

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### **Sarah Doig, Entertainment in Elizabethan England**

Sarah Doig gave an eloquent, well-researched talk about entertainment in Elizabethan England when she saved the August meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. She had stepped in literally at the last minute when the pre-arranged speaker failed to arrive.

Sarah explored different aspects of entertainment in Elizabethan England by beginning with music. The English Renaissance of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century saw a significant change in the nature of music from largely religious to the secular. Families like the Kitsons of Hengrave Hall near Bury St Edmunds were patrons of music. Two noted musicians, Edward Johnson and John Wilby, lived there to entertain the family but they also taught the children singing and how to play instruments. Musical accomplishment was expected of the nobility. Elizabeth I was a keen musician. There is a portrait of her playing the lute and other sources comment on her skill at playing the virginal. Printing also helped to secularise music as it was published more widely. Many towns had waites bands whose members were good singers and had the ability to play a range of instruments. However, other street music which often comprised of the playing of fiddles, flutes and drums was looked down upon. Dance was a form of entertainment enjoyed by all ages. It was another favourite pastime of the Queen.

The introduction of the printing press in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century and greater access to education raised literacy rates. At its peak in the period 1560-1580, it is thought that 30% of husbandmen (farmers), 70% of yeomen and 60% of tradesmen in Norwich could read. However, fewer were able to write as this was a more complex skill. Printing made books cheaper but they were still expensive. Some books, household manuals and herbals, were aimed specifically at women. Penny ballads enjoyed an extensive readership. They were often sensational stories, such as the final hours of a condemned man, but they could also pass on the news, or religious or political views. Wealthy men had access to a wide range of literature, including history, biographies, and sermons. The classics, Homer and Virgil, were read either in the original or in translation.

Most educated people wrote poetry but Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser were two of the greatest poets of the period. The other popular form of writing was for the theatre, with Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe particularly notable. However, theatres had an unsavoury reputation and were excluded from the City of London. Initially, plays were performed at taverns, the first theatre being built at Shoreditch in 1576. The Globe was constructed in 1599 in Southwark. The absence of artificial light meant that performances occurred in the afternoon when they could be attended by several thousand people drawn from all social classes.

Sports were very popular in Elizabethan England. They were regarded as a good preparation for war. Archery, wrestling and other martial sports were encouraged. Hunting trained young men in agility, speed and horsemanship. Similarly, hunting provided an opportunity to show wealth and power through the possession of parks, horses and dogs cared for by a large staff of servants.

There were a number of other pursuits for all classes including riotous football matches, bear baiting and cockfighting. Taverns were popular. Smoking was a new and exotic pastime introduced in the 1560s. Cards, chess, billiards, dice and story-telling were quieter forms of entertainment. Overall, entertainment was an integral feature of life of all people in the Elizabethan period.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 23 September at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD when a short AGM will be followed by Roy Tricker giving a talk about 100 years of St Edmundsbury Diocese. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net). This also has a report on the recent Heritage Circle visit to STANTA, the Stanford Training Area.

Gerry Gurhy