

Knights

In the Middle Ages, there was a definite structure in society. You were born into a class of people and generally stayed in that class for your entire life. Working hard did not change your status. Your clothing, food, marriage, homes, etc., were determined for you. After the rank of king, the hierarchy was the nobles, the knights, the clergy (religious people), the tradesmen and the peasants.

The easiest way to become a knight was to be the son of a noble. At about age 7, the sons were taken to a different castle to be trained as a page. They spent their time becoming strong, riding horses and mastering the use of weapons. They learned how to read, write and speak Latin and French. They also learned about dancing and the rules of chivalry (the set of rules for honorable behavior).

At about age 16, the page became a squire whose duties were to work for a knight. He dressed the knight, served his meal, tended his horse and cleaned his weapons. Squires also practiced wearing heavy armor and using weapons. At about age 20, if the squire was worthy, he was made a knight in a "dubbing" ceremony. In the ceremony, the knight-to-be knelt before the lord of the manor. He was touched on each shoulder with a sword and proclaimed a knight.

Clothing

- Under their armor, the knights wore padding to ease the pain of wearing such heavy metal.
- In the early years, knights wore chain mail. These were metal chains linked together. It took about five years to make body armor out of mail. The covering for their chests and arms weighed between 20 and 30 pounds and sometimes had up to 200,000 rings. In the later years, knights wore full metal armor.
- The helmets that knights wore had eyeholes (usually slits in the metal) and breathing holes so the knights could get sufficient air.
- Shields were made of wood or metal and generally had the knight's family seal shown on it to help identify him.
- The sword was the major weapon of the knight and weighed about 2½ to 3 pounds. It was worn on his left side and fastened around his waist.
- The other weapons that a knight used were a knife (worn on the right side) and a lance (a long spear used while on horseback). Metal axes, battle hammers and maces (a long metal or wooden pole with a heavy end used for clubbing an opponent) were introduced when armor became too strong to penetrate with a sword.
- Knights often appeared in tournaments or jousts. They sat on a horse and carried a lance with a blunt end. They went face-to-face with another knight to try and knock him off his horse. This was done as practice for real warfare.

Homes

- Knights often traveled the world; however, because they were noblemen, they had a castle that they considered home.
- The castle was a private fortress protected by the knights.
- The nobles' families lived within the part of the castle called the keep. The upper floors were for the bedrooms of the lord and his family.
- The lower floors were where the visiting knights stayed, generally in a very large room.
- Castles were generally quite smoky. A central fire area with a hole in the roof was standard. Perhaps some carpets, called tapestries, hung on the walls, but the floors were often dirt-covered with dried grass and reeds, or were made of stone. Dogs generally were allowed to go anywhere. By today's standards, we would find the cleanliness to be very bad.

Chivalry

Late in the Middle Ages, knights began to follow the practice of chivalry. The ideal knight was chivalrous when he possessed these virtues and qualities:

- Live to serve his king and his country
- Avoid lying, cheating or torture
- Believe in justice for all
- Respect women
- Avenge wrongs