

The Poor in Tudor Times

Where they lived

A poor family's house was usually one small room with a hole in the wall for a window (which might have a closing wooden shutter). They slept on straw or straw-filled mattresses with only a blanket to keep themselves warm. Furniture was simple; a wooden table, some stools and maybe one wooden bed, and a one or more wooden chests to keep everything in. They would also have an iron cooking pot, to hang/sit over the fire and some wooden bowls and mugs. The cottage floor was usually just beaten earth. Very poor people had cob houses, where the walls were made from a mixture of mud, lime and straw. The cheapest wooden frame for house making was the cruckframe. This was an upside-down tree which had grown into a 'V'-shape. Two frames were needed for a house, one at each end of the building. The walls of these houses were filled in with wattle and daub. A mixture of woven branches and plaster made of mud and straw. Cottage roofs were made of thatch. The poor often had to share their home with their animals (it was warmer, and cheaper than having a separate barn). The room would be divided by a fence to keep the animals at one end. The houses were damp and draughty and filled with smoke as they had no chimneys. The smoke went out through a hole in the thatch.

The only water would come from a well or stream and would have to be fetched in buckets, this made it difficult to keep everything (including themselves) clean. The loo would be a hedge or an outside hut away from the house and rubbish was just thrown onto a 'midden' where the pigs and hens would find anything worth scavenging. It's not surprising that people were lucky to live to the age of 30 and the death rate for children was 8 out of 9, many died because they did not have enough to eat.

How they lived

When Henry VIII became King poor people could get help from the monasteries and even if you were very poor you usually had a little bit of land to keep an animal or two on and enough to grow food for yourself. There were many farm labourers who either rented a cottage and got paid wages by the farmer or got a cottage in return for working for the farmer. A farm labourer was paid 6d a day (2p) and a loaf 2d (1p). You could live off your land and anything you could find in the hedges and woods. You had milk, butter and eggs from your animals and could hunt rabbits. In your pottages (vegetable stews made from roots, seeds, leaves, berries) you could have some bacon from your pig. Your bread was not white and fluffy but was made from rye or barley flour or from ground acorns and was very dense and dirty-coloured. You would drink ale you had made yourself. If you got ill you would use herbs (from your garden or the woods) to treat yourself.

You would get up when the sun came up and go to bed when the sun set. The only light in your house came from the fire or from rushlights (candles made from reeds dipped in animal fat) which gave off very little light and stank.

The children of poor people did not go to school: as soon as they were old enough they went out to work, either helping their parents look after their animals or working for the farmer, picking up stones, guarding animals. The girls worked as well, but were expected to spend more time at home learning to spin and weave.



Poor people seldom had more than one or two sets of clothes and these they washed rarely and wore until they fell apart. Poor men would wear a shirt with breeches (short trousers) and a jerkin (waistcoat). Sleeves were separate and were tied onto the jerkin in colder weather. They would have a knee length woollen cloak for cold weather. Women had a plain gown with a top and skirt (shorter than at court to keep out of the mud) and a petticoat or two. They had to work hard and needed to be able to move freely.

Life was not all hard work however. There were lots of holy days to celebrate and on Mayday everybody celebrated the coming of Spring with dancing around the Maypole and eating and drinking. Football was just as popular then as now but the pitch was the distance from one end of a village to the other or from one village to another and everybody joined in. The ball was made from a blown-up pig's bladder. Cruel sports were popular and were easily arranged; dog-fighting, cock-fighting, pig baiting, bull baiting and even bear baiting. They also enjoyed wrestling, archery, swimming, in the river, and cudgel play, where two people would try to hit each other over the head first with a heavy stick!

Two things happened that made more and more people poor and even homeless. The monasteries were closed and the big landowners began to keep sheep (wool was wanted by Europe). They need to fence in their land to stop the sheep wandering and they threw the poor people out of their houses. They also needed fewer labourers to help them.

The 'dispossessed' poor were forced to wander through the country and towns trying to find work in the countryside or in towns. Many poor looked hard for jobs but many of those wandering (vagrants) decided to live by robbery and violence. Throughout the Tudor period the number of beggars and robbers increased (especially in London and other big cities), despite the nasty punishments you could be given if caught. Just for being homeless you could be whipped and branded with a 'V' for vagrant meaning someone who was too lazy to work. If you begged because you were desperate you were whipped until you bled. For stealing a small item you could end up in the stocks where you were pelted with disgusting things by onlookers or even (if it was worth a shilling, 5p) hanged.

It was obvious that something had to be done and it was decided to tax rich people and make them pay something to help the poor (in 1572). The only problem was that the only place you could get help was the village you were born in or had lived in and if you asked for help elsewhere you would be sent back. This meant that you could get some help but you still had nowhere to live and no job.