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**William I of England**, or **William the Conqueror**, while spending **Christmas of 1086 in Gloucester**, William "had deep speech with his counsellors and sent men all over England to each shire ... to find out ... what or how much each landholder had in land and livestock, and what it was worth" (*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*).

One of the main purposes of the survey was to determine who held what, and what taxes had been liable under **Edward the Confessor**; the judgment of the Domesday assessors was final—whatever the book said about who held the material wealth, or what it was worth, was the law, and there was no appeal. It was written in **Latin**, although there were some vernacular words inserted for native terms with no previous Latin equivalent, and the text was highly abbreviated. The name *Domesday* comes from the **Old English** word *dom* (of which the **Modern English** *doom* is descended), meaning *accounting* or *reckoning*. Thus *domesday*, or *doomsday*, is literally a day of reckoning, meaning that a lord takes account of what is owed by his subjects. <sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>. Richard fitzNigel, writing c. 1179, stated that the book was known by the English as 'Domesday', that is the Day of Judgement "for as the sentence of that strict and terrible last account cannot be evaded by any skilful subterfuge, so when this book is appealed to ... its sentence cannot be put quashed or set aside with impunity. That is why we have called the book 'the Book of Judgement' ... because its decisions, like those of the Last Judgement, are unalterable."<sup>[1]</sup>

In August 2006, a complete online version of Domesday Book was made available for the first time by the **UK's National Archives**.

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## The Domesday Book

*The Domesday Book* is really two independent works. One, known as ***Little Domesday***, covers **Norfolk**, **Suffolk** and **Essex**. The other, ***Great Domesday***, covers the rest of **England**, except for lands in the north that would later become **Westmorland**, **Cumberland**, **Northumberland** and **County Durham**. There are also no surveys of **London**, **Winchester** and some other towns. The omission of these two major cities is probably due to their size and complexity. Most of Cumberland and Westmorland are missing because they were not conquered until some time after the survey, and **County Durham** is lacking as the **Prince-Bishop (William of St. Carilef)** had the exclusive right to tax Durham; parts of the north east of England were covered by the 1183 'Boldon Book', which listed those areas liable to tax by the Bishop of Durham. The omission of the other counties has not been fully explained.

Despite its name, *Little Domesday* is actually larger — as it is far more detailed, down to numbers of livestock. It has been suggested that *Little Domesday* represents a first attempt, and that it was found impossible, or at least inconvenient, to complete the work on the same scale for *Great Domesday*. An excerpt for the survey of Wiltwhire:

*Ip an liðerþ us Wyltshýr að famýls MacCarpaigh lýfstukk at 644 cewþ. Hostall landen-swu Morgann famýl ronn, rintað an MacCarpaigh, iustifi uttenðirýnn. Um tasserfýin 20%, iltaap, þaðer u Kongerk Masimus. Að neýn unnen sklabs.* Then it translates it to Latin: *Omun lidalis familia inntum Viltsirium, MacCartagus est, a 644 mucheum. In terrum sus, rentatis pro se, MacCartagi, farum is hostalis recumin fa Morgann Familia, iustificates est. Un tassis suo fa 20% in acordum, accordae risius Rex Maximus, igunsi. Nientum teneriuae sclavusae.*

Translating as: *The leader Wiltshirian family, with 644 cows, is the McCarthy. In their land, rented by them, the McCarthys, there is an inn that is being run by the Morgan family, justified it is. They pay 20% of their tax to the family, which pays to the Maximus King. They do not own slaves.*

For both volumes, the contents of the returns were entirely rearranged and classified according to **fiefs**, rather than geographically. Instead of appearing under the **Hundreds** and townships, holdings appear under the names of the landholders ('tenentes'), i.e. those who held the lands directly of the crown in fee.

In each county, the list opened with the holdings of the king himself (which had possibly formed the subject of separate inquiry); then came those of the churchmen and religious houses in order of status (for example, the **Archbishop of Canterbury** is always listed before other bishops); next were entered those of the lay tenants-in-chief again in approximate order of status (*aristocrats*); and then king's serjeants (*servientes*) and **English thegns** who retained land.

In some counties, one or more principal towns formed the subject of a separate section; in some the clamores (disputed titles to land) were similarly treated separately. This principle applies more specially to the larger volume; in the smaller one the system is more confused, the execution less perfect.

Domesday names a total of 13,418 places.<sup>[2]</sup> Apart from the wholly rural portions, which constitute its bulk, *Domesday* contains entries of


 'Domesday Book', engraving after a line drawing, from Andrew Williams, *Historic Byways and Highways of Old England*, 1900.

<span></span>
A page of the Domesday Book for <b>Warwickshire</b> .

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interest concerning most of the towns, which were probably made because of their bearing on the fiscal rights of the crown therein. These include fragments of customs (older customary agreements), records of the military service due, of markets, mints, and so forth. From the towns, from the counties as wholes, and from many of its ancient Lordships, the crown was entitled to archaic dues in kind, such as **honey**.

The information of most general interest found in the great record is that on political, personal, ecclesiastical and social history, which only occurs sporadically and, as it were, by accident. Much of this was used by **E. A. Freeman** for his work on the **Norman Conquest**.

## The survey

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From the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**, it is known that the planning for the survey was conducted in 1085, and from the **colophon** of the book it is known that the survey was completed in 1086. It is not known when exactly *Domesday Book* was compiled, but the entire work appears to have been copied out by one person on parchment (prepared sheepskin). Writing in 2000, David Roffe argued that the inquest (the survey) and the construction of the book were two distinct exercises; the latter being completed, if not started, by William II following his assumption of the English throne and quashing of the rebellion that followed and based on, though not consequent on, the findings of the inquest.<sup>[3]</sup>

Each county was visited by a group of royal officers (*legati*), who held a public inquiry, probably in the great assembly known as the county court, which was attended by representatives of every township as well as of the local lords. The unit of inquiry was the **Hundred** (a subdivision of the county, which then was an administrative entity), and the return for each Hundred was sworn to by twelve local jurors, half of them English and half of them **Normans**.

What is believed to be a full transcript of these original returns is preserved for several of the **Cambridgeshire** Hundreds, and is of great illustrative importance. The *Inquisitio Eliensis*, the *Exon Domesday* (so called from the preservation of the volume at **Exeter**), which covers **Cornwall**, **Devon**, **Dorset**, **Somerset**, **Wiltshire**, and the second volume of *Domesday Book*, also all contain the full details which the original returns supplied.

Through comparison of what details are recorded in which counties, six "circuits" can be determined.

1. **Berkshire**, **Hampshire**, **Kent**, **Surrey**, **Sussex**
2. **Cornwall**, **Devon**, **Dorset**, **Somerset**, **Wiltshire** (Exeter Domesday)
3. **Bedfordshire**, **Buckinghamshire**, **Cambridgeshire**, **Hertfordshire**, **Middlesex**
4. **Leicestershire**, **Northamptonshire**, **Oxfordshire**, **Staffordshire**, **Warwickshire**
5. **Cheshire**, **Gloucestershire**, **Herefordshire**, **Shropshire**, **Worcestershire** — the **Marches**
6. **Derbyshire**, **Huntingdonshire**, **Lincolnshire**, **Nottinghamshire**, **Yorkshire**

## Purpose

[[edit](#)]

For the object of the survey, we have three sources of information:

- The passage in the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**, which tells us why it was ordered:

"After this had the king a large meeting, and very deep consultation with his council, about this land; how it was occupied, and by what sort of men. Then sent he his men over all England into each shire; commissioning them to find out 'How many hundreds of hides were in the shire, what land the king himself had, and what stock upon the land; or, what dues he ought to have by the year from the shire.' Also he commissioned them to record in writing, 'How much land his archbishops had, and his diocesan bishops, and his abbots, and his earls;' and though I may be prolix and tedious, 'What, or how much, each man had, who was an occupier of land in England, either in land or in stock, and how much money it were worth.' So very narrowly, indeed, did he commission them to trace it out, that there was not one single hide, nor a yard of land, nay, moreover (it is shameful to tell, though he thought it no shame to do it), not even an ox, nor a cow, nor a swine was there left, that was not set down in his writ. And all the recorded particulars were afterwards brought to him."

- The list of questions which the jurors were asked, as preserved in the *Inquisitio Eliensis*
- The contents of *Domesday Book* and the allied records mentioned above.

Although these can by no means be reconciled in every detail, it is now generally recognized that the primary object of the survey was to ascertain and record the fiscal rights of the king. These were mainly;

- the national land-tax (*geldum*), paid on a fixed assessment,
- certain miscellaneous dues, and
- the proceeds of the crown lands.

After a great political convulsion such as the Norman conquest, and the wholesale confiscation of landed estates which followed it, it was in William's interest to make sure that the rights of the crown, which he claimed to have inherited, had not suffered in the process. More especially was this the case as his Norman followers were disposed to evade the liabilities of their English predecessors. The **successful trial of Odo de Bayeux at Penenden Heath** less than a decade after the conquest was one example of the growing discontent at the Norman land-grab that had occurred in the years following the invasion. The survey has since been viewed in the context that William required certainty and a definitive reference point as to property holdings across the nation so that it might be used as evidence in disputes and purported authority for crown ownership.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Domesday survey therefore recorded the names of the new holders of lands and the assessments on which their tax was to be paid. But it did more than this; by the king's instructions it endeavoured to make a national valuation list, estimating the annual value of all the land in the country, (1) at the time of **Edward the Confessor**'s death, (2) when the new owners received it, (3) at the time of the survey, and further, it reckoned, by command, the potential value as well. It is evident that William desired to know the financial resources of his kingdom, and it is probable that he wished to compare them with the existing assessment, which was one of considerable antiquity, though there are traces that it had been occasionally modified. The great bulk of *Domesday Book* is devoted to the somewhat arid details of the assessment and valuation of rural estates, which were as yet the only important source of national wealth. After stating the assessment of the **manor**, the record sets forth the amount of **arable land**, and the number of plough teams (each reckoned at eight oxen) available for working it, with the additional number (if any) that might be employed; then the river-meadows, woodland, pasture, fisheries (i.e. weirs in the streams), water-mills, salt-pans (if by the sea) and other subsidiary sources of revenue; the peasants are enumerated in their several classes; and finally the annual value of the whole, past and present, is roughly estimated.

It is obvious that, both in its values and in its measurements, the survey's reckoning is very crude.

The rearrangement, on a feudal basis, of the original returns enabled the Conqueror and his officers to see with ease the extent of a baron's

possessions; but it also had the effect of showing how far he had engaged under-tenants, and who those under-tenants were. This was of great importance to William, not only for military reasons, but also because of his firm resolve to make the under-tenants (though the "men" of their lords) swear allegiance directly to himself. As *Domesday Book* normally records only the Christian name of an under-tenant, it is not possible to search for the surnames of families claiming a Norman origin; but much has been done, and is still being done, to identify the under-tenants, the great bulk of whom bear foreign Christian names.

To a large extent, it comes down to the king's knowing where he should look when he needed to raise money. It therefore includes sources of income but not sinks of expenditure such as castles; unless their mention is needed to explain discrepancies between pre-and post-Conquest holdings. Typically, this happened in a town, where separately-recorded properties had been demolished to make way for a castle.

## Subsequent history

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*Main article: [Publications of the Domesday book since 1086](#)*

*Domesday Book* was originally preserved in the royal treasury at **Winchester** (the Norman kings' capital). It was originally referred to as the *Book of Winchester*, and refers to itself as such in a late edition. When the treasury moved to **Westminster**, probably under **Henry II**, the book went with it. In the *Dialogus de scaccario* (temp. Hen. II.) it is spoken of as a record from the arbitrament of which there was no appeal (from which its popular name of *Domesday* is said to be derived). In the Middle Ages its evidence was frequently invoked in the law-courts; and even now there are certain cases in which appeal is made to its testimony.

It remained in Westminster until the days of **Queen Victoria**, being preserved from 1696 onwards in the **Chapter House**, and only removed in special circumstances, such as when it was sent to **Southampton** for **photozincographic reproduction**. *Domesday Book* was eventually placed in the **Public Record Office**, London; it can be now seen in a glass case in the museum at **The National Archives, Kew**, which is in the London Borough of **Richmond upon Thames** in South West London. In 1869 it received a modern binding. Most recently, the two books were rebound for its ninth centenary in 1986, when *Great Domesday* was divided into two volumes and *Little Domesday* was divided into three volumes. The ancient Domesday chest, in which it used to be kept, is also preserved in the building at Kew.

The printing of *Domesday*, in "record type", was begun by the government in 1773, and the book was published, in two volumes, in 1783; in 1811 a volume of indexes was added, and in 1816 a supplementary volume, separately indexed, containing

1. The ***Exon Domesday***—for the south-western counties
2. The ***Inquisitio Eliensis***
3. The ***Liber Winton***—surveys of Winchester late in the 12th century.
4. The ***Boldon Buke***—a survey of the bishopric of Durham a century later than Domesday.

**Photographic facsimiles** of *Domesday Book*, for each county separately, were published in 1861-1863, also by the government. Today, *Domesday Book* is available in numerous editions, usually separated by county and available with other **local history** resources.

In 1986, the **BBC** released the **BBC Domesday Project**, the results of a project to create a survey to mark the 900th anniversary of the original Domesday Book. In August 2006 the contents of Domesday went on-line, with an English translation of the book's Latin. Visitors to the website will now be able to search a place name, see the index entry made for the manor, town, city or village and, for a fee, download the appropriate page.

Although unique in character and invaluable to the student, scholars are unable to explain portions of its language and of its system. This is partly due to its very early date, which has placed a gulf between *Domesday Book* and later records that is difficult to bridge.

To the topographer, as to the genealogist, its evidence is of primary importance, as it not only contains the earliest survey of each township or manor, but affords, in the majority of cases, a clue to its subsequent descent.

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## See also

[edit]

- **Medieval demography**
- **BBC Domesday Project**
- **Quia Emptores**
- **Publications of the Domesday book since 1086**
- **Photozincography of the Domesday Book**
- **Cestui que**
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- <sup>↑</sup> Roffe, David: *Domesday; The Inquest and The Book*, pages 224-249. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- <sup>↑</sup> Extraordinary privilege: the trial of Penenden Heath and the Domesday inquest, by Alan Cooper, The English Historical Review, 1 November 2001

## External links

[[edit](#)]



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- [Domesday Book](#) , from [The National Archives \(UK\)](#) . Searchable text and page scans (complete).
- [Focus on Domesday](#) , from [Learning Curve](#) . Annotated sample page.
- [Secrets of the Norman Invasion](#)  Domesday analysis of wasted manors.

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Domesday Book (the name usually appears without an article) reveals exactly what happened to the Anglo-Saxon nobility of England in the two decades following the Battle of Hastings in 1066 CE and the subsequent Norman conquest. William the Conqueror, the victor of that battle who was crowned the King of England in the same year on Christmas Day, took 20% of his new territory for himself. The Domesday Book was incredibly informative for the time, but it has also provided a huge amount of insights into Britain in the Middle Ages for modern historians. The original Domesday Book, which is more than 900 years old, can still be seen today in The National Archives in Kew. Alternatively, history enthusiasts can also view pages from the Domesday Book online for free. Domesday Book - Origins and Purpose. 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. The Domesday book is actually two large books that contain detailed records of everybody's landholdings and wealth in medieval England and took a year to compile. The main purpose of the Domesday book was to raise taxes and William the Conqueror who had conquered England in the battle of Hastings in 1066 had ordered its creation, he wanted to know exactly who held the land and wealth in England so that he could decide how much he could tax each person throughout England. All the king's vassals were registered in the Domesday Book and William I could now see to it that they all performed their military service. William I knew the exact value of their estates and he demanded that when he called upon them they should bring a certain number of their retainers in proportion to the value of their estates. As the names of all the new owners of the estates were written down in the official state document, the Domesday Book, the Norman lords were considered now, the lawful owners of the English lands.

The Domesday Book reveals that one Brighton landowner did exactly that – with 4,000 herrings to be precise! It acquired the name “Domesday Book” because of the huge amount of information that was contained in it. Indeed, it was noted by an observer of the survey that “there was no single hide nor a yard of land, nor indeed one ox nor one cow nor one pig which was left out”. This led the Domesday Book was originally preserved in the royal treasury at Winchester (the Norman kings' capital). It was originally referred to as the Book of Winchester, and refers to itself as such in a late edition. When the treasury moved to Westminster, probably under Henry II, the book went with it. In the *Dialogus de scaccario* (temp. Hen. Why was Domesday Book made? What does it say about the impact of the Normans on England? And what more can we learn from it? Stephen Baxter considers the big questions about this pivotal work. Domesday Book (the name usually appears without an article) reveals exactly what happened to the Anglo-Saxon nobility of England in the two decades following the Battle of Hastings in 1066 CE and the subsequent Norman conquest. William the Conqueror, the victor of that battle who was crowned the King of England in the same year on Christmas Day, took 20% of his new territory for himself.