

**Barrie Trinder, *Georgian Banbury***, Banbury: Banbury Historical Society/Robert Boyd Publications, 2023, 155 pp, £15.

Barrie Trinder, a noted urban historian, grew up in Banbury, and in 1957 was one of the first to join the Banbury Historical Society where he edited their journal for eleven years. This background stood him in good stead for his study of Victorian Banbury published in 1988, and followed now by this work covering the years from 1714 to 1830. The author says the book covers a 'period of calm', drawing on the wide range of abundant records and registers possessed by the town.

The subject has been divided into eleven sections, starting in the first three chapters with an overall look at Banbury and its surrounding agricultural hinterland; 'Banburyshire'. Contemporary Banbury was modest in extent with about 2,500 population in 1714. It stood on a major north/south and east/west crossroads with a daily coach link to London. Its broad-based economy of retailers, craftsmen and some small manufactures made it a moderately prosperous place, and not beholden to its county head Oxford. Many townfolk had several occupations, and lucky ones had enough money and foresight to buy shares in the Oxford Canal, which was constructed during this period, bringing coal more easily to Banbury and opening up new jobs like metal working. A legacy of Banbury's twelfth-century creation was several market places and the cathedral-sized Gothic church St Mary's. It was, however, until 1825-6 a dirty town with unpaved streets deep in mud and night soil and 'yards' of mean cottages housing the poorest. By 1830 the built up area of Banbury had grown to about a hundred acres, plus a 4,500 acre surrounding 'kitchen garden zone'. The surrounding 'Banburyshire's' enclosures, open and closed villages and the later development of the threshing machine that impacted on rural jobs causing unrest at the end of the period are also described.

Professions and trades are covered in Chapter Four. At the top end there were doctors, lawyers and auctioneers and by the 1780s there were two country banks. The busy markets employed many including 'higglers' who arranged cattle deals. Pubs were the places to do those deals, and load and unload goods. The weaving of plush and shag became a leading occupation, with workshop homes often fronted by shops. The range of articles produced included hats, shoes, clothes, furniture, candles, ropes, whips, harnesses and Mr Thomas' pocket knives (widely acclaimed and ground on a wheel turned by a blind man). More luxurious goods included fans, masks, handkerchiefs and haberdashery. Banbury had gold and silver smiths, and wine merchants, while the Quakers were noted for their clock making. Internationally famed were Banbury Cakes, made by three out of the town's twenty-six bakers. Bigger items, known as manufactures, discussed in the fifth chapter, were centred on making horse girth cloth, plush and shag for national and export markets. By 1831 it was estimated 550 worked in plush making of which only 125 were male. In 1795 the women were only paid 3s. a week, the men £2. Some workers' solidarity arrived with the establishment in 1774 of the Friendly Society of Shag Weavers, a form of trade union. At the end of the period, plush was superseded by the manufacture of metal objects like horseshoes, plough parts, fire baskets and notably farm gate hinges. Banbury craftsmen's ingenuity is demonstrated by the number of patents they applied for, including a turnip cutter that by 1860 three hundred men were employed to manufacture.

None of this industry would have amounted to much without the 'Thoroughfare' discussed in Chapter Six. Hostelries existed for travellers on the London to Birmingham stagecoach that called at Banbury from 1679 on and by 1830 took only seven and a half hours to London. Drovers would move as many as 2,000 cattle a day through Banbury, taking three hours to pass through the town. It was, however, the creation of the canal plus increased roads that boosted

Banbury's economics from the 1770s. Twenty-three of the original 170 canal subscribers were Banburians and the town greeted the first boats to arrive in March 1778 with a band, church bells and a dinner. Banbury also became the 'metropolis of the carrier cart' with 427 carts making weekly journeys to Banbury. These small horse drawn carts brought people and produce to market and took away craft and shop goods.

For thirty-six years Banbury returned, usually unopposed, either Lord North or a family member of his as its MP. From their country seat at nearby Wroxton the family had great influence on Banbury's politics, smoothed by free beer at elections and charitable donations. North was prime minister when America gained her independence, while Sulgrave on the other side of Banbury was George Washington's ancestral home. America later became an attractive new home for many Banburians. Banbury's town governance is also detailed in Chapter Seven. The Vestry (parish church) looked after poor relief; an escalating problem and expense; payments were made to deserted wives, widows, children and for paupers' burials, and a workhouse supported. Bellmen were paid £6 a year to walk security shifts by night. Town criers, bread weighers and ale tasters added further aspects of law enforcement.

Congregations, covered in Chapter Eight, were diverse in Banbury, though mostly lived peaceably with each other. While the majority attended Church of England services at St Mary's and open Roman Catholic worship survived, eighteenth-century Banbury had a reputation for religious zeal and in 1751 had more dissenters than anywhere else in Oxfordshire. John Wesley visited Banbury three times and chapels were built as non-conformist sects flourished. Churches and chapels were leading venues for meeting people since Banbury was not gentrified enough to have assembly rooms but as Chapter Nine shows, it was a fairly convivial place with its performances of Purcell's music in St Mary's, subscription concerts, lectures and, from 1798, a theatre (guted in 1959). Pubs provided games such as skittles, shuffleboard, billiards, and bowling, and many of the social events mentioned previously were staged at the Three Tuns. Badger baiting, prize fighting, walking feats were the principal 'sports' of the era.

"The End of the Old Corruption" is Trinder's title for Chapter Ten. The demolition and rebuilding of St Mary's after seventeen years of prevarication over plans to build a new 3,000 seater church brought derision on Banbury. Not completed till 1822, it took fifty-two years to pay off the cost while the architect waited nineteen years for payment. More serious was the forty years of unrest after 1794. Riots against the high cost of food involved calling out the militia. In the 1831 election over the Reform bill, the North's family's political stranglehold was finally broken and a Reformist candidate elected. The result was acclaimed as of national significance; Samuel Sidney remarking in 1851 that 'at Banbury was fought, after the English fashion, one of the great fights that preceded the carrying of the Reform Bill'. Until ended by the 1838 Municipal Act, the Corporation continued to be a self-electing largely ceremonial body known for processing behind mace bearers (the maces were later sold to pay corporation tavern bills). In 1820, forty appointed commissioners oversaw paving, lighting, street cleaning and town patrolling. In 1834 gas lighting was installed and in 1836 a police force replaced the old watchmen.

The book ends with a short section, "Reflections", defining Georgian Banbury not as a classic canal side town, but the economic hub of its region with rural workers moving into Banbury for employment. Religious attendance was above the national average and Banbury opposed slavery not a remote concept but its horrors heard at first hand of from black freed slaves. Summing up, Trinder says in the eighteenth-century Banbury was to quote Hardy on

Casterbridge ‘pole, focus and nerve knot of the surrounding country life’. He gives historic perspective to the town though I would have liked more detail of the people themselves and their lifestyle. How did they get around their dirty streets, did many ride, if so where were the stables? On the many market days, how were the stalls set out, what were the most popular items, what principally did the farmers bring? I learnt the bellmen were paid to provide ‘security’, but what did this mean, did they carry arms or alarms for their nightly patrols through the muddy streets? A theatre is mentioned but nothing about the plays put on. People are referenced but not fleshed out; more could have been made of the mayoral Beesley family, of the inventor of the turnip cutter and others.

Each chapter ends with a list of references and all are illustrated liberally with maps, tables, prints and photos. At the end of the book are four very comprehensive appendices covering demographic statistics, a bibliography, plus four indices: on subjects in references to Banbury; other places, and to personal and company names. This meticulous detailing of sources and references, also included through the text, makes Georgian Banbury an invaluable reference work for the historian. While this authenticates the lively and excellently written text, it leads on occasion to a somewhat breathless outpouring of names, dates and events that can be confusing for the more general reader wanting to learn about the town’s history.

*Carol Geare, Enstone, April 2024*