

Lizzie Cotter's Story

Lizzie introduced herself at last year's Big Cheese Roll. Although fictional, her story is based very much on the lives of real people who experienced the 1766 food riots. It can be adapted to provide inspiration for artworks and poems. Hers is one of three stories, alongside those of the Mayor and Mother Big Cheese. All these stories will be available in different formats for schools and communities to use, share, retell and discuss in age appropriate ways.

Lizzie was born on a smallholding on the Thorsby Estate. Her family worked their patch of land and paid rent to the big house. Her family would come to the annual Goose Fair in old Market Square, every autumn hoping to make enough to buy what they needed for the following year. She remembers moving to the city when she was younger. Her mam says the great houses that owned the land they'd farmed had got new machines and needed fewer workers. The rents had gone up and lots of their old neighbours had looked for work in Nottingham. Here lace and textiles were being made and smoke filled the city as more and more people came looking for work. She and five of her brothers and sisters live with their parents, uncle and cousins in two rooms. All of them work, including her brother Billy and cousin Ethel, though they're both only six. Her dad only has one hand now but works hard at whatever job he can. Their home is cold in the winter and hot in the summer. Life is very hard and dangerous. Working hours are long yet her family and most people they know often can't afford food. Lots of children don't have shoes.

Her friend Helen's nan can hardly see but still makes lace for the fine people of Nottingham. Every year food prices go up but their wages don't. Her Uncle thinks all working men should have a vote like the factory owners and land owners do. Lizzie and her mam think women should have the vote too but her uncle thinks that's daft. For the last few years people have been talking about change. Then whispers came of the first food riots down south. Some say working people took the over-priced food from traders and sold it at fair prices folk could afford then passed the money back to the traders. Lizzie likes that idea. She knows there's been violence too and that has her more worried. Its market day and there are loads of giant cheeses, tall and round as the Mayor's son, but at prices no one she knew could pay. The crowd began to plan. She, her mam, Helen and their younger brothers, sisters and cousins are going to help roll off cheeses and share them out. Mrs Arnot from down the hill says her lads will be searching the warehouses and boats along the canal for food to take....

By the end of the day the Mayor had come but no one liked what he had to say and he was bowled over by a cheese. Some of her neighbours and her cousin had been arrested and taken to the coffee house on Peck Lane. But they were set free when protestors outside scared the magistrate. Tomorrow they say the military will come and who knows what will happen. She hopes one day food prices and wages will be fair and everyone can have enough to eat. She knows that day will come.