

REVIEWS

WANTON TROOPERS: BUCKINGHAMSHIRE IN THE CIVIL WARS 1640–1660

by Ian F W Beckett

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The English Civil Wars do not lack for narrative histories. There is, however, a desperate need for histories that bring a qualitative study of what took place that informs the reader as to why and how these terrible events happened in the first place. Professor Beckett is clearly a historian who provides understanding, which he manages in a very generous manner.

This book is a practical emanation of the splendid exhibition at the County Museum in 2004–5 of portraits from the Civil Wars in Buckinghamshire. Professor Beckett has drawn on research and advice from a number of sources, including in and around BAS, so the acknowledgment page is well worth a read, as are the references. The illustrations are a delight and include articles from the BAS archive.

This history embodies the deeds of the great men of those days and places them in the context of the time. The forces that drove the instincts of both establishment and rebellion are illustrated, along with the needless horrors of war and the sad and miserable outcomes that afflicted all the County. Beckett properly quotes Bulstrode Whitelocke who wrote in 1642 how ‘we have insensible slid into the beginnings of a civil war, by one unexpected accident after another, as waves of the sea...’. In other words, be careful what you wish for. Is this the role for the historian in the world which is to come?

The book is organised into four chapters, each detailing an aspect of events. The economic history of the period is very well stated, together with the issues that beset both landowners, freeholders and tenants in Buckinghamshire in those days. The county was a hotbed of resistance to deforestation, enclosures and marsh drainage. To this tumult was added religious division, a very personal and divisive form of politics and the need of The Crown

for ever-increasing revenues within a shrinking economy.

The first chapter is devoted to the events that led up to the catastrophe of war. Beckett spends useful time exploring the principal characters and the political forms they adopted. He devotes a lot of energy in a depiction of John Hampden, the quintessential hero of the County, in his opposition to arbitrary demands for money by the King. He also mentions the role of the Earl of Bedford as a moderate leader of the ‘godly’ party along with Goodwin and Temple, and the ‘court’ faction enjoying the patronage of George Villiers, among many others. This chapter concludes sadly, yet appropriately with the unedifying sack of Sir Patrick Minshull’s house at Bourton, Buckingham. By now it became obvious that conflict was inevitable.

The second chapter commences in a similar vein with each side cheerfully looting and destroying the great houses of the quality for little or no strategic reason other than squalid opportunism. Then we begin to see the death of the heroes. The royalist Earl of Carnarvon is killed at Newbury in September 1643, only two months after John Hampden died at Chalgrove Field. These are but two in a list of local gentry who allowed their political loyalties to manifest into arms and action. Gradually the old gentry lose their influence and status as lesser men filled the seats of the County committees to exercise their power, particularly in the ambitious Committee of Compounding, that used new laws to expropriate money from the other side: papists, royalists and other presumed ‘delinquents’. Wars require money, thus hard times were made harsher by these demands. The ordinary people went in two directions. The braver, more thoughtful sort opposed to tithes and enclosures wrote noble declarations such as ‘A Light Shining in Buckinghamshire’, whereas the majority ducked their heads down to survive the times. This latter is probably why no wills were recorded at the Buckingham Deanery between May 1642 and May 1645.

Buckinghamshire was fortunate not to be the

site of major battles, but there were skirmishes enough and a few sieges of fortified houses. Armies regularly marched through the countryside, particularly along Watling Street. The County acquired a seeming strategic purpose in the war; to shelter, protect and help feed the Parliamentary capital in London. This was not helped by the proximity of the Royalist capital of Oxford in the next county. The garrisons at Newport Pagnell and Aylesbury covered important supply lines to and from London whilst prosecuting military action. As the war developed Parliamentary forces besieged Brill and Boarstall, to little effect other than exciting tales of heroism and daring-do, whilst Boarstall village was depopulated and ruined.

Taxation to pay for the war became more disruptive to society than the military. Beckett points out the irony that those who had at the outset so readily opposed the financial demands of the Crown were now forced to create new taxes that far exceeded those supposed unconstitutional demands made by the Crown in the first place. The need to fund the war with money, horses, fodder and food is provided in detail. Raiding was a common and oppressive event often leading to the untimely death of the innocent. Both parties levied rates on country people to fund the erection of fortifications and impressed forced labour at will. If a parish declined to pay, then it would be ravaged. Cattle and horses were seized as a matter of course. Then soldiers would mutiny as they had not been paid, often looting neighbouring villages to assuage their misery. Consequently, as the first Civil War came to a close both Aylesbury and Newport Pagnell were put under martial law in January 1646 with the garrisons disbanded on 11th June, 1646 and 6th August 1646 respectively.

The wanton troopers of the title, condemned for their brutality by Andrew Marvell for shooting a faun, were most likely ill-paid, hungry men with tattered uniforms and broken boots, whose violence stemmed from the abuse of their officers who had long forgotten why they had ventured to war in the first place.

The Second and Third Civil Wars did not touch Buckinghamshire, but there is no doubt the bad times continued. Beckett avoids saying much about the differences between the Presbyterians and the Independents, although he mentions the sermons preached by officers of the Independent persuasion at Newport Pagnell following the

victory of Naseby. He also is very brief on the political differences between Parliament and the New Model Army, as none of this took place in Buckinghamshire. The County did have its radical puritans in Iver and Colnbrook and more generally in central Buckinghamshire, where deforestation and enclosure were the most common, but these events were among the common people and are only known to historians where they have been reported by others.

This is a very useful book for students of both the County and the Civil Wars. It will become a necessary item in any library devoted to those subjects. The price is quite reasonable for a work of this nature and content. Go and buy it.

Nigel Robert Wilson

THE FIELDS OF BRITANNIA

by Stephen Rippon, Chris Smart and Ben Pears
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The long-accepted narrative of the changing landscape of England in the fifth and sixth centuries was one that emphasized discontinuity rather than continuity. Histories of the period always stated unequivocally that, following the advent of the Anglo Saxons in the fifth and sixth centuries, the agricultural economy of the Roman province of Britannia ceased to function, for the native Celtic population had been eliminated by massacre, expulsion, or enslavement, and the fields and pastures they had worked fell into disuse and reverted to forest and scrub. The invaders came into a largely land of forest, heath and moor which, over the centuries following, was transformed by clearance and enclosure into the landscape of fields, meadows and pastures that has survived down to recent centuries. In this long-accepted account, almost nothing of the rural landscape of England and Wales is the product of the Romano-British population of the province of Britannia and is entirely the work of later mediaeval peasants.

However, in recent decades an alternative account has been proposed that emphasises continuity rather than discontinuity. Many archaeologists and historians have questioned the traditional catastrophist narrative of ethnic cleansing of the Celtic population and subsequent inheritance by

the Anglo Saxons, of an empty and wasted landscape, a virtual *tabula rasa* on which to draw a landscape whose lineaments are unrelated to what had been created before. There is now mounting evidence that the population of the Roman province may have reached substantially higher levels than it was attainable until well after the Norman Conquest: over those four centuries there had developed an intensive market-oriented agrarian economy that profoundly impacted on the landscape. The fifth century indisputably was a period of chaos and upheaval during which the population declined drastically and the commercial economy ceased to function, but the advent of alien Saxon tribes from across the North Sea was marked more by infiltration into a continuing system of settlement and land management rather than a process of warfare and ethnic cleansing marked destruction, expulsion and massacre. Possibly in this period of transition, farmlands and territorial units such as villa estates were taken over by the Saxons: arable cultivation and grazing, albeit at a reduced level of intensity continued, and much of the original landscape survived into Saxon times to influence the layout of the landscape into medieval times.

Now, in *The Fields of Britannia*, Stephen Poole, Chris Smart, and Ben Pears make an important contribution to this debate. They draw conclusions from the quantitative analysis of data gathered during from locations around England and Wales in a research programme at Exeter University funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Their intention was to reconstruct the landscape history of the province of Britannia from Roman times through to the eighth century. Massed data from around the country provided an understanding of the changing rural economy and land management from nine regions, each of which may be assumed to have a distinctive geology, topography, climate, soil type, and cultural and economic history. In turn these regions are subdivided into smaller local units termed *pays*. They used three categories of data: the results of pollen analysis, the makeup of bone assemblages and charred cereal remains, and the orientation of ditches and field boundaries from excavations.

In the first place, pollen analysis from core samples taken vertically through sediments in marsh and other areas of impeded drainage can reveal the relative importance of cereals, grasses, and woodland species at different times through

from the Roman to medieval periods. This information is complemented by data on the relative proportions of sheep, swine, and cattle from assemblages of livestock bones found at excavation sites. Together, these amassed sets of data have enabled the authors to indicate a probable sequence of changes in land utilisation and vegetation over the study period. There are considerable differences in the pattern of vegetation and land management from region to region over eight centuries, but what stands out is that in Roman times there is no evidence to support the long-held view of a province largely covered by vast swathes of forest and wood, with only limited areas cleared for grazing and arable farming. Nor does it seem that woodland species increased to any great extent during the fifth and sixth centuries, indicating there was no extensive reversion of cleared land to wood and waste. In other words, though there is some evidence for a decline in farming activity at the end of the Roman period, more especially of arable cultivation as indicated by the presence of cereal pollen in the palaeoenvironmental data, it seems that a grazing and livestock economy continued right through from Roman into medieval times, even if at a low subsistence level. This continuity and slow transformation of land utilisation might then indicate substantial survival of Romano-British landscape features over the fifth and sixth centuries into Anglo Saxon and later medieval times.

To investigate whether Romano-British field patterns endured into the medieval period, the authors of *The Fields of Britannia* amassed data on linear features from excavation sites around the country. Ditches, property boundaries, and building foundations may be dated, more especially from ceramic data, or the chance survival of coins and other artefacts. Does the orientation of these linear features show a significant coincidence when the alignments of Romano-British and of Saxon and medieval boundaries are compared? If a Saxon field boundary is parallel with the foundations of a Roman building say, or with the rectilinear pattern of Celtic fields, then there is surely a high probability of some continuity in the field system over the study period. The results are variable. Quantitative analysis of field boundaries shows that over much of lowland Britain, coincidence of alignments between Romano-British and later historic landscape features can be as

high as 70% and is over much of the land more than 50%. Interestingly, in the former “champion” lands of the central belt of England, boundaries of furlongs and alignments of strips in the open fields are frequently in alignment with earthworks dating from the fourth century and earlier. Perhaps very significantly, the authors refer to some areas of co-axial field systems where present day field boundaries are parallel with ancient alignments. In general, the evidence is suggestive of a substantial survival in some form of Romano-British fields through the early medieval period.

It is a disappointment that Buckinghamshire provides data for a limited number of sites only. The county (including Milton Keynes) lies partly within the *pays* recognized by the authors as the Chilterns, the Great Ouse Clay Vale, and the Upper Thames Valley. There are no sites within the Chilterns that provide data. Little reference is made to the impressive co-axial landscape identified by Williamson in the adjoining Hertfordshire Chilterns around Hemel Hempstead and Berkhamsted. There are palaeoenvironmental data from Biddlesden (wrongly located in Northants), and reference to locations such as Linford and Long Crendon. Unfortunately, *Fields of Britannia* was published before the excavations in progress in the Aston Clinton area had become available, so little reference is made to this important site. There, the Roman Akeman Street strikes unconformably across a well-defined co-axial landscape; Roman buildings have recently been found whose orientation parallels almost exactly the alignments of ancient drove roads, the Icknield Way, and the medieval open field system. This is a location that provides strong support for the thesis of the authors of *The Fields of Britannia*. Perhaps the most impressive piece of evidence of continuity in

field systems between Roman and medieval times comes from Weedon, just north of Aylesbury. There, the excavated remains of a Roman building and its associated ditches and field boundaries show orientations that coincide almost perfectly with the orientation of the later ridge and furrow marking the medieval open-field strips. However, anyone familiar with Weedon will know that the village is aligned along a ridge that slopes fairly steeply to the south and north. The Roman boundaries point are oriented downslope, and so too are the corrugations of the ridge and furrow. The probability surely is that both Celtic and medieval farmers independently aligned their buildings and field boundaries parallel with and at right angles to the contours. Weedon does not seem the most satisfactory site to use for a demonstration of continuity in field systems.

The authors have assembled a mass of evidence that supports the narrative of continuity of land utilisation, occupancy, and field systems through the troubled and dark period of transition from Roman to Anglo Saxon rule. The palaeoenvironmental data are perhaps most convincing, the excavation data perhaps less so. These do suggest that in some way the lineaments of the Romano British rural landscape have influenced the layout of later field systems, though whether full continuity is demonstrated seems less certain. That said, *The Fields of Britannia* does without doubt suggest the transition from Roman rule to Anglo Saxon occupation was not as catastrophic and violent as suggested in older histories and does make an important contribution to our understanding of the development of the rural landscape of southern Britain.

Michael Ghirell