

Seven-year-old George Lord Dacre died on 17 May 1569. The little lord's death had large consequences. His uncle Leonard claimed the Dacre title and lands, but was outmanoeuvred by the duke of Norfolk, step-father and guardian to George and his sisters. Leonard joined the northern rebellion later that year and died in exile at Brussels. Norfolk, fortunately for Queen Elizabeth, did not back the rebellion. Instead he married the Dacre girls to his sons and secured their lands for his dynasty.

It has long been known that George met his death in an unusual way, 'slain casually at Thetford by the fall of a vaulting Hors upon him', as the contemporary life of his brother-in-law, Philip Howard, earl of Arundel, put it. But the coroner's inquest report into his death, one of some 9,000 we are studying to shed light on everyday life in sixteenth-century England, adds remarkable detail. It was about two in the afternoon when George, having dined with other gentlemen and gentlewomen in 'a dynyng chamber' in the duke's house in Thetford, went off by himself for some recreation. In a gallery in the upper part of the house stood the wooden 'vawtynge horse', four and a half feet high, more than six feet three inches long, and set on four wooden feet. It was too high for him to jump onto its back, so he tried to adjust it by extracting 'a pynne of iron' supporting one of the back legs. The horse collapsed on top of him, crushing his head and killing him instantly.

The inquests tell us about the lives and deaths of many less celebrated children. Of 1030 deaths registered between 1551 and 1560, at least 140 were those of children aged 13 or under, probably nearer 170 if we include those described merely as a child or as someone's son or daughter. At least 37 of them were playing when they had their fatal accidents. Children clearly had fun, but as in any age it had its dangers.

Lord George's vaulting horse was worth 10 shillings, more than many real-life working horses, but most had to make do with cheaper playthings. Three-year-old Christiana Jelyan of Wrangle in Lincolnshire was engaged in the classic toddler's pastime of 'making out of mud certain wastell [bread] called cakes' when she fell backwards into a ditch. Girls, and sometimes boys, drowned picking flowers near water. Five-year-old Nicholas Braunche played with a knife he had picked up from a table. He tripped over the cradle of a younger sibling, fell and stabbed himself in the throat.

Animals were all around and children often played with them. One two-year-old girl was playing with a two-month-old foal when it kicked her in the forehead. A boy even younger followed a gosling into a pond in the back yard of his house. Exploring near animals could be dangerous for older children too. Seven-year-old John Watson slipped into a barn one morning past a mare and a colt. The colt kicked him in the side and he died five hours later. Robert Cranefold, the same age, got more than he bargained for when he hit a grey horse tied to a post with a small twig, and was kicked in the head. Horse-mills, like watermills, caused accidents for those who got caught in the machinery.

Other children played safer games but picked bad places to play them. Joan Middleton and Richard Sone were playing by the city wall of Chichester when a November gale blew

down a sixty-foot section and buried them. Robert Alcocke was playing with other children in his father's smithy when a scythe and a large hammer fell on his head. Several boys and girls played in carts that tipped up on top of them or ran over them when they fell off. Children playing on roads were trampled by horses, run over by carts or squashed between traffic and roadside posts. Children playing by water fell into ponds, wells, ditches, streams and rivers. Toddlers could come to grief even in vats full of water, brewing vessels or buckets left out for soaking linen, bran or salt fish. One, said the inquest jurors, was looking at her reflection in the water when she fell.

Watching adults or siblings at work was interesting but dangerous. William Gregorys was watching his father repair a cart in his barn when one wheel fell off and hit him in the head. William Russhe followed his sister and other children when they drove some cattle to water, but tripped and fell on a knife. Very small children were kept out of the way by strapping them into chairs, but might fall into the fire if the chair toppled over. Older children fell asleep in unsuitable places, on the edge of ponds or under hedges in fields traversed by carts. George Nycolson slept by a lime kiln in Newcastle's Sandgate and was suffocated by smoke. Catherine Else slept under Marlow Bridge and was swamped by a wave when several boats came through the lock.

As children grew, they began to be exposed to the hazards of work. Of 61 children aged 6 or under who died in accidents in the 1550s, only one was working, herding pigs. Of the 79 aged between 7 and 13, about one in four was working when they met their fate. Girls fetched water or washed linen, boys drove carts, forked hay or herded animals. Sometimes the boundaries between work and play are unclear. When seven-year-old Jane Nune fell into Loughton Brook in Buckinghamshire reaching out for a goose feather in the water, was she looking for a plaything, or collecting down for pillows?

Ten-year-old Thomas Hubbard was too keen to enter the world of grown men's work. He was sent out to the fields in Brundish, Suffolk, with food and drink for the ploughmen. He tried his hand at ploughing, but tripped on a stone or clod of earth and accidentally hit a passing colt with the whip with which he was controlling the plough-horse. The horse kicked him in the back of the head and he died four hours later. Nine-year-old Thomas Cokerell learnt too exuberantly. He was driving a cart in the fields of Reymerston, Norfolk, under the rule and guidance of his father. Then, rashly and without consulting his father, as the report put it, he ran and jumped into the cart as it was moving. The startled horses turned the cart over and he was hit in the head.

Watching adults play was dangerous too. In 1552 spectators aged eight and ten were killed in archery practice in Louth, Lincolnshire, and at a hammer-throwing contest in Corfe, Dorset. Adolescence brought participation, but that was no safer. John Tyler and Thomas Wylson, aged 15 and 16, died playing football, one falling heavily after tripping on a mole hill, the other accidentally stabbed in the thigh by the knife in the belt of the player he tackled. The pleasures and perils of life were not peculiar to childhood. But the sad fates of hundreds of youngsters less famous than little Lord Dacre are wonderfully revealing of the realities of growing up in sixteenth-century England.

Boxes:

Edmund Fenwycke was enjoying some grown-up entertainment in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 12 June 1552 when he died in a freak accident. He was lying on a scaffold set up in the Cloth Market watching the annual Corpus Christi Day mystery plays. At 4 pm two men set off the charges in three gun chambers as part of the pyrotechnic effects for the plays. One gun chamber exploded and a fragment hit Edmund on the left side of his head, giving him a wound a fatal 3 inches deep.

John Malkyn, aged 12, was servant to a weaver at Great Missenden in Buckinghamshire, who sent him out to collect herbs on 18 July 1554. John tried to add a little fun to his work with tragic consequences. As he walked by a moat on the site of Missenden Abbey he spotted a young moorhen and ran after it to catch it, but stumbled, fell into the moat, and drowned.

William Marshall's fate must have been a lesson to his playmates, if they were old enough to remember what happened on 24 May 1555. Playing with other boys in the croft around his home at Faxwell in Bedfordshire, he hit his father's horse in the back of its legs with a stick and got a kick in the head in return. Four days later the three-year-old was dead.

Catherine Bewvis, aged 7, and other girls were playing on the edge of a mill pond on the River Lea at Hertford on 24 July 1559 when her daring got the better of her. She tried to walk across the river on a beam, then noticed a twig floating on the water and reached out for it. She fell in and the flow of the water carried her under the waterwheel, where she drowned.

Steven Gunn of Merton College, Oxford and Tomasz Gromelski of Wolfson College, Oxford are working on a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council on accidental death and everyday life in 16th-century England.

Books

The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England by Barbara Hanawalt (OUP, 1989)

Medieval Children by Nicholas Orme (YaleUP, 2001)