THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 70:
MIND YOUR MANORS FOR PETE'S SAKE

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 70: Mind Your Manors For Pete's Sake. In this episode, we're going to continue to look at the Norman settlement of England. We'll look at life in the countryside, and we'll look at how the Norman masters interacted with the English peasants. This arrangement brought lots of words from French and Latin into English, and those words are still very common in the language today. So this time, we'll look at how many of those words came into English, and we'll see how their meanings have changed over time.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can always reach me directly by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And I wanted to say 'thanks' to those who have donated to the podcast. I appreciate the support, and I hope you enjoy the slow transition we're making from Old English to Middle English.

And speaking of that transition, I want to begin this episode by focusing on the gradual evolution of the language in the years after the Norman Conquest. As I've noted before, this was a period in which Old English writing fell out of favor. Many scribes still spoke English, and they continued to copy older English manuscripts. But those documents were just copies. Most new documents were being composed in Latin. And in a few years, a lot of documents were being written in French. But English was no longer the language of government or literature. So these were basically the Dark Ages of English. The written record went silent, and that makes it difficult to trace the specific changes that were taking place within the language.

So we have this period during which written English was on hiatus. And even though we don't have documents to trace the changes, we know that the language was evolving during this period. When English started to re-appear, it was quite different. And it included a lot of French words that were not there before the Conquest. So we can say with some certainty that those French words entered English during this period of the early Norman settlement. So that's what I want to focus on in this episode. I want to examine those Latin and French words that were flowing into English – and would soon appear in those early Middle English manuscripts.

A lot of those new words relate to what was happening in the countryside where most of the people lived. So let's turn our attention to the English countryside in the years immediately following the Norman Conquest.

Last time, we looked at how thousands of Anglo-Saxon landholders were pushed aside and displaced by a small group of Norman barons. So this is a good place to start our look at those new French words – with the word *baron*. You may have noticed that I didn't use the word *baron* during the Old English period. But I suddenly started using it in the last couple of episodes. Well, that's because it is a French word that came to England with the Normans.

The Anglo-Saxons had earls, and ealdormen and thanes. But these new French landholders who received massive estates directly from the king were called *barons* using that French term. The ultimate etymology of *baron* is a little obscure, but it probably came from the Germanic language of the Franks. In fact, Old English had the word *beorn* which meant a warrior or nobleman. And many scholars think Old English *beorn* and French *baron* were cognate with common Germanic roots. One theory is that both words are related to the word *bear*, and they originally meant a powerful warrior who fought like a bear. Remember that the name *Beowulf* meant the 'bee hunter' and was a euphemism for 'bear.' So there might be an ultimate linguistic connection between *baron* and *bear*, but again that is just a theory.

Whatever the original meaning of the word was, the word *baron* now referred to these major landholders, almost all of whom were French. And the land of those landholders was called the *demesne*. Now I should note that the early Norman and Middle English scribes typically spelled the word *demesne* 'd-e-m-e-s-n-e.' That was just a variation of the original French spelling. Over time, that original Norman spelling gave way to a more traditional French spelling, and that gave us 'd-o-m-a-i-n' by the early 1400s. But regardless of the spelling, both words basically meant the same thing.

So we have the *baron* and the baron's *demesne*, both brand-new words in English. Now another word for a large domain is an *estate*, and the word *estate* also came in around this time. But the original meaning of the word was a little different than today. The Old French word was *estat*. Now over time, Modern French has converted *estat* into *etat*. And we actually have that Modern French version of the word in the term 'coup d'etat,' which is literally the 'blow or stoke of the state.' But again, the original Old French version was *estat*.

And *estat* meant 'status or condition.' In fact, the word *estat* comes from the Latin word *status* – or /staht-oos/. So Latin *status* became Old French *estat*. As the Normans were settling into England, some English speakers took that word *estat* and dropped the /ay/ part at the beginning, and that produced the word *stat*, and after a later vowel change, it became *state*. So if we refer to someone's *status* or condition, we refer to their *state*. We might refer to their 'state of mine.' And I might ask you about the 'state of things.' Each year, the President of the United States gives an address called the 'State of the Union.' That was the original sense of the word *state*. So again, *status* was borrowed directly from Latin, and *state* is just a variation of the same word that came to us via French.

So how did *state* evolve from 'status or condition' to a word referring to a political entity as in the 'Secretary of State' or an 'enemy of the state?'

Well, soon after *state* or *stat* entered English, it became common to refer to the 'state of things.' The 'state of the country,' the 'state of the church,' the 'state of the barons,' the 'state of the knights,' and so on. By the 1300s, the word *state* had acquired a new sense. It now referred to a collection of prominent people. The 'state of the king and nobles' was gradually shortened to just the *state*. And that gave us the modern sense of the word *state* as a 'political group or entity.'

So *state* came in with the Normans, and it came from their Old French word *estat* after the /ay/ part was dropped at the front. Well, the word *estat* also survived with that /ay/ part at the front. And that gave us the word *estate*, as distinguished from just *state*.

Now *estate* also originally meant 'status or condition.' So early on, an English speaker with a good knowledge of French would say *estat* in the proper French way. But an English speaker who didn't know French very well would Anglicize it to just *stat*. So *estat* and *stat* were just two different pronunciations of the same word, and it ultimately gave us the distinction between *estate* and *state*.

So, as I said, both words originally meant the same thing – 'status or condition.' But over time, *estat* came to refer to a 'good or favorable condition.' So if I referred to someone's *estate*, I wasn't really referring to their land. I was referring to their 'good status and prominent condition.' So if a baron acquired several tracts of land, I might refer to his improved estate meaning his improved status. Over time, the sense of the word shifted from the person's prominent status to the thing that made his status prominent – his property. And specifically, it came to refer to his landholdings. And that is how we got the modern sense of the word *estate* to refer to someone's property or possessions. And notice the parallel evolution of the words *state* and *estate*. *State* came to refer to the 'public' or 'government' resources controlled by the nobles. Whereas, *estate* came to refer to the 'private' resources controlled by the nobles.

So we've looked at barons, and demesnes and estates. So you probably recognize an emerging theme. A lot of these new French words related to the new French nobility. And in fact, that's another word that entered English around this same time – the word *nobility* and the related word *noble*.

Whereas *baron* had a specific meaning as a prominent landholder, the word *noble* was a more generic term for a prominent or well-known person. It could also refer to a person born to a prominent family. As I said, *noble* comes from French, and ultimately from Latin. But if we trace the word back to its Indo-European root, we find that it is actually cognate with the Old English word *know* – 'k-n-o-w.' And the ultimate link between *know* and *noble* is that nobles came from prominent families, so they were well-known. We might say they were *notable* – another word that came in from French around this same time. So English *know* and French *notable* and *noble* are all cognate. They all came from the same Indo-European root word.

So we have explored the etymology of *barons*, *demesnes*, *states*, *estates* and *nobles*. Another word associated with those new French barons and nobles is the word *manor* – 'm-a-n-o-r.' Today, we think of the word *manor* as a large house. But the original sense of the word was a large feudal estate. At the center of the manor was often a manor house. But the entire estate was called the *manor*.

We can think of a *manor* as a large centralized farm held by a lord and worked by a variety of peasants who were bound to the land through a variety of obligations. The English countryside was dominated by these manors. Now in fairness, this wasn't a new arrangement. As we saw in earlier episodes, these types of farms or estates had emerged during the Anglo-Saxon period. But

the Normans gave them a new name – the *manor*. And the Normans also gave them a unique legal status which we will examine later.

Now much of rural England was dominated by these manors. This was especially true in the Midlands and southern England.

The word *manor* is closely tied to the Domesday Book which we looked at the last episode. When William's clerks went around England and catalogued the various land holdings, they based the survey around manors. So for them, it was the basic way to categorize the economy and land holdings of rural England.

Now it might not surprise you that the word *manor* is cognate with the word *mansion*. Both words come from the same Latin root. And another word from that same root is the word *menial*. In Norman French, the word *menial* was an adjective to describe things pertaining to the manor house or household. It was also used as a noun to mean a household servant. So a lord might have one or more 'menials' to help him take care of the manor house. The lowly, humble work of the 'menial' came to be described as, well, *menial*. And that's how we got the modern sense of the word *menial* to refer to any kind of lowly or humble task – the type that might be performed by a servant.

Now speaking of *servant*, that was another word brought by the early Normans. In fact, they had two slightly different pronunciations of the same word – *servant* and *serjant*. They both meant a *servant*. But the later pronunciation acquired a distinct meaning as a military servant. And it eventually evolved into *sergeant*. But originally, *servant* and *sergeant* meant the same thing.

Now obviously, *servant* is closely related to other words like *serve* and *service* which also came in around this same time in the first century or so after the Conquest. Middle English also had the word *servage* which was basically the same thing as *service*, but it fell out of use over time.

Now all of these words – *servant*, *sergeant*, *serve*, and *service* – came from a common Latin root word which was *servus*. And in Latin, that word meant 'slave.' So these words derived from an original sense of forced labor or service. But over time, they acquired a more general sense of any work or labor performed or any duty owed to someone else.

Another word from that Latin word *servus* was the word *serf* – 's-e-r-f.' And a *serf* was basically a slave. It was specifically a slave who was tied to the land. So if the land changed hands, the serf passed with the land to the new land holder.

Now the word *serf* was very common back in France, but it wasn't really used very much in England. In fact, it doesn't appear in any English documents until the late 1400s – about four centuries away from where we are now.

Another term for the rural inhabitants of England is *peasants*. But again, the Normans didn't really use that term. In fact, the word *peasant* didn't come into English until the 1400s –- around the same time that *serf* came in.

So if the Normans didn't use words like *serf* or *peasant*, what words did they use? Well, they actually had lots of terms for people who lived and worked in the countryside. Remember that ninety percent of the population lived in the countryside. So the Normans classified and labeled them with lots of different terms. And remnants of those terms can still be found throughout Modern English.

Before I go through these terms, let me note that some of these terms are Latin and some are French. And the reason for that is because most of the official documents in the first century after the Conquest were written in Latin. Then, after that, the Normans started to use French for official documents. So the early literature tends to use Latin terms, and the later literature tends to use French terms. But as we know, the French terms were usually just variations of the earlier Latin terms.

The best example of this are the terms *villanus* and *villein*. These were probably the most prevalent terms used by the Normans to describe peasants or certain groups of peasants. *Villanus* is the original Latin term. The plural version was *villani*. And those terms were used in early documents like the Domesday Book that were composed in Latin. The word *villein*, spelled 'v-i-l-l-e-i-n,' was a later French version of the same Latin root word. It became more common as French documents became more common.

Now many modern scholars think that the Latin term *villanus* had a slightly different meaning than the French term *villein*, but I'm not going to dwell on those differences here. The important thing to know is that, regardless of the term, the Norman administrators tended to lump most peasants into this category. In fact, it was probably a bit of a catch-all term. If a peasant didn't get some other particular classification, they were usually labeled as *villani* or *villeins*. At the time of the Domesday Book, they were about forty percent of the rural population of England.

The peasants in this group held tracts of land from a lord. Of course, in exchange for that land, they had to provide certain services to the lord, and they often had to pay certain fees to the lord. And they couldn't just leave or transfer their land holdings to someone else without the lord's consent, so they were tied to the land. They were not free. But their holdings were usually large enough to support their family – typically around 15 to 40 acres.

By now, you have probably already noticed an important linguistic connection between that French word *villein* and our Modern English word *villain*. In fact, they are the same word, even though our modern word *villain* is spelled differently. Over time, the meaning of the word evolved from a simple peasant to a sinister or evil person. And that shows how the old social structures affected the evolution of the language. Peasants were subject to rigid and strict laws that inhibited their freedom. They were often exploited. And naturally, they looked for ways to improve their lot in life. But that often meant violating some of the strict rules that held them in place. So over time, the word *villain* acquired a more sinister sense. But it also reflects the perspective of the lords and barons at the top of the social ladder.

This perspective can also be found in another common English word connected to medieval villeins. In Latin, the suffix *-aster* was sometimes added to a word as a pejorative ending. So if you stuck *-aster* on the end of a noun, it gave the noun a negative meaning. It is sort of like how we put *-gate* on the end of a word today to indicate a scandal – like *troopergate*, *nannygate* or *deflategate*.

Well, in Latin, you could *-aster* in a similar way. If you put it on the end of a noun, it suggested that the noun was bad or nefarious. And that usage passed into Middle English as well. So a *medicaster* was a bad medic or doctor. So it was a quack. A *historiaster* was a contemptible historian. A *poetaster* was someone who wrote trashy poetry.

Well, since the upper classes looked down on peasants, they applied the same construction to villeins. In Old French, a contemptible or disgusting peasant was a *villenastre*. But by the 1400s, that word had become shortened to just *nastre*. And that is the original version of our word *nasty*. So *nasty* originally referred to a dirty or filthy peasant.

Before I move on from *villeins*, I should remind you that the ultimate root of *villein* is the Latin word *villa*. I discussed this back in Episode 19. *Villa* was a Roman word for a country house or farmstead. And it later passed into English in its own right in the early Modern English period. As the villas or farmsteads grew in size, the number of peasants required to work on those farms also grew. So small settlements began to emerge around those villas, and that produced the word *village*. So *villein*, *villa* and *village* are all cognate.

So those were the *villeins*. Another Norman term for peasants was *cottars* or *cottagers*. These were similar to villeins but they held smaller tracts of land, usually less that 5 acres, sometimes less than an acre. So their land wasn't large enough to support themselves or their family. So they had to rely upon the lord for help and support.

Again, the *cottars* or *cottagers* were unfree and subject to the lord's control. The name *cottar* or *cottager* is believed to derive from the fact that they typically lived in a small hut with a small attached piece of land. That type of hut was called *cot* in Old English. The Vikings also had that same Germanic word. And that word passed from the Old Norse language of the first Norman Vikings into Norman French. So when the Normans arrived in England in 1066, they brought that word *cote* with them. So Old English and Norman French both had the word *cote* meaning a hut. The Normans described the *cote* and the property that surrounded it as the *coteage*, and that word then passed into English as *cottage*. And we still have that word today. So that word *cote* gave us *cottage*, as well as the terms *cottars* and *cottagers*.

Another term sometimes used for a peasant was the Latin word *rusticus*. That Latin word ultimately gave us the word *rustic* to mean something rural, plain or simple.

Another term for a peasant was Latin *nativus*, which meant someone born into bondage. This is the same root word that gave us the English word *native*. And in fact, the word *native* originally had this same sense in Middle English. It was a person born into bondage. A French version of that word was *neif*, and that French word was also used to mean a peasant. So once again,

documents written in Latin used Latin *nativus* and documents written in French used the French *neif*, but the French word came from the Latin word. The French version of the word *neif* later produced the word *naive* meaning 'simple or innocent.' And that word also passed into English in the 1600s.

Many peasants worked in the fields, but some worked in the lord's household. So they were household servants. A peasant who worked in the household was a *famulus*. A group of such servants was a *familia*. Since the *familia* lived with the lord and his wife and children in the manor house, they typically had a close relationship with other. Of course, the word *familia* gave us the word *family*. And over time, the meaning of the term shifted from the household servants to the actual relatives who lived in the household. And that same root word also gave us the word *familiar*.

So in summary, words like *cottage*, *rustic*, *native*, *naive*, and *family* all have roots in the French words used to describe English peasants. And we can add to that words like *villain*, *nasty*, *serve*, *servant*, *sergeant*, and *serf*.

So all of those words have origins in English peasantry. But there were people in the English countryside who were actually below the peasants. They were the slaves. Some were personal slaves – the property of a specific lord. Others were tied to a piece of land, like the serfs found in France. Either way, they were unfree and had little, if any, legal rights. They were basically just property.

The Domesday Book was written in Latin, so to describe these people, the book used that traditional Latin term *servus* that I discussed earlier. That's the word that gave us words like *serve*, *service* and *servant*. But remember that the original Latin word *servus* meant 'slave.'

So when the surveyors used that term in the Domesday Book, it is assumed that they meant it in that traditional sense. And slavery was a common feature of Anglo-Saxon society. So many of the people who were slaves before the Conquest remained in slavery after the Conquest. And the Domesday Book reflects that by telling us that about ten percent of the rural population were still enslaved when the book was compiled in the year 1086.

But shortly after the Domesday Book was compiled, slavery was officially abolished by the Normans. As I've noted before, the Normans not only took control of the English government, they also took control of the English Church. And the new church leaders denounced slavery as a sin. So in the year 1102, only 16 years after the Domesday Book, the Council of Westminster formally prohibited slavery and the slave trade in England.

Now you shouldn't make too much out of this prohibition. The fact is that the day-to-day life of the average slaves didn't change very much. In fact, it appears that the Normans just stopped using the term *servus* or slave, and they just labeled most of them as something else, usually one of those terms I mentioned earlier. So a *servus* now became a *rusticus*, or a *neif*, or a *famulus*. So they went from a slave to an unfree peasant. It was a subtle legal distinction that probably made little difference to the day-to-day life of the former slave.

So if the slaves had existed below the peasant class, what existed above the peasant class? Well, the answer is the free landholders. They were the people who held their own lands. They typically had a lord, but they could choose their own lord. If they were unhappy with a given lord, they could find another one. They could also give and transfer their land holdings to other people. And they could leave their property to their children and other heirs. They typically had to provide some service to their lord, but otherwise, they were free to use their property as they pleased. They were also considered free under the law. So they had legal rights that the peasants didn't have.

The Normans sometimes referred to these free land holders with a Latin term – 'liberi homines' – literally the 'free men.' The Normans also picked up an Old English word which referred to free land holders. That term was *sokemen*. And that term *sokeman* was actually more common in the east – in the old Danelaw region.

As I noted, the term *sokeman* was derived from an Old English expression. When an Anglo-Saxon king conferred land to a supporter, it was specifically stated that the king granted 'sake and soke' upon the landholder. It meant that the new landholder had free rights over the property. *Sake* was *saku* in Old English and it meant an 'accusation or a claim.' And *soke* was *socn*, and it meant jurisdiction. So 'sake and soke' meant that the landholder had the jurisdiction or right to make certain claims to the property. And that right of 'sake and soke' produced the word *sokeman* for the person who held those rights. The property itself was sometimes call *soke* property.

Now there is another interesting aspect of 'sake and soke.' Both words are cognate with the word *seek*, also from Old English. So if you 'seek' something, you are pursuing something. And that is the connection with the word *sake*, which meant something pursued like 'an accusation or a claim.' So if you 'seek' a 'sake,' you're pursuing a claim.

If you had a good claim, you were 'with sake.' But if your claim was bad or groundless, you were 'without sake.' In other words, 'without a claim.' Well, shortly after the Normans arrived, they picked up this Old English word and applied it to legal proceedings. If peasant John made a claim in court, it was said that the remedy was being sought 'for the sake of John' – in other words, for the claims of John. Well, that type of phrase became very popular. And so, people might refer to something being for 'John's sake' – in other words, being in support of John's claims or for John's benefit. And so *sake* acquired the modern sense of benefit. I might work hard for my own sake and for the sake of my family. But by the 1300s, the phrase was adopted for exclamations by adding a religious element to it. People said things like 'For God's sake,' or 'For Christ's sake' to add emphasis to a statement. Some people were uncomfortable with that type of language, and so they converted it into phrases like 'for goodness sake,' or 'for pity sake', or 'for Pete's sake' – the 'Pete' presumably referring to St. Peter. But it all goes back to that Old English word *sake* meaning a claim.

Another expression evolved along the same lines as 'for Pete's sake.' If I wanted to say something and add a personal note of emphasis to it, I might make the statement and then add the phrase 'for my own name's sake' to the end. So it was a way of saying that I am making this

statement for my own benefit, and I want people to remember that I said it. So I might say something like, "I'm going to be there for you for my own name's sake." So it was a way of saying that I put my name behind something, and I intend to protect my good name by honoring my promise. Well, that expression – 'for my own name's sake' – became common in early Modern English, and it ultimately produced the word *namesake*. *Namesake* was another way of preserving one's good name over time. It this case, it meant to literally preserve one's name by giving it to someone else. So William the Conqueror was a Norman king, as was his son and namesake William Rufus.

That same type of construction also led to the word *keepsake*. A *keepsake* is something given to you that you keep for the sake of someone else. In other words, you hang onto it in order to keep that keep the memories of that person's alive. So you might keep your grandmother's wedding ring a keepsake if she passes away.

So in words like *namesake* and *keepsake*, and an expression like 'for Pete's sake,' we see a linguistic connection back to the term 'sake and soke' to refer to free landholders in Norman England.

So I hope you're still with me after all of that etymology. I wanted to take you through those words for serfs, peasants, and free landholders to show you how those Latin and French words were flowing into English. And how those initial words produced even more words over time.

But I want to conclude this episode by returning to those manors where most of the peasants lived and worked. As the Norman period progressed and eventually gave way to the Angevin period in the 1150s, the status of the peasants declined even further. Most of the rural inhabitants of England were compressed into one large class of unfree peasants. Whereas the Domesday Book classified peasants into a variety of categories, now those categories started to blur together. For example, slaves once held a distinct position below the peasants. But with the abolition of slavery, slaves acquired a few more legal rights. So they moved up and essentially became unfree peasants. Again, the legal status may have improved slightly, but their overall economic status didn't change very much.

Meanwhile, the status of the villeins actually decreased. They lost some of their legal rights and became increasingly obligated to the local lords. So as we move forward, a lot of the fine distinctions between these various peasant groups became blurred. Even the sokemen or free landholders experienced a decline in their status. Whereas they once were able to leave a particular lord and find a new lord, many of them lost that right as well. So most of them also became permanently attached to a specific lord.

So the various rural social classes were compressed into one big group of unfree peasants. And the key part of that is that they were 'unfree.' As English law developed over the next couple of centuries, this became a fundamental distinction in the law. Were you free or unfree? And in order to understand why this distinction was so important, we have to go back to those manors in the countryside.

Most of the peasants were attached to a particular manor. And under Norman law, each of these manors was entitled to establish their own private court to deal with matters associated with the manor. These manor courts – or manorial courts – were independent of regular King's courts. So now, there were two different legal systems at work in rural England. And this was a very important development because it tended to tie the peasants to the land in a way that was virtually unbreakable. So let me explain what I mean.

First, let me note that the word *court* is another one of those French words that came in immediately after the Norman Conquest. *Court* originally had the sense of a courtyard. And it was first used in English to refer to the 'King's court,' so it was the place where the king resided and therefore met with his advisors. It soon came to refer to a meeting of those advisors. And it then came to refer to any meeting of prominent persons who met to make a decision about something or to render a judgment about something. As I noted in an earlier episode, Old English tended to use the word *mot*, which is related to the words *meet* and *meeting*. But now, the word *court* came in.

Now the King's courts included the traditional courts out in the hundreds and the shires. Traditionally, if there was a dispute between peasants or landholders, that is where they went to have the dispute resolved. But as I noted, lord's were now given the right to establish their own courts at the manor. And those were completely independent of the traditional courts.

The manor courts not only covered the manor itself, they also covered the small villages that were emerging around those manors. We'll look at life in those villages in an upcoming episode, but for now, it is important to understand that most of the people who lived in those villages were peasants who worked on the farms. So the villagers were also subject to the law of the local manor.

So these manor courts were almost like the private courts of the lord. And that meant that the lord could use those courts to keep the peasants down and exploit them. The manor court not only settled disputes between the peasants, it also settled disputes between the peasants and the lord himself. In other words, if a peasant felt that he was being exploited – that the lord was taking advantage of him by demanding services or payments that weren't actually owed – then the peasant's only option was to go to the manor court. But the lord often controlled that court. So you can start to see the problem here. The manor court gave the lord control over his peasants. They really had nowhere else to go if they were being exploited or oppressed.

So the manor court became a tool used by the lord to control the peasants. And the court actually had very broad authority. It decided the rules of the manor, and it punished anyone who failed to follow the rules. It made sure that the required payments were being made to the lord, and the required services were being performed for the lord's benefit.

But beyond handling the administration of the manor, the manor court was also an actual court. It heard disputes between the peasants. This could include variety of disputes, like unpaid debts, broken promises, slander, and any number of other wrongdoings. The penalty for the guilty party was typically a fine. As I noted, the manor court also heard disputes between the peasants and

the lord himself. So if a peasant felt that the work he was required to perform was excessive, he went to the court. Or if he was being assessed with excessive fines or fees, he would have to go to the same court. And this is where the exploitation and abuse of the peasants really began to set in.

Not only did the peasants owe labor to the lord, they also owed the lord a variety of fees. If a peasant died, his son couldn't take his father's lands without paying a fee called a *relief*. If a peasant's daughter wanted to get married, the peasant might have to seek the lord's approval and pay a fee to the lord. Sometimes, the obligation to provide labor was converted into an obligation to pay rent. So the peasant had to pay a certain amount to the lord just to keep his holdings. And the lord could increase those rents. On top of that, fines could be imposed for a variety of offenses. And in every case, the unfree peasant had no choice but to pay the fees, perform the services, or go the manor court which was often controlled by the lord. So the manor court was an effective way for the lord to generate revenue from his peasants. And it was also a way to keep the peasants tied to the farm.

When the manor court met, which was at least twice a year, it was presided over by the steward of the manor. The court itself was made up of peasants and free landholders. There were usually twelve of them. So this was another version of the Norman jury. But the peasants and free landholders who made up the jury held their lands directly from the lord. So when a dispute involved the lord, they rarely ruled against him.

Furthermore, the same jurors often met over and over again. So they formed a more or less permanent body. And that made them even more susceptible to the lord's control.

Not all peasants and free landholders could serve on the jury. Only certain ones had a special obligation to attend the court's proceedings and serve on the jury. Those were the ones who had an obligation called 'suit of court.' *Suit* was word for the required attendance at the court's proceedings. This is the ultimate origin of the legal sense of the word *suit*, as in a *lawsuit*, or 'to file suit' against someone in court.

And whenever court proceedings were held in Norman England, whether it be the manor courts or the King's courts, it was expected that everyone would wear formal attire. All the officials dressed like each other. It was said that everyone was 'in suit' or 'of suit' with each other. This is sort of like playing cards where every card might be of the same suit. Well, since the court officials were said to be 'in suit' when they wore the same clothing, that formal attire came to be known as a *suit*. So that's the connection between a lawsuit and business suit.

So as you can see, the manor courts were a major problem for poor peasants who were being exploited by their lords. In some cases, a peasant might try to side-step the manor court to have his claims heard before the king's courts, in other words the hundred court or the shire court. Those courts weren't under the lord's control. But this is where that fundamental distinction between being free or unfree came into play. Only 'free' peasants could use the King's courts. So in order to have your claim heard there, you had to prove that you were a 'free' peasant. Otherwise, the dispute was kicked back to the manor.

Now as I noted, earlier, most of the peasants were deemed to be unfree by this point. So in most cases, all the lord had to do was claim the peasant was unfree, and the matter went right back to the manor court.   But sometimes a peasant was actually able to succeed. If he could prove that his obligations to the lord were very minimal, he might be deemed a free peasant. He could then challenge the lord in the king's courts. But that was pretty rare. For the most part, the peasants were squarely under the thumb of the local lord.

So as I conclude this episode, we can now identify two major changes that the Normans brought to the English countryside. First, the old Anglo-Saxon nobles and landholders were replaced with a new Norman aristocracy. And most of that Norman power was concentrated in the hands of powerful lords who spoke French and maintain large manors.   The second major development was the creation of the manor courts which gave those lords almost complete control over their peasants. Any social mobility that once existed before the Conquest was now gone. The divide between the French nobles and English peasants was now made permanent, or at least semi-permanent.

The native Anglo-Saxons were now relegated to second-class status in their own country. And there wasn't much they could do about it.

But these developments had another linguistic consequence which we will explore over the next couple of episodes. The English peasants were now tied to the land in a way that was even more restrictive than before. That meant that English speakers in one area rarely traveled beyond the manor or local village, and they rarely had an opportunity to communicate with English speakers in other parts of the country. That separation was coupled with the loss of English as a written language. And English was no longer being taught it those church schools. So there was no longer a national standard to hold the language together.

And all of that meant that regional dialects started to become more diverse. The Old Norse language of the Viking settlers had already changed English in the Danelaw. But now, other regional dialects were becoming more distinct. So as we move forward over the next couple of episodes, we're going to see how complicated this became. We'll have an increasingly fractured English language. We'll have a heavy Norse influence in the north. We'll have an aristocracy who spoke French. We'll have an increasing number of English speakers who were learning French, either out of desire or necessity. And on top of all of that, Latin was still the standard language for Church business and most written documents. So England was increasingly a polyglot nation. And this linguistic confusion contributed to a new form of English. And that new form of English borrowed heavily from all of those influences.

We'll explore those developments over the next few episodes. So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.