

Peter's Tale

The story of a villein's son at the time when St Leonard's had recently been built

Introduction for teachers and readers

This is the story of an imaginary boy living in Flamstead in the 12th Century. As the son of a villein (a peasant or tenant farmer legally tied to the lord of the manor), Peter would have been very poor. Although Peter is imagined, the world and life that he describes here is based on historical fact.

This written version matches the long audio recording with the same title.

Peter speaks

Fellow or friend, be ye welcome to Flamstead!

My name is Peter and I am the son of Aldith and Willam of the Field. I am a boy of 10 years of age, but in two years' time I shall be considered an adult and be given a sharp knife of my very own. I live in a small, thatched dwelling, with wattle and daub walls. As well as my parents, I live with my elder sister Elis, my younger brother Wyot, and my grandparents, Aldous and Etheldred. Father Firmin says we are now in the Twelfth Century!

I speak English because I'm the son of a villein, or tenant farmer. French or Latin is spoken by our elders and betters, as they are educated. I don't go to school and don't need to read or write. My day is governed by the seasons and by what the Lords of the Manor and Church decree.

As a villein, my father has entered into a contract with the landowner to rent a dwelling place and two acres of land to farm. We own a plough, but we must push it because we cannot afford to rent an ox from a wealthier tenant, let alone keep one of our own. We must pay rent to the Bailiff, the agent of the land owner, and a tithe to the Church, which does not leave much money over to buy extra food or clothing with, or pay fines. Luckily our land owner is merciful and does not expect us to pay too much in kind or coin. Still, it doesn't stop my father going on and on about the cost of our living! Times can be very hard, particularly towards the end of winter when our supplies begin to run out. My mother is always worried that we shall not have enough to feed our family if we have a poor harvest. I thank the good Lord that we have our little home and field, and are not landless slaves or beggars.

I go to church often, but I don't always understand what our priest is saying, as mass is said in Latin. But he is a very kind and patient man, who does try to explain what God expects of me, and tells us tales of a great ship that held every animal on the earth, even something called an olyfaunt that has a nose as long as I am tall, and how the angels foretold Jesus's birth. He has a great book called the Bible and it has some wonderful stories in it. Some are very sad, some are a little frightening, but others are wonderful and sometimes even funny. Brother Firmin, our priest, tells me that one day the inside walls of our new stone-built church will be brightly painted with pictures of all the stories, so we can understand them better. We sit on the floor in church and, if we can get away with it, my friends and I play a game of nine men's morris. But if we're caught, we get in a great deal of trouble from both Brother Firmin and my mother! We enjoy the Holy Days, or as you know them, holidays, as this means that we do not have to work. My favourite time is the feast of the Mass of Christ, you call it Christmas, when we get 12 days off! Somehow, though, there is always something that needs doing or mending and I must help my family to survive.

Our home is one room with no windows and there are rushes laid over a beaten earth floor. The rushes keep the damp from rising up and making us cold. In the centre of the room is a ring of large stones that make up our fireplace. This provides our means of heating, cooking and lighting, although occasionally we

have rush lamps. All that we own, pots, a ewer and a few wooden plates, is stored on three shelves hanging on the wall and vegetables hang in string nets from the roof, as well as the bunches of herbs that we use for our food and our medicines. This keeps our precious foodstuffs away from thieving mice and other vermin. On the other side of the room, we have a quern stone in which we grind the rye to make our flour. The act of doing this is the origin of the expression the 'daily grind' and Elis says it's a job she hates. A grain ark, which is a large wooden box with a close fitting, pitched lid, like the roof of our hut, sits beside it. Every day my mother and sister turn the lid over to mix the flour and water for our daily bread. Then they bake the little cakes of black bread on the hot stones of our hearth.

My mother and sister keep house, with help from my grandmother, but my brother and I help my father work our small piece of land. We manage our land entirely when my father is called to farm the lands of our master, the Lord of the Manor. He must do this by law or he will be fined heavily by the Lord and we simply cannot afford to pay out our hard-earned pennies on anything other than the necessities of life. On our land we grow some barley that my mother uses to brew the beer that we drink, some oats and rye that we use for our bread, and some broad beans and peas that we dry to use as the mainstay of our daily meals. We also grow some cabbages, leeks and turnips on our small holding. We do manage to keep a couple of pigs

and we are lucky enough to be able to go into the wood to gather the beech nuts that they love. Wyot and I love to explore the beech woods and often go with our grandfather when he forages for the wood we need for our fire. We must be careful not to take too much or we risk yet another fine from the Lord for taking more than our share. At times, when we are sowing crops or harvesting, everyone in our household must work on the land to ensure we have enough to eat and maybe even a little extra to sell or exchange for wool, eggs or anything else we need.

Our clothes are very practical and plain, made of woven wool and coloured with natural dyes that can be found in the hedgerows. My grandmother and mother are teaching Elis how to make clothes from some fabric that my parents have saved very hard to buy. Because we are only tenant farmers, we are only permitted to buy fabric worth no more than two marks for the whole cloth, with no silver or gold adornments. If we were able to afford anything better we would

be fined for trying to mimic our betters. I wear a long wool tunic and hood, woollen leggings and stout leather boots that my grandfather smears with fat to help keep the water out. My clothes are often hand-me-downs from other families with boys that have grown too big for them, but my mother mends and adapts them so that I am almost presentable!

I'm very happy to be a Flamsteadian and I'm lucky to live well with my family and have the support of a hardworking community. My friends and I have lots of fun and love to play tricks on each other. The highlight of the year is when the mystery players arrive and we can have a good laugh at the cheeky jokes and, if the play is bad, we get to throw rotten food at the stage.

Well, thank you for spending some time with me this day, gentle traveller, and may God be with you every step of your journey onward!