

The Development of Local History in Oxfordshire

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In his history of Kiddington first published in 1783, Thomas Warton remarked that ‘Histories of counties have been condemned as the dullest of compilations ‘ as the product of ‘the petty diligence of those uninspiring Antiquaries who employ their time in collecting Coats of Arms, poring over parish registers and transcribing tombstones.’ He, however, felt that such histories, ‘if properly written, become works of entertainment, of importance and universality.’ⁱ

This article looks at the work of past local historians of Oxfordshire, at their efforts to compile works of entertainment, importance and universality and at the means which they adopted to get into print. Historians of Berkshire and those who worked on Oxford alone have generally been omitted and a discreet veil has been drawn over the huge range of material published in the twentieth century.

It is perhaps useful to begin by setting the study of Oxfordshire local history in a national context by examining the gradual growth of interest in local and family history between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. Medieval people had little interest in topographyⁱⁱ and the subject of English local history effectively began with William of Worcester (1415-?82), the son of a Bristol burgess. Between about 1477 and 1480 William made journeys around England recording much antiquarian detail, noting the distances between towns and pacing out the dimensions of major buildings.ⁱⁱⁱ His work remained unpublished until 1778 and was dismissed by the *Dictionary of National Biography* as ‘a mass of undigested notes of very unequal importance.’ In 1970 however, the record of his pacings helped local archaeologists to understand the layout of the old Greyfriars church in Oxford which had been demolished in the sixteenth century.^{iv} Like William of Worcester, John Leland (?1506-52) was a topographer rather than a historian; as tutor to the Duke of Norfolk's son, he came to the notice of Henry VIII and, in 1533, he was appointed King's Antiquary. He was commissioned to seek out English antiquities in libraries and other repositories and journeyed around the country between about 1534 and 1543, observing closely, accumulating facts and investigating remains. Many later historians

had access to his writings but they remained in manuscript until Thomas Hearne published the *Itinerary* in 1710 and *Collectanea* in 1715. Another key figure in the development of local history was William Camden (1551-1623) whose book *Britannia*, published in 1586, summarized about ten years of extensive research^v. Although enlarged in later editions Camden's original account of Oxfordshire ran to only nine pages and, as an Oxford alumnus, he devoted a large proportion of this space to praising the University: 'our most noble Athens, the seat of the Muses, the support or rather the sun, the eye, the soul of England; the most famous source of learning the Wisdom, whence religion, politeness and learning are copiously diffused all over the Kingdom'.^{vi}

If the whole country was Camden's stage there was also a growing band of country gentlemen and gentry-lawyers who made the county their field of interest. The first county history was William Lambarde's *Perambulation of Kent* published in 1576 and, during the 1590s, John Norden followed with histories of Middlesex and Hertfordshire. Each new history tended to inspire others and William Burton's *Leicestershire* (1622) encouraged William Dugdale's *The antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656) which in its turn ignited the interests of the Oxford historian and diarist Anthony Wood. The concerns of these historians reflected their background and their books concentrate especially on the genealogy of county families, on manorial descent and on the church and its contents. From the late seventeenth century these leisured gentlemen were joined as local historians by the parson or antiquary cleric who was socially at one with the scholarly squire but was more likely to study his parish.^{vii}

Interest in local history seems not to have been an attribute of Oxfordshire's gentry - at least until the twentieth century, but the county has been blessed with a succession of leisured historians who made a considerable contribution to our knowledge of the county. Primacy must be given to Anthony Wood (1632-95), the son of an Oxford man who earned a good income from leasehold property, lodgings and a real tennis court. Wood gained his M.A. in 1655 and, being amply provided for in his father's will, gave 'himself up to the idle enjoyment of music and of books on heraldry and English history.' Dugdale's *Warwickshire* gave him a new sense of purpose but, regrettably for the county, he was diverted after 1660 into research on the city and University by gaining access to the Twyne collection in the Bodleian Library.^{viii} Much interesting, useful and sometimes amusing detail about the county is, however, to be found in his diaries which were edited in five volumes by Andrew Clark

for the Oxford Historical Society.^{ix} Natural history attracted the attention of Robert Plot (1640-96), the son of a Kentish gentleman who gained a DCL at Oxford in 1671. He originally planned a systematic study of England but restricted his scheme to Oxfordshire which was published in 1677 and to Staffordshire in 1686. Extracts from the index to his *Natural history of Oxfordshire* give the flavour of the work: 'Air of Oxfordshire healthy; Anatomy improved at Oxford; Clock that moves by air; Crows how frightened from mischief; Men apt for generation until 80.' Much of it is highly entertaining although Thomas Warton criticised his 'peculiar propensity to the marvellous' and Staffordshire gentlemen boasted for years about how they had 'humbled old Plot'.^x

From 1731 until 1868, the leisured local historian had the perfect vehicle through which to express his historical interests, the *Gentleman's Magazine*. In 1814, for example, a truly relaxed contribution came from A Traveller who sent in two drawings of Henley 'taken from the bow window of the adjacent inn ...'. Considerable venom might be generated by correspondence about pedigrees and in 1828, [missing word?] challenged E.E. to 'indulge me with a reference' for a statement which he thought to be fallacious. Many useful articles were contributed and in 1800 for instance J.S-m-onds gave a valuable account of Marston where the manor house was occupied by six paupers and excellent bacon was the chief product; he also reported several dialect words such as '*unked*' meaning unlucky and '*hoxey*' for muddy roads. The chief Oxfordshire contents of the *Gentleman's Magazine* were edited by G.L.Gomme and published in 1897; articles may also be traced through Cordeaux and Merry's bibliographies of Oxfordshire'.^{xi}

Important leisured historians of the nineteenth century include the historian of Banbury, Alfred Beesley (d.1847) and J.S. Burn, the first historian of Henley. Beesley, the son of Quaker parents, served part of an apprenticeship to a Deddington watchmaker but 'Placed in easy pecuniary circumstances, he was enabled to follow the bent of his inclination'. He spent years collecting material for his *History of Banbury* which he published by subscription in 1841; then, regardless of cost, he amassed a huge quantity of additional illustrations for an interleaved copy^{xii} which was later deposited in Banbury Library. Burn, on the other hand, was a newcomer to Henley who found no detailed history of the town and swiftly remedied the deficiency by publishing his *History of Henley-on-Thames* in 1861. He admitted to problems in deciphering borough and manorial records, but the book contains much topographical information and monumental inscriptions from both churches and chapels.

One other leisured historian should perhaps be mentioned - Vernon Watney, the owner of Cornbury Park who published his own book *Cornbury and the Forest of Wychwood* in 1910. It is a lavish production, interesting not only for information about the house and families connected with it but also for the extensive use of photographs; one of the appendices lists all the trees in the park in

1907, a reminder of the fascinating detail which such histories provide for the serendipitous enquirer.

Moving on to the antiquary cleric, Oxfordshire boasts in White Kennett (1660-1728) the man who founded the study of parochial history. The son of a Kent vicar, he was educated at Oxford and was presented to the vicarage of Ambrosden by Sir William Glynne in 1685. Some argument about a local charity caused him to investigate the parish records and he was captivated, going on to publish his *Parochial Antiquities attempted in the history of Ambrosden* in 1695. Apart from discharging his holy office he could think of no better way of serving his parish than by compiling its history. He was not concerned to defend his study 'from the slights and ridicules that may be cast upon it by idle witless people who think all history to be scaps and all antiquity to be rust and rubbish;' those who despised history as 'a dry, barren, monkish study' he was prepared to condemn 'to their dear enjoyments of ignorance and ease.'^{xiii}

Kennett had few immediate imitators but the Revd John Pointer in 1713 wrote *An account of a Roman pavement lately found at Stunsfield* which Thomas Hearne dismissed as a 'very silly and ridiculous book.'^{xiv} A more scholarly approach was demonstrated by the Revd Thomas Warton (1728-90), the son of a Basingstoke vicar who became rector of Kiddington in 1771. Like Kennett, he took readily to local history and could not understand why, given the presence of the Bodleian library and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxfordshire still lacked a capable historian. Trusting that his own history of Kiddington would form part of a subsequent county history he published it in 1783 as *A specimen of a history of Oxfordshire*. His scholarship is demonstrated by a massive array of footnotes but Warton also showed a rare interest in using the landscape itself as an historical source. He was, in fact, no ordinary rector, being also Professor of Poetry, Poet Laureate, Camden Professor of History and a scholarly and genial man who enjoyed his beer in the company of Oxford watermen!^{xv}

In the nineteenth century, the prolific work of Oxfordshire parsons reflected the growing interest in local history. John Allen Giles (d.1884) gave up the headship of the City of London School at the age of 32 to become Curate of Bampton and devoted his spare time to writing a vast number of books on many subjects. His *History of Bampton* was published with the help of subscribers in 1847 and he printed an enlarged second edition on his own press in 1848; a *History of Witney* followed in 1852. Both are mines of information, much of it still useful, and Giles warned critics of the Bampton book to stay away from the town because 'its inhabitants will most assuredly rise in its defence.'^{xvi} Another busy cleric was the Rev. Edward Marshall (d.1899) whose stints in various Oxfordshire parishes were accompanied by histories of Enstone (1868), Sandford St. Martin (1866), Iffley (1870), Woodstock (1873) and Deddington (1879); he also published *A history of the diocese of Oxford* in 1882. An unfriendly obituary notice remarked that he was 'not specially acceptable either as a preacher or as a public speaker; he had rather the gift of acquiring rather than imparting knowledge; he had a curious faculty for creating friction and a certain absence of tact.'^{xvii} The Rev. Henry Napier, rector of Swyncombe, was able with the help of friends to publish his lavish *Historical notices of the parishes of Swyncombe and Ewelme* in 1858. The book contains useful material derived from original sources but, for modern tastes, perhaps concentrates excessively upon the Suffolk family. His preface, however, makes a spirited case for the study of local history and he felt that any place was interesting historically if the right questions were asked.'^{xviii} Local history was again powerfully justified by the Revd J.C. Blomfield, rector of Launton, who published his *History of the deanery of Bicester* between 1882 and 1894. General history was, he felt, a record of courts, camps and councils; by contrast, local history 'is a humbler record, descending to the ordinary life of the common people ..., those who tilled the fields, produced the food, built the houses, moulded the characters, paid the taxes, administered government and carried on in their respective stations the varied business of civilized nations.'^{xix}

After the leisured and the clergy it is time to consider those other contributors to Oxfordshire local history - professional historians, commercial authors and engravers, and a growing middle class which formed historical societies to disseminate the results of their research. Chronologically, we should begin with Thomas Hearne (1678-1735), the son of a poor parish clerk at White Waltham in Berkshire. His potential was spotted by the local squire Francis Cherry who virtually adopted him and sent him to Oxford University. Hearne joined the staff of the Bodleian Library for a time but his main life's work was to edit the works of John

Leland and the English chroniclers. He also left behind 145 volumes of diaries which include historical and contemporary information and show no pity to Hanoverians or his personal opponents.^{xx} The growing eighteenth century interest in landscape encouraged Samuel Ireland, the author and engraver, to publish his *Picturesque views on the river Thames* in 1791-2. The two volume work was fulsomely dedicated to Lord Harcourt, creator of the Classical landscape at Nuneham, and contains interesting drawings and many references to antiquities. Ireland hoped that his books on the Thames and other rivers would be profitable. Joseph Skelton had the same ambition for his *Antiquities of Oxfordshire* (1823) but recognised that ‘no works answer so ill in a pecuniary point of view as those connected with county or local history.’ Skelton had originally planned to describe only those subjects that were worthy of engraving but he was sent so much information that the volume eventually included a brief description of every parish.^{xxi} His contributors are not named but a typically interested contemporary was John Dunkin (1792-1846) who was born in Bicester but spent most of his adult life as a bookseller, printer and stationer in Kent. His continuing fascination for the Bicester area was, however, manifested by his *History and Antiquities of Bicester* (1816) and the *History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Bullingdon and Ploughley* (1823). Neither book was intended for publication, the first eventually being published by subscription and the second at the expense of Sir Gregory Osborne Page Turner. A particular feature of Dunkin's work is his use of what he called ‘traditionary history’, oral history handed down through the generations from the time of Charles I.^{xxii}

By the mid-nineteenth century there were many middle class individuals like Dunkin with an interest in local history. Their enthusiasm was further aroused by the railways which led to the discovery (and destruction) of many sites and made visits much easier; at the same time the mechanization of printing made publication of research a cheaper proposition. More numerous and more gregarious than early historians these men and a few women formed historical societies, held meetings, read papers, went on excursions and published reports and transactions.^{xxiii} The first in Oxfordshire was the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, later the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, which was founded in 1839. Until 1860, the society was concerned mainly with Gothic church architecture and ecclesiology, but it subsequently came to resemble the other local archaeological societies which it had helped to encourage. From the first, it published *Proceedings* and encouraged monographs on churches of special interest; much later, in 1936, came the first volume of *Oxoniensia*.^{xxiv} The North Oxfordshire Archaeological

Society was founded in 1853 with an initial 56 members to 'study and preserve antiquity, ecclesiastical, civil and military of North Oxfordshire and portions of adjoining counties.'^{xxv} The Society, which later dropped the North from its title, published its first volume of *Transactions* in 1856. One of the society's most active members was William Wing who wrote on many subjects and published for example *Brief annals of the Bicester Poor Law Union* (1877-79), *Annals of Bletchington* (1872) and *Annals of Heyford Warren* (1865). All these works originally appeared in local newspapers which had become another important means of publishing local history. Of still greater value to local historians was the foundation of record societies which dedicated themselves to making documentary sources available to a wider public. The Oxford Historical Society has published more than 130 volumes since its formation in 1884 and the Oxfordshire Record Society over 50 volumes since 1919.

None of these developments seemed likely to remedy the lack of an overall county history but the ambitious concept of the *Victoria County History* (V.C.H.) provided a solution to the problem. The idea came from G.L. Gomme, the folklorist, antiquary and clerk to the London County Council who won the support of Herbert Doubleday, a partner in the firm of Constable & Co. Doubleday put the project on a businesslike footing, secured the Queen's approval to use her name and endowed the V.C.H. with its splendid format. From the outset it was planned as a whole, county by county with general and topographical volumes; subject editors of national repute were appointed for the general topics and high standards of methodical research became the rule. The project went through many vicissitudes and original hopes of finishing the whole series in six years were wildly optimistic.^{xxvi} Nevertheless, Oxfordshire has been one of the most fortunate counties with the two general volumes published in 1907 and 1939 and a further nine topographical volumes published since 1954.^{xxvii}

The individual local historian still has an important role, however, and although it is perhaps invidious to single out one individual from the many twentieth century Oxfordshire historians, E.A. Greening Lamborn (1878-1950) deserves a special mention. An Oxford schoolteacher and for many years headmaster of East Oxford School, he was described as 'the best self-trained archaeologist in the British Isles' and regarded as the greatest Oxford antiquary since Anthony Wood.^{xxviii} Among his many works *A school history of Berkshire* (1908) and *The story of architecture in Oxford stone* (1912) were

pioneering attempts to interest the young in their locality. It is also noteworthy that, since his death, the Greening Lamborn Trust has helped to fund many local history publications which might not otherwise have seen the light of day.

In the age of photocopiers, word-processors and desk-top publishing there is no reason why the fruits of historical research should languish in manuscript for hundreds of years as did the work of John Leland or William of Worcester. Nevertheless, there remain those doubts about the viability of local history publishing which were expressed by Joseph Skelton and continue to be heard from today's publishers. If this is to change, more Thomas Hearnes need to be attracted into publishing for, as the *Dictionary of National Biography* put it, he had little grasp of history: 'it seemed to him enough that a document was old to induce him to publish it.'

ⁱ Warton Thomas (1783) *Specimen of a history of Oxfordshire*. 2nd ed. iii.

ⁱⁱ Riden P.J. (1983) *Local History: a handbook for beginners*. p.14; Hoskins W.G. (1959) Local history in England. p.15.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter D.N.B.).

^{iv} Hassall T.G. (1971) Excavations at Oxford 1970. *Oxoniensia*. XXXVI. p.6.

^v D.N.B.

^{vi} Camden William (1781) *Britannia*. p.5.

^{vii} Riden P.J. *op. cit.*, p.14-15; Hoskins W.G. *op. cit.*, p.16-22.

^{viii} D.N.B.; Clark A. (1891) (ed) *The life and times of Anthony Wood, antiquary of Oxford, 1632-1695*, described by himself. Vol. 1. Oxford Historical Society (hereafter O.H.S.). XIX.p.5-7.

^{ix} O.H.S. (1891-1900) vols. 19, 21, 26, 30, 40.

^x D.N.B.; Warton T. *op. cit.*, p.4. 11. Cordeaux E.H. & Merry D.H. (1955) *Bibliography of the county of Oxford*. O.H.S. New Series Vol.11. Supplementary volume, O.H.S. New Series Vol.28, 1981.

^{xi} Supplementary volume, O.H.S. New Series Vol.28, 1981.

^{xii} Jackson's Oxford Journal (hereafter J.O.J.) 17.4.1847, p.3.

^{xiii} D.N.B.; White Kennett (1695), *Parochial antiquities attempted in the history of Ambrosden*, pp.ix-xvii.

^{xiv} Rannie D.W. (ed) (1897), *The remarks and collections of Thomas Hearne*. Vol.4, O.H.S. vol.34. pp.217-8.

^{xv} D.N.B.; Warton T. *op. cit.*, p.1-5.

^{xvi} J.O.J, 27.9.1884 p.5; Giles J.A. (1847) *History of Bampton*, p.66. 17.

^{xvii} J.O.J, 23.9.1899.pp.5,7.

^{xviii} Napier H.A. (1858) *Historical notices of the parishes of Swyncombe and Ewelme*, p.66.

^{xix} Blomfield J.C. (1887) History of the Deanery of Bicester, part 3,p.5.

^{xx} Doble C.E. et al (eds) (1884-1918), *The remarks and collections of Thomas Hearne*. O.H.S. vols. 2,7,13,34,42-3,48,50,65,67,72.

^{xxi} Skelton Joseph (1823) *Engraved illustrations of the principal antiquities of Oxfordshire*. Vols.i-ii.

^{xxii} D.N.B.; J.O.J.26.12.1846.p.3; Dunkin J.A. (1816) *History and antiquities of Oxfordshire*. Vol.v.; *ibid.*(1823),

History and antiquities of the Hundreds of Bullingdon and Ploughley, Vols.v-vi.

^{xxiii} Riden P.J. *op. cit.* pp.17-18.

^{xxiv} Pantin W.A. (1939) The Oxford Architectural and Historical Society 1839-1939. *Oxoniensia* Vol.4.pp.174-194.

^{xxv} North Oxfordshire Archaeological Society (1853) *Rules ... together with a list of the members*. p.6.

^{xxvi} Pugh R.B. (ed) (1970), *The Victoria History of the Counties of England*. General introduction pp.1-18.

^{xxvii} By 2009 thirteen topographical volumes. See *VCH*.

^{xxviii} *Oxford Times* 25.8.1950.p.8.