

THE VICTORIA HISTORY OF THE COUNTIES OF ENGLAND

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Just about 80 years ago a group of English enthusiasts founded the *Victoria history of the counties of England*, commonly called, for short, the *V.C.H.* County histories were not, of course, a new thing; England had witnessed their appearance as individual enterprises since at least the mid-17th century. The founders of the *V.C.H.*, however, promoted the idea of a single series for all the English counties, though divided into county 'sets'. They found a private publisher and secured from Queen Victoria, who had not then many months to live, permission to apply her name to the series. To her or to her memory every volume has since been dedicated. By stages that it would be of little worth to describe here the *History* came into the hands of the University of London in 1932 and there remains.

England is of course only a part of the United Kingdom but the *V.C.H.* is limited to that part and does not extend to Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland. Given that, what and how many are the English counties? They were, when the *V.C.H.* began, 40 in number. Since 1974 there have been statutory changes which have altered them and their boundaries. The *V.C.H.*, however, can take little notice of those changes; in its eyes there are still just forty. It did, however, long before those statutory changes, exclude from its purview the counties of Monmouth and Northumberland. The reasons for those exclusions, which were sound ones, do not call for explanation here.

The idea of the promoters was that the history of all the English counties should be written or rewritten on a basis of original research; old county or parish histories should not be rehashed. Each 'set' of county volumes was to be divided into 'general' and 'topographical' chapters or sections. The former were to deal with such matters as the economic or ecclesiastical history of the whole county. Beside them were to be placed translations of the respective county sections of Domesday Book (1086) with a commentary and an index for each. The 'topographical' chapters or sections were to deal historically with every city, town, or village.

This scheme prevailed, with refinements, until the end of the Second World War. It was then altered in various ways. First, natural history, which had formed a 'general' topic, was for all practical purposes excluded. Secondly new 'general' topics, of which the most important were county government, the parliamentary constituencies, and transport were included. Thirdly the 'topographical' volumes were transformed almost, though not quite, beyond recognition. Those volumes had always had as their main constituents a survey of the descent of landed property, called 'the manorial descents', the descent of advowsons, that is the right to present a clergyman to care for the spiritual welfare of the parishioners, details of the more ancient churches and more splendid secular buildings, and an historical catalogue of the charities founded to benefit the poor. In ancient boroughs the story of the borough constitution would be traced; if there were a castle its fortunes and appearance would be described. To the whole was prefixed a brief introduction defining the geographical relationship of

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the place to other places near by, and making a few remarks about physical appearance, local customs, and well-known former residents.

All these features have been retained but most of them have been transformed. The church sections are no longer confined to advowsons and buildings, but contain much about the revenues of the benefice and the traditions of worship. The introductions have been enriched by incorporating much more thorough descriptions of the way in which each settlement has evolved. Maps, old and new, ancient deeds, and travellers' impressions are drawn upon to make that possible, together with a good deal of field work. In bigger places the evolutionary story is 'hived off' as a separate 'growth' section. Approaches by road, canal, or rail are historically described. Besides such enrichments wholly new sections have been added. These concern agrarian and industrial history, parish government, whether conducted through manorial courts or the parochial vestries, the establishment of Roman Catholic and Protestant Nonconformist churches, and education, especially at the primary level. In larger places special sections are devoted to public services and social amenities. All these sections, whether older or newer, dovetail into or are complemented by sections in the 'general' volumes. For example the histories of medieval religious houses are always placed in such volumes, so that the most that will be found in a parish history in a 'topographical' volume is an account of the surviving buildings. Again the main story of a local industry is placed in a 'general' volume but the detailed information about the location of factories or mines and their successive ownership or occupations are treated 'topographically'.

In the case of very large towns a kind of compromise between 'general' and 'topographical' treatment has been reached. These town histories are divided into a notional part one, in which the general constitutional, economic, and architectural history is traced and a notional part two providing the detail about churches, chapels, public buildings, schools, and charities.

That important reservation apart, the 'topographical' volumes assume a strictly topical form, for the *History* is essentially a work of reference and such a form greatly eases its use. It cannot be made into light reading, but gracious expression and absolute clarity are always aimed at. It is also weighted on the institutional side and cannot indulge in much speculation or in many comparisons.

Much attention is given to illustrating the *History*. It is full of maps and plans — town plans showing the sites of the buildings and streets mentioned in the text, block plans showing growth, village plans showing field systems. There are also many half-tone illustrations, showing the character of the landscape, whether urban or rural at the present time, interesting buildings, whether extant or demolished, and portraits of local worthies.

The number of county 'sets' into which the series is divided does not exactly correspond with the number of historic counties. There are, in fact, 45 such 'sets'. Of these 13 are finished and twelve are in progress. The remainder are stationary but all but one have at least one volume to their credit. Up to the present 165 complete volumes have been published, three are in the press, and some fifteen more are in preparation. Over the last 27 years the annual output of volumes has slightly exceeded two a year.

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That part of the United Kingdom called England and the Republic of South Africa have had such different histories that the experience of English topographers can only be of limited relevance to their South African colleagues. South Africa, however, is now planning a range of regional histories of her own and it may be that the *V.C.H.* has some guidance to impart in the realms of organization and technique. The *V.C.H.* aims at the greatest possible degree of uniformity. It also tries to keep its narratives in scale with one another, not sanctioning lengthy treatment of a particular place or topic merely because there is a fortuitous abundance of source material. These intentions are realized to the best of our ability by the following means. For every county there is a so-called 'check-list' of printed sources which incorporates all those sources which must be searched for every place appearing in a 'topographical' volume. As the searching of each source is completed, the list is marked accordingly, so that nothing essential is omitted and so as to ensure that no source is examined twice over. There is likewise for each county a list, rather differently compiled, of unpublished sources. It is not intended that writers shall limit themselves to the sources specified in the two 'check lists', for there will be for many a place special sources needed for that place alone.

Next there is a set of memoranda. These deal with the nature of particular sources but many of them have the more important aim of pointing out what particular 'sub-topics' within a given topic are worthy of attention. While they are drafted primarily to help *V.C.H.* workers, they have also been found useful in university teaching. All the more important memoranda are discussed between the General Editor, who works in London, and the County Editors who mostly work outside. Nothing, therefore, is imposed by the centre upon the circumference, which the circumference can regard as inoperable. Finally there is a *Handbook for editors and authors*, on sale to the public, which gives guidance on spelling, punctuation, and the best means of citing sources. A merit of this work is that it often specifies the reasons for its rulings.

It must be apparent that the *History* is not nearly finished and that its later titles have been compiled according to a scheme that has improved upon the one originally devised. It is also true that the sources available for research have enormously multiplied not only since 1899 but over the last 30 years. Some might think that a series begun so long ago ought to be halted and a new *History* devised upon a different scheme ought now to be initiated. That is not the present contention. There is conversely the feeling that the *V.C.H.* is maintaining and ever improving the techniques of historical topography which is one of England's gifts to the world of letters. Even if the idea of 'finishing' daunts us, we should go on and perhaps stiffen the resolve of other nations.¹ 

1. The development, structure, and aims of the *V.C.H.* are fully set out in its *General introduction* (1970) in which also the contents of all volumes issued up to that time are listed and indexed.