

History: Unit 2  
Lesson 24 of 30

# How did people's leisure time change during the Elizabethan period?



# The Theatre

## Description of activity

When Elizabeth I became queen there were no permanent theatres in the country. Plays based on the stories of the bible were popular but these were performed in public, not in purpose built spaces. Demand for this form of entertainment in the 16th century lead to the construction of permanent theatres in the Southbank area of London. Theatres such as the **Globe Theatre** were opened in 1599 and were capable of holding large audiences. Plays such as those written by **William Shakespeare** were performed by professional acting companies such as **The Queen's Men** who were often funded by wealthy **patrons** such as Elizabeth I.

## Participants in the theatre

The Theatre was a popular form of entertainment that was enjoyed by all social classes during Elizabeth's reign. However, your experience of the theatre was largely determined by your social class. The poorer types of people in Elizabethan society sat at the base of the stage in an area known as the 'pit' as tickets were cheaper. Those from the upper classes of society tended to buy more expensive tickets and sit in better seats in the 'galleries' which gave them a better view of the stage.



# Music and dancing

## Background

Due to the growth in the demand for the theatre, music also flourished as a popular form of leisure and entertainment during the Elizabethan era. New music was written to accompany the wide-ranging types of plays performed in Elizabethan theatres, such as tragedy and romance.

Knowledge of music was also a highly prized skill in Elizabethan society and as a result, music also formed an important part of the education of young men and women from noble families. More expensive instruments such as the lute and the harpsichord were common in noble households and musicians would play for these families when they attended feasts, banquets and celebrations. As a result, dancing also became very popular.

## Participants in music

People from all social classes enjoyed music in Elizabethan society. However, the times and places that they would enjoy it differed between them. Whilst those in the upper classes of society were more likely to enjoy music at feasts or at court, the lower classes were more likely to listen to music in public spaces like the **alehouse**, the fair or during popular festivals throughout the year.



# Spectator sports

## Background

Spectator sports became more popular during the Elizabethan era. A spectator sport is a sport that someone watches take place, rather than participates in.

One of the most popular types of spectator sports in Elizabethan England was **bear-baiting**. The sport involved a bear being lead into an arena and then chained up so it could not fully move. A pack of dogs would then be sent towards the bear to attack it. The practice continued until the bear had killed all or nearly all of the dogs. At the time, many spectators did not view this practice as 'cruel' and the popularity of it meant that many purpose built **bear-baiting** arenas were constructed throughout London. Another popular spectator sport involving animals was **cock-fighting**. **Cock-fighting** was when two cockerels were made to attack each other whilst wearing metal spurs on their beaks.

## Participants in spectator sports

Spectator sports like **bear-baiting** and **cock-fighting** were popular pastimes for all social classes in Elizabethan England. However, some **puritans** did disapprove of these sports, not because they were cruel, but because many of the fights were held on a Sunday, which **puritans** believed was a holy day of rest.



# Physical sports

## Background

A large variety of physical sports were played in Elizabethan England. However, the type of sport that was played was often dependent on your social class.

## Participants in physical sports

Noblemen and women enjoyed sports such as hunting and fishing. Noblemen also engaged in sports that were not seen as appropriate for women, such as fencing, archery, jousting and tennis. Sports such as swimming and wrestling were popular with men from all classes, although noblemen wrestled in private with men of their own social status, whereas men of a lower social class often wrestled in public while people betted on the outcome.

Football was a game that was popular with men of the lower classes. This was because it had a reputation as a violent game that often resulted in fighting and on a few occasions, death. Football was a very different game than it is today as there was a lack of rules that people had to follow.



# How did people's leisure time change during the Elizabethan period?

<b>Leisure activity</b>	<b>Description of activity and how it changed?</b>	<b>Who participated in this leisure activity?</b>
<b>Theatre</b>		
<b>Music and Dancing</b>		
<b>Spectator sports</b>		
<b>Physical sports</b>		



# How did people's leisure time change during the Elizabethan period?

Leisure activity	Description of activity and how it changed?	Who participated in this leisure activity?
<b>Theatre</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose built theatres were built in Elizabeth's reign.</li> <li>• Popular plays such as those from Shakespeare were performed in theatres like the Globe.</li> <li>• Professional acting companies were established.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All social classes enjoyed the theatre but where you sat in the theatre and your experience of it was determined by your social class.</li> </ul>
<b>Music and Dancing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Music developed due to the theatre and its importance in education.</li> <li>• All social classes enjoyed music.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The upper classes were more likely to experience music at feasts and celebrations whilst the lower classes were most likely to in public spaces, like the alehouse.</li> </ul>
<b>Spectator sports</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spectator sports such as bear-baiting and cock-fighting became more popular in Elizabethan England and purpose built arenas were constructed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All social classes enjoyed spectator sports.</li> <li>• Puritans objected to these spectator sports if they were played on a Sunday.</li> </ul>
<b>Physical sports</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A variety of physical sports such as archery, fencing, hunting, wrestling, tennis and football were popular in Elizabethan England.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some sports were enjoyed by men from all social classes, such as wrestling and swimming.</li> <li>• Football was more popular amongst the lower classes as it had a violent reputation.</li> <li>• Women participated in sports such as hunting and fishing.</li> </ul>



# Interpretation questions

1. What does Interpretation A say that would suggest Elizabethan England should be seen as a 'golden age'?
2. What examples can you think of that would support the view of Interpretation A?
3. What examples can you think of that may disagree with Interpretation A?
4. **Challenge question**: To what extent do you agree with the view in Interpretation A?  
Explain your answer.

## **Challenge question starters**

*I agree with Interpretation A to a (large, partial, small) extent...*

*One reason I believe this is because...*

*For example...*



# Interpretation A

*'The reign of Elizabeth I was a golden age for culture. Rich and poor alike were able to equally participate in the new leisure and entertainment opportunities. The forms of entertainment on offer such as the theatre, music and popular sport were enjoyed by everyone.'*



# Glossary

**The Globe Theatre** - A theatre built in 1599 by William Shakespeare's company of actors.

**William Shakespeare** - Famous English playwright whose plays were widely attended during Elizabeth's reign.

**The Queen's Men** - A company of actors which was established by Elizabeth's orders in 1593.

**Patrons** - Someone who supports someone/ something by providing them with money.

**Bear-baiting** - A form of entertainment within which a pack of dogs is set upon a bear which is chained up.

**Cock-fighting** - A form of entertainment within which two cockerels fight with metal spurs on their beaks.

**Puritans** - A more extreme type of Protestant.

**Alehouse** - A name given to a place where alcohol was served in the 16th century.

