The Nobility

In Shakespeare's time there are only about 55 noble families in England. At the head of each noble family is a duke, a baron, or an earl. These are the lords and ladies of the land.

These men are rich and powerful, and they have large households. For example, in 1521 the earl of Northumberland supports 166 people – family, servants and guests.

A person became a member of the nobility in one of two ways: by birth, or by a grant from the queen or king. Noble titles were hereditary, passing from father to oldest son.

People in other classes might lose status by wasting their fortunes and becoming poorer. It took a crime such as treason for a nobleman to lose his title.
Many nobles had died during the Wars of the Roses, a series of civil wars fought in England in the 15th century. Often, there were no sons to inherit their titles. Elizabeth, her father (Henry VIII), and her grandfather (Henry VII), rarely appointed new nobles to replace those who died. They saw the nobility as a threat to their power and preferred to keep the number small.

Elizabeth created only a few noblemen during her reign. The two chief examples were William Cecil, made Lord Burghley, and Robert Dudley, created Earl of Leicester. Both men who had very helpful to her.

"It is easy to think of the nobility as the idle rich. They may have been rich (though not necessarily), but they certainly weren't allowed to be idle. Often, high office brought debt rather than profit. Honorific offices were unpaid, and visiting nobles to England were the responsibility of the English nobility to house and entertain at their own expense. Appointment to a post of foreign ambassador brought with it terrible financial burdens. The ambassador was expected to maintain a household of as many as 100 attendants." (Britain Express)

"The nobility lived luxuriously. They had no choice. As historian A. H. Dodd wrote, `While the simple gentleman [wealthy but not noble] might live like a lord, the lord "could not live like a simple gentleman without losing face."'43 Nobles were expected to be lavish in their dress, their houses, and their habits. They were expected to serve in an office, such as being an ambassador to a foreign country, at their own expense. " (Lace)

At one time, members of the nobility ran the country, but by Elizabeth's time, those days were gone forever. From Tudor times on, the nobles had to share power with the gentry and the great merchants. Still, they had enormous influence. Most of Elizabeth's council came from the nobility, and the chief officers in the counties -- such as the Lord--Lieutenants and sheriffs -- usually came from noble families.
When Elizabeth I was young, only about 5% of the population would have been classed as gentry: knights, squires, gentlemen, and gentlewomen "who did not work with their hands for a living." (Time Traveller's Guide) Their numbers, though, were growing. They were the most important social class in Shakespeare's England.

"Wealth was the key to becoming part of the gentry. These were people not of noble birth who, by acquiring large amounts of property, became wealthy landowners. Some families bought property bit by bit over generations. A man might marry the daughter of a lesser knight or noble and gain land through his wife's inheritance. Some of the great merchants made their fortunes in the city, then bought a country estate.
"The upper gentry lived like nobles, building huge houses, and employing hundreds of servants. They could not buy their way into the nobility, but their sons or grandsons often became peers (nobles). A good example of the social mobility of the century is Burghley. His grand-father was a man-at-arms under Henry VII, his father was knighted, he was made a baron, and his son was made an earl; each generation earned a title higher than the one before. The gentry were the backbone of Elizabethan England: They combined the wealth of the nobility with the energy of the sturdy peasants from whom they had sprung. Historian A.L. Rowse wrote:

The rise of the gentry was the dominant feature of Elizabethan society. It was they essentially who changed things, who launched out along new paths whether at home or overseas, who achieved what was achieved, who gave what all societies need—leadership. One may fairly say that most of the leading spirits of the age, those who gave it its character and did its work, were of this class.44

"Examples were everywhere. Two of the queen's chief ministers, Burghley and Walsingham, were products of the gentry. Francis Bacon, the great essayist and philosopher, came from this class. So did John Hawkins and Francis Drake, the famous explorers. So did Walter Raleigh, the man who led the way to the English colonization of America.

"The gentry were the solid citizens of Elizabethan England. They went to Parliament and served as justices of the Peace." (Lace)
"Between the two extremes of rich and poor are the so-called 'middling sort', who have saved enough to be comfortable but who could at any moment, through illness or bad luck, be plunged into poverty. They are yeomen farmers, tradesmen and craft workers. They have apprentices and take religion very seriously; usually, they are literate." (Time Traveller's Guide)

"They had existed for centuries and were, like the gentry, peculiar to England. They had no counterparts in Europe, which had great nobles, poor peasants, and little in between.

"The yeomen were prosperous, and their wealth could exceed that of some of the gentry. The difference was how they spent their wealth. The gentry lived like lords, building great houses. The yeoman was content to live more simply, using his wealth to improve his land and to expand it. ... Some owned land, and others leased land for long periods (up to ninety-nine years) at a fixed rate."
"Below the freeholding yeoman on the social scale were the small leaseholders or "copyholders". Their lands might occasionally compare in size and wealth with those of the wealthier yeomen, but they were much less secure. A lease might be for life, in which case a copyholder could not be sure his son would inherit the land. His lease might be hereditary, but the amount due to the landowner might change. Copyholders were often forced off their land to make way for the larger operations.

"Beneath the copyholders were the hired laborers. Some of these lived in one place, working for wages on the lord's land and farming the four acres that, by law, went with their cottages. Other laborers went from county to county as migrant workers, wherever there might be sheep to shear or crops to harvest." (Lace)
At the bottom were the poor. There was far more poverty under Elizabeth than in previous reigns, mostly because of enclosure, but there were also the sick, the disabled, the old and feeble, and soldiers unable to work because of wounds. In earlier times, the church -- notably the monasteries -- had cared for the poor. Under Elizabeth, the government undertook the job -- a big job because enclosure had created so much unemployment.

The result was the famous Elizabethan Poor Laws, one of the world's first government-sponsored welfare programs. The program was financed, at first, by contributions from the wealthy. When this proved inadequate, a poor tax was levied on everyone. The Poor Laws had three goals: first, those unable to care for
themselves were placed in hospitals or orphanages. Children, when they were old enough, were put out as apprentices to craftsmen. Second, the able-bodied who could not find jobs on their own were put to work, usually in workhouses established in the towns. These were places where the unemployed were put to work making goods for sale -- such small items as candles, soap, or rope -- in exchange for a place to sleep and enough food to keep alive.

The third goal was to discourage the permanently unemployed, "rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars" responsible for "horrible murders, thefts, and other great outrages." The Elizabethans made a clear distinction between those who, for one reason or another, were unable to work and those able-bodied people who refused employment, whether in a regular job or in a workhouse. The Elizabethan sense of order revolted at the thought of people wandering about with no respectable occupation. To refuse to work for wages was an offense punishable by law. When vagrants were caught, they were whipped and returned to the parishes (church areas) of their birth. William Lambarde wrote of such a case:

John at Stile, a sturdy vagrant beggar, of low personage, red-haired and having the nail of his right thumb cloven, was the sixth day of April in the forty and one year of the reign of our sovereign lady Queen Elizabeth openly whipped at Dale in the said county for a wandering rogue according to the law, and is assigned to pass forthwith from parish to parish by the officers thereof the next straight way to Sale in the county of Middlesex, where (as he confesseth) he was born. . . and he is limited to be at Sale aforesaid within ten days now next ensuing at his peril.

If the vagrant refused work or escaped from a workhouse and was caught, he was "burned through the gristle of the right ear with a hot iron of the compass of an inch about." If, for a third time, a vagrant was found to be unemployed, the punishment was death.