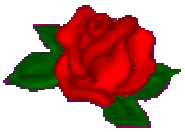
Foul food

In the Middle Ages the Church had rules about what you could (or could not) eat. Until the start of the 13th century adults were 'forbidden four-footed flesh meant'. And no one was allowed meat on a Friday – only fish.

The trouble was, people cheated. If they couldn't eat **'four-footed flesh'** then they ate large birds.



When it came to sweet dishes the rich people ate all the sugar they could get their teeth on … until the sugar rotted their teeth, of course. One flavour that was popular then is rare now – the flavour of roses.

The peasants' main food was a dark bread made out of rye grain. They ate a kind of stew called *pottage* made from the peas, beans and onions that they grew in their gardens (There were no potatoes yet.) Their only sweet food was the berries, nuts and honey that they collected from the woods. Peasants did not eat much meat. Many kept a pig or two but could not often afford to kill one. They could hunt rabbits or hares but might be punished for this by their lord.

Every manor-house had a large kitchen with several fireplaces. There were many cooks and scullion boys, each with their own special job. They had to prepare meals for all the people who lived in a manor-house – perhaps 50 people and visitors also. Joints of fresh meat, perhaps venison, chickens and geese, were roasted in front of the fire on a spit, which was turned by a scullion boy. When the birds were done, they were served at table, from the spit. Salted meat, which was eaten in winter, was boiled in large cauldrons, and served as stew.

Meat of all kinds, and bread, were the chief foods. Herrings, eels and salted fish were very common in winter. Spices such as ginger, cinnamon and saffron, were used by the rich to make their food more tasty. Cider, beer and wine were drunk, and even the children had beer for breakfast. Fruit was popular; apples, pears, peaches and plums were grown. Grape vines often covered the sunny monastery walls, and dates, figs and oranges could be bought at the fair.

Foul food facts

1. The Lord of the manor brewed ale (a type of beer) about 3 times a year; he expected his workers to buy it at a high price. It was a sort of extra tax the workers had to pay. But sometimes the bachelors of the village were given a challenging treat. They could drink as much of the ale as they wanted, free … so long as they stayed on their feet. If they sat down they had to pay.

2. Butchers were not allowed to sell meat by candlelight. This was so the customer could see what they were getting! A man was caught trying to sell pork from a dead pig he'd found in a ditch. He was fastened in the pillory and the rotten meat burned under his nose – a common punishment for this sort of fraud.

3. Large towns had takeaway food suppliers selling delicious thrushes (at two for a penny) and tasty hot sheep's feet. They would even deliver cooked food to your home.

4. Many towns checked the quality of bread and punished bakers who tried to cheat. Some were found guilty of adding sand to loaves, in one disgusting case, a loaf contained cobwebs.

5. Turkeys hadn't been discovered so they ate birds called bustards. What happened? Bustards became extinct in England! Fancy a bit of red meat on a Friday? Then eat a beaver. Beavers used their tails for swimming, so they could be called fish … couldn't they? (Er … no, actually.) What happened? Beavers became extinct in Britain.

What did people eat?

Rich people ate …	Poor people ate …	Everyone ate …