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## Chapter 1

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### The business of living

#### Changing fortunes

Colchester is in north-east Essex, on the banks of the River Colne. In the eighteenth century it was a sizeable town of around 10,000 inhabitants. It was the centre of a productive rural hinterland (the grain of East Anglia supplied both regional and the huge London markets) and had a long, if uneven history as a producer of woollen cloth. It was a port and a centre for a range of industries such as malting, milling and salt-refining. Its regular markets, inns, shops and trades attracted custom from the region. Colchester was well placed on lines of communications by sea and land, between London, southern England and continental Europe. Colchester polite society included increasing numbers of (more or less) affluent individuals who chose to move there. The town acquired many of the attractions of polite culture. Its social life was enhanced as it became a garrison town during the Napoleonic period. It was a chartered borough, with its own corporation and courts. Colchester returned two members of parliament on a wide freeburgess franchise, so was of national as well as regional political relevance.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, decline and decreasing national significance have been written into most modern histories of eighteenth-century Colchester. The cloth trade fell off by fits and starts, while the cutting edge of English urban and industrial growth shifted northwards and westwards. The corporation was so shambolic as to surrender the borough charter for twenty years. By the 1840s Colchester was a Tory market town.<sup>2</sup> However, for the twenty-first-century historian processes of de-industrialisation are themselves of interest. Recent historiography of the English eighteenth century also points to leisure, culture and consumption as important loci for understanding the development of modern industrial society. Renewed interest in topics as diverse as the eighteenth-century family, poverty and its management, crime and disorder, as well as the socio-cultural processes of formation of identifiably modern (urban) subjectivities encourage re-examination of Colchester's eighteenth-century history, in particular that of the middle layers of town society.

The eighteenth-century middling sort has proved notoriously difficult to define. Income level, occupation, patterns of consumption, family structure and relationships, property holding and management all contributed to middling identity, but no single factor accounted for it. This was a very diverse social group with numerous gradations of status. French argues that contemporaries used different delineations according to

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1 J. Cooper *et al.*, *The borough of Colchester, Victoria county history of Essex*, vol. 9 (Woodbridge, 1994), pp. 133–75; G. Martin, *The story of Colchester* (Colchester, 1959); D. Stephenson, *The book of Colchester, a portrait of a town* (Buckingham, 1978); A.F.J. Brown, *Colchester in the eighteenth century* (Colchester, 1969).

2 A.F.J. Brown, *Colchester in the eighteenth century* (Colchester, 1969); A.F.J. Brown, *Colchester 1815–1914*, (Chelmsford, 1980).

social context, something that has made the task of historians harder.<sup>3</sup> In the most comprehensive recent consideration of these questions for the period to 1750, he distinguishes between the internal self-definitions of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century middlings which were shaped from their locally-focused identities as the 'chief inhabitants' of the parish (or indeed borough) and externally recognisable social, economic or occupational characteristics.<sup>4</sup> My own approaches to what was shared among this heterogeneous group emphasise a nexus of relationships between family, property, credit and office-holding, all matters which, as French argues, focused on localism. However, during the half century following the conclusion of his study, external forces of historical change went some way to shift both the perspectives and indeed the constituency of those who adhered to middling social and cultural patterns in Colchester.

My earlier survey of borough records, newspapers, wills, poll books and administrations for 1735–50 indicated that occupations in Colchester borough included the range of craft trades and amounted to 57.7 per cent of the 1,120 individuals surveyed. There were yeomen and horticulturalists (unsurprisingly present in far greater numbers in the rural parishes), high-street retailers, carpenters and metalworkers, millers, brewers, maltsters and distillers, baymakers and merchants. Of those with known occupations in the borough including the liberties (440 individuals), the baytrade comprised 26.6 per cent, compared to 6.5 per cent of occupations associated with the port at the Hythe, 10.4 per cent in the professions, including physicians, surgeons, apothecaries, schoolteachers, attorneys, scribes, clergy and non-conformist ministers, and 4.1 per cent gentlemen. These sources under-represented labourers who were only 4.8 per cent of individuals surveyed. Although this sample does not define the middling sort, it indicates its prevalence in local records.<sup>5</sup> Particularly after 1750, the numbers of households in trading and professional occupations nationally increased from around one in seven of the population in 1700 to nearer one in four or five by 1800.<sup>6</sup> Middling incomes ranged from around £50 per year (the minimum necessary to pay poor rates) to around £2,000 per year, though some of the lesser landed gentry commanded only a few hundred

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3 J. Rule, *Albion's people: English society, 1714–1815* (New York and London, 1992), Chapter 3; H. Barker, *The business of women; female enterprise and urban development in northern England 1760–1830* (Oxford, 2006), p. 8; C. Wiskin, 'Urban businesswomen in eighteenth-century England', in R. Sweet and P. Lane (eds.), *On the town: women and urban life in eighteenth-century England* (Aldershot, 2003), pp. 87–110, here pp. 94–5; R. Sweet, *The English town 1680–1840: government, society and culture* (London, 1999), p. 180; H. French, 'The search for the "middle sort of people" in England, 1600–1800', *Historical Journal* (2000), for an overview of the historiography.

4 H. French, *The middle sort of people in provincial England, 1600–1750*, (Oxford, 2007); H. French, 'Social status, localism and the 'middle sort of people' in England 1620–1750', *Past and Present* 166 (2000), pp.66–99.

5 S. D'Cruze, *The middling sort in provincial England: Politics and social relations in Colchester 1730–1800* (PhD thesis, Essex, 1990), p. 42.

6 P. Sharpe, 'Population and society 1700–1840' in P. Clark and D.M. Palliser (eds.), *The Cambridge urban history of Britain*, Vol. 2, 1540–1840 (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 491–528, here p. 524.

pounds a year and the most prosperous merchants could gross £10,000 annually.<sup>7</sup> The middling sort comprised up to 30 per cent of the population in larger towns.<sup>8</sup> In Colchester, a survey of rateable values suggests a figure of at least 20 per cent middling sort within the town's population in the 1780s and 90s.<sup>9</sup>

Colchester had an impressive past. It had been an important Roman town, fortified to quell the East Anglian tribes and the site of a large temple. The medieval broadcloth industry was damaged following the Black Death here as elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> though better times returned from the late sixteenth century with the introduction of new techniques of woollen cloth manufacture. Colchester's seventeenth-century history was indelibly marked by the events of summer 1648 when the town was occupied by a Royalist army and then besieged for twelve weeks by the Parliamentary forces under General Fairfax. Around 200 houses in six parishes were destroyed, not counting the devastation to churches. St Johns Abbey, St Botolphs and Crouched Friars were laid to waste. Many of Colchester's landmark buildings, including the huge Norman castle and several of its churches remained dilapidated if not ruined into the eighteenth century. The town's troubles continued after the surrender. A heavy fine was raised on the town. Around half of Colchester's population of 10,000 died over eighteen months in the plague of 1665–6, though this population loss was fairly quickly replaced. Brown describes the town in 1670 as accommodating a population of around 9,500 in 2,100 houses. However, the textile depression of 1716 began an

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7 M. Berg, *Luxury and pleasure in eighteenth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2005) p. 207; Sweet, *The English town*, p. 179.

8 Berg, *Luxury and pleasure*, p. 207.

9 My figure of around 20 per cent middling sort in the Colchester population is based on rateable values shown in Land Tax Assessments for ten Colchester parishes: St Mary-at-the-Walls 1783, St Leonard 1783, St James 1790, St Peter 1778, Holy Trinity 1783, St Nicholas 1792, St Runwald 1783, St Giles 1786, St Botolph 1793, All Saints 1787. The selection was made depending on record availability and the apparent efficiency of the record-keeping. Rateable values remained very constant over the decades, and were the same for parish rates and land tax. Tax payers on property of £1 or £2 per annum rateable value were excluded. Top rateable values could be as high as £40 and £50 for the larger inns, so no clear dividing line could be drawn between middling sort and rentier town gentry. Within these criteria, rate/tax payers (household heads) were assessed as a percentage of the population figures for the parishes in the 1801 Census, less an amount of 30 per cent to account for children, which would in itself tend to an underestimate since population was then growing. These calculations produced a range of between 10.6 per cent of population in St Giles and 22.9 per cent in the prestigious parish of All Saints. These figures were extremes and most parishes produced figures around the average of 13.8 per cent rate payers above the minimum within the adult population. As no clear upper limit can be set to differentiate between the middling sort and the town gentry, this figure is something of an over-estimate of the size of the middling sort. In St James, for example, five rate payers of more than £2 rateable value are listed as 'Esq' and one other is Mrs Wegg of East Hill House. If these can be accounted town gentry, they amount to a little more than 6 per cent of the total rate payers listed in that parish. There is, however, a much more significant under-estimate in that counting rate payers does not include wives and adult children. Rate payers were heads of households, many of whom were married men. Hence around 20 per cent middling sort within the Colchester adult population can be estimated.

10 R.H. Britnell, *Growth and decline in Colchester, 1300–1525* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 181–205.

out-migration which had resulted by the 1740s in houses being demolished in several parishes. Population growth recommenced only in the 1770s, reaching 11,520 in 1801.<sup>11</sup>

The urbanisation of English society that began in the mid-eighteenth century was a key historical development, then unique in Europe. Population growth in England as a whole was virtually stagnant early in the century so even the slow growth rate of towns at around 5–6 per cent was significant. Although at around 1600 around 8 per cent of the population lived in towns of over 5,000 population, by 1750 the figure was approaching 16 per cent, by 1800 over 27 per cent and by 1841 the proportion was over 50 per cent.<sup>12</sup> Improved rates of agricultural production sustained this larger population and developing communications produced a cohesive urban network and facilitated the marked growth in internal trade. In 1700 Colchester and Norwich were the two largest East Anglian towns (both centres in the cloth trade), followed at some distance by the ports and larger market towns such as Ipswich, Chelmsford and Yarmouth (some 3,000 inhabitants) and satellite textile centres such as Halstead, Braintree, Lavenham and Hadleigh (1,000–3,000 inhabitants). Colchester was therefore the major urban centre in north-east Essex, larger than Chelmsford, the county town. In 1700 the English urban network was dominated by London, the largest metropolis in Europe and by far the largest town in England. Six or seven towns of more than 10,000 inhabitants included regional centres like York, major ports such as Bristol and textile towns in the South West and East Anglia, such as Norwich. Nationally, therefore, Colchester fell into the next ranking, among the twenty-five or so towns with populations between 5,000 and 10,000, compared to the 500 or so English market towns with populations of up to 1,800, and forty or fifty towns of up to 5,000.<sup>13</sup> By 1800, though the giant capital remained the largest single centre, the fastest points of new urban and industrial growth were in the Midlands and the North. Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham and the Potteries were home to a large sector of the urban population, whereas Colchester had only a little over 11,000 population in 1801.

Provincial urban society is now recognised as a key part of the urban network, where urban culture flourished not as a pale imitation of London, but in lively dialogic relationship with the metropolis. Towns (including smaller towns) were accelerators of social and cultural change. Urban concentration provided better markets for the goods

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11 P. Morant, *The history and antiquities of the most ancient town of Colchester* (Colchester, 1748), book 2, p. 110, re demolitions; Brown, *Essex at work*, pp. 14–15, 98.

12 E.A. Wrigley, *Poverty, progress and population* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 280; P. Deane, *The first industrial revolution* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 278; E.A. Wrigley and R. Schofield, *The population history of England 1541–1871; a reconstruction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

13 C. Chalkin, *The provincial towns of Georgian England* (London, 1974); C. Chalkin and M. Haviden (eds.), *Rural change and urban growth 1500–1800*, (London, 1974); A. Everitt (ed.), *Perspectives in English urban history* (London, 1973); P. Clark, *Country towns in pre-industrial England* (Leicester, 1981); P. Clark (ed.), *The early modern town* (London, 1976); M. J. Daunton, 'Towns and economic growth in eighteenth-century England' in P. Abrams and E. Wrigley (eds.), *Towns in societies* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 9–33; P. J. Corfield, *The impact of English towns, 1700–1800* (Oxford, 1982).

and services which were associated with cultures of politeness.<sup>14</sup> Urban society was distinctively gendered; women were the majority of urban inhabitants and had particular visibility and opportunity for work, social association, leisure and pleasure (even where those opportunities amounted to better chances of gleaning a living by begging).<sup>15</sup> A growing body of scholarship on the middling ranks of Georgian urban society delineates the importance and distinctiveness of this social group, though much of this work focuses on London or on larger and faster-growing provincial towns. For example, Hannah Barker's work on Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield emphasises the dynamic effect middling business, and particularly that of businesswomen, had on those buoyant urban economies.<sup>16</sup> Colchester had its share of businesswomen, from Elizabeth Selly the wealthy brewer who died in 1768 to the numbers of milliners, innkeepers, schoolteachers and women in other trades who were part of the growth of the trading and retail sector in the second half of the century.<sup>17</sup> This study takes a view of eighteenth-century Colchester from the perspective of its middling sort to re-examine the tension between historical processes of comparative urban decline and social modernisation.

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14 Wrigley and Schofield, *The population history of England*; E.A. Wrigley, 'Urban growth and agricultural change: England and the continent in the early modern period' in P. Borsay (ed.), *The eighteenth-century town* (London, 1990), pp. 64–75; P. Borsay, *The English urban renaissance: culture and society and the provincial town* (Oxford, 1989); Sweet, *The English town*, pp. 1, 2, 10–12, 194–6; P. Clark et al. (ed.), *The Cambridge urban history of Britain* (Cambridge, 2000).

15 Corfield, *The impact*; H. Barker and E. Chalus (eds.), *Gender in eighteenth-century England* (Harlow, 1997); T. Hitchcock, *Down and out in eighteenth-century London* (London, 2004).

16 Barker, *The business of women*; P. Sharpe, 'Gender in the economy: female merchants and family businesses in the British Isles, 1600–1850', *Histoire Sociale – Social History*, 34 (2001), pp. 283–306; M.R. Hunt, *The middling sort: commerce, gender, and the family in England, 1680–1780* (Berkeley and London, 1996); J. Barry and C.W. Brooks, 'The middling sort of people: culture, society, and politics in England, 1550–1800', (London, 1994); J.M. Ellis, *The Georgian town, 1680–1840* (Basingstoke, 2001); Rule, *Albion's people*; J. Ellis, 'Regional and county centres', Chapter 20 in P. Clark et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge urban history of Britain* (Cambridge, 2000).

17 John Bensusan Butt *Biographical Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century Colchester* (hereafter JBB BD) (forthcoming 2008), entry for Elizabeth Selly JBB BD/769; S. D'Cruxe, "'To acquaint the ladies": women traders in Colchester c.1750–c.1800', *Local Historian*, 17 (1986), 158–62.