

NOTES AND QUERIES

RESPONSE TO THE 1623 FAMINE IN TWO LANCASHIRE MANORS

Angus J. L. Winchester

It is now well established that north west England experienced a severe and widespread mortality crisis in 1623. Both Andrew Appleby, whose research into famine in early modern England included a detailed examination of the 1623 crisis,¹ and C. D. Rogers' extra-mural class, who looked at the crisis in Lancashire,² concluded that the rapid rise in recorded burials culminating in the autumn of 1623 was the result of famine, rather than a specific outbreak of disease. The suffering appeared to be most severe in upland parishes which relied on external supplies of grain and which often supported large numbers of poor cottagers, many of whom were engaged in the textile industry.

A sidelight on the famine and on the response of local communities to the appearance of desperately hungry people in their midst has been revealed by chance in manor court records from two widely separated parts of Lancashire. At Lowick, near Ulverston, the court baron held on 5 March 1623 made the following orders:

' — that the millers at noe milne within the Mannor shall suffer anie person to linger in the said milnes but such as have graine to grynd upon paine of xii^d every default.

' — that noe persons cominge to the said milnes to grynde their corne as aforsaid shall give anie almes to anie poore folkes to forfeite for it xii^d.'

In the upland east of Lancashire the manor court at Rishton, near Blackburn is found responding in similar vein to the natural tendency of the hungry to gather at the local mill. On 14 May 1622 the Rishton jury ordered:

' — that yf any freholder or tenaunte within the Lordshippe shall or doe gyve any mealle or ote mealle grotes [i.e. crushed oats] to the dryer of the Corne at the Holte Kylne then everie one that offendeth to forfeit x^s4.'

At the next court, in May 1623, the order was repeated and extended to cover the giving of oatmeal to the miller at Holte Mill as well, and at the court held in October 1624 a further order was made:

' — Item yt ys ordeyned that yf any tenaunte within this mannor shall or doe hereafter gyve any almes to any beggars at the holte mylne that everie one so offending to forfeit x^s5.'

The picture painted by these orders is a sad one: the wealthiest members of the community, the farming fraternity, were closing ranks against the starving poor who congregated at the mills in the hope of begging flour or money from those bringing grain to be ground. The order against giving oatmeal to the miller and kiln-keeper at Rishton was again presumably intended to preserve those men from harassment by beggars.

A cursory examination of other Lancashire manor court records for the years 1622-4⁶ has yielded no other similar entries, though a subjective impression was gained that the courts were particularly assiduous in attempting to remove 'inmates' or 'byfiers' (lodgers who were likely to become a charge on the community) in those years. Perhaps manor court verdicts might be examined in other parts of the country in years of suspected famine to see whether the sad and desperate measures resorted to in these two Lancashire communities were repeated elsewhere.

NOTES

1. A. B. Appleby, **Famine in Tudor and Stuart England**, 1978, chs 8 and 9.
2. C. D. Rogers, **The Lancashire Population Crisis of 1623**, Manchester Univ. Extra-mural Dept 1975.
3. Lancs. Record Office, DDLK/1/2.
4. LRO, DDPt/23/Rishton court book.
5. **Ibid.**
6. Court records for the following manors, preserved in LRO were examined: Lytham, Westby (DDCL/1141); Eccleston and Heskin (DDM/7/113); Euxton (DDM/7/120); Clayton-le-Woods (DDM/7/103); Billington (DDPt/23).