

SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLAND

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE was born at Stratford-on-Avon, in 1564, and died in 1616. As a young man he came to London to make his fortune as an actor. He joined a company of Players, but it was not until he began to write plays that he gained fame and fortune. In 1599, Shakespeare and his friends built the famous Globe Theatre on the south bank of the Thames. It was here that his best known plays - *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Henry V* - were performed.

The building of a theatre like the Globe was a very special event. It had been the custom for many years to perform plays in the market-place, in the churchyard or in the courtyard of an inn: in any public place, in fact, where an audience could be gathered together.

The Globe Theatre itself was like an inn. It had a sign which gave it its name: a picture of Hercules carrying the world on his shoulders. It was built around an open courtyard, a three-storey building, with its balconies and galleries arranged like the rooms of an inn.

The performances were held in the afternoon about two o'clock. The flag fluttering on the tower of the theatre was a sign that a performance would be given that day. Handbills were printed which advertised the play. The prices for admission were 3d., 6d., 9d. and 1s. It was cheaper to stand in

the pit or courtyard, and dearer if you wished to have a seat in one of the galleries or balconies.

The stage itself jutted out from an end wall into the pit or yard; part of it was covered over, probably as a protection against the weather. At the rear of the stage was a small room, covered by a curtain, which could be used as a tomb or a cave, or for a scene in an inn. On either side of this room were doors through which the players could enter or leave the stage. Above the small room was a balcony, which was used to represent a cliff, or the wall of a castle, or just a balcony as in the famous scene of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The galleries for the spectators surrounded the front and sides of the stage. From these galleries you could look down into the pit or the yard, and see the people moving about, eating oranges and apples, and talking to the players before the performance began.

The stage itself was fully open to view, and only simple scenery was used, but the magic of William Shakespeare captured the audiences of his world, just as it still captures the audiences of today.



T A S K S

1. Where was William Shakespeare born?
2. Why did he come to London?
3. How did he gain fame and fortune?
4. What famous theatre did Shakespeare and his friends build?
5. Name three of Shakespeare's plays.
6. What was the sign of the Globe theatre?
7. At what time were performances held?
8. What were the prices of admission?
9. Using this and your other work on the theatre, explain why some people in Elizabethan England felt that theatre was a bad thing.
10. Design a poster advertising a play by William Shakespeare. Use the play titles mentioned in the information above. Include the following details: Venue: the Globe theatre, admission prices, dates of performances, type of play [*Romeo & Juliet* = Romance; *King Lear/Othello/Hamlet* = Tragedy; *King Henry V* = History] - and don't forget to include the author!
11. Describe in your own words a visit to the Globe Theatre.

Finish for homework