

## REVIEWS

*Aldbury: the Open Village. A portrait of country life.* Jean Davis, pp. 170, 43 plates, 5 maps. Jean Davis, Little Barley End, Aldbury, 1987. £5.95.

This is an account, designed and published by its author, of the life of the inhabitants of Aldbury from the Middle Ages to the present day, focusing

on the first half of the nineteenth century, for which exceptionally abundant records survive—registers, vestry minutes, accounts, diaries, letters, surveys, engravings and Peter de Wint's water-colours. Physical changes in the village, its fields, woods and commons are traced through maps, terriers and the Tithe Award.

Uniquely among parishes of the Icknield Belt beneath the Chiltern escarpment, Aldbury was not enclosed, even when the General Enclosure Act of 1845 facilitated this. There were fifteen owners at that time, and the dead hand of the Pendley estate was probably enough to frustrate enclosure; further, the advantage to Ashridge and Stocks would have been slight. Hence while Pitstone (1856) and Edlesborough (1865) were given new roads, regular fields and compact farm units, the medieval topography of Aldbury survived, and with it a wealth of minor place names (unfortunately not indexed). However, for two centuries the manorial courts had not controlled the open fields, and even regulation by the Vestry is not evidenced after 1757, though stinting of the uplands commons was maintained by the agreement of the major occupiers. All the copyholds had been converted into freehold by a private Act in 1691, thus loosening what had been a very stable social structure. In the same year the old manor house, presumably the successor to the Saxon 'old *burh*' which gave the place its name, was sold as scrap, following eight years of litigation leading to the annulment of the heiress's clandestine marriage. Her second marriage was hardly 'bigamous' (p. 30); she successfully took the risk of treating the first marriage as void *ab initio*, before obtaining, probably by bribery, a declaratory decree to this effect.

The third and last of the symbolic dreams of Joseph Mayett, in which the wheat was both ripened and cleansed of weeds by a flameless fire, was located in the fields of 'Alderbury'; clearly the second syllable was sometimes heard as late as 1830.

We now have a fascinating account of closely interwoven families and their homes, which is not likely to be superseded. Life at the rectory, and its architectural history, are traced in particular detail; the glebe farm of 32 acres was dispersed in

45 'acre' or 'half acre' strips. The parish possessed Town Houses for widows, and the Church House for the poorest of the poor. The seventh Earl of Bridgewater, who arrived in 1803, ensured by vigorous rebuilding that there was a house for every family and a few to spare, despite the rising population. The arrangements for 'roundsmen' (surplus labourers allocated to farmers by the overseers) are discussed, but there are no corresponding particulars of work provided by the surveyors of the highways.

The churchwardens' books are a treasure; they record work on the church fabric and furnishings, the sundial (recently stolen) and the lychgate, and the purchase of a pitch-pipe and tune books. Mrs Davis lovingly describes the singing, lined out by the parish clerk from the lowest deck of the three-decker pulpit, the woodwind players ('Nebuchadnezzar's band') and the bread dole, which was not for 'those that go to Meetings'. Yet one Baptist supplied the bread, another tended the church clock and a third repaired the pulpit cloth and the curtains. One wishes that more could have been said of the inner life of the Baptists, who have been near the heart of the community for three centuries; the account is sympathetic but, perhaps of necessity, viewed mostly from the outside.

This most welcome book throws light on numerous aspects of village life: the shops and inns; the straw-plait industry and the Friendly Societies, both safeguards against destitution; the growth of poaching during the Bleak Years; the belated coming of education, and, in contrast, the brilliant literary, artistic and craft traditions of Stocks; the effects of the canal and the survival of very diverse common rights.

In 1871 fifteen old surnames accounted for over a quarter of the population, then approaching its maximum. By 1987 these comprised only a tenth of the village electorate. Inflated house prices threaten their continuance, and the future of Aldbury is in the hands of people who work in London. They will doubtless cherish the stocks and the pond and defend the Green belt, but can they preserve the spirit of the village?

A.H.J.B.

*Aylesbury Remembered. Conversations with Aylesbury Residents.* Aylesbury Past Project, pp. 73. Buckinghamshire County Museum & Community Programmes Agency. ISBN 0 860059 449 1. 1987

This is a fascinating little book, for although it is about the not-so-distant past it gives glimpses of a way of life that is now completely vanished. What is particularly striking is the modesty of people's expectations, and the very strong influence of home life on young people's standards.

Modesty of expectations is illustrated by the account of how one mother used to buy honey from a big stone jar when it had gone sugary on the top and was therefore going cheap. This meant that the children were allowed to spread it on the bread themselves, as thickly as they liked, instead of mother rationing it out. It was a real treat.

Everyone expected to work hard because they saw their parents do so, and keeping up with the Joneses meant, not having a new car or two tellies, but being clean and tidy and deserving of respect. These taped interviews evoke a very comprehensive picture of Aylesbury the market town in the first half of the century, and incidentally reveal much about some very lively characters who are still there today.

A.C.T.

*Buckinghamshire Probate Inventories 1661-1714.* Ed. Michael Reed, pp. xxiv + 330. Buckinghamshire Record Society No. 24, 1988. ISBN 0 901 198 21 9. £18 from The Hon. Secretary, B.R.S., c/o County Record Office, County Offices, Aylesbury, Bucks.

Probate inventories are among the most valuable classes of records, listing as they do—or at least should—all the moveable goods in a man's house at the time of his death, and usually indicating in which room each item was to be found. The sequence in which the rooms are listed has much to say about the layout of the house. They are therefore valuable alike to social and economic historians and to students of vernacular—and sometimes even polite—architecture.

This reviewer must declare an interest in the last, and express his gratitude to Dr Reed for making so much material so much more easily accessible. A great deal can be learned from it about the internal arrangements of houses and the names and uses of various rooms. They allow firm conclusions about which rooms were heated, where people were sleeping in ground floor parlours, and where they were still living in the traditional way in open halls. Indeed this is perhaps the one area where a statistical analysis is possible; the sample is big enough (just), since the exercise is not dependent on sub-sampling, and the data is less subject to the limitations of which Dr Reed rightly warns us in his introduction.

A few of the houses concerned are still standing. One of them is Little Shardeloes (No. 140), where, however, there has been so much alteration that no attempt to trace the footsteps of the appraisers is likely to succeed. The Saracen's Head, also in Amersham, where John Day (No. 139) was innkeeper, might be more rewarding, but in general such exercises are disappointing.

The introduction gives a useful account of the economic and social background of the inventories in town and country, and altogether the volume paints a clear and detailed picture of the physical setting of people's lives.

Dr Reed is not quite correct in saying that this book contains 'all of the probate inventories relating to Buckinghamshire that were once in the records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and which are now both accessible and legible'. At least one is omitted: PROB 2/869, the inventory of Jane Harrison of Coleshill, dated 1673. She was a spinster lady living in a one-room cottage, with perhaps a lean-to scullery and a loft.

The reader should be aware, moreover, that other Buckinghamshire inventories for the period exist, some at Aylesbury, some at Lincoln. Their inclusion would make any statistical conclusions just that much more valid. Aylesbury and Lincoln also have a number of earlier inventories, so the statement that 'none survive for Buckinghamshire before 1660' needs to be understood as referring only to those in the Public Record Office.

It would be valuable to know how many Buckinghamshire inventories survive that are not legible, or not accessible, or both. There is a hint of contradiction in saying, first that 'there are so many remaining . . . as to make selection essential', and then that all those legible and accessible have been transcribed.

The glossary is a monument to out-of-the-way erudition, which makes it the more surprising to find 'tumbrell' and 'unguentum album' among the Unidentified Words.

An index would have been more than useful. Indeed, the lack of one makes the material difficult to use.

J.C.T.

*Fawley, Buckinghamshire.* Geoffrey Tyack, pp. 16, illustrated. Fawley PCC, 1986.

This booklet, available from the church and intended as a guide for visitors, is sub-titled 'A short history of the Church and Parish', but the parish is dealt with in less than a page, and it is really a history of the church. Mr Tyack is an architectural historian, and he has given us a good, clear account of how the layout, furnishings and decoration have changed over the centuries to reflected changing attitudes to worship, or the whim of the patron. We may deplore much that our ancestors did to churches, but it is itself of considerable interest as a record of these things.

*Non-Conformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses; Buckinghamshire.* Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, pp. 30, plates and numerous figures. HMSO, 1986. ISBN 0 11300 006 5. £1.95.

Until recently the only easily obtained information on nonconformist architecture in Buckinghamshire was to be found in the excellent Shire Publication *Discovering Chapels and Meeting-Houses* by David A. Barton (1975) or some local guides such as Robert Huxter's full history of Jordans Friends Meeting-House, *Jordans Meeting* (1987). Now through the enlightened decision of the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments to publish Christopher

Stell's *An Inventory of Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England* (HMSO, 1986) in county fascicules we have an authoritative survey of nonconformist architecture in the county. Incidentally all the fascicules for the counties contained in the parent volume still cost in aggregate less than the whole volume.

We must be very grateful for this work of deep scholarship, but for reasons of economy much of Mr Stell's work on the nineteenth century has been either curtailed or excluded altogether. I had the privilege of commenting on the typescript some years ago and the difference between the two is marked. This has led to some criticism by other reviewers of the main volume, but the fact that this volume (and fascicules) has been issued at all is a matter of profound relief. Indeed one hears rumours that no more volumes will be published which would be most unfortunate.

'Chapel crawling' is infinitely more difficult than 'church crawling'. Obtaining access is rarely easy as chapels are invariably locked (Friends Meeting-Houses usually being a glorious exception) and this volume will be a very great help. Buckinghamshire is a county with a long tradition of nonconformity and some of the finest early meeting-houses are to be found within its borders. They range from the late seventeenth-century Keech's Meeting-House in Winslow and the very well known Jordans Friends Meeting-House to the superbly situated isolated Waddesdon Hill Strict Baptist Chapel of 1792. Later, in the nineteenth century a more aggressive architecture appears, including the extraordinarily quirky Primitive Methodist Chapel in Stewkley and James Weir's bizarre Italianate Methodist Church in Aylesbury of 1893 (not included in the present fascicule).

This variety is illustrated by well-chosen photographs and Mr Stell's own line drawings as well as high-quality plans and elevations. There is a brief introduction which sketches in the historic background to Buckinghamshire nonconformity. Obviously for a fuller history in central England the main volume would have to be consulted.

Reading the Buckinghamshire fascicule, the architectural evolution in the county becomes clear, starting from a simple domestic style, and evolving in the late eighteenth century into more overtly 'architectural' treatments. These included in the first quarter of the nineteenth century the simple pediment fronts with arched windows as in the Wesleyan Chapel in Newport Pagnell or the two good chapels in Stony Stratford. At Great Missenden in 1838 a full stucco pilastered and pedimented temple facade was applied. Elsewhere the simpler more restrained architecture continued, but by the mid nineteenth century more architectural variety emerged with Gothic, neo-Byzantine and other styles that reflected the growing confidence and respectability of nonconformism. It is a fascinating story and with the decline of nonconformism and the merging of some denominations, such as the Congregationalists and Presbyterians to form the United Reformed Church, the future of many chapels is problematic.

In Buckinghamshire several chapels have been converted into houses, including the General Baptist at Ford and the Congregational Chapel at North Crawley. This should preserve the exteriors, but not the interiors, some of which have qualities of dignity and inner calm that is very precious. A happier solution for a disused chapel is its preservation unaltered. Waddesdon Hill Strict Baptist has been donated to the admirable Friends of Friendless Churches following its purchase by descendants of its founding fathers, aided by the Buckinghamshire Historic Buildings Trust, for just such a purpose. But clearly the best way of preserving chapels is for them to continue in the use for which they were built. Mr Stell's excellent and very informative volume should, it is to be hoped, open the eyes of many to the richness of this county's nonconformist heritage.

Martin Andrew