

History of the County of Somerset. Volume XI: Queen Camel and the Cadburys

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Reviewer: Michael Hicks

How fortunate are historians of that broad band of southern Somerset covered by seven topographical volumes of the Victoria County History (VCH) compared with those of most of the historic county for whom no such resource yet exists. It is the distant ideal of the complete set for Somerset that is most urgently required. Progress however has been slow and will be much delayed now that local authority funding has ceased. It is easier to fund towns like Cheltenham, Cirencester and even Basingstoke than rural backwaters that lack generous sponsors. Volume XI treats such a rural backwater: the southern parts of Catsash hundred in the south-eastern corner of Somerset, ten rural parishes distinguished principally by an ancient hillfort (Cadbury Castle) and gashed by the A303 with its dual carriageways and roundabouts. One 20th-century roundabout severs the 18th-century Hazlegrove house from its 17th-century arched gateway and 19th-century lodge. Photographs of both structures are included within the text. Such illustrations, which encompass all churches and most significant houses, greatly enhance the book, although sometimes more explanation (especially of aerial photographs) would have been desirable.

A mass of data is assembled from diverse sources and categorised into thematic sections. The VCH model (originally that of Sir William Dugdale) remains valid. Professional researchers take an overview of each parish and integrate information of the most diverse origins to compile parish histories that in this case are unlikely ever to be superseded. Volume XI is written to the modern model that covers a much fuller range of history and of historical sources – archaeological discoveries, the landscape and vernacular buildings are firmly integrated with the evidence from place names and documents. It counters the rather unfair criticisms that such dense directories are undigestible and unreadable, mere assemblies of data devoid of explanation and replete in technical terms that mean nothing to ordinary readers, and that their measured (deadpan) descriptions and judgements conceal whatever is different, distinctive, and exciting about each place and its history. Such detailed sections rightly remain and indeed underpin the whole. Sections within each parish history seek to treat themes rather than topics, population and settlement, landownership rather than manors, economic history, and religious history rather than churches, and the Catsash Hundred article that opens the volume seeks to provide an overview of the topography, landscape, and evolution of the whole area of rolling pasture that has always lacked clear boundaries and defining features. Conversion of the raw data into interpretation has been a heroic enterprise for which Ms Siraut deserves the warmest congratulations.

Why were these 11,920 acres divided between these ten parishes of widely varying sizes and shapes and why were there so many detached sections? It would have been helpful incidentally to have the detachments more clearly defined and measured. The volume does its best with the archaeology and the imprint of past field systems, but suffers generally from a shortage of early documents and maps. Pre- and post-conquest there was arable production in open fields and clearance of woodland everywhere, the peak of activity and perhaps of population being before the Black Death, which slew all the tenants at South Cadbury. That may be why only Queen Camel and North Cadbury feature the outstanding towers from the later middle ages that are one of Somerset's glories. Enclosure, conversion to pasture, and depopulation came early and informally, in the 17th century and earlier, so that even today after an upward blip this landscape of dairies and cider orchards supports a mere 3,082 people. The fabric and documents for every church commence after 1200, surely not because parish formation came so late, but because high medieval prosperity funded new churches that replaced anything old and because episcopal records start relatively late. Could more have been made of Queen Camel's standing as mother church of Somerton and Chilton Cantilo, perhaps as a former minster? (Where is Chilton Cantilo?) If South Cadbury was originally dedicated to St Thomas Becket (d. 1171), it is an important clue to when the church was moved or the parishes were formed. Is it really credible however, given that both the church and wayside chapel at South Cadbury had the same dedication? It is striking that the glebes were so large – 23, 43, 89, even 102 acres. May this phenomenon be indicative of early foundation? Manorial government is generally inadequate, but the process whereby manors were supplanted by larger farms is well delineated. The proliferation of day and Sunday schools in the 19th century was promoted and often funded by the rectors. Volume XI faithfully records the modern grouping of parishes and infrequent services, the decline in bus services and the disappearance of the only rail service, and the closures everywhere of primary schools, pubs, post offices and shops that have impoverished local society. The Catsash Inn and Camelot Pub are much appreciated survivals. Scarcely any of the traffic on the congested A303 stops today in any of these parishes.

Almost every parish is illustrated by maps drawn from the early Victorian tithe awards that record only vestiges of the open fields and totally ignore the lost and shrunken settlements mentioned in the text. Too much is entered onto the parish maps from other periods and too little too, such as the streams, bridges and farms mentioned in the texts. Rectories are always included. More maps are the answer. Fortunately perhaps little has disappeared under concrete or housing estates. If residents now commonly commute to Yeovil, Wincanton or Castle Cary, these local centres have not generated dormitory development in these parishes. These nearby townlets were the hubs of local trade, although the importance of Queen Camel, once surely a market town, is perhaps understated. Where were the centres intermediate between them and the county centres of Taunton and Bath?

Inevitably there are some pet areas where the reviewer differs from the author. He prefers the clarity of the

old manors' section and the commencement of each manor with its name in italics. The distinctions between overland and occupier, barony and knights fee, and for what service a manor was held is not always clear. That the capital messuage, home farm, and park are without value need not mean that the lord was an absentee but that he was occupying them himself. Manorial histories treat whoever occurs rather than manorial descents. Queen Camel is described rather misleadingly as a royal estate: only two queens ever held it. The descent and partition of the Holland earldom of Kent after the death in 1408 of Earl Edmund (not mentioned) is well-known. The Hungerford estates passed via Mary Hungerford to her descendants, the Hastings earls of Huntingdon, even if her stepgrandmother Margaret and her second husband Sir Thomas Burgh (Lord Burgh) occupied them for life. It is highly unlikely that lands at Sutton Montis settled by William Montagu on another William Montagu in 1198, at Queen Camel settled on Sir Francis Hastings by his brother Earl Henry, or the vicarage manor at Queen Camel acquired c.1896 by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners were strictly sales. Only Queen Camel church was appropriated to a monastery (Cleeve Abbey), apparently to clothe the monks, a vicarage being ordained in 1282, but there were two other late medieval foundations in the locality. North Cadbury church was indeed remodelled by Elizabeth Lady Botreaux (d. 1433) and approved by king and pope, but the college itself was abortive even though statutes were drawn up for it. Elizabeth had only a life interest in her estates and her son William transferred his patronage to a hospital at Bath to which he also failed to relinquish the requisite endowments. Henry Pouncefoot also failed to endow the chantry at Compton Pouncefoot, requested in 1485 by his father Sir Walter in the aisle that he had built, and it was therefore presumably Henry's executors who completed the foundation c. 1530.

Traditionally the VCH treated parishes alphabetically within hundreds, but the northern parishes of Catsash hundred have already been published. The southern parishes appear in no particular order, Queen Camel, North Cadbury as the most prominent coming first, South Cadbury with North Cadbury and South Barrow with North Barrow, neither alphabetically nor as Barrow, North and Barrow, South. Sutton Montis and Weston Bampfylde remain last. This refreshingly undogmatic approach does not apply to the index, which could still be more helpful to the reader, with more 'floruit' and other dates and separate entries for estates. There are still some unexplained technicalities, such as terre tenancy and common arable, and the colloquial use of 'likely' for 'probably' grates every time. At times the text seems unnecessarily sparse. What is known of the church supposed to have been in South Cadbury castle and what exactly do the documents say about the two medieval chapels that disappeared? What is meant by the comment that 'there is little record of the medieval parish'? What was the consequence of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 1957? Haynes Motor Museum deserves longer treatment. Generally, however, Dr Siraut has said all that can be said.

The standard of research, the sheer quantity of detailed information, and the avoidance of ambiguity are all entirely welcome. Volume XI is comprehensive, indispensable, and in almost all particulars definitive.

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