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Survey and making of Domesday

The survey was ordered by William the Conqueror at Christmas 1085 and was probably started around mid-January 1086. All England except the far north (still yet to come fully under Norman control) was divided into seven or more [circuits](#)^{az}. Each circuit was assigned three or four royal commissioners. Lists of manors and men for every county were compiled by the King's [tenants-in-chief](#)^{az} (his principal barons and churchmen), his sheriffs (the King's official in every county) and by other local officials. The 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle' relates 'there was no single [hide](#)^{az} nor a yard of land, nor indeed (it is a shame to relate but it seemed no shame to him [William] to do) one ox nor one cow nor one pig which was there left out, and not put down in his record'. (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, ed., D. Whitelock, pp.161-62)



The seven Domesday regions or 'circuits'; permission: Getmapping plc

[Editor. (Accessed Apr. 20, 2023). Survey and making of Domesday. The National Archives (UK). Source: <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/domesday/discover-domesday/making-of-domesday.htm>]

When all the information had been collected, the commissioners visited special sittings of the county courts to test the accuracy of the information provided. Jurors (half of them English, the other half French) were summoned from all the [hundreds](#)^{az} or [wapentakes](#)^{az} to verify the accuracy of the information under oath. The evidence would have been based on various existing sources, including [geld](#)^{az} records and church payment lists. Some of the information provided would have been oral testimony.

The commissioners asked the jurors several questions. A copy of a draft survey (the Ely Inquest) survives for Cambridgeshire and appears to list the questions asked. Because these questions were very similar in each circuit this brought a certain amount of consistency to the recorded answers. However, not all these questions have answers in every entry in Domesday, and the scribe who wrote down all the answers was not always consistent. Also, the way in which people were described in Domesday varied from one county to another. Terms such as [villan](#)^{az} are sometimes used to embrace a wide variety of people, and at other times used in a specific sense.

The questions asked can be summarised as follows:

1. What is the [manor](#)^{az} called?
2. Who held it in the time of King Edward (in 1066)?
3. Who holds it now (in 1086)?
4. How many hides are there?
5. How many [plough](#)^{az} (team)s on the [demesne](#)^{az} (local lord's own land) and among the men (rest of the village)?
6. How many [free men](#), [sokemen](#)^{az}, villans, [cotta\[ge\]rs](#)^{az}, [slaves](#)^{az}?
7. How much woodland, meadow, pasture, mills, fisheries?

8. How much has been added to or taken away from the manor?
9. How much was the whole worth (1066) and how much now (1086)?
10. How much had or has each freeman and each sokeman?


All the above questions to be recorded three times: in the time of King Edward (1066), when William gave it (often 1066), and now (1086).

And whether more can be had than is had (in other words, can the manor raise more tax revenue)?

Writing up the findings

When all the information had been verified and gathered together it was written down in Latin in regional returns or 'circuit summaries'. Before this could happen much had to be edited out. The remaining information was arranged into counties and then sorted, not by place, but by hierarchy of owner starting with the King. Under each owner the land was described by each hundred or wapentake and then by manor. The finished circuit summaries were the first stage in the writing-up process. There is some evidence that since the survey would decide once and for all who owned what, some tenants-in-chief exaggerated their holdings to ensure permanent title to that land.

It was always intended that there should be one final volume. In fact Domesday Book survives as two volumes. Each represents a different stage in the remarkable story of how Domesday was compiled. The smaller volume, Little Domesday, is an example of an earlier stage in the writing up process by which Great Domesday, the larger volume, was produced. For conservation reasons, Great Domesday is now rebound in two parts, and Little Domesday in three parts.

 Great and Little Domesday Books today bound in five parts: two (above) for Great Domesday and three (below) for Little Domesday; Catalogue reference: E 31/2/1-2 and E 31/1/1-3

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