

HISTORIANS OF MERE

Part II 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.

The next stage in the recording of Mere's history came from an equally unexpected source, though one which gave a welcome impetus to local studies across the whole country. In 1955 the National Federation of Women's Institutes organised a national competition for the compilation of Village Scrapbooks. Nearly all WI's participated, and as a result many villages acquired fascinating collections of local interest. Mere's contribution was a most impressive volume, but it is understood that it failed to win first prize in its area because it was more of a history than a scrapbook; their loss has been our gain. For the first time for some 50 years an attempt had been made by Mere people to put together the story of Mere, illustrated by a number of old pictures. The whole is handsomely bound in canvas, as a tribute to what had been Mere's staple industry; one's only criticism of this is that a coarse linen was used, rather than the bed-ticking which would have been truly appropriate as Mere's historic industry. The scrap book remains in Mere, carefully guarded by the Women's Institute.

It was fortunate that the WI selected Miss Joyce Rutter, of Newport House, Salisbury Street, as editor of their "Scrapbook of Local History". Born in 1905, the daughter of Dr. F.B.Rutter, Quaker, physician and philanthropist, of Dewes House, where she spent her childhood, she had an unrivalled knowledge of the history and the families of Mere. For many years she had been responsible for the WEA classes in the Lecture Hall, founded by her grandfather, John Farley Rutter, in whose management she was deeply involved, and was acknowledged as the authority on the history of the town. Miss Rutter persuaded different people to write various sections and helped them with research and to find photographs, many of which were her own.

The preparation of the scrapbook was the catalyst for a renewed interest in local history, and in 1957 at a public meeting in the Lecture Hall an Editing Committee was formed to publish it in a form that could be made available to the public. The Committee was chaired by the Rev. N.E.E.Johnson, then vicar, and consisted of Miss E.M.Morris, Miss A.Joyce Rutter, J.L.Thomas, R.P.Coward, M.E.Evans, J.R.Hooper, A.C.Wardle & Mr. & Mrs. J.F.Rutter. Miss Rutter was the moving spirit behind the production of the book, to which a total of 44 people contributed in various ways, and which was published in 1958 under the title "The Story of Mere". It has long been out of print, but a number of copies are still available for reference in the town.

In 1972 it was decided that a second book, in a different format, was called for and the Editing Committee, now under the chairmanship of Mrs. Norah V.Rutter, published "Mere, a Wiltshire Country Town", in which much of the historical content of "The Story" was condensed, but supplemented by much new material and bringing

the story up to date, with a number of new illustrations. It was a great success, and was reprinted in 1979.

The two books were not the only result of the original WI scrapbook. It was as a direct result of the interest created that at a meeting where Miss Rutter gave an illustrated lecture on "XVIIIc Mere", the Mere Historical Society was formed, with her as vice-chairman, archivist and librarian. It has now been one of the town's most active societies for 25 years. On her death in 1988, Miss Rutter left many of her books and papers to the Society, in whose library they can be consulted.

The same Committee which organised the meeting launching the Historical Society had in 1970 taken another important step by setting up the Mere Museum, which for quite a while operated as a part of the Society, until being established in 1978 as a separate body. The Museum inherited a motley collection of artefacts from the collection started by T.H.Baker in the 1890's, and has, under the curatorship of Dr Longbourne, a member of the Editing Committee, assembled a collection of great interest. It is now under the control of a committee representative of local interests, and, with the guidance of the Wiltshire Museums Service, operates to the full standards of conservation. More than anyone, it is to Dr Longbourne that Mere has come to look for knowledge of the town's history.

Since 1975 there has been no further overall historical publication on Mere. However, the Historical Society's biennial "Newsletter" has been the vehicle for occasional short papers on the subject. In addition, the Friends of Mere Museum produce a series "Mere Museum Monographs", papers on specific subjects of interest. Both the Newsletter and the series have been the work of local researchers and have added to our knowledge. The Historical Society's library contains all of them, and a number of other books and papers which touch in one way or another on the history of the town and its surroundings, including a number of pamphlets, press cuttings and other ephemera of local interest. In 1995 two "proper" Mere people, Dorothy George & Jim Doddington, published "Mere Memories" - an exercise in oral history setting down the memories of many of the older inhabitants; if only our ancestors had done the same!

"The Story" & "A Wiltshire Country Town" remain the only books giving an overall picture of the history of Mere, and the sheer economic facts of publication costs mean that they are likely to remain so. It would be a brave - or philanthropic - writer who would embark today on a publication of such a scale. Few small towns have such comprehensive histories written in this century, and they remain a monument to those who put them together. They were the result of team work and have all the advantages, and few of the defects, of such an approach. There are, it is true, one or two areas where one wishes that more had been included, and others where original rather than secondary sources might have been used, but these are minor considerations.

Much, however, has happened since 1975 in the world of historical research. There has been a great increase in public interest, fostered by University extra-mural activities, Field Clubs, WEA classes and others, and fuelled by the growth of the retired population with increased leisure and still active minds. Allied to this amateur interest has been a growth in the professionalism of a number of those researching,

with an emphasis on thorough research and use of primary sources. They have been greatly assisted by the publications of a new generation of professional historians, such as Michael Aston, Joe Bettey and John Chandler, who have been studying the history of Wessex in such a scholarly but readable fashion. Recent years have also seen the establishment of Family History Societies, bringing together the many people with a desire to know more about their roots and ancestry; invariably their researches run in parallel to, and greatly assist, the work of the local historian. It is particularly noteworthy that in all these spheres the emphasis nowadays is on the social and commercial side of life. The XIXc historian tended to concentrate on political and military aspects; we now are more interested in what life itself was really like.

At the same time, the last 40 years have seen a wealth of new research material become available, such as the release of the census returns from 1851 to 1891. In 1964 the Wiltshire Record Society published the 1762-75 letters of Henry Hindley, the Hamburg merchant of Mere, with an analysis by the highly respected textile historian Julia de L. Mann. It is only in recent years that there has been an awareness of the vast amount of material open to the researcher in the County Record Office at Trowbridge. Study in fields such as these will, over the years, throw much new light on the story of our town.

Whilst it is hard to see local publication of a fully comprehensive and detailed history of our locality ever becoming a practical proposition, the time may come when we will have it available. Throughout this century publication of the magisterial "Victorian County History" series has continued over the country as a whole, and Wiltshire has been better served than some other counties. This series follows the same pattern as did Colt Hoare of devoting a separate volume to each of the traditional Hundreds: however, whereas Colt Hoare started with his home Hundred of Mere as Volume one, it appears that the VCH intends to leave it to the last, and it will apparently be some few years before completion. Even then, it is a highly expensive project which has to be the subject of the whims of public funding, and it would be a brave man who committed himself to a finite date for it. In many ways this makes the task of the amateur local historian more important, in that there could be so much more material made available to the compilers when they finally reach our neglected corner of the County. In the final analysis, the Mere volume may prove to be a far better product through the delay. Of one thing we can be certain - it will not find a home on many private book shelves, as the cost of each volume puts it out of reach of most pockets.

In conclusion, the Foreword to "Mere, a Wiltshire Country Town" is as true today as it was twenty years ago, and merits repetition: "Local history is a fascinating and open-ended subject. It appeals to the detective in us and to our need to identify with the past. It reminds us that what is commonplace and unremarkable today may be the nostalgia of tomorrow. But it is never possible to stand back and remark 'That is complete': there is always more to do."

Since the writing of the first part of this article, other writings of T.H.Baker have come to light. Wiltshire & Swindon Record Office hold, as part of the Diocesan Records, [WRO G23199911] a large MS book which is basically an index of items relating to Mere and district in The Salisbury & Winchester Journal over a long

period. Loose inside it are a number of sheets in which he sets out, no punches barred, his recollections of and opinions on a number of local farming families. Another large volume of notes is held by Somerset Record Office; this covers mainly matters concerning the Somerset villages with which his family were connected, but interspersed are a number of items of Mere interest.

In 1966 the writer commenced the publication of "Mere Papers", a series of occasional papers on aspects of the history of Mere; this article formed the introduction to the series. The intention was to make available, in a convenient and economic format, the result of amateur researches locally. Each issue, of 24 or 28 pages in A5 format, is produced simply by a local "Copy Shop" and is sold in aid of The Friends of the Church of St. Michael the Archangel, Mere. Considerable local interest has been created, and so far eight papers have been published, with a number of others contemplated; it is hoped that they will make a useful contribution for posterity.

This completes a two-part article; part I appeared in the Autumn 1998 edition of The Regional Historian.

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