

Books 2012 (2)

Here followeth my second rummage through the year's books on West Midland history. I'd be the first to admit to its selectivity. I give a wide berth to books on Murderous Bloxwich or the Murderous Women of Warwickshire, and just as adamantly stay on the platform, when books of nostalgic tram journeys chug past.

I'm equally hesitant to pick up a collection of old photos, unless the editing and the captions offer something more than a dewy-eyed wander through demolished streets.

A case in point is Terry Daniels, Oldbury, Langley and Warley Through Time, Amberley Books, £14.99. This is a patchy series; some of the "Through Time" books make a genuine contribution to the history of a town or suburb, with a thoughtful introduction and informed captions. Others simply randomly hurl a boxful of old pictures together.

Daniels' book is in the former camp. There is an attempt to disentangle the complex historical geography of the area, and the comparison of "then and now" images helps us to understand its development.

One other photographic book drew my attention. Graham Gough has been a staff and freelance photographer on Black Country newspapers for half a century, beginning at the Dudley Herald in the 1950s and later moving on to the Express & Star. A Black Country Album, History Press, £12.99, pulls together a selection of his images.

Gough's photo-journalism, in contrast to the "Through Time" images, inevitably focuses on people stories, the kind that picture desks like. One famous snap he took of Princess Alexandra stuck in mud at the Three Counties Show won him awards, but self-evidently not a knighthood.

In contrast too to the rose-tinted hew of most local photography, Gough's images show the sharp as well as the sweet: a house eviction, the 1962 race riots in Dudley, Black Country ponies grazing in a rubbish-strewn wasteland. There's the parade of celebrities as well - all part of the snapper's duties - but a real sense of place. More so, in fact, than the average black & white of a half-built shopping centre.

For some years now David Bell has been listening to miners, their voices coming not from far below, but from the comparative safety of an armchair in retirement. Having lent an ear to the pitmen of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Staffordshire, he now turns our attention to the men of Warwickshire.

Memories of the Warwickshire Coalfields, Countryside Books, £9.95, is partly an oral history, and partly just a history, of the 400 square kilometers that constitute the Warwickshire field. Half a century ago there were almost 17,000 men employed there. Daw Mill, one of only three deep mines still open in the UK, is the last survivor and provides Bell with many of his voices. But the book stretches back as far as the Baddesley Pit disaster of 1882, an event I've been meaning to cover in a column for

some time.

Closed communities - no pun intended here - often offer the richest seam - nor here either - for oral history, and the pit towns and pit heads of North Warwickshire were certainly that. Richly illustrated from the Coal Board archives, David Bell's volume gives us a tangible feel for this fast-disappearing part of our history.

When I wrote a piece for the Post last month on the "bonfire of the archaeologists", Birmingham's Planning Archaeologist, Mike Hodder, sent me a plaintive email stressing that he was still here. Indeed he is. For almost twenty years now, Mike has presided over something of a golden era in Birmingham archaeology.

Excavations in the Bull Ring, in Sutton Park, Deritend and elsewhere have added immensely to our knowledge of the city's growth and early development. Birmingham. The Hidden History, History Press, £17.99 is an updated version of the book Mike first published in 2004, taking into account the new digs that have taken place since that first edition.

I found the book fascinating and very helpful. There is something very tangible about this kind of approach, supplementing the abstract reflections history is often prone to. It's as if someone has walked out of the past and told me things I would never expect to know.

Finally, I've selected Carl Chinn, Free Parks for the People, Brewin Books, £14.95. Carl has been a sort of unofficial historian for Birmingham City Council for at least a couple of decades - most of the many images come from the collections of Birmingham Archives & Heritage - and here he tackles the history of the Corporation parks. The book begins with the first glimmers of a campaign to provide Birmingham with open space, and takes in the next 150 years up to the incorporation of Sutton Coldfield.

The chronology of Birmingham's parks has long been known; what Carl does is give them a wider context, and focuses on the remarkable range of activities that were held in them, from the Tulip Festivals at Cannon Hill and union meetings at Cofton to the music concerts and scout rallies. It makes one realize how much more passive are the municipal parks today, compared to their energetic past.

So there is a modest shelf's worth of new books for your Christmas reading. Normal service will be resumed next week.