The Domesday Book

Produced at amazing speed in the years after the Conquest, the Domesday Book provides a vivid picture of late 11th-century England. Find out how it was compiled, and what it reveals about life in the new Conqueror's kingdom.

Introduction

The Domesday Book - compiled in 1085-6 - is one of the few historical records whose name is familiar to most people in this country. It is our earliest public record, the foundation document of the national archives and a legal document that is still valid as evidence of title to land.

Based on the Domesday survey of 1085-6, which was drawn up on the orders of King William I, it describes in remarkable detail, the landholdings and resources of late 11th-century England, demonstrating the power of the government machine in the first century of the new Millennium, and its deep thirst for information.

It was an exercise unparalleled in contemporary Europe, and was not matched in its comprehensive coverage of the country until the population censuses of the 19th century - although Domesday itself is not a full population census, and the names that appear in it are mainly only those of people who owned land.

Used for many centuries for administrative and legal purposes, the Domesday Book is the starting point for most local historians researching the history of their area and there are several versions in print which should be available through good reference libraries. Despite its iconic significance, it has been subjected to increasingly detailed textual analysis by historians who warn us that not everything it says should be taken at face value.

Providing definitive proof of rights to land and obligations to tax and military service, its 913 pages and two million Latin words describe more than 13,000 places in England and parts of Wales. Nicknamed the 'Domesday' Book by the native English, after God's final Day of Judgement, when every soul would be assessed and against which there could be no appeal, this title was eventually adopted by its official custodians, known for years as the Public Record Office, and recently renamed the National Archives.

The official who wrote Dialogue of the Exchequer in 1179 wrote that 'just as the sentence of that strict and terrible Last Judgement cannot be evaded by any art or subterfuge, so, when a dispute arises in this realm concerning facts which are written down, and an appeal is made to the book itself, the evidence it gives cannot be set at nought or evaded with impunity'. It was a landmark in the triumph of the centralised written record, once set down fixed forever, over evolving local oral traditions.

Why was the Domesday Book compiled?

According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the decision was taken at William's Christmas court in Gloucester in 1085, and his men were sent:

'all over England into every shire [to] find out how many hides there were in the shire, what land and cattle the king had himself in the shire, what dues he ought to have in twelve months from the shire. Also he had a record made of how much land his archbishops had, his bishops and his abbots and his earls, and what or how much everyone who was in England had.... So very narrowly did he have it investigated that there was no single hide nor yard of land, nor indeed ... one ox or cow or pig which was left out and not put down in his record, and these records were brought to him afterwards'.

This survey and audit would clearly establish who held what, in the wake of the Norman Conquest itself

This may be an exaggeration of what actually happened, but it does show how the survey was perceived at the time. Some historians have seen the immediate cause lying in an invasion threat from Denmark and Norway and William's urgent need for accurate information about the military and other resources at his disposal.

The first general population census of 1801 had a similar requirement behind it at a time when England was threatened with invasion from Revolutionary France.

Twenty years after King William's successful invasion of England, and the mass re-distribution of land amongst his followers, it was time to consolidate and define. This survey and audit would clearly establish who held what, in the wake of the Norman Conquest itself; it would also clarify what rights and dues were owed to the King, and would settle the liability of his great barons to provide military resources, in soldiers or cash, for a monarch whose campaigning season never ended.

What doesn't appear in Domesday?

The Domesday Book does not cover certain important cities, such as London, Winchester, Bristol and the borough of Tamworth; nor Northumberland and Durham or much of north-west England. For Wales, only parts of certain border areas are included. Neither was it ever fully completed, being abandoned at some stage early in the reign of William Rufus, who succeeded to the throne in 1087.

Not every place that existed in 1086 appears in the Domesday Book. We know this from other evidence - such as Anglo-Saxon charters, architectural evidence or the origins of the place-name itself. The place-names found in the Domesday Book are township and estate names, and may include other villages and hamlets that receive no specific mention in the text; for example, the Domesday entry for Shepshed, near Loughborough, includes the settlements of Long Watton, Lockington and Hemington, but they are not specifically mentioned.

Great and Little Domesday

Domesday was never a single volume but originally two books, Great Domesday and Little Domesday (which was a longer version, covering the counties of Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, which was never written up into the main volume). It is now contained within five volumes, having been re-bound in 1984 to improve the prospects for its preservation for another millennium.

Great Domesday was mostly written by a single scribe, with the hand of a second clerk appearing, checking his work and adding some notes and further entries. Minor errors were inevitable and led to some inconsistencies for later scholars to worry over.

The counties of Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk appear in a more detailed version known as Little Domesday. 'Little' refers to its physical size, not the content, as it is more detailed than Great Domesday, notably in its description of livestock belonging to the manor. Domesday Suffolk, for example, records 434 goats and 2 donkeys. It was the work of several clerks, perhaps as many as seven, and was neatly but hurriedly written, resulting again in minor errors.

Other versions of parts of the Domesday survey, which are not held by the Public Record Office, are the "Exon" Domesday (Somerset, Cornwall and most of Devon), held by some to be written by the same scribe who worked on Great Domesday; the 'Ely Inquest' (Ely Abbey estates) and the Cambridgeshire Inquest (parts of Cambridgeshire).

How was Domesday Book compiled?

It was only possible because England already had a sophisticated administrative system, built up by the Anglo-Saxons, with shire counties, whose boundaries survived with little change until 1974, and a well-functioning tax system.

The traditional view is that all major landowners had to send in lists of their manors and tenants, which were compared to existing tax records. Commissioners were then sent out to assess the situation on the ground, questioning local juries in detail. Each was assigned circuits containing two or more counties.

Their methods of proceeding do seem to have varied from circuit to circuit so comparative analysis by historians can be misleading. To avoid bias, the juries would have both Normans and native Anglo-Saxons sitting on them. William wanted everything to follow legal form to legitimise his title which he claimed, not simply by right of conquest but as King Edward the Confessor's legitimate heir.

The questions

The Ely Inquest lists the questions asked by the commissioners. 'They inquired:

- What the manor was called
- Who held it at the time of King Edward
- Who holds it now

- How many hides there are (*measurement of land for taxation purposes, between 60 and 120 acres*)
- How many ploughs held by the lord and how many belonging to the peasants
- How many villeins (*the wealthiest of the unfree peasants who had to pay his lord labour service and rent*)
- How many cottars (*an unfree peasant with a holding of land up to 5 acres*)
- How many slaves (*unfree man or woman*)
- How many freemen
- How many sokemen (*equivalent to a freeman but owing dues to his lord for his holding*)
- How much woodland
- How much meadow
- How much pasture
- How many mills
- How many fisheries
- How much had been added to or taken away from the estate
- What it used to be worth altogether
- What it is worth now

All this was to be recorded three times - as it was in the time of King Edward [before 1066], what it was when King William gave it and as it is now. And it was also to be noted whether more [tax revenue] could be taken than is being taken now.' It also gives the names of some of the jurors showing the Norman and English mix.

Compiled at amazing speed for an age without computers or rapid means of communication, and where most of the population could neither read nor write, the returns were then summarized and re-shaped. The scribes followed a set pattern in their organisation of the data. Each county section began with an entry describing all the boroughs, followed by a list of landholders and then a detailed description of their manors, beginning with those held by the king himself and followed by those of the tenants-in-chief, itemised in rank order. Red ink was used for key headings.

Who appears in Domesday Book?

Most of the names that appear are those of landowners. The king and his family held about 17 per cent of the land, bishops and abbots about 26 per cent and around 190 tenants-in-chief held about 54 per cent. Some holdings were huge, with some twelve barons controlling nearly a quarter of the country but it is not always easy to distinguish between individuals with the same names who may have held lands in the same county or across a number of different counties.

Anglo-Saxon names appear mainly as under-tenants of Norman lords. Some 4-5,000 entries relate to Anglo-Saxon lords, such as Aelfric, the pre-Conquest lord of March Gibbon in Buckinghamshire, who, Domesday records, paid his rent 'miserably and with a heavy heart'. Providing definitive proof of rights to land and obligations to tax and military service.

Women in Domesday

Some women's names appear in Domesday. The most prominent was Judith, countess of Northumbria and Huntingdon, who was King William's niece. One Aelgar was granted enough land to live on by the Sheriff of Trent in return for teaching his daughter the art of gold embroidery. Others are anonymous, such as the one 'poor woman' of Barfreston in Kent who only appears in the text because she had to make an annual payment of 3 ¾ d, although for what is not recorded. Exceptionally, Asa of Scoreby in Yorkshire is noted as holding her land 'separate and free from the control and power of Bjornulfr her husband, even when they were together'. Now separated, she had withdrawn 'all her own land and possessed it as a lady'.

Villani

Of the 268,984 individuals described in Domesday, some 40 per cent are listed as villani. This Latin term has been translated in different ways by historians, as villein, villager, and villan. Philip Morgan has described them as "simply members of the vill who held a fixed share of its resources, including a changing pattern of strips within the fields, and owed labour services to the lord's demesne" (land held directly by the lord of the manor). Some might have farms of as much as 30 acres, but still owe their lords two or three days' work on his land. Below them in the social hierarchy came the bordars who owed more services but held less land and below them the cottars, with even less, perhaps just a few acres and a vegetable garden. Sometimes those with trades - millers, blacksmiths, potters, shepherds and the like - receive specific mention and are named such as Fulchere the Bowman. Others appear with names associated with more personal characteristics, such as Alwin the Rat and Ralph the Haunted.

At the bottom of the social pile came the servi or slaves, about 10% of the total population, who had no property rights and could be bought and sold. Often listed with the number of ploughs, it has been assumed that most would have worked as ploughmen, domestic servants and dairymaids.