



Medieval England and how the feudal system worked

KS4 HISTORY

Ages 11-16 ⌚ 4 min read

What was medieval England like?

Medieval England lasted roughly from **1066 to 1485**, beginning after the **Norman Conquest** when **William the Conqueror** defeated King Harold at the Battle of Hastings. During this time, England was a very different place from today. There were no cars, electricity, factories, or supermarkets. Most people lived in small villages and worked the land as farmers, while a tiny group of nobles owned almost everything.

Life was harsh by modern standards. Many people died young from disease, infection, or starvation. Most villages had a church as the centre of community life, and the Church was extremely powerful—it owned about one-third of all English land. Castles dotted the landscape, serving as homes for nobles and places of defence during conflicts.

How did the feudal system work?

The **feudal system** was the backbone of medieval society. It was a chain of power and responsibility linking everyone from the King at the top all the way down to peasants at the bottom. Think of it as a pyramid where each level depended on the one above it.

Think of it like a school: the headteacher is at the top, then teachers, then prefects, then students. Everyone has different jobs and responsibilities, and each level follows the rules of the level above.

At the top was the **King**, who owned all the land in theory. The King gave large areas of land (called **fiefs**) to his most trusted **nobles** and **barons** in return for their loyalty and military support. These nobles then gave smaller pieces of land to **knights**, who promised to fight for them. The knights rented land to **peasants** (also called **serfs** or **villeins**), who did most of the farming.

What were the duties of each class?

Nobles and barons had to provide soldiers for the King's army and pay taxes. In return, they could keep the wealth from their lands and had real power in their region. **Knights** trained for battle and served their lords for around **40 days per year**. They also had to protect peasants and keep order.

Peasants had the hardest lives. They farmed the lord's land (usually **3 days per week**) without pay, then worked their own small plots. They couldn't leave the village without permission and had to obey strict rules. However, the feudal system did offer them some protection: lords were expected to defend their peasants in return.

Think of it like a team sport: players agree to follow the coach's rules and work together, and in return the coach promises to look after them and make them successful.

Daily life and social change

Peasants lived in simple homes made of wood and mud with thatched roofs. They ate mostly bread, vegetables, and ale. Nobles lived in castles and ate meat, but they also faced constant danger from war and disease. Education was rare—only nobles and clergy could usually read and write.

By the **14th and 15th centuries**, the feudal system began to break down. The **Black Death** killed millions, creating labour shortages that gave peasants more bargaining power. Towns grew, trade expanded, and a new merchant class emerged. These changes eventually led to the modern world we know today.