

Life in Medieval Britain

Life in the Middle Ages was very different from the way we live today. The majority of the population lived in rural areas, with some people such as merchants and lawyers living in medieval towns. Wealthy and powerful nobles, such as kings and lords, ruled society during this time. These nobles gave pieces of land to less important nobles, such as lords and knights. In return for land, the lords and knights provided the powerful nobles with loyalty and military assistance. This area of land was known as a fief, and was under rule of the lord. Peasants were at the bottom of the social ladder, and rented land from the lesser nobles. In order to pay their rent, peasants gave the lord crops or livestock as well as worked in the lord's fields a few days a week. Peasants composed around 90 percent of society during the medieval period.

The daily lives of nobles and peasants during the Middle Ages differ from daily life today, so we will explore a number of the different aspects of the medieval period in order to better understand daily life at Rosslyn Castle and Chapel.



Men in the Medieval Period



This drawing shows two men threshing wheat c.1330.

Within the fief he owned, the Lord had nearly total authority. He was the judge and jury whenever a dispute needed to be settled.

Men held most jobs in daily medieval life, both inside and outside of a castle. There was little social mobility during the medieval period, so men were typically born into their position and occupation in the medieval world. However it was not impossible for a lower born person to move up through the ranks, say from squire to knight, as long as they had the money to equip themselves.

Women in the Medieval Period



A woman cooks over an open fire in this illustration from the 14th century.

A woman's job in the Middle Ages was to have children and to take care of the household. She was responsible for the upbringing of the children, and to help with cooking and cleaning. More upper-class women spent their time in 'womanly pursuits', such as embroidery. Women were not educated at this time, and were expected to be subordinate members of society. Sometimes fathers taught their daughters the skills of their trade, so that they might support themselves if orphaned.

Noblewomen had no rights and they were the property of their husband. They were expected to be prudent, loving, and wise. It was necessary that women love and honour their husband at all times, and humble herself to him in word and deed.

Women in the Middle Ages had only two possible choices for their futures: they could either choose to marry or to 'take the veil' and become a nun. Most women were married, usually when they were teenagers. Because noblewomen did not have rights, they were not allowed to choose their own husbands. Their fathers chose their husbands for them. If widowed, the woman could continue her husband's business. Widows could therefore achieve a degree of independence that married women lacked. For this reason, many widows with property refused to remarry and lose control over their estates.

Children in the Medieval Period

The lives of children, including where they lived and the education they received, were dependent upon their parents' places in society.

Young children played with toys, including hobbyhorses and puppets. Games like chess were also popular forms of childhood entertainment. Starting at the age of seven, children had lessons to learn and chores to do. Boys began to study to become knights. Girls did not have lessons, and instead learned how to manage the household and how to behave like a lady.

Between the ages of twelve and fourteen, children became 'young adults', and were expected to work. Peasant children spent their days helping their parents and doing chores.



These medieval children play with toys and catch butterflies in this 14th century drawing.

The Church

The Catholic Church was the most important institution in medieval life. It extended its influence over many different aspects of the village, including ones that were traditionally secular. For example, the calendar was based on religious festivals and obligations. The most popular medieval legends, or stories about famous people that are often exaggerated, were about Christian saints. The Church was very serious in its collecting of tithes from the medieval people, and withholding of tithes was considered an extreme offence. Chapels, including Rosslyn Chapel, were built by castle owners for use as private family churches. Sermons were given daily by parish priests in small rooms called chapels. Prayer was a big part of every day. The church had to approve what you did and how you behaved, or you would be punished, sometimes with your life. The church had great power, and did not hesitate to use it.



Praying and reverence to God was a key part of everyday medieval life.

Power of the Priests

Medieval people believed that in order to get to heaven, they needed to follow the teachings of the Bible. Because the common people at the time could not read or write, the village priest read them the Bible and instructed them on how to behave. Churches and chapels of the time used carvings and stained glass windows to illustrate important biblical lessons.

Guide researched and written by Hannah Mooney

Useful Reading

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