

About the Era:

THE WORLD of THE PRINCE

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In 16th century England, the gap between the rich and the poor was large – and growing. In his 1577 book about English society, William Harrison, a country parson, describes the divisions between various social classes. “We in England divide our people commonly into four sorts.” The first are **gentlemen** (women were included in the class of their husbands and fathers), which covers everyone from nobles to professionals; next come the **citizens of the cities**, who are free men with special privileges; next come the **yeomen** of the countryside, such as farmers, tradespeople, and craft workers; and finally the **poor** – day laborers, servants and vagrants, who have “neither voice nor authority.”

While most societies have different economic levels, what is staggering about Tudor England is the amount of people in each extreme. About 5% of the population were “gentlemen.” The majority of English citizens, a whopping 80-90%, were poor – or, as they were often called, “common people.” Between 1520 and 1600 the population of England doubled – from 2 million to 4 million – widening the gap between rich and poor even more as jobs became harder to find.

On the Street

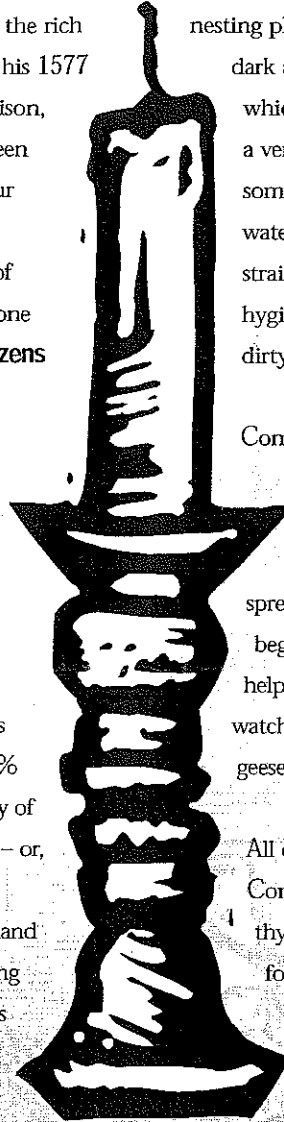
The lives of the common people were full of hardships. Their homes were not much better than sheds. Usually there was one dirt-floored room downstairs for living and cooking, and an upstairs for sleeping and storing hay. Windows had shutters but no glass. Thatched roofs were a fire hazard and a

nesting place for rats and insects. Inside the houses were dark and dingy. Light came from candles or torches, which posed a major fire risk. The poor survived on a very basic diet: hunks of bread, hard cheese, sometimes meat or fish. There was no running water or real drainage. All waste was dumped straight onto the street. Partly as a result, personal hygiene was bad. Many of the commoners were dirty and smelly.

Common people were expected to show respect and deference to those in the higher classes. Many of the poor were illiterate, which means that members of the clergy were relied on for the spread of knowledge. In poor households, children began helping out around the age of seven. Girls helped their mothers fetch water, clean clothes, and watch younger siblings. Boys herded cattle, tended geese and sheep, and collected firewood.

All children were expected to obey the Fourth Commandment of the Bible: “Honor thy father and thy mother.” They often knelt to ask their parents for their blessing. Parents prized obedience and manners, as a result many children were raised with harsh discipline.

Many diseases were rampant. Smallpox, syphilis, and tuberculosis were common among all classes – but in the crowded areas where the urban poor live, these diseases were everywhere. One in every five newborn children died before reaching its first birthday. About 25% of children born between 1550 and 1600 didn't live past 10 years old.



AND THE PAUPER

In the Palace

Things were different for the select few who lived in the palace. The royal family and their courtiers had a full staff of servants who waited on them. Nobility was passed down from generation to generation – and with it, specific sets of customs and traditions. Royalty and nobility wore lavish clothing. A fancy velvet dress might cost more than a day laborer could earn in 10 years of work. The palace chef prepared lavish meals for the royal family – well-prepared chicken or steak, as opposed to the bread and cheese of the commoners.



The strict hierarchy of Tudor England was reinforced through customs and standards of behavior. For the well-to-do, social status depended on appearances and hospitality. The rich entertained gentlemen and women in their lavish houses. Clothing also expressed status and wealth. One law (enacted in 1463) even said that velvet and satin can only be worn by men above the rank of knight, and their wives. The rich and powerful had large households, with enormous serving staffs. For example, in

1521 the Earl of Northumberland supported 166 people – family, servants, and guests.

- In times of inflation, some men and women do a day's work for board and lodging, with no payment.

- In the 1550s, a laborer can make 1 shilling a day.

- Poor relief in some parishes is 6 pence a week.

- The staple diet of the poor is a halfpenny loaf of bread, which feeds two people.



- A Tudor soldier's daily rations – if they arrive – are 32oz of meat, 24oz of bread, 16oz of cheese and 5 pints of beer.

- On January 6, 1508, to mark the end of the 12 days of Christmas, the Duke of Buckingham gives a feast for 460 people. The menu includes

swans, herons and peacocks, 680 loaves, 260 flagons of ale, 400 eggs, 200 oysters, 12 pigs and 10 sheep. The total cost is £7 – more than a year's pay for a laborer.



- In 1597, the year when the poor are in greatest need because of widespread famine, one courtier lavishes £2,000 on his mistress.

- In 1550, Sir William Petre, one of Elizabeth I's officials, has 21 servants at his home, Ingatestone Hall in Essex.

- Begging licenses were only given to the elderly and the sick during Henry VIII's reign. Anyone without a license was subject to terms in the stocks, whipping, having their ears cut off, and, for repeat offenders, death by hanging.

