

Popular Consumption and the Mass Market in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries

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Résumé

L'auteur montre les nouvelles perspectives qu'offre la reconnaissance récente d'un marché de consommation très actif dont l'existence, du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle, reposait sur une clientèle qui s'étendait bien au delà des gens de haute et de petite noblesse. Ce marché desservait les paysans, artisans, marchands et petits commerçants de toutes les parties du royaume. L'auteur souligne la grande variété des biens de consommation bon marché alors disponibles, de même que les nombreux niveaux de qualité, qui permettaient de vendre certains articles à des prix abordables pour les petites gens. La demande stimulait la production mécanisée mais, comme ce qui était fait à la machine n'était pas toujours supérieur, des produits fabriqués à la main coexistaient avec ceux fabriqués à la machine.

L'évolution de la mode était une menace constante à la survie des industries locales, mais il semble que celles-ci aient réussi à survivre davantage au XVII^e siècle qu'au XVI^e, en trouvant de nouveaux débouchés outre-mer. Colporteurs et vendeurs itinérants activaient les ventes à domicile, mais la géographie des régions les mieux desservies appelle certaines explications. Un atlas des localités rurales dont la population permanente comprenait ou ne comprenait pas de notables et une meilleure connaissance de la structure sociale de diverses villes contribueraient peut-être à expliquer pourquoi les biens de consommation atteignaient certaines régions et pas d'autres, et comment la consommation de masse différait de ce qu'elle allait devenir au XIX^e siècle.

Abstract

The author discusses new approaches arising out of the recent recognition of a lively consumer market in existence in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, serving more than just the aristocracy and gentry. It reached down to farmers, craftsmen, merchants and small traders living all over England. She emphasizes the great variety of cheap consumer goods available, and the many different qualities, with the result that prices brought some of them within the purses of humble people. Demand stimulated the use of machines but because machine-made goods were not always superior, hand and machine manufacture coexisted.

Changing fashion constantly threatened the survival of local industries, but in the seventeenth century they seem to have survived more successfully than in the sixteenth century by finding new markets overseas. Chapmen and pedlars promoted vigorous sales at home, but the geography of the best served areas needs to be explained. An atlas of rural districts with and without resident gentry and better knowledge of the social structure of different towns might help to explain why consumer goods reached some areas and not others and how mass consumption differed from that of the nineteenth century.

The history of clothing is approached from many different directions. I approach it from the point of view of an economic and social historian, concerned first of all with the way people, especially those living in rural areas, got their living and secondly how they spent

the cash that came their way and fed and clothed themselves. Summing up in a sentence the trends in recent years of research into popular consumption and the mass market, I would say that scholars are probing, at deeper levels than before, the production of consumer

goods in order to find out more precisely what articles were being produced, where and by whom. The results of that investigation have shed new light on many different aspects of the demand side, and we have been forced to pose further new questions. We now recognize the existence from the sixteenth century onwards of a much larger consumer market, not only in England but on the Continent of Europe and then in the New World, than was contemplated before.

The consumer goods under review are items of clothing, but the criticism to be levelled at earlier research pertains not only to clothing but to all consumer goods. The production side was examined by documentary historians at too high a level of generality. With regard to textiles, woollen broad cloth was distinguished from the New Draperies, but beyond noticing the existence of a multitude of different kinds of New Draperies, and the use of mixed threads in their making, the investigation did not go much further. The role of changing fashion was acknowledged, and its power over the market was recognized; it was well understood that the New Draperies displaced broadcloth in general favour after the middle-sixteenth century. But fashion was usually regarded as an upper-class concern. Although Spanish, Italian, French and Turkish fashions came and went among the well-to-do, no questions were asked concerning the geographical distance over which those fashions spread when once the

gentry took them up, nor where they went socially when the gentry forsook them.

Contemporary writers influenced us to consider the matter narrowly for they depicted fashion as a fanciful, frivolous, indeed, ridiculous indulgence. William Vaughan, writing in 1600, decided that in the beginning of the world clothing was absolutely utilitarian, and men wore pelts and skins of beasts simply to keep out the cold and cover their shame. In 1600 it was conventional to think that pelts and skins alone provided the earliest clothing, though, in fact, Danish archaeologists have recently discovered textiles woven from spun willow fibres dating back 6,000 years.¹ Contrasting the present with the past, William Vaughan warmed to his theme by adding that primitive man "had no beaver hats, sharp on the top like unto the spire of a steeple, nor flat-crowned hats, resembling rose-cakes. They wore no embroidered shirts, nor garments of cloth of gold...they bought no silken stockings nor gaudy pantoffles."² Thus he moved in two sentences from the simple life of early man to the extravagances of the Renaissance fop.

The notion of a consumer market of limited scope in the sixteenth century, patronized only by courtiers and gentry and some middle-class townsmen, has now proved increasingly unsatisfactory as many more handicraft industries have been identified as by-employments, practiced alongside agriculture in the countryside. As well as wool spinning,



Fig. 1
Sixteenth-century Italian woman's jacket knitted in silk and metal thread. In Britain during this period fashion was usually regarded as an upper-class concern; Spanish, Italian, French and Turkish fashions came and went among the well-to-do, but no questions were asked concerning the geographical distances over which those fashions spread when once the gentry took them up, nor where they went socially when the gentry forsook them. (Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum, ROM 966.24, gift of York Knitting Mills)

and wool cloth weaving, which was already conspicuous in the later Middle Ages and constituted a large export trade, villagers are found by the later sixteenth century busily engaged in stocking knitting, lace making, thread twisting and glove making on a scale that implies the existence of a considerable home market. The growing, processing, and weaving of hemp and flax were widespread all over the country, but again in certain areas of more concentrated production, like East Anglia, provision plainly went beyond the needs of the locality. All these lesser branches of the clothing industry have attracted little interest hitherto from historians. Similarly, the expanding pin and needle industries have passed unnoticed at this period, even though they were vital to all dress-making and tailoring.³

Country handicrafts relied on local towns as collecting centres, and since these towns also had their knitters, lace makers, glovers, and so on, some questions concerning the specialization that existed between towns and their neighbouring villages have thereby been raised. It is possible that some textile trades like tape making and ribbon making were never carried on in villages—in other words, they were exclusively town occupations—but the matter is far from settled. These trades too have failed to draw attention from documentary historians. Rural communities producing clothing for a commercial market were plainly ignoring all mediaeval assumptions and conventions that industry should be confined and controlled in towns. The pressure to break through the constraints of these ancient rules of life must have come from somewhere since the goods were plainly in demand. Now fresh insights into the scale of popular consumption have been gained from two directions.

The dimensions of more sizeable markets overseas are being perceived, far beyond the immediately accessible countries across the Channel and the North Sea, for English cloth and clothing. These markets were being supplied from an early date in the sixteenth century, if not earlier still. English kerseys, for example, were already described by a Venetian in 1513 as “one of the most important foundations of trade in the world,” and were arriving in considerable quantity in Hungary even in the 1540s. Since they were bought there by masons, glass blowers and blacksmiths, we have to envisage the possibility of a body of consumers in England as well, for the Englishman would not have had to pay

anything like the same costs of transport to export markets.⁴ Then in the course of the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the market for English cloth and clothing expanded still further overseas to serve frugal colonists in the New World and South America and native peoples in India and Asia. The evidence of a market for such wares in countries far poorer than England has meant that the consumers at home cannot be ignored.

Further understanding of mass consumption has come from our examining more sensitively the many different qualities and prices of fabrics and garments bearing the same descriptive label. Knitted stockings make a good example of the varying qualities on sale, for this one item of clothing was new in the market, yet a wide range of qualities appeared in a comparatively short space of time after their first introduction. They came in as a new fashion in the early sixteenth century, capturing first of all the fancy of the well-to-do. The high fashion silk stockings were then copied in wool, the wool then invited refinement, and so worsted and jersey stockings were knitted. By the 1580s and 1590s you could buy coarse wool stockings for between twelve pence and eighteen pence a pair, while you paid eight to nine shillings for worsted, and twenty shillings for silk stockings. Twelve pence was about one-and-a-half days' wages for a farmworker in 1580, and the thousands of pairs of English stockings shipped to southern Spain—a poor part of Spain, not Castile—in the early seventeenth century tell us clearly that they came within the purse of self-supporting peasant families.⁵

Contemporaries recognized the virtue of having such a range of clothing qualities available. From the point of view of the producers, it greatly enlarged their markets. The government was always trying to regulate cloth by weight and width, thinking mainly of maintaining a high standard for the satisfaction of merchants selling at high prices. It drew protests from the makers of Welsh cottons in the early seventeenth century, pointing out that the poor could afford cloth at six or eight pence a yard, “when they have not 12d. or 16d. to bestow.” The stocking knitters of Leicester in 1670, similarly harassed by more regulations about standards, said much the same thing: “it is not the curious making of a few stockings, but the general making of many that is most for the public good...when the stockings are made up and sorted, there are amongst them some for all sorts of people...if none but fine stockings be made the poor must go without.”⁶

Most economic historians these days are obsessed with quantities and average prices. But we need to examine just as closely the quality and full range of prices from the cheapest to the dearest. The most cheering evidence that attention is being directed that way is a recent article by the young Japanese historian, Heita Kawakatsu, on the market for British cotton goods in India and East Asia in the late nineteenth century. The quantities exported have long since been counted up by other scholars. But historians have remained unsure about whether English cottons were cheaper than those made by the Japanese and Chinese for their own home market. Dr. Kawakatsu has now examined their quality, by studying the yarn counts of the various woven cottons that were shipped to east Asia, including those from Britain and those from India, together with the quality of the cotton yarn being used. India produced short staple cotton which was made into coarse cotton fabric with a low yarn count, Britain increasingly used long-staple cotton from Egypt, Brazil and the United States, with a high yarn count. So cottons made in England and India were not, in fact, in direct competition with each other; they were satisfying different consumer groups, with different tastes and different purses.⁷

It is worth noticing also that this study uncovers the far from simple relationship between handmade and machine-made goods and so illuminates the situation in the early modern period also. In many cases it is clear that wares wrought by machine were of better quality than those produced by hand. Granted that many hundreds of hand-knitted stockings were coarsely made—we can judge this from their price, and the knowledge that knitting as you walked to market did not permit fastidious work—yet it was still possible for some hand-knitted goods to be far finer and superior to the machine-made. Even when using Indian short-stapled cotton, normally used for coarse goods, Indian hand spinners and weavers in the nineteenth century could still produce the finest muslin, as fine as cobweb, resembling, as one writer expressed it, a “web of woven air,” looking like “the work of fairies or insects rather than of men.” Machines could not achieve this degree of fineness and certainly not with short staple cotton. This fact is important for explaining the seeming contradictions sometimes encountered in descriptions of hand-knitted goods. Shetland knitting, for example, was sometimes described as coarse and unlovely, whereas Shetland lace shawls were as fine as gossamer.⁸

Other insights into the swelling consumer market have come from investigations into the spending power of the middle and labouring classes. The wage indices of building labourers, hitherto used to suggest the falling purchasing power of all labourers in the sixteenth and most of the seventeenth centuries, are being questioned. Building labourers may prove to be a special group with a distinctive pattern of employment, life course and income. Their money wages may not correctly represent their disposable income.⁹ This is not to say that poverty and inadequate wages were not serious problems in early modern England. But it is necessary to differentiate between paupers and precariously employed wage labourers, on the one hand, and the next highest rank in society, the husbandmen, yeomen, artisans, craftsmen and traders living above subsistence level who had at least some spare cash to spend on consumer goods. The probate inventories show the furnishings of houses becoming more elaborate among the yeoman and tradesman class, most noticeably of all in the second half of the seventeenth century. Window curtains, cushions, coverlets and hangings appear more frequently, along with many more pairs of sheets, pillowcases and napkins.¹⁰ Unfortunately, probate inventories do not enumerate, let alone describe, personal clothing with the same care. Occasionally, perhaps as a result of the idiosyncrasies of the local valuers, personal garments were at least counted if not described. Thus some of the garments of Stoneleigh villagers in Warwickshire were counted in inventories: one man had two doublets, two pairs of stockings, six falling bands and four shirts.¹¹ It is likely that more inventories will turn up in due course with itemized lists of clothing that can be matched with different social classes. If not, other sources of information must be sought. Dr. Lemire's use of prosecutions for theft of clothing is ingenious and shows what may yet be found in the records.¹²

The opportunities for earning cash to spend on a touch of luxury were being enlarged in the seventeenth century, and this knowledge bears directly on the scale of the market. In the first place, more hand labour was being used in the fields, and more women were being employed; in the second place, the consumer industries were spreading into more villages, and by offering work they furnished more cash to spend on consumer wares. The framework knitting industry is one example of a new occupation, visibly seen to be spreading through Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire

villages, slowly from the late 1640s, and much more rapidly after about 1670. Knitting on the frame, however, did not oust knitting by hand. Again the different capacities of hand and machine have to be taken into account. The two industries co-existed for a century and more, for the frame had limitations as regards stitch pattern and elasticity of fabric while the hand-knitter had the flexibility to meet changing fashions quickly and to satisfy the special demands of individuals. In some quarters, moreover, it was a common opinion that hand-knitted wares were more durable.¹³

The purchasing power to sustain an expanding consumer market can confidently be identified in the seventeenth century. Through the work of Dr. Margaret Spufford,

a far better understanding has been gained of the role of pedlars and chapmen roaming through every village in the kingdom, selling small wares like lace, buttons and ribbons and reaching hamlets in the most remote corners of the realm. The activities of these traders and the wares they carried has been admirably depicted in Dr. Spufford's book, *The Great Reclotting of Rural England, Petty Chapmen and their Wares in the Seventeenth Century*. Pedlars might have three hundred and more yards of fabric in their possession at death.

Since about 2,500 chapmen were licensed in 1697-8, and their goods at death were valued on average at forty-two pounds, one can modestly calculate 100,000 worth of small consumer wares to have been on the roads of England at any one time.¹⁴

Among the tasks for future research, we need to define the domestic consumer market more exactly, both geographically and socially, so that we can delineate it in the period from 1500 to 1750 in a way that shows the difference from that coming into existence after 1750. It would be an exaggeration to speak of a consumer market embracing the whole of Britain in the early modern period and offering the same variety of wares to all. It is likely that country areas where



Figs. 2 and 3
 Man's sixteenth-century knitted wool hat. In seventeenth-century Britain framework knitting became a new occupation but did not entirely replace hand knitting. Indeed, some were of the opinion that hand-knitted wares were more durable than their machine-made counterparts. (Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum, Harry Wearne Collection, ROM)

gentlemen were present in some number enjoyed a better service from local shopkeepers and chapmen than those where they were few and far between. The account book of Lord Howard of Naworth Castle in Cumberland, for example, shows the family buying from pedlars in 1620, four yards of lace "at the gate by my lady." Bone lace was bought of a pedlar for Mrs. Aletheia, who also lived there, for seven shillings.¹⁵ It is certain that the manor house in a village where the gentleman resided was the first port of call for any pedlar with the necessary salesman's drive. Similarly, the wide range of haberdashery stocked by James Backhouse of Kirby Lonsdale in 1578, including French garters and French parchment gartering, would be better understood if it could be set beside a map showing the gentry who were living in the vicinity.¹⁶

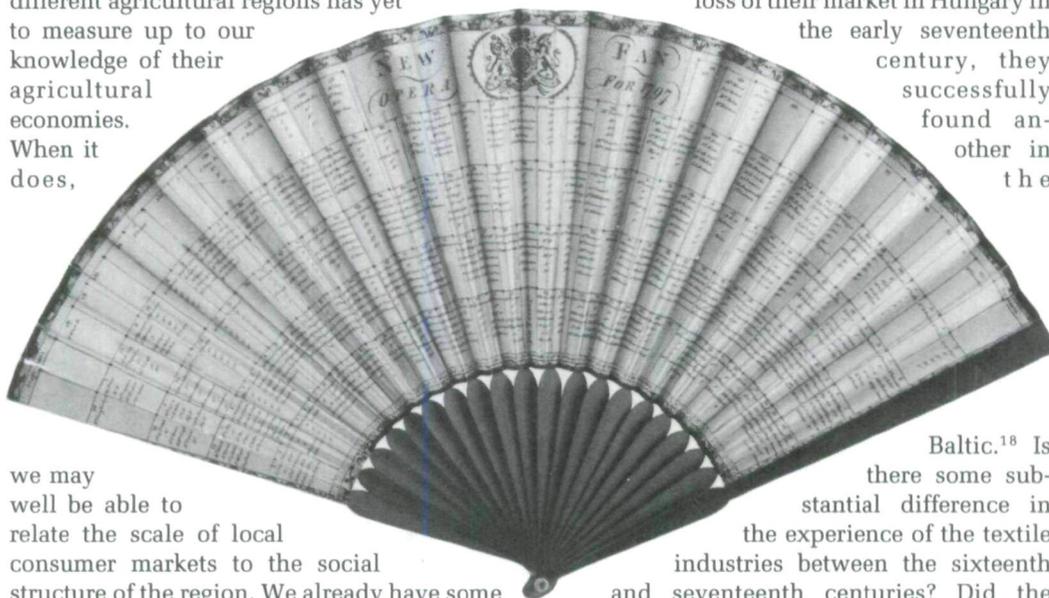
Knowledge of the social structure of different agricultural regions has yet to measure up to our knowledge of their agricultural economies. When it does,

we may well be able to relate the scale of local consumer markets to the social structure of the region. We already have some notion of the areas where gentry were numerous, or became more numerous at this period, and where they were rare personages, to the considerable lamentations of government. We also have some idea of the regions that had many husbandmen and smallholders, while others had a more sizeable group of yeomen. The consumer market must bear some traces of these differences. Dr. Lorna Weatherill has noticed in her study of consumer goods in probate inventories a considerable gulf between the purchasing power of the yeomen class compared with the husbandmen.¹⁷ Although the foregoing remarks pertain to the rural areas, notable differences were present as well in the class structure of

towns, a fact which calls for more precise delineation. A social atlas of England at different periods in the past would go a long way towards directing attention to the regions where greater and lesser domestic consumer demand should be expected.

The second problem requiring more research concerns the changing fortunes of the different branches of the clothing industry as fashions changed. Some local industries fell into depression and disappeared when their goods went out of favour. Others clearly found fresh markets and continued to thrive even when new branches of the same industry pushed them out of favour with their old clientele. For example, the Hampshire kersey industry in the later sixteenth century seems to have fallen by the wayside when Yorkshire produced cheaper kersey. But, as Walter Endrei has shown, when the Yorkshire kersey merchants in turn were threatened with the

loss of their market in Hungary in the early seventeenth century, they successfully found another in the



◀ **Fig. 4**
 Woman's fan, 1797.
 Consumer goods such as this fan listing the annual opera schedule were sold to an ever-expanding consumer market. (Courtesy of Royal Ontario Museum, bequest of Miss Edith L. Mason, ROM 942.36.2)

Baltic.¹⁸ Is there some substantial difference in the experience of the textile industries between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Did the expanding world market of the seventeenth century enable English consumer industries to survive and multiply more successfully by finding new markets for old, instead of replacing one with another as seems to have been the more usual outcome in the sixteenth century? If so, this would explain the expanding range of goods on sale at varied prices.

A further question concerns the more varied qualities of goods and the fact that fashion mattered to more people than before. Did it also have the effect of multiplying the number of places that could maintain a local industry with its own specialties and clientele? It is noticeable how the English lace industry seems to have raised its standards in at least two of the

specialized areas of concentration in the seventeenth century. Dorset and Devon made the best quality lace, and Buckinghamshire the second best. By 1698 it was claimed that Buckinghamshire lace, which was once eight shillings a yard, had been upgraded in quality and now sold for thirty shillings. Devon and Dorset had also upgraded their quality which now commanded six pounds a yard.¹⁹ This plainly left a gap in the market for those lacemakers who could produce something cheaper. Was it then filled by yet more lacemakers, perhaps from somewhere further north, since this was the direction in which the manufacture of cheaper kerseys and fustians moved whenever more labour was needed at less cost? In short, the proliferating centres of production need to be mapped more exactly, along with the changing quality of their wares. At present, the constant expansion of centres and the changing quality of wares is best seen

in the knitting industry as local historians uncover more villages and districts engaged in knitting in Wales, Scotland and Ireland as well as England. These places need to be differentiated regionally, and their main marketing centres identified. In differentiating their wares, fresh searches need to be made, not only in English documents but in foreign archives as well, for just as France has shown itself to be a guardian of samples of English textiles, so it is likely that other European countries may be found to be good custodians of clothing imported from England. In 1662 an Englishman bewailed the fact that the Dutch commanded the quality market for cloth in France, Poland, the East Indies, Scotland, Ireland and even England itself. England, in his view, had "become the poor man's clothier."²⁰ In that case, England had a far more impressive mass market all over Europe. It was not a source of economic weakness but of strength.

NOTES

1. *The Independent*, 1 April 1989.
2. William Vaughan, "Of Superfluity of Apparel," chap. 58, *The Golden Grove* (1600), n.p.
3. Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects. The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Nesta Evans, *The East Anglian Linen Industry. Rural Industry and Local Economy, 1500-1850*, Pasold Studies in Textile History, 5 (London, 1985).
4. Walter G. Endrei, "English Kersey in Eastern Europe with Special Reference to Hungary," *Textile History*, 5 (1974): 90-99; Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and The Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Fontana ed., 2 (1975), 213.
5. Joan Thirsk, "The Fantastical Folly of Fashion: the English Stocking Knitting Industry, 1500-1700," in Thirsk, *The Rural Economy of England* (London, 1984), 237ff; P. Bowden, Statistical Appendix, Table 15, in Joan Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV, 1500-1640* (Cambridge, 1967), 864.
6. Thirsk, *Economic Policy*, 116.
7. Heita Kawakatsu, "International Competition in Cotton Goods in the Late Nineteenth Century: Britain Versus India and East Asia," in *The Emergence of a World Economy, 1500-1914. Papers of the Ninth International Congress of Economic History*, ed. Wolfram Fischer, Beiträge zur Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte, Band 33 (1986), 619-43.
8. *Ibid.*; Helen Bennett, *Scottish Knitting* (Shire Publications, Princes Risborough, no. 164), 10.
9. Donald Woodward, "Wage Rates and Living Standards in Pre-Industrial England," *Past and Present*, 91 (1981): 28-46.
10. This is evident in any published selection of probate inventories. See, for example, John S. Moore, ed., *Clifton and Westbury Probate Inventories, 1609-1761* (Avon Local History Association and Bristol University Extra-Mural Department, 1981) and a review of the same in *Midland History* 9 (1984), 131.
11. N.W. Alcock, *Stoneleigh Villagers, 1597-1650* (Warwick: University of Warwick, 1975), 28, 36.
12. Beverly Lemire, *Cotton in Fashion: Trade Industry and Consumption in Britain, 1660-1800*, Chap. 5 and App. 5:2, forthcoming; Lemire, "The Theft of Clothes and Popular Consumerism in Early Modern England," *Journal of Social History* (December 1990).
13. S.D. Chapman, "The Genesis of the British Hosiery Industry, 1600-1750," *Textile History* 3 (1972): esp. 10.
14. Margaret Spufford, *The Great Reclotting of Rural England, Petty Chapmen and Their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1984), 16, 145.
15. Rev. George Ornsby, ed., *Selections from the Household Books of the Lord William Howard of Naworth Castle*, Surtees Soc., 68 (1877), 122, 188.
16. J. Raine, Ed., *Wills and Inventories from...the Archdeaconry of Richmond*, Surtees Soc., 26 (1853), 275-81. For comments on this document, see Thirsk, *Economic Policy*, 121. For a district seemingly lacking in gentry and starved of consumer goods, see R.W. Ambler and B. & L. Watkinson, *Farmers and Fishermen, The Probate Inventories of the Ancient Parish of Clee, South Humberside, 1536-1742* (School of Adult and Continuing Education, University of Hull, 1987).

17. Lorna Weatherill, "A Possession of One's Own: Women and Consumer Behavior in England, 1660-1740," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 149.
18. Endrei, "English Kersey in Eastern Europe," 94-7.
19. Victoria and Albert Museum Library, 43 A2h, "The Case of the Lacemakers in Relation to the Importation of Foreign Bone Lace, 1698." I wish to thank Dr. Roger Richardson for this reference.
20. Thirsk, *Economic Policy*, 132.