

Medieval Towns

Medieval towns had seen a massive growth in the numbers of people living there after the Norman invasion. This got worse after the Black Death as more peasants bought their freedom.

The old systems that had been used during the Roman era were forgotten or not used as the Saxons believed them to be built by giants and so had fallen into disrepair by the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066.

This led to filthy streets as people threw their rubbish straight into the gutters.

There were open sewers to take human waste straight into the river where most people got their drinking and washing water. Some people were lucky enough to have access to clean water in a local well but most people drank Small Beer (a very weak ale) as the water was so dangerous.

This led to fewer baths for people as well as if you washed in the dirty water you may also get sick.

Medieval Public Health

Did things start to change?

During the Black Death mayors and even the king ordered the streets to be cleaned of rubbish in order to stop the spread of the bad smells.

Many laws were introduced to encourage people to clean up their part of the streets and severe fines were put in place for making the streets dirty.

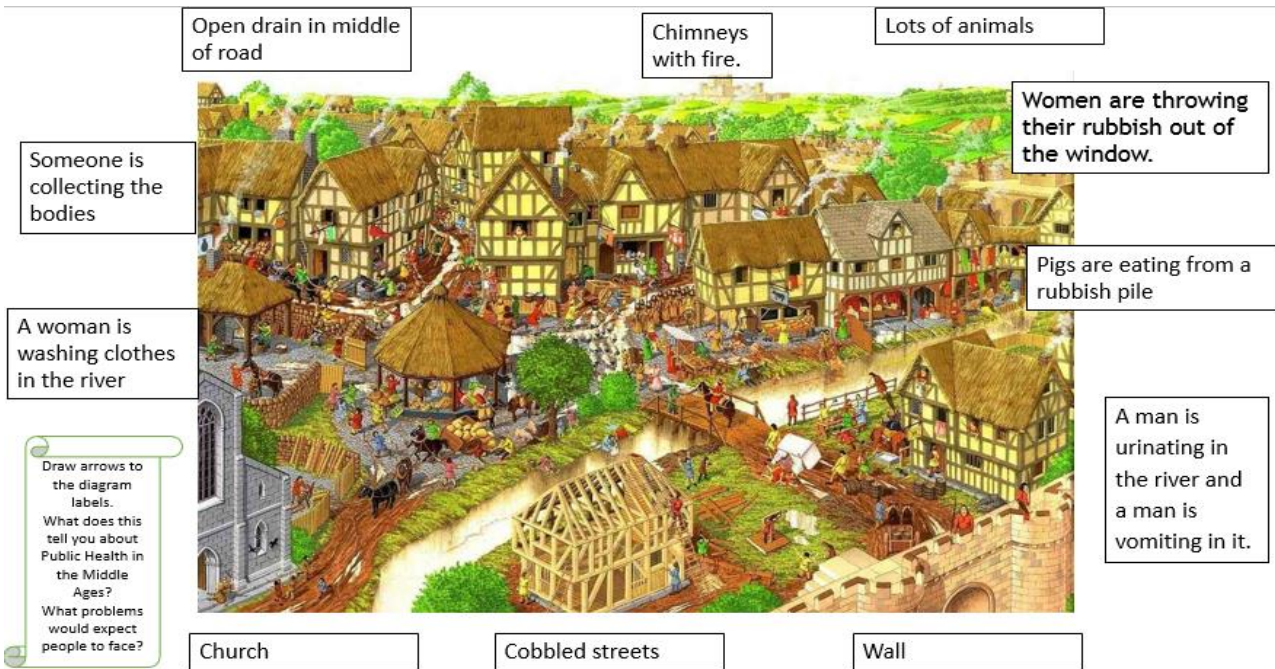
Butchers in London were ordered not to throw their waste into the streets but to take it straight to the river. However, in general the streets remained narrow and full of general filth as there was no regular rubbish collection as the government was more interested in fighting wars than sorting out public health.

Medieval Monasteries and Public Health

It was part of the Christian religion to keep yourself clean, especially if you were going into pray. This led monks to be somewhat cleaner than their secular counter-parts, they had an enforced bath every 3 months! However, most bathed more frequently than this.

The monks also knew about the importance of not mixing waste with drinking water and so most monasteries got their drinking water from upstream and had flushable toilets that entered the water system downstream.

Monks also provided free healthcare for the sick and old as part of their charity work as the government did not believe it was their job to help these people.



Draw arrows to the diagram labels. What does this tell you about Public Health in the Middle Ages? What problems would you expect people to face?

