



THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The effects of the Industrial Revolution. The 18th century was characterized by many events: the rise of the Middle classes, the development of commercial activities, both the growth of industries and banks, and total changes in life-style. The bourgeoisie, although still excluded from political power, played an increasingly influential part in the cultural life of the country, influencing tastes and attitudes in a way which is unique to British culture. In particular the period between 1688 and the middle of the 18th century, pervaded with a relative political stability, was marked by the profound changes that led to the transformation of England from an agricultural country into a great manufacturing and commercial power. It was a gradual and complex process caused by a chain of connected factors and events.

The wars of the 18th century were followed by the acquisition of a vast colonial empire, whose growth in wealth and population opened new markets to English goods. The English established their rule in India after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, and in Canada British predominance was assured by the Capture of Quebec in 1759.

Within a short time the small-scale hand production of home industry began to prove inadequate to further developments. The continuous increase of the English trade, in concentrating huge profits in the hands of an ambitious upper middle class, mostly composed of affluent merchants, led to a vast accumulation of capitals to be profitably used.

The flourishing trade and the economic advancement of the nation invested agriculture; the old system of agriculture of subsistence, based on small-scale farming, was to reveal itself incompatible with the exigencies of an expanding market and the growth of population. New techniques and a better organization were used in order to keep in line with the national economic developments. But their application required the employment of considerable capitals which was impossible for small farmers; thus the pioneers of the new more advanced methods in agriculture were rich landowners and the city magnates who had bought land estates.

Parliament passed a series of Acts of Enclosures which favoured the transfer of lands from small farmers to the hands of capitalists. The new «enclosures» of the 18th century transformed the commonly cultivated open fields into large farms in which the most scientific and efficient methods could be adopted. As a result, small farmers, in the impossibility to compete with up-to-date agricultural system, were compelled to sell their land or were dispossessed of their properties.

The dispossessed farmers and cottagers formed a big army of unemployed and a reserve of wage earners for the rising industries. It was the combination of the two factors, capital and labour force, which are at the base of the Industrial Revolution (late 18th and early 19th centuries).

Scientific inventions such as the Flying Shuttle in 1733 by John Kay, the Spinning Jenny in 1764 by James Hargreaves, the Water Frame in 1769 by Richard Arkwright, the Spinning Mule in 1779 by Samuel Crompton, the Power Loom in 1786 by Edmund Cartwright, and James Watt's Steam Power Engine resulted in revolutionary changes in the weaving industry and in coal mining, and meant new economic prospects, a reordering of social rules, wealth and prosperity for a new strata of society.

A great deal of factories arose in the North of England, in South Wales and in the Midlands; their growth caused every form of the previous domestic industry to disappear. Small artisans deprived of their labour went to increase the army of the unemployed. Most labourers left their fields for the big industrial towns, where they hoped to find employment.

The accelerating pace of industrial expansion required new fuels and new materials: coal provided the power that turned Watt's engine; cast iron to make the new machinery was produced in huge quantities. The industrial development was closely linked to a suitable transport system: canals were built and an imposing network linked the new centres of industry; roads, which had been left unrepaired since the days of the Romans, were resurfaced.

This new aspect of England forced millions into new occupations and new attitudes to their lives; great human and social changes were a direct result. Human sufferings and hardships were the obvious reverse of medal: the working conditions in factories were appalling, especially in the case of children who had to endure long working days. At the beginning there was no law that protected labourers, however later on they organized themselves and consequently gave rise to the long struggle between capital and labour.

Pitt's era and the French Revolution. William Pitt the Younger had become Prime Minister in 1783. At the beginning of his office he was confronted with the problem of the relevant amount of the national debts. He succeeded in reducing them by adopting a vigorous policy of administrative and fiscal reforms. As a follower of Adam Smith's theories, he also adopted a series of measures to promote the liberalization of trade.



In foreign policy Pitt cautiously avoided any entanglement which could lead England to war. It was during his office that the French peasants and the lower class, oppressed by miserable conditions of life and high taxation, revolted against the King and the Government. After the storming of the Bastille in 1789 the French people marched towards Versailles and took King Louis XVI prisoner.

The English public opinion was much impressed by these events, and a large part of the people sympathized with the French Revolution: revolutionary clubs were founded in London and other cities. The ideas of the Revolution also appealed to a new generation of poets, among whom were Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake. By this time Edmund Burke's *Reflections on French Revolution* (1790) appeared. He was among the first thinkers to realize that the French Revolution was different from the English Glorious Revolution, aiming at the establishment of Constitutional monarchy, but preserving the old order and the existing institutions. Burke's work was followed by Thomas Paine's reply in his *The Rights of Man* (1791), in which the author championed the cause of the French Revolution and hailed it as the advent of a new and better era.

Meanwhile Austria and Prussia, alarmed by the tide of events in France, issued the Pillnitz Declaration, inviting the European nations to use their power to restore the king of France to his throne. But in 1793 Louis XVI was executed: the violence of the Revolution and its excesses diverted much of the initial support to its cause. The British also changed their attitude toward the French Revolution; all European kings were anxious to intervene against France.

Under the pressure of the upper classes and after the French invasion of Belgium, Pitt abandoned his peaceful policy and joined other European nations in the first coalition against France. The war did not produce any decisive results, as the supremacy of the French army was counterbalanced by the supremacy of the English fleet. During the war, Pitt adopted a series of repressive measures by limiting the freedom of the press and by suspending the Habeas Corpus. In 1798 an insurrection broke out in Ireland which ended in the Act of Union of 1800, abolishing the Irish Parliament. The war against France was brought to a conclusion with the Treaty of Amiens (1802); however, by then Pitt had resigned from his office, and the treaty was signed by his successor Henry Addington.

The Napoleonic wars. Peace did not prevail for long as the war against France was resumed in 1803 to ensure the ambitious project of Napoleon Bonaparte. The French leader, born in Ajaccio in 1769, had distinguished himself in the military Campaigns of Italy and Egypt, and by the Coup d'Etat of 1799 he had become First Consul. The danger of a French invasion of England was prevented by the great victory at Trafalgar (1805) by Admiral Horatio Nelson, who was mortally wounded in the battle. At this point Napoleon, who had proclaimed himself Emperor in 1804, reverted to economic restrictive measures against England: he declared the country in state of blockade, prohibiting any form of trade with the allies of France. The English replied with the Orders in Council of 1807: these forbade French trade with the United Kingdom, her allies or neutrals, and instructed the Royal Navy to blockade French and allied ports. The economic war between the two countries lasted until a decisive result was reached by one of the two rival powers. A turning point was the brilliant victory of the Duke of Wellington (1769-1852), who succeeded in the end in conquering Spain from the French.

Napoleon continued to represent a dangerous threat over the English nation, till his definitive defeat at Waterloo (1815) by the Duke of Wellington. Napoleon was taken prisoner and exiled on the Island of St. Helen, where he died in 1821.

The Congress of Vienna gave a new asset to Europe. After the upheavals of the Napoleonic wars, Britain gained Malta, Trinidad, Ceylon and the Cape of Good Hope.

The reigns of George IV and William IV. During the last years of his reign, George III suffered from recurrent attacks of insanity, and his son George was appointed Prince Regent (1811-1820: Regency Period); he became king of England in 1820 as George IV.

During his regency and the first years of reign, England felt the effects of both the consequences of the Napoleonic wars and of her rapid transformation into an industrial power. The introduction of machinery changed the ways of life and the old balance between social classes. People asked for political and social reforms, as a large section of them could not make their voices heard in Parliament; their claims gave origin to the Radical Party. Riots took place frequently: in 1811 a group of artisans, the so-called Luddites – from Ned Lud, the leader – initiated a machine-breaking campaign, which was the first signal of the poor classes' awareness of their own problems. Brutal laws made by reactionary politicians such as Lord Liverpool, a Tory Prime Minister (Corn Laws, 1815; the Six Acts, 1817), caused rebellions which were strongly crushed, like the Massacre of Peterloo in 1819.

The situation improved when the Government promoted a series of reforms, among which the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829), granting the Catholics the same rights as the Protestants.

In 1827 the nation was involved in a war in Greece in order to protect its interests in the East threatened by the Turks; the Greeks, who had rebelled against their Turkish rulers, were helped by the English to regain their freedom.



George IV died in 1830. The spirit of reform continued into his brother's reign, William IV (1830-1837), who managed to have the First Reform Bill, passed in 1832. With this law the rotten boroughs were abolished, and the middle classes began to share political power with the upper classes. Among the first laws passed by the new Parliament there was the abolition of slavery and of the slave trade in all British possession. In 1833 a number of Factory Acts stopped women from working over twelve hours a day, or children under nine from being employed. The introduction of a system of National Education took place in 1834.

As William had no children when he died, the English Crown passed to his niece Victoria, who was the daughter of Edward, George III's fourth son.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

1760-1820 Reign of George III: 1769 → James Watt's Steam Engine; 1793-1802 → Great Britain fights against the revolutionary government of France; 1802 → Treaty of Amiens; 1803 → Beginning of the war against Napoleonic France; 1805 → Battle of Trafalgar; 1807 → Orders in Council; 1811 → Beginning of the Regency Period; Birth of Luddism; 1815 → Victory at Waterloo: end of the Napoleonic wars; Corn Laws; Congress of Vienna; 1817 → Six Acts; 1819 → Massacre of Peterloo.

1820-1830 Reign of George IV: 1829 → Catholic Emancipation Act.

1830-1837 Reign of William IV: 1832 → First Reform Bill; 1833 → Abolition of slavery in British colony; Factory Acts; 1834 → Poor Law; Introduction of a system of National Education.

