

## Life in Medieval Britain

### 1 Pre-reading

Think about how you spend your day and answer these questions.

1. How does your day begin?
2. Do you use an alarm clock to help you wake up?
3. How do you study at school? Do you use books? What do teachers do in the classroom?
4. What kind of entertainment do you have?

### 2 Reading and writing

Read the passage and write down at least five things that are different from the way you live.

#### MEDIEVAL BRITAIN

##### Town Life

The day officially began with the ringing of the Angelus bell<sup>1</sup> at 4 or 5 o'clock. Most shops opened at 6 o'clock. Bells were the main medium<sup>2</sup> of telling time and making announcements. The town crier<sup>3</sup> rang a hand bell when he walked through the town giving news and proclamations.



Open drain channels<sup>4</sup> ran along the sides or down the centre of the streets. Many stables opened out into the streets<sup>5</sup>. People often threw<sup>6</sup> dirty water out of windows. As a consequence, towns were not very clean at that time.



##### Law

Law and order in the town was enforced by the beadle<sup>7</sup> or constables<sup>8</sup>. A thief<sup>9</sup> found in possession of stolen goods<sup>10</sup> was hanged<sup>11</sup>.

##### Curfews<sup>12</sup>

Curfews were imposed in towns to keep the peace. Originally the "curfew bell" was rung at 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening.



#### Glossary

**1 Angelus bell** campana dell'Angelus **2 main medium** principale mezzo  
**3 crier** banditore **4 open ... channels** fognature a cielo aperto **5 stables ... streets** stalle davano sulle strade **6 threw** buttavano **7 beadle** sagrestano  
**8 constables** guardie **9 thief** ladro **10 stolen goods** merce rubata **11 hanged** impiccato **12 curfews** coprifuochi

##### School Life

Most schools had no books and the students were taught by rote<sup>13</sup>. Classes could be very large, 100 or more boys (no girls, but some were accepted at small local schools). The school day lasted 13 hours with breaks<sup>14</sup> for meals. Students could be beaten<sup>15</sup> regularly with a birch rod<sup>16</sup>.



##### Table Manners

Meat was cut with daggers<sup>17</sup> and all eating was done with the fingers from trenchers<sup>18</sup>. One trencher was used by two people. People used just one drinking cup. Scraps<sup>19</sup> were thrown on the floor for the dogs.



##### Entertainment

Life in the Middle Ages was not all hard work<sup>20</sup>! Even the poorest peasant<sup>21</sup> could take part in church festivals, join a marriage or a funeral procession, or watch and listen to travelling poets, musicians, acrobats and dancers.



### 3 Reading comprehension

Answer the questions.

1. What started the day in Medieval Britain?
2. When did the shops open?
3. How did people know the time?
4. What were the streets like?
5. What happened to a thief?
6. What was the "curfew bell"?
7. What was school life like in Medieval Britain?
8. How did people eat?
9. What kind of entertainment was there?



#### Glossary

**13 were ... rote** studiavano a memoria  
**14 breaks** intervalli **15 beaten** picchiati **16 birch rod** frusta di betulla  
**17 daggers** pugnali **18 trenchers** taglieri **19 scraps** avanzi **20 all ... work** tutto lavoro duro **21 peasant** contadino



### A Timeline of British History

#### The Middle Ages

- 1066** The Normans win the battle of Hastings. William the Conqueror is crowned<sup>1</sup> king.
- 1086** The Domesday Book is compiled. It lists all the manors<sup>2</sup> of England and their value.
- 1170** Thomas Becket is killed in Canterbury Cathedral.
- 1189** Richard I (the Lionheart<sup>3</sup>) becomes king.
- 1199** Richard I fights in France. John becomes king.
- 1215** King John signs<sup>4</sup> the Magna Charta which grants<sup>5</sup> political and civil liberties.

- 1337** The Hundred Years' War between England and France begins.
- 1348** The Black Death<sup>6</sup> comes to England. A third of the population dies.
- 1453** The Hundred Years' War ends. England loses all its territory in France, except Calais.
- 1455 - 1485** England suffers a series of civil wars known as the Wars of the Roses.
- 1485** Henry VII wins the battle of Bosworth, Richard III is killed and Henry becomes the first Tudor king.

#### The 16<sup>th</sup> Century

- 1509** Henry VII dies. Henry VIII becomes king.
- 1534** Henry VIII refuses the Pope's authority, and makes himself head<sup>7</sup> of the Church of England.
- 1555 - 1558** Queen Mary persecutes Protestants. Nearly 300 people are burned to death<sup>8</sup> for heresy.
- 1558** Elizabeth I becomes queen.
- 1588** The Spanish Armada is defeated.

### A Timeline of British History

#### The 17<sup>th</sup> Century

- 1605** The Gunpowder Plot<sup>9</sup>, a Catholic conspiracy to blow up<sup>10</sup> parliament, is discovered.
- 1653** Oliver Cromwell becomes Lord Protector of England.
- 1665** Plague<sup>11</sup> in London. This is the last outbreak<sup>12</sup> of bubonic plague in England.
- 1666** The great fire<sup>13</sup> of London. Most of the city is destroyed, but it is soon rebuilt.

#### The 18<sup>th</sup> Century

- c. 1780** The Industrial Revolution begins.
- 1783** Britain signs a treaty<sup>14</sup> recognising the independence of the American colonies.

#### Glossary

**1 crowned** incoronato **2 manors** proprietà terriere **3 Lionheart** Cuor di Leone  
**4 signs** firma **5 grants** garantisce **6 Black Death** la peste nera **7 makes ... head** si proclama capo **8 burned to death** arse vive  
**9 Gunpowder Plot** la Congiura delle Polveri **10 blow up** far saltare in aria **11 plague** peste **12 outbreak** focolaio **13 fire** incendio **14 treaty** trattato