DOMESDAY PLUS 900

William I's great survey, completed in 1086, inspires a massive project nine centuries later. Tony Quinn reports

THE BBC is to give the British people the chance to write a modern, video disc version of William the Conqueror's Domesday Book to celebrate its 900th anniversary in 1986 — with the help of BBC micros in schools. The resources and expertise of several of the Corporation's departments and the Open University are to be used, and schools will be offered the chance to collate the information.

But Peter Armstrong, Editor of the Domesday Project and the man who thought of the idea, stresses that he wants to involve everyone. 'We hope to mobilise communities. Everyone will have the chance to contribute something,' he says, 'with the schools acting as a focus and providing the computer.' Parents and local societies can help collect data and then there are 80,000 pictures to be taken for the disc.

The BBC will be writing to all 30,000 schools in Britain to ask them whether they want to participate in collecting facts during the summer term next year. It is estimated that 10,000 schools will be needed to make the scheme work, which would involve about a million children. A similar project was undertaken in the 1950s by Dudley Stamp, and it is estimated that it took him 16 years: the BBC, with the aid of computers, aims to do more in just two.

To those schools which decide to participate the BBC will allocate a local area 12 kilometres square based on Ordnance Survey maps. With the maps will come a set of discs containing a database questionnaire asking about the geography, amenities and land use in the area. As well as this, they will be asked to write about the area in their own words. Armstrong stresses that they will be able to add anything and comment on the issues affecting them, as long as it is publishable!

The school will be the centre of the project, as only by computerising the information will the idea be practical. Once the schools have sent in the discs the information will be stored on a mainframe computer. This 'people's database' will be put on one interactive video disc complete with pictures of the places and detailed Ordnance Survey maps. On another disc will be facts and figures from the census and other national databases held by the Government and the BBC.

The sheer scale of the project takes some reckoning: two laser discs each holding two gigabytes – enough for half a million text pages and 80,000 pictures (including satellite shots), plus the software to manipulate the information and produce maps, bar charts and other graphics. All the maps and data will be indexed. There is no sound on the discs as this would require moving pictures; still frames make far better use of the space on the disc.

But the project is not going to be merely a unique data-gathering exercise: the BBC and Philips, who will be producing the video disc hardware, aim to establish a world standard for laser discs. The hardware will run on other micros, although the actual Domesday (Doomsday) disc software will be written for the BBC micro. Acorn is writing the software and building the final stage interface for the video disc.

Domesday should help the laser technology overcome the 'chicken and egg' situation whereby the hardware won't sell because there's no software, and no-one will write any software because there aren't enough people with the hardware to run it. The BBC's project, involving the Department of Trade and Industry, Philips and Acorn, will not just create the technology; it will demonstrate its potential and show how it can be used. Elsewhere within the BBC, producers are talking about selling TV programmes on video disc.

The Domesday disc truly is, as Armstrong describes it, 'a portrait in data and pictures of Britain and the British, containing twice as much information as a complete set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.*

Armstrong came up with the idea in May and presented it to the BBC in September – the go-ahead was given only at the end of October. When the video discs and hardware are released in 1986, they will be accompanied by a major TV documentary series following the development of Britain from the Domesday Book to its laser-disc successor. The presenter will be historian Michael Wood, recently seen on the BBC's *River Journeyseries.*

A special editorial board of academics has been set up to decide

Historian Michael Wood, who in 1986 will present a major TV documentary series on Britain since the Conquest when the video disc Domesday is launched, leafs through the original version. In preparation for the series the Domesday Book of 1086, in the National Archive, will be withdrawn from public access to undergo cleaning and restoration

exactly what should go on the discs, how the questions will be asked and how the information should be presented. The variety of information to choose from is enormous – everything from tree counts to folk music – and the board's members will have to narrow it down. The data will be held on a form on the discs so that it can be accessed by other software and used in educational and other programs.

The project is the biggest the BBC has ever undertaken, costing some £2 million and employing about 50 people just to produce the discs. It is a bold idea which Peter Armstrong believes only Britain, with its network of BBC micros in schools, could do and that only the resources of the BBC itself could support. 'The idea sold itself

fairly quickly,' says Armstrong, 'as we realised the tremendous educational opportunity it presented.' It will also demonstrate the possibilities of a technology that many people in the BBC believe will revolutionise education, he adds.

It is seen as an ideal follow-up to the Computer Literacy Project. John Radcliffe, who started the project and has now moved on to the Open University, is heavily committed to Domesday and will be co-ordinating the OU's involvement.'

After updating the Domesday Book once, will the BBC do it again and update the video in, say, 20 years? Armstrong wants to get this one out of the way first. He says: 'There is a temptation to update, but we don't know.'