

Domesday Book gets the modern touch

IN TWO years' time, Britain will be celebrating the ninth centenary of William the Conqueror's Domesday Book. The anniversary will also coincide with the appearance of a new Domesday Book—published on video discs. With a nice touch of flair, the BBC—creator of the 20th century project—will present copies of the new media Domesday Book to Prince William.

For the publishing industry, wedded to print and paper for centuries, it offers an example through which the traditional benefits of the book can be exploited in tandem with the visual power of video and the flexibility of the computer. For over 20 years publishers have been groping to find a satisfactory formula to harness their skills to television—generally without much success. Now that the BBC has done it, with an imaginative project carried out with professional thoroughness.

Arising from a conventional television series about the original Domesday Book, the video disc venture will involve 10,000 schools across Britain. Children will provide the ground research about their towns and villages, feeding data into the project (on their BBC microcomputers), plus pictures and other information. A national photographic competition will also provide the general public with an opportunity to participate—submitting transparencies which document all aspects of life in their local communities.

Two LaserVision video discs will provide the carrier for this mass of information. One disc will be devoted to local material provided by schools and the public; a second disc will carry more structured national information supplied by a variety of academic and public bodies—such as the National Data Archive, the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, the Ordnance Survey and the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies. A third will provide general information about the project.

Because a conventional optical disc has a capacity for some 50,000 frames or pictures per side—and this new Domesday Book requires effectively 2m pages—Philips is developing with the BBC a new version of the LaserVision video disc player which can handle digital as well as analogue signals.

This means that a standard BBC microcomputer can be driven by the disc to provide a much greater store of information, in this case alpha-numeric (viz text) to supplement the picture information more usual to the video disc.

In practice, users of the Domesday video discs will be able to call up a map of any area in Britain and selectively scale down to any region of the map, such as a town, small hamlet, river or woodland area—and then "extract" both visual and printed information about the area. As in the original Domesday Book, this information will cover every-



BY JOHN CHITTOCK

thing from population data, employment, the economy, to ecological and geographical details—plus photographs of inhabitants, flora and fauna, architecture and high quality graphics.

The original Domesday Book suffers one enormous problem—it is organised under the names of landowners, so that researchers have only one route in retrieving specific information. The Domesday video disc, interfaced with a microcomputer, will enable any category or permutation of information to be extracted and displayed on the television screen with ease and speed.

For Philips and the video disc, this project is the breakthrough that the technology needs. It will bring on to the market a BBC branded video disc player, made by Philips, which could repeat the success of the Acorn BBC computer. For the Department of Trade and Industry, which is helping to finance this £2.5m venture, it is an elegant catalyst in helping to firm up Britain's lead in video software and information technology.

Perhaps most significant of all, the publishing industry will be under new pressure to take this medium seriously. Some have been persevering, such as IPC—which has recently launched videocassette programmes appropriate to readers of *Woman's Own* and *New Scientist*. The cassettes for

women have a slight ring of Mills and Boon about the titles (*Who Will Love My Children?*, *Having it All*) and are selling well through promotions in the magazine.

In divesting themselves of the Daily Mirror, IPC's parent group Reed also parted with another video project—MirrorVision. This has been promoting through the newspaper a range of video titles aimed at Mirror readers, ranging from motorcycle racing to Marjorie Proops.

The arrival of Mr Robert Maxwell at the Daily Mirror is bound to give MirrorVision an additional boost; his commitment to video has been long established, but generally waiting for the right opportunity.

Apart from editorial input, publishers have another essential advantage in the video business—a built-in distribution machine with targetted names and addresses. Findlay Publications are about to exploit this advantage through its four engineering magazines. Using a combined circulation of 55,000, Findlay is promoting its newly established Technical Video Library. Industrial sponsors of suitable engineering videocassettes may deposit programmes with the library (on payment of a fee) and these are reviewed in the relevant magazines and promoted through a quarterly newsletter.

The emphasis in all of these video publishing projects is special interest subjects. Another such entrant in recent times has been the magazine programme *Marketing Television*—circulated on videocassettes to marketing directors of major companies by Home & Law Publishing (with advertising agencies, for a change, paying for advertising spots to promote themselves).

The BBC Domesday project demonstrates how the skills of publishers are uniquely suited to video, and especially to the video disc. Indeed, Philips reckon that 32 per cent of professional LaserVision applications are already in publishing.

Since the latest of the regular forecasts from Leisure Consultants predict a UK VCR population of over 14m machines by 1989—but anticipates no growth and some casualties in magazine publishing over the same period—the message for publishers is clear.