

SOCIAL HISTORY OF ENGLAND – UNIT V

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THE AGE OF QUEEN ANNE

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Synopsis : Introduction — a period of great prosperity — the main cause for the prosperity — agricultural improvement — the social hierarchy — house building — decoration and furniture — educational system — marriage system — social vices of the time — sports and pastimes — means of transport — important industries — coffee house the centre of social life — religious activities of the time — the City of London and its administration — conclusion — decline in the importance of the court.

Queen Anne ruled England from 1702 to 1714. It was a golden age in the history of England because it was a period of great prosperity. Industry, agriculture and commerce all continued to prosper. Only during the last three years of her reign were there signs of distress and discontent, and that was chiefly due to the unavoidable war conditions in which the people had to live.

This prosperity and content that prevailed all over the country was partly owing to good harvests and cheap food. English agriculture had improved so far that more wheat was grown than in medieval times. Wheat was the most important article of food. Rye, barley and oats came next in importance. In the reign of Anne there was a great exchange of agricultural products between one district and another. Thus the coasts of Sussex and Hampshire sent their corn. Cheshire and other western countries sent their cheese by sea to London. England's agricultural improvement during this regime was so much that she was able to send corn abroad on a large scale. Cattle farming was also on its way of progress.

The social hierarchy consisted of the Duke, the squire, the yeoman, the freeholder and the tenant. The dukes were immensely rich and lived like princes. But the squire had an income of only about two hundred or three hundred pounds a year. From this he had to pay a land tax of four shillings in the pound. On the whole the small squires found it extremely difficult to make both ends meet. The yeomen who were far more numerous than the squires formed about one-eighth of the population. The tenant farmers were a little less in number. The difference between the freeholder and the tenant farmer

was more political and social than economic. The freeholder had a vote for Parliament and was often in a position to use it as he liked. The tenant farmer had no vote, and even if he had, he would have been forced to cast it as his landlord wished. There was another reason why the distinction between the freeholders and the tenant farmers could not be absolute. Very often, a man cultivated a piece of land as a tenant and another piece as 'its owner. Sir Roger de Coverley, who is pictured by Addison as a typical squire of the time, with all his generosity, was very insistent that his tenants should cast their votes in favour of the candidate in whom he was interested.

There was considerable improvement in the matter of house-building and house decoration. Farm houses and big mansions with large windows and spacious rooms were built in the traditional dignified but simple style. Tapestry was no longer in fashion for wall decoration. These houses were furnished with lighter and finer furniture made of mahogany imported from the West Indies. Chinaware brought to Europe by the Dutch and English East India Companies had become a passion with ladies. Alexander Pope refers to this in his mock-heroic poem, "The Rape of the Lock"

In Queen Anne's reign it was not yet time to appreciate the value of good education. A gentleman of the time was satisfied with spending one per cent of his income for his children's education. There were only a few public schools like Eton, Winchester and Westminster which were patronized chiefly by the aristocracy. The sons of the squires, yeomen and shopkeepers went to the nearest grammar schools. In wealthy families private chaplains were employed to teach the young gentlemen. In schools the punishment was of a rather severe type. Flogging was resorted to as a means of imparting knowledge and maintaining discipline. Writers like Locke and Steele were highly critical about this method. Women's education was almost neglected and there was no good school for them. Most girls learnt from their mothers to read, write, sew and manage the household.

In the early part of the eighteenth century most of the marriages were arranged by the parents. However, runaway marriages were common. There were also numerous love

marriages. Divorce was almost unknown. During the twelve years of Queen Anne, in the whole country there were only six divorces.

Drunkenness was the acknowledged national vice of Englishmen of all classes, though women were not accused of it. In fact, during the time of Queen Anne it was so widespread that magistrates often appeared on the bench, heated with wine. Another social vice was gambling. Both sexes gambled freely, the fine ladies and gentlemen even more than the country squires. In London, Bath and Tunbridge Wells, the gambling table was the centre of interest and immense sums of money changed hands over cards and dice. Tobacco smoking was a common habit with many people. A smoking parlour was set aside in some country houses. Among the common people of the south-western countries, men, women, and even children smoked pipes. The taking of snuff became general in England during the first year of Anne's reign, as a result of the immense quantities thrown on to the London market after the capture of Spanish ships loaded with snuff. A very harmful social vice prevalent mostly among gentlemen was duelling. A dispute between two persons was settled conclusively with a duel which ended in the death of one of the two. London and the country capitals were the commonest scenes of such duels as Thackeray had immortalised in his novel *Henry Esmond*. The first half of the eighteenth century was the golden age of the highwaymen, the period when Jack Sheppard, Jonathan Wild and Dick Turpin flourished. In 1712 a club of young men called Mohocks terrorised the landowners by wanton outrages which included the subjection of women to insults and indignities and the beating of the feeble watchmen who were supposed to keep order in the streets. Sir Roger de Coverley while preparing to go to a theatre took all necessary precautions to protect himself and his men from the attack of the Mohocks on their way back home at night.

There were certain sports and pastimes which provided relaxation to the people. In Anne's reign a primitive kind of cricket was just beginning to take its place among the village sports. Football also was played by many. Cockfighting was watched with excitement by all classes of people. Horseracing attracted hundreds of people to the places where it was

conducted. The most usual sports that people could easily resort to, were angling, shooting and snaring birds of all kinds.

The roads were in a bad condition. This was mainly because of the inadequate administrative machinery. Every parish through which a road passed was bound to maintain it by means of six days a year of unpaid labour by the farmers. Because of the bad condition of the roads, sea and river traffic became more popular especially for heavy goods.

The most important industries of the period were coal-mining and cloth-making. The coal mines were treated as the property of the owner of the land. Explosions were common in these mines and many workers lost their lives. In Anne's time the coal-mining industry was midway between the domestic and the factory system. Some of the workshops had large premises and employed many apprentices and journeymen. The industry next in importance was cloth-making. Spinning was done chiefly in country cottages by women and children, and weaving chiefly in towns and villages by men. Two-fifths of the English exports consisted of cloth woven in England. When Gibraltar became an English possession in 1704 a new avenue was opened for this trade in the Mediterranean region and Turkey. The American colonies were valued largely as markets for cloth made in England.

Coffee-drinking was a common habit at least among the wealthier classes. From the reign of Charles II the coffee-house was the centre of social life. In Queen Anne's time there were as many as five hundred coffee-houses in the city of London. The Tories, the Whigs, the clergymen, literary men, businessmen and all other groups had their separate coffee-houses where they met and discussed all things under the sun but chiefly politics and religion. Foreign visitors admired the freedom of speech enjoyed by the Englishmen of the time.

The religious activities of the period consisted of the establishment of many religious societies and charity schools. The first object of these societies was to promote a Christian life in individuals and families, to encourage church-attendance, family prayers and Bible study. During the reign of Anne hundreds of charity schools were founded all over England to educate the children of the poor in reading, writing, moral

discipline and the principles of the Church of England. Another characteristic activity of the period was the working of the Society for the Reformation of Manners. This society issued thousands of articles against drunkenness, swearing, public indecency and Sunday trading. Another society was the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Cheap Bibles and Prayer Books were made available even in the county districts by this society.

London, the greatest city in the world, was situated two miles from the Parliament at Westminster and the Queen's Court at St. James. It was the centre of business. Every country sent its raw materials and food to London and in return it sent to every country her finished products. The city contained more than a tenth of the country's population. The lower strata of the population of the capital lived in most filthy conditions without sanitation, and naturally enough the death-rate among them was high. The city of London enjoyed complete self-government in an unusually democratic form. Nearly 12,000 rate-paying householders elected 26 aldermen and 200 councillors to manage the affairs of the city.

From the time of the Revolution the Court lost its glamour and importance. The ill-health of Queen Anne also was partly at least responsible for this. She was an invalid and therefore kept Court only on rare occasions. Another reason for the decline of the Court was the changing spirit of the time. In the eighteenth century patronage was sought not in the Court but in the Parliament and in the chambers of Ministers.