

Review

Swithland Wood, A Study of its History and Vegetation by Stephen Woodward. Leicestershire Museums, Art and Records Service, 1992. 227pp. in A4 format; 79 figures; 34 tables. £4.50 plus £1.50 post and packaging. ISBN 0-85022-303-2

Widely regarded by Leicestershire people as a place of recreation, Swithland Wood is not only one of the County's large woods but, as a site of Special Scientific Interest, is considered one of the richest from a wildlife point of view. In this timely and well illustrated book Stephen Woodward brings together a huge amount of information, much of it the result of his own original research, to offer for the first time a detailed account of the Wood's history and natural history.

After a general introduction dealing with the purely natural features of the site there follows an examination of the evidence for the history and origins of the wooded area, both as a discrete entity and also as part of the wider scene of the former great Bradgate Estate. Much of the remainder of the book is devoted to a detailed study of the flora (vascular plants, bryophytes and lichens), accompanied by an account of the ecological techniques employed. Readers with no botanical knowledge or training may well regard these sections as no-go areas. On the other hand, botanists perceiving no interest in the well laid out illustrated history sections would do well to ask themselves the reason why. The author makes the point that the flora and fauna of a wood can only be fully appreciated when its history, especially its management over the years, is understood. This necessitates the marrying together of data from a wide variety of sources including the landscape itself.

Swithland Wood, like so many of our local major woodlands, stands mostly on patches of ridge and furrow, the ploughland of earlier centuries. The present tree cover can therefore only be secondary woodland, yet its total richness in terms of the numbers of plant species present makes it an important wood even by national standards. There are indicators present which point to the existence of much longer-standing communities. Clearly, patches of woodland have appeared and disappeared over the centuries to produce the complex mosaic we see today. Those small areas which have remained relatively undisturbed have acted as reservoirs for wildlife species which subsequently re-colonise the secondary woodland. The role of small-leaved lime and its particular ecological history have been well highlighted. The author points out that, whilst there may have been woodland present (but unrecorded) by Domesday Book (1086), there are no documentary references to woodland for the two-and-half centuries following. It is now believed that several of the very large wooded areas which appear in the Domesday Book folios for Leicestershire, disappeared at this time. Again, there are no recognisable references to the site of Swithland Wood in the copious manorial records for the Charnwood Forest in the later middle ages. The author suggests the meagre evidence points to the pre-thirteenth century site of Swithland Wood as being treeless, heathy grassland, some areas of which were destined to be enclosed for woodland and grazing, some to be quarried and others to be ploughed by land-hungry peasants. It is only with the written records of later centuries that the histories of the different sections can be tied together. It is to be regretted that there is a disappointing low survival rate for documents of the Bradgate Estate which was owned by the Grey family for five centuries.

The author draws attention to the need for further study of the fauna of Swithland Wood, for a knowledge of the presence and distribution of species of certain critical groups such as beetles, spiders and micro moths will complement the botanical evidence for the Wood's origins. Together with a few minor quibbles I wondered why the absence of data from pollen analysis had not been accounted for and secondly why the Viking origin of the name Swithland, 'land cleared by burning', had not been included. However, readers should have no doubt that here is a major work on an important English woodland, a work that can be most certainly recommended to anyone with an interest in botany or this aspect of landscape history.

Leicester

Anthony Squires

Clerical Poll-Taxes of the Diocese of Lincoln, 1377-1381 edited by A. K. McHardy. The Boydell Press for the Lincoln Record Society, 81, 1992. xxxvii + 252pp.; 5 maps. £19.50. ISBN 0 901503 54 1.

Historians with an interest in the medieval church, its parochial system and its clergy have reason to be particularly grateful to Dr McHardy for her painstaking work on the documents associated with the clerical poll taxes levied in the diocese of Lincoln between 1377 and 1381. The lists of clerical taxpayers printed in this volume represent what is, in effect, a census of the clergy, parish by parish, and the editor has supplied full names of as many incumbents as she could trace from other sources. She has also added information about the careers of certain clergy mentioned in these documents where appropriate. It has been a monumental and at times a frustrating task for Dr McHardy, as she has cross-referenced her clergy against the bulky but incomplete institutions registers of the bishops of Lincoln.

But the importance of these documents extends beyond their value for ecclesiastical history. They have significant things to say about developments in fiscal history, since at this stage poll taxes were largely experimental. Other forms of direct taxation such as the clerical tenths which had been imposed since 1337 almost as annual exactions had not yielded as much as the crown had hoped, largely because of the antiquated assessments of clergy wealth used as the basis of the tax (in the southern province the papal *Taxatio* of c.1291 continued as the basis for assessment in the fourteenth century). Poll taxes were introduced during the 1370s in an attempt to circumvent this out-of-date procedure and increase revenue to fund an expensive foreign policy. So these documents from the diocese of Lincoln tell us in some detail about the way these new taxes were to be raised, and who was to collect them. The graduated poll tax of 1379 produced thirteen different rates of payment according to clerical rank and income, and the documents from the archdeaconries of Bedford and Huntingdon arising from this assessment reveal much about the status and relative wealth of clergy serving parishes.

Furthermore, for the historian with an interest in reconstructing local communities, these lists of clergy assessed for taxation provide a comprehensive snapshot of parochial life in one English diocese in the late fourteenth century. The possibilities of work on the surname evidence, for example, and the place-names as revealed in these surnames, is exciting. Were religious houses being staffed by members of local families, or did they recruit from a wider area? The duplication of some family names

may suggest a tradition of certain families supplying clergy to local parishes. The number of women who appear in these lists may surprise many, but the Order of Sempringham, with its Lincolnshire origins, offering a means of vocation to women, may account for this. For local historians of Leicestershire, the return of 1377 from the archdeaconry of Leicester will be of particular interest. Dr McHardy notes the relatively high number of permanent chapels in both Leicestershire and Rutland, 'so well-established and permanently endowed that their incumbents, although described only as chaplains, were beneficed'.

So this is an important edition, with a general interest which is masked by its somewhat dry title, inevitable in a record society publication. The editor provides a substantial Introduction to her documents, in which she sets the political scene which gave rise to the need for the state to levy such taxes, and assesses the reliability of the assessments themselves, and how successful they were as a means of raising revenue. The second section of the Introduction describes the documents themselves, and the third highlights what the editor herself feels to be most significant in them for future researchers. She makes many sensible points which anyone using such evidence needs to absorb. She says, for example, that the accuracy and detail of tax assessments reflects how far distant from home the collectors were and how well they knew the countryside: a simple but telling point. She notes how much information these documents supply about the relationship between secular and regular clergy, and between the rich and propertied clergy and the poor and unbeneficed. Her greatest surprise was to uncover such a high number of unbeneficed clergy, and she concludes that they represented the church's pastoral care for the majority of people at this time.

This edition is supplied with a number of excellent maps, including attempts to map the medieval parishes of Leicestershire and Lincolnshire. A reviewer, or any reader, however, cannot fail to be disconcerted, not to say irritated, by the number of typing or proof-reading errors which occur in Introduction to this otherwise excellent edition, and it is to be hoped that the transcripts of the documents which follow are not similarly flawed.

Leicester

Margaret Bonney

Spiritual Pilgrim: A Reassessment of the Life of the Countess of Huntingdon by Edwin Welch. University of Wales Press, 1995. pp 233. £30.00

The middle of the eighteenth century saw a remarkable religious revival, linked closely to the growth of Methodism. The movement was concentrated among the lower classes of society, but one of its most important figures was Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, certainly a most unlikely figure to find at its heart. 'Converted' in 1741, at the age of 32, during the following fifty-two years she founded a college for the training of evangelical ministers, supported an orphanage in Georgia, encouraged the building of chapels in England and Wales, and established what was to become the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion.

She was the younger daughter of a younger son, and as such had little formal education, well demonstrated by her spelling and her handwriting, and indeed until her father succeeded to the title, and such of the estates as had not been alienated by her grandfather, the family's income had been very limited. In consequence she was

always very careful in her expenditure and showed considerable skills of management. At one stage, her activities in insisting on the collection of rents on her husband's estates precipitated local riots which needed the introduction of the military in order to keep the peace. Although it was her marriage which gave a wider access to 'society' it was her link with the Wesley brothers which led her to take a growing interest in evangelical ideas. As Dr Welch has demonstrated that the rest of her life shows a deepening of her ideas, what he has fittingly termed a spiritual pilgrimage. In the course of his study Dr Welch has produced a clear and logical analysis of the ways in which Lady Huntingdon's spiritual development produced results of great significance in the religious life of the period. He has above all thrown great light on the classes amongst whom she worked and above all paid tribute to her own spirituality.

He has also raised a number of further issues of significance. It is unfortunate that he passes over the riots precipitated by her assiduous collection of her husband's rents which not only throw light upon various aspects of the history of Leicestershire and Derbyshire but also on possible contradictions between her desire to better the conditions of the poor and her wish to uphold her own family's interests. There is one other very important point. The appearance of Frederick, Prince of Wales, among those who had some connection with Lady Huntingdon's religious group and the existence within the Household of the Princesses Amelia and Caroline of sympathisers who held religious meetings in their rooms suggest that Lady Huntingdon might not after all have been the only member of the nobility linked closely with the Methodists. Such links with the court, to some extent hinted at in the *Memoirs of the Earl of Egmont*, must cause historians to think again about the social background of Methodism.

This biography is a tribute to the assiduity and enthusiasm of its author. Lady Huntingdon had insisted that she should have no formal memorial; her will had required that she should be buried 'as privately as decency will admit of' beside her husband in an unmarked grave, and that she should have no 'official' biography. What eventually appeared proved to be so inaccurate as to be worse than useless. It has proved equally difficult to reconstruct her correspondence. Letters have become dispersed all over the world, and on occasion separate sheets from the same letter are to be found in widely dispersed archives.