

# **Domesday Book, Old English Charters and the Institution's Library: studying eleventh-century England (Saturday Snippets, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2017)**

*By Dr Bob Higham*

Development of the Institution's library from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards coincided with a period of great interest in the primary sources for medieval English history. This interest continued, unabated, and the library went on to acquire many crucial publications in this field.

This brief talk draws attention to some items on our shelves, published between the 1780s and our own day, containing the texts of Domesday Book and of Old English charters or containing scholarly discussions of those sources and what they reveal about late Saxon and early Norman England. To these printed items can now be added internet resources which can be consulted from desks in our – indeed in any – library amidst the published output of more than two centuries. Past, present and future generations of readers – both professional and amateur – are thus connected.

What follows is based on my own experience and some recent “Googling”. It shows - using some published sources relating to my own research interests in the late Saxon and Norman period -

- a) how materials gathered at the Institution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century laid the foundations for 20<sup>th</sup> century developments in this field and -
- b) how these materials are still relevant to scholarship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century era of on-line access

And thus, hopefully, it will discourage notions of “old therefore disposable” and “recent therefore relevant” that may linger in some minds; as well as emphasise the continuity in intellectual life which libraries such as the Institution's represent; at the same time, illustrate how over the past two centuries, we have moved from an era of expensive printed volumes available to the few, to one of cheaper published volumes available to the many and, now, into growing internet resources.

## **A. DOMESDAY BOOK**

The late 18<sup>th</sup> century a period of very active antiquarian endeavour (the Library has, for example, volumes of the Society of Antiquaries' *Archaeologia*, from its first publication in the 1770s). King George III, was a patron of learning in many fields. He supported the publication (in 1783) of the Exchequer and Little Domesday texts (Latin only) in two volumes prepared by Abraham Farley.

*Abraham Farley (1712-1791) was a civil servant, eventually deputy Chamberlain of the Exchequer, in whose custody (at Westminster Abbey) the Domesday Book lay.*

Following publication of the two volumes in 1783 -

- (a) a parliamentary commission (1800) advised the better preservation and use of public records and
- (b) authorization (1806) by the king to pursue these aims was forthcoming
- (c) there was agreement by the commission (1813) to concentrate on Domesday Book, the work being directed by Sir Henry Ellis

The result was publication in 1816 of two further volumes, comprising related texts (including the Exon Domesday preserved at Exeter Cathedral) and a series of Indices and Commentaries.

*Henry Ellis (1777 – 1869) worked at the Bodleian Library and then at the British Museum. He was also co-editor of an edition of Dugdale's Monasticon and for some years Director of the Society of Antiquaries of London. Note that it was Ralph Barnes, Clerk to Exeter Cathedral Chapter, who carried out the actual transcription of Exon Domesday which appeared in the 1816 edition.*

These volumes were the standard source for Domesday data in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (in some counties local material was also published separately: in Devon, by various authors who wrote two volumes – *The Devonshire Domesday Book and Geld Inquest* - around 1890, published by the Devonshire Association). Accessibility to Domesday data changed early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the setting up (in 1899) of the Victoria County History series. A standard element in the first volume for each county was an English version of the Domesday text and a chapter explaining the county's society as revealed by the text. The Devon volume was published in 1906. The VCH editor of this volume was William Page and the Domesday material was produced by Oswald J. Reichel.

*Reichel (1840-1923) was an Anglican clergyman whose church career was marked by scandal and conflict. In 1880 he acquired the 16-sided house called La Ronde (Lympstone) and there devoted himself, in retirement, to research. He was a prolific local medieval historian who also wrote on medieval canon law. He was an important figure in the emergence of the Devon and Cornwall Record Society and the development of the Devonshire Association.*

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the VCH texts of Domesday Book were the most accessible sources for most readers. The 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw publication of a large quantity of secondary literature aimed at analysis of the purpose, methods and results of Domesday Book. Some of this, too, is represented in the Institution's library; for example – to choose two items widely separated in date - F.W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond* (1897) and R. Welldon Finn, *Liber Exoniensis* (1964).

*Maitland (1850-1906) was first a lawyer and from 1888, Downing Professor of Law at Cambridge, where he was a historian of law and related matters.*

*Welldon Finn was (c. 1900 – c. 1972) was for a time based at University College, London, but was an independent researcher and writer for much of his life.*

From the 1960s, readers benefited from the Cambridge University Press project, the *Domesday Geography* series of county volumes (eds. H.C. Darby *et alii*; maps by G.R. Versey). These books presented Domesday data in map form, especially emphasising their importance in landscape, social and economic history. *The Domesday Geography of South-West England* appeared in 1967, written not only by Darby and Welldon Finn but also by William Ravenhill.

*H.C. Darby (1909-1992) was an historical geographer and Professor of Geography at Cambridge. He master-minded the whole Domesday Geography regional series.*

*William Ravenhill (1919-1995) was Professor of Geography at Exeter University, with particular interests in historical geography and history of cartography; also active in archaeological circles.*

In the mid-1980s, there was much celebration of the 900<sup>th</sup> Domesday centenary (Domesday Book was compiled 1085-1087). This led to various publication projects. Two crucial ones, which are represented in the Institution's library (and there were others) were -

a) a county-based series published by Phillimore (Chichester) under the general editorship of John Morris. For each county the Latin text was accompanied by an English translation and explanatory notes. It was a great achievement. All interested in Domesday studies could have one on the shelf. Devon was published in two volumes (1985) with text and notes by Frank and Caroline Thorn.

*Frank and (the late) Caroline Thorn produced several of the Phillimore county studies. They were drawn into the project by John Morris. Frank developed great expertise in identifying and mapping all the names occurring in the text. They subsequently worked on a Hull University project, producing an electronic and up-dated version of the Phillimore data.*

b) a county-based series published by Alecto Historical Editions (London) comprising for each county: a volume of essays (on England generally); a volume of photographically-reproduced original DB county text with maps; and a third volume containing county-based essays and an English translation of the DB text. For Devon, these volumes appeared between 1987 and 1991. The texts, translations and commentaries were by Frank and Caroline Thorn, and Frank Barlow.

*Frank Barlow (1911 – 2009) was Professor of History at Exeter University. As well as Domesday matters, he wrote extensively on medieval church history and royal biography.*

As new information technology was also developing in the 1980s, Domesday Book became a focus for research projects aimed at making the Domesday texts accessible electronically. As available software became more sophisticated, tools for electronic analysis of Domesday data also emerged. Development of on-line resources – in the historical world generally – has proceeded rapidly. For example, in the field of Domesday studies -

The project at Hull University was a pioneer in this field. See <http://www.domesdaybook.net>

The National Archives (Kew, home to Exchequer and Little Domesday) features DB prominently on its website and offers explanatory material. See <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/domesday/>

PASE (the Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England) – an on-line project covering early English source material comprehensively – has a Domesday section. See <http://domesday.pase.ac.uk/>

Finally, there is the Exon Domesday Project (King's College, London University in conjunction with Exeter Cathedral, in whose archives the Exon text resides). The Exon text has been studied by a team of researchers for the past three years, following dismantling of the binding which was damaging the manuscript. The Project illuminates many aspects of the Domesday survey's methods, those involved in compiling it, those who wrote the texts and much else. The results of the Project – which finishes in the autumn of 2017 - will be put in the public domain mainly in on-line form.

A sample web-page is currently available via <http://www.exondomesday.ac.uk>

*In addition to the Cathedral Archive and Library staff (Ann Barwood, Ellie Jones, Peter Thomas, Stuart McWilliam), some of the Exon Domesday Project team are also Devon-connected: especially Julia Crick (formerly of Exeter University, now Professor of Palaeography and Manuscript Studies at King's College, London) and Frank Thorn (who edited the Phillimore Devon volumes and contributed to the Alecto edition for Devon).*

This project is unconnected with our Institution. But readers in the Institution Library will soon be able to follow up this latest aspect of Domesday studies from a screen on a desk, only a few feet away from shelves bearing the Domesday volumes published in 1783 and 1816. Sitting amongst copies of the printed books which started scholarly Domesday studies more than two centuries ago, a library reader will also have access to the latest research tool for investigating 11<sup>th</sup> century Devon.

## B. ANGLO-SAXON CHARTERS

It was not only Domesday Book to which early scholars gave attention in exploring early English history. It was also known that – scattered in many depositories - there were hundreds of charters which illuminated individuals, royal government, church institutions, land-ownership and estates. Sometimes these charters survive as single sheets, but often only as copied into cartularies.

Crucial in making such materials available to the academic world was John Kemble's six-volume *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici* (1839 – 1848).

*Kemble (1807-1857) was from the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century family of actors. He explored careers in the Church and Law but settled on the study of Old English literature and related matters whose pursuit he promoted (first, in editing of the poem Beowulf in 1833) at Cambridge University.*

His *Codex* was a seminal work, but professional readers who knew some of the materials at first hand noted many omissions and inaccuracies. These defects inspired an even more crucial project -

Walter de Gray Birch's *Cartularium Saxonicum: a Collection of Charters relating to Anglo-Saxon History* (which originally appeared in 32 instalments, but then published in 3 volumes, 1885-1893).

*Birch (1842-1924) studied at Cambridge and worked in the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum from 1864-1902. He edited many other early sources in addition to charters.*

Birch's texts were the essential resource for all for many decades, both as a general coverage and the starting point for those who had reason to consult the original manuscripts. Particular studies also benefitted from publication of charters in local journals (including the Transactions of the Devonshire Association) as well as from a series of Occasional Papers published by the Department of Local History at Leicester University, some of which related to charters. These included H.P.R. Finberg's *The Early Charters of Devon and Cornwall* (No. 2; 1953) and a supplement to this in W.G. Hoskins's *The Westward Expansion of Wessex* (No. 13; 1960).

*H.P.R. Finberg (1900-1974) was an agrarian historian and analyst of early charters. He was Head of the Department of Local History at Leicester University and had south-western interests.*

*W.G. Hoskins (1908-1992) was born and educated in Exeter (University College of the South West). He was also Head of the Department of Local History at Leicester University. He retained a strong south-western involvement, including much effort at our Institution, and published a great deal on the history of Exeter and Devon (eg. Devonshire Studies, with H.P.R. Finberg).*

A hugely important development was the publication of Peter Sawyer's *Anglo-Saxon Charters. An Annotated List and Bibliography* (1968). This was the most comprehensive listing yet achieved, identifying the texts in single sheet manuscripts and in cartularies, giving dates, with details of who issued them and to whom, and much else.

*Peter Sawyer (b. 1928) taught medieval studies at various universities and was a notable scholar of the viking period. He was Professor of History at Leeds, from where he retired to Sweden.*

A feature of many (Latin) charters is their description (in Old English) of the boundaries of the estates concerned. These can be related to features in our present landscapes, as was demonstrated for the south west in Della Hooke's *Pre-Conquest Charter-Bounds of Devon and Cornwall* (1994).

*Della Hooke is a well-known charter-bounds expert; at Birmingham university for many years.*

In the age of information technology, a logical extension (created at King's College, London, from 2007 onwards) of Peter Sawyer's (1968) printed volume was an electronic version - referred to as "ESawyer" - giving on-line access to an up-dated Sawyer's List and also (often) to the texts themselves. See <http://www.esawyer.org.uk>

Note also that the name of John Kemble is commemorated in a Cambridge University website which provides a guide to Anglo-Saxon charters, medieval cartularies and many related matters.

See <http://www.kemble.asnc.cam.ac.uk>

Thus, as with Domesday studies, library users can study on-line charter texts while working only a few feet away from shelves bearing some of the 19<sup>th</sup> century books which launched their study.

Also, as with Domesday studies, users of our library are only yards away from the Cathedral Archive and Library: this is not only home to Exon Domesday but also to a rich collection of 11<sup>th</sup> century charters, many drawn up for Leofric, first bishop of Exeter (died in 1072). These include a charter drawn up to record and describe his installation at Exeter by Edward the Confessor in 1050.

## **CONCLUSION**

We have been looking at two areas of specialist publications for specialist readers. But the contents of primary sources and academic secondary literature of the sorts described here are produced not only by academic writers for academic readers. They are also employed by academic writers who place this data in wider context, to illuminate history more generally for a broader-based reading audience. Our Library's shelves contain several examples, including --

a) The project created by Exeter University's Centre for South-Western Historical Studies published as Roger Kain and William Ravenhill (eds), *Historical Atlas of South West England* (1999; pages 88-109 for deployment of Domesday material and Anglo-Saxon charters). Note that the University's Centre was based partly on its campus and partly here at the Institution: a happy collaboration.

*Roger Kain is an historical geographer and was Professor of Geography at Exeter University, before moving to London University.*

b) R.A. Higham, *Making Anglo-Saxon Devon* (2008). The Mint Press (Exeter) asked me to write a short book on Anglo-Saxon Devon. But because there was very little in print of a general nature to act as a model, it proved – oddly - easier to write a much longer book drawing on both primary and secondary material, injected with my own ideas and observations. The whole print-run was sold, showing the public interest in what might seem, at first sight, a fairly unapproachable subject.

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This presentation illustrates one of the (many) great values of a Library such as ours. The theme is **CONNECTION**. Its contents can connect past, present and future generations of readers. And its contents – ranging from editions of primary sources and critical studies of them, to books deploying such material but aimed at wider audiences - can cater equally for many types of user, both professional and amateur. Most of these materials are also available in Exeter University's library, but scattered in various locations and sometimes (in the case of the older items) in the Special Collections section. In our Institution, they sit on open shelves, available to all in a small space.