

## REVIEWS

*It should be understood that all statements and opinions in reviews are those of the respective authors, not of the Society or the Editor.*

Simon Townley, ed., *A History of the County of Oxford, Volume 15: Carterton, Minster Lovell and Environs. Bampton Hundred Part Three*. Boydell and Brewer for the Institute of Historical Research, Woodbridge and New York, 2006. Pp. xiii + 280. ISBN 1 904356 06 0, ISSN 1477-0709.

This volume, volume 15 of the *Victoria County History of Oxfordshire*, covers eight, mostly rural parishes which lie in the west of the county between Burford and Witney. Although geologically the area is complex, the landscape and, above all, the farming types have much in common across the parishes. All were dominated for most of their history by mixed farming, although sheep and woodland played a part in some areas. Their history also has much in common with the broader region. In the Middle Ages the area was a peasant landscape, but from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries we see the emergence of prosperous yeomen whose holdings spread over several parishes. After the mid-eighteenth century larger 'commercial' farmers who came to dominate the social and economic life of their region emerged. In the late twentieth century the dominance of this group was in its turn challenged by changes in agricultural production and the arrival of new social groups – the retired and the professional commuters.

It was not an area of great families. The Lovels who rebuilt Minster Lovell Hall in the fifteenth century were a power in the land, and at the beginning of the twentieth century the more than slightly eccentric Lord Redesdale and his family (the Mitfords) lived in Asthall Manor, giving the historian two odd, if fascinating, accounts of 'rural' upper-class life in Jessica Mitford's *Hons and Rebels* and Nancy Mitford's *In Pursuit of Love*. There were also a number of gentry families, many of them long established, whose contributions to village and parish, although different from place to place, could at times be considerable.

The society of the area according to the accounts of the different parishes in this volume was remarkably stable and peaceful. Although some parishes experienced population decline in the fourteenth century, for example, Brize Norton and Black Bourton, there does not seem to be any evidence of local catastrophe. The religious and political strife of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also seems to have had little real impact, apart from the quartering of troops, while most of the ill-educated rural clergy simply followed the dictates of their spiritual leaders through those upheavals.

Yet the individual parish studies do show real change, and highlight quite dramatic shifts. The study of Carterton is a micro-history of a place which, while unusual in rural Oxfordshire, has many parallels elsewhere, and which points to both an attempt to democratize land ownership and to changing attitudes to the countryside. Founded in 1900–1 as a speculative development of smallholdings (named after its promoter William Carter), it sought to appeal to the desire to go 'back to the land' which seemed almost ubiquitous in the years before the Great War. Carter began with about 300 plots, each of one acre, although many settlers bought more than one plot. Its growth, even initially, was remarkably successful compared with similar settlements. By 1910 most plots were sold and had acquired a mixture of prefabricated and self-built, usually wooden, houses, which occur on 'plot land' developments throughout Britain. As with many such settlements, the initial desire to work a bit of land met with mixed success, although in the interwar period there seems to have been a moderately successful market-garden industry in the village.

Carterton, however, survived and prospered in a way few such settlements did, owing largely to events outside the control of the early pioneers. In the late 1930s the RAF built an air-force base at Brize Norton, in which parish Carterton stood. The Second World War and subsequent

decades saw this expand, and with that expansion the character of Carterton changed absolutely. Although the history of Carterton was different and unusual in precise detail, the account of the expansion of the village from a remote, small settlement to a major town, dominated by service trades, has many echoes across the whole of rural England since 1945. Ironically perhaps the few remaining original shacks and bungalows, so despised by the planners and writers of the interwar period, are now the object of the preservationist.

An 'experiment' which grew from a similar impulse, although in an earlier period, has a more complex and less happy history. This was the Chartist settlement of Charterville, in Minster Lovell parish. Created in 1842–3 as part of the Chartist Land Plan, it was one piece of an ambitious scheme to resettle the poor on the land. Its life as part of the Plan ended with the Plan itself in 1851–2, but many settlers remained, even enjoying periods of prosperity in the 1860s and 1870s based around producing vegetables, especially potatoes. However, the twentieth century, with its more intensive methods of farming, spelt the end of this utopian dream, although aspects of the original buildings were still very clear in the 1960s, and some still remain obvious today.

Carterton and Charterville represent two sides of the rural dream which has led so many into the rural areas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This migration continues and is noted in several of the parish histories in the less spectacular form of new estates and in particular the change of ownership of the larger, and especially the older, properties in many villages, where the prosperous farmers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have been replaced by professional people and the retired. This social revolution – for that is what it is in many ways – will figure prominently when these volumes are revised in a hundred years' time, as no doubt they will be! However, a caution against simply locating such change in the modern period is provided by the account of Kencot, where from the seventeenth century there was an unusual preponderance of resident gentry, many of them living in grander farmhouses, whose land was increasingly farmed from outside the parish (p. 150).

In all the parish accounts we get a local version of changes which occurred in many rural areas and at national level. For example, in the accounts of religious history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we see the Church of England's endemic problems of non-residency and decay succeeded by a much more active and resident clergy after 1850, building and rebuilding churches and schools and living 'in their parishes and for their parishes' in the way Wilberforce of Oxford had urged them to in the 1840s and 1850s. In part at least, this Anglican 'revival' was a response to the rise in religious nonconformity and especially Methodism and Primitive Methodism, both of which were strong in most of the parishes. More prosaically the bald references near the end of most parish accounts to the arrival of electricity, but more especially mains water and mains drainage, point out just how deprived of the basic needs of life most rural areas were well after the Second World War.

I have not reviewed a volume of the *VCH* before, although I first used one in 1968 and have referred to them ever since. Reading this volume I am reminded just how much we owe to those who have worked on them over the years. It is still possible to criticize them, especially on the matter of broader interpretation of the material they assemble with such care. However, that was not and is not their purpose. To the jobbing historian like myself the accounts of land ownership, farming systems, and, even to the modernist, manorial structures and functions are an essential starting point to writing about parishes, regions, and even the national picture. The *VCH* has also changed and is changing – in my view for the better. This volume contains sections written under the old 1960s guidelines, although adapted, and one written under the new 2002 structure. Comparisons are not sensible, or even desirable, but the new structure does fit in much more closely with recent ideas about the driving forces of historical change without, I am glad to say, compromising the careful scholarship which marked the earlier volumes. No serious historian of West Oxfordshire can ignore this volume, and there are few historians of rural England who will not glean something from it.

ALUN HOWKINS

William Whyte, *Oxford Jackson: Architecture, Education, Status, and Style 1835–1924*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006. Pp. 268, 100 plates. £65.

One of the plates in this consistently stimulating book is a cartoon of 1891 by George Du Maurier entitled '*Intellectual Culture v. Aristocratic Barbarism*'. It pokes gentle fun at the circumlocutions of a young woman, who could easily have strayed out of North Oxford, in search of a governess for her small daughters. Her world – serious, high-minded, self-consciously progressive – was one in which Thomas Graham Jackson moved with ease. He gave architectural form to the aspirations of the liberal intelligentsia who, in the aftermath of the Oxford Movement, began to guide the fortunes not only of Oxford, but of English universities in general. And just as the work of Powell and Moya and of James Stirling throws light on the higher educational world of the 1960s, so Jackson's illuminates that of late Victorian England.

Architectural critics and historians have never been entirely comfortable with Jackson. Urbane and successful, the holder of a college fellowship which helped him launch his career in Oxford, he designed buildings that are usually easy on the eye and sensitive to their context. Their appeal derives mainly from their pictorial rather than their strictly architectural qualities, their hybrid character epitomizing what H. S. Goodhart-Rendel – no admirer of Jackson's work – called the 'bric-a-brac' style. He was a poor planner, as anyone who has tried to find his or her way through the Examination Schools will know. And, as William Whyte demonstrates, his close association with Oxbridge and the public schools ensured that he became typecast as a designer of educational institutions, failing to make a decisive mark on national architecture. He was an excellent writer and historian, and his memoirs, edited by his son and published by the Oxford University Press in 1950 under the title of *Recollections of Thomas Graham Jackson* (and issued in a new edition, with missing material restored, in 2003) are among the main primary sources for anyone wishing to get under the skin of late Victorian architecture in England. But their very readability has perhaps deterred historians wishing to get to grips with either the buildings or the man. If he could write so eloquently about his own work, why bother?

In Whyte, Jackson has found his ideal interpreter. A Fellow of St John's and an old member of Wadham – Jackson's own college – he understands the donnish mind and is at home in the intellectual world of the late nineteenth century. He sees Jackson's architecture not so much as a structural system as a 'rhetorical device', the vehicle for which was 'progressive eclecticism': a phrase popularized by the critic Alexander Beresford Hope in 1858. So at the Examination Schools, his most important building, he juxtaposed contrasting stylistic ingredients – a touch of Kirby Hall here, some Italian Renaissance flavouring there – to produce a novel synthesis which appealed to liberal-minded dons chafing at clerical obscurantism and the Gothic style from which it appeared to be inseparable. With this commission under his belt, he went on to produce variations on the same theme at Brasenose, Trinity, Hertford, and Corpus Christi, as well as at Somerville and at the boys' and girls' High Schools – quintessentially liberal institutions, designed to increase the educational opportunities of the sons and daughters of the aspirational classes. (The former Boys' School in George Street will have, appropriately, become the home of Oxford University's History Faculty by the time this review appears.) More work followed: in the University Parks, in the Science Area, at Carfax. And Oxford expressed its gratitude, as Whyte reminds us, in suitably fulsome terms. Jackson was 'artifex Oxoniensissime' (1911), 'the Oxford architect *par excellence*' (1924).

At his best, as in the beautiful and little-known chapel at Radley College, one of several public-school commissions, Jackson was indeed one of the enjoyable architects of his age. But he did not always maintain the same high standard, and some of his work, like his ponderous museums and laboratories in Downing Street, Cambridge, that most dismal of academic thoroughfares, is deeply disappointing. Whyte recognizes these inconsistencies but does not altogether explain them. We are often told that Jackson was a poor planner, but not what constitutes good planning: something that can be demonstrated by comparing the Examination Schools with Oxford Town

Hall, a superficially similar, but much more efficient and user-friendly building by H.T. Hare, one of his many talented contemporaries. And in view of Jackson's close association with the Arts and Crafts movement – he became Master of the Art Workers' Guild in 1896, despite having crossed swords with William Morris himself over the restoration of the spire of the University Church – more could surely have been said about the superb craftsmanship which enlivens so many of his buildings, both externally (for example, the High Street front of Brasenose College) and internally (for example, Hertford College chapel, unfortunately illustrated only from the outside). Whyte mentions Jackson's 'obsessive attention to detail', but someone had to translate his vision into built form, and about this he remains largely silent.

George Nathaniel Curzon called Jackson the 'creator of modern Oxford': a judgement with which it would be hard to dissent, so long as one's eye does not stray much beyond the city centre. Whyte's well-written, meticulously researched and mercifully compact, though expensive, monograph explains how and why he achieved this enviable position. Progressive in his sympathies, yet in a sense also deeply conservative, his architecture helped define an institution which endeavoured to adapt to the modern world while at the same time nurturing deep roots in a cherished and mythologized past. Even today his work epitomizes Oxford, and that is both its strength and its weakness.

GEOFFREY TYACK

Trevor Rowley, *The English Landscape in the Twentieth Century*. Hambledon Continuum, London, 2006. Pp. xv + 472, 200+ illustrations (unnumbered). £25.00.

Trevor Rowley is well known to members of the Oxfordshire Architectural and Historical Society and other readers of this journal, not only as a past President of the Society, but also for his long and distinguished career in researching and teaching landscape history – an interest that he has communicated with both enthusiasm and lucidity to both academics and the learning public through his continuing education classes and very readable books. This landscape history of England in the twentieth century is a rich addition to the corpus, and one of the first attempts to tackle the subject on a broad canvas.

The approach is thematic. The Introduction uses Stonehenge as a kind of taster: a good example of how attitudes to the past have developed, illustrating in the process some of the diverse pressures of change that have typified the twentieth century. Some of these, such as the remains of the very early military airfield nearby, have become part of what is valued as part of the national heritage. In explaining his approach to the subject, Trevor Rowley has sought both to emulate the tradition of the Oxfordshire-based doyenne of landscape history, W. G. Hoskins, and to move on: in the author's own words, 'to try to use some of Hoskins's methods of landscape analysis to look at many of the things which he found so distasteful, to try to understand what we have created and why. And suggest here and there that perhaps it isn't all quite as bad as we sometimes think.'

This is a very fair summary of what the book provides. It is a substantial account of how the English urban and rural environment was changed in the twentieth century, written in the tradition of English landscape studies pioneered by people like W. G. Hoskins and L. Dudley Stamp. However, it also recognizes that the pattern of twentieth-century development should not just be seen as speeding up the loss of heritage and landscape character, but also as leaving an imprint of change in the landscape that is as characteristic of the history of our own times as earlier legacies are of former eras. There are few if any other books that can match the range and depth of material that is covered here. Although this is 'contemporary' history in the sense that so much of it has been experienced by people living today and/or their parents, there are constant reminders of just how radical the changes have been – even in the last half century.

After a first chapter giving an overview of some of the main forces of change in the English landscape during the twentieth century, the approach becomes thematic. There are separate chapters on 'The Age of the Car', 'Taking Off' (on the growth of air travel and airports), 'London', 'Towns and Industry', 'New Towns and Garden Cities', 'Suburbia and Metroland', 'The Village', 'The Countryside', 'The Country House', 'Uplands and Forests', 'The Impact of War', 'The Seaside', 'Sports and Recreations', 'Theme-park England', and finally, 'Historic Monuments'. The relative emphasis on urban landscapes (not just confined to the four chapters on urban and suburban themes) is justified by the nature and scale of change that occurred.

For each theme there is a general account of how and why the landscape and townscape was altered in different ways and at different times through the century, supported by copious well-chosen details of places, events, and landscape features. These accounts are backed up by more specific case studies that illustrate trends in greater depth. Sources include a wide range of legislation, official reports, and secondary sources, as well as the landscape itself, and the narrative is written in a clear, lucid style. The result very successfully weaves together the social and economic history of the twentieth century with how it became manifest in the world around us. Sensibly, these accounts often refer back to earlier developments, especially where key changes began in the nineteenth century. This works well, and the general account of each theme is not only well illustrated, but also helpfully enlivened by the innumerable references to particular places and events, and occasional anecdotes.

The chapters are generously illustrated with well-chosen black-and-white photographs and occasional maps on the majority of pages. Oxfordshire readers are particularly fortunate since the single largest acknowledged source of illustrations is our excellent Oxfordshire Studies service. Apart from providing many well-chosen examples that illustrate some general aspect of most of the main themes of the book, there are also several local gems that will raise an eyebrow or crease a smile, such as the unfortunate accident with a tank on Burford Bridge (p. 307), or the policemen's bicycle race at the Iffley Road athletics track in full uniform (p. 377).

Oxford and Oxfordshire examples come up in several contexts, including the development of universities, urban redevelopment (the demolition of St Ebbes and relocation of its residents to Blackbird Leys, and the Westgate centre as an example of 1970s shopping precincts), Cowley and the history of the car industry, Middleton Stoney as one of the relatively few major new country houses, Bicester, Brize Norton, and Upper Heyford as examples of urban growth based on military bases and supply depots, together with Harwell, Culham, Stanton Harcourt, and Witney, exemplifying the varied post-war fortunes of other wartime aerodromes, Henley as a social sporting event – and much else besides, including class division manifested by physical barriers of which the infamous Cutteslowe Walls were not the only example.

This kind of thematic approach can be difficult to pull off well because so often particular places or developments reflect more than one theme, but on the whole this is handled very well, though of course choices had to be made. For example, although surprising at first sight, it makes sense that the demise of canals as a form of industrial transport and their revival for leisure should be dealt with in the chapter on 'Theme-park England', rather than those dealing with other forms of transport. Only in one or two places might the editing have been a bit tighter where themes overlap.

Because the book is so wide ranging, I found myself wondering if there was any major aspect of twentieth-century life or social history that it did not cover. Although the coverage of some issues is inevitably a bit more thorough than others, there is very little that does not get a look in, and much that is covered in some depth. For example, some public services like water supply, transport, and social housing are looked at in some detail; education and the growth of universities rather less so. The sprawling scale of the infrastructure spawned by the National Health Service, especially in cities like Oxford that have major universities and regional health authorities, gets only rather brief coverage (pp. 136, 150–1), though mentions crop up under other themes (including, for example, the conversion of country houses into nursing homes).

Oxford makes an interesting example of how the NHS exemption from planning controls has led to some fairly intrusive developments, like the rabbit warren of ill-planned buildings behind the listed Radcliffe Infirmary or the eye-catching John Radcliffe Hospital, which would hardly have been allowed for other types of development – though of course patients undoubtedly benefit from the green panoramas to be gained from its windows.

I suspect a future landscape history of England may also have to deal in more depth with the impact of the late twentieth-century electronic revolution – so much of it is in our homes and offices that we tend to forget the gradual changes we have seen in the loss of telegraph poles, and forests of large TV aerials and the coming of satellite dishes, telecommunication towers, and mobile-phone masts – even those disguised as trees like the one at Bartlemas, in east Oxford. Some features, like the tower at Stokenchurch, have become familiar landmarks, others, like the masts sticking out of the trees close to where I live on the top of Boars Hill, quietly accumulate more dishes and other appurtenances without attracting very much attention.

But these are quibbles: this book is far more interesting for the depth and breadth of what it does cover with such lucidity than any areas where one might wish for more.

As the Introduction recognizes, one of the issues that underlies all the themes is what counts as history and heritage and what counts as its destruction, erosion, and loss. Hoskins wrote something of a diatribe against the intrusiveness of the concrete jungle taking over parts of Oxfordshire, and he might well have been surprised that wartime installations and even major Cold War facilities like Upper Heyford are now valued by many as a highly evocative testament to the military threats that Britain survived in the twentieth century.

The way conservationists look at the recent past is often shaped more by a sense of loss than one of gain, because it is too close to us to have acquired the real patina of history that we apply to developments that took place more than a couple of generations ago. There is thus a natural tension between the conservationist's concern at losing the past and the contemporary historian's analytical examination of the pressures and processes of change.

On the whole Trevor Rowley has succeeded well in his aim of looking at the twentieth century in the tradition of the Hoskins approach, while also recognizing that views change as the present recedes into the past. This book is at its best where the historical analysis holds sway seeking to give an objective account of developments, in many instances noting opposing views and attitudes to such matters. And, yes, 'here and there' an impression does come across of how twentieth-century legacies that Hoskins despised are already seen as important and welcome contributions to the rich diversity of the historic environment that future generations will enjoy. Nevertheless, there is also a recurrent undertone of regret for lost historic character that clearly reflects a late twentieth-century conservationist's concern for the environment.

These tensions are explicitly recognized in several references to works such as David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country*, which recognizes that how we view the past is always shaped by our own perspectives from an ever-changing 'present' day. Perhaps we can never take a detached view, but I ended up feeling that the idea of the past as the result of continuous on-going change might have been explored a bit more in terms for changing attitudes to conservation and how it is now helping to shape the world we live in.

In this respect I found the last chapter of the book the most disappointing. The idea of balancing the introductory account of the vicissitudes of twentieth-century development at Stonehenge with a closing account of changing attitudes to heritage has a lot of merit, but unlike almost all the other themes covered in earlier chapters, this one, focusing mainly on ancient monuments, has been approached on too narrow a canvas. And even then it does not fully reflect quite how far and fast attitudes and provision for heritage conservation had progressed by the end of the century. Taking an even broader view, concern for the historic environment can be seen as being only one small part of a very much wider conservation movement in which the fundamental inter-linkages between landscape, history, and the natural world have gradually become recognized in the institutional policies of a very diverse range of organizations, including how vast parts of the

public estate are now managed by bodies such as the Forestry Commission, the Highways Agency, and the Defence Estates Agency. The destructive forces of agriculture were not only becoming fully recognized, but Britain was taking a European lead in promoting environmentally friendly farming to repair and halt some of the earlier devastation, making this the principal justification for farming subsidies.

Although Trevor Rowley does touch on many of these issues under the various relevant themes about different aspects of town and countryside, it is a pity that the final chapter does not draw together the positive achievements of environmental awareness. It is an aspect of twentieth-century social history that for all its many failures has come to be reflected in the physical design of everything from major infrastructure schemes to minor developments using traditional materials in sensitive locations. The M40 east and north of Oxford is a good example: the last-minute major re-routing to skirt Otmoor, the relatively sharp bends to avoid parts of Bernwood Forest, the deliberately unobtrusive, non-standard fencing to provide unimpeded views over Otmoor, and the complex false cuttings and natural planting schemes to protect the setting of villages up the Cherwell valley are all hallmarks of how the concerns of landscape, nature conservation, and visual and noise intrusion have become such a major influence on the design of late twentieth-century infrastructure projects, not just the opposition to them.

But with this rather esoteric caveat aside, overall I found this book a delight to read: highly informative and presented in a way that carries the reader along, wearing its underlying scholarship with a light touch and a pleasing, accessible style. If there are quibbles, they are minor for a book of such breadth and insight into our recent past. And for Oxfordshire readers there is plenty of local interest. Both author and publisher are to be congratulated on a very fine production.

GEORGE LAMBRICK

