

History

Enquiry: What can we learn about the medieval world from the Book of Margery Kempe?

Medieval Trade

Mr Cooper



A woman of the world

In her twenties, Margery Kempe liked to be the centre of attention and so she wore expensive clothes. She says that she wore “**gold pipes**” in her hair and that her dresses were “slashed with various colours” so that she “would be all the more stared at”. Margery also tells us that as a young woman, she set up a few businesses, including **a flour mill** and **a brewery**. Unfortunately for Margery, the horses refused to budge so the mill didn’t work, and the beer she brewed went flat. The people who worked for her were so embarrassed they quit.



From this, we can tell that, unlike 90% of people in England in the 14th century, Margery came from a wealthy family. And thanks to the other historical documents, we know quite a lot about where that money came from. Her father was one of the most important people in the booming **trading port** of Lynn: he was the town's mayor and represented the local people in **Parliament** on several occasions. But where did her father get his money from? The short answer is: sheep!



Golden sheep

In medieval England, people made a lot of money from selling sheep's wool, which was the best quality in Europe. This meant that people making clothes were willing to pay a lot of money for it, even if they lived in places far away from where the sheep lived. Lots of English wool was traded with northern Italy and parts of modern-day Belgium. However, buying and selling this wool was a complicated business because it involved travelling great distances. That's why **merchants**, like Margery's father, became so important. Merchants bought and sold the wool on behalf of the farmers and cloth makers. They became very wealthy in their own right, because they took a percentage of whatever was paid.



The Hanseatic League

Margery spent most of her life in her hometown of Bishop's Lynn, now called King's Lynn in Norfolk. It was one of the most important ports in England and it was connected to ports in other parts of Europe, like Germany and Poland. When merchants met each other, English merchants were known for selling wool, while merchants from Eastern Europe sold huge amounts of wax for church candles. In Lynn, there was a group of German merchants living there, and one of Margery's 14 children lived in the German town of Danzig! The merchants in these ports spoke different languages and came from different places but they often found it useful to work together. Shortly before Margery Kempe was born, an organisation made up of representatives of these trading towns was created. It became known as **the Hanseatic League** and one of its centres still stands in the middle of King's Lynn today.



Glossary

Gold pipes: a medieval headdress worn by women

A flour mill: a place where wheat is ground down to make flour, powered by horses

A brewery: a place where beer is made

A trading port: a town on the coast where people come to buy and sell things

Parliament: the place where the king asked representatives of the people about tax rates

A merchant: a person who makes money by buying and selling things

The Hanseatic League: a medieval organisation made up of trading ports in northern Europe



Comprehension Questions

1. How do we know that Margery was wealthy?
2. What important jobs did Margery's father have?
3. What did merchants do?
4. What was the main product sold by English merchants?
5. Why was the Hanseatic League set up?

