

# Bread in Great Britain in the Middle Ages

## A Brief Overview

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## Introduction

This paper will give a brief overview of various aspects of bread in Great Britain in the Middle Ages. For the most part this paper will contain information from the years 700 through 1500, although some information will be from earlier times. Bread was a very large part of the daily diet in the Middle Ages, and played a large role in the lives of those of the time.

## Importance of Bread in the British Diet

“Surviving accounts of great houses suggest that people ate between two to five pounds of bread a day.” (Sim 2002, 64) For comparison, modern Americans eat on average about 53 pounds of bread per year, per person and that works out to about 0.14 pounds per day.” (“Fun Bread Facts” n.d.) Those in Great Britain find it to be a larger part of their daily regimen and devour 0.19 pounds per day. (“Flour & Bread Consumption | Nabim” n.d.) In reality, the consumption of bread depended upon the status of the person doing the consuming, and I'll discuss that next.

## Bread Varieties and Status

When the growing season went well and the harvest was successful everyone was able to eat. It was your status which determined the quality of what you had for food. Therefore, bread was more than the staff of life, it was also an indication of your station. For example in famine years the poorest people could find themselves reduced to eating what was called *horse bread*, which was made with dried peas and other things that had been ground up to make flour. Usually as its name suggests this bread was fed to domesticated animals, including horses and dogs. Most of the time poor people ate bread made of unbolted rye flour. This bread was referred to as *black bread* and *tourte*. This was coarse, dark and heavy bread. (Sim 2002, 64; Hammond 1993, 48)

For the poorer classes there was also pottage, also known as porridge. Pottage used whole grain, which was available to everyone who could not afford to take the grain to the miller to have it ground into flour and then to have the dough baked. Pottage was therefore the staple food for the poorer classes. To it could have been added dried fruit, or vegetables to change the flavor. So, for the poorest peasant families, pottage was favored over bread as it was more economical, since it required no milling and thereby escaped both the miller's fee and the quantity loss in the process. (Gies and Gies 1990, 165)

Moving a step up in quality was *maslin* bread. *Maslin* bread was made of a mixed grain flour composed of unbolted wheat and rye, or whatever grain grew best locally. It was a brown bread that certainly would have sustained you through a day's work. (Sim 2002, 64; Hammond 1993, 48) Under regulation (discussed more below) *maslin* bread weighed about four pounds. That is one serious loaf of bread! Another flour mixture for *maslin* was composed of rye, oats or barley. (Gies and Gies 1990, 164)

Of better quality than *maslin*, bread of the middle classes was referred to as *wastel*, *bis*, *trete* and *cocket*. This bread's level of quality depended upon the varied amounts of bran left in the flour after milling and the time taken in the bolting process<sup>1</sup>. (Sim 2002, 64; Hammond 1993, 48)

<sup>1</sup> Bolting (sieving or sifting) was a process during which the flour is forced through a fine cloth in order to remove the bran and grit of that flour

*Paindemaine* was the bread made for the upper class. Only the best wheat flour was used to make this bread. The flour was collected over a period of time during bolting, removing as much of the bran as possible, leaving only the whitest flour. After the fifteenth century this same fine white bread was called *manchet*. (Sim 2002, 64; Hammond 1993, 48) In the late fourteenth century in upper class households, *cocket*, which was round and intended for the entire community of the household was consumed as well as *paindemaine*. (Woolgar 1999, 124) For most of the people in the household, no matter the class, the amount of bread consumed was on average one to two loaves per day (Woolgar 1999, 124-125), or about 1-2 pounds a day as mentioned above.

Grains included in the flour could vary depending upon how many loaves a bushel of flour could make and how many were needed by a household, manor or bakery. For example, “A treatise in the first half of the fourteenth century advocated for at least 20 loaves per bushel of flour. Most ranged from twenty-two and a half loaves and up to thirty-seven.” (Woolgar 1999, 124) If the household, manor or bakery needed more loaves there may be more bran added to the flour or the addition of rye. By adding more unbolting wheat, rye, flour to the mixture for the bread, the baker was easily able to stretch the number of loaves he would be getting per bake.

## Distribution

As mentioned above the type of bread available to a medieval British person was dependent upon their class. Availability of and access to bread also depended upon where a person obtained their bread. Not everyone baked their own bread, indeed, it is likely that most people had their bread baked for them as will be shown below.

For example, imagine an area of small hamlets surrounding a manorial estate; within that area would be most, if not all, of the separate classes. The upper class would eat the bread made for them by their cooks and bakers, the *paindemaine* discussed previously. In the estate's area would be those that worked for the owners of larger farms, and those that were manorial servants, and they were often fed very well and would receive their “daily bread” twice per day along with beer and a piece of meat, or fish on days of Lent. One way for landholding villagers to make certain they would not go hungry in old age was to pass on their ownership of property to an heir in trade for food, clothing and a place to live out their lives. In return those villagers were allotted a set amount of grain from the estate's stores or from the heir of their property. “For example in 1294 one couple was to be given seven quarters of grain for the year, made up of three quarters of wheat, a quarter and a half of barley, a quarter<sup>2</sup> and a half of beans and peas and a quarter of oats” with which to make pottage or bread. The very poor would go to the Lord's manor daily and would be given “a share” of *black bread* or *maslin* if they were lucky. (Hammond 1993, 30)

Those in the village or hamlets who had property and could work their fields would take the grain from their own crops and from gleaning the fields after harvest to the estate or local mill to be made into flour, with a fee of course. Afterwards the flour was brought home and used for making dough for bread. These may have been flat breads (especially in the poorer households) made on a stone over the

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<sup>2</sup> To give some explanation to the previous notation, a quarter is a measurement equaling 8 bushels, or one quarter ton. (Trager 1995, 67)

fire in their kitchen or cooked in a pot, to make the flour last, most of the bran would have been left in the flour, making it a strong wholemeal bread. (Brears 2008, 109)

In the cities, large merchant households, the middle and working classes, and even sometimes the poor surely found it easier and possibly cheaper to just buy their breads than to deal with trying to grow the grain and then deal with the miller and baker just to get their daily bread.

Laws and ordinances (see below for more) were put in place that disallowed bakers to sell their breads in front of their shoppes, but hucksters (usually women) were allowed to sell their breads door to door and in the market. These sellers of bread made their living from being able to buy 13 breads for the



price of 12, bringing into reality the *Illustration 1: Hucksters Selling Bread at Leaden Hall Market, London, 1598 (Hammond 1993, 46)*

“baker’s dozen”, where the huckster would make their living by selling the 13th loaf and keeping that profit for themselves. (Hammond 1993, 48)

## Laws and Regulations

As discussed above, bread was an important food and the usage and making of bread was highly regulated during the medieval period. This included regulation of the weight, quality and even the price of bread.

Various groups, including the Church, the King, and the local Lord, were keen to take any monies that they could get. For example, Seigneurial Monopoly (*banalite*) required the people to use and to pay for the usage of the mill and ovens controlled by the Church, the King or the local Lord. (“Ecclesiastical Lordship, Seigneurial Power and Commercialization of Milling in Medieval England” n.d.)

Some examples of laws and regulations about bread or flour include the following: If a Lord were to build a mill upon his lands a *milling soke*<sup>3</sup> would have been levied against his tenants where they were required to bring their grain to be milled at his mill. Upon milling, a portion of their grain was taken by him or his representatives as payment. (Watts 2002, 41) And in 1202 England<sup>4</sup> created its first law to

<sup>3</sup> The customary law of Mill Soke meant that after harvest the farmer or his wife would take their grain to the manorial mill where the miller would grind it for a payment of a portion of the flour which was usually a small amount like one sixteenth or a twenty-fourth of the final weight. Because the mills construction was paid for by the Lord of the Manor, his tenants were obliged “to bring their corn (corn means grains to the English) to be ground by the Lord’s miller, who retained a percentage of the flour ground in payment, his ‘toll’, usually about one fifteenth. This arrangement can be seen as either the Lord providing a service for his tenants, or as a form of subjection and taxation, tenants being compelled to use the Lord’s mill.” (Hampshire Milling Group n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> When the government decided to assert its power and control, in 1202 it created a law called the Assize to help control the pricing of bread and the wages of bakers. Some 40+ years later they made an addition to the law which standardized the

control the price of bread to limit the amount of monies made by the baker. In 1266 this law was amended to also control the weight, quality and the price of bread. (Trager 1995, 61) “In an ordinance in 1377, bakers were forbidden to sell their bread from in front of their shops, and only in the markets.” (Hammond 1993, 48) Also, in later medieval England the use of querns was regulated. Stories were told of quern stones being confiscated and used as tiles upon the floors of manorial offices. (Watts 2002, 40)

As mentioned at the end of the previous section there were also laws about where a person could sell bread. Bakers were not always allowed to sell their bread in front of their shops. Instead hucksters would buy that bread and sell it door to door or in the markets.

## Ingredients

The basic ingredients of bread were flour, salt and water. Despite these few simple ingredients, there were many types of flour dependent upon the grain used to make that flour and therefore many types and qualities of bread as spoken about previously. It also must be remembered that not all in the medieval period had access to the varieties of flour available.

The basic varieties of grain available were Wheat, Barley, Oats and Rye. Each had their own growing issues, some growing better in the southern parts of the country and some better in the cooler climates.

Wheat has been in use since the beginning of civilization. Wheat is a cereal grass, when ripe the seeds are harvested as a grain, to be used for food and for resupply of seed for growing. Although wheat was grown all over the Great Britain it grew best in southern England. (“Wheat - a Plant That Changed the World” n.d.)

Likewise Barley and Oats, although present in all of Great Britain, were mostly grown in northern half of the country, being much happier with the cooler climate there. Barley was the second most grown of the four grains mentioned above for it was found to be a key ingredient in the making of beer. (Hammond 1993, 2, 3, 48)

Rye was the hardiest of these four cereal grains, growing the best in the largest varieties of soil. (Hammond 1993, 2, 3, 48)

Another rather undesirable flour source was vetch, which was sown and grown for fodder and sometimes mixed with barley and oats to create a berevechicorn (mix) that was to be fed to the animals but also used for human consumption during times of famine. (Hammond 1993, 2, 3, 48)

Water was collected and used from running streams, wells and rivers where the water was swift running over rocks to help keep it clean. Standing and/or unclean water was avoided at all costs. (Hyer and Hooke 2018, 1)

Salt in the medieval period was derived mostly from evaporation, the drying of pools of water from natural salt water springs or from sea water. This method did not produce very pure salt and it was usually purified further by re-hydration, filtering and drying it again. (Hammond 1993, 110)

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weight of loaves of bread from loaf to loaf. The government also made it mandatory that bakers used a personal mark (brand) on the bread so all would know who had made it if there were discrepancies with the weights. (Trager 1995, 59,61)

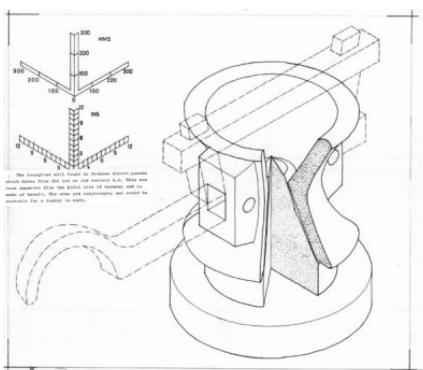
## Flour Milling

The making of flour was important and quite a time consuming process which warrants further exploration. Flour was made by grinding, or milling, the grains mentioned above, and sometimes other things like vetch, peas and beans, into a fine powder.

The first evidence of milling is in 12,000 B.C. Halfan tribespeople on Egypt's lower Nile used limestone grinding stones to produce a kind of flour from seeds of wild cereal grasses. (Trager 1995, 2) Later on, in 2200 B.C., hieroglyphic designs from Egyptian tombs showed the first indications of use of a *saddle quern*<sup>5</sup>. A saddle quern is composed of two stones; a rounded and smooth stone to push and pull against the lower stone resulting in a crushing and grinding of the grain. This was a very labor intensive job requiring several hours of hard work to produce enough meal to feed a single family for a day. Despite the labor required the saddle quern was used for nearly three-thousand years, into the midst of the Roman period. (Watts 2002, 25)



*Illustration 2: Hand Driven Rotary Quern*  
 (“Replica\_rotary\_quern\_\_side\_vie.w.Jpg (JPEG Image, 3008 × 2000 Pixels) - Scaled (44%)” n.d.)



*Illustration 3: A schematic drawing of how the animal driven rotary quern would have worked.*  
 (“Hour\_Glass\_mill\_Item\_JKMC-DRW-23-007\_400\_346.Jpg (JPEG Image, 400 × 346 Pixels)” n.d.)



*Illustration 4: Donkey powered grain mills, Pompeii, Italy.*  
 (“FQ2C\_TL\_5-350BC-Pompeii-20Apr98-SWatts-98-06-13A-Scan\_650\_457.Jpg (JPEG Image, 650 × 457 Pixels)” n.d.)

For around 3000 years the saddle quern was the primary tool for grinding grains. Somewhere during the Iron Age, the rotary quern arrived on the scene. One of the earliest types was the beehive quern, two small in diameter stones, one stationary stone with another on top of the lower. The upper stone was turned by the use of a handle protruding from it's side, while grains were fed into a singular hole in the top. These hand-worked querns were adapted over time, becoming less of a burden to the user, but still twenty percent of the grain milled in early fourteenth century England was still ground by hand mills. (Watts 2002, 27, 41) So, it seems that throughout the medieval period the hand-worked rotary quern

<sup>5</sup> A quern is a “stone tools for hand-grinding a wide variety of materials.” (“Quern-Stone” 2017) Types of querns include the saddle, beehive, rotary, lava and medieval quern. Medieval querns were often decorated with the marks of the church, manor or monastery which owned them. These decorations included collars, and other types of decorative stones. (Watts 2002, 25,27,33,39)

was used by the lower classes to grind their grains and legumes (peas and beans and vetches if needed) for their bread.

Large rotary quern mills that were powered by animals were probably introduced to Great Britain near the first century A.D. (Watts 2002, 46) Taking into consideration the drawing of the hourglass mill (see illustration on previous page), you can easily see how domesticated animals, donkeys, horses, oxen would have been used to power these mills.

Water mills were also used in Great Britain in the Medieval period and earlier. Archaeologists discovered evidence of timber flooring and/or wheel troughs for a water mill at the Roman fort at Haltwhistle Burn Head between the years of 1956 and 1971. This mill was dated to the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. (Hyer and Hooke 2018, 168) The re-introduction of water mills in post-roman Britain happened somewhere in south-east of England in the seventh to eighth century, where they were mentioned in a charter in the Kingdom of Kent in the 762. (Watts 2002, 72)

Dating the introduction of Wind Mills into Great Britain has been a cloudy topic indeed. The earliest reference is dated to 1180, and the few mills recorded this early seemed to all be in the area near the Solent Strait and the Tyne River. However, wind powered mills grew in number quickly, with estimations of over four-thousand mills in England alone by c.1400. (Watts 2002, 103) There is a depiction of a wind mill on a bench in North Cadbury church, Somerset, dated 1538 (Watts 2002, plate 18).

In 1086 over six thousand mills were recorded in the Domesday Book (Watts 2002, 83) In the 1300's Dr. John Langdon estimated between 10-15,000 mills in Great Britain, of course this was only an estimate as they were everywhere by then and the amount of hand mills would have certainly made that number grow exponentially. (Watts 2002, 84)

## **Baking Bread**

### **Process**

Unfortunately, the making of bread was such an everyday task that its recipes and techniques were rarely written down, but it is possible to extrapolate from post-medieval recipes. We know that the grain, once ground into flour, was measured and mixed with water and salt to form a thick dough. This was usually mixed in large wooden cooper's troughs or *kimnells* (Brears 2008, 116-117) and left overnight to ferment. The next morning the dough would be removed a section at a time from the trough and shaped into rounds where it would be left to rise once more before being moved to the oven on the baker's peel.

### **Equipment**

Wooden bowls, *kimnells* (tubs made of wood for mixing dough and other things (Markham and Best 1994, 304)), a wooden peel (a long handled slice of wood with a square end, used to place loaves of bread into the oven and to take them back out when finished baking (Brears 2008, 122)), linen cloth, and woven baskets would have been the mainstay equipment for the baker in the medieval period.



These are all fairly common items that you can find in most small bakeries in use today. Tools such as these can be seen in medieval manuscripts and illuminations. See pictures shown below/above for example.

## Ovens

Ovens for the baking of bread were usually owned by the Lord of the Manor in the area, and most towns would have had at least one and possibly more. The ovens in the manors or castles, with their domed interiors could have been anything up to around fourteen feet in diameter and by perhaps 3 feet in height. (Brears 2008, 120) “Possession of an oven was rare (judging by archaeological evidence) and those wanting to bake would have had to pay to use the communal oven.” (Hammond 1993, 28)

## Communal Ovens

For most people there were no ovens, since the ovens needed to be built into brick or stone walls and that was a luxury that most of the labor force did not have, for their homes were mostly made of wattle and daub. If you could afford it, you could pay to use one of the bakers' ovens or you could go to the communal oven with the grain you had milled, either by the local mill, or by hand.



Illustration 5: King's Communal Oven at Corbridge (“Photographs Of Newcastle: Corbridge - St. Andrew’s Church and Vicars Pele” n.d.)



Illustration 6: Baker's moving loaves with a pele in a baker's shoppe.(Hammond 1993, Plate 5)

In small towns and hamlets which were built by the Lord of the manor the ovens may have been this size or somewhat smaller. For those who had smaller ovens on their properties, these would have been mostly small and perhaps made of cob, a mixture of sand, clay and straw mixed together, if not brick or stone. All of these ovens would have been fired with wood, starting with small twigs and thin branches tied into bundles called *bavins* and *faggots* until a fire was ablaze before adding larger pieces of wood called *billets*. (Brears 2008, 56–57) One example of a communal oven was the oven in Corbridge. This double oven (the King’s Oven) was first recorded in 1310 and was last used somewhere in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another set of communal ovens was recorded in the town of Elton on the Nene River in

Huntingdonshire, where there were 2 ovens, one near Overend and the other near the Manor House. All the local villagers were obliged to use them (for a fee, of course). (Gies and Gies 1990, 136)

In cottages and small farms where there was no oven, and no separate bake house, the bread would be baked on a flat stone over a fire or within a iron pot. From prehistory and throughout the middle ages this remained a very efficient way of baking bread, and there is documented evidence of baking on a flat stone from Yorkshire dating to 1170 (Brears 2008, 109-110)

## **Timing**

Bread was baked as needed, either by a person in a smaller (and perhaps poorer) family, the bakers for a large household, or a commercial baker. For the larger households and manors different types of bread were baked at varying times throughout the week. This was because most all of the bread types discussed above were baked in the household or manorial ovens, i.e. bread for the middle classes, for the lower classes, the servants, the poor and even for the domesticated animals, as all of these were associated with the household. In some houses the bread for the head of the household and his/her guests was baked fresh every day, in others the finest of the breads were baked every other day or every few days. (Woolgar 1999, 124-125)

As mentioned above, there were no ovens or separate bake houses for every rural family, it is assumed that the lower class workers and those living on small farms made and baked their breads in their kitchens as needed: perhaps daily, perhaps every few days, maybe even weekly.

There is little to no record of baking schedules for the commercial or communal ovens. It would be my best guess that because bread is such a staple of the times the ovens were run on most days.

## **Conclusion / Summary**

Many vital points have been talked about briefly, shedding some light upon the importance of bread and its creation in the medieval period in Great Britain. This paper provides a survey of bread types, the distribution of bread, and the laws and regulations governing the baked goodness. We also visited quickly the milling of grains, the simple ingredients necessary for bread and the process of baking. With so many details to cover we should not forget one of the biggest; the ovens, those for large households, the commercial, the communal, and the flat stone in your hearth. Of course all these aspects have only been touched upon lightly, and each could be made into a worthy topic of research in its own right. And just remember, the best smell in the kitchen, castle, or hovel is that of baking bread!

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