

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Decorated Medieval Floor Tiles of Somerset**, by Barbara J. Lowe. Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society and Somerset County Museums Service, 2003. Pbk, 160 pp. numerous figures. ISBN 086 183 366 X

The medieval floor tiles of Somerset are surely amongst the most interesting and important surviving in any of the counties of southern England. The splendid pavement at Cleeve Abbey is widely recognised as one of the very finest tiled floors in Britain, but other examples at Barrow Minchin Nunnery, Muchelney Abbey and Keynsham Abbey have attracted much less interest, whilst the scatter of tiles in many parish churches, and loose tiles in museums and private holdings, have never been properly documented. Barbara Lowe's new survey of the county's medieval floor tiles, which presents the results of many years of active research, is therefore greatly to be welcomed as an important contribution to the study of an aspect of the medieval architecture of Somerset and of the ceramic industries of South-West England.

The sheer volume of surviving material will come as an initial surprise: Lowe documents tiles at no fewer than 62 different sites in the county. Wessex tiles of the 13th and early 14th centuries are much the most numerous type represented, but there are also various groups of later tiles, with several complex pavements of the 15th century including imports from South Worcestershire or the lower Severn valley. These are introduced with a brief general survey of tile production in England, followed by consideration of tile types and production techniques, tile groups and schools. The core of the book is the substantial catalogue of designs, arranged by theme (fish designs, floral designs, etc) with its handsome corpus of drawings which includes eye-catching half-scale reconstructions showing those patterns which were composed of groups of tiles. Here the heraldic designs receive close attention, with discussion of their possible identifications and dates, and there are wide-ranging matches to individual patterns, no doubt reflecting much fieldwork throughout South-West England and correspondence with fellow workers. A site gazetteer and concordance follow. Further sections discussing dating evidence would have been valuable, and this subject deserved fuller treatment; for example Ward Perkins' arguments for dating the Cleeve Old Refectory pavement (in his paper in *SANH* 1941, an omission from the bibliography), which rested on the combination of individuals represented in the heraldic tiles, do not emerge with clarity, either in the gazetteer or the concordance, since consideration of the dating is confined to the catalogue entries for the individual heraldic designs.

As county censuses of this sort are published the contrasts between different counties become evident. Lowe's corpus makes an interesting contrast with that in Dr Emden's pioneering publication of Dorset tiles: not only are there twice as many sites and patterns recorded in Somerset, but the range of material is different. Dorset, for example, has no examples of the 13th-century floors composed of concentric bands of tiles (represented on five different sites in Somerset) and none of the individual letter tiles of which Lowe publishes as many as 50

different designs; Dorset also has very little to compare with Somerset's series of complex 15th-century pavements. Comparison with Devon, where work by Laurence Keen is in hand, will show how very different the overall history of tile production could be, even in adjacent counties. In Devon most decorated tiles belong to a much more restricted period, c. 1280–1350.

In recent years tile studies in Britain have taken new directions, with increased emphasis on the identification of fabrics based on petrological examination, especially by thin-sectioning, leading to more precise identification of tile sources. More sophisticated analytical techniques, such as Inductively Coupled Plasma analysis, are now slowly being introduced into the subject, and these are likely to move the focus of study from tile designs and 'schools' of related patterns to study of the output of individual kiln sources. The Wessex tiles in Somerset, for example, must have been made at several sources within and outside the county, and the identification of these would greatly refine our understanding of the industry. The application of further techniques, such as seriation, or the detailed study of the progressively wider splits evident in individual tile stamps (which Christopher Norton used successfully to work out the order in which many Wessex floors were laid), offer other ways in which the activities of the Wessex tilers could be better understood. Lowe's work does not explore these new approaches (some of them of course expensive specialist exercises requiring laboratory facilities) but it does provide a fundamental work of reference on which such studies could be built in the future.

At a time when some county archaeological societies are struggling to maintain the publication of their annual Proceedings, it is greatly to the Society's credit that it should have the ambition to launch a new monograph series. Well written, attractively produced and edited to a high standard, the volume is a fine illustration of the continuing strength of non-professional archaeology in South-West England.

JOHN ALLAN

**Domestic Interiors: The British Tradition 1500–1850**, by James Ayres. Yale University Press, 2003, 272 pp., 228 b/w & 63 col. illus. £45. ISBN 0-300-08445-5

Domestic interiors at the polite end of the social spectrum are familiar from numerous publications, but the vernacular tradition is little known, largely owing to the fragmentary survival of examples. Therefore, the author is to be congratulated on gathering together so much fascinating material in this volume, which is a greatly expanded version of his *Book of the House in Britain*, published in 1981. One of the great strengths of the book is Ayres' thorough knowledge of specialist crafts and trades. In addition he is adept at explaining arcane details coupled with an engaging turn of phrase. For instance, before describing various fittings for early forms of artificial lighting, he observes that 'Before the introduction of electricity, and certainly before the appearance of gaslight, the darkness which descended at night was every bit as terrible and total as is described in Genesis'.

The author lays out his thesis logically with an informative introduction followed by chapters on individual aspects thus: heat and light, walls, doors and doorways, windows, floors, ceilings, stairs, paint and painting, furniture. The conclusion places the vernacular tradition in context and in little more than a dozen pages provides an admirable summary. Casual readers could do worse than read this first – they would learn much and have their appetites whetted for the preceding specialist chapters.

Ayres describes not only fixtures, fittings and decoration, but also the layout and uses of rooms. As a result, it is instructive to learn how fashions descended through the social scale and to observe how the subtleties of status may be discerned. 'Everything within the house

reflected the status of its occupants, from the presence or absence of textiles to the type of candle that was burnt for artificial light’.

The period covered in detail, as indicated by the book’s subtitle, is significant. Inevitably buildings surviving from the medieval period tend to belong to the upper levels of society, as ‘the mud shelters of the peasants have been dissolved by the action of rain and time’, but features long rejected by the aristocracy continued in use in vernacular houses. Interestingly, Ayres notes that examples from America have been invaluable in providing evidence for a shared trans-Atlantic culture. At the other end of the time scale, vernacular traditions were dying out by the middle of the 19th century as a result of industrialisation and improved communications. However, the survival of primitive forms in the remoter parts of the British Isles is extraordinary. One of several examples quoted is the use in Ireland until the 20th century of rudimentary doors consisting of ‘nothing more substantial than a bundle of brushwood’ and probably the last door of this type was made for a cowshed in County Cork in 1955.

The transmission of ideas down to the vernacular level is illustrated with contemporary paintings and references to plays and literature, not neglecting that mine of information the late 17th/early 18th-century diarist Celia Fiennes. The importance of London as a source of new and fashionable ideas has long been recognised, but this reviewer was surprised to learn that ‘it has been estimated that in England, as early as 1700, as many as one person in six had lived in London at some time’. So it is only to be expected that travel by artists and artisans was highly significant in bringing metropolitan ideas to all parts of the country – or even the empire. Ayres quotes a neat definition of décor in 1726 as ‘the keeping of due Respect between the Inhabitant and the Habitation’ and the early 18th century saw a dramatic increase in the standard of living, so that in 1763 the *British Magazine* could opine that ‘in a few years we shall probably have no common people at all’.

The author’s fund of knowledge illuminates every aspect of this work. For instance, he reminds us that ‘focus’ is the Latin for hearth, thus the focus of the living room. The word ‘pane’, now used almost exclusively for windows, in the 16th century described an assemblage of small pieces to form one unit and was often applied to textiles, as in ‘counterpane’. The explanation for early doors having any number of keyholes is as a consequence of locks being portable and considered part of the tenant’s property. The concept of ‘fixtures’ was very different from our own. Ayres quotes a will of 1597 where it was necessary to state that ‘all the glass in the windows of my house, the windows, doors, locks, bolts, benches, shelves, all the [floor] boards and planks in the garrets and upper chambers and floors beneath, nailed and unnailed, the gates and pales of my yard and iron work, as they now stand, to remain in the house’.

Although *Domestic Interiors* illustrates examples from all parts of the British Isles, Somerset is well represented. For example, the mid 18th-century built-in cupboard-bed in the Blake Museum at Bridgwater is of a kind more characteristic of the north of England and Scotland. The chapter on ceilings contains a number of references to decorative plasterwork, which was so admirably recorded by John and Jane Penoyre in *Decorative Plasterwork in the Houses of Somerset 1500–1700* (1994), where they illustrated examples both accomplished and professional and delightfully naïve. The same applies to the myriad of examples reproduced by Ayres of painted decoration, wood carving, wall paper, textiles and furniture.

It is easy to be enthusiastic about this volume, as it is both highly readable and extremely informative. The breadth of knowledge presented in such an accessible form is formidable and it is thoroughly recommended to anyone interested in not only architecture and the decorative arts but also in social history. Lastly, but certainly by no means least, *Domestic Interiors* is beautifully illustrated in colour and black and white to the high standard one has come to expect from Yale University Press.

STEPHEN CROAD

**Somerset – The Millennium Book**, edited by Tom Mayberry and Hilary Binding, Somerset Books, Tiverton, 1999, 144pp; no price given. ISBN 0 86183 485 2

This book is a noble celebration of the Millennium and worthy of the event that it marks. It is handsomely produced with elegant typefaces and generous with wide margins and uncluttered space. The Prince of Wales contributes a foreword in which he refers to the event as a time which inspired us 'not only to look to the future, but also to remember and celebrate the richness of the past'. In an introduction Adam Green, former County Archivist, draws attention to the diversity of the county.

The reader is first attracted by the striking illustrations, many in colour, drawn from the Society's own rich collections. Every one has something of beauty or interest and they effortlessly evoke our history and Christian tradition. Most of these are by the best topographical artists and architectural draftsmen who worked in Somerset in the 19th century including Danby, the Bucklers, Wheatley, and Tovey. Wheatley's painting of Frome (18) captures, not with exactitude, but with a profounder instinct, the spirit of the town perched precariously on its narrow hillsides, church, chapel, factory and house, jostling together for space cheek by jowl. His picture of Mells (20), if such it be, takes artistic license to a bold extreme.

As we get deeper into the book, the paintings merge into archive photographs with which we have all become increasingly familiar as the nostalgia industry flourishes and expands. Here they are used validly in relation to the text. However, this is no mere coffee table book. The editors have chosen as contributors the best available talent in the field. Each of the nine chapters is well written and skillfully crafted, each a telling example of *multum in parvo*. The arrangement of the chapters is broadly chronological beginning with The Making of the Shire, a distillation of Dr Costen's great knowledge of early Somerset. Dr Bettey deals with churches and church life with his usual erudition and Dr Dunning gives us a judicious survey of the rather sparse history of our towns.

To give an account of the Age of Elegance Robin Bush is well chosen. Tom Mayberry has the difficult task of charting the transition from Victorian to modern times which he does with skill, understanding and aplomb. The editors have been unobtrusive and are to be congratulated on producing this splendid and useful book to mark the 150th anniversary of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. It will long be a source of pleasure and instruction.

MICHAEL MCGARVIE

**Somerset in the Age of Steam: a history and archaeology of Somerset Industry c. 1750 – 1950** by Peter Stanier. Somerset Books, Tiverton, 2003. 160 pp, A4, illustrated with photographs and maps. Index. Hardback. £19.95. ISBN 1 86183 481 X

This book records Somerset's industries from the end of the first phase of the industrial revolution until the dawn of the revolution in information technology. Although it is true that little heavy industry has survived within Somerset's borders, the quotation from Kelly's 1889 Directory of Somerset at the head of the preface reminds us of the number and variety of locally based industries that were flourishing in the late 19th century.

The rapid demise of the steam-powered manufacturing industry of Great Britain after the end of the second world war resulted in the destruction, often without adequate record and in the face of opposition from concerned historians of technology, of industrial buildings and the breaking for scrap of their machinery and associated prime movers, many of which had been working for more than a century and which had not yet reached the end of their lives. It was in

response to this massive destruction that increasing numbers of mainly amateur historians began to study and record those technological developments, considered to have been in large measure responsible for the addition of 'Great' to 'Britain'.

Industrial archaeology, christened less than 60 years ago, has sometimes been derided as a subject unworthy of serious study. Given that degree courses in industrial archaeology have for several years been offered at universities and that its study requires at the very least a knowledge of economic and social history, building construction, surveying and mechanical engineering, such a view is no longer tenable. Today there are many professionally qualified practitioners in this discipline of whom the author of this book is one. Considered outstanding in his field, Dr Peter Stanier was born in Cornwall and has already written several books on industrial subjects including studies of mining and quarrying in the South West. He edits the quarterly *Bulletin of the (national) Association for Industrial Archaeology*, and as he lives close to the border of Somerset and Dorset he is particularly well qualified to write about the history and archaeology of Somerset's industry. In less skilful hands the disparate nature of the industries covered by this volume could have resulted in little more than a tedious catalogue of sites; it is a tribute to Dr Stanier's considerable talent that he has written a book which provides both a comprehensive and readable account of the industrial development within the geographical area of Somerset as it has existed since 1974.

In 21 chapters, accounts of the history of 30 industries as diverse as quarrying, metal and coal mining, the clay industries and milling, leather and paper making, brewing and lime burning are covered, including the transport infrastructure upon which those industries relied, canals and river navigations, turnpike roads, railways and ports. Most of the 230 photographs in the book were taken by the author shortly before publication, and are well reproduced. Several archive photographs, maps and extracts from trade catalogues are also included. Inevitably in a work as comprehensive as this, an occasional trifling error may be noticed: the location of the photograph on page 116, also reproduced on the front of the dust jacket, is incorrectly stated, as the photograph was taken at Watchet.

A well-researched and enjoyable book, which while illuminating the broad canvas of Somerset's industrial past, is well written and full of interesting detail: the selection of further reading is helpful as is the index without which no serious work may be considered complete. The typography is clear and unfussy, and, except for a few examples of inset photographs, the design of the book pleasing. The book is highly recommended.

MIKE JONES

**Somerset Families**, by Robert Dunning, Somerset Books, 2002; £19.95, ISBN 0 86183 446 1

A book on Somerset families has long been needed and we have it at last from the pen (or computer) of our official historian Dr R.W. Dunning. This guarantees that it will be elegantly written in an easy style incorporating the scholarship gleaned from 40 years of research into the history of our county. He says it is not a work of original research but he draws on wide sources, many obscure and unknown to most of us.

The 25 families chosen are a personal selection, no doubt picked for the particular interest and individuality of the families concerned. They are well chosen and the variety impressive. Two are ducal (Beaufort and Seymour); others are more conventional like the baronial Mohuns and Luttrells who succeeded each other at Dunster. Then there are commercial families such as Clark, Fox and Wills, naval and clerical families (Hood and Leir), artistic families (Elton),

lawyers (Hobhouse) and solid county gentry represented by the Harbins and the Horners. Incidentally, Dr Dunning could have enhanced his account of the Horners of Mells with some extracts from 'A.B.'s' Memoirs.

The common thread in all this variety was public service not only as MPs and magistrates but also by serving as High Sheriffs and Lord Lieutenants. Here they became the embodiment of the county's identity and guarantors of its historic integrity. In the past the outward sign of status was the family seat and these are well represented in Dr Dunning's book in a choice selection of fine prints and photographs. Their owners are also profusely on show in many guises, rarely smiling but taking a solemn view of the world.

Dr Dunning has the foresight to recognise a new breed of settlers, attracted by trade or scenery to Somerset. They are less exalted than their predecessors, less pretentiously housed and contribute to local life in different ways. They are still Somerset families. Perhaps some of these will appear in a second collection (which would be welcome) together with one of Somerset's most literary noble families, the Boyles of Marston Bigot.

MICHAEL MCGARVIE

**Hannah More, The First Victorian** by Anne Stott, Oxford University Press; £25.00; ISBN 0-19-924532-0

Hannah More has not always been well served by her numerous biographers over the last 200 years. Born the daughter of a schoolmaster, yet managing, by her genius and wit, to enter the circle of the leading intellectuals of her day as an equal, there is much more to her life than the footnotes to educational reform she normally elicits. Maybe it is some reflection on their subject, however, that the range of biographers should be so diverse. Mary Alden Hopkins, devoted fan; Augustine Birrell, cynic; Charlotte M. Yonge, romantic novelist; and the Revd William Shaw, epitomised by the pen-name he adopted, The Revd Sir Archibald MacSarcasm. Only M. G. Jones previously offered a serious academic appraisal.

Yet her new biographer, Anne Stott, suggests that the greatest damage to Hannah More's reputation was perpetrated by the well-meaning Revd William Roberts. He published 'Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Hannah More' in four volumes within a year of her death in 1833 and bowdlerised her letters; prompting her god-daughter, Marianne Thornton, to exclaim '... if such an oaf will write a book, at least he should be honest.' It is Stott's contention that his 'improvements' have seriously hindered a considered evaluation of Hannah More's contribution to the momentous events of her time, and it is the case she makes for this which must be the key to an assessment of her work.

Stott's sub-title, 'The First Victorian', is not original, though previously it has been used to exemplify More's paternalism, class consciousness and prudery. Here More's energetic campaigning, moral fervour and belief in Britain's providential destiny are cited. Whatever one's view it is demonstrable that Hannah More, and her close friend William Wilberforce, had a major influence on 19th-century morals, whether for good or ill. However, this book argues that she was also 'a more lively and attractive character than previous stereotypes have suggested.' In one example Stott contrasts the moral of More's Cheap Repository Tracts, 'that everything turns out for the best, provided one goes to church and keeps the sabbath', with her letters to her close friends, showing a great deal more compassion and attempts to influence government policy, plus anger and frustration concerning the lack of institutional action to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

This biography uses a wide variety of published and unpublished sources, including a number of letters previously unavailable, giving new insights into More's life. Stott's analysis of them

is usually of a high standard. Having said that, local detail can easily be overlooked. A small example is the More sister's assertion that all baptisms, marriages and burials in Cheddar were conducted on the sabbath, as there was no resident vicar or curate. A check in the local registers refutes this, yet the charge is repeated by the Mores nine months later. Other local research also suggests that the two sisters often wrote to entertain their friends, or to advance their cause, rather than in strictly accurate terms. In some cases there is evidence that they misinterpreted what they had been told. The potency of the Somerset vernacular to create misunderstandings should never be minimised.

As my interest in Hannah More arose when researching the local history of Cheddar, I turned to the index to discover how many textual references there were to the village, only to find that many instances I had noted were not recorded there. That does detract from its value in local studies but, having said that, I found this book both lively and thought-provoking. If the recent re-awakening of interest in its subject arose, perhaps, from fashionable 'gender studies', it assuredly vindicates its point that women did play a considerable role in 18th-century society and, whether you are a cynic or a romantic, Hannah More was definitely someone who helped to shape the lives of many generations in this country.

JOHN G. PAGE

**Willow. Paintings and drawings with Somerset voices**, by Kate Lynch with a foreword by David Bellamy. Published by Furlong Fields Publishing in association with The Brewhouse, Taunton. 2003. 100pp. Numerous colour illustrations. No price stated.

When Kate Lynch moved from the hills of the Somerset/Dorset border to the Somerset Levels some five years ago she found herself painting an unfamiliar landscape that she neither knew nor understood. If her work was to have any depth or passion she needed to learn more about the people who lived and worked that landscape. She met with willow growers and basket makers whose families had farmed the wet, flat land for generations and, imperceptibly, their traditions and craftsmanship became the subject matter of her work.

Willow has been worked on the Levels for 2000 years or more and as she talked and listened and watched Kate found herself drawn close to the history of the region. Woven willow was used in the prehistoric trackways that crossed the Levels and in the walls of huts and baskets that date from the Iron Age to the time of the Romans. Over the centuries it has been woven to make coracles, fish traps and bee skeps while later uses included early aeroplane seats, laundry baskets and wheelchairs. In the Second World War, willow growers and basket makers played their part in the war effort by weaving carriers for homing pigeons and airborne panniers for dropping supplies. Today willow still provides the framework for the Guards' bearskins, willow coffins are becoming popular and balloonists ascend to the heavens in huge willow baskets. Spiling – the use of woven willow in the conservation of river banks – has become a popular 'green' solution to a perennial problem while woven garden structures and sculpture are all the rage.

Once baskets were made in most villages throughout the country but in the 19th century demand grew and the Somerset industry became key. Tall brick chimneys extending from old boilers mark the sites of old withy works. Today there is plastic, and machine-made baskets flood the market but nonetheless there are still skilled traditional basket makers on the Levels who produce quality items from the willow grown in nearby withy beds. It is their work and their words that Kate has recorded in this beautifully designed and produced book.

The Oral History Archive at the Rural Life Museum at Glastonbury was begun more than 30 years ago when it became apparent that many of the old rural crafts and ways of life were

disappearing in the wake of the Second World War. Kate had already begun to tape reminiscences as she painted when she learnt of the Archive, met with Ann Heeley and, as she says, 'a happy collaboration followed'. There are now some 30 recordings of Somerset willow growers and basket makers in the Archive, available to students, researchers and the general public.

Kate Lynch's atmospheric paintings convey the dourness and the dampness of the haunting landscape of the Levels and the hard physical work and concentrated dedication of the men and women who still remember and practise skills passed down through the generations. Most of the paintings are in oils on paper but some are willow charcoal drawings – charcoal that is also produced on the Levels. Opposite each illustration is set an extract from the reminiscences – willow growing and basket making have their own language as well as their own skills and both are recorded here.

This is a book to enjoy and return to with pleasure again and again. It is also a unique record of a way of life.

HILARY BINDING