

The Elizabethan Age, 1558-1603

Popular Entertainment

Cruel Sports

The watching of blood sports was enjoyed by all sections of society. The most popular were bear-baiting, bull-baiting and cockfighting. Such events attracted large audiences. Many of whom placed bets on the outcome of the contests.

Bear-baiting

Bears would be chained to a wooden stake by one hind leg or chained by the neck. Dogs would be released around the bear to make it angry. The dogs would attack the bear, attempting to kill it by biting its throat, and the spectators would place bets on which dog would survive the longest before being killed by the angry bear. Queen Elizabeth enjoyed this type of entertainment a great deal and when she went on her royal progresses towns put on bear-baiting shows for her.

Bull-baiting

The bull would have a rope tied around the base of its horns and the other end of rope would be attached to a stake in the centre of the ring. In a contest lasting about an hour, trained bulldogs would then be set free one by one by their owners in order to attack the bull. During the contest the audience would place bets on the outcome of the baiting match. Owing to the difficulty of obtaining bears, bull-baiting was a far more common activity across England and Wales.

Cockfighting

Most often it was a fight between a single pair of birds, but sometimes as many as twenty gamecocks could be put into the ring at the same time and allowed to fight it out until only one bird was left. Spectators would bet on which bird they thought would win.

Task: Use the information above to complete the table below.

	Description of the cruel sport	Reasons for its popularity
Bear-baiting		
Bull-baiting		
Cockfighting		

Entertainment enjoyed by the rich

Hunting

A very popular pastime among the rich throughout Tudor times. Deer hunting was very much an upper-class sport and wealthy Elizabethan nobles had their own deer parks.

Hawking

Another popular pastime. It involved the use of a trained falcon or hawk to fly off a trainer's arm when the blind cap was taken off its head, kill selected prey and then return. The upper classes used peregrines and they were the only persons allowed to breed hawks, while the lower orders made use of kestrels and sparrow hawks.

Archery

A popular activity throughout the Tudor period. Men over the age of 24 were expected to practice archery on a Sunday after church.

Dancing

Dancing was very popular among all classes. While the lower classes enjoyed traditional country dances, the classes could employ musicians to play different dance tunes. The queen liked dancing and was said to be very accomplished at it.

Music and singing

Singing was an important home entertainment and many people could play an instrument.

Ball games

Tennis was a game that emerged during Tudor times and became popular among the upper classes. Bowls was a fashionable game played by all classes. Football was very popular amongst the lower classes. It was very different to the modern game as there was no pitch, no proper goals and no limit as to the number of players on each team. There were few rules, making it a very rough game which often resulted in many injuries.

Task: Using the information above, describe ways in which entertainment for the rich and poor were similar.

Describe ways in which entertainment for the rich and poor were different.

The development of the Elizabethan theatre

Source H: **The Tudor Scholar Richard Morrison in his book, The Laws of England (1535), called for the banning of many plays.**

Robin Hood plays should be forbidden and others devised that show the wickedness of the bishop of Rome, monks, nuns and such like ... Things sooner enter by the eyes, than by the ears: remembering more when they see rather than when they hear.

Source I: **Part of a petition sent by the inhabitants of Blackfriars in London to the Privy Council in 1596, in which they voice their opposition to the proposed building of a theatre in their area of London.**

A general inconvenience to all the inhabitants ... by reason of the great gathering together ... of all manner of vagrant and lewde persons that ... will come thither and worke all manner of mischeefe.

Task: Read sources H and I above. Explain why some Elizabethans saw the theatre as a threat to law and order.

Attitudes towards the theatre

Support for the theatre

During Elizabeth's reign the theatre quickly developed into a popular form of cheap entertainment, attracting large audiences from all social classes. The queen herself enjoyed the theatre. Nobles also frequented the theatre, and a visit to watch the performance of a new play became part of the social calendar. One reason for the popularity of the theatre was the actual plays performed there. Dramas with gripping storylines, tales of heroism and plots with good triumphing over evil. Plays could be used by authorities as propaganda. Shakespeare's plays delivered the strong message that obedience and loyalty to the monarch was essential in order to ensure that law and order was maintained.

Opposition to the theatre

Opposition from the Authorities

As London's population rose sharply during the Tudor period, the authorities grew increasingly concerned about maintaining law and order. They wanted to avoid the gathering of large crowds which often resulted in some civil disturbance, and so they pressed for new theatres to be built outside the city walls. The theatre attracted a mixed crowd of people, from those who were simply out to enjoy a play, to beggars and pickpockets, who viewed this as an opportunity to engage in crime. This potential for lawlessness worried the authorities.

Opposition from religious groups

Some of the strongest opposition to the growth of the theatre came from religious groups, chief of which were the Puritans. They considered the theatre to be the work of the devil, encouraging people to be sinful. They considered the plays to lack decency and morals, and to contain rude gestures and antics, which caused audiences to lead a sinful and corrupt lifestyle. In their opinion, such plays should be banned.

Task: Use the information above in order to complete the table.

Arguments put forward by those who supported the theatre	Arguments put forward by those who opposed the theatre