



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Waddell, Brodie (2022) The economic crisis of the 1690s in England. *Historical Journal* , ISSN 0018-246X.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/50023/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

ARTICLE

The Economic Crisis of the 1690s in England

Brodie Waddell 

History, Classics and Archaeology, Birkbeck, University of London, UK
Email: b.waddell@bbk.ac.uk

Abstract

Beginning in 1689, England was struck by not one but three economic shocks. First, the war against France – Europe’s greatest military power – attracted swarms of hostile warships and privateers that heavily damaged English maritime trade, while military expenses also led to a doubling of the tax burden. Second, wartime conditions and government mismanagement sparked a currency crisis in 1695–7 that halted much domestic commerce and caused a run on the recently founded Bank of England. Third, William III’s reign brought rapid inflation in the cost of the necessities of life, especially food and fuel, which resulted in prolonged widespread hunger from 1693 onwards. Yet, these hardships have rarely received more than a passing mention in political histories of the Glorious Revolution and do not fit easily into the narratives of economic expansion in the later Stuart period. Close analysis of these ‘hard times’ demonstrates the limits of histories that emphasize long-term developments over short-term crises. Using evidence from a wide range of local and national archives, this article shows the impact of these shocks on the lives of ordinary people.

Looking out from her country house over the cloth-making districts of south Somerset, Mary Clarke watched the troubles mounting in the wake of the Glorious Revolution. From the moment of William and Mary’s coronation in April 1689, England was at war with the new regime’s enemies in Scotland, Ireland, and France. The following year, Clarke recorded that ‘want of trade’ was great, that money was ‘never scarcer’, and pondered ‘how the taxes will be raised tiss hard to know’.¹ The weather soon turned, bringing unseasonable temperatures and ruined harvests. At nearby Exeter, the price of wheat doubled. Around the same time, the supply of money and credit essential to the south-west’s woollen industry contracted – first gradually, then in a sudden collapse in late 1695. The poor of the region slipped into beggary. Old Goody Thorne came to Clarke in tears after labouring to spin thirty ounces of wool, only to be paid with an old shilling worth merely a third of its face

¹ Somerset Archives and Local Studies (SALS), DD\SF/7/1/31/15, /20.

value because of the severely debased coinage.² ‘The poor’, wrote Clarke in November 1696, ‘have noe bread nor noe worke noe fire nor noe cloths’.³

The hard times of William III’s reign left almost no family untouched. Shortages of food, fuel, money, and employment afflicted the whole kingdom throughout the 1690s, a decade in which ordinary people faced a barrage of economic blows worse than anything they had experienced since the turmoil of the Civil Wars and Interregnum. By several measures, the period was as bad as the notorious crisis years that punctuated the reigns of the Tudors and early Stuarts. Yet, these hardships have rarely received more than a passing mention in histories of the Glorious Revolution.⁴ Instead, scholars of the later seventeenth century tend to present their period as one of a growing ‘commercial empire’, an expansive ‘financial revolution’, and rising living standards for labouring people.⁵ Such terms are accurate when applied to the later Stuart period as a whole, but that is exactly why the 1690s stand out. Three decades of growing prosperity came to a shuddering halt. Examining the nature and effects of the disasters that unfolded not only brings attention to an understudied moment in English history. It also shows the limits of the overarching narrative of long-term economic development. This sort of multi-pronged, cyclical calamity – when military conflict, monetary instability, and rapid inflation caused widespread misery among ordinary people, elements which will be explored below in turn – had more in common with the much better-known ‘crisis’ years of the 1590s, 1640s, and 1790s.⁶ A closer look at the 1690s shows that the narrative traditionally offered by social and economic historians of a crisis-prone Tudor and early Stuart period followed by a prosperous and stable later Stuart period is overdrawn.

² SALS, DD\SF/7/1/31/69. Thorne’s shilling was valued at a groat rather than the usual 12d, which means she was being paid only 4d for about two days of work.

³ SALS, DD\SF/7/1/31/98.

⁴ Steve Pincus, *1688: the first modern revolution* (New Haven, CT, 2009), pp. 449–50, 458–9; Tim Harris, *Revolution: the great crisis of the British monarchy* (London, 2007), p. 491; Tony Claydon, *William III and the Godly Revolution* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 123–4; John Miller, *The Glorious Revolution* (2nd edn, London, 1997), p. 50; Eveline Cruickshanks, *The Glorious Revolution* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 67, 78. They receive no mention at all in Maurice Ashley, *The Glorious Revolution of 1688* (New York, NY, 1966); J. R. Jones, *The Revolution of 1688 in England* (New York, NY, 1972); W. A. Speck, *Reluctant revolutionaries: Englishmen and the Revolution of 1688* (Oxford, 1988).

⁵ David Ormrod, *The rise of commercial empires* (Cambridge, 2003); Henry Roseveare, *The financial revolution, 1660–1750* (London, 2013); Keith Wrightson, *Earthly necessities: economic lives in early modern Britain* (New Haven, CT, 2000), pp. 230–1. It should be noted that these three authors forthrightly if briefly acknowledge the difficulties of the 1690s within a broader story of economic improvement. The contemporary economic crisis in Scotland, by contrast, has already received an excellent detailed study: Karen Cullen, *Famine in Scotland: the ‘ill years’ of the 1690s* (Edinburgh, 2010).

⁶ R. B. Outhwaite, ‘Dearth, the English crown, and the “crisis of the 1590s”’, in Peter Clark, ed., *The European crisis of the 1590s* (London, 1985), pp. 23–43; J. A. Sharp, ‘Social strain and social dislocation’, in John Guy, ed., *The reign of Elizabeth I: court and culture in the last decade* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 192–211; Ben Coates, *The impact of the English Civil War on the economy of London, 1642–1650* (Aldershot, 2004); Steve Hindle, ‘Dearth and the English Revolution: the harvest crisis of 1647–1650’, *Economic History Review*, 61:51 (2008), pp. 64–98; Roger Wells, *Wretched faces: famine in wartime England 1793–1801* (Gloucester, 1988).

Most people experienced such problems not as an abstract national misfortune but rather as a mounting series of local and personal calamities. Using evidence from a range of local and national archives, this article makes the case that the economic turmoil is best appreciated by studying its impact on individuals and communities. Merchants, shopkeepers, and artisans learned of vital shipments lost or cancelled, only to receive bills for poll taxes and poor rates that rose more steeply every year. They became desperate as debts grew larger and bailiffs prowled at the door.⁷ Labouring men and women who worked in manufacturing found their wages unpaid at the end of the week, often a precursor to unemployment. Their families, and the rest of the poorer sort, struggled through bitterly cold winters as the price of fuel and food rose higher. Households used to wheaten bread switched to rougher grains, while the worst off were left with horseflesh, peas, beans, or turnips.⁸ If such options ran out, the poor turned to their neighbours for pity or took to the road in search of charity or work.

The direct suffering caused by the sharp reversal of economic fortunes should not be neglected in histories of the Revolution. If William's landing at Torbay on 5 November is worth including in England's national memory, then Goody Thorne's tears for her clipped shilling ought to be remembered too. Indeed, the sudden reversal of fortunes was often directly linked to the new regime and provoked much political debate.⁹ When we view the 1690s from the perspective of a sailor's widow in Stepney or a weaving family in Tiverton, we can understand why the decade provoked such contention. Furthermore, histories of later Stuart economic development cannot highlight the rise of London and Bristol as global ports or the growth of industry in places like Manchester, Leeds, and Newcastle without also accounting for the precariousness of these apparent sources of prosperity. The events of the 1690s demonstrate that historical narratives of long-term economic expansion risk eliding the hard times that shaped the lives of ordinary people.

I

On 17 May 1689, the English crown declared war on Louis XIV's France. The eight-year conflict that ensued was a catastrophe for overseas and coastal trade. Almost immediately, the war sparked widespread privateering and

⁷ On the personal tragedy of 'loss of credit' and bankruptcy, see Craig Muldrew, *The economy of obligation* (Basingstoke, 1998), pp. 274–98; Tawny Paul, *The poverty of disaster: debt and insecurity in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 2019). For increasing numbers of middling households 'breaking' in this period, see J. Horsfall Turner, ed., *The Rev. Oliver Heywood, B.A., 1630–1702* (4 vols., Bingley, 1881–5), III, p. 268, IV, p. 173; *The manuscripts of S. H. Le Fleming, Esq., of Rydal Hall* (London, 1890) (hereafter *Le Fleming*), p. 331.

⁸ Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC), *The manuscripts of the House of Lords* (2 vols., 1900–3), II, pp. 509–10; Turner, ed., *Heywood*, IV, p. 130; A. Clark, ed., *The life and times of Anthony Wood, antiquary, of Oxford, 1632–1695* (5 vols., Oxford, 1881–1900) (hereafter *Wood*), III, p. 437.

⁹ For the increasingly politicized public reactions to the crisis, see Brodie Waddell, 'The politics of economic distress in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, 1689–1702', *English Historical Review*, 131 (2015), pp. 318–51.

commerce-raiding that resulted in thousands of British vessels being captured or wrecked. Only four months after hostilities began, an official 'Account of ships lately taken by the French privateers' listed fifty-five merchant vessels including *The Avarilla* from Virginia, carrying 800 hogsheads of tobacco, and the unfortunately named *Happy Conclusion* from Jamaica, captured with 600 hogsheads of sugar. According to this account, in these first few months the crown had already lost £73,050 in customs revenue and the merchants £218,500 in merchandise.¹⁰ The threat to internal trade arrived almost as rapidly, due to England's reliance on coastal shipping for much of its domestic commerce. The coasts had become so dangerous that bulky goods such as cheese from Liverpool and Chester had to be sent to London by land.¹¹ As a result of such disruptions, the first year of the war was described by contemporaries as a 'hard time of bad trading'.¹² Yet these initial losses did not signal merely a short-term dip in trade; they foreshadowed seven more years of continuously depressed and disordered maritime commerce, with wide-ranging effects throughout English society. Ordinary people would be paying for the costs of war, through taxation and shocks of business and employment, long after the cannons fell silent.

Although the English government soon set up a convoy system to counteract French attacks on commercial vessels, the results were mixed. When news reached England of the under-protected Turkey fleet of English and Dutch merchant ships sailing directly into the main French fleet in the Bay of Lagos and suffering heavy losses, it 'put a great Stop to Trade', bringing misery not only for the traders involved but also for London's silk-weaving community.¹³ By early 1694, the Turkey merchants had 'shut up their shops and warehouses' and the price of silk had risen so dramatically that 'multitudes' of silk-throwers and silk-weavers in London were 'greatly distressed...for want of work'.¹⁴ Two years later, the weavers still recalled 'when the Turkey-Fleet was Damnified by the French' as a time when they had 'neither Work nor Money to buy Bread'.¹⁵ Such infamous disasters left scars that were slow to fade, even as English defensive policies became more successful.¹⁶

¹⁰ The National Archives (TNA), CO 5/1/18 ('An account of ships lately taken by the French privateers', Sept. 1689). The annual net customs revenue was just over £1 million in 1687, so this was a loss of 14 per cent of the expected yearly revenue in only four months.

¹¹ J. D. Marshall, ed., *The autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster, 1665-1752* (Manchester, 1967), pp. 94-5. For the continued dangerousness of the western sea in 1694-5, see Bodleian Library, Oxford (Bodl.), Carte MS 76, fo. 705.

¹² Turner, ed., *Heywood*, III, pp. 238-9. For other reports from this time such as 'Money dead; no trading', see Wood, III, p. 319; *Report on the manuscripts of the marquess of Downshire* (London, 2 parts, 1924), I pt 1, p. 329; Narcissus Luttrell, *A brief historical relation of state affairs from September 1678 to April 1714* (6 vols., Oxford, 1857), I, pp. 576, 578, II, p. 27.

¹³ On the failure to protect the Turkey fleet, see Luttrell, *Relation*, III, p. 161; John Ehrman, *The navy in the war of William III* (Cambridge, 1953), pp. 501-2.

¹⁴ Luttrell, *Relation*, III, p. 288; HMC, *Lords*, I, p. 323.

¹⁵ TNA, CO 388/5/57.

¹⁶ The other notorious loss occurred in September 1695 with the capture of three great East India Company ships, worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. The company's stock fell from 94

Moreover, perhaps more damaging were the persistent small-scale attacks nearer to home. Observers positioned along the English coastline provided a stream of bad news. In 1693, at Harwich in Essex, a resident reported that privateers 'swarm [ex]tremely upon this Coast [so] that not a Ship can Stir' and 'one of them forced a ship on shore laden with wheate oyle & skins & went on board her & took out 80 sacks & then set her on fire'.¹⁷ Even local coastal traders and fishermen faced the constant threat of a violent capture. Only the Treaty of Ryswick, signed in September 1697, finally brought an end to the plague of privateers.

Some did benefit from the war. Men with official posts in the expanding fiscal-military bureaucracy earned a tidy profit, as did the well-connected private contractors who supplied the troops with food and uniforms.¹⁸ Those with capital to invest in government debt often did well.¹⁹ The war also opened opportunities for humbler individuals, such as the gunsmiths of Birmingham and the shipwrights in the busy royal dockyards.²⁰ Almost 100,000 Englishmen earned a living as soldiers or sailors.²¹ Some communities benefited from the suddenly increased demand for smuggled goods and from the occasional windfalls that came when English privateers captured enemy ships.²² More broadly, manufacturers of goods that normally competed with continental imports profited when shipments from France were banned and other sources were squeezed by the dangers of shipping.²³

Yet, for most people, the war's economic damage was more obvious than these indirect gains. In fact, merely counting up the millions lost to privateers severely underestimates the material costs. For every English ship captured by the French, many more simply did not sail at all. Fear of attack made small-scale merchants such as Samuel Jeake of Rye give up the maritime trade for a safer occupation, though he soon learned that this 'could but barely maintain my family'.²⁴ The ships that still sailed faced higher costs from losing members of their crews to the navy and having to wait for convoys. They were

to 54 by 22 October: Luttrell, *Relation*, III, pp. 524–5, 540, 544, 550; Anne L. Murphy, *The origins of English financial markets* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 184.

¹⁷ Bodl., Carte MS 76, fo. 389. Dozens of additional examples could be cited, such as the frequent mentions of losses in Luttrell, *Relation*, III, pp. 117, 120, 122, 125, 145, 147, 157, and *passim*.

¹⁸ Ehrman, *Navy*, pp. 149–51.

¹⁹ For an example of the creditors and projectors, see David Armitage, 'Paterson, William (1658–1719)', *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. See also the entries for Sir William Scawen and Sir Theodore Janssen. For other public creditors at this time, see P. G. M. Dickson, *The financial revolution in England: a study in the development of public credit 1688–1756* (London, 1967), pp. 253–60.

²⁰ John Childs, *The British army of William III, 1689–1702* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 171–2; D. C. Coleman, 'Naval dockyards under the later Stuarts', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 6 (1953), pp. 139–40.

²¹ Childs, *Army*, pp. 103–4 (c. 41,000–69,000 British soldiers); Ehrman, *Navy*, p. 110 (c. 22,000–49,000 British sailors).

²² For the substantial incomes that could come from smuggling, see D. W. Jones, *War and economy in the age of William III and Marlborough* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 169–70.

²³ Marshall, ed., *Stout*, p. 94.

²⁴ Michael Hunter and Annabel Gregory, eds., *An astrological diary of the seventeenth century: Samuel Jeake of Rye, 1652–1699* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 195, 233.

also adversely affected by the frequent embargos that the crown laid on all commercial shipping.²⁵ As well as causing expensive delays, these embargos forced traders to send out vessels at unseasonable times of the year, meaning more were lost or wrecked in storms.²⁶ Overall, it was seaborne trade as a whole that suffered, a point easily missed by focusing on the relatively small number of long-distance merchant ships lost to the French.

The 'decay of trade' during the Nine Years War can be measured directly against pre-war figures. The various numbers that can be pieced together from local and national taxation records are hardly indisputable, but suggest a steep decline in commercial shipping. The starkest figures are from the port books of the exchequer, which record the number and tonnage of ships cleared for departure (Figure 1). Though records do not survive for all years, English shipping clearances fell from 331,000 tonnes in 1686 to less than 200,000 tonnes per annum in 1692–3, 1693–4, and 1696–7.²⁷ National customs revenue also dropped, albeit less dramatically. James II received about £1 million a year from this source, whereas William III was able to collect annually only £600,000 in the first three years of his reign.²⁸ By these proxies, we can suggest that English imports and exports may have fallen by something like half in some of the years following the Revolution.

Coastal shipping – at this time, vital for domestic trade – also suffered a measurable decline. The south coast, unsurprisingly, was hardest hit. Annual coastwise trade for Kent and Sussex ports during the war was more than 20 per cent lower than its long-term pre-war average.²⁹ The contraction of east coast trade was probably less significant, though still unmistakable. At King's Lynn, the town's dues collected from shipping declined by almost one third between 1688 and 1690.³⁰ Annual coastal shipments from Newcastle, which supplied London and much of England with fuel, fell from about 544,000 tonnes under James II to merely 430,000 tonnes during the war.³¹

To pay for the conflict, the state raised taxes on the English population. The high levels of taxation in the long eighteenth century are well-known, but the sharpness of the spike after 1688 remains remarkable.³² Whereas James II's government only collected around £2.0 million in tax revenue per year, this rose to nearly £3.0 million soon after the Revolution and peaked at more

²⁵ See, for example, the embargoes issued in 1693 and 1694, and the merchants' complaints against them: TNA, CO 389/13, pp. 5–6, 52; TNA, CO 391/7, pp. 176–8; Luttrell, *Relation*, III, pp. 75, 82.

²⁶ Jones, *War*, pp. 145–57.

²⁷ R. Davis, *The rise of the English shipping industry in the 17th and 18th centuries* (London and New York, NY, 1962), p. 26.

²⁸ *Parliamentary papers 1868–69* (366), XXXV, pp. 4–66, 444–5. For other national figures, see Jones, *War*, pp. 127–31, 145–61; Murphy, *Origins*, pp. 16–17.

²⁹ J. H. Andrews, 'Geographical aspects of the maritime trade of Kent and Sussex, 1650–1750' (Ph.D. thesis, London, 1954), pp. 170 (Table 18), 192 (Table 23).

³⁰ King's Lynn Borough Archives, KL/C 44/55.

³¹ John Hatcher, *The history of the British coal industry, I: Before 1700* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 490–2.

³² P. K. O'Brien, 'The political economy of British taxation, 1660–1815', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 41 (1988), p. 3; John Brewer, *The sinews of power: war, money and the English state, 1688–1783* (London, 1989), ch. 4.

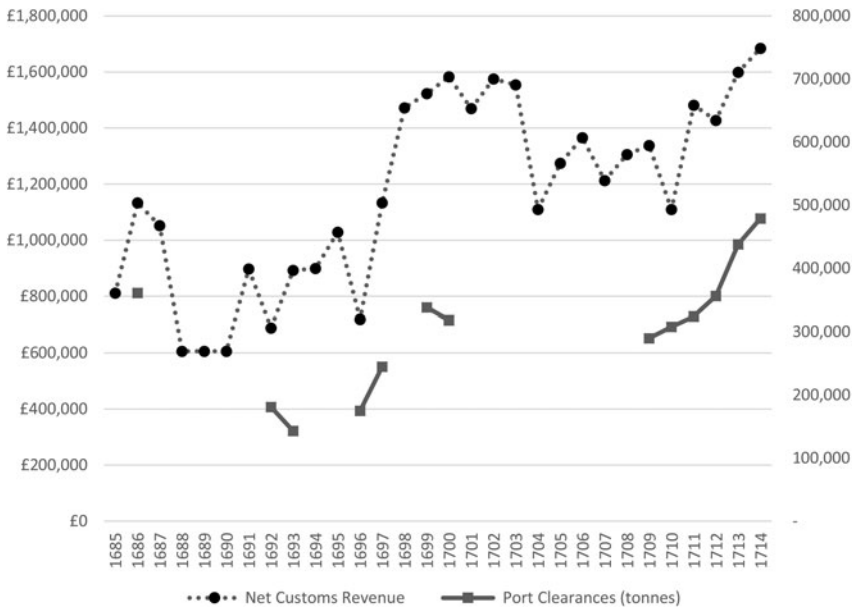


Figure 1. National customs revenue and shipping tonnage, 1685–1714.

than £5.0 million in 1698–9 (Figure 2).³³ It would have had to be still higher if not for additional funds provided by the Bank of England through the creation of the National Debt. Although the new government repealed the unpopular hearth tax, it soon introduced a land tax, expanded the excise on beer, and passed new duties on salt, seaborne coal, glass, tobacco pipes, leather, hackney coaches, hawkers, and windows. New taxes were even imposed on births, burials, and marriages.³⁴ Inevitably, ordinary people quickly felt the impact. By 1701, a Wiltshire clothier who at first enthusiastically supported William III's early campaigns against Jacobite resistance noted with apparent bitterness that he had since paid close to £80 in taxes 'through the occasion of the Revolution'.³⁵ Of course, much of this revenue was spent on shipbuilding, seamen's wages, and other domestic reinvestment, but huge sums were sent overseas to provision the army in Flanders and hire foreign mercenaries, draining millions from the English economy.³⁶

The end of the war in September 1697 did not bring immediate relief. While customs revenue from foreign trade revived, the number of English ships

³³ C. D. Chandaman, *The English public revenue, 1660–1688* (Oxford, 1975), p. 333 (beginning at Michaelmas 1680); *Parliamentary papers 1868–69* (366), XXXV, pp. 4–66 (beginning at Michaelmas 1688).

³⁴ J. V. Beckett, 'Land tax or excise: the levying of taxation in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England', *English Historical Review*, 100 (1985), pp. 298–9.

³⁵ J. de L. Mann, 'A Wiltshire family of clothiers: George and Hester Wansey, 1683–1714', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 9 (1956), p. 252.

³⁶ Jones, *War*, pp. 20–6, 228–47.

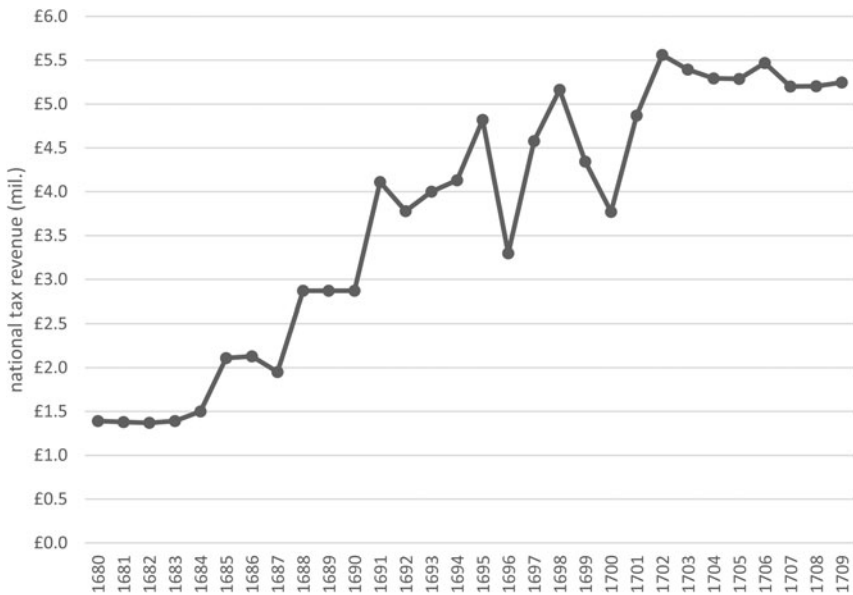


Figure 2. Total national tax revenue.

clearing the ports in 1700–1 was still lower than before the Revolution. Demobilization costs and interest owed on wartime loans meant that taxes remained high between the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick and the outbreak of the War of Spanish Succession in 1702. Peace brought new problems too. With parliament fearful of a large standing army, tens of thousands of seamen and soldiers – most still owed much of their wages – were immediately discharged from service in 1698–9.³⁷ The surge of unpaid, unemployed veterans threatened the prospects of other workers and may have pushed down wages in many localities. Struggling to find lawful work, many of the newly disbanded understandably turned to begging or crime.³⁸

The war's adverse effects were widespread. With merchants across the country suffering, the thousands of men, women, and children whose labour supplied them with goods for export fared no better, as depressed demand caused misery in England's textile districts. The plight of the London silk-weavers after the damage to the Turkey fleet was hardly an isolated example. In the south-west, Thomas Power reported that 'thousands stand Idle for want of supply' of raw wool in November 1695, because 'wee have not had 30 baggs of wooll into this porte for Eight month past for want of convoy, whereas

³⁷ Childs, *Army*, pp. 199–205; Ehrman, *Navy*, pp. 617–18. For examples of desperate disbanded soldiers owed wage arrears, see Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, pp. 518, 618.

³⁸ For the major problems caused by a proportionally smaller demobilization in 1748, see Nicholas Rogers, *Meyham: post-war crime and violence in Britain, 1748–1753* (New Haven CT, 2012), ch. 2.

usually had two or three vessells every weeke'.³⁹ Hardship also hit the cloth towns in eastern counties like Essex. In Colchester, where woollen production dropped markedly, weaver James Carter lamented in November 1693 that 'he hath ben out of Constant work ever since last Shrovetide' and pleaded with the town's magistrates to help him to find 'worke in his Trade'.⁴⁰

For the families of rank-and-file soldiers and sailors, any hope of economic security was illusory: wages were paid belatedly and often in discounted debentures, provisions repeatedly ran short, and military careers ended in death, maiming, or the sudden immiseration of demobilization.⁴¹ Areas with high concentrations of sailors and shipbuilding, such as London's eastern suburbs, suffered deprivation. In November 1693, the churchwardens and overseers of Stepney reported that many local 'Seafaring men' had been killed or captured during the conflict, leaving their widows and orphans in 'great poverty and want', pushed 'to such lamentable extremitie as to beg graines for their food'.⁴² Nearby in Ratcliffe, local officers witnessed 'great increase of the poor, occasioned by the present war'.⁴³

The inhabitants of Stepney and Ratcliffe were not alone. The 1690s witnessed the fastest rise in the cost of poor relief out of any decade in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁴⁴ Just as the number of needy parishioners was increasing, so too was the population of 'poor travellers' who moved from place to place in search of relief. Though an increase was noted earlier in the decade, the demobilization that began in autumn 1697 led to even higher numbers on the roads, including many described as seamen or soldiers.⁴⁵ In Yorkshire, the charitably minded minister Oliver Heywood noted in early 1698 that 'tis a matter of admiration to think what multitudes of poor people come weekly and dayly to our door, from Halifax and elsewhere'.⁴⁶

The human and financial cost of England joining the battle against Louis XIV was severe. The economic problems were doubtless made worse by the fact that the English people were relatively unfamiliar with major military mobilization, having just enjoyed fourteen years of peace after the three brief Anglo-Dutch Wars. Contemporaries would have had to look back to the 1640s to find a precedent for the scale and duration of wartime disruption that erupted after the Glorious Revolution.

³⁹ British Library (BL), Add. MS 28924, fo. 85.

⁴⁰ Essex Record Office (ERO), T/A 465/269/19. For other examples of Colchester petitions citing unemployment at this time, see ERO, T/A 465/269/16–17.

⁴¹ Childs, *Army*, chs. 4, 8; Ehrman, *Navy*, pp. 131–5.

⁴² London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), COL/CC/01/01/049, fo. 284.

⁴³ *Middlesex county records: sessions books, 1689–1709*, ed. J. Hardy (London, 1905), p. 107.

⁴⁴ B. Waddell, 'The rise of the parish welfare state in England, c. 1600–1800', *Past & Present*, 253 (2021), pp. 151–94.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the many men described as disbanded, lame, or poor soldiers who were relieved by the churchwardens of Ashwell (Rutland) in 1697–8: Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Record Office, DE5199/6.

⁴⁶ Turner, ed., *Heywood*, III, pp. 276–7.

II

Alongside depressed trade and increased taxes, the war with France also provoked a major monetary and financial crisis. The quantity and quality of English coinage had long been poor, but it worsened dramatically in the early 1690s.⁴⁷ The immediate cause was the spread of illicit ‘clipping’ – the technique of shaving the edge of shillings and other silver coins, then melting down the trimmings into bullion while passing on the clipped coin at its full face value.⁴⁸ Paying and provisioning the British and foreign troops fighting on the continent required vast amounts of silver, a want the clippers were only too happy to supply.⁴⁹ The prevalence of clipped coins also encouraged people to hoard those that were unclipped, accelerating the process whereby circulating money came to be composed almost entirely of ‘small’ or ‘bad’ coins. Despite the threat of death by hanging for anyone caught defacing the coinage, the clipping industry became increasingly sophisticated as the demand for bullion grew. But clipping was just one aspect of a collapse in the circulation of currency that, despite the government’s efforts, severely blighted industry and everyday commerce for several years.

Monetary problems soon rippled across the country. As we heard earlier, Mary Clarke in Somerset could already see by late 1690 that a lack of ‘ready money’ was impeding business.⁵⁰ According to the grand jury of the West Riding of Yorkshire, ‘Chlippinge and abusing of money is grown to that hight that you see half of it almost Spoyled which is the distruction of trade & all affaires where an honest man should get a livelyhood.’⁵¹ Such difficulties only proliferated as the war progressed. In 1693, William Stout discovered the extent of the problem when he took a trip from Lancaster to London to buy stock for his shop. The shopkeeper reported ‘great confusion in trade, people being cautious in setting a price of their goods without known in what money they should be payed’.⁵² By 1695, the situation was no longer sustainable, with much of the circulating silver clipped to about half its original weight. Anyone handling such coins could feel how little was left of the precious metal that supposedly underpinned the value of every shilling and half-crown. As a result, many simply lost faith in the currency.

When parliament reconvened in November 1695, the king urged legislators to take swift action on this ‘Matter of so general Concern, and of so great

⁴⁷ On the long-term problem of monetary scarcity, see Craig Muldrew, ‘“Hard food for Midas”: cash and its social value in early modern England’, *Past & Present*, 170 (2001), pp. 78–120.

⁴⁸ Carl Wennerlind, *Casualties of credit: the English financial revolution, 1620–1720* (Cambridge, 2011), ch. 4.

⁴⁹ For more on this process, see Jones, *War*, pp. 20–6, 228–47.

⁵⁰ SALS, DD\SF/7/1/31/15, /20. For other reports of monetary scarcity in 1690, see Marshall, ed., *Stout*, p. 97; Luttrell, *Relation*, II, p. 104.

⁵¹ York Minster Archives, MS Add. 319, fos. 10–11 (n.d., c. 1689–91).

⁵² Marshall, ed., *Stout*, pp. 108–9. For further reports of coinage problems in 1693–4, see *The diary of John Evelyn*, ed. E. S. de Beer (6 vols., Oxford, 1955) (hereafter *Evelyn*), V, p. 186; Jonathan Healey, *The first century of welfare: poverty and poor relief in Lancashire, 1620–1730* (Woodbridge, 2014), p. 236. The Mint estimated that the coinage was about 15 per cent ‘deficient’ in 1688, rising to over 20 per cent by 1691, over 30 per cent by 1693, and about 40 per cent by late 1694: Jones, *War*, pp. 232–3.

Importance'.⁵³ On 14 December, after much heated debate, the House of Commons agreed to an address asking the king to reform the coinage.⁵⁴ Five days later, the crown issued a royal proclamation setting a series of deadlines after which various current coins would no longer 'pass' as lawful payment.⁵⁵ The events sent panic through the English economy, with retailers rejecting coins long before the official deadlines. In mid-December, even before William's proclamation, the shopkeepers of Great Yarmouth were 'frightened into being beyond measure curious about the Lesser Coines', causing 'a great Vexation to the Populace, especially to such of them as have but a just sufficiency for a day or two's Expence'.⁵⁶ The new year brought little relief. There were accounts in several counties in early 1696 of 'Great confusion & distraction' due to the scarcity of 'passable' coins.⁵⁷ The grimmest report came from Thomas Power in Devon. On 7 January, he wrote to London that the royal proclamation had caused such disruption that 'the poor in many places are ready to starve' and 'several have been murdered in some Markitt Towns about it'.⁵⁸ Over subsequent months, counterfeiting boomed and bills of exchange became less reliable.⁵⁹

On 4 May 1696, all of England's old, clipped silver money ceased to be legal currency for private transactions. The Mint in London had been producing great quantities of new 'milled' coins with ridged edges designed to make clipping impossible, but much of it disappeared soon after it had been issued. As long as the 'small' clipped money was current, people avoided using the 'broad' milled money for everyday exchange. Instead, the new coins were melted down into bullion or sent overseas where clipped silver was not accepted. So, when the May deadline arrived, there was simply not enough good money available to grease the wheels of commerce. Vast sums of clipped coins suddenly became unusable, but there was nothing to replace them. The result was a liquidity crisis, the most severe and abrupt monetary breakdown since the debasements of Henry VIII and Edward VI.⁶⁰

The most prominent institutional victim was the Bank of England, founded only two years before. Within days, it was overwhelmed by depositors seeking

⁵³ Luttrell, *Relation*, III, pp. 555–61; *Journal of the House of Lords* (London, 1767–1830), XV, p. 599.

⁵⁴ *Journal of the House of Commons (JHC)*, XI (London, 1802), p. 363.

⁵⁵ *By the king, a proclamation. Whereas...the coin, which passes in payment, is generally clipped* (London, 19 Dec. 1695).

⁵⁶ BL, Add. MS 28924, fo. 103.

⁵⁷ Evelyn, V, p. 229; SALS, DD\SF/7/1/31/44, /48; *The manuscripts of Lord Kenyon* (London, 1894) (hereafter *Kenyon*), p. 395; *The diary of Abraham de la Pryme, the Yorkshire antiquary*, ed. Charles Jackson (Ripon, 1870) (hereafter *Pryme*), pp. 77–8; Bodl., MS Rawl. letters 91, fo. 305; *Le Fleming*, p. 339.

⁵⁸ BL, Add. MS 28924, fo. 105.

⁵⁹ TNA, ADM 106/484/25; Ehrman, *Navy*, p. 584; SALS, DD\SF/7/1/31/48, /52, /61; Evelyn, V, p. 233; Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, p. 40; *Kenyon*, p. 402. The Bank of England seems to have been anxious about 'the State of the Cash' that it was receiving by March: Bank of England Archives (BEA), G4/2, pp. 114, 117.

⁶⁰ C. E. Challis, *The Tudor coinage* (Manchester, 1978), pp. 81–112; Jennifer Bishop, 'Currency, conversation, and control: political discourse and the coinage in mid-Tudor England', *English Historical Review*, 131 (2016), pp. 763–92.

to withdraw funds in milled coinage. Although the governor temporarily mollified frustrated depositors, the Bank's directors knew the situation was deteriorating fast.⁶¹ A week later, they warned their members that the whole kingdom was appallingly undersupplied with new money – the Mint had not yet coined even £400,000. The Bank's directors could no longer issue cash to their depositors, and all they could offer instead were exchequer tally sticks.⁶² Predictably, people began to lose faith in the Bank's bills and notes, especially when the treasury failed to supply as much milled money as promised.⁶³ Such fears were contagious and before long other forms of paper currency were being refused or heavily discounted.

The shockwaves spread through the kingdom over the course of the summer. In London, the troubles of the Bank's depositors were minor compared to those of less wealthy inhabitants. On 5 May, one observer lamented:

the Strange Confusion there is throughout the towne about money, in so much that at our great Clare markt there were but 3 joynts of meat, & at theis time all money is refused unless it be new or verry broad of which theres but little Stirring.⁶⁴

The shortage of useable coinage continued to afflict the capital, though the worst was over by August.⁶⁵ For the rest of the country, the pain continued much longer. In Lincolnshire, within a week of the May deadline, the crisis had 'putt all things to a stand, and makes the markates very small that was larg ones a little while since'.⁶⁶ It hit the labouring poor particularly hard as they rarely had an opportunity to dispose of clipped coinage at face value through taxes or loans to the government. Instead, they tried to use it for their bare necessities, but the traders who normally supplied them with food and other essentials took the old coin at a crippling discount if at all. Worse still, the disruption to commerce also led some employers to dismiss their workers, leaving industrial districts in a wretched state. Labourers suffered in the mining districts of Derbyshire and around Newcastle, and in the cloth manufacturing towns of East Anglia, the West Riding of Yorkshire, and the south-west.⁶⁷ Conditions in Manchester were particularly harrowing. In

⁶¹ Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, p. 55.

⁶² BEA, G4/2, p. 135; Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, p. 59; TNA, SP 44/274, pp. 111–12.

⁶³ Bodl., MS Ballard 11, fo. 132; Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, pp. 79, 84, 85.

⁶⁴ Bodl., Carte MS. 130, fo. 263. For other reports from London in May and June, see *Kenyon*, p. 409; *Evelyn*, V, p. 242; Bodl., MS Ballard 11, fos. 137–8; *Evelyn*, V, p. 245; TNA, SP 44/274, p. 155.

⁶⁵ Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, p. 91; *Evelyn*, V, pp. 253, 255–6.

⁶⁶ *Pryme*, p. 93.

⁶⁷ Specifically, distress and complaints were reported from the following areas associated with industry or manufacturing over the course of the summer: TNA, SP 44/274, p. 133 (Derbys.); TNA, SP 44/100, p. 250 (Newcastle); TNA, SP 44/274, pp. 159 (Newcastle, Leicester), 166 (Wilts.), 169 (Kendall, Halifax, Sheffield), 188 (Norwich), 228–9 (Staffs.); TNA, SP 44/274, pp. 141, 145 (Colchester); BL, Add. MS 6668, fos. 210–11 (Derbys.); *Pryme*, pp. 95 (Rochdale), 97 (Newcastle); 'Petitions in the State Papers: 1690s', in *Petitions in the State Papers, 1600–1699*, ed. Brodie Waddell, *British History Online*, www.british-history.ac.uk/petitions/state-papers/1690s (Leics.); Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, p. 70 (Newcastle).

June, the town was 'in so great distresse for want of current money, that without some speedy supply, all traffick will cease'. The local tradesmen could no longer 'employ the many families that depend upon them for work', estimated at 40,000 souls, and soon many more would be forced to join in the 'miseries of those that know not how to buy bread at present'.⁶⁸ Other groups suffered as well. Families who ran alehouses and inns had reportedly 'given over brewing and selling of ale, because that they can get no good money for the ale that they shall sell'.⁶⁹ Anyone who relied on cash, as buyers or sellers, faced a long, brutal summer of hungry days and anxious nights.

On returning in October, parliament's proposed solution was to restrict still further the circulation of 'old' money. A new bill ordered that 'all the hammered Silver Money of this Kingdom do go in Payments by Weight only' – that is to say, even unclipped old money would henceforth be heavily discounted.⁷⁰ Instead of reviving trade, this seems to have stomped the life out of any prospect of a rapid recovery, drawing out the disruption even longer. Letters and petitions from dozens of English towns reported deepening misery for labouring people. In November, the ironmasters of Birmingham were 'forced to turn off most of their Workmen, for want of Money to pay them', and button-makers of Macclesfield were 'ready to starve for want of Employment and Food'.⁷¹ That winter, in places as far afield as London, Dover, Cornwall, Lancashire, and Lincolnshire, 'the small Currency of Money' left 'the poorer Sort reduced to the utmost Extremity'.⁷²

By the end of 1696, the delicate web of long-distance finance that had tied the country's most important manufacturing districts to the metropolitan markets was frayed from months of strain. Bank of England bills, which London merchants used to pay their provincial suppliers and had become essential due to the lack of ready money, rapidly fell into discredit as the public began to lose faith in the nation's financial institutions. Soon, people would only accept the bills at a significant discount.⁷³ As the new year dawned and parliamentary inaction continued, the great cloth traders of the West Country ran out of both credit and patience, determining to send 'no more Cloth to London till such time they could be Payd in Money and not in Bancke notes'.⁷⁴ Manufacturers in eastern cloth towns such as Colchester and Sudbury also faced 'extreme Poverty, for want of Money to carry on their Trades, which is occasioned by the Non-payment of

⁶⁸ Kenyon, pp. 409–10.

⁶⁹ Pryme, p. 109. This generalization is supported by the specific example of Penryn, Cornwall, where the innkeepers were 'not able to Subsist' due to 'the Scarcity of mony' alongside expensive provisions and quartered soldiers: TNA, SP 32/6/31.

⁷⁰ JHC, XI, p. 572 (emphasis added).

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 583. See also SALS, DD\SF/7/1/31/92, /96–8.

⁷² JHC, XI, p. 584.

⁷³ Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, pp. 84, 85, 90, 102, 110, 129, 131, 160.

⁷⁴ Mann, 'Wiltshire', pp. 250–1. For other complaints from Devon and Wiltshire in January, see JHC, XI, pp. 655, 665. There was also a continued scarcity of money in other parts of the country until at least March: Bodl., MS Ashmole 1829, fos. 100, 137; Evelyn, V, p. 261; Turner, ed., *Heywood*, IV, p. 173; *Le Fleming*, p. 348.

Bank-Bills'.⁷⁵ Those who received paper money were now facing losses of almost a quarter when they tried to convert it into cash and many decided that they had no choice but to turn out their workers.⁷⁶ That spring, as the government's Malt Tax Lottery scheme failed in London due to weakness of public credit and continued want of useable currency, labouring families in the south-west were experiencing first-hand the effects of a broken financial system.⁷⁷ Wiltshire clothier George Wanley described a 'Great Scarcity of money and Great scarcity of worke'.⁷⁸ Some parts of the country did not escape the after-effects of coinage crisis until the spring or summer of 1697.

The currency problems of the 1690s were neither brief nor isolated. What started as a disruptive economic malady in the early part of the decade transformed into a series of acute emergencies punctuating the years 1695, 1696, and 1697. Hardship was particularly severe in manufacturing and industrial districts, but it was not confined to such regions. The problems were impossible for anyone to ignore: the silver coins in their purses became ever smaller as clipping accelerated; shopkeepers and tradesmen became increasingly distrustful of the old money with each new proclamation and statute; when clipped coins were refused, new coin was scarce and paper money was discredited. Specie had long been inadequate and petty credit was widespread, but the monetary instability of this crisis period left much of the labouring population without steady employment and, at crucial moments, unable to buy their daily bread.

III

To make matters worse, the price of everyday essentials started rising in 1689 and remained high for the rest of the decade, as poor weather combined with the effects of warfare, commercial disruption, and monetary instability. For the labouring poor, the surging costs of grain and coal were where the economic crisis was most painfully felt. Ordinary people experienced the crisis first and foremost in the shrinking value of their wages, the chill of their homes over winter, and the pangs of their empty stomachs. Not every community suffered to the same degree and parts of the country avoided the worst, but in most regions the pain was awful and acute.

War was the primary cause for the rising price of coal. In some cases, this took the form of direct attacks by privateers on the coastal trade, but the threat of capture also disrupted the fuel supply in other ways: some ships turned back mid-journey to avoid prowling privateers; others were prevented from sailing by the embargos laid on shipping and by the press masters' endless hunt for able seamen.⁷⁹ In London, impressment of seamen serving the

⁷⁵ JHC, XI, pp. 698, 704.

⁷⁶ Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, pp. 177, 185, 186, 200.

⁷⁷ For the failure of the Malt Tax Lottery, see Murphy, *Origins*, p. 58; Dickson, *Financial revolution*, pp. 49, 57.

⁷⁸ SALS, DD\SF/7/1/31/118; Mann, 'Wiltshire', p. 252.

⁷⁹ On coastal attacks, see Luttrell, *Relation*, II, pp. 353, 436, 508, 584. On turning back, see Luttrell, *Relation*, III, p. 335; BL, Add. MS 28924, fo. 6. On embargos and impressment, see D. R. Hainsworth,

Newcastle coal trade may have been at its worst during the preparations for a naval 'decent' on France in 1692. Along with seamen, whole fleets of coal ships were 'prest' for naval duty, with '200 light colliers' seized in May, 'all the other collier vessels' in the Thames in June, and finally 'the biggest of the collier ships' in July.⁸⁰ In addition, the war had an indirect impact through monetary instability and fiscal demands. From 1694, new duties were laid on every chaldron of seaborne coal.⁸¹

As a result of dwindling supply, prices leapt. By this time, coal was the chief fuel for urban households and, in London, its price jumped from 20s per chaldron under James II to 32s in 1689 and remained stubbornly high until peace came in 1697.⁸² Equivalent increases were recorded in the southern towns of Winchester and Sandwich.⁸³ The urban poor were most affected, hardly able to afford paying 50 per cent extra for their fuel. As early as December 1690, a petition to the House of Commons declared that the poor of London were 'in danger of perishing for want of Firing'.⁸⁴ In early 1696, during the parliamentary debates on coal duties, there were similar reports from London and Norwich of impoverished parishioners at risk of freezing. In the West Midlands, crowds attacked fences, hedges, and woodlands in a desperate search for fuel.⁸⁵

More dangerous still was the dearth of grain that England faced through much of the 1690s. As with coal, the Nine Years War was a factor, with the coastal corn trade disrupted by privateering and impressment. Chichester in Sussex sent an average of more than 1,000 quarters of meal to other English ports each year throughout 1686–8; the total plunged to less than 100 quarters in 1692–4 and remained low until 1698.⁸⁶ With coastal transport more expensive and unreliable, grain costs rose in many markets and merchants struggled to supply localities with low stocks. In addition, a new group of buyers appeared in many ports at this time, competing with domestic consumers and further pushing up prices: English and Dutch factors buying up 'great quantities' of grain to feed Confederate forces in their campaigns against France.⁸⁷

ed., *The correspondence of Sir John Lowther of Whitehaven, 1693–1698: a provincial community in wartime* (London, 1983), p. 49. For more extensive analysis of the impact of war on coal prices across a longer period, see William Cavert, *The smoke of London: energy and environment in the early modern city* (Cambridge, 2016).

⁸⁰ Luttrell, *Relation*, II, pp. 466, 472, 514. For impressment of collier seamen in 1691, see *ibid.*, pp. 174, 181, 187, 191–2, 214. See also the reports of coal bought at Newcastle for shipping to the army in Flanders: Luttrell, *Relation*, II, pp. 568, 571.

⁸¹ *Statutes of the realm*, ed. John Raithby (s.l., 1819), VI, pp. 600–6 (6 & 7 W. & M. c. 18).

⁸² W. H. Beveridge, *Prices and wages in England from the twelfth to the nineteenth century*, I (New York, NY, 1930), pp. 434, 577. For contemporary comment on the prices at London, see Bodl., MS Carte 239, fo. 50; Luttrell, *Relation*, II, pp. 187, 191–2, 354, 625; *ibid.*, III, pp. 517, 519. I am grateful to William Cavert for his advice on this issue.

⁸³ Beveridge, *Prices and wages*, pp. 90, 240.

⁸⁴ *JHC*, X, p. 491.

⁸⁵ *JHC*, XI, pp. 375–82, 390, 398, 410–11, 421; Norfolk Record Office (NRO), NCR Case 16a/26, fo. 8.

⁸⁶ Andrews, 'Geographical', p. 192. The annual average was 1,020 quarters in 1686–8, 443 in 1689–97, and 1,875 in 1698–1702.

⁸⁷ Luttrell, *Relation*, II, pp. 173, 180, 274, 481, 486, 498, 508, 585, 611, 629; *ibid.*, III, pp. 20, 24, 32; Childs, *Army*, p. 251; Jones, *War*, p. 36 n. 30.

A disastrous run of weather was a more direct cause. The diary of the antiquary Anthony Wood at Oxford makes for grim reading. Over the spring and summer of 1692, he wrote:

Latter end of April, cold, wet; the springe exceeding backward; all fruit spoiled, very deare...

June 20, Munday, rain'd all day. Rain'd every day for a week after – a great flood, all grass spoyl'd – not such weather in the memory of man...

Aug. 5, Friday, a frost in the morn and much wet the same day and the day following...Very unseasonable weather, and like to spoyle the harvest of corne, as the harvest of hay was before...

September was a cold and unseasonable month in England, as all the months of this yeare hitherto hath been. An unseasonable yeare. Nothing but unseasonable times...⁸⁸

Wood and his contemporaries recorded a litany of meteorological misfortune over the years that followed. The summers of 1693, 1694, 1695, and 1696 were ruined by 'great Raines', 'very wet weather', 'unseasonableness', and 'continual rains and mists, to the great damage of the harvest'.⁸⁹ The winter of 1694–5 brought such an extraordinarily long frost that 'the Severity of the Weather' caused 'great hardship', while the next winter was 'soe severe that all trades are att a full stop' in Somerset and 'so exceeding fierce' that crops were 'much rotted' in Surrey.⁹⁰ Then, in December 1697, the fen-dwellers of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, and Cambridgeshire witnessed 'the vastest flood that ever they saw or heard', which broke bridges and banks across many miles of countryside.⁹¹ The most remarkable weather events of the whole decade must be the May snow storms of 1697 and 1698. At the very moment when green shoots were emerging from the ground, the heavens sent 'a colde winterly season in the midst of the Spring'.⁹² Storms left snow drifts along with 'a hard frost and ice thicker than a crown' in places as far afield as London, Nottinghamshire, and Yorkshire.⁹³ The decade seemed to be a long, dark, wintery nightmare – and it measurably was. At the nadir of Europe's 'Little Ice

⁸⁸ Wood, III, pp. 389, 391, 397, 403. For further evidence from this year, see Luttrell, *Relation*, II, pp. 355, 498; *Evelyn*, V, pp. 93, 96, 98, 108, 112, 114, 117.

⁸⁹ W. Le Hardy, ed., *County of Buckingham: calendar to the sessions records* (Aylesbury, 1933–80), I, p. 480; Wood, III, pp. 421, 431, 463, 484, 486; Luttrell, *Relation*, III, p. 515; *Pryme*, p. 112; *Evelyn*, V, pp. 145, 155, 157, 188–9, 245, 247, 250, 253, 256, 259.

⁹⁰ NRO, NCR Case 16a/25, fo. 333; Luttrell, *Relation*, III, p. 433; Wood, III, pp. 478, 481, 483; SALS, DD \SF/7/1/31/112; *Evelyn*, V, p. 263; *Flemstads most strange and wonderful prophecy* (London, 1695), pp. 4–5; John Shower, *Winter meditations* (London, 1695), epistle dedicatory.

⁹¹ *Pryme*, pp. 166–8; Cambridgeshire Archives (CA), R76/92, pp. 90–1.

⁹² TNA Discovery catalogue description of Nottinghamshire Archives, DD/E/117/1.

⁹³ Hampshire Record Office, 63M84/235, n.p. (3 May 1698); Borthwick Institute for Archives (BIA), MD.112, p. 31; W. H. Stevenson et al., eds., *Records of the borough of Nottingham* (9 vols., Nottingham, 1882–1951), V, pp. 397–8; *Le Fleming*, p. 351; *Pryme*, pp. 176–8; Turner, ed., *Heywood*, IV, p. 158; *Evelyn*, V, p. 287; *Flying Post or The Post Master*, 5 May 1698, issue 466; *Philosophical Transactions*, XXI (1699), pp. 47–8. For May 1697, see Essex Record Office, T/A 156/1, vol. 1, pp. 69–70.

Age', this ten-year span was the coldest of any between 1500 and the present day and included four of the six chilliest individual years.⁹⁴ In England, nearly every year of William III's reign was unusually cold (Figure 3).⁹⁵ Those who bewailed 'very little summer' and miserable harvest weather in the middle years of the decade were right to think that something was amiss – these summer months were amongst the coolest ever recorded in England.⁹⁶ Late frosts killed young grains and wet summers rotted crops in fields.

When combined with the disruptive impact of the Nine Years War, failed harvests brought food shortages and high prices. Wheat, the staple breadcorn, was cheap and plentiful on the eve of the Revolution. Afterwards, grain prices began rising and did not stop until they reached levels unseen for decades. Six or seven 'lean years' were especially bad: across the kingdom, a quarter of wheat cost roughly double its 1688–9 rate in 1692–3, 1693–4, 1695–6, 1696–7, 1697–8, and 1698–9.⁹⁷ At Norwich, prices in the summer of 1694 and winter of 1697–8 were at least two and a half times those enjoyed in the final months of James's reign.⁹⁸ Other key foodstuffs such as barley, oats, hops, butter, and cheese all reached exceptionally high prices. Although these increases were not as consistent as they were with wheat, one still finds complaints like that from Oxford in March 1694 where 'All things [were] exceeding deare.'⁹⁹ True plenty only reappeared in England with the harvest of 1701, when the relatively low prices of the 1680s finally returned.

Assessing the countrywide level of dearth understates the human impact. Each region had its own distinct pattern of inflation and averaging them together rounds off the worst of the jagged price peaks. At London, Norwich, Coventry, Eton, Winchester, and Portsmouth, the price of wheat peaked in 1693–4 and returned to these heights again in 1698–9.¹⁰⁰ In these

⁹⁴ Geoffrey Parker, *Global crisis: war, climate change and catastrophe in the seventeenth century* (New Haven, CT, 2013), ch. 1.

⁹⁵ 'Hadley Centre Central England Temperature (HadCET) dataset' (Met Office, 2014, www.metoffice.gov.uk/hadobs/hadcet/). Specifically, 1690 was precisely average, but all other years from 1689 to 1701 were colder. The decade as a whole was the coldest ever recorded (1660s–2000s), being on average 0.76 degrees cooler than the mean for 1660 to 1729.

⁹⁶ Pryme, p. 112; HadCET. Specifically, Aug. 1694 (second coldest, 1659–2013), Sept. 1694 (coldest), July 1695 (second coldest), Aug. 1695 (second coldest).

⁹⁷ Peter J. Bowden, 'Statistics', in John Thirsk, ed., *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, II (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 829–30.

⁹⁸ NRO, NCR Case 16a/25–7.

⁹⁹ Wood, III, p. 446. For barley, oats, and rye, see below. In 1698–9, the average prices of other food crops (beans, peas, and hops) were significantly inflated and in the case of hops, essential for the ale that formed a key source of calories for labouring people, they reached unprecedented heights. In 1697–8, dairy products were the dearest they had been since 1673–4. Even the prices of beef and pork in the mid-1690s were the highest since the Restoration. For all these prices, see Bowden, 'Statistics'.

¹⁰⁰ Jeremy Boulton, 'Food prices and the standard of living in London in the "century of revolution", 1580–1700', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 53 (2000), p. 483; NRO, NCR Case 16a/25–7; Coventry History Centre, BA/H/C/17/2–3; B. R. Mitchell, *British historical statistics* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 754–5; Thorold Rogers, *A history of agriculture and prices in England, 1259–1793* (7 vols., Oxford, 1866–1902), V, pp. 89–98. Note that Portsmouth's second peak was 1697–8 rather than 1698–9.

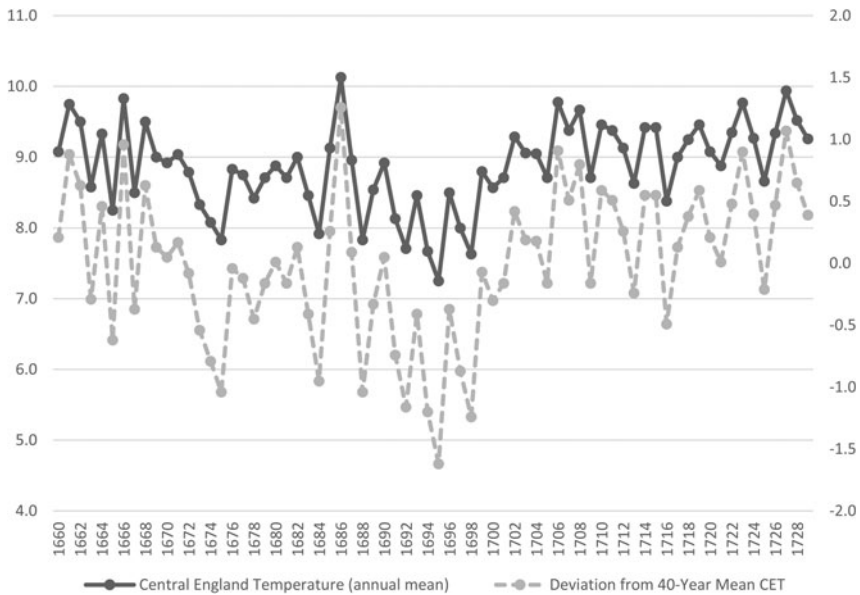


Figure 3. Annual temperatures, 1660–1729.

places, everyone remarked frequently on ‘the dearness of provision’ and ‘Scarcity of bread’.¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, in Cornwall, Devon, and Somerset, the most ‘Pinching’ grain prices reigned in the second half of the decade, when observers remarked on the ‘very excessive rate’, and barley bread, more popular in this region than elsewhere, also rose in price.¹⁰² Oatmeal- and rye-eating northerners and Scots were less affected by the scarcity of wheat, but still suffered in the final years of the decade when it was said that ‘corn of all sorts is exceeding dear’.¹⁰³ Despite its highly commercialized agriculture, England was

¹⁰¹ ERO, T/A 465/271/15; ERO, D/DBm Z10, p. 2; *Buckingham sessions records*, I, p. 492. For other complaints from 1693–4, see LMA, COL/CA/01/01/102, p. 274; CA, Q/S01, p. 57; NRO, C/S 2/4, unpaginated (10 Jan. 1693); Bodl, MS Ballard 35, fo. 68; Wood, III, pp. 437, 446; HMC, *Lords*, I, p. 323; Luttrell, *Relation*, III, pp. 86, 96, 233, 240. For others from 1698–9, see LMA, COL/CA/01/01/107, p. 9; ERO, Q/SO 3, pp. 10, 30, 58; ERO, Q/SBb 12/26; *Middlesex sessions books*, p. 193; Luttrell, *Relation*, IV, pp. 436, 438; *Evelyn*, V, pp. 287–8, 301; *JHC*, XII pp. 385, 394–5, 408, 424, 441.

¹⁰² TNA, SP 32/6/31; SALS, Q/SO/8, fo. 248. For other reports of dearth from the south-west from 1696 to 1699, see SALS, DD\SF/7/1/31/88, /98, /112; DD\SF/7/1/53, unpaginated (July 1697); DD\SF/7/1/74, unpaginated (4 Nov. 1696); *JHC*, XI, pp. 622–3, 665; *JHC*, XII, pp. 391, 446; Richard Newnam, *The complaint of English subjects* (London, 1700), pp. 21–2, 29, 33–5; Mann, ‘Wiltshire’, p. 252. On barley bread, see Bowden, ‘Statistics’, pp. 829–30, 865; Rogers, *Prices*, V, pp. 282–3. According to Bowden’s regional statistics, the sharpest rise in the price of barley from the 1680s to the 1690s was in the south-west (36 per cent).

¹⁰³ On disruption in the north and Scotland, see Francis Hill, *Tudor and Stuart Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1956), pp. 225–6; York City Archives, E113. Annual ‘national’ prices of oats and rye peaked in the second half of the decade: Bowden, ‘Statistics’, pp. 829–30; Rogers, *Prices*, V, p. 286.

still far from a single, unified market and the internal trade in foodstuffs failed to eliminate regional shortages.

The effects of inflated food prices were predictable. A late seventeenth-century labouring family was typically forced to devote about 80 to 90 per cent of its budget to food and fuel, so when these costs spiked the result was hunger.¹⁰⁴ Several groups of petitioners from London claimed that the 'great Scarcity and Dearness of Corn and Bread' meant that 'poor Workmen are not able, with their Wages, to find their Families with Bread; so that many have been forced to beg, others to leave their Country'.¹⁰⁵ Most vulnerable were the poorest of the poor, such as destitute prisoners and paupers, whose survival depended on a fixed allowance from their superiors. At Colchester, a disabled woolcomber named Stephen White was granted 18d per week to maintain himself and his young family, but in 1694 had to sell all his goods and still 'by reason of the dearnesse of provision cannot Subsist with that allowance'.¹⁰⁶ Many others who usually managed to get by with a meagre parish pension discovered that they could not make ends meet in the worst years of this decade.¹⁰⁷

The most extreme outcome was the possibility of starvation. Several contemporaries reported instances of poor people starving in the decade's worst years. According to Tiverton tradesman Richard Newman, hundreds if not thousands nearly died unable to afford food during this 'Starving Time'.¹⁰⁸ However, while these anecdotes suggest that the economic turmoil of the decade had fatal consequences for some of the country's most vulnerable, there is no evidence of famine. The national mortality rate did not rise substantially in any year of William's reign, despite the heightened levels of widespread hardship. In Wrigley and Schofield's sample of 404 parishes, less than 2 per cent showed any 'crisis mortality' during these years, one of the lowest figures for the whole early modern period.¹⁰⁹ Although starvation was a real threat to some vulnerable individuals during the 1690s, it was mercifully rare when compared to the Tudor period or to other countries at this time. Other scholars have suggested good reasons for this contrast, including better regional market integration, the resilience of the poor relief system, and increased production of cheaper grains.¹¹⁰ Yet the lack of mass mortality

¹⁰⁴ Craig Muldrew, *Food, energy and the creation of industriousness: work and material culture in agrarian England, 1550-1780* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 215 (based on figures for c. 1680 and c. 1740). Note, however, that this proportion would be lower when workers were partly supplied with food by their employers: *ibid.*, pp. 226-33.

¹⁰⁵ *JHC*, XII, p. 441.

¹⁰⁶ ERO, T/A 465/271/15.

¹⁰⁷ Waddell, 'Rise of the parish welfare state', pp. 30-1.

¹⁰⁸ Newnam, *Complaint*, p. 21; Luttrell, *Relation*, II, p. 355. There were many more that reported poor people 'ready to starve' or 'nearly starved'.

¹⁰⁹ E.A. Wrigley and Roger Schofield, *The population history of England, 1541-1871: a reconstruction* (London, 1981), pp. 649-56, 660-1, 667.

¹¹⁰ Andrew Appleby, 'Grain prices and subsistence crises in England and France, 1590-1740', *Journal of Economic History*, 39 (1979), pp. 865-87; R. B. Outhwaite, *Dearth, public policy and social disturbance in England, 1550-1800* (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 24-6; R. H. Hoyle, 'Why was there no crisis in

should not blind us to the years of widespread hunger that interrupted a period that is more usually considered one of growth and prosperity.

The dearths of the 1690s had some unpleasantly distinctive features. The most stark was the contrast with the previous decade. Even wealthy observers remarked on the contrast, noting that provisions repeatedly reached double or triple 'the price in ordinary times'.¹¹¹ Also striking are the number of years of elevated prices. England experienced more 'deficient harvests' during this decade than any comparable stretch over the early modern period.¹¹² Finally, the impact varied significantly across the country. In some parts of the kingdom, the dearth years were brief enough to be bearable, whereas other areas faced truly dire conditions. Still, it is impossible to find a region that made it through unscathed. No matter where they lived, anyone who had to spend most of their income on bread, coal, and other essentials felt the pinch of dearth in the aftermath of the Revolution.

IV

The effects of the economic crisis of the 1690s were worsened by their compound nature. Disrupted trade, rising taxes, financial turmoil, and higher prices were not necessarily threatening when they arrived separately, but became disastrous when they all struck together. In 1693 and 1694, French privateering left trade near its lowest ebb in many years, taxes were higher than ever, and miserable weather ruined harvests.¹¹³ In early 1697, Oliver Heywood described how 'Money is scant, trading bad, people are breaking weekly, assessments heavy, [and] poverty comes like an armed man.'¹¹⁴ In 1698–9, grain prices jumped and trading was 'dead' just as rapid demobilization flooded the roads with penniless men.¹¹⁵ Any of these years on their own would be unpleasant enough, but were all the more damaging for the fact that so many 'ill years' hit England in such a short period.

In the hard times that followed the Glorious Revolution, middling men and women suffered severe shocks to their trade and business, while labouring people and the poor faced tighter restrictions on their living conditions. Focusing on these specific and local experiences of crisis can reshape our understanding of the wider history of England's economic development in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. From our present-day vantage point, it is easy to spot the positive long-term trends. With trade

England in the 1690s', in R. H. Hoyle, ed., *The farmer in England, 1650–1980* (Farnham, 2013), pp. 97–100.

¹¹¹ *Memoirs of Thomas Papillon of London, merchant (1623–1702)*, ed. A. F. W. Papillon (Reading, 1887), p. 361.

¹¹² William George Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations and English economic history, 1620–1759', *Agricultural History Review*, 16 (1968), pp. 17, 28–31; William George Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations and English economic history, 1480–1619', *Agricultural History Review*, 12 (1964), pp. 44–6.

¹¹³ All of these are mentioned frequently in Wood, III, pp. 415, 421–2, 431, 437, 448, 463.

¹¹⁴ Turner, ed., *Heywood*, IV, p. 173 (alluding to Proverbs 6:11 – 'So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man').

¹¹⁵ Turner, ed., *Heywood*, IV, pp. 158, 160; Healey, *Welfare*, pp. 236–8.

expanding and increasingly efficient, consumer goods became more widely available than ever before and the English economy was connected to markets in Europe, Asia, and America.¹¹⁶ In finance, credit and investment were booming, leading to the foundation of the first English banks.¹¹⁷ The cost of living fell, as population growth slowed and rising agricultural productivity ended sustained inflation. For most of the period between the Restoration and the Hanoverian Accession, real wages and disposable income were rising.¹¹⁸ Yet most people who lived through this period lacked the luxury of such disinterested analysis. The 1690s witnessed a crisis with extreme repercussions, within a wider period in which the economic environment has typically been seen as benign.

In one sense, then, this decade of economic turmoil demonstrates the continued precarity of everyday life at the end of the seventeenth century. In retrospect, it may appear obvious that by this time England had escaped the threat of mass famine and was gradually becoming Europe's pre-eminent commercial, financial, and industrial hub. But for most people, the only certainty was the ever-present risk of immiseration.¹¹⁹ Scholars studying early modern attitudes to labour, consumption, credit, and charity can learn as much from these moments of crisis – and especially from labouring people's experience of them – as from the long-term trends in real wages or probate inventories.

The disjuncture between the three decades of expansion that preceded the Revolution and the miserable years that followed were what made the crisis such a powerful shock. Indeed, many of the welcome developments since the mid-seventeenth century meant that the problems faced by William's subjects were different from those faced by their Elizabethan and early Stuart predecessors. Years of growth in coastal and overseas shipping meant that the interruption of maritime trade during the Nine Years War affected more people than ever before. English commerce had become reliant on a financial network that had spread so successfully that when both hard cash and paper credit collapsed in 1696, the effects were felt far from London's Royal Exchange. Meanwhile, although a widening group of people benefited from the robust commercial and industrial sectors in the late seventeenth century, without access to land and crops of their own they were more sensitive than previously to the effects of rising prices.¹²⁰ This is not to say

¹¹⁶ Ormrod, *Commercial empires*, pp. 56, 67, 183–202, 276; Nuala Zahedieh, *The capital and the colonies: London and the Atlantic economy 1660–1700* (Cambridge, 2010), chs. 4–6; Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer behaviour and material culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London, 1997), ch. 2; Mark Overton, Jane Whittle, Darron Dean, and Andrew Hann, *Production and consumption in English households, 1600–1750* (London, 2004), ch. 5, appendix 4; Stephen Broadberry et al., *British economic growth, 1270–1870* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 205 (Table 5.6).

¹¹⁷ Dickson, *Financial revolution*; Roseveare, *Financial revolution*; Murphy, *Origins*.

¹¹⁸ Bowden, 'Statistics'; Wrigley and Schofield, *Population history*, p. 643; Jane Humphries and Jacob Weisdorf, 'The wages of women in England, 1260–1850', *Journal of Economic History*, 75 (2015), pp. 405–47.

¹¹⁹ Historians of debt and credit have already expertly examined individual precarity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though they have paid less attention to collective commercial failures: Muldrew, *Economy of obligation*; Paul, *The poverty of disaster*.

¹²⁰ Bohstedt, using E. A. Wrigley's figures, estimates the proportion of 'market dependent consumers' in the English population increased from 30 per cent in 1600 to 39.5 per cent in 1670 to 45

that the hard times of the 1690s were worse than the outright famines of earlier decades. The economic growth of the preceding decades made the country more materially resilient when this new crisis arrived – but it also made its effects more diverse, unexpected, and conspicuous.

Acknowledgements. I am very grateful to Charlie Taverner for helping me turn a spawling draft text into something more appropriate for publication as an article, and I also would like to thank Mark Hailwood, Dave Hitchcock, and Steve Hindle for commenting on that initial overlong draft many years ago. Much of the archival research used here was undertaken while I was an Early Career Fellow at Cambridge in 2010–12, funded by the Leverhulme Trust and Isaac Newton Trust, so I am grateful to those bodies for supporting me at that time.

per cent in 1700: John Bohstedt, *The politics of provisions: food riots, moral economy, and market transition in England, c. 1550–1850* (Farnham, 2010), p. 93.

Cite this article: Waddell B (2022). The Economic Crisis of the 1690s in England. *The Historical Journal* 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X22000309>