

The Domesday Book

Our chief link with the life of the people is the Domesday Book, the minute survey of the land and its resources which William initiated in 1086.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle says he sent his men all over England into each shire. "So very narrowly indeed, did he commission them to trace it out, that there was not one single hide, nor a rood of land, nay, moreover (it is shameful to tell, though he thought it no shame to do it) not even an ox, nor a cow, nor a swine was there left, that was not set down in his writ. And all the recorded particulars were afterwards brought to him."

The whole country was divided into counties, the counties into Hundreds and the Hundreds into manors. Only in a few cases have the Hundreds been preserved on the modern map – the Three Hundreds of Aylesbury, the Chiltern Hundreds and the Hundred of Hoo, in Kent, are instances where the titles have survived even though the political significance has disappeared.

Everything in the manor belonged to the lord of the manor, held in trust by him for the king.

Apart from the land which he ploughed himself, most of the manor was granted by him to his followers in return for their services.

The Domesday Book shows several classes among the retainers of the lord of the manor including the villeins who held about thirty acres, the cottars who held about five acres as well as a number of bondsmen who held no land and were in fact slaves or serfs who worked in return for board and lodging, and were never allowed to possess property of any kind, but had their freedom.

Probably the life of the villein or cottar was no harder than that of the modern labourer. As today he depended for his prosperity on the goodwill of the landowner, but, he had his house, he ploughed his own land and raised his own vegetables, and, in return for these privileges he ploughed the land of his lord and was pledged to follow him into battle. Even though he had no money with which to buy pleasures, in a simple age there were no pleasures to be bought and he enjoyed the protection without which life would have been impossible.

Nor must we take too seriously the dire tales of rape and oppression which are perpetuated in legend and story. It is certainly true that the Norman lords brooked no oppression. To have done so would probably cost them their lives; for the countrymen, as ever conservative, looked on them as interlopers and continued to do so even though their life under them may have been easier than under the Saxons. In any case we must remember that the Feudal System effected a vital change towards unity and co-operation which would have been impossible in a purely individualistic manner life.

Taken from "Romantic Britain" by Harold Shelton