



Medieval Trivia



- ❖ In Medieval times, sticks were used as counters, a sort of primitive version of the beads on an abacus. Schools adapted this crude tool for taking attendance. As long as you made it by the time the person taking attendance reached your name, you received a notch on the stick used to record your presence. That was the nick of time.
- ❖ The crusaders had contempt for the Moslem dietary laws forbidding the eating of pork. They said that since Moslems used pigskins to make water bags and made use of other parts of the animal as well, why not use the whole hog and also eat the creatures? Eventually the expression going whole hog came to mean setting no limits when referring to anything.
- ❖ Most people got married in June because they took their yearly bath in May, and were still smelling pretty good by June.
- ❖ Baths equaled a big tub filled with hot water. In medieval times, the man of the house had the privilege of the nice clean water, then all the other sons and men, then the women and finally the children. Last of all the babies. By then the water was so dirty you could actually lose someone in it, hence the phrase *“Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water.”*
- ❖ Houses had thatched roofs. Thick straw, piled high, with no wood underneath. It was the only place for animals to get warm, so all the pets... dogs, cats and other small animals, mice, rats, bugs lived in the roof. When it rained it became slippery and sometimes the animals would slip and fall off the roof.
- ❖ There was nothing to stop things from falling into the house. This posed a real problem in the bedroom where bugs and dirt would fall on your nice clean bed, so they found if they made beds with big posts and hang a sheet over the top, it addressed that problem. Hence those beautiful big 4 poster beds with canopies.
- ❖ The floor was made of dirt. Only the wealthy had something other than dirt, ergo the saying "dirt poor". The wealthy had slate floors which in the winter they would get slippery when wet. So they spread thresh on the floor to help keep their footing. As the winter wore on they kept adding more thresh until when you opened the door it would all start slipping outside. A piece of wood was placed at the entry way, later named a "thresh hold".
- ❖ They cooked in the kitchen in a big kettle that always hung over the fire. Every day they lit the fire and added things to the pot. They mostly ate vegetables and didn't get much meat. They would eat the stew for dinner leaving leftovers in the pot to get cold overnight and then start over the next day. Sometimes the stew had food in it that had been in there

for a month. Hence: "Peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine days old".

- ❖ Sometimes the working class could obtain pork and would feel really special when that happened. When company came over, they would bring out some bacon and hang it to show it off. It was a sign of wealth and that a man "could really bring home the bacon." They would cut off a little to share with guests and would all sit around and "chew the fat."
- ❖ Bread was divided according to status. Workers got the burnt bottom of the loaf, the family got the middle, and guests or nobility got the top, or the "upper crust".
- ❖ England is old and small. At some point in time, they started running out of places to bury people. They started digging up coffins and would take the bones to a house and re-use the grave. In reopening these coffins, one out of 25 coffins were found to have scratch marks on the inside and they realized they had been burying people alive. People started tying a string on the wrist of the alleged deceased and lead it through the coffin and up through the ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would have to sit out in the graveyard all night to listen for the bell. Hence on the "graveyard shift" they would know that someone was "saved by the bell" or if he was a "dead ringer".
- ❖ Lead cups were used to drink ale or whiskey. The combination would sometimes knock people out for a couple of days. Someone walking along the road would take them for dead and prepare them for burial. They were laid out on the kitchen table for a couple of days and the family would gather around and eat and drink and wait and see if they would wake up. The origin of the custom of holding a "wake" was to give a person a chance to wake up before they were buried
- ❖ Many surnames (last names) were created as descriptions of the person's job, location, or parents. For example: Carpenter, Farmer, Smith, & Chamberlain are all jobs that people held; Kent, Blackwood, Honeywell, & Overbrook are all places people lived or near; and Williamson, Fitzgerald, Upjohn & MacDonald are all references to their parents.
 - Chamberlain was the servant in charge of lighting the fires.
 - Smith can refer to any craftsperson, blacksmith, leathersmith, goldsmith, etc.
 - Kent is a county in England.
 - Blackwood meant you lived near the Black Woods.
 - Overbrook meant you had to cross a brook to get to that person.
 - Prefixes and suffixes such as –son, -ian, -sen, Fitz-, Up-, & Mac- all meant "Son of..." so Matthew Fitzwilliam actually means Matthew son of William.