

Teesdale u3a

February's meeting of the Historic Environment Group

Life in Elizabethan England 1558-1603

A talk by Marilyn Anderson, report by Celia Chapple

Elizabeth came to the throne at the age of twenty-six, inheriting a society with religious and social problems, and divided by extremes - wealth and poverty, with little in between. Through words and detailed pictures, Marilyn illustrated a life in an unpredictable society. The hierarchy was clear: God was supreme followed by royalty and then peasants. Queen Elizabeth created her own religion, Protestantism, eliminating rule by the Pope and bishops with their Latin texts and saints. The prayer book was in the Queens' English with little heed to the saints, and an oath of allegiance was taken to the Queen as governor.

The wealthy spent money on colourful clothing fabrics worn in layers with embroidery and sewn-in jewels. Peasants wore brown and green muslin or wool, and leather boots with wooden soles. However, no-one escaped the bed bugs, lice and fleas which were rampant in bedding, clothing and wigs. Bedding was wrapped tightly in boxes to suffocate the fleas.

The threat of death was always around the corner as no-one was exempt from the plagues. Quarter of a million people died in her reign. Little was known of the cause or cure of illnesses such as rickets, scurvy, TB and 'the sweating fever,' or of the role that poor sanitation played. Vegetable matter, faeces and meat scraps were swept onto the streets. In addition, famine hit the poor. The penalty for quite small misdemeanours such as stealing bread or poaching could result in a public hanging.

The Queen died leaving a legacy of £300k in contrast to the £300k debt she inherited, with a merchant 'middle class' developing. Her 45-year reign was one of change as she confidently made her mark although global travel also brought new ideas. Woodland shrunk as it was made over to farmland and timber usage. Public latrines were established in 1568. More public schools were established between 1560 and 1590 although teachers were given a lowly status as were servants. Art, music and dance were revived (since Henry VIII's destruction of monasteries) and plays, Morris Dancing and madrigals are some examples we know from Elizabethan England.

Marilyn's thoroughly researched talk held the group's interest from beginning to end, ranging from gruesome to fascinating and intimate details of the life of Elizabethan rich and poor.

The next meeting will be on **Thursday 13th March** at Enterprise House (starting at 10am promptly).

Details of all u3a interest groups can be found on our website: www.teesdaleu3a.org.uk