

The English chronicler Henry Knighton wrote about the effects of the Black Death in England in 1348-50 as follows:

And the price of everything was cheap, because of the fear of death; there were very few who took any care for their wealth, or for anything else. For a man could buy a horse for half a

mark, which before was worth forty shillings, a large fat ox for four shillings, a cow for twelve pence, ... a lamb for two pence, a fat pig for five pence, a stone of wool for nine pence. And the sheep and cattle wandered about through the fields and among the crops, and there was no one to go after them or to collect them. They perished in countless numbers everywhere, in secluded ditches and hedges, for lack of watering, since there was such a lack of servants, that no one knew what he should do.

In the following autumn, one could not hire a reaper at a lower wage than eight pence with food, or a mower at less than twelve pence with food. Because of this, much grain rotted in the fields for lack of harvesting, but in the year of the plague, as was said above, among other things there was so great an abundance of all kinds of grain that no one seemed to have concerned himself about it.

One could hardly hire a chaplain to minister to any church for less than ... ten marks, and whereas, before the pestilence, when there were plenty of priests, one could hire a chaplain for five or four marks or for two marks, with board. ... But within a short time a very great multitude whose wives had died of the plague rushed into holy orders. Of these many were illiterate and, it seemed, simply laymen who knew nothing except how to read to some extent. The hides of cattle went up from a low price to twelve pence, and for shoes the price went to ten, twelve, fourteen pence.

Meanwhile, the king ordered that in every county of the kingdom, reapers and other laborers should not receive more than they were accustomed to receive, under the penalty provided in the statute, and he renewed the statute from this time. The laborers, however, were so arrogant and hostile that they did not heed the king's command, but if anyone wished to hire them, he had to pay them what they wanted, and either lose his fruits and crops or satisfy the arrogant and greedy desire of the laborers as they wished. When it was made known to the king that they had not obeyed his mandate, and had paid higher wages to the laborers, he imposed heavy fines ... from each according to what he could pay. ... Then the king had many laborers arrested, and put them in prison. Many such hid themselves and ran away to the forests and woods for a while and those who were captured were heavily fined.

Source: Qtd. in James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin, eds., *The Portable Medieval Reader* (New York: Viking Press, 1949), 218-22.