The century after 1750 has traditionally been seen as a period of great change, characterised by a so-called ‘revolution’ in agriculture, industrial and urban growth, economic crises, social dislocation, and political unrest.

But changes, when aggregated across a broad area, may appear more pervasive and more significant than when considered from the perspective of a single place, where daily life was much less eventful and dramatic.

In the small, coastal village of Humberston in Lincolnshire, the heavy, undrained soils held back agricultural innovation. Poor communications hindered economic development. The landlord and tenant farmers exercised a tight control over housing, jobs and poor relief and imposed their moral code on the village. In many senses, this was a rural backwater.

Yet landlord and agent invested in the improvement of the land and the farm buildings. Farmers prospered in the good years and struggled through the bad. Farmworkers mostly had secure jobs and were relatively well paid. Cottagers kept a cow and a pig, had access to pasture, and thus enjoyed a measure of economic independence. The poor were, by the standards of the time, treated sympathetically. Social relationships were sometimes fractious and divisive but seldom violent. There was an attachment to church and chapel and a toleration of both.

The intensive historical investigation and analysis of a single place, such as Humberston, can help to reveal something of the complexity and reality of everyday life and thus can enrich and elaborate, confirm or challenge, the ‘grand narrative’ of conventional history.