The Victoria History of the Counties of England

THE VICTORIA HISTORY—the V.C.H. as it is popularly called—was founded in 1899. It was at first published commercially but since 1932 has been owned by the University of London who manage it through the Institute of Historical Research to whose staff the general Editor, his deputy, and other of his associates belong. It set out to be and still remains an historical encyclopaedia of the English counties covering with great care and accuracy very many aspects of English life from the earliest times, though always as seen through local spectacles. Its original plan has not been radically changed since the first volume came out in 1900 but in recent years its scope has been immensely broadened: new themes have been taken up and many more original sources used.

The *History,* which now runs to some 165 volumes, with over a dozen more in preparation, covers all the counties of England, apart from two which have been excluded from the plan. The excluded counties are Northumberland, to which the *History* "sold out" long ago because that county was publishing a similar history of its own, and Monmouthshire which it has been thought best to treat as though it were a part of Wales. The "counties of England" are not, of course, the modern ones created by the Local Government Act, 1972, but the historic counties as they were constituted up to March 1974. The respective counties form "sets" and for each set there are several volumes. The number of sets does not precisely correspond with the number of historic counties, for Yorkshire is planned to provide a "general" set and separate sets for each riding and for the city of York, and London and Middlesex possess sets of their own. Each county set is loosely divided into "general" volumes and "topographical" ones. The first deal with such topics as successive editors have thought it best to handle for a county as a whole, for example the prehistory, the history of transport, economic life, religious life, sport, administration, and parliamentary constituencies. Among the "general" topics there has always been included a translation of the county section of Domesday Book with a commentary upon it. The "topographical" volumes deal with each city, town, and village in the county. Many more of the "general" chapters have been published than the "topographical" ones. Effort has recently been preponderantly concentrated on "topography". At the present time twelve counties are in progress and only six of their volumes that are being prepared for publication are "general" ones.

In the past much of the *History* was written by independent scholars, some of them of great distinction, specially commissioned for the purpose. Some such people are still engaged, but increasingly

in latter years the work has been in the hands of full-time County Editors and their assistants, mostly paid out of funds provided by Local Authorities. These men and women, many of whom possess research doctorates, become after training highly skilled, so that since the Second World War, when the *History* began to expand after a prolonged hibernation, something like a new profession, that of topographer, has been created. The relationship of these people to the Institute of Historical Research will be explained later on.

It has always been a rule that the *History* should be written from original sources and should not rely upon secondary works. Many of these sources, like the publications of the Public Record Office or Parliamentary Papers, are in print but very many are still in manuscript and are likely to remain so. Some of these manuscripts are in the custody of the state or are in great university libraries. At least as many are stored in local record offices or are still in private custody. The materials are in many instances abundant and in order that the *History* may move forward at a steady and brisk pace techniques have to be contrived which will enable the writers to "pick out the eyes" and not become bogged down in a mass of complex detail. Some such short-cuts will be mentioned later.

The sources for local history, however, are not exclusively written ones. When the story of a town or village is being narrated it is also necessary to do much field work. With the aid of maps, ancient and modern, writers must walk over the ground observing the course of roads, rivers, and canals, whether or not still in use, the lay-out of settlements as they have evolved from century to century, and the building developments that have taken place. The final assessment of the date and evolution of buildings is entrusted to the general Editor's Architectural Adviser, but all workers are expected to have some understanding of these matters. In earlier times there was on the architectural side a concentration on the churches and the larger and more impressive houses, and full descriptions were supplied. Now descriptions are much reduced and the buildings are used rather to explain the geographical and social changes that have occurred. Nor are the greater domestic buildings singled out; middle- and working-class housing is considered just as important, and so are industrial buildings of all periods.

No two places in England are alike and the method of handling their histories has therefore to be flexible. There are, however, certain standard features which every author aims to cover. These are the growth (or, sometimes, it may be the decline) of the settlement, the history of its land tenure, its agrarian and industrial character from age to age, its religious, administrative, and educational history, and the story of its charities. To these must be added in some places the civic buildings, the public services or amenities, the management of marshes, the place that a town has occupied as a centre of county government, or the story of a castle or a prison. These features have to be related to what has been or will be said

in a "general" volume in the same set. The history of monasteries, hospitals of ancient foundation, cathedral chapters, and endowed grammar schools is normally treated in "general" volumes, where additionally much of the less detailed economic and ecclesiastical history is to be found. So far as these features are concerned the function of the parish histories is to fill out, by giving more abundant detail, the themes dealt with elsewhere in general terms. Thus the history of the Staffordshire coalfields and potteries appropriately falls into a "general" volume, the location and number of the mines and pot-banks in particular towns into a "topographical" one.

Except in places that are both large and ancient the parish histories are arranged topically section by section. This enables the reader to see almost at a glance how a manor that belonged to (say) Glastonbury abbey in the 13th century came into the hands of a land speculator under the Tudors; when the elementary school, the buildings of which are now a grain store, came to be founded and by whose piety or zeal. No method of arrangement is so well adapted for quick reference, and the "topographical" volumes are compiled primarily for that purpose. Moreover, systematic and uniform arrangements facilitate the comparison of comparable phenomena in different parts of England.

It is indeed true that in the case of a few large cities there has been or will be a compromise between the two methods, the general development forming an actual or notional first part of the volumes and the more detailed information an actual or notional part two. Thus in the history of Kingston upon Hull, which forms *Yorkshire, East Riding,* Volume I, there are long narrative sections on the medieval history, the 16th and 17th century history, the city from 1700 to 1835, and the modern city. This sequence records the main constitutional, economic, and demographic changes in the place and in the evolution of its plan and draws partly on the more expressly factual details in the second part. Thus in the "general" section covering the 17th century Hull the various ways in which its cultural life was then enriched are briefly told; the fuller story about the creation of parish libraries is to be found in the detailed section on the churches.

Before, however, anyone starts to write a parish history, he has to make up his mind how to frame and organize it. In general the "topographical" volumes are arranged by the so-called "ancient" parishes as they existed at about the time of the 1831 Census, before, in fact, boundary changes, as we understand them now, began. Chapelries and hamlets are normally fitted into the "ancient" parochial frame, though sometimes, especially where an old chapelry has grown large, it is treated separately. This is the principle for small and smallish places. Great towns and cities are usually dealt with by their boundaries at the time of writing, though where a large town has absorbed an old village, the village will probably be treated apart up to the time of absorption. To organize a complicated parish is

difficult work and an editor sometimes feels that every solution must be in some senses bad. The parishes are grouped within their hundreds as defined at about the time of the same Census, large hundreds being split between volumes. The hundreds are given their own histories.

Many hours have to be spent on illustrating the "topographical" volumes. As time has gone on, more maps have been provided. There have always been sketch maps of the hundreds, but these are now more carefully drawn. In recent years there have always been plans of towns, marking the chief buildings mentioned in the histories and the sites of those that have vanished. There are also now maps of villages and fields systems, sometimes two or three villages together. These may be redrawn versions of quite early surveys. Many buildings, especially those that have disappeared, are depicted from old engravings, water-colours, and photographs, and it is now the usual practice to illustrate the terrain, which may vary from the fly-overs joining the M5 and M6 in West Bromwich to the still comparative peace of the Pewsey vale in Wiltshire. These pictures are part of local history and will be highly valued by and by when the landscapes have changed again.

Many readers of this journal may be expected to possess a special interest in ecclesiastical history. Let us, therefore, consider what sort of information the *History* has to offer them, so far as the twelve active counties are concerned. Since 1953 five county "sets" have included articles on religion among their "general" articles. These concern Leicestershire, Middlesex, Shropshire, Staffordshire, and Wiltshire, and there are Cheshire articles now being prepared which are due to be completed, though not published, this year. For these counties the appropriate volumes all contain or will contain historical surveys of the religious houses in them, which number respectively 33, 19, 41, 40, and 49. These articles trace the history of the houses from their foundation until their dissolution, or, in the case of the cathedral chapters of Lichfield, Salisbury, and Chester and of such hospitals as have not been dissolved but have survived as almshouses, to the present day. They show, so far as surviving materials allow, what was the landed property of the houses and how it was managed, the quality of the spiritual and intellectual life within them, the size of the communities, the lay-out of the buildings, the names of the heads, and the varieties of the seals. The history of the Anglican Church in Wiltshire is divided chronologically into three sections and covers both the policy pursued by successive bishops and also to some degree the attitudes adopted by the parish clergy and the laity. The parallel Cheshire and Staffordshire chapters concentrate or will concentrate primarily on the history of the dioceses of Chester and Lichfield. In the case of Middlesex and Shropshire, where the bishop is seated outside the framework of the county "set", the articles are confined to organizational details. This is because the history of the diocese of London was published long ago in a *London*

volume and that of Lichfield and Hereford dioceses has fallen or will fall into the Staffordshire and Herefordshire histories. Roman Catholicism and the history of the Free Churches in Staffordshire, Wiltshire, and Cheshire have or will have rather full accounts covering not merely the history of the organizational framework but estimates of the character and distribution of the non-Anglican communities. In Middlesex and Shropshire the treatment is more strictly organizational.

It will be seen that editorial policy has been somewhat ambivalent. There is a natural temptation to draw a rounded picture of Protestant Nonconformity in a given area rather than to limit the scope to the framework within which, for example, Friends' meetings have been grouped. On the other hand until the state of religion in each parish has been, however summarily, surveyed it is hard to write a sound general appraisement.

How is religion treated at the parochial level? The aim is to record for each parish every organized ecclesiastical community within it apart from religious houses of medieval foundation. Inevitably the Church of England sections are much longer than the others; the Church has normally been established since at least the 11th century, has drawn upon the fruits of husbandry for its support, has played a significant part in local government, has provided through its incumbents community leaders, and has left behind buildings that are often of great age and beauty. In early times the *History* focussed attention on the Church, though, even so, it hardly went beyond describing the descent of the advowson and the history of the fabric. More is now published, notably the history of the benefice income and of the behaviour and attitudes of the clergy and congregation.

In former days the Free Churches fared even less well. They were lucky if they were even mentioned. Since 1949, however, it has been the aim to trace briefly the fortunes of every organized dissenting community that has ever been established within an "ancient" parish. This may amount to no more than that "A.B. registered his house in 1748 as a meeting-place for Protestant dissenters". When we are in better luck we have a longer story to tell. Here is the entry for the first General Baptist church in Swindon:

> FLEET STREET. This was the first General Baptist chapel in Swindon and was opened in 1849. Its earliest congregation consisted mainly of Baptists who had formerly attended the Stratton Green chapel, and for the first few years the Revd. Richard Breeze superintended both chapels. Fleet Street remained subordinate to Stratton Green until 1855 when an independent church was formed with 24 members and Breeze became its first pastor. In 1868 the chapel was enlarged to seat 520 and a schoolroom was added. Soon after this mission work was begun in the Gorse Hill district and in 1882 a mission church, dependent upon Fleet Street, was built there. In the same year the Baptist

> chapel in Cambria Place also became dependent upon the Fleet Street church.
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> By 1879 accommodation had become inadequate and in 1886 the congregation moved to the Tabernacle in Regent Circus, opened that year. The Fleet Street chapel was demolished, although the schoolroom was left and was still standing, used as a store, in 1951 (*V.C.H. Wilts.* ix. 156-7).

This is, of course, still only an outline. It tells us little about the quality of Baptist witness in the town. It is, however, a reliable foundation for a much longer study. The footnotes, not printed here, can be easily followed up. When, too, similar accounts of all the other General Baptist congregations in Wiltshire can one day be set beside it, it will be possible to build a full picture, fuller even than what is given in the "general" volume containing the ecclesiastical history of Wiltshire, of the fortunes of the Baptist connexion in the county.

Changes in society naturally need to be reflected in the shape of the *History*. Thirty years ago the divisions between the Established Church, Roman Catholicism, and Protestant Dissent, and between the Free Churches *inter se,* were still well marked, and Christianity as a whole was still publicly significant. Consequently it seemed right to trace each non-Anglican congregation down to the time of writing. With the blurring of the divisions and the decline of the prestige this may perhaps become less necessary in future. Moreover new religious congregations have been established in England. Thirty years ago space did not have to be found for the Orthodox church, nor for Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. It now must be, and in recent years the history of Jewish synagogues, neglected in the past, has been included.

Where there are many people working in different places, there is a risk that there will be uneven balance and too much variety of method. In the case of the *History* this is partly overcome by drawing up for each county a "check-list", which contains the irreducible minimum of printed sources that must be searched, and less mandatory surveys of manuscript sources. In addition there has been created a set of memoranda on treatment and sources, which point out what are the facts or events to fasten upon and what may be safely ignored. The existence of these documents is some guarantee to the reader of uniformity and good performance which would be lacking if each writer went his own way.

Let us go back and survey rapidly the stages through which the *History* has passed. It is generally reckoned to have originated in 1898 or 1899, Sir Lawrence Gomme, first Clerk to the L.C.C., and H. A. Doubleday, later Editor of the *Complete Peerage*, being the originators. Valuable subsidies were collected and with their support the firm of Constable undertook to publish. Queen Victoria allowed the *History* to bear her name and to her memory each volume is still dedicated. All her successors have graciously asked to be kept informed of progress. The first volume appeared in 1900 and four

years later William Page, an authority on the history of London, became sole editor and in the face of every conceivable difficulty carried on until his death in 1934.

After its foundation the *History* flourished for eight years but began to go bankrupt in 1908. It had recovered somewhat by 1910 but had to cease all activity in 1915 and lost nearly all its staff. It picked up lamely in 1920 and was helped out of its difficulties by the second Viscount Hambleden, a partner in the firm of W. H. Smith. On his death in 1931 his son could not continue his father's patronage but conveyed the *History* to Page on easy terms, who thus came to own the work that he edited.

In 1923 the Institute of Historical Research was founded. Professor A. F. Pollard, its founder, was always on the watch for projects to make his creation more useful. Page was assigned a room in the Institute, and in 1932, having by then grown old, he gave the *History* to the University of London. The University entrusted it to the Institute. The *History,* however, came without endowment. Consequently the thirties were lean years for it, and the war years still leaner. The *History,* however, survived the war and the University began to put more money into it. In addition Local Authorities began to patronize it. The system of co-operation between the Local Authorities and the Institute is this. The former undertake to provide money for the support of two or three editors or assistant editors per county. These people work exclusively on their own counties. If their work is approved by the general Editor their scripts are sent to press and are printed at the University's expense. The system has gradually expanded so that eleven counties are now so collaborating. The general Editor's own staff are working on a twelfth. Financial anxieties now face centre and circumference alike, but since 1949 only one county fund has lapsed and that in circumstances quite unlike those of the nineteen-seventies.

The question is constantly asked: when will the *History* be finished? It is best not answered directly, though one must always say mournfully that completion is far away. But how do things look statistically? Among "general" articles the situation is perhaps not too depressing. Ten counties lack some or all of their pre-history, a deficiency difficult to remedy, and ten also lack their transport, which presents fewer problems. Nine lack agriculture, eight lack population tables, seven parliamentary and administrative history and "schools", six sport, five industries and ecclesiastical history, three their Domesday sections, and two their forests. To fill these gaps, however, over twenty articles are already in preparation.

Up to the Second World War the *V.C.H.* contained articles on natural history. These have now been abandoned apart from sections on physique. These are successors to the former sections on geology and describe the geographical configuration of the counties. Five such studies, one already in preparation, still need to be supplied.

Whatever cheerfulness, however, this situation may engender is

counterbalanced by the formidable task of completing the "topographical" sections. For only twelve "sets" have all the "topographical" articles appeared. There remain thirty "sets" that are "topographically" unfinished. Of these thirty twelve are in progress but they are not reaching their end; two indeed have started only recently. Deducting what has been published and what is waiting to be published it must be reckoned that there are nearly 2,000 unstarted parishes in those active counties.

For 18 county "sets" there are at present no plans for resuming or beginning the parish histories. Not all of these are small or sparsely populated, for they include Devon, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, and the West Riding. Among great cities that are topographically untouched are London and Westminster. Adding together the unwritten parishes in both active and inactive counties a total of nearly 6,500 is reached. This is more than half the ancient parishes in England.

At the moment it is reckoned that two trained workers, working about ten months a year, can produce about 30 parishes in about 3½ years, provided that none of those parishes is at all large. That period excludes the time taken in choosing illustrations and preparing maps, correcting proofs and making indexes. Adding in these supplementary processes it would be fairer to say that two men need four years to complete 28 such parishes. Given the staff at present available it might be said that an output of 105 small parishes a year is possible. Needless to say the great cities and conurbations take far far longer. Bristol, for instance, could perhaps occupy three workers for three years. Naturally if there were more workers more parishes could be brought out, but additions to the staff for some time to come can hardly be foreseen and it may be hard to cling on to what there is.

Over the past quarter of a century there have been many changes for the better in the *History*. It has become broader in very many directions, and its technique has improved enormously. These changes have naturally had a decelerating effect but, even given that they are retained in future, the pace could still be brisker. It is an unfortunate fact that training in advanced historical research has hitherto laid too much emphasis on comprehensive coverage, whether of sources or of topics, and not enough on productivity and writing to a time-table.

Even, however, if people can be persuaded to write faster, as is by no means impossible, the end will still be far away. This is much to be regretted because with the passing of each year a pattern set in Queen Victoria's reign becomes ever harder to adapt. Nevertheless there are compelling reasons for driving on, for the *History* is keeping alive and ever improving upon the distinct art or science of topography which has been one of England's great gifts to the literature of civilized society.

Those who wish to study more fully the development, structure, and aims of the *History* will find them set out in its *General Introduction* (1970) in which also the contents of all volumes issued up to that time are listed.

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