REVIEWS

APPRENTICING IN A MARKET TOWN
Hugh Hanley
Phillimore & Co. Ltd. 2005
ix +180 pp. 49 illustrations £19.95p.
ISBN 1 86077 324 9

As a sequel to his outstanding history of the Thomas Hickman Charity, published five years ago, Hugh Hanley has now produced an equally exhaustive study of the other major charity in Aylesbury. This was endowed by William Harding in his will proved in February 1720.

The book itself, lavishly illustrated, commences with a description of William Harding's ancestry followed by an account of his life history. The remainder of the book is taken up with the development of the charity from 1720 to the millennium. Its early years were spent in sorting out the estate, collecting in money, buying and selling land and repairing William's farmhouse, but even then the trustees still had sufficient resources to begin to fulfil the main object of the charity which was to provide money to pay for the apprenticing of 'poor Persons settled Inhabitants within the Parish of Aylesbury or Walton'. This continued to be the principle object of the charity until well into the twentieth century when following the decline in the old apprenticeships and a considerable increase in the funds of the charity due to the sale of its lands for building, the scheme was widened to include the provision of almshouses, grants to schools and colleges, particularly for computers, and a range of gifts to individuals and organisations; a position finally officially recognised by the Charity Commissioners in 1991, when it allowed grants for 'Any charitable purpose for the general benefit of the inhabitants of the town of Aylesbury'. As a consequence one of the beneficiaries was the County Museum, which received £100,000 in 1992 for the art gallery and £48,000 for the Roald Dahl children's gallery three years later.

Interwoven amongst all this are numerous accounts of the activities of the personalities involved, ranging from the resolution of petty squabbles between masters and apprentices to the misappropriation of funds by John Wilkes in the 1750s and subsequently repayment. There is also an appendix containing a comprehensive list of the Trustees of the Charity although it is disappointing to note that in many cases only initials are recorded instead of the forenames. Zachariah Daniel Hunt, trustee, banker and also the County Treasurer, looks far more impressive than mere Z. H. Hunt. It would also have been helpful to have had a further appendix of the known apprentices and their trades even if this remained somewhat incomplete. Again, whilst there are many statistics embodied in the text, a graph or table of yearly numbers of apprentices and possibly the charity's income and expenditure would have helped to epitomise its progress. Perhaps the author will consider producing a study on those lines as an article for *Records of Bucks* some time in the future.

All in all, this a very readable, well-presented account of an exceptionally important charity and with its excellent index will appeal, not only to the local or social historians with interests in Aylesbury or local charities, but also to the many family historians whose ancestors resided within the town.

Edward Legg

BLETCHLEY PARK'S SECRET SISTERS
John A Taylor
The Book Castle 2005
xv + 159 pp. £14 99.
ISBN 1 903747 35X

In recent years, particularly after the publication of *The Ultra Secret* in 1974, the reunion of its personnel, organised by the Bletchley Archaeological & Historical Society in October 1991, and the publication of Robert Harris's novel, *Enigma*, the activities at Bletchley Park have tended to be seen as the be-all and end-all of North Bucks involvement in the Second World War, although, in fairness, there has been a trickle of information on psychological

warfare. Dick Crossman provided some information regarding his involvement locally, whilst John Pether produced his paper, *Black Propaganda*, on the subject in 1998, and other books have covered the subject from the personal angle.

With this book John Taylor has continued to redress this imbalance by producing a popular account of the many other activities that were taking place locally during the war, recording establishments in the towns and villages around Bletchley, from Woburn on the East to Gawcott on the West and describing each unit in turn.

Here, the author has approached the subject using the nationally known facts and backing them up with extracts from newspapers, local reminiscences, etc. The result is an extensive corpus of information somewhat wider than the title suggests. The main story details the history of the Political Intelligence Department, (P.I.D), covering the many changes that took place there during the course of the war, together with considerable background information on the personalities involved. The author then branches out to describe the local transmitters used to disseminate the 'disinformation', and includes recollections of the personnel who maintained them. The book concludes with sections on the Special Communication Units, aeroplane construction at Wolverton Works and appendices on Bletchley Park and the history of Woburn.

In many ways this is a more confident work than John Taylor's previous publication on the Bletchley trail and generally has better quality photos. The introductory section however, is somewhat confusing. In particular it would probably have been better to relegate the information about the Fenny Stratford repeater station and the Czech wireless station, etc., to an appendix at the end. The index also, whilst excellent for names and places, is limited in many other respects. There are, for example, no references to transmitters, aeroplane manufacture, leaflet drops, or the Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.); all of which are described in the book. Non-specialist younger readers may also find the the constant use of initials without formal introduction or a separate glossary somewhat daunting

Plainly, in a work of this nature there are bound to be some errors; the photograph on page 38 showing the site of the former BP petrol station, is at the corner of Whaddon Way in Bletchley and not Tattenhoe, whilst the presence of a 'hunting party' in Whaddon Chase country in September (page 136) would certainly have raised many local eyebrows. Nevertheless this book is an interesting addition to the literature on war-time Buckinghamshire and will doubtless become a useful source for future researchers in this field.

Edward Legg

TRANSFORMING ENGLISH RURAL SOCIETY: THE VERNEYS AND THE CLAYDONS, 1600–1820

John Broad

Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp xvi. 295.

ISBN 0 521 82933X

Sir Edmund Verney, the King's Standard Bearer, who was killed at Edge Hill, is often seen as the most important member of the family in the seventeenth century. As John Broad shows, it was Sir Edmund who re-established the Verneys at Middle Claydon in 1620 – the essential starting point for everything that was to follow. Yet, at least as far as Buckinghamshire is concerned, Broad implies that the most crucial figure was really Sir Edmund's son, Sir Ralph (1613–1696). Benjamin Disraeli once remarked that it was difficult or impossible to ruin a landed family. This was to be true of the Verneys – though it was a close-run thing. It seems that the credit for the Verneys' long term survival – and perhaps responsibility for their near disaster towards the end of the 18th century – ultimately lies with Sir Ralph. Sir Edmund was a courtier and life at Court was expensive. Kings, especially Stuart kings, were often better at making promises than fulfilling them. At the time of his death, Sir Edmund was heavily in debt. Thereafter, the effects of the Civil War – high taxation, depredations by the soldieries of both sides, arrears of rent and – in the case of Sir Ralph – several years of exile in France, meant that something quite drastic had to be done. Ralph Verney's response to these problems forms the most fascinating aspect of John Broad's excellent book, which brings together two distinct but related themes – the story of the Verneys themselves and the impact of their estate management policies on the Claydon village communities.

The book could be seen as a contribution to the ongoing debate as to whether the development of capitalism in England owed more to the countryside or to the town; Board seems to favour the former. Here we have an important study of rural and agricultural capitalism. Ralph Verney's approach is made clear in a letter of 1650, in which he described the 'Rules' he followed when letting land. He sought to maximise income and insisted that 'no man is bound to suffer his tenants to reap the benefits of his land, because they are poor that were a ready way indeed to make them rich, and him poor'. Verney acknowledged that his policy of letting land at rack rent had brought him much censure, 'perhaps too justly deserved', but gave no other indication of remorse. The enclosure of Middle Claydon, between 1654 and 1656, was a great success, resulting in much higher rents and eventually to larger farms, in short to the creation of a classic 'closed parish'.

At least until the middle of the next century, Sir Ralph's successors continued in much the same way. Gross income of around £2,300 a year in 1657 rose to nearly £5000 by 1736 and debts of about £12,000 completely disappeared. But it is important to stress that this was not merely the result of prudent estate management. The rise of the Verneys also owed much to a similarly hard headed dynastic policy. Daughters were allowed to marry the man of their choice – but provided with modest dowries. The marriages of sons were very much arranged matters. Brides were sought for their wealth; the Verneys wanted heiresses and were relatively indifferent to social status. Of course, such brides were in no position to demand generous jointure arrangements. But the success of a dynastic policy also depended on luck. Ideally, wives should die before their husbands or at any rate enjoy only brief widowhoods. They should have enough children to perpetuate the line but not too many to create a problem of how to provide for them. While Sir Edmund Verney had ten children who lived beyond childhood, the family size of later generations was much smaller. It seems that dynastic and estate trends were on similar lines – fewer farms and richer farmers, fewer and richer children.

But what if there were no children? A policy of marriage to heiresses had its dangers. By definition an heiress had no surviving brothers, perhaps indicative of a sickly family with low levels of fertility. In 1740, the Verneys achieved what seemed to be their greatest success, the marriage of Ralph, later second Earl Verney, to Mary Herring, daughter of Henry Herring. Her father had made a fortune in the wine trade; Mary brought a dowry of £40,000 and received a further £13,000 when Henry Herring died. But Mary was childless and Broad suggests that this may have been a factor in her husband's notorious extravagance – on expensive and overcharged building work at Claydon House and on politics – and even in his gullibility in business matters. By the time of the second Earl's death in 1791, his debts amounted to more than £100,000. It was left to his heir, his niece, Mary Verney to save as much as she could from the wreck and to put things on a regular though more modest footing.

But survival was possible because of basically sound estate management. When distant properties were acquired through marriage they were usually sold to buy property in the Claydon area – including a good deal in East Claydon. This facilitated close control and the successful application of enclosure, a move towards larger farms and an increasing concentration on dairy farming. Although the major benefits were probably with the landowners, tenants were usually able to make a reasonable living. As Broad notes, the lasting legacy of the Verneys was that they forged the Claydons into a group of estate villages whose farming and landscape patterns, and social relationships endured into the twentieth century and is still strongly visible in the twenty-first.

John Broad has already made several major contributions to the history of Buckinghamshire. *Transforming English Rural Society: The Verneys and the Claydons, 1600–1820*, is a work of high calibre, an exemplary synthesis of 'family', 'economic' and 'social' history.

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THE HOUSEHOLD BOOK (1510–1551) OF SIR EDWARD DON: AN ANGLO-WELSH KNIGHT AND HIS CIRCLE,
ed. Ralph A. Griffiths (Buckinghamshire Record Society, 33, 2004). liii + 501 pp.
ISBN 00901198 37 4

The household book of Sir Edward Don of Horsenden is one of the more fascinating and tantalising

texts published in an outstandingly distinguished record series. Sir Edward (c. 1482–1551) spent most of his comparatively long life in Buckinghamshire, where he served for over twenty years as a justice of the peace, for one as sheriff (of Bedfordshire as well as Buckinghamshire), and received various other commissions from the crown. He may also have been returned as MP for Chipping Wycombe in 1523. On his father's death in 1503 Edward succeeded him as keeper of the royal park at Princes Risborough, and he was a gentleman-usher of the chamber in Henry VII's household. He served Henry VIII in his first war with France (1512–14), was knighted at Tournai in 1513, and accompanied the king to his famous meeting with Francis I of France at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. After 1523, however, Sir Edward's service was restricted to his county of residence. This 'well-connected knight' gained no major offices. In May 1536 he appealed to the king's principal secretary Thomas Cromwell to prevent him from falling into beggary. He does not however appear to have benefited from the colossal plunder of the Church during the later years of Henry VIII's reign. He married Anne, daughter of Sir John Verney, c. 1508, and by September 1510 had two daughters. Anne may have borne him more children, but if so they died young, and both the daughters died in 1529. In Buckinghamshire the Don line died with him.

The contrast between Don's career and his father's could hardly have been more striking. John Don (c. 1426–1503), descendant of a long line of Dons of Kidwelly in Carmarthenshire, had helped Edward IV make good his claim to the throne and had been rewarded with key offices and extensive lands, becoming in effect Edward's 'principal lieutenant' in south-west Wales. He had married Elizabeth, sister of the king's faithful servant Lord Hastings, in 1465, and had been knighted after the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471. He had bought Horsenden along with other Buckinghamshire lands in 1480 and had henceforth made his main residence there. He had shared his king's and brother-in-law's cultural interests and in about 1478 commissioned from the famous Bruges painter Hans Memling a gorgeous triptych, reproduced at the beginning of this volume, showing him and his wife and daughter kneeling on either side of the Virgin and Child. After surviving the dangerous reign of Richard III despite the execution of Hastings and his own possible support for the duke of Buckingham's abortive rebellion, he had gained the trust of Henry VII. Sheriff of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire in 1485–6, he had served as an envoy to Louis XI of France in 1487, and had been rewarded with a grant of the stewardship of Kidwelly for life in 1488. He arranged his son Edward's advantageous marriage and probably lived to see him placed in the king's household. He was however unable to bequeath to him his own evident vitality, energy, ambition, or skill in self-advancement. Edward looks like a man who stood in his father's shadow, hard put to it to preserve his inheritance, let alone enhance it.

Sir Edward's Household Book spans the years 1510–51, with some gaps, the longest of which is between September 1510 and December 1516. It includes a series of monthly personal and household accounts in Sir Edward's own hand, together with a great deal of miscellaneous material, including accounts submitted by servants, memoranda (including medical remedies), some 'diary entries' about events and visits, and a series of weather reports, occasionally covering several days. Professor Griffiths's interesting and valuable introduction provides all the information about the careers of John and Edward Don briefly summarised above, gives a description and analysis of the Household Book, and assesses its significance. Sir Edward seems to Ralph Griffiths 'a well-educated and literate man who applied himself to his inter-related private, personal and official affairs with care and precision' though 'not perhaps a man of imagination or one with marked cultural interests like his father's'. He occasionally purchased books, used spectacles, regularly bought lute strings, welcomed minstrels and players, gambled (losing more than he won), and liked fine clothes. He seems to have been a loyal member of the old Church. 'In sum', Professor Griffiths concludes, 'Sir Edward's household book reveals a man who concentrated on his shire of Buckingham, and yet who kept in touch with the court and the capital, and with Wales, and whose household underpinned the economy of the small towns and villages of west Buckinghamshire. He cherished his extended family and nursed his estates in both England and Wales.'

For Ralph Griffiths, a distinguished Welsh historian, the Dons possess special interest as Welsh gentry who achieved a substantial place in English society while retaining strong connections with the

land of their ancestors. Sir Edward's Welsh relatives often visited him. He employed Welsh servants in his household, and after his death the tenants of his Buckinghamshire lands included many with Welsh names. Professor Griffiths infers from notes in his hand that Sir Edward may have been consulted by Cardinal Wolsey, and even by King Henry himself, about the problem posed by the unruly and fractious behaviour of his prominent kinsman Rhys ap Gruffydd, who was ultimately executed in December 1531. The person who benefited most from the king's subsequent disposal of Rhys's lands was Sir Edward's son-in-law, Thomas Johns or Jones.

The Dons' Welsh background and connections are well and thoroughly explored by Professor Griffiths. Much more work remains to be done on Don's role, standing, and relationships in his county of residence. The full significance of many of the entries in the household book will only become apparent as the result of patient detective work that collates them with other family, judicial and administrative records relating to the county. It is clear, however, that the book will prove a major source for Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire history during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. A handful of the notes from the fraught and dangerous early 1530s will illustrate its rich potential. In May 1530, Don stood godfather to 'Master' Fortescue's daughter at Stonor, and two years later Lady Don stood godmother to Sir A F(ortescue)'s daughter at Shirburn. Sir Adrian Fortescue was engaged in a prolonged dispute with his wife's cousin Sir Walter Stonor over the possession of the Stonor estate. Don briefly described the dramatic climax of the dispute in January 1533. Sir Walter took possession of Stonor by force, but Lady Fortescue recaptured it almost immediately, despite the death of one of her men, fatally wounded by a crossbow. The 'lytyll goode lady' took Sir Walter by the hand to escort him out of the house for his own safety. Reinforcements coming to his aid arrived an hour too late. The dispute was settled soon afterwards by means of a division of the estates. Sir Adrian was to be executed in July 1539 a punishment long attributed to his alleged disagreement with Henry's religious policies. Sir Edward Don's own conservatism is amply illustrated by several entries of these years. Early in 1530 Sir Edward and Lady Don seem to have entered the lay fraternity associated with the Charterhouse of Sheen in Surrey, a house soon to be implicated in the affair of Elizabeth Barton, the 'Nun of Kent'. They were visited at Horsenden by some local abbots, and, in September 1534, the very year of the dissolution of their order's English houses, by two Franciscan Observants.

Don's keepership of the park at Princes Risborough constituted an important continuing link with the court. In September 1534 he provided Malmsey wine for 'Master Secretary', Thomas Cromwell, when the powerful minister came to hunt there. The following year Cromwell's son Gregory also hunted in the park, and dined at Horsenden, bringing eighty people in his company. (Neither of these references appears under the Cromwells' names in the index.) The park was also the scene of some unpleasant and worrying episodes of poaching and violence. In July 1530 Master William Windsor (perhaps William Windsor of Bradenham, later second Lord Windsor) was heard to say at Aylesbury sessions that Don's deputy keeper of the park served without wages, instead being encouraged 'to rob and stele and brybe and faste and brag etc'. In May 1534 Windsor reportedly made an obscure but hostile remark about Sir Francis Bryan to Sir John Hampden. Don met Bryan, a brilliant and versatile courtier of King Henry's, inclined to conservatism in religion, at least two occasions later that year, one of them in the king's company, and in 1535 sent money to Sir Francis's minstrels.

Many of the later accounts in Don's book are preceded by melancholy descriptions of himself as 'le pouvre velyarde' (poor old man) and, towards the end, by reminders to 'Lerne to dy'. Don's record is eloquently silent about the destruction of Catholic worship under Edward VI and the confiscation of endowments for intercessory prayer. In April 1549, however, he paid his share of the cost of the 'masse booke in Englyshe', presumably the new Book of Common Prayer, shortly before its official introduction. 1549 was a shocking year. Never, Don seemingly reflected in somewhat wobbly Latin, had he seen the things that he was now seeing as an old man. Rebellion broke out in Buckinghamshire in July. This somewhat obscure rising has been attributed by historians to a mixture of religious and economic grievances. Rebels pulled down some hedges of Don's. (These were *not* Ket's rebels, pace Professor Griffiths, but almost certainly local men.) Don, now in his late

sixties, sent six men at the Protector Somerset's command, relayed by Lord Windsor, to a rendezvous at 'Schedyngtun wynde myll' (not in index and not identified), and himself joined commissioners at Thame. He recorded with evident agreement the 'sayyngs of H.E.' to the effect that England had now robbed all neighbouring nations of their characteristic vices and shortcomings, including Germany's heresy, Scotland's poverty and Denmark's 'mutenry', or propensity to rebellion.

This fascinating text has been presented by the Buckinghamshire Record Society in the usual handsome format. This edition does however present the reader with a number of challenges. Care has been taken, Professor Griffiths explains, 'to intervene as little as possible between Sir Edward and the reader'. There are no footnotes, the index is less comprehensive than it should be for easy cross-reference, and the select glossary is too select. The text is full of puzzles. One example is the entry on p. 5 in which Don records the payment on 30 March 1518 'at Thame at M^{t} Dormers to the parsse of Adley a mark for leryng my hofferyng my wyves and Bessys and Cyssels to Sainte Jamy Jirgulys ii^{d} and the offerynges viii^{d}'. The reader will not find Adley in the index, but must scan down as far as 'Ardley (Adley), Oxon.' If the parish really was Ardley, well the other side Bicester, what was the connection between its incumbent and Master Dormer? Why were the Don family making offerings to (St James's?) Jirgulys, and what on earth were the latter? Were they kept at Adley/Ardley? During the 1549 disturbances mentioned above, one 'Henry Wyntt' with his sons and others pulled down the gates of Don's south wood and put in their own animals. 'Wyntt' appears nowhere in the index, but the persevering reader who tracks down 'Winter (Wynter, Wynttyr), Harry (Henry)' will be rewarded with references showing that the dispute over the pasturing of Henry Winter's sheep in the south wood was already over twenty years old in 1549. For a man who 'spelt with reasonable and mature consistency', Don certainly wrote some very odd sentences. On p. 126 we read 'Item the first day there was a fawyn [?] fawnyd in the quirk [?]' Does this perhaps refer to the birth of a fawn? If so, should the last word really be read 'park'?

This edition makes available a magnificent resource for the study of early and mid-Tudor England in general and Buckinghamshire in particular. This necessarily selective account cannot do its richly varied contents proper justice. Professor Griffiths rightly remarks that it 'touches the interests of an unusually broad range of scholars'. Historians of climate, food, dress, medicine, religion, social life, of the family and household, of central and local government and the links between them, will all find invaluable evidence here. A growing number of scholars will in years to come have cause to be grateful to Professor Griffiths and his research assistant, Dr John Mullan, as well as the late Mrs E.M. Elvey, on whose work they drew. One hopes that a sympathetic biographer endowed with investigative stamina and equipped with a thorough knowledge of the Buckinghamshire context will some day use this text to introduce a wider readership to Sir Edward Don, his social and mental worlds, and his distinctive pleasures and foibles.

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THE CZECH CONNECTION: THE CZECHO-SLOVAK GOVERNMENT IN EXILE IN LONDON AND BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.
Neil Rees
Privately printed, 2005. Pp. 64.
Obtainable from: Neil Rees, 1 Eskdale Avenue, Chesham, Bucks HP5 3AX; Chapter One, Chesham; Wendover Bookshop; and The Book Castle, Dunstable (£7-50 plus £1-50 p&p)
ISBN 0 9550883 05.

The wartime defence plans for Buckinghamshire reveal over 20 major 'vulnerable points' and no fewer than 94 minor ones, the former ranging from Chequers to the Headquarters of Bomber Command at High Wycombe, Martin-Baker Aircraft at Denham and Bletchley Park. The proximity to London, of course, accounted for the relocation to the county of sections of many government departments and for the location of other wartime agencies such as 'Winston Churchill's Toyshop' (MD1) at Whitchurch. The work of Bletchley Park has become extensively known and other wartime activities have also received some attention in recent years. Bletchley Park is now a museum; many of the other buildings

used for wartime activities are little changed; and many of the county's fifteen wartime airfields also retain their appearance. There is also another wartime reminder in the form of the bus shelter bequeathed to Aston Abbotts by Edvard Beneš, the President of Czechoslovakia, though it is actually on the main Aylesbury to Leighton Buzzard road at the crossroads between Aston Abbotts and Wingrave. The reason, of course, is that the Abbey at Aston Abbotts became the seat of the exiled Czech government in November 1940.

Neil Rees, who comes originally from Aylesbury and with family connections to Rowsham, met a number of British war brides while visiting Czechoslovakia in 1990 and, becoming interested in their story, set out to collect photographs and reminiscences. The result is this well illustrated booklet. Some are modern views of the Abbey and other buildings associated with the wartime Czech presence, but most are contemporary photographs. Inevitably, many are of Beneš or the Czech Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, but there are glimpses of Czech soldiers and a short section on the local Home Guard platoon. The text takes the form of extended captions, but there is also a handy chronology and a brief bibliography, albeit primarily of works in Czech. Rather than simply captions, however informative, the booklet would have benefited from a short introduction setting the wider scene. Thus, for example, there is relatively little on the relationship between the exiled Czech government and the allies beyond a caption indicating Churchill gave the Czechs formal recognition in April 1941, and another showing the Czechs departing from London for Moscow in March 1945. Similarly, there is only brief reference to the links with SOE and the caption relating to the Czech wireless station at Hockliffe does not mention the concerns of the British in 1942 that, despite warnings, the Czechs persisted in communicating with a wireless station in occupied Europe known to be under German control.

Nonetheless, this is an interesting and worthwhile booklet that helps to fill in more of the picture of the myriad activities in wartime Buckinghamshire. Neil Rees is to be commended on his efforts.

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DISRAELI: A PERSONAL HISTORY
Christopher Hibbert.
London; HarperCollins 2004
pp xii + 401, £25.00
ISBN 0 00 714717 1

At first sight, the only surprising thing about Christopher Hibbert's *Disraeli* is that it was published in 2004. It has the feel of a biography, targeted at the 'general reader' and written sometime between the 1930s and the 1950s. Surviving general readers will love it, because it is well-crafted story, elegantly written and illustrated with some good anecdotes. They may like it even more for what it does not contain – there is not too much sex, not too much psychology, not too much revisionism or even too much analysis. More critical spirits will say that, when compared to the erudition of Blake or the insight of Ridley, Hibbert's book is a slight, if charming museum piece. Perhaps unwisely, Hibbert reminds us that Dizzy himself could be cruel about people in their 'anecdotage'. Our first response is to wonder whether an old style biography like this can really add much to our understanding. Little by little it dawns upon us that it can.

Despite the huge and impressive efforts devoted to the study and interpretation of the life of Benjamin Disraeli, we still lack a truly convincing answer to the central question – how on earth did this exotic Jew, so utterly un-English in appearance and manner, without Public School or University education, often touched by scandal and usually closely pursued by his creditors, ever make it to the 'the top of the greasy pole' in Victorian Britain. There have been partial explanations in plenty – Parliamentary skills, ruthless ambition, a rich wife, luck... – yet it is hard not to feel that this cannot be the whole story. Perhaps there can never be a 'universal theory' and hence we should be grateful to anyone who suggests new avenues of inquiry. Reading between the lines we come to appreciate that this is precisely what Hibbert does. He suggests, rather tentatively it is true – but anything else would not be his style – that Buckinghamshire might have had something to do with it.

Of course, Disraeli and his rather strange wife were an odd couple in Buckinghamshire. They were not especially popular in the neighbourhood of Hughendon and Hibbert notes that Mary Anne gave 'mortal offence' by her parsimony. Having

ordered a quarter of cheese, she sent it back because her husband had been called away to London. But it is surely striking that soon after Disraeli first entered Parliament, his sister, Sarah, told him that he was now 'quite as great a man at Westminster as at Aylesbury'. Sarah could see that the two were connected; a rising politician had to be a great man somewhere before he could hope to be a great man in Parliament. In other words, he needed a local power base to sustain and refresh him.0In Disraeli's case, the initial link was probably fortuitous – arising from Isaac Disraeli's move to Bradenham in 1829. There the young Benjamin made a slow recovery from what seems to have been a nervous breakdown. Thereafter much of his political life was in Buckinghamshire, beginning with the unsuccessful contest at High Wycombe and culminating in election for the county in 1847 – a seat held for thirty years until elevation to the House of Lords. Of course, Disraeli was useful to the old Buckinghamshire 'establishment' – represented by the Temple Grenvilles – not least for his brilliant speeches in favour of the Corn Laws. He was useful too the 'new establishment represented by his fellow-Jews, the Rothschilds. But whether old or new, Buckinghamshire could see that there really was something special in Disraeli. The real significance of Hibbert's book is that it shows that it was really Buckinghamshire that gave Disraeli his chance – shrewd as he was he took it.

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