From kings to peasants

12. In medieval times, the king or queen was the most important person in the country. The king gave land to his barons and other noblemen. In return, they supplied the king with soldiers, horses, and weapons to fight wars. This system of giving away land in return for services was known as feudalism.

13. The Church was very powerful in the Middle Ages. It controlled large areas of land, and grew rich from the taxes paid by the peasants who worked on these lands. Peasant farmers had to give the church a tithe, one tenth of everything they produced.

14. The barons were the most powerful noblemen. A wealthy baron might supply the king with around 5,000 fighting men. Some barons also had their own private army to keep control over their own lands.

15. The wealthiest lords and barons often gave away some of their lands to professional fighters called knights. Knights were skilled soldiers who rode into battle on horseback.

Quiz

1. What is the name of the mound of soil on which early castles were built?
2. Which was the safest and best-protected part of the castle?
3. What is a moat?
4. Who was in charge of the castle guards?
5. What did the king give to his lands in return for their services?
Ready for battle

23 Knights wore a long-sleeved tunic made of linen or wool, with a cloak over the top. By the 1200s knights had started to wear long hooded coats called surcoats. Knights nearly always wore bright colors, and some even wore fancy items such as shoes with curled pointed toes, and hats decorated with sparkling jewels.

24 Early knights wore a type of armor called chainmail. It was made of thousands of tiny iron rings joined onto each other. A piece of chainmail looked a bit like knitting, except it was made of metal, not wool. But a knight also wore a padded jacket under his chainmail to make sure he wasn’t cut by his own armor.

25 Gradually, knights began to wear more and more armor. They added solid metal plates shaped to fit their body. By the 1400s knights were wearing full suits of steel armor. They wore metal gloves, called gauntlets, and even metal shoes!

26 A knight had two main weapons: his sword and his shield. The sword was double edged and was sharp enough to pierce chainmail. Knights also fought with lances, daggers, and axes.

27 Between 1337 and 1453 England and France were almost continually at war with each other, what we now know as the Hundred Years’ War. The English armies won important battles against the French in 1356 and at Agincourt in 1415. The English were well-armed and could fire arrows or guns, which helped to keep the French soldiers at bay.

28 A Swiss foot soldier’s main weapon was a halberd. This was a combined spear and battle-ax, and was a particularly nasty, but very effective, way of a foot soldier getting a knight off his horse.
A castle tour

38 Stone castles were cold damp places with lots of drafts. A castle was not exactly a luxury home. Cold winds blew through the windows, which had no glass.

> The lord of the castle and his family were the only people who slept in beds. They slept on pillows put in covers made of animal skins.

> Most castles also had a well within their walls. This was essential as a source of water if someone had taken the castle.

> Castles had no central heating and no running water. Wool hangings and tapestries on the walls, and rugs on the floor, helped to keep the rooms warm.

> The kitchens were often built in a separate part of the castle, away from the keep, in case they caught fire.

39 There were many workshops and other buildings inside the safety of the castle walls. They included an armoury, a smithy, stables, kennels for the making flint, and a chapel. There were sometimes even gardens and orchards.

40 Medieval castles had no toilets! Instead people sat on wooden boxes called "garderobs". These were built over a vaulted chamber. Waste from above toilet fell down the chute into the vault.
62 When Edward the Confessor died in 1066, Duke William of Normandy, his cousin, claimed that he had been promised the throne of England. William and his knights invaded England and defeated Harold, the English king, at the Battle of Hastings.

63 On and off between 1337 and 1453 the neighboring countries of England and France were at war. The Hundred Years' War, as it was called, carried on through the reigns of five English kings and five French ones. The two countries fought each other to decide who should control France. In the end the French were victorious, and England lost control of all her lands in France apart from the port of Calais.

64 One of the major battles of the Hundred Years' War was fought at Crécy in 1346. English soldiers defeated a much larger French army, killing almost half the French soldiers. During the battle, the English army used gunpowder and cannons for possibly the first time.

65 Deadly weapons called caltrops were used in the Hundred Years' War. A caltrop was a star-shaped piece of metal. These were scattered along the ground in front of an attacking army. They stopped both horses and footsoldiers in their tracks.

66 A young French girl known as Joan of Arc led the French army against the English, who had surrounded the city of Orléans. After 10 days the English were defeated. Joan was later captured, accused of being a witch, and burned to death.
The crusades were military expeditions from Europe to Palestine. The aim for European Christians was to recapture Palestine, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, from the Muslim Turks who had seized control of it. The First Crusade set off from Europe in 1096. Between 1096 and 1204 there were four separate crusades.

Thousands of young boys and girls set off for the Holy Land in 1212 in one of the strangest crusades — the Children’s Crusade. Many died of cold or hunger while marching to the Mediterranean ports. Others drowned during the sea crossing, and some were sold as slaves along the way.

The Muslim leader Saladin fought against the knights of the Third Crusade. Saladin had already defeated the Christian armies and seized the city of Jerusalem. The Third Crusade was meant to recapture Jerusalem. It was led by an emperor and two kings: Emperor Frederick I of Germany, and Richard the Lionhearted of England and Philip II of France, but the Crusaders failed to recapture Jerusalem.

A crusader knight would share his tent with his beloved horse; it must have been a bit of a squeeze!

Many crusaders fought in these religious wars as personal retainers. They were not religiously motivated but were fighting for the glory of their lords.