Domesday Book, 1086

Everyone has heard of Domesday Book but not many know anything about it.

- what is it?
- who made it?
- where is it?
- what is its value?
Domesday Book, 1086

the oldest and most famous English public record
Domesday Book

The ancient bindings
Domesday Book

Phillimore: the first modern edition
At his Christmas court in 1085, William the Conqueror ordered the Domesday Inquest after ‘very deep conversation with his council about this land, how it was occupied, or with which men ... and how much land each man had ... and how much it was worth’

*(Anglo-Saxon Chronicle)*
The Domesday Inquest was begun and completed in 1086.
From the earliest times, Domesday Book was kept in the Royal Treasury with the king's most valuable possessions.

Today it is in the Public Record Office.
Domesday Book is superbly organised for the business of government

The major taxpayers of Middlesex, indexed for quick reference
Reputation of Domesday Book

There have been some curious notions about its contents. It has been cited as:

• The Last Judgement
• a guarantee of peasant freedom
• a record of royal tyranny
• evidence of English dominion of the seas
• a repertory of colourful tales
Doomsday - meaning Day of Judgement - was so named 'because its decisions, like those of the Last Judgement, are unalterable' (Dialogue of the Exchequer, 1177)
In the fourteenth century, many peasants claimed their freedom on the basis of Domesday Book appeals to Domesday Book from villages in 6 southern counties.
The villagers of Benson claimed their freedom as privileged tenants on royal land.

*Terra Regis* is the land of the king in Oxfordshire.
In the seventeenth century, Domesday Book was seen as evidence of the Norman Yoke, the root of royal absolutism and tyranny.
Samuel Pepys sought evidence of English ‘dominion of the sea’ in Domesday Book.
The reputation of Domesday Book reached even the rural backwaters of the Mississippi valley where, 800 years later, Huck Finn told the tale of Henry VIII and his many wives recorded there.
According to Huck, Henry VIII:

‘used to marry a new wife every day, and chop of her head next morning. And he made every one of them tell him a tale every night; and he kept that up until he had hogg'd 1001 tales that way; and then he put them all in a book’

‘and called it Domesday Book, which was a good name’
The truth was more mundane. The Conqueror wanted Domesday Book to record:

‘how much land every landowner had and ... how much money it was worth ... omitting not one ox, nor one pig’

(Anglo-Saxon Chronicle)
Every ox and every cow and every pig is an understatement. In one entry Domesday Book recorded:

‘there is half an ox’
Not ‘a monstrous birth

This is simply how Domesday Book indicates shared ownership: half cows, half pigs, half mills, - even half peasants - are recorded.
Fame, and ‘a good name’, have attracted many imitators

- William Rufus
- Oliver Cromwell
- Lloyd George
- BBC
- Gordon Brown
King William Rufus, instigated by an ‘evil advisor’, produced a new Domesday

‘with the king's consent he measured all the ploughlands, which in English are called hides, with a rope, and made a record of them; ... he reduced their size and cut back the fields of the peasants to increase the royal taxes. So ... he brutally oppressed the king's helpless and faithful subjects, impoverished them by confiscations, and reduced them from comfortable prosperity to the verge of starvation’

(Ordericus Vitalis)
On the basis of this story William Rufus - rather than his father, William the Conqueror - has been credited with the making of Great Domesday by some historians.
Sources on the Crown lands of Charles I have been called a ‘Domesday of Crown Lands’, or ‘Oliver Cromwell's surveys’
In 1910, Chancellor Lloyd George ordered a New Domesday survey. But he was compelled to abandon the effort by opposition from the landed interest. No new Domesday Book was compiled, and many of the records of the survey have since been dispersed and lost.
In 1986, on the 900th anniversary of the Domesday Inquest, the BBC undertook a new Domesday survey.
In 1997 Chancellor Gordon Brown ordered a Register of National Assets, dubbed *Domesday Book II* by the press. There was resistance from other branches of government. After more than four years, no publication has occurred.
Thank you for watching.