



# Medieval Pilgrimage to Walsingham



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# Why Walsingham?

In the year 1061 a noblewomen called Lady Richeldis lived in Walsingham. She was devoted to God and to Mary, and wanted to do something special to honour them. She prayed about this.

One night, Lady Richeldis had a vision. In the vision, Mary, mother of Jesus, appeared to her. Mary took Lady Richeldis to the house in Nazareth where the Angel Gabriel had appeared to Mary and asked her to be Jesus's mother. Mary asked Lady Richeldis to build a copy of this house in Walsingham.

Lady Richeldis had the same vision twice more - 3 times in total. She knew from what Mary had said that the House needed to be built near water. There were two possible sites, and she chose one and started to build.

However, everything went wrong. The building wouldn't go together properly and kept falling down. Lady Richeldis was in despair. She spent a night in prayer asking God and Mary for their help.

In the morning, a House had been built...but on the other site. It was so perfect that it is said that it was the angels who brought it in the night.

From then on, people started coming to visit Walsingham, to see where Mary had appeared to Lady Richeldis and to visit the little Holy House. Pilgrimage to Walsingham had begun.

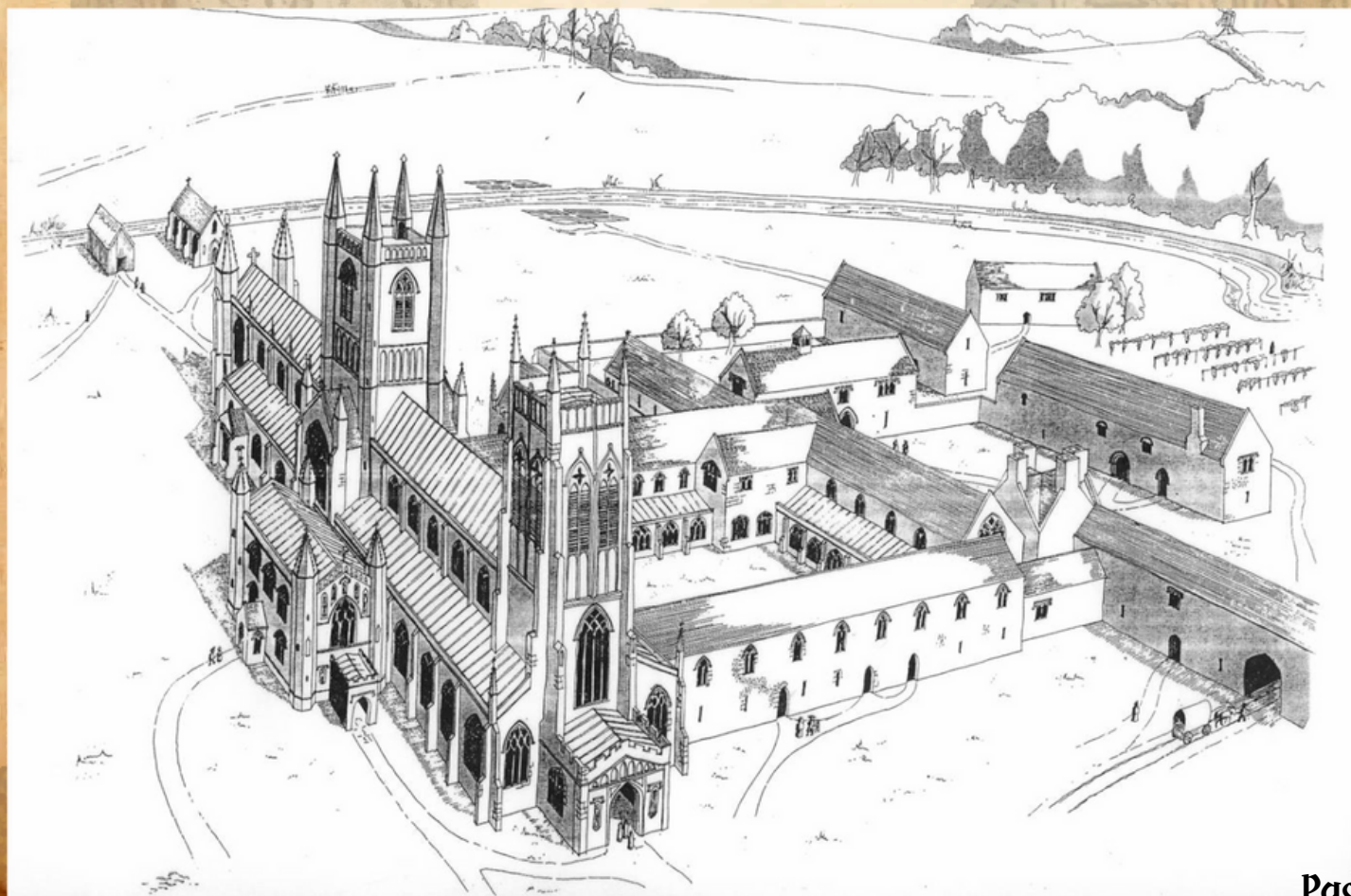




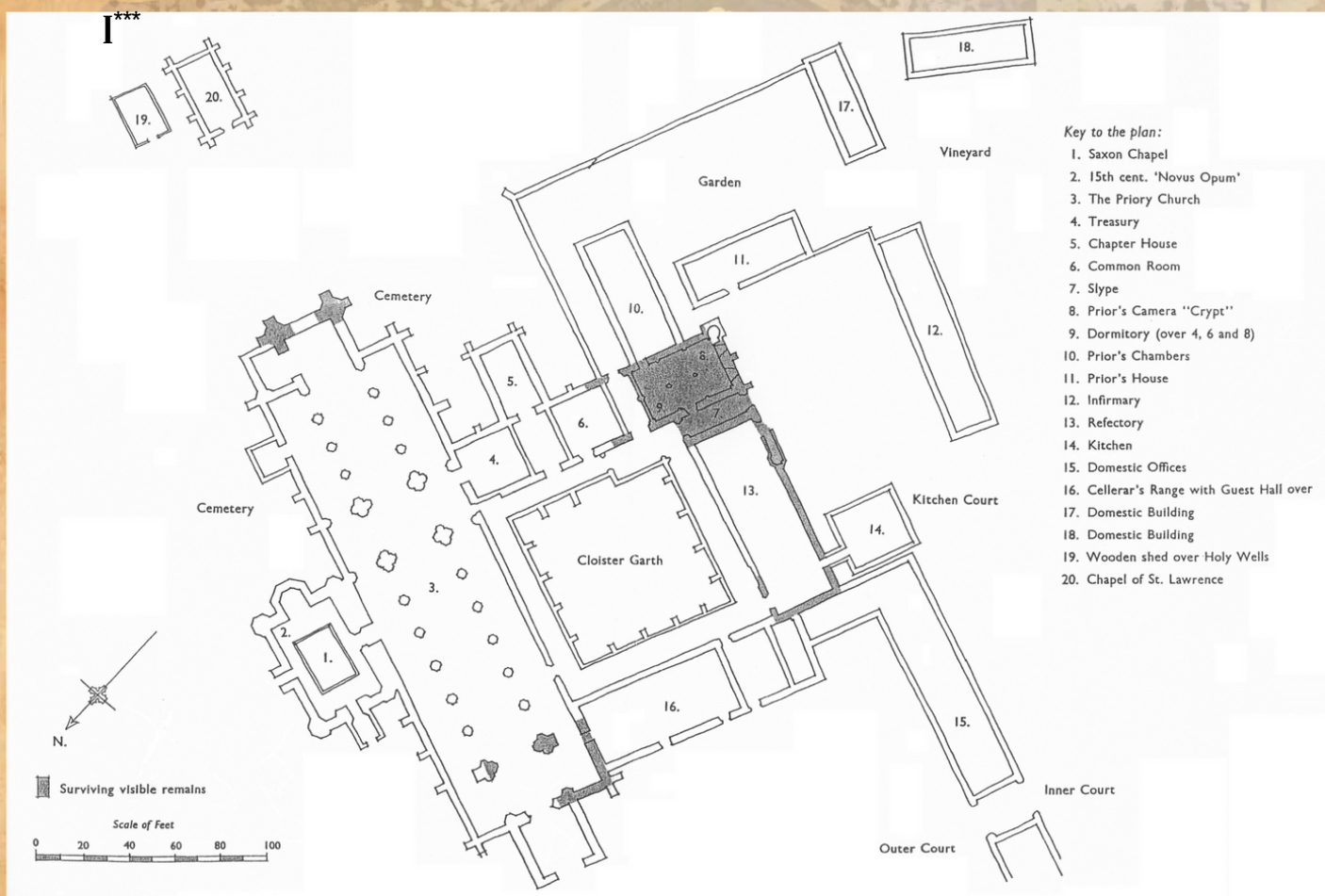
# What happened next in Walsingham?

Geoffrey de Faverches, son of the Lady Richeldis, started the process of building a church next to the wooden Holy House. Over the next nearly 500 years, a stone church, complete with a stone building covering the Holy House, plus an Abbey were constructed.

Following the Reformation, the Abbey fell into disrepair and many of the stones were taken by locals who used them in their houses. One house in Walsingham village still has carved faces in the living room on stones looted from the church! The only remaining feature today is the eastern arch, known as the Lonely Arch.



# What happened next in Walsingham?



**Above:** A plan of the Abbey grounds.

**Left:** The stone building enclosing the wooden Holy House.



# What is Pilgrimage?

Pilgrimage is a journey with an intention, usually to a place of some significance for the pilgrim. It will often involve some form of hardship, such as walking barefoot or observing dietary restrictions.

The word 'Pilgrimage' comes from Latin *peregrinus* (foreign) and *per ager* (going through fields)



# Why Did People go on Pilgrimage?

There were many reasons why medieval pilgrims went on a pilgrimage:

## **For religious reasons**

Religious reasons for going on pilgrimage could include visiting a place where relics of saints were kept, to gain spiritual merit or to do something difficult for God by enduring hardships when travelling. Pilgrimages in Medieval times could be local or long-distance. Some pilgrims travelled from England to Jerusalem or Santiago de Compostela in Spain! Local pilgrimages were cheaper and easier, but still important when giving thanks or asking for help from God.

## **To socialise**

Socialising was a large part of pilgrimage. From travelling in a group to meeting new people on the way and storytelling while walking or riding (see the Canterbury Tales for an example of this), pilgrimage gave people the chance to encounter others and gain a sense of belonging to a group. Pilgrimages often coincided with church festivals, fairs and markets so there was an added incentive to travel at these times for fun as well as prayer.

## **To seek a cure for illness**

With little or no medical care available for the majority of people in medieval times, cures for illnesses were few. Many people believed that illness was a punishment from God, so going on a pilgrimage specifically to seek a cure was very popular.

(see later section on illness for more details).

# Why Did People go on Pilgrimage?

There were many reasons why medieval pilgrims went on a pilgrimage:

## **To visit new places**

While many people stayed close to home (and some, including slaves, were not allowed to travel), in medieval times pilgrimage gave an excuse for venturing to new places. These could be locally in England, more distant, or abroad. Holidays were not common, but a pilgrimage would have provided a change from daily routines and labour.

## **For entertainment**

Markets in larger towns would have been a feast for the senses. As well as providing basics such as food and cloth, more exotic spices, silks, furs, leather and fruits such as dates, oranges and lemons could be purchased...if you had the money! Annual fairs, which lasted for 3 days around a church feast day, provided entertainment (jugglers, singers, drama) as well as drink and a chance to meet others.

## **Because they had to!**

If a crime had been committed, a punishment given could be to go on a pilgrimage to say sorry for what had been done. The criminal needed to bring back a letter or pilgrim souvenir to prove that the pilgrimage had been completed.

# Who were Pilgrims?

Pilgrims ranged from royalty to everyday people, just like you or me.

## 11th Century

In the 11th century, England was invaded by the Normans from France. Powerless to do anything about it, everyone was required to pray for the invaders to leave. There was an understanding that the invasion (in common with illnesses) were a punishment from God for sins committed.

Pilgrimage became more and more popular in the years following 1066, including to Walsingham. Perhaps the only way to try and have some control over nationwide affairs, such as the occupying rulers, or more local concerns such as being enslaved or suffering from illness.

It is very difficult to put numbers on pilgrims who were travelling at this time. This is because record keeping was developing and only exceptional circumstances were recorded. In addition, only male pilgrims were recorded; women and children were excluded.

## 15th Century

By the 15th century, pilgrimage was less fashionable, largely due to the invention of printing which allowed people who could afford it to have Bibles and other religious writings in their own homes. The proliferation of relics also meant that travelling long distances to venerate a relic was less necessary as local families and churches had their own.

It's in this atmosphere that Henry VIII founded the Church of England in the Reformation when a split from the Roman Catholic church took place.

# Royal Visitors

King Henry III was the first documented royal to visit Walsingham in the 13th Century. Following his visit, he asked for a candle to be lit for the monarch in the Holy House. This tradition continues to this day. He also gave money for timber, tapers and a golden crown for the head of the statue.

## King Henry VIII

King Henry VIII visited Walsingham with his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. They prayed in the Holy House and Henry VIII left money for stained glass windows to be installed. In common with previous monarchs, a candle burned in the Holy House for the King.

Despite this, when King Henry VIII sent out messengers to demand that church allegiance should be transferred to him from the Pope, Walsingham was one of the first places to capitulate. Clerics who did not agree, such as Mileham, were murdered.

The Priory and church which had been built next to the Holy House were abandoned. The Holy House was destroyed and the gold, jewels and statue were taken to London. Henry VIII took the wealth for himself, and the statue of Mary holding Jesus, was burned in Chelsea.

# Pilgrimage Basics

## Where to Stay

On the journey and on arrival in Walsingham, there were a variety of places to stay:

### Inns

Inns were an option for travellers who could pay, but beware, if you looked poor you may not have been able to get a bed. Facilities were rough with wooden bed frames strung with rope. Thank goodness for thick pilgrim cloaks to keep you warm in the night. They could be rather smelly with floors covered with rushes mixed with stale food, urine and spilled drinks. Add to this candles made from tallow (animal fat) and the shared cess pit (open toilet) and the smell could have been rather overwhelming. Some inn-keepers mixed herbs, lavender and rose petals with the rushes to try to make it smell better.

Staying in an inn was an expensive option as you would have also paid for your servants and any horses to rest there too.

# **Pilgrimage Basics**

## **Where to Stay**

**On the journey and on arrival in Walsingham, there were a variety of places to stay:**

### **Private Homes**

**Many householders were prepared to share their homes with travellers. Looking after pilgrims was seen as an act of charity and it was believed this could earn merit with God. Private houses were a much better option than staying in an inn, and could be luxurious. However, if you stayed in a peasant house, facilities would be much more basic.**

### **Castles and Manor Houses**

**Castles and manor houses were lived in by noblemen. They would be more likely to host noble pilgrims rather than peasants, and the hospitality could be lavish. Being larger, more people could be hosted. Entertainment and conversation around the fire included listening to or telling stories, dancing and playing dice games. Servants would keep the food and drink flowing.**

# Pilgrimage Basics

## Where to Stay

On the journey and on arrival in Walsingham, there were a variety of places to stay:

### **Monasteries:**

Abbeys, priories and hospitals offered places to stay and eat as part of their Christian duty. Depending on your social status, you may have slept over the stables with other pilgrims or been hosted by the Abbott (head monk) himself. While the food was plain, it was nutritious. The plumbing and sanitation was the best out of all the available places to stay. But, beware, the toilets were shared and often had 3 or 4 seats in a row!

### **Hospitals:**

The word 'hospital' comes from 'hospitality' - that is, looking after people. While 'hospitals' were often used by people who were sick, they could also host others. There were lots of rules to follow if you did stop in a 'hospital' - saying prayers on arrival and attending church before leaving for example. You would also have eaten in silence as the Bible was read to you and the food would have been plain and cheap.

# Pilgrimage Basics

## How to Get There

### **Pilgrimage Travel:**

In medieval times most people didn't venture far from home routinely. Exceptions were for pilgrimage and to visit markets in larger towns or cities. Maps were uncommon, large and not to scale - in fact, the Gough map was the size of a door - so navigation was tricky. Compasses were unknown in England.

If you wanted to travel from London to Walsingham you may have made use of local guides. With the knowledge of their own area, they could escort you to the next major town where you would pick up another guide and so on.

Roads were based on the Roman road network. Bridges were initially uncommon; to cross a river you would need to use a ford. However, the upkeep of stone bridges became a pious act and a form of indulgence. This is why many bridges had chapels built on or near them.

Many people would have walked but other options included travelling by horse or, if you were rich, by coach or by litter. It was slow going - about 3mph - so you could only cover around 15 miles per day.

# Pilgrimage Basics

## What to Eat

In medieval times, many people worked on the land to produce food for themselves and their families. There was little surplus and people often starved to death. Food was available seasonally and, with no refrigeration, could not be stored easily, other than by salting.

The general pattern was for 2 meals a day, dinner at around 10-11am and supper at around 4-5pm. Breakfast was not common, except if embarking on a long journey, in which case bread and cheese may be eaten in the morning.

There were strict rules, laid down by the church, about what could be eaten when. No meat on Weds, Fri or Sat and throughout Lent and Advent, with, additionally, no eggs during Lent or Advent. These restrictions applied to everyone - King to slaves - and anyone who disobeyed was sentenced in the church court.

Meat was generally available more readily in the autumn. As it was expensive to feed animals over the winter, they were slaughtered at Martinmas (11th November). During the summer, the meat may be roasted, but boiling was preferred as it kept all the nutrients in the water, later used for pottage (thick soup) or stews, rather than the fat dripping into the fire and being wasted.

# Pilgrimage Basics

## What to Eat

### Fruit and vegetables:

These were available seasonally. Some foods which are common today were not available. These included potatoes, tomatoes or carrots. Fruit and vegetables were eaten mainly by the growers, but some were traded in local villages and towns. Some exotic fruits were imported, including oranges, lemons and pomegranates.

### A Peasant Diet:

Poorer people ate a plain diet consisting of staples of boiled bacon, rye bread and peas plus a soup called pottage. Pottage was made from meat stock, oats, salt and just about anything else that was available. Meat was not often eaten as animals, such as cows were of more use alive as they provided milk. Vegetables were home grown and included onions, garlic, peas, leeks, cabbage and beans. Fruits, fresh and preserved, included apples, pears, cherries, plums, grapes, walnuts, damsons, wild blackberries and sloes. Some fresh fish was expensive as it was difficult to transport unless it was preserved in salt. However, it was much sought after as fish could be eaten on days when meat could not.

Ale, containing malted barley or oats and flavoured with herbs, was drunk instead of dirty water.

Bread was brown and wholegrain and used as trenchers or plates. The soaked bread was fed to pigs following a meal.

# Pilgrimage Basics

## What to Eat

### A Nobleman's Diet:

In contrast to a peasant's diet, noblemen and the rich ate a diet which was heavily meat based. This showed their wealth as they could afford it. A typical feast may have looked like this:

- Boiled and stewed meats in sauces
- Fruit, nuts or a surprise (such as live birds coming out of a pie)
- Roast meat - e.g. venison, heron, partridge, rabbit
- Smaller animals - e.g. sparrows, martinets with quince
- Cheese
- Hypocras - spiced red wine and wafers

Fish and seafood were served on days when meat could not be eaten. This included: seals, porpoises, puffins, dolphins and geese (which were classed as fish as they had begun their lives in water!)

Vegetables were used in sauces, not served separately.

Sugar was available in many different forms and was used to flavour food along with nutmeg, cinnamon, ginger, salt, treacle, pepper, cloves and coriander.

Bread was made from refined white flour. This is in contrast to the heavy, rye bread eaten by peasants.

Any left-overs, if there were any, were given to the poor.

# Pilgrimage Basics

## What to Eat

### Monasteries:

When pilgrims arrived in Walsingham, the monastery - a place where monks who had taken religious vows lived and worked - was an option for both staying in and eating at. However, despite everyone being equal in the eyes of God, there was much inequality in the treatment of pilgrims (and within the community of monks itself). The best food was reserved for the Abbott (head monk) and shared with important or rich guests. Ordinary or poorer pilgrims and less important monks ate a much plainer diet. The almoner (who looked after the money) and the sacristan (who looked after the church) were entitled to better fish and fruit than other monks, for example.

There would have been two dining rooms - one for the monks and one for the pilgrims. They were called a Refectory. According to the rule of St Benedict, monks were not supposed to eat 4 legged animals in the Refectory, and no meat on Wednesdays, Fridays or Saturdays. The monks, however, interpreted this to mean that animals could be eaten, just not in the Refectory itself. Thus began the tradition of a misericord, an alternative dining room in which brothers could eat meat up to 86 days per year on a rota basis.

# Pilgrimage Basics

## What to Eat

A typical menu might have looked something like this:

**Breakfast** - only the Abbott and other principal monks may have had some bread and cheese. The other monks were expected to be in church!

**Dinner (late morning meal):**

**In the Refectory:** pottage (soup) with meat entrails (oral), birds, fish, cheese flan or a custard based dish.

**In the Misericord:** meat including beef, veal, mutton, pork or lamb.

**Supper (afternoon or evening meal):**

One course only, meat or shellfish.

(Fish was only served at dinner - many monasteries had their own fishponds).

Pilgrims and guests may have eaten in a similar manner to this, but it was unlikely they would have enjoyed the meats...except if they were rich and noble!

# Pilgrimage Basics

## What to Wear

By the 14th century, it was not necessary to wear any special clothes to be a pilgrim. Traditionally, a long tunic, cloak and wide brimmed hat were worn, but this was not common by the end of the middle ages.

Fashions changed greatly through the medieval period from largely shapeless dresses and tunics in the early times to more figure revealing clothes later. As tailoring improved, so did the elaborateness of clothing, especially sleeves. Your social status would have determined what you could wear.



Some pilgrims wore a scallop shell on a cord around their neck. This is an ancient symbol of pilgrimage, and could be used for baptism. In some churches, a scallop shell is still used for baptism today.



# Pilgrimage Basics

## Illness:

In medieval times, illness was often fatal. Physicians of the time treated illness differently from today. There was not the same understanding of how the body works, and so treatment was based on astrology, herbology, faith and a lot of luck. There were two main theories which dictated how people were treated:

1) Religious - this explained illness as coming directly from God in response to sins committed. There was a belief that disease and suffering purified the soul so to be cured required faith and belief in God. Cures were granted by God, which rather let the physicians off the hook if the person did not recover or survive!

2) Humors - in Medieval times it was believed that the body contained 4 humors which corresponded to the 4 elements of fire, water, earth and air. These were cholera, phlegm, black bile and blood. In order to be healthy, these humors needed to be in balance. This meant that if someone had a fever, they had too much fire and needed to be treated with cold compresses.

Going on pilgrimage, either for yourself or for someone who was too ill to travel, was one of the few things you could do for yourself to try to help. Pilgrimage made a statement to God that your belief was strong and by travelling a distance and enduring hardships, this demonstrated devoutness and earned merit with God. In addition, monks were good herbalists and there was a chance that they could help.

# Pilgrimage Basics

## Illness:

At Walsingham, there was the added draw of being able to drink, wash and bathe in the water from holy wells. Pilgrims took part in Sprinkling at the well, being given the water in 3 ways, and were able to take some of the water home in ampullae (little bottles). In the Abbey grounds there remains the 2 wells and the bath, built for pilgrims to immerse themselves in.

A final option may have been surgery, without any real anaesthetic or sterile equipment. It was very dangerous to be treated in this way, and death by medical misadventure was common. Given this, enduring a pilgrimage seemed a far better option.



# Further Reading and References

## Fiction:

- **A Little Lower than the Angels - Geraldine McCaughrean**

A superb story about an apprentice stonemason in medieval times.  
Suitable for 7 upwards.

## Non-Fiction:

- **The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England - Ian Mortimer**

A very readable "travel guide" to Medieval England.  
Suitable for 14 upwards.

## References:

- **The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England - Ian Mortimer**
- **Pilgrimage - A Very Short Introduction - Ian Reader**
- **The Oxford History of Medieval England - Saul**
- **Pilgrimage in Medieval England - Webb**
- **English Medieval Pilgrimage - D.J. Hall**
- **Food and Feast in Medieval England - Hammond**

