

Review

A History of the County of Oxford. Edited by Mary D. Lobel and Alan Crossley. Vol. IX. Bloxham Hundred. (The Victoria History of the Counties of England.)

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The great history of Oxfordshire marches triumphantly on. When completed it will for area and population involved have no superior in the Victoria investigations into English counties. Its latest progeny, volume IX, has the immense advantage of having all its accounts of parishes, except that of Wroxton (done by Professor Lawrence Stone), written by one author, Dr. J. F. A. Mason. It would be hard to over-praise this Masonic gift of such a complete and invaluable history of Bloxham Hundred. Oxonians in particular must be grateful for a superb and generous contribution, worth the giving and the taking.

The volume contains the histories of eleven ancient parishes in north Oxfordshire and of Bloxham Hundred which those parishes, together with the Sibfords and Mollington (reserved for a later volume), comprised. Bloxham hundred adjoins and in parts intermingles with Banbury hundred and abuts southward on the hundreds of Chadlington and Wootton. It consists mainly of the valleys and interfluves between the Cherwell on the east and the modern Warwickshire border or the escarpment crest of the North Oxfordshire Heights and Edgehill on the west. Geomorphologically it embraces a deeply-dissected dip-slope composed of Lower and Middle Jurassic rocks in which pervious and impervious beds of various thicknesses alternate. This causes an abundance of spring-lines at which limestone strata are sapped or undermined by springs so that they slip downhill upon the lubricated underlying clays. Consequently the valleys today are wide and steep-sided, both features being accentuated by the fact that towards and at the close of the last glacial phase much sediment and solifluxion debris accumulated upon the valley-floors as a flat sheet of deposition. The close-spaced dissection by numerous streams and the resultant complexity and fragmentation of soil cover seem to have encouraged settlement by numerous small groups during and after the Anglo-Saxon invasions. Today Bloxham hundred contains 19 nucleated settlements several of which, as at Bloxham and Adderbury (East and West), are characterized by twin nuclei, one nucleus facing the other across the uninhabited floodable valley-floor. The economy was based almost exclusively on mixed farming until varied by the addition of textiles, particularly plush-weaving, and later by the quarrying or mining of ironstone. Inevitably the industrial development of Banbury affected Bloxham hundred and in recent decades has become dominant.

The early prosperity, derived largely from mixed farming, is reflected in the parish churches as at Bloxham and Adderbury. All these religious edifices are described in admirable detail, complete with chronological ground-plans and excellent views and photographs. The general prosperity and the abundance of good local building stone are also reflected in the high quality of the many surviving 'peasant' dwellings and numerous manor houses and in several fine country mansions, including Broughton Castle, Hanwell Castle and Wroxton Abbey, which receive the same sumptuous treatment as the churches. The relative security or independence of many local farmers is suggested as one reason why the area became notable for its Puritanism and later also for Quakerism. Other reasons given are proximity to Banbury and the lead taken in nonconformity by the larger land-holders, particularly the Fienneses of Broughton, the Copes of Hanwell and not least Bray Doyley of Adderbury who was important also at a national level.

The arrangement of the contents of this fine volume follows the pattern of its

immediate predecessors. A brief summary of the hundred (Bloxxham) as an administrative unit is followed by detailed individual accounts of its ancient parishes. Where these parishes incorporated several townships each township is dealt with separately; thus in the ancient parish of Adderbury it is easy to find the full history of Bodicote, which was made a separate ecclesiastic and civil parish in 1855, and of Barford St. John which in 1932 was joined administratively to its twin Barford St. Michael in Wootton hundred.

The account of each parish or township follows a standard plan. First, the general topography and the essential features of the historico-geographical qualities of the parish are summarized. This difficult and formidable task introduces the following detailed accounts of the manorial history, of domestic architecture and of local government, including intimate details of poor law administration. Then an equally detailed and authoritative investigation is made into the parish's economic development, its mills, its church and religious affairs, including nonconformity, and finally into its schools and charities. The results are impressive and are indispensable to Oxonians and of great value to general practitioners. In a brief review it would be invidious to select certain parts or themes for special praise. Samples such as the detailed accounts of the poor, of the nonconformists at Adderbury, of pre-enclosure economics (with excellent maps), of the acreage of holdings at Horley and Hornton from 1851 to 1961, and of the mills at Broughton spring readily to mind.

If there are chinks in the armour of this elegant pachyderm they do not lie in its historical sections nor in its scholarship. Textual errors are conspicuous by their absence. There may be a slight mis-spelling in one or even two of the personal names in the innumerable footnotes and perhaps 'the parish (Shenington) lives mostly between the 500 and 625 ft. contour line' is an unconscious—and not wholly unacceptable—variant but otherwise the square metres of print are faultless. The Index too strikes a nice adequacy, being neither excessively long nor irritatingly repetitive. If there are blemishes—or to state the case more fairly, if there are lines of possible improvement—they lie in the general topographical account and in certain omissions particularly of an adequate picture of the regional setting of individual parishes, and of modern techniques of discussing and depicting spatial socio-economic relationships.

First to the topographical accounts. Some are excellent but in others the geological and geographical phrases lack the high quality of the historical descriptions. True the physical nature of the Bloxxham hundred is extremely complex and may defy analysis within a few sentences but the area falls partly in the scope of the recently-published *Geology of the Country around Banbury and Edge Hill* (H.M.S.O. 1965) and is represented on the accompanying 1-inch Geological Sheet 201, New Series. Reference to these and other primary sources would have cleared up some topographical uncertainties. To quote random examples; Wroxton parish is said to lie 'on a sandstone plateau covered by red loam, rising at Claydon Hill, its highest point, to 550 ft.' (p. 171). The local historian, knowing the Anglo-Saxons' flair for geological accuracy, may be surprised that they misnamed Claydon Hill until he consults the official survey and finds that all the Claydon Hill Upland is floored with Upper Lias Clay. Again, on more geographical lines, elsewhere the Bloxxham hundred is said to lie between the river Cherwell and the Cotswold crest whereas in fact the Cotswolds are traditionally terminated northward at the Evenlode. Or again, the persistent mis-use of the imaginary contour line as a reality. A parish is a piece of ground, not a picture on a map or document; Drayton parish lies between 400 and 500 ft. (above O.D. or sea level), not 'within the 400 and 500 ft. contours'.

Second, remedies for certain suggested omissions. It seems to your reviewer that the parishes although described so superbly as individual units are never adequately revealed in their regional setting. It may be argued that this has already been done in the first two county volumes but even when these introductory volumes are reasonably up-to-date and are to hand it is most inconvenient to use them and the parish (hundred)

volume simultaneously. How much more convenient it would be if the introductory account in each hundred volume was expanded to include all its essential aspects. Each parish would then acquire a regional setting of great value to a wide range of readers. To give a crude example, the administrative history of Bloxham hundred in volume IX could be profitably expanded by the addition of a few lines of text and three pages of maps, each page having four maps. The first page could consist of simple, clear maps or diagrams of the relief; drift geology; hydrography; and present-day land-use. It would obviate the geological and geographical uncertainties that can creep into the topographical accounts of parishes. The second page of diagrams could depict historical and demographic themes, such as prehistoric and Romano-British sites and routeways; turnpikes and bridges (with dates); decadal variations in population for each parish since 1801; and the present distribution of houses and settlements, based perhaps on some classification.

Such a scheme, while taking up little textual space, would begin to reveal the subtle inter-actions between the parishes and the effects of their regional location. Each parish would become what it was and is—an administrative unit in a wider social and economic setting.

But here we need to introduce another line of suggested improvement, namely, the addition or adoption of modern techniques for the analysis and cartographic representation of socio-economic relationships, or crudely for the discussion and depiction of the activities of the parishioners. The idea is fairly old but its recent resurgence, with a vast literature, may be exemplified by H. E. Bracey's *Social Provision in Rural Wiltshire* (1952), P. Haggett's *Locational Analysis in Human Geography* (1965), and *Socio-Economic Models in Geography* (1967) edited by R. J. Chorley and P. Haggett. As these modern concepts of socio-economic relationships have not been adequately developed in the introductory volumes to the county histories they might well be expressed in the volume on each hundred or grouping of hundreds. Thus in the introduction to *Bloxham Hundred* (Vol. IX) one page of 4 maps or diagrams could have been devoted to the journey-to-work (commuting); land-use changes 1869-1968; accessibility to Banbury (type, route and time taken); and occupations, or some other important socio-economic topic. Much of the data are available from county planning offices and various ministries and could where necessary be bolstered by private local surveys. As said, the textual additions would be minimal because the maps or diagrams would virtually speak for themselves. Such concepts and techniques would for the sake of a few additional pages give the parochial volumes of the Victoria County History a welcome touch of unity and modernity.

Two small points may illustrate the advantages of always using concentrated cartographic techniques. The fine full-page map of Bloxham in 1954 (Vol. ix. *Oxoniensia*, p. 54) could have been refined to show at least the main periods of expansion of the built-up areas, and the developments from 1954 to 1968 could have been added from a simple survey. Similarly the excellent plates which deal mainly with a wide range of architectural features could be varied or extended occasionally by the addition of a full-page six-inch vertical aerial photograph (Ordnance Survey) showing in incomparable detail a township in its regional setting.

The reader may think of the extra cost but the fact is that at the moment the *Victoria History of the Counties of England* is good value for money and that *Bloxham Hundred*, Volume IX of the history of Oxfordshire, is an excellent investment for bibliophiles and librarians.

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