RURAL HISTORY TODAY

Rural History Today is published by the British Agricultural History Society

Issue 29 | August 2015

Above: Three-decker pulpit In Thurning Church, Norfolk (see p4).

100 years of the WI

In its hundred years of existence the WI has proved itself to be a diverse and resilient movement, shaped by and in response to changing times. Here's to the next hundred!

"Most Institutes in villages before the war had been clubs for working men. Women warn't supposed to club together … But coming together on purpose, as a body, and calling themselves 'the WI' – well!" (Shelia Stewart, Lifting the Latch: A Life on the Land, Oxford, 1987, p. 82)

Members of the first WI formed at Llanfair PW in September 1915. (by kind permission NFWI)

So recalled Oxfordshire farm worker Mont Abbot on the formation of the WI in his village of Enstone in 1921. Of all the changes wrought by the Great War, it was the appearance of the WI, Abbot argued, that was the 'biggest revolution of all'. Enstone's WI came six years after the first group had met in Llanfair PW on Anglesey in Sept 1915. Its early success was rapid. By the mid 1920s the WI movement claimed a quarter of a million members; thirty years later it was double this. In its centenary year the WI still attracts a membership of 212,000 in 6,600 branches and remains the largest women's voluntary organisation in the country.

The WI movement was founded in Ontario, Canada in 1897. It was promoted in Britain by Madge Watt, secretary of the WI Advisory Board for British Columbia, who was employed by the Agricultural Organisation Society in 1915 to help set up the first WIs amidst growing concerns over wartime food supply and production. The AOS handed over to the Women's Branch of the Food Production Department of the Board of Agriculture in 1917. Following this, the National Federation of Women's Institutes was formed, with Lady Denman elected as Chairman and Grace Hadow as Vice-Chair. Its first AGM was held in 1918. By the end of the war the WI had become an independent organization, with just over 1,400 institutes in existence. The following year saw the first appearance of the WI monthly magazine, *Home and Country*.

The WI embodied a number of guiding principles, which came together in the early years of the movement. Firstly, from 1923 it was an all-woman movement, run by and for women only. Secondly it was a rural movement, for settlements of 4,000 people and under. Finally, in an era before universal

Dr Nicola Verdon provides an insight into the history of the WI as it celebrates its centenary year.

Also in this issue

www.bahs.org.uk

@BAHSoc

www.facebook.com/bahsoc

British Agricultural History Society

enfranchisement, it operated on democratic lines, with one member one vote at the local level and equal voting rights for all institutes at the AGM. Significantly, through its personnel and ideals, it linked to the broader women's movement of the early 20th century.

It is however, the 'Jam and Jerusalem' image that the WI became known for and that has dogged, and devalued, popular understanding of the WI across the 20th century. Both were – and remain – important to the WIs. Jerusalem was adopted in 1923 as the anthem of the organization to be sung at all meetings. The 'Jam' comes from its early origins in wartime when one of the published aims of the organisation was to stimulate interest in the agricultural industry. They did this by encouraging women to cultivate gardens and allotments, preserve foods and avoid waste (rather than exhorting them to undertake low-paid work on the land). Sales tables, where members could sell their home produce, quickly became part of WI, and in the interwar years more formal WI markets began, the first, in Lewes in 1919, serving as a model. During the Second World War jamming centres (as well as canning centres) were opened.

As scholarship by historians including Maggie Andrews and Caitriona Beamont has shown however, the WI is about much more than 'Jam and Jerusalem'. Right from the start, it has been a campaigning organisation that over the decades has tackled a diverse range of issues, and provided a forum for rural women to participate in local and national affairs. Although never denying the primacy of domestic life for rural women, the WI has always attempted to place value on that role and present it as skilled and essential work.

Image credit: The Bees

'Cake-bakers and trouble-makers: Lucy Worsley's 100 years of the WI' will be broadcast on BBC2 in September. It features a contribution on rural women's lives in the interwar years by the author of this article.

Picture taken during filming at the Black Country Museum (left – Lucy Worsley, right –Nicola Verdun).

The WIs therefore offered rural women a new social platform within village life. They centred on the monthly meeting, which was either held in the afternoon or evening (depending on time of year and local circumstances) and featured WI 'business', followed by talks and demonstrations, ending with tea (and cake) and entertainment – singing, drama, dancing and music all being important. They gave rural women time and space to meet, talk, laugh, learn and develop. It is not surprising they were so popular. Other members of rural society were not so sure. Some men thought that the WI was taking over women's lives. Mont Abbot, who was quoted at the beginning of this article, argued that women who joined the WI in Enstone were 'the laughing-stock of the men in the village' and the monthly meeting was labelled as a 'gossip-shop' (although as he conceded these women, including his own mother, 'were only doing what we men going to the pub had been doing for years', pp. 82–3). One of the WIs most vocal critics was the National Union of Agricultural Workers. They questioned the democratic principles of the organisation, believing it was a forum for 'titled or monied' ladies of the village to boss other women around, and thereby suppress any action on improving wages and working conditions for the rural working class (see *The Landworker*, September 1921 and September 1923 for example).

Whilst WI did struggle to eliminate class divisions in rural society this should not distract from the importance of its early campaigning history. This focused on improving the physical environment of rural women's daily lives, with the provision of decent affordable housing, water supply and sanitation at the local level, key campaigns. The 1931 AGM pressed for better medical supervision of pregnant women in rural areas. Nor did the WI shy away from more uncomfortable national issues: backing the Bastardy Bill in 1920 (to compel fathers of illegitimate children to provide financial support), urging public health education to combat venereal disease in 1922 and in 1934 urging the government to promote world disarmament. The radical nature of some of the early campaigns was weakened in the post Second World War years, and in the 1950s issues such as litter and handicrafts predominated. From the 1960s the specifically rural focus of the movement was also diluted, the rule that limited formation of WIs to villages of 4,000 or less being dropped in 1965. Today some of the most vibrant and popular WIs are based in fashionable urban areas as they tap into modern, middle class, metropolitan tastes for cup-cakes, knitting and artisan bread (and jam). The Seven Hills WI in my own city of Sheffield, formed in 2009, currently has a waiting list for membership.

Conservation volunteers from Hampstead Norreys WI with The Country Wife *at the National Needlework Archive. (photograph by NNA)*

The Country Wife *mural created for the Festival of Britain in 1951. Above and detail right. (photographs by kind permission NFWI and the NNA)*

Visit the Country Wife

The Country Wife mural was made by Constance Howard for The Festival of Britain in 1951. It was then given to Denman College where it became part of WI history. In 2009 it was transferred to the WI Collection at the National Needlework Archive in Berkshire. There you can visit *The Country Wife* and see the conservation work being undertaken up close and personal. Also from Tuesday 1st September to Thursday 1st October you can see a special exhibition 'Celebrating the WI' displaying some of the gems of the WI Collection at the NNA.

▶ *For more information, directions and opening times:* **www.nationalneedleworkarchive.org.uk**

CONFERENCES

BAHS Winter conference

Occupations, work and gender in rural Britain, 14th–20th centuries

Saturday 5 December, 10.00–16.30

Wolfson at the Institute of Historical Research

The speakers include Richard Smith, Jane Whittle, Leigh Shaw-Taylor and Sebastian Kelbeck (as a double bill) and Nicola Verdon.

BAHS Spring Conference

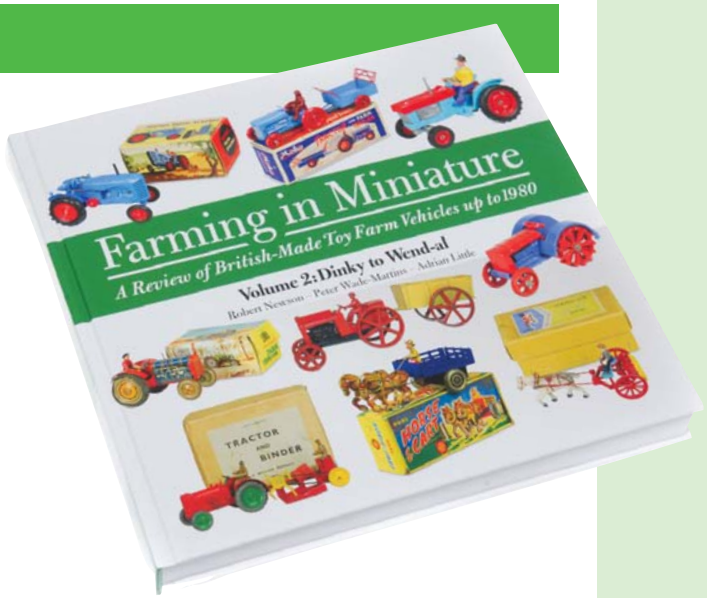
To be held at Wortley Hall, Sheffield from 4–6 April 2016.

NEW BOOK

Farming in miniature

The second volume of *Farming in Miniature*, by Robert Newson, Peter Wade-Martins and Adrian Little, covering manufacturers from Dinky to Wend-al has recently been published by Old Pond, 5M publishing Ltd (ISBN 978-1-908397-56-0) price £49.95.

In total over 60 British manufacturers working between the 1920s and 1980 were identified making farm toys, including both horse and tractor-drawn implements.



The rural parson in Victorian England
A Norfolk case study

Susanna Wade Martins looks at some of the sources for studying the Victorian rural clergy and what they can reveal about the influences this group could have on rural society.

Throughout Victoria's reign, the two most influential families in a rural parish were likely to be those of the squire and the clergyman, and in the many villages without a resident or dominant landowner, the parson might reign supreme. What sort of person was he likely to be and how did he spend his time? Norfolk, with over 700 rural parishes can provide much evidence to begin addressing these questions.

The answer is likely to come from a variety of sources. Firstly the Ecclesiastical Commission of 1835 (PP 1835 xxii) collected a wealth of statistical information about the make-up of the clergy at the beginning of Victoria's reign. Of the 300 or so Norfolk clergymen, the largest proportion (67) of those whose backgrounds we know, came from clerical families, 44 from other professions, 42 were the sons of the landed gentry and 31 came from the peerage. These would be the sort of backgrounds that could afford to support a son through one of the universities. Compared with the law or medicine, the church was a cheap profession to enter providing an elegant, leisured and gentlemanly lifestyle. A typical country parson was therefore an educated and often well-connected gentleman.

The Ecclesiastical Commission also reported on the age of the clergy. While the largest number in Norfolk (50) came from the age group 60–65, there were also a significant group of younger men, with 45 being under 30 and 43 being between 31 and 35. The years 1800–1830 saw a huge expansion of Oxford and Cambridge universities creating a pool of potential graduate clergymen. As a result, nationally by 1840 the majority of parsons were under 45. The profession was therefore predominantly a young one, with incumbents sharing a common aspiration and culture with the gentry classes.

A second source is sometimes to be found amongst parish records which may contain a variety of miscellaneous notes about or collected by individual parsons. For instance an obituary of Reverend Edward, survives amongst the Ashill records. Born in 1789, typically for the time, the son of a rector in Hethersett, he secured his status amongst the gentry by a marrying a daughter of John Custance of Weston Hall. He was also probably one of the most long-lived of Victorian clergymen. Ordained by Bishop Bathurst in 1812, he was appointed to Ashill in 1813 where he remained for 76 years, dying just before his 100th birthday in 1889. He had no curate until he was 88 and continued taking services and preaching until shortly before his death. Another long-lived but less exemplary clergyman is described by Owen Chadwick in his introduction to *A Victorian Miniature* (1960) was Dr Miles Beevor who became vicar of Ketteringham in 1786 and remained there 39 years until 1835. During that time he held two other livings where he resided and divided his time between politics and hunting. He only came to Ketteringham to perform his duty and if there was no congregation waiting he locked the church and rode home. The normal congregation was four, 'the cobwebs gathered and the fabric began to decay. Some time between 1814 and 1835 a whole tomb standing in the chancel vanished'.

Like these two men, once appointed, many clergymen remained in the same parish for the rest of their lives. George Crabbe was rector of Merton for 33 years and on his death at the age of 65 he was described as 'taking the keenest interest in all that concerned the parish, the hall and the neighbourhood'. Arthur Roberts remained at Wood Dalling from 1831 until his death in 1886 and while there published 20 volumes of village sermons under titles such as *Plain sermons on gospel miracles preached to a Village congregation* in 1867 and six volumes of *Village Sermons*. Perhaps the longest serving priest was the Rev. P. Chandler of Lammas who was installed in 1764 and was still there seventy years later. The fact that once installed, the incumbent had the freehold for life discouraged moving and was not necessarily a good thing. A long tenure could lead to an 'absence of fresh interest and the invigorating stimulus of a new career' There was a 'loss of old fire and force and efficiency'.

Sometimes the parish records include evidence for the work that some of these clergymen carried out in the parish. These include 'visitations' which involved visiting every household in the parish to discover whether the children were being sent to school (usually only a church one was available before 1870) and the religious leanings of the parents. These documents might also contain details of housing conditions and employment. The curate of Bawdeswell visited the 144 households within the parish in 1842. He noted whether the parents and children could read and write, whether the children were likely to be confirmed as well as including a description of each person.

A third source is to be found in diocesan records. Archdeacon's visitations give details of the incomes of the incumbents, whether they were resident in their parishes and whether they held livings in plurality, how many services they took and the state of church buildings. Through these we can see how during Victoria's reign most country parsons came to take their parochial duties more seriously. More services were conducted and churches were put in better repair. As more parsonages were built non-residence was

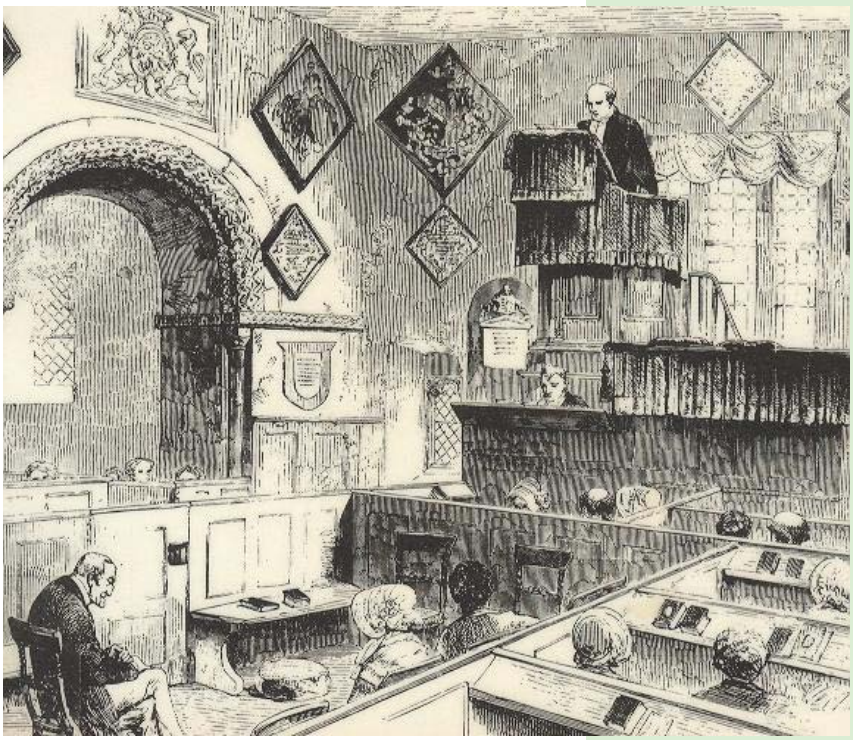
reduced. An English cleric who moved to New Zealand as a bishop in 1841, returning in 1854, wrote, 'It is now a very rare thing to see a careless clergyman, a neglected parish or a desecrated church'. Consistory Court papers give details of clerical misdemeanors. Arthur Loftus, possibly a relation of the Yarmouth MP William Loftus was rector of Fincham in the 1840s and was accused in the Consistory Court of keeping two prostitutes as servants, claiming that this was on the advice of his doctor as he had been denied conjugal rights by his wife. Not surprisingly this defense failed and he was deprived of his rectory, stipend and any further preferment.

A final written source in which Norfolk is particularly rich is the writings of the parsons themselves. Parson Woodford's *Diary* written in the 18th century is well-known, but the 19th century also contained its literary clergymen.

The Revd Whitwell Elwin (1816–1900) came from a wealthy dynasty of clergymen and followed his kinsman Caleb Elwin to the family living of Booton in 1849 where he remained for 50 years. In 1852 he published a selection of letters and poems of Lord Byron and in 1853 he began writing for the *Quarterly Review,* in all contributing 42 articles between 1853 and 1889. From 1853 to 1860, he was the editor, travelling to London four times a year to undertake the work. When he retired from this post, Elwin concentrated on his parish work, but still found time to edit and publish five volumes of the works and letters of Alexander Pope, published in 1870–1871. He was described by Edward Bulwer-Lytton as 'one of the last true men of letters, scholarship, style, tenderness, discrimination with a vast knowledge of books and unlimited leisure'. His most striking legacy is the church at Booton which he began to rebuild in 1875 and completed in 1891. Having rebuilt the chancel, Whitwell went on a tour of English cathedrals measuring details that he wished to include at Booton. The result is a 'lavish building designed with a knowledge of Early English detail but a happy disregard for principles of Early English composition…The architecture and fittings are the result of one man's personal and idiosyncratic vision'. The strange slender west towers are a landmark visible for many miles around.

Of an antiquarian bent was Augustus Jessop, active member of the local archaeological society and critic of some of the severe 'restoration work that was being carried out in many of Norfolk's churches after about 1850.He describes a church to which 'a hurricane of a man had been recently appointed, and which he had already set himself to restore…He had an army of bricklayers picking and slopping about the sacred edifice tearing down and digging up that and smalming over the other.'

The fervour for 'restoration' could come from two directions, and according to Jessop, both were equally damaging. The high church ritualist, seeking to emphasis the importance of the sacraments in



church services, rather than the role of preaching 'gets rid of the Jacobean pulpit, or the royal arms, or the ten commandments and sets up a construction which he calls a reredos, all tinsel and putty and papier mache…and intones the service keeping well within the chancel,' while the low church 'evangelical' was just as destructive. 'Then the axes and hammers come out with a vengeance. None of your pagan inscriptions for him…none of your crosses and remains of frescoes on the walls… As for the rood screen – away with it…if you must have a division between the nave and chancel, set up a pulpit there, tall prominent and significant.'

Perhaps the most informative on the day-to-day life of a country parson are the diaries of the Rev Armstrong, vicar of the small market town of East Dereham between 1850 and 1888, three selections from which have been published, the most recent in 2012 (*Under the Parson's nose* C. Armstrong, editor). Through his diaries we can follow, not only his involvement in urban matters where the Board of Health, took up much of his time, but also his visits to the outlying hamlets where he often found both adults and children 'excessively ignorant'. He objected to the clergy becoming magistrates (although many did). Writing of magistrates in general he commented that 'it seems very incongruous that such eccentric and ill-informed men as some of the county magistrates are, should have the power of sentencing prisoners to such an awful penalty as solitary confinement'. The rector of Colkirk, the Revd.Heitland commented that the clergy-magistrates were often the most harsh contributing to a 'sullen discontent' towards the church.

Armstrong was a conscientious trustee of many local charities. That he understood very little of the lives of the recipients of doles for which he was responsible is shown by many comments in his diary.

While the Revd. Collinson, described by Armstrong as 'admirable in all matters not connected with his profession' and occupying the family living of Bilney, residing in his recently erected architect-designed gentleman's residence of a rectory, thought there was no point in giving the inmates of Gressenhall workhouse handkerchiefs because they would not know what to do with them, the Revd. Marcon of Edgefield took a far more sympathetic view; 'We parsons have no right to expect our people to be moral, unless we see, as far as we can see, that their conditions conduce to that end in the same way as our own do'. Armstrong was concerned that the 'monotony of toil' resulted in the poor being 'heavy and dull', leading in some cases to insanity in old age. 'There is much truth in what Dr Challice once said to me 'I find' said he 'that joking don't pay'.

Another source of information is the buildings themselves. Between 1830 and 1900 over 500 of Norfolk's 700 churches went through a major period of restoration which involved not only the fabric but the internal layout of the building which could reflect both the 'high' or 'low' church views of the incumbent as well as the social divisions within society. The reign of Victoria also saw the building of rectories. With the arrival in Norwich of Bishop Stanley in 1837 a campaign of parsonage-building began and the decade 1841 to 1850 saw the largest programme of building in the 19th century with the plans for eighty being approved and granted funding from Queen Anne's Bounty. Many of these buildings were of a solid style typical of the period and would not have been out of place as the residences of the minor gentry from which class of course many of their occupants came. William Donthorn of Swaffham worked on many gentry houses as well as public buildings and workhouses. He designed at least five Norfolk parsonages. Others were the work of the Norwich architect Arthur Brown and S.S.Teulon built Tudor-style rectories at Bressingham (1842) and North Creake (1845).

Armstrong saw his duties as being to the church, school and cottage, all of which he fulfilled on his terms very adequately. By the second half of the nineteenth century the typical country parson was therefore an educated and well-connected gentleman who cared deeply about the spiritual health of his flock, tried to improve church attendance, resisted non-conformity and played a pivotal role in developing education and the care of the poor.

The role of the clergyman could also be a lonely one. The serious-minded felt that they should set a good example by not joining in the sporting activities of their gentleman neighbours such as hunting and shooting. Card parties and dancing were also disapproved of. From the landlords whose educational background was likely to be similar to his, he was often separated by an inferior income, from the larger farmers whose income was likely to be similar, he was separated by his superior education and from the labourers who formed the bulk of his congregation, he was separated by both income and education.

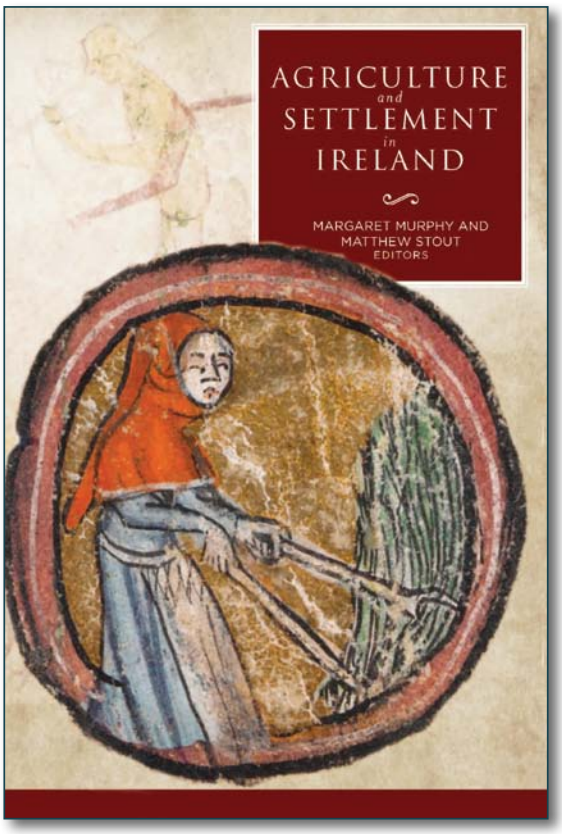
There is much that we do not yet know about the role of this potentially influential member of rural society, and there is no doubt that as a profession they included a wide range of abilities and aptitudes. This short article merely touches the surface, but as a significant class within the countryside, they are worthy of closer study.

The interior of Thurning church was remodeled in the 1840s and emphasises the social divisions of the time. Box pews, each allocated to a farming family as well one for those from the hall, line the north aisle while open benches for the villagers occupy the nave. At the west end are boxes for the rectory and hall servants. By the end of the century most churches had removed their box pews and replaced them with the more egalitarian open pews. These at Thurning are said to have remained in use by individual farms until the 1920s.

NEW BOOK

on Irish agriculture and settlement

Published in association with the Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement and the Agricultural History Society of Ireland, this book explores the relationship between Irish settlement and agricultural practice from the Neolithic to the eighteenth century.



The types of farming that took place in any particular period of Irish history had a powerful impact on the development of settlement. Interdisciplinary studies in this volume address the key periods to illustrate this process, from the spread of Neolithic pastoralism, the very basis of farming on this island, through the medieval focus on tillage, which gave rise to manorial villages and granges, to the eighteenth-century agricultural revolution and the impact that had on urban and rural landscapes.

Edited by Margaret Murphy and Matthew Stout, the contributors are: Michael Carey (Coillte Teo), Jim Collins (UCD), L.M.Cullen (TCD), Patrick Cunningham (TCD, Raymond Gillespie (Teagasc), Tony Leavy (Teagasc), Eileen Murphy (Teagase), Margaret Murphy (Carlow College), Brendan Riordain (ind.), Katharine Simms (TCD), Geraldine Stout (Archaeological Survey of Ireland) Matthew Stout (St Pat's, DCU)

▶ *Published June 2015 256pp; ills. Hardback ISBN 978-1-84682-507-1 £45*

For more information including a full list of contents, visit www.fourcourtspress.ie/books/2015/agriculture-and-settlement-in-ireland

The Weald and Downland Museum – looking back and looking forward

2015 is an exciting year for the Weald and Downland Museum. It is 50 years since the historian and educationist, Roy Strong proposed the founding of a museum to which threatened buildings could be moved and preserved.

The 1960s were a time when many historic buildings were bulldozed to make way for new development. In Surrey 350 listed buildings had been destroyed between 1951 and 1965 and in Kent it was thought to be three a month. The building of the new town at Crawley had involved whole sale destruction of unique building types. Strong expressed concerns for Bayleaf farmhouse which was to be demolished to make way for a reservoir and it became the first building to be moved to the museum when it was founded on the West Dean estate in 1967.

In the last 50 yeas the museum has grown to include a whole range of buildings, many timber-framed and ranging from fine farm houses to cottages of landless labourers as well as industrial buildings. Now in 2015 an ambitious project, with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund is under way.

The 'Gateway project' will provide better visitor facilities in a cluster of new buildings near the entrance, there will be better signage , trails and historical interpretation both on the site and within the galleries. Hambrook barn will become a 'family learning hub'. Importantly three buildings which have been used for office purposes will be released to become exhibits. A medieval house, a later farmhouse and a waggon shed will be renovated with their architecture and social history fully explored. The museum will remain open during the building work and the hope is that this will be completed for the 2017 season.

NEW BOOK

Parish Government in a Leicestershire Village : The Buckminster Town Book

The first volume of the Leicestershire Record Series

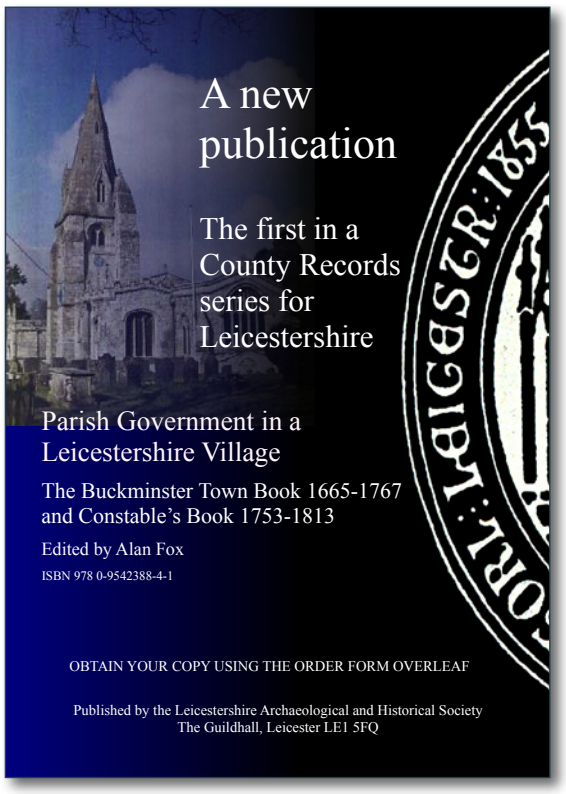
Prof. Chris Dyer of the Centre for English Local History at the University of Leicester introduces this important new series.

Most counties have their own Record Society or Historical Society. Their many volumes are essential sources for local historians, and are used for all kinds of historical research. Leicestershire is a very historically conscious county with a lively and active archaeological society, but did not found a record society a hundred years ago. It is now determined to catch up, with a record series under the wing of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society. We hope in the future to see editions of such sources as tax records (the Hearth Tax is an obvious candidate), or the Religious Census for 1851, or court records from manors, quarter sessions or the church.

Our first volume is an edition of two connected documents from Buckminster in the north-east of the county, which are of much general interest because they indicate the routines of parish life which were needed in all parishes, but are not always fully documented.

The records cover the period 1665–1813, and they provide a comprehensive answer to the question: 'How did the grass-roots of local government work, before the county councils and all the modern systems of administration?' In the case of Buckminster, like many others, the crucial body was the vestry, which met under the chairmanship of the vicar, and which operated through officers: churchwarden, overseer, constable and surveyor of the highways. As Buckminster was united with Sewstern, these offices were duplicated, but often the same man filled two of the jobs. They served for a year, and at the end of their term of office presented financial accounts. These were written into the Town Book (which covers the years 1665–1767) and the Constable's Book (for 1755–1813).

We can only marvel at the ability of the parish officials to carry out so many duties – in modern terms they were multi-tasking, and they had to work very hard, and developed skills in many types of government. The vestry gained its income mainly from a levy of 1d. per acre from the whole parish. There were also church lands to be rented. In administering the poor law they had to agree the terms under which the children of paupers were apprenticed, and they



made various payments to the poor, including the organisation of a feast for the poor in August. They were charged with killing vermin. The constable collected taxes for the central government, including those ingenious eighteenth-century taxes on windows and servants. He had to attend the annual 'statute fair' held at a number of venues, a potential scene of disorder.

The Buckminster books are an insight into the social life and social attitudes of country people over more than a century. The volume is edited by Alan Fox, and the general editor of the series is Mark Page.

▶ *Copies of* ***Parish Government in a Leicestershire Village*** *can be obtained from Clarendon Books, 144, Clarendon Park Road, Leicester LE2 3AE. Cheques should be made payable to Clarendon books. Price £15.00 plus £3.00 postage.*

Rural History Today is published by the British Agricultural History Society. The editor will be pleased to receive short articles, press releases, notes and queries for publication.

Articles for the next issue should be sent by 30 December 2015 to Susanna Wade Martins, The Longhouse, Eastgate Street, North Elmham, Dereham, Norfolk NR20 5HD or preferably by email scwmartins@btinternet.com

Membership of the BAHS is open to all who support its aim of promoting the study of agricultural history and the history of rural economy and society. Membership enquiries should be directed to the Treasurer, BAHS, Dr William Shannon, 12A Carleton Avenue, Fulwood, Preston PR2 6YA Email: bill_shannon@msn.com

Enquiries about other aspects of the Society's work should be directed to the Secretary, Dr Nicola Verdon History Subject Group, Department of Humanities Sheffield Hallam University, City Campus Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WB

Tel: 0114 225 3693
Email: n.verdon@shu.ac.uk