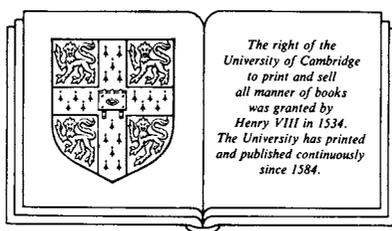


*Worlds within worlds:
structures of life in
sixteenth-century London*

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Introduction

Do you think that they, with their Battles, Famine, Black Death and Serfdom, were less enlightened than we are, with our Wars, Blockade, Influenza and Conscription? Even if they were foolish enough to believe that the earth was the centre of the universe, do we not ourselves believe that man is the fine flower of creation? If it takes a million years for a fish to become a reptile, has Man, in our few hundred, altered out of recognition?

T. H. White, *The Once and Future King*¹

The best and the worst of urban worlds

Recent scholarship has painted a rather grim picture of life in England's cities during the sixteenth century. Indeed in the view of many historians it was an age of acute urban crisis, decades when a host of insurmountable problems left cities throughout the realm desolate and decayed: traditional urban economies deteriorated in the face of suburban competition; growing unemployment and the financial burdens of urban residence, especially high taxes, resulted in widespread depopulation; a century-long rise in prices depressed living standards and drove the majority of all townspeople below the poverty line. Summarising what is viewed by many as a consensus regarding the state of England's cities from the 1520s through the 1570s, C. Phythian-Adams concluded that 'at no other period in national history since the coming of the Danes have English towns in general been so weak'.²

Exacerbating specifically urban problems were general social and

¹ White 1958: 569.

² Phythian-Adams 1979: 285. Among the most important contributions to the debate over the state of English cities in the early modern period are Bridbury 1981; Clark and Slack 1972, 1976; Corfield 1976; Dobson 1977; Dyer 1979; Goose 1986; Kermodé 1982; Palliser 1978, 1983: 225–36; Pearl 1979; Phythian-Adams 1978, 1979: 281–90.

economic problems affecting England and indeed most of western Europe in the sixteenth century, especially a considerable increase in population which in many places meant that there was not enough land, food, or jobs to go around, and a near fivefold increase in prices, the so-called 'price revolution', which is said to have produced in England a drastic decline in real income of more than 50 per cent.³ If urban life was dismal, things were not much brighter in the countryside, for 'poverty was the pervading condition of pre-industrial England'.⁴ According to W. G. Hoskins, the majority of people everywhere struggled through lives of 'almost unrelieved gloom and misery', made bearable only by their 'astonishing faculty for enjoying life on next to nothing' or by escaping frequently to what was 'an easy alternative, a temporary oblivion, and that was cheap drink . . . Only in this way could they soften the hardness of their working lives.'⁵ Still, it is in describing the quality of urban life that the bleakest terms are used. In most cities 'the poor and wage-earning class', including from one-half to three-quarters of all townspeople, 'were living at best at subsistence level'.⁶ Meagre social services provided little or no relief for their indigent majorities and thus in cities 'poverty, like filth, was everywhere to be seen on the streets'.⁷ Since most writers have accepted Hoskins' assessment that 'fully two-thirds of the urban population in the 1520s lived below or very near the poverty-line', one shudders to think what life was like by the dearth-ridden 1590s.⁸

These pressures, we are told, were the straws which nearly broke the urban back. Their administrations beleaguered, their treasuries depleted, poor relief was a 'massive financial burden' which few municipal governments could shoulder and thus the problem of 'poverty not infrequently threatened to overwhelm English towns'.⁹ Tensions mounted in cities as the stream of vagrants pouring in daily through their gates became a flood, swelling the ranks of their destitute

³ Phelps Brown and Hopkins 1981: 63. The rise in prices during the sixteenth century and its effects upon living standards are discussed below in Chapter 5, especially pp. 148–53.

⁴ Clarkson 1971: 210. See also Hoskins 1976a: 42–7; Pound 1971: 25–36.

⁵ Hoskins 1976a: 47–52.

⁶ Pound 1971: 26, 34.

⁷ Patten 1978: 35.

⁸ Hoskins 1976b: 101, an estimate supported or accepted, for example, by Clark and Slack 1976: 112; Clay 1984: I, 214–20; Patten 1978: 34–5; Pound 1971: 25–6; Russell 1971: 20; A. G. R. Smith 1984: 52. Analyses of subsidies upon which most of these estimates are based were criticised effectively by Phythian-Adams 1979: 132–4. For the degree of poverty in London and other early modern English cities, see pp. 162–73 below.

⁹ Clark and Slack 1972: 20, 1976: 121.

majorities and stretching to the limit their ability to cope with social problems. Masses of impoverished, desperate people were themselves a threat as well, for 'town authorities could never forget that lurking in the field of social distress was the monster of political disorder'.¹⁰ Fearing bread riots or even worse, urban ruling bodies fortified themselves with additional powers wrested from the commonalty. Challenges from citizens now excluded from urban government rarely succeeded in reversing this drift towards oligarchic rule, for 'they merely hardened the magistrates' resolve and led to further restrictions on the commons' involvement in politics, even at the lowest, ward level'. This, however, was but one form of a polarising trend which is said to have affected every aspect of urban society, reflected not only in the assumption by urban elites of economic and political power but also in 'the disappearance of many traditional expressions of the coherence of the urban community'.¹¹ Poverty and polarisation, therefore, are seen as universal problems which threatened continually to undermine the stability of cities throughout early modern England.

London is said to have offered the best and the worst of urban worlds in the sixteenth century: a fabulously wealthy elite living cheek by jowl with a thoroughly destitute majority.¹² The capital's people were more impoverished, its streets filled with more violence, its rulers more insensitive than anywhere else in England. G. Norton set the tone nearly a century and a quarter ago when he concluded 'not only that the general style of living amongst the citizens must have been . . . very wretched, but that the general aspect of the City must have been mean and unsightly'.¹³ Writing thirty-five years later, W. Besant described London as a city 'crowded and confined, [abounding] with courts and slums of the worst possible kind'.¹⁴ With these beginnings it is hardly surprising that among some of the most influential urban historians today the overall view of early modern London is that of a place where destitution was pervasive, permeating the city like a Victorian fog, a society always teetering on the brink of chaos. The 'largest number of poor and the most grinding poverty'¹⁵ in all of

¹⁰ Clark and Slack 1972: 19; MacCaffrey 1975: 249; Pound 1971: 26.

¹¹ Clark and Slack 1976: 130–3. For the polarisation of urban society in early modern England, see pp. 162–76 below.

¹² See, for example, Ashton 1984: 30; Beier 1985: 40; Clark and Slack 1976: 69.

¹³ Norton 1869: 142–3.

¹⁴ Besant 1904: 29–30.

¹⁵ Hoskins 1976a: 118–19.

England produced there 'conditions that we would associate with ghettos in Western cities and places such as Calcutta'.¹⁶ Up and down its squalid streets and alleys tramped a menacing army of wretched poor, gaining new recruits daily as London became 'for the sixteenth-century vagabond what the greenwood had been for the mediaeval outlaw – an anonymous refuge'.¹⁷ The capital soon 'swarmed with rogues and tramps and masterless men who lived as they could, like swine'.¹⁸ As the Tudors' reign wore on and conditions worsened, 'London experienced unprecedented social problems in the late Elizabethan period'.¹⁹

Many historians found in the history of London the most extreme examples of the poverty and especially the polarisation which characterised early modern English cities in general. Nowhere, for instance, was the gap between rich and poor wider than in London. Hoskins estimated that one-twentieth of the city's population owned more than four-fifths of its wealth and 'even this is a conservative reckoning'.²⁰ P. Clark and P. Slack argued that 'social tension and discontent were obvious consequences of this economic and social polarisation'. Recurrent food riots, outbreaks of violence against aliens, quasi-class conflict within guilds, and so on made the capital 'notorious for popular unrest in the sixteenth century'. Fearing the monstrous crowd yet lacking the will to confront the city's problems directly, London's rulers retreated into the bunker of oligarchy and 'exhibited the national bias towards more rigid and inflexible rule by clique'. Clark and Slack acknowledged that 'the causes and, to some extent, the consequences of [London's] demographic and economic expansion were largely beyond the control of the City magistrates. But whenever the latter did have an opportunity to assert their authority they failed, conspicuously, to seize it. . . . As a consequence, local government in the metropolis remained chaotic.'²¹

Unlike other cities in England plagued by a 'creeping process of de-urbanization',²² their populations dwindling as growing numbers of people fled decaying economies and the costs of urban residence, London's problems were caused by its phenomenal growth during the sixteenth century from a city of approximately 50,000 people, a small

¹⁶ Beier 1978: 221, 1985: 84.

¹⁷ Hill 1972: 33.

¹⁸ Besant 1904: 29–30.

¹⁹ Beier 1978: 217.

²⁰ Hoskins 1976a: 38.

²¹ Clark and Slack 1976: 69–70, 1972: 36–7.

²² Phythian-Adams 1978: 173–83. According to J. de Vries (1984: 270–8), in 1600 there were five cities in western Europe where at least 120,000 people lived: Mantua (120,000), Venice (139,000), London (200,000), Paris (220,000), and Naples (281,000). Rome and Palermo each had 105,000 inhabitants.

town by continental standards, to one of only a handful of cities in all of Europe with at least 120,000 inhabitants. In his study of 'Social Problems in Elizabethan London', A. L. Beier concluded that 'London's rise to the position of a great city evidently included a huge increase in its social problems'. Upon what evidence is this assertion based? The *only* quantitative evidence offered to support that claim is that the number of people arrested for vagrancy rose from 69 in 1560–1 to 209 in 1578–9 and then to 555 in 1600–1, figures which suggest 'a massive increase in London vagrancy'.²³ Beier argued that the eight-fold rise in arrests outstripped the city's roughly threefold increase in population and consequently the capital experienced a real increase in vagrancy. What Beier failed to consider is that *relative to the size of the city's population* the figures suggest a very *low* rate of vagrancy. Using his estimates that 80–90,000 people lived in London in 1560 and 250,000 in 1605, the number of vagrants arrested in those years amounts to 0.1 and 0.2 per cent of the population respectively. True, this does show a real increase in vagrancy arrests, but the figure for 1600–1 – the terminal date of the 'massive increase' in vagrancy – equals *one-fifth of 1 per cent* of the entire population. Even if we assume that the number arrested in 1600–1 represented, say, one-tenth of the city's vagrant population, 5550 vagrants would equal roughly 2 per cent of the total population (or 4 per cent if the population then was 150,000, a likelier figure). Yet elsewhere Beier estimated that vagrants amounted to about 2 per cent of England's total population in 1603 and based upon that evidence he concluded that the 'numbers of vagrants were remarkably *low*' at the end of the Tudors' reign.²⁴

In absolute terms as well as Beier's argument is very difficult to accept. Based upon the arrests for vagrancy of 555 people, are we to believe that there can be 'no doubt that by 1600 London's streets were filled with vagrant young men'? Such a crowd would barely have filled the Guildhall let alone the streets of a city where approximately 150,000 people lived. In a city of that size, do his figures warrant claims that there was a 'massive increase in London vagrancy' and 'large-scale juvenile delinquency', or that the city experienced a 'huge increase in its social problems' during the second half of the sixteenth century?²⁵

²³ Beier 1978: 204. His study extended to 1624–5 when 815 vagrants were arrested, but the largest increase in arrests occurred before 1600. Unlike 1560–1600, when the number of arrests increased about three times as much as London's population, arrests rose by 47% during 1600–25, less than twice the 28% increase in population cited by Beier. Beier reaffirmed this position in Beier 1985: 40; Beier and Finlay 1986: 18.

²⁴ Beier 1974: 5–6. Italics are mine. For other estimates of London's population during the sixteenth century, see p. 61, n. 1 below.

²⁵ Beier 1978: 204–10, 1985: 40–7.

The point here is not to minimise the problems facing London and its people during the sixteenth century. Rather it is to second the criticism made by V. Pearl and implied by F. F. Foster that this view of the city – overwhelmed by insoluble problems and nearly paralysed by social conflict – ‘is too stark and simplistic’, especially since we know in fact very little about the social and economic history of early modern London.²⁶ For too long unsubstantiated claims of the capital’s abysmal poverty, incompetent government, and violence-ridden streets have been accepted uncritically by historians. For instance, London’s reputation for repeated outbreaks of popular disorders during the sixteenth century is apparently so notorious that most historians no longer cite references to such instability. After all, over a century ago Norton wrote that ‘riots in the streets of London, which . . . had become common throughout many preceding reigns, grew to a great height’ under Queen Elizabeth. What are his sources? – references to apprentices wielding clubs in Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* and other early seventeenth-century plays! So, Norton quotes Shakespeare, Besant refers to Norton, and so it goes until the unverified claim of London’s chronic instability gains such currency today that few historians bother to question its veracity or even to cite its sources.²⁷

Early modern London’s alleged instability

There is ample evidence that during the sixteenth century many cities on the European continent experienced considerable instability, at least in the form of individually serious if not pervasive outbreaks of violent conflict. Within a few months of its beginning in May 1520 the revolt of the *Communeros* had toppled governments in several northern Castilian towns. The burning of much of Medina del Campo, Spain’s financial and commercial centre, by royalist forces in August outraged cities in the south and drove many of them into the *Comunero* fold. In

²⁶ Pearl 1979: 4–5; F. F. Foster 1977: 160. As W. G. Hoskins (1976a: 118–19), J. Patten (1978: 182–3), and others have noted, we know too little about the history of early modern London. There is no comprehensive study, but aspects of the city’s history are explored in A. L. Beier and R. Finlay (eds.), *London 1500–1700. The Making of the Metropolis*, London, 1986; Boulton 1987; Brett-James 1935; Finlay 1981; F. F. Foster 1977: 1–53; [P. E. Jones] 1950; Norton 1869; Page 1923; Pearl 1961: 45–68; pp. 32–6 and 176–83 below. For guides to the records of the City of London, see p. 414 below.

²⁷ Norton 1869: 154–5. Clark and Slack’s claim (1972: 36–7), for example, that London was ‘notorious for popular unrest in the sixteenth century’ lacks a single supportive reference in n.112 on p.54.

neighbouring Valencia the *Germanía*, a 'violently radical social movement' led by artisans, seized control of the city of Valencia and, as its influence spread into the countryside, 'clearly constituted a grave threat to aristocratic power and to the whole hierarchical order'. It took more than a year to quell both revolts.²⁸ Social and economic conflicts triggered risings in a dozen cities in northern and southern Germany in 1513 and similar tensions, now intertwined with anti-clericalism and other religious issues, produced another wave of urban revolts twelve years later.²⁹ Flemish towns rebelled against Charles V in the 1520s and 1530s, including Ghent which 'almost succeeded in bringing about a general revolt in Flanders'.³⁰ In the summer of 1566, at the beginning of the Dutch Revolt, hundreds of churches were sacked by Calvinists in an iconoclastic fury which swept through scores of towns.³¹ More serious risings occurred in the following decade when militias of artisans refused to suppress proletarian revolts in Brabant and Flemish towns.³² The bloodiest chapter of the Dutch Revolt occurred in November 1576 when Spanish troops sacked Antwerp, one of Europe's greatest cities, destroying a thousand houses and slaughtering 8000 people.³³ France too had its share of urban conflict, especially during the last four decades of the sixteenth century when the nation was torn apart by the Wars of Religion. The assassination of several Protestant leaders on St Bartholomew's Day, 1572 unleashed mobs of Catholics in Paris who in six days massacred 3000 Protestants. During the next two weeks another 10,000 Protestants were butchered in provincial towns.³⁴ In assessing the stability of London during the sixteenth century, therefore, it is important to bear in mind that on the continent urban strife frequently took extremely violent forms, including risings where the expressed and often realised aim was the overthrow of established government and other conflicts in which thousands of lives were occasionally lost and entire cities destroyed.

And what of London? In the records of the City³⁵ and its livery companies, as guilds were called in the early modern period, little evidence is found of the riots which are said to have swept the city repeatedly during the Tudors' reign, nor are there any signs of the

²⁸ J. H. Elliott 1963: 151–9.

²⁹ Clark 1976a: 6–7; Cohn 1979: 24–5; Holborn 1959: 171–4; Moeller 1972: 54–7.

³⁰ Smit 1970: 32–3.

³¹ Geyl 1958: 92–4; Parker 1977: 74–82.

³² Smit 1970: 30.

³³ Parker 1977: 178.

³⁴ Briggs 1977: 22–4; Dunn 1979: 34–6; Salmon 1975: 186–8.

³⁵ Throughout the text the capitalised form 'City' is used only to refer to the institutions, records, etc. of London's municipal government.

epidemic of instability for which, we are told, the capital was notorious. As happens in any major urban centre, then and now, tensions erupted once in a while, football games occasionally turned into brawls, rowdy youths stirred up trouble at times, and thus disturbances and even incidents of violent conflict occurred in London, though infrequently. On 7 December 1536 the French ambassador's servant was attacked by men yelling 'Down with the French dogs'. He died the next day and a few additional assaults were reported.³⁶ In December 1553, five months after the accession of the Catholic Queen Mary, Londoners were ordered by the mayor not to 'mock or scorn any priests passing by the streets', and after her unpopular marriage to the Spanish King Philip seven months later they were admonished to 'gently retain Spaniards'.³⁷ There 'was a great watch in the city' during the week of 17 February 1567, 'for fear of an insurrection against the strangers', that is, French, Dutch, and other aliens living in London, but several apprentices were unwilling to take the instigator's lead and gave word to their masters who in turn informed the mayor. The riot never took place.³⁸

Except for Evil May Day in 1517 and a period of disturbances in the mid-1590s, both of which will be considered later,³⁹ most complaints about disorder in Tudor London concerned the behaviour of unruly young men, chiefly the antics and brawling of apprentices, youths in their late teens and early twenties, and journeymen, most of whom were not much older. After a 'disorder' in March 1576 householders were warned that their apprentices and journeymen should not 'misuse, molest, or evil treat any servant, page, or lackey of any nobleman, gentleman, or other going in the streets'.⁴⁰ Apprentices were involved in another scuffle with noblemen's servants in July 1581, though apparently a minor affair provoked by the servants, and twelve months later 'an affray' was reported involving watermen at Lion Key, a landing along the Thames not far from London Bridge.⁴¹ Football games were sometimes sources of trouble. Youths were barred from playing football in January 1586 and again in April 1590 when three journeymen were imprisoned for breaking windows and otherwise 'outrageously and riotously behaving themselves at football

³⁶ J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner and R. H. Brodie (eds.), *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, 36 vols., London, 1862-1932, XI, 537.

³⁷ *Drapers CM*: V, 21, 42v.

³⁸ Gairdner (ed.) 1880: 140-1.

³⁹ See pp. 11-17 below.

⁴⁰ *Jour.* 20: 276v.

⁴¹ *Remembrancia*: 448-50.

play in Cheapside'.⁴² In the late sixteenth century festivities on Shrove Tuesday, traditionally a holiday for apprentices, became tumultuous on occasion, but only across the Thames in Southwark, where in the next century brothels were often torn down on that day, and in large fields outside the walls where archers practised amongst grazing cows. In February 1578 'assemblies' of young men were banned during Shrovetide to prevent 'great disorders, uncomely and dangerous behaviours . . . in the fields and elsewhere and especially in Moorfields and Finsbury Fields' north of the city beyond Moorgate. Five young men were imprisoned in March 1595 after Shrove Tuesday disturbances in Southwark and along Petticoat Lane bordering Spitalfields, also without the walls towards London's east end, and next year householders were warned to keep their apprentices and journeymen indoors during Shrovetide 'for the preventing of disorders'.⁴³

Unlike cities on the continent, however, where youths figured prominently in abbeys of misrule and other rituals of status reversal when henpecked husbands and cuckolds were humiliated, wife beaters and others who violated societal norms were punished, there is little evidence that in sixteenth-century London the disorderly behaviour of young men was initiated by organised youth groups, occurred within a framework of ritual, or was functional in the sense elucidated by N. Z. Davis in her study of festive customs and organisations in early modern France.⁴⁴ According to S. Brigden, during the reign of Henry VIII lords of misrule were chosen at Christmas and a boy dressed, preached, and paraded as a bishop on Childermas Day, but she acknowledged that in general 'youthful high spirits and the desire to humiliate unpopular elders did not find expression in London in the creation of organised youth groups'. Davis too found few echoes of French misrule across the Channel.⁴⁵ This was true especially after the Reformation, for many of the feast days which provided occasions for festivals and carnivals and thus for misrule were no longer celebrated in Protestant England. Similarly, in his study of popular culture in London, P. Burke concluded that 'traditional festivals were in relative decline' and in most respects were 'less important in London than in the great cities of Catholic Europe'. Only in activities during Shrovetide did Burke find evidence of young men involved in the

⁴² Jour. 22: 10; Rep. 22: 160v. See also Jour. 23: 4v, 225v.

⁴³ Jour. 20: 388; 24: 93v; Rep. 23: 365v, 369. For Shrovetide disturbances in London, see Beier and Finlay 1986: 21; Brigden 1982: 50-1; Burke 1977: 144-8; S. R. Smith 1973a: 154-5; Thomas 1976: 219.

⁴⁴ N. Z. Davis 1975: 97-123. For England, see Ingram 1984.

⁴⁵ Brigden 1982: 50; N. Z. Davis 1975: 302-3, n. 47.