

# Peasant Life in Elizabethan England

by Richard Foss



Throughout history, most people have lived and worked in small communities, the rhythm of their lives set by the seasons and the timeless patterns of birth, marriage, and death. These patterns were already becoming disrupted toward the close of the Elizabethan age, but it's worth taking a moment to consider daily life in that simpler era.

First of all, the average person never traveled farther than half a day's walk for any reason. There was no need; all the necessities of life were available handmade and homemade in their own village. People's wants were few: produce from neighborhood farms, drink from the village brewer, and firewood from local forests constituted the needs of daily life. These needs were satisfied by barter, since money was scarce, and they could all be met without the dangers of travel on unknown roads and among strange companions. A few times a year, a local market fair might tempt those with a surplus of goods or a few hoarded coins to shop for luxuries, but that trip of a few miles was regarded as a great journey, to be recounted at length by the fire for many nights thereafter.

Those few peddlers, pilgrims, actors, or soldiers who actually preferred the traveling life were thought unstable and untrustworthy, and valued for their tales and trinkets rather than for their wandering nature. The news of Europe they carried was more entertainment than useful information for the most part. Who cared of wars abroad or the fall of kings, when neither would bring one drop more rain to dry fields or encourage a straining plough-ox to greater efforts? News of a crop failure in a neighboring county or a similar local calamity was another matter, and bearers of such tidings could be assured of a rapt audience over tankards of ale at the local tavern.

The village was the center of life in other ways. In a world of little mobility and large households, families remained close in fact as well as spirit, and everyone was part of a web of brothers, cousins, and kin by marriage who provided moral and monetary support to those in need. With much land held in lifetime or perpetual leases from noble families, there was little transfer of property, and generations lived and died in the same homes and in the same circumstances.

The year rolled by with only the seasons, local fairs, and religious celebrations to tell one day from another. Life was an early morning trudge to fields or sheep meadows, a few pints of ale, some cheese and bread at midday, and the evening's walk home. (Ale was drunk by everyone, even children, and regarded as a healthful beverage.) The villages were quiet after sundown, with those who could afford candles and those who could only afford a single fire both spending their evening in talk and games. Wealthier peasants might while away an evening reading the Bible, Book of Common Prayer, or some other tome: by Elizabeth's day it was clear that social mobility and commerce both required literacy, and perhaps half of the population

could read at least a little. Only on Sunday was there a break in the routine. The townsmen met for church in the morning, with free time for gossip, games and a few pints of ale after the service was over. Women worked communally at sewing or spinning while men bowled, played skittles or ball games, or enjoyed board games like nine man's morris, the ancient Saxon game known as hnaef, or draughts (now known as checkers).

These bucolic times were waning even before the age of Elizabeth, and the changes accelerated during her reign. Wars and unrest overseas caused the price for English woolens and other goods to rise sharply, and new prosperity awakened the ambitions of the expanding middle class. Religious dissent made its way from the cities into the country, and Englishmen accustomed to the rule and religion of the Crown heard new doctrines preached by Quakers, Baptists, and other previously unheard of Puritan sects. War in Ireland and France led to massive call-ups of the militia, and soldiers returning home brought exciting stories of strange lands to audiences at home. All these factors led to a new awareness of a world beyond the well worn roads of their own county. The flood of immigrants fleeing the war-torn shores of Europe brought new ideas and customs into the countryside, and peasants who had never known anyone from more than a few miles away met their first Dutchman, Spaniard, or Jew. These foreigners were more likely to be literate, and with their curious customs brought knowledge of better medicines, farming methods, and industrial techniques. The result of the return of hometown soldiers and the influx of foreigners was a revolution in the arts and sciences, and an enrichment of the lives of rural peasants.

Our modern world, where prices can rise and fall based on wars and corporate mergers ten thousand miles away, can make the life of one of those pre-Elizabethan villagers seem desirable. A life ordered by sunrise and sunset, planting and harvest, is indeed more orderly than the chaos and confusion that is our modern world- but also full of long days of heavy labor and limited by superstition and ignorance. The expansion from one world to the other began during the age of Elizabeth, when the peasantry looked beyond their villages and discovered the world.

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