

The Medieval Village

The medieval village would have people of a mixed of wealth living within it. The lowest ranking were the surfs, who essentially belong to the land and therefore the lord who owned it. There were also Yeomen farmers who owned their own plots of land. All the elements would work together under the administration of a Lord of the Manor, who was a member of the gentry or nobility. He could own many estates around the country, so was assisted by a steward in each parish, while manor court justice might be dispensed through a bailiff.

Each village would have several key components.



The manor house was the home, or just the office, of the Lord of the Manor, and sometimes his bailiff too. The small square building to the right of the house is the kitchen, which was separate to avoid fire spreading to the living quarters. As the administration and financial centre of the parish, the manor house was often one of only two stone buildings in the village. The house itself was often surrounded by barns and other service buildings as well as private gardens and a dovecote. The manor house could be surrounded by a moat and entered by a gate house, either for extra protection or just to show off.



Parishes were divided into three huge fields. Two were arable, while the third would be pasture and fertilised by grazing animals. The great fields were divided into thin strips which allowed maximum use of the land and saved having hedges and walls. Each peasant farmer worked several strips spread around the parish, giving a share of the good and bad land. The ploughs were pulled by teams of oxen. The ridges of this farming system survive in many Leicestershire pasture fields today.



Most medieval villages had a church or a chapel, which were usually located close to the manor house, as religion was an important element in everyday life and brought everyone together. Very small villages and hamlets might share a church with a larger neighbour. The graveyards usually surrounded the church and the archery butts, where the boys and men would practice with their bows on Sundays and Saintsdays, were often close to the church.



The parish windmill was an important part of the village system. All villagers had to take their corn to the mill for grinding and would pay the miller, who in turn would pay a tax to the lord of the manor. There were also watermills dotted about where decent sized waterways ran.



The village pond was used to house any stray animals found wandering outside the common grazing land. The owner would have to pay a fine to the Steward to release their animals. Occasionally the building could also be used as a gaol for criminals.



Most villagers would live in simple one or two room timber and daub houses with thatched roofs. Many would have small closes or crofts as private gardens and grazing land for small animals.



Fish ponds, or 'stew' ponds were well stocked with fresh water fish to feed the lord and the villagers on the many meat-free fasting days in the medieval Christian calendar.