

FOUNDATION EDITION



OCR GCSE (9–1)
HISTORY B (SHP)

THE PEOPLE'S HEALTH

c.1250 TO PRESENT

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An OCR endorsed textbook



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Matters of life and death

Did anyone really care about health in medieval England?

The image below appeared in 1976 in a magazine called *Look and Learn*. The magazine aimed to use interesting artwork to help young people learn about their world. This is an artist's impression of a London street scene in the fourteenth century.

As you can see, the artist includes lots of details to suggest that medieval towns were unhealthy places.

▼ An illustration from *Look and Learn* magazine in 1976



Reflect

In the image on page 8, find the following:

- A man suffering from deadly plague. He has fallen to his knees on the rough street.
- A dog sniffing at him suspiciously.
- Fellow townspeople backing away in alarm.
- A woman throwing rubbish, or something worse, from an upstairs window.
- Pigs roaming freely through the city searching for food amidst the waste.
- The open drain running through the street.
- The body of another victim of plague, wrapped in a sheet, being loaded onto a cart.

The Enquiry

The artist who created the image on page 8 has worked hard to create the impression that medieval towns were unhealthy places. No one seems to care about the health of the city. The caption for the original picture declared that 'London was such a filthy place at the time of the plague that nothing could be done to stop the disease'.

It is certainly true that London in the Middle Ages was dirty compared to our own day. It was also full of dangers to health. But why was this? We might assume that medieval people simply did not care about their health. We might even think that they were too stupid to take actions that seem obvious to us today.

In this Enquiry you will learn about the health hazards that people faced between 1250 and 1500. You must decide whether they made any serious effort to tackle these. You will do this in four stages:

- 1. You will remind yourself about life in England in the Middle Ages.**
- 2. You will learn about living conditions in the Middle Ages.**
- 3. You will consider how people responded to the Black Death. This was the dreadful plague that first struck Britain in 1348.**
- 4. Finally, you will find out exactly what kings, church leaders and mayors did to preserve the health of the people.**

The next four pages get you started. They remind you how people lived in the Middle Ages and what they believed about their world. We call this wider knowledge the '**historical context**'.

Fortunately, we have a wonderful historical source to help us to get a sense of life in medieval Britain. It is the Luttrell Psalter. This book was made between 1320 and 1340. It belonged to a medieval knight called Sir

Geoffrey Luttrell. Like all books of that time, it was written and illustrated by hand.

Every page of the **psalter** has wonderful illustrations. These show scenes from the medieval world. You will see several of these on the next four pages. They help you understand this wider context of medieval life. You will use this to help you make sensible guesses about the people's health in medieval Britain.

1.1 Britain 1250–1500: an overview

Record

Make a copy of this table. As you read pages 10 to 13, add notes in each column. We have given you an example.

Specific feature of life at this time	How I think this may have affected the people's health
People believed that God was all powerful	They might have hoped that God would protect them from illness

2



▲ God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit from the Luttrell Psalter. God the Father sits behind Jesus on the cross. The Holy Spirit is shown as a dove by the head of Jesus

1. God's world and God's people

Medieval people believed that God was all powerful. He showed himself as...

- God the Father, who ruled all human life.
- God the Son. This was Jesus. He died on the cross to pay for the sins of the world.
- God the Holy Spirit, who gave people strength. They needed this to resist the power of the Devil who brought evil into their lives.

2. God's Church

Every Christian in England was a member of the Roman Catholic Church. Priests cared for people in small areas known as **parishes**. Monks and nuns lived in abbeys and monasteries. They prayed for the world around them and helped people by providing food, shelter and care.

Roman Catholics believed that souls needed to suffer for a time before they went to heaven. The Church taught them that they could reach heaven more quickly by doing good deeds on Earth. These included giving money and care to the sick and needy.

3. Kings: the servants of God

Medieval people believed that God had put kings on Earth to rule over them and keep them safe.

Kings taxed their people. They used the money from these taxes to live in a grand style. It also funded the work of some royal officials. But medieval government did far less for people than we expect today. The great Roman Empire had provided its citizens with good roads, fine buildings and a good water supply and drainage. Medieval kings did not.

4. Lords: the servants of kings

The king gave land to powerful barons. In return, the barons controlled the different parts of the kingdom for him. The barons shared out their land amongst knights, like Sir Geoffrey Luttrell. Each parcel of land was called a manor. The knight was the lord of the manor. The farm produce from the manor allowed a knight's family to live in some comfort. The rest of the profits went to the baron and the king. In the thirteenth century the barons and the knights won the right to sit in parliament. They had some say over what taxes the king would receive. But they still had no real control over what the king chose to do with his wealth.

5. Labourers: the servants of all

Below the king and his lords were the labourers (peasants). They did the hard, physical work that created the nation's wealth. Most served the lord of the manor by working in the fields. In return they were allowed a house and some land for their own family. Others worked for wages and had no land at all. Over 90 per cent of the population lived in the countryside. In times of bad harvest they would be the first to suffer. They had no say in how the country was ruled and their way of life depended almost completely on decisions made by the lords, the king and the Church.



▲ A king kneels before God. From the Luttrell Psalter

Reflect

Think of three different reasons why the poor were more likely to suffer from health problems than the rich in the Middle Ages.

▼ Peasants plough the land with a team of oxen. From the Luttrell Psalter



6. The limits of technology

In this picture (right), people are delivering sacks of grain to the village miller. Water mills and windmills such as this were the most powerful machinery of their day. Most work was done by hand. All new ideas were spread by word of mouth or handwritten text until the first printing presses appeared in England in the 1470s. There were no powerful lenses, so tiny creatures such as microbes and germs were completely unknown.

▼ A windmill, from the Luttrell Psalter



▼ A doctor balances a patient's humours by letting blood flow from his arm. From the Luttrell Psalter



7. The influence of ancient ideas

The first windmills in Europe were made by Muslims in their lands in Spain. The Muslims influenced medieval Europe in other ways too. Arab scholars kept alive the ideas of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers. These had been forgotten in Europe until books by Arabs made their way to Europe.

The Church was happy to spread some of these ancient ideas. They matched Christian beliefs that God had made a carefully ordered Universe.

The ancient Greeks believed that the human body was made from four liquids, or humours. These were blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. The body only worked when these humours were properly balanced. Eating the right foods would balance the humours. If a person had a fever, a doctor might cut a vein and allow blood to flow from the patient's arm. They said this would rebalance the humours.

8. The growth of the wool trade

By the end of the Middle Ages, England was famous for the wool that it exported to Europe. This made the country more wealthy. Many people could eat better food and live in better houses. The wool trade also led to the growth of many English towns.



▲ A celebration in a medieval town. From the Luttrell Psalter

9. The growth of towns

By the standards of our own day medieval towns were not very large. They still felt crowded and busy. They were full of activity, noise and mess as all sorts of craftsmen and women went about their business.

A mayor and a **council** of important men controlled life in towns. They wanted their town to prosper so that everyone could be proud of it.

They also made rules to keep people safe from dangers such as an outbreak of fire.

Many town **councillors** were also members of guilds. These controlled the quality and price of the goods that were made in the town. There were **guilds** for cloth workers, bakers, brewers and all sorts of trades. The guilds were also deeply religious groups. They tried hard to look after the welfare of the town community.

10. Daily life and leisure

Medieval people enjoyed a drink. At any time a friendly drink might lead to a drunken disturbance. The two men in this picture have turned to violence. They are hitting each other with clay pots that may have held their ale. The artist has shown the men with the legs of wild animals. He may be suggesting that this was 'bestly' behaviour.



▼ A fight from the Luttrell Psalter

Record

Complete the notes in your table (see page 10). At the end of your Enquiry you could check to see how many of your ideas about health in the Middle Ages proved to be accurate.

1.2 Living conditions

Record

By now you should have a good overview of medieval life and some ideas about how this may have affected people's health. Now we can look in more detail at the conditions in which people lived in the Middle Ages.

Our health has always depended on what we eat and drink, the air we breathe, the houses

we live in, how clean we can keep ourselves and what we do with the waste we create – especially the waste from our own bodies!

On the next six pages you will be reading about the living conditions of medieval people, first in the countryside and then in the towns. As you read, make notes in two columns like this:

Helpful for health	Hazardous for health
Many people worked outside in the fresh air.	If the harvest failed, people would be short of food and might die of famine.

Life on the land: the countryside

Daily bread

Peasants worked hard on the land. Their lives depended on it. They worked in fresh air with friends and family. This hard, physical work started at a very young age.

Nothing mattered more than the harvest in medieval life. A bad harvest could mean death. A terrible harvest led to the Great Famine of 1315–16. Outbreaks of disease affected cattle and sheep. The bad weather and poor harvests lasted until 1322. About 10 per cent of the population died in this Great Famine.

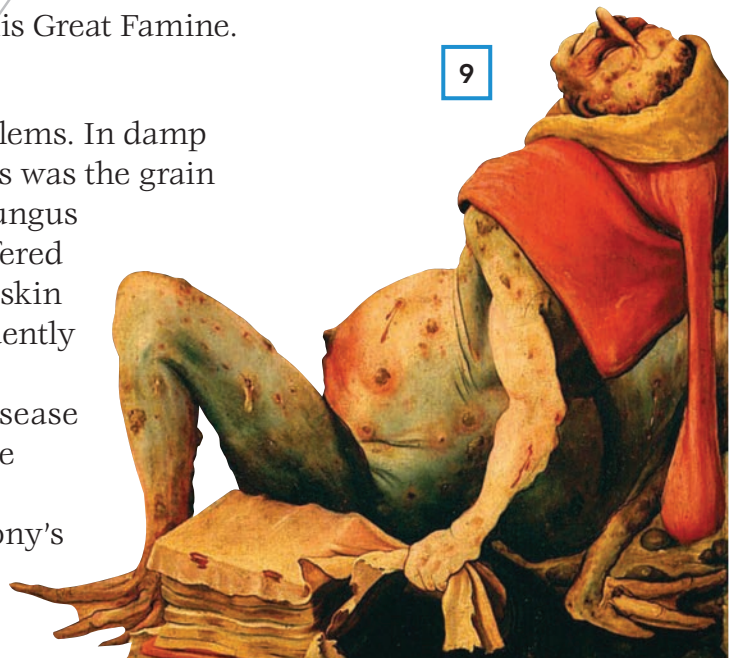
Dangerous bread

Even a good harvest might bring hidden problems. In damp conditions, a certain fungus grew on rye. This was the grain used to make bread. We now know that the fungus causes a disease called ergotism. Victims suffered from an outburst of painful pustules on their skin and a dreadful burning sensation. They frequently had hallucinations and many went mad.

No one connected the fungus with the disease until centuries later when microscopes were invented. Medieval people believed it was caused by demons. They named it 'St Anthony's Fire'. St Anthony was the Christian saint who, they believed, might heal victims.

▼ A victim of St Anthony's Fire from the Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grunewald, 1516

9



Water and drink



▲ A water mill, from the Luttrell Psalter

The importance of water

Every village was near a stream or spring. This provided water for humans and their animals. Springs often fed wells in the village. The water from wells was cleaner than water taken from streams where animals went to drink.

The dangers of water

From records of deaths by accidental drowning, we know that peasants sometimes bathed in the streams, usually in the summer months.

An extract from a coroner's report covering the Oxford area

July 13, 1346 John de Salesbury on Wednesday bathed in the Thames and was drowned.

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The power of water

Some streams turned water wheels. These helped to grind grain. In the later Middle Ages, some powered fulling mills where mighty wooden hammers cleaned and softened newly made cloth. The cloth was soaked in a mixture that was largely made up of human urine. If there was no mill, men and women worked the urine mixture into the cloth with their feet. Fulling in the countryside polluted many streams.

Produce from water

Medieval people ate a lot of fish even though they knew nothing about its valuable vitamins.

In the picture above, you can see nets in the water. They are catching fish and eels. The medieval Church insisted that no one ate meat from land animals on Fridays. That was the day of the week when Christ had been crucified. For this reason, many villages created their own fish ponds.

Alternatives to water

Medieval villagers probably drank more water than most town dwellers. Both drank large amounts of ale. This was brewed from barley. This was an important part of their diet and gave valuable **nutrition**. The most common ale was known as 'small beer'. This was not as strong as today's beers. It had just enough alcohol in it to stop the brew from going bad for a few days. Boiling the brew for hours also killed off any germs in the water, although no one at the time knew this.

Reflect

Which of these do you think was the greater hazard to human health in the Middle Ages?

- Bread
- Water

Record

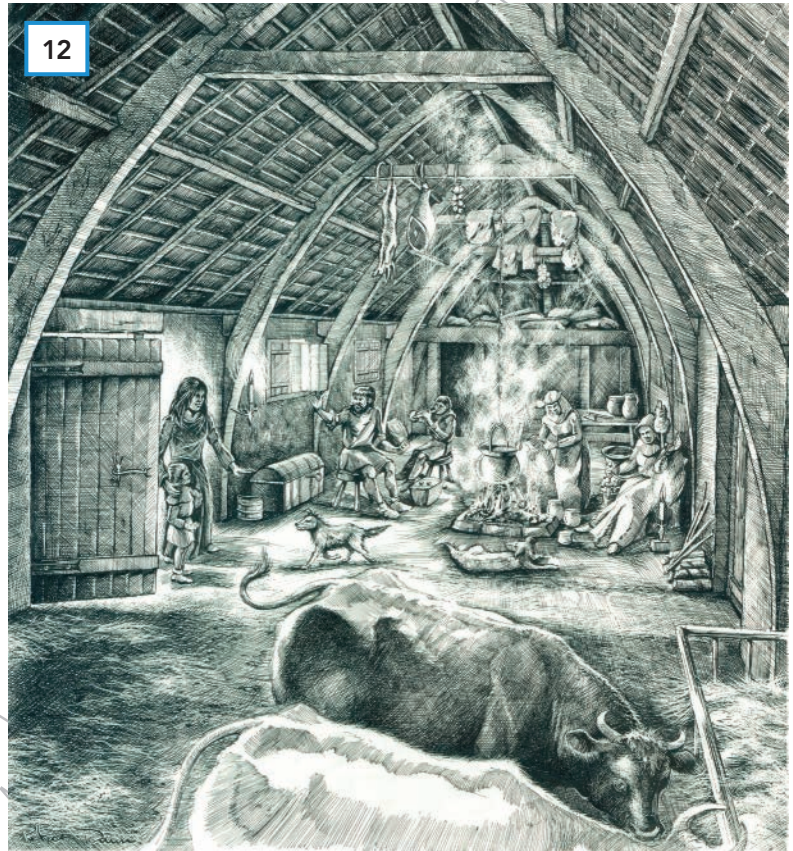
Add some more notes to your helpful/hazardous columns.

The peasants' houses

Villagers grazed cattle, sheep and pigs on land nearby. Their geese, ducks and hens might wander inside their houses.

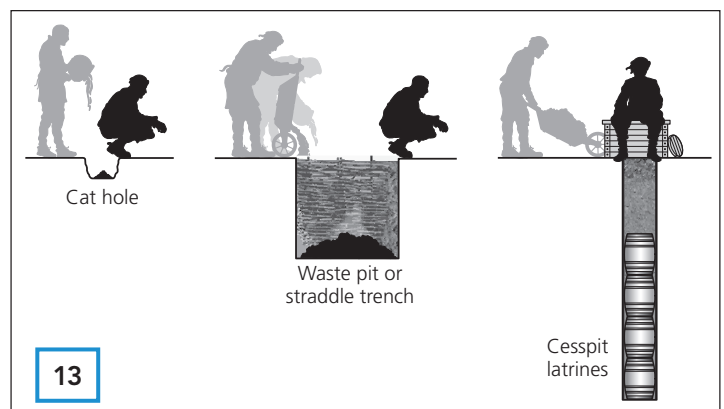
Some peasants lived in very simple huts made from sticks and mud. But many lived in quite large houses with strong timber frames like the one in this picture. It shows:

- an open wood fire for cooking and warmth
- a large iron pot containing pottage; this was like a thick soup made with peas or beans and onions
- mutton, beef or pork hanging in the smoke-filled rafters; the smoke preserved the meat
- small windows with wooden shutters, not glass
- the valuable cows inside the house; this kept the animals safe and the peasants warm
- the floor covered with rushes or straw; archaeologists have found floors that have been hollowed by regular sweeping.



▲ An artist's reconstruction of a peasant's house, drawn c.1990

▼ Types of cesspit



Gardens and waste

Most peasants had a healthy diet. They grew vegetables and fruit. They also ate nuts, honey, milk, cheese and eggs.

Each garden had a **midden** or rubbish tip. It held floor sweepings, waste from cooking, animal droppings and possibly human excrement. Some houses had their own **cesspit**. Peasants covered the mess with ash from their fire. Or they may have just taken themselves off to the nearby woods. They probably used moss as lavatory paper.

Waste from cesspits and middens was spread over the fields to fertilise the soil.

Reflect

What do you think were the advantages and disadvantages of each of these types of cesspit?

Life in the towns

Record

Continue your notes as you read about towns.

Living conditions in towns were rather different from the countryside.

Roads and streets

Peasants took fresh food and other goods (including fresh moss) to the towns. Their grain, fruit, fish, cheese, timber and cloth were sold in the market. So was honey, which was used to sweeten food. Sugar was a rare and expensive treat in the Middle Ages.

Drovers walked livestock such as cattle to town where they were butchered for fresh meat. Roads near the centre of towns were often paved or cobbled. These were easily damaged by carts and animals. So were the drains that ran down the centre of the streets.

Reflect

What sorts of food did townspeople buy from country people in medieval markets?

Markets and shops

In the streets around the market, traders served customers from the spaces in front of their houses. Many sold foods but there were tailors and barbers as well. Their skills helped keep people clean.

Reflect

This water-seller carries a sort of bucket on a pole over his shoulder. What do you think he used this for?

Water and waste

The market square in some towns had a **conduit**. This was a fountain that all could use. The water reached the town through lead pipes from springs in the countryside. The first conduits were built by cathedrals and friaries in the town. These needed clean water for baptisms and other acts of worship. They could afford to lay the pipes. By the fifteenth century, towns were rich enough to take charge of the conduits. Water-carriers filled leather sacks at these conduits and sold water from door to door.

Street vendors and taverns sold hot food and ale. Sometimes vendors made meat pies from old or rancid meat. Tavern ale was strong. It caused drunkenness even though the Church warned that this was sinful. There were public **latrines** around many markets.

At the end of a market day the streets were filthy. Waste from the stalls lay around. So did dung dropped by animals. From 1293, London paid **rakers** to clear the streets. They disposed of the rubbish outside the town walls. From there it could be taken by the peasants and spread on the fields. By 1500, most other towns employed rakers as well.

▼ A water-seller, from the Luttrell Psalter



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Trades and mess

Record

Add some more notes to your helpful/hazardous columns.

Mention some of the trades that caused pollution but also say how the trades may have helped people's health.

Medieval trades created all sorts of pollution in towns. By the end of the Middle Ages, most councils had rules for butchers and fishmongers. They had to do all their cutting on the outskirts of the town. They also had to dispose of the rubbish themselves. By 1500 some towns employed carters to collect and remove their waste.

Other industries had to work on the edge of town too. This panel shows some of these (see right).

- **Tanners** made soft leather by scraping hair from animal hides and treating them with natural acids.
- **Brewers** made the ale that nourished people. This created large deposits of barley husks.
- **Dyers** coloured textiles. Clean, new clothing was important but the liquid dyes had to be disposed of.
- **Washerwomen** kept people clean by washing their clothes. They were constantly pouring away large quantities of soapy water.
- **Masons** (builders) made and mended the houses that sheltered people. But they created rubble and dust.
- **Lime burners** made limewash paint. This stopped rainwater from destroying the walls of buildings. But the process filled the air with nasty smoke.

Smell

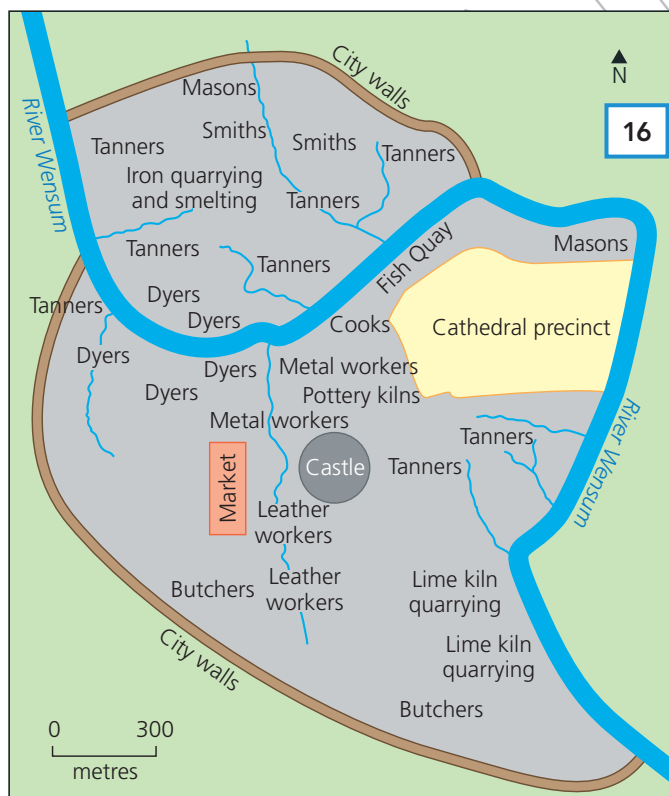
Some lime burners and metal workers used sea-coal. This made a terrible smell.

Archaeologists have compared the skeletons of medieval children from town and countryside. These show that town children suffered from damaged sinuses. This is a sure sign of breathing difficulties. Children from the country did not.

People at the time believed that the main cause of disease was an invisible poison in the air. They took this idea from ancient Greeks and Arab writings. They called this poisoned air '**miasma**'.

From a book written in 1240 by a monk, Bartholomaeus Anglicus

If the vapour in the air is malicious, stinking and corrupt, it corrupts the spirit inside humans and often brings pestilence.



▲ Norwich in the fourteenth century, showing the locations of different trades

House and garden

Houses in towns were not all the same:

- Rich merchants owned houses like the one shown in the photo on the right.
- The upper floors jut out to provide more floor space inside. In the Middle Ages it had a thatched roof, full of insects, mice and rats.
- In the centre of town, houses were tightly packed.
- Further out, many had gardens with flowers. Householders believed that their scent purified the foul air that might cause disease. They also grew vegetables and kept animals such as chickens and pigs. The dung made a fine compost heap.
- Householders were supposed to clear their gutters and drains and the streets around their property. Not everyone did.
- The overhanging upper floors shut out sunlight. Puddles of stagnant rainwater added to the smells that medieval people believed were dangerous.
- Poorer areas were usually the most dirty and cramped.

▼ A fifteenth-century merchant's house in Exeter



▲ A barrel used to line a cesspit. Archaeologists have cut away the side to reveal the thirteenth-century contents still inside

Water and waste

A few people had their own well but most collected water from the town conduit. Some bought it from the water-carrier.

Householders were allowed to leave rubbish outside their house for three or four days. They then had to move it or pay rakers to take it away. If they did not, they could be fined.

Human waste was more of a problem. The rich might have a latrine inside their house but for most people it was outside in a yard. Several houses might have shared a latrine. The waste dropped into a cesspit. The best were made from stone. Others were lined with barrels sunk into the ground. The worst had no lining so excrement leaked into the cellars of nearby houses.

Professional **gongfarmers** cleared latrines. They might need to climb into the pit to scoop out the mess. They then had to take cartloads of cess out of the town. They often sold this to farmers with land just outside the walls. Sometimes they simply tipped it into nearby streams, like the one outside Exeter called Shitbrook.

Record

Finish your notes on things that helped health or were hazards to health. Highlight the three most important discoveries you have made.

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The Enquiry

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Record

Record ideas and information that will help you complete the end-of-enquiry task.

Reflect

Think carefully about the text, diagrams and pictures when you see a **Reflect** task.

Review

Bring together everything you have learnt throughout the enquiry in the **Review** task.

Closer Look

Look in more depth at one aspect of each enquiry as you take a **Closer Look**.

Key Idea

Consider the 'big ideas' in history with **Key Idea** summaries at the end of each enquiry.

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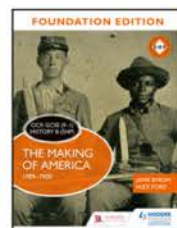
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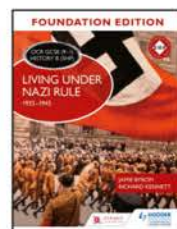


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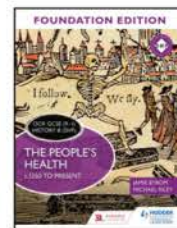
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