

**Simon Townley** (ed.), *The Victoria County History of the Counties of England. A History of the County of Oxfordshire, Vol. XX, the South Oxfordshire Chilterns, Caversham, Goring, and area*, Boydell and Brewer for the Institute of Historical Research, 2022, 546 pp., circa 96 illus.; 65 b/w; 8 colour; 23 line, £95.

The Victoria County Histories of England - a project to write the history of every county in England - was started in 1899. In the words of the VCH website 'The VCH aims to complete authoritative, encyclopaedic histories of each county, from the earliest archaeological records to the present day, as well as topics such as topography, landscape and the built environment.' Each county is responsible for producing histories, and each has progressed at a different speed. The project is by no means complete, it grows like a monumental Gothic cathedral of history. Some counties are slow, or almost dormant: Lincolnshire has produced only one volume, published in 1906; Leicestershire has done a bit better, its first volume appeared in 1907, four volumes appeared after the Second World War under the aegis of W.G. Hoskins, and more work has been undertaken in the last 10 years with a view to publishing more volumes. The ground has shifted under the foundations of many volumes-boundary changes in 1974 radically altered the shape of some counties-a large chunk of Berkshire was ceded to Oxfordshire for instance. Parish boundaries have also been much changed in the part of Oxfordshire covered by this present volume. (*Maps 2 and 3*). Caversham, once a large parish, was whittled away by modern boundary changes. In 1894 2475a was detached to create Kidmore End parish. The remaining 2404a was split between the parish of Eye and Dunsden and Reading borough in 1911.

Oxfordshire is one of the pinnacles of this Gothic project, with twenty volumes completed and the latest covering twelve ancient parishes bordering the north-east bank of a long curve of the Thames from Crowmarsh Gifford (opposite Wallingford) almost to Henley. Until comparatively recently, these parishes were long, thin areas of land stretching from the Thames up into the Chiltern hills-a characteristic common in this type of terrain, allowing the parish to have variety of landscape and agricultural conditions. Checkendon is a typical example; for most of its length it is barely two thirds of a kilometre wide. There was much cross parish activity, especially in upland areas, with parishioners crossing boundaries to attend the nearest church even though it was in another parish. Main lines of communication are going to be the same across the narrow boundaries, for instance the historic main roads of Mongewell and Checkenden are the same, crossing both parishes. Of course, the Thames is a means of communication common to all the parishes. An anomaly caused by the vagaries of boundaries is that the main settlements of Crowmarsh Gifford and neighbouring Newnham parishes sit facing each other, either side of a village street. In these circumstances, instead of VCH's standard parish by parish study, it may have made more sense to look across parishes to bring out the similarities of, say, the areas higher up the Chilterns, or those communities by the Thames, especially their shared agricultural, economic, and social histories. Parish by parish history leads on occasion to duplication when grants of land etc. are made to aristocrats or ecclesiastical institutions over several boundaries. The VCH is, however, always arranged parish by parish and an alternative approach may not have been possible.

The history of agriculture on these slices of land is often similar-determined largely by landscape, from wet pasture and marsh near the Thames, through drier soils where most arable farming took place, up to the heathlands and wooded areas higher up the Chilterns. Sheep/corn agriculture was common in the middle areas of the parishes for centuries, the sheep were folded to increase soil fertility. Pig keeping and dairying ebbed and flowed

according to the relative price of grain and dairy products. More recent times has seen more diverse rural activity, market gardening and nurseries in some parishes, and recreational facilities such as riding schools.

The medieval sections mostly concern changes in land ownership. Not being a medievalist myself I can only admire the meticulous detail of these passages, for example, the descent of the manor of Checkendon from Wulfraed in 1066 to Lewis Balfour in 1974. Principal houses (mainly manor houses) in each parish are fully described. I particularly like the description of Wyfold Court ‘a 40-bedroom French Gothic mansion’ summed up by Pevsner as, ‘a Nightmare Abbey in spirit with a touch of Scottish Baronial’.

The parish most altered over the last 1000 years is Caversham which changes from an agricultural community with a certain amount of river traffic to a suburb of Reading with middle-and lower-class housing predominating. But the other parishes in the area have witnessed a change in their social make-up. The isolated cottages and small hamlets in the wooded areas now command very high prices and consequently have become a pleasant place to live for the retired and working rich, many of whom commute to work elsewhere-70% of Checkendon’s working population were commuters in 2019.

Unlike early volumes of the VCH, modern ones include illustrations and there are many in this edition, including 8 colour plates, relevant to the text and well captioned. Each parish in this volume has at least one map, usually based on an eighteenth or early nineteenth century original-tithe maps, enclosure awards, and estate surveys being the main sources for these maps. They show boundaries, settlements, land use, and communications and sometimes other information. On occasion they are, I think, loaded with too much information. It is a pity that, because of the long thin shape of the parishes, some of the maps are drawn over two pages, with wide gutters in between. I had trouble with *Table 1*, ‘Population 1086-2011’. The information in it was drawn from diverse sources and the effort to show population over a millennium for each parish is laudable but the result is too complex. The table is hedged around with many caveats-there are 38 notes to the main table. There is a useful glossary, mostly of medieval terms connected with land ownership, and a good bibliography of published sources and material available in archives.

All in all, this is another important sourcebook for professional and amateur historians.

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