

Book Review: The Victoria History of the Counties of England A History of the County of Somerset. Volume XI Queen Camel and the Cadburys

*Edited by Mary Sirault and published by the Institute of Historical Research, The University of London
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Back at the beginning of June, I was honoured provide the keynote talk at the launch of the latest volume of this incredibly important undertaking. The Victoria County History is a monumental labour of love, decades in the making. Luckily for us working in south Somerset, this latest volume covers the core area of work relating to the old South Cadbury Environs Project study area, including Queen Camel, South and North Cadbury, North and South Barrow, Compton Pauncefoot, Maperton, Sparkford, Sutton Montis and Weston Bampfylde. Volume X covered the Castle Cary area. As I said at the launch, my life would have been a whole lot simpler if this volume had been available ten years ago, and Mary Sirault is to be congratulated for having pulled together a detailed and useful reference work. In this case, 'edited by' is a rather inaccurate description as Mary has authored most of the chapters included in the book.

Each chapter is organised under the themes of settlement and population; landownership; economic history; social history; religious history; and local government. This enables a systematic evaluation of the documentary and other sources which are brought together into a coherent narrative. It draws together information from charters and maps with the evidence of the landscape and built heritage. Given the nature of the evidence, the post-medieval period is best represented, but from the perspective of someone interested in unravelling the features of the landscape, even the more apparently obscure details of charters and church land holdings provide insight and explanation of the form of the landscape as we now find it.

I can see myself referring back to this volume repeatedly during future research, and it may well prevent me making some daft mistakes in interpretation in the future. The information on land owners will also be of interest and use to family historians, as will the picture painted of community and everyday life in these parishes over the last few centuries. As a history of villages and settlements, with detail on all the buildings of note, this volume is a must-have for residents of the area with an interest in where they live.

The scale of the research task is really staggering, especially as other volumes are in production (the text of Volume XII (Dunster) is well advanced). The bibliography alone is hugely useful, along with the list of documentary sources - although not being a historian, but a mere archaeologist, I can't get over my prejudice against footnotes and putting the bibliography at the front of the volume! The book is well and extensively indexed, and seems to accurately locate most of the things I was looking for (nothing more annoying than a badly indexed book of this type). As is the case with all the volumes in this series, the

production is excellent, with good paper quality and binding and well produced illustrations and photographs albeit entirely in black and white.

On top of all of this, I found this volume almost curiously readable. It is certainly something one would dip in and out of, and almost anecdotal stories (who knew that an American immigrant ended up living in North Cadbury at the beginning of the 19th Century?) that retain your attention. In addition, it is well written, flows, and pulls things together in such a way that you don't just get a comprehensive picture of the history and landscape development of each parish, but a snapshot of the broader picture over time, and the way that the Catash Hundred fits into the wider story of Somerset, the South West, and England.

Congratulations to Mary Siraut on this publication, and I look forward to the next volume. The only drawback is the price – available from Boydell and Brewer, this handsome red hard back will set you back £95.

Clare Randall