



During the Elizabethan era, there was a wide range of leisure activities for both the upper and lower classes to enjoy.



The most popular team sport amongst the lower classes was the Elizabethan version of **football**, which was actually more similar to modern-day rugby. Amongst young men in particular, cudgels was a popular pastime. This involved fighting each other with sticks, or 'cudgels'. It was good training for sword-fighting.



Other popular sports for adults included running, jumping, jousting, archery, fencing, fishing and playing skittles. **Jousting** was an upper class sporting contest where two opponents on horseback fought each other with lances (long sticks with pointed tips). The aim was to knock your opponent from their horse. **Archery** is the sport of shooting with a bow and arrow at a specific target. Archery contests were popular. All classes watched, but it was mostly the upper classes who played the sport. **Fencing** was a sport played by the upper classes. Blunted swords were used to fight an opponent. The weapons were between 75cm and 180cm long! Knights also developed this skill as part of their training. **Skittles** was similar to modern-day ten-pin bowling. It was played outside on the grass. The object of the game was to knock over all, or specific, skittles.

**Blood sports** were another popular leisure activity. This type of sport involved the hunting, wounding or killing of animals. **Cock-fighting** involved placing two roosters in a pit, where they would fight each other to the death using their beaks, and sharp blades that were attached to their feet. Bets would be placed on which rooster people thought would win. Many gentlemen lost their fortunes through gambling on this sport. **Bear and bull-baiting** was another spectator sport, where the animal was chained in the middle of an arena, and attacked by specially trained dogs until it died from its wounds.



**Hawking** is a sport where a trained hawk or falcon is used to hunt and catch other animals. As a lot of time had to be dedicated to the training of the bird, and large sums of money were needed for special housing and other equipment, it was a sport that only the upper classes could afford.



**Board games**, like chess, backgammon and a version of draughts were played by the lower classes as they were a cheap form of entertainment. They were often played indoors and by families. There were many different types of **card games**. They were played by all classes, and money was gambled on the outcome. Card games were mostly played by men, as it was considered inappropriate for women to gamble – however, Queen Elizabeth I enjoyed betting money!

**Music** became very popular in the Elizabethan era, and the queen herself encouraged musicians and composers. From an early age, children from the upper classes were taught to sing and play musical instruments, and were encouraged to perform at social gatherings. Popular instruments at the time were harpsichords, flutes and lutes. Most towns at that time had a resident band called a group of **waites**, who entertained people at public occasions.

**Dance** was thought to be a great form of exercise. Many of the dances performed by the upper classes originated in Spain, Italy and France, and so dancing masters were hired in order to teach the new steps and movements. The dances were highly sophisticated, and complicated to learn. Those in the lower classes greatly enjoyed dancing too. They favoured the more traditional country dances, such as the jig, which involved a lot of leaping, or morris dancing, where handkerchiefs and sticks were used to exaggerate hand movements.



Trips to the **theatre** to watch plays being performed became an increasingly fashionable pastime for both the rich and the poor in the Elizabethan era. It was as popular as a trip to the cinema is now. Many famous playwrights were born in this time, including perhaps the most well-known of all, William Shakespeare. Different coloured flags were flown from the top of the theatre to indicate what sort of play was going to be performed: white for a comedy, red for a historical play, and black for a tragedy. The lower classes paid 1d (a penny) to stand in the 'pit' in the theatre, a space at the base of the stage. The upper classes paid 5d or more for better seats in the gallery above. The audiences especially loved the 'special effects', which included smoke, fireworks, the firing of a real cannon, and 'flying' entrances using the rigging above!

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Using the Elizabethan Leisure Activities Sheet to help you, can you recommend some pastimes for the people below based on their interests and likes? **Record** and **explain** your suggestions in the boxes below.



(Lower-class man)  
*I enjoy the type of leisure activity that I can make some money from!*

Suggestions:

(Upper-class gentleman)  
*I have lots of time and money to dedicate to a sport.*



Suggestions:

(Lower-class man)  
*I would like to play a sport which helps me to develop my fighting skills.*



Suggestions:



(Upper-class lady)  
*I like to be entertained by others.*

Suggestions:

(Lower-class man)  
*I like all sports, but I prefer to watch others playing them.*



Suggestions:



## The Elizabethan Theatre



During the Elizabethan era, plays became an increasingly popular form of entertainment for all. At first, they were performed outdoors in the backyards of inns, but in 1576, the first purpose-built theatre was constructed. These buildings could generally hold up to 1500 spectators. Plays were often performed in the afternoon, to make the most of the daylight, as there was no artificial lighting then.

### What was a performance at the theatre like for the poor?



The poorest theatre-goers paid one penny to stand in the pit, the area at the base of the stage. This was about the same price as a pint of ale or a loaf of bread. For two pennies you could sit on a bench at the back of the pit, and for three pennies you could have a cushion. With up to 500 people in the pit, it was a hot, cramped, smelly place to be. The upper classes often referred to those in the pit as the 'groundlings', or, particularly in the summer months, the 'stinkards'. The cobblestone floor was covered in discarded nutshells and other rubbish. Plays were often up to three hours long. As there were no toilet facilities, some people may have relieved themselves in the pit! The audience were loud and yelled at the actors, sometimes even throwing rotten vegetables at them. If they didn't like the play, they stamped and shouted until the actors changed the performance.

### What was a performance at the theatre like for the rich?

The richest theatre-goers sought the seats that were the furthest away from the pit and the lower classes. They intensely disliked the noise and stench of the 'groundlings'. The top row in the gallery contained the most expensive seats. They were protected from the weather here by a canopy. Both men and women attended the theatre, although women from the upper classes often hid their face behind a mask, as it was considered an unseemly pastime for a rich lady. There were no toilet facilities here either. People had to leave the theatre and relieve themselves somewhere outside.



### What was a performance at the theatre like for the actors?



In the Elizabethan era, actors were neither highly paid or respected. They were seen as 'unruly' and a threat to a peaceful society. Only men were allowed to be actors. Therefore, the roles of women were usually played by teenage boys, who had to wear dresses and make-up. An actor had to be able to sword fight, sing, dance and have a good memory for learning lines. Audiences expected a new play to be performed every day, so most actors had to juggle different parts from many plays at the same time, with hardly any time to rehearse. There were not enough copies of the full play for each actor, so they only had their own part written out, including their 'cues' – the last few words of the actor before them.