Inside the town

INSIDE THE TOWN

Towns had limited space inside them and the streets and lanes were narrow and winding. Houses were packed closely together and were generally two or three stories tall. The bottom floor was often a shop.
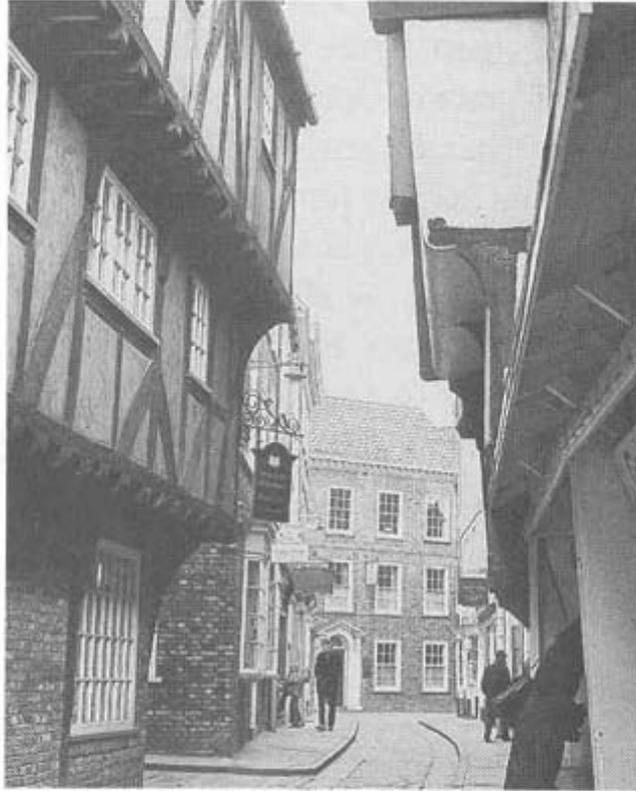
The Shambles in York. Note the open shops at street level and the overhanging houses which have changed very little since the fifteenth century.

Many families shared each house. Houses had small windows because glass was very costly. Rooms were dimly lit with candlelight or the light from a fireplace. There was very little furniture — a table, some chairs and a dresser for clothes might be all. In the houses of rich merchants there was sometimes a four-poster bed, although people generally slept on hay-filled bags.

In the street

Cobblestones were placed in front of the shops, however the middle of the street or lane was usually left as an open drain or ditch. Into this gutter went all of the rubbish and waste from the houses and shops. Even the filth from stables and the scraps from butcher shops were thrown

there. The contents of chamber pots were simply emptied out of the windows with little regard for the people below. People were supposed to keep the street outside their shops or houses clean, but generally it was only when it rained that the foul mess was washed away. Unfortunately the filth in these ditches would be washed into the river where people swam, washed their clothes and obtained their drinking water.

Townspeople

While many of the townspeople were traders, there were many other jobs for the people of a medieval town. Some of these were: blacksmiths, carpenters, leather-workers, fletchers, stone-masons, dyers, goldsmiths, cartwrights, butchers, bakers and brewers.

Guest, V., Eshuys, J., Phelan, P. (1993), *Discovering the Medieval world*, Jacarand Press, Milton, Qld, pp. 98-99.