

England's Past for Everyone Series

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Nick Holder

In February 2005 the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded over £3 million to the Victoria County History (VCH) – the high priest of England’s local history – to establish an ambitious new local history project, England’s Past for Everyone (EPE). The project had some impressive targets: it had to commission, research and produce 15 new local histories, and the new histories were to come in several different formats. The books would take the authoritative research tradition of the venerable large red VCH volumes but package it in a more accessible and contemporary format – paperback, well illustrated and with more focussed subject areas. There would also be resources for local schools in the ten areas covered, as well as online publication of what might be termed a research archive for future investigators. And (as if the aims were not high enough already) the books were all to be written by a combination of professional or academic researchers leading teams of local volunteer researchers. And did I mention that all this was to be done in five years?

As I write this at the beginning of 2010, 13 of the 15 books have been published (with two more appearing in the next couple of months) and it is clear that the VCH and EPE have performed an extraordinary feat of historical research and publication. The books are lovingly produced, well written and beautifully illustrated, with every volume retailing for an extremely good value £14.99.

Let us look now in more detail at these new EPE books. Three volumes are detailed histories of largely rural parishes – a genre that is in some ways the bread and butter of English local history and an important component of the red VCH volumes – *Cornwall and the Coast: Mousehole and Newlyn* by Joanna Mattingly, *Codford: Wool and War in Wiltshire* by John Chandler, and *Exmoor: the Making of an English Upland* by Mary Siraut. *Cornwall and the Coast* tells the story of the parish of Paul, almost at the very western tip of Britain, just beyond Penzance. Its two main settlements, Mousehole and Newlyn, were remote fishing villages: isolated communities in terms of the Cornish landscape and road network but linked to the outside world by that great Cornish highway, the sea. A good part of their economy was based on some regular annual visitors to their shores – the shoals of pilchard who generally came in late summer or autumn. Joanna Mattingly tells us fascinating detail on the working lives of the fishermen out at sea with their seine nets and the fishwomen and girls who helped bring the catch in and who carried out most of the processing tasks. In covered courtyards or in cellars below houses, the women stacked alternating layers of fish and salt to form chest-high walls of fish, which were packed into barrels a month later. This story is based on careful analysis of a range of sources – a hallmark of this EPE series – including research in the archives of the Cornwall Record Office and elsewhere, and on architectural surveys of the towns’ traditional buildings. The book also has important contributions by Matthew Spriggs and Oliver Padel who present new research concerning the Cornish language, which managed to hang on in this enclosed community as late as the 18th century.

The *Cornwall* volume has some aspects in common with the *Exmoor* book: for most of the past the

inhabitants of both areas struggled with a tough and isolated landscape but in the 20th and 21st centuries railways and cars have somehow softened that landscape, opening it up to visitors from all over England. Whereas fishing and sheep farming were, respectively, the principal employment sectors, both regions now rely on tourism. Mary Siraut's book examines the long history of Exmoor (which straddles the counties of Devon and Somerset), explaining its unusual status when it was subject to medieval forest law (the Assize of the Forest), with all the resulting tensions between the protection of the royal hunting areas and the common rights of tenants such as grazing, land clearance and fuel collection. Siraut is particularly good at the details of medieval and early modern rural life, showing how tenants were not just sheep farmers but instead worked with the land practising a mixed pastoral and arable economy, keeping cattle and ponies in addition to sheep, and growing corn, rye and oats where the land was good enough (in rotation with grass even on the better land).

Sheep also feature prominently in the *Codford* book but in this part of Wiltshire the indigenous breed was the Wiltshire Horn or 'Horned Crock', a large sheep with attractive spiral horns but a poor fleece and low meat quality. Why then were so many kept in this part of the Wylve valley? Put simply, they functioned as efficient muck spreaders, their dung fertilising the arable fields before sowing and thus transferring the nutrients from the grass of the higher downlands to the lower valleys. The medieval open field system largely survived in the two Codford parishes until the 19th century and the strips of the huge open fields can therefore be traced on an 18th-century estate map and the enclosure maps of the 19th century, a final glimpse of that long-lived arable system before its demise. This reader is forced to admit that, on occasion, dark thoughts anathematical to the pure local historian entered my mind: did enough actually *happen* in Codford to warrant nearly 200 pages of history?! Fortunately, John Chandler's approach remedies this by using the local history as a springboard to wider themes, in the form of numerous 'panels' (elsewhere often called 'text boxes') that examine Domesday Book (his observation that it is essentially a spreadsheet is particularly incisive), 'floated' water meadows (a 17th-century innovation that enhanced the quality of water meadow pasture by controlled winter flooding) and the military landscape of the Second World War.

There are three stories of that other mainstay of English local history, the market town – *Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* by Antonia Catchpole, David Clark and Robert Peberdy, *Henley-on-Thames: Town, Trade and River* by Simon Townley, and a two-volume study of Ledbury by Sylvia Pinches, *Ledbury: a Market Town and its Tudor Heritage* and *Ledbury: People and Parish before the Reformation*. The *Burford* book is perhaps the most impressive of the three. It features a superb analysis of the early history of the town using documentary sources, historic maps and observation 'in the field' to put forward a model of the town's expansion. The authors (primarily Catchpole for this chapter) map the possible Saxon *burh* by the church and river crossing, and go on to chart in greater detail the layout of the planned medieval town of c 1100 – probably founded by the Norman lord, Robert fitzHamon – with its wide market street and its regular burgage plots each with a street frontage of 1½ perches (7.5m). Once again in this series, the history of the locality is closely connected to sheep: the town's burgesses created wealth first by selling and exporting wool via Southampton and later by processing this wool themselves into semi-finished broadcloths. One of the great strengths of this book (and, indeed, of the whole series) is the way that new architectural analysis of the surviving buildings is woven into the narrative. The authors (primarily David Clark and his team of volunteers for this aspect of the book) show that the town had two great periods of building prosperity: the second half of the 15th century and the first half of the 17th century. They demonstrate that two traditions of vernacular architecture co-existed quite happily: timber framing using local oak from Wychwood Forest and masonry building in good quality limestone from the nearby quarry of Taynton. Unusually in this EPE series, the book also functions as a guidebook to the town since it has a detailed gazetteer of buildings, enabling one to walk down the historic streets and understand the various houses and shops. One striking revelation of the book is the way that the appearance of this classic Cotswold market town is to a large extent a creation not of the 15th or 17th century but of the early 20th century. The authors show how the Arts and Crafts movement inspired owners and local government officers to recreate the pre-industrial past, putting back 'correct' features such as mullioned windows and hood mouldings over doorways, as well as 'improving' the timber-framed houses by blacking the timbers and whitening the wattle-and-daub panels. It would be an exaggeration to call the result a pastiche but it is an interesting lesson in

how heritage is created and packaged.

The reader will not, by now, be surprised to learn in Sylvia Pinches' books on *Ledbury* that the wealth of this Herefordshire market town also derived in good part from the local sheep. Ledbury, like Burford, prospered in the medieval and early modern period in large part thanks to the efforts of its merchant class who purchased wool and converted it into woollen cloth. One of the strengths of these books, however, is that the author makes extensive use of documentary sources to move beyond this accepted fact. In the first *Ledbury* volume Pinches uses a 13th-century document known as the Red Book, which gives details of the Bishop's rented properties in the town, and which is laid out (rather handily for the modern historian) street by street. In the second *Ledbury* volume Pinches uses a series of 'Easter books' kept by the parish for about ten years either side of 1600, which list all the householders of the parish as well as others who made donations to the vicar at Easter. Once again, the donors are recorded by street, and this time in a sequence that is repeated each year: it is therefore possible to correlate names of the townsfolk with their status, craft and approximate address for a period of ten years. Using this data, Pinches shows that existing burgage plots were subdivided at this time in order to house an expanding population. She also proves that while the cloth trade may have been the most important in terms of wealth creation, the leather trades were more significant in terms of employment. The research that contributed to these books includes a fascinating community archaeology project that saw dozens of local volunteers digging archaeological trial pits in their gardens, recording both the layers of earth and the artefacts they excavated. Both *Ledbury* books feature an important strand of building analysis although this is more effectively presented in the first volume dealing with the medieval town than in the second book on the early modern town. The lesson of the *Burford* book shows us that it is important to *test* assumptions about the dating of vernacular buildings: I suspect that the town's early modern timber-framed buildings might have a wider date-range than the late 16th- and early 17th-century date assumed by the author (dendrochronological dating is referred to in passing in the second book but there does not seem to have been a detailed study). Furthermore, the author does not adequately address the fact that the black and white appearance of the town today is clearly the result of Victorian and Arts and Crafts 'improvements' of the timber-framed buildings: some early photographs and paintings in the books show unimproved timber buildings covered with render or whitewash and it seems likely that the original appearance of the town was rather more shades of cream and grey than the black-and-white picture postcard appearance of today.

Simon Townley's book on *Henley-on-Thames* manages to combine some of the best features of the two town books just discussed, incorporating both good architectural analysis and a detailed investigation of documentary sources. The town had the good fortune to have transport links to the largest consumer market in medieval and early modern England, London. Indeed, this transport link is celebrated in the very name of the town. Thanks to its situation on the river Thames at the highest point at which the river was consistently and easily navigable (at least until improvements upstream in the 17th century), Henley became an important trans-shipment market, with its merchants receiving goods such as grain and firewood by land transport and loading them onto the flat-bottomed medieval sailing 'shouts' and their larger 17th-century successor, known as western barges. For a while the river declined in importance for the town as turnpike roads were built but it has once again come to the fore thanks to the creation of the famous regatta in 1829, the setting for the first Oxford and Cambridge boat race. The story told in this book is enhanced by the original research work of contributors such as Robert Peberdy, who has studied the economy of the medieval town, and the architectural historians Ruth Gibson and Geoffrey Tyack who examine three groups of the town's buildings (medieval, early modern and Georgian).

Architecture, landscape and people are studied in interesting ways in the three volumes dealing with historic houses, their families and estates. Jayne Kirk's book is on a Sussex house – *Parham: an Elizabethan House and its Restoration* – and two books (jointly authored by Philip Riden and Dudley Fowkes) examine neighbouring Derbyshire country houses, *Hardwick: a Great House and its Estate* and *Bolsover: Castle, Town and Colliery*. Hardwick Hall is, famously, the house built by Bess of Hardwick who prominently recorded her architectural creation by having giant initials 'E S' set into the parapet (for Elizabeth, dowager countess of Shrewsbury). Riden and Fowkes' book is in fact something of a 'masculinist' rewriting of the

history of the house, playing down the role of the legendary Bess (and reminding us that Mary Queen of Scots never slept there) and instead emphasising the part played by her second son William Cavendish, who later bought the title of earl of Devonshire. The authors also note the role of Bess' second husband William Cavendish senior (father of the later earl) who worked his way up the civil service, helping Thomas Cromwell with the Dissolution of the monasteries and later working directly for Henry VIII as treasurer of the Chamber, a senior financial role. The *Hardwick* book does not set out to be a revolutionary new architectural study of the house itself (Mark Girouard's work is probably definitive) but it is a very good summary of the construction, decoration and evolution of the house. Of course, it would be more accurate to talk of plural *houses* since Bess and her son first dramatically enlarged the existing hall in the 1580s before engaging Robert Smythson to build the new Hardwick Hall a hundred yards away in the 1590s. Rather than seeing the new hall as a replacement for the old one, the authors suggest that it is better to think of them as detached wings of slightly different date, with the two *together* providing the scale and grandeur that the socially rising family required. Significantly, this book contains new documentary analysis of the house and estate in the 17th century, using materials such as receivers' accounts preserved in the Duke of Devonshire's archive, before going on to examine the estate – including the coal industry – in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Riden and Fowkes' other book, *Bolsover*, seems to tread a similar path to *Hardwick*: it tells the story of a great house built by the architect Robert Smythson for the son of Bess of Hardwick. However, Bolsover Castle is a slightly later Jacobean mansion and it was built not for Bess' ennobled son William but her youngest son Sir Charles Cavendish. The work was carried out between the 1610s and the 1630s and passed through two generations, with the architect John Smithson taking over from his father Robert and a young William Cavendish inheriting the property from his father Charles. The authors see the new castle as a Jacobean vision of medieval life: vaulted ceilings and pillars, giant hooded fireplaces, battlements and chivalric art. This new 'medieval' vision also allowed space for Classical decoration including a stunning painted ceiling showing Christ's ascent into heaven. With a large service wing detached from the castle 'keep', including a spectacular 'riding house' with a viewing gallery to watch equestrian displays, the house was a 'palace for pleasure' designed as an entertainment retreat for the family and its guests (the main family residence was six miles away at Welbeck). This book differs from *Hardwick* in that it has a lot more detailed discussion of 'before' and 'after' the country house. The investigation of the medieval castle is particularly impressive given that virtually no trace of it survived the creation of the 17th-century house and the authors utilise an extensive range of sources to get closer to the vanished 11th-century fortification, and to trace the history of the small and relatively unsuccessful medieval planned town and its hinterland. The final part of the book examines the short but important chapter in the area's history – the arrival of deep coal mining in the 1870s, the industry's links with the railways and the role of the (relatively) enlightened capitalism of Emerson Bainbridge, founder of the Bolsover Colliery Company and a lessee of the Cavendish's aristocratic successors.

The third country house book examines Parham in Sussex. Jayne Kirk skilfully uses the evidence of the building itself as well as the estate's own archive, deposited in West Sussex Record Office and catalogued by volunteers in this EPE project. She describes the evolution of the Elizabethan house from its construction, beginning in 1578, for the local gentry family the Palmers. There is a good discussion of the materials used in the house: predominantly local sandstone called Amberley blue and home-grown timber from the Palmers' own estate. The design of the house (by an unknown architect-builder) was a broadly symmetrical two-winged 'H' form and Kirk makes the useful point that the architecture of the period was moving beyond the traditional medieval and Tudor fashions that had divided a house into a 'high' end for the owners and a 'low' end for the servants. The book goes on to chart internal improvements in the early 17th century by the Bishops and some more dramatic changes by the same family in the 18th century. By the 19th century the fashion was beginning to turn towards restoration rather than improvement and so the architect Anthony Salvin began to dismantle some of the house's later accretions, removing sash windows and replacing them with stone mullions. The chapter dealing with the 20th-century owners the Pearsons is an important one because it details the extensive restoration of the house by the architect Victor Heal. In a remarkably long-running association lasting from the 1920s to the 1970s, Heal and the Pearsons attempted to turn the clock back to the late 16th century. However, in the opinion of this reviewer the focus on Victor Heal has created a

structural problem in the book. It is quite understandable that in trying to understand the Elizabethan house Jayne Kirk has had to go through Heal as a 'mediator', given his meticulous recording of the restoration campaign. However, for the reader it can be somewhat confusing to read the account of the layout and decoration of the Elizabethan house and be repeatedly told 'this is what Heal believed the house was like; he is partly correct and partly incorrect'. The problem is exacerbated by the use of Heal's reconstructed plans to illustrate the Elizabethan house: firstly the plans do not seem to reproduce that well and secondly the captions often have caveats along the lines of 'by the way, we now know that this tower had not actually been built at this time!' It seems a shame that the author did not have more confidence in her own analysis of the house and feel able to put Heal's views to one side. Some newly drawn floor plans of the house (in addition to the plan of the lower floor) would also have helped the reader.

The later emphasis on the coal industry in the books on *Hardwick* and *Bolsover* leads us onto three books with a definite industrial focus – *The Medway Valley: a Kent Landscape Transformed*, by Andrew Hann, and a two-parter on Sunderland, *Sunderland and its Origins: Monks to Mariners* by Maureen Meikle and Christine Newman, and *Sunderland: Building a City* by Gillian Cookson.. The volume on *The Medway Valley* has, for this series, quite a tight chronological focus – essentially the 19th century. At the beginning of the century the agrarian economy of the valley was predominantly based on wheat and barley lower down the valley with sheep and woodland higher up the slopes. The century saw the rapid industrialisation of the area, thanks to its close water transport links to the capital (down the river Medway, turn left for London), especially the manufacture of bricks and cement to feed the insatiable London house-building industry. At the same time, agriculture became more horticultural, with a particular emphasis on hops. Andrew Hann notes that Kent's reputation as the 'garden of England' is to a large extent based on what visitors saw (or chose to remember) from the roads and railways, and perhaps what migrant workers came here to do (it is certainly a more poetic evocation of the county than the 'cement works of the Southeast'!). Hann's work is particularly good on the social effects of industrialisation – the economic fragility of life for many local people as they worked seasonally in agriculture in winter, bricks in spring and summer, horticulture in late summer and autumn.

The two volumes on *Sunderland* at first sight form a natural counterpart to *Medway*: the reader naturally expects a classic story of the northern industrial revolution. In fact, the remarkable first *Sunderland* book covers early English monasticism, an ordinary medieval rural economy, the 'accidental' birth of the coal industry in the 16th century and the Civil War, before getting onto the fully industrial chapter in Sunderland's history that is the subject of the second volume. The opening chapters of the first book are a fascinating account of the 7th-century monastery at Wearmouth, its well-travelled aristocratic founder Benedict Biscop, the prior and abbot Ceolfrith and of course its most famous scholar Bede. The book has important contributions by the early medieval historian Alan Thacker and the archaeologist Rosemary Cramp (who excavated the Wearmouth site) and presents the most up-to-date interpretation of the evolution of the monastery. As one has come to expect from this series, the authors ably combine evidence culled from documents, standing buildings (quite remarkably, part of the monastic church is preserved in the west end of St Peter's Monkwearmouth) and archaeological excavation. The monastery – probably abandoned as a result of Viking Raids and refounded on a smaller scale in the 11th century – ended up as a minor cell of the cathedral-priory of Durham, with the bishop as the feudal overlord of the whole region. In the 1580s, the Bowes family who were both merchants and local officials (under the bishop of Durham who remained the manorial lord after the Reformation) established a salt-making industry. It was this industry – relatively short-lived as it turned out – that provided the impetus for the development of coalmining further up the river Wear in order to provide fuel for salt evaporation. Gillian Cookson takes up the tale in the second *Sunderland* volume, charting the rise of the town's shipbuilding and coal industries to their peak in the 20th century. The focus of the book moves beyond the industries themselves and examines the efforts of the town to develop its infrastructure including the dramatic new iron bridge over the Wear built in 1796 and a more or less continuous programme of harbour improvement works lasting nearly two centuries. Cookson takes us up to the end of the 20th century, charting serious losses such as the closure of the last shipyard in 1988 as well as gains including the opening of the Nissan car plant in 1986 and the granting of City status in 1992.

The last two books reviewed here are two of the most unusual in the series but also two of the best. Nicholas Orme's *Cornwall and the Cross: Christianity 500–1560* is the only county-wide local history in the EPE series. It is also more of a conventional history, written by a leading medieval scholar using his own extensive research over many years. It is also more closely linked than the other EPE books to one of the Victoria County History volumes, *Cornwall, Volume 2, Religious History to 1559*, which is due to appear later in 2010. *Cornwall and the Cross* is superb work, describing and analysing a millennium of Cornish Catholicism, from its beginnings – only really glimpsed at through the later stories of the early Cornish saints – through to its near extinction during the Reformation. In the first chapter Orme places a steady hand on the tiller and guides the reader carefully through the muddied waters of 'Celtic Christianity'. In fact, as he shows, there probably was no such thing and the term 'Celtic' is not really that useful, except as a linguistic term to describe a group of languages (with Cornish being a Brittonic Celtic language). One of the problems for historians is that the most useful written accounts – the early saints' 'Lives' – are just not that early. Orme argues that the most important document is that of the 6th-century St Samson but even this 'Life' was written nearly two centuries after his death. Later chapters of Orme's book contain very clear and stimulating accounts of medieval religious life in the county. There is interesting analysis, for example, of the unusual types of monastic house established in the county: there were no proper Benedictine *abbeys*, although there were a number of smaller cells and priories (including St Michael's Mount), all of them dependent on Benedictine houses elsewhere in England or in France. Although this reviewer would have preferred a little more discussion of archaeological evidence, particularly in the chapter on the early middle ages, the book is very impressive in many respects, not least of which is the author's success in writing a book on Cornwall using documentary sources dealing with the whole diocese of Exeter. One of the strengths of the book is the way that we are escorted back into a very different spiritual landscape by the narrator's voice. At the beginning of a chapter on popular religion (religion as experienced by the people rather than as administered by the clergy), the author tells us:

Everyone in England during the later Middle Ages made a journey on the day of their birth. They were taken from their mother's breast by the midwife and their family, and carried to the parish church to be named and baptised. Like it or not, they joined the Church at birth, and they were expected to support it [...] for the rest of their lives.

Bristol: Ethnic Minorities and the City, 1000–2001 is a fascinating book written by Madge Dresser and Peter Fleming, with several other contributors including many Bristolians who shared their memories and recollections of 20th-century life in the city, and others who shared their family history research. Unusually for a local history this book examines a locality from a quite new perspective, describing the place as experienced and shaped by outsiders and incomers. The book is thus one of EPE's most popular histories, with the emphasis returned to the *people* of the past (and present), as opposed to the *place* where the past happened. The story is told chronologically, with individual chapters or sections for many of the ethnic communities who have settled in Bristol, beginning with an expertly written chapter on Bristol's medieval Jewry or Jewish quarter (not the same as a ghetto). In spite of the mass expulsion of 1290, Bristol Jews reappear later in the story, including a small group in the 16th century, one of whom, Joachim Gaunse, taught Hebrew and accompanied Sir Walter Raleigh to Virginia. Another long running thread in Bristol's history is the story of its Black communities. Bristol was, of course, heavily involved in the slave trade from the 17th to the 19th century but research for this book makes clear that the human cargo of the 'triangular' trade was remarkably invisible in this city. There were only a few freed slaves in Bristol during this time, together with some Black workers and sailors, and occasional sons of African merchants who came to Bristol for work experience. Later chapters in the book draw on different sources including police records and oral testimony to chart Black experience in the second half of the 20th century, painting a complex and carefully nuanced picture of successes and failures, adaptation and independence. Black experience is also charted through poetry, including the great Linton Kwesi Johnson (although this reviewer has always thought of Johnson as a Londoner rather than a Bristolian). The wide coverage of the book – it looks at many other community groups including Irish, Welsh, Huguenot, Somali, South Asian – is certainly one of its strengths but it might also highlight a problem, that of identity. The opening and concluding chapters do

contain careful discussions of terminology and identity but the inevitable labelling and pigeon-holing of 'communities' tends to create an exaggerated sense of community homogeneity. What the book perhaps lacks is a sense of personal identity as a Venn diagram defined by overlapping concepts of ethnicity, language and class, or birthplace, religion and nation (not to mention gender and sexual orientation). A particular strength of the book is in the concluding chapter, in which the authors take a 'long view' of the city and its communities. Among many other insights, the authors define a theory of the economic strength of an ethnic community: in general, the economic success of a group depends on the 'skills and capital' (including the ability to exploit international networks) that a group can bring to the receiving economy, but they note that this success is always subject to the luck of the economic wheel of fortune (the ethnic majority is more likely to accept the minority when they are perceived to be economically useful).

Readers who have made it this far in the review will be in no doubt as to the reviewer's high regard for the EPE series. Like the best local history, the series narrates and yet subtly alters our national history. This history has of course a long chronology and a number of the books do justice to that timespan. Local histories often try to deal with prehistory but the results generally seem a little false: 'a few bits of flint have been found in the area and so we can say that the village/parish/area of [fill in the blank] has been continuously occupied for many thousands of years'. Instead, the *Exmoor* volume in this series expertly brings prehistory into local history by weaving a narrative that reaches from the Neolithic into the early middle ages, allowing for gaps in our knowledge by the judicious use of question marks. As we have seen, many of the volumes present new and extremely well researched accounts of aspects of medieval and early modern England such as the church (*Sunderland, Ledbury* and *Cornwall and the Cross*) or the development of towns (*Burford, Bolsover, Henley* and several others). Other books present new discoveries about the people of medieval England, including unexpected discoveries such as Icelandic child slaves (*Bristol*) and the 14th-century cleric Ralph Tremur who came to London spreading heresy – a generation before the Lollards – and stealing communion wafers (*Cornwall and the Cross*). The dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th century crops up again and again as both an end and a beginning, changing England's power structures and creating new land-owning classes (the two *Cornwall* books, *Parham, Hardwick, Bolsover*). Moving forward in time, there are several good accounts of Civil War battles and skirmishes (*Sunderland* in particular but also *Ledbury* and *Burford*). There is also a strong sense in most of these EPE volumes of the continuity of England's long rural past: the landowners and the labourers, and of course the sheep and the open fields. We get a sense of the North–South divide in the different experiences of the industrial revolution, with the former defined perhaps by coal (*Sunderland, Bolsover* and *Hardwick*) and the latter defined by agricultural improvements (*Exmoor* and *Codford*) and the pull of London as a centre of consumption and construction (*Henley* and *Medway*). Many of the books give a sense of the profound changes of the 20th century, including the effects of two world wars (*Codford* and *Sunderland*), the changes in population (*Bristol*) or the creation of 'heritage' (*Burford* and *Parham*). Several books close with excellent accounts of the present and pose stimulating questions for the future: just what are towns and, indeed, the countryside for now we no longer seem to manufacture very much, or need many people to look after the sheep or go out fishing?

One final characteristic of these books deserves to be noted and celebrated: they look superb! Virtually every book has a series of specially commissioned plans and maps that really help the reader make sense of the text (dare I say that this is often a weakness of local history and, indeed, national history books). The quality of the photography and the reprographics is consistently high throughout the series (again, all too often, many fine books are let down in this regard). I would like to conclude by congratulating the many authors, contributors and volunteers of this superb series, not forgetting the invisible collaborators behind the scenes (editors, proof-readers, designers, cartographers, photographers and EPE office staff) who have produced works of such quality. England's Past for Everyone is a worthy addition to the VCH stable and a noble successor to previous generations of leading local historians such as Leland, Dugdale and Hoskins.

Other reviews:

[16]

Links

- [1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4721>
- [2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4722>
- [3] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4723>
- [4] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4724>
- [5] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4725>
- [6] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4726>
- [7] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4735>
- [8] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4727>
- [9] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4728>
- [10] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4730>
- [11] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4731>
- [12] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4732>
- [13] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4733>
- [14] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4734>
- [15] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4729>
- [16] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>