

## Books 2012

It's time once more for my first round-up of the year's local history books, just in time for your Christmas gift tokens. Please do use a bookshop (or a library), or they will vanish from our high streets. I jest not.

First off is a book by Christine Cluley and Jennifer Meir. They've made a calculated guess (almost certainly correct) that the people who are interested in historic buildings are also keen on gardens. *Historic Houses and Gardens of Warwick*, Amberley Publishing, Stroud, £14.99, is a more than useful introduction to both, accompanied by full colour illustrations.

Warwick is the kind of place that merits more than a cursory guide, and I don't recall there being one in print anyway. The selection here is by no means comprehensive, and by no means all houses, covering only those buildings which could be called public. But the book neatly spans the distance between a guidebook and a Pevsner, a new edition of which must still be some distance down the road.

As for the gardens, I'd like to bet there are residents, let alone visitors, who do not know there is a green oasis behind St Mary's church, or another at the rear of the Friends' Meeting House.

The plan, then, is to have lunch in Lord Leycester's Hospital, tea at Oken's house in Castle Street, and let this book do the rest.

I first met Heather Flack when she was the curate at Kings Norton, at the time the church won the second series of Restoration. Now retired back to Bewdley, Heather has turned her attention to the history of her neck of the Wyre Forest.

Fenella Flack, *Pieces of Wyre*, 2 vols, Flack Publishing, £6 each, is a collection of 20 or so fragments of the history of Kidderminster, Bewdley and environs. Heather has turned the histories into little stories, poems and playlets, always ensuring that the people involved - a maid from Harvington, a Bewdley boatman, a Kidderminster suffragette - are central to the tale.

It's an exercise in recreation effectively, always with one thorny historical question uppermost in her mind. What was it like to be there ?

Anyone who lives in Sutton Coldfield will know that the town is richly endowed with charities, beginning with Bishop Vesey's gift of the park to its inhabitants back in 1528. As clerk to the trustees, Edward Field knows and understands them better than most. *The History of Sutton Coldfield Municipal Charities*, Brewin Books, Studley, £9.95 is fascinating account of charitable work in Sutton, past and present.

When carefully maintained, charities can have extraordinary longevity, not least in the provision of almshouses, the first of which were established under Vesey's original charter. What distinguishes the Sutton charities from most others, and partly explains their survival, is that they were established under the sturdy umbrella of the municipality.

Such solid reliability has helped the charities to continue to grow. Miss Frances Lingard bequeathed money for the building of almshouses as late as 1897, and, newly refurbished, they grace the front cover of Field's book.

I would encourage any poor maiden of Sutton (if there is such a girl) to apply to the municipal charities for a marriage dowry, and explore whether this provision in the original charter is still honoured.

Pat Hughes and Annette Leek, *The Story of Worcester*, Logaston Press, £15, is a worthy addition to Logaston's back catalogue, and one of the best city histories I have seen in a long time. Pat and Annette have scoured the county archives for illustrations - building plans, watercolours, maps - and many are here published for the first time.

It would be wrong to call this a complete history of the city; the two authors are perfectly ready to admit that they have played to their strengths, and such histories already exist. Medieval Worcester is dealt with cursorily, and there is little to be said of the 20th Century. For the period in between, however, they have produced a remarkably rich and multi-faceted history, always grounded in the documentary evidence. Rarely has time in a record office been put to more engaging use.

If you have been tempted to pop into The Hive, Worcester's new, all singing and dancing, library and record office, here's an excellent introduction to what it has in store.

Finally, Amanda Simmons, *British Camp. Herefordshire Beacon*, Wisteria Books, Malvern, £12.00 is a combined history and guide to the more walkable of Malvern's two great summits. I used it to climb the Beacon a couple of months back, and then explored the rest of the book less energetically with my feet up.

Amanda tackles not only the long - very long - history of this famous peak, from Bronze Age settlement to Victorian retreat, but is equally comfortable treating its geology, its flora and fauna. What comes across in particular is that the Herefordshire Beacon is state of mind, as much as it is a feature of the landscape.

The haunt of poets and painters - as far back as William Langland in the 14th Century - the Beacon has been the source of inspiration to many, from Masfield and Elgar through to modern artists such as David Prentice. The hill stays the same, but the human reactions differ.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who tramped these hills as a child, declared in her diary that the view over Worcestershire was much finer than the one into Herefordshire. You will need to put Amanda's book in your back-pack and decide for yourself.