

What were the defining characteristics of English society in the 17th century?

Reading

Set a Purpose

As you read, look for information that helps you describe what English society was like in the 17th century. Consider the political and economic climate of the time.

Thirty Years War a series of wars fought between Catholics and Protestants in Europe

monarch a king or queen

colonization settlement and control of the lands of others for the purpose of extracting resources

Spanish Armada a fleet of ships sent by Spain in 1588 to invade England

The 17th century was a turning point in European history. Religious wars, such as the **Thirty Years War** (1618–1648), killed millions and destroyed towns and villages. New ideas about government and who should rule threatened **monarchs** who believed that their powers came from God. **Colonization** brought new wealth to many European countries, and Western Europe was experiencing an economic revolution.

England was also becoming a powerful and wealthy nation by the time Elizabeth I died in 1603. With the defeat of the **Spanish Armada** in 1588, English ships had the freedom of the seas. England also established colonies in North America, the Caribbean, South America, Africa, and India. Trade in goods such as cotton, ivory, and gold, as well as the slave trade, enriched England enormously. The country was becoming a world power.

The population of England grew rapidly during this century. English merchants, manufacturers, and landholders found new opportunities to become wealthy. They were now powerful people, and were no longer content to be ordered around by the king.

The Geography of Great Britain

Today, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland consists of part of the British Isles. England, Scotland, and Wales occupy one large island. Northern Ireland shares the other large island with the Republic of Ireland, a country that is not part of the United Kingdom.

Great Britain has almost 18 000 kilometres of coastline, with many good harbours. In addition, its rivers provide transportation routes within the country. As people inhabiting an island nation, the British were often able to isolate themselves from events in Europe.

Regions

England can be divided into two major regions—Lowland Britain and Highland Britain. Lowland Britain is in the south and east. It consists of low-lying and fertile land, ideally suited to agriculture. The climate here is warmer than elsewhere in Britain because of the Gulf Stream, which carries warm water and winds from the Gulf of Mexico. Highland Britain, in the north and west, consists primarily of hilly or mountainous countryside with thin soils, although there are pockets of fertile lowland within the Highland region as well.

As a result, Lowland Britain has always been more heavily populated, wealthier, and more powerful politically. In the 17th century, the north was less populated than the south, and its people poorer. These conditions were a factor during the political disturbances of that time.

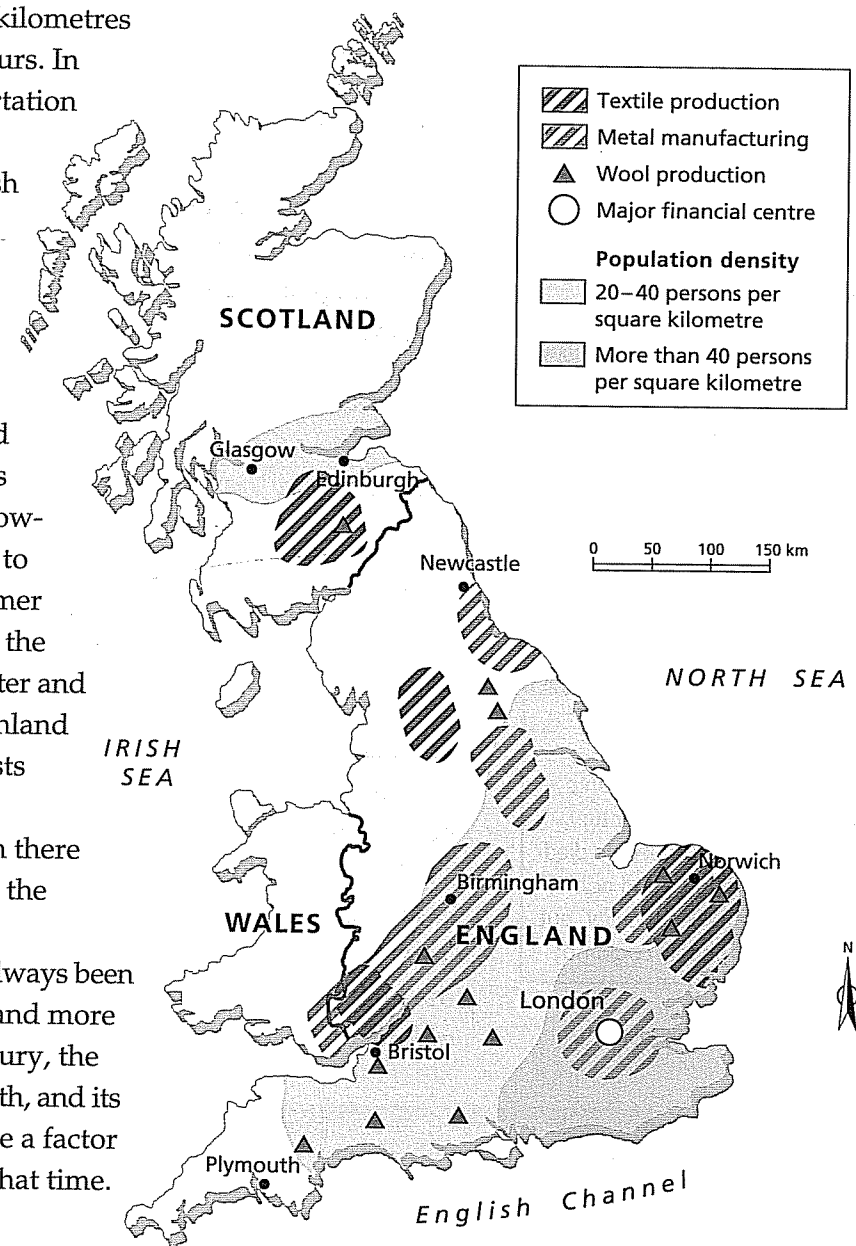
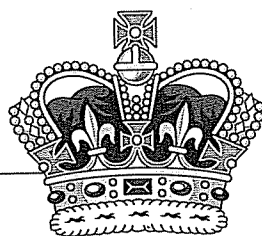


FIGURE 4-2 The important cities and towns of England, Scotland, and Wales, around 1640. Where were the largest cities and towns and the major industries located? Why would this be so?

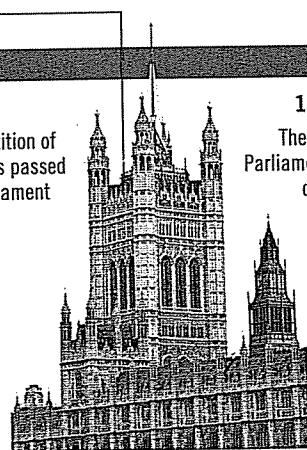
TIMELINE

1603
James I becomes king of England, Scotland, and Ireland after the death of Elizabeth I



1625
Charles I is crowned

1628
The Petition of Right is passed in parliament



1640
The Long Parliament is called

1642
The English Civil War begins

1649
Charles I is executed; the Rump Parliament now rules

1658
Death of Cromwell

1660
Charles II is declared king; the English monarchy is restored



1685
Catholic James II takes the throne

1688
The Glorious Revolution removes James II; a year later, William and Mary become king and queen of England under a new Bill of Rights

feudalism legal and military customs that ordered society in medieval Europe

Changes in Society

In the 17th century, England was still very much an agricultural nation. Most people lived in the country, and worked on farms or the estates of lords. But towns and cities were growing rapidly, and **feudalism** had ended. Townspeople no longer had ties to lords. They felt much more in control of their own destinies.

As English society became more divided, three basic classes developed.

Upper class	the monarch, the monarch's advisers, nobles, and high church officials, such as bishops
Middle class	merchants, manufacturers, landowners, professionals, and military officers
Lower class	farmers and ordinary workers

Did You Know?

The Great Plague that hit London in 1665 was the worst outbreak of bubonic plague in the 17th century. Around 100 000 people died. Wealthier people and nobles were able to flee the city, but most poor people could not.

The upper class and the more prosperous members of the middle class lived in fine town and country houses. They owned valuable possessions, including china from Asia and fine furniture made from the woods of Africa. English merchants roamed the world, bringing back new, exciting, and profitable goods to sell to this wealthy part of society.

The lower classes, which included skilled workers such as carpenters, blacksmiths, stonemasons, and dressmakers, could earn good incomes from their skills and lived quite comfortably. Many of these skilled workers belonged to cooperative organizations. These organizations looked after their members' welfare.

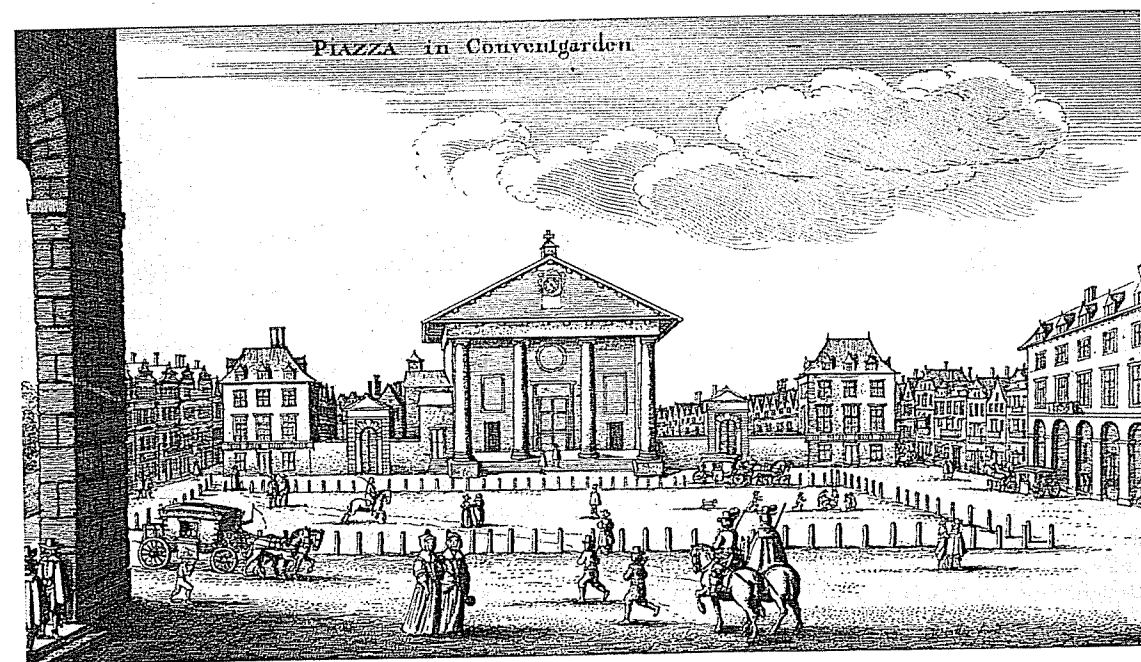


FIGURE 4-3 Covent Garden in the 17th century. Based on this image, what can you infer about the people who lived in this part of London?

Less-skilled workers did not fare as well. They worked long hours for perhaps ten pennies a day for men, and a few pennies for women. Their living quarters were small and cramped, with whole families living in one or two rooms.

Many other people lived in poverty, with little or no opportunity to improve their lives. Widows suffered after the loss of their husband's wage. For many unemployed people, including children, their only means of livelihood was crime.

Poverty and Crime in 17th-Century England

People who were homeless due to poverty and lack of work were known as vagabonds. Most of the middle and upper classes saw these people as lazy, or thought that they preferred a life of crime. Punishments for vagabonds were severe, including whipping. By the early 17th century, however, new Poor Laws started dividing vagabonds into those who could not work (due to disability or age, for example) and those who could ("sturdy rogues"). Sturdy rogues were still punished.

The Effects of Trade

The poor lived mainly on bread and beer, and could occasionally afford some meat or cheese. The wealthy ate enormous quantities of meat, which was often strongly flavoured with spices to disguise the fact that it was sometimes not very fresh. Fruits and vegetables were not popular, and were usually eaten cooked.

In the 17th century, English diet and social customs began to change. Foods and other products were arriving from other parts of the world. The new foods included pineapple, maize, potatoes, coffee, tea, and chocolate. Soon a new social institution sprang up—the coffee house. This was where men gathered to drink coffee, smoke tobacco (also newly introduced from North America), and indulge in gossip and political discussions.



FIGURE 4-4 This engraving from 1674 shows men enjoying a drink and a chat in a 17th-century coffee shop. Why might shops like this be popular?

Did You Know?

The Great Fire of London happened in 1666, when a huge fire started in a bakery in central London. The fire raged unchecked for four days, destroying two-thirds of the entire city. Finally, houses in the path of the fire were blown up to create a firebreak.

Protestant any Christian not belonging to the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Church

Church of England the official church in England, headed by the monarch

tithe a payment of one-tenth of a person's earnings

Calvinist a follower of the teachings of John Calvin, a leader of the Protestant Reformation

parliament the legislative body in England

The Role of Religion in English Society

Religion was extremely important in the 17th century. Most people went regularly to church. Most of England was **Protestant**, although some Roman Catholics remained in the country. Within the Protestants, there were many different groups with different ways of worshipping and different interpretations of the Bible. In 1290, Jewish people had been forced out of England. They were banned from living there until the mid-17th century.

The official church was the **Church of England** (or Anglican Church), with the king as its head. The Church of England decided how church services were to be conducted everywhere in the country, and it was supported by the people, who paid church **tithes**. Although it was Protestant, services and ceremonies in the Church of England were often very elaborate, and its buildings were richly decorated.



Cavaliers and Puritans.

FIGURE 4-5 Compare the clothing worn by the people shown in this picture. How does it differ? What does this show?

The Puritans

The Puritans were a very large and powerful Protestant group. They were totally opposed to the ceremonies and decoration of Anglican churches. The Puritans were **Calvinists** and believed that churches should be simple and plain. They associated religious art and decoration with the Roman Catholic Church, which they hated. Puritans wore dark clothes and disapproved of drinking, gambling, sports, and the theatre. They were suspicious of human weakness. They believed that stern laws were needed to keep people from straying into sin.

Puritanism spread rapidly through England in the 16th and 17th centuries. At various times, it was illegal for Puritans to hold their own church services, and many Puritans were fined and imprisoned for their beliefs. Some Puritans entered **parliament**, seeing politics as another way to promote their beliefs. As a result, the Stuart kings would have to fight parliament on both religious and political grounds.

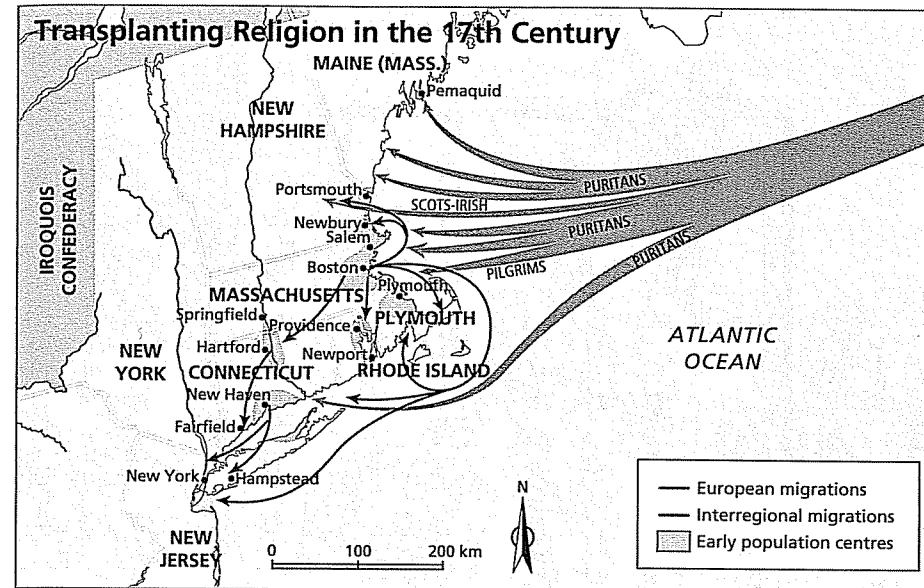


FIGURE 4-6 Puritans faced persecution at home in England, Scotland, and Ireland, which is why many left for the New World. However, they themselves persecuted non-Puritans in the American colonies. How would they justify such persecution?

Other Puritans left the country in search of religious freedom. One group of Puritans, the Pilgrims, chartered a ship, *The Mayflower*, to take them to America. They founded a Puritan colony at Plymouth in 1620. These were the first of many Puritans who settled in what would later become New England.

Witches

Witch hunts swept across Europe from the 15th to the 18th centuries. People who were accused of witchcraft were thought to have used magic to harm others, often in connection with Satanic ritual. An accusation of witchcraft could lead to mass hysteria and panic. It was usually the Church and political officials who tried and condemned the accused witches.

Official witch hunting took place in England and Scotland during the 17th century. While historians disagree on the number of people executed, it is certainly in the hundreds, if not thousands. Witch hunts also took place across continental Europe and in the Puritan colonies in America.

The majority of people put on trial for witchcraft were women over the age of 50. (It was believed that women were more easily tricked by Satan.) They were often social outcasts, women who had never married, or "wise women" who knew about medicinal plants and treatments for illness. Some were people who told fortunes or sold love potions. Others were simply old women who lived alone, perhaps with a pet animal, such as a cat.

WEB LINK

To read more about the Pilgrims, visit our website.

Perspectives

Did You Know?

People believed that only the innocent could drown. Satan would protect real witches by not allowing them to drown.



FIGURE 4-7 Why would the execution of witches be public? Why were people like Matthew Hopkins able to have so many women tried and condemned for witchcraft?

WEB LINK

To read more about Matthew Hopkins, visit our website.

duck to plunge suddenly under water and out again

democracy a government that is controlled by the people who live under it

civil rights the rights of a citizen, such as safety, protection from discrimination, and the right to vote

The most famous witch hunter in England was Matthew Hopkins, who called himself the “Witch-Finder General.” Hopkins travelled throughout England claiming to have been commissioned by parliament to find and condemn witches. He is believed to be responsible for the deaths of around 200 women. Condemned witches were **ducked** in water, with their thumbs tied to their toes, until they drowned (which proved their innocence). Others were hanged, burned, or pressed to death (crushed between two doors loaded with weights). Matthew Hopkins was paid well for his work, and also wrote a book about his experiences. His methods of discovering witches were used during the witch trials in the American colonies.

English Parliament and Civil Rights in the 17th Century

What rights do Canadians enjoy today? Canadians sometimes take their **democracy** and their **civil rights** for granted. For most of human history, people did not have democracy. Rulers in Europe had absolute power, and could do as they wished. Ordinary people could not participate in the process of government. Nor did people have civil rights, such as the right to be free from unlawful arrest.

Many of the democratic traditions that Canadians enjoy today come to us from England. The process of establishing them took many centuries. **Magna Carta**, signed in 1215, recognized individual freedoms, and required the English king to consult an elected parliament and to rule lawfully.

Magna Carta the Great Charter, which guaranteed the English people certain civil rights and limited the powers of the monarch

Monarchs and Parliament

Although monarchs such as Elizabeth I had learned to work with parliament, most English kings and queens had been used to ruling as they saw fit. They expected their subjects to accept and support their decisions. This support included providing money, in the form of taxes or loans, to pay for things such as soldiers and new palaces. Most monarchs hated restrictions on their power and often tried to bypass them. For example, they would try to bypass parliament.

Today, people in many parts of the world still struggle to attain basic political and civil rights, such as the right to a fair trial, or the right to choose their government through free and fair elections. In England, the struggle that began in 1215 with Magna Carta would continue 400 years later, as James I and Charles I fought parliament for control.

Thinking IT THROUGH



Compare and Contrast

1. Look for essential ideas about 17th-century English society. Using a graphic organizer, compare and contrast the living conditions of the upper, middle, and lower classes. Use this organizer to write a report from the perspective of a foreign ambassador describing English society to his government.

Make Connections

2. Trade had an effect on English society. How do trade and the arrival of goods from other parts of the world affect Canadian society today?

Build an Argument

3. How might witch hunts and people like the “Witch-Finder General” be used to maintain the power of Church and government in English society?

Summarize What’s Important

4. Identify the role of parliament in limiting the power of a monarch since the signing of Magna Carta.

Synthesize and Evaluate

5. Write a paragraph to answer the section question: *What were the defining characteristics of English society in the 17th century?* Set aside your paragraph to help you answer the Chapter Focus Question at the end of the chapter.