This book serves as a companion to *The Birth of Industrial Britain: Economic Change 1750–1850* (1999). In that volume the main contours of Britain’s economic development were charted during the century that witnessed the most significant structural economic changes in modern times. After c. 1760 Britain gradually achieved rates of economic and industrial growth that reached a 2–3 per cent annual increase by the early nineteenth century. These growth rates point to a slower transition to a capitalist industrial economy than the metaphor of a ‘take-off’ into self-sustained growth once implied, yet they were still sufficient, according to economists’ criteria, for an industrial revolution to be under way. During the century after 1750 the nation was also transformed from a country where most people lived in rural areas and worked on the land to one where increased work in towns and cities became the norm. High wages in England and abundant supplies of capital and cheap energy stimulated the demand for new technology. A wave of macro-inventions – notably the steam engine, cotton spinning machinery, and iron smelting by coke – resulted from this mix of factors. Britain’s success in global trade in the early modern period directly affected the wage and price structure in the English economy, and this created the demand for new technology (Allen, 2009). Though British industrialisation was incomplete by 1850, the main sectors of the economy had experienced significant structural growth and change since the mid-eighteenth century.

*The Birth of Industrial Britain: Economic Change 1750–1850* analysed changes in population growth, agriculture, industry, finance and capital, foreign trade and internal transport. It concluded that the dynamics of change in the economy outweighed evidence of continuity. There was still much traditional rural labour and domestic industry in the mid-Victorian era, and margins of the nation where time had stood still. There were areas of deindustrialisation, labour immobility and poverty. Representative political participation lagged behind economic improvements and social change. Yet by 1850, compared with the situation a century before, important changes in the economy outstripped
signs of stasis: Britain had several large industrial cities with flourishing hinterlands, a vastly improved internal communications network, more efficiently organised agriculture, more sophisticated business techniques in overseas trade, developing financial institutions, continuing evidence of inventiveness and technological ingenuity, more intensive economic development in regions with good fuel resources and raw materials, and a reputation for producing quality manufactured goods at prices cheaper than most of its competitors. Small wonder that Britain was hailed as ‘the workshop of the world’ at the Great Exhibition held at the Crystal Palace, Hyde Park, in 1851: economic improvements had led to important changes in the social fabric of the nation.

The current book looks at the social consequences of these economic changes. Though it discusses areas of continuity, it is particularly concerned with the impact of social change on the mass of the population affected by rising industrial and economic growth. A fair amount of attention is given to the role of Parliament and the middle classes in promoting legislation concerning changes in social policy. The ideas of major reformers who had a significant impact on social change are examined. The institutional contexts of British society are dovetailed into the analysis. But the main focus is on the mass of working-class people who experienced changes in agricultural and industrial work, alterations in patterns of leisure, shifts in living and health standards, improvements in educational provision, wider choice in religious worship, amendments in poor law policy, and changes in crime and the law. That these changes in British society were accompanied by discontent in some regional areas and opposition among certain occupational groups is traced through patterns of popular protest. Some themes that would form an essential part of a general account of British history in the Georgian and Victorian periods are omitted because they throw little light on the experiences of the working population. Thus the book has virtually nothing to say on the growth of Tractarianism or nineteenth-century public schools, on genteel leisure pursuits and aristocratic lifestyles. Consideration is given, however, to themes where the behaviour, ideas and power of the middle and upper classes did impinge on workers’ lives.

Our study begins with a consideration of the variety of working practices in early industrial Britain, focusing on changes in agricultural and industrial work, notably in relation to the rise of factories and trends in female and juvenile labour. These themes take up the first half of Chapter 2. The remainder of that chapter charts the time and space constraints on working-class recreational pursuits during the century after 1750. Chapter 3 examines different ways of gauging changes in working-class living and health standards, concentrating on problems associated with evidence on housing and environmental conditions, wages and prices, family incomes, and height and nutrition. Chapter 4 underscores the importance of Christianity to people's
lives in the period of early industrialisation, examining the position of the Anglican church and the growth of Protestant nonconformity. Evangelical religion is accorded its place in the spectrum of religious change that occurred in Britain in the century after 1750. Chapter 5 traces the slow growth of popular education for the masses, showing the spread of monitorial education and explaining the cautious entry of the state into educational provision for working-class people. Chapter 6 discusses the provision of poor relief and shows that a moral and economic critique of the Old Poor Law led to the implementation of a harsher New Poor Law in the 1830s. Chapter 7 shifts the focus of the study towards patterns of popular protest. It documents the range of demonstrations that broke out in Georgian and early Victorian Britain and assesses the causation and consequences of breaches to the peace. Chapter 8 concludes the book with an account of changing patterns of crime and the main changes in justice and punishment in early industrial Britain.