

REPORTS

Christine Draycott, Adam J N Goodwin, Mary Toms

LEICESTERSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY COUNCIL ORAL HISTORY COMPETITION

The written word has long been our window on the past as experienced by literate people. Only oral history, however, can hope to pass on the rich tapestry and feel of everyday life. Everyone has something worth recording to say about their life, not only because of its relevance to that person but also because it gives an insight into the general fabric of that person's life and family, their beliefs, their dwelling, their occupations and their surroundings.

In July 1993 the Leicestershire Local History Council launched an Oral History Competition. Mr and Mrs Michael Woodford of Youngs Cameras, Leicester, very generously offered to sponsor the competition as part of their company's bi-centenary celebrations.

Twelve entries were received. The wealth and variety of the material presented made up for the slightly disappointing number.

The class for a recording not exceeding fifteen minutes had two entries. The winner was Mrs Joan Stevenson of Newton Linford. Her recording of Mrs Florrie Anderson and Mrs Gwen Wakefield re-living their life in the village prior to and during the Second World War produced a wide range of material in a friendly 'fireside chat' approach. Second was Mr Harry Limbert of Quorn, who recalled 'A week in his life in Martin Street, Leicester', where he lived as a boy in 1927 — a delightful story of life in this city street narrated by his grandson Carl Limbert.

Eight entries were received for the class for recordings of up to thirty minutes. 'The life and times of Mr Eric Flowers, woodman on Barkby Hall Estate', recorded by Mrs Wendy Madelin of Gaddesby, took the first prize — a fascinating anecdotal picture of life in a rural village in the 1930s. In second place the 'Childhood memories of Humberstone Garden City', narrated by Mr Michael Neal of Braunstone, took the listener into the living room of his home. In joint third place were the 'women's land army memories' of Mrs Margaret Pearce of Queniborough, recorded by Mrs Angelia Pick of Barkby Thorpe, and a well-conducted interview by Miss Jennifer Shepherd of Barkby of Mr Jack Richardson speaking about his memories of Barkby during the early part of this century.

The remaining four entries were all highly commended. Mrs Jenny Wilson of Leicester tackled the difficult task of interviewing a frail ninety-year-old Mrs Scott, which produced many details of her childhood in Aylestone Park and her working life during the First World War. A second recording by Mrs Wilson, of Mrs Ivy Baker, born in 1912, recounted her early life in Gladstone Street, Leicester. Mrs Dorothy Wilkes of Syston recorded Mr George Richardson speaking of his boyhood in Rearsby and Queniborough in the early years of this century. Mrs Sue Bates of Barrow-on-Soar recorded many interesting stories of the village in the 1920s remembered by Mrs Rose Clarke.

Of the two entries received for the class for young persons under the age of eighteen years, the first prize was awarded to sixteen-year-old Mandy Kealy, who managed to capture the emotional feelings of Mrs Palmer's Second World War experiences in the Women's Land Army when working in the Vale of Belvoir. The runner-up was nine-year-old Ruth Clarke of Glenfield, who interviewed her great-grandmother aged ninety six and discovered what schooldays were like in the early 1900s in Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

The presentation of awards by Mr and Mrs Woodford took place at the Leicestershire County Record Office in November and was attended by some fifty people — members, competitors, judges and friends. All the tapes were available to hear and the undoubted enthusiasm of those present made a most warm and convivial evening. The tapes will together make a contribution to the oral archives of the County Record Office, where they have been deposited.

M T

LEICESTERSHIRE RECORD OFFICE REMOVAL TO WIGSTON MAGNA

Leicestershire County Council's new Record Office, which opened to the public on the 8th of February 1993 and which was officially opened by HRH the Duke of Gloucester on the 13th of May, represents a landmark in service to everyone interested in Leicestershire's history. The amalgamation of the Record Office and the Leicestershire Collection means that for the first time all the county's local studies resources are under one roof. The office's home since 1957 had been No 57 New Walk, Leicester. Following local government reorganization in 1974 and the merger with the city archives, the accommodation for collections, staff and visitors, despite

being extended, became increasingly cramped. By the end of the 1980s three 'outstores' were in operation so that only a quarter of the ever-growing holdings were actually housed at No 57. The Leicestershire Collection of books, maps, newspapers, periodicals, recordings and other local studies material had been housed and growing equally at the Reference Library in Bishop Street since 1905.

In July 1991 work began on the £1½ million project to convert the former All Saints School in Long Street, Wigston into accommodation for the public and staff and to build a new strongroom at the rear. The strongroom was designed in accordance with the relevant British Standard and the principle of thermal inertia; it relies on its massive construction to maintain correct levels of temperature and humidity. The new building was to be handed over in April or May 1992 but, owing to a series of frustrating delays with the construction work, the removal did not commence until November.

Planning and preparing for the move had taken the best part of two years. All four shelf miles of archives were either boxed or packaged. Crucial to the whole operation was the computerizing of the location index to the collections. The removal presented the opportunity to arrange the collections from all four sites in proper order. 10,000 entries were made on computer, allowing accessions to be sorted into the numerical order required for storage at Wigston and new shelf locations to be calculated. A total of 28,000 linear feet of shelving was installed in the new strongroom, to accommodate 20,000 feet of archives and 3,000 feet of books, leaving 5,000 feet for future expansion. Labels showing new shelf numbers were printed for every single item to be moved; these were then colour-coded to assist in the actual removal. Remarkably all 48,000 labels were stuck on by the staff in three weeks.

The first van arrived on Monday the 9th of November and the office was closed down for the next three months. A strict timetable had been prepared in conjunction with the removers, who loaded up collections at the old stores and delivered them to Wigston, where Record Office staff were responsible for the arduous task of shelving every item. Slowly but surely the new strongroom filled up with collections from 57 New Walk, Bishop Street, Newarke Houses Museum, New Walk Museum and last but not least the dreaded Humberstone Drive outstore. The whole process was of course an enormous logistic exercise; but the considerable preparation paid dividends.

The new office has already welcomed a record 15,000 searchers in its first year, an increase of 50% on the previous figure and a far cry from the 394

who first used the searchroom at 57 New Walk in 1957. Visitors now enjoy two much larger and more comfortable searchrooms, all resources accessible together, an education/lecture room, a rest area, disabled access and toilet and late evening opening on Wednesdays. Nostalgia for New Walk and any regret at leaving its central location are far outweighed by these vastly improved facilities and the people of Leicestershire now have a Record Office to serve them well into the next century.

A J N G

FRIENDS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LOCAL HISTORY AT LEICESTER UNIVERSITY

The Department of English Local History, founded in 1948 under the late Professor W G Hoskins, has become well known through its pioneering work on the cultural, topographical, economic and social history of many parts of England. It has recently moved to splendid new premises at Marc Fitch House, substantially renovated through the generosity of the Marc Fitch Fund. The two most important resources of the house are the Map Room, which includes an especially good coverage of Leicestershire Ordnance Survey maps, and the Marc Fitch Fund Library, which is especially strong on genealogy and family history.

The Friends of the Department are an informal body of local historians comprising current members of the Department, both staff and students, former members and any other person who has the interests of the subject at heart. Friends receive advance notice of the Department's seminars and access, by arrangement, to the facilities of Marc Fitch House, 'a place of friendly erudition'.

The principal event in the calendar of the Friends is the annual W G Hoskins Lecture, given by a scholar who had made a substantial contribution to local history. This is also a social occasion, with home-made tea in Marc Fitch House and a book sale. There is usually an annual outing too. The principal means of keeping in touch is through the annual Newsletter, which is circulated in the autumn. Further details of membership and of the Department are available from the Secretary of the Department, Mrs Pauline Whitmore, Marc Fitch House, 5 Salisbury Road, Leicester (telephone 522762).

C D