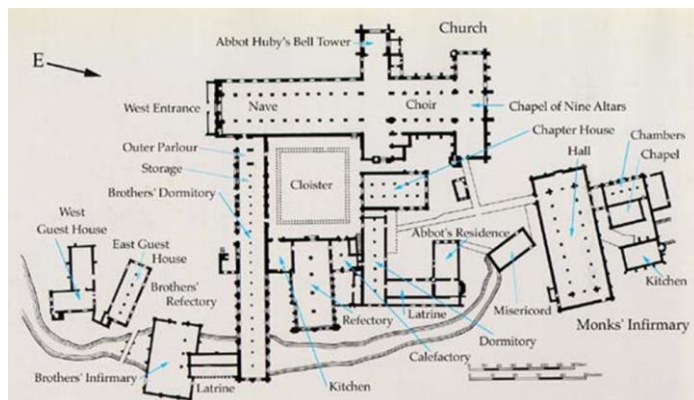


Medieval (1250-1500)

Fountains Abbey - Yorkshire



This plan of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire shows there was an infirmary (hospital) for the sick, and a block of latrines (toilets) alongside the river so waste was flushed away. Pure spring water from the hills was piped into the kitchens and washing areas.

Life in the countryside

Food

A good harvest gave a chance of health and comfort. A bad harvest meant lack of food which could lead to death. In the Great Famine of 1315-16, 10% of the population died. In damp conditions, a fungus grew on rye. This caused ergotism. Victims suffered from blisters on their skin and a burning sensation. They had hallucinations and went mad.

Water and drink

Every village was near a stream or a spring that provided water. Many villages had their own fish pond. The Church insisted that no one ate land animals on a Friday. Medieval people did not know that fish provides vitamins. The most common ale was 'small beer'. This was not as strong as today's beer but boiling the brew killed off any germs, although no one knew this.

Houses

The houses varied in size. Some peasants lived in simple huts with walls covered in sticks and mud. Many lived in quite large houses with strong timber frames like the one shown in the drawing. The most common food was pottage, a thick vegetable soup made in a large iron pot. Animals were kept inside at night to keep them safe.

Gardens and waste

Peasants grew vegetables and fruit. Nuts were gathered from the woods, honey from beehives, milk and cheese from cows or sheep and eggs from hens; they had a healthy diet. In each garden there was a tip called a midden. Waste was valuable as it was used to fertilise the soil.

Life in the towns

Roads and streets

Peasants would travel to towns to take grain, fruit, fish, cheese, timber and goods to be sold at market. Country roads turned to mud in winter. Roads near the centre were paved or cobbled and so was the marketplace. But these often broke up.

Water and waste

In the market square some towns had a conduit (a fountain where water flowed). Water carriers filled sacks and sold them. Street vendors and taverns sold food and ale. Tavern ale was strong and drunkenness was common. From 1293, London paid rakers to clear the streets and dispose of rubbish. No one had water pipes. People put rubbish in the street for 3-4 days, but could be fined after. Some cesspits had no lining and leaked into the neighbours' houses. When a latrine was full a gongfermer would scoop out the mess and take it away.

Trade and mess

Butchering animals made a mess. By the end of the Middle Ages most councils ordered butchers and fishmongers to do their cutting on the outskirts of town.

House and garden

Rich merchants might have owned houses which jutted out to provide more space inside but this shut out sunlight in the streets. In the centre of town, houses were tightly packed together but further out many had gardens. Most townspeople ate similar food to the villagers but there was a greater variety. The rich loved to eat meat which was less healthy.

The Black Death

Arrival, spread and types of plague

The plague reached England in 1348. Plague is caused by a germ that lives in fleas. When a flea bites its victim the germ is passed on. The disease started in Asia and reached Europe through trade routes. Fleas lived on rats that infested the ships. The rats came ashore and the disease spread. It travelled 500 miles in 500 days. People had no knowledge of germs or how it spread.

Bubonic plague = from a flea bite, caused painful swellings (buboes) in the armpit and groin, fever and blisters. Death followed within a few days.

Septicemic plague = caused when the infection reached the bloodstream. The victim would bleed and the fingers, toes or nose would turn black and begin to rot away.

Pneumonic plague = caught by breathing in cough droplets from an infected person. The victim would cough up blood and be dead within two days.

Causes and cures

Causes: God's punishment, miasma (bad air), eye contact, imbalance of the four humours, earthquakes.

Cures: Camomile lotion was rubbed on the buboes. Live toads or chickens were tied over the buboes. Praying or whipping. People carried posies or flowers or burned rosemary.

Impact

60% of the population died (3.5 million people in 2 years). The plague hit harder in towns. In 1349 King Edward III wrote to the Mayor of London telling him to clean up the city. There were twenty more outbreaks before 1500. This meant people lived in fear of plague.

Medieval monasteries

In the 13th Century, the church set the highest standards of hygiene. Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire had an infirmary for the sick, a block of latrines, pure spring water from the hills piped into the kitchens and washing areas. The church had enough wealth and power to bring clean water over long distances. By 1500 standards in monasteries had dropped and towns were more willing to spend money on the health and hygiene of their people.

Monasteries and other church communities needed clean water because:

- It was blessed and used in baptisms and other church services.
- It was used to wash silver cups after Mass and sacred linen altar cloths.
- It was used by monks and nuns for regular washing and for baths between four and twelve times a year.
- It provided drinking and washing water as well as baths for sick townspeople who were treated by the monks and nuns.

Bringing water over long distances was expensive as it involved digging trenches in the streets or private gardens to lay pipes. Individuals and town councils could not afford this where as the church communities has the necessary wealth and power. By 1500 the situation was changing as towns were becoming richer and were more willing to spend money on the health and hygiene for their people. Wealthy citizens became less likely to leave donations to the Church in their will, instead they tried to win the approval of God by leaving money to town councils instead.

TIMELINE OF MAJOR EVENTS

1276 In Shrewsbury, Edward I gave permission to raise money to pave the town's market place.	1301 In York, King Edward I ordered the authorities in York to clear the filth from its streets.	1340s In Exeter, the Church paid for the construction of a passage to carry lead pipes for water.	1348 The Black Death first reached England at Melcombe, a port in Dorset.	1349 King Edward III wrote a letter to the Mayor of London telling him to clean up the city.	1351 A jury of London cooks found someone selling 'putrid and stinking' chicken pies.	1361-2 Plague struck again.	1385 A warden was appointed to check London's streets and the Thames' banks were clean'.	1420s In Exeter, two ex-majors left money to improve the water supply. Two conduits were built.	1430s The Mayor of London organised the replacement & extension of pipes that provided fresh spring water.
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