

***WALKING THE CITY STREETS:
THE URBAN ODYSSEY
IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND***

By Penelope J. Corfield

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The art of urban ambulation has many connotations: crowds, crushes, high hopes, hard paving stones, sore feet, strange encounters, and street wisdom. For walking was – and is – an essential mode of transport in the cities, even in those not built primarily to pedestrian scale. It is a virtually universal experience, for virtually all citizens, once past earliest infancy. It is useful, democratically accessible, yet also immensely variegated in style and purpose: from the brisk and efficient march to the nonchalant saunter; from the eye-catching swagger to a discreet and inconspicuous shuffle; from the easy glide of the expert to the stumblings of a newcomer, trying to push the wrong way against the surge of a crowd. All walked; and, famously, some were specialist streetwalkers, practitioners of one of the oldest of all urban occupations. Their presence added to the possibilities for adventure and misadventure, and heightened the challenge of social identification.

City life was at its most visible and paradigmatic to the town traveller in its streets. This article investigates the urban odyssey and its implications, arguing that the street terrain of eighteenth-century English towns was neither an incomprehensible chaos nor an unambiguous perfection but a coherent and lively arena for social peregrination, perception, challenge, and engagement.

PEREGRINATION

At any time of day or night, some people were liable to be found in the street. None were excluded. Indeed, the right of unfettered access and passage was – and remains – crucial to the basic functioning of urban social and economic life;

and intra-city mobility has remained significantly extensive, even in places divided by civil conflicts or by formal segregation on religious or racial lines. Social divisions within eighteenth-century English towns, however, were by no means organised into systematic warfare. Nor were the city streets uncharted tracks through lawless jungles (despite the claims made by some Hanoverian satirists and Victorian reformers), but these thoroughfares were known arteries of public communication in an expanding urban network.¹ Their problems were those posed by the expansion of travel, not by its collapse.

Public highways in England (in all their variegated terminology, from alleys and lanes to avenues and malls) had long been freely accessible to all comers, regardless of wealth or status. Town streets were therefore without tolls or charges, and remained so in the eighteenth century. The expanding turnpike system in the eighteenth century concentrated essentially upon wheeled traffic on the long-distance road network, siting the new toll-booths carefully outside the urban perimeters.² Meanwhile, private highways were very rare, and of uncertain status. The celebrated King's Road in London was, for example, royal property, for which in theory a special ticket-of-access was required.³ But, in practice, persistent trespassers in the eighteenth century had *de facto* claimed it as a public highway, long before its official dedication.

Custom and convention in England also endorsed the accessibility of the streets to all age and social groups, and to both sexes. Eighteenth-century

¹ In the following discussion, much evidence relates to London and the larger provincial centres, which were indisputably 'urban'; but it is also drawn from many smaller settlements, old and new, with non-agrarian economies and a nucleated population (of c.2500+), which grew in increasing numbers in this period. The argument does not, however, imply that all towns were identical. For comparisons, see F. Bédarida and A. Sutcliffe, 'The Street in the Structure and Life of the City: Reflections on Nineteenth-Century London and Paris', *Journal of Urban History*, 6 (1980), 379-96; A. Farge, *Voir vivre dans la rue à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1979); and essays and bibliography in S. Anderson, ed., *On Streets* (Cambridge, 1978).

² W. Albert, *The Turnpike Road System in England, 1663-1840* (Cambridge, 1972), esp. 21-9. Road tolls, never very popular, were particularly resented when levied on essentially local traffic, as, for example, between Bristol and nearby mining villages: see R.W. Malcolmson, "'A Set of Ungovernable People": The Kingswood Colliers in the Eighteenth Century', in J. Brewer and J. Styles, eds., *An Ungovernable People: The English and their Law in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1980), 85-127.

³ See H.M. Colvin et al., *The History of the King's Works, Vol. V: 1660-1782* (London, 1976), 459-60.

women, for example, readily joined the throng, walking out unveiled and in many cases unchaperoned. Fashionable young ladies were the most trammelled by maidservants and companions; but by no means completely so, as contemporary illustrations, letters, and novels attested.⁴ Meanwhile, working women walked alone or in company as a matter of course. If some streets had their dangers, especially by night, there was no suggestion of a female curfew, or that the city streets were seen as intrinsically male terrain.⁵ On the contrary, access to the relative mobility and personal freedoms of town life around the clock was often adduced as an attraction to women migrants from the countryside.⁶

While there were legal constraints upon many aspects of street conduct – from riotous assembly to disorderly behaviour to persistent begging – English common law furthermore upheld traditional rights of passage, even for notorious characters.⁷ Malefactors had the right to pass unhindered, although, after legislation in 1802, they were not supposed to lurk in public places.⁸ Equally, prostitutes could not be arrested simply for appearing out of doors or for walking about peaceably. That was affirmed in 1709 by a key ruling from

⁴ Contemporaries did not usually specify whether young ladies were attended in public or not; but novelists allowed their heroines to move about town freely, without feeling the need for any comment on this behaviour. Thus not only did the naïve heroine of E. Haywood's *Miss Betsey Thoughtless* (London, 1751) travel about on her own, but so did the prudent Anne Elliott in J. Austen's *Persuasion* (London, 1818). On more formal occasions, however, and at night, it was more customary for young ladies to be escorted by a servant, chaperon, or party of friends.

⁵ Concern to shield respectable women from the dangers of the streets, especially at night, was anxiously voiced in the policing debates of the 1820s and 1830s, by contrast with more relaxed attitudes earlier: see A. Clark, *Women's Silence, Men's Violence: Sexual Assault in England, 1770-1845* (London, 1987), 116-23. In practice, however, it proved difficult to restrict respectable women in Victorian England to the domestic hearth; and attention was redirected toward street safety and regulation.

⁶ For female migration to town, see P.J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1982), 45, 99-101; and D. Souden, 'Migrants and the Population Structure of Later Seventeenth-Century Provincial Cities and Market Towns', in P. Clark, ed., *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns, 1600-1800* (London, 1984), 133-68.

⁷ R.H. Spearman, *The Common and Statute Law Relating to Highways in England and North Wales* (London, 1881), esp. 1-2, 46-7. Street offences and their regulation in the eighteenth century were dealt with under a miscellany of laws, later codified in the Vagrancy Act, properly 5 Geo. IV, cap. 83 (1824), 'An Act for the Punishment of Idle and Disorderly Persons, and Rogues and Vagabonds', and supplemented by 5 & 6 William IV, cap. 50 (1835/6), 'An Act to Consolidate and Amend the Laws Relating to the Highways in ... England'.

⁸ The poorly defined offence of loitering in a suspicious manner with intent to commit a felony was introduced with reference to private property by 23 Geo. III, cap. 88 (1873), extended to streets and public places by 42 Geo III, cap. 766 (1802), and codified in the 1824 Vagrancy Act.

Lord Chief Justice Holt, when trying a murderous affray that had ensued after the detention of one Ann Dickins as a disorderly person. His constitutional enthusiasm triumphed over social disdain: ‘What! Must not a Woman of the Town walk in the Town Streets? ... Why, a light Woman hath a right of Liberty as well as another to walk about the Streets’.⁹ In practice, the legal boundary between rights of access and the regulation of public behaviour was far from clear. Rogues, beggars, and vagabonds were vulnerable to arrest, especially if loitering and ‘unable to give a good account of themselves’; and prostitutes could be charged as ‘disorderly’,¹⁰ but there was no automatic ban.

In the busy towns, therefore, all comers had access to the public terrain. That was a necessary component of urban expansion and an easy recruitment of an immigrant population from the countryside. City dwellers were accustomed to move easily among strangers. Newcomers walked freely in the streets, although those who looked too Scottish risked abuse,¹¹ and those who looked too French, ridicule.¹² The larger and more accessible the town, the readier the acceptance of strangers, whereas, in smaller villages, it was not unknown for intruders to receive rough treatment. William Hutton, himself a Derbyshire man, reported that dogs were set upon him in 1770, when he visited tiny Market

⁹ T. Bray, *The Tryals of Jeremy Tooley, William Arch, and John Clauson ... Before the ... Lord Chief Justice of England* (London, 1732), 19. Streetwalking was not in itself illegal, although both men and woman committed a common law offence if ‘grossly indecent’ and a statutory one if ‘disorderly and riotous’. In 1770 Sir John Fielding noted that prostitution (as opposed to keeping a bawdy house) was ‘scarce, if at all, within the description of any statute law now in being’: S. Webb and B. Webb, *English Local Government: English Poor Law History, Part 1 – The Old Poor Law* (London, 1927), 353. It was not until the Vagrancy Act of 3 Geo. IV, cap. 40 (1822) s. 2 that prostitutes and nightwalkers, wandering about and ‘not giving a satisfactory Account of themselves’ were statutorily defined as ‘idle and disorderly Persons’, liable for up to one month’s hard labour; while the 1824 codifying Act (s. 3) named the offence as ‘wandering in the Public Streets or Public Highways, or any Place of public Resort, and behaving in a riotous or indecent Manner’. For a helpful account of Victorian reforms, albeit exaggerating the earlier lawlessness, see R.D. Storch, ‘Police Control of Street Prostitution in Victorian London: A Study in the Contexts of Police Action’, in D.H. Bayley, ed., *Police and Society* (London, 1977), 49-72.

¹⁰ There were many specified exemptions, such as discharged soldiers and sailors begging their way home.

¹¹ Anti-Scottish feeling was commonly voiced in eighteenth-century England, especially during Bute’s controversial ministry in 1761-3. For reference to anti-Scottish graffiti in hostleries on the Great North Road, see T. Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (London, 1831), 224.

¹² ‘When people see a well-dressed person in the streets, ... he will, without doubt, be called “French dog” twenty times perhaps before he reaches his destination’, recorded a French-speaking Swiss visitor in June 1726: see C. de Saussure, *A Foreign View of England in the Reigns of George I and George II*, transl. by Mme de Muyden (London, 1902), 112.

Bosworth in Leicestershire, then housing fewer than 700 inhabitants. By contrast, he had earlier been delighted with his reception in the Midlands metropolis of Birmingham, ‘the seat of civility’, in 1741.¹³

Universality in the city streets conferred a continuing diversity as well as personal mobility. Walking therefore was not only a utilitarian necessity but also an agreeable form of informal entertainment in its own right. The urban promenade was the occasion for the citizens to sally forth to view the sights and each other: ‘to see and be seen’, in the famous phrase.¹⁴ It was an integral part of city social life. Indeed, it remains so in many urban cultures today. Venues and informal timetables for the promenade in the towns of eighteenth-century England were variegated, the weather adding its own unpredictability. ‘It should never rain at a public place’, sighed John Byng, one rainy June in Cheltenham in 1781.¹⁵

In many cities, the main occasions for social walking were on Sundays, on holidays, and at special festivities, although the new pastime of window-shopping was enjoyed more frequently. Meanwhile, in London and in the specialist spas and resorts, fashionable society promenaded daily in the season, both in the mornings and the afternoon (weather permitting). ‘I was an hour and three quarters on my legs’, recorded a gouty visitor to Bath in May 1767.¹⁶ ‘*Oh, my poor legs! They reproach me for it to this very minute*’.

Locations for communal walking were often places established by long tradition: castle mounds, riverbanks, and common lands; and there were popular protests, if these sites were encroached upon or (in the case of common fields)

¹³ W. Hutton, *The Life of William Hutton, F.A.S.S., Including a Particular Account of the Riots at Birmingham in 1791*, ed. C. Hutton (London, 1817), 115.

¹⁴ This much-repeated phrase was used, among others, by de Saussure, *A Foreign View*, 48: adding that ‘English men and women are fond of walking’.

¹⁵ See C.B. Andrews, ed., *The Torrington Diaries, Containing the Tours through England and Wales of the Rt. Hon. John Byng (later fifth Viscount Torrington) between the Years 1781 and 1794* (London, 1934-8), I, 14.

¹⁶ B. Mitchell and H. Penrose, eds., *Letters from Bath, 1766-7, by the Rev. John Penrose* (Gloucester, 1983), 174.

enclosed. In this period, furthermore, there was a marked development and formalisation of special areas for this purpose, pioneered particularly in spas, resorts, and leisure cities, but emulated in many urban centres. New streets were laid out and designated as ‘parades’, ‘walks’, and ‘promenades’.¹⁷ Town squares also represented a triumph of formalised public space over mere developmental density. These areas were often planted with trees and greenery, to celebrate *rus in urbe*.¹⁸ Meanwhile, in the seaside resorts, visitors were invited to stroll out over the waves on jetties or upon the specially built piers.¹⁹ These places ranged from the ultra-fashionable to the raffish; the social promenade was enjoyed by all classes of society.

Parks were also popular places for this pastime, and special pleasure gardens were also promoted for the congregation of the citizenry. Tree-lined avenues were laid out, with fountains, statuary, lamps, musicians, food stalls, and dining booths. Many provincial ‘Vauxhalls’ were named after the famous Spring Gardens of south London,²⁰ while others aped ‘Ranelagh’, the rival venue at Chelsea. ‘Everybody goes there ... The company is universal: there is

¹⁷ The Pantiles at Tunbridge Wells, paved in the 1700s for ‘the necessary exercise of walking’ were a celebrated exemplar: T.S. Burr, *The History of Tunbridge-Wells* (London, 1766), 57-8, 100-1, 116-19 (see illustration, p. 49 below). Very influential too were the Parades built by John Wood at Bath, the Grand (North) Parade rapidly becoming ‘the principal Place of publick Resort in the City’: J. Wood, *An Essay towards a Description of Bath* (London, 1749), II, 350-1. Modern surveys have stressed that these amenities, while characteristic of spas, resorts, and county capitals, were by no means confined to them: see M. Girouard, ‘The Georgian Promenade’, in *Life in the Georgian Town: Georgian Group Annual Symposium Proceedings* (London, 1986), 26-33; P. Borsay, ‘The Rise of the Promenade: The Social and Cultural Use of Space in the English Provincial Town, c.1660-1800’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 9 (1986), 125-40, esp. 126, 135-7; and A. McInnes, ‘The Emergence of a Leisure Town: Shrewsbury, 1660-1760’, *Past and Present*, 120 (1988), 53-87, esp. 67-8.

¹⁸ On square design, see P. Zucker, *Town and Square: From the Agora to the Village Green* (New York, 1959); E.B. Chancellor, *The History of the Squares of London, Topographical and Historical* (London, 1907), gives a discursive account, but, disappointingly, there is no modern study of the urban square. For an eighteenth-century critique of *rus in urbe* taken to excess, see J. Steuart, *Critical Observations on the Buildings and Improvement of London* (1771), in Augustan Reprint Society nos. 189-90 (Los Angeles, 1978), 8-16.

¹⁹ At Margate, for example, ‘The Pier is a lounging place for many people every evening, but on a Sunday it is a general promenade’: G.S. Carey, *The Balnea: Or, an Impartial Description of all of the Popular Watering Places in England* (London, 1801), 6. Quayside walks had long been popular at the ports and were supplemented in the nineteenth century by new pleasure piers at the resorts: see J.K. Walton, *The English Seaside Resort, 1750-1914* (Leicester, 1983), 13, 163-5; and S. Adamson, *Seaside Piers* (London, 1977), 11-14.

²⁰ For Vauxhall, see W.W. Wroth and E.A. Wroth, *The London Pleasure Gardens of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1896), 283-326; and for the many alternative venues, see *ibid.*, *passim*. Most provincial towns in the eighteenth century also had recreational fields, and many developed more formalised parks and gardens.

his Grace of Grafton down to children out of the Foundling Hospital’, reported a youthful Horace Walpole in June 1744, with enthusiastic exaggeration.²¹ Entrance fees preserved some social discrimination,²² but a degree of hurly-burly and popular support was essential for success. The entire population was given over to pleasure, ‘in this age of *Vauxhalls* and *Ranelaghs*’, concluded a sober onlooker in 1756.²³

Walking was recommended by some for health and exercise,²⁴ by others for instruction, and – above all – as urban entertainment. It offered unrivalled opportunities for understanding the city, with all its tangible and contradictory realities.

The social roles and conventions of street life had to be learned through experience and assimilation. John Gay’s poem of 1716,²⁵ entitled *Trivia* after the Roman goddess of the roadways, hymned that view. (See titlepage, following). Sub-titled *The Art of Walking the Streets of London*, it provided a witty updating of the odyssey, in which the big city had become at once the grail as well as location for the quest, and its denizens simultaneously heroes and hazards. The ‘great-hearted Odysseus’ in modern times sets out for Ithaca with stout walking shoes and an umbrella but still faces the constant iteration of challenges and adventures, now located in the mutable world of the streets.

²¹ W.S. Lewis, ed., *Horace Walpole’s Correspondence, XXXVII: With Henry Seymour Conway and Others* (London, 1974), I, 164.

²² Vauxhall’s Spring Gardens, opened in 1661, were free until c.1730, when entrance tokens (rapidly counterfeited) were sold. Eventually a *per capita* fee of 1/- (unchanged from 1736 to 1792) was imposed: see W. Wroth, *Tickets of Vauxhall Gardens* (London, 1898), 2-3. Ranelagh Gardens, at 2/6d or 5/- on firework nights, were most costly: G. Rudé, *Hanoverian London, 1714-1808* (London, 1971), 73; but there were also many cheaper ‘six-penny gardens’.

²³ [T. Amory], *The Life of John Buncl, Esq: Containing Various Observations and Reflections ...* (London, 1756), I, 460, where, in a footnote, he urged an end to the universal dissipation: ‘For shame, *rational*s, stop’.

²⁴ An enthusiast was J. Hanway, *A Journal of Eight Days’ Journey* (London, 1756), I, 151. Notable records for speed and distance walking were compiled by W. Thom, *Pedestrianism: Or, an Account of the Performances of Celebrated Pedestrians during the Last and Present Century* (Aberdeen, 1813), 33-100.

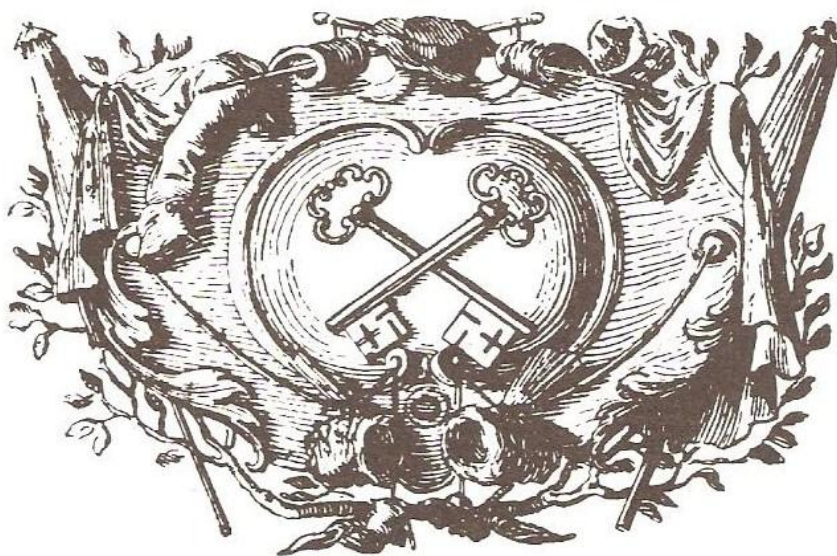
²⁵ J. Gay, *Trivia: Or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (London, 1716), in V.A. Dearing, ed., *John Gay: Poetry and Prose* (Oxford, 1974), I, 134-81.

TRIVIA:

OR, THE
ART of WALKING
THE
STREETS of LONDON.

By Mr. *GAY*.

Quo te Mæri pedes? An, quo via ducit, in Urbem?
Virg.



LONDON:

Printed for *Bernard Lintott*, at the *Cross-Keys*
between the *Temple Gates* in *Fleetstreet*.

Figure 1: Title Page of John Gay's *Genial Street-Georgic* of 1716, Which Was the First of Many Literary Explorations of the Dangers and Delights of the Modern Urban Odyssey

Gay's publication was emblematic, marking 'a crucial moment in the history of urban literature'.²⁶ It was also far from unique. There was a substantial literature in eighteenth-century England, in prose, verse, and alphabetical listings, concerned with interpreting, familiarising, and classifying the city and mass living; and the genre has grown mightily since then. Not surprisingly, among this torrent there were many works devoted to the streets.²⁷ There were constantly new sights to be seen, strangers to be evaluated, judgements to be made, routes to be navigated, addresses to be found, footsteps to be placed.

Pedestrians were advised to keep their eyes open, their wits about them. The sublime and the ridiculous were often simultaneously close at hand. Newcomers, having difficulties in finding their way around, sought directions from innkeepers, porters, hackney-carriage drivers, or simply from passers-by. Visitors could also consult local street directories, which were produced in a growing numbers of cities in the later eighteenth century.²⁸ More specialised inquiries were aided by the publication of specialist handbooks to the professions and to the book trades. Meanwhile, another interest was catered to by magazines, published in London and Edinburgh, offering guidance to the 'Amorous Walk'. These were semi-facetious listings of 'ladies of pleasure',

²⁶ See P. Rogers, *The Augustan Vision* (London, 1978), 220. For this genre, see *ibid.*, 220-1; and a chatty survey in WE.H. Irving, *John Gay's London Illustrated from Poetry of the Time* (Cambridge, 1928). Gay himself acknowledged some 'hints' from Swift's *Description of a City Shower* (London, 1710); and the theme was implied in the title (if not contents) of T. D'Urfey's political squib, *Collin's Walk through London and Westminster: A Poem in Burlesque* (London, 1690).

²⁷ For listings, see H.G. Fordham, *The Roadbooks and Itineraries of Great Britain, 1570-1850: A Catalogue* (Cambridge, 1924). Local examples included W. Gostling, *A Walk in and about the City of Canterbury* (Canterbury, 1774); Anon., *The Ambulator: Or, the Stranger's Companion in a Tour round London* (London, 1774); W. Hutton, *A History of Birmingham to the Year 1780* (Birmingham, 1781), 45-7, with a street tour; S. Watts, *A Walk through Leicester: Being a Guide to Strangers* (Leicester, 1804); S. Englefield, *A Walk through Southampton* (Southampton, 1805); and P. Egan, *Walks through Bath, Describing Everything worthy of Interest* (Bath, 1819).

²⁸ P.J. Corfield, with Serena Kelly, "'Giving Directions to the Town": The Early Town Directories', *Urban History Yearbook 1984* (Leicester, 1984), 22-35.

itemising names (lightly concealed), addresses, and sexual attributes.²⁹ As guidebooks to urban prostitution, they were undoubtedly incomplete, but they presented the trade in the guise of a *bona fide* urban business, and they may have helped to send custom toward the appropriate part of town, easing the perennial problems of social recognition.

Many works were ostensibly directed toward the migrant from the countryside, whose baffled surprise on first encountering street society was a source of amusement for many, as well as a lure for the city sharks, sighting fresh prey entering trustingly into the jaws of danger. The general tenor of these writings was sternly admonitory. Their titles told the tale. *Villainy Unmask'd: Containing an Ample Discovery of the Many Surprising Tricks ... now Practised by Rogues of all Denominations* was published by 'A Lover of his Country' in 1752. *The Cheats of London Exposed: Or, the Tricks of the Town laid Open to both Sexes* was promised by another author (c.1770), while W.G. Perry's *London Guide and Strangers' Safeguard against the Cheats, Swindlers, and Pickpockets that Abound ...* (1818) was one of many in a continuing sequence of publications.³⁰ In keeping with the subject matter, it was a genre that was much affected by plagiarism, as compilers happily borrowed each other's texts, without acknowledgement. London was the focus for the greatest alarm, but it also stood proxy for the urban experience more generally, as smaller places were promptly compared to London, once the crowds assembled.

²⁹ See, for example, Ranger's *Impartial List of the Ladies of Pleasure in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1775; reprint, 1987). In London there were a number of listings, including *the Ranger's Magazine: Or, the Man of Fashion's Companion* (London, 1795), updating an earlier *Rambler's Magazine*: British Library, Add. Mss. 27,825 Place Papers 37, fos. 121-2; as well as *The Covent Garden Magazine: Or, Amorous Repository* (17702), superseded by *Harris's List of Covent-Garden Ladies: Or, Man of Pleasure's Kalendar* (London, 1786): in Place Papers, loc.cit. fos. 113, 132-5. But John Dunton's *The Night-Walker: Or, Evening Rambles in Search after Lewd Women* (London, 1696) was not a guide to urban vice but a record of his Gladstonian mission to reclaim street sinners.

³⁰ F.W. Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery*, 2 vols (London, 1907) lists some (but far from all) eighteenth-century titles. There was much plagiarism in this genre, as well as liberal adaptation of earlier texts. For example, Anon., *The Devil upon Two Sticks: Or, the Town Until'd* (London, 1708), took inspiration from A.R. Le Sage's *Le diable boiteux* (Paris, 1707), in turn prompted by L. Velez de Guevara's *El diablo cojuelo* (Madrid, 1641). A modern interpretation of eighteenth-century metropolitan imagery draws attention to the vitality of the 'rogue' literature but sees its material as essentially admonitory: M. Byrd, *London Transformed: Images of the City in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 1975), 20-4.

Potential hazards for the neophyte were everywhere. Smiling citizens offered to show shortcuts, that led into dark alleyways, where confederate robbers awaited. ‘Guinea-droppers’ pretended to restore coins dropped in the street, as a prelude to fleecing the gratified and trusting countryman thereafter. ‘Duffers’ purported to have foreign goods to be sold off cheaply, and ‘mock auctioneers’ deceived the unwary into bidding for worthless goods. ‘Kid-layers’ stole visitors’ baggage at the coaching inns, while ‘waggon-hunters’ waylaid young girls on their first arrival in town, in order to trap them into prostitution. Pickpockets – Gay’s ‘subtle Artists’ – took small valuables, while the attention was distracted. Card sharpers marked, palmed, slipped, and bent their cards or played with false packs. ‘Thimble riggers’ secreted the ball, while taking bets on its location under one of three cups. Gamesters knew how to load and file their dice and had special tricks for shaking and throwing them.³¹ All were techniques ‘to noose unwary Woodcocks, and deprive them of their Plumes’, as an author explained in 1714, in eloquent metaphor.³² The litany was endless and inventive, although some were standard tricks of great antiquity.

Whether any or all of the stream of migrants and visitors coming to town actually studied these warning tomes is, of course, problematic. A considerable number of the newcomers were illiterate, and even those who could read were unlikely to sit down to peruse *Villainy Unmask’d*, especially if they had arrived in town in search of bright lights and ‘streets paved with gold’.

Rather, these writings were distillations of the citizenry’s own lore and experience of city life. They addressed an urban as much as a rural readership. Indeed, the frankness of these guidebooks did not make them, in any serious sense, solely or even chiefly anti-urban tracts. They carried multiple messages,

³¹ See Anon., *The Cheats of London Exposed* (London, c.1770), 1-61. Some ancient tricks with cards and dice had earlier been explained in Charles Cotton’s classic study, *The Compleat Gamester: Or, Full and Easy Instructions for Playing at above Twenty Games ...* (London, 1674 and many later editions).

³² C. Lucas, *Memoirs of the Lives, Intrigues, and Comical Adventures of the Most Famous Gamesters and Celebrated Sharpers ...* (London, 1714), 153.

reflecting the common ambivalence toward city life. Often they admired its vitality and excitement, even while deploring the consequential drawbacks and dangers. One tract, vividly titled *Hell upon Earth* (1729), denounced in traditional terms the ‘great, unwieldy, overgrown Town’. Yet it stressed the continual round of ‘Vice – and Pleasure’. In a fine burst of alliteration, it adumbrated urban excitements: not only ‘Accidents, Aggravations, Agonies, Animosities, and Arrests’ but alternatively ‘Admirations, Adventures, Amours, Assemblies, and Assignations’.³³ This antiphony was as likely to attract adventurers as to discourage fainthearts.

Indeed, compilers of city handbooks expressed a covert – and not-so-covert – admiration for the ingenuity and skill of the city sharpers. By contrast, the country dwellers were invariably depicted as slow moving and dim witted. They were teased for their ignorance and backwardness. Whatever the merits of pastoral scenery, the ordinary residents of arcadia were not much admired by the literate and urbane eighteenth-century culture. Urban enthusiasm for country life was rapidly turned into boredom after a brief visit, satirists noted slyly.³⁴ The rural squirearchy, the Bob Acres of England,³⁵ were objects for unkind laughter, as were their tenantry and labourers, who were commonly designated as ‘clowns’, ‘boobies’ and ‘bumpkins’. Such terms were ‘very ready in the mouth of every citizen and apprentice’, it was reported in 1793.³⁶ A wit had earlier proposed the official appointment of a Town Usher, who could act as an

³³ Anon., *Hell-upon-Earth: Or, the Town in an Uproar* (London, 1729), 1.

³⁴ ‘Euphelia’ in *The Rambler*, 11 August 1750, dreamed of ‘groves, and meadows, and frisking lambs’ but was rapidly bored by the real countryside. The theme recurs in ‘Dick Shifter’s Rural Excursion’, *The Idler*, 25 August 1759; while a citified ‘Dolly Dimple’ sniffs at the barbarity of rural life, in *The Connoisseur: By Mr Town, Critic and Censor-General*, 52 (23 January 1755).

³⁵ Bob Acres was teased for his imperfect mastery of town style but reassured by his manservant: ‘Why, ’an you were to go now to Clod Hall, I am certain the old lady wouldn’t know you’: R.B. Sheridan, *The Rivals: A Comedy* (1775), ed. E. Duthie (London, 1979), 70. John Trusler, *The Way to be Rich and Respectable, Addressed to Men of Small Fortune* (London, 1766), 7, also wrote anxiously: ‘For many years, a country squire has been an object of ridicule: but why?’

³⁶ F. Grose, *The Olio: Being a Collection of Essays* (London, 1793), 72. Hostile references to ‘country bumpkins’ can be found from at least the 1670s, as in, for example, W. Wycherley, *The Country-Wife: A Comedy* (1675; Penguin edn 1968), 175: ‘Why? d’ye think I’ll seem to be jealous, like a country bumpkin?’ A survey of pro- and anti-town traditions is furnished by R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973), which tends, however, to underestimate the strength of pro-urbanism.

escort to awkward country cousins and ‘instruct them how to wonder and shut their mouths at the same time’.³⁷

An eminent authority gave cautious support to that view. For John Locke in 1690 the denizens of woods and forests were ‘irrational’ and ‘untaught’, the inhabitants of cities and palaces by contrast being civil and rational, although he stressed that the latter did not thereby have a better understanding of the fundamental laws of nature.³⁸ The challenge of the city environment, however, had produced a certain alertness and sharpness among its population, whether or not they had received a formal ‘town education’.³⁹ In a society that stressed the values of ‘Reason’ and ‘Enlightenment’, these were significant accolades.

There was, then, alongside the traditional fear of urban corruption and danger, an emergent and rival viewpoint in eighteenth-century English culture. The new pro-town emphasis was unsentimental, zestful, and confident. It was also accorded increasingly vocal public expression. The stereotype of the eighteenth century – as an era when complacent landowners were endlessly bowed to by an obsequious peasantry in a placid countryside – takes insufficient account of the functional dynamism of English urban society, let alone the extent of agrarian change. Indeed, the country gentry, not to mention their wives

³⁷ *The World: By Adam Fitz-Adam*, no. 164 (19 February 1756).

³⁸ J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), ed. P. Laslett (Cambridge, 1967), 201, sec. 58. In his references to what is sometimes discussed as ‘differential rationality’, Locke clearly alludes to differences in life experiences and mental application, not in basic rational capacities, which were common to all human beings: see *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. P.H. Niddich (Oxford, 1975), 668-71, 707-8. For a later and very sweeping analysis of an urban calculating and rationalist mentality, see G. Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, in idem, *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. D.N. Levine (Chicago, 1971), 324-39.

³⁹ A ‘town education’ was used to refer generically to the acquisition of urban ‘polish’ and style. See, for example, H. Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones* (1749; Everyman edn, 1974), I, 159: Tom’s youthful bashfulness was ‘a misfortune which can be cured only by that early town education, which is at present so generally in fashion’. Similarly, the young Evelina was ‘quite a little rustic and knows nothing of the world’, with ‘a very *bumpkinish air*’, in F. Burney, *Evelina: Or, the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1777), ed. E.A. Bloom (Oxford, 1982), 19.

and daughters, were very ready to visit and stay in town,⁴⁰ rubbing shoulders with many of their tenantry on the way.

PERCEPTION

Reactions of town travellers were not, of course, unanimous. Hogarth saw both points of view: the nightmare *Gin Lane* depicted urban catastrophe, the smiling *Beer Street* a bustling prosperity (both published in 1751).⁴¹ There were many who recoiled from city crowds and preferred rural life. But others disagreed, sometimes with vehemence. ‘I have no relish for the country’, sighed Sydney Smith, unsuccessful in his search for an urban ministry: ‘It is a kind of healthy grave’.⁴² Others viewed rustic life as a state of hibernation and the return to town as an awakening from a dream or from protracted slumber. According to a doggerel verse of 1810, grandly titled *The Age: A Poem, Moral, Political, and Metaphysical*,⁴³ urban experience alerted country dwellers to:

*Important matters, dark and deep,
Which woke them from their rural sleep.*

If the pro-country enthusiasts were at times consciously nostalgic and arcadian, the pro-town lobby had more than a hint of intellectual and cultural arrogance. It was with unmistakable urban confidence, for example, that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848 affirmed that the modern rule from the

⁴⁰ Many landowning families spent a sizeable part of the year in town for ‘the season’, whether at London, the spas, the seaside resorts, or the county capitals, all of which reported many visiting ‘gentry’. Indeed, a substantial clientele of town and country gentry was needed to keep these places in business. Landowner absenteeism from the English countryside has not been studied in detail but a recent overview has suggested that it was increasing notably, in the century after 1640, especially in the Home Counties and Midlands: see C. Clay, ‘Landlords and Estate Management in England’, in J. Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Vol. V: Part II, 1640-1750: Agrarian Change* (Cambridge, 1985), 174-5, 240.

⁴¹ S. Shesgreen, ed., *Engravings by Hogarth: 101 Prints* (New York, 1973), Plates 75-6. These powerful scenes were not literal depictions but contributions to the successful campaign against excess gin drinking. Artistic antecedents were found in Breughel’s *La cuisine maigre* and *La cuisine grasse*, from which some figures were borrowed directly: see F. Antal, *Hogarth and his Place in European Art* (London, 1962), 164-5.

⁴² N.C. Smith, ed., *Selected Letters of Sydney Smith* (Oxford, 1981), 170, letter dated July 1838; and *ibid.*, 7, the same sentiments in June 1801.

⁴³ Anon., *The Age: A Poem, Moral, Political, and Metaphysical* (London, 1800), 3.

towns had ‘rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life’.⁴⁴

City dwellers were subjected to an intensive informal education into city ways. They had a panoramic mass of fast-changing information to assimilate daily. For Ned Ward in 1698, the ideal mode of learning was to walk the streets to study the citizens, who were ‘the best *Living Library*, to instruct Mankind, that ever you met with’.⁴⁵ Educational metaphors were often invoked. Another admirer of urban style later suggested in 1821 that the great city was ‘a complete *CYCLOPAEDIA*, where every man ... may find something to please his palate, regulate his taste, suit his pocket, enlarge his mind, and make himself happy and comfortable’.⁴⁶ Nor were the lessons exclusively ennobling. In 1777, Sheridan encapsulated a dramatic tradition that ran back at least to the Restoration, by finding urban life a veritable *School for Scandal*.

Towns were centres for the creation, circulation, and dissemination of news and information. That was an intrinsic function of urban society. A characteristic townee’s greeting was, ‘*What’s news?*’ The streets were an important channel for this communication; and information circulated rapidly. The city bellmen and newsvendors cried out the news, both official and unofficial; gossips chatted; while balladeers, sometimes funded by eager politicians, sang to entertain, inform, and influence.⁴⁷ Knots of people gathered at informal exchange points: marketplaces and market crosses were traditional venues, as were water pumps. A step off the streets, the plentiful taverns, gin

⁴⁴ See K. Marx and F. Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), in D. McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford, 1977), 225.

⁴⁵ E. Ward, *The London-Spy Compleat*, in *Eighteen Parts* (1698-9), ed. R. Straus (London, 1924), 163. And another reference to street ‘discourse for [the] mental eye’, in Anon., *Momus: Or, the Laughing Philosopher* (Dublin, 1777), 19.

⁴⁶ P. Egan, *Life in London: Or, the Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorn Esq. and his Elegant Friend Tom the Corinthian* (London, 1823), 23. Tom and Jerry were subsequently much copied, becoming, by indirect ancestry, progenitors of the modern cartoon characters: see D.A. Low, *Thieves’ Kitchen: The Regency Underworld* (London, 1987), 104-25, esp. 105-6.

⁴⁷ For payments to ballad singers in the 1774 election in Westminster, see British Library Add. Mss. 33,123 Pelham Papers (1774), fo. 114v. See also examples in the British Library’s Place Papers and in R. Palmer, *A Ballad History of England: from 1588 to the Present Day* (London, 1979), 5-9, 37-88.

shops, and coffeehouses also shared in the circulation and dissemination of news – and gave refreshment and shelter to city walkers.

Written material was abundant, including handbills, fly-sheets, newspapers, prints, pamphlets, ballad- and song-sheets. The *Icon Libellorum* in 1715 estimated, with some exaggeration, that the nation's entire population was sustained by popular pamphlets: the poor who hawked and sold them, and the well-to-do, who read them to discover the secrets of church and state.⁴⁸ Individual copies of papers were sold, resold, and read aloud in alehouses and coffeehouses. Alexander Pope in 1712 commented wryly on the universal solemnity with which both grave and trivial matters were discussed, and he proposed a 'newsletter of whispers' to 'slake the general thirst after news'.⁴⁹ The fictional Sir Gregory Gazette (1748) on his arrival in Hereford called instantly for copies of the *Gloucester Journal*, *Worcester Courant*, and *Northampton* and *Chester Mercuries*, and, not being supplied, was quick to express his disappointment: 'A strange town this, Mr Jenkins: no news stirring, no papers taken in'.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ M. Davies, *Icon Libellorum: Or, a Critical History of Pamphlets* (London, 1715), 3. Recent research has noted the array of material in print: see, for example, B. Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs, 1500-1800* (London, 1979), esp. 238-69; M. Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1981), esp. 19-82; I. Rivers, ed., *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Leicester, 1982); and R. Myers and R. Harris, eds., *The Sale and Distribution of Books from 1700* (Oxford, 1984). Urban literacy rates were generally higher than rural levels, and showed a sustained rise over the long term, with local fluctuations and reverses reflecting variations in the scale of migration and of educational provision: see L. Stone, 'Literacy and Education in England, 1640-1900', *Past and Present*, 42 (1969); and R.A. Houston, 'The Development of Literacy: Northern England, 1640-1750', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 35 (1982), 208-13.

⁴⁹ See Pope's anonymously published letters in *The Spectator*, 452, 457 (8 and 14 August, 1712), reprinted in N. Ault, ed., *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope, Vol. I: The Earlier Works, 1711-20* (Oxford, 1936), 56-62. Key studies of the early press are G.A. Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper, 1700-60* (London, 1962); M. Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole* (London, 1987); and J. Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1987). See also R. Collison, *The Story of Street Literature: Forerunner of the Popular Press* (London, 1973); and L. James, ed., *Print and the People, 1819-51* (London, 1976). For the modern street newscaster, or *repentista*, recounting the news in impromptu verse for semi-literate audiences in Brazil, see report: 'Streetwise in Brazil', *The Guardian* (23 March 1984).

⁵⁰ From S. Foote's play, *The Knights* (1748), in *The Works of Samuel Foote Esquire* (London, 1830), I, 15. Comparison with G.A. Cranfield's *A Handlist of English Provincial Newspapers and Periodicals, 1700-60* (Cambridge, 1952), 5, 8-9, 15, 23, shows that these were taken from real local papers.

Words and visual signals competed for the attention of passers-by. Names were written up over shops, on signboards and inscriptions, on posters and placards. The very urban graffiti published ubiquitous messages. It was claimed (no doubt apocryphally) that one young city tyro had revived lapsed reading skills by studying the ‘language of the walls’.⁵¹ Graphic illustrations were also abundant, particularly important for those city residents and visitors who were illiterate. Painted signs and shopkeepers’ symbols, often richly embellished, were hung out prominently in the streets, ‘like faithful Land-marks to the walking Train’.⁵² The barber’s striped pole, the pawnbroker’s three golden balls, and the gin shop’s hanging flagon were universally known as signals for their respective trades.

Information was supplied on all sides. It was helpful to maintain a regular, steady scanning of the street scene, with what a modern observer has neatly defined as ‘that rapid, causal, essentially urban interrogation’.⁵³ Small details could prove significant. The agitation of the shop signs overhead presaged the coming of a storm. Old hands could tell the time of day from crowd density; the day of the week from popular behaviour (busiest on Saturday and market days, more leisurely, if not more decorous, on Sunday); and the month of the year from the seasonality of fresh goods hawked in the street.

⁵¹ As recounted by Harriet Martineau: see W.K. Webb, ‘Working Class Readers in Early Victorian London’, *English Historical Review*, 65 (1950), 334. For eighteenth-century graffiti, see G.R. Guffey, ed., *The Merry-Thought: Or, the Glass Window and Bog-House Miscellany, I-IV (1731-?)*, Part 1, in Augustan Reprint Society, no. 216 (Los Angeles, 1982), iii-x; and M.A. Novak, ed., *The Merry-Thought, Parts 2-4*, in Augustan Reprint Society, nos. 221-2 (Los Angeles, 1983), iii-xiii. Later, a twentieth-century migrant to America burnished his English by reading the public advertisements: L. Adamic, *Laughing in the Jungle: An Autobiography of an Immigrant in America* (New York, 1932), 75.

⁵² Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 145. De Saussure, *A Foreign View*, 81, also noted in the 1720s: ‘Every house, or rather every shop, has a sign of copper, pewter, or wood painted and gilt. Some of these signs are really magnificent, and have cost as much as one hundred pounds sterling’. See D. Davis, *A History of Shopping* (London, 1966), 189-91; J. Larwood and J.C. Hotten, *The History of Signboards from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (London, 1866), esp. 17-28; and A. Heal, *The Signboards of Old London Shops* (London, 1947), 2-4, 8-12.

⁵³ J. Raban, *Soft City* (Glasgow, 1975), 248.

Hence, as Gay noted:

*Experience'd Men, inur'd to City Ways,
Need not the Calendar to count their Days.*⁵⁴

Every sense was alerted by the crowds, speed, and general bustle. 'I at first imagined that some great assembly was just dismissed, and wanted to stand aside till the multitude should pass', Smollett's naïve young heroine declared, before she realised that this throng was the norm of big city life. Her acerbic uncle was more emphatic. People were everywhere 'rambling, riding, rolling, rushing, jostling, mixing, bouncing, cracking, and crashing, in one vile ferment. ... All is tumult and hurry. ... The foot passengers run along as if they were pursued by bailiffs [and] the porters and chairmen trot with their burdens'.⁵⁵ Nor were such comments confined to the capital city, although the average speed of peregrination tended to rise proportionately with the populousness and density of the urban environment.

William Hutton similarly observed that people walked fast in Birmingham: 'their very step along the street showed alacrity'. At Bristol, it was noted that 'all are in a hurry, running up and down, with cloudy Looks and busy Faces', while John Dyer in 1757 hymned 'busy Leeds': 'Thus all here is in motion, all is life'.⁵⁶ Earlier too, the well-travelled Daniel Defoe in the 1720s had often reported towns as 'bustling' and 'thronged'. The archetypal imagery deeply impressed William Wordsworth, who had lived in Bristol and London as

⁵⁴ Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 155. Each town had its own weekly chronology, but Saturday was universally the busiest day (as chief market and payday) and Sunday the most leisurely. Hanoverian Sundays, however, were by no means torpid: see W.B. Whitaker, *The Eighteenth-Century English Sunday: A Study of Sunday Observance from 15677 to 1837* (London, 1940), esp. 64 and passim.

⁵⁵ Smollett, *Humphry Clinker*, 99-100.

⁵⁶ Compare Hutton, *Birmingham*, 63; P.T. Marcy, 'Eighteenth-Century Views of Bristol and Bristolians', in P. McGrath, *Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Newton Abbot, 1972), 27; J. Dyer, *The Fleece* (London, 1757), cited in R. Lonsdale, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Eighteenth-Century Verse* (Oxford, 1984), 174.

a young man. No enthusiast for town society, he nonetheless caught its shimmering magnetism:⁵⁷

... *the quick dance*
Of colours, lights, and forms, the deafening din;
The comers and the goers face to face,
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
And all the tradesmen's honours overhead.

Noise was the corollary of crowds. 'Clamour seems to be *the order of the day*', snorted John Byng in 1794.⁵⁸ By night, things were quieter; but many city residents were late to bed, and night watchmen perambulated calling the hours, although for Coleridge those 'hoarse, unfeathered Nightingales of Time' had but a 'drowsy cry'.⁵⁹ By day, activities quickened. Hogarth satirised the tumult, as his 1741 *Enraged Musician* (shown below) gazed in despair at the animated scene, in which animals yelped, babies bawled, children played, musicians sang and piped, hucksters called their wares, bells were rung, horns were blown, drums were banged, grindstones were turned, and even a parrot squawked'.⁶⁰



⁵⁷ W. Wordsworth, *The Prelude – 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts*, ed. J. Wordsworth et al. (New York, 1979), 235.

⁵⁸ Andrews, ed., *Torrington Diaries*, IV, 1.

⁵⁹ E.H. Coleridge, ed., *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford, 1964), 93.

⁶⁰ See W. Hogarth, *The Enraged Musician* (1741), in Shesgreen, ed., *Engravings by Hogarth*, Plate 47.

‘Babel’ and ‘Babylon’ were common synonyms for city societies, referring to the clamour of their many tongues, as well as to their reputations for moral depravity. At Bath, Jane Austen dissected the medley, comprising ‘the heavy rumble of carts and drays, the bawling of newsmen, muffin-men, and milkmen, and the ceaseless clink of pattens’.⁶¹ The latter sound was particularly characteristic. Prudent citizens – often but not exclusively women – wore high wooden overshoes, bound in an iron frame, that lifted them out of the mud and wet, and made a percussive ringing sound as they trod on stoned or flagged streets. A Franco-American visitor disembarking at Falmouth in 1810 was immediately struck with the ‘universal clatter of irons on the pavement’; and Gay’s town traveller heard the city housewives ‘safe thro’ the Wet the clinking Pattens tread’.⁶² Many of the poorest people wore wooden clogs, if nothing finer; and only few went barefoot.⁶³ In the long term, the characteristic clatter began to wane, as, with the eventual improvement of street paving and cleaning, styles of footwear became lighter and more finely tooled.⁶⁴ But raised shoes long had their advocates, not only for style but for treading safely through dirt and rubbish.

Characteristic odours thereby assailed the city walker, although this aspect of mass living was rarely mentioned directly. Both Gay and Swift, however, were sensitive to the ‘wrinkled Nose’. They noted in particular the

⁶¹ J. Austen, *Persuasion* (1818; Penguin edn, 1980), 149.

⁶² L. Simond, *An American in Regency England: Tour in 1810-11* (1815), ed. C. Hibbert (London, 1968), 14; also Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 141. Pattens or overshoes of wood or leather were fashionable for women, as distinct from the heavy wooden clogs worn by both sexes, especially in the north of England: see A. Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1979), 100-1, 109, 131-2, 149; and for earlier times, F. Grew and M. de Neergaard, *Shoes and Pattens: Medieval Finds from Excavations in London* (London, 1988), 91-101.

⁶³ It seems that going barefoot for adults was relatively unusual in eighteenth-century England, judging from contemporary comments and illustrations, in which even the poorest beggars and vagrants were shown shod. Certainly, the development of wholesale shoe manufacturing from the later eighteenth century onward in Northampton, Norwich, and later in Leicester, suggests an extensive domestic market: see J.S. Hall, *The Book of the Feet: A History of Boots and Shoes* (London, 1847), 85-92, lamenting the pace of change; and T. Wright, *The Romance of the Shoe, being the History of Shoemaking in All Ages, especially in England and Scotland* (London, 1922), 129-50, 154-8. In addition, there were numerous local shoemakers and cobblers: see E. Hobsbawm and J.W. Scott, ‘Political Shoemakers’, in E. Hobsbawm, *World of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1984), esp. 116-19.

⁶⁴ A country gentleman in Bedfordshire, dressed as if for an evening in London, wore ‘white silk stockings, thin shoes’: Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 92; and see J. Swann, *Shoes* (London, 1982), 27-30.

unpleasing aftermath of heavy rainfall, when the noxious contents of gutters were stirred to run through town ‘bearing their Trophies with them as they go’.⁶⁵ Another commentator in 1777 suggested that it was the ‘unsavoury odours’ of town in the warmer months that encouraged the fashionable exodus to find a rural retreat.⁶⁶ Dung, soot, refuse, crowds – all contributed to the urban confection. Towns with smoky mills and refineries were the most offensive to lungs and nostrils, while the spas and resorts by contrast liked to stress (not always accurately) their own fresh breezes and salubrious airs. As population densities increased, clearing odoriferous rubbish became a continual task, tackled officially by city scavengers and unofficially by ‘bunters’, who rummaged at night for rags and bones in back-street dung hills.

Multi-textured street life thus afforded intensive experience around the clock. That theme inspired numerous writers and artists, including Hogarth’s vivid exposition of *Morning, Noon, Evening, and Night* (1738), as experienced in the big city.⁶⁷ (Shown on next page) These depictions recorded the interwoven pattern of many different urban life-styles, each with its own distinct chronologies. All the various occupations and activities had their own routines. As the *Spectator* remarked amusedly in 1712, successive social groups appeared in sequence throughout the day: ‘Men of six o’clock give way to those of nine; they of nine to the generation of twelve; and they of twelve disappear, and make

⁶⁵ Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 140, 150: ‘Here Streams ascend/ That, in mix’d Fumes, the Wrinkled Nose offend’. See also J. Swift, *Description of a City Shower* (1710), in *Poetical Works*, ed. H. Davis (London, 1967), 93: ‘Now from all Parts the swelling Kennels flow,/ And bear their Trophies with them as they go:/ Filth of all Hues and Odours seem to tell,/ What Streets they sail’d from, by the Sight and Smell .../ Sweepings from Butchers’ Stalls, Dung, Guts, and Blood,/ Drown’d Puppies, stinking Sprats, all drench’d in Mud,/ Dead Cats and Turnip-Tops come tumbling down the Flood’.

⁶⁶ G.S. Carey, *A Rural Ramble: To which is Annexed a Poetical Tagg, or Brightelmstone Guide* (London, 1777), 2.

⁶⁷ S. Shesgreen, *Hogarth and the Times-of-the-Day Tradition* (Ithaca, 1983), Plates 38-41. Interpretation of the times of day marked an urban updating of the long-popular artistic theme of the four seasons.



- 1725



- 1700



- 1725



- 1700

room for the fashionable world, who have made two o'clock the noon of the day'.⁶⁸ One classic mid-eighteenth-century account recreated in eloquent prose a full twenty-four-hour saga of city life, from Saturday midnight to the

⁶⁸ R. Steele in *The Spectator*, 454 (11 August 1712; London, 1827), VI, 355. Similarly, in 1807 Southey divided Londoners into the Solar and Lunar races: see R. Southey, *Letters from England: By Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella* (1807), ed. J. Simmons (London, 1951), 47. Diurnal/nocturnal chronology has subsequently been explored in novels, such as G. Sala, *Twice Around the Clock* (1859); and later still in film, such as A. Warhol's *Sleep* (1963).

following Sunday midnight. As the daytime citizens walked abroad, the night population slumbered and *vice versa*. The quietest time was between three and four in the morning. But, even then, highwaymen, drunkards, pickpockets, constables, and night watchmen had not yet gone to bed, while pigeon fanciers, cow keepers, water workers, and the women who attended the fish markets had already got up. One hour later, the streets were already busy: Maidservants were collecting water from the pumps, to avoid the daytime queues; fish dealers were squabbling over the catch at the mackerel market; ‘Drunken Husbands, whose Money is all spent ... [were] going with sorrowful, relenting Faces home to their half-starved disconsolate Families’, and ‘Young Men and Women, who had rather do *anything* than serve their Maker ... [were] calling each other up to walk in the Fields, ... gather Cowslips, and get drunk before Breakfast’.⁶⁹

These urban life-styles ran on man-made timetables, increasingly chronicled by watches and clocks, and decreasingly regulated by the rising and setting of the sun and moon. Town residents were made very conscious of time. Individuals wore watches hanging from fobs and belts, while many places had clocks on public display, sometimes jutting out prominently into the main street.⁷⁰ Indeed, the disorder of mass urban life was not as spasmodic and inchoate as it often appeared. On the contrary, it depended upon a considerable degree of economic and social organisation for its survival and effective functioning.

Elements of this city imagery were perennial: bright lights and crowded streets characterised ancient Babylon as well as modern Manhattan. Certainly, in the eighteenth century many of the great European metropolises also evoked

⁶⁹ Anon., *Low-Life: Or, One Half of the World Knows not How the Other Half Live ... With an Address to the Ingenious and Ingenious Mr Hogarth* (1754; London, 1764), 1-103, esp. 19-26. Inspired by Hogarth, this celebrated work also plagiarised material from *Hell-upon-Earth* (London, 1729), as cited above n. 33.

⁷⁰ There is no detailed survey of public clocks, but for clock-making skills, see H. Cescinsky, *The Old English Master Clockmakers and their Clocks* (London, 1938), 30-106, 116-59. See also suggestive discussions in E.P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’, *Past and Present*, 38 (1967), 56-97; and D. Landes, *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World* (London, 1983), esp. 85-97, 218-36.

strong reactions. Paris, Naples, Vienna, Amsterdam, Madrid – the five largest centres after London – all attracted their meed of admiration and criticism. Yet the extent to which eighteenth-century England in particular was responding to the implications of the new assertiveness of city culture has often been underestimated. It was, nonetheless, a crucial feature of the age, not least because many writers and publicists were themselves literally or metaphorically denizens of the very urban ‘republic of Grub Street’.⁷¹

Eventually, in the long term, world-wide urbanisation has meant that the town has become less the exception, much more a routine social norm. That has blurred the sense of drama engendered by early growth. Undoubtedly, in eighteenth-century England, urban residents were still a minority of the total population, in 1800 as in 1700. But they lived in the focal points of economic and cultural expansionism, in places vivid with diversity and experience.

CHALLENGE

By 1801 England and Wales already constituted one of the most densely urbanised areas in the world, with approximately one of three inhabitants living in centres with more than 2,500 inhabitants.⁷² Within that complex, metropolitan London was itself a major concentration of population, which was unrivalled in Europe or the Americas, and scarcely exceeded elsewhere.⁷³ Meanwhile, England’s fast-changing urban system was becoming more visibly

⁷¹ For Grub Street, renamed Milton Street in 1830, see P. Rogers, *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture* (London, 1972), esp. 1-2, 18-37, 397-404.

⁷² See Corfield, *Impact*, 1-16; J. de Vries, *European Urbanisation, 1600-1800* (London, 1984), 31-2, 62, 64, 118-19, 164-6; and E.A. Wrigley, ‘Urban Growth and Agricultural Change: England and the Continent in the Early Modern Period’, in idem, *People, Cities and Wealth: The Transformation of Traditional Society* (Oxford, 1987), 157-93, esp. 158-67.

⁷³ By 1801, ‘greater’ London (i.e., the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, the East End, the County of Middlesex, and the other circumjacent urban parishes) housed close to one million people: Rudé, *Hanoverian London*, 1-5. That made it one of the largest cities in the world, surpassed only by Edo (Tokyo) and Peking (Beijing): see G. Rozman, *Urban Networks in Russia, 1750-1800: Premodern Periodisation* (Princeton, 1976), 243.

polycentric. The number and size of English provincial towns – often described as ‘little Londons’ or ‘London in miniature’⁷⁴ – were both growing, so that they contained among them by 1801 twice the population of the great capital city. Nor was the urban experience confined to long-term residents. The towns were circulating systems, through which passed numerous visitors and temporary residents. There were complaints that landowners were leaving their rural responsibilities in pursuit of urban pleasures. A worried cleric complained melodramatically in 1766 that ‘flies and machines pass from city to city; great towns become the winter residencies of those whose slenderness of fortune will not carry them to London; and the country is every where deserted’.⁷⁵

As successful city life drew sustenance from good communications, so the residents and municipalities devoted much attention to sustaining access and mobility. In a manner characteristic of the eighteenth century, changes were made in a distinctly piecemeal fashion, varying from town to town, and often from parish to parish, too. Yet, overall, a visible process of streamlining and specialisation can be detected, in response both to the growing pressures of traffic of all kinds and to the quest for urban ‘improvement’. That had ramifications for city streets, for city governments, and for city walkers.

Numerous specialist occupations were developed to assist the flow of people and vehicles. Crossing-sweepers, who cleared and brushed a pedestrian pathway across mucky roads, acted as unofficial traffic controllers. Shoe-cleaners offered remedial assistance. Everywhere, there were porters and carriers to convey goods and messages; and plentiful coach- and chairmen to carry people. The sedan chairs provided a popular form of individualised transport, even if the sight of these boxed conveyances in motion, ‘vibrating

⁷⁴ Celia Fiennes in the 1690s compared Exeter, Newcastle upon Tyne, and Liverpool (then with c.5,000 residents) with London: C. Morris, ed., *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes* (London, 1947), 184, 209, 247; and at various times Birmingham, Bristol, and Bury St Edmunds (at the Bury Fair in September) were also so described.

⁷⁵ Trusler, *Way to be Rich*, 6.

along on two poles’, could provoke mirth.⁷⁶ At night, the lamplighters made their rounds, while the services of link-boys were also available, with their burning brands for hire as mobile lighting. Smart Georgian town houses acquired handsome street furniture to match, including cast-iron torch-extinguishers, shoe-scrapers, and ornamental railings;⁷⁷ while door-knockers gave scope for a versatile range of tattoos, according to Southey,⁷⁸ from the double rap of the postman to the individual touch of the master of the house.

Meanwhile, as the specialist street occupations waxed, other street businesses began to move into fixed locations. With the growth of regular trading, itinerant vendors were surpassed in importance by those operating from permanent shops. Many services and goods, especially perishables, had traditionally been offered for sale by peripatetic salesmen and hawkers, calling their wares in the streets. A considerable amount of business was still transacted by these means in the eighteenth century. Artists and writers enjoyed noting the distinctive cries and costumes of the vendors.⁷⁹ Among those to be heard in mid-eighteenth-century Norwich were ‘Will you buy a Broom?’ ‘New Milk eho eho!’ and ‘Bellows to Mend!’ the latter after ‘making a strange disagreeable noise ... Twang, twang’, as an earnest observer recorded.⁸⁰ In the long term, however, customers increasingly travelled to the shops rather than *vice versa*, encouraging the growth of specialist shopping areas in the city centres. Itinerant vendors did not disappear but declined in commercial importance, although for some highly perishable commodities – such as milk – they long retained a significant role. Open-air business, however, continued at street markets and

⁷⁶ Simond, *An American in Regency England*, 14. See also T. Fawcett’, ‘Chair Transport in Bath: The Sedan Era’, *Bath Studies*, 2 (1988), 113-38. Many street services, such as those of sweepers, shoe-blacks, chairmen, link-boys and porters, are noted in *Trivia*: Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 135-7, 145, 147-9, 156, 164-5.

⁷⁷ Extinguishers, foot-scrapers, railings, and other external furnishings constituted between them a large market for decorative ironwork, whose fluent styling can still be seen outside some surviving Georgian houses. See E.G. and J. Robertson, *Cast-Iron Decoration: A World Survey* (London, 1977).

⁷⁸ Southey, *Letters from England*, 76-7.

⁷⁹ Rowlandson was one of many who enjoyed drawing the urban street scene. Collections of street cries were also produced by J.T. Smith, *The Cries of London ... Copied from Rare Engravings or Drawn from the Life* (London, 1839) and C. Hindley, *A History of the Cries of London, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1881).

⁸⁰ British Library, Add. Mss. 27,966 William Arderon, Letters and Tracts (1745-60), fos. 228-9.

fairs; and the Bristol wholesale merchants robustly chose to trade on the pavement outside their Exchange, or Tolsey, despite being ‘constantly exposed to the inclemency of the weather’.⁸¹

Furthermore, as the urban areas expanded, urban streets themselves became continually more differentiated in function. The main through route was demarcated from the social promenade, the shopping mall from the back street, the smart terrace from the modest alley, where dwelled the ‘pretty Sally’ of eighteenth-century ballad fame.⁸² An informal street specialisation assisted the processes of social recognition. That was particularly important for amorous encounters, which entailed a process of mutual identification and negotiation. In many of the larger towns and resorts, a ‘red light’ district developed, often located in or near the streets specialising in the entertainments industry, which attracted crowds of people and therefore facilitated meetings between prostitutes and customers. Women of the streets were numerous and were not hesitant to join in the social display. The evening promenade under the Piazza at Covent Garden in London ‘partook of the splendour of a Venetian carnival’ and was attended by crowds of ‘Love’s votaries’, as an early nineteenth-century writer recalled.⁸³ While many then repaired to nearby brothels and rented rooms, others consummated their encounters outdoors, as did, for example, the

⁸¹ Marcy, *Bristol and Bristolians*, 27-8.

⁸² The perennially popular ballad ‘Sally in our Alley’ was penned in c.1715 by Henry Carey: see Lonsdale, ed., *Eighteenth-Century Verse*, 138-9.

⁸³ T. Burke, *English Night Life: From Norman Curfew to Present Black Out* (London, 1943), 51. The unofficial association of the theatre with the red-light district was well seen in London, where both businesses migrated together from Tudor Southwark to Hanoverian Covent Garden and environs: see *ibid.*, 46-51; although this was not the only area where prostitutes congregated. Meanwhile, homosexuals in London also had semi-clandestine meeting places in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, Moorfields, Covent Garden, St James’s Park, and, later, Kensington Gardens: see E.J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin, 1977), 29-30; and R. Trumbach, ‘London’s Sodomites: Homosexual Behaviour and Western Culture in the Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of Social History*, 11 (1977), 15-16, 22.

young Boswell, in London's parks, streets, and alleyways, as well as on Westminster Bridge.⁸⁴

Local magistracy was well aware of the problems of maintaining order amid these multifarious activities. Much municipal government began in the streets, literally with the parish pump. There was a perennial routine of cleaning, paving, watching, lighting, and repairing the streets. A basic requirement was the need to prevent individuals from obstructing, damaging, or encroaching onto the public highways (a test case had prudently decided that it was not an offence to let rainwater drip from leaking gutters).⁸⁵ A number of places made efforts to respond to new pressures on street use, either via existing municipal powers or via special *ad hoc* 'Improvement Commissions'.⁸⁶ Local government zeal in action was, of course, extremely variable. Yet these developments reflected a general concern that citizens be enabled to go about their routine business in seasonable security – whether that was defined in terms of firm terrain under foot; or in traffic regulations to control the new wheeled competitors for road space; or in freedom from theft, assault, or undue personal annoyance. Indeed, given that urban residents daily walked forth among thousands of strangers, it was clear that a minimum framework of trust, bolstered by law and generally accepted conventions, was an essential ingredient to successful town life.

Considerable, if often piecemeal, efforts were made to improve street design and layout. A number of main roads were straightened and broadened, with projections and overhanging buildings pulled down. Over time, the concept of a modern urban thoroughfare grew grander, while narrow, twisting lanes

⁸⁴ For Boswell in 1762-3, the Strand and St. James's Park were favoured places of *rendez-vous*: see F.A. Pottle, ed., *Boswell's London Journal, 1762-3* (London, 1951), 49, 227, 231, 272-3, and (for Westminster Bridge) 255-6. See also *ibid.*, 240-11, 280, 304: resolutions against 'low street debauchery'.

⁸⁵ Spearman, *The Common and Statute Law*, 156-64, esp. 158.

⁸⁶ Corfield, *Impact*, 157-8, 175-6. See also S. and B. Webb, *English Local Government: Statutory Authorities for Special Purposes* (London, 1922); and, an under-valued work, R.H. Spencer, *Municipal Origins: An Account of English Private Bill Legislation relating to Local Government, 1740-1835* (London, 1911).

acquired an old-fashioned connotation. In practice, most towns remained highly eclectic in street layout, but access to a number of historic cities was facilitated by a blithe destruction of their medieval walls and gateways.⁸⁷ New pressures for streamlining led to curbs on the luxuriance of the pendant shop signs. Many places followed the example of London and Westminster in 1762, ordering advertising matter to be affixed to walls rather than protruding overhead.⁸⁸

In addition, from the later eighteenth century onward there were moves to improve identification by posting street names and by ensuring for the first time that all urban housing was numbered.⁸⁹ Postal addresses thereby became much more precise, and direct postal services to the home multiplied. Changes were not made solely with pedestrians in mind. There was intensified competition between rival road users. Traditional bylaws, which had insisted that horses be led and not ridden within the confines of city centres, could not be sustained against the attraction of wheeled speed. The growing numbers of coaches and carriages did not, however, usurp complete priority. Certainly their clientele tended to be the more wealthy and powerful, yet rich and poor alike had an interest in avoiding accidents and traffic jams. Gradually, therefore, the allocation of road space became regulated. Pedestrian areas were therefore increasingly separated from driving zones, being demarcated by posts or by

⁸⁷ See Corfield, *Impact*, 180. Eighteenth-century architectural taste followed Palladio's recommendation that urban streets in cool climates be broad and commodious, for convenience, circulation, light, and ornamentation: I. Ware, ed., *The Four Books of Andrea Palladio's Architecture* (London, 1738), III, 59-60. Narrow medieval streets went out of favour: see, for example, Wood, *Description of Bath*, II, 352. L. Mumford, *The City in History* (London, 1966), 441-7, interprets the change as a triumph for the rider and coach traveller but underestimates the interest also in improved pedestrianism. See also discussion in G.A. Stelter, 'Cultural and Urban Form in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America', *Journal of Urban History*, 10 (1984), 351-82.

⁸⁸ Larwood and Hotten, *History of Signboards*, 28-30.

⁸⁹ Corfield, *Impact*, 187-8. Numbering sequences were not always coordinated. For example, *Mason's Greenwich and Blackheath Shilling Directory* (London, 1852), iii, reported that 'in George Street, there are at least half-a-dozen number fours'. But systematisation was eventually encouraged by the growth of postal services: see K. Ellis, *The Post Office in the Eighteenth Century: A Study in Administrative History* (London, 1958), 7-8, 31-2, 124-5; and M.J. Daunton, *Royal Mail: The Post Office since 1840* (London, 1985), 5-8, 16-19.

raised sections of paving.⁹⁰ Custom also established that in Britain traffic drove on the left.⁹¹

Paving improvements also became a mark of urban modernity, as old cobbles or dirt track fell out of fashion and were gradually replaced in the main thoroughfares by new paving stones. These were hard on the feet (if less so than uneven cobblestones) but assisted the circulation of traffic and the clearance of rubbish. The progress of renovation was often noted by visitors. John Byng at Oxford in 1785 enjoyed ‘a long walk about the town ... to survey the progress of the new pavement’, but was sarcastic about Cambridge, which was in 1790 no more than ‘newly paved (*after a fashion*)’. Other places did rather better: he found Cardiff in 1787 ‘paved by Act of Parliament, as all towns sho’d be, where stone is plenty’; Macclesfield in 1790 was ‘a large, improving town, newly paved’; and Doncaster in 1792 was ‘a well-built, well paved, wide-streeted town’.⁹² The latter place also won praise from Sir John Sinclair in 1790: ‘an excellent pavement throughout – *trottoirs* 10ft wide in the principal street, and from 5 to 6ft in the others’.⁹³

It took continuous labour to tackle the grime and rubbish that collected in these highways. All places made some efforts in this direction, employing scavengers, sweepers, and the reclusive nightsoilmen, whose carts of human refuse creaked through the streets after dark. But standards varied quite markedly. Noisome courts and alleys often lay behind fashionable well-tended

⁹⁰ The chronology of these developments is by no means clear; but Gay in *Trivia*, for example, referred to street posts in early eighteenth-century London (Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 146) and they were often depicted, from mid-century onward, in prints and drawings of main streets.

⁹¹ This custom had developed without recourse to statute law and was not given legislative endorsement until it was accepted (not created) in the statute codifying highways law in 1835-6: Spearman, *The Common and Statute Law*, 165.

⁹² See Andrews, ed., *Torrington Diaries*, I, 209; II, 235-6 (for Oxford and Cambridge); I, 280 (Cardiff); II, 172 (Macclesfield); III, 28 (Doncaster). In addition, he praised ‘new paving’ in Gloucester, Worcester, Hereford, Canterbury, and Faversham: *ibid.*, I, 17, 44, 127; IV, 164, 167. For changes in a later era, see C. McShane, ‘Transforming the Use of Urban Space: A Look at the Revolution in Street Pavements, 1880-1924’, *Journal of Urban History*, 5 (1979), 279-307.

⁹³ Travel Diary of J.S. [Sir John Sinclair], July 1790, in British Library Add. Mss 35,127: Correspondence of Arthur Young (1790-7), II, fo. 33r.

malls and avenues. Within Britain, the reputation for the filthiest streets was held by the Old Town of Edinburgh. One agitated admirer of the place in 1798 hymned its ‘total want of all faecal propriety and excremental delicacy’:⁹⁴

*Taste guides my eye, where'er new beauties spread,
While prudence whispers: 'Look before you tread'.*

He had obviously expected better of the famous Athens of the North. Other places attracted happier inspection. In Sheffield, for example, a Victorian writer recalled nostalgically its tradition of communal street cleaning. At a signal from the Bellman, water was let out of a reservoir, whereupon animated scenes ensued: ‘Some people were throwing the water against their houses and windows; some raking the garbage into the kennel; some washing their pigs; some sweeping the pavement; and youngsters throwing the water over their companions, or rushing them into the widespread torrent.’⁹⁵ In the long term, however, communal scenes such as that disappeared, as municipalities increasingly employed their own workmen for street cleaning. The practice of allowing animals to forage in gutters was also discouraged. Pigs and chickens gradually disappeared from urban streets, although specialist town survivors such as cats and dogs flourished freely (and were much depicted in eighteenth-century townscapes).

Another innovation brought improved safety and accessibility for the human traffic, in the form of improved street lighting. The eighteenth-century technology of illumination was admittedly feeble and murky, when assessed by later standards. It consisted of rape-seed oil lamps, placed in front of a reflective background that magnified the gleam.⁹⁶ Yet it was considered very brilliant at

⁹⁴ A. Bell, *Sydney Smith: A Biography* (Oxford, 1982), 15, quoting letters from December and June 1798 respectively.

⁹⁵ See S. Roberts, *Autobiography and Select Remains* (London, 1849), 21-2, reminiscing about his youth in later eighteenth-century Sheffield.

⁹⁶ M.E. Falkus, ‘Lighting in the Dark Ages of English Economic History’, in D.C. Coleman and A.H. John, eds., *Trade, Government and Economy in Pre-Industrial England* (London, 1976), 254-73.

the time, quite eclipsing candle power – especially when it is remembered that the urban bright lights shone until late at night, in contrast to the darkness of the surrounding countryside. In some places, evening walkers still navigated by the help of the moon. Birmingham’s Lunar Society immortalised its assistance. Increasingly, however, the work of progressive municipalities and lighting commissions took over from the householder the responsibility for illumination, beginning with the main thoroughfares and places of congregation.⁹⁷ At dusk, lamplighters with ladders and cans of oil, busied themselves, extending the hours of urban activity into the night. Only in the two ancient university cities were attempts made to maintain a scholastic curfew, but the young scholars were nonetheless to be observed after dark, ‘roaring drunk about the streets, which is called being fresh’.⁹⁸

Crowds congregating in the streets represented both entertainment and hazard. The extent and nature of policing therefore became a matter of serious debate in eighteenth-century England, as traditional administrative and legal practices were put under pressure by the intensification and diffusion of urban growth. Problems were particularly visible in London and the largest provincial towns, where calls for reform were most urgent.⁹⁹ Yet, at the same time, many defended strongly the traditional freedom from stringent street controls. The term *police* itself, which was just coming into currency, was deplored as a

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 249-52; and, for an example, see McInnes, ‘Emergence of a Leisure Town’, 71-3.

⁹⁸ Byng in Oxford in 1784 also found the Oxford scholars unduly impertinent toward women and strangers: see Andrews, ed., *Torrington Diaries*, I, 120.

⁹⁹ For still-continuing debates, see L. Radzinowicz, *A History of the English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750. Vol. I: The Movement for Reform* (London, 1948); *Vol. II: The Clash between Private Initiative and Public Interest in the Enforcement of the Law* (London, 1956), esp. 1-29, 349-427; *Vol. III: Cross Currents in the Movement for the Reform of the Police* (London, 1956); and the helpful overview by D. Philips, ‘“A New Engine of Power and Authority”: The Institutionalisation of Law-Enforcement in England, 1780-1830’, in V.A.C. Gatrell, B. Lenman, and G. Parker, eds., *Crime and the Law: The Social History of Crime in Western Europe since 1500* (London, 1980), 155-89.

foreign term, just as later the Victorian bobby's cry of '*Move on there!*' attracted popular resentment as being thoroughly 'unEnglish'.¹⁰⁰

Preservation of order, in the eighteenth century, was the job of the parish constabulary, aided by the night watchmen, who patrolled with pikes, staves, and badges of office.¹⁰¹ In addition, after legislation in 1744, magistrates were empowered to organise a quarterly 'privy search' at night, to apprehend 'rogues and vagabonds'.¹⁰² Many minor offences were then dealt with by summary jurisdiction from the local justices, while major ones went before the courts.¹⁰³ The legal code itself was sanguinary, if unsystematic and often confusing; but law enforcement in practice was low-key and highly decentralised.¹⁰⁴ There were certainly new developments in policing in the course of the eighteenth

¹⁰⁰ The connotations of 'police' are discussed in Radzinowicz, *English Criminal Law*, III, 1-5. For an example of working-class opinion in 1836, see I.J. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London: John Gast and his Times* (London, 1979), 273: a speaker at a Surrey Radical Association meeting asserted (to applause) that being told to move on insulted every 'freeborn Englishman'. In the eighteenth century, upper-class advocates of personal liberty had defeated or amended the more ambitious reform proposals and later ensured that the Victorian police (except in London) remained under the supervision of local government: Philips, "'A New Engine of Power and Authority'", 155, 171-4, 187-9.

¹⁰¹ Parish constables were traditionally held to be petty tyrants, often incompetent, and always corrupt. The *Devil upon Crutches*, 61, claimed that they 'squeeze a good Livelihood out of them [bawdy houses] by visiting the Owners once a Quarter, demanding Hush-money, and making them promise to behave better for the future'. Criticisms were easily made, although there is as yet very little research to confirm or refute them.

¹⁰² The general 'privy search' was first imposed by 7 Jac. I, cap.4 (1609/10), repealed under Queen Anne, and reinstated by 17 Geo. II, cap. 5 (1744). But the procedure was soon in disarray: Radzinowicz, *English Criminal Law*, II, 18-19.

¹⁰³ Many imponderables obscure the scale of eighteenth-century criminality. A large majority of crimes were not reported, while petty offences were dealt with informally by constables or summarily by magistrates. Serious crimes came to court only if a private prosecutor pursued the case. Hence statistics of crimes indicted measure accurately the activities of the courts but only obliquely the totality of crime: see J.M. Beattie, 'Towards a Study of Crime in Eighteenth-Century England: A Note on Indictments', in P. Fritz and D. Williams, eds., *The Triumph of Culture: Eighteenth-Century Perspectives* (Toronto, 1972), 299-314; and idem, *Crime and the Courts in England, 1660-1800* (Oxford, 1986), 8-9, 35-73, 199-202.

¹⁰⁴ See J. Fielding, *Extracts from Such of the Penal Laws as Particularly Relate to the Peace and Good Order of this Metropolis* (London, 1768), 1-7, for comments on the widespread ignorance of the law. Historians dispute the social rationale behind the eighteenth-century 'bloody code' but not its discretionary application: see E.P. Thompson et al., *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1975); and J. Langbein, 'Albion's Fatal Flaws', *Past and Present*, 98 (1983), 96-120.

century, but those also tended to be piecemeal and localised.¹⁰⁵ Much was left to the discretion of magistrates, with relatively limited resources of enforcement.

Yet the system was sufficiently successful, despite some scares, to keep interpersonal violence down to comparatively low levels. The streets were often rowdy and boisterous; and street robbery, especially pickpocketing, was almost certainly on the increase. But even the admonitory ‘rogue’ literature stressed the moral and financial pitfalls of town life rather than direct risks to life and limb.¹⁰⁶ Indeed, cases of serious personal assault and homicide in eighteenth-century streets do not seem to have been very numerous, and their incidence may have been falling in the long term.¹⁰⁷ There were certainly fluctuations in levels of violent crime from year to year, that caused genuine contemporary concern.¹⁰⁸

Furthermore, there were ‘rough’ streets, that were more hazardous and less civil to strangers than others; and rumour heightened the effect. In June 1778, for example, the aristocratic Judith Milbanke reported luridly from Newcastle upon Tyne: ‘Some parts of the Town near the River, it is literally

¹⁰⁵ There were attempts at galvanising the system by private associations to bring prosecutions (for example, the Societies for the Reformation of Manners) and legislation in 1778 eased the process of prosecution. There were also growing numbers of appointments as parish constables and private watchmen, as well as policing innovations under provincial Improvement Commissions in some larger towns. In London, an Act of 32 Geo. III, cap. 53 (1792) established the first stipendiary magistrates, comprising at least three apiece for each of seven public offices in Middlesex and Surrey (but excluding the jurisdiction of the City of London). For the extent of change, see Beattie, *Crime and the Courts*, 41-72; and Radzinowicz, *English Criminal Law*, II, 349-430.

¹⁰⁶ For this literature, see above n. 30.

¹⁰⁷ Recorded levels of indictments for violent crime in towns were very low, both in the total number of cases and as a proportion of recorded crime. For example, in 1810, 15.4% of Old Bailey offences were crimes of violence; in 1820, only 7.3%: see G. Rudé, *Criminal and Victim: Crime and Society in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1985), 25, 29-30. But that also reflected weaknesses in detection, enforcement, and prosecution. The comparative history of crime, whether between countries or over time, is even more problematic: see L. Stone, ‘Interpersonal Violence in English Society, 1300-1980’, *Past and Present*, 101 (1983), 22-33; and ‘Debate’ between L. Stone and J.A. Sharpe, *Past and Present*, 108 (1985), 206-44. But Beattie, *Crime and the Courts*, 107-8, 111-12, 132-9, cautiously confirms Stone’s view that there was a long-term decline in violent offences. For modern international comparisons, see T.R. Gurr, P.N. Grabosky, and R.C. Hula, *The Politics of Crime and Conflict: A Comparative History of Four Cities* (Beverly Hills, 1977), stressing that trends in violent crimes were not identical or even similar to crimes of appropriation, or other offences.

¹⁰⁸ These scares often prompted attempts at reform. Eventually, however, it was the general scale and permanence of urbanisation that sharpened the debate and weakened resistance to the reform of law and policing: see Beattie, *Crime and the Courts*, 626-37; and Philips, “‘A New Engine of Power and Authority’”, 157-65.

dangerous to walk in – even for Men, as, if you return a word or look for all the abusive Names they bestow on Passengers most plentifully, I believe they would make no scruple of tearing you Limb from Limb’.¹⁰⁹ Rumours, however unsubstantiated, had an impact upon public opinion, and they could not be checked against official criminal statistics, since none were compiled in this period. Yet, overall, neither the real nor reputed dangers proved sufficient to discourage migration and mobility.

Certainly, it was rare for men in the town streets of eighteenth-century England to carry personal weapons of war. Fights and drawls, when they did occur, were conducted with fisticuffs, or perhaps cudgels. Constables and night watchmen also went unarmed but for their wooden staves, and that tradition was generally accepted.¹¹⁰ Gentlemen, who were entitled by rank to wear swords in public, decreasingly invoked the privilege, except on ceremonial occasions. Fashionable style found that violent weaponry contradicted an urban ethos of civility. Richard ‘Beau’ Nash, the influential Master of Ceremonies at Bath, inculcated that view so well that ‘a sword seen in the streets of Bath would raise as great an alarm as a mad dog’, as Sheridan’s impetuous young *Rivals* discovered.¹¹¹

Nor was the new armoury of guns and pistols, although plentifully manufactured in eighteenth-century Birmingham and London, commonly worn,

¹⁰⁹ Letter cited in M. Elwin, *The Noels and the Milbankes: Their Letters for Twenty-Five Years, 1767-92* (London, 1967), 109-110. Her sportive account continued: ‘The People of this place are literally Savages & speak a Language not to be understood’. For territorialism among street gangs in modern Chicago, see R.L. Keiser, *The Vice Lords: Warriors of the Streets* (New York, 1979).

¹¹⁰ Arming the police was very rarely canvassed. It was mentioned only to be dismissed, in Anon., *Street Robberies Consider’d: The Reason of their being so Frequent with Probable Means to Prevent ’em ...* (London, 1728), 61, which suggested instead the appointment of younger and fitter night watchmen.

¹¹¹ Sheridan, *The Rivals*, 105: spoken by young Absolute on Bath’s South Parade, with a sword hidden under his cloak. See also Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, 55.

especially as it was illegal to use firearms in the streets.¹¹² Instead, men carried sticks, canes, or the new and very urban umbrella.¹¹³

Popular traditions, furthermore, did not extend admiration to street violence, in contrast to attitudes in more tempestuous frontier cultures. Gangs of bullies did on occasion intimidate urban populations. The Mohocks in Queen Anne's London were one such example: allegedly young scions of aristocratic families, who enjoyed 'roasting porters, smoking cobblers, knocking down watchmen, overturning constables, breaking windows, blackening sign-posts, and the like immortal enterprises', as Addison reported scornfully.¹¹⁴ But their notoriety faded, after some arrests, and they did not become cult figures. Nor did footpads and street pickpockets. Admiration was reserved for more dashing criminals, whose depredations generally took place outside town and who were famed for their prowess and speed on horseback.¹¹⁵

A personal etiquette of acceptable street behaviour seems to have been in gradual process of definition, created and endorsed by custom and convention even if by no means universally adopted in practice (for which evidence is particularly difficult to glean). The informal code decreed that staring too directly at other people was rude; peering closely through the windows of private houses was unacceptable; belligerent jostling or pushing was disliked; spitting was discouraged; and excessive swearing and drunkenness in public were socially as well as legally proscribed. It was polite for men to 'surrender

¹¹² Spearman, *The Common and Statute Law*, 156. Little is known about the extent of personal possession and carrying of firearms in England, but they were chiefly used for sporting and military purposes; and guns were rarely mentioned as a problem for urban policing. That contrasts with traditions elsewhere, such as in frontier America. H.B.C. Pollard, *A History of Firearms* (London, 1926), 85, 87, notes that England's long-distance coaches carried pistols and blunderbusses, but says nothing about the use of weaponry in town.

¹¹³ The umbrella for women was mentioned in Gay's *Trivia* (Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 141) but took longer to gain acceptance by men. By the later eighteenth century, it was in use by both sexes: see Anon., *Hints to the Bearers of Walking Sticks and Umbrellas* (London, 1808).

¹¹⁴ Cited in T. Burke, *The Streets of London through the Centuries* (London, 1940), 62.

¹¹⁵ Beattie, *Crime and the Courts*, 150-4.

the wall' to women, while themselves taking the outside of the pavement.¹¹⁶ To the dismay of Dutch visitors, there was not much fuss about urban litter; but there was disapproval of men urinating visibly in public, and *Trivia* advised finding 'some Court or secret Corner' instead.¹¹⁷ This informal etiquette aimed at reducing personal annoyance or embarrassment and to respect the claims of others, even among the hurly-burly.¹¹⁸ It may be seen as representing middle-class and women's values; but, more fundamentally, it promulgated a response to urban life on a mass scale for the 'respectable' of all classes.

Social custom as well as official disapproval, for example, discouraged aggressive begging in the streets, such as the 'mobbing' of wealthy-seeming individuals by crowds of spectators. That behaviour seems to have been relatively unusual in eighteenth-century England. Street begging too had its customs and conventions, which tried to preserve the dignity of the supplicant. 'Stationary' mendicants, with their own regular pitch, tended to be relatively more accepted than the 'movables', who followed the crowds.¹¹⁹ But many, among the respectable poor as well as the rich, deplored all forms of street begging. One critic in 1807 defined it as 'a most indelible disgrace to these enlightened times'.¹²⁰ During this period, therefore, the developing framework of parochial poor relief, combined with legal penalties and social disapproval,

¹¹⁶ Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 144: 'Let due Civilities be strictly paid./ The Wall surrender to the hooded Maid'. And for 'jostling for the wall' in *Trivia*, see *ibid.*, I, 135, 136, 141, 145, 166. In 1773, Dr Johnson noted a waning of disputes, recalling that 'in the last age' men divided into 'those who gave the wall, and those who took it: the peaceable and the quarrelsome': in R.W. Chapman, ed., *Boswell: Life of Johnson* (Oxford, 1976), 80-1.

¹¹⁷ Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 152. For social emphasis upon bodily decorum, see Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, 22. Some towns maintained 'places of easement' and men also used chamber pots in taverns and alehouses: Arderon Mss, fo. 241.

¹¹⁸ It paralleled the stress upon good manners in all forms of social interaction: see, classically, N. Elias, *The Civilising Process, Vol. I: The History of Manners* (Basle, 1939; English transl. Oxford, 1978), esp. 252-63, although his analysis pays relatively little attention to urbanisation. For reformers' attempts at monitoring public behaviour, see A.G. Craig, 'The Movement for the Reformation of Manners, 1688-1715' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1980); and Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, 16-20, 22-6, 30-1. Public manners were not, of course, universally polished; but Rowlandson's *Curiosity Cured* (c.1808?), depicting robust reprisals upon a woman for staring through a front-door keyhole, suggested at least some awareness of polite convention: R.R. Wark, *Drawings by Thomas Rowlandson in the Huntington Collection* (London, 1975), Plate 152.

¹¹⁹ C.J. Ribton-Turner, *A History of Vagrants and Vagrancy, and Beggars and Begging* (London, 1887), 216-18.

¹²⁰ An 'Old Subscriber', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 77, 1 (1807), 303.

contributed to a long-term reduction in street begging,¹²¹ although it by no means disappeared entirely and many places, which were reported to have cleared the ‘problem’, found that it recurred in hard times.

Some other close attentions were impossible to eliminate. Men remarked upon female behaviour and appearance, while, especially in the red-light districts, prostitutes openly solicited men for custom. Streetwalkers either strolled upon and down, or stood at known ‘stands’, from which they gave ‘ogling Salutations’ and plucked at men’s sleeves, according to the disapproving Daniel Defoe.¹²² *Trivia* meanwhile parodied the cajoling street chorus to ‘My noble Captain! Charmer! Love! my Dear!’ which flattered the ‘credulous Ear’.¹²³

Safe walking therefore required vigilance. Even the most prudent pedestrians at times found themselves jostled or pushed. That gave pickpockets their opportunity.¹²⁴ Working either singly or in pairs, they purloined from the inattentive citizen, taking the visible, portable, and valuable items that formed the appendages of smart city dress: watches, purses, pendant pockets, handkerchiefs, necklaces, fans, snuffboxes, hats, even wigs.¹²⁵ An immediate hue and cry of ‘Stop Thief!’ offered the victim a faint chance of recovering the departing goods, but dependence upon instant community response was far from infallible. Hence it was increasingly supplemented by other means, such as

¹²¹ Little is known about street mendicancy, but there is some discussion in Ribton-Turner, *A History of Vagrants*, esp. 163-227; and see, for later times, L. Rose, *Rogues and Vagabonds: The Vagrant Underworld in Britain, 1815-1985* (London, 1988). For poor-law policy and measures to reduce street begging, see also P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988), 167-8.

¹²² Anon. [D. Defoe attrib.], *Some Considerations upon Street-Walkers: With a Proposal for Lessening the Present Number of them, in Two Letters to a Member of Parliament* (London, n.d.), 2.

¹²³ Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 168.

¹²⁴ Pickpocketing was endemic and almost certainly increasing. But, as the practice was exceptionally difficult to police, prosecutions for the offence were only few: see comments in Beattie, *Crime and the Courts*, 180-1; and Rudé, *Criminal and Victim*, 36-40.

¹²⁵ The rogue literature listed ticks used to distract the victim, while the pickpocket was at work. D. Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722; New York, 1964), 178-87, esp. 187, itemised Moll’s social camouflage for the craft of pickpocketing: ‘On these adventures we always went well dressed, and I had very good clothes on and a gold watch by my side, as like a lady as other folks’.

newspaper advertisements.¹²⁶ But the irritation of petty theft, which was always at its greatest when crowds assembled, stopped neither the urban display nor the ‘envious Eyes’.

ENGAGEMENT

Perambulating the teeming streets, the city dwellers therefore enjoyed at once the pleasure, puzzle, and necessity of scrutinising each other discreetly:

*[to]remark each Walker’s diff’rent Face,
And in their Look their various Bus’ness trace.¹²⁷*

Identification was often testing, especially on first or fleeting acquaintance. As, for example, the graphic adventures of *Moll Flanders* made clear, the elegantly dressed lady of fashion might be the leader of a gang of pickpockets or a notorious prostitute or even all three simultaneously. Uncertainties of this sort were the stuff of urban humour, with special laughter reserved for the country bumpkins, who were city bedazzled that they bowed to the footman instead of the mayor, and gallantly saluted the chambermaid in lieu of the mistress of the house. Another well-worn joke was to mistake a streetwalker for a lady of fashion.

Judgements had to be made quickly. Street traders and prostitutes became professionally skilled at this art. City dwellers knew little of the hundreds of people they encountered daily. It was not feasible to enquire minutely into each individual’s background, birth, status, wealth, temperament, or abilities. As a consequence, rigid distinctions of rank were not easily maintained in a crowded street. Street salutations tended to become brisk and utilitarian. The female

¹²⁶ Beattie, *Crime and the Courts*, 36-8.

¹²⁷ Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 151.

curtsy was attenuated into a bob,¹²⁸ while the male tradition of doffing to a social ‘superior’ began also to be minimised. The hat was touched or raised fractionally, rather than given a full flourish. Sometimes acknowledgement was omitted completely. A visiting cleric at Bath in 1766 was shocked to see that his colleagues felt able to ‘pass by the side of a Bishop, without any compliment to his Episcopal Order’.¹²⁹ Hat honour, however, was still found as a mark of respect from men to women and between acquaintances; but newcomers in town were warned against ‘spungers’, who attempted to elevate their own status by hat doffing to every fashionable party they passed.¹³⁰

But, in general, the relative anonymity of city streets conferred ample opportunities for avoiding automatic recognition, for those who wanted that. The quintessentially urban Addison was not alone in finding village society too intrusive. There was little personal privacy, when all were known to one another. ‘I shall therefore retire into the town’, he wrote in 1711, ‘and get into the crowd again as fast as I can, in order to be alone’. The first arrival in a great city could be an undeniably disconcerting, not to say overwhelming, experience. Yet, once established in town, residents had some freedom of manoeuvre. ‘I can ... at the same time enjoy all the Advantages of Company, with all the privileges of Solitude’, as Addison concluded happily.¹³¹ The larger the town, the greater the potential for seclusion; London was therefore unrivalled in that respect.

¹²⁸ Elizabeth Ham, daughter of a Dorset yeoman, recalled herself in the 1780s as ‘a little rustic uncouth child’, adding that ‘I used to curtsy to all the fine-dressed ladies that I met, till told not to do so by the nurse-maid’: in E. Gillett, ed., *Elizabeth Ham: By Herself, 1783-1820* (London, 1945), 27.

¹²⁹ Mitchell and Penrose, eds, *Letters from Bath*, 87. See Simond, *An American in Regency England*, 28: people did not remove their hats, ‘a slight inclination of the head, or motion of the hand, is thought sufficient’; and P.J. Corfield, ‘Dress for Deference and Dissent: Hats and the Decline of Hat Honour’, *Costume*, 23 (1989), 64-79.

¹³⁰ G. Barrington [attrib.], *The Frauds and Cheats of London Detected* (London, 1802), 54-5.

¹³¹ *The Spectator*, no 131 (31 July 1711; London, 1827), II, 323-4v. This apparently paradoxical argument has a long tradition, from Strabo in ancient Rome to Georg Simmel in 1903, ‘Metropolis and Mental Life’, 331-4. For a Hanoverian variant, see M.M. Verney, ed., *Verney Letters of the Eighteenth Century from ... Claydon House* (London, 1930), I, 56: in January 1758, William Abel sold East Claydon Manor to live quietly in town: ‘As Inaction and Quietness [sic] are the injoyments of Old Age (at least they will be soe to me, with the Help of a Coffee House), I promised the injoyment of ’Em in Town, where perhaps I may have an opportunity of disposing of my daughters’.

Life among the crowds everywhere conferred some scope for imaginative self-presentation. Street judgements, being rapid and external, emphasised the importance of dress and style. ‘People, where they are not known, are generally honour’d according to their Cloaths’, said Mandeville,¹³² in a verdict that was much repeated. It encouraged expenditure upon conspicuous items of dress, cosmetics, and accoutrements. ‘There seems to be an absurd passion universally prevalent among Mankind; which is, to be always thought what they are not’, sniffed *Momus* in 1777.¹³³ That was especially so among young adults, who were numerous and visible among the ranks of the city population. Indeed, an air of youthfulness was much cultivated; and the use of cosmetics to achieve that effect was so great, confide ‘Rusticus’ in 1755, that he was astonished to find ‘no old aunts in this town’.¹³⁴

Camouflage and deception, as well as emulation and display, added to the uncertainties and excitements of city life. While many aspired to grandeur, fashionable society also had the option of playing at ‘simplification’. In June 1763, for example, Boswell went out, dressed as a ‘blackguard’ in rough dress and carrying a stout oaken stick, although he was gratified that the worldly-wise streetwalkers recognised him as a ‘gentleman in disguise’.¹³⁵

Clearly there were limits to the speed and thoroughness with which external images could be changed. Occupation and income have their own constraints. The blackened face and garb of the chimney sweep could not be mistaken, nor were those living in affluence, whether old or new, readily confused with those in chronic poverty, with their down-at-heel shoes, shabby clothing, and, often, unhealthy looks. It was in practice difficult for a newcomer, even with money, to pass instantly into the world of fashion, as

¹³² B. Mandeville, *The Fable Of the Bees* (1723; Oxford, 1924), I, 127. For fleeting urban impressions, see also Simmel, ‘Metropolis and Mental Life’, 325-6.

¹³³ *Momus*, 62; and further comments on the rage for change in *ibid.*, 89-91.

¹³⁴ ‘Rusticus’ in *The Connoisseur*, 46 (12 December 1754).

¹³⁵ Pottle, ed., *Boswell’s London Journal*, 272-3.

many a mortified aspirant testified. Fanny Burney, herself a social traveller, was, for example, sarcastic about the tradesman's son, whose lack of style to match his fine new feathers 'very effectually destroyed his aim of *figuring*, and rendered all his efforts useless'.¹³⁶ But these niceties were less apparent in the immediacy of the streets, and identification by dress and appearance was certainly more adaptable than social categorisation by rank and birth.

Rapid turnovers of personnel and the quick, fleeting vision of town styles together contributed also to encourage the growing velocity of fashion turnover in eighteenth-century England. Inspiration was often derived from Paris and a widening network of international influences, but the towns then acted as centres for the circulation and transmission of innovation.¹³⁷ Furthermore, the streets made essential showcases for those dramatic fashions that needed crowd attention for their best effect. Courts and polite assemblies were no longer the sole venues for display.

Different sections of society evolved their own customs and codes. The tilt of a man's hat could be used to indicate his group and even political allegiance. Meanwhile, the startling young Macaronis, who paraded the streets in the 1760s and 1770s with huge high-pointed wigs (see following illustration), were successors to the urban fops, coxcombs, pretty fellows, sparks, and bloods of earlier eras, as well as precursors of the loungers, dandies, bucks, swells, mashers,¹³⁸ and street-wise generations to follow.

¹³⁶ See Burney, *Evelina*, 219. More or less kindly laughter at 'parvenu' pretensions was common in ballads, plays, and novels in this period.

¹³⁷ There is helpful evidence in Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England*, passim; A. Ribeiro, *A Visual History of Costume: The Eighteenth Century* (London, 1983), 13-16; C.W. Cunnington and P. Cunnington, *Handbook of Eighteenth-Century English Costume* (London, 1957). See also N. McKendrick, 'The Commercialisation of Fashion', in N. McKendrick, J. Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-century England* (London, 1982), 34-99.

¹³⁸ Burke, *Streets of London*, 90; and illus. (1772) in Ribeiro, *A Visual History of Costume*, Plate 103.



Society in the eighteenth century was visibly pluralistic. In general, these communities were not starkly polarised between a small minority of great wealth and a multitude of destitute paupers. On the contrary, there was a fast-changing distribution of affluence, a new diversity of occupations and status. The sixteenth-century Sumptuary Laws, that had attempted to designate appropriate clothing to be worn by different ranks and occupations, had lapsed long before they were given the analytical *coup de grâce* by Adam Smith in 1776, who denounced them as ‘the highest impertinence and presumption in kings and ministers’.¹³⁹

In particular, the growing visibility and confidence of the urban middle class bridged the extremes. ‘The different Stations of Life so run into and mix with each other’, complained the Dean of Gloucester in the 1770s, ‘that it is hard to say where one ends and the other begins’.¹⁴⁰ Wealth and poverty had not disappeared, but minute gradations of rank and degree were blurring. A new terminology of ‘class’ began to take over from the older language,¹⁴¹ while the informal street slang for ‘nobs’, ‘cits’, and various other ‘cullies’ was yet more diversified and expressive.

Amid this confusion, many optimistic newcomers, in search of the fabled streets paved with gold, found also broken paving stones and muddy gutters. Urbanisation has always held out greater prospects of social mobility than it has ever achieved. Yet the eighteenth-century towns and cities presented and themselves represented economic opportunity, social mutability, and a potential mass energy. Many were physically as well as socially attractive places, although the quality of urban amenities was never uniform. And everywhere, living among the crowds brought an intensity and vitality of experience that

¹³⁹ N.B. Harte, ‘State Control of Dress and Social Change in Pre-Industrial England’, in Coleman and John, eds., *Trade, Government and Economy*, 132-65; also A. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), in R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner, and W.E. Todd, eds. (Oxford, 1976), I, 346.

¹⁴⁰ J. Tucker, *Selections from his Economic and Political Writings* (New York, 1931), 264.

¹⁴¹ P.J. Corfield, ‘Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain’, *History*, 72 (1987), 38-61.

could allow city dwellers to become attached to even the least outwardly prepossessing places.¹⁴²

Urban streets therefore displayed the ‘full tide of human existence’, in the words of Dr Johnson’s friendly tribute to London’s Charing-Cross.¹⁴³ All manner of events happened in these public places: work and play, love and death. They provided space for philosophic meditation;¹⁴⁴ informal pulpits for outdoor preachers; pillories for petty offenders undergoing public penance; venues for the servants’ annual hiring fairs; and homes for vagrants sleeping rough, although it was rare, in the damp English clime, to find whole families living permanently on the pavements, as happens in some parts of the world.¹⁴⁵

Processions, games, and festivities drew crowds into the streets, which constituted a free and accessible public theatre for all age groups. Incorporated cities had grand civic parades,¹⁴⁶ in which, for example, the mayor of Norwich was accompanied to the cathedral by a splendid snap-dragon, while at Coventry (from 1678 onward) Lady Godiva rode in the annual ‘Grand Show Fair’. Each town had its own cycle of fairs and festivities – including fireworks on 5 November and impromptu rituals on May Day, when country milkmaids, carrying silver, and chimney sweeps, carrying garlands, promenaded to collect money.¹⁴⁷ Some festivals included communal games, which attracted large

¹⁴² There were many songs about specific localities, often expressing both affection and wry criticism in equal measure. Later writers have found community and vitality as well as poverty and problems in unfashionable terrain: see, for example, R. Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester, 1971); and A. Kazin, *A Walker in the City* (London, 1952), on Brownsville, New York.

¹⁴³ Chapman, ed., *Boswell: Life of Johnson*, 608: this comment was made in 1775, after Boswell had praised the animation of Fleet Street.

¹⁴⁴ W. Godwin’s *Enquirer* (London, 1797), who paraded deep in thought, was satirised in E. Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (Bath, 1800), II, 347-8.

¹⁴⁵ In eighteenth-century England, individual vagrants did sometimes sleep in doorways and parks, but even the poorest migrants usually found a roof of some kind, with or without charitable help. An informative contrast is P. Ramachandran, *Pavement Dwellers in Bombay City* (Bombay, c.1972).

¹⁴⁶ P. Borsay, ‘“All the Town’s a Stage”: Urban Ritual and Ceremony, 1660-1800’, in Clark, ed., *Transformation of English Provincial Towns*, 228-58, suggests that indoor civic ritual tended to triumph over outdoor popular festivities in this period, with plebeian society consigned to a spectator role; but it may be queried how many municipal ceremonies had ever been participatory carnivals.

¹⁴⁷ C. Phythian-Adams, ‘Milt and Soot: The Changing Vocabulary of a Popular Ritual in Stuart and Hanoverian London’, in D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe, eds., *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London, 1983), 83-104.

audiences from town and countryside.¹⁴⁸ Famous events were the annual bull-running at Stamford in mid-November and Derby's Shrovetide football match, played in the streets by hundreds of young men.

Large and rowdy gatherings, even of an unarmed populace, caused some magisterial unease. Yet they also affirmed communal identity on public terrain. Municipal leaders were therefore far from invariably hostile to open-air meetings. At contested elections in parliamentary boroughs, for example, little restraint was placed upon partisan crowds at the polling booths, cheering, mobbing, and sometimes throwing stones, while later the victorious candidates were triumphantly 'chaired' before the people, 'like the figure of a pope at a bonfire', wrote Horace Walpole, who hated the experience.¹⁴⁹ On other occasions, too, aggressive crowds were tacitly condoned. In the 1750s, for example, an Anglican magistracy allegedly winked at anti-Methodist brawls'.¹⁵⁰

Communal protest also claimed the streets. That was particularly apparent when grievances escalated into riots. The streets became arenas for milling assemblies of demonstrators, who attacked property and manhandled opponents. These were tense occasions, albeit varying in temper and duration.¹⁵¹ As a challenge to order, riots were quashed – by force, if they did not end spontaneously; but, to clarify the law, magistrates were required publicly to read

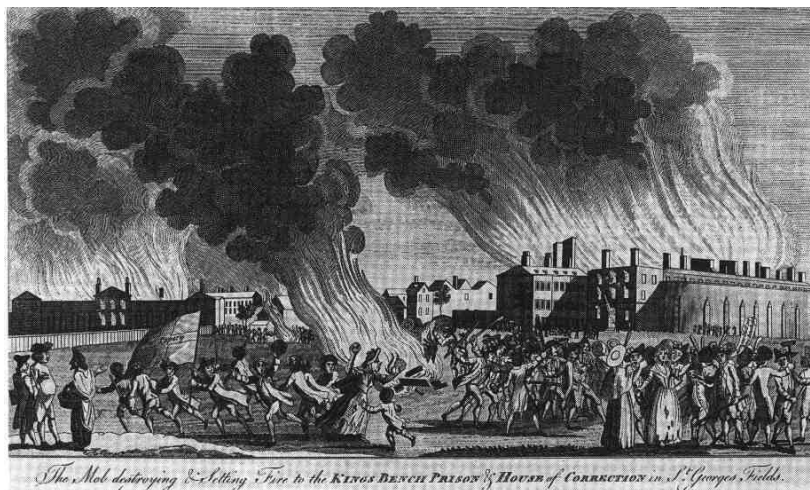
¹⁴⁸ See R.W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850* (Cambridge, 1973), esp. 37, 66-7; and *Victoria County History Warwickshire, VIII: The City of Coventry and the Borough of Warwick* (London, 1969), 219-20.

¹⁴⁹ Lewis, ed., *Walpole, X: Correspondence with George Montagu, II, 1762-70* (New Haven, 1941), 254. But Walpole's father boldly stood up while being 'chaired': see idem, *Walpole, IX: Montagu, I, 1736-61* (New Haven, 1941), 351.

¹⁵⁰ Such claims were difficult to prove, but recurred with sufficient frequency to indicate some contemporary awareness of possible magisterial ambivalence toward street disturbances. For summary discussion, see J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England, 1700-1870* (London, 1979), 30-4.

¹⁵¹ But crowds were not synonymous with riots: see *ibid.*, 5-11, 35-52; and M. Harrison, 'The Ordering of the Urban Environment: Time, Work and the Occurrence of Crowds, 1790-1835', *Past and Present*, 110 (1986), 134-68.

the Riot Act (1715) and then allow rioters an hour to disperse.¹⁵² That could lead to farce. At the Nottingham cheese riot in 1766, a well-thrown cheese knocked out the mayor, while he stood proclaiming his text.¹⁵³ But it indicated official caution at invoking the army against street politicians, especially as it was widely, if wrongly, assumed that troops were not to be used until the act had been read.¹⁵⁴ Most anarchic (but least typical) of civil commotions in this period were London's Gordon Riots in June 1780, when mismanaged anti-Catholic agitation escalated into mayhem and bloodshed – as shown below.¹⁵⁵ But it was not until the mid-1790s that Pitt's government, worried by both French revolution and English radicalism, legislated to curtail rights of public assembly,¹⁵⁶ eventually taming, though not ending, street protest.



¹⁵² Before 1715, riot risked being construed as treason. After the 1715 Act for Preventing Tumults and Riotous Assemblies, known as the Riot Act (1 Geo. I, stat. 2, cap. 5) twelve or more people, rioting in the streets and refusing to disperse within an hour from an official reading of a special proclamation, were liable to the lesser penalties of felony.

¹⁵³ See J.D. Chambers, 'Population Change in a Provincial Town: Nottingham 1700-1800', in L. Pressnell, ed., *Studies in the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1960), 111.

¹⁵⁴ E.N. Williams, ed., *The Eighteenth-Century Constitution: Documents and Commentary* (Cambridge, 1965), 409, 417-20; see also discussion in A. Hayter, *The Army and the Crowd in Mid-Georgian England* (London, 1978), 9-15.

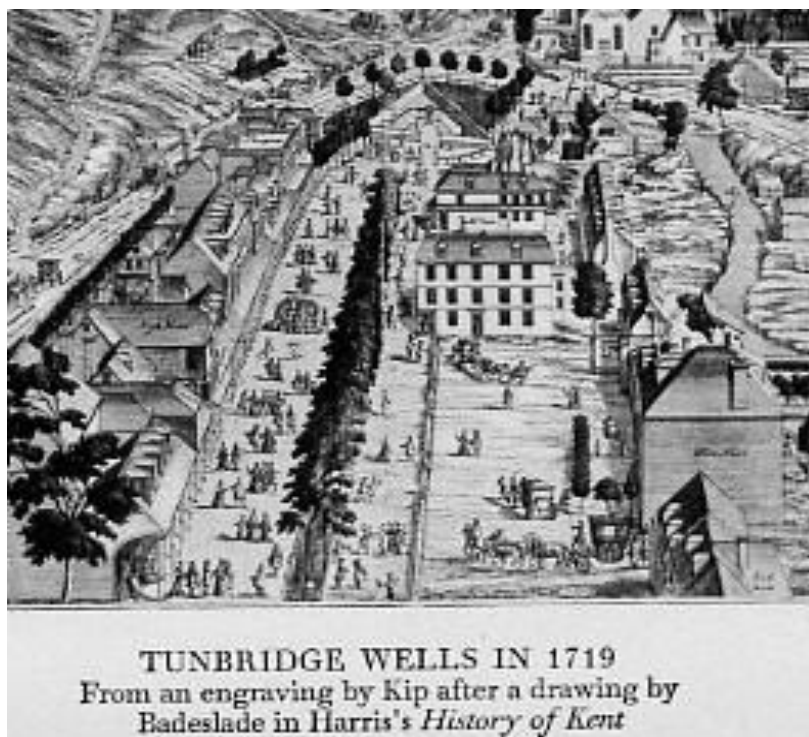
¹⁵⁵ See variously J.P. de Castro, *The Gordon Riots* (London, 1926); Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances*, 76-90; and Hayter, *The Army and the Crowd*, 147-61.

¹⁵⁶ The 1795 Act for the More Effectually Preventing Seditious Meetings and Assemblies (36 Geo. III, cap.8) was one of the two controversial 'Gagging Acts' of that year. It required that prior notice be published of all mass political meetings attended by more than fifty people (other than those convened by public authority), wherever held; and it put their subsequent proceedings under discretionary control of the local magistrates, on penalty of death. The act lapsed in 1800, but its expiration was not well known; and the legal status of mass meetings remained unclear, with further controlling laws in 1817 and 1819: see E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1980), 159-62; and E. Royle and J. Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers, 1760-1848* (Brighton, 1982), 77-9.

ENVOI

Multiple tensions therefore subsisted between hopes for an urban Jerusalem and fears of an equally urban Babylon. For William Blake, transfigured city dweller, the cry of the chimney sweep and the curse of the ‘youthful harlot’ spoke of searing bitterness amid the street bustle.¹⁵⁷ Yet from that came also social creativity and intense experience. Advocates of city life did not have to deny its problems. Rather, they admired its mass energy, engagement, and responsiveness, creating hopes of civic transformation. It had a kaleidoscopic appeal, as people walked about the streets, their eyes open and senses alert, at once onlookers and agents in the unfolding epic of modern times:¹⁵⁸

*O ye associate Walkers, O my Friends,
Upon your State what Happiness attends!*



¹⁵⁷ W. Blake, ‘London’ from his ‘Songs of Experience’, in *The Complete Poems*, eds, D.W.H. Stevenson and D.V. Erdman (London, 1971), 154, 214-15. The commingling of vision and specificity in Blake’s urban imagery has a disturbing resonance. See *ibid.*, 619-20, for map of Blake’s London; and for his presence, as a young man, in the Gordon Riots: see D.V. Erdman, *Blake – Prophet against Empire: A Poet’s Interpretation of his own Times* (Princeton, 1977), 7-9.

¹⁵⁸ Dearing, ed., *John Gay*, I, 157.

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