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The Archaeological and Local History Societies of Gloucestershire

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CHARLES PARRY

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETIES OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE

The oldest society dedicated to the antiquities of Gloucestershire is the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club. Formed on the model of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club at the suggestion of Sir Thomas Tancred, the Club's first secretary, its inaugural meeting was held at the Black Horse Inn at Birdlip on 7 July 1846. The objects were 'to investigate the natural history, antiquities and agriculture of the Cotswold district and its neighbourhood',¹ by means of occasional meetings of those of congenial tastes not hampered by pedantic rules. Twenty-five gentlemen were invited to be the first members; the first annual subscription was 6d.

The Club clearly struck a popular note and rapidly increased in size. Within a few years it had become necessary to limit numbers to 40 as otherwise they would have been too many to enjoy the hospitality of the Cotswold wayside inns which the founders treasured. The popularity of the idea soon spread, and similar clubs were founded at Woolhope, Malvern and elsewhere.

Despite the emphasis on conviviality, the Club had a serious purpose and owed much of its success to the support of the senior staff of the recently established College of Agriculture at Cirencester. Scholarly papers were read and published in the Club's *Proceedings*, some of which recorded new discoveries, for example in the field of geology. However the twin purposes of the Club (the social and the scholarly) regularly created a tension at periods when the one was thought to predominate at the expense of the other. Thus on the retirement of the first president Thomas Barwick Lloyd Baker in 1860, his successor Sir William Vernon Guise felt the need to stimulate the production of papers for publication² and to introduce new members by extending the permitted number to 100. Some 35 years later the membership during the 1860s (apart from the leading lights) was characterised by the then president, M.W. Colchester-Wemyss, as

county squires and clergymen of the old school: one or two Professors with spectacles, and a bagful of gryphites and pygasters and pectens, and a vocabulary that would frighten owls: and last, not least, a contingent of old Indian officers from Cheltenham, tanned by the sun, and touched on the liver: and whose talk was of *elephas orientalis*, cholera morbus, and the Nizam.³

Colchester-Wemyss's article also described archaeological exploration in early Victorian times.

His brother had come home from Oxford, fired with antiquarian zeal; and he said one morning 'John, let's come up on to the Camp and have a dig to see if we can find something' . . . So they shouldered a spade each, and went up the hill, where they worked away for about an hour, with the result of turning up a piece of black pottery the size of one's hand, and some scores of coins of the Constantine period – say of the Lower Empire: most of them struck at Trèves.

Twenty years after this, the farmer who had the ground ploughed it for the first time since the Roman occupation: for it had been a rough pasture field. In doing so he turned up a pot, with a sherd broken from its side: the very sherd that had been taken off by the spade in the experimental digging just described.

Needless to say this cavalier attitude was not encouraged by the Club!

In addition to its *Proceedings* the Cotteswold Club has created two enduring monuments to its efforts. The first and perhaps the more important is the Badgeworth Nature Reserve, the only known site in Britain of *ranunculus ophioglossifolius*, adder's-tongue spearwort or the Badgeworth buttercup. First noticed in 1890, it did not appear continuously on the site until after 1911.⁴ The site attracted interest but it had no protection and it came under threat after 1930 when the property changed hands and the new owner prepared to sell the field for development. G.W. Hedley, a member of the Club, managed to buy it in January 1933 and the Club looked after it and paid for its upkeep for the next thirty years. When the Gloucestershire Trust for Nature Conservation was formed in 1961 the Club relinquished its responsibility. By that time no other English site for the plant was known. The Club had saved a species from extinction, created the first nature reserve in Gloucestershire and had advanced the cause of nature conservation in general.

The other major achievement of the Club was the publication of *Gloucestershire Flora*. The project was first suggested in 1877 by Professor G.S. Boulger of the Agricultural College.⁵ He began to collect materials for it, but he could not bring them to a state of readiness for publication and the project collapsed. The proposal was revived in 1907. Professor Boulger's 'very large ms. material' was handed to the new generation of would-be editors, appeals were made for additional information, and a series of progress reports appeared as appendices in the *Proceedings*. Hopes that a preliminary list could be published in 1923 were not fulfilled, but work continued and in 1931 a botanical sub-committee was appointed to oversee the work. An appeal for subscriptions was issued in 1939 but the outbreak of war caused plans for publication to be deferred. A new appeal with prospectus was issued in 1946; this was so successful that the print run was extended to 600 copies. *Gloucestershire Flora* was published to great acclaim in 1948 and it remains the standard work on its subject.

In the meantime, in 1946, the Club had its centenary celebration. It then numbered about 150 members, who paid £1 as an entrance fee and an annual subscription of £1. Many delegates from eminent institutions and societies paid tribute to the work of the Club in the fields of botany, entomology, archaeology, zoology and geology and especially in bringing these allied interests together for their mutual benefit. In recent years the Club's tradition of publication has fallen rather into abeyance but its social side remains vigorous.

Another society, sadly short-lived, was the Gloucester Cathedral Society. It was founded in

1882 by Canon W.H. Lyttleton for 'the promotion of an intelligent interest in Gloucester Cathedral amongst all classes' by arranging and subsequently publishing lectures, by collecting materials for a history of the cathedral and of the abbey it had superseded, and by arranging guided tours of the building for the working classes. The first lecture began inauspiciously as Dr. A.E. Freeman had lost both his voice and his script.⁶ He had intended to provide 'a long discourse on the city and abbey of Gloucester, and their position in the general history of the land'. His knowledge was so extensive that he had written 70 pages and had not got beyond the Norman era. Perhaps the loss of the script proved a blessing in disguise.

The Society attracted more than 150 subscribers for its first volume of Records, which comprised the texts of the lectures and additional papers. Contributors included Thomas Gambier Parry on 'The Builders and Buildings of the Cathedral'; Sir William Guise (who also chaired the inaugural meeting) on 'Historic Monuments in the Cathedral'; and F.S. Waller, the cathedral architect, on its Norman architecture.

In only its second full year doubts were being expressed about the continuance of the Society.⁷ Its founder and leading light had died and soon afterwards most of the other leading figures either died or moved away from Gloucester. Henry Law, the dean of the cathedral, died in 1884 and his successor on the day of his installation accepted the see of Exeter. The next dean was also only briefly in Gloucester before becoming master of Trinity College, Oxford, in 1886. In the following year Sir William Guise died.

Meetings continued sporadically for several years and a third volume of Records was published for the years 1885-97. The Society was never formally wound up, and on the death of its editor, Canon William Bazeley, in 1925 enough funds remained to publish in 1927 a belated second part to the third volume. This contained 'Headmasters and Ushers of the King's (College) School, Gloucester, 1545-1841', edited by Roland Austin from notes compiled by J.N. Langston, of which the last few unsold copies were donated to the school in 1993.

A notable characteristic of the period was the relatively small number of people who were active in these societies. The lists of officers and prominent members of the societies contain many names in common, and they were (naturally) ready to collaborate in such ventures as, for example, the establishment in 1896 of a joint reading room for the Cotteswold Club and the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society to house both societies' books. The cupboards made for this purpose were still being used by B.G.A.S. in 1996 to store its stock of publications. Pre-eminent among the leading lights of the local societies was Sir William Vernon Guise of Elmore. Second president (1859-1886) of the Cotteswold Club, inaugural president of the B.G.A.S. and chairman of the first meeting of the Gloucester Cathedral Society, his encouragement and vision lent much to the achievements of these bodies and on his death they lost a staunch friend. His magisterial Presidential address to the B.G.A.S. charted a course for the furtherance of archaeology and local history which in some respects is still incomplete.

Of Sir William's main interests archaeology was second only to geology. He had attempted to found a county archaeological society in the early 1840s, but after only four years it merged with the Cotteswold Club shortly after the Club's foundation. Guise therefore enthusiastically supported the establishment of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society on 21 April 1876, and the Society soon became the largest and most effective of the county societies of Gloucestershire. That the time was ripe for such a society was shown by the fact that when the first volume of its *Transactions* was published more than 500 members had subscribed, 15 per cent of them for life. About one third of the members came from Bristol and Clifton.⁸ From its earliest years a few members have expressed concern that the Society's activities have been biased too far towards one or the other of its twin centres of Bristol and the county town, a

concern that was reflected in the discussion at the inaugural meeting as to which geographical element of the Society's name should have precedence. However, much of the Society's strength has sprung from the wise decision to balance its activities between Bristol (the venue for the inaugural meeting) and Gloucester (the site of its first annual meeting) and had it not done so the Society might well have suffered the fate of its short-lived predecessor.

The Society was fortunate to attract men of vision and ability as its early leaders.⁹ Sir William Guise led the Society as President of its Council until the year before his death in 1887. The Revd. (later Canon) William Bazeley, who became an honorary secretary in 1879 and General Secretary soon afterwards, remained very influential till his resignation in 1907. The quality and importance of the Society's publications was guaranteed by the election of Sir John Maclean as editor in 1878. Under his control the *Transactions* achieved a reputation for excellence which it has held ever since. He also edited Smyth's *Lives of the Berkeleys* and *Hundred of Berkeley* for the Society, making available for the first time the complete texts of those remarkable compilations. This may have stimulated the production of a catalogue of the muniments of Berkeley Castle, begun in 1886 and published privately in 1892. However, Maclean's financial ability did not match his scholarship. Despite measures of retrenchment the cost to the Society of the editions of Smyth's works exceeded subscription income by £131, a large sum for an organisation not ten years old, and this caused the Society to reject other proposals for publication. The episode foreshadowed the problems of marketing and financing the Society's occasional publications which were to recur regularly for the next eighty years or so. Though the *Transactions* continued to appear annually with only a few exceptions, the Society's publication of monographs was erratic and lacked a consistent policy. Despite this, some excellent volumes were produced. C.S. Taylor's *Analysis of the Domesday Survey of Gloucestershire* (1889) and the *Bibliographers' Manual of Gloucestershire Literature* (1895–7) are the outstanding examples; both are still indispensable in their fields.

With the retirement of Canon Bazeley in 1907 and the death of Sir Brook Kay, President of Council 1887–1903, in the same year, the founding generation of the Society passed away. The original project to establish museums in Bristol and Gloucester had not been pursued as the City Museums met that need, but the Society had founded a library, by then enriched by the magnificent gift by his widow of the books of the Revd. David Royce; it had undertaken several major archaeological digs and published the results of many more; and it had been instrumental in preserving some notable sites and buildings, thereby setting a pattern for its principal activities which still obtains. The over-elaborate structure of the Society created on its foundation was still in being, with more than a dozen geographical districts each having Vice-Presidents and local secretaries, but it is doubtful if it was ever fully effective in practice.

The Society was seriously affected by the First World War. Those who would normally have had time and interest to devote to its work were involved either in active service or in war-related work at home. By 1917 there were only 423 members and three of the principal officers had resigned simultaneously. However the Society's fortunes were revived by J.E. Pritchard as Chairman of Council and Roland Austin, now General Secretary as well as Librarian of the Society. The Society's administration was simplified, its subscription and membership records brought up to date, and a recruitment campaign was begun which eventually restored membership to pre-war levels.

The Society's main achievements in the inter-war years were the preservation of the Roman site at Chedworth which was purchased and later given to the National Trust; the management on behalf of the Royal Society of Arts of Arlington Row, Bibury, also later handed over to the National Trust; and the support and sponsorship of a succession of important excavations, many led by Mrs. Elsie Clifford. The Society had celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1926 with its

membership at 743. However other agencies were already beginning to appear which could forward the Society's objects, such as the Bristol Archives Office in 1924, the Bristol Record Society in 1932 and the Gloucestershire Record Office in 1936, the last's principal officer being Roland Austin. Few publications were produced in this period, the most notable being G.B. Grundy's *Saxon Charters of Gloucestershire* (1935). The effects of the Second World War on the Society were similar to those experienced a generation earlier: membership and levels of activity in all areas declined sharply, and it was several years before the Society's membership recovered.

In the last forty years or so three major figures have fundamentally influenced the Society's work. Professor McGrath came to Bristol in 1946 just before the bequest of Alfred Bruce Robinson became available. This provided for the first time a source of income specifically intended for the publication of historical records. From 1951 a steady stream of volumes was produced, almost all under Professor McGrath's aegis as general editor, to an excellent academic standard. As the terms of the Robinson bequest limited the range of sources to parish and diocesan records of a mainly genealogical nature, in the late 1960s an attempt was made to reconstitute the Society's Records Section and widen its terms of reference. This was only partially successful, perhaps because the books only sold in small numbers even within the Society's membership. After Professor McGrath's resignation in 1980 only two further volumes appeared. Regular publication of historical records resumed with the establishment of the Gloucestershire Record Series in 1988.

The second major influence on the Society in the post-war era was Dame Joan Evans. As editor of the *Transactions* for a decade she maintained the high standards the Society had come to accept as its due, and later by a generous gift she created an endowment to ensure that its publication could continue unhampered by financial difficulties.

The third and most lasting influence has been exercised by Dr. Elizabeth Ralph. Elected General Secretary in 1948, she quietly and effectively guided the affairs of the Society for more than thirty years, during which its membership doubled and its influence was greatly extended. In particular she coordinated the provision of advice on listed buildings operated through the Council for British Archaeology since 1956. She was elected President for the Society's Centenary year of 1976 and retired as General Secretary ten years later.

In 1976 the Committee for Archaeology in Gloucestershire was created under the aegis of the B.G.A.S., to act as a campaigning body and clearing house for archaeological issues. The Committee has brought together all amateur and professional interests, has published the *Handbook of Archaeology in Gloucestershire* and a *Code of Practice*, and has provided a means of co-ordinating expert evidence at public enquiries. Another body which owes its origins in part to the B.G.A.S. is the Gloucester and District Archaeological Research Group (GADARG). Founded in 1967 it took over the work of the Gloucester Roman Research Committee established by the Society in 1931. It has organised, supported and published work on excavations and historical research and it produces an annual journal, *Glevensis*, of a very good standard.

Many similar town or village societies have been founded in the last thirty years, producing good publications and encouraging the preservation of local antiquities. Despite, or perhaps because of this, the B.G.A.S. and its older sister body the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club continue to flourish in their 120th and 150th years respectively.

Notes

1. Rules, reprinted in *Proc. C.N.F.C.* 40, 50.
2. Annual address 26 February 1861, reprinted in *ibid.* 3, 15.

3. Annual address 4 May 1894, reprinted in *ibid.* **11**, 189.
4. *Badgeworth Nature Reserve*, ed. Sonia Holland (1966): copy in Glos. R.O., D 4059/6/13.
5. *Proc. C.N.F.C.* **7**, 3.
6. *Records of Gloucester Cathedral*, ed. W. Bazeley, i (1882–3), 6.
7. *Ibid.* ii (1883–4), 1.
8. These figures are based on the list of members printed at the end of *TBGAS* **1**.
9. The following account of the Society's early years draws in part on Elizabeth Ralph, 'The Society 1876–1976', in P. McGrath and J. Cannon (eds.), *Essays in Bristol and Gloucestershire History* (BGAS, 1976). The opinions expressed are those of the present writer.

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