THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Penelope J. Corfield, 'The Georgian Town: New Perspectives', *Life in the Georgian Town*, Georgian Group Symposium, 1985, pp. 7–14,

TEXT © THE AUTHORS 1985

THE GEORGIAN TOWN: NEW PERSPECTIVES[1]

Penelope J. Corfield

SATIRE AND LAUGHTER WERE MUCH IN EVIDENCE in eighteenth-century towns. It was a period of growth, expansionism, crowds, dynamism — and such experience prompted raillery as well as exuberance. Under the apparently placid exterior of constitutional traditionalism were many changes in Georgian England, including a notable growth of towns.[2]

That provided the stimulus for the emergence of a vivid and challenging urban culture. Town residents were prepared to laugh knowingly not only at ministers and kings but also at themselves and the 'follies of the day'. Satire indeed was an intensely urban form of communication, depending upon a certain receptiveness among its audience, an alertness to multiple messages, a readiness to share the joke. The towns furthermore provided key markets for the prints, ballads, broadsheets, and pamphlets that were produced in such abundance in the eighteenth century.[3]

Urban societies were dynamic but emphatically not complacent. Considerable satire was directed at the towns themselves, just as some of the most probing critiques of their problems were produced from within the towns themselves. William Hogarth's celebrated print of *Gin Lane* (Figure 1) fell within that tradition. It contained a searing depiction of an urban environment of universal drink, dissipation, death and destruction, where only Kilman the Distiller and Gripe the Pawnbroker flourished. The print was produced as part of a campaign to license and regulate the sale of spiritous liquor, and reform promptly followed, with the Gin Act of 1751.[4] Yet Hogarth's imagery lived on after the immediate issue at stake, contributing powerfully to the perennial mythology of the town as Babylon, a place of endless fascination and endless danger.

Many other sources echoed this theme. A mass of literature was produced, warning newcomers against the tricks and dangers of town life. These texts had titles like *Villainy Unmasked* (1752), *The Cheats . . . Exposed* (?1770), and the *Stranger's Safeguard; Or, Frauds . . . Detected* (1802). They make lurid, not to say eye-opening, reading, as the devices of card-sharpers, thimble-riggers, gamesters, guinea-droppers, duffers, cut-purses, bawds, and a variety of urban con-men and -women stand revealed.

Yet, very notably, such warnings had little effect in curbing the regular flow of country migrants into the towns. On the contrary, eighteenth-century England was a society on the move, and the destination for many was an urban one. Migration patterns were undoubtedly influenced by change in the countryside, but they were powerfully affected by the attractions of the towns, which were seen as places of employment, adventure, social contacts, opportunity, and civility. The urban 'bright lights' and the streets paved with gold had their own mythic elements, but they constituted a potent lure, especially in a traditional rural society.

The towns were therefore viewed by many in positive terms. Not all sighed for the tranquillity and calm of country life. On the contrary, the pro-town tradition in Georgian England was a strong and growing one.[5] That too was depicted by Hogarth, in the genial print of *Beer Street*, which was produced as a deliberate contrast to the horrors of Gin Lane (Figure 2). Here the positive, indeed, the jolly side of urban life was stressed. Houses were

FIGURE 1. Hogarth's celebrated print of *Gin Lane* was produced in 1751 as contribution to the campaign to regulate and control the sale of cheap spirits; but it also summed up one archetypal image of the city. Death, dissipation, and degradation were everywhere to be seen, and urban energy seemed merely destructive.

FIGURE 2. Hogarth's counterpart to Gin Lane was *Beer Street* (1751), extolling the merits of British beer; and the positive aspects both of drink and urbanism. As Hogarth recorded 'Here all is joyous and thriveing: Industry and Jollity go hand in hand'. The vitality and diversity of the town were indentified as creative forces.

constructed, trade flourished, traffic teemed, streets were paved, songs sung, and much beer drunk. Only the house of the pawnbroker was delapidated and without custom; and even he was allowed a tankard of British beer.

Reform of urban problems was possible, therefore, without necessarily being anti-town. A close reading of much of the warning literature in fact reveals a marked degree of ambivalence. The town as Babylon was indeed denounced, yet there was considerable emphasis upon its countervailing attractions. The meeting of many people, the babble of many tongues, was not necessarily an unwelcome or undesirable experience. Often, the allegedly anti-town tracts in the eighteenth century expressed instead an uneasy mixture of response. Listen to *Hell-upon-Earth* (1729): its title was entirely hostile, urban society was the secular location of the bottomless pit, and the visitor there risked encountering at the very least 'Accidents, Aggravations, Agonies, Animosities, and Arrests'. And yet: it also adumbrated 'Adventures, Admirations, Amours, Assemblies, and Assignations', in a bravura piece of writing, where everything in the multiform town began with an 'A'. This was a *jeu d'esprit*, of course, not a serious social study, but it expressed a sense of adventure as well as misadventure, of enjoyment as well as hazard.

Between them, these writings furthermore expressed a considerable respect for the power of the modern city, and the vitality of its citizenry.Urbanization has proved historically a compelling phenomenon.[6] The sheer size, complexity, and diversity of town life — its collective scale and volume in modern times — has had profound implications. With its

overlapping, interlocking complexities, its association with light, power, movement and mass, the city was a major force for change.

In eighteenth-century England, most towns, other than the huge metropolis, were individually fairly small (certainly so by modern standards). Yet they were, of course, located in a much smaller total population — and, most significantly, the towns were now growing rapidly in size and numbers.[7] From about the 1680s, a sustained process of urbanization was apparent, making England by 1801 one of the most densely urbanized areas in the world. It was matched only by the Dutch Republic, but there the process of town growth was slowing down rather than accelerating.

These developments did not pass unchronicled. In 1690, John Adams published a comprehensive *Index Villaris*, giving an 'exact Register, alphabetically digested' of the cities and market towns, significantly putting them beside a 'perfect Catalogue' of the residential seats of the nobility and gentry. Many other listings and local enumerations followed. Throughout the century, as many as one in ten people in England and Wales lived in the capital city, while many others had visited it at some time in their lives. By 1801 'Londinopolis' was one of the largest conurbations in the world, considerably outstripping in population the leading capitals of continental Europe, such as Paris, Rome, and Madrid.[8] Meanwhile, the number and size of the provincial towns were also expanding, so that, by the end of the eighteenth century, virtually one out of every three people was a town resident. 'The country is everywhere deserted', cried a melodramatic observer in 1766, untruthfully but pointedly.

Dynamic expansion engendered an urban confidence, that was widely felt. 'When the word Birmingham occurs, a superb picture instantly expands in the mind', wrote an enthusiast in 1781, 'which is best explained by the other words: grand, populous, extensive, active, commercial — and humane'. He was not trying to show off an urban sense of humour, but expressing his deep convictions. Consider his famous account of his first arrival in that town, as a young eighteen-year-old migrant:

> I was much surprised at the place, but more at the people. They were a species I had never seen. They possessed a vivacity I had never beheld: I had been among dreamers, but now I saw men awake; their very step along the street showed alacrity.[9]

The urban centre, of which this was written, had at the time probably no more than twenty thousand inhabitants. Yet even that number of people, living in a compact, nucleated, bustling centre, had a distinctive identity, that made a dramatic impression within the sparsely populated countryside of Georgian England.

No wonder then that many rural residents were constantly agitating to get to town, either to stay or to visit. There were certainly those who preferred life in the countryside, then as now. But in the eighteenth century there was, equally clearly, a sizeable lobby who enjoyed the stimulus of town society. 'I have no relish for the country', sighed a worldly parson, who could not find an urban ministry: 'It is a kind of healthy grave'. Others talked of rustic life as a state of hibernation, or as the equivalent of sleeping with one's eyes open.[10]

Women were particularly conspicuous in the townwards move. Country life was very much more of a male preserve, dominated by male values and masculine entertainments. In towns, by contrast, social networks were more pluralist and diversified, although they were by no means havens of matriarchy. The many references to women's eagerness to get to town may have been at times exaggerated, but they reported an important trend. An irascible John Byng in 1789 found no Duchess to greet him on his country tour. She was instead in town, 'lost in the Confusion of Dresses and Perfume: Countess or Courtezan, all alike', he snorted.[11] Young country girls also travelled to go into service in urban households, or to find yet more hazardous urban adventures. The net result was that virtually all Georgian towns, whatever their size or economic function, housed a majority of women among their resident population.

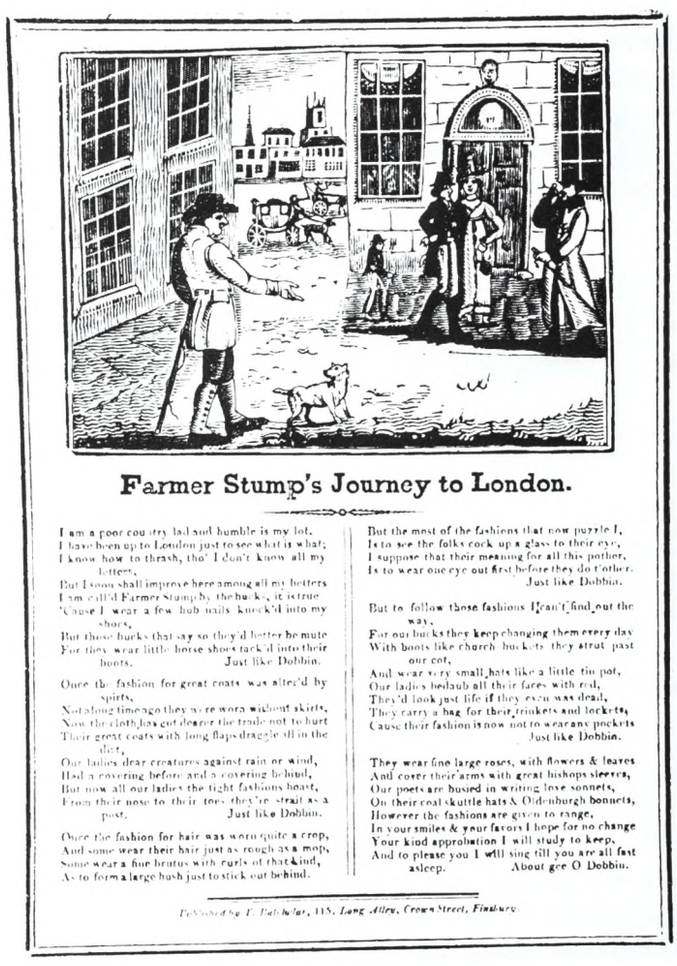
Urban vitality and diversity attracted many visitors as well as permanent migrants. The influence of the new city culture was therefore diffused beyond its own immediate environs, as people circulated through the busy streets: 'the comers and the goers face to face', in Wordsworth's graphic phrase. If one in three people lived in towns at the end of the eighteenth century, a higher proportion still had visited town at some time or other in their lives. The trip to market was the most universal occasion. A journey to see the town sights — or to attend a fair, show or entertainment — was another popular event. Economic and social needs alike brought people to town.

New styles, fashions, and information on the topics of the day were thereby put into brisk circulation. Many songs and ballads reported, only half jokingly, the visit to town as an educational experience.

> I am a poor country lad, and humble is my lot —
> I have been up to London, just to see what is what;
> I know how to thrash, tho' I don't know all my letters,
> But I soon shall improve here among all my betters,

recited *Farmer Stump's Journey to London* (Figure 3). The same themes were sung of many provincial towns, both large and small. City wits enjoyed satirizing the allegedly dim-witted and slow-moving rustics. Another ballad rejoiced that sophisticated town society had taught their country visitors:

> Important matters, dark and deep,
> That woke them from their rural sleep.



Farmer Stump's Journey to London.

I am a poor country lad and humble is my lot,
I have been up to London just to see what is what;
I know how to thrash, tho' I don't know all my letters,
But I soon shall improve here among all my betters
I am call'd Farmer Stump by the bucks, it is true
'Cause I wear a few hob nails knock'd into my shoes,
But those bucks that say so they'd better be mute
For they wear little horse shoes tack'd into their boots. Just like Dobbin.

Once the fashion for great coats was alter'd by spirts,
Not a long time ago they were worn without skirts,
Now the cloth has got dearer the trade not to hurt
Their great coats with long flaps draggle till in the dirt,
Our ladies dear creatures against rain or wind,
Had a covering before and a covering behind,
But now all our ladies the tight fashions boast,
From their nose to their toes they're strait as a post. Just like Dobbin.

Once the fashion for hair was worn quite a crop,
And some wear their hair just as rough as a mop,
Some wear a fine brutus with curls of that kind,
As to form a large bush just to stick out behind.

But the most of the fashions that now puzzle I,
Is to see the folks cock up a glass to their eye,
I suppose that their meaning for all this pother,
Is to wear one eye out first before they do t'other.
Just like Dobbin.

But to follow those fashions I can't find out the way,
For our bucks they keep changing them every day
With boots like church buckets they strut past our cot,
And wear very small hats like a little tin pot,
Our ladies bedaub all their faces with red,
They'd look just like if they even was dead,
They carry a bag for their trinkets and lockets,
Cause their fashion is now not to wear any pockets
Just like Dobbin.

They wear fine large roses, with flowers & leaves
And cover their arms with great bishops sleeves,
Our poets are busied in writing love sonnets,
On their coal skuttle hats & Oldenburgh bonnets,
However the fashions are given to range,
In your smiles & your favors I hope for no change
Your kind approbation I will study to keep,
And to please you I will sing till you are all fast asleep. About gee O Dobbin.

Published by T. Batchelar, 115, Long Alley, Crown Street, Finsbury.

FIGURE 3.
This ballad was typical of many, celebrating the sophisticated delights of town (as shown by smart town housing, busy streets, and fashionable dress) and satirizing the country bumpkins for their clumsy attempts to imitate town styles.

Whatever the urban hankering for 'nature' and a pastoral simplicity, there was very little urban enthusiasm for the ordinary inhabitants of rural England (below the rank of the peerage). The country people were termed: 'bumpkins', 'boobies', 'clowns' and 'rustics'. They were depicted as simpletons, naïvely impressed with urban sophistication, and readily imposed upon by city slickers. Even the lesser gentry from out of town were objects of amusement, like Sheridan's archetypal Bob Acres, endlessly bemused at the transition from Clod Hall to the great resort city of Bath.[12] 'For many years a *country squire* has been an object of ridicule: but why?' wailed a worried traditionalist in 1766.

As well as their social and cultural appeal, the towns also constituted a growing source of economic power and diversity within eighteenth-century England. That also strengthened their confidence and sense of dynamism. Land was no longer the sole, or even main, source of wealth or status. The burgeoning towns were expanding as centres of commerce, finance, industry, overseas trade, defence (the dockyard towns) and entertainment, in the form of both inland spas and seaside resorts. London as metropolis was matched by scores of 'little Londons' across the country. And as the urban population grew, so did the diversification and specialization of urban economic life.

Whenever 'luxury' was discussed or denounced,[13] it is noticeable that it was often nervously associated with the growing wealth and consumerism of the towns. Similarly, the 'monied interest', that was challenging the traditional claims of landed society, was closely associated with the very urban bankers, brokers, merchants, and financiers.

> We are a Species of Gentry that have grown in the World this last Century, and are as honourable and almost as useful as you landed Folks, that have always thought yourselves so much above us; for your trading — forsooth — has extended no farther than a Load of Hay or a fat Ox,

declared one fictional tradesman, with evident sarcasm. His remarks, of course, greatly underestimated agrarian commercialism, but showed a willingness to challenge the traditional social order. Other urban groups were sharing this social confidence. Artisans and craftsmen prided themselves on their skills and importance; and the newly-named 'middle class' (the term can be found from the 1750s) were articulate about their claims to status. Indeed, a number used the title of 'gentleman', even while practising a trade. In 1777, one anonymous author, who called himself the 'Laughing Philosopher', asserted firmly that true status was based upon morality and not at all upon birth. By way of historic proof, he instanced Henry VIII, who was undeniably a king but 'not a gentleman'.

Society at the great spas and resorts particularly exemplified the heady fusion of new wealth and new values within the ambit of traditional England. These places were notable show-cases for the confidence and attractions of the urban culture. People crowded there both for their medical services and for entertainment. As leisure was commercialized,[14] so it became urbanized, for both patrons and audiences were to be found in towns. Gentry families resided in the resorts for the 'season', while increasingly the new middle class joined the throng. All met under the social tutelage of a Master of Ceremonies, who endeavoured to inculcate an urban 'civility'. The attractions of the resorts was such that many travelled to Bath or Scarborough, who would not normally frequent the specialist manufacturing centres like Halifax or Sheffield, or working ports like Hull or Whitehaven.

Access to any town, however, was sufficient to gain access to a vibrant network of news, gossip, discussion, and ideas. Just as urban centres circulated goods and services, so they were nodal points for the dissemination of information. A characteristic townee's greeting was: 'What's news?' and the town streets abounded with means of communication. Papers, pamphlets, ballads, prints, cartoons, broadsheets, all were plentifully on sale (Figure 4). Messages also were chalked on walls and scratched on glass windows. One illiterate urchin had — allegedly — learnt to read by studying the very urban graffiti, although that might

FIGURE 4.
Walton's *Pretty Maid buying a Love Song*, painted in 1778, caught with limpid directness a classic street scene. An array of ballads, songsheets, pamphlets, and handbills were on sale in town, and were purchased by both men and women. Details of clothing — and the state of the paving stones — are shown with detailed care.

have left him with a rather restricted vocabulary and syntax. Meanwhile, for those who did not either have or gain access to the written culture, there were multiple visual signals. Shops and inns hung out elaborate signboards, and tradesmen the traditional symbols of their trade: the striped pole of the barber, the three golden balls of the pawnbroker, and a flagon to advertise the sale of spirits.

Literacy and education were particularly associated with the towns. Schooling and instruction were among the key consumer services that they had on offer, and their own functioning increasingly encouraged the spread of formal learning and the acquisition of specialist skills in communication. The book trade was itself, of course, an urban trade. At the same time, the many and diversifying clubs, debating societies, libraries, and learned institutions were located in towns, which provided membership, venues, and a favourable cultural context. Of course, some of those getting books from urban libraries, or visiting urban debating societies, were country residents. Yet that indicates the extent to which the pluralist towns were becoming the new social foci — rather than simply the court or the grand nobleman's residences. A 'town education' was a generic term for social polish. It referred to much more than schooling. Fielding's Tom Jones was bashful in his youth, 'a misfortune which can be cured only by that early town education that is at present so much in fashion' (1749). Fanny Burney's Evelina was, before coming to town, 'quite a little rustic; and knows nothing of the world' (1778). Both learnt quickly, once embarked upon the urban odyssey.

There were, at the same time, contradictory and unwelcome lessons to be learnt in towns. A walk in the city streets could be hazardous. Crowded places, where conspicuous consumer goods were publicly on display, were vulnerable to endemic levels of petty theft, as

the adroit fingers of pickpockets purloined watches, purses, snuff boxes, silk handkerchiefs, and even wigs. It would be erroneous therefore to assume that towns were entirely tranquil and orderly places, with nothing in mind but discussion of new ideas and progressive education. On the other hand, their societies were clearly more complex than the lurid 'Hells-upon-Earth' of hostile myth.

In fact, it took quite a complex level of organization and trust to enable towns to function at all. People depended upon a degree of security, to move daily among strangers; but that did not remove all hazards. While pickpocketing was endemic, however, levels of casual interpersonal violence seem to have been fairly low.[15] Certainly, despite occasional scares, there was no halt to the movement of population to towns, and, once there, citizens and constables did not carry the firearms that were plentifully made for military and export markets in eighteenth-century Birmingham.

Freedom to move around the streets in relative safety encouraged the favourite urban pastime of walking abroad 'to see and be seen', as the famous phrase put it. As well as the fashionable promenades where polite society sallied forth, there were many informal meeting-places in town for other social groups. All were keenly aware of the importance of externals, of dress and accoutrements.[16] In pluralist societies, where people were not instantly known by their birth, parentage, and background, there was considerable scope for social role playing.

Towns were therefore places of fashion, dress, and disguise. 'The present rage of imitating the manners of High Life hath spread itself so far among the gentlefolks of Lower Life, that in a few years we shall probably have no common folks at all', complained the *British Magazine* in 1763, although on close inspection social differentials had vanished less completely than this author feared. The circulation of new styles grew ever more rapid as the urban populations hastened to adopt the latest fashions. It led to complaints of their frivolity and reliance upon externals. 'So minutely and absurdly do we adopt the humours of the time, that we rise by Fashion, sleep by Fashion, eat by Fashion, drink by Fashion, go to the skies by Fashion [a reference to the new pastime of ballooning] or by Fashion go to the Devil', scoffed yet another acerbic onlooker.

Georgian town residents had therefore to remain constantly alert, ready to see the sights, absorb the news of the day, and negotiate the hazards of an emergent mass society. They lived, after all, at the heart of an expansionist trading empire, and had to encompass much change and diversification. John Locke in the 1690s paid the town populations the compliment of being more 'civil and rational' than the 'untaught irrational denizens' of woodland and forests. Later, and from a rather different perspective, Karl Marx preferred an urban liveliness to the 'idiocy of rural life'. In fact, country society was much less immobile than they implied; but the advent of urbanization on a sizeable scale represented a yet more potent force for long-term change.

A stereotyped view of eighteenth-century England, as a place where an obsequious peasantry stood constantly doffing hats to a complacent squirearchy, cannot therefore be sustained, in view of the dynamism and importance of the towns. Their irreverence and pluralism — whether in religion, dress, manners, morals, or political allegiance — was often denounced, yet thereby implicitly acknowledged. Interpretations of this period, derived ultimately from Namier's influential emphasis upon the 'few', need to be put into the broader context of the diversified 'many'.[17]

Into the traditional world of landowning society, there now came the troubling presence and compelling claims of the towns. And, with them, came satire and a confident self-mockery. Merriment signalled the momentum of change. Let the 'Laughing Philosopher' have the last laugh. Georgian towns were venues for an alliterative catalogue of: 'whim and wickedness; folly and fornication; disease and dissipation; riches and roguery; pleasantry and

poverty; humour and humbug; pantomime and patriotism'. Everything was there to be seen, experienced and enjoyed. In sum, the mighty city was 'the finest laughing theme of the great world'.

REFERENCES

1. Abridged text: It has not proved possible to reproduce all the slides that accompanied this lecture, but information about illustrative material is available from the author, c/o Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, Egham, Surrey.
2. P. J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700–1800* (Oxford University Press, 1982).
3. Much interesting material is contained in H. M. Atherton, *Political Prints in the Age of Hogarth: A Study of the Ideographic Representation of Politics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974).
4. For a brief account of this campaign, see M. D. George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1926; Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 42–50. The legislation marked a success for urban reformers, in face of determined opposition from the distillers and from some of the landed interest, who faced glutted grain markets in the early eighteenth century and therefore wished to encourage sales to distilleries.
5. See R. Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, Paladin, 1975), for a discussion of the pro- and anti-town traditions, albeit one that (in my view) underestimates the growing influence of pro-urbanism.
6. It has also proved (hitherto) irreversible. A brief survey of world urbanization is available in E. Jones, *Towns and Cities* (Oxford University Press, 1966); and a classic and controversial discussion of the general theme, in L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (1961; Pelican Books, 1966).
7. Further details of England's eighteenth-century urban growth are provided in Corfield, op. cit., pp. 1–16.
8. 'Greater' London including the built-up conurbation contained something near to 900,000 or 1 million inhabitants in 1801, compared with Paris (600,000), Vienna (230,000), Amsterdam (220,000), Madrid (200,000) or Rome (170,000): J. de Vries, *European Urbanisation, 1500–1800* (London, Methuen, 1984), pp. 270–78.
9. W. Hutton, *An History of Birmingham* (first published 1781; revised edn, 1819), pp. 28, 92. This view was, of course, not universally held. Contrast, for example, Austen's pretentious Mrs Elton, who declared, 'One has not great hopes from Birmingham. I always say there is something direful in the sound': J. Austen, *Emma: A Novel* (1816; in Penguin edn, 1969), p. 310.
10. For a fully-documented discussion of this theme, see P. J. Corfield, 'Walking the City Streets: Social Role and Social Identification', in E. Weber (ed.), *People in Towns* (University of California Press, forthcoming).
11. C. B. Andrews (ed.), *The Torrington Diaries: Containing the Tours through England and Wales of the Hon. John Byng (later Fifth Viscount Torrington)*, IV (London, 1938), pp. 106–07.
12. R. B. Sheridan, *The Rivals* (1775; in New Mermaid edn, 1979).
13. See for example J. Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to Smollett* (London and Baltimore, 1977).
14. See especially J. H. Plumb, 'The Commercialisation of Leisure' in N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, Europa Publications, 1982), pp. 265–85.
15. There is scope for much more research into patterns of urban criminality and law enforcement in the eighteenth century. A general introduction to sources and problems is contained in J. S. Cockburn (ed.), *Crime in England, 1550–1800* (London, Methuen, 1977).
16. Two essential surveys are C. W. and P. Cunnington, *Handbook of Eighteenth-Century English Costume* (London, 1957) and A. Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, Batsford, 1979); and see N. McKendrick, 'The Commercialisation of Fashion', in McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, op. cit., pp. 34–99.
17. Contrast the general approach in L. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 2 vols, 1929) with more recent interpretations such as J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge University Press, 1976) and J. Cannon (ed.), *The Whig Ascendancy: Colloquies on Hanoverian England* (London, Arnold, 1981).