



The Medieval period

The medieval period in Britain is defined by political and economical instability, social change, and the rising power of the Church. Although often discussed in terms of the battles, famines, plagues, and kings, a lot changed for the common people too. Wars in the Holy Land, with France, Ireland, and Scotland, and infighting amongst the ruling elite, sees the country plunged into an almost constant stream of conflict, both at home and abroad. Disastrous famines, high taxes, and The Black Death push the lower class into revolt and rebellion against the Church and Crown.

Towns, and even cities, start to grow in size. Explorers start discovering new lands and trade becomes quicker as ships become larger and faster. Traders and specialists start to form a new class of wealthy 'middle class' urban dwellers living outside of the feudal system of landowners and farm workers.

Archaeologically speaking we are fortunate to still be surrounded by a huge number of buildings dating to this period. Stone is used to construct important buildings like castles, cathedrals, and churches. Some homes are built from stone, but even the wooden timber framed constructions are still with us today.

Key Dates (1066–1485)

1066 William II Duke of Normandy defeats the last Anglo-Saxon king, Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings. The Norman Period begins.

1070 The Normans move into Wales and begin building castles to secure the land. Work begins on a number of cathedrals across Britain including Canterbury, Britain's oldest cathedral.

1154 Henry II, the first Plantagenet king, ascends the throne.

1170 Henry II's knights murder Thomas Beckett in Canterbury Cathedral on 29th December.

1215 King John signs the Magna Carta.

1215–1217 The First Barons war sees the French prince, Louis, invited over to England by the barons unhappy with King John's rule. Louis proclaims himself king and controls most of southern England until King John dies in 1216 and John's son, the nine year old Henry III, is crowned king.



This artist's reconstruction shows what we think central Canterbury looked like in about 1200. Drawn by J A Bowen.

1305 William Wallace executed in London for organising resistance to English rule in Scotland.

1315–1317 The Great Famine, sparked by bad weather, occurs over Europe. Food stocks do not return to normal until 1322. Millions die and the weakened populations are more susceptible to disease.

1348 The Black Death enters Britain. It ravages the country for four years, possibly killing up to 50% of the population. Some villages are deserted completely and people move into towns.

1381 The Peasants Revolt.

1400–1409 The Welsh rebel against English rule.

1455 The War of the Roses begins. The war is fought between two opposing sides of the extended royal family; the Tudors and the Plantagenets. The Tudors are descendants of the Welsh royal princes and secured their claim to the English throne by marrying well. Henry Tudor (Henry VII) was a descendant of Edward III on his mothers side, and through his fathers side he was the grandson of the dowager queen of England, Catherine of Valois.

1477 William Caxton publishes the first printed book in Britain.

1483 Richard III becomes king and the 'Princes in the Tower' disappear. The boys were Edward V, and Richard of Shrewsbury, Duke of York, declared illegitimate by Richard III to secure

his claim to the throne. Although commonly thought to have been murdered (an incident made famous by William Shakespeare's play) it is possible that the boys died of natural causes.

1485 Richard III is killed at the Battle of Bosworth. He is the last Plantagenet king and the last king of England to die on the battlefield. His remains were paraded through the streets of Leicester before being buried in . . . Henry Tudor becomes Henry VII and marries Elizabeth of York, the daughter of Edward IV, Richards niece. By joining the two houses they create a new, stable dynasty.

