

Knowledge Organiser: Elizabethan England, c1568-1603

(8) A 'Golden Age'

Key figures

William Shakespeare	The most celebrated playwright of all time. Shakespeare was the principal writer for the Lord Chamberlain's men, a theatre company. He wrote 38 plays including Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar and Twelfth Night.
Richard Burbage	One of the most celebrated actors of the Elizabethan period. As a leading member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, he was the first to play many famous roles including Hamlet and King Lear.

Key terms

Great Chain of Being	Elizabethan society was based on the Great Chain of Being. God is at the top, followed by his angels. Human beings are beneath, followed by animals and plants. There were subdivisions of humans: the monarch at the
Nobility	Most powerful and usually wealthiest; held titles that were passed from father to son; held the most senior
Gentry	Often wealthy landowners; held important positions like JP; might be richer than some nobles but still below them in society.
Peasantry	The poorest members of society; worked as farm labourers; often struggled for work and the rising population made this even more of an issue.
Patron	Someone who funds the work of an artist or performing group.
Renaissance	The revival (rebirth) of European art and literature. It impacted Elizabethan England.
Pit	Where the ordinary people stood in the theatre to watch the performance.
Gloriana	The Elizabethan age was known as 'Gloriana' and was achieved through plays and festivals.



Elizabethan accomplishments

Buildings	The Elizabethans built many of the stately homes that still stand today, for example, Hardwick Hall. These houses were built to impress the queen and other nobles.
Art	Portraits became very popular and were much more than just representations of the sitters. They often included a lot of symbolism, for example, Elizabeth was painted with her hand on the globe to show her power.
Theatre	Theatre became hugely popular during the Elizabethan era. Many theatres were built and the period produced plays that are still performed and studied today.
Science and technology	There were some significant breakthroughs in navigation and astronomy. There were more effective printing presses allowed ideas to spread faster.
Literature	In addition to plays, poetry became very popular. Shakespeare wrote many sonnets.
Education	Education was seen as increasingly important during Elizabeth's reign. Although still focused on wealthy boys, some girls also received a limited education.
Exploration	Europeans discovered new lands and peoples, and England began to become a major power at this time.
Peace, power and pride	Before Henry VII became king, England had spent many years in chaos with different men claiming the throne. Elizabeth's long reign established peace and order, while military success and the country's growing wealth also made people proud to be English.

Exam questions:

1. Explain what was important about the 'Great Chain of Being' in Elizabethan society. (8 marks)
2. Explain what was important about Elizabethan theatre. (8 marks)

Key questions

Was it really a 'golden age'?

- The phrase 'golden age' is used to describe a time of great achievement. There is certainly no doubt that the Elizabethan era saw new ideas and accomplishments.
- However, some argue it is a myth and England was the same brutal place. Blood sports continued to be popular, and the population remained very much divided. A small minority were rich but more people were very poor.
- Life expectancy was low and illnesses that would not kill us today were lethal.

What was it like to be wealthy in Elizabethan England?

- Two groups made up the wealthier members of Elizabethan society: the nobility and the gentry.
- The highest noble title was duke and their average income was £6000 per year (equivalent to about £1 million today).
- The gentry were the landlords of the countryside. They lived off the rents of their tenants and could earn up to £200 per year (£34,000 today).
- Rich Elizabethans were proud to show off their wealth and often built fine houses.
- The richest often held banquets and fashion was important. Women whitened their faces and men and women wore a ruff around their neck.

How were theatres transformed in the Elizabethan period?

- From 1572 actors had to be licensed and this led to actors forming companies to perform in purpose-built theatres, the first to open in 1576/
- The Globe Theatre opened in 1599 where Shakespeare made his name.
- Theatre became very popular. It was exciting and a social event. Prices varied so everyone could afford to go. The rich sat in tiered galleries which had roofs. In the centre was an unroofed pit where the poor stood.
- The Queen never went to the theatre. Actors performed for her at Court.
- London theatres faced opposition: some saw it as sinful, Puritans saw theatregoing as a distraction from prayer, theatres were dangerous places where there was drunkenness, crime and immoral behaviour.

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