

Possible 'takeaway' knowledge about the Middle Ages

- People's quality of life was greatly affected by the quality of the harvest, which in turn depended on changes both in climate and in the weather. Successive harvest failures could lead to great hardship and the danger of starvation for some.
- The population grew quickly until the early 1300s, then fell by up to 50% with the onset of the Black Death. These changes in population affected prosperity and freedom. In the fifteenth century living standards for many were higher than over the next three centuries.
- Life-expectancy and health were similar in this period to other periods apart from that since the late nineteenth century. People tried to safeguard their health, especially trying to improve public health in periods of plague.
- Ideas about science and medicine were very different from ours but were detailed, carefully-studied and logical in terms of the world-view of the period. Scholars sought new ideas and universities developed.
- Christianity was the official religion in Britain though its ideas were sometimes questioned. Ideas of heaven, hell and purgatory had a great influence on many people's actions. The Church's holy days determined working patterns and created many opportunities for rest and community activities.
- The Church in England was part of wider Christendom, under the authority of the Pope, and was very wealthy. Abbeys played a significant part in trade and in providing care for the poor.
- The vast majority of people lived in villages and were agricultural workers, hard physical work shared by women and children. Many towns grew or were founded in the early part of this period.
- Women were regarded as under the command of their menfolk though in practice individual women ran businesses or their husbands' estates and gave their husbands advice on many issues.
- Britain was closely connected to the rest of Europe through trade. England's strong links with Scandinavia were ended by the Norman Conquest. After this, French culture and language had a major influence in England and politics was strongly affected by disputes and wars with France.
- England was the richest and most powerful part of Britain and English lords gradually took over Wales but had little impact in Ireland. Scotland fought successfully to remain independent.
- Wars were chiefly fought for the king's glory and to defend his lands and power. Crusades against nonChristians in the Middle East and Europe continued unevenly throughout this period.
- Monarchs were seen as God's representatives and remained central to government, being expected to defend their people from enemies and disorder at home and from abroad.
- Monarchs were expected to consult their nobles about important decisions before taking the decisions themselves. Magna Carta and parliaments began as attempts to ensure kings did consult nobles and others.
- Nobles were very reluctant to rebel but sometimes did when their own positions were threatened by the uncontrolled actions of kings. Kings were usually only deposed in the last resort.
- Government was increasingly complex with detailed records.
- The commons were increasingly well informed about political events and expected kings and nobles to provide defence, peace and prosperity. They became confident and well organised enough to protest when feeling threatened by poor government.
- People were just as intelligent (or not!) as in later centuries and shared many emotions and ideals with people today. By the 1400s literacy levels were rising and printing developed.