

4. Manifestations of Class in the 18th & 19th Centuries

Who Owned Britain

Great landowning families dominated the political scene, nationally and locally. A land survey was carried out in 1873, the first since the Domesday Book of 1066. This was at the request of the Earl of Derby, keen to refute that Britain was owned by 30,000 people only. With the exclusion of London the survey revealed that 80% of all land was owned by 700 aristocrats.

At the top, just below the Royal elite, were the great titled families, grandees of vast estates, often in several counties. Perched beneath were major aristocrats with holdings of between 50 and 100 square miles. Squatting on a secure ledge below were the titled and untitled with land holdings of 10,000 acres or more. The bottom rung was precariously occupied by those with at least 1,000 acres, the minimum any self-respecting gentleman required to maintain his privileged lifestyle.

Bankers, industrialists and brewers were by now members of the landed elite. Financiers with the greatest wealth, were the most prominent, such as Samuel Hoare at Stourhead, Barings in Hampshire and the Rothschilds with distinguished properties in Buckinghamshire, and Samuel James Lloyd who invested over £1.6m on land between 1823 and 1883. Industrialists with smaller fortunes also acquired extensive land holdings. Sir John Guest, Dowlais Ironworks' magnate, purchased the Canford Estate near Poole in Dorset whilst the Heathcote family, lace manufacturers in Tiverton, acquired 5,000 acres in the county of Devon - and inventor and industrialist William Armstrong who purchased Craggside. More industrialists joined in with no fewer than 39 cotton magnates by the 1870s, each with more than 1,000 acres, joined later by Lord Ashton, otherwise known as Lord Linoleum of Lancaster.

Symptoms of Aristocratic Government

For Eton and classics educated 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, life was on a grand scale. Summer garden parties, elaborate and glittering dances, extravagant dinners and leisurely weekends typified. So did shooting parties. At Hatfield House, white-gloved footmen in distinctive blue and silver edged livery, maids in white caps and black uniforms, a housekeeper, a steward and a host of estate staff tending 1,500 acres, dairy, tennis court, stables, cricket ground, billiard room and chapel – all ensured the Salisbury family were well looked after and guests too. Life at Hatfield had its quieter moments too as the family whizzed off to a town house in Piccadilly, Cranborne Manor in Dorset or Dieppe for carefree holidays at 'Chateau Cecil,' their cliff-top house.

Greatly affected by the bullying and sadism of Eton, Salisbury was determined not to impose such a repressive regime on his own children, a view shared by Lady Salisbury. She insisted, "children could be as noisy, as dirty, as objectionable as nature had made them, without fear of criticism." This liberal approach to education and life extended to a cavalier approach to domestic hygiene, in contrast to the grandeur of Hatfield and staid image of order, neatness and efficiency. An apocryphal tale is of a portly Lord Salisbury fast asleep, blissfully unaware several rats had taken refuge in his bed. On waking, he noticed they were all dead, having suffocated during the night.

Salisbury succeeded on the world platform, protecting British interests and preserving peace but not social advance at home. Gradual, incremental and consensual change was considered only if harmless and absolutely necessary. Empirical benefits had to be stated. Clement Atlee

much admired Salisbury but many did not. The Morning Post called him the Prime Minister of despair and the Times Literary Supplement described him as 'strange, profound, aloof and unlovable,' adding he had a "slightly brutal streak in his character." An associate once said, "He never in his life said a flattering thing without adding a pin-prick."

For historian Andrew Roberts, the Marquess of Salisbury was "the last grand aristocratic figure of a political system that died with Victoria." Deeply held convictions, not necessarily based on rational logic, such as denying women the vote and being anti-Catholic, could be said of other aristocrats too. Arthur Balfour succeeded him, inviting a quip from Lord Rosebery that seldom had such talent been imbued in one family. Aristocratic government came to a juddering halt in the Liberal landslide victory of 1906.

Unpicking the Social Divide

The young academic and historian, R.H. Tawney asserted in 1912, "there has rarely been a period when the existing social order was regarded with such dissatisfaction by so many intelligent and respectable citizens." He may have alluded to the division between capital and labour, struggle for voting equality, especially for women, efforts of Sidney and Beatrice Webb for a fairer society, end of aristocratic rule, demise of the country house, rise of the Liberal and Labour parties, huge expansion of professions and varying gradations of middle classes.

In *England After War*, a sequel to his 1909 study, C.F.G. Masterman opted for 'aristocracy', 'middle-class' and 'workmen' or 'feudalism', 'bourgeoisie', and 'workmen.' He had to admit the classifications were blurred post war with many ex-officers returning to find no work, or only menial jobs. A decade later in *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley thought society was evolving into meritocratic and material, classified into 'clever' professional 'alphas', obedient executive 'betas' and hard-working 'gammas.' A later study in 1936, *The Condition of Britain* by G.D.H. & Margaret Cole simply divided the social order into 'rich, comfortable and poor.' It overcame gradations of wealthy upper classes and wealthy upper middle classes, now combined into the classification of rich.

This manifested itself in the honours system too with the rich, powerful and famous getting knighthoods, those beneath becoming commanders and those at the bottom, officers and members, with award of an OBE and MBE. Here were hierarchical honours for a society that was hierarchical, reinforced and accepted by the recognition system. "Despite the decline of the aristocracy," said Richard H. Tawney, "the cult of inequality" remained as strong as ever, affected by wealth, birth, position and circumstance.

Most attention focused on the middle. A.J.P. Taylor felt "the middle classes set the standards of the community" and "were its conscience and did its routine work." As with the Edwardian era this middle strata continued to expand. George Orwell noted "the upward and downward extension of the middle class: managers, salesmen, engineers, chemists and technicians of all kinds" and the "professional class of doctors, lawyers and teachers etc." Orwell concluded the tendency of advanced capitalism has been to enlarge the middle class and not to wipe it out. He had a point as those in the professions rose substantially with lawyers, accountants and medical services to the fore.

Negative stereotyping came from within the middle classes too. Arnold Bennett in *Riceman Steps* (1932) explored lower middle class meanness whilst George Orwell, from a higher social stratum, concluded middle classes were unimaginative and callous. These themes resonate in his "A Clergyman's Daughter" (1935), *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and "Coming Up for Air

(1939). Stereotyping also applied to a fledgling Communist Party in their views of society and the opinions of those looking in who saw it as a threat, only rivalled by fascism. In late 1920 the Party merged with the Worker's Socialist Federation led by Sylvia Pankhurst, and ultra left of the Labour Party. Not only was there solidarity with British workers but with 'exploited people' of the British Empire.

A.M. Carr-Saunders & D. Caradog Jones examination of the Social Structure of England (1927) revealed no upper class. It was they said, "a mistake to speak of class divisions and class distinctions today." A decade later they were of the same opinion, citing dress, speech and use of leisure. J.B. Priestley shared these views. In housing, transport, morals, leisure and dress, society was becoming more homogenous, and 'without privilege.' Probing deeper, differences did exist at each end of the spectrum, especially for the mass at the lower end, affected by lack of wealth, disposable income and status - and by their social environment.

It is helpful to broaden considerably David Carradine's interpretation on class between the wars and examine it from other dimensions. Of great importance is not only perceptions of class but the actuality and practical effects, influenced too by opportunity, or lack of it, and social mobility. The three Es of entrepreneurship, the 'establishment' and education amply illustrate. Then there are occupations to consider including access, any entry pre-requisites, training, qualifications, old-boy networks, memberships, progression routes and so on. All these would impact on aspiration, achievement and quality of life.

Notable was the limited existence of formal apprenticeships and lack of work-based training so evident in Germany. Thanks to Lit & Phil Societies, Workers Educational Association and night schools there was some attempt to equip working people with knowledge and skills but such efforts came largely from the voluntary sector, not the state.

No single definition exists of 'the establishment,' that conveys a shadowy organisation, yet the connections are both formal and loose. Constituents include government, parliament, press, the monarchy, judiciary and church. At first sight it appears classless. A skim through reveals widely differing educational backgrounds, types of occupation and seniority. These in turn do involve a form of hierarchy through power and influence. All members appear equal but it is clear some are more equal than others, especially those attending Eton and Harrow in the premier league, rather than minor public or private schools or 'grammars' in the state sector.

The desire of George Orwell was the spread of socialism and his greatest fear fascism. In *The Road To Wigan Pier*, Orwell insists we need less class consciousness, expropriation, bourgeois ideology and proletarian solidarity, not to mention the trio of thesis, antithesis and synthesis and more about justice, liberty and the plight of the exploited and unemployed. At the heart is common decency. United against fascism, he hoped class prejudice will fade away.

His hope too was of a sinking of the middle classes into an amorphous mass of working class from teachers, journalists, jobless Cambridge graduate, clerks and civil servants, commercial travellers and thrice-bankrupt drapers. "All we have to lose is dropping our aitches." Orwell would have to wait until 1945 for a Labour government and action on the Beveridge that would the "five giants" of idleness, ignorance, disease, squalor and want.

Discrimination and Bias in Education

In 1916 Sir John Gorst, Conservative Vice-President of the Committee on Education, stated that school boards had merely dabbled in education, damaging financially insecure grammar schools in the process. Balfour chimed in to say 'intolerable strain' had been placed on the

voluntary sector that included denominational schools, but some felt that increased religious teaching was detrimental. As with the Marquess of Salisbury, Robert Lowe and others in the Victorian era, believed further education of 'lower classes' would imperil social order. Taxing minds was the purpose in raising the school leaving age beyond 12. In Europe, many schools focused on engineering and science, practical subjects downplayed in the British model, "the one preferred by gentlemen."

Many children continued to be educated in a 'senior section' of elementary schools until the age of 12. In 1917, a "school certificate' and 'higher school certificate' were introduced, the forerunner of GCE O' Levels and A Levels, pre-requisites for university entrance. Four types of secondary school existed: endowed grammar school, 'central schools' with a less academic emphasis, a county or municipal school under a local education authority (LEA) and legacy of the elementary school, with connotations of just marking time.

By 1919 nearly 30% of children had free places, helped in part by the TUC and others saying the system was unfair, if not 'rotten,' and by pioneering initiatives with the Bradford Charter insisting on secondary education for all to the age of 16.

In the 1918 Act bearing his name, Herbert Fisher proposed raising the school leaving age to 14 with more practical instruction for 'older and more intelligent children.' In 1920 there were almost six million children in public elementary schools with just 961 grant-aided secondary schools in England with 246,000 pupils of which nearly 73,000 had free places, about 1.2%. The Act was well-intentioned, idealistic but unrealistic, falling victim also to the Geddes Axe of 1921 and the inability or unwillingness of LEAs to pool thinking and resources.

Raising the school leaving age was to come into operation on 1 January 1921 but just 25 days before, on 7 December 1920, the date was postponed and idea of part-time education beyond 14 dropped for economic reasons Under Labour, the leaving age was finally raised to 14 in October 1922 but funding remained an issue with class sizes up to 50. The proportion of free places in secondary schools was to rise to 40%.

'Selection by differentiation' was to involve a written examination, supplemented by an oral one with psychological tests in borderline cases. Staffing of non-selective schools was to be on par with grammar schools and focus on practical work related to 'living interests.' Leaving at 15 was recommended. A further report argued for more money for books and the setting up of school libraries. Yet more cuts were made to education budgets in the years to 1929. Lord Eustace Percy, President of the Board of Education, observed in his autobiography that elementary education beyond 11 amounted to "finishing schools for young workers" and that "class education of this kind was coming to be increasingly suspected and resented."

The ceiling of 25% in selective places remained whilst the 75% majority languished in senior elementary schools whose courses led to no qualifications. Opposition to schooling beyond 14 came from industry, insisting "only a minority were mentally capable of benefiting." At least free places in grammar schools doubled between 1920 and 1932 to almost 50%, on the basis the brightest were worth spending money on. The catch was scholarship entry depended on "the quality of the social and economic environment" - the poorer the district the lower the success rate. One child in ten in an elementary school received a formal secondary education at 11. This compared to twice as many in Germany, over twice in France and three times in Switzerland. In the USA almost all pupils were given this opportunity.

Almost all presidents of the Board of Education during the inter-war years were members of the landed gentry or aristocracy; all Eton educated and all but one at Oxford. At best they had only a nodding acquaintance with the schools system and needs. Education of their own political masters and administrators was firmly within the independent sector. Professor of Education at Leicester University and historian, Brian Simon, is not alone in expressing little surprise that the prevailing social pattern of education would be upheld and perpetuated.

In 1938, just over half of children over the age of 11 remained in all-age elementary schools. Meanwhile, public schools had hardly changed too other than additions of Stowe and Canford in 1923, for boys only, and Westonbirt in 1928 for girls. In the late 1930s, 24% of entrants to Oxford and 19% to Cambridge came from the state sector and 54.9% for all universities. Put another way, 76% of all Oxford entrants and 81% of Cambridge, came from 1.1% of the UK pupil population.

Demise of the English Country House

The slaughter of World War 1 carried off many aristocratic sons and heirs, severely depleting the number of house staff and agricultural workers too, upon which the great estates relied. Social, political and economic forces were eating away at the foundations of country-house life. County councils and a reformed Parliament, emasculating the House of Lords in 1910-11, brought an end to the landowners' political power. With it went the political significance of the country house.

Estates were left groping for a purpose. Despite high running costs and the inconvenience of location, country houses had brought power, prestige and influence. Great Victorian houses, such as Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire, built for entertaining on a massive scale, were particularly vulnerable. Abandoned by the 7th Duke of Newcastle, it was demolished in 1938.

In May 1918, George Herbert realised he had little choice but to sell much of the furniture at his impressive home in Bretby, Derbyshire. In similar vein, a few years later Maud Alice Burke took the equally painful, if slightly less desperate measure, of selling her jewels and replacing them with costume pieces.

George was not an unemployed miner or factory worker facing destitution; nor was Maud an impoverished middle-class widow. They were Lord Carnarvon and Lady Cunard, members of Britain's titled aristocracy who for generations had enjoyed untold wealth. Several of their contemporaries were forced to sell not just treasured belongings to make ends meet, but stately homes – passed down through generations.

In 1918 Sir Francis Ashley-Corbett sold his 4,500-acre Everleigh Manor house and estate, in Wiltshire. The previous year Lord Pembroke sold one of his estates in the same county, and went on to dispose of 8,400 acres of the Wilton estate, also in Wiltshire, with many of his tenant farmers taking the opportunity to buy their holdings.

Many, who had accumulated several country estates through marriage, sold those surplus to requirement. With rents continuing to fall, many landowners with large mortgages found interest payments hard to meet. A collapse in land prices meant a mortgage cost threatened to exceed the value of their estates. On top came higher income tax and death duties.

This led to massive land sales and sharp rise in country house demolitions. Seventeen houses are known to have been lost in 1926 alone. Some pragmatically restructured their assets with others following the lead of the Duke of Leeds. He had inherited over half a million pounds,

after tax, and decided living in idle comfort on the Riviera was much preferred. On selling Hornby Castle, dating back to the Middle Ages, it was demolished within the year.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 had a massive adverse impact on members of the aristocracy who had invested heavily in the stock market, hoping to maintain their privileged lifestyle. Sir Arthur & Lady Sybil Colefax lost their life savings. She used her privileged status to reinvent herself as a fashionable interior designer in partnership with Peggy Ward, Countess Munster, unlike wealthy heiress Mabelle Wichfeld. She had once employed a retinue of 80 servants at Blair Castle in Perthshire but was so short of cash on her death in 1933 that her funeral at Savoy Chapel, next to London's Savoy Hotel, was paid for by friends.

For the wealthy and eccentric, life was still marvellous. At his country house near Newmarket, Lord Fairhaven had an extra touch of luxury for guests. When their shoes were taken away overnight by servants to be cleaned and polished, they were returned with the laces ironed.

Times seemed harder for the likes of Thomas 5th Marquess of Bath. He lost his eldest son and his brother on the Western Front and was forced to sell of 8,600 acres of the Longleat estate over the next three years to raise money. Decline is hardly the word for the lifestyle he led in keeping an indoor staff of more than 20. His footmen still wore silk stockings, patent leather 'pumps' and cockade hats. When his surviving son, Henry, came of age in 1926, the year of the General Strike, no fewer than 1,000 guests sat down to lunch at Longleat.

Little changed at Lowther Castle in Westmoreland. Every morning the Earl of Lonsdale, a keen racing man, had his grooms lay out a stencil of the family coat of arms with numbered partitions on the stable floor. Into each portion they sprinkled different coloured sawdust. When the stencil was complete, there lay the Lonsdale coat of arms in full colour. The Earl would then come to inspect it. He brought with him a pack of pet dogs which literally sniffed around and scabbled in the sand, ruining the grooms hard work.

Similar disregard for the efforts of others was shown at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire, where 50 servants kept 80 open wood fires burning in the rooms because the crusty, old-fashioned Duke of Bedford refused to install central heating. He clung to tradition. Dinner guests were assigned a personal footman who stood behind their chair whilst they ate. When electricity was eventually installed at Woburn, each bedroom was still equipped with a single candle so house guests could seal their letters with wax.

Other country houses of the era were more modern and daring. At Faringdon, the eccentric Lord Berners dyed the pigeons a different colour every month and suggested his neighbouring farmers might do the same to their horses and cattle. His guests included the surrealist artist Salvador Dali who played the piano in the ornamental lake, whilst poet John Betjeman's wife, Penelope, brought her horse to tea in the drawing room.

Another guest was the Marchesa Luisa Casati. She kept a pair of pet cheetahs at her palazzo by the Grand Canal in Venice and allegedly dipped her black servants in gold paint. When she stayed at Faringdon she brought a boa constrictor in a glass case. "Would it like something to eat?" Berner's mother asked. "No" the Marchesa replied. "It had a goat this morning."

Legendary too were the parties that society photographer Cecil Beaton held at Ashcombe, his house on the Wilshire Downs. At weekends he indulged what he called his "queer streak." At a time when homosexuality was illegal, there were many masks, dressing up and play-acting by Beaton and his gay friends. Ashcombe was something new, a place in the country rather than a fully-fledged country house. Beaton would drive down from London on Fridays and the

guests would arrive the next day. Their way to the house was lined by papier mache figures pointing them in the right direction. Then the fun began.

Meanwhile at Madresfield Court in Worcestershire, Earl Beauchamp had a passion for male servants which he indulged with reckless abandon. Diarist Harold Nicholson remembered a dinner where an astonished fellow guest turned to him and asked, "Did I hear Beauchamp whisper to the butler, "Je t'adore?" Quick as a flash, Nicholson, whose homosexual affairs were pursued rather more discretely, replied, "shut the door."

At Kenmore House, County Kerry, Viscount Castlerosse insisted on being accompanied on a round of golf by a servant carrying a jug of whisky. Soon he set up a series of locked huts at strategic points around the course, each containing a bottle of whisky. In a competition, his ball lay deep in a bunker to the amusement of a swelling crowd. "Oh God, come down and help me with this shot. And don't send Jesus. This is no job for a boy."

At Cliveden, an Italianate mansion overlooking the Thames, a staff of Victorian proportions was maintained. There was a butler, an under-butler and three footmen; a valet for Viscount Astor and two lady's maids for his wife and daughter; a housekeeper; four housemaids; and two still-room maids, whose work was to help produce drinks and medicines, and to preserve herbs and flowers for use in flavouring food. Also employed was a chef, three kitchen maids; a scullery maid; another daily; four laundry maids; two odd-job men; a hall boy; telephonist; a house carpenter and night watchman. Add to that about 70 estate workers, from gardeners and game-keepers to electricians, a boatman and part-time clock-winder.

Nancy Astor was demanding, sometimes both mean and mean-spirited as Rose Harrison her personal maid recalled. Capricious, peremptory and occasionally violent, during one tantrum she tried to kick Rose. The secret, Rose discovered, was to stand up to her. After one spat, Nancy stated grandly the difference between them was that "I was born to command." Rose replied, "The difference between us, my lady, is that you have money, and money is power."

By the end of the Thirties, even prestigious country houses such as Cliveden, started to feel the winds of social change. Young generations of servants were less prepared to accept the terms and conditions of employment their elders had taken for granted. Many families also found they could no longer pay for vast numbers of staff. There was a dawning realisation too that some roles and duties were a tad excessive, though the incumbent in 1961, Lord Astor, might not agree. Debauchery and scandal shook Parliament to its core with a Russian spy, sexual shenanigans, characters of dubious virtue and resignation of Secretary of State for War, John Profumo. He left politics to dedicate his life to the social charity, Toynebee Hall.

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