

# ELIZABETHAN LONDON

RUPERT COLLEY



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ElizabethanLondon\_



## Queen Elizabeth I's coronation

### Elizabethan London

London. What words can we use to describe London? Crowded, polluted, smelly, dirty, dangerous? Perhaps. But it's also exciting, fun, colourful, and vibrant. It's the centre of our cultural and financial life. The heart of the nation. If you asked Londoners what they thought of the city back in 1600, they probably would have used very similar words. Elizabethan London was just as crowded and just as dangerous. But it was just as exciting and vibrant.

On 15 January 1559, the people of London, braving the cold and the rain, turned out in their thousands. There were festivals and celebrations throughout the country, and especially in the capital. It was the day of Queen Elizabeth I's coronation. Rich and poor crowded the streets of London, whooping and cheering, hoping to catch a glimpse of their new monarch. The crowning of the 25-year-old queen was, they hoped, the beginning of a new, golden era.

The new queen emerged from Westminster Abbey to a great noise of cheering, trumpets and the banging of drums.

On becoming queen, Elizabeth told her court:

*Though you have had, and may have,  
many princes more mighty and wise  
sitting in this seat, you never had nor  
shall have, any that will be more  
careful and loving.*

## Good Queen Bess

Elizabeth Tudor was born on 7 September 1533. Her father was King Henry VIII and her mother was his second wife, Anne Boleyn. Henry was desperate for a son to succeed him as king. So the birth of Elizabeth was a great disappointment. Henry had Anne executed in 1536. Elizabeth was two years old.

Henry died, aged 55, in January 1547. The next king was his son, Elizabeth's younger half-brother, Edward – even though he was only 9. Edward VI was a sickly child and died from a lung infection in 1553, aged only 15. His half-sister Mary Tudor then became queen. Mary was the daughter of Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon.

Henry VIII had turned England into a Protestant country. Mary made it Catholic again, remaining loyal to the 'old church' and the pope. Mary Tudor forced Protestant priests to give up their faith or else suffer a painful death. Some 300 of them were burned at the stake. As a result, Mary I is remembered by history as 'Bloody Mary'.

Mary died childless in 1558, and her half-sister Elizabeth became queen. She was affectionately known as the 'Good Queen Bess'.

Elizabethan England was a Protestant country once again, but there were still many Catholics who were prepared to fight and die for their beliefs. On becoming queen, Elizabeth was named the 'Supreme Governor' of the Protestant Church of England. During her reign, a leading Catholic found guilty of plotting against the queen would be executed. But Catholics were not executed simply for being Catholic. Elizabeth was happy for Catholics to practise their beliefs in private – as long as they did nothing to threaten the safety of the nation and its people.

# London

London during Elizabeth's reign was, roughly, where the City of London is today. It was a built-up area either side of the River Thames, the 'great highway of London'. The river was always busy – with boats, sailing ships, ferries and barges laden with goods to sell and barter. There was only one bridge crossing the river – London Bridge. Otherwise, you had to hop on a small boat taxi that ferried people from side to side all day long.

Richer people lived on the north side of the river, the poor on the south. Often, people crossing the river would see convicted men chained to the banks. Three times a day the tide would wash over them, soaking them with the Thames' filthy water. But these men were criminals – no one felt sorry for them. More gruesome still were the severed heads on display on London Bridge – a dire warning against breaking the law. There were many stalls and fine buildings on the bridge, while underneath, the watermen were busy hiring out boats .

London was an overcrowded city of narrow, cobbled streets. The streets were lined by tall buildings with thatched roofs, high chimneys and overhanging first floors. They had no drainage and no sewage system. Instead, people threw the contents of their chamber pots out of their windows. Rotting food and human waste ran down the narrow streets. Birds took away the worst of the scraps, while heavy rain washed the excrement into the Thames. Fleet River, which flowed through the city, was an open sewer.

Stray dogs ran everywhere. Londoners didn't like them – fearing they carried the plague. Dog catchers were employed to kill and dispose of them.

London's skyline was dominated by St Paul's Cathedral, originally built many centuries before. (The St Paul's we see today was built in the years following 1675, after the original was destroyed during the Great Fire of London of 1666.)

# Population and immigration

There were 2.8 million people in England when Elizabeth became queen in 1558. When she died in 1603, after 44 years on the throne, the nation's population had grown to 4.1 million. The population of London had grown from about 120,000 to 200,000 (about the size of modern-day York). The nation had also become more urban. In the 1550s, only about 5 per cent of people lived in cities and towns. By 1603, this figure was nearer to 15 per cent. People could expect to live to about the age of 40.

London was not a healthy place during Elizabeth's reign. Every year, more people died in the capital than were born. But London's population increased because of people moving in from the countryside and abroad. People came from the countryside, either because they hoped to make their fortune, or because they were driven by hunger. But there were few jobs and few homes for them. Most remained homeless. Many had no choice but to turn to crime or begging (which itself was a crime).

'Justices of the Peace' (JPs) were appointed. Their duty was to 'uphold the Queen's peace'. They made sure people went to church on Sundays and that vagabonds, or tramps, were not hanging around on the streets. It was also their job to oversee services for the poor. From 1601, they also had to collect taxes, called the 'Poor Rate', from the richer households to pay for services for the poor in their parish.

The poor were divided into one of three types. First, there were the 'deserving poor'. These were the old, the crippled and the sick. The JPs made sure they were looked after with handouts. If they were homeless, they'd be housed in a poorhouse. These were fairly grim but much better than nothing. Children of the deserving poor were given jobs as apprentices – so at least they could learn a trade and start their adult life with a skill.

Second, there were the 'able-bodied poor'. These were people who wanted to work but couldn't find jobs. Often, they were put to work in a workhouse where they could earn a small wage paid out of the Poor Rate. There they stayed until they got themselves a 'proper' job.

Then, third, there were the 'undeserving poor' – beggars, vagabonds and criminals.

These were people who didn't want to work. They, not surprisingly, got nothing. In fact, they were likely to be punished. The folk who came to London from the countryside were certainly classed as 'undeserving'. They faced being severely whipped (in public), or having a hole burnt through their ear. Then they were sent back to the village they'd come from. People who kept on with a life of crime and begging risked prison and, in rare cases, hanging.

Even back then, London had a small number of people from abroad – mainly from Africa. The 'Moors' from north Africa, the 'Blackamoors' from the west coast and the 'Ethiops' from central Africa. These people were not slaves. Although the English had just started trading in slaves, slavery within England was not permitted. Such people usually worked as servants, entertainers or musicians. There are a few records of Africans marrying native Londoners.

One of Shakespeare's most famous characters, Othello, was a black moor. Although Elizabeth had at least one black person working for her, she became concerned about the number of 'Negars and Blackamoors' that had 'crept' into England. They were, she said, 'infidels,

with no understanding of Christ or his Gospel'. In 1596 and again in 1601, she ordered them to be deported. But little happened, and they stayed.

Most foreigners in London came from Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. There were also a number of French Protestants (called Huguenots). If they stayed in France they risked being killed by the French Catholics.

These foreign-born immigrants enjoyed the same benefits as Englishmen. They were allowed to set up as tradesmen and were protected by law. But they were not allowed to hold positions of power, so they couldn't become aldermen (local councillors), for example. They were victims of prejudice. The foreigners caused overcrowding, many Londoners said, and they committed most of the crime and undercut the wages of honest working Londoners. They were blamed for the rise in property prices: 'They take up the fairest houses in the city, divide them up, and take in lodgers and dwellers'.

# The Plague

With so many people coming to live in London, the numbers risked running out of control. The government might have worried about that. But they didn't have to. Frequent outbreaks of the plague kept the numbers down. Elizabethans everywhere, rich and poor, were terrified of the Bubonic plague, known as the 'Black Death'. And they had every reason to be. London was hit by the plague several times during Elizabeth's reign.

The biggest outbreak, in 1603, killed about 30,000 Londoners. They had no idea that the plague was spread by fleas that lived on rats. The government tried everything to prevent its spread. Ships arriving from abroad had to be held in quarantine for forty days. They lit bonfires at the ends of the streets to purify the air. But nothing worked.

If you or anyone in your house caught the fever, your house would be locked up from outside for twenty days with a big red cross painted on the front door. This meant no one could enter and no one could leave. And it meant almost certain death. There was no cure

for the plague – except to leave the city and escape. The rich often had a place in the country or country friends they could call on. But, for the poor, this was not an option.

Once infected, most people died. Only the rich could afford coffins. The dead were hauled onto carts, pulled through the streets, and their bodies were dumped into mass graves, called 'plague pits'. No funeral. No ceremony. Not the most dignified of ends.

## School and Education

Young boys, aged five to seven, went to what was called a 'petty' school and were usually taught by a patient housewife. There were good schools for middle-class boys, but schools for girls were less good. Boys were expected to speak Latin. School was free but you had to provide your own candles. Children were beaten (both at school and at home) – but that was expected.

The children of the rich were taught at home by personal tutors – men who charged a lot for their services. Boys were taught history, Latin, Greek, English, astronomy and Christianity. At the age of fourteen, most boys of the noble class went on to study at university. The girls were taught embroidery and housekeeping, and did not attend university.

The poor needed their children to work. Education was a luxury they couldn't afford.

Education improved during Elizabeth's reign. At the beginning, only about twenty per cent of Elizabethans could sign their name. By 1603, a third of males could read and write, but still only about one in ten females.

## Crime and Punishment

There was no police force in Elizabethan times. But there were 'watchmen'. Their job was to patrol the streets, keeping an eye out for trouble. The poorer parts of London had fewer watchmen, so it was best to avoid going out at night in the poorer areas.

There were plenty of prisons in Elizabethan London. Newgate, Bridewell and the Marshalsea were among the most famous and feared. Nobody wanted to end up in one of these places. Floggings, cruelty and bullying happened every day in Elizabethan prisons.

Punishments could be severe. A man risked being hanged for stealing even the smallest of things – a few eggs or potatoes. The idea was to deter would-be criminals. But it simply made criminals more desperate to avoid being caught.

If you criticised the queen or complained too loudly about the government, you risked being branded with a hot iron or having your ear cut off. This was because it was against the law to utter 'seditious' words.

The Elizabethans had a whole array of instruments with which to torture the truth from



people or execute them. Take, for example, the iron maiden. The victim would be made to stand inside this upright coffin-shaped box. There were spikes on the inside which would pierce the vital organs as the doors were closed. Other carefully placed spikes would get them in the privates and even in their eyes. The spikes weren't long – not out of kindness, but to ensure a slow and very painful death.

The rack was another instrument that was greatly feared. The victim would lie down and be stretched slowly and agonisingly until their bones dislocated. The victim would scream as their bones and ligaments popped. If a person's muscles are stretched too far, they never return to their original shape. So, those who did survive the rack were crippled for life. In extreme cases, the victim would have his limbs totally separated from his body.

Men and women accused of treason, of planning to overthrow the queen, for example, were sent to the Tower of London. Many innocent men confessed to treason rather than face torture. One of the most famous prisoners in the Tower was the queen herself. Before she became queen, her older half-sister, Mary Tudor, had her locked up for two months.

Noblemen and women found guilty treason were simply beheaded – usually on Tower Hill. Common traitors were taken to Tyburn or Smithfield where they faced a far more gruesome death – hung, drawn and quartered. The victims were hanged until they were almost dead. Then they had their penis and testicles cut off, and their ribcage cut open. They were then disembowelled and had their hearts ripped out. Lastly, they were beheaded and quartered – sliced into four. The four parts of the corpse would be put on public display. A favourite custom was to display the heads on spikes on London Bridge. And all this butchery was done in public. If the victim was lucky, a kind member of the crowd might rush the guards and pull them down by the legs while they were still hanging. Death by hanging was far preferable.

Up to 6,000 people were executed in London during Elizabeth's reign. This in a city of no more than 200,000 people.

Women without work often became prostitutes. Brothels had to have their doors painted white and the women were called 'Winchester geese'. But they faced harsh punishment if caught – often by the very men who used their services. The women risked

having their heads shaved and being carted round the city with a sign round their necks. Women who carried on working as prostitutes risked being whipped. Men risked getting syphilis. Indeed, Henry VIII was said to have died from it.

Elizabethans had some strange beliefs and were very superstitious. Many superstitions we have today come from the Elizabethan age – not walking under a ladder, for example, saying ‘Bless you’ when someone sneezes, or being wary of a black cat crossing your path.

They were also frightened of witches. Unmarried women were often suspected of witchcraft. Anne Boleyn, Queen Elizabeth’s mother, had been labelled a witch, and so the queen felt a little sorry for women accused of witchcraft. It didn’t stop her from agreeing to a new witchcraft law in 1563 but it was, at least, more forgiving than previous laws. Under the new law, accusers had to provide evidence that a woman had caused harm before she could be judged a witch and sentenced to death. And at least in England, witches were hanged. In France, for example, witches were burned at the stake. There were 270 witch trials during Elizabeth’s reign – 247 women and 23 men.

## Entertainment

Bear and bull-baiting were popular entertainments, drawing large, rowdy crowds. The unfortunate animal would be tied to a stake and snapped at by vicious dogs, usually mastiffs. For extra fun, the bear would be blinded and have its teeth broken.

For the entertainer, it was far easier to use bulls. They were easier to get hold of and, as soon as they were dead, the meat could be sold. But they weren’t as popular as bears. The problem with bears was that they were extinct in England by this time. So the entertainer had to import bears from northern Europe. And that wasn’t cheap – especially if the bear got killed too quickly. A dead bear was no good to anyone – not even Elizabethans fancied eating roasted bear! So they tried to keep the poor bear alive and fighting for as many ‘shows’ as possible.

Cock fighting and dog fighting also drew in the crowds.

Other, less cruel, entertainments included dancing, juggling, bowling and watching fireworks, which had only just been invented.

During winter, people skated on the frozen Thames, using animal bones as blades.

Then there was the theatre. There were over twenty theatres in Southwark alone, nestled among the many taverns, brothels, bear-baiting arenas and gambling joints. Elizabethan Londoners loved the theatre, although the city authorities were less keen. The authorities believed theatres corrupted the youth and attracted the wrong sort of people: ‘masterless men, thieves, horse stealers, whoremongers and other idle and dangerous persons’.

London was home to several world-famous playwrights – Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson and the most famous writer of them all – William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was born in 1564, 100 miles west of London (about four days by horse) in the market town of Stratford-upon-Avon. The world knows all about his famous plays (*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and many others), but we know very little about the man himself. Indeed, we’re not even sure of his exact date of birth. At some point, when he was in his twenties, like many a young man seeking his fortune, he moved to London.

At first he lived in Bishopsgate. He worked behind the scenes in various London theatres, did some acting and started writing. His plays were an immediate success. He became a partner in a theatre company. With the money he made, he bought his wife and himself a large house back home in Stratford. Historians believe he spent most of his time in London because Stratford was so far away. They think he went home only once a year – during Lent, when, by law, all theatres were closed.

In 1599, his company built perhaps the most famous theatre of them all – the Globe, on the south bank of the River Thames. Shakespeare died thirteen years after Queen Elizabeth – on 23 April (St George’s Day and possibly his birthday) in 1616.

Women were not allowed to appear on stage. Instead, boys played the female roles. They weren’t paid but they were fed well.

# Lord Mayor

London was the largest city in Europe. Its business and trade were controlled by the guilds. A guild was an association of tradesmen. Young boys worked for a guild as an apprentice, learning their trade. Their apprenticeship could last at least seven years. After that, they would become 'journeymen', working under a 'master'. After many years of working and perfecting their skills, the journeyman hoped that he too could become a master. There were many trades: blacksmith, shoemaker, goldsmith, ironmonger, baker, cook, beer brewer, wine merchant, weaver, button-maker, porter, and many more. Men without a master, 'masterless men', were considered a threat to society.

The guilds looked after the interests of their trades. Leading guildsmen were appointed aldermen or burghers (similar to a councillor today). Each year, one of them was appointed London's Lord Mayor. The Lord Mayor's Parade, a grand event, took place every year on Michaelmas Day, 29 September.

The Lord Mayor was the most important man in London and the country, and answered only

to the queen. London has had a Lord Mayor since 1189. Today, we still have a Lord Mayor and, as in Elizabeth's day, each Lord Mayor is appointed for just one year. The Lord Mayor is different from the Mayor of London, a role which was created in 2000. The Mayor of London is a political role, because the Mayor is elected and is a member of a political party. The Lord Mayor is not involved with politics.

## Revolt

The people in power lived in constant fear of widespread rebellion. Poverty and hopelessness had led to the Peasants' Revolt in 1381. That happened two centuries earlier, but Elizabeth's government truly feared the same thing could happen again.

The peasants did not rebel against the government, but a small group of nobles, led by Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, did. Essex had been a great friend of the queen, perhaps even her lover. But they had fallen out. He was barred from the royal circle and sacked from the government.

An angry Essex planned his revenge. He formed a group of nobles, many of them Catholic, who resented the queen. On 8 February 1601, Essex led his group of rebels through the capital, hoping to draw people on to their side. But no one joined them. It all went wrong very quickly as men loyal to the queen arrested Essex and the ringleaders. Essex was executed within the month.

## The Death of the Virgin Queen

The queue of men wanting to marry the queen was very long. Yet, despite many proposals and interest from potential suitors, Elizabeth never married. She was too devoted to her people to have time for a man in her life. And so she is remembered as the Virgin Queen. Also, she liked being in control without some man trying to assert his authority. Queen Elizabeth was a very shrewd woman. So long as the kings and princes of Europe saw her as a potential wife and believed they stood a chance of marrying her, they were less likely to make trouble for her or her country. She once said she'd rather be a 'beggar-woman and single' than be 'queen and married'.

Elizabeth I died in Richmond Palace aged 69 in the early hours of 24 March 1603. She'd been queen for 44 years. The funeral took place five weeks later, on 28 April. A procession of 1,000 people escorted the coffin to Westminster Abbey. Tens of thousands watched in the streets. One witness described the 'general sighing, groaning and weeping' among the

crowds. Elizabeth was placed in a tomb with her half-sister, Mary Tudor.

Elizabeth had refused to name a successor and, of course, she had died childless. But the men of her government knew whom they wanted. The English throne passed to James Stuart, the Scottish king who was James VI of Scotland. His mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, had been executed sixteen years earlier on the orders of Elizabeth.

And so the Tudor era had come to an end. From March 1603, England was ruled by the House of Stuart, with James VI of Scotland as James I of England. London continued to grow and prosper.

Within just a couple of years, the capital, and the nation, would be rocked by the Gunpowder Plot when Guy Fawkes tried to blow up Parliament. And within just a few decades, London would be ravaged by the Great Plague of 1665 and, the following year, the Great Fire. But London survived, as it always does, to keep its place as a vital, cosmopolitan and exciting city. During Elizabeth's and James's time, London was the greatest city in the world.

Over 400 years later, it still is.

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## About the Author

Rupert Colley was a librarian in Enfield for 22 years until he gave it up to be a full time writer in 2011. Having studied history he launched a series of short books called History In An Hour, "history for busy people". There are now 35 books published by HarperCollins.

Rupert lives in London with his wife, two children and dog (a fluffy cockapoo) and writes historical novels. Historical fiction with heart.