



JOHN MORTON BESTALL

JOHN MORTON BESTALL 1921-1973

A MEMOIR

BY JOAN SINAR

John Morton Bestall was born on 2nd July 1921 in Chesterfield of a family native to the town, resident there for several generations. In 1932 he went to Chesterfield Grammar School, from which in 1938 he won a Derbyshire County Major Scholarship. In 1939 he left the Grammar School for University College, Oxford, with a College Exhibition to read Modern History. Like the other fit young men of his year he took the shortened two-year war-time degree course for Bachelor of Arts, taking Part I in 1940 and Part II in 1941.

John was then called up for the Royal Air Force, and served with Bomber Command at Abingdon as a radar mechanic. He was the most gentle and apparently least war-like of men, and it came as a shock to realise with what interest and pride in his old squadron he visited the Derbyshire Record Office to check on a recent accession, the photograph of a Wellington and crew from that squadron. In his last few months in the Royal Air Force he went to a course in German for something to do. His German was found to be rather better than the instructor's, so John got the class, a new job as Education Instructor, and his introduction to what became his life's work, educating adults.

On his return from the Air Force John returned to Oxford to read for an honours degree. In October 1946 he was admitted Master of Arts, and in December Bachelor of Arts for the second time, now with an honours degree in Modern History, a reversal of the usual sequence, which must have entertained him. In 1947 he took his Diploma of Education, and went back to Derbyshire to teach at Repton School.

On 27th July 1948 John Bestall married Barbara Wardell, a Chesterfield girl whom he had known and loved for years, and who like him had worked in radar. This marriage was most fortunate in freeing John to do the work he wanted with loving and generous support, informed by sympathetic understanding. Without his wife's partnership John could not have achieved what he did.

After their marriage John went off alone, because of housing difficulties, to teach in Shropshire at Wenlock Edge School. While there he turned to adult education, working for the University of Birmingham in 1948-1949 as a part-time tutor for courses in International Affairs. He moved for a term to Merchant Taylor's School, Crosby, but in 1949 came home again to Derbyshire as Resident Tutor in north-east Derbyshire in the University of Sheffield Department of Extra-Mural Studies. Here he started in Chesterfield what must be England's longest-lived extra-mural class in local studies, a class which experimented in several fields and moved under his guidance into long-term original work on probate inventories, work which they still maintain as a voluntary group after his death.

John's main work for the Department lay to begin with in International Affairs. His rise in the Department was swift. In 1954 he was appointed Staff Lecturer for University Extension work and began to play a part in the internal working of the Department. This was recognised the following year by his appointment as Deputy to the Director, Maurice Bruce, to help run an expanding Department. In 1963 he was appointed Deputy Director, taking full charge of the Department during Professor Bruce's longer foreign tours. By 1973, when he died, he was working, amongst other things, on the future role of adult education, and its organisation.

Although John Bestall's professional work was in the mainstream of University Extension work and the Extra-Mural administration, love of Derbyshire and interest in the past led him to explore the opening field of local studies, and the use of the past

for present purposes. As early as 1954 he became a member of the Council of the Historical Association, and published a paper on 'Local History in Adult Education', in *Adult Education*, Winter 1955. When I first met him in summer 1961 he was taking his Sheffield class on a tour of Border castles and abbeys, which Historical Association members were invited to join, and soon after I came to Derbyshire in 1962 he was talking about his use of 19th-century records in an Extension Course for the Sheffield Police. As his interests widened and he became more widely known, he was called to serve on the University's Board of Extra-Mural Studies, the Extra-Mural Academic Committee, and on the committee on lecturing techniques, and was University representative on Local Education Authority committees in Sheffield, West Riding, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire. In 1964 he was elected Chairman of the Adult Education Committee of the Historical Association. Even when his university work was increasing and his health failing he continued his work for the Historical Association, acting as Area Adviser over a wide area. Similarly, he continued to explore and publicise new ways of helping people to recognise and appreciate both the fascination of the past and its present relevance through its influence on the environment. He took his Sheffield class abroad to study the architectural expression of different ways of life. His articles 'What museums can offer?' appeared in *Adult Education*, January 1970, and 'Group project in Local History' in *The Bulletin of Local History*, 1973.

In Derbyshire John Bestall played a special role. He worked not only through the University and the Historical Association but also through the Derbyshire Archaeological Society, whose Council he joined in 1955. He was one of those instrumental in reshaping the Society and setting up sections for special interests. His personal interest lay in the Local History Section. Mrs. Nixon, first Secretary and Editor, recalls his help, and his warm encouragement of the new Section and the bulletin, *Derbyshire Miscellany*, which he urged her to begin.

In 1957 John became the Hon. Editor of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society, and four years later persuaded the Society to change the Journal's format. He introduced a larger page size to facilitate the publication of modern excavation reports, and changed the type to provide a page at once elegant and easily legible. Only rapidly rising costs forced the abandonment of this format in the 1972 Journal. For 12 years John edited the Journal singlehanded, seeking as time went on advice from Jeffrey Radley, who joined him as Assistant Editor in 1969. In 1970 John had his first heart attack, and while he was in hospital Jeffrey Radley was killed. John and his wife saw the 1969 Journal through the press, and then he resigned the editorship of the Journal.

John Bestall had long been grieved that work on Derbyshire's past was made very difficult by the lack of ready access to record source material. He personally conducted a one-man campaign in north-east Derbyshire to publicise the need for and the uses of a county record office. In 1961 he persuaded the Derbyshire Archaeological Society to press the County Council to set up such an office, a shrewdly timed move which coincided with two other pressures, one from within the Council itself, the other from the Historical Manuscripts Commission. His letter welcoming my appointment in 1962 was most heartening. Throughout my early years in Derbyshire he smoothed my way, introduced me to the Society, and possible friends, and encouraged me when I was singlehanded, and exploring Derbyshire. The Record Office owes much to his lively and continued interest, which continues to bear fruit after his death.

Having been given a Record Office for Derbyshire, John then strengthened his efforts to set up a Derbyshire Record Series for the publication of key record texts. He achieved this under the Society's aegis in 1966. He planned and found editors for a wide range of material, of which only seven volumes will appear. Four of the Series were, or will be, published in co-operation with the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts under the scheme for joint publication by the Commission and local record societies: two schedules of 16th- and 17th-century political and family papers, *A Calendar of the Shrewsbury Papers in the Lambeth Palace Library*, ed. E. G. W. Bill; and its companion

volume *A Calendar of the Talbot Papers in the College of Arms* by G. R. Batho; *The Cartulary of Dale Abbey*, a major monastic cartulary, and *The Kniveton Leiger*, a fine rare example of a lay cartulary, both edited by Professor Avrom Saltman. Of the other three volumes, Dr. I. S. W. Blanchard edited a volume of medieval estate records, *The Duchy of Lancaster Estates in Derbyshire*, Dr. M. R. Austin, *The Church in Derbyshire in 1823/4*, the record of an archidiaconal visitation; and Professor Saltman, *The Cartulary of the Wakebridge Chantry*. Professor Saltman knew John Bestall as General Editor of the Record Series better than anyone else, and has contributed a note to follow this memoir.

When John resigned the Editorship of the Journal he retained the General Editorship of the Record Series, which he had in hand at his death in 1973. Fortunately he never knew that the new Series would be so badly hit by inflation and rapidly rising costs that to economise the Society would be forced to suspend it. The volumes which he had sent to press are going through. After that, until happier times, the Society is reluctantly reverting to its earlier practice of publishing occasional record volumes. The Sections are, however, now sufficiently well established to contribute to the series of occasional volumes. Indeed the first of the new series, *Burdett's Map of Derbyshire*, was a project which John was considering shortly before his death.

John Bestall's death was premature. Yet his achievements are much greater than his 51 years should allow. Because of his generosity in stimulating and helping to perfect the work of others he had little time for his own research. His article 'The Medieval Scene and After' in the handbook *Peak District National Park*, H.M.S.O. 1960, though short, is the best extant history of the Peak District. He planned a history of Derbyshire of which the first few pages only are written. He was, however, a Chesterfield man, and Chesterfield Corporation commissioned him to write the town's history. Over the years he worked on this commission, and at his death he left almost ready for press the first and third volumes, *Medieval Chesterfield* and *Chesterfield 1835–1851*, together with major sections of the second volume covering the intermediate years. The first volume appeared in March 1974. The third will appear probably in 1976, and the second at a later date.

It was in and around Chesterfield that John's concern for our architectural heritage was most clearly seen in Derbyshire. He would visit and report to the appropriate bodies on historic buildings threatened by planning proposals. He twice objected to proposals concerning the redevelopment of Chesterfield town centre, and gave evidence at the ensuing enquiries. At his death he was in correspondence concerning plans for what became the rescue group Chesterfield Archaeological Research Committee. Because of this informed concern for historic buildings and the conservation of key areas he served on two separate Planning Conservation Advisory Committees, that for the City of Sheffield and that for the County of Derbyshire.

John Bestall was a gentle friendly man of high ideals, very few illusions, and a dry sense of humour. He had a singularly tough, lively, scholarly mind, and the determination and tact necessary to the steady pursuance of his ends: the opening up to ordinary men and scholars of the complexity of past and present; and the betterment of life. In Derbyshire, on which he lavished his love and scholarship, his work was seminal. He drove himself to death to advance the study of Derbyshire life, to identify and conserve a wide range of evidence, printed, manuscript, architectural and environmental, and to enhance the world about him.

In his young days John played both cricket and football at school and college. He played cricket for the Chesterfield Barbarians, and later for Sheffield University Staff. Though he retained an interest in football, it was to cricket he turned for the little relaxation he permitted himself. He was a keen supporter of the Derbyshire County Cricket Club, which made things easier for him by being foresighted enough to have one of their two grounds at Chesterfield.

John Bestall was lucky to marry a woman who knew him, loved him, and accepted his way of life, including his committed vegetarianism. Barbara Bestall built a happy

home and family life, and, as their daughter, Anne, grew up, she joined John increasingly in working for their joint ends. Few people knew how much she did. She shared many of her husband's interests, particularly in buildings, landscape and the relationship of past and present. For years she indexed his Journals, and in 1973 indexed *Medieval Chesterfield*, much of which had been discussed with her. In his last years she motored him to Chesterfield, Derby, Matlock, Kendal, around Yorkshire, wherever his interests took him. Knowing that he could not be happy with work undone, she did all she could to help him. When John Bestall died he was Vice-Chairman of the Council of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society. In recognition of his work and her unstinting support, after his death his wife was elected an Hon. Life Member.

John Bestall's friends and colleagues miss him very much. To his wife and daughter we could at first only offer sympathy and an expression of our grief. Now we offer this volume of essays in honour of his life and work. They range widely over Derbyshire life, but not so widely as John's own interests. Some were discussed with John himself before his death, and we are delighted that his wife joins in this, as in so many earlier of John's Journals, contributing the index.