Queen Elizabeth the First

An unlikely queen?

Queen Elizabeth the First was born in 1533. She was the daughter of King Henry the Eighth and his second wife, Anne Boleyn.

Today, we think of her as one of the most successful and popular of all Kings and Queens. But when Elizabeth was a child, it seemed unlikely that she would ever get to be Queen at all. There were several people with a better claim to the throne than her - including her half-brother Edward, and her half-sister Mary.

Fact

A very royal family

Elizabeth’s half-brother Edward became King Edward the Sixth, and her half-sister Mary became Queen Mary the First.

Elizabeth’s long reign

However, both Edward and Mary died young, and so Elizabeth was crowned Queen in January 1559. She reigned for nearly 50 years, until her death in 1603.

Elizabeth was loved and admired, even though some people had originally thought that it would be impossible for a woman to be a good ruler. Many important writers, artists and explorers lived and worked during Elizabeth’s reign – playwrights, the most popular of whom was William Shakespeare, musicians such as John Dowland and explorers such as Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake.

The Queen loved to entertain in style, and dressed in richly decorated clothes and expensive jewellery. As we find out in the story, she also enjoyed plays and other entertainments.

Fact

A royal nickname

Queen Elizabeth the First was very popular. Lots of people thought she represented everything that was powerful, royal and good about their country. They called her Gloriana to show how important she was.

Queen Elizabeth the First saw many ups and downs in her long reign. For more detail about her life, take a look at some of the websites listed at the end.
William Shakespeare

Mystery man

Shakespeare is one of the most famous and best-loved playwrights of all time, but we don’t know very much about his life. We do know that he was born in 1564 in Stratford on Avon, Warwickshire. We also know that when Shakespeare was 18, he married Anne Hathaway. They went on to have three children - Susannah, and the twins Hamnet and Judith.

Success in London

Shakespeare worked as both an actor and a playwright. His plays were performed in London by a company of actors called the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (after Queen Elizabeth died, and James I came to the throne, they changed their name to the King’s Men). During his lifetime, Shakespeare was famous and successful both as an actor and as a writer of plays. He died on April 23 1616.

Still with us today

The role of dictator was meant to last for just a couple of years. But in 44 BC Caesar made himself dictator for life. In fact, he had become a sort of king. But this was completely against the rules of the Roman Republic, and there were plenty of senators who wanted to stop him.

In March 44 BC, Caesar was stabbed by a group of senators as he entered the Senate. He was alone and unarmed, and he died at once.

Fact

Famous plays

Thirty-seven of Shakespeare’s plays still survive today, the most famous of which include Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, King Lear, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Tempest and Othello.

Playhouses at the time of Queen Elizabeth

- There were no theatres (called playhouses) until 1576. Plays used to be performed in places like inns - they would often take place outside in the inn yard.

- The first purpose-built theatre was called The Theatre! It was in Shoreditch in London, and it was built like an open-air amphitheatre, with three tiers of seats. The stage was covered so that if it rained, at least the players wouldn’t get wet (though the audience might!).

- By the time that Shakespeare was writing there were a number of rival theatres in London. Alongside The Theatre there was also The Curtain and The Globe. All three theatres have long since been destroyed, but a modern replica of the Elizabethan Globe Theatre stages all Shakespeare’s plays in the middle of busy 21st century London. Visiting it, it’s a bit like stepping back in time!

- If you do visit the Globe Theatre at Bankside, in London, you can find out at first hand what an Elizabethan theatre might have been like. Although the Globe was only built in 1997, it is an accurate reconstruction of the original Elizabethan Globe Theatre which once stood on the same site. Like the old Globe Theatre, it has a covered stage but the area where the audience stands is open to the air. If you go to see a play on a rainy day, it’s best to take your raincoat!
• The original Globe Theatre had a thatched roof over the stage and the area where important people sat. Unfortunately, in 1613 the thatched roof caught fire during a performance of Shakespeare’s play *Henry the Eighth*. The fire was caused by a stage cannon used in a battle scene. It took less than two hours for the whole theatre to burn down to the ground! Not surprisingly, when the theatre was rebuilt, the builders gave it a tiled roof.

• Ladies and girls could not act in plays (which is why boys like Jack – and even Kipper – ended up playing female parts). However, ladies were allowed to go and watch plays. They sometimes wore a veil or even a mask when they were at the theatre though, and it would be at least another 100 years before they could act on the stage.

Some more websites to explore

• A British Library webpage with information about playhouses in the time of Shakespeare: http://www.bl.uk/treasures/shakespeare/playhouses.html

• The website of the Globe Theatre at Bankside, London, where you can find out about this modern reconstruction of an Elizabethan theatre: http://www.shakespeares-globe.org/

• A website where you can see a range of portraits of Queen Elizabeth the First, with information about her: http://www.marileecody.com/eliz1-images.html

• A BBC web page about Queen Elizabeth the First: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/elizabeth_i_01.shtml

• A game on the BBC website that explores a Tudor street scene: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/walk/flash/tudor.html

• A BBC website with a brief biography of Shakespeare: http://www.bbc.co.uk/coventry/features/local-history/history-view-shakespeare-biography.shtml

• A Royal Shakespeare Company web page about Shakespeare’s London: http://www.rsc.org.uk/explore/shakespeare/london.aspx