THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The Norman Conquest of England in 1066 did not lead immediately to control of the north. William the Conqueror's new Earl of Northumbria, Copsig, was soon burnt to death by his enemies in the church at Newburn, and uprisings continued against Norman authority. Finally, after a massacre of Normans in 1069 the King came north with a powerful army, defeated his enemies and laid waste to large areas of land, burning houses and crops. Even this did not lead to peace, and in 1080 Walcher, the bishop of Durham, was murdered along with 100 of his men at Gateshead. More punishment raids followed and the North was eventually brought under Norman control. However, Norman influence never extended far into Scotland and the border between the two countries was a matter of simmering dispute and intermittent violence.

William could not rule every part of the country himself - travel was difficult and slow in the eleventh century, and he was also still Duke of Normandy with obligations there – but he needed a way of controlling England so that the people remained loyal. Castles were built in order to garrison troops and to act as powerful symbols of Norman rule, representing a visible threat to the people of England. William built his own castle - the Tower of London – using Norman craftsmen and imported stone from France. However, he needed a way of effectively governing the country, and solved the problem by imposing a system of government known as Feudalism which formed the basis for a social structure and way of life in Medieval England which survived for many centuries.

Feudalism

William divided up England into very large plots of land - similar to our counties today. These were 'given' to those noblemen who had fought for him in battle or were linked by family ties. In return, the nobles swore an oath of loyalty to William, and were obliged to collect taxes locally for him, and to provide the king with soldiers if told to do so. The men who received these parcels of land gained the titles of barons, earls and dukes, and in the terms of the Feudal System, these men, were known as tenants-in-chief.

The barons, etc., in turn, divided their lands and gave these parcels to trusted Norman knights, often those who had also fought well in battle. Each knight, or sub-tenant was given a segment of land to govern, in return swearing an oath to the baron, duke or earl, to collect taxes when told to do so and provide soldiers from his land when needed. The common people, or peasants in these smaller territories, or manors, were tenants of the knight, or lord, and often treated harshly under the constant threat of armed reprisal. The role of the lords was simply to keep the English people in their place, under the control of the Normans, and any failing in this primary task could be removed.

Although in theory the king remained chief feudal lord and all beneath him were his tenants, feudalism in practice meant that the country was not governed by the king but by individual lords, or barons, who administered their own estates, dispensed their own justice, minted their own money, levied taxes and tolls, and demanded military service from vassals. Usually the lords could field greater armies than the king and following the reign of William 1, many kings were little more than figurehead rulers.

Feudalism was built upon a relationship of obligation and mutual service between vassals and lords. A vassal held his land, or fief, as a grant from a lord. When a vassal died, his heir was required to publicly renew his oath of faithfulness (fealty) to his lord (suzerain), an act called "homage". The vassal was

required to attend the lord at his court, help administer justice, and contribute money if required, also to answer a summons to battle, bringing an agreed upon number of fighting men. In addition, he was obliged to feed and house the lord and his company when they travelled across his land. This last obligation could be an onerous one. William the Conqueror travelled with a very large household, and if they extended their stay it could nearly bankrupt the lord hosting them. In a few days of Christmas feasting one year William and his retinue consumed 6,000 chickens, 1,000 rabbits, 90 boars, 50 peacocks, 200 geese, 10,000 eels, thousands of eggs and loaves of bread, and hundreds of casks of wine and cider.

On the lord's side, he was obliged to protect the vassal, give military aid, and guard his children. If a daughter inherited, the lord arranged her marriage, but if there were no heirs the lord disposed of the fief as he chose.

The Peasant's Life

Manors, not villages, were the economic and social units of life in the Middle Ages. A manor consisted of a manor house, one or more villages, and up to several thousand acres of land divided into meadow, pasture, forest, and cultivated fields. The fields were further divided into strips; 1/3 for the lord of the manor, less for the church, and the remainder for the peasants and serfs. This land was shared out so that each person had a roughly equal share of good and poor.

In many areas the Norman raids had destroyed the [Anglo-Saxon] villages, which in any case had been slow to develop after the Roman period. This meant that completely new settlements were often built. The standard form adopted across the region, though with variations, was two rows of houses arranged either side of a wide, central road or village green. Surrounding the village would have been large fields divided into strips, and shared by the villagers. The strip fields were ploughed by horses and oxen, which produced the characteristic earthworks known as ridge and furrow. The remains of such features, though rarely the strip field layout, can still be seen around many former medieval settlements around the urban fringe.

The lifestyle of peasants in Medieval England was extremely hard. Many worked as farmers in fields owned by the lords and their lives were controlled by the farming year. The peasants were at the bottom of the Feudal System and had to obey their local lord to whom they had sworn an oath of obedience. The peasant was responsible for paying out money in taxes or rent, which was usually the chief source of income for his lord; also a tax called a tithe, payable to the church, amounting to 10% of his annual agricultural production. The church collected so much produce from this tax that it had to be stored in huge tithe barns, some of which survive today. Peasants also had to work for free on church land; indeed, it is estimated that in many cases at least half the peasant's working time was spent on the land belonging to the lord and the church. Time might also be spent doing maintenance and on special projects such as clearing land, cutting firewood, and building roads and bridges. The Domesday Book was the record of a survey of the population and taxable value of England, carried out at the behest of William I in order that the king could know how much tax should be charged. However, the Domesday survey did not penetrate north of the Tees. Although the Boulden Book of 1183 provides a similar record for parts of Tyne and Wear south of the Tyne (i.e. in the former County of Durham, there is no equivalent record for Newcastle or most of the land north of the river until the late 13th century.

During the mid-14th century the Black Death impacted severely on the society and economy of the north-east region. This followed a series of famines in the early part of the century, as well as epidemics among farm animals in the 1320s. Furthermore, the weather became wetter and colder, making farming more difficult. However, from the 15th century there was a revival in farming, leading ultimately to changes in its organisation. Instead of farming small strips of land scattered across several large fields, these strips were increasingly lumped together into blocks making ploughing and harvesting easier. In some places powerful families were able to reorganise the shapes and distribution of fields for their own advantage. By the end of the medieval period life for most people was still dominated by farming, but there were an increasing number of towns, and the industries which would dominate the area from the 17th century were beginning to develop. As well as the great noble families, the church had become one of the most important landowners, but its powers were considerably curtailed during the Reformation at the end of the 16th century.

Throughout the medieval period, villages consisted of from 10-60 families living in rough huts – at best, wooden-framed with wattle and daub walls - on dirt floors, with no chimneys or windows, and amongst the very sparse furnishings were beds on the floor softened with straw or leaves. Water usually came from a local river or stream – often also the main drainage route from the village – but sometimes a well and was collected in wooden buckets. Often, one end of the hut was given over to livestock, which were kept in the house, particularly at night, for reasons of security and warmth. The peasant diet was mainly porridge, cheese, black bread, and a few home-grown vegetables. Peasants had a hard life, but they did not work on Sundays or on the frequent saints' days, and they could go to nearby fairs and markets. The lot of serfs was much harsher. Although not technically a slave, a serf was bound to a lord for life. He could own no property and needed the lord's permission to marry. Under no circumstance could a serf leave the land unless he chose to run away - if he ran to a town and managed to stay there for a year and a day, he was a free man. However, the serf could not be displaced if the manor changed hands, and he could not be required to fight, although he was entitled to the protection of the lord.

The lives of peasant children would have been very different to today. They would not have attended school and very many would have died from disease before they were six months old. As soon as was possible, children joined their parents working on the land, clearing stones, chasing birds and tending livestock.

Medieval Castles

Many of the Norman noble families and knights settled in the north-east in an attempt to increase the security of the region, built motte and bailey castles on their estates in order to provide them with some protection. None of these castles survive well in their original form in Tyne and Wear, although the present castle keep at Newcastle is a 12th century Norman rebuild of a motte and bailey type earth and timber structure, the original New Castle upon Tyne, founded in 1080 by Robert Curthose, eldest son of William the Conquerer. Tynemouth castle is also known to have been established by the late 11th century, from the account of the rebellion in 1095 by Robert Mowbray, earl of Northumberland (from c.1080) against William Rufus when the castle was besieged for 2 months before surrendering. Some of the present earthworks at Tynemouth priory site may be those of the original castle. Another possible survival is Ryton motte, a well-defined, flat-topped mound on the north side of Ryton church, within the churchyard.

However, the small size of this feature - 30 metres across the base, 8 metres across the top and 4 metres high – suggests that it is unlikely to have been constructed as a mott. Ravensworth castle, the standing remains of which date to the 13th century, may also have originated as a Norman stronghold since it first appears in documentary sources during that period. Many such defences built in Northumberland, including a chain of motte and bailey castles along Tynedale and Redesdale to protect the English border, and lager baronial castles at Alnwick, Mitford, Morpeth and Wark.

Following the Norman period, between the 13th and early 16th centuries, some of the earlier Royal and baronial Norman castles were expanded, as at Newcastle where an enclosing curtain wall and gateway was added in the 13th century. By the early 14th century, however, this curtain wall had been rendered militarily redundant by the construction of the new town wall which incorporated a much wider area than that bounded by the castle curtain walls. Its role had been reduced to that of a Royal supply base, and at its core the 12th century keep slipped into decay.

Lesser landlords constructed smaller strongholds at their manorial centres, some of which survive in Tyne and Wear, as at Heaton (HER 116), where the 13th century remains of a tower attributed to Adam of Jesmond, lord of the manor of Heaton in the mid-13th century survive, and Burradon (HER 312), where the remains survive of a three-storey tower measuring c.25 x 22 feet, incorporating the remains of a parapet and vaulted ground floor. Many others of similar size are recorded but do not survive (e.g. HER 139, 726, 788 and 964). In contrast to the larger castles, the purpose of such small strongholds, variously known as peles and towers, was as a place of temporary refuge rather than as a base for a garrison of troops. Similar buildings were often provided for the vicar or priest of the parish church, as at Houghton-le-Spring, where there is documentary evidence for a fortified rectory in the 15th century (HER 264), and at Ponteland, just over the county boundary, where part of such a 'peel' survives. In the 16th and 17th centuries the threat of warfare and enemy raiding decreased and such strongholds became less fortified, with thinner walls and larger windows.

Church and Religion

In addition to castles and towers, churches were the only other type of structure commonly built in stone. By the end of the medieval period most villages had either a church with a priest or small chapel served by the priest from a nearby village. The earliest Norman churches, simple structures with plain rounded arches, are not unlike late Anglo-Saxon churches, but by the mid-12th century the church designs were becoming more sophisticated in both decorative detail and plan. The emergence of the Gothic style between the 12th-15th centuries led to many church alterations, often with small Norman windows being replaced by larger, pointed, Gothic-style windows which sometimes contained elaborate stained glass. In wealthy areas the local community or the lord was able to make substantial donations to the church, which was then expanded with the addition of extra chapels and aisles. In addition, medieval churches were often extravagantly painted with religious scenes.

Burials carried out in the graveyards associated with medieval churches are sometimes associated with gravestones or slabs placed over the graves. Such slabs are often decorated with carved motifs including crosses and various symbolic or purely decorative elements. The nobility and other wealthy benefactors of the church sometimes had stone effigies built for themselves inside the churches, and sometimes paid for chantry chapels in which to place them.

Medieval Newcastle

As early as the Norman period, Newcastle became the only urban settlement of any size between the Wear and the Tweed. Other settlements with the nominal status of towns dis not achieve the same size as Newcastle. Tynemouth, despite its large castle, never developed into a regional market centre, partly due to the proximity of North Shields and the economic jealousy of Newcastle. North Shields, though larger than Tynemouth in the 14th and 15th centuries, was probably no larger than about 200 houses and lacked the grand religious and secular institutions and buildings of both Newcastle and Tynemouth. On the south bank of the Tyne, South Shields remained as little more than a fishing village until the post-medieval period, while Sunderland was a village of only 30 householders in 1565. No other urban centres developed in the area of Tyne and Wear until the period of industrialisation following the medieval period. The medieval town of Newcastle developed following the construction in 1080 of a motte and bailey castle with a wooden keep, subsequently reconstructed in stone, on the site of the Roman fort. Protective walls were built around the castle but the area enclosed was rather small and settlement very soon spilled outside the protected area.

Following the transfer of the government of Northumberland to King David of Scotland, settlement spread rapidly outside the town walls. At the same time King David presented the religious houses with the land between the town walls and the new development, covering the present Cloth, Groat and Bigg Markets. The accession of Henry 2nd to the throne of England led to the immediate revocation of the agreement with Scotland, however, and hostile incursions by the Scots began again. This led to the construction of a new town wall enclosing the area of the new settlements as well as the religious houses. The new city walls, enclosing a much larger are than that of the Norman castle, were begun in or soon after 1265 and completed in the early 14th century, at which time an outer ditch was hastily added in response to the onset of the Scottish wars. The defensive circuit when complete was over two miles long, with walls 7-10 feet thick and up to 25 feet high. The circuit was studded with 17 D-shaped towers and considered even in Henry VIII's day as stronger and more magnificent than "all the walls of the cities of England and most of the cities of Europe". Although nominally defining the boundary of the medieval town, archaeological evidence indicates that the wall cut through existing property boundaries and did not delimit the extent of the medieval city.

By the end of the Norman period, the three major arteries of the medieval borough, Westgate, Market Street and Pilgrim Street had already formed. By 1175 Westgate was the main street in the town but Newgate Street was also developing, and during a period of rapid development, a continuous line of properties developed by the end of the 13th century between St Andrew's church and St. Nicholas's. Newgate Street may have originated as a Roman route northwards from the fort, and certainly grew in importance following the construction of the Norman castle (there is also a strong body of opinion that places the Anglian settlement of Monkchester upon Newgate Street). This wide street accommodated open markets for many centuries (it was known as Market Street until the early fifteenth century), with areas of specific trading demarcated along its length – the 'bere' or 'bigg' (i.e. barley) market, the 'cloth' and 'flesh' markets, etc. Tradesmen and craftsmen also moved permanently to Newgate Street to service the religious establishments there (the Benedictine Nunnery and Franciscan Friary), as well as the visitors attracted to them. Residential development followed, along with inns and taverns to service the retinues of visitors, including nobles such as King David who probably entered Newcastle by that route on his visits to the city.

At least part of the Newgate Street frontages are known to have been in the possession of St. Bartholomew nunnery. Despite its somewhat turbulent subsequent history, Newgate Street seems to have retained something of its medieval character in later centuries, specifically in the variety of trades carried out in its back alleys and courtyards until well into the nineteenth century, and in the quantity of inns that survived there even more recently, particularly before its redevelopment in the 1970s. Two large inns, the Manor and the King's Lodgings, appear along Newgate Street on Speed's early map of the city. St. Nicholas Cathedral.

Between Newgate Street and Pilgrim Street, the other main thoroughfare leading from the north, was the medieval street of High Friar Street (or Chare), which ran for a distance of 236 metres between Newgate Street, opposite St Andrew's church, and Pilgrim Street. This narrow street probably came into being as a result of the foundation of the nunnery, perhaps as a street of poor residences and small-scale industry serving the religious establishment, and became the effective northern boundary of the town. However, in the fourteenth century the town wall replaced it in this role and it came to languish somewhat in the shadow of the wall. The growth in importance of Newcastle as a residential and commercial centre led, in 1400, to it being granted the status of an independent county with its own sheriff (rather than the king's sheriff, as had previously been the case). The original castle and its surrounding area, the Castle Garth, remained outside the jurisdiction of Newcastle within the county of Northumberland.

Newcastle's Religious Houses

In addition to the Cathedral and parish churches (the town consisted of 4 parishes within the walls), a number of which, including St Nicholas's and St Andrew's survive, one of the most striking characteristics of the medieval town was the existence of religious establishments. In Newcastle there were five friaries, a nunnery and many hospitals. The lack of a large Cathedral – the town developed after the great Norman cathedral building days – heightened the importance of these institutions. The Benedictine nunnery was the oldest religious house in the town and occupied the largest area, covering much of the present Eldon Square shopping centre, the Grainger market and part of Market Street, but the location of its principal buildings within that general area is unknown. It was established sometime in the later 11th century to the north of the early town walls, founded to provide a convent for devout daughters of the local gentry. The Franciscans (or 'Greyfriars' - named after the colour of their cloaks) had been founded by 1214 to work in the urban community as teachers, doctors and social workers, and arrived in Newcastle in 1274, settling on land to the east of St Bartholomew's. The Dominicans, or Blackfriars, were settled by 1239 in the area between Stowell Street and Low Friar Street, where their buildings still stand. The Carmelites, or Whitefiriars arrived in the town in 1262 and settled in the Pandon area on the east side of the town but were re-settled on the west side of the town, between Westgate and the river, when a new section of wall was built through their original friary. The other religious establishments in the city were Austin Friary, established in 1290 on the site of the later Holy Jesus Hospital, where one of the Friary's towers survives, and the house of the Trinitarians, founded in 1360.

Life in the medieval town

The growth of trade and the merchant middle class went hand in hand with the growth in towns in the later medieval period. Trade grew and the population of towns with access to coastal trade routes swelled, particularly after the Black Death. Towns were built on trade, and the new urban elites were the

merchants. Merchant guilds controlled town government, and eventually, the growth of towns and their guilds led to the breakdown of the manor-centred feudal society.

Merchant Guilds. Guilds controlled the trade in a town. Merchant guilds regulated prices, quality, weights and measures, as well as business practices. The power of the guilds was absolute in their domain, and to be expelled from a guild made it impossible to earn a living. Each guild had a patron saint, celebrated religious festivals together, put on religious plays, and looked after the health and welfare of the members and their families. The formation of guilds in Newcastle was allowed by King John in 1216, and there were eventually a total of 12 in the city.

Craft Guilds. Separate from the merchant guilds were the craft guilds, which regulated the quality, working hours and conditions of its members. There were three levels of craftsmen: masters, journeymen, and apprentices. Parents paid a fee to place a boy with a master craftsman as an apprentice, receiving food, lodging and clothing as well as instruction in the craft. The period of apprenticeship lasted for 2-7 years, after which time the apprentice became a journeyman (from the French "journee" (day), meaning that the journeyman was paid by the day for his work). After several years as a journeyman the craftsman would submit a piece of his best work to the guild for approval. If this piece was accepted he could become a master craftsman and own his own shop. All townsmen were free, and this provided some incentive for serfs to run away to the towns. If they could remain there for a year and a day they were considered free and could not be compelled to return to the manor.

The size of medieval Newcastle, in common withal other provincial towns, was rather small and it probably retained something of a rural atmosphere – its population in 1400 was about 4000, the size of a modern large village or small country town. A large part of the population would have depended directly on farming, and a daily routine would have been the driving of cattle from within the town walls onto common-owned pasture on the Town Moor, Castle Leazes and Nun's Moor. On the east side of the city, Pandon was an industrial area, where the unpleasant tanning and fulling industries were practiced.

Roads within the town were narrow, and tradesmen and householders were constantly encroaching on them, even on the Tyne Bridge, where shops lined the narrow routeway, particularly on the Gateshead side of the bridge. Traffic moved slowly, not least because tolls at the town gates were often paid in kind (that is, with goods rather than money), causing lengthy delays. Sanitation was a constant concern, since open drain channels ran along the sides or down the centre of streets, domestic animals (particularly pigs) foraged freely, stables opened out onto the streets and middens were the primary means of waste disposal. In Newcastle, for example, the former castle ditch was used as a town midden from the 15th century and had developed into a dunghill by 1620.

Fire was also a constant fear of town dwellers. Due to closely packed wooden houses and inadequate water supply, fires were difficult to control and could produce widespread damage. Other factors that increased the risks of fire included roofs of reeds, rushes and straw, and the prevalence of straw bedding, often kept close to open hearths for warmth. Most houses were built of wood up until Tudor times, when the flourishing new brick industry and a rapidly falling timber supply swung the tide away from wood as the material of choice for most domestic building.