**Medieval Peasant Life**

The Medieval peasant together with freeman and villeins, lived on a manor in a village. Most of the peasants were [Medieval Serfs](http://www.medieval-life-and-times.info/medieval-life/medieval-serfs.htm) or [Medieval Villeins](http://www.medieval-life-and-times.info/medieval-life/medieval-villein.htm). The small, thatch-roofed, and one-roomed houses of the Medieval Peasant would be grouped about an open space (the "green"), or on both sides of a single, narrow street. The population of one of these villages often did not often exceed one hundred people. The Medieval Peasant shared a common life in the work of the fields, in the sports of the village green, and in the services of the parish church. But there was time for rest and entertainment in the life of a Medieval Peasant.

**Medieval Peasant - Food**  
The life of a Medieval peasant changed with the seasons. Small animals required slaughtering during the autumn as it was not economic or practical to feed animals during the winter. The meat was then preserved in salt. Bread was a mainstay of the Medieval Peasant. Corn, grain, cabbage, ale or cider was obtained from the local area.

**Daily Life of a Medieval Peasant on the Farms**  
The Daily Life of a Medieval Peasant who worked on the land was often hard.  A Medieval peasant had to labor on the lord's land for two or three days each week, and at specially busy seasons, such as ploughing and harvesting. The daily life of a Medieval peasant can be described as follows:

* The daily life of a Medieval peasant started at started in the summer as early as 3am
* A Medieval peasant would start with breakfast, usually of pottage
* Work in the fields or on the land started by dawn and the daily life of a Medieval peasant included the following common tasks:
  + Reaping - To cut crops for harvest with a scythe, sickle, or reaper.
  + Sowing - the process of planting seeds
  + Ploughing - To break and turn over earth with a plough to form a furrow
  + Binding and Thatching
  + Haymaking - cutting grass and curing it for hay.
  + Threshing - To beat the stems and husks of plants to separate the grains or seeds from the straw.
  + Hedging - creating boundaries
* Outside work finished at dusk, working hours for Medieval Peasants were therefore longer during the summer months
* Peasants made some of their own tools and utensils using wood, leather and the horns from cattle
* Women generally ate when her husband and children had finished and had little leisure time

**Medieval Peasant in a Castle**  
Servants and Medieval peasants had to provide meals and undertake menial tasks for their lord and his family. Many of the Medieval peasants who worked in the castles were women. Women worked in the kitchen and were expected to cook, clean and wait on the lord. Other occupations were carried out by the Medieval peasants within the castles as stable hands to help with the horses and kitchen staff. The horses were extremely important to the Lord and Knights - the horses had to be fed, groomed and their stables kept clean.

**Medieval Peasant Clothing**  
The Medieval Peasant clothing was basic and practical. The Medieval Peasants clothes consisted of:

* A blouse of cloth or skin fastened by a leather belt round the waist
* An overcoat or mantle of thick woolen material, which fell from his shoulders to half-way down his legs
* Shoes or large boots
* Short woolen trousers
* From his belt there hung a sheath for his knife
* Medieval Peasants generally went bareheaded, but in cold weather or in rain he wore a woollen hat
* Gloves were only worn by Medieval Peasants for their practical clothing value and were padded for use in tasks such as hedging

**The Lifestyle of Medieval Peasants**

The lifestyle of peasants in Medieval England was extremely hard and harsh. Many worked as farmers in fields owned by the lords and their lives were controlled by the farming year. Certain jobs had to be done at certain times of the year. Their lives were harsh but there were few rebellions due to a harsh system of law and order.

The peasants were at the bottom of the Feudal System and had to obey their local lord to whom they had sworn an oath of obedience on the Bible. Because they had sworn an oath to their lord, it was taken for granted that they had sworn a similar oath to the duke, earl or baron who owned that lord’s property.

The position of the peasant was made clear by **Jean Froissart** when he wrote:

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| **It is the custom in England, as with other countries, for the nobility to have great power over the common people, who are serfs. This means that they are bound by law and custom to plough the field of their masters, harvest the corn, gather it into barns, and thresh and winnow the grain; they must also mow and carry home the hay, cut and collect wood, and perform all manner of tasks of this kind. Written in 1395** |

The one thing the peasant had to do in Medieval England was to pay out money in taxes or rent. He had to pay rent for his land to his lord; he had to pay a tax to the church called a **tithe**. This was a tax on all of the farm produce he had produced in that year. A tithe was 10% of the value of what he had farmed. This may not seem a lot but it could make or break a peasant’s family. A peasant could pay in cash or in kind – seeds, equipment etc. Either ways, tithes were a deeply unpopular tax. The church collected so much produce from this tax, that it had to be stored in huge tithe barns. Some of these barns can still be seen today. There is a very large one in Maidstone, Kent, which now has a collection of carriages in it.

Peasants also had to work for free on church land. This was highly inconvenient as this time could have been used by the peasant to work on their own land. However, the power of the church was such that no-one dared break this rule as they had been taught from a very early age that God would see their sins and punish them.

The Domesday Book meant that the king knew how much tax you owed and you could not argue with this – hence why it brought ‘doom and gloom’ to people.

After you had paid your taxes, you could keep what was left – which would not be a great deal. If you had to give away seeds for the next growing season, this could be especially hard as you might end up with not having enough to grow let alone to feed yourself.

Peasants lived in **cruck houses**. These had a wooden frame onto which was plastered wattle and daub. This was a mixture of mud, straw and manure. The straw added insulation to the wall while the manure was considered good for binding the whole mixture together and giving it strength. The mixture was left to dry in the sun and formed what was a strong building material.

Cruck houses were not big but repairs were quite cheap and easy to do. The roofs were thatched. There would be little furniture within the cruck houses and straw would be used for lining the floor. The houses are likely to have been very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. Windows were just holes in the walls as glass was very expensive. Doors might be covered with a curtain rather than having a door as good wood could be expensive. At night, any animal you owned would be brought inside for safety. There were a number of reasons for this.

First, wild animals roamed the countryside. England still had wolves and bears in the forests and these could easily have taken a pig, cow or chickens. The loss of any animal could be a disaster but the loss of valuable animals such as an ox would be a calamity.

If left outside at night they could also have been stolen or simply have wandered off. If they were inside your house, none of these would happen and they were safe. However, they must have made the house even more dirty than it usually would have been as none of these animals would have been house-trained. They would have also brought in fleas and flies etc. increasing the unhygienic nature of the house.

The houses would have had none of the things we accept as normal today – no running water, no toilets, no baths and washing basins. Soap was unheard of and as was shampoo. People would have been covered with dirt, fleas and lice. Beds were simply straw stuffed mattresses and these would have attracted lice, fleas and all types of bugs. Your toilet would have been a bucket which would have been emptied into the nearest river at the start of the day.

Water had a number of purposes for peasants – cooking, washing etc. Unfortunately, the water usually came from the same source. A local river, stream or well provided a village with water but this water source was also used as a way of getting rid of your waste at the start of the day. It was usually the job of a wife to collect water first thing in the morning. Water was collected in wooden buckets. Villages that had access to a well could simply wind up their water from the well itself.

Towns needed a larger water supply. Water could be brought into a town using a series of ditches; lead pipes could also be used. Water in a town would come out of conduit which was similar to a modern day fountain.

Bathing was a rarity even for the rich. A rich person might have a bath just several times a year but to make life easier, several people might use the water before it was got rid of!

It was said that a peasant could expect to be fully bathed just twice in their life; once, when they were born and when they had died! Face and hand washing was more common but knowledge of hygiene was non-existent. No-one knew that germs could be spread by dirty hands.

London had a number of public baths near the River Thames. These were called “**stews**“. Several people at one time would bath in them. However, as people had to take off what clothes they wore, the stews also attracted thieves who would steal what they could when the victims were hardly in a position to run after them!

Regardless of how water was acquired, there was a very real potential that it could be contaminated as toilet waste was continuously thrown into rivers which would make its way into a water source somewhere.

Families would have cooked and slept in the same room. Children would have slept in a loft if the cruck house was big enough.

The lives of peasant children would have been very different to today. They would not have attended school for a start. Very many would have died before they were six months old as disease would have been very common. As soon as was possible, children joined their parents working on the land. They could not do any major physical work but they could clear stones off the land – which might damage farming tools – and they could be used to chase birds away during the time when seeds were sown. Peasant children could only look forward to a life of great hardship.

For all peasants, life was “nasty, brutish and short.”

**Life in the Country**   
The majority of people living during the Middle Ages lived in the country and worked as farmers. Usually there was a local lord who lived in a large house called a manor or a castle. Local peasants would work the land for the lord. The peasants were called the lord's "villeins", which was like a servant.   
The peasants worked hard all year long. They grew crops such as barley, wheat, and oats. They also had gardens where they grew vegetables and fruits. They also sometimes had a few animals such as chickens for eggs and cows for milk.

**What were their homes like?**   
Although we often think of pictures of large castles when we think of the Middle Ages, most people lived in small one or two room homes. These homes were very crowded and usually everyone slept in the same room. In the country, the family animals, such as a cow, may also live inside the home. The home was usually dark, smoky from the fire, and uncomfortable.   
  
**What did they wear?**   
Most peasants wore plain clothing made from heavy wool to keep them warm during the winter. The wealthy, however, wore much nicer clothes made from fine wool, velvet, and even silk. Men generally wore a tunic, woolen stockings, breeches, and a cloak. Women wore a long skirt called a kirtle, an apron, woolen stockings, and a cloak.   
In order to separate the nobles from the peasants, laws were passed called "sumptuary" laws. These laws stated who could wear what types of clothes and what materials they could use.   
  
**What did they eat?**   
Peasants during the Middle Ages did not have a lot of variety in their food. They mostly ate bread and stew. The stew would have beans, dried peas, cabbage, and other vegetables sometimes flavored with a bit of meat or bones. Other foods like meat, cheese, and eggs were usually saved for special occasions. Since they didn't have a way to keep their meat cold, they would eat it fresh. Leftover meat was smoked or salted to preserve it. The nobles ate a wider variety of food including meats and sweet puddings.   
  
**Did they go to school?**   
Very few people attended school in the Middle Ages. Most peasants learned their job and how to survive from their parents. Some children learned a craft through apprenticeship and the guild system. Wealthy children often learned through tutors. They would go to live in the castle of another lord where they would work for the lord, learning about how a large manor was run.   
  
There were some schools run by the church. Here students would learn to read and write Latin. The first universities also began during the Middle Ages. University students would study a wide range of subjects including reading, writing, logic, math, music, astronomy, and public speaking.   
**Interesting Facts about Daily Life in the Middle Ages**

* The bread eaten by people of the Middle Ages was gritty from the millstones used to grind the grain. This caused the people's teeth wear down quickly.
* Peasants were not allowed to hunt on the lord's land. Punishment for killing a deer was sometimes death.
* Medicine was very primitive at the time. Sometimes doctors would "bleed" people by putting leeches on their skin.
* People mostly drank ale or wine. The water was bad and would make them sick.
* Marriages were often arranged, especially for nobles. Noble girls often married at 12 years old and boys at 14.

**On a typical day:**

**Peasants and serfs got up, while it was still dark usually. The first thing they did was say their morning prayers. Then the men left to get their assignment for the day from the reeve, the manor lords' who directed their work. Usually the peasant's wife stayed home, fed the livestock, collected eggs, milked the cow, pulled water from the well or river, and cooked and washed. Women were responsible for weeding the garden near their home, picking vegetables, and spinning cloth. Kids did not go to school. Children worked with their mother. When the boys got old enough, they worked with their father. At night, they ate a simple meal of stew and black bead and sometimes cheese. Right after sunset, they went to bed.**

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| **A Contract Between a Villein & His Lord, 1307** |
| During the Middle Ages, economic life centered on the manor.  Lords received manors from kings and other lords in return for military service.  A manor consisted of the lord's house; cottages for his tenants; a church, mill, and workshops; and woodlands, fields, and pastures.  Most of the tenants were serfs bound to the manor for life.  Other tenants, called *villeins*, were legally free but subject to the authority of the lord.           Each *villein*had a contract with his lord spelling out his rights and duties.  Eventually lords wrote these contracts down in account books so that everyone would know what the duties were.  An example of such an account book follows:            John of Cayworth [*villein*] holds from his lord one house and thirty acres of land.  For his right to this land, he must pay the lord two shillings a year at Easter and Michaelmas.  At Christmas he must give the lord one cock and two hens worth four shillings.           He must harrow [cultivate] the lord's land for two days during Lent at sowing time with his own horse and harrow.  He receives from the lord each day that he harrows three meals.           He must carry the manure of the lord's animals for two days using his own two oxen.  He receives from the lord three meals each day that he carries the manure.           He must carry wood from the lord's forest to the manor house for two days in summer.  He receives from the lord three meals each day that he carries wood.           John of Cayworth may not allow his daughters to marry without the consent of the lord or the lord's bailiff.  Neither may he permit his sons to enter the clergy without the lord's consent.  He may not cut the timber growing on his land without the consent of his lord or the bailiff, and then only for the purpose of building.           After his death, his survivors will pay to the lord the best animal that he had, unless he has no living beast, and then the lord will receive no payment.           And if his sons or daughters wish to continue holding his house and thirty acres after his death, they must make a payment to the lord equal to the entire rent for one year, and continue paying the rent as set down in this contract. |