

## REVIEWS

*The Autobiography of Joseph Mayett of Quainton (1783-1839)*. Ed. Ann Kussmaul, pp. xxxii + 101. Bucks Record Society No. 23, 1986. ISBN 0 901198 19 6. £10.00 cloth, £4.50 paperback.

In their twenty-third publication the Bucks Record Society have broken new ground.

Although not 'popular' in a pejorative sense, this most touching autobiography of a farm labourer at the beginning of the nineteenth century must have a wider appeal than some of the Society's earlier volumes and this, coupled with its use as one episode in a worthy television series (*This Land of England*) has led to it appearing not only in the familiar yellow cloth

binding but also in paperback form.

Mayett was exceptional in being literate as a labourer at that time—his mother had taught him to read—and never ‘taught’ to write; yet despite the lack of punctuation or grammatical form, his shaky spelling and uncertain capitalization, his narrative is clear, so spontaneous that reading is easy and has been much helped by the editor who has sensibly divided the text into logical paragraphs.

The interest is threefold. The bread-line poverty of the casual farm labourer who, if he failed to be hired at the October hiring fairs might be ‘on the parish’ receiving perhaps four shillings a week at least one of which went on his cottage rent. The grim details of hiring, tough farmers (although there were exceptions), the wages and the work are both valuable and moving. However, half the text is taken up with Mayett’s twelve years service with the Royal Bucks Militia which he joined at Buckingham in March 1803 and served till the end of the war. It was a tough life but at least he was fed and clothed and his ability to read and write was an advantage.

The third strand—and to Mayett by far the most important—is the information he gives about the Baptist church and his own spiritual struggles. The new little chapel which still survives on Winchendon Hill (and has lately been acquired by the Friends of Friendless Churches) had been perennially short of money and their quarrels both theological and worldly make sad reading. Yet clearly it was his simple and genuine religious faith that sustained Mayett in his difficult yet somehow inspiring life.

The editor’s general introduction and footnotes are models of their kind.

E.V.

*Seventy Summers*. Tony Harman, pp. 256. BBC Publications, 1986. £12.95 cloth, £8.95 paperback.

‘This is the story of one farmer and one farm’, written to accompany a series of tele-

vision programmes which are awaited with keen interest. The author ‘had Grove Farm—that was all that mattered’ at the age of 19. A full autobiography would include much that is here mentioned only incidentally, such as Harman’s successful building enterprise and his distinguished public and political service, here recounted only when it directly concerned agriculture. His greatest achievement was to introduce the Charolais breed into England, and hence to the world.

During the century after the Norman Conquest the Saxon family of del Broc, whose seat was at Hundridge, were actively engaged in assarting in the upland hamlets of Great Chesham. They enclosed two virgates, about sixty acres, near Whelpley Hill (which did not rank as a separate hamlet). The bounds are still clear enough on the map and on the ground, but they soon extended their holding, and by the critical year 1290 it ranked as a manor distinct from Chesham Higham, though the Earls of Oxford still claimed overlordship. By 1362 Grove Manor was held by the great house of Cheyne, whose Lollard sympathies contributed to that radical dissent which has so long characterized the area. Their moat, on this dry plateau (520 ft.), is the best in our county, with inner and outer ramparts and an inner moat enclosing an almost unique example of medieval domestic flintwork. Harman acknowledges our President’s share in his decision to turn this haunted hall, long used as a barn, into what became his home, though this was not his original intention. ‘At the finish Florence and I fell in love with it.’ On learning that the arch over his front door came from Tisbury in Wiltshire, he sent down to Tisbury to get the right stone. The locals insisted that this was a Roman site, and Mr Harman found many Roman and Belgic sherds when clearing the moat.

Total recall is an uncommon gift, and a style to convey it even rarer. It was not until his first seventy years were almost complete that Mr Harman began his delightful series of articles in the *Guardian*. In this book he records just what it feels like to drive a cow home from Milk Hall along the lanes, to milk by hand in a cold leaky cowshed, and to overcome the difficulties of

harvesting flax or vegetable seeds. He recalls with candour and not without regret his enthusiastic bulldozing of hedges in the forties; but he has planted trees intermittently since he was ten, and he was not the first hedge-grubber, even on this demesne farm of small closes. The map of the environs of the Grove on p. 6, which superimposes the Tithe Award on the first six-inch cadastral survey, shows that during 1840–79 ten small fields lost their identity and five little woods or dells disappeared; but the following sixty years of low farming substantially froze the late medieval field pattern for Tony Harman to inherit and to change. He was born in 1912 at Little Grove Farm (within the two virgates) which his father, a Bond Street silversmith, had bought very cheaply. In that year the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments identified the Grove Farm complex as 'especially worthy of preservation', as *The Times* noticed; Lord Beauchamp's Ancient Monuments Bill had just been passed, and was invoked to protect it. The manor had been held by the Lowndes family since 1692, and its tenant was allegedly the worst farmer in Bucks. Sydney Harman bought Grove soon after the Armistice, when landlords were panicking; his son assumed control in 1931, after one year at Cambridge. During the twenties its bailiff, 'The Preacher', a thoroughgoing nonconformist, set to work to teach young Tony everything he could.

The only local book like this, and its acknowledged exemplar, is John Wilkins's *An English Gamekeeper*. 'I decided to carry on where he left off.' Mr Harman kept no diary, but where one can check his memories they appear generally accurate, perceptive and quite fair. His highly memorable gallery of characters includes old-fashioned farming Puddephatts, Batchelors and Browns who still did things properly, his formidable grandmother Alice Warrender and his great friend Aneurin Bevan, whom he introduced to Asheridge and who in return secured him Cowcroft, once a capital messuage of Chesham Bury.

Mr Harman's reconstruction of William Cobbett's rural ride of 1822 is clearly right as regards his own neighbourhood; however, it

seems clear that Cobbett entered Chesham but chose to miss the pocket borough of Amersham. If so, his route was probably up Fuller's Hill and through Pipers Wood to Mop End. The commons which he crossed were Sheephanger ('Shipangle' to us locals), Ley Hill and what was then Wycombe Heath.

Perhaps regrettably 'The Road to Wooden Babylon' is the title of a chapter rather than of the book. The eight cottages so called were replaced by a health farm, the predecessor of Champneys, and the site was renamed Orchard Leigh (*quaere*, because the neighbouring Lye Green was alternatively Leigh Green?). Now the orchards are gone.

The busiest of the Seventy Summers occurred about halfway through. Mr Harman's public life became increasingly varied, his farming less so. The Grove came to specialize in beef cattle, and its crops were limited to wheat, barley and rape, with yields beyond all expectation. 'We have given up our capability for doing a lot of different things'; but he foresees a future more diversified and less boring. The end of high farming a century ago led to the countryside becoming more beautiful, with more woods, more flowers and more wildlife. 'The same thing will happen again.'

A.H.J.B.

*A Guide to the Historic Buildings of Milton Keynes*. Paul Woodfield and Milton Keynes Development Council, pp. xvi + 192, 14 pp. colour plates. Milton Keynes Development Council, 1986. ISBN 0 903379 05 8.

To report on 663 buildings is an heroic undertaking, and the authors have discharged it with notable success. Their introduction strikes a most welcome note: '... historic buildings ... provide an intangible link with time past and with geographical identity. Research has shown that this link seems to be an important factor in the stability of ... human communities'. This needed saying.

The definition of 'Historic Buildings' here applied is happily wider than that allowed to DoE listers, and many good recent buildings

are included. The authors are sensitive to townscape, and sympathetic to the work of minor architects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The fact that a number of hands have been at work is not obtrusive, and the writing is in general lucid and lively; the writer whose work stands out in this respect is clearly a person of wide-ranging scholarship.

Where dissatisfaction is felt it is not as a rule the fault of the authors. It must have been financial constraint that led to the exclusion of measured drawings, apart from one long section and one isometric; but the absence of plans and sections makes it harder to understand some of the buildings. One would have very much liked to know more, for example, about the 'quasi-cruck' at Brookfield Cottages, Bradwell (what *is* a quasi-cruck?). But this is perhaps a specialist's complaint. Similarly the brevity of the essays is no doubt unavoidable, but it has allowed very little in the way of supporting evidence for most of the dates proposed. This is the more unfortunate in that a number of photographs of timber-framed buildings give some grounds for questioning the

suggested dates. However, the more important buildings are properly given much fuller treatment.

The 'hammer beams' in the Chantry House, Fenny Stratford, would have been better designated 'stub ties', since their structural function is quite different from that of true hammer beams.

The lack of captions to make clear the viewpoints of the pictures is a small obstacle to comprehension, as it sometimes makes it difficult to relate picture and text. The pictures themselves are mostly informative, however, though of varying quality. The proof-reading leaves something to be desired.

The function of a guide is to accompany a visitor, and this book will come into its own when used in that way. It is a considerable tribute to it, however, that it is to some extent a substitute for a visit, giving a clear and comprehensive conspectus of what there is to be seen in the new City.

J.C.T.