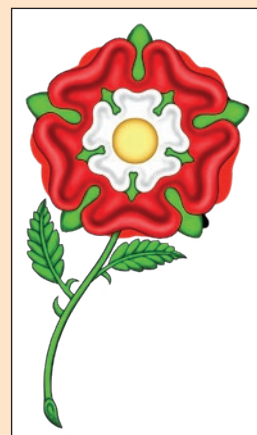


Writing for talking – Researching a period in history

Life in Tudor England

Something that has always dismayed me when studying history is the concentration on wars and battles, so, what I'd like to talk to you about today is the lives of ordinary folk in England about 500 years ago. My interest in this period stems from childhood, when I used to spend holidays in my aunt's beautiful old farmhouse in Sussex. It was built in 1490, when the Tudors ruled the country, and I would lie in bed at night and imagine what life must have been like then. However, when I started researching the period I soon shed any romantic notions I had of it.



In case you're not sure of your history, the Tudors ruled England from 1485 to 1603, the most famous examples of Tudor monarchs being Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. Towns then, other than London, were very small and overcrowded. The streets were narrow, cobbled and filthy, and very unhealthy. Open sewers carried the filth to the nearest river; rats and flies thrived, spreading diseases such as typhus and the plague. Few people lived beyond the age of 40 and children often died before they were five.

As you might imagine, it was a different story for the rich. They lived in mansions in the countryside, with anything up to 150 servants. Tudor houses are easily recognizable because of their numerous tall chimneys, needed for their many fires. These not only kept the vast rooms warm, but they also cooked the food for their huge feasts – feasts that would often consist of up to ten courses, and include such meats as wild boar, venison, roast tongue, and fowl such as peacocks, blackbirds, and sparrows. Three quarters of



the Tudor diet was made up of meat – potatoes were not introduced until the reign of Elizabeth I. Honey was what was normally used to sweeten food – sugar was rarely available and a sign of great wealth. However, the poor seldom got to eat meat or taste sugar – they lived mainly off vegetables such as cabbage and turnips, with an occasional caught rabbit or fish.

As for education, poor children didn't attend school, but those from better-off families sometimes had tutors to teach reading and French. Boys were often sent to grammar schools, and here they would learn mainly Latin, in classes of up to 60. The school day was a long one, from dawn to dusk. There were only two universities in Tudor England – Oxford and Cambridge – and some boys went to university at the age of 14.

For entertainment, while the rich went hunting or enjoyed fencing or jousting contests, the poor watched bear fighting and also played a kind of football where they jumped on each other, a sport which frequently led to broken bones. But of course, something which was enjoyed by people of all backgrounds was the theatre, especially the plays of a young playwright called William Shakespeare.

There is so much more I could say about the Tudors. I find their day-to-day lives fascinating – much more interesting than the wars they fought. I hope that you have found it interesting too. If anyone has any questions, I'll be pleased to try and answer them.

