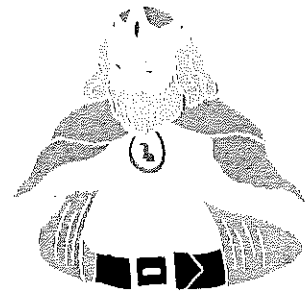


# Medieval Times



## Social Structure

The Medieval social structure was defined by the Feudal System. At the top of the Feudal System was the King. Below him were the noblemen: Barons and Earls and Dukes and so-forth. Below them came the knights. The nobility were a privileged class holding most of the money, land, and therefore, the power. Their lives, though difficult by today's standards, were luxurious compared to the lives of the peasants.

Below knights came the various classes of the peasantry. Although divided into various classes (from freemen to villeins and serfs), there were few differences that actually set them apart, since life was generally a big struggle for them all. Many peasants lived in small, dirty huts where they faced a constant struggle to stay warm and fed. They wore simple clothes, ate simple foods, worked from sun up till sundown, and were subject to the whims of the nobility. The Feudal System held the belief that each person had his own special place in society and that in this place they would (unless something special happened) remain.

## Law and Order

In Medieval times Medieval law and order was especially harsh and barbaric. Medieval laws were set by the King (or queen), or by the king and/or queen's top subjects: their noblemen. Laws covered everything from how many loaves of bread a baker needed to bake, what constituted proper ale and even what side of the road you were allowed to drive on. Keeping the peace was done by instituting such laws as providing each village and town with a ducking-stool (into which, gossipy women could be strapped and ducked...dumped...into the nearest pool or pond) and the enforcement of curfews after dark. Punishment for infractions -- either real or imagined, large or small--were harsh and did not always fit the crime. Various medieval punishments included...

- The Rack – Being stretched on the rack until your arms and legs ripped out of their sockets.
- The Gallows – Being hanged by the neck until dead.
- Breaking on the Wheel – Being strapped to a wagon-wheel and having your limbs smashed and broken by a sledgehammer.
- Being boiled in oil – Another Medieval favorite! King Henry VIII of England who once sentenced a cook to be executed by being boiled alive in a pot of oil, for trying to poison his master's gruel!

Other, lesser punishments included...

- The Whipping Post – Being strapped or tied to a post and flogged.
- The Stocks or Pillory – Being confined to a set of stocks (head & arms locked in a wooden frame) or pillory (feet, as well) and being left there for a pre-determined period of time. In rare instances, people actually died in the stocks or pillory, from abuse from passers-by.



The peasantry, the lowest and poorest class of people in the Medieval world, were the most numerous in number. They fell under the direct rule of their landlord, who could tax them and use them as he wished. Far from the king's eyes, some noblemen became greedy, corrupt and lawless, taxing their peasantry to exhaustion

## Other Aspects of Daily Life

Bathing was not that common in the Medieval era. It was not seen as being necessary, it was seen as too much hard work (and after a day plowing the fields, the last thing you wanted was more work!) and it was seen as pointless, because once you were clean, you would only get dirty again the next day!

But, in the rare instances that people actually bathed in the Medieval world, it was either done in a ready source of water (a stream, lake or river) or it was done in the bathtub. Bathing in a bathtub was such a hassle that most people just didn't bother! You had to light a fire, boil the water, fill the bathtub, wait for the water to be juuuust right, then you had to strip, get in, scrub, scrub, scrub, get out, dry down, put your clothes back on and then tip out the water.

Oh, but only...and ONLY...after every other person in the household had used that exact same bathwater to have their baths, too! Hot water was too scarce a commodity to waste on just one person!

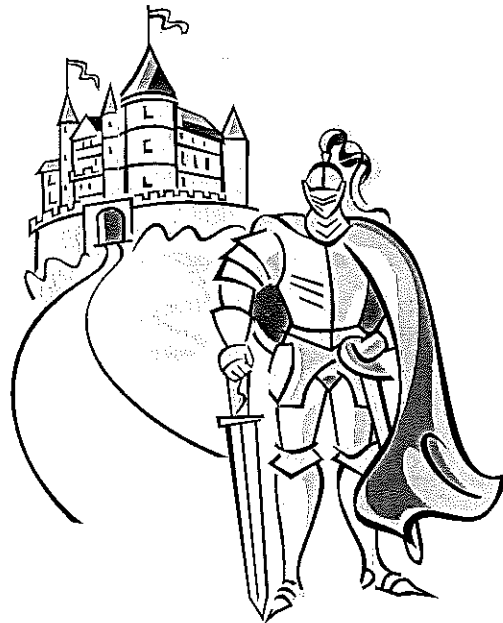
What about clothes and bed sheets? Weren't they washed?

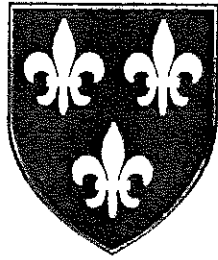
Yes. But again, very rarely. It wasn't generally seen as being necessary, and men and women could wear the same clothes for days or weeks on end before having them changed. In most cases for the peasantry, they didn't have very many other clothes to change into, so there was no point in washing them!

Entertainment in the Medieval world came in various forms. Without books to read, XBoxes to play on, or movies to see entertainment was found in sports such as skittles, darts, bear-baiting, puppet-shows and that favorite of all childrens' pastimes!...

...fairytale!

Fairytales were born out of the Middle Ages as stories to distract peasants from their miserable lives. Stories like "Rapunzel" fed the dreams of peasant girls that they would be whisked off by their Prince Charming. "Hansel and Gretel" probably made little peasant boys forget their own hunger for a while, while also teaching children not to wander from home, lest they find ugly witches with houses made from gingerbread. More stories, such as "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty" were more famous fairytales, told to children (and probably to adults as well) to entertain them when there was nothing on the local stage to watch.

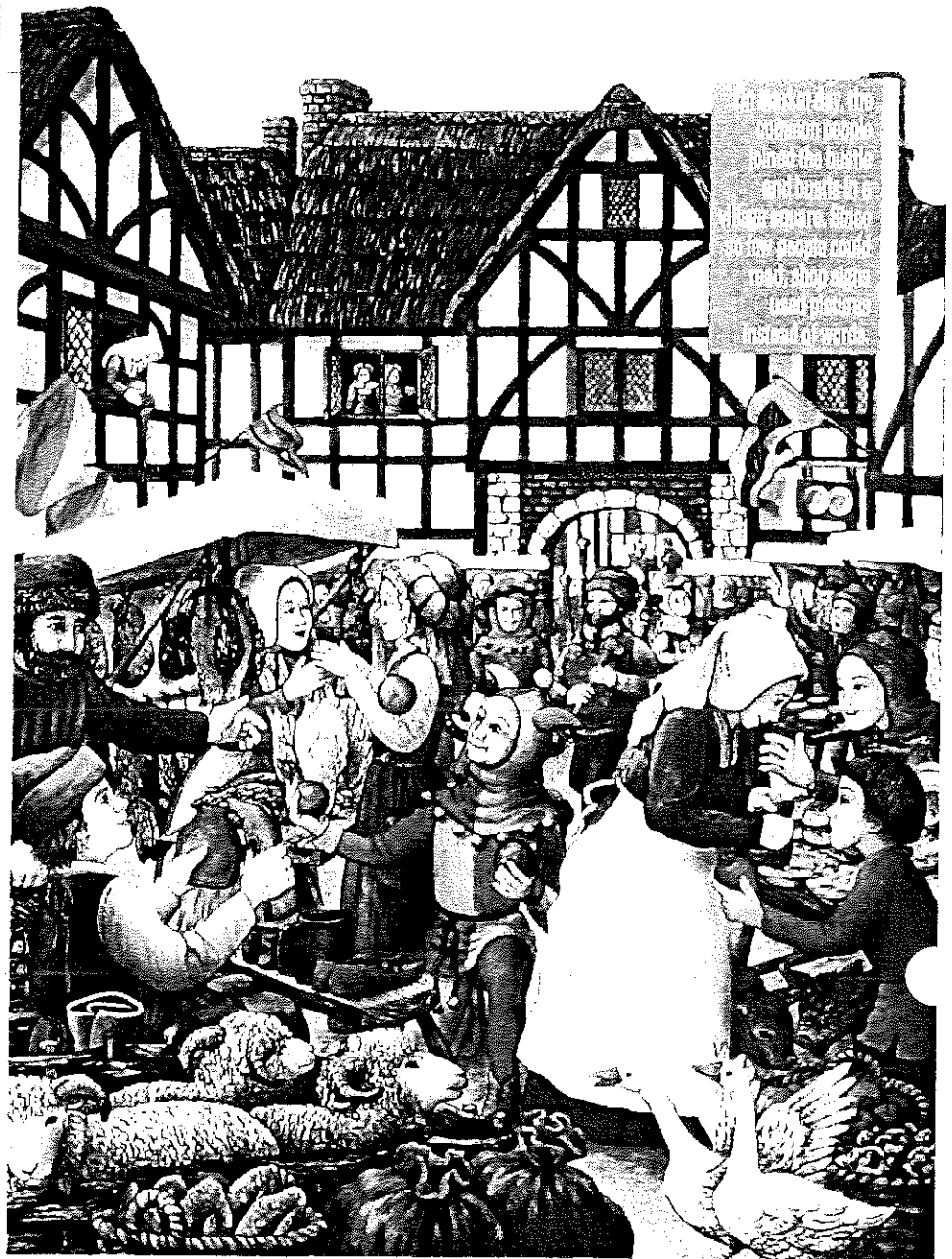




# If You Lived in the Middle Ages



By Dancet Steffens  
and Elena Cabral



## WORDS to know

- **apprentice**: a person learning a trade, usually without pay.
- **feudal** (*FYOO-dul*): relating to a political and economic system in Europe during the Middle Ages, in which landowners granted the use of land in exchange for services.
- **fief**, (*FEEFS*): the estates of feudal lords in the Middle Ages.
- **medieval** (*mee-DEE-uhl*): of or relating to the Middle Ages.
- **serf**: a worker on the lowest rung of the feudal system.

\* Mary, Peter, and their family members are imaginary characters, used to illustrate facts known about life in medieval England.

**T**hink about life in the Middle Ages. You may picture stone castles and knights in gleaming armor. But what was everyday life like for kids?

Let's travel back to **medieval** Europe. There, the Middle Ages lasted from roughly the end of the Roman Empire in 476 A.D. to around 1450.

Your journey will take you to Norfolk, a county in England. The year is 1076. William the Conqueror has been King of England for 10 years.

When you arrive, Mary, 11, and Peter, 12, are just waking up.\*

## Manor Life

A servant lights the fireplace in Mary's room each morning. But Mary still wakes up shivering. The stone walls of her manor house are very cold. As she walks through the house, ceramic tiles feel smooth under her stockinged feet. Colorful tapestries of unicorns and knights cover the walls.

Mary's father is the lord of the manor. Under England's **feudal** system, kings award wealthy nobles like Mary's father their own stretches of land, known as **fiefs**.

The King protects nobles and their

families in exchange for their loyalty. The nobles must promise to join the King in battle and bring along an army of knights. On their estates, nobles and knights rule over workers known as serfs.

In Mary's home, mouth-watering smells float from the kitchen. Boar, pigs, and even oxen are roasted in the huge fireplaces. Mary has berries, other fruit, and nuts for breakfast. She drinks ale sweetened with honey. Her favorite meal is roasted rabbit with turnips and carrots.

Peter's home is a 10-minute walk from the manor house. He lives in a two-room cottage with a roof made of thatched straw. Peter and his father are serfs on Mary's father's estate. Four days a week, Peter helps his father farm the land. Like many poor children, he does not attend school. If Peter is fortunate, a local Catholic priest may show him how to recognize words in the Bible. (Almost everyone in Europe belongs to the Roman Catholic Church.)

When Peter awakens, he gets up from his straw bed on the dirt floor. The stone fireplace in the middle of the room is used for both cooking and heating. Peter's mother has already begun baking for the day.

The family eats the bread she makes, along with a soup of cabbage, leeks, and onions from their garden. They get milk and cheese from their sheep, goats, and cows.

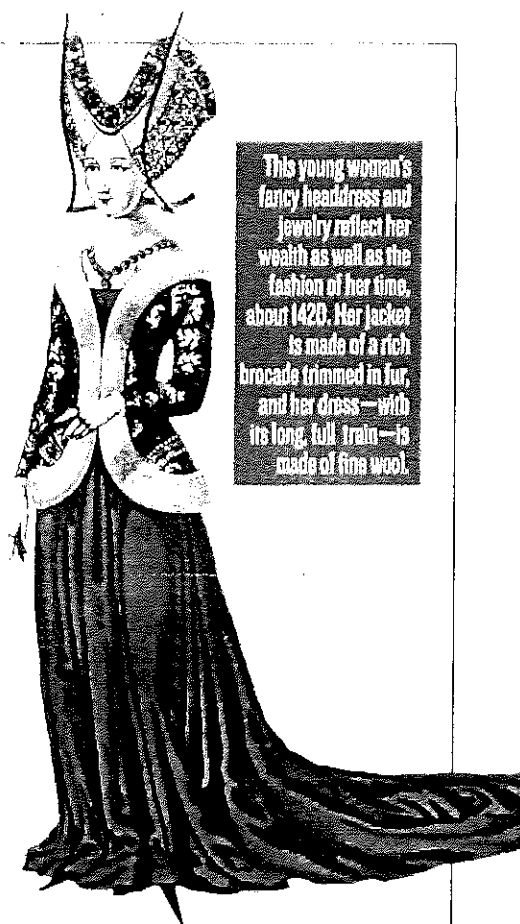
Peter's shirt and pants are made of wool, but his clothing is not as soft as Mary's. It is also dull in color. The bright dyes used to make Mary's dresses are expensive.

## Becoming an Apprentice

While Peter is farming, Mary weaves blankets for her wedding chest. If she doesn't marry, she will be sent to an abbey to become a nun. Mary knows that her father is rich enough to offer a generous **dowry**—a combination of land and money to be paid to her future husband.

Mary's brother, Harold, has just turned 14. He is training to be a knight. In feudal Europe, knights live by their own code called **chivalry**. It is meant to encourage bravery, courtesy, and honor.

For his part, Peter would like to go into a trade as a blacksmith or a carpenter. Some children are able to work as **apprentices** to master craftsmen. In order to do so, they must live with the master's family for years. Once they learn a trade, they can

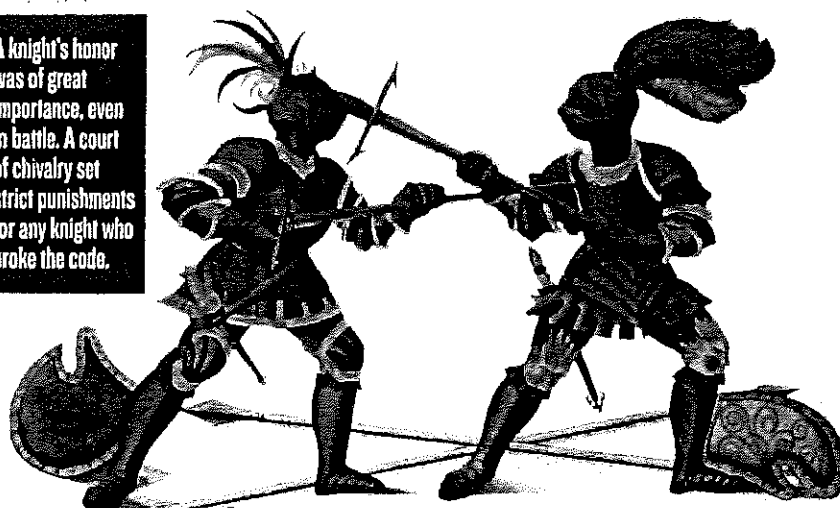


This young woman's fancy headdress and jewelry reflect her wealth as well as the fashion of her time, about 1420. Her jacket is made of a rich brocade trimmed in fur, and her dress—with its long, full train—is made of fine wool.

make a good living as journeymen, traveling around for work experience and money. Despite his dreams, Peter will probably remain a serf.

After a long, hard day working the land, Peter has a simple meal of soup and bread. In the manor house, Mary is already abed. She supped on apple fritters, roast peacock, and custard tarts, while a harpist performed. Peter and Mary live in the same time and on the same land, but they are, in many ways, worlds apart. JS

A knight's honor was of great importance, even in battle. A court of chivalry set strict punishments for any knight who broke the code.



## Your Turn

### THINK ABOUT IT

1. In what ways are Mary's and Peter's lives different?
2. Which role in the feudal system would you choose? Why?



ENTER THE MIDDLE AGES  
[www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/history/middleages](http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/history/middleages)

Use the selection “Medieval Times” to answer the following questions

1. What is the main purpose of the selection Medieval Times?
  - A. to express a view about the harshness of Medieval laws
  - B. to inform readers about life in the Middle Ages
  - C. to persuade readers to become knights
  - D. to entertain readers with stories about Medieval life
2. Which of these is an idea present throughout the reading?
  - A. Life in the middle ages could be unpleasant, difficult, and corrupt
  - B. Laws in Medieval times were harsh but fair
  - C. Fairy Tales were a popular form of entertainment in the middle ages
  - D. Kings noblemen were at the top of the social system and they set the laws of the time
3. Why is the section Social Structure important to the selection?
  - A. It tells of the harsh punishments in the middle ages
  - B. It informs the reader about details of daily life
  - C. It creates a vivid picture life in a village
  - D. It educates the reader on the way the social system was arranged in Medieval times
4. How is this selection organized?
  - A. cause and effect
  - B. chronological order
  - C. topics and supporting details
  - D. compare and contrast
5. What information supports the idea that some lawmakers abused their power and were unfair to the peasants?
  - A. *Medieval laws were set by the king (or queen), or by the king and/or queen's top subjects: their noblemen.*
  - B. *Far from the king's eyes, some noblemen became greedy, corrupt, and lawless taxing their peasantry to exhaustion.*
  - C. *The peasantry, the lowest and poorest class of people in the Medieval world, were the most numerous in number.*
  - D. *The Feudal System was the belief that each person had his own special place in society and that in this place they would (unless something special happened) remain.*

**Use the article “If You Lived in the Middle Ages” to answer the following questions...**

6. How did the author organize this article?
- A. compares and contrasts medieval life for a serf and a lady
  - B. shows the causes of poverty and the effects on everyday life
  - C. describes all aspects of medieval life: politics, religion, employment
  - D. explains the sequence of events necessary to become a knight.
7. What is the author’s purpose in writing this article?
- A. to show how hard it is to become knight
  - B. to show that medieval life varied depending on social status
  - C. to show that nobles got to eat better food than serfs
  - D. to show that apprentices got to travel from village to village
8. What is a major way in which Mary’s life differs from Peter’s?
- A. the food they eat
  - B. the clothes they wear
  - C. the dwellings in which they live
  - D. all of the above

**Use both selections to answer the following questions**

9. The two selections are similar in that
- A. they both depict the daily life of children
  - B. both selections discuss the social and feudal system of the Middle Ages
  - C. both selections educate the reader on the punishments of the Middle Ages
  - D. they both provide information about the practice of becoming an apprentice
10. The writers of both selections would probably agree that
- A. the laws of the Middle Ages were too harsh for the crimes
  - B. living conditions in Medieval times were most unsanitary
  - C. Peter’s chances of becoming a blacksmith were slim
  - D. Life in the Middle Ages was difficult but was especially hard for the peasants

