

A HISTORY OF THE SOCIETY

PART I, 1847-97

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In this contribution to the history of History, our President traces the story of our first fifty years. This half century saw the Society evolve from a body dominated as to its membership by the clergy, and as to its interests by ecclesiology, to a broadly-based body in which the seeds of a critical and wide-ranging interest in the past were stirring.

The study of antiquity in Great Britain goes back for centuries. Even in the thirteenth century, tumuli were being excavated, though more in search of treasure than for antiquarian reasons; and it is in the great topographical journeys of Leland that the first true antiquary can be recognised. Although his task was to list libraries for Henry VIII his observations were all-embracing. He came to Chenies:

The olde house of the Cheyneis is so translated by my Lorde Russel . . . that little or nothing of it yn a maner remaynith ontranslated; and a great deale of the house is even newly set up made of brike and timber . . . The house is within diverse places richely painted with antique workes of white and blak. . . . in a chapelle, be 2. tumbes of the Chaynes . . .

Fifty years later his notes were used by William Camden whose *Britannia* was published in 1586, a work of such value and scholarship that a new edition was published in 1789. Many of the seventeenth-century Heralds were scholars and recorded much in their Visitations. The same century saw the first of the scholarly county histories, Dugdale's *Warwickshire*.

If the eighteenth century saw a general decline in standards, at least there was an exception in Bucks where Browne Willis, the Squire of Whaddon, set high standards of enquiry and research in his *History and Antiquities of the Town, Hundred, and Deanery of Buckingham* published in 1755. The early nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in the past in two ways. One found expression in

the Romantic movement. This took many forms, but the influence of Scott's verse and novels was immense. A study of mediaeval architecture was essential if such great mansions of the period as Ashridge in Bucks were to be at all convincing. The second strand was the beginning of scientific archaeology, in which Sir Richard Colt Hoare's *Ancient Wiltshire* is the seminal work.

It might be thought that the publication of George Lipscomb's monumental *History of Bucks* in 1847 was an influence on the formation of the Society in that year, but this was certainly not so; indeed, as Dr Wyatt has pointed out, our first members were distinctly lukewarm towards it (*Records XIX*, 272). The Society was in fact a child of the Oxford Movement, which, particularly from 1833-45, was the driving force that began to shake the Church of England out of its eighteenth-century lethargy. Its influence excited the younger clergy who were emerging from Oxford and Cambridge (and only graduates from the two Universities could be ordained). The revived interest in the liturgy, which Keble and Newman had stimulated, led naturally to the history and architecture of the churches, which were mostly in a deplorable state of decay.

Throughout the previous century, little or nothing had been done to keep them in repair. Browne Willis, who personally restored Bletchley, Bow Brickhill and Buckingham churches and built a new one at Fenny Stratford, was considered wildly eccentric by his

fellow squires who thought that he was wasting money which should have been used as dowries for his daughters. There are numerous descriptions of the physical state of parish churches in the 1840s:

... the whitewashed walls, the damp stone floors, the ceiled roof, the high stiff pews with mouldy green baize curtains and faded red cushions. . . . the mean table with a moth-eaten red cloth upon it in the chancel. . . . the dirt . . . the indescribable dank smell of decay . . . (S. Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape*, 1976)

And the congregation often reflected these conditions in their behaviour; it was common to find the font full of brushes and candles, the brasses used as frying pans by workmen, boys sitting on the sanctuary steps and rails, and hats left on the altar. The gentry were no better in their high box pews: '... when the Commandments began a servant regularly entered at the chancel door with a luncheon tray' (*ibid.*).

In 1839 two societies were founded, the Cambridge Camden Society and the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture, and both exercised great influence over the next twenty years. Arrogant and opinionated they may have been but their propaganda was effective; it is no coincidence that the great period of church restoration and rebuilding began in the late 1840s. A new breed of Bishop encouraged the division of large parishes, which meant a new church in Gothic revival style; fourteenth-century Decorated emerged as the most 'correct' style for an Anglican church. In Bucks new parishes and churches were created at Cadmore End, Colnbrook, Hazlemere, Lacey Green, Penn Street, Prestwood, Seer Green, Walton (Aylesbury) and New Wolverton between 1845 and 1853 alone. This no doubt reflected the vigour and enthusiasm of bishop Samuel Wilberforce appointed to Oxford in 1845; his predecessor, Bagot, very much an eighteenth-century relic, had even refused to accept Bucks into his diocese when it was detached from Lincoln in 1839.

It was logical for this renewed interest in church architecture and the Christian past to

result in the foundation of archaeological societies. As Stuart Piggott puts it:

However much we criticise the early church restorers, and with reason, and however hard we may find it to appreciate many of the churches built at that time, we cannot escape the recognition that it was the proselytising vigour of the Camdenians that brought an appreciation of ancient buildings—and by an easy extension, ancient monuments in general—into the lives of the English upper and middle classes in the 1840s as never before. (*ibid.*)

So we find Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire founding archaeological societies in 1844, followed by Norfolk in 1946 and Bedfordshire, Sussex and Buckinghamshire in 1847.

Given this genesis, it is not surprising to find that, when thirteen gentlemen met in Aylesbury on 14 November that year and agreed to found a Society 'To promote the study of architecture and antiquities, to collect books, drawings, casts and rubbings . . . and for mutual instruction at meetings by conversation and papers', not only were nine of them clergymen but five of these were young curates. The Vicar of Aylesbury was in the chair but it was the Revd Charles Lowndes, Rector of Hartwell, who was to be the main driving force of the Society in its first forty years. The four laymen were Zechariah Hunt of the Old Bank, Thomas Field, a jeweller, Robert Gibbs, proprietor of the *Bucks Advertiser* and John Kersley Fowler, landlord of the White Hart in Aylesbury.

Several meetings were held in the following months at which a Constitution and Rules were agreed. Rule 2 deserves to be given in full:

The Society shall consist of a President, Vice-Presidents, two Secretaries, a Treasurer, two Auditors, Honorary and Ordinary members, being in communion with the Church of England: of whom, the Bishop of the Diocese for the time being shall be requested to accept the office of President; the Archdeacon of the County, being a subscriber, shall be considered *ex officio* a Vice-President: and the other Officers shall be elected at a General Meeting of the Society; and that every candidate for admission to the Society, shall

be proposed and seconded in writing at a General Meeting, according to the annexed form, and balloted for at the next Meeting, one black ball in five to exclude; and that on the election of a member, one of the Secretaries shall send him notice of it and a copy of the Rules.

Hunt opposed the obligation to be a committed member of the Church but was outvoted 1-12 and it was eleven years before that qualification was removed. It is obvious that the Church dominated the infant Society, holding all offices except that of Treasurer; all Rural Deans were *ex officio* members of the Committee whilst Churchwardens were admitted without subscription. It is not evident why two secretaries were necessary as they can hardly have been overworked, yet ten names appear in the first eleven years; probably they were young curates who moved on to other parishes. However the years from 1858 to 1979 needed only six secretaries, who served an average of twenty years each.

The earliest surviving list of members is for 1854 and shows that after seven years the Society had become more widely known. Major landowners had become vice-Presidents, amongst them Lord Chandos at Stowe, Aubrey, Bernard, Clayton, du Pré, Duncombe, Hanmer and Lowndes. Yet of the 118 ordinary members 66 were clergymen. There were fourteen Honorary Members of whom two were clergymen serving abroad, two were Churchwardens and one, W. Thompson, is described as 'stonemason of Aylesbury'. The list included Revd Charles Boutell, the great heraldic expert, J. Akerman, Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries and J. H. Parker, the Oxford bookseller and antiquary. Lastly there were six architects, most of whom were working on churches in the county. There is no recorded work by W. Slater or J. A. Repton (a keen ecclesiologist and the son of Humphry the landscape gardener) but J. A. Harrison had built the new church at Frieth, W. Butterfield had restored Wavendon, and was at work at Wooburn; he was to build Dropmore in the future. E. B. Lamb was probably elected more for his church at Prestwood and various rectories rather than his mutilation of the façade of

Hughenden Manor for Disraeli. The best-known today is G. G., later Sir Gilbert, Scott who was born at Gawcott where his father, who had built the church there in 1827, was Rector. Later in life he recorded how his love of Gothic began when he visited Hillesden, where the fifteen-year-old boy's sketches can still be seen. In 1854 his only work in the county had been Weston Turville Rectory and the workhouses at Amersham and Winslow but he had just received the commission for the total restoration of St Mary's, Aylesbury; his report on that church's condition was printed in the first number of the *Records*.

In these early years meetings were held quarterly when members read short papers. In 1852 there is the first recorded outing when a 'select party' visited the already derelict church at Quarrendon just outside Aylesbury. Over the next twenty years several efforts were made to save it but all were unsuccessful and today the site can barely be identified. In 1853 there was an ambitious meeting, lasting two days, at Banbury, when members of four county Societies of Oxford, Bucks, Warwick and Northampton visited a number of churches in the neighbourhood. From 1854 it became normal to organise an Annual Excursion during which the Annual General Meeting was held. The enthusiasm and stamina of members on these occasions seems to have been limitless. The account of 27 July 1854 occupies 98 column-inches in the *Bucks Herald*. Members left Aylesbury in carriages at 10.30 for Hartwell where Dr Lee showed them the house and museum and gave them a breakfast *à la française*. After this they visited Stone church and passed the newly-built County Lunatic Asylum which was considered 'remarkable for its extreme ugliness', before reaching Dinton Hall and church where the Revd J. Goodall, who was both Squire and Rector, entertained them to 'an excellent cold collation'. In the afternoon they returned to the White Hart, Aylesbury for the meeting, which began with an Address by the Archdeacon followed by the normal business of an annual meeting. Members were then treated to three substantial lectures: 'Ancient Eucharistic Vestments', 'Ancient roman Roads in Bucks' and 'dese-

crated Churches of Bucks'. They were no doubt ready by then for another cold collation, prepared by John Kersley Fowler, who was the owner of the White Hart and a keen member. There followed a visit to St Mary's, which was being restored, and the day ended with a 'conversazione' at the home of Zechariah Hunt.

In 1855 the excursion was to Akeley, near Buckingham, on the day the Bishop dedicated Tarring's new church. On the notice of this meeting are printed various train times which show that by leaving London at 6.30, Oxford at 7 or Warwick at 7.50, Buckingham could be reached by 10. (Buckingham cannot be reached by train at all to-day; Akeley church was demolished in 1986.)

The accounts for 1855 survive. The annual subscription was five shillings, a life subscription £5. Income was £112, expenditure £84 of which—and this has been constant in the accounts for 130 years—the costs of producing the *Records* was about half. But it is interesting to see also 'Survey of site of ancient Camp at Cholesbury £1.5.0' and 'Opening Barrow at Hampden 10s. 0d.'

It was in January 1854 that it was decided to begin publishing 'papers' which had already been given as talks at meetings. The title generated some argument but eventually Fowler's suggestion of *Records and Gleanings* was turned down and the first number, printed by James Pickburn, Temple Street, Aylesbury, was issued in March 1854 as:

RECORDS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE
or Papers and Notes on the
HISTORY, ANTIQUITIES AND
ARCHITECTURE OF THE COUNTY
together with the Transactions of the
ARCHITECTURAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL
SOCIETY
of the
COUNTY OF BUCKINGHAM

There were forty pages of text, followed by the list of members, books in the library and seven pages of advertisements. A copy cost two shillings. It is significant that although the library contained two hundred volumes, Lipscomb's *History* was not among them; one member

considered it 'very incomplete and inaccurate' and an appeal was made to members to correct their parish entries so that, in due course, the Society could produce an 'accurate Topographical History.'

The objects of the *Records* were two-fold: 'the diffusion of correct information on all subjects which fall within the cognizance of such a Society' and 'the collection and preservation of such materials as may serve to illustrate the history of the County.' In the new atmosphere of interest in antiquity much that was new was being discovered.

Such discoveries are now especially likely to be made, at a time when Church restoration is daily progressing, and new railways are contemplated through the County. Nothing need be said to show the interest which these must possess, nor of their value to the Architect and Antiquarian. Besides this however, they may be of the utmost importance to the landed proprietor or to the historian.

The Society's Rules laid down that the office of President was to be offered to the Bishop of Oxford. Samuel Wilberforce accepted, no doubt willingly, for the society's ideals were very much his own. He was one of the new breed of vigorous, reforming Bishops in the reviving Anglican church, a man of strong character and limitless energy. Many new churches were founded in his large diocese; he drove great distances to visit outlying parishes and kept a firm grip on all the incumbents, showing sympathy with them if in difficulties but quick to correct the lazy or incompetent. His published *Letterbooks* are good reading and perhaps one quotation will suffice:

Revd and dear Sir,

Before I reply positively to the question whether I will licence you to Mr Littlehales' curacy I must ask you to state to me whether you will *not*, whilst resident in the curacy, indulge in Field Sports. (*Letterbooks*, 292.)

Yet, successful as he was as Bishop, his life was a sad one. His wife and several of their children died young and many of his closest friends went over to Rome, including his brother-in-law the future Cardinal Manning. He was generally considered to have had the worst in the famous

debate with T. H. Huxley on Darwin's theories at the Royal Society and, in retrospect, it is ironic that the President of a Society devoted to the study of antiquity should have been so hotly upholding the literal truth of the first chapter of Genesis. His biographer wrote that 'he was one of those who are so fair-minded that they only end up by falling out with those both to right and left' (*D.N.B.*). Perhaps the fact that he was generally known as Soapy Sam tells us something about him. He was translated to Winchester in 1870 but died three years later.

Wilberforce's successor as Bishop was John Mackarness who, it was assumed, was also President. Certainly from 1870 to 83 his name appears as such on all the literature, but apparently he had never actually been approached. So, at the 1884 meeting an extraordinary, if not farcical, situation arose which the minutes record:

A long conversation took place as to the presidentship, it appearing that, from the rules of the Society, the Bishop of the Diocese occupied that position *ex officio*, but it was doubtful if he was aware of the fact. Ultimately, Captain Fremantle proposed the following resolution, which Sir Philip Duncombe seconded, and it was carried: – 'That this meeting being informed that it is doubtful whether the Bishop of the Diocese, who is nominally the President, has ever been communicated with on the subject, or is aware of his position, his son, Revd C. C. Mackarness, vicar of Aylesbury, be asked to communicate with his father to ascertain whether the Bishop would consent to act as a working president of the Society; in the case of his declining to do so, that the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos be asked to accept the presidentship of the Society; and that the rule be revised accordingly.'

Richard Plantagenet Temple-Nugent-Brydges-Chandos-Grenville, third (and last) Duke of Buckingham was head of the Grenville family, settled at Wotton Underwood since the 12th century. Stowe became their main seat, through marriage with the Temples, in 1749. Unlike his spendthrift father who nearly bankrupted the estate in 1848, he was the epitome of

the serious, conscientious Victorian nobleman, and succeeded in rebuilding his estate to something approaching its former glory. He had been M.P., Cabinet Minister, Governor of Madras and Chairman of the London and North Western Railway. Disraeli appointed him Lord Lieutenant in 1869. He did his duty as President, entertaining the Annual Meeting at Wotton in 1867 and at Stowe in 1884 when he gave a talk on the history of the house. He died in 1889, the last male Grenville.

The Presidency then reverted to the Bishop of Oxford, who was now the great historian William Stubbs. He was a former 'servitor' at Christ Church, then for years an obscure vicar doing historical research, known only to a few fellow scholars, until 'by one of those brilliant appointments which can justify the political appointment of Bishops and Regius Professors' he was given the chair of History at Oxford. Here he revived the history school and produced 'Stubbs' Charters', familiar to generations of students. He was consecrated Bishop in 1888 and became President of the Society two years later, but he accepted the office only on condition that he would never have to attend a meeting; this is not surprising as 'he disliked dinner parties, smoking, late hours and committees.' But the society were well content as is explained in his obituary in the *Records*:

The Bishop's many engagements precluded him from being an active President, but nothing could have been more suitable than his choice as chief officer of the Society, and the acceptance of this position by so learned an historian was greatly appreciated and welcomed, and at the same time conferred an honour on the Society over which he presided, (VIII, 408).

Of the other officers in these first fifty years one name stands out. The Revd Charles Lowndes was the younger brother of William Lowndes of Chesham and thus a direct descendant of 'Ways and Means' Lowndes who built Winslow Hall. Rector of Hartwell 1855–90, he was a founder member and was appointed Secretary in 1858. For the next thirty-two years was clearly the man on whom the Society depended,

for he was not only Secretary, but also Treasurer and Editor. In his obituary Robert Gibbs wrote:

. . . he was its *factotum*, undertaking all the working offices connected with it . . . indeed without his management the Society would have been as nothing. He was a constant attender at our annual excursions, and for many years the sole conductor of them. He was a frequent contributor to the pages of these *Records*. (VI, 438)

It is significant that at his retirement his work was divided between four new officers. The new Secretary (1884–96) was the Revd Randolph Piggott, Rector and Squire of Grendon Underwood. Here he built Grendon Hall (now the Open Prison). It seems probable that towards the end of Lowndes's regime the Society was in low water and that Piggott effected some improvement, for at the 1885 meeting T. F. Fremantle (later the 3rd Lord Cottesloe) said:

The Society did not blow its trumpet loud enough and from some other cause it had got into a sadly stationary state. Now they were making a new start under their excellent secretary Revd Piggott.

Membership, which had risen from 129 in 1853 to 247 in 1867, was less than 200 in 1884.

Amongst his other duties Lowndes also found time to supervise the Society's Collections, later to become the nucleus of the Museum. For a few years a room was rented in Silver Street but later there must have been a move, for an insurance policy has survived from 1863; in this the Phoenix, for an annual premium of 11/6d insured for £100:

Furniture, tables, cases, coins, specimens of various things, curiosities and books (no one article in case of loss to be valued at more than £10) in the Society's Rooms, brick, timber and tiled situate in Church Street.

John Kersley Fowler had suggested the creation of a Museum as far back as 1855 but it was another fifty years before this came about. No doubt the collection was a miscellaneous one, yet in 1858 the Society possessed Celtic gold coins from Whaddon, fragments of a Roman mosaic floor from Kimble and a number of seals, rubbings and MSS.

In the Society's first fifty years most activity was concerned with the *Records* and the Annual Excursion. Committee meetings were quarterly and papers were still read but clearly the Excursion was the main event of the year. From the mid sixties the pattern of the day was much the same, involving visits to some churches and a manor house where the owner, who was often a Vice-President, always provided 'a sumptuous luncheon'; either there or at another house the Annual Meeting was held. 1869 was typical with visits to seven churches, Gayhurst House, Cowper's house in Olney, Tyringham Hall for lunch and Chicheley Hall for the Meeting and dinner. This was easily managed with the excellent railway service of those days and carriages meeting members at the station. Twenty years later they lunched at the Eight Bells, Long Crendon after seeing the Court House, four churches and Notley Abbey; the meeting was at Dinton Hall.

Very occasionally they ventured outside the county for visits to London, Oxford, Windsor and St Albans, but a popular variation was the river Thames. In 1870 a 'saloon boat' was boarded at Marlow which took the party to Bisham Abbey and other sites. On this occasion a member, Owen Wethered the Marlow brewer, wrote to the Secretary:

I wish to be allowed to provide the refreshments on board and have sent down the necessary ingredients for claret cup and a man to superintend the manufacture.

No doubt this helped the smooth running of the meeting held on board. They were again on the river in 1876 when from Bourne End the *Star of India* took them down river with the intention of holding the meeting on Magna Carta island but:

Progress down the river was not so rapid as expected, and therefore it was determined to hold the meeting on the barge.

Probably the most memorable day in these years occurred in 1867 when after visiting Boarstall Tower and four churches they were entertained by the Duke of Buckingham (not yet their President) at Wotton; here, after the Meeting, they were treated to 'a handsome collation' which culminated in:

a *magnum bonum* of port wine, deposited in the Wotton cellars one hundred years ago,

and which has wonderfully preserved its colour, strength and flavour, being produced by the Duke as especially appropriate to the occasion. Shortly after 7 o'clock the guests departed to their several homes, lighted by a brilliant harvest moon, and highly grateful by the days entertainment and the affability of their noble host.

Only once was there a second outing and this, in 1889, was due to the initiative of a young recently appointed Assistant Secretary. He was the son of the Vicar of Swanbourne, in later life to be Sir John Myers, Professor of Ancient History at Oxford. President of the Royal Anthropological Society and father of J. L. Myers, Bodley's Librarian.

When Lowndes retired, John Parker became Editor (or Literary Secretary as it was called at the time), a post he held for twenty-two years during which he contributed over forty articles. He came from a well-known Wycombe family; his father, the Town Clerk, had written *Early History and Antiquities of Wycombe*. John became Mayor, and his brother James was the well-known Oxford bookseller. 1897 saw the completion of Volume VII of the *Records*: since 1854 fifty-one numbers had been published, eight making a volume. Originally it appeared quarterly but from 1864 it was issued annually. Although from the start the intention was to deal only with County matters there were several breaches of this rule particularly in the early numbers, such as 'Colour: how far admissible in Architecture?' 'Salmon in the River Thames' or 'Vestments in the Church'. During these forty-three years there were detailed articles on almost half of the County's two hundred churches, an incomplete but valuable inventory of church plate, of sepulchral monuments and of brasses. There were pioneering articles on John Schorne of North Marston, on Browne Willis and on the Buckinghamshire Swan.

The techniques of field archaeology were not very advanced at this time and the recording is primitive by modern standards, yet the Revd Henry Roundell's account of excavations at Tingewick in 1860 are detailed and has clear illustrations (*Records III*, 33); Anglo-Saxon finds at Bishopstone in 1877 were illustrated by early photographic plates (*Records V*, 24). Generally line drawings were used but, surprisingly as early as 1858 there is a lithographic reproduction of the Virgin and Child glass in Weston Turville church in three colours (*Records II*, 249). This is ironic for as late as 1935 the then Editor strenuously but unsuccessfully objected to the use of a second colour in the report on the Pottery Kiln Site at Hedgerley (*Records XIII*, 252) as being unsuitable in a learned journal.

Towards the end of the century, standards were clearly rising; elaborate accounts of church restorations had disappeared as had articles such as 'The England of Former Days', and a more critical approach is evident in the final article in Volume VII in which E. J. Payne demolishes contemporary theories about Whiteleaf Cross (*Records VII*, 559); even though the study of place-names was in its infancy—Bledlow was said to mean Bloody Ridge—he was the first to suggest that the Cross was of quite recent date. In his introduction to that Volume the Editor wrote:

All the papers contributed are essentially on archaeological or historical subjects in connection with Buckinghamshire, and the writers may be said to have had the special purpose of carrying out the main objects of the Society—namely, the adding to the knowledge already acquired, which must ultimately result in an accurate and comprehensive county history.

Even if, ninety, years later, that last wish has not yet been accomplished the rest is equally valid to-day.

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