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Little Known Facts of Life In the 1500's

Bathing was considered to be a health risk. Most people got married in June because (among other things) they had taken their yearly bath in May and were still smelling pretty good. However, by June they were starting to produce an aroma, so brides carried a bouquet of flowers to help mask any body odor.

A bath equaled a big tub filled with hot water. The man of the house had the privilege of the fresh, clean water. Then all the other sons and men bathed. They were followed by the women, and finally the children. Last of all came the babies. By then the bath water was so dirty you could actually lose someone in it. Hence the expression, "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water."

Most houses had thatched roofs — thick straw, piled high between trusses, with no wood sheathing underneath. The roof straw was a warm place for animals to lodge, so dogs, cats and other outdoor pets, plus mice, rats, and bugs nested on or in the roof material. When it rained the roof became slippery, sometimes causing animals to slip and fall from atop or inside the wet thatch. Hence the saying, "It's raining cats and dogs." There was nothing to stop critters from falling out of the roof thatch into the house. This posed a real problem in the bedrooms (typically located upstairs and directly under the roof) where bugs, mice and their associated droppings could mess up your nice clean sheets. So, they started making beds with tall posts at each corner and hung a sheet over the top to address that problem. Hence those beautiful big four-poster beds with canopies.

Most home floors were dirt. Only the wealthy had something other than dirt, hence the expression "dirt poor." The wealthy had slate floors which would get slippery when wet during the winter. So they spread thresh (straw) on the floor to help keep their footing. As the winter progressed, they kept adding more thresh until when you opened the door it would naturally start slipping outside. A piece of wood was placed at the bottom of the entry way, which they called a "threshold."

Most people cooked in the kitchen in a big kettle that always hung permanently over the fire. Every day they lit the fire and added things to the pot. People mostly survived on vegetables because meat was costly. They would eat a thin stew for dinner leaving leftovers in the pot to get cold overnight and then start over the next day. Sometimes the stew had food items in it that had been in there for a month. Hence the children's rhyme: "peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine days old,"

Sometimes people could obtain pork, which helped honor a guest or celebrate an important occasion. When company came over, the host would bring out some bacon and hang it to show it off. It was a sign of success and wealth and that a man could really "bring home the bacon." They would cut off a little to share with guests and would all sit around and "chew the fat."

During a meal, bread was divided according to status. Hired workers

got the often-burned bottom portion of the loaf, the family got the middle section, and guests were honored with the top part, or the "upper crust."

Those with money had plates made of pewter. Food with a high acid content caused some of the lead to leak into the food, triggering lead poisoning. This happened most often with tomatoes, so people stopped eating tomatoes for 400 years. Most people could not afford pewter plates, but had trenchers a piece of wood with the middle carved out to form a bowl. Given this time period's aversion to washing things, trenchers were never cleaned, so eventually bacteria and worms flourished in the wood. After eating from wormy trenchers, people would get "trench mouth." Lead cups were used to drink ale or whiskey. This chemical combination would sometimes knock the drinker out for a couple of days. Someone walking along the road would mistake the person for dead and prepare them for burial. They were laid out on the kitchen table for a couple of days and the family would gather around and eat and drink and wait and see if the person would wake up. Hence the custom of holding a "wake" before final burial.

England is old and small and they started running out of suitable places to bury people. So eventually they started digging up coffins and would take their bones to a house and reuse the grave site. In reopening these coffins, one out of 25 coffins were found to have scratch marks on the inside. The Brits realized they had been burying people alive. So they thought they would tie a string on their wrist and lead it through the coffin and up through the ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would have to sit out in the graveyard all night to listen for the bell. Hence on the "graveyard shift" they might find that someone was "saved by the bell" if he was a "dead ringer".



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