

History

Enquiry: What can we learn about the medieval world from the Book of Margery Kempe?

# Village life in medieval England

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## Fewer people

The world that Margery Kempe was born into in around 1372 was a world very different to the one we live in today. For a start, there were only two million people living in England, compared to around 56 million today. Even before the Black Death killed a third of the population, England was an emptier land. Most people lived in small villages of no more than 150 people, and there were only 10 towns in the whole country with more than 3,000 people living in them. Even London, the biggest town in England had around 30,000 people, compared to almost nine million people today!



## A slower pace of life

Today, it's possible to travel across the country in only a few hours if you have a car. When Margery was alive, there were no tarmacked roads — only dirt tracks — and the fastest way of travelling was on horseback, which only the rich could afford. This meant that life moved at a much slower pace and people rarely travelled far from their homes. Most people only travelled if they wanted to visit a holy place or sell something at a market.



## A tough life for peasants

When Margery wrote her book, around 90% of people were peasants living in small, wooden homes in villages. Almost all of them had to live in the place they were born because they needed to work for the local lord. The local lord lived in a **manor house** usually at the heart of the village. The local lord would give peasants a few strips of land where they could grow crops and raise sheep. In return the peasants had to farm the lord's land for at least three days a week. If the **harvest** failed in autumn, they might run out of food and not survive the winter. Peasants mainly ate vegetables and poor quality bread, while only the lords and their family regularly ate meat. Life was tough for peasants, who lived on average until they were 30 years old.



## Changing times

For most people, life didn't change a huge amount for several hundred years. Kings came and went, wars sometimes destroyed their homes, but generally the land needed to be farmed whoever was in charge. This all started to change a few decades before Margery was born when the Black Death swept through Europe, killing many people. The peasants were suddenly able to ask for higher wages from their lords, and to move around looking for work. A new class of peasants called **yeomen** also appeared, who became wealthy by buying up abandoned farmland and homes. By 1381, when Margery was about eight or nine, the peasants had grown so frustrated by the lords' treatment, that they rebelled and burnt down parts of London.



# Glossary

**A manor house:** the house where the local lord lived

**The harvest:** the time when all the food was brought in from the fields

**A yeoman:** a peasant who had become rich by buying empty land



# Comprehension Questions

1. Where did most people live when Margery Kempe was born?
2. Why did it take so long to travel around England?
3. What was life like for peasants?
4. Why did peasants start to question their situation?
5. Why was white bread only eaten by rich people?

