

BOOK REVIEWS

Somerset Villages: The Houses, Cottages and Farms of Chiselborough. Somerset and South Avon Vernacular Building Research Group, c/o Rural Life Museum, Glastonbury, 1993. Available from J. Dallimore, 4 Court Hey Orchard, Pitney, Langport, TA10 9AE. iii + 104 pp., numerous maps, plans and illustrations; £8.25 + £1.00 postage.

This is the fifth volume in the series produced by the Somerset and South Avon Vernacular Building Research Group, all of which have so far been devoted to settlements in the south or east of Somerset. Chiselborough is a small parish which lies immediately to the south of Ham Hill; but as this study points out, 'Hamstone' was also quarried within Chiselborough itself (and thus had a major influence on the character of its vernacular buildings), although stone was imported from Ham Hill for high quality dressings. Of over fifty dwellings in the parish which survive from the 16th to the 19th centuries, most have been surveyed and the individual reports and plans take up approximately half the volume; but these are preceded and informed by an overall assessment of a number of themes which include the typology and evolution of plan-forms, the occurrence of moulded features in stone and wood, and roof construction. Remarkably, there is little evidence (in the form of smoke-blackened roofs, for instance) of the survival of medieval houses in this parish, and there are evidently no jointed crucks. Less remarkable, but nevertheless instructive when compared with western Somerset, is the absence of lateral stacks from houses of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The work of the Group has not been confined to a physical examination of the buildings of Chiselborough, however, and the initial sections of the book are devoted to the broader historical background, including the lordship of the manor, forms of tenure, land use, engrossing of holdings, non-agricultural employment, and social structure, whilst each of the individual building reports includes an account of the descent of the property, and a number of threads are pulled together in a final conclusion. The Group has been fortunate to find relevant material in the archives of the earls of Ilchester and Egremont and the Wyndhams of Orchard Wyndham, as well as other sources, and such material has been used to tackle a number of questions relating to the built environment. For example, a particular feature of the parish is the presence of a considerable number of cottages (many dating from the 18th century, but some surviving from earlier) which seem to owe their existence to a combination of population pressure and the availability of unenclosed land for squatting at Fair Place (the site of the annual Chiselborough Fair). The study also refers to weak manorial control resulting from absentee lords and joint ownership of the manor, and this may also help to explain the incidence of squatting. Attention is also given to the question of the attrition of buildings over time, the evidence suggesting that, in Chiselborough's case, accidental destruction by fire was much less important than neglect and deliberate demolition, often resulting from the engrossing of

properties. Like other parts of Somerset and the South West, Chiselborough seems to have been affected by the so-called 'Great Rebuilding' of the late 16th/early 17th centuries, but the study admits that it is difficult to account for this since the usual explanation (that it was financed by high profits from corn) does not seem particularly applicable in this area where mixed farming prevailed.

The contents of this study include useful maps of, for instance, land use and geology, and of settlement and field patterns; some of the information is helpfully presented in the form of tables and graphs; the building reports are succinct and accompanied by plans and elevations; there are several sketches and photographs, as well as facsimiles or transcripts of historical records; and a glossary and footnotes are also provided. The text is clearly presented and generally, if not consistently, well written. Regrettably, however, a comparison of the table on page 40, the plans on page 43 and the individual building reports reveals that the information about dating and plan-types of certain buildings is inconsistent (although the differences are usually only marginal) and there are several inaccurate cross-references to figure and/or page numbers. Some of these faults have evidently arisen from revisions of the text which were not cross-checked with data elsewhere in the book, but they should not be allowed to detract from the value of the book as an authoritative guide to the vernacular buildings of Chiselborough and as a well-researched attempt to relate those buildings to their historical background.

If one measure of the worth of a work of this kind is that it inspires the reader to make a visit to the area to see the landscape and buildings at first hand, the reviewer of this particular study can vouch for its success.

MARK MCDERMOTT

Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset 1500–1700, by John and Jane Penoyre. Somerset Books, 1994. ix + 88 pp., maps, glossary, 125 illustrations; £12.95.

The more perceptive of the many visitors to Montacute House must wonder why the wealthy lawyer, Sir Edward Phelips, should have chosen for his elegant mansion a plasterwork depiction of the bucolic and malicious 'Skimmington Ride' as the dominant feature of his hall. The authors of this interesting and beautifully-illustrated book offer no explanation for this puzzle, but they provide ample demonstration of the popularity of such plasterwork decoration in West Country houses during the 16th and 17th centuries, and they explore the remarkable range of designs, subjects and motifs which were used. They also describe the techniques and materials used, the craftsmen involved and the sources of their designs.

The fashion for elaborate plasterwork designs in ceilings, friezes and overmantels became particularly popular in Somerset as well as in Devon and west Dorset from the late 16th century. Such high-quality and intricate work was inevitably very expensive, and not surprisingly is most commonly found in the rich farming lands of Taunton Deane or in the cloth-producing region around Frome, with little of such work to be seen on Mendip, in the Levels or in the far west of Somerset. Those who could afford such work to decorate their rooms and to show off their wealth and status, concentrated on high-level friezes around halls or bedrooms, and ceilings, using an apparently limitless variety of patterns, strange beasts, grotesque creatures, mermaids, plants and foliage. Above all, the most lavish treatment was given to overmantels with biblical or classical scenes, cherubs, caryatids, coats of arms, dates, initials and sumptuous decoration. Among the subjects to be found are Abraham and Isaac at Carhampton and Stringston, scenes from the Life of Christ at East Quantoxhead, Adam and Eve at Over Stowey, Daniel in the Lion's Den at Halswell House, the 'Death of Actaeon' in the Luttrell Arms at Dunster, the 'Judgement of Paris' at Dunster Castle, and a lively 'Triumph of Time' at Old Cleeve.

The sources and symbolism of the various designs are helpfully explained and illustrated, and the book includes a gazetteer, a useful glossary of terms and a bibliography.

The authors are concerned entirely with decorative plasterwork in houses, although they include a reference to the plaster ceiling formerly in the chapel of the beautiful and well-documented house at Chantmarle near Cattistock in Dorset. The building and consecration of this chapel in 1612 was described in detail by the owner, Sir John Strode, who employed the notable craftsman Robert Eaton of Stogursey to create the plasterwork ceiling. Other examples are to be found in the church ceilings of the 1630s at Axbridge and East Brent, in the chancel ceiling of 1638 at Abbotsbury, and especially in the chancel ceiling and wall at East Knoyle (Wilts.) which are covered in biblical texts and scenes depicted in plasterwork, dating from c. 1630 when Sir Christopher Wren's father was rector there.

The old suggestion that the decorative plasterwork in the West Country was done by foreign craftsmen is firmly discarded, and it is made clear that most was the work of native or even of local craftsmen, such as Robert Eaton of Stogursey or the Abbot family of Frithelstock in north Devon. In several houses, comparative study by the authors has revealed the use of the same moulds by craftsmen, while documentary research has identified many of the arms and initials which appear in the designs, and the names of the owners who paid for the work. Particularly interesting are the chapters describing the derivation and meaning of the designs, the materials used, the tools, techniques and methods employed by the craftsmen, and the best ways of conservation. Some of the subjects chosen give an insight into the concerns of the Somerset gentry and wealthy farmers who could afford such expensive decoration during the 17th century. Family links, love, fertility and marital fidelity figure largely in heraldry, initials and the use of the vine, the pineapple and the thistle, while roses represented the transience of human life. Other emblems warn against evil or worldly enticement, for example in the form of the mermaid, or urge the viewer to hold fast to the virtues, such as Hope with her anchor or the Lamb of mercy. Some designs adopt a more direct approach, including the winged angel sounding the last trump above a skeleton at Gaulden Manor, Tolland, or texts such as *God Be Our Defence* at Creech St Michael, the exhortation to *Trust in God and Abide in Thy Place* at Rowlands, Ashill, or the gloomy *Sine Cerere et Baccho Friget Venus* (Without Bread and Wine Love Grows Cold) at Bournes, Wiveliscombe.

The authors are to be congratulated on this well-written and excellently-illustrated account of a specialised, but interesting feature of numerous local manor houses and farms. The lavish illustrations include high-quality photographs by Geoff Roberts of whole designs and of details, as well as useful drawings of fragments, motifs and designs by John Penoyre. The book is obviously the result of dedicated research, both in the documentary sources and in the detailed examination, study and comparison of plasterwork in Somerset and elsewhere. It is a welcome addition to the architectural history of the county.

J.H. BETTEY

Richard Trew 1793–1874, Mayor of Axbridge: A History of Axbridge in the Nineteenth Century, by Virginia and Stanley Castle. Privately published. Available from Stanley Castle, Overbrook Cottage, Cocklake, Wedmore, BS28 4HF. x + 160 pp, paperback; £10. ISBN 0 9521777 0 6

Richard Trew's busy public life provides a useful framework for this study of 19th century Axbridge. Topics as diverse as the opening of the Cheddar Valley Railway and the murder of Ann Wilkins at the Lady Day Fair of 1852 are explored in the context of Richard's career as mayor (11 times) and Clerk to the Axbridge Board of Guardians.

The chapter on the Axbridge workhouse is particularly strong. The authors draw on the Guardians' minutes and Richard's many letters to the Poor Law Commissioners to build up a detailed picture of the creation of the Axbridge Union and the day to day running of the workhouse. Throughout the book, quotations are backed up with detailed footnotes and references to the original documents used.

A few errors have crept into the text. On page 2, for example, a common recovery is taken at face value as a genuine legal action rather than a means of transferring property.

The abiding impression, however, is of the authors' local knowledge and enthusiasm. Virginia Castle did most of the research for the book. After her death in 1992, her husband, Stanley, edited her notes for publication. The result is an interesting book which should be required reading for anyone researching Victorian Axbridge.

ANDREW DOWSEY

Wells: The Anatomy of a Medieval and Early Modern Property Market, by A.J. Scrase. University of the West of England, Faculty of the Built Environment Working Paper 30, 1993. Available from the faculty, Coldharbour Lane, Frenchay, Bristol, BS16 1QY. viii + 231 pp., paperback. £8.00.

Behind the long title of this monograph lies the successor to Mr Scrase's earlier Working Paper 12. It builds on articles by Mr Scrase which have appeared in these *Proceedings* and elsewhere, and brings a historical geographer's viewpoint and presentation techniques to bear on questions of how and why the smallest city in England developed in the way it did. Where Mr Scrase previously concentrated on analysis of topographical detail to piece together the physical development of Wells over time, here he investigates how shifting property values between c. 1340 and c. 1600 can chart changes in the city's physical history and prosperity, and examines the reasons behind these changing values.

The result can, with its pages of graphs and tables, be somewhat intimidating. It is, as titled, a working paper which the author himself summarises, disarmingly, as 'a mass of numbers presented in a variety of ways'. The style can veer abruptly from the technical to the slangy, but the book is written in crisp, short sentences. It is in A4 format, with a paper cover. This economical method of production has kept the work at a reasonable price. There is no index – presumably a further economy – but a good contents list and clear headings compensate to some extent. The book would have benefited from some more general location maps. A bibliography of Mr Scrase's other writings, even when updated and included in this book, would also have been helpful.

Mr Scrase has organised a mountain of material, comprising the records of nearly 4,000 property transactions from about 1215 to the later 19th century. Only those who, like the present reviewer, have attempted this will realise how complicated such analysis can be. The way is beset with hazards, such as the escheator who assembles an obit payment from several different property sources; or the careless copyist who perpetuates Geoffrey Hokerston *alias* Cruk as Geoffrey Hokerston and Alice Cruk, creating a totally fictitious Wells lady of property.

Mr Scrase moves from the general to the particular, with individual cases succinctly described and neatly grafted into the whole picture. A general chapter on landholders and estates gives a clear, readable account of the ways in which property came into institutional, mostly religious, ownership. Institutional policy (or lack of it) on terms and rents for leases is analysed. There is a useful section on other types of rents and charges; and a review of the main estate-owners in Wells: these comprised institutions that disappeared at the Reformation, the bishop and the cathedral, the corporation and other secular owners. There are special studies of mortgages and capital values, and a series of tables forming six appendices. It will be useful to have, concisely presented, the evidence

of dates and trends on, for example, the change from leasing for lives to leasing for terms of years; or the change from repairs being a landlord's responsibility to being that of the tenant. Mr Scrase examines the approach of the 'big three' – bishop, cathedral and corporation – to their properties, and whether they adopted the same or different techniques of management at any one time, and why. He poses the question of what, exactly, happened after the Black Death in 1348, contrasting evidence for the fall in population with other evidence for the peak of medieval prosperity. One of the most interesting chapters is on women in the urban property market. Developed from an earlier study, this analyses the frequent appearance of women in medieval property transactions, and refers to redoubtable Wells ladies such as Margery Churchesteghele and Margery Monier (about whom Mr Scrase wrote in volume 125 of *Proceedings*).

At the end, his conclusion is one which will sound familiar to most honest local historians, namely that 'the main lesson . . . is the impossibility of generalising about Wells as a whole'. Even so, what Mr Scrase has achieved by bringing modern techniques to bear on the subject is to make a great quantity of material available in a manageable form. In 1977, Michael Aston and Roger Leech produced *Historic Towns in Somerset*, the most modern analysis of Wells upon the evidence then available. Mr Scrase's new book appears at the same time as D.G. Shaw's *The Creation of a Community* (Oxford University Press, 1993), and together they show how far local studies have come in just sixteen years.

FRANCES NEALE

The Norweb Collection, Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A., Tokens of the British Isles 1575–1750. Part IV Norfolk to Somerset. Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles 44, by R.H. Thompson and M.J. Dickinson. Spink and Son Ltd, London, 1993. 218 pp, illustrated. £25.

The Honourable R. Henry Norweb and his wife Mrs Emery May Holden Norweb were avid coin collectors. In the late 1940s they turned their attention to the English series. In the process of collecting, they amassed the largest collection of 17th century trade tokens ever gathered, amounting to some 13,000 specimens. Issued in the period 1648 to 1672, trade tokens were an unofficial response to the need for a low denomination, base metal regal coinage. Prior to Henry Norweb's death in 1983, work was under way on the publication of the trade token element of the collection in the Sylloge series. The tokens were to be published alphabetically by county, the first volume appearing in 1984. Nine years further on in this mammoth undertaking, volume four has been published, featuring Norfolk, Northampton, Northumberland, Nottinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Rutland, Shropshire and Somerset. The attributions to county are based upon pre-1974 counties; hence the likes of Bath appear within the listings for Somerset.

The authors state that 'the purpose of the publication, in accordance with the Sylloge practice, is to put the tokens in the Norweb Collection at the service of those who would base studies on them, and not itself to publish documentary research, something which, on a national basis, would hardly have been possible'. Within each county, tokens are arranged alphabetically by locality and issuer. For the vast majority of pieces this is the first time that illustrations, so crucial for anybody undertaking a detailed study, have been published. The plates are of high quality throughout. This is a great achievement for a class of artefact which is exceedingly difficult to photograph satisfactorily. Where legibility is difficult this is almost invariably because of the poor condition of the token concerned. The descriptions of the tokens are placed opposite the appropriate plates, an arrangement which is very welcome from the user's point of view. For economy of space and because the tokens are illustrated, the catalogue entries do not include a full reading

of the obverse and reverse legends, and effective use is made of a numerical code to describe the central image of each token. The reference to the standard work on the series is also given (William Boyne's edition of George Williamson's *Trade Tokens Issued in the Seventeenth Century*, published in 1891). A welcome inclusion is the weight, metal, and die axis of each token.

The Somerset section of the volume features 455 tokens: they represent 149 different issues and die varieties out of a known total in excess of 360. The Norweb collection for Somerset was not as strong as that for some counties, nor was the overall condition of the pieces remarkable, but the collection did include some extreme rarities such as the tokens struck for Anne Orgainer of Godney and John Phillips of Stogumber.

The tokens of just one issue are given more detailed treatment: in a brief chapter entitled 'The Legend of the Glastonbury Thorn' two variations of a token issued by a Glastonbury mercer, Henry Gutch, are considered. Since at least 1858, the image on the obverse has been unquestioningly accepted as representing the Glastonbury Thorn. Robert Thompson convincingly argues that this token has always been looked at upside down and that it depicts Glastonbury's main landmark, the Tor. Once pointed out, the identification is obvious.

Following the death of Mrs Norweb in 1984, the practice was established of selling the tokens from each county as they were published. New tokens are rarely added to the magnificent collection cared for by Somerset County Museums Service (and largely owned by this Society), but the sale of the Norweb collection enabled six specimens to be acquired, namely tokens from Axbridge, Bridgwater, Glastonbury, Godney and Ilchester (2).

The scale of the undertaking in publishing the Norweb collection regrettably meant that inclusion of already published documentary information and further research was out of the question. For Somerset, documentary research has still to be done on the great majority of issuers. There remains a need for a publication covering this aspect together with comprehensive illustration of all types and varieties regardless of the collection from which they come. (The reviewer would be grateful to hear from anyone with original documentary references to Somerset trade token issuers or to the use of tokens.)

The authors are to be congratulated on having produced a publication of the highest standard which meets, without question, their objective of making data on the Norweb collection available for study in a readily usable form.

STEPHEN MINNITT

Somerset Wills Index: Printed & Manuscript Copies, by Sir Mervyn Medlycott, Bt. Harry Galloway Publishing, 39 Nutwell Road, Worle, BS22 OEW, 1993. xxv + 165 pp; £25 + £3.50 UK postage. ISBN 1 873931 17 4. Also available on microfiche.

Perhaps the greatest, and certainly the most deeply-felt, archival loss ever suffered by Somerset historians occurred on a night in 1942. An enemy raid on Exeter destroyed the District Probate Registry, and with it went hundreds of thousands of wills and inventories relating to Somerset and Devon. Though everything at Exeter was destroyed, other wills and will copies survived elsewhere. It is these documents which Sir Mervyn Medlycott has painstakingly sought out in producing an index containing more than 17,000 entries. The entries are arranged alphabetically by surname, and state in addition forename, occupation (where known), abode, document type, date, and source. There is a separate place-name index at the end of the book.

The author's industry deserves high praise, and the resulting book will be of great and lasting value to historians and genealogists. Sir Mervyn's helpful introduction guides the reader through the complex subject of probate records for the diocese of Bath and Wells;

it also describes the sources which have been consulted, and, as importantly, those which have not (including, for example, wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury). If there is a complaint to make, it relates to the matter of layout: the entries are not particularly easy on the eye, though the system of abbreviation is efficient and comprehensible, and the level of accuracy seems high.

This book will inevitably become out of date as new sources are discovered (Sir Mervyn himself suggests some likely lines of enquiry), and as the listing of collections already at the Somerset Record Office progresses. Nevertheless, the book will hold the field for a long time to come and we should all be grateful for the immense amount of labour and skill which has gone into its production. Thank you Sir Mervyn!

S.J. BERRY

By Waterway to Taunton: A history of the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal and the River Tone navigation, by Tony Haskell. Somerset Books, 1994. 145 pp., numerous illustrations, paperback. £12.95. ISBN 0 86183 260 4

A company was established to improve the navigation of the River Tone in 1699, a century and a quarter before an Act was secured to build the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal. Today the canal survives as the only fully navigable waterway in Somerset, a fact almost as remarkable as that of its original construction. A canal link between Bristol and Taunton had been authorised in 1811, but lack of capital meant that a much shorter watercourse between Bridgwater and Taunton became the consolation prize for years of surveys and political wrangling. Even in 1825, by which time the Act authorising the shorter canal had been secured, supporters of the Grand Western Rail Road Company met in Taunton to consider the expediency of constructing a railway, 'with locomotive Steam Engines or other power', between Bridgwater and Exeter with a branch to Tiverton. Had this development progressed, the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal would have been stillborn and the Stockton and Darlington Railway would not have enjoyed its unique place in the history of transportation.

Many records of the canal were destroyed in Bristol by enemy action. It is a tribute to the researching skills of Tony Haskell, therefore, that so much information has been brought together for this publication. He has been able to rely heavily on the excellent records of the Conservators of the River Tone in the Somerset Record Office, but he has also used contemporary newspapers, court records, family papers and oral reports passed on to people whom he has interviewed. Because of the relative paucity of evidence about the canal, the author has rightly cast his net widely at times. Although he justifiably considers the development of contiguous canals to Chard and Tiverton, references to the cultivation of withies and to land drainage are matters not really pertinent to his main themes. Occasionally the author goes astray. His explanation of the Taunton Stop Line in the Second World War, for example, is misleading: it was designed to protect the Midlands and Home Counties after the sacrifice of the western peninsula to invading forces. More often, however, Tony Haskell provides real illumination: I for one was delighted to find a credible answer to a question frequently asked of me – 'How were barges propelled through the Crimson Hill tunnel on the Chard Canal?' (A letter quoted by the author says that bargemen used hooked poles 'which engaged with iron rings fixed in the roof or sides of the tunnel'.)

The Conservators of the River Tone dramatically changed sides, from being aggressively hostile to the new canal to becoming its protectors through the long years of decline. More than any other body, they deserve the credit for preserving this waterway from the fate that befell the Grand Western, the Chard and the Glastonbury Canals. As a Conservator himself, Tony Haskell will be well placed to see that this protective role is

continued, even if he and his fellow Conservators must now forgo the levels of self-indulgence enjoyed by their predecessors on the annual voyage of the Conservators along the canal. (At the place of arrival in 1811 the Conservators shared large quantities of 'eatables and drinkables', played cards, backgammon, bowls and skittles, and concluded with a 'sumptuous tea'.) Tony Haskell, as a local government officer, was personally involved in the struggle to restore the canal to navigation, and his last chapter charts the long and slow progress towards this very recently-achieved goal.

This is an enjoyable and well-written book, copiously illustrated with maps, illustrations and photographs. It will be a valued addition to the libraries of all those interested in Somerset history as well as of those with a wider interest in the history of transport.

SANDY BUCHANAN

The Megalithic Monuments of Stanton Drew, by L.V. Grinsell. Privately published, 1994. 12 pp; illustrated. £1.00. ISBN 0 9523020 0 4

The remarkable stone circles and other megalithic monuments at Stanton Drew have attracted the attention of archaeologists and scholars for more than 300 years. John Aubrey, evidently the first person to leave a written record, visited the site in 1664, when it was unhelpfully covered by a crop of ripe barley. Thereafter, a succession of 18th and 19th century antiquarians investigated the monuments and offered varied interpretations of their significance.

In his informative short study, our former President provides his own interpretation of the site. Noting the absence of long and round barrows in the area of Stanton Drew, and their abundance near Stonehenge and Avebury, he suggests that Stanton Drew may represent a ceremonial site which failed. He summarizes the work of earlier scholars, which culminated in the study published by C.W. Dymond in 1896, describes the folk traditions to which the site has inevitably given rise, and provides an extensive bibliography.

Mr Grinsell has produced a welcome addition to the literature on Stanton Drew. His study includes a simplified site plan, and is illustrated with reproductions of the evocative sketches made by William Stukeley in 1723.

TOM MAYBERRY