Shakespeare arrived in London in 1588. At that time, places like Euston and Paddington were tiny villages on the outskirts of England’s capital city. London itself covered just one square mile of land.

The river Thames was the life blood of London. It was everybody’s thoroughfare. The Thames was a harbour, a source of food – including the oysters, a poor man’s meal – a transport route for goods inland and out, London’s main source of water as well as also its sewer.

The Thames would from time to time freeze over in winter – as in 1607 - creating an impromptu skating rink and talking point for the locals, where Londoners would promenade and browse market stalls.
Shakespeare’s London

Life in London was just like it is in any capital city today – hectic! People got around on foot or horseback – they crossed the river by boat as there was only one bridge.

Shakespeare’s London

London was busy and dirty. There weren’t any street cleaners or public services like we have today. Each person looked after themselves, and tried to ignore everyone else. Cleanliness was not important. The contents of chamber pots were thrown straight out of windows into the street.

There was no drainage. Streets were muddy and infested with rats. When the Thames overflowed water, mixed with sewer and disease spread throughout the streets.
Shakespeare's London

The streets were narrow, cobbled, slippery with the slime of refuse. Houses were crammed together, and there were a lot of furtive alleys. Chamber pots were emptied out of windows. There was no drainage. The Fleet Ditch stank enough to make a man throw up. But the City had its natural cleansers— the kites, graceful birds that made their nests of rags and refuse in the forks of trees. They scavenged, eating anything with relish.

Shakespeare's London

People in London were used to such violent sights. On a Law Day they might watch as many as 30 public executions.
Shakespeare's London

The Bear Garden (below) was not only a theatre but also a bear baiting pit too.

Arranging contests between animals was a common form of recreation. It was thought particularly suitable entertainment for royalty.

A bear or bull was tied to a stake and attacked by one or more dogs.

It was sometimes made more ferocious by having pepper blown up its nostrils. The bear took vicious revenge on the on-lookers if it managed to pull free – as sometimes happened.
It is little surprise that the plague was the most dreaded disease of Shakespeare's time. Carried by fleas living on the fur of rats, the plague swept through London in 1563, 1578-9, 1582, 1592-3, and 1603. The outbreaks in 1563 and 1603 were the most ferocious, each wiping out over one quarter of London's population.

Lucky Elizabethans would contract the basic bubonic plague with their odds of survival around fifty percent. Symptoms would include red, grossly inflamed and swollen lymph nodes, called buboes (hence the name bubonic), high fever, delirium, and convulsions. However, if the bacterial infection spread to the lungs or to the bloodstream the unfortunate victim would certainly die, usually within hours with symptoms too horrific to recount.

The plague doctor costume consisted of an ankle length overcoat and a bird-like mask which was filled with strong herbs designed to keep infection away.