact of war; post-war boom and growth of affluence; consumerism and changes in position of women and youth; immigration and racial tensions
- Developments in social policy: the Beveridge Report; the Butler Act; the growth of the Welfare State, including the NHS; the growth of education
- The condition of Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations: continuing north/south friction including riots of September 1964; beginnings of civil rights campaign

A Level History

Britain, 1851-1964: Challenge and Transformation

Suggested Reading and Enrichment Options for the Incoming Lower 6th

Textbooks:

We will use a range of textbooks and other reading material through the course, with key chapters provided in photocopies and PDFs accessible through the school's SharePoint system. However, if you would like your own copy of textbook to support your study throughout the course, three textbooks specific to this course exist. They are listed below, in order of our recommendation:

- Fortune & Walker, Oxford AQA History for A Level: Challenge and Transformation: Britain c1851-1964 (Recommended)
- Dixon & Gillingham, A/AS Level History for AQA Challenge and Transformation: Britain, c1851–1964 Student Book
- Shepley and Byrne, AQA A-level History: Britain 1851-1964: Challenge and Transformation

Three exciting narrative accounts:

- Stephen Bates, *Two Nations: Britain in 1846*
- Richard Aldous, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs. Disraeli* (a well-written recent account of the rivalry between the two dominant personalities in mid-19th century British politics; a very good way into what can at first seem quite a dry topic)
- Richard Toye, *Lloyd George and Churchill: Rivals for Greatness* (another 'dual biography' and an account of two great but flawed politicians who play significant parts in both the AS and A Level section of the course)

Overviews of the period:

- Andrew Marr, *The Making of Modern Britain* (written to accompany an excellent BBC TV series, very readable but well-informed – excellent for the period from 1900 onwards; his *History of Modern Britain* is relevant to the second (A2 Level) half of the course)
- Robert Tombs, *The English and their History* (A challenging but worthwhile account of English history, putting our course into context; an historical tour de force – quite long but also, quite simply, brilliant).

Relevant fiction:

Literature from the Victorian period:

- Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South (there is also an excellent BBC TV adaptation of this)
- Charles Dickens – any of his works are relevant, but the ones published closest to the start of our course are *Hard Times, Little Dorrit, David Copperfield and Bleak House* (there are many TV and film adaptations of these as well!)
- George Eliot – *The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner* (BBC film adaptations)
- Anthony Trollope – *The Barsetshire Chronicles* (BBC TV adaptation)
- The Brontë sisters - Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne's *Agnes Grey* were all published in 1847, just before our course begins. (lots of film and TV adaptations)
- John Galsworthy, *Forsyte Sage* series (TV adaptation is very good)

Historical fiction set in the Victorian period:

- Philip Pullman, *Sally Lockhart* series – trilogy about a young orphaned girl in Victorian London (also adapted for film)
- Anne Perry, *Thomas Pitt* series – detective stories set in Victorian London
- George MacDonald Fraser – *Flashman Papers* series
- Goodreads.com has some a list of highly rated historical fiction set in Victorian Britain – I haven't read them all so can't recommend them all personally! www.goodreads.com/list/show/3559.Best_Victorian_Historical_Fiction_Set_In_Britain

Films and documentaries:

Documentaries and podcasts about the Victorian period:

- Gladstone and Disraeli: Clash of the Titans
- The Great Famine (documentary about the Irish potato famine)
- BBC Radio 4 *The Prime Ministers* series
- BBC Radio 4 *Prime Ministers Props*
- BBC Radio 4 *Great Lives* series – lots of relevant episodes!
- Jeremy Paxman's *The Victorians*
- BBC's *Twenty-four hours in the past*
- BBC's *Victorian Farm*

Films/TV series set in the Victorian period:

- Gaslight (1944) film set in Victorian London
- Young Victoria (2009)
- Cranford (2007)
- Captains and the Kings (1976)
- Disraeli (1978)
- Young Winston (1972)
- Black '47 (2018)
- And many others! IMDB's list is https://www.imdb.com/list/ls000066901/?sort=list_order,asc&st_dt=&mode=detail&page=2

By the same author

Non-Fiction:

A Church at War: Anglicans and Homosexuality

God's Own Country: Religion and Politics in the USA

Asquith

The Poisoner: The Life and Crimes of Victorian England's Most Notorious Doctor

1815: Regency Britain in the Year of Waterloo

Fiction:

The Photographer's Boy

Stephen Bates

TWO NATIONS

BRITAIN IN 1846

First published as *Penny Loaves and Butter Cheap: Britain in 1846* in 2014 by Head of Zeus Ltd

This paperback edition first published in 2015 by Head of Zeus Ltd

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN (PB) 978-1-78185-354-2
ISBN (E) 978-1-78185-255-2

Typesetting by Lindsay Nash

Printed in the UK by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

Head of Zeus Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45–47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

Contents

Introduction

British society in 1846 was changing rapidly. It was the height of the Industrial Revolution and its people were moving steadily and irreversibly from the countryside to the towns and cities. When they arrived there, they found new factories, working disciplines and methods of earning a living, but also squalid and foetid conditions. Almost all of the industrial cities that we know today were expanding, but London, the biggest conurbation in the world, was growing particularly quickly, stretching out and absorbing previously rural villages: Islington and Hampstead, Notting Hill and Hammersmith, Wandsworth and Putney. We would recognize the names of most of the streets and many of the buildings of the period survive, even those thrown up rapidly and imposingly across the suburbs to house the new middle and professional classes.* New Oxford Street had just been carved through the slums to connect the West End to Holborn and the first purpose-built five-storey blocks of flats in London were being built opposite St Pancras Old Church 'for improving the dwellings of the industrious classes'.

It was an age of innovation. The railways were spreading along routes they still follow today, enabling people to travel for distances and to places that they and their ancestors could

* A third of the houses in Britain today were built before the First World War, most of them during the Victorian period.

never have dreamed of visiting before. The Electric Telegraph Company was set up in 1846, allowing for the first time the instant transfer of information across the country. 'Why,' asked Francis Ronalds, the inventor of the telegraph, 'should not the Government govern at Portsmouth as promptly as in Downing Street?'[1] He meant that the invention could be used for passing orders to the fleet, but the Admiralty was not interested, though newspapers were. In a burst of creativity stimulated by the Industrial Revolution, inventors were developing new-fangled machines which would make life easier in the future: gas cookers, primitive washing-machines, agricultural machinery and ever bigger steamships capable of crossing the Atlantic. Within a few years, in 1851, the Great Exhibition would show off 100,000 exhibits from all over the world (but chiefly as a showcase for the industry of Great Britain) to six million visitors to the Crystal Palace, a glass and iron structure that was itself breathtaking to Victorians in its size and enterprise: nearly 600 metres long and 32 metres high, a demonstration of confidence and ambition, constructed in a few months – 'a sight,' said *The Times*, 'the like of which had never happened before.'[2]

In such a burgeoning, bustling society, government struggled to keep up with the pace of change, but it tried. This was the age of the inquiry and the royal commission, in which inspectors earnestly investigated every facet of Victorian life, looking into everything from sewers to cemeteries, and sought coordinated national solutions for many of the challenges and social problems thrown up by the relentless changes. Philosophical men thought they had found hygienic and efficient remedies in laissez-faire economics and utilitarian approaches to the great issues of the day, and many of their ideas about

how society should be organized and conducted are still with us nearly two centuries on.

This was a country falling over itself to embrace the new and harness it. But it was also a time when many felt challenged by change, fearful that religious truths were being undermined and the old social order threatened. Even as the country raced forward, many looked back to an idyllic, pseudo-medieval past and sought to replicate a romantic image of it in their gothic buildings, their manners and their sensibilities.

And then, in the middle of this rush towards the modern age, came an enormous calamity, the worst natural disaster in the Western world since the Middle Ages: the potato famine in Ireland – a catastrophe which tested the government of Britain and found it severely wanting. Not only did a million people die, but a million emigrated, altering forever the face of five countries – Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia and Great Britain – and affecting their relationships for generations. The famine had another effect too: it precipitated a political crisis in Britain in 1846 that permanently changed British politics and inaugurated economic policies that remained the goal of successive governments for a century to come.

At the heart of the decisions made in London in 1846 was one man: Sir Robert Peel, one of the most important and impressive figures in British political history. Having played a large part in turning the Tory party into a major electoral force following the Great Reform Act of 1832, he was then instrumental in splintering it, by the decision he took to repeal the Corn Laws. In doing so, he acted in defiance of the will of the bedrock of his party and thrust the Tories into parliamentary

opposition for the following thirty years, the longest period out of government in their history. This political cataclysm realigned British parties for good: it led to the development of a new Conservative party and the creation of the Liberals out of the merger of the Whigs and Peelites, foreshadowing the politics of today. Peel strides across this narrative as the dominant personality of his time. Many of his contemporaries thought he was too; yet, if not a forgotten figure, his character is enigmatic and to us his personal style is remote and distant in both time and manner. For the best part of a century he remained a traitor to many Tories, and although he has been largely – though not entirely – rehabilitated in the last half-century, he remains obscure and elusive. Peel is a figure from a far-off past: a Tory, yes, and with conservative instincts, but the dominant head of a government which deliberately inaugurated some of the most far-reaching and long-lasting economic and political changes of the nineteenth century, many of them still with us today. When he died, people recognized the scale of his achievements. *The Times* wrote in its obituary:

> If it be asked who opened the gates of trade and bade the food of man flow hither from every shore in an uninterrupted stream, it is Peel who did it... No man ever undertook public affairs with a more thorough determination to leave the institutions of his country in an orderly, honest and efficient state.[3]

The Irish famine was a pretext for the abolition of the Corn Laws – which protected British agriculture and had kept the price of food high – but the decision to get rid of them was

one Peel had already decided upon for other reasons. Their repeal had no significant or immediate effect on the starving populations of Ireland, or Scotland. In 1846, the decision over the Corn Laws – taken largely for economic purposes – had far-reaching political consequences; but it was also reached by a prime minister who was consciously motivated by a concern to improve the living conditions of a large swathe of the country's impoverished and voteless population, and thereby to remove the causes of discontent which might lead to revolution. Violent disorder was a constant and vivid fear for the ruling classes of the country in the 1840s, for Britain was by no means the tranquil and stable state that it appears from this distance. Peel's strength was to articulate the need to address directly the grievances of the poor, in a way that no previous prime minister had felt the need to do. As *The Times* said: if the Corn Laws had not been repealed, 'the whole realm of England might have borne a fearful share in [Europe's] storm of wreck and revolution' in 1848. Instead, that year England had an orderly Chartist protest demonstration in Kennington and a petition that called for parliamentary reform rather than revolution, peaceably delivered to Parliament by hansom cab, which MPs then ignored.

In many ways the Britain of 1846 is immeasurably different from our country today. It was a world of darkness and shadows, lit by gas lamps in some central city streets and candles in homes; a world of coal smoke and fogs in which starvation and absolute destitution existed alongside immense and heedless wealth and power; a world in which a single loaf of bread could cost a tenth of a man's weekly wage and children were still sent to work in factories and mines for twelve hours a day; a world of foul and pervasive smells and

terrifying diseases far beyond the power of contemporary medicine to conquer. It was a time when criminals were still hanged in public; when vestigial police forces had to call in troops if there was disorder and when the best protection for a householder from the Bill Sikeses* of the world was thought to be a stout cudgel and window shutters. Most middle-class households were kept going by servants. Literacy, especially for women, was by no means universal and life expectancy in many cities extended scarcely into the twenties: it was a world of high infant mortality and sudden, inexplicable death. It was also an age of extraordinary artistic and cultural achievement, when respectable folk flocked to buy the next monthly instalment of Mr Dickens's latest novel, *Dombey and Son*, or crowded the theatres and penny gaffs to jeer at Sweeney Todd or laugh at Harlequin and his paramour Columbine;† when gruff, shabby old J.M.W. Turner was still exhibiting at the Royal Academy and the debonair young German composer Felix Mendelssohn was conducting the première of his great oratorio *Elijah* to a rapt audience at Birmingham town hall.

One hundred and seventy years have elapsed since then and yet that age is not so far away. To intrude a small personal but far from unique example: my great-grandparents, only three generations back, were alive then. In the 1840s, my father's grandfather, David Challis, was a young wine-merchant in Leicester, having like so many others joined the exodus from the country – from his family's farm, in rural north Essex, on which he had been born – to the town, and he lived just long enough to hold my father as an infant in his arms for a

* Bill Sikes is the murderous burglar in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*.

† Two traditional pantomime characters of the period.

photograph. On my mother's side, my great-grandparents were probably preparing to flee Ireland, perhaps because of the famine, and were heading east to London rather than west to the United States. The 1856 wedding certificate of William Alexander, a shoemaker aged 28 years, and Mary Sullivan, 20, a spinster, for their marriage at St George's Catholic Church, Southwark, solemnized 'according to the rites and ceremonies of the Roman Catholics', is the oldest family document we still have; William signed his name but his bride and both witnesses made their mark with crosses. These folk are not quite in the memory of anyone now living, but some of them were known to people alive until recently. They may not have appreciated it at the time, but all of them lived – like 26 million other British and Irish people – through one of the pivotal years in the nation's history: 1846.

1
Christmas 1845

'The only person fitted to govern the Country.'

QUEEN VICTORIA'S JOURNAL, 20 DECEMBER 1845

In the early afternoon of Saturday, 20 December 1845, Britain's former and future prime minister Sir Robert Peel travelled down to Windsor to meet Queen Victoria. He left Paddington by the 2 p.m. train and was in the royal presence at the castle an hour later: a journey and a punctuality that would have been impossible to imagine only five years earlier, before the railway had reached the town. Not long before, Peel had reluctantly resigned his office when the cabinet threatened to split over repealing the Corn Laws. After the Whig opposition had failed to form a government to replace him, the country was left without leadership for three weeks: a political crisis which only came to an end on that afternoon when Peel agreed to form a new administration. In doing so he probably scarcely imagined that he would precipitate one of the greatest governmental convulsions of the nineteenth century. The decisions he took over the next six months completed a national economic course – free trade – by which successive British governments would be guided for the following century, and inaugurated a policy of cheap food which the country has adopted ever since. But those decisions would split the Tory party Peel led with an acrimony and fury that would last for generations. Statues would be erected to

the prime minister who had lowered the cost of bread across the country; but many in the Tory party would revile him as an arch-traitor to their dearest principles.

On that fine but windy afternoon, Peel found the young queen, 26 years old and pregnant with her fifth child, in a lively state of anticipation over whether he would agree to form a new government: 'Our excitement and suspense great,' she wrote in her journal that evening. 'After luncheon we saw Sir Robert Peel, who behaved most nobly and with a courage and devotion for one and the country which prove that he is the only person fitted to govern the Country. All he does is from a sense of duty because he considers it right and not from any party motive.'[1]

She had not always felt that way about Peel. Six years earlier, the queen had strenuously opposed him taking office as a replacement for the elderly Whig prime minister Lord Melbourne, who had been the teenaged queen's mentor during her first two years on the throne. But in the years since Peel had become prime minister in 1841, she had grown increasingly reliant on his advice and judgement, and so his decision to resign at the start of that December had thrown her into consternation. It was a huge relief to her that Lord John Russell, the leader of the opposition Whig party, had been unable (or perhaps just unwilling, given the leisurely way he had been sounding out party colleagues) to form a government instead. Russell had been to visit her that morning to give her the news in person – he had caught the 11 a.m. train – and a *Punch* cartoon would shortly encapsulate the event by showing the diminutive Russell as a uniformed page-boy clutching an oversized top hat being dismissed by the queen with the words: 'I'm afraid you're not strong enough for the

place, John.'[2] Russell's party was indeed divided: of his close and powerful colleagues, Lord Palmerston was refusing to take any post other than the Foreign Office, and the young Lord Grey was refusing to serve at all if Palmerston became foreign secretary. But what had worried Victoria was the idea of having to get used both to a new, less congenial prime minister and to some radical reformers sitting on the government benches, such as the Anti-Corn Law League campaigner Richard Cobden. In her journal she wrote:

> At 12 Lord John Russell came and gave us his reasons for definitively declining to form a Govt... he is evidently v. glad not to make any further attempts as the last was so very difficult and he certainly never took the necessary authority over his followers. I feel thankful that all has turned out now as it has and that we have done everything in our power to give them a chance for they would have been driven to extreme opinions which certainly would have caused their downfall. The thought of possibly having Mr Cobden in the government was anything but pleasant.

The immediate cause of the political crisis at Westminster was rotten potatoes in Ireland. That autumn much of the potato crop, on which a large proportion of the Irish peasant population lived, had failed disastrously. It was failing in the rest of the country too and across the Continent, as a fungal blight called Phytophthora infestans spread through Europe in the wake of a wet summer, turning the tubers black and rotting them not only in the ground but even after they had been dug up sound and put into storage. Labourers in the rest of Britain, however, though badly affected, at least had other

sources of food, a more varied diet and access as a last resort to local workhouse relief, which was more widespread than in Ireland. There, especially in the rural areas of the south and west, tenant farmers might grow other crops to pay the rent on their meagre smallholdings, but they had nothing else available to eat: about four million people out of a population of eight million ate only knobbly and unappetizing 'Connaught lumpers' – healthy men would consume up to twelve pounds a day each, it was said.[3] Without them, they and their families would starve to death. It was the only crop grown on two million acres of Irish soil. Now a third of the entire crop was turning to slime before the appalled eyes of a peasantry who, as every year, were relying on it to last them through the winter and well into the following summer. There had been blights before, and potatoes always ran short in the hungry months before July when the next crop was ready, but the rapidity with which the blight spread so soon after the harvest meant that a catastrophe was looming.

Word of Irish distress was only gradually seeping through to largely unsympathetic politicians and civil servants in London, men who viewed the Irish as an indolent, ungrateful and alien species ('more like tribes of squalid apes than human beings'[4]), grown idle in their reliance on such a basic crop, which 'foster[s] habits of indolence, improvidence and waste'. Peel was not like that – three decades earlier he had served for six years in Ireland as chief secretary of Lord Liverpool's administration, though he had never been back. Nonetheless, as urgently as he had seen the need to provide relief to the starving peasantry on both sides of the Irish Sea, he also saw the crisis as a prime opportunity to extend an economic policy that his government had already embarked upon: the lifting

of tariff barriers on imported goods in order to facilitate free trade and enhance Britain's industrial prosperity to the further advantage of its international economic supremacy. The major remaining barriers to this policy were the Corn Laws, which imposed duties on imported grain and had been intended to protect the crop of home cereal-growing farmers. The tariffs they imposed were complicated and bureaucratic. Introduced by Lord Liverpool's Tory government at the end of the Napoleonic wars to safeguard home agricultural production, their intention was to protect the high price of corn for domestic farmers and landowners, by levying a sliding scale of import duties that were to be imposed if the price of home-grown corn fell below eighty shillings a quarter (a quarter being eight bushels, equivalent to 480 lb or 217 kg). In fact, eighty shillings a quarter was relatively expensive, and in the thirty years following 1815 the price of corn never rose this high, so the tariff on imports was always in place. Peel had already modified the scale in 1842, but the effect had been drastically to increase the cost of the most basic of foods. A single loaf of bread could cost tenpence, nearly a twentieth of the weekly wage of industrial workers and as much as a tenth of the wage of agricultural labourers – the very men who actually harvested the wheat.

Whatever the original motivation, by the 1840s these tariffs were seen as naked class legislation both by many industrial manufacturers and by the rising numbers whose income and prosperity did not come from the land, who thought they favoured the landed class over themselves and their employees. The intellectual tide was with them: most economists now favoured repeal as a step towards freeing trade. As these free-traders saw it, the Corn Laws were keeping prices

– and wages – artificially high and were a government interference with the open market. They were a drag on industry and the cost of living for the poor: restricting their industriousness, enervating their energies, potentially seducing them into violent disorder – and on top of that, increasing the wages they had to be paid. But many of the landed gentry who supported the Tory party believed very differently: they saw the Corn Laws as a vital protection for British agriculture and their own prosperity. Great Whig landowners such as Lord Palmerston – who also owned land in Ireland – felt the same. Opposition leader Russell, however, was beginning to see the tariffs issue as a useful means of dividing the government. This meant the leadership of both parties was now committed to repeal. But any change, particularly by a Tory prime minister, would be politically toxic for his supporters. That Christmas Tory MPs would be subjected to the full weight of the landed gentry's fury.

'Rotten potatoes have done it all. They have put Peel in his damned fright,' snorted the elderly Duke of Wellington, now approaching his eighties but still a force in Tory politics.[5] During the autumn Peel had sent scientific advisers to assess the situation in Ireland and had sanctioned a secret operation, channelled through Barings Bank so that American corn-dealers would not be alerted, to buy £100,000 worth of maize in the US to relieve domestic distress: supplies of sweet corn that would arrive too late, in too small quantities, and which the Irish did not know how to cook and did not want to eat. They called it 'Peel's brimstone' because of its yellow colour.[6] Back in London, Peel increasingly believed that it was the Corn Laws that had to be tackled to reduce the cost of food; a marrying of expedience with necessity – the use of a domestic

crisis to serve a long-term economic goal. What he had proposed to his colleagues in early November 1845 was an emergency reduction of the duty on imported grain, followed by the gradual removal of the tariff over four years: a procedure which was not only going to be cumbersome and bureaucratic, but would actually have little impact on the current crisis and would only aggravate his backbench critics rather than appeasing them. What the cabinet already knew was that he had decided that the Corn Law tariffs must be abolished altogether. Once suspended, they would never be reimposed. There had been straws in the wind for several years as the government had reduced other tariffs on many other food imports, including sugar. The principle of protection was being worn away. Only that spring Peel, sitting on the front bench and listening to Cobden eviscerating the principle of the Corn Laws yet again, had crumpled his notes and turned quietly to his colleague Sidney Herbert sitting beside him, saying: 'You must answer this, for I cannot.'[7]

But when he had broached the plan to phase out the tariffs to his fellow ministers early in November, during a secret cabinet meeting at his home in Whitehall Gardens (where the Ministry of Defence now stands), only three of them supported him. The rest were not happy and the prime minister was soon writing to the queen to warn her that his government might fall. Victoria, much influenced by her husband Prince Albert – himself a political progressive, who was fully supportive of the move towards free trade – sought to stiffen their resolve:

> The Queen thinks the time is come when a removal of the restriction upon the importation of food cannot be successfully resisted. Should this be Sir Robert's own opinion, the

> Queen very much hopes that none of his colleagues will prevent him from doing what is right to do.[8]

It was at this point that Russell, alerted by rumours that Peel was planning repeal – and hence that there was a possibility of a government split – seized the initiative and issued a letter from Edinburgh to his constituents in the City of London. It was the most immediate way of making a policy announcement. He stated that he himself had decided that total repeal was the only way. Seeking to ride the tide of popular, urban, public opinion and without bothering to consult his colleagues, Russell stirringly announced:

> The corn barometer is pointing to fair while the ship is bending under a storm. I used to be of opinion that corn was an exception to the general rules of political economy but observation and experience have convinced me that we ought to abstain from all interference with the supply of food... Let us, then, unite to put an end to a system which has been proved to be the blight of commerce, the bane of agriculture, the source of bitter divisions among classes, the causes of penury, fever, mortality, and crime among the people... The Government appear to be waiting for some excuse to give up the present Corn Law. Let the people by petition, by address, by remonstrance, afford them the excuse they seek.[9]

Peel was in a spot, in danger of being outflanked and pre-empted. Parliament was not in session, but now that the government was admitting that there was a crisis in Ireland and the opposition was demanding reform, Peel could scarcely do

nothing, nor could he defend a tariff he no longer believed in. Gradually, his colleagues were coming round: a Tory government was at all costs better for the country, surely, than a Whig one. The Duke of Wellington stated: 'A good government for the country is more important than the Corn Laws, or any other consideration.' But two influential cabinet members, the Duke of Buccleuch and Lord Stanley, heir to a large part of Lancashire, told Peel that they would have to resign. Unfortunately, they did so on the same day that *The Times* published a scoop damagingly – and, as became clear, wrongly – announcing that the cabinet was unanimously in favour of repeal; Peel had yet to share his planned policy change with his party. With the government in disarray over such a fundamental shift, Peel resigned on 5 December 1845, leaving the way clear for Russell to form a ministry instead. The queen had hoped to send for her old adviser Lord Melbourne – the last occasion on which a British monarch tried choosing her own prime minister – but the old man astutely insisted that he was too ill to cross the sea to the Isle of Wight, where the royal family was inspecting the building of Osborne House, so the job of forming a government had fallen instead to Russell, the Whigs' Commons leader.

A fortnight later, though, and now he was unable to do so. At a time of acute political emergency, with the opportunity to become prime minister and carry free trade to a triumphant conclusion, he found his colleagues squabbling among themselves over which offices they should hold and refusing to serve if they did not get them. Russell, a diminutive figure with a high-pitched voice, had aristocratic influence (he was the younger son of the Duke of Bedford) but not political authority, and stepped back from the chance to govern and

from the responsibility for carrying a divisive policy. The crisis could not be allowed to linger longer – if Parliament was to be recalled in January, notice had to be given – and so it was that Peel found himself at Windsor Castle on the Saturday afternoon before Christmas. He had been passed what his keenest Tory backbench critic Benjamin Disraeli felicitously described as the poisoned chalice, but Peel now seized it with relish. That morning, he had summoned his colleagues to a cabinet meeting scheduled for nine o'clock in the evening and, before leaving, penned a rapid note to Wellington: 'I am going to the Queen. I shall tell her at once and without hesitation that I will not abandon her. Whatever may happen, I shall return from Windsor as her Minister.'[10]

He knew what he had to do. The queen wrote in her journal:

> He was much affected and excited and evidently indignant at the timid, and I must say shabby conduct of those who would never let Lord John Russell do what is right... He assured me that there was no sacrifice he would not make excepting his honour. This is noble, courageous and I must say chivalrous conduct... For the sake of the Crown and Country – that dear and great country – I pray that Sir Robert may remain at the head of the Government for yet many a year!

Fortified by her support, Sir Robert was on the train just after 4 p.m. and back at Paddington by 5.15. He would not have dissented from the queen's judgement that he was acting in the national interest – whatever the backbench members of his party might believe. He led them, but now he had not been chosen by them. His mood had changed too: energized

and emboldened by the crisis and the queen's confidence, there would be no more hesitancy, or consultation. He would not waver like Lord John Russell and retreat from doing what was right, however unpopular it would be with his party. By contrast, that night Russell dined at Palmerston's house. The diarist Charles Greville was also there: 'I never saw people so happy, as most, perhaps all of them, are to have got out of their engagement.'[11]

At his meeting that same evening in Downing Street, Peel told his cabinet colleagues that he would meet Parliament alone if necessary and propose the measures he thought appropriate to deal with the crisis. He was met with silence, broken only when Lord Stanley repeated his dissent: he would support a suspension of the Corn Laws, so long as they were reimposed after the crisis had passed, but otherwise he would not break his word to the party to uphold their continuation. 'We cannot,' he said, 'do this as gentlemen.'[12]

That night, though, it was clear what would happen. The following morning's *Observer* newspaper warned:

> It is idle to blink at the question... with the total repeal of the corn laws the landlords and labourers will be enormous sufferers, the one by the reduction of their property, the other by the deprivation of the field for their labour. The farmers will perhaps suffer even still more for, lying as it were between these two classes they will, like the 'buffers' of a train of steam carriages, have to stand the shock of every collision.

Its editorial writer forecast demonstrations in the streets by disaffected landowners.[13]

There was agitation on the other side, too, and it was powerful. In its next edition, of 24 December, the Wednesday after Peel had resumed office, the bi-weekly *Manchester Guardian* was reporting a packed meeting of the manufacturers and mill owners of the city at the town hall on the previous day, to raise funds for the Million League Fund of the Anti-Corn Law League. The meeting was addressed by Cobden and his fellow MP John Bright, and the list of donations filled a densely typed column, even though the paper would only enumerate gifts of more than £50. Its harassed reporter, probably the editor Jeremiah Garnett, who was a keen supporter of the League, wrote that to list all the donors would fill the paper's space to the exclusion of other pressing news:

> we give every amount we heard announced of £50 and upwards but we found it impossible to write down the names and amounts of numerous subscribers and, from the rapidity with which the chairman read them out, no perfect list exists.[14]

The factory owners of the northern towns were an increasingly powerful and wealthy lobby and their mobilization by the League was focused, effective – and disconcerting to a landed aristocracy used to having its own way.

Stanley's comment in cabinet that evening was a gibe that must have stung, for Peel was acutely aware that his social origins were not as elevated as those of many in the party. He liked to describe himself as the son of a cotton spinner, though in fact his grandfather had built the large family fortune from calico printing in Blackburn, Lancashire. The prime minister was an immensely rich man by any standards: his father had

settled more than £300,000 on him during his lifetime and bequeathed him £154,000 when he died in 1830. He owned 9,000 acres of prime agricultural land on the rolling plains of Warwickshire and south Staffordshire and had an annual private income in excess of £40,000: nearly £2.5 million by modern values. His father might have been a baronet – Peel had succeeded to the title too – but the family's status was derived from commerce rather than lineage. Peel himself had never worked in business. He had been raised on the family's Staffordshire country estate at Drayton, near Tamworth, and educated as a gentleman. Harrow had been followed by Christ Church, Oxford, an academic career which culminated in the first double first-class degree, in mathematics and classics, that the university had ever awarded. His political career had been built on administrative diligence and intellectual rigour, and he was disdainful of those in his party who could not follow where his mind led. Colleagues noted that one of Peel's favourite metaphors was drawn from hunting: 'heads see but tails follow.'[15] In an era when many backbench MPs valued their independence and resented party whipping, Peel rather expected his judgement to be respected and obedience to follow. 'The Right Honorable Baronet's horror of slavery,' said Disraeli waspishly, 'extends to every place, except to the benches behind him.'

The Tory backwoodsmen had long been suspicious of him because of his willingness to abandon fundamental party principles when he came to believe that situations had changed. They knew he was the most dominant politician in the country and that there was no one else on their front bench to match him, yet they increasingly resented his power – and now they were growing reckless. First there had been his betrayal of the

Protestant Ascendancy – the belief in Crown and Church that was one of the bedrocks of Toryism – when in the late 1820s he had abruptly switched from opposition to Roman Catholic emancipation to supporting it. Then there had been more betrayals, as they saw it, when Peel's government had reduced the duty on imported sugar, affecting British colonial sugar barons who had been required by a law of 1833 (but only implemented in 1840) to give up the slaves who worked their Caribbean plantations. He had already been tinkering with the Corn Laws in his 1842 budget and that too had increased their unease. Following that, his government had proposed increasing its grant to the Irish Catholic priests' training seminary at Maynooth, outside Dublin. Peel saw this as a means of winning over the Catholic clergy in rural Ireland, but the backbenches believed it was another betrayal of the Protestant Ascendancy. It was a time of extraordinary religious ferment, with the Church of England challenged by evangelicals on one side and beset by noisy conservative churchmen heading Rome-wards on the other. The passionate furore caused by the Maynooth grant, hard to understand today, was affected by a sense among its own backbenchers that the government was itself undermining the state's institutions. Was there no Tory principle he would not abandon? He had promised in 1844 that he had no plans for more changes to the Corn Laws, and now here they were again.

So Peel's plans for repealing the Corn Laws altogether produced resentment, anger and, increasingly that Christmas, fury. Peel really did not appreciate the visceral complaints of those in his party who did not spend their time poring over statistical tables and official reports, but who only knew where they stood on principle:

> How can those who spend their time in hunting and shooting and eating and drinking know what were the motives of those who are responsible for the public security, who have access to the best information and have no other object under Heaven but to provide against danger and answer the general interests of all classes?

So he had written to his wife Julia in exasperation a few days before resuming office that December.[16] If they had studied the problems as he had, read up the arguments, commissioned the reports, gathered the facts and analysed them, they would have understood the danger the famine crisis posed to security in Ireland and the risk of violent upheavals in the country as a whole. Free trade would liberate the wealth and potential of the most industrially advanced country in the world. It would enhance the prosperity of its people and secure their contentment. He would explain these advantages carefully, logically, even ponderously – he was not a sparkling speaker – but if they could not see that, there was not much more he could do. He must act in what he saw as the national, not the party, interest. But it was the betrayal they did not like, even more than the policy. As Lord George Bentinck – the most furious of the backbench rebels, an immensely rich Nottinghamshire landowner and son of a duke, who had scarcely spoken during his eighteen years in Parliament and had previously loyally supported Peel – said: 'I keep horses in three counties and they tell me I shall save fifteen hundred a year by free trade, but I don't care for that; what I cannot bear is being sold.'[17]

It was intellect, not sentiment, which drove Peel. He came from the generation that had grown up in the wake of the French Revolution (Peel always read avidly about the subject)

and the prolonged upheavals and economic dislocation of the Napoleonic wars – events which had terrified the British landed classes for more than fifty years and were a terrible warning of what might happen to them too. He, like them, had seen quite enough violent disorder at home over the previous decades, but unlike many of them, he no longer believed that repression was enough on its own to quell disturbances. The causes of discontent must also be addressed if it was not to fester and become worse. Not that he believed in appeasement – he was the minister who had introduced a police service in London in 1829, in the teeth of opposition from Tories who believed it was the right of freeborn Englishmen to defend their own property without interference with their liberties from a state police force.

During these decades, there had been political demonstrations put down by force, agricultural and industrial riots punished savagely, and even the assassination of a prime minister – Spencer Perceval, the man who had given Peel his first government job – shot in the lobby of the House of Commons itself in 1812. The queen had also been the target of a series of would-be assassins and Peel's own political secretary had been killed by a deranged assailant who mistook him for the prime minister in 1843. These were febrile times: ruthless cycles of economic prosperity and depressions had seen families impoverished and workers made destitute. There had also been waves of famine and regular epidemics of cholera and typhoid. Perhaps it was no wonder that he sought intellectual solutions to the unprecedented upheavals of a dangerous and burgeoning society, engulfed in rapid industrial and social change. On Sunday, 21 December, the *Observer* newspaper gave more prominent coverage to crime than it did

to the political crisis: the murder of Sir Lawrence Jones, Bart. by brigands near Smyrna made the front page, as did an 'appalling' murder in Jersey, the attempted shooting of a gamekeeper at Dunmow and the grievous wounding of PC Turner (Number N210), who had been stabbed with a pig slaughterer's knife when, one dark night the previous week, he attempted to prevent two men stealing a sheep from a field in White Hart Lane, Tottenham. Had Turner's thick leather belt not deflected the blade, the newspaper said, the wound would have been deadly.

Peel, now aged 57, had been the most dominant political figure of the previous fifteen years. Even Disraeli, his keenest critic, remarked that he 'played upon the House of Commons like an old fiddle'. He was the man who had led the Tories back to power in 1841, nine years after the Great Reform Act had been expected to consign them permanently to opposition: a man of fierce intellect, competence and vision, prepared to make a career of politics, as many of his colleagues were not. But he had grown tired in office. The perpetual hard work away from his family, reading those lengthy reports, writing long-hand letters late into the night, relentlessly overseeing every aspect of government – without the aid of particularly competent or dynamic colleagues or a large civil service, decades before the invention of the telephone or typewriter – had begun to wear him down. He was suffering from crippling headaches 'like the noise of boiling water', nosebleeds and gout; he had ear-aches and was becoming deaf – the result of a shotgun blast too close to his ears while out hunting years before; and he was getting plump. These were not conditions likely to make a proud man feel more emollient towards his critics.

Peel knew he had little in common with many of his fellow Tories. He might be respected, but not admired. He was mocked for his provincialism: his Staffordshire accent, his dress sense and his eating habits. 'I was never so struck as yesterday by the vulgarity of Peel,' the diarist Greville had written ten years earlier. 'In all his ways, his dress, his manner, he looks more like a vulgar shopkeeper than a Prime Minister. He eats voraciously and cuts cream and jellies with his knife. [The Earl of] Jersey pointed this out to me. And yet he has genius and taste and his thoughts are not vulgar though his manners are to such a degree.'[18] Disraeli sneered after Peel's death:

> [He] always poot a question and to the last said 'woonderful' and 'woonderfully'. He guarded his aspirates with immense care. I have known him slip. The correctness was not spontaneous. He had managed his elocution like his temper: neither was originally good.[19]

In this, Peel was not alone: in the days before BBC English was broadcast across the land and received pronunciation became standard, many educated men spoke with regional accents. One of them was Peel's ministerial colleague and acolyte William Gladstone, whose recent biographer Roy Jenkins detected a faint Liverpudlian accent in a scratchy early recording made of the old man in the 1880s. Thomas Carlyle was more generous about Peel's voice. It was, he wrote, 'extremely good, low-toned, something of *cooing* in it, rustic, affectionate, honest, suitably persuasive'.

Peel's speaking style was fluent, but not charismatic. *The Times* said in its obituary after his death:

> His egotism was proverbial but beside the excessive use of the first person it occasionally betrayed him into performances at variance both with prudence and taste... His style of speaking was admirably adapted for its purpose, for it was luminous and methodical, while his powerful voice and emphatic delivery gave almost too much assistance to his language, for it was apt to be redundant and commonplace. He had not the strong simplicity of expression which is almost a tradition of the old Whig school.[20]

Peel had never been gregarious. He was a shy man, despite decades in politics. Acquaintances had always found him cold; his smile, as the Irish politician Daniel O'Connell had famously once said, was like the silver plate on a coffin. Chilly, then, to those outside his family circle: for inside it he was a loving husband and doting father, and was warm and sardonic with his closest and most loyal friends. But he was also touchy, and sensitive of slights, unwilling to be mocked and unable to bend or conciliate. These were not attributes that would help him to win over the Tory party as he provoked its anger with his plans for the Corn Laws.

Peel did not like having his portrait painted and was dissatisfied with the results, which was curious for a man who built his own picture gallery at Drayton Manor and filled it with enormous paintings that he had commissioned of his contemporaries. Those paintings of Peel that were made were stiff and formal – the best of them, by John Linnell, strangely tentative; but they show a tall, handsome man with auburn hair, an aquiline nose and wary eyes. *The Times* described him as 'that tall, fair-haired, somewhat parrot-faced gentleman' and he was regularly caricatured in magazines such as *Punch*.[21]

But sadly, Peel seems to have turned down a request to have a daguerreotype portrait made in July 1846, so he remains the last prime minister not to have been photographed and – because we cannot quite see him (unlike many of his contemporaries) exactly as he was – he remains a figure from a distant, pre-modern age.[22]

On the day that Peel travelled down to Windsor, one of the most keenly awaited books of the year was published. Charles Dickens's latest annual Christmas offering, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, which the author had only finished writing three weeks before, was not a patch on *A Christmas Carol*, published two years earlier – Dickens was finding it a strain to keep up the standard – but it still sold out, all 16,500 copies, within a fortnight: more quickly than the *Carol* had done in 1843. The story was preposterous and is now little read, but in an early example of cross-media marketing, it was helped along by immediate stage adaptations – the first at the Lyceum theatre in London on the day of publication and a further sixteen within a month.[23]

Reviews were mainly favourable. That weekend's *Observer* gave it four close-printed columns: 'his songs be as welcome to the hearths and homes of merry England as is the genial season of festivity which they usher in so gracefully'. There was just one notable dissenter. *The Times* described the book as 'a twaddling manifestation of silliness' – a judgement which later literary criticism has shared – but at the time that could easily be discounted because Dickens's considerable energies were absorbed that Christmas with the imminent prospect of editing a new rival paper in the New Year. The *Daily News*

– 'Liberal Politics and thorough Independence' – was to be the author's new plaything and mouthpiece, for which he would be paid £2,000 a year, more than any other editor except John Thaddeus Delane of *The Times*. He had been busy recruiting staff, including his improvident father John Dickens, who had been placed in charge of the reporters – a surprisingly successful appointment as it turned out and one that would long outlast his son's editorship. Peel's reappearance in the Commons in the New Year coincided with the first edition of the *Daily News*, and Dickens senior promptly took off for the West Country to distribute copies – to Exeter, Plymouth and back to London, all in a day. This was a feat made possible by the railway, and necessary because *The Times* had refused advertising for the new publication and blocked co-operation on distribution of the paper as well as the shared use of foreign freelance correspondents. Within three weeks of the paper's first appearance, though, Charles Dickens had decided that the daily grind of putting out a newspaper was not for him and had resigned. He would spend much of the year to come abroad in Switzerland and France, writing the draft of what would become his seventh novel, *Dombey and Son*.[24]

In Yorkshire that Christmas, other authors were also at work. In Haworth parsonage, the Brontë sisters were finalizing a selection of their own poems, which Charlotte was planning to send off for publication in the spring. On 2 January 1846, Emily wrote (and dated) her poem 'No Coward Soul is Mine': 'I see Heaven's glories shine/ And Faith shines equal arming me from Fear.' Later that month, Charlotte would write to the London publishers Aylott and Jones asking for an estimate of the cost of printing an octavo volume of 200 to 250 pages 'of the same quality of paper and size of type as Moxon's last

edition of Wordsworth'.[25] They had spent some of the autumn choosing their pseudonyms: Charlotte was Currer Bell – after a local philanthropist – Emily, Ellis Bell and Anne, Acton Bell, their surname the middle name of their father's curate, Charlotte's future husband. The sisters would scrape together £31.10s to pay the cost of the poems' publication but, despite reasonable reviews, in the first year only two copies were sold. That winter, they also settled down to start writing *The Professor*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* and caring for their brother Branwell, sunk deep in alcoholism. Charlotte would write *Jane Eyre* the following summer. It was to be an extraordinary literary year: R.S. Surtees was filling the gaps between hunting, shooting and fishing with his literary efforts, Mrs Gaskell was busy writing, and in 1846 Edward Lear would publish his nonsense poems as well.

In Kent that December, Charles Darwin was enjoying 'raging discussions' with his friends at his home in the village of Down. The botanist Joseph Hooker came and brought with him a group of young naturalists and palaeontologists, including Edward Forbes, a geologist, who had an interesting theory about a sunken continent that might explain how plants of the same species had originally spread across the world. Darwin was astonished by the magnitude of the idea – an appallingly bold step 'to sink into the depths of the ocean within the period of existing species so large a tract of surface'. Others in the group were just as sceptical of Darwin's own developing thoughts on the transmutation of plants and animals: Hooker 'aloof from all speculation on the origin of species', still supporting 'the old assumption that each species

has one origin [and] is immutable'. Forbes himself did not believe that the fossil record showed that animals evolved; any that did must do so because of God's will. This was not what Darwin wanted to hear. In the New Year, though, he would give five pounds towards the renovation of the local parish church and start to worry that the potato blight might have reached his own crop. The disease was, he thought, 'a painfully interesting subject'. In 1846 the Darwins would draw in their not inconsiderable resources and attempt to live on a thousand pounds a year, while still being 'as rich as Jews'; but they presumably did not need to economize as much as their handyman who, paid twelve shillings a week, was having to find an extra shilling out of that to pay for the rising cost of food for his family .[26]

Far away across the Atlantic, north of the Canadian mainland, two Royal Navy ships, the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, were spending the long Arctic winter at anchor, stuck in the ice and darkness off the south shore of Devon Island, to the west of Baffin Bay. They held the naval party led by Sir John Franklin, which had set out from Greenwich the previous May on an expedition to find a way at last through the Northwest Passage, which might open a route to the Pacific. The two sailing ships had been on a previous expedition here, but this time, to strengthen their chances, they were equipped with railway steam-engines to provide extra power and the latest screw propellers, as well as every modern convenience. The 134 men in the two crews had access to libraries with more than two thousand books. Each ship had a hand organ which could play fifty tunes automatically, including hymns. The officers

had mahogany writing desks and there were instruments for making geological, botanical, zoological and magnetic observations. Before they left London, the *Illustrated London News* had written: 'The arrangements made for the comfort of the crews are excellent. The quantity of stores taken aboard is considerable.' There was tea and rum, 909 litres of wine for the sick, 4,287 kilograms of chocolate, 3,215 kilograms of tobacco and 4,200 kilograms of lemon juice. On board, for the first time on an expedition, there was also a daguerreotype camera to record the trip. It may have been the one which was used to take photographs of the officers shortly before their departure. Their ghostly faces peer out hauntingly from their portraits, now preserved in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, for these men would never again be seen by their fellow countrymen. Over the course of the next few years, they would all die agonizing and lonely deaths in the Arctic from starvation, exposure, disease, maybe cannibalism and, possibly, lead poisoning from the seals on the tins of food – another innovation – that the expedition had taken with them. Franklin himself, dressed in his rear admiral's uniform, complete with shiny buttons, decorations, epaulettes and a cocked hat, looks tired and distracted in his picture: a man, then aged 59, too old and unfit for the voyage, yet desperate to make it as his last chance for glory. His much younger fellow officers, Francis Crozier and James Fitzjames, look like the sort of ebullient young men you might meet in the bar of a rugby club on a Saturday night, were it not for their high winged collars and the black stocks tightly wound around their necks.[27]

During the voyage across the Atlantic a few weeks later, Franklin wrote a last letter to his wife: 'Let me now assure

you, my dearest Jane, that I am amply provided with every requisite for my passage and I am entering on my voyage comforted with every hope of God's merciful guidance and protection.' He wrote also of the happiness he felt in his officers, crew and ship. Fitzjames himself wrote home: 'We are very happy and very fond of Sir John.' These were their last known messages. The letters were passed, along with five crew members who were already too ill to go further, to the crew of a transport vessel, the *Barretto Junior*, which had accompanied the expedition as far as Greenland. And with that the *Erebus* and *Terror* passed from view, heading west.[28]

By that Christmas one of the sailors on board the *Terror* was dying. We know, because the grave of Petty Officer John Torrington, together with those of two other early casualties of the expedition, was later found on Beechey Island, a small spit of gravel off Devon Island. They were the lucky ones: only scattered bones and remnants of equipment were ever discovered of the rest, including Franklin, Fitzjames and Crozier. When the three graves were excavated in the 1980s, the men's bodies were found perfectly preserved by the permafrost, still dressed in their uniforms, arms bound to their sides, jaws clamped by spotted neckerchiefs wound around their heads by a ship's undertaker, their eyes open, hair tousled and teeth bared. Torrington was a 20-year-old Mancunian, a slight, short man, not at all a burly sailor: just five feet four inches tall and no more than six stone in weight, with delicate features and long, clean, tapering fingers. He had died first, on 1 January 1846, and the autopsy that was carried out 138 years later showed his death had been caused by the effects of tuberculosis and pneumonia, exacerbated by lead poisoning. He had been taken on as a stoker, but

his condition would have meant he had never been fit for that work, and he must have retired to his hammock quite soon after the ships left behind the last whaling vessels they had passed the previous summer – his last chance of being saved. By Christmas, Torrington would have been very sick indeed, probably suffering from delirium and mood swings, malnourished and feverish. When he died on New Year's Day, the crew were able at least to provide him with a wool-lined coffin and a tin plaque inscribed with his name, age and date of death. Why had he ever tried to go to sea and why was he picked for one of the most physically demanding jobs on board? Had it been the economic conditions at home? Had he wanted to escape Manchester and discover adventure? He found an isolated grave on a distant, barren shore instead.

Back in London, Peel was feeling reinvigorated. 'It is a strange dream,' he wrote to his friend Princess Lieven. 'I feel like a man restored to life after his funeral service has been preached.' Prince Albert had discussed the developing political situation with him on Christmas Eve and wrote a memorandum afterwards:

> Sir Robert has an immense scheme in view; he thinks he shall be able to remove the contest entirely from the dangerous ground upon which it has got – that of a war between the manufacturers, the hungry and the poor against the landed proprietors, the aristocracy, which can only end in the ruin of the latter... He will deal with the whole commercial system of the country... removing all protection and abolishing all monopoly, but not in favour of one class and as

> a triumph over another, but to the benefit of the nation, farmers as well as manufacturers.[29]

Peel was, for the moment, the subject of public acclaim for shouldering the burden of responsibility for handling the crisis. Sir Thomas Lethbridge, a Somerset landowner who was nonetheless an enthusiastic free-trader, wrote to the prime minister early in the New Year: 'Land, money and trade are all calling upon you. The great body of the people are ready for this Immense Change and you are the only Person in Existence that can do it.'[30] *The Times* also breathed a sigh of relief: 'Sir Robert Peel is minister again and the nation is reassured. The funds rise and manufacturers feel a little more encouragement to add to their stocks.'[31]

That Christmas night the businessmen of Manchester took their wives and families to the advertised performance of excerpts from Haydn's *Creation* and Handel's *Messiah* with 'upwards of 500 performers' at the Free Trade Hall. There were special late trains afterwards to take them back home to Rochdale, Oldham and Todmorden at 10 p.m. and Stockport at 11: 'all parties carried by one fare only'.

On the last evening of the old year, the queen mourned the loss of her pink and grey pet parrot, which had just died, but added that she had had a two-hour meeting with Sir Robert that day:

> The sudden rise in the stocks is a sure and evident proof of the confidence in the government and from all sides (including Uncle Leopold* and the king of the French) we

* King of the Belgians.

receive letters of satisfaction. I have to thank God for so many blessings vouchsafed to us. We are well and our children are particularly flourishing. Most humbly, fervently and most confidently do I pray for the continuance of our great happiness.[32]

But the country would be very far from happy in 1846.

2
The Condition of England

'Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed of different breeding, are fed by different food, and are ordered by different manners and are not governed by the same laws.'

BENJAMIN DISRAELI, *Sybil* (1845), BOOK 2, CHAPTER 5

We can tell, dimly, what Britain looked like in the mid-1840s from the very earliest photographs which were taken during that period, shortly after the invention of the daguerreotype. The tiny pictures, whose images were reflected on copper plates coated with light-sensitive silver plating and iodine and then fixed with salt water, have a luminous, crystal, mirror-like clarity as they catch the light. It is like looking into a glass, darkly. They show immovable objects such as buildings and places better than moving people because of the time taken for the exposure. But even the tiny figures in the landscapes demonstrate how they dressed and held themselves. In the earliest picture known to have been taken in London, a view from Trafalgar Square looking down Whitehall, made by a Frenchman called de St Croix in the autumn of 1839, the buildings are easily recognizable, as is Le Sueur's equestrian statue of Charles I, which still stands there.[1] But this and other pictures

receive letters of satisfaction. I have to thank God for so many blessings vouchsafed to us. We are well and our children are particularly flourishing. Most humbly, fervently and most confidently do I pray for the continuance of our great happiness.[32]

But the country would be very far from happy in 1846.

2
The Condition of England

'Two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed of different breeding, are fed by different food, and are ordered by different manners and are not governed by the same laws.'

BENJAMIN DISRAELI, *Sybil* (1845), BOOK 2, CHAPTER 5

We can tell, dimly, what Britain looked like in the mid-1840s from the very earliest photographs which were taken during that period, shortly after the invention of the daguerreotype. The tiny pictures, whose images were reflected on copper plates coated with light-sensitive silver plating and iodine and then fixed with salt water, have a luminous, crystal, mirror-like clarity as they catch the light. It is like looking into a glass, darkly. They show immovable objects such as buildings and places better than moving people because of the time taken for the exposure. But even the tiny figures in the landscapes demonstrate how they dressed and held themselves. In the earliest picture known to have been taken in London, a view from Trafalgar Square looking down Whitehall, made by a Frenchman called de St Croix in the autumn of 1839, the buildings are easily recognizable, as is Le Sueur's equestrian statue of Charles I, which still stands there.[1] But this and other pictures

– Fox Talbot's calotypes (slightly fuzzier, but an improvement since views could be duplicated and printed on paper) of scenes around Westminster from the mid-1840s – show a grimy place with dirt-covered streets, blackened walls and a smoky atmosphere, making the sky look hazy. The people caught accidentally by the exposures are blurry, small and distant – top hats can be made out, and crinolines. Fox Talbot took pictures of his colleagues and of workers on the family estate in their waistcoats on sunny days at Lacock in Wiltshire. In Edinburgh at the same time, the painter David Octavius Hill and his young colleague Robert Adamson were setting up a photographic studio to take calotype portraits of Scottish worthies, but they were also carrying their camera equipment out of doors to make images of ordinary people on sunny days: soldiers at the castle and the fishermen of Newhaven and their wives, who gutted the catch and then hauled the fish in creel baskets up the hill to sell in the city.[2] The photographers' partnership was ended by Adamson's early death at the age of 26 in 1848, but by then they had taken at least 2,000 photographs. There is no shortage of imagery allowing us to stare the people of the 1840s squarely in the face, before ever getting to the paintings and illustrations of the era.

What the pictures cannot show, of course, is the smell of the period, which is probably the first thing that would strike a modern person who had somehow been transported back 170 years: a pungent mix of horse droppings and rotting refuse from the streets and coal smoke from thousands of chimneys above, or the sour odour of people with inadequate washing facilities and stale clothing. Nor can they show the relative darkness after nightfall of a land without electric or neon lighting. The streets of London and the main thoroughfares of

other towns and cities were by now lit with gas – a much dimmer light than we are used to these days – but most private homes were not, and candles were still the form of lighting that illuminated rooms in the evenings. In 1846 the Canadian geologist and doctor Abraham Gesner invented kerosene – the mixture of coal, bitumen and oil shale, known as paraffin in Britain, that would soon be used in lamps to give a brighter light – but that was a decade or so away from domestic use.

The first photographs not only symbolize a new invention in an age bursting with innovations, enabling future generations to see directly what the country and its people looked like then and forever afterwards, but they also catch a country on the edge of modernity, in rapid transition from an older, largely agrarian society to a modern, urban and industrial one. This was the decade when railway lines spread rapidly, and migration from the countryside to find work in towns and cities accelerated. When the 1851 census of Britain was taken, it recorded that for the first time more people were living in towns and cities than in the countryside: just over half the population, compared with about a third fifty years earlier. The total size of that population had doubled since the start of the century – from 13 million to 26 million (less than half the current population size) – and during the 1840s alone it increased by about 10 per cent, even taking into account the sudden decline in the population of Ireland following the famine.[3]

In this rapidly urbanizing society, London was the biggest city in the world, reaching 2.5 million in 1846 – a doubling in size over the previous fifty years, making it two-and-a-half times larger than Paris, the next biggest European capital. Many of the manufacturing towns of the North of England and Midlands were also experiencing exponential growth in

these years. Sometimes they were towns that had scarcely existed fifty years before, or small settlements which took off with the arrival of industry: Bradford's population in 1801 was 13,000 and by 1851 had reached 104,000; Manchester – which had only been incorporated as a borough in 1838 – saw its 75,000 inhabitants increase to 303,000 in the same half-century; Birmingham's 71,000 turned into 233,000.[4] This was a population which was not just expanding, but was on the move from its roots: the 1851 census, which recorded birthplaces for the first time, reported that 'in almost all the great towns the migrants from elsewhere outnumbered the people born in the town'. It was a young population too: 60 per cent of the country was under the age of 24 during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Life for those left in the country was harsh and primitive, in thrall socially and sometimes financially to the local squire or landowner, who could dictate the terms of life and livelihood. But the factory jobs in town offered little improvement: marginally better paid and more regular, maybe, but arduous, repetitive and dangerous, with long hours and often squalid living conditions. In the country, working hours were still governed by the hours of daylight and by the amount of work available seasonally; but factories needed to operate permanently to a different timetable. Hence strict disciplines were introduced into the workplace to inculcate punctuality in employees who lacked watches and were unused to keeping to time. This was why lateness or absence was severely punished and the most prominent features on the factory building were usually a clock and a bell.

Life expectancy, though improving, was poor, especially in the towns: in rural Rutland in 1842, the gentry might expect

to live to the age of 52, tradesmen to 41 and labourers to 38; in Derby to 49, 38 and 21 respectively; and in Manchester to 38, 20 and 17. Young labourers in Bethnal Green at this time were dying on average aged only 16 and in Liverpool at 15.[5]* Overall, life expectancy in 1841 was about 40 years. In the cities, death rates had shot up during the intense industrialization of the 1830s: in Birmingham from 14.6 per 1,000 to 27.2 in the ten years between censuses, in Liverpool from 21 to 34.8, and in Bristol from 16.9 to 31.[6] The Victorians measured such things punctiliously.

By the early 1840s what old infrastructures there were in towns were buckling under the strains caused by rapid expansion. The new buildings thrown up to cater for the increasing urban population were basic and jerry-built. A succession of foreign visitors were impressed by the manufacturing energy and productivity, which often made them gasp, but appalled by the living conditions, filth and poverty. Here is Léon Faucher, a French journalist, writing after being shown around the slums of Liverpool under the protection of a policeman in 1844:

> Imagine a sort of hole dug in the ground, between ten and twelve feet square, and often less than six feet high, so that it is difficult for a grown man to stand upright. These holes do not have windows; air and light come in only through the door, the top part of which is generally at street level. You go down as if into a pit, by a ladder or an almost vertical staircase. Water, dust and mud accumulate at the bottom. Since the floor is rarely paved and since no form of

* Life expectancy figures were seriously skewed by horrendous infant mortality rates: if you lived past early childhood there was a reasonable chance of lasting to 40.

ventilation is possible, it is perpetually dank and humid. In some places the cellar has two compartments, the second of which, normally used as a bedroom, only gets light through the first. Every cellar is lived in by three, four or five people.[7]

The same year, the German traveller J.G. Kohl stood on the banks of the Irwell in Manchester:

What an extraordinary spectacle! There stand rows and groups of huge manufactories, each consisting of numerous buildings which are sometimes bound together by one surrounding wall... See how eagerly these manufactories suck up through pumps and buckets the river water, which dirty as it is, is invaluable to them and which they pour back into the river in black, brown and yellow currents after it has served their purposes... The blue heavens above are hidden from us by the thick smoke of the huge factory chimneys which weave a close, impenetrable veil of brown fog between the city and the sky... The great establishments are built in various ways; some piled storey on storey, others on the straight line system in long successive rows; others like huge greenhouses, all on one floor lighted from the top. From these huge and oddly shaped buildings rise immense chimneys of all heights and diameters, many as tall as the steeples of St. Paul's and St. Stephen's and sometimes architecturally ornamented with stone garlands, bas-reliefs and pedestals... In the neighbourhood are seen the dwelling places of the work people, mean-looking little buildings, huddled in rows and clusters... These quarters are the most melancholy and disagreeable parts of the town, squalid, filthy and miserable to a deplorable degree. Here stand the

abominable beerhouses, dram shops and gin palaces which are never without customers. Here the streets are filled with ragged women and naked children.[8]

In such slums the poor dwelt among excrement, overflowing from inadequate drains and open sewers and settling inches deep in basement rooms where families lived. Above ground, men employed to cart the waste away either dumped it in the nearest river or stream, or left it in great festering piles in the streets next to the tenements of the poor.

An even greater horror was the city burial grounds, where corpse had been piled on corpse for decades and barely covered over. The grisly details were exposed by George Walker, a London surgeon who became a campaigner for reform and whose 1839 book *Gatherings from Grave Yards* disclosed the abuses in the starkest terms. Municipal cemeteries presented an obvious solution to the problem, but they were opposed by both the Church of England clergy, who objected to the potential loss of burial fees, and the speculators building private cemeteries. Walker, with his earnestness and resolution to secure reform, year after year in the face of the inertia of these vested interests, became an archetypal Victorian lobbyist, though his name is little remembered today. Some churchyards rose up above the surrounding basements as more bodies were crowded in: Bunhill Fields in London had 100,000 corpses buried in four acres. The Church of England opposed reforms which would set up separate cemeteries away from its premises and so its city churchyards were bursting open. St Anne's, Soho, 'overlooked by houses thickly inhabited', had rotten coffin wood and fragments of bone lying about at ground level, and at St Giles-in-the-Fields partially

decayed bodies still with flesh on the bones and human heads with hair attached could be seen on the surface. Gravediggers hacked through the coffins of recently deceased children to make way for more, and at the Enon Baptist Chapel on Clement's Lane, between the Strand and Holborn, Sunday school children told of clouds of winged insects rising from the graveyard and crawling all over the building in hot weather.[9]

These stories were replicated in many cities, but such areas existed alongside new buildings bursting with opulence and civic pride. The great classical edifice of Liverpool's St George's Hall was being built in the 1840s at the same time as Faucher was touring the city's slums – whose inhabitants were probably among those doing the building – and Birmingham's town hall, constructed along similar lines, in imitation of the Parthenon of ancient Greece, was also newly opened. Soon the cities of the North would be competing with each other for the erection of ever grander, larger, more imposing civic buildings. The noble, spec-built middle-class houses of the Regency period, the suburban villas designed by Decimus Burton and built by Thomas Cubitt, which still survive and give us a picture of nineteenth-century gracious living, were also being thrown up at this time, many of them with inadequate sanitation. The water supply even to these houses was intermittent and polluted and only a third of the properties in London were connected to the sewers at all. The drains were so badly constructed that the water often failed to run off and was left to stagnate in the pipes, or flood neighbouring basements.

It was another German visitor, Friedrich Engels, sent to Manchester from Düsseldorf in 1842 to spend time at a branch of his family company's cotton mills, on whom the industrial behemoth had its most profound and lasting effect.

He went home after two years, aged 24, to write his polemic *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, armed with copious notes, cuttings from the *Manchester Guardian* and a burning sense of the injustice of the economic woes that bore down on the labouring population:

> I wanted to see you in your own homes, to observe you in your everyday life, to chat with you on your condition and grievances... I have done so: I forsook the company and the dinner parties, the port wine and champagne of the middle classes and devoted my leisure hours almost exclusively to the intercourse with plain Working Men... you are right, perfectly right in expecting no help whatever from [the middle classes]. Their interest is diametrically opposed to yours... the middle classes intend in reality nothing else but to enrich themselves by your labour.

He contrasted the supposed pre-industrial life of skilled craftsmen, working with their families at home – 'a passably comfortable existence, leading a righteous and peaceful life' – with the economic competition and industrial grind which had worn them down. He said it had set class against class and locally born workers against Irish immigrants, who lived in even worse squalor than they did:

> the most horrible spot... lies... immediately south-west of Oxford Road and is known as Little Ireland... the race that lives in these ruinous cottages, behind broken windows, mended with oilskin, sprung doors and rotten door posts, or in dark, wet cellars, in measureless filth and stench, in

this atmosphere penned in as if with a purpose, this race must really have reached the lowest stages of humanity.[10]

More modern research suggests Engels was wrong, perhaps even racist, about that, succumbing to a traditional English prejudice. Even if their living conditions were dreadful, Irish immigrants were better educated and fitter than the English slum-dwellers who despised them and more enterprising than those who remained back home.

The working class was not one organic whole. There were also tradesmen and skilled artisans, many mobilizing to support the Chartist movement which was campaigning for political reform in the 1840s. They wanted not to overturn the parliamentary system – as the landed classes feared – but to be given the chance to have their, exclusively male, say in it: to vote in elections by secret ballot, safe from intimidation. Some of these and many others had turned to religion – evangelical denominations and sects were expanding, splitting, reforming and competing for both members and respectability – and they also joined the co-operative friendly societies, committed to mutual help.

The middle classes were also expanding. By the 1840s perhaps a million people could count themselves members of what would later be considered white-collar professions, although they were only a fifth of the numbers in labouring, agricultural or domestic service jobs. In cities such as London there were increasing numbers of clerks scratching away at ledgers in banks, counting houses, offices and law firms, in tedious secretarial jobs, adding lists of numbers, copying letters, legal documents and contracts in neat, copperplate longhand: men like Bob Cratchit in Dickens's *A Christmas*

Carol, who beavered away for fifteen shillings a week – though he was significantly underpaid, for clerks could expect upwards of £60 a year. The 1851 census would record 44,000 clerks, a number that would increase to 67,000 ten years later. Higher up the ladder, the professions were expanding too and establishing their own guilds and professional associations: the Law Society in 1843, the Institute of Mechanical Engineers in 1847, and more would follow in the years to come. These were bodies which would come to set their own entry standards and qualifications, and a man might rise in them (only men, of course) and through diligence, application and luck become wealthy and honoured – or, occasionally, disgraced. A clerk at the Bank of England in 1844 would be paid £100 a year by the age of 21, rising by £10 increments every year to a maximum of £250 (for comparison, the governor of the Bank received £400 a year and the directors £300). For this, a bank clerk's working hours were from 9 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., or until 5 p.m. with one-and-a-half hours for lunch. They might be sacked for being 'a smoking, singing, public house man' even outside working hours, but in 1845 the directors ordained that they might qualify for between six and eighteen days' annual holiday depending on seniority; the following year they were also banned from smoking cigars at work. When in 1844 one clerk, William Burgess, embezzled £8,000 from a client's account, he fled to Boston, was brought back from the US and sentenced to transportation for life.[11]

In every town and village there were small businesses: maybe 600,000 small shopkeepers and street sellers, servicing a middle-class population increasing in affluence, albeit sometimes precariously and without many checks and balances to limit the risks they were taking. New industries such as

insurance and advertising were expanding fast, and there were opportunities for investing one's savings in railway shares and speculative schemes that could collapse as quickly as they inflated, thrusting aspiring families back down the ladder to penury as fast as they had risen.

Each morning and evening, the army of Bob Cratchits, from Islington, Pentonville and Hackney, would trudge to and from the City, while the professional men with families would catch the omnibus further out, from Bayswater, Brixton and Clapham. At home, their wives would employ housemaids to do the laborious and menial drudgery. Their houses were filling up with furniture and knick-knacks, symbols of status and prosperity: not just the necessities of life, but fripperies as well, such as pianos and wallpaper (often a fashionable green and accordingly laced with arsenic, which would give them headaches, make them sick and occasionally kill them). To furnish their aspirations they could draw inspiration from an increasing number of magazines and periodicals, all emphasizing the virtues of home and family. But most of them did not own their own homes: perhaps 10 per cent of houses were owner-occupied, the rest being rented.[12] It was a society on the move, onwards and upwards.

And, whatever the indignant young Engels thought, not all the middle classes were ignoring the plight of the workers. They could hardly avoid them, living nearly cheek by jowl as many of them did, suffering from the same pollution, the same stinks, the same dirty water, and the same diseases and epidemics. These were huddled towns and cities. When Charles Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* in 1836 and 1837, he was living in Doughty Street, near Holborn, in a comfortably middle-class area, with the barristers' garden at Gray's Inn at

the end of the road. But in imagining Fagin's den of thieves and criminals, he placed it in Ray Street, just a few hundred yards and a ten-minute walk away, in Clerkenwell. By now, however, the professional and middle classes were seeking to escape: Dickens's worthy characters headed out to Camden Town, Islington and Hampstead north of the river and Walworth south of it to see their 'Aged P.' (as John Wemmick did in *Great Expectations*), or to go home to their wives and children. It was said of the Manchester middle classes that they 'reside chiefly in the open spaces of Cheetham, Broughton and Chorlton' – and who could blame them, considering the state of the nearby slums? William Cooke Taylor, in his *Notes of a Tour in the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire* in 1842, had written:

> We have improved on the proverb, 'One half of the world does not know how the other half lives', changing it into 'One half of the world does not care how the other half lives.' Ardwick knows less about Ancoats than it does about China.[13]

But the middle class could not escape the cholera epidemics that erupted spasmodically from the early 1830s – the outbreak of 1832 expunged 18,000 people and the disease's return in 1848–9 would kill a further 53,000 in England and Wales – or the more endemic typhoid. Such frighteningly lethal illnesses were unpredictable in their arrival, spared no one rich or poor, were untreatable and could kill within hours. Charles Greville remembered Mrs Smith, the daughter of Lord Forrester, married to the heir of Lord Carrington:

young and beautiful, was dressed to go to church on Sunday morning, seized with the disorder, never had a chance of rallying and died at eleven at night... the dread of cholera absorbs everybody.[14]

Then there was the Earl of Clarendon's maid, who was eating gooseberry fool one evening and being carried off in a sealed coffin the following morning. Visit almost any Victorian town cemetery or church graveyard today and, amongst the grand tombs and mouldering statuary, you are likely to see poignant memorials to husbands and wives, children and babies lost to fevers, sometimes in quick succession, within weeks. Most believed that infection arose from miasmas emerging like mist from the ground, others that God had targeted the dissolute to teach them a lesson, though that was hard to sustain if one's children had died. The wrath of the Almighty was an evangelical creed so harsh that ultimately people recoiled from it. Alternatively, the protectionists, who were opposed to free trade, tended to think foreigners were to blame for spreading epidemics. Whatever the cause, reformers appreciated that disease had to be tackled, if only in the interests of economic efficiency: a debilitated workforce was an unproductive one.

And, if there was ignorance of the plight of the deserving, or undeserving, poor, it was not from want of being told. Dickens's early novels are full of comparisons between the rich and impoverished in his society. Reporters such as Cooke Taylor and James Kay wrote up their eye-witness reports in book-length detail and a succession of 'Condition of England' or 'purpose' novels were published through the decade. These were works like Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, written following

the death of her baby son from scarlet fever in 1845, or Disraeli's *Sybil*, from which the famous 'two nations' reference is taken. All pointed up a fractious divided society.

There was poetry too: Caroline Norton's *A Voice from the Factories* and most famously Thomas Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' of 1843, first printed in *Punch*, about the plight of seamstresses:

> Work — work — work!
> My labour never flags;
> And what are its wages? A bed of straw,
> A crust of bread — and rags.
> That shattered roof — this naked floor —
> A table — a broken chair —
> And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank
> For sometimes falling there!
> ...
> Stitch! stitch! stitch!
> In poverty, hunger, and dirt,
> And still with a voice of dolorous pitch, —
> Would that its tone could reach the Rich! —
> She sang this 'Song of the Shirt!'[15]

This was from the magazine's early, radical phase in the decade following its launch in 1841, before it became complacent and respectable. A cartoon from 1846 catches the tone. It shows a poor but respectable woman with her painfully thin and evidently ailing daughter on a visit to a surgery, with the plump, well-dressed doctor patting the child on the head, saying as he does so: 'You must give her plenty of nice puddings, some calves' foot jelly – a little wine – a fowl or two

– take her to the seaside and, if possible, go with her to Baden Baden.'[16] The punchline is a little ponderous for modern tastes, perhaps, but the meaning is clear: such remedies were far beyond the family's capabilities.

Talk of class in the absolutist Engels sense was a new phenomenon in the 1840s (of course *The Condition of the Working Class in England* did not receive an English translation for more than forty years). The 'masses' and the middle class were not of one mind, or sensibility. The northern cotton manufacturers who flocked to meetings organized by the Anti-Corn Law League were among those most resistant to legislative attempts to limit the hours of child labour or improve factory conditions, on the grounds that this was an interference with their individual liberty and their workers' free will. There were clear gradations in their society, just as there were among the working classes.

The factory owners' fiercest persecutor was an evangelical Tory aristocrat, Lord Ashley, later Lord Shaftesbury, a man who, although now remembered as one of the great Victorian social reformers, was a prickly and self-righteous opponent. Ashley's disgust at what he called 'the Millocracy' seemed sometimes to verge on class hatred. He thought that they and their factories were deeply subversive of the social order – that they were exploitative of the workers, unlike paternalistic aristocrats such as himself – and inimical to Christianity. However evangelical the mill owners' roots were, he suspected them of promoting godlessness, if not popery. Before taking up the cause of improving working conditions, Ashley, whose wealth came from large family estates in Dorset, had never been near a factory in his life. His crusade at least partially had the aim of uniting the two Englands, of the aristocracy

and the underclass, in a paternalistic compact against the millocrats. As he wrote in 1841: 'I have done much in hope to conciliate the landed gentry in [the mill workers'] behalf and approximate the parties who have common interests and "tell it not in Gath", a common enemy, the mill owner! He is the Jacobin of commerce.'[17] The element of retaliation – against Ashley and others who thought like him – in the Anti-Corn Law League's rhetoric and campaigning was inevitable.

In the 1840s the prolonged battle to improve working conditions, started in the 1820s, was beginning to obtain results. This was a raw struggle at the heart of the Industrial Revolution, between old ways of doing things – families had worked down mines or in craft industries for centuries – and new concerns for workers' moral welfare. It was between laissez-faire capitalism and supposed economic freedom, and the conviction that society could be ordered better. And it was also between the traditional, local administration of society, through the parish or the squire, and the sense that national rules laid down by government were now needed to combat abuse and direct the nation in a more orderly way. Over a period of twenty years cotton-spinning factories – where children scampered dangerously between the machinery clearing threads and unblocking tangles for twelve hours a day, risking life and injury for little money, no offer of education and precious little leisure – came to be regulated by the imposition of legal controls and inspections. These were nowhere remotely near what we would recognize as adequate or even particularly effective today, but they were remarkable for their time: a recognition by government for the first time that national regulations had to be established to control working conditions. There was an economic argument for this, to

improve efficiency and order and prevent good employers being undercut by bad ones, but there was also a pre-eminent moral purpose, deployed by Ashley and others. This was to improve the way people lived, and to make them more responsive to God. Thus, in 1842, the Mines Act prohibited women and children from going underground, partly because of the sense that this was not a suitable industry for them to work in, but more pressingly because the nation had been shocked by reports of women colliers working semi-naked and wearing trousers next to men, and children as young as six being sent to sit in the darkness and open the doors in the shafts for coal wagons as they passed. Alongside this, the campaign to limit working shifts for children and women in factories to ten daytime hours took several attempts, but the reform was eventually passed in 1847.

The 1830s and 1840s were a period when a nascent civil service was called in by government to conduct inquiries into the state of the nation. Their reports poured out: one reason why we now know so much about what it was like. Commissions recorded conditions in factories and mines, child labour, the state of city cemeteries, the working of the poor law and workhouses,* prisons and schools, handloom weavers,

* The much-hated Poor Law of 1834 was designed to reduce the cost of supporting the unemployed and poverty-stricken, by forcing those seeking help to apply to workhouses where they would be made to undertake manual labour. Previously such people had been supported by grants – 'outdoor relief' as opposed to incarceration – raised through parish poor rates that were levied on the local property owners. This new system was regarded by its supporters as more efficient and cheaper. The nineteenth-century arguments about the deserving and undeserving poor have striking

sanitation and Irish land tenure, tithes and ecclesiastical fees, lunacy and bankruptcy. All were designed to solve immediate crises or ongoing problems by marshalling statistical evidence and deploying factual information. By such means, it was confidently believed, dispassionate national solutions could be discovered and applied scientifically and logically in legislation across the country. It was the sort of weighing and measuring of the nation's problems that had not been attempted before.

Such empirical approaches were derided by Dickens ('Facts alone are wanted in life,' says Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times*) and by Thomas Carlyle in his essay *Chartism*: 'you might prove anything by figures'. But it was the sort of information that was invaluable to government and to ministers such as Peel, seeking to frame legislative solutions to new social problems. These reports, such as Edwin Chadwick's *Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, published in 1842, were extraordinarily thorough documents, painting a vivid picture of aspects of contemporary British life and pointing to ways of ameliorating it. Chadwick's 400-page report, garnered over two years of thorough research and laced with striking examples of deprivation and squalor, laid bare the conditions in the cities, paved the way for more research (he was immediately commissioned to investigate the graveyards scandal), and led to legislation to improve public health and the administration of towns and cities. Chadwick's report was forensic in its detail, from the redesign of sewer pipes (oval-shaped ones would be more efficient) to

resonances with today's debates over welfare, even if the solutions adopted have evolved.

the disposal of sewage waste in Edinburgh, and his conclusions were inescapable. Bad sanitary conditions increased the mortality rate and wasted the workforce, and improvements would prove worthwhile and cost-effective:

> These adverse circumstances tend to produce an adult population short-lived, improvident, reckless and intemperate and with habitual avidity for sensual gratifications... these habits lead to the abandonment of all conveniences and decencies of life and especially lead to the overcrowding of their homes which is destructive to the morality as well as to the health of large classes of both sexes... the expense of public drainage, of supplies of water laid on in houses and of means of improved cleansing would be a pecuniary gain, by diminishing the existing charges attendant on sickness and premature mortality.[18]

Chadwick had found that many towns and boroughs had a jumble of competing boards and authorities, often rivalling each other and jealous of their powers: St Pancras had nineteen, Birmingham three separate sets of commissioners and four boards of surveyors, all at loggerheads.[19]

Reformers such as Chadwick were heavily influenced by utilitarian efficiency theories along the lines of the prescriptions of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). Bentham's Panopticon was a striking example. This was the 'all-seeing eye' which, when applied to prison design, as it was at Pentonville in 1842, proposed a building with long sight-lines where convicts could be constantly, clearly and efficiently monitored. It was 'a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind in a quantity hitherto without example'.

Chadwick, a Manchester-born lawyer and workaholic, impatient with colleagues less diligent or professional than himself, argumentative, and happy to accumulate sweeping personal powers, had been a close friend of Bentham, so it is not surprising that his solutions were also utilitarian ones. When applied more abstractly, they meant the enforcement of national systems of regulation and bureaucracy, overseen by central administrators such as... well, Chadwick could think of no one better than himself. Over time he would serve as a commissioner for the Poor Law, Rural Constabulary, Health of Towns, London Sanitation, Sewers, the General Board of Health and the Crimean Sanitary Commission. Reports such as his were not bland expositions – they were pointed and, in effect, polemical. What is more, they ushered in gradual improvements in sanitation and health in towns and cities, and among factory workers. They made for clean and efficient solutions for legislators trying to frame national laws and for central governments taking over ever wider responsibilities for the running of society, as well as paying for it through taxation. Thus inspectors fanned out across the country, visiting factories, laying down standards, zealously initiating prosecutions, knowing that they would be held responsible themselves if things went wrong. This was all very well: it led to a system of government inspection that prevailed for more than a century. But it also led to a mentality that the gentlemen in Whitehall always knew best and bred rigidity, complacency and also a certain desiccated lack of humanity.

This was most vividly demonstrated in the workhouses that sprang up across the country following the passage of the 1834 Poor Law, legislation enacted by the Whig government which had just passed the Reform Act in a mood of

administrative efficiency and cost-saving. 'We are busy introducing system, method, science, economy, regularity and discipline,' as Lord John Russell wrote to Chadwick at the time.[20]

The workhouses were designed to be grim – refuges of last resort for the destitute, the sort of places that no one would go if they had an alternative. They were run on rigid, cheerless lines: they intentionally had Spartan living conditions, often inadequate food, hard, repetitive work, and – most resented of all – the segregation even of married couples, from each other and from their children. No longer would the poor be allowed to receive aid as 'outdoor relief' at home (although this provision was not abolished). Instead, they would be corralled and incarcerated where they could be kept an eye on and made to work. The workhouses were, as one assistant commissioner put it, designed to be of prison-like appearance, 'intended to torment the poor' and instil 'a salutary dread of them'. They were for the 'less eligible' and aid would only be received now in return for work: 'no relief shall be given to the able-bodied, or to their families, except in return for work and that work as hard as it can be made... and that workhouse as disagreeable as it can be made,' as the economist Nassau senior wrote to the minister Lord Brougham in 1833.[21]

So feared was it that, even 140 years later, my mother, the youngest child of Victorian working-class parents, could speak with a shudder of ending up in the workhouse as if it still existed: the system had long gone but the building itself still stood gauntly on the hill above Newbury, Berkshire, where we lived. It was a maternity hospital by then, but still cast a baleful shadow over the town below. The system was brand-new in 1837 when Dickens started writing his

powerful critique of it in *Oliver Twist* – the image of grim, ancient buildings usually portrayed in adaptations of the novel is anachronistic – and, so far as government and its local administrators were concerned, it was not only efficient, but cost-effective as well. The cost of poor relief fell by more than a third, from £6,736,000 in 1831 to £4,603,000 in 1835, and was little more than that in the early 1840s at the time of the most severe depression of the era.

More than 350 workhouses were built across the country in the 1830s, most of them in country towns and rural areas, where they soon got a bad name from those who were unappreciative of their utility – mainly those who needed to use them, rather than those paying for them. They soon provoked scandals, in fact as well as fiction, which were ruthlessly exposed by *The Times* newspaper in its campaign against the system. The worst was at Andover in north Hampshire where, in 1845, the inhabitants were found to be so starved that they were gnawing the rancid animal bones that they were supposed to be pounding into dust for fertilizer as their daily work. That the bones may even have included human ones, culled from the local churchyard, only made the exposure of what was going on more horrific. One inmate, Samuel Green, aged 61, admitted to the inevitable eventual inquiry:

> We looked out for the fresh bones by the look of them and then we used to be like a parcel of dogs. Some were not so particular about the bones being fresh as others. I like the fresh bones... sometimes I have had one that was stale and stunk and I eat it even then... because I was hungered, I suppose.[22]

The Andover workhouse was a ghastly regime, run by a Scottish retired artillery sergeant-major and Waterloo veteran called Colin McDougal and his sluttish wife. They were under the benevolent supervision of the chairman of the misnamed board of guardians, the local vicar Christopher Dodson. Not much guardianship was undertaken. Dodson had, however, recently been presented by the board with a service of plate costing £270 in testimony of his able and zealous services – equivalent, it was pointed out, to the cost of keeping a pauper for five years. The reason the inmates were so desperate was because McDougal had been stealing their food.

It was, Peel's home secretary Sir James Graham insisted, 'a workhouse squabble in the South of England'.[23] The commission of inquiry found that McDougal's conduct had been marked with undue severity and, crucially, a disregard for decorum:

> that he was on several occasions, once even while reading prayers to the inmates, seen in a state of intoxication, that he was utterly deficient in many of the qualities which are of essential importance in the difficult position which he filled, viz. fairness and impartiality, a due sense of truth, a well-regulated temper and proper habits of self-control.

Despite this finding, the Rev. Dodson and the board refused to sack him, though McDougal eventually resigned. The vicar himself stayed on for another thirty-two years, unrepentant to the last and seemingly unconcerned that abuses continued. The Andover minutes record that, in heavy snow in the winter of 1846, a one-legged labourer called William Few dragged himself, his wife and three children ten miles across the North

Hampshire downs from the windswept and remote upland village of Faccombe to seek relief, only to be turned away because he was not considered sufficiently a pauper. That Christmas of 1846 those same minutes state:

> Mr Hugh Mundy proposed that, as Christmas Day falls on a Friday, a bread and cheese day, and as no subscription could be raised to give the inmates roast beef and plum puddings on that day, the diet of Tuesday consisting of meat etc be substituted for that of Friday. Which proposition was not seconded.[24]

Mundy was the man who had exposed the bone-grinding scandal the year before, so there may have been some ill-feeling among his colleagues. Perhaps the Rev. Dodson went home after the meeting to dine off his dinner service. Meanwhile, the 'imposing and commodious' Andover workhouse had satisfactorily reduced the cost of relief to the local parishes from £12,715 to £8,272, a saving of 35 per cent.

At least McDougal did not kill anyone, perhaps more by luck than judgement, but others did, seemingly without penalty. There was the case of Joseph Howe, another former sergeant-major, in charge of the Eton workhouse, who brutally mistreated an inmate called Elizabeth Wyse when she tried to look after her sick two-year-old on Christmas Day in 1840. He dragged her away from her child and locked her overnight in solitary confinement in an unheated cell. While enduring a temperature of –29 degrees – the coldest night for decades, it was said – she soiled the floor. Her punishment was to be locked in it again the next day and made to clean the cell with her hands. The story got out, to *The Times*, and Howe was

fined £10 (around £600 today), at which point it came to light that he had killed a small boy when in charge of the Brackley workhouse only the previous year, by pouring boiling water over him. That had not forced his dismissal. He told the unlikely story that he had thought the water was cold and that enabled him to move on to Eton to take another post. Such men make Mr Bumble – the workhouse beadle in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* – look positively benign.

The man who exposed the Eton scandal was a clergyman, the Rev. Sydney Godolphin Osborne, who was a remarkable campaigner for justice for the agricultural poor, people whose lives were as desperate as any factory worker's. Osborne, the third son of Lord Godolphin, had married into one of the great liberal dynasties of the day, the Grenfell family, and was related to yet another, the Kingsleys. He was the vicar of Durweston in Dorset for more than thirty years. Both his background and his home were close to Lord Ashley's but the two did not get on, partly because Ashley disapproved of Osborne's high churchmanship and partly because he resented having to share credit for campaigning to end abuses with the clergyman.

Osborne's aristocratic self-confidence helped him to take on local landowners who came to loathe him for his regular correspondence to *The Times* publicizing their activities and abuses. Osborne, a tall, cadaverous figure with an Old Testament beard, also served almost as a roving correspondent for the newspaper, taking himself to Ireland to investigate the famine ('when is our turn to come?' he wrote home to the paper, thinking of the Dorset peasantry and their potatoes)

and later even to the Crimean War to inspect Florence Nightingale's hospital and comfort the dying there. He also campaigned for women's rights, free trade and improved sanitation.[25]

Farm labourers in Dorset at that time were generally paid seven shillings a week for married men and between two shillings and six shillings for single men and lads. By comparison, a factory worker in town might get twelve shillings a week, a collier eighteen shillings and a skilled man such as a wire-drawer a pound. For an agricultural labourer, pay would rise to ten shillings at harvest time for a fourteen-hour day and then there might be a gallon of the farmer's worst cider – the stuff his family and friends wouldn't drink – thrown in if he was feeling generous. Cottage rents were a shilling a week, so there was little cash to spare. They might, however, occasionally be sold meat by the farmer from sick sheep and cows slaughtered only when the animals were diseased and dying 'afore they are cold dead', for which they might be charged four pence a pound. It was eaten, one labourer explained to Osborne, because "tis the only meat we ever sees'.

He wrote up the testimony of another labourer as a first-person account in an article for a magazine in 1848:

> They expect us to do the work of meat-fed men, on wages which won't find meat. Then, sir, they are all against crowding the stock and say they can't thrive amidst bad smells; why, bless you, they crowds us in our cottages till we scarce have room to turn and as for smell – eight or ten forever sleeping in one room, who have most of them been at hard work all day, the land undrained above us and the ditches full of the stuff we can throw nowhere else – why,

> if smell hurts a pig or a sheep, the squire has not a ram or a boar which could live a week in health where most of us live; they never think of bringing gentlefolks round to see how they lodge us; they don't care to see that we are kept in good air and in well-drained dwellings.

When once an angry farmer confronted him in Blandford shouting, 'If it was not for "the cloth", I'd take you by the nose and lead you down the street!', Osborne faced him down, retorting: 'Don't worry about "the cloth", just you try it!'

This was the Dorset from which the Tolpuddle Martyrs had been transported a few years earlier for trying to organize themselves into a trade union, and the society into which Thomas Hardy was born in 1840. It was a bleak life with a seething undercurrent of periodic violence. A *Punch* cartoon of 1844, 'The Home of the Rick Burner', shows a desperate farm labourer with four starving children in rags around him in their empty and dilapidated cottage contemplating the corpse of his wife. At his shoulder swirls the faint image of a horned devil carrying a fiery brand, inciting him to insurrection. The message: that there might be reasons for his resort to criminality.[26]

Agricultural labourers had risen up against their declining wages and living conditions in the wake of the introduction of new threshing machinery on farms right across the south of England in the early 1830s. They had smashed machines, burned hayricks and destroyed barns. 'Damn it, let it burn,' said one labourer watching a barn ablaze at Orpington in Kent (according to *The Times*). 'I wish it was the house; we can warm ourselves now; we only want some potatoes: there's a nice fire to cook them by.'[27] The so-called Swing riots, named

after the anonymous letters sent to landowners signed by the fictitious Captain Swing – 'mark this, thou despot!' – had shown the depth of rural resentment.

The reform of the matrix of savage ancient game laws in 1831 had made matters worse, not better. Game that had been caught on farmers' land was no longer reserved to the aristocracy, but was now the property of landowners or those who bought a game licence. But tenant farmers as much as labourers could now be punished if they trapped birds or other wild animals for food, or poached them for sale, or even killed them for destroying their crops on land they farmed but did not own. Another *Punch* cartoon of 1844 shows a peasant, head bowed, bound and gagged, beneath an altar on which stands a hare. Beside it an ermine-clad and coroneted earl stands with a raised sword bearing the inscription 'According to Law', while in the background a phalanx of other aristocrats look on approvingly. Meanwhile, in the distance the peasant's family trudge off to the workhouse under a thunderous sky melodramatically split by lightening. The caption reads: 'The Game Laws, or the Sacrifice of the peasant to the hare.'[28]

When – inevitably – there was a parliamentary inquiry in 1846, MPs heard tales of farmers and their peasantry watching helplessly as their crops were laid waste each summer by birds and hares reared to be shot in landlord battues.[29] A Mr Chambers of Beechamwell, Norfolk, who rented 3,000 acres, told the MPs that game destroyed £1,000 worth of his crops each year and he could do nothing about it. Labourers accused of poaching by hated gamekeepers could expect heavy punishment. A farmer named Woodward of Kempsey in Worcestershire gave evidence that two of his ploughboys, aged 14 and 16, 'very good boys', had killed

a rabbit encountered in their work and received six weeks' imprisonment, leaving him without anyone to plough his fields. In 1844 the *Aylesbury News* had carried an indignant report about a labourer named Eborn accused of poaching by a 'duke-made parson magistrate', the Rev. G. Chetwolde, who had seen the man pick up an empty snare. Eborn, who had no previous convictions, was known to be of good character. He had lived in the same cottage for twenty years and was unemployed. Eborn swore the trap was not his, but it did him no good: he received a sentence of thirty-two weeks' imprisonment, leaving his wife to starve. Parson justices like Chetwolde were, understandably, particularly hated.* A surviving 'Swing' letter warns one Hampshire clergyman:

> Your name is down amongst the Black hearts in the Black Book and this is to advise you and the like of you who are parson justices to make your wills. Ye have been the Blackguard Enemies of the People on all occasions, Ye have not yet done as ye ought...[30]

That the letter is perfectly correctly spelled, in a neat, legible hand, makes it all the more chilling.

A tenant farmer on the landowner Lord Forester's estate in Shropshire gave evidence that his son, out shooting rats, had been caught by a gamekeeper who accused him of aiming for his lordship's partridges, though there was no evidence that he

* Parson justices often served as local magistrates as a consequence of their local social (and financial) status. Like other magistrates, they were officially chosen and sworn in by the lord lieutenant of the county, on behalf of the Crown. They were often loathed and despised because of their harshness and their perceived support for the landed gentry and the status quo.

had. John Bright, the Anti-Corn Law League campaigner and Radical MP, who had set up the inquiry as part of his campaign against the aristocracy (itself part of the parliamentary campaign to abolish the Corn Laws), asked him: 'How often does Lord Forester shoot upon your farm?' 'Never but once a year... they come about a quarter to eleven and I generally see the game cart going away towards half-past three.' 'Then you consider it is for the sake of these six hours' sport you are encumbered with all this damage?' 'Yes, I do.' It was a hard life even for tenants.

This was how many of the rural and urban poor lived, scraping a living when in work, thrown into destitution when times were hard. Not all employers were neglectful or bad. In the Rhymney Valley in South Wales, the Marquess of Bute built two-storey cottages in the Palladian style for the men who worked his blast furnaces – it was called Butetown – and at Cyfarthfa Row in 1840, William Crawshay provided the workers from his ironworks with fifty terraced houses with gardens – buildings still habitable 130 years later. When a nearby ironmaster called Baily, with a reputation for meanness, built a terrace for his workers on the hill behind his house at Nantyglo, however, he made sure that none of the buildings had windows overlooking his property.

There was a strong paternalist element in the provision some employers made for their workers. The Ashworths of Bolton provided the workers at their cotton-spinning factory with housing, gave them holidays, encouraged education and paid sufficiently high wages that their wives did not have to work. But they also insisted on cleanliness – a change of shirt twice a week – attendance at church or chapel every Sunday,

sobriety and sexual morality. There were schools, a library and a cook-shop selling bread and pies. A visitor to the Ashworths' estate village at Egerton in 1849 gleefully reported:

> [it was] as sweet, wholesome and smokeless as it could be were its denizens the most bucolic hinds of Devon... Here is no grime nor squalor. The people are hard-working labourers, but they live decently and fare wholesomely. There is no ragged wretchedness to be seen, no ruinous and squalid hovels... a gratifying spectacle of the manufacturing system working under favourable auspices.[31]

At Flockton near Wakefield, Milnes Stansfeld had not only provided cottages for the miners who worked in his collieries, but there was a horticultural society, a cricket pitch and gymnastic apparatus. There was even music appreciation for the adults so that 'collier boys can be heard in the streets singing and whistling the beautiful airs from Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Spohr'.

Nor were all landowners vengeful in defence of their game. Buckinghamshire's Sir Harry Verney, moved by the story of Eborn, spoke out against the evils of the game laws: 'any system which renders our rural population criminal must be highly injudicious to the best interests of society'. Labourers, he told Bright's committee, 'instead of being valued and esteemed are viewed as surplus population, to be shipped off, or got rid of in any way'. If the game was allowed to be controlled by the farmers, they would not lose so many crops, would be more prepared to invest in improving the land, and would therefore employ more labour and so reduce rural poverty. Verney – who was not alone among the great landowners in calling

for reform of the game laws – even defended poachers: they were not the dregs of society, he said, but very often 'men of considerable enterprise and intelligence'.*

One such, William Gowing, 'the greatest poacher in England' from Saxmundham in Suffolk, gave evidence to the committee that the main causes of poaching were starvation wages and dread of the workhouse:

> There is a door for the man, a door for the woman and a door for the children... Then he says, I will use my endeavours to get a little game, to keep out of the union-house as I might as well be caught under the game laws and get committed for two months' hard labour as to go into the union-house.[32]

One of the MPs defending landowners' rights, Grantley Berkeley ('I think a great deal of the prosperity of the agricultural districts is induced by pheasants and partridges,' he had said), asked Gowing: 'The gaol is such comfortable quarters then?' To which the poacher poignantly replied: 'They cannot hear the cries and screams of their children, nor the

* When Verney proposed to the magistrates of Buckinghamshire a motion pointing out to the government the 'injury caused to the inhabitants of the county by the preservation of game in great abundance', only five others supported him. One local newspaper suggested his proposal should be reprinted every week for three months so that he could receive 'the heartfelt thanks of hundreds of sturdy sons of the plough'. But in the autumn of 1846 twenty-six poachers were jailed in the county in the last week of October and the first week of November. The obtuseness must have aggravated Verney, but the family owned 40,000 acres of the county and received an income of £100,000 a year from it, so he could probably afford to ignore local opposition.

complaints of their wives [as they do in the workhouse] – that is what vexes them.'[33]

The committee's report in August 1846 filled a thousand pages, but by that time the Corn Laws had been repealed, the League's impulse to kick landowners was waning, and the urgency of the Peasants versus Pheasants political battle was lost. Not that the battle in the fields and woods was over. The *Lynn Advertiser* that month reported on a 'Dreadful Rencontre with Knives' in a turnip field where a poacher was wounded in the side and the gamekeeper's face was 'literally hacked to pieces... Both men were so dreadfully wounded that it is not thought they could survive many hours.' The same month in Devon a farm watcher was shot: 'on a post-mortem examination a number of small shots were found lacerating most frightfully the liver and injuring the bone. The surgeon also found a piece of the deceased's watch-chain which had been carried into the wound.' The local newspaper report said: 'there is a great deal of poaching, the practice being rather favoured than resisted by the generality of farmers.'[34]

In 1842, during the previous economic slump, with factory workers thrown onto the streets and farm labourers destitute, Prime Minister Peel had thought it prudent to buy arms and ammunition to protect his family at Drayton, fifteen miles outside Birmingham, where rumours of trouble were seething. 'We had better say nothing about it,' he wrote to his wife that August. 'I think one of the rooms in the tower would be the safest place of deposit. The ammunition should be carefully kept near the arms and in a safe place.'[35]

3
Alas! The Foul and Fatal Blight

'Ireland! Ireland! That cloud in the west! That coming storm! That minister of God's retribution upon cruel, inveterate and but half atoned injustice! Ireland forces upon us those great social and great religious questions. God grant that we may have the courage to look them in the face.'

WILLIAM GLADSTONE, LETTER TO HIS WIFE CATHERINE, 12 OCTOBER 1845

However many excuses are made for Britain's reaction to the Irish famine that started in 1845 and that would turn into the worst natural disaster in western Europe since the Black Death, it is hard to escape the sense of callousness and ineptitude with which the authorities mainly tackled it. It is easy to say that a crisis of that magnitude would have challenged any administration at any time, let alone one that was in its managerial infancy and of amateurish competence as the British civil service in Ireland was in the 1840s. It is not true, however, that what was happening was not known or appreciated on the British side of the Irish Sea. There were no television news reports to tug the heartstrings and prick the conscience, of course, but there were plenty of graphic reports in the press and urgent appeals from both British and Irish observers that allowed the authorities in London to know what was happening. Gladstone's letter to his wife was about