

## The Domesday Books – the great survey of England

William the Conqueror (1028-1087)

Post by Olive Morrin, Special Collections & Archives



Special Collections has recently added the Domesday Books to its collections. This collection was photoinchgraphed by Her Majesty's command at the Ordnance Survey Office, Southampton under the direction of Colonel Sir H. James between the years 1861-63. The counties in our collection which are individually bound include Berkshire, Hampshire, Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Cornwall, Devonshire, Dorsetshire, Somerset, Wiltshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Middlesex, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Cheshire, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Worcestershire, Nottinghamshire, Huntingdonshire, Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, Yorkshire, Essex, Norfolk, Suffolk and Lancashire.

The Domesday Book or the Great Survey of England was made by order of [William the Conqueror](#) A.D. 1086 and is the earliest public record in England. The survey was compiled from each county in England except for the four northern counties of Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmorland and Durham which were not yet part of the Norman realm also London and Winchester were excluded. Domesday has been used to establish legal precedent throughout its existence.

One of the most likely reasons why William commissioned the survey was to see how much tax he was accruing from each county. He was also under threat from Denmark and Norway and may also have just wanted to gain more information about the land he had conquered 20 years earlier. The survey eventually became known as Domesday and Henry II's treasurer, Richard Fitz Nigel wrote of it "This book is metaphorically called by the native English, Domesdai, the Day of Judgement. For as the sentence of that strict and terrible last account cannot be evaded by any subterfuge, so when this book is appealed to on those matters which it contains, its sentence cannot be quashed or set aside with impunity".



SCRIPTORIUM MONK AT WORK. (From *Lacritz*.)

This formidable task was begun in January 1086 and completed in two years. William sent his officials and clerks all over England to collect the required information. Domesday was written in Latin and as literacy was rare, monks were most likely to have been given the task of transcribing the information. The [Anglo-Saxon Chronicle](#) for 1085 tells us the King “sent his men all over England into every shire to ascertain, how many hundreds of ‘hides’ of land there were in each shire, and how much land and live-stock the king himself owned in the country, and what annual dues were lawfully his from each shire. He also had it record how much land his archbishops had and his diocesan bishops, his abbots and his earls...” The information contained in Domesday is a significant aid in understanding Norman England in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Domesday reveals the extent of Norman domination as most of England was controlled by less than 250 people and excluded almost all the native population.



The information in Domesday is contained in two books, Great Domesday and Little Domesday. Great Domesday contains all of England under Norman control except Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk. These three counties are contained in Little Domesday. The information in Little Domesday is in greater detail than Great Domesday.

The Domesday books are an invaluable primary source for historians. The original manuscript is now held at the National Archives in [Kew](#) and is available online through the [Open Domesday site](#).

**Reference:**

Victoria King's article for the History Magazine Oct/Nov 2001 issue

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