

## England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century: English society

### The Norman Conquest and the Feudal System

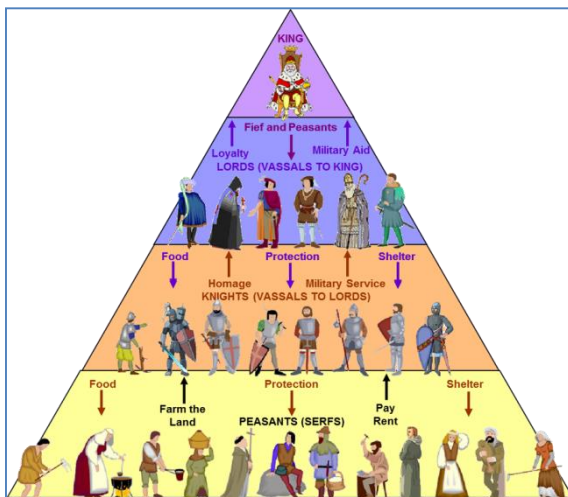
The Norman Conquest of England during the eleventh century had started a ***process of change for English society that had a considerable impact upon every aspect of people's lives.***

- The introduction of the feudal system had reorganised land ownership throughout the country and defined the rules that peasants had to live by.
- The king and nobility were obviously top of the social structure, which was strictly hierarchical in nature. Senior churchmen were of an equal status to nobility and ***by the fourteenth century about two hundred figures formed the ruling elite, owning over 75% of the land in England.***
- Below the nobility in the social structure were the knights and by the fourteenth century it has been estimated that there about one thousand knights, who had achieved their position either through outstanding service or because they had accumulated enough wealth to do so.

### Agriculture / farming and the population

***Agriculture was overwhelmingly the major occupation in England.*** Up to the coming of the Black Death, agriculture appeared to have been flourishing.

*People lived in village communities, where 3 or 4 large fields were separated into strips – each family would farm their allocated strip of land. Virtually all these villages throughout England were under the control of a lord, or sometimes several. Four or five villages might be grouped together into one large manorial unit.*



Approximately one sixth of the population were freemen, owning around 20% of the land which could be passed on to their descendants in return for carrying out certain services and paying rent. However, ***the largest proportion of the population was made up of those who were not free, the villeins*** who were tied to the land and the manor on which they lived. Poorer villeins were known as cottars. They farmed the land in return for being allowed to live on the manor. Although by the fourteenth century some had managed to change this to paying rent, the majority still undertook labour service as a means of payment.

The population of England was estimated to be ***two and a half million to four million.*** Before the Black Death the ***population had been increasing.*** ***Towns were few and far between with only London and possibly York having populations in excess of ten thousand.***

Road connections were not as limited as people have thought, with many Roman roads still in use during this period, along with other well established routes. Evidence shows that trade between different parts of the country was considerable by the standards of the age, suggesting that the roads that existed were adequate for carts to travel along regularly.

### Literacy check...

**Feudal system:** social structure implements by the Norman kings. Systems of patronage, land and service. King at the top, then Barons, Knights and Peasants at the bottom.

**Agriculture:** farming. Main job in medieval England, either as a land owner or worker on the land.

**Freemen:** paid rent to the land owners, but were not tied to the manor.

**Villeins:** peasants who were tied to the manor where they lived. Worked for the local land owner.

**Cottars:** poorest villeins. Worked in return for being able to live in the manor.

**Labour service:** peasants worked as a way of paying their rent.

## England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century: importance of the Church

### The Church in everyday life

Without a doubt, the church played an extremely important role in the everyday lives of the population. The age was ***genuinely religious – the Catholic Church controlled most peoples' lives***. During the first half of the fourteenth century, the authority of the Pope was hardly questioned and any laws extending the powers of the church were accepted. As far as ordinary people were concerned, the church was the cornerstone of their lives. Marriages, baptism, burials, attending Mass and confessions of sins were fundamental to people's lives.

### Role of the Church

The church was also physically important, being the most prominent place in the community where people could meet and ***the parish priest was basically the link between the community, the Catholic Church and God***. Priests also looked after the sick and dying, performing spiritual duties to ease their suffering. However, the church also performed many administrative duties, such as the collection of tithes (taxes), recording births, deaths and marriages. As a result, the majority of educated men had come from the Church.

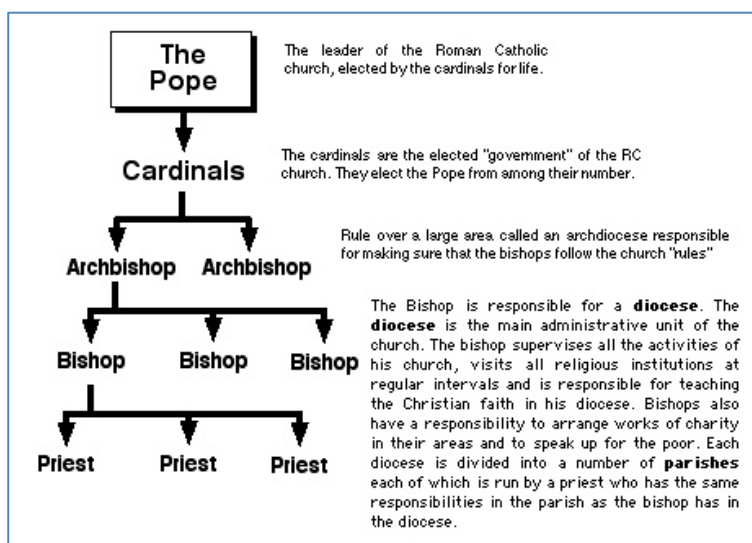
#### Literacy check...

Catholicism: a branch of Christianity that is led by the Pope from Rome.

Priest: local Church-man who led the local community in their religion. Had a wide role in the local community.

Heresy: going against the official beliefs of the monarch / country's official religion. It was punishable by death.

Heretic: someone who is accused of heresy.



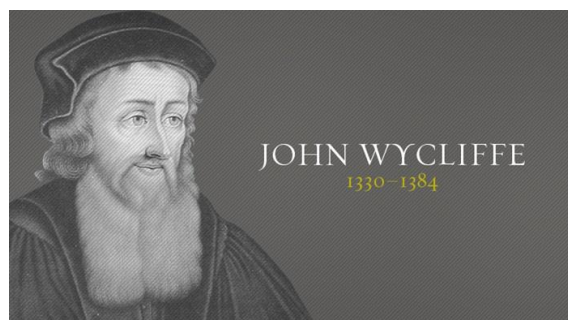
### Monks and Nuns

It is also estimated that there were about 17,500 monks and nuns during the first half of the fourteenth century. In addition to this there were thousands of Franciscan and Dominican friars.

### Challenges to the Church

However, despite the dominance of the Catholic church, it did begin to face several challenges as the fourteenth century progressed:

- The Black Death and the obvious inability of the church to prevent its spread, led many to question its power and undermined people's faith in it.
- From the mid-1300s on the church also faced a challenge from Lollardy, a religious and political movement that called for the reduction in the power of church officials such as the Pope and which challenged many other ideas of the power of the Catholic church. Founded by John Wycliffe and his followers, who became known as Lollards, they were declared as heretics and faced persecution from the church.



## England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century: importance of the wool trade

### The importance of the growing wool trade

The wool trade grew a lot during this time period and many people relied on it for their income. The wool trade had developed throughout the medieval period to become the chief export of England. During the early fourteenth century the average annual exports of English wool amounted to 35,000 sacks, with the finer grades being some of the most valued in Europe.

### Control of the wool trade

Before the fourteenth century, the majority of England's trade was with Flanders, but the influence of Italian merchants became stronger.



English wool traders became more powerful in the mid-1350s when they were granted a monopoly by Edward III. This became known as **the Staple**, where in return for the monopoly, merchants organised the trade via a few markets through which all wool was to pass, making it easier for tax to be calculated (making Edward III and England richer, which helped fund wars).

However, the financial demands of the monarchy ruined many of these merchants. Whilst the monopoly enabled them to pay low prices in England, it damaged English growers who received less for their wool. Charging high prices on the wool abroad also damaged the English wool trade and the later fourteenth century saw a gradual decline in the monopolies granted.

### The financial and political impact of the wool trade

- The trade was politically important as revenues (income) from the sale of wool financed wars. This was particularly the case during the reign of Edward III who put large taxes on wool traders.
- Prior to the Hundred Years' War Edward encouraged Flemish master weavers to move to England and this strengthened the links with Flanders.
- The industry was responsible for large scale employment, as the cloth trade expanded during the century.
- In terms of spinners and weavers, economic depressions in the industry were associated with periods of increased poverty and starvation. Many wealthier people and indeed the Church measured their wealth in terms of their sheep flocks. After the Black Death, due to the lack of available farm labourers, the numbers of sheep kept increasing because it took less farmers to look after sheep than crops.



Sheep fold, from the Luttrell Psalter, mid-14th century

### Literacy check...

Export: English goods sold outside of the country.

Import: goods brought into the country to see.

Monopoly: unique control over a trade / product.

Tax: money paid to the king / government.

Economic depression: downturn in trade. Leads to poverty.

## England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century: position of women in society

Throughout this period, women were seen as subordinate to men. In essence, ***a woman in medieval England belonged to a man, be it her father or husband.***

### The role of women

The domestic roles of women were extremely varied.

- Since nine out of ten women lived in the countryside, they worked in the fields, sowing, harvesting and threshing.
- They fed and looked after the family, brewed beer, spun wool and wove cloth.

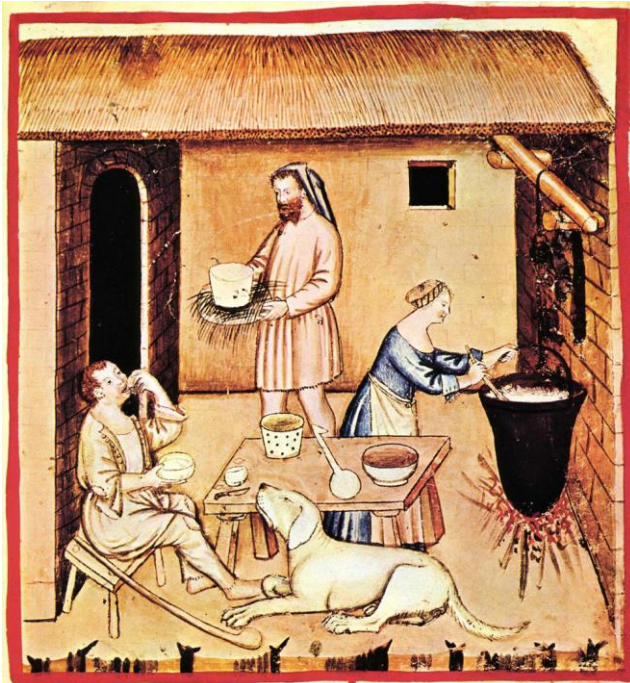
### Literacy check...

Subordination: seen as secondary to men.

Domestic: connected to the home.

Heir: the person who inherits from the father. Boys inherited from their father, even if they had older sisters.

Marriage by fifteen was commonplace, where 'ownership' passed from father to husband. Childbirth, given the lack of medical knowledge and care, was very dangerous and death before the age of 40 was common for women from poor backgrounds.



### Control over women

***The control exerted over women was considerable:***

- They could not get married without their parents' consent.
- They could not divorce their husbands.
- They could not own any property unless they were widowed.
- In the towns, women found it difficult to become merchants or traders and entry to the guilds was almost impossible since many barred women from joining.
- Skilled jobs, apart from making clothes, were therefore usually out of reach for women.

However, widows were often able to assume control of their dead husband's business and this enabled

some women to lead reasonably independent lives.

### Life for richer women

***Life for women from richer backgrounds was obviously easier than for those from poor ones and as a result they tended to live longer.*** However, arranged marriages for social, financial or political reasons were common and ***producing a male heir was seen as essential.***

In times of war, the wives of the nobility were often left in charge of estates and castles, meaning they had some (temporary) political power. Noblewomen were often taught to read and write, but this tended to be the limits of their education.

### Women and the Church

The most learned women of the period were those who joined nunneries, which offered an alternative path to marriage. Abbesses could hold considerable power. However, the general view of the Catholic Church towards women was that they were to be considered weak and sinful. Adultery on the part of women was certainly thought of as being immeasurably more serious than if committed by a man.