

# BBC Bitesize - GCSE History

## Elizabeth I - Episode 8: Elizabethan culture and the golden age

**Announcer:** BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

**Anouska:** Hi! This is the Bitesize GCSE History podcast. I'm Anouska Lewis.

**Alice:** And I'm Alice Loxton. Throughout this series, we've been exploring the key facts and exam skills to help you with your History GCSE on Elizabeth I.

**Anouska:** It's never too late to go back and listen to earlier episodes. In this one, we're looking at Elizabethan culture and the Golden Age and we're using actors to read historical sources throughout.

**Alice:** The Elizabethan Age is known by some as England's Golden Age because it was a prosperous time. It's also known for its developments in culture. Things like theatre, art and architecture.

**Anouska:** But before we get going, I want to know Alice, what's your favourite way to relax?

**Alice:** OK, well I suppose I might read a good book, or if I've had a really long day I'd probably go out with my friends and have a good chat.

**Anouska:** Ooh, well that means you're not a million miles away from being an Elizabethan then. Popular activities were things like going to the theatre, singing, dancing, and watching blood sports, which we'll get to in a bit.

**Alice:** But there were still huge inequalities in Tudor England. The rich had more free time and money to spend, so their leisure activities looked very different to poorer members of society.

**Anouska:** The printing press had been invented so books were now being widely shared amongst wealthy people who enjoyed studying music and reading.

**Alice:** There was lots of new literature written during this period. A lot were history books, but there were also ones written about travel and discovery.

**Anouska:** The most popular forms of creative writing were poetry and plays and the wealthiest families would also entertain in their own homes. They'd have grand banquets followed by private performances.

**Alice:** Pretty glitzy. In contrast, poorer members of society might spend their free time playing cards or perhaps watching sports.

**Anouska:** Let's hear from Thomas Platter. He was a tourist from Germany who visited London in 1599. Here he is writing about what he saw. This is voiced by an actor.

**Thomas:** In London, cock-fights are held throughout the year in a place which is built like a theatre. In the centre on the floor stands a circular table covered with straw where the birds are teased and encouraged to fly at one another.

**Alice:** Thomas is describing a common pastime in Elizabethan England there.

**Anouska:** Cruel sports, or blood sports, included bull-baiting, and bear-baiting. It's illegal today.

**Alice:** So tell me Anouska, how do you relax after a busy day?

**Anouska:** I usually watch TV, or if I'm being really honest, scroll on my phone.

**Alice:** Well, you're also a little like the Elizabethans then. They didn't have TVs or phones, obviously, but they did have theatres. During Elizabeth's reign, the theatre was one of the most popular forms of entertainment.

**Anouska:** In a previous episode we said that life was very different for the wealthiest and poorest members of society. There were drastic differences in their houses, their fashion, and their standards of living.

**Alice:** But every level of society would come to watch plays. It was universally popular.

**Anouska:** And one of the most beloved playwrights was William Shakespeare. Many of the stories in his plays were about English history and supported Queen Elizabeth and her family.

**Alice:** A great example of this is his play 'Richard III' which made Elizabeth's grandfather Henry VII look pretty good, showing him to be the victor over King Richard.

**Anouska:** One play that Elizabeth is said to have inspired was 'The Merry Wives of Windsor'. In it, there's reference to the Queen of the Fairies, which is supposed to be about her.

**Alice:** And what were theatres like? You might want to grab a pen and paper and make some notes here.

**Anouska:** Theatres had tiered seating with different prices, including cheap seats. Although the cheapest seats weren't actually seats, people paid to stand in the stalls.

**Alice:** But what this meant was that people from all ranks of society could come. And in 1595, historians estimate that 15,000 people were attending the theatre each week.

**Anouska:** Going to watch plays was an escape from everyday life, just like when I scroll through my phone or watch TV. But it also gave Elizabethans a chance to socialise and catch up on the latest news.

**Alice:** It became a social event, there really was something for everyone.

**Anouska:** Since people from all levels of society were coming to watch, Elizabeth and her advisors realised it could be a powerful tool.

**Alice:** The Master of the Revels could approve all plays before they were performed.

**Anouska:** In 1587, a play called 'The Isle of Dogs' written by Thomas Nashe and Ben Jonson, was banned. We don't actually know what was in the play as unfortunately no copies exist today, but it could have been that there were comments in there that were negative about the Queen.

**Alice:** And so you could say that the theatre was another form of propaganda.

**Anouska:** Elizabeth was a patron of the theatre, meaning she supported the arts financially, and by attending plays.

**Alice:** So in the same way we spoke about Elizabeth's portraits, playwrights would be encouraged to create plays that she would like, otherwise she might take away the support.

**Anouska:** If you want a refresher on those portraits, pause this and listen to our earlier episode on Elizabeth's image.

**Alice:** Good idea. But this theatre business was not new. Before Elizabeth's reign, there were plays but they were mainly 'morality plays' which had religious themes. It was in the Elizabethan period that comedies became popular.

**Anouska:** Who doesn't love a good giggle?

**Alice:** Well actually, not everyone liked the theatre. The Puritans, remember they're the strict group of Protestants, felt that theatres were immoral. According to them, plays were spreading ideas which would encourage bad behaviour.

**Anouska:** The authorities weren't fans of the theatre either. When Elizabeth became queen, there were no permanent theatres, so actors had to travel across the country to perform in inns - which is what we'd now call pubs.

**Alice:** And this attracted crowds that would sometimes get pretty drunk and behave badly. So the authorities were concerned about law and order.

**Anouska:** In 1572, the government passed an Act which said that actors needed to be supported by a nobleman or have a licence to perform, otherwise, they could be punished.

**Actor:** All common players who wander about and have not a license shall be taken, adjudged and deemed rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars.

**Alice:** That's wording from the 1572 law. Clearly Elizabethan actors weren't very well-respected.

**Anouska:** So, we mentioned noblemen supporting actors. They would become patrons of theatre companies, supporting select groups of actors.

**Alice:** The Earl of Leicester had his own theatre company called the Earl of Leicester's Men.

**Anouska:** And in 1583, Elizabeth established The Queen's Men. But why would they bother becoming patrons of the theatre?

**Alice:** Well, as we said earlier, the theatre was an important propaganda tool and patrons could control the types of plays that were published.

**Anouska:** It could also improve noblemen's status. If the audience really liked a show, it would reflect well on the patron of that theatre company. It might also bring him fame and wealth.

**Alice:** If you didn't have a wealthy patron to protect you, you could avoid being punished by performing in a permanent theatre.

**Anouska:** So more and more were built. By the end of Elizabeth's reign, there were seven major theatres in London, which housed around 40 companies of actors.

**Alice:** Some of the famous theatres include The Rose, The Swan and The Globe Theatre.

**Anouska:** If you want to see what some of these theatres look like head to the GCSE History pages on the BBC Bitesize website, there are some really cool pictures there.

**Alice:** And now, why don't we go back in time, and listen to another account from Thomas Platter. He's the German tourist we heard from earlier and here he is speaking about a visit to the Globe in London just after it opened. This is voiced by an actor and the year was 1599.

**Thomas:** The playhouses are so constructed that they play on a raised platform, so that everyone has a good view. For whoever cares to stand below only pays one English penny, but if he wishes to sit he enters by another door, and pays another penny, while if he desires to sit in the most comfortable seats which are cushioned, where he not only sees everything well, but can also be seen, then he pays yet another English penny at another door. And during the performance food and drink are carried round the audience, so that for what one cares to pay one may also have refreshment.

**Anouska:** It kind of sounds like our version of going to the cinema.

**Alice:** It does! The Globe was built in 1599 and it was one of the largest in London at the time.

**Anouska:** It could fit up to 3,000 people and it was an open amphitheatre.

**Alice:** So that meant that there was no roof over the audience, and people could sit on both sides of the performance.

**Anouska:** If you need to hear any of that again, just rewind and listen as many times as you need.

**Alice:** Anouska, for the final time in this series, shall we end the episode with a quiz?

**Anouska:** Yes, let's do it. Feel free to grab a pen to write down your answers.

**Alice:** OK, question number one, what cruel sports did the Elizabethans enjoy watching? The answer is bull-baiting, bear-baiting, and cock-fighting. Audiences would bet on which animals would win.

**Anouska:** Next question, what kinds of plays were popular before Queen Elizabeth's reign? The answer is morality plays. These were mostly centred around religious themes. But during Elizabeth's reign, audiences preferred non-religious plays, like comedies!

**Alice:** And finally, in 1572 an Act was passed in response to the rising popularity of travelling theatre performances. The question is what did this Act do? The answer, it proposed punishing actors who performed without a licence or the backing of a noble patron. Authorities were worried about people behaving badly at performances and wanted to encourage law and order. No bad behaviour here!

**Anouska:** Thank you for listening to this episode of the Bitesize History podcast.

**Alice:** We have loved diving into Elizabeth I and sharing some exam techniques to help you with your GCSE History exam.

**Anouska:** But don't worry, you can always head to the BBC Sounds app and hit play on any of the episodes in this series. And remember, you'll always be our Lizzie Legends!

**Both:** Bye!