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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.