

Middle English is the term used to describe the kinds of English used between the Norman Conquest of 1066 and William Caxton's introduction of printing to England in 1475.

How do we know about Middle English?

As in the late Old English period, Middle English texts come down to us on manuscripts, which are books and documents handwritten by scribes. Many thousands of manuscripts survive from the Middle English period. You can still see some of them on display in museums and libraries such as the British Library in London, the Bodleian Library in Oxford or the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh.

What Middle English sounded like can be worked out by comparing it with other languages and with later forms of English, by looking at spellings, and by studying words which rhyme with each other.

What did people write in Middle English?

People used Middle English for all the purposes we use writing for nowadays – for letters and legal documents, for books about cooking and about illnesses, and for literature. Much Middle English writing was to do with religion, since people were generally very devout. Perhaps the best-known literary work from the period is *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, which dates from 1390–1400.



What does Middle English look like?

Here are the opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales*, which give you an idea of the kind of language used in London at the end of the fourteenth century.

**Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour...**

Translation

whan = when, **his** = its, **shoures** = showers, **soote** = sweet, **droghte** = drought, **perced** = pierced, **roote** = root, **bathed** = filled, **veyne** = vein, **swich** = such, **licour** = liquid, **vertu** = power, **flour** = flower

When April has pierced the drought of March to the root with its sweet showers, and filled every vein with so much liquid that it has the power to make the flower grow ...