

The Elizabethan Age

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth I became Queen of England in 1558 and ruled until her death in 1603. We call the time of her reign the Elizabethan Age.

The country she inherited from her sister, Mary, was poor and without real leaders. The English people were divided by the disputes between Catholics and Protestants. England had been made poor by foreign wars.

Elizabeth was only a young woman when she came to the throne but she was proud and clever. She set about restoring peace at home. She encouraged the building and manning of ships to defend England in case of attack by foreign powers. Under Elizabeth's rule England prospered.

Peace at home meant that people could work in peace, confident that they would be able to enjoy the rewards of their labour. Farmers and trades people of every kind flourished. People built bigger and better houses. People generally ate well and dressed well.

Elizabeth loved music, dancing and theatre and encouraged art and learning generally. She was intelligent and well educated. She liked witty, intelligent, educated people about her.

It was into this world of peace and plenty that William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and his talents were able to develop.

In 1588 Elizabeth's navy defeated the great Spanish Armada sent by Philip of Spain to conquer England.

Her sea captains - Raleigh, Hawkins, Drake and Frobisher made voyages of discovery around the world. They brought back treasure and began the process of colonising the newly found lands of America.



Questions

1. When did Elizabeth I become Queen of England?
2. How long was Elizabeth Queen of England?
3. What did Elizabeth do to make sure England could defend herself from foreign attacks?
4. How did peace at home help the ordinary people of England?
5. Why did Elizabeth encourage art and learning?
6. When was William Shakespeare born?
7. How did Elizabeth's sea captains help her?

Shakespeare's Home and Family

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 at Stratford-on-Avon in England. His father, John, was a glove-maker and general trader who owned his own business. His mother, Mary, was the daughter of a rich local farmer, Robert Arden.

They lived in a large house with a garden in Henley Street. John Shakespeare's business was also run from this house. The house in Henley Street where William Shakespeare was born still exists. Every year thousands of tourists from all over the world visit the house.

John Shakespeare came from a farming family just outside Stratford. He moved to Stratford as a young man and became a successful businessman. By 1556 he owned several properties in Stratford-on-Avon. In 1558 he was elected a constable and in 1568 he was elected bailiff or mayor of Stratford.

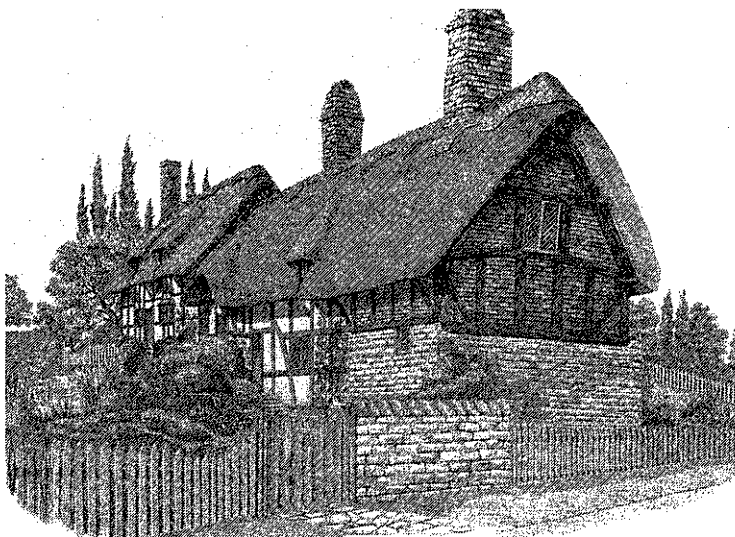
John Shakespeare married Mary Arden in 1557. William was their third child. Two older sisters had both died as infants but William survived in spite of an outbreak of the plague that year. William was followed by three brothers - Gilbert, Richard and Edmund - and two sisters - Joan and Anne.

William went to the local Grammar school until he was about fourteen. He probably left to help run his father's business. When he was eighteen he married Anne Hathaway, a local farmer's daughter. They had a daughter Susanna and then twins, Hamnet and Judith.

Later, probably sometime in 1587, William left Stratford to go to London.

Questions

1. When and where was William Shakespeare born?
2. Who was William Shakespeare's father?
3. What was his father's trade?
4. How many brothers and sisters did William have?
5. Who did William Shakespeare marry?



The house on the left is known as Anne Hathaway's cottage. It belonged to the family of Anne Hathaway who married William Shakespeare in 1582.

The house, just outside Stratford-on-Avon, can still be seen today.

The Globe

The Globe theatre was built in Bankside in 1599. Here many of Shakespeare's plays were performed for the first time. Shakespeare not only wrote for the company but often took small parts in the plays.

The Globe was roughly circular in shape. Inside there were three tiers of galleries covered by a thatched roof. The roof did not cover the whole theatre. The pit or yard in the middle of the theatre was open to the sky.

The stage was a wooden platform raised a few feet from the ground. It projected out into the pit and could be seen from all sides.

Behind the stage was an inner room masked by curtains. Above it was a gallery which could be used either by musicians or for scenes like the famous balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Behind the stage was the tiring house - the changing rooms - where actors got ready for their parts. There was a roof over the stage area and a trapdoor in the floor of the stage. Some scenery was used and the trapdoors above and below the stage might be used for special effects.

The people who stood in the pit or yard to watch the play were called groundlings. People who sat in the galleries, probably on wooden benches, paid more.

Plays were performed in daylight, in the afternoon, in the summer months. Bad weather might prevent a performance so a flag would be hoisted to let people know that a performance was going to take place.



The Globe Theatre taken from
Visscher's View of London 1616



An artist's impression of the stage

Questions

1. When was the Globe theatre built?
2. Why is the Globe theatre famous?
3. Why did the groundlings get wet if it rained?
4. Why did it cost more to go in the galleries?
5. What was the gallery above the stage used for?
6. What was the tiring house used for?
7. What was the signal flag used for?

Special Effects

Thunder and lightning, witches and warlocks, ghosts and apparitions, bags of blood and guts - Elizabethan audiences loved them and Shakespeare gave them what they wanted.

From *Titus Andronicus* to *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's tragedies are awash with blood and littered with dead bodies. Actors used bladders of pigs blood which they burst when they had been stabbed. Animal entrails were used for disembowelings, and artificial severed heads were part of the props kept by the companies of players.

People in Shakespeare's time were used to such sights in real life. Public executions were always well attended and the heads of traitors were left to rot on stakes on London Bridge as a warning to others.

Ghosts appear in many Shakespeare plays. In one scene from *Macbeth* the three witches conjure up Hecate, three apparitions, the ghost of Banquo and a procession of kings. These apparitions probably came up through the trapdoor in the floor of the stage where the witches' cauldron was.

Sometimes the trapdoor in 'the Heavens' above the stage was used to fly down characters. In *Cymbeline* "Jupiter descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle." The sound of thunder was made by rolling a cannon ball across the floor of the hut up in 'the Heavens'. Fireworks were also used.

A cannon, kept up in the hut above 'the heavens', was also used in plays like *Henry V*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*. It was shot off during battle scenes or as salutes. In June 1613 the cannon at the old Globe playhouse was fired during a production of *Henry VIII*. It set fire to the thatched roof and the theatre was burnt to the ground.



The head of Macbeth held aloft after his defeat at the end of the play

Questions

1. What did Elizabethan actors use to show they had been stabbed?
2. Why weren't Elizabethan audiences horrified by the violence in Shakespeare's tragedies?
3. Why was the trapdoor in the stage floor particularly useful for the staging of *Macbeth*?
4. What was the trapdoor in 'the Heavens' used for?
5. How was thunder made?