

Ordinary Life in Elizabethan and Jacobean England

Shakespeare was born in a small market town. His mother had grown up in the countryside nearby. Life on a farm was very dependent on the seasons. Most people worked from dawn until dusk. They ploughed the fields, sowed crops, weeded them by hand, cut and gathered hay, looked after the animals, harvested the corn with sickles before threshing it and taking the grain to the local mill (usually a water-mill) to be made into flour. The only rest from work was on Sundays, when everyone had to attend church, and festivals.

Cows were kept for beef and leather, sheep for mutton and wool, and pigs for pork and bacon. Chickens were kept for eggs. Because grass does not grow in winter, only a small number of animals could be kept for breeding and fed on hay saved from the summer. The rest were slaughtered in the autumn. For that reason the only fresh meat in winter was wild animals, most of which were reserved by landowners for themselves. Meat could be salted, but the taste usually had to be hidden with herbs and spices. That was the reason spices were so expensive, and what prompted Columbus to look for new ways to India and the spice islands.

The most important food was bread, cooked in large bread ovens. Country people ate with a knife and their hands from wooden plates called trenchers. Butter and cheese were made from milk. Bees were kept to provide honey. Drinking water from wells could be dangerous, so everyone, including children, drank beer. Wine was available at the inn.

Most people had a bath at most twice a year, during the spring and autumn cleaning, when the rushes covering the floor were changed. Rich people used perfumes to smell better. There were beds, but servants slept on the floor. Clothes were kept in chests. The furniture was tables and benches or 'joint-stools'. Only the most important person in the house had a chair. Meat was cooked on a spit over the open fire, where a cooking pot could also be hung. Turning the spit was a servant's job. Light came from the fire or from a rush-light dipped in fat (which could be burned at both ends). Candles were only found in rich houses. Glass was still rare, so windows had wooden 'casements' which could be opened.

Rich people in large mansions could afford to give feasts and employ large numbers of servants. A popular hobby among rich people was still falconry: training hawks to catch small animals and birds. Shakespeare often uses the imagery of falconry.

In the town there were shops and various trades were carried out. To learn a trade you still had to become an apprentice and work for a master. In time you became a journeyman, who worked for a master in another town for a wage. Finally you could submit your 'masterpiece' to the trade guild and become a master yourself and set up your own business. The guilds still had considerable power.

If you wanted to travel you had to choose your moment carefully. The roads were not well maintained, and if it rained they could become impassable. It was easier to travel by water, along the rivers or round the coast. Only the rich could afford horses, or even an uncomfortable carriage.

In London, the roads were mostly paved, but very dirty. The dung from the animals fell in them, and people in the houses usually did not have an outside privy like those in the country (there were no bathrooms or toilets), so they threw the contents of their chamber-pots out of the window. A drain in the centre of the road carried all the rubbish down to the river when it rained. The stench in the city was appalling, so richer people moved further west (as the prevailing wind came from the West).

To make the space in their houses as large as possible, people in London built the upper storeys projecting over the street so that the houses were almost touching. This was a fire-risk, because the

wooden, thatched houses caught fire easily and the fire could spread quickly. In 1666, most of London, including St Paul's Cathedral, was completely destroyed by fire.

Diseases were common. The most feared was the plague, carried by rats and fleas. However, people thought it was carried in the air, and protected themselves with bunches of flowers. Typhoid and smallpox were also common, and syphilis was a widespread sexually transmitted disease.



It was easy to see a person's status from the way they dressed. There were strict rules forbidding people to wear certain types of clothes or materials unless they had a certain rank, but young men and women liked following the latest fashions, usually from Italy or France. Women wore gowns over stockings, petticoats and hooped skirts, sometimes with corsets or bodices to make their waists narrow. They wore ruffs around their necks and 'tires' (hats or bonnets) on their heads. Lower-class women wore simple caps. Men wore a doublet and hose with a cloak, also with a ruff and hat (often with a feather) or cap. Later the hose was replaced by breeches and the ruff by a collar. During James's reign, religious differences in dress became more prominent, with Puritans insisting on simple clothes in black, brown and white.



The Church of England was designed to allow people to believe almost anything they wanted, but increasing numbers of people either hoped for a return to the Catholic Church (the 'Papists', like those who organized the Gunpowder Plot of 1605) or wanted a more fundamentalist Protestantism (the 'Puritans', like those who sailed on the *Mayflower* in 1620). The Puritans were opposed to any entertainments, particularly theatre.

Women had no rights. They belonged to their fathers until marriage, and then to their husbands. It was rare for women to be given an education; it only happened if their parents believed in doing so and engaged a tutor for them. They could not attend school or university or join many guilds. They were expected to learn the skills of running a household and cooking. Some women set up small businesses or kept inns.

Anyone who refused to attend church could be fined. Fines were also used as punishments for most minor offences. Beggars and minor thieves could be whipped or put in the stocks (where their arms or legs were held between planks of wood and people could throw rotten food or dirt at them). Debtors could be kept in prison until they or their family paid. More serious offences were punished by public hanging. Noblemen had the privilege of being beheaded instead. There was a tradition of being allowed to make a public speech before execution, which is still alive in the tradition of being allowed to say what you like at Speaker's Corner or Tower Hill. The worst form of punishment was hanging, drawing and quartering for treason. The victim was hanged, then cut down while still alive, cut open and had his entrails burnt before the arms, legs and head were cut off and displayed in various places as a warning.

Although differences in social class were very important, during Shakespeare's lifetime there was considerable social mobility, and people could rise or fall in society according to their economic circumstances. Shakespeare's father, a wool-merchant and glove-maker, was quite wealthy when Shakespeare was born, and rose to hold several offices in the town. However, his business declined and he fell on hard times, while Shakespeare made large sums of money in the theatre, so that he was able to buy the largest house in Stratford with various pieces of land, and to pay for a family coat of arms to become a 'gentleman'. Other people, particularly in sea-ports like London and Bristol, made money from the new overseas trade, as new products like sugar and tobacco became popular.

[Michael Mitchell]