The Feudal System

Once William had become King of England, he had to decide how he was going to govern the country. He didn’t want the old English nobles to keep their estates, because they would be too powerful and might try to overthrow him. Anyway, they had to make room for William’s supporters who had been promised land in return for helping him.

William was very careful not to just give land away. His supporters were rewarded, but they had duties to perform as well. This system of duties and rewards was known as the Feudal System. In Normandy when barons were given land they had to swear an oath of loyalty to the lord who was giving it. This was called doing homage. By swearing the oath, the barons agreed to provide knights (mounted soldiers) to guard castles or fight in wars for the king. The more land the baron was given, the more knights he had to provide.

The picture on the left shows a baron paying homage to the king. Paying homage meant that he promised to be loyal and to fight for him. When a baron was paying homage he had to swear the following oath of loyalty:

I become your man from this day forth. I shall be true and faithful to you for the lands I hold from you.

The barons sometimes had their knights living with them in castles. Usually, however, they gave some of their own land to their knights, who in return did homage and agreed to fight when asked. The knights kept some land for themselves and shared the rest amongst the peasants who farmed it. The peasants did homage to the knights who, in turn, promised to protect them.
In return for their land the peasants had to carry out various duties for the knights. They had to:
- fight if needed
- Not leave the knight’s land unless the knight agreed
- Work on their lord’s land for three days a week.
- Give gifts of chicken and eggs to their lord at Christmas and Easter.

The feudal system proved ideal for distributing the land of the newly-conquered England. William could have a large army whenever he liked, without the expense of keeping soldiers at his royal court. He also made sure that his supporters were rewarded, and at the same time loyal to him. See the diagram on the right for a summary of how the feudal system worked.

**Tasks**

**MT: complete this paragraph**
William did not want the ___________ nobles to keep their land. He wanted to give it to his ___________. As well as receiving land, the nobles had to swear an ___________ and agree to do _______________. William needed an army so the nobles had to promise to provide ___________ for him. The nobles already knew about this system because it was used in ___________. It was called the ___________ system.

**CT Explain what the following were in Norman England:**

a. a baron  
b. a knight  
c. doing homage

**ChT Imagine that you were able to carry out a radio interview with the following people:**

a. an English noble  
b. a Norman baron  
c. an English peasant

Your first question to them is ‘Do you think the Feudal System is fair?’ What answer do you think each person would give?