



Frontispiece: Edward Harbin Bates Harbin, died 1918, priest of Cucklington, Stoke Trister and Puckington; squire of Newton Surmaville. Bates Harbin was a leading member of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, of the Somerset Record Society and of the committee of the *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*. He served as the first local editor of the *VCH* in Somerset. See the paper 'Scholars in our Society's Past' by Dr R.W. Dunning pp. 1-8

SCHOLARS IN OUR SOCIETY'S PAST

R.W. DUNNING

Presidential Address given in Taunton 19th May 2001

The history of our Society has yet to be written and perhaps ought to be. Whoever takes on such a task will have to start with constitutions and committees and finances. This address is about some of the scholars who have been its members and who have contributed not a little to its prestige and to the pages of its *Proceedings*; and a highly select few about whose work I can speak with some knowledge. I have included no archaeologist, though I know what distinguished ones we have had in our midst from Arthur Bulleid and Harold St George Gray to Raleigh Radford. Neither are there geologists among this chosen few though William Buckland, dean of Westminster and the country's leading practitioner of his time, was present and spoke at the Society's first meeting in 1849. There are no natural historians here, either, though members of this Society were pioneers in many ways and continue among the most active of our members.

It is, unashamedly, a personal choice; a choice of historians whose connections with the Society as members, officers, even Presidents range in date between 1860 and 1940. I begin with two who joined respectively in 1860 and 1861. The first is Edward Augustus Freeman (Fig. 1), described at his death in 1892 as 'the Society's most distinguished member'.¹ He had already published two books on architecture and was in his late thirties when he bought a house called Somerleaze, actually in the out parish of St Cuthbert, Wells, but overlooking Wookey, of which he liked to be thought the Squire. The choice of home may have had something to do with childhood holidays at Weston super Mare with his grandmother and excursions to Barleywood to meet her great friend Hannah More.

Freeman knew Greek and Latin and some Hebrew by the time he was eleven but his undoubted brilliance had not been tempered by the rough-and-tumble of the company of boys of his own age. He was sometimes tactless and rude and was apt to overstate a case in controversy, and thus some of his fondest hopes were not realised. Yet what he achieved in several fields was amazing, and his regular contributions to the Society, as lecturer or commentator on the annual excursions and as author of papers in *Proceedings*, contributed much to the esteem in which the Society in his time was held.

On leaving Oxford in 1845 Freeman was unsure what to do. Should he take Holy Orders (he had been deeply affected by the Oxford Movement) or should he become an architect? No, was the answer to the first alternative since he believed clergy should be celibate and he wanted to get married. And 'not exactly' was the other possibility, but within four years he had published *A History of Architecture* which was a considerable achievement, especially for one who had at that time never travelled abroad. There followed *The History and Antiquities of St David's*,

¹ *SANH*, 38, 370

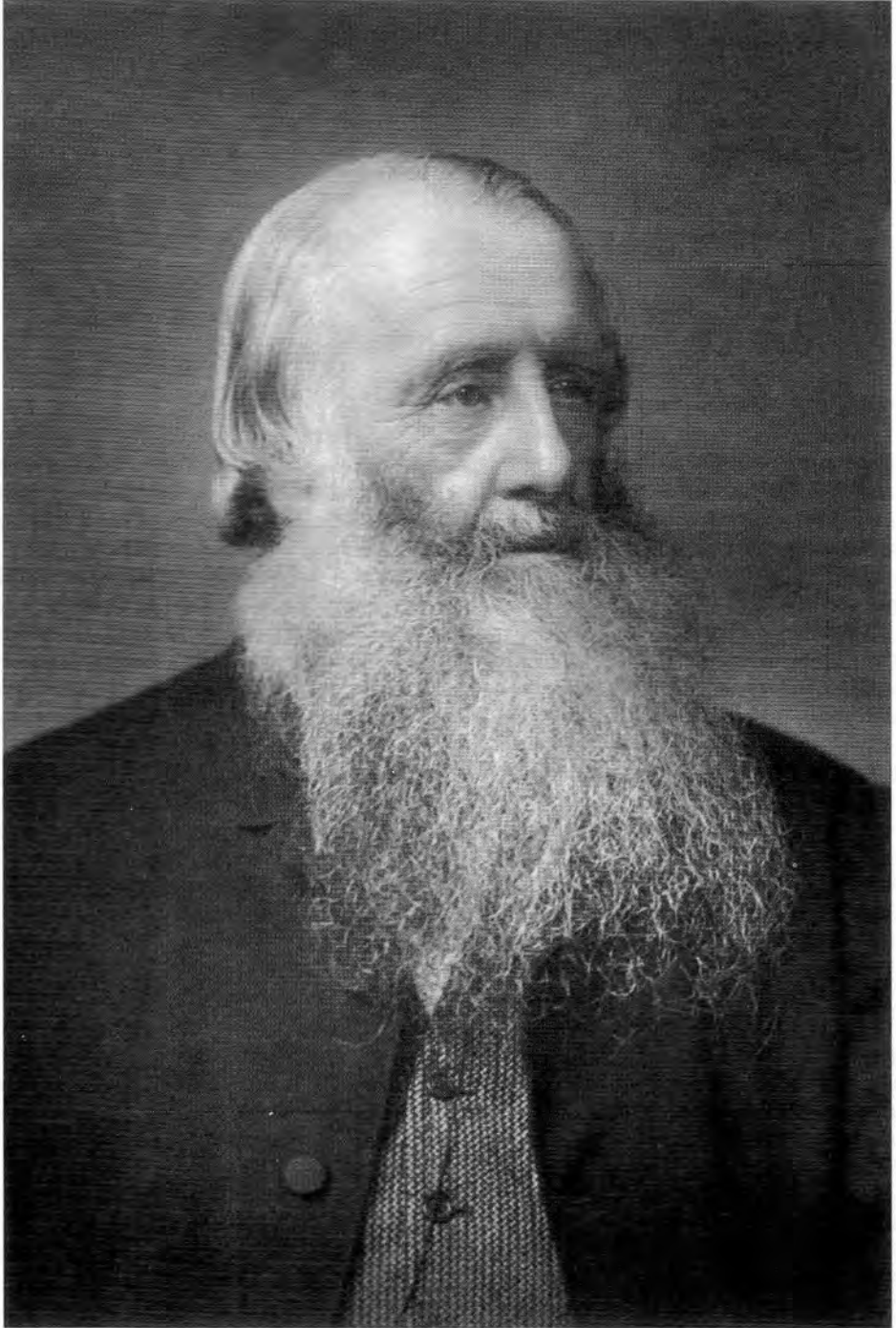


Fig. 1 Edward Augustus Freeman, died 1892, of Somerleaze, Wells: 'the Society's most distinguished member'

written jointly by Freeman and his friend W. B. Jones, which proved to be the scholarly basis of much-needed restoration of the cathedral a decade later and has recently been republished by Pembrokeshire County Council. After two successes, curiously a failure indicated a course he was in a sense to follow for the rest of his life. He wrote an essay for a university prize at Oxford on the effect of the Norman Conquest which received no reward. Thenceforward Freeman determined to read all he could find on the subject and between 1865 and 1869 produced his magisterial three-volume *History of the Norman Conquest* which may still be read with profit.

Before he settled finally in Somerset Freeman was something of a wandering scholar, first renting a house at Dursley and later one near Cardiff. A second strictly architectural book, on Gothic window tracery, was followed by a steady stream of articles and reviews for the *Saturday Review* and the *Guardian* on Greek and Roman history and a wide range of other subjects which led to politics and a deep interest in Greek and later Balkan independence. He stood for election to Parliament as an Independent Radical at Cardiff in 1857 and at Wallingford in 1858, on neither occasion actually going to the poll, and he failed again as a Gladstonian Liberal in the Mid Somerset constituency in 1868. In 1876 he was in trouble for words he may not have spoken about India and seriously upset leading Liberals, and when in 1886 he had been restored to political favour he was too unwell to stand again. His enthusiasm for the oppressed brought him in 1875 the orders of the Redeemer from Greece, of Takova from Serbia, and of Danilo from Montenegro. In 1876 he raised the enormous sum of £5,000 for the relief of Christians suffering under the Turkish Empire; and an article attacking blood sports which caused demonstrable suffering to the hunted (champion of the oppressed again) brought him sharp opposition from Anthony Trollope.

Amidst all this activity he continued to write and teach and attend the Society's excursions and annual meetings. As a new member in the 1860s he had experienced failure as three times the electors to chairs of History at Oxford overlooked his claims, but then in the 1870s both Oxford and Cambridge awarded him honorary doctorates. In 1884 a sympathetic government appointed him to the Regius Professorship of Modern History at Oxford in succession to William Stubbs. He was not long to enjoy the job, partly because he found he had no power to change how the subject was taught, partly because the undergraduates could not be compelled to attend his lectures, and partly because his health was failing. His new enthusiasms were the history of Sicily and the reign of Henry I, but only the first project was completed by the time of his death at Alicante in 1892.

The other early Society member, who joined in the year after Freeman, was Emanuel Green, ten years younger and a native of Holcombe. Most of his life was spent in London where he amassed a huge library of Somerset books which at his death passed to the City Library at Bristol. He found time, however, to be an active member and was Honorary Secretary 1881–1887 when to hold that post meant being editor of *Proceedings* and organiser of excursions. He had begun writing for *Proceedings* in 1867, was a founder member of the Record Society in 1886 and for it edited meticulously six important volumes. His greatest work, however, was his three-volume *Bibliotheca Somersetensis* of 1902, a list of all printed books and pamphlets on the county he had either collected himself or had personally handled.

Freeman and Green were both giants. In 1866 another joined the Society, two years after graduating from Oxford with a first in Law and Modern History. William Hunt was born in Bristol, the son of the then curate of Holy Trinity, Hotwells. He was ordained and was still his father's curate when he became a member, but soon was appointed vicar of Congresbury where in his ministry of 15 years he restored the church and built a school. He was Honorary Secretary of the Society for seven years in the 1870s but in 1882 left the county for London where, for the rest of his very long life (he died in 1931 in his 90th year) he became a professional historian,

contributing nearly 600 biographies for the *Dictionary of National Biography*,² wrote small books on the histories of Bath and Wells diocese and the city of Bristol, contributed regularly to the *Saturday Review* and acted as joint editor of what was at the time the best comprehensive *Political History of England*. His peers recognised his worth by making him President of the Royal Historical Society. He, like Green, was a founder member of the Somerset Record Society and edited (actually rather badly) the cartularies of Bath Abbey.³ Few of his fellow members in the Savile Club ever guessed he was a clergyman, but he has a reasonable claim to be 'among the great Victorian writers of eminence and distinction'.⁴ He was a member of our Society for 65 years.

That is not a record, for in 1870 a recent graduate from Christchurch, Oxford, became a member. His motive was probably genealogical; that is, this grandson of Henry Francis Lyte the hymn writer was a descendant of the Lytes of Lytes Cary. His mother was a descendant of the first duke of Marlborough's elder brother and thus a Churchill of Churchill, hence his name Henry Churchill Maxwell Lyte. In marrying in 1871 a daughter of J.C. Somerville of Dinder his Somerset credentials were absolute.

In 1886 Lyte became an archivist on the grand scale when he was appointed Deputy Keeper of the Public Records (the Keeper was the Master of the Rolls), a post he held with great distinction for 40 years. Those dark green volumes in the glass-fronted shelves in the corridor outside the Society's library, so essential to all historians of English history, are the product of his vision and energy. His three-volume *Book of Fees* is a mine of important information on early tenurial history.

Sir Henry, as he was known from 1897, was a Vice-President of the Society from 1910 (when he was also Vice-President of the Society of Antiquaries of London), another founder member of the Somerset Record Society and from 1892 a member of its council. He wrote eight important articles on Somerset families in our *Proceedings* including two on his own, compiled an equally important list of medieval clergy for the period when bishops' registers are missing and, at the annual meeting at Castle Cary in 1890 (the days when the meeting lasted three days and included excursions) he rejected the popular idea of a revised edition of Collinson's *History* and proposed that the Society should begin the long process of systematically collecting information for a suggested county history and that (typically for an archivist) the results 'should be filed, or bound, for permanent preservation at Taunton Castle'.⁵

Sir Henry was jointly or solely responsible for no less than nine volumes for the Record Society including two on Dunster (to add to the three on the subject he had already written), among them the invaluable series of bishops' registers between the 1440s and the 1550s which are the foundation of studies on the Reformation in the county. He was at work on the last within a few days of his death and Dean Malden, who saw the manuscript through the press, was 'unable to detect in it any trace of failing power'.⁶

By the time of Sir Henry's death in 1940 three other giants of the Society had long gone, all three, almost inevitably, clergymen. Frederick William Weaver (Fig. 2), a Staffordshire man and a mathematician, came in 1877 to join the staff of King's School, Bruton, and to serve as curate in the parish. In 1879 he took over the tiny living of Milton Clevedon nearby and, apparently with the encouragement of Bishop Edmund Hobhouse, joined our Society in 1883. He edited two important volumes, the *Visitations of the County of Somerset in the Years 1531 and 1575* in 1885 and *Somerset Incumbents* in 1889, four volumes of medieval wills, a cartulary

² He is the subject of an entry in the *New DNB* by the present writer

³ *Somerset Record Society*, 7

⁴ *SANH*, 77, 146

⁵ *Ibid.*, 36, 35-6

⁶ *Somerset Record Society*, 55, 17



Fig. 2 Frederick William Weaver, died 1933; sometime rector of Milton Clevedon; editor, hon. secretary, Vice President

and a feodary (five of those for the Record Society) and was from 1891 until 1917 joint editor of *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*.

As if that were not enough Weaver was Honorary Secretary of our Society from 1896 until 1919, editor or joint editor of our *Proceedings* from 1896 until 1916, excursions secretary and Vice-President. He died in Oxford in 1933 at the age of 81, remembered for his genial hospitality, his amusing talk, his bachelor existence in his large Vicarage, and his habits of wearing a clerical straw boater indoors and out and always carrying both a walking stick and an umbrella.

Coupled with him in his eccentric habits (and of course his love for Somerset) was Joseph Armitage Robinson, a native of Keynsham, who joined the Society only in 1908 – only, because he had been distinguishing himself as a scholar in the fields of Christian Apologetics and Armenian studies since the 1880s, was holder of honorary doctorates from two German universities, and had been Norrisian Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. History came to him rather late when he was found to be the only canon of Westminster in 1902 capable of organising the liturgy for the coronation of Edward VII. His reward was to be made Dean there at the early age of 44.

To be Dean of Westminster was not easy. His refusal to allow George Meredith to be buried in the abbey caused much trouble and yet another coronation in 1911 was more than he could bear. So he came to be Dean of Wells, contributed articles to our *Proceedings*, a volume for the Record Society, a biography of St Dunstan, and notable small but crucial works on the Glastonbury Legends, the early Saxon bishops of Wells, and on early archdeacons, the last of which has only just been superseded. *Spy* published a cartoon of the tall, gaunt, prematurely bent figure with long white hair and the grand title of Lord High Almoner which he once used to effect when he found himself in a French bank without a passport and needing cash. One of the joys of his return to Somerset was that he could often go to Downside to see his great friend and fellow liturgical scholar Edmund Bishop. Inevitably and properly, our Society appointed Dean Robinson a Vice-President and the Record Society elected him to its council. He died at Upton Noble Manor in 1933.

My third clerical giant came to live in Somerset as curate of Cucklington in 1894. Edward Harbin Bates (later Bates Harbin) was in line of succession to the Harbin family estate at Newton Surmaville, but for the time being he was a conscientious parish priest, holding the small living of Puckington from 1898 until he became squire of Newton in 1909 (*see* frontispiece). He had joined our Society in 1886 before his ordination (F.W. Weaver remembered the occasion well) and almost immediately on his arrival in East Somerset he began his local history studies, examining and quoting from the overseers' accounts of Stoke Trister which have subsequently disappeared.⁷ In 1896 he was elected President of the Wincanton Field Club, incidentally succeeding F.W. Weaver. His many contributions to our *Proceedings* began in 1887 with extracts from Leland's Itinerary, then only available in manuscript, and continued regularly until his early death in 1918, including his comprehensive inventory of church plate. He was Secretary of the Record Society from 1898 until his death and edited five volumes; and was Honorary Secretary of this Society from 1905 until his death, serving as President in 1910 and thereafter as Vice-President. From 1900 if not earlier he was a member of the committee of *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* and the committee still meets annually at Newton in Bates Harbin's study.

On a very cold day in December 1899 Edward Bates and Herbert Arthur Doubleday, described as joint editor of the Victoria County History, met on Taunton railway station ('had an interview' was the phrase Bates used in his diary). Bates 'agreed to write the local portion for 250 guineas'. Ever since 1890 when Henry Hobhouse, MP, had been our President, leading members of the Society had made noises about a County History to replace the work of Collinson, Mr Hobhouse

⁷ *Proceedings of the Wincanton Field Club*, 6, 26–7

returning to the subject at every opportunity. In July 1899 the new President, Sir Edward Fry, told of friends in Northumberland who were then engaged in their own county history, the cost of which, it was thought, would be prohibitive in Somerset where rents were down and land had depreciated.⁸ At the end of that same year came the great national scheme, the *Victoria County History*, but the Society's reaction was somewhat muted. No mention was made of it at the Annual Meeting in 1900; and when Mr Hobhouse was asked at the end of the year if he would join a local support committee he replied that 'for some years past' he had 'taken great interest in the question of a county history' but that he would not commit himself to this new idea until Doubleday could tell him 'something of your scheme and your editor'. Bates had evidently kept his counsel. F.W. Weaver and Emanuel Green joined the committee with enthusiasm and Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte was later to say of the second volume of the *Victoria History* that it marked 'a very great advance upon anything that has yet been done for the county'.⁹

Edward Bates was too busy with two volumes for the Record Society at the time of his meeting with Doubleday and could not start before 1901. His diary records: 'May 13, 1901, began V.C.H. Abdick and Bulston hundred, Ashill parish'. That script is still among the records of Somerset VCH at Taunton castle in his unmistakable hand, but he was soon 'taken off' the manorial histories and between August 1901 and January 1902 he translated the text of Domesday Book for the county. Then back to manorial histories of South Petherton hundred, then to a map of Somerset Domesday and the translation of the Geld Inquest, which he confessed he was beginning to hate. The year 1904 saw work on Martock hundred and then early in 1905 he had a long interview in London with the new editor of the V.C.H., William Page, whom Bates thought 'a much more businesslike man' than Doubleday. 'Now', he wrote, 'we may get on'; and so on 10 October the first volume of the county history was published. Instead of those promised 250 guineas Bates was paid 10s 6d per printed page and 4 guineas for the map, a total of £59 7s 9d. An amazing labour of love.

Thereafter Bates, or Bates Harbin as he had become, acted as unpaid local adviser, commenting as requested on chapters as they were submitted by others for the next volume. The 'Railways' section 'even now ... shows a complete want of knowledge', he wrote of one contribution, and he knew what he was talking about for the subject had interested him since his childhood in Northumberland. Page wrote in June 1910 that he was grateful 'for the immense help that you have given us and for the great care and trouble you have always shown'. Yet where was the long-expected second volume of the History? In January 1911 Bates Harbin commented to Page that he had just seen a review of a volume on Nottinghamshire and why did Notts, such an 'uninteresting county' take precedence over Somerset? The Editor's excuses mentioned a defaulting indexer and printing strikes, but *Somerset II* finally appeared early in 1912, no matter the date 1911 on the title page. And Bates Harbin was driven to asking for a copy.

Time does not permit to give details of Edmund Hobhouse, second son of that Henry Hobhouse of Hadspen who was for many years Keeper of the State Papers, who in his retirement (he had been the first Bishop of Nelson, New Zealand) at Batcombe and later at Wells was with E.A. Freeman and two others a founding father of the Record Society, a member of this Society from 1883 and a Vice-President until his death in 1904. Another of whom only brief mention may be made is Thomas Scott Holmes, for more than 20 years vicar of Wookey and later Chancellor of Wells, member and a local secretary of this Society, who was from 1890 secretary of the Record Society and father if not actually editor of nine of its volumes. He was also author of substantial parts of the second volume of the *Victoria History* for which he had not received payment after twelve years' wait and was offered the volume with only a trade discount and not free.

⁸ *SANH*, 45, 10

⁹ Correspondence in the VCH Office, Taunton Castle

Neither is there time to write fully of Alexander Hamilton Thompson, a Bristolian and architectural and ecclesiastical historian, who became a member of the Society in 1920 when he was elected President, often came from his university in Leeds to hold forth on outings until just before the Second World War but who was, regrettably, forgotten thereafter so there was no obituary in our *Proceedings* at his death in 1952.

The sister organisations the Somerset Record Society and *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* have been often mentioned. My chosen giants rightly saw them as partners in the same enterprise. For that reason if for no other we hear of the activities of the Record Society at our own Society's annual meeting. For many years the report on its health was given by its long-serving secretary Mrs Sophie Rawlins, a former President of this Society and a pioneer scholar of the history of Parliament and of the county's shrievalty,¹⁰ to whose kindness I owe references to her father's diary. *Notes and Queries* is also well, and like the Record Society would welcome new subscribers. It has recently lost its most able Somerset Editor Derek Shorrocks, former County Archivist and once our own President. An historian looking for giants in a few years time will not have to look far.

¹⁰ S.W. Bates Harbin, *Members of Parliament for the County of Somerset* (1939); S.W. Rawlins (ed.), *The Sheriffs of Somerset* (1968)