

COUNTDOWN TO

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The girls of Waldegrove School: in search of the lost shopping precinct

NURSERYLANDS shopping precinct in Hampton Hill, West London is not mentioned in

William the Conqueror's Domesday Book of 1086; more surprisingly, it is also not to be found on the local authority's planning maps for the area. This was discovered by pupils from the Waldegrove School for Girls when they surveyed the area as part of their contribution to the BBC's Domesday Project — an ambitious rewriting of the original Domesday Book using BBC micros and interactive video disc technology, involving over 13,000 schools around Britain.

Fifty first-year girls from the school, which is in nearby Twickenham, went out in mini-buses one sunny day in July accompanied by three teachers and your intrepid AUreporter. The girls had been working on the Domesday Project on and off throughout the summer term, meticulously colouring in large-scale planning maps of the 12 square kilo-

metre area around the school according to land use — residential, industrial, farming, etc. But when it came to the Nurserylands area, the maps showed it as just that — nurserylands. The shopping precinct was only built five years ago and the maps had not been revised; to the girls this was a dramatic illustration of the usefulness of their data, which the BBC will eventually combine with that from all the other schools taking part and put onto a single video disc.

Outside a supermarket in Nurserylands precinct, groups of girls were interviewing shoppers, to work out the 'sphere of influence' of the precinct — how far people travel to shop there and what they come to buy. They also classified the shops there — food, specialist, department store, etc — and entered this information onto sketch maps of the precinct. Back at school the information was typed into BBC micros using the Domesday discs supplied by

the BBC. By the end of term the children will have 20 pages of text on disc, plus some 35mm slide photographs to illustrate the area, ready to send to the BBC.

Earlier in the day the girls had been counting vehicles on the Uxbridge Road as part of a traffic survey: this busy road links the M3 and M4 motorways and is the subject of many local complaints. By counting the numbers and types of vehicles using the road at different times during the day, the girls were collecting data which has a real use instead of information for a sterile school project. In fact, the school intends to repeat the survey in subsequent years, to see if there is any reduction in traffic when the M25 orbital motorway is completed.

The Waldegrove School is a secondary school in a predominantly residential suburban area and within its 12 square kilometre Domesday block are nine primary schools. The school gave

DOMESDAY

Geoff Nairn brings you up to date on the BBC's project

each of these a one square kilometre block to map and some of the more interesting surveys: one school was let loose in Hampton Court counting trees, while others conducted social surveys into television viewing habits and fashion. The Waldegrove pupils took what was left and had to be content with surveying a rather boring area composed almost entirely of suburban housing — geography teacher Pauline

nearby to share the workload, a well-equipped computer room (12 networked BBC micros plus another 12 elsewhere), enthusiastic staff prepared to put time into preparation, a head willing to reorganise the timetable to fit in field trips, and children interested in the project. In other parts of the country things haven't been quite as easy.

In North Wales, for example, a row broke out when the BBC insisted that all the text entered onto the Domesday discs must be in English, despite the fact that some local education authorities have a bilingual policy — English and Welsh. Charles Davies, Domesday co-ordinator for Clwyd, insisted that Welsh should be allowed. He said: 'There's no way you can ask children whose first language is Welsh to write about their local area in a foreign language.'

The original Domesday Book only covered England and it must have been tempting for the BBC to exclude the Welsh once again, but the BBC compromised and allowed each Welsh school 10 pages in Welsh and 10 pages of English translation. To some this still smacks of discrimination, for English schools are allowed 20 pages of text in their native language, and consequently a few Welsh schools are boycotting the Project. Charles Davies also criticised the BBC for not providing large-scale maps of the Domesday blocks, as some schools were unable to get local authority planning maps.

Ysgol Penbarras is a Welsh-speaking primary school with 82 children in Ruthin, Clwyd — all but a couple of the seven schools in the Ruthin area teach in Welsh. The school's headmaster, Alun Edwards, also thought the BBC's decision on Welsh pages rather unfair, but his main criticism was about the 12 square kilometre block his school had been given. For 11 out of the 12 square kilometres — the ones which didn't include the town of Ruthin — his pupils had not been able to mark down even one of the 67 amenities mentioned in the Domesday Project amenity check list (shops, factories, schools, etc). Mr Edwards felt that the Domesday survey was biased in favour of urban areas, and sparsely populated rural areas such as that around Ruthin 'scored' badly. For the village of Llanbedr Dyffryn Clwyd, for example, his pupils

could only record a pub and a post office.

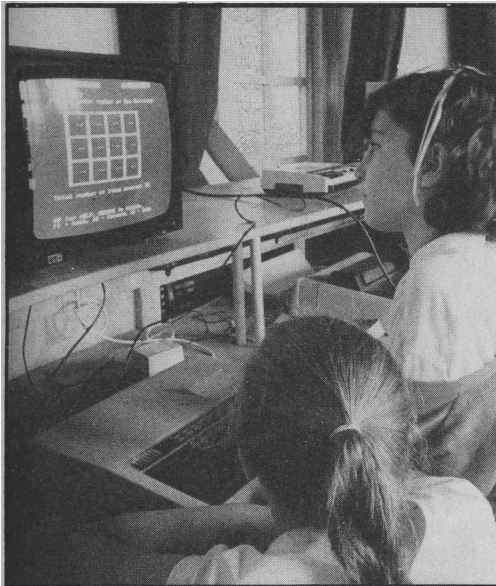
Another problem the school faced was trying to identify the border of its Domesday block when out in the fields, and Alun Edwards would have liked to have had until Christmas to collect the data, because visiting the countryside in a mini-bus was proving very time-consuming. Overall, however, he thought the project worthwhile — the pupils had learnt about different sorts of land cover and had realised just how good the dairy farming land was in their area.

Meanwhile in Scotland the Fife region boasted it had completed all its Domesday surveys by the end of June. Jim Birney, Curriculum Development Officer for Fife, attributed this enthusiasm to the variety of the area. He said 'The children were stimulated to find out about their environment. We've got everything; urban deprivation, new electronics industries, coal mines in the west, hill sheep-farming in the east and fishing on the coast. Fieldwork is quite common with schools in the region and the Domesday Project fits in well.'

The Benarty primary school visited the Lochore area of central Fife which consists of derelict open cast mines and was recently turned into a country park. Another school toured the Fortronics electronics factory as part of its Domesday survey — and came away with free samples.

Further north, in the Grampian region, some schools have been handicapped by their LEA's decision to plump for Sinclair Spectrum computers — the Domesday Project does not support these. To produce their Domesday pages they have had to borrow BBC micros from other schools.

It's too early to say just how successful the Domesday Project has been, and a lot depends on how comprehensive the coverage proves to be: in sparsely populated Northumberland, for example, coverage is quite patchy. Inevitably there have been problems, and it remains to be seen whether the resultant Domesday video discs find any commercial application. Nevertheless, the Project is one of the most innovative and ambitious attempts to take computers out of the classroom and into the real world.



Collected data is recorded back in the classroom

Cox was somewhat envious of schools in the wilder parts of Britain.

Nevertheless, the staff at the Waldegrove School were enthusiastic about the Domesday Project and were going to repeat it as a 'stand alone' school project next year. Pauline Cox said: 'It's not just an historical land survey, it's more a contemporary record of Britain in the 1980s'.

The children were equally enthusiastic. Tamsin Honeybourne, aged 12, saw the Project as 'rewriting the Domesday Book', and until that year she had not used a computer — now she goes along to the school's lunchtime computer club. Joanna Severs, also aged 12, hoped that the results of the Project might be used 'to improve the environment'.

Schools such as Waldegrove School are inevitably the ones to benefit most from something like the Domesday Project: they have a physically undemanding area to survey, other schools