Spectre at the feast
An allegory depicting Elizabeth I in her later years, with the figure of death looking over her shoulder – just as, in a very real sense, the threat of starvation loomed over her subjects after a series of terrible harvests

The dark side of Elizabethan life

The Elizabethan era is often painted as a golden age. Yet, says **James Sharpe**, for many thousands of people life was far from golden, blighted by violence, vagrancy and crushing hunger

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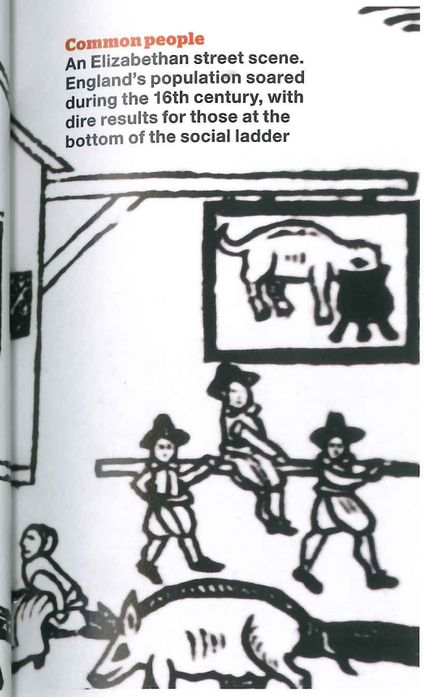
A woodcut shows an idyllic harvesting scene from the 1600s. In the previous century, though, the 'Merrie England' of Elizabeth I had been blighted by disastrous crop failures



Common people
An Elizabethan street scene. England's population soared during the 16th century, with dire results for those at the bottom of the social ladder

Interest in Elizabeth I and her reign seems limitless, and invariably suffused with admiration – an attitude epitomised in *The Times* of 24 March 2003, on the quatercentenary of the queen's death: "Tolerance found a patron and religion its balance, seas were navigated and an empire embarked upon and a small nation defended itself against larger enemies and found a voice and a purpose… Something in her reign taught us what our country is, and why it matters. And as her reign came to craft a sense of national identity that had not been found before, so she came to embody our best selves: courageous, independent, eccentric, amusing, capricious and reasonable, when reason was all. The greatest prince this country has produced was a prince in skirts."

In an ICM poll for *Microsoft Encarta* at the same time, 55 per cent of respondents thought that Elizabeth had introduced new foods, notably curry, into Britain, and one in 10 credited her with bringing corgis to our shores.

More soberly, in 2002 Elizabeth was one of just two women (the other was Princess Diana) in BBC Two's list of '10 Greatest Britons'. Books, films, newspaper articles and plays have all played their part in polishing the Virgin Queen's reputation. There have been many biographies (about one a year from 1927 to 1957), countless novels, and Edward German's 1902 operetta *Merrie England*, whose very title tells us what Elizabethan England was apparently like. More recently the Michael Hirst/Shekhar Kapur *Elizabeth* movies concluded that, under Elizabeth, England became the most prosperous and powerful nation in Europe.

Social breakdown

However, not everyone who actually lived through the Elizabethan era was quite so convinced that they were experiencing a golden age. Take Edward Hext, an experienced Somerset justice of the peace, who on 25 September 1596 wrote to Lord Burghley predicting imminent social breakdown in the county. Hext reported that thefts were prevalent, most of them carried out by criminal vagrants who would rather steal than work. He also complained that there had been food riots, with rioters declaring that "they must not starve, they will not starve". Class hatred was manifest, he wrote, with the poor saying that "the rich men have gotten all into their hands and will starve the poor".

Hext was not, it seems, a lone doom merchant. On 28 September 1596 we find William Lambarde, another veteran justice of the peace, telling the Kent quarter sessions at Maidstone that those in authority needed to act swiftly – or the countryside would erupt.

This wasn't merely a case of two old men romanticising the 'good old days'. Hext and Lambarde knew they were on the edge of a major social crisis. The harvests of 1594 and 1595 were bad enough, but 1596 was disastrous, sending grain prices rocketing to their highest levels in the 16th century, with grim consequences for thousands.

This crisis has rarely featured in popular accounts of Elizabeth's reign. Yet it not only provides an alternative perspective on what life was like for ordinary men and women in the 16th century, far from the glittering court of the Virgin Queen, but also deepens our understanding of how the regime functioned.

At the heart of the problems confronting Elizabethan England was the challenge of feeding its soaring population. In 1500 there were about 2.5 million people in England. By 1650, that number had soared to more than 5 million– and the economy simply couldn't keep up. This problem manifested itself particularly in two ways. First, the price of grain rose disproportionately: whereas the population of England more or less doubled between 1500 and 1650, the cost of grain – wheat, rye, barley, oats – increased sixfold. This had grave implications, because a large (and increasing) proportion of the population depended on bread, or bread-grain, bought in the market.

Elizabethan England was on the edge of a major social crisis. **The harvests of 1594 and 1595 were bad, but 1596 was disastrous**

Second, real wages – the purchasing power of a day's pay – failed to keep up with prices. Whereas the price of grain rose by a factor of six, an average day's pay did little more than double. And, of course, given the glut of labourers, the chances of finding work, even at reduced levels of pay, diminished. Few people were wage earners in the modern sense, but most of the poor were dependent on waged work for a proportion of their income. The declining buying power of real wages pushed many into acute misery.

As a result, the Elizabethan period witnessed the emergence of poverty on a new scale. By the 1590s, the lot of the poor and the labouring classes was bad enough at the best of times. What made it worse was harvest failure. The steady upward progress of grain prices was exacerbated by years of dearth, and the shortages of 1594–97 were remarkable for the misery that was engendered.

Yet for a prosperous yeoman farmer with a surplus of grain to sell, bad harvests could be a blessing: you had enough grain to feed your family, and enjoyed enhanced profits from the grain you took to market. In contrast, if you were a middling peasant, normally termed a 'husbandman', your position would be badly squeezed by harvest failure. Families in this stratum desperately tried to maintain their status until their inability to meet mounting debts or some personal disaster sent them down to the labouring poor. As a result, by 1600 many villages in the English south and Midlands were becoming polarised between a rich and locally powerful class of yeoman farmers and a mass of poor people.

300 Londoners, marching north to embark for war service in Ireland, **mutinied at Towcester, elected a leader and took over the town**

The impact of failed harvests on local society is illustrated vividly by the parish registers for Kendal in Westmorland. These record that, following the disastrous harvest of 1596, just fewer than 50 parishioners were buried in December that year – compared with a monthly average of just 20 in 1595. The death toll remained high throughout 1597, peaking at 70 in a particularly grim March.

London also suffered badly. Here, an average year would see burials running at a slightly higher level than baptisms (the early modern capital's formidable population increase was largely fuelled by immigration). Yet there was, it seems, nothing average about 1597; in that year, around twice as many Londoners were buried as baptised – and the seasonal pattern of the burials indicates that famine was the cause.

No segment of England's population was more terrifyingly vulnerable to high grain prices than prisoners awaiting trial in its county jails. The basic provision for feeding them was bread paid for by a county rate – a rate that did not increase in line with grain prices. The results were predictably catastrophic. We know of 12 coroners' inquests on the deaths of prisoners who perished in Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex county jails in 1595 – and 33 in 1596. In 1597, that rocketed to 117. Some of these deaths resulted from starvation and many famine-induced maladies: the Elizabethan jail was an extremely efficient incubator of disease.

Burden of warfare

The social dislocation caused by the bad harvests of the 1590s was exacerbated by warfare. England was continually at war between 1585 and Elizabeth's death in 1603 – in the Netherlands in support of the Dutch Revolt; in Normandy and Brittany in support of French Protestants in that country's wars of religion; on the high seas against the Spanish; and, most draining of all, in Ireland.

Conflict was costly – the government spent £5.5m on war between 1585 and 1603, much of it funded by taxpayers – but not particularly successful. It also involved the raising of large numbers of soldiers. Kent, a strategically important county, contributed 6,000 troops from a population of 130,000 between 1591 and 1602.

Some towns where troops were concentrated saw serious unrest. Soldiers at Chester, the prime embarkation port for Ireland, mutinied in 1594, 1596 and 1600. The first of these episodes, in which the 1,500 soldiers billeted in and around the city "daily fought and quarrelled", was suppressed only when the mayor of Chester declared martial law, set up a gibbet and hanged three men identified as ringleaders.

In 1598, 300 Londoners marching north to embark for war service in Ireland mutinied at Towcester, elected a leader and took over the town. Soldiers were normally recruited from the rougher elements of society, and the experience of soldiering in late 16th-century conditions did little to soften them. As a result, soldiers returning from wars tended to join the ranks of vagrant criminals.

The crisis elicited a variety of reactions from those disadvantaged by it. One was to complain, which led to prosecutions for seditious words. In March 1598, Henry Danyell of Ash in Kent declared that "he hoped to see such war in this realm as to afflict the rich men of this country to requite their hardness of heart towards the poor", and that "the Spanish were better than the people of this land and therefore he had rather they were here than the rich men of the country".

His were isolated sentiments, perhaps – but even so it is interesting that some inhabitants of 'Merrie England' were advocating class warfare and support for the nation's enemies.

Resorting to crime

Theft was another remedy. Crime records from Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex suggest that there was a massive

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rise in property offences (larceny, burglary, house-breaking and robbery) – from an average of around 250 a year in the early 1590s to about 430 in 1598. Hard times were clearly encouraging the poor to steal, even though most of the offences were capital. Indeed, records suggest that more than 100 people were executed for property crimes in these five counties in 1598.

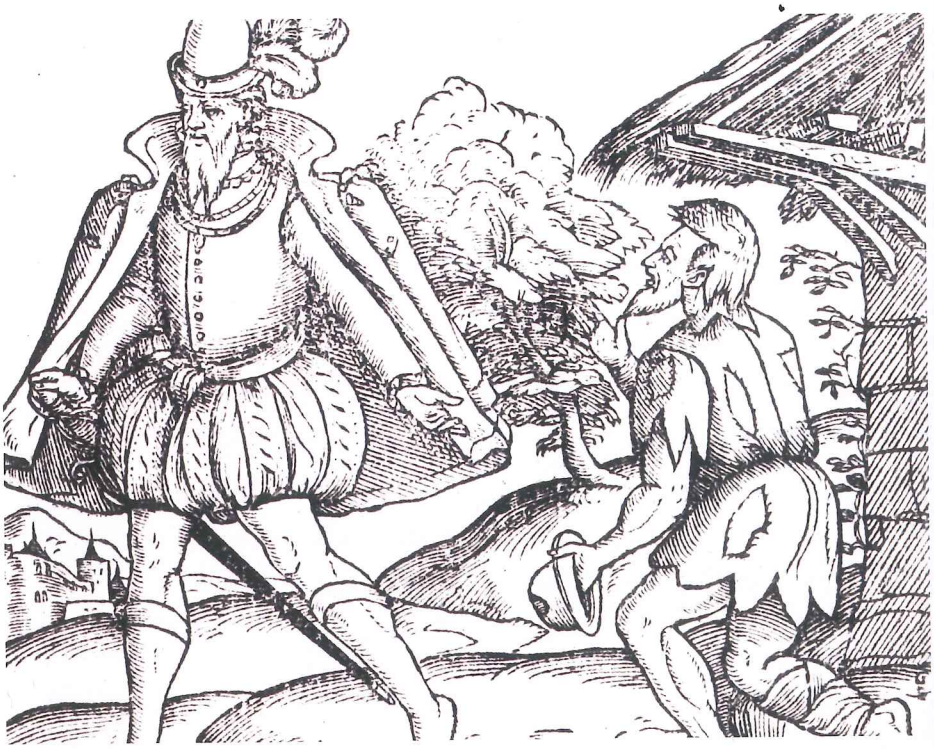
Another reaction to high grain prices was a rash of grain riots across southern England. The 'riot', at least in its early stages, had much of the character of a demonstration, and the objectives were limited to controlling prices in the local market or preventing the export of grain from their area; there is little evidence of grain rioters envisaging what would today be called social revolution.

The one incident for which we know such an outcome *was* envisaged was a complete failure. This was the Oxfordshire Rising of 1596 when, following unsuccessful petitioning by the poor of the county authorities, five men began to formulate plans to lead a revolt. When the ringleaders met on Enslow Hill in the north of the county to spearhead their revolution, they found that nobody had turned out to join them. And so the men made their way home – only to be arrested. Following their interrogation and torture, two were hanged, drawn and quartered on the very hill on which their projected rising was supposed to begin, and the three others disappear from the historical record, presumably having died in prison.

This crisis of the 1590s illuminates serious tensions in Elizabethan society far removed from the stereotypes of Gloriana's triumphant reign. But it also, perhaps surprisingly, demonstrates the regime's durability. People might complain; they might steal; they might participate in local grain riots. But, as the Oxfordshire Rising demonstrates, the chances of getting a large-scale popular revolt off the ground were seriously limited.

But why? The answer comes in two parts. First of all, over the Tudor period England's county and town administrations established much closer links with central authority in the shape of the Privy Council (the body of advisors to the queen). They were learning the importance of working together to ensure the smooth running of government.

The second half of the answer is provided by the increasing social polarisation that accompanied Elizabeth's reign. In 1549, the Midlands and south of England were rocked by a large-scale popular revolt led by wealthy farmers and other notables – the natural leaders of village society.



The poor become poorer A rich man spurns a beggar in a woodcut of 1566. During the Elizabethan period, poor harvests and the burden of warfare helped create more vagrants

People might steal, complain or even participate in local grain riots, **but the chances of getting a large-scale popular revolt off the ground were seriously limited**

Over the following half a century, with the divide between rich and poor steadily growing, these same village leaders – the group from which parish constables, churchwardens and poor-law officials were drawn – began to regard controlling the poor as a major part of parish government. They increasingly saw themselves as stakeholders in, rather than sworn opponents of, the Elizabethan regime.

But though they contained the crisis of the 1590s, government officials at all levels must have been painfully aware of the strain it imposed. When parliament met in October 1597, many of the county members would have had experience of interrogating thieves, placating rioters and fixing grain prices in their local markets, and many borough MPs would have been very aware of the pressure put on their towns' poor relief systems.

And it was that pressure that produced the one major, concrete legacy of the crisis – the near-comprehensive Poor Law Act of 1598, rounded off by further legislation in 1601. It may be more prosaic perhaps than Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the world or the defeat of the Armada, but this piece of legislation has to rank among the defining achievements of Elizabeth's reign.

The two acts provided for a nationally legislated yet locally administered poor-relief system that was in advance of anything then existing in a state of England's size. They comprised arguably the much-feted Elizabethan Age's most important legacy to later generations, and were inspired by the horrors of those harvest failures from 1594 to 1597. Perhaps the poor – who during those years resorted to theft, were reduced to vagrancy, rioted or were indicted for seditious words – had achieved something after all. H

James Sharpe is professor emeritus of early modern history at the University of York, and author of *A Fiery & Furious People: A History of Violence in England* (Random House, 2016)

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