

Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

Wildlife of the Bristol Region – series published by Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre (BRERC), all Hbk. and profusely illustrated.

The flora of the Bristol region, by Ian P. Green *et al.* 2000, vi, 276 pp., out-of-print, ISBN 978-1-874357-18-6.

The butterflies of the Bristol region, by Ray Barnett *et al.* 2003, viii, 205 pp., £24.95, ISBN 978-0-9545235-0-3.

The moths of the Bristol region, by Ray Barnett *et al.* 2008, 526 pp., £33.50, ISBN 978-0-9545235-1-0.

Dragonflies and damselflies of the Bristol region, by Ray Barnett *et al.* 2013, vi, 150 pp., £19.50, ISBN 978-0-9545235-2-7.

Geological sites of the Bristol region, by Kathryn Stagg *et al.* 2018, 296 pp., £19.50, ISBN 978-0-9545235-3-4.

BRERC covers a region centred on Bristol and Bath, extending from Thornbury south to the Mendips, and from Weston-super-Mare to the Cotswolds. Within this area it is the major repository of environmental data, supported by local authorities and wildlife groups. As such it excels at authoritative facts and figures, distribution maps, good photography and scientific illustrations, which all the volumes in this series have. They are beautifully produced in hardback and, of course, have detailed indexes and extensive bibliographies. Attention to detail is a given. Each is the work of a team of writers, editors and compilers, containing comprehensive taxonomic and distribution data. Each also gives some subject background for the non-expert reader, covering landscape, habitats, conservation status, biodiversity and some explanation of technical terms.

However, scientific information is only part of the attraction of these books. How such information can be used is also an important part of science, and a ‘finding out more’ section, with online sources, is included in all the volumes. The ‘Moths’ volume (at 526 pages the longest) has particularly helpful information on use of moth records, the nature conservation value of moths as a group, and a list of species which have not been recorded since 1990 – in several cases the last sighting was in the 19th century. There is also an appendix of probably erroneous records. The ‘Butterflies’ volume introduces the reader to the field activities of watching and studying butterflies, with case notes from several specific sites, and information on local and national butterfly organisations. Along with others in the series, this volume details how records and other raw data can contribute to

environmental research, local planning and development, pollution control, land management and education.

A sense of history also infuses the books. Each has a section on the development of the study of the organisms over time, with biographical notes on local collectors and lengthy lists of recorders. Perhaps the earliest, though informal, record is a comment by one William Turner who noted finding a particular plant ‘a little from Bristow’ in 1592. Butterfly and moth recording started to develop systematically in the 17th century, dragonfly recording in the 20th. Each volume has details of how records have been kept in the past, where the historical data is now stored and how it can be accessed and used. Alongside history, the volumes give a lot of biographical information on collectors and recorders. Botanists are the most numerous, but every volume has some details of local experts in their field. Sometimes there is a picture of the expert actually in a field, but, overall, pictures of plants, insects or geology greatly outnumber pictures of people.

Although a series, the books do have individual characteristics. ‘Dragonflies and damselflies’ is the shortest volume, but possibly the most profusely illustrated with beautiful colour photographs and a couple of lovely watercolours. The title page bears a poetic description, by Tennyson, no less, of the final larval moult. It also wins on historical perspective, starting with a chapter on dragonflies in the geological record, three hundred million years ago. ‘Moths’ includes a useful and practical essay on ‘Photographing moths’. ‘Flora’ (with the benefit of static subjects) is able to include the most distribution maps, 1,008 in all.

‘Geological sites’, with which the series name changed to Wildlife and Geology of the Bristol Region, has a specially written poem – ‘Set in Stone’ – as a frontispiece. It has a short section on geological concepts and the influence of geology on landscape, notes on early pioneers and local geological collections, and sites associated with William Smith, the ‘father of English geology’; there is also a poem by Smith on Tucking Mill. As an aid to using the literature there is a glossary and a chart of older and local names linked to the names in current usage. The book also includes discussion of some economic factors of geology, such as local building stones, and a brief history of the Somerset coalfield.

Overall, this series will appeal to environmentalists of all kinds, whether historically minded or keen to see field records in the service of 21st-century global problems.

SUE GOODMAN

Handlist of Somerset probate inventories and administrators' accounts, 1482-1924, by Adrian J. Webb, Somerset Record Society, vol. 98, 2019, xxxvi, 282 pp., £16.00, ISBN 978-0-901732-46-0.

This book lists 7,618 probate inventories for Somerset covering the period 1482 to 1924. It includes documents from collections at the Somerset Heritage Centre from four document collections: D/D/Cta, 1577-1748, D/D/Cti, 1705-1750, D/D/ct/1, 1575-1640 and DD/SP, c. 1609-1755, plus over 350 inventories from private deposits. There is one inventory from Lambeth Palace Library, and others from Bristol Archives for Bedminster, Clapton, Combhay, Dunster, Keynsham, Long Ashton, Portbury and Wellington. There are 62 inventories from Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, and also included are records from The National Archives, London, in document classes PROB 2 (1417-1660), PROB 3 (1702, 1718-82), PROB 4 (1660-c. 1720), PROB 5 (1661-c. 1725), PROB 31 (1722-1858) and PROB 37 (1783-1858).

There are six examples (full transcripts). These give details of the goods and property owned by the deceased with the value of each. There is an alphabetical list by surname giving the place and year of probate with the document reference. There is also a place name index and an index of occupations.

This is a most useful reference book for local and family historians.

DAVID T. HAWKINGS

Branch Lines to Chard, by Ian Harrison, Lightmoor Press, 2019, 320 pp., illus., £35, ISBN 978-1-911038-52-8.

This is a substantial hardback publication totalling 320 pages, and printed on high-quality paper. It contains 303 black-and-white photographs and 96 in full colour.

There are 151 maps, diagrams, reproduced notices and extracts of documents and schedules covering the operation of the line.

Chapters 1-6 detail the history of the line in chronological order from opening until closure 103 years later. It begins with a detailed description of the short-lived canal link from the Bristol Channel to Chard, the history of which is closely linked to the building of the northern part of the railway. The book deals in considerable detail with the number of schemes proposed in the early 19th century, firstly for a ship canal and followed by several railway schemes that never came to fruition.

It further describes the geography of the area which dictated the routes of the two main lines from London

to Exeter, both running roughly north-east to south-west and both by-passing Chard, one twelve miles to the north and one three miles to the south. Chard was left with no railway link, until a line running approximately north to south was eventually built in two parts by two powerful competing railway companies. The London and South-Western, later the Southern Railway, reached Chard via a standard-gauge branch from Chard Road, later renamed Chard Junction, from the south in 1863. The Bristol and Exeter, later to be merged with the Great Western, reached Chard with a broad-gauge branch from Taunton in 1866. The intense competition between the companies which shaped the next 50 years is well documented in the book. Each railway operated its own stations in Chard, with minimal co-operation, until First World War economic necessity brought about the concentration of all passenger services at the Great Western station in 1917. Goods traffic was still dealt with at the two separate stations until total closure in 1966.

Chapters 7-14 give a comprehensive description of the line, including the main-line stations, from Chard Junction to Taunton. Each station on the line is described in considerable detail, with accompanying photographs, plans and diagrams. The considerable changes that took place over the years are covered in detail, from the steady expansion of services and facilities in the early years, to a period of enforced co-operation between the wars, and finally the gradual decline after the Second World War.

The use of part of the route of the line during World War Two for defences against possible invasion, known as the South-West Stop Line, is dealt with briefly in this book, and is well documented in other publications. The route from Chard to Ilminster is now a cycle path, giving a close-up view of some of the substantial engineering features on the line, a legacy of its broad-gauge origins, and an interesting view of the surviving wartime defences.

Chapters 15 and 16 deal with the operation of the line in remarkable detail, the train services, both passenger and freight, and the locomotives and rolling stock that was used on the line. A few mishaps occurred over the years, and these are described together with photographs and the inevitable inquiries that followed.

Appendices 1-4 contain the timetables, maps, signalling systems, working diagrams for staff, rolling stock and locomotives. The detail of this section is quite remarkable, accurately covering the many changes that took place in all aspects of its operation over the life of the line.

The detail and accuracy that has been achieved in this publication could only have been possible through painstaking research over a long period. A good proportion of the photographs in the book have never been published before, and considering that all of the originals are at least 59 years old, with many older than that, the quality of reproduction is generally of a very high standard.

This publication would be an incredibly valuable reference resource for anyone wishing to study the transport element of the social history of the area, for the railway enthusiast, and for railway modellers.

In conclusion, this publication is of the highest quality in content and material, meticulously researched and, as far as I can determine, accurate in every detail. It is a high-quality publication in every respect.

DEREK COAKER

Biographical sketches of Somerset Folk Singers, part 1: years 1903-05, part 2: year 1906, part 3: years 1907-16, by David Sutcliffe, privately published, 2018-19, 70, 80, 80 pp., price not shown.

Somerset is well-known for its position as the epicentre of the early 20th-century English folk song revival, mainly but not entirely due to the work of Cecil Sharp in meeting local singers from around the county and transcribing their songs. Some of these singers are well known, for example John England of Hambridge (from whom Sharp collected his first song, 'The Seeds of Love', in 1903); Louie Hooper, also of Hambridge, and John Short of Watchet. However Sharp had contact with some 350 singers many of whom are little known.

David Sutcliffe, local singer and Morris dancer, has already described, in his book 'The Keys of Heaven', the collaboration between Sharp and Rev. Charles Marson, vicar of Hambridge¹. In these volumes he sets out details of all of these singers, based on a range of material, published and unpublished. The research was carried out in preparation for a paper given to the English Folk Dance and Song Society Folksong Conference in 2018². It is fortunate that the renewed interest in traditional English songs before the First World War coincided with the availability of detailed local information such as the decennial national censuses of population and the 25" Ordnance Survey maps. Today genealogical research is helped by such services as ancestry.com.

The result of this detailed research is three volumes of 'biographical sketches', the first for 1903-5, the second for 1906 and the third for 1907-16. In each volume, after a map and a summary which notes the number of singers and their occupations, details of each singer's life are set down, listed geographically for different areas of the county (e.g. Hambridge area; Bridgwater Town etc). Some singers merit only a small entry (Alice Davy of Minehead/Dunster has only two lines – 'no biographical details possible') whereas Betsy Holland of Simonsbath receives two full pages in which not only are her details recorded but also those of her family.

These three printed volumes are only part of the project. There is also a website³ which in addition to

Somerset singers will include those from Cornwall, Devon and Gloucestershire.

Comment: This is an impressive piece of work, and very necessary. While many singers are known by name there has, over the years, been more interest in their songs rather than the social and economic context although this is changing with work by David Sutcliffe, Yvette Staelens and others. These volumes and the associated website will be of interest and value as a source of information in several ways:

- for people researching their family history;
- for writers of village histories;
- for studies of the social and economic life of the county at the beginning of the 20th century;
- as well as the general reader who just wishes to browse in the hope of finding something of interest.

If I have any criticism it is of the layout and not the excellent content. The pages should be numbered with the index relating singers to the page and the singers could usefully be in alphabetical order (within each area). It would have been helpful to have more illustrations and local maps (although I understand that this is planned for the website). However this does not detract from the author's achievement.

1. David Sutcliffe (2010): *The Keys to Heaven: The Life of Revd Charles Marson, Socialist Priest and Folk Song Collector*.
2. David Sutcliffe (2018): *Cecil Sharp and the Rev. Charles Marson: The Early Years of Song Collecting in Somerset, August 1903-September 1905*.
3. www.cecilsharppeople.org.uk

DAVID RABSON

Doris Hatt: Revolutionary Artist, by Adrian J. Webb, Christopher Stone, Denys J. Wilcox and Stephen Lisney, South West Heritage Trust, 2019, 48 pp., illus., £7.99, ISBN 978-0-9573802-6-4.

Doris Hatt was a talented artist, whose career spanned most of the 20th century, from 1915 when as a student at Goldsmiths College, London, a First World War recruiting poster she designed won a competition and was used throughout the country; until her death in 1969. She could probably be described as being of the European Modernist School and with her ever-changing art had some influence in her native Bristol, especially as a leading member of the Clifton Arts Club, but being a provincial woman was unjustly overlooked at the national level.

This little book, published to accompany the exhibition of her works *A Life in Colour: the Art of Doris Hatt*

curated by Dr Denys J. Wilcox and held at The Museum of Somerset, Taunton, 16 March - 29 June 2019, gives a concise account of her life, extensively illustrated with examples of her work, allowing the reader to enjoy her love of line and colour as she experimented with different developments in European Art as the century progressed.

Doris was born in Bath but from the 1920s she lived in Clevedon. She was a painter of still lifes, portraits, but predominantly landscapes, and drew inspiration from the local landscape of Somerset, especially the Quantocks and the Somerset Levels, as well as making trips further west to Dorset, Devon and Cornwall.

But it was not just as an artist that Doris was extraordinary, her strength of character was remarkable. Despite being born into a reasonably affluent family she lived her life by socialist principles, eventually joining the Communist Party and making her politics clear by standing as the Communist Party candidate for the local council in the late 1940s. She was also a committed feminist and she had a life-long partnership with another woman, Margery Mack Smith, who moved into her house in 1929. As well as painting, Doris shared her enthusiasm for contemporary art by giving talks and encouraging local artists and, unusually for a woman in the 1930s, she designed her own house.

The main text of the book is complemented by two additional sections. The first is an extract from *Half my Days and Nights* by Hubert Nicholson¹ in which Nicholson gives a fascinating insight into Doris and her life in the 1930s when he got to know her, and which says a lot about how she was seen by her contemporaries.

The book ends with *How to Look at Pictures: notes for a short talk* which reproduces the text Doris wrote for one of her public talks and gives a very illuminating insight into her enthusiasm and love of art in Doris's own words.

This book is tiny but a gem, worth looking at not only by those who have an interest in modern art but also those wanting to know more about local social history. I am very pleased to have been introduced to this extraordinary woman and can only second the authors' concluding remarks as they '...hope the current reappraisal of Doris Hatt's life and art will gain her new friends and admirers, and bring the wider recognition and standing she surely deserves.'

1. William Heinemann, London 1941

RACHEL BILLINGE

The Missing Lynx: The Past and Future of Britain's Lost Mammals, by Ross Barnett, Bloomsbury Wildlife, 2019, 320 pp., numerous maps and 8 pp. of col. photographs; lists of species and references, index, Hbk. £16.99, ISBN 978-1-4729-5734-4, Pbk. £10.99, ISBN 978-1-4729-5735-1, Ebk. ISBN 978-1-4729-5733-7.

This eminently readable book provides the reader with an excellent introduction to our 'missing' mammalian megafauna; the large mammals that roamed Britain in the recent past. Folk memories, place names and their abundant remains, found mainly in caves (including those of Mendip), testify to their former presence. They are not here now – but we, *Homo sapiens*, are.

The bulk of the book comprises separate chapters considering the lives (and ultimate fate) of individual species – although two, *Mammuthus primigenius* and *Coelodonta antiquitatis*, are grouped together as 'woollies' (nothing to do with sheep!). We start with cave hyaena and proceed, roughly in the order of their extinction, through sabretooth cat, cave lion, Irish elk (shelk), bovids, bears, lynx and wolf to beaver.

Many of you probably think, as I thought, that the history of these extinctions had been well established some time ago. I was brought up short by the phrase 'Way back in 2006'. Advances in technology during the last decade have required everything written earlier to be re-evaluated.

Dr Barnett wrote his thesis on sabretooths; not surprisingly, that chapter is one of the most exciting. The American, *Smilodon populator* (dirk-toothed cat), is the best known species but *Homotherium latidens* (scimitar-toothed cat) was its more ferocious European equivalent. The sabretooths were thought to have become extinct at the end of the Pleistocene (30,000 years ago, before modern humans appeared on the scene). Yet a cluster of five canine teeth and an incisor were found (c. 1850) in Kents Cavern (Devon) – where the oldest radiocarbon-dated modern human in Britain was found.

The well-known Piltdown Man fraud was not the only example of Victorian archaeological skulduggery and the hunt for *Homotherium* teeth is not above suspicion. Those five (upper) canines and an incisor cannot have come from fewer than three skulls and, from an anatomical point of view, we might have expected other teeth as well. Suspecting of being fishy, the teeth were tested in detail. The outer layers proved that the they had lain in the deposit in which they were found for some 50,000 years; but the inner layers showed that the cats had lived somewhere else. The teeth had been moved to Kents Cavern after the death of their owners!

Of course, prehistoric man need not have known *Homotherium* in the flesh to have valued the teeth as 'trophies' but this discovery has generated many questions awaiting answers.

The book is full of stories like this and I could have chosen many others to illustrate my point, but linking all the chapters is the growing conviction that the progressive extinction of the mammalian megafauna is closely linked to the inexorable increase of ourselves, *Homo sapiens*. Not to that of humans in general, however, since all members of that megafauna had co-existed with

the earlier species of *Homo* for millennia (*H. antecessor*, *H. heidelbergensis*, *H. neanderthalensis* etc.). Climate change played a part as well, as temperatures rose and the ice retreated. For the largest herbivores, changes in the vegetation may have been crucial and any human influence may have merely hastened an inevitable end.

For the cave bear, however, the expertise of our hunters in spearing hibernating animals – including a laboratory where novices could practice on a clay model – proved decisive.

No responsible person would advocate resurrecting sabretooths, cave hyaenas, cave lions or the ‘woollies’, even if that were possible, but the re-introduction of other species, still present elsewhere in Europe, could have many advantages. The beaver has led the way and there is a strong case for the lynx to follow. Wolves have proved to be a success in Yellowstone National Park...

For me, the abiding memory of this book will be a sentence on p. 93 and the subsequent footnote. First, the sentence: ‘Russian hunters have recently found two perfectly preserved cave lion cubs eroding out of the banks of the Uyandina River in Siberia.’ And now the footnote: ‘Two more cave lion cubs have also just been found. You wait 14,000 years for a cave lion and then four turn up at once!’

JOHN CROTHERS

The Common Buzzard, by Sam Walls and Robert Kenward. T. & A.D. Poyser, Bloomsbury, 2020, 304 pp., line drawings, photographs, figures. Hbk. £59.99, ISBN 978-1-4081-2525-0, Pbk. £34.99, ISBN 978-1-4729-7208.

The Common Buzzard is certainly a common bird-of-prey in Somerset. From the village where I live, in the Quantocks, I see the hawk in the air, or else one will be perched on a branch, patiently waiting for the sight of some prey item, perhaps a small mammal or some unwary bird. In particular, I recall spectacular soaring flights in springtime, as well as the monotonous food-begging calls of young birds in late summer and autumn. Yes, the Buzzard is a success story.

It seems that the authors are both well-qualified to write this book. Sam Wells and Robert Kenward both worked on Buzzard dispersal and survival in Dorset in the 1990s with the use of radio-tracking. In addition, the authors have drawn extensively on their experience as falconers: they have both flown Buzzards.

The controversial subject of conflict between driven

grouse shooting and raptorial birds is well discussed. Similarly, problems in the management of Pheasant shoots relating to Buzzards are considered in some detail.

The Common Buzzard is one of the most abundant hawks in the world; in Somerset, we commonly see the bird soaring on thermal currents with broad, outstretched, digitate wings. Across Europe, it seems that Buzzards have evolved an ability to adapt to local conditions, eating earthworms, voles, mice, rabbits, moles, birds or carrion.

The authors have searched the world raptor literature in detail. Some 500 scientific references are cited, which must have been a highly time-consuming task. Happily, the book’s text is eminently readable throughout.

I found the chapter on food and prey items of great interest, especially the production of feather fault-bars when the diet has been deficient. Also, Buzzards appear to regulate the amount they eat from day to day; thus, a day with ample food intake is followed by meagre rations on the next day. Much of the information on diet has been provided by falconers. Of course, food is necessary to supply energy for the bird, plus adequate amounts of mineral salts and vitamins as required for the bird’s health. I am reminded of occasions when I have kept watch near a Buzzard’s nest, binoculars poised, trying to identify prey items being carried in for the chicks.

Pellet analysis is very helpful in determining what food has been ingested; pellets which are found at roost sites are particularly helpful in providing information. Various bird species are commonly selected as prey, while rabbits and voles are favourites amongst mammals, with numbers varying according to their availability and abundance.

There is an excellent chapter on courtship and nesting behaviour, followed by another highly informative one on eggs, incubation and chick rearing. Without effective nesting behaviour, of course, a bird species cannot survive.

The book is enhanced by its artwork. Alan Harris has produced much of this, including an impressive front cover picture of two soaring Buzzards, together with a back cover showing the raptors searching for earthworms on grassland. Action photographs of the hawks have certainly increased the quality and interest of the book.

This well-written volume contains a wealth of information on the Common Buzzard. If you admire the Buzzards in our skies, I strongly advise you to buy a copy of the volume for your bookcase. You will not be disappointed.

PHILIP RADFORD