



# **SOCIETY IN THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

## **Teacher's Guide to the Exhibition**



Museum Plantin-Moretus/Prentenkabinet



KONINKLIJK  
MUSEUM  
VOOR SCHONE  
KUNSTEN  
ANTWERPEN



## **SOCIETY IN THE 17th CENTURY ENGLAND**



Source: <http://www.oldirishmaps.com/>

During the 17th century the population of England and Wales grew steadily. It was about 4 million in 1600 and it grew to about 5 1/2 million by 1700.

During the 17th century England became steadily richer. Trade and commerce grew and grew. By the late 17th century trade was an increasingly important part of the English economy. Meanwhile industries such as glass, brick making, iron and coal mining expanded rapidly. The status of merchants improved. People saw that trade was an increasingly important part of the

country's wealth so merchants became more respected. However political power and influence was held by rich landowners.

At the top of English society were the nobility. Below them were the gentry. Gentlemen were not quite rich but they were certainly well off. Below them were yeomen, farmers who owned their own land. Yeomen were comfortably off but they often worked alongside their men. Gentlemen did not do manual work! Below them came the mass of the population, craftsmen, tenant farmers and labourers.

At the end of the 17th century half the population could afford to eat meat every day. In other words about 50% of the people were wealthy or at least reasonably well off. Below them about 30% of the population could afford to eat meat between 2 and 6 times a week. They were 'poor'. The bottom 20% could only eat meat once a week. They were very poor. By an act of 1601 overseers of the poor were appointed by each parish. They had power to force people to pay a local tax to help the poor. Those who could not work such as the old and the disabled would be provided for. The overseers were meant to provide work for the able-bodied poor. Anyone who refused to work was whipped and, after 1610, they could be placed in a house of correction. Pauper's children were sent to local employers to be apprentices. On a more cheerful note in the 17th century in many towns wealthy people left money in their wills to provide almshouses where the poor could live.

## **A history of English society**

### **LONDON IN THE 17th CENTURY**



Source: <http://lewisvillegas.files.wordpress.com/>

In 1600 Westminster was separate from London. However in the early 17th century rich people built houses along the Thames between the two. In the late 17th century many grand houses were built west of London. Meanwhile working class houses were built east of the city. So as early as the 17th century London was divided into the affluent west end and the poor east end. 17th century towns were dirty and unsanitary. People threw dirty water and other rubbish in the streets. Furthermore the streets were very narrow. At night they were dark and dangerous. However there were some improvements in London. In the early 17th century a piped water supply was created. Water from a reservoir travelled along elm pipes through the streets then along lead pipes to individual houses.

In 1600 people in London walked from one street to another or if they could afford it they travelled by boat along the Thames. However from the early 17th century you could hire a horse drawn carriage called a hackney carriage to take you around London. In the 1680s the streets of London were lit for the first time. An oil lamp was hung outside every tenth house and was lit for part of the year. The oil lamps did not give much light but they were better than nothing at all.

During the 17th century towns grew much larger. That was despite outbreaks of plague. Fleas that lived on rats transmitted bubonic plague. If the fleas bit humans they were likely to fall

victim to the disease. Unfortunately at the time nobody knew what caused the plague and nobody had any idea how to treat it.

Plague broke out in London in 1603, 1636 and in 1665. Each time it killed a significant part of the population but each time London recovered. There were always plenty of poor people in the countryside willing to come and work in the town. Of course, other towns as well as London were also periodically devastated by the plague. However the plague of 1665, which affected London and other towns, was the last. We are not certain why.

### BANKING IN THE 17th CENTURY



Source: <http://al-faedah.blogspot.in/2012/08/the-origins-of-modern-banking.html>

Banking developed in the 17th century. In the early 17th century goldsmiths lent and changed money. Then in 1640 King Charles I confiscated gold, which London merchants had deposited at the mint for safety. Afterwards people began to deposit money with goldsmiths instead. The goldsmiths gave receipts for the gold in the form of notes promising to pay on demand.

In time merchants and tradesmen began to exchange these notes as a form of money. The goldsmiths realised that not all of their customers would withdraw their gold at the same time. So it was safe to issue notes for more gold than they actually had. They could then lend money using the extra notes. The Bank of England was founded in 1694.

### RICH PEOPLE'S HOMES IN THE 17th CENTURY

In the late 17th century furniture for the wealthy became more comfortable and much more finely decorated. In the early 17th century furniture was plain and heavy. It was usually made of oak. In the late 17th century furniture for the rich was often made of walnut or (from the 1680s) mahogany. It was decorated in new ways. One was veneering. (Thin pieces of expensive wood were laid over cheaper wood). Some furniture was also inlaid. Wood was carved out and the hollow was filled in with mother of pearl. At this time lacquering arrived in England. Pieces of furniture were





coated with lacquer in bright colours. Furthermore new types of furniture were introduced. In the mid 17th century chests of drawers became common. Grandfather clocks also became popular. Later in the century the bookcase was introduced. Chairs also became far more comfortable. Upholstered (padded and covered) chairs became common in wealthy people's homes. In the 1680s the first real armchairs appeared. In the early 17th century the architect Inigo Jones introduced the classical style of architecture (based on ancient Greek and Roman styles). He designed the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, which was the first purely classical building in England. The late 17th century was a great age of building grand country homes, displaying the wealth of the upper class at that time.

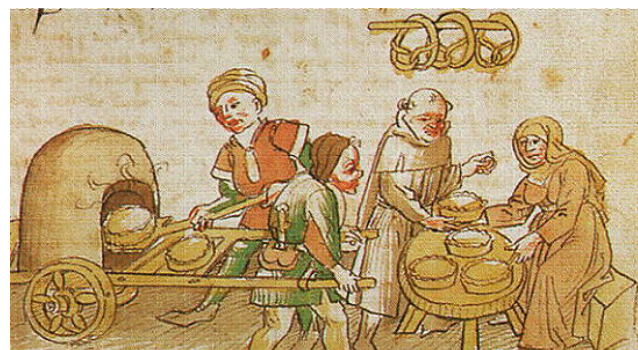
### **POOR PEOPLE'S HOMES IN THE 17th CENTURY**

However all the improvements in furniture did not apply to the poor. Their furniture, such as it was remained very plain and basic. However there were some improvements in poor people's houses in the 17th century. In the Middle Ages ordinary people's homes were usually made of wood. However in the late 16th and early 17th centuries many were built or rebuilt in stone or brick. By the late 17th century even poor people usually lived in houses made of brick or stone. They were a big improvement over wooden houses. They were warmer and drier. In the 16th century chimneys were a luxury. However during the 17th century chimneys became more common and by the late 17th century even the poor had them. Furthermore in 1600 glass windows were a luxury. Poor people made do with linen soaked in linseed oil. However during the 17th century glass became cheaper and by the late 17th century even the poor had glass windows.

In the early 17th century there were only casement windows (ones that open on hinges). In the later 17th century sash windows were introduced. They were in two sections and they slid up and down vertically to open and shut. Although poor people's homes improved in some ways they remained very small and crowded. Most of the poor lived in huts of 2 or 3 rooms. Some families lived in just one room.

### **FOOD IN THE 17th CENTURY**

In the early 17th century people began eating with forks for the first time. During the century new foods were introduced into England (for the rich) such as bananas and pineapples. New drinks were



Source: <http://www.godecookery.com/twotarts/twotarts.html>

introduced, chocolate, tea and coffee. In the late 17th century there were many coffee houses in the towns. Merchants and professional men met there to read newspapers and talk shop. The rich began eating ice cream. Many rich people built special underground chambers in the grounds of their houses for preserving ice during the summer. The ice was covered in straw to preserve it. The poor food remained plain and monotonous. They subsisted on food like bread, cheese and onions. Ordinary people also ate pottage each day. This was a kind of stew. It was made by boiling grain in water to make a kind of porridge. You added vegetables and (if you could afford it) pieces of meat or fish.

### CLOTHES IN THE 17th CENTURY



Source: <http://theatrecostrumes.webs.com/timeline6.jpg>

At the beginning of the 17th century men wore starched collars called ruffs. Women wore frames made of wood or whalebone under their dresses. However the farthingale was soon discarded and the ruff evolved into a large lace collar (for those who could afford it!). In the 17th century men wore knee length, trouser like garments called breeches. They also wore stockings and boots. On the upper body men wore linen shirts. In the early 17th century they wore a kind of jacket called a doublet with a cape on top. Men wore their hair long. They also wore beards. In the late 17th century a man's doublet became a waistcoat and men wore a frock coat over it. With breeches it was rather like a three-piece suit. Men were now clean shaven and they wore wigs. Women wore a linen nightie like garment called a shift. Over it they wore long dresses. The dress was in two parts the bodice and the skirt. Sometimes women wore two skirts. The upper skirt was gathered up to reveal an underskirt. Women in the 17th century did not wear knickers. From the mid 17th century it was fashionable for women to wear black patches on their faces such as little stars or crescent moons.

### PASTIMES IN THE 17th CENTURY

The 17th century traditional pastimes were cards, bowls, games like tennis and shuttlecock . People also played board games like chess, draughts, backgammon and fox and goose. The wealthy also played a game called pale-maille. Charles II also made yachting a popular sport. The theatre remained popular. However the Puritans disapproved of the theatre and in 1642 they banned it completely. Theatre began again in 1660. In the early 17th century the stage jutted out into the audience. In the late 17th century it took on its modern form. In the early 17th century, boys played women's parts. However after 1660 actresses performed.



Source: <http://www.historyextra.com/feature/bad-sports-puritan-attempts-ban-games-17th-century-england>

Among the poor cruel 'sports' like cock fighting and bull and bear baiting were popular. (A bear or bull was chained to a post and dogs were trained to attack it).

The first English newspaper was printed in 1641. The first womens magazine was The Ladies Mercury in 1693.

### EDUCATION IN THE 17th CENTURY

In well off families both boys and girls went to a form of infant school called a petty school. Upper class girls (and sometimes boys) were taught by tutors. Middle class girls might be taught by their mothers. Moreover during the 17th century boarding schools for girls were founded in many towns. In them girls were taught subjects like writing, music and needlework. (It was considered more important for girls to learn 'accomplishments' than to study academic subjects). Only boys went to grammar school. In the grammar schools conditions were hard. Boys started work at 6 or 7 in the morning and worked to 5 or 5.30 pm, with breaks for meals. Corporal punishment was usual. Normally the teacher hit naughty boys on the bare buttocks with birch twigs. Other boys in the class would hold the naughty boy down.

## **TRANSPORT IN THE 17th CENTURY**

In 1600 the royal posts were exclusively used to carry the king's correspondence. However in 1635, to raise money, Charles I allowed members of the public to pay his messengers to carry letters. This was the start of the royal mail.

From the middle of the 17th century stagecoaches ran regularly between the major English towns. They were very expensive and they must have been very uncomfortable without springs on rough roads. There was also the danger of highwaymen. In 1663 the first Turnpike roads opened. You had to pay to use them. The money was used to maintain the roads.

In towns wealthy people were carried in sedan chairs.

In Tudor times goods were carried by packhorse or carriers with carts carried goods. It was still easier to transport goods by water. Around Britain there was a 'coastal trade'. Ships and boats carried goods from one part of the coast to another.

## **17th CENTURY MEDICINE**

During the 17th century operations were performed by barber-surgeons. Their knowledge of anatomy improved. Medicine also improved. In 1628 William Harvey published his discovery of how blood circulates around the body. Doctors also discovered how to treat malaria with bark from the cinchona tree. However medicine was still handicapped by wrong ideas about the human body.

The average life span in the 17th century was shorter than today. Average life expectancy at birth was only 35. That does not mean that people dropped dead when they reached that age! Instead many of the people born died while they were still children. Out of all people born between one third and one half died before the age of about 16. However if you could survive to your mid-teens you would probably live to your 50s or early 60s. Even in Stuart times some people did live to their 70s or 80s.

## **17th CENTURY WARFARE**

In the early 17th century firearms were either matchlocks or wheel locks. A matchlock held a slow burning match, which was touched to the powder when the trigger was pulled. With a wheel lock a metal wheel spun against iron pyrites making sparks. During the 17th century both of these were gradually replaced by the flintlock which worked by hitting a piece of flint and steel making sparks.



Furthermore in the early 17th century the cartridge was invented. The musket ball was placed in a container, which held the right amount of gunpowder to fire it. The soldier no longer had to measure powder from a powder horn into his gun.

Apart from artillery there were two branches of an army. The cavalry were usually armed with wheellock pistols and sabres. They were protected by back plates, breastplates and helmets. The infantry consisted men armed with muskets and those armed with pikes. A musket took a long time to reload and the soldiers were very vulnerable while they did so. Therefore they were protected by men with pikes (a weapon like a long spear). In theory there were two musketeers to each pike man. The pike men usually had a steel helmet but musketeers did not usually wear armour. About 1680 the bayonet was invented. With bayonet fixed a musket could be used as a weapon even if it had been fired and was not reloaded. The bayonet did away with the need for pike men.