

## Portrait Of Britain: 1500

Britain in 1500 was for the most part an old-settled but, by the standards of much of contemporary Europe, an under-populated landscape. As an Italian visitor put it, 'The population of this island does not appear to me to bear any proportion to her fertility and riches'. A steady recovery from the steep population decline of two centuries of plague was only just beginning. England and Wales had perhaps 2.25 million people, Scotland and Ireland about a third of that number each. Lack of population pressure meant that living standards were comparatively high. Sir John Fortescue, writing in the 1470s, mocked French peasants for their diet of 'apples and very brown bread made with rye' when Englishmen of all classes ate 'every kind of flesh and fish in abundance'. An English builder's wage in 1500-9 bought more food than in any decade until the 1880s. Serfdom was withering away as tenants held a strong hand in negotiating with their lords. Richer peasants in southern England were able to build substantial timber-framed houses on stone foundations with several rooms, fireplaces, separate barns, sometimes even slate roofs. Thousands of them survive to this day.

Pastoral farming for wool, leather and meat thrived in upland areas everywhere, but in England it also took up large areas of former arable land as enclosed fields in the lowlands. This bred strife in places where the demand for grain and for access to common land was starting to rise again. There were riots against enclosures around Coventry in 1496 and in 1489 Parliament legislated against the decay of tillage. Scotland's agriculture was less controversial but more vulnerable to famine in a climate less favourable to cereal cultivation. Ireland was divided between an anglicised east and south-east and a Gaelic north and west characterised by the dominance of herds over transient tillage. Since one grain of cereal sown rarely produced more than four harvested, bad weather or blight could readily bring dearth anywhere and would do so more often as the number of mouths to feed grew. By 1527-28 the English government was sending out commissioners to assess grain stocks and prevent profiteering.

Yet disease killed far more than hunger, especially among the young. Infant mortality was high, child mortality not much less so. One-third of the population were under fifteen, but many would not see adulthood. Surviving to thirty was hard, but if one made it, an average life span of about sixty awaited. Plague, though less devastating than before, was recurrent, killing monks at Christ Church Priory, Canterbury, for example, in 1487, 1501, 1504 and 1507. Older-established diseases such as dysentery and smallpox continued to work alongside it, and a new scourge, the sweating sickness, perhaps a virulent form of influenza, struck England in 1485, 1508, 1517 and 1528. In 1555-59 bad harvests followed by another influenza-like epidemic killed more than one in twenty of the English population.

Wool was still exported raw to industrial cities on the continent from both England and Scotland, as it had been for several centuries. In England, however, increasing quantities were now made into cloth in booming weaving communities such as Lavenham in Suffolk and Halifax in Yorkshire. In areas unsuitable for intensive agriculture, like Halifax, cloth enabled many families to make ends meet, as wives and daughters spun and their menfolk wove. Elsewhere cloth made the fortunes of successful entrepreneurs: the clothier Thomas Spring of Lavenham was the richest commoner in England, not much poorer than the duke of Norfolk according to the tax assessments of 1523. Those who owned the sheep profited too, despite periodic outbreaks of murrain like that in 1480-81 in which the Norfolk lawyer Roger Townshend lost over 2,000 animals. Some of the great gentry of East Anglia ran flocks of 10,000 or more, while well-planned sheep-farming laid the basis for the fortunes of Midlands families like the Spencers of Althorp. Fishing, mining, metalworking and other handicrafts were locally important, but agriculture and cloth were the only truly national industries. Where sheep, cloth and fertile food production went together it made the richest counties in England. Kent, Wiltshire, Essex, Northamptonshire, Suffolk and Berkshire were the top six in pounds per thousand acres raised by the government in the forced loan of 1522.

English cloth was sold both to domestic consumers and to European customers via the developing London-Antwerp trade axis. Back from Antwerp came materials for the cloth industry such as alum and dyestuffs, manufactured goods such as high-quality cloth, linens and metal wares. Antwerp also offered European status symbols such as tapestries, paintings and books, as well as luxuries from further afield, especially once the trade

in spices brought by sea from the East Indies by the Portuguese was established there in 1499. Only wine, counting for more than a quarter of total imports by value in 1500, was more readily found outside Antwerp, notably at the former English stronghold of Bordeaux. Scotland traded its wool, leather, cloth and fish to France, the Netherlands and the Baltic countries for a similar range of imports.

Ports like London and Exeter flourished through this growing trade. Bristol did well out of more distant opportunities from the 1480s, as its merchants began to exploit the rich Newfoundland fishing grounds. From 1496, under the leadership of the Genoese Cabot family, merchants were commissioned to explore the Atlantic for Henry VII and set up colonies in uninhabited or conquered lands, though none as yet resulted. Meanwhile older centres of manufacture and raw wool export such as Coventry and Boston were in steep decline. Coventry may have lost half its population between 1440 and 1550. Only London, with some 40,000 souls, counted as a big city by European standards, though it was less than half the size of Paris. Bristol or Norwich, with populations a quarter that number, would only have made decent provincial towns in the Netherlands, half the size of Tournai or Utrecht. Edinburgh was probably about the size of Bristol, Dublin rather smaller. Though a smaller proportion of the population lived in towns in Scotland, Wales, and the English Pale in Ireland than in England, urban centres were still major concentrations of wealth, business and administration. Only in Gaelic Ireland and its neighbours the Scottish Isles and Western Highlands were towns insignificant and few.

The rise and decline of different towns, the spread of weaving and enclosure produced shifts in employment and population. For the lucky this might mean going to London and making a fortune. For the unlucky it meant being arrested for vagrancy. A statute of 1495 prescribed three days in the stocks for 'vagabonds, idle and suspect persons living suspiciously'; in 1531 this became a still more summary whipping and sending home. Such measures paralleled local outbursts of concern about the behaviour of the young, the poor, the mobile and the under-employed. In market towns, manufacturing areas and along major roads as well as in larger towns, local elites of yeomen, artisans and traders tried to maintain order in their communities through their positions in manorial courts, borough courts and the administration of the parish church. Charitable provision for those genuinely unable to work, through almshouses, confraternities and parish collections, increased at the same time but could not cope with the problem by the mid-sixteenth century, when poor rates began to be levied. As work opportunities for men began to contract, women's options beyond domestic work, child care and spinning contracted still further. Towns placed increasing restrictions on independent trading by women and the steady replacement of ale by hopped beer brewed in commercial breweries limited what had been an important women's trade.

The prosperity of the years around 1500 was vividly displayed in church-building. Spires, towers, clerestories, aisles and side chapels were being added to churches all over England and lowland Scotland, often, like the great spire of St James's, Louth, built in 1500-15, funded by myriad local donations. Inside there were ever more statues of saints, lights kept burning before them by the confraternities, each with its own patron saint or feast. These religious guilds were proliferating in town and countryside alike, sometimes as craft associations, sometimes as vehicles for new forms of pious practice, sometimes as social clubs or unincorporated town councils. The greatest, like the Holy Cross guild of Stratford-upon-Avon, drew together the social elites of entire regions; the least are known to us from a handful of bequests in wills from one country parish. Yet all subscribed to the great social ideal of Christian charity between guild brothers, guild sisters, and neighbours in general. And all prayed for the souls of the departed, whose release from purgatory was one of the key concerns of religion.

When not building churches or holding guild feasts and services, churchwardens and guild wardens co-ordinated the expenditure of much of their and their neighbours' surplus income on the elaboration of local festive culture. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, new or spreading Christian feasts and practices – Corpus Christi, St George's Day, boy bishops, Easter sepulchres – were added to the older rhythm of Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas, Shrovetide, Palm Sunday, Easter, Ascension Day, Whitsun and All Saints. Processions, plays, services and feasts of increasing scale marked each of them out. In the decades before 1500, new secular jollifications joined them in the town and village calendar. At Hocktide, eight days after Easter, teams of men and women kidnapped members of the opposite sex and ransomed them for the benefit of parish funds. Maypoles, morris dancing and Robin Hood plays all spread widely too.

In the countryside religious rites spoke directly to the needs of the agrarian economy in the blessing of ploughs on

Plough Sunday in January, the blessing of land and crops on Rogation Days. In the cities religious rites spoke just as directly to the needs of social, political and economic order, as Corpus Christi processions took the citizenry through their streets. They marched as one united body, but the mayor and aldermen escorted the consecrated eucharistic host more closely than common councillors, councillors more closely than guildsmen, higher-status crafts before lower. The unenfranchised – almost all women and many poorer men – had to make do with watching the processions and the cycles of plays that often accompanied them. Local identities were reinforced as different communities stressed different feasts, just as different parishes, regions and nations honoured distinctive saints: William Elphinstone, bishop of Aberdeen from 1483 to 1514, encouraged devotion to more than seventy neglected saints of Scotland.

For some this interweaving of religious and social life no doubt made religion an unreflective business. Protestant reformers would soon call it superstitious. There was a niche saint to be invoked for each of life's problems. St Erasmus, martyred by evisceration, served for stomach troubles; St Sebastian, martyred by crossbow, for the plague with its shooting pains; St Margaret, swallowed by a dragon which exploded to permit her escape, for childbirth. In the mass itself the stress on the miracle of transubstantiation could lead to a mechanistic view of the merits of 'seeing' one's 'maker', as the priest elevated the consecrated wafer to be adored as the true body of Christ. And the idea that the celebration of mass could focus the benefits of Christ's sacrifice on a named individual led to a multiplication of chantry masses paid for by those keen to ease their own passage, or that of their loved ones, heavenwards.

Yet there was also much in contemporary piety that was more individual and thoughtful. Schooling and lay literacy had grown as disposable income rose and child labour became dispensable in the economy of larger numbers of households. From 1476, when William Caxton began printing at Westminster, and 1507-8, when Walter Chepman and Andrew Millar did the same at Edinburgh, book production could advance well beyond even the well-organised copying of manuscript texts organised by fifteenth-century stationers.

From the outset, religious books were central to the market for print. Some were compilations of saints' lives or single-sheet indulgences to purchase the remission of sins on the authority of the Church. But many – 114 known editions for the English market at perhaps 500 copies each between the 1470s and the 1530s – were primers, books of Latin prayers for reading in church or at home, often in tune with the Christocentric trend of the new devotions to the Five Wounds of Christ or the Holy Name of Jesus. Others catered to a still more individual lay spirituality, ranging from the works of the English mystic Walter Hilton through translations of Thomas a Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* to the sermons on the penitential psalms of John Fisher, bishop of Rochester.

Some books stimulated an individual or family religion condemned by the Church as heretical. Manuscript works generated by the Wycliffite scholars of the late-fourteenth century still circulated in the Lollard communities of the Chilterns and elsewhere. Indeed, bishops were finding more Lollards to condemn than they had for a century, though it is unclear whether there were more to find or whether they were looking harder. Lollardy would soon blend with Protestantism seeping in from abroad. Both movements were critical of the monasteries, most of which were past their best well before Henry VIII and the Scottish reformers struck them down. On the other hand, Protestantism drew some of its earliest leaders – the martyr Robert Barnes and Bishops Bale, Coverdale and Hilsey in England, John Willock and John McAlpine in Scotland – from the friars. Bequests from lay people suggest their preaching and pastoral work were still widely popular. They featured in the Franciscan Observants, the favourite reforming movement of Henry VII as of many of his contemporaries on the thrones of Europe. And they would provide, together with More, Fisher and the Carthusians, the leading opposition to Henry VIII's attack on the church.

To cater for the needs of a more educated laity, expansion in the universities aimed to generate a more educated secular clergy, though the lawyers tended to outnumber the preachers. New colleges were being founded at a lively rate. Between 1440 and 1530 Cambridge gained King's, Queens', Jesus, Christ's, and St John's; Oxford added Magdalen, Brasenose, Corpus Christi, and Cardinal's College (now Christ Church); and Scotland saw three new colleges at St Andrews and new universities at Glasgow and Aberdeen. In the universities, as at court, humanist intellectual influences from Italy, France and the Netherlands were gathering strength. Desiderius Erasmus, whose publication of the *Adages*, pearls of wisdom culled from the classics, in 1500, marked him out as the rising star of northern humanism, visited England in 1499 and struck up a lasting friendship with the young

Thomas More. The association would lead in 1516 to More's Utopia, the greatest English contribution to international humanist literature. For the moment direct humanist influences on vernacular literature were not so strong. English and Scots verse alike was dominated by authors, such as Skelton and Dunbar, who looked back to Chaucer rather than across to Italy. Welsh and Irish poets continued to develop their inherited traditions under the patronage of local lords whose lineage, hospitality and valour they praised with great virtuosity.

The best way to reap the benefits of continental learning was to travel. Englishmen studying in Italy in 1500 included Richard Pace, future secretary to Henry VIII, Thomas Linacre, future founder of the Royal College of Physicians, and Cuthbert Tunstall, future Master of the Rolls, bishop of Durham and author of the best-selling maths textbook *De Arte Supputandi* (1522). British artists travelled less than scholars and the results were evident in the comparative insularity of artistic style. Perpendicular church architecture flourished without much reference to the classicism spreading from Italy, and until the mid-sixteenth century Italian materials such as terracotta and motifs such as putti, 'antique heads' and acanthus leaves were applied superficially to traditional courtyard houses without any sense of anachronism. When rulers wanted works that would look sophisticated to continental eyes they had to bring in foreign artists prepared to cross the Channel. Those who came, above all Pietro Torrigiano and Hans Holbein, were not negligible talents, but it was still hard for Henry VIII to keep up with the French and Netherlandish courts as he felt he should. English music, in contrast, while no longer at the leading edge of European innovation, did produce native composers of lasting reputation, John Taverner in the 1520s leading on to the Elizabethans Tallis, Gibbons and Byrd. Scotland too had strong musical traditions and buildings erected by master-masons from the Netherlands and France.

What the English were good at, Continentals thought, was killing their kings. Five depositions, two murders and a death in battle between 1461 and 1485 suggested to some an instability that went beyond the incompetence of individual monarchs. Among the ministers of Henry VII, many of them common lawyers of comparatively humble origins, remedies were sought in increasing the financial strength of the crown, its power to do effective justice and its ability to intervene in local affairs with or without the support of the great nobility. The King's character fitted such a programme well: suspicious, concerned with detail, prepared to be thought avaricious, though it was probably the power and security that wealth brought that comforted him rather than the wealth itself. Henry used debt as a tool of political management, wishing to have 'many persons in his danger at his pleasure'. Great men who were loyal, like the earls of Oxford and Shrewsbury or the duke of Bedford, he trusted, but he was also prepared to make those he trusted great, men like his mother's financial agent Reynold Bray or the ruthless lawyer Edmund Dudley. The result was often disruption in local politics and disaffection among those who felt Henry ruled with too heavy a hand. Yet in the crises of the reign, facing the pretenders Lambert Simnel in 1487 and Perkin Warbeck in 1497, securing the Tudor succession in 1509, Henry and his lieutenants amassed enough support to survive, preparing the strength of the later Tudor monarchy.

In Ireland such aggressive kingship was less feasible. After the Gaelic revival of the past two centuries the boundaries between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish areas had stabilised, leaving most of the island beyond royal control. The influence of the English crown could be temporarily increased by expensive military interventions like that of Sir Edward Poyning's in 1494-95, the source of Poyning's Law which subjected Irish parliamentary legislation to English veto. But most of the time Henry had to rely on the Fitzgerald earls of Kildare to maintain order in the English Pale and defence against the Gaelic lords by their private power among the Anglo-Irish and their private deals with Gaelic neighbours. Only when the Fitzgeralds rebelled in 1534 would English policy turn to schemes for more drastic remodelling of Irish politics and society.

In Wales military conquest and cultural conflict were heading towards a more peaceful resolution. Henry Tudor, hailed by some Welsh poets as a native deliverer from Saxon tyranny, bringer of 'the long foretold triumph of the red dragon over the white', found room at his court for loyal Welshmen and gave his son Prince Arthur a strong council to supervise the fragmented government of Wales and the Marches. He collected large sums of money from the Welsh as from all his subjects, but he gave substantive benefits in return, issuing charters removing the civil disabilities imposed in the wake of Owain Glyndwr's rebellion. These also allowed the Welsh gentry to hold land by English land law, a much preferable arrangement to those who wished to build up hereditary estates. Thus local leaders like Sir Rhys ap Thomas of Dinefwr or the Gruffydds of Penrhyn were drawn into an easier relationship with royal authority than that of the Anglo-Irish peers, let alone the Gaelic lords of Ireland, and the basis was laid for the Acts of Union 1536-43.

The Highlands and Islands posed similar challenges for the kings of Scots. They too asserted themselves with occasional military forays: James IV toured the Isles in force three times in 1493-95. They were heavily dependent on noblemen able to exercise power across the cultural divide between Lowland and Gaelic worlds: the Campbells in the West, the Gordons in the North. Yet such dependence was less out of the ordinary for them than for the English. Throughout the kingdom the nobility, bolstered by strong kin-groups, hereditary offices and a low rate of attrition in Scotland's briefer and less frequent civil strife, ruled the localities far more securely than their counterparts south of the border. The comparative weakness of the fiscal and judicial organs of the state may have frustrated James IV, who wanted money for an impressive court, a modern artillery train and a navy of large, heavily-gunned ships. Yet it was probably a comfort to his subjects, who did not need to rebel against over-taxation as Henry VII's did in 1489, 1492 and 1497.

Henry's first wars sprang from an English engagement in French politics lessened, but not ended, by the loss of Normandy and Gascony in 1450-53. His son would revive such war on a larger scale, though with little result. The war of 1497 came in response to James IV's own quest for military glory. By 1500 Henry and James were at peace, awaiting the wedding in 1503 of James to Henry's daughter Margaret that would unite their dynasties. The peace it brought was short-lived: James would meet his death at Flodden invading England in 1513. Yet at length, after a century of wars and Reformations, this was the alliance that would bring the Stewarts to the English throne and unite the crowns of Britain.

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