

The nine-hundredth centenary of the compilation of Domesday Book has made it the focus of much attention. It has always been agreed that Domesday Book was an exceptionally rich source of historical information, but there has been long-standing controversy about the purpose for which it was compiled, the extent to which it revealed continuities or change between Anglo-Saxon and Norman England, and the accuracy of its detailed estimates of wealth and taxpaying capacity. In this article Dr Sally Harvey evaluates the answers which modern research has brought to these and other questions.

Domesday Book

Domesday Book was unique in Western Europe and it set a standard: henceforward only the most all-embracing surveys were called Domesday. What is known as Domesday Book is in fact a composite work in two volumes. Volume one, known as Great or Exchequer Domesday, is an abbreviated version of the returns from 32 counties; while volume two, or Little Domesday, covers the counties of Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, and gives all the details of the original findings. The Inquiry also had many local detailed versions and extracts. Much of the data is numerical, and the whole is written in a highly abbreviated and short-hand Latin. It thus bulks large in our information on early Norman England, and on the late Anglo-Saxon England taken over by the Normans. For the economic and social historian there are valuable data on arable exploitation and on annual incomes from landholding, and also an enumeration of rural population in different classes from which subsequent population trends in England can be measured. For historians of government, Domesday Book represents in its framework the evidence for many of the procedures of administration.

How and Why: Early Views

Historians have argued for a long time on why and how Domesday Book came to be written. It has no title page, no author, no editor, no preface. And it probably did not get its name until a few decades had passed. The mystery of the precise intentions behind this immense administrative effort have been investigated along with its methods. Arguments as to why it was made have been based on how it was made. This can be confusing as these are potentially two different subjects. Just as important, before the contents of Domesday can be put to use, we need to know their origin and bias. The question mark which hangs over the rule of Norman England in general hangs over Domesday Book in particular. What role did surviving Anglo-Saxon institutions play in its make-up? What is the product of new forces and new rulers?

Controversy has focussed on two related issues: the nature of the institutions - whether Saxon or Norman involved in the compilation of the information for Domesday Book; and its purpose. Was it designed as a tax book, with the data assembled on the basis of 'hundreds', a geographical area; or for the levy of feudal obligations, with the data assembled on the basis of 'tenants-in-chief', a group of landholders at the summit of the feudal hierarchy? [For a brief explanation of these terms, and of others shown in quotation marks, see the Glossary in the

box on p.6].

About the turn of the century much careful research was carried out on Domesday Book. The Victorian scholars -J. H. Round and F. W. Maitland -both concluded Domesday was nothing other than a tax or 'geld' book. They did so chiefly on the evidence from a 'satellite source', the Inquest of the County of Cambridge, which is laid out by hundreds. Information was provided by juries - representatives on oath - from the hundreds (an Anglo-Saxon institution) probably in the shire court (also Anglo-Saxon) to gather information for a tax reassessment. This country-wide Anglo-Saxon taxation was unique in Western Europe, and was perhaps the main reason why England was so attractive to the invasion of would-be Kings. The assembly of information was overseen by groups of royal commissioners: trusted leading Normans, both ecclesiastics and laymen. Thus, according to this view, the Inquiry was the product of Anglo-Saxon institutions taken over by the new Norman ruling group to revitalise a long-established tax system.

The character of Domesday that V. H. Galbraith propounded in 1940 was completely different. He argued that it was an inquiry of feudal 'tenants-in-chief' for a feudal purpose, not for the collection of geld. His chief source was another 'satellite', the Exeter Domesday, with its original livestock detail laid out under tenants-in-chief, and crossing the boundaries not only of hundreds, but even of counties. Galbraith argued that Domesday Book represented the revolution in tenure that had taken place in England, because it consisted of returns by 'tenants-in-chief', who were mostly new and mostly Norman. In his view its purpose was to obtain a valuation of their lands upon which feudal obligations would be levied. These included the lord's right to take the lands of a minor or heiress into his own hands during the minority, or before marriage, for wardship: in practice this meant he would take the bulk of the income from the land himself. According to this view Domesday Book's inspiration was thus new and Norman and feudal.

The disadvantage of both these theories is that they cannot easily be reconciled with the order of Domesday Book itself. Domesday Book is actually a sandwich of the two approaches. It is laid out first by counties, then within counties by tenants-in-chief, then within the lands of the tenants-in-chief, by hundreds. The two units are not self-contained: many tenants-in-chief held lands in several counties, and in different hundreds in a single county: some 'vills' were divided amongst several holders. How was this information assembled? Both the theories outlined above would require a major re-ordering of material and a complete re-writing to produce the order of Domesday

Book. But time was short. The consensus reached by modern historians is that both Domesday volumes were produced in William's reign, not later: the inquiry was completed in 1086, and the king saw the returns before he left England for the last time in August. The refined version of Great Domesday was produced in the following twelve months, and when William died in September 1087, work on it stopped with the cities of London and Winchester not yet copied up. How can this be resolved?

Solution and Resolution

I would argue that the departure point of the inquiry was shire lists already in existence for tax purposes. These formed the skeletal framework for Domesday since such lists were already arranged both in order of landholder and in order of hundred, sometimes the landholder was primary and sometimes the hundred. Most survive in copies in the archives of landholders and can be dated *before* Domesday Book: either they contain earlier assessment figures or they show an earlier situation, in landholdings. Within Domesday itself survive lists for Yorkshire, previously thought of as summaries of Domesday. One section dealing with royal lands is arranged under landholders of the 1060s (including Earl Tostig who died in 1065) and another section is arranged by 'wapentakes' with the holders of land annotated in. Such fiscal lists emphasise the force of the Anglo-Saxon foundations of Domesday Book. They also show that the great landholders knew their fiscal responsibility before, as well as after, the Conquest. That is not to ignore the large contribution of the landholders. Much of the detailed information was probably supplied directly by the larger landholders, but provided according to the shire lists supplied. Probably the hundred was primary in the east of the country and the landholder in the west. Either way the information was quickly converted to the other order.

Glossary

Demesne: lands not let out to tenants.

Geld: literally 'money', but used for all sorts of taxes.

'The geld' denotes the national system of taxation.

Hundred: the administrative unit within the shire in the south and west of England.

Satellites: texts associated with the Domesday Inquiry, but their exact relationship is undetermined.

Tenants-in-chief: the leading barons who held land from the king.

Thegns: Anglo-Saxon gentry.

Vills: a feudal township consisting of a number of houses or buildings with their adjacent lands.

Wapentake: the local administrative unit in the Danelaw, equivalent to the hundred.

We now turn to the second issue: the function of Domesday Book. On this, Galbraith's view - that it was a feudal valuation - has won consensus. The annual values of estates undoubtedly interested the commissioners most; the values were the sole item given for the two dates with the utmost consistency, and in 18 counties they are often given for a third, interim, date as well. The feudal valuation is the one entirely novel purpose of Domesday Book, fully intentional, and fully carried out. The whole character of William II's reign (and much of Henry I's Coronation Charter), is a commentary on this use of Domesday. With the knowledge of the values of his tenants-in-chief before him William II could be ruthlessly demanding because he could

be precise. Indeed, knowing the values of ecclesiastical lands, he could hardly bear to let them out of his hands at all he deliberately kept at least eight bishoprics and thirteen abbeys vacant so that he could receive their revenues.

The vast Domesday data also indicate a second function. An almost complete turn-over in landholding had taken place forcefully in the previous twenty years; military men had even moved into the one stable element, the lands of the churches. Undoubtedly a second and vital function of the Inquiry was to check the authority of these tenurial changes. Disputes were not necessarily resolved, but they were recorded for settlement subsequently, and in some counties long lists of disputes are recorded in Domesday Book. Particular inquiries to deal with disputed lands had already been held in William's reign, consisting of sessions of royal commissioners with representatives of shires and hundreds present. To check landholding was a central function of the Inquiry without which valuation or fiscal reassessment would be useless.

Thirdly, Domesday Book was intended to be a geld book. But not for the collection of geld, it had been collected long before the Domesday Inquiry; and not for an arbitrary and ad hoc reassessment. Instead, it was to be for one which was closely based on assets of all sorts and on ability to pay. Why was such a broadly-based reassessment needed? William's scorched-earth policy had made arbitrary reductions necessary; but recoveries had been made since. Domesday Book shows that a very recent reassessment of land had begun in the south-eastern counties, but it led to lower assessments not higher. In 1084 geld at the high rate of six shillings (30p) had already been levied, but incompletely collected. Because of this the men who had accompanied William and become powerful magnates knew that their successful take-over bid was in jeopardy.

To face the 200 ships assembled by the Danish King in 1084 William had brought over to this country a 'larger force of soldiers and mounted men than had ever come to this country before'. he had now to accommodate them with his magnates 'each in proportion to their land'. Yet many of the wealthiest lands lay untapped and exempt. I would argue that the main item in Domesday Book which has not yet found an accepted definition - the ploughland or teamland - represents a new effort at fiscal reappraisal. It was based on variable assets in different regions, but essentially upon arable land and its ancillary assets, such as meadow for the plough-teams. Several chroniclers put plough teams at the head of their list of items the Domesday Inquiry sought; and several associate the inquiry with taxation. Indeed, the recent statistical work of McDonald and Snooks demonstrates that the existing assessment of Essex shows a relatively much higher incidence of taxation on the smallest holdings. (See Figure 1) If taxation were to be increased it could only be achieved by tying its incidence accurately to resources.

To summarise; the aims of the Domesday Inquiry were threefold. It checked tenure, it valued lands for the levy of feudal aids, and it recorded assets for a basic fiscal reassessment; all spheres of interest for the twelfth-century Exchequer. These aims were precise and within the limits of any great questionnaire, almost completely fulfilled. The construction of Domesday Book enforced a great welding of Anglo-Saxon practices and Norman feudal interests, in which the growth of the Exchequer was securely rooted. There was also a direct result. All landholders of consequence were summoned to Salisbury in 1086 to take an oath of fealty to William 'no matter whose vassals they might be.' It tied both great magnates and powerful under-tenants to the king on the basis of the full-scale data for feudal obligations and fiscal dues contained in Domesday Book.

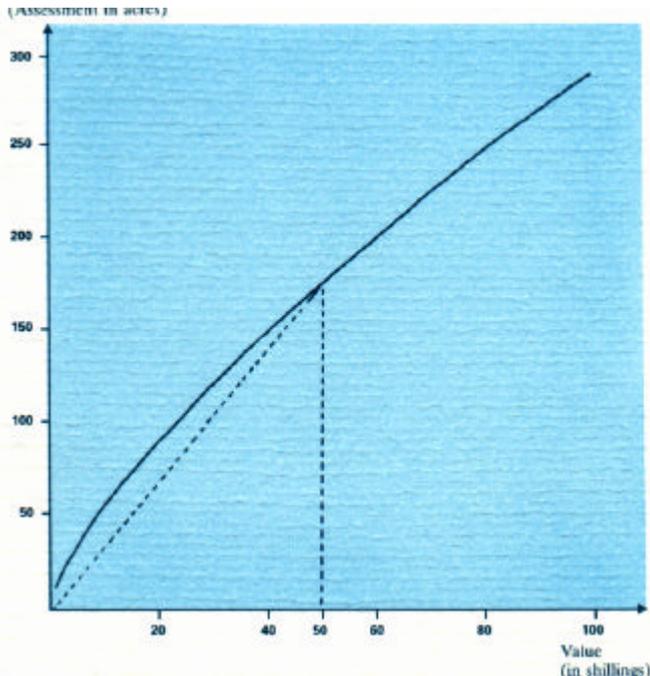
Continuity and Change

Reconstruction of pre-conquest landholdings has recently thrown light on some continuity of practice from Anglo-Saxon England. On the basis of an analysis of these pre-Conquest landholders Sawyer has questioned the existence of a 'tenurial revolution' at the time of the Conquest. Accepting the massive change in *persons* he argues that the *structures* of post-Conquest lordships frequently followed in the footsteps of the pre-Conquest. That Norman lords were often assigned the lands in several counties of particular Anglo-Saxons has long been recognised, but Sawyer emphasises that the lands held by men and women *commended* to an Anglo-Saxon lord, were also acquired by that lord's Norman successor, then given to his subtenants. Thus, the tenurial change was not usually a matter of a small group of powerful newcomers taking over the lands of many small pre-Conquest 'thegns'. Great accumulations of land and influence had been common in Saxon England also. Gilbert de Ghent succeeded to Ulf Fenisc, Geoffrey de Mandeville to Asgar the Staller, and Count Alan of Brittany to Eadgifu the Fair. Yet, it is doubtful if the proportion of continuity and discontinuity of landholding structures can ever be weighed accurately given the data we have. Domesday Book does not usually record the pre-Conquest holder and, even when it does, it is not always possible to identify him with certainty unless a second name or title is given. Also, the characteristics of the two types of lordship remained different. However, it is worth noting that, in addition to the earls, there was a small group of very powerful landholders in Anglo-Saxon England, just as in Norman England.

The links between the two power structures and the close similarity of status between Anglo-Saxon and Norman sheriffs has now also been highlighted. Continuity amongst the class of skilled royal functionaries such as goldsmiths, foresters, or huntsmen has always been visible clearly in

Figure 1: The Tax Assessment-Manorial Annual Value Relationship for Essex Lay-Manors 1086

Domesday Book. Other strands of continuity have recently been



From J. McDonald and G. D. Snooks, 'How Artificial were the Tax Assessments of Domesday England? The Case of Essex', *Ec. Hist. Rev.* (1985).

emphasised. Eleanor Searle has shown how marriages between the new landholders and the daughters or widows of Anglo-Saxon landholders helped to give a smooth transfer, a legitimacy and, arguably, a respect for the new regime. This was important if the new lords were ever to be acceptable and safe. It embodied a change of legal principles and a nice use of them.

Women could anyway hold and transfer land in their own right in the Anglo-Saxon period. Under the Norman law they could not. But they could still be the means of its transfer as heiresses and widows. Hence the king's - and his baron's - consent was needed for the marriage of heiresses. This was an important factor in the rebellion and repercussions following the marriage in 1075 between the daughter of Ralf of East Anglia and the Earl of Hereford for which consent had been refused. Only two Englishmen of importance retained their lands in Domesday; one, Colswein of Lincoln, left only a daughter who was married to a Norman, whilst Turchil of Warwick's lands may have descended with his daughter and her marriage. Finally, a sector of the Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical landholding world has been given a new lease of life. Blair has shown that secular minsters were not ousted by Benedictine monasteries in the early Norman period. On the contrary they continued to have strong influence.

Wealth and Taxes

The extraordinary range and detail of Domesday Book means that, even 200 years after publication, there is still further information to be gained from the use of its data.

Steady progress has been made by Darby in transforming Domesday data into maps in five regional volumes of Domesday geographies, together with a gazetteer volume which also maps Domesday settlements. The series was completed by a final volume in 1977 on Domesday England as a whole. Maps now make assimilable the basic items in Domesday, the most fundamental to the economy being the distribution of population. Though the adult rural male population was recorded, the figures in Domesday, mapped by Darby, are minima. The households of baronial and manorial lords were not recorded. Nor were all the towns included, and of those that were, the classes of population were often incomplete. Population distribution also makes clear where much of the weight of the economy lay. The heaviest concentrations were in the counties of East Anglia and Essex, and on the Kent and Sussex coastlines. In central and southern England, south of a line from the Humber to the Severn estuary, population was well distributed. **North** of this line it was sparse in many areas.

In Darby's reaps of waste, previously cultivated land of little or no value when the survey was taken, it is now easy to see both the devastation present at the end of the Confessor's reign, and that resulting from the Conqueror's subjugation of the north and west. The balance of the economy was certainly affected by this throughout the Conqueror's reign and beyond. The devastation of the city of York on two occasions, together with the wasting of its hinterland, is in marked contrast to the increased traffic of London, Dover, Winchester and Wight to Normandy and Flanders. This reinforced the high levels of population, and the already extensive agricultural exploitation of eastern England and parts of the south coast. The portrayal by Le Patourel of the Norman advent as waves of colonisation of the British Isles northwards and westwards, not as a single conquest, accords with this economic picture. Despite all the exertions of William's military strength in the north, Domesday surveys only south Lancashire (between the Ribble and the Mersey), and Yorkshire - and no further.

On how wealth was generated, Domesday information in general, and the annual values in particular, still have much to tell us. Although Galbraith put the annual values of land at the centre of the Inquiry, he himself dismissed them as often 'manifestly bogus'; and Darby did not map them until near the conclusion of his great geographies. Only recently have they been given the attention they deserve. The values were shown by Harvey to have been used by contemporaries in their transactions; and their validity has been confirmed by McDonald and Snooks in a recent statistical computer study of Essex -the county with the most detailed information. They demonstrated that the values were closely allied to assets and manpower, and therefore realistic.

The values - the net income of lands to king and landholders -represent the surplus over subsistence generated in the countryside, and show England to have been a wealthy state. The considerable agrarian-based surplus helps to explain how England was able repeatedly to raise large sums in taxation, much of which, before and after the Norman Conquest, left the country.

Questions Asked in the Domesday Inquiry

What is the name of the manor?

Who held it in the time of King Edward? Who holds it now?

How many hides are there?

How many teams - in demesne - of the tenants?

How many villeins -cottars - slaves?

How many freemen - sokemen? How much wood - meadow - pasture?

How many mills - fisheries?

How much has been added or taken away?

How much was the whole worth? How much now?

How much had or has each freeman sokeman?

All this to be given thrice; that is, in the time of King Edward, when King William gave it, and at the present time. And, if more can be had than is had? [From the *Inquest of Ely*]

How was this surplus achieved? Sawyer suggested that the silver for the large quantity of silver coin raised in taxation was obtained via the export of wool and sheepskins to the Flemish cloth industry. Exeter Domesday and Little Domesday, for the south-west and eastern England, show large numbers of sheep kept on 'demesnes'. The total, including the unrecorded flocks of freeholders, villeins, and smallholders, might well have been considerable. But McDonald and Snooks's statistical analysis on values in Essex, questions the role of livestock in producing significant profits. They argue, from a high degree of correlation between the working ploughs and the values, that incomes from land were largely based upon arable. However, the sample of Essex lay landholders is too small geographically, and covers only a part of the range of landlord choices and structures. Other counties need similar studies to resolve this important difference in interpretation. Other interesting questions about the varied economic preferences and organisation of different landholders are

now being asked. From the detailed Essex computer analysis it has been concluded that on the lay estates there was little difference in agricultural methods. This can be compared with the results of a simple country-wide analysis by Harvey of the structure of estates, based upon the plough-teams of the demesne, and the plough-teams of the villeins and tenants. The great demesnes mostly belonged to the monastic houses, and only a mere handful of the great lay landlords were interested in demesne agriculture. Demesne agriculture needed a large work-force and a number of supervisory staff, such as reeves and riding-men; and there were close links between demesne agriculture and slavery. (The absence of slavery in much of eastern England and the rapid decline of slavery under the Normans is a notable feature of Domesday England.) In contrast, leading lay lords with large manors went for the easier profits available from raising rents and transforming former small dues into full-scale rents: a policy facilitated by the political circumstances of the Conquest. From these studies we can see that there was in fact quite a range of landlord choices and structures.

How far these profits from landholding were successfully tapped by fiscal levies, and how up to date were the assessments, is another important area of enquiry. As we have seen, a study of Essex (see Figure 1), indicates that tax was regressive, with the tax rate declining relatively as the value of the holding increased. Thus, both the economic and the fiscal evidence points to the small producer as providing an increasing proportion of England's disposable wealth.

It is evident, therefore, that modern research on Domesday Book has resulted in some important changes in historical interpretation. It has revealed: that Domesday book served a diversity of purposes; that there were substantial continuities between Anglo-Saxon and Norman England; that Domesday England possessed great wealth; and that the tax system was an efficient means of exploiting that wealth, particularly in relation to the small producer.

Further Reading

R. Weldon Finn, *An Introduction to Domesday Book (1963)* is the best general work already printed. **V. H. Galbraith**, *Domesday Book: its Place in Administrative History (1974)* is dated, but remains a lively study. **H. C. Darby's** authoritative reference work, *Domesday England* will be reissued in 1986. *Domesday Book: A Reassessment* ed. **P. Sawyer (1985)** contains studies of some newer problems. Other studies which will appear this year include **Sally Harvey**, 'Domesday England' in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales II*, and **E. Hallam**, *Domesday Book through Nine Centuries*.

Dr Sally Harvey has held lectureships in medieval history at the Universities of Leeds and Oxford. She has published several articles on the Domesday Inquiry, and her book, Domesday Book and its Purpose, is coming out later this year.

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The editors would welcome comments on this issue and suggestions for topics which might be included in future issues. ReFRESH 3 will be published in the Autumn of 1986 and contain articles by Mark Overton on agricultural improvements and by Michael Turner on enclosures.

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