

Elizabethan Life for a Middle Class Townsperson

Introduction: There was no formal middle class at this time period. There was the nobility/gentry and the lower classes. However, many merchants and townfolk were becoming so wealthy via trade and services that they could ape the manners of the upper class and enjoy many of the same luxuries. So they started to develop their own habits and characteristics different from that of poorer folk or higher class. The more luxurious living conditions similar to those of the nobility were accompanied by the conservative morals and thrifty nature of self-made men who had come up from simpler beginnings. The Statute of Apprentices in 1563 mandated that all persons except gentlemen, scholars and landowners must choose a trade from the crafts, the sea or agriculture. Industrial districts began to develop and many farmers were driven by enclosure of the open lands to move to industrial and trade centers for work.

Lifestyle: Thanks to the changes wrought by her father Henry VIII, Elizabeth I was the leader of the English Church and the central figure of an Elizabethan's religion. She was Queen by divine mandate from God and was the most important figure in their lives. When she sometimes went out into England to make progresses and meet her people, she was cheered and welcomed. Towns would plan elaborate masques and festivals in her honor.

Elizabethans were very superstitious and attracted to the fanciful and the occult. Charms and amulets were often worn. Signs and omens were taken seriously. Anything out of the ordinary could be taken as an omen—it was bad luck to hear a toad croak or an owl hoot. Many things could signal an impending death, like blood dripping three times from a nose, a red or bloody moon. Remedies were often based on folk tradition—tumors could be removed by stroking with a corpse's hand. Feeding on snakes could restore your youth.

Religion: Church services were mandated on Sundays and festivals. Morning services in the church began at 7:00am, and sometimes at 5:00am in schools and cathedrals. Psalms and lessons or readings were following by communion followed by a sermon and a psalm. Infants were baptized after the morning service—an infant must be baptized within the first month after birth or his/her parents were fined. Afternoon service was at 2:00pm with psalms, lessons and a sermon, and catechism for young folks over six and under the age of 20. A good subject went to evening services as well. Communion was not given to those who did not know their catechism and ten commandments. Communion was required at least three times a year.

Education: Both public and private schools were becoming more and more available for the lower and classes who could not afford private tutors. Merchant guilds would sometimes sponsor the school fees of poorer students. Wealthy tradesmen might endow a school to show gratitude for their success. The early school for small children was called a peggies or petty school. Though not everyone could write, more and more folk were learning to read and the literacy rate of the populace was rising. Like now, those of the lower classes could use education to better their lot in life and create opportunities.

Living Conditions: In cities and towns, homes were usually built of timber and plaster. The merchant's shop was in the front part of the house on the ground level, with the rest of the house serving as the merchant's residence. Sometimes, temporary booths might be set up by doors and windows to draw shoppers within. The main, largest room in a wealthy home was the hall, where gatherings took place and meals were taken. There may have been a separate room for women to gather and do needlework or play music, called a bower or withdrawing room. Privacy was nonexistent—rooms opened into one another and were not the modern convention of doors opening on a hallway. Often, wooden floors were covered with carpets or strewn with rushes. Homes could be heavily ornamented with plasterwork, tapestries or cloth hangings, wainscoting/paneling, paintings and painted walls. Sometimes a posy might have been painted on the wall—a pithy saying or verse, like one recommended by Thomas Tusser who wrote a book called "*Good Husbandry*":

Hast thou a friend as heart may wish at will?
Then use him so to have his friendship still.

Toilette needs were made at home or purchased from the apothecary, such as balls of scented soap or a tooth rinse made of a quart of honey, a quart of vinegar and a pint of white wine.

Leisure activities: Elizabethan folk loved a good festival. There were regular fairs called ales, at which ale (the staple beverage of the time) was consumed heavily. For example, a Church Ale was often held to raise funds for decoration or repair of the church, and attendees may have contributed more than intended due to overindulgence. Like modern times, most public demonstrations were accompanied by fireworks. Also, Elizabethan folk loved a good practical joke, sometimes to the point of cruelty or bullying by modern standards, like tossing in a blanket or Dun in the Mire (played with ropes and a log of wood but where participants often arranged for the log of wood to fall upon each others toes during the game).

Elizabethan folk also loved group sports such as football, balloon ball (large leather ball pushed about either with hands or a short wooden paddle); stow-ball or bandy-ball (golf); tennis; trap-stick or trap-ball (ball struck out of a trap with a small paddle and batted before reaching the ground); and barley-break a/k/a “The Last Couple in Hell.” This last game was played by six people, three of each gender, coupled up at random. The playing field was divided into three compartments, with the middle one called hell. The couple placed in this section moved to catch the other couples bound by various rules and the game was over when all couples had been caught and placed in hell. Elizabethans also loved music, both instrumental and vocal, and dancing. The higher orders and those trying to imitate them like the upper middle class were fond of Italian and French dances. Most other folks were fond of country dances and even the nobles would sometimes do country dances at court.

Food: Elizabethan meals were prepared in a number of ways, including spit roasting, baking, boiling, frying, salting/preserving and smoking. The staple beverage was ale but the wealthy and upper classes also drank wine. Basic foods for all classes were bread, fish and cheese. Those who could afford it ate meat such as lamb, beef, mutton, pork, veal, rabbit, and fowl. Commonly eaten vegetables were turnips, parsnips, carrots, onions, leeks, garlic and radishes were also eaten. Sometimes fruits were added to the meal such as apples, pears, plums, cherries and strawberries. Forks were just being introduced from Italy during this time, so they were not used much until later in history. You cut up your food with your own eating knife and ate it with your fingers or with a spoon. Elizabethans also had a real sweet tooth and loved desserts such as pastries, tarts, crystallized fruit and marzipan, called marchpane and fashioned into decorative edible displays.

Clothing: Clothing was governed by sumptuary laws listing what you could wear depending on such factors as land ownership or annual income, but the middle class loved to push the envelope. They would wear many of the same fashions as the nobility but with less dear fabrics and simpler trims. Elizabethans loved bright colors and had many descriptive names for colors such as gooseturd green (yellow green), dead spaniard (pale grey tan), orange tawney (orange brown), incarnate (red), lusty gallant (vivid red) and maide’s blush (rose). Both men and women wore hats or headcoverings. Children dressed the same as the adults with simpler fabrics and fastenings.

Clothing was layered. A woman would start with a smock or shift, followed by her stockings, corset or boned petticoat or “petticoat bodyes,” farthingale, bumroll and petticoat. This would be followed by her kirtle or underskirt (with forepart if appropriate), her partlet when needed and her gown. Ruffs were common as well, stiffened with starch into figure-eight shapes and sometimes accented with blackwork embroidery. The working middle class might wear a corded petticoat rather than a farthingale for easier movement. Clothing would be heavily ornamented with embroidery or beadwork if time and wealth permitted. Sleeves were considered a separate garments and were attached to the gown via brass pins, laced or hooked onto the gown or sewn on as needed and then removed for storage. Clothing was worn into the ground, taken apart and remade or bought from or sold to vendors in the thriving used clothing market.

Bibliography

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