



# The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England

*Paul Slack*

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## **The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England**

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Improvement was a new concept in seventeenth-century England; only then did it become usual for people to think that the most effective way to change things for the better was not a revolution or a return to the past, but the persistent application of human ingenuity to the challenge of increasing the country's wealth and general wellbeing. Improvements in agriculture and industry, commerce and social welfare, would bring infinite prosperity and happiness. The word improvement was itself a recent coinage. It was useful as a slogan summarising all these goals, and since it had no equivalent in other languages, it gave the English a distinctive culture of improvement that they took with them to Ireland and Scotland, and to their possessions overseas. It made them different from everyone else.

*The Invention of Improvement* explains how this culture of improvement came about. Paul Slack explores the political and economic circumstances which allowed notions of improvement to take root, and the changes in habits of mind which improvement accelerated. It encouraged innovation, industriousness, and the acquisition of consumer goods which delivered comfort and pleasure. There was a new appreciation of material progress as a process that could be measured, and its impact was publicised by the circulation of information about it. It had made the country richer and many of its citizens more prosperous, if not always happier. Drawing on a rich variety of contemporary literature, *The Invention of Improvement* situates improvement at the centre of momentous changes in how people thought and behaved, how they conceived of their environment and their collective prospects, and how they cooperated in order to change them.

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