Rewriting William the Conqueror

A project to update the Domesday Book will be announced tomorrow. John Elkington reports

NO-ONE has been watching developments at troubled Acorn Computers more keenly than its partners in the BBC Domesday Project. Thousands of BBC micro-computers are at the heart of the BBC's plans to capture the Britain of 1985 on videodisc. And, while Acorn was never expected to inject money directly into the project, its contributions on the software side are likely to be critical. There is currently no off-the-shelf operating system which could enable the BBC micro to cope with the task of accessing the Domesday discs and processing the mountains of data. Olivetti's bail-out operation came as welcome news indeed.

To recap, September 29, 1986, will mark the 900th anniversary of the completion of the Domesday Book, considered by many historians to have been the most astonishing administrative feat of the Middle Ages. Teams of scribes, writing on vellum with quill pens, completed that "survey of the lands of England" in remarkably short order, but it is tempting to imagine what more they might have achieved if they had been able to use microcomputers and the latest interactive videodisc technology.

Come the summer term, an estimated one million people, including school children from 10,000 schools around the country, will start work as surveyors for the Domesday Project, which the BBC sees as an ideal follow-up to its Computer Literacy Project. With a budget of around £2.5 million and a core team which will peak at well over 30 people, the BBC plans to exploit the network of BBC micros in Britain's schools.

Unlike most of those who provided the input for William the Conqueror's great survey, however, those participating will do so willingly — and will be operating at the cutting edge of a key area of information technology. Over 12,000 of the 32,000 schools approached late last year have already agreed to take part in the preparation of this "people's database".

To mark the Domesday anniversary, BBC TV will be running a six-part documentary series next autumn, presented by historian Michael Wood. "Whereas the series will approach the subject from a historical point of view, discussing how Britain has evolved over the last 900 years," explains Peter Armstrong, executive editor of the series and editor of the

Domesday Project, "the intention of the Domesday videodisc project is to provide a comprehensive image of Britain in the 1980s, a contemporary snapshot."

To record this national "snapshot", the BBC and its partners will have to push their technology to its limits — and beyond. Acorn, which collaborated with the BBC on the Computer Literacy Project, is responsible for developing a new operating package and protocols for handling interactive video. The company has also been working on the interface needed to link the BBC micro with the videodisc player — and on the sophisticated package of programs needed to retrieve, combine, compare and present Domesday material on the screen.

Philips Electronics, the

leading European manufacturer of videodisc players, is working on a new player capable of handling the Domesday discs. Video discs, notes Mike Tibbetts of the Domesday team, originally had "a rocky ride", but interactivity should open up new vistas for the technology. The Domesday Project, he says, "was big enough to spark everyone into action."

Like the Domesday Book itself, the BBC's videodisc output will come in two main parts. In total, the two Domesday discs, which should retail for around £95, will hold information equivalent to two complete sets of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

One disc will hold a wide range of national data culled from censuses, government surveys such as the General Household Survey and other sources, like the massive survey recently completed by the BBC itself on the way in which people spent their time throughout the day. And there will also be 40,000 "national" pictures on this first disc. So this would be your first stop for data on demographic trends, natural resources, health statistics and the like.

The second disc will contain Ordnance Survey maps and the local data, text and pictures compiled by the participating schools. Each of the 125 local education authorities has appointed a Domesday co-ordinator, who has been responsible for allocating each school with a 4 kilometre by 3 kilometre square.
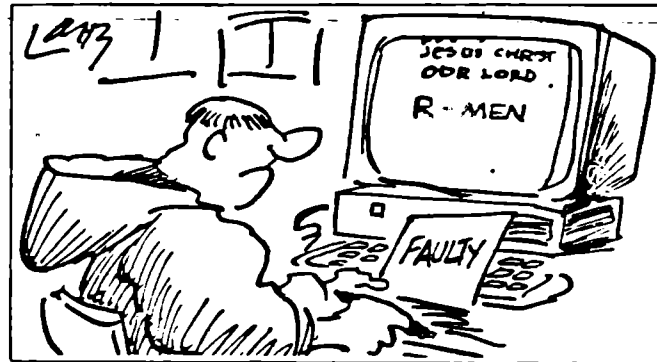
The children will provide a broad assessment of land-use, together with a count of over sixty different amenities, ranging from phone-boxes and football grounds to ponds and power stations. They have also been asked to produce a free-form description of their area, to occupy up to 20 screen pages of about 135 words each, and to select three to four representative slide photographs. The survey was piloted in 17 schools — and worked well.

All this information is scheduled to be ready for final formating and mastering by July 28, 1986. Although the software is being developed with the BBC micro in mind, the Domesday team is also looking at ways in which other micros could be hooked in.

But what would some latter-day William the Conqueror expect to get for his money 18 months hence? Sitting down in front of a colour monitor, a few strokes on the keyboard would call up the first level of information. This would start with a map of the entire United Kingdom, on which he could overlay information on, say, Green Belts, unemployment black-spots, or voting patterns. Next, by moving the cursor to any region of the country, he could zoom into a larger-scale map of about 40 kilometres by 30 kilometres, with a whole new set of information. Finally, he could focus down to the 4km x 3km level, at which point individual churches and farms would be visible.

And just in case this astonishing ability to investigate the far-flung corners of his realm in a matter of seconds failed to persuade William to throw in the quill, he might be interested to know that BBC Enterprises are already thinking up a range of second-generation interactive video titles, with possible candidates including natural history, language-learning, and science. Even a Conqueror's mind needs honing.

John Elkington is a director of Earthlife UK Ltd.