

## Books of 2011 (Part 2)

Last week I made my pick of the year's history books on Birmingham, a heady mix of misunderstood politicians, misunderstood architects and a handful of musicians. This week's it's time to look a little further afield for stocking and bookshelf fillers.

I've decried before now the tyranny of the old photo book in local history, particularly for its sheer laziness. All the publisher needs to do is to throw together a bunch of old photographs (for which they're reluctant to pay a reproduction fee), find someone who can write "circa 1900" on the bottom of each one, leave out the index (I find this especially irritating) and hey presto, there's a new book on the shelf.

Amberley Publishing has embraced a somewhat more interesting format with their "Through Time" series, juxtaposing "then and now" pictures, with enough text to make you feel you are actually learning something about the history of the place. Michael Glasson, *Walsall Through Time*, 96 pp., £14.99, is a good example of the genre, not a comprehensive history of Walsall by any means, but a decent introduction to it. The author, as curator of the Walsall Leather Museum, knows what he's talking about, and runs through the development of this important Black Country town with expertise.

For reasons of space, the Walsall volume will have to stand for the rest; there are plenty of others covering the West Midlands if you're interested.

Derek Hurst et al., *Dodderhill Through the Ages*, xiv + 215 pp., Orphans Press, Leominster, may well be an item you have missed. I spotted it at a meeting of the Bromsgrove BMSGH, and snaffled the last copy. At £5 the book was a snip, courtesy of the Heritage Lottery Fund, which subsidised its publication.

This is a really heartening example of community history. The research team first met on a WEA course back in 2000 (now where did the funding go for those ?), developed into a Local Heritage Initiative application to HLF, and has now completed its journey as a comprehensive, expertly edited, history of the parish of Dodderhill and Wychbold.

If I tell you that the first 100 or so pages cover the Roman and medieval periods, it's evident that the research group have not cut corners and gone for easy (living memory) history. Their investigation of local buildings, land ownership and agricultural patterns is painstaking and engaging, a credit to themselves and to one of HLF's most fertile ideas. The text is accompanied by useful maps and diagrams, showing a real engagement with the local history, not simply the documenting of it.

With London 2012 now on the horizon I've already seen the early signs of a publishing tidal wave approaching the bookshops. No doubt the picturesque town of Much Wenlock in Shropshire, where William Penny Brookes initiated the modern Olympic movement, will be much in the spotlight. Catherine Beale, *Born out of Wenlock*, 192 pp., Derby Books, £12.99, is more than a simple biography of Brookes, or an introduction to the place that bore him from cradle to grave. It's a detailed and insightful account of how the games, first held on Windmill Field in

1850, have come to have such a seminal place in the history of modern sport. If sport is all about timing, then Catherine has crossed line early.

Beale examines Brookes' programme of local social improvement, and introduces us to the background to Victorian physical education and its underlying class divisions. Her inventory of the participating athletes, mostly from the local counties but from as far afield as Lancashire and the Cotswolds too, is in itself an important contribution to the history of sport in the West Midlands.

If you need a reminder of what sport was like before money took hold of it, then Catherine Beales's book is the perfect antidote.

Finally, A. D. M. Phillips and C. B. Phillips, *A Historical Atlas of Staffordshire*, ix + 190 pp., Manchester University Press, is a book I've put on my own "most wanted" list. (Don't be fooled by the price here. Some shops say it costs £60; in fact it's only £35.) The authors tried this format most successfully in a volume on Cheshire, and have now moved further south. The idea is to explain and interpret the history of that vast and disparate county by using a series of maps and diagrams (some 300 in all), with highly informed accompanying text. Not content with their own expertise, the editors have roped in specialist support from academic historians such as Nigel Tringham and Robert Swanson where needed.

Given that boundaries - between towns and parishes, electoral units and Poor Law Unions - play such an important part in history, this is surely the best way of presenting them.

The book follows a roughly chronological pattern, uncovering Staffordshire's demography, industrial growth and decline, and political administration, with excursions into the ever-changing patterns of disease, migration and land use in the county. If the *Victoria County History* (more comprehensive in Staffordshire than in many counties) sometimes feels like an antiquated way of delivering local history, the historical atlas might well be the way to revive it.

Enjoy any or all of the above. I hope next year to have my book on Birmingham workhouse out for you to enjoy (if that's the word) too.