

Professor W G Hoskins – a Memoir

By MAURICE BERESFORD



PROFESSOR W G HOSKINS, c 1973
Photograph courtesy of Mr M A Havinden

HE was born at Exeter on 22 May 1908 and died at a nursing home in Cullompton on 11 January 1992. A founder member of the British Agricultural History Society, he was its President in 1972–4, and a frequent contributor to this *Review*. In recent years his *Who's Who* entry concluded with 'Recreations: quietly remembering'. He had much to remember, as do we. His CBE and his FBA together with many honours, public and academic, recall that he was more than once capped for England, but some spectators will aver that he played at his best for his two counties, Devon and Leicester.

Devon was his first and enduring love. An earlier 'Recreation' entry was 'parochial explorations'. These began when a schoolboy in Exeter. Devon was for many years his home, then later a place of refuge, and finally a resting place in his last afflictions, some of which – like the much-quoted 'despair' of 1968 in which he ended his Leicester professorship – were self-inflicted. *Devon* was the title of his largest book, a heroic effort at a one-man county history; to write it he claimed

to have set foot in all 450 parishes, and no one would dispute it.

Devon's county town, where scholarships took him to grammar school and University College, was the subject of his MSc Econ. thesis (1929) from which arose his first book (1935). In 1963–4 he was briefly and unhappily a Liberal member of the city Council.¹ It was some recompense that his first honorary degree was from Exeter. In his last years, at Stoke Canon in a bungalow looking across the Exe meadows, a photograph of that ceremony was one of the few objects in his sickroom apart from family photographs: for all his maps and books, even the *festschrift*, had been sent to the saleroom in an earlier fit of depression.²

¹ 'I got in as a Liberal with the largest majority in the City': WGH to Beresford, 21 May 1963; 'I am much oppressed at law by a threatened libel action ... I came up against what I am sure was a horrible conspiracy and the thugs are now ganged up to finish me financially and in every other way': WGH to J G Hurst, 27 May 1964.

² His annotated copy of the one-inch Ordnance Survey sheet 122 (Melton Mowbray) was found in August 1989 in a remainder box of an Exeter bookshop.

His other county, by adoption, was Leicestershire, to which he went in 1931 as Assistant Lecturer in Commerce at the University College. His letter of application explained that he wanted 'time to pursue research, because at Bradford teaching duties took up the whole of his time'.³ He had been a lecturer in business studies at Bradford Technical College, a year so searing that he omitted it from his entry in *Who's Who*. At Leicester his duties were mainly to teach Economics for the London BSc Econ, a syllabus familiar to him from his undergraduate days at the University College of the South West, and from some tutorial teaching while a postgraduate.⁴

Economic history papers were few, but it is likely that they included the Tudor special subject for the Tawney and Power syllabus. The development of his lectures on that theme can be seen in *The Age of Plunder, 1500-47* which appeared tardily in 1976.⁵ The title shows that he followed Tawney in sympathy for the underdog and the dispossessed, and even at the peak of his fame he was disdainful of the Establishment.

Between 1929 and 1936 a London PhD thesis, 'The Ownership and Occupation of Land in Devonshire', was being written, bringing him into closer contact with Tawney, who was to become his enthusiastic referee in more than one subsequent promotion. It was also his first serious incursion into rural history, a subject which had first aroused his interest as a schoolboy on holiday at his cousin's near Crediton.

That the thesis is available in print only through a short paper in *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries* indicates the indifference to serious local history at that time in the publishing and academic worlds, an attitude which he was to meet again when his researches at Leicester produced a model history of the suburban village of Wigston Magna, where he was living. Refused by publishers at that time, it was recommended by Tawney (its dedicatee) to Macmillan's in the days of his later fame – although even then nervously re-titled *The Midland Peasant*, causing Herbert Finberg, his friend, collaborator and successor, to fantasize a threat of a rival village history, 'The Other Midland Peasant'.

However, there was the consolation of a more appreciative audience in Leicester itself. His day-time duties were tied to the London BSc Econ syllabus which, despite Eileen Power's own books

and Tawney's legendary injunction to muddy the historian's boots, gave no opportunity to interest students in exemplars from local history. Hoskins was fortunate to find nocturnal compensation. In Vaughan College the city had a flourishing centre for adult education. As one of its directors has written, 'he began his researches in Local History and Historical Archaeology ... in response to the needs and interests of his adult students',⁶ although in 1932-4 the courses were in economics and civics. In the autumn of 1934 he began a course called 'Local History', 'illustrated throughout with lantern slides', with one evening on 'the importance of field survey'. These continued and developed in 1935-40 alongside classes in political economy and government.⁷

The College prospectuses show that he sometimes had different courses on three nights of a week. The printed syllabuses, and Hoskins' own lecture notes show that by 1939-40 these students were hearing what the outside world would eventually know as *The Heritage of Leicestershire* (1946), *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), and *Fieldwork in Local History* (1967). They were also able to participate in field excursions at the frontier of knowledge: 'I was taking adult students in the early summer of 1940 to see sites on the ground – at Ingarsby, Great Stretton and Knaptoft'.⁸

The Making of the English Landscape was to conclude with the quotation, 'Seeing England presents thee with so many Observables', and it is clear that nearly twenty years earlier the 'observables' and the archives of Leicestershire were already the twin pillars of his discipline, and he was partnered by a skilled photographer and friend, the College Principal since 1932, F L Attenborough, whose photographs, like passages in Hoskins' own prose, succeeded in catching the elusive and unspectacular beauty of Midland fields and hedgerows.

Another receptive audience during Hoskins' pre-war period at Leicester was the county Archaeological Society to whose *Transactions* he contrib-

³ Ex inf, Geoffrey Pyrah, Hon Archivist, University of Leicester, 11 April 1988.

⁴ Ex inf, Michael Havinden, University of Exeter, 20 February 1992.

⁵ It was begun in 1956 and was originally advertised as covering the period to 1640; as late as 1973 it was hoped to make two volumes: WGH to Beresford, 13 September 1973.

⁶ A J Allaway, *Vaughan College, Leicester, 1862-1962* Leicester, 1962, p 82; see also J Simmons, *New University*, Leicester, 1958, pp 116, 127 and 155. Negatives of the Attenborough photographs are now alongside the Hoskins MSS in the Department of English Local History, University of Leicester.

⁷ Ex inf, A E Brown, Department of Adult Education, University of Leicester, 17 June 1991.

⁸ 'I had a good working knowledge of English archaeology (even lecturing on the subject)'; lectures at Vaughan College on 'The Archaeology of Leicestershire' were given in the summer of 1937, in 1938-39, and from 1946 to 1949: WGH to J G Hurst, 24 March 1969. Extracts from this long autobiographical note will be found in M W Beresford, 'A Draft Chronology of Deserted Village Studies', *Annual Report of the Medieval Settlement Research Group*, i (1986), pp 18-23.

uted eleven papers. He even persuaded the Society to devote a whole volume in 1948 to *Studies in Leicestershire Agrarian History*, and to make a separate hardback book of it. His own contributions began, as did his Vaughan College courses, with archaeology in the traditional sense of Roman and Pre-historic (1935), before moving to 'The fields of Wigston Magna' (1937), thence via parish histories to the pioneer surveys of deserted villages, yeoman wealth, and the Great Rebuilding.⁹

He had had no formal training in archaeology, and conducted no excavations, but he taught himself to apply locally what could be learned from Hadrian Allcroft's *Earthwork of England* (1908).¹⁰ It is also possible that in his Bradford year he had learned from Arthur Raistrick, whom he acknowledged later as 'that great authority on Northern England and on the practical side of local history in general', and to whom, when he was General Editor of the Hodder and Stoughton 'Landscape' series, he entrusted the *West Riding* volume (1970). Raistrick certainly believed he had been a beneficent influence. In 1987, hearing that Hoskins was seriously ill, he wrote, 'I had both friendship and respect for him ... on two occasions he joined one of my local history classes ... [in] comparative studies of Linton and Heptonstall. Both these he used in his books'.¹¹ Against Hoskins's Preface in a presentation copy of *The West Riding*, he had pencilled, 'not quite the pioneer he claims to be'.¹²

In 1941 Hoskins left Leicester for 'nearly five years imprisonment' of 'civil servitude in the Great Wen'. It was not all loss, for intervals in fire-fighting and other Civil Defence duties were used to digest and analyse the massive collection of notes from archives that he had gathered for his Vaughan College classes and the summer field courses.

The two decades following the return from exile in January 1946 were indeed the Glory Glory years, with rapid academic promotion, the creation of a separate Department of English Local History, a steady flow of books together with book reviews and broadcast talks, and the membership of the Royal Commission on Common Lands (1955-8)

to whose *Report* he contributed a comprehensive 'History'. He left Leicester for the Oxford Readership in Economic History in 1951.

There is no need to repeat here the ample biographical and bibliographical data included in the *festschrift*, which Christopher Chalkin and Michael Havinden edited in 1974.¹³ By that time he had returned to Leicester to take a Chair, and then early retirement in 1968, and he had made his first TV appearance in 'Horizon'. To the biography and bibliography in the *festschrift*, subsequent years added two more honorary degrees and two books: *The Age of Plunder*, and *One Man's England*, an illustrated text of his second BBC TV series (1978). Revised editions of *Fieldwork in Local History* (1982), and *The Making of the English Landscape* (1988), were mainly the work of Christopher Taylor, 'my one-time pupil', one of many craftsmen who acknowledge debts of apprenticeship from the master's Oxford days. He had been frustrated by the small amount of economic history in the undergraduate degree, but his appointment diaries in those years are a record of the postgraduate talent that knocked on his door.

He had always displayed a tendency to quarrel with people and institutions whom he had once loved, not least of all with himself. As Joan Thirk put it in the best of the press obituaries, 'He had strong pleasures and prejudices ... in earlier days a beaming smile moderated the indignation'.¹⁴ Careful readers will find mocking entries that aired his prejudices hidden in his indexes at this period – in *Midland England* 'Lunacy, modern, *passim*, lies between 'Luffenham, South' and 'Luton'.

Twentieth-century industrial society was certainly not to his liking, but he did not appreciate – and certainly did not acknowledge – what twentieth-century technology had enabled him to achieve, whether in the motor cars driven by his wife, Jane, that facilitated his parochial explorations; the fast trains that enabled him to live in Exeter and work in Oxford; paperback publishing which enabled him to tutor the leisured middle class in their own explorations; broadcasting which enabled him to preview a number of his themes on the Third Programme and thence in *The Listener*; and then in the Indian Summers of 1976-78, the helicopter and television cameras which enabled him to bring muddy boots into the living rooms of an audience numbered in millions, introducing them painlessly to economic history through a selection of those local exemplars that he had visited in his days as an active researcher. Some flavour of these can be gained from the two

⁹ His use of 'medieval archaeology' in a lecture title (April 1937 and January 1938: Notebook 'J', Hoskins MSS) may be the earliest use of this term as now understood; R L Bruce-Mitford, 'Medieval Archaeology', *Arch News Letter*, i, 1948, n 6, pp 1-4.

¹⁰ 'My "excavation" at Hamilton is best forgotten. It was simply ignorant enthusiasm and produced nothing': WGH to J G Hurst, 24 March 1969.

¹¹ Raistrick to Beresford, 25 August 1987; later conversations with both men were unable to elicit the exact date of their first contact.

¹² R F G Hollet & Son, *Occasional List* no 47, Settle, 1991, note on item 702; also corrections to Hoskins' *English Landscapes* noted in item 428.

¹³ C W Chalkin and M A Havinden, eds, *Rural Change and Urban Growth*, 1974, pp xix-xxvi and 342-50.

¹⁴ *The Independent*, 14 January 1992.

magnificently illustrated books published by the BBC, although they do not quite catch the ruddy complexion under the grey locks which must have caused many viewers to wonder if they ought not adjust the colour button on their receiver.

'Observables' was one of his favourite words, and he was indeed the Great Observer – of townscapes as well as landscapes, and he held his audiences, professional and amateur, by the vividness of his language which itself derived from the acuteness of his observation. The ease of movement over the landscape and the flow of happy examples may have concealed from some, not only the hard physical effort of exploration, which has its acres of misses for every square yard of hits, but long hours of research in archives.

The quality of his published work also took strength from the discipline of many years of teaching economics and economic history. At Leicester he had taught all periods of economic history, and his local studies were always designed to illustrate general economic history topics, and more than once to illuminate where there was still darkness, as with late-medieval depopulation and the implications of post-medieval rural building, from parsonages to farmhouses.

His early study and teaching in economics – at a time when it was arithmetical but not yet algebraic – gave him a firm respect for quantities. He enjoyed counting, and half-apologized in the Preface to *The Age of Plunder* for facing the reader with so many quantities. He was a pioneer in the use of probate inventories as also of taxation

assessments. His study of rural wealth in Devon, like that of sixteenth-century towns, was based on an exercise in ranking taxation data, while the studies of post-medieval harvest fluctuations in this *Review* were essentially research in measurables, a quite different Hoskins from him of the observables.

In recent years, whatever the ravages of the body, the mind was clear and tranquil. He had not the energy, he said, to finish an autobiography but he knew what title it would have had: 'A Provincial Life', a declaration of contentment with that lot, with echoes of the title of one of his several volumes of reprinted essays, *Provincial England*.¹⁵ Certainly it embodied a relief that he had dwelt so little in a metropolis, and he would certainly have relished emphasizing that his years in Oxford were spent in a place that was as much a part of the English provinces as Leicester or Exeter.¹⁶

¹⁵ In conversation in August 1990 he claimed that its manuscript had been destroyed by the manager of a nursing home who feared revelations in it, but this may have been a distorted recollection from a troubled period.

¹⁶ I am grateful to those named in the footnotes for information supplied, and to Professor Phythian-Adams and Dr Harold Fox for access to the Hoskins MSS; the Hurst correspondence cited is now with the archive of the Medieval Village Research Group in the National Monuments Record (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments); that with Beresford, Ms 910 in the Special Collections of the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds. WGH himself would have wished others to learn of the financial and other help that he received in recent years from a former American student who wishes to remain anonymous.