

SEVENTY YEARS OF MIDDLESEX HISTORY

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March 1982 saw the culmination of more than seven decades of historical scholarship, marked by the publication of Volume VII of the *Victoria History of the County of Middlesex* (Oxford University Press, £60), edited by T. F. T. Baker. This is, therefore, an opportune time to look briefly at the present volume, along with its six predecessors, for this marks the completion of that part of the historic county which was not absorbed into the L.C.C. in 1889. The areas which were so transferred will be the subject of further volumes, the first of which is already well under way.

The V.C.H. in general is often criticised for perpetuating what is seen as an anachronistic format based on hundred and parish divisions, with an emphasis on manorial and ecclesiastical history. Such comments apply especially to urban and suburban areas which have grown up since 1800. They may have some validity, but it must not be forgotten that the parish was central to local government and life in general right down to the present century, when Middlesex was finally engulfed by the Great Wen. It is also questionable whether it is justifiable to change the format of a standardised, national historical survey, which commenced in 1899, has produced one hundred and eighty volumes, and is set to continue its task into the next century. It has, after all, proved possible to treat railways and factories along the Great West Road within the existing framework, and one only has to contrast the parish histories in Volume II of Middlesex, published in 1911, with those in Volume VII

to see that laid-down formats do not stultify the outlook of the contributing scholars.

The Middlesex V.C.H. has had a chequered history, and has only been in continuous production since it was revived in 1955, as the list on p. 400 shows.

The completion of this task is a testimony to the successive County Editors, to the University of London, which owns the V.C.H., and to the various local authorities who have continued to make financial contributions in an increasingly stringent climate.

The eccentric appearance of Volumes I–III over no less than fifty-eight years reflects two quite separate phases of the V.C.H.'s own history in Middlesex. Under the general guidelines for the History, the first volumes are for the treatment of general themes in the history of the county, while the rest is given over to a treatment of each parish in detail. Volume II represents the first, Edwardian phase of the History, and contains the end of the general treatment, and the first parochial histories. Work on Volume I seems to have commenced, but was stopped by the onset of the Great War. (As an aside, the 'rogue' volume entitled London, Volume I, which appeared in 1909 must be mentioned. This covers the City, Borough of Southwark and 'ancient parish' of Westminster, and its 588 pages deal with Roman and Saxon archaeology, ecclesiastical history and religious houses.)

Not until 1955 was the work resuscitated, when local authorities and the erst-

<i>Volume</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Pages</i>	<i>Principal contents</i>
II	1911	406	Political, economic, social, industrial, agrarian history, sport; Spelthorne Hundred (Ashford-Littleton)
III	1962	325	Spelthorne Hundred (Shepperton-Teddington), Isleworth, Elthorne (Cowley-Harlington)
I	1969	385	Physique, archaeology, Domesday, religion, education, hospitals
IV	1971	289	Elthorne (Harmondsworth-Ruislip), Gore (Edgware and Harrow)
V	1976	424	Gore (Hendon-Stanmore), Edmonton
VI	1980	228	Ossulstone (Friern Barnet, Finchley, Hornsey with Highgate)
VII	1982	280	Ossulstone (Acton, Chiswick, Ealing and Brentford, West Twyford, Willesden)

while Middlesex Local History Council agreed to set up a Council and appoint editorial staff. Over the last twenty-seven years, successive editors have produced one general and five topographical volumes.

The fact that the volumes are spread over such a long period shows at a glance that although the framework for the parish histories is essentially unchanged, the content and approach are vastly different. In 1911, each parish received an average of four–five pages, almost entirely concerned with the manor and the church, although the Editor allowed no less than seventy-three pages for Hampton Court. In Volume VII, Acton is given fifty and Willesden seventy-eight pages, to give two examples.

The more recent volumes still deal in depth with medieval and post-medieval history, including the descents of manors and the church. In doing so they provide local historians with the distilled essence of thousands of documents which can act as the basis for further research. Each parish now contains a section on its development since about 1850, full of useful pointers. It would be to misunderstand the purpose of the V.C.H. to expect it to provide an encyclopaedic history of every topic in every parish—that, after all, would be to render the local enthusiast largely redundant!

This conflict between the general and

the particular is a commonplace in the study of London history. For example, Michael Robbins' *Middlesex* in the New Survey of England series (1953) gives a thematic history in 212 pages, and a topographical gazeteer in another 152, may be contrasted with the late H. J. Dyos' study (1961) of Victorian Camberwell, which covers broadly one century in one parish and fills 177 pages.

Turning to Volume VII, it is impossible in such a short compass to review fully its 254 closely-packed pages, illustrated with thirty-five plates and some good, concise maps. One minor quibble from page 1 onwards concerns metrication, that scourge of historical writing and maps. While the maps have both imperial and metric scales, the text refers only to kilometres and metres, while parish areas are given only in acres. Likewise, many of the sources used quote only imperial measures. Could we have a consistent approach in Volume VIII and thereafter?

The article on Chiswick (pp. 50–100) forms a convenient example of the current V.C.H. treatment. It starts with a description of the location, area and general configuration of the parish, followed by communications within the area and to the outside world, from Roman roads to the M4. The problems of dealing with transport in London, which has been the subject of vast amounts of work on railways, buses, trams and so on, is illustrated

on p. 54, where almost all the sources cited are secondary, and the demise of West London's trolleybuses in May 1962 has been inferred from the bus map. The section on 'Growth' gives an overview of Chiswick from prehistory, with an emphasis on the post-medieval period, considering the Village and other districts in turn. Villa development from the 1860s, including Bedford Park, and even municipal enterprise in building all have their place.

Social and cultural activities cover pubs, clubs, sport, amenity societies (including the Brentford & Chiswick Local History Society), music hall and cinema, and suggests many lines for further work. On then to the more traditional, manorial history, whose detail on fees, successions and personalities contains further useful pointers.

The section on economic history reflects how much this has changed in content and approach since the early days of the Victoria History, including as it does items on Thorneycrofts and Reckitt & Coleman. The local government from parish to London Borough includes reference to the all-important infrastructure of urban life—gas, water, sewerage and open spaces, for example. The ancient

church of St. Nicholas is treated in depth, and there are abbreviated notes on other churches and places of worship, including a Buddhist centre at 5, Heathfield Gardens. Notes on schools and charities round off the article.

This forms the pattern for the other histories in this volume. The historical connection between Ealing and Old Brentford results in their being treated together, while the small extra-parochial sliver of West Twyford is easily accommodated in the standard format. It is interesting to note that it receives four-and-a-half pages, about the same as Ashford in Volume I. Willesden, with its sub-districts of Neasden, Cricklewood and Brondesbury represents a transition from the stereotypical semi-detached suburban image of Middlesex (Jackson 1973) to the Victorian terraces of inner London, and hence a bridge into later volumes. It is interesting to note a reference to Rachmanism (p. 186), and another to the magazine 'Private Eye' and its satires on Neasden in the 1970s (p. 195), proof, if any were needed, that the V.C.H. has kept up with the times where appropriate.

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