

HOMework HELPERS

INVESTIGATING MEDIEVAL LIFE

Cooking in the Village

Today we are used to having a wide choice of food every day. We can choose from a huge range of food from all over the world in our supermarkets. Most foods are available all year round. We eat strawberries in winter time, kiwi fruit from New Zealand and can choose from Italian, Indian or Chinese carry out meals in the evenings. Five hundred years ago, life for ordinary people in Scotland was very different.

What kind of food did ordinary people eat?

Most ordinary people ate the same food every day. They had two meals a day, made from food which they had grown or produced themselves. They ate a lot of food made with oats – a heavy kind of oat bread, porridge and rough, thick oatcakes called bannocks. Stews and thick soups called pottage were also common and sometimes you might have mutton from sheep. If you lived near the sea you would be able to eat fish. At different times of the year there would be different types of fruit and vegetables. Many people kept cows and hens for milk and eggs. Honey was the only way of sweetening food. Everyone - even children! - drank a weak kind of home-made beer made from barley because it was difficult to make sure that water was clean.



Where did the food come from?

Most people had a patch of land for growing crops. People grew oats, barley and vegetables, such as a kind of cabbage called kale, beans, peas and onions. If the harvest was bad, then families would be short of food and people would die because of hunger. Families kept a cow or two, or goats to provide milk for making cheese and for the meat. The cows were killed in the autumn because there was not enough food for them to eat during the winter. Hens were kept for their eggs and meat. People collected food from the woods – nuts, berries and mushrooms. They also laid traps for rabbits and for small birds. If you lived near the sea you would have the chance to catch fish such as herring and to collect shellfish like cockles and mussels. The rich local landowner was the only person allowed to catch fish from rivers – but you might have tried to catch them anyway, by poaching at night time.

How was the food cooked?

Most people lived in small houses with just one room. In the middle of the room was an open fire. The smoke would drift out through gaps in the roof. All food was cooked over the fire. Food could be boiled up in a pot which sat or hung over the fire, or could be roasted over the fire. Oatcakes were made on a kind of frying pan called a griddle.

How did people keep food?

There were no fridges in those days so fresh food could not be kept for long. It was possible to dry certain foods such as fish, meat and herbs over the fire. Vegetables could be pickled to make them last longer.

