

**‘The North Riding of Yorkshire in an Age of Transition 1750-1820’
The social and economic development of a rural county**

Scheme Briefing

The theme has been carefully chosen to cover the period before the birth of the railways and the development of heavy industry to reflect the transition from a rural economy to large scale industrialization in a county renowned in the modern age for its scenic beauty. The eminent Economic Historian Arnold Toynbee (1852-1883) described the second half of the 18C as the “age of transition to the modern industrial system and to improved methods of agriculture”¹. The conference will address some of the issues involved in this transition in what essentially remains a rural county to this day.

The period is coincident with the reign of George III (1760-1820) when major changes were taking place in society and trade at home and abroad. Substantial wealth had already been generated from overseas trade in the east by way of the East India Company monopoly and in the west by the development of the West Indies sugar trade. Much of the wealth generated found its way into the acquisition and development of country estates. Locally, Henry Lascelles (1690-1753) of Stank Hall Northallerton, who accumulated considerable wealth from his involvement with West Indies trade, founded the Harewood dynasty whose wealth funded the building of Harewood House and the acquisition of extensive land holdings in the county.

George III was known as “Farmer George”² and in his “saner” moments wrote pamphlets on agricultural improvement under the pen name of Ralph Robinson. He was passionately interested in agriculture³, and during his reign the Agricultural Revolution reached its peak. It was a period of great innovation and exploration much of which had practical implications at a local level. Established landowners and a burgeoning merchant class were drivers of change and they applied their newly acquired commercial acumen to developing their country estates both architecturally and scenically. These developments were often accompanied by agricultural innovation.

Parliamentary enclosure peaked during this period, which reinforced the position of the landowning classes at the expense of local labour markets. Improved methods of cultivation originating in the Low Countries and selective breeding of livestock fuelled the explosion in agricultural productivity. This was a period of enquiry with the Arthur Young (1776) and John Tuke (1794) tours of the county, the formation of local Agricultural Societies and Land Improvement companies and the establishment of the Board of Agriculture (1793).

The Agricultural Revolution in Britain proved to be a major turning point in history. The population in 1750 reached 5.7 million and by the end of the study period had doubled in size. This had happened before in the mid 14 and 17 C’s, but had been cut back by plague and war and a weak agricultural infrastructure³. However, by 1750, when the population reached this level again, the improvements in agricultural technology and new methods of cultivation, stimulated by international influences, allowed population growth and industrial development to be sustained.

The extractive industries were already well established in the area over many centuries, but extensive capitalization took place during this period. Textiles were a major contributor to the local economy and generated capital which funded later massive industrialization in what is now known as the Tees Valley and the birth of the ‘Infant Hercules’ of Middlesbrough. This was facilitated by the birth of the railways and the inception of Joint Stock Banking locally at Darlington on the border with County Durham.

A renaissance in market towns took hold and there were accompanying changes in social organization and attitudes. Local architects came to the fore, most notably John Carr (1723-1807), and Palladianism dominated as an architectural style.

The Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815) gave particular impetus to local industry, but with the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo the economy went into temporary decline. It is intended to continue the story into the industrialization of the Tees Valley at a later conference.

1. Arnold Toynbee: "Lectures on the Industrial Revolution of 18 C England" 1884/87.

2. 'Farmer' George and his 'ferme ornée', Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, http://www.rbgekew.org.uk/heritage/timeline/1773to1820_farmer.html, retrieved 21 February 2008

3. Watson, J. Steven (1960). The Reign of George III, 1760–1815. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 10–11

Potential for individual themes

Transport: Roads, Rivers and Ports

The Linen Industry

Corn Milling

Parliamentary Enclosure

Improvements in cultivation

Improvements in animal husbandry

Mining: Lead, Coal, Iron, Copper, Zinc, Alum, Jet and Stone

The evolution of the Country Estate

The development of the Country House

Urban Renaissance

The accumulation and uses of wealth

Colonial influences

The achievements and legacy of Henry Lascelles (1690-1753)

The Influence of John Carr (1723-1807)

A Georgian Perspective (George III ,1760-1820)