

Reviews

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

The Archaeology of the Oxford Region, Ed. by Grace Briggs, Jean Cook and Trevor Rowley. Oxford University Department for External Studies, 1986. Pp. 189; 18 maps, 19 figs., and 8 pls. but no index.

Rowley claims in the Preface that this book is a sixty-year-delayed companion to Sir Cyril Fox's *Archaeology of the Cambridge Region*. This is not quite the case: Fox produced a large book that contains virtually a catalogue of Cambridgeshire's antiquities, but *Archaeology of the Oxford Region* is more of a narrative and much less comprehensive. Being the work of several authors, it lacks the cohesion of approach that Fox could bring to bear, and which Michael Aston and Ian Burrow achieved for Somerset – for Oxfordshire is not the only county to have a recent survey of its archaeology published. Aston and Burrow also used many more illustrations, and it is a disappointment to find that *Archaeology of the Oxford Region* does not similarly have pictures and text thoroughly integrated. It is, however, the first systematic review of the county's archaeology since *The Oxford Region: A Scientific and Historical Survey* was published in 1954, and would be welcome for that alone.

Many contributors stress that Oxfordshire is an artificial unit and that it needs to be seen as part of a wider geographical area, but Young is right to point out that the 1974 boundaries have at least improved the position by bringing together the two sides of the Thames. Nevertheless it has to be faced that the different geological zones that run through Oxfordshire mean that man has had very different environments with which to deal, the high ground of the limestone belt being a great contrast to the low-lying Thames valley. The various authors could deal with this constraint either by stretching their studies far beyond the county borders, or by ignoring the peripheries and concentrating upon the valley gravels. Roe is almost forced to take the former approach, as the Palaeolithic is not well represented in Oxfordshire, and by tools rather than by recognisable activity-areas. There is little more evidence for the Mesolithic, but Case shows that new information can be expected from below the Neolithic long barrow at Ascott-under-Wychwood, one of the most important excavations of the 1960s, which well merits the page of photographs that it receives. Bradley deals characteristically with the Bronze Age by apologising for using the term, and he too is able to make good use of recent excavation results. Miles, in a very readable contribution, shows how these have affected understanding of the Iron Age by producing environmental data which allow a realistic assessment of the economy. Young, for the Roman period, has a little less new material to draw upon, but he too is able to stress the value of information on the rural economy.

The book is unbalanced by an overlong contribution by Hawkes, whose chapter is really an attempt at a defence of the traditional, politically and ethnically obsessed,

archaeology of the early Saxon period which has now been undermined so effectively by sustained source criticism. Metalwork predominates, yet still as individual items, not as parts of 'data-kits' as they are treated by Pader, whose name is significantly lacking from the bibliography. There is little here on the rural economy. Even in its concentration on objects, the survey is incomplete, for there is nothing on the gold coinage, yet a mint at Dorchester has been suggested by Michael Dolley. The rest of the Saxon period is dealt with by Hassall, in a brief and relevant contribution. Hassall is also responsible for the next chapter, on the city of Oxford. This is an admirable summary, which demonstrates clearly the major advances that have been made in understanding the topography, the buildings and the availability of marketed products. Bond is allowed by the editors to repeat some of this information, but in other respects his is a useful contribution, written with an eye to the Sites and Monuments Record maps that follow after an explanatory introduction by Steane. Yet why does the book stop here? There is nothing on post-medieval or industrial archaeology, without which it is incomplete.

Any multi-author compilation is liable to be a curate's egg: this one is far from addled though it will very soon cease to seem new-laid, for there is less in it that will stand the test of time than there is in its 1954 predecessor. This is because – and it is not necessarily a fault – the contributors have aimed at up-to-date current summaries; it is to be hoped, therefore, that the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s will add new information and ideas that will create demand for another survey in much less than thirty years' time.

DAVID A. HINTON

Harwell Millennium Book Committee, *Harwell: Village for a Thousand Years*. Harwell Parish Council, 1985. Pp. 116 + appendices and many illustrations. Price £4.

Compared with many villages in what was formerly north Berkshire, Harwell and its history has been well served. In addition to the very dated coverage in the *Victoria History* shared by all villages, those interested in Harwell's history can turn to a number of other valuable published works¹ including *Robert Loder's Farm Accounts* edited by G.E. Fussell, A. Fletcher's studies of the Tudor and Stuart period, and J.M. Fletcher's work on various local buildings. This new contribution, whilst drawing effectively on such existing studies, is different from them in that it is the product of a committee. Twenty-six individuals are acknowledged as contributors to the text alone, and the list of those who assisted with other aspects of the production and who provided photographs and other materials brings the total to more than twice that number. It is very much the fruit of collective local effort.

The editor, Barbara McIlroy, makes modest claims for the new book. It 'has been compiled as a souvenir of Harwell's recorded life of one thousand years.' Whilst 'a book of this kind has many shortcomings,' it is hoped that 'as a collection it may prove of interest not only to Harwell people but many others, who either have left the village or have some other connection with it.' Beyond this a possible stimulus to further research is envisaged.

The approach employed is basically a chronological one, devoting most attention to the 19th and 20th centuries. The story begins with finds in the parish of Roman coins

¹ Listed as Appendix V.

and an Anglo-Saxon cemetery of c.500 A.D. but, to the authors, the real beginning is marked by three charters of 956 to 985 A.D. which 'are the first record of Harwell as "a place on the map"', hence the book's title. Aspects subsequently dealt with include the medieval manors (one of them a retreat from plague for Magdalen College members), and the rise of the Lodgers from husbandmen to gentry in four generations, part of a wider pattern of social polarisation in the early modern village. The mid 17th-century village experienced, apparently without harm, a three-day visitation by the Earl of Manchester and his soldiers but, two centuries later, Harwell was devastated by a great fire graphically reported in the local press. Given the serious limitations of contemporary fire-fighting techniques in a largely thatched village, a total of nine farmsteads and 21 other dwelling-houses were destroyed. From 1882 the inhabitants were helped in coping with less dramatic visitations, of illness, by the indefatigable Dr. Richard Rice who was ceaselessly active in Harwell and the adjacent parishes until his retirement in 1945. By then a major turning-point in Harwell's history had been marked by the creation of an RAF station nearby in 1937. This site was taken over in 1946 by the Atomic Energy Research Establishment which has dominated local life ever since.

The text is interesting and lively throughout and is excellently supported by a wealth of illustrations which are very well produced. The bulk of them are photographs, including some fine modern ones and others depicting scenes dating from the end of the last century onwards.

The book does not claim to offer a coherent and analytical history of Harwell so it should not be judged by that standard, but at times it does threaten to degenerate into a collection of snippets, however fascinating. Readers would also benefit from slightly fuller treatment of some important themes. For example, what is to be made of the entry for Harwell in Domesday Book, printed in translation but with no further word of explanation or comment? Similarly, the early 19th-century enclosure is sold very short with a little on general background, a small map, and a list of family names on it. Something about the acreage involved, the existence of any old enclosures, and the pattern of land ownership would have been helpful. The statement on page 10 that the Black Death 'killed about four million people, or half the population of England' seems to be an isolated case of unreliable comment.

Overall, the many contributors are to be congratulated on the book. It meets the declared objectives in an interesting and professional way. The audience, the people of Harwell and others associated with the village, has again been well served by a publication more widely accessible than earlier ones.

JOHN BROOKS

The Muster Certificates for Berkshire, 1522. Ed. and transcribed by John Brooks and Nigel Heard. Oxford Polytechnic Faculty of Modern Studies Occasional Papers, 1986. Pp. 28, ff. 131. Obtainable from the Dept. of Humanities.

The muster certificates contain lists of the names of able-bodied men over the age of 16, and often also of their military equipment. In some counties, like Berkshire, information on the value of the land and goods, and on the status of those listed is also given. Such muster lists were first compiled in 1522, overtly to gain a more accurate measure of the manpower and weapons available to the government of Henry VIII, who was pursuing an expensive foreign policy involving war with France. They came at an

interesting juncture when awareness was high of the dangers of dependence for recruitment on the personal followings of important landowners, and of the anarchic implications of over-mighty subjects. Less explicit was the potential use of the muster rolls for fiscal purposes. The evidence suggests that in some areas they formed the basis for the lay subsidies levied the following year and first collected in 1524–5. These lay subsidies are better-known to historians than the muster returns. The aim of this publication is to make available the surviving muster certificates for Berkshire and to demonstrate their usefulness in research across a wide range of population, economic, social, local and family history.

The text of the Berkshire returns, taken from originals amongst the Court of Augmentations miscellaneous books in the P.R.O., is accompanied by a useful introduction explaining the background to the taking of the returns and the form of the original documents, and reviewing the general secondary works on this source. It is clear from this that the Berkshire certificates are amongst the fullest and, therefore, potentially most useful. They list, by parish, the names of the lord(s), his steward, the incumbent (with the value of the benefice), and other males over 16, usually distinguishing between freeholders, householders, labourers and servants. Valuations in land or goods appear beside the names. Returns survive for nine hundreds in the county – Shrivenham, Faringdon, Lambourn, Wantage, Ganfield, Faircross, Kintbury, Eagle and Compton. For five of these areas people rated on goods have been marked as tenants of local landholders. Here there is a large amount of information for western Berkshire (and thus post-1974 Oxfordshire). How may it be of use to researchers?

Estimating pre-parish register population levels and assessing the distribution and size of settlement in this period of supposed stagnation over 150 years after the Black Death, is an obvious focus of interest. W.G. Hoskins has written, 'The vagaries of Tudor statistics are often beyond explanation, and nowhere more so than in muster returns' (*The Age of Plunder* (1976) p. 15). One cannot disagree with this but, armed with the experience of earlier researchers, there is much to be gleaned from the muster lists. Most of this earlier work is referred to in the introduction but to it should be added the discussion of sixteenth-century population levels in E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871* (1981) pp. 563–9.

The potential for finding out about tenurial relationships, possible patterns of gentry influence and local social structure is obvious. Similarly relative wealth between places and between people described as being of the same or different status may be explored. Finally those in pursuit of named individuals or families may turn to these pages with profit. This publication makes available an under-used source, which offers much of interest in itself, and even more so when used with other evidence from the same period.

KATE TILLER

Calendar of the Court Books of the Borough of Witney 1538–1610. Ed. by J.L. Bolton and M.M. Maslen. Oxfordshire Record Society, Vol. LIV for 1981–2, 1985. Pp. xcvi, 260; 3 maps. Copies available to non-members price £12.00 (exclusive of postage and packing) from the Hon. Secretary, Oxfordshire Record Society, Bodleian Library, Oxford OX1 3BG.

This substantial addition to published town records for Oxfordshire makes available, as a calendar in modern English, the proceedings of a court which sat once every three or

four weeks to hear various civil pleas and discharge certain administrative functions. It was distinct from a manorial leet held by the Bishop of Winchester or his lessees and while the latter survived until 1925, the borough court became moribund in the early 17th century. The two books edited here are the only surviving record of its proceedings and were preserved in the parish chest, rather than passing into the custody of either the manor or the local authority.

The calendar is prefaced by a lengthy introduction which, with a glossary, runs to nearly a hundred pages and outlines the growth of the borough as well as the work of the court. Many small towns appear to have had courts such as this one; only exceptionally do details of proceedings survive and thus this volume has considerable general interest for both legal historians and students of early modern urban history. The Witney court did little criminal business, presumably because such cases were heard by the justices of the peace. It was, on the other hand, frequently resorted to by suitors from the town and surrounding parishes seeking recovery of small debts. The court also dealt with public health and other matters which elsewhere would have been the concern of the lord's leet. Deeds binding covenanted servants to their masters were enrolled, as were some conveyances of real estate as well as transactions involving the burgesses' own property. The range of business illustrates the variety of local practice which existed in small towns as to which institution actually undertook certain duties which Tudor legislation laid on the parish rather than the manor.

The second part of the introduction discusses the economic and social history of Witney in the 16th century, drawing mainly on consistory and prerogative court probate records and assessments to parliamentary taxation. Although interesting, it is perhaps arguable that an essay of this kind belongs in the pages of *Oxoniensia*, rather than a record society publication.

The text of the two court books has been calendared on sensible lines, making accessible many details of topographical or genealogical interest and removing any need normally to consult the original. There are separate indexes to persons, places and subjects, all of which, like the text, follow Hunnisett recommendations. My only quibble is that had sittings of the court been numbered, index references to those numbers would have been slightly more precise than the page numbers used by the editors. Otherwise, the book is an excellent addition to a fine series.

PHILIP RIDEN

Stanley C. Jenkins, *The Fairford Branch: The Witney & East Gloucestershire Railway*. Oxford, Oakwood Press, Locomotion Papers 86, 1985. Pp. 152, plates, maps and plans. Price £4.95.

One of the most highly-developed aspects of British transport historiography is the detailed history of railway companies which existed prior to the Grouping in 1923, or of one of the 'Big Four' which were created then and lasted until nationalisation in 1948. A visit to any specialist bookseller will reveal just how many such books are in print at any one time, by a wide variety of publishers. Alongside these must be placed the technical histories of locomotives, carriages and even goods wagons, catering to what must be a large, even voracious, market for this type of 'history'. Far less common are syntheses of the social and economic impact of the railway in Britain by professional transport and other historians, aimed at a rather different market.

The work under review is one of a type which bridges the gap between these two widely divergent types of transport history, being both a detailed history of a small fragment of the railway network, and set within a wider local historical context. It is one of a series produced by Oakwood Press over many years, but is both longer and weightier than many of its predecessors. So much so that it is difficult to see that it will not be the last word on the subject of the branch line from Yarnton Junction to Witney and Fairford, closed in the early 1960s in the Beeching era. Every aspect of the history of the Witney and East Gloucestershire Railways is lovingly recorded, and illustrated with a wealth of photographs, both old and new, together with a goodly number of maps, plans and even elevations of the stations and other structures on the line.

Thus far, Mr. Jenkins provides us with a good example of the genus branch-line history, at once typical and exhaustive. There are, however, some features which set this book apart from many of its companions. It is in fact an updated version of the author's history of the line published in 1974, expanded to include material from his Leicester local history thesis on *Victorian Witney and Its Railway* (1975). This means that much invaluable information on the people behind the promotion of the lines and their social and economic impact on the local communities is included. The famous blanket mills of Witney were provided with a new outlet to the national market at a time when they might have been expected to decline in the face of competition from northern mill towns. The photographs of 'Blanket Specials' destined for Maples of London are a salutary reminder that it was not only the carriage of minerals and other bulky materials which was affected by the railway. It is true, however, that the import of cheap coal and certain building materials into rural Oxfordshire was another great benefit of the railway, and one which survived through the Beeching period until 1970, when the line was finally closed.

Local landowners, such as Walter Strickland of Cokethorpe Park, first chairman of the Witney Railway, and Sir Charles Russell of Charlton Park, a leading light in the history of the struggle to provide an alternative route to Cheltenham by way of these two minor lines, and industrialists like the Earlys of Witney were not the only people involved in the provision of these two railways. Local craftsmen such as the builder Malachi Bartlett made a substantial contribution to the building of the line and its stations.

It is interesting through this book to contrast the fortunes of the two railways which made up this twenty-mile branch line. The Witney railway, opened amid great celebrations in 1861, was relatively successful, as the revenue data tabulated on p. 21 show. The East Gloucestershire, on the other hand, led nowhere in particular, and was always underutilised. It was a failure because all the various schemes to project it as part of a through line to Cheltenham, in competition with the Great Western, ultimately came to nought, and alternative routes to London by way of the London & North Western or the Midland Railways were eventually ruled out when the GWR itself took over the two smaller companies and ensured that the line remained a relatively obscure appendage to its system. The Fairford branch remained with its western terminus poised for extension to Cirencester and beyond. The remote, often eerie landscape of the upper Thames near Lechlade always retained the qualities which had doubtless drawn William Morris to Kelmscott. Only the wartime development of airfields, notably Brize Norton, brought much life to this end of the line, but after the war, the renaissance of road traffic which had begun in the thirties soon put paid to the line.

Although one might cavil at the welter of statistical and descriptive detail which characterise this type of history, it does at least ensure that material relating to many aspects of local history is put on record in an easily accessible form. The study is placed

within not only the context of railway politicking but also the local community during a century which saw unprecedented change. It is difficult now to imagine the impact which the building of the line and its subsequent operation must have had on local people who had previously measured journeys into Oxford in hours, but who now had the chance to travel on cheap excursions to the South Coast, to London and other parts of the network. One great merit of a history of this type is that it provides information across a wide spectrum of parishes and communities, thereby overcoming the rather blinkered approach which so often besets local historical writing.

In general the book is well produced and presented, although there are perhaps rather too many views of certain stations, albeit some of them unusual. The pictures of farm carts and waggons are a reminder that road transport remained essential as a feeder to the railway, even if long-distance coaches along the London-Cheltenham road were a thing of the past by 1870. Typographical errors appear to be few; however, the first-class fare from Witney to Oxford quoted on p.16 can hardly have been 1s. 6d.

This history will be of interest not only to the railway branch-line enthusiast, but also to local people along the branch, many of whom are less mobile now than they were a century ago, in communities which have little or no public transport. It will provide a good foundation for more detailed studies of how the railway impacted upon the lives of the inhabitants and on local industry and agriculture. Meanwhile, the alignment remains in many areas as an industrial-archaeological monument to Victorian enterprise.

KEITH BAILEY