

*The Complete Diary of a Cotswold Parson. The Diaries of the Revd Francis Edward Witts 1783-1854 in 10 volumes.* Alan Sutton (ed). Volumes 1-8: Amberley Publishing, Stroud, 2008-9; volumes 9 and 10: Fonthill Media, Stroud, 2018 and 2020. Numerous colour and b/2 ill., as detailed below. Hardback, volumes 1-9, £50 per volume, volume 10, £80. [ISBNs: vol 1, 978-1-84868-000-5; vol 2, 978-1-84868-001-2; vol 3, 978-1-84868-002-9; vol 4, 978-1-84868-003-6; vol 5, 978-1-84868-004-3; vol 6, 978-1-84868-005-0; vol 7, 978-1-84868-006-7; vol 8, 978-1-84868-007-4; vol 9, 978-1-78155-623-8; vol 10, 978-1-78155-800-3].

In 1978, Alan Sutton, who was on the verge of establishing what was to become one of the country's leading publishers of local history, published *The Diary of a Cotswold Parson*, which comprised extracts from the diaries of the Revd Francis Edward Witts (1783-1854), who was Rector of Upper Slaughter from 1808 until his death 45 years later, as well as vicar of Stanway from 1814 onwards. The extracts were chosen, edited and introduced by the Gloucestershire-based architectural historian, David Verey (who had served as President of this Society in 1972-3), and, remarkably, the book is still in print today.

In so doing, Alan Sutton became aware of just how much David Verey's selections were the proverbial 'tip of the iceberg' and that the diaries contained far more of value to historians, local and national, than Verey's modest 189 page book would allow. Consequently, in 1981, with the considerable - and continuing - support of the present Francis Witts (the Revd Witts' great-great-grandson and the current custodian of the Witts family papers) and other members of the Witts family, he began to arrange for the typing of the entire diaries and embarked on a search for a suitable editor; failing to find one, he took on the task himself and this monumental ten-volume series, *The Complete Diary of a Cotswold Parson*, published in stages between 2008 and 2020, is the result.

Some idea of the sheer scale of both the original diaries and the published volumes may be conveyed by a series of stark statistics. By the editor's own calculation, the surviving diaries exceed two million words, while the ten published volumes comprise 304 pages of introduction, 4,554 pages of diary transcriptions, 48 pages of colour plates (in addition to around 1,200 black & white illustrations within the text itself, including pages from the diaries and other family papers) and 1,456 pages of a remarkably comprehensive index (volume 10), which, due to its size, has been published in two parts. When title pages, preambles and so forth are included, the total number of pages reaches a staggering 6,531: when placed on a bookshelf, the volumes measure 18 inches 'end to end'.

However, these volumes are far more about quality than quantity, for as well as recording the Revd Witts' personal, family and professional life from the age of 12 onwards, the diaries provide a wealth of information about life and society in Gloucestershire and beyond during the first half of the 19th century. In addition to his clerical duties, Witts was a prominent and well-connected member of County society, serving as a magistrate (having been appointed as such in 1812), as Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Stow-on-the-Wold Poor Law Union from its establishment in 1836, as a Governor of the Gloucester Infirmary and a Committee member of the city's lunatic asylum, and as a trustee of the Stow Provident Bank and of several Cotswold turnpikes. Through these, and his wider social connections, he came into contact with a remarkable range of his contemporaries, and his diaries contain many 'pen portraits' of his fellow clergy and of the

professional and leisured individuals with whom he worked, visited and dined. He also provides considerable information about the workings of the many institutions with which he was involved, including the church, the courts, the police, prisons, workhouses and asylums, and of the political life of the County. He was also by no means parochial in his interests, for his diaries include many observations on national (and in particular, parliamentary) and international affairs.

Inevitably, given his wide range of involvements, Witts travelled regularly around the County, in particular between Upper Slaughter and the Quarter Sessions at Gloucester, and he was a keen observer of the world around him, describing the landscapes, towns, villages, churches and country houses that he visited, and providing detailed descriptions of the many new buildings and developments that he witnessed, from canals, bridges, roads and railways to the rapidly expanding spa town of Cheltenham, through which he passed regularly.

Life was not, however, all work for Francis Witts. He enjoyed – and records - visiting exhibitions, attending concerts (including the Three Choirs Festival at Gloucester) and the theatre. He was also an avid reader and his diaries include his own reviews of many of the books he read (over 500 of which are noted), from contemporary novels and accounts of travels and adventure to serious works of philosophy and theology.

A total of 105 diaries and ‘standalone’ accounts of Witts’ travels in England, Scotland and Germany have survived, although there are significant gaps, notably between 1808 and January 1820. It is clear that Witts ceased writing them at certain times of his life, while some may have been lost or destroyed. Fortunately, there is other material within the Witts family papers that helps to ‘fill the gaps’ in the narrative of his life, most notably the diaries of his mother Agnes (d. 1825) and of his wife, Margaret (d. 1850). Although his earliest diaries date from 1795, it is not until 1801, when Witts and his parents returned to England after several years’ residence in Scotland, Germany and Denmark, that the Gloucestershire references begin. Witts was, however, no stranger to the County, having been born in Cheltenham, with his early schooling at Elmore, and his parents, who led a somewhat nomadic life following their return to England, often stayed for long periods in both Cheltenham and Clifton from 1801 onwards, before finally settling in Cheltenham.

Volumes 1 to 9 each have the similar format of an Introduction, followed by the transcriptions (with footnotes where needed) plus the appropriate acknowledgements and picture credits. Volume 1, which covers Witts’ early diaries from 1795 to 1805, is the largest volume, with the longest Introduction (188 pages), comprising a detailed account of Witts’ life and work, and of his immediate and extended families, as well as summarising the content of that volume’s diaries – the latter being the approach taken by the far shorter Introductions to volumes 2 to 9.

The two-part volume 10 is very different – it is an index volume, and is the key to accessing the wealth of information that lies within the diaries. Compiled jointly by Alan Sutton and Stephen Lloyd, a descendant of the Revd Witts, the index is in three parts, in each of which the references are to the date of mention in the diaries rather than to the volume and page number. It is a truly astonishing achievement and really does need to be seen to be believed.

First there is an index of places – and even a casual glance at this makes it immediately clear what a treasure trove the diaries are for anyone studying the history of early 19th-century Bristol and Gloucestershire. One hundred and seven separate subjects are listed for Bristol, Clifton and the

Hotwells, plus many other incidental mentions, while there are entries for 177 Gloucestershire places, those for Cheltenham, Gloucester, Northleach, Stanway, Stow and Upper Slaughter being especially extensive.

Next comes a detailed subject index, in itself a good indication of the breadth of Witts' interests and involvements. This comprises six sections: the Domestic Environment - home and family; Art, Music, Pastimes and Theatre; Society, the Law, Local Governance, Education and Public Health; Agriculture, Commerce, Industry, Transport and Infrastructure; the Establishment, Politics, Religion, the Armed Forces and International Affairs; and finally, Abstract and Miscellaneous, which includes such varied topics as archaeology, slavery and its abolition, sport and notable weather events. Each of the sections into which the main heading is divided includes a brief introduction, followed by the dates of the diary entries and extracts from them.

Finally, there is a biographical index, with a note on virtually every person mentioned in the diaries – around 3,600 of them, from the aristocracy and gentry, through bankers, clergy and solicitors, to workhouse inmates and prisoners in the County Gaol. It is a veritable cross-section of society. Wherever possible, a biographical introduction, often quite extensive, is provided for each person, as well as the date or dates of the diary entries, and in many cases extracts from them. One can well believe that, as the editor states in the volume's introduction, it has taken him 15 years to compile.

Congratulations are certainly due to Alan Sutton on the completion of this mammoth, almost 40 year task, as are the sincere thanks of historians, whether local, family or national, as well as the general reader, for making these fascinating diaries accessible to all, particularly now that the index volume is available. As well as tracing the life and work of a significant member of early 19th-century Gloucestershire society, the volumes provide an invaluable quarry of information and opinion on so many aspects of the life of Gloucestershire and beyond; the fact that this Society's two most recent Presidential Addresses both draw (with the necessary permissions) on Witts' observations – one on the impact of the 1825 banking crisis on the development of Cheltenham and the other on his accounts of the County's roads – is certainly an indication of that. Anyone studying an aspect of the history of Bristol or Gloucestershire –or, indeed, of England as a whole - during the first half of the 19th century would be well advised to check what the Revd Witts may have had to say about it.

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