

Digital Domesday Book lasts 15 years, not 1,000

by Robin McKie
and Vanessa Thorpe

IT WAS meant to be a showcase for Britain's electronic prowess – a computer-based, multimedia version of the Domesday Book. But 16 years after it was created, the £2.5 million BBC Domesday Project has achieved an unexpected and unwelcome status: it is now unreadable.

The special computers developed to play the 12in video discs of text, photographs, maps and archive footage of British life are – quite simply – obsolete.

As a result, no one can access the reams of project information – equivalent to several sets of encyclopaedias – that were assembled about the state of the nation in 1986. By contrast, the original Domesday Book – an inventory of eleventh-century England compiled in 1086 by Norman monks – is in fine condition in the Public

Record Office, Kew, and can be accessed by anyone who can read and has the right credentials. 'It is ironic, but the 15-year-old version is unreadable, while the ancient one is still perfectly usable,' said computer expert Paul Wheatley. 'We're lucky Shakespeare didn't write on an old PC.'

Nor is the problem a new one. A crisis in digital preservation now afflicts all developed countries. Databases recorded in old computer formats can no longer be accessed on new generation machines, while magnetic storage tapes and discs have physically decayed, ruining precious databases.

For millennia, men and women have used paper to create everything from the Dead Sea Scrolls to Neville Chamberlain's 'piece of paper from Herr Hitler'. In the past few decades, computers, scanners, cassettes, videos, CDs, minidisks and floppy

disks have been used to replace the written word. Yet in just a few short years these digital versions have started to degrade.

The space agency Nasa has already lost digital records sent back by its early probes, and in 1995 the US government came close to losing a vast chunk of national census data, thanks to the obsolescence of its data retrieval technology.

Betamax video players, 8in and 5in computer disks, and eight-track music cartridges have all become redundant, making it impossible to access records stored on them. Data stored on the 3in disks used in the pioneering Amstrad word-processor is now equally inaccessible.

Our digital heritage – only a few decades old – is already endangered, as broadcaster Loyd Grossman pointed out last week. 'Last year marked the 30th anniversary of email, but it is salutary that we do

not have the first email message and no knowledge of its contents,' he said at the launch of the Digital Preservation Coalition. Saving Domesday Project is viewed as one of the coalition's top priorities.

It was to be the mother of all time capsules, filled with images and sounds defining life in Britain in 1986 – when hill farmers struggled to cope with Chernobyl nuclear fallout, Maradona beat England

with the 'hand of God', and Michael Heseltine resigned from the Cabinet over the Westland affair.

Thousands of schoolchildren helped record festivals, events and details of ordinary life, which were stored on 12-inch laser discs.

They contained more than 250,000 place names, 25,000 maps, 50,000 pictures, 3,000 data sets, 60 minutes of moving pictures, and an unknown number of words. Around a million people contributed. The trouble was that the discs could only be viewed using a special BBC Micro computer, which cost £5,000 to buy. Few were purchased, and only a handful are left in existence. 'The information on this incredible historical object will soon disappear forever,' Grossman said last week.

In a bid to rescue the project, Paul Wheatley has begun work on Camileon, a program aimed at recovering

the data on the Domesday discs. 'We have got a couple of rather scratchy pairs of discs, and we are confident we will eventually be able to read all their images, maps and text,' he said. 'Unfortunately, we don't know what we will do after that. We could store the data on desktop computers – but they are likely to become redundant in a few years.'

'That means we have to find a way to emulate this data, in other words to turn into a form that can be used no matter what is the computer format of the future. That is the real goal of this project.'

It won't be an easy task. Jeff Rothenberg of the Rand Corporation, one of the world's experts on data preservation, points out: 'There is currently no demonstrably viable technical solution to this problem; yet if it is not solved, our increasingly digital heritage is in grave risk of being lost.'



And his children Kept coming year by year till there were eight, And Josef was but ten. And then he died And left this helpless family, and the boy Sold papers on the street, ten years of age, The widow washed. And first he sold the _Times_ And helped to spread the doctrines of the _Times_ Of ordered liberty and epicene Reforms of this or that. But when the _Star_ With millions back of it broke in the field He changed and sold the _Star_, too bad for him-- Discovered somethingÂ At last He broke this moment's musing and spoke up: "Your case appeals to me. You may step out, And wait till I prepare the papers, then I'll have a check made for a thousand dollars." Widow Fortelka rose up and took The crucifix she wore and kissed it, wept And left the room. "Digital Domesday Book Lasts 15 Years Not 1000." The Observer, March 2, 2002. Video (in-class): The Making of the Renaissance Book.Â McDermott, Joseph P. "The Making of an Imprint in China, 1000â€"1800." In A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China. Hong Kong University Press, 2006, pp. 9â€"42. (notes 196â€"211). Digital Domesday Book lasts 15 years not 1000. R Mckie. V Thorpe. Commodore 64 Programmerâ€™s Reference Manual. Commodore Business Machines. Inc. A new approach to the functional design of a digital computer, Papers presented at the.Â After three years' service the new kiln furniture's performance is assessed by comparison with the former â€œInconelâ€ firing basket and stainless-steel wire gauze equipment. Read more. Article. Book Review:Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum: Part XLIX: Late-Babylonia January 1971 Â· Journal of Near Eastern Studies. Robert D. Biggs. Read more.

The Domesday Book is the record of the great survey of much of England, and parts of Wales, completed in 1086, done for William I of England, or William the Conqueror. The Domesday Book (also known as Domesday, or Book of Winchester) was a record of all taxable land in England, together with such information as would indicate its worth. As the scribes went round England, they were protected by William's armed men. Each group was led by a Royal Commissioner, who took a list of standard questions. "Digital Domesday Book lasts 15 years not 1000". The Guardian. Guardian Media Group. 25 years on, in May 2011, the BBC will release around 25,000 photos of British life and landscapes and approximately 150,000 pages of accompanying text, onto the Domesday Reloaded website. "Dennett, Melita (5 April 2011). "BBC Domesday reloaded: Call for community contributors". The digital version of the Domesday Book also sheds light on how land was passed from Saxon landowners to the new Norman nobility in the years after the Battle of Hastings. All users have to do is type in the name of the area they wish to learn about and the findings will be presented in map or table form. "As you can imagine, constructing this database has been quite an exercise, but it is a phenomenally useful research tool. Essentially, it's now possible for anyone to do in a few seconds what it has taken scholars weeks to achieve in the past". The Domesday Book was commissioned by William the Conqueror. It was a gigantic survey of every town and village in England and described in detail which barons owned which tracts of land.