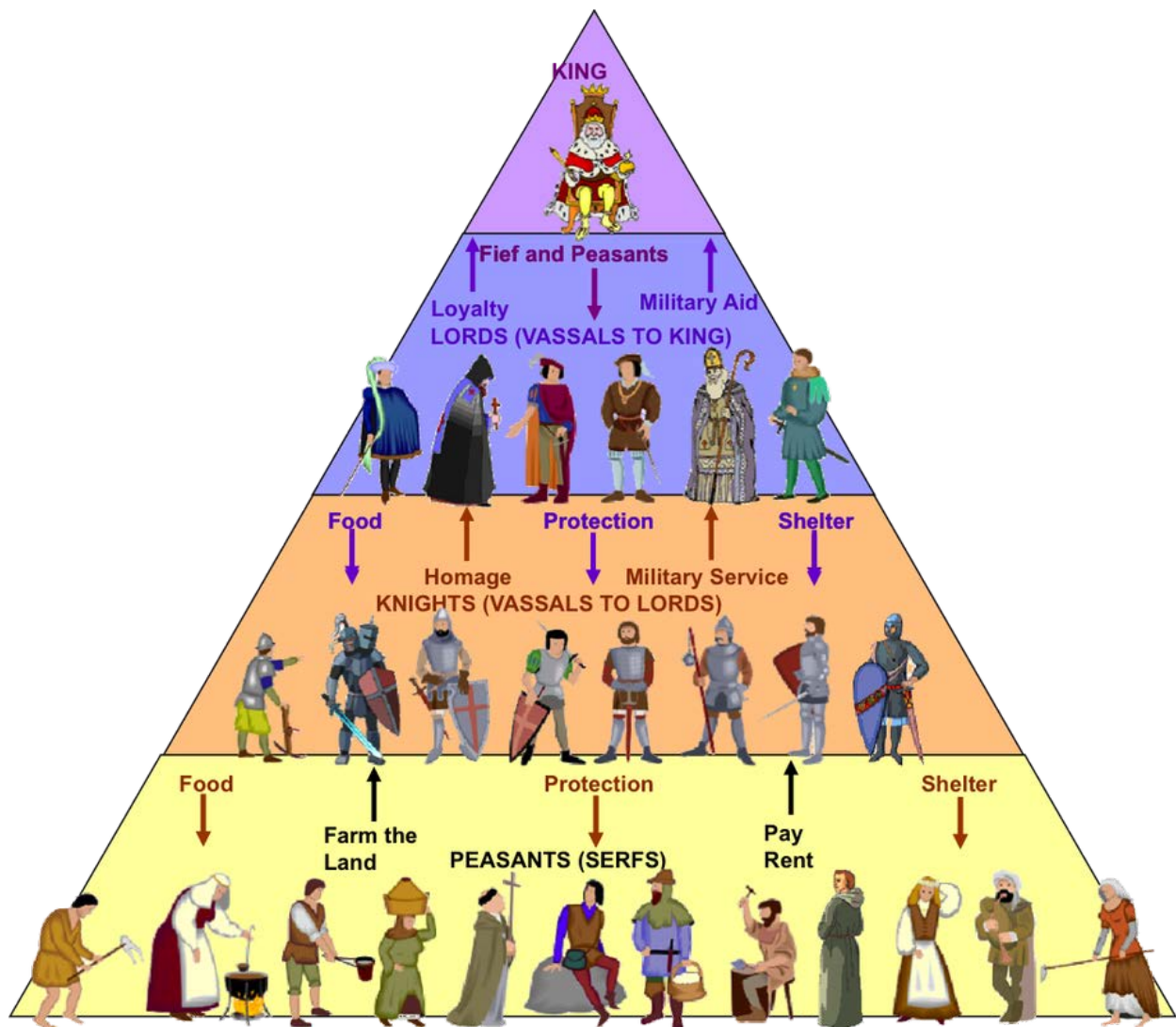


What was life like for a medieval serf and how do you know?

Text A

The Feudal System



<http://thefeudalsyste.blogspot.com>

Text B

The Peasant's Life

Villages consisted of from 10-60 families living in rough huts on dirt floors, with no chimneys or windows. Often, one end of the hut was given over to storing livestock. Furnishings were sparse; three legged stools, a trestle table, beds on the floor softened with straw or leaves. The peasant diet was mainly porridge, cheese, black bread, and a few home-grown vegetables. Peasants had a hard life, but they did not work on Sundays or on the frequent saints' days, and they could go to nearby fairs and markets. The lot of serfs was much harsher.

The Serf's Life

Although not technically a slave, a serf was bound to a lord for life. He could own no property and needed the lord's permission to marry. Under no circumstance could a serf leave the land without the lord's permission unless he chose to run away. If he ran to a town and managed to stay there for a year and a day, he was a free man. However, the serf did have rights. He could not be displaced if the manor changed hands. He could not be required to fight, and he was entitled to the protection of the lord.

Feudalism and Medieval Life by David Ross, published on [britainexpress.com](http://www.britainexpress.com).

http://www.britainexpress.com/History/Feudalism_and_Medieval_life.htm

Text C

Life in the village

Even in the later Middle Ages, the medieval peasant's life was hard and the work back-breaking. It followed the seasons – ploughing in autumn, sowing in spring, harvesting in August. Work began at dawn, preparing the animals, and it finished at dusk, cleaning them down and putting them back into the stalls.

A peasant's hut was made of wattle and daub, with a thatch roof but no windows. Inside the hut, a third of the area was penned off for the animals, which lived in the hut with the family. A fire burned in a hearth in the centre of the hut, so the air was permanently eye-wateringly smoky. Furniture was maybe a couple of stools, a trunk for bedding, and a few cooking pots.

Many peasants' huts included a simple loom. The daughter would spin wool using a distaff and spindle, and the wife would weave it into rough cloth.

Peasant food was mainly vegetables, plus anything that could be gathered – nuts, berries, nettles. The usual drink was weak, home-brewed beer. Honey provided a sweetener. If he ate bread, the peasant did not eat white wheat bread, but black rye bread.

The most difficult time was late spring, when food stores were running out, and new food was not yet growing. A poor harvest meant that some of the villagers would starve to death.

A male peasant would wear a rough tunic, with a hood and gloves, and leather shoes with wooden soles. Women wore a coarse gown over a sleeveless slip.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, when some peasants were growing quite rich, 'sumptuary laws' forbade them to wear clothes above their class.

Village life was not all misery. Holy days meant a day off work. Peasant fun was rough – wrestling, shin-kicking and cock-fighting. The ball was almost unnecessary to a medieval ball game, which was basically a fight with the next village. Occasionally a travelling musician or bear-baiter would pass through.

Text D

Feudal Peasants

Peasants

In the Middle Ages, there was a definite structure in society. You were born into a class of people and generally stayed in that class for your entire life. Working hard did not change your status. Your clothing, food, marriage, homes, etc., were determined for you. After the rank of king, the hierarchy was the nobles, the knights, the clergy (religious people), the tradesmen and the peasants.

For peasants, life was hard. They worked long hours every day just to ensure that their family had a roof over their head and food to eat. If your parents were peasants, you probably would be a peasant as well. Most of the peasants were farmers, but some were tradesmen, such as millers or tavern owners. The farmers leased their land and also paid taxes to the lord and to the king. Most farmers were not free, but rather were serfs. They were required to stay with the land and had to work several days a week for the lord of the manor. There were some free peasants, but most did not leave their lord.

Clothing

- Because they were poor, their clothing was usually rough wool or linen. The women wove the fabric and made the clothes. Peasants generally had only one set of clothing and it almost never was washed.
- Men wore tunics and long stockings.
- Women wore long dresses and stockings made of wool.
- Some peasants wore underwear made of linen, which was washed “regularly.”
- The most common colors for peasant clothing were brown, red or gray.
- Both men and women wore clogs made of thick leather.
- In cold weather, both men and women wore cloaks made of sheepskin or wool. They also wore wool hats and mittens.
- Children basically dressed in the same style as the adults.

Food

- Peasants generally lived off the land. Their diet basically consisted of bread, porridge, vegetables and some meat.
- The main crops were corn, wheat and beans.
- Near their homes, peasants had little gardens that contained lettuce, carrots, radishes, tomatoes, beets and other vegetables. They also might have fruit and nut trees.
- If the peasant was wealthy enough to have cows or goats, the family would have cheese and milk.
- Many peasants died when the weather was too wet or too dry. If their crops didn't grow, they didn't have food to eat.

Homes

- Peasants lived in towns on the lord's manor.
- Houses were constructed of stone or of branches covered with mud and straw.
- The roofs were thatched.
- There were generally two rooms in the home.
- The rooms had dirt floors and a few furnishings in the common room, such as stools, tables, chairs and chests.
- The second room contained the beds for the whole family.
- Often in the winter, the animals also lived in the common room.
- An open fireplace was in the common room.
- There were small windows without glass.
- Candles were used to light the inside of the house.

Childhood

- Often, children were named after a close relative or a saint.
- In a peasant household, everyone was needed to work in the fields. Often children as young as age 2 were left alone. Many accidents happened.
- Peasant children were poor and did not have many toys.
- Children did not go to school or have tutors, so few knew how to read.

Marriage

- Virtually all marriages were arranged by the parents.
- Peasants generally married people from their own village.
- Men were the head of the household and the wife was his property — to be treated in any way he wanted.
- Men were allowed to divorce their wives, but women were not allowed to divorce their husbands.
- Adultery and divorce were less common among the peasants.

Religion

- Religion was very important to the peasants.
- They believed that faith could take them to a world that was certainly easier than the one in which they lived.
- Peasants generally observed the Sabbath and celebrated church holidays.

Text E

The Medieval Church

The Medieval Church played a far greater role in [Medieval England](#) than the Church does today. In [Medieval England](#), the Church dominated everybody's life. All Medieval people - be they village [peasants](#) or [towns](#) people - believed that God, Heaven and Hell all existed. From the very earliest of ages, the people were taught that the only way they could get to Heaven was if the Roman Catholic Church let them. Everybody would have been terrified of Hell and the people would have been told of the sheer horrors awaiting for them in Hell in the weekly services they attended.

The control the Church had over the people was total. [Peasants](#) worked for free on Church land. This proved difficult for peasants as the time they spent working on Church land, could have been better spent working on their own plots of land producing food for their families.

They paid 10% of what they earned in a year to the Church (this tax was called tithes). Tithes could be paid in either money or in goods produced by the peasant farmers. As peasants had little money, they almost always had to pay in seeds, harvested grain, animals etc. This usually caused a peasant a lot of hardship as seeds, for example, would be needed to feed a family the following year. What the Church got in tithes was kept in huge tithe barns; a lot of the stored grain would have been eaten by rats or poisoned by their urine. A failure to pay tithes, so the peasants were told by the Church, would lead to their souls going to Hell after they had died.

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/medieval_church.htm