

Shrewsbury, dearth, and extreme weather at the end of the sixteenth century*

by R. W. Hoyle

Abstract

This paper contributes to our understanding of dearth in early modern England and adds new weight to the developing recognition that famine is first and foremost the consequence of adverse climatic conditions and only secondly the outcome of market failures or unemployment. Evidence of weather in western England in the dearth years of the 1580s and 1590s is drawn from a chronicle from Shrewsbury, which has until now remained unexploited to this end. These years are shown to have been ones of unusual rainfall. The Chronicle also sheds light on the response of farmers to weather. It outlines the relief effort mounted by the borough authorities in Shrewsbury in these years: its account is supplemented by material from the borough archive. It shows that the town attempted to manage conditions in the difficult circumstances produced by extreme weather. Finally evidence is provided of the use of vegetables as a famine food in Shrewsbury.

‘There are no extant contemporary accounts of the weather in 1585’.¹

There is, one senses, something of a sea change afoot in our understanding of early modern famine.² Following Sen’s highly influential work published in the early 1980s³, there has been a view that famine was caused by inequalities in the allocation of foodstuffs following harvest failures.⁴ Where people lacked the means to purchase food because of either unemployment or

* I am grateful to the *Review*’s referees for the comments, not all of which I have been able to take on board.

¹ Natalie Mears, Alasdair Raffae, Stephen Taylor and Phillip Williamson (eds), *National Prayers: special worship since the Reformation*, I (Church of England Rec. Ser. 20, 2013), p. 156. The form of prayer issued that year referred to ‘immoderate and excessive rain’ and black and heavy clouds’, *ibid.*, p. 159.

² There is now a comprehensive history of European Famine: Guido Alfani and Cormac Ó Gráda (eds), *Famine in European History* (2017), which includes an introduction by the editors and an account of ‘Britain’ by R. W. Hoyle (pp. 141–65).

³ A. Sen, *Poverty and famines: An essay on entitlement and deprivation* (1984) is the basic text.

⁴ This is the approach of Schofield and Walter which remains the fundamental text for students of early

modern English dearth. The conditions which underlay the harvest are barely considered; the word ‘weather’ barely appears in the text and not in the index. Climate is considered in a discussion of the relationship of mortality trends against temperature trends (pp. 52–7) and appears at length in the index, but weather is not a synonym for climate and vice-versa. John Walter and Roger Schofield, ‘Famine, disease and crisis mortality in early modern England’, in John Walter and Roger Schofield (eds), *Famine, disease and the social order in early modern society* (1989) and Walter’s essay in the same volume, ‘The social economy of dearth in early modern England’, at pp. 75–128. Another work of the same period barely considers weather or the causes of harvest failure, merely the consequences of harvest

high prices (the two being interconnected), famine could occur, even if there was food available to be bought. The analysis of famine came to be more about the unequal access to foodstuffs and less about the causes of the underlying shortages of food. Indeed, famine historians, like sixteenth-century local administrators in England, or those charged with the government of Bengal in the last years of the British empire, have been all too prone to hold that in episodes of famine there was no great shortage of food, but that markets were being manipulated for the profit of grain traders and farmers.⁵

If there is a shift in approach, it largely comes from the renewed interest of agricultural historians in famine. Famine in the sense that it concerns us here is caused by harvest failure which in turn is normally (not invariably) a consequence of adverse weather for periods of the year before the harvest or coinciding with the harvest itself. Farmers were not impotent in the face of inclement conditions, but their capacity to save the situation depended in large measure on the season in which the ill-weather occurs and the form that it took, be it hard or extended winters, excessive or unseasonable rain, or drought. But once a harvest had failed, or fallen short of needs, then it was up to civil society to decide how to allocate the available food and whether to take steps to procure more foodstuffs. Justices of the Peace were empowered to manage food supplies following the issue by the Privy Council of the Book of [Dearth] Orders. This not only gave the justices powers with which to act but also established *expectations* of how the justices would manage the situation.⁶

It is this post-harvest stage which has attracted most attention in recent years (the ‘social economy of dearth’) whilst, for want of evidence, weather events taking place before harvest have barely been explored. In the first part of this paper we draw on an unexploited source from Shrewsbury – an urban chronicle – which tells us a great deal about the weather in a succession of late sixteenth-century crisis years and answers the question, posited in our opening quotation, about what was wrong with the weather at this time. In the second part of the paper we continue the exploration of the Chronicle by drawing on it for what it tells us about the response of the borough to the shortfall in foodstuffs. This account is supplemented by other materials from the borough archive. Here we add to the conventional account of the ‘social economy of dearth’.⁷

Note 4 *continued*

failure: Peter Clark (ed.), *The European crisis of the 1590s* (1985), which situates itself in the then popular idea of the Little Ice Age. It includes an index entry for climate but not for weather.

⁵ This is all part of a larger mindset which denies the natural origins of crises such as forest fires, which the popular (and political) mind often blames on arson and human agency rather than seeing them as essentially natural events.

⁶ The *Book of [Dearth] Orders* was first issued in January 1587 and again in 1594, 1595 (continued into 1596), 1600, 1608, 1622 and 1623. There is now a large literature on the Books of Orders, starting with Paul Slack, ‘Books of Orders: The making of English social

policy, 1577–1631’, *Trans. Royal Historical Soc.*, 5th ser. 30 (1980), pp. 1–22, usefully brought together in Buchanan Sharp, *Famine and scarcity in late medieval and early modern England; the regulation of grain marketing, 1256–1631* (2016), ch. 8. For its local implementation and the text of the book issued in 1608, Todd Gray (ed.), *Harvest failure in Cornwall and Devon: The Book of Orders and the Corn Surveys of 1623 and 1630–1* (1992).

⁷ Dearth I take to be high prices producing starvation and social dislocation. Famine I take to be the more extreme situation in which there is a heightening of the death rate. One may follow the other. A famine might develop out of dearth, but I would expect a dearth to be invisible in terms of heightened death rate.

The Chronicle, normally known as Dr Taylor's manuscript, is not an unknown source.⁸ The material most relevant to Shrewsbury was extracted and printed as long ago as 1880 and, whilst a search of the manuscript reveals some additional material, virtually all of the material cited in this paper has been in print since then. The identity of the chronicler is unknown and the surviving copy is plainly a fair copy of a lost original. It ends in 1603 – whether deliberately or by loss of a succeeding volume is not clear – but for the last quarter of the sixteenth century it is a full document, giving a detailed account of events within the town of Shrewsbury but also more reflective comments on the weather and the state of agriculture in the surrounding area. There is an interest in unusual atmospheric conditions as well as extreme weather: the author notes several episodes of the aurora borealis in September 1592, occasional comets and an instance of ball lightning in one of Shrewsbury's churches. Storms and the flooding of the River Severn are both noted. It suggests a broad familiarity and awareness of the agricultural economy, but in years when agriculture was unexceptional, it makes no comment. It is those years when the weather was extreme and there was a real anxiety about the food supply, as reflected in high prices, that the anonymous chronicler describes the state of agriculture. It should be added that a reading of the Chronicle suggests that the author wrote his account of each year as events took place, and gathered them together at the end of the year. The Chronicle is much more structured than the extracts from it suggest (and the extracts give a very poor sense of its contents), but it describes events when they were fresh in the mind, returning to a question like food prices repeatedly over a period of months. Whilst the individual entries are often undated, there are sufficient entries describing events which are given a date to locate the undated entries in the course of the year.

It should come as no surprise that there were difficulties and distress in Shrewsbury in both the late 1580s and mid-1590s. That there were famines in north-west England in the mid-1580s and again in the mid-1590s was established by Andrew Appleby in a book published in 1978.⁹ Appleby found especially high levels of mortality in the winter of 1587–88 and again in an extended period from late 1596 lasting into the spring of 1598. More locally, in an essay of 1974, Palliser brought forwards evidence for famine in several towns close to Shrewsbury, at Tamworth and Newcastle-under-Lyme in the neighbouring county of Staffordshire and Nantwich in Cheshire, some 30 miles to the north.¹⁰ We now turn to exploring what lay behind this.

⁸ The original manuscript is held in the library of Shrewsbury School: I am grateful to Dr Robin Brooke-Smith for making it available to me. The printed extracts are in W. A. Leighton (ed.), 'Early chronicles of Shrewsbury, 1372–1603', *Trans. Shropshire Archaeological Soc.* 3 (1880), pp. 239–52, hereafter cited as SC. All citations are to the printed text except for a few to the unprinted sections which are cited as Dr Taylor's Ms with a folio

number. A modern edition is desperately needed.

⁹ A. B. Appleby, *Famine in Tudor and Stuart England* (1978).

¹⁰ David Palliser, 'Dearth and disease in Staffordshire, 1540–1670', in C. W. Chalklin and M. A. Havinden, *Rural change and urban growth, 1500–1800: Essays in English regional history in honour of W. G. Hoskins* (1974), pp. 54–75.

I

The problems noted by the chronicler began in the summer of 1585. The weather in the summer and at harvest time was ‘unseasonable’. Husbandmen found it hard to get their corn harvested. Much of it was flattened and sprouted in the ear: that which was harvested continued to sprout. The price of rye rose on the harvest and, and the chronicler said, ‘looked to become dearer’. He noted an extreme storm on 13 November, but by February 1586 he could report that ‘this year and almost all the month of February the weather was so extreme and frosty that husbandmen could not in no good time plough their ground for rye’. March, on the other hand, was very wet and the price of grain rose sharply, and would have risen more had the magistrates not stopped its transport. It was doubtless the same persisting wet which brought a substantial mortality amongst sheep ‘in most places in England’.¹¹

In June and July ‘corn grew to be very dear in most parts of England and especially in the west and north countries’. The Book of Dearth Orders was implemented on the Queen’s instruction and corn factors were instructed to bring their stocks to market.¹² In Shrewsbury itself, prices reached 8s. for rye, wheat 9s. a bushel, and barley 4s. 6d., but a supply of rye was procured and sold at 5s. a bushel. The price trajectory over the year in Shrewsbury is shown in Table 1. We find a six-fold increase in the price of rye between the late summer of 1585 and the midsummer of 1586, and although the price fell from 8s. to 5s. when the foreign rye arrived, it was still four times the rate prevailing before the 1585 harvest.¹³

The Chronicle makes no comment on the harvest of 1586 although it does note storms around Michaelmas and the river Severn being very high, and a further storm on 8 December. Nor does it refer to agricultural conditions in 1587. But it does tell us that 1587 was an even more expensive year than 1586 with wheat at 11s. and rye at 9s. on the eve of the harvest. The harvest itself was ‘quick and timely and most completed by St Bartholomew’s day’ (24 August), after which the price of wheat fell to 3s. 8d. and rye to 3s. (still twice the rate of the late summer of 1585). What the chronicler thought noteworthy of 1587 was the advent of a disease called the Burning Ague in July. This caused a high mortality in Shrewsbury and prompted the great assize to be deferred until later in the year, ‘until the coldness of the year’. There was plainly some understanding that the illness would abate with the onset of winter.¹⁴ The Severn was again very high in the second half of December ‘by reason of the great rain in Wales’.

The chronicler then offers no comments on the weather in 1588 or the 1588 harvest. In 1589 though he commented that the weather had again been ‘unseasonable’ from May Day to the middle of November. Much hay had been lost: in the low grounds it had gone rotten and been carried away by flood water. Much corn was taken in ‘not seasoned’ (unripe). All grains rose in price, wheat to above 5s. and rye to 3s. at the least.¹⁵ Looking back over the year, the chronicler recalled that those who had sown rye at first had sown barley again in the same

¹¹ SC, pp. 304–5.

¹² Shropshire Archives (hereafter SA), Shrewsbury Borough Records, 3365/2624 (unlisted bundle) includes censuses of grain brought to Shrewsbury market in April–July 1586 and the identity of the vendors.

¹³ SC, p. 307. For the relief effort in this year, see pp. 29–30 below.

¹⁴ SC, p. 311.

¹⁵ SC, p. 314

TABLE 1. Grain prices in Shrewsbury, 1585–87

	<i>Rye</i>	<i>Wheat</i>	<i>Barley</i>
1585, before harvest	1s. 3d.–1s. 4d.		
1585, after harvest	2s. 4d.		
1586, March	4s. 8d.		
1586, June–July	6s. 0d.	8s. 8d.	
1586, July	8s. 0d.	9s. 0d.	4s. 6d.
1586, July after supply of foreign grain arrived	5s. 0d.		
1587, before harvest	11s. 0d.	9s. 0d.	
1587, after harvest	3s. 0d.	3s. 0d.	

Source: W. A. Leighton (ed.), 'Early chronicles of Shrewsbury, 1372–1603', *Trans. Shropshire Archaeological Soc.* 3 (1880), pp. 239–52 *passim*.

place, anticipating that the rye had failed. As a result there was a good supply of barley at 2s. to 2s. 6d. the bushel, which people used to make bread, either with rye or as single-grain barley bread. This kept the price of rye to around 4s. the bushel when, without the barley, the chronicler thought that it would have risen to 7s. or 8s. the bushel.¹⁶

There was already a shortage of fodder at the end of 1590 from the dryness of the year, which caused many cattle to perish for lack of foodstuffs. The weather turned to rain and snow after Christmas: there was flooding when the snow thawed at the end of March. People could not fallow their barley ground and the frost killed garden plants. It forced the sowing of barley to be delayed until April but, so far as we can tell, without adverse consequences for the harvest of 1591.¹⁷ We then have a period in which the chronicler makes no comment on weather or agricultural conditions.

The summer of 1592 was marked by extreme hot and dry weather, so much so that men travelling towards London and drovers driving cattle had to buy water for their sustenance and that of their cattle. There was no grass to be had, and cattle perished for want of fodder.¹⁸

In late 1593 the Chronicle takes up the weather again, and the state of the agrarian economy. (For prices in these years taken from the Chronicle, see Table 2.) The river Severn flooded in December 1593. It broke its banks on 15 December and flooded the riverside suburb of Frankwell. This was accompanied by storms: 'terrible tempests of wind and rain for the space of a month ... the like weather hath not been seen'.¹⁹ The chronicler does not make any comment, at this stage, on the agrarian economy. Throughout the summer and part of the harvest of 1594, he tells us, there was 'great wet'. The River Severn remained unusually high

¹⁶ SC, p. 315.

¹⁷ SC, pp. 319–20. The data for deaths in Figure 1 shows a distinct peak in 1591 for which there is no obvious explanation: the peak months for burials in the two

parishes do not coincide.

¹⁸ Dr Taylor's Ms, fo. 191v.

¹⁹ SC, p. 328.

TABLE 2. Shrewsbury grain prices, 1594–98

	<i>Rye</i>	<i>Wheat</i>	<i>Barley</i>
1594, summer	1s. 6d.–1s. 8d.	2s. 8d.	
1594, before harvest	3s. 2d.	5s. 4d.	
1594–5, winter	4s. 4d.–4s. 8d.	5s.–5s. 4d.	
1595, March	5s. 8d.	7s. 0d.	
1595, after harvest	6s. 0d.	7s. 6d.	
1596	12s. +	14s.–15s.	
1597, mid-May	15s.	18s.	
1597, mid-December	9s.–9s. 2d.		
1598, September	3s. 4d.	4s.–4s. 4d.	

Source: As for Table 1, except for Dec. 1597, SA, 3365/2630, folder for 1598, no. 3, petition of Thomas ap Edward, miller, accused of offering to buy rye at 9s. 2d. a bushel when the market price was 9s. 0d.

throughout the summer. There were a few fair days, but mixed weather began again, so that where rye was 18d. or 20d. the bushel and wheat 2s. 8d., it had, by the time the chronicler made his note, reached 3s. 2d. for rye and 5s. 4d. for wheat. The chronicler was full of foreboding: ‘if God did not send seasonable weather in time, it will be like to fall dearer, but God be praised it came to pass that the end fell out a very fair season to all people’s comfort’. He was not alone in his nervousness. There was a general fast in the town on 11 August 1594 when:

most of the inhabitants in Salop [Shrewsbury] repaired to St Mary’s church there to pray and call upon God to send seasonable weather to bring in their corn for the comfort of his people who lamenting their sins and calling to God with such godly sermons made there of the preachers to the comfort of all hearers.²⁰

1595 was a difficult year. The chronicler blames high prices in the winter of 1594–95 in part on ‘swiftness of rye and the unseasonableness of barley’ and the transport of both grains ‘stolen out of the land’. Corn was very dear in Shrewsbury early in 1595, rye at 4s. 4d. or 4s. 8d., wheat at 5s. or 5s. 4d. the bushel.²¹ By March the price had risen further with rye at 5s. 8d. and wheat at 7s.²² The harvest of 1595 brought no respite: an entry in the Chronicle made late in the mayoral year (so before early October) recorded that prices remained high.

²⁰ SC, p. 331. This may have been part of a national movement rather than a local initiative. Fasting was a common reaction to impending harvest failure in the hope that it might earn divine intervention. See, in general, Steve Hindle, ‘Death, fasting and alms: the campaign for general hospitality in late Elizabethan England’, *Past and Present* 172 (2001), pp. 44–86. There appears to be no evidence for national fasting days in 1594; see here in an entirely negative sense, Mears, Raffe, Taylor and Williamson (eds), *National Prayers*. Forms of prayers and instructions for fasting were

issued in Dec. 1596, *ibid.*, pp. 219–21.

²¹ In some unpublished text, the chronicler continued to say that corn was dear all over England, especially in London where it sold for 8s. for Rye and 9s. or 10s. for wheat. Help arrived with supplies by Denmark which brought the price down to 3s. 4d. the bushel, otherwise the people would have perished. Dr Taylor’s Ms, fo. 203r.

²² SC, p. 332. The Chronicle also contains an account of how Stourbridge fair was washed out that autumn. Dr Taylor’s Ms, fo. 202v.

Even at the end of the year wheat was 7s. 6d. and rye 6s. 'God for His mercy sake amend it and help the poor'.²³ Unfortunately He kept His distance. In January 1596 the river Severn flooded badly, but the chronicler noted that from November 1595 to January 1596, the wind had 'remained very ruggid in the west and north west for the space of nine or ten weeks, very unquiet and mutable weather without any great frost or snow to speak of contrary to usual time'.²⁴ This sounds like episodes of rain but mild temperatures. The chronicler says nothing further about conditions in 1596 until late in the calendar year. From Michaelmas (the end of September) to late in the year (the account is not specific as to when these conditions lifted) there was a persisting 'tempest of thunder, wind and rain'. This would have made it hard, if not impossible, to plough and sow winter grains.²⁵

Then, looking back over 1597, the chronicler tells us that the bailiffs and aldermen of the town had procured Baltic corn at London imported:

to ease all England and especially London of the excessive prices which corn bare all England over and especially in Shrewsbury so that there was provided above 3200 bushell[s] at least for Shrewsbury and came by way of Bristol and was sold to the commons there after the at a rate of 8s. the bushel of rye which was in the market at 12s. and better, and wheat at 14s. and 15s.²⁶

Forty bushels of the rye was reserved to be baked for the poor by the town's bakers in penny, twopenny, threepenny and fourpenny loaves. We will consider these relief efforts further later in this paper, but note for the moment that rye at 12s. was a full 50 per cent ahead of the maximum price recorded in 1586 (of 8s.) and wheat, at 14s. or 15s. was 50 per cent over the rate of 1586 (9s. 0d.). The chronicler's note ended with a prayer, that:

God most mighty send plenty that his chosen flock perish not and die for want as many in all countries in England die and go in great numbers miserably a begging and leave their houses and be not able to live.²⁷

There was an influx of people into Shrewsbury looking for relief. On 20 January 1597 the decision was taken to expel 'inmates and idle persons pestering the town' back to their own countries:

for that they [had] repaired in great numbers out of sundry countries to live idly and loitering, overcharging and hindering the cheapness of corn, being so exceedingly dear, by which means the poor inhabitants had less relief to their utter undoing. God amend it when his will is. Amen.²⁸

It was in these desperate circumstances that the chronicler reported that on 13 April, about four in the afternoon, it rained wheat in Ludlow for a time. Perhaps God was laughing at them;

²³ SC, p. 333.

²⁴ SC, p. 334.

²⁵ SC, p. 335.

²⁶ We have some prices from Market Drayton, a market town to the north of Shrewsbury, from 1596: the peak price there was 19s. 6d. for wheat and 16s. for

rye. These prices though may well relate to 1597 when they would be in line with Shrewsbury prices. Palliser, 'Dearth and disease', p. 61.

²⁷ SC, pp. 335–6.

²⁸ SC, p. 336.

certainly the chronicler ended his note of this extraordinary event with a cry that God should 'take pity upon us and give us all grace to repent and amend'.²⁹

It was to get worse. The Chronicle suggests that prices peaked about the middle of May 1597 with wheat at about 18s. a bushel, rye at 15s. 'and all other victuals after the like rate'.³⁰ The Chronicle then goes silent. There is no comment about the harvest of 1597 nor conditions in 1598, but 1598 was certainly a high price year (we have a reference to rye selling at 9s. or 9s. 2d. in December 1597) and, as we shall show, there were attempts to buy in foodstuffs in 1598. When the Chronicle returns, it is to tell us (by implication) that the crisis had passed; at the end of September 1598 prices had returned to something close to 'normal': rye was sold at 3s. 4d. the bushel, and wheat at 4s. or 4s. 4d.³¹

II

Shrewsbury was one of the larger English provincial towns with a population at the end of the sixteenth century of about 6000.³² The town was an entrepôt, dealing in the trade between England and Wales, particularly in textiles. Although apparently inland, it could be accessed from the Bristol Channel up the Severn using barges based at Bewdley which would unload at the town's own quays. River access to the sea must have given it a considerable advantage in the crisis years over land-locked towns. Shrewsbury had corporate status: unusually for an English town, its authority also extended over a rural hundred (the Liberty of Shrewsbury). The town's government took the form of two bailiffs elected annually, a council of 12 aldermen and a large council of 24 assistants. Decisions taken within the inner circle had to be put to the commons for their approval but this seems to have been largely a formality. The bailiffs also acted as JPs in the town. The town's governors therefore had the administrative capacity to address crises and to enforce their will on the town at moments of disorder. It may reasonably be argued that the reaction of the corporation in Shrewsbury to crisis was typical of English towns as a whole in the late sixteenth century but better documented than most.³³

The Chronicle shows that the town was certainly not without resource when it came to the dearth. The borough authorities were quick to take action before the harvest of 1586. In the spring and early summer of 1586 they were monitoring the quantity of corn being brought into the town's markets in accordance with the Book of Orders. It seems likely that the end of the previous harvest's grain brought some disturbances even if these are obscure. There was a 'tumult' at the High Cross on 29 July which saw a baker imprisoned for unspecified offences. Another baker was 'in ward' at the same time for weighing bread without authority. Four other bakers made their submission for breaking the assize of bread, perhaps at the same time. We can suggest that for whatever reason, high prices brought disputes with the town's bakers.³⁴

²⁹ SC, pp. 336–7.

³⁰ SC, p. 337.

³¹ SC, p. 339.

³² For Shrewsbury see the recent VCH Shropshire, VI (i), *Shrewsbury, general history and topography* (2014).

³³ There is enough evidence on towns entering the

grain market in the 1590s in Walter, 'Social economy of dearth', pp. 118–20 and P. Clark, 'A crisis contained', in Clark (ed.), *Crisis of the 1590s*, p. 59 to make one believe that this was general.

³⁴ SA, 3365/2624, probably a year file for 1586.

This was too big a crisis to be resolved by the implementation of the Book of Dearth Orders and the maintenance of discipline amongst the bakers.³⁵ In October the town commissioned Richard Mechen and Richard Anderson to travel 'to such places as ye shall think most meet where ye shall find store of provision to be had for ready money'. They were instructed to procure a whole shipload of 'good and sweet rye' to the quantity of 80 or 100 tons for the best price they could obtain, which it was hoped would be under 20s. a quarter. They were then to get a letter from the Lord Chancellor licensing the transport of the grain. It would seem that Mechen and Anderson went to Ipswich carrying with them £400. They managed to procure 40 last of rye, each last containing two tons, so making 80 tons, from a man called Edward Hunting. All of this was in Ipswich measure: in Ipswich bushels the price was 3s. 6d. a bushel, a last containing 80 bushels. The total cost was therefore £560, carriage to Bristol included. Hunting was to load the grain at Ipswich on or before the end of November: he was to deliver the grain at Bristol in the King's Road (the part of the Severn normally used for loading and unloading ships) on or before 10 December. If he could add another 20 lasts to the load to make it up to 60 lasts, then he was to do so, which would have made the total cost £840. The grain was to be paid for within a month of it being received at the King's Road. It was then up to the town to arrange the transport of the grain up the Severn to Shrewsbury.

It is not altogether clear how the town raised the money to pay for this grain. From the surviving memoranda and accounts, it seems that some of it was raised from the guilds and private individuals, but the lists of contributions are incomplete and do not, in total, amount like the sum needed for this venture. What they did with the grain is explained by the chronicler. It was sold to the poor at a rate of 5s. a bushel.³⁶ This was still four times more than they might expect to pay in a good year and so one cannot expect that it was a complete solution to a very difficult problem. It does raise the possibility, though, that the town, by being its own corn factor, could cover its costs and perhaps even make a profit on a relief effort such as this.

Shrewsbury again entered the market in 1597 and 1598. In the first of the two years, the chronicler tells us that they procured 3200 bushels of grain from Danzig (Gdansk) and Denmark through London, and had this shipped to Bristol. The grain, which from what he says may have been mixed rye and wheat, was sold to the commons at 8s. the bushel for rye when the market was at 12s. Forty bushels a week were also reserved to be baked by the town's bakers in small loaves priced at 2d., 3d. or 4d. to be sold to the poor who were evidently unable to afford anything more than this: they were 'so unruly and greedy to have it that the bailiffs, six men and other officers had much a do to serve them': in effect that there were disorderly crowd scenes when the bread was sold, so great was the demand for it.³⁷ One William Medlycott was

³⁵ The following is based on SA, 3365/728 (an unlisted and unnumbered package of papers). The borough minute books for this period are missing although it is possible to reconstruct them to a limited extent from extracts made whilst they remained in the custody of the borough, a task that I am undertaking. There is a large late sixteenth-century archive but it is fragmentary,

broken and scattered between unlisted bundles. There are no extant engrossed accounts for these years. It will almost certainly be possible to enlarge on this account when the borough archive is fully catalogued.

³⁶ SC, p. 307.

³⁷ SC, pp. 336–7.

sent to meet this consignment at Tewkesbury where he had the opportunity of buying a further 200 quarters of Rye for the town at 5s. 8d. a quarter.³⁸ He sought the sanction of the bailiffs to buy this and their permission appears to have been given. If the 60 last procured in 1586 amounted to 4800 bushels of grain, then this relief effort seems somewhat smaller than that of 1586. It does imply though an outlay of at least £800.

This may not be all. There are signs that the bailiffs and town tried to secure more grain in the winter of 1597–98. We have a small body of correspondence from early 1598.³⁹ It would appear that an attempt to buy corn in Norfolk and have it transported to Shrewsbury came to nothing because it proved impossible to secure the appropriate licences from the Privy Council.⁴⁰ A letter to the corn factor engaged to procure this corn, a Mr Acton, dated 10 March 1598, drew attention to his failure to supply the corn on the due date of 26 February (whilst admitting that it was not his fault) and sought recompense from him as the town had been at some expense sourcing corn from elsewhere. At some time during the winter the town, doubting whether Acton could deliver, issued a commission for the acquisition of 2500 bushels of foreign corn to be delivered as quickly as possible at Bristol. Whether this was fulfilled is unknown. It seems likely that it did arrive. Confronted with the failure of Acton to deliver, at the beginning of March, they wrote to a Mr Browne in London for news of the state of the London grain market and drafted instructions for the purchase of more corn. What they wanted was 200 quarters, a much smaller quantity, to be delivered on May Day either at Bristol or Shrewsbury. They had been offered corn at Bristol for 40s. a bushel by the Bristol measure but wanted to undercut this price. Browne found a merchant who was willing to send a ship to Bristol, but pointed out that 200 quarters was much less than a fully laden ship. The merchant was unwilling to promise to deliver on May Day but offered to deliver during May. Browne also mentioned that the London price had increased from the 30s. he had quoted in an earlier letter to 34s. or 35s. a quarter after 4,000 quarters had been sent to Ireland. The price when carriage was included would be 40s. at Bristol. As the town had said that it could procure rye at that price at Bristol, Browne proposed not to proceed until he heard further from Shrewsbury. Here the extant correspondence ends, but what we have makes clear that the borough was anticipating shortages in the summer of 1598.

Other towns are known to have entered the market for grain in these years including Chester to the north of Shrewsbury and, lower down the river Severn, Worcester and Gloucester.⁴¹ At Tamworth, in a land-locked position 50 miles to the east, a note in the parish register tells us that the famine was broken by the arrival of Polish grain.⁴² At Shrewsbury the lost minute books of the borough would doubtless contain much more detail on how the money was raised

³⁸ H. Owen and J. B. Blakeway, *History of Shrewsbury* (2 vols, 1825), I, p. 400, n.1 (citing lost corporation minute books).

³⁹ For what follows, unlisted papers in SA, 3365/2706.

⁴⁰ SA, 3365/2706 also contains a petition to the earl of Pembroke as Lord President of the Council of Wales asking for his help in securing a licence from the privy council for the transport of 600 quarters of wheat and other grains supplied by one Thomas Oxwick of

Walsingham from Norfolk to Bristol. In common with most of the other documents in the file, it is undated but comes from the winter of 1597–98.

⁴¹ P. Clark, 'A crisis contained. The condition of the English towns in the 1590s', in Clark (ed.), *European crisis of the 1590s*, pp. 44–66. For Worcester, A. D. Dyer, *The city of Worcester in the sixteenth century* (1973), pp. 167–8.

⁴² Palliser, 'Dearth and disease', p. 62.

and expended. The extracts from the books allude to the management of the crisis only when it impinged on matters of interest to an eighteenth-century copyist. The town had certainly had amassed a fund of £400 by about 1593 or 1594 which was to be spent in buying an endowment for the town's public preacher. A corporation order (which is undated in the extant extracts) instructs that this money was to be deployed to buy corn and the preacher's stipend raised instead by a levy amongst the occupations (guilds) and private individuals. A later order instructs the bailiffs of the borough to disburse £820 for the purchase of 900 quarters of corn for the relief of the inhabitants. As the bailiffs could not access enough money from the town's resources, they were authorised to borrow the balance. Again the extract is undated, but by convention the order had to be put to an assembly of the commons for its approval and this met on 5 January 1598.⁴³ A quite different eighteenth-century source which also drew on the lost minute books commented that 'the money was soon received again by the corn being sold at prime cost'.⁴⁴ The signs are that the town raised the money by borrowing from itself, from its richer inhabitants, and from its guilds, but recovered most, if not all, of the money it laid out from its inhabitants.

III

We also have some additional (and exceptional) evidence from Shrewsbury which shows that in one (and perhaps more) of the famine years of the 1590s the grain supply ran out in the weeks before the harvest. One Richard Gardiner of Shrewsbury published a manual for vegetable growing in 1603 explaining how to manure and plant a kitchen garden and gather seeds.⁴⁵ As his title page said, this was to be 'very profitable for the common wealth and greatly for the help and comfort of poor people'.

In a reflective passage towards the end of the pamphlet, Gardiner called on Christ to accept his enterprise:

in respect I desire the benefit of this commonwealth herein and is a special mean to help and relieve the poor as by experience was manifest in the great dearth and scarcity last past in the county of Salop and elsewhere, for, with less garden ground than four acres planted with carrots, and above 700 close cabbages, there were many hundreds of people well refreshed thereby for the space of 20 days when bread was wanting amongst the poor in the pinch or few days before harvest. And many of the poor said to me they had nothing to eat but only carrots and cabbages, which they had of me for many days and but only water to drink. They had commonly six wax pounds of small close cabbages for a penny to the poor. And in this manner did I serve them and they were wonderfully glad to have them, most humbly praising God for them.⁴⁶

⁴³ SA, 6001/290, pp. 15, 17, 34.

⁴⁴ SA, P257/X/2/1, 'Mr Hotchkiss's case of St Mary's church', fo.111r.

⁴⁵ Richard Gardiner, *Profitable instructions for the manuring, sowing and planting of kitchen gardens* (1603), printed in *Trans. Shropshire Archaeological Soc.*,

sec. ser. 4 (1892), pp. 241–63. Page numbers are to this reprinted version.

⁴⁶ p. 260. See also the encomium of Gardiner on p. 246. It would be interesting to know whether Gardiner is referring to the days before the harvest as 'The Pinch'. *The Oxford English Dictionary* recognizes

Gardiner recommended eating carrots boiled and buttered ('a good dish for hungry or good stomachs'): 'carrots in necessity and dearth are eaten of the poor people after they be well boiled instead of bread and meat'.⁴⁷ It is possible then that Gardiner's vegetables bridged the gap between the grain from the last harvest running out and that from the new harvest becoming available.

IV

Given that what was done was quite different in character to modern famine relief, was the relief effort of any consequence? We have parish registers for three of the four Shrewsbury parishes covering the last quarter of the sixteenth century (Figure 1).⁴⁸ Both show a clear crisis in 1587 and a smaller episode in 1591. In 1596, oddly, the parishes show a fall in mortality: in 1597 and 1598 there is a clear crisis.⁴⁹ The difficulty is that this might be read as showing that the relief effort was insufficient, or it might be read as alleviating a much greater crisis which would have occurred if there had been no attempt to maintain the food supply. But, as may be seen from the figure, none of the three crisis years really compares with the epidemic crisis year of 1604 when the mortality in St Mary's was around 3½ times the average of the 20 years 1586–1605. (The register for St Julian's refers to plague deaths, but if the register is complete, then the parish seems to have largely escaped.) Given that the Chronicle suggests episodes of wet and cold weather in 1586–87 and 1594–98, it would not be too surprising if there had been a heightened mortality, especially amongst the old, from pulmonary diseases brought on by exposure to inclement weather even if the food supply was maintained to a satisfactory degree. It hard to see any obvious difference between the experience of Shrewsbury and that of the Staffordshire towns examined by Palliser.⁵⁰

Shrewsbury, and one might suppose other towns too, engaged in a project to secure corn for the provision for its inhabitants. As we have noted earlier, this was not famine relief as would be understood today: the grain may well have been sold at near to market rates, but it was not sold so cheaply as to make a loss on the initial outlay. We have to see this as a process of borrowing, whether from the town's own reserves or from its guilds or citizens, but the fact remains that the town could access money on a large scale which allowed it to enter the corn market on its own behalf. The exact motivation must remain unclear. It may have been genuinely altruistic: it may have been to meet the expectations placed on them by the townsfolk; it may have been to avoid social unrest and disturbance. It was also to serve the needs of the town alone: we have noticed the expulsion of the poor who had come into the town looking for charity or work in 1598. Charity, if such it was, started at home and stayed

Note 46 *continued*

that 'pinch' has a meaning in the sense of 'stress or suffering caused by cold, hunger, poverty, etc.; hardship', as in the phrase 'to feel the pinch' and gives a late sixteenth-century example, but does not recognise 'The Pinch' as a time of the year when people felt the pinch of hunger.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 261.

⁴⁸ The register of the fourth parish, St Alkmunds has a succession of gaps of three or more consecutive months in its burial register including five months in 1588 and so is not drawn on here.

⁴⁹ Other writers have attributed the crisis mortality in 1587 to typhus. VCH Shropshire VI (i), p. 137.

⁵⁰ Palliser, 'Dearth and disease', *passim*.

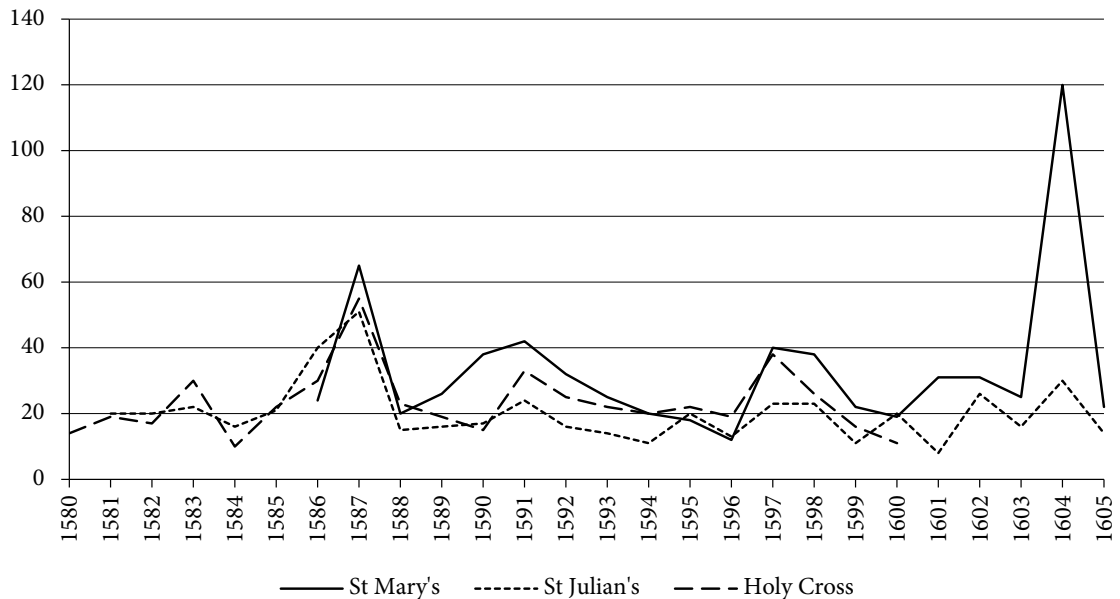


FIGURE 1. Annual numbers of burials in three Shrewsbury parishes, 1580–1605 (calendar years)

Source: Figures are the author's own count from the parish register transcripts in the search room of Shropshire Archives.

Note: There is no complete data for St Mary's before 1586. There are months without recorded burials in 1595 and 1596. Holy Cross: the burial register runs continuously from 1580 to May 1601 but with evident deficiencies in August and September 1584. St Julians: the register runs continuously from 1581 to 1605. Registration at St Alkmunds appears to be too incomplete (with runs of months without any burial registered) to be used.

at home. And so we can note a further paradox. Larger towns, normally dependent on the supply of grain from surrounding villages, had the resources – financial as well as logistical – to procure grain over long distances in famine years. Rural parishes, who normally supplied towns with their grain, must in most cases have lacked the institutional and financial means to enter distant corn markets. Towns may therefore have had an easier time in famines than the countryside and it is in the latter where we perhaps ought to look for episodes of famine mortality. In the case of Shrewsbury, we have noted that mortality in the crisis years is far from spectacular. If we look at Wem, a small market town with a large rural parish just 12 miles north of Shrewsbury and without a resident lord (Figure 2), we find that Wem suffered gravely in 1595 and 1596, but in 1604 there is little trace of the plague mortality so marked in Shrewsbury. This is suggestive and could be pursued further if only parish register survival allowed it, but there is a hint here that famine relief in Shrewsbury allowed mortality levels to remain low where in Wem they soared. Conversely in 1604 we can speculate that quarantine protected Wem when plague ran riot in Shrewsbury. On the other hand, villages and rural communities might have had a great greater resilience if farmers were willing to sell to their neighbours at the farm gate, especially at less than the prevailing price, or if cottagers had access to gardens. These matters lack clear-cut answers.

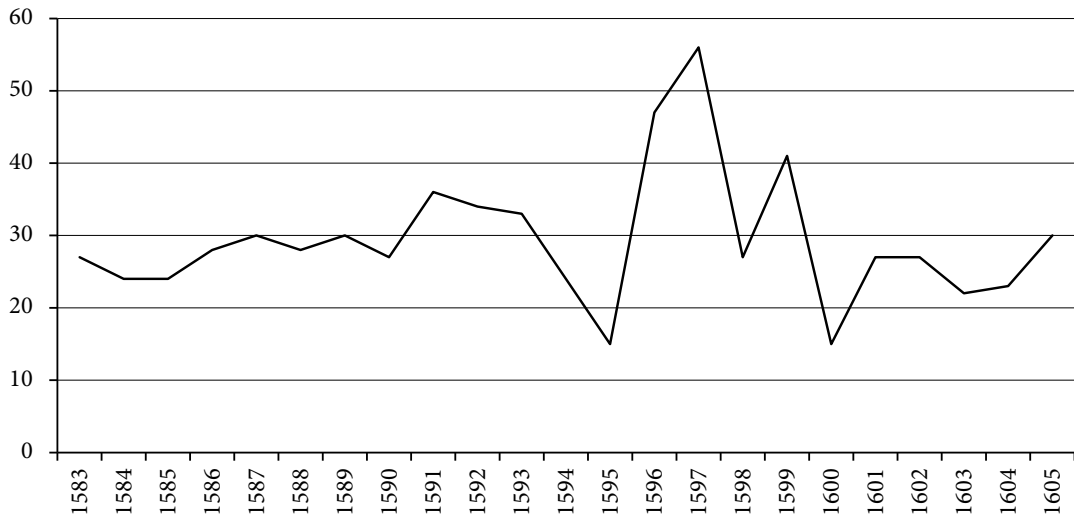


FIGURE 2. Annual burials at Wem (Shropshire), 1583–1605

Source: Figures are the author's own count from the parish register transcripts in the search room of Shropshire Archives.

V

The Shrewsbury Chronicle makes the context for the crisis of the 1586–87 and 1594–98 clearer. Both were periods of extreme wet in western England. The weather was unsettled for protracted periods. Agriculture was disrupted at both the sowing and harvest stages. Prices increased over the years of crisis and became astronomically high. In two of the three major crisis years and perhaps all three, the town of Shrewsbury procured corn which it sold at less than the market price but probably at a rate sufficient to cover its costs. (It is therefore significant that people still had money with which to buy food.) Other steps to manage the crisis were taken including the expulsion of migrants seeking work or charity and at least some management of the town's bakers. It is impossible to say with confidence that the town authorities were successful in preventing famine deaths. By their refusal in 1598 to assist those for whom they felt they had no responsibility, they probably caused deaths. Shrewsbury's reputation as a well-ordered town was doubtless preserved, the town authorities acting with proper responsibility and conscience. They even extended their 'pity' to a man convicted of stealing a bag of corn: he was taken out to be executed but reprieved 'considering the extreme dearth and scarcity of the year'.⁵¹ As this shows, the urban elite were not without understanding of, and even empathy for, the plight of the poor, and tried to manage circumstances well beyond their control.

Even though Shrewsbury seems to have had some success in securing additional supplies, and these may have reduced the price of grain from what would otherwise have been the prevailing price, the price of grain remained far above that which people would pay in a 'normal' year.

⁵¹ SC, p. 337.

That there was grain available to buy does not solve the mystery of how people with limited means survived the crisis. Gardiner's vegetables may have been a part of the answer, but even these had to be bought. Quite exceptionally, on one occasion, we hear something of the voice of the poor, which gives us hints of their survival strategy. Joyce, the wife of Meredith Meighan, corvisor, petitioned the bailiffs for relief after the crisis.⁵² She had lived through these 'extreme dear years' and survived, but to support herself and her four children she had sold all her possessions ('all she ever had'), and had been 'glad to eat horse bread a long time to relieve them for pining for want of meat'. Joyce never mentioned what had happened to her husband: evidently not dead, but whether he had deserted her or been impressed is not explained. Lacking his support, she intended to go to London where she hoped that her friends would help her. She asked the bailiffs for financial help and a passport. They, recognizing a bargain when they saw one, offered her 10s. for her travel expenses if one of her husband's brothers would stand surety that she would never come back to be a burden on the town.

Late sixteenth-century society was neither passive nor defeated in the face of adverse weather conditions. We have noticed the practice of re-sowing with barley if there was a likelihood that rye had failed, and the trading down in bread grains. We have seen endeavours to secure new supplies of grain, some of which came from the Baltic, and to mobilise the financial strength of the borough and its inhabitants to do this. We have seen the self-help of Richard Gardiner and the cultivation of carrots and cabbages as famine foods. We have also seen the desperate state to which Joyce Meighan was evidently reduced: the poor sold household goods to buy bread, and the bread they bought was of the lowest quality. Times were plainly hard, but people approached the problems with some resource. Survival in such hard conditions might depend on income, access to work and relief as well as the supply of grain organized by borough corporations such as Shrewsbury. The root of their problem was not markets, speculation or hoarding, all of which they could try to manage and overcome, but the weather, which they could not.

⁵² SA, 3365/2625 (unlisted and unnumbered bundle).