

Benjamin Woolley: The Domesday Project

New images of Britain

The Domesday Book, William the Conqueror's unique survey of England, will be 900 years old in 1986. Using the latest video and computer technology, the BBC is celebrating the anniversary by compiling a new, electronic, Book. Benjamin Woolley reports.

I know that 900 years ago the village of my birth—Lolinminstre, now Lyminster—had 30 pigs. Great Domesday, the so sonorously named first volume of the Domesday Book, forges this charmingly intimate link with a point in history nearly a millennium distant. However, the great book was not compiled for the benefit of casual 20th-century historians. It is customarily thought to have been a compilation of the Anglo-Norman equivalent of the tax return. Recent evidence suggests that William, having had 20 years to settle into his new kingdom, wanted it so he could run his hands through his newly acquired and undoubtedly considerable booty. Essentially, it was an inventory of his possessions which, thanks to an ingeniously contrived feudal system introduced by the Normans, turned out to be every acre of plotted land in England.

Now, for less sinister reasons—in fact for laudably democratic ones—the BBC has decided to follow William's example and create a 'people's database'. The BBC Domesday Project is designed to compile a new Domesday to commemorate the original's 900th anniversary next year. The project's editor, and also executive producer of a linked television history of Britain since 1066, is Peter Armstrong, who also produced *The Sea of Faith* and *Global Report*. The man is clearly possessed. He is a keen computer programmer, competently manipulates some of the most advanced consumer electronics around, and plans to use untried and untested technology to offer the public easy access to the 20,000 Ordnance Survey maps, two million pages of information and 120,000 pictures that will make up the project's

picture of Britain.

This summer a million or so people, split into groups including schoolchildren, members of Women's Institutes, Scouts, Guides and natural historians, will be marching across the countryside, searching for the local information that will make up the first volume of the new Domesday. The mission of each group will be to make a detailed survey of a local four- by three-kilometre patch, to comprise 20 pages of text on their community's lifestyle, a study of land use, using 20 standard categories of land cover and 67 categories of amenities (from 'Abattoir' to 'Club (Working Men's or Similar)', and four slide photographs.

Participating schools and clubs have all been supplied with computer disks on to which to enter all the text and data relating to their area. These disks will be used by the project to compile the first volume of Domesday: the local volume. The collated information will not be stored on paper or parchment but on a much newer technology: video disk. Philips is designing and building a special video disk player which, when connected to a computer, will enable inquirers to retrieve the information they want from the mass available. The hardware needed to do this will cost around £1,500 (including the Domesday disks), and will probably be available in libraries and schools throughout the country in 1986 and 1987.

The new Domesday will consist of two video-disk volumes. The second volume will be the national survey, selected by an editorial board of academics from the accretion of computer-held statistical data lodged with national research bodies. There will also be 40,000 pictures from a variety of collections, and facilities for 'simulated walks' through various types of terrain, generated by stringing together a series of photographs of a particular area according to commands from the user.

And what, one may ask, as many of the disgruntled villeins of Norman England will have asked, is the point of all this? One could frame an answer in terms of a vast generalised statement about the human condition: that is, that humanity has always striven to understand

Illustration by Lee Stannard.



its environment so that it may master it. Or one could appeal to pseudo-psychological observations about instinct and say it is natural inquisitiveness. Or one could say it is a chance to put new and important technologies to good use. Or one could say it is for educational purposes. It is hard to know how to judge a project of such scale and ambition as this. It seems even more ambitious than the original Domesday, since it is pioneering what they call leading edge, state-of-the-art technologies, and involves the co-ordination of considerably more people and information. It also lacks the despotic authority of a king to encourage the participation of reluctant sources.

The original Domesday was not, in the modern sense, a public document. It was compiled for the use of William's Treasury, to help establish tenure. Though probably left incomplete after the death of the king in 1087, it was bound into one volume to aid ready reference. Some historians and graphologists have argued that Great Domesday was probably the work of a single compiler, possibly Samson, later Bishop of Worcester. The king's *legati* would return from hearings conducted around the country, laden with facts and figures about the various villages, 'hundreds' and towns in their circuit and Samson, or whoever it was, probably condensed and standardised the gathered information for inclusion straight into the final draft of the manuscript.

The important historical point about the compilation of Domesday (the original) was that it imposed a new political and social structure on England, the feudal structure imported by the Normans. In the final analysis, it showed that everything was the king's, with some land leased to his friends, the tenants-in-chief—earls, barons, bishops, abbots and so on. The survey was split into counties, and each county divided up according to the fiefs of the king and his tenants. Thus the political map of England was redrawn along feudal lines.

Historians are always talking about the re-drawing of political maps, but the interesting thing about this redraft is that it was done on paper. Feudalism may have been the result of William's conquests, but it only made sense, formed a systematic and coherent order, because it was mapped out in the Domesday Book. In a sense, Domesday made the new feudalism possible.

Surprising though it may seem, there is not really a modern equivalent of Domesday, which is why the Domesday Project could prove so

significant. Though of course there are sophisticated means of establishing who owns what, there is no current public national survey of land ownership and use. The Domesday Project will not supply such a survey, but it will provide a detailed survey of land use, and will bring together all the disparate data about the modern economy and society that, properly integrated, will create a completely new and unpredictable picture of the nation. Who knows what British culture will look like constructed from such a mass of disparate data? It could be like a tower in a flat land, offering a view never before imagined or imaginable.

Uniquely, the picture will be compiled by the survey's user, rather than its compiler. The 'interactive' video-disk technology allows the minimum of structuring to be done at compilation stage. On the disk, the survey will just be an apparently randomly ordered series of maps, pictures, pages of text and computer programs. Only when these are brought together by the computer, according to criteria supplied by the user, will they make sense.

Ever since d'Alembert's and Diderot's *Encyclopédie* claimed to bring together all knowledge according to rational principles, it was tempting to believe that a final arbiter for all knowledge could be supplied by a reference book. Those heady days are passing. In these less determinate times, the idea that encyclopaedia contributors and compilers can provide an objective account of all human knowledge, free of all prejudice and assumption, is no longer high principle but hogwash. Encyclopaedias like *Britannica* are now sold as 'investments in the future', educational aids, ready reference, handcrafted, embossed, leather-bound ornaments for bookshelves.

Nevertheless, thanks to Time-Life and television, an assumption persists that, when it comes to explaining things in an accessible way, subjectivist modesty is completely out of order. We have to hug the comfortable assurance that there's a body of facts that only need be consulted to establish the truth on any issue. This is all very well when certain assumptions are declared. In Peter Armstrong's *The Sea of Faith*, Don Cupitt displayed proper academic integrity when he supplied the co-ordinates of his position: he was saying, 'Stand here, where I am, and I think you'll see this.' But such strategies are confined to BBC2 and Channel 4.

The Domesday Project, or rather the technology it uses, changes all this completely. Because it is interactive, the assumptions it makes can be kept to a minimum. It can, as it were, throw in anything it can obtain that is of reasonably respectable provenance and say to the user, 'Make of it what you will.' It will, of course, be using other people's data and research, which entails importing other people's assumptions, but these assumptions will not actually dictate how the data is to be seen.

To illustrate this, the disks will be released with prerecorded sessions by celebrity users. We will be able to see how they used the database to draw together a picture of the nation which, no doubt, confirms their views of it. The exercise will show how the data can be manipulated to compile different perspectives. Whereas before the magician just showed you the tricks, he will now tell you how they are done. We are all in the magic circle.

Michael Wood launches the Domesday Project on 26 April on BBC1 at 7.30pm.