

HARSH OR HEROIC?

In a **castle** on top of a lofty hill, flags fly from towering turrets. A beautiful lady stands at the balcony of a tall tower. Below, a knight in full armour parades on his horse.

What do you think of when you hear about knights in shining armour? Search in your library for stories and poems featuring knights. How are they most usually shown?

This sounds exciting, doesn't it? Well, in the Middle Ages, life was far less colourful than that. Wealth and power lay in the hands of only a few. For most, life was very harsh. Lighting, heating and sanitation were basic. The threat of disease, war or **famine** was a daily reality. The average life expectancy was about 30 years. Despite the harsh living conditions, the Middle Ages were later idealised. A knight's life was seen as heroic, helping the weak and poor, and defending his king. He rescued damsels in distress from the tallest towers and fought imaginary, fire-breathing dragons!



Plague victim

Diseases that are treatable today had harsh and often deadly results in the Middle Ages. Leprosy, an infectious disease, spread to epidemic proportions in Europe during the 1100s and 1200s. Plague killed about 30 million people in Europe and Asia in the mid-1300s. Back then, people didn't know that it was caused by the infected fleas of black rats.



Wars and battles were a harsh reality of life during medieval times. Richard I was king of England from 1189 to 1199. He was known as Richard the Lionheart. His brave manner made him a popular king. He spent many years fighting to regain seized land. He died during a castle siege.



There were some heroines during the Middle Ages. Joan of Arc was a French peasant who fought at the head of a French army during the Hundred Years' War. The war started in 1337 and ended in 1453! It spanned the reigns of five English kings and five French kings. Joan of Arc was later accused of witchcraft and was burned at the stake.