

Elizabeth's Golden Age had little lustre for ordinary folk

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The Elizabethan Golden Age wasn't so golden for ordinary English families, whose living standards were lower than at any other period since the 14th century, research suggests.

In the first study over such a long timescale, economic historians have used an array of data on the availability of work, rates of pay, benefits in kind and prices of food and household goods to chart the material wellbeing of a typical rural family from 1280 to 1850.

The researchers, at the London School of Economics and Oxford University, confirmed that living standards improved greatly after the Black Death, when labour shortages led to better wages and conditions, raising rural working families well above the subsistence level. Their study shows a marked decline from the early 16th century, however, with living standards at their lowest ebb in the last years of the reign of Elizabeth I before improving slightly during the following decades, and significantly after the Restoration of Charles II in the 1660s. The Elizabethan

period, from 1558-1603, is often considered a Golden Age because of a flowering of the arts, the opulence of the nobility and the exploits of famous navigators such as Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh. However, Professor Sara Horrell, of the LSE, said: "People think about Elizabethan ruffs and fine clothing and so on but there's a lot there that also says it wasn't so prosperous for everyone.

"There were a lot of things that really disrupted their living standards and made it very much harder. Poor harvests, enclosures of common land, sweating sickness, a debasement of the coinage, the dissolution of the monasteries [and] a reduction of charity to families, and restrictions on women's work."

The study considered a family of five, with two working children. The researchers said that, after the turmoil of the Civil War, living standards and opportunities for work increased from the 1660s and the extensive participation of women and children was central both to improving conditions and preparing the way for the Industrial Revolution.