

Background Sheet 5 (Stage 2 British Colonisation of Australia)

A Brief look at Conditions in England in the 1780s

CP Moritz, a German visitor to England in 1782, wrote of his trip in *Journeys of a German in England*. The following quotes are taken from that book:

'Nothing in London makes a more detestable sight than the butchers' stalls especially in the neighbourhood of the Tower. The guts and other refuse are all thrown on the street and set up an unbearable stink. Especially in the Strand, where one shop jostles another and people of different trades often live in the same house, it is surprising to see how, from the bottom to top, the various houses often display large signboards with painted letters. Everyone who lives and works in the house sports his signboard over the door.'

'In the 1780s much of London and the large towns still lacked proper water supplies, and sewerage systems. Disease was rampant and people did not know how disease was spread or how to stop it. Most of the population could not read or write to any extent. It was fashionable for the educated middle and upper classes to be great letter writers and to keep diaries.'

Travel was slow, difficult and expensive. It took all day to travel about 100 km by coach and longer by cart. Labourers' wages varied from around 10d a day to

2 shillings a day, depending on the type and place of work. A footman's wage was about 15 pounds a year while a curate was paid 30 pounds and the Bishop of Winchester 5000 pounds.

In 1767-1770 bread cost 2d per 1 lb loaf (460 g); cheese 2 to 3d per lb); meat 3 to 4d per lb. (12d = 1 shilling; 20 shillings = 1 pound)

Postage of a letter from London to Edinburgh cost 7d; to America, it cost 1 shilling. A hackney cab in London cost 1 shilling per mile.

The population of England doubled between 1700 and 1800. Working-class children from about the age of eight worked up to 14 hours a day in the mills.

The Enclosures Acts of the mid to late eighteenth century forced cottagers (subsistence farmers) to become labourers. With an increased supply of labour, farmers ceased to employ labourers all year round, only employing them when they were needed and laying them off in winter.

An average weekly income for a labourer was less than the cost of the basic necessities for a family.

At the same time as the enclosures were happening, industry was changing from cottage industries to factories and mills, powered first by water, then by steam.

There was a high level of unemployment. After England lost the American War of Independence (1775-1783), returned soldiers were discharged adding to the unemployed. Relief of the poor and care of the sick and orphans was the responsibility of the parish (there were 15,000) which often had limited resources. Conditions for receiving help and the type of help received varied over the years. Basically, what help there was was restricted to residents born in the parish or long-term residents. People who moved to find work got no support.

Sources:

Hart R, English Life in the Eighteenth Century, Waylan Publishers, 1970.