

Year 7: Medieval Life

1. Key words

The Feudal System: a system of government where the king gave land to his lords and barons. The lords and barons would then pledge their loyalty to the king and promise to protect his rule. Peasants were at the bottom of the Feudal system.

Villein: The Medieval word for peasants who had no freedoms. It is the root of our word “villain”, but these people were not bad, just poor.

Miasma: a popular idea that bad smells or rotting matter was the cause of disease.

Buboes: the pus filled spots that occurred on your body when you had the Bubonic Plague.

The four humours: the four liquids in your body as thought in the Medieval period – blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm.

Progress: an improvement.

Significant: important.

Change: something different.

Continuity: something that stays the same.

Pilgrimage: a religious journey to a sacred religious site, e.g. Lourdes for Catholics.

Excommunicated: to officially exclude someone from participation in the sacraments and services of the Christian Church. This can only be ordered by the Pope.

Castle: a defensive fortification where a lord or king would live.

Motte and Bailey: a Motte and Bailey castle is a fortification with a wooden keep situated on a raised earthwork called a motte, accompanied by an enclosed courtyard called a bailey.

Vassal: someone who pledges their allegiance to a lord.

Squire: a knight in training. The squire would take care of the knight's armour and weapons. He would also accompany the knight into battle.

2. The Black Death

- It hit England from 1348-50.
- It was a disease which was spread by the fleas on the black rats which travelled on ships from China to Europe.
- In the Middle Ages, people blamed witches, Jewish people and God for sending the illness. It was seen as a sign of sin, that the four humours of the body were out of balance and/or cats and dogs.
- The Black Death was also known as the “bubonic plague”, as you had buboes [huge boils] on your skin as one of the symptoms.
- It killed approximately 1/3 of the English population.
- It killed 38,000 Londoners.
- The consequences of the Black Death were:
 - Peasants wanted higher wages, so they rebelled against their Lords in an event called The Peasants’ Revolt.
 - There was a lack of people who could milk cows and do daily farm work.
 - People that survived thought they were God’s chosen ones.
 - Jewish people were blamed and there was a rise in violent behaviour towards them.
 - Many villages lost all their inhabitants, so were abandoned.
- The treatments included bloodletting, prayer, flagellantism, and herbal remedies using honey and garlic.
- The Black Death spread quickly because the cause of disease was not understood at the time. Medieval people didn’t know germs existed – the flagellants (religious people who whipped themselves for forgiveness from God) spread infection and people ran away to different towns and unwittingly spread the disease.

3. Public Health

- The Medieval government was more concerned with fighting wars like the Crusades than fixing the public health crisis. This attitude is called laissez-faire.
- Waste was thrown out of people’s houses onto the streets – they didn’t have a sewage system, nor flushing toilets or bin collections. Butchers would often butcher animals on the streets too, meaning the streets were a breeding ground for germs.
- The upper classes would have access to private baths, but the lower classes would use a public bathhouse twice a year.
- The Roman public health system was destroyed by war and the medieval system was very limited.
- Exeter had aqueducts that would bring in fresh clean water to the city, Newcastle employed rakers to keep the streets clean and London imposed fines for people dumping waste and stopped butchery in the street in 1381.

4. Towns and villages

- Peasants lived on the manor in villages. Their houses were called cruck-houses.
- The peasants would rent strips of land from the Lord of the manor to farm on. They would have strips in different fields, so that each peasant would get a fair share of good and bad land. Crop rotation took place for fields to get a range of crops.
- Peasants would earn their status as a free man if they escaped and were hidden from their Lord for a year and a day.
- Town life was hard for peasants, as they were poor and some committed crime to get by. The curfew bell rang between 8-9pm and most citizens retired for the night behind the safety of their doors.
- Due to the restriction of city walls, many buildings were 6 or 7 storeys high and, as the buildings were so close together, fire was a common threat and occurrence.
- Entertainment in towns for peasants included bear baiting, public wrestling and archery. For the upper classes there was golf, fencing and hunting.
- The merchants and craftsmen controlled most of the business within the walls of a city. They formed guilds of tradesmen.