Elizabethan Entertainment Factsheet

The first three blood sports began in England as early as the 1200s. Whilst initially they were simply blood sports they soon became public events which involved gambling and the exchange of a great deal of money.

**Bear baiting and bull baiting**

Seen as a great sporting and gambling event it was patronised by all classes of Elizabethans including the Queen, courtiers and foreign ambassadors. Vast amounts of money were waged on the outcome of these contests.

Bear baiting was a contest in which the bear was chained to a stake by one hind leg or by the neck and worried by dogs. The whipping of a blinded bear was another variation of bear-baiting. Queen Elizabeth attended a famous baiting which was described by an Elizabethan chronicler called Robert Laneham as follows:

*"... it was a sport very pleasant to see, to see the bear, with his pink eyes, tearing after his enemies approach; the nimbleness and wait of the dog to take his advantage and the force and experience of the bear again to avoid his assaults: if he were bitten in one place how he would pinch in another to get free; that if he were taken once, then by what shift with biting, with clawing, with roaring, with tossing and tumbling he would work and wind himself from them; and when he was loose to shake his ears twice or thrice with the blood and the slaver hanging about his physiognomy."*

**Bull baiting**

Bull baiting was a contest in which trained bulldogs attacked tethered bulls. The bull, with a rope tied round the root of his horns, would be fastened to a stake with an iron ring in it, situated in the centre of the ring. The rope was about 15 feet long, so that the animal was confined to a space of 30 feet diameter. The owners of the dogs stood round this circle, each holding their dog by its ears, and when the sport began, one of the dogs would be let loose. The bull was baited for about an hour. Bull-Baiting and Bear-Baiting was extremely similar, except that Bull-Baiting was more common in England due to the scarcity and cost of bears.

**Elizabethan Venues for Bear & Bull Baiting**

Bear baiting and Bull baiting took place in purpose built arenas. The most famous London arena, called a Bear Garden, for Bear Baiting was in Paris Garden in Southwark.

The most famous London arena for Bull Baiting was called the Bull Ring Theatre. The Audience capacity for Bull and Bear Baiting was up to 1000 people. Gambling was a major feature. The arenas had protective walls around them made of stone (flint). The seating arrangements for the spectators were tiered benches.

Elizabethan Bear & Bull Baiting were immensely popular sports during the Elizabethan era.  Even Queen Elizabeth was pleased to spend an afternoon watching these bloodthirsty forms of entertainment. Bull baiting had been introduced to England during the Medieval period of the 1200's - nearly every town in Elizabethan England boasted a Bull and Bear baiting ring

**Cock Fighting**

Cock fighting was a common pastime, and the bets on this game could amount to thousands of pounds, an exorbitant amount of money in those days, and many respectable gentlemen lost all their money this way. Henry VIII had a royal cockpit built at one of his palaces.

Young boys on Shrove Tuesday would normally bring in their own fighting rooster and would spend the afternoon at school placing bets on which rooster would win. The most famous cock-pit in London was in Drury Lane, and most towns and villages had their own pit.

**Theatre**

The plays were an extremely popular pastime, with William Shakespeare's plays taking the lead. Quite a few theatres were built in and around London at this time including "The Globe", "The Swan" and "The Fortune". Little scenery was used but props were used widely. The props were quite realistic, with innards of pigs being strewn across the stage when a man's body was shown to be cut open.

The Elizabethan Theatre was a booming business. People loved the Theatre. The Elizabethan plays and theatres were as popular as the movies and cinemas of the early 20th century. Vast amounts of money could be made. The inn-keepers increased their profits by allowing plays to be shown on temporary stages erected in the yards of their inns (inn-yards). Soon purpose-built playhouses and great open theatres were being constructed.

Theatrical Performances proved to be so popular that in 1591 the growing popularity of theatres led to a law closing all theatres on Thursdays so that the bull and bear baiting industries would not be neglected!

Visiting a theatre and watching a play was very different not just because of who was in the audience, but because of the expectations of how people would behave. Theatregoers were not expected to be still and silent throughout the performance like modern audiences are. Rather, it was the modern equivalent of going to see a popular band, communal and at times raucous, depending on the subject matter of a given performance.

The audience would eat, drink and talk throughout the performance, and theatres were open air and used natural light. Most plays were performed not in the evening as they are now, but rather in the afternoon or during the daylight.