



The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century

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Now in paperback, a literary time machine that takes readers into the sights, smells, and tastes of the fourteenth century—a book that is revolutionary in its concept and startling in its portrayal of humanity.

The past is a foreign country. This is your guidebook. A time machine has just transported you back into the fourteenth century. What do you see? How do you dress? How do you earn a living and how much are you paid? What sort of food will you be offered by a peasant or a monk or a lord? And more important, where will you stay?

The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England is not your typical look at a historical period. This radical new approach shows us that the past is not just something to be studied; it is also something to be lived.

Through the use of daily chronicles, letters, household accounts, and poems of the day, Mortimer transports you back in time, providing answers to questions typically ignored by traditional historians. You will learn how to greet people on the street, what to use as toilet paper, why a physician might want to taste your blood, and how to know whether you are coming down with leprosy.

The result is the most astonishing social history book you're ever likely to read: revolutionary in its concept, informative and entertaining in its detail, and startling for its portrayal of humanity in an age of violence, exuberance, and fear.

The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century Details

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From Reader Review The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century for online ebook

Dannii Elle says

I have long found this period of history the most fascinating to read about. What compels my interest is not the fierce battles or matters of court, but more the running of the day-to-day life of the common people, during this time.

For that reason, it was like this book was penned with my particular desires in mind. Unlike many other non-fiction books, this was not set out in the typical chronological format. Instead, this was split into sections that focused on one particular area of interest - such as clothing, food, and housing. Battles, the Black Plague, and other areas of historic interest were noted but little space was given over to dwelling on those subjects. This is more of an overview of how an average day would look like to an average citizen.

I also adored how this book was penned, which fitted well with the structure of this book. With the minimum of dryness and a sprinkle of humour all information was relayed. It was neither sensational nor overly-academic, but instead a steady mixture of them both. As the title suggests, this book is written as if it were to be used as an actual guide for an actual future time-traveller, assisting them on how best to fit in if they were to return to an average day from this period of history. Average seems to be the word to best sum up this book's ultimate focus, but certainly not how I would describe how it delivered what many would perceive these rather banal facts.

Jemidar says

Really 4.5 stars.

Because this book is such a tantalizing glimpse into the real lives of people in 14th century England it has inspired me to do something that my university lecturers couldn't, and that is to actually read The Canterbury Tales. It's now officially my special project for next year. Thank you Dr Mortimer :-).

Nigeyb says

An exciting and compelling way to engage with the past

The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century is a wonderful concept. History told in the form of a living guide - up close and personal. It's brilliant. Ian Mortimer shows us the food, the customs, the language, the clothes, the games, the laws, the risks, the illnesses, medicine, the poor, the aristocrats, the merchants, the soldiers, writers, poets, religion, the criminals, and so on. He also brings alive the sights, the smells, the landscape, cities, towns, markets and hamlets. Every few pages there are insightful facts and lightbulb moments that connect the 14th century to

our lives in the early 21st century.

The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England: A Handbook for Visitors to the Fourteenth Century really brings the era to life. Take, for example, his section on the Black Death. You may already know that it wiped out a third of Europe's population (dwarfing the First World War) but until you walk through devastated communities watching rats and wild pigs eating corpses or see a man sobbing as he tells you he has buried five sons, I don't think you've probably fully got to grips with the implications of such extraordinary loss of life.

The entire book is consistently vivid and instructive. Ian Mortimer uses the second person and the present tense throughout. So, you travel into the city or you sit down at a table, making it an effective technique for fully engaging the reader. This approach may not be for everyone but I found it compelling and involving.

I notice Ian Mortimer has taken the same approach in two other books - The Time Traveller's Guide to Elizabethan England and The Time Traveller's Guide to Restoration Britain: Life in the Age of Samuel Pepys, Isaac Newton and The Great Fire of London. I intend to read them too.

5/5

Nikki says

As a history book, this is an interesting format and it's reasonably engaging, though by the end I was starting to get worn down by the sheer level of detail. But what bothered me was that apparently, if you want to time travel, you'd better be male: there's some lip service paid to actually discussing women's role in society, with some references to the kind of work women did (mostly: make ale, I gather), and quite a lot of reference to the kind of clothes women wore, and how likely women were to be assaulted and raped, but. We hear about monks and not about nuns, about merchants and not about their wives, about farmers and not their daughters.

And don't give me the excuse about that not being interesting to read about: nor is intricate detail about what a monk can eat on which days, for most people.

In summary: to time travel, apparently you have to be male. And only men are interesting. Slightly disappointed I paid for this book right now.

Diana says

A very interesting way to write a history book. This author wrote this book like it was a travel guide. He tries to describe the sights, smells, and people of the era as if you could walk down the road and be in the middle of it. I really enjoyed reading it, and suggest it to anyone who enjoys reading history. I hope he writes more like it.

katwiththehat says

This book was super interesting and informative if you're looking to understand what life was like back in

14th century England. Plenty of statistics, but also the author worked hard to tell about life in an interesting narrative way that kept things from getting too dry. I found all the little tidbits about trade and buildings and the daily life of an Englishman very informative as well as statistics about percentages of the population that was literate, what sort of life you could expect if you were born into a household that worked for a landowner, etc. 5/5 stars.

Tracey says

Huh - I either never posted this review, or it vanished. Yay for beginning-of-the-year cleanup.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

A Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England was a title calculated to gain my attention. The premise: a different take on presenting an overview of a period of time, using the format of a travel guide – something of a *Fodor's England 1320* that might be found in the TARDIS. Exploring the experience of all the senses, this should be a gem of a resource to the writer of historical fiction or fantasy.

From the introduction:

We might eat differently, be taller, and live longer, and we might look at jousting as being unspeakably dangerous and not at all a sport, but we know what grief is, and what love, fear, pain, ambition, enmity, and hunger are. We should always remember that what we have in common with the past is just as important – real and essential to our lives as those things which make us different.

Er. Almost lost me there. "Be taller" I can let pass with a chuckle – I'd probably fit right in, heightwise, in 1320, tall only amongst hobbits (oh: actually, I'd still be short – women averaged 5'2") – but I strenuously object to the remarks about jousting. Dangerous? Yes, and so are auto racing and football. Not at all a sport? Pfft. Say that to former NYRF jousters Justin Lewis or Justin Ray Thompson's face, I dare you. (And before anyone can chime in, yes I'm aware that the jousting of today bears about the same resemblance to 14th century joust as today's sword fighting resembles theirs. But it's still a sport. It had its own reality show for a minute there.)

"W.H. Auden once suggested that to understand your own country, you need to have lived in at least two others. One can say something similar for periods of time. To understand your own century, you need to have come to terms with at least two others." I like it. If nothing else, one wonderful thing about looking at another time period in this sort of format is as in the introduction, the oft-repeated, but necessarily so, axiom that people never change. There are some shifts in perception and tolerance – bear- and bull-baiting are no longer remotely acceptable in much of the world, and the education of children no longer relies heavily on the rod, and it's no longer considered a hilarious lark to set a trap to string someone up by the ankle ... but it's taken centuries to shift such things out of the norm into the abnormal, and the behaviors or the desires toward them do still linger. One point carried through this book is that, fundamentally, a medieval man or woman is not so very different from someone you'd meet on the street right now. (Particularly if "right now" you're walking down a path at a Renaissance Faire, but that's a whole 'nother post.)

I rather enjoy how almost point for point this book contradicts *A World Lit Only By Fire*. As described there, the medieval period was dark ("lit only by fire") and filthy and pest-ridden, and the peasantry slogged their way through a short and grinding existence until they died of something which could probably be cured or

prevented now. In which there is some truth, of course – but Ian Mortimer points out that a medieval man had no 21st-century standard by which to judge his own surroundings. If it was by our standards filthy, that only means our cleaning methods include chemicals, ready-made tools, and easily accessed fresh water; the average housewife did quite well with what she had. No one expected to live to see their nineties, and while the average day in the life might have been filled with drudgery, the sun shone just as bright as it does now, and it was also filled with laughter and song every chance there was.

Otherwise, there were surprisingly few surprises here for a reader of a great many medieval-set books; whatever can be said of some, I have always had the greatest faith that Edith Pargeter's books could be relied on as largely accurate. But it is the handful of surprises, and the much more generous concentration of detail, that make this a terrific reference. How far can someone expect to travel on medieval roads, on foot or by horse or otherwise? It's in here.

There is some excellent information here, entertainingly presented. I do wish some parts had been expanded, though. Sumptuary laws are touched on, the origins, and some detail given – but I think if a time traveller had to rely purely on this book as regards to what he is and is not allowed to wear he might end up in trouble: color, for example, was dictated as well as material. A great many of the dictates were moot, as crimson velvet or any material dyed purple was too expensive for most, but on the off chance a time traveller missed this and just wore the most accurate things she had for the Renaissance Faire, she could be subject to fine.

Another thing that surprised me was the failure to explain small surprising things ... for example, the mention of a brown scarlet item of clothing. Apparently, I find after a little research, "scarlet" (from mid 13th century French) originally meant fine fabric, of whatever color: "a kind of rich cloth". (1200–50; Middle English < Old French escarlate < Medieval Latin scarlata, scarletum, perhaps < Arabic saqirl??, siqill?? < Medieval Greek sigillátos < Latin sigill?tus decorated with patterns in relief; see sigillate). The author is very good about most such things, which makes this sort of omission strange.

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On the whole, while this was a wonderful idea, well-written and well-read, and very enjoyable, for me there just wasn't quite the depth of information I hoped for. This was a very nice overview, dipping down here and there for a closer look. But I still love the idea of the Fodor's Medieval England; I'd love to see that. I listened to the Audible version, which despite a lovely reading by Jonathan Keeble probably didn't do justice to the book. This is the sort of book which encourages flipping back and forth, referring to the index and whatever other appendices there might be, as well as - I daresay - illustrations which were, obviously, absent from my version. Highly recommended - on paper.

Karen Brooks says

Historian Ian Mortimer does something really interesting with this book: he sets out to recreate the period (the Fourteenth Century) as if he were writing a travel book for tourists as opposed to researching and explaining a forgotten time. In other words, he places the reader in the moment, advising you where to go, what to see, how to behave, speak, dress and what to expect should you happen to have the good fortune to be transported back to not-so-merry old England in the 1300s.

After my second reading of this book in less than a year, I wish I had access to Dr Who's Tardis because, with Mortimer's well-thumbed book under my arm, I would head straight for Exeter, where the book opens, prepared for the ordure of the aptly named, Shitbrook, the breath-taking sight of the cathedral, avert my eyes from the remains of criminals clinging to the gallows, and be careful not to stare at the bright and strange clothes the people are wearing, while tripping along the cobbles, one hand firmly on my money so a cut-purse does not take it.

Like many contemporary historians, Mortimer believes in social history, reconstructing the past in order to understand how it was lived and not simply by kings, queens, monks, lawyers and nobles, those who have left records of their deeds and desires for us to absorb and through which we judge them. Instead, Mortimer turns to all classes and all experiences and takes the reader on a magnificent and fascinating journey back to a character-filled society with its own delights and dangers. It was so good the first time, I did it again and liked it even better.

Explaining where to stay, how to tell the time, greet people (Eg. "fellow or friend, ye be welcome"), about the sumptuary laws, what certain coins look like and what you might be able to buy and where, what diseases we might succumb to if we're not careful, what we might be served and how to eat it whether it be in an inn, a peasant's house or a king's castle (all of which are thoroughly described as if you're on a guided tour), Mortimer runs the gamut of class and place in this vivid recreation that is at once hugely informative and always vastly entertaining.

Even how to avoid running foul of the law and what punishment might be meted out is made clear as well as the significance of religious observances. Medieval humour is also explored as well as, for those so inclined, where you might find the best er hum, sexual services (Southwark, the Stews, in London, in case you wanted to know). He also discusses how to entertain ourselves while we're there (the Stews aside) and who, among the great figures known to us now, we might expect to encounter on our journey – Geoffrey Chaucer anyone? He has rooms above Aldgate.

Just when you think you've stepped back into the present, Mortimer will remind you to take a deep breath and stop. Listen, he advises. What do we hear? Very little. Maybe some bells, the sounds of birds and animals and, above all, the chatter and clutter of people should we be near a town or city. Or, if present at a joust, the thunder of hooves. The medieval world is a very quiet place, something I hadn't considered, along with many of the other preconceptions and yes, prejudices I had about this period and which Mortimer's grandest of tours manages to overturn.

If you're looking for a book that will literally transport you to another time and place, than I cannot recommend this one highly enough. A fabulous read.

Brad says

What a fantastic way to consume an overview of an historical period. Ian Mortimer's decision to create a guide for tourism shifts the focus of history from the "Great People of History" to the "People You'll Meet while Walking by Shitbrook," and that turns out to be far more fascinating -- at least to me.

Want to know how to avoid prosecution for murder in case you slip up during your travels? Mortimer lets you know. Want to know what sports you can expect to enjoy? They're all here. Want to know what drinks to avoid, what to look for in foods, what roads to take, what protection you'll need while travelling, what to wear, what to read, what to carry with you? Look no further than this fantastic guide.

I'll be leaving for London 1362 tomorrow, just after one of the outbursts of plague has cleared up. That way I can take advantage of the decreased and depressed population, and hopefully avoid the buboes.

See you when I get back.

LeeAnne says

A very fun, entertaining book!

Here are a few things I learned:

The Landscape:

There are almost no conifer or evergreen trees in the middle ages so the winter skyline is particularly bleak.

There are no grey squirrels, only red ones. The grey variety has yet to reach Britain.

Cattle and sheep are smaller than their modern counterparts: much smaller.

There are no wolves. The last English wolf was killed in North Lancashire in the 14th century.

The People:

Half of the entire population are under the age of 21 so everyone is inexperienced and immature. Imagine a nation being run by a bunch of hormonal teenage boys. People marry at age 14. Many commanders in the Army are still in their teens.

A woman who is 30 years old is considered to be in the winter of her life. Women are blamed for all intellectual and moral weaknesses in society and are basically viewed as deformed men.

The avg medieval person is considerably shorter than their counterparts of today, although nobility are about the same height as today. This disparity in height is due to genetic selection as well as difference in diet. The extra height gives a nobleman a considerable advantage in a fight.

Speaking of fighting, it is not unusual to come across men who have lost eyes, ears and limbs in wars. A surprisingly large amount of men have to hobble around without a leg or with foot injuries that never healed correctly.

Food:

The main staple of food is bread & something called "pottage" a thick stew of oats or peas (green pottage) or leeks (white pottage) that has been boiled into a mush for several hours over a fire. If you have a garden, you will throw in some herbs, garlic and cabbage. Add left over bread crumbs as thickener and that's your daily meal when you are not eating plain bread.

Most peasants have very few opportunities to eat meat, dairy or even fish. Pickled and salted herring is the

only kind of fish they usually eat.

If you have a well kept fruit orchard you are very lucky and can make preserves from apples, pears, berries, plums and grapes.

A Medieval Street in York, England

The Language:

In 1300 the nobility speak French, not English! If you can't speak French, you can't command any respect. Only the lowly poor peons speak English. Nobody commissions any literature in English. Not until 1350 when King Edward the III, who speaks English, expresses pride in the English language, do aristocrats begin to speak English as well as French.

Hygiene:

People rarely bathed or did laundry but did wash their hands before each meal.

A peasant usually had only one set of clothes.

Health:

In the Great Plague, 35%-45% of the entire population is wiped out in just 9 months. Thousands of villages are left empty. If you are lucky enough to avoid catching the plague, don't relax too much, leprosy or tuberculosis might still get you.

If you do get sick, and are wealthy enough to pay a physician, he will not need to see you in person to treat you because diagnosis are based on astronomy. You will also be diagnosed by the color and smell of your urine and the taste of your blood.

There is so much more in this book, but I can't tell you everything! Please read it! It's really good!

Tracey says

Obviously, *A Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* was a title calculated to gain my attention. The premise: a different take on presenting an overview of a period of time, using the format of a travel guide – something of a *Fodor's England 1320* that might be found in the TARDIS. Exploring the experience of all the senses, this should be a gem of a resource to the writer of historical fiction or fantasy.

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"W.H. Auden once suggested that to understand your own country, you need to have lived in at least two others. One can say something similar for periods of time. To understand your own century, you need to have come to terms with at least two others." I like it. If nothing else, one wonderful thing about looking at another time period in this sort of format is as in the introduction, the oft-repeated, but necessarily so, axiom that people never change. There are some shifts in perception and tolerance – bear- and bull-baiting are no longer remotely acceptable in much of the world, and the education of children no longer relies heavily on the rod, and it's no longer considered a hilarious lark to set a trap to string someone up by the ankle ... but it's taken centuries to shift such things out of the norm into the abnormal, and the behaviors or the desires toward them do still linger. One point carried through this book is that, fundamentally, a medieval man or woman is not so very different from someone you'd meet on the street right now. (Particularly if "right now" you're walking down a path at a Renaissance Faire, but that's a whole 'nother post.)

I rather enjoy how almost point for point this book contradicts *A World Lit Only By Fire*. As described there, the medieval period was dark ("lit only by fire") and filthy and pest-ridden, and the peasantry slogged their way through a short and grinding existence until they died of something which could probably be cured or prevented now. In which there is some truth, of course – but Ian Mortimer points out that a medieval man had no 21st-century standard by which to judge his own surroundings. If it was by our standards filthy, that only means our cleaning methods include chemicals, ready-made tools, and easily accessed fresh water; the average housewife did quite well with what she had. No one expected to live to see their nineties, and while the average day in the life might have been filled with drudgery, the sun shone just as bright as it does now, and it was also filled with laughter and song every chance there was.

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Bettie? says

Description: *Imagine you could get into a time machine and travel back to the 14th century. This text sets out to explain what life was like in the most immediate way, through taking the reader to the Middle Ages, and showing everything from the horrors of leprosy and war to the ridiculous excesses of roasted larks and haute couture.*

As Susanna mentions in her review, the clothing section was very interesting: knitting was not known in 14C.

Fully recommended.

3.5* The Time Traveller's Guide to Elizabethan England

4.5* The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England

Orsolya says

Most of us who read history or historical fiction set in Medieval (or even Tudor) England, can agree on one thing: we can't understand the ways of life "back then" properly because we tend to apply modern morals and standards to history. However, with the "The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England", readers can finally understand Medieval times. I guarantee you will never look at a history book the same again...

Divided into main sections such as the landscape, people, medieval character, what to eat/drink, etc; Ian Mortimer dives deep into medieval life. His depth of information is staggering (but never boring or overwhelming) and allows the reader to fully understand medieval life which extends beyond knights and jousts. Consider it a 'Medieval Times 101' crash course, as Mortimer focuses on the macro view of life versus individual kings or events (although he does touch upon specifics) as we are used to reading. Although academic in topic, Mortimer's writing style is anything but; as it is easy to understand, descriptive, and witty.

The Time Traveler's Guide cleared up so much information in my mind which has been swimming around from the countless history books I have figuratively consumed. The ranks of clergy, description of the privy seal (and other seals), and even "fun" factoids such as the inception of "acres", the defining term "o'clock", and even surnames (John Ilbertson used to be John, son of Ilbert) are included and explained in a clear and rational way. The reader truly feels like he or she is visiting the past (sort of like Scrooge with the Ghost of

Christmas Past), observing life and almost being apart of it. Mortimer is rich, colorful, and very informative. There ARE some moments of overwhelming presentations, but that is due to the lack of standardization in England during that time and not due to Mortimer's writing style or expertise. My favorite realization? I FINALLY understood the differences between pennies, shillings, marks, and pounds. In the past, my eyes have always glazed over during money talks in other history books.

One qualm was the constant references to Chaucer and "The Canterbury Tales". Although Mortimer used a medium amount of sources for the book; Chaucer is readily quoted and referred to. If Chaucer was a brand and this book was a TV show, it would scream, "product placement". Also, the chapter regarding laws and court systems was confusing, but admittedly, I'm not even interested in those topics in modern times so perhaps it just wasn't my cup of tea, personally.

Overall, The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England is an absolutely terrific book: one of those works which you are sad to see end. The crux of it all is Mortimer's passion for history. There is no escaping it and it bleeds through his work. More importantly, he views history in a different manner than the average person passing this ardor onto the reader, who will never view history or Medieval England the same again. The Time Traveler's Guide to Medieval England should be used as the sourcebook for every subsequent medieval-themed historical fiction book, play, TV show, commercial, etc. Where was this book over 15 years ago when I was a school child partaking in our school's "Medieval Faire"? Perhaps, I should travel back into that time...

Cait • A Page with a View says

It's nonfiction written like fiction, which made it super fascinating to read. This book covers all of the details of what life would be like in medieval England, except it walks you through each section like you're really there experiencing it. There were some really amazing facts and I actually learned a lot (like what types of squirrels were present at this time).

abby says

"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." -- L. P. Hartley

Take this book along on your next trip to Medieval England to help ensure your travel experience is a smooth one. Some things you might need to know for your journey:

-- If you are from Australia, you might be impressed that even in the 1300s people have some vague concept of existence of the continent. However, you should keep in mind it's considered much too hot for man to inhabit, and instead is the home of creatures that hop around on a floppy, oversized foot that they use to shade themselves.

-- Don't eat meat on Wednesday, Friday, or Saturday. The Church forbids it. Seafood is permitted, but good luck finding some outside the nobility. Water loving species like badgers and puffins count as seafood (but please don't eat puffins!).

-- Hospitals are for the sick, but also travelers. If you stay there you might have the fun experience of sleeping in the same bed as someone with leprosy.

-- Speaking of lepers, try not to come down with a rash of any sort in the 1300s or you might be declared one and forced to wear a bell around your neck (ask your cat about how this can damage your self esteem).

-- You might notice more blind horses wandering around than you'd expect (which would probably be no blind horses at all). Blinding horses was the Medieval equivalent of scratching off vin numbers, meant to insure stolen beasts didn't make their way back home.

This book is the slice-of-life history study I've been searching for. It's everything I'd hoped Ruth Goodwin's *How To Be a Tudor* would be but wasn't. I've never had a strong interest in Medieval times or English history, but that's not required to enjoy this fast paced and fun book. If I had one critique it would be to add more information about the Church and the Plague, both of which dominated 14th century life but were absent throughout most of the book. Highly recommended for history fans.
