

Interesting things of Elizabethan Life

Subject: Interesting History

Here's some history fun for you. Next time you are washing your hands, and complain because the water temperature isn't just how you like it. Think about how things used to be....Here are some facts about the 1500s.

Most people got married in June, because they took their yearly bath in May and still smelled pretty good by June. However, as time passed they were starting to smell, so brides carried a bouquet of flowers to hide the body odor. Baths consisted of a big tub filled with hot water. The man of the house had the privilege of the nice clean water; followed by his sons, and other men living under the same roof. Then came the women and finally the children. Last of all were the babies. By then the water was so dirty you could actually lose someone in it, hence the saying, "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water."

Houses had thatched roofs--thick straw, piled high--with no wood underneath. It was the only place for animals to get warm, so all the dogs, cats and other small animals (mice, bugs) lived in the roof. When it rained it became slippery and sometimes the animals would slip and fall off the roof, thus came the saying, "It's raining cats and dogs." There was nothing to stop things from falling into the house either. This posed a real problem in the bedroom where bugs and other droppings could really mess up your nice clean bed. Hence, a bed with big posts and a sheet hung over the top afforded some protection. That's how canopy beds came into existence.

The floor was dirt. Only the wealthy had something other than dirt, hence the saying "dirt poor." The wealthy had slate floors that would get slippery in the winter when wet, so they spread thresh (straw) on the floor to help keep their footing. As the winter wore on, they kept adding more thresh until when you opened the door it would all start slipping outside. A piece of wood was placed in the entranceway creating a "thresh hold."

In those old days, they cooked in the kitchen with a big kettle that always hung over the fire. Every day they lighted the fire and added things to the pot. They ate mostly vegetables without much meat. They would eat the stew for dinner, leaving leftovers in the pot to get cold overnight, then start over the next day. Often times the kettle contained the same stew for quite a while, hence the rhyme, "peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine days old."

Families that could obtain pork considered themselves quite special. When visitors came over, they would hang up their bacon to show off. It was an outward sign of wealth that a man could "bring home the bacon." Another indication was to cut off a sliver of bacon to share with guests and sit around to "chew the fat."

Those with money had plates made of pewter. Unknowingly at the time, food with a high acid content caused some of the lead to leach onto the food, causing lead poisoning and

death. This happened most often with tomatoes, so for the next 400 years or so, tomatoes were considered poisonous.

Most people did not have pewter plates, but had trenchers, a piece of wood with the middle scooped out like a bowl. Often trenchers were made from stale bread, which was so old and hard that they could be reused for quite some time. Trenchers were never washed, and worms and mold got into the wood and old bread. After eating off wormy, moldy trenchers, one would get "trench mouth."

Bread was divided according to status. Workers got the burnt bottom of the loaf, the family got the middle, and guests got the top, or "upper crust." Lead cups were used to drink ale or whiskey. The combination would sometimes knock them out for a couple of days. Someone walking along roadside would often take them for dead, and prepare them for burial. The "deceased" were laid out on the kitchen table for a couple of days, and families would gather around, and eat, drink and wait to see if the party would wake up, thus began the custom of holding a "wake." England is old and small, and the locals started running out of places to bury people. They would dig up coffins and would take the bones to a "bone-house" and reuse the grave. When re-opening coffins, 1 out of 25 coffins were found to have scratch marks on the inside. Realizing they had been burying people alive came the thought of looping a string around the wrist of the corpse, through a hole in the coffin, and up through the ground attached to a bell. Someone had to sit in the graveyard all night (the "graveyard shift") to listen for the bell; thus, someone could be "saved by the bell" or was considered a "dead ringer."