

followed a biologically predictable pattern; if a peasant wife used no effective birth control and nursed her infants (an activity that delayed the resumption of menstruation), she usually gave birth at intervals of about 2½ years. Aristocratic women, who not only married at younger ages but also employed wet-nurses, usually produced larger numbers of children. Eleanor of Castile, who married Edward I when she was about 10 years old, bore 15⁷ (or possibly 16) children. Philippa of Hainault, who married Edward III at the age of 14 years, gave birth to twelve children.²

Being eight children in 20 years, Alice Penfader made the most of her fertility as a nursing mother, and she seems never to have tried to prevent or terminate a pregnancy. This was not the rough lack of knowledge. Medieval women knew about a wide variety of plants that could discourage conception or sometimes induce early abortion. Their concoctions were not as effective as methods used today, but they sometimes worked. Artemisia, which inhibits ovulation, and rue, which causes uterine contractions, were among the plants readily available to women in Brigstock. Alice seems never to have resorted to such measures, but many women did. In addition to producing many children, Alice and her husband Robert were also lucky enough to beat the odds of infant and child mortality. In most medieval villages, almost half of all children died before reaching adulthood, but most of the children of Alice and Robert grew to full age. All in all, the Penfader household was atypical. Most of the neighbors in Brigstock, like most peasant couples, produced only three children who survived them.

HOUSE AND FARMYARD

Cecilia was the seventh of eight children, born into a house filled with three brothers and three sisters. This house was probably comfortable by Brigstock standards but humble by the standards of our day. Like all the houses in Brigstock, it was dark. Some houses had no windows, but the Penfaders, as well as other tenants, might have cut a window or two into their walls. If so, the windows had no glass, and only shutters kept out the wind and cold. Like all the houses in Brigstock, the Penfader house was filled with smoke. A fire was essential for warmth and cooking, but, as chimneys were unknown among peasants, smoke was vented through a hole in the roof. Perhaps the Penfaders, like other tenants who could afford it, built an especially high roof to draw up the

²The use of wet-nurses, women paid to breast-feed the infants of others, was common in Europe and medieval times. In the early twentieth century, when the vulgarianized use of rubber-made artificial nipples and bottle-feeding more feasible, wet-nursing declined in importance in Europe. Many wet-nurses had milk because their own infants had died, but others nursed two children at once. Sometimes wet-nurses lived in the households of their employers (especially when the employers were aristocrats); sometimes infants were sent away to spend their early years in the homes of wet-nurses. For more information on this subject, see Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (1988).

Penfader's 1 Medieval Life, 1599.



The interior of a peasant house.

smoke to the hole in its apex; this strategy eased the smokiness. Finally, like all the houses in Brigstock, the house in which Cecilia grew up was small. Peasant houses were usually twice as long as their width, and a prosperous family like the Penfaders probably lived in a house about 30 feet by 15 feet. Dark, smoky, and cramped, peasant houses were not welcoming places. It was no wonder people usually preferred, weather permitting, to sit outside on benches set against the walls of their homes.

Until recently, a stone house that perhaps dated back to Cecilia's day stood in Brigstock. Its walls were built of rubble, not stone blocks, but even this was fine by the standards of the early fourteenth century. Most medieval peasants used rubble only for a low foundation a foot or two off the ground; they then built the walls by placing posts every few feet and filling in the gaps with wattle and daub, that is, sticks and twigs woven together with the gaps

A man trying his feet and shoes over a fire which is also used both for cooking (notice the pot) and for smoking meat and sausages (hung from a bar above).



filled with clay, straw, moss, and other such materials. (Sometimes these walls were so flimsy that robbers literally broke into a house by avoiding the locked door and forcing entry through the walls.) Set at a low point in the walls of the Brigstock house were crucks, long curved timbers, that rose up to brace the wall and hold the roof. The roof was straw thatch; this was cheap and easy for medieval peasants and prone to disastrous fire. A house like this would have been little as Cecilia's likely was, with a combination of family labor and hired labor. If a family could afford it, they were especially likely to hire skilled workers to lay the foundation, erect the timber frame, and set the thatch.

The interior of the medieval house that until recently stood in Brigstock had a second floor, but this was a later addition. In Cecilia's house, there would have been one floor only, a packed dirt floor, possibly covered with straw. Perhaps boards laid across braces of the crucks provided, at one end of the house, a loft for storage or extra sleeping. Furnishings were minimal: benches or stools for sitting; a trestle table that could be put away when not in use; a nest to hold bedding, towels, and other linens; a cupboard to hold jugs, bowls, and spoons. All these would have been pushed against the walls. When it was time to eat, the table would be unfolded, the bowls and spoons set out, and the benches put in place. The Penifaders' diet was simple. Parents and children ate bread and drank weak ale at every meal, and they also ate, whenever available, such other foods as bacon, sausages, cheeses, eggs, fish, onions, leeks, cabbages, apples, and pears. When it was time to sleep, the tables and benches were set aside, and bedding (at best, a cloth bag stuffed with either straw or chaff from threshed oats) was laid out in their place. The one important feature of the interior was the hearth, set in the center of the house, with its pots and trivets; it was around the hearth that everyone sat, ate, and slept. Perhaps the Penifaders' house, like the main floor of the now demolished Brigstock house, was partitioned to create a small room on one side. This room was probably used for storage and sleeping; it offered a bit of privacy, but it was far from the hearth in winter.

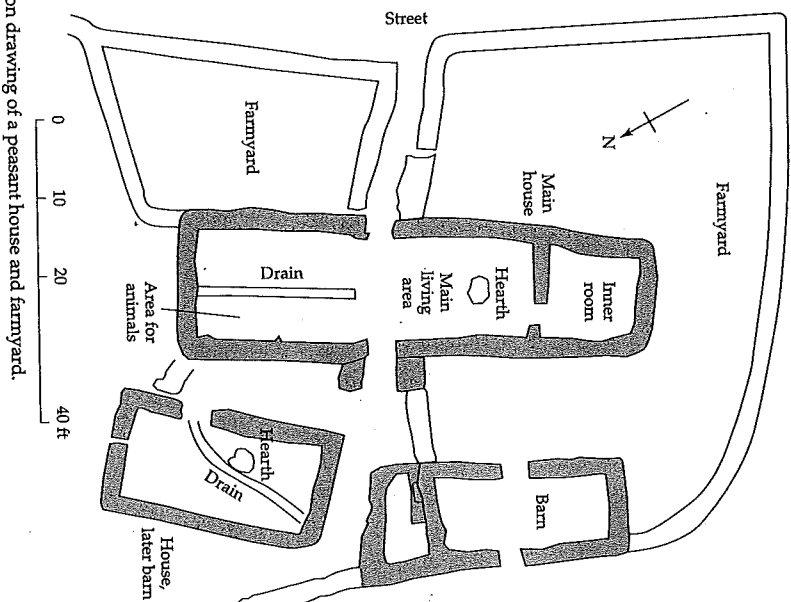
Cecilia, in other words, grew up in a house that provided the essentials of life: a place for cooking and warmth, a shelter from wind, rain, and snow; a place to eat and sleep. But her house was not a place to linger, and whenever

she could, Cecilia probably wandered into the farmyard around her house where her parents and siblings also spent much of their time. Sometimes houses stood together along a street, built with shared walls, and in such cases, farmyards ran behind the houses. More often, however, houses stood separately within their farmyards; in these cases, most of the farmyard ran behind the house, but some of it could also lie in front and along the sides. The farmyard was a large area, perhaps an acre or more, closed off by fences or ditches from street, lane, and neighbors.³ In the Penifader farmyard, Cecilia sat with her family in the early evening, assisted her mother in many tasks, or watched over the safekeeping of some of the household animals. (In the winter, cows, pigs, chickens, and other animals were often taken into the house to protect them from the elements and to add to the warmth of the interior. But animals were usually kept in the farmyard, sometimes in a barn.) The farmyard was a social place, especially in front of the house, where Cecilia probably found benches for sitting, fences for leaning, and a cobbled space for games. She amused herself in ways that echo the play of modern children—by imitating the work of her parents, by dancing and singing, by chasing animals, or wandering about the farmyard, by playing ball or other organized games, and by creating imaginary worlds with other children. The farmyard was also a place for storage: perhaps a barn for animals, a shed for tools or grain, a well or cistern for rainwater, a haystack or two, and certainly, at some distance from the house if possible, a dung heap where human and animal waste was carefully accumulated for spreading as fertilizer on the fields.

Most importantly, the farmyard was a place of work, especially work for women and children. Cecilia's mother baked bread and brewed ale in the farmyard; she milked cows and made cheese; she took advantage of outdoor light to mend old clothes and stitch new ones; she tended a beehive; she collected eggs from her roosting hens; she fattened her pigs; she cared for a few apple and pear trees; she cultivated a garden that yielded onions, turnips, peas, beans, leeks, garlic, cabbages, and herbs. The farmyards of Brigstock, small, readily fertilized, easily worked on an intermittent basis, and free of any communal regulation, were the most intensely cultivated lands in the community. The products that came from farmyards were valued by everyone, for the variety they brought to the diet and for their marketability. In collecting eggs, making ale, and cultivating onions, Alice Penifader not only fed her family but also earned some cash by selling foodstuffs to her neighbors or at nearby markets.

As Cecilia grew up in the house and farmyard of her parents, she followed hygienic practices that today might seem crude. Bathing was rare, not only because of fears of drowning but also because baths were considered unhealthy—liable to lead to colds, fevers, or worse. On occasion, she splashed herself with water and soap, but more often than not, cleanliness meant clean hands, clean face, and little more. She also had no toilet, and she either walked out to the dung heap in the farmyard or used a bucket that was occasionally emptied on

³An acre measures 43,560 square feet, that is, about 75 percent of a football field in the United States.



Excavation drawing of a peasant house and farmyard.

the dung heap. Like her parents and siblings, Cecilia wore simple clothes: long tunics and leather shoes; long gowns (men wore shorter tunics); and for winter, heavy furred cloaks (both outfitted with hoods). Made of undyed wool, all clothing fitted loosely. This made it slightly easier for Alice Penitaders to clothe her family by stitching a new cloak or altering an old one for a hand-me-down.

ARABLE PASTURE, STREAM, AND FOREST

Outside the immediate house and farmyard of her family, Cecilia found a large and diverse community. Brigstock lay in the heart of Rodingham Forest, a royal preserve for hunting. The Norman kings William I (1087–1100) and Henry I (1100–1135) hunted in the forest and maintained a road at Brigstock

for their use. Built of wood, it consisted of a hall, a chamber, and a stable. As far as we know, no kings visited the lodge after Henry I, but they kept it in good repair; Cecilia might have stared at these buildings and crept around them as a child. By the late fourteenth century, however, the lodge had fallen into ruin, and it was so thoroughly demolished that modern archaeologists have not yet succeeded in pinpointing its location. Local tradition holds that the manor house that now stands in Brigstock, an imposing structure of fine stone blocks built about 1500, rests on the site of the timber lodge of Cecilia's day.

Brigstock and Stanton today are thriving villages, clustered in a gently rolling landscape. Both settlements are nucleated, that is, with all the houses gathered into a central location. In Cecilia's time, the Penitaders and their neighbors had already settled along the same main streets of Brigstock and Stanton that can be seen today, but their lives were different and much less prosperous from the lives of those who now inhabit these villages. The peasants of fourteenth-century Brigstock relied on an economy of *makeshifts*, an economy that required them to respond flexibly to any opportunity that arose.⁴ They had, in other words, to juggle many tasks and to make do with whatever materials, cash, and work they could find. Peasants often relied a bit on wages earned by working for others or on profits gained from selling ale, bread, wool, or other commodities, but they especially relied on what they could produce from the land. Two anchors kept this highly flexible economy going—first, the arable fields on which peasants grew wheat, barley, rye, oats, and other crops; and second, the meadows and pastures that fed their sheep, horses, and oxen.

Like many medieval communities, Brigstock had open fields that were plowed, sown, weeded, harvested, and left fallow (that is, unplanted) according to common agreement. Brigstock had several such fields (each given a local name), and the Penitaders held bits of land in most of them. The arable lands of Cecilia's parents were spread through several fields around the manor—a half-acre here, a parcel there, another half-acre over there. (When Cecilia grew up she too would hold land scattered about the manor. In 1335, for example, she acquired an acre of arable that was distributed in three locations. As described in the court roll, they were found under the "Sale," in "Stitches," and "between the Valkmill and the new dyke.") Every year, the Penitaders' use of each small bit of land, whether they planted it with wheat or rye in the autumn, or oats, barley, or beans in the spring, or left it fallow, was determined by the common agreement of all tenants. Robert and Alice, in other words, were not able to sit on their front bench and plan what to plant where and when; instead, they had to use their land in ways agreed on by their neighbors. This system of agriculture is different from the large blocks of land, farmed by single owners, that now dot the landscape of Europe. Yet it made good sense at the time.

⁴A "makeshift" is an expedient, a temporary way of managing. It comes from the expression "to make shift," meaning to get along as best one can. Owen Hutton coined the term "economy of makeshifts" to describe the survival strategies of the poor during the ancien régime. See her much acclaimed book, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750–1789* (1974).