

Reviews

Mary Prior, *Fisher Row*. Oxford University Press, 1982. Pp. 406. £22.50.

Fisher Row was, before recent municipal improvements, one of Oxford's neglected and partly derelict riverside sites, stretching for *c.* 400 yds. along the west bank of the castle mill stream in St. Thomas's parish, Oxford. The row is divided into Upper, Middle, and Lower Fisher Row by two of the busiest roads in the city, Park End Street and Hythe Bridge Street, which carry traffic to and from the railway station and points west. Few of the hundreds who cross the row each day are aware that it exists, let alone that it once housed a thriving community of fishermen, bargemen, and canal boatmen. Fisher Row and its inhabitants have now been rescued from obscurity in one of the most remarkable contributions to urban and transport history of recent years. Few attempts have been made to reconstruct urban communities over prolonged periods of time; the complexity of property ownership, the mobility of urban populations, and the sheer weight of numbers have proved daunting. Dr. Prior, however, demonstrates in *Fisher Row* that by concentrating on an occupational community within a relatively small and stable area an astounding amount of information can, with patience, skill, and imagination, be recovered. Ultimately, of course, the success or failure of such a study will be determined by the sources. In that respect Dr. Prior was extremely fortunate in having available not only the usual parish register and census material, but the archives of Osenev abbey and its successor Christ Church, owners of much property in the area, and the Oxford city archives, including apprenticeship enrolments and unusually full details of leases. In Ralph Agas and David Loggan she was also blessed with reliable early cartographers.

The earliest known inhabitants, of Lower Fisher Row, were fishermen of the 12th and 13th centuries, tenants of Osenev abbey. By also conducting a host of by-employments such as basket weaving and, astonishingly, barbering, the fishermen survived, tenaciously independent, into the 19th century. Their survival was threatened on many occasions. They saw off a challenge in the 16th century from Oxford's powerful fishmongers, who tried to deny them access to the city's free waters. In the 17th century they were faced with a more serious threat, from a sharp decline in demand for river fish, but improvements to the navigation of the Thames offered them new opportunities on the growing number of barges plying the river. Barging also brought new families to the row, and it was for them that Upper and Middle Fisher Row were first developed. One of the most instructive sections in the book contrasts the relative accessibility to research of the leaseholders of the more spacious and desirable properties in Upper Fisher Row with the impenetrable obscurity of the rent-paying sub-tenants of Middle Fisher Row. The adaptability of the row was again in evidence with the arrival of a new breed of boatmen after the opening of the Oxford Canal in 1790. The marriage of canal boatmen into the established families of Fisher Row, and the consequent reorientation of skills and attitudes, demonstrated once more the row's ability to remain stable yet vital in the face of repeated challenges. Part of the fishermen's and boatmen's resilience undoubtedly derived from their privileged position as freemen, which placed them within the city's narrow economic and political community and gave them essential access to the city's free waters. The abolition of freemen's exclusive rights by the

Municipal Corporation Act of 1835 was, therefore, a heavy blow. Fisher Row also found itself to be an unfashionable example of the type of allegedly lawless fringe community whose independence local authorities were seeking to break. Lack of sympathy could be lived with; what could not was the railway, which killed river and canal trade and made it all but impossible to make a living on the water. A few have kept the tradition alive by catering for pleasure traffic, but to do so they have been forced to move out of Fisher Row to new sites.

Dr. Prior has examined each stage of the Row's varied career in minute detail. Her principal method is painstakingly to reconstitute the Row's families. Genealogies of Biblical complexity reveal how the many families of the 19th century traced their descent, like the tribes of Israel, from a handful of eponymous ancestors. Most importantly, she demonstrates the way in which occupation influenced family structure. Canal boatmen, travelling long distances, and therefore frequently absent, left behind families that were matriarchal and extended; strikingly different were fishermen's families, stationary and patriarchal, the nuclear families of historical convention. The two groups were indistinguishable to outsiders but there was little intermarriage between them and the Row in fact contained two distinct communities. Among both groups Dr. Prior found a stability that contradicts the conventional idea of the instability of urban communities. Her repeated demonstration that changing surnames need not denote different families is a salutary lesson to those of us, lazy or unawares, who are content to characterize a street or area after a brisk canter through the census returns or lease-books.

Fisher Row ranges far beyond the subject of its title. There are detailed accounts of the building of mills and of the mechanics of river and canal traffic. The book's importance also lies in unravelling some of the complex network of family and business connexions that underpinned the country's system of internal water transport in the 18th and 19th centuries. The water-side public house, for instance, is shown to have been at the heart of financial dealings and marital alliances. Much work remains to be done before we can expect a clear picture of the local working of the system, but Dr. Prior here indicates several possibilities for future researchers, and it is to be hoped that some at least will be taken up.

Criticisms of the book do not undermine its basic tenets. The early sections, on Fisher Row in the Middle Ages, are perhaps weaker and less certain. Some of the genealogical material is too dense and detailed for a book of this type, and is unlikely to elicit from the reader more than a respectful raising of the hat as he hurries by. The index is inadequate, and at times eccentric. To take a few examples almost at random: one looks in vain in the index for the Shotterill family, mentioned on p. 159; the Potteries is indexed for p. 192, but not for p. 218, and, compounding the offence, Stoke-on-Trent is omitted, as are Tipton and Shirleywich (all p. 244); important references to Oldbury on pp. 225 and 228 are also missing from the index. Yet casual literary references are indexed assiduously. A remark about boatmen and undergraduates behaving like the cartoon characters Tom and Jerry (p. 211) is solemnly indexed as 'Tom and Jerry' (without, incidentally, any cross-reference from Jerry). In this and in other respects some criticism must be directed at Oxford University Press, whose editing has been slipshod. *Fisher Row*, particularly in the first half, is littered with mis-prints and mistakes. It is a pity that so fine a work should be marred by the half-hearted efforts of the Press.

CHRIS DAY

E.H. Cordeaux and D.H. Merry, *A Bibliography of Printed Works relating to Oxfordshire*. Supplementary Volume. Oxford Historical Society, N.S. Vol. xxviii, 1981.

Oxfordshire historians have since 1955 turned with gratitude to Cordeaux and Merry for a comprehensive list of printed material on all aspects of the history of the county. (Since 1968 and 1976 they have also been able to turn to the same authors' bibliographies of the University and the City of Oxford.) The supplementary volume now published covers works published between 1951 and 1980, including many privately printed parish and village histories and many articles in periodicals. It also includes many obscure, earlier, works omitted from the previous volume; the names alone of such publications as *A Metrical Address to My Friends and Customers* (1843) by J. Smith of the Printing Office Bicester make interesting reading.

This supplementary volume is arranged in the same way as the original two volume bibliography, general works by subject and individual localities in alphabetical order, which makes reference from one to the other easy. The index is very full, indeed much fuller than that in the original bibliography in that names of societies and even of journals are indexed, as well as personal names. There is a separate index of subjects. There are also extensive and detailed cross-references within the bibliography, for instance from "Friendly Societies" to the 27 societies listed under individual places, and from 'Architecture' to 20 building lists or articles about individual buildings or parishes.

The compilers state in their preface that this is their last contribution in the field of local bibliography; it is a fitting end to a long and distinguished career in the field. It is to be hoped, however, than in another 25 years time someone will be found to issue a new supplement to such a valuable work; local history in Oxfordshire would be greatly impoverished by a failure to keep up to date so splendid a bibliography.

J. COOPER

Christine Bloxham, *Portrait of Oxfordshire*, London, Robert Hale. Pp. 224. Price £8.25.

Writing a 'portrait' of a county is, as Miss Bloxham acknowledges in her introduction, a difficult task, particularly when the county is the new, post 1974, Oxfordshire which is neither an historical nor a geographical unit. Presumably a portrait is not really a history nor simply a description, but it is not altogether clear what else it can be, and much of this book seems to move rather uneasily from snippets of history to descriptions, some of which are all too reminiscent of a guide book. One of the chapters which holds together best is that on Wychwood Forest and Otmoor, both areas which have a very strong historical and, in the case of Otmoor, geographical, identity; areas, therefore, of which a 'portrait' can best be written. It seems a pity that this regional approach was not applied to the rest of the county: the Cotswolds, North Oxfordshire, the Vale of the White Horse, the Chilterns, might all have lent themselves to such an approach. The result would not have been a single 'portrait of Oxfordshire', but it would have been a series of portraits of the often very different areas which make up the modern county, and that is probably, for Oxfordshire, the best that can be done.

Apart from the chapter on Wychwood Forest and Otmoor and another on Oxford, the book is arranged thematically, with chapters on Geology, Archaeology and Folklore, Agriculture, Crafts and Industries, The Thames, Canals, Roads and Railways, Villages, Country Houses, and Towns. All contain much fascinating detail: the description of the

watercress beds at Ewelme and the song about the Watercress Queen, the account of Betty White, champion maker of Banbury cakes, and the wealth of information and anecdote about pleasure boating on the Thames spring to mind. Most topics, too, are well illustrated by quotations from travellers' descriptions or traditional rhymes. The chapter on Crafts and Industries brings the story up to the present day with accounts of Harwell and Culham, and, in the chapter on villages it is good to see the Black Death put into perspective and treated as only one of a number of causes of desertion.

These good points, do not altogether outweigh a number of shortcomings. Although the material is interesting, some chapters, particularly those on villages and country houses, are disjointed, and at times give the impression of a series of notes. More seriously, there are a number of errors. Some, such as the dating of the projected uprising against inclosures (p. 114) 1569 instead of 1596, and the dissolution of Dorchester Abbey (p. 131) 1557 instead of 1536 are presumably printer's errors which have escaped the author's notice. The dating of Piers Gaveston's death (p. 183) to 1313 instead of 1312, and the references to Austin Canons (p. 192) for Austin Friars, and to a Victorian architect G.E. Smith (p. 187) for G.E. Street, may fall into the same category. Other errors may seem trifling in themselves, but raise doubts about the author's general accuracy. It was the Forest Charter of 1217, not Magna Carta of 1215 which ended the death penalty for illegal hunting (p. 97); Oxford town hall was opened in 1897, not 1851 (p. 203); the water gardens at Buscot were made for the first Lord Faringdon (d. 1934), not in the 1960s (p. 164). There is no evidence that Harold Harefoot was crowned at Oxford (p. 191), and although he died there, the only evidence for his funeral suggests that he was buried at Westminster. Edward the Confessor issued no orders about the navigation of the Thames (p. 69), least of all in 1066, as he died on 6 January that year; presumably Miss Bloxham is thinking of one of the orders issued by Edward I for the improvement of river navigation. The Dominican Friars (p. 192) arrived in Oxford in 1221, ahead of the Franciscans.

Some errors imply a lack of understanding of the subject. It is at least a serious anachronism to talk (p. 191) of Cnut's 'Parliaments'. The Viking or Danish tactic was to leave their ships under guard near the sea and to raid inland on horseback or on foot; the Thames, even in the 9th and 10th centuries, was hardly a suitable route for 'lightning raids' (p. 69), and in any case homeward bound Vikings could have been trapped by the bridge at London. It is in no way surprising that the St. Christopher wall-painting at Coombe (p. 111) was overpainted in the 17th century with pictures of Moses, Aaron and the Ten Commandments; that was what the law of church and state enjoined.

The chapter on Oxford seems a lost opportunity. Here is an area of which a portrait could have been written, but the chapter is scrappy, the historical account jumping from the St. Scholastica's Day riot (whose date, 1355, is for some reason not given) to the 19th century. The paragraph on the modern university implies, incorrectly, that Nuffield and St. Catherine's are graduate colleges and that the medieval St. Edmund Hall is a 20th-century foundation. A disproportionate amount of space is devoted to the city's museums. Perhaps Oxford, which has its own portrait in this series, should have been omitted from the county portrait.

References are given only for direct quotations, an arrangement which is reasonable in a book like this for the general reader, and there is a full bibliography. The index is adequate.

J. COOPER

K. Rutherford Davis *Britons and Saxons. The Chiltern Region 400-700*. Chichester, Phillimore, 1982. Pp. xiii, 172; 7 plates, 11 maps. Price £9.95p.

Mr Davis's concern is with Anglo-Saxon settlement and British survival in the area which later comprised Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire, South Oxfordshire and Bedfordshire S. of the Ouse. He contends that a British state, presumably derived from the *civitas* of the *Catwellauni*, survived here until the late sixth century; and that the *Chronicle's* annal for 571 is telling us something very important about the end of that state and about the history of southern Britain. ('In this year Cuthwulf fought against the Britons at *Biedcanford*, and captured four *tunas*, Limbury, Aylesbury, Bensington and Eynsham.')

The other written sources are, of course, exiguous: Constantius's account of Verulamium at the time of Germanus, Bede's statement on the continuity of the cult of St Alban, two very late Welsh references of faintly possible relevance: no more. The contention that, with the 571 annal, they provide a case for the survival of British authority is not new. Mr Davis's close analysis of the archaeological evidence *is* new.

His case is this. There are only some half-dozen sites in this wide area which have produced Germanic material earlier than about the end of the fifth century in contexts suggesting settlement. There are the well-known finds at Dorchester. In the cemetery at Berinsfield (which Mr Davis regards, unprovably, as in some relationship of continuity with the Dorchester finds) were brooches of the 'Luton' type, arguably of the very early fifth century; and chip-carved belt-buckles of the kind much discussed in relation to 'continuity'. Similar finds have been made at Luton and Kempfield. At Aylesbury there is belt-furniture, at Sandy cremation pottery, believed to be very early. Mr Davis argues that these finds derive from early fifth century settlements of German mercenaries in British service.

This reviewer is in two minds about such arguments, in general. On the one hand they have, widely considered, intrinsic plausibility; and there is no doubt that when Mrs Hawkes and Mr Dunning drew attention to the significance of chip-carved belt-furniture they advanced the understanding of early Dark Age Britain in a marked way. On the other hand, granted the range of possibility, and the chanciness of archaeological discovery, one cannot but feel that far too much can be deduced about 'Germanic mercenaries' from ambiguous evidence.

But Mr Davis's case is a good one to the extent that it depends upon the relationship between the places where these finds were made, and those mentioned in the 571 annal, which can legitimately be supposed to have been centres of authority. Bensington (Benson) is two miles from Dorchester and was in medieval times the centre for five hundreds. It looks as if the Dorchester/Benson/Berinsfield area is one of those nodal complexes like Ilminster/Somerton with a very long lasting provincial significance. Luton is a couple of miles from Limbury, Kempston about the same distance from Bedford (which Mr. Davis believes — and although it is hard to see how he can ever be proved to be right, still it is the best guess — to be Biedcanford). Aylesbury is both mentioned in the 571 annal and has produced early finds. In short, the coincidence between the places at which, or immediate areas in which indications of early Anglo-Saxon settlement have been found, and the places mentioned in the 571 annal is strong. The author's general argument is strengthened by the fact that, from the late sixth century, the range and scale of Germanic remains in his area increase greatly; which would be consonant with a Saxon take-over after 571.

In one area, that to the west of Luton, there are indications of Anglo-Saxon settlement which, though not so early as those on the sites already mentioned, at least take one back to *c.* 500. This evidence Mr Davis interprets as being for British rulers having established a 'central reserve' of German warriors. Many other explanations are possible. Here, as in his suggestions about 'wary British liaison officers' there is a tendency to try to make the

evidence sustain more than it will bear.

Such minor infelicities apart Davis's case is strong enough to convince one that it is a very serious possibility that some or many of the gaps in the distribution maps of Saxon objects in the Chiltern area are due not to the destruction of cemeteries or failure to discover them, but rather to Anglo-Saxons not having settled the areas concerned in the pagan period. 'Blanks means Britons' is not a bad argument here.

If so, there are important implications for the study of place-names. Much of Mr Davis's book is devoted to analysis of these. Some of his arguments are convincing: for example that the relationship between *ham* names and pagan burials does not support Dr Cox's argument that these belong to a very early phase of name giving. Others are less so: for example that the relatively small number of *ingtun* names is an indication of this element's having been used for only a short time, rather than for places of a relatively uncommon type. His reflections on the special features of Chiltern toponymy and their relationship to the possibilities of British survival are specially interesting. He argues that such survival may often be reflected not so much in British place-names as in the (late) adoption of particular types of English place-name.

All told, this is a worthwhile and thought-provoking, though not a definitive book. It is less useful to the historian of Oxfordshire than one might have hoped. Granted Mr Davis's 'Chiltern' theme it is understandable that he should limit himself to the most southerly part of the country. It is a pity, however, that this should have prevented his giving any detailed consideration to Eynsham, so important in the annal of 571, which is so important to him. The hasty user of this book should be warned that in its valuable appendices the heading 'Oxfordshire' means 'southernmost Oxfordshire', though this is not stated.

J. CAMPBELL