

HISTORIANS OF MERE - Part I

by MF Tighe

The objective of this paper is to give something of the background of those who have previously studied the history of Mere, and to provide a guide to their work with an indication of where the results of their research can be found. It also offers some pointers to future study

Whilst Mere is mentioned in the various diaries of early travellers, these entries give us little which is reliable by modern standards. In the years 1659-70 Joan Aubrey, the Stuart antiquarian of Kington St. Michael in the north of the county, conceived the idea of a Topographical history of Wiltshire, never completed, the text of which was deposited in the Bodlian Library. It was finally published, with a commentary by the Rev J.E. Jackson, by the Wiltshire Archaeological & Natural History Society in 1862. It is an interesting example of the thoughts of the time and records details of the interior of the church, but to the serious historian of today it is of little practical help. It seems that Aubrey was the first to attribute the derivation of Mere to the Anglo-Saxon *maere* - a boundary. The first scholarly approach to the subject was by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, in his "Hundred of Mere", published in 1822, a copy of which is in the ownership of Mere Historical Society.

In 1717 Henry Hoare, second son of the founder of Hoare's Bank, of which he was a partner, bought the manor of Stourton, demolished the existing house, and proceeded to build the present Stourhead House, completed in the year of his death in 1725. His son, also Henry, as well as continuing in the banking firm, inherited the estate and laid out the grounds as we know them today. In the absence of surviving male issue, he settled the banking business on his nephew, Richard, the first baronet, who had married his daughter, and the Stourhead estate on Richard's son [and his own grandson], Richard Colt Hoare, who was to leave the bank and thus preserve the estate should calamity strike the bank. Henry died in 1785, and in 1787 Richard Colt Hoare became the second baronet: it is to him that we owe much of the development of the gardens and grounds, and the enrichment of the house by works of art either collected by him during his travels or specially commissioned by him from leading artists of the day. The Stourhead archives are deposited at the Wiltshire Record Office.

Sir Richard was not only a connoisseur, but also a scholar with a particular interest in the antiquities of Wiltshire: he collaborated with William Cunnington, the early archaeologist, and this resulted in the publication of the 2 volume "Ancient History of Wiltshire". This was followed by the 13 volumes of "The History of Modern Wiltshire" which he co-ordinated, writing some volumes himself. This history covered the county by Hundreds, and it is "The Hundred of Mere" which for the first time offers a reliable base for the study of our town. He died, a lonely man, in 1838, and is commemorated by a life size statue in Salisbury Cathedral, where his achievements are recorded.

Not surprisingly, much of the Mere volume is devoted to Stourhead itself, but we have contemporary descriptions of the church in Mere and its monuments and a wealth of genealogical information. He made a close study of a large number of documents, not previously studied, and set out in their original texts. Only a few years before what is now the Public Record Office had been established in the Tower of London, he was the first local historian to make full use of this invaluable source. His transcription, and analysis, of the *Survey of the Manor of Mere 24 Edw I* [which he appears to ascribe to 1300, rather than 1296] provided a firm base for our knowledge of the period.

Colt Hoare, of course, was naturally coloured in his approach by the fact that he was of the land-owning gentry. He is lyrical in his praise of the benefits accruing from the 1807 Enclosure of nearly half of the land of the parish, referring to what was presumably Mappedore Common as "a shelter to rogues and sheep stealers". At the same time, he records that on this site several barrows containing urns of very rude pottery were discovered - no traces remain thanks to agricultural "improvement" - and draws the significant conclusion that the lowlands on the edge of the Vale were occupied in pre-Roman days as well as the downlands. It is also thanks to him and Cunnington that we know so much about these pre-historic remains, albeit their excavation techniques probably destroyed as much as they discovered. It is by his observation that we know for certain that a barrow in West Knoyle was crowned by a windmill, all traces of which had gone not many years later - the only one near Mere apart from that at East Knoyle.

His work remains as the foundation of all studies of the earlier history of Mere, and after nearly two centuries is essential reading for the student. Apart from occasional references in the Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine, it was to be nearly 80 years before any further serious study was made, and then it was from an unexpected source - a farmer, working by the light of an oil lamp in the inhospitable surroundings of Mere Down Farm.

It is to Thomas Henry Baker [1833-1914] that we are indebted for so much of our knowledge of the town up to the start of this century. (His life and work is described in Dr David Longbourne's account which is held by the Mere Historical Society). He was omnivorous in his researches, meticulously recorded in his beautifully clear handwriting in the three volumes presented to the Vicar of Mere in 1952 by the executors of his youngest daughter. They are the most important resource available to any student. In addition, he transcribed the whole of the Parish Registers and Churchwardens' Accounts up to the early XIXc, and these transcripts also remain in the Vicar's custody. They were not the only registers he transcribed - he copied other Wiltshire parishes, and contributed to the well known "Phillimore" series of Marriage Registers.

Sadly, but as is so often the case with the amateur student, Baker noted far more than he was able to publish. His 1883 "Record of the Seasons &c" has only passing references to Mere, but no doubt there would not have been the market then for a detailed study of the history of an obscure Wiltshire town. For some years he contributed a monthly article to the Parish Magazine, very few copies of which survive, but the only published work was an article of some 113 pages in the 1897 edition of Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine, which was reprinted as a separate pamphlet. It is this pamphlet to which reference is most frequently made, and which for many years was the only serious publication available. It is a masterly summary of the knowledge then available, but was, of course, aimed at the specialist readership of the members of the Wiltshire Archaeological Society, rather than the popular market. It should always be studied in conjunction with his MS notes.

It is amazing that such detailed studies should have been carried out by a man who, in the toughest period for British farmers, had the responsibility of farming 1,000 acres of Wiltshire countryside and none of the facilities available to the modern researcher. Much local historical research was being carried out at the time across the country, but usually in the more restful environment of the Victorian vicarage, and Baker's work stands comparison with any of it. As might be expected, there are certain areas which are neglected. He makes little or no reference to trade, to manufacturing industry, or to social conditions, but this is only to be expected. Such matters were hardly regarded as respectable to the late Victorian student of history, and were generally ignored. Strangely, Hine's "History of Beaminster", a contemporary account of a community strikingly like Mere, is one of the very few to have avoided this taboo. It has to be left to the late XXc historian to fill these lacunae. It was fortunate that Baker had the co-operation of two successive vicars, the Rev E.G. Wyld and the

Rev J.A.Lloyd, who shared his interest, and with them he created a small museum over the North Porch of the Church.

Although he cannot strictly be regarded as an historian of Mere, mention must be made of Charles Edwin Ponting FSA [1850-1932], an architect who was Diocesan Surveyor of Salisbury from 1883 to 1923. During these 40 years he was responsible for work on 237 churches. His many restorations were always sympathetic, avoiding the excesses of so many XIXc restorers. In the course of his work, he produced a succession of papers on the history and architecture of churches where he was working, published in Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine. In volume xxix is his masterly study of St. Michael's. In 1888 drastic rebuilding was proposed at Woodland Manor, and Ponting was brought onto the scene by the Rev E.G.Wyld. Ponting's published survey of the building was instrumental in preserving the original features of Mere's most interesting house. His reports go beyond the dry discussion of structure and reveal his antiquarian interest.

After Baker left Mere, there seems to have been little or no study of its history for half a century. A few local guidebooks, published by Edmunds the chemist, touched on the background, but they all prove on reading to be unashamedly [and even unthinkingly] derived from Baker.