An Introduction to England in the Later Middle Ages

The battle of Otterburn in 1388 stands towards the end of that period known as ‘the Middle Ages’. Historians like to argue about when this period began and ended but generally, for England, it is taken to cover the time from when the Romans left (about 400 AD) until the establishment of the Tudor dynasty with Henry VII (1485).

For many years the Middle Ages were seen as a period of ignorance and violence where everyone had a really bad time and then died young. In truth, this was never the case. It is true, however, that the Middle Ages were very different from life today. There are, quite literally, hundreds of good books about life in the Middle Ages. In this brief note we will cover some of the big things that we need to be aware of when looking at events in later part of the Middle Ages.

By and large people were much the same in the Middle Ages as they are today except for being a bit shorter on average. They had much the same feelings, emotions, hopes and fears as we do. They lived in family groups for the most part, they had jobs of one sort or another and they worried about money, ill health and the weather – the climate played an important role in a society that was primarily agricultural. They enjoyed their days off, took part in sports and games and celebrated special occasions.

There were not many people in England in 1400 when compared to today. The total population was about 2.5 million. Today it is about 56 million. But there were some big differences in their lives and, as historians, it is these that we particularly need to understand if we are to make sense of things that happened at the time. So, here are the main differences:

**Religion**

Just about everyone in the later Middle Ages in England believed in God and belonged to the Christian church. At this time there was no Church of England and no Christian church at all except the Catholic church under the rule of the Pope. The Bible was considered to be the true source of God’s wisdom as interpreted by priests and other clergy. In the absence of our modern scientific understanding of how many things work, people in the Middle Ages were content to believe that these things worked because God had designed them in that way. Religion was at the centre of everything.

**Society**

Society in the Middle Ages was seen as being made up of a number of separate layers like this:



(The above illustration is available in various formats elsewhere within this Pack)

1. At the top is the King. The king owns all of the country. He makes the laws and he leads the army when the country goes to war – which happened quite a lot.
2. Next come the great noble families – the lords. These men control great areas of the country which have been given to them by the king. In return for this the lords have agreed to support the king and to join his army with their own men when he calls for them. Their land ownership makes them very rich. Out of the total population of 2.5 million there were only a few hundred lords.
3. Below the lords we have the knights and esquires. Just as with the lords, so the knights have land which they have been given by the lords, again in return for service in the army if called upon. Once again there were very few knights – maybe less than 1,000 by 1400.
4. Next were the merchants and craftsmen who lived in the towns and cities. At the end of the Middle Ages this group was growing richer and more important, which did not always make them popular with the lords and the knights. The merchants and craftsmen were organised into special societies called guilds. Each trade had its own guild and they set very strict rules about membership and the quality of goods.
5. At the bottom of the pile we have everyone else. This would be the vast majority of the people, generally known as peasants which is a word from Anglo-French (*paisant*) meaning ‘someone who lives and works on the land’. There were actually many different sorts of peasants and they had their own complicated social structure but the general rule was that a peasant belonged to a master (either a lord or a knight) and was given somewhere to live and a small piece of land to grow food for his family in return for working on the master’s land. The peasant might also be expected to join his master’s military force. Some peasants who were born as free men or who ran away managed to leave the land to live in the towns and cities where they worked for the merchants and craftsmen.

There is one group who are missing from the list – the clergy. At the top of the clergy was the Pope. The Pope usually thought that he ranked above the King. Most kings did not agree and there were a lot of arguments about this.

The senior clergy (archbishops and bishops) were almost always members of great noble families and would consider themselves on the same level as the lords. The junior clergy, such as parish priests, were often hard to distinguish from the wealthier free peasants and may even have started life at that level.

Alongside these were the monks who lived away from the world in their monasteries. These monasteries were often given valuable land (complete with peasants) and other gifts by the lords and knights in return for prayers. It was believed that these prayers would make things a bit easier for people after they had died and gone to face God to account for their actions. These gifts made some of the monasteries very rich.

For the most part, people accepted that their place in the structure had been ordained by God and it was up to them to live accordingly. Sometimes people at the bottom of the pile tried to revolt against their masters as happened with the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381. This never ended well for them – poorly armed peasants and merchants could not survive a fight with well-trained and well-armed soldiers and knights. To reinforce this structure of society and to prevent people getting ideas above their station there were laws which governed the quality of clothing that each group could wear. Lords and knights did not want rich merchants to be wearing better clothes than them.

**Health**

As we said, the population of England in 1400 was about 2.5 million. Before 1350 it has been about 4 million. Population estimates are always difficult to make and these figures should be taken as only broad estimates. We do know however that the population fell sharply in the second half of the 14th century. So what had happened to 1.5 million people in those fifty years? The answer is that they had died in the worst outbreak of disease in European history in terms of the proportion of the population who died. This was the great plague known today as the Black Death which struck in the middle of the 14th century and killed a huge part of the population. There was no medicine at that time to fight the plague but today we are able to contain it with antibiotics – the disease (bubonic plague) still exists and kills a number of people each year. In fact, medical care as we know it today did not exist and there was no proper understanding of how the human body worked, how people became ill or how diseases were passed between people. It was believed that these things were God’s will and had to be accepted.

The things people ate also affected their health. The king, lords, knights and wealthy merchants ate a rich diet that included a lot of meat and fish and very few vegetables. Some of this meat would seem quite odd today - swan, peacock, magpie, porpoise and boar. Meat was very expensive so the richer people liked to eat huge amounts of it to show how important they were. With their meals they would drink wine. This diet would not be considered healthy today.

At the other end of the scale the peasants ate little meat and fish and their diet was made up mainly of vegetables, plus anything that could be gathered – such as nuts, berries and nettles. The usual drink was weak, home-brewed beer. If he ate bread, the peasant did not eat white wheat bread, but black rye bread. By today’s standards the peasants’ diet was much healthier but, to balance this, they had to do all of the hard manual jobs.

As a consequence of all of these factors, the life of people in the Middle Ages was generally shorter than it is today. Some people did live to be quite old, even by modern standards but many died as children or teenagers. Women often died while giving birth. The result of all this was a population which was, on average, much younger than we have today. If you had lined up everyone in medieval England in age order, the person in the middle would have been 21 years old. About half of the population would have been under the age of 21. If you lined up everyone in the same way today the middle person would be 40.5 years old – almost double.

On consequence of this young population is that everything would have started much earlier. In 1346 Prince Edward, the son of King Edward III, led a part of the English army against the French at the battle of Crecy. He was 16 years old. In 1403 at the battle of Shrewsbury, Prince Henry, the son of King Henry IV, commanded a part of the army – he, too, was just 16. That would never happen today. Other things happened earlier too. Noble girls were often married at 12 and considered ready to have their own children at 14. By their mid 20s they would have had several children – assuming they had not died in childbirth already. For most young nobles marriage was arranged between families for political, dynastic or financial reasons. At the lower end of society marriage would depend on the availability of a parcel of land to support a new family unit and might not occur until the early 20s.

**War**

Traditionally, the Middle Ages have been portrayed as the ‘Feudal Age’, when knights were given land in return for performance of unpaid military service and were expected to provide men from their estates to fight under their command. Whilst this may have formed the basis of the English military system in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it was most certainly not the way armies were raised in the later Middle Ages. English armies of this period were all paid by the crown and, in theory at least, all soldiers were volunteers.

The late medieval period was the most militarised of the whole Middle Ages. England was, at various times, fighting France, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Medieval warfare is covered in more detail in the accompanying document ‘An Introduction to Medieval Warfare’.

Life in the Middle Ages was just as varied and complex as it is today. The points above give a simplified introduction to some of the main differences. There are many good books which give more detail. Especially recommended as an introductory text is ‘The Time Traveller’s Guide to Medieval England’ by Ian Mortimer – Vintage Books 2008 - ISBN 9781845950996. This is a very readable and enjoyable account of medieval life by a respected author.