

To what extent did ordinary lives get better in the period 1500 to 1750?

Key dates:

1536	Henry VIII's closure of the monasteries (which traditionally supported the poor).
1572	Vagabonds Act passed, Justices of the Peace could oversee poor in their parishes.
1601	East India Company set up to encourage trade in Asia and India.
1601	Act for the Relief of the Poor passed, increasing support for the poor.
1650	The beginning of the 'Little Ice Age', a period of cooler weather in Europe.

Key terms:

Parish	An area or district which usually had its own church.
Justice of the Peace	A local law officer who was responsible for ensuring order was kept. Usually, the job was voluntary.
Monastery	Where monks lived and worshipped God together.
Vagabond	A person who wandered from place to place seeking work.
Famine	A serious shortage of food, often leading to starvation.
Enclosure	The process of consolidating areas of land for one landowner. This often led to common land (once shared by the whole village) being taken over.
Sanitation	Conditions relating to public health, especially the availability of clean water.
Superstition	Belief in the supernatural, or specifically in witchcraft.

'At the end of Elizabeth's reign... the social improvements that had taken place improved their habits and raised them to a higher position.'

George Nicholls, A History of the English Poor Law (1854).

'The majority of people during the era of Stuart Britain were poor, with a large portion living in terrible poverty. The 16th century witnessed a surge in population, which led to an increase in poverty and hunger.'

History Extra website.

Evidence that ordinary people's lives DID get better:

Lots of new towns and cities developed during the period, offering people new opportunities to make money. This was especially important due to the changes caused by enclosures.

There were developments in trade and industry, and companies like the East India Company opened up new routes for trading.

There was increasing influence from abroad in things like culture, religion and eating habits. Several monarchs from the period brought European ideas, and trading developments brought changes too.

Evidence that ordinary people's lives DID NOT get better:

Many people still lived in poverty, struggling to feed their families. They were reliant on good harvests, and changes in the weather - like those caused by the Little Ice Age - had a devastating impact.

Women continued to have few freedoms, and their lives were largely controlled by men. If they showed particular skill in medicine, they risked being accused of witchcraft.

The divide between the rich and the poor remained in place - in fact, it widened. Ordinary people continued to work for those above them, with little chance of changing their lives.