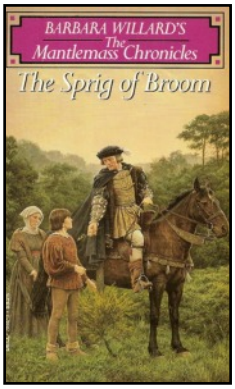
If you'd been 12 in the Middle Ages …



Over the whole manor the crop was a heavy one – wheat, barley and oats, all to be safely garnered, according to long custom, by the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. Everyone was needed that year to bring the harvest home … the oxen came and went, dragging the loads to the barnyard for threshing ... the work seemed endless. Roger said he must wait till harvest home to tell his father of his decision to become a monk.

'Wait till Michaelmas, wait till the fruit's in,' Medley urged.

'And then wait till Martinmas for the last root and berry, I suppose!'

They were resting on a great pile of last year's straw, out of the barn to make way for fresh. 'Come on, you gurt grummut,' growled Roger in the voice he had not used a long while now. 'Give over grizzling, do, and get thee armed-up. There's naun won wi'out a battle.'

An extract from Barbara Willard's novel, *The Sprig of Broom*.

How many differences can you spot in this passage between the lives of Roger and Medley and your own?

Reading good historical novels is a brilliant way to learn about the past. We remember the details because we enjoy finding out what happens to the people and how their story ends. The lives of Medley and Roger, boys of about 12, and Roger's sister, Catherine, in the 1400s were very different from yours, although they are very similar to us as people.

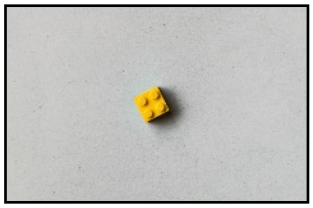
Here are ten of the most important differences if you'd been 12 in the 1400s!

1. You would almost certainly be living in the countryside. Almost 90% of the people lived in country villages and worked growing food. Many families in towns also owned land in fields outside towns where they grew food and kept animals.

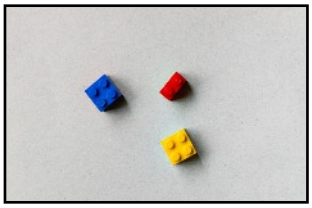
2. Everywhere was much quieter – no cars or planes, no music or television, no noisy crowds apart from in a handful of towns. As a result you would hear animals and birds much more clearly and music would feel a more special event.

3. There were far fewer people. Britain was much emptier. These Lego bricks give you an idea of how different it was – one brick represents 2 million people, roughly the number of people in Britain around 1100.

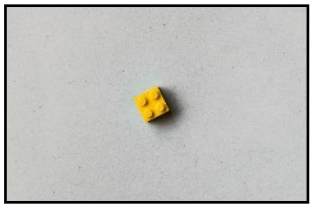
Another way of imagining this is to look at your classroom – it will feel full with 30 people in it but it would feel very empty if you were the only person there.



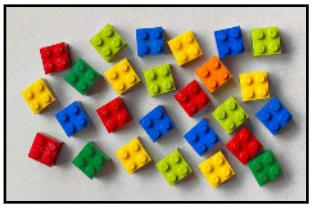
Population in 1100



Population in 1300
But after the Black Death in 1348 the population total fell back to the total in 1100



Population in 1500

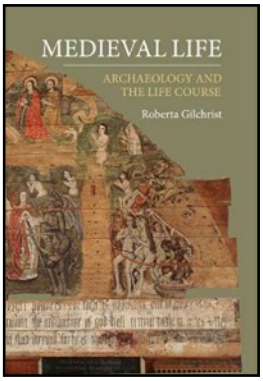


Population in 2000

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4. Everywhere was much darker unless the sun or the moon was shining. Your home was lit by the fire used for cooking or by candles made from animal fat. Step outside at night and you'd struggle to see anything as there were no street lights, making walking or riding difficult and dangerous. Getting up and going to bed were much more closely linked to sunrise and sunset than nowadays.

5. Many children aged 12 were three or four inches shorter than you are. Most people could not afford meat and did not eat much fruit or dairy products. At some times of the year there was less food available. Therefore they had poorer nutrition than you because they got fewer vitamins from their food and so grew more slowly than you do. But they carried on growing for longer than you. Nowadays people stop growing taller at about 18 but in the Middle Ages they kept growing until their late 20s and reached the same height as people reached in the mid-1900s.



A great deal of evidence about the everyday lives of people in the Middle Ages comes from skeletons which have been excavated and examined by archaeologists.

6. By the age of 12 you'd be very skilled at collecting eggs and feeding poultry, milking goats and cows, looking after herds of sheep, collecting nuts and berries from woodland and fruit from your own trees, caring for and riding horses, spinning thread to use to mend or make clothes, sweeping out your home with a broom, scouring pots after cooking - and lots more. You would have been doing these tasks since you were 7 years old. At harvest time you will be working in the fields with everyone else, helping to ensure you have food for the winter and early next year.

7. Collecting water for cooking, drinking and washing took a lot of time. You'd need to collect it from a stream or well. You also need a constant supply of wood from local woodland for cooking and warmth.



From: British Library

This picture from the Luttrell Psalter shows how women carried water and milk.

8. All this heavy work meant that many people suffered great pain as they grew older. Their bones and their joints in fingers, knees, back and hips were badly damaged by work while their bodies were growing. Carrying water is extremely heavy and hard work. Boys suffered from the effects on their bodies of archery practice which was compulsory from the age of 7 for some of the Middle Ages.

9. You would struggle to understand some of what people from other places are saying. Local accents were very strong and every area had its own words. For example, Roger and Medley might offer you eyren to eat after travelling over local roads made stoachy by heavy rain.

10. Now for the saddest part. About 20% of children in country villages died before their first birthday. Even more babies died in towns. However the people who did live through childhood and reach the age of 20 had a good chance of living for another 30 years or longer. It was not unusual for people to live to be 60 or 70, especially if they were well-off and had a good diet.

Every girl learned to use spindles or spinning wheels to turn wool into woollen thread to make clothes. Almost everything in the house was made of wood (like this spinning wheel), pottery, iron or wool. There were no plastics.



From: British Library

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Notes for Teachers

This Reading is actually a duplicate of two pages from Section 2 of Medieval Lives, an enquiry called *Were medieval people very different from us?* I decided to include these pages as a separate item as they may make good reading for pupils even if you don't use the whole of Section 2.

The rest of Section 2 is largely about similarities between people in the Middle Ages and people today but these pages focus on practical differences that would affect 12 year olds directly or be very obvious if they went back in time. If you want to set tasks along with the reading you could consider one or more of the following:

- What would you find most surprising/hardest to get used to?
- Are all the differences evidence that life was harder?
- Multi-sensory questions – what would you see, hear, touch …?
- You could also discuss who might live differently e.g. the children of nobles and gentry.
- If needed, help pupils focus by asking them to create a spider diagram with a heading for each point 1-10.

Difference point no. 9 – the meanings of the two Sussex dialect words are:

eyren - eggs
stoachy - muddy or dirty.

Other resources you could use in conjunction with these pages:

1. Bruegel's painting *Children's Games* could be used here.

2. The Lego bricks pictures come from an activity providing an overview of population

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/Population.html

Barbara Willard's *Mantlemass* Series

This series was published in the 1970s and I highly recommend them if you can find them second-hand. They follow one family who live at a house called Mantlemass through from the late 1400s to the Civil War. One thing I like about them is that they don't sugar-coat the past – they're good at showing how political events happening a long way off have repercussions on localities and people who aren't apparently involved. The series counts as children's literature but the books aren't light reading and don't by any means have lots of happy endings – be warned!

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