

## Poverty in Elizabethan England

Paul Slack

After the Anglican Church, the English poor-law was the most long-lasting of Elizabethan achievements. As finally codified in the legislation of 1601, it persisted without fundamental alteration until 1834 and played a major part in Elizabethan government. Any list of the 'stacks of statutes' which the Tudors imposed on the shoulders of justices of the peace will include the acts of 1563, 1572, 1576 and 1598, which were concerned with the relief of the destitute and the punishment of vagabonds, along with related legislation aiming to regulate the lives and behaviour of the 'commons', such as the Statute of Artificers of 1563. Social welfare and regulation were matters of increasing public concern between 1558 and 1603.

Much of this is familiar historical ground. What is less clear is the reason for this development. To begin with there was the poor-law itself, gradually shaped by successive statutes up to the great enactment of 1601. It had three essential features. The first, and ultimately the most important, was the poor-rate, the compulsory assessment in each parish which financed outdoor relief to deserving indigent households. In 1563 secular sanctions were threatened against those who refused to contribute to collections for the poor. In 1572 justices of the peace were empowered to determine the size of contributions, thus turning them into an imposed tax: they were to assess richer parishioners after surveys of the poor had been made to see what money was needed. Finally, in 1598, the ground was prepared for the widespread adoption of rates, when the main responsibility for levying them was transferred from overworked justices to the churchwardens and overseers of every parish.

The second feature of the poor-law, the quid pro quo in return for public taxation and outdoor relief, was a sustained but unsuccessful campaign against vagrants and beggars. Begging and casual almsgiving were prohibited unless licensed by authority, and successive poor-laws viciously attacked wandering paupers with a variety of penalties. In the end, under a second act of 1598, vagrants were to be summarily whipped and returned to their place of settlement by parish constables. Once again the execution of the law was made quicker and easier than before by placing it in the hands of parish authorities; it did not require the cumbersome intervention of justices in every case, as the Act of 1572 had done.

The third feature of the law was complementary to the others: an effort to provide work for the poor so that they would neither wander abroad nor needlessly claim relief. By an act of 1576, justices of the peace were authorised to provide any town which needed it with a stock of flax, hemp or other materials on which paupers could be employed, and to erect a house of correction in every county for the punishment of those who refused to work. In practice little was done before 1603. Although some of the larger towns had houses of correction, workhouses, or work stocks, they were always small, they rarely lasted long and they were often mismanaged. Nevertheless,

the imposition of labour discipline was from the start as fundamental an aim of legislators as the provision of public doles for the deserving poor and public whippings for vagrants.

It has long been recognised that these legislative prescriptions owed a good deal to earlier local initiatives which pointed in the same direction. Compulsory taxes for the poor had been instituted in London, Norwich, Ipswich and York in the later 1540s and 1550s. Temporary expedients to begin with, they were well established there and in other towns such as Exeter, Cambridge and Chester before the Act of 1572. That statute itself seems to have been influenced by experiments in poor relief begun in Norwich in 1570, which included a survey of the poor, an increase in rates, and fresh expedients to provide employment. There were also local houses of correction before the Act of 1576, the first of them the London Bridewell, founded in 1553, which gave its name to many of its provincial imitators.

The importance of local precedents should not be allowed to obscure the large role played by central government in framing social policy, however. Councillors knew the problems of the localities as well as MPs, and they also needed to demonstrate the paternalism of government, its concern for public order and the social harmony of the common weal. The government itself seems to have pushed for decisive legislation on poor relief in 1572, for example. Even at the local level, we often find national figures sponsoring new welfare experiments: the Earl of Huntingdon in Oxford, the Earl of Leicester in Warwick, Sir Francis Walsingham in Hampshire. Moreover, historical attention has sometimes concentrated too much on statutes, on the poor-law. Conciliar action under the royal prerogative was equally innovative in the field of social welfare and imposed at least as many burdens on local authorities.

At first sight the concerns of the central government appear almost entirely negative, for the Council's most frequent declarations of social policy, in proclamations, concentrated on one simple target, rogues and vagabonds. There was a more positive side to government policy, however, and that appeared in a major Elizabethan innovation: the printed Books of Orders circulated to all justices of the peace. There were two series of these, one describing actions to be taken during epidemics of plague, the other directing local responses to dearth and harvest failure. Each codified earlier practices and imposed a new uniformity on local authorities. According to the plague orders, published for the first time in 1578, infected houses were to be strictly quarantined; the sick and their families should be supported from special rates and guarded in order to prevent fresh contacts. The dearth orders, first published in 1586, kept justices and parish officers equally busy. They had to take local surveys of grain when the harvest failed, to arrange for surpluses to be brought regularly to market, and to see that they were sold there in small quantities to the poor. Both books were reprinted whenever plague or dearth recurred, and they were enforced, haphazardly but widely. Scores of towns were isolating and supporting large numbers of infected households in the plague epidemics of 1592 – 6 and 1603 – 9, and lists of grain stocks were drawn up in the hundreds and divisions of several counties in 1586 – 7 and 1597 – 8.

Elaborate responses to poverty, dearth and disease were perhaps the most striking elements of Elizabethan social policy, but they were not the only symptoms of contemporary interest in social regulation and control. The Council tried to get at some of the roots of these problems in its prolonged battle against the growth of London: prohibiting new building and the subdivision of houses, at first through a proclamation of 1580 and then with the help of a statute passed in 1593. An act of 1589 against the erection of cottages on commons and wastes was directed against the same phenomenon in the countryside: rapid population growth which went hand in hand with

impoverishment, disease and disorder. Statutes against enclosure and in favour of tillage in 1563 and 1598 exhibited a similar desire to prevent disruptive social and economic change. The Statute of Artificers of 1563 showed, among other things, that MPs wished the disciplines of apprenticeship to be widely enforced for the same purpose, in agriculture as well as in industry. Throughout the reign, proclamations enforcing sumptuary legislation were intended to perpetuate existing social distinctions in dress.

Much of this activity – apprenticeship restrictions, enclosure laws and sumptuary regulations in particular – had, of course, a long history behind it. But there was a change in emphasis in the course of the reign. Some old concerns fell into the background and others came to the fore. If we look at proclamations, for example, it is notable that six of the nine Elizabethan proclamations on apparel were issued before 1581, while ten out of thirteen proclamations concerning vagrants were issued after 1581. Parliamentary interest in the condition and conduct of the poor also increased in the last two decades of the reign. Sumptuary regulations were still debated, but government interference with the behaviour of the social elite now aroused opposition, and existing legislation on the subject was repealed in 1604. A warmer parliamentary welcome was given to proposals for stricter regulation of other matters: poverty, on which there were at least seventeen bills in the 1597-8 session alone: drunkenness, inns and alehouses, on which there were thirteen bills between 1576 and 1601; profanation of the Sabbath, giving rise to six bills between 1584 and 1601; and bastardy and swearing, on which there were bills in 1597 and 1601 respectively. The manners and behaviour of the lower orders rather than of their betters seemed urgently to require reformation at the end of the reign.

Similar anxieties can be found at the local level, in the by-laws passed by town councils and in the orders made by quarter sessions. By the turn of the century urban magistrates all over the country were trying to control lodgers and inmates, the subdivision of houses, the number of alehouses, and popular recreations, especially on the Sabbath. Country justices were spending an increasing amount of time dealing with bastardy, alehouses, unlawful games, cottages, vagrants and the settlement of the poor. Whether one looks at the records of the Council, or Parliament, or of local authorities, there can be no doubt that in the latter half of Elizabeth's reign people in authority felt threatened by rising population, large numbers of vagrants and paupers, and the disorders they provoked.

The most obvious circumstantial explanation for some of these developments lies not in general economic trends but in the temporary crises which occurred in Elizabeth's reign. The Rising in the North appears to have been a particularly formative event. Although there was no justification for the view that vagabonds caused rebellion, the myth was a potent force in the years immediately after 1569, as it had been after 1549. It stimulated searches for vagrants throughout the country, and probably led directly to the legislation of 1572. An associated political conspiracy in Norwich was followed by the remodelling of social welfare there in 1570, and fears for political stability may have inspired the revision of poor relief machinery in Bristol in the same year. The 1570s were also a decade of considerable activity in London, with the Council prodding the corporation to produce new schemes for the relief and employment of the poor, for grain provision and plague control, especially after a sudden rise in food prices in 1573 and an epidemic in 1577-8.

For the nation as a whole, the disasters of disease and dearth were much more serious in the last two decades of the reign. Plague spread to many towns after devastating outbreaks in London in 1593 and 1603, disrupting economic activity and throwing hundreds of victims onto parish relief. Harvest failures in 1586, and in 1595, 1596 and

1597, brought malnutrition, disease and further surges in mortality to the poorer suburbs of towns and to more isolated rural areas, such as the uplands of Cumbria, where cases of starvation were reported. Food prices rose everywhere, however, and the later 1590s in particular were years of social stress over much of the country. Widespread distress was accompanied by a peak in crimes against property, by a similar high point in illegitimacy rates, and by food and enclosure riots. The comprehensive poor-relief legislation of 1598 was prompted by critical circumstances.

It is much more difficult to judge the extent to which economic conditions were deteriorating in the longer term and producing a gradual increase in the number of the poor. There is no doubt that the standard of living of wage-earners and labourers declined. Population increased at a greater rate than productivity in the sixteenth century; prices rose faster than wages; and the purchasing-power of the latter dropped, to reach its nadir in the years around 1620. According to the available indices, the real value of wages fell by about a quarter in the course of Elizabeth's reign. However, there are serious problems in measuring how far (and how many) people were dependent on money wages, and hence in determining what this drop meant in actuality. All we can say is that it is unlikely that popular living-standards declined by as much as a quarter between 1558 and 1603. We should also beware the temptation to interpret the evidence of starvation and malnutrition in some parts of the country in the later 1590s as evidence that England as a whole was plunging into a 'Malthusian trap'. Even in these exceptional years, outright starvation was localised. By the middle of the seventeenth century the country was feeding a population twice that of 1500; and the growth in agricultural output which this implies had begun before 1600. As for industrial productivity, it has recently been shown that rural and urban industries were expanding by the early seventeenth century, and beginning to stimulate and to satisfy a mass market for all kinds of consumer goods. Again, this economic growth must have begun before 1600.

If the traditional view of an unparalleled slump in Tudor living-standards needs some revision, as it certainly does, it retains more truth than an alternative which sees no decline at all. It is now clear that England was further away from a Malthusian situation in 1600 than it had been in 1300; and that prudential checks (notably late marriage and low fertility) rather than the stark positive checks of famine and disease stopped demographic growth in the end, in the mid-seventeenth century. But the prudential checks are themselves eloquent testimony to contemporary perceptions that economic conditions had been deteriorating and that per capita incomes had fallen sharply. Things were getting worse for the mass of the population.

Moreover, the gains in agricultural and industrial productivity which became evident after 1620 were achieved only by processes of adjustment which were painful and which seemed to promise little in the way of positive return before then. They required an increase in wage labour in agriculture, which reduced the status of the traditional English peasant, made more people dependent on the market and hence multiplied the potential victims of inflation. They depended partly on an expansion of rural industry, particularly in forest and pastoral areas where there were new squatter settlements formed by migrants from farming-regions where growing populations could not be sustained. Migration to towns, by the poor as well as by more well-to-do apprentices, similarly provided labour for urban industries and services. All these developments brought economic gains in the seventeenth century, but that could not be foreseen in 1603 when the country's labour resources were still demonstrably and grossly underemployed. To Elizabethans they seemed a threat rather than an opportunity.

This economic background explains why Parliament legislated against squatters and cottagers and why the government was worried about the growth of London. The slow

processes of adjustment to rising population also aggravated the two problems which the poor-law was designed to attack. Heavy migration made vagrancy seem an ever more serious threat. Cheap labour supplies meant the emergence in towns and villages of a large and vulnerable class of underemployed 'labouring poor' – a term which was coming into use in this period. In neither case did contemporaries see the facts wholly as they were, but their anxieties produced documents which throw light on both phenomena and on the extent of contemporary misconceptions about them.

The local registers of vagrants punished after the Act of 1598 and the records of searches and examinations before that date are too partial to permit estimates of how many vagabonds there were on the roads of England; or even to prove – though they suggest – that the number was increasing towards the end of the reign. These documents tell us more about local concentrations, on main routes from the north and west to the south-east and in cities and market towns, and about short-term variations from year to year. The later 1590s were particularly bad, since dearth and high prices always pushed paupers onto the roads, moving to towns in search of charity. In Oxford, where a dozen or so vagrants were normally punished each year, there were sixty-seven in 1598; in Salisbury ninety-six vagrants were caught in the same year, compared with an average of less than twenty. One suggestive indication of trends over the longer term, however, comes from the records of Bridewell in London. The number of vagrants punished there rose from sixty-nine a year in 1560-1 to 209 in 1578-9 and to 555 in 1600-1. The city's population rose about threefold in the same period.

Still more indicative of the mounting problem in the metropolis is the fact that vagrancy came to overshadow other categories of offences punished at Bridewell. Intended as it was to 'punish sin', Bridewell dealt with all kinds of petty crime, and especially with sexual misdemeanours. In the early 1560s therefore only 16 per cent of all offenders were vagrants. By 1600-1, however, they comprised 62 per cent of the total. It would be difficult to argue that this change was caused by an autonomous shift in attitude on the part of magistrates or constables. The proportion of sexual offenders declined rapidly, not because of any increase in official tolerance, but because the crowds of rogues and vagabonds left little time for anything else. All the evidence suggests that from the 1570s until the end of the reign London's streets and those of many other towns were full of vagrants and beggars.

If contemporaries were right to regard vagrancy as a growing problem, they saw its character less accurately. William Fleetwood, the Recorder of London, went out himself into the streets one morning in 1582 and apprehended seventy-four rogues whom he sent to Bridewell. 'Some were blind', he wrote, 'and yet great usurers and very rich.' His comment reflected the ineradicable commonplace prejudice that the mobile poor were a wilfully idle, deceitful and criminal class. Some of them certainly were, but they were not a majority. The records of assizes and quarter sessions show that a life on the roads often led vagrants to petty crime of one kind or another: there were thieves, pickpockets, and pedlars who doubled as receivers of stolen goods. But most of the vagrants dealt with summarily by constables after the Act of 1598 were not accused of crimes other than vagrancy: if they had been, they would have been brought before quarter sessions. Rather they were the unemployed, genuinely wandering in search of a living, at least at first. Many had once been apprentices or servants; sometimes they had trades after their names. But now, as one of them said, they 'lived poorly by the charity of good people' while they travelled.

When local authorities turned to look at the other half of the problem of poverty, the needs of the domestic resident poor of each parish, they thought it could be reduced to manageable proportions by simple means. Once they had identified them, they could

expel strangers and vagrants. They could apprehend the wilfully idle poor and discipline them to habits of work in houses of correction. That would leave only a rump of respectable paupers to be supported: in particular, the sick and disabled, widows and orphan children. In this way the disciplines of whip and workhouse could restrict poor-relief to the traditional categories of the deserving poor. This optimistic assumption inspired many of the censuses and listings of the poor which were taken in towns and villages in the later sixteenth century, and some of these valuable records survive.

Their contents scarcely justified optimism. Their authors often had different definitions of poverty in mind, and that makes comparison between them difficult. They were also prompted by diverse local circumstances: an industrial depression in the case of Norwich in 1570, the distress caused by dearth in Warwick in 1587, and in Ipswich, some parishes of north Kent, and Crompton in Lancashire in the later 1590s. Nevertheless, they all revealed poverty to be a much larger and more intractable phenomenon than their originators had supposed. Roughly 10 per cent of the population of St Mary's parish, Warwick, required relief in 1587. Nearly 12 per cent of the inhabitants of three north Kent parishes were thought to have a claim to public support in 1598. In nine of the twelve parishes of Ipswich in 1597 13 per cent of the people were unable to support themselves. No less than 22 per cent of the English population in Norwich (foreign immigrants were excluded) were classed as poor in 1570.

These figures are remarkable enough as indicators of the perceived quantity of poverty in the later sixteenth century; but the listings also tell us something about its quality. There is little sign of the idle wastrels, sleeping in doorways and living solely by begging, whom the Norwich citizens, for example, expected to find. Some disabled paupers and many small children did go out to beg, but they were helping to support small households whose other members, women and children included, worked when they could, spinning or weaving, making lace or stockings, nursing or doing domestic chores for their betters. In Ipswich some of the poor had children 'at school' learning trades. In Crompton they rented their own houses. In Norwich a few of them even had mortgage debts. They were trying to maintain, not flagrantly abandoning, respectability.

In every listing of the poor, women and children in broken families were particularly prominent: a reflection of the burdens which old age, widowhood and the death of a parent imposed on family budgets. Yet there were also plenty of structurally 'normal' nuclear families, who were in poverty simply because of low earnings. Married couples were at the head of 38 per cent of the poor households in Warwick, of 51 per cent in Ipswich and of 62 per cent in Norwich. These were the labouring poor, not the poor by impotency or casualty, to use contemporary terms. Their importance emerges most clearly in the great Norwich census, which is full enough to permit an estimate of the cause of poverty in each household. Old age, illness or the death of a bread-winner accounts for the state of 35 per cent of the families; in 7 per cent of cases the family had been deserted by the father; in 8 per cent poverty appears to have been the result of a large number of children; but in the remaining 50 per cent of cases it can only have resulted from irregular employment, unemployment or low wages. Here once more were the victims of an economy which was failing to employ an expanding population.

In the countryside the task of discrimination was easier, if only because the able-bodied poor often moved off to the towns. In the three north Kent parishes only 1.5 per cent of the population received public support, and they were the impotent. But by the end of Elizabeth's reign even country parishes were finding that they had on occasion to help a labourer and his family, alongside the widows who were the familiar figures

on relief-rolls. As a result, outdoor relief and the poor-rates which paid for it became the essential elements in the poor-law. Whipping vagrants did nothing to reduce the burden of the domestic poor of towns; workhouses and work stocks employed no more than a tiny minority of them. Only the dole was left, and the number receiving it and the cost on the rates continued to increase, despite the desire of contemporaries to keep them down.

In this respect and more generally, therefore, circumstances help us to understand Elizabethan reactions to poverty. It is plausible to argue from the evidence that conditions were getting worse: there were more vagrants and more paupers with valid claim to public assistance, and both were the result, not just of frequent temporary crises such as dearth and plague, but of long-term economic trends which produced heavy mobility and underemployment.

Part of the opposition to the poor-laws was, of course, self-interested. Taxation for poor-relief was vehemently resisted, in Warwick and elsewhere, because it was taxation. Those who were the victims or beneficiaries of public action had equally good reason to object to its regulatory aspects, to abuse the magistrates who, in the words of a Thetford man in '1577, 'did more than they might do... dealing with the poor but not with the rich'. But there were also issues of greater principle involved. In the parliamentary debates on the poor-law in 1571 and 1572, several members questioned whether the definition of a vagrant should be drawn so broadly that it encompassed such representatives of traditional wayfaring-life as minstrels. Miles Sandys thought the whole law 'oversharp and bloody': vagrancy could easily be eliminated if the justices worked to 'relieve every [poor] man at his own house'. On the other hand, Thomas Wilson urged harsh penalties because of the 'looseness and lewdness' of the times: 'he said it was no charity to give to such a one as we know not, being a stranger unto us'.

Behind such controversy lay two related questions. The first was whether the relief of the poor was a matter for government intervention at all. Should it not be left to the old practices of neighbourly, and largely informal, charity? The parishioners of part of the West Riding adopted this view when they opposed the prohibition of begging and the introduction of rates in 1598 on the grounds that 'many are able to give relief which are not able to give money'; neighbours would support their neighbours with help in kind. The second question was how much discrimination there should be in the giving of alms, whether public or private. Should minstrels or strangers be treated generously, as traditional ideals of hospitality might seem to imply?

These issues were never starkly articulated in this period, but they were tacitly present in much of the literature on charity and hospitality published in Elizabeth's reign. No English writers took as hard a line in favour of public intervention and discrimination as Martin Bucer and some continental reformers; still less did any of them openly oppose these innovations. While some stressed their necessity, however, others expressed reservations and insisted on qualifications. Robert Allen, for example, warned his readers against being too scrupulous in their giving: in the end it was better 'that alms should be cast away, than any creature should perish for want of relief'.

There was certainly a good deal of confusion in practice. Informal and indiscriminate almsgiving continued, on an unquantifiable but probably large scale. Vagrants went on calling 'at many gentlemen's and honest men's houses to have their charity'. Although poor-rates became more common after the Act of 1572, it was only in the generation after the 1598 statute that they spread to a majority of rural parishes. It is unlikely that they raised anything like the sums given in alms in the streets or in voluntary contributions in parish churches before the end of the reign; just as they certainly did

not match the sums available for poor relief from privately endowed charities. The government itself was often forced to pay more than lip-service to old ideals while advocating the new. In years of dearth the Church was called upon to publicise the traditional virtues of neighbourly hospitality, with scarcely a hint of discrimination.

Yet the trend throughout the reign was plainly towards more government intervention and direction of welfare activity. The Books of Orders for dearth assumed that public regulation of markets would replace neighbourly charity as a more efficient and effective use of scarce resources when the harvest failed. The Books of Orders for plague imposed on infected households quarantine restrictions which prevented the visiting of sick neighbours, and thus, as some contemporaries complained, flew in the face of traditional charitable obligations. The campaign against vagrants and beggars and against indiscriminate almsgiving grew in vigour. By 1603 some old ideals were in retreat.

One reason for this was the commonplace assumption that the old ideals had conspicuously failed in practice. Whether enamoured of new developments or not, many contemporaries bewailed the decline of charity. Thanks to W.K. Jordan's studies of endowed charities, we can now see that they were probably wrong. Though applying only to discriminating forms of charitable endeavour, and though controversial, Jordan's figures show that the yield from private endowments for poor-relief had made good the loss of monastic almsgiving by the 1580s, and that it more or less kept pace with inflation throughout the reign. Socially concerned observers had no inkling of that, however. They saw only the disappearance of the old religious charitable institutions, and the empty or absent poor-boxes in churches, and some of them continued to think, as they had done since the 1540s, that the state must step in to make good the deficiency.

Continuous from before 1558, too, were the aspirations of governments anxious to prove their humanist credentials with a little social engineering in the interests of the common weal. William Cecil provides a link with the days of Thomas Cromwell in his encouragement of projects and projectors on economic and social matters; and the Books of Orders were one result of his interest in and correspondence about social problems, particularly in London. It seems clear also that the capacity for autonomous growth which infects most bureaucratic innovations was at work. The increasing use of divisional or petty sessions, for example, which allowed justices to regulate the affairs of their own neighbourhood, shows that once laws were on the statute book some local administrators were creative and energetic in implementing them. Yet, in addition to all this, it may be argued that there was a new ideological element in Elizabeth's reign. It came from Protestant religious enthusiasm.

An older tradition of historical writing about Puritanism, associated particularly with R.H. Tawney, attributed to it a 'new medicine for poverty' which was characterised by punishment rather than relief and by harsh discrimination rather than real charity. It is now clear, however, that that view is mistaken. More recent work has shown that the social attitudes and objectives of Puritans hardly differed from those of other members of the social, political and religious elite in Elizabethan England. They favoured discrimination in poor-relief, certainly, but then so did other people; and their support for the poor-law was not unqualified. Some of them shared contemporary doubts about aspects of it. Thomas Norton, for example, was one of the defenders of minstrels in 1571-2. Many of them wanted to increase generosity to the poor, to see new hospitals, almshouses and charitable doles, as well as to reinforce social discipline.

Even so, there is considerable evidence that Puritans made a powerful contribution to the developments we have been seeking to explain. This lay first and foremost in what



has been termed their 'social activism'. Their determination to shape a godly commonwealth led them to undertake practical reforms in pursuit of what were fundamentally commonplace social ideals, while their less committed colleagues did nothing. Again and again we find godly ministers and magistrates, often in close alliance, initiating new regulations and new institutions. It was the Presbyterian divine, Thomas Cartwright, acting, it has been said, like a Calvinist deacon, who inspired the listings of the poor in Warwick in the 1580s and who helped to reform poor-relief there. The result was certainly closer discrimination in the giving of relief, but also a large increase in the sums spent on poor households. The consequences were similar in Norwich a decade earlier, where new orders for the poor specifically provided for a deacon in every ward. The wholesale reform of social welfare there between 1570 and 1572 occurred under a mayor, John Aldrich, who had Puritan leanings, and on the eve of the city's greatest fame as a Puritan citadel guided by its 'apostle', John More. As an MP Aldrich may well have influenced the poor-relief legislation of the 1570s, just as later Puritans, such as Robert Wroth and George More, took a notable part on committees on the poor-law in the last parliaments of the reign.

Energetic Calvinist paternalism had a further consequence. Directed as it was against a multitude of social and moral ills, it strengthened and multiplied the existing links between poor-relief and other forms of social regulation. In the 1570s some of the Norfolk justices had regular divisional meetings at the Acle Bridewell, where, after prayers, they punished rogues, bastard-bearers, drunkards and other unruly people. Walsingham reported to Cecil that it was work which was both 'necessary and ... full of piety'. In 1578 the Puritan justices of Bury St Edmunds similarly drew up a list of orders against offences from idleness and fornication to usury and witchcraft. In Parliament men such as Wroth and More were active on committees on a whole range of subjects concerning the conduct of the rude masses. The relief and regulation of the poor was conceived as one part of a wider campaign for the reformation of popular manners.

The result could only be a hardening of established prejudices about the disorderly poor. Despite new generosity in the provision of outdoor relief, despite the facts which the censuses revealed about virtuous, inescapable poverty, the effect of much Puritan rhetoric was to associate the poor with social threats of all kinds. Puritan preachers and writers might admit the existence of the respectable pauper, but in their bylaws and orders Puritan magistrates spoke a different language, stressing the infectious vices which indigence bred. A proclamation in Norwich in 1571 pictured a society in which the lower orders slid inexorably:

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- **About the Author:**

Paul Slack is Fellow and Tutor in Modern history at Exeter College, Oxford.

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