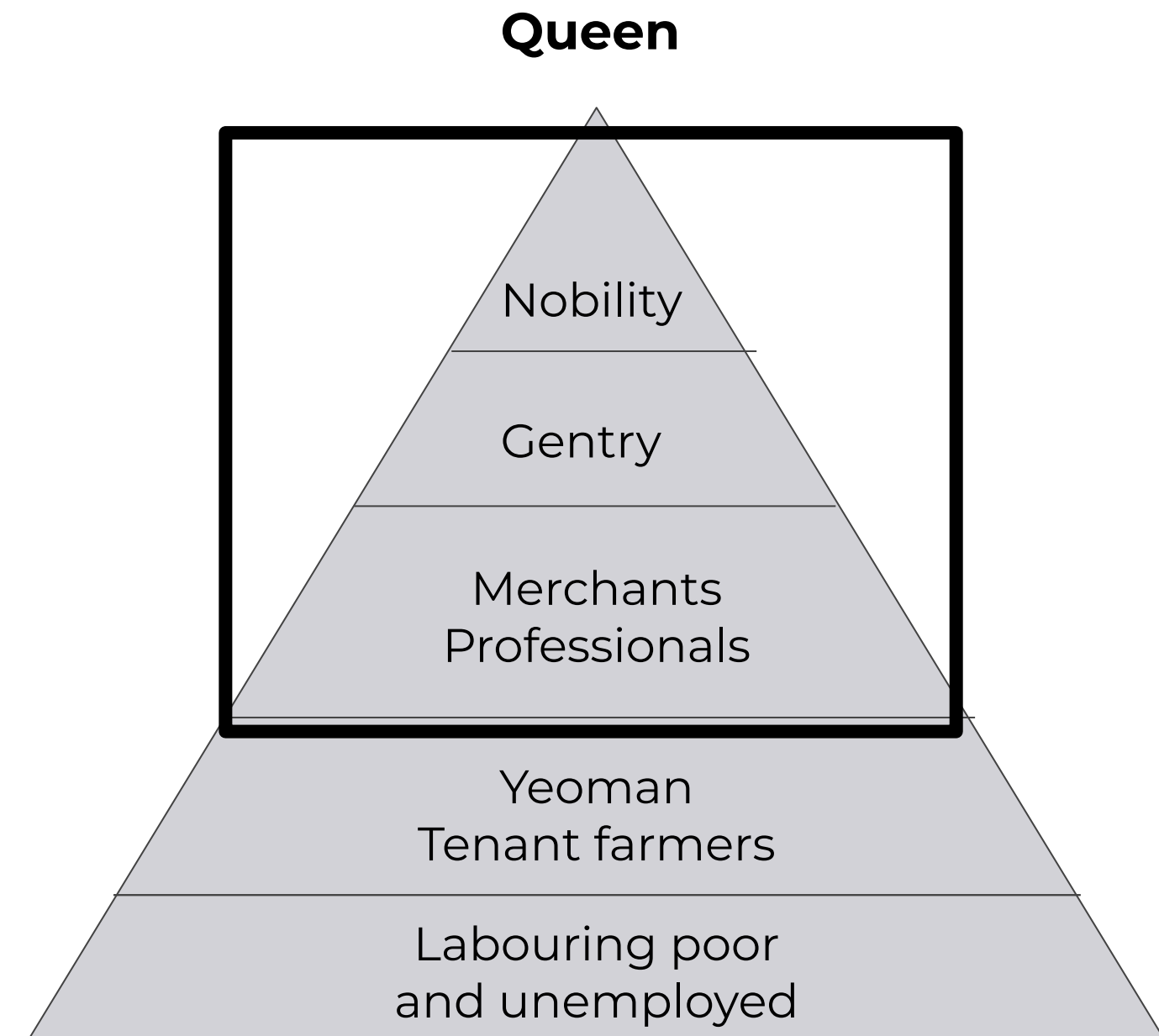# How was Elizabethan society structured and what challenges did it pose?

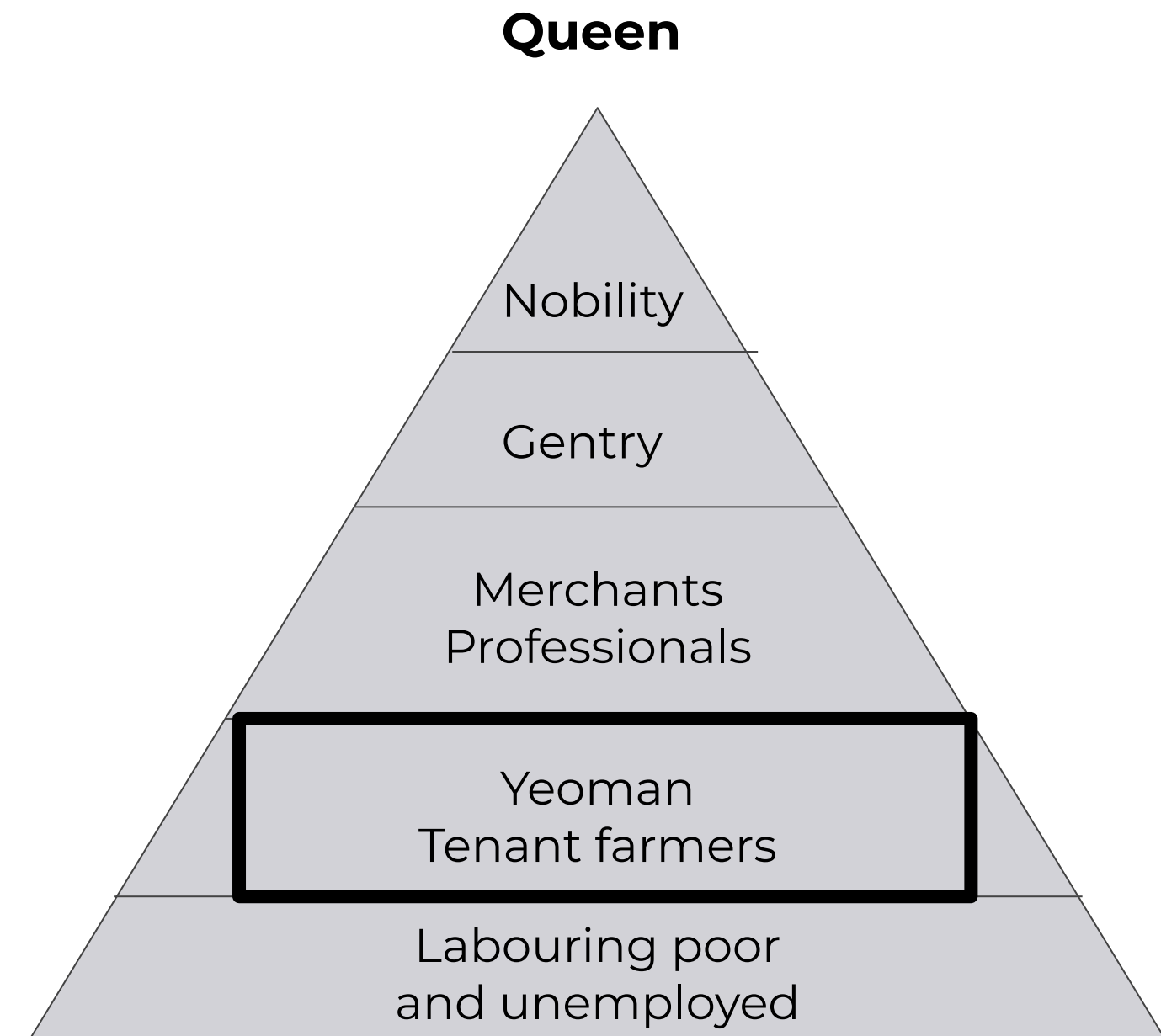# How was Elizabethan society structured? Part 1

Elizabethan society was very **hierarchical.** This meant that everyone in society fit into a particular class and had an assigned 'status' or position.

At the top of the hierarchy came the monarch, Queen Elizabeth, followed by a small group of wealthy and powerful families called the **nobility**, who owned land and titles such as 'Duke' or 'Earl'. This was followed by the **gentry** who also owned land but did not have titles. Below the gentry were the **merchants** who bought and sold goods. In this category were also **professionals** such as doctors and lawyers.

Queen

Nobility

Gentry

Merchants Professionals

Yeoman Tenant farmers

Labouring poor and unemployed
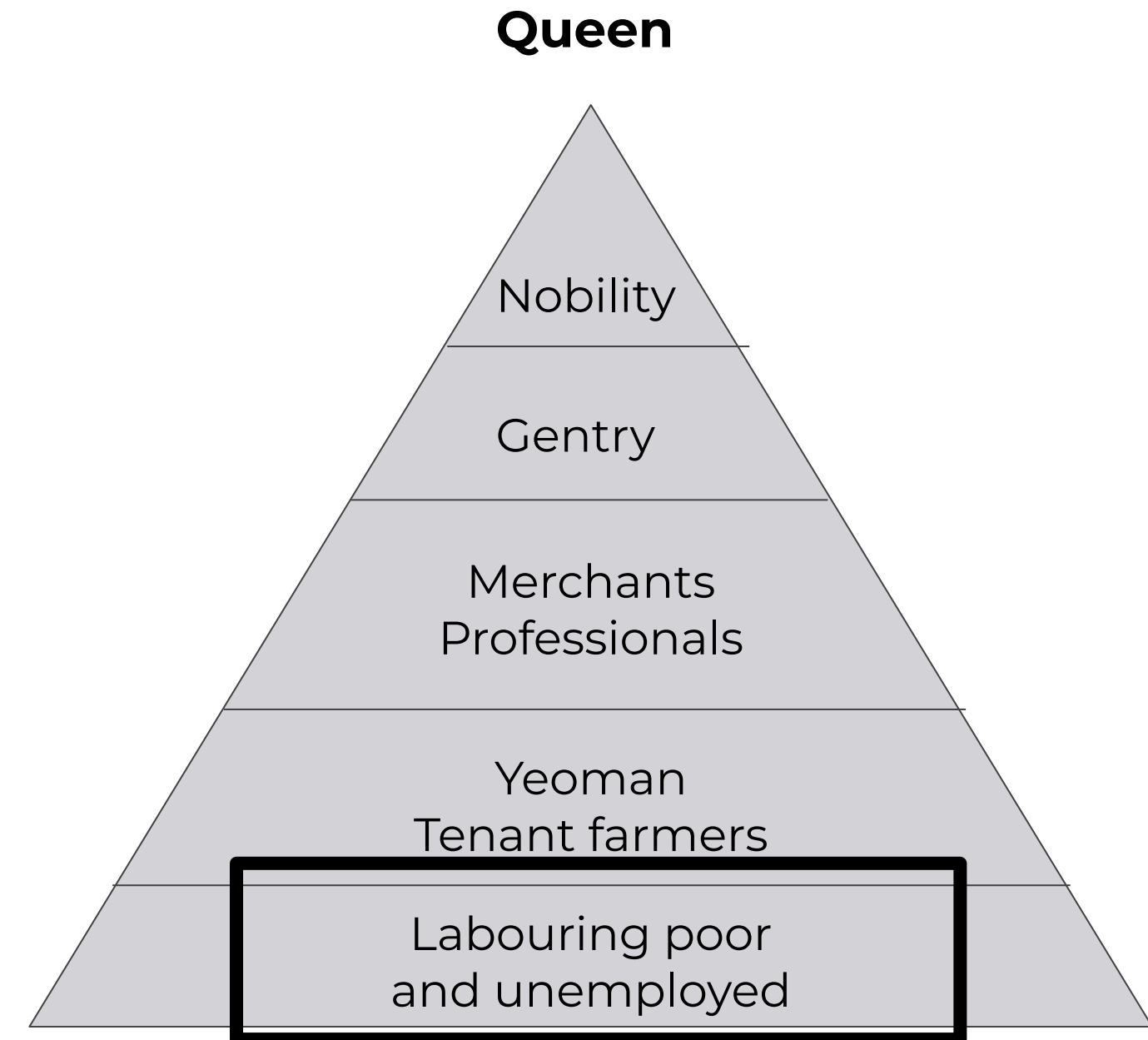
How was Elizabethan society structured? Part 2

As we go down the hierarchy you can see that each section of society gets bigger. This reflects the different amounts of people in each part of society, there were many more **yeoman** and **tenant farmers** than merchants and professionals. **Yeoman** owned their own property and farmed some land. **Tenant farmers** rented their land from the gentry and the nobility and farmed the land or used it to graze their animals. The hierarchy was based on a system of owing respect to those above you in the hierarchy, and caring for those below. Landowners were expected to look after their tenants.

Queen

Nobility

Gentry

Merchants
Professionals

Yeoman
Tenant farmers

Labouring poor
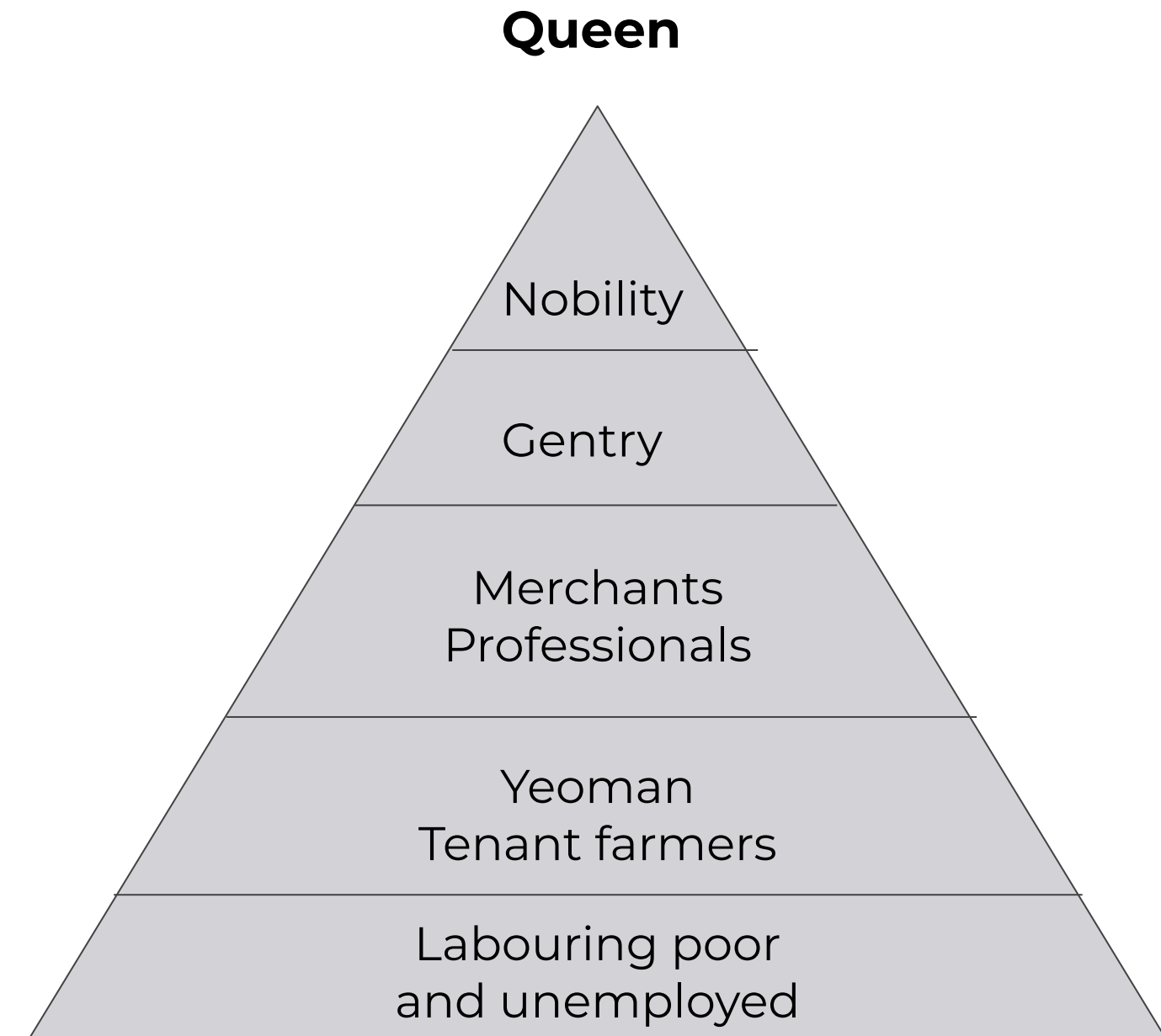and unemployed

How was Elizabethan society structured? Part 3

Finally, the largest group of people in Elizabethan society, but at the bottom of the hierarchy, were the **labouring poor.** They relied on seasonal work and low wages to try and make a living. They made up about half of all families in Tudor England.

There were also those who were **unemployed** and could not find work. During Elizabeth's reign, the population increased by nearly 50%, which meant there was more competition for work and food. **Poverty** therefore a huge issue in Elizabethan England.

Queen

Nobility

Gentry

Merchants
Professionals

Yeoman
Tenant farmers

Labouring poor
and unemployed

What challenges did Elizabethan society pose? Part 1

Although society was very structured and hierarchical, it had been difficult for previous monarchs to maintain order. English society in the sixteenth century was often a dangerous and violent place, and open rebellion could break out very easily. **There was no police force or permanent army**. Therefore, the unequal structure of society was important for maintaining law and order.

Queen

Nobility

Gentry

Merchants
Professionals

Yeoman
Tenant farmers

Labouring poor
and unemployed

What challenges did Elizabethan society pose? Part 2

The Nobility

The nobility represented a small but powerful group of families. Many members of the nobility were **courtiers.** This meant that they attended Elizabeth's court and often had positions of power within the Elizabethan government. Elizabeth could reward loyal members of the nobility with land and titles in different parts of England - this was known as **patronage.** In return, the noble families were expected to maintain law and order in the area of the country that they controlled. For example, the Duke of Norfolk would be responsible for a part of England called Norfolk. Members of society who lived in a particular region would be expected to show respect to their 'Lord' in return for their care and support.

However, this could mean that members of the nobility had the power to raise an army of people from their area of control against Elizabeth if they should choose to. The previous Tudor monarchs had purposely granted few titles and tried to exclude them from government so they did not become too powerful.

What challenges did Elizabethan society pose? Part 3

The Gentry

The gentry did not have titles like the traditional nobility, so their status and power was based on their wealth. This class of people grew hugely in Elizabeth's reign. They grew in importance in government, with key members of Elizabeth's council coming to dominate Elizabeth's **privy council.** This was a group of her most trusted advisors who helped to run the country on a day-to-day basis. They often competed for power and other forms of **patronage,** such as a particular position or role.

What challenges did Elizabethan society pose?

Tenant farmers, professionals, labouring poor and unemployed

The groups within the 'bottom half' of society's hierarchy had little power and influence. They relied on those above them to provide them with land on which they could work. However, as mentioned previously, there was no permanent police force or army to enforce the law. Many people within these groups could potentially be recruited into a rebel army.

In addition, there was not an effective system to support the poorest members of society. This meant that **vagrancy** increased during Elizabeth's reign, meaning that those who were unemployed often turned to begging and theft. As a result, they could be punished or imprisoned by the local authorities.

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Glossary

Hierarchy - a system in which members of society are ranked according to their status

Nobility - a group of powerful, wealthy and titled landowners

Gentry - a middling group in Elizabethan society whose status was based on wealth

Merchant - a person involved in business or trade

Tenant farmers - individuals who would rent land from a landlord and grow crops or graze animals on the land. They could sell the produce that they made.

Labouring poor - those who worked with their hands and often did not have a regular income

Questions

1. How can historians describe the structure of Elizabethan society?
2. Why was maintaining this social structure important for Elizabeth in the sixteenth century?
3. Which individuals / groups in the structure could potentially pose a challenge to Elizabeth? Why?
4. Which groups in the structure could potentially help Elizabeth? Why?

Challenge yourself: Why was the nobility potentially the most supportive <u>and</u> the most challenging group for Elizabeth?