Feudal System

To use the Domesday Book and, to a greater or lesser extent, most other medieval records, it's useful to know something of the prevailing system of land tenure at this time.

In post-conquest (William the Conqueror) medieval England, land was not owned, in the modern sense, by anyone but the monarch.
Instead it was held by tenants, from lords (or occasionally ladies) in return for the obligation to perform some service.
This was the feudal system, with the king at the top of the ladder, his direct tenants (tenants in chief) beneath him, and lower still under-tenants of various sizes, down to the peasant farmers who held a few acres in return for labouring on the land of the local lord.
The main building block of the feudal system was the manor, an estate on average somewhat smaller than the parish (typically a parish might contain several smaller manors or one larger one, though sizes could vary considerably, and some manors were much bigger). Most frequently the service performed for the king by his tenants was military - in this case feudal holdings were measured as so many knights' fees, according to how many knights the holder of the land was obliged to provide. Land might also be held by serjeanty, that is by some non-military service, often in the royal household, or in the case of religious houses by free alms, that is by spiritual service.
Land held by a lord himself, rather than by his tenants, was known as demesne. The same term describes the royal estates (held by the king rather than his tenants in chief), manors held by tenants in chief rather than under-tenants, and even the part of a manor held by its lord, rather than manorial tenants.
Whatever their ancestors may have thought of its merits, genealogists have reason to be grateful for the documentation produced by the feudal system. It was obviously in the king's interests to be very clear who his tenants were, what obligations they had to him, and who had the right to succeed them when they died. Consequently, most of the documentation concerns the tenants in chief, and the under-tenants immediately beneath them, at least as far as public records are concerned. Fortunately, as well as the great magnates, this class included many comparatively small men, who might hold as little as a single manor, and have no under-tenants of their own.

Taxes:

The earliest taxes in England were based on land. The first land tax, the geld, began in the late 10th century to raise tribute money for the Danish invaders, and continued until the mid 12th century. However, few records of the geld survive, and none is earlier than the Norman conquest. In the late 12th century, the geld was replaced by another land tax, the carucage, initially levied to pay the ransom of Richard I. Some records of the carucage survive, but in the early 13th century it in turn was succeeded by taxes on moveable goods and, later by alternative taxes on landed income.

In addition, much of the crown's income came from Feudal dues of various kinds, which were, in effect, taxes on land. One example was the feudal aid, a payment which by tradition the king could demand from his tenants to finance the knighting of his eldest son or the marriage of his eldest daughter. Another was scutage, a payment made by those who held land in return for military service, but who were unable or unwilling to perform it. These taxes applied to lands held by the king's tenants; a parallel tax, levied on the king's own estates (the royal demesne) and on the royal boroughs, was tallage.

Obviously, it was important for the crown to maintain detailed records concerning the feudal tenure of land. Domesday Book, the earliest such record, is dealt with in a separate section. Some similar local surveys survive from the 12th century, often representing attempts to supply information omitted from Domesday, or to bring the old survey up to date. But in 1166, it was found necessary start afresh, and the tenants in chief were ordered to send in details of their holdings, their under-tenants and the service they owed. The resulting returns are called the Cartae Baronum, or 'Barons' Certificates' ('barons' is a misleading description, to the modern eye - all the tenants in chief were included, down to humble knights subsisting on a single manor). In the returns, a distinction is made between under-tenancies created before the death of Henry I (1135), described as those of the old enfeoffment, and those created more recently.

The inquiry of 1166 is thought to have been motivated by Henry II's intention of levying a feudal aid for the marriage of his eldest daughter two years later. Aids continued to be levied until the beginning of the 15th century, and provide, in effect, regular surveys of feudal tenure. Many of the original returns survive; in addition, they were often copied into books kept in the Exchequer for future reference. One of the main such collections, covering a wide range of material from the 13th century, was officially called the Book of Fees, but familiarly known as the Testa de Nevill ('Nevill's Head'), probably after a caricature of a medieval civil servant, with which its container was decorated. One of the main printed collections is based on the Book of Fees; the other, Feudal Aids, extends to the early 15th century. As well as these periodical surveys, from the mid-13th century onwards inquiries were held after the death of each tenant in chief, to determine what lands they had held and who should succeed them.