

Life in Medieval Scotland: The Feudal System

Know Your Place!

Life in the Middle Ages was very different from the way we live today. Scotland was ruled by a Feudal system. At the top was the king. He owned all the land in his country, but he gave large areas to the highest noblemen, who were called barons. Some barons were given extra privileges – they were called earls, but they were essentially still barons. They would be seen as the owners of the land, but actually the king could take it away at any time. So the nobles had to stay loyal! They also had to provide armies to protect the kingdom.

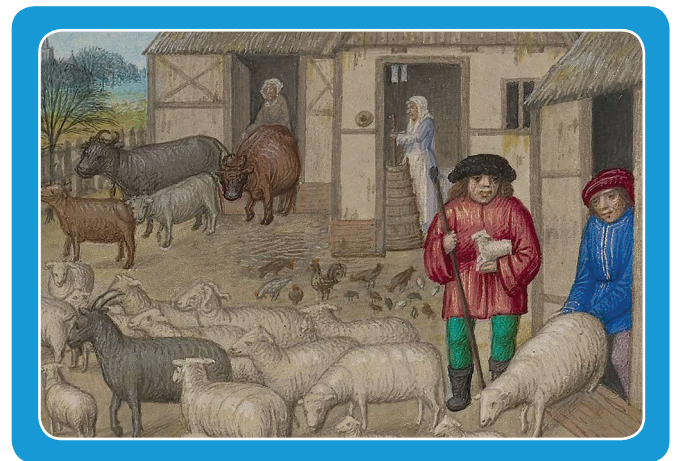


Here a medieval king accepts a nobleman as his feudal lord.

The important nobles could gift some of their land to less important nobles, such as knights. In return for the land, knights had to be loyal to their masters, and fight in their armies for a number of days each year.

Life in the Countryside

Peasants made up about 90 per cent of the population. They were at the bottom of the social ladder and had to rent their land from the nobles. In order to pay their rent, peasants gave their lord crops or livestock. They had to work in the lord's fields a few days a week. They also had to provide at least 42 days of military service every year. That was hard enough, but the Church also took rent, or tithes, from them. They could be hanged if they refused to pay their tithes. In times of poor harvest, the peasants could struggle to give their masters the rent they owed, and often starved. They were tied to the land, as without the crops to use as rent, they could not pay their way.



Peasants would keep animals such as goats, sheep and cows to use as payment for rent.

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Towns and Trades

Towns were beginning to grow during the Middle Ages. Independent men with special skills set up their homes and businesses in central locations, usually around a market cross. Carpenters, blacksmiths, leather workers, merchants and so on were able to sell their specialist skills from their workshops. They set up craft guilds, to protect the secrets of their trades. This made sure that there were not too many people with the same skills working in a town. These merchants or tradesmen could become quite rich.



This blacksmith works at his bench cutting keys. You can see the furnace where he heated the metal behind him.

Jobs for Boys

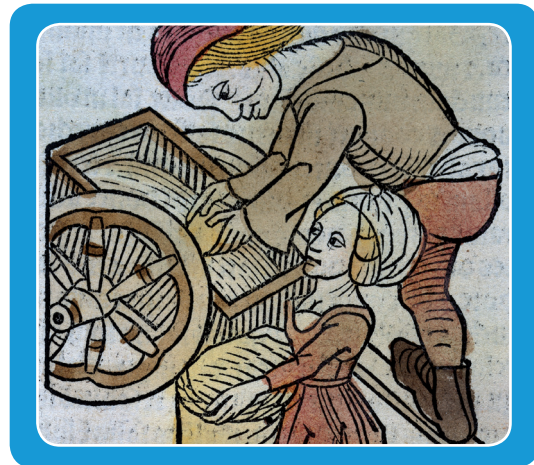
Boys could learn a variety of trades, such as a carpenter or blacksmith. They would be born into a particular craft family and would be trained to follow their fathers into the trade. It was not impossible for a lower born person to move even further up through the ranks, say from metal worker to squire to knight, but they would have to have the money to equip themselves.

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Different for Girls

Girls were not educated at this time, but sometimes fathers taught their daughters the skills of their trade, so that they might support themselves if he was killed. Girls often took on trades such as brewing and baking.

A woman's main job was to have children and to take care of the household. Fathers would choose a husband for their daughters. If a husband died, the wife could take over his business and run it herself. But if she remarried, her new husband owned everything! Not surprisingly, many widows wanted to keep control of their wealth and refused to remarry. Women often had to run the family estates when their husbands were away at war, and had to defend their castles if attacked.



Some girls helped their fathers and learned skills such as baking and brewing.



Can you find out about the story of Black Agnes, a woman who famously defended Dunbar Castle in 1337?