

ORDER, DISORDER AND POPULAR PROTEST IN EARLY MODERN RYE

by *Graham Mayhew*

There is a tendency among early modern English social historians to define popular protest almost entirely in terms of grain and enclosure riots and to separate consideration of these from other categories of social conflict such as adolescent behaviour, individual outbursts or acts of social deviancy, or religious and political strife. It is the contention of this article that each of these apparently distinct types are often merely different occasions for the expression of widespread feelings of resentment and social discontent which lay just beneath the surface of early modern society.

Whenever existing institutions or sectional interests came under threat as at the Reformation or during the apparent attack on constitutional liberties and the Elizabethan Church Settlement in the 1630s, or when an influx of French Protestant refugees in the early 1570s at a time of economic stagnation in Rye appeared to threaten the livelihoods of a wide range of occupational groups, there was an outburst of popular protest accompanied by occasional disorder. In the 1570s this expressed itself in an explosion of Francophobic sentiment resulting in a series of petitions demanding protectionist measures against the newcomers as well as occasional isolated outbursts of verbal abuse or violence against the immigrant community.

For this reason a broad definition of popular protest has been adopted here, avoiding such artificial distinctions in order to demonstrate that disorder occurred not only in times of severe economic crisis but was endemic in early modern society. It was indeed often the only means of expression for deeply-felt

individual, social and economic grievances on the part of those outside of the governing elite. It is this all-pervasive nature of popular protest which helps explain the importance placed by urban and rural magistrates upon discipline and good order in a well-governed commonwealth and the swiftness and severity of their response to any attacks, verbal or physical, upon their authority. Because of the quality and extensive survival of its records, 16th and 17th century Rye provides an ideal case study of the wide spectrum of disorder and social conflict within an early modern community and the underlying social tensions which they reflected.¹

The concept of **order** was at the heart of the early modern magistrate's conception of good government. A mid-16th century town clerk of Rye put it in the following terms:

It is not possible that that countrey shall well stand in good government and the people grow in welth where order in every state is not fitly observed and that body cannot be without much greafe of inflamation where any least parte is out of ioynt and not duly set in his owne naturall place.

This organic conception of how society worked provided a framework for understanding the rights and duties incumbent on individuals within early modern communities like Rye, who were seen as being bound together through mutual interdependence:

Love is not the knot only of the common wealth whereby diverse partes be perfectly ioyned to gether in one pollitike body, but also the strength and might of the same gathering to gether in a small rome with order, which scattered wold ells brede

confusion and debate.

From this followed the particular responsibilities of magistrates, in whom were to be sought exceptional qualities of perception and understanding:

It is an other matter to understand a man's owne greefe and to know the common welthes sore and therefore not they that know their owne case as every man doth but they that understand the common welthes state out to have in countreys the preferment of ruling.

They were further enjoined to 'Let none of theis thinges be sene in thie manners and conversation which thine authoritie punisheth in the manners and conversation of the people' and to 'let no man's iniurie move the lesse then that which pertayneth to the privately'. Urban magistrates thus had a responsibility to rule wisely and justly. In return those under them were enjoined to 'obey your magestrates faithfully and serve in subiection truly'. For:

Where unrulie subiectes be there can neither comen dutie be kept which nature prescribeth nor common law be regarded which pollicie requireth.

And:

Who can persuade where treason is above reason and might ruleth right and it is had for lawful what soever is lustfull and comotioners better then comissioners and comon woe is named comon welth.

From this it followed that 'That good which a man will not doe willingly, he must be drawne thereunto constraignedly', for social deviance of any sort was seen as a form of disorder and a threat to the commonwealth, a view overtly stated regularly in judicial proceedings in early modern Rye and most forcibly in this final passage from the Rye town clerk, presumably written in response to news of one of the periodic mid-Tudor rebellions:

Herein you may see what unruly subiectes wold have done, spoyled the Kinges Maiesties subiectes, weakened the K[inges] strength, overthrowne his townes, taken away

his munition, drawne his subiectes to like naughtines, yea and as it is among forren ennemies in sacking of Cities, no doubt thereof they wold have fallen to slougher of men, ravishing of wives, deflouring of maydens, chopping of children, fying of howses, beating downe of streates and overthrowne all together.²

The concept of good order was thus at the heart of popular understanding of the nature of a well-governed commonwealth in the early modern period. Communal harmony depended upon a mutual understanding and acceptance of the bonds of duty and obedience between magistrates and their subjects. Disorder and popular protest occurred when there was a real or perceived breakdown in these reciprocal relationships.

An example of this in the case of a whole community occurred in May 1597 when Tenterden, a Cinque Port limb of Rye, refused to contribute towards Rye's share of the costs of sending a naval expedition against Spain. According to the bailiff and jurats of Tenterden:

not soe willinge thereunto, as we expected, partlie in respect of the great Charge that they have of late tyme bene burdened withall many wayes. And partlie by reason of the great dearthe of this yeare, which hath and yet doth oppresse manye, for whoes sustentacion they have bene and yet are forced to be at great charges. . .

But the principal reason for their unwillingness to contribute was a perceived injustice done to one of their fellow inhabitants at the hands of the mayor and jurats of Rye which they expressed in terms of the traditional organic metaphor:

That in respect they are a member of you they have and wilbe allwayes willinge to contribute to you. But for soe much as they have founde suche extraordinarie discourtesie at your handes, as can hardlie be presupposed would be offered by a bodie to their member, As that one of us should be by you imprisoned in which your selves toke

upon you to be iudge in your owne cause . . . And there in prison deteyned untill you were paied Twentie poundes and upwardes . . . as yet we doe forebeare to satisfie your expectacion of our benevolence unto you.³

Such instances of whole communities acting to protest a sense of collective grievance were rare. More common were protests by small groups and individuals, which fall into four main categories: dissension within the community occasioned by political and religious changes at the national level, which could easily become a pretext for factional conflict among the urban political elite; communal or group hostility against outsiders and perceived threats to local or sectional interests; youthful unruliness borne of the pent-up frustrations of young people at the behavioural and other restrictions imposed on them by their elders; and occasional outbursts of popular unrest in times of crisis which reflected the underlying socio-economic divisions within early modern towns.

Of these various possible sources of local conflict, the two forms which posed the greatest potential threat to authority were popular outbursts as a result of acute economic crises which generally saw the magisterial elite uniting in the face of a threat from below and factional conflicts within the elite into which people lower down the social scale could be drawn. In an age where rumour could so easily take on the guise of fact, it paid those in authority to keep a weather-ear open to street-corner and ale-house gossip which might provide a forewarning of impending trouble. A hint of this possibility as a result of a shortage of firewood in Rye in the early winter of 1589 occasioned the following response from the mayor, Henry Gaymer, writing from London where he was attending the parliament, to William Tolkin, his deputy 28 November:

you writt mee that all thinges at home are quiett savinge the pore have no wodd and that by lycensinge some of our neighbors to transport wodd hathe done hurt for by a private gredynes of gayne our Towne is unserved. For the Townes quietnes I thanke

god, and pray dayly for the contynuaunce therof and for the pooers want of wodd no man is more sorryer then my self and to reforme yt . . . do hartely beeseache you in my absence to . . . make a generall restraynt of all wodd and billetes for althoughe I favoured some few with the passe of 80 thowsand billetes and not above, I did nott doo yt that the pooer shuld want nor for any private gayne to my self by takinge xijd upon a thowsand as ther bee in Rye most uniustly and dishonestly have gyven owt and when yt shalbe fownd that I have, do, or shall reape a penny gaynefor any billetes . . . for any license that hath byn graunted by mee, I will yeld my selfto the censure of my enemyes, who I knowe are redy to pry the least fault in mee that can bee fownd.⁴

RELIGION, POLITICS AND FACTION

Religion and politics provided a fertile feeding ground for factional conflict and disorder in early modern society. In this respect Rye was typical of English towns of the period. From the factional disputes of the 1530s between supporters of the traditionalist vicar of Rye, William Inold, and their Protestant opponents to the disputes occasioned by the growth of Puritanism and Sabbatarianism in the town a century later, national religious and political events inspired outbreaks of factionalism, disorder and even violence, on rare occasions involving members of the magistracy themselves.

The religious changes of the 1530s for example occasioned a lengthy power struggle between the traditionalist old guard and a group of younger merchants, beerbrewers, shipowners and the like, who adopted an advanced Protestant outlook. The result was a series of allegations and petitions to Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's secretary of state, from the rival factions. One item formed a lengthy indictment of the views of 19 of the leading members of the Protestant faction, accusing no less than 11 future jurats, six of whom would serve as MPs

and four as mayors of the town, of holding heretical views. A subsequent petition, dated 12 August 1537, purporting to come from the mayor, jurats and 75 of the freemen branded their Protestant opponents as being 'very symple and of small substance rude both in their communication and behaviour', raising the spectre of social disorder in their agitation which was portrayed as being not only against Inold 'but also ayenst the estate of the seyde towne.'⁵

But the most serious event of these years and the one of which the privy council took most notice was the public outburst of a single individual, one Randall Bell, capper, against Henry VIII's claim to be Supreme Head and Governor of the Church of England. This took place, symbolically, during the celebration of mass in the presence of the mayor and jurats on 15 August (the recently abrogated Feast of the Assumption) 1539, towards the end of Rye's first year under a Protestant mayor. According to the account among the case papers of his trial for treason held in Rye before commissioners including the mayor and the attorney general:

Randall Bell the xv daye of August . . . in Rye as the prest was at hygh masse at the tyme of consercracyon of the most blyssed Sacrament wyth his capp upon hys hed dyd go crosse the chauncell and so assendyd the stepys unto the Northend of thalter and setting one of hys handes under hys syd layd the other hand upon the alter and a lytell before the elevacyon he dyd go toward the myddes of thalter and dyd offer to cacche and take the sacrament vyolently out of the prystes handes calling the pryst false knave and sayd thow cannyst nott make God and suche leke saynges and the deacon dyd put hym back and therwyth thesayd Randall layd hys hand upon hys dagger and dyd speke many raylyng wordes. And Robert Wymond one of the Jurattes of the Towne perceyvyng hys demeanour dyd come out of hys sete to hym and commaundyd hym a waye and so after he was had to pryson. Wherupon after evensong of the same daye

he beyng therof examynyd . . . he therto sayd that of hys owne corage he dyd come up to the aulter to thentent to saye that the sacrament ys naught . . . and thys he sayth he wyll justefye for the Churche standyth a wrye and not as Cryst dyd leave yt. And he sayd further the kyng ys your kyng and nott my kyng and that he had more ryght to the crowne then the kyng. . .

Bell, who had evidently been in prison in Rye previously for his views against the supremacy, claimed that he was supported in his actions by the Earl of Shrewsbury and Lord Montague. On further examination the following day he reiterated his previous statements and added:

that the Churche ys not as yt ought to be because the Churche ys nott as Cryst dyd leave yt but ys nowe removyd in that the pope ys refusyd to be hed of the Churche and therefore ther cann be no salvacyon nor anye due mynystracyon of the sacramentes or other rytes of the Churche untill the pope be hede of the Churche ayene and further sayd that yf he could have caught the sacrament he would have troden yt under hys fete and would have cast the chalyse into the myddes of the chauncell. . .⁶

With the reintroduction of the mass under Mary in December 1553 it was the turn of Protestants to protest. It was evidently following a disturbance of some sort that the Edwardian vicar, Edmund Scambler a married priest, three magistrates and a number of other leading Protestants were summoned before the privy council, 'being admonished by the Lordes to live hereafter like good and quiet subjectes, upon hope they will so do were . . . dysmissed of thier further attendance' on 20 February 1554.⁷

With the accession of Elizabeth and the re-establishment of Protestantism, religion provided less opportunities for outbreaks of disorder, although the spread of Puritan ideas in Rye led to an assault on the vicar, Richard Greenwood, by a servant of Robert Wood a future jurat, in 1591 a 'fact . . . very pernicious

and not to be suffered in any well governed commen welth' according to the court record; the group as a whole being characterised by the authorities in a letter to the Lord Admiral as:

a smale secte of purytanes, more holy in shewe then in dede . . . mutynous fellowes . . . who professe to be more pure then others and be indede such worse then in show . . .⁸

Not until the years leading up to the Civil War did religion once again become a cause of conflict in Rye. The 1630s marked the growth of Puritan influence on corporation affairs, an early indication being the decision of the assembly in December 1631 to alter the traditional day of election of the mayor from the Sunday following St Bartholomew's Day to the Monday in order to end 'ye manifest breach of the saboth' 'which ought wholly to be employed and spent in the service and worshippe of God'.⁹

This Puritan mood was not however to the liking of everyone in Rye and brought forth a concerted campaign of opposition by one of the wealthier freemen, Mr Anthony Norton, Gent, a brewer and extensive landholder who but for his opposition to the political mood of the town might otherwise have expected to become a member of the ruling magisterial elite. Norton's outspoken attacks on the decisions of the corporation stretched over two decades, beginning in 1636 when as one of the churchwardens he threatened to present the members of the grand inquest (the presenting jury) for non-attendance at church when they attempted to leave in order to carry out their traditional annual search of inns and tipping houses for breakers of the sabbath. The following year he wrote to the Bishop of Chichester complaining that the town preacher often omitted reading the church service altogether and sometimes preached for two hours or more and that the corporation had desecrated the chancel by using one aisle for the town's munitions house and for the place of punishment by whipping of apprentices. As a result he was censured and fined by the corporation for revealing its secrets and for being

openly contemptuous of the mayor. A lone royalist in an overwhelmingly parliamentary town, he incurred the unanimous censure of the assembly in 1651 for disaffection against the state. Two years later he was in trouble again, having declared that 'none but rogues fought against the King and that Cromwell and all that followed him were rogues' and was fined 6s for profane swearing and his goods distrained. His protests were perhaps the least 'popular' of any individual's in Rye in the early modern period.¹⁰

Religion and politics were potentially dangerous subjects for uninformed gossip with a capacity for provoking violent sentiments and disturbing the minds of local inhabitants. Urban magistrates were ever vigilant to detect such disturbers of the peace and to administer swift and exemplary punishment to prevent the canker spreading. Francis Brooke, tailor, 'rather over precyse in religion, haveing read more than he understandeth' seems to have caused particular problems to the authorities between 1598 and 1600 with his views on the royal supremacy. According to the mayor and jurats, writing to the Lord Warden in January 1600 following complaints about him from the vicar, Brooke was a simple man who 'of late could not read but by his industry, haveing obtained knowledge to read English, he hath waded therein farther than his capacitye can reach unto, whereby he hath over gone his senses and consumed himself by following the letter of the Scriptures contrarye to the intent and meaning thereof . . .'

In Brooke's case a little knowledge was a danger not only to himself but to others with whom he came into contact. Mary Milles, wife of William Milles a husbandman described in October 1598 how on one occasion in her house Brooke:

for Christe his church, and, after used these wordes viz that yf her Maiestie were in the dominion of christ his chursh, then he . . . wold praye for her other wise he wold not, adding further . . . Lett he or they that dare speake to the contrarye. And she further saith that the speaches which the said

Brooke then used did so troble her mynde that she after stode in doubt whether she might praye for her Maiestie or not. But nowe she is hartely sorry that she was so folishe to herken to so bad a fellowe.

According to Gilbert Darly, a Rye glover, Brooke had told him:

That yf her maiestie be in the spiritt of Christ she is the daughter of God. And so he the saide Brooke beinge in the Spiritt of Christ is the sonne of God and brother unto her Maiestie.

But the final straw for the authorities came when Brooke accused the mayor of having:

the spirytt of the Devyll and Mr Smyth [the vicar] to be a false prophett whereby he spreadeth rumors dyscordes and Mutenyes in the commen welthe which is not tollerable or to be sufferedd. For reformacion whereof it is thought good yt discipline be mynystredd unto him yt he may be reformed and may be brought to lyve under Lawe and government.¹¹

A not dissimilar situation arose in March 1639 when George Goodwine, a London carpenter, was brought before the mayor and jurats after he was heard to say in an inn that 'he was King of England and had right to the Kingdome'. On further examination, Goodwine, 'a verie sencelesse and . . . distracted man' who had previously been in Bridewell and Newgate for his utterances said:

that King James neglectinge to do iustice lost his right to the Kingdom and King Charles going on in the same coarses is an usurper, and . . . if he had his right he should inioy the Kingdome. His ground for this is that in Ecclesiastes that better is a poore and wise child then an old and foolish King.

On instructions from the Lord Warden, he was put in the stocks on market day for two hours, then whipped and banished from the town, being sent with a pass from constable to constable to Plaistow, Essex, where he said he had been born.¹²

Although there was an underlying suspicion

on the part of urban magistrates of anyone or anything which might threaten communal order and tranquility, there were occasions on which the authorities themselves deliberately sought to arouse the feelings of local inhabitants as a means of reinforcing the prevailing moral and social order. This was of course the purpose behind exemplary justice, which invariably took place on market days in order to achieve the greatest possible impact. But it could also be used on other occasions as in December 1578 when a suspected priest was apprehended:

and beinge brought to towne, the people very desirous to se him and his maskynge apparrell for contentation of their myndes, and to the ende they might behold the vanitie therof, we were so bold to apparel him accordingly, and passinge the streets was beheld both of yonge and olde to no small number whose acclamations and displeiking of suche vanyties we refer to the report of the messenger.¹³

Popular feeling was a dangerous weapon even when it was used in the maintenance of the existing order. The use of the crowd was very much the last resort of urban magistrates when all other methods had failed. A situation of this type arose when an elderly woman and her second husband were forcibly evicted by her daughter and son-in-law from a house in Rye whose ownership was disputed, the daughter claiming possession through inheritance by her late father's will, her mother insisting she had a life interest. After taking legal advice on the matter, the mayor went with the jurats 'in lawfull manner . . . to remove this force', Robert Trewe the son-in-law having barricaded himself in 'with a boarspeare in his handes', and to restore possession to Margaret Taylor and her husband pending the outcome of a suit at law:

But the said Trewe wold in no wyse departe his saide possession but affirmed with great othes yt whosoever entred he wold kyll him. Whereupon I commaunded the ayde of the towne to remove the force. And after the people were assembled, I used many

perswasions to the said Trewe to laye downe his armes and in quiet manner to come out and to take corse for recovery of his landes by lawe. After longe perswasion he came out of the dores, and then my self and others the Jurattes of Rye offered to enter into the said Tenemente entending to have delivered the said Margaret into her former quyet possession, which the said Trew perceaveinge he with great force layd handes upon me and tooke me by the throote to expel me and used other vyolence towerdes me and strake divers in my Companye, for which great abuse and daungerous example I have commytted him to prison untill he shall acknowledge his fault . . . which to do he utterly refuseth affyrmyng yt he wyll come out in despite of me and my bretheren without any submyssion or fyne paying or ells he wyll lye in prison whyle I am maior . . .¹⁴

Factionalism within the magisterial elite might also develop similarly into a riot. One such incident, on 11 November 1577, involving the mayor, town clerk, town preacher, seven jurats and the mayor's sergeant and a large crowd led to a Star Chamber case. The full background details are extremely complex, but the occasion for the incident was a dispute over the will of George Raynoldes, a former mayor and jurat for 32 years who had recently died leaving most of his property for charitable purposes in the hands of his executor John Heblethwaite and two overseers, one of whom was the mayor, John Fagge, leader of one of the two rival factions in the corporation. His opponents, who included five jurats and Richard Fletcher, town preacher, alleged the will was a forgery and supported a claim to the property by George Raynoldes's nephew, John Raynoldes of Brodhurst, Kent, who anticipated his inheritance by granting a lease of his late uncle's principal tenement to one John Rolfe, merchant, who had been resident in the town since 1558.¹⁵

According to Heblethwaite's testimony, immediately on George Raynoldes' death he

entered the property and took possession of it as executor. Rolfe, having obtained his lease, waited until Heblethwaite was absent from the town and then employed two burly individuals to break into the premises, ejecting Heblethwaite's wife in the process and forcing Mrs Appleton, the town clerk's wife and Mrs Heblethwaite's children to take refuge in the attic while Rolfe barricaded himself in on the ground floor. These events took place in the early evening of 11 November. By nine o'clock a small crowd had gathered outside the house, led by the town clerk, who was intent on breaking in, ejecting Rolfe and rescuing his wife. What ensued was a riot as William Appleton, John Bennett the mayor's sergeant and others led the assault, according to Rolfe's testimony:

very evill disposed and riotous persons . . . in very riotous and rebellious manner . . . being weaponed and arrayed with bowes, billes, holbardes, partizans, swords, bucklers, daggers, spaddes, pitchforkes, spades, axes, and other weapons . . . marched thence forwardes in very riotous and rebellious manner, and into the said principal messuage whereinto they before had conveyed certaine dagges ready chargid and gonpowder, and the same in very forceable manner and riotous sort assembled and the walles thereof brake downe and by the breaches entered . . . and . . . did assault, beat, wound and evill entreat, crying out moost desperately with lewde voyces against your said subiecte in this sorte viz "downe with him, downe with him, kyll him, kyll him", and contynued the same . . . by the space of two whole houres so that your said subject was in despaier of his liffe duringe which space sondry riotous persons . . . unknowen adioynid them selves unto the same rioters and divers others of your Maiesties subiectes herynge theroff resorted thether in great companie, so that ther were assembled together to the number of CC persons . . . divers of the woorshipfull Jurates of the said towne beinge Justices of peace ther desirous

to preserve your Maiesties peace . . . gevinge straight commandment . . . to cease . . . but all in vayne . . .¹⁶

According to the Star Chamber interrogatories, Henry Gaymer, jurat, the leader of the opposing faction to the mayor John Fagge and the town clerk, William Appleton, had with the assistance of Richard Fletcher the town preacher, and three fellow jurats, Robert Carpenter, William Davy and John Mercer, prepared calivers, daggers and other weapons to aid Rolfe if need should require, storing them at the house of Matthew Milles, another jurat, which was connected by a gate in a fence with the disputed tenement. So it was obvious that Rolfe's initial forcible entry was well planned. The whole episode was clearly a trial of strength between the two factions, with feelings running extremely high, particularly among the leading protagonists. Gaymer, in particular had already threatened to ruin Heblethwaite, telling him that it would cost him £500 before Rolfe's title should be overthrown 'and that it shall cost bludde or the matter were tried'. On the night of the incident he was heard warning his servant John Stace, 'Stace if thou turne thy face from me this Night I will runne the throughe with my sworde'. According to other witnesses the town clerk, understandably outraged at his wife's predicament was heard 'revileinge and greatly misusinge . . . Mr Fletcher preacher of Rye' and who, having broken into the house attacked Rolfe with a rapier yelling 'kyll him, kyll him' a 'pernicious . . . example . . . beinge Towne Clerke' according to a witness of the rival faction who claimed he had called at him through the window to desist. As for the mayor, he was nowhere to be found, having apparently 'after conference had with . . . William Appleton departid and walkid secretly behinde the churche . . .'¹⁷

When the mayor, who according to Rolfe's testimony:

neither was nor could be ignorant of so great a Ryot . . . was with much a do founde out . . . he comying thether and fyndinge the said rioters . . . wold not compell them by vertue

of his auctoritie to cease . . . although he were thereunto oftentimes moost earnestly desired, intreated, by the said Jurates and divers other your loving subiectes, but rather anymated and encouraged them in their malicious doinges . . . yet to the end that he wold seem in shewe to do somewhat in discharginge his office, he craftely called them in your Maiesties name, to doe no more then they lawfully might, or wordes to that effecte, which his deceptfull meaning beinge to the rioters before then, knowen they surceased not, nether wold the saide Maior remove by force nor compell the riotors to laye downe their weapons, until this complainant overchargid with multitude, and wearied with stripes, was inforcid for safgard of his liffe to deliver upe unto him, the said house, his longe desired praye, payinge therefore but vij li [i.e. £7] by the year, which beinge don, the ryot ymmediately ceased, and the outrage was appeasid . . .¹⁸

The 1577 riot was the most spectacular incident in a struggle for power within the corporation which lasted until the early 1590s and saw four jurats publicly refusing to serve under John Fagge when he was re-elected for an unprecedented third consecutive term in 1579 and allegations of vote-rigging in 1580 when Robert Jackson, one of Fagge's closest associates and the man accused of falsifying George Raynoldes' will, was elected in his place.¹⁹ But although the events of 11 November 1577 were the only occasion when inter-magisterial feuding led to a breakdown in order and a full-scale riot, there were other occasions on which political rivalries might lead to individual acts of violence. In October 1573 for instance William Appleton was bound over to keep the peace against Adrian the wife of Robert Jackson whom he had replaced as town clerk in 1571 and who stood against him again in 1574. The same day, Robert and Adrian Jackson were similarly bound to keep the peace against William Appleton.²⁰

As the 1577 riot demonstrates, in

exceptional circumstances, inter-factional feuds and rivalries could lead the chief protagonists to enlist the aid of considerable numbers of townspeople from outside the immediate circle of the political élite. In less extreme circumstances urban magistrates viewed too active a participation by ordinary freemen in the town's affairs with a large measure of suspicion, a view shared by the government. Thus the Lord Warden intervened in 1526 to quell factionalism within the Cinque Ports, securing a temporary enactment limiting the choice of mayor in the larger ports to 37 freemen and in the smaller ports to 13 'of the most wysist and discretist' sort, to be nominated by the outgoing mayor, who were to choose his successor from one of the existing magistrates. In Rye the new system seems to have been in operation for two years only, in 1527 and 1528, before reverting to the wider freemen's franchise.²¹

In 1580 the Lord Warden intervened again in response to the continuing factionalism in Rye by issuing a series of articles for the future conduct of mayoral elections, limiting the freemen's choice to one of three candidates previously nominated by the outgoing mayor and jurats from among their own number. Other clauses proposed restricting the election of town officers and burgesses to parliament to the mayor and jurats together with the recently established common council from whose ranks new jurats were to be appointed. Perhaps in recognition of the political unrest which the exclusion of the freemen from all direct participation in the town's affairs apart from the annual mayoral election would cause, the proposed articles were rejected by the unanimous advice of the common council.²²

The establishment of the common council itself in 1575 probably needs to be seen more as a political device of the leading faction to secure its position in the corporation than as an attempt at a further restriction of the franchise. Appointed 'from the moost wisest, discretist and honest commoners' by the existing mayor and jurats, its 24 members were given an equal voice with the

magistrates in the town's affairs at fortnightly assemblies from which the residue of the freemen would henceforth be excluded, thus perpetuating the current balance of power on the jurats' bench. Passed initially at a town assembly by the votes of the mayor, six jurats and 38 freemen, with a further four jurats and 25 commoners giving their belated assents, this leaves at least two jurats and 40 freemen unaccounted for. There had already been disturbances following the 1573 mayoral election, with 'filth and ordure' flung into the faces of certain individuals following a knock on their doors by unidentified night-time callers. Now there was open political unrest.²³

The establishment of the common council was clearly viewed by a number of freemen as a deliberate attempt to exclude them from the town's affairs, 15 of whom were among 22 men implicated in disturbances following the enactment of the decree. 'Unbrided persons' according to the mayor and jurats, of an 'uncontentid sort', 'who can abide no good order', they had riotously broken into the court hall and left hanging an old sheet with 24 knaves of cards 'in contempt of iustyce . . . wher we use to do iustyce' together with 'a libell hanging on that seditious devise' against George Syre a jurat, together with the newly-chosen common councillors:

I Doctor Syre the Ipocrite, blake sayncte, fies maior, skriples knave we xxiiij which now bee com in doo meane to make codpis pointes of thy knaves skynnes for we are called the xxiiij knaves and I doo dowt but wee will play our partes fynlye xxiiij tymes or the yere goes a bowt we wilbe lefte to be poussedd liars for we meane too dobell and treble . . .²⁴

In this instance it appears that the threat of exclusion from participation in town government unleashed a wave of resentment against the political elite. A better solution was the harnessing of popular sentiment to a clearly-defined political end, as in 1571 when a combination of flood tides and high winds

seemed likely to cause the inundation of 45 acres of recently-inned marshland north of the town to the east of the Strand quay. According to the petition by the owners to the Privy Council, they having provided 60 workmen to repair a breach in the walls made by some of the local townspeople, through which the flood waters were already beginning to pour, when on 6 November, John Bayley, deputy to the mayor of Rye and others 'of the meaner sorte to the number of an hundred persones in evill and unlawfull manner assembled, prohibited your said orator the amedinge and recoverye of the premisses pretending the breche thereof to be greatlye to the amendment of the said haven and . . . have so informed your honours . . .'²⁵ The inning of marshland around Rye was generally thought to be the chief reason for the decline of its harbour. On this occasion it seems that the urban magistrates, seizing the opportunity to harness nature to their own designs, enlisted the aid of the inhabitants against an unpopular project which had chiefly benefitted rural landowners from outside the town.

COMMUNAL AND SECTIONAL INTERESTS UNDER THREAT

Not all popular protests took the form of public disturbances or direct action. Often dissatisfaction was expressed in the form of complaints or petitions and supplications to the authorities by those with a particular sectional interest or sense of grievance. In general such complaints had an economic basis and took a protectionist line. Several complaints and petitions of this type, made to the mayor and jurats, were directed against the substantial resident community of French immigrants who, it was feared, were threatening the livelihoods of established Rye householders.

Even before the religious wars brought as many as 1,500 resident Huguenot refugees to Rye from Dieppe and other parts of Normandy in the two decades between the massacre of St Bartholomew (1572) and the entry of the

Protestant Henri IV into Paris (1594), there was a smaller foreign community of French, Walloons and Flemings, numbering at least 100 men of military age (16 to 60).²⁶ In 1539 this led to protests to the mayor from English residents that these aliens were exercising 'to their own uses the arts of knitting and beting of nettes, eysyng and cuying of lines for fishing and other handycrafts, to the loss of our English mariners and fishermen and increase of aliens among us'. Others were waiting with their ships to carry goods overseas thereby denying trade to English ships. As a result of these protests a number of aliens were prosecuted for offences under the statutes regulating employment and trade.²⁷

The presence of a much larger immigrant community in Rye from the early 1570s inevitably aroused widespread fears among tradesmen as to the future security of their livelihoods as foreign artisans and traders set up business in the town. As a result there was a spate of complaints to the mayor and jurats, leading to action against French smiths and cutlers (1575), cordwainers or shoemakers (1575/6), bakers (1578 and 1593), retailers of cloth and mercery ware (1586), shipwrights (1589) and Frenchmen engaged in forestalling the Rye market of household provisions and tanned hides for illegal transportation overseas (1586).²⁸

In some cases, as with the cordwainers and shoemakers, who in 1575/6 complained 'that their living decreases to the apparent impoverishment of their families, apprentices and covenant servants by reason of foreign incomers as also by reason of the French and other foreign strangers flying to the town for succour', restrictive trading companies or gilds were established with powers to make their own ordinances for the regulation of their particular trade.²⁹

In other cases, offending individuals were ordered to desist from trade and/or fined, as in July 1587, when Guillaume Vatmere had to pay 10 French crowns for continuing to retail cloth having previously 'uppon complainte of the commons' been ordered not to do so, the

prohibition being extended on this occasion 'aswell unto the saide Gillam Vatmer as unto all other of the French nacion inhabytinge' in Rye, including their wives and servants, who:

do retaile any Canvas, Lynnen clothe, haberdashery ware, mercery ware, grocery, or any suche commodities, as the mercery men of the Englishe nacion in Rye do use to retaile.³⁰

Sometimes whole groups of inhabitants came in person to complain to a town assembly, as in September 1589 when 'the Shipwrightes of the towne' to the number of 18 named individuals:

came and compleined yt the French Shipwrightes aswell papystes as protestantes came over from Diepe and tookwe awaye their occupacion; and that the Frenchmen which come hither for Succor do sende for those French Shipwrightes and sett them on worke upon their Shypingge, refusinge to sett the Englishe men on worke, although they are contented yt the French shall sett some master workmen of their contrye Shipwrightes beinge of the relygion on worke. Of which foresaid abuse they crave remedy unto whome the Mayor and Jurattes have graunted remedye.³¹

There was only a fine line between peaceful petitioning and public protests. This was overstepped in June 1589 when Thomas Snodden, a joiner, presumably in pursuit of what may have been a widespread sense of economic grievance, especially among the poorer inhabitants, was arrested:

for abuse in the Churche against the frenche in the tyme of devyne service thare, to the great disturbance of the french congregacion, and for withstanding the Maiestrate when he commaunded him to warde and . . . that he so abused the Maiors Deputie in prison by callinge hym knave and other odious wordes (not for reverence sake to be wrytten).³²

The French were not the only group of immigrants to be regarded with a measure of

hostility by some of the local tradesmen. In the early 1650s a similar situation arose in the case of discharged soldiers from the parliamentary army who were settling in large numbers in Rye to the alarm 'of ye poore tradesmen' of the town, who in November 1651 had once again approached the mayor and jurats with:

severall complaintes . . . that many of the disbanded souldiers and others strangers did sett upp and exercisse publike trades and callinges to there great preiudice and apparent ruine and desiringe redresse therein.³³

Not all complaints about unfair trading were levelled at outsiders, however, as is shown by a number of allegations made against fellow residents, dating mainly from the later 16th century, when many residents were facing difficulties as a result of economic stagnation and the beginnings of population decline. In 1575 there was a spate of such complaints, by Rye's sole capper against the mercers for selling hats (April), by the mercers against the tailors for retailing cloth (July) and by the town's bakers against the beerbrewers for competing with them in baking bread (September). There was also a more general complaint from the Tailors' Company to the assembly against newcomers who had set up in the trade in Rye without compounding for so doing (1577) and a renewal (1577 and 1581) of the ongoing conflict over delayed payments and poor service between the Rye fishermen and the royal purveyor of seafish.³⁴

Much of John Dowce's complaint was probably mere special pleading since he acknowledged 'havinge heretofore and doinge yet set sondry of the poore of the towne on worke'. So one might well doubt whether or not he:

must be constraigned to cease therin, and him self to be utterly impoverished, excepte your worshipes se convenient remedy therin' by granting to him not only the production of thick knitted woollen caps for winter 'which is but parte of the yere, The sommer tyme

men beinge gevin to the buyinge and waringe of hattes, which also as it is the coveringe of the self same part of the body, and for the same use . . . so are more fytylly brought to be incident to one trade, and the same artificer for sale as the other . . . that the sale of hattes within the towne may be restrayned from the mercers and suche other to whome the dealinge and knowledge therof cannot so well appertaine, and may be united to the Capper, who is by science to have more especiall knowledge then the other . . . Whereby divers of the poore of the towne shalbe sett on worke towards their releiff and didminishinge of the common charge . . .³⁵

In the case of the bakers, however, who were considerably less wealthy than the beerbrewers against whom five of their number petitioned the mayor and jurats, there is more reason to believe their 'pytifull complainte', which convinced the urban magistrates, who justified acceding to their request since:

it manifestly apperith that the bakinge of breade and bisket by the brewers . . . who have not ben lawfully traynid upe to the ocupacion of bakinge is and leike to be the utter overthrowe and impoverishinge of the saide bakers, their wyves and children, a thinge to be foresene, siththey are divers householdes . . . and are to lyve by their trade and callinge. And sith not only the statutes of this Realme, dothe order that the subjectes in the same should lyve by that they have lawfully bin brought upe in, but also in all good orderid Cities and townes it is seldome senne that the brewers are also bakers, two sondry sciences and eche a sufficient lyvinge . . .³⁶

The fishermen's complaints seem to be equally justified, since the corporation, in passing them on to the Comptroller of the Queen's Household in May 1581 pointed out that despite the promise of payment of arrerages on 18 April, they had still not been paid anything since December:

so as they are almost fyve monethes behinde of their mony, which bringeth them in so lowe state as they are not able longer to contynue their trade to the seas . . . besides the misery their wyves, children and family are presently in . . .³⁷

The financial difficulties endured by the Rye fishermen as a result of the delays in payment for fish received by the royal household, which was one of their major customers, is a recurrent theme of the town clerk's correspondence files. In August 1577 they had sought the help of the mayor and jurats who wrote to the Comptroller 'for suche money as is due to them for fishe bought before Mr Gaymer entrid into thoffice. And for that we se there state, and what great nede the poore men shall have of there mony against that tyme to make there provision to Yermouth . . .'³⁸

Henry Gaymer, who became deputy purveyor for Rye in 1577, evidently came under considerable personal criticism when problems of delays in payment recurred in 1581. As a town magistrate it was felt that he had a particular duty to safeguard the fishermen's interests, as is clear from a letter to him in London from the then mayor, Robert Jackson, in February 1581:

I have byn your deputy at Strand iij daies this weke only to have her maiestie well served. I have hard and daily hear of the dolorous crie of the pore fishermen ther wifes children and family. I wish in hart and praie unto god with all my hart it might ones perce into your brest in sort as all privat gaynes or comodty might not drowne you but that as you by birth and oth ought, so you wold . . . releve aese and comfort them. The gaynes and praises therof mostly wilbe yours. Ther overthrow and undoing will mak you to be some partenor therof but such as I and others must fele it first in that they all trust you and we must trust them. I pray you in good will consider with your self . . . and waie that it is good when all men do well and prosper, when brytheryn ioyned in goodnes and when the devill is habvoydyd (?) out of

our hartes and when we all sing one song to
godes glory which I besech hym for my part
to grant me and you well to do . . .³⁹

This belief in the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the dutiful magistrate and the obedient subject was an inevitable consequence of the organic view of the well-ordered commonwealth and formed the basis on which petitioners submitted their grievances to the town magistrates for redress. Often this was unstated, but sometimes the organic comparison was overt, as in John Dowce's reference in his supplication to the 'other good provisions and orders within the towne' wherein 'your wisdomes . . . ordaine and sett downe suche indifferent Judgment as may be for the mayntenance of every good **member** of the same'.⁴⁰

YOUTH AND POPULAR PROTEST

One constant in early modern society was the conflict between adolescent servants and apprentices and the authority of their elders, which is apparent in the Rye records from the 1504 decrees against servants playing tennis or other unlawful games on workdays and in the penalties laid down at the same time for children and servants breaking any of the church windows.⁴¹ Young people were often involved in brushes with authority, offending social norms in a series of ways ranging from illicit pre-marital sex and petty pilfering from their masters and mistresses to disturbing the peace by occasional outbursts of high spirits. Underlying each of these types of offence was a sense of frustration at the constraints placed upon them by their elders. Their acts can therefore best be understood as a form of protest against the restrictive situations in which they found themselves.

Although in general relations between servants and their masters seem to have been good, the restrictions placed on apprentices, who were often bound by their indentures until the age of 24 must have appeared irksome at times, especially if they were rigidly enforced:

At dice Cardes tables or any other unlawfull games he shall not play. Taverns Inns Alehouses the company of women unhonest he shall not use haunt or frequent. Matrimony with any woman duringe his tearme he shall not contract nor from the service of his said Master absent himselfe by day or night. The goods of his said Master inordinatly he shall not wast nor them to any man lend . . . And in all other things shall so behave himselfe as becometh a good servant to doe,⁴²

Often with as little as 4d a quarter laid down as his pocket money apart from what his master might let him earn or he might manage to acquire by other means.

It is not therefore surprising that many of the petty thefts which came before the courts were committed by servants and apprentices (11 of 37 petty larcenies, 12 of 114 suspected property felonies in the period 1558–1603).⁴³ Percivall Durrant, covenant servant to William Shipton, currier, confessing to the theft of 53s 6d in cash from his master's house in July 1568, described how, when he was out in the fields with his master and dame gathering boughs and rushes, his thoughts had turned to a sum of money which he had seen counted out on a table the previous evening by one Hartfylde's wife who was staying with her husband in his master's house. He therefore returned home early and:

takinge the kay of the dore went upp into the chamber wher Hartfylde lay in bed on slepe then this examynant openid the chest beinge not lockid and saw the money ther his harte began to grudge and move at it then he went downe agayne and came to Hartfylde agayne awakid hym and then Hartfylde arose and said he wold go by hym a peticote in the towne so Hartfylde did and lockid his chamber dore and toke the kaye with hym after whos departinge this examynant did clyme into a garet wyndowe and so disendid into the chamber and aboute betwyne vi and vij of the cloke that daye he did take out of the said chest in money Liijs vjd and in stikes

vs vjd and after he had thus done he presently fled awaye and went to Wynchelsey and so to Battill and from Battill returnid towardes Wynchilsey agayne and so from thens to Flymwell wher he dronke iij pottes of bere and from thens to Brensley in Kent wher he was apprehendid . . .

Somewhat surprisingly, despite his confession, he was acquitted and thereafter disappears from the records.⁴⁴ Clearly, from his examination, having eventually succumbed to the temptation to steal the money he had no clear plan as to what to do with it and simply wandered aimlessly between a number of small towns and villages in the vicinity of Rye until he was caught.

The urge to wander seems to have been a common one among young people in the early modern period and indicates the boredom and sense of constriction in their lives of which many were conscious. There is little evidence that the potential consequences of such escapades were given much consideration, nor that moral objections weighed heavily on the participants. Rather it seems that for a small number of young people the temptation to travel and for a time at least to shake off the authority of their masters (or occasionally their parents) was enough to set them on the road with somebody else's money. This certainly seems to be the best explanation for the behaviour of John Beching, an otherwise perfectly respectable young man with seemingly good prospects who was taken in Rye on 17 November 1582 after a fortnight on the road. A servant to one Mr John Edinge, gent, of Yalden, Kent, he had been sent by his master to deliver a letter to a Mr Fane at Burson and had gone on to his grandfather, Thomas Sawmon, to collect his master's half-yearly rent of £4:

but he saieth he tarried at his grandfathers frome that Saturday [3 November] untill the Tuesday followinge, and havinge tarried so longe was loth to retorne home againe, for that in the meane tyme, he went to a brydall and at play lost some of his mony and

theruppon came to Rye the Wednesday followinge where he hath remaynid at Mr Farlies, and also lastly at James Milles. He saieth that he spent at Farlies vjd ordinary eche meale and that at James Milles eche meale vjd besides other extraordinary charges. Also he saieth he plaied at disce, at passage and at tables, in Mr Farlies house with a younge man a smithe, which he knoweth if he se him againe . . . he saieth farther yt while he was at Mr Farleis beinge ix daies, he spent by estimacion xxs above ordinary uppon frenchemen there . . . Also he brought a Rapier and a dagger of John Bembricke cost him viijs.

When he was finally caught he had 22s 3d left, of which 2s went to the waterbailiff's sergeant for his pains and the residue, together with 7s which was refunded by John Bembricke on the return of the rapier and dagger, all of which was handed over to his grandfather, together with the boy 'to be conveyed to his Mr'.⁴⁵

A not dissimilar example is provided by Roose Maior, a female servant, who claimed she had been robbed on the highway in Kent of the sum of 15s. According to her late master, Richard Sampson, who was called to testify as to how she might have so large a sum on her person: about fyve or six wekes passed, she receyvid frome him somuch Aquavite and suche leike ware as amounted to fyftene shillinges or nere aboutes to sell abrode in the contry, and sithens hath not harde where she is become, and for money in hir purse she had none to his knowledge and verely thinketh that she in this tyme of hir absence hath spent suche mony as she receyvid for his said warre and as towchinge the person . . . the said Roose Maior hath byn of longetyme, a very evill member in the common weale, one which hath layne diseasid in the streates of our towne and hath byn suckerid by the cheritie of well disposid people, thesis two yeris past or there aboutes, and very lately emongest others ponished accordinge to our orders

and decres for suche causes for hir incontinent liff beinge deliverid of a childe and unmarried . . .⁴⁶

Occasionally servants were dismissed for indiscipline and a refusal to accept their master's or mistress's authority, as in the case of Thomas Lee, servant to William Didsbury, dismissed from his service in June 1593 for his 'froward demeanour towards his Mr and his Mrs and his fellowes'; or Drew Cornishe, servant to Thomas Radford junior, who was ordered to leave town in 1576 for his 'dronkenness and evil demeanour'; while Richard Starne, servant to Margaret Danyell, widow, found drunk and disorderly in the streets in December 1593 was ordered 'within vij dayes to gett him into service to some honest man' or else depart.⁴⁷

As a last resort, servants might attempt to run away as the only course open to them to remedy a hopeless domestic situation, as in the case of two of William Gilford's apprentices in 1564 and two apprentices and a servant at will of Robert Jackson's, who were apprehended and whipped at the cart's tail for conspiracy to rob their master and depart abroad in August 1576.⁴⁸ In the latter case two letters survive, one from Thomas Rede to his master, Robert Jackson and another from the eldest of the conspirators, John Bell, to the mayor and jurats, which provide an interesting insight into relations between masters and servants at their worst. According to Thomas Rede:

Master maye it please you to understand that a fortnight or iij wekes paste you brocke my hed without any ockesyon which then I did fyrst pertend to goe a waye, then I parseving allso I had scervid you iij yeres and have learynd nothing which is a great hynderaunce unto me, neyther know I not what I shuld learne being with you eny longer . . .⁴⁹

This was corroborated by John Bell: Mr mayre and your brotheren I would desseyre your frynship for I truste you shall fynde me in no gret faute. This was the begynnyng upon wane tyme my mastar

dyd brake Thomas Redes hede and ther uppon he sayde to me he woulde goe awaye and dyd ayxe me and if it war good travellynge in Fraunce and I sayde I could not tell for I was newere at no place but at Rochell. Then sayd Thomase Rede yf you will goo I wyll prepare somme money to bare our charyges that is my owne. Then I sayde it is verrey ill for too travellynge in Fraunce. He sayde then I wyll gette anothare and spake to Byllye and then towlde me that he would goo to and within ij dayes thereaftare he towlde me that Byllye would not goe. I sayde it was all the bettare for I hade byne anowse in Fraunce all redaye and then so none of us would gooe. And then uppon Sunday nyghte or moundaye mornynge laste we did take of Flushynge then Thomas Rede would nedes goo thethar and then on Twesdaye mornynge my mystres dyd calle me thyfe and Roge slone (?) for no othar occasyon but because I was out a munday nyghte aftar ix a cloke for aney othar a fence I had downe har none and then same daye Thomas Red dyd ayxe me and if I wold goo awaye wyth hyme before my Mr came home and I sayd I if he would bare my charyges to Gravesend. Then Thomas sayd Byllye and I wyll to gethers betwyxte us and we wyll have horesseyes to carrye us to Gravesende and there wyth Thomas Rede sente me to Muddelles and aftarward went thethar hym selfe and then Muddell promyste hyme to have horseyes abd he dyd deseve us wherfore we ware sorrey but I dyd care lest of that for I dyd thynke to have my masters good wyll to goo awaye as well as I had com to hyme for I nevere had nothyng of Thomas Rede in my lyfe mor then vs vjd at iij tymes to by me showes and ij shylynges of my mastarand that is all that I cane saye I knowe nothyng elles in the warlde but onley of akloke and adublet that Byllye bought of Gorge Downke.⁵⁰

Servants and apprentices were also prominent among those committing late night

disturbances, as in the case of four unnamed young men found abroad in the streets one night in June 1574 who were committed to ward and fined 12*d* each. Again there is more than a hint of deliberate rebelliousness against authority, at its most overt in July 1593 when another four young men were reported 'for rydeinge and chaseinge Mr. Dydesburyses asse' in a field outside the Landgate and for muzzling it.⁵¹

Sexual frustration might also find its relief in disorderly behaviour, although more commonly in clandestine sexual encounters between servants. There was however one incident in which five young men apparently broke into the bedchamber of Jone Dale, a maidservant, in July 1593. According to her testimony and their own confessions:

they about iij weekes past in the night, the candell beinge by them putt out, in most lewde manner threw her into a cradell and putt their handes under her cotes and there used suche outrage as is most unmeete to be donne by men, or to be comprised in wrytinge.

They were ordered to be put in the stocks on the next market day 'with papers on their heddes declaring their inhumane demeanor'.⁵² A very different kind of frustration led the 18 year old Samuel Jeake and a group of his friends and contemporaries to a public display of another sort when in 1642 they walked out of the parish church in protest 'when the children of visible unbelievers were baptised'. In an extremely lengthy justification of their views to the then vicar, John Beaton, in a letter packed with biblical references, the young Jeake displayed all the combativeness of zealous youth against the compromises and spiritual slackness of his elders, drawing the advice from a Kentish clergyman from a nearby parish:

take heede Samuel you run not before you are sent, for although you can speake well and seduce ye people and have an eloquent tounge . . . yet let me perswade you to takwe heede of pride, with which I heare you are mightily puffed up.⁵³

The opening lines of this letter, the first of several major expositions of Jeake's evolving theological position provide a good example of his forthright approach:

Mr Beaton

All serviceable respects unto you presented, prostrating our selves and our judgments at your feet for censure (so censuring us as ye word of God will beare you out in ye fact) . . . it hath beene our condition of late to remaine accidentally occasions of offence to you, by our behaviour in ye parish Assembly. To vindicate our owne innocency in as much humility as we could, we came to your house to still this noise at least to declare yt our wills was not our rules, but ye word of ye great God, and when we were seated in your chamber we found that Theoricke discourses tends more to vaine janglings then to Edification and yt ye point of removing our Baptismall scruple was rather turned into virulent publique reproofes and . . . was . . . translated into personall recollections of former committed reprovved, confessed and reformed faults, and so by this practise ye rules of our Saviour were violated . . . And after some time spent in alleading many texts to prove many things no satisfaction was either given by you or obtained of us . . . our last resolutions were . . . That we should committ our arguments to paper . . . that you . . . might more seriously view them, and now we add one suite more, that you would overthrow them by ye word of Christ and we as willingly shall lay downe our practise as ever we tooke it up when we are convinced. Now Sir in obedience unto your command we have performed what you required, and what we unanimously promised which followeth as ye Lord shall enable us . . .⁵⁴

ECONOMIC CRISIS AND SOCIAL UNREST

The economic crisis of the 1590s was especially severe in Rye, where local factors

exacerbated the effects of national grain shortages. Between May 1592 and May 1597 the price of grain rose sharply, a 2*d* loaf falling in weight from 64 oz to 16 oz. Bread prices remained at crisis levels of 35 oz or below from November 1594 until May 1602 when the weight of a 2*d* loaf rose to 62 oz. These high food prices, at a time when average wage rates for labourers remained static at 12*d* a day, coincided with a decline in the Rye fishing fleet during the 1590s by one-third, the loss of the transit trade in cloth to Rouen which fell by four-fifths between 1594–6, the plague epidemic of 1596–7 which left 510 dead (about one-fifth of the population), and heavy demands for local taxation to raise over £200 towards the provisioning of two ships from the western Cinque Ports for the Cadiz expedition in April 1596 and towards the more than £1,400 spent on harbour works to counter silting between 1596–1600, all of which combined to produce a fall in population during the decade 1590–1600 of approximately one-third.⁵⁵

This acute economic crisis was reflected locally in the increased numbers of vagrants passing through the town and by an increase in property thefts to unprecedented levels. There was also a rising tide of frustration and resentment locally at the apparent impotence of the mayor and jurats in the face of the massive problems facing the town. As during the acute grain shortage of the summer of 1586, the only previous occasion when a 2*d* loaf had fallen to 30 oz or less and four men (three fishermen and a cordwainer) had been imprisoned for, with others, ‘bending themselves towards a mutiny’, local dissatisfaction boiled over into open unrest.⁵⁶

The earliest indication of impending trouble came in April 1594 when John Locke, fisherman, was put in the stocks with a paper over his head ‘for saying that the next yere, he would have Jacke Barthlemew (being an Inocent) to be Mayor’.⁵⁷ In October 1596, bread prices rose again and the 2*d* loaf fell for the first time below 30 oz. On 15 October the mayor wrote to the

commissioners for the purveying of grain to allow the shipment of a quantity bought by the town’s purveyors in the west of the county ‘for we assure you if these iijc [300] of our Neighbors which now be at Yarmouth were at home as shortly they wilbe . . . there is not within the hole towne suffycyent wheate and malt to vycually the towne fortnight . . .’⁵⁸

By December the situation was set to deteriorate further and the trouble began. A set of depositions dated 15 December 1596 record how earlier in the week John Cotten, fisherman, had used ‘Mutynous speeches’ against the mayor, Thomas Hamon, at the Strand, saying that he ‘wysed yt Mr Mayor were hanged and all those Rascalls and Vylleines yt chose him’, provoking considerable discord, Andrew Winterbourne coming to Cotten’s defence and William Palmer, another fisherman, saying ‘yt divers were of yt mynde if they durst say so much’ and Robert Convers, the deputy town clerk saying in open Sessions ‘yt all the fyshermen were drunkerdes’. Winterborne and Palmer were bound over for their good behaviour and Cotten was ordered to stand in the collar in the market place on the following Saturday, being the next market day, with a paper over his head signifying his offence.⁵⁹

By April 1597, grain prices were set to rise even further, the 2*d* loaf falling to its lowest weight in May. On 18 April, when a grain ship came into Rye bound for London, there was almost a riot, the mayor writing to the Lord Treasurer to explain his actions in staying the ship:

through the universall scarsytye of corne and graine we can not be permytted to transport from the corne contryes of England provysion of graine to susteine our poore people. By meanes whereof weare enforced at this tyme to make stay of a smale barke laden with xxy quarters of Barlye imbarked for one Mr Bowier of London out of the West partes of this cuntrye of Sussex, where the outrage of the meaner sort of thinhabitauntes is such as they will not

permytt any provisyons of corne to be shipped hether except the same shold be done by force to the dangerous breach of her maiestyes peace. Wherefore we most humbly desyre your honorable protection and warrant yt the saide barlly may be sold here at any reasonable price to be converted into breade for the releefe of our poore distressed inhabytauntes.⁶⁰

In June the authorities were again able to alleviate the situation temporarily when a Breton ship carrying wheat and rye came into the harbour. There was still an undercurrent of discontent, however, the wife of William Egbury, fisherman, one of the poorer ratepayers, being fined 20s on 17 June with the further threat of two hours in the collar and three duckings in salt water if she re-offended, 'for abuseinge Mr Mayor in sayinge yt the wheat and rye which of late was brought in by a Brytton came in against Mr Mayors will, contrarye to all truth' and a month later Richard Swanne, a freeman, being disfranchised for trying to dissuade two of his neighbours from paying their town dues, saying 'yt yf any yt shold be Maior were worse then he yt now is Maior he wyshed yt he were hanged at the Landgate'.⁶¹

The economic crisis of the 1590s reveals the undercurrents of unrest just beneath the apparently calm surface of early modern society. Much of the unrest in 1596–7, as previously in 1586, was centred upon the ordinary fishermen and their families, among the poorest of the town's inhabitants. Their hostility focussed upon the perceived failure of the mayor, Thomas Hamon, to ensure adequate supplies of grain for bread to feed themselves and their families. The coinciding of the mayoralty of the town's leading beerbrewer with an acute grain shortage was quite accidental, but it appears to have intensified the feelings of grievance of the poorer elements among the populace. Their protests raise serious doubts concerning the degree of deference to the existing authorities by those at the bottom end of the social scale in early modern towns.

What is perhaps clearer is that in a society with only limited means of coercion available to those in authority, the maintenance of order had to depend largely upon consensus between governors and governed. It was on this principle that the administration of justice and the regulation of society depended, and there is more than enough evidence to demonstrate that this was fully appreciated on both sides. On two occasions when the town's butchers refused to sell at the prices set, on the latter occasion in May 1586 four of them being committed overnight to prison, it was the authorities who had to concede by raising prices. Similarly in the autumn of the same year, during another period of acute grain shortage, when the town's bakers repeatedly broke the assize by an average 11–17 oz on a 2*d* loaf despite heavy fines and the threat of the pillory, it was the mayor and jurats who had to back down in the face of economic realities. With only 39 bushels of wheat and 81 of meal left in the town and many bakers having run out of grain altogether, the magistrates were forced to lower the assize for a 2*d* loaf to just under 31 oz, the top weight at which bakers were still selling bread.⁶²

Much of the magisterial insistence on the duties and obligations incumbent on those living within an organic commonwealth and the vigilance with which they sought to prevent any overt challenge to their authority can therefore best be seen rather as an acknowledgement of the fundamental weakness of their position rather than as proof of any binding social consensus. In reality they were acutely aware of the regular and repeated threats to their authority, seen for instance in physical attacks on magistrates and town officers, refusal to pay rates or other town dues and contempt or abuse of the mayor and jurats sitting in justice, of which there were 47 cases in all during the Elizabethan period alone.⁶³ Similarly several of those fined for profane swearing during the Commonwealth period (34 instances 1650–60) seem to have chosen to do so in the presence of the mayor or other magistrates, presumably as a further means of expressing their general

dissatisfaction.⁶⁴ Even more common were the regular verbal assaults on the annual presenting jurymen as they went round the town each December enquiring into minor infringements of market regulations and petty nuisances (7 of 20 surviving lists of presentments 1604–59), ranging from goodwife Welsh's calling them 'Tom Turd with his fellows' with 'other slanderous and abusive words', or Thomas Watson's description of the same jury as 'a company of Jacanapseis' in the mid-1630s, to William Wooton's 'ill language and abusing ye whole Jury in the Executinge of there office in his owne shop to ye disharteninge of some of the Jury in the performance of their duty', in 1652. In their case a similarity of wealth and status with those whom they presented seems to have bred a particular contempt for their efforts.⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

Popular protest in the early modern period was manifested across a broad spectrum of events ranging from petitions calling for redress, individual acts of social deviance, petty crimes against property and verbal abuse to physical attacks on persons in authority and in the most extreme circumstances small-scale public disturbances and large-scale riots. This variety of responses reflected an equal variety of underlying feelings about the nature of society and the status quo and more crucially concerning the willingness and ability of the urban magistracy to reform the disequilibria which developed from time to time.

At their most articulate, those engaged in these widely-differing forms of protest showed a developed political understanding based on a belief in the reciprocal rights and obligations of governors and governed, masters and servants in an organic society in which the health of the members was seen as the overriding responsibility of the authorities who comprised its head. How far this was mere lip-service in order to appeal to the prevailing social and political outlook of the magisterial elite is a

matter for conjecture. However the frequency and degree of personal abuse and occasional violence to which magistrates and other town officers were subjected in the performance of their office, together with their own often acute awareness of the possibility of disorder, raises serious doubts concerning the degree to which there was a common acceptance of the need for deference to authority in a well-ordered society. However, even when acute economic crisis brought about widespread discontent, there is no evidence of any serious questioning of the structure of society, only of the capacities and shortcomings of the individuals at its head.

Historians should always be wary of making too much of a single case study. Nevertheless, the evidence from Rye does suggest a number of parallels with findings elsewhere. The wife of William Egbury's verbal abuse of the mayor during the grain shortage of 1597 and the similar involvement of other women in economic protests throughout the period confirms Peter Clark's findings for women's involvement in similar protests and disturbances in Kent.⁶⁶ However, the wide variety and extent of social protest in Rye raises serious doubts as to the validity of Clark's conclusion that there was remarkably little apparent social conflict in early modern English society and seems chiefly a result of his limiting the focus of his research to grain riots.

As far as disturbances occasioned by grain shortages are concerned, the Rye evidence also bears out the findings of Buchanan Sharp for the West Country that protests were often focussed against particular individuals, chiefly the wealthier grain merchants, bakers and brewers who were often perceived as instrumental in these crises.⁶⁷ Certainly it is the case that in Rye in the mid-1590s when the living standards of the poorer sort were already depressed as a result of a declining local economy and were exacerbated by soaring bread prices culminating in 1597, the chief target for abuse was the mayor, Thomas Hamon, a beerbrewer and one of the five highest-rated individuals in the 1596 town assessment.

The 1590s, which marked the beginning of Rye's terminal decline as a major south coast port, saw social relationships stretched to the uttermost limits. Yet although the crisis of the 1590s was exceptional, the antagonisms revealed in these years indicate the extent of social discontent and personal resentments which existed behind the facade of apparent order and social harmony.

It is however doubtful whether events in Rye justify the view propounded by Anthony Fletcher and others that these years marked the breakup of cultural unity and an increasing gulf in attitudes between the local elite and the mass of society as exemplified in the clash between Puritan morality and traditional cultural values.⁶⁸ Nor is there any evidence of a widening of the social distinctions between masters and servants in the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods as Fletcher would have us believe. Indeed in Rye the series of decrees as early as 1504 forbidding servants from playing tennis or other unlawful games on workdays and setting penalties for servants and children who broke

any of the church windows indicates that the discipline and regulation of servants' behaviour was a consideration throughout the period. It may well be therefore that much of the apparent evidence for attitudinal changes or attempts to impose stricter standards or moral discipline and social control is merely a trick of historical perspective resulting from the survival or otherwise of the relevant records.

Nevertheless it is clear that there were more than enough disordered individuals in early modern towns prepared publicly to challenge authority for it to appear necessary to those in authority continually to reiterate the maxim that:

though the maiestrate were a man of ill disposition yet it becomith not eny under his government to misuse him in speche or otherwise . . . for if we suffer suche ill members emongest us unponished government will decaye and all goo to wrecke . . .⁶⁹

Author: Graham Mayhew, 29 West Street, Lewes.

Notes

¹ This paper was first presented to the 1988 History Workshop conference. I would like to thank those who commented upon it there, particularly Jim Sharpe and Annabel Gregory.

² East Sussex Record Office (hereafter ESRO) RYE 57/4, ff. 23–24v. For a similar emphasis on the importance of order and a shared sense of organic communal values in times of unrest see: B. Sharp, 'Popular Protest in Seventeenth Century England', in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth Century England* (1988), ed. B. Reay; K. Wrightson, 'Two concepts of order, justices, constables and jurymen in seventeenth-century England', in *An Ungovernable People. The English and their law in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (1980), ed. J. S. Brewer and J. Styles, 21–46; J. Walter, 'Grain riots and popular attitudes to the law: Maldon and the crisis of 1629', *ibid.*, 47–68; P. Clark, 'Popular Protest and Disturbance in Kent 1558–1640', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, 29, (1976), 365–82; A. J. Fletcher, 'Honour, Reputation and Local Office-holding in Elizabethan and Stuart England', in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (1985), ed. A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson, 92–115; R. B. Manning, *Village Revolts and Social Protest and popular Disturbance in England*

1509–1640 (1988), esp. p.318; J. Walter and K. Wrightson, 'Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 71, (1976), 22–42.

³ ESRO RYE 47/54/13.

⁴ ESRO RYE 47/39/9.

⁵ PRO SP 1/113/106–9; SP 1/124/21. For a fuller account of these controversies see G. Mayhew, 'Religion, faction and politics in Reformation Rye: 1530–59', *Suss. Arch. Coll.*, 120 (1982), 139–60; G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 60–77. Unfortunately G. R. Elton, *Policy and police* (1972), 85–90, having looked only at the State Papers evidence has accepted the erroneous claim of their traditionalist opponents who controlled Rye corporation at that time that the Rye Protestants of the 1530s were of a lower social class than the controlling faction. This has unfortunately recently been repeated in C. Haigh (ed.), *The English Reformation Revised* (1986), 108–9.

⁶ ESRO RYE 12/3.

⁷ *Acts of the Privy Council of England 1552–4*, ed. J. R. Dasent (1892), 387, 391, 395.

⁸ ESRO RYE 47/43/16.

⁹ ESRO RYE 1/12 f.13.

¹⁰ ESRO RYE 1/12 ff. 215, 226; RYE 1/14 ff. 20v, 22, 23v, 108v, 120; RYE 47/123. A Fletcher, *A County Community*

- in Peace and War: Sussex 1600–1660* (1975), 302.
- ¹¹ ESRO RYE 47/55/8; RYE 1/6 ff. 257–8.
- ¹² ESRO RYE 47/129/6–7; RYE 1/12 f. 306.
- ¹³ *Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts: Thirteenth Report. Appendix IV* (1892), 61.
- ¹⁴ ESRO RYE 47/48/17, 69.
- ¹⁵ For a full account of the factionalism within the corporation during the mid-Elizabethan period see G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 127–37. For a similar riot at Lewes see J. Goring, 'The Fellowship of the Twelve in Elizabethan Lewes', *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **119** (1981), 157–72.
- ¹⁶ ESRO RYE 137/36.
- ¹⁷ PRO STAC5 H32/29; STAC5 H76/38.
- ¹⁸ ESRO RYE 137/36.
- ¹⁹ ESRO RYE 1/4 f. 307; RYE 47/24/6.
- ²⁰ ESRO RYE 1/4 ff. 99, 147v, 175.
- ²¹ G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 94.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 95.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 103–4.
- ²⁴ ESRO RYE 47/10/134–5.
- ²⁵ PRO SP12/274 75(1).
- ²⁶ For a fuller account of the Huguenot refugee community in Rye see G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 79–90; W. J. Hardy, 'Foreign Refugees at Rye' in *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London*, **2** (1887–8), 406–24, 567–77; W. J. C. Moens, 'Remarks upon Mr Hardy's Paper, "Foreign Refugees at Rye"', *ibid.*, 424–7; W. D. Cooper, 'Protestant Refugees in Sussex' *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **13** (1861) 180–208; G. and J. Daval, *Histoire de la Reformation à Dieppe 1557–1657* (Rouen, 1878); H. D. Gwynne, *Huguenot heritage: the history and contribution of the Huguenots in Britain* (1985). Gwynne understates the size and stability of the Huguenot community in Rye.
- ²⁷ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. J. Gairdner *et al.*, **14** pt II (1895), no. 349.
- ²⁸ ESRO RYE 1/4, ff. 218v, 284; RYE 47/9/32; RYE 1/5, ff. 84v–5, 89, 160, 310.
- ²⁹ ESRO RYE 47/9/32.
- ³⁰ ESRO RYE 1/5, f. 113.
- ³¹ ESRO RYE 1/5, f. 160.
- ³² ESRO RYE 1/5, f. 155v.
- ³³ ESRO RYE 47/145/2.
- ³⁴ ESRO RYE 1/4, ff. 195, 204v, 211v, 213; RYE 47/15/25; RYE 47/21/6; RYE 47/25/29; RYE 47/24/21.
- ³⁵ ESRO RYE 1/4, f. 195.
- ³⁶ ESRO RYE 1/4, ff. 211v, 212, 213–4.
- ³⁷ ESRO RYE 47/24/21.
- ³⁸ ESRO RYE 47/21/6.
- ³⁹ ESRO RYE 47/25/29.
- ⁴⁰ ESRO RYE 1/4, f. 195.
- ⁴¹ ESRO RYE 60/4, f. 145v.
- ⁴² Apprenticeship indenture 13 August 1625 between John Fowle, singleman and Anthony Rogers, butcher, for 9 years from Michaelmas. ESRO RYE 1/11, f. 73.
- ⁴³ G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 211–2, 229.
- ⁴⁴ ESRO RYE 1/4, f. 16–7.
- ⁴⁵ ESRO RYE 47/30/73.
- ⁴⁶ ESRO RYE 47/25/6.
- ⁴⁷ G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 229.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 228–9.
- ⁴⁹ ESRO RYE 47/13/76.
- ⁵⁰ ESRO RYE 47/13/75.
- ⁵¹ G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 229.
- ⁵² ESRO RYE 1/5, f. 302.
- ⁵³ ESRO FRE 4223, no. 67.
- ⁵⁴ ESRO FRE 4223, nos 49–52. For a discussion of Jeake's theological outlook see M. Allison, 'Puritanism in mid-17th century Sussex: Samuel Jeake the elder of Rye' *Suss. Arch. Coll.* **125** (1987), 125–38 and A. Fletcher, *A County Community in Peace and War*, (1975), 64, 66–8, 117–20.
- ⁵⁵ G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 24, 47, 170–2, 245, 268–70, 287.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 212–3; ESRO RYE 1/5, ff. 82v, 87, 90, 93.
- ⁵⁷ ESRO RYE 1/5, f. 332v.
- ⁵⁸ ESRO RYE 47/54/22.
- ⁵⁹ ESRO RYE 47/54/1.
- ⁶⁰ ESRO RYE 47/53/11.
- ⁶¹ ESRO RYE 1/6, ff. 144v, 149.
- ⁶² G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 217. It was presumably a dispute of this sort which led to a riotous assault on the mayor, Alexander Bennet, by four butchers and one other man in August 1656. ESRO RYE 1/14, f. 210.
- ⁶³ G. Mayhew, *Tudor Rye* (1988), 219–21.
- ⁶⁴ ESRO RYE 47/146 (1652 Grand Jury Presentments); RYE 1/14 (individual cases at sessions 1650–60). The grand jury presented 16 offences of profane swearing and cursing in December 1652. Other cases listed in the sessions books were in the mayoral year 1653–4 (5 cases); 1655–6 (5 cases); 1656–7 (6 cases); 1658–9 (2 cases). Twice in 1653–4 and twice in 1655–6 these incidents are specified as having taken place in the presence of the mayor or jurats.
- ⁶⁵ ESRO RYE 7/5–21; RYE 47/146; especially RYE 7/16, RYE 47/146.
- ⁶⁶ P. Clark, 'Popular Protest and Disturbance in Kent 1558–1640', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, **29** (1976), 365–82.
- ⁶⁷ B. Sharp, 'Popular Protest in Seventeenth Century England', in *Popular Culture in Seventeenth Century England*. (1988), ed. B. Reay, 271–308.
- ⁶⁸ A. J. Fletcher and J. Stevenson 'Introduction', esp. pp. 13, 25, in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (1985) ed. A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson. See also J. Walter and K. Wrightson, 'Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, **71** (1976), 22–42.
- ⁶⁹ ESRO RYE 47/23/114.