

## What was life like in medieval London?

London changed a lot during the medieval period. From the 600s to 800s London was located in the west, where Covent Garden is today. At the end of the 800s people moved back into the old Roman town due to increased Viking raids. The old town had the remains of a wall around it and people felt safer there. At this time London's population was about 8,000 people. By 1300 London was both the largest and wealthiest city in England. By the middle of the 1500s it had grown to about 120,000 people and had spread out in all directions outside the old city walls.

## What were houses like in medieval London?

In the early medieval period the houses of ordinary Londoners had thatched roofs with clay and timber walls like the ones in this reconstruction. Floors were made of clay with straw spread on them. Most activity in the house took place around the hearth, the only source of heat in the winter and where food was cooked throughout the year.

As London became more crowded houses grew taller and the streets narrower. By the end of the 1200s three storey houses were common. The upper floors partly overhung the street. London suffered many fires and laws were introduced banning thatched roofs, but many people ignored them.

People who could afford to, built stone houses. The nobility and wealthier clergy lived in fine, large houses, often with courtyards and gardens. Many were built along the Strand, which linked the city to the royal palace of Westminster.



**Museum of London reconstruction of the inside of a Saxon house**

## Was religion important in everyday life?

These badges remind us how important religion was in medieval life. Most people living in London were Christian. They prayed to specific saints for help and went on **pilgrimage** (a journey to a holy place), bringing back these small pewter badges to wear. Thomas Becket was a patron saint of London and many Londoners travelled to the site of his murder in Canterbury.

London was dominated by St Paul's Cathedral. By the 1320s it was the largest building in medieval Britain. Most schools and hospitals were run by the Church and it decided which days were holidays and even what and when you ate.

There was also an important Jewish community in London. Many worked as money lenders and built stone houses for extra security. But lots of people were jealous of their wealth and in 1290 all Jews were forced to leave England.



Pilgrim badges showing Thomas Becket, found in London, 14<sup>th</sup> century



By 1200 there were over 100 parish churches in London – more than any other town in Britain.

## What was life like for poor Londoners?

This leather shoe has a hole cut in it to make it more comfortable. It is probably a second-hand shoe, worn by a poor Londoner. Many of the leather shoes found in London have been repaired and patched, often more than once. For the less well off there was a thriving market in patched and mended clothes and footwear.

Life in medieval London was very different depending on how wealthy you were. If you didn't have an oven there were cookshops and bakeries that would either sell cooked food or would cook your food for you.

There was no form of support for people who could not work and so there were many beggars. Wealthy people and the **livery companies** (associations of people who work in the same craft or trade in the City of London) did charitable works to help the poor, as did the local churches and religious houses.



A leather shoe probably worn by a poor Londoner, mid 1300s

In the 1200s and 1300s an average pair of shoes cost about five- or sixpence – approximately the same amount as a skilled labourer earned in a day.

## What was life like for rich Londoners?

This leather shoe would have been the height of fashion in the late 1300s. It was probably worn by a rich Londoner. The leather is decorated with criss-cross designs. The pointed toe means it would have been hard to do much active work or to run when wearing it.

Wealthy Londoners could afford to wear the latest fashions. Exotic goods were imported from every part of the known world – silks, spices, gems, carpets and fruits such as oranges. If you had enough money there was little that could not be bought in London's many markets and shops.



A leather shoe probably worn by a wealthy Londoner, late 1300s

There were also many crafts and trades, most of which were controlled by the city livery companies, for example, the grocers, the goldsmiths and the printers. Many people came to London to seek their fortune from elsewhere in Britain and abroad.

Dick Whittington came to London to seek his fortune. He died very wealthy and left money for many charitable projects, including the building of a public toilet.

## What was life like for children in medieval London?



Medieval ice skates, 1100s

These bone ice skates remind us that while children's lives in medieval London were very different to today, there was also time for playing. Many children did not survive childhood due to illness and accidents. Children only went to school if their parents were rich enough. If you were poor you went to work as soon as you were able to – sometimes as young as seven.

Many children went into service, working as maids, page boys and other jobs in wealthier households. If you could afford it you would be sent to learn a trade as an apprentice from the age of fourteen. But there was also time for playing – small pewter dolls and toys have been found and a description of the late 1100s describes boys playing ball and in the winter going sledging and skating, using animal bone skates.

### See also

Collections Online is an online database which allows users to find out more about the Museum of London's objects, both on display and in store. Go to

[www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/collections)

Medieval London games

[www.museumoflondon.org.uk/explore-online/games](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/explore-online/games)

### Further resources for teachers/tutors

Explore the images for this topic in the Picturebank:

[www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank](http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/picturebank)

### Visit the Museum

Find out more about this topic in the Medieval London gallery at the Museum of London (including the reconstructed Saxon house).

### Further reading

Schofield, J. *Medieval London Houses*, (Yale University Press, 2003)

Ross, C. and Clark, J. (eds.) *London: The Illustrated History*, (Allen Lane, 2008)

The BBC History website:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle\\_ages/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/).