

## XIV BOOK REVIEWS, 2004

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P. Wilson and J. Price (eds.), *Aspects of Industry in Roman Yorkshire and the North* (Oxford, Oxbow Books, 2003), pp. 151, 68 ills. ISBN 1 84217 078 3. £25.00.

This volume arises out of a day school held in 1994 to consider, as the preface puts it, 'the crafts and materials' of Roman Yorkshire, although the word 'industry' has subsequently been introduced into the published title. What in terms of organisation and scale of production distinguishes a 'craft' from an 'industry' can be inferred from some of the papers, although one would have welcomed some summary discussion of the point by the editors. In terms of its regional brief the volume has stepped beyond Yorkshire to include 'the north', although what is primarily covered here is the north-eastern side of England between the Humber and Hadrian's Wall.

The ten papers are all by scholars distinguished in their fields; three are focused on particular places (Cool on York, Wilson on the North York Moors and Halkon on Holme-on-Spalding Moor), the remaining seven divide into four dealing with technologies which used high temperature processes (Swan on pottery, Price on glass, Dungworth on copper alloy, Bayley on non-ferrous metalworking) and three which did not (van Driel Murray on leather, Allason-Jones on jet, and Gaunt and Buckland on building stone). Taken together they present us with an enormous range of information and a great body of references to be followed up.

One measure of the value of a volume of collected papers is the degree to which they address common themes and the way in which

each author makes his or her own comment on them. I spotted a number of such themes beginning with the impact of the Roman conquest, and found it refreshing to be able to consider this from the point of view of technology, that is materials, manufacturing processes and the form of finished artefacts, rather than of the generalised economic and social theories which usually dominate the debate. In particular, as van Driel Murray puts it (p.121) in her stimulating and well-written paper, we are prompted 'to call into question the now common opinion that Roman culture was no more than a thin veneer over essentially native society'. Having said this, the degree to which and the speed with which the Roman conquest made its impact in a technological sense in the north clearly varied across the region. Around York and the forts it was pretty much total and instantaneous as the army brought in its own craftsmen to supply its needs. In remote areas like the North York Moors there is, as Wilson points out (p.19) '... little evidence of changes arising from the incorporation of the area into the Roman province...' and, he suggests, a continuation of pre-existing forms of craft activity. What one would like to know, however, returning to van Driel Murray's point, is whether folk on the Moors wore shoes, apparently a Roman introduction, or indeed 'cowboy boots' (p.116), and if so were they made locally or in places like Catterick where empire-wide styles prevailed? The evidence unfortunately does not survive.

This leads me to the second theme I spotted: regional identity. These papers are concerned with a geographic region, if not a particularly well-defined one, and most authors address the question of whether it had a distinctive character in technological terms. In doing so a fascinating diversity emerges. Some technologies had by virtue of their raw materials a regional

flavour, principally jet and building stone, although as far as the latter is concerned the use of stone conformed to Roman building technology elsewhere in the western empire. Other technologies, notably the working of leather, copper alloy and glass, appear to have developed little in the way of a regional identity. However, as Swan shows in her splendidly erudite and wide-ranging paper on pottery, a great variety of regional traditions, notably in the type and form of vessels, can be identified in the products of the Yorkshire area. For example, military potters arrived from a number of different regions including various parts of Gaul, the Rhineland and, in the Severan period, north Africa, and worked at York and elsewhere. Distinctive local industries – the word used advisedly in view of the scale of production – developed out of both military and civilian traditions. To some extent the great variety of regional identities detectable in pottery must be to do with the vast quantity which has been recovered and the detailed research to which it has been subjected. One wonders whether a similar picture will, in due course, emerge in, for example, metal or leather working as scholars turn their attention more regularly to these materials.

In making this last point I am drawn to allude to a third theme made, at least by implication, in several papers. This is the almost complete absence of any detailed publication of the large and diverse body of artefactual material from sites excavated at York in the last 20 years or so (see p.1 and p.113). This would be of great research value in its own right, but should also illuminate further the great regional corpuses from, for example, Castleford and Catterick which have appeared in recent years. As excavator of some of those York sites it is perhaps invidious for me to go further, but I should say that although Cool's paper in this volume provides a very valuable summary, completion of the work she and other specialists have embarked upon is long overdue – English Heritage please take note.

In conclusion, this is a most welcome volume which I shall mine extensively for teaching and research. Jennifer Price and Pete Wilson have,

as they did with their Roman Yorkshire volume of 1988 in the British Archaeological Reports series (no. 193), rendered the region a great service and one looks forward to comparable volumes on the Roman crafts and industries of other parts of Britain.

Patrick Ottaway

Gillian Cookson, *The Townscape of Darlington* (Boydell Press, University of London Victoria County History Studies, 2003), pp x + 198, 51 ills. ISBN 1 904356 21 4. £29.95.

This book is packed with carefully researched information as might be expected from any publication coming under the Victoria County History imprint. With its soft-back covers and numerous illustrations it is to be welcomed as a bold attempt to make the work of the VCH more widely available.

There are countless footnotes, an excellent index and a most impressive list of printed sources. A surprising feature, however, considering the care that has been taken with the text, is the absence of useful maps. Much of the work is given to the development and change of the streets that make up the centre of Darlington but, apart from a schematic diagram of medieval Darlington and an almost unreadable plan produced by the Board of Health in 1852, there is no way for the reader to identify the various roads, although the extraordinarily wide margins could easily have afforded space for sketch maps. The photographs too are of poor quality, reflecting no doubt the relatively low price which must have been intended to attract the purchaser – although the illegible blurb on the back cover is not encouraging to the casual shopper.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first is an interesting account of the early settlement up to and including the great fire of 1585 which largely destroyed the medieval town. The second, entitled 'The Growth of a Market Town' is to a great extent based on property deeds, hearth tax returns and window tax records. It is in this chapter that the detail begins to become oppressive, not least because the window tax returns give details of the

windows taxed and by whom the tax was paid but not the address of the property. Consequently the account becomes irritatingly conjectural.

Chapter 4, 'Urban and Suburban Darlington, 1800 – 1914' is the longest and most densely packed of the six. Read in conjunction with a street map of Darlington it is interesting, as the rapid expansion of streets can be seen pushing back town boundaries. Read without a map it is a bewildering list of street names and builders, some of whom are featured in the following chapter which is a brief account of the architects whose work had most influence on the town at that period. The next chapter on building materials gives an exhaustive account of brick making in the town between 1820 and 1946.

The final chapter, on the modern town, is easier reading and makes a satisfactory ending for the Darlington reader who will remember many of the events that took place and be able to recognise his or her own history in the context of the town plan.

Who this reader will be is questionable. The book is sure to appear on library shelves, both in the public sector and in the academic world but to the general reader it may be disappointing, partly because of the very narrow field that it covers in such great detail and partly because it lacks the human interest that would flesh out the skeleton of facts. Gillian Cookson, in her introduction, speaks slightly of 'well worn tales of railways and Quakers' but she has missed the point. Railways and Quakers form a colourful part of the rich tapestry of Darlington. The tapestry may be threadbare in some places but Darlingtonians take pleasure and pride in their forbears and may see this book as deficient in that respect.

Christian Duff

Nina Jennings, *Clay Dabbins: Vernacular Buildings of the Solway Plain* (Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, Extra Series vol. XXX, 2003)

pp.xii + 197, 98 figs, 35 plates. ISBN 1 873124 38 4. £20.00.

It would be a mistake to look at the title and assume that this book is not relevant to the study of vernacular buildings in the north east of England: nothing could be further from the truth, for it not only offers a fine study of the threatened building type named in the title, but also provides a good demonstration of the importance of the context of any building type, and of the need to consider many kinds of evidence for the history of any structure.

In her introduction, Jennings gives the geographical, historical and social context for the 'clay dabbins', followed by an account of the recent social history of the Solway Plain. There follow chapters dealing with the development of the plan and structure of the clay houses; farmhouses from the late seventeenth century; cottages; farm buildings; construction and carpentry; stability; and seventeenth-century stone buildings. The final chapters discuss conservation and maintenance and the conclusions which have been reached in the course of the study. There is a glossary of specialist terms and a comprehensive index.

Since many of the buildings considered were found to be of cruck construction, that particular form of structure is fully examined and explained. Plans, elevations and photographs of many buildings, some of them by the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments but most by the author, are both aids to the reader, and invaluable records of the buildings. All this is supplemented with documentary evidence, including historic maps, the seventeenth-century records of the hearth tax, the 1910 Inland Revenue Land Valuation Survey, State Papers, wills and diaries, published studies of individual buildings, published histories and topographical works of many periods, and local oral tradition. Researchers in other parts of the country where clay is used as a building material have also been asked for comparisons and comments. No potential source of information has been neglected.

In these buildings across the Solway Plain, clay was used with straw or some other fibre as

a binder for sand and pebbles, the material being built up in decreasing width and finally smoothed off. A conservation specialist's advice is quoted on checking the consistency: the egg test (a small ball of the material tossed into the air); the sausage test (the roll being held by one hand and banged against the other); and the bacon test (a thin strip of material being swung back and forth); it should not break. The whole book is written in this straightforward way, and is as entertaining as it is informative. It is good to find an explanation of the way in which damp was controlled by evaporation through the fabric of the building, and by ventilation given by open fires, and to be warned of the dangers of meddling with such simple systems: readers are reminded that to use cement render instead of limewash is to seal the walls and prevent moisture escaping.

It would be good to have more tree-ring dates to compare with other dating evidence. A warning is given about date stones: they could

date not the construction, but the insertion of an attic floor; they could even have come from a different building. There are references to the border bastles and their fire-proof materials, and, amazingly, it seems that the clay buildings too, and their crucks, were virtually fire-proof. An extract is given from a 1541 survey of the Northumberland border which John Hodgson quoted in his *History of Northumberland*, and which was also printed by C. J. Bates in *AA*<sup>2</sup>, 14 (1891), 28–51: the timbers of the houses were 'so thicke mortressed that yt wylbe very harde. . . to breake or caste downe, walles as well as rooffes be so great & cov'ed . . . w[i]th turves & earthe that they wyl not easily burne or be sett on fyre'.

Nina Jennings has produced a book which will become a classic, and the Cumberland and Westmorland Society is to be congratulated for publishing it, and for doing so in such an attractive format.

Grace McCombie