

The Middle Ages

Reading Comprehension

The period after the Norman Conquest (1066), until about 1485, is called The Middle Ages. During this time, the English language and culture developed and the UK started to form a distinct identity.

The Middle Ages saw the development of a national culture and identity. After the Norman Conquest, the king and his noblemen spoke Norman French and the peasants had continued to speak Anglo-Saxon. Gradually, these two languages combined to become one English language. Some words in modern English, for example, 'park' and 'beauty', are based on Norman French words. Others, for example, 'apple', 'cow' and 'summer', are based on Anglo-Saxon words.

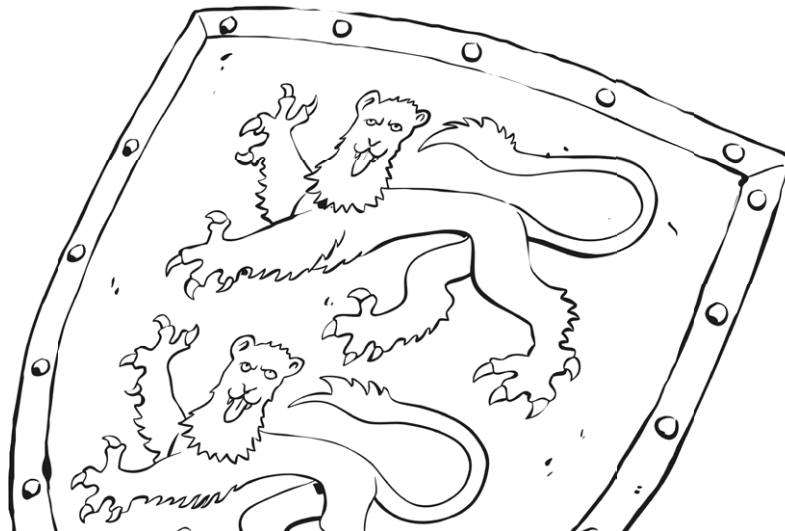
In modern English, there are often two words with very similar meanings, one from French and one from Anglo-Saxon. 'Demand' (French) and 'ask' (Anglo-Saxon) are examples. By 1400, in England, official documents were being written in English, and this had become the preferred language of the royal court and Parliament.

In the years leading up to 1400, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote a series of poems in English, about a group of people going to Canterbury on a pilgrimage. The people decided to tell each other stories on the journey, so the poems describe the travellers and some of the stories they told. This collection of poems is called The Canterbury Tales. It was one of the first books to be printed by William Caxton, the first person in England to print books using a printing press. Many of the stories are still popular. Some have been made into plays and television programmes.

In Scotland, many people continued to speak Gaelic and the Scots language also developed. A number of poets began to write in the Scots language. One example is John Barbour, who wrote The Bruce about the Battle of Bannockburn.

The Middle Ages also saw a change in the type of buildings in Britain. Castles were built in many places in Britain and Ireland, partly for defence. Today many are in ruins, although some, such as Windsor or Edinburgh, are still in use. Great cathedrals, for example Lincoln Cathedral, were also built, and many of these are still used for worship. Several of the cathedrals had windows of stained glass, telling stories about the Bible and Christian saints. The glass in York Minster is a famous example.

During this period, England was an important trading nation. English wool became a very important export. People came to England from abroad to trade and also to work. Many had special skills, such as weavers from France, engineers from Germany, glass manufacturers from Italy and canal builders from Holland.



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Reading Comprehension Questions

Once you have read the text carefully, answer the questions below, using evidence from the text and referring back to check your answers.

Answer true or false to the following questions:

1. Many languages were spoken in Britain after the Norman Conquest.

2. The Norman French and Anglo-Saxon languages joined together to become the English language.

3. By 1400, French was still the language used by most kings, queens and members of government.

4. One of the first books printed in England was The Canterbury Tales.

5. Geoffrey Chaucer's books are still enjoyed today.

6. During the Middle Ages, many people stopped speaking Gaelic in Scotland.

7. The only reason that castles were built in Britain and Ireland was so that the countries could be protected.

8. All the castles which were built in the Middle Ages, are still in good condition today.

9. England sold a lot of wool to other countries in the Middle Ages.

10. Skilled workers came to England from other countries to work and to do business.

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1. How did the UK begin to form an identity during the Middle Ages?

2. Which languages were spoken after the Norman Conquest?

3. How did the English language form?

4. What are examples of English words which originated from French words?

5. What are examples of English words which originated from Anglo-Saxon words?

6. Who was Geoffrey Chaucer?

7. Who was the first person in England to print books using a printing press?

8. Where was Gaelic spoken?

9. What are cathedrals used for today?

10. How were the stained glass windows in the cathedrals a form of communication?
