Chapter Five
Harvesting the Agrarian Revolution

In truth the agrarian revolution is but a current in the wake of mightier movements.

R.H. Tawney\(^1\)

I do not believe that it would be going too far to say, that nine-tenths of the farmhouses of England have been destroyed since the day that the ‘good old King’ came to the throne…Nothing that man could devise would be more injurious to the country than this.

William Cobbett\(^2\)

While the period 1760 to 1820 is generally identified with the first wave of the Industrial Revolution, possibly the most impressive area of economic performance during this period was to be found in the rate of increase in agrarian output. This period coincides with the era of parliamentary enclosures, which extinguished the open fields and the customary courts that governed them on the remaining half of the land that remained subject to open field farming after the middle of the century. Since most arable land became subject to economic leases after enclosure, this meant a steady addition of new land to the growing competitive market in land leases. This, in turn, helped to accelerate the growth of the domestic market, the spread of innovations in agriculture, including: mechanical devices, continued improvement in agrarian productivity and a resumption of rapid population growth adding to

\(^1\) Tawney 1912, p. 408.
\(^2\) Cobbett 1824, p. 147.
the expanding pool of landless labourers and poor in both city and country. While the growth of population and the expansion of cottage manufacturing were common developments across Europe at this time, no other country witnessed the expansion of cottage manufacturing on the same scale as Britain. The economic processes set in motion by agrarian capitalism were now culminating in an extraordinary economic transformation that was unfolding before and, once it began, alongside the Industrial Revolution. In this chapter we will explore this transformation in order to better understand the nature of the economic context within which the Industrial Revolution started and unfolded.

Of the key factors that made up the economic context in which the Industrial Revolution emerged and was sustained, most can be linked to the previous and ongoing development of agrarian capitalism. These include: a price recovery; renewed population growth contributing to an expanding surplus population no longer tied to the land, with increasing numbers already engaged in domestic manufacturing; an expanding supply of grain based on improved agriculture capable, with imports, of meeting the bulk of the demand for food amongst the growing population; sufficient domestic demand to sustain a rapid increase in manufacturing; accumulated savings for capital formation along with a growing system of country banks and a rapidly improving system of transportation on turnpiked roads and canals. The expansion of colonial markets is an additional factor that can be associated with success in war and empire-building and with the growth of domestic production, the former expanding demand for