

BBC Bitesize - GCSE History

Elizabeth I - Episode 5: Life in Elizabethan England

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

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

Anouska: In this series, we look at some of the key facts and exam skills for your History GCSE on Elizabeth I.

Alice: I'm Alice Loxton

Anouska: And I'm Anouska Lewis... Right Alice, let's transport ourselves to Elizabethan England - what was daily life like for people back then?

Alice: So, we spoke last episode about the lavish gatherings called Royal Progresses which were thrown for Elizabeth and her Court, and all the expensive materials she would wear in her portraits.

Anouska: She lived a life of wealth and luxury. Historians have called this period a 'Golden Age.'

Alice: But life was not like this for most people in the 1500s. It was during Elizabeth's reign that England became involved in the transatlantic slave trade which was the forced enslavement and movement of people from Africa to the Americas.

Anouska: The slave trade continued for centuries and by 1870 it's estimated that British ships transported 3.4 million people from Africa of whom 2.6 million survived the journey and were enslaved. Head to the BBC Bitesize website to learn more.

Alice: In England, the number of people living in poverty increased during Elizabeth's reign. And there was no welfare system or support like we might see today.

Anouska: Poverty was mostly considered your own fault in Elizabethan times and it was difficult to find help from the government.

Alice: A lot of poorer people worked as labourers and tenant farmers - meaning they lived and worked on the land that they rented, they didn't own it.

Anouska: And they worked really long days, from about 5am-5pm.

Alice: So 12 hours of manual labour, that's really tough. And life expectancy was low at just 35 years old. Many children didn't live past the age of five. So, the big question, why was poverty on the rise during the Elizabethan period? Grab a pen and paper and jot down some notes, we're gonna throw quite a few stats at you now.

Anouska: So, stat number one, there were simply more people. The population rose by over one million during Elizabeth's reign, from 2.8 million to 4 million.

Alice: About 90% of England's population lived and worked in the countryside, but a significant number headed to the towns and cities to try and find work.

Anouska: London's population alone increased from around 60,000 in 1500, to over 200,000 by 1600.

Alice: But since there were more people, there weren't enough jobs to go around, and unemployment rose.

Anouska: It also meant there was more demand for goods. Prices then rose and fewer people could afford what they needed.

Alice: Combine that with a string of particularly bad harvests in the 1590s, unemployment increased again, and demand for food was even higher so prices continued to rise. And so we had inflation. Prices rose, but wages fell.

Anouska: And on top of all of that, Parliament had to raise taxes to fund a series of wars that England was waging. For the wealthy, life was just getting better. The nobility had the highest social ranking, and their social position was often set by birth. But there was a rising social class just below this, called the gentry.

Alice: And wealthy people were pretty eager to show off their higher status in this period. Remember last episode we talked about the nobility needing to build grand houses in order to host the Queen's progresses? Well this is all connected.

Anouska: We call this time 'the age of the great rebuilding.' Houses were decorated really beautifully.

Alice: People liked to build houses in the shape of a capital letter E or H because these shapes were visually pleasing and symmetrical.

Alice: Did you know that windows were a luxury? Glass was really expensive, so the more windows you had, the richer you seemed. And a great example of this is at Hardwick Hall which was the house of Bess of Hardwick. She had so many windows in her house a famous rhyme developed which goes, Hardwick Hall, more glass than wall.

Anouska: Ooh I love that!

Alice: So we know that there was an increase in unemployment, but what we haven't mentioned yet is the increase in begging, or 'the vagabonds' as the Tudors called them.

Anouska: Before the Reformation, which took place during Henry VIII's reign, monasteries used to look after the poor. These were religious buildings where monks lived.

Alice: Now monasteries provided charity and shelter for poor people. But Henry VIII closed the monasteries in England during his reign and so without them, the poor had nowhere to go.

Anouska: So now, the poor visibly wandered from town to town, so even though there might not have been a huge difference in the number of poor people, it felt and it looked like there was.

Alice: And this was a real source of concern for the elite members of society. Let's hear a real primary source now from a wealthy man who was writing at the time.

Anouska: This source comes from Sir Edward Hex, who was a landowner and Justice of the Peace. He was writing to Lord Burghley, the Queen's chief minister. He wrote this in 1596 and it's voiced by an actor.

Edward: Poverty is the fault of the poor themselves. The country cannot bear the cost of the large number of idle, wandering people and robbers. These refuse to work; they prefer to lie idly in ale-houses day and night, eating and drinking excessively. The most dangerous are the wandering unemployed soldiers. There are many thousands in the country.

Alice: So what was it that people were so scared of? We'll use some direct quotes from that source to support our points here. And this is a great thing to do in your exams.

Anouska: Sir Edward calls beggars 'dangerous' and describes them as 'robbers.' So crime was a common fear.

Alice: There was no national police force at this time so it was Justices of the Peace who were in charge of keeping crime rates low and they saw beggars as a serious threat to their authority.

Anouska: Another theme that really comes through in his account is that beggars were lazy. Sir Edward calls them 'idle, wandering people' and says that they 'prefer to lie idly in ale-houses day and night, eating and drinking.' We're also getting an idea of where the blame for poverty was put. Sir Edward says that 'poverty is the fault of the poor themselves.' So he thinks that their own behaviour was the reason for their situation.

Alice: We know that there were different categories of poor people according to people like Sir Edward, those who deserved help and those who didn't. The deserving poor were

categorised as people who were poor because of circumstances outside of their control. So maybe they were sick, or old, or orphans. Therefore they deserved help.

Anouska: But according to Tudors, the undeserving poor were beggars who couldn't be bothered to find work and therefore it was assumed that the situation they found themselves in was their fault.

Alice: This undeserving poor, or vagabonds, were a big problem according to Elizabeth's Government and they really felt something needed to be done.

Anouska: Several acts of law were passed during Elizabeth's reign that put some responsibility on the Government to support the poor. I'd really recommend having your pen and paper handy and writing some notes, there's quite a lot to remember.

Alice: The 1572 Vagabonds Act meant that people had to pay 'a poor rate' in their local areas. So this was essentially a tax, used to support the poor.

Anouska: But that was only for the deserving poor.

Alice: That's right. The solution for begging, or the so-called 'undeserving poor' was more severe. The Vagabonds Act reintroduced the death penalty, so people could actually be killed if they were repeatedly caught begging.

Anouska: Here's an extract from the Middlesex County Records, read by an actor. The date is the 29th March 1574.

Actor: John Allen, Elizabeth Turner, Humphrey Foxe, Henry Bower and Agnes Wort, being over 14 years and having no lawful means of livelihood, were declared vagabonds and sentenced to be flogged severely and burnt on the right ear.

Alice: So you can see there, punishment was really harsh! A number of Acts followed later, and in 1601 The Elizabethan Poor Law was introduced.

Anouska: This actually stayed in place for about 200 years, but what did it do?

Alice: It essentially combined all of the previous acts into one legal framework. The Poor Rate system became compulsory across the whole nation, and if you didn't contribute you could go to jail.

Anouska: It made dealing with the poor a government issue. It wasn't just left to local people or charitable noblemen, it was accepted that the government would help the most in need.

Alice: Begging was officially banned and charitable houses, called almshouses, were built.

Anouska: These were supported by private donations and aimed at those they considered 'deserving'.

Alice: So the big question here is, did the 1601 Poor Law solve the problem?

Anouska: Well....in some ways yes, and in some ways no. Actually it seems that the gap between the rich and poor increased during Elizabeth's time as Queen, and there were more beggars at the end of her reign.

Alice: So, punishing people for begging didn't really address the causes of poverty.

Anouska: Clearly not, but there were some changes in attitudes towards the poor. Elizabeth and her Government started to take responsibility for those who weren't able to support themselves.

Alice: And the introduction of these laws may well have prevented people from begging. But, judgement over the types of people who deserved help did still remain. Shall we test our knowledge of this topic then?

Anouska: Yes. It's my favourite time, it's Quiz time! Grab a pen and paper and write down your answers.

Alice: So first question, what was another word that the Tudors used to describe beggars? The answer is Vagabonds. Tudor people were really concerned about the rising number of vagabonds walking through towns and the countryside searching for work.

Anouska: Next question. There were two categories of poor people according to Elizabethans, what were they? The answer is, the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. The belief was that the deserving poor needed help but the undeserving poor, mostly beggars, had caused their own circumstance and should therefore be punished.

Alice: So next question, let's think about an exam scenario here. You might be asked to write an essay about why poverty increased. What three reasons might you give? And I'll give you a bit more time for this one, you might even want to pause the episode whilst you write. Let's have a look at three reasons you could choose and you'd write a paragraph on each of these. Number 1 - The population rose and so there were fewer jobs available.

Anouska: Number 2 – There were bad harvests. A series of bad harvests increased demands for limited goods.

Alice: And Number 3 - War. To fund the wars that England was waging, Parliament had to raise taxes, which made poor people suffer even more.

Anouska: So we've made it to the end of another brilliant episode, Alice.

Alice: We have! Thank you so much for listening. Next time we're meeting a fascinating character - Mary, Queen of Scots.

Anouska: Ooh I'm buzzing for that one! You can listen to all episodes of the Elizabeth I series on the BBC Sounds website.

Alice: And if you want to listen on the go, we really recommend downloading the BBC Sounds app. See you next time Lizzie Legends!

Anouska: Bye!