

FEARNHILL SCHOOL HISTORY DEPARTMENT – KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER – LIFE IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Key events

Living in a medieval town:

- A medieval town would seek a charter giving it the right to become a borough. The rich merchants would then be allowed to choose a mayor and hold a market.
- Houses were made of a wooden frame, with the gaps filled with woven strips of wood, known as 'wattle', and covered, or 'daubed', with clay and horse-dung. Most roofs were thatch.
- Medieval shops were workshops, open to the street for customers, with the craftsman's house above. Because few people could read, shops signs were a huge model showing the craftsman's trade. People of the same trade often worked in the same street.
- The streets of a medieval town were narrow and busy. They were noisy, with the town crier, church bells, and traders calling out their wares. There were many fast food sellers, selling such things as hot sheep's feet and beef-ribs.
- Criminals were put in the stocks or the pillory. These were wooden boards with holes for feet, hands or head. Medieval punishments were cruel, and crimes such as theft were punished by hanging.
- Holy Days would be marked by colourful processions, as the different guilds competed to make the best display.
- If a serf ran away from his village to a town and remained free for a year and a day, he could become a 'freeman' of the town.

The Church in the Middle Ages had huge power over people's lives

- The Pope claimed authority over all kings and bishops. The bishops were powerful landowners who acted as the king's advisers.
- If a cleric was accused of a crime, he was not tried in the king's court. Instead, he was tried in a Church court where the punishments were not so strict.
- The Popes were able to convince many knights to earn forgiveness for their sins by going on Crusade against Muslim control of Jerusalem and the Holy Lands. An act that protected the Church's power and led to centuries of such Crusades.
- The reign of King John shows what often happened in the Middle Ages when a monarch lost a war – his authority was completely undermined. The barons rebelled and, on 15 June 1215, they forced John to agree to Magna Carta (The Great Charter) - a set of demands by which the barons tried to limit the power of the king to their advantage.
- The reign of King John was a turning point in the history of England's government. The barons – successfully – had said 'no' to the king, and made him do as they wanted. The charter only spoke about freemen and not the majority of people who were peasants. No monarch of England ever had unrestricted, or 'absolute', power again and within a century England saw the beginnings of Parliament.

The key events that led to Thomas Becket's death:

- Becket refused to sign the Constitutions of Clarendon – he said that it would mean that clerics were punished twice for the same crime.
- At a Great Council held at Northampton in 1164, Becket was found guilty of treason.
- Becket fled to France.
- In 1170, the Pope threatened to excommunicate Henry, so Henry let Becket return to England. Becket had won.
- Then Becket excommunicated three bishops who supported Henry. In rage, Henry is said to have shouted: Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?
- Four knights heard this and, in a misplaced effort to please Henry, rode to Canterbury, and murdered Becket at the altar of the Cathedral on 29 December 1170.

The Late Middle Ages saw great losses of life, and so the daily life of anyone living during this period might have been focused on trying to eat as well as possible and avoid catching the plague. On the other hand, toward the end of the Late Middle Ages, after The **Great Famine** and The **Black Death**, advances in technology, art, and culture meant that a new world was open to the people.

The **Peasants' Revolt** (also known as the Great Rising or Wat Tyler's Rebellion) occurred in 1381. At the time of the revolt, the English population was dealing with the effects of the Black Plague as well as the Hundred Years' War. These two issues led the government to take unpopular steps to deal with problems that arose as a result of these issues. These steps led to the rebellion.

Key people

During the Early **Middle Ages**, nobles lived more comfortable lives than the lower classes (peasants), but this did not mean that they were always easier. Nobles had a lot to think about: governing their lands, keeping the loyalty of their workers, and staying in favour with the king.

Serfs, the term for the lower classes during the Early Middle Ages, were very busy people, but in different ways. Rather than looking over other people and keeping order, they spent their time planting crops and making clothing for the manor (and everyone who lived there).

King William II: Known as William Rufus because of his red hair. He died in mysterious circumstances due to a hunting accident in the New Forest.

King Henry II: He introduces new courts, laws and punishments to make England a safer place. He is friends with Thomas Becket until he is murdered.

Thomas Becket: A close friend of Henry II and he became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. The King and Thomas fell out and in 1170 four knights murdered Thomas at Canterbury Cathedral.

King John is most famous as the king who was forced to agree to Magna Carta - a set of laws he had to follow giving rights to the people. This was after many conflicts with barons and the Church.

Richard II: King during the Peasants' Revolt. His ministers issued a Poll Tax which angered the peasants and was seen as unfair. He was just 14 at the time and managed to contain the revolt. He later passed harsh laws against peasants.

Wat Tyler: A tiler from Essex who would take on a lead role in the Revolt. He was attacked while negotiating with the king and was killed for his part in the revolt.

John Ball: A well-known preacher in the 1380s. He was a radical who wanted peasants to have more rights. He was another leader of the Peasants' Revolt.

Key questions/words

What makes a good ruler? What happened to William Rufus? What was life like for a peasant? Was life the same for everyone in a medieval town? How important was religion in medieval times? How important was the Holy Land to people of all faiths? Why did people go on crusade? What happened to Thomas Becket? Was John a good or a bad king? Why is Magna Carta so important? What was the impact of the Peasants Revolt?

Religion played a very important role in shaping the Middle Ages. It influenced education, customs, morals, and routines of nearly everyone in Europe, and from time to time, the rule of a king and the laws of the church came into conflict with one another.

Church: a building used for public Christian worship.

Monarch: a sovereign head of state, especially a king, queen, or emperor.

Peasant: a poor smallholder or agricultural labourer of low social status.

Feudal System. The basic government and **society** in Europe during the **middle ages** was based around the **feudal system**. Small communities were formed around the local lord and the manor. The lord owned the land and everything in it.

Magna Carta, which means 'The Great Charter', is one of the most important documents in history as it established the principle that everyone is subject to the law, even the king, and guarantees the rights of individuals, the right to justice and the right to a fair trial