

Tudor Childhood

Childhood was hazardous in the 16th century. Perhaps 25% of children died before their fifth birthday and as many as 40% died before their sixteenth birthday. Childbirth was also dangerous for women and many mothers died.

When a child was born, it was washed in warm water and then, to keep it warm, it was rubbed with butter or rose oil. The baby was then swaddled – wrapped in cloths like bandages. Normally the baby was baptised within a few days because the risk of it dying was so high.

Ordinary women breast fed but upper class women gave their baby to a wet nurse to be fed. Babies were swaddled until they were eight or nine months and sometimes longer and most of the time they were laid in a wooden cradle and allowed to sleep. Children were weaned between 1 and two years old and, if their parents could afford it, they were given a stick of coral to chew on when they were teething. Children often learned to walk with a wooden frame on wheels.

Little boys wore gowns or skirts but when they were six or seven they were given their first breeches – short trousers. This was called “being breeched.”

In the early 16th century many boys went to chantry schools. Rich men left money in their wills to pay priests to pray for their souls. After the religious changes of the 1540s, the chantry schools were closed. However many rich men founded grammar schools.

Boys usually went to a kind of nursery school called a “petty school” first then moved onto grammar school when they were about seven. The school day began at 6.00am in summer and 7.00am in winter – people went to bed early and got up early in those days. Lunch was from 11.00am to 1.00pm. School finished at about 5.00pm. Boys went to school six days a week and there were few holidays.

In Tudor times many children learned to read and write with something called a hornbook. It was not a book in the modern sense. Instead it was a wooden board with a handle. Fixed to the board was a sheet of paper with the alphabet and the Lord's prayer – the Our Father – written on it. The paper was usually protected by a thin slice of animal horn.

Discipline in Tudor schools was savage. The teacher often had a stick with birch twigs attached to it. Boys were hit with the birch twigs on their bare buttocks.

Of course many boys did not go to school at all. If they were lucky they might get a seven year apprenticeship and learn a trade. Some craftsmen could read and write but few labourers could.

As for girls, in a rich family a tutor usually taught them at home. In a middle class family their mother might teach them. Upper class and middle class women were educated. However lower class girls were not.

Tudor children who did not go to school were expected to work. They helped their parents by doing tasks such as scaring birds when seeds were sown. They also helped to weave wool and did other household tasks. Children from rich families usually had their marriages arranged for them. If they refused to marry the person their parents chose they were beaten until they changed their minds. Children from poorer families had more choice over whom to marry. Yet girls usually married young. Many were married when they were only fifteen or sixteen. Boys often married between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one.

Toys changed little through the centuries. In the 16th century children still played with wooden dolls. They were called Bartholomew babies because they were sold at St Bartholomew's fair in London. They also played cup and ball and with wooden yo-yos.

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