

Alex Craven and Beth Hartland, *The Victoria History of Gloucestershire: Cheltenham before the Spa* (London, Institute of Historical Research 2018). x + 168 pp., 53 figs. Cardcovers, £14.00 [ISBN: 9781909646742]. **Reviewed 11.2018**

The attractive illustrated cover of this paperback, and its intriguing title, seem designed to make a potential purchaser pick it off the shelf of a local bookshop. What would that person find inside - their first impressions? Well, a text which is easy on the eye, divided into chapters, with some slightly surprising pale turquoise pages, and many footnotes on every page. Readers not familiar with the Victoria County History and its role in local history will find these explained in the preface by James Hodsdon, the Chair of the Gloucestershire County History Trust. The Trust brought the book to fruition by the collaboration of two professional historians and volunteers mainly from the Cheltenham Local History Society and with support from Dr John Chandler, notably his contribution of the index and many of the explanatory panels - the pale turquoise pages. If you go online to find a price and ordering details, there is a lot more background to this.

It is important to understand the VCH genesis, and those familiar with VCH paperbacks might want to know this is not part of the England's Past for Everyone series, that is, it is not entirely a stand-alone book, but a VCH Short, the first instalment of a projected hardback covering a wider area of Gloucestershire and a longer time period, the classic 'earliest times to the present day'.

The chapters therefore fit what the VCH regards as 'the most significant topics of historical enquiry' into a systematic formula: Land and People, Settlement, Landownership, Economic History, Local Government, Social History, Economic History and Religious History. These topics are covered in detail from the eighth century to c.1740, although many of the explanatory panels cover longer periods, since they are helpfully designed to explain terms and concepts not necessarily familiar to the general reader or modern-period historians, and clearly based on modern research, although this is not cited. So, for example, the first five (of nineteen panels) cover hundreds, parishes and other divisions; early roads and communications; Romans and natives in the landscape, field and early minor names in the landscape, and monastic landlords. These and other panels are useful to readers of this book in particular, local historians in general, and also undergraduate and postgraduate students approaching the medieval and early-modern periods. The title of the sixth panel, 'why are manorial descents important', is rather telling because it is a justification for the VCH's tracing of the holding of manors by elites from before the Conquest. This of course is a mainstay of early VCH volumes and indeed of antiquarian works and, as the panel boldly states, such descents do not make 'inspiring prose'. When they are well researched, as here, they are an invaluable and ongoing resource to which (local) historians will turn in the future, and this is the justification for their publication. When such historians approach other topics in this locality, they will be able to return to the lists of manors here and their descents as a reliable source of information. They will also find the royal demesne manor of Cheltenham set in its the wider national context: its exchange for the strategically significant Cinque Ports of Rye and Winchelsea in Sussex after Henry III's defeat in Poitou in 1242. This enables the authors to set out part of the reason for the growth of Cheltenham as a market town, before going on to deal with other manors and estates in the remit of the book (Redgrove, Cheltenham rectory, Arle Court, and several others).

Urban growth appears in other chapters of course, with discussion of mills and other trades and industries following on from agriculture and leading onto the early modern-period and including

Cheltenham's market and two fairs. Primary sources in the National Archives and Gloucestershire Archives and Bristol Record Office, the British Library and beyond have clearly been closely examined, as well as numerous printed primary sources and secondary antiquarian and local history books. From time to time the amount of factual detail is slightly overwhelming at the expense of a stronger narrative, but this is perhaps the price to be paid for such a rich resource. The book finishes with a consideration of the origins and status of the parish church, originally a minster, and of parochial life as expressed in bequests to chantries and lights (which have an explanatory panel) and a summary of the building's development. The consequences of the Dissolution, Reformation and Civil War for Cheltenham are explained, together with the role, numbers and activities of dissenters from the Anglican Church, who also have their own helpful panel explaining non-conformity.

The book is beautifully illustrated with photos and extracts from documents and well supplied with maps but, as an outsider, I would nevertheless have found a location map helpful too. This might also be a thought of the putative purchaser of *Cheltenham before the Spa* from a local bookshop who, like me, might be surprised by the absence of a concluding chapter. This however seems to be a result of its admirable prompt publication as part of what in time will be a fuller VCH volume, and once this is understood, does not detract from the hard work of all those who contributed to it. It should be widely read.

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