

Medieval Teenagers and the Black Death teaching resource

Summary: introduction to town and country life in medieval England at the time of the Black Death (AD1348-50), with emphasis on the life experiences of teenagers. Students can make judgements about how easy/hard life would have been for them in medieval Britain, identify factors that would have motivated life choices, and discover if they would have survived the Black Death.

Target audience: KS3 History students

Curriculum links: the development of church, state and society in Medieval Britain (1066-1509)

Examples (non-statutory):

- Society, economy and culture. E.g. feudalism, farming, trade and towns.
- The Black Death and its social and economic impact.

Supporting materials:

Cartoon
PPT presentation
Village and town character cards
Photos of skeletal pathologies
Reproduction of apprentice contract

Lesson plan and notes for teachers:

SLIDES 1-2: Introduction of subject and opening questions

- How do you think was life like in medieval times for boys and girls your age?
- Do you think you would have gone to school? Boys and girls?
- Would you have to get a job?
- Would you have lived at home or moved out?
- What type of jobs would have been available to you?
- Examples: Blacksmith, chimney sweepers, farm work etc.
- Students know loads already!

SLIDE 2: Visual material: Youtube cartoon

- We are about to show you a cartoon of some research that we did at University (department of Archaeology).
- The cartoon is about a medieval boy named William Westoby who lived in a small village near the town of York.

Play the video.

SLIDE 3:

- Children in medieval times wouldn't have gone to school unless they were very rich.
- More likely to receive formal education if you were a boy.
- Girls only went to school if their father was a lord and wanted them to be able to read and write to get them a better marriage.
- Because families were larger and there were many mouths to feed, we know that medieval children started to work very young usually before they turned 15.

SLIDE 4:

- We can see signs on their skeletons of heavy labour, a lot of lifting, some broken noses, which confirm having to work from a young age.
- Jobs were mainly focusing on agriculture.
- Hard and demanding work in fields and looking after animals.

SLIDE 5:

- It was very popular to have young girls come and help out in the household. We see in records that girls as young as 7 were already working as servants.
- Girls were also expected to look after younger children in preparation for motherhood. In fact, girls married and become mothers rather late.

SLIDE 6:

- Things were more exciting in the towns as there were more jobs.
- Children would work in shops and services.
- For example, on top of being servants in the town, they could help out the local blacksmith sharpening knives.
- Other options included working as carpenters, builders or butchers.
- Just like William Westby in the cartoon, some children had the option of becoming apprentices. These would last about 7 years, the terms and condition would be very strict and you would live in your master's house with his family.

SLIDE 7:

- Benefit: in the end you would learn a trade and potentially start your own business which could bring you lots of money.
- Mainly children of better-off families that could work to save money and learn a trade and new skills that would benefit them in the future.
- Children from poorer families that could not afford apprenticeships would be forced to move away from their families to become servants or unskilled labourers.

SLIDE 8:

- Start of the activity (see separate instructions)

SLIDE 9:

- List of a few things to consider before you make up your mind.
- Read out the pros and cons of every lifechoice.

SLIDE 10:

- We are now in the year 1348 and the bubonic plague has arrived in England, also known as the Black Death.
- The disease is spread by fleas that feed on the blood of infected rats.
- If you are infected, you suffer from high fever and headaches and develop boils around your armpits, neck and groin.
- One third of the English population died due to the plague, mostly the poor who had moved into the towns.

SLIDE 11:

- Life would have changed for the survivors of the Black Death.
- Discuss with the students what they think happened to the survivors, and whether they were better or worse off than before.

SLIDE 12:

- Read out the consequences of the Black Death for its survivors
- There were fewer people available to work which meant that wages increased.
- A lot of houses became empty, meaning there was more space which caused rents to be lower and more affordable.
- Food became cheaper as more land became available for cultivation and less mouths had to be fed.
- In cases where the older sibling died, a younger child who would have previously ended up with nothing had the opportunity to inherit land, a business or family money.
- Better marriage options became available as there were fewer boys and girls competing for a potential husband or wife.