



**VAGRANCY IN ELIZABETHAN  
ENGLAND AND THE RESPONSE  
OF THE PRIVY COUNCIL, WITH  
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO  
FIVE TOWNS**

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*Awarded 1995*

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### *Abstract*

This thesis investigates the nature of vagrancy in Elizabethan England and how the Privy Council tried to suppress it in five towns - Chester, Leicester, Northampton, Norwich and York. The investigation is based on a whole range of government (central and local) and non-government sources. The first three chapters are taken up with establishing: the rise of the phenomenon of vagrancy in the sixteenth century and its economic, social and political causes; what the Privy Council did and who were the main people in it who tackled the problem of vagrancy; the offices of local administration through which the Privy Council acted to curb the menace; and the types of vagabond or masterless person who posed such a threat to Tudor and early Stuart England. In chapters four to eight the thesis focuses on the towns in question and examines what the Privy Council considered to be the best policies for each community. Due to the nature of Elizabethan government and provincial urban society the battle to overcome vagrancy was fraught with political tensions, contradictory purposes and vested interests. The thesis concludes with a chapter assessing the Privy Council's policies as they related to the five towns and what the wider and future implications were.

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or any other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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The gathering of primary and secondary source material for this study required much work in the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide. There are many staff members in the library who went out of their way to assist me, and foremost I must express my gratitude to the subject librarians Pat Scott, Margaret Hosking and Susan Woodburn. They took the time to point out when and where books and articles were located, and informed me about when the latest texts would be available. I thank the staff in the Special Collections for allowing me to look at some rare and priceless works. All of the staff in Inter-Library Loans assisted whenever they could in obtaining material from other states' libraries. In particular there are people in the Barr Smith Library whose assistance and advice I valued and I feel it would be a grave disservice not to acknowledge them: Angela Smith, Maria Albanese, Sue Doyle, Juliet Giustozzi, Kathy McCulloch, Chris Miners and Jo Moore. They were all extraordinarily patient and courteous and offered many ideas whenever I asked them about locating hard-to-find or mis-shelved items. To them I can only express my deepest thanks.

## Abbreviations

- AHEW* Joan Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales. IV. 1500-1640.*
- Anstruther, *Seminary Priests* Godfrey Anstruther, *A Dictionary of the Secular Clergy of England and Wales 1558-1850, I.*
- APC* *Acts of the Privy Council of England.*
- Beier, *Masterless Men* A.L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The vagrancy problem in England 1560-1640.*
- Beresford, *Lost Villages* Maurice Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England.*
- BIHR* *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research.*
- Blomefield, *Norwich* Francis Blomefield, *The History of the City and County of Norwich, Part 1.*
- Boynton, *Elizabethan Militia* Lindsay Boynton, *The Elizabethan Militia 1558-1638.*
- CSP* *Calendar of State Papers.*
- Clark, *English Alehouse* Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: a social history 1200-1830.*
- Clark and Slack, *English Towns* Peter Clark and Paul Slack (eds.), *English Towns in Transition 1500-1700.*
- Craig, "James Ryther of Harewood" W.J. Craig, "James Ryther of Harewood and His Letters to William Cecil, Lord Burghley", Parts I and II.
- D'Ewes, *Journals* Sir Simonds D'Ewes, *The Journals of All the Parliaments during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth.*
- DNB* *Dictionary of National Biography.*
- EcHR* *Economic History Review.*
- EEH* A.E. Bland, P.A. Brown and R.H. Tawney (eds.), *English Economic History: Select Documents.*
- EHR* *English Historical Review.*
- Elton, *Tudor Constitution* G.R. Elton (ed.), *The Tudor Constitution.*
- First Assembly Book* Council of the City of Chester, *The First Assembly Book, A/B/1.*
- Groombridge, *Council Minutes* Margaret J. Groombridge (ed.), *Calendar of Chester City Council Minutes 1603-1642.*
- Harrison, *Elizabethan Journals* G.B. Harrison, *The Elizabethan Journals 1591-1603.*
- Hartley, *Proceedings* T.E. Hartley (ed.), *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I, 1558-1581.*
- Haynes, *State Papers* Samuel Haynes, *A Collection of State Papers...From the 1542 to 1570...Left by William Cecill Lord Burghley.*
- Higgins, *County Government* G.P. Higgins, *County Government and Society c.1590-1640.*
- HLQ* *Huntington Library Quarterly.*
- HMC* Historical Manuscripts Commission.
- John Speed's England* *John Speed's England: A Coloured Facsimile of the Maps and Text from the Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine...1611.*

- Kennett, *Chester*
- L&P*
- Leonard, *Poor Relief*
- Lodge, *Illustrations*
- Nichols, *History and Antiquities*
- Papers of Nathaniel Bacon*
- Pollen, *Martyrs*
- RBL*
- RBN*
- REED*
- Scarisbrick, *The Reformation*
- Slack, *Poverty & Policy*
- Strype, *Annals*
- Tanner, *Tudor Documents*
- TED*
- Thomson, *Lords Lieutenants*
- Tingey, *Records*
- TLAHS*
- TLAS*
- TRHS*
- VCH*
- Wake, *Musters, Beacons, Subsidies*
- Wark, *Recusancy*
- Wright, *Queen Elizabeth and her Times*
- Wright, *Three Chapters of Letters*
- YCR*
- Annette M. Kennett (ed.), *Tudor Chester*.
- R.H. Brodie et al (eds.), *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic...Henry VIII*.
- E.M. Leonard, *The Early History of English Poor Relief*.
- Edmund Lodge, *Illustrations of British History, Biography and Manners*.
- John Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*.
- A. Hassell Smith et al, *The Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey*.
- John Hungerford Pollen, *Unpublished Documents Relating to the English Martyrs...1584-1603*.
- Records of the Borough of Leicester*.
- Christopher A. Markham and J. Charles Cox (eds.), *Records of the Borough of Northampton*.
- Records of Early English Drama*.
- J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*.
- Paul Slack, *Poverty & Policy in Tudor and Stuart England*.
- John Strype, *Annals of the Reformation and Establishment of Religion...During the First Twelve Years of Queen Elizabeth's Happy Reign*.
- J.R. Tanner, *Tudor Documents A.D. 1584-1603 with an historical commentary*.
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- Gladys Scott Thomson, *Lords Lieutenants in the Sixteenth Century: A Study in Tudor Local Administration*.
- John Cottingham Tingey (ed.), *The Records of the City of Norwich*.
- Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*.
- Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society*.
- Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*.
- Victoria County History*.
- Joan Wake (ed.), *A Copy of Papers Relating to Musters, Beacons, Subsidies, Etc. in the County of Northampton A.D. 1586-1623*.
- K.R. Wark, *Elizabethan Recusancy in Cheshire*.
- Thomas Wright (ed.), *Queen Elizabeth and her Times, A Series of Original Letters*.
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## PREFACE

The purpose of this study is to examine the Elizabethan Privy Council's suppression of vagrancy in five towns, Chester, Leicester, Northampton, Norwich and York, and to an extent the counties of which they are a part. Emerging during Thomas Cromwell's administrative reforms in the 1530s, the Privy Council became the main instrument of rule in Tudor England. The Privy Council was composed of the leading officers and notables of state who wielded influence through established legal and judicial institutions. Privy councillors exercised their chief role of advising the monarch as individuals or, more commonly, as a body. They worked through regular government departments which were charged with particular duties. Apart from governing the kingdom, especially in the supervision of finances and justice, privy councillors were also politicians engaged in advancing their own agendas and interests. They were men of superior standing in the realm with a lot of wealth and power at stake.

However, it is strange that the role of the Elizabethan Privy Council, a body constituting the most powerful men in England and meeting more regularly than Parliament ever did, has not received more recognition in the study of one of the most controversial aspects of early modern or preindustrial life - vagrancy. Historical research has emphasised either parliamentary measures, the systems of poor relief conspicuously operated by urban centres and rural communities, or the implementation of the poor laws in succeeding centuries. My analysis hopes to contribute modestly to a rectification of this situation by analysing vagrancy from the point of view of Elizabeth's chief privy councillors, as individuals and as a unit. I am not concerned with the origins and history of vagrancy in Tudor England, a topic which has been more than adequately analysed by specialist writers but still has to be addressed, but with the shifts in how it was perceived and punished. In my view the various manifestations of vagrancy cannot be explained by economic circumstances alone. The laws that defined it and the Elizabethan statutes in particular inevitably took into consideration and reflected the politico-religious atmosphere of the times. Tudor England was very much a society in which power and authority were transmitted through individuals, a theme which is well documented and not claimed as being original here. The point is that powerful individuals had visions of what society should be like and tried to shape it accordingly.

Writers on England in the reign of Elizabeth I note that her kingdom experienced only a few of what can be described as tranquil years. Hers was a country racked by continual warfare, whether in England itself or internationally. England went to war with Scotland (1559-60), with France (1562-63) and with Spain (1585-1604). The last was the most grievous and it entailed intervention in the Netherlands in 1585, in France in 1589 and a long, drawn out presence in Ireland, especially after 1595 to suppress Tyrone O'Neill's uprising. In between the wars with France and Spain, Elizabeth had to contend with the Rising in the North in Yorkshire and the Border counties in the autumn and winter of 1569.<sup>1</sup> This revolt was of momentous importance because the Privy Council punished not only the nobles and gentlemen who engineered it, but also those people of the lower orders who were perceived to support it. The revolt inspired security precautions elsewhere in England. Elizabeth's proclamation of 20 November 1569 dealt specifically with three other counties in this study, Norfolk, Northamptonshire and Cheshire. These shires' lord lieutenants, officials about whom more will be heard later, were urged to suppress "any Stirre or Tumoult...that might be moved by disordred People."<sup>2</sup> Warfare coincided with other developments hovering in the background to this study: economic stagnation, harvest failures which blighted the country in 1586 and again in a sustained four year horror period from 1594-97; and plague.

An examination of events in Leicester, Chester, York, Northampton and Norwich in the context of Privy Council intervention means bringing to light the theme of 'centre' versus 'locality'. In dealing with vagrancy Elizabeth I's Privy Council worked with institutions of local government and people who represented them. Given that there has been much historical research and debate on the theme of centrality versus locality and its influence on the tumultuous events of the 1640s, it is plausible to see whether or not vagrancy played a part in this important aspect of English history. An approach such as this is possible because, as Derek Beales points out, there has been a gradual shift in studies of late sixteenth and early seventeenth localities and their public affairs, away from the gentry and its perception of the county or urban community. Instead, writers are now interested in examining "the extent to which ordinary people below the ranks of the elite made independent and significant choices" in their lives.<sup>3</sup> Was Elizabeth I's Privy Council

1 R.R. Reid, "The Rebellion of the Earls, 1569", *TRHS*, New Ser., XX (1906), pp.171-203.

2 Haynes, *State Papers*, pp.559-60.

3 Derek Beales, "Local Affairs in Seventeenth-Century England", *The Historical Journal*, 32, 2 (June, 1989), p.437.

really better than its often maligned Jacobean and Caroline successors, when it came to utilising town administrations to suppress vagrancy?

Lastly, I wish to comment on the sources used in this thesis. Fortunately, the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are richer in primary sources than earlier periods. The decisions and public enactments of Tudor governments are readily accessible. State papers are supplemented by many private collections which the Historical Manuscripts Commission has calendared (perhaps none is greater than the documents which constitute the *Marquis of Salisbury* papers). Since the main emphasis is on the Privy Council, the major sources are its decisions and proclamations as recorded in the *Acts of the Privy Council*. Sadly, the *Acts* do not record the actual processes by which policy decisions were reached. Another glaring setback is the fact that the *Acts* for the years 1583-85, 1594 and 1605-13 have been lost. Calendars of various state papers, whether they deal with domestic, Irish or various foreign matters, cover government proclamations, statutes, directives and comments on vagabonds. They contain the correspondence of local magistrates and town officials addressed to the Privy Council as a whole or to individual councillors. The correspondence from localities contain returns of arrests, depositions about suspects with their statements and suggestions for remedying the problem. Records of county quarter sessions indicate vagrancy trends in the immediate locality of each town and put it in a wider perspective.

At the local government level the historian is lucky that sixteenth century people left a great store in the form of narratives, diaries and reports. There are many avenues of finding source material for Elizabethan Chester, Leicester, Northampton, Norwich and York. Official town records differed in their manner of and reasons for compilation<sup>1</sup> but they are nonetheless full of references to vagabonds, their arrest and type of punishment. It was not enough to look at the records of these towns alone because vagabonds or those suspected of being so moved from town to town. There are instances where they escaped the attention of the authorities in one town only to turn up somewhere else. Printed town documents are in turn supplemented by church and parish registers. They record and describe the efforts of churchwardens in expelling strangers and drifters, and local idle or destitute people who were relieved with alms or short-term jobs.

Originally it was thought that literary sources and dramatic records would play only a supporting role in this study, but this changed as it gradually dawned that dramatic, ceremonial and pageant activity provided a different insight into vagrancy. In 1975 an ambitious research

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Dyer, "English town chronicles", *The Local Historian*, 12, 6 (May, 1977), pp.285-92.

project known as the Records of Early English Drama (REED) began. It grew out of short papers based on research into the records of York and Chester, and led to an attempt to systematically transcribe and publish original documents relating to all manner of official and non-official religious and civic festivals, rituals and processions, and travelling professional and amateur playing companies all over pre-1642 England.<sup>1</sup> Plays, ballads and pamphlets constitute an important source for vagrants in that their condemnation of them did not necessarily mean they promoted the government line of thinking. Of the Elizabethan plays, ballads and tracts used in this study some were not published until James I's reign, the reasons for the gap between writing and publication being a fear that the meaning of one's work would be misconstrued by the authorities, and a wish to keep things private.<sup>2</sup> Ballads are an important source of entertainment and information. In the sixteenth century they were widely circulated on manuscript broadsheets.<sup>3</sup> Tudor balladeers have been called "the journalists of the times" because they had the innate capacity to capture, mould and reflect the national mood.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of this thesis it will become clear that many secondary sources, old and new, have been referred to. Every town in this review has the journal of a local archaeological or historical society specialising in its history, and considerable use is made of them. This has much to do with the nature of the topic. Since opinions on the nature of Tudor government, poverty and vagrancy and the towns in question are constantly being reviewed, validated or changed by research, these rightly should be scrutinised. Where possible the latest ideas in historical thought about the Elizabethan era have been perused. In any case many of these sources contain primary source material in them and could not have been found elsewhere due to a variety of pressures in the research process. The setting out of how many and what kinds of sources were available has thankfully assisted in the subject of vagrancy not becoming a 'narrow' one. More importantly, it also provides the opportunity for further discourse on the scope of the topic in hand.

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- 1 Alexandra F. Johnston, "A Medieval and Renaissance Dramatic Records Project", *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*, XVII (1974), p.105. REED's editorial policies and practices were recently debated by Theresa Coletti and Peter H. Greenfield. Read their respective articles, "'Fragmentation and Redemption': Dramatic Records, History, and the Dream of Wholeness", *Envoi*, 3, 1 (Spring, 1991), pp.1-13; and "'But Herefordshire for a Morris-daunce': Dramatic Records and the New Historicism", *ibid.*, pp.14-23.
  - 2 H. Robinson Shipherd, "Play-Publishing in Elizabethan Times", *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, New Ser., XXVII, 4 (1919), pp.581-82.
  - 3 Hyder E. Rollins, "The Black-Letter Broadside Ballad", *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, New Ser., XXVII, 2 (1919), p.258.
  - 4 S.M. Pratt, "Antwerp and the Elizabethan Mind", *Modern Language Quarterly*, XXIV, 1 (March, 1963), p.54; Rollins, *op. cit.*, p.259; C.H. Firth, "The Ballad History of the Reigns of the Later Tudors", *TRHS*, Third Ser., III (1909), p.51; Hyder E. Rollins (ed.), *Old English Ballads 1553-1625* (Cambridge, 1920).

And se what myschyfe  
Idle persons do inuent;  
What conspiracies haue ben wrought,  
Wythin this lyttle whyle

Robert Crowley, 'Way to Wealth', 1550.