

# Knowledge Organiser: Elizabethan England, c1568-1603

## (9) The poor in Elizabethan England



Key terms	
Pauper	The poorest members of society who were unable to find work.
Retinue	A group of advisors or guards (i.e. private armies) accompanying a private person.
Reformation	The split of Protestantism from the Catholic Church. The English Reformation refers to Henry VIII's break with Rome.
Enclosure	An area surrounded by a barrier.
Rack renting	When landlords unfairly increased rents.
Inflation	A currency becoming worth less, shown through rapidly rising prices.
Deserving poor	People who were poor through no fault of their own; the old, the sick or wounded or people who tried hard to find work but were not able to.
Undeserving poor	Dishonest poor people who tried to trick others out of their money.
Almshouse	Charity building set up to provide food and rest for the poor.
House of Correction	Where beggars would be forced to spend the night as punishment.
Flogged	To be whipped, a punishment used for begging and other crimes.
Vagrant	A person without a settled home or work who wanders and lives by begging.

Causes of poverty in Elizabethan England	
Population growth	The population of England rose by 43% from 1550 to 1600. There were fewer jobs to go round and increased demand for food in turn increased food prices.
Inflation	Food prices rose more than wages due to rising population and bad harvests. Inflation was made even worse by monopolies and rent-racking.
War	Injured soldiers could not work. War also disrupted trade which added to inflation.
Bad harvests	Led to food shortages. This pushed up prices, especially in the 1590s. Some faced the threat of famine.
Enclosure	Good farming land had been fenced off for sheep grazing. Sheep farming employed fewer labourers than crop growing so some labourers lost their jobs and lost common land on which they used to graze animals or grow crops to feed their families.
Rents	Landowners increased rents paid by the poor. This was known as rent-racking.
Closure of monasteries	Monasteries had previously helped the poor when they hit hard times but they had all been closed by Henry VIII.

Types of poor in Elizabethan England	
Helpless poor	The sick and old who were provided with food to live on and placed in special home where they were cared for.
Able-bodied poor	Those who were considered fit, including children, were expected to work. They were given food and drink as payment.
Idle poor	Those who were seen as lazy were whipped and then sent to a House of Correction where they would be forced to

Key questions
<p><u>How had the Tudors attempted to deal with poverty?</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Henry VIII and Edward VI passed laws to try to deal with poverty, but not only did the problem remain, it grew more serious.</li> <li>From 1495 beggars were punished in the stocks or sent back to their home towns.</li> <li>From 1531 beggars were publicly whipped, those caught a second time would have a hole burned in their ear and a third offence would mean they were hanged.</li> <li>The 1576 'Act for settling the poor on work' placed the responsibility on local authorities.</li> </ul>
<p><u>How did different towns and cities deal with poverty?</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>London:</b> Bridewell Palace was used as a shelter for the homeless. Bedlam hospital was built to house the mentally ill. Other hospitals were opened for the sick and orphans but conditions were poor as institutions couldn't cope with the growing numbers coming to the city.</li> <li><b>York:</b> In 1515, the city authority issued beggar licenses. From 1528, a Master Beggar was appointed to keep order.</li> <li><b>Ipswich:</b> Introduced a licensing system for beggars from 1569. Opened a hospital for the sick and old.</li> <li><b>Norwich:</b> After a survey shows 80% of the population lived in poverty, the authorities separated the poor into the 'idle poor' and 'unfortunate poor'.</li> </ul>
<p><u>How effective were the Poor Laws?</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In 1601, the first ever Poor Law was introduced. It stated that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⇒ The wealthy should be taxed to pay for the care of the sick and old.</li> <li>⇒ Fit and healthy paupers should be given work.</li> <li>⇒ Those who refused work should be dealt with harshly.</li> </ul> </li> <li>The poor were categorised into three groups (see 'Types of poor...')</li> <li>Over the following few years instances of begging did seem to decrease but this may have been as much due to the threat of the House of Correction as the increased help available.</li> <li>Some historians argue the law was unsuccessful because it made each area responsible for its own paupers and some were passed from place to place.</li> </ul>

Exam questions:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain what was important about the problems of poverty in Elizabethan England. (8 marks)</li> <li>Write an account of how the Poor Law system changed under Queen Elizabeth I. (8 marks)</li> </ol>

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