

# Reference: Everyday Life in Late Medieval England

## Everyday Life in Late Medieval England

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Writing about daily life in Chaucer's era can be accomplished using techniques, that is, methodology, developed by social historians. Social historians look for textual evidence in legal documents, such as wills and tax records, and for physical evidence, such as architecture and objects recovered during archaeological excavations. Sometimes, social historians take literature and art into account too. Historians take as much evidence as they can find and try to construct a likely scenario with it. We can never know everything perfectly about the past, so there is always a little bit of fiction in every piece of history writing. But historians keep trying to narrow the gap by finding more and more evidence and interpreting the evidence better and better over time. When it comes to daily life, historians are assisted by the fact that, in some respects, daily life has not changed very much. Most things in Chaucer's everyday life still exist today. We still go to work, eat food, wear clothes, and some of us attend church. We still have families and friends and coworkers. However, a bit like science fiction, the way Chaucer went to work, the kind of clothes that he wore, and the food that he ate might be different than today. In fact, gaps in evidence and interpretation mean that there is a degree to which we cannot even know just how different things were. As with all history, then, we want to begin by being aware that we are overgeneralizing and missing some details as we go, especially since this is just a short textbook overview and not an entire argument-driven book on the subject.

We might start by waking up in the morning. In the Middle Ages, what time you woke up depended a lot on who you were. If you were a monk (though not if you were Chaucer's Monk! [[GP 165-207](#)]) or a nun like Chaucer's Prioress (who sang the divine service well [[GP 118-62](#)]) you would wake during the night to rise with your fellows and pray in church, before going back to sleep again for a few more hours. Most people, however, woke more or less with the sun. That is to say, they woke with their animals, with their neighbors, and perhaps to the tones of town [clocks](#) or church [bells](#), if not to the tones of the nearest rooster (like Chanticleer [[NPT 2849-54](#)]) or cow needing milking.

Once awake, medieval people went about their mornings much like you or I might. Though lacking indoor plumbing, they washed up just as we do. A full hot bath was a rarer luxury than it is today, but medieval people bathed as frequently as possible, and in towns and cities public [baths](#) were popular. At home, everyone kept hands and faces as scrupulously clean as they could and also endeavored to clean their [teeth](#). In the *General Prologue*, the narrator seems impressed

with how well the Prioress keeps her mouth and hands clean even while eating ([GP 118-62](#)), and Alisoun is careful to wash her face after work in the *Miller's Tale* ([MilT 3307-11](#)). Various qualities of soap were major imports to England in the later Middle Ages, supporting local production. Men and women might shave or not, depending on fashion and personal preferences. Perfumes and [deodorants](#) were sought out as they are today, as Absolon's use of breath fresheners in the *Miller's Tale* shows ([3690](#)). Everyone worked hard to present a tidy appearance to the world.

Except in hot weather, people slept in their underwear—[cap](#), underpants, and long, smock-like shirt for men and women. Women wore [bras](#) when clothing styles did not give an individual's figure enough support without one. Getting dressed meant putting on additional layers. Men working in physical jobs might work without trousers, as bare skin is easier to wash than woolen clothes. Otherwise, hose were plural for men and women until late in the Middle Ages. Each leg was either separately tied onto what we today might call shorts or laced around the leg like garters. This was a feature, not a bug, since each leg could be repaired or replaced separately and could be different colors for a decorative flare. Women wore one or more skirts over their hose, as we see in the Wife of Bath's description ([GP 445-76](#)). Both men and women added layers of outer garments that might be shorter or longer depending on the fashion of the time and place. Generally, as the Middle Ages progressed, men's tops got shorter and shorter, shrinking from [long robes](#) to [waist-level](#), like the Squire's outfit ([79-100](#)). Eventually, this upward creep required the front of their hose to be closed with a piece of cloth that would develop later into elaborate Elizabethan codpieces. In contrast, [women's clothing](#) shifted from [flowing curves](#) toward more structured styles. By the later fifteenth century, both [men's](#) jackets and women's dresses were beginning to achieve an [architectural quality](#). Barring the highest noble and festival occasions, everyone always kept their heads covered, oftentimes with multiple layers of [caps](#), [hats](#), and hoods. In the *General Prologue*, the Wife of Bath's layers of headscarves are notable, and while on pilgrimage, she further crowns herself with a large hat ([445-76](#)). In the same place, we read that the Pardoner leaves his hair uncovered . . . except for his cap ([669-714](#)). In fact, the headgear of many characters in the *Canterbury Tales* receives notice in the *General Prologue*. Hair gets in the way, and heads shed heat. Keeping heads covered was an efficient solution to both problems while also keeping hair cleaner, and like almost all clothing, it was a means of showing off one's social status. Except for laborers (in which case, again, our own hides are easier to clean than shoes) [leather shoes](#) were worn (we are told that the Wife of Bath's were new), and the wealthier sometimes chose [pattens](#)—like overshoes, sometimes with a platform—to strap onto their [shoes](#) to keep them clean in the dirty streets.

While [buttons](#) were in use by Chaucer's era, for the most part, clothing still tied together with strings called "laces" or "points," as we see with Absolon's kirtel ([MilT 3322](#)). Pins that we today might call brooches did not serve simply as decorative jewelry but often retained a functional purpose of holding clothing together for men and women. (However, they did not need to be quite as large as the one Alisoun is wearing in the *Miller's Tale* [[3265](#)]!) Belts also served an important function and were as highly decorated as an individual could afford. Belts not only held together clothing but also served as a kind of deconstructed kit on which one might hang keys, small knives for eating, and other useful tools. Most people hung a [purse](#) from their belt as a kind of externalized pocket, and like the belts themselves, these [purses](#) could be quite decorative. Therefore, most people wore jewelry, however basic. While [silver](#) and [gold pins](#),

[rings](#), and belt- and purse-fittings might be reserved for the wealthier middle class and nobility, [pewter](#) and [brass](#) jewelry was also made and probably served the majority of people for both function and decoration. Indeed, since enamel was a popular finish for much late medieval jewelry, no one but you would know whether the metal that lay beneath was gold or brass. In the end, by the late Middle Ages, the [small amount of gold](#) required for a ring was apparently within reach of even the more prosperous craftsmen or husbandmen. In the *General Prologue* the narrator points out that the guildsmen's gear is not copper but real silver, as is the Yeoman's St. Christopher medal ([GP 115; 366-67](#)). In contrast, in the *Miller's Tale*, Alisoun's jewelry is latoun, or brass ([MilT 3251](#)).

Today, the fur industry is all but gone, but in an era without modern heating technologies, fur was as necessary as jewelry. To be warmest, fur was used as a lining, with the fur turned inward to trap heat, and turned up cuffs or trimming were a decorative luxury, showily revealing the utilitarian lining. Modern fur coats are the height of inefficiency, with their fur worn on the outside! As with all clothing, your class had a lot to do with what you could afford to wear, with the omnipresent woolfell or sheepskin at the lower end and a variety of fine, imported arctic furs at the higher end. Furs demonstrated one's fashionability too. Grey squirrel is an example of a fur that was high fashion in Chaucer's era—and we see that the Monk wears it—but was worn by servants a hundred years later ([GP 165-207](#)). (In the never-ending cycles of fashion, grey squirrel was popular again among the wealthy for a time in F. Scott Fitzgerald's era.) Since most fur-bearing animals were not domesticated, the fur industry had direct ecological impact in many places. For example, the fur demands of the late Middle Ages left the European beaver all but extinct in many places, including England, which may be one reason that Chaucer's [Merchant's beaver hat is Flemish \(270-308\)](#). We should recall that a hundred years after Chaucer's day, England was thrilled to hear that John Cabot had found many furbearing animals, including beaver, in North America.

Fashion was going through a bit of a revolution in Chaucer's era. While wool and linen remained the staple fibers of all English clothing, other options were increasingly available. Beginning in the early fourteenth century, cottons from the Mediterranean were imported steadily, and they were stock imports by the fifteenth. Moreover, by Chaucer's era, Italy had begun [silk production](#), and this increased the availability of luxury fabrics to the wealthy, who could now purchase imported Syrian, Chinese, or Florentine silks, velvets, and brocades. While few could afford entire suits of silken clothing, small, more affordable pieces could be made into belts or purses and were clearly valued as jewelry, as we see from the silk belts and purses mentioned in the [General Prologue](#).

Whether silk or wool, clothing was expensive because it was still spun and woven by hand, thread by thread and inch by inch. The adoption of the [spinning wheel](#) in the fourteenth century allowed for [spinning](#) thread faster than a [drop spindle](#), but it still took many hours of work to produce even a single yard of cloth. This was true in Chaucer's era and well beyond Shakespeare's era, until the mechanization of weaving and spinning in the eighteenth century began the Industrial Revolution. In the Middle Ages, along with jewelry, clothing was willed to one's heirs. If one was in service (and in the Middle Ages, almost everyone at every level of society served someone), one was likely to receive clothing as part of one's wages for that service. The market for used clothing was a lively one, and [mending services](#) were an important

part of every community, especially as needles were a specialty item not everyone owned. The commonness of secondhand clothing may explain Chaucer's narrator's emphasis in the [General Prologue](#) on characters who have new clothes. We do well to remember that much of this clothing was brightly colored. Cloth dyes were big business, as dye materials could be sourced locally or imported from as far afield as Southeast Asia. Undyed cloth in its natural colors was cheapest, so [wearing rich colors](#), and a variety of colors, was another way to manifest one's wealth. The tendency to render [the Middle Ages in monochrome](#) in modern television shows and movies says more about our contemporary aesthetics than it does about medieval clothing.

Today, we often eat before we head to work, but breakfast usually featured a bit later in the Middle Ages than it does today. After getting dressed, one might tend stock, attend a service at a parish church or chapel, or even start on a bit of work leftover from the day before. Peasants, like Chaucer's Plowman and yeomen who worked farms themselves, lived by the cycle of the agricultural year, and smaller animals were kept in towns and cities by townfolk who also tended gardens and small orchards all within city limits. For many of us today, medieval work-life can look a bit relaxed. Craftsmen had a lot of flexibility; they needed to produce enough to cover their overhead with whatever cushion they thought advisable or could achieve. While farming pressures and market fluctuations meant that no one could lead a stress-free lifestyle, this culture is almost unimaginable to us today following the mass restructuring of labor during the Industrial Revolution. There were people who had to show up at a workplace at a given time regularly, but these were few, mostly bureaucrats, lawyers, and clergy. Most people worked when there was work to do, and when enough was done, people did other things.

And there were always holidays. There were lots of holidays. Lots and lots of holidays. Sundays were supposed to be work-free to attend church. The Christmas season began on Christmas Day and extended to Epiphany, or Twelfth Day, with Christmas and New Year's Day as high points. The ending of the Christmas season signaled the beginning of the agricultural year with Plow Sunday and Plow Monday after Epiphany. February featured Candlemas, or the Purification of the Virgin, and marked the end of winter. Rather than celebrating Mardi Gras alone, the days before Ash Wednesday were festival days called Shrovetide. The long Lenten fast ended with Holy Week's festivals, including Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the massive celebration of Easter Sunday. The Easter festivities extended until Hocktide a week afterward. April meant St George's day, swiftly followed by May Day, and the beginning of the local festivals characterizing the summer season. Rogationtide led up to Ascension, and then Whitsun (or Pentecost) preceded the great feasts of Corpus Christi and Midsummer. Lammas marked the beginning of August and the harvest season, highlighted at local harvest festivals. Between Lammas and the beginning of Advent, the major holiday celebrated widely was All Saints, and this heralded the beginning of winter. However, one might celebrate locally popular saints' days in these months, as well as the feasts tied to the annual season of butchering and salting livestock that would not be overwintered. All told, there were three or four dozen work-free holidays a year in addition to Sundays. Dairy animals must be milked every day, and all animals must be fed, but the religious and secular festival cycle meant that from royalty to peasant, medieval people enjoyed far more leisure time than most of us do today.

So what about medieval breakfast (and lunch and dinner)? If one had a good start on the day before breakfast, one might only have two meals, as many of us do today, working through

lunch. Bread was a staple food for all classes. Medieval England had very old [laws about bread](#) and regulated the weight of loaves and their wheat content in order to modulate prices and ensure that most people could afford bread most of the time. The most expensive, nutritious multigrain bread in many groceries today would have been the cheapest bread in medieval England, food for the poor. The whitest, finest bread was the most expensive, and this is why it is a bit of a shock to find the Prioress feeding her dog with it ([GP 118-62](#)). Bran was used as animal food. Heavy multigrain, full-bran “horsebread” sometimes even included peas and was used like a combination of the alfalfa pellets and sweetfeed fed to horses today, though it too could be used to feed the indigent. Most people did not bake bread at home. As home bakers today realize, the best bread comes out of the hottest ovens, and this was impractical or downright impossible for many homes in the Middle Ages. Instead, people either made bread dough at home using sourdough-type starters and walked it to a local oven, run by a baker, for baking, or bought loaves directly from the baker. Heating one central oven to such high temperatures was far more efficient for communities than attempting this in individual homes.

The same principal worked for much food-production and explains why Symkyn the miller orders his daughter to go into town to buy bread and ale, even though his wife has just kneaded a loaf herself ([RvT 4094; 4136-37](#)). Making food and ale and reselling both was big business in the Middle Ages, even in small villages. Ale was a low-alcohol beer. Lacking hops, a natural preservative, ale did not last, but the boiling required in making it left it safer to drink than much untreated water. Individuals might make ale, but the batches were large enough and the shelf-life short enough that many homes sold ale on the side on a sort of rotating basis. In larger towns and cities, ale tended to become a product brewed by professionals, especially after the importation of hops in Chaucer’s lifetime; this was the first true English beer. This is not to say that people might not stir up a pot of pottage—a mix of grains, legumes, and whatever else could be afforded—at home over a fire, but more elaborate preparations were inefficient for many medieval home kitchens. Large, wealthier households might have the mouths to feed and the financial wherewithal to brew and cook at home, but for many, most of the time, dining was, at least in part, take-out. So one’s breakfast might be yesterday’s stale bread dipped in ale, perhaps bolstered with some cheese or an egg laid by one’s yard hen cooked over a home fire as the widow does in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* ([NPT 2844-45](#)). Though more widely available than we might think, red meat was still a treat for most people, and salt pork was the most common option (as we see with the same widow’s bit of bacon). Given England’s coastline and rivers, fish was regularly part of most people’s diets, and this, too, was often a preserved form, either pickled or salted and dried. Spices remain expensive today, and they were so in the Middle Ages too, which is why the narrator notes the wealthy Franklin’s preference for strongly spiced food ([GP 331-60](#)). However, by the fifteenth century, even peasants could afford pepper to season their pottage.

Fasting was part of the religious festival cycle, but when one fasted and from what varied quite a bit. Clergy and the most pious laypeople might fast several days a week and for entire weeks during Advent and Lent. What one gave up when one was fasting depended a lot on how rich one’s diet was to begin with. Chaucer’s comments about the plain sufficiency of the widow’s diet in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* underscore that for many that a fasting diet might not be very different from one’s daily bread ([NPT 2833-45](#)). Fasting could, therefore, be a complicated business—fish replaced meat, but there were entirely meatless days too and days of strict bread



and water fasts for the most pious. If one did not have the means to eat much more than bread, ale, and beans, then fasting was more or less a constant.

Like jewelry, tableware displayed a keen balance between utility and the display of one's wealth. Most was made of wood, ceramic, or metal. However, each of these materials existed in more and less expensive forms. [Woodenware](#) would usually have been some of the least expensive housewares; however, as the Wife of Bath reminds us, every home used it ([WBP 99-101](#)). Moreover, some woods were valued more than others, and the speckled wood of maple burls was turned into [bowls](#) that could be fitted with metal settings fine enough to be willed to one's heirs. [Ceramics](#), too, were common in every home, but these could be [local products](#) of [every level](#) of fineness or [deluxe imported crockery](#). About a hundred years after Chaucer's death, the first Chinese porcelains reached England (and these too were immediately [harnessed in English metalwork](#) to underscore their rarity). [Brass](#), tin, and—increasingly as the fifteenth century wore on—a tin alloy called [pewter](#) would be found in most homes. [Silver and gold](#) graced the tables of the wealthiest, of course, but silver trappings might harness a maple-wood drinking cup in more modest homes. [Glassware](#) was almost all imported from Germany and Venice and was increasingly common on English tables at all levels of society as the Middle Ages wore to a close. [Small knives](#) were the main utensil and were considered personal enough implements that one brought one's own knife when dining out: the belt knives mentioned frequently in the [General Prologue](#) could serve this purpose. [Silver spoons](#) had been collected even by peasants throughout the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth and were passed on to heirs in middle class wills. For everyday use, one might use wooden spoons but, clearly, silver was common for festival days and for everyday in wealthier homes. [Forks did exist](#), though they were not regularly used in England until after Chaucer's era: from a medieval perspective, with a spoon and a good knife, why would one need a fork at all?

For most people, then, medieval food and its tableware were relatively simple. All bets were off during communal feasts though. Several times a year, most people would be involved in a feast, whether a lord's harvest feast, parish ale, or trade guild feast. These could be extravagant affairs with ale and wine, meats, fish and seafood, and spiced dishes of all sorts: the guildsmen's Cook is expert in making feasting food ([GP 379-87](#)). Feasting meant that even people who ordinarily ate quite spare, monotonous meals could regularly look forward to finer delicacies. Large, fine cups engraved with feasting slogans suggest that people might also look forward to finer tableware at feasts than they saw on a daily basis too.

After a day of work or festival, people headed to bed as they awoke, more or less with the sun. As with cooking, this was an issue of practicality; like heat, light was expensive. In a cash-poor society, people might be paid in candle-ends, and [candles were a standard gift to churches](#). Groups of parishioners pooled resources to compete with other groups to keep more candles going more of the time. In a world lit only by fire, illumination in the darkness was a rich, if everyday, wonder. People keeping small oil lamps or [candles](#) lit at home was a common cause of housefires in the Middle Ages, so we know that the urge to stay up just a little later was common among our medieval forebears.

These elements of daily life varied little for men or women, the elderly and children. In farming areas, women and men had tasks in support of animal husbandry and fieldwork, as did the

elderly, teens, and older children as they were able. Younger children were supervised when possible to prevent accidents, the most common path to injury or death after illness. In villages, towns, and cities, everyone pitched in to maintain the household and to participate in the household's craft. Among craftsmen, children were sent to apprentice away from their families, so many urban homes also included older children and teens from outside the family.

In Chaucer's England, most people married in their late teens or twenties, as is common today in many parts of the world. Nobles might marry quite young, but rarely did they cohabit as a couple until both were in their teens, and the Wife of Bath's early first marriage is unusual ([WBP 4](#)). The English saw a value in waiting until women were fully physically mature to begin facing the dangers of childbearing, and exceptions (like Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII) proved the rule. Pregnancy and childbirth were dangerous in the medieval world, and nearly a quarter of women died during childbirth or just after. Mothers who survived gathered with their friends a month after labor and celebrated in church, giving thanks as a group for the survival of one. While medieval marriage might have been more of a partnership than the love matches made in parts of the world today, many couples clearly loved each other deeply, and the risks involved in bearing children weighed on entire families.

Infancy was also a dangerous time, and many babies and children were killed by disease before they were a few years old. The use of rags soaked in raw milk as baby bottles increased the chances of infection. We have ample evidence of families mourning lost children and cherishing those who lived in memory of the dead. Chaucer himself lived through the worst plague Europe had faced in hundreds of years, the Black Death, as a child. Whether he contracted the disease and survived or managed to escape without illness, he witnessed an England wracked by loss, and one that resolutely and brilliantly rebounded. It is perhaps unsurprising that the generation of the Black Death should result in so many enduring works of literature: these were people specially attuned to the precious joys of life. Thanks to the robust immune systems survivors developed, if a child lived until about age seven, she or he was likely to live into adulthood: the worst dangers were past.

From cradle to grave, people's lives revolved around their parish churches. While some medieval people left traces of personally felt, deep religious faith, almost all participated actively in parish life. Although taking the sacrament of the Eucharist was an annual rite for most parishioners, regular attendance at Sunday mass was expected, and absences were noted. We may get a sense of this from the lack of irony in Chaucer's extended depiction of the Parson, and many characters are described as going to mass on Sundays simply because it was part of life ([GP 477-528](#)). This experience was multiplied for many people, however, who might attend funeral masses, additional masses on anniversaries of loved ones' deaths, and masses in celebration of baptisms and having survived birth, those to mark saints' days, or for many other reasons. Like the Wife of Bath, people commonly were married at the church door, that is, on the porch, and this semi-sacred public space was a popular spot for business transactions too; one might well hesitate to break an oral contract made at the church door ([WBP 6](#)). By Chaucer's lifetime, parish churches were already crowded with memorial altars and altars devoted to other saints or purposes beyond the main altar, and this collection grew denser as the fifteenth century wore on. Collectively, the members of the parish came to be responsible for the fabric of most of the church building itself, and parish guilds were organized in part to handle the financial requirements of these

responsibilities. Groups of parishioners took it upon themselves to ensure the church had candles, paint and cloth decorations for the altars and statuary, organs, musicians, and more. Fund-raising programs for large improvement projects such as building a new tower, updating stained glass, or building additional space for even more side chapels could be quite extended and involved. Parishes could be tiny, and the social organization of an entire neighborhood might focus on its church, but even in larger parishes, the church was a focal point of pride and daily life for all from the humblest servant or laborer to the grandest merchant or noble.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading:**

Writing about history requires interpretation just like literary criticism does, and historians believe some kinds of statements are so close to fact that they can stand on their own, without citation: for example, “William the Conqueror defeated Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings in 1066.” At the same time, the interpretations that historians make can look more like fiction than they often admit, especially at the introductory level, so that one can write “most people, however, woke more or less with the sun” knowing that it could never be statistically proven. History textbooks are written at a general level that blends these two kinds of statement frequently, creating narratives of what might be called “general knowledge.” Therefore, while history written for other historians can be as densely packed with citations as literary criticism is, when written by historians, history textbooks tend to provide students with a general bibliography for further reading at the end of sections rather than individual citations as in literary criticism.

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