

What was life like in a medieval town?

People who didn't live in villages in the countryside, or in castles, lived in towns. When William conquered England in 1066 there were only about 15 towns with a population of more than 1000 people, and only about eight with more than 3000 living there. London was the largest with about 10,000 people, followed by Winchester and Norwich with about 3000 people each. Most people (about 90 per cent of the population) lived in small villages out in the countryside, with no more than 50 to 100 people in each.

Mission Objectives

- Explain what life was like in a medieval town and what a town might look like.
- Discover why towns grew.
- Assess how buying and selling was organized.

Why towns developed

After 1066, towns began to grow. Some villages grew in size too – and became towns! Sometimes towns grew where major roads met or near a bridge where people came to buy and sell goods. Others grew near a castle or monastery. The local lord still owned these places, but, if the town continued to grow and the townspeople made lots of money, they might join together and buy their land and freedom from the lord or king.

Town charters

A town's freedom, written down on a special piece of paper known as a charter, gave the townspeople the chance to run the town themselves. In fact, by 1400, about 300 towns had received their charter and freedom. By this time, London's population had grown to over 40,000.

The diagram on these pages shows a typical town in about 1250. Look for the following:

- 1 Most streets were just dirt tracks
- 2 A pedlar selling goods as he walks through the streets
- 3 The castle – at one time only the castle was here, but over the years the town was built in front of it
- 4 Shops had picture signs to show what they sold because few people could read
- 5 Large private house, probably the home of a merchant
- 6 Defensive tower and guardpoint
- 7 Entrance gate – guarded by sentries 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- 8 Having fun – all sorts of people might entertain the townspeople in return for a few coins
- 9 A young apprentice being taught the skills of a trade by a master craftsman; the training lasted seven years
- 10 The market – held once or twice a week, people came from the countryside to sell eggs, cheese, butter, fruit, and vegetables
- 11 Many houses had vegetable gardens
- 12 Market stalls – merchants brought exotic goods, such as spices and silks, from abroad
- 13 Meeting rooms above the gateway
- 14 Traders bringing in goods by river
- 15 A wagon bringing goods to sell at the market
- 16 The Guildhall – where the town guild met. This was a group of traders and craftsmen that made rules for its members to follow; they set prices, organized training and made sure goods were well made
- 17 Town walls patrolled by guards

Wise Up Words

charter export guild merchant

Town Charter

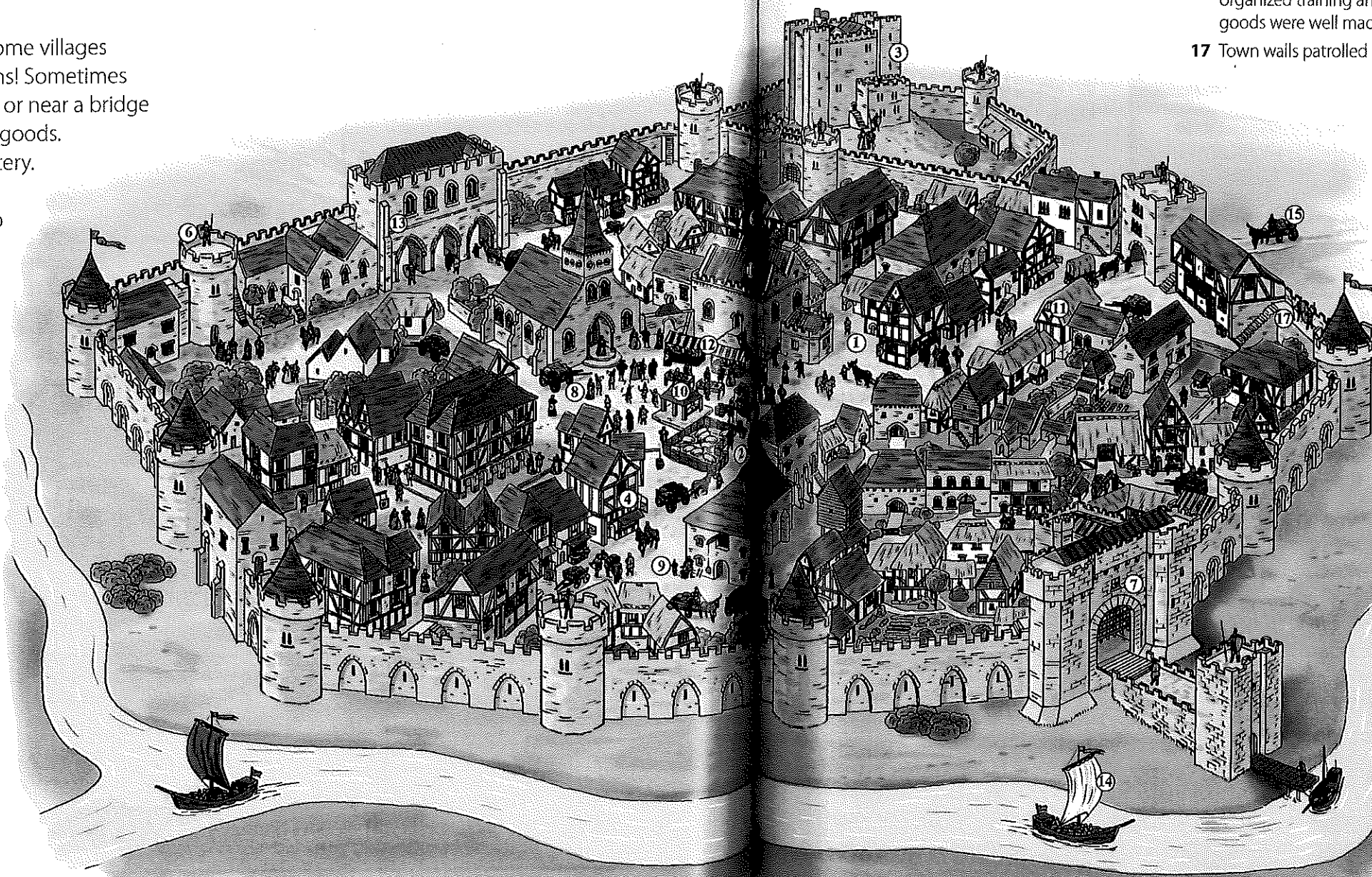
The king gives the officials running this town permission to:

1. *RENT LAND* for their own use without working for the lord
2. *HOLD MARKETS* every week without paying taxes to the lord
3. *HOLD FAYRES* every year
4. *FIX PRICES* for goods sold at market
5. *HOLD COURTS* to punish traders who break the rules of the market
6. *HAVE THE RIGHT OF GALLOWES* – to punish criminals by hanging.

▲ **SOURCE A:** A typical charter granted by a king or local lord in the Middle Ages. Both Leeds and Liverpool became towns in 1207 after receiving their charter.

Work

- 1 List the main reasons why some towns grew.
- 2 Look at **Source A**.
 - a What is a charter?
 - b What advantages were there in having a charter for:
 - i the townspeople?
 - ii the local Lord or King?



5.2B What was life like in a medieval town?

Look through all the sources on these pages to discover what life was like in a medieval town.

SOURCE A: Market stalls around a town wall, as shown in a manuscript from 1458. Can you see what customers are buying?



'Traders can be found in their particular areas each morning. There is wine for sale on the river bank. Every day you may find food, dishes of meat – roast, fried and boiled; fish; cheap cuts of meat for the poor and more expensive for the rich... Just outside the town there is a field called Smith-field. On every sixth day of the week there is a sale of fine horses... In another part of the field are things brought to market by the country folk – farming tools, pigs, milk, cows, large oxen and woolly sheep, mares to pull the plough and young foals.'

- wood leather
- fish silk
- grain wine
- hawks soap
- lead farm animals
- furs canvas
- spices glass
- rope wool
- salt

SOURCE B: Goods for sale at Boston Fair in 1250. Some goods like wool, leather and fish would have been produced locally. Other goods like furs, rope and wine would have been imported from abroad.

SOURCE C: William Fitzstephen's 'Description of the city of London', from around 1174; Britain's most important export at this time was wool. It was sold by farmers and traders abroad where it was made into cloth. Some was made into cloth in Britain too. Fortunes were made from the wool trade and it has been estimated that by 1300 there were up to 18 million sheep in Britain (and around 3-4 million people).

- Henry the lead beater
- Robert the cook
- Hugh the carpenter
- Thomas the painter
- Hugh the hosier
- William the builder
- William the butter maker
- William the cutler
- John the cordwainer
- John the thatcher
- Pagen the miller
- Richard the combere
- Robert the baker
- William the belt maker
- William the skinner
- Richard the saddler
- Edward the weaver

SOURCE D: Craftsmen in Coventry in 1250.

- Combere – prepared wool for clothmaking
- Cordwainer – made boots
- Cutler – made knives
- Hosier – made stockings
- Skinner – took skins off animals
- Thatcher – made house roofs from straw or reeds
- Weaver – made cloth

SOURCE E: Medieval trades and their names.

- Poor workmanship will be punished by a fine and goods will be confiscated.
- Shoemakers Guild, Chester
- No one shall make or sell hats within the city unless he has special permission.
- Hatmakers Guild, London
- If the threads of the cloth are too far apart, the cloth and the tools used will be burned.
- Weavers Guild, Bristol
- If by chance a member of the guild shall become poor through old age, accident or sickness, then he shall have seven pence (3p) from the guild every week.
- Tanners Guild (leather workers), London

SOURCE F: Guild rules from a variety of towns.

Work

- Look at the picture of a town on the previous page and at Source A opposite. Imagine you live ten miles away from town. For the first time ever, your parents are taking you into town, and it is the most exciting day of your life – there are lots of new (and strange) sights, sounds and smells. Describe your visit.
- Look at Source C.
 - Where in London would you be able to buy:
 - wine?
 - sheep?
 - In larger towns (like London, Bristol and York), different parts of the town were used by traders selling the same thing. For example, all the silversmiths might be in Silver Street. What traders might you have expected to find in the following streets:
 - Baker Street, Cutler Row, Pudding Lane, Gold Street, Brewhouse Lane, Vine Street and Tanners Lane?
 - What advantages might there be in having all the traders close together, for:
 - the buyer?
 - the sellers?
- Look at Sources D and E. Copy and complete the following chart placing the name of the correct tradesman in each column.

Building	Making things to eat	Making things to wear	Other

- Look at Source F and label 16 on page 77.
 - What was a guild?
 - Why do you think some of the guild rules were so strict?
 - Why do you think the guild chose to give money to their members who became poor because of old age, sickness or accident?

Hungry for More?

Many of our surnames today come from jobs and trades that people did long ago – names such as Cooper, Miller, Shearer and Carpenter, for example. Try to find ten more surnames that come from medieval trades.

How smelly were the Middle Ages?

We know today that dirt and rubbish are home to germs and disease. From an early age we are taught to avoid germs by washing our hands regularly, clearing up rubbish, flushing toilets, brushing our teeth, and keeping ourselves clean. Our houses are full of cleaning products too; all are designed to make our clothes cleaner and our work surfaces germ-free! However, medieval people knew nothing of germs – not because they were stupid, they just didn't have the microscopes through which they could have seen them. As a result, people in the Middle Ages were a lot less fussy about living in smelly and dirty places than we are today. So just how smelly were the Middle Ages?

Mission Objectives

- Explore how and why standards of cleanliness and personal hygiene were very different from today.

How clean is your castle?

Even rich people in their castles still lived a pretty smelly life. Only the very rich had a bath regularly, usually in a big wooden tub lined with cloth. There was soap, but it wasn't very effective because it was usually made from animal fat and wood ash. King John, for example, bathed once a month and was charged five pence by the man who organized it. This doesn't sound a lot but it was the same amount that a labourer earned in a week!

What about toilets?

A castle's toilets were little more than holes with stone or wooden seats. The lord usually had his own at the top of the castle, next to where he slept, and torn strips of cloth were used instead of toilet paper. Often the toilets (or **garderobes** as they were known) were built on different floors, one above the other. The sewage dropped down chutes straight into the moat (see **Source A**). If there was no moat, the sewage emptied into a pit, which had to be cleaned out by hand by the castle's gong farmer (see page 50)!

Poor peasants

Ordinary peasants struggled to keep clean too. Their cottages had no floorboards or carpets, just earth covered with straw. Windows, if they had any – were holes in the wall with a wooden shutter to keep out the wind. In the centre of the room was a fire, its smoke escaping through a hole in the roof. A medieval peasant must have always smelled of smoke – or even worse during the winter when they brought their animals inside and out of the cold! There were no taps to provide clean water for washing or drinking either; it had to be fetched from a stream, a river or a well. And there were no toilets, just a bucket in the corner of the room or a hole dug outside.



SOURCE A: A diagram of how a castle toilet system might have worked.

A load of rubbish

In the towns, life was just as smelly. There was no organized collection of rubbish in medieval times. Instead, people just tipped their rubbish into the streets or dumped it into a pit and let it rot away. There were no drains or sewage pipes to carry away dirty water either. At night, people went to the loo in pots. The next day they tipped the waste out of the window into the street below! In London, there was a public toilet. It was located on London Bridge and emptied straight into the River Thames below!

'The butchers were often the worst. They used to throw out any waste and let the animals' blood run along the road. In hot weather, the smell was terrible. Townspeople still kept animals, which could be fed on the land around the town. But often they let their pigs roam around the streets, looking for food in the gutters. There were chickens too. And rats.'

▲ SOURCE B: A modern historian writing about the sorry state of the streets.

'Next case: the lane called Ebbegate. This was a right of way [a public footpath] until it was blocked by Thomas Wytte and William de Hockele. They built toilets which stuck out from the walls of their houses. From these toilets human dung falls onto the heads of passers-by.'

▲ SOURCE C: Notes from a court case in 1321. Thomas Wytte, an owner of a house, and William de Hockele were taken to court because of their toilets. In another court case from 1347, two men were found guilty of piping their own sewage into their next door neighbour's cellar.

Getting better?

Although houses didn't have bathrooms or running water, it would be wrong to think that all people were permanently filthy. Some towns had public 'bath houses' where you could have a wash for a small fee, and a few places even employed **scavengers** to remove the filth. Some people also began to make the connection between rubbish and disease too. Although they didn't know about germs (they thought it was the bad smells from the rubbish that carried infection), it still led to England's first national health law in 1388 (see **Source D**).

'So much dung and filth and rubbish is thrown in ditches, rivers and other waters that the air is greatly infected and many illnesses and terrible diseases do daily happen. It is decreed, as well in London as in other cities and towns throughout England, that all they who throw dung, garbage, guts and other rubbish in ditches, rivers and other places shall have to remove, empty, or carry away, or pay to our Lord the King a fine of £20.'

▲ SOURCE D: The English Sanitary Act, 1389.

Wise Up Words

garderobe scavenger

What Happened When?

1348

All this rubbish attracted rats, which spread the killer disease, Black Death. Black Death ravaged towns and villages from 1348.

Work

- Think about your own personal hygiene. What have you done over the last few days to keep yourself clean, tidy and as germ-free as possible? Make a list.
 - Look at your list. Underline the things that people in medieval times would not have been able to do.
 - Give reasons why people in the Middle Ages were not as clean as we are today.
- Who was cleaner – the rich or the poor? Give reasons for your answer.
- Imagine you have been asked to create a leaflet to inform a group of foreign visitors coming to medieval England. What can they expect to find 'when nature calls'? Explain about toilets in castles, towns and villages. You might like to consider:
 - what toilet facilities they would expect to find in a castle
 - how castle toilets differed from those in the towns and villages.

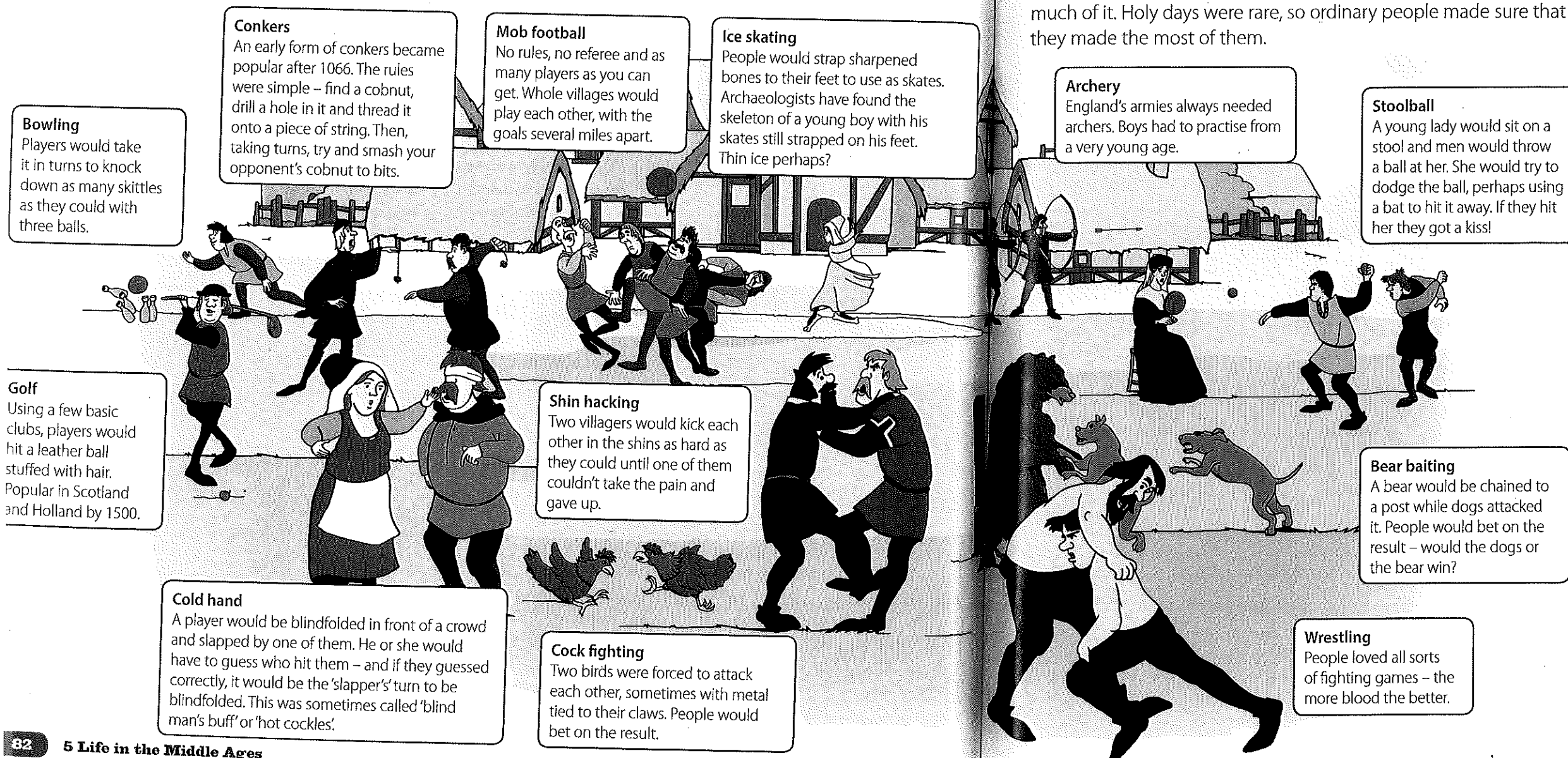
Could you have fun in the Middle Ages?

In the Middle Ages, ordinary people didn't really have holidays. Instead, there were a number of feast days through the year, such as Easter Day, May Day, Midsummer's Eve, Christmas, and various Saints' days. On these days, after going to a church service, they would have some free time for themselves. In fact, our word 'holiday' comes from the term 'holy day'. And people generally made their own fun, creating home-made equipment with whatever they had to hand. Some of the sports and games were so popular that they are still enjoyed today.

Mission Objectives

- Investigate how both rich and poor spent their spare time in the Middle Ages.
- Categorize some of the major differences between sport today and sport in the Middle Ages.

So how did ordinary people enjoy their holy days?



What about the rich?

A rich noble may have gone to a tournament. This was a series of competitions such as sword fighting, jousting and horseriding. There would be prizes for the best competitors. Rich men might also go hunting, or enjoy feasting or dancing. A group of acrobats or jugglers might entertain him and his guests. And if they got bored with the entertainers, they might play chess, draughts, cards, or throw dice.

In the Middle Ages a popular game for rich men was real tennis. Two players had to hit a wooden ball over a rope with a racquet. Sometimes the ball was hit so hard that players could be killed if it hit them on the head!

Do it yourself...

Whether you were rich or poor, you had to make your own fun in the Middle Ages. There were no cinemas or theatres to visit. You couldn't even go to an organized, professional sports match. But people must have enjoyed their spare time because they didn't get much of it. Holy days were rare, so ordinary people made sure that they made the most of them.

Hungry for More?

Have you enjoyed any of the games or sports shown in the picture recently? If so, which ones? Have any of the sports or games changed at all? If so, how?

Be a Top Historian

These sports and pastimes are great examples of how some things from long ago **stay the same** whilst others **change** a lot... and there are always lots of reasons why some things change. For example, bear-baiting is no longer acceptable as it is considered cruel, whereas the game of conkers is largely unchanged because it is fun and easy to set up.

Work

- Explain where the modern word 'holiday' comes from.
- Look closely at the illustration showing ordinary people enjoying their holy day. Make two lists, one headed 'Things we no longer enjoy today' and the other headed 'Things we still enjoy today'.
 - Choose one example from your list of things we no longer enjoy today. Explain why you think this pastime is no longer practised.
 - Choose one example from your list of things we still enjoy today. Explain in what ways, if any, it has changed since medieval times.
- Design a poster to advertise a medieval holy day in your town. Make sure you include the name of the holy day, a programme of events and fun activities taking place. Add some illustrations. Remember, all holy days began with a church service.

5.5 Has football changed much since the Middle Ages?

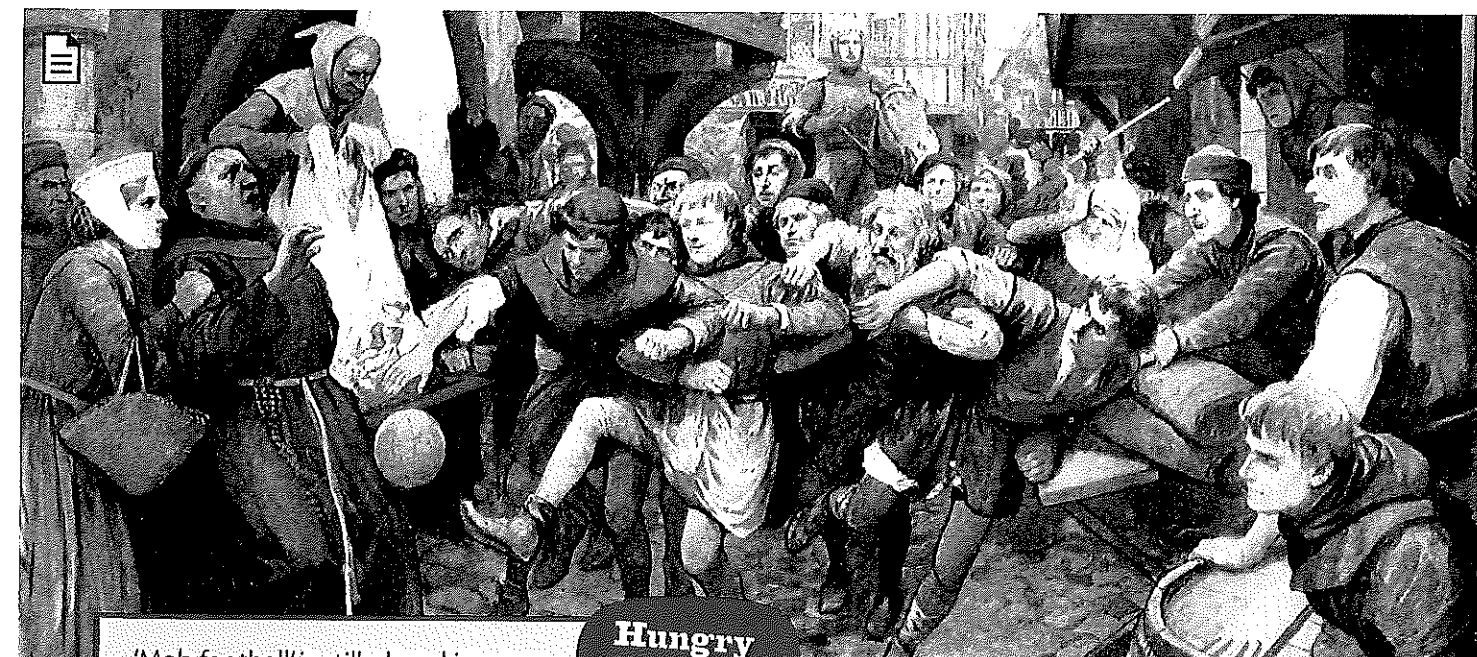
Over 1000 years ago, a small army from Denmark landed on the English coast and tried to steal as much as they could before sailing away again. However, their leader was captured and the angry English mob chopped off his head. The men then split into two groups and kicked the severed head around amongst each other. And this is how football in Britain began.

Mission Objectives

- Discover the origins of football in Britain.
- Evaluate how football in the Middle Ages differs from football today.

'After lunch all the youth of the city go out into the fields to take part in the ball game. The students of each school have their own ball. The workers from each city craft also carry balls. Older citizens, fathers and wealthy men come on horseback to watch the juniors competing, and to revive their own youth. You can see their inner passions aroused as they watch the action and get caught up in the fun.'

▲ **SOURCE A:** The first description of mob football played in London on Shrove Tuesday, written by William Fitzstephen in 1174.



'Mob football' is still played in some parts of Britain today. Try to find out a bit more about this sport. Where is it played? Who plays it? How often? What are the rules? How do the players score?

Hungry for More?

SOURCE B: A more modern view of football in the Middle Ages. A monk once described it as 'a devilish pastime. More a bloody murdering practice than a sport.'

Banned

Football was regularly banned. In 1314, the Lord Mayor of London banned it: 'The hustling over large footballs causes great uproar in the city.' Despite the threat of imprisonment for anyone continuing to play, the ban was ignored! In 1331, King Edward III became the first king to officially ban football by royal decree. He said that people were playing it so much they were forgetting to practise their archery skills. The king was worried that if a foreign army invaded England, men would have forgotten how to use their bows and arrows properly.

Indeed, football was one of Britain's most banned games. Between 1314 and 1667, it was officially banned by more than 30 royal or local laws. Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V all tried to ban it, but people were so determined to play that they carried on regardless. In Scotland, King James I once famously ruled that 'na man play at the fute-ball', but the Scots loved the game so much they were playing football in Edinburgh the very next week.

FACT!

In 1321 the Pope issued a special letter of forgiveness to a player who had accidentally killed an opponent. A few days later a Londoner wrote that players used to 'retire home as from battle, with bloody heads, bones broken and out of joint and bruises that will shorten their days'. By 1450 players in some towns introduced a new rule to try to reduce the number of accidents: the ball could only be kicked, not carried or thrown.

Work

- a Write these statements in the correct chronological order.

 - A new rule was introduced in some towns saying the ball could only be kicked, not picked up.
 - King Edward III was the first king to ban football by royal decree.
 - A Danish prince's head was used as a ball.
 - The Pope issued a special letter to forgive a player who had killed an opponent.

b Which of the above events do you think had the biggest effect on the game of football? Explain your answer.
- a Make a list of all the differences you can find between football in the Middle Ages and football today.

b What do you think the biggest difference is? Explain your answer.
- a Why do you think so many kings tried to ban football?

b Why do you think the bans weren't very successful?



SOURCE C: A modern game of football. Can you spot any differences from mob football of the past?

The Middle Ages had its own pop songs and dance music. There was no recorded music or pop charts, but listening to a live band – and dancing around – were still very, very popular in medieval times. So what was medieval music like? Who performed this music? And what other types of entertainment were popular?

Music and dance

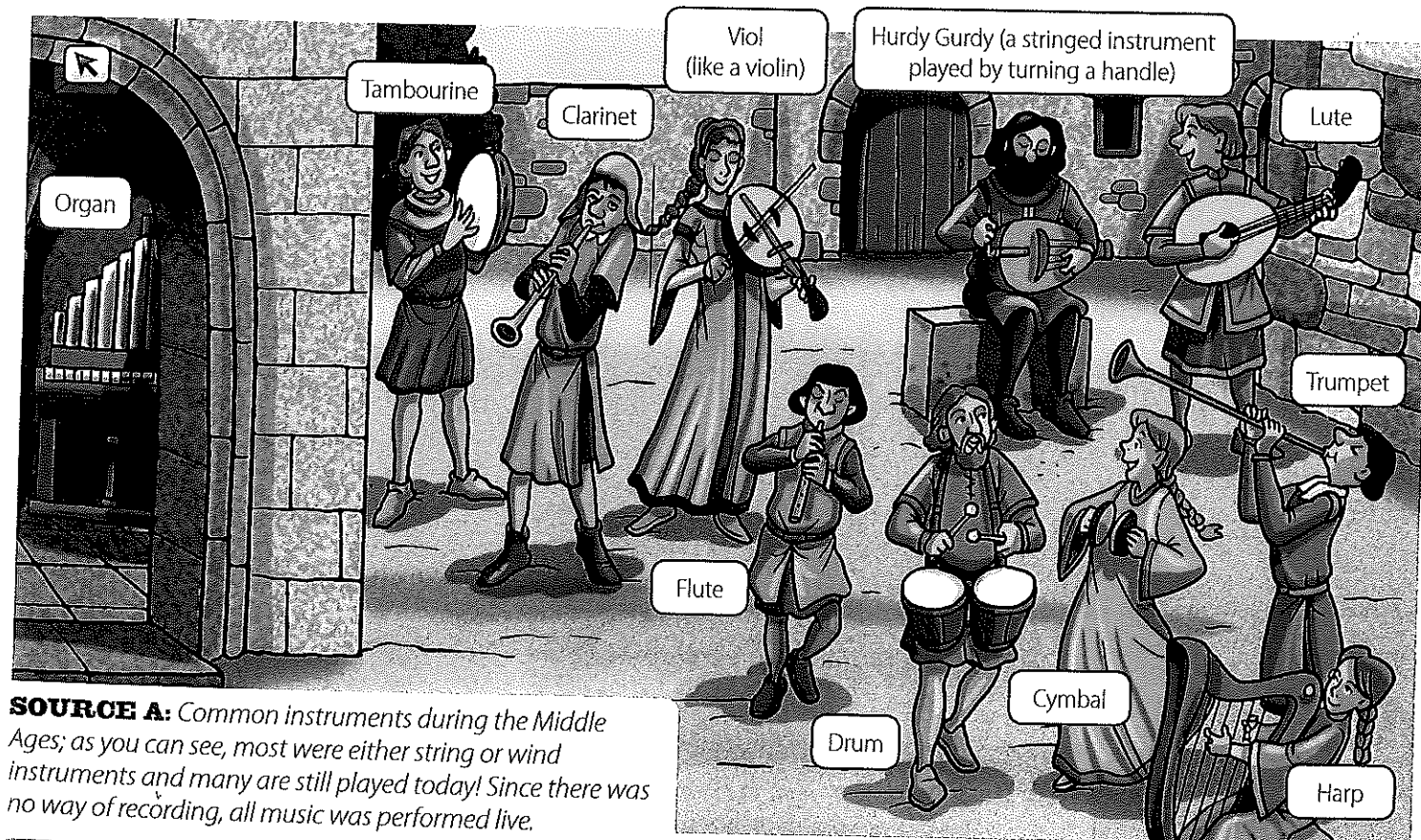
There were two types of music – ‘sacred’ (played in the church) and ‘house’ (played in and around people’s homes). Church music had no harmonies, just a single singer singing a tune – and not one you’d spend the rest of the day humming! The music played outside church was much livelier. A band consisting of anything up to a dozen people would play all sorts of high tempo music on lots of different instruments (see **Source A**). People danced in large circles and moved around clapping, spinning and jumping in time to the beat. Singing over a mug of ale outside your house or on the village green was a very popular pastime.

Mission Objectives

- Investigate the important role music played within medieval life.

Sumer Is Icumen In
 Summer has come in,
 Loudly sing, Cuckoo!
 The seed grows and the meadow blooms
 And the wood springs anew,
 Sing, Cuckoo!
 The ewe bleats after the lamb
 The cow lows after the calf.
 The bullock stirs, the stag farts,
 Merrily sing, Cuckoo!

▲ **SOURCE B:** A popular song from the thirteenth century. This was a bit like a pop song of today and was often sung in summer when the crops were growing well.



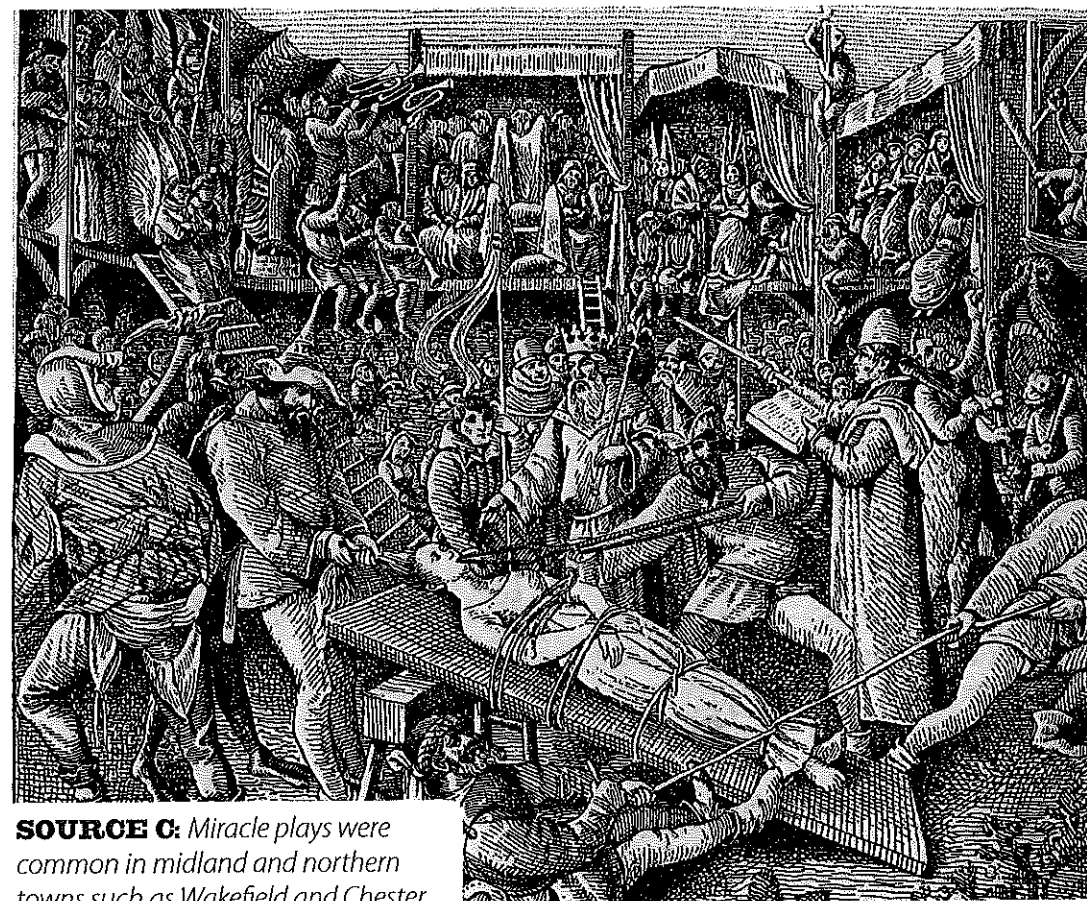
SOURCE A: Common instruments during the Middle Ages; as you can see, most were either string or wind instruments and many are still played today! Since there was no way of recording, all music was performed live.

Wandering minstrels

Listening to musical instruments wasn't the only way to hear music. Singers known as **minstrels** wandered from town to town entertaining the crowds. They sometimes sang for the lord in his castle, if invited, but generally played out on the streets so people could dance and sing along. They would usually expect a few coins in return for their performance. However, the minstrels weren't just popular for their singing – often the news they brought from other parts of the country was just as interesting as the show. After all, wandering around so much meant that they knew all the gossip from the local towns and villages!

Play time

Plays were another popular form of live entertainment and drew large crowds. Originally, they were put on in church to teach peasants about the Bible or about saints. Over time, they became morality tales where good overcame evil, and were so popular they were moved outside. They were called **miracle plays** and were usually performed by groups of travelling actors who toured the country. Records show that plays were performed in 127 different towns during the Middle Ages and they must have been watched and enjoyed by thousands.



SOURCE C: Miracle plays were common in midland and northern towns such as Wakefield and Chester.

Wise Up Words

minstrel miracle play

Work

- What is the difference between ‘sacred’ and ‘house’ music?
 - Which do you think was the more popular? Give reasons for your answer.
 - Why do you think music and plays were so important and popular in medieval Britain? Explain your answer carefully.
- Look at **Source A**.
 - List which instruments you have heard of before. Have you played any of them?
 - Why was all music played live in the Middle Ages?
- What was a ‘wandering minstrel’?
 - Apart from entertaining the crowds with music, what other role did wandering minstrels perform?
- Read **Source B**.
 - Why do you think people in the Middle Ages enjoyed singing this song?
 - Do you think songs about cuckoos and farm animals would be good topics for a pop song today? Explain your answer.
- Look at **Source C**. What was a ‘miracle play’?

To many people today, fashion is very important. You only have to look in any newsagents to see dozens of fashion magazines, and whole satellite channels are dedicated to following the latest trends. Most of you reading this page right now will be aware of the newest trends in shoes, hairstyles and jewellery.

Mission Objectives

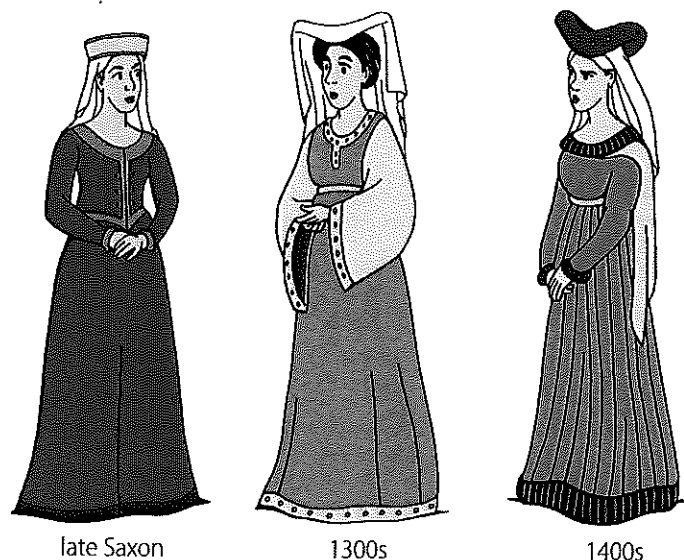
- Understand the role fashion played in the lives of the rich and how fashion changed during the Middle Ages.

Dress to impress

Fashion was important in the Middle Ages too. The rich dressed in fancy clothes to impress each other. Clothes became a status symbol, with lords and ladies trying to outdo each other by wearing the latest costumes made from fine wool, leather, linen, velvet, silk, or fur. They decorated these clothes with gold and silver thread, jewels, chains, and fancy buttons. Even the coloured cloth used to make the clothes had different meanings: red meant you were in love, yellow meant anger and grey meant sadness. Natural dyes (made from plants, berries, nuts, crushed insects, and even rust) were used to make the different coloured cloth.

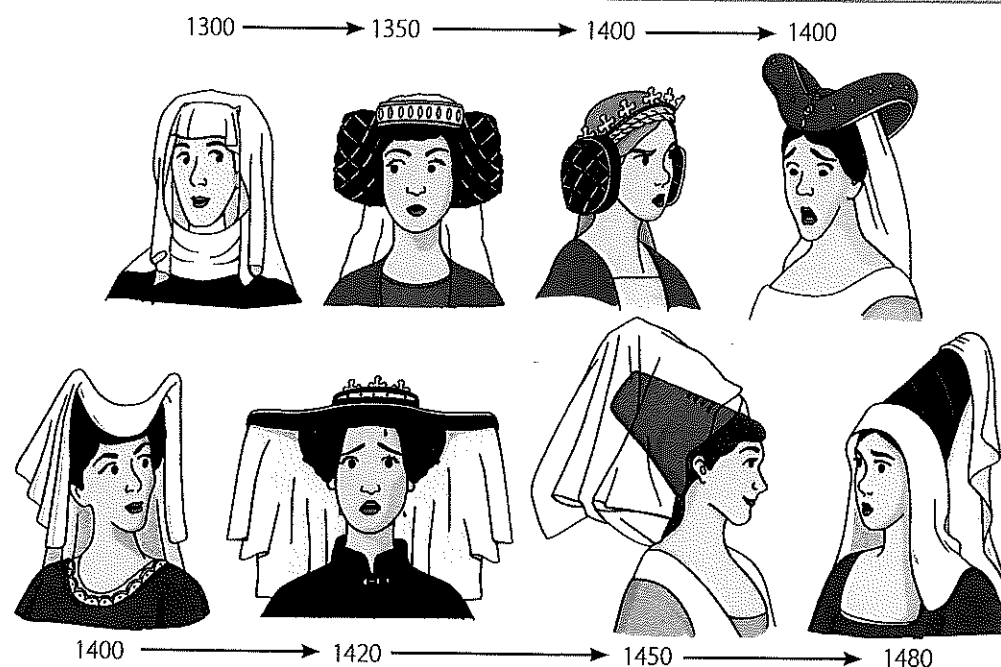
Female fashion

Women's dresses were always long and got brighter and more elaborate throughout the Middle Ages.



Hats

Women often hid their hair beneath fancy hats, some shaped like animal horns or butterfly wings. The famous 'steep hat', which was cone shaped and very fashionable in the late 1480s, was nearly a metre tall.



Following fashion

In the early Middle Ages, the rich wore fairly simple clothes – but as the years passed, fashions became more and more elaborate. Dresses got longer, hats got taller, cloth got brighter, and shoes got pointier. And just like today, hats, shoes, hairstyles, coats, dresses, and cloaks varied from year to year, so it was a constant fight for the most dedicated followers of fashion to keep ahead.

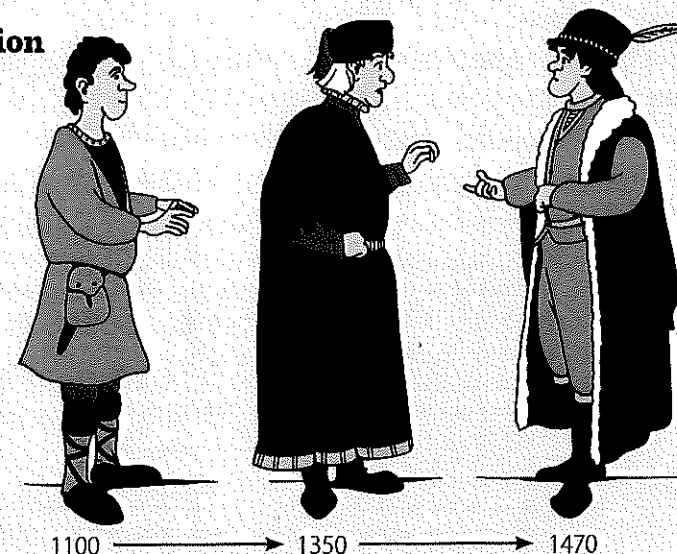
Shoes

Pointed shoes called 'poulaines' were very fashionable in the Middle Ages. In fact, some shoes were so pointed that the toes had to be tied back. And platform shoes called 'pattens' were common too, for walking through the filthy, muddy streets.



Male fashion

A well-dressed nobleman might wear a tunic, leggings and a hat, but throughout the Middle Ages the style of hat, length of tunic, thickness of robes, and tightness of leggings varied.

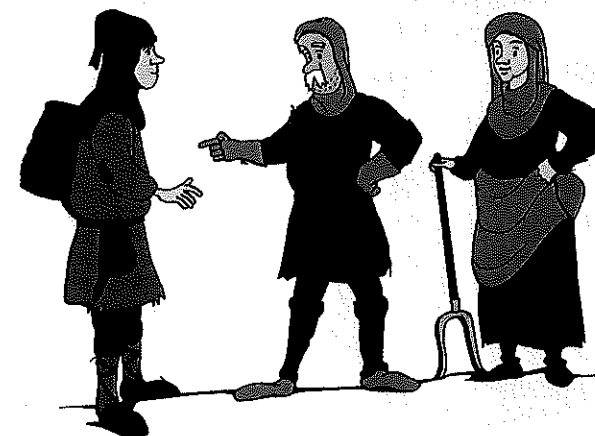


Did peasants follow fashion?

It was a very different story for the ordinary peasants. Following the latest fashions meant nothing to them. Instead, they wore plain and simple tunics, woollen leggings, straw or woollen hats, hoods, and capes. They dressed in dull colours such as grey, brown and dark green. Some peasants couldn't even afford to buy shoes. Their clothes were nearly always handmade and would last for years!

Peasants' clothes

Peasants' clothes were made from coarse wool or linen. They dressed practically rather than fashionably. In winter they kept warm by wearing leather or sheepskin jackets.



Work

- Why was fashion so important to rich people in the Middle Ages?
 - How could the clothes a person wore express how they might be feeling?
 - In your own words, explain how and why a poor person's clothes differed from a rich person's.

2 The Big Write!

We all know that there were no fashion magazines in medieval England, but imagine that there were! Imagine you are an editor for a fashion magazine during the Middle Ages. You need to prepare a double-page spread for a magazine bought by the rich and fashionable. Your feature could include the following:

- latest fashions
- fashion dos and don'ts
- what the best-dressed people are wearing
- the key points about the fashions, for example, how pointed your hat should be
- a 'headline' or spread title – this needs to be catchy and encourage the reader to do more than glance at your article
- examples of fashion styles
- bright, clear, colourful pictures
- a layout like a magazine – look at examples in current magazines to help you.