



A view of London Bridge in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Claes Jansz Visscher (see the activity on page 67).

## *London in Shakespeare's times*

### *A city of opportunity*

At some point in the late 1580s, William Shakespeare decided to leave his home in Stratford-upon-Avon and move to London. Nobody knows why he made this decision, but the most obvious explanation is that he went there to find a job. It is unlikely that there were many possibilities of interesting work for an actor/playwright in the small market town of Stratford, whereas there were lots of opportunities in the capital city in the early 1580s. In London the theatre was a growing industry, despite the fact that the Church and the City Corporation<sup>1</sup> wanted to close them down saying that they had a bad influence on the people. However, the government did not have the power to make theatre-going illegal, particularly as the Queen herself enjoyed theatrical performances and supported some acting companies.

London's first theatre, called The Theatre, was built in 1576 and it was here that Shakespeare got a job when he arrived in London. From then on he was never without work. Theatres were profitable places and it wasn't difficult for a talented young man like William to make more than enough money to live on.

1. **City Corporation** : local governing body.

## A growing city

The population of London started to grow rapidly during the medieval period because of the increase in trade. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it was the largest town in England and the capital city. About 15,000 people lived there in 1100 but by 1300 the population had increased to over 80,000.

However, the city lost at least half of its population during the terrible plague known as the Black Death (1348-1350). Despite further outbreaks,<sup>2</sup> it managed to make a quick recovery and historians estimate that the city's population inside the old medieval walls in 1500 was around 50,000. In 1550 that number had risen to 70,000, and by 1603, when Elizabeth died, the population was estimated to be 140,000. In Europe at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century only Naples and Paris had larger populations.

## A mix of cultures

The growth in population was due to the large numbers of people that were moving to London from other parts of Britain and also from other countries. Between 1524 and 1648 there were many religious conflicts in Europe and thousands of Protestants from France, the Netherlands and Germany escaped to England where they could live in safety. There was also a small Jewish community. Jews had not been allowed to live in England since 1290, when Edward I had expelled<sup>3</sup> them because of a widespread<sup>4</sup> anti-Jewish feeling. However, following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, some found their way to London, but they had to practise their religion in secret.

The reign of Elizabeth I also saw the beginning of Britain's first black community. In 1501 Catherine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII, had brought many black North Africans from Spain with her. After that more black people began to arrive as a result of the slave trade. In Elizabeth's reign there were many hundreds, perhaps more, of them in Britain. They were mostly freed slaves and they worked especially as domestic servants, but also as musicians, dancers and entertainers. Some of them married native English people.

We don't know if Shakespeare knew any Jews or black people, but they are certainly

2. **outbreaks** : sudden occurrences of something unpleasant, e.g. a disease.

3. **expelled** : made to leave.

4. **widespread** : found over a large area.

the inspiration of some characters in his plays. For example, he created Shylock the Jew for his play *The Merchant of Venice*, and several black characters appear in other plays. The most well-known are Othello, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, and the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*.

### A centre of trade and commerce

Thanks to its position on the river Thames, London was ideally located for trading with the rest of Europe. The city had been a port since Roman times, but by the 1570s it was the most important international trading centre in Europe. Luxury goods like Italian silk, sugar from the West Indies, and spices and perfumes from the East were brought up the River Thames on ships and stored in large warehouses<sup>5</sup> near the wharves<sup>6</sup>. The streets of the City were always crowded with foreign merchants discussing prices, exchanging money and concluding deals.

Unlike the Dutch city of Antwerp, London did not have a specific place where merchants could do their business, a stock exchange. That changed in 1571 when a wealthy London merchant and financier called Sir Thomas Gresham (1519-1579) founded a stock exchange on a piece of land in the City. The building was opened by Queen Elizabeth, who immediately ordered it to be named the Royal Exchange. It was an impressive building in the classical style and had a huge, gold grasshopper – Gresham’s personal badge – on the roof. The Exchange quickly became a meeting place for merchants and businessmen and was the centre of London’s business life.



Unfortunately, the building was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666. A new Exchange was later rebuilt but that building too was destroyed in a fire. The building that we can see in London today dates back to the 1840s.

A view of the Royal Exchange, London, about 1600.

5. **warehouses** : big buildings where large amounts of goods are stored.
6. **wharves** : structures built for boats to stop at.

## A place of entertainment

Every capital city has its centre of entertainment and for a long time in London that was Southwark, an area on the south bank of the river Thames. In Elizabethan times, Southwark was outside the city boundaries<sup>7</sup> and so beyond the control of the City Corporation. This made it a good place for prohibited activities such as bear-baiting and bull-baiting,<sup>8</sup> and also for theatres,



Bear-baiting in an illustration from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

which were disapproved of. In 1598 the Lord Chamberlain's Men, Shakespeare's acting company, built the Globe there, which brought the number of theatres in Southwark to three – the Rose and the Swan being the other two. Records indicate that Shakespeare himself may have lived in that part of London between 1596 and 1599 before moving back across the river to live in the City.

On 29 June 1613 the Globe burned down in a fire, but it was rebuilt soon afterwards. In the same year another theatre – the Hope – was built on the site of the old Beargarden, where the bear-baiting and bull-baiting contests had previously taken place.

### 1 Comprehension check

Answer the questions.

- 1 Why did the London City Corporation want to close down the theatres?
- 2 Where did Shakespeare find a job when he first arrived in London?
- 3 Why was there a decrease in the population of London in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century?
- 4 Why did Jews have to practise their religion in secret in London?
- 5 What was the role of the Royal Exchange in London?
- 6 Why was Southwark a popular place to open theatres?
  
7. **boundaries** : something like lines on maps that mark where one area of land ends and another begins.
8. **bear-baiting and bull-baiting** : old form of entertainment involving dogs that attack captive bears or bulls.