

1086: Axminster at the Time of the Domesday Book

Introduction and Sources

The Domesday Book was drawn up in 1086 following a national survey of land based on local hearings and inquiries. Its purpose was to enable William the Conqueror and his Norman successors to understand more clearly the value of their land holdings, and therefore how much money they could hope to raise via taxation.

In the case of Devon we have both the entries in the main Domesday Book, and the more detailed returns contained in the 'Exon Domesday'. This latter document originally covered five counties in the South West, but only survives in full for Devon and Cornwall. The original manuscript is now held in Exeter Cathedral.

Following the Conquest of 1066 virtually all land passed into the ownership of the Norman victors, and whilst by 1086 large tracts had been granted to William's supporters, those lands were still subject to taxation.

Although understanding the significance of the entries in the Domesday Book is not simple, they tell us the relative size and importance of each settlement or estate, by allocating to each a value expressed in units known as hides and virgates (a virgate being worth a quarter of a hide).

There are many opinions regarding the precise meanings of these terms, and how many acres are equivalent to one hide. However, although there is general agreement that the terms were not consistently applied across the county, within each individual county it is safe to assume that one hide was as valuable as any other, so local comparisons can be made with a reasonable degree of confidence.

For those who want to delve deeper into the background to the Domesday Book, two websites in particular are recommended: domesdaybook.net and openDomesday.org. The first provides clear explanations of the underlying principles. The second provides a simple way to access returns by location, without needing to know which place names were in use in 1086.

In the specific context of Axminster, 'The Hundred of Axminster in Early Times' by Rev Oswald Peacher* (edited after his death in 1903 by Lt Col F B Probert and published by the Devonshire Association alongside an equivalent analysis of Axmouth) is particularly helpful, and by some way the main source document used in compiling the short document. Rev Peacher wrote about all of the Hundreds in Devon, which makes his commentary particularly valuable. A copy of his short book is held in Axminster Library.

*For a fascinating and gripping account of Rev Peacher's life, see the National Trust's website: www.nationaltrust.org.uk/rev-oswald-peacher. He was at one time the owner of 'his house', Axminster.