

Simon Townley (ed.), *The Victoria County History of the Counties of England. A History of the County of Oxfordshire, Vol. XVIII, Benson, Ewelme and the Chilterns (Ewelme Hundred)*, Boydell and Brewer for the Institute of Historical Research, 2016, 483 pp., circa 120 illus.; 16 plates; 118 maps and plans; 3 tables, £95.*

There is a reassuring solidity to volumes of the Victoria County History. These tall books with their distinctive red covers stand in contrast to online sources such as Wikipedia. I must quickly add that I have contributed to Wikipedia and acknowledge its virtues but it eschews original research and primary records, drawing instead on already-published material. This volume in contrast is firmly grounded on records from the past, as a perusal of the extensive footnotes to each page will verify. The volume covers the Oxfordshire Hundred of Ewelme. At first glance it is not a particularly exciting area: 14 rural parishes, the only population centre, Benson, an overgrown village. But the economic and social history of the area is fascinating.

Ewelme Hundred has both ‘open’ and ‘closed’ communities-determined in the main by historical land ownership and this volume brings out the contrast between these social structures. A prime instance of how a longstanding pattern of land tenure can influence the social and economic structure of an area is provided in the Chapter on Benson. It was a royal demesne in Anglo-Saxon times and, although Wallingford became dominant as a royal *burgh*, Benson’s royal status is reflected in the number of free ‘sokemen’ holding land there. The relative freedom of many landholders was reflected in a lively land market. The Crown sold Benson manor in 1628 and Benson had an increasingly fragmented land ownership, absentee landlords and weak manorial structure-by the 1840s the manor had over 100 landholders, mostly occupying smallholdings. Relative freedom helped Benson to develop as a service area on a main coaching route to London; inns were established, as well as coach building, shops, and other such services, staffed by a wage-earning class who in turn fuelled demand for shops in from which to buy goods and public houses for recreation. By the nineteenth century the area had a reputation for independence and at times the inhabitants became unruly. A curate in 1832 complained that the population was ‘principally of the lower class...whose morals are not bettered by the existence of fourteen beer shops and public houses’ and a weak magistracy. Benson men were participants in the Swing Riots in 1832 and later in the century there was some agricultural trade union activity. A friendly society, founded in 1830, held annual feasts which were sometimes rowdy events, leading to police intervention and enforced closure in 1892. Religious dissent, another feature of ‘open’ villages, was ‘rife’ in the nineteenth century and a Dissenting school was set up in opposition to the Anglican one. There were Quakers, Baptists, Calvinists, Congregationalists, and Methodists active in the parish at various times. So, the general character of the village in the nineteenth century was largely determined by the way land was controlled there since before the Norman Conquest.

The maps in this volume are very good: parishes are illustrated with maps and there are others showing particular areas, such as that of the Brick and pottery workings at Nettlebed. The parish maps illustrate some of the complexities of rural life in the past. Take, for instance, *fig. 4.*, which shows Benson, Berrick Salome and Ewelme parishes c.1800 with their

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common lands, open fields and early enclosures. The map helps to explain the landscape which, prior to enclosure in 1863 'was dominated by vast open fields' shared by the three communities. Greatest in extent c.1300, the fields in 1863 totalled some 1950 acres and were subdivided into 16 fields of widely varying sizes. Farmers from all three communities often held arable strips in each of the fields which were, in theory worked in a three-year rotation. Two hundred and twenty acres of common were also shared between the settlements-some open to all three, some to specific villages, and additionally some farms had specific rights in certain commons. Inhabitants also had varying rights over woodland and meadowland (dry and wet). Luck has given us a particularly good map of Oxfordshire pre-enclosure, (Richard Davies, *A New Map of Oxfordshire*, 1797) and the four sheets covering Ewelme Hundred have been reproduced (*fig. 2*). This map includes field boundaries and woods and clearly depicts the contrasting landscape of the vale areas, with significant areas of 'nothing' - open fields with no hedges in them, with that of small irregular fields assarted from the Chiltern woodlands.

The map of Nettlebed parish in 1840 (*fig. 75*) depicts a Chiltern parish looking very different from that of Benson-here the irregularly-shaped arable fields are all enclosed, there are tracts of woodland and common north of the village. A hilly, wooded parish, the agriculture was long a mixture of cereal production, sheep and other animals, and wood products. Favourable clay and sand, together with wood for fuel led to the development of an important brick, tile, and pottery industry and the common became pockmarked with old pits. Nettlebed village was on a main road to London so, like Benson, it developed an economy of coaching inns, brewing, and shops.

As is usual with recent VCHs, this volume is well illustrated. The coloured plates include two pictures of imposing coaching inns. Ewelme almshouses and the beautifully painted interior of the church there and at Chalgrove were obvious candidates for coloured photographs. Maybe a couple more coloured plates of vernacular buildings would have been appropriate, although there are some in black and white throughout the book. One is struck by the number of black and white pictures of 'former' buildings-inns, rectories, turnpike houses, farmyards, barns, and the like, indicating the changing nature of society and economic history in this part of Oxfordshire, an area at one time with a high proportion of poor people and now one where houses are not infrequently priced in millions.

As well as notes on sources, particularly useful in the case of material housed in various archives, there is a glossary of unusual words, mostly those concerning property rights, religious activity and obsolete forms of taxation. This volume is significant addition to the history of Ewelme Hundred and a useful addition to the history of England.

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