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 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 affects 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, minidiscs 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 5in 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 Lord Grossman pointed out last week. 'Last year marked the 30th anniversary of email, and 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.'

But 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 jasper 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 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 jasper 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 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 jasper 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 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 jasper 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 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.
While the information in the Domesday Book is still accessible today, there were great fears that the discs of the Domesday Project would become unreadable as computers capable of reading the format had become rare and drives capable of accessing the discs even rarer. However the system was emulated in 2002 using a system called DomesEm by the CAMILEON project. “Digital Domesday Book lasts 15 years not 1000”. The Observer. http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/mar/03/research.elearning. ^ Wearden, Graeme (27 February 2006). The Domesday Book does not cover certain important cities, such as London, Winchester, Bristol and the borough of Tamworth; nor Northumberland and Durham or much of north-west England. For Wales, only parts of certain border areas are included. Neither was it ever fully completed, being abandoned at some stage early in the reign of William Rufus, who succeeded to the throne in 1087. Not every place that existed in 1086 appears in the Domesday Book. We know this from other evidence - such as Anglo-Saxon charters, architectural evidence or the origins of the place-name itself. 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 Â£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.
Domesday Book, the original record or summary of William I's survey of England. By contemporaries the whole operation was known as the description of England, but the popular name Domesday i.e., when men face the record from which there is no appeal was in general use by the mid-12th. Encyclopaedia Britannica's editors oversee subject areas in which they have extensive knowledge, whether from years of experience gained by working on that content or via study for an advanced degree. See Article History. Domesday Book, the original record or summary of William I's survey of England. While the information in the Domesday Book is still accessible today, there were great fears that the discs of the Domesday Project would become unreadable as computers capable of reading the format had become rare and drives capable of accessing the discs even rarer. However the system was emulated in 2002 using a system called DomesEm by the CAMILEON project. "Digital Domesday Book lasts 15 years not 1000". The Observer. http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2002/mar/03/research.elearning. ^ Wearden, Graeme (27 February 2006).