

History Revision – The Medieval World

The **Middle Ages** / Medieval World are the terms used to describe that period of time from the crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor, on Christmas Day in the year **800A.D.** to the beginning of the Renaissance **in about 1400 A.D.**

Primary Sources from the Middle Ages include; Ruins of Castles / Bayeux Tapestry / Domesday Book / Monks Manuscripts / Pictures painted at the time.

VIKINGS AND NORMANS;

In the 8 & 9 centuries A.D. Vikings from Scandinavia attacked Ireland, England and other parts of Europe. Some settled in North East France where the locals referred to them as “North men”. They eventually became known as the Normans.

In 1066A.D. the Normans conquered England and introduced their way of life there. Almost 100 years later their descendants the Anglo – Normans invaded Ireland in 1169. Just like in England they introduced their way of life – Houses / Laws / Farming / System of Govt.

THE FEUDAL SYSTEM;

Land was very important in the middle Ages, it meant wealth and power. Ownership of land was organised through a system known as the **Feudal System**.

All land was owned, by the king, who needed help in controlling it and defending it. This help he received from his most powerful subjects – **the Barons and the Bishops**. The king gave this land in return for their help – if they misbehaved he took it off them.

This land (called a **Fief**) was given to them at a special ceremony, which was held in public. The Lord, receiving the land knelt before the king and swore to be true, loyal and supportive. By swearing in this way, he became a **Vassal** of the king. He undertook to provide Knights and soldiers for the king in time of war. He also promised to give the king hospitality, should he visit with his entourage.

In turn the Barons and the Bishops needed help this they got from **the Knights**. Like the Barons / Bishops the Knights swore an oath of loyalty and support and to obey. The Knights were given **Manors** – villages with land around them. Some of this land they kept for themselves – This was called the **Demesne**. The rest of the land they divided among the peasants who worked it on their behalf.

MEDIEVAL CASTLES;

There were two main types of Castle. Castles were built for a number of reasons;

- To defend the land or a trade route.
- To reflect the power and status of the Lord.
- To provide a place to live.
- To give shelter to the locals in time of war.

MOTTE AND BAILEY;

These were the earliest castles, built of wood. The Motte was a large mound of earth with steep sides. On top of this a house, surrounded by a timber fence was built. Below it was the Bailey – a flat area enclosed by a ditch, a fence and a Moat. The Bailey contained lodgings for soldiers, stables for horses and workshops and kitchens. The Normans built Motte and Bailey castles to help them hold on to captured land. Their major disadvantage was they burned down easily.

STONE CASTLES;

These soon replaced Motte and Bailey castles. They were much more expensive to build and only the king /Barons / Bishops could afford to build them. They had many defensive features;

- A stone tower, called a **Keep**, where the Lord lived with his family.
- A huge Bailey enclosed by a **Curtain Wall**, which could be 20 feet thick.
- A **Moat** beyond the Curtain Wall and completely surrounding it.
- A series of **Battlements** on top of the Curtain Wall from where arrows, stones, boiling water, or boiling tar could be thrown on the attackers.
- **Towers** along the Curtain Wall to strengthen it.
- A **Drawbridge** over the Moat, which could be closed in time of attack.
- A **Portcullis** / Iron Gate in the Curtain Wall.

The Keep was the most important building in the castle. It contained the Great Hall and the private quarters of the Lord and his family. However it was dark, damp, Cold and draughty. It also contained the chapel, dungeon, and the storerooms.

THE LORD AND LADY OF THE CASTLE;

The Lord organised the business of the castle, kept his territory under control and carried out the wishes of the king. He presided over the law courts in his area and settled disputes. He hunted for meat on his lands.

The Lady ensured the smooth running of the castle. She organised the stores, the food and drink, and the servants. She spun flax and wool and was responsible for her daughter's education. She checked the accounts and the money that came from the estate.

ATTACKING THE CASTLE;

Castles were difficult to capture – a **Siege** was usually the method attempted. The attackers built machines to catapult missiles at the castle. These missiles included rocks, fireballs or dead bodies (to encourage the spread of disease). They also used scaling ladders / siege towers / battering rams. They also tried to tunnel under the walls in an attempt to bring them down.

THE KNIGHTS;

Those trained to be Knights were the sons of Lords or other Knights. They had to go through several stages in their training.

- **Page** – At the age of 7 he went to live in the castle of another Lord. He learned to serve at table and good manners.
- **Squire** – At the age of 14 serious combat training began. He also cared for the Lords armour and practised with sword, shield and lance. He had riding lessons and helped the Lord dress for battle. He might accompany the Lord into battle as a flag bearer but he did not fight.
- **Knighthood** – At the age of 21 he is ready to be dubbed a knight. He spent the night before in a **Vigil** of prayer in the church, dressed in a white tunic. The next day dressed in full armour he knelt before **Chivalry**. Under this vow he promised to be truthful, generous and loyal; to be kind his Lord. The Lord struck him with the flat of the sword on the shoulder and said “Arise Sir...” The new knight then took his vow of to the poor; to protect women and children
- Knights fought battles during the summer and spent the winter practicing their skills at Jousts and Tournaments.

THE MANOR AND VILLAGE LIFE;

Most medieval people lived in villages. **The Manor** was the land the village around it. It was under the control of the Knight who lived in the Manor House. He rented much of the land to peasants and employed a Bailiff to run the Manor. The Manor House had a wall and a moat around it. The peasants lived in the village. Some peasants were Freemen who paid a money rent and were free to move around. However most peasants were Serfs who paid their rent with their crops and their labour. They were not free to move around and were tied to the same Manor for life. A serf could become a freeman if he could get away from the Manor for a year and a day. At certain times during the year, all peasants had to work their Lords land. Farming used the Open – Field System while Common Land was used for grazing cattle and sheep.

MEDIEVAL CITIES AND TOWNS;

Towns were centres of trade. They grew up in particular places;

- On the coast, where there was a good harbour.
- At a river crossing.
- Near castle or a monastery.
- Where two trade routes met.

Towns were granted **Royal Charters**, by which the king gave the town permission to elect its own council, have its own courts and hold its own markets. High walls surrounded these towns and gates controlled entry. At the centre of the town were the church and the marketplace.

MERCHANTS AND CRAFTSMEN;

In any town these were the two main groups. The merchants were the richer of the two and often controlled the politics of the town. Craftsmen often had their workshops in the ground floor of their houses. Both groups organised themselves into **Guilds**. Guilds were like Trade Unions. They controlled training / prices of a particular business or craft and protected the interests of its members. They took care of their members who were sick and supported the

families of those members who had died. To become a member of a Guild was a long and demanding course.

- **Apprentice** – Began at the age of 14 .A young man wishing to train, moved in to live with a Master craftsman and his family. Here he learned the skills of his trade. Conditions were harsh and punishments were severe.
- **Journeyman** – At the age of 21 an apprentice became a Journeyman. He was free to work freelance for anyone and he was paid by the day, hence the name from the French word “journée” meaning “day”.
- **Master craftsman** – To become a master craftsman he had to have his work assessed by the Guild. The work, which he presented to the Guild for this assessment, was called his “master piece”. If he passed the test he could now have his own workshop and apprentices.

MONASTERY AND PARISH;

Religion was very important during the middle ages and had great influence on the lives of all people, from the King to the poorest peasant. Churches were built of stone and were often the biggest buildings in the town. Early medieval churches were built in the **Romanesque style** and its features included;

- Rounded arches over the doors and windows.
- Thick walls and thick pillars supporting the roof.
- Small windows set in the thick walls.

Later medieval churches were built in the **Gothic Style** and its features included;

- Pointed arches over doors and windows.
- Slender walls and narrow pillars supporting the roof.
- Huge tall windows including the famous “Rose Windows”.

MEDIEVAL MONASTERIES;

Monks and nuns, living in monasteries devoted their lives to God.

- They ran hospitals for the sick and the poor.
- They ran schools to teach.
- They ran guesthouses for travellers and pilgrims.
- They ran farms to be self-sufficient.

The main buildings in a Medieval Monastery were as follows;

- The Church - where the monks gathered to pray with the local community
- The Almonry – where the monks gave out food to the poor.
- The Cloisters - where he monks prayed in private
- The Refectory - where the monks ate their meals
- The Infirmary - where the monks treated the sick
- The Chapter House - where the monks met to discuss monastery business
- The Scriptorium - where the monks copied manuscripts

THE LIFE OF A MONK;

A boy wishing to become a monk joined the monastery as a **Novice**. He learned the **Rule of St Benedict** and helped with the work. At the end of this time as a Novice, if he wished to remain in the monastery he took three vows;

- **Poverty.**
- **Chastity.**
- **Obedience.**

He wore a special type of clothes called a **Habit** and had his head shaved in a special style called a **Tonsure**.

The life of a monk was organised around **Prayer and Work**. The monks gathered in the church **seven times a day** to pray **The Divine Office**. When they weren't praying they worked around the monastery fulfilling the various jobs as seen above.

THE PRINCIPAL MONKS OF THE MONASTERY;

The head of the monastery was called the **Abbot**. The other monks elected him to his position. The **Novice master**, the **Guest Master**, the **Almoner**, the **Infirmarian**, helped him in the running of the monastery.

THE DECLINE OF THE MIDDLE AGES;

A plague called the Black Death spread across Europe from 1345 – 1348. It killed 30% of the entire population of the continent. This huge loss of life brought an end to life as it had been lived during the middle ages. The cause of the plague was unknown and many believed it was a punishment from God. Towns and cities were hardest hit as people lived so closely together. In some cases the whole population of a town died out and the settlement was abandoned. The middle ages were over.