

How did the feudal system help William control England?

Background

The system had been used in France by the Normans from the time they first settled there in about 900AD.

It was a simple, but effective system, where all land was owned by the King. One quarter was kept by the King as his personal property, some was given to the Church and the rest leased out under strict controls.

William the Conqueror William I of England 1027 to 1087 / Credit: Design Pics Historical Collection / Universal Images Group / Copyright © Design Pics Historical Collection / For Education Use Only. This and millions of other educational images are available through Britannica Image Quest. For a free trial, please visit www.britannica.co.uk/trial



How did it work?

The king

The king was in complete control under the feudal system. He owned all the land in the country and decided who he would lease land to. He therefore only allowed those men he could trust to lease land from him. However, before they were given any land they had to swear an oath to remain faithful to the king at all times. The men who leased land from the king were known as barons; they were wealthy, powerful and had complete control of the land they leased from the king.

The barons

Barons leased land from the king which was known as a manor. They were known as 'the lord of the manor' and were in complete control of this land. They established their own system of justice, minted their own money and set their own taxes. In return for the land they had been given by the king, the barons had to serve on the royal council, pay rent and provide the king with knights for military service when he demanded it. They also had to provide lodging and food for the king and his court when they travelled around the country. The barons kept as much of their land as they wished for their own use, then divided the rest among their knights. barons were very rich.

The knights

Knights were given land by a baron in return for military service when demanded by the king. They also had to protect the baron and his family, as well as the manor, from attack. The knights kept as much of the land as they wished for their own personal use and distributed the rest to villeins (also known as peasants or serfs). Although not as rich as the barons, knights were quite wealthy.

Villeins/peasants

Villeins, sometimes known as peasants or serfs, were given land by the knights. They had to provide their knight with free labour, food and service whenever it was demanded. Villeins had no rights. They were not allowed to leave the manor and had to ask their lord's permission before they could marry. Villeins were poor.

Freemen

These were similar to the peasants except they were paid for their work. They worked for themselves and were free to leave when they wanted.

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Tasks

1. Create a diagram which shows how the feudal system worked. Make it as colourful and decorative as you can!
2. Answer the following questions:
 - How did the feudal system help William to keep control of his people?
 - What were the limitations of the system? (How might it fail? Could it go wrong?)