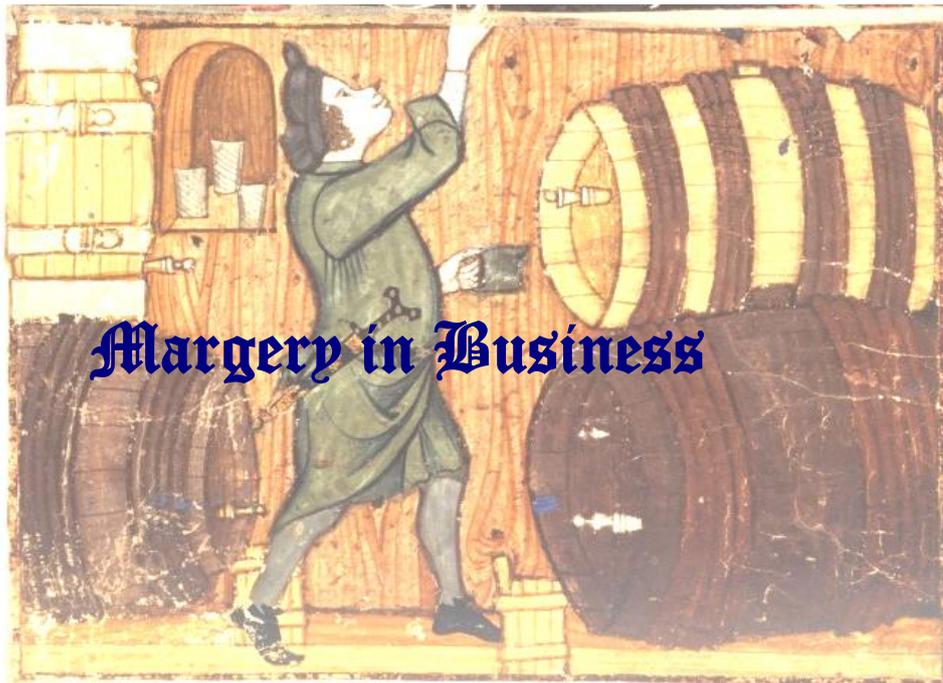


Margery Kempe: Mother, Wife and Mystic



The religious life of Margery Kempe is well documented. Her unique autobiography, the earliest in English, describes her spiritual journey but also incidentally and obliquely tells us of the day-to-day routine of a wealthy Lynn housewife in the late 14th century.

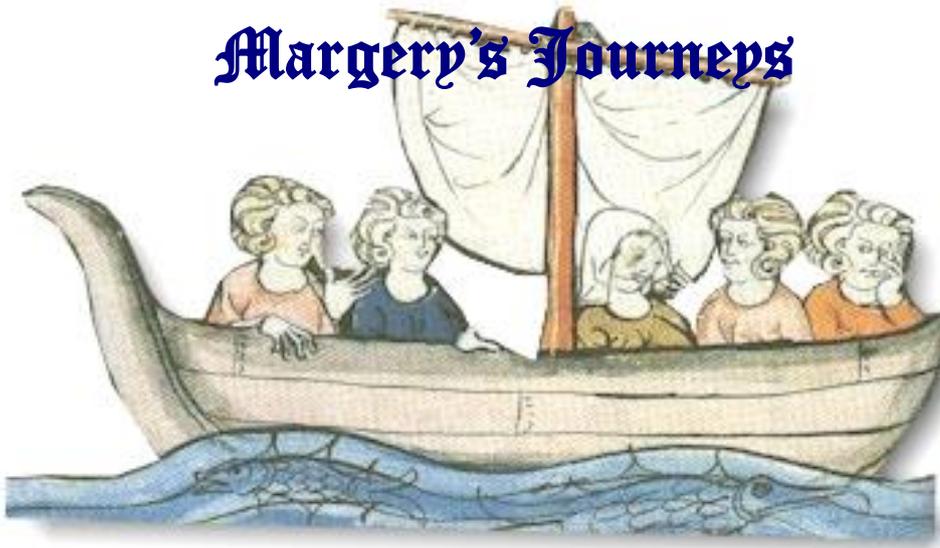
She was born c.1373, the daughter of John Brunham, who was five times Mayor of Lynn and a prosperous merchant, which gave Margery a high opinion of her social standing. She describes wearing 'gold pipes on her head', fur tippetts on her hoods and fashionably slashed sleeves and 'cloaks of many colours'. At 20, she married John Kempe, a cloth maker and newly-elected town burgess, with whom she had 14 children over 20 years of relatively normal married life, though how many lived we do not know. She mentions in Chapter 8 of her *Booke* that Jesus says he will 'save all your children', but whether these are live children or the souls of dead ones is not plain. We know only about one son who went to Danzig (now Gdansk in Poland) as an apprentice to a merchant and married a local woman there. After the birth of her first child, Margery was dangerously ill for months until a vision of Jesus led to her recovery; then she asked her husband for the keys to the buttery to 'organise her household as before'. As an elite family, they had servants to help her with housekeeping and children.



Medieval women made significant contributions to local economies and Margery Kempe owned successively a brewery and a horse mill. This was in addition to her household tasks and gave her an independent income to supplement her husband's merchant activities, which never lived up to her expectations. Brewing was usually in the hands of women. Her brewery produced the best ale in Lynn for four years but failed when the beer brewed flat. The mash may have been too hot, which killed off the yeast, but local townspeople said it was a punishment for her pride. She incidentally tells us later in her narrative that walking home from York with her husband she is 'berying a botel wyth bere in hir hand'; this is a very early mention of hopped beer as opposed to ale and certainly the first mention of beer in a bottle. The milling enterprise was also ultimately unsuccessful, though Margery was admitted to the Great Guild of the Trinity later in life, the mark of a successful trader or merchant. She writes about crafts, trades and merchant guilds in her *Booke*.

Margery must have had her own money. Before she left to go to Jerusalem, presumably needing her husband's permission for the pilgrimage, he asked that she pay off his debts, sleep with him regularly again and eat meat with him on Friday. She agreed to pay off his debts and to eat meat with him on Fridays as she used to do but not to sleep with him again. He agreed.

Margery's Journeys



The remarkable journeys abroad undertaken by Margery Kempe came later in her life, but she made regular visits around England on pilgrimage for many years accompanied by her kindly husband who was her greatest supporter.

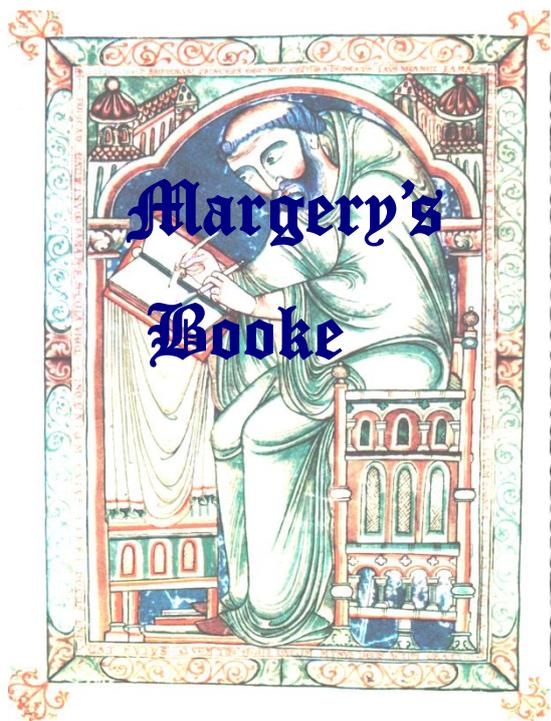
The custom of going on pilgrimage was an integral part of pre-reformation life.

Pilgrim sites abounded in England such as Walsingham, which was second only to Canterbury. In 1413, aged about 40 Margery travelled from Great Yarmouth across Europe to Rome and the Holy Land.



Margery was a difficult companion, weeping and 'forever speaking of the gospels'. Several times she was 'abandoned, scorned and cursed' but, nothing daunted, she sailed to Santiago in Spain in 1417. Her *Booke* records visits to religious figures of the day such as

Julian of Norwich to seek counsel. She spent seven years caring for her husband, who fell down the stairs and was badly injured, until he died in 1431, the same year as her son also died and, aged 60, she travelled, mainly walking, to accompany her son's wife back to Poland. Margery died in 1439.



A copy page of *The Booke of Margery Kempe* c1450 dictated by Margery and written in Norfolk English. Now in the British Library. MS 6182.

Margery Kempe could not write, though she may have been able to read. Writing was laborious; preparing vellum, quills and ink was not suitable work for a gentlewoman. Only a small number of men of the priestly and merchant class could read and write, usually in Latin, and only rarely were women given any education. Medieval people relied on the visual for information with pictures on church walls describing passages from the bible. Nevertheless her knowledge of religious works of the age is considerable and she remembers, not always correctly, many passages from them which may have been read to her.

She starts to dictate book one to a local priest on 23 July 1436 after a false start by another writer. Margery never names this second amanuensis, but the most convincing conjecture is Master Robert Spryngolde, her parish priest, who was well educated and also a Margery supporter. She describes the lengthy process and the many trials of bad eyesight, the devil's interference and illness. Book two is started in 1438. The manuscript was then lost but an early copy turned up in 1934 in the library of Colonel Butler-Bowden having been at one time in the Carthusian Priory of Mount Grace in Yorkshire. The book stands in a class of its own; 'there is nothing about the book which is not sensational, starting with the book's discovery which amazed the academic world'.