

Going to the theatre

The first theatres were built in Britain by the Romans, but after they left, the theatres were abandoned and there were no more built for about a thousand years. Going to watch plays, however, continued as a popular form of entertainment. Groups of actors travelled around the country, together with acrobats, jugglers and minstrels. They performed stories from the Bible and miracle plays on temporary platforms, in marketplaces and inn yards.

There was not a single theatre in the country when Elizabeth became Queen. Many local authorities thought that groups of travelling actors were a threat to law and order and should be punished as **vagabonds**. In London, however, some powerful nobles, like the Earl of Leicester, protected groups of actors, giving financial and legal support, and ensured their plays continued to be performed to the city's growing population. Wealthy traders and manufacturers who lived in London, and their workers, had the money to watch plays. Against this background, the first theatre to be built since Roman times opened just outside London in 1576. It was built by James Burbage, and called the Theatre, and was such a success that it was soon followed by the Curtain in 1577 and the Rose in 1587. The most famous theatre, Shakespeare's Globe, came later, in 1599.

People from all social classes loved the theatre. Entrance fees were cheap; for one penny, the audience could stand in the pit. These 'groundlings' were very close to the actors and were known for being noisy. They also got very wet if it rained during a performance. For two or three pennies, wealthier spectators could stand or sit in one of the three covered galleries. The upper classes sat on stools on the stage, presumably as much to be seen as to see.

Elizabethan playwrights wrote some of the most popular and acclaimed plays ever written. Audiences appreciated the complex characters, gripping plots and memorable lines delivered in blank verse by imposing actors of the day, like Richard Burbage and Edward Allen. Christopher Marlowe was the first famous Elizabethan playwright. In Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, the wealth of Barabas, the richest man on the island, is seized, and he schemes to regain it until his death at the hands of Maltese soldiers. The play crackles with religious conflict, intrigue and revenge, and is also considered to be the first successful **black comedy**. Elizabethan audiences loved it.

Some Elizabethans, however, opposed the theatre. They thought it would encourage idleness, spread disease and create unrest. Puritans believed that theatres were the work of the Devil. The Lord Mayor of London asked the Privy Council to control the theatres, but the councillors only seemed prepared to close them down when plague was a threat.

The Queen did not go to the theatre, but she invited actors to Court to perform their plays for her. She obviously enjoyed the plays; in 1572, there is a record showing that she added a tip of around £3 to the payment due to the Lord Chamberlain's Men for a play presented at Court on St Stephen's Day. However, the Queen, too, was worried that theatre audiences might hear religious or political messages that criticised her government. In 1572, censorship was introduced. All acting companies had to have a royal licence, and all play scripts had to be submitted to the Master of Revels, who was responsible for co-ordinating all theatrical entertainment at Court, before they were performed.

WHAT ABOUT SHAKESPEARE?

William Shakespeare is by far the most famous playwright of this time, but he is not mentioned above. This is because he wrote his first play around 1591, and your course ends in 1588! So if you are asked about theatres and writers in your exam, then writing about Shakespeare will not be relevant. However, Shakespeare could not have been a success, and there would have been no theatres for him to work in, if it had not been for the growth in theatres from the 1570s. The success of his plays shows that theatres were thriving by the 1580s.

ELIZABETHAN THEATRE ?

1. Describe two features of theatres in Elizabethan London.
2. What made going to the theatre so popular?
3. What was Elizabeth's attitude to theatres and plays?