

BBC Bitesize - GCSE History

Elizabeth I - Episode 7: Trouble's abroad

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Alice: Hello and welcome back to the Bitesize GCSE History podcast.

Anouska: In this series, we go over some of the key facts and exam skills for your History GCSE on Elizabeth I. I'm Anouska Lewis

Alice: And I'm Alice Loxton. In this episode we're going to be looking slightly further afield.

Anouska: When Elizabeth became Queen, England's religion was Protestant, and Spain's religion was Catholic. But despite this, the two countries were on okay terms.

Alice: At the time, Spain was the most powerful country in the world. They had an enormous navy of large ships. So it was important to keep the relationship friendly.

Anouska: But over time, tensions built up which led to Spain invading England. Spoiler alert, this story ends with a war.

Alice: It does indeed, but the big question is how did we get there? The most obvious tension between Spain and England was religion.

Anouska: And there was evidence that Spain had been involved in plots to overthrow Elizabeth, which we explored last episode.

Alice: Head to the BBC Sounds App and search for the Bitesize History podcast. So, why else might Spain have wanted to start a war with England?

Anouska: Well, there was that failed marriage proposal.

Alice: Ah yes, King Phillip II of Spain had really wanted to marry Elizabeth. Even though he had been already married to Elizabeth's sister, Mary I.

Anouska: Yikes. Elizabeth had said no to his proposal though.

Alice: And Philip was also pretty annoyed about all the... well, piracy.

Anouska: oooh-arghhh.

Alice: There were plenty of English pirates would sail around the world, stealing from Spanish ships and plundering their treasures.

Anouska: Elizabeth was all for it. She believed that it could open up trade routes for England and she openly encouraged it.

Alice: And one of the most famous examples was Sir Francis Drake. He was the first Englishman to sail around the world.

Anouska: Elizabeth had a soft spot for him. He brought her back gold, silver and jewels from his travels.

Alice: And all of this loot was stolen from Spanish Ships, so you can probably understand why King Phillip would have been quite so angry. Traditionally, Spain and England had maintained an alliance and so they united together against their common enemy - France.

Anouska: However, France was preoccupied, it was busy dealing with a civil war at home and so it was unlikely to invade anyone else

Alice: So Spain had less need for this friendship, for this alliance with England. And then it gets worse, the Spanish controlled a country called The Netherlands, whose people are Dutch and in 1566 groups of Dutch protestants began the Dutch revolt which was a great rebellion against Spanish control.

Anouska: The Netherlands was a vital country for English trade, so when the revolt started in the 1560s, Elizabeth was alarmed.

Alice: She agreed to send English troops to the Netherlands to fight against the Spanish, although they didn't achieve much.

Anouska: But it did mean that now, for the first time, English and Spanish armies were fighting each other.

Alice: It might be a good idea to rewind that section and listen again if you need to because there'd plenty of drama to come.

Anouska: Let me set the scene, it's now the 29th of July, 1588.

Alice: An English Captain has just spotted a fleet of armed ships in the distance.

Anouska: They're sailing towards England. And they look like they're sailing in a crescent formation.

Alice: Perhaps like a crescent moon, or a delicious croissant.

Anouska: Hmmm... tasty. King Phillip of Spain had decided to invade England, and try to overthrow Elizabeth. It's the beginning of the Spanish Armada, which was the name of Spain's fleet of ships sent into battle. England knew the attack was coming and they needed to prepare. Elizabeth appointed Robert Dudley to be in charge of their land army. He arranged for Elizabeth to come to Tilbury, a town in Essex on the Thames, to announce his appointment and rally the troops.

Alice: It was the 9th of August 1588, and Queen Elizabeth delivered a speech to her troops which would go down in history.

Anouska: Let's hear an extract from her Tilbury speech read by an actor.

Elizabeth: I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any Prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm: to which rather than any dishonour shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.

Alice: Hmmm... it's an interesting speech. I mean, what do you make of her calling herself a weak and feeble woman?

Anouska: Yeah that bit really stood out to me. I'm not sure I'd describe her that way. Especially based on what we've learnt about her so far.

Alice: I think perhaps what's going on here is that she's proving to people that she can be both the pure and feminine Queen they expect her to be but also the strong ruler that they need her to be at this dramatic moment.

Anouska: So what actually happened during the Spanish Armada?

Alice: Well, it wasn't smooth sailing for the Spanish, let's put it that way. They left Lisbon on 28th May 1588 but immediately they hit storms.

Anouska: They had to repair their ships and ended up sailing for England on the 21st of July.

Alice: So it's not a great start and the English spotted them early on.

Anouska: As the Armada sailed through the English channel, they were chased by English ships. But their crescent formation gave them quite a strong defence.

Alice: The Armada then anchors near Calais, their aim being to pick up some more Spanish troops from the Netherlands, before setting sail again for England. But this wasn't the best idea.

Anouska: Let's hear a first hand account from a Spanish sailor, reporting on what happened. It's the 7th August 1588 and this is voiced by an actor.

Sailor: During the night the eight ships filled with fire advanced in line. They came drifting towards our fleet with the most terrible flames that may be imagined. The English had succeeded in breaking up our formation. Shortly afterwards the terrible battle began.

Alice: It all sounds pretty terrifying. Clearly the English were using tactics to create fear, which led to all of this chaos and damage.

Anouska: As that sailor said, the English sent in fire ships to attack the Armada - these were wooden ships. They were filled with tar, gunpowder and loaded cannon. They were set ablaze and then sent to drift towards the Spanish ships.

Alice: And all of this was a surprise, the Spanish weren't expecting it. Chaos ensued and they scattered out of their crescent formation.

Anouska: Weather was also not on the Spanish fleet's side. Wind blew them towards dangerous sandbanks where the English continued to attack, causing significant damage.

Alice: Following this chaos, the depleted Armada headed back to Spain. But trapped by the English, who began to chase them, they were forced to sail around the north coast of Scotland. And it was only when the English supplies ran out that they stopped pursuing their enemy.

Anouska: Left alone in the rough Scottish seas, the Spanish met even more storms. Thousands of sailors drowned. For a useful breakdown of the Spanish journey, head to GCSE History on the BBC Bitesize website.

Alice: It was a disaster for the Spanish. They lost about 20,000 men and 51 ships in total, that's almost half of the ships they started with.

Anouska: By comparison, England lost 100 men, although thousands more did die from illness in the weeks following.

Alice: So a pretty bad result for the Spanish. And let's have a little think the reasons for Spain's defeat. It might be worth grabbing that pen and paper again, and let's tick these off together.

Anouska: Number one, leadership. Spain had a poor commander. It was the Duke of Medina Sidonia who led the Spanish fleet. He was inexperienced in naval battle and he made some fatal errors in his planning and tactics.

Alice: Number two, planning. Their plan relied on picking up lots of extra soldiers, but in practise, this never even happened.

Anouska: Number three, Spanish tactics. The Spanish were more prepared for land battles than naval ones. The Spanish ships were very large (ideal for carrying men) but not very quick or nimble.

Alice: Number four, English tactics. The use of fire ships and cannons was suitable for naval warfare and the English ships were smaller and faster.

Anouska: And number five, the weather. The storms wrecked lots of Spanish ships. People at the time thought that the windy weather was a sign that God was on Elizabeth's side.

Alice: I see. Well, modern Historians have argued we can't even really call this event a great English victory because only about five Spanish ships were actually sunk by English action.

Anouska: But whatever you think, we can't deny that England had won and Spain had lost.

Alice: So England's victory strengthened Elizabeth I's position as Queen of England. We know she had faced questions over her legitimacy and there were plots to overthrow her, so this victory improved her reputation as a strong ruler.

Anouska: It also strengthened Protestant rule. Catholic Spain had been defeated by a strong Protestant English navy.

Alice: Right Anouska, I think it's time to test ourselves with a quick quiz!

Anouska: You know I love a quiz!

Alice: First up, who was the English explorer who stole expensive goods from the Spanish? The answer is of course Sir Francis Drake. His travels were encouraged by Queen Elizabeth but he greatly angered King Phillip II of Spain and this was one of the motives for the Spanish Armada.

Anouska: Next question, what's the name of the famous speech Queen Elizabeth delivered to her troops before they set sail? It was the Tilbury speech. In it she instilled confidence in her troops, at a time of great worry and upheaval for England.

Alice: And finally, what did the English victory do for Elizabeth's reputation? It strengthened her position as a Queen. She seemed like a strong ruler and it improved the legitimacy of her religion, Protestantism.

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

Alice: There's loads of other History GCSE series which you can find by searching for Bitesize on BBC Sounds.

Anouska: Next time, we're exploring Elizabethan culture and the 'Golden Age'

Alice: Can't wait.

Anouska: See you next time, Lizzie Legends.

Alice: Bye!