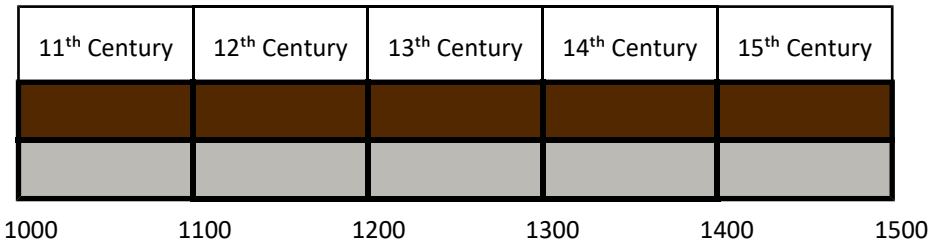
Using colours to tell your Big Story

Many people think that life in the Middle Ages was always hard and difficult and never changed – life must have been awful. That's why the timeline (below) uses two very dull colours to tell the story of the Middle Ages.

Grey is for continuity – because many people think that life stayed the same throughout the Middle Ages. There were never any changes.

Muddy brown is for life always being hard and difficult.



However this dull and boring story of the Middle Ages is wrong – and you are going to find out why. You are going to be the person in the microlight aircraft, able to see the whole of the Middle Ages spread out below you. You'll discover a far more interesting and accurate story – and use more colours to make the story clearer.

What do you already know that challenges the two ideas about the Middle Ages listed above?

I'm Ian Dawson.

I wrote this chapter and other books about the Middle Ages. I don't think the story in this timeline is accurate.

Your challenge is to write a more accurate story!

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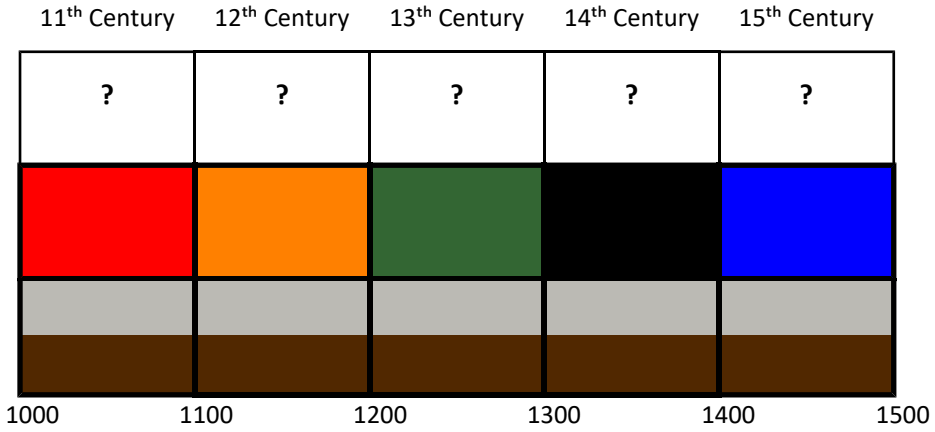
Choosing your colours for your Big Story of the Middle Ages

We are going to use more colours to tell a more accurate story of the Middle Ages and make the story clearer. The new timeline below still uses grey and brown but there is also room for two more colours in each century. I have filled one of the new colours in, using the Colour Code below. Your tasks include choosing the fourth colour that goes in the empty box at the top of the timeline for each century.



What do the new colours tell you about each century?

Can you think of any events or reasons that explain the new colours?

Colour Code: What do the colours mean?

BROWN	Hard and Difficult	GREEN	Faster Changes
GREY	Unchanging, Continuous	BLUE	Opportunities and Optimism
RED	Danger	BLACK	Disaster and Despair
AMBER	Slow Changes		

Why are brown and grey still in the timeline?

Brown and grey do tell us important things about life throughout the Middle Ages. The **brown** line tells us that many people did work extremely hard, digging and ploughing the fields or carrying water from the well or river and firewood for cooking. Another hardship was sickness. One in every five children died before their first birthday and there were no effective anaesthetics to dull pain.

The **grey** line shows that there were continuities. Over 80% of people worked in farming throughout the Middle Ages and they depended on the food grown in their own fields for having enough to eat. If harvests were poor then people went short of food and even starved. Religion stayed important because people wanted to avoid going to Hell after they died.

Your tasks

1. Read the story of Eleventh Century on page 3. What evidence supports using red in the timeline?

2. Now chose one more colour which helps you to describe the Eleventh Century. Add that colour to the empty box, above the red box on the timeline. Then explain why you have chosen that colour.

3. Now repeat Tasks 1 and 2 for each of the other centuries, using the information on pages 4 to 7.

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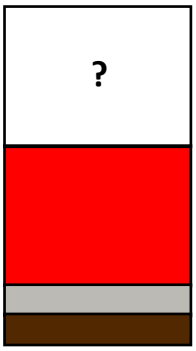
The Eleventh Century 1000-1100

Your Big Story of the 11th Century



One of the most famous events in English history took place in this century – the Battle of Hastings in 1066. **There was plenty of other warfare too**. As the century began, the English were fighting Viking invaders. They lost. In 1016 the Danish king, Canute, became king of England and Danish kings ruled England until 1042.

In 1066 TWO armies – the Norwegians and the Normans – invaded England. There were three terrible battles, two in the north and one in the south, ending with William of Normandy as King of England. The Norman Conquest had begun! The Normans built castles to keep control but the English fought back. In 1069 there was a great rebellion in the north but King William won again and punished the people of the north severely, destroying homes, food and animals. The Normans also invaded parts of Wales which had its own kings but they did not invade Ireland or Scotland which were still separate lands with their own kings.

The Vikings came from Denmark and Norway

That sounds as if all people did was fight but there was no major fighting for 45 years between 1020 and 1065 or for 30 years after 1070, **so England was peaceful** for three-quarters of the century. What happened in peacetime?

We also call the English the Anglo-Saxons or Saxons.

England's kings were rich and powerful, **before and after 1066**. They had detailed laws, collected taxes and sent written orders to officials all over the country. In 1085 King William ordered a great survey of every village to find out how much the land was worth and many other details. The survey was completed very efficiently and quickly, using the system of government developed long before 1066. The results were written up carefully in Domesday Book.

The drawings on pages 3-7 do not show individual people but the kinds of clothes they wore in each century.

The English were farmers, growing food and rearing animals to eat and sell. Their **lives were changing slowly but steadily**. The population was increasing, to about 2.5 million. Two hundred years earlier, families had lived separately in isolated farms but now they lived in small villages and built churches in their villages. Small towns were growing where craftsmen made leather boots or silver jewellery. This was the beginning of the villages and towns we live in today.

Roads were improved and bridges built over rivers so farmers could take crops and animals to sell in towns. Traders also bought and sold goods all over Europe. The sea did not divide Britain from Europe but provided the link that enabled them to travel. One important invention was the watermill, powered by water from rivers. Using small hand-mills to grind corn to make bread had been really hard work. Watermills made almost everyone's lives easier. All this helped make England wealthy.

The lives of the commons (the working people) were also changed by settlers from abroad. Viking farmers and traders settled in the north and in Ireland. Many Viking words became part of the English language. Many places are still named after Viking leaders. However after 1066 England's strongest link was no longer with Viking Scandinavia but with Normandy and France.

Kings of England in the 11th Century
Ethelred 978-1016
Edmund 1016
Canute and his sons 1016-1042
Edward the Confessor 1042-1066
Harold II 1066
William I 1066-1087
William II 1087-1100

By 1100 nearly every village has a Norman lord instead of an English lord, a hugely difficult change for people to get used to. Would the new lords – who didn't speak English – treat local people fairly? In time, Normans and English began to marry each other and gave their children French names (like William or Richard) and everyone began to use some French words in everyday speech. The Normans also built large cathedrals and monasteries. By 1100 they had changed what many places looked like.

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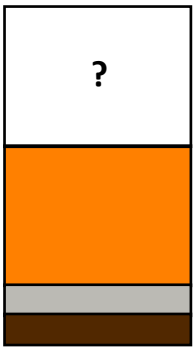
The Twelfth Century 1100-1200

Your Big Story of the 12th Century



There were two famous events in this century that you are bound to learn about in school. The first was the murder in 1170 of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket had quarrelled with King Henry II over the king interfering in the work of the Church. News of Becket's murder by four of the King's knights raced around Europe. Thousands of pilgrims, rich and poor, travelled to Canterbury every year to pray at Becket's tomb, asking him to help them or cure their sicknesses.

The other famous event was the Third Crusade in 1189-92 when King Richard I (the Lionheart) and other kings from Europe tried to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslim army led by Saladin. They failed but this wasn't the end of the Crusades. For another 300 years Crusaders travelled to Jerusalem and to parts of Europe to fight against non-Christian armies.

The Christian army had captured Jerusalem in 1099 during the First Crusade.

Pilgrimages and the Crusades show that religion was very important to people. That was not changing but many other things were **changing slowly** which is why there is so much Amber in my timeline for this century. Here are some of these changes – the population was growing so farmers needed to grow more food (helped by a dry, warm climate). Windmills were built to grind corn more easily to make bread. People were buying and selling more things from cooking pots to jewellery to wool for clothes and blankets. There were more jobs in towns, making and selling these things, so more people moved to live in towns. Even so, nearly 90% of people still worked as farmers. Most were villeins, people who were not free to leave their work on their lord's land without their lord's agreement.

Kings of England in the 12th Century
Henry I 1100-1135
Stephen 1135-1154
Henry II 1154-1189
Richard I 1189-1199

Education was developing too. This sounds strange as very few people went to school but these changes were the start of more people being educated. New universities were set up around Europe so more people were learning from books written in Ancient Greece and Rome or by Arab scholars. Historians, some of them monks, wrote histories, carefully researching the evidence. Others wrote poetry and music. Many well-educated men worked for the King, making royal government and law courts more efficient. All this explains why this period is known as the 'Twelfth Century Renaissance' – Renaissance means the rebirth of learning.

Many of these **developments spread from Europe**. Another example was the founding of new monasteries, often led by monks from France or Italy. They were built in the countryside, well away from towns so that monks could lead simple lives of prayer. English kings and lords still spoke French as their first language. Henry I was also Duke of Normandy and Henry II and Richard I ruled an even large area of France called the Angevin Empire. Therefore they all spent a lot of their time outside England. Henry II also sent an army to invade Ireland, the beginning of England's attempts to conquer Ireland.

The Angevin Empire gets its name from Henry of Anjou who became King Henry II

Was there lots of war? Yes, in patches. Henry I kept England very peaceful but after he died there was a long civil war as Henry's daughter, Matilda and her cousin, Stephen fought over the crown. Henry II was another great soldier who worked hard to improve the laws and law courts to make England peaceful and a safer country for people to live in.

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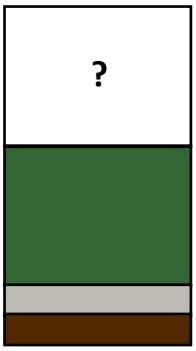
The Thirteenth Century 1200-1300

Your Big Story of the 13th Century



The changes that had begun in earlier centuries speeded up in the thirteenth century. **Everyone experienced changes**, from kings to the commons. That's why I've coloured this century Green for Go!

The number of people kept increasing. There were between 5 and 6 million by 1300, three times more than in 1000. The bigger population meant that there were more people buying food, clothes, cooking pots and everything else they needed. Therefore there was much more trade, so craftsmen, farmers, shopkeepers and traders grew wealthier. Sheep farmers and merchants also sold wool abroad where it was made into cloth

The bigger population also led to some villeins being given their freedom by their lords who didn't need lots more workers on their land. Some workers moved to towns. In 1100 there had been 100 towns. In 1300 there were over 800 town, and 20% of people lived in them. Others stayed in their villages, hoping to work for wages. Some did well but others struggled because wages were low as there were so many people desperate for work. This increased the danger of people going hungry if there was a poor harvest, because they could not afford extra food.

There were changes in religion too. The Church was becoming richer. Monasteries grew wealthy from selling wool from their huge flocks of sheep. Cathedrals and churches were rebuilt, many with beautiful stained glass windows full of colour. However some churchmen criticised wealthy bishops and monks for not living simple, religious lives. They set up a new group of monks – the friars - who did not own anything. Many friars lived in towns helping and praying with the poor.

People began to use surnames more. If John from Halifax moved to live in Leeds he might be called John Halifax.

Kings also faced rebels. They were expected to discuss important decisions with their barons and to take the good of their people into account. King John did not do this. He lost Normandy to the King of France, then demanded far higher taxes to pay for soldiers to win those lands back. The barons rebelled, forcing John in 1215 to agree to Magna Carta, a set of rules about how kings should govern the country.

Barons are also called nobles or magnates.

Whatever we call them they were rich and powerful.

King Henry III also angered his barons because he only listened to a group of his favourite advisers and made decisions other barons disagreed with. This time the barons, led by Simon de Montfort, forced Henry to meet them three times a year so he had to ask their advice and think about the good of the 'community of the realm', all the people in England. Those meetings are called parliaments which means 'talking places'. Even farmworkers in villages far from London knew about and supported the rebel barons' plans. However the king and his son, Prince Edward, fought back, beating the rebels in battle and killing de Montfort.

Other kings did work well with their barons. Edward I and his barons had the same ideas about what was important. Edward was a great soldier, fighting on Crusade, in France and trying to control all of Britain. He conquered Wales, then invaded Scotland but conquering Scotland was a huge task and he did not succeed. These wars were very expensive so Edward held parliaments regularly to raise taxes to pay for his wars. From now on parliaments were held regularly.

Kings of England in the 13th Century
John 1199-1216
Henry III 1216-1272
Edward I 1272-1307

These changes were not as great or rapid as those during the Industrial Revolution (c1750-c1900) but they were still important, affecting many people's lives.

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The Fourteenth Century 1300-1400

There were many black days in the fourteenth century. For English soldiers the blackest was at Bannockburn in 1314 when their army was destroyed by the Scots, ending English chances of conquering Scotland. Also in 1314, endless rain and freezing temperatures ruined the harvest. People did not have enough to eat. Then the next two harvests failed and crops and animals died. Unable to find food, 15% of the people starved to death. This was the start of the Little Ice Age when temperatures fell and rainfall increased, making bad harvests more likely.

The blackest day came when the Black Death reached Britain in 1348 from Europe and Asia. Over 40% of the population died from this plague. The population plummeted down to 2 million people, the same total as in the 11th century. Plague kept coming back too – in 1361, 1369 and 1375 – killing 10% to 15% of the people each time. Local outbreaks also devastated individual towns.

There were black days for kings too. Barons had rebelled before against kings they did not trust but no king had been deposed. People believed that Kings represented God so deposing a king felt like going against God. But Edward II was deposed in 1327 and Richard II in 1399. Both were replaced by close relatives. Nobody could imagine a country without a king.

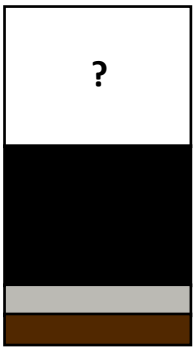
The Black Death was terrible but **it created opportunities** for some of the survivors. There were far fewer workers so lords paid higher wages to attract people to work in the fields for them, despite this being against the law. The workers started to use this money to build bigger houses, eat more meat and better bread, buy better clothes and more land for themselves. But some workers in towns were less well off because there were fewer people to buy the goods they made.

The villeins (about 40% of the people) also wanted to improve their lives but first they needed their freedom so they could earn wages – but lords would not free them. Villeins were also angry at paying high taxes when the lords were not defending them from French attacks. This led to the Great Revolt of 1381 when many people marched to London to protest. The Revolt turned to violence, the leaders were executed and nothing changed immediately but over the next fifty years most villeins were freed by their lords.

Wars continued despite these changes. Some lords and knights went on crusades to eastern Europe. Edward III's war against France, the Hundred Years War, was so successful that some soldiers made fortunes from loot or ransoming prisoners. If that war had been a football match Edward had put England 3-0 ahead but by the 1390s, when Richard II made peace, the score was 3-3. The French had fought back, raiding English towns.

These wars gave people a greater sense of nationalism, of being English. More people were writing in English. A lot of great poetry was written at the end of the 14th century. The most famous poet was Geoffrey Chaucer who wrote The Canterbury Tales. A small number of reformers even wanted the Bible to be in English instead of Latin so that more people could read it. They hoped this would give people the chance to think about religion themselves instead of following what they were told by priests.

Your Big Story of the 14th Century



The Little Ice Age lasted from c1300 to c1850

Deposed: forced to give up the crown to someone else

Villeins: people who were not free to leave their villages and had to work for their lord in return for land

The **Great Revolt** is also called the **Peasants Revolt**

Kings of England in the 14th Century
Edward II 1307-1327
Edward III 1327-1377
Richard II 1377-1399

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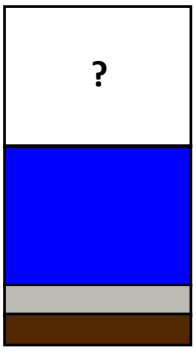
The Fifteenth Century 1400-1500

Your Big Story of the 15th Century



The famous events in this century are wars – the second half of the Hundred Years War with France, a major Welsh rebellion led by Owain Glyndwr against the English and the civil war called the Wars of the Roses – so having blue for optimism in the timeline may be a surprise but plenty of people did have new opportunities.

Henry V restarted the Hundred Years War in 1415 and soon England was heading for a great victory when the English longbowmen won the battle of Agincourt and conquered the north of France. Then, in 1420, the French agreed that Henry would become King of France when their own king died. If this has been football the score was 6-3. But Henry died soon afterwards and the French fought back, led for a time by Joan of Arc. When the French recaptured Normandy in 1450 they led 7-6. English kings still claimed they were also kings of France but they had lost.

Away from war, **life was getting better** for many people because the population was still small. Landowners and employers needed workers so they had to pay higher wages to attract people. Many people were employed making cloth and clothes instead of the wool being sent abroad to clothmakers. Workers on farms and in the towns were also well-paid – better than at any time until the late 1800s. They had better houses, food and clothes and more children went to school. Some women had jobs and ran businesses that women had not done before because there were not enough male workers. More people were learning to read, over 40% of people in London by 1500. Demand for books led to the development of printing. Johannes Gutenberg developed printing in Germany and William Caxton set up the first printing press in London in 1476.

People also took care of each other, leaving money in their wills to provide fresh water supplies, building public toilets and improving roads in their towns. People also left money to rebuild or enlarge local churches and buy prayer books. People still cared very much about their religion.

Kings of England in the 15th Century
Henry IV 1399-1413
Henry V 1413-1422
Henry VI 1422-1461
Edward IV 1461-1470
Henry VI 1470-1471
Edward IV 1471-1483
Edward V 1483
Richard III 1483-1485
Henry VII 1485-1509

At the same time the Wars of the Roses were taking place. It wasn't one long continuous war between 1455 and 1487 but a war in fits and starts with periods of peace between battles. Nobody wanted a war! Lords and knights wanted to be loyal and to be respected by their friends. They did not want to be sneered at as traitors. So no-one wanted to depose Henry VI even though he was a poor king. He was a quiet, peaceful man who did not anger anyone but gradually fear and feuds built up and Henry could not stop them. In 1461 Henry was deposed by his cousin young Edward IV, a brilliant soldier. In 1470-71 there were more battles. Finally Henry earl of Richmond, often known as Henry Tudor, became king after Richard III was killed at the battle of Bosworth in 1485. Henry clung onto the throne after that despite being very inexperienced.

These wars had little effect on most people's lives. There was little destruction or looting during the Wars of the Roses although **coastal towns had been burned** by the French earlier. The population stayed low, thanks to continued outbreaks of plague, and so wages stayed high. For most people, life was improving.

People were also more aware of their nationality because of wars against other countries. After centuries when English kings and lords spoke French, by 1400 they all spoke English as their first language.

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Telling My Story of Medieval Britain

This is my big story of Medieval Britain – it's my view from the microlight aircraft.

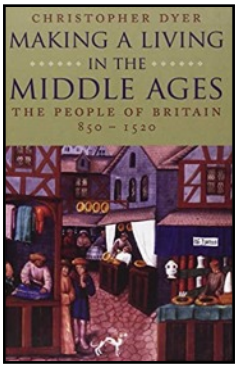
Other people would tell the story differently – they'd leave out some of the details I've included and then add other things instead.

"Godspeed well the plough!"

This medieval saying tells us one essential thing – that people's lives depended on the harvest growing in the fields around them. If there was a good harvest they had plenty to eat; if it was bad their lives were in danger. If there were two bad harvests the poor could starve, though other villagers tried to share food. That's why almost everyone I can see from my microlight aircraft is working in the fields.

There were plenty of other continuities too. Religion stayed important to people because they feared going to hell after they died. There were many wars (just as in every period of history). Many people worked incredibly hard at essential chores, like carrying heavy pails of water from the well (their skeletons show the wear of this on their bones and muscles). Every part of Britain was ruled by a king – people did not imagine a government that was not led by a king. The sea continued to be a link (not a barrier) between Britain and Europe with traders, pilgrims and armies travelling across Europe to the Mediterranean and beyond.

There were also continuities in people's ideas and attitudes. They loved their families and enjoyed time with friends. They wanted to improve life for their children and were desolate when their children died, and they did die far more often than young children today. Most people wanted to be respected by those they knew and believed it was important to be loyal to others and not betray them. They enjoyed having a good time, dancing, singing, telling stories on the many Holy Days, such as three weeks at Christmas when they did not work in the fields. They liked having good quality pottery or clothes and kept their homes clean – archaeologists find plenty of evidence of floors being swept in ordinary village homes. They looked after family and neighbours who were too old or poor to look after themselves.



Historians write many books about the Middle Ages as a whole, like the ones on these two pages.

These books tell their Big Stories.

Of course, not everybody fits the description in that last paragraph. Some were cruel, some disloyal, some were thieves, others selfish. And life was very different from today. There were no effective anaesthetics to kill pain or antibiotics to kill bacteria and save lives. A simple cut finger could lead to death if it became infected. Their world looked different too. It was darker, far darker than we can imagine, because there was no gas or electric lighting.

Everything I have written so far seems to support the idea that nothing changed in the Middle Ages – so I had better explain the important changes that did take place! As you've seen, there were steady changes in many parts of life in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, changes which speeded up in the 1200s. Then came the disasters of the fourteenth century – famine and the Black Death – which led to more changes, some bad, some good that made life easier for many workers in the 1400s.

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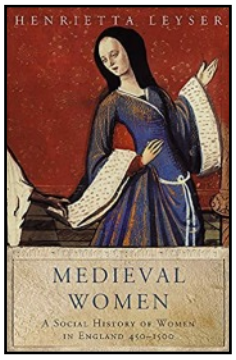
Some changes took place 'inside' the things that stayed the same!

Religion stayed important but new ideas kept developing – new groups of monks were set up, some people wanted the Bible to be in English. Wars continued but gunpowder weapons developed and armour improved. The common people carried on working as farmers but lived in villages instead of isolated farms, developed watermills and windmills and successfully improved their farming to feed three times as many people by 1300. They still had kings but some were deposed and good kings learned to work with their people. So even the things that seem to stay the same were actually developing and changing too. People were not helpless. They tried to change their lives for the better. They could not stop the plague but tried to find ways to stop it spreading, clearing away dirt, improving water supplies and building public toilets.

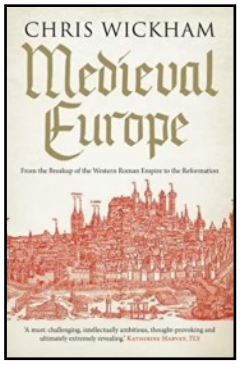
And there were even greater changes. The climate grew colder and wetter around 1300, making it harder to grow food. By then the population was three times bigger than it had been in 1000 but then it fell back again because of the Great Famine and Black Death – both the growth and fall of the population changed lives hugely. From the late 1300s many people were earning higher wages and improved their lives by building bigger homes and buying better clothes and food. More children went to school and learned to read. Printing was developed so more people could buy books. People grew wealthy from the wool trade, then later from making cloth.



And there were still more changes. In 1000 there were hardly any towns but by 1300 about 20% of people lived in towns. Universities were set up. Britain was closely linked with Scandinavia in 1000 but by 1100 the closest links were with France. English kings conquered Wales but failed to conquer Scotland. The language people spoke changed. They used many French words after 1066 and kings, lords and ladies spoke French but by 1400 even kings spoke English. Ordinary people learned more about what the king and his lords and advisers were doing and wanted their opinions listened to. They protested and demanded changes, both in their villages about local matters and nationally about taxes, wars and how the country could be better run.

Summing up. We now come to the year 1500 and the end of the period we call the Middle Ages. There was no great revolution then. During the 1500s some aspects of life continued to change steadily while others stayed the same. It wasn't until the late 1700s that a revolution began in the way that people lived and even then many working people were worse off than their ancestors in the 1400s.

Most importantly, the people who lived in the Middle Ages deserve our respect. Even when life was most frightening, when the Black Death killed nearly half the population, they buried the dead carefully and coped bravely and with resilience, just as we hope we would do in similar circumstances.



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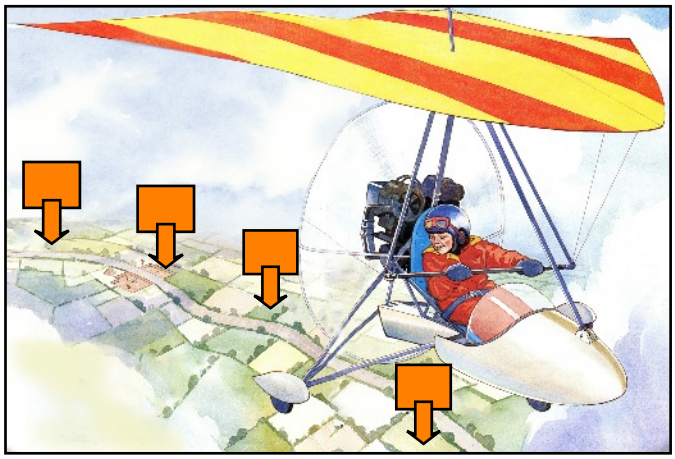
Why are Big Stories so valuable for understanding the past?

Some people really like Big Stories, zooming over centuries, looking down to see the big picture of the patterns in the past. Some people don't like them. They prefer digging into one period or topic in detail, getting to know everything about it. However, to really understand the past we need to do both – we need to spend time up in a microlight seeing the Big Story and then land our microlight and get our hands dirty seeing what the sources tell us about one event or person or period.

If you take GCSE History you will study a theme over 800 years so this work is good practice!

So what do we learn best from a Big Story and what do we learn best from Depth Studies?

Here are my answers. Do you agree?



A big story is like sitting in a microlight zooming over centuries, looking down to see the big picture of changes and continuities.

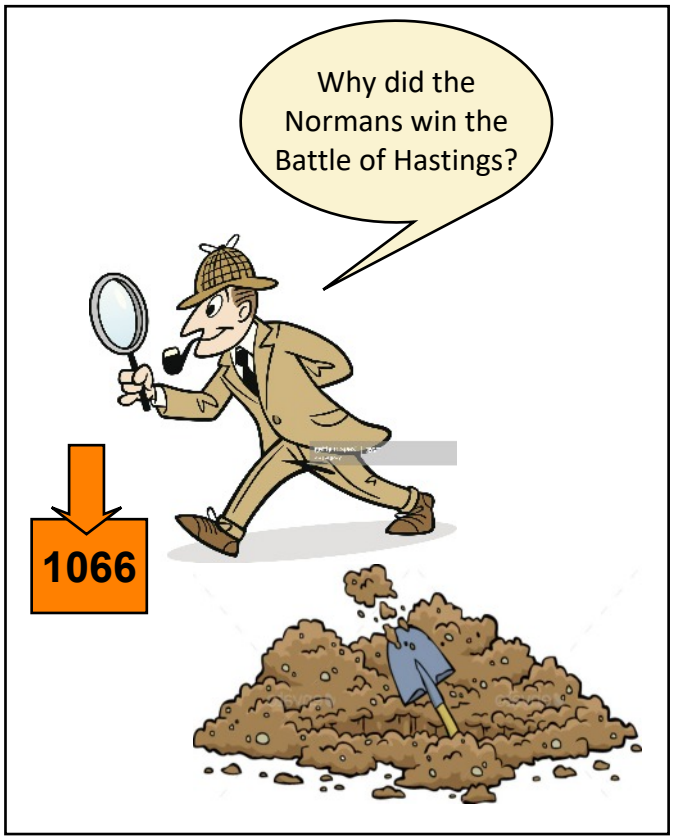
What's so valuable about Big Stories?

We can see connections between events far apart in time and see which of the events were turning points which led to important changes.

We can see changes that only happened gradually over long periods of time. We can't see that kind of change if we only study 10 or 20 years.

We can identify the long-term reasons behind events (such as population changes or the development of ideas) that we can't see in a short-period Depth Study.

We realise that people's emotions and feelings (like love for their family) don't change much over time even if their clothes, homes and other things do.



A depth study involves digging deep into the details of one event or a short period of time, getting to know everything about it.

What's so valuable about Depth Studies?

We can learn about individual people and their ideas and thoughts, their lives and decisions. This helps us understand their choices and actions.

We can use sources like letters or pottery that give us lots of detail about people's lives and about individual events.

We can study one event and really get to know what happened and why it happened and all the people who were involved.

Which do you prefer – Big Stories or Depth Studies – and why?

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Conclusions: The Big Story of Medieval Britain

It's always important to pause at the end of a topic and reflect on what you have learned. You have much more chance of remembering the key points if you identify them carefully. The tasks below will help you do this.

1. Choosing your take-aways

This task helps you to identify the most important things that you want to **TAKE AWAY** and remember from your work of The Big Story of Medieval Britain

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.

(or choose take-aways that are NOT in this list and explain why you have chosen them.)

A. There were continuities in medieval life. These included some of the most important aspects of life such as the importance of the harvest every year for people's health and welfare.

B. There were important changes that affected life for centuries in the future, such as the development of printing and gunpowder.

C. Many aspects of people's lives had both continuities and changes. Religion remained important but people did not just believe what they were told but had new ideas about how to worship God.

D. Some changes were the result of people finding intelligent ways to solve problems or wanting to make improvements for the sake of their families – as people have always done.

E. Increases and falls in the size of the population had huge effects on people's lives.

F. Changes in the Middle Ages were very important even if they were not as great as many changes later during the Industrial Revolution.

G. The people of the Middle Ages deserve our respect for their intelligence and resilience.

H. It is important to study Big Stories so we learn about the broad patterns of changes and continuities, instead of only studying topics in depth.

I. We have to use generalisations in Big Stories so that the stories stay clear but we also have to be careful not to make them too simple.

How do the takeaways H and I differ from A-G?

2. Your Overall Enquiry:
Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?

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

Has what you've learned from this chapter changed <u>your</u> view of life in the Middle Ages?

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