

Who were the beneficiaries and who were the victims of the price rises of the sixteenth century?

The sixteenth century saw the beginnings of a dramatic population rise which spanned the first half of the seventeenth century as well. The scale of the rise - a doubling of the national population from the 2.5m of the 1520s to 5m by 1680 created great pressures on the existing system of food-production and economic life, pressures which some groups in society were well-placed to profit from, and from which others only lost. However, it should be noted that the rise in population was by no means uniform across the country. Relative differences even in comparatively geographically-close areas can be startling. An example could come from the population of Staffordshire, which doubled between 1563 and the 1660s, yet the nearby Forest of Arden in Warwickshire only increased by 50%.¹ Other local studies point to various locations - notably in upland parishes such as Orwell in Norfolk - where population-rise was much less noticeable than in their lowland neighbours. The cause of the rise of population stems from a complex series of intertwining factors. Richard Hakluyt, writing in 1584, commented that 'through our long peace and seldom sickness we are grown more populous than heretofore.'² It has been suggested in confirmation of this point of view that the bubonic plague - which bore such a heavy role for the relative underpopulation of the late Middle Ages - became less virulent in the sixteenth century. Admittedly there were several extremely serious outbreaks later, notably the plagues of 1603 - which killed 30,000 Londoners; 1625 - which killed 40-50,000 Londoners; and the Great Plague of 1665 which killed 70-100,000 in London alone.³ However these outbreaks became increasingly diseases of the towns only, leaving the bulk of the countryside relatively unaffected. In any case, it has been argued that the deaths of parents pushed their surviving children into a marriageable situation earlier, and the resultant increase in fertility could quickly replenish the population level. However, this tendency for younger marriages was not exclusive to the surviving children of plague victims, but was so widespread as to attract comment from moralists such as Philip Stubbes, who said in 1583 that many younger marriages were undertaken 'without any respecte how they may lyve together with sufficient maintenance for their callings and estat.' Likewise Sir Anthony Thorold even wrote to Lord Burghley about the number of young couples with 'no regard how to live nor where to dwell.'⁴

Increased population had a direct effect on the demand for food products and land, forcing prices for these basic commodities up entirely independently from the simultaneous injection of cash into the money supply caused by the actions of governments in firstly dissolving the monasteries in order to raise armies, and then debasing the currency for much the same reasons. At its most basic level, the need for subsistence grew in order to support the increased number of mouths requiring feeding. Over the course of the sixteenth and onto the seventeenth centuries, it is unsurprising to find that the price of staples, particularly grain, increased further relative to that of other products especially wool and manufactured goods. A comparison can be seen in the index of prices of grain prices against wool in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Against an index of 100 for 1520 prices, grain had risen to 383 by the end of the century as opposed to wool which had reached only 284.⁵ This trend continued easily on into the next century, such that by 1650, grain cost 5.1 times as much as it had done in 1520. With the rising prices, the incentives to cater to the food-market became much clearer to farmers of all conditions. A comment from c.1549 has it that 'the price of corn would rise...and that price

¹ Wrightson *English Society 1580-1680* p. 120

² Coleman: *The Economy of England 1450-1750* p.14

³ Sharpe *Early Modern England: a social history* p.53

⁴ Wrightson *English Society 1580-1680* p. 124

⁵ Coleman: *The Economy of England 1450-1750* p.37

would provoke every man to set plough in the ground, to husband waste grounds, yea to turn the lands which be enclosed from pasture to arable land; for every man will the gladder follow that wherein they see the more profit and gain.⁶ The two methods which this passage outlines - the cultivation of previously waste grounds and the active enclosure of common pastures brought a great deal of profit to the land-owners who had sufficient capital to acquire new lands - Sharpe suggests a figure of £80-£100 needed to acquire sufficient pasturage for a herd of cattle⁷ On the other hand they provoked great resentment from those not rich enough to benefit to the full extent from the expansion in agricultural lands. Even though only 2% of the country was enclosed in the years between 1455-1603, making a grand total of 9%, perceptions remained. Thomas More's *Utopia* claimed that the encloser was a 'covetous and insatiable cormorant' and that sheep 'did eat up and swallow down the very men themselves'.⁸ Edward VI's own proclamation of 1548 stated that 'christian people by the greedy covetousness of some men are eaten up and devoured of brute beasts, and driven from their houses by sheep and bullocks.' However, despite his concerns that 'since of late by the enclosing of lands and arable grounds in divers and sundry places of this realm many have been driven to extreme poverty and compelled to leave the places where they were born', governments found themselves unable to stop the trend even had they been willing. Lords of the manor were perfectly within their rights to enclose commons under the Statute of Merton three hundred years previously, despite the protests of rebels in 1549 that 'they wylle obaye the kynges maieste and my lord protector with alle the counselle, but...thaye wyll not have ther commonse and ther growndes to be inclosyd and soo taken from them.'⁹

Where it was impossible to expand agriculture into what was previously unused or under-used land, clearly the prices of land rose in line with the price of the crops. Again from c.1607 it was said 'for corn being dearer than cloth or meat comparatively, then only will the husbandman plough, since his only end is profit.'¹⁰ This greater pressure on land can be confirmed by the higher rents demanded for land-holding and & the increasing value of sales. Rents on arable land in Norfolk & Suffolk for instance rose sixfold between the 1550s-1640s, while meadows - for sheep-farming - rose only double or treble. In the words of Sir Robert Drury, writing in 1613 about a new tenant: 'he may chouse which ferme he will have, and Adams shall have the other, and I will make a lease for 12 years, But not a penny onder 10 shillings the acre, for as the pryse of thinges ryseth, I will warrant you, you shall see the pryse of Lands ryse much or sixe months be passed.'¹¹ The great benefits to landowners from this rise in prices can also be seen in some individual cases such as the Petre estate in Essex which produced rents of £1400 in 1572, yet £4200 in 1640; Stoneleigh in Worcestershire was worth £418 in 1599 yet £1440 in 1640.¹² Pentocks on the Bacon estate in Suffolk was rented in 1535 for £3 3s 4d, yet by 1600 this had risen to £44 8s - an increase of over tenfold in sixty years.¹³ Nor did the benefits of increased prices for arable land only affect the very rich landowners, since the more prosperous yeomen also took the opportunity to gain at the expense of those with smaller holdings. This can be seen from the fact that between 1562-1634, 78 new gentry families appeared in Lincolnshire, predominantly rising members of the yeomanry; in 1642 of the gentry of Yorkshire no less than 23% of the families had received their arms more recently than 1558. The acquisitiveness of the richer sections of country society did not extend merely to the private sales of land and enclosure, but also it was they far more than any other group who had sufficient capital to seize

⁶ Coleman: *The Economy of England 1450-1750* p.31

⁷ Sharpe *Early Modern England: a social history* p.141

⁸ Coleman: *The Economy of England 1450-1750* p.39

⁹ Loach *Edward VI* p.60

¹⁰ Coleman: *The Economy of England 1450-1750* p.31

¹¹ Simpson: *The Wealth of the Gentry* p.210

¹² Wrightson *English Society 1580-1680* p. 131

¹³ Simpson: *The Wealth of the Gentry* p.206

on the government's need for cash and so bought formerly clerical and monastic lands - which in the mid-fifteenth century totalled 20-25% of the entire surface area of the country.¹⁴ The big losers from land sales in this period were certainly the church - though this was enforced - and the Crown itself, which sold not only churchlands but also its own demesne lands. Also losers in this developments were those smallholders who maintained small plots for which they were forced to pay rising rents. Especially hit were those husbandmen who were forced to sell their crops in order to pay the rent, then buy food to feed themselves with only to find that the price had risen in the mean-time. For many of them the final resort was to sell their smallholdings to their richer yeoman neighbours - thus once again confirming the growing gap in money and assets to the benefit of those already possessing them originally.

The net results of these factors stemming from the rising population and prices for basic commodities was to induce a redistribution of population throughout the country. Areas such as the Fens which had a greater amount of common land found themselves receiving more newcomers looking to use the pasturage rights. An example of this would be in the Isle of Axworth in the Lincolnshire Fens, where more than 100 new cottages were erected in the years between 1590 and 1630. This redistribution also roughly matched the manufacturing areas, where under-employed cottagers could supplement their earnings by those looking for a pool of cheap labour. The census of 1570 in Norwich found children as young as five and six contributing wages to the family income. Certainly any extra earnings were very necessary, since the rising population depressed the wages of agricultural labourers far beyond the upward rising of food prices. Where the index of grain based on 100 in 1450 had reached 575 by 1590 and the index of livestock 433, the index of day wages for agricultural workers in south-eastern England had only struggled up as far as 219. Thus the numbers of people slipping beneath the poverty line grew steadily. In Heydon in Essex by 1625, 43% of householders were considered to be beneath the poverty line, while a further 23% were just above it and might easily be forced onto the relief system in a bad year.¹⁵ In 1569 it was calculated that there were 13,000 rogues and masterless men in the country; in 1577 William Harrison claimed 10,000 vagrants, while a Jacobean ex-highwayman claimed 80,000.¹⁶ The embryonic system of poor relief and workhouses implemented in the reign of Elizabeth shows tangibly the new need for central governmental attention to this area of society which was unnecessary beforehand.

Another major location of population redistribution was in favour of the towns. As an example, Worcester doubled its numbers between 1563-1646, while in London the metropolis's population rocketed from 60,000 in the 1520s to 200,000 in 1600. This was despite the fact that the rate of mortality in towns was much higher than in villages. London for instance between 1560-1625 needed 5600 immigrants each year simply to maintain its existing population level. The cleanliness and proximity of city dwellers also ensured that plague epidemics were much more serious than in rural areas. However, despite the hygienic difficulties, serving the expanding towns created another enormous spur to the economies of towns' hinterland areas. In 1579 London imported 17,380 quarters of grain, mainly from Kent; by 1638 this had risen to 95,714 quarters.¹⁷ Clearly farmers from all the counties close by could now guarantee a willing market for its goods, while even in the smaller provincial towns such as Worcester, regular markets encouraged greater specialisation and economic interdependence. These specialisations could be much more lucrative than conventional farming techniques. Market-gardening for instance could bring in revenues of up to £20-30 per acre compared with £1 per acre for grain.¹⁸

¹⁴ Coleman: *The Economy of England 1450-1750* p.43

¹⁵ Wrightson *English Society 1580-1680* p. 141

¹⁶ Sharpe *Early Modern England: a social history* p.226

¹⁷ Sharpe *Early Modern England: a social history* p.88

¹⁸ Sharpe *Early Modern England: a social history* p.138

In conclusion, the economic picture of sixteenth-century England is one of polarising wealth distribution. Those who already had assets, be they farm produce or land-holding, were well-positioned to succeed further in amassing greater wealth still in an inflating market. For those forced to buy, the position was the reverse, with the low level of wages brought about by an increasing population not keeping up with the real cost of living. With foreign trade still tied as ever into a precarious international market based around cloth being sent to Antwerp until late in the century, commerce had not yet begun to transform the economy. Nevertheless in the development of markets in the towns there were beginnings to what later became English overseas economic expansion. As with land and food-production, those who already had possessions and assets were ideally placed to benefit from this, while those with no land or only a very small amount soon became dependent on their richer neighbours for either work - the Earl of Rutland between 1600-30 managed to make £1000-1500 profit from the iron forge and furnace on his lands, fed as they were by his own coal - or for charity. Either way the polarisation of society had created a more efficient agricultural system at the cost of a new class of paupers.