

What was life like in Tudor London?

Tudor London (1485–1603) was the largest city in the country and was growing fast. Its population quadrupled from around 50,000 people in 1500 to 200,000 in 1600. This was due to the huge number of people moving to London from elsewhere in the country and abroad.

London was a popular place to live as it was the hub of trade and industry, the home of government and the royal court, and the centre for literature and the arts. However, the population growth led to over-crowding, poor sanitation, disease, bad housing and crime. Though London was the home of the wealthiest people, it also had many of the poorest.

How big was Tudor London?

The first maps of London were made in the Tudor period and they tell us a lot about what London was like. This map from 1574 shows the City of London in the centre, with Westminster on the left and Southwark at the bottom. London was quite small – only about three miles (nearly five kilometres) long from the Tower of London in the east to Westminster Palace in the west. The City of London, inside the ancient walls, was crowded with narrow, winding streets. London was surrounded by fields – it would only take about 20 minutes to walk from the City centre to the countryside.

Between the City and Westminster, along the street known today as the Strand, was a row of palaces which belonged to rich noblemen. They had beautiful gardens which stretched down to the Thames riverside.

There was only one bridge across the River Thames in London: London Bridge. The bridge was very busy with traffic, so the quickest way to get across the river was by boat, which cost one penny.



Map of Tudor London dating to 1574

Children in Tudor London



Hand-knitted woollen mitten, 1500s, found in Finsbury

Tudor London was a dangerous place for children due to the risk of disease. Many children died when they were very young. Objects found in London show that Tudor parents cared deeply for their children. They bought their children toys and carefully knitted clothes, like this mitten, to keep them warm in winter. The mitten was probably lost by a child one winter while out playing in the fields outside the City walls.

While most poor children did not have a chance to attend school, families with more money could pay for children to be taught by the parish clerk or at a grammar school such as St Paul's. School days were long: from 7am until 5pm in the winter and 6am until 6pm in the summer. Lessons involved lots of reading aloud and learning by rote and children were beaten if they got things wrong.

At about 14 years old, children could become apprentices to learn a trade. Apprenticeships lasted for seven years – apprentices worked for free in return for food, clothes and a bed.

About 2,000 children were pin makers in Tudor London. Masters employed children because they were cheap labour and had small, quick fingers.

How healthy were Tudor Londoners?

Tudor Londoners suffered from a great number of diseases in their over-crowded city. Sweating sickness, smallpox, tuberculosis, plague, typhus, cholera and dysentery were all common.

Hospitals were run by monasteries. When King Henry VIII closed England's monasteries in the 1530s, it meant that the hospitals also closed, such as St Mary Spital in Spitalfields. Some were re-opened by the City authorities.

Apothecaries sold medicines and barber-surgeons dealt with wounds, set broken bones, and pulled out rotten teeth. Medical knowledge was limited and doctors were expensive, so many people did not get any medical care when they were ill, or they treated themselves at home. The King helped to cure many people suffering from the skin disease scrofula. He touched them and gave them a gold coin like this one to protect them.



Gold coin, 1509–1538

Theatres and taverns

One of the most popular Tudor entertainments was to visit the theatre. The first purpose-built theatre opened in Shoreditch in 1576. It was called The Theatre. Soon other theatres were built on the south bank of the Thames in Southwark. This painting of London in the 1630s to 1650s shows four theatres (from left to right): the Swan (built 1595), the Hope (1614), the Rose (1587) and the Globe (1599). Each theatre has a flag flying to show that a play was on that day.

Southwark was also famous for its many alehouses and taverns where people could drink ale and beer. The City also had over 1,000 alehouses by 1613. The authorities were worried about fights and other problems caused by people drinking too much.



Painting of London, 1630s–1650s

Rich and poor

London was a great place to make money, which is why thousands of people moved there in the 1500s. This is a portrait of a butcher called Gamaliel Pye who came to London from Northamptonshire to look for work. He became very rich and was in charge of the London meat markets. Wealthy people like Gamaliel Pye helped to look after London's poor by giving them money and food.

London's religious houses had cared for the poor until they were closed in the 1530s. Without help from the monasteries many people had to beg for food. From 1552 the people who lived in each London parish were asked to give money to the poor in their area. As well as paying this 'poor rate', Gamaliel Pye left money in his will so that beef, coal and loaves of bread could be handed out to the poor for five years after he died.



Portrait of Gamaliel Pye, a wealthy London butcher who lived from around 1514 to 1596

Most people in Tudor London lived until they were 35 to 40 years old, though rich people often lived longer.

See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, both on display and in store. Go to

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections

The Medieval London website for more information on Tudor London:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/medievallondon

Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank.

Further reading

Picard, L., *Elizabeth's London. Everyday Life in Elizabethan London*, (Phoenix, 2004)

Ross, C. & Clark, J. (eds.), *London. The Illustrated History*, (Penguin, 2008)

Visit the Museum

There are displays on early Tudor London in the Medieval London gallery at Museum of London.

There are displays on later Tudor London in the War, Plague & Fire gallery at the Museum of London.