

Reviews

The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire. By Jennifer Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner. Penguin Books 1974. 936 Pp. 121 pl. 36 figs. £5.

The publication in 1974 of volumes on Oxfordshire and Staffordshire marked the successful completion of the most remarkable architectural publishing enterprise of our time. Twenty-five years of compilation and visiting have been recorded in some 46 volumes (excluding later editions) covering every English county. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's series has directed our eyes and minds to England's architectural heritage, through a comprehensive survey backed by singular comparative judgement, written with precision and wit. His descriptions and criticisms have turned the average person's architectural thinking away from the Highways and Byways, Little Guides or 'Gossips' England, to a more critical approach to the historic environment. Changes of taste and increased destruction of newly recognized minor architectural pleasures have also brought the series into the public eye. How often has 'Pevsner' been quoted for mention, or omission, at public enquiries by developers and objectors alike, to each other's discomfort?

I was given *Cornwall* in 1951, and have bought each subsequent volume as it came out, acquiring a detailed gazetteer of the architecture of the English counties in 40 inches of shelf room. The influence on my generation is undoubtedly a large one. *Cornwall*, the first volume, a paperback of 230 pages, was priced at the equivalent of 17½ pence. *Oxfordshire* is cased with 936 pages and costs £5. Apart from the increase in price and words the series has maintained its stated aims remarkably well. The intention to complete; to give full particulars of the architectural features of all ecclesiastical, public and domestic buildings of interest in each town and village in the county concerned; to describe the furnishings of churches and other artistic treasures; to be more detailed and to place greater emphasis on aesthetic appreciation than any other existing guide; to provide a general architectural history of a county; all this has been achieved. Today we would ask for an extra ingredient, the understanding of the vernacular building traditions which the *Murray's Architectural Guides*, edited by John Betjeman and John Piper, had earlier attempted, and rather more attention to the hidden wealth of domestic buildings. The Buildings of England are the major monuments of State, Church and gentry, but the town perambulations have widened their scope over the years, and the introduction of specialist introductions, such as Clifton-Taylor on building materials, are welcome additions.

How has Oxfordshire, having waited longest, fared in this colossal enterprise? Its most unhappy distinction is size, as it is the largest volume in the series, and is difficult to use in the field. The text falls into two parts: Nikolaus Pevsner contributes the City of Oxford (326 pages) and Jennifer Sherwood the County (524 pages). The publishers have ignored the case for two volumes, as used in many earlier volumes of the series with less justification. The chance to market a much needed pocket architectural guide to the City at a reasonable price has been temporarily lost.

Nikolaus Pevsner has provided a concise standard introduction to the architecture of Oxford, based on critical descriptions. He confesses to know 'the other place' better, but none the less the City's spell has worked on him. Like Goodhart-Rendel in the fifties he considers the totality of its buildings. There is no stopping at 1714 as the 1939 Royal Commission, or dismissing 'modern' architecture as Aymer Vallance in his 1912 *Old Colleges of Oxford*. Pevsner does not hide his distress either that today's designers contrive to stray from the ideal tenets of the Thirties, or his unreasonable contempt for Bladon rubble stone. The text for the City was evidently written in 1968/9 and unevenly revised subsequently.

The layout of the Oxford section follows the well established form; a masterly intro-

duction, individual descriptions of colleges and university buildings; followed by churches and public buildings, and completed by the all-embracing perambulations, including parts of outer Oxford (but not Binsey, Iffley or Wolvercote which are in the County gazetteer). A separate feature is the section on pre-Victorian window glass, which confuses the main text and should have been included in the gazetteer. For some reason the glass at University College is treated this way. The perambulations are also confusing, particularly in High Street and St. Giles, and too full of cross references for easy use. But comments like these are carps enjoined by regular use.

The value of the volume as a reliable quick reference and comparison is perhaps best demonstrated by a series of quotations taken from the text: the vault of the Divinity School is 'a feat of make-believe as cunning as any of the Italian and German Baroque' (29); the Schools Quadrangle has a frontispiece that 'is the biggest in England, and that means anywhere' (261); Trinity Chapel 'has an interior with wood carving of a quality not surpassed as an *ensemble* by anything in Britain' (43); the facade of the Sheldonian Theatre may be revolutionary in Oxford 'but nationally speaking... as a young amateur's job, just a little confused' (255); The Radcliffe Camera is 'England's most accomplished domed building' (50) which counters Sacheverell Sitwell's 'we may pass it often, but it leaves no particular impression' (*British Architects and Craftsmen*, 110); the Library at Christ Church has in its plasterwork 'one of the most gorgeous stucco displays in England' (51); Sir Thomas Jackson 'set his elephantine feet in many places in Oxford... licence to mix motifs from anywhere' (59); Basil Champney's Oriel building is 'gargantuan' (60); Lloyds Bank at Carfax 'takes some beating... and shows the consequences of seeing too much Jackson about everyday' (307). However, the 20th century saw 'one great failure of nerve... a peculiar, feeble Oxford style characterized by the use of squared rubble with ashlar dressings' (64); Nuffield's tower will 'one day be loved—but the rest?' (65); St. Catherine's College makes it 'look even more absurd' but then St. Catherine's 'is the most perfect piece of architecture of 20th century Oxford' (67); at Balliol the new buildings hold Waterhouse's hall 'in a deadly embrace' (102); the Jesus Old Members Building has 'a surfeit of canting in divers ways' (68); but the front of Woolworths is 'very tactfully and elegantly done'; however, Westgate 'no one would call elegant' (69). Of the Queen's Florey Building 'some will adore it and some detest it' (190); decaying stone is 'picturesque' and the Sheldonian heads were 'in a wonderful state of decomposition and ought to remain so' (256); All Souls Front Quadrangle 'has not been face-lifted yet. It is a blessing'; 'the area by the Radcliffe Camera and the Bodleian is unique in the world, or, if that seems a hazardous statement, it is certainly unparalleled at Cambridge' (254); in Radcliffe Square there is 'a density of monuments of architecture... which has not the like in Europe' (71); Oxford has 'a landscape made of stone, sombre at its best' and has 'the most telling skyline of England'.

There is much to agree and to disagree with in matters of opinion, but the reader is not misled or bored. I would personally have wished for more details of major restorations or repairs, such as those carried out at the Divinity School complex. I would also have wished for some discussion of the relative importance of the survival of Oxford's medieval college buildings in a European context. Surely nowhere outside these islands is it possible to see medieval buildings of an academic function on this scale? This is one reason, conscious or otherwise, that so many visitors come to Oxford. It is the size and quality of the whole complex city townscape, grand monuments and humble foils, still functioning for its original use, that impresses the visitors. If the visitor wishes to know more about its architectural parts Nikolaus Pevsner has now provided most of the answers.

The sketch plans of Colleges in the text will greatly assist the user and are generally accurate, a difficult task. However, Worcester is out of date and Keble wrongly anticipates. A separate index to Oxford is also a practical feature. The photographs seem, in some cases, to have been chosen to illustrate a building's appearance before the cleaning and refacing of the last twenty-five years. An uninformative blackness prevails in some. In summary we now have a concise critical account of our Oxford buildings which is unsurpassed by any other architectural guide book.

Jennifer Sherwood, in writing an introduction and gazetteer of some 270 entries to the towns and villages of the old County of Oxfordshire, contributes the larger portion of the volume. Many regular users will welcome the innovation in the introduction of sectional divisions. These are churches, church furnishings, church monuments and secular buildings. Alex Clifton-Taylor writes on building materials and David Brown on Roman Oxfordshire. The text shows much careful research and is cross-referenced to national collections. I have used the volume with considerable satisfaction in my own explorations of Oxfordshire. One occasionally disagrees on matters of opinion or period or finds a church description tedious. A visit to a country house by contrast is greatly enhanced on every occasion. The towns are fully described with perambulations. In the villages the general pattern is church, rectory and farmhouses. The contrast of the gain to the text where a short visual description of village setting is given (*e.g.* Swinbrook) to the more general case where this is omitted (*e.g.* Islip) is very clear. Oxfordshire has gained, alongside the City, a major work of reference to its historical buildings and architectural monuments.

JOHN ASHDOWN

Historic Towns in Oxfordshire: A Survey of the New County. Edited by Kirsty Rodwell. Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit Survey No. 3. 202 pp., inc. figs., maps. Price £5.

This is a work of great importance, not so much for what it tells us of its subject as for its likely influence on future research and discoveries. It is the second in a series of surveys of the archaeological potential of the new county of Oxfordshire, surveys which the Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit rightly regards as an essential first step in its work of conserving, recording and interpreting the material remains of the county's past. The present survey is intended as a handbook and guide not only for professional or amateur archaeologists in Oxfordshire's towns, but for planners and developers, whose decisions may affect the archaeological record above or below ground.

The bulk of the book consists of separate sections on twenty towns, all within pre-1974 Oxfordshire except four (Abingdon, Faringdon, Wallingford, Wantage). There is a short account of each, divided into eight parts: setting, archaeology, history, medieval topography, archaeological potential, development, buildings and bibliography. For each too there are uniform illustrations: an oblique air photograph with explanatory diagram, a map (scale 1 : c. 36000) showing its location with roads, archaeological sites, etc., for some two to three miles around, and three detailed plans (scale 1 : 4545), extended to fold-outs in the cases of Oxford and Witney. The first of these plans shows the extent of settlement at key periods (normally 1200, 1500 and 1700), marking the sites of medieval buildings and other archaeological evidence; the second shows the dates of the town's existing buildings; and the third shows the conservation position, marking buildings under statutory protection, the limits of scheduled or conservation areas, and the sites of past excavations. The book is introduced by general accounts of the historical development of the towns of the area (with outline plans of all twenty) and of its urban buildings. These, and much of the rest, are by Kirsty Rodwell, but the book is the work of a team, in which J. Munby and H. Turner played a particularly large part. The section on Oxford itself is by J. Ashdown and T. Hassall.

Essentially the book summarizes work that has already been done on the twenty towns; with a few exceptions—notably the accounts of buildings at Wantage and Witney—it is specifically not based on new work. Despite the obvious similarity of form it is not to be seen as a local version of the *Historic Towns Atlas*, still less as an abbreviated *Victoria County History*. At the same time, by setting out the history and archaeology of the county's towns side by side in standard form it provides a valuable comparative study which makes it all but an original work of research. From it we can discover not only archaeological priorities but also which towns stand in need of up-to-date investigation from historical sources; this partly reflects the progress of the *Victoria History of Oxfordshire* (compare, for

instance, Dorchester, which has been covered by the *V.C.H.*, with Chipping Norton, which has not), partly work done by individuals (thus Abingdon has been well served by historians while Faringdon has not, although surviving records could probably be made to yield a good deal of information about its complicated early history). But in using *Historic Towns in Oxfordshire* we must remember that it is not conceived as a definitive work of scholarship. Various minor criticisms of content, treatment or editing might be made if it were a more pretentious work, but none are relevant here except perhaps the occasional failure to name on the plans streets that feature in the topographical argument of the text; Broad Street in Abingdon, North Street in Bicester and Oriel Street in Oxford are examples.

Given the book's purpose the selection of towns for inclusion could reasonably have followed either of two principles. They could have been restricted to places that are towns today, on the grounds that town sites impose archaeological problems and working methods unlike those elsewhere. Or they could include all places that had ever been towns, on the grounds that an urban past produces particular sorts of material remains. It is this second principle that has been followed, though not too rigorously: the twenty towns comprise 'all the major market centres of whatever period', but excluding Roman sites (apart from the two known to have had walls) and excluding also 'some of the minute failed market towns of the medieval period'. Even so the sites covered include such places as Charlbury, which by no stretch of imagination could be called a town today, and Alchester, which lies beneath fields. This method of selection inevitably leads to the question What is a town? or rather What was it? Was there really anything other than the possession of a market that made 13th-century Watlington like contemporary Wallingford or Oxford and unlike the villages that lay between?

This question the book does not answer—and indeed it might reasonably be retorted that this is one of the questions that future excavations may well answer with its help. But there is throughout the unspoken assumption that the places covered were prominently set apart from surrounding villages not only by their markets but by their wealth, size and appearance too. One senses in the text almost a feeling of relief when the evidence points in this direction, of mild disappointment when it does not. Connected with this is a perceptible tendency to see urban features at as early a date as possible; thus the word *town* is used to translate both the 9th-century *ham* (p. 163) and the 13th-century *villa* (p. 125), neither of which has any urban connotation (if anything, rather the opposite).

These, of course, are no more than matters of emphasis. What precisely distinguished town from village in medieval England is highly debateable. But insistence on the urban features, the townliness, of the places covered may in two cases have risked distorting future investigations. At Woodstock the rural settlement of Old Woodstock, though happily included in the conservation area, is effectively omitted from the detailed plans; yet it adjoined the borough of New Woodstock and the two must have formed a single community, a single settlement for all but legal and administrative purposes. At Banbury even the conservation area excludes not only the all-but-adjacent rural settlement of Neithrop but also Calthorpe (now Calthorpe Street), an area of husbandmen's homes which were outside the borough's administrative bounds but physically lay right in the heart of the medieval town and were clearly an integral part of it; this may even have been the site of the village that pre-dated the borough founded in the twelfth century. It is a pity that in these two cases the towns have not been treated as single units combining rural and urban elements—as has, indeed, very sensibly been done in the analogous cases of Faringdon and Thame.

The book is excellently produced: clear, compact, informative and easy to use. It deserves wide sales as well as every success in the part it is to play in preserving the archaeological record of Oxfordshire's towns. One measure of its success will be the amount of revision needed when it appears in a second edition. In this case it reflects no discredit on the book or its authors to hope that a second edition will not only soon be called for but will be unrecognizably different from the first.

P. D. A. HARVEY

Stonesfield Slate. By M. Aston. Oxfordshire County Council, Department of Museum Services Publication No. 5, 1974. Pp. 86, 44 illus. Price £1.50.

Dr. Robert Plot clearly stated the distinguishing characteristic of the County's most revered roofing material when he wrote in 1676 'that the Houses are covered, for the most part in *Oxford-shire* (not with Tiles) but *Flat-stone*, whereof the lightest, and that which imbibes the Water least, is accounted the best. And such is that which they have at *Stunsfield*, where it is dug first in thick Cakes about *Michaelmas* time, or before, to lie all the *Winter* and receive the Frosts, which make it cleave in the *Spring* following into thinner *Plates* . . .'

The esteem in which Stonesfield slates have been held in the locality is as high today as it was in the 17th century, even though the industry ceased production before World War I. So much so that Stonesfield is often used mistakenly as a generic term to describe any form of limestone roof covering in the Oxfordshire Cotswolds. Geologically the stone slabs are not slates at all, being formed from rock split along its natural bedding planes rather than a metamorphic rock which breaks along the lines of compression as in the ubiquitous Welsh slate. However, the misnomer is now so well entrenched that it would be impossible to substitute a more technically correct name for the material, such as 'tile-stone' or 'fissile flat stone'.

The use of Stonesfield slates in significant numbers as an important local roofing material only appears to have commenced in the 16th century when the process of splitting the green rock by the action of frost was discovered. It is the frosting method of producing slates, first described by Plot in the quotation which heads this review, which distinguishes Stonesfield slates from the other stone slates quarried in the Cotswolds and which provides an analogy with the Northamptonshire slates from Collyweston, the exploitation of which by a similar technique seems to have commenced at about the same time.

Unlike the medieval trade in west country slate from Devon and Cornwall and the 19th-century domination of the building industry by slate from the quarries of North Wales, the Stonesfield slate mines were never more than of local importance. This can be accounted for partly by difficulties of transport and the geologically restricted extent of the deposit of suitable stone, but it is also due to the inherent properties of the material itself. Fissile limestone slates are considerably thicker than true metamorphic slates and consequently they are a very heavy roofing material. Their attractive aesthetic appearance is balanced by the necessity of providing a more than usually substantial timber roof structure to support them. At a time when the development of roof carpentry was towards lighter and cheaper roof trusses using imported softwoods and when large numbers of thin Welsh slates were available throughout the country via the emergent canal and railways systems, Stonesfield slate offered no practical advantages and remained what it had always been, a regionally vernacular material. And this, of course, is a large part of its charm.

The history of the industry was admirably presented in an important chapter in W. J. Arkell's *Oxford Stone* (1947). It is a measure of the success of Mr. Aston's monograph that that work has now been superseded. Building on the firm foundations of Arkell's scholarship, he has seized perhaps the last opportunity to provide the definitive account of the industry, and he is to be congratulated for the thoroughness with which he has set about his task. The book logically progresses from an account of the geology of the district, through a chronological discussion of the history and working of the industry, to conclude with a detailed chapter on the practical aspects of roofing with Stonesfield slates. The appendices are of particular value, with a gazetteer of all the known shafts and workings, and a comprehensive bibliography.

The distinction between the slatters or crappers, the men who produced the slates, and the slaters who used them for roofing, is used as the appropriate framework on which to discuss the various processes involved. Most of the information about the organization and working of the industry is derived from the 19th century, despite the survival of a tantalizingly detailed agreement of 1774 between the Duke of Marlborough and a slate digger. This document, reproduced and transcribed in full, is of the greatest importance

in revealing the complicated system of tenure involved in extracting a valuable underground material in a predominantly agricultural society. It is the most illuminating single piece of new evidence that Mr. Aston has unearthed and its discovery is of inestimable help in interpreting the more accessible documentary information contained in the parish registers, wills, and local directories. The census returns have been used for 1851, but it is a curious omission that this rich source apparently has not been examined for 1861 and 1871. The juxtaposition of Figure 11, showing seventeen workers of various sorts listed in the 1851 census as being engaged in the industry, with Figure 12 mentioning only a single quarryman in the 1852 edition of *Gardners Directory*, clearly demonstrates the importance of this class of record and suggests that the opportunity has been missed for a comparative analysis of such topics as continuity of employment, mobility of labour, and family tradition in the industry in the third quarter of the 19th century.

The book has been attractively designed, although its shape is ill-adapted for the shelves of the average personal library. This irritation is somewhat appeased by the use of the margins for admirably clear line drawings and the generous size of the full-page illustrations which presumably would not have been possible with a more conventional format. As befits a publication of the County's Museum Services the treatment of the artifacts associated with the industry is particularly well done and fully illustrated with drawings of a uniform excellence. Unfortunately, however, the otherwise favourable impression of the book's appearance is marred by the two indecipherably blurred photographs on pages 57 and 58. Their antiquity surely was insufficient justification for their inclusion, and they add nothing to the reader's comprehension of the subject.

However, these are minor flaws to set against the overall excellence of the book. The shade of the defunct Stonesfield slate industry has been vividly and enthusiastically served by its historian. One hopes that this will be only the first of a series of monographs by the Department of Museum Services on the distinctive building materials of the county.

MALCOLM AIRS

Oxford and its Region. Edited by C. G. Smith and D. I. Scargill. O.U.P. 1975. 87 pp., 2 plates.

This is not a revised edition of A. F. Martin and R. W. Steel, *The Oxford Region* (1954). It is a collection of nine brief essays by members of the School of Geography, augmented by Tom Hassall, produced for the 1975 conference of the Institute of British Geographers. Topics range through geology, climate, archaeology and tourism, unfortunately briefly. The cheap paper used makes the booklet unpleasant to handle.

DAVID A. HINTON

The Village of Woolstone in the Vale of the White Horse. By J. Hadow. Nov., 1975. 45 pp. plus end papers. Obtainable from the Author, Johnings, Woolstone, Faringdon, price £1 (proceeds to the Thomas Hughes Memorial Hall).

This little village history follows the usual chronological pattern, but the author has the advantage that the parish contains several well-known monuments, and was well documented in the Middle Ages because it was owned by Winchester. It would have been useful to have had more detailed description of the buildings than is given on page 18, since page 25 has a tantalizing reference to a cruck—in what was once a watermill. A list of field names is to be deposited at the Berkshire Record Office, which will be valuable for future historians.

DAVID A. HINTON

Misericords at New College, Oxford. By Francis W. Steer, M.A., F.S.A. Phillimore, 1973. Pp. 42, 64 plates and one plan.

The set of sixty-two carved misericords under the stall seats of the chapel of New College are almost all that remains of its original fittings. The carvings vary according to the individuality of the craftsman or the demands of his employer and of the 62 fourteen are of human figures or faces, eleven of conventional flowers and foliage, seven of human figures in action, and thirty of miscellaneous subjects. The expression on many of the faces suggest that they are intended to be portraits. The master carpenter Hugh Herland designed the timber work for William of Wykeham's foundations at New College and Winchester and may very well have chosen the carvers for these misericords in the late 14th century, perhaps by 1386. The carvings illustrating costume, furniture, pastimes and domestic scenes of this time are important because they show contemporary accuracy of detail, particularly so in the case of one of the four buildings which shows a walled town with a raised portcullis in the gateway.

The carving of each misericord is described in detail with fine photographs, four to a page, showing the truly remarkable detail; the photographs are the excellent work of Mr. G. L. Remnant, F.S.A.

Mr. Steer has produced a splendid, fascinating and scholarly guide to these treasures of New College which will deserve the grateful thanks of each and all of those who are interested in these medieval carvings of the highest merit.

The late P. S. SPOKES¹

¹ This review was written not long before the author died, on 22 January 1976. It is his last contribution to the journal of the society to which he had contributed so much, as President from 1949 to 1952, as Secretary of the Sub-Committee for Old Houses, and as Vice-President.

Both Oxfordshire and Berkshire have many historic buildings that would have been lost but for his devoted work. His scholarship combined detailed knowledge of all aspects of architectural studies with extensive research into archival collections. His camera recorded what would otherwise have passed into oblivion.

He was indefatigable in his work for local institutions, using his influence as a senior member of Oxford City Council (he was Lord Mayor in 1968-9) in the interests of the Oxford Archaeological Excavation Committee, and the Oxford City and County Museum (now the Department of Museum Services).

Peter Spokes will be remembered for his scholarly bibliographies, his steadfast endeavours in the cause of conservation, and his work on the history of buildings. We remember him gratefully for the encouragement which he gave to those of a younger generation to whom he was not afraid to give responsibility.

Richard Foster, Tom Hassall, David Hinton