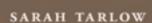# The Archaeology of Improvement in Britain, 1750–1850

Sarah Tarlow

This page intentionally left blank

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF IMPROVEMENT IN BRITAIN, 1750–1850

In this innovative study, Sarah Tarlow shows how the archaeology of this period manifests a widespread and cross-cutting ethic of Improvement, one of the most current concepts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. Theoretically informed and drawn from primary and secondary sources in a range of disciplines, the author considers agriculture and the rural environment, towns and buildings such as working-class housing and institutions of reform. From bleach baths to window glass, rubbish pits to tea wares, the material culture of the period reflects a particular set of values and aspirations. Tarlow examines the philosophical and historical background to the notion of Improvement and demonstrates how this concept is a useful lens through which to examine the material culture of later historical Britain.

Sarah Tarlow is Senior Lecturer in Historical Archaeology at the University of Leicester. The author of *Bereavement and Commemoration* and co-editor of *The Familiar Past? Archaeologies of Later Historical Britain*, she has published on a wide range of topics and is a member of the editorial board of *Archaeological Dialogues*.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF IMPROVEMENT IN BRITAIN, 1750–1850

SARAH TARLOW

University of Leicester

TO RACHEL, ADAM AND GREGORY

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

The writing of this book was supported by a Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust and a period of study leave granted by the University of Leicester. I am most grateful to both institutions for giving me this opportunity.

The ideas expressed here have taken shape partly through discussion with sharp-minded colleagues and friends. I would particularly like to thank Dave Edwards, Terry Hopkinson, Deirdre O'Sullivan, Marilyn Palmer, Mark Pluciennik and Richard Thomas. Outside my own institution, conversations with John Robb, Andrew Fleming, Chris Cumberpatch and Eleanor Casella have been very useful. Dave Edwards and Marilyn Palmer both read and commented on the entire text at a time when they had plenty of better things to do — I owe you each a large gin. The readers for Cambridge University Press — Matthew Johnson, Peter Mandler and Mary Beaudry — provided very helpful suggestions and comments. Peter Mandler especially gave a historian's view on the text, and his recommendations have helped immeasurably. Many thanks to Simon Whitmore and Beatrice Rehl at Cambridge University Press for being such helpful editors. Finally to Mark Pluciennik I am infinitely indebted for the moral, intellectual and logistical support without which this book would not have been written; thanks also to my two older children Rachel and Adam for their patience, and to the youngest one, Gregory, whose arrival proved a powerful enforcer of deadlines.

All figures are copyright of the author, except where otherwise stated. The cover illustration shows a 'prone couch' for the correction of poor posture, from G. B. Childs *On the Improvement and Preservation of the Female Figure*, 1840.

ONE:

INTRODUCTION

⌒

Yet, unless I greatly deceive myself, the general effect of this chequered narrative will be to excite thankfulness in all religious minds, and hope in the breasts of all patriots. For the history of our country during the last hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement. Those who compare the age on which their lot has fallen with a golden age which exists only in their imagination may talk of degeneracy and decay: but no man who is correctly informed as to the past will be disposed to take a morose or desponding view of the present.

T. B. Macaulay *History of England* 1849: 1

In tracing the progress of improvement, it is not necessary to draw the line of distinction between individual, local, and national establishments. These . . . have all one origin and one tendency.

David Laurie 1810: xxxiv

This book is not a complete account of the history and archaeology of Britain between 1750 and 1850. The history books alone dealing with that century fill several hundred metres of shelf space in my university library and one obviously cannot distil all that information, or even the most important bits of it into one, medium-sized book. Instead I have chosen to focus on aspects of the material evidence of the period which throw light on what I consider to be an important and characteristic aspect of the period: the idea of Improvement. My (admittedly ambitious) aim here is to provide an enhanced historical and theoretical context for existing and future work; to complement and contextualise the numerous pieces of small scale and meticulous work that have been produced in industrial, post-medieval and landscape archaeology. There are a number of things that this book is not: it is not intended as a critique of past work, nor yet a summary of it, although I will be drawing heavily on the original research of other archaeologists and historians of the periods. It is not a totalising

single narrative into which all developments can be seen to fit, or which accounts for all historically and materially evidenced practices. Rather, it is a framework which I hope can be employed, adapted or rejected by others in the project of developing a theoretically sophisticated later historical archaeology in Britain.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP OF THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES: FINDING A NAME

It is perhaps indicative of the fragmentary state of archaeological study of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain that there is still no consensus about what it should be called. 'Post–medieval archaeology', as adopted by the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology and used as the title of its journal, has traditionally encompassed only the early modern period. Gaimster's (1994) review of the subject, aiming 'to summarise the post-war development of an archaeological approach to the study of British post-medieval society' is typical in that the period defined is from 1450–1750, and refers almost exclusively to changes in ceramic production, exchange and use. Virtually no reference is made to wider historical questions or to the study of landscape, architecture or other aspects of the broad context. The problems with defining a start date for this period (Courtney 1997) are matched by those of defining an end. There is still no agreement on whether post-medieval archaeology is equivalent to early modern history, or includes the entire period from the fifteenth to the twentieth century.

In the traditional chronology of British archaeology, 'Post–medieval archae-ology' is followed by 'industrial archaeology' (see reviews such as Hunter and Ralston 1999; Vyner 1994; and the regional research frameworks produced by English Heritage), but the problems with this designation are even greater than with 'Post-medieval archaeology'. It is variously used to denote a theme, a period and/or an approach to data. The work of industrial archaeologists has traditionally orientated itself towards (as its name indicates) a research agenda limited to the remains of industry, although a case has been made that the term should be understood to include the archaeology of the industrial age, including its build-ings, landscapes and artefacts (Palmer 1990). It must be noted, however, that despite the efforts of some industrial archaeologists to expand their discipline, it remains predominantly focused on the technology and isolated from other developments in later historical archaeology. The context-free chapter on industrial archaeology (Cranstone 2001) contributed to Newman's *Historical Archaeology of Britain* (2001), for example, sits oddly in a book otherwise dedicated to the integration of different forms of evidence in addressing social historical questions.

Recent Repositioning

We are now close to the point where it is no longer necessary to lament the rudimentary state of archaeology of later historical periods in Britain. The past few years have seen a flurry of publications dealing with the (long) post–medieval period. There are new books, conferences and academic posts (in November 2003, a search of staff websites of British archaeology departments showed seventeen people in academic positions who mentioned a research interest in this period; in addition there are scores of archaeologists in commercial, heritage and local government employment who contribute to the development of later historical archaeology), so it would no longer be correct to say that the period is neglected. The ambition of later historical archaeology has also grown, and institutional changes recognise this expansion. The Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology, formerly very conservative in its remit and interests, has dropped the 'end-date' of 1750 and now considers all archaeology from the sixteenth century onwards. Its association with the Society for Medieval Archaeology has given rise to a series of conferences and books which examine critically some of the issues affecting the medieval/post medieval transition (Gaimster and Stamper 1997; Gaimster and Gilchrist 2003; Barker and Cranstone 2004; Green and Leech 2006). Crossley's textbook *Post-Medieval Archaeology* (1990), which was limited to the early modern period, has been effectively superseded by Newman (2001), an excellent though confessedly atheoretical survey of the archaeology of Britain from the Reformation to the twentieth century. Other authored volumes (e.g. Johnson 1993, 1996; Tarlow 1999; Finch 2000; Dalglish 2003) and edited volumes (e.g. Tarlow and West 1999; Buchli and Lucas 2001) have raised the profile of later historical archaeology and related material studies (including archaeological studies of landscape and architecture). An increase in the number of PhD students and a new academic forum (the annual conference on Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory, established in 2003) have also re-invigorated the subject. British later historical archaeology has never been more exciting or even, in a limited archaeological way, fashionable.

In America, South Africa and Australia, the archaeological study of the period from European contact to the present is known as 'historical archaeology' and some recent occurrences (e.g. the British conference initiated in 2003 on Contemporary and Historical Archaeology and Theory) suggest the term is now being used in Europe to refer to the archaeology of the last 500 years, despite reservations. Partly these reservations are practical arising from confusion between the 'American' meaning of historical archaeology (the last 500 years or so) and the Euro–Asian meaning of the term (the last several thousand years), giving rise to ambiguity and misunderstanding in our discussions. Partly they are political and philosophical; 'historical archaeology' is not really acceptable as a global term (contra Orser 1996). In Europe, where 'historical archaeology' is used in place of

a more temporally specific term, it generally refers to all periods which have produced decipherable textual evidence (Andrén 1998), and where the relationship between text and material needs to be considered. Thus historical archaeology in most of Europe covers a period four times as long as in North America; and in parts of Asia, historical archaeology is far longer than in Europe. Cranstone has made a convincing case that the use of the term 'historical archaeology' to refer to the period after 1492 in Europe is unacceptably Ameri-centric (Cranstone 2004). Ironically, 'historical archaeology' is Orser's preferred term (1996: vii) for 'the post-1492 world'. Exasperatingly, he goes on to describe much of the endeavour of historical archaeologists as 'Eurocentric' – another term which is a more forceful criticism outside Europe – and which seems to imply that European perspectives dominate global historical archaeology rather than those of white Americans.

To adopt the terms used by historians – early modern and modern – would seem sensible, and 'early modern archaeology' is pretty satisfactory, but 'modern archaeology' is ambiguous and could easily be confused with contemporary material culture studies, or could be alluding to present-day archaeological practice. Recently (1999), Susie West and I suggested the term 'later historical archaeology', but at the time of writing, no clear convention has been adopted.

Does it Matter?

Absence of consensus on nomenclature reflects the lack of agreement about research questions, or even what are the main processes, themes and questions in this period to which archaeologists might usefully contribute. Squabbles about inclusion and exclusion, however, represent more than academic turf wars; they signal real differences in view about what are the most interesting and valuable directions of research to pursue. Some archaeologists of historical periods have criticised their fellows for the modesty of their ambitions, for being, in Moreland's evocative phrase 'bottom dwellers' in historical interpretation, seeking out 'text-free zones' where the historian cannot go (Moreland 2001).

In the case of later historical archaeology in Britain, the search for 'text-free zones' where the study of material culture can genuinely offer new facts that are not known or knowable from documentary sources has directed researchers to study aspects of the technology of manufacture itself, and to concentrate on the earlier post-medieval period where there are more gaps in written sources. The understanding of archaeology that underlies this approach is the one that sees material culture as interesting only if it can give us new facts about the past, and archaeology as a second-rate substitute for historical research. Thus, the kind of facts it gives us, though fascinating to some, do not often engage

with the analysis of big historical questions. Many — perhaps most — archaeologists of this period working in Britain do not contextualise their work beyond questions of local technological and economic development, or the narrow histories of one kind of material. Much of the time archaeologists work to no agenda at all for this period, merely recording information generated as by-products of palliative field work, or because post-medieval material is in the way of the *really* interesting earlier deposits. There is little sense that arguments are being made, or that there is much real engagement with historical issues. The pages of *Post-Medieval Archaeology* continue to be dominated by accounts of particular excavations or descriptions of certain bodies of material, and one rarely encounters synthetic analysis or work that attempts to draw out major paradigms. The 'big questions' of history such as the development of capitalism, formation of class identity, the nature of modernity, the creation of an industrial society (rather than industrial machinery), the variety and nature of personal and group identities, colonial and post-colonial relations and economics and the development of modern consumerism have had a limited impact on most field and artefact-centred research. Ongoing endeavours by English Heritage to specify regional research agendas are certainly a welcome development, but with the reduction in funding for their production, it is unclear whether these will eventually be easily available for all areas (currently only a small number of regional framework documents are well advanced). Moreover, the regional research frameworks themselves are intended to be used as planning and management tools and are therefore academically informed, but not highly interpretive, being mainly concerned with identifying priorities in the collection of data.

Later historical archaeology can and should be far more ambitious than this, but it will involve a major change in the way we think about the value and orientation of the subject. Material culture is a central aspect of human expression; it can be just as complex, misleading, ambiguous, rich and insightful as text or art. Nobody would think of asking why we should study the literature or sculpture of the nineteenth century, since we know about the course of historical change in that period from other sources. But other kinds of material culture — pottery, gravestones, field boundaries and even window glass — are just as interesting as art or poetry, not because they give us new facts about what happened, except for some fairly trivial details of manufacture and exchange, but because they enrich our understanding of an exciting and complex period and our appreciation of the meaning and context of superficially mundane and familiar things is itself worth enhancing.

Building a New Later Historical Archaeology

In the absence of a well-developed theoretical framework Palmer and Neaverson have suggested that a naïve progressivism underlies much industrial

archaeology: 'The necessity of locating the earliest example of a particular process, or the most complete surviving site for the purposes of listing and scheduling . . . has inevitably led to an approach which concentrates on the positive aspects of human progress' (Palmer and Neaverson 1998: 4).

They go on to say that, in view of the striking evidence of social upheaval and class redefinition over the last 200–300 years, a Marxist theoretical framework may be more appropriate than this implicit Whiggishness. In other areas of later historical archaeology a neo-Marxist perspective has indeed come to dominate the theoretical horizon, as we shall see.

A neo-Marxist perspective is attractive to historical archaeologists for a number of reasons: first it opens up a really inclusive kind of past which foregrounds the experience of subaltern groups; next, it provides a socio-political context for the understanding of material conditions; third, it is relational, that is, Marxist archaeologies analyse society or culture rather than the individual or interior experience; finally, it informs, and indeed requires, a critical and reflexive archaeological practice in the present.

Neo-Marxist archaeologies have been developed in Britain and elsewhere with reference to the prehistoric past (e.g. McGuire (1992); Spriggs (1984); Shanks and Tilley (1987a, 1987b)), but the rise of Marxist-orientated historical archaeology owes a great debt to the American east-coast archaeologist, Mark Leone. Leone took Deetz's (1977) well-known and highly influential identification of the 'Georgian order' (something Deetz, in turn, had taken from the architectural historian Henry Glassie) and interpreted it as the expression of an essentially capitalist mind-set according to which discipline (e.g. bodily discipline, time discipline) and order are actively promoted as ideological strategies to legitimise capitalism, which he defines as:

> A social system in which the people who own and control the fields, factories, machines, tools and money do not assume the brunt of the work. Other men and women, who must sell their labor as if it were a commodity, perform the work. Nonetheless, the owner of the means and money — the capitalist — reaps most of the benefits from the labor of the workers. This way of seeing capitalism pushes its economic character to the front, without denying the totalizing efforts of capitalism. (Leone 1999: 13)

Leone believes that historical archaeology is necessarily an archaeology of capitalism which, for him, has two related aspects: the first is the delineation of how, historically, inequalities in terms of class, gender, race and so on, came to exist. This includes analysis of how the ideologies that permitted or promoted these inequalities were expressed in society. The second aspect is what could be called 'consciousness-raising'. This means acknowledging that these historical

inequalities continue to structure social and political relationships today and, through active dialogue with many groups in contemporary society, exposing the strategies through which those relationships have been naturalised or other–wise legitimised. Together these add up to a kind of mission statement for the historical archaeologist:

> Our job, therefore, as historical archaeologists is, first, to help identify the workings of capitalism, such as capital extraction, alienation, and supply and demand. Second, we need to see how these penetrate communities and change culture. Third, we can create an understand–ing of the social and economic implications of activities that make up daily life, such as looking at a clock, eating with a fork on a creamware plate, and going shopping. (Leone 1999: 19)

Leone's Marxist characterisation of the period emphasises the development of a certain set of relations of production, based on class (Leone 1995). The relation–ship between the owners of the means of production and the emerging 'working class' (and, by extension, other subaltern groups such as women, blacks and foreigners) is fundamentally unequal and exploitative. This inequality may be legitimated by ideological strategies which naturalise or mask it. Relations of power and inequality permeate all social relationships of the period, and the mediation of the tensions thus engendered ('contradictions') allows the expres–sion not only of strategies of ideological domination, but also of resistance. Thus, houses and the material components of daily life have been studied for their role in the definition of individual identity which is then used strategically in the promulgation of, or in resistance to, particular legitimatory ideologies. Relations of dominance on slave plantations and in industrial towns have been studied alike through architecture and material culture, where a dominant elite attempts to control the daily life of a subordinate slave population or working class; resistance by these groups is studied in their rejection of middle/upper–class ways of life and their connected rejection of concepts of the individual and of the legitimacy of the master–slave or capitalist–worker relationship. Leone's treatment of the development of capitalist social and economic relations has been further elaborated by Martin Hall. Like Leone and his students at Annapolis, Hall's work in Cape Town focuses on the creation of and resistance to a colonial, capitalist society, and on its presentation and meaning in a post–colonial world. Hall's view of capitalism incorporates a recognition of the significance of discourse in material practice, i.e. that material culture, and the ways it is deployed, have an active, expressive and communicative role. Whilst Hall does not claim that the processes of capitalism worked out everywhere the same, he is interested in 'similarities of form' generated by colonial discourse, itself a product of global capitalism (Hall 2000: 18).

A number of academics working in this period have made a case that it is the rise of capitalism that is the key defining process of the period or even that historical archaeology is identical with the archaeology of capitalism (Leone and Potter 1988b: 19; Paynter 1988: 415; Wurst 1999). Orser (1996: 71–2) cites several recent authors to demonstrate that the archaeology of the modern world is inseparable from the archaeology of capitalism. Other attempts to find a single major process by which the period can be described are dismissed by Wurst (1999):

> Many historical archaeologists recognize that our field is explicitly defined by capitalist social relations (Handsman 1983; Orser 1987; Leone and Potter 1988a; Little 1994; Leone 1995). Others have defined historical archaeology in terms of modernity or colonialism (Schuyler 1970; Deetz 1991; Deagan 1991; Orser 1996). These terms do not deny connections to capitalism, although they effectively mask them. (Wurst 1999: 7)

For Wurst, approaches which fail to foreground capitalism are politically suspect. Only the centrality of capitalism is acceptable in the analysis and explanation of historical archaeology. Obviously, whether or not we accept this premise depends not only on how you define 'historical archaeology', but also on how one defines capitalism.

Most of the historical archaeologists of capitalism argue that capitalism is not just an economic system, but a structuring ideology, a mindset, that permeates all material practices and social relations. Every detail of life, from the layout of streets to the composition of a meal, from the landscape of a garden to the choice of ceramics, is in some way a response to capitalism. Even those practices which seem to ignore, subvert or circumvent the expectations of capitalist relations are produced by capitalism, in the sense of being 'acts of resistance' (e.g. Leone 1999; Purser 1999; contributors to the *International Journal of Archaeology* 3.1 and 3.2 (1999)).

Leone's openly radical agenda, also a feature of Hall's recuperative and emancipatory project, is an attractive one for historical archaeologists of the left, giving their work relevance and urgency in a contemporary context. Particularly in Britain, where material has been analysed in a very narrow social context, an interpretive framework foregrounding capitalism provides an attractive alternative model for the creation of a critical and contextual later historical archaeology. The most sophisticated, and most 'social' theoretical approach to the growth of the modern world in Britain is probably the 'archaeology of capitalism' pioneered in this country by Matthew Johnson (1993, 1996). Johnson (1996) feels that 'the work of American historical archaeologists has shown in practical terms the way forward for Old World

medieval and post-medieval archaeology more than any other school of thought'. (1996: 14)

Matthew Johnson, who is less concerned with the 'consciousness-raising' aspect of Marxist archaeology than Leone, although he is clearly influenced by the approach and themes of the Annapolis school, nevertheless put 'capitalism' at the centre of his analysis of the archaeology of early modern England. He uses the term 'capitalism' as 'a necessary shorthand for the changing practices and transitions that have shaped aspects of modern life' (1996: 3), but recognises that those practices will vary from place to place (1996: 7). Reviewing Johnson (1996), Schuyler points out that Johnson's definition of capitalism may be 'overly fluid'. Johnson's capitalism 'embraces lifeways, conceptions of the self and the individual, table manners, music and bodily discipline' (Schuyler 1996: 226) which, as Johnson himself concedes, means that it becomes difficult to define the core and specific features of the system.

'Marxism' and its Limits in Later Historical Archaeology

The aim of this book is not to subvert or attack a broadly Marxist position to which I am sympathetic. However, it does address some perceived weaknesses of the Anglo-American 'Historical Archaeology' of capitalism. Notably it considers motivation, and confronts phenomena that do not sit comfortably in Marxist explanatory frameworks: philanthropy, aspiration and collective activity. All these three could, of course, be explained as manifestations of 'false consciousness', or as ideological strategies for masking the 'bottom line', but I argue here that such analysis necessitates subscription to a very cynical understanding of human culture, and some contortions of analysis. In re-assessing our approach to the archaeology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we must consider the central issues of power, inequality, capitalism and class in a British context. Nevertheless, it is also clear that relying on them as the *sole* foci of study prejudges and limits our understanding of recent British society.

The problem is that neo-Marxist historical archaeologies risk becoming simply another kind of reductionism, this time reducing the complexities of human actions, practices and thoughts to the strategic negotiation of power relationships, often through the assertion of identity. Marxist historical archaeologies prejudge the meaning of the material past by supposing that all human practices are 'really' about the exercise, legitimation, manipulation or rejection of power relationships of inequality. Thus, the historical particularity of a context is in some ways diminished to the identification of (usually) two groups between whom power negotiations are taking place, and the choice from a repertoire of strategies (e.g. naturalisation, masking, resistance through alternative discourses or the assertion of other identities) by which this negotiation was accomplished. In this way, material 'discourse' as discussed by Hall for

example, is a 'performance of power' directed at an audience of 'others' who may reject, subvert or subscribe to the set of relations enacted (Hall 2000). The archaeology of capitalism always asks the same question: what does this or that aspect of the material past tell us about relationships of power between social groups? This is an interesting question with important political implications in the present, but it is not the only question worth asking. Material practices are about belief, culture, aspiration and ways of understanding the world, as well as about social control. Cultural action can be about the creation of horizontal relationships, and individual relationships as well as hierarchical ones and relationships between groups. As Williamson (1995) has suggested when writing about the creation of parks and gardens by the gentry in eighteenth century England, the response of the poor, or other marginalised groups might be irrelevant where the main social motivation was the consolidation of convivial relationships within the upper middle classes. Material action also has cultural specificity and involves the pursuit or enaction of cultural values.

I hope that this book can be read alongside archaeologies of capitalism, and that it might throw some light on the conceptual factors that made the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries different and specific, and affected the particular course of capitalist expansion through the period, without reducing complex and varied phenomena to contests between hapless peasants and villainous landowners.

The Idea of Improvement

One of the outstanding tasks for British historical archaeologists, then, is to draw out what is distinctive about later historical periods. Given capitalism's early origins, it is not capitalism per se that makes the later eighteenth century and the nineteenth century different to what went before, although the scale of capitalist economies and the pervasiveness of capitalist ideologies were unprecedented. However, systems of social and economic relations are informed also by habits of mind and ways of constituting the subject, which are variable through time. The historical specificity of the post-Enlightenment individual is sometimes hard to see, precisely because we do share it, but this book attempts to draw out one of the central, but historically particular, values of modernity, and use it to understand the material remains of the period.

As Susie West and I argued (1999), the proximity of later historical archaeology to our own times, and the superficial 'familiarity' of the period often masks what is historically distinctive about the modern age. The permeation and currency of the ethic of improvement is a case in point: it might be the very ubiquity of improvement that has led to its historical invisibility. Improvement, a very popular theme in the eighteenth century, is a sufficiently