

Domesday & the Normanisation of England

By

[Geoff Boxell](#)

"After this the king had important deliberations and exhaustive discussion with his Council about this land and how it was peopled, and with what sort of men. Then he sent his men all over England into every Shire to ascertain how many Hundreds of 'hides' of land there were in every Shire, and how much land and livestock the king himself owned in the country and what annual dues were lawfully his from each Shire. He also had it recorded how much land his archbishops had and his diocesan bishops had, his abbots and his earls and – though I may be going into too much detail – what or how much each man who was a landowner here in England had in land or livestock, and how much money it was worth. So very thoroughly did he have the enquiry carried that there was not a single 'hide, not one virgate of land, not even – it is shameful to record it, but it did not seem shameful to him to do it – not even one ox, nor one cow, nor one swine which escaped notice in the survey. And all the Surveys were subsequently brought to him." Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 1085

"In the twentieth year of William, King of England, at whose command in this year was made a written survey of the lands of the several provinces, of the possessions of each magnate, of his fields, his farms and manors, of his men, both serfs and free, of cottagers as well as those possessing houses and fields, of ploughs, of horses and other animals, of the services and rent of the whole land and everyone. A second group of commissioners followed the first sent, and these were strangers to the neighbourhood, in order that they should find fault with their report and charge them before the king. And the land was troubled by many calamities arising from the collection of money for the king." Bishop Robert of Hereford, 1086

The great survey was such that, according to the Anglo Norman writer Richard Fitz Nigel, it was named after the great day of doom, when the Lord Jesus Christ would open the book of life and judge all that came before him. So why was it carried out and what was its purpose?

According to Richard Fitz Nigel, it was traditionally said at Winchester, where the Domesday Book was compiled, that the survey was part of William the Conqueror's plan to 'bring the subject people under the rule of written law'. This was so that each person in future would be content with his own rights and not encroach unpunished on those of others.

England had been practicing written land transfers for at least 400 years before 1066. In addition, since King Ælfred's time the English had paid geld for either buying off or financing armies to fight against the Vikings, and had a complex financial structure to pay for the upkeep of the defensive burghs and maintaining a permanent fleet. As a result of the above, many modern academics believe that the real reason the Domesday survey was carried out was to find the means of paying for the immense army of mercenaries that William had hired to defend his stolen kingdom from the threatened Danish/Flemish invasion of 1085. The invasion came to naught when the Danish King, Knute, was murdered, but the army had to be paid for. William had levied taxes before to pay for his mercenary forces, but the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us this army was '...so large an army of horse and foot from France and Brittany as never before sought this land; so that men wondered how this land could feed all that force'. Whilst the idea that Domesday was to pay the mercenaries and compensate for the

scorched earth policy that William had employed along the East Coast is valid, there are other factors that need to be considered.

After the crushing of the English at Senlac Ridge, outside Hastings, William took all the land of those that died in arms against him; this was then either held by him or distributed amongst his surviving followers. The years 1067-1071 saw many revolts against William and his Normans, which led to more land transferring from English to Norman hands. The chronicler Orderic Vitalis however, states that most of the systematic redistribution came in 1071-72 after the crushing of the northern English Earls, Edwin and Morcar. It was a result of their final uprising that William gave up any hope he had of the English becoming reconciled to his rule. Written land transfers could be either by charter or writ. In a charter, amongst other differences, the boundaries of the land are described, in a writ they are not. There are hardly any writs known from this period where William gives legal title of land transfer to a layman and no charters, except to the Church which was much shrewder in this area! As a result wholesale changes of ownership had taken place on mainly verbal grounds, or at best by a writ that lacked clear definition of the land boundaries. This caused many grievances and disputes. Whilst Norman fought Norman both in the courts and in the field, Richard Fitz Nigel tells us that '...the English lay in ambush for the suspected and hated race of Normans and murdered them secretly in woods and unfrequented places as opportunity offered.' Many a Frenchman, sent by his lord to take possession of his new holding, never made it there, or if he did, didn't stay alive long enough to enjoy it! It was no surprise that William did not know who, in reality, owned what. A national survey of land holding, such as Domesday was, would clear matters up.

The second problem was the way in which England was now run. Under the English kings, England was divided into great earldoms. The earls attended the king's moot (council), the Witan, together with representatives of the Church. The boundaries of the earldoms frequently changed under the king's direction. The earldoms were not hereditary and the appointee ruled at the king's discretion. The earls ruled as agents of the king through the Shire moots, the local major thegns, who attended the Shire Moot, ruled through their local Hundred Moot (Wapentake in the Danelaw) and the lesser thegns who attended the Hundred Moot ruled through their local tithing Moot. All men were required to belong to a tithing, which consisted of either 10 or 12 families. Thus the earls, through the thegns, knew the worth of the lands they controlled on behalf of the king and any land transfers were in writing, or at the very least known by those involved in the transaction. Under William the king's council was made up only of his intimates (Shire representation did not return until the reign of Henry III when Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, caused the Great Parliament to be called in 1265. Ironically Simon was a Norman born Norman). In addition, with the exceptions of the earls holding the palatinate shires on the Welsh and Scottish borders, the Norman earls were given the title of 'Earl' as an honorific only. A consequence of William's arrangements, complicated by the loss of local knowledge caused by the lack of native English lords, was that he had little means of knowing exactly who was doing what and when in the land. In addition, his abolition of the great earldoms meant that no-one was directly responsible for sorting out the mess land ownership had got into, let alone what the worth of the land now was for taxation purposes.

One result of the shambolic way the land had been reallocated following the various uprisings was that, except for the palatinates, the great landholders in England held properties scattered all over the kingdom. Whilst not planned as such, William must have been pleased with the arrangement. His own experience in Normandy of problems with over powerful subjects

controlling large physically united land holdings had taught him of the dangers they posed. In fact his own behaviour, as Duke of Normandy, towards his overlord, the King of France, was one of continual warfare and intrigue.

The need to pay for the army of 1085 may have been the excuse for conducting Domesday, but it was needed anyway to ensure that land ownership was clear and legal, and that the king was getting his due.

The men William sent out gathered the information required by calling a meeting of the Shire Moot. Here they took the oath of the Shire Reeve (Sheriff), all the barons and their Frenchmen and sworn juries from each Hundred as well as the priest, the reeve, and six men from each village. The questions asked by the king's men were: the name of the land holding; who held it in King Edward's time; who holds it now; who holds what land from whom and their rank; the number of mills and fishponds; the number of ploughs, both on the lord's land and the tenant's; the livestock; the amount of woodland, pasture, and meadows; at what worth was it assessed for geld (tax) in King Edward's time, when it was bestowed by King William, and at the time of the survey. In addition they asked whether it could be increased in value.

The findings were sent to the financial capital of the kingdom, Winchester, where they were to be made into one large record. In fact this didn't happen as William died in France in 1087. He was supervising the burning of the town of Mantes when a burning ember caused his horse to stumble and the pommel of his saddle pierced his gut. William was taken to Rouen to die and after to Caen to be buried. The funeral was a disaster. Firstly William's followers deserted the corpse to look to their own future. Then his servants robbed his corpse. There was a fire along the funeral route and before they could commence the funeral service, there was a dispute over the ownership of the gravesite. Finally, William's stone coffin turned out to be too small and when his body was stuffed into it his guts burst and filled the Abbey with a great stench.

As a result of William's death, the Domesday Survey was never fully compiled and we have the survey in two parts. Great Domesday covers all England except for East Anglia, London, Winchester, Northumberland, Durham, Westmoreland, Lancashire (though parts of the last three are covered by being included in other shires) and Cumberland, which was disputed land nominally under the rule of the King of Scots. Little Domesday covers East Anglia. Little Domesday contains many details missing from Great Domesday. Little Domesday, in all likelihood, gives us an idea of the original returns that William's men sent to Winchester where it is thought Samson, the king's clerk, later to be Bishop of Worcester, oversaw the work of compiling the returns into one volume.

One of the striking features of Domesday is the massive transfer of land from English to Norman (Norman, French, Breton, Flemish) hands. If we exclude the king, 30 lay magnates, 50 prelates and some 170 persons held the bulk of the land worth more than £100 per year. Of these 250 odd people, only two were now English!

The estimates of England's population at this time vary from 1.2 to 2 million. Most authorities agree that the Normans and their French, Breton and Flemish colleagues, at all levels of society, never numbered more than 25,000. This would indicate that from 1.3 to 2.1% of the population owned and controlled about 95% of all the land the Church did not hold.

The situation was not quite as bad as the above indicates as several of the incomers had married the widows of the previous English owners. Many also married the daughters and/or heiresses of the dead or dispossessed English owner. The Breton, Alan the Red, Earl of Richmond, abducted Gunhild, daughter of Edith Swan Neck and King Harold, from Wilton, where she was a nun. He then lived with her in a hand-fast marriage. By means such as this, the incomers provided continuity with the earlier owners and helped the folk over whom they had power accept them as their new lord. Any resultant Anglo-Norman children would further legitimize the new owners.

Whilst even to this day many noble families will echo the words of the chief justiciar in the twelfth century when he told Henry II that even if all documents perished: '..we should ourselves be its charters, for we are the feoffees from that conquest made at Battle', later generations of, 'Normans', took much pride in claiming descent from English forebears. An example of this is the ongoing dispute between the Wake, Howard (the family of the Dukes of Norfolk), and Harward families. All claim to have the best line of descent from the Norman Hugh de Evermue and his wife, the daughter of that great leader of the English resistance to the Norman Conquest - Hereward the Wake!

Another trend that Domesday shews is the reduction in the number of freemen (ceorls or sokemen in the Danelaw). The ceorls and sokemen had varying degrees of freedom, some owned their land, some paid rent (cash, kind or a mixture of both) only, some a mixture of rent and labour. This mixture of rent and labour could vary immensely. The Normans had difficulty in understanding the subtle social distinctions that existed between the free English villagers, their rights and obligations. This was often caused by the fact that free and unfree, ceorl and serf, lived alongside each other and often performed the same duties. All free men, irrespective of status however, owed fealty to a lord. Some had the right to chose their own lord, whilst others had no option but to owe fealty to the local thegn.

The reduction in those who had the right to bear arms, swear and bear witness, and change location and lord continued after Domesday. By late mediaeval times the majority of the rural population were, although nominally free, little more than serfs, that is bound to the land they lived on and thus sold as an asset when the land changed ownership. There was another class of people in pre-Conquest England, the theow, who were true slaves in that they were bound to their owner, not the land, but they seem to have been ignored by the Domesday writers. In the time of King Edward there had been around 25,000 slaves in England. By the time of Domesday the number of slaves had declined and this decline continued until by the late 12th century they disappeared as a class.

A non-physical asset of a landowner was the right of 'sake and soke', that is the right to hold a judicial court and retain the fines imposed. It is difficult to determine just how much the right of a landholder to have jurisdiction over his men and tenants had been granted by the kings of the English prior to 1066. Whilst we have charters and writs from the time of Knute and Edward the Confessor that grant sake and soke, there are indications that these were not recent innovations in regard to control and responsibility for the behaviour of a lord's following. The innovation comes where sake and soke was granted over a Hundred Moot where the lord was not the chief landholder. There he would find many belonging to the Hundred owed fealty to a lord other than himself, a matter that could lead to complications. The granting of sake and soke increased after the Conquest and as the number of free men with the right to chose their own lord decreased, the power of the local land owner to control the folk working or living on his holdings increased. It should be remembered, however, that

although a lord had jurisdiction over his folk, he was also responsible for their good behaviour and the Shire Reeve made twice-yearly visits to ensure that all who resided in a Hundred had given fealty to a lord. If a lord's man or tenant broke a serious law, or was a persistent offender the case would come before the Shire Moot and the man's lord held responsible and liable to pay any fine imposed or *angeld* (compensation) due.

A very visible sign of the Normanisation of England was the prolific building of castles. Before 1066 English earls and thegns lived in undefended properties with a palisade or fence designed to keep stock in and wild animals out. Before the Conquest the most visible sign of fortifications were the burghs. Mainly built during the times of Ælfred and his offspring, these were defended towns, with ditches, embankments and wooden palisades. They were defensible refuges for the folk during time of attack and uncertainty and had originally been built during the struggle against the Vikings and the re-conquest of the Danelaw. Castles had appeared in England during Edward the Confessor's time under the influence of the Normans he brought with him, but they were few and far between and either in, or just outside a burgh. The English castles and burghs were defensive structures. The castles built by the Normans were offensive.

To the Normans a castle meant a safe haven from the hostile local population and a protected base from which they could strike at will at those who displeased them. Such was their dependence on castles as part of their strategy to conquer and hold the land that they brought prefabricated ones with them in the invasion fleet. Once an area of land was taken a castle was built and manned, holding all within riding distance under their sway. These early castles were not the massive and complex stone castles that are such a tourist attraction today. The early Norman castles were of the 'motte and bailey' type.

A motte and bailey castle was built of wood. A ditch was dug and the earth removed used to make a mound or 'motte'. On the mound a tower (keep) was raised. On the inside lip of the ditch a palisade was erected and the enclosure or 'bailey' created used to house both men and horses. A motte and bailey castle was a disposable item. The Normans frequently abandoned such castles, whilst those erected at important sites were subsequently replaced by more extensive examples in stone. Investigations by retired military veterinary surgeon, R.H.A. Merlen, show that the castles in the Welsh Marcherlands, which are typical motte and bailey constructions, are all commensurate with the tillage and grazing land needed to maintain a garrison of 75 men at arms, 50 horses and the 16 oxen needed for ploughing.

The first castles were crude and temporary affairs that were erected as and when needed and abandoned or dismantled when no longer required. As the king's permission was required to build a castle, many that were pulled down were ones that had been erected without his permission! Although castles were initially built to protect the 'new' lord and his followers from the local folk, as the Normans over the years became 'English', the castle's role changed to being a place of protection and refuge for both the lord, his followers and the local folk.

Much is made by some authorities of the 'feudalisation' that followed the Conquest, where feudal service equals the holding of land in exchange for military service. This is a debatable point. Prior to 1066 the obligation of landholders to either serve or provide assistance to the local Fyrd (militia) or fleet was long established. A thegn was required to either attend the Fyrd himself, or provide a substitute. The fact that he was also required to provide 4 horses, two with saddles, would indicate that he would bring at least one mounted attendant with him. It is known from both poetry and legal documents that *ceorls* also served in the Fyrd, as

all men were required to have a lord, it inevitably leads to the conclusion that the ceorl would serve either alongside his lord or the lord's nominee. Under the Normans the thegn became a 'knight' (from the Old English cniht, or youth) and the mounted attendant called a squire; even the size of the land holding required to be a knight, 5 hides, was the same as that earlier required for the rank of thegn.

Although after 1066 everything changed, in many ways it was really just the same.