

**Andrew Long (ed.) and Aston History Group, *Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney - A Parish History***, Aston History Group/The Flying Press Ltd 2021, 205 + v pp., multiple colour and b/w illustrations, £15. (Available from Aston Community Shop; Penny Black House, The Square, Aston; or [aston.historygroup@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:aston.historygroup@hotmail.co.uk).)

Produced in large-format soft covers and lavishly illustrated, this new history of the west Oxfordshire parish of Aston, Cote, Chimney and Shifford is clearly intended to attract a wide but probably mostly local audience, including those residents with only a passing interest in their local history. That is a laudable aim, and in its format and presentation the book should certainly succeed in achieving that. At the same time it draws on nearly thirty years of active research by the Aston History Group (formed in 1994), which over that time has built up its own archive, giving the content a solid basis. It is also (lightly) footnoted, in contrast to all too many local history publications which suffer as a result, and the whole is rounded off with a serviceable index.

The book opens with two short chronological chapters which sketch the area's very early development from prehistory to the Norman Conquest, reproducing maps (albeit now fairly old ones) of the numerous cropmarks visible on the Thames gravels, and drawing attention to key archaeological features such as the Bronze-Age barrow cemetery at Shifford. (A colour insert explains what crop marks are and how they are formed.) The Anglo-Saxon chapter similarly sketches in the national and local context (sometimes perhaps too broadly), and briefly explains the villages' connection with the important royal estate centre and minster at nearby Bampton, to whose large parish they all belonged until the 19th century.

The real meat of the book, however, is in the following thematic chapters, which cover such topics as 'Farming and Enclosure', 'Trades, Occupations, Services and Shops', 'The Poor', 'Transport', 'Education', 'Leisure', and 'The Parish at War'. Much of the material focuses on the 19th and 20th centuries, making good use of censuses, trades directories, newspapers, old photographs, and local knowledge, and building up a very human picture of a real and tangible place. Some chapters venture a little further back, the farming chapter, for instance, including some brief discussion (with clear maps) of the pre-enclosure field system, and drawing attention to 'The Sixteens', an unusual body of elected villagers who oversaw Aston and Cote's open-field farming. The 'Religion' chapter, too, looks back at the early history of Cote Baptist chapel (including a slightly unnecessary excursion into Lollardy and Wycliffe), and has a full section on Aston's 19th-century church, where a little more explanation of why the village did not acquire a church until 1839 might have been useful. (Essentially, the core of Bampton's pre-Conquest minster parish remained intact until Victorian reformers took matters in hand.) The 'Buildings' chapter benefits from a full account by Donna Thynne (of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record) of the development of Corner House at Cote, a much-altered 16th-century yeoman house, and the outlying hamlets of Chimney and Shifford (both shrunken or semi-deserted medieval settlements) each deservedly get their own chapter, which include references to the large late Anglo-Saxon cemetery excavated at Chimney as well as to more recent changes. The unusual Aston Training School – founded in 1888 to train labourers' daughters for domestic service, and which went on to open its own laundry – also gets its own chapter, fulfilling the editor's aim of explaining 'features that are particular and unique'.

The book's greatest value – aside from the fact that it will hopefully elicit some wider local interest in the villages' histories – is, in fact, its accumulation of so much 19th- and 20th-

century material, whether visual, documentary, or oral, which builds up a vibrant picture with some nice human detail. Inserted panels give verbatim quotations from local newspapers and other local sources, adding some colour, and on a human level it is touching to see (on *page 73*) a photo of Mr and Mrs H. Fitchett of Back Lane – 'the first couple in Aston to draw the Old Age Pension' – dressed up in their Sunday best. The maps are clear and simple, and the innumerable photographs evocative and informative, some of them showing documents as well as people and streetscapes, and so giving some hints of the raw materials of local history. The large-format layout, with its three columns and multiple headings and images, does have a slightly magazine-type feel, although that is probably a positive for drawing in more casual readers wishing to dip in and browse rather read from cover to cover. As Andrew Long concedes in his introduction, 'the history of our parish is similar to other villages and perhaps not as spectacular'. Nevertheless there is much here for anyone interested in Oxfordshire rural life, and local residents should certainly snap it up.

*Simon Townley (VCH Oxfordshire), 2023*