

English For Life in the UK - Episode 2: Medieval Britain

Welcome to Episode 2 of English For Life in the UK. English for Life in the UK is a podcast intended for intermediate level learners of English. It is produced by a group of volunteer teachers from the St Augustine's centre in Halifax, Yorkshire, and is intended mainly for students attending this course at the centre. However, we hope it will also be of use to anyone wanting to improve their English and learn more about life in this country. We are currently studying some aspects of British history and in this episode we will be focusing on the time known as the Medieval Period also known as the Middle Ages, which lasted from around 1066 to 1500. We are going to start by just saying - introducing ourselves to you. So John.

J: Hello I'm - my name's John. I'm one of the volunteers at St Augustine's Centre. I've been teaching ESOL classes for a few months now and I have started on delivering a Life in the UK classes with Mark and Christine in the last few weeks.

M: Where were you born John?

J: I was born in town called Keighley. It's just 10 miles away from Halifax. I now live in Halifax, I lived for a time in Scotland. I went to University at the University of Glasgow.

M: Christine?

C: Yes my name is Christine. I live locally. I live near here but if - people will be able to tell because of my accent that I am Scottish. I was born in Scotland and I lived there until I was 18. And my accent still sounds Scottish. I teach this class here at St Augustine's like John and Mark - I am a volunteer and teach this class and I do some other things as well at St Augustine's.

M: OK thanks Christine. So my name is Mark and I was born in London. I moved up to Yorkshire about 35 years ago, so I've been here a long time now and I used to be a teacher. I'm retired now and I volunteer here at the St. Augustine's Centre. And have been teaching this particular course with Christine for the last 3 years is it? (well this is our third year) This is our third year ok

[Music. 3:15 minutes]

C: Yes, so today in the class we looked at the period coming shortly after the invasion of the Normans in 1066 and that famous battle, the Battle of Hastings in 1066. And we talked a bit about how the society changed, and you said, John, it became a feudal society. I wonder if you could explain a bit about that?

J: So in terms of we explained the meaning of the feudal society - so quite a hierarchical society where you would have the crown - the King at the top. Underneath you would have the Barons and Lords on one hand, the church and the clergy on the other and underneath propping everything up the common people the serfs and peasants and labourers.

C: Thank you. And you also showed us and had some examples of the different languages that were used at the time and how they have affected the development of our language today.

J: Obviously as well as the social and political changes that they brought, they brought a very large change to the language. So I read a short passage, I read the Lord's prayer in Anglo-Saxon of the period from the 11th century and asked them if they could understand - they could see which language it was. And then we went on to explain that you know for a long time this would be the language spoken by the Anglo-Saxon

serfs and the people at the bottom of society, whereas the Lords and The Ruling Class and the clergy had come in from Normandy and would speak Norman French. And we went on to explain that as time progressed that these languages merged together to form the basis of modern English.

M: I think you said that modern English has also been derived from other languages as well John, what are the other main ones?

J: Broadly speaking roughly it's a quarter Germanic - Anglo-Saxon, a quarter Norman French, a quarter Latin because obviously we have the influence of the Catholic church for this period so much of - many Latin words found their way into the English language. And also we use various Greek words - words of Greek origin. And also, especially in this part of the UK, we do have quite a lot of Norse - Scandinavian words in terms that found their way into the English language.

M: So one of the reasons why learning English is so difficult is that there are lots of different words that mean the same thing. Isn't that right?

J: Yes so we examined this through synonyms. So an example that is often pointed to by historians is that quite often the words for the actual animal in terms of livestock would be an Anglo-Saxon route such as *coo* into *cow*. Whereas the actual meat would be from the Norman French so *beuf* from French becomes beef. *Pig* is an Anglo-Saxon word, *pork* is a Norman French word etc. Part of that - it shows somewhat not just the division of language but the division of prestige in society where the farmhands would be looking after the animals and the people actually eating the meat would tend to be from the Norman French contingent. (Yeah)

C: Very interesting. And then we wanted to talk about the Magna Carta. Can you say why that is an important document?

M: OK, so the Magna Carta was - as you say - a document, in fact the phrase Magna Carta is an example of Latin which John was just talking about, and it just means the great charter or the great document that had been written. And it was a document that was agreed between the King and the Barons - that's those landowning rich and powerful people at the top in feudal society. And up until this point the king was all-powerful and anything the king decided was supposed to happen and there were no real limitations on his power. But the Barons were getting not very happy with this and some of them were going off and doing their own thing anyway and there were rebellions against the king and so in the end it was - they came together to agree a document which is - was called Magna Carta. It was signed in 1215. And in the end a lot of what was in that document didn't come about but the ideas in it were important for the future of the United Kingdom as it is today.

C: So how? Could you say a bit more about why they're important? This document?

M: OK so the document set out certain rights and responsibilities. so those things that people have to do and those things they are not supposed to do and this was particularly about the - the rights of the king. For example to set taxes, and there were limitations put on that whereas up until then the King could just decide on anything that he wanted to in terms of taxes. There was something about the rights of the church that were put down in this document and the beginnings of what we would call the justice system in this country - saying that you couldn't just imprison somebody without good reason and without a process behind it. So those ideas were all very important. The other thing that was really important was that a group of Barons - was called the council of Barons - was set up and their job was to implement this charter, that is to put the charter into practice. Now in the end a lot of those things didn't happen but the

ideas behind them were important and the idea of the council, some historians would argue, that is the beginning of what today is our Parliament.

C: So the House of Lords was first thought of back in...

M: That's right, and the House of Commons - the common people - at that time the common people had no power but the idea - and we'll hear some more from John a bit about that through some of the other events that took place during this period - but the idea that the common people might eventually have a say in what happens in this country. That you can trace some of that back to that period.

C: Very interesting.

J: It's the beginning isn't it? It's things that come up again during the English Revolution and civil war. The idea that the king can't do exactly as he pleases - that he is bound by law and he does have to consult with other people in society.

M: It's worth perhaps saying that on a future session in this course we will do something about the monarchy, as we call it. That is the King or as we have now the Queen. And we will go into more detail about what the current position is now in relation to the Queen

C: And we also talked about another, more devastating event, you know, 100 years or so later - where the Black Death, which spread from Europe, was a terrible illness that killed nearly half the population of the UK in 1347. Certainly more than 1/3 were killed and this led to some big changes in society.

J: We looked at it briefly as a phenomenon itself so where it had come from, what happened to people when they became ill. As you pointed out - you know - the percentages of the population who fell ill and who died. Kind of looked at it more - examined it more really from the social point of view - the effect that it had on society. Which was extremely important - it was really, as an event and a series of recurrences it came back every sort of 10 years up to the Peasants Revolt, a devastating thing for people and their lives obviously - a terrible thing to live through. But in terms of society it brought about a lot of positive change really - in terms of people who were left - who survived - it created certainly the common people were in a much greater position in terms of bargaining with their Lords and landowners. So they were able quite often to throw off the confines of serfdom that had been implemented through the feudal system, quite often move to urban centres and towns, take up new trades and importantly - you know - pushing bargain for higher wages and better conditions. A lot of this anger built up towards the Peasants Revolt. This was made worse by the - again - the imposition of the poll taxes, very famously reintroduced in 1390 something that we might look at in more recent editions of Life in the UK.

M: So what is a poll tax?

J: A poll tax is seen historically as being a very unfair form of taxation, in that everybody in the community has to pay the same amount of tax. At this time in history it was being used to pay for very expensive wars with France during the 100 Years War. And this idea has persisted you know, that everybody pays the same amount of tax is unfair because obviously people who are wealthy, who are middle class, who are poor don't earn the same amount. And this caused a great deal of anger and as I say- was really the spark that lit the touch paper in the Peasants Revolt of 1381.

C: I wonder if you could tell us a bit more about that Peasants Revolt?

J: Yeah - it was the largest uprising - unrest of its time during mediaeval England. Again as I said - there'd been a lot of anger and resentment building for a long time. What the authorities, the King and the Barons did - they passed laws to keep people's wages to the same level that they'd been before the plague. This was seen as very unfair because there was only - you know - perhaps half as many people available to work. They felt that they should be able to charge more for their services. But in order to stop this happening - to keep them in their place - the laws were passed to limit their wages at a very low level. A level, as we said, that happened before the Black Death. So they were angry about that, they were angry then about the imposition - not just of the poll tax itself but of how it was imposed. [15:00 minutes] They were very heavy handed - they went into villages, and they would abuse people and attack them - the tax collectors - so really pushed them too far. This uprising began in Essex, which is a county to the east of London. It spread to Kent and eventually there was 65,000 people, ordinary people, who took up arms and marched on London. At the time the population of London was only 40,000 people, so you can imagine this great army bearing down on the city. The city was relatively undefended because most of the soldiers were already in France fighting, so the King and his Lords were very vulnerable at this time. The peasants were led by a man called Lock Tyler and a priest, called John Ball. So we looked, at the end of the class today, we looked at some of his writings, some of his sermons that he used to rouse the people up to this uprising. They were unfortunately eventually defeated. They came to an agreement with the king - he promised them improvements in their - in their lot in life - which he reneged on, went back on. And the ringleaders - the people who organised it - were executed in quite a horrible way - hung, drawn and quartered. And the rebellion was put down by the king and his men. But the ideas that people put forward about equality, about ordinary people having a stake in society and a better life - the ideas were first put down and first put forward by these people. And they went on through the centuries to be expanded on and these ideas, although the rebellion was defeated, the ideas survived and went on and were taken up by other people further on in history.

C: Thank you

[Music 16:55 minutes]

Language Support

Each week at the end of the episode I will identify a few language issues or questions that have come up. I will start this week with some vocabulary and phrases. First of all, very important one for us, John said he was a volunteer ESOL teacher. For those who don't know what that means, ESOL stands for English for Speakers of Other Languages. So it's just a short expression ESOL using the letters E-S-O-L, English for Speakers of Other Languages, which many of you listening to this podcast will be.

Then an important piece of vocabulary for this episode in particular, John talked about a **hierarchical society**. The word "hierarchical" means arranged from top to bottom, it means in order of rank or importance. In this case we were talking about feudal society and at the top those with the power and the wealth. At the bottom the common people who had very little.

We then went on to talk about some of the names that these groups of people had in feudal society. Apart from the king at the very top, we talked about the **barons**. Another word for this would be **lords** - it was those people who had a title, who were land owners, were rich and powerful, often even had their own armies at this stage. Down at the bottom there are different words we used for the common people - the ordinary people. We talked about **serfs** and **peasants** and **labourers**. All of these refer to the common people, who worked on the land at the time.

You could say those words - serf, peasant, labourer - were **synonyms** and that was something we went on to talk about. A **synonym** is more than one word but has the same meaning. John used examples of *cow* and *beef*, *pig* and *pork*, because he was talking about the words that came from the Anglo-Saxon root and the Norman or French root. In an exercise we did, we had lots more, for example *smell* was the Anglo-Saxon word, *odour*, which means the same as *smell*, came from the French.

Other examples in everyday use today would be *sick* and *ill*. *Slim* and *thin*. *Big* and *large*. All these words have a very similar meaning, these pairs of words have a similar meaning.

A few more bits of vocabulary from today. At one stage John talked about the king having **renege**d on an agreement, if you **renege** on something you go back on something you've previously agreed. So the king had agreed certain things with the people and then he didn't do what he said he was going to do, so he **renege**d on them.

Christine referred to the Black Death as a **devastating** event. Something that is **devastating** is something that is very damaging or destructive. You could say a synonym for devastating would be disastrous. The Black Death was devastating, it was disastrous because a large portion of the population died.

I'm going to finish with one phrase which John used, he said that the Poll Tax, this tax that had been introduced, was the **spark that lit the touch paper**, and which led to the peasants' revolt. The **spark that lit the touch paper**. A touch paper is something that's usually found on a firework or a large gun, a cannon of some sort. And when you light that *touch paper* with a spark, or you light it in any way, then it leads to the explosion. So in this case it is the expression "the spark that lit the touch paper" means it's an event - in this case the poll tax - which sparked off, which led to the explosion of the peasants' revolt.

There is another very common expression in English which is similar to this - **the straw that broke the camel's back**. The idea there is you think of a camel with lots of things loaded on the back of the camel, eventually one more little thing put on top and the camel would collapse. So that is used - **the straw that broke the camel's back** - for a small event which leads to something very large happening.

I hope those have been useful additional pieces of language for you this week. And we look forward to talking with you again in the next episode.

Goodbye for now.