

LIFE IN ENGLAND

In 1610 the largest shareholder in the Virginia Company of London left England and went to Virginia to see the condition of the colony he supported financially. He had actually just been appointed its first governor and “captain general.” Thomas West was a cousin of Queen Elizabeth I and a member of the Privy Councils of both Elizabeth and James I. He was married to Cecilia Sherley, a member of a family of wealthy merchants who traveled and traded in Europe and around the Mediterranean. West, who had inherited the title of baron and was addressed as “Lord De la Warr;” found himself in the New World, far away from the lifestyle to which he was accustomed.



De la Warr came from a society strictly defined by class and birth, which created limited opportunities for economic and social advancement. A small elite such as the West family controlled wealth and political power. Less than ten percent of the population held almost 75 percent of all property. But most people did not live like the Wests. Life was difficult for the majority who lived in small, one-room cottages or crowded city tenements. The greatest social mobility occurred in the middle ranks of society which included prosperous farmers, wealthy urban merchants or professionals such as lawyers.

In England, housing and clothing were indicators of wealth. Much of the increased prosperity of the landowning class was put into multi-storied buildings of stone, timber or brick with glass windows and paneled walls. Houses of the poor and middling levels of society were built of mud/clay walls with thatched roofs, no glass windows, and few partitions. The gentry owned numerous garments made of silk and fine linen, while merchants and professionals wore woolens and the poor wore coarse linen clothing.

England was governed by a king or queen whose position was inherited. In 1603, King James VI of Scotland also became King James I of England. The King was not an absolute monarch, however. Some government functions were controlled by Parliament, including the elected House of Commons, which had responsibility for raising money to operate the government. Local governments had authority over counties and cities. Almost everyone in England was a Christian, and the majority attended the Church of England headed by the King. Many English men and women were Puritans who wanted to change some of the Church of England's organizational structure and rituals.

Families averaged two or three children, with a few live-in apprentices, laborers or servants. Wealthy parents provided for their children by dividing their land among their sons and daughters. Boys were sent to school while girls were prepared for marriage. Lower class children lived away from home and served as apprentices to craftsmen or merchants.

Everyone enjoyed recreation time. Upper class boys learned fencing, jousting and tennis. But everyone enjoyed swimming, wrestling, fishing and games such as lawn bowling and nine pins. Children played tag, marbles and rolled hoops. Indoor games included billiards, chess, backgammon and dominoes as well as dice and card games. All classes attended cock-fighting contests. Many of these sports and games were common at holidays and annual festivals where the English also enjoyed music and dance. In the late 16th century, architecture and literature flourished in England. With the appearance of the plays of William Shakespeare and others, people from all classes spent time at the theater.

Lord de la Warr left this familiar environment to go to Virginia to serve as its governor. His arrival in Virginia saved the colony, which the settlers under Sir Thomas Gates were preparing to abandon. De la Warr reestablished Jamestown. He located two forts down the James River at current day Hampton by displacing the Kecoughtan Indian tribe from their land. He also established one up river at the fall line. After less than a year in Virginia, de la Warr's health became poor and he returned to England, but he remained active in the affairs of the Company. In 1618, while traveling back to Virginia to resume his duties as governor, he died at sea.



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