



Merton Priory fits into

OCR SHP: The people's health, c. 1250 to present

Medieval Britain c.1250–c.1500

- The characteristic features of medieval Britain: an overview
- Living conditions: housing, food, clean water and waste.
- Responses to the Black Death: beliefs and actions
- Approaches to public health in late-medieval towns and monasteries

AQA Paper 2 Option AA 3.3

- Medieval medicine: approaches including natural, supernatural, beliefs about cause of illness.
- Medical progress: the contribution of Christianity to medical progress and treatment; hospitals
- Public health in the Middle Ages: towns and monasteries; the Black Death in Britain, beliefs about its causes, treatment and prevention.

Edexcel Option 11: Medicine in Britain, c1250–present

1 Ideas about the cause of disease and illness

- Supernatural and religious explanations of the cause of disease.
- Rational explanations: the Theory of the Four Humours and the miasma theory; the continuing influence in England of Hippocrates and Galen.

2 Approaches to prevention and treatment

- Approaches to prevention and treatment and their connection with ideas about disease and illness: religious actions, bloodletting and purging, purifying the air, and the use of remedies.
- New and traditional approaches to hospital care in the thirteenth century. The role of the physician, apothecary and barber surgeon in treatment and care provided within the community and in hospitals, c1250–1500.

3 Case study: Dealing with the Black Death, 1348–49 – approaches to treatment and attempts to prevent its spread.

Monasteries were important to mediaeval medicine in providing healthcare for inhabitants and the local population, and in copying books and manuscripts. Merton Priory had both a sizeable infirmary (for the brethren and corrodians) and an almonry at the gatehouse, for serving the local poor.

St Augustine's Rule says: "Subdue the flesh, so far as your health permits, by fasting and abstinence from food and drink. For him, a healthy mind and soul meant a healthy body. If you were ill, you could have more food, but no snacking! If a brother was in "more delicate health from their former way of life", he again could have special food. The sick should not be overfed, but they should have "the kind of treatment that will quickly restore their strength." Merton Priory's large infirmary had its own kitchens, and apparently served lots of fruit.

"As for bodily cleanliness too, a brother must never deny himself the use of the bath when his health requires it. But this should be done on medical advice, without complaining, so that even though unwilling, he shall do what has to be done for his health when the superior orders it. However, if the brother wishes it, when it might not be good for him, you must not comply with his desire, for sometimes we think something is beneficial for the pleasure it gives, even though it may prove harmful."

In days before central heating, baths were less pleasurable than they are now – but St Augustine's point was that we must deny ourselves pleasures to ensure our soul's health. The infirmary had a large hearth: warmth was important to health, and it's possible that baths were taken near it. Prayer was the first medicine for sick brethren, but Augustine said "if it remains uncertain whether the remedy he likes is good for him, a doctor should be consulted."

The infirmarian was the brother in charge of caring for the sick. He had to look after the infirmary, making sure that clothes and bedding were washed, and that the kitchen was stocked with healthy food. He would also make sure that there was a ready supply of medicines. The infirmary had its own cloister: this would have been for growing some of the herbs to make those medicines. The infirmary cloister was also for the sick to convalesce in – healthy air (as opposed to nasty miasma), and a pleasing environment.

The canons of Merton Priory were very well fed, and in fact had conditions associated with obesity and a high-protein

diet (lots of meat!). Archaeological excavations (digging up their bones) showed that they had revealed osteoarthritis of knees, hips and fingertips, and a particular form of osteoarthritis called DISH. These suggest that the canons were over-fed and under-exercised!

Merton Priory was hit by the Black Death, which swept through the south-east during the summer 1348 and spread during the following year. The Bishop of Winchester ordered the archdeacon of Surrey to make use of the sacrament of Penance to try to curb its spread, and there were bare-footed processions, and so on. These failed to stop the plague, and it killed many inhabitants of Merton Priory lands in Surrey, and two priors of Merton Priory itself. Merton was on the way to Westminster and London, and had people moving through it, ideal for spreading plague. The Priory, with its almonry and with the canons being in the general public community much more than enclosed monks, could not have escaped the plague – despite all their prayers.

Edexcel Option B2: The reigns of King Richard I and King John, 1189–1216

King John stayed at Merton Priory on his way to Runnymede. Furthermore, there is a suggestion that the canons of Merton wrote/ copied Magna Carta.

Key topic 1: Life and government in England, 1189–1216

1 The feudal system

- The feudal hierarchy and the nature of feudalism (landholding, homage, knight service, labour service); forfeiture.
- The role and influence of the Church.

Merton Priory was founded by Gilbert the Sheriff with land given him by Henry I. By the later 12th century, Merton Priory held various manors and parish churches as gifts from various aristocrats, and from the king. Merton owed dues to the king – for example, in 1214, the Priory took one Walter to court for not giving scutage to the king. Sometimes, the king would give the Priory exemptions from feudal dues. Tenants of the Priory had to give labour, tithes, rents, and other charges. Villeins were also part of the Priory's jurisdiction – they were answerable to the court of the Priory.

2 Kingship and succession

- The nature of kingship: duties, rights, rituals, display.

In 1215, John stayed at Merton Priory on his way to Runnymede. There he left for safe-keeping seven silver cups, a staff with 45 rubies, a staff with 22 sapphires, and another with 27 sapphires. The Cellarer returned them on 27th June. This little episode shows something of the magnificence of the King, and the ritual element of kingship. John travelled light down to meet his barons, leaving behind his state bling.

3 Royal government and finances

- How England was governed when Richard was absent, 1189–99, and during King John's continued presence in England, 1199–1216.
- Royal revenues: the royal demesne and the role of sheriffs in collecting revenues; feudal incidents; scutage; taxes on moveables and income in 1207.

In 1198, King Richard demanded that various men, including the Sheriff of Kent and the Prior of Merton, inspect the treasures of Canterbury Cathedral. (The King wanted to take them to pay for his expenses – war with France.) The Convent (the canons) of Canterbury objected; the King seized the treasure. Canterbury went to the Pope, who said the treasure must be returned; Richard died, and the treasure was returned. This shows the extraordinary amount of money Richard needed to fund his reign.

In 1196, William de Tureville gave the Priory the Ville of Taplow, for which the Priory had to give two knights' service, scutage and forinsec to the King.

Key topic 3: King John's downfall, 1205–16

Merton Priory's connexion here is tangential – Stephen Langton was a good friend of Merton Priory, staying there in 1213 on his return from exile, the exile which caused John's excommunication. Langton was one of the architects of Magna Carta. (Merton Priory was also a favourite place of Edmund Rich, one of the drafters of the later, but similar, *Provisions of Merton*.)