Paul Langford’s polite and commercial Englishmen

This extract from Paul Slack’s extended obituary of Paul Langford (1945–2015) discusses his two books that redefined 18th-century England.

Anyone who saw him in these years hard at work in the Upper Reading Room of the Bodleian in term-time, or in the two dozen and more provincial record offices he visited in the vacations, knew that he must be engaged on some large enterprise. But there was no prior indication of how substantial an advance on his earlier work it would turn out to be, both in the breadth of its historical vision and in the depth of its scholarship, until the appearance in rapid succession of the two books which made his name and by which he will always be remembered. The new breadth of vision was prompted by an invitation from John Roberts, the General Editor, to write a volume in the recently planned ‘New Oxford History of England’, and it produced A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783 (Oxford, 1989). The fresh focus for his scholarship became evident when he received a later invitation to give the prestigious Ford Lectures in 1990, and this resulted in Public Life and the Propertied Englishman 1689–1798 (Oxford, 1991). It was predictable of Paul that his New Oxford History volume was the first of the series to be published, and that Public Life and the Propertied Englishman was sent to the press as soon as the last of his lectures had been delivered.

The two books, on which he must have been working simultaneously, were very different in style and content, the first a novel interpretation of a whole society, with particular focus on the two themes in its title (taken from William Blackstone), the second a massive work of dense scholarship on a particular and particularly important topic. (He had hoped to publish a shorter synopsis alongside the latter, in the shape of the Ford lectures more or less as delivered, but the Press demurred.) A Polite and Commercial People deliberately set out ‘to emphasize the changes which occurred in an age not invariably associated with change’; and to underline the role as agents of change, not of a small aristocracy, but of ‘a broad middle class whose concerns became ever more central to Georgian society and whose priorities determined so much both of debate and action’. Britain was no longer a traditional society in any sense. It was a ‘plutocracy’ in which ‘power was widely diffused, constantly contested, and ever adjusting to new incursions of wealth, often modest wealth’; and it was held together by the commerce and politeness which were essential elements in what Paul called ‘the peculiar modernity of the Hanoverian age’. There was nothing very unusual in pointing to new kinds of commerce and consumption when explaining rapid social change in the 18th century; but the stress on the importance of polite...
modes of behaviour in regulating and conferring status across a broad social range was novel. It made politeness central to historical understanding of the 18th century for the first time.

The overall effect of the book was therefore to turn attention away from a landed elite and established church towards the middling and commercial classes who had left as indelible a mark on manners and attitudes as on the economy and politics. Paul confessed that the result was ‘a bias perhaps’ (p. xi), and there were reviewers who thought that sections of society above or below his very large middle class got short shrift, but all of them welcomed the book as giving new life to a much neglected period of English history. It contained some nicely quotable phrases in the author’s most assured style, to the effect, for example, that ‘a history of luxury and attitudes to luxury would come very close to being a history of the eighteenth century’ (p. 3). It was also very witty. Until we read Langford’s treatment of them, few of us ever supposed that the intricacies of English politics in the 1750s could be so entertaining. One review concluded that he had set a standard ‘in terms of scholarship, liveliness and sheer historical craftsmanship which later New Oxford Histories would find it difficult to match.

The full text of the obituary can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/memoirs