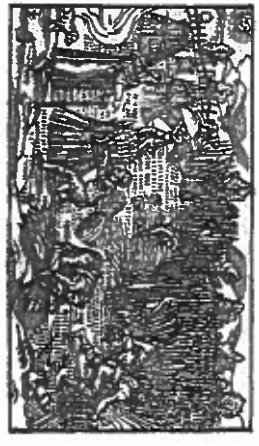


Was there a Mid Tudor Crisis?

→ A term first used by
John Jones, 1975.

Context: Mid-Tudor England – a time of crisis?

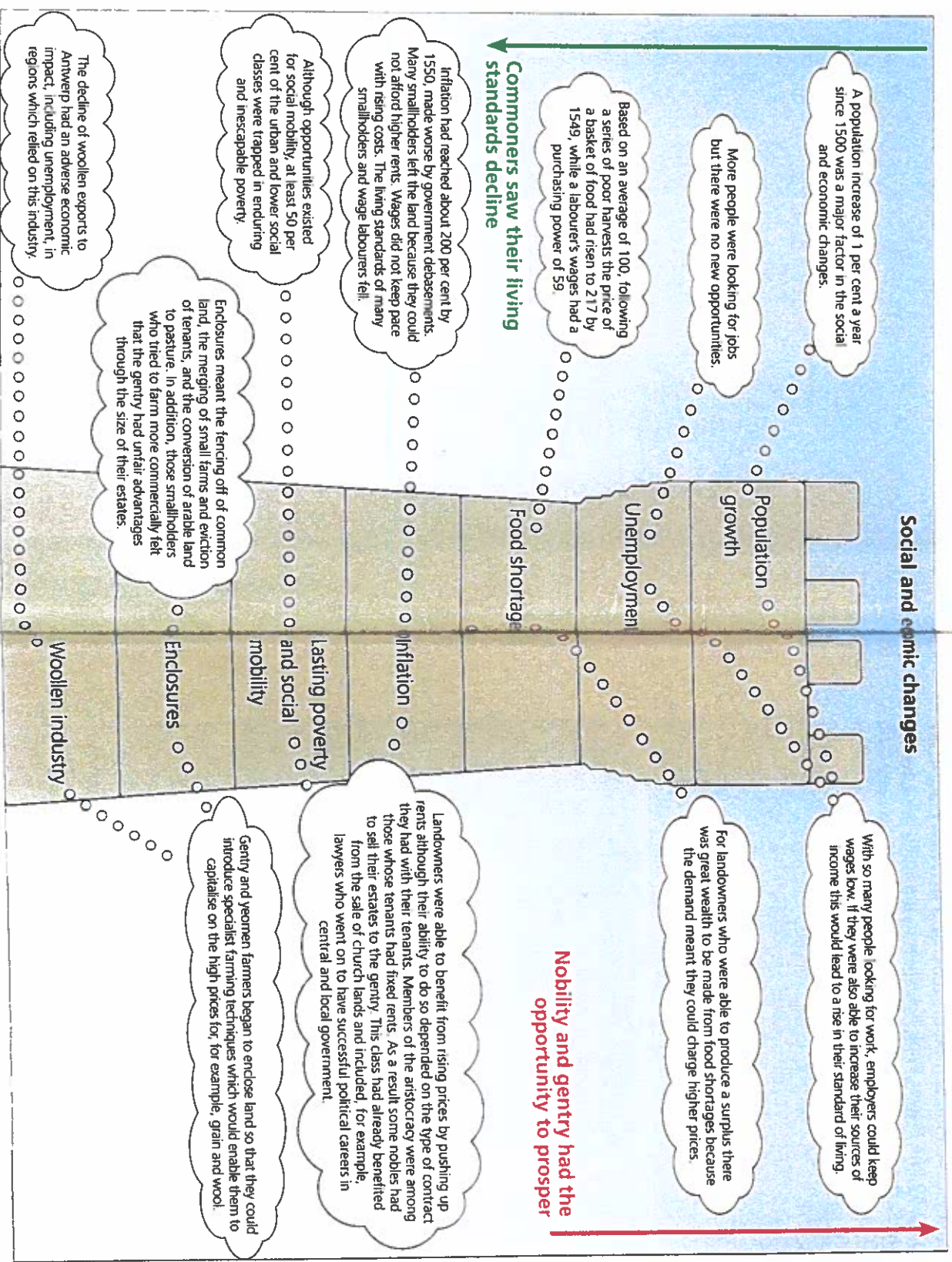
Historians have often described the period between the death of Henry VIII and the accession of Elizabeth I as the 'mid-Tudor crisis'. This idea of crisis stemmed from a range of problems which all occurred within the short period of the brief reigns of Edward VI (1547-53) and Mary Tudor (1553-58). This page introduces two linked aspects of this 'crisis' – economic problems and class conflict – and shows how some classes prospered while others moved into poverty.



△ This illustration from 1577 (Holinshed's Chronicles) shows workers labouring in the fields to harvest the wheat in time



△ This woodcut from 1567 shows a vagabond being flogged as a punishment for begging.



- 1 What were the most likely causes of rebellion between 1547 and 1558?
- 2 Which groups of people were most likely to rebel at this time?
- 3 Why might the ruling classes be reluctant to rebel during this period?
- 4 Why might government responses to rebellion be slow during Edward VI's reign?



△ A restored Elizabethan yeoman's house. Yeomen were wealthy farmers and their houses were the most visible sign of their place in the village social order.



△ After enclosure the open fields, including the common land, were parcelled into units or farms with boundary walls.

Mid-Tudor crisis: more problems

The causes of **sweating sickness** remain debateable and it does not exist today but it was responsible for several epidemics in both Tudor England and Europe between 1485 and 1551.

Symptoms included shivering, headaches and hot sweats and the disease could kill within hours. It seems to have been more prevalent in London (20,000 people died there during the 1563 epidemic) and amongst the higher classes.

Economic problems were not the only aspects of this period to create a sense of crisis. During the years from the mid-1540s to the late 1550s the people of England also experienced wars, rebellions, religious change and uncertainty over who would wear the crown. As if this was not enough there were severe outbreaks of 'sweating sickness' and plague in 1551-52, of influenza from 1556-58 and smallpox four years later, all of which had high mortality rates.

Your understanding of these broader events and of the debate on whether there was a 'mid-Tudor crisis' will give you a framework within which you can analyse the threats from the rebellions that took place – the two rebellions of 1549 (the Prayer Book Rebellion in the south-west and Kett's rebellion in East Anglia), Wyatt's rebellion of 1554 and the Lady Jane Grey Plot of 1553.

Dynastic Insecurity. Henry's death in 1547 left the throne to his nine-year-old son, Edward. If Edward had no children, the next in line were his half sisters, Mary and then Elizabeth. History seemed to suggest that if the monarch was not an adult male then the prospect for strong and stable government was considerably reduced. This belief induced anxiety over how effectively England would be governed and what problems might ensue.

Religion. Henry VIII's establishment of the Royal Supremacy in the 1530s allowed his sons government to establish a Protestant reformation between 1549 and 1552. However, the succession of Mary Tudor, a staunch Roman Catholic, meant that these changes were short lived. These rapid about turns in religion led some people to oppose and rebel against their monarch on religious grounds and added to the sense of royal insecurity.

Noble Faction. The fact that a boy king would need a regency council to govern for him led to an increase in **faction** during the last years of Henry VIII, as leading nobles jockeyed for position. Henry's will stipulated that there should be a Regency Council but in 1547 the Earl of Hertford quickly established himself as Lord Protector and took the title of Duke of Somerset. Within two years however Somerset had been overthrown in a coup led by the Earl of Warwick who, as the Duke of Northumberland, became Lord President of the Council. Northumberland then attempted to change the succession so that the dying Edward would be succeeded by the Protestant Lady Jane Grey and not by the Catholic Mary Tudor.

Faction describes the division of the government/court into rival groupings dominated by powerful nobles, each jockeying for position and trying to win the favours of the monarch. After the 1530s these opposing alignments usually included religious differences. A strong monarchy could keep the nobles in check and so faction was always at its most intense when the monarch was weak or distracted. Faction is an important consideration in any analysis of a rebellion, particularly those categorised as elite conspiracies. People were likely to be more willing to rebel when they perceived weakness at the centre and faction was clear evidence of that.

Foreign Policy. There was no glorious victory in foreign policy to raise people's spirits. Somerset continued the war against France and Scotland to force the latter to honour the marriage treaty between Edward VI and Mary, Queen of Scots but his fruitless pursuit of military success almost bankrupted the government. Northumberland withdrew from foreign commitments but at the cost of losing English-controlled Boulogne to the French, which represented a considerable humiliation. When Mary Tudor became queen, her support for her Spanish husband's war against France led to the loss of Calais, the last English garrison abroad. Meanwhile, the hostility of the Holy Roman Emperor to Edward's Protestant reformation caused him to threaten the exports of English cloth to Antwerp with disastrous results for the English cloth industry.

Crisis, what crisis?

As you have seen above, there seems to be plenty of evidence to explain why historians have often described the period between the mid-1540s and the late 1550s as the 'mid-Tudor crisis'. However, historians writing within the last twenty years have challenged this 'crisis' label. They see the fact that the Tudor state faced disastrous foreign wars, internal rebellions, religious change, epidemics and economic and financial collapse and yet still emerged stable and with the monarch able to govern effectively, as a sign of strength rather than weakness. They also argue that this checklist of problems was typical of those faced by many governments and was not unique to the reigns of Edward and Mary. Why do you think that recent historians have become suspicious of general labels like 'crisis'? The development of this debate is exemplified below, summarising the views of some of the historians who have contributed to it. All are well worth reading.

1 In the first edition of *England under the Tudors* (1955), G.R. Elton portrayed the succession of Edward VI and the prospect of a minority government as threatening the stability of a government which was already divided by faction based on religious differences. This made the country ripe for both internal unrest and possibly foreign invasion. He believed therefore that the death of Henry VIII triggered a crisis.

G.R. Elton

2 In the early 1990s David Loades challenged this view and claimed that historians liked to use the word 'crisis' because it made a period seem more exciting than it actually was in order to 'catch the readers' attention'. In *The Mid-Tudor Crisis 1545-1565* (1992) he characterised this period as one of change, development and continuity, less dramatic perhaps but ensuring each of Henry's children was able to succeed to the throne in turn; 'the true significance of the reigns of Edward VI and Mary lies less in what happened than in what did not happen'.

David Loades

3 Nigel Heard was another historian who disliked the use of 'crisis'. In *Edward VI and Mary: A Mid-Tudor Crisis?* (1990) he wrote: 'The concept of a mid-sixteenth-century crisis in England is now considered to be difficult to maintain. This is certainly true if by "crisis" it is implied that the whole country, and all of the people, were experiencing a crisis continually between 1547 and 1558. Indeed, it is only really possible to say that the country as a whole and some sections of society underwent very short-lived crises at times between these dates ... at no time, even in 1549, was the country in danger of collapse, and for most people life went on as normal'.

Nigel Heard