

History

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

# The Medieval World

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## The shadowy past

It is challenging to work out what life was like for people living in the medieval world. Unlike the lives of powerful people, like kings and popes, not much is written down about the lives of ordinary men and women. And because most people didn't read or write in the medieval world, we simply don't know much about what they thought or said. Not only this, but the only buildings made of stone in the medieval world were usually religious places like monasteries or castles. The homes of ordinary people were made of wood, and so haven't survived to the present day.



## The importance of Margery's book

This is why the discovery of the Book of Margery Kempe in 1934, about 500 years after she wrote it, is so important. Even though she was from a wealthy background and had quite an unusual life, we can still learn a lot about what life was like for ordinary people. The fact she only mentions the king once or twice tells us a lot in itself: most people probably got on with their lives and weren't very interested about what the king was doing! Her book allows us to find out about medieval life in a way that other surviving historical documents cannot.



## A man's world

From reading her Book, we also learn that Margery lived in a world where men were in charge. She was constantly criticised and insulted by men, and it was men who threatened to burn her for her religious beliefs. Many people were shocked that she travelled without a man. They were so shocked people often didn't believe her when she said her husband had given her permission to travel alone.

Despite this, the fact Margery did what she did and said what she said tells us that medieval women could break the rules, just at great cost. She travelled thousands of miles without her husband, she challenged powerful religious men and she refused to stop crying.



## A connected world

We can also learn a lot about how connected the medieval world was. It's true that most people were peasants who never left the village in which they were born. However these villages were connected to the wider world. It was very common for people to go on pilgrimage, maybe not all the way to Jerusalem, but at least somewhere in England to visit a saint's home. It's also clear that lots of people travelled to buy and sell things like wool, including Margery's own son who moved from Norfolk to northern Germany.



## Comprehension questions

1. Why do we know more about kings and queens than we do about ordinary people?
2. Why doesn't Margery mention kings much in her book?
3. Why did Margery upset men so much?
4. What was traded across Europe?
5. Why did people travel abroad?

