Victoria County History: Shropshire VI Shrewsbury

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The *Victoria History of the Counties of England*, more commonly known as the ‘Victoria County History’ or simply the ‘VCH’, founded in 1899, is without doubt the greatest publishing project in English local history. Its rededication by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in the year of her Diamond Jubilee, signifies that today, it continues to play a leading role in promoting English local history. (1) Reputed for producing its famous ‘Big Red Books’, it now publishes popular paperbacks, such as, the ‘England’s Past for Everyone’ series and recent ‘VCH Shorts’ – single parish volumes on Mapledurwell (Hampshire) and Eastnor (Herefordshire), and increasingly provides online resources through the freely accessible website: ‘British History Online’. (2) Maintaining the format originally devised in Victorian England, the VCH continues to study the nation through the locality in the 21st century. When it was established this was initially from national records with research being conducted in national archives. However, post-1945 there was a greater emphasis placed on the use of local records with full-time staff being based at county record offices, as was the case in Shropshire.

*The VCH in Shropshire.*

In-line with the overall VCH plan general volumes have been published for Shropshire. The first published in the pre-war period was on natural history, early man, the Romano-British period, Domesday, ancient earthworks, industries and forestry. (3) A county committee was established in Shropshire in 1960, work resuming in 1961 funded by the County Council with the second covering ecclesiastical and religious history, schools, sport, Domesday and administrative and political history. (4) There have also been published several topographical volumes giving accounts of the history of each parish by topic and organised by hundred. For instance, these volumes have covered 22 parishes in central Shropshire, stretching from the Severn Valley up to the South Shropshire Hills; an area between the north of the River Severn and the Weald Moors, covering most of the East Shropshire coalfield, two parishes from the borough of Wenlock and eight from Bradford hundred contributing territory to Telford new town; and a volume encompassing Wenlock, Upper Corvedale the Stretton Hills and the Upper Division of Munslow Hundred. (5) There has also been a thematic volume on agriculture with contributions by leading agrarian historians namely, Peter Edwards and Anne Kettle. (6) By comparison with other Midland counties, Shropshire is well
Parochial structure has presented problems for the study of towns which are usually multi-township, with urban activities being the concern of individual parochial administration until the municipal reforms of the 1830s. Nevertheless, the VCH has not avoided studying towns and cities, which it began to study in-depth in the 1960s and 1970s as urban history developed as a separate discipline. Notably Hoskins argued that major towns should be studied separately, volumes for Leicester and Birmingham being published in 1958 and 1968 respectively. Indeed topographical volumes have since been published covering Beverley (Yorkshire), Coventry (Warwickshire), Gloucester (Gloucestershire), Hull (Yorkshire), Lichfield (Staffordshire), Oxford (Oxfordshire), Stafford (Staffordshire), Stoke-on-Trent (Staffordshire), Telford (Shropshire), York (Yorkshire) and parts of the West Midlands conurbation. In addition, volumes for the counties of Essex and Middlesex cover essentially London suburbs and numerous volumes have been published which include the histories of towns of local and regional importance. Recent volumes have explored Witney (Oxfordshire), Burton-upon-Trent (Staffordshire) and Corby new town (Northamptonshire).

Turning to the book under review, in terms of methodology, this volume adopts the approach or model pioneered by VCH Cheshire in the treatment of Chester, and is structured chronologically with the first part outlining the story of Shrewsbury. It is essentially an urban biography – a fashionable approach suited to a general audience, covering aspects such as topography and the built environment, administrative and political organisations, and economic, social and religious developments, ranging from 700 AD to the 20th century. This format for the typology of large towns can be replicated in other counties in the future, for example Hereford or Worcester.

Shrewsbury boasts a largely unaltered medieval street plan, and over 600 listed buildings, including some of the finest timber-framed buildings in England, Ditherington flax mill, notably the first iron-framed building in the world constructed in 1796/7, a Norman castle, Shrewsbury Abbey and the remains of medieval town walls. It recounts the town’s history from the early medieval period until the 21st century in a series of chapters written by experts. They include the archaeologist Dr. Nigel Baker (University of Birmingham) and Professor Richard Holt on Shrewsbury before 1200. Dr. Alan Thacker, Robert and the late Dorothy Cromarty explore the town between 1200 and 1350, when Shrewsbury was of national importance. W. A. Champion writes on developments between 1350 and 1780 when the town ‘within the walls’ achieved its current shape and character. The well-known local historian Barrie Trinder, noted for his work on the Ironbridge area, examines the modern period, its industrial development and suburban spread. There are also sections on individual religious congregations and their buildings, institutions and their continuity, and topics particular to Shrewsbury, such as county institutions, the town walls and castle.

In the ‘Introduction’ (pp. 1–4) Thacker defines the town of Shrewsbury and the focus of the volume on the area bounded by the meandering loop of the River Severn, the town’s suburbs, common fields and moors and Abbey Foregate. This area, despite being slightly enlarged by the Municipal Reform Act of 1835, remained largely unchanged until the extension of the municipal boundary in 1934 and 1967. The subjects
covered are outlined including the government and local politics of the town and its place in the history of the nation, aspects of the economic, religious, social and cultural history; topography and also accounts of buildings and domestic, commercial and industrial architecture. As pointed out, the first and last two chapters are structured differently to the main chapters of the volume covering the period from the 13th to the 18th century; however, collectively they provide a chronological narrative of the towns’ historical development.

The opening chapter, ‘Shrewsbury 700–1200’ (pp. 5–30) written by Baker, Holt and Thacker considers Shrewsbury’s location respective to Roman sites in the area, notably Wroxeter (Viroconium) and ecclesiastical sites in the pre-Conquest period, and how it emerged as an important regional borough which served an administrative function with the development of the shire or county. (17) Domesday provides the first insight into the town, giving an indication of the population with clear similarities with other large towns of the region, for example, Chester, Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester. Discussion of the town in the 12th century focuses on the role of the castle, the translation of Saint Winifred and the way in which self-government was established with the delegation of royal authority, members of the elite among the burgesses dominating the offices of government and the guild playing an important role as in other English provincial towns. There follows a detailed examination of the topography of the post-Conquest town exploring the castle, layout and street plan, the suburbs of the Abbey and Abbey Foregate, the hospital of Saints Giles and George, and the outer suburbs of Castle Foregate, Coton and Coleham. One of the more distinctive aspects of this volume is its treatment of the topography or built environment of the town. This is a real strength overall, being covered separately in each chapter.

As highlighted in ‘Shrewsbury 1200–1340’ (pp. 31–88) written by Thacker and Dorothy Cromarty, with contributions by Champion and Robert Cromarty, Shrewsbury by 1200 was a prominent readily defensible Marcher town with strong royal links, well placed to deal with Welsh incursions and administer the principality of Wales. Hence it was a place where negotiations between Welsh princes and the leading ‘frontier aristocracy’ of the Marches met for negotiations. (18) There is a detailed chronological narrative of the relationship between the town and the Crown, including discussion of the development of urban administration in the thirteenth century emphasising the significance of the guild, merchants, various borough officers and the town courts. Other aspects considered are military expenditure, local politics and the riot of 1303. The section on economic history provides insight into the town’s population, the growth of trade with the shift in the market place and the establishment of new fairs. Close documentary analysis, a hallmark of VCH work, reveals the commodities and foodstuffs traded. The growth of the town’s economic significance corresponded with the expansion of inland trade and the commercialisation of the economy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Perhaps most importantly, it was the growth of the medieval wool export trade with continental Europe during the later 13th century and with it the town’s wool merchants that came to dominate the economy. Linked to this was a considerable triangular wine trade between Flanders, Gascony and Shrewsbury being identified. Lastly, the indigenous trades and crafts evident in the town during the 13th and early 14th centuries are outlined briefly, a useful table summarising the variety of trades and crafts practiced by townsmen and the role of women in the medieval urban economy is discussed. This is followed by a detailed account of religious history. Consideration is given to not only the Abbey but other religious institutions including the friaries, minsters and parish churches the spires of which still dominate the townscape today. Again there is an in-depth examination of Shrewsbury’s topography, firstly the defences of the castle and town walls, the medieval English and Welsh bridges long since destroyed, and a description of particular streets and districts.

The chapter, ‘Shrewsbury 1340–1540’ (pp. 89–135) by Champion begins with a useful map showing Shrewsbury, Shropshire and the Welsh Marches c.1500. Continuing with the theme of politics and government discussed in the previous chapter, it provides a further narrative of the political developments affecting the town and region more generally. For instance, it describes the revolt of Glyn Dwer and the Percys, the War of the Roses and the Council of the Marches which met in Shrewsbury. This volume
contributes new and interesting material as to the activities of the Council, a regionally specific political and legal jurisdiction, and significantly, the effect which the declining importance of Marcher lordship had on the link between Shrewsbury and the Crown. (19) The development of local government in the century after 1340 provides rich insight into the town’s political development through the guild merchants and the establishment of the borough courts. The section on economic history covering the 200 years after the Black Death highlights the challenges which the town faced. Although the town’s commerce recovered with cloth manufacturing leading, serving both local demand, but also newly expanding markets. There is a detailed analysis of tolls and credit totals for the period 1372–1519, with the decline in inland trade after 1460 having a dramatic impact on the town’s revenues. However, the picture presented is that there was an upturn in the economic fortunes of the town as indicated by the dramatic increase of the wool trade. Analysis of the town’s occupational structure reveals the growth in a wide range of craftsmen between the years 1397–8, 1525, 1569 and 1587, with a concentration in the textile trade: drapers, mercers, tailors and skinners, weavers, shearman, corvisors and glovers all being mentioned. It is suggested that the boom in capping after 1500 provides an interesting illustrative example of how changing fashions were reflected in the local economy, but it can also be linked to Tudor statute relating to the making and wearing of caps. (20)

Great attention has been paid into viewing the history of Shrewsbury in the context of the wider region, initially in terms of administration and political structure, but also with reference to the economic matters. This highlights how detailed local study can shed light on aspects of the history of the nation, fulfilling a founding aim of the VCH. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the towns trading hinterland, drawn from the origins of debt litigants in the early sixteenth century, encompassed the Marcher lordships and Wales through the West Midlands to London and significantly down the River Severn. Malcolm Wanklyn has highlighted the importance of the inland river trade with barges called ‘trows’ carrying grain as well as a range of other cargoes. (21) The Welsh cattle trade was also extremely important. An interesting feature of this analysis is the importance of rivers in defining what Charles Phythian-Adam’s referred to as ‘cultural provinces’. (22) There is discussion of the town’s religious life and cultural activities, focusing on the numerous parish churches. This reviewer found the vivid account of the festive calendar especially interesting, not only the religious feasts of the Christian calendar, but also the staging of religious dramas or plays in ‘The Quarry’ with a series of notable spectators. This provides a striking parallel with the present given its use today as a venue for concerts, events and shows. The topography of the town is again examined, providing a description of the medieval buildings. The plan of the plots on the north-western side of Pride Hill and the tabulation of tax assessments of male householders in 1525, provides insight into the social and occupational topography by ward and principal streets. Religious topography is also considered, the spatial distribution of ecclesiastical buildings and monuments being interpreted relative to other boundaries or prominent sites within the urban area.

‘Shrewsbury 1540–1640’ (pp. 136–79) begins by outlining the economic and social history of the town. The population of Shrewsbury more than doubled in the century after 1540 accompanied with the growth of inland trade and the intensification of livestock marketing, as suggested by records of livestock transactions at the markets and fairs. As a result, a new corn market was built along with a new market hall in 1596–7, the latter still dominating the town square today. Also quays at Mardol and Frankwell were improved benefitting the river trade. This period also saw the growth of trade and craft manufactures, the town continuing to play a prominent role in the Welsh cloth trade with the Drapers Company being granted a monopoly by the Crown in 1609. Whilst the cloth trade continued to dominate Shrewsbury’s economy, there were other crafts and trades including brewing and a significant leather working industry, alongside the livestock trade. There were also professionals present in Shrewsbury: lawyers, physicians and surgeons. As with other towns in England, the problem of poverty became an increasing concern for the corporation although action was in response to statutory legislation rather than initiated locally. However, the town’s provision for the poor was, as pointed out, typical of large towns in England. (23) At the opposite end of the social spectrum, early signs of Shrewsbury’s ‘urban renaissance’ before 1640 include its legal function as the location for the Quarter Sessions and the Council of the Marches, and the increasing prominence of gentry families in society was most obviously displayed by the construction and improvement of their
properties. Most of the families were essentially either newly established, or older ones that had benefitted from the distribution of land and property following the Dissolution.

The following section explores the nature of politics and government in Shrewsbury during the period 1540–1640 with much of the discussion concentrating on the court practices of the ‘curia parva’, as well as the other courts. This draws extensively on previous research published by the volumes’ joint editor, Champion, where he describes the business of the town’s courts which increased after 1540 with the administrative burden placed on the bailiffs who were also the justices of the peace. This growth in court business was due to inter-personal offences like affrays and brawling, which seem to have often been drink-related, as well as more specific grievances. The communal nature of the ‘curia magna’ declined, although the leet jurisdiction had not completely collapsed by 1640 despite population growth and legal developments, the borough’s courts continuing to remain active. It is argued that Shrewsbury’s political structure appears to have been resistant to change, the town being an example of an urban ‘oligarchy’ – it being summarised that ‘constitutional checks erected in the century after the Black Death were supplanted by a much more restricted system, the depth of political participation, and its festive element, being radically reduced’ (p. 155). Moreover, it is concluded, on the basis of the evidence of the 1630s, that ‘a section of the town elite still engaged in a populist dialogue with lesser burgesses, though that civic outlook did not prevail, with important long-term consequences’ (p. 155). Likewise with regard to borough autonomy and the increasing role of the state during this period, it is apparent that at Shrewsbury as elsewhere, there was a weakening of municipal autonomy, although the support for the borough from the gentry reflected the transition underway and the efforts by which townsman interacted with the state as illustrated by the Newport family. Similarly the relationship between the borough and the Crown is considered.

Religious developments in the early modern period are discussed in-depth specifically the impact of the Reformation. The presence of a small group of protestants in the town led by Thomas Ireland resulted in the growth of an active and progressive protestant ministry, the town experiencing a godly reformation, leading members promoting godly ministry. However prior to the Civil War this failed to take hold given Crown’s involvement in two of the five parishes. It is shown that a protestant identity developed in Shrewsbury and the surrounding area, closely tied to the history of Shrewsbury School, being expressed locally through the literary culture of the wealthier inhabitants of the town, as well as the entertainments described by contemporaries. It is argued that Shrewsbury provides an example of a town ‘whose cultural identity was refashioned in a distinctive and not merely derivative way before the Reformation and the Civil War’ (p. 171).

The topography of the town is discussed again. Population growth in the period after 1540 resulted in the growth of residential suburbs, especially Coleham and Castle Foregate, with a comparison being made between the ‘Burghley’ and Speed town maps. It is suggested that the transformation of the built environment corresponds with Hoskins’ ‘Great Rebuilding’ (1560–1640), with new building reflecting the towns commercial prosperity and the rising wealth of merchants and professionals, with many of Shrewsbury’s prominent surviving historic buildings, both residential and industrial, dating from this period notably Rowley’s House (c.1590–1615) and Fellmongers Hall (c.1590). The refurbishment of the interiors of medieval buildings is also covered, discussion illustrated with reference to case studies of particular buildings, such as, the wool-stapler Roger Marshall’s house at 4 Belmont which presents elements of the ‘Shrewsbury school’ of carpentry. The impact of the Reformation on the town’s ecclesiastical buildings and monuments is referred to with the removal of church fabric at the Abbey, the stripping of the roofs of the Dominican and Franciscan houses, as well as the destruction of churchyard and other stone crosses. This examination of topography is taken further by considering occupational, ethnic and social patterns. Analysis reveals the concentration of cloth workers in the area of ‘Murivance’, ‘Shoplatch’ and ‘St John’s Hill’; the street name ‘Butcher’s Hill’ being indicative of butchers working and residing in the street; river workers resided in the Welsh ward adjacent to the River Severn with a large number living in Frankwell, Mardol and Knockin Street (39 of 58 in 1668). Trades flourished in the suburbs, for instance, tanning and leatherworking in Coleham and Frankwell, brick and tile making in Castle Foregate and glove making in Abbey Foregate. A table effectively summarises the residences of the poor in 1640, with poverty
concentrated in the Welsh ward (affecting 57 per cent of those surveyed in 1640) and the presence of beggars and labourers from Wales in Frankwell, again highlighting Shrewsbury’s juxtaposition relative to Wales. In addition those in poverty on the inside of the River Severn were employed in weaving trades. Surprisingly, however, the rich and poor appear to have lived in relatively close proximity to each other.

The following chapter ‘Shrewsbury 1640–1780’ (pp. 180–230) is written by Champion and Barbara Coulton, with contributions by James Lawson.(26) It emphasises the role religion played in creating division between those involved in the politics of the town. Thus religion and politics are dealt with together in this section, religion dividing the governing class of Shrewsbury before 1640 as a result of the failure to establish a national church. There is much discussion of the Civil War period and the Interregnum. Even after the Restoration division remained, dissenters being subjected to scrutiny. The town was caught up in further royal campaigns, there being political and religious unrest with riots following the Whigs electoral success, as dissenters, particularly Presbyterians, were the subject of attack. There is detailed discussion of how the nature of politics changed, there being a tendency for gentry men or aristocracy from outside the borough liberties to join the corporation, superseding the drapers domination of the mayoralty. The picture which emerges of religion in Shrewsbury during the 18th century is a diverse one. In addition to the established church, Quakerism flourished, although by the end of the 18th century this was beginning to decline, a trend reflected in the other non-conformist denominations (Independents, Unitarianism and Baptists) which struggled financially to maintain an effective ministry. As pointed out, it was the established church which was most affected by the partisan politics of the 18th century.

In terms of the economic and social history of this period, Shrewsbury suffered severely from the Civil War which caused disruption for the cloth, cattle and cheese trades. Population followed the national trend, the tabulation of data for four parishes for the years 1695, 1750 and 1801 revealing the end of population growth in the mid-seventeenth century, with it remaining stable until the 1690s. Population rose by approximately 10 per cent until 1750, growing by more than 50 per cent to 1800. The 18th century saw, in the view of this reviewer, the apogee of Shrewsbury as Daniel Defoe (1660–1731) eloquently described:

‘This is indeed a beautiful, large, pleasant, populous, and rich? town; full of gentry and yet full of trade too; for here too, is a great manufacture, as well of flannel, as also of white broadcloth, which enriches all the country round it. The Severn surrounds this town, just as the Thames does the Isle of Dogs; so that it makes the form of an horse-shoe, over which there are two fine stone bridges, upon one of which is built a very noble gate, and over the arch of the gate the statue of the great Lewellin, the idol of the Welch, and their last Prince of Wales. […] Over the market-house is kept a kind of hall for the manufactures, which are sold here weekly in very great quantities; they speak all English in the town, but on a market-day you would think you were in Wales. Here is the greatest market, the greatest plenty of good provisions, and the cheapest that is to be met with in all the western part of England. […] As an example of the cheapness of provisions, we paid here, in a publick inn, but a groat a night for hay, and six-pence a peck for oats for our horses, which is cheaper than we found it in the cheapest part of the north of England; all our other provisions were in proportion; and there is no doubt but the cheapness of provisions joined to the pleasantness and healthiness of the place, draws a great many families thither, who love to live within the compass of their estates’. (27)

The river trade enabled a wide variety of goods for example Cheshire salt, linen, ‘Manchester wares’ from Lancashire and Staffordshire earthenware, to be transported to and from Shrewsbury which served a much larger hinterland. Shrewsbury’s connection with the Atlantic slave trade is highlighted with reference to individuals and families with merchants involved in the cloth trade. For instance, John Hill who was a cloth merchant also had a share in a sugar plantation in Barbados. There is an interesting discussion of ‘Prosperity and the Urban Renaissance’, which covers living standards and the extent of parish relief, as well as institutions like the infirmary and foundling hospital which were admired by contemporary visitors. A clear picture is presented of the social and cultural activities of the town in the 18th century like the Shrewsbury
races, balls, assemblies and music concerts. Nevertheless, despite the rise of leisure activities and social and cultural opportunities, the economy stagnated. It is pointed out that the decline of the river trade from the 1760s diminished as the town’s importance as a transhipment point ceased. Further evidence for the contraction of the economy is suggested by the dramatic fall in the number of masters admitted to the Drapers company (which had peaked by 1680), falling by over a half between 1720 and 1750. A similar pattern of decline is evident in the leather and textile trades.

This leads onto a discussion as to whether Shrewsbury functioned as a ‘leisure town’, engaging with a longstanding historiographical debate on the subject. It is argued that Shrewsbury was by no means unique, but rather that whilst there was an increase in the ‘luxury trades’ and leisure sector, its traditional artisanal trades remained important, malting being of growing significance along with the victualing trades more generally. The cloth trade continued regardless of the decline in the numbers of admissions to the Drapers Company. There is evidence of entrepreneurial activity, for example in mining, lead being mined in the south-west of the county; there was also involvement in the starch and printing trades. Its occupational structure does not seem to have been affected by the presence of gentry and, whilst with urban and regional specialisation its leather and textile trades diminished, there continued much entrepreneurial activity. It continued in its traditional role as a county market town and regional centre for Mid and North Wales and its manufacturing function developed.

Regarding topography for the period 1640–1780, it is pointed out that Shrewsbury emerged largely unscathed from the ravages of the Civil War, the town remaining essentially the same between 1640 and the mid- to late-18th century as Rocque’s map shows. It was, however, in the 18th century that the town’s fortified gates were taken down and replaced with those that we see today. For example, in 1766 the stone bridge was demolished and the present English Bridge in a classical style was constructed between 1769 and 1774 by John Gwynn. It was also during this period that the town walls were gradually removed. The later 18th century saw the construction or rebuilding of public and institutional buildings, such as, the county gaols the first in 1705 and another known as the ‘Dana’ in 1793; the Salop infirmary and hospitals, and the Corn market was replaced by the Shirehall. Interestingly, the influence of Thomas Telford, the county surveyor is apparent. It is pointed out that by comparison, the suburbs and main streets did not achieve the architectural coherence which towns like Ludlow achieved, instead being a combination of half-timbered buildings and others rendered or of brick construction. As previously considered, the residential and occupational topography of the town is discussed, the valuations of property (mostly houses) in 1667 is tabulated providing an overview of the distribution of population socially and on the basis of trades and merchants. By the 1790s it is apparent how wealthier inhabitants of the town began to move out to suburban villas, with this apparent social separation becoming clearer with changes to the south-west of the town in the area towards the town walls and ‘The Quarry’. Finally in this chapter, urban improvements are outlined including the building of fashionable terraces and walks, the paving, straightening and widening of streets, street lighting and improved water supply. Citing contemporary accounts, however, it is argued that despite such efforts, the town required further improvement.

The final two chapters covering the modern history of the town are written by Trinder. ‘Shrewsbury 1780–1914’ (pp. 231–76), with contributions by Robert Cromarty outlines the town’s apparent heyday in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Whilst in terms of population, it was smaller than Chester, Leicester, Exeter or York, it was larger than Derby, Oxford, Worcester, Wolverhampton and Preston, and far exceeded any town in Wales. Outlined is Shrewsbury’s expanding marketing and retailing function, the establishment of communication links with roads and bridges, navigation along the River Severn, the impact of canal and railway development in the wider region with the town being connected with the national rail network in 1848. The town continued to enjoy prosperity with typical market town manufacturing including mills, malting, brewing, tanning, engineering, but most importantly textiles, the latter marking a continuation of the traditional trade of the Shrewsbury Drapers although at this point it was in decline. By comparison flax and linen manufacturing grew, although this was short-lived (1790–1820).

In ‘Shrewsbury in the 20th Century’ (pp. 277–306), Trinder explores the town’s experience of the First and
Second World Wars. Particularly interesting with reference to the former was the establishment of a Royal Flying Corps field at Monkmoor. Discussion also covers local government provision of housing and, in particular, the growth of the suburbs in the post-1945 decades. The presence of light engineering and manufacturing is dealt with, such as, the Sentinel Waggon Works which, opening in 1915 at Harlescott produced steam-powered lorries, whilst the Silhouette company moved to Shrewsbury in 1940, manufacturing undergarments and swimwear. Also, outlined are educational opportunities and the social and cultural activities provided by the cinemas and the Music Hall, replaced by Theatre Severn and converted into the new town museum.

To conclude, the volume is beautifully presented throughout including the plan from the ‘Burghley’ atlas and contemporary maps by Speed and Rocque, as well as illustrations, paintings and photographs. Although in black and white, these are reproduced to a high standard, bringing the medieval, early modern and modern town to life. Reference is made to relevant secondary literature and, whilst this could have been more detailed, this may have detracted from the aims of the VCH. It will be of interest to both local and national historians as well as urban historians. However, given the cost of £95 and level of detail, it is unlikely that the book will be read by a general local audience. Instead it will be largely used by academics, and purchased by libraries as a reference work for keen family and local historians. The latter is a function which the VCH needs to embrace more thoroughly in order to engage with the public. In that sense, it fulfils the main aim of the VCH outlined by Christopher Elrington its former general editor, which he described as the ‘scholarly comprehensive encyclopedia of English local history in all periods, a repository of essential information, and the starting point for further research’ .(28) It is the reviewer’s opinion that a condensed paperback or hardback version organised by period or theme, written in accordance with VCH standards, could be attractive to a more general readership and compete in the same market as books published by ‘local interest’ publishers and sold in high street book shops.

Those who have contributed, the majority of whom are volunteers, should be congratulated for researching and writing this volume and the one that follows, which is nearing completion regardless of the absence of local organisation. Moreover, this book stands testament to the former director J. V. Beckett’s assertion that ‘the VCH continues to offer a reassuringly stable agenda as volume after volume of high quality local history written in the finest traditions of English archival research, addresses essentially the questions laid down in 1899 and subsequently redefined, on a parish-by-parish basis’. (29) Whilst Shrewsbury’s significance nationally has diminished, the volume accounts for its importance historically, and consequently, the town should take great pride in this work and that, which will follow in due course.

The future of the VCH in Shropshire?

The publication of this volume and part two, which is nearing completion, but requires further funding to finish, is a suitable point to debate some wider questions about the nature of VCH work and, in particular, the future of VCH Shropshire. A dramatic reduction in the archives service by Shropshire Council means that carrying out research necessary for the writing of such a volume in the future is problematic. The appointment of full-time professional staff is unlikely, and this raises questions as to whether the VCH will be ‘active’ in Shropshire again following the completion of the second Shrewsbury volume. The situation in Shropshire is a stark contrast to the neighbouring county of Staffordshire, where Dr. Nigel Tringham (Keele University and County Editor VCH Staffordshire) single-handedly continues to publish red books through a long-term partnership between Keele University and Staffordshire County Council. The absence of a similar partnership, despite Keele’s Centre for Local History claiming to notionally host VCH Shropshire, means that the work of the VCH in Shropshire will, in all probability, end. However, this does not necessarily have to be the case. So what are the future prospects?

Clearly funding is an issue. Nevertheless there are bodies which could be approached to provide some pilot funding, for example the Walker Trust, the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society and the Marc Fitch Fund. The latter provided vital funding for the present volume reviewed here. The lack of a higher education institution is frequently cited as hampering the progress of the VCH in the county. However,
Shropshire Council is currently working in association with the University of Chester to create a university presence in the town establishing: ‘University Centre Shrewsbury.’ It is intending to offer a BA History degree from September 2015 using ‘Shrewsbury and its hinterland as a model for exploring the history of Britain’ with an emphasis on the ‘special facilities available in Shrewsbury’ and ‘vocational elements’. Other universities with a previous or current presence in Shropshire include Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Manchester Metropolitan.

The recent appointment of Professor Richard W. Hoyle as Professor of Local and Regional History and director and general editor will hopefully see the VCH enter a new phase of renewed activity and provide leadership for the future. It is this reviewer’s opinion that given the success of the VCH short series an initial single parish publication is possible, if it could be produced quickly using a combination of volunteer research, professional Central Office staff and contract researchers: a model that is employed by the VCH in other counties. When Dr. David Cox, the last remaining full-time member of staff retired in 2002, he was working on volume 12 covering Newport and the Weald Moors of which an incomplete and unpublished manuscript was deposited at Keele University Library, the material for which along with other research notes is held at Shropshire Archives and could potentially be used for a future red book volume or a short. Future red books, which remain the aspiration of the VCH, could cover the small market towns and rural parishes of north Bradford hundred, adopting a similar structure to that of the forthcoming VCH Northamptonshire volume on Towcester and its rural hinterland. Similarly, one would anticipate that a study of Ludlow would be attractive to a local audience and visitors to the town. Also, perhaps in the future thematic volumes could be written, such as, on ecology, the environment or landscape history of the county, thereby bringing together the traditional work of the VCH, with that of other interest groups or stakeholders and thus widening the scope of new funding opportunities. This provides another opportunity to restate the case for the VCH in Shropshire.

But what about the future of the VCH more generally? Funding that is currently acquired by local authorities is spent on volunteer based heritage projects aimed at the necessary cataloguing and conserving of material and the creation of online resources, such as, ‘Discovering Shropshire’s History’, with little thought given to publications. The lack of standardisation nationally beyond Access to Archives (A2A) means that county and regional record offices produce their own online resources of varying extent and quality. Could the VCH be the online encyclopedia for the history of a county in the same way that the red books were envisaged, being more closely embedded in partnerships with archives and heritage services in the counties? Are there opportunities for the VCH to provide resources for family historians and genealogists and offer a wider range of services, such as, historical consultancy and advising on history and heritage matters? Is there the possibility of seeking collaborative doctoral awards (CDAs) to foster the links between the VCH and archives, record offices and museums and to provide funding for research which can contribute to publications? Similarly in the past the VCH has also provided an opportunity for historians at the beginning of their careers, so perhaps postdoctoral fellowships could be another way of funding research directly or indirectly. A short-term priority for the VCH in Shropshire must be the setting up of a ‘Shropshire County History Trust’, which would provide a valuable presence in the county, begin fundraising for the next volume on Shrewsbury and future work, and establish a research strategy for the county. This would correspond with an apparent revival of the VCH in the Midlands and other counties like Cumbria. Whilst Shropshire is fortunate to already have a considerable number of ‘Big Red books’, there remains much history yet to be written. The publication of part two is eagerly awaited; the story of Shrewsbury is to be continued…

Notes


2. The England’s Past for Everyone (EPE) series were an outcome of Heritage Lottery funded project run by the VCH between September 2005 and February 2010 and saw the following publications: M. Dresser and P. Fleming, Bristol: Ethnic Minorities and the City 1000–2001 [2] (Chichester, 2007); N. [3]


16. For example: B. Trinder, *Beyond the Bridges: the Suburbs of Shrewsbury 1760–1960* (Chichester, 2006); *A History of Shropshire* (Chichester, 1998); *Industrial Archaeology of Shropshire* (Chichester, 1996). For more information including a full list of publications see: <http://www.trinderhistory.co.uk/> [13] [accessed 1 December 2014].


20. For example the Cappers Act, 1488 fixed the price of knitted caps and An Act for the Continuance of the Making of Caps, 1571 insisted that anybody over the age of six years was to wear a cap made in England on the Sabbath and holy days.


31. Keele University Library DA 600.v4; Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury 6908.


34. For example, Leicestershire VCH Trust website <http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/leicestershire> [15] [accessed 1 December 2014], and Cumbria County History Trust website <http://www.cumbriacountyhistory.org.uk> [16] [accessed 1 December 2014].