

**A HISTORY  
OF THE PROTESTANT  
REFORMATION**

**LETTER SIXTEEN**



**By William Cobbett**

**1825**

**A HISTORY  
OF THE  
PROTESTANT "REFORMATION"  
IN  
ENGLAND AND IRELAND**

**Showing how that event has impoverished and degraded  
the main  
body of the People in those Countries**

**IN A SERIES OF LETTERS**

**Addressed to all sensible and just Englishmen**

**BY WILLIAM COBBETT.**

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**A HISTORY  
OF THE  
PROTESTANT REFORMATION  
LETTER XVI**

**Former Population of England and Ireland.  
Former Wealth.  
Former Power.  
Former Freedom.  
Former Plenty, Ease, and Happiness,**

**By William Cobbett**

**Kensington, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1826**

**Dear Friends,**

449. This Letter is to conclude my task, which task was to make good this assertion, that the event called the "**Reformation**" had impoverished and degraded the main body of the people of England and Ireland. In paragraph 4, I told you, that a fair and honest inquiry would teach us, that the word "**Reformation**" had, in this case, been misapplied; that there was a change, but a change greatly for the worse; that the thing, called the Reformation, was engendered in beastly lust, brought forth in hypocrisy and perfidy, and cherished and fed by plunder, "**devastation, and by rivers of innocent English and Irish blood**"; and that, as to its more remote consequences, they are, some of them, now before us, in that misery, that beggary, that nakedness, that hunger, that everlasting wrangling and spite, which now stare us in the face and stun our ears at every turn, and which the "**Reformation**" has given us in exchange for the ease and happiness and harmony and Christian charity, enjoyed so abundantly, and for so many ages, by our Catholic forefathers.

450. All this has been amply proved in the fifteen foregoing Letters, except that I have not yet shown, in detail, how our Catholic forefathers lived, what sort and what quantity of food and raiment they had, compared with those which we have. This I am now about to do. I have made good my charge of beastly lust, hypocrisy, perfidy, plunder, devastation, and bloodshed; the charge of misery, of beggary, of nakedness and of hunger, remains to be fully established.

451. But I choose to be better rather than worse than my word: I did not pledge myself to prove anything as to the population, wealth, power, and freedom of the nation; but I will now show not only that the people were better off, better fed and clad, before the "**Reformation**" than they ever have been since, but that the nation was more populous, wealthy, powerful and free before than it ever has been since that event. Read modern romancers, called historians, every one of whom has written for place or pension; read the statements about the superiority of the present over former times, about our prodigious increase in population, wealth, power, and, above all things, our superior freedom; read the monstrous statements of **HUME**, who unblushingly asserts

"that one good county of England is now capable of making a greater effort than the whole kingdom was in the reign of **HENRY V.**, When to maintain the garrison of the small town of Calais required more than a third of the ordinary revenues"; this is the way in which every Scotchman reasons. (*History* (Murray's reprint), i., 605) He always estimates the wealth of a nation by the money the government squeezes out of it. He forgets that "**a poor government makes a rich people.**" According to this criterion of **Hume**, America must now be a wretchedly poor country. This same **HENRY V** could conquer, really conquer, France, and that, too, without beggaring England by hiring a million of Prussians, Austrians, Cossacks, and all sorts of hirelings. But writers have, for ages, been so dependent on the government and the aristocracy, and the people have read and believed so much of what they have said, and especially in praise of the "**Reformation**" and its effects, that it is no wonder that they should think that in Catholic times England was a poor, beggarly spot, having a very few people on it, and that the "**Reformation**" and the **HOUSE OF BRUNSWICK** and the Whigs have given us all we possess of wealth, of power, of freedom, and have almost created us, or at least, if not actually begotten us, caused nine-tenths of us to be born. These are all monstrous lies, but they have succeeded for ages. Few men dared to attempt to refute them, and if anyone made the attempt he obtained few hearers, and ruin, in some shape or other, was pretty sure to be the reward of his virtuous efforts. Now, however, when we are smarting under the lash of calamity; now, when everyone says that no state of things ever was so bad as this, now men may listen to the truth, and therefore I will lay it before them.

**452.** Populousness is a thing not to be proved by positive facts, because there are no records of the numbers of the people in former times, and because those which we have in our own day are notoriously false; if they be not the English nation has added a third to its population during the last twenty years! In short, our modern records I have, over and over again, proved to be false, particularly in my *Register, No. 2 of volume 46*. That England was more populous in Catholic times than it is now we must believe, when we know that in the three first Protestant reigns thousands of parish churches were pulled down, that parishes were united in more than two thousand instances, and when we know from the returns now before Parliament, that out of 11,761 parishes in England and Wales, there are upwards of a thousand which do not contain a hundred persons each, men, women and children. Then, again, the size of the churches. They were manifestly built, in general, to hold three, four, five or ten times the number of their present parishioners, including all the sectarians. What should men have built such large churches for? We are told of their "piety and zeal;" yes, but there must have been men to raise the buildings. The Lord might favour the work, but there must have been hands as well as prayers. And what motive could there have been for putting together such large quantities of stone and mortar, and to make walls four feet thick, and towers and steeples, if there had not been people to fill the buildings? And how could the labour have been performed? There must have been men to perform the labour; and can anyone believe that this labour would have been performed if there had not been a necessity for it? We now see large and most costly ancient churches, and these in great numbers too, with only a few mud huts to hold the thirty or a hundred of parishioners. Our forefathers built for ever, little thinking of the devastation that we were to behold! Next come the lands, which they cultivated and which we do not, amounting to millions of acres. This anyone may verify who will go into **Sussex, Hampshire, Dorsetshire, Devonshire and Cornwall**. They grew corn on the sides of hills which we now never attempt to stir. They made the hill into the form of steps of stairs in order to plough and sow the flat parts. These flats or steps still remain and are, in some cases, still cultivated ; but in nine cases out of ten they are not. Why should they have performed this prodigious labour if they had not had mouths to eat the corn? And how could they have performed such labour without numerous hands? On the high lands of Hampshire and Dorsetshire there are spots of a thousand acres together which still bear the un-effaceable marks of the plough, and which now never feel that implement. The modern writings on the subject of ancient population are mere romances, or they have been put forth with a view of paying court to the government of the day. **GEORGE CHALMERS**, a placeman, a pensioner, and a Scotchman, has been one of the most conspicuous in this species of deception. He, in what he calls an "**Estimate**," states the population of England and Wales in 1377 at 2,092,978. The

half of these were, of course, females. The males then were 1,046,486. The children, the aged, the infirm, the sick, made a half of these; so that there were 523,243 left of able-bodied men in this whole kingdom! Now the churches and the religious houses amounted at that time to upwards of 16,000 in number. There was one priest to every church, and these priests, together with the monks and friars, must have amounted to about 40,000 able men, leaving 483,243 able men. So that, as there were more than 14,000 parish churches, there were not quite twelve able-bodied men to each! **HUME** says that **WAT TYLER** had, in 1381 (four years after Chalmers's date), a hundred thousand men assembled on Blackheath," so that, to say nothing of the numerous bodies of insurgents assembled at the same time in **Hertford, Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk** and **Lincoln**; to say nothing of the king's army of 40,000; and to say gentry, and rich people, here **Wat Tyler** had got together on Blackheath more than one-fifth of all the able-bodied men in England and Wales! And he had, too, collected them together in the space of about six days! Do we want, can we want, anything more than this in answer, in refutation of these writers on the ancient population of the country? Let it be observed that in these days there were, as Hume himself relates, and his authorities relate also, frequently 100,000 pilgrims at a time assembled at Canterbury to do penance or make offerings at the shrine of **THOMAS-A-BECKET**. There must then have been 50,000 men here at once; so that, if we were to believe this **pensioned Scotch writer**, we must believe that more than a tenth of all the able-bodied men of England and Wales were frequently assembled at one and the same time, in one city, in an extreme corner of the island, to kneel at the tomb of one single saint. Monstrous lie! And yet it has been sucked down by "**enlightened Protestants**" as if it had been part of the Gospel. But if Canterbury could give entertainment to 100,000 strangers at a time, what must Canterbury itself have been? A grand, a noble, a renowned city it was, venerated and even visited by no small part of the kings, princes, and nobles of all Europe. It is now a beggarly, gloomy looking town, with about 12,000 inhabitants, and, as the published accounts say, with 3,000 of its inhabitants paupers, and with a part of the site of its ancient and splendid churches, convents, and streets, covered with barracks, the cathedral only remaining for the purpose, as it were, of keeping the people in mind of the height from which they have fallen. The best criterion of the population is, however, to be found in the number and size of the churches, and that of the religious houses. There was one parish church to every four square miles throughout the kingdom; and one religious house (including all the kinds) to every thirty square miles. That is to say, one parish church to every piece of land two miles each way; and one religious house to every piece of land five miles long and six miles wide. These are facts that nobody can deny. The geography tells us the number of square miles in the country, and as to the number of parishes and religious houses, it is too well known to admit of dispute, being recorded in books without number. Well then, if the father of lies himself were to come and endeavour to persuade us that England was not more populous before the "**Reformation**" than it is now, he must fail with all but downright idiots. The same may be said with regard to Ireland, where there were, according to **ARCHDALL**, 742 religious houses in the reign of **Henry VIII.**, and, of course, one of these to every piece of land six miles each way; and where there was a parish church to every piece of land a little more than two miles and a half each way. Why these churches? What were they built for? By whom were they built? And how were all these religious houses maintained? Alas! Ireland was in those days a fine, a populous, and a rich country. Her people were not then half-naked and half-starved. There were then no projects for relieving the Irish by sending them out of their native land!

**453.** The wealth of the country is a question easily decided. In the reign of **HENRY VIII.**, just before the "**Reformation**," the whole of the lands in England and Wales had, according to Hume, been rated, and the annual rental was found to be three millions; and, as to this, Plume quotes undoubted authorities. Now, in order to know what these three millions were worth in our money we must look at the Act of Parliament, **24th year of Henry VIII., chapter 3**, which says, that "no person shall take for beef or pork above a half-penny, and for mutton or veal above three-farthings a pound, avoirdupois weight, and less in those places where they be now sold for less." This is by retail, mind. It is sale in the butchers' shops. So that, in order to compare the then with the present amount of the rental of the country, we must first see what the annual rental of England and Wales now is, and then we must see what the price of meat now is. I wish to

speak here of nothing that I have not unquestionable authority for, and I have no such authority with regard to the amount of the rental as it is just at this moment; but I have that authority for what the rental was in the year 1804. A return, printed by order of the House of Commons, and dated 10th July, 1804, states, that "the returns to the Tax-office (property tax) prove the rack-rental of England and Wales to be thirty-eight millions a year. Here, then, we have the rental to a certainty; for what was there that could escape the all-searching, taxing eye of **PITT** and his understrappers? **King Henry's inexperience** must have made him a poor hand, compared with **Pitt**, at finding out what people got for their land. **Pitt's** return included the rent of mines, canals, and of every species of real property; and the rental, the rack-rental, of the whole amounted to thirty-eight millions. This, observe, was in time of bank restriction, in time of high prices, in time of monstrously high rents, in time of high price of meat: that very year I gave eighteen shillings a score for fat hogs, taking head, feet, and all together; and for many years before and after, and including 1804, beef, pork, mutton and veal were, taken on the average, more than ten-pence a pound by retail. Now, as Henry's Act orders the meat to be sold, in some places, for less than the half-penny and the three-farthings, we may, I think, fairly presume that the general price was a half-penny. So that a half-penny of Henry's money was equal in value to ten-pence of **PITT'S** money; and, therefore, the three millions of rental in the time of **HENRY** ought to have become sixty millions in 1804; and it was, as we have seen, only thirty-eight millions. In 1822, **MR. CURWIN** said, the rental had fallen to twenty millions. But, then, meat had also fallen in price. It is safer to take 1804, where we have undoubted authority to go on. This proof is of a nature to bid defiance to **CAVIL**. No man can dispute any of the facts, and they are conclusive as to the point that the nation was more wealthy before the "**Reformation**" than it is now. But there are two other Acts of Parliament to which I will refer as corroborating in a very striking manner this fact of the superior general opulence of Catholic times. The Act, 18th year of **Henry VI., Chap. 11**, after setting forth the cause for the enactment, provides that no man shall, under a heavy penalty, act as a justice of the peace who has not lands and tenements of the clear yearly value of twenty pounds. This was in 1439, about a hundred years before the above-mentioned act about meat of **HENRY VIII**. The money was of still higher value in the reign of **HENRY VI**. However, taking it as before, at twenty times the value of our money, the justice of the peace must then have had four hundred pounds a year of our money; and we all know that we have justices of the peace of one hundred a year. This **Act of Henry VI.** shows that the country abounded in gentlemen of good estate; and, indeed, the Act itself says that the people are not contented with having "men of small behaviour set over them." A thousand fellows, calling themselves historians, would never overset such a proof of the superior general opulence and ease and happiness of the country. The other of the Acts to which I have alluded is **1st year Richard III., chap. 4**, which fixes the qualification of a juror at twenty shillings a year in freehold, or twenty-six and eight-pence copyhold, clear of all charges. That is to say, a clear yearly income from real property of, at least, twenty pounds a year of our money! And yet the Scotch historians would make us believe that our ancestors were a set of beggars! These things prove beyond all dispute that England was, in Catholic times, a really wealthy country; that wealth was generally diffused; that every part of the country abounded in men of solid property; and that, of course, there were always great resources at hand in cases of emergency. If we were now to take it into our heads to dislike to have men of "small behaviour set over us;" if we were to take a fancy to justices of the peace of four hundred a year, and jurors of twenty pounds a year; if we were, as in the days of good King Henry, to say that we would not be governed nor ruled "by men of" small behaviour, how quickly we should see Botany Bay! When **Cardinal Pole** landed at Dover, in the reign of **Queen Mary**, he was met and escorted on his way by two thousand gentlemen of the country on horseback. What! 2,000 country gentlemen in so beggarly a country as **Chalmers** describes it! Aye, and they must have been found in Kent and Surrey too. Can we find such a troop of country gentlemen there now? In short, everything shows that England was then a country abounding in men of real wealth, and that it so abounded precisely because the king's revenue was small, yet this is cited by **HUME** and the rest of the Scotch historians as a proof of the nation's poverty! Their notion is that a people are worth what the government can wring out of them, and not a farthing more. And this is the doctrine which has been acted upon ever since the "**Reformation**," and which has at last brought us into our present

wretched condition.

**454.** As to the power of the country compared with what it is now, what do we want more than the fact that for many centuries before the "**Reformation**" England held possession of a considerable part of France; that the "**Reformation**" took, as we have seen, the two towns of **Boulogne and Calais** from her, leaving her nothing but those little specks in the sea, Jersey and Guernsey? What do we want more than this? France was never a country that had any pretensions to cope with England until the "**Reformation**" began. Since the "**Reformation**" she has not only had such pretensions, but she has shown to all the world that the pretensions are well founded. She even at this moment holds **Spain** in despite of us, while in its course the "**Reformation**" has wrested from us a large portion of our dominions, and has erected them into a state more formidable than any we have ever before beheld. We have, indeed, great standing armies, arsenals, and barracks, of which our Catholic forefathers had none; but they were always ready for war nevertheless. They had the resources in the hour of necessity. They had arms and men; and those men knew what they were to fight for before they took up arms. It is impossible to look back, to see the respect in which England was held for so many, many ages, to see the deference with which she was treated by all nations, without blushing at the thought of our present state. None but the greatest potentates presumed to think of marriage alliances with England. Her kings and queens had kings and princes in their train. Nothing petty ever thought of approaching her. She was held in such high honour, her power was so universally acknowledged, that she had seldom occasion to assert it by war. And what has she been for the last hundred and fifty years? Above half the time at war; and with a debt never to be paid, the cost of that war, she now rests her hopes of safety solely on her capacity of persuading her well-known foes that it is not their interest to assail her. Her warlike exertions have been the effect, not of her resources, but of an anticipation of those resources. She has mortgaged, she has spent beforehand, the resources necessary for future defence. And there she now is, inviting insult and injury by her well-known weakness, and, in case of attack, her choice lies between foreign victory over her or internal convulsion. Power is relative. You may have more strength than you had, but if your neighbours have gained strength in a greater degree, you are, in effect, weaker than you were. And can we look at France and America, and can we contemplate the inevitable consequences of war, without feeling that we are fast becoming, and indeed that we are already become a low and little nation? Can we look back to the days of our Catholic ancestors, can we think of their lofty tone and of the submission instantly produced by their threats, without sighing, "Alas! those days are never to return"?

**455.** And as to the freedom of the nation, where is the man who can tell me of any one single advantage that the "**Reformation**" has brought, except it be freedom to have forty religious creeds instead of one? Freedom is not an empty sound; it is not an abstract idea; it is not a thing that nobody can feel. It means,—and it means nothing else,—the full and quiet enjoyment of your own property. If you have not this, if this be not well secured to you, you may call yourself what you will, but you are a slave. Now, our Catholic forefathers took special care upon this cardinal point. They suffered neither kings nor parliaments to touch their property without cause clearly shown. They did not read newspapers, they did not talk about debates, they had no taste for "mental enjoyment;" but they thought hunger and thirst great evils, and they never suffered anybody to put them to board on cold potatoes and water. They looked upon bare bones and rags as indubitable marks of slavery, and they never failed to resist any attempt to affix these marks upon them. You may twist the word freedom as long as you please, but at last it comes to quiet enjoyment of your own property, or it comes to nothing. Why do men want any of those things that are called political rights and privileges? Why do they, for instance, want to vote at elections for members of parliament? Oh! because they shall then have an influence over the conduct of those members. And of what use is that? Oh! then they will prevent the members from doing wrong. What wrong? Why, imposing taxes that ought not to be paid. That is all; that is the use, and the only use, of any right or privilege that men in general can have. Now how stand we in this respect compared with our Catholic ancestors? They did not perhaps all vote at elections. But do we? Do a fiftieth part of us? And have the main body of us any, even the smallest,

influence in the making of laws and in the imposing of taxes? But the main body of the people had the Church to protect them in Catholic times. The Church had great power, and it was naturally the guardian of the common people; neither kings nor parliaments could set its power at defiance: the whole of our history shows that the Church was invariably on the side of the people, and that in all the much and justly boasted triumphs which our forefathers obtained over their kings and nobles the Church took the lead. It did this because it was dependent upon neither kings nor nobles; because, and only because, it acknowledged another head; but we have lost the protection of the Church, and have got nothing to supply its place; or rather, whatever there is of its power left has joined, or rather been engrossed by, the other branches of the state, leaving the main body of the people to the mercy of those other branches. "*The liberties of England*" is a phrase in every mouth, but what are those liberties? The laws which regulate the descent and possession of property; the safety from arrest, unless by due and settled process; the absence of all punishment without trial before duly authorised and well-known judges and magistrates; the trial by jury; the precautions taken by the divers writs and summonses; the open trial; the impartiality in the proceedings. These are the "**liberties of England.**" And had our Catholic forefathers less of these than we have? Do we not owe them all to them? Have we one single law that gives security to property or to life which we do not inherit from them? The treadmill, the law to shut men up in their houses from sunset to sunrise, the law to banish us for life if we utter anything having a tendency to bring our "**representatives**" into contempt; these indeed we do not inherit, but may boast of them, and of many others of much about the same character, as being unquestionably of pure Protestant origin.

**456.** Poverty, however, is after all the great badge, the never-failing badge of slavery. Bare bones and rags are the true marks of the real slave. What is the object of government? To cause men to live happily. They cannot be happy without a sufficiency of food and of raiment. Good government means a state of things in which the main body are well fed and well clothed. It is the chief business of a government to take care that one part of the people do not cause the other part to live miserable lives. There can be no morality, no virtue, no sincerity, no honesty, amongst a people continually suffering from want; and it is cruel in the last degree to punish such people for almost any sort of crime, which is in fact, not crime of the heart, not crime of the perpetrator, but crime of his all-controlling necessities.

**457.** To what degree the main body of the people in England are now poor and miserable, how deplorably wretched they now are, this we know but too well; and now we will see what was their state before this vaunted "**Reformation.**" I shall be very particular to cite my authorities here. I will infer nothing; I will give no "estimate," but refer to authorities such as no man can call in question, such as no man can deny to be proofs more complete than if founded on oaths of credible witnesses, taken before a judge and jury. I shall begin with the account which **FORTESCUE** gives of the state and manner of living of the English in the reign of **HENRY VI.** that is, in the fifteenth century, when the Catholic Church was in the height of its glory. **FORTESCUE** was **Lord Chief Justice of England** for nearly twenty years; he was appointed Lord High Chancellor by **Henry VI.** Being in exile in France, in consequence of the wars between the **Houses of York and Lancaster**, and the King's son, **Prince Edward**, being also in exile with him, the Chancellor wrote a series of letters addressed to the prince, to explain to him the nature and effect of the laws of England, and to induce him to study them and uphold them. This work, which was written in Latin, is called *De Laudibus Legum Anglicarum*: or Praise of the Laws of England. This book was many years ago translated into English, and it is a book of law authority quoted frequently in our courts at this day. No man can doubt the truth of facts relating to such a work. It was a work written by a famous lawyer for a prince, it was intended to be read by other contemporary lawyers, and by all lawyers in future. The passage that I am about to quote, relating to the state of the English, was purely incidental; it was not intended to answer any temporary purpose. It must have been a true account.

**458.** The Chancellor, after speaking generally of the nature of the laws of England, and of the difference between them and the laws of France, proceeds to show the difference in their effects

by a description of the state of the French people, and then by a description of the state of the English. His words,—words that, as I transcribe them, make my cheeks burn with shame,—are as follows: Besides all this, the inhabitants of France give every year to their king the fourth part of all their wines, the growth of that year; every vintner gives the fourth penny of what he makes of his wine by sale. And all the towns and boroughs pay to the king yearly great sums of money, which are assessed upon them for the expenses of his men at arms. So that the king's troops, which are always considerable, are subsisted and paid yearly by those common people who live in the villages, boroughs, and cities. Another grievance is, every village constantly finds and maintains two cross-bow-men at the least,—some find more,—well arrayed in all their accoutrements, to serve the king in his wars as often as he pleaseth to call them out, which is frequently done. Without any consideration had of these things, other very heavy taxes are assessed yearly upon every village within the kingdom for the king's service; neither is there ever any intermission or abatement of taxes. Exposed to these and other calamities, the peasants live in great hardship and misery. Their constant drink is water, neither do they taste throughout the year any other liquor, unless upon some extraordinary times or festival days. Their clothing consists of frocks or little jerkins made of canvas, no better than common sackcloth; they do not wear any woollens except of the coarsest sort, and that only in the garments under their frocks; nor do they wear any trowse but from the knees upwards, their legs being exposed and naked. The women go barefoot except on holidays. They do not eat flesh, except it be the fat of bacon, and that in very small quantities, with which they make a soup. Of other sorts, either boiled or roasted, they do not so much as taste, unless it be of the inwards and offals of sheep and bullocks, and the like, which are killed for the use of the better sort of people and the merchants, for whom also quails, partridges, hares, and the like, are reserved upon pain of the galleys: as for their poultry, the soldiers consume them, so that scarce the eggs, slight as they are, are indulged them by way of a dainty. And if it happen that a man is observed to thrive in the world and become rich, he is presently assessed to the king's tax, proportionally more than his poorer neighbours, whereby he is soon reduced to a level with the rest. (Fortescue, **De Laudibus Ltum Angliæ (translated)**, ed. 1775, P. 124 The chapter treats of the state of France under the absolute rule of Louis XI )Then comes his description of the English at the same time; those “**priest-ridden**” English, whom **Chalmers** and **Hume**, and the rest of that tribe, would fain have us believe were a mere band of wretched beggars. **The king of England** cannot alter the laws or make new ones without the express consent of the whole people in parliament assembled. Every inhabitant is at his liberty fully to use and enjoy whatever his farm produceth, the fruits of the earth, the increase of his flock, and the like; all the improvements he makes, whether by his own proper industry or of those he retains in his service, are his own to use and to enjoy without the let, interruption, or denial of any. If he be in anywise injured or oppressed, he shall have his amends and satisfactions against the party offending. Hence it is that the inhabitants are rich in gold, silver, and in all the necessaries and conveniences of life. They drink no water, unless at certain times upon a religious score, and by way of doing penance. They are fed in great abundance with all sorts of flesh and fish, of which they have plenty everywhere; they are clothed throughout in good woollens; their bedding and other furniture in their houses are of wool, and that in great store. They are also well provided with all other sorts of household goods and necessary implements for husbandry. Every one according to his rank hath all things which conduce to make life easy and happy.

**459.** Go and read this to the poor souls who are now eating sea-weed in Ireland, who are detected in robbing the pig-troughs in Yorkshire, who are eating horse flesh and grains (draff) in Lancashire and Cheshire, who are harnessed like horses and drawing gravel in **Hampshire and Sussex, who have 2d. a day allowed them** by the magistrates in Norfolk, who are all over England worse fed than the felons in the gaols. Go and tell them, when they raise their hands from the pig-trough or from the grains-tub and with their dirty tongues cry “**No Popery,**” go, read to the degraded and deluded wretches this account of the state of their Catholic forefathers, who lived under what is impudently called “**Popish superstition and tyranny,**” and in those times which we have the audacity to call “**the dark ages.**”

460. Look at the then picture of the French; and, Protestant Englishmen, if you have the capacity of blushing left, blush at the thought of how precisely that picture fits the English now! Look at all the parts of the picture, the food, the raiment, the game. Good God! If anyone had told the old Chancellor that the day would come when this picture, and even a picture more degrading to human nature, would fit his own boasted country, what would he have said? What would he have said if he had been told that the time was to come when the soldier in England would have more than twice, nay, more than thrice the sum allowed to the day-labouring man; when potatoes would be carried to the field as the only food of the ploughman; when soup-shops would be opened to feed the English; and when the judges, sitting on that very bench on which he himself had sat for twenty years, would (as in the case last year of the complaint against the magistrates at Northallerton), declare that bread and water were the general food of working-people in England? What would he have said? Why, if he had been told that there was to be a "**Reformation**," accompanied by a total devastation of Church and Poor property, upheld by wars, creating an enormous debt and enormous taxes, and requiring a constantly standing army,—if he had been told this he would have foreseen our present state and would have wept for his country; but if he had, in addition, been told that even in the midst of all this suffering we should still have the ingratitude and the baseness to cry "**No Popery**," and the injustice and the cruelty to persecute those Englishmen and Irishmen who adhered to the faith of their pious, moral, brave, free and happy fathers, he would have said, "God's will be done: let them suffer."

461. But it may be said that it was not, then, the Catholic Church but the laws that made the English so happy, for the French had that Church as well as the English. Aye! But in England the Church was the very basis of the laws. The very first clause of Magna Charta provided for the stability of its property and rights. A provision for the indigent, an effectual provision, was made by the laws that related to the Church and its property; and this was not the case in France, and never was the case in any country but this; so that the English people lost more by a "**Reformation**" than any other people could have lost.

462. Fortescue's authority would of itself be enough, but I am not to stop with it. White, the late rector of Selborne, in Hampshire, gives, in his history of that once famous village, an extract from a record, stating that for disorderly conduct men were punished by being "compelled to fast a fortnight on bread and beer!" This was about the year 1380, in the reign of **RICHARD II.** Oh! miserable "**dark ages**"! This fact must be true. White had no purpose to answer. His mention of the fact, or rather his transcript from the record, is purely incidental; and trifling as the fact is, it is conclusive as to the general mode of living in those happy days. Go, tell the harnessed gravel-drawers in Hampshire to cry "**No Popery**," for that if the Pope be not put down he may in time compel them to fast on bread and beer, instead of suffering them to continue to regale themselves on nice potatoes and pure water.

463. But let us come to Acts of Parliament, and first to the Act above quoted, in paragraph 454, which see. That Act fixes the price of meat. After naming the four sorts of meat, beef, pork, mutton and veal, the preamble has these words: "**These being the food of the poorer sort.**" This is conclusive. It is an incidental mention of a fact. It is an Act of Parliament. It must have been true; and it is a fact that we know well, that even the judges have declared from the bench, that bread alone is now the food of the poorer sort. What do we want more than this to convince us that the main body of the people have been impoverished by the "**Reformation**"?

464. But I will prove by other Acts of Parliament this Act of Parliament to have spoken truth. These Acts declare what the wages of workmen shall be. There are several such Acts, but one or two may suffice. The **Act of 23rd of Edward III.** fixes the wages, without food, as follows. There are many other things mentioned, but the following will be enough for our purpose: —

A man filling dung-cart

A woman hay-making or weeding corn for the day		1d	
Mowing an acre of grass		3½d	
A reaper		4d	
The price of shoes, cloth, and of provisions, throughout the time that this law continued in force		6d	
Threshing a quarter of wheat		4d	
A pair of shoes			
	4d	A fat hog 2 years old	3s 4d
Russet broad-cloth by Yard	1s 1d	A fat goose	2½d
A stall-fed ox	£1 4s 0d	Ale, the gallon, by proclamation	1d
A grass-fed ox	£0 16s 0d	Wheat the quarter	3s 0d
A fat sheep unshorn	1s 8d	White Wine the gallon	6d
A fat sheep shorn	1s 2d	Red Wine ditto	4d

These prices are taken from the Preciosum of Bishop Fleetwood, who took them from the accounts kept by the bursars of convents. All the world knows that Fleetwood's book is of undoubted authority.

465. We may, then, easily believe that beef, pork, mutton and veal were the food of the poorer sort, when a dung-cart filler had more than the price of a fat goose and a-half for a day's work, and when a woman was allowed for a day's weeding the price of a quart of red wine! Two yards of the cloth made a coat for the shepherd, and as it cost 2s. 2d., the reaper would earn it in 6 days; and the dung-cart man would earn very nearly a pair of shoes every day! The dung-cart filler would earn a fat shorn sheep in four days; he would earn a fat hog, two years old, in twelve days; he would earn a grass-fed ox in twenty days; so that we may easily believe that beef, pork, veal and mutton were the "food of the poorer sort." And, mind, this was "**a priest-ridden people,**" a people buried in Popish superstition! In our days of "Protestant light" and of "**mental enjoyment**" the "**poorer sort**" are allowed by the magistrates of Norfolk threepence a day for a single man able to work. That is to say, a halfpenny less than the Catholic dung-cart man had; and that threepence will get the "**no popery**" gentleman about six ounces of old ewe mutton, while the Popish dung-cart man got for his day rather more than the quarter of a fat sheep.

[**Note:**• It may pass through the mind of some readers that the picture drawn by Cobbett with such vigour, or even passion, must be an exaggeration, nay, a caricature. Yet the genius of the man had divined and grasped the truth; and he only anticipated the results arrived at by the exact investigations of the present day. The late **Professor Thorold Rogers**, who devoted the whole of a laborious life to an enquiry into the economic history of England, comes, so far as this period is concerned, to the same conclusion as Cobbett himself. Indeed, the words in which he delivers what may be termed a scientific conclusion form almost a heavier indictment than that framed by Cobbett's indignation. The extract from *The Economic Interpretation of History* is long and is thrown into an appendix; but it must not on that account be overlooked.]

466. But the Popish people might work harder than "**enlightened Protestants.**" They might do more work in a day. This is contrary to all the assertions of the "**feelosofers,**" for they insist that the Catholic religion made people idle. But, to set this matter at rest, let us look at the price of the job-labour, at the mowing by the acre and at the threshing of wheat by the quarter, and let us see how these wages are now, compared with the price of food. I have no parliamentary authority since the year 1821, when a report was printed by order of the House of Commons, containing the evidence of **Mr. Ellman** of Sussex, as to wages, and of **Mr. George**, of Norfolk, as to price of wheat. The report was dated 18th June, 1821. The accounts are for twenty years on an average, from 1800 inclusive. We will now proceed to see how the "**Popish, priest-ridden**" Englishman stands in comparison with the "No-Popery" Englishman:—

**Popish Man.**

	s.	d.
Mowing an acre of grass ... ..	0	6
Threshing a quarter of wheat .	0	4

**No- Popery Man.**

s.	d.
3	7 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub>
4	0

Here are "**waust improvements, Mau'm!**" But now let us look at the relative price of the wheat which the labourer had to purchase with his wages. We have seen that the "**popish superstition slave**" had to give 5d. A bushel for his wheat, and the evidence of **Mr. George** states that the "**enlightened Protestant**" had to give 10s. a bushel for his wheat, that is, twenty-four times as much as the "**popish fool**," who suffered himself to be "**priest ridden**." So that the "**enlightened**" man, in order to make him as well off as the "**dark ages**" man was, ought to receive 12s. instead of 3s. 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d. for mowing an acre of grass; and he in like manner ought to receive, for threshing a quarter of wheat, 8s., instead of the 4s. Which he does receive. If we had the records we should doubtless find that Ireland was in the same state.

467. There! That settles the matter; and if the **Bible Society** and the "**Education**" and the "**Christian knowledge**" gentry would, as they might, cause this little book to be put into the hands of all their millions of pupils, it would, as far as relates to this kingdom, settle the question of religion for ever and ever. I have now proved that **Fortescue's** description of the happy life of our Catholic ancestors was correct. There wanted no proof, but I have given it. I could refer to divers other Acts of Parliament, passed during several centuries, all confirming the truth of **Fortescue's account**. And there are in Bishop Fleetwood's book many things that prove that the labouring people were most kindly treated by their superiors, and particularly by the clergy; for instance, he has an item in the expenditure of a convent, "30 pair of autumnal gloves for the servants." This was sad "superstition." In our "**enlightened**" and Bible-reading age, who thinks of gloves for ploughmen? We have priests as well as the "**dark ages**" people had; ours ride as well as theirs, but, theirs fed at the same time; both mount, but theirs seem to have used the rein more and spur less. It is curious to observe that the pay of persons in high situations was, as compared with that of the present day, very low when compared with the pay of the working classes. If you calculate the year's pay of the dung-cart man, you will find it, if multiplied by 20 (which brings it to our money) to amount to 91 pounds a year, while the average pay of the judges did not exceed £60 a year of the then money, and, of course, did not exceed £1,200 a year of our money. So that a judge had not so much pay as fourteen dung-cart fillers. To be sure, judges had in those "**dark ages**," when **LITTLETON** and **FORTESCUE** lived and wrote, pretty easy lives; for **Fortescue** says that they led lives of great u leisure and contemplation, and that they never sat in court but three hours in a day, from 8 to 11. Alas! if they had lived in this "**enlightened age**" they would have found little time for their "contemplation"! They would have found plenty of work, they would have found that theirs was no sinecure, at any rate, and that ten times their pay was not adequate to their enormous labour. Here is another indubitable proof of the great and general happiness and harmony and honesty and innocence that reigned in the country. The judges had lives of leisure! In that one fact, incidentally stated by a man who had been twenty years Chief Justice of the Queen's Bench, we have the true character of the so long calumniated religion of our fathers.

[**Note:** . De Laudibus Legum Anglia, ed. 1775, pp. 185. "The judges, when they have taken their refreshments, spend the rest of the day in the study of the laws, reading of the Holy Scriptures, and other innocent amusements t their pleasure]

468. As to the bare fact, this most interesting fact, that the main body of the people have been impoverished and degraded since the time of the Catholic sway; as to this fact, there can be no doubt in the mind of any man who has thus far read this little work. Neither can there, I think, exist in the mind of such a man any doubt that this impoverishment and this degradation have been caused by the event called the "**Reformation**," seeing that I have in former chapters, and especially in **Chapter XIV.**, Clearly traced the debt and the enormous taxes to that event. But I

cannot bring myself to conclude without tracing the impoverishment in its horrible progress. The well known fact that no compulsory collections for the poor, that the disgraceful name of pauper, that these were never heard of in England in Catholic times, and that they were heard of the moment the "**Reformation**" had begun; this single fact might be enough, and it is enough; but we will see the progress of this Protestant impoverishment.

**469. The Act, 27 Henry VIII., chap. 25,** began the poor laws. The monasteries were not actually seized on till the next year; but the fabric of the Catholic Church was, in fact, tumbling down, and instantly the country swarmed with necessitous people, and open begging, which the government of England had always held in great horror, began to disgrace this so lately happy land. To put a stop to this the above Act authorised sheriffs, magistrates, and churchwardens to cause voluntary alms to be collected; and at the same time it punished the persevering beggar by slicing off part of his ears, and, for a second offence, put him to death as a felon! This was the dawn of that "**Reformation**" which we are still called upon to admire and to praise!

**470. "The pious young Saint Edward,"** as **FOX** the Martyr-man most impiously calls him, began his Protestant reign, **1st year Edward VI., chap. 3,** by an Act, punishing beggars by burning them with a red-hot iron and by making them slaves for two years, with power in their masters to make them wear an iron collar, and to feed them upon bread and water and refuse meat! For even in this case still there was meat for those who had to labour: the days of cold potatoes and of bread and water alone were yet to come; they were reserved for our "**enlightened**" and Bible-reading days, our days of "**mental enjoyment.**" And as to horse flesh and draff (grains), they appear never to have been even thought of. If the slave ran away, or were disobedient, he was by this Protestant Act to be a slave for life. This Act came forth as a sort of precursor of the Acts to establish the Church of England. Horrid tyranny! The people had been plundered of the resource which **Magna Charta**, which justice, which reason, which the law of nature gave them. No other resource had been provided, and they were made actual slaves, branded and chained because they sought by their prayers to allay the cravings of hunger!

**471.** Next came "**good Queen Bess,**" who, after trying her hand eight times without success to cause the poor to be relieved by alms, passed that compulsory Act which is in force to the present day. All manner of shifts had been resorted to in order to avoid this provision for the poor. During this and the two former reigns licences to beg had been granted. But at last the compulsory assessment came, that true mark, that indelible mark of the Protestant Church as by law established. This assessment was put off! to the last possible moment, and it was never relished by those who had got the spoils of the Church and the poor. But it was a measure of absolute necessity. All the racks, all the law-martial of this cruel reign could not have kept down the people without this Act, the authors of which seem to have been ashamed to state the grounds of it, for it has no preamble whatever. The people so happy in former times, the people described by **Fortescue**, were now become a nation of ragged wretches. **Defoe**, in one of his tracts, says that **Elizabeth** in her progress through the kingdom, upon seeing the miserable looks of the crowds that came to see her, frequently exclaimed, "**pauper ubique jacet,**" that is, the poor cover the land. And this was that same country in which **Fortescue** left a race of people, "having all things which conduce to make life easy and happy "

**472.** Things did not mend much during the reigns of the **STUARTS**, except in as far as the poor-law had effect. This rendered unnecessary the barbarities that had been exercised before the passing of it; and as long as taxation was light the paupers were comparatively little numerous. But when the taxes began to grow heavy, the projectors were soon at work to find out the means of putting down pauperism. Amongst these was one child, a merchant and banker, whose name was **JOSIAH**, and who had been made a knight or baronet, for he is called **SIR JOSIAH**. His project, which was quite worthy of his calling, contained a provision, in his proposed Act, to appoint men to be called "**Fathers of the poor;**" and one of the provisions relating to these "**Fathers**" was to be, "**that they may have power to send such poor as they may think fit into any of his Majesty's plantations!**" That is to say, to transport and make slaves of them! And,

gracious God! this was in **Fortescue's country!** This was in the country of **Magna Charta!** And this monster **dared to publish this project!** And we cannot learn that any man had the soul to reprobate the conduct of so hard-hearted a wretch.

**473.** When the "**Deliverer**" had come, when a "**glorious revolution**" had taken place, when a war had been carried on and a debt and a bank created, and all for the purpose of putting down Popery for ever, the poor began to increase at such a frightful rate that the Parliament referred the subject to the Board of Trade, to inquire and to report a remedy. **LOCKE** was one of the commissioners, and a passage in the Report of the Board is truly curious. "The multiplicity of the poor, and the increase of the tax for their maintenance, is so general an observation and complaint that it cannot be doubted of; nor has it been only since the last war that this evil has come upon us; it has been a growing burden on the kingdom this many years, and the last two reigns felt the increase of it as well as the present. If the cause of this evil be looked into, we humbly conceive it will be found to have proceeded, not from the scarcity of provisions, nor want of employment for the poor; since the goodness of God has blessed these times with plenty no less than the former; and a long peace during three reigns gave us as plentiful a trade as ever. The growth of the poor must therefore have some other cause, and it can be nothing else but the relaxation of discipline and corruption; virtue and industry being as constant companions on the one side, as vice and idleness are on the other."

**474.** So the fault was in the poor themselves! It does not seem to have occurred to **Mr. Locke** that there must have been a cause for this cause. He knew very well that there was a time when there were no paupers at all in England ; but being a fat placeman under the "**Deliverer**," he could hardly think of alluding to that interesting fact, "**relaxation of discipline**"!\* What discipline? What did he mean by discipline? The taking away of the Church and poor's property, the imposing of heavy taxes, the giving of low wages compared with the price of food and raiment, the drawing away of the earnings of the poor, to be given to paper-harpies and other tax-eaters, these were the causes of the hideous and disgraceful evil; this he knew very well, and therefore it is no wonder that his report contained no remedy.

**NOTE:** Report of the Board of Trade in the year 1697, respecting the relief and employment of the poor. Drawn up by John Locke, p. 2.

**475.** After **Locke** came, in the reign of **QUEEN ANNE**, **DEFOE**, who seems to have been the father of the present race of projectors, **Malthus** and **Lawyer Scarlett** being merely his humble followers. He was for giving no more relief to the poor; he imputed their poverty to their crimes, and not their crimes to their poverty; and their crimes he imputed to "**their luxury, pride and sloth.**" He said the English labouring people ate and drank three times as much as foreigners! How different were the notions of this insolent French Protestant from those of the **Chancellor Fortescue**, who looked upon the good living of the people as the best possible proof of good laws, and seems to have delighted in relating that the English were "**fed in great abundance with all sorts of flesh and fish**"!

**476.** If **Defoe** had lived to our "enlightened age" he would, at any rate, have seen no "**luxury**" amongst the poor, unless he would have grudged them horse-flesh, draff (grains), sea-weed, or the contents of the pig-trough. From his day to the present there have been a hundred projects and more than fifty laws to regulate the affairs of the poor. But still the pauperism remains for the Catholic Church to hold up in the face of the Church of England. Here, the former may say to the latter, here, look at this; here is the result of your efforts to extinguish me; here, in this one evil, in this never ceasing, this degrading curse, I am more than avenged, if vengeance I were allowed to enjoy; urge on the deluded potato-crammed creatures to cry, '**No Popery**' still; and when they retire to their straw, take care not to remind them of the cause of their poverty and degradation.!

477. Hume, in speaking of the sufferings of the people in the first Protestant reign, says, that at last those sufferings "**produced good,**" for that they "**led to our presentsituation.**" What, then; he deemed our present situation a better one than that of the days of **Fortescue!** To be sure **HUME** wrote fifty years ago, but he wrote long after **Child, Locke, and Defoe.** Surely enough the "**Reformation**" has led to "**our then present, and our now present situation.**" It has "**at last**" produced the bitter fruit of which we are now tasting. Evidence given, by a clergyman too, and published by the **House of Commons in 1824,** states the labouring people of Suffolk to be a nest of robbers, —too deeply corrupted ever to be reclaimed; evidence of a **Sheriff of Wiltshire** (in 1821) states the common food of the labourers in the field to be cold potatoes; a scale, published by the magistrates of Norfolk, in 1825, allows threepence a day to a single labouring man; the judges of the **Court of King's Bench (1825)** have declared the general food of the labouring people to be bread and water; intelligence from the northern counties (1826), published upon the spot, informs us that great numbers of people are nearly starving, and that some are eating horseflesh and grains, while it is well known that the country abounds in food; and while the clergy have recently put up from the pulpit the rubrical thanksgiving for times of plenty, a law recently passed, making it felony to take an apple from a tree, tells the world that our characters and Jives are thought nothing worth, or that this nation, once the greatest and most moral in the world, is now a nation of incorrigible thieves, and, in either case, the most impoverished, the most fallen, the most degraded that ever saw the light of the sun.

478. I have now performed my task. I have made good the positions with which I began. Born and bred a Protestant of the Church of England, having a wife and numerous family professing the same faith, having the remains of most dearly beloved parents lying in a Protestant churchyard, and trusting to conjugal or filial piety to place mine by their side, I have in this undertaking had no motive, I can have had no motive, but a sincere and disinterested love of truth and justice. It is not for the rich and the powerful of my countrymen that I have spoken; but for the poor, the persecuted, the proscribed. I have not been unmindful of the unpopularity and the prejudice that would attend the enterprise; but when I considered the long, long triumph of calumny over the religion of those to whom we owe all that we possess that is great and renowned; when I was convinced that I could do much towards the counteracting of that calumny; when duty so sacred bade me speak, it would have been baseness to hold my tongue, and baseness superlative would it have been, if, having the will as well as the power, I had been restrained by fear of the shafts of falsehood and of folly. To be clear of self-reproach is amongst the greatest of human consolations; and now, amidst all the dreadful perils which the event that I have treated of has at last surrounded my country, I can, while I pray God to save her from still further devastation and misery, safely say that neither expressly nor tacitly am I guilty of any part of the cause of her ruin.

## The End of Letter 16



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