ENGLISH MEDIEVAL PHRASES

There are many phrases that we use in everyday life. Some of these were first spoken back in the Middle Ages.

1. "The apple of one's eye"
In early medieval England the pupil of the eye was known as the apple (Old English æppel) since it was thought to be an apple-shaped solid. Since the delicate pupil of the eye is essential for vision, it is a part that is cherished and to be protected. Thus apple of the eye was used as a figure for a much-loved person or thing. Even King Alfred the Great used this phrase.

2. "Baker's dozen"
This phrase arose from a piece of medieval legislation, the Assize of Bread and Ale of 1262. Bakers of the period had a reputation for selling underweight loaves, so legislation was put in place to make standardized weights. To make sure that they did not sell underweight bread, bakers started to give an extra piece of bread away with every loaf, and a thirteenth loaf with every dozen.

3. "To curry favour"
The phrase came from the Middle English words 'curry favel', which in Old French was 'estriller fauvel'. It meant 'to rub down or groom a chestnut horse. In Le Roman de Favuel, a 14th-century French romance, a chestnut horse representing hypocrisy and deceit is carefully combed down by other characters in order to win his favour and assistance. The popularity of the work led people to accuse those who tried to further their own ends by flattery to be currying favel. By the sixteenth century the phrase had changed slightly to currying favour.

4. "To play devil's advocate"
Devil's advocate is a translation of the Latin 'advocatus diaboli'. This was the popular title given to the official appointed by the Roman Catholic church to argue against the proposed canonization of a saint by bringing up all that was unfavourable to the claim. The post, which was officially known as Promoter of the Faith (promotor fidei), seems to have been established by Pope Leo X in the early sixteenth century.

5. "To throw down the gauntlet"
The gauntlet was a piece of armour that knights wore to protect their forearms and hands. A gauntlet-wearing knight would challenge a fellow knight or enemy to a duel by throwing one of his gauntlets on the ground.

6. “By hook or by crook”
Records of this phase date back to the 14th century. One theory for its origin suggests that a medieval law about collecting firewood allowed peasants to take what they could only cut from dead trees by using their reaper’s bill-hook or a shepherd’s crook.

7. “Hue and cry”
This phrase dates back to 12th-century England. Hue comes from the Old French ‘huer’, which means to shout out. In the Middle Ages, if you saw a crime being committed, you were obliged to raise ‘hue’ and ‘cry’, that is to shout and make noise, to warn the rest of the community, so they could come to pursue and capture the criminal.

8. “A nest egg”
By the fourteenth century the phrase nest egg was used by peasants to explain why they left one egg in the nest when collecting them from hens – it would encourage the chickens to continue laying eggs in the same nest. By the seventeenth century this phrase now meant to set aside a sum of money for the future.

9. “A red-letter day”
During the fifteenth century it became customary to mark all feast days and saints’ days in red on the ecclesiastical calendar, while other days were in black.

10. “To sink or swim”
The phrase refers to the water ordeal, a medieval practice of judging whether a person was innocent or guilty by casting him or her into a lake. The belief was that water would not accept anyone who had rejected the water of baptism, so if the victim sunk they were innocent, but if they floated they were guilty. Chaucer used a similar phrase: “Ye rekke not whether I flete (float) or sink”.

There is also one phrase that was first thought of as medieval, but has more modern origins:

“To pay through the nose”
One theory has this phrase dating back to the early Middle Ages. The Vikings were said to have imposed heavy taxes on the people, and if one did not pay it they suffered the punishment of having their nose slit. However, this phrase was not used until the 17th century, which makes its medieval origins to be unlikely.

11. “Let the cat out of the bag”
In medieval markets, sneaky sellers would show a sample of their goods, then give customers a sealed bag ready to go. Sometimes, what they showed wasn’t what was inside. For example, they might show a pig but put a cat in the bag. Smart customers who checked their bags found out the truth and spilled the secret, letting everyone know. One of the earliest times we read the phrase “let the cat out of the bag” is in a letter that was written to Martin Luther in 1530.

12. “Cold Shoulder”
In the Middle Ages, a welcomed guest would be received with a grand meal. However, an unwelcome visitor or a guest who overstayed their welcome would likely be served leftovers, such as a cold shoulder of mutton from the previous night’s dinner.

13. “To get off scot-free”
In medieval England, one of the types of duties/payments that peasants had to make to their feudal lords was called ‘scotage’. However, the poorest peasants would be exempt from this payment, thus going “scot-free.” Another theory is that in taverns bills were also known as “scots,” and to go “scot-free” meant to receive one’s ale complimentary or to have the bill covered by a drinking companion.

14. “Dead as a doornail”
Medieval doors were adorned with sturdy nails, often with large heads. The doormaker would need a big hammer and anything continually pounded with such a tool would undoubtedly become lifeless.

This phrase dates back at least to the 14th century, when the words “ded as a dore-nayl” appear in Middle English poems like The Romance of William of Palerne and William Langland’s Piers Plowman.

15. “Dyed in the wool”
In medieval times, vegetable dye was applied to raw wool rather than to spun yarn or finished cloth. This method ensured that the dye seeped into all the fibres, resulting in a more consistent and durable colour in the final cloth. This technique gave rise to the expression “dyed in the wool,” referring to someone deeply ingrained with a particular characteristic or belief.

16. “Red herring”
A dried, salted, and smoked herring takes on a reddish hue. Due to their pungent odour, these cured fish were valuable in medieval times for training hounds in stag-hunting, as they served as effective bait.

It was once believed that the phrase “red herring” was only used after the Middle Ages, but last year a scholar searching a 15th-century manuscript discovered that it was written as a comedic line in a mock sermon.

17. “Seal of approval”
Throughout the Middle Ages, seals have served to validate documents. They have taken various forms, including carved precious stones, impressions on clay, lead, wax seals, and signet rings. A document bearing a seal was considered approved, granting it legal status in contracts during medieval times or ensuring confidentiality in personal correspondence.

18. “Beyond the pale”
The word “pale” originates from the Latin word “palum,” meaning ‘stake.’ In English, it initially referred to a fence marking the boundaries of a territory under specific authority, such as a cathedral pale. Over time, this extended to denote the limits of political jurisdiction. For instance, there was an English pale around parts of Ireland under English rule in the fourteenth century and around the French port of Calais from 1347 to 1558. It came to be viewed as what was within the pale was considered civilized, while beyond it was seen as barbaric.

19. “To talk gibberish”
According to one theory, this phrase has a start with Abū Mūsā Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, a ninth-century scholar who wrote about sciences, magic, alchemy and philosophy. When his Arabic works made their way to Europe, his name was simplified to Geber. However, the complex writing would be very difficult to understand for most readers, thus leading some to see his works as ‘gibberish’.

20. “A Pinch of Salt”
This phrase – in Latin “addito salis grano” – was written by Pliny the Elder around AD 77. According to Pliny, King Mithridates VI of Pontus developed immunity to poisoning by ingesting small, regular doses of poison with a grain of salt to make them more tolerable. However, Pliny likely meant the phrase literally and that classical Latin doesn’t use “salt” figuratively for skepticism. The English expression seems to have emerged in the Middle Ages, leading to speculation that “cum grano salis” might be a piece of medieval Latin. Nonetheless, the idiom is clear: just as adding salt enhances flavour, taking a dubious story with a pinch of salt makes it more digestible.

“Peeping Tom”
We have a bonus phrase, which while not spoken in the Middle Ages comes from a medieval legend. The story of Lady Godiva, which dates back to the 13th century, recounts how a noblewoman rode naked through the streets of Coventry to protest against the oppressive taxation imposed by her husband, Leofric, Earl of Mercia. According to the tale, Leofric promised to reduce the taxes if she undertook this daring ride. Lady Godiva, motivated by compassion for the townsfolk, accepted the challenge and covered herself only with her flowing hair, shielding her modesty as she galloped through the streets.

Centuries later, in the eighteenth century, this tale was embellished. As Lady Godiva rode through the streets, the townsfolk respected her wish for privacy by staying indoors with doors and shutters closed. However, one man, Tom the Tailor, succumbed to curiosity and peered at Lady Godiva through a window. This ‘Peeping Tom’ then was blinded, either through divine punishment or from angry neighbours.

From the website:
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You can learn more about these phrases and others in **Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins**, by Linda Flavell and Roger Flavell.