

John Nichols and his Circle

by Rosemary Sweet

This article discusses the place of John Nichols and 'The History and Antiquities of Leicestershire' in the antiquarian culture of the late eighteenth century. Nichols possessed unique advantages as the leading printer and publisher of antiquarian publications, but he also embodied many of the abiding concerns of antiquaries in this period and was able to draw upon the assistance and enthusiasm of a wide range of like-minded individuals in the compilation of the history. The enormous archive of Nichols correspondence still extant provides rich insights into Nichols and his circle of fellow antiquaries.

John Nichols is one of the pivotal figures of the eighteenth-century book trade and literature; his contribution to the history of English literature, simply in terms of his editorship of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, *Anecdotes of Literature* and the *Literary History* would alone single him out for scholarly attention. Students of Leicestershire history, however, have far more reason to revere his memory; he being the compiler and editor of that momentous achievement of county historiography, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicestershire*, which no-one, who takes Leicestershire history seriously, can afford to ignore. Nor is there any shortage of literature relating to Nichols and his achievement.¹ It is not the intention of this paper to discuss the actual content of the *History of Leicestershire*, rather, it sets out to consider the volumes as part of the genre of county histories, and John Nichols as a member of an extensive and pervasive antiquarian community. The wider aims of the antiquarian project will be discussed and the contribution which Nichols and his collaborators were able to make to the broader agenda of antiquarianism, in addition to their role in Leicestershire historiography.

The first issue to be raised is the meaning of the county for eighteenth-century society and the extent to which the county operated as a meaningful identity. This is a point worth pursuing on two counts – the first, and most prosaic, is to consider why Nichols chose to devote so much time (ultimately over twenty-five years of his life) and so much money on a county history.

¹ I am greatly indebted to Julian Pooley of the Surrey History Centre for his generous advice and encouragement. He is currently compiling a database of all the extant correspondence of John Nichols, his son John Bowyer Nichols and grandson John Gough Nichols, and other members of their family. I would also like to thank Adrian Green, Jo Story and Alan White for their helpful comments on this paper. The following works were also used: J.E. Bilson, 'The Predecessors & Co-Adjutors of John Nichols, the Historian of Leicestershire' in id., *Leicester Memoirs*, Leicester: University Press, 1924; A.H. Broadfield, 'John Nichols as Historian and Friend. Suum Cuique', MS copies in Leicester University Library and at LLRRO; Charles Phythian Adams, 'Leicestershire' in C.J. Currie and C.P. Lewis (eds), *English County Histories: A Guide*, Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1994; E.L.Hart (ed.), *Minor Lives. A collection of biographies by John Nichols*, Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971; James Kuist, *The Works of John Nichols. An Introduction*, New York: AMC Press Inc., 1968; Jack Simmons, 'John Nichols' in *English County Historians*, Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1968; Albert H. Smith, 'John Nichols, Printer and Publisher', *The Library*, 5th ser., 18, (1963), pp. 169-90. See also his 'A Biography of John Nichols, 1745-1826; with a critical and descriptive account of works written and edited by him', University of Leicester MA thesis, 1959.



1. John Nichols FSA (1745-1826) printer, antiquary and editor of 'The History and Antiquities of Leicestershire'

The second point is the comparative ease by which he was able to call upon Leicestershire residents for assistance and the approbation with which his history was met. Although he complained that in the early stages it did not meet with the reception he had hoped for, the response of members of the Leicestershire landed elite would appear to have been positive.² After the fire of 1808 at his London printing offices in Red Lion Passage, over 250 gentlemen volunteered to double their subscription to five guineas on the remaining volumes, as a gesture towards indemnifying him for some of his losses incurred.³ How should the support and enthusiasm for Nichols' 4,500 page venture be understood?

Nichols was a Leicestershire man only by adoption – both his wives came from Leicestershire – but he never resided for any extended period in the county, he never held office there, and he had no business interests there.⁴ All of which one would suppose to be of some significance if he were to have developed any sense of *identity* with the county. Nevertheless, he developed a powerful affiliation with the county through personal friendships and, cumulatively, through the exercise of collecting and publishing the materials for the history; so much so that to contemporaries he was known as much for his county history as for his equally important role as editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. But prior to this, he was already the leading publisher of county histories. When he embarked upon the history of Leicestershire, he had recently pub-

² The complaint was made in the preface to *History and Antiquities*, 1 pt.2 (1815), p. vi, where Nichols referred to the 'tardy patronage received at the commencement of the publication'.

³ Letters of condolence and offers for doubling the subscription are collected in Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 372. Details of the fire are given in *Gentleman's Magazine*, 78, (1808), 99-100

⁴ He married Ann (d. 1776), daughter of William Cradock of Leicester in 1766 and Martha (d. 1788), daughter of William Green of Hinckley in 1778.

lished both the history of Dorset (1774) and the history of Worcestershire (1781) – the former had proved so successful that its editors were wishing that they had printed a larger edition.⁵ Nichols clearly developed a strong affection and loyalty to the county of Leicestershire over the course of his career, but we should also appreciate that he saw the county history as one of many constituent parts of a national topography; his publications and interests throughout his career were particularly connected with the study of British antiquities, as opposed to those of Greece and Rome, and the county history offered a framework for building up a comprehensive survey of the nation's topography and antiquarian heritage. More immediately however, he knew that there was a market for county histories amongst the gentry of the county and amongst antiquarian and learned circles nationwide and he saw in Leicestershire a body of material and a gap in the county historiography which he, with his family connections, was in a position to fill.

Although county histories found a readership which easily transcended the county boundaries, their primary appeal was with the county gentry, and it was from amongst the gentlemen of the county that the editors of such volumes primarily sought subscriptions.⁶ It should be remembered that the county entity meant more than simply an organizing concept for the collection of material on the history of England, but over hundreds of years had existed as administrative, political, military and social unit. The division of the country into counties had taken place in the Anglo-Saxon period; the county boundaries were therefore a record of a crucial period in the evolution of the English state, a period for which records were notoriously scarce. The county was itself an actor in English history – it embodied the collective actions of those who had resided in that area – the forebears and ancestors of the current landed elite.⁷

The county was inextricably tied in with the narration of English history, from the Domesday survey to the parliamentary inquiries of the eighteenth century, whose findings Nichols also reproduced. The active land market in the eighteenth century and the drive for consolidation of absolute property rights provided an additional incentive for recording the tenurial history of property and gave the inclusion of Domesday Book a contemporary relevance. As John Hutchins the historian of Dorset explained, he had thought it particularly important to give an account of 'our' families in the county, as 'since the beginning of this Century above 90 are extinct.'⁸ County historians were fully aware of the legal implications of their work, and indeed, emphasised this as a positive selling point to the gentlemen of the county. Take, for example, the case of Joseph Cragg of Leicestershire, who wrote to Nichols in 1795 with an inquiry about Domesday Book (the Leicestershire section of which was published in the first volume of the history) – a friend of his, he wrote, was extremely concerned that, although currently exercising manorial rights over what he believed to be his property, he was not certain if

⁵ Bodl. MS Top. Gen. c. 8, f. 391, n.d., 1776, Richard Gough to William Cuming, commenting on the sale of the *History and Antiquities of Dorset* over which they had collaborated in seeing through the press. Gough blamed himself for not providing for more copies for public sale, but had not expected the work to be met with such success.

⁶ The main appeal of county histories was widely acknowledged to be amongst the gentlemen of that county, but county histories also appealed to antiquaries, who like Nichols, saw the county history as part of a much larger antiquarian project.

⁷ Historians of the seventeenth century in particular, have highlighted the importance of the 'county community' as a primary focus of identity and loyalty during the early modern period. For a review and a critique of the historiography see C. Holmes, 'The County Community in Stuart Historiography', *Journal of British Studies*, 19 (1980), pp. 54-73 and A. Hughes, 'Warwickshire on the Eve of the Civil War: A "County Community"?'', *Midland History*, 7 (1982), pp. 42-72.

⁸ Bodl. MS Top. Gen. d. 2, f.222, John Hutchins to Richard Gough, 11 Feb. 1767.

he really owned it – if Domesday were to show that there had always been two manors there, his claim would seem much less exceptionable.⁹ Not surprisingly, the issue of property was foremost in the county history, rather than the history of the church or natural history. The framework of most county histories followed the distribution of property and the administrative units – Nichols was following the common pattern in dealing with the county hundred by hundred – and thereby giving expression to the administrative identity of the county elite.

Given that the county was still the basic unit of local administration, all those who held any kind of public office, as JP or above, held that office by virtue of possession of land in that county, and their authority was predicated upon the reality of that county. Their standing in the community was one, therefore, which depended upon an enhanced consciousness of the county unit – which was, of course, provided by the county history. The conduct of county business was a significant part of the persona of the public life of the propertied Englishman, and it drew on a strong sense of public responsibility which was reinforced by the expansion of county administration in the hands of the justices of the peace over the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Whilst Nichols was compiling and publishing the history, the sense of county identity would have been heightened amongst many of the Leicestershire gentry through their involvement with the militia and the volunteer corps. Although these bodies were raised for national defence in case of invasion from France, they were organized on a county basis and their officers were drawn from the gentlemen of the county.¹¹ Similarly, the favoured organizational model in the eighteenth century, whether for improving agriculture, prosecuting crime, reforming morals or educating the poor was the county society.¹² Association then, reinforced the cohesion of the county elite, whilst politics, although frequently divisive, was similarly conducted within a county framework, and drew on a rhetoric of local patriotism. Even whilst regional differences were being eroded in some respects, the county unit was one which was gaining in strength and importance in other areas.

An interesting development in the eighteenth century which reflected the strength of county feeling was the practice of county gentlemen forming a committee to promote the completion of the county history. This occurred in Northampton, where a committee of thirteen gentlemen, headed by Sir Thomas Cave of Stamford Hall (also an active promoter of Leicestershire history) was formed in order to see through the publication of the history of Northamptonshire – a publication which had had a chequered history up to that point. Begun and left incomplete by John Bridges, the history was then handed over by the committee to Benjamin Buckler of All Souls' College, Oxford. Buckler promptly reneged on his engagement, and it was passed on to Peter Whalley, who eventually brought the project to completion. John Hutchins' history of Dorset had passed through fewer hands, but as his health declined towards the end of his life, and having been struck

⁹ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 355, f.164, Joseph Cragg to John Nichols, 11 March, 1795. One should also note, however, that for the same reasons, those with a questionable right to property might be less enthusiastic to have their property rights investigated.

¹⁰ David Eastwood, *Governing Rural England. Tradition and Transformation in Local Government 1780-1840*, Oxford: University Press, 1994; id., *Government and Community in the English Provinces*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997; Paul Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman*, Oxford: University Press, 1990.

¹¹ J.E. Cookson, 'The English Volunteer Movement of the French Wars, 1793-1815: Some Contexts', *Historical Journal*, 32 (1989), pp. 867-91.

¹² The county club as a distinct variant on the eighteenth-century habits of sociability is discussed by Peter Clark in his recent publication, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800. The Origins of an Associational World*, Oxford: University Press, 2000, pp. 290-3.

by fire at his home, a committee of gentlemen was established to promote subscriptions and support the publication.¹³ Another of Nichols' correspondents, the Warwickshire antiquary, William Hamper discussed with Nichols the desirability of publishing a new edition of Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire* with additions and improvements, and hoped to persuade the gentlemen of the Grand Jury to discuss the propriety of encouraging such a project and employing a 'proper Person' to undertake it.¹⁴ It was appropriate to do so, because a county history reflected *honour* upon the county, and by implication upon the county gentlemen. This emphasis on the honour to the county is a recurrent theme in correspondence concerning the promotion or publication of county histories. The level of involvement of the county elite is a reminder that identities operated at local, regional and national levels and were constructed through a sense of history, tradition and continuity, which had yet to be displaced by the cult of the new.

Undoubtedly there was a stronger metropolitan culture reinforced by the lengthening periods spent in the metropolis or in fashionable centres such as Bath; a culture which transcended regional differences and in which sociability was focused upon the London Season.¹⁵ Improvements in communications were gradually bating down the sense of difference and particularity; travel times were dramatically reduced, the postal service was efficient and the proliferation of newspapers meant that no one was beyond the reach of London news, London fashions or London tastes. Such changes made the county history, which recorded and preserved the county customs, traditions and history all the more important; it was a symbol and reminder of the historic county identity. The conceptualization of the county was arguably becoming sharper.

It is one thing to argue that the gentry had an interest in promoting the county history because it validated their own position in the county and allowed them to see an engraving of their country seat and their forebears listed back to the Norman Conquest in print. It is another to explain how and why Nichols was able to co-ordinate such a mammoth task of compilation and correction. In the acknowledgments Nichols thanked by name over seventy individuals for their practical assistance, a figure which does not include all those who assisted him with the loan of manuscripts or access to libraries, or who provided plates for the illustrations. Nichols' commitments in London prevented him from making prolonged visits, or carrying out extensive research in Leicestershire himself, he was therefore reliant on the assistance of those on the ground.¹⁶ One might develop this further to consider how the history of Leicestershire was predetermined both by the cumulative manner in which it was written and the perception of antiquarianism in the eighteenth century, and the precedents for collaborative projects.

It is in this context of general inquiry and public spirit that it is helpful to try to locate Nichols' project. For it is striking how much good will and assistance he was able to call upon for in return for comparatively little remuneration. Obviously, for some, the prospect of seeing their name acknowledged in print, to see their own poor researches

¹³ Tony Brown and Glen Foard, *The Making of a County History: John Bridge's Northamptonshire*, Leicester: University Dept of Adult Education, 1994, pp. 154-6; LLRRO 23D57 (papers of Sir Thomas Cave). See also. A.H. Smith, 'John Nichols and Hutchins' *History and Antiquities of Dorset*, *The Library*, 5th ser., 15 (1960), pp. 81-95 and introduction to reprint of 3rd edition by Robert Douche, Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1973. See also Bodl. MSS Top. gen. d.2; Top. gen. c.7; Top. gen. c.8 and Gen Top.42.

¹⁴ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 357, f.13, William Hamper to John Nichols, 21 May 1810.

¹⁵ On the rise of a metropolitan based 'polite' society, see, for example Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance*, Oxford: University Press, 1989; J.M. Rosenheim, *The Emergence of a Ruling Order. English Landed Society, 1650-1750*, Harlow: Longman, 1998, esp chapters 4, 6 and 7; John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, London: Harper Collins, 1997.

¹⁶ Nichols made frequent visits to Leicestershire, generally as part of a longer summer tour, but was never resident in any one place for long.



2. Francis Peck FSA (1692-1743), antiquary and naturalist and rector of Goadby-Marwood, Leicestershire

preserved for the critical glance of posterity, was reward enough – William Harrod wrote to thank him for ‘immortalizing’ him by announcing his history of Market Harborough in the appendix and William Hamper expressed his gratitude for ‘the Niche which you have given me in the Temple of Immortality by enrolling my Name as one of your Correspondents in the History of Leicestershire.’¹⁷ Nichols was, in fact, exploiting both the pervasive sense of patriotism – operating here at both a local and a national level – and the centrality of antiquarian pursuits for ‘polite’ culture. His requests for information were frequently met with deafening silence, but there were also responses of positive enthusiasm, such as that of William Pares, who wrote promising that ‘I shall be most happy to give you every information in my power respecting your enquiries, if you will give me a Line saying what you think will be serviceable in your history of Leicestershire, in your history of the Hundred of Sparkenhoe I will give you everything I am capable of doing.’¹⁸

It has already been suggested that the gentry had an interest in the county history, as it could uphold their own authority and sanction their property holding, but the contribution of the clergy is equally, if not more, noteworthy. How was it that Nichols was able to draw upon the services of so many country clergymen? Why was it that the pages of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* were full of communications from incumbents across the country, minuting their contribution to the antiquarian endeavour? Robert Southey, in *Letters from England*, ridiculed those individuals who sent in badly engraved drawings

¹⁷ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 357, f.186, William Harrod to John Nichols, 6 Jan 1801; Bodl. Eng. Lett. b.18, f.106 William Hamper to John Nichols, 14 Dec. 1811.

¹⁸ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. b. 19, f. 44 William Pares to John Nichols, 19 Feb 1800.

of non-descript churches, with their monumental inscriptions, and discussion of families which none had ever heard of.¹⁹ Southey was effortless in his superiority, but he could not dispute the fact that such communications were an object of interest to large numbers of ‘gentlemen’ and particularly, clerical ones. I stress the clerical gentlemen advisedly – antiquarianism was unequivocally dominated by men of the cloth – at least forty-eight of the seventy thanked by Nichols in his acknowledgments were ordained; similarly the composition of the Society of Antiquaries was of a strongly ecclesiastical persuasion.²⁰ In a survey of urban histories, – a rather more diverse range of publications than county histories – the single largest group of urban historians was similarly that of the clergy.²¹

To a great extent the clerical influence was predetermined by the methods which antiquaries embarking upon publication used to collect their information. The normal practice was to send out a questionnaire with detailed queries to each incumbent of a parish in the hope that he would fill them in and return them. Nichols was something of an expert in the history of these topographical surveys, and indeed in *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica* he wrote a history of the county questionnaire as an introduction to the series.²² His own list of questions, which he circulated to the nobility, gentlemen and clergy of the county, included only seventy-four points of information – a mere bagatelle compared with Francis Peck’s rather more searching series of 102 questions, prepared in 1729 for a civil and natural history of the same county. Amongst other points, Peck wished to know ‘What have you new as to the management of Bees or Fish-Ponds’; ‘What accounts have you of Children crying in the Womb? And What Stones or other matters have you known taken out of dead Bodies?’ None of these lines of inquiry were retained in the Nichols version. In addition to the tried and trusted questionnaire, Nichols prepared a special sheet of headings targeted specifically at the clergy, which he assured the recipients would take only an afternoon to attend to. The editor had then only to ‘cut and paste’ them together, and the history was written – at least that was the theory.

The use of the clergy as compilers of information by the state was of course a well-established practice, and in the 1790s most rural clergymen would only recently have sent back returns on the charitable benefactions in their parishes.²³ It would have been only natural that private individuals should appeal to the same constituency. Clergymen were generally of some learning, and by the end of the eighteenth century, were overall of a higher social standing than at the start. They automatically had an interest in the church which was the starting point for antiquarian inquiry – the monumental inscriptions, the parish registers, the lists of charitable benefactions to the church, and the records of incumbents, were the bread and butter of the local history. As another would-be compiler of antiquarian collections put it in his appeal for assistance: ‘Who is there, generally speaking, better qualified by education, than the clergy generally living on the spot? Who have more leisure? Or who can be better

¹⁹ Robert Southey, *Letters from England* (ed.) Jack Simmons, London: Cresset Press, 1951, p. 348

²⁰ By 1790, when membership had become more fashionable amongst ‘polite society’ at least seventy of the 453 members were clergymen (printed list of members in Bodleian copy of *Archaeologia*, 9 (1790).

²¹ Rosemary Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England*, Oxford: University Press, 1997.

²² *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica*, 1 (1780), pp. I-iv (hereafter *BTB*).

²³ The inquiry into charitable provisions was made in 1786. Clergy would also have been accustomed to provide data on church attendance and sectarian composition for diocesan inquiries and in response to parochial visitations.

than they informed, being by education themselves esteemed gentlemen?²⁴ This may be stating the obvious, but it is worth remembering that there were many who had an interest in their own church and the local antiquities, who never published or made an imprint on the national scene. Antiquarianism was a hobby which was easily accommodated into the lifestyle of the polite gentleman or clergyman. The committed antiquary such as Richard Gough, who devoted his entire life to the subject, was an exception – far more common was the gentleman who had a passing interest, who could pick it up for a short period and put it down again.²⁵ An interest in antiquities, whether Roman or British, was part of the persona of the polite, educated individual who might typically be a clergyman.

For the rural clergyman, this kind of antiquarian activity could also serve as something of an intellectual life-line. This is less apparent in the correspondence over the history of Leicestershire – Nichols' persistent pressure for information is the strongest impression – but speaking more generally, the chance to exchange ideas and news on antiquarian topics was an important means for rural clergy to keep in contact with the world outside the confines of their parishes. Gough and Nichols were pumping these men for information, but they were also providing them with a sense of belonging to an antiquarian community – a republic of letters. They could put them in touch with other antiquaries in their field; both Nichols and Gough lent books, plates and manuscripts, and operated as a kind of antiquarian clearing-house cum help-line. Samuel Denne, one of Gough's regular correspondents who Nichols roped in to correct the proofs of Leicester Abbey is typical of the rural clerical antiquary.²⁶ Writing to Gough from Kent, he bemoaned the fact that his 'retired situation' restricted his access to the books necessary for his antiquarian studies, and that 'unfortunately there are not more than two of my neighbours who have the least bias to the same researches.'²⁷

The response to Nichols' inquiries was not, of course, as good as he had hoped. Nichols never specified what his success rate was, but he and all those who sent out similar queries, were disappointed at the level of returns, but he seems to have had enough contacts in Leicestershire to chivy clergy into providing the necessary information where queries had failed.²⁸ The next stage was to send out the proof sheets for those on the spot to correct and to fill in the missing details. Again, this was a tried and trusted technique, and in all of this, it would seem likely that Nichols was relying on the advice and experience of Richard Gough, who deployed similar methods as editor of the *Anecdotes of British Topography*, and more particularly the 1780 edition of Camden's

²⁴ Peter Muilman in *Morning Post*, 7 Nov. 1769.

²⁵ The place of antiquarianism in English culture is developed more fully in Rosemary Sweet, 'Antiquaries and Antiquities in Eighteenth-Century England', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (forthcoming).

²⁶ Denne complained that Nichols had sent him too many proofs to be speedily digested 'in the noddle of a person who is more than halfway between three score and three score and ten.' J. Nichols (ed.), *Illustrations of Literature*, 6, p. 671. Samuel Denne to John Nichols, 13 Feb. 1796. Denne died three years later in 1799. Denne was apologising for retaining proof sheets 'a second and a third day' after their arrival.

²⁷ Bodl. MS Gough Gen. Top. 39, f.81, Samuel Denne to Richard Gough, 24 Aug. 1795.

²⁸ D.C. Cox estimates that about a quarter of the questionnaires sent out by Nash to the clergymen of Worcestershire would have been returned. Cox, *This Foolish Business: Dr Nash and the Worcestershire Collections*, Worcester: Worcestershire Historical Society Occasional Publications, 7 (1993) p. 15. Nichols commented in *BTB*, 1, pp. ii-iii, on the low level response to previous queries. He claimed that the Irish Physico-Historical Society met with only 40 responses to 4000 questionnaires sent out in 1744.

Britannia, which Nichols had printed. Nichols would print off proof sheets, send them out, receive them back corrected, print them out again, send them out once more. It was an endless process of emendation, to which anyone could contribute – proof sheets were sent out with the profligate abandon of a modern day mail shot. Nichols' position as printer was clearly of inestimable value here. As George Ashby, friend and fellow antiquary of Leicestershire commented somewhat enviously, 'You see what an uncommon and great advantage he hath, as a printer, to be able to draw off a few copies of such a large work, in order to give the *Cognoscenti* an opportunity of communicating their thoughts.'²⁹

Nichols himself was only too aware of the dangers of perpetually accumulating information and postponing the rationalization of material, rather than seeing it through the press. He had himself been the publisher of Hutchins' *History of Dorset* – a work which Hutchins had begun in the late 1730s, and only completed in 1774 due to the energetic efforts of Richard Gough to see it through the press.³⁰ Nichols had also been the publisher for Treadway Nash's *Collections for a History of Worcestershire*, another work with an erratic prehistory. In 1778 Nash had commented rather tartly to Nichols, that 'a fatality seems to attend the history of Worcestershire; this is the third time a volume has begun to be printed on that subject.'³¹ That it was published at all was largely due to the fact that Nash had become so daunted by the potential magnitude of the task before him, that he effectively gave up on the job and published what was essentially a very limited expansion of the previous collections.³²

Nichols was disciplined, therefore, in churning out the material at regular intervals. This is of course a reflection of the fact that he was author, editor, printer and publisher combined, and although he was dependent upon the communications of his contacts in the country, his own business interests would not permit him to draw the process out once he had assembled the material. He could not afford to let his printing presses lie idle; throughout the publication of the history of Leicestershire he was engaged on a number of other large projects, notably the *Literary Anecdotes*, which were competing, not just for his editorial attention, but for room in the printing house. Material was literally published as it came in; corrections or additions from correspondents which arrived at Red Lion Passage a day or two late would necessitate stopping the press, and resetting the type face to accommodate the alterations. Helpers who had been sent proof sheets to correct, were relentlessly pestered for their return – which, given the efficiency of the postal service out of London into Leicestershire, could be remarkably quick. To his friend, John Ward, of Hinckley, he wrote 'I do not wish to press upon your kindness; but as soon as with convenience to yourself you can return the Proofs, I shall esteem it a favour.'³³

²⁹ George Ashby to William Stevenson, 14 May 1791, J. Nichols (ed.) *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 9, p. 684, quoted in Broadfield, as n.1, p. 702. In a similar vein, Ashby wrote to Nichols on 21 June 1791, 'I cannot imagine that any county history was ever wrote with equal advantages to the present. The being able to set up so many sheets at once, and to keep them unworked off, and send them about for correction, is what, I believe, never happened before, and must contribute wonderfully to the perfection of yours.'

³⁰ The correspondence relating to Gough's involvement in the publication is in Bodl. MSS Gen. Top. d. 2, c.7 and 8 and Top. Gen. 42.

³¹ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. b. 13, f. 24, Treadway Nash to John Nichols, 30 Nov. 1778.

³² T. Nash, *Collections for the History of Worcestershire* (1781–2) ; Richard Gough was left to compile a supplement of additions and corrections, published in 1799; on Nash, see Cox, 1993 as n. 25.

³³ John Nichols to John Ward, 20 Dec. 1809, *Leicestershire and Rutland Notes and Queries*, 2 (1891–3), p. 310.

In 1811 we find him apologising to the Leicester solicitor, Samuel Miles, as he acknowledged the corrections Miles had sent him: 'I hasten to thank you for your Two kind Packets of Corrections; and to apologize for those repeated and querulous Enquiries after them with which you have been troubled, and to which the extreme Urgency of the Business imperceptibly impelled me.' The value of the material made up for the delay, but even so, Nichols regretted that the material on Newtown Linford was too late for inclusion at all. The remainder of the letter, in which he detailed the implications for the printing time table, highlights the rigorous efficiency with which Nichols operated to keep the project under control:

'The only possible Remedy, however, shall be applied, though it will occasion some Delay, and some Expence. I will *destroy* the sheet already printed; and print the sheet entirely over again.— The other Corrections will occupy two or three Days, and in the mean Time that Sheet shall be reprinted by other Workmen.—I shall after that, have Two Indexes to complete; which, however, wait only for the *finishing* of these Sheets.— I thought to have *finished* last Saturday – and I still hope to finish next Saturday the 30th.—The Plates (nearly 130) are rolling off – and the Binders have begun their Preparations – and on *Monday the 16th* I propose to offer myself (in Mezzotinto) and my book to the Candour of the Publick.'³⁴

One of the striking aspects of the history is its lack of synthesis. On a pragmatic level this was inevitable given the methods employed, and the resources which he had at his disposal. Parts of the history were never even printed from a finished manuscript, but were added to, piecemeal, until judged complete.³⁵ As Nichols himself candidly admitted in the preface to the 1790 *Collections Towards a History of Leicester*, the material was very much an accumulation – a common-place book connected by an index – which the reader was begged to use if he found the account of a parish to be in any way deficient.³⁶

But Nichols' willingness to present the material in this way would not have been based solely upon the exigencies of the printing press. The mode which he adopted was one which was widely accepted amongst antiquaries as being the most suitable approach. Antiquarianism was a science. We need to divest ourselves of the negative image of pedantry and unsystematic and uncritical compilations. Certainly there were antiquaries who displayed such faults – as there are today, and certainly the caricature of the antiquary was one which exploited the potential for ridicule in such tendencies. But there were other antiquaries who employed a much more rigorous approach to their studies. It was a process of recovery and collection; it demanded accuracy and application; but it was not a synthesis – that was the work of the historian. Nichols was following the principles of antiquarian scholarship which his friend and partner in so many of his antiquarian ventures, Richard Gough, espoused in his own publications and reviews for the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Information should be collected and preserved as carefully and accurately as possible, with full references, to enable the reader to make an informed and intelligent judgment for himself. It was not the role of the antiquary to shape the evidence or to obtrude his opinion upon the reader. Nicholas Sambrooke Russell, who compiled the history of the earls of Leicester for Nichols, expressed himself

³⁴ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. b. 19, f.13, John Nichols to Samuel Miles, 25 Nov. 1811.

³⁵ Broadfield, as n.1, p. 349.

³⁶ John Nichols, *Antiquities in Leicestershire*, BTB, 8, 1790, p. v.

particularly forcefully on this point to his fellow labourer in the Nichols' vineyard, Aulay Macaulay:

‘I aim at truth and actual information and endeavour instead of mixing the narrative with a great deal of my own reflection, to state facts so clearly and forcibly, that the readers may make the obvious reflections for themselves.’³⁷

Bearing this in mind, we can appreciate the rationale for the cumbersome section of primary sources reproduced and set before the reader with little or no critical apparatus or commentary at the outset of volume one. Antiquarianism was about preserving texts and documents – just as it was about preserving buildings – because they were interesting in themselves and because they could be of public benefit. By reproducing these Nichols was making them available to all those who would have been unable to afford the fees of the Tower of London or the other record repositories. The first volume of the history is dominated by the reproduction of the Domesday survey for Leicestershire, taken from the facsimile which Nichols had been commissioned by Parliament to print in 1783. Given that the charges for information from Domesday were 8/6 with an additional charge of 4d for every line transcribed, Nichols could rightly pride himself on the provision of a public service.³⁸ The inclusion of these documents complimented the modern tables of statistical information, which were similarly reproduced more or less undigested. Nichols was not an innovator in this respect – similar material was being made available in other county and local historical publications. This was information of contemporary interest, but it was also the historical material of the future – the taxation returns and the charitable inquests were the eighteenth-century equivalent of the Pipe Rolls and the Domesday survey, which Nichols reproduced with such care. Nichols was making publicly available information which was of use and of interest to the citizen – in the same spirit that reformers were demanding the inspection of corporation accounts and the publication of the charters which enshrined the rights and privileges of the inhabitants, in a drive to instigate greater openness and accountability in the institutions of government.³⁹ The rise of bureaucracy and statistical analysis, not unnaturally made people more interested in its historical and contemporary manifestations. Such information was highly regarded for the insight which it offered into the ‘manners and customs of the time.’ It also reflects the prevailing ‘scientific’ temper of the time; the empirical traditions of the scientific revolution were the mainstay of the British intellectual tradition and provided the standard around which the moderns rallied against the ancients. Antiquaries, despite their ancient subject matter, were from the camp of the moderns.⁴⁰ They were like scientists conducting an experiment – they had to produce the raw materials from which any other body could achieve a similar result. Hence Russell’s reluctance to obtrude his fancies or his opinions.

³⁷ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 364, f. 230, Sambrook Russell to John Nichols, 19 Feb. 1791.

³⁸ LLRRO extra illustrated copy of Nichols, *History and Antiquities of Leicestershire*, 1 pt 1, pp. xxxvi-vii. The original resolution in the House of Lords had been that they were ‘desirous also that the publick should be made acquainted with a books of much curiosity and of some use, hitherto known only to a few.’

³⁹ On the publication of charters see Sweet 1997, as n.21, p. 204-13.

⁴⁰ Joseph Levine, *Humanism and History. Origins of Modern English Historiography*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987. Antiquaries distinguished themselves from the virtuosi and the dilettante, who simply collected antiquities as *objets d’art*, and valued them on aesthetic grounds only.

Nichols pointedly included material of a more general scope to broaden the appeal to those who were not of an antiquarian turn of mind, as had other antiquaries before him. His predecessor, Sir Thomas Cave, who had issued proposals for an enlarged edition of Burton, had intended ‘to render this work more entertaining to such as have no particular pleasure in the perusal of Antiquity’ and therefore he advised his readers that he would ‘embellish it’ with information on eminent persons, remarkable transactions, buildings of note, and also ‘natural history of herbes, plant, &c... avoiding all idles tales of apparitions and witchcraft etc.’⁴¹ Nichols was following a well-established trend in including the sections on natural history: one has only to look at the questionnaires sent out over the century by would-be county historians to appreciate that natural history and antiquarianism had always been viewed as natural and necessary partners. There was a very significant ‘grey’ area where the boundaries between the two could not be drawn. The Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries overlapped not just in membership but in papers too – and this complementarity was reflected in the antiquarian publications of the time.⁴² Nichols was simply unusual in the success with which he was able to draw upon other expertise in order to provide an adequate, even extensive coverage of these ‘non’ antiquarian topics in his history. Other authors, who were not similarly placed at the centre of a literary and antiquarian network, and who did not have so many struggling authors in their debt could not command such power, and if natural history was not within their own area of expertise or they had no personal contacts themselves, the topic would be less than adequately covered.

Natural history and antiquarianism were companion studies – pursuits which attracted the same kind of gentleman. A striking number of antiquaries were also natural historians, and natural historians were also antiquaries – the classic example is Thomas Pennant, who wrote profusely on a range of subjects from zoology to antiquities, but there were many others like him, who along with Roman coins and inscriptions collected fossils, botanical specimens and displayed an interest in experimental science.⁴³ As William Cuming of Dorset explained to Gough, ‘I am deep in Conchology – an Amusement I have lately taken to on finding Coins come in but slowly.’⁴⁴ Richard Gough was unusual amongst antiquaries for his *lack* of interest in other areas – though he could be responsive to the odd fossil. This reflects, again the *scientific* character of antiquarianism and is an appropriate reminder to historians now to remember that antiquarianism should be integrated into the general spirit of public inquiry which seized the minds and enthusiasm of gentlemen of the eighteenth century. As Richard Gough put it, antiquarianism was a key discipline in an age ‘when every part of Science is advancing to perfection.’⁴⁵ It is an aspect of eighteenth-century culture which has, I would suggest, been rather neglected by historians. It is not generally remembered, for example, that Sir Joseph Banks was an active member on the Council of the Society of Antiquaries, made collections towards the history of Lincolnshire and conducted correspondence on antiquarian subjects with a number of the leading antiquaries of the day.⁴⁶ However,

⁴¹ LLRRO extra-illustrated Nichols as n.35, 3, pt.1, pp.xii-xiii.

⁴² On the overlap between the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries, see Joan Evans, *A History of the Society of Antiquaries*, Oxford: University Press, 1956, p. 152. In 1790, 161 of the 453 were also members of the Royal Society (printed list of members for 1790).

⁴³ There is, as yet, no thorough study of Pennant in English.

⁴⁴ Bodl. MS Tog. Gen. c. 8, f. 470,

⁴⁵ Bodl. MS Top. London c. 2, f. 156 v.

⁴⁶ John Gascoigne’s biography of Banks is an exception to this, *Joseph Banks and the English Enlightenment. Useful Knowledge and Polite Culture*, Cambridge: University Press, 1994, esp. pp. 29-36, 57-73, 119-33.

reading the antiquarian texts with this in mind, the connection becomes clear. Antiquarianism was a public duty, a public responsibility – to collect antiquities was an important element of the eighteenth-century endeavour to record, compile and classify.⁴⁷ Like science itself, it was also a part of ‘polite society’. Polite science and its integration in a non-specialist community is a fashionable topic amongst eighteenth-century historians at the moment.⁴⁸ There is much less interest however, in the equally polite, and equally well integrated pursuit of antiquarianism.

Part of Nichols’ success lies in the fact that he was able to draw upon the labours of those who had been compiling material relating to the history of Leicestershire on their own account – part of the hidden iceberg of antiquarian activity in the eighteenth century – and who would have had encountered difficulties in getting their work published were it not for Nichols’ willingness to incorporate their efforts, into his own history. Rogers Ruding, for example, who did sterling work in gathering information and in correcting material,⁴⁹ was primarily concerned in seeing the publication of his history of coinage, which as he himself admitted, was of limited appeal – it was Nichols, of course, who took the risk of publishing the history. Sambrooke Russell, whose history of the earls of Leicester forms one of the most valuable portions of the first volume, would have been unlikely to have seen his work published elsewhere. In addition to the history of the earls, he undertook some of the parish histories and arranged for others to be done by acquaintances.⁵⁰ Earlier publishing connections were also instrumental: Nichols had been the printer of both Crabbe’s *The Library* in 1781 and *The Village* in 1783. Aulay Macaulay’s history of Claybrooke was first published by Nichols in 1787 for *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica*, but was incorporated almost unchanged into the county history. He continued to collect information and assist in the correction of proofs until the end of the project. Although Crabbe lost his zeal for involvement in the project, particularly after he had moved from Leicestershire to Suffolk, most of Nichols’ correspondents were enthusiastic supporters, and their letters suggest a high level of identification with the history as their personal concern, and not simply Nichols’ project. Walter Mounsey, for example, wrote to Nichols telling him how he had been at Belvoir Castle with the Duke of Rutland, and had been dropping heavy hints that the Duke should follow Lord Moira’s example and contribute engravings of the magnificent works being carried out at the castle by Mr Wyatt.⁵¹

The nature of Nichols influence over a number of his contributors was not just that of publisher and aspiring author, but had a financial element. Nichols was a man

⁴⁷ K. Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities in Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

⁴⁸ See Gascoigne 1994 as n. 43 and also his *Science in the Service of Empire*, Cambridge: University Press, 1998; Alice Walters ‘Conversation Pieces: science and politeness in eighteenth-century England’, *History of Science*, 35 (1997), pp. 121-54; Larry Stewart, *The Rise of Public Science: rhetoric, technology and natural philosophy in Newtonian Britain, 1650-1750*, Cambridge: University Press, 1992; Paul Elliott, ‘The Derby Philosophers: Urban Scientific Culture and Society in Provincial England, c. 1750-1850’, Univ. of Leicester, PhD thesis, 2000; Roy Porter, ‘Science, Provincial Culture and Public Opinion in Enlightenment England’, *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 3 (1980), 20-46. See also the articles on the Royal Society in the eighteenth century in special issue of *British Journal of the History of Science*, 32 (1999).

⁴⁹ In 1809 he reported having gone over all of St Margaret’s and All Saints in Leicester correcting the proofs (noting, in passing, that the monumental inscriptions had become very mixed up) and in going through the Journals of Parliament for references to Leicester History. Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 364, f.110-111, Rogers Ruding to John Nichols, 20 April, 1809.

⁵⁰ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 364, ff.223-227.

⁵¹ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 360, f. 142, Walter Mounsey to John Nichols, 30 Nov. 1807.

renowned for his public spirit (as common councillor, alderman and deputy to John Wilkes) and his charity (he was one of the founders of the Margate seabathing infirmary and secretary to the Literary Fund).⁵² He also extended charity to his authors and his draughtsmen – but this did give him considerable control over their output and bound them to him in a debt of gratitude. Rogers Ruding, for example, who was working so assiduously on his behalf in 1809, had written to Nichols on 30 March 1804 thanking him for the kind offer of stock, which would help him through his present difficulties and save him from having to sell his library.⁵³ This was in a response to a letter in which Ruding had outlined his financial difficulties and his plans to sell his library, but had begged for a three month loan to tide him over whilst he made extracts from the books which he would have to sell.

Mounsey, who with Crabbe compiled material for the natural history, and who was busy trying to galvanize enthusiasm in the Duke of Rutland, was similarly indebted to Nichols. Nichols effectively acted as a banker for Mounsey – the latter told tradesmen to draw on Nichols for their bills, promising Nichols that these sums would never exceed what Nichols owed him, and on other occasions, he too had to appeal to Nichols for the loan of money to tide him over. Nichols looked over his financial and legal interests in London, investing money in stocks, and advising Mounsey on the management of his affairs. Even after both Mounsey and Nichols died, John Bowyer Nichols continued to look after Mounsey's widow and daughter.⁵⁴

The relationship with the draughtsman J. P. Malcolm is also of interest. Malcolm had come over to England from Philadelphia, but never succeeded in establishing himself as an artist on a secure financial footing, and was in perpetual financial need. He used to beg advances from Nichols, on the strength of drawings yet to be completed. On 28 March 1792 he wrote to Nichols begging for an advance, whilst he was engaged on making drawings at Loughborough. He wrote again on 5 March, repeating his request, reporting that he had made seventy drawings of brasses and monuments, but had nothing with which to pay for his lodgings. In 1794 we find him writing again to Nichols on financial problems, asking for a 10 guinea advance, and promising that he would work only for Nichols in future, as soon as his commission for Lord Ferrers was complete. By 1795 the begging letters were coming in thick and fast: the crisis point seemed to come when the rent and the butcher's bill came in all at once (necessitating a loan of £13) and, to cap it all, he fell foul of the Hair Powder Act:

'From totally misunderstanding the Hair Powder Act I have I am afraid made myself liable to the £20 penalty if Friday (as I am told there is no business transacted at the public offices on the King's birthday) should be too late to obtain the certificate. However inconvenient it is to spare a Guinea I should despise the thought of living in England and exhibiting myself so publicly as an opposer of her laws to whom I am so much indebted as I am really guineas-less will you be so good as to let me call for one on Friday at half past two.'⁵⁵

⁵² *Gentleman's Magazine*, 96, (1826), pp. 489-504.

⁵³ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 364, f.103, Rogers Ruding to John Nichols, 30 March 1804.

⁵⁴ Broadfield, as n.1, p.354.

⁵⁵ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 358, f. 165, J. P. Malcolm to John Nichols, 3 June 1795. See also Malcolm's accounts for work done for Nichols at LLRRO DE5463/11.

Malcolm was permanently in financial crisis until his early death in 1815, and without employment from Nichols would have fallen by the wayside. Right up until his death he was employed by Nichols, not just in engraving drawing, but in compiling the index – which, given the size of the volumes and the fact that he was severely lame, was quite a feat. Nichols was in a unique position, and skillfully distributed his largesse to ensure returns, judging a fine line between keeping costs down and ensuring his authors and draughtsmen stayed off the bread line and out of the debtors' gaol. But even when his protégés were in the debtors' gaol, he exploited the potential. When the draughtsman and engraver John Prattent found himself in Marshalsea, Nichols willingly paid him for the engravings depicting the 'insider's view' of the prison.⁵⁶

When contemplating Nichols' achievement, it should also be remembered that he was hardly working from a blank slate. Nichols would have been the first to admit this, and indeed carefully traced out the history of the different collections towards the history which had formed the basis of his own compilation. No-one who has given the *History and Antiquities* even a cursory glance could possibly miss the fact that the county history was a cumulative project, one which had been ongoing since the publication of Burton's original history in 1622. Burton had planned a second edition which, due to the interruptions of the Civil War never came to light, and since then there had been intermittent plans to publish a fuller history. Francis Peck, George Ashby and Sir Thomas Cave had all contemplated publishing a revised and expanded county history;⁵⁷ Peck had died before his was completed; Ashby was overtaken by Nichols, and moved to Suffolk. Cave had found his time too much taken up with parliamentary duties towards the end of his life, and in 1778 he died before any more work could be done upon the collections.⁵⁸

Nichols was aware that Cave had made these collections, but for some time was unable to trace their whereabouts. In 1788 he used the pages of his own *Gentleman's Magazine* to plead in rather petulant tones, for information regarding their whereabouts. 'What a pity such collections should be neglected, and that the drudgery of forming them a second time should remain to be gone over again.'⁵⁹ The collections eventually came to Nichols through the mediation of Gough in 1790, who approached Sir Charles Cave, the antiquary's grandson. Meanwhile, there had also been proposals to reissue Burton's history in 1769 by Alderman Gregory of Leicester – a local printer, with some additions, — but this never materialized. Another publisher/bookseller Thomas Whittingham, who made something of a speciality of republishing antiquarian volumes, issued a 'corrected' edition of Burton in 1777. But as the antiquarian fraternity were not slow to point out, it was actually essentially unaltered. Good antiquaries like Gough and Nichols regarded this as rank commercial exploitation. Such a publication did nothing

⁵⁶ These were published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 74 (1804). For Prattent's letters to Nichols written from Marshalsea, see Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 362, ff.223-233. 'There is on the East side of the Prison formerly a Palace the remains nearly intire of the ancient Building which if you should approve would make a tolerable subject for your attention. If you please I will make an accurate sketch and send it to you.' (f. 223, n.d.).

⁵⁷ Broadfield, as n.1, p. 124. Broadfield refers to a letter now at Yale, from Cave addressed to Ashby, dated 8 Aug. 1758, in which Cave refers to printed proposals for subscriptions.

⁵⁸ Cave's collections included much of Peck's material; Farmer's materials, which included the Carte history of Leicester and Staveley's MSS were also presented to Nichols for his use. Bilson, 1924 as n.1, offers a brief outline of the various contributors.

⁵⁹ Nichols in *Gentleman's Magazine*, 58, (1788), p. 139.

to further antiquarian science; brought no new knowledge into the public domain, and merely perpetuated old errors. A new county history was wanted, not just a reprint.⁶⁰

In addition to these collections which were clearly being made with a view to eventual publication, Nichols listed twenty-three different annotated copies of Burton's 1622 *History of Leicestershire*, of which he was the beneficiary. He also mentioned a number more, to which he had been unable to gain access. Annotated versions and manuscripts would be passed from antiquary to antiquary, transcribed and amended by various hands. Nichols used a history of Leicester written by Thomas Stavely, copied by Samuel Carte, copied by Willis in the Bodleian, this final copy being the one which he himself transcribed. Other antiquaries offered to transcribe particularly interesting annotations in manuscripts in their possession, or annotated volumes which they held. Important though the expansion of print culture was in the development of antiquarianism in the eighteenth century, it was still very much a manuscript culture in terms of objects of study and communication. The ongoing collection and compilation of additional information, in the form of marginalia and extra illustration was standard practice amongst English antiquaries. The material was scarcely ever intended to see the light of day – it was collected in the hope that some time in the future, a 'more able hand' might be able to reduce it to order. Such habits reinforce my earlier point about the prevalence of low-level antiquarianism through English society. Comments about the supposed decline in county antiquarianism and topography during the mid eighteenth century, which authorities such as Stuart Piggott have made, are in this context, difficult to justify.⁶¹

The simple fact that histories were not being published is not indicative at all of a decline in interest. What it does reflect is the enormous problems in publishing these undertakings. The importance of Nichols' financial resources now becomes increasingly apparent: he was a bankroller for the county topographer. Few other county historians were men of anything more than moderate means; they were minor gentry and Anglican clergy. The only other comparable publication was the history of Wiltshire, published under the auspices of Sir Richard Colt Hoare, who used his extensive financial resources and powers of patronage to co-ordinate the compilation of the history which bears his name.⁶² Most county historians would have been unable to risk publishing such an enormous project, or one with such lavish illustrations. Antiquarian interest was widespread, but not at the price which these volumes commanded – Nichols sold his at £2 10s 6d – which was expensive enough, though this represented a substantial subsidy. By the early nineteenth century, a county history such as Clutterbuck's *History of Hertfordshire* was selling for 6g, or 12g for a copy printed on royal paper. County histories with their folio pages of thick paper, the high quality and variety of type face, the numerous notes and their sheer length were extremely expensive to produce. And this was before any of the plates were engraved.

Nichols was also fortunate in that he already had the communications network and the facilities to hand for getting the history printed, and could call upon his wide circle

⁶⁰ Gough complained about Whittingham's plans in a letter to George Ashby in 1776. 'I told him [Whittingham] plainly it was lost labour to republish these books in this manner.' West Suffolk Record Office, E2/22/1, unfoliated collection, 18 Sept. 1776.

⁶¹ D.C. Douglas, *English Scholars, 1660-1730*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2nd edn., 1951, p. 273-5; Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape: essays in antiquarianism*, Edinburgh: University Press, 1976.

⁶² Sir R.C. Colt Hoare, *The Ancient History of South and North Wiltshire*, 2 vols, 1812-21.

of antiquarian contacts to finish his business for him. As Ralph Gifford pointed out, when he suggested that Nichols should ‘number the People of Leicestershire as they stand in Domesday Book’, there was no need for Nichols to undertake such drudgery, as ‘you are connected with scores of painstaking patient Creatures, who, on your dropping a single word, will with Pleasure do it for you.’⁶³ Nichols also had a distribution network, with provincial booksellers across the country, upon whom he could call to solicit subscriptions to his works: for example, J. H. Homfray of Norwich, who was chronically in Nichols’ debt, hoped to make up for this by pressing his own customers to subscribe for Nichols’ works. In 1815, when he owed Nichols £74 12s 6d, he was writing to Nichols, telling him how he had been persuading Lord Henniker to subscribe to the *Anecdotes of Literature*.⁶⁴

We are still left wondering why Nichols engaged on this project at all. The influence of his close friend and associate, Richard Gough, must, be asserted at this point. In his acknowledgments Nichols simply noted the loan of an annotated copy of Burton, the use of certain of his observations on Leicestershire monuments and hints on the description of antiquities.⁶⁵ But this, he stressed, was all that Mr Gough would allow him to say. We may be confident in assuming that Mr Gough’s influence was actually a good deal greater, particularly in stimulating Nichols’ interest in the early days. The *Bibliotheca Topographica Britannica*, the series in which Nichols had published the *Leicestershire Collections* and had thereby become aware of the wealth of material to be published on Leicestershire, had been the brainchild of Gough.

Richard Gough was probably the most influential of the later eighteenth-century antiquaries; in 1768 he published *Anecdotes of British Topography*, in 1780 he published a new translation of Camden’s *Britannia*, with extensive additions; a second edition of *British Topography* came out in 1789 and between 1786 and 1799 the three volumes of *Sepulchral Monuments* were also published. From 1771-97 Gough was Director of the Society of Antiquaries of London, the duties of which office included overseeing the Society’s publications – hence arose the association with Nichols who was the Society’s printer. He would also have been in frequent contact with Nichols in his capacity as leading reviewer for the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, a position which he occupied from 1786. Gough was passionate about the importance of antiquarian science to the national interest.⁶⁶ In his view the preservation of the nation’s antiquities was of public concern and a reflection upon national honour. In *Anecdotes of British Topography* Gough had described his obsession with antiquities as ‘a zeal to serve the public’.⁶⁷ Gough’s sense of the public importance of antiquarian studies led him to see Richard Farmer’s failure to publish the history of Leicester for which proposals had been issued in 1766, as a betrayal to the public and the antiquarian cause. He accused him of following the ‘primrose path of poetry’ instead.⁶⁸ The pursuit of British antiquity reflected honour

⁶³ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 356, f. 132, Ralph Gifford to John Nichols, 18 Aug. 1790.

⁶⁴ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 358, ff. 29-31.

⁶⁵ Nichols, *History of Leicestershire*, 1, pt. 1, p. vii.

⁶⁶ For further discussion of Gough’s antiquarian vision, see Sweet, forthcoming as n. 25

⁶⁷ Richard Gough, *Anecdotes of British Topography*, 1768, p. v.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, In 1767 Farmer had published *An Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare*. Elsewhere Gough commented upon the difficulties which Farmer was encountering in collecting materials. ‘He finds so much difficulty in collecting materials that he has put off the publication another quarter.’ BL Add. MS 22936, f. 62 v, R. Gough to Foote Gower, 2 Mar 1767. Farmer, a fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and native of Leicester, had been compiling materials for a history of the town, including the collections made by Carte.

upon the nation, because it preserved the memory of past glories and past achievements and demonstrated the respect in which the nation held its own antiquity (as opposed to the aristocratic fascination with the civilization of Greece and Rome).⁶⁹ It was of pragmatic value (as we have already witnessed in the context of settling property disputes) and it was the means by which the nation's history could be retrieved from the mists of time. Antiquities provided the factual basis from which the nation's history could be written. As another antiquary, Thomas Pownall expressed it, the correct approach to the study of antiquities was one which by 'an induction' of the particulars would 'lead to some combination of the general system of fact'.⁷⁰

Gough was particularly concerned to recover the Saxon and medieval past which was lost in obscurity. 'There is scarce a department in our antiquities', he claimed, 'for which we must not recur to our Saxon ancestors.' The history of the Saxons and the period following the Norman Conquest was still shrouded in obscurity, but the materials, Gough argued, were there for the gathering. Sambrooke Russell's comments on the history of the Earls of Leicester are particularly interesting in this context: 'It has at least the merit of originality, & is humbly prepared as an hint to historians to view the Anglo-norman part of our history, & attempt something to give us constitutional information – a thing every day ranted in the Cabinet, Parliament, & Courts of Justice.'⁷¹ In addition to illustrating the importance attached to medieval history within the Nichols' circle of antiquaries, this comment again highlights the contemporary relevance which antiquaries believed their studies held. Nichols undoubtedly shared Gough's belief in the patriotic significance of county topography, and like Gough and many other antiquaries who had not been on the Grand Tour, native antiquities held a more powerful attraction than those of Greece and Rome. The *History of Leicestershire* was a homage to his adoptive county, but was also a contribution to the greater national glory.

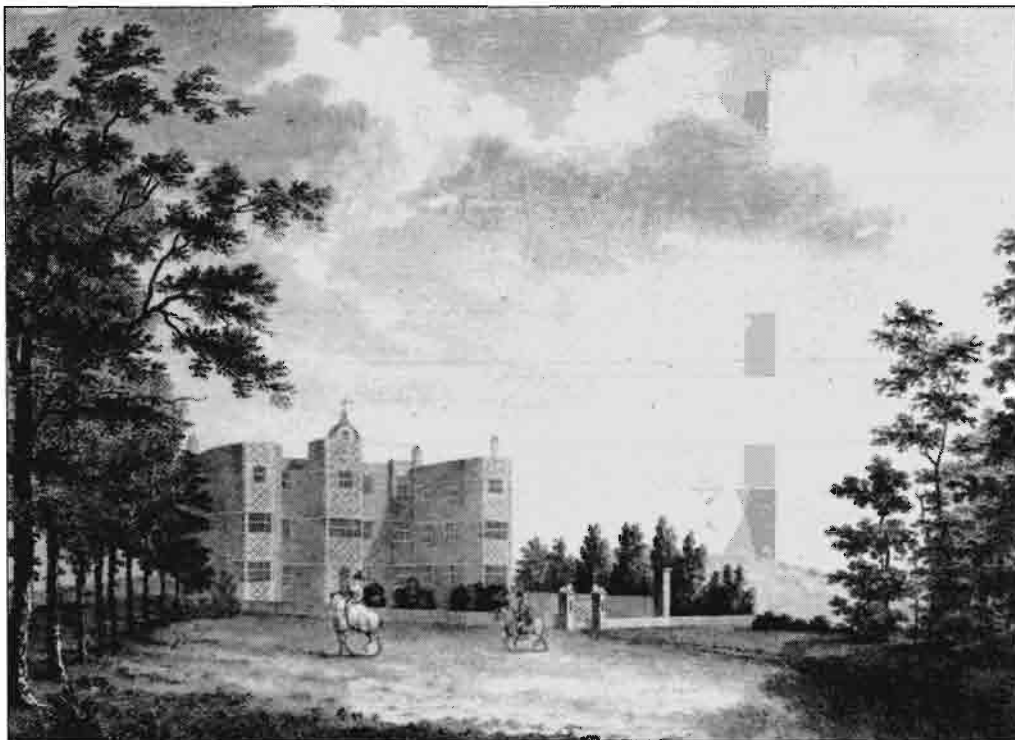
Another particular concern of Gough's was the illustration of the monuments of antiquity – as a means of preservation and as providing insights into the manners and customs of an age which were otherwise unrecoverable. It was largely through the efforts of Gough that the Society of Antiquaries employed a number of outstanding draughtsmen in the later eighteenth century, such as John Carter, Joseph Schnebbelie and Joseph Grimm – a number of whom also worked for Nichols on the Leicestershire history.⁷² The high priority given to illustrations – there are over 2,500 plates, is another clear indicator of the Gough influence on antiquarian studies. Unlike some county histories, the plates are not dominated by engravings of county seats, but include the churches, tombs and the miscellaneous monuments of antiquity; again this might be taken to reflect Gough's typically tart comment in *Anecdotes of British Topography* that, 'Those who contribute plates of ancient monuments to county histories promote knowledge better than by filling them with views of private houses, interesting to none but the owner's vanity.'

⁶⁹ On the eighteenth-century fascination with Rome, see Philip Ayres, *Neoclassical History and English Culture*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996 ; Francis Haskell and Nichols Penny, *Taste and the Antique: the lure of classical sculpture*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981, repr. 1994.

⁷⁰ Thomas Pownall, *A Treatise on the Study of Antiquities as the Commentary to Historical Learning, Sketching out a General Line of Research*, 1782, p. ix.

⁷¹ Bodl. MS Eng. Lett. c. 364, f. 227, Sambrooke Russell to John Nichols, 13 Aug. 1792.

⁷² John Carter is the only one of these draughtsmen to have attracted an academic study of his work. See J. Mordaunt Crook, *John Carter and the Mind of the Gothic Revival*, J. S. Maney & Son, for the Society of Antiquaries, 1995.



3. View of west (principal) front of Quenby Hall, from the park. Engraved by Walker after a drawing by John Throsby, from 'The History and Antiquities of Leicestershire' vol. III.

One of Gough's acts of friendship had been to attempt to secure the election of Nichols to the Society of Antiquaries in 1777. The proposal failed. It was not deemed fitting that a person employed by the Society should be elected a member. This had not proved a problem with Nichols' predecessor, William Bowyer, and nor did it create embarrassment when Nichols finally achieved election in 1810.⁷³ It is not surprising to find Gough railing in his correspondence at the social pretensions and intellectual inadequacies of his brethren in the Society, who could not countenance the admission to their ranks of an individual who so obviously had much to contribute, particularly given that the following month it was agreed automatically to admit the eldest sons of peers on the same footing as their fathers.⁷⁴ For Nichols, however, it must have come as a slight and a disappointment. In defiance he proudly signed himself FSAS on his imprint: the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, under the eccentric leadership of the earl of Buchan, was willing to welcome those whom its English sister society had looked

⁷³ Society of Antiquaries MS 447/1, f. 189 Jeremiah Milles to Richard Gough, 19 May 1777. Milles, who was President at the time, could not agree to Nichols being put up as a candidate for the Society. He admitted that Bowyer, Nichols' predecessor as printer to the Society, had been a member, but argued that Bowyer had become a fellow long before he was printer to the Society, and was anyway 'very learned'. Why Nichols was deemed to be so much less learned is not clear. His rather acerbic comments upon the Society in the preface to *BTB*, 1, indicate that the slight was sorely felt.

⁷⁴ Society of Antiquaries, MS 447/2, f. 102, Michael Lort to Richard Gough, 20 June 1777.

down upon.⁷⁵ Nichols was made an honorary and corresponding member of that society in 1781, and of the sister Society in Perth in 1785, but the *History of Leicestershire* was to prove, as nothing else would, that Nichols' claims to membership of the English Society of Antiquaries were impeccable.

Personal details

Rosemary Sweet is a Lecturer in the Department of Economic and Social History at the University of Leicester, and deputy director there of the Centre for Urban History.

⁷⁵ William Hutton, printer, publisher and Birmingham historian, was similarly spurned by the English Society, but was welcomed into the Scottish Society. Nichols published the second editions of Hutton's *History of Blackpool* (1808), much of which was lost in the fire, *The Battle of Bosworth Field* (1813) and *The History of Derby*.