

History

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

# The Medieval Church

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## A dangerous heretic

For much of her life, Margery Kempe was accused of causing trouble by the Catholic Church. The Church saw her as a dangerous threat. She was branded a **heretic** who should be burnt at the stake for what she was saying and doing. It might seem strange to us today that a medieval woman would be seen this way, especially as the worst thing she seemed to do was to cry a lot. However again and again, she was criticised, insulted and put in prison for her actions.



## A powerful landowner

For over a thousand years since the death of Jesus Christ, the Catholic Church, which was led from Rome, had been in charge of religion across western and central Europe. This meant that everyone respected the Church, including kings across Europe, who gave it huge amounts of power and wealth. Indeed, in England alone, the Church owned about a third of all land, making it one of the most important landowners in the country.



## Holy homes

As well as churches, religious centres called **monasteries** grew in importance. These were places where **monks** and **nuns** lived and worshipped, and they became hugely important centres of pilgrimage, like Hailes Abbey in the West Midlands and Walsingham in Norfolk. Monasteries provided healthcare and education since the medieval government didn't provide any services like these. Monasteries were paid for by a tax called **a tithe** that everyone had to pay. By the time Margery was born, there were around 900 monasteries in England (there had only been 50 in 1066.)



# Wycliffe and the Bible

As a result, people like John Wycliffe started to criticise the Church. They said the Church was lying about what Jesus really said, that its priests were more interested in money than God. Wycliffe said the Bible should be translated from Latin so that everyone could understand it. The leaders of the Church were very worried about this criticism, so they hunted down anyone they suspected of spreading these dangerous ideas.



## Dangerous tears

This was why Margery was criticised, even though she believed strongly in the Catholic Church. The problem was that she was a woman who talked too much about God. The Church didn't approve of a woman having her own ideas and didn't like that she often screamed and cried during church services. Despite some people finding her embarrassing — including her own husband who vanished whenever she started making a scene — she made powerful allies, including monks, priests and bishops.



# Glossary

A heretic: someone who disagrees with the official position of the Church

A monastery: a building where monks or nuns live and worship

A monk: a man who worships God all the time

A nun: a woman who worships God all the time

A tithe: a 10% tax that everyone had to pay to the Church

To be corrupt: To use your position and power dishonestly



# Comprehension Questions

1. What is a heretic?
2. What made the Church so powerful?
3. What happened at monasteries?
4. Why did some people start criticising the medieval Church?
5. Why was Margery criticised by some people in the Church?

