

OBITUARY

DEREK SHORROCKS

Derek Shorrocks, former County Archivist of Somerset and a Past President of this Society, died in Taunton on 10 April 2001, aged 76.

Derek, the eldest of three brothers, was born in Lancashire on the last day of 1924. He was the grandson of a coal miner and the son of a school master, growing up in a household where a taste for study and for books was acquired early. Derek's intellectual abilities were quickly apparent, and at the age of 11 he gained a scholarship to Manchester Grammar School. He served in the RAF during the Second World War – making his first brief acquaintance with Somerset while training at RAF Locking – and in 1946, after a four-year delay, took up a scholarship at St John's College, Cambridge, where he gained a first in classics.

Derek's earliest encounter with archives was at the Lancashire Record Office in Preston. In 1949 he was accepted for the fledgling archive diploma course at Liverpool University, and began his career in 1950 at the Essex Record Office. His relationship with the County Archivist, Fred Emmison, was not easy; but Emmison, who was then working on Essex Assize records, quickly recognised Derek's unusual abilities as a scholar and palaeographer, regularly dispatching him to Chancery Lane to cope with the Assize records that had defeated everyone else. It was during his time in Essex that Derek met and married his wife Patricia.

After a brief but happy period at the Kent Record Office, Derek moved to Somerset in 1957 as Assistant to the County Archivist, Ivor Collis. The new Somerset Record Office, the first purpose-built repository of the post-war era, was then only weeks old, and one of Derek's first duties was to transfer the contents of the strongrooms at Shire Hall, Taunton, to the new premises in Obridge Road. His early years in Somerset coincided with the arrival at Obridge of many of the county's great estate collections. Possessed of outstanding scholarship, an intuitive grasp of archive structure, and a memory of extraordinary retentiveness, Derek Shorrocks was the ideal person to list and organise these collections, and the work he did remains fundamental to the study of West Country history. He was never defeated by a document, however abstruse its form or content, and relished the challenge of the really difficult. It was Derek, for example, who listed, at great speed, the decaying and confused records of the diocese of Bath and Wells, revealing them as one of the finest diocesan collections in existence.

He became County Archivist of Somerset in 1978 and held the post until he retired in 1988. Thereafter his health soon deteriorated, but though his plans for research were curtailed, they were not abandoned. The Somerset Record Society had already, in 1974, published his edition of medieval deeds relating to Bath and district. Now, in retirement, he brought all his skills and experience to bear on an edition of Bishop Still's visitation act books of 1594. The edition was published by the Record Society in 1998 and is an exemplary treatment of some very complex material.

Derek's other great interest was athletics, an enthusiasm he developed during war service and at Cambridge. He was a keen long-distance runner, but his chief involvement was as a county track and field judge. He gave notable service at club, county and regional levels, and was President of Taunton Athletics Club.

Derek Shorrocks was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and served as President of our Society in 1988-9, devoting his Presidential Address to the appropriate subject of the Society's remarkable archive collections. From 1977 he served as Somerset Editor of *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*, a task which he especially enjoyed. His former colleagues will long remember him as a man of meticulous scholarship and quiet generosity who was a guide and mentor to many people. He never sought the professional limelight and his qualities were as a result too easily overlooked. But as those who got to know him soon discovered, his archival skills were of the highest order, and his catalogues were models of lucid exposition. Their forthcoming publication on the World Wide Web happily means that they will reach a far larger audience than Derek can ever have imagined. They will also stand as lasting testimony to a man whose knowledge of Somerset archives has never been equalled, nor is ever likely to be. To his wife Patricia and her family we offer our sympathy in their great loss.

TOM MAYBERRY