

Effectiveness of policies on effects of death in england



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

How effective were government policies in mitigating the effects of dearth in England during the period 1500 – 1850?

INTRODUCTION

Look up ‘dearth’ in a modern dictionary and you will see it defined as ‘scarcity’, but in 16th and 17th century England ‘dearth’ could for many mean death. Although the spelling is near enough, a ‘dearth’ or scarcity (mainly applied to grain, which made up the staple diet of beer and bread) originated from the now quaint word ‘dear’ meaning expensive. And when food was too expensive the bulk of the population would starve; despite the philanthropy of the wealthy and the inadequate poor laws, which changed little for centuries after its first incarnation under Queen Elizabeth I. This was seen, particularly before the enlightenment, but surviving into in the 18th century, as the fault of the poor themselves who perhaps inadvertently had overloaded their sin quota and brought forth the ‘wrath of God’ who then visited upon the unfortunate sinners bad harvests and the consequential famines that followed.

“ For the removal of those heavenly judgements which our manifold sins and provocations have most justly deserved, and with which Almighty God is pleased to visit the iniquities of the land by a grievous scarcity and dearth of diverse articles of sustenance and necessaries of life” ^[1]

Although this might sound like a Cromwellian outburst it was actually written in the mid-18th century, providing proof positive for the masses that any misfortune which might arise (death, famine, etc.) was not by any fault of

the ruling elite, but by powers beyond even kings, despite their 'divine rights'.

But just in case the religious concept was not enough to quell any disturbances arising out of a starving population, laws had to be passed which, for example, forbade meetings of more than three men, and of not more than a dozen to be *assembled* at anytime or anywhere.

As with everything, words have a history. They are moulded by historical events and people. But they do not usually expire completely, instead they change.

'Dearth' was a far more ominous and morbid word to the people of the 16th, 17th, and 18th century than it is to the modern ear.

During the 17th century, starting in the late 16th, Governments were resistant to intervene in periods of dearth, though a form of protectionism was practised, to offset extremes of supply and demand, abundance and dearth, which was altered and revised when needs be. With a minimum and maximum price allowable for the exporting and importing of grain. A totally free market did not arrive until 1570. But as the price restrictions were instituted at a local and not governmental level the laws were not difficult to circumvent. Smuggling, for example, was practised, and easy to get away with, and it is true that smuggling was probably widely engaged upon. Add to this such things as bribery and corrupt local officials and it is easy to imagine a thriving black market sector within the price constraints.

This state of affairs begs the question of why did centralised government distance itself from intervention in the corn trade, and leave it to localised administration to implement any government protectionist policies? Opinions vary amongst historians but just two possibilities posited cite the City of London's preoccupation with largely its own affairs, with its own idiosyncratic system, and the fact that abundance and dearth were largely regional and varied at different times and in different parts of the country. When central government *did* intervene, due to a particularly bad dearth, it is questionable whether intervention was instigated with an altruistic motive through amelioration of some of the more dreadful sufferings of the populace, or with a view to quell any disorder that might arise. Another interesting government policy that was sometimes practiced was the demonisation of alcohol, hoping that the populace would more easily subsist on more bread and less beer. When deaths from epidemic diseases, which were ubiquitous in this era, are taken into consideration, mortality rates still show a definite rise in years of serious dearth.

Modern era economic problems are usually controlled by such methods as manipulation of the cash flow and trade agreements between different nations or economic blocs. But there was a tradition, which tailed off during the course of the 18th century, of sustaining a viable price/market equilibrium by means of monitoring disturbance and discontent amongst the populace. This method, a fairly simple equation, disturbance = government intervention, form low-level intervention to more extreme protectionist legislation. Even in pre-industrial agrarian societies autarky was a constant goal for government but seldom reached simply because what commodity

might be abundant in one country might be scarce in another. Also it must be borne in mind that often disturbances, some violent, were the only means at a disenfranchised populace' disposal to express grievances. Often, particularly in depressed periods, disturbance and rioting were so endemic as to present these events or "*rebellions of the belly*"^[2] as hardly worth commenting upon; by contemporary commentators and modern historians alike. A comment by Professor Barnes is fairly typical,

" In general these disturbances were more or less alike, and hence nothing is gained by giving a detailed account of each one"^[3]

Dearth was, in these times, not only a fairly frequent occurrence but was part of the popular consciousness. It was ever present in the minds of government and governed alike. In the case of government, future dearths could cause a considerable threat to public order and social stability, thus causing some deal of worry.

In these times of no effective policing agency, social stability was maintained by the prevailing ruling elite's ideology, which involved a complex inter-relationship between government and governed, crown and nobility, landowners and workers; and the monitoring by government of dearth can, with historical evidence, be seen as a major factor in the maintenance of social stability in the post-feudal/nascent industrial-capitalist society. An additional problem for government was the fact that dearth was difficult to foresee and could arise within a short period of time. In a society going through fundamental structural changes, the rise of a merchant class, for example, dearth was a perennial problem, and a major one. The ruling elites

<https://assignbuster.com/effectiveness-of-policies-on-effects-of-death-in-england/>

had a real fear of unrest amongst the labouring poor, who themselves had very justifiable grievances. Indeed, it must have been patently obvious amongst many of the poor, despite lack of education, that it was their toil that kept the nobility in such splendour. This is not to say that much of the populace, perhaps the majority, accepted their lot in life. Many

“ never took noe lewd course for to rong any man. Nor yet rune about the country as others have done ... for corne ... & took it by violen[ce]”. [4]

What was the poors understanding of the courses of dearth? These were varied, obviously bad harvests and religious superstition played a part, but also the system of enclosure was thought to be a cause. In effect, enclosure acted as a means to raise the price of corn, and often accentuated the problem of dearth. Others believed that dearth was caused *deliberately* by speculators to whom dearth would have been financially advantageous. Thus, dearth was caused by,

“ many loaders that buy ... upp ... whoole loades and carry it away and so make corne at such an excessive rate; *although there is corne enough* ” [5]

This demonisation of middlemen was expediently taken up by government, who pronounced against

“ evill disposed persons unthankfull to God and without pittie towards poore men, [who] by their engrossing of grayne and other abuses will make want amidst plentifulness and continew still the affliction of the poore by their malice” [6]

This was not merely propaganda. Some measures to control middlemen were indeed placed on statute.

Why events such as the Peterloo massacre had not happened earlier was in no small measure due to the fact that before the influx of agricultural workers into the newly industrialised towns and cities, practically everyone was illiterate apart from the ruling elites, and the organisation of any demonstration was hampered by the fact that dialects varied so much, thus even nearby villagers had some difficulty comprehending each other. Also, as England changed from a *subsistence* economy to a money economy and agriculture became more commercialised, dearths decreased in frequency. In a subsistence economy, such as in the feudal period, there was little incentive for peasants to produce more than they could subsist on as this would be surplus that could not be capitalised on, as in a money economy. Subsequently dearth usually meant that although grain was scarce, there would be just enough to subsist on. Very bad harvests though, frequently led to mass starvation and deaths. Dearths and famines were interpreted as nature's way of balance. If the population grew too large, then this would result in too many mouths to feed, leading to famine and deaths which would bring the population down to manageable proportions. In Malthus' book 'An essay on the principle of population' he argued just that. ^[7] Malthus the clergyman even argued against any poor relief, as this would upset what he saw as nature's, checks and balances.

Poor relief, instituted by government, was as a result of a great famine of the 1590s, (at this time in England's history there were indeed too many mouths to feed, which went somewhat towards a vindication of Malthus' theory).

CONCLUSION

Between 1500 and 1850 England was in a transitional period from a post-feudal, largely mercantile society into an industrial/capitalist society. As peasant workers migrated into the new industrial cities and towns society underwent a fundamental change. Workers began to congregate in much larger numbers than the agricultural society of scattered villages. After the enlightenment people were no longer so willing to accept dearths and famines as being an inevitable occurrence in a strictly hierarchical world with God at the apex, and began to question government excuses and reasons for dearths and famines. But government was spared increased disturbance and social unrest simply because dearths became less commonplace. The Peterloo massacre of 1819, which was a peaceful demonstration against the corn laws as they stood at that time, was due more to the ineptitude of local magistrates and somewhat drunken soldiers, than to the demonstration itself, which might easily have passed off peacefully. Therefore this event really lends itself to being somewhat out of context within the period discussed in this essay.

Paradoxically, once the socio-economic conditions made it more favourable for peasants to look elsewhere to hire their labour in a money-economy, this could often make their plight worse. Landlords, at a time when peasants were virtually their property, at least had to ensure that their workers were sufficiently fed and nourished to work. When workers started working for <https://assignbuster.com/effectiveness-of-policies-on-effects-of-death-in-england/>

money, there was no such check or balance, if the worker could not afford food he would starve.

From this period, particularly the early period of the 15th and 16th centuries, a paucity of written records of dearth is an obvious impediment to historians. These were not written about in the main because many, if not most, contemporary writers simply did not think that there was any real need for these events to be written down and recorded. And as written records did increase, the occurrence of dearth became less for the reasons discussed above. To people living at the time, dearths and famines were events which they probably thought would last *in perpetuum*, and as they varied in occurrence and in different regions at different times, a truly comprehensive systematic record is problematic for the modern historian. The corollary to this situation is that the effectiveness of government to mitigate the effects of dearth in this period is difficult to gauge. The fact that wars and epidemics were also prevalent during this period adds a further difficulty to an assessment when attempting to link dearth, and particularly famine, to morbidity rates as a determinant towards the assessment of government success in the mitigation of dearths and famines.

It would be fair to say though, that government was successful merely because of the fact that society held together, unlike revolutionary France. But not so much as in the amelioration of the conditions under which the poor laboured, but successful in that no major riots are recorded. Therefore it could be argued that government was successful in mitigating, if to mitigate

is taken in the meaning of as to *lessen*, social unrest and disorder and maintaining the *status quo*.

Altruism towards its subjects was not high on the agenda of government and crown, and where it was practiced towards the poor it was the mainly the result of a perceived Christian duty towards relieving the lot of the poor, rather than any philanthropic motive, and an aid, through the poor law, in maintaining social order.

To summarise; with the aid of religion, protection of subsistence living standards by the means of poor relief, price control and demonisation of ‘middlemen’, along with the fact that any disturbances or riots that did occur were regional, thus preventing a general nationwide uprising; successive governments through 1500 – 1850 could be deemed to have been effective towards the mitigation of the effects of dearth and famine.

References

Rose, R. B. ‘Eighteenth Century Price Riots and Public Policy in Early Modern England’. *International Review of Social History*, 6. Royal VanGorcum, The Netherlands, 1961.

R. B. Outhwaite, *Dearth, Public Policy and Social Disturbance in England 1550 – 1800*, Macmillan, London, 1991.

John Walter and Keith Wrightson, *Dearth and the Social Order in Modern England, Rebellion, Proper Protest and the Social Order*, ed. Slack, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000

1

Footnotes

[1] Page 15, R. B. Outhwaite, *Dearth, Public Policy and Social Disturbance in England, 1550 – 1800*, Macmillan, London, 1991.

[2] Page 278, Rose, R. B. 'Eighteenth Century Price Riots and Public Policy in Early Modern England'. *International Review of Social History*, 6. Royal VanGorcum, The Netherlands, 1961.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Page 114, John Walter and Keith Wrightson, *Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England, Rebellion, Proper Protest and the Social Order*, ed. Slack, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

[5] Page 116, Ibid.

[6] Page 117, Ibid.

[7] Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.