

## **BACKGROUND - The life of a working class peasant in the Middle Ages.**

Most peasants were serfs who were unable to leave the estate without the lord's permission. Some peasants were freemen who had more rights and fewer responsibilities to the lord. Both required the lord's protection and served the lord well.

The peasants home were made of logs held together with mud. The roof was thatched with straw. They were generally one room with hole in the ceiling through with heat and smoke cook escape. A peasants' furniture was sparse, maybe a table and some stools, piles of straw covered with animal skin for beds, and a loom for weaving cloth. There was also a wooden tub, leather jug, iron cooking pots and hooks for hanging poultry and meats. The house was surrounded by a patch of land. The peasant grew his/her own vegetables, fruit trees and raised animals to provide for their food. Animals were important so in the winter they were brought inside the hut to keep them from freezing. Ale or wine was brewed. Bees were kept for honey, salt could be bought and water was drawn from a village well or the river. Garments were spun from the wool of sheep. Most of the peasants didn't have shoes: in cold weather they wrapped their feet in cloth.

A peasant had a short life span of about thirty years. Poor sanitation, poor medical help and lack of medication, and poor diet were contributing factors to a short life span. Cholera, small pox and typhoid fever were common ailments and killed many. Many babies died at birth or never lived past infancy.

A peasant's worked for three days a week for the lord of the manor, and more during harvest time. Crops were sowed by hand, grain was cut with a sickle and fields were plowed with a crude plow possibly powered by an animal. If this was not the case, farmer and his wife dragged the ploy through the soil. Not only did the peasant work for the lord, he paid him rent. Rents were paid by giving a portion of grain, honey, and eggs that the peasant raised on his plot of land. They also had to give one tenth of all that was raised to the Church.

A peasant typical day may have been something like this. The serf arose, said his prayers, grabbed his clothing and a piece of bread and left his home to meet with other villagers. They waited for their daily assignment from the reeve. The peasant's wife was not needed in the fields, usually. She stayed at home collecting eggs, feeding the livestock, and milking the cow. After she finished these tasks, she put a wooden yoke with buckets attached to it, on her shoulders and went to the river or well to haul her water for cooking or washing. She weeded the garden, picked vegetable, spun and wove cloth. Wool, linen and flax were spun into clothing. She also spun hemp for sacks and cords. Children worked along side their mother. They worked in the fields. They helped to tend the animals. There was no formal education except what was necessary for religious instruction. After all the work was finished for the lord, peasants returned home to work their own land. If they were fortunate, they had oxen and maybe a plow to share. Their day ended as the serf sat down to meal of stew, bread and cheese. Soon after the sunset, the serf would go to bed.

Although the work days were long and hard, there were many holidays on the calendar. Most holidays were determined by Church holy days. At Christmas, peasants celebrated twelve days of leisure and recreation until the Twelfth Night. Another week was allotted to them at Easter and another week at Whitsuntide, seven weeks after Easter. Sundays were always free days. There were also occasional breaks with wakes, market days, fairs, weddings, funerals and public occasions. As you can imagine, a day of celebration meant a welcomed day away from the rigors of hardship and work.

On feast days, the whole community participated together in church rituals. Depending on the type of holiday, certain entertainment and foods were provided. Sporting events were important in keeping all men trim and in good fighting condition. Laws were passed that required able-bodied men to practice archery on Sunday but these laws were ignored by many young men so that they might play ball games instead! The game was rough, with few rules and no referee. Other sports included wrestling, throwing heavy stones and other feats of strength. Gambling was another form of entertainment and the pub was a gathering place for gossip and game-playing. During the Middle Ages leisure time was characterized by community participation. The entire village gathered for the events described above.

People who lived in the villages needed more than the food that they were able to raise for their survival and comfort. The weekly market was a meeting place for both town and country people. It provided those necessities that would have been unavailable. The lord would bring his crops to sell, local craftsmen would display their wares and peasants would bring their handy work. Early traders supported themselves and accumulated wealth by travelling from village to village, presenting their goods on tables or in open stalls. Bread, meat, ale, meals, candles, cloth, leather goods, wood and metal were some of the wares offered. Trade was important to the survival of the town and merchants realized this early on, and the market place was the hub of social life for the village. The village square was transformed into a market on the weekends: the markets were well organized and well supervised events. At some fairs, traders from Venice or Genoa would sell silks and spices. Others would sell different types of wood and leathers. These fairs saw different types of entertainment: jugglers, musicians, puppet shows, bull-baiting, bear-baiting, cock-fighting, games and rides, not too different from today's fairs. Fairs began as a part of the gathering for religious festivals and wakes.