

with the choice. The pope, not the emperor, became lord of Christendom.

You remember those Nordic seafarers, the Normans, who conquered a stretch of land along the northern coast of France still known as Normandy today? They quickly learnt to speak French, like their neighbours, but they didn't lose their appetite for adventurous sea voyages and conquest. Some of them went as far as Sicily, where they fought the Arabs, then conquered southern Italy and went on, under their great leader Robert Guiscard, to defend Pope Gregory against Henry IV's attacks. Others crossed the narrow stretch of sea that lies between France and England, known as the English Channel, and under their king, William (afterwards named 'the Conqueror'), defeated the English king (a descendant of the Danish King Canute) at the Battle of Hastings. This was in 1066, a date which all the English know, because it was the last time an enemy army succeeded in setting foot on English soil.

William had his officials draw up a list naming every village and property in the land, many of which he bestowed on his fellow soldiers as fiefs. The English nobility were now Normans. And because the Normans who came from Normandy spoke French, the English language is still a mixture of words from Old German and Romance languages.



CHIVALROUS KNIGHTS



I am sure you have heard of knights of old from the Age of Chivalry. And you have probably read books about knights and their squires who set out in search of adventure; stories full of shining armour, plumed helmets and noble steeds, blazoned escutcheons and impregnable fortresses, jousting and tournaments where fair ladies give prizes to the victors, wandering minstrels, forsaken damsels and departures for the Holy Land. The best thing is that all of it really existed. All that glitter and romance is no invention. Once upon a time the world really was full of colour and adventure, and people joyfully took part in that strange and wonderful game called chivalry, which was often played in deadly earnest.

But when exactly was the Age of Chivalry, and what was it really like? The word chivalry comes from the French word *chevalier* meaning horseman, and it was with horsemen that chivalry began. Anyone who could afford a good charger on which to ride into battle was a knight. If he couldn't, he went on foot and wasn't a knight. Noblemen whose lands had been bestowed on them by

the king were also knights and their serfs had to provide hay for the horses. A nobleman might, in his turn, bestow part of his fief on his agent or steward, who would also be rich enough to own a fine horse even if, in other respects, he had little power. When his lord was summoned to war by the king he had to ride with him. So stewards were also knights. Only peasants and poor servants, farm-lads and labourers who went to war on foot weren't knights.

It all began around the time of the emperor Henry IV — that is to say, after the year 1000 — and went on for several centuries, in Germany and in England, but above all in France.

However, these knights weren't yet knights as you or I would imagine them. That only happened gradually. First the princes and nobles set about building themselves great fortresses, fortresses that were intended to be secure against all assault. These can still be seen today in hilly places, or standing, proud and defiant, on sheer cliffs, with only one approach along a tiny, narrow track.

Before you reached the castle gate there was usually a wide ditch or moat, sometimes full of water. Over the moat was a drawbridge, with chains on either side to haul it up at any moment. When the bridge was raised, the castle was secure and no one could get in. On the other side of the ditch were thick, strong walls with loopholes to shoot arrows through and holes for pouring boiling pitch down on the enemy. The walls themselves were topped by tooth-like battlements, behind which you could hide to spy on the enemy. Within this thick wall there was often another one, and sometimes even a third, before you reached the castle courtyard. The courtyard then gave access to the rooms where the knight lived. A hall with a fireplace and a fire was reserved for the women, who were not as hardened to discomfort as the men.

For there was nothing comfortable about life in a castle. The kitchen was a soot-blackened room where meat was roasted on a great spit over a crackling log fire. Apart from the rooms for the knights and their valets there were two others: the chapel, where the chaplain held divine service, and the keep. The keep was a massive tower, generally in the heart of the castle, where stores were usually kept, and in which the knights took refuge once their enemies had

overcome . . . the mountain, the moat, the drawbridge, the boiling pitch and the three walls. At which point, they were confronted by this mighty tower, where the knights were often able to hold out until help arrived.

And of course, we mustn't forget the dungeons! These were cramped and freezing cells in the depths of the castle into which knights threw their prisoners. There they were left to languish in the dark until they died or were ransomed for a vast sum.

You may have seen one of these castles. But the next time you do, don't just think of the knights in chain mail who lived there. Instead, take a look at the walls and towers and spare a thought for the people who built them. Towers perched high on tops of mountain crags, walls hung between precipices. All made by peasant serfs, men deprived of liberty — bondsmen, as they were called. For it was they who had to split and carry the rocks, haul them up and pile them on top of each other. And when their strength gave out, their wives and their children had to take over. A knight could command them to do anything. Better a knight than a serf any day.

Sons of serfs became serfs and the sons of knights, knights. It wasn't so very different from ancient India and its castes.

At the age of seven a knight's son was sent away to another castle, to learn about life. He was called a page, and had to serve the ladies — carry their trains and perhaps read to them aloud — for women were rarely taught to read or write whereas pages usually were. On reaching the age of fourteen, a page became a squire. He didn't have to stay in the castle and sit beside the fire any more. Instead, he was allowed to accompany his knight when he went hunting, or to war. A squire had to carry his knight's shield and spear and hand him his second lance on the battlefield when the first one shattered. He had to obey his master in all things and be true to him. If he proved a brave and loyal squire, he in his turn would be dubbed a knight at the age of twenty-one. The ceremony of dubbing was a very solemn one. The squire first had to fast and pray in the castle chapel. He also received Communion from the priest. Then, in full armour, but without his helmet, sword or shield, he knelt between two witnesses. His lord, who was to dub

him a knight, tapped him on each shoulder and on the neck with the flat blade of his sword, while reciting the following words:

In the name of God and of Mary his mother

Accept this blow and never another.

Be upright, true and brave.

Better a knight than a slave.

Only then was the squire allowed to rise. He was a squire no longer. He was a knight who might now dub others knights, whose shield now bore his coat of arms — a lion, a leopard or a flower — and who would usually choose a fine motto or device to live by. He was solemnly presented with his sword and helmet, golden spurs were fitted to his boots and his shield was set on his arm. Off he rode in his bright plumed helmet, with his mighty lance and a scarlet cloak over his chain mail, accompanied by his own squire, to prove himself worthy of his knighthood.

From all this solemn ceremony you can see that a knight was by now something more than just a soldier on horseback. He was almost a member of an order, like a monk. For to be a good knight, bravery was not enough. A monk served God through prayers and good works and a knight served God through his strength. It was his duty to protect the weak and defenceless, women and the poor, widows and orphans. He was only allowed to draw his sword in a just cause, and must serve God in each and every deed. To his master — his liege lord — he owed absolute obedience. For him he must risk all. He must be neither brutal nor cowardly, and in battle must only fight man to man, never two against one. A vanquished opponent must never be humiliated. We still call this sort of behaviour chivalrous, because it conforms to the knights' ideal.

When a knight loved a lady, he did battle in her honour, and went in search of adventures to win fame for his beloved. He pronounced her name with reverence and did everything she asked. That, too, is part of chivalry. And if it seems natural to you today to let a lady go through a door first, or to bend down and pick up something she has dropped, it's because inside you there is a remnant of the thinking of those knights of old who believed

that it is a gentleman's duty to protect the weak and honour women.

In peacetime, too, a knight would demonstrate his courage and his skill in games of chivalry known as tournaments. Knights from many countries gathered to test their strength at these war games. Dressed in full armour they galloped towards one another at full tilt, each doing his best to unhorse the other with his blunted lance. The lady of the castle presented the winner with a prize — usually a garland of flowers. To please the ladies a knight had to do more than shine at feats of arms. He had to behave in a moderate and noble manner, not curse or swear as soldiers usually did, and master chess-playing and poetry and other arts of peace.

In fact, knights were often great poets, who wrote songs praising the women they loved, telling of their beauty and their virtue. They also sang of the deeds of other knights of the past. There were long stories in verse, telling of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, of Perceval (or Parsifal) and Lohengrin and the Quest for the Holy Grail (the cup Christ drank from at the Last Supper), of the unhappy love of Tristan and Isolde, and even stories about Alexander the Great and the Trojan War.

Minstrels wandered from castle to castle, singing of Siegfried the Dragon-slayer and Theodoric, King of the Goths (who became Dietrich of Berne). These songs, sung in Austria on the Danube at that time, are among the earliest we know, because those transcribed under Charlemagne have all been lost. And if you read the story of Siegfried in the *Song of the Nibelungen*, you will find all the ancient Germanic peasant warriors behaving like true knights. Even the terrifying Attila the Hun, solemnly celebrating his marriage to Siegfried's widow, Kriemhild, in Vienna, is portrayed as a noble and chivalrous king.

As you know, a knight's first duty was to fight for God and for Christendom. And it wasn't long before they found a wonderful opportunity to do so. Christ's tomb in Jerusalem was, as was the whole of Palestine, in the hands of Arab unbelievers. So when reminded of their duty to help liberate the tomb by a great preacher in France, and by the pope — whose victory over the

German kings had made him the mightiest ruler of Christendom – Christian knights in their tens of thousands cried out enthusiastically: 'It is God's will! It is God's will!'

Under the leadership of a French knight, Godfrey of Bouillon, a great army set off along the Danube in 1096, first to Constantinople and then on through Asia Minor towards Palestine. These knights and their followers had crosses of red material stitched to their shoulders and were called 'crusaders'. Their aim was to liberate the land in which Christ's cross had once stood. When, after long years of battles and unimaginable hardships, they finally reached the walls of Jerusalem, it is said that they were so moved by the sight of the Holy City, which they knew from the Bible, that they wept and kissed the soil. Then they besieged the town. It was valiantly defended by Arab soldiers, but eventually they took it.

Once inside Jerusalem, however, they behaved neither like knights nor like Christians. They massacred all the Muslims and committed hideous atrocities. Then they did penance, and, singing psalms, proceeded barefoot to Christ's tomb.

The crusaders founded the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem, with Godfrey of Bouillon as its Protector. But because it was small and weak, far from Europe and in the midst of Muslim kingdoms, the little state was forever under attack from Arab warriors. This meant that, back in England, France and Germany, priests were forever urging knights to go on new crusades. Not all of these were successful.

However, one good thing came of the Crusades, although it wouldn't have pleased the knights at all. In the distant Orient the Christians discovered Arab culture – their buildings, their sense of beauty and their learning. And within a hundred years of the First Crusade, the writings of Alexander the Great's teacher, the books of Aristotle, were translated from Arabic into Latin and eagerly read and studied in Italy, France, Germany and England. People were surprised to find how similar many of his teachings were to those of the Church and filled heavy Latin tomes with complicated thoughts on the subject. All that the Arabs had learnt and experienced in the course of their conquests around the world was now

brought back to Europe by the crusaders. In a number of ways it was the example of those they looked on as their enemies that transformed the barbaric warriors of Europe into truly chivalrous knights.

Medieval Times

Reading and Questions

Directions: After reading “Chivalrous Knights,” answer all questions in your history notebooks, under unit one

Questions for “Chivalrous Knights”

1. What does the word chivalry mean?
2. What were the castles like that these knights lived in?
3. How did a person become a knight?
4. How were the knights expected to act?
5. What did knights do?
6. What did the knights do that was very “un-chivalrous” to the Muslims?