

'Trade flat, money scarce, spirits low': the Journal of John Kirby of Leicester, 1813-48

by *David L. Wykes*

Autobiographical sources left by businessmen are rare for the first half of the nineteenth century, as indeed for all periods. Thus the personal journal kept by the Leicester hosier John Kirby from 1813 until his death in 1848 is of interest, particularly for the details it gives concerning the experiences of the small businessman during the difficult economic conditions that followed the end of the Napoleonic War.¹ The journal is of further importance for the insight it gives into the lives and concerns of a newly emerging middle class. It also provides evidence on the attitudes and experiences of that most important of Victorian groups, the Nonconformist family.

The original intent of the journal was undoubtedly religious. The entries for the first year consist almost entirely of summaries of sermons delivered by the celebrated Baptist preacher Robert Hall, minister of Harvey Lane Meeting, which Kirby attended after his second marriage. From December 1814, Kirby also began a series of annual reviews originally to document his spiritual progress. Thus in origin the journal follows a long tradition found in evangelical dissent, of the believer seeking to record his or her religious progress. Fortunately for the historian, if the volume is entirely conventional in concept, it subsequently acquired a more secular content. As Kirby's anxiety over his business affairs and his family's health increased, such concerns came to dominate his annual reviews, and after the death of his second wife in 1835 the volume became the medium in which he confided. Inevitably, the journal also contains a mass of incidental detail on his family, their dates of birth, their health, their holidays and his concern for them. In later years there are also references to political events together with Kirby's comments. The value of Kirby's journal as an historical source is enhanced by the autobiographical reminiscences, *Leaflets from my Life*, published by his second daughter Mary Kirby.²

i

John Kirby was born at Ibstock in February 1781, the second of fifteen children. His father, Thomas Kirby (1753-1826), was a substantial tenant farmer of a farm in Ibstock owned by the Pares family, who were one of the leading business families in Leicestershire during the second half of the eighteenth century. In 1802 the Kirby family removed to another Pares farm at Appletree in Northamptonshire on the border with Oxfordshire, about six miles north-east of Banbury. Thomas Kirby's wife also came from

1. LRO DE 619: Diary of John Kirby, 1813-1848. The quotation used in the title is from page 118 of the diary. The volume is in its contemporary binding, measures 12½ x 8 in., and consists of approximately 300 pages, of which Kirby's journal covers a total of just over 200 foliated pages with the rest unused. Kirby's spelling and grammar have been maintained in all quotations, unless the meaning is unclear.
2. M. Kirby, *'Leaflets from my life': a narrative autobiography*. London & Leicester, 1887

farming stock.³ It was therefore not surprising that John should originally have followed his family in farming as well, but after a few years as a farmer's boy his father decided in view of John's delicate health to place him in the hosiery trade, then enjoying a period of expansion as a result of the war. Because of his age (he was then 16 years old) Kirby was sent to Cosby at the beginning of August 1797 to learn how to operate a stocking-frame, before being apprenticed in Nottingham at the end of the following year.⁴ In later years he considered his stay in Nottingham to have been important despite his failure to obtain a situation there. Nearly 40 years later he was to write, 'as far I can now judge, . . . all the little knowledge I got was at Nottingham to which I removed and though my stay there did nothing for me as to promoting my worldly interest, it was highly beneficial to me in other respects.'⁵ It was during this period, for example, that he learnt French.⁵

Kirby left Nottingham in January 1803, at the age of nearly 22, after Mr Bailey, his master, was appointed the town gaoler.⁶ He travelled to Leicester where he met his father at the Nag's Head in High Cross Street. His father, at a loss as what to do with this son who seemed unable to find a suitable situation in life, first attempted to persuade a woolcomber called William Barnacle, who was also accustomed to frequent the Nag's Head, to take John on and teach him woolcombing. Perhaps fortunately for John, who thought Barnacle 'a drunken worthless fellow', this failed, and so almost in despair his father approached his friend Thomas Pares (1746-1824), who agreed to take John into the office of his law firm until something more suitable could be found.⁷ Entering the Thursday following his arrival in Leicester, John remained in the office of Messrs Pares, Miles & Alston for nearly four months, and during this time it appears he was mainly employed in clerical work, such as drawing up abstracts of title for clients.⁸ Kirby was then found a place in the hosiery warehouse of Messrs Pares & Heygate in the Newark, where John Pares (1749-1833), the brother of Thomas, was a partner.⁹ The firm, which had been one of the largest in Leicester during the last decade of the eighteenth century, with a substantial American market, had suffered a considerable reduction in business following the introduction of new machinery by Joseph Paget & Sons of Loughborough and a number of other manufacturers. At the same time as Kirby entered the hosiery warehouse, one of his younger brothers, Samuel (1787-1854), was placed in the Leicester office of the related banking firm of Messrs Pares, Paget, Pares & Heygate, which had been established in 1800 following the decline in the hosiery concern.¹⁰ John Kirby believed he would have been taken into the bank had his writing been thought good enough.¹¹

3. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, pp.9-10. Thomas Kirby had been one of the creditors of a butcher in Nailstone, with his partner Samuel Bradley, a farmer of Heather. LRO DG 8/203: A Petition in Bankruptcy against John Poole of Nailstone, butcher (16 Dec 1789); DE 619, pp.105, 117, 122, 146; LRO Will of George Morley, Bardon Park, 1812
4. DE 619, p.104 and loose paper inserted in front of journal
5. DE 619, pp.147, 137; Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.12
6. *Records of the Borough of Nottingham: being a series of extracts from the archives of the Corporation of Nottingham*, 8: 1800-1835, ed. D. Gray & V. W. Walker, pp.27-28. Nottingham: Forman, 1952
7. DE 619, pp.147, 104
8. DE 619, loose paper; LRO 3 D 42/2/324: An attested Abstract of Title, dated 12 April 1804 and signed by John Kirby and William Sanderson 'Clks to Messrs Pares, Miles and Alston'.
9. DE 619, p.104. He gives the date as Wednesday 2 May 1804, but this appears to be an error for 1803, since Kirby states later (p.147) that he remained in the attorney's office for only four months before entering the warehouse; he had arrived in Leicester in January 1803.
10. LRO DE 365/298: Short Memoir of Thomas Paget (1778-1862) by his widow Ann, the daughter of John Pares, 22 Sept 1864; C. J. Billson, *Leicester memoirs*, pp.21-22. Leicester: Backus, 1924
11. DE 619, pp.147-48; Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.10 provides a slightly different account from that of her father.

There is, unfortunately, virtually no information concerning the period of Kirby's life which followed; a period which covers the formative years of his early business career. It would seem likely, despite his subsequent claim that what 'little knowledge I got was at Nottingham', that he gained additional experience while with Messrs Pares & Heygate, who were at the time still among the leading hosiers in Leicester. In February 1807, at the age of 26, Kirby married Mary Ellis, whose family were involved in the hosiery trade. As a result he moved to a house in Cank Street.¹² Although there is no surviving information, it would seem reasonable to assume that this marriage helped Kirby to set up in business. It is unlikely, in view of his large family, that his father could have provided much financial assistance, but Kirby's connections with the Pares brothers are just the type of contacts that historians recognise as important for young men setting up in business. If it is unlikely that Kirby received much direct financial help from his father, he does appear during this early period to have had one of his younger brothers, Robert, then aged 16, as an assistant.¹³ Such arrangements were a recognised method by which members of a family helped each other. Kirby would have acquired the assistance of someone he could trust, at a time when no doubt he had little cash to spare for salaries, while his younger brother would have learnt something of the trade and have been given his first entry into the world. Unfortunately, Kirby's marriage proved short-lived, for his wife died in March 1811, aged 29. Their only child, John, had died in October 1809, less than a month after his birth. Just over 18 months later, in October 1812, Kirby married as his second wife Sarah Bentley.¹⁴

ii

Although Kirby's earliest years in business are unfortunately obscure, it is possible to trace the broad outlines of his involvement. Following his marriage in February 1807 he had gone to live in Cank Street, and he is first recorded in the parish rate book as occupying a house assessed at £10 in April 1808. The first directory recording Kirby's business dates from 1815, but he was assessed at £3 on a warehouse in Cank Street in June 1813¹⁵ This period, involving a growing family, was not without its difficulties, and in January 1816 he wrote:

On a review of the state of my affairs I find that while my property is diminishing, my family is increasing, I am therefore making progress towards Bankruptcy which is a galling idea and calls imperiously on me for greater economy, and self denial in all the luxuries of life. I am therefore most resolutely determined in the present year to retrench every avoidable expence, to study and practice the most frugal methods of housekeeping.¹⁶

It is clear that his early business consisted of working on commission for a London hosier, since in July 1816 James Pritt & Co. stopped payment, 'by which I am deprived of a situation and have to make my way in the world'.¹⁷ Working on commission was undoubtedly the easiest method for a young man with only limited capital to get started,

12. DE 619, p.104. A Mr Ellis was assessed on a house for £11 (LRO 21 D 51/II/1: St Martin's Parish Rate Book, second rate, 9 July 1807, fol.2)

13. DE 619, pp.105, 32. Kirby records that Robert was living with him from 14 Dec. 1810 until 14 May 1813.

14. DE 619, p.104

15. 21 D 51/II/2 fol.1: St Martin's Parish Rate Books, 1st rate; 21 D 51/II/13 fol.2: 15 June 1813, 2nd rate; *The Leicester directory*, sold by J. Fowler (1815), where Kirby is misnamed as William

16. DE 619, p.53

17. *The Post-Office annual directory for 1814*. London, 1814, s.v. James Pritt & Co, hosiers, 15 Wood Street, Cheapside

but with the failure of Pritt & Co Kirby was forced to make his own way in business.

In October 1817, presumably as a result of the change in his circumstances, he took on Thomas Dexter as an apprentice for four years. Dexter was to receive nothing for the first year, £10 for the second, £15 for the third, and £20 for the fourth.¹⁸ By October 1818, Kirby had given up his original house, and taken another, also in Cank Street, but assessed at the lower rate of £8. Nonetheless, although assessed as a dwelling, this appears to have been connected with his business, since he had moved his family to a house in Granby Street in September that year. He continued to be rated on the house in Cank Street until 1820.

There is no further review of his situation until the beginning of 1820, when he made a retrospective survey of the previous twelve months. 1819 had looked quite promising: 'its beginning augered prosperity, . . . my temporal affairs prospered beyond my expectations, and to add to the climax of my happiness God blessed us with a dear boy'. But 'how deceitful are appearances' for these 'promising appearances were soon beclouded',¹⁹ and by November he was writing

the aspect of my affairs being most gloomy and I feel fully sensible it will require all the exertion and discretion I am possessed of accompanied with the blessing of God to enable me to stand my ground and maintain my family as heretofore.²⁰

First, his wife, following the birth of their son, was seriously ill, indeed her life despaired of, and then in October the whole family had typhus, including the maid-servant and charwoman:

this trial was not over before one of another sort and arising from another quarter caused me some alarm, lest the small proportion of this world's goods of which I was possessed should make to themselves wings and flee away. During the first half of the year goods were scarcely to be sold, while during the same period they were almost weekly diminishing in value insomuch that the reduction of value might average at 30⁶ per cent. By this great change I lost a good part of my property. My ill star did not stop here, for before the close of the year two of my customers stopped payment, which wound up the disasterous events of this disasterous year, such another I trust and pray we may never experience.²¹

In fact the year proved so disastrous he was apparently unable to finish the review. In May 1820 he moved his family from Granby Street to a house in Southgates, at the same time giving up the house in Cank Street.

The move back into the old town from the newer suburb then developing along the London Road appears to have been part of some sort of financial retrenchment. Conditions still continued to be very difficult. In the month he moved his family to Southgates, he was writing of the 'flatness of trade and an apprehension of similar disasters and losses of those of last year.' Nonetheless, he was able to look back and recognise that when viewed against the unpromising circumstances of his first arrival in Leicester, he had achieved some measurable level of success. At the end of 1820 he noted 'it has been checkered with many ills and disappointments, sanguine as were my hopes and expectations of escaping them at its commencement'. The continued ill health of his family had caused 'distress, anxiety and expense' and to add to his concerns, 'Trade has gone from bad to worse instead of improving'.²² In the review of the previous

18.DE 619, p.53

19.DE 619, p.81

20.DE 619, p.80

21.DE 619, p.81. Some punctuation added.

22.DE 619, pp.84-85, 90. Cf. p.89

twelve months which he made on his fortieth birthday in February 1821, he could see no improvement, and later in October the same year on his wedding anniversary, he noted that ‘difficulties and losses in trade have made very frequent inroads to mar our peace and darken our prospects’.²³

There are no further reviews or details concerning his business situation until February 1824, when a return of confidence led to new projects. Nonetheless, he was only too aware of the precarious nature of his business:

the most important thing that now engages my attention is the erection of a steam engine for the purpose of spinning worsted, it would be a very trifling thing to many individuals but to a person of my small property it is a serious concern, small miscarriages may be productive of ruin to myself and family, I have therefore given the matter all the consideration in my power and it does appear to me that the prospect of success is certain unless frustrated by some unforeseen calamity against which human prudence cannot guard.²⁴

With the improvement in his circumstances, Kirby finally gave up the warehouse in Cank Street, and, judging from the rate assessed on the new building, took a larger warehouse in Southgates instead.²⁵ But his hopes for an improvement in business proved far too sanguine, and by May he was recording ‘Trade flat, spirits low, Oh when will the days of darkness be past’. A visit to Nottingham in July found the ‘People there are to all appearance in prosperity, many are rapidly rising in wealth’, but of his own schemes

It is now eleven months since I seriously thought of putting up a steam engine, it has up to the present time been a source of trouble and expence, without producing anything, I look to the future for remuneration, but time has made me less sanguine, still such is the restlessness of my mind that new schemes agitate and engage my attention—Oh the plague of getting money.²⁶

Nonetheless, by the end of 1825 he was sufficiently hopeful about the future to enter on what proved to be the greatest expenditure of his life. In October of that year he purchased a house in Friar Lane with a garden extending through to Millstone Lane, at a cost of just under £1000. He was able to complete the purchase without a mortgage. It was not intended just as a residence for his family for he built a two-storey warehouse in the garden facing Millstone Lane.²⁷ He clearly had doubts at the time about the wisdom of this investment.²⁸ It not only tied up so much of his capital, but with the additional running costs committed him to a far greater level of expenditure than before. It was clearly a substantial house, reflected in the rates assessed at £27, nearly twice the figure for his previous house in Southgates; a house suitable for use by a wealthy manufacturer or professional man, and one which had in fact been previously occupied by a surgeon. His concern over his additional expenditure was soon justified. In the summer of 1826, he was writing

Trade flat, money scarce, spirits low, I stand in wonder and astonishment at my stupidity and folly in having locked up my property in Factory Houses & frames so that I have

23. DE 619, pp.91, 94

24. DE 619, p.99; his daughter provides a vivid description of a visit to Kirby’s factory in Redcross Street, see Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.48

25. LRO 21 D 51/III/18: St Mary’s Parish Rate Book, Mar. 1825, fol. 45

26. DE 619, pp.100, 103, 106

27. Deeds deposited by McAlpin & Halkyard, Solicitors, 12 D 57/112–3: Deeds of Lease and Release; 12 D 57/124a: Abstract of Title, fol.1

28. DE 619, p.105: ‘Hope for the best’, to which has been added in another hand, presumably that of his wife, ‘what an adventurous man’

nothing left to carry on my business.²⁹

In December he wrote of 'a year of great anxiety and changes', occasioned by his wife's poor health and his business concerns. His wife's health had also been a cause of considerable additional expense as a result of medical fees and other charges.³⁰

In addition to his warehouse in Millstone Lane, Kirby also established a factory in Redcross Street for spinning wool in premises rented from Joseph Wheatley. He is first recorded in October 1827 as occupying a house rated at £22. By January 1830, the property was described as a house and a spinning factory, when Kirby was rated with Joseph Harrison on Harrison's house and the factory. Harrison appears to have been the manager. His diary reveals, however, that he was spinning worsted by steam as early as February 1824, though it may have been in a different factory. It is not possible to say when Kirby gave up the factory, but probably in 1847 when he is known to have been retrenching his business activities.³¹ In January 1831 he took out a mortgage on his property in Friar Lane for £1000, borrowing the money from his wealthy brother William Kirby at 5 per cent. per annum. The mortgage was not redeemed until 1850, and then by his executors. There is no indication as to why Kirby required the money, though it may have been concerned with the purchase of new machinery which was being constantly introduced during this period. It is also not unreasonable to suppose that Kirby obtained some benefit from his brother's involvement in banking. In 1825 Samuel Kirby formed a partnership with Thomas Paget to establish a new bank in the town.³²

Although he continued to record the details of family and other events, there is, with the exception of 1832 and 1833, a gap in the annual reviews of nine years until 1835. Kirby was prompted to review his personal affairs in 1833 as it marked the thirtieth anniversary of his coming to Leicester. He again noted the unpromising circumstances of his first arrival in the town, and he continued

and though even now I have nothing to say in my own praise or defence as it respects accomplishments. Yet I do think as great a measure of prosperity has attended me as I could expect and that my circumstances upon the whole are better than my situation thirty years ago would reasonably warrant me to look forward to.³³

The early 1830s appear to have been a more prosperous period for Kirby in his business affairs, but the death of his wife in July 1835 cast a long shadow over all his subsequent activity. It was quite simply 'the greatest blow to my happiness that ever happened to me', and he went on to note the injustice of it all: 'she struggled with me in all my difficulties and now [when] I seem to have overcome them, she is not allowed to share with me'.³⁴ He had lost both companion and wife. Always of a melancholy disposition, he laboured under a great mental affliction for the remainder of his life. His annual reviews were resumed, but he became increasingly anxious about the growing expense of his family. In January 1837 he wrote

29. DE 619, p.118

30. DE 619, pp.119, 121

31. LRO St Mary's Parish Rate Books: 21 D 51/III/23, fol.64 (Oct 1827); III/28, fol.19 (Jan 1830); 7 D 67/438, p.60 (Dec 1832); 444, p.85 (Jun 1834); 455, p.85 (1st Quarter 1837); 456, p.113 (3rd Quarter 1847). Unfortunately, there are no surviving rate books between 1837 and 1847

32. LRO 12 D 57/113-14: Mortgage 7 Jan 1831, Reconveyance 5 Mar. 1850 Messuage and land in Friar Lane extending through to Millstone Lane; DE 619, p.108

33. DE 619, p.139

34. DE 619, p.52

Another year entered upon—God had blessed me in my temporal affairs. I mean as to pecuniary matters, in other respects my desires are unfulfilled and likely to be so, I however thank God for what he has given & look to him for assistance that my efforts may be crowned with success that I may attain that which I have not though desired.

But there was a poor spring, and by April ‘Trade too is dreadfully flat, goods declining in value & many workmen out of employ.’ At the end of May he was in Nottingham: ‘Trade very flat’, and on 2 June he noted ‘Three large American Houses stopped payment. Every thing as to trade gloomy, goods falling in value.’ The state of the economy continued to be bad, and in July he wrote, ‘Spirits low, business flat, all things seem against me, oh when will fortune smile upon me again.’ By May the following year he was

Labouring under great mental depression on account of business. I feel as though I should never recover myself, the thoughts of my dear children presses heavily on me, the thoughts that I have brought them up in a stile of life in which I shall not be able to support them.

But his son, a frequent source of anxiety since the time he had fallen under the influence of a dissolute cousin, was at last ‘desirous of attending to business so that the gloom of my present situation is not without alleviating circumstances’. Nonetheless, it did not last, and by the end of the year he was writing

I am now quite perplexed about my son who ought according to the usual course of things to be of great service to me, instead of which he is a source of almost constant annoyance and plague by his conduct, and of embarrasment to know how to dispose of him.³⁵

The expense of his family, and his inability to maintain them, remained a constant source of worry: ‘the might of an expensive family have preyed upon my spirits.’ In March 1839, he wrote of ‘the state of my business with my heavy expenses press upon my mind’, and at the end of the year, ‘This is another year of disaster, all my doings so wrong, oh when will the tide of my affairs turn, I never think of them without dismay.’³⁶ On the seventh anniversary of his wife’s death, he noted

Oh when will the tide of my affairs turn, will prosperity never more visit me, shall I never more be able to obtain a maintenance for my family but be ever more have to witness the decrease of my property. Oh my God send me now prosperity. Bless my dear Children.³⁷

The journal records nothing to brighten Kirby’s affairs, just his continued and growing gloom over the direction taken by his business and his deep depression over his personal life. In November 1845 it was discovered that he had the stone. By February 1846 he had undergone four operations at the hands of the noted local surgeon, Thomas Paget, who like his father before him specialised in lithotomy.³⁸ Not surprisingly he found himself unable to continue his business as before.

A change has come over my affairs as far as money matters, I ended the last year with bright visions and prospects now I feel depressed & low, I am unable both from age & the

35. DE 619, pp.162, 163, 165, 166, 167; Kirby *Leaflets*, as n.2, pp.63, 26, 34

36. DE 619, pp.167, 168, 169

37. DE 619, p.172

38. DE 619, p.184, 185, 189; Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.67; E. R. Frizelle, *The life and times of the Royal Infirmary at Leicester: the making of a teaching hospital, 1766–1980*, p.442. Leicester: Leicester Medical Society 1988, p.442

present state of my health to prosecute & carry on the business to the same advantage as in my younger days, there is much to discourage me in carrying it on.

By 1847 he was retrenching his business activities, and had dispensed with the services of Beales his long-serving foreman. 'I have felt more satisfied since I gave James Beales notice—We live in a world of Change, all worldly engagements soon terminate and pass away.'³⁹

When Kirby died in October 1848, his family was apparently left in straitened circumstances. His daughters continued his journal, and Mary wrote:

We were in the greatest uncertainty as to whether we should be able to live upon the wreck of his property, but we cried unto the Lord and he heard us—Let Our Song ever be Bless the Lord O my Soul, and forget not all his benefits.⁴⁰

Kitty, the youngest daughter recorded how their prayers were answered:

one thing after another came to our aid. One Sat night nothing in hand, Sarah found a bank bag with some 10£ in it forgotten there in a china mug, in the dining room cupboard: . . . [when] that was expended we had employment.⁴¹

The eldest sister went out to teach the daughter of the Vicar of St Mary's, while Mary and Elizabeth began to write for their living. They were to publish a number of popular and improving works together. In addition, their father's foreman succeeded in changing the dates of payment on Kirby's business debts from one to two years, a very real advantage. But the moneys of the estate were scattered about in a series of trade debts and only slowly was the money received. 'The first money paid in was also given to Tom [their brother] to keep the business together, as was right, but little by little a remnant was secured', and the estate eventually realised over £5000.⁴²

iii

The journal is very much an account of Kirby's personal affairs—his religious beliefs, details of his family, his business worries and family concerns. The early years covered by the journal reveal little concern with political matters, and the first references were brief and confined to the great national and international events of the period. He noted the fall of Bonaparte and the news of peace in 1814, but Waterloo passes unmentioned. He did record the death of Princess Charlotte, and that ten days later Robert Hall had 'improved on the death of the Princess', seeing it as 'a Judgment of God on the nation'. There are also entries marking the death of George III and his funeral in 1820, where Kirby noted that Hall had again delivered a sermon on the late King, his attitude towards dissenters and his desire that they should receive toleration. The General Election of 1818 was mentioned, but without comment. Kirby could not vote, and perhaps not surprisingly he was more concerned that year in recording the move of his family from Cank Street to their new home in Granby Street.⁴³

From the late 1820s, however, with the growing pressure for reform, Kirby began to take a much greater interest in the political events of the period. He had shared in the widespread popular rejoicing at the collapse of the Bill of Pains and Penalties in

39. DE 619, pp.185, 187; Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.15

40. DE 619, p.189

41. DE 619, p.190

42. DE 619, p.190; Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.68; Hagar & Co., *Commercial directory of the county of Leicester*, p.38. Nottingham, 1849: Thomas Bentley Kirby, hosiery manufacturer, Millstone Lane

43. DE 619, pp.35, 38, 59, 82, 83, 64

November 1820, and with it the failure of George IV's attempt to obtain a divorce from his wife Caroline.⁴⁴ The bill became a symbol for reformers of the corruptness of the existing political regime. He voted in the General Election for 1826, having qualified as a householder following the purchase of his house in Friar Lane.⁴⁵ The Catholic question in 1829 was the first major political event on which Kirby commented in detail. He drew a direct connection between opponents of Catholic Emancipation and 'the cry of the party upon the proposal of any liberal measures, that the church & state are in danger'.⁴⁶ 1830 proved an excellent year for political reform. His interest in reform was further encouraged by 'the three memorable days' of the French Revolution in July 1830. The choice of the title 'King of the French', rather than 'the old mum[m]ery of his most Christian Majesty', met his approval and was 'a gleam of common sense'. The General Election in Britain the following month, in which he voted, gave him hope as a supporter of reform for an improvement in the domestic political situation.⁴⁷ By November he was saluting the end of the Duke of Wellington's ministry and

the commencement of a new era in the political history of Great Britain by the formation of a new Ministry pledged to Parliamentary Reform and Retrenchment of expenditure. I do hope that nothing will occur to prevent in any degree the ministry carrying into full effect the contemplated reform & that the reform will be sufficiently extensive to meet the wishes and to satisfy the desired of the large body of the people. I hope it will be a reform that will not need to have the hand set to it a second time.

He followed the successes and disappointments which marked the progress of the Reform Bill through Parliament, and his election as a councillor for West St Mary's Ward in December 1835 following the Municipal Reform Act, is evidence for his active involvement in local politics. The death of his wife, however, had left him with very little enthusiasm for 'municipal honors'.⁴⁸ He was concerned as to the effect that Queen Victoria's accession would have on the political change in the country, but he noted that the General Election of 1836 promised to remove the two Tory members from the Borough.⁴⁹

iv

As with many Victorians, religion lay at the heart of Kirby's life and that of his family. It not only dictated the original purpose of the journal, but it continued to influence and infuse Kirby's attitudes and opinions in business, politics and life generally. His father had been a member of the Presbyterian meeting at Bardon Park, and all Thomas Kirby's children, save the youngest, who was born after the family had moved to Northamptonshire, were baptised at Bardon.⁵⁰ During the eighteenth century English Presbyterianism had been increasingly influenced by heterodox ideas and although the

44. DE 619, p.89

45. *The poll for electing two burgesses to represent the Borough of Leicester in Parliament . . . 1826*, p.54. Leicester: Cockshaw, 1826

46. DE 619, p.129

47. DE 619, pp.130, 131; *The poll at the electing of two knights for the shire to represent the county of Leicester in Parliament, 1830*, p.108. Leicester: Combe & Son, 1830

48. DE 619, pp.132, 137, 152; J. Storey, *Historical sketch of some of the principal works and undertakings of the Council of the Borough of Leicester: with a complete list of Mayors, Magistrates, Aldermen, Councillors and Head Officials . . .*, pp.194-95. Leicester: W. H. Lead, 1895. Kirby was in fact re-elected at the annual election of 1836

49. DE 619, p.165

50. PRO RG4/1173: Bardon Park and Ashby-de-la-Zouch Presbyterian Meetings, Register of Births & Baptisms, 1756-1837

transformation of individual congregations was gradual, most of the larger urban meetings had adopted Unitarian opinions by the first decade of the nineteenth century. In contrast most rural Presbyterian meetings surviving at the end of the eighteenth century, including Bardon Park, became Congregationalist. In those congregations, mainly urban, which were influenced by the more liberal ideas, the orthodox-inclined members withdrew to the more congenial surroundings of the Congregational or Baptist Chapel. Thus, like many at the end of the eighteenth century who had been brought up as Presbyterians, John Kirby was influenced by the evangelical revival and he clearly favoured orthodox Calvinism. His younger brother, Samuel, however, became a member of the Leicester Great Meeting, whose congregation, originally Presbyterian, had moved to a Unitarian position under Charles Berry.⁵¹

Despite his Nonconformist background, John Kirby during his early years in Leicester was a member of the church of St Mary de Castro, where the Rev. Thomas Robinson (1749-1813) was Vicar. Robinson, an evangelical churchman, was the leading Anglican clergyman in the town and the only one of any distinction during this period.⁵² Kirby's second wife, Sarah Bentley, however, was a member of the Harvey Lane Baptist Meeting, where Robert Hall (1764-1831) was minister.⁵³ According to their daughter she refused to leave Hall's ministry, and Kirby not wishing to attend one place of worship while his wife attended another sought Robinson's advice. He told Kirby to go and hear Hall, 'for if it were possible, I should be delighted to go every Sunday and hear him myself', and so after his marriage Kirby joined his wife at Harvey Lane Meeting.⁵⁴ He became with his wife amongst the closest of Hall's Leicester friends, and a most regular attender at Harvey Lane, as his private journal records. The entries for the first year of the journal consist almost entirely of summaries of the sermons he had heard, and he continued to make regular summaries until 1817, the year after Hall had resigned from Harvey Lane.⁵⁵ John and Sarah Kirby had become such intimate friends that Hall elected to stay with them during his final week in Leicester.⁵⁶

It is clear that Kirby's attendance at Harvey Lane was the direct consequence of his wife's membership, and that his attachment to the congregation was very largely personal, the result of his friendship with Robert Hall. With the exception of the summaries he made of the sermons he heard, there are only a few incidental remarks concerning Harvey Lane, mainly occasional references to the death of members, and little about the value of congregational life. His wife had become a member at the age of 21 in May 1811, six months before her marriage, but Kirby never underwent adult baptism and was not therefore in full membership.⁵⁷ Nonetheless, Kirby probably did not suffer too seriously as Hall favoured the principle of open communion and, although not adopted at Harvey Lane until the next pastorate, it led Hall to administer communion to a small group of paedobaptists who were not full members.⁵⁸

51. 'Obituary of Samuel Kirby, Esq., of Ansty-Frith House, near Leicester', *Christian Reformer*, ser. 2, 10 (1854), p.644

52. see *Dictionary of National Biography*

53. see *Dictionary of National Biography*

54. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.12. There may be a certain degree of licence with this story since the journal does not start until May 1813, and Robinson died on 24 March. Perhaps Kirby did not join his wife until after Robinson's death

55. DE 619, pp.1-112. Kirby's journal is therefore probably the most sustained account of Robert Hall's preaching

56. DE 619, pp.112-15; Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.6

57. LRO 24 D 71/II/2, Harvey Lane Baptist Chapel, Church Book, 1794-1867, pp.88-89; see no. 320, 12 May 1811, Sarah Bentley

58. S. Mitchell, *Not disobedient . . . : a history of United Baptist Church, Leicester, including Harvey Lane*

Hall resigned from Harvey Lane in 1826 because, as he confided to the Kirbys, he felt betrayed by the deacons over the behaviour of Sarah Oldershaw, who had to be excluded from membership for theft. He had been ‘severely wounded’ seven years earlier by the conduct of the deacons and ‘he made up his mind then to leave if an occurrence of the same kind took place again. He adverted the some warmth upon the conduct of the Deacons in the late affair of S. Oldershaw.’⁵⁹ His wife’s attachment to Harvey Lane had always been the stronger than Kirby’s, and her death reinforced his family’s growing estrangement. Neither Kirby, nor his eldest daughters, cared for J. P. Mursell, Hall’s successor as minister. A sermon by Mursell condemning social contacts with those of different political and religious opinions, which Kirby took as a personal attack upon him and his family, helped sour relations. In his sermon Mursell

gave utterance to some severe and uncalled for remarks on social intercourse and its abuses as he was pleased to term it, . . . for our too familiar intercourse with persons of dissimilar views in religion and politics and for indulging in too noisy & exciting amusements. I suppose singing & music. . . for myself I think I can well plead not guilty to the charge of indulging in noisy & exciting amusements, for nobody was ever more unmusical.⁶⁰

Mursell’s particular strictures against too much familiarity with ‘persons of dissimilar views’ (they were friends with the Unitarian Biggs family) and for their choice of amusements help illustrate how far Kirby’s family had already moved away from Harvey Lane. Kirby and his family also did not care for Mursell’s radical politics, and Kirby’s daughters returned to St Mary’s after his death.⁶¹ The extent of their loyalty to the Established Church is evident. Mary Kirby was to write retrospectively concerning her mother’s funeral address, which in the absence of Mursell was given by Miall, the radical Congregationalist minister. He gave ‘a flowery address about “the garden that lay beyond the grave”; but no extemporaneous service can compare with the simplicity and beauty of that used by the Church of England.’ After their resignation from Harvey Lane, the decision to bury their mother, at her request, in the burial ground attached to the chapel, was to remain a source of distress.⁶²

v

Direct references to Kirby’s religious opinions are most evident during the first few years of the journal, though his attitudes and actions continued to be strongly influenced by his religious beliefs. There is no account of his actual religious conversion, though on his thirty-eighth birthday, when he considered his religious progress, he did allude to ‘my youth when first the gleams of divine truth entered my dark mind’. In his review made in December 1814 of the year’s activities, he thanked God for his mercies, expressing himself in an entirely conventional Calvinist outpouring, ending ‘Oh that these did produce their due effect upon my heart.’⁶³ Two years later, in January 1817, he wrote

1760–1845, Belvoir Street 1845–1940 and Charles Street 1831–1940, p.51. Leicester: privately published, 1984
59. DE 619, pp.107, 113; Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.6

60. DE 619, p.164

61. Nevertheless, Catherine, the youngest daughter, was baptised and received into the membership of the new church in Belvoir Street by Mursell in April 1851. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.28; DE 619, pp.184, 193

62. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.28. In 1860 Mary Kirby married the Rev. Henry Gregg, who was presented to the living of Brooksby by his wife and sister-in-law: DE 619, p.193; Kirby, *Leaflets*, pp.169–78

63. DE 619, pp.73, 44

Another year is past, I am one year nearer eternity, Oh that I was one year nearer in preparation. It becomes me to enquire whether I have made any progress in holiness, or whether I have receded from what I had attained. And do thou oh God assist me not only to make the enquiry but to recover what may be lost and to preserve in seeking an entire conformity to Jesus Christ. May the ensuing year be more blessed unto me, seeking God's direction, may we be guided in all things by him. May that which was sinful be as the past year, only remembered as past.⁶⁴

His concern with preparation continued. In November 1817 he recorded that Hall, three days after he had delivered a sermon to mark the death of Princess Charlotte, 'preached a most solemn and impressive discourse on death and the necessity of a preparation for it. He mentioned Mrs Hudson's death, which took place this day.'⁶⁵ Later entries duly acknowledge the blessings of God, but no longer show the same open concern with preparation and salvation. His earlier doubts as to the means of salvation had given way to concern over the actual question of assurance, whether he would in fact be saved. As he grew older he became more and more aware of the uncertainty of obtaining salvation. On his thirty-eighth birthday he began to fear he was even further away from attaining the state of 'a perfect man' than twenty years earlier, and he had become increasingly aware from personal experience of the difficulties of obtaining saving grace.

When the impressions of the Gospel were vivid and warm I did not expect less than a compleat conformity to the divine image, experience has since taught me that the old man was not destroyed, but that the law of sin does work in my members and so great at times has been the force and power of this unsanctified tendency to evil, that instead of expecting its compleat extinction as formerly, I have felt as though it was in vain to oppose or combat against it and been ready to sacrifice all my better hopes and prospects.⁶⁶

There was also for those who were religious always a constant fear that worldly concerns were crowding out religious duties. In March 1818, Kirby confessed that

I have cultivated religion so little and let the spirit of devotion escape from me; while the corroding cares of the world seem to absorb my very soul to the destruction of my own comfort . . . most heartily do I wish to break the chains that bind me I feel however my sluggish heart cannot rise without superior aid.⁶⁷

In June 1820, concerning the first Sunday spent in the house in Southgates, he wrote 'Alass to me it has been a very unprofitable one. I feel no relish for spiritual things, & am full of evel thought . . .'⁶⁸

A constant preoccupation of Kirby throughout the volume was with the health of his family and the ever present threat of death. For families of all classes sickness was a frequent and almost inescapable occurrence. His second wife's health was a cause of great anxiety to Kirby, and for most of their married life scarcely a year past when she did not suffer some serious illness. A major factor was child-bearing, for nothing proved a greater hazard for women. After the birth of each of their children his wife was ill, sometimes very seriously. In the eleven years between their marriage in October 1812 and December 1823, when their last child was born, Kirby's wife gave birth to six children, two sons and four daughters. Their first child, a son, died when aged two and

64. DE 619, p.54

65. DE 619, p.59

66. DE 619, p.73

67. DE 619, pp.61-62

68. DE 619, p.85

a half.⁶⁹ Kirby's journal also records that she suffered two miscarriages. After her miscarriage in January 1818 she was extremely ill for two days, 'and so weak that it was almost impossible to keep her from continually fainting.'⁷⁰ In February the following year, their son Thomas Bentley was born, but a week later Sarah was again very ill, and during the next nine days her life despaired of. She was in Market Harborough in June recuperating. In November the whole family caught typhus in what, following the great reduction in prices, proved to be one of the most disastrous years recorded by Kirby in his journal. By May 1820 he was able to report

My dear family all well, which has seldom been the case in the present year, on the contrary it has been distinguished by much domestic affliction, and much anxiety and distress on account of external circumstances arising from the flatness of trade and an apprehension of similar disasters and losses of those last year.⁷¹

By November the children were all ill with measles, and he was much depressed as a result. The state of his business was an additional source of anxiety. On Christmas Eve he wrote 'Health restored & family pretty well.' Nonetheless, in the end of year review made a week later, he noted that over the past twelve months 'illness has exceeded illness in one part of my family or other, causing distress anxiety and expense.' Trade had also gone 'from bad to worse'. Nonetheless, 'instead of repining at my lott I would beseech infinite goodness to give me grace to improve every adversity to my spiritual good, and not to abuse any measure of prosperity he may send.' Six weeks later, on his fortieth birthday, he wrote that he had completed the better half of his life, 'that which remains must of necessity partake much of disease & suffering.' He went on 'the past has been a year of anxiety and depression', nonetheless, 'I feel . . . thankful for the mercies continued unto me and acknowledge they are more than we deserve.'⁷² The birth of their youngest daughter, Elizabeth, was very nearly the occasion of the death of Kirby's wife, Sarah, and she did not recover from her confinement until nearly two months later. Although Sarah was ill with a violent cold in November 1824, she was 'otherwise better than perhaps [at any] period since our marriage'⁷³ In October 1825, following her second miscarriage, Sarah was again very ill, and her life despaired of. She was still only recovering slowly in December.⁷⁴

Throughout the journal runs a recognition of God's sovereign power and providential mercy. Despite the almost intolerable burden, not least over his wife's health, Kirby's concerns were made bearable by his faith in God's divine mercy: 'many a time have my fears been great, but in six troubles, yea in seven hath God wrought out deliverance, and I trust will deliver.'⁷⁵ In addition, Kirby's business affairs were often very gloomy as a result of the extremely difficult economic conditions which followed the end of the Napoleonic War. 1826, for example, was a year of great anxiety about his wife's health and his business affairs, which was compounded by the death of his father, 'and if it were not for what God has done & is doing for me, I should sink into despair, but looking at the bright side of my prospects I am sustained.'⁷⁶ He was also well aware how much in his business 'I depend upon the blessing of God, well knowing that without it, it is but

69. The only child of Kirby's first marriage, also a son, died within a month of his birth

70. DE 619, p.52

71. DE 619, p.84

72. DE 619, pp.89, 90, 91

73. DE 619, p.106

74. DE 619, pp.99, 100. Cf.110

75. DE 619, p.68 (my punctuation)

76. DE 619, p.119

in vain that I build'.⁷⁷ The disappointments he suffered in life he had come to see as 'turn[ing] out to my benefit, so that my ills have been *goods* in disguise.' Because of his faith he was able to rationalise such disappointments in terms of the providential nature of God's goodness: 'had it pleased God to grant my wishes in many instances it would have been to my hurt'.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, Calvinism could also lead to gloomier thoughts. Worn down by his wife's illness, in 1829 Kirby began to question God's mercy: 'the strokes of divine anger grow more and more severe, Oh when will his indignation be over spent'.⁷⁹

vi

One important consequence of the general improvement in incomes amongst the business and professional classes was the desire for greater knowledge and learning, together with the money and leisure to satisfy such demands. John Kirby himself appears to have received little formal education during his early life, and some fifty years later when recalling his childhood he wrote

there was no instructive society at Ibstock, and I had no access to books either of amusement or instruction and what I was taught at school was of the baldest and very meagreist discreption, confined to reading writing and arithmetic . . .⁸⁰

As a result he attempted to educate himself. While he was in Nottingham during his late teens, he took the opportunity to learn French from a refugee living in the town. One of his daughters was later to recollect that in her childhood they had read the translations her father had originally bought for his own use, and that they were 'in very easy French'. They appear to have consisted mainly of fairy tales.⁸¹ Direct evidence of his attempts to improve his learning comes from a list of books he entered in his journal in August 1813. The list is revealing in a number of respects. The knowledge the books offered was essentially a classical one, beginning with ancient history and moving on to antiquities and law. Moreover most of the works were originally published before the late eighteenth century, giving the list a noticeably dated appearance. There are no books covering the new scientific knowledge that historians particularly associate with the middle class in the early nineteenth century. In fact it is unlikely that Kirby had much contact with scientific ideas until the mid 1830s when he attended some of the lectures of the recently founded Mechanics' Institute. Some of his reading was clearly for pleasure. Within a few months of starting the journal he discussed in some detail Mungo Park's *Travels into the Interior of Africa* (1799). Nonetheless it is revealing that his interest was largely religious, for he noted 'how much some of the customs', Park witnessed, 'agree with ancient Jewish customs'. The early part of the volume contains a number of references to other works, with sometimes his notes. These were books which had presumably been recommended to him.⁸² Interestingly, there are no references to any published collections of sermons, so often the staple works of the Nonconformist reader. Kirby's regular Sunday diet, provided by one of the greatest preachers of the day, appears to have satisfied his desire for sermons, and he expressed little interest in controversial theology, perhaps not surprisingly for a man whose education had been so hard won.

77. DE 619, pp.119, 100

78. DE 619, pp.139, 146, Cf. 59, 61, 68, 84, 90, 91, 162

79. DE 619, pp.129–30

80. DE 619, p.181

81. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.12

82. DE 619, pp.14–17, 24–25, 27, 40, 43

Kirby encouraged his own children in their education and learning. They were kept well supplied with books, largely of the moral and religious kind. In addition, every Saturday night when they were young, Kirby would produce a number of the *Penny* and *Saturday Magazine*, and later copies of Chamber's *Miscellany* and Knight's publications. Kirby borrowed most of his books from the Permanent Library, but what he could not obtain in any other way he purchased.⁸³ As his daughter Mary remembered some 60 years later, 'it was very different in those days, when books were scarce,' now 'there are perhaps more books than readers.'⁸⁴

Kirby's daughter Mary also provides the main account of the education of his children. Unfortunately there is no evidence concerning his son's education, or indeed that of his younger daughters. At about the age of five, Sarah, the eldest child, was sent to learn to read and was given her first lessons in music. Since she proved to have little aptitude for the latter, her younger sister Mary took her place. Both daughters were sent away to a school in Market Harborough, the contact being made through an acquaintance of their mother. This proved to be an unhappy experience; both girls disliked the school. On their return to Leicester they attended a new school on the London Road run by Miss Elizabeth Coltman, but because of her delicate health Mary was then sent away for a couple of years to a school at Frisby on the Wreake conducted by Miss Fancourt, a friend of the Kirbys and the niece of Dr Fancourt, Vicar of St Mary's in Leicester. On her return to Leicester Mary's general schooling ceased, but she was sent once or twice a week to take French lessons from a Parisian lady living in the town, and she also continued her musical studies.⁸⁵ Together with her older sister she was fortunate that after the death of their mother, John Ryley, a leading figure in the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society and in the Mechanics' Institute, took an interest in their education, lending them books from his own extensive library. He even began to teach Mary Latin, and in time she learnt how to scan Virgil and to read a little Italian.

There were also other opportunities for the daughters of middle class families to acquire further knowledge. From the fourth session, in 1839, women were admitted to the lectures of the Literary and Philosophical Society, and it was through Ryley, who was President during the following two years, that Mary was able to attend the meetings. She also attended many of the lectures of the Mechanics' Institute as well.⁸⁶ As a consequence Mary Kirby developed a considerable taste for botany, publishing in 1850 the first modern *Flora of Leicestershire*. After her death her herbarium of 400 local specimens collected during the 1840s was given to the Literary and Philosophical Society and forms the basis of the present county collection.⁸⁷

Kirby's decisions concerning the education of his daughters, in particular the type of education he gave them, is not only evidence of his ability to support the rise in his

83. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, pp.8, 9, 13

84. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.13

85. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, pp.2, 3-4, 13, 15-23, 25; F. E. Skillington, 'The Coltmans of the Newarke at Leicester', *TLAS*, 18 (1934-5), p.14. Elizabeth Coltman (1761-1838) was the youngest daughter of John Coltman of the Newarke.

86. Skillington 1934-35, as n.85, pp.30-31; F. B. Lott, *The centenary book of the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society*, pp.2, 119, 252. Leicester, 1935; Ryley was a man of considerable literary accomplishments. He had been a reviewer in London, and as a consequence knew most of the leading literary men of the day before he retired to Cambridge, where his friendship with Robert Hall brought him to Leicester on the removal of the latter to the town in 1808: 'Obituary of John Ryley, J.P.', *Leicester Journal*, 3 Oct. 1856, p.3, col.4

87. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, pp.40, 42-43, 73; A. B. Jackson, 'Notes on the Kirby Herbarium', *Trans. Leicester Lit. & Phil. Soc.*, 6.1 (1901), pp.213-15; *VCH Leics.*, 1, p.28. London, 1907

family's standard of living out of the profits of his business, but of the new middle class attitudes that often accompanied such improvements. Knowledge of music and languages were after all the accomplishments of young ladies. Nonetheless, as Kirby's business began to face increasing difficulties from the late 1830s onwards, he became more and more anxious about his ability to support his family according to the standards to which they had become accustomed: 'the thoughts of my dear children presses heavily on me, the thoughts that I have brought them up in a stile of life in which I shall not be able to support them'.⁸⁸ In 1844, labouring under even greater difficulties he wrote, 'It is one of the greatest of my troubles that I cannot do more to promote the comfort and happiness of my dear daughters, that I cannot be a better father to them'.⁸⁹ In fact after his death they were forced, in common with many ladies in reduced circumstances, to use their education to obtain a livelihood through teaching or writing. Nevertheless, when Kirby's estate was finally settled, he left each of his children an adequate competence for their future support, though, as Mary Kirby recognised, it was decidedly favourable to his daughters, at the expense of what his son might reasonably have looked for, since he was expected to continue Kirby's business.⁹⁰

vii

The value of John Kirby's journal derives not from his significance as a businessman, for he was not a major figure, but rather from the account it provides of the aspirations and concerns of the small manufacturer during the turbulent economic conditions that followed the end of the Napoleonic War. Nonetheless, Kirby was to some extent set apart from many of his contemporaries because he not only established his own business, but managed to weather the economic storms of the period. He was undoubtedly fortunate in a number of important respects. His attempt to establish his own business coincided with an unusually prosperous time in the hosiery trade. The period after 1815, with the end of wartime scarcities, was by contrast very difficult. It is also likely that his early association with the Pares family proved advantageous to him in his later career. In addition, there is evidence that he was assisted by his family. His younger brother, the chief cashier of one leading bank in Leicester, and later the partner in another, would have been in a position to give Kirby valuable help over his lack of liquidity, though unfortunately there are no records to confirm this point.⁹¹ Nevertheless, despite holding markedly different religious opinions, they remained on good terms, going on holiday together in 1836 following the death of John Kirby's wife. Another brother supplied Kirby with a mortgage which was not repaid until after Kirby's death, nearly 20 years later. Without doubt Kirby also possessed one other incalculable advantage, luck (though he himself would have expressed it in terms of divine providence), for it is clear that on a number of occasions Kirby was dangerously overextended financially, particularly in 1824, after he had invested heavily in a worsted spinning factory, and even more seriously in 1825, following his purchase of a house in Friar Lane and the construction of his factory in Millstone Lane. He himself was only too aware of the extent of his exposure by the summer of 1826. Nonetheless, Kirby was successful in

88. DE 619, pp.166, 167, 172, 179

89. DE 619, p.179

90. DE 619, pp.190, 194; Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, p.68

91. I am grateful to Mr B. Esam, Senior Manager, Lloyds Bank, Leicester High Street Branch; Dr J. M. L. Booker, Lloyds Bank Archivist and Curator; Mr J. R. L. Middleton, Assistant Manager, National Westminster Bank, Leicester St Martin's; and Mr R. H. Reed at the National Westminster Bank Archives in London, for their help concerning the bank archives in their custody.

gaining his economic independence, and, despite his habitually pessimistic nature, he was able, when he compared his later circumstances with the unpromising situation on his first arrival in Leicester, to recognise the extent of his own achievements.

If his achievements are compared with those of his brothers, then two were clearly much more successful than John. William Kirby, who was known as the rich uncle of the family, had 'made a handsome fortune in a very short time, in Wood Street [London], in the Coventry ribbon trade, and happily retired from business before it became depressed'. He had then, in the absence of any children of his own, devoted himself and his fortune to the support of the London Orphans' Asylum. Samuel Kirby, who had entered Pares's bank as a clerk in 1804, rose to become chief cashier before leaving to form a new partnership with the three Paget cousins in 1825. Another brother, however, was less fortunate. A writ of bankruptcy was issued against Joseph Kirby, a cornfactor of Newton Burgoland.⁹²

John Kirby's daughter, when writing about her father, described his business as a prosperous one. What seems clear from Kirby's journal, while he did enjoy periods of prosperity, which enabled him not only to support his family and their middle-class lifestyle but to purchase his own house and build a factory, he also suffered a number of severe reverses as a result of the many sudden and unpredictable slumps in trade, in particular in 1819 when his stock fell in value by 30 per cent. The journal graphically illustrates the uncertainty of business, the fear of bankruptcy and ruin when hardly a year passed without a recession. When combined with his intense anxiety over the health and welfare of his family it is no surprise to find that religion played such a significant part in his everyday life. It seems likely that the growth in his business peaked around the mid-1830s, thereafter in most years he probably lived beyond his means. At Kirby's death four-fifths of the value of his probate estate was recorded in canal and bank shares or tied up in his Friar Lane property; all investments which had been made before 1830. The moneys remaining in the business when the final distribution was made to Kirby's children in February 1851 represented under a fifth of the value of the estate.

The Industrial Revolution is considered by historians to have given rise to new and larger urban groups whose wealth was based upon manufacturing and professional incomes, and the first half of the nineteenth century is seen as the crucial period in the formation of the urban middle class. Only recently, however, has the middle class begun to receive the same kind of detailed study as the aristocracy or working class. In part this is because as a group the middle class has not proved easy to define, for it is clear the middle class was made up of a series of complex and often fragmented groups and interests. Nevertheless, it is generally argued that at the heart of the middle-class identity was a set of shared values and attributes based on the new sources of manufacturing and professional wealth.

In a number of important respects it is clear that Kirby shared this new outlook. His journal makes clear that an evangelical faith lay at the heart of his life. It is also evident that his income and social position depended upon his success in business. His concern for his family, their well-being and comfort, his expenditure on their health, their education, their recreation, and the other areas so closely identified with middle-class interests, are also evident.⁹³ It is clear from his journal that Kirby did not see his business as an end in itself, but rather as providing the means by which to support his family.

92. Kirby, *Leaflets*, as n.2, pp.36–38, 68; LRO DE 212/1: Writ of Bankruptcy against Joseph Kirby of Newton Burgoland, cornfactor, dealer & chapman, 9 Feb. 1828

93. L. Davidoff & C. Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780–1850*, part III. London: Hutchinson, 1987

Indeed, a constant theme, particularly during the later years, was the concern that because of the decline in his business he would no longer be able to maintain his family at the level to which they had become accustomed.⁹⁴

Nonetheless the journal also suggests historians should be cautious when making generalisations about the middle class. Kirby's evangelical faith has a timeless quality: his religious beliefs would have been instantly recognisable to earlier generations and even to his Puritan forefathers. It is also clear that there were significant religious divisions within the middle class that cannot be ignored. Mursell's sermon condemning too much familiarity 'with persons of dissimilar views in religion and politics', and such recreations as music and singing, is evidence of the gulf of opinion that existed in attitudes and behaviour between families of the same social and economic background as a result of the religious divisions. But Mursell's sermon also points to social divisions between those nominally of the same communion. Similarly, the evidence for Kirby's limited interest in the new scientific ideas of the period suggests historians should be cautious when stressing the middle-class commitment to scientific culture, though it is interesting to note the interest in botany shared by Kirby's eldest two daughters.

The journal, however, is not without its problems as an historical source. It is more in the nature of a commonplace book than a journal or diary, for Kirby mainly used the volume to record his current thoughts and concerns. The contents are therefore much more an immediate statement than a record of Kirby's life, though the series of annual reviews do help to give a more objective analysis. Kirby made no attempt to provide a comprehensive account of his life, or some sort of coherent memoir similar to his daughter's published autobiographical recollections. For example, what information is contained in the journal about his earlier life is incidental, part of an attempt to reveal God's providential will. The journal is therefore at times very precise, recording even the day of the week of a particular event which Kirby deemed of importance, such as the birth of one of his children or the day he entered Pares's office. In other respects it is disappointing. Because the journal was not kept until 1813, it does not cover the crucial period of his life when he entered the hosiery trade on his own account. There are also few details concerning the actual operation of his business and what is known is derived largely from other sources. There are few references to local or national events in the journal, or his opinions on such issues. Nonetheless, the volume probably provides what is a unique account of the thoughts and concerns of a small manufacturer about his business and family during what is considered by many historians to be one of the most important and formative periods of modern history. It is this which helps to make the volume of particular interest and value.

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94. DE 619, pp.166, 167, 168, 172, 178, 179, 180, 188. Indeed, it was expressed as early as 1816, when his growing family posed a threat to his solvency, p.53