
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

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Reviews

Christopher Taylor, Christopher Brookes, Evelyn Lord and Sam Lucy

Medieval Bourn a Cambridgeshire Village in the Late Middle Ages

David Baxter 2008

Mission Computers, Cambridge, x + 190pp., 5 maps, 3 figs, 18 tables & 11 plates ISBN 1 902044 15 0, unpriced

At first sight this is a standard, old-fashioned history of a single village in the long tradition of English Local History. Except that it turns out to be non-standard, up-to-date and certainly not the history of just a village. The only point of similarity with many local histories is that there are not enough good maps. The author falls into the old trap of assuming that the reader knows the parish as well as he does. A situation made worse by the computer-generated maps that are both hard to read and an abomination of cartography. Even this reviewer, who has puzzled over Bourn since 1960, had to dig out his old 6-inch OS map to understand fully the text. In particular because much of the book is a *landscape* history of Bourn, the four parish maps are totally inadequate.

Despite this *Medieval Bourn* is very good indeed. This is because it is not a run of the mill local history. It does not begin with the discovery of a prehistoric axe, moving on to the traces of a Roman villa found in the eighteenth century, passing straight on to Domesday Book and filling most of the rest with a transcript of the Church Wardens' Accounts. The book is expressly the story of the last three centuries of the medieval period in Bourn and concentrates on what is the best-documented part of its history. This, of course, is helped by the fact that its late-medieval institutional lords, Barnwell Priory and Christ's College, made and kept very detailed accounts of the lives of the people of Bourn, providing a wealth of information not available at many other places. In Chapter 1 this fine documentary record is analysed carefully and set in its landscape context, using the author's local knowledge. This demonstrates how much most of us miss of the medieval landscape without the kind of documentary sources that Bourn has in such abundance.

The author correctly points out how different the morphology of the village, with its dispersed 'ends' and hamlets, is when compared with that of its near

neighbours and that of much of Midland England. However, it is not quite as unusual as he claims. Similar villages exist in the south-west of our county and survived at nearby Wimpole until the seventeenth century. Nor is his explanation for the layout of Bourn, its size and complex pattern of tenure really convincing. A better one would be that Bourn still retains remnants of its Anglo-Saxon pattern of dispersed settlement that other villages have subsequently lost. However, the book contains much more than a reconstruction and interpretation and of the late medieval landscape. Chapter 2 covers the life of the village and includes its social structure, changes in the status of its peasants, the impact of plague and famine and much else. Chapter 3 is a detailed account of the economy of Bourn, its crops, their yields, agricultural practices and trade. The book ends with a chapter on the remarkable iron-working industry, the remains of which were found as a result of excavation and fieldwork, but were more fully explained by the documentary record. A fine piece of work that should stand as an exemplar for future Cambridgeshire local historians.

Christopher Taylor

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RCHM

The Cartulary of the Hospital of St John the Evangelist, Cambridge

Edited by Malcolm Underwood 2008

Cambridgeshire Records Society, Vol 18 Cambridge
lv + 292 pp. 10 illustrations ISBN 090432320X £21.50

The Hospital of St John the Evangelist had a similar destiny to the convent of St Radegund's: just as the convent was converted into Jesus College shortly before AD 1500, so, soon after, the site, the archives and some of the buildings of the hospital passed into the hands of the college of St John the Evangelist. The buildings were swept away, apart from small fragments, in the 1860s; but the archives remain, and very fortunately they have been for many years now under the care of Malcolm Underwood, one of the most senior and