

History

Lesson 1 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

# Medieval Lives in Domesday Book

Enquiry: Which sources reveal the most about medieval peasants?

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# What was Domesday Book?

Domesday Book is the name given to the record of an enormous survey that took place across England in 1086. King William I (also known as William the Conqueror) wanted to know precisely how much each part of the country was worth. Some historians think the main reason for this was so he knew how much money he could collect from the English in taxes. Others think that William ordered Domesday Book to be made because he wanted to show how powerful he was as a king. However, many historians agree that we cannot be certain precisely why Domesday Book was made.

We do know that Domesday is a huge record of 13,418 places, and therefore a really interesting source for learning about medieval lives.



# What can Domesday Book tell us about peasants?

It is clear from studying Domesday Book that most settlements in England were organised around fields for growing crops and keeping animals. There are hundreds of thousands of 'villagers' listed in Domesday, which suggests that a typical peasant's life would be spent working in agriculture in a small community of other peasants.

Domesday also demonstrates some hazards of medieval life. Lots of peasants lived near 'meadows', which refers to land recorded in Domesday that is likely to flood and therefore not suitable for growing crops. In cases where villages had been destroyed by raiding armies, or even by King William's forces in an attempt to demonstrate control, the record uses the word 'waste' to show there is nothing of value. Near Hastings, fifteen separate villages were recorded as 'waste'.



# What can Domesday Book not tell us about peasants?

Despite being an incredible overview of the lives of ordinary people in England, there are certain things that Domesday cannot tell us. Women were rarely recorded in the survey because they rarely owned land, so it is difficult to learn precise details about women's lives.

Domesday was written at speed in abbreviated Latin, and it is very impressive that it was completed in just a few months. However, it does not record what land, houses, or people actually looked like, which can make it difficult to know specific details about what materials were available, how medieval people designed their homes, or even what clothes they wore. We would need to examine other sources in order to find out more about how the medieval world looked.



# Glossary

**Agriculture:** the system of farming, growing crops, keeping animals.

**Latin:** the ancient language used in medieval England for the most important documents. It was not understood by most peasants.

**Source:** a (primary) source is something that survives from the past that historians use as information. Examples include documents (letters, tax records) and physical objects (a sword, bones in the ground, a ruined church).



# Comprehension Questions

1. Who ordered Domesday Book to be made?
2. What was one *possible* reason why Domesday Book was written?
3. According to Domesday Book, in what type of settlements did the vast majority of ordinary people in medieval England live?
4. Describe at least one difficult feature of peasants' lives that Domesday contains.
5. What can Domesday *not* reveal about peasants' lives?

