REVIEWS

BERNWOOD: THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF A FOREST
Ed. John Broad and Richard Hoyle.
University of Central Lancashire, (Harris Papers Two) 1997, xvi + 126 pp., 8 plates, 9 tables, 9 maps, 2 figures; £9.95 from Dept. of Historical and Critical Studies, ISBN 0–906694–73–6.

This is the second volume of a series initiated by a new University to make the results of research in local history available in an attractive but affordable format. It originated from an important paper read by the editors in 1991 to an Oxford conference of the British Agricultural History Society, combining Dr Hoyle's study of the economy of Bernwood as a royal forest for some 550 years before 1632 with Dr Broad's work on its landscape and employment during the next 250 years, when the Crown no longer insulated it from market forces. Their expanded text is now preceded by a chapter by Dr Harvey illuminating the origin, purpose and administration of the medieval Forest, and followed by an ecological assessment by Dr Rachel Thomas of its traditional management in relation to nature conservation, demonstrating her deep knowledge of and commitment to Bernwood, though she now has a wider brief.

The authors do not dissent from the view that Bernwood was a great multiple estate, Celtic in more than its place-names, which was taken over by the Mercian Crown in the seventh century as a going concern, thereby forestalling any further Anglian encroachments. In 845 Wotton Underwood, near the heart of the Forest, was sold by King Berhtwulf, with the assent of a very strong Mercian Witan, for ready money. The purchaser was to be succeeded by whoever rendered him faithful service for the land, presumably service previously due to the king. It would appear that the large area, extending almost to Aylesbury, which Henry II sought to add to the Forest did not embrace Wotton; this involves the identification of the headwaters of the *ealdimererithi* (for OE *ealdgemæreriþig*), the 'old boundary brook', whose lower course separates Long Crendon, within Bernwood, from Chearsley, outside. This would explain why Richard I had to take separate action to include Wotton, which was a Canterbury peculiar; it was about this time that someone there despairingly marked the 845 grant *Inutile*. Henry III relinquished these extensions, but his disclaimer had a somewhat provisional quality, and as late as 1452 the seneschal of Bernwood claimed jurisdiction from the Thame to the Claydon Brook; we still have Bernwood Farm in Botolph Claydon. More could have been said on the varying boundaries, and especially on the detailed but difficult perambulation of 1298; however, the editors have concentrated on the parishes of Oakley, Brill and Boarstall, which comprised the royal forest of Brill in the strictest sense. Its administration is so well recorded, from the twelfth century to the seventeenth, as to invite this volume, whose references to archival sources are exemplary, though there is no index.

Outside this core area, farms and households in the adjoining Quarters and neighbouring townships continued to render various dues which had once maintained the Dark Age rulers of Bernwood. The hereditary foresters claimed that their office antedated the Norman Conquest. Edward the Confessor, king and saint, built a hunting lodge at Brill and healed one of the builders; but it is rightly emphasized that his hunting rights did not differ in kind from those of other great landowners. In contrast, William the Conqueror, who was at Brill in 1072, claimed much wider regalian rights of vert and venison. Thenceforward, under the special forest law, the king's officers prevented landholders from taking deer, excluding deer from their fields, or felling their own trees (except for their own use) without express permission. Clearance and enclosure were thus precluded as long as the Crown, by asserting its own rights, was prepared to defend the commons against enclosing landlords. Cottagers paid smokesilver for the right to collect dry wood, potters claygavel to take clay.

At the splendid Buckinghamshire Landscapes exhibition in the new County Art Gallery, attention was focused on maps which are also works of art:

the famous depiction of Boarstall in its cartulary, and the elegant New College maps of central Bernwood. These are beautifully reproduced in this volume, and illustrate steps in the long process by which forest became field; but it is shown that they were intended to support assertions by their makers. How far they are strictly veridical deserves further study, but recent aerial and ground survey results, avaialable after *Bernwood* went to press, indicate that the Boarstall cartulary map is substantially accurate. The National Trust hopes to incorporate these findings in a future survey of the area.

During the last century of the Royal Forest the Dynhams of Boarstall were both its hereditary foresters and major landowners therein, and allowed themselves large-scale felling and over-grazing; but half the area was still wooded, and the Crown's interest was sufficient to maintain the communal practice of intercommoning and to insulate the common woodlands from the pressures which were creating large ring-fenced pastoral farms throughout the south midlands. The Dynhams declared that their improvements enhanced the beauty of the Forest, and they opposed its final liquidation even though this was to their advantage. The increasing use of the woods by commoners and others was becoming incompatible with their endlessly renewable cropping by coppicing, not to speak of the need of the deer for winter browse. To keep the system sustainable, it was found necessary to deny the grazing rights of the purlieu townships; after 1561, their agistment rents were not accepted.

Disafforestation, initiated by the Privy Council in 1622–3 and completed in 1632, abolished the forest jurisdiction and the commoners' rights and allotted land to the Crown, freeholders and ancient cottages. The immemorial clay-based industries were safeguarded, and cottagers in Brill and Oakley who could prove long usage of the forest commons were granted the benefit of a Royal Charity, the Poor Folks' Pasture in Boarstall; it was vested in elective trustees, who became self-perpetuating and may sometimes have acted arbitrarily, despite supervision by Quarter Sessions. The forest was promptly disembowelled; what we now call Bernwood Forest is on its periphery, and extends into Oxfordshire. The fate of the deer is not addressed, and may perhaps be taken for granted.

After disafforestation, Oakley was a normal though rather scattered village, not finally enclosed until 1821. Boarstall, after a complex history of development from different foci, was destroyed in the Civil War and rebuilt as an adjunct to the great house. Brill, on its magnificent hilltop, commanding the great fat plain of Otmoor, had once been a royal borough with a portreeve and burgesses. Though never chartered, it retained urban features, especially a range of non-agricultural trades. The evidence marshalled here shows that it grew until the 1860s, though it did not prosper. Cottages could no longer proliferate on the waste, but existing dwellings could be divided and backyards filled in. Yet perhaps it could have been mentioned that mid-Victorian Brill was a little town with shops, lodging-houses for Dorton Spa, a magistrates' court, a police station, endowed schools, two chapels, almshouses, a revived fair and a surviving pottery; it even became the terminus of the remotest and most rural branch of the Metropolitan and Great Central Joint Railway.

This account of the life and afterlife of the Forest, securely based on abundant public records, is so magisterial that one hesitates to ask for more; but Bernwood owes its character to many centuries of undocumented settlement, and the influence of the Royal Forest on the whole area, so distinctive and still so little known, is not yet exhausted. Archaeologists will have more to say on its prehistory, and oral and other social historians on changes in the last century or so; but within its chosen limits this excellent symposium will immediately become and will long remain the standard history of Bernwood.

Since our government, central and local, now accepts the need to increase the broad-leaved woodland cover during the twenty-first century, Bernwood Forest should have a future as well as a past.

A.H.J.B.

CHESHAM SHUTTLE – the story of a Metropolitan branch line.
Clive Foxell
ISBN 0 9529184 0 4; A5 format, 83 pages of text plus 48 pages of illustrations including maps
Published in 1996 by the author; price £10.95; available from *The Book Shop*, Amersham, and *Chapter One Booksellers*, Chesham

In the days before Dr. Beeching, some rural branch lines existed almost in a vacuum, with their staff (and sometimes their passengers) fiercely independent of the main line world beyond the junction. Chroniclers of such lines often adopt a similarly parochial view of "their" railway and record its life largely without reference to the world around.

In writing the history of the Chesham railway Dr Foxell faced the totally opposite situation for this is certainly a branch line, but one which is totally dependent on the main line from Baker Street to Aylesbury. To complicate matters, *that* main line spent its early years as a pawn in the plans of railway manager Edward Watkin to make a new railway link between Manchester and London, and its later years as part of the vast London Transport empire.

We thus find that over one third of Dr Foxell's text is occupied with affairs wholly beyond the confines of the Chesham branch. First it charts the development of public transport in the Chilterns before Chesham was connected to a railway, then it chronicles the events, social movements and technical changes which have since influenced the branch. We are thus presented with a very readable account of the life and times of the main line of the Metropolitan Railway as well as of the Chesham branch and, to this extent, the title of the book is possibly misleading.

After leading us through the forty years during which Chesham waited for its railway Dr Foxell details the construction (1887 – 1889), opening (1889), and brief period as terminus of the main line from Baker Street (1889 – 1892) before the latter line was extended from Little Chalfont to Aylesbury. From this point many other branch line histories skip with little comment over a large part of the branch's ensuing life before becoming more detailed in describing relatively recent times. In contrast Dr Foxell has produced a balanced story of the whole life of the branch which is an interesting and useful account of the changing character of Chesham's railway during a century of service. At times Dr Foxell's defensiveness about Chesham leads him to read more into the outside world's attitudes than may be justified. For example, on page 66, the use of old coaches to convert the branch train to a new method of operation in 1940 might simply be due to wartime expediency rather than an indication of London Transport's "disdain" for the Chesham branch!

The reviewer would have liked to learn more about why Chesham was not included in the programme of building Metroland housing estates (we are told that the Company sold much of its surplus land at Nashleigh Hill to Chesham UDC for a recreation ground). It would also have been interesting to know more about the abandoned plans for an extension of the line to Tring – what route would have been taken, and was any land acquired beyond Nashleigh Hill?

It is a pity that a most readable book contains a number of small but irritating errors. Many spelling mistakes were noted plus several inaccuracies in railway details (e.g. the wrong opening dates for the lines from Ashendon through Bicester and from Princes Risborough to Aylesbury on the map opposite page 19 and the wrong route for the South Eastern Railway line to Dover on the map opposite page 30). While each is minor in itself, the reviewer found them a distraction to reading.

The 75 photographs are mainly of the branch itself and give good coverage of its construction and operation. Many were new to the reviewer and one, showing some forty goods wagons being loaded and unloaded at Chesham gives food for thought on one reason why our roads are so crowded today.

Peter Gulland

CHEQUERS
Norma Major
ISBN 0 00 470875 X Harper Collins 1996 *272 pp. 137 colour plates, 115 black & white illustrations.*

It is not easy to be certain either for whom this book was written or from what standpoint. Mrs Major surely does not write as an historian, or she would not treat the details of acreages and 'messuages' given in the Feet of Fines as corresponding to any actual state of affairs on the ground. Nor, certainly, as an architectural historian, or she would have given us plans and sections, without which it is very difficult to make sense of the descriptions or understand the many antiquarian 'restorations' to which the house has been subjected Only for the last private owner, Sir Arthur Lee, later Lord Lee of Fareham, are we vouchsafed any hint of motivation. His guiding principle for the restoration, we are told, "was to preserve every aspect of the Elizabethan house, and to bring the rest of it as far as possible into harmony with William Hawtrey's imposing north front. But not much of the original remained: there was no panelling and not a single old fireplace." This is an indication of the extent to which the work depended on the imagination and scholarship of the architect, Reginald Blomfield (who was not a specialist in the Tudor period). Anthony Eden did not approve, we learn: he thought the house had been ruined, and Richard Crossman found it heavily restored 'with an oppressive atmosphere'.

One of the most attractive aspects of the book is the wealth of anecdotes about the occupants and visitors. Many vistors at a conference of African heads of state found urgent reasons to return to London late at night; it emerged that they did not care for sleeping in curtained tester beds. Bats, however, seem seldom to have been a problem.

It would be unreasonable to look for any account of the great modern scandal that rocked Chequers, for it would be unrealistic to expect Mrs Major to have heard any whisper of it. This was the sustained and unscrupulous effort by the trustees, master-minded by their chairman, Lord Goddard, to eject the tenant of the demesne farms, Eugene Randag. After every dishonourable trick in the legal repertoire had been deployed, it was ultimately successful. If the full story were ever told it would occupy a volume no less fat than this one.

More rigorous editing would have prevented a photograph of practice at the nets being captioned as 'a game of cricket'. And it should certainly have corrected the author's evident belief that 'accrue' is a transitive verb.

For all its shortcomings this is an attractive book, well-researched and well-organised and (mostly) well-written. Some of the photographs are splendid, and nearly all are worth more than a glance. Perhaps it works best as social history.

There is no index and the book is sparsely referenced.

J. C. T.