Hidden away and almost forgotten, the Medieval peasant was at the bottom of the pile. Upper classes rarely mentioned them, and if they did, it was to complain of their smell, ignorance, ugliness, or dishonesty.

We might refer to peasants as one group, but there were differences in status that they understood and separated themselves by. There were four different classes: villeins, serfs, crofters, and cotters. Feudal law most protected the villein because his ancestors had made a contract with a lord for protection, whereas the serf's ancestors in the village were made subject of the lord as a group. Serfs were tied to the land, and if one lord took the land away from another, he got the serfs too. Crofters and cotters had no land, but rented their services to nobles or rich villeins.

A peasant worked hard for what little he received. The lands he farmed were not all in one place, but were in strips separated by open fields. It was common for peasants to work in groups, both for the companionship and because with the oxen and heavy plows then in use, it was impossible for the peasant to work alone.

The French peasant complained that the king demanded taxes, the noble paid no tax, the priest demanded his tithe, the merchant needed his profit, the soldier paid for nothing he took, and the beggar had nothing to take. The peasant complained he alone was supporting the king, noble, priest, merchant, soldier, and beggar. He was also at the mercy of these people. If the lord had a bishop as guest, he took up a collection from the serfs, and if for entertainment they rode across his land on a fox hunt, the peasant lost hours of back-breaking labor.

It was in the nature of a peasant to be docile and not cause trouble, but there were occasions when resentment broke out in mob violence. In 1356, French peasants were fed up with the salt tax and revolted in the north and west of France. This was known as the Jacquerie rebellion. Out of it came a demand for the taxpayers to have more say in decisions to raise taxes.

In 1381, England was at war with France, and new tax money was needed to pay for it. The merchants and large landowners were tired of being taxed, so Parliament came up with a head tax, and everyone, except beggars, was forced to pay one shilling. The person with the greatest burden from this tax was the poorest peasant, who did not want to sacrifice his shilling to the king. When collectors were sent to catch tax evaders, rebellion spread. Wat Tyler, a peasant, killed a tax collector and became a hero to the poor. The peasants marched on London, and King Richard II fearlessly rode out to talk with them. The peasants returned home with new respect for the king and many empty promises.

The largest peasant revolt came in Germany in 1524-1525 when peasants and urban workers rebelled over higher rents and losses of privileges. They attacked nobles and wealthy priests. Then the rulers sent in armies that crushed the rebels and put the rebel leaders to horrible deaths.
CHALLENGES

1. What rank of peasant had the highest status?

2. If land was exchanged between lords, what happened to the serfs?

3. How did crofters make a living?

4. Why did peasants work in groups?

5. Why was a nobleman's fox hunt hard on the peasant?

6. Why were French peasants unhappy in 1356?

7. What was the French peasant revolt called?

8. What tax did English peasants have to pay, and how much was it?

9. How did Wat Tyler become a hero?

10. Who were the targets of German peasant anger in 1525?