The Middle Ages

AD 500 to 1485

Society in The Middle Ages

When Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his Canterbury Tales in the 1380s, he set them in the context of the time – he imagined a group of pilgrims going to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury.

In his introduction, he tells us about the people who were there, including:

|		
carpenter	miller	soldier
cook	monk	squire
doctor	nun	tapestry
dyer	ploughman	weaver
friar	priests	weaver
knight	prioress	
lawyer	reeve	
merchant	sailor	

Society in The Middle Ages

Nowadays, we often analyse society in terms of wealth (rich, poor) or class (upper, middle, working). Medieval writers divided society into 'those who fight', 'those who pray' and 'those who work', and Chaucer included all three sorts of people in his book.

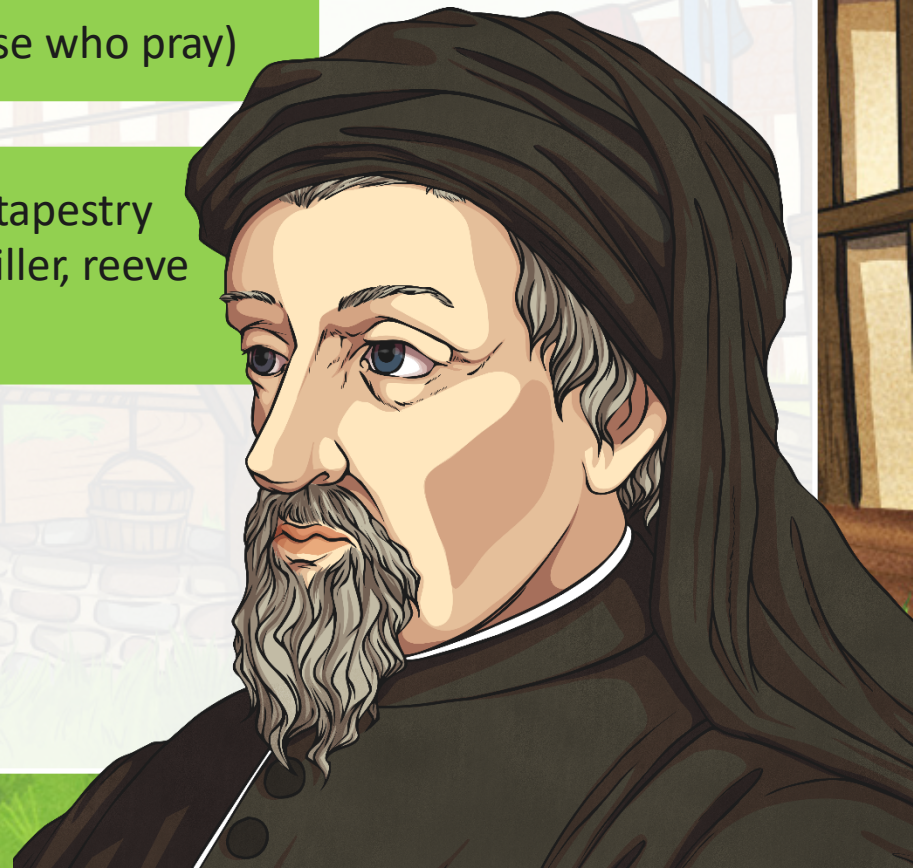From the list of his characters, which would you put into each category?
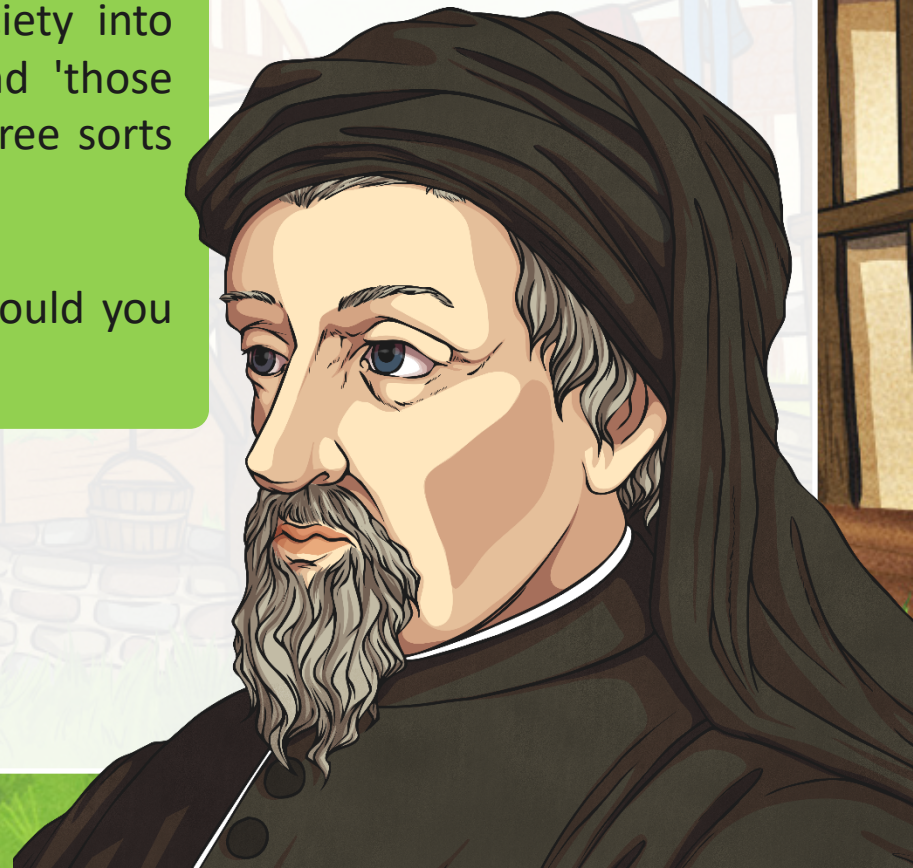
Society in The Middle Ages

Chaucer grouped them in this order:

Knight, squire, soldier (i.e. Those who fight)

Prioress, nun, priests, monk, friar (i.e. Those who pray)

Merchant, lawyer, carpenter, weaver, dyer, tapestry weaver, cook, sailor, doctor, ploughman, miller, reeve (i.e. Those who work)

A Day in the Life of a Medieval Lord

Dawn: Hear Mass, followed by a breakfast of white bread and wine.

Morning: The lord would speak with his reeve (the general manager for his manor). His lady would perhaps do embroidery. Knights and pages would practise fighting.

10am: Lunch was normally half a dozen simple dishes, but if the lord was entertaining guests there would be many more dishes, as well as entertainment such as jesters, fools and jugglers.

Afternoon: Hunting or hawking, or chess and backgammon if the weather was bad.

Late afternoon: Prayers, then a meal. If there were guests, this would be magnificent!

After supper: Listen to the news and stories brought by a travelling minstrel, or just sit and talk.

Bedtime: When the lord decided he wished to go to bed, the household would have a light supper, say prayers and go to sleep.

Castle Life in the Middle Ages

Many nobles lived in castles. The great hall was the centre of a castle. The walls were decorated with tapestries. Everyone except the lord, sat on benches. There was a minstrel gallery for musicians and singers. At night, the servants slept on the floor.

The great hall would have at least one fireplace with a chimney. This was a Norman invention and stopped the room filling with smoke.

The lord had his own room, called the solar, and his own four-poster bed, with curtains for privacy.

At the top of the castle, the lady would have a day room for herself and her maids-in-waiting. This had the largest windows and the best views.

The toilet was called the 'garderobe' and was usually a chute straight into the moat. One way to capture a castle was to climb up the chute.

Life in A Medieval Town

A medieval town would seek a charter giving it the right to become a borough. The rich merchants would then be allowed to choose a mayor and hold a market.

Houses were made of a wooden frame, with the gaps filled with woven strips of wood, known as 'wattle', and covered (or 'daubed'), with clay and horse-dung. Most roofs were thatched.

Life in A Medieval Town

Medieval shops were workshops that were open to the street for customers, with the craftsman's house above. Because few people could read, shops signs were a huge model showing the craftsman's trade. People of the same trade often worked in the same street.

The streets of a medieval town were narrow and busy. They were noisy, with the town crier, church bells and traders calling out their wares. There were many fast food sellers, selling such things as hot sheep's feet and beef-ribs.

Nobody was supposed to carry a weapon or wear a mask.

Life in A Medieval Town

At dusk, a bell rang for curfew, when everyone was supposed to shut up their house. The gates to the town would be closed, then a watch would patrol the streets looking for thieves and apprentices who stayed out late.

Criminals were put in the stocks or the pillory. These were wooden boards with holes for feet, hands or head. Medieval punishments were cruel and crimes such as theft were punished by hanging.

Life in A Medieval Town

In November, the poor of the town would elect a 'lord of misrule', who would wear a paper crown and get up to mischief. At Christmas, poor people would go around town demanding traders give them charity.

Holy Days would be marked by colourful processions, as the different guilds competed to make the best display.

If a serf ran away from his village to a town and remained free for a year and a day, he could become a 'freeman' of the town.

A Day in the Life of a Medieval Town

4am: The Angelus bell rang to announce the first Mass of the day and the end of the nightwatchman's duty.

6am: Shops and market stalls opened.

8am: Foreign merchants were allowed to start trading.

9am: Breakfast.

3pm: Most shops and market stalls closed.

8pm: Curfew Bell. Town gates closed, houses shut up, the night watch began.

Life in A Medieval Village

In the early Middle Ages, under the feudal system, the life of a serf was hard.

Even in the later Middle Ages, the medieval peasant's life was hard and the work back-breaking. It followed the seasons – ploughing in autumn, sowing in spring, harvesting in August. Work began at dawn, preparing the animals and it finished at dusk, cleaning them down and putting them back into the stalls.

Life in A Medieval Village

A peasant's hut was made of wattle and daub, with a thatched roof and no windows.

Inside the hut, a third of the area was penned off for the animals, which lived in the hut with the family. A fire burned in a hearth in the centre of the hut, so the air was permanently eye-wateringly smoky. Furniture was maybe a couple of stools, a trunk for bedding and a few cooking pots.

Many peasants' huts included a simple loom. The daughter would spin wool using a distaff and spindle, and the wife would weave it into rough cloth.

Life in A Medieval Village

Peasant food was mainly vegetables, plus anything that could be gathered – nuts, berries, nettles. The usual drink was weak, home-brewed beer. Honey provided a sweetener. If they ate bread, the peasants did not eat white wheat bread, but black rye bread.

The most difficult time was late spring, when food stores were running out and new food was not yet ready to be eaten. A poor harvest meant that some of the villagers would starve to death.

Life in A Medieval Village

A male peasant would wear a rough tunic, with a hood and gloves, and leather shoes with wooden soles. Women wore a coarse gown over a sleeveless slip.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, when some peasants were growing quite rich, 'sumptuary laws' forbade them to wear clothes above their class.

Village life was not all misery and hardship. Holy days meant a day off work. Peasant fun was rough – wrestling, shin-kicking and cock-fighting. The ball was almost unnecessary to a medieval ball game, which was basically a fight with the next village. Occasionally a travelling musician or bear-baiter would pass through.

The Feudal System

king

lords and nobles

knights

peasants
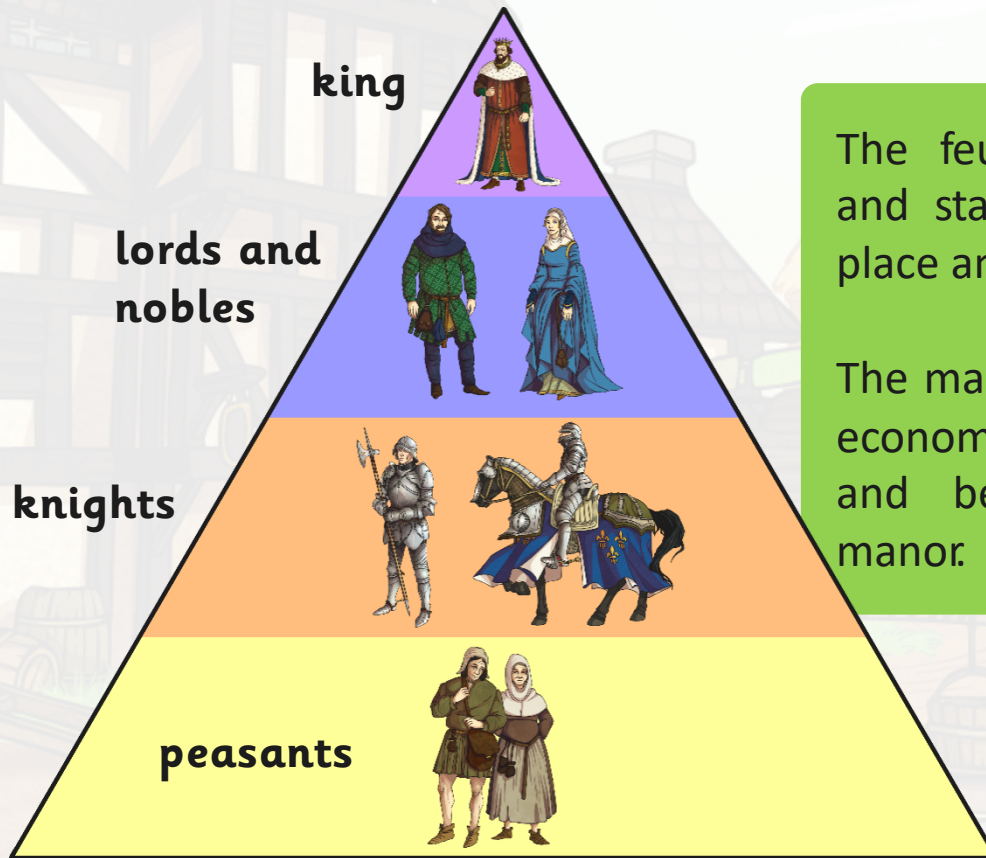
The feudal system provided order and stability. Everyone knew their place and what they had to do.

The manorial system provided for an economy that was based on farming and being self-sufficient on the manor.

Manors

The manor was the lord's estate. The manor system was an economic arrangement between a lord and his serfs.

The lord would provide serfs with housing, strips of farmland and protection from bandits. In return, the serfs tended the lord's lands, cared for his animals and performed other tasks to maintain the estate.

The manor was largely a self-sufficient community.

Plan of a Mediaeval Manor.
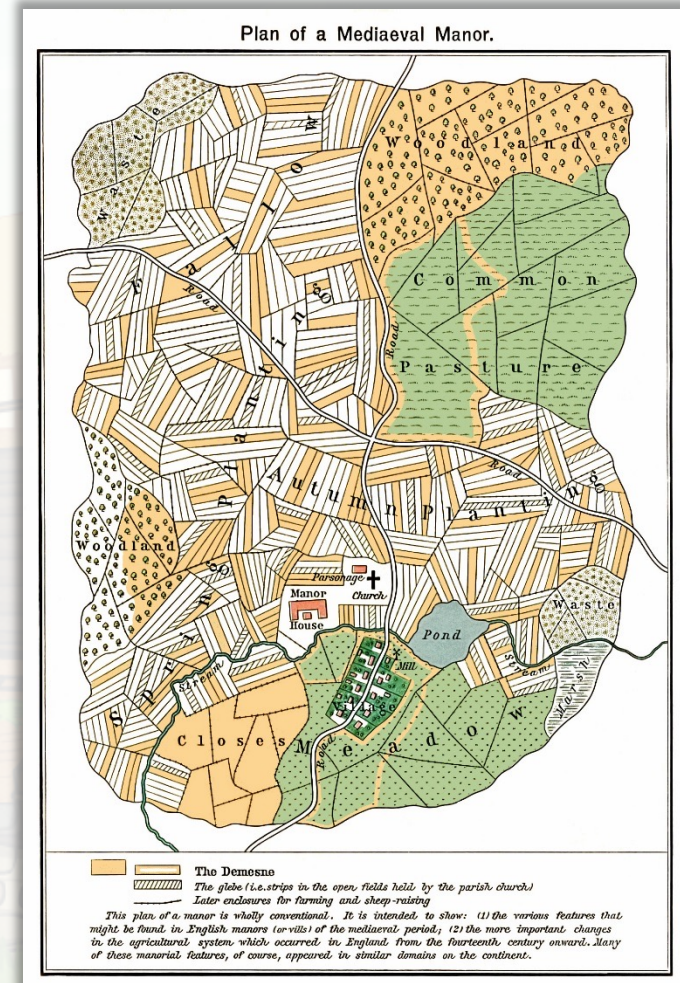
Knights

The education of a young noble began early (age 7). He would be sent off to the castle of another lord. He waited on his hosts and learned courtly manners. He played chess and learned war strategies. To develop fighting skills, he would practise sword fighting.

At around the age of 14, the boy would become a squire and would act as a servant to a knight. The squire took care of the knight's armour, weapons and warhorse. The squire would also escort the knight to battles.

At around 21, a squire became a fully-fledged knight. Knights were to abide by a complex set of ideals, which became known as the code of chivalry.

Knights

Later in the Middle Ages, battles were often for show. Knights were bound by a strict code of conduct called chivalry.

According to this code, knights were expected to be brave, loyal, true to their word and protective of women and those weaker than themselves.

The Church and Feudalism

Feudalism and the manor system created divisions among people. Shared beliefs in the teachings of the Church bonded people together.

Priests and other religious officials administered the sacraments, or important religious ceremonies.

Kings and peasants were subject to canon law, or the law of the Church, in matters such as marriage and religious practices.

The Holy Roman Empire became the strongest kingdom.

Farming Improvements

The use of horses instead of oxen was introduced. Horses could plow twice as much as an ox in a day.

The Three Field System emerged, which enabled people to use 2/3 of their 600 acres of farmland instead of just 1/2.

Field 1
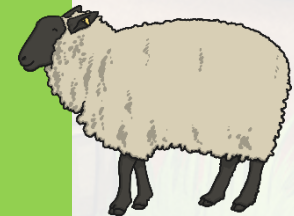200 acres for a winter crop such as wheat or rye.

Field 2
200 acres for a spring crop such as oats, barley, peas, or beans.

Field 3
200 acres lay fallow for animals to graze.

England Develops

By the early 800s, there were many small Anglo-Saxon kingdoms throughout the former Roman province of Britain.

For centuries, invaders from various regions in Europe landed on English shores. Many of them stayed, bringing their own ways and changing English culture.

England Develops: The Law

The royal courts of justice sent royal judges to every part of England at least once a year. They collected taxes, settled lawsuits and punished crimes.

There was the introduction of the use of the jury in English courts. A jury in medieval Europe was a group of loyal people (usually 12 neighbours of the accused), who answered a royal judge's questions about the facts of a case.

Jury trials became a popular means of settling disputes. Only the king's court was allowed to conduct them.

England Develops: The Magna Carta

King John was forced to sign the **Magna Carta** (Great Charter).

This guaranteed the nobles certain basic political rights and put a limit on the king's powers.

England Develops: Parliament

Two groups gradually formed in Parliament:

- House of Commons (Knights & Burgesses).

- House of Lords (Nobles & Bishops).

At first, Parliament was meant to be a tool to weaken the great lords. As time went by, however, Parliament became strong. Like the Magna Carta, it provided a check on royal power.