

Household & Family Session 8 – Illness & Old Age

"Were there changes in attitudes towards the elderly and to death?"

Old Age

In the Early Modern period, "Old age" was the stage between the ages of 50 and 62, while the years from 62 until death were the "crooked age", a period, as **Shakespeare** put it in 'As You Like It' of: *"second childishness and mere oblivion: sans teeth, sans taste, sans everything."*

(Quote 1) Though life expectancy was generally low by modern standards, some examples of extreme longevity are recorded in the period. The **Manchester Mercury**, 13th March 1759, reported: *"At an entertainment given by the Master of the Talbot Inn, at Ripley, in Surrey, on Shrove Tuesday last, to twelve of his neighbours, inhabitants of the said parish, and who lived within five hundred yards distance, the age of the whole amounted to one thousand and eighteen years. What is most remarkable, one of the Company is the mother of twelve children, the youngest of whom is 60. She has within the fortnight walked to Guildford and back again (which is 12 miles) in one day. Another has worked as a journeyman with his master (a shoemaker, who dined with him) 49 years. They all enjoyed their senses and not one made use of a crutch."*

(Quote 2) And in the **Chelmsford and Colchester Chronicle**, 18th March 1768: *"From Alford in Cheshire we learn that one Edward Parker and his wife are now living in a cottage near that place, whose ages make 218 years, the man being 112 and the woman 106 years old."*

(Quote 3) And the **Chelmsford Chronicle**, 4th June 1779: *"A few days since died near Wirworth, in Derbyshire, James Simpson, commonly known by the name of Juggler, in the 114th year of his age. He sheared corn last summer and could see nearly as well as ever he could in his life. He worked till about a week before his death."*

However, old age often brought poverty, particularly among women. A census carried out in Norwich in 1570 recorded 68% of women over the age of 61 being classed as poor.

In the late 16th and early 17th centuries, there was a growth in the provision of privately endowed alms-houses for the poor, some of which continue to offer sheltered housing for the elderly today.

IMAGE – SHERBURN HOSPITAL, DURHAM CITY

Relatively few old people lived as lodgers, known as "sojourners" or "tablers", in the households of their married children. Throughout the period, some 80% of people of all social classes over the age of 60 were the head of their household or their spouse. Only a small minority of parents lived long enough to be an economic burden on their children.

Death

IMAGE – DEVIL TAKING DYING MAN’S SOUL, 1508

Death was a common occurrence at all ages, not just among the old.

(Table 1 - Life expectation at Birth)

The new-born were most at risk, with 18% mortality among one to five year olds. Disease was the greatest killer, but a proportion of infant deaths among the poor were caused by smothering in shared beds. Between a quarter and one third of all children died before the age of 15.

The rural elite who survived to the age of 21 could expect to live into their early 60s, except during period of high mortality due to diseases such as bubonic plague and influenza. It has been estimated that some 6% of the population of England died during a 'flu epidemic in 1558.

From the 1750s, life expectation among the “better” and the “middling sort” rose to the late 60s.

The Verneys of Middle Clayton, Buckinghamshire provide an example of the high rates of mortality in a rural elite family during the 17th century.

In 1625 the mayor of Abingdon and his wife both died of the plague, leaving their daughter Mary as a 7 year old orphan. Relatives bought her wardenship from the Crown and sold her at the age of 13 to Sir Edmund Verney, to be married to his 16 year old son and heir, Ralph.

Ralph Verney lived to the age of 83 but Mary died aged only 34, having given birth to six children. Of the six, two died in infancy and two when aged 4 and 8.

IMAGE – MARY VERNEY, Aged 18 in 1636 (Pregnant)

This painting shows Mary at the age of 18, pregnant with her third child, her son Edmund, who survived into adulthood, married and produced three children.

He lived to the age of 52, but his eldest son died unmarried of a fever at the age of 20 in his father’s lifetime. The second son died of a fever four years later, unmarried and aged only 22. The surviving daughter died in childbirth at the age of 21. Her baby died a month later.

At the age of 40, Ralph’s second son, John married a 16 year old girl. She bore him four children, who all lived, but she died after only six years of marriage, at the age of 22. Six years later, now aged 52, John married the 31 year old daughter of a baronet. She produced a child who died almost immediately and a year later, once again pregnant, she succumbed to smallpox and died after only two years of marriage. John married a third time, this year a 25 year old who lived, but failed to produce any children.

Hygiene and Sanitation

Throughout our period, there was a general lack of hygiene, even among the elite.

(Quote 4) When the Great Plague hit London in 1665, **the court of King Charles II** fled: *"leaving at their departure their excrements in every corner, in chimneys, studies, coal-houses, cellars."*

Town ditches were used as latrines, butchers slaughtered animals in their shops and threw the offal into the street outside, decomposing bodies of the rich in their vaults beneath the churches stank out the congregations and the poor were laid side by side in common pits.

(Quote 5) Dr. Johnson remarked in 1742:

"London is a city which abounds with such heaps of filth as a savage would look on with amazement."

Despite periods of poor harvests, famine did not cause a significant number of deaths in England during the early modern period, though malnutrition made the population more susceptible to disease.

Infant and child mortality rates dropped in the second half of the 18th century, and life expectation rose in general.

Major factors in the decline in early deaths included improved medical practices, better personal hygiene aided by the developing chemical industry producing a variety of soaps and detergents, and the so-called "great re-clothing" that took place in the 18th century due to the availability of cheap and easily washed cotton and linen clothing.

Sanitary conditions in London improved from the 1750s, with the introduction of local regulations covering public hygiene and sewage disposal.

IMAGE – NATIONAL CONVENIENCES, GILRAY. 1796

A Gilray cartoon of 1796, titled "National Conveniences" ridiculed foreign hygiene standards by illustrating the English water closet, the Scotch bucket, the French latrine and the Dutch lake!

Medical Practice

Medical practice at the beginning of our period was bound up with superstition and depended heavily on the use of herbal remedies, leeches, blood-letting and purges.

Medicine was still based on the works of the Roman physician Galen, who believed that the body is ruled by four humours, which determine your personality and how you react to various diseases.

TABLE – “The Humours”

Blood/Sanguine	= hot	= fiery disposition
Phlegm	= cold	= calm temper
Yellow bile	= dry	= bad tempered
Black bile	= moist	= melancholy disposition

Surgery was primitive and considered to be a very lowly form of doctoring that was generally left in the hands of barbers.

In 1658, Samuel Pepys survived an operation to remove a stone from his bladder. In the absence of anaesthetic, the only pain-killer administered was a concoction of rose-water with white of egg and liquorice.

Some years later, Pepys met the recipient of one of the earliest blood-transfusions.

IMAGE – 17th CENTURY BLOOD TRANSFUSION

The Royal Society hired a young Cambridge divinity student called Arthur Coga to receive half a pint of sheep’s blood, for the payment of 20 shillings. When asked the significance of the blood being from a sheep, he is supposed to have replied that, as a divinity student, it was appropriate as Christ was the Lamb of God. Pepys met him at a dinner a week later and described him as being “*cracked a little in his head*”.

IMAGE – WILLIAM HARVEY, 1578-1657

In 1628, William Harvey made the major discovery that blood circulates through the body, pumped by valves in the heart.

Plague

There were several outbreaks of bubonic plague in England during the 16th and early 17th centuries.

Between 1545 and 1631, a total of 1,632 residents of Loughborough in Leicestershire are recorded as having died of plague. The town's population in any year during the period was probably between 1,300 and 1,500 people.

(Quote 6) During the last major epidemic in 1631, **John Browne, the Vicar of Loughborough**, wrote to the Mayor of Leicester:

“These are to certify whom it may concern that the shattered town of Loughborough is not so dangerous as by some may be considered, in as much as there are but only three houses visited by he plague, being all of them small tenements, and being in a back lane or place far remote from our market place or any common passage, being inhabited by poor people. And there are dead of the sickness as is supposed only eleven persons in all men, women and children, on the space of seven weeks since first the infection began.”

The parish records show that the total death toll to plague that year was, in fact, 135.

It is estimated that over 30% of the population of Newcastle died in an outbreak of plague in 1636, but 1665 is probably the most notorious plague year in our period.

IMAGE – GREAT PLAGUE OF LONDON 1665

The Great Plague that had devastated London spread to other parts of the country in the summer of 1665. The disease was carried in a parcel of cloth that arrived from London at the tailor's workshop of George Vicars, in the village of Eyam (“Eem”) in Derbyshire.

IMAGE – MEMORIAL TO SOME OF EYAM'S PLAGUE VICTIMS

The plague raged for 14 months, and claimed the lives of at least 260 inhabitants, but the people of Eyam chose voluntary quarantine and avoided all contact with neighbouring settlements until the disease had done its worst. Food and other supplies were left at boundary stones on the outskirts of the village. Coins were disinfected in vinegar and left as payment for the goods. The sacrifice of the villagers of Eyam prevented the epidemic from spreading to other villages in the district.

Malaria (Ague), Typhus (Gaol-Fever), Cholera, Consumption and Smallpox

We generally associate malaria with tropical countries, but it thrived in marshy areas of England, even during what has been called the “Little Ice Age”, between the 1560s and the 1730s, when winters and springs were outstandingly cold and wet. In the winter of 1657/8, for instance, snow lay in parts of England for a total of 102 days. The “Little Ice Age” was responsible for the dire harvests in the 1580s, 1590s and 1630s and the consequent periods of dearth.

Malaria was known in England as the “ague”, and it remained quite common in certain parts of the country until the mid-18th century.

(Quote 7) Daniel Defoe described how:

“Our London men of pleasure ... go from London on purpose for the pleasure of shooting, but those gentlemen who .. go so far for it, often return with an Essex ague on their backs, which they find a heavier load than the fowls they have shot.”

Visitors to marshy parishes in counties like Essex and Kent remarked on the sallow, sickly faces and swollen bellies of the children.

(Quote 8) Those who lived all their lives in marshy areas built up a certain level of immunity. **Defoe** observed:

“a strange decay of the female sex here ... it was very frequent to meet with men that had had from five to six, to fourteen or fifteen wives. The reason .. was this; that they being bred in the marshes themselves, and seasoned to the place, did pretty well with it; but that they always went into the hilly country .. for a wife: that when they took the young lasses out of the wholesome and fresh air, they were healthy, fresh and clear, and well; but when they came out of their native air into the marshes .. they presently changed their complexion, got an ague or two, and seldom held it above half a year, a year at most, and then ... the men would go to the uplands again, and fetchd another so that marrying of wives was reckoned a good kind of farm to them.”

(Quote 9) Although he did not appreciate that mosquitoes were the carrier of the disease, **Thomas Sydenham** did recognise a link when he wrote in his book on fevers, in 1666:

“When insects do swarm extraordinarily and when ... agues appear early, as about midsummer, then autumn proves very sickly”.

Sydenham recommended the use of cinchona powder, which came from the bark of a species of South American tree and contained quinine.

IMAGE – CINCHONA or “JESUIT’S BARK”

It was commonly known as “Jesuit’s Powder”, because its use was first championed by Jesuit Cardinal Lugo. This association with Popery meant that Protestant physicians were prejudiced against its use. In September 1658, the ague claimed the life of Oliver Cromwell, who refused to use this “popish cure”.

The remedy was eventually popularised by Robert Talbor, who was appointed as Royal Physician to King Charles II in 1672. Talbor used the powder to cure the King of a bout of ague in 1678. He was knighted for his services and later went on to cure Louis XIV of France and the Queen of Spain.

Typhus, Tuberculosis and Smallpox

Outbreaks of typhus were also common throughout our period.

Typhus first appeared in England at the end of the 15th century. It was often called “gaol fever” or “ship fever” because it thrived particularly in places where people lived close together in insanitary conditions.

It was generally believed that infectious diseases like typhus and cholera were caused by inhaling noxious vapours, or “miasma”, rising from rivers and marshes. In fact, typhus was carried by fleas and lice.

Tuberculosis was responsible for about 20% of deaths in 17th century London. It gained its common name of “consumption” because the victim was almost literally consumed by the disease.

Smallpox was another major cause of death and disfigurement in the period, until the practice of inoculation became widespread in England during the 18th century.

(Quote 10) In 1760 **Oliver Goldsmith** wrote:

*"Lo, the smallpox with horrid glare
Levelled its terrors at the fair;
And, rifling every youthful grace,
Left but the remnant of a face."*

In 1715, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu survived smallpox, but was left with disfiguring scars. A year later, her husband was appointed ambassador to the court of the Turkish sultan. By that time, inoculation was an established part of Turkish medicine and Lady Mary saw inoculation being successfully carried out in Istanbul, using infected matter from smallpox victims.

She took the brave (or foolish) step of having her infant son inoculated to protect him from possible infection.

IMAGE – LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU, 1689-1762

After she returned to England, she also had her daughter inoculated and began to campaign for the procedure to be more widely used.

(Quote 11) *The Gentleman's Magazine* of April 1750 remarked on the practice of inoculating for smallpox:

“The following method of communicating this disease has been found effectual. With the point of a needle or lancet, if ceremony is requisite, open the top of a ripe pustule; draw a single small thread thro’ the matter till part of the thread is thoroughly moist with it; Let it dry, then put it in to a clean phial, or box.

To perform the operation, nothing more is required than to make a slight scratch, with a needle or lancet, so as to fetch out the least quantity of blood imaginable, near that part of the arm where issues are generally opened; cut off a very short bit of the thread, charged with the matter; less than the 8th part of an inch will be sufficient; lay this upon the bleeding scratch, keep it there with a piece of sticking plaster, and the operation is finished.”

IMAGE - VACCINATION

(Quote 12) It was not only qualified doctors who offered this service, as this Notice in the **Oxford Journal** of February 11th 1758 shows:

"I, George Ridley near Stroud in the County of Gloucester, broadweaver, at the desire of people hereabouts do give Notice that I have inockilated these two seasons past between two and three hundred for the Small Pox and but two or three of them died. Many people be a feared of the thing but efaith it is no more than scrattin' a bit of a hole in their arm a pushin in a piece of scraped rag dipped in some of the Pocky matter of a child under the distemper. That everybody in the Nation may be served I will, God willing, undertake to inockillate them with the perviser they will take two purges before hand and loose a little blood away, for half a Crown a head; and I will be bold to say nobody goes beyond me. N.B. Poor folk at a shillin' a head but all must pay for the purgin'."

In 1796, Edward Jenner pioneered inoculation with the milder cow-pox, as an effective alternative, after observing that dairy-maids who caught cow-pox never seemed to contract small-pox.

By the end of the 18th century, inoculation against smallpox was considered an essential requirement for anyone seeking employment in London as a household servant.

Tobacco Smoking

IMAGE – 16th CENTURY DUTCHMAN SMOKING A PIPE

Tobacco was introduced into England at the end of the 16th century and there were contradictory views about its benefits or ill-effects.

(Quote 13) No less than **King James VI/I himself** wrote a “Counterblaste to Tobacco” in 1604: *“In my opinion, there cannot be a more base, and yet hurtful corruption than is the vile use of taking Tobacco in this Kingdom. It is, as you use or rather abuse it, a branch of the sin of drunkenness, which is the root of all sins. Is it not the greatest sin of all that you, the people of all sorts of this Kingdom, having by this continual vile custom brought yourselves to shameful imbecility, that you are not able to ride or walk a short journey but you must have a reeky coal brought you from the next poor house to kindle your Tobacco with?*

Now, how you are by this custom disabled in your goods let the Gentry of this land bear witness, some of them bestowing three, some four hundred pounds a year upon this precious stink, which I am sure might be bestowed upon many far better uses. And for the vanities committed in this filthy custom, is it not both great vanity and uncleanness that at the table men should not be ashamed to sit puffing of the smoke of Tobacco one to another, making the filthy smoke and stink thereof, to exhale athwart the dishes and infect the air, when very often men that abhor it are at their repast?

Surely smoke becomes a kitchen far better then a dining chamber. And yet it makes a kitchen also oftentimes in the inward parts of men, soiling and infecting them with an unctuous and oily kind of soot, as hath been found in some great tobacco takers that after their death were opened up. But herein is not only a great vanity but a great contempt of God’s good gifts, that the sweetness of man’s breath, being a good gift of God, should be willfully corrupted by this stinking smoke.

Have you not reason then to be ashamed, and to forbear this filthy novelty? A custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.”

(Quote 14) In 1701, **Nicholas Boisregard** warned: *“Taking too much tobacco by young people causes trembling, unsteady hands, staggering feet and a withering of their noble parts.”*

Quack Doctors and Patent Remedies

Self-styled “physicks” and quack doctors were common throughout our period, offering services, remedies and potions to the desperate and the gullible.

IMAGE – 17th CENTURY QUACK DOCTOR

Herbal remedies remained popular throughout our period and the properties of the various types of herbs were explained in **Nicholas Culpepper’s “The English Physician”**, published in 1616.

TABLE – HERBAL PROPERTIES

Bay	An antiseptic, stimulates digestion and relieves rheumatic pain
Chamomile	Effective for stomach ailments
Coltsfoot	Treats irritating coughs
Comfrey	Works against rheumatism and diarrhoea, and cured ulcers
Horehound	Eases coughs and catarrh
Hyssop	Treats asthma, indigestion and fevers
Mint	Relieves disturbances of the intestines
Pennyroyal	Relieves headache, nausea and flatulence
Rosemary	Soothes sore throats
Thyme	Eases indigestion
Wormwood	Destroys worms in the intestines and aids the nerves

Mass-produced remedies became popular in the 17th century and were sold in apothecaries’ shops throughout the country.

IMAGE – APOTHECARY’S SHOP

Anderson's Pills were prepared from a formula allegedly learned in Venice by a Scot who claimed to be physician to King Charles I.

Daffy's Elixir was the invention of a 17th century clergyman and was the first medicine to be granted an English patent.

The 18th century was the hey-day for quack doctors and remedies were advertised as cures for all kinds of afflictions.

IMAGE – PHYSICIAN’S ADVERTISEMENT

In 1726 a patent was granted for the making of Dr. Bateman's Pectoral Drops. The patentee was not a physician named Bateman but a businessman named Benjamin Okell, who was in partnership with an entrepreneur called Dicey, who owned a warehouse and print-shop in Bow Churchyard in London.

Two decades later, Michael and Thomas Bretton patented "An oil extracted from a flinty rock for the cure of rheumatick and scorbutick and other cases", and John Hooper, an apothecary in Reading, was given a patent for the manufacture of "Female Pills" bearing his name.

(Quote 15) Robert Turlington of Lombard Street, London produced a 46-page brochure to promote his "Balsam of Life". The booklet was filled with flowery text and offered countless testimonials from a variety of folk such as the wife of a gardener, an ostler, a bodice-maker, a mathematical instrument-maker and the doorkeeper at the East India Company. *"The Author of Nature provided a Remedy for every Malady which Men of Learning and Genius have ransacked the Animal, Mineral and Vegetable World to discover. The Balsam of Life is a perfect Friend to Nature. It vivifies and enlivens the Spirits, mixes with the Juices and Fluids of the Body, and gently infuses its kindly Influence into those Parts that are most in Disorder. It can cure a host of maladies, from dropsy to sprained thumbs.*

The Balsam of Life is concocted from twenty-six botanicals, some from the Orient and some from the English countryside, digested in alcohol and boiled to a syrupy consistency. The therapeutic potency of the Balsam of Life is proved by countless testimonials. All were jubilant at their restored good health."

The medicines were sold in distinctive-shaped bottles.

IMAGE – TURLINGTON'S BALSAM OF LIFE

For example, Turlington's Balsam of Life came in a pear-shaped bottle with sloping shoulders, while Godfrey's Cordial came in a short conical vial with steep-pitched sides.

(Quote 16) For those who wished to sample the delights of the bawdy houses, **Barber-surgeons** and apothecaries were able to offer:
*"Implements of safety which infallibly secure the health of our customers. Manufactured from the finest lambs' bladders at Mrs. Phillips's of Half Moon Street on the Strand, London
N. B. Ambassadors, foreigners, gentlemen and captains of ships, &c, going abroad, may be supplied with any quantity of the best goods in England. Also available washed and second-hand."*

IMAGE – 18th CENTURY CONDOMS

I'll end with another feature of life that has not changed from the Early Modern period to our own times; the hypochondriac!

IMAGE – THE HYPOCHONDRIAC

PART TWO SUMMARY

The Early Modern Period was a time of remarkable change that affected all aspects of life in the English household and family, at varying degrees and speeds for different parts of English society.

Population growth

Although the scale of life remained small throughout the period, England's population grew substantially, from about two and quarter million in 1500 to eight and three quarter millions by 1801.

TABLE - Population

England remained a largely rural society throughout the period, but industrialisation led to the increasing movement of people from the countryside to the growing towns. Even in 1800, barely a quarter of the population lived in towns of 5,000 or more inhabitants.

TABLE – Population living in towns of 5,000+

Status and The Great Chain of Being

At the beginning of the period, society was still ordered by the medieval hierarchy of "The Great Chain of Being", in which everyone had his place, linked by mutual bonds of duties and responsibilities.

ILLUSTRATION – The Great Chain of Being

By the 18th century, most of these bonds had broken down and English society was divided into three classes: the "better", the "middling" and the "poorer" sort.

"The Middling Sort" were a distinctive feature of England in the Early Modern Period, made up of substantial yeoman farmers in the shires and merchants, professional men and master-craftsmen in the growing towns. Having income or property valued at 40s or more per annum, they were entitled to vote in parliamentary elections and they chose and served as the unpaid officials who administered local government throughout the period.

It was "the middling sort" who were the vital element in English society that drove and delivered the agricultural and industrial revolutions.

County or “Country”

The administrative organisation of England changed little between 1500 and 1800.

Unlike most European countries, there was no large-scale bureaucracy in England.

The county was the main unit of local government and justice.

The Lords Lieutenant of each county were responsible for the national defence.

The county courts, or assizes, dealt with most serious crimes such as murder, robbery and riot, and the county gentry provided the Justices of the Peace at the Quarter Sessions that regulated alehouses, unlawful games and other petty offences.

Minor crimes such as slander and sexual misdemeanours were dealt with by the Church courts.

The Parish

Within each county, the parish was the main administrative unit responsible for policing in the community and providing elementary education, relief for the poor and support for the elderly and infirm.

The parish notables, such as churchwardens, jurymen and overseers of the poor, who were vital to governing their local community, were chosen by and usually came from the ranks of the “middling sort”, while husbandmen provided many of the lowlier parish officers such as constables and sidesmen.

TABLE – SOCIAL STATUS OF PARISH NOTABLES

The Church and the Family

As well as being ultimately responsible for the parish system, the Church continued to play an important role throughout our period.

Attendance at the parish church was compulsory from 1559 to 1690, but the spread of literacy led to more private reading and meditation, and to the head of the household inheriting much of the priest’s authority through leading daily family prayers and Bible readings.

Until the 1540s, the Church was the main provider of support for the poor, the sick and the aged, through the monasteries, chantries and parish priests, but much of this charitable provision was dismantled at The Reformation.

In the late 16th century, a succession of bad harvests, outbreaks of plague, a growing population and rapid inflation resulted in a growth in the numbers of mobile landless poor, or “masterless men” as they were known. It became necessary to introduce a series of Poor Laws in the second half of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. As a result, the burden of paying for poor relief fell increasingly upon the “middling sort”.

The concerns and values of Puritanism spread most easily among the literate “middling sort” during the late 16th and early 17th centuries and their personal interest in reducing the cost of poor relief was often entwined with puritan concern to regulate the moral behaviour of poorer members of the community, often using harsh measures to deal with beggars and vagrants.

PICTURE - Whipping Beggar

The community generally regulated itself and the courts were used only as a last resort. Those who transgressed from “normal behaviour” suffered public humiliation at the hands of their neighbours.

(PICTURES – Pillory & Skimmington Ride)

The Household and Patriarchy

The household remained the basic unit of English society throughout the period. Its status was determined by the rank of its head, who was invariably a man.

Until the middle of the 17th century, the role of the head of the household was considered equivalent to that of the King in the State, a patriarchal role that continued even after the nation literally cut off its head with the execution of King Charles I.

In all but the lowest levels in society, the household comprised not only the nuclear family but also apprentices and live-in servants, domestic or agricultural. For most of our period, up to one third of all households contained live-in apprentices or servants. Everyone living within the household was considered to be a member of the family.

PICTURE – Family 1782

Population growth, increasing opportunities for unskilled waged-work in towns and new industries and the towns, and the reduction in the number of small landholders all contributed to a decline in the custom of taking on live-in apprentices or servants during the 18th century. At the same time, price inflation was affecting food more than wages, and live-in servants became less affordable than day labourers.

TABLES – Prices and Wages Inflation

A move towards personal privacy

There was an increasing stress on personal privacy, which is reflected in changes in the arrangement of rooms within the houses of all but the poorest classes.

ILLUSTRATION – House Plans

As the period progressed, in all but the meanest hovels the medieval hall, open to the height of the roof, was divided into two storeys and the rooms in the house were sub-divided to create separate spaces for cooking, eating and sleeping.

However for the poor, who were always the majority of the population, circumstances hardly changed from the beginning of the 16th century to the end of our period and privacy remained a practical impossibility for the majority of the poor in both the towns and the countryside.

Growth of a consumer economy

The expanding urban population and the growth of a relatively prosperous class of “middling sort” led to the development of a market economy in England. Wills and the inventories of possessions recorded after a person’s death provide evidence that by the end of the 17th century all but the lowest social classes were beginning to buy a variety of household goods.

By the end of the 18th century, as more people moved away from the land, the “lesser sort” of people were becoming consumers, too.

New industries sprang up and mass production made a wide range of goods affordable to people beyond the ranks of the aristocracy and gentry. With the introduction of cheap and easily washed linen in the 18th century, a great “re-clothing” took place among the lower ranks in society, which resulted in improving conditions of health.

Craftsmen and shopkeepers in the growing towns were providing goods and services to meet the increasing demand and even households the remotest upland areas were visited by chapmen selling luxuries such as curtains, tablecloths, lace and ribbons, books, razors, children's toys and looking glasses.

Women and the Law

The law treated men and women very differently.

On marrying, husband and wife became one person in the eyes of the law. The husband acquired absolute control over his wife's personal property, including full rights in his lifetime over her estate. Wives could hold freehold land only through their husbands and could not make wills without their husbands' agreement.

In law, the children belonged solely to the husband and even after the husband's death the widow had no rights over them unless she was made guardian in his will.

A man convicted of murdering his wife would be hanged as a common murderer, but a wife killing her husband was considered to be committing petty treason and would be burned at the stake.

At the height of puritan influence, between 1560 and 1650, there was an increase in the number of cases of "unruly" women brought before the courts for adultery, bearing illegitimate children, keeping unlicensed alehouses, petty theft, brawling or scolding their husbands.

A domineering or scolding wife, in particular, was a symbol of the "world being turned upside down" and might be sentenced to wear a "scolding cap" or suffer in the parish ducking-stool.

PICTURES – Scolding Cap & Ducking Stool

The role of women in the family and household

Although the Protestant Reformation reinforced the authority of the husband and father, wives did play a significant role in managing the affairs of the household and servants.

Partnership was closest among the yeomen and husbandmen class, where the wife's role was crucial to the family's enterprise; working in the fields, managing poultry, brewing ale in the home, selling produce in the market, spinning and weaving, as well as managing the household economy.

PICTURES – Butter Making, Market Selling & Haymaking

The Effect of Waged Labour on the Woman's Role

Economic partnership between husband and wife was less likely when the family was dependent on waged labour, which became increasingly common as patterns of agricultural work and industry changed during the Agrarian and Industrial Revolutions.

In 1520 only about 25% of men were waged labourers, but by 1820 up to 70% of men were working for a wage.

Dependence on waged work eroded the role of the household as the main productive unit and women were often reduced to purely domestic duties.

However, by the end of the 18th century, the growth of factories throughout the country brought new opportunities for women to earn wages themselves from work outside the home.

PICTURE – Spinning Jenny

At the same time, the wives of the middling and the better sort were becoming increasingly idle.

Marriage

The majority of the rural population met prospective marriage partners at dances and traditional village festivities, but for the "better sort" there were few occasions when the sexes could meet socially. The gentry married partners selected for them by the family and kin network...

From the early 18th century balls, card parties and assemblies held in the local county towns provided new opportunities for the sons and daughters of the elite to meet prospective partners.

PICTURE – ASSEMBLY ROOM BALL

From the 1740s, the London season from New Year to June was followed by the summer season in Bath, which created a national marriage market.

Late Age of Marriage

For most of our period, marriages were entered into at quite a late age for all but the male heirs and the daughters of the landed classes.

TABLE - AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE

Primogeniture meant that the eldest son inherited the greater part of his father's estate, so they were usually not able to marry until they took over the family landholding on the death of their father.

Younger sons and daughters spent much of their adolescence living-in as apprentices or servants, during which time they saved towards marrying and setting up an independent household.

By the late 18th century the decline in the number of smallholdings and live-in servants and apprenticeships, and the growth in waged employment was undermining the old incentives to postpone marriage.

Remarriage

As marriages were contracted at a relatively late age and were often broken early by the death of a partner, the likely duration of a marriage was only 17 to 20 years, and remarriage was common, often soon after the death of the spouse.

Divorce and Separation

Divorce, on the other hand, was extremely rare and was only possible for the very rich, by means of a private Act of Parliament.

In a period when it was virtually impossible to track down a person once he left his native parish, the simplest way to be rid of a spouse was for one of the partners to desert and effectively disappear.

Marriage and the Law

In the 16th century, marriage did not require any formal civil or religious ceremony to be legally binding. A man and a woman were married if they simply gave promises to each other as husband and wife, followed by sexual consummation.

PICTURE – Church Wedding circa 1500

During the 16th century, solemnization in a Church wedding ceremony became increasingly accepted as the social norm. From 1563, the Church required the bride's parish priest to ask the banns publicly in church and each parish had to maintain a register of marriages.

Marriages that broke these rules were held to be “clandestine”.

Selecting a partner

During the first half of our period romantic love or physical attraction were considered irrational reasons for a couple to marry.

Before the Reformation, the Church considered that the primary purpose of marriage was for the procreation of legitimate children and the avoidance of fornication. The Protestants added companionship as a desirable benefit.

In the propertied classes, marriage was a collective decision made by parents and kin to produce an heir and to preserve and increase the status and estates of the family. The prospective bride and groom had little choice in the matter, as the parents' generally held control over the couple's financial security.

PICTURE – Marriage a la Mode

In the 18th century there was a shift towards sons and daughters being allowed to choose their partners, while the parents reserved a right to veto 'unsuitable' matches.

As parental permission was not required legally, some couples chose the option of a “clandestine” marriage through the simple exchange of promises without their parents' knowledge.

Hardwicke's 1753 Marriage Act

Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 meant that oral commitments and spousals were no longer legally binding in English Law. It became a legal requirement for every marriage to take place in an Anglican church or chapel, and to be recorded in the parish register, with the signatures of both partners.

Jews and Quakers were exempted from this requirement.

PICTURE – Wedding 1723

To avoid the restrictions of Hardwicke's Act, some couples eloped across the Border into Scotland where the old laws still applied.

PICTURES – Elopement & Escape to Gretna

However, for most parents, Hardwicke's Marriage Act removed the fear of their children contracting secret but binding engagements with unsuitable partners, and young people began to be allowed greater freedom to associate with the other sex.

Foreign visitors in the 18th century remarked on the freedom the English had in the choice of marriage partner and how English women had a greater level of equality within marriage than their sisters in Europe.

PICTURE – Mr & Mrs Hallett 1785

Portions and Jointures

Brides were expected to bring with them a substantial cash sum as a dowry, or portion, so heiresses and rich widows were particularly valuable catches in the marriage market.

Among the "middling sort", the wife's marriage portion may be in cash or household goods, usually equal to about three years' income for her husband's estate: £3-8,000 for gentry; £250-500 for yeomen; £10-50 for husbandmen.

In return for the portion, the groom's father guaranteed the bride an annuity, or jointure, if she survived her husband.

Unmarried adults were generally considered a social and financial burden on the family. Daughters, in particular, were a serious economic drain on the family, but could be useful for cementing political connections.

Spinsters and Bachelors

In the second half of our period, as much as a quarter of the younger sons of the elite were lifelong bachelors. They could not afford marriage and had to take up a profession such as the army or colonial service. .

At the same time there was a rise in the cost of marriage portions, which also led to an increase in spinsters among the daughters of the elite, from 5% in the 16th century to as high as 25% in the 18th century.

The spinster problem could not be easily solved, because of the lack of occupations open to them. By the end of the 18th century many "accomplished girls, portionless and homeless" were being driven to become governesses to young children in wealthy households.

Bridal Pregnancy and Bastardy

Bridal pregnancy was common in the 16th century, as it was the custom in all levels of society to have sexual relations some time before a formal wedding ceremony took place.

TABLE – Bridal Pregnancy

Changing moral attitudes and stricter community control on personal behaviour resulted in a decline in bridal pregnancy during the 17th century and, by the end of the 18th century. It had become confined to the poorer levels in society.

Birth and Childhood

Mortality levels among babies and children remained high throughout our period. Almost one third of children in all levels of society died before the age of 15.

TABLE – CHILD MORTALITY RATES

From the mid-17th century, deaths among children over the age of 10 years halved and, once a child reached 15 years of age, there was a fair chance of living to a ripe old age.

Feeding Baby

Breast-feeding was almost universal for infants for much of our period. In families of the better and middling sort, the child was usually fed by a wet nurse rather than the mother herself.

During the 18th century, there was a growing practice of maternal breast-feeding rather than 'farming out' to professional wet-nurses and by the end of our period England was leading the way in maternal feeding.

Attitudes to Childhood

Attitudes towards the upbringing of children changed in England during the early modern period with the rise and fall of contrasting theories on the nature of the new-born child:

The Calvinist view was that the child is born in Original Sin, and must be reared by repression of its will and its subordination to its parents and others in authority. The training of children was often directly equated with the breaking in of young horses or hunting dogs.

The idea of the child being like a blank sheet, or **Tabla Rasa**, neither good nor evil, was introduced in the 17th century. This theory proposed that the child's mind and nature is open to being moulded by education and experience.

In the 18th century, it became fashionable to believe that the child's character and potentialities are **pre-determined** – genetically determined as we would call it. Environment and education can reinforce good habits and restrain bad ones, but cannot change the nature of the child.

In the mid-18th century, the French philosopher Rousseau espoused the **Utopian ideal** of the Noble Savage - the child is born good and is corrupted only by experience in society.

Discipline

A move towards more permissive attitudes to disciplining children, at least among the middling and better sort, is reflected in family portraits of the period.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, children are portrayed in formal poses, standing or sitting beside their parents looking like miniature adults.

PICTURES – Brooke Family 1567 & Lucy Family 1640

By the 18th century, these scenes were being replaced by paintings showing children in more affectionate and natural or poses.

PICTURE – Copley Family 1776

Education and Literacy

The Protestant Reformation swept away the monastic schools but encouraged endowments of grammar and charity schools to teach basic literacy so that the Word of God could be read direct from the Bible,

The spread of literacy helped promote new ideas in a variety of matters including religion and philosophy, moral advice, the upbringing of children, farming, industry and commerce, and gave access news of regional, national and international affairs.

By the 18th century, elementary education was available to boys from a wider range of social classes, and even to some girls.

From its backward state in the 16th century, by the end of our period, the North East of England had become a remarkable centre of expertise in engineering and technology through a network of philosophical societies, specialist academies and night schools.

Recreation

Changing attitudes towards how people spent their leisure time emphasised an increasing polarisation in many local communities where puritans banned a variety of sports, games and entertainments that they considered led to moral depravity and deterred church-going.

PICTURE - Maypole

The alehouse in particular, an essential meeting place for business, social and leisure activities, was regarded as a potential headquarters for crime and radical forces, and a hotbed of social disorder.

PICTURE - Alehouse

The result was an increasing level of regulation and the eventual licensing of premises and imposition of excise duty on ale and beer.

By the end of the 18th century, a number of the popular sports of today such as horse-racing, cricket and tennis had become established, the village pub and the tavern in the town had replaced the alehouse and business was being conducted in the more sober surroundings of the coffee house.

Summary

The period from 1500 until 1800 is described by historians as the “early modern period”, a time when England moved gradually from the customs, practices and attitudes of the Middle Ages into an era when the country led the world in philosophical, social and technological advances.