

BBC Bitesize - GCSE History

Elizabeth I - Episode 2: Elizabeth's government

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Alice: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize History podcast. This is the series designed to help you tackle your History GCSE.

Anouska: We explore the key facts, events, people and concepts to help you in your exam.

Alice: And you can use this podcast in lots of different ways. That might be listening whilst you are on the bus or writing notes as you go, use it in whatever way works best for you.

Anouska: I'm Anouska Lewis a history podcaster.

Alice: And I'm Alice Loxton a historian and author and in this series, we're diving into all things Elizabeth I.

Anouska: Last episode, we discussed Elizabeth's journey to the throne and in this episode, we're looking at her government.

Alice: I have to say, the way the government worked in the 1500s was a little different to how our government works today. Alright Anouska, shall we run through it?

Anouska: Let's get going. I recommend grabbing a piece of paper and making some notes as we go. Queen Elizabeth was surrounded by lots of people during her reign, including government officials, servants (that's people like ladies in waiting), and advisers.

Alice: Together, this group was known as the Royal Court and was made up of about 1000 people!

Anouska: All the noble families would be represented there and the Court was the source of trends and fashions for the country.

Anouska: It was also the centre of political power. So, if you were a wealthy and ambitious person, you'd probably go there to try and get noticed by the Queen.

Alice: If you could impress her, she might give you an important job in government which would bring you even more power and influence.

Anouska: Speaking of the government, who was it making decisions in the Elizabethan era?

Alice: Well...Queen Elizabeth I was sovereign of England - that meant she had the most authority out of anyone. But she still needed a team - a loyal group of advisors who each had their own connections and expertise.

Anouska: Like all the top football teams have a head coach, an assistant coach, a nutritionist, a physio....

Alice: That's it, exactly. And these advisors were known as the Privy Council. They guided The Queen when she needed to make decisions, a bit like your football coach.

Anouska: The Privy Council advised Elizabeth on important decisions like marriage, religion, war and relations with other countries.

Alice: And Elizabeth could choose the members of her Privy Council, but in reality she kind of had to choose the most powerful landowners otherwise she might have a rebellion on her hands.

Anouska: She chose 19 noblemen - that's quite a small group, but it meant there was a smaller chance of them disagreeing.

Alice: And if she really wanted to, she could overrule the Council's decisions, but it would be very difficult to do this if all the members were in agreement.

Anouska: Yeah, imagine if all those coaches on your football team wanted to do one thing, and you were the only one who disagreed. It would be hard wouldn't it?

Alice: Hmmm... could be a bit awkward.

Anouska: Luckily for Elizabeth, this didn't happen very often.

Alice: The Privy council initially met three times a week but as their influence grew they would meet every single day.

Anouska: Wow that's a lot.

Alice: It would certainly keep them busy!

Anouska: Who were some of her most trusted advisors?

Alice: Well, first up we have William Cecil. He was Elizabeth's Secretary of State from 1558, and he guided her for 40 years.

Anouska: Okay, William Cecil. Who else?

Alice: Well, there was also Robert Dudley.

Male actor: Hello, remember me?

Anouska: Oh alright Robert! We spoke about you last episode. Robert was one of Elizabeth's suitors.

Alice: He was and he was also Earl of Leicester and a trusted advisor to Elizabeth until he died in 1588. Sir Francis Walsingham was another one...

Anouska: Ah yeah, he was in charge of Elizabeth's secret service and advised her on foreign affairs. He was super important because in 1586 he worked out that there was a plot to overthrow Elizabeth. His discovery led to the execution of Mary Queen of Scots.

Alice: Which is pretty dramatic stuff and we'll hear all about that plot, and others, in a later episode.

Anouska: In 1571 The Spanish Ambassador, De Spes, wrote to King Phillip II of Spain to tell him about Elizabeth's advisors...let's hear what he thought of them. This is voiced by an actor.

De Spes: William Cecil manages most of the business on the Council, and by means of his craftiness, seeks to outwit other ministers. Next after him, the man who has most to do with affairs is Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. He is not fit for such work, but is held in great favour by the Queen. There are others of less authority and some are creatures of Cecil, who only repeat what he says.

Alice: Harsh words! And there's a really useful breakdown of Elizabeth's key ministers on the BBC Bitesize website. Just head over to the GCSE History page.

Anouska: Although incredibly powerful, the Privy Council didn't have total control over how England was governed. Grab a pen and some paper if you haven't already because we're covering some key terms here. Elizabeth gave important roles to those who showed her the most loyalty. This was called patronage.

Alice: Now patronage basically meant giving someone an important job and Elizabeth did it lots because it meant that she could control people. If she could give someone a job, she could also take it away... if they didn't do what she wanted.

Anouska: Being kicked out of Court was considered a disgrace so patronage was highly desired. Roles she gave out through this included Lord Lieutenants. They were responsible for particular areas of the country, making sure everything was running as it should be and informing the Privy Council of any unrest.

Alice: There were also Justices of the Peace and they were appointed by the Queen to enforce law and order in their areas. There were about one thousand five hundred across the country.

Anouska: And then we have the Members of Parliament. This Parliament was far less powerful than the one we have today. There was no Prime Minister, and no political parties.

Alice: The Members of Parliament, aka MPs, were all men, and they were all voted in by wealthy landowners.

Anouska: Elizabeth only called Parliament to meet when she needed them - usually when she was short on money.

Alice: And only Parliament had the power to raise money through taxes and then give it to the Queen. These taxes were an essential boost to her income.

Anouska: She'd also meet them when she needed to make laws by passing Acts of Parliament and when she needed MP's support and advice on important issues.

Alice: But, she didn't want Parliament becoming too powerful, so she put some very strict limits on them. They could only meet if Elizabeth called it, and she set the agenda.

Anouska: They could only talk about what Elizabeth allowed them to discuss and she could close Parliament at any time - we call that prorogue. Elizabeth reigned for 45 years. In those years, Alice, how many times do you think Parliament was called?

Alice: Ok... I'm thinking once, twice a year something like that?

Anouska: Nope... Parliament only met thirteen times in 45 years.

Alice: Only thirteen times! So MPs didn't have much power at all. But, they were keen to get more influence and they did challenge Elizabeth on quite a few things during her time as Queen. We discussed one of them last episode?

Anouska: We did! Marriage! MPs wanted Elizabeth to get married and produce an heir. Elizabeth's response was that it was her private business and they shouldn't get a say in the decision.

Elizabeth: At present it is not convenient; nor never shall be without some peril unto you and certain danger unto me.

Alice: Yeah, back off! Okay, we should probably talk about monopolies next.

Anouska: The board game?

Alice: Hmm... no, not quite. It might be a good idea to get that pen out again and make some notes on this section.

Anouska: Pen at the ready!

Alice: In the Elizabethan era, monopolies gave individual nobles and merchants the sole right to make or sell certain things. So monopolies could make or break someone. They could be the key to your success but if Elizabeth decided not to renew your monopoly, that would be really bad news for your business.

Anouska: Oooh, that's a good link to the patronage concept we were talking about earlier isn't it? It was a way for her to control people and maintain their loyalty. But was there a financial reason for monopolies too?

Alice: Absolutely, Elizabeth intended for monopolies to promote business and boost the economy, but because one person now controlled the entire supply of a particular product it also meant that prices began to rise.

Anouska: It's also worth saying that Elizabeth made money from granting these monopoly licences, didn't she?

Alice: Yes that's right. Towards the end of Elizabeth's reign some MPs felt monopolies were unfair. They protested against them in the late 1500s and wouldn't grant taxes until she'd got rid of them.

Anouska: Here's what Francis Moore, an MP, had to say during a debate in Parliament. This is voiced by an actor. The year was 1601.

Francis: I cannot utter with my tongue, or conceive with my heart, the great grievances that the town and country for which I serve suffer by some of these monopolies. It bringeth the general profit into a private hand, and the end of all is beggar and bondage to the subject.

Alice: Well...that didn't really make Elizabeth look amazing, so in the end she compromised and removed some monopolies.

Anouska: Right Alice, it's rebellion time. It's time to meet Robert Devereux, the second Earl of Essex. Now the Earl of Essex had been granted a monopoly, like the ones we were just talking about, but bad news, the Queen decided not to renew it and it was from here that his dramatic downfall began.

Anouska: Spoiler alert!

Alice: Sorry! So Essex became a member of Elizabeth's Privy Council in 1593, and the two of them were close, until...

Anouska: Oh no, I hate a friendship breakup, what happened?

Alice: Well the two of them had, let's say, a complicated friendship, which ended when he was sent to Ireland to defeat a rebellion. But whilst he was over there he went against Elizabeth's orders. Instead of defeating the rebellion, he made peace with the rebels.

Anouska: Ooooh drama!

Alice: Just a bit. He was banned from court and financially ruined.

Anouska: In his desperation, he attempted to gather the people of London to start a rebellion and overthrow the government, but that didn't really work and he was executed for treason in 1601.

Alice: There's a lot of treason going around in the Elizabethan era! Shall we test our knowledge of this topic then?

Anouska: Grab a pen and paper and write down your answers. Question number 1. In her 45 year reign, how many times did Parliament meet? Thirteen times. Elizabeth put strong limits on Parliament so they wouldn't get too powerful.

Alice: Ok, next up, what was the name of Elizabeth's group of advisors? The Privy Council. They advised Elizabeth on important issues like marriage, religion and war.

Anouska: And lastly, which Earl launched a rebellion against Elizabeth in 1601? It was the Earl of Essex. He was one of Elizabeth's privy councillors and he launched The Essex Rebellion after discontent with the Queen.

Alice: So a bit of a troublemaker. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE History podcast. And for joining us as we explored Elizabeth's Government.

Anouska: There's still a lot more to learn. So go and take a listen to the rest of the episodes on BBC Sounds to find out more.

Alice: Next episode we'll be looking at the religious tensions in the Elizabethan era.

Anouska: Remember you're our Lizzie Legends and we'll see you next time.

Alice: Bye.