A Note on Money

For the sake of convenience, I have sometimes used or quoted the traditional abbreviations £ (pounds), s (shillings) and d (pence) in the text of this book. For example, 11s 8¾d means eleven shillings and eight and a quarter pence. Readers unfamiliar with pre-decimal currency should note that twenty shilling coins constituted a pound, and there were twelve pence in a shilling. A pound coin or ‘sovereign’, therefore, was worth 240 pence. The smallest coin was a farthing, worth a quarter of a penny. Readers will also find occasional mentions of sums in guineas. The guinea coin itself, worth twenty-one shillings, was defunct by the start of the Victorian era, but was still often used as a notional unit in pricing certain articles. This peculiar amount, fixed in 1717 when Britain adopted a de facto gold standard, was retained because it had aristocratic connotations. To pay in guineas was to be rich enough to add a shilling tip, as it were, to every pound.

As for incomes, Victorian male manual labourers rarely earned more than fifty pounds a year (and often considerably less). Skilled male workers in factories and workshops might earn seventy or eighty pounds a year. Male clerks, beginning their career, might earn similar sums; but depending on their employer, they
could aspire to more senior positions with better remuneration. For example, well-paid post office clerks in the mid-century began on £90 p.a., potentially rising to £260 p.a. with annual increments. Senior administrators at the Post Office were paid £350–£500 p.a. Women, meanwhile, at the start of the nineteenth century, were generally employed in very poorly paid roles, including the manufacture of clothing, laundry work and domestic service. The low pay of female servants, typically £10–£25 p.a., was at least mitigated by free food and accommodation. Better-paid careers in department stores, schools and offices opened up for women towards the end of the century. Female telegraphists, for example, could earn from £40 to £100 p.a., depending on their skills and experience.