During the long eighteenth century, English rural society became increasingly polarized between substantial farmers, whose incomes enabled them to enjoy the widening range of material goods and services, and the world of smallholders and cottagers, whose livelihoods were based on a combination of wage labour in agriculture (usually seasonal in nature), work in rural crafts and services, and sometimes sales of garden and field produce. Economic pressures within agriculture and estate administration favoured larger tenant farms at the expense of smallholders, and the garden and field plots associated with village farmhouses were often eroded. Enclosure (both parliamentary and by agreement) tended to eliminate the smallest landowners who sold their land, with or without the farmhouse. Adding to the problem, the rural population in southern England grew rapidly in the second half of the century, outstripping the demand for jobs in towns that had earlier absorbed the out-migration. In short, more rural housing was required for a group in society whose ability to pay for it was diminishing.

These changes took place, moreover, in the midst of a major rebuilding campaign in London and provincial towns to banish vernacular wooden structures and put in their stead multi-story, uniform, neo-classical designs in brick and stone with slate or tile roofing. In rural areas the movement resulted in an unprecedented amount of country house construction and landscaping, the relocation of model farms in regular fashion across the countryside, and the (re)-building of villages in neat and regular lines of cottages, as at Nuneham Courtney in Oxfordshire, or Milton Abbas in Dorset. It certainly reinforced the new security felt by the aristocracy...
and gentry after the revolution of 1688. But only a small percentage of the rural population lived in country houses, and the model villages were the exception not the rule. Cottagers constituted a significant proportion of those residing in the countryside. Given their deteriorating economic position, it seems unlikely they could have invested additional amounts in housing.

In this chapter, I explore the decline in self-constructed housing and the provision of new and not so new housing by the private sector, charities, and local governmental authorities. I challenge the assumption that pure economic liberalism prevailed and all cottagers ended up either in a hovel or a workhouse. I do find, however, that ambitious re-building efforts championed by some reformers ran into trouble at the end of the eighteenth-century as Britain faced crises at home and abroad. Opinions clearly came to differ as to how dire a problem the impermanent cottages of the poor really were and whether the provision of more durable housing by the parish authorities or charities was the right course of action. Did the Georgian brick townhouse model improve family morale and morals or was a return to self-built housing on a bit of unused land the answer for the restoration of family values and parish poor relief funds? More than one scholar has noticed how the stand alone thatched cottage, a fire trap if there ever was one, actually became such a symbol of family happiness that architectural pattern books offered a tidied-up, more durable version of it for the consumption of the respectable middle-classes. To understand this phenomenon and more importantly the issue of how a society which increasingly celebrated individual property rights dealt in new ways with the needs of those with little or no property is the objective of this chapter.2

The Decline of Self-Constructed Cottages

Traditionally, yeomen, husbandmen, and cottagers had constructed houses from local building materials, drawing, if they had the means, on skilled

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