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## 12 Government and society

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During the Tudor period the changes in government, society and the economy of England were more far-reaching than they had been for centuries. But most far-reaching of all were the changes in ideas, partly as a result of the rebirth of intellectual attitudes known as the Renaissance, which had spread slowly northwards from its beginnings in Italy. In England the nature of the Renaissance was also affected by the Protestant Reformation and the economic changes that followed from it.

### Tudor parliaments

The Tudor monarchs did not like governing through Parliament. Henry VII had used Parliament only for law making. He seldom called it together, and then only when he had a particular job for it. Henry VIII had used it first to raise money for his military adventures, and then for his struggle with Rome. His aim was to make sure that the powerful members from the shires and towns supported him, because they had a great deal of control over popular feeling. He also wanted to frighten the priests and bishops into obeying him, and to frighten the pope into giving in to his demands.

Perhaps Henry himself did not realise that by inviting Parliament to make new laws for the Reformation he was giving it a level of authority it never had before. Tudor monarchs were certainly not more democratic than earlier kings, but by using Parliament to strengthen their policy, they actually increased Parliament's authority.

Parliament strengthened its position again during Edward VI's reign by ordering the new prayer book to be used in all churches, and forbidding the Catholic mass. When the Catholic Queen Mary came to the throne she succeeded in making Parliament cancel all the new Reformation laws, and agree to her marriage to Philip of Spain. But she could not persuade Parliament to accept him as king of England after her death.

Only two things persuaded Tudor monarchs not to get rid of Parliament altogether: they needed money and they needed the support of the merchants and landowners. In 1566 Queen Elizabeth told the French ambassador that the three parliaments she had already held were enough for any reign and she would have no more. Today Parliament must meet every year and remain "in session" for three-quarters of it. This was not at all the case in the sixteenth century.

In the early sixteenth century Parliament only met when the monarch ordered it. Sometimes it met twice in one year, but then it might not meet again for six years. In the first forty-four years of Tudor rule Parliament met only twenty times. Henry VIII assembled Parliament a little more often to make the laws for Church reformation. But Elizabeth, like her grandfather Henry VII, tried not to use Parliament after her Reformation Settlement of 1559, and in forty-four years she only let Parliament meet thirteen times.

During the century power moved from the House of Lords to the House of Commons. The reason for this was simple. The Members of Parliament (MPs) in the Commons represented richer and more

influential classes than the Lords. In fact, the idea of getting rid of the House of Lords, still a real question in British politics today, was first suggested in the sixteenth century.

The old system of representation in the Commons, with two men from each county and two from each "borough", or town, remained the rule. However, during the sixteenth century the size of the Commons nearly doubled, as a result of the inclusion of Welsh boroughs and counties and the inclusion of more English boroughs.

But Parliament did not really represent the people. Few MPs followed the rule of living in the area they represented, and the monarchy used its influence to make sure that many MPs would support royal policy, rather than the wishes of their electors.

In order to control discussion in Parliament, the Crown appointed a "Speaker". Even today the Speaker is responsible for good behaviour during debates in the House of Commons. His job in Tudor times was to make sure that Parliament discussed what the monarch wanted Parliament to discuss, and that it made the decision which he or she wanted.

Until the end of the Tudor period Parliament was supposed to do three things: agree to the taxes needed; make the laws which the Crown suggested; and advise the Crown, but only when asked to do so. In order for Parliament to be able to do these things, MPs were given important rights: freedom of speech (that is freedom to speak their thoughts freely without fear), freedom from fear of arrest, and freedom to meet and speak to the monarch.

The Tudor monarchs realised that by asking Parliament for money they were giving it power in the running of the kingdom. All the Tudor monarchs tried to get money in other ways. By 1600 Elizabeth had found ways to raise money that were extremely unwise. She sold "monopolies", which gave a particular person or company total control over a trade. In 1601, the last parliament of Elizabeth's reign complained to her about the bad effect on free trade that these monopolies had.

Elizabeth and her advisers used other methods. She and her chief adviser, Lord Burghley, sold official positions in government. Burghley was paid about £860 a year, but he actually made at least £4,000 by selling official positions. He kept this secret from Parliament. Elizabeth's methods of raising money would today be considered dishonest as well as foolish.

In their old age Elizabeth and Burghley noticed less, and became more careless and slower at making decisions. They allowed the tax system to become less effective, and failed to keep information on how much money people should be paying. England needed tax reform, which could only be carried out with the agreement of Parliament. Parliament wanted to avoid the matter of tax, and so did local government because the JPs who were responsible for collecting taxes were also landlords who would have to pay them. As JPs were not paid, they saw no reason for collecting unpopular taxes. Elizabeth left her successors to deal with the problem.

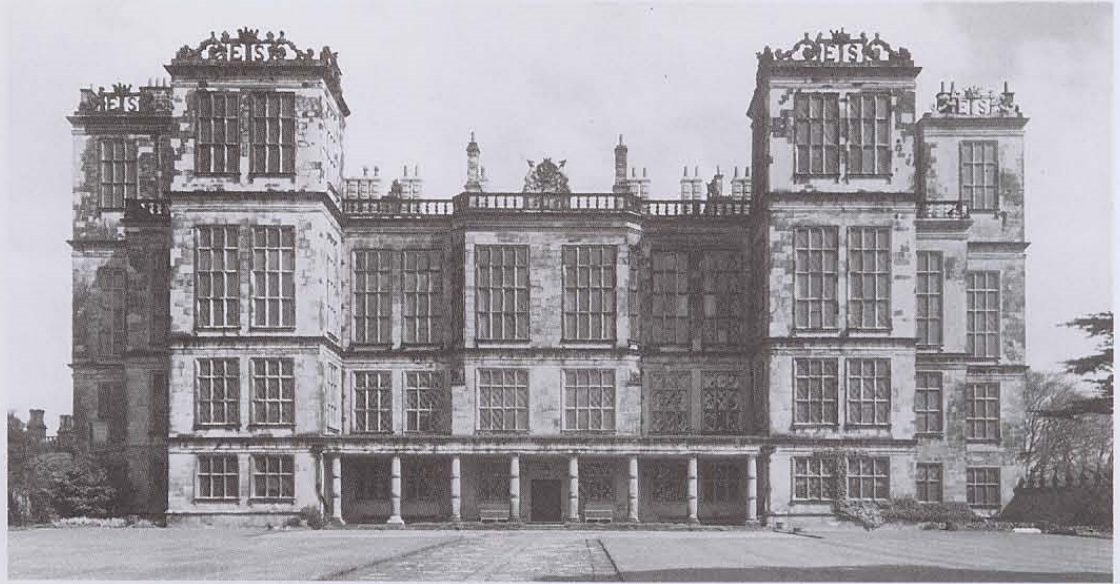
Elizabeth avoided open discussion on money matters with Parliament. There was clearly an unanswered question about the limits of Parliament's power. Who should decide what Parliament could discuss: the Crown or Parliament itself? Both the Tudor monarchs and their MPs would have agreed that it was the Crown that decided. However, during the sixteenth century the Tudors asked Parliament to discuss, law-make and advise on almost every subject.

Parliament naturally began to think it had a *right* to discuss these questions. By the end of the sixteenth century it was beginning to show new confidence, and in the seventeenth century, when the gentry and merchant classes were far more aware of their own strength, it was obvious that Parliament would challenge the Crown. Eventually this resulted in war.

## Rich and poor in town and country

Even in 1485 much of the countryside was still untouched. There were still great forests of oak trees, and unused land in between. There were still

Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, built in the 1580s, astonished local people by the daring use of so much glass. Never had domestic buildings been so light inside. The owner, Elizabeth of Shrewsbury, was newly wealthy and anxious to be remembered. So she had the initials "E.S." placed in the stonework. In Tudor times furniture became better. Chairs replaced benches and stools, feather mattresses replaced straw mattresses. By 1600 the chests used to store clothes were larger, with a drawer in the bottom. It was the beginning of the chest of drawers.



wild animals, wild pigs, wild cattle, and even a few wolves. Scattered across this countryside were "islands" of human settlement, villages and towns. Few towns had more than 3,000 people, the size of a large village today. Most towns, anyway, were no more than large villages, with their own fields and farms. Even London, a large city of over 60,000 by 1500, had fields farmed by its citizens.

In the sixteenth century, however, this picture began to change rapidly. The population increased, the unused land was cleared for sheep, and large areas of forest were cut down to provide wood for the growing shipbuilding industry. England was beginning to experience greater social and economic problems than ever before.

The price of food and other goods rose steeply during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This inflation was without equal until the twentieth century. The price of wheat and barley, necessary for bread and beer, increased over five times between 1510 and 1650. While most other prices increased by five times between 1500 and 1600, real wages fell by half. The government tried to deal with the problem of rising costs by making coins which contained up to 50 per cent less precious metal. This only reduced the value of money, helping to push prices up.

People thought that inflation was caused by silver and gold pouring into Europe from Spanish

America. But a greater problem was the sudden increase in population. In England and Wales the population almost doubled from 2.2 million in 1525 to four million in 1603. Twice the number of people needed twice the amount of food. It was not produced. Living conditions got worse as the population rose. It is not surprising that fewer people married than ever before.

In the countryside the people who did best in this situation were the yeoman farmers who had at least 100 acres of land. They produced food to sell, and employed men to work on their land. They worked as farmers during the week, but were "gentlemen" on Sundays. They were able to go on increasing their prices because there was not enough food in the markets.

Most people, however, had only twenty acres of land or less. They had to pay rent for the land, and often found it difficult to pay when the rent increased. Because of the growing population it was harder for a man to find work, or to produce enough food for his family.

Many landowners found they could make more money from sheep farming than from growing crops. They could sell the wool for a good price to the rapidly growing cloth industry. In order to keep sheep they fenced off land that had always belonged to the whole village. Enclosing land in this way was



*A wedding feast in the village of Bermondsey, now a London suburb. Merry-making is just beginning, and the view gives us a good idea of village life. The Tower of London can be seen across the river in the background.*

often against the law, but because JPs were themselves landlords, few peasants could prevent it. As a result many poor people lost the land they farmed as well as the common land where they kept animals, and the total amount of land used for growing food was reduced.

There was a clear connection between the damage caused by enclosures and the growth of the cloth trade. As one man watching the problem wrote in 1583, “these enclosures be the causes why rich men eat up poor men as beasts do eat grass.” All through the century the government tried to control enclosures but without much success. Many people became unemployed.

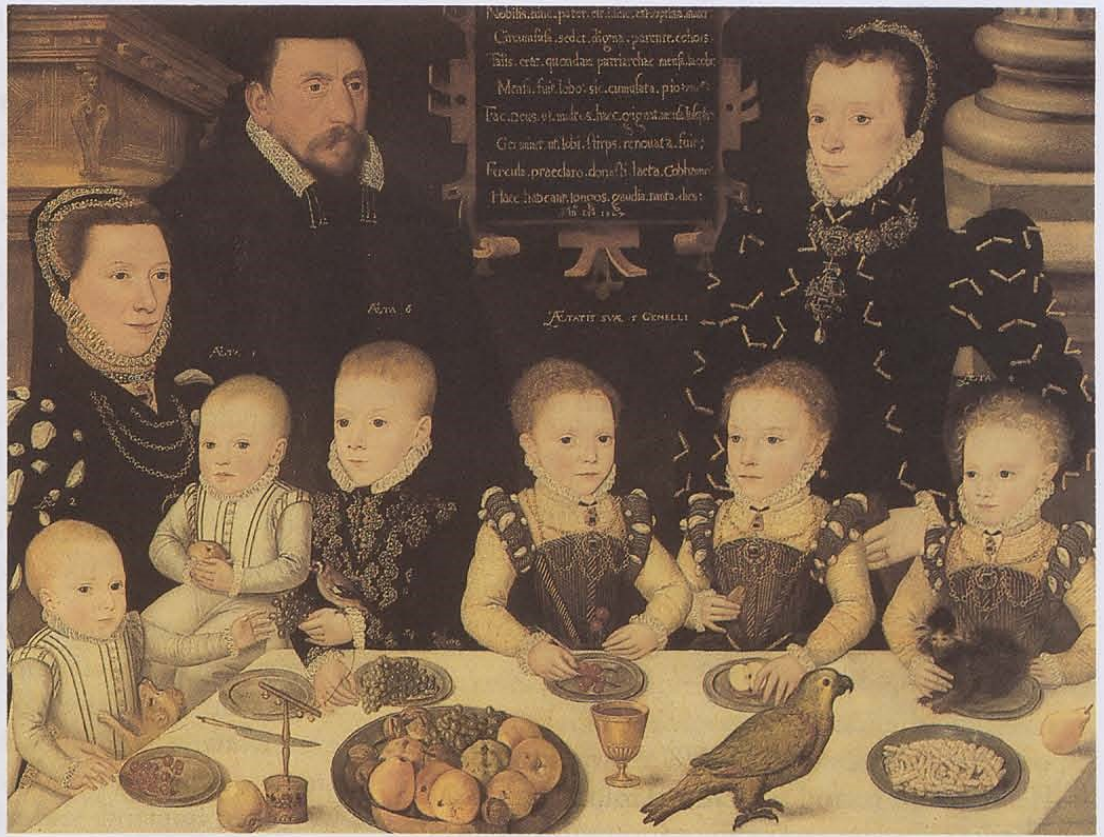
There were warning signs that the problem was growing. In 1536 large numbers of people from the north marched to London to show their anger at the dissolution of the monasteries. Their reasons were only partly religious. As life had become harder, the monasteries had given employment to many and provided food for the very poor. This “Pilgrimage of Grace”, as it was known, was cruelly

put down, and its leaders were executed. Without work to do, many people stole food in order to eat. It is thought that about 7,000 thieves were hanged during Henry VIII’s reign.

Efforts were made by government to keep order in a situation of rising unemployment. In 1547 Parliament gave magistrates the power to take any person who was without work and give him for two years to any local farmer who wanted to use him. Any person found homeless and unemployed a second time could be executed. It did not solve the crime problem. As one foreign visitor reported, “There are incredible numbers of robbers here, they go about in bands of twenty . . .”

In 1563 Parliament made JPs responsible for deciding on fair wages and working hours. A worker was expected to start at five o’clock in the morning and work until seven or eight at night with two and a half hours allowed for meals. In order to control the growing problem of wandering homeless people, workers were not allowed to move from the parish where they had been born without permission. But

A wealthy family in the 1560s. The girls in the centre are twins, but the family likeness of the others is evident. Children wore the same style of clothing as their parents. The dinner tables of the great and wealthy had become a good deal more orderly since the days of Sir Geoffrey Luttrell (see page 57). Parents often placed their children at the age of eight or nine in households of higher social standing. This offered the chance of an advantageous marriage later, and a rise in status and wealth.



already there were probably over 10,000 homeless people on the roads.

Good harvests through most of the century probably saved England from disaster, but there were bad ones between 1594 and 1597, making the problem of the poor worse again. In 1601 Parliament passed the first Poor Law. This made local people responsible for the poor in their own area. It gave power to JPs to raise money in the parish to provide food, housing and work for the poor and homeless of the same parish.

Many of the poor moved to towns, where there was a danger they would join together to fight against and destroy their rulers. The government had good reason to be afraid. In 1596, during the period of bad harvests, peasants in Oxfordshire rioted against the enclosures of common land. Apprentices in London rioted against the city authorities. The Elizabethan Poor Law was as much a symbol of authority as an act of kindness. It remained in operation until 1834.

The pattern of employment was changing. The production of finished cloth, the most important of England's products, reached its greatest importance during the sixteenth century. Clothmakers and merchants bought raw wool, gave it to spinners, who were mostly women and children in cottages, collected it and passed it on to weavers and other clothworkers. Then they sold it.

The successful men of this new capitalist class showed off their success by building magnificent houses and churches in the villages where they worked. England destroyed the Flemish cloth-making industry, but took advantage of the special skills of Flemish craftsmen who came to England.

The lives of rich and poor were very different. The rich ate good quality bread made from wheat, while the poor ate rough bread made from rye and barley. When there was not enough food the poor made their bread from beans, peas, or oats. The rich showed off their wealth in silk, woollen or linen clothing, while the poor wore simple clothes of leather or wool.

By using coal instead of wood fires, Tudor England learnt how to make greatly improved steel, necessary for modern weapons. Henry VIII replaced the longbow with the musket, an early kind of hand-held gun. Muskets were not as effective as longbows, but gunpowder and bullets were cheaper than arrows, and the men cheaper to train. Improved steel was used for making knives and forks, clocks, watches, nails and pins. Birmingham, by using coal fires to make steel, grew in the sixteenth century from a village into an important industrial city. In both Birmingham and Manchester ambitious members of the working and trading classes could now develop new industries, free from the controls placed on workers by the trade guilds in London and in many other older towns.

Coal was unpopular, but it burnt better than wood and became the most commonly used fuel, especially in London, the rapidly growing capital. In Henry VIII's reign London had roughly 60,000 inhabitants. By the end of the century this number had grown to almost 200,000. In 1560 London used 33,000 tons of coal from Newcastle, but by 1600 it used five times as much, and the smoke darkened the sky over London. A foreign ambassador wrote that the city stank, and was "the filthiest in the world".

## Domestic life

Foreign visitors were surprised that women in England had greater freedom than anywhere else in Europe. Although they had to obey their husbands, they had self-confidence and were not kept hidden in their homes as women were in Spain and other countries. They were allowed free and easy ways with strangers. As one foreigner delightedly noticed, "You are received with a kiss by all, when you leave you are sent with a kiss. You return and kisses are repeated."

However, there was a dark side to married life. Most women bore between eight and fifteen children, and many women died in childbirth. Those who did not saw half their children die at a

young age. No one dared hope for a long married life because the dangers to life were too great. For this reason, and because marriage was often an economic arrangement, deep emotional ties often seem to have been absent. When a wife died, a husband looked for another.

Both rich and poor lived in small family groups. Brothers and sisters usually did not live with each other or with their parents once they had grown up. They tried to find a place of their own. Over half the population was under twenty-five, while few were over sixty. Queen Elizabeth reached the age of seventy, but this was unusual. People expected to work hard and to die young. Poor children started work at the age of six or seven.

An Italian visitor to England gives an interesting view of English society in Tudor times: "The English are great lovers of themselves, and of everything belonging to them; they think that there are no other men than themselves, and no other world but England: and whenever they see a handsome foreigner, they say that 'he looks like an Englishman'." The English did not love their children, he thought, for "having kept them at home till they arrive at the age of seven or nine years at the most, they put them out, boys and girls, to hard service in the houses of other people, holding them to seven or eight years' hard service. They say they do it in order that their children might learn better manners. But I believe that they do it because they are better served by strangers than they would be by their own children."

In spite of the hard conditions of life, most people had a larger and better home to live in than ever before. Chimneys, which before had only been found in the homes of the rich, were now built in every house. This technical development made cooking and heating easier and more comfortable. For the first time more than one room could be used in winter.

Between 1530 and 1600 almost everyone doubled their living space. After 1570 the wealthy yeoman's family had eight or more rooms and workers' families had three rooms instead of one, and more furniture was used than ever before.

One group of people suffered particularly badly during the Tudor period. These were the unmarried women. Before the Reformation many of these women could become nuns, and be assured that in the religious life they would be safe and respected. After the dissolution of the monasteries, thousands became beggars on the roads of England. In future an unmarried woman could only hope to be a servant in someone else's house, or to be kept by her own family. She had little choice in life.

## Language and culture

At the beginning of the Tudor period English was still spoken in a number of different ways. There were still reminders of the Saxon, Angle, Jute and Viking invasions in the different forms of language spoken in different parts of the country. Since the time of Chaucer, in the mid-fourteenth century, London English, itself a mixture of south Midland and southeastern English, had become accepted as standard English. Printing made this standard English more widely accepted amongst the literate population. For the first time, people started to think of London pronunciation as "correct" pronunciation. One educator in Henry VIII's time spoke of the need to teach children to speak English "which is clean, polite, [and] perfectly . . . pronounced." Until Tudor times the local forms of speech had been spoken by lord and peasant alike. From Tudor times onwards the way people spoke began to show the difference between them. Educated people began to speak "correct" English, and uneducated people continued to speak the local dialect.

Literacy increased greatly during the mid-sixteenth century, even though the religious houses, which had always provided traditional education, had closed. In fact, by the seventeenth century about half the population could read and write.

Nothing, however, showed England's new confidence more than its artistic flowering during the Renaissance. England felt the effects of the Renaissance later than much of Europe because it was an island. In the early years of the sixteenth century English thinkers had become interested in

the work of the Dutch philosopher Erasmus. One of them, Thomas More, wrote a study of the ideal nation, called *Utopia*, which became extremely popular throughout Europe.

The Renaissance also influenced religion, encouraging the Protestant Reformation, as well as a freer approach to ways of thinking within the Catholic Church. In music England enjoyed its most fruitful period ever. There was also considerable interest in the new painters in Europe, and England developed its own special kind of painting, the miniature portrait.

Literature, however, was England's greatest art form. Playwrights like Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and William Shakespeare filled the theatres with their exciting new plays.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, and went to the local grammar school. His education was typical of the Tudor age, because at this time the "grammar" schools, which tried to teach "correct" English, became the commonest form of education. His plays were popular with both educated and uneducated people. Many of his plays were about English history, but he changed fact to suit public opinion.

Nothing shows the adventurous spirit of the age better than the "soldier poets". These were true Renaissance men who were both brave and cruel in war, but also highly educated. Sir Edmund Spenser, who fought with the army in Ireland, was one. Sir Philip Sidney, killed fighting the Spanish in the Netherlands, was another. A third was Sir Walter Raleigh, adventurer and poet. While imprisoned in the Tower of London waiting to be executed, he wrote a poem which describes how time takes away youth and gives back only old age and dust. It was found in his Bible after his execution:

Even such is time, that takes in trust  
Our youth, our joys, our all we have,  
And pays us but with earth and dust.  
Who, in the dark and silent grave,  
When we have wandered all our ways,  
Shuts up the story of our days.  
But from this earth, this grave, this dust,  
My God shall raise me up, I trust.