

BOOK NOTICES

The Landscape of Towns, by Michael Aston and James Bond (Dent, 1976), 255 pp., 20 plates, 43 figs., £5.50.

This is the third book in the excellent series 'Archaeology in the Field', a series with the aim of introducing aspects of archaeology less well known to the layman and opening his eyes to a fresh enjoyment of his surroundings. It might be thought that the appreciation of towns was a subject covered by hundreds of authors and all too familiar to the public. But it is the contention of Aston and Bond that there is still a tendency to limit our interest to a select few aesthetically rewarding gems like York, Chester and Bath. Their aim is to open readers' eyes to the shaping of all towns. 'If we can show that Barnsley is in its own way as significant historically as Bury St. Edmunds or that Dudley rates consideration as seriously as Dunster, we shall have achieved some of our objectives.' They acknowledge the studies of historians, planners, geographers and others, but their own approach is essentially that of the archaeologist, and its most useful contribution is to draw together archaeological material usually only available in journals and interim reports. From the Somerset point of view, for example, Roman Ilchester, Saxon Lyng and Medieval Langport are all discussed.

The chapters are arranged in chronological sequence, and understandably the early chapters offer the most stimulating discussion. Why does so little survive of Roman buildings? they ask, and they suggest that perhaps there is more still to be recognized in the cellars and property boundaries of our towns. An analysis of Saxon planning describes the relationship of markets to parish churches, suggesting for example that there may have been one by St. Benedict's in Glastonbury (though surely west rather than east of the church?). And the book is interspersed with small analytical sketch maps that one would like to have as the foundation for a new kind of guide book.

There are details one would have liked to have seen, especially for the benefit of the non-specialist. Burgage plots for example are described in size and shape, but no indication is given of how they were used—urban archaeology should provide a line or two on that, even if the book's main concern is with shape rather than function. Materials get only a brief discussion, and this brevity helps to cloud the issue of regionalism. Kendal's courtyard developments would not be recognized in Winchester for example and the tendency to archaic designs in Cotswold towns contrasts with the big-city styles of, say, Bristol. Regionalism is not just a matter of materials and style, but also of function, and all these factors are the meat on the bones of street plans and property lines.

Somerset is lucky to have scholars of the calibre and experience of Michael Aston, one of the present generation of men with encyclopaedic understanding of archaeology, and the rare gift of communicating his knowledge. *The Landscape of Towns* is a sample of his worth.

MARION MEEK

Victorian and Edwardian Somerset from old photographs, by David Bromwich and Robert Dunning (Batsford, 1977), 120 pp., 141 plates, £3.95.

The growth of photography during the second half of the 19th century was generally held to be responsible for the decline of the portrait painter and topographic artist. It is interesting to note that barely a century later the work of these pioneer photographers is widely sought after by a variety of people ranging from the speculative collector to the social historian. The publication of *Victorian and Edwardian Somerset* is therefore timely and the selection of illustrations has been carefully undertaken by two individuals eminently qualified to make such decisions: David Bromwich, Somerset's Local History Librarian, and Robert Dunning, Editor of the Victoria History of Somerset.

A factor that will commend this book to its readers is that the majority of the photographs have been abstracted from private collections (the reviewer counted a total of forty-eight different sources): the pictures are thus fresh to our eyes as they have generally not appeared in print before. The contents are divided into eleven sections, and although each photograph is numbered, the same cannot be said for the pages. The addition of an index would also have been useful for readers interested in particular localities. However, the authors must be congratulated on the geographical distribution of the material which covers the historic county of Somerset. A balance has also been achieved between life in Somerset towns and the activities of the rural populace. The bustling throng of traders around the masted ketches at The Quay, Bridgwater (no. 16) contrasts with the peat diggers near Ashcott (no. 122) posed for a group shot during a cider break.

The ultimate section entitled 'The Face of the People' deals not, as one might suppose, with the proletariat but with Somerset worthies such as Walter Bagehot, the economist and journalist (no. 138). But there is no social bias: the common people pervade the entire volume. Photograph no. 52 shows not only Fred Huish, builder and contractor of Street, but also his numerous employees portrayed across two pages of the book. The incorporation of these 'double-page spreads' is particularly effective: photograph no. 91 depicts the opening of the Knightstone Baths, Weston-super-Mare in 1902. The myriad bodies within the Baths are reflected into the still pool below creating a symmetrical composition.

Several surviving structures are revealed in less familiar guises: 'King John's Hunting Lodge' at Axbridge (no. 37) appears, circa 1895, adorned by advertisements and occupied by a hairdresser. The famous statue of Queen Boadicea on Westminster Bridge, London, is surrounded by stricken horses (no. 57): fortunately, the photograph was taken at the foundry of Messrs. Singer of Frome, where the parts were cast in 1902.

The authors have, in the reviewer's opinion quite correctly, kept comments and captions very brief. The fine reproduction of these early prints allows them to speak largely for themselves. Nevertheless, there are times when one wishes for additional notes. In photograph 35, the bearded passenger with the sketch book in the horse-drawn omnibus is the Taunton water-colour artist, Harry Frier. Very occasionally an error intrudes: the clerical gentleman in photograph 60 is not George Alfred Denison, archdeacon, but in fact Bishop King of Lincoln.

Although the early practitioners of photography required their subjects to remain still, this technique need not be detrimental. The fire engine and crew, Wincanton, c. 1880 (no. 26) look truly resplendent in their uniforms, whilst the miners, grouped outside an iron mine in the Brendon Hills (no. 54) personify the grim toil needed to create a powerful industrial nation. Historians will continue to debate whether the Victorian and Edwardian periods really were 'The Good Old Days' but the photographs convey an atmosphere of tranquillity and social stability, soon to be shattered by the holocaust of the Great War. The illustrations provide a fund of information about Somerset during an era which has now vanished completely. Furthermore, readers who are also users of modern 35 mm cameras will develop a profound respect for the pioneer 'photographic artists' with their cumbersome equipment.

A final, and not insignificant, remark is that the price of this book explodes the myth that many photographs in a publication necessitates an expensive production.

BRIAN J. MURLESS

Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles. Volume 24: Ancient British, Anglo-Saxon and Norman Coins in West Country Museums, by A. J. Gunstone (Published for the British Academy by The Oxford University Press and Spink and Sons Ltd., 1977), unpaginated, 35 plates, price not given.

This is the latest in the series of sylloges. At the outset, it must be said that it is for the specialist, student, museum numismatist etc., rather than the general reader.

Covering the collections in 29 museums in the counties of Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire and Avon, it begins with a description of the history and development of each, followed by a complete chronological catalogue with a photograph of every coin. Like other catalogues of museum collections, it provides an invaluable starting point for any student in the field, particularly so as it combines in one volume all of the museums in the South-West. Having said that, it is unfortunate that a number of the photographs are not sufficiently clear to identify the detail, which rather detracts from its value. The chronological order of the book has also suffered by three museums, including the Somerset County Museum, either receiving or locating further relevant collections of coins after the completion of the manuscript. However, the important fact is that they were included.

Members of this Society may be interested in the following quote taken from the sylloge—'The result, so far as the numismatic collection is concerned, is that the Somerset County Museum has by far the best collection in the south-west'.

In spite of the above criticisms, this is a most welcome and useful addition to the series.

STEPHEN MINNITT
Somerset County Museum

Butleigh, a thousand years of a Somerset parish, by E. F. Syngé (Butleigh P.C.C., 1974, reprinted 1975), 50 pp., 50p.

In the fine tradition of Anglican incumbents, yet in a modern format, manageable scale and with unusual modesty of approach, understandably so popular that a reprint was necessary after only a month or two, Mr. Syngé introduces in a most charming way the history of a parish which was in his care for a decade. That his work raises as many problems as it solves is at once an indication of the way in which the author says what he does not know, and also of the potentially useful sources which he has discovered, housed at such places as Longleat, which are inaccessible to most of us. The illustrations and the map, so often the weak points of a work of this kind, are a worthy complement to the text, conveying the spirit of Butleigh and its past, the changelessness of the pastoral scene.

One of the most interesting features of the parish is the independent development of Butleigh Wootton, carved, it might be, out of natural woodland and having not only its own open field system denoting a distinct farming pattern, but also once boasting a chapel, probably of manorial origin, discovered (and its traces destroyed, no doubt) by John Periam at the end of the 18th century, its very existence revealed now in his diaries. Butleigh, indeed, boasts a rich past, from its honoured place among the earliest Glastonbury estates to possession by Grenvilles, Periams and Hoods and occupation by Symcoxes and Rockes. Its church has work by Buckler and Pugin, evidence of the taste and views of Dean George Neville Grenville, squarson of the parish. If many people remembered Butleigh until a few years ago because of the haunting spectre of Buckler's roofless Butleigh Court, the parish will now, in Mr. Syngé's work, be remembered for its more lasting history.

ROBERT DUNNING

Minehead, a New History, by Hilary Binding and Douglas Stevens (the Exmoor Press for Floyds of Minehead, 1977), 290pp., 75 illustrations and 6 maps, paperback £2.95.

Histories of small towns and parishes of any substantial nature rarely appear, the costs of any publication other than a short monograph being prohibitive. For a new history of Minehead, last documented by the prolific Prebendary Hancock in 1903, we have to thank Floyds, a department store in the town, who chose to celebrate their centenary by unselfishly commissioning the work. In similar circumstances most firms would have issued a history of their own business activities and Floyds' example is one which others might usefully follow.

The new book has been issued in limited hardback, and paperback editions, the latter most reasonably priced. A generous text, chronicling the town's past from birth to Butlins, is supplemented by a wealth of well-chosen illustrations. The pictures are generally well reproduced, although one might have wished for clearer versions of two of the most interesting: those on pages 68 and 215. Many of the early photographs evoke the atmosphere of the 'world we have lost' with striking clarity. I particularly liked those of the Minehead-Lynton coach surmounting Porlock Hill and the besmocked girl in Tithings Court. For those not familiar with Minehead's topography, a map of the modern town locating the sites of features such as inns mentioned in the text would have been welcome, as would a more comprehensive index. The authors owe an obvious debt to Hancock, particularly for his work on the medieval Luttrell records, but their book considerably augments and extends his treatment. Sources have been widely sought and carefully used. Full accounts are given of the development and decline of both harbour and corporation: and the bribery and feasting at former election times is vividly recreated.

The role of the individual in his community has not been forgotten and pictures of many colourful characters enliven the story. I was particularly glad to find a number of new (to me) references to one of my favourite reprobates, Ralph Tucker. For several years from 1613 the parish officers tried desperately and with little success to rid themselves of this 'sturdy beggar' and his family. The port's whistling ghost, Mother Leakey, is also treated much more fully than hitherto, although Bishop Piers, who investigated reports of her apparition, is described rather strangely as 'Pierce' (following Hancock).

Social and economic topics are carefully considered, particularly the two brickworks in the town (with due acknowledgment to Mr. B. J. Murless), and space is found for such superb items as the satirical concert poster of 1918.

There are inevitably a few disappointments. The loss of the Luttrell family's personal correspondence, probably during William Prynne's archival activities at Dunster in the mid-17th century, rather depersonalizes their early involvement in the town's affairs. One might also have hoped that in an earlier reference to the hobby horse than 1830 would have emerged. These, however, are shortcomings not of the authors but of their sources. Mrs. Binding and Mr. Stevens have produced a highly readable and comprehensive account of their town: a labour which merits imitation by other Somerset communities

R.J.F.B.

The Book of Taunton, by Robin Bush (Barracuda Books Ltd., 1977), 148pp., illustrated, £8.25.

The first comprehensive History of Taunton, by Joshua Toulmin, was published in 1791, and although this was subsequently enlarged in new editions prepared by James Savage (1822) and Charles Webb (1874), there has long been a pressing need for a new definitive history of the town. Until his illness and untimely death in 1976, the late Mr. T. J. Hunt had seemed to be the scholar best equipped to write such a work, and it was he who suggested that Robin Bush should undertake the task, and made available to him the fruits of his own researches: the new book is appropriately dedicated to Mr. Hunt's memory.

It is very evident that Mr. Bush, who is assistant editor of the Victoria History of Somerset, has made use of a wide range of sources, both printed and in manuscript form, in the preparation of his *Book of Taunton*, and the contents not only span the whole period from prehistory to the present day, but cover a range of topics which include the role of the bishops of Winchester (who built the castle and were lords of the manor), religion, trade and industry, town government, entertainment, crime and punishment, education, and the problems of sickness and poverty. The text of the book, which is written in a lucid style, comprises a total of some fifty pages, and it is clear that, even allowing for the large page-size, the author has had to condense his material considerably: this is presumably because the *Book of Taunton*

has had to conform to the format of a series of similar titles published by Barracuda Books. The remainder of the book is comprised of numerous illustrations (reproductions of early maps, drawings, paintings and photographs), several of which are taken from the Society's collections, and this would again appear to be a feature of the series. The quality of both the printing of the text and the reproduction of the illustrations is extremely good, and the volume as a whole is attractively produced—although its size may cause problems of storage.

The illustrations which form such a substantial part of the *Book of Taunton* are undoubtedly of considerable interest, but it is regrettable that they are not explicitly related to the text. More importantly, the serious student might well feel that the illustrations could have been reduced in number to allow for an expansion of the text. As it stands, the text provides a great deal of basic information about many aspects of the town's history, but limitations of space seem to have precluded a more detailed development of the subject-matter and a greater emphasis upon discussion and analysis: the modern school of urban historians would probably wish for more attention to demography and the analysis of social and occupational structures, for instance. Urban history is, moreover, a *comparative* subject. This is not to imply, however, that the interpretative approach is wholly absent: in the chapter on 'Trade Routes', for instance, the author attempts to explain the decline of the woollen industry in Taunton. Here he mentions electoral disruption and air pollution as possible causes, but seems to place the main emphasis upon the clothiers' exploitation of the clothworkers, which culminated in a drastic reduction in the price paid per piece of cloth during the 1760s: one might equally argue, however, that depressed prices/wages must have been a symptom of an industry that was already in serious difficulties.

Although the *Book of Taunton* is concerned with the variety of the town's history over many centuries, rather than with a single continuous theme, the chapter entitled 'A Factious Town', which is concerned with Taunton's 'long history of political discord and disloyalty to the Crown', seems to provide something of a keynote. Here Mr. Bush is especially concerned with events of the 17th and 18th centuries, but he avoids the temptation to devote a disproportionate amount of space to the Monmouth Rebellion. In the concluding paragraph of the chapter the claim is made that successive sovereigns have deliberately shunned Taunton since 1685, and that even when George VI 'passed swiftly through' the town in 1937 it was thought necessary for him to sleep in the royal carriage at Norton Fitzwarren 'rather than spend a single night in "the factious town of Taunton"'. It would be interesting to know the precise evidence for this apparent assertion that the king deliberately avoided sleeping in Taunton because of the town's particular reputation: there has certainly been a popular tradition that Taunton has been ostracized in this way, but this does not amount to historical proof. Unfortunately, on this, as on all other matters of further research, the reader is handicapped by an absence of footnotes (although there is a bibliography at the end of the book).

It seems clear that the publishers of the *Book of Taunton* have aimed at a popular, rather than an academic, readership. The book should consequently be regarded as a *contribution* to the study of Taunton's past rather than as the definitive History which has long been awaited. It provides a readable and attractively presented introduction to the history of the town.

M.MCD.

ALSO RECEIVED. *Celtic Civilization and Its Heritage*, by Jan Filip (Collet's, Academia, second revised edition, 1977), 231 pp., illustrated, £4.95 (£2.95 paperback). *Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society Journal*, Number 2 (1977), 48 pp., illustrated, £1.15.