

PREFACE

*In terms of historical scholarship,
Herefordshire is something of a forgotten county.*

Only one introductory volume of the Victoria County History has been published in 1908 and a county history, projected in 1804 by John Duncumb, remains incomplete. The county is also remote from the seats of learning and has generally been neglected by students in search of subjects for dissertations. Only its flourishing antiquarian society – the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club – and the three beautiful but scarce volumes of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, published in the early 1930's, illuminate the twilight. Thus the work of local historians such as Wynnell Hunt is especially valuable. Her research on Cradley adds to the patchwork of similar endeavours on the county's rural parishes and towns. These studies bring alive aspects of the past, providing some essential reference points in this age of accelerating change.

The tradition of writing parish histories extends back to the 18th. century and beyond. Gilbert White's *Antiquities of Selborne* was published in 1789 – but looking along my shelves, I find few signs of parochial antiquarianism outside the major towns of Herefordshire until the late 19th. century. Samuel Bentley's *Short Account of Bosbury (1881)* strikes my eye and far more magisterial, *The History of Ewyas Harold (1902)* by A.T. Bannister. With the advent of self-publication and the resurgence of the local publisher in the late 20th. century, the pace has quickened and Wynnell's book is in good company. It joins a growing list of parish histories, which are especially plentiful in east Herefordshire.

Every parish is different and every parish history is distinct. Cradley's early history as a church estate means it is relatively well-documented. It appears to have lain upon an ancient frontier between the Hwicce and the Magonsaete, two sub-kingdoms which emerged in the fragmented world of post-Roman Britain. Earlier historians, studying dialect and intonation, placed it within a Celtic world, quite distinct from the Severn valley over the hill to the east. Wynnell shows that the key to all this lies in the study of place-names. Much is also said about the

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agricultural history of the parish, which, of course, was its life's blood. I remember in the 1980's, when I ran a local history class in Cradley, how impressed I was with the comprehensive collection of parish records, dating principally from the 18th century, in the Herefordshire Record Office. Uniquely, the work of all the parish officers is recorded down to the regular payments made by the churchwardens to little boys for killing 'urchins' (hedgehogs) and a remarkable numbers of birds of prey. Wynnell has exploited this source thoroughly but also has had the patience to wade into the copious records of the 19th. century. A detailed history of all the institutions of Cradley is to be found here, as well as a chapter exploiting the oral history of the village – a fleeting source, often forgotten by local historians who get submerged in the written word.

This is a book full of riches, a gift to all the inhabitants of Cradley, present and future; an essential tool for the village school and the first point of reference for all those scholars who may wish to take the story further.

David Whitehead, Hereford, December 2001.