And nothing starts in the archive, nothing, ever at all, though things certainly end up there. You find nothing in the Archive but stories caught half way through: the middle of things; discontinuities

( Carolyn Steedman, Dust)

My own strain of archive fever has driven this project forward for nearly three decades. The final periods of intensive research were made possible by an AHRC Fellowship that gave me invaluable time at the British Library, the National Archives, Kew, and in the Seligman Collection at Columbia University. I’d like to thank the archivists and librarians at these institutions and also the Bodleian Library, the Henry E. Huntington Library, the John Rylands Library, the Lewis Walpole Library, Nuffield College, Oxford, and Worcester College, Oxford. I am also grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for funding the ‘Networks of Improvement’ project. My work on associations in the late eighteenth century for the project has fed directly into this book.

I can easily recover the book’s moment of inception. It came when reading E. P. Thompson’s The Making of the English Working Class as an undergraduate in 1981, but my fascination with the subject matter was sealed when Marilyn Butler very kindly lent me the manuscript of Iain McCalman’s Radical Underworld to read as a Ph.D. student. My debts to Marilyn, who is deeply missed by everyone, are many and varied, but few compare to this introduction to a lasting and inspiring friend. Soon afterwards, Marilyn also introduced me to Mark Philp whose encouragement and inspiration also pervade these pages. Near the end of the research, he and I spent some happy days in the Treasury Solicitor’s papers hunting down radicals. I was lucky to have the fruit of his research, in the shape of Reforming Ideas in Britain, to see me through the final year of writing this book.
Final preparation of the manuscript was completed at the Centre for Eighteenth-Century Studies at the University of York, where I followed in the footsteps of John Barrell and Harriet Guest. The staff have been highly supportive in all kinds of ways, not least in providing continual food for thought in relation to the material in this book. The centre has been an immensely stimulating environment to work in and I’d like to thank Mary Fairclough, Mark Jenner, Catriona Kennedy, Emma Major, Alison O’Byrne, Jane Rendall, Jim Walvin, and Jim Watt for directly contributing advice and ideas. Clare Bond has been a particular point of sanity. I look forward to drawing on their time and patience for years to come. I’d also like to thank the English Department at York, especially David Attwell, and the F. R. Leavis Fund for its help with illustrations.

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Some of the material, especially in Part ii, has been discussed in essays and articles published over the past twenty years or so. I am grateful to the editors in each case for their advice and support; details can be found in the bibliography. Thanks also to James Chandler, Linda Bree, and Anna Bond for shepherding me through the press. I’m also grateful to the readers who provided the reports that enabled me to focus my argument more clearly through the last stage of writing. Most of all I am grateful to Jane, Sharmila, and the rest of my family, not least for putting up with my mind being on the Treasury Solicitor’s papers, when it should more often have been on them.