

## BOOK REVIEWS

**An Unhappy Civil War: the experiences of ordinary people in Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire, 1642-1646**, by John Wroughton. The Lansdown Press, Bath, 1999; viii, 312pp; illustrated; paperback; £14.99. ISBN 0 9520349 2 6

Dr Wroughton has written before on the English Civil War in Bath and North Somerset, but this book is new and different, keeping the promise of its title and probing deeply into the impact of the war on the everyday lives of all sorts and conditions of named individuals throughout the three counties. The choice of these three counties owes some validity to the 'mutual association' which we are told that their parliamentary gentry formed in October 1642, but is really justified by the range and depth of source material which they have yielded between them, and the satisfying and worthwhile book which the author has been able to derive from it.

The main narrative is arranged into ten chapters headed respectively: 'Forced to decide/fight/pay/support/provide/ yield/improvise/defend/share/endure,' and each of these into half-a-dozen or more short sections each concentrating on a specific aspect of taxation, plunder, billeting or other disruption to normal life, and illustrating it with actual examples. A few Somerset ones will provide the flavour. Horses were particularly vulnerable to requisition, and represented a serious loss to a farm. William Beeny of Portbury had his white mare seized by the king's soldiers in 1644, and was exceptionally fortunate to recover it two years later. Henry Harvey, a more substantial figure in Bridgwater, owned property which stood in the way of the besieging army there, and lost 20 houses and 30 gardens 'pulled down and laid waste,' a pigeon house, a barn and two stables 'burnt to the ground' and all his 'household stuff, wearing apparel, books and money.' Anne Martyn produced a similar catalogue of losses after the storming of Wellington House: 'several kine, one heifer, ten young cattle, three calves, five colts, a mare and a horse, forty sheep, five beds with their furniture, bacon, butter, cheese, wool, linen, corn of all sorts, pewter, brass and other goods,' as well as her eldest son, who was killed in the raid.

Outcomes like these are what an effort of imagination might lead us to expect in such circumstances. It is more surprising that the author has succeeded in turning up such a wealth of detailed evidence, and that the contemporary bureaucrats and other scribblers found time and paper (against the competing demand of cartridge manufacture) to create so many records and preserve them from destruction.

Interspersed in the main text are nine 'horrors of war' case studies, concluding with a particularly gruesome casualty at the siege of Taunton. At the end of the book are a chronology of the war, references to support each of the chapters, a bibliography, and an index, all, like the text itself, comprehensively and meticulously compiled. The only real slip I can find anywhere is the inclusion of two references to Edmondscott as if it is in Milverton, Somerset: it is really the modern Emscote in another Milverton in Warwickshire.

Illustrations include maps, photographs, contemporary portraits, reproductions of documents, and a very few contemporary woodcuts: the Civil War seems not to have created anything quite

like the playing cards which illustrate most books on the Monmouth Rebellion. The gap is filled here by a particularly effective series of modern imaginative line drawings by Stephen Beck.

Felicitous quotations abound. The 'unhappy civil war' of the title itself is taken from the parish registers of Claverton Church. Sir William Wailer writes 'with what a perfect hatred I detest this war without an enemy.' John Turberville had a house full of soldiers 'and such uncivil drinkers and thirsty souls, that a barrel of good beer trembles at the sight of them.' Bulstrode Whitelocke looked back afterwards and wrote: 'O let our prayers be to God, never to have such calamitous times again.'

DAVID BROMWICH

**A People Bewitched: Witchcraft and Magic in Nineteenth Century Somerset**, by Owen Davies. Privately published, 1999. 182 pp. Price not stated. ISBN 0 9536390 0 2

This book tackles a subject that is perhaps not normally considered by historians of the 19th century. The author uses newspaper court reports to supplement popular stories and concentrates particularly on cunning folk. These people claimed among other things to be able to counter witchcraft and were the only beneficiaries of the superstitious beliefs which they seem to have done much to encourage. There are some good cameo portraits of notorious characters like Billy Brewer of Alfred Street, Taunton, painted by Harry Frier. In fact the subtitle might more properly be gullibility and fraud and by no means be confined to a bygone age. The book gives us an insight into the everyday lives of the poorer classes and the sufferings of those unjustly named as witches. There is a bibliography of works on the subject as well as footnote references to the relevant newspapers.

MARY SIRAUT

**Streets and Market Places in Towns of Southwest England: Encroachments and Improvements**, by Anthony John Scrase. Mellen Studies in Geography Volume 2, Edwin Mellen Press, Lampeter, 1999. 91pp; hardback: 27 figures: £34.46. ISBN 0-7734-7953-8

This short book is based on a talk given at an urban history conference. It reflects its origins and reads like a lively session paper with detailed points made on the basis of the illustrations and with interesting ideas floated, but rather less like the more considered view that might be expected from its title. The material dealt with comes from the old counties of Somerset and Gloucestershire and the illustrations and data used are therefore indebted to the two books on the historic towns in the counties and to the survey of medieval towns in Avon, the key archaeology and planning texts for the area. The small size of the book means that the figures are over-reduced and lettering has seriously broken up on some. The captions for some of the figures discuss features that are simply not visible or, like 3.5, actually not shown, presumably because the original figure has been cropped to reproduce successfully while the caption remained unchecked.

The subject is approached from a geographer's and archaeologist's perspective, the author being both. Streets and market places are considered as spaces where changes have occurred through a timespan from the medieval period to the present day. In general the pattern is one of encroachment in the early period followed by a gradual clearing away in the modern period to produce the traffic-dominated thoroughfares of recent times, now becoming increasingly pedestrianised. Encroachments comprise permanent market stalls, market crosses, water troughs,

guildhalls, memorials and neighbouring buildings. The theme is illustrated with case studies of Bath and Wells and by shorter surveys of other towns. There is an interesting discussion of ownership and how houses expanded onto and beneath the streets they fronted.

The author puzzles over the definition of these spaces. He rejects the model of public and private space distinguishing streets and houses respectively since many public buildings were not accessible to the public, eg. the town lock up, while many private spaces were, eg. inns. One way of defining open spaces in towns might be as communal or shared areas, with different uses such as markets, processions and gatherings allocated agreed times. One of the main ways in which a town expressed its essence was in its major annual processions and a town's open spaces could thus be seen as a kind of shared stage setting. The author also floats the idea of unowned spaces and perhaps another fruitful approach might be to see them as blank areas filled with the differing concerns of the town as they change through time. This might lead on to the concept of the contested space, as the long view might show with its picture of encroachments and improvements. There are clearly contests between the formal and informal in the different unregulated uses of a town through the full 24 hour period – the night town is not mentioned in the book but is an important but infrequently considered transformation. But whatever the definition of open spaces, the book suggests the possibility that they may be able to tell us as much about status, function and mentality as the interiors of private houses.

The map-based approach used is one that never fails to produce interesting material. There is a temptation, which the author occasionally succumbs to, to think that the plan-form is everything, while archaeology has shown that it can conceal surprises. But even if an interpretation of a plan-form turns out to be wrong it is almost always a productive interpretation in terms both of asking new questions and helping us look at the phenomenon of towns over the last millennium in a more reflective way.

PETER ELLIS

**The Somerset Coalfield**, by S Gould. Somerset Industrial Archaeology Society, 1999. 68pp; illus: £6:95. ISBN 0 9533539 0 7

Having found Shane Gould's talk on 'The Somerset Coalfield' at the South Wales and South West Industrial Archaeology Conference extremely interesting, I was pleased to discover he had written a book on the subject. Although of only 68 pages and costing only £6:95 this is a real book, packed with information as a small typeface is used and no space is wasted: even the smart black and white covers comprise useful maps.

Unlike the rather superficial, picture-oriented local history books being produced in great numbers by commercial publishers, this is a book written by an expert and published for a specialist audience, but it is a lively and readable book that would also interest any non-specialist local historian: and not just in Somerset. My own research in Dorset has shown that 18th and early 19th-century leaders in Shaftesbury had first employed a Radstock mining expert to search for coal around their town, and, later, as the search was unsuccessful, had been keen to establish rail links to the Somerset coalfield in the hope of reducing the price of fuel there. Incidentally it was thought that coal was not discovered in Shaftesbury because of the self-interest of the Radstock expert!

In this book the excellent pictures are not just there to sell the book, but really illustrate the text and give a good overall picture of this oddly-sylvan coalfield. I thought how skilfully the author had made mining terms self-explanatory in the text, then found there was a good glossary anyway: why are glossaries always put at the back of a book when you need them before you start to read?

For such a small book it is amazingly comprehensive: it covers coal mining and use in the area from the possibility that the Romans used it in their temple at Bath, through late medieval bell pits and the gradual introduction of technological improvements, to the peak of production in the early 20th century, modernisation after nationalisation in 1947, and finally closure in 1973. The book also covers communications and even the social aspects of the lives of miners and coal owners. Not only is information presented chronologically, but there are good indexes, a gazetteer and a bibliography enabling the reader to look up individual collieries and pursue further research.

Certainly this is a book that no one interested in the history of Somerset should be without, but I would also recommend it to local historians in the surrounding counties, not forgetting those who study mining generally who will, I think, find this unusual coalfield fascinating. As a planning advisor Shane Gould is well aware of the vulnerable status of industrial buildings and throughout the book he makes informed pleas for the conservation of various buildings vital to the understanding of the working of the mines. Let us hope that here too he has some success.

TONY INNES

**The Victoria History of the County of Somerset, volume VII: Bruton, Horethorne, and Norton Ferris hundreds (Wincanton and neighbouring parishes)**, edited by R. W. Dunning; Oxford University Press for the Institute of Historical Research, 1999. xxii + 276pp, 34 plates, 33 maps and plans. £70. ISBN 0 19 722792 9

Reviewing a volume of the *VCH* is at once easy and difficult: easy, because of the comfortable familiarity of format and purpose, but difficult because it is hard to find new or interesting things to say about a popular and revered institution. The task is the academic apotheosis of reviewing the telephone directory – everyone knows what to expect, both in content and quality, which seems to leave little to say but to extract random nuggets of information as evidence that the reviewer has at least opened the pages.

The glory of the *VCH* is an assemblage of facts which would have left Mr Gradgrind himself speechless; even experienced research historians must boggle slightly at the sheer magnitude of the compilation, knowing that each little footnoted datum ('In 1638 the vicarage house comprised parlour, kitchen, and two butteries with chambers over') is the product of laborious research, verification, and informed selection. The density of evidential support is such that the occasional statement without apparent documentary endorsement (Stowell court house 'was rebuilt possibly by John Hody (d. 1497)') is positively obtrusive, although one can be confident – so authoritative is the *VCH* as a medium – that this reckless speculation will be ratified by the material in circumjacent citations.

This massive authority of the *VCH* is well earned. True, it was not ever thus; some of the early volumes were produced hastily by relatively inexperienced hands, and a High Court judge once condemned the testimony of a Gloucestershire volume as 'deeply flawed', whilst the predilections of the first patrons led to some imbalanced concentrations on field sports (and the utterly solipsistic *Northamptonshire Families* in 1906). Even today the dead hand of past general editors lies upon the idiosyncratic footnote forms for citing familiar publications. But the standards of scholarship nowadays are irreproachable, and Somerset is in the hands of local history's ablest practitioner.

Thus the present volume does exactly what it says in the title, superbly; it offers the familiar format of parish history, with local topography, manorial descents, economic history, and the customary welter of essential information on churches, charities, parliamentary representation, local government, and education. The content here covers that south-eastern peninsula of

Somerset, touching both Wiltshire and Dorset, which straddles the ancient routes leading south-westwards from Salisbury and Salisbury Plain. Three significant economic centres – Bruton, Wincanton, and Milborne Port – served a hinterland which was characteristically dependent upon those traditional staples of the English agrarian economy, grain and wool. The area was relatively lush and relatively prosperous, although there is detailed evidence here that this prosperity did not reach all sections of the populace.

The strength of the *VCH* is that it provides facts rather than interpretation (plenteous detailed evidence of Wincanton's economic development, but no attempted explanation of its growth by comparison with neighbouring towns). This is a dangerous distinction to make; even the editor of the volume concedes (elsewhere and informally) that historical 'facts' are subjective and interpretative by their very nature, and that distinguished historian Conrad Russell once challenged the then secretary of state for education to formulate a list of ten historical facts, none of which would be susceptible to critical revision within a decade. But even Wittgenstein might have difficulty in casting any effective doubt on 'There was a maypole in the village in 1615', or 'In 1847 two schools, both mixed, taught a total of 32 children'. It is for these myriad hard building-bricks of local history that the *VCH* is used, admired, and loved, and the rare touch of colour, reported rather than fabricated ('when [Yarlington] house was sold in 1782 it was described as "picturesque but damp" and was demolished soon afterwards'), sets off the structural components admirably. This is, as expected, a fine volume in a fine tradition.

J. B. POST