

LIFE IN A MEDIAEVAL CITY

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Life in a Mediaeval City by Edwin Benson

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EDWIN BENSON

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MEDIAEVAL CITY**

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York a city of destruction and a "storehouse of the past"

YORK
IN THE XVTH CENTURY

FROM A DRAWING BY
E. RIDSDALE TATE

A MEDIÆVAL CITY

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

IN English history the fifteenth century is the last of the centuries that form the Middle Ages, which were preceded by the age of racial settlement and followed by that of the great Renaissance. Although the active beginnings of this new era are to be observed in the fifteenth century, yet this century belongs essentially to the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the most attractive feature of the Middle Ages is that they were so intensely human. A naïve spirit appears in their formal literature, as in Chaucer's account of the Canterbury pilgrims, in their decorated religious manuscripts, in their thought, and very characteristically, in their architecture, which combines a simple naturalness with a bold and daring ingenuity. From columns, the constructional motive of which is so simple and natural, and walls pierced with windows, they erected systems of lofty arches and high stone-vaulted roofs, the stability of which depended on very skilled balancing of thrust and counter-thrust.

To-day mediæval buildings are to be found all over England. The majority of them are examples of an architecture that has not been surpassed for majesty, beauty, size, and constructional skill.

Such buildings, without the help of the literary and other memorials, testify by themselves to the greatness of the Middle Ages.

Through the fifteenth century England continued to be in a state of political unrest. There were wars and risings both abroad and at home, for besides the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) and the Wars of the Roses (1455-1485) there were wars with the Welsh and the Scots, as well as disorders made by powerful, intriguing barons. The barons and great landowners took advantage of the weak royal rule to increase their own power. Parliament, especially the House of Commons, succeeded in the first half of the century in strengthening its constitutional position, but during the Wars of the Roses it became less truly representative of the solid part of the nation, the middle class, and more and more a party machine worked by the baronial factions. The proportion of people wanting peace and firm government steadily increased, and, when the internecine Wars of the Roses, which affected the lords and kings far more than the people, were followed by the protection and order provided without excessive cost by the Tudors, it was the people who most welcomed the change.

The towns were, however, comparatively little disturbed by these perpetual disorders. The mayors and corporations as a rule guided their cities through difficult times with politic shrewdness. Town life developed through flourishing trade and an increasing sense of municipal unity, and municipal importance.

CHAPTER II

IMPORTANT FACTORS AFFECTING THE HISTORY OF YORK

A. GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION

AMONG the factors affecting this particular city geographical position is evidently the most important. It is to this, combined with the consequent military value of the site, that York owes its origin as a city, its importance in the Middle Ages, and its practical importance to-day. York, which is the natural centre for the North of England, is the halfway house between London and Edinburgh, and is on the shortest and quickest land or air route, however the journey is made, between these two capitals. The Ouse and Humber have enabled it always to be within navigable distance of the North-East coast. The city itself is situated on an advantageous site in the centre of a great plain, the north and south ends of which are open. The surrounding hills and valleys are so disposed that a large number of rivers radiate towards the centre of the plain. Civilisation—if we must rank the ultra-fierce Norsemen, for instance, among its exponents—proceeded westwards from the coast, and wave after wave of the invading peoples crossed with ease the eastern and north-eastern hills, which are far less formidable than those on the west. York was already an important place in the days of