

## JOHN MORTON BESTALL

### *A Note*

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It was a unique privilege to have known John Bestall and to have worked with him for 14 years. Who would have blamed him had he contented himself with his far-from-easy task as Deputy Director of Extra-Mural Studies at Sheffield University? And if he had desired no more than to devote some of his spare time to writing the history of Chesterfield, his home town, it would certainly have been considered a substantial offering on the altars of research and local piety. Yet we seem to have taken it for granted that he should also be active in the Historical Association and be the Editor of the Derbyshire Archaeological Journal and of the county Record Series. Only in England, with its strong tradition of voluntary service, are such things possible, but I fear the load was too heavy. 'My movements tend to be so irregular that in general about 10 p.m. is the best time to catch me.' This was written as late as 30th April 1972 and speaks for itself.

The volumes of the rejuvenated Derbyshire Archaeological Journal and of the Record Series add up to an impressive editorial achievement, especially under recent conditions. It is indisputable that for the last 60 years the work of a local history society editor has become progressively more exacting in all its aspects. It seems too often he needs all the powers of Hercules to qualify for the task of Sisyphus. The gestation of each volume seems nothing short of a miracle, but there is hardly any time to savour the fleeting triumph. If we additionally take into account the special situation in Derbyshire, which gave much of Bestall's work the character of *creatio ex nihilo*, his perennial optimism can be regarded as nothing short of awe-inspiring. I am sure he must have derived some well-deserved satisfaction from his achievement in putting Derbyshire on the map of English local history. It need hardly be added that his editorial practice was sound and constructive. In his unwearied pursuit of the 'material cause', he never lost sight of the final object—a well-written article or an accurate text, properly indexed.

Having only met Bestall briefly, on one or possibly two occasions, I have often wondered about the sources of his characteristic spiritual strength, especially in the last years, his cheerfulness, optimism and sweet nature. His letters to me, dealing exclusively with editorial matters, nonetheless frequently mention his family, his late parents, his wife and daughter. Fortunate in his home, he could face the world without diffidence and realise himself in his work.