Medieval marriage practice continues to influence ceremonies today – from banns [the reading three times of your intention to marry] to declaring vows in the present tense. Indeed, the word ‘wedding’ itself even dates from the period. However, some things were very different…

In the Middle Ages, getting married was easy for Christians living in western Europe. According to the church, which created and enforced marriage law, couples didn’t need the permission of their families or a priest to officiate. However, while tying the knot could take a matter of moments, proving that you were wed often proved difficult.

Although the church controlled – or tried to control – marriage, couples did not need to marry in a church. Legal records show people getting married on the road, down the pub, or over at friends’ houses. All that was required for a valid, binding marriage was the consent of the two people involved. In England some people did marry near churches to give greater spiritual weight to proceedings, often at the church door (leading to some rather fabulous church porches being added to earlier buildings), but this still did not necessarily involve a priest.

People were allowed to get married from puberty onwards, generally seen at the time as age 12 for women and 14 for men. Parental consent was not required. When this law finally changed in England in the 18th century, the old rules still applied in Scotland, making towns just over the border, such as Gretna Green, a destination for English couples defying their families.

Although the medieval church upheld freely given consent as the foundation of marriage, in practice families and social networks usually had a great deal of influence over the choice and approval of marriage partners. It was also normal at all levels of society to make some ‘pre-nuptial’ arrangements to provide for widow- and widowerhood and for any children. It was also expected that everyone would seek the permission of their lord, and kings consulted over their own and their children’s marriages. Marriage between people of different classes was particularly frowned on.

There were various ways in which a medieval couple could use words or actions to create a marriage. Consent to marry could be given verbally by ‘words of present consent’ – no specific phrase or formula was required. A ‘present consent’ marriage did not have to be consummated in order to count. However, if the couple had agreed to get married at some point in the future and then had sexual relations, this was seen as a physical expression of present consent.

So, for engaged couples, intercourse created a legally binding marriage. Consent could also be shown by giving and receiving an item referred to English as a ‘wed’. A ‘wed’ could be any gift understood by those involved to mean consent to marry but was often a ring. A ‘wedding’ where a man gave a woman a ring and she accepted it created the marriage.

It is clear that there were misunderstandings. It could be difficult to know if a couple was married and they might even not agree themselves. The statutes issued by the English church in 1217–19 include a warning that no man should “place a ring of reeds or another material, vile or precious, on a young woman's hands in jest, so that he might more easily fornicate with them, lest, while he thinks himself to be joking, he pledge himself to the burdens of matrimony”. The vast majority of marriage cases that came up before the courts were to enforce or prove that a marriage had taken place.
As God was the ultimate witness, it was not necessary to have a marriage witnessed by other people – though it was highly recommended to avoid any uncertainty. There was also a church service available, but it was not mandatory and the evidence suggests that only a minority married in church. Many of those couples were already legally married by word or deed before they took their vows in front of a priest.

Divorce as we understand it today did not exist. The only way to end a marriage was to prove it had not legally existed in the first place. Christians could only be married to one person at a time and it was also bigamy if someone bound to the church by a religious vow got married. As well as being single and vow-free, you also had to be marrying a fellow Christian. Breaking these rules automatically invalidated the marriage.

There were also a number of other ‘impediments’ that should prevent a marriage going ahead, but might be waived in certain circumstances if the marriage had already taken place. Couples who were already related were not to marry. The definition of ‘family’ was very broad. Before 1215, anyone with a great-great-great-great-great-grandparent in common was too closely related to get married. As this rule was hard to enforce and subject to abuse – the sudden discovery of a long-lost relative might conveniently end a marriage – the definitions of incest were changed by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, reduced to having a great-great-grandparent in common.

Reading the ‘banns’ was introduced as part of the 1215 changes to try to flush out any impediments before a marriage took place. Nevertheless, until the Reformation there was no ‘speak now or forever hold your peace’. In the Middle Ages problems discovered or revealed after the marriage could have an enormous impact. For example, Joan of Kent (who later married Edward the Black Prince and become the mother of the future King Richard II) was married in her early teens with full publicity and a church service to an aristocrat, but after about eight years this marriage was overturned in the papal court and she was returned to a knight she had secretly married without her family’s knowledge or approval when she was 12.

It is difficult to know how many medieval people married for love or found love in their marriage. There was certainly a distinction between free consent to marry and having a completely free choice. What is clear is that the vast majority of medieval people did marry and usually remarried after they were widowed, suggesting that marriage was desirable, if only as the social norm.