

Medieval washer women notes

Washerwomen enjoyed unusual freedom of movement for the Medieval Period.

They used urine as a bleach for tough stains or water strained through wood ashes which are called lye.

They would congregate in a group down by the river and gossip whilst they worked.

Washing involved beating laundry on a rock with a paddle. It was hard work! Many washer women suffered with an aching back, chapped hands and sore feet.

Some of the names given to washerwomen were 'Scolding sluts and wrangling queens'. Other work washerwomen sometimes did was nursing, spinning, cleaning and cooking.

Work would suffer in bad weather. If there wasn't dry day in sight, the washing gets washed, but there would be no space to dry it - and no sun to bleach the linens.

Thieves would often try to steal the laundry which meant the washer women had to keep an eye on it. If they lost the laundry, they wouldn't get paid for the work they had done!

If a laundrywoman was attached to a royal household, they might receive a luxurious cape as a gift for loyal service. This would mean undertaking an apprenticeship to deal with expensive fabrics, training that would cost them money.

If a laundress was attached to a religious institution they had to conduct their business outside of the Abbey walls, or be married to a reliable male employee of the Abbey/Monastery. Otherwise, it was felt they could lead the monks astray!

Would you like to have been a washer woman?