

BBC Bitesize - GCSE History

Elizabeth I - Episode 4: Elizabeth's Image

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Anouska: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE History podcast. This is the series designed to help you tackle your History GCSE. I'm Anouska Lewis.

Alice: And I'm Alice Loxton and in this podcast we will take a dive deep into the world of Elizabeth I.

Anouska: So far we've looked at Elizabeth's journey to the throne, how her Government worked, and the religious tensions she was trying to sort out.

Alice: It was really important that Elizabeth had the support of the people around her, and that her subjects respected her. So in this episode we're exploring Elizabeth's image and how she controlled the way in which people viewed her.

Anouska: Let's look back quickly and go over some of the problems Elizabeth faced whilst she was Queen.

Alice: When Elizabeth became Queen in 1558, people talked. They said that women were weak and that Elizabeth wouldn't be a strong ruler because she was a woman.

Anouska: Which, as we all know...is simply not true. What else were people saying about her Alice?

Alice: Well, they said that her government had run out of money, which to be fair, was true. Mary I had left Elizabeth with a debt of £250,000, which is about 120 million pounds today.

Anouska: Ooh, that must have stung. Some people were also claiming that she had no right to be queen because her parent's wedding was illegal.

Alice: So Anouska, the bottom line is, Elizabeth had a bit of work to do in order to gain respect and trust from her country, didn't she?

Anouska: Clearly she did, but she also understood the need to create the right image, and she had some ideas of how she could present herself as a strong monarch and win people over. The first step was her coronation...which took place in London on the 15 January 1559. Elizabeth really wanted to hit the ground running, and create a strong first impression.

Alice: This would've been the very first time people saw her as Queen, right?

Anouska: Exactly and you only have one chance at a first impression. So the coronation was a lavish, grand affair. She travelled by boat along the River Thames, and two days later, there was a procession through the streets of London and a ceremony at Westminster Abbey.

Alice: Pretty impressive. And despite having that huge debt, the coronation cost a whopping £16,000 which would have been about 7 million pounds today.

Anouska: Yeesh!

Alice: So that really just shows just how much she wanted to impress people and look really powerful.

Anouska: We would call this an act of propaganda - she was putting out a very considered image of herself, in order to gain support.

Alice: Right, now propaganda is a really important term for this topic, so you might want to pause and write that one down.

Anouska: I'm think we should write a definition for it too?

Alice: Good idea so here we go, pens at the ready. Propaganda is communication that is primarily used to influence or persuade an audience.

Anouska: And there was one method of propaganda that Queen Elizabeth I was particularly known for.

Alice: If you've ever gone to a museum...you've probably noticed those big old paintings of important people hanging on the walls, aka portraits. And Queen Elizabeth I loved them.

Anouska: Sounds a bit like me with my selfies!

Alice: Well you might have more in common with Elizabeth than you think! Tell me Anouska, why is it that you post your selfies?

Anouska: Erm... I guess other than it being a bit of fun, I kind of want to show people my hottest self, so they'll think the best of me?

Alice: Well, you've hit the nail on the head there, it was exactly the same for Elizabeth. She used her portraits to show everyone that she was a strong and powerful queen.

Anouska: I guess you could say that people use selfies today to build a brand too, Elizabeth I was kind of like an influencer. The details in her portraits fed into the brand of Elizabeth I and the legacy that she wanted to leave.

Alice: I wonder what a conversation between Elizabeth I and one of her royal portrait artists would have been like?

Anouska: Yeah, I bet she had a lot of ideas - let's hear an imagined conversation now.

Alice: And it's worth having a search online for some of Elizabeth's portraits whilst you listen. Her most famous paintings include the Armada Portrait, the Coronation Portrait and my favourite one, the Rainbow Portrait.

Elizabeth: Okay, sit down. We have some important things to discuss.

Artist: Yes your majesty.

Elizabeth: People are saying a lot of things about me, and I need to prove them wrong. Firstly, I've inherited some debt, so you need to make me look like a rich ruler.

Artist: Yes Marm, I can include rubies, diamonds and pearls in your hair.

Elizabeth: Good, good.

Artist: Your dress will look splendid - people will know it's made of silk. And I'll include expensive items like feathers from a foreign bird, or a jewelled crown on the table beside you.

Elizabeth: Ah, perfect! A lot of people are underestimating me because I'm a woman. So it's also extremely important that you make me look like a strong ruler.

Artist: Absolutely. We could include some globes in the image, maybe showing a map of Tudor Britain. And you'll look very serious, so people know you're in control.

Elizabeth: Brilliant! That way we show England is an important nation and I am the one ruling it.

Artist: How about I add a crown, and a sceptre - a gold stick that tells people you have the right to rule as queen. And we'll dress you in royal robes to remind people you are royalty by blood.

Elizabeth: Oooh this is going to be good!

Alice: It might be a good idea to rewind that fictionalised conversation between Elizabeth and her artist. And whilst listening, it's worth picking out some of those key elements in her real portraits.

Anouska: Yep, good idea Alice. Analysing sources, like Elizabeth's portraits, is a key skill at GCSE. There will be things that we didn't include, so use your own analysis skills as well.

Alice: When analysing portraits and their accuracy, we need to remember that the Queen had a bit of an agenda here. She wanted people to see her in a certain way. It's a bit like the way that we use filters today – perhaps you might touch up your photos.

Anouska: Exactly, if a portrait was created in 1600, we know Elizabeth would have been in her 60s, does she look like that in her picture?

Alice: Well, if she doesn't, it's probably because she wants to look like a strong female ruler, and maintain her image as the pure Virgin Queen. And looking younger than her actual age, for the Tudors, would have achieved that.

Anouska: Elizabeth had the power to reject portraits if she didn't like them, and there's evidence of her privy council destroying unflattering pictures, so artists were inclined to make her look as good as possible.

Alice: Were there any other ways that Elizabeth used propaganda during her reign?

Anouska: Yes there were. The queen and her Royal Court would go on tours of the country every year, usually in the summer. These were called Royal Progresses. So she'd turn up to the houses of wealthy nobles, alongside her entire Royal Court, and expect to be entertained.

Alice: Wow – that's a lot of pressure. It's like forcing someone to host a massive party or a festival. Presumably all of this was pretty expensive?

Anouska: Exactly, these nobles would have to provide top notch hospitality for the queen. This was their chance to impress her. We're talking full-on banquets every night, as well as entertainment. They'd be expected to provide gifts for her as well.

Alice: And I guess these nobles would need big houses to host all of these people?

Anouska: Definitely. These progresses encouraged nobles to build grand stately homes. Imagine, they'd need to host the entire Royal court, which was a thousand people, as well as hundreds of wagons filled with Elizabeth's belongings.

Alice: All of this was considered a great honour, but it was also a bit of a hindrance - the hosts would often go into debt with the expense of the trip.

Anouska: So why did Elizabeth bother with these progresses?

Alice: Well, they were important. They allowed her to be seen by the people of England. Rather than always staying in her palace and making decisions behind closed doors, she was out and about, building relationships with her people and winning their loyalty.

Anouska: Ooh that's so clever! I imagine it saved her some money too if everything was paid for by hosts?

Alice: That's true. She didn't have to pay for feeding and housing her court whilst staying with the others. But it also helped prevent rebellions. When she visited a certain area, or a noble's house, it was a great honour for them and reminded them that they should be loyal to her.

Anouska: Elizabeth also controlled her image through speeches. In 1601, she made a speech to Parliament, later named her 'Golden speech' in which she showed just how much she loved her people. Let's have a little listen, this one is voiced by an actor.

Elizabeth: It is not my desire to live or reign longer than my life and reign shall be for your good. And though you have had, and may have, many mightier and wiser princes sitting in this seat, yet you never had, nor shall have, any that will love you better.

Alice: All of this fed into the cult of Gloriana, a movement that elevated Queen Elizabeth to the virgin goddess status.

Anouska: The name Gloriana comes from a poem called the 'The Fairie Queene' that was written in Elizabeth's honour to flatter her. It's one of her other nicknames.

Alice: Artists, like the ones who created her portraits, as well as musicians and authors, all contributed to this Gloriana status. And we'll talk much more about that in a later episode.

Anouska: As always Alice, I think we should end this episode with a quiz.

Alice: Great idea. Get ready to write down your answers. First question. Portraits were used as a tool by Elizabeth to promote the best version of herself. What's another word for this? I'll give you a hint here, it begins with a P. The answer is propaganda. Elizabeth was putting out a very carefully considered image of herself, even if it wasn't completely accurate, so that people would remain loyal to her.

Anouska: Question two. What do we call the summer tours Elizabeth went on with her Royal Court? The answer is, the Royal Progresses. Members of the nobility would host, feed, and entertain Elizabeth as well as the many members of her court.

Alice: And finally, what's the name of the famous speech Elizabeth gave to Parliament in 1601? The answer is, the Golden Speech. In it, she was extremely complimentary of

Parliament and her subjects. This was another way she could gain people's loyalty. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Bitesize History podcast.

Anouska: I loved diving into Elizabeth's use of portraiture and propaganda. But there's still so much to more to come!

Alice: Next episode, we'll look at life in Elizabethan England. And you can listen to all the episodes of the Elizabeth I series, and the other History series, by searching for Bitesize on BBC Sounds.

Anouska: But for now, bye Lizzie Legends!

Alice: See you next time.