

The Elizabethan Age, 1558-1603

Lifestyles of the rich and poor

Elizabethan social structure

TASK: Number the titles 1-7 to put them in order of Elizabethan society hierarchy.

Wealthy merchants and Professionals	
Cottagers and Skilled artisans	
The Monarch	
Landless unskilled labourers and the poor or unemployed	
Yeomen and Tenant farmers	
Nobles and Lords	
Gentry	

Contrasting lifestyle of the rich and poor

TASK: Colour code the following information into three categories, the lifestyle of the rich, the lifestyle of the gentry and the lifestyle of the poor. The information looks at three categories of Elizabethan life: houses, fashion and education.

Many homeowners used their increased wealth, gained from the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, to remodel their homes. They changed from being defensive structures to more welcoming places to live. They were often designed in an 'E' or 'H' shape, with large windows, which improved lighting.	In terms of fashion this group tended to follow the style adopted by their superiors, the nobles and lords. Although they could not afford the same level of expense on these items as their superiors, their outfits were modern and stylish. They did lack the fine threads of gold and silver of the nobles though.	This class would live in smaller homes, often only containing one room, sometimes shared with animals. It had an earth floor, and a thatched roof, with a timber frame. It was barely furnished, with normally just a bed, a table and some stools. Some, were able to build a new house with separate bedrooms and a kitchen.
This group attempted to imitate certain aspects of nobles' homes, but not on such a grand scale. By renting out some of their land, they were able to gain income, which they used to modernise and refashion their homes from medieval style buildings into more modern, fashionable accommodation. New houses were built out of stone, brick or half-timber, and contained at least eight rooms plus servant's quarters.	A lady of fashion would wear knitted stockings, over which a large petticoat or farthingale would be worn- wooden hoops would be sewn to ensure the under-gown was splayed out. An Elizabethan nobleman would wear the latest fashion made from the finest materials – silk, linen and velvet. He would wear a plain vest, with a long sleeve shirt, or doublet, on top.	There was very little in the way of education for this class because They could rarely afford any education for their children. Instead, they spent their leisure time in the inn or tavern, where consumption of alcohol would occur. They would also take part in gambling, bear baiting, playing cards or betting on the racing. Fishing and archery were also common hobbies.

The male members of this class would normally wear a pair of leather shoes, knitted stockings, a doublet and jerkin (jacket and waistcoat) made of cloth or canvas. Women wore a petticoat with a jacket, however they would not be elaborate or of good quality. They would also wear a net or a cap on the head, as well as leather shoes.	The sons of this group often attended grammar school – called this because they focused on teaching Greek and Latin grammar. The number of grammar schools increased under Elizabeth's reign to 360 in England and Wales – almost one in every large town. The aim of the grammar schools was to produce the perfect gentleman.	The male children of wealthy nobles and lords were tutored at home, receiving education in classics (language, history, philosophy). Female children would have a different focus for their education. They would be tutored by a governess and would be taught the practicalities of running a large household.
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Causes of poverty

There was a sharp rise in poverty during the sixteenth century, especially during the reign of Elizabeth. Historians have suggested a number of reasons to help explain why this occurred.

Reason	Explanation
Rising Population	The population rose by a million during the Elizabethan period. More people meant there was more demand for goods, and so prices rose.
Rising inflation	Prices for goods rose, but wages fell as there were more people around to do the work.
Cloth Industry	Woollen cloth was England's main export. There was a decline in demand and this led to unemployment.
Bad Harvests	Harvests were particularly bad in 1556, 1596 and 1597. This led to even higher demand and more rising prices.
Costly Wars	Wars against France, Scotland and Spain caused taxes to rise and the value of coinage to fall. The end of the wars saw large numbers of unemployed soldiers wandering the countryside for work.
Changes in farming	Many landlords decided to enclose their fields and keep sheep instead of growing crops which led to high unemployment.
Dissolution of the monasteries	This caused a rise in unemployment (among monks, servants and labourers) and took away the vital role of charity relief.
Rack renting	Sharp increases in rent meant that many tenant farmers were unable to pay higher rents and were evicted.
Rural depopulation	A combination of poor harvests and changes to farming methods caused many unemployed farmers to drift away from the countryside to the towns in search of work.

TASK: Identify and explain the factor which you consider to be the **most** important reason for causing an increase in poverty during the sixteenth century.

TASK: Identify and explain the factor which you consider to be the **least** important reason for causing an increase in poverty during the sixteenth century.

Unemployment and vagrancy

Rising unemployment combined with economic hardship resulted in an increase in homeless beggars who toured the country in wandering bands, causing problems for the authorities.

TASK: Match the vagrant to the correct description.

Hooker or angler	Tied arsenic on their skin to make it bleed, hoping to attract sympathy whilst begging.
Clapper dudgeon	Dressed in tatty clothes and pretended to suffer from 'falling sickness' (epilepsy) by sucking soap and foaming at the mouth.
Doxy	Carry a long wooden stick and knock on doors of houses seeking charity during the day to see what could be stolen. After dark, they return and use the hooked stick to reach in windows and steal clothes and valuables.
Abraham man	Former soldiers who have become vagabonds and who survive by robbing, using threats or by begging when the opportunity arises.
Ruffler	They pretended to be dumb in order to beg for charity from passers-by.
Dummerers	Pretended to be mad, hoping their threatening behaviour would result in charity donations through pity.
Counterfeit crank	A devious female beggar who would carry a large bag on her back to make it look like she was knitting. She was really walking around, picking up anything valuable and running off with it.

Government Legislation

Elizabeth inherited a problem of increasing poverty and she attempted to deal with this by passing a series of Acts of Parliament. This policy culminated in the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601.

TASK: Match the Act to the correct description.

Statute of Artificers 1563	JPs were to build two Houses of Correction in each county to house those who refused to work. JPs should keep materials in every town to provide work for those who could not find jobs. Nothing was being done to remove the causes of poverty.
Vagabonds Act 1572	The 1598 Poor Law had now been made permanent. This became known as the Elizabethan Poor Law. This came after a realisation that the government had a responsibility towards helping the poor and led to the set up of a legal framework to tackle poverty.
Act for the Relief of the Poor 1576	This act made it compulsory for boys to serve a seven year apprenticeship in a craft or trade and it set a maximum wage limit. It attempted to create employment to reduce vagrancy.
Act for the Relief of the Poor 1598	Begging was strictly forbidden and anyone found begging was to be whipped and returned to their place of birth and if this was not known they were sent to the House of Correction. This act reduced the risk of social unrest.
Act for the Punishment of Rogues 1598	Four overseers were appointed to each parish to collect and supervise poor relief. Work was to be found for able bodied men and women and poor children were to learn a craft or trade. The act helped those in need of support and remained until 1834.
Act for the Relief of the Poor 1603	This act introduced severe punishments against vagrants, made JPs keep a register of the poor in their parish and made the local people pay a poor rate and provide shelter for the elderly and sick. The punishments were harsh to deter vagrancy.

TASK: How successful were the Elizabethan Poor Laws? Explain your answer.
