Between the years 1621-24, Scotland and the north of England were afflicted by a famine which must count amongst the more important demographic events of the seventeenth century. Michael Flinn did not flinch from calling it “a national disaster” which may have surpassed the so-called “Seven Ill Years” of the 1690s in its scale and intensity. The timing of the famine is also significant; twenty-four separate cases of either localised or national food shortages have been identified in the period 1550-1600, but by the second decade of the seventeenth century, Scotland seems to have been exporting surplus grain and reducing imports of victual from the Baltic.

The crisis of 1621-24 has primarily raised interest amongst historians who see it as an indicator of the persistent instability of what was still, for most people, a subsistence economy in Scotland. Furthermore, it has been used to highlight the shortcomings of a poor relief system that was not designed to cope with large-scale destitution. Rosalind Mitchison’s work has been particularly influential in establishing this view. She rightly stressed how formidable obstacles to collective action in the localities severely limited the effectiveness of legislation on poor
relief, but these stimulating preliminary studies have not been substantially advanced.iv Mitchison herself acknowledged that she had focused on the rural parish; towns were conspicuous by their absence, yet it was towns, even relatively small ones, which possessed organisational mechanisms that could protect all but the most vulnerable members of the community from starvation.v This raised the possibility that the famine of 1621-24 affected urban and rural society differently, and that the way in which towns dealt with the crisis needed to be assessed separately.

Although Scottish (and English) historians have not ignored the famine of 1621-24, the crisis still needs to be adequately contextualised within investigations into the development of poor relief in the early seventeenth century. Making sense of Scotland’s copious burgh and church records, predominantly still in manuscript, is a daunting one, but until the task is undertaken, it seems premature to conclude that in the area of poor relief, “little if anything was achieved in Scotland in the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”vi Even if this turns out to be true, it does not mean that because little was achieved, nothing was attempted. The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries did see urban experiments in compulsory rates and institutional care. Large burghs were clearly leading the way, but in this respect, Scotland may turn out to be not dissimilar to other peripheral northern European kingdoms.vii

If Scotland’s post-Reformation poor relief system is to be fully understood, it seems acceptable to begin where the challenges were most pressing. As the seat of national government, chief entrepôt for the nation’s mercantile activity and Scotland’s largest burgh, Edinburgh was forced to address the problem of wide-scale poverty much earlier than most of the rest of Scotland. Its size and status intensified the difficulties of feeding a growing population, but this was counter-balanced by greater resources for the implementation of poor relief programmes. The first half of the seventeenth century, in particular, was a period of considerable experimentation. This article seeks to outline Edinburgh’s provision for the poor in the decades after the establishment of a compulsory poor rate in 1592, and argues that by the 1620s, the capital had a system that was efficient and effective by the standards of the day. The crisis of 1621-24 undoubtedly tested that
system, but Edinburgh’s basic institutional framework – a town council with a high degree of autonomy and a well-established local church court, known as the kirk session – enabled the burgh to cope with the famine. This did not mean that Edinburgh avoided deaths related to food shortages, but it did prevent the social dislocation evident in rural parishes and averted public disorder. By looking at Edinburgh’s experience, it is possible to shed light on why the poor relief system worked in the capital, but failed in so many other parts of the country in the early seventeenth century.

II

Poor relief in Edinburgh had gone through fundamental change in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, when the capital had moved away from charitable assistance as the sole means of tackling indigence. In common with many European urban centres, Edinburgh’s population had risen significantly in the decades before the mid-seventeenth century; it had probably doubled in less than a century, reaching around 20,000 by the 1630s, by which time it was about twice that of nearest rivals Aberdeen and Dundee. At the same time, a combination of price inflation, stagnant wage rates and economic contraction had almost certainly increased the proportion of the urban population who were vulnerable to periods of destitution. It was perceived by the ruling elite of towns all across Europe that the numbers of idle vagrants were rising and that concentrations of such people posed a threat to the social order. These conditions prompted many urban centres to consider compulsory rates as the only feasible answer to their problems during the sixteenth century.

The Scottish poor relief system which developed during the seventeenth century and beyond was founded on a parliamentary act of 1579. It improved on an earlier temporary act, passed in a convention of the nobility in 1574, which had itself borrowed heavily from English legislation of 1572. The basic idea behind it reflected a view of the poor with a long historical precedent and almost universal acceptance across Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe; provision should depend on a distinction between who deserved assistance and who did not. The title of the act makes this plain – “Anent the punishment of strang
and ydle beggaris and provioun for sustentatioun of the puyr and impotent”; the perception that there were “idill” beggars who needed to be punished and “impotent” poor who required assistance was maintained in subsequent legislation. This expedient may have had a moral dimension but it also conveniently limited the numbers requiring financial aid – a relief, no doubt, for Edinburgh’s elite, who could be stubbornly hostile to forking out in the name of charity.

Edinburgh, with its mushrooming population and persistent vulnerability to epidemics, was prompted to take action against poverty sooner than smaller burghs where such pressures seemed less acute. Serious efforts to reorganise the town’s poor relief system in the wake of the 1560 Reformation show that at least in the capital, parliamentary legislation was lagging behind local practice. Nonetheless, as in other Reformed cities, early initiatives in Edinburgh were thwarted by the recalcitrance of inhabitants who failed to see the attractions of taxation. The problem was compounded during the 1560s and 1570s by the ideological battle surrounding the establishment of the new Protestant church, resulting in various pilot schemes faltering on questions of precedence or jurisdiction. A serious outbreak of plague in the mid-1580s finally concentrated minds, but it was only in November 1591 that a monthly contribution for the poor was instituted. In 1592, parliament urged the rest of the country to implement measures that had “alreddie tane effect within the partis of the burgh of Edinburgh.” There were complaints, of course, but the sight of other burghs struggling to cope with the famine of 1596 allowed Edinburgh town council to adopt a certain smugness about the efficiency of its new system.

The “sustentatioun of the puyr and impotent” required a considerable amount of organisation. By the early seventeenth century, most of the day-to-day business of assessing need and providing assistance was carried out by the kirk session’s lay members, the elders, and particularly their junior colleagues, the deacons. A compulsory collection was made each month, seemingly without complaint, from the “nightbours leweill [i.e. loyal] merchants and craftsmen, [and] members of the college of Justice.” Who exactly this included cannot be known because the rolls have since disappeared. The compulsory part was
supplemented by contributions from the four parishes, taken at the church doors by the deacons every time there was a service. These sums were turned over to the kirk treasurer, who was an appointee of the town council, not of the kirk session. At least where money was concerned, the secular authorities had no intentions of allowing the church to exercise a free hand. The kirk treasurer’s account was kept completely separate from the town council’s own chaotic finances, not only for simplicity, but also to ensure transparency; nobody would be willing to contribute to poor relief if there was even a suspicion that the town council was requisitioning the money for other purposes.xix

In 1621, the compulsory element raised £2,521 14s.xx This figure remained fairly constant until a wider programme of ecclesiastical reforms, begun in 1633, seems to have prompted a rise in compulsory contributions. It is likely that from the year that records become available, in 1615, until 1633, approximately the same number of people were assessed for approximately the same amount of money each year. It is also likely, as the wording of a 1592 census for the purposes of poor relief states, that the more substantial members of the burgh community supplied these sums.xxx The voluntary contribution reveals a different pattern. It rose consistently each year from £3,570 16s in 1618 to a pre-Civil War peak of £10,375 13s 8d in 1632, then fluctuated around £9,000 until the collapse of Charles I’s Scottish regime in 1637.xxii This trend may reflect increasing affluence amongst the burgh’s wealthier inhabitants during the first three decades of the seventeenth century, resulting in greater sums going into their parish poor boxes. Perhaps the destitution which became so evident during the early 1620s made a lasting impression on a generation of Edinburgh church-goers, prompting them to continue giving generously for many years thereafter. Throughout the 1620s and 1630s, the voluntary contribution was almost always nearly double that of the compulsory component, indicating the continued importance of charity in the town’s poor relief system.

There were other sources of funds available. Fines imposed by the kirk sessions on fornication, transgression of the Sabbath, blasphemy and a wide range of other social indiscretions meant that, in effect, sin paid for good works. Apart from a surprisingly
large amount in 1636, these sums never exceeded £1,000 per annum and were frequently substantially less. Gifts, promises, legacies and fees paid by those marrying outwith the burgh also provided varying amounts of money. In the last decade of James VI and I’s life, therefore, Edinburgh’s kirk session was collecting around £10,000 per annum for the poor.

In 1621, when the kirk treasurer began recording the number of people on the rolls, there were about 183 unnamed ordinary poor listed. Over half the charge was disbursed weekly by the deacons throughout the four administrative quarters of the burgh on these regular recipients of assistance. On top of this figure, a further thirty-nine people were listed as “extraordinars,” who could receive a one-off payment by supplicating the session. “Extraordinars” could be anyone from an adulteress requiring support for her child, to a banished minister of Bohemia, to an indweller of Dundee. As well as money payments, the town council also provided clothing for another sixty people, who might be regular pensioners or “extraordinars.” Special provision was made for orphaned children, who in this year totalled fifteen youngsters. They were placed with a weaver called George Hood, who was compensated by the kirk treasurer for attempting to turn his charges into economically viable members of the community. Although some overlap of these categories probably exists, it seems likely that the town council provided outdoor relief for a rough total of just under 300 people in 1621.

Institutional care in Edinburgh was not operated by the kirk session, but by specific management committees appointed directly by the town council. A multi-functional setup developed on a site adjacent to the Trinity College Church at Leith Wynd port. The oldest facility was a small hospital, predating the Reformation, where a select number of men and women, burgesses and the unfree, could be cared for. Until its numbers mysteriously dwindled in the early 1630s, occupancy levels were usually above forty persons. More recently, the town had decided to build a weaving workhouse, which opened its doors in 1620. That year, it was able to provide accommodation for forty-two young “maisterless persouenes.” This facility was intended to benefit the town by providing a means of keeping the able-bodied poor under control at minimal cost, as the inmates would support
themselves with their labour. In reality, the project never paid for itself, as Aberdonians who copied Edinburgh’s example over a decade later would also discover. Unlike Aberdeen, Edinburgh’s workhouse was a separate institution from its house of correction, which opened in 1632, although their proximity on the Trinity College site must have emphasised the close ideological relationship between moral improvement and punishment. xxxi Prior to the establishment of the house of correction, indoor relief catered for around eighty-two Edinburgh people.xxxii

In total, just under 400 individuals were receiving either indoor or outdoor relief in Edinburgh in the early 1620s, representing about 1.5% of the population. By the 1630s, it is possible that about 3% of Edinburgh’s inhabitants were receiving assistance – similar to the 1690s. This figure is surprisingly low. A comparison against English provincial towns, where at least 5% of the population could expect public relief at the end of the sixteenth century, is perhaps unfair because the two countries were so different. The capital of another relatively poor northern kingdom, Stockholm, was also able to provide relief for about 5-6% of its people.xxxiii If it could be presumed that the 183 ordinary poor on the parish rolls represented a household, not just themselves as individuals, then at least 4.5% of Edinburgh’s households received assistance in 1621.xxxiv As the actual poor rolls have disappeared, such an assumption is impossible to test. It is plausible, nonetheless, that the shortcomings of the capital’s record-keeping, rather than an unusual level of parsimony, could explain Edinburgh’s apparently limited poor relief.

Other forms of charitable activity can be detected in Edinburgh during this period, but the evidence is scanty in the extreme. The Edinburgh hammermen, for example, are one of the few incorporated guilds whose records have survived. They reveal that regular collections were taken from members at their meeting house on the Cowgate, and that much of this money was distributed to the widows of hammermen.xxxv While the guilds represented a relatively small proportion of Edinburgh’s population, their close-knit communities may also have provided help when the illness or death of a member placed his apprentices, journeymen and other servants in a predicament. It is also possible that even if a craft did not have the framework for
providing relief enabled by incorporation, there were unofficial networks of support nonetheless. Naturally these networks would not produce accounts, just as private charity exercised by friends, neighbours and extended families almost always goes unrecorded.

The people most likely to benefit from both formal and informal poor relief were those with a relatively stable position in the local community. They could be quantified and thus posed no threat to the fabric of urban society. Orphaned infants, widows, disabled people, or those temporarily unable to work through sickness, had a range of options available to them (although some were clearly more palatable than others) before hitting destitution. This was not the case for that amorphous body of people, often young, single men and women from other parts of Scotland, who came to the capital seeking work. In a period when wages were failing to keep pace with price increases all across Europe, a problematic corpus of able-bodied poor existed who were reduced to scraping an existence on the margins of society. Some of them, unable to make a viable niche for themselves in the legitimate urban economy, turned to begging, theft or prostitution. These were the people that the town council feared. They were “contagious Innemyes to the comounweill,” whose poverty was seen as a godly indictment of their immoral lives. The result was a polarised system which gave strictly limited aid to the deserving poor of the community, while everyone else was labelled a vagrant against whom punitive measures were deemed necessary.

Strict penalties for illegal begging had been laid down in the parliamentary legislation of 1579. Beggars could expect to have their ears bored with a hot iron for a first offence and hanged for a second. In 1619, however, an exasperated privy council noted that the legislation on the poor was “neglectit” throughout the kingdom. The council expressed particular irritation with the “strong and idle vagaboundis” who seemed to swarm in and around Edinburgh, and the town council were urged to administer a range of punishments. There are no examples of such sentences being carried out in the burgh, perhaps because the town council felt it had too many other things to worry about. When the town council did take action it was often the result of nagging by the senior body, which was usually thinking about the
capital’s public image; in 1627, gypsies and other able-bodied, idle types were impressed into Danish military service to make sure that Charles I did not trip over them on the way to his coronation (he was expected in 1628 but did not arrive until 1633). In most other instances, simply clearing the streets was considered appropriate. No doubt many of the people ejected by these periodic clear-outs drifted back again once councillors had turned their attentions elsewhere.xi

The able-bodied poor were most at risk from punitive action when some form of crisis upset carefully-balanced budgets. War, famine or plague were unpredictable traumas that the finances of the poor relief system were not designed to cope with. Urban centres were also particularly affected because such calamities tended to push the rural destitute towards the towns in search of relief, thereby undermining the idea embodied in the 1579 act that each parish should be responsible only for its own poor.xlii A series of bad harvests beginning in the autumn of 1621 generated just such a crisis; it provides a valuable insight into how Edinburgh’s poor relief system coped under pressure.

III

The first indicators that the abundance of the previous two decades had ended came in 1621. A very dry summer across the eastern seaboard was followed by an autumn so spectacular for the level of rainfall, that Perth was flooded. England was also affected by bad weather. The English privy council noted the “scarcitie of corn” in mid-September and acted to restrict food exports.xlii At least three contemporary Scottish chroniclers all recorded remarkable climatic events which threatened the harvest and pushed up the price of victual.xliii On 22 November, the privy council acknowledged the inadequate harvest and prohibited the export of corn; it chose not to reduce duties on imports which had been imposed to discourage international merchants from spending Scotland’s limited reserves of coin abroad.xliv There may have been no great increase in mortality or the movement of people as yet, but the fact that the following year’s seed had also been depleted did not bode well.xlv

In the spring of 1622, the Scottish privy council observed
“ane great penurie and scairstie of victuall,” even amongst the better sort, at the same time as shortages, rising prices and occasional “riotous assemblies” were occurring throughout England. On 1 April 1622, the Scottish privy council discharged the custom on importing victual. Had there been an abundant harvest in 1622, these measures may have proved sufficient to avert a crisis; many parts of England were showing recovery by the spring of 1623, although the north-west was a striking exception to this. In Scotland, however, the harvest of 1622 offered no respite. Flinn describes it as nothing short of “catastrophic.”

The only sign of difficulties in Edinburgh during the autumn and winter of 1622 was a rise in the price of victual. As in other burghs, the town council annually set the prices for bread in October or November based on the market price of grain. In October 1622, wheatbread was set at 12d for an eleven ounce loaf by the burgh authorities, compared to fourteen ounces in the last years of the 1610s. Ale, too, was set at the relatively high price of 16d a pint, although this was not uncharacteristic of the 1610s. More significantly, the urban authorities had thought it necessary to raise the price of bread and ale prematurely, in May 1622, presumably because the prices set in the autumn of 1621 were not expected to remain in line with market values. This would suggest that shortages of malt and wheat were driving up the price of these staple goods in urban centres; similar trends are evident for Aberdeen.

Recognition that a localised shortage was turning into a national calamity stirred the privy council into action on 31 March 1623, when an act was passed against forestallers of markets. The council expressed concern that it was not just vagabonds and beggars who were afflicted – “honest housholderis” were also forced “to go a-begging.” From June onwards, reports began to arrive on the privy council’s table from sheriffdoms across Lowland Scotland. These were the responses to a privy council initiative of 14 June, which ordered justices of the peace, sheriffs and other local officials to convene temporary commissioners to deal with the famine. For the burghs, the obvious solution was to remove the duties on foreign imports that were making it unprofitable for merchants to seek victual from abroad. The privy council was less convinced. Concerned with
the need to stop Scottish merchants spending the country’s limited supplies of coin abroad, they recommended that investigations be made into how much victual was available in the localities. Reports were to be submitted in November, after the next harvest, which the privy council no doubt hoped would be sufficient to preclude any action on the import duties. In the interim, the council recommended traditional remedies. Vagabonds were to be suppressed and means found to support the indigent poor, in accord with the act of 1579. This meant assessing the inhabitants for a charitable contribution, with recourse to seizure of victual and fining in the event of non-compliance.

Stark variations in attentiveness to the privy council’s directive reveal how difficult it was for a group of councillors who spent much of their time in Edinburgh to influence local practices if the neighbourhood gentry refused to cooperate. As with the English Books of Orders, which allowed local officials to investigate private grain stores and seize their contents if necessary, levels of compliance with centrally-directed mandates varied considerably. Several areas refused to impose a tax to support the poor, most notably East Lothian, which queried the legal status of the justices and expressed doubts that “ane simple proclamatioun” from the privy council was sufficient warrant for a tax. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Perthshire raised money from “personis of wealth and substance,” while also allowing those “without any certaine domicill” to beg through the sheriffdom for a year. Yet even in those areas where there was an obvious willingness to make provision for the most vulnerable members of society, it did not extend beyond the “proper pure.” Selkirkshire contemplated setting up a work scheme for the able-bodied, but Stirlingshire’s refusal to assist any “extraneane” (i.e. extraneous) poor, especially “the Hieland pure,” was more typical. It was often during those times when the poor were most obviously in need of assistance, that the so-called idle vagabond or stranger beggar was most likely to be harassed, punished and evicted from the parish.

Even under normal circumstances, those people who did not hold any land of their own were probably on the move in the summer months, when the growing crops and fattening animals did not require their labour. From late spring in 1623, thousands
of people facing no work, no food, and no imminent prospect of either, were drawn towards the towns. By 2 May, the capital appears to have been inundated. The town council indicated how serious the problem was by allowing the kirk treasurer for that year, John Spence, to raise a voluntary contribution from Edinburgh’s inhabitants “for the supplie of extraordinar poore in so great extramitie and derth.” It is evident that Edinburgh intended to prioritise its own population, so that “their own poore and uther seik and waik persones within this burgh sould not perish through falt of sustenance” – Edinburgh’s political elite had no intention of becoming a charity outlet for the entire country. Ever mindful of where their cash was going, the council also fretted that “ydill and sturdie beggars” would exploit the confusion to extort undeserved aid. “Streetkeepers” were hired in 1623 and in 1624, to flush out “sturdie beggers” who might be lurking in Edinburgh’s maze of closes, while a five-man guard was mounted on the ports to prevent people from getting into the burgh in the first place.

The sheer volume of dislocated persons proved irresistible. Although they were prevented from entering the burgh itself, they evidently gathered in the suburbs, putting pressure on the limited resources of those living in the shadow of the town. A particular focus seems to have been Trinity College Church on the north side of the burgh. The “verie great confused multitude” may have been attracted to an old religious centre with hospital facilities, or they may simply have decided that there was nowhere else to go, having been repelled by the closed port. The town council undoubtedly hoped they could be encouraged to return home. On 16 and 17 May, twenty-seven “strange and sturdie beggers” had been “dispatched” by two of the bailies with just under £6 Scots between them. A week later, the old provost, dean of guild, some of the ministry and members of the north-east parish kirk session, disbursed £96 10s Scots amongst the people who had convened in the churchyard.

The immense pressure which this situation placed upon the urban authorities and the society they governed is indicated by an incident involving three “poore” millers working at the Water of Leith. Some time before the first week of December 1622, John Boncle, James Alexander and Robert Gibson were sentenced
to death for stealing wheat “for their necessarie sustentatioun” from the town’s mills. A Colonel Brog bargained for lives which were unlikely to last much very longer on campaign in Flanders than on the town scaffold, but the millers showed their ingratitude for this stay of execution by escaping. They were promptly recaptured, apparently after lurking around the mills in a “threattning” manner. The issue was still a live one in May, by which time the capital was struggling to cope with a large influx of rural migrants. Its outcome is revealing about the priorities of the authorities and those they governed as the crisis deepened.

Initially, when the millers were sentenced “to be hangit to the deade,” it was the “magistrates of Edinburgh” who, along with Colonel Brog, petitioned King James successfully for a reprieve. As will be demonstrated when a similar incident occurred in January 1624, Edinburgh’s population seems to have been broadly sympathetic towards those who were perceived to have become criminals only because they were struggling, as most were, to make ends meet. By campaigning to have the thieves sent to Flanders, the town council displayed sensitivity to popular opinion but were seen to be upholding justice. The only people who were not happy about this development were the baxters, whose response hints at the particular strains affecting the men who baked the capital’s bread. They were determined to secure at least one hanging, that of “the most notable lymmair of the thrie,” John Boncle. Once again, the town council were reluctant to carry out the sentence and demanded a fresh warrant from the privy council, who assented. If Boncle was executed in the burgh, there is nothing to distinguish him from the other anonymous public executions listed in the town treasurer’s accounts.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that despite their efforts in May, the Edinburgh authorities could not control the influx of people into the burgh. One chronicler recorded how “the famine increased daylie” during June 1623, to the extent that the starving were dropping dead on Edinburgh’s streets. Unable to find a solution alone, the town council sent commissioners to the privy council on 5 June. In the presence of the new Lord Chancellor, Sir George Hay of Kinfauns, the Treasurer, John Erskine, second earl of Mar, and other councillors, the commissioners
sought “to make overtouris anent the releif of the poore and indi-
gent and how strong and sturdie beggars may be putt to worke.”
Apparently devoid of any ideas themselves, the privy council did
not actually make any resolutions on that evidently trying day.lxiv

It would be another month before the privy council acted
again on this matter. Some sense of the dislocation which famine
had created is evident in the council’s assertion that the poor were
travelling “in troupis and companyis athorte the cuntrey,” necessi-
tating a ban on people removing themselves to other parishes.
Previous legislation was re-enacted and justices of the peace were
ordered to convene for the purpose of discussing “some goode
course” for dealing with the poor. This essentially meant that the
justices were expected to organise a tax for the support of the
indigent and to ensure the punishment of vagabonds. Once again,
the council’s primary concern appears to have been the segrega-
tion of the poor into those who deserved help, and those who did
not. They acknowledged a “grit derthe and scairstie of victuall
throw the whole land” during the previous two years, but the
council were adamant that “strong, sturdie and idill beggaris”
were preventing the “trewlie poor” from receiving assistance. In
what seems to have been a moment of frustration with those who
were perceived to be feigning destitution, the privy council
ordered that beggars were not to “ly nor be seene” upon the
streets of Edinburgh.lxv

To a large extent, however, Edinburgh’s town councillors
acted without recourse to the privy council in their attempts to
assist the multitudes of “secke and infirme” in and around the
town. After 2 May 1623, when the town council had authorised
the collection of an extraordinary voluntary contribution, a new
account was opened by the kirk treasurer to separate this money
from the normal provision for the poor. The “extraordinar volun-
tary contribution” provided an additional £5,273 1s 8d, donated by
250 burgh inhabitants. The account was essentially divided into
three parts. £2,355 19s 4d, by far the largest sum, was allocated to
“extraordinary poor conforme to particular precepts answering
everie persons supplication in particular for their present support”
—a rather wordy way of saying that anyone who supplicated the
session would have their claim considered. A further £1,063 15s
was exclusively used to deal with the multitudes corralled into the
Trinity College complex. The smallest sum, £758 17s 4d, was distributed to people according to the quarters of the burgh. This money was probably paid to Edinburgh inhabitants who would not normally have been eligible for relief.

While the absence of any data makes it impossible to work out how many people from beyond the burgh were receiving help at the Trinity College complex, a crude estimate can be made for those within the burgh for the peak crisis year of 1623. In the kirk treasurer’s ordinary account, it can be estimated that around 406 separate payments were made, but if some payments overlap, this may not represent 406 individuals. In the separate extraordinary account, 729 individual payments are recorded, but as there are blanks in the data, it is possible that about 800 people were receiving assistance. In 1623, therefore, around 1,156 people were receiving relief in Edinburgh, although it is apparent that not all of them were from Edinburgh. With this caveat, it is possible to estimate that under four percent of the population were receiving relief in 1623. Perhaps it is more significant to note that approximately four times as many people received some form of assistance from the town in 1623 compared to 1621.

Comparison of the kirk session’s expenditure on poor relief during the period 1621-24 with other years does indicate that more money was collected and distributed during the famine than under normal circumstances. The graph at Figure One shows the annual expenditure on the poor from 1615 to 1628. It is apparent that although the expenditure on those who were recorded on the parish rolls (the ordinary poor) displays an upward trend before it soars after 1626, there is a clear peak at the years 1623-24. Additional payments, intended as “pairtlie ordinar for some odde weeks and pairtlie extraodinar” also rises during the famine years. Payments to the extraordinary poor display a downward trend in the later 1610s, but rise to a significant peak in 1623. This suggests that not only was Edinburgh’s kirk treasurer spending more on those already on the poor rolls, but also that there were others, normally ineligible for poor relief, who were receiving assistance. This is corroborated by the numbers of people receiving money (Figure Two). These figures suggest that the rise in ordinary and extraordinary spending was dictated by a rise in the number of people needing assistance, not an increase in
the amount given to the same body of people. This is particularly apparent with those considered to be “extraordinars” – the number receiving assistance quadrupled between 1622 and 1623, some of whom came from beyond the burgh.\textsuperscript{lxix}

Whatever the town council’s attitude to Edinburgh’s own poor, its primary aim with everyone else’s was to “dispatch” them home again as swiftly as possible. Financial aid was given for return journeys, and some of these payments were quite substantial. John Stevenson was given £26 13s 4d to return to Holland, while Jean Castelaw received £20 for her trip to Ireland. Those “extraordinary poor” who supplicated the session in 1623 and were granted a one-off payment received, on average, just under £6. Amongst their number were an advocate, two gentlemen, a schoolmaster and a goldsmith. It seems that the session recognised the existence of persons whose temporary hardship did not negate the fact that they belonged amongst the respectable middling orders of society. There is at least a suggestion here that some people were receiving money commensurate with their social status not their actual level of need.\textsuperscript{lxx}

For those too sick to travel, accommodation was provided at the Dingwall, a partly ruinous building sited near the suburban sprawl of dwellings around Trinity College.\textsuperscript{lxxi} Unspecified repairs were made to the building in the summer of 1623 and in early August, a timber house was added “for receiveing and interteining of the poore seeke folk.” This amounted to £155 17s 2d. Two women were paid to distribute meat, drink and other necessities to “the seik folk.” This cost a further £123 18s 2d. All who “wer mendit and convalesced of their sieknes” were instructed to be sent back to their own parishes. The delivery of eighteen bolls of meal to the master of St. Paul’s workhouse indicates that some of the sick migrants may have been sent there.\textsuperscript{lxxii}

Recovery was augured by a good harvest in the autumn of 1623, and payments to the extraordinary poor in Edinburgh declined accordingly. Nonetheless, it appears to have been a bitter and protracted winter, with the Tay freezing intermittently between November 1623 and February 1624.\textsuperscript{lxxiii} The price of ale and bread reached peak levels in November 1623, suggesting that there were still serious shortages; a pint of ale had gone up by 4d, to 20d, while a 12d loaf had dropped from eleven ounces to just
Perhaps this brought a new wave of the destitute to Edinburgh, or perhaps the privy council was encouraging good housekeeping in the capital, because another order to clear beggars from the streets was issued on 25 November. In January, the burgh authorities intercepted three forestallers at Leith, who purchased victual in Burntisland at a cheaper price than it would have sold for in the Edinburgh markets. Two of them, David Jenkin and James Cochrane, were elite merchants who would sit on the town council in the future, while John Hilston had already served as a bailie. Clearly the burgh authorities were making an example of their own – they were each fined £100 and the grain was sent back to Leith where it was sold “to his Majestie’s lieges” for the same price at which they had bought it, thereby denying them a profit.

Then a curious event occurred. On 27 February 1624, the town council registered an act of the privy council, relating to a disturbance on 23 January. It had occurred prior to the public execution of numerous “counterfute theives and lymbers callit Egiptianes,” who had been apprehended in East Lothian and brought to Edinburgh. At the eleventh hour, a warrant had come through from the privy council granting them a temporary reprieve. Some of the crowd, covered by the general “shoutting and crying” that greeted this announcement, were able to help one of the condemned, Gavin Trotter, to escape. Quite a fracas then ensued, as the bailies dived in and fought off those who were trying to release the remaining prisoners. Eight men were duly executed on 27 January, presumably by a shamefaced town council who were, at that point, still under the censure of their superiors. When the privy council wrote to the king two days later to justify their actions (with the minimum amount of unnecessary detail), they revealed that the women and children had been spared.

The official attitude to gypsies was hostile at the best of times, as embodied in an act of 1609 that aimed to remove all of them from Scotland, by execution if necessary. Although the events of January 1624 cannot be tied directly to famine, the fact that the privy council specifically wished to “gif a terour” to others suggests they were not unaware of the social context. Yet if these people really were “thevis and lymmaris,” as the
privy council claimed, why was there a spontaneous popular reaction against their punishment? Urban populations were not renowned for their tolerance of a people who could be seen as the archetypal “masterfull ydill beggar.” Is it possible that amongst the poorer members of society, hardship could breed solidarity rather than a divisive competition for limited resources? Perhaps, as in early modern Gloucester, Edinburgh was experiencing the ripples of social discontent generated by a growing divide between rich and poor – it is possible that the food shortages of the early 1620s occurred at the same time as an Edinburgh property boom.

Whatever the reasons behind the disturbances of January 1624, it is clear that the authorities had misjudged the mood of those they referred to as the multitudes. Popular support for those whose only crime was to be in the kind of impoverished condition that seemed to threaten much of the urban population in the early 1620s, had been expressed in dramatic form. John Walter has described riots linked to food shortages as an important component of the relationship between governors and governed. If handled correctly, they did not necessarily equate to a questioning of the social hierarchy, but actually reminded those at the top of their responsibilities. If this was the nature of the 1624 disturbance, then it is no surprise that the privy council acted swiftly to close the case. Edinburgh town council was exonerated of any negligence by the privy council less than week after the riot. Nobody was subsequently pursued for assisting the escape of Gavin Trotter.

The events of that January may have spurred the town council into renewed activity on behalf of the people still suffering from the food shortages. Although it is not mentioned in the town council minutes, the kirk treasurer’s accounts state that men representing kirk and council met on 9 February to promote another collection “throughout the toun.” This raised the sum of £2,052 12s 3d, which was recorded in the second set of extraordinary accounts opened by the kirk treasurer for 1624, James Murray. Bells were rung throughout the town to summon the people to contribute, but the council felt no need to repeat the act of 2 May 1623. Some small miscellaneous sums came in from two Edinburgh inhabitants, plus £333 6s 8d from “a noble man who wald not have his name exprest.” The situation was by no
means entirely under control. Mr Patrick Henryson was paid over £66 for keeping a record (again, inconveniently missing) of the meetings between men of kirk and council who were debating how to proceed with “the great multitud of extraordinar poore within the [Trinity] college kirkyard.”

Extraordinary distributions to the burgh’s own poor probably ceased about the end of March, by which time considerable efforts had been made to clear Trinity kirkyard of unwelcome guests. There were still sick people languishing at Trinity, however. Marion Hutcheson was again paid for her services in March, with assistance from Marion Rutherford. The £1,046 9s 4d which was spent on “117 extraordinary persons” probably reflects a final drive by the council to wind up operations in Trinity kirkyard. There appear to have been only seventeen people remaining by the start of March, who received £570 4s 2d. They, too, were “dispatched and sent away everie one to their owne pairts together with so much money,” amounting to the small sum of £12 2s, probably around the end of March. As in the previous year, some of these people appear to have ended up in Scotland from abroad – two Englishmen, one Frenchmen, a German and two Grecians were given support; some of them may have been in the burgh the previous year.

For hundreds of these people, however, their journeying had ended in Edinburgh. In 1623, the kirk treasurer recorded that £84 9s was spent on graves in the college kirkyard, with 259 adult graves and forty-five smaller graves, presumably for children. For some reason, 312 winding sheets were required for the 304 people buried there, at a further cost of £225 19s 4d. In 1624, the numbers of dead were much reduced. Only sixty-one graves and forty-two winding sheets were paid for that year. The total amount spent on burials came to £42 17s 3d. It would consequently appear that between 346 and 373 persons were buried at the expense of the kirk treasurer, mostly in the Trinity kirkyard.

It seems possible that many of these people who were buried at the town’s expense were migrants with no known relations who could cover the costs. A drop in the number of baptisms in the capital during 1623 may suggest that deaths occurred amongst Edinburgh’s own inhabitants, but a resident was far more likely to
have friends or family keen to avoid the indignity of a pauper’s burial.\textsuperscript{lxxxvii} Anecdotal evidence, probably from an Edinburgh-based source, states that famine was killing people in the burghs as well as in the countryside, but the writer made particular reference to the deaths of the “mony pure that had cume to Edinburgh.”\textsuperscript{lxxxviii}

IV

After about March 1624, there is no further mention of the famine in Edinburgh, although the amount of bread which could be purchased for 12\textcurrency{d} in November 1625 was still significantly reduced from the pre-famine years.\textsuperscript{lxxxix} In the aftermath of the crisis, the poor relief system in Scotland was not subject to scrutiny, nor was there any serious attempt at reform.\textsuperscript{xc} Debate continued on thorny questions relating to grain imports and exports, but the interests of Scottish merchants, not the poor, were at the heart of them. In November 1625, Charles I sent detailed instructions to Scotland on the implementation of the poor laws, but there is no reason to suppose, without detailed analysis of regional records, that it received any more attention than that which had gone before.\textsuperscript{xci} Poverty itself was apparently less likely to exercise the minds of the ruling elite than the potentially disruptive social ills which accompanied it. Although it is significant that Charles’s proclamation omitted specific references to punishment, he did express concern that the “vices, athisme and impietie” proliferating uncorrected amongst the poor would “bring the fearfull judgementis of God” upon the land.\textsuperscript{xcii} This statement merely confirmed a widely-held view that the poor were a threat to the accepted religious, social and political order.

The absence of a “satled course” for the “internement of the poore” had been revealed only too plainly at local level when town councillors and kirk session members had found their suburbs inundated with the starving multitudes from all across the country.\textsuperscript{xciii} Given that the harvests of both 1621 and 1622 had failed, two factors had to be addressed to prevent the wide-scale suffering that occurred in Scotland in these years. Where supplies were inadequate, victual had to be transported from
areas where it was more plentiful, or from abroad. It also had to be affordable.

In southern and eastern England, it is possible that better levels of agricultural productivity meant that shortages were less acute, while the existence of a relatively sophisticated, integrated grain market ensured that availability and price remained remarkably uniform. These conditions did not prevail either in northwest England or in Scotland. The obvious solution to shortages was to ship in food from abroad, but this option had its detractors. Anyone who owned land and had an income from the sale of its produce (smallholders as well as great magnates) would be unhappy if a glut of foreign grain drove down the price of home-grown victual. As merchants did not tend to make their money from land, it is hardly surprising that this solution was proposed by the burghs; their merchants were anticipating handsome profits from importing cheap grain from the Baltic and selling it at a higher price in Scotland.

Given the prevarication on the issue of import duties, it seems likely that privy councillors were reluctant to allow significant shipments of foreign grain into Scotland. Concerns were arguably justified two years later. The return to satisfactory home harvests meant that the market was saturated in 1624 and grain lay spoiling in Leith warehouses during the summer of 1624. Although Scottish merchants clearly had access to foreign grain supplies, there was still the problem of affordability. The only way to address this was by getting the rich to subsidise the cost of victual. Although the privy council had a wide remit and could exert pressure on local landowners to do this, it had neither the legal, fiscal or (if it came to it) military resources to impose its will on Scotland’s myriad of regionalised jurisdictions. This resulted in a great deal of variation at local level, especially in a matter like poor relief, which relied so heavily on the landholding elite’s willingness to dip into their financial reserves. In Edinburgh, practice was ahead of parliamentary legislation because the threat posed to the burgh’s social stability by wide-scale destitution was eventually considered more unpalatable than a tax. In many rural areas, it would seem that the relative abundance of the previous two decades or so had helped to keep poverty within acceptable limits, so that there was less
incentive to implement poor relief legislation. When famine occurred, there were many localities where no precedent existed for a tax and no mechanisms were in place to collect the money.xcvii

Edinburgh possessed a number of advantages over rural areas, and even other burghs, in dealing with the hardship caused by food shortages. The capital had the most advanced poor relief system in Scotland. During the 1590s, Edinburgh town council had used its authority to force regular collection of a compulsory levy for the poor. When crisis occurred in the 1620s, Edinburgh already possessed the mechanisms to cope with the rise in individuals seeking public assistance. Its kirk session, which provided the manpower for this endeavour, was well-established and had long since sorted out its relationship with the secular authorities on this issue. Kirk sessions existed in most of rural Lowland Scotland by this time, too, while the creation of justices of the peace after 1609 arguably increased the manpower available to organise the collection and distribution of money. The problem was that while local elites remained less convinced than Edinburgh town council of the need for regular compulsory poor relief, the necessary funds were simply not available.xcviii

Edinburgh was the hub of Scotland’s international trade networks and its merchants were at the forefront of the import and export business; two such men, William Wilkie and the future provost, William Dick, had been “speciall importaris” of victual from abroad.xcix It is possible that the burgh had storage space at its own mills or in Leith for stock-piling grain in good years, although an act of November 1625 ordering that “public granaries” should be erected “in fit places” suggests this practice was not common elsewhere. The town council also possessed the power to set prices and was prepared to take action against those who might try to profit from the shortages. Food did become more expensive but perhaps not prohibitively so for the bulk of the population. This is not to say that everybody in Edinburgh could afford to buy adequate supplies, but the town council had probably done enough to prevent widespread suffering, and the attendant social disorder, within the burgh.

The huge influx of rural migrants as a result of famine was
arguably the biggest threat to the social order in towns. In the
countryside, able-bodied individuals with no money, no food and
no work were forced onto the road by temporary commissions set
up to ensure that only those from the parish received its help.
Although it is not difficult to conceive of a permanent underclass
in Scotland, wandering from parish to parish in search of work,
communities were probably capable of tolerating and supporting
such individuals when times were good. They only really became
a threat when bad harvests, trade depressions or other such
calamities raised their numbers beyond that which highly
informal parish-based modes of relief could cope with.\textsuperscript{ci}

It seems apparent that crisis intensified an almost universally
accepted mind-set which artificially divided the poor into
deserving or “honest” paupers, and undeserving vagrants. These
notions would not have been unfamiliar to English or Continental
Protestants, whose association of poverty with immorality was
bolstered by secular fears about social disorder.\textsuperscript{cii} While there
was, no doubt, genuine concern for the sufferings of the afflicted,
the perception of a “community-orientated society” also gener-
ated a need to exercise control over those who might threaten it.\textsuperscript{ciii}
In the light of these distinctions between deserving and
undeserving, “ours” and “theirs,” it is no wonder that hundreds,
possibly thousands, died in and around the market centres of
Lowland Scotland during the early 1620s.

This mindset does not appear to have altered substantially
between the famine of the early 1620s and the better-known
calamity of the 1690s. Although Edinburgh’s provision for the
poor had certainly expanded by the end of the century, reaching
a greater proportion of the population than had been the case
seven decades earlier, it seems likely that this level had actually
been reached as early as the 1630s; Edinburgh spent roughly
the same amount on weekly distributions to the ordinary poor in
1635 as it did in 1693.\textsuperscript{civ} This was more advanced than Aberdeen,
however, which had not organised obligatory contributions by
the 1690s and remained reliant on voluntary measures. In rural
areas, the situation was arguably worse in the 1690s than in
the 1620s, because the 1689 revolution had caused widespread
disruption in parish activity.\textsuperscript{cv} It is possible to conjecture that
the 1620s and 1630s were a high point in Scottish poor relief
provision that would not be superseded during the rest of the century.

At the most basic level, of course, some of the blame for the 1621-24 crisis must lie with the notoriously inclement Scottish weather. To the clerical commentators writing after the event, this was not a meteorological phenomenon, but the indictment of a wrathful God on a sinful society. The minister and historian John Row believed that the highly controversial innovations in worship confirmed by the parliamentary ratification of the Five Articles of Perth in 1621 had broken the “oath of God and the Covenant.” It was no surprise to him (with the benefit of hindsight) that “vehement dearth and famine” would be God’s judgement on this event. David Calderwood saw the dearth in equally providential terms. It is interesting that unlike their predecessor, James Melville, who had lived through the difficult years of the 1590s, neither of these ministers discussed the famine in terms of a defective social hierarchy, where the privileged had conspicuously failed in their duty to provide for the disadvantaged. Perhaps there had been such a failure, but the problems with the early poor relief system in Scotland were partly bureaucratic, partly social. Without an awareness that poverty was not related to morality, and without a system that enabled effective action before localised food shortages became widespread, the poor law could only help a minority of specially selected cases. That the act of 1579 should have continued to form the foundation of poor relief until 1845 was arguably the biggest failing of all.
FIGURE ONE

Amount spent annually in Edinburgh on the ordinary and extraordinary poor.

Source: ECA, Kirk Treasurer’s Accounts, SL154/3/1.
FIGURE TWO

Number of ordinary poor receiving assistance from the kirk treasurer in Edinburgh, 1621-24, with the number of extraordinary payments during the same period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ordinary poor</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>April-June</th>
<th>July-September</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1621</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>180</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1622</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>204</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1623</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>249</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1624</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>204</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1625</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>209</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional payments to the ordinary poor</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>April-June</th>
<th>July-September</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1621</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1622</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>over 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1623</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1624</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1625</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extraordinars</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Annually</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1621</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1622</td>
<td>90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1623</td>
<td>397</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1624</td>
<td>117</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1625</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The records only begin to represent the number of people receiving assistance in 1621. A visitation by the presbytery during the April-June period of 1625 confuses the figures, and the parishes were re-organised in 1626. The additional payments (called extraordinary payments in the records), listed as part of the payouts administered in each parish, should not be confused with the list of named ‘extraordinars’, who appear to have suppli-cated the session for a one-off payment.

NOTES


ii S.G.E. Lythe, *The Economy of Scotland in its European Setting, 1550-1625* (Edinburgh and London, 1960), 16, 22-3, 163, 220. In 1618, the Scottish burghs complained against the import duties on wheat, bear and malt; *Records of the Conventions of Royal Burghs, 1615-1676*, ed. J.D. Marwick and T. Hunter (Edinburgh, 1866). The debate continued, but in 1620, the privy council believed that the previous autumn’s harvest had been abundant enough to justify the duty on imported victual and to allow a reduction in the duty on exporting Scottish victual; *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland* [RPCS], 1st series, xii, p.xxv-xxv, 94-5, 159.


(East Linton, 2002), 58-60, 64-7; Grell and Cunningham, ‘Changes in welfare provision’, in Grell and Cunningham (eds.), Protestant Europe, 21-6.


ix Migration into towns, not a more favourable ratio between births and deaths, maintained and raised urban populations in many early modern societies. Under- and un-employment was a greater hazard for incomers, who had yet to establish themselves in their host communities, than for the indigenous population; their situation was undoubtedly made more precarious by the price inflation and stagnant wage rates which afflicted much of Europe during the course of the sixteenth century. See, for an overview, J. Barry, ‘Introduction’, and A.L. Beier, ‘Social problems in Elizabethan London’, in J. Barry (ed.), The Tudor and Stuart Town: A Reader in English Urban History, 1530-1688 (London and New York, 1990), 12, 18-19, 123-26.

x A convention was smaller, could be called more quickly and was more manageable, from the government’s point of view, than a full sitting of parliament. T. Thomson and C. Innes (eds.), Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland [APS] (12 vols., Edinburgh, 1814-75), iii, 86-9, 139-42; Mitchison, Old Poor Law, 7; Goodare, ‘Parliament and society’, 425-28.


xii Further acts added to the 1579 act, but did not fundamentally alter it. APS, iii, 86-9, 139, 576; iv, 140, 232-33.


xvii A monthly contribution was probably collected from 1591, but the absence of kirk treasurer’s accounts until 1615 means this is not entirely certain. See, *Edin Recs, 1589-1603*, 297, 302, for references to extents for the poor. It has been suggested that Edinburgh did not have a regular compulsory poor rate during the seventeenth century; H.M. Dingwall, *Late Seventeenth Century Edinburgh: A Demographic Study* (Aldershot, 1994), 250; DesBrisay, Ewan and Diack, ‘Life in the Two Towns’, 60. This may be the case for the second half of the century, but not the first half. The kirk treasurer’s accounts show regular compulsory collections from 1615 until the English invasion of 1650 interrupted all government activity in the capital; Edinburgh City Archives [ECA], Kirk Treasurer’s Accounts, SL154/3/1. I would like to thank Dr. Helen Dingwall for discussing this point with me.

On the College of Justice: Founded in 1532, the College of Justice was the supreme civil law court in Scotland. The Scottish legal profession was overwhelming concentrated in Edinburgh.

xviii ECA, SL154/3/1, account 1617.

xix An example exists from a 1646 bequest by Lady Yester. ECA, Town Treasurer’s Accounts, vi, f.17.

xx All sums are in £ Scots, which was worth 1/12 of the £ sterling.


xxiii ECA, SL154/3/1, account 1636. £1,439 4s 8d was collected that year.

xxiv The kirk treasurer’s charge rose significantly before the civil war, partly because voluntary contributions rose.
The kirk treasurer’s accounts for 1621 were audited in March 1622, and it is presumably at this time that the kirk treasurer made the decision to begin recording the numbers of poor, not just the amount spent. This suggests that the town council was taking a keener interest in where the kirk’s money was going, as a result of an awareness that the previous autumn’s failed harvest was likely to increase the demand for poor relief.

ECA, SL154/3/1, account 1621.

These calculations assume that in any one year, the people on the rolls in January were more or less the same individuals on the rolls in December, give or take a few additions, deaths or removals. For example, thirty-two people were recorded for the northwest quarter in the first three months of the year and thirty-five were recorded in the second three-month period. It is assumed that the number of people recorded was thirty-two plus another three, not sixty-seven separate individuals. ECA, SL154/3/1, account 1621.


ECA, SL152/3/1, Trinity Hospital Accounts.


More work is needed on institutional care in Scotland. Rosalind Mitchison noted that unlike in England, the sixteenth century Scottish legislation did not make provision for the able-bodied. In 1581 and 1597, parliamentary legislation sought to limit the export of wool, partly so that the poor could be suitably employed. R. Mitchison, ‘The making of the old Scottish poor law’, *Past and Present* 63 (1974), 60-2; *APS*, iii, 221; iv, 135.

ECA, SL154/3/1, account 1632; P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition 1500-1700* (Oxford, 1976), 121; E.I. Kouri, ‘Poor relief in Sweden and Finland, c.1500-1700’, in Grell and Cunningham (eds.), *Protestant Europe*, 182; Dingwall,
Late Seventeenth Century Edinburgh, 268.

xxxiv There were 3,901 households in Edinburgh in 1635; P.G.B. MacNeill and H.L. MacQueen (eds.), *Atlas of Scottish History to 1707* (Edinburgh, 1996), 456.

xxxv ECA, Hammermen Books, 1628-63, ED008/1/3.

xxxvi *APS*, iii, 139-40. See also a privy council act of 1619 which shows how poverty was related to immorality; *RPCS*, 1st ser., xii, 3.

xxxvii Numerous examples of attitudes towards the poor can be found in M. Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Jersey, 2002), 35, 41, 68, 78, 176, 304. See also, Goodare, ‘Parliament and Society’, Ch. 8. The tightening of the definitions of deserving and undeserving can be seen across northern Europe. See, T. Riis, ‘Poor relief and health care provision in 16th century Denmark’, 129-30; Kouri, ‘Poor relief in Sweden and Finland’, 176-78, 184, 187; L. Peterson, ‘The wrath of God: Christian IV and poor relief in the wake of Danish intervention in the 30 Years’ War’, 149, 150, 158, in Grell and Cunningham (eds.), *Protestant Europe*. In England, however, Steve Hindle has pointed to a “tripartite” division into the impotent, thriftless and labouring poor, but the lack of means to deal with able-bodied labourers in Scotland meant that in practical terms they were simply grouped with the impotent; S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550-1640* (Basingstoke, 2002), 146.

xxxviii *APS*, iii, 139-40.

xxxix Those who did not return to their parish of origin or residence could be “wairdit, putt in the ironis or stockis, scourged and thair earis nailled to the trone [weigh-beam].” Beggars would be “brynte in the cheike with ane hote irone.” Repeat offenders should be “hanged to the deid.” *RPCS*, 1st ser., xii, 5.

x Todd, *Culture of Protestantism*, 301, 304, 308; National Library of Scotland [NLS], Wod.Fo.XVI, southeast parish of Edinburgh kirk session register 1626-38; ECA, Black Book, 1627-1702; *RPCS*, 2nd ser., i, 540, 542-43, 544, 546.

xlii *APS*, iii, 139.

xli Calendar of State Papers (Domestic) [CSP(Dom)] 1619-23, 288, 290.

RPCS, 1st ser., xii, 455, 598-99. The privy council had imposed the duties in March 1621 after a good harvest the previous autumn.

The evidence is limited, but a slight rise in the number of burials at Dunfermline at the end of 1621 (less marked at Kelso) may hint at the hardship which must have been experienced by the poor that winter, Flinn (ed.), Scottish Population, 118, 122.


1 April 1622 may seem a late date to make this decision, but merchants would not have undertaken a winter sea voyage to the Baltic anyway, so it is not clear that taking the decision any earlier would have made much difference. RPCS, 1st ser., xii, 702-4.

CSP(Dom) 1619-23, 490, 491, 494, 495, 498, 500, 529, 535, 536-7, 544; Appleby, Famine, 121-32, 147-52.

An allowance for the baxters was included in Edinburgh's table of prices. It is not clear, however, that wheathread or its cheaper derivatives, made from coarse-ground flour or from combining wheat with rye, was the dominant food of the bulk of the urban population. Oats were the staple of the Scottish diet, but at least one individual travelling through Scotland in 1598 observed that “in Cities … wheaten bread” was common. Burghs did not usually seem to set prices for oatbread, although in the four years when Aberdeen set a price for oatbread that can be compared against wheathread, the former was considerably cheaper than the latter (with the exception of 1612). Gibson and Smout acknowledge the importance of oatbread to the urban diet, but while wheathread was purchased by urban dwellers from the baxters, individuals probably bought oatmeal to make their own cakes at home. A.J.S. Gibson and T.C. Smout, Prices, Food and Wages in Scotland 1550-1780 (Cambridge, 1995), 29-30, 54,
56 [tables 2.2 and 2.4], 41, 226. In late seventeenth-century Aberdeen, oats were “a staple of poor people’s diets”; DesBrisay, Ewan and Diack, ‘Life in the Two Towns’, 63.

li Gibson and Smout, Food, Prices and Wages, 61-2 [table 2.8].

lii In 1620 a 12d loaf weighed twenty ounces, but this is not in keeping with the trends evident for the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Edin Recs 1604-26, 214, 227, 231, 238; Gibson and Smout, Prices, Food and Wage, 175, 176 [tables 5.1 and 5.2], Ch. 2.

liii RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 203-4.

liv RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 258-60; CRB 1615-76, 148.

lv RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 258-60.


lviii There is no pagination, but the years in question are clearly marked “The extraordinary charge and discharge of the treasurer in 1623” and “The ordinar and extraordinar charges for 1624.” They supplement the regular accounts of the kirk treasurer only in those years. In this article, future references for the supplementary accounts will be extraordinary account, 1623 or 1624. ECA, SL154/3/1, extraordinary account, 1623.

lix Edin Recs 1604-26, 242; ECA, SL154/3/1, extraordinary account, 1623, 1624.

On the old provost: The term does not refer to his age – the old provost had led the council in a previous year, usually the one immediately preceding.

lxi RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 137, 146, 227; ECA, Town Treasurer, iv, 1228-9.

lxii Calderwood, History, vii, 377.

lxiii RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 238.

lxiv The privy council was chiefly concerned that day with the first meeting of a commission to consider a set of grievances presented by the commissioners for the convention of royal burghs. This forum usually met several times a year to consider issues of particular relevance to them. RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 238.

lxv RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 287-90.

lxvi In the ordinary accounts, payments by quarter are taken for the April-June period. This figure includes sixty-eight additional payments, some of whom were “extraordinars” and some were additional payments to the ordinary poor, twenty-six pensions, eleven young poor, and fifty sets of clothes. ECA, SL154/3/1, account 1623.

lxvii This figure includes payments according to “particular precepts,” but does not include a series of payments for removing beggars, feeding the people at the Trinity College complex and paying the council’s servants. ECA, SL154/3/1, extraordinary account, 1623.

lxviii ECA, SL154/3/1, account 1621.

lxix Figure One shows only the sums for extraordinary and ordinary expenditure, not the provision made for orphan children, or the money spent on providing clothes. 1628 was selected as the cut-off point as the records for 1629 are missing, and in 1630 the payments to the ordinary poor are rising dramatically. In 1623 and in 1624, the supplications from the extraordinary poor are listed in the extraordinary accounts, and not, as they normally are, in the regular accounts. Figure Two shows the number of poor who received payments between April and June, and between July and September. The records only begin recording these numbers in 1621. Once again, these figures do not include provision for orphan children or clothes. I am grateful for assistance and advice provided by Dr. Martin Rorke.
ECA, SL154/3/1, extraordinary account, 1623.

The Dingwall, north of Trinity church, is depicted as ruinous on Gordon’s map of 1647. It was still in use as late as 1649, for housing the sick and poor. ECA, SL154/3/1, extraordinary account, 1623; S. Harris, *The Place Names of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1996), 233.

The detailed accounts which the session saw have now disappeared. ECA, Kirk Treasurer, 1623.

ECA, Kirk Treasurer, 125.

*Edin Recs 1604-26*, 247.

RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 382.

*Edin Recs 1604-26*, 248. See the index under Cochrane, Jenkin and Hilston for their council service.

*Edin Recs 1604-26*, 250; RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 406, 410, 415.

RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 393.


RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 410.

ECA, SL154/3/1, extraordinary account, 1624.

ECA, SL154/3/1, extraordinary account, 1623, 1624.

It is not clear why there were more graves than winding sheets in 1624. Perhaps there were individuals who could cover the cost of the sheet, but not the burial itself.

ECA, SL154/3/1, extraordinary account, 1624.

Flinn (ed.), *Scottish Population*, 117-8, 119. Dunfermline, Kelso and Dumfries saw burials quadruple between 1622 and 1623, but Flinn has surmised that rural migrants, not
the burgh residents, largely accounted for this.

lxxviii I would like to thank Dr. Winifred Coutts for discussions about this anonymous journal, which is currently being edited as a Scottish History Society text. NLS, Wod.Qu.IX, f.193r.

lxxxix Edin Recs 1604-26, 284.


xcii Charles sent these instructions to the 1625 convention of estates, who passed the matter onto the privy council. RPCS, 2nd ser., i, 161; APS, v, 178-79, 184. The issue was seemingly shelved until it came up again in relation to the Revocation scheme. RPCS, 2nd ser., i, 228.

xciii RPCS, 2nd ser., i, 160.


xcv RPCS, 1st ser., xiii, 528.

xcvi The privy council’s consolidation of its own authority over local jurisdictions is briefly discussed by Julian Goodare in the context of witchcraft. J Goodare (ed), The Scottish Witch-hunt in Context, (Manchester, 2002), 126-34. Much of the privy council’s success in establishing a post-1603 role was in those areas where its was able to instigate negotiation and offer redress. The evidence relating to poor relief would suggest that its ability to compel the recalcitrant, especially in fiscal matters, was still relatively limited. Goodare, State and Society, Ch. 2. The privy council’s functions are described in J. Goodare, The Government of Scotland, 1560-1625 (Oxford, 2004), Ch. 6. I am grateful to Dr. Goodare for discussing this with me. For comparisons with English powers to force localities into action, see Braddick, State Formation, 27-46, 118-119; Slack, Poverty and Policy, 139-40.


xcix It was the grain bought by these merchants that was spoiling in Leith in 1624. They were granted a license to re-export it. *RPCS*, 1st ser., xiii, 527-28.

c *RPCS*, 2nd ser., i, 156. It is not clear if any action was taken locally.


