

# Activity: Medieval life and the Black Death

## Learning outcomes:

Students will learn about town and country life in the Middle Ages. They can make judgements on whether life would have been easier/harder for them in medieval England and identify factors which would have motivated life choices.

The activity demonstrates the impact of the Black Death on the English population and encourages students to reflect on its social and economic consequences.

## Instructions:

1.

Use the PowerPoint as an introduction (**SLIDES 1-7, see separate PowerPoint script**). The presentation provides key information on medieval life in the towns and the countryside.

2.

**USE SLIDE 8:** Students are then split into two groups, those living in the town and those living in the countryside (can split the class into two, draw names out of a hat, write names on the board).

3.

Students draw a card from the “town” or “country” pile, describing their living situation and the life choices they face. They then read out and discuss their options.

**USE SLIDE 9 for extra information:** Once students have made their decision “migrants” move from the country into the town area.

4.

**USE SLIDE 10:** After the migrants have moved, announce that it is now AD 1348 and the Black Death will hit England. “Kill off” a third of the countryside children, starting with poor children from large families. “Kill off” half of the town children, starting with poor migrants, poor town-dwellers, better-off migrants (see cards on who dies in the village and the town).

5.

**USE SLIDES 10-11:** Finish by getting students to think about how life changed for the people who survived the Black Death. Starting with a discussion of the immediate aftermath and longer term consequences.

## Extension exercise:

Encourage students to think about what archaeologists might be able to tell about the lives of medieval people by looking at their skeletons.

- **Age?** By looking at the eruption of deciduous (milk) and permanent (adult) teeth in the jaw, archaeologists can age children accurately up to 19 years of age. Older people can be aged (although less accurately) by looking at degenerative changes in the ribs and pelvis.
- **Sex?** By looking at the shape of the pelvis and skull, archaeologists can tell if a skeleton was male or female. Shape changes are visible from around 16 years of age, due to the changes of puberty. It is usually not possible to determine the sex of skeletons younger than 16 years.
- **What diseases they had?** Some diseases like leprosy, syphilis and tuberculosis can be seen on the skeleton. Evidence of general infection also shows up on the bones but it is often not possible to identify a specific disease. Fractures, tooth decay and arthritis can also be seen on the skeleton. It usually takes a long time for a disease to bring about changes in the bones. This means that infections which kill people quickly, like the Black Death, cannot be seen on the skeleton.
- **How they died?** It is usually not possible to tell how a person died, unless a skeleton has very severe traumatic injuries like a fractured skull. Many medieval people were killed by infectious diseases which kill too quickly to show up on the skeleton.
- **Where they lived/grew up?** People are often buried where they died, but this does not mean they had lived in this place all their lives. Think of the Black Death game you just played – some children who died in the town had originally come from the countryside.