

from Chapter Two: “The People”

The Time Traveler's Guide to Elizabethan England (2012)

By Ian Mortimer¹

The Nobility

In the Middle Ages kings constantly had to watch out for great lords waiting in the wings. These could be the king's own cousins; sometimes they even were his brothers or sons. Elizabeth does not have this problem. Her grandfather Henry VII had no brothers or cousins. He had just two daughters and one surviving son, Henry VIII, who in turn sired two daughters and one legitimate son, Edward VI. As the last surviving child of Henry VIII, Elizabeth is in the extremely fortunate position that she does not have to contend with powerful royal dukes. There is no obvious heir champing at the bit—and that is just how she wants things to remain. She consistently refuses to name a successor, even when Parliament² demands that she do so. In her first parliament she declares that she will die a virgin and, despite being tempted on more than one occasion to change her mind, she remains unmarried. She knows that, if she were to acknowledge her eldest aunt's granddaughter, Mary, the Catholic queen of Scots, as her heir, she would only make herself a bigger target for Catholic assassins. [...]

Elizabeth has very few over-mighty lords to deal with too. After the Catholic duke of Norfolk is executed for treason in June 1572

(for his part in the Ridolfi Plot), there are no more dukes in England. Like her grandfather Henry VII, Elizabeth has a policy of not creating any new marquesses or viscounts, and she creates very few barons and even fewer earls.³ The reason is to limit the power of her subjects and thus strengthen the authority of her government. Even the bishops, who used to exercise political opposition to kings in the old days, are politically weak. They are no longer servants of the Roman Church, independent of the king of England, but serve the monarch in her role as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Rather than challenging the queen, they find themselves having to preach “the doctrine of the godly prince”—or, in this case, the godly princess. Elizabethan England is thus devoid of private



Elizabeth I

¹ BA, PhD, and DLitt degrees in history from Exeter University and MA in archive studies from University College London

² the highest legislature, consisting of the sovereign, the House of Lords, and the House of Commons

³ The full list of aristocratic titles (the peerage) are as follows: dukes and duchesses (addressed by title or as “Your Grace”); marquesses, earls, viscounts and barons (addressed as “Lord X”); marchionesses, countesses, viscountesses and baronesses (addressed as “Lady X”).

armies, royal dukes, and political bishops. Those considering revolt against Elizabeth have no one to turn to for leadership.

Elizabeth's careful policy means that there is something of a scarcity of noblemen in England. After the execution of the duke of Norfolk, the highest rank in the peerage is that of marquess; never a common title: there is just one in 1600 (the marquess of Winchester), plus a dowager⁴ marchioness (the widow of the last marquess of Northampton, William Parr, who dies in 1571). Third highest in rank are the earls; there are eighteen of these in 1600. Next come the two viscounts, Lord Montagu and Lord Howard of Bindon. The lowest rank is the baronage: there are thirty-seven barons in all. In total, just fifty-seven peers are summoned to Parliament at the start of the reign and fifty-five at the end (underage heirs are not summoned). Collectively they are all peers of the realm, but the equality suggested by that word "peers" is misleading. Even within each class of title there is a hierarchy, the older titles taking precedence over the more recent ones. There are huge discrepancies of wealth too. Only two or three lords have an income of £10,000 per year; most have over £800, some as little as £300. Thomas Wilson estimates that the earls and the marquess have an average income of £5,000 per year and the barons and viscounts about £3,000. As you will see, the very idea of "equality" is something that Elizabethans reckon relates to men only when they stand before God on Judgment Day. Here on Earth, there is no such thing.

Income does not equate to spending power—not when you are a peer of the realm and can borrow money. Take the example of the young Henry Percy, ninth earl of Northumberland. His father, the eighth earl, has a good income in 1582 (£4,595), but after he dies in 1585, a large part of the estate is apportioned to provide an income for his widow, the dowager countess, leaving young Henry with "just" £3,363. The problem is that Henry proceeds to spend twice that. In his own words: "Hawks, hounds, horses, dice, cards, apparel, mistresses; all other riot of expense that follow them were so far afoot and in excess as I knew not where I was or what I did until, out of my means of £3,000 yearly, I had made shift in one year and a half to be £15,000 in debt." Fortunately for Henry, one of the privileges of being a nobleman is that he cannot be imprisoned for debt, so he is at least clear of that worry. Other privileges include the right to be judged by his peers, paying very little tax, and freedom from torture. Having said this, with Elizabeth on the throne, it is probably best not to rely upon these privileges too heavily. The queen is not like her tyrannical father, Henry VIII, who would get around a lord's right to be judged by his peers by having the offending man summarily executed; however, not many courts will defy the queen's wrath. Several peers of the realm spend years imprisoned in the Tower before they even come to trial.

The Gentry

Rich and privileged as the nobility are, it is the gentry who own and run England. They are the five hundred or so knights with country estates, and approximately fifteen thousand other gentlemen with an income from land sufficient to guarantee they do not have to work for a living.⁵ In this group you have the greatest disparities of wealth—from knights as rich as Sir John Harington (later Lord Harington) and Sir Nicholas Bacon, with incomes of £4,000 or more per year, down to local gentlemen with a thousand acres let out to tenant farmers for not much more than £100. Thomas Wilson declares that to be a gentleman, one should have £500 per year in the south of England and £300 in the north. The relationship of wealth to status is thus complicated. Some people see them as completely separate issues: they think that having a coat of arms is the crucial factor denoting

⁴ a widow with a title or property derived from her late husband

⁵ The Titled Gentry are Baronets and Knights (addressed as "Sir X"). The former title is inherited. The latter title is not, but is awarded by the Crown for service.

gentlemanly status, armigerous men⁶ being descended from knights and thus having the right to call themselves “esquire.” It is not surprising, therefore, that families in every county are claiming coats of arms, whether they truly are entitled to them or not. Heralds (officers of the College of Arms) make regular visitations of the counties to examine these claims. Talk about hierarchy: at a time when there is no national police force, there is a national organization devoted to policing the right to bear a coat of arms.

You begin to get a sense of the extent of the gentry’s dominant position when you compare their total wealth with that of the nobility. All the earls, barons, and other lords have a combined income of approximately £220,000 in 1600. The income of the gentry is at least ten times as much, if not twenty times. And wealth is not the limit of their influence. They control the rural population through governing them, employing them as servants, and directing the majority who are their tenants. There are fourteen hundred justices of the peace (JPs), who sit as magistrates in each county, and all are drawn from the ranks of the gentry. In the absence of a standing army, the defense of the realm is overseen by the deputy lieutenants of each county, who have authority over the “trained bands” or militia. Again, these men are drawn from the ranks of the gentry. In Sir Walter Raleigh’s words, “The gentry are the garrisons of good order throughout the realm.” Small wonder, then, that Elizabeth takes such care over the lists of justices of the peace. She pores over them and pretends she is personally acquainted with every gentleman in the kingdom. Some courtiers snigger at this behind her back; but, in truth, she does know a great number of them because of her progresses through the country. Displease the queen and you can bet she will remember your name when it comes to scrutinizing those lists.

The other area in which the gentry have a large say in running the country is in Parliament. They exert influence in two ways. First, they take a major role in electing the seventy-four “knights of the shire” who form approximately one-third of the House of Commons. Second, a large number of gentlemen are sent to Parliament as representatives of boroughs, through the patronage of wealthy landowners. The duke of Norfolk, for instance, sends eighteen gentlemen to the House of Commons as representatives of boroughs where he is the major landowner. The gentry’s representation extends to urban areas too. You might have thought that the larger towns would want to be represented by merchants and traders, but often a community will choose a member of the gentry, on the basis that he will have more influence over his fellow MPs.

Professions

There are three distinct professions or vocations in England: the law, the Church, and medicine. All three have an extended period of training, and require considerable investment. All three are the subjects of university degrees and can generate a healthy income. Schoolmasters are not considered wholly “professional” because they do not need a degree and they are not normally paid more than



the Shakespeare coat of arms; its purchase in 1596 elevated the

⁶ An armiger is a person entitled to use a heraldic achievement (e.g., bear arms, an "armour-bearer") either by hereditary right, grant, matriculation, or assumption of arms. Such a person is said to be armigerous.

tradesmen. Similarly, although music can be studied at a university, it does not make men rich, so musicians are not considered “professional” either. Even writing books is not generally considered a “professional” activity. There are no publishers paying royalties, alas, so one needs to have an income in order to be able to write in the first place. Shakespeare is one of the very few writers who manages to elevate himself from a relatively humble level to the status of a gentleman. It is a salutary thought that, although he manages to acquire sufficient wealth to buy New Place in Stratford and a significant portion of the rectorial tithes of the parish, one of the heralds dismisses his newly acquired coat of arms as that of “Shakespeare the Player.”

It is the Church and the law that offer the greatest opportunities to an ambitious man. If you rise through the ranks of the clergy to become archbishop of Canterbury, you will have not only a seat in the House of Lords but an income of £2,682 per year. Those who profess the law can do even better. When Sir Nicholas Bacon dies, he leaves £4,450 of cash and silver, plus an income from land of about £4,000 per year. Sir Edward Coke is reputed to have an income of between £12,000 and £14,000, making him one of the richest men of the century; and Sir John Popham is not far behind with £10,000 per year. Obviously not many lawyers earn in the thousands, but most make a decent living, in the region of £100 per year.

Medicine is the least rewarded of the three professions, both financially and in social distinction. Elizabeth does not bestow a knighthood on any of her physicians or surgeons. Most wealthy Elizabethans do not pay their medical practitioners anywhere near as much as their lawyers. It is perhaps not surprising. Faced with a legal issue, an Elizabethan lawyer will serve you just as well as his modern counterpart. You would be unwise to place that much confidence in an Elizabethan physician.

Merchants, Traders, and Townsmen



typical fashion of a wealthy London merchant and his wife

Civic society too is hierarchical: another great spectrum of wealth, social status, and authority. At one extreme you have the richest London merchants, some of whom have capital worth £50,000 at the start of the reign and twice that much at the end. These men tend to have significant political roles, becoming an alderman (the chief representative of one of the twenty-six London wards), lord mayor, or the master of a livery company. They have considerable influence; several wealthy London merchants are knighted. It is commonly said that most aldermen have goods to the value of £20,000. At the other end of the social scale, there are merchants who are destitute, and shopkeepers and artificers who struggle to earn £8 per year.

In most large towns about half the population have no goods or assets of any significant value. The larger provincial towns and cities in particular are dominated by a few merchant families who own virtually all the wealth. In Exeter, for instance, 2 percent of the population own 40 percent of the taxable property, and just 7 percent own two-thirds of it. On top of this, life

expectancy is shorter, people marry later and have fewer children, and a greater proportion of their children die young. Why, then, do the other 93 percent not simply leave? One answer to this is obvious: where else would they go? These people rely heavily on their fellow townsmen to defend their reputations and to protect each other physically. Many have responsibilities to their friends and kin in the city. Leaving your hometown is not something you do without considerable preparation or in a state of desperation.

There are other reasons why people choose to live in urban areas. When a rich merchant becomes pre-eminent, he looks to move out to a country estate and to set himself up as a country gentleman; therefore no English merchant family dominates a large town for long. New families and individuals rise up, competing to take the place of those that have left. Hugh Clopton and William Shakespeare are both good examples of men who move to London, make their fortunes, and return to their place of birth. You will find much the same in cities such as Exeter and Coventry: the mayors and aldermen are often sons of country yeomen who have come to make their fortune. Don't think the urban rich are all born rich. The wealthy 7 percent is not a static cohort in any city or town.

For the less well-off, a city or town offers a certain reliability of income. Take Exeter, for example, which has a population of about 8,000. About 30 percent of these are dependents under the age of fifteen, which leaves a population of adults and working youths of 5,600. About 880 of these are servants. Another 2,000 are women—480 widows, 80 independent single women, and 1,440 dependent wives. That leaves about 2,720 independent adult males. In theory, a man needs to become a freeman of the city in order to run a business. To do this, he has to be the son of a freeman, serve an apprenticeship, or pay a hefty fine of £1–£5 (depending on his circumstances). How many of those 2,720 men qualify? If you examine the rolls held in Exeter's Guildhall, you will see that 1,192 individuals are admitted to the freedom of the city over the period Michaelmas (September 29) 1558 to Michaelmas 1603. Given that most men gain their freedom in their early to mid-twenties, they can expect to be freemen for about another thirty-five years. Thus, in any year, about 930 of those 2,720 men are freemen of the city. In addition, there are the professionals—clergy, lawyers, and medical men—and the schoolmasters, whose authority to practice is normally based on a university degree or a license granted by the bishop. These people might not own a significant portion of the wealth of the city, but they all have a considerable stake in its good management. The freemen themselves take a part in this, by electing the twenty-four aldermen who run the city. The huge inequalities of wealth thus distort our image of the satisfaction of the citizens at the time. A barber or a butcher in Elizabethan Exeter is not necessarily preoccupied with the discrepancies of wealth around him—no more than his modern equivalent is today—if he is earning enough to keep his family clothed and fed.

What about those men who are not freemen or professionals? Some are still young, with few financial responsibilities. They may be apprentices or journeymen working to save enough money to pay the fines to become freemen. Only about 10 percent of all those becoming freemen of Exeter do so simply through the easy route of succession from their fathers. The remainder earn their positions. Those who are not freemen are employees, laborers, and unskilled workers. Some are described by their contemporaries as "poor," owning nothing except the clothes they stand up in. A number of those are truly destitute or are itinerant beggars looking for food (we will meet them later). Nevertheless, in a town they do at least have a chance of finding employment or a meal. Merchants are not the only ones who look at a city as a place of opportunity.

Yeomen, Husbandmen, and Countrymen

Rural areas have just as much disparity of wealth as towns. At one extreme you have the very rich, the gentry in their manor houses and stately homes, with the large incomes noted above. At the other

end you have itinerant beggars and local paupers. In between you have a range of yeomen, husbandmen, rural craftsmen, and laborers.

Yeomen are the successors of the medieval franklins. They are “free men”—not in the sense that they have the freedom of a city but because they are “free” from the bonds of servitude that applied to the villenage in the Middle Ages. In William Harrison’s understanding, they are “forty-shilling freeholders”: the rents of the land they own bring in £2 or more per year, giving them the right to vote in a parliamentary election. But who is a yeoman, who a gentleman, and who a husbandman is a very confused issue. Some “yeomen” could buy out quite a few local “gentlemen.” As a rule of thumb, apply the following gradations and be prepared to modify them when someone takes umbrage:



gentry and yeoman farmer

- A gentleman owns land but does not farm it: he lets it to others through copyhold (if it forms part of a manor) or by lease (if it is freehold land).
- A yeoman does farm land, and might own the freehold of some of it; but he normally leases a substantial acreage. He employs laborers to help him.
- A husbandman farms land but does not own it—normally he rents it. He may also employ helpers, especially at harvest time; but he tends to be poorer than a yeoman.

One of the reasons why some yeomen become wealthy is that, being workers, they have little reason to spend their income in an ostentatious manner—unless they want to pretend they are gentlemen. Another is that they are better positioned to exploit the land for profit. Fixed rents—by way of long leases—and the increasing value of wool underpin the wealth of many yeomen. Some husbandmen also benefit from these conditions: their thriftiness, low rents, and the rising value of their produce allow them to make a considerable amount of money. William Dynes of Godalming, Surrey, describes himself as a husbandman despite having goods to the value of £272 in 1601. Similarly Edward Streate, husbandman of Lambourn, Berkshire, leaves goods worth £97 to his widow in 1599 (the average is about £40).

There are others who make their living on the land. An agricultural laborer works in the fields on behalf of a yeoman or husbandman. You will often hear the words “cottager” and “artificer.” A cottager is someone who, unsurprisingly, lives in a cottage and has very little or no land except a garden. He may also have rights to graze a couple of cattle and a horse or two on the common, and to collect firewood from the manorial woods. “Artificer” is the Elizabethan word for a craftsman. Rural areas have a great demand for a wide range of locally manufactured products, and as you journey around the country you are bound to come across basket-makers, hurdle-makers, fishing-net makers, charcoal burners, thatchers, knife-grinders, and woodsmen, as well as farriers, blacksmiths, millers, brewers, carpenters, wheelwrights, and cartwrights. Many of these people are laborers, cottagers, and artificers all in one—plying a mixture of trades, laboring at harvest time, and growing their own vegetables and fruit in order to sustain themselves and their families.

The Poor

In 1570 the civic authorities in Norwich take a census of the city's poor. When complete there are 2,359 names on the list: about a quarter of the whole population (about 10,625 in that year). Not everyone included is unemployed or homeless; although three hundred of them are accommodated in parish poorhouses, hospital buildings, old city gatehouses, or church houses, most are living in their own homes, whether these be rented or owned. Quite a few have a means of making a little money, but others are wholly impoverished. Some are disabled, some mentally unstable or "lunatic"; some in extreme old age. What they all have in common is that they are likely to be a burden on the community.

The poor are an unavoidable feature of Elizabethan life. In 1577 William Harrison estimates that there are ten thousand vagrants on the roads, not including the resident poor in towns and villages. In 1582 William Lambarde remarks on the increasing number of vagabonds in Kent; and in 1593 he laments that the county is "overspread not only with unpunished swarms of idle rogues and of counterfeit soldiers but also with numbers of poor and weak but unpitied servitors." It is the same at the western end of the country. In 1600 Richard Carew writes that of the poor "few shires can show more or own fewer than Cornwall." He blames Ireland for sending over so many vagrants to beg in the county. The following year, Stratford-upon-Avon complains of seven hundred paupers in the town; and in 1602 a judge declares that there are thirty thousand "idle persons and masterless men" living in London. Thus, whether we are talking about the urban poor or gangs of young vagrants on the roads, poverty brings us face-to-face with the harsher side of Elizabethan life.

Let us begin with the resident poor, and consider those in Norwich. No fewer than 926 of them (40 percent) are children below the age of sixteen. For them this is a sad world: they have a significantly diminished chance of surviving to adulthood, let alone gaining an apprenticeship and a place in the community. Poorly fed, weak, and suffering from ailments such as scurvy and scald head, such children will find few masters to employ them. Of the 1,433 poor adults, about two-thirds are women, and about a quarter of these are over the age of sixty. You may think that there are more women than men because women live longer and they are widows. It comes as somewhat of a shock to realize there are just as many women who have been abandoned by their husbands. Margaret Matheu, for example, is a born-and-bred Norwich woman aged thirty-two years. Her husband, Thomas Matheu, left the city three years ago, and she has no idea where he is. He could be dead for all she knows; but she cannot remarry while he might yet be alive. She rents a room from William Joy, receives no alms (parish charity), and is described as "very poor," having nothing but a few pennies per week for spinning "white warp" (yarn). In a similar state is Alice Reade, forty, whose husband justified his abandoning her by claiming that he was already married to someone else and therefore their marriage was invalid. He left her with three children and a baby at her breast. She rents a room and lives from spinning; her nine-year-old son also spins, as does her fourteen-year-old daughter. They receive no alms and are "very poor." Perhaps even more lamentable is Helen, the wife of John Williams; she is heavily pregnant, about to give birth, and cannot work. Her husband has disappeared off to Cambridge and left her with no money.

If you want to see what it is really like to be poor in an Elizabethan city, visit the property called Shipdams in the Norwich parish of St. Martin at the Bale. It is a large old house, the rooms tenanted by a number of destitute people. In one you have Richard Starkyn, sixty-six, an unemployed cobbler, and his seventy-six-year-old wife, Elizabeth, who is too sick to work. They have alms of just 2 pence per week and are "very poor." In the next room you have Cecily Barwic, fifty-four, a widow who spins white warp and is also "very poor." Then there is Margaret Harrison, sixty, who lives by knitting and helping to wash dirty laundry and looks after her nine-year-old son, who also knits every day. In the room next to her lives Agnes, sixty-eight, whose husband, Thomas Gose, is in the hospital; she spins white warp for a living, receives 1½ pence per week in alms, and is "very poor." In the next room there

is Agnes's daughter Margaret, twenty-eight, the wife of Thomas Collins, hatter, who has abandoned her and gone to London and sends no help to her in her poverty; she knits to keep herself and her two daughters. They receive no alms, and when the inspector visits he finds a prostitute in their bed. In the next room there is Christopher Smythe, forty, an unemployed hatter with only one leg, and his wife, Dorothy, thirty-eight, who spins white warp, and their two daughters, who are both learning to spin with Widow Mallerd; they receive 3 pence alms per week between them. Next is Robert Haygat, forty, an unemployed brewer, and his wife, Margery, twenty-five, who has a breastfed baby and spins white warp; they receive no alms and are "very poor." Finally in this property there are three old widows: Katherine Mallerd, sixty-nine, who teaches Christopher Smythe's daughters to spin, receives no alms, and is "very poor"; Alice Colton, eighty, who spins but is lame in her hand, receives no alms, and is "very poor"; and Eme Stowe, eighty, who is lame in one arm, receives 2 pence per week in alms but has to look after her daughter's eleven-year-old illegitimate son. The two of them go about the streets begging together. That is what the urban poor are like: old, lame, sick, impotent, abandoned, and desperate. They have all developed strategies for survival—from keeping younger people in the household to prostitution and laundry help. You might notice a blind man in his fifties being led around the streets of Norwich by a twelve-year-old boy, an orphan, whom he provides with food. Some women make 2 shillings per week from caring for the sick and dying. This is a dangerous occupation, especially if the sufferers have an infectious disease such as smallpox or plague. But if as much as 6 shillings is on offer for a week's attendance on a plague victim, poor women willingly take on the task.

Whereas the resident poor are mostly women, three-quarters of the itinerant poor are single men. They are inevitably much younger: two-thirds are below the age of twenty-five. One group of twenty beggars in Crompton, Lancashire, in 1597 includes twelve boys under the age of fifteen and three under the age of five. The cause of their begging is the famine of 1594–97; their parents have probably starved to death. Alternatively, look at poor Alice Morrice at about the same time. Born at Borden, Kent, she is



a beggar being whipped in the streets for vagrancy

sent at about the age of ten to be a servant in the house of her uncle. All is well until her father dies and her uncle throws her out. Orphaned, with only a small amount of money left to her by her father, she goes from town to town. When the money has all gone, she can do nothing but join those who beg or steal. The Devon parish of Morebath sees several "poor walking women" give birth in outhouses and barns in the early 1560s. In London in 1583, "the poor lie in the streets upon pallets of straw . . . or else in the mire and dirt . . . [and] are suffered to die in the streets like dogs or beasts without any mercy or compassion."

The fundamental problem is that of population expansion. The number of people in England has been increasing since the second decade of the century, when it was 2.4 million. As we have seen, by 1600 it has risen to 4.11 million; yet no provision has been made for the extra people. With the land clearances making way for sheep-grazing and parkland, there is now even less agricultural land to support them. When you also consider the harvest failures and the downturns in certain industries, you can see why there are so many beggars on the highways. Walk into Canterbury, Faversham, and Maidstone and talk to the poor there. Some have traveled several hundred miles,

coming from Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cumberland, and Cheshire. They have not traveled from the northern towns but from rural areas, where their crops have died and they have been unable to pay their ever-increasing rents, with the result that they have been evicted. They have gone south hoping for a better life. But when they get there, they are treated like outcasts.

Unless you dress well, you yourself are likely to be treated as a vagrant wherever you go. Property owners are scared of strangers. They deliberately conflate them with the “Egyptians” or Gypsies who have been traveling in England for decades. Although Gypsies form a small percentage of the itinerant poor, they are a potent symbol of why such people are considered undesirable. Gypsies are considered synonymous with thieves: it is said that they travel eighty in a band and break up into groups of five or six to go searching for food and things to steal. In reality, they travel in small family groups, but people are not interested in the mitigating circumstances. The Egyptians Act of 1530 declares that, as Gypsies have no means of making a living except palmistry, telling fortunes, and robbery, they must abjure the realm. [...]

It is in this context that the lawmakers turn their attention to other itinerants. A whole genre of literature springs up on the topic. The books are sensational: they purport to offer insights into the criminal world that lurks in every town and describe in detail the sinful, filthy miscreants and their strategies for thieving and murdering the good citizens. The hatred that once applied just to the bands of Gypsies is now transferred to the roaming dispossessed and starving youths. In 1572, Parliament passes “An Act for the Punishment of Vagabonds and for the Relief of the Poor and Impotent.” This states that “a vagabond above the age of fourteen years shall be . . . grievously whipped and burned through the gristle of the right ear with a hot iron of the compass of an inch unless some credible person will take him into service for a year.” Additionally, a youth of eighteen who lapses into an itinerant lifestyle having previously been caught is to be hanged as a felon. [...]

Surely Elizabethan England, with all its wit and political application, can do better than this? Eventually it does. Certain towns—Norwich is among them—start to make provision for their resident poor. Licenses are occasionally issued to allow the genuinely needy to beg legally. There is also a growing recognition that the root of the problem is not the desire to be a vagrant but poverty. It is a slow process, however. The first Elizabethan Poor Law is passed in 1563: it forces villagers and townspeople to pay toward the upkeep of the local poor, with those who refuse being handed over to JPs. In 1576 another act orders civic authorities to keep a stock of capital items so the poor might be set to work, and in this way pay for their upkeep. Finally in 1597 Elizabeth’s government passes “An Act for the Relief of the Poor.” This piece of legislation is not as famous as the defeat of the Spanish Armada but it is just as significant, for it establishes the means by which poor people in England are looked after for the next 237 years. From now on, overseers are to be appointed in every parish, who are to see to all the children that cannot be cared for by their parents, placing them as apprentices where appropriate. In addition, the overseers are to manage a supply of work for all those who cannot maintain themselves. And they are to tax the parishioners to provide for the poor. Note the word “tax”—from this moment on, looking after the poor is a matter of secular social responsibility, paid for by local taxation; it is no longer an act of religious charity designed to improve the standing of the donor’s soul and send the rich man to Heaven. It is no longer a matter of choice. A second act repeals all the earlier legislation for the punishment of vagabonds, and practices such as cutting holes in people’s ears cease. A third act allows for hospitals or workhouses to be established for the accommodation of the poor. Workhouses might be spoken about with some horror in the modern world, but they mark a positive step away from the practice of evicting the homeless repeatedly until they are forced into felony and hanged. The Act of 1597, revised and reissued in 1601, does not solve all the problems overnight, but it leads to a long-term solution. And it saves lives. If you hear it being proclaimed, it is worth pausing and reflecting that, partly because of it, the English will never again starve to death in their thousands because of a harvest failure.