

Reviews

Banbury Corporation Records : Tudor and Stuart, calendared, abstracted and edited by J. S. W. Gibson and E. R. C. Brinkworth. The Banbury Historical Society, Vol. 15, 1977. xxiv + 360 pages. £6.50 to non-members.

Banbury is rapidly becoming one of the best-known of Tudor and Stuart towns. Thanks to the publications of its record society, the materials for its history are more accessible than those of many larger and richer boroughs, and they have already been used admirably by the authors of the *Victoria County History* (Vol. 10, 1972). The latest publication of the society presents as its main text the Corporation Accounts, beginning in 1555 and extending into the early 18th century. These are not in themselves of major interest, save to local historians: the earliest give some valuable information about markets and tolls, but after 1600 the accounts become progressively more formal. The volume has been given wider appeal, however, by the inclusion of other relevant documents from both local and central archives. There are, for example, abstracts of the Charters and charity commission reports. Perhaps the most interesting of these additions are the accounts of political controversies in the town between 1596 and 1608, when an attempt was made to topple the ruling oligarchy, and vivid descriptions of election and charter disputes at the end of the 17th century. But there is material also on Puritanism, fires, poor relief and the damaging effects of the Civil War.

The documents have been modernized, abstracted and arranged (in the case of the accounts rearranged) in chronological order. Purists may think that this takes the reader too far from the originals. But the result is an illuminating chronicle of the major affairs of the borough between 1555 and 1700, for which all historians will be grateful. The editors have placed scholars still further in their debt by adding full biographical notes on the members of the corporation and chief office-holders, which allow a detailed study of the *cursus honorum* in the town. If those medium-sized market towns which Alan Everitt has described as the 'Banburys of England' were all as well served by their historians as Banbury itself, our knowledge of early modern urban history would be transformed.

PAUL SLACK

The excavation of an Iron Age settlement, Bronze Age ring-ditches and Roman features at Ashville Trading Estate, Abingdon (Oxfordshire) 1974-76. By Michael Parrington, with other contributors. Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit Report 1, Council for British Archaeology Research Report 28, 1978. Pp. viii and 139, 16 plates. £8.00.

The Oxfordshire Archaeological Unit has established an enviable reputation for its record of publications; as the recent issues of this journal show, reports on the excavations undertaken by the Unit since its inception in 1973 have appeared promptly and regularly, and to a high standard. This volume is the first in a series of reports to be published jointly by the Unit and the Council for British Archaeology, and presents the results of an excavation which ended in March 1976; the preparation of such a large amount of material and its actual publication within no more than two years are, by the standards of modern archaeology, highly commendable achievements.

It must be said at once that this is an unusual report. Of the 139 pages of text, 38 are devoted to the pottery, 17 to the seeds and 29 to the animal bones. How welcome it is to see the seeds and the bones in particular given such extensive treatment; even today

they are too often regarded as optional extras, as useful additions to the real essentials of the structures and the pottery. Here, however, the bones and the seeds are uncompro-misingly given equal status with the more traditional categories of archaeological evidence. The report, in consequence, has a somewhat unfamiliar look, and there are parts indeed which are not for the faint-hearted. Some will no doubt regard internode margins and Kiesewalter's factor as total mysteries, and will find such statements as 'its glumes were glabrous and its lemmas awned' (p. 103) more reminiscent of the Jabberwocky than of an excavation report. Every discipline, however, needs its own specialized terminology, and there is no real reason why such words and such ideas should be any more inaccessible than the mumbo-jumbo of 'devolved situlate jars' that was once the standard stuff of Iron Age reports, and they will certainly be more meaningful. If this report requires an intellectual effort for its comprehension, that effort will be well worthwhile, for there is much in both the primary evidence and in its analysis and interpretation that is of the greatest interest.

The Bronze Age ring-ditches, fully discussed by Christopher Balkwill, are further evidence for an extensive cemetery in the Abingdon area, and this together with the possibility of recognizing prehistoric land divisions on the gravels could be of great importance in understanding the relationship of the valley to the downland in the second millennium.

The excavated area revealed a succession of different land uses, with pits followed in turn by houses and a field system, and it is a pity that the general discussion, like the title, stresses an Iron Age settlement but only Roman features; in all phases there must have been many features beyond the limits of excavation, and the failure to discover actual domestic structures in some phases does not make them any the less interesting. It is time that we looked more generally at the spatial organization of prehistoric activity, and here is a good example of the successive location of different functions on the same area.

The report on the Iron Age pottery by C. D. DeRoche contains a full discussion of the forms, fabrics, surface treatment and technology. The stratigraphy provided a basic chronology, and the continuous decline in the proportion of shell-tempered fabrics thus demonstrated is used to give an approximate date for other unrelated groups. The broad outline in D. W. Harding's *The Iron Age in the Upper Thames Basin* is confirmed, and there is now the stratigraphic proof previously lacking, but his angular horizon and phase of decorated pottery receive no support. If the hope expressed in the introduction that 'only now can we begin to understand the complexities of innovation and conservatism which were at work' seems over-optimistic, we are at least provided with a clearer picture of the continuously changing usage of pottery.

At one point reliance on Harding's results is excessive. His identification of a series of large vessels with expanded rims as imitations of bronze cauldrons was the basis of much of his chronology for the earlier Iron Age. Flat bases have, however, now been recognized (p. 71), which, so to speak, knock the bottom out of the cauldron hypothesis, and it is therefore inconsistent to accept (p. 72) Harding's dates based on this identification.

Other groups of finds are discussed by various contributors; perhaps the most important is the wooden ard-share treated by Peter Fowler. One irritating feature of the presentation is that the section on the small finds is geared to the drawings; it is necessary to search the discussion of domestic industry and of ceramics to find the descriptions of such undrawn finds as loom-weights and other fired clay objects.

The plant remains, discussed by Martin Jones, are the first from a British site to receive adequate publication, and this is undoubtedly an important contribution, both substantively and methodologically, to Iron Age studies. Much valuable information has been retrieved both of a purely botanical nature and for the subsistence economy of the site. The decreasing frequency of the spike rush, for example, shows a lower proportion of damp ground under cultivation; this is attributed to improved drainage rather than to a shift of arable to the higher ground, but it will be interesting to see how further research modifies this conclusion. Jones is surely right to explain the significant decline in sample

purity by reference to changes in site organization rather than in harvesting or processing ; the earlier samples, being nearer to the houses, naturally have a larger proportion of cereal grains. The spatial variation thus implied in the observed deposits has interesting implications for other finds, and it is a pity that the pottery and the bone were not similarly analysed.

The discussion of the animal bones by Bob Wilson and others gives full treatment of the domestic species represented, the pathology and the butchery ; the latter, in particular, is an encouraging innovation. There is also a useful contribution by Julie Hamilton to the discussion of the problems concerning the ageing of sheep by the mandibles ; comparison of the various suggested methods shows a wide variety of results, with of course very different economic interpretations.

There are of course some criticisms to be made, though mostly minor. Apart from the difficulty of finding some of the finds, the normal convention of ' b.c. ' and ' a.d. ' for uncalibrated radiocarbon dates has been ignored, and it would have been less misleading if the conversions to the 5730 half-life had been omitted altogether. Perhaps the most serious point is a lack of integration and final synthesis. The studies of the economy and the site topography pose problems of correlation, and the whole volume surely deserves a more forthright statement of the contribution it has made to Iron Age studies. But perhaps it is inconsistent to praise the speed of the report and to demand more work. As it is, this is a major contribution, and, if the advance on Harding's review of 1972 is a suitable yardstick, then the progress is obvious, both in substance and in method.

T. C. CHAMPION

The Erosion of Oxford. By James Stevens Curl. Oxford Illustrated Press Ltd. 1977. Pp. x and 205, inc. many photographs. £4.

This book is by the first chairman of the Oxford Civic Society, one of the many environment-conscious groups which formed in England in the 1960s. Its inspiration was the threat to the city presented by a variety of new road proposals, which usually announced their horrendous nature by euphemistic ' Relief ' titles. The degree of erosion which Mr. Curl chronicles ranges from the vast housing complexes at Cowley to graffiti and street lamps. It is a sad tale of stupidity, greed and ignorance, off-set by the occasional success such as Headington Quarry or the Oxford Architects' Partnership's building in Longwall Street—but *not* the Sacher Building.

The book is well illustrated, with a lively and thought-provoking commentary.

Alfred's Kingdom : Wessex and the South, 800-1500. By David A. Hinton. J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd. 1977. Pp. xii and 228, inc. 40 text figures. 39 plates. £5.95.

Since the author of this book, which ' attempts to survey the medieval development of the south of England ', has editorial control of the reviews in this journal, an unbiased pronouncement on it could hardly be expected. In any case it would not warrant a full notice here, since it is not exclusively concerned with the county. Indeed, purists will be surprised to find Oxfordshire included at all, since it was never one of the ancient shires of Wessex. The author's autobiographical sense of geography links Oxford and Southampton in a way perhaps justified by the 8th-century *sceattas* (*Oxoniensia*, xxxvii (1972), 51-65)—provided that he is not held too closely to his starting-point of 800. It is hoped that the book's audience will enjoy reading it as much as the author enjoyed writing it, and that *Oxoniensia* readers will forgive the reviewer for usurping this opportunity to wish the journal well in this, his editorial last word.

DAVID A. HINTON