



DAILY LIFE IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

Jeffrey L. Singman

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DAILY LIFE IN

Elizabethan
England

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DAILY LIFE IN

Elizabethan England

JEFFREY L. SINGMAN

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Daily Life in Elizabethan England is in part a revision of *The Elizabethan Handbook*, a manual for Elizabethan living history produced by the University Medieval and Renaissance Association (now the Tabard Inn Society) at the University of Toronto for its "Fencing, Dancing, and Bearbaiting" event in June 1991, and subsequently revised and expanded for private publication by the present author. Although relatively little of the original text survives, some credit is due to the people who originally produced it, or who had a hand in later revisions, including Susan Carroll-Clark, Maren Drees, Victoria Hadfield, Lesley Howard, Shona Humphrey, A. J. S. Nusbacher, Tricia Postle, and Tara Jenkins.

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Introduction

The reign of Elizabeth is for many of us one of the most appealing periods in the history of English-speaking peoples. Our images of the Elizabethan age, whether derived from the stage, screen, or books, have an enduring romantic appeal: the daring impudence of the sea-dogs, the dashing valor of Sir Philip Sidney at Zutphen or the Earl of Essex at the gates of Cadiz, the elegant clash of steel as the masters of the rapier display their skill. In addition to its imaginative appeal, the period is one of considerable historical importance. In political terms, Elizabeth's reign saw the definitive emergence of England as a significant naval power, as well as the growth of England's commercial and colonial activities: the British Empire, which so shaped the world in which we live, had its roots in the reign of Elizabeth. In the cultural sphere, England's achievements were no less significant, most notably in the person of William Shakespeare.

Elizabethan daily life has received a good deal of attention during the past two hundred years. Yet although many books have been written on the subject, this volume is very different in one fundamental respect, which has influenced its shape in many ways.

This is the first book on Elizabethan England to arise out of the living history movement. In its broadest sense, living history might be described as the material re-creation of elements of the past. In this sense it includes a wide variety of activities. People who play historical music (especially on reproduction instruments) or who engage in historical crafts are practicing a form of living history.

In its fullest sense, living history involves the attempt to re-create an entire historical setting. Perhaps the best example is the historical site of

Plimoth Plantation in Massachusetts, where the visitor will find not only reconstructed houses of the pilgrim settlers of 1627, but a staff of highly trained interpreters who represent the individual men and women who were at the settlement in that year, even down to the dialect of English likely to have been spoken by the persons they are portraying.

This book began its life as *The Elizabethan Handbook*, a brief guide written by the University Medieval and Renaissance Association of Toronto (an amateur living history group based at the University of Toronto), to accompany its “Fencing, Dancing, and Bearbaiting” Elizabethan living history event in 1991. It was later published in expanded and revised form by Vox Clamantis Monographs in 1993, as part of a series of manuals geared for living history use. Very little of the original text still remains, but the underlying connection with living history is very much present.

The living history background of this book gives it two particular advantages over previous works. The first is its hands-on approach. In addition to telling the reader what sort of foods people ate, what sort of clothes they wore, and what sort of games they played, this book includes actual recipes, patterns, and rules, based on sources from the period. We ourselves have had great fun reproducing such aspects of the past, and hope that readers will enjoy them too.

The second important advantage is the perspective that living history affords. The people who contributed to this book have not simply read about the Elizabethan period. We have also spent time living in thatched cottages, cooking over open hearths, and sleeping on straw mattresses. The simple act of doing these things cannot actually tell you how they were done, but there is no better way to focus your attention on the essential parts of historical daily life than by actually trying to live it. As a result, this book offers a uniquely clear, focused and detailed account of the Elizabethan world. Many fundamental topics that other books mention only briefly (if at all) are given full attention here.

This book is also distinguished by its attention to the daily life of ordinary people. Books about Elizabethan England often tend to focus on the world of the aristocracy, leaving the impression that every man in Elizabethan England wore an enormous starched ruff, every woman wore a rich brocade gown, and they all lived in huge brick mansions. Yet the lives of ordinary people can be just as interesting and informative. This book tries to give the other 98% of the population a degree of attention more in keeping with their numbers.

Another important feature of this book is that it attempts to incorporate a high quality of scholarly research in a form that is accessible to a broad readership. There tends to be a great divide between “scholarly” and “popular” accounts of the past. Scholarly accounts generally offer high-quality information based on primary sources

(primary sources being sources of information contemporary with the period in question, as opposed to secondary sources, which are modern works that make use of primary sources, or tertiary sources, which are modern works that rely on secondary sources). The information in scholarly works is generally superior, since the authors are in closer contact with the original sources of information, but their language and content tend to be geared towards the specialist. On the other hand, popular works are written for a broader audience, but often rely on inferior secondary and even tertiary sources of information.

As far as has been possible with so vast a subject, this book relies directly on primary sources; in particular, it has made use of some original books and manuscripts that are especially rich sources of information but are not well known even in scholarly circles (the rules for games, for example, derive from a forgotten seventeenth-century treatise on the subject). This is particularly true in the hands-on sections of the book: the patterns, recipes, rules, and so on are all based as far as possible on primary sources. Where primary sources are impractical, the book strives to make use of the best and most recent secondary work on the period.

At the same time, we have attempted to present this information in a format that will be accessible and enjoyable for a wide audience. After all, the greatest value of the past lies in its interaction with the present. If history only touches the historians, it is truly a lifeless form of knowledge. Readers of this book may be surprised to find just how much of Elizabethan life is relevant to the present. The Elizabethans were dealing with many of the same issues that face us today: unemployment resulting from an economy in transition; conflicting views over the relationship between religion and the state, a technological revolution in the media of communication, bitter cultural strife, and a general sense that the established social order was at risk of disintegration. In the modern age, where we are increasingly worried about our ability to sustain our standard of living and about the impact of our activities on the environment, we can benefit by learning how people lived in a period when their material expectations were much lower and the degree of industrialization was still quite limited. This is not to suggest that we should idealize the Elizabethan age—it was also a period of hardship and intolerance; but we can acquire a much clearer perspective on the present by comparing it to the past.

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A Brief History of Tudor England

The Middle Ages are customarily taken to have ended when Richard III was defeated by Henry Tudor in the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. Henry's accession as Henry VII marked the end of the Wars of the Roses, which had dominated English politics for much of the fifteenth century, and was to herald the beginning of an unprecedented period of peace that lasted until the outbreak of civil war in 1642.

Henry VII devoted his reign to establishing the security of his throne, which he passed on to his son Henry VIII in 1509. Henry VIII is best known for having married six wives, but his marital affairs were of great political importance as well. His first wife, Catherine of Aragon, produced only a daughter, named Mary. Desperate for a male heir, Henry applied to the Pope to have his marriage annulled. For various reasons the request was refused, so Henry had his Parliament pass a body of legislation that withdrew England from the Catholic Church, placing the king at the head of the new Church of England.

As head of his own church, Henry now divorced Catherine and married Anne Boleyn. This marriage proved no more successful in Henry's eyes, as it produced only a daughter (little did he know that this daughter, as Elizabeth I, was to become one of England's most successful and best-loved monarchs). Henry had Anne Boleyn executed on charges of adultery. His third wife, Jane Seymour, died of natural causes, but not before bearing him a son, Edward. Of Henry's three subsequent wives, none bore any heirs.

Upon Henry's death in 1547 his son came to the throne as Edward VI. Edward was still underage and his reign was dominated by his guardians,

who furthered the Protestant reformation of the English church that had begun with Henry's break with Rome. Edward died in 1553 before reaching the age of majority. The throne passed to his eldest half-sister, Mary. Being a devout Catholic, she brought England back into the Catholic Church. However, she died in 1558 after a brief and undistinguished reign. She had allied England with Spain by marrying the Spanish king, Philip II, who involved England in his war against France. The war went poorly and England lost Calais, the last remnant of its once huge French empire. Mary is most often remembered as Bloody Mary, in memory of her persecution of Protestants.

The throne now passed to Henry's second daughter, Elizabeth. According to the Catholic Church, Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon had been invalid, which meant that his marriage to Anne Boleyn was invalid too. Elizabeth's very legitimacy as Henry's daughter and heir relied on England's independence from the Catholic Church. Elizabeth had Parliament withdraw England from the Catholic Church once more and was established as head of the Church of England, as her father had been.

The new queen faced serious international challenges. Her country was still officially at war with France and Scotland. Elizabeth swiftly concluded a peace treaty, but Scotland remained under the authority of a French regent, Mary of Guise. Mary was mother of the actual queen, Mary Stuart (known today as Mary Queen of Scots), who was in France. However, Elizabeth was aided by the rise of Protestant feeling in Scotland. France was a Catholic country, and the Protestants in Scotland were inclined to draw Scotland out from under French domination and closer to England. In 1559 John Knox, the spiritual leader of this militant Scottish Protestantism, returned to Scotland from exile in Geneva, and the country rose against the regent. After some hesitation, Elizabeth sent military support. The French were expelled from the country, and the Protestant party took effective control.

France too had a growing Protestant movement, and a civil war between Protestants and Catholics erupted in 1562. Elizabeth sent troops to Normandy, with an eye to re-establishing the foothold on the Continent that her sister had lost, but the army was ravaged by illness and had to be withdrawn in 1563. Religious conflict between French Catholics and Protestants was to recur throughout most of the rest of Elizabeth's reign, substantially undermining French power in international affairs.

In the meantime, Scotland was under new stresses of its own. Mary Queen of Scots, who had been married to Francis II, King of France, returned to Scotland after his death in 1560. Her reign was tumultuous, and relations with her subjects were not helped by her firm Catholicism. After a series of misadventures, Mary's subjects rose against her, and she was ultimately forced to seek refuge in England in 1568.

The situation was extremely awkward for Elizabeth, who believed in the divine right of a ruler to occupy her throne but who was also dependent on the Protestant party in Scotland to keep England's northern border secure. To make matters worse, Mary had some claim to the English throne by right of her grandmother, a sister of Henry VIII. According to the Catholic Church, Elizabeth was illegitimate and Mary was the rightful queen. Mary remained in comfortable confinement in England during a series of fruitless negotiations to return her to the Scottish throne.

Unfortunately, Mary was not content to confine herself to Scottish politics. Many Catholics wanted to see her replace Elizabeth as Queen of England, and Mary was only too willing to entertain the idea. There were still quite a number of Catholics in northern England. In 1569 several of the northern earls led a rebellion against Elizabeth, thinking to place Mary on the throne. The rebels were swiftly suppressed, but the incident was a reminder of the threat posed by this Catholic claimant to the throne. The following year the Pope issued a Bull, or papal decree, excommunicating Elizabeth and declaring her deposed, a move that further aggravated religious tensions.

Mary became even more involved in English politics. In 1572 a plot was organized by Roberto Ridolfi, a Florentine banker, to have Mary wed the Duke of Norfolk, the foremost nobleman in England, with an eye to creating a powerful Catholic alliance to topple the Queen. The plot was discovered and Norfolk, already under suspicion for his involvement with the northern rebellion, was executed for treason. Many people urged Elizabeth to have Mary executed as well, but she was extremely reluctant to kill a queen, knowing the implications to herself.

In the meantime, relations with Spain were becoming progressively worse. At first Elizabeth had worked to preserve something of the alliance between England and Spain created by her sister's marriage to Philip II, but growing religious divisions in Europe made this increasingly difficult. In the Low Countries, an increasingly Protestant population was still under the rule of the Catholic Philip II. Rebellion erupted in 1567. At first Protestantism was widely spread throughout the area, but over time a successful Spanish counteroffensive succeeded in regaining the southern provinces (equivalent to modern-day Belgium), leaving only the Netherlands proper in a state of rebellion. Popular sentiment in England was strongly in support of the Protestant rebels, and many Englishmen volunteered to fight in the Netherlands against Spain over the years. Even the more conservative Elizabeth was not happy about the presence of a large Catholic force suppressing Protestantism practically on England's doorstep.

Spain's very size and power made it a threat, and the situation was made worse by Spain's vast and profitable empire in the New World.