

FIEF AND MANOR

The term “fief” was used in the medieval era to refer to property held by someone of status that conferred both rights and obligations. It could include anything that conferred an income: a mill, a toll bridge, a market, as well as farmlands, those bound to it, and the surrounding woodlands and wastelands. When the fief constituted tillable land and its villeins, the fief was considered a manor. Despite the formal notion that all land belonged to the crown, landholders thought of themselves as the “owner” of their land, with the obligations associated with that position as a kind of tax on their property. The term “vassal” to refer to a subordinate landholder was generally not used in England, although the concept certainly applied. Similarly, the term “feudal” to refer to this system is a later invention by historians and would not have been used at the time.

A fief might be obtained by inheritance (typically from father to the eldest son or from spouse to spouse), marrying into one, royal writ, or capture in battle. Fiefs were generally held by a noble lord, knight, or possibly a landed freeman (franklin), who is a vassal to a liege. The liege might be a noble or a religious leader. The lord owes annual fees to their liege, which are subsumed into the economic model for operating a fief in *Medieval Manager* (see pp. 36-38). Non-monetary obligations included military service, if called, by the liege or King, and paying for the liege’s ransom, should they be captured in a crusade or other battle. The fief holder also had the obligation to

respond to his liege’s summoning to counsel. The purpose might be to consult on a matter of war, political dispute, important marriage, or to try significant judicial cases.

The smallest manor was only 6 acres or so, nowhere near enough to support a single knight; the largest holdings were thousands of acres. The manor’s “demesne” was the land held directly by the lord, typically about 1/3 of the total tillable acreage, and worked by the villeins of the manor as their service. A minimum demesne for a landholding knight, allowing support of arms, armor and one or two warhorses was about 120 acres.

The overall size of the lord’s manor included not only their demesne, but also the lands of their villagers, both bound (villeins) and free (free tenants and cottars). A substantial estate of 2000 acres might support 90 households, comprising about 180 adult males, and another 360 women and children for a total population of 540. A prosperous peasant family held about 30 acres, a struggling family only 15 acres, and an impoverished cottar only 5 acres. A larger manor might also support a single wealthy franklin (free farmer) holding 100 acres or more, within the total lands of the manor.

Manors were sometimes expanded by developing adjacent parcels of land and bringing them under the plow, referred to as an “assart.” The lord could encourage villagers to develop swamps and border wastelands by rewarding them with economic privileges associated with the new holdings. Conflicts might ensue with nearby manors that also had eyes on the same land.

Table 5: Size of Manors

Size of Manor	Demesne	Households	Villeins	Cottars	Free Tenants	Village Population	Base Annual Income
100 acres	40 acres	4	2	1	1	24	24s
200 acres	70 acres	8	4	2	2	48	£3
250 acres	85 acres	11	5	3	3	66	£5
500 acres	150 acres	24	12	6	6	145	£12
750 acres	200 acres	37	19	9	9	222	£20
1000 acres	300 acres	45	23	11	11	270	£30
2000 acres	600 acres	95	45	25	25	570	£75

A resident fief holder actually living on a manor was usually a petty knight holding a single manor. Most higher-ranking fief holders, such as barons, earls and abbots held multiple fiefs and were absentee landlords. These nobles turned over the day-to-day responsibilities of running their fiefs to their steward and bailiffs.

Table 5 on the previous page provides the characteristics for manors of particular sizes, represented as the “Total Area,” which is the acreage of plowed and planted land for grain and legumes. Only $\frac{2}{3}$ of that land is productive in any given year due to fallowing and crop rotation. Households are a key unit for determining the workforce, with a working assumption of about 6 adults and children for each household. In addition to the laboring village population, the manor also included a religious leader and their staff, as well as the lord’s family and their residential servants, which might add 20-80 people to the total population.

A manor also holds some additional land, including pasture, woodlands, and wetlands and other untilled wastes.

As a rough estimate, the manor should also hold about $\frac{1}{5}$ the Total Area as additional acres of woodland and pasture. Depending on the local environment, wetlands and other wastes might constitute $\frac{1}{10}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ of the Total Area. Therefore, a 500-acre manor might have as additional land assets 60 acres of woodland, 40 acres of pasture, plus 50 acres of wetland or rocky upland.

The lord also owned the mills, bakery, and any other services in the village, such as a smithy. These facilities were rented to a villager who charged fees for their use. All villagers were required to have their grain ground at the lord’s mill and their bread baked at the lord’s bakery. Almost any manor would have at least one mill and a bakery. A single mill serviced 15- 50 households. Larger manors might require two mills, but very small manors might not be able to support one mill, requiring the use of a mill in a neighboring village or town. Of course, in more egalitarian fantasy settings, every household may well be baking their own bread in their own private ovens, and enjoying other privileges not typical of the historical feudal relationship.



CASTLE AND MANOR HOUSE

The centerpiece of the manor was the castle or manor house—sometimes simply called the “great house”—which served as the residence of the lord or their bailiff. For a non-noble knight in residence on their own single fief, the manor might simply be a grand stone house, likely surrounded by a palisade or wall for protection—not necessarily a proper castle. The simplest, and least expensive, manors were nicer wooden buildings with a stout wooden palisade for defense. Even the more modest manor houses still served an important role as a defensive refuge from attack. During peaceful times, the defensive function was unnecessary. But during political upheavals, many lords retreated to their fortifications when their opponents had the upper hand. Those holding manors on the borders with wild untamed lands—common situations for fantasy settings—have more need for stout, defensible castles.

Many 13th-century English castles, built earlier in the Norman era, were still based on an older scheme, the motte bailey. A typical motte bailey castle was a three-story square tower built atop a 30' high earthen mound (motte) surrounded by a wooden or stone palisade with hedges and ditches as defensive works. More recent constructions featured a stout round or square keep connected to rectangular masoned stone buildings surrounded by a large stone wall with battlements and a two-story stone gatehouse. A gatehouse guarded by twin towers was a novel feature in the 13th century, present in many newer and renovated castles, but not older ones. Larger castles often had a rectangular shape to the main keep. Dimensions might be over 100' by 70' feet with corner turrets or towers. Most would rise to heights of 30' to 70'. The roof of the main keep was constructed of lead or slate and might include lead gutters to redirect rainwater into a rooftop cistern for water storage. Glass windows were now commonplace, but wooden shutters with iron bars remained in use. Outer walls could vary from 12 to 20 feet thick narrowing to 10 to 17 feet at the top. Defensive works often consisted of a dry moat around the perimeter filled with thorns and brambles or in some cases a deep flooded moat for improved protection. In a fantasy setting other far worse horrors might be resident in the moat (undead, golems, and so on).

The focus of a castle or manor house was the great hall. Here, the main meal and feasts were served and much of the business and entertainment of the manor conducted. The great hall occupied most of the ground floor or second floor (American reckoning) of the main building. A truss triangular support created a high double-story ceiling without the use of pillars. If on the ground floor, the hall floor might be earth (covered with rushes and perhaps flowers), stone or plaster. If on the second story, the hall nearly always had a wooden floor, supported by wooden pillars or stone vaulting from the story below. The great hall of one typical castle from this era was on the ground floor and had a 30' ceiling with a very large fireplace on one side, and arches and windows along the walls allowing some natural illumination. Some halls might have a raised gallery on one or all four sides to accommodate musicians. Entrance to the hall was usually via a door in a side wall at one end. If the hall was on the second floor, entrance was by an outside staircase—sometimes within an adjacent fortified masonry structure that could be easily defended.

The hall would probably have a fireplace in one wall at the end where the lord's dais was located and several screens to block drafts. Older, unrenovated castles might still have a simple open fireplace near the lord's dais at one end of the chamber, with smoke finding its way out through louvers in the roof; the recent innovation of the chimney was still not found everywhere. Either way, the great hall was damp, cold, and dark. Candles and rushlights gave off little light and most people went to bed soon after nightfall. Of course, in a fantasy setting, the situation might be quite different due to the availability of light spells and magical devices.

Other rooms in the manor house might include the kitchen (although this was more often an outer building), buttery (which held all the beverages in “butts”—not dairy products), wardrobes (where spices, cloth, plates, and jewels were stored under lock and key), pantry, a small chapel for the lords' family, lord's room, small chambers for a few household officials, a treasury, a well, and a study. Provisions would be stored in a basement, if the castle had one. In some castles, the lord might sleep in a room above storerooms adjacent to the dais end of the great hall. A matched situation at the opposite end created chambers for the eldest son and family or steward, over the buttery and pantry. There were few internal corridors for the most part—rooms opened directly into each other. The greatest lords and ladies had separate

chambers, but for most others private chambers were a rare luxury. Personal servants might sleep in the lord's or lady's chamber on a trundle bed or bench. Other household staff slept on straw pallets or straw mattress thrown atop a bench in their workspace, the basement, or out in the great hall. Furniture throughout was fairly limited: a table or two, high tripods, strong trestles, firebrands, benches, wooden armchairs with cushions, chests for holding possessions, and stools. The great bed for the lord had a heavy wood frame with laced leather or rope thongs, a mattress of feathers, sheets, coverlets, pillows, and was surrounded by linen hangings suspended from poles or rings for warmth and privacy. On the bedroom walls were wooden pegs for clothing and a perch for a favorite falcon or hawk. Westminster Palace during Henry III's reign had hot and cold running water in a bath house, the former supplied from pots heated in a special furnace. Garderobes (toilets) were located at the end of a short right-angled passage in the thickness of the wall, often in a buttress. One was usually located near the lord's chamber and another off the great hall. A few more advanced castles rerouted rainwater into the garderobe shaft to periodically cleanse them.

The walls of castles were typically not undecorated stone (Hollywood notwithstanding). Most were whitewashed and often plastered and painted red, blue or green. Walls were decorated with hangings of printed cloth or occasionally woven tapestries.

Outer buildings, all within the walls of the bailey, included kitchen, bakery, brew house, guest rooms, dairy, dovecot, pigeon loft, kennels, stables, smithy, granges (for grain storage), and an additional chapel. These structures might be elaborate stone buildings or a simple timbered shed with a thatched roof. In some larger castles, extensive covered wooden passageways connected these structures. Poultry and other animals were kept in enclosures. A deep well was also often present here, perhaps in addition to one located inside the keep itself. In a larger fully-garrisoned castle, a separate hall within the bailey served the needs of the men-at-arms, likely with its own kitchen and essential servants. The castle kitchen was often built of timber, with central fireplaces or a couple hearths. Utensils were washed in a scullery outside. Temporary extra kitchens were set up for major feasts. A castle garden might be near the kitchen and planted with fruit trees, vines, potted herbs and flowers.

Either within the walls or just outside it, the castle might be served by a fish pond, beehives, orchard, or vineyard.

The fish pond might be stocked with trout, pike, or eels. Beehives were particularly valuable since they were a primary local source of sweets (honey), as well as wax for candles.

The manor house was not just a residence—it was the center of administrative activities for the manor. This included serving as the manorial court (hallmote) and where villagers paid their rent or taxes. On major feast days, it was also a site for entertainment. Visiting guests might include royal officials, knights of the shire, local officials, religious leaders, financiers, and royal ladies of the realm (especially widows). The lord's liege might even make a visit for a period of time, bringing along their entire household. Such events severely taxed the resources of most manors.

Daily life in the manor house started with all the servants rising before dawn to begin their tasks. The lord and family rose for religious observances, followed by a simple breakfast of bread and ale or wine. The morning was spent attending to castle business or entertaining guests. The lord had conferences with all the managers. Throughout the day, the lord and lady's personal chamberlain or chambermaid was often by their side. Knights and squires practiced riding and melee skills. Children took lessons under a chaplain or clerk. When allowed free time, children would play with dolls, tops, balls, horseshoes and practice archery. Grooms swept out the stables and fed horses. The smith fired up their forge and worked on refitting horseshoes, nails, and wagon fittings. Domestic maids emptied chamber pots and swept floors while the laundress washed all the linens. After the main meal, just before noon, there would be entertainment (music or stories) and perhaps some dancing. A light supper was served in the late afternoon, with more entertainment in the hours before dark.

Construction costs:

Construction of new castles was fairly rare and beyond the means of most land-holding nobles. Most new construction required the resources of the crown, and the financing resources of moneylenders. Therefore, most manor lords inherited a manor house and castle, rather than building a new one from scratch. The significant costs came in maintaining and renovating. In contrast, the more modest timbered or unmortared stone buildings of the villagers or outbuildings were cheaper and quicker to construct and were generally built anew every 20-30 years. The mortared stone walls of a castle and its keep required significant repair at a similar frequency.

[Table 6](#) estimates construction costs from a variety of original 13th century sources. The majority of the costs listed are for labor, not materials. This assumes that required materials were readily available in the immediate area. If the construction requires special stone that must be shipped from a significant distance, or timber in a region where there are no trees, increase the construction costs listed by 20% or more. Securing distant or unusual resources for castle construction or renovation might be an adventure. Unskilled and semi-skilled labor could be found locally, depending on the size of the village population, but skilled masons for mortared stone walls would require hiring workers from towns or cities. The costs listed are the costs a lord would pay for building structures. Villagers didn't actually *pay* the cost listed— their own labor and that of their neighbors was donated and most of the materials were free.

The construction table uses estimates following heuristics for simplicity and is based roughly on actual 13th century construction costs recorded, including both materials and labor. Note that internet sources and fantasy gaming materials provide estimates that are substantially different than those recorded in the (albeit limited) historical record. If the number of available laborers is less than that listed, increase the time of construction by a commensurate figure (if 100 laborers are required but only 50 are available, increase the construction time by a factor of 2). A structure needing major repair might cost $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ the original cost to build. Routine maintenance of mortared

stone structures might be estimated at 10% of original cost every 20 years. To give some sense of this cost in current dollars, the small £6500 castle would cost about \$46 million in the 21st century. The £3 cottage might sound cheap, but it would be \$22,000 today. Of course, in a fantasy roleplaying setting the possibility of magical assistance might significantly affect the costs of construction. Depending on the power of earth-moving, transmutation, and levitation spells, the costs of construction and labor needed might be easily 10% of that listed.

The local labor pool might be sufficient for projects that require no skilled labor (i.e., no masonry). Even for projects requiring skill, unskilled workers can still provide 80% of the labor. The local labor pool for projects lasting weeks or months can be estimated by calculating the number of cottar households x 2 plus the number of villein and free tenant households. This estimates the number of able-bodied adults that can offer surplus labor—the individual might be a single relative, grown son, or possibly an adult woman. Therefore, a 500-acre manor with 6 cottar and 18 villein/free tenant households can deliver a short-term surplus labor pool of 30. Half the available surplus labor pool could be counted towards longer-term construction projects (those measured in years). No surplus local labor is available during the autumn harvest months. Available surplus labor for short projects might be doubled in December and January, when villagers had more free time.



**A reconstruction of Wigmore Castle,
13th-century Herefordshire, England**

Table 6: Castle and Manor Construction Costs

Feature or building	Time to construct	Laborers required	Cost	Cost (gp)
Lead roof: 20' x 20' area*	1 week	20	£100	2000
Glass window: 10' x 5' area*	1 day	2	7s	7
Oven, new*	2 weeks	4	7s	7
Chimney and fireplace, as renovation*	1 month	8	£6	120
Garden: new, 40' x 40' area	2 weeks	25	£2	40
Fish pond: 15' deep, 90' x 90'	3 weeks	50	£6	120
Moat: 20' deep, 20' wide, 100' length	1 week	50	£2	40
Motte (earthen mound): 30' high, 90' x 90' area	1 month	50	£8	160
Palisade, timber: 20' high, 300' length	2 months	50	£20	400
Curtain wall, mortared stone: 30' high, 100' length*	6 months	100	£200	4000
Drawbridge*	3 months	25	£20	800
Simple timbered shed, stable, or barn with thatched roof and dirt floor, 10' x 20'	2 weeks	5	10s	10
Cottage or outbuilding with wattle-and-daub or unmortared stone walls and thatched roof, 15' x 20'	1 month	10	£3	60
Longhouse, outbuilding, or granary with wattle-and-daub or unmortared stone walls and thatched roof, 15' x 50' or 30' diameter (holds 8000 bushels as granary)	1 month	20	£6	120
Manor house: 30' x 80', timber with wattle-and-daub walls and wood shingled roof, one story, with a loft area	6 months	25	£20	400
Manor house: 30' x 80', mortared 3' thick stone walls, wooden or stone flooring, slate or wooden roof, two stories*	1 year	50	£100	2000
Mill, rebuilt, with mortared stone walls*	6 months	20	£18	360
Mill, new, with mortared stone walls*	9 months	25	£30	600
Gatehouse for palisade: 20' x 10', 24' high, 3' thick mortared walls, two stories, with stout iron-reinforced, 10' wide x 12' high barred doors*	9 months	20	£25	500
Tower: 20' x 20' or 20' diameter, 30' high, 10' thick walls, 2 stories, without living quarters within and located in curtain wall*	1 year	100	£300	6000
Gatehouse: 30' x 15', 30' high, 10' thick walls, two stories, stout iron-reinforced, 10' wide x 12' high barred doors, portcullis with drawbridge*	1 year	100	£350	7000
Tower: 60' x 60' or 60' diameter, 30' high, 10' thick walls, 2 stories, basement, with slate or wooden roof*	1 year	300	£1000	20,000
Keep: 70' x 100' keep, 30' high, 10' thick walls, 2 stories, basement, with slate or wooden roof*	2 years	300	£2500	50,000
Castle: 70' x 100' keep, gatehouse, 4 towers, curtain wall of 300' length on four sides creating a single 90,000 sq ft bailey, 6 outbuildings*	2 years	900	£6500	130,000

* Component requires skilled labor (masons, glassworkers, or other artisans).