LABOURS OF THE MONTHS: JANUARY TO MARCH

The picture cycle of labours of the months are commonly found in books of hours, a collection of prayers. While these images are not necessarily true-to-life depictions of medieval life, they give us an insight into the rural lives of medieval people, and their work and life during different times of the year. Slight variations of work depicted, the order of images, or themes occur depending on the region and time of production and the wishes of the patron or artist.

**JANUARY.** While it is easy to imagine January as a time of dearth, it was a festive time in the Middle Ages. Winter store was still well-stocked, and after Christmas Day came the ‘twelve days of Christmas’ feasts, leading up to Epiphany on 6 January.

**FEBRUARY.** The ground is still frozen in some places and the weather is still cold, but the farmers shovel snow and begin to plough the soil for early sowing of grains like barley. They also gather firewood and kindling throughout winter.

**MARCH.** There may still be some snow in the mountains, but the farming year has begun in earnest. This image shows medieval peasants pruning vines, tree saplings, and plants in the orchard.

The colouring images above were created based on the calendar picture cycle from Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 8. This manuscript dates from around 1490, most likely from Bourges, in central France.

FURTHER READING

**On the Middle Ages:**

**On Medieval Food & Cookery:**
- Peter Brears, *Cooking and Dining in Medieval England* (Totnes, 2008)
- Maggie Black, *Food & Cooking in Medieval Britain* (London, 1985)
- Constance B. Hieatt, Brenda Hosington and Sharon Butler (eds.), *Pleyn Delit: Medieval Cookery for Modern Cooks*, 2nd edition (Toronto, 1996)

**On Medieval Books of Hours:**