
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

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Reviews

Malcolm Underwood, Paul Spoerry, Debby Banham

An Intimate History of the Parish of St Clement in Cambridge, 1250–1950

T. E. Faber 2006

Cambridge: Privately published, xxiv, 956pp.

Tom Faber's explorations of the history of his neighbourhood began with the unravelling of a mystery about his own house, thought from the seventeenth century to have been a house for chantry priests of St Clement's, and later called The Old Vicarage, both without firm historical evidence. His characteristically restless quest for the truth of its history led gradually to a consuming interest in the buildings and people of the whole parish, resulting in a fascinating panoramic study of the area which, with its appendixes, indexes, and plans of tenements, is nearly a thousand pages long. After an introductory tour of the parish as it was in 1886, the book moves on to examine its topography through the history of blocks of holdings in its various sectors: the Church and its surroundings, Quayside with its wharves and warehouses, the settlement around Thompson's Lane, and the commercial area of Bridge Street. A third section, the longest in the book, called 'People' tells the story of families of the parish as they appear in a wide range of published and unpublished sources.

The history's biographical emphasis reminds one of another great study of parish identity: Richard Gough's *History of Myddle*, written in 1700–01 but not published until 1834. Gough started from the named family pews in the parish church, a circuit of which was the cue for a wealth of anecdotal detail about their owners, and hence about sixteenth and seventeenth century village life. Tom's analysis, however, is far from anecdote, although it contains some highly entertaining personal stories. It reveals his tireless scientific bent for arriving at accurate detail, through comparing the terms of deeds of properties, rentals, surveys and tax lists found in a number of Cambridge colleges and in public collections. All of this was accompanied by attempts at systematic mapping of tenements, showing graphically how the balance of acquisition altered among the various families. Tom's sense of precision was often frustrated by a continual need to revise

layouts, based on the sometimes ambiguous evidence of boundaries in medieval and later deeds.

Indeed, ambiguity both in the realm of topographical data and in weaving strands of personal information into a satisfying whole presented Tom with his greatest difficulty. The research for an informative passage (p. 123) on the brewing trade that flourished in the neighbourhood of the present Thompson's Lane was complicated by uncertainty about the succession of tenants, and about the way in which businesses shared the land. Nevertheless we now know much more about who managed this trade and how the river water was piped and pumped to support it. Similarly, the reconstruction of families and careers, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, was subject to occasional conjecture due to lack of firm identification. Yet the accumulated details of these holders of land, messuages and civic offices, and of the alliances between their families, which emerge in such a prosopographical study, also provide valuable raw material for studying the economy and government of the town.

At Tom's death in 2004 the legacy of his unpublished materials, in an almost finalised state for a history of the parish, presented both an inspiration and a challenge. The situation was splendidly resolved by the initiative of his widow Elisabeth in pressing forward with publication, and by the work undertaken by Laura Naplin in order to realise that goal. It is an effort that will be enormously appreciated by anyone interested in the development of the town of Cambridge.

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