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1

Patrons of the Nation

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY was an age of improvement.¹ Things did not all necessarily get better; in many ways, and for many people, it was an age of horrors. But for scholars in particular, it was an age in which knowledge seemed every day to advance. Their letters criss-crossed Europe and North America, many of them reaching as far as India or China, all sent in an active pursuit and sharing of knowledge. This ‘Republic of Letters’, at least as an ideal, transcended all political and social barriers: so long as they had something to contribute, anyone, of any class or nation or religion, could participate.² Many of the contributions, however, conformed to a specific agenda, most famously set out by an English politician and philosopher of the early seventeenth century, Francis Bacon.³

The ‘Baconian programme’, as the economic historian Joel Mokyr has termed it, was to accumulate and rigorously test knowledge, especially as it might someday be useful.⁴ Scholars devoted themselves to describing what they did not yet understand: anything and everything was counted, catalogued, classified, and compared, from rocks that might contain ores for new materials or pigments, to plants that might yield better foods or fibres or medicines, to the movements of bright objects in the night sky, which might provide new ways for sailors to find their bearings at sea. Bacon’s promise was that when useful knowledge was amassed, material improvements would surely follow. And with the amassing of potentially useful knowledge, even more might then be generated. From the accumulated data would emerge patterns and

predictable regularities—laws of nature—which might in turn be harnessed towards useful ends.⁵ Knowledge, when recorded and shared, could then be interpreted and theorised, and conjectures made about the remaining gaps, all contributing to a philosophy of nature—what we now call science.

By the mid-seventeenth century, natural philosophers had begun to formalise their relationships with one another. They began to meet regularly to discuss their work and share their findings, forming organisations for the collection and diffusion of knowledge. The preeminent institution to emerge in England was the ‘Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge’, founded in 1660, and most commonly known today as simply the Royal Society. In France an *Académie des Sciences* was soon established too, as were many other learned societies across Europe. These societies did more than just collect information; they were places for truth to be tested, for experiments to be performed and replicated before a wide audience rather than reported by letter from the privacy of the home (after all, even the most prestigious or trustworthy correspondents might deceive themselves). It was at the societies that information could become accepted as fact.⁶

The Baconian obsession with collection and cataloguing was also applied beyond natural philosophy, to history, archaeology, and ancient languages, so that the learning of distant ancestors might also be preserved and built upon.⁷ In London from 1707 some scholars met to share information on British heraldry, genealogy, monuments, and ancient buildings—a group that later became known as the Society of Antiquaries.⁸ Societies emerged outside of the capital cities too, often called ‘literary and philosophical’, catering to both the antiquarian and scientific interests of local scholars—that at Northampton, for example, was referred to as a ‘Royal Society in miniature’.⁹ More informally, too, scholars exchanged their theories and observations over drinks in taverns and coffee houses—after overseeing the dissection of a dolphin, for example, fellows of the Royal Society like Isaac Newton or Edmond Halley would continue their discussions at the Grecian Coffee House down the road, where they might also share a table with politicians, poets, or merchants.¹⁰ As the historian Peter Clark has argued, with the

growth of British cities in the eighteenth century, their clubs, societies, and other associations also multiplied. The groups that met to promote natural philosophy or improvement were only a few among a growing 'associational world' of mostly urban societies devoted to art, music, literature, commerce, charity, religion, and politics, as well as just socialising and having fun.¹¹ Alongside the scholarly pursuits, the coffee houses and taverns were places where stock prices were reported, news was exchanged, and plans were hatched.

By the early eighteenth century, however, the Baconian promises of material improvement were not being fully met. It was not enough for natural philosophers to collect knowledge that might be useful; the knowledge actually had to be put to use. In its early years many fellows of the Royal Society had recognised this. They investigated not only the works of nature, but also human artifice: 'all useful arts, manufactures, mechanical practices, engines, and inventions', as well as agriculture.¹² In addition to science, the Royal Society was supposed to devote itself to recording and advancing technology. Some of its fellows, following Bacon's programme to the letter, began work compiling a dictionary of crafts, industries, and inventions.¹³ They also hoped to eventually purchase manufacturers' secrets, to reveal the best techniques and inventions to the public so that they could be more widely used. The practice of buying and revealing secrets would itself be 'a most heroic invention',¹⁴ and in 1664 the Royal Society took out a patent covering various improvements to carriages, chairs, coaches, chariots, pistols, powder horns, textile machinery, and a newly invented pendulum to be used for navigation at sea.¹⁵

But the broad ambitions of the Royal Society's early fellows were soon curtailed by economic and social reality. With only limited time and funds, it made sense to specialise; and in choosing what to make a priority, the natural philosophical investigations of amateur gentlemen were more prestigious than the practical, hands-on work of the middle-class artisans. The artisans themselves often also opposed attempts to reveal their secrets, believing that it would threaten their livelihoods.¹⁶ And besides, the reasoning went, 'pure' natural philosophy promised the discovery of universal laws, which would find general uses, whereas

spending time developing particular machines and techniques would only ever benefit their specific time and place. An invention would soon be superseded and forgotten, but a scientific law was forever. So long as pure science continued to progress, the fellows of the Royal Society contented themselves with the belief that the potential applications would also multiply.¹⁷ The practical applications could be investigated later on, and by others.

Over the course of the late seventeenth century the functions of the Royal Society shifted decidedly towards natural philosophy, with only the occasional investigation of practical applications. Although it counted artisans and merchants among its fellows, the majority were wealthy gentlemen with an interest in science, and in the 1730s it rejected proposals to once more encourage inventions.¹⁸ Its counterparts in the rest of Europe showed a similar, but even more pronounced shift. Natural philosophers on the continent were heavily influenced by the works of René Descartes, whose approach was to logically deduce nature's laws.¹⁹ Whereas British natural philosophy was mostly led by observation and experimentation, in France it was led by abstract mathematical reasoning.²⁰ France's *Académie des Sciences* excluded artisans entirely, restricting its membership to only aristocrats and scientists. Albeit less pronounced in Britain, there was a clear social divide between those who knew (the *savants*) and those who made (the *fabri-cants*); a separation between heads and hands.

The problem was that the ever-expanding knowledge of the savants was not so easily applied. As natural philosophy advanced, it developed its own jargon, making it more difficult to communicate to those who might put it to use. The process of application was also itself difficult and time-consuming, requiring careful experimentation. Plenty of advancements could even be made in technology without requiring any new natural philosophy. Bacon's programme had involved collecting and revealing the best practices from around the world, many of which were already in use: perhaps the secret glass-making techniques of Venice would improve the same industry in Britain; perhaps the leather-making processes of London could benefit Dublin or Edinburgh. A common 'treasure' of knowledge would then more easily be expanded

upon, showing people what had already been done and hinting at what might be improved next. It would, at the very least, save the wasted effort of reinventing something that had already been invented elsewhere. Even more urgently, however, collecting and revealing the world's various arts and inventions would ensure that they were not lost—secrets were often taken to the grave, and many experiments were started but never completed for want of money or time.²¹

For Bacon's programme to be properly realised—and for his promises of material improvement to come true—a new institution was required. In 1721–22, a series of proposals circulated in London, very probably written by an inventive English watchmaker named Henry Sully, who had recently been rejected by the French *Académie* for being a mere artisan.²² Whereas the Royal Society and its French counterpart promoted 'learning, sciences, and philosophy', Sully's proposed society would devote itself to 'preserving and improving inventions, arts, and manufactures'.²³ This society of arts—that is, dealing with human artifice—would pick up where the Royal Society had left off.²⁴ It would compile a register of the best practices and inventions, ensure that promising new ideas were put through proper trials, and buy from inventors those improvements that would otherwise be kept secret. It would reveal the 'mysteries' of trades and manufactures, and build upon them further. In time, Sully promised, Britain would become the 'retreat and succour of every peculiar genius for arts and inventions'. Beyond the advantage to the nation and the world, however, Sully offered private benefits too. He suggested that subscribers to the society would profit from patenting some of the more promising inventions.

But Sully's reputation was sullied. He was associated with a Scottish banker named John Law, who in the late 1710s had overseen an ambitious scheme to reorder the French government's finances. Law ran the Mississippi Company, which gradually acquired all the various other companies that had monopolies on France's intercontinental trade. In exchange for the monopolies, the company bought up the French government's accumulated war debts, allowing repayment on more generous terms—the scheme allowed the government to more easily fund itself. As the Mississippi Company absorbed its competitors, its shares

became increasingly valuable. By 1719 it had agglomerated into a Company of the Indies and ran the collection of all French taxes, taking its own cut. Meanwhile, so that people could buy the company's shares, Law printed paper money. To back the paper currency, however, Law needed to amass gold and silver. For one of his strategies he enlisted Sully's aid, paying him to entice skilled British watchmakers to France, to work in factories under Sully's direction (in response, in 1719 the British government outright banned the emigration of skilled artisans like watchmakers).²⁵ Sully's factories then bought and melted down old gold and silver coins, keeping the precious metals in France by using them to make luxury watches. Buoyed by their success, in 1718 Law and Sully together even founded a *Société des Arts*.

Disaster struck in 1720, however, when Law discovered he had printed too much paper currency and tried to devalue the company's shares. Law's financial projects collapsed, and so did the *Société* when Law was sacked and fled the country. Sully, however, managed to profit from the disaster by persuading the British government to pay him to return with the other British watchmakers. It was on his return to London that Sully circulated his proposals for a society of arts. But the project found no takers: Britain had just seen its own financial crisis when the share prices of the South Sea Company collapsed. The South Sea Company had the monopoly on supplying African slaves to Spain's American colonies, and like the Mississippi Company had also been used to try and restructure the British government's debt.²⁶ With the 1720 stock market crashes in both Paris and London, the reputation of all publicly traded companies, or 'projects', was tarnished. Sully's scheme for a society of arts, promising easy profits to its subscribers like any other project, was a non-starter. Rejected, Sully went back to France and managed to re-found the *Société des Arts* in 1728, though he died later that year.²⁷ The *Société* continued without him for about a decade, meeting privately in the apartments of a young aristocrat. Yet when the aristocrat lost interest and was called away to fight in a war, those involved became disaffected and all trace of the organisation disappeared.²⁸

Despite the abortive attempts in London and Paris, Sully was not alone in trying to create a society of arts. In both Ireland and Scotland,

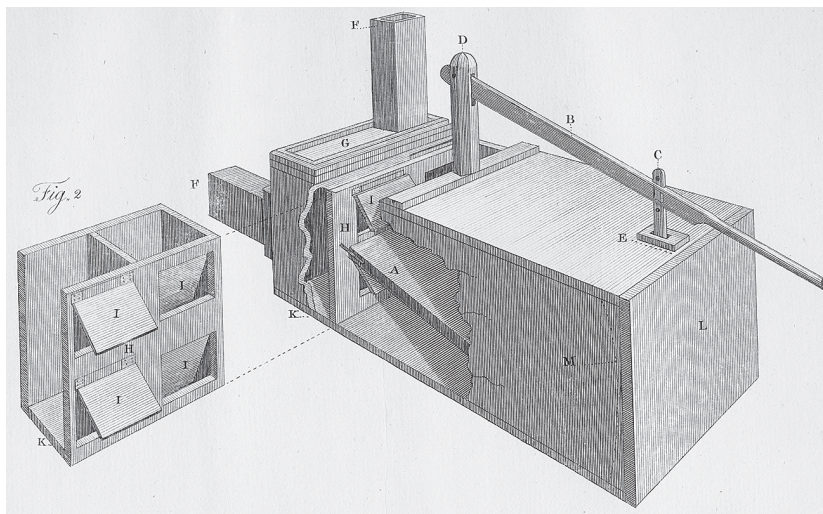
the need for the diffusion of useful knowledge was all the more urgent. Many Scots believed that the economic gap between England and Scotland had only widened since the union of the two states in 1707. To remedy the situation, in 1723 in Edinburgh a group of major landowners with a few natural philosophers established a 'Society of Improvers in the Knowledge of Agriculture in Scotland', which collected and disseminated information on the best agricultural techniques. They began with agriculture because it was, in their view, 'not only a science, but the life and support of all arts and sciences'.²⁹ In 1727 some of its members also obtained government funding for a 'Board of Trustees for Improving Manufactures and Fisheries of North Britain', to oversee the development of Scotland's major industries (Scotland was often referred to as 'North Britain' well into the nineteenth century). The Board of Trustees lobbied for linen subsidies, sent spies to discover foreign techniques, encouraged foreign linen workers to immigrate, funded a few linen-related inventions, and established schools to teach spinning and the drawing of woven patterns. Edinburgh's Society of Improvers hoped that Scotland would replace continental Europe as the main source of linen imports to England.

Likewise, the natural philosophers and antiquarians meeting at Dublin's Philosophical Society complained that the economic gap between Ireland and England was widening. Many of the major landowners rarely set foot in Ireland, simply collecting their rents and spending the money in England or abroad. When an English aristocrat squandered the family money on luxuries, most of it was at least spent in London where it would stimulate English industries; but the profligacy of an Irish absentee landlord harmed both his family and his country. Even more gold and silver left Ireland to pay for English coal and other imports, leading to a general shortage of coin circulating in the economy. Dublin's scholars feared that Ireland would revert to a barter economy.³⁰ Their solution was to move beyond simply assigning blame, to instead applying useful knowledge in the service of Ireland's agriculture and industry. In 1731 they founded a 'Dublin Society for Improving Husbandry, Manufactures and other Useful Arts'. It collected information on best practices, printed and distributed the latest agricultural tracts,

collected and displayed models of the latest agricultural machinery, and even purchased a botanical garden for its own experiments.³¹ Just like its Scottish counterpart, the Dublin Society paid especial attention to promoting Ireland's linen industry.

By the 1740s some saw the need for a similar organisation in England, particularly as natural philosophy seemed to have failed to meet Bacon's promises of material improvement. As the Royal Society shifted away from practical applications, natural philosophy developed a reputation as mere 'idle and empty curiosity'.³² In *Gulliver's Travels*, natural philosophers were lampooned as 'so taken up with intense speculations' that to bring them to their senses their servants had to periodically smack them with blown bladders fastened to sticks.³³ A popular play, *The Virtuoso*, had as its main character an aristocratic amateur scientist, Sir Nicholas Gimcrack (a gimcrack was a derogatory term for a useless invention), who tried to learn to swim on dry land by imitating a frog, transfused sheep's blood into a man, and went around the country bottling air. His problem was in considering practical application as 'base and mercenary, below the serene and quiet temper of a sedate philosopher'. 'I care not for the practice. I seldom bring any thing to use', boasted Gimcrack. Only 'knowledge is my ultimate end'.³⁴ Yet the Royal Society's founders had in fact warned of science's worsening reputation. They had stressed science's usefulness as a way to gain public support for their programme.³⁵ Looking to the distant past, it seemed as though only things that were widely considered useful were preserved from the ravages of time and barbarian invasion.³⁶ The best way to defend natural philosophy was thus to apply it to practical purposes.

In their own personal ways, some English natural philosophers devoted themselves to applying scientific theory to practice. Stephen Hales, a clergyman and fellow of the Royal Society, spent most of his scientific career investigating how sap flows through plants and how blood circulates in animals, as well as how both fluids interact with the air. When he reached his late sixties, he decided to put his findings and theories into practice. His brother had likely died in prison from typhus, a deadly fever believed to be caused by noxious air, and Hales was alarmed by a serious typhus epidemic among soldiers who were



1.1. Stephen Hales's ventilator. The engraving was taken from a model in the Society's repository, which was donated by Thomas Yeoman. From a catalogue of the Society's machines assembled by the register, William Bailey, RSA/SC/EL/2/6-7.

cooped up in ships while awaiting passage abroad. So he applied his understanding of gases to invent the ventilator—a device for bringing fresh air into enclosed and stuffy spaces. It would improve health in mines, hospitals, prisons, and workhouses—anywhere that people had to endure cramped and damp conditions. Applied to ships, it would make sea-travel less deadly and thus encourage commerce. Although it did not in fact prevent typhus (which is usually transmitted by lice), the ventilator undoubtedly made life more bearable for seafarers. Its most lasting use, however, was in preserving various goods by keeping them dry: gunpowder, malt, hops, and particularly grain, which when damp attracted weevils.³⁷ For Hales, his invention of the ventilator was clear proof that ‘the study of natural philosophy is not a mere trifling amusement.’³⁸

Yet although Hales was not alone in demonstrating natural philosophy's uses, such efforts were undertaken by individuals, and only occasionally. England still lacked an organisation to encourage the application of science and other improvements systematically. The decisive impetus for change was to come from outside the Royal Society's elite

circle of natural philosophers, from one of the many peripheral figures of the Republic of Letters who enthusiastically collected and recorded unusual fossils, rocks, plants, insects, antiquities, weather patterns, and other curiosities, communicating their observations to those who might better make sense of them.

This figure was William Shipley, a younger son of minor gentry. He was raised by his mother's family at Twyford Hall, in Hampshire, and allowed to train as an artist in London while his elder brother was educated for the clergy and later became a bishop. Shipley was briefly a member of the King's ceremonial bodyguard, the 'Honourable Band of Gentlemen Pensioners', but he quit to pursue his love of painting. While in London, he frequented Slaughter's Coffee House in St Martin's Lane, a favourite haunt of artists, chess-players, and foreign refugees (to the extent that some people even went there to learn French).³⁹ Shipley visited Slaughter's for his afternoon tea, but largely kept to himself, preferring to quietly read the newspapers, take notes on antiquarian curiosities, or sketch diagrams of inventions. He would place his sixpence on the bar, and leave silently. When he did speak, it was usually in monosyllables, both solemn and slow.

Shipley's introverted behaviour reportedly got him into trouble. Coffee houses were places to talk. Customers were expected to join the general company and engage in the debates and discussions, not sit quietly apart. In the late 1740s, many in Britain were also worried about a French-sponsored invasion by supporters of the deposed Catholic line of James II, the Jacobites. In 1745, a Jacobite invasion force had even landed in Scotland, and with the support of many Highlanders, had marched to Derby, right in the heart of England. Even though the invasion was quashed, people continued to suspect fresh plots. Dressed all in black, and barely saying a word in a coffee house well known for its French customers, Shipley appeared a likely foreign spy; his various notes and diagrams might in fact be coastal charts, to aid another French invasion. His fellow customers at Slaughter's reported him to a magistrate, who had Shipley hauled before him for questioning. Shipley was reportedly unable to say much to defend himself, but was rescued by a couple of friends who came to vouch for his patriotism and high stand-

ing as a gentleman—they promised that in future he would be coaxed to do a little more talking.⁴⁰

One of Shipley's friends was Henry Baker, who had made a fortune as a speech therapist, treating the stutters and lisps of the wealthy after he discovered a method of teaching deaf children to speak and read. Baker was a member of both the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries, and became particularly famous for his use of the microscope. He collected and examined whatever he could get his hands on, including crystals, scorpion stings, maggots, animal blood, and diseased human skin. Baker tried to make natural philosophy popular and accessible, publishing bestselling books on how to use the microscope and composing a successful poem that extolled nature's glories. He was also, crucially, an active link between the Royal Society and men like Shipley, the amateur enthusiasts on the periphery of the Republic of Letters. Baker was both natural philosophy's distributor and its 'insatiable' gatherer.⁴¹ 'I should be a very undeserving member of the Royal Society', Baker wrote, to not 'encourage or assist others in enquiries that tend to the same delightful purpose.'⁴²

Shipley promised to transmit to Baker whatever observations or curiosities came his way when in 1747 he left London for Northampton. Preferring a rural life to the crowds of the capital, Shipley toured the countryside to paint perspective views of gentlemen's parks and estates, all the while recording and collecting for Baker.⁴³ He sent him fossils from quarries and mines, a design for an improved barometer, casts of carved ancient Roman gems and coins, the eggs of some microscopic water animals preserved in mud, and descriptions of the ancient stone circles at Stonehenge and Avebury. Shipley soon joined the local philosophical society, a group of about thirty gentlemen 'very much addicted to all manner of natural knowledge', and enlisted their help in collecting knowledge for Baker.⁴⁴ The members of the Northampton society transmitted to Baker their accounts of a minor earthquake, more fossils, and even a box of unusual-looking worms. When they stumbled upon something useful, Baker passed on their information to the Royal Society or the Society of Antiquaries. Shipley was not that original a natural philosopher in his own right, but he was always finding ways to help and

encourage others, and his selflessness extended beyond natural philosophy and antiquarianism, to society in general.

Shipley, like many others in the mid-eighteenth century, was concerned that private, selfish interests were increasingly subverting the public good.⁴⁵ The problem seemed to pervade every level of society. At the top, the nobility and gentry had divided into self-serving factions, each political party seeking its own advantage at the expense of the nation. The upper classes also seemed to be ‘dissipated in idle and expensive diversions’, frittering their money away on gambling and foreign luxuries, and setting a bad example to the lower classes, who also seemed to be wracked with idleness and vice.⁴⁶ The gentry spent all their time in London on party politics and luxury, while neglecting their landed estates and leaving their tenants and labourers unemployed and hungry.

In the middle, too, manufacturers and merchants seemed to be profiting at the expense of the public, especially the poor. Manufacturers guarded their secrets closely, driving up prices and denying their competitors the opportunity to employ more people, leaving ‘swarms of thieves and beggars throughout the kingdom.’⁴⁷ When manufacturers made improvements, they protected the most useful inventions with patents, again restricting competition and driving up prices, albeit temporarily. Merchant companies limited competition in international trade by acquiring government-sanctioned monopolies, and local retailers took advantage of any situation that allowed them to drive up prices and lessen quality. Merchants and manufacturers all seemed ready to conspire against the public.⁴⁸

In Northampton in particular, Shipley noted that merchants hoarded wood and coal during the cold winters, selling it at high prices when it was most needed for fuel for heating. These ‘engrossers’ seemed to pursue personal profit by exploiting the poor. Yet Shipley’s response was not to deplore the practice or to campaign to have it outlawed. Instead, he suggested a practical improvement: a fund to which members of the public could subscribe, which would buy wood and coal in the summer when they were cheap, and sell them for as little as possible during the winter. If successful, the scheme would undercut the engrossers and

force them to lower their prices. Shipley's approach was not to change public opinion, but to appeal to public action. It worked. When he put some of his own money towards the scheme, the other gentlemen of Northampton followed suit.

Yet Shipley's vision did not stop with taking on the Northampton fuel engrossers. He soon developed a plan for the improvement of the entire nation: a fund that might be used to solve any and all of the public's problems. His solution was to turn the general problem on its head: instead of allowing the public good to be subverted by individual selfishness, Shipley suggested harnessing people's self-interest in order to serve the public.⁴⁹ It was simply a matter of incentives.

When Shipley moved to Northampton, he had been impressed by the town's horse fairs. Thousands of horses were brought in to be sold at each fair, attracting buyers from across the country and abroad. Shipley was thus able to see Britain's market for horses all gathered in one place. He was shocked that the demand for horses could be so large. Vast sums of money changed hands at each fair, and the horse breeders tried everything to improve the quality of the horses on offer, importing breeds from as far away as North Africa. Shipley discovered that the cause of the demand was the growing popularity of horse racing. Races were being established in county after county, with the public subscribing towards silver plates and cash prizes for the winners. The promise of either honour or riches for horse owners and their riders seemed to be 'two sharp spurs' driving on the improvement of the breeds, and the effects of the plates and prizes seemed to be out of all proportion to the rewards on offer. Shipley reasoned that similar prizes might be applied to loftier purposes.

Upon further research, it seemed to Shipley that the arts and sciences progressed in proportion to the rewards they received. Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, it was when the rulers had become patrons of the arts that the pinnacles of classical civilisation had been reached. There did not seem to be anything special about the ancients in terms of their natural abilities or locations—it was again just a matter of the right incentives. The reign of Rome's first emperor, Augustus, was particularly famous among the coffee-house antiquarians and literati for

the influence of his cultural adviser, Gaius Cilnius Maecenas. Under Maecenas's patronage many of the greatest poets and authors of the age, such as Horace and Virgil, had flourished. In the early eighteenth century, with the printing press making literature accessible to new consumers, English literature was widely considered to be undergoing a new Augustan Age. The printing press allowed anyone, in their own way, to be a modern Maecenas. Supported by the wealth of a growing middle class, new writers, poets, and playwrights, such as Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Joseph Addison, each vied to be the modern Horace or Virgil.

Beyond literature, Shipley reasoned that the other aspects of civilisation might also be encouraged. Prizes, or 'premiums', might be used to promote the other arts and sciences. The Dublin Society since 1741 had offered premiums for agricultural improvements, and Irish landed estates in some cases had more than doubled in value—'incontestable proof' that premiums were beneficial to the country as a whole as well as to the rents of the nobility.⁵⁰ Irish success seemed to confirm Shipley's theory that the only thing that held back a nation was the lack of encouragement, not the climate or people. Some observers already wondered why premiums that were 'so evidently advantageous' had no equivalent in England.⁵¹

In stressing the potential of premiums, Shipley recognised the importance of self-interest. As Baker put it, 'whoever would lead mankind, even to their own good, must take advantage of their passions.'⁵² But the premiums needed to be funded. Shipley's own experience of the Northampton fuel scheme suggested that much could be achieved through public subscription, and the experience of the Dublin Society confirmed this—their fund was raised through subscriptions and private donations. If there were enough 'generous and public-spirited persons' to fund the premiums in Ireland, then surely enough could be found in England too.⁵³ At first glance, there was a contradiction at the heart of Shipley's plan: that in order to exploit most people's selfishness, he would rely on other people's selflessness.

Shipley drew mostly upon a feeling of public-spiritedness that was already present—an affinity with the 'imagined community' of the na-

tion.⁵⁴ By ‘the public’, Shipley had in mind first the nation, and then the wider world. Only scholars, the citizens of the Republic of Letters, tended to be interested in the good of all ‘mankind’.⁵⁵ They might feel a closer affinity to distant foreigners who shared their interests in natural philosophy or antiquarianism than with their uninterested neighbours. They also hoped to uncover scientific laws that would be applicable anytime and anywhere, and often envisaged the practical uses of that knowledge in similarly universal terms—for the benefit of the entire world. For Shipley’s plan to find enough backers, however, he had to appeal to more than just a few scholars. For everybody else in England, the rest of the population of English speakers was already a sufficiently broad group of strangers with whom to develop an affinity.

Serving the public interest was thus synonymous with patriotism—not necessarily a dislike of foreigners, nor even a belief that England was superior to its rivals, but an altruistic devotion to the very broadest group with whom most people in England felt some special bond. A subscriber to Shipley’s fund would first and foremost be a ‘patron of the nation’.⁵⁶ The fund might still encourage improvements that were of universal benefit, for example when it came to alleviating sickness or saving lives—nobody would begrudge such improvements to the rest of the human race. But these had to compete for attention with other, more local concerns. Practical improvements also had to be applied somewhere—that place would be where it was most convenient, at home. When it came down to it, on matters of security, trade, and industry, Shipley’s fund in the service of ‘the public’ would always prioritise the interests of the English. It was ‘for the good of mankind in general and of this nation in particular’.⁵⁷

Yet serving the public by subscribing to the fund would not entirely be an act of selflessness. His plan was not contradictory after all. Shipley recognised that in demonstrating some self-sacrifice there was honour and social standing to be had. Public-spiritedness was widely considered a unique attribute of the nobility, ‘which does honour to the eminence of their station, and dignifies the enjoyment of superior opulence and wealth’.⁵⁸ The nobility’s vast riches and political power were deserved, the argument went, because they alone shouldered the

responsibility of protecting the public interest. Their wealth gave them the independence to make decisions for the country, in theory making them too rich to be swayed by appeals to self-interest. But the division of the nobility into self-serving party factions had put this justification at risk. What Shipley offered was a new way to affirm their worth—a subscription fund whose sole purpose was serving the public. It would ‘unite in one common band all real patriots’, leading at least one well-wisher to hope it might even eventually ‘utterly extirpate all party distinctions.’⁵⁹

The appeal, however, also extended beyond the nobility, to the minor gentry and the emerging middle classes—the expanding group of merchants and artisans and their children and grandchildren, who had grown wealthy off trade and industry but who now sought the prestige to match it. For them, the ability to demonstrate public-spiritedness would allow them to justify their newly gained privileges and to prove that they, too, could be as noble as the nobility. Shipley’s subscription fund would offer a clear proof of that public-spiritedness. He looked to Ireland, which thanks to the Dublin Society’s fund could already ‘boast her patriots unenobled by titles, and her heroes of a private station.’⁶⁰

In collecting support for his fund, Shipley thus took advantage of self-interest—the human desire for social standing—because he framed it as an act of selflessness. Unlike Henry Sully’s society of arts, a speculative project for private profit, Shipley’s version was successful because he framed it as a service to the public alone. Whereas Sully’s reputation was tarnished by his association with schemers like John Law, Shipley’s public-spirited scheme to take on the Northampton fuel engrossers reassured potential subscribers that his proposals were both serious and selfless.

Shipley set out by calling upon Northamptonshire’s local gentry, trying to persuade them to sign their names to a list of potential subscribers. If high-ranking aristocrats could be persuaded to sign the list, it would encourage the wealthy middle classes to add their names too. Shipley alone had limited success, but his friends knew of someone with the influence and connections to ensure the scheme’s success: Stephen Hales.

By 1751, Hales was a high-ranking clergyman, a trustee of the colony of Georgia, and had recently been given direct access to the royal family as chaplain to the mother of the future King George III. He was the young prince's botany tutor. He thus had connections to the country's highest nobility, clergymen, and natural philosophers. He was also sympathetic to Shipley's aims. Hales, too, was worried about the subversion of the public good to private interests. 'I cannot keep useful secrets,' he claimed, unlike the many artisans and manufacturers who denied the public the full advantages of their inventions.⁶¹ Henry Baker knew Hales through the Royal Society, and the host of Northampton's philosophical society, Thomas Yeoman, was the engineer who built and fitted Hales's ventilators.⁶² They both seem to have put Shipley in touch.

Hales recommended that Shipley move back to London, particularly in the winter to late spring, when many of the country's politicians and aristocrats would be in town because Parliament was in session. This time of year was known as the 'London season', or even the 'petitioning season', when the roads back to aristocrats' country seats were rendered difficult or impassable by coach or carriage, turned to soft mud by the rains. It meant a relatively captive audience of 'persons of high rank, large fortunes, and great minds.'⁶³ Hales introduced Shipley to his nephew's nephew-in-law, Robert Marsham, the 2nd Baron Romney, who had apparently been formulating his own plan for a similar organisation together with his brother-in-law, Jacob Bouverie, the 1st Viscount Folkestone. The two aristocrats saw in Shipley someone with the persistence to get it done. Crucially, they allowed him to use their names as he went from door to door trying to drum up support. Hales also facilitated an introduction to a fellow high-ranking clergyman, Isaac Maddox, the Bishop of Worcester, who likewise put his name to the plan.

Shipley now had the credibility he needed. He even managed to get a satirical newspaper to take a break from poking fun and to print his scheme in full: 'I shall make no apology to the lovers of mirth and humour', proclaimed its pseudonymous editor, 'for the seriousness and gravity of what is now laid before them.' Yet after spending December 1753 in the metropolis, Shipley's canvassing failed to yield any new

recruits.⁶⁴ The London season dragged on without results, and the spring of 1754 approached—an impending closure of the window in which to get the fund started. Finally, on 22 March 1754, Shipley called a meeting of the plan's supporters at Rawthmell's Coffee House, on Henrietta Street in Covent Garden.

Ten others turned up. Shipley was joined by Folkestone and Romney, along with Hales and Baker, who dragged along some of their connections: a couple of other fellows of the Royal Society (a merchant and an instrument maker), and Hales's neighbour (a wax chandler and linen draper). Shipley persuaded one of his friends and his landlord, a surgeon, to show up, along with a jeweller-turned-porcelain maker named Nicholas Crisp. The Bishop of Worcester could not make it, but he paid his subscription. Over coffee, or perhaps something stronger, this small gathering of aristocrats, clergymen, scientists, merchants, artisans and others, declared themselves to be a 'Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce'.

Over the following years it would be called a number of things, sometimes the Premium Society, occasionally the Society of Arts and Sciences. Yet it was most often known as simply the Society of Arts. The members of the new Society committed to pay at least two guineas a year into the fund—almost 3,800 pounds in today's money when compared to the average wage⁶⁵—or twenty guineas to be members for life. Folkestone and Romney committed to cover the costs of the Society's premiums until more subscribers joined. The Society agreed to meet regularly on Wednesday evenings (the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society both met on Thursdays), and Shipley jotted down the minutes. The small group met wherever was most convenient, moving between coffee houses, a library, and Shipley's own rooms.

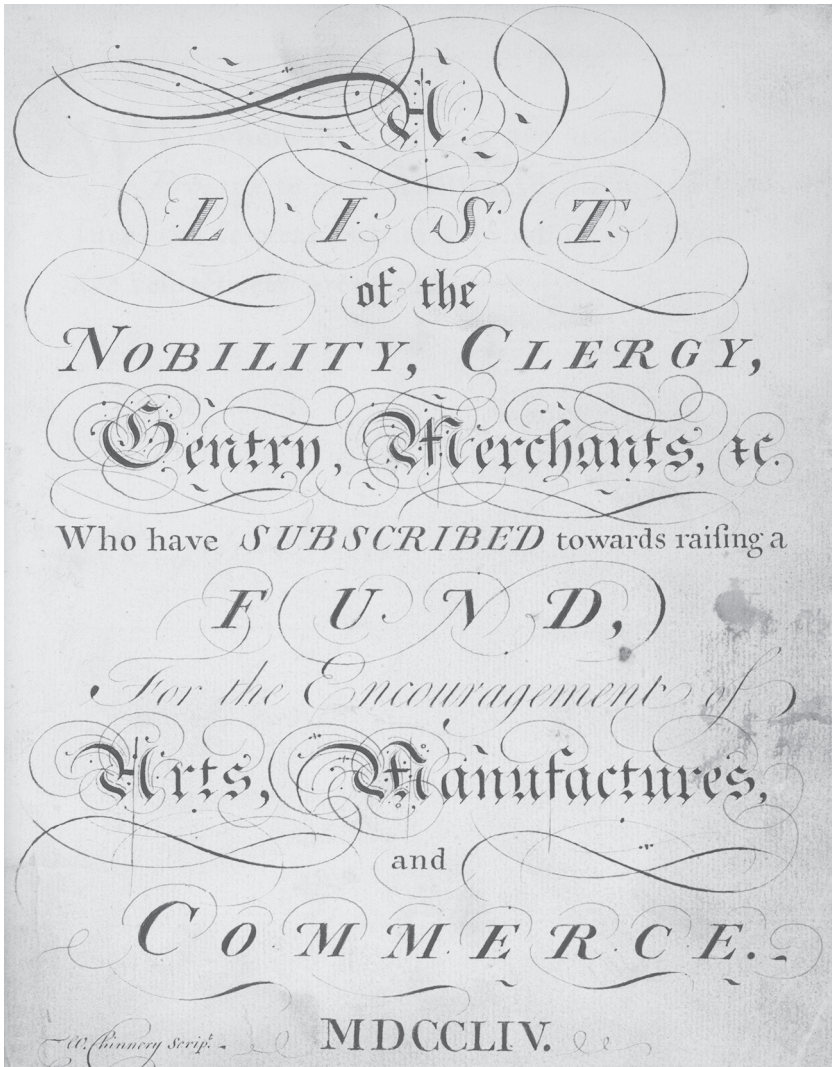
Growth was slow at first. In some early meetings only two or three subscribers were in attendance, and on one occasion Shipley waited around for two hours for someone else to turn up, before giving up and going home.⁶⁶ Yet within two years the list of subscribers had swelled to over two hundred, and in another two years to almost seven hundred. Shipley's persistence paid off. By 1758 the Society's fund was so large as to allow them to offer over a hundred separate premiums. Its subscribers

included many of the country's top nobility and politicians: various dukes, the prime minister, the chancellor of the exchequer, most of the other cabinet ministers, and many other members of Parliament and government bureaucrats.⁶⁷

The model of the Society of Arts was also quickly adopted elsewhere in Britain, and further afield too. In 1755 in Edinburgh, members of a debating club, the Select Society, founded a subsidiary body to award premiums: an Edinburgh Society for Encouraging Arts, Sciences, Manufactures, and Agriculture in Scotland (the Society of Improvers there had since faded away). And in Wales, at Brecon, a group of enthusiasts in 1755 set up the first of many county premium societies (it continues today as the Brecon County Show, making it the oldest surviving agricultural society in Britain). Other premium societies, often calling themselves 'economic' or 'patriotic' societies, sprung up throughout the 1750s and 60s across France, Germany, Switzerland, America, and even Russia, spurred on by the apparent success of both the Dublin Society and the Society of Arts in London.⁶⁸ By 1764, just ten years after the last-ditch attempt at Rawthmell's to get the fund off the ground, the Society of Arts had over two thousand subscribers and had spent over eight thousand pounds in premiums.⁶⁹

The Society printed and circulated lists of its subscribers, mostly in alphabetical order (except that each letter started with the highest nobility, followed by the lords, then the knights, before alphabetically listing the names of the commoners). It seemed that Shipley's intuition was correct: hundreds of people were willing to pay to prove their patriotism (and have their names placed alongside those of the country's highest nobility).

Yet there was more to being a subscriber than just handing over money for appearances. Everyone who paid their two guineas also had an equal say in everything the Society did, whether they were a duke from an ancient lineage, or a merchant with some profits to spare for a patriotic cause. 'The greatest and the meanest are equally industrious in the same design', boasted Henry Baker to a friend, adding that 'all rank and distance is laid aside.'⁷⁰ It was a subscriber democracy, and directly democratic. Subscribers could be involved as members so long as they



1.2. Frontispiece from the Society's original list of subscribers. RSA/AD/MA/900/16/1a.

turned up to the meetings, where everything was usually decided by just a show of hands.

The Society gradually adopted rules to formalise their proceedings, for example setting an order in which to discuss matters, requiring that each vote be confirmed at the following meeting, and only allowing the

rules and orders to be changed at a quarterly general meeting. But for at least a century the organisation remained essentially flat. From 1755 it annually elected presidents—Folkestone was the first, upon his death succeeded by Romney—but their role was only to lend prestige to the meetings, ensure order, and if necessary cast a tie-breaking vote. A number of vice-presidents were also elected each year to stand in for the presidents when they were away. Beyond this, the sole privilege of these officials was that at the meetings they were the only ones allowed to wear their hats—probably ‘cocked’ tricornes, made of beaver felt.⁷¹

As it grew, the Society appointed committees to investigate detailed matters, such as which premiums to advertise and which submissions deserved prizes, but any member of the Society was allowed to attend, and their recommendations were only recommendations. The general membership of the Society always had the final say, voting on whether to accept the committee’s recommendations, and often disagreeing. The members could reject a committee’s report outright, or force it to reconsider and present fresh recommendations. In the early years the committees would meet throughout the week in coffee houses or taverns, or wherever else was convenient. Over time these committees became more established, and split into regular categories: correspondence, accounts, agriculture, chemistry, mechanics, manufactures, the polite arts, colonies and trade, and miscellaneous matters. As with the president and vice-presidents, the members annually elected committee chairs too.

Shipley had purposefully created a Society over which he had no control. His vote was worth just as much as anyone else’s. (He had even originally proposed that the number of votes should be proportional to the amount paid, which would immediately have meant handing over control to the much wealthier aristocrats he had canvassed.) Instead, Shipley was content with serving the Society not as a leader, but as a functionary: he took the minutes, drew up the lists of subscribers and premiums, managed the Society’s official correspondence, took care of all its effects, and chased existing members for their two guineas a year. At first he did much of this for free, but it soon became a paid role. The title that eventually stuck for the chief functionary was that

of ‘secretary’, though as the subscription fund grew, so did the Society’s activities and staff. Soon many of Shipley’s original duties were split between the secretary, an assistant secretary, a collector to chase up the subscriptions, and a ‘register’, later called the housekeeper, to take care of the Society’s rooms and effects.⁷² As with all the other positions, however, the Society’s principal staff were annually elected by the subscribers. Even their wages and bonuses were put to the vote.

The subscribers were thus more than just piggy banks; if they wanted to, they could turn up to the Society’s meetings to exercise their democratic rights. And other than the subscription fee, albeit substantial, there were essentially no other barriers to entry. New members had to be proposed by an existing member and balloted for—at the end of the weekly meetings someone, at first the porter, later a pair of servant boys, would circulate the room with a balloting box, allowing each member to vote by placing a cork ball into a compartment either for or against.⁷³ But hardly anyone seems to have been turned away. The procedure kept out only known troublemakers—those who had already publicly insulted or libelled members—not those of lower rank or station.⁷⁴ Some savvy tradesmen and artisans realised that membership of the Society shortened the social distance between them and many of the wealthy upper classes: the furniture designer Thomas Chippendale, for example, found many future patrons among his fellow members. Over time the number of required proposers for a member increased from one, to two, to three, but with no discernible effect—the Society does not appear to have become more exclusive. If anything, the proportion of the members who were from the middle classes seems only to have increased. By the early nineteenth century one eminent scientist disparaged the members of the Society of Arts as mere ‘tradesmen from the Strand.’⁷⁵

Shipley’s plan was that anyone and everyone should be allowed to become a modern Maecenas, at once both a patron of the nation and a patron of the arts. Unusually for the eighteenth century, this even extended to women: Shipley saw no reason why women would be any less patriotic or public-spirited than men. Whereas the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries admitted members based on perceived achievements in science and antiquarianism, fields from which women

were almost entirely excluded, the Society of Arts accepted members based on their values alone. Their patriotism, regardless of gender, would itself be demonstrated by the fact that they chose to subscribe. This open approach meant that the Society of Arts had female members from the very beginning, whereas the much older Royal Society and Society of Antiquaries did not admit women until the 1940s, almost two hundred years later. Yet the Society of Arts was unusually open even when compared to other patriotic funds: its Irish precursor, the Dublin Society, did not admit women to full membership until 1921.

It is not clear just how involved the early female members were. As fully paid-up subscribers, they certainly had the right to attend and vote at meetings, yet there is no evidence that they actually did. Coffee houses had a reputation as raucous places for men to socialise with other men, where they might acquire 'a swagger in the gait, a drunken totter, a noisy riotous deportment, a volley of oaths, and a total want of what is called good-breeding'.⁷⁶ Although the establishments were often run by women, they were places men went to escape the company of their wives. The coffee-house culture seems to have stayed with the Society of Arts, even after it moved into more sedate venues. Its debates could become heated, full of 'strong expressions and shouting' as well as 'hissing and clapping'.⁷⁷

A public assembly of men was considered an unsuitable place for women in polite society, even by some of the female members themselves. Elizabeth Montagu, who was a member of the Society of Arts for almost half a century, preferred to cultivate intelligent conversation more privately, over breakfast or tea in the home of an aristocrat. She was leader of the 'bluestockings', a social circle that actively encouraged female intellectuals in traditionally male-dominated spheres, particularly art and literature. Montagu promoted a public role for women, and gloried in the pursuit of fame, but it was to be done via art or the written word, not in person. Women, in her view, needed to protect an image of decorum and virtue so that their words and works could also be admired. If women engaged in heated debates in a public assembly, she feared they might instead appear impassioned instead of reasoned, factious instead of patriotic. She was disparaging of women who were

overtly political, complaining that they adopted ‘masculine opinions and masculine manners.’⁷⁸ Montagu and other female members still engaged in the politics of the Society—they voted in the annual elections of its officers and staff—but they did so behind the scenes, by proxy.⁷⁹ (It was only in 1807 that the Society explicitly stated that female members were allowed to attend and vote at all meetings and committees—the introduction of the rule suggests that women had been almost, if not entirely, absent.)

Although the Society’s meetings could be raucous, the rules and procedures increasingly resembled those of Parliament. Members were to be seated, only rising one at a time to speak, and had to address the president or vice-president in the chair, much like a member of Parliament should address the Speaker of the House of Commons. The Society became ‘a place where many persons chose to try, or to display, their oratorical abilities’—a less exclusive arena in which to gain experience of public speaking, especially for people who might not ever have had a chance of being elected to Parliament.⁸⁰ This may explain why so many of the coffee-house literati joined, such as the theatre actor David Garrick.

But the meetings could be intimidating. Oliver Goldsmith, an Irish novelist, playwright and poet, began a speech only to lose his train of thought and be ‘obliged to sit down in confusion.’ Samuel Johnson, famous for his dictionary, likewise complained how ‘all my flowers of oratory forsook me’, although on another occasion he is said to have ‘excited general admiration’ for his ‘propriety, perspicuity, and energy’ in a speech related to mechanics.⁸¹ It was not all soaring oratory, however. One foreign observer, allowed to attend one of the Society’s committee meetings, complained of ‘long and vehement speeches’ by certain members.⁸² Anyone could pay to have their say—the droning bores as well as the eloquent wits.

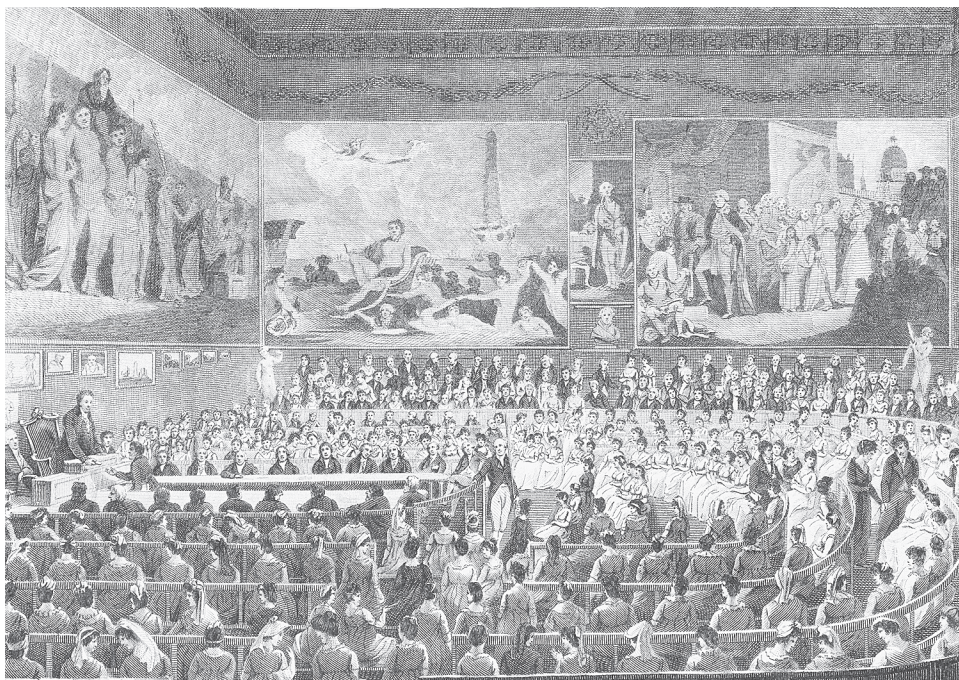
Also like Parliament, as the Society grew in its prestige, its members felt that it deserved a suitably prestigious venue. There were practical reasons for a new venue too. The number of members hoping to have their say very soon outgrew the living rooms, libraries, and coffee-house booths that the Society had commandeered. It began to hire larger and

larger spaces to serve as its ‘Great Room’. In 1758, the architect William Chambers—partly responsible for bringing the neoclassical style to Britain—drew up ambitious plans for a building to permanently house the Society. It would be as grand as his later design for Somerset House. He envisaged the Society having halls for displaying models of machinery and works of art, numerous vestibules, living quarters for the staff, and a grand central corridor ‘in the manner of an Egyptian hall’, flanked by gardened courtyards, which led to a vast oval amphitheatre for the meetings.⁸³ It was, unsurprisingly, too expensive.

In the end, in 1759 the Society moved into more modest premises in Denmark Court, just off the Strand, though with a Great Room that could fit four hundred. Chambers had to content himself with designing the interior and furniture (the ornate chair he created for the Society’s president survives to this day). Fluted Ionic columns decorated the walls, and 23-foot Corinthian pillars held up a 16-foot-high ceiling dome.⁸⁴ Yet even these expanded premises became too crowded. Within a year of moving in, the Great Room was so packed and stuffy that the Society considered installing one of Hales’s ventilators.⁸⁵ The evaporated sweat from the packed-in bodies was condensing in the ceiling dome and dripping back down onto the members’ heads.⁸⁶

The Society’s rapid growth also produced unpleasantness of a social kind. There was a risk that the Society might ‘degenerate into cabal and corruption’, a charge often levied at Parliament.⁸⁷ In the early days of the Society, sat around a coffee-house table, decisions were often reached unanimously. From this evolved the arrangement of members in a U-shape facing the president, who was flanked by the secretary and assistant secretary. This was unlike Parliament, divided by a wide aisle into two opposing benches—a layout that was immediately adversarial. The Society’s somewhat semi-circular layout was instead, at least in theory, conducive to consensus.

The lofty promise of the Society was, after all, that it would unite Britain’s middle and upper classes in a common patriotic cause, not descend into petty political factions. Chambers’s proposed oval amphitheatre would have emphasised its consensus-building even further. Yet the Society was in this sense a victim of its own success. A larger and



1.3. The distribution of premiums at the Society of Arts. Note the horseshoe configuration of the benches in the Great Room. This is the oldest known depiction of the Society as it actually was. Drawn by Edward Pugh, engraved by Isaac Taylor, and published in 1804 by Richard Phillips to illustrate his *Modern London*.

larger group of members inevitably resulted in a greater diversity of opinions and interests, with members splitting into factions, each with their own ideas as to how the Society should spend its fund. At the same time, the increased size of the fund meant that there was an even larger prize potentially up for grabs. As we shall see, some unscrupulous individuals saw the potential to direct the fund to their own personal gain. So long as they could hoodwink the other members to vote in their favour, the Society's growing wealth provided opportunities for corruption.

It did not help that the Society's aims were so vague—a Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce covered a lot. Shipley's plan encompassed essentially anything and everything that might be encouraged with the use of premiums. His original pro-

posals promised to ‘embolden enterprise, to enlarge science, to refine art, to improve our manufactures, and extend our commerce’.⁸⁸ When he mentioned specifics, he covered everything from husbandry to painting, tapestry, architecture, education, and even poetry. Hales had chipped in with naval improvements—nothing could be more useful for a maritime nation—and Shipley had also mentioned ways to reduce unemployment and crime. Ultimately, it would be up to the Society’s members to decide.⁸⁹

The Society became popular because its wide remit allowed people to project their own ideas onto it; the control that members had over the Society gave them the chance to materially further each of their own pet projects. At least, if they could persuade enough of their fellow members. Some tried to use the fund to reward new advances in medicine and health. Hales after all had thought that combating disease was one of the clearest proofs of knowledge’s usefulness. But for some reason, in the early years, the majority disagreed and premiums for cures were routinely rejected.⁹⁰ Others wanted the Society to encourage literature: one hopeful bookseller even proposed the Society be renamed the ‘The British Society for the Encouragement of Letters, Arts, and Manufactures’. His hope was largely in vain, except for a 1758 premium for ‘the best dissertation on the history of the arts of peace’, which would enumerate ‘the effects of those improvements on the morals and manners of the people’—several contenders were considered, but never rewarded. The same bookseller also proposed the Society be called ‘The Philopatrian Society’, because the word was new and distinctive, and alluded to ‘the very motive and bond of our association, namely the love of our country’.⁹¹ The original name has nonetheless stuck to the present, except for the 1908 addition of ‘Royal’, and all of the suggestions retained the breadth of Shipley’s ambition: it was a Society to improve everything.

The breadth of Shipley’s vision meant that the Society would offer premiums to encourage a staggering and seemingly incoherent variety of things. The Society was often prey to well-organised interest groups, as well as individual schemers. The painters and sculptors wanted it to encourage fine art; the amateur farmers proposed premiums for

agriculture; the natural philosophers wanted it to encourage experiments and to collect and disseminate useful knowledge; some people just wanted money for their latest project. As we shall see, the Society was forced to develop ways to deal with corruption and to reduce the power of factions, gradually adding rules to obtain consensus and prevent private interests using the fund to benefit themselves.

Because the majority ruled, the Society often came to reflect the widely held opinions of London's elites, particularly the newly wealthy middle classes, who tended to turn up to vote at the meetings more often than the aristocrats. Subscribers paid to have their say, but they still had to convince enough of the others if they wanted to have their way. The Society's activities thus reveal the priorities of Britain's expanding elites over at least a century. They encouraged everything from sowing acorns, to improved hand-mills, to mechanical means of cleaning chimneys, to transporting fresh fish to London by land. Yet all had in common elements of Shipley's ambition: the redirection of private interests to the benefit of the public.

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