

Were medieval people very different from us?

This enquiry explores some of the similarities and differences between people in the Middle Ages and people today. Firstly, you are going to explore two ideas about medieval people and decide if you think they are true:

A) Medieval people’s feelings were dominated by emotions like anger, selfishness and hatred

B) Medieval people did not love their children

Later you can read about some differences in everyday life for children (on pages 10-11)

You can use this page to record the evidence you find and develop your answer to the enquiry question.

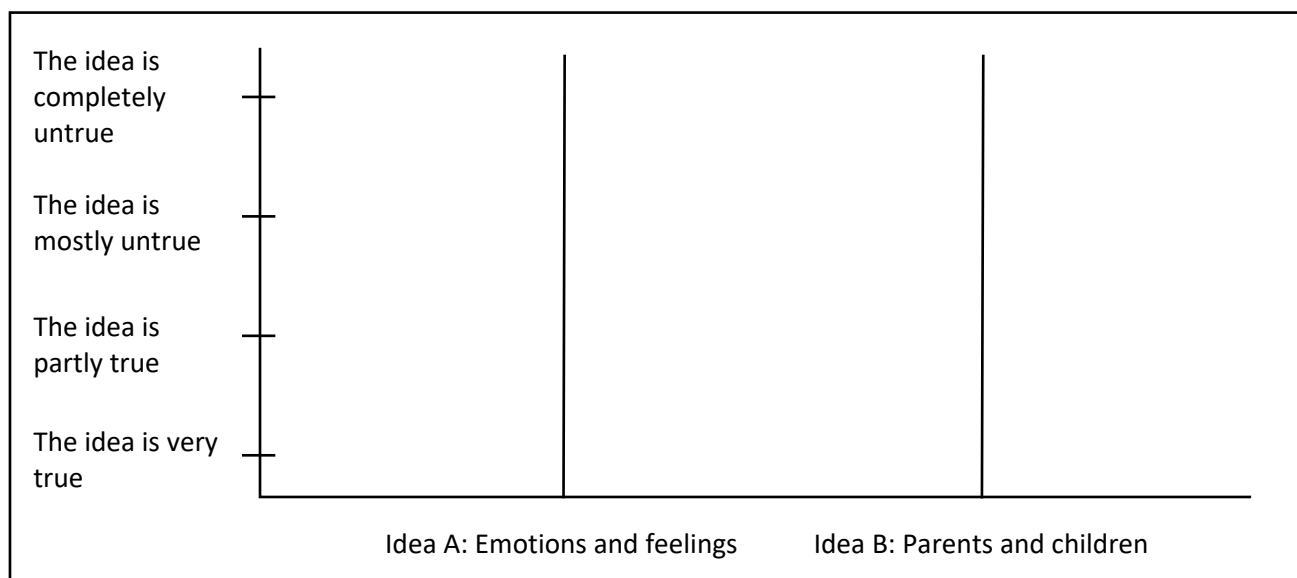
Task 1

Use this table to record the evidence for and against these two ideas.

	Evidence to support the idea	Evidence to challenge the idea
A. Medieval people’s feelings were dominated by emotions like anger, selfishness and hatred.		
B. Medieval parents did not love their children		

Task 2

Use the information in your table above to fill in this graph. Put a cross on each of the two vertical lines to show how true you think each idea is.



Idea A: Medieval people’s feelings were dominated by emotions like anger, selfishness and hatred.

It’s often hard to think of the people of the Middle Ages as people like us. If the main topics we study are battles and plague then it’s difficult to imagine anyone laughing at a joke in the Middle Ages or having friends or being kind to each other. However there is plenty of evidence to understand medieval people’s emotions and feelings.

Were they really so different from us? Or do we have a lot in common with these people who lived centuries ago?

Task

1. Your task is to read the pieces of evidence your teacher gives you and to identify the feelings in each piece. The boxes below give you the feelings to choose from.
For example, do you think Evidence 1 is about the feelings in Box A, or Box B or in another box?
2. Then write the number of the evidence in the correct box. Some evidence will go in more than one box.
3. Now use what you have found out to complete the tasks on page 1.

Boxes showing you six different groups of feelings and emotions

<p>A.</p> <p>Grief, sorrow, fear, worrying about people,</p> <p>Evidence Numbers</p>	<p>B.</p> <p>Love, loyalty, friendship, kindness, generosity</p> <p>Evidence Numbers</p>	<p>C.</p> <p>Honour or pride</p> <p>Evidence Numbers</p>
<p>D.</p> <p>Anger, hatred, selfishness, greed</p> <p>Evidence Numbers</p>	<p>E.</p> <p>Enjoyment, happiness, having fun</p> <p>Evidence Numbers</p>	<p>F.</p> <p>Morality – a sense of right and wrong. Being merciful</p> <p>Evidence Numbers</p>

Evidence 1: Margaret and John

In 1443 Margaret Paston wrote to her husband John who was away in London. Her letter includes these words:

“I wish with all my heart to hear how you are and thank God for your improvement from the serious illness you have had. Your mother and I have not been easy in our hearts since we heard of your illness until we heard of your improvement. Your mother sends you her blessings and a reminder to eat and drink properly for that will do most to help you recover.”

Evidence 2: Cases in the royal courts in Norfolk in the early 1300s

John Walsh was arrested for the murder of Richard Cous. The jurors swore on their oath that there was an argument between John and Richard and that Richard drew a knife and threatened to wound John. John fled into a corner but could not escape so he drew his sword in self-defence. Richard ran towards John with his knife outstretched to kill John but he ran into John's sword. He died of the wound at once. The jurors say that John could not have avoided being killed himself in any other way than by drawing his sword. He is returned to prison to await the king's pardon.

Peter le Synekere was arrested for the burglary of the house of Godfrey of Gayton and for stealing wheat worth 14 pence, one tunic worth 10 pence and 3 hoods worth 8 pence. The jurors say that Peter did steal these things but he did so because of hunger and poverty. He is returned to prison until the king is consulted.

Evidence 3: Rebellion, 1483

In the autumn of 1483, a rebellion broke out against King Richard III. Many of the rebels took part because they were outraged by the way Richard had become king that summer. He had deposed his young nephew, Edward V, who then disappeared, together with his brother. Some people believed the two boys had since been murdered, perhaps in the Tower of London. Richard had executed several of the young king's supporters.

The murder of children was seen as just as great a crime then as it is today. The rebels had a great deal to lose – their lives and their wealth – yet they risked taking part in the rebellion in protest against Richard's actions. Their rebellion failed but many fled abroad, returning two years later in 1485 when they defeated and killed Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth.

Evidence 4: Henry VII's pocket money

Henry VII's expenses in 1495 included small sums of money he paid out:

- For the king's losses playing chess
- To the French actors in reward
- For the king's losses playing tennis
- To the King's fool (jester)
- To the women that sang to the King and queen
- For making the King's bonfire
- To a tumbler
- To nine trumpeters and three minstrels
- To a Welshman for making a rhyme
- To the little maid who danced for the King

Evidence 5: The Battle of Agincourt, 1415

Around 1417, a French poet, Alain Chartier wrote a poem, *Le Livre de Quatre Dames*, the story of four ladies after the battle of Agincourt.

The poem tells of a young man, taking a stroll one fine summer morning, when he meets a young woman who is weeping because her husband was killed in the battle. He died honourably but she is devastated at losing the only man she could ever love. Her only hope is that, after her own death, they will be reunited in Paradise.

Then the young man meets a second woman. Her husband is alive but a prisoner in England and she fears he may die in prison. She believes the uncertainty makes her suffering greater than that of the first lady. While they are debating whose loss is the greater, along comes a third lady whose husband is simply missing – is he dead, alive, a prisoner? She feels she is suffering the most because she doesn't know what has happened to her husband. And finally comes the fourth lady whose husband is alive because he ran away from the battle. She believes that her suffering is greatest of all because he's brought shame on them both and on their families and she envies the other ladies' untarnished honour.

Evidence 6: Sir John Heydon's wife

In July 1444 Margaret Paston added some local news to a letter to her husband, John:

"Heydon's wife had a child on St Peter's Day. I heard it said that her husband will have nothing to do with her or with the last child that she had either. I heard it said that he said that if she came to him to make her excuses he would cut her nose off to let her be known for what she is, and if her child came into his presence he said he would kill it. He will not be persuaded by any means to take her back, so I heard say."

Evidence 7: Margery to John

February 1477 Margery Brews sent a letter to John Paston III which contains these extracts:

“To my most dearly beloved Valentine, I commend myself to you with all my heart, desiring to hear of your happiness, which I pray Almighty God to preserve ... And if it pleases you to hear how I am, I am not in good health, in body nor in heart, nor will be until I hear from you ... My heart commands me to love you truly above all earthly things for evermore ... and I beg that you will not let anyone on earth see this letter, except yourself. By your own, M.B.”

Evidence 8: Cleaning the walls

In 1336 an English army invaded Scotland and tried to capture the castle of Dunbar. The castle's defence was well-organised by Agnes, countess of Dunbar who made fun of the English failure to break down the castle walls. According to one chronicler:

‘After the English had fired their cannons at the castle wall, a young lady, dressed prettily, wiped the wall with a towel in full view of the English army – so that they could see her and be all the more annoyed.’

Soon afterwards the attack was called off!

Evidence 9: King John of Bohemia

In 1346 the English army, led by King Edward III, won a great victory over the French army at the battle of Crecy. The battle began late in the day and continued by moonlight until the French army fled.

Next morning English soldiers found the body of King John of Bohemia who had fought for France. John was 50 years old and nearly blind as the result of an eye disease. Although he could hardly see, he was determined to fight in the battle so he and a group of his followers tied their horses together with leather cords. This allowed his followers to lead John into the battle so that he ‘could make a few sword strokes against the enemy’.

Next morning their bodies were found together in a heap, the horses alive but still tied to each other. John's followers had known that they riding to certain death but they and John believed that this was the only way for honourable men to behave.

Evidence 10: An arrow in his arm

In 1471 Sir John Paston and his brother, also called John, fought at the battle of Barnet. After the battle Sir John wrote to their mother:

“... my brother John is alive and fares well and is in no peril of death. He is hurt with an arrow in his right arm below his elbow. I have sent him a surgeon who has dressed the wound and he trusts he shall be well in a short time ...”

Evidence 11: Crimes recorded in Wakefield courts, 1315-1316

- John, son of Henry of Fikkesby, burgled a dairy and carried away 17 cheeses, each worth 10 pennies. It is ordered that he be arrested.
- William, son of Richard Wolvet, and Adam, son of John Typup, opened the cellar door of the parson's house with a false key they had made and stole bread and clothing worth 6 pennies. They should be arrested.
- Robert Carpenter of Wakefield built a fence around a field that is common land [open to everyone] so that other people cannot graze their animals there. He is to be arrested.

Evidence 12: The Queen's brother

Isabella of Angoulême was the queen of King John (1199-1216). There were many problems during King John's reign, including rebellions and battles, but when Isabella was pregnant and missing her family, John wrote to her brother to ask him to travel from France to visit her and cheer her up.

Evidence 13: John Carre's will

In 1487 John Carre, a wealthy merchant, made his will. He left money to pay for:

- improving hospitals in York which cared for people with leprosy, a disease which rotted flesh.
- gowns and hoods for the thirteen poor men who held torches at his funeral,
- 50 beds (each with a new cover and mattress, two new blankets and sheets) for poor, unmarried men and women in need of help.
- to help the married men and women who were most in need of help in the city
- for meat and drink for prisoners in the city gaols
- for improving the roads in York
- for every poor man and woman in a hospital in York

He also left money to his servants and gave a pair of silver and gilt spectacles to the Abbot of St. Mary's Abbey.

Evidence 14: After the battle of Edgecote

After the Battle of Edgecote in 1469, poems were written in praise of some of the Welsh soldiers who had died. The poem for Thomas ap Roger Vaughan, said that Thomas's wife:

Elen Gethin was weeping
Drops of dew, as drops of rain.

The poem for Rhys ap Dafydd Llwyd said his wife is still waiting for his return:

Margaret doesn't believe, Rhys,
That you are not alive and well – come to Powys!

Evidence 15: The King's shoes

The historian William of Malmesbury told this story about King William II in a chronicle written around 1130:

"Dressing one morning, King William was outraged to discover how little his shoes had cost. 'You son of a bitch,' he shouted at his servant, 'since when has a king worn such cheap shoes? Get me some that cost at least twice as much.'"

Evidence 16: Fighting with his heels

James Ormond, earl of Wiltshire, supported King Henry VI during the Wars of the Roses. In 1455 he carried the King's banner at the battle of St Albans but ran away disguised as a monk before the battle ended. According to one chronicle, he 'fought mainly with his heels because he was afraid of losing his beauty for he was known as the most handsome knight in the land'.

In 1461 he was even faster on his feet – he ran away from two battles! He escaped from the battle of Mortimer's Cross but wasn't quick enough after the battle of Towton. This time he was captured by his enemies and executed.

Evidence 17: Londoners close the city gates, 1461

Early in 1461, King Henry VI's army was heading south, aiming to take back control of London from the king's enemies. Londoners began to hear rumours about how the King's army – that the soldiers were robbing and destroying every village in their path, stealing clothes, money and food and driving off cattle and other farm animals. Some said the army was like a plague of locusts, destroying everything in its path. What would they do when they reached London with all its wealth? The people of London decided to shut the city's gates and keep the King's army out.

Idea B: Medieval parents did not love their children

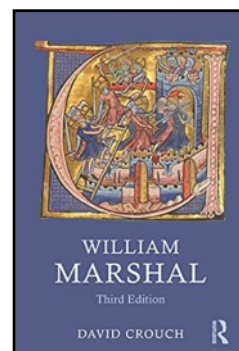
The story of William Marshal

One day in June 1152 a boy called William Marshal, who was only about 5 years old, was made to stand on a huge catapult with a rope round his neck. It looked as if, at any moment, William was going to be executed. Why was young William in such danger?

A civil war was being fought between King Stephen and his cousin Matilda over who should rule England. Young William's father, John Marshal, was on Matilda's side but the King's army had surrounded his castle. John promised the King that he would surrender. He handed William over to the King as a hostage to prove he would keep his promise. William's life depended on his father surrendering, as he had promised.

John did not keep his promise. He sent for reinforcements and then refused to surrender his castle to King Stephen. That's when the King threatened to execute William unless John kept his word to surrender but John did not give in. Instead he said 'Hang the boy. I can always have more sons.'

John Marshal's castle seemed to be far more important to him than his son.



William Marshal defeats an opponent.

This drawing, from the 1250s, is by chronicler Matthew Paris.

William lived to be the most famous knight of his time, became earl of Pembroke and ruled England while Henry III was a boy after 1216.



From: Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

The myth: Medieval parents did not love their children

In the 1960s some historians believed that medieval people did not care about their children. These historians used stories like the one about John and William Marshal as evidence to support their interpretation. They had other evidence too. They said that parents could not love their children if they made their children do farm work when they were as young as 7 years old. Children also died in accidents at home, after being scalded by boiling water, or from falling into wells or rivers.

However one of the exciting things about history is that historians keep learning more as they study the evidence in more detail or look at new evidence. As a result historians often change or modify their interpretations.

What evidence is there that challenges the idea that medieval parents did not love their children?

Myth: a story that many people believe but may not be true.

Interpretations: an interpretation is someone's version of what happened in the past. Historians, museums, film-makers and many other people all create interpretations of what life was like in the past.

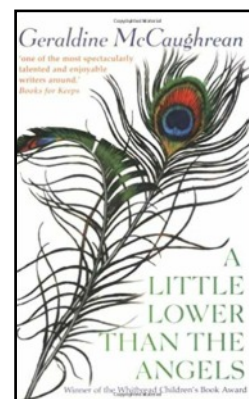
Myth-busting: Evidence that medieval parents did love their children

1. There is plenty of evidence that parents were deeply upset when their children were sick or died. In 1484 Prince Edward, the 8 year-old son of King Richard III and Queen Anne, died after a short illness. The Crowland Chronicler wrote: 'the boy's father and mother were almost out of their minds for a long time because of the sudden grief.' Poor families loved their children just as much. A priest in Howden in Yorkshire wrote down the story of a boy called Orm. In 1124 Orm fell into a coma, probably because he was diabetic. His parents feared he was dead. Then they were overjoyed when he recovered but he fell ill again and they nursed him lovingly until he died. He was buried next to a boy who'd been his friend.

2. Children were given toys to play with. Babies had rattles, some with bells inside them. Older children had marbles, dice and counters for games, toy weapons and model knights, spinning tops, balls, hobby horses, miniature jugs and cooking pots for playing 'house' and toy animals such as a small bird with moveable wings. Archaeologists have found these toys or they are shown in pictures.

3. Adults tried to protect children. York council made a law in 1376 to stop people driving horses dangerously, protecting children playing in the streets. Parents put barriers around fires to stop children being burned or scalded by boiling water.

4. Babies were dressed in woollen bootees and hats. Toddlers wore shoes as soon as they could walk and some shoes had draw-strings which could be fastened easily, a kind of medieval Velcro! Some parents used reins to keep toddlers away from fires or water. Wealthy parents made sure their children had clothes that stood out. Eleanor de Montfort, the sister of King Henry III, gave her daughter 25 golden stars to decorate the hood of her cloak.



Many historical novels, like this one, tell stories about children in the Middle Ages.

Remember the hands! On the one hand ... on the other ...

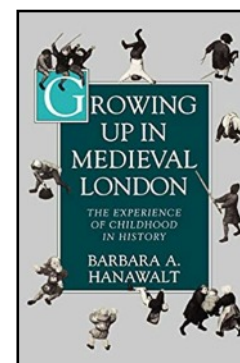


Many questions in History are tricky because different evidence suggests different answers. But you can't just ignore some of the evidence when you answer the question, you have to explain both sides – on the one hand evidence X suggests one answer but on the other hand evidence Y suggests a different answer. Then you decide which hand holds the best evidence!

Coming to a conclusion

Did medieval parents love their children? On the one hand parents did get angry with their children and many children were beaten for misbehaving – far more than today. Some parents were cruel to their children. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence that parents did love their children, were desperately worried when they were sick and deeply upset when children died. Most parents loved their children in the Middle Ages, just as they have done in every period of history.

And what about William Marshal and his father, John? Professor David Crouch, a historian, suggested that John was not as cruel as he seems because he did not expect King Stephen to execute William. John knew that the King was a kind man and so gambled that the King would not kill William. John was right. Instead of killing William, King Stephen played a game of knights with William and set him free. Even so I cannot imagine many parents treating their son as John did.



Everyday Life: If you'd been 12 in the Middle Ages ...

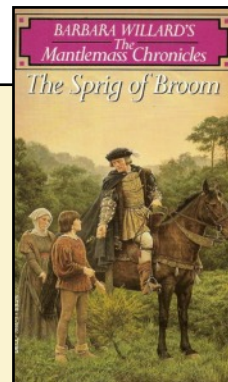
Over the whole manor the crop was a heavy one – wheat, barley and oats, all to be safely garnered, according to long custom, by the feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. Everyone was needed that year to bring the harvest home ... the oxen came and went, dragging the loads to the barnyard for threshing ... the work seemed endless. Roger said he must wait till harvest home to tell his father of his decision to become a monk.

'Wait till Michaelmas, wait till the fruit's in,' Medley urged.

'And then wait till Martinmas for the last root and berry, I suppose!'

They were resting on a great pile of last year's straw, out of the barn to make way for fresh. 'Come on, you gurt grummut,' growled Roger in the voice he had not used a long while now. 'Give over grizzling, do, and get thee armed-up. There's naun won wi'out a battle.'

An extract from Barbara Willard's novel, *The Sprig of Broom*.



How many differences can you spot in this passage between the lives of Roger and Medley and your own?

Reading good historical novels is a brilliant way to learn about the past. We remember the details because we enjoy finding out what happens to the people and how their story ends. The lives of Medley and Roger, boys of about 12, and Roger's sister, Catherine, in the 1400s were very different from yours, although they are very similar to us as people.

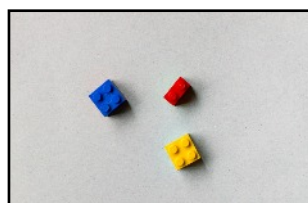
Here are ten of the most important differences if you'd been 12 in the 1400s!

1. You would almost certainly be living in the countryside. Almost 90% of the people lived in country villages and worked growing food. Many families in towns also owned land in fields outside towns where they grew food and kept animals.
2. Everywhere was much quieter – no cars or planes, no music or television, no noisy crowds apart from in a handful of towns. As a result you would hear animals and birds much more clearly and music would feel a more special event.
3. There were far fewer people. Britain was much emptier. These Lego bricks give you an idea of how different it was – one brick represents 2 million people, roughly the number of people in Britain around 1100.

Another way of imagining this is to look at your classroom – it will feel full with 30 people in it but it would feel very empty if you were the only person there.



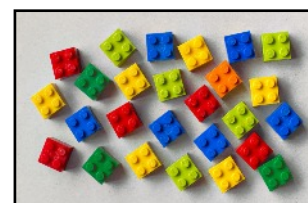
Population in 1100



Population in 1300
But after the Black Death in 1348 the population total fell back to the total in 1100



Population in 1500



Population in 2000

4. Everywhere was much darker unless the sun or the moon was shining. Your home was lit by the fire used for cooking or by candles made from animal fat. Step outside at night and you'd struggle to see anything as there were no street lights, making walking or riding difficult and dangerous. Getting up and going to bed were much more closely linked to sunrise and sunset than nowadays.

5. Many children aged 12 were three or four inches shorter than you are. Most people could not afford meat and did not eat much fruit or dairy products. At some times of the year there was less food available. Therefore they had poorer nutrition than you because they got fewer vitamins from their food and so grew more slowly than you do. But they carried on growing for longer than you. Nowadays people stop growing taller at about 18 but in the Middle Ages they kept growing until their late 20s and reached the same height as people reached in the mid-1900s.

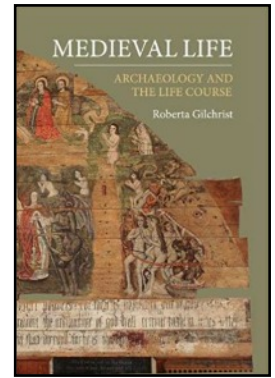
6. By the age of 12 you'd be very skilled at collecting eggs and feeding poultry, milking goats and cows, looking after herds of sheep, collecting nuts and berries from woodland and fruit from your own trees, caring for and riding horses, spinning thread to use to mend or make clothes, sweeping out your home with a broom, scouring pots after cooking - and lots more. You would have been doing these tasks since you were 7 years old. At harvest time you will be working in the fields with everyone else, helping to ensure you have food for the winter and early next year.

7. Collecting water for cooking, drinking and washing took a lot of time. You'd need to collect it from a stream or well. You also need a constant supply of wood from local woodland for cooking and warmth.

8. All this heavy work meant that many people suffered great pain as they grew older. Their bones and their joints in fingers, knees, back and hips were badly damaged by work while their bodies were growing. Carrying water is extremely heavy and hard work. Boys suffered from the effects on their bodies of archery practice which was compulsory from the age of 7 for some of the Middle Ages.

9. You would struggle to understand some of what people from other places are saying. Local accents were very strong and every area had its own words. For example, Roger and Medley might offer you eyren to eat after travelling over local roads made stochy by heavy rain.

10. Now for the saddest part. About 20% of children in country villages died before their first birthday. Even more babies died in towns. However the people who did live through childhood and reach the age of 20 had a good chance of living for another 30 years or longer. It was not unusual for people to live to be 60 or 70, especially if they were well-off and had a good diet.



A great deal of evidence about the everyday lives of people in the Middle Ages comes from skeletons which have been excavated and examined by archaeologists.



From: British Library

This picture from the Luttrell Psalter shows how women carried water and milk.

Every girl learned to use spindles or spinning wheels to turn wool into woollen thread to make clothes. Almost everything in the house was made of wood (like this spinning wheel), pottery, iron or wool. There were no plastics.

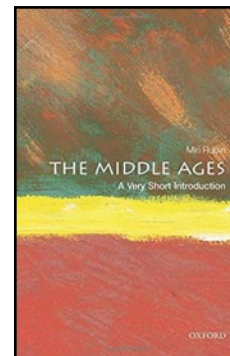


From: British Library

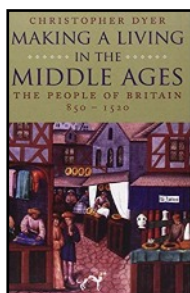
Conclusions: Were medieval people very different from us?

‘It is often assumed that people of this period were vastly different from us. This is not a helpful assumption. Then, as now, individuals aimed to live the best lives possible while struggling to make ends meet [and] displaying emotions familiar to us: loyalty, jealousy, greed, hope, and passionate love.’

In the paragraph above, Professor Miri Rubin tells us something very important about the people of the Middle Ages – that they were just like us in many of their emotions and feelings. They loved their children, husbands, wives and friends dearly. They could be happy or angry, sad or kind, just as we are. They were just as intelligent as we are. They were not very different from us. They were very similar.



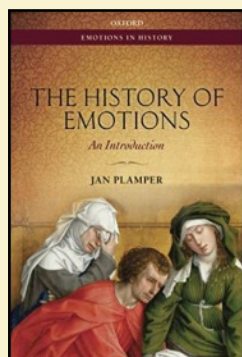
Resilient: strong and tough in difficult conditions



Medieval people could also be incredibly brave and resilient. In 1348 the Black Death, a terrible plague, killed over 40% of the population. Some people did panic but there is also plenty of evidence that many people coped courageously with the emergency and the fear. Professor Christopher Dyer says ‘the main impression is of a civilized and organized society doing its best ... in desperately difficult circumstances.’

Therefore we do have a lot in common with people in the Middle Ages even though our lives are very different in other ways. We are lucky – we have electricity, anaesthetics to kill pain, hot running water, cars, phones, computers. Modern antibiotics kill infections which would have killed people in the Middle Ages. Even a small cut led to death if it became infected. However all these things are very new.

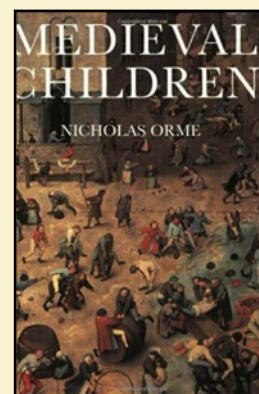
Our lives today are very different from life in the Middle Ages but many of the changes are very recent. My grandfather, who died in 1950, never travelled in a car or a plane, never used a computer, watched television or used an antibiotic such as penicillin. My grandfather is a reminder that most people in history did not have the luxuries that we have today. It’s not the people of the Middle Ages who were different. It’s us who are different from everyone else who lived in the past!



History – far more than kings and battles

When I was at school in the 1960s, lessons about the Middle Ages were mostly about wars, politics and kings (though not queens) with a few lessons on the everyday lives of people in the villages. At that time historians mostly studied and wrote books about war and politics.

Nowadays, historians and archaeologists study a much wider range of topics. They research and write books and articles about every aspect of people’s lives in the past, including emotions and childhood. One reason I’ve included these topics is so you can see that historians study every aspect of life in the past.



Choosing your take-aways

It's always tempting to rush onto the next topic. New topics always look exciting because they're new. However it's really important to pause at the end of a topic and reflect on what you have learned about the topic you've just finished.

The first important question to ask yourself is:

What are the most important things I have learned, that I want to TAKE AWAY and remember?

You have much more chance of remembering the really important points if you identify them carefully.



1. Here is a list of possible take-aways. Choose the 3 that you think are the most important to remember and explain why they are important to remember.

2. Choose one more take-away from this enquiry that is NOT in this list and explain why you have chosen it.

A. People had the same kinds of emotions and feelings in the Middle Ages that we have today.

B. Children had some of the same toys that children have today.

C. Everywhere was darker, quieter and emptier than today.

D. Children took ten years longer to grow to their full heights compared with children today.

E. Many of the differences between our lives and those of people in the Middle Ages are the result of very recent changes in the last 70 years.

F. People were as intelligent in the Middle Ages as we are today.

G. Medieval children helped their parents with household and farming work from as young as 7.

H. Historians and archaeologists study every aspects of people's lives in the past.

I. Historians' interpretations of events and life in the past often change when they study evidence in more detail or find new evidence.

J. A great deal of evidence about everyday life in the Middle Ages comes from skeletons examined by archaeologists and other archaeological finds.

Your Overall Enquiry:

Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?

The second important question to ask yourself at the end of this enquiry is:

Has my work on this enquiry changed my answer to our overall question?

Think about:

- What you've learned about life in the Middle Ages
- Has what you've learned changed or amended your view of life in the Middle Ages?

Now decide whether you want to change your first answer to the overall question or keep it the same.