

Professor William George Hoskins (1908-1992) and the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society

by David L. Wykes



Professor W. G. Hoskins, who died on 11 January 1992 at the age of 83, was the outstanding contemporary historian of Leicestershire. He was also one of the most original and influential English historians of this century. Many tributes have been paid to his work in popularising local history, in particular the study of past landscapes; and elsewhere in this volume Professor Phythian-Adams offers a re-assessment of Hoskins's thinking and scholarly development. This account attempts to consider his work on Leicestershire, and in particular his association with this Society.

Hoskins was a Devon man by birth and education. He took his first degree at the University College of the South West at Exeter, his native city. Both his M.Sc. degree awarded in 1929 and his Ph.D. in 1938 were concerned with the history of Devon, and in 1935 he published his first book, *Industry, Trade and People in Exeter, 1688-1800, with special reference to the Serge Industry*, which had formed part of his M.Sc. thesis. Nevertheless, though he continued to publish on Devon history to the end of his scholarly career, his most creative writing was concerned with Leicestershire. Hoskins came to Leicester on his appointment as an Assistant Lecturer in Commerce at the University College (now the University) in 1931. Apart from the war years, when he was a member of the Central Price Regulation Committee in London, and the period he spent at Oxford between 1951 and 1965 as Reader in Economic History, his academic career was at Leicester. During the years before the war he was to develop a particularly important association with the Society: important to the Society and to the historical study of this county, but also to Hoskins himself in his development as a historian.

Hoskins was elected a member of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society at the meeting in September 1935, but he had already addressed the members in January that year. The subject of his lecture, 'The Anglian and Scandinavian settlements of Leicestershire', was to form his first article in *Transactions*. The paper must have been substantially ready for publication when delivered as a lecture since the volume in which it was printed was issued in November 1935. Between 1935 and 1950 Hoskins was to publish a total of 16 papers in *Transactions*. They covered all the main areas of his research interests, and represent his earliest attempts to explore these themes in print. As his principal scholarly output before the war, these papers were also the published work that established his academic reputation as a historian. They include such seminal articles as his studies of Leicestershire yeomen families, sixteenth-century parsons, Leicestershire farmers in the sixteenth century, the origins of Market Harborough, deserted medieval villages, and a series of essays on Wigston Magna which culminated in the publication of his *Midland Peasant*. He also edited a special collection of essays on Leicestershire agrarian history which was issued to members as the volume for 1948. The importance of these articles is illustrated by the republication of a number of them in two volumes of collected essays: four of the five papers in Hoskins's *Essays in Leicestershire History*, issued in 1950, had first appeared in *Transactions*, as had four of the eleven published in *Provincial England* in 1963.

Nonetheless, if Leicestershire and the Society were fortunate to be the focus of much of Hoskins's pioneering work, this association was also to prove of great consequence to Hoskins himself. Not only were many of his earliest articles first published in *Transactions*, but during the 1920s and '30s the Society was served by an exceptional group of historians who did much to develop a more scholarly approach to the study of the history of Leicestershire. It is evident that Hoskins was fortunate in the county which was to become the main area of his historical study. Professor Phythian-Adams has pointed out the considerable advantages Hoskins derived, especially as a historian whose own expertise was in the modern period, from the publication of a significant proportion of the main medieval records for the county. Many of these records had been edited by active members of this Society, among them George Farnham, whose remarkable *Medieval Village Notes* (published 1929-33) have been an invaluable source for historians of the county. Other detailed studies had been made (some in collaboration with Farnham) by A. Hamilton Thompson, one of the leading medieval

historians of the time, who became President of the Society in 1937. Farnham died in 1933, before Hoskins became a member, but he had been responsible (with Hamilton Thompson and S. H. Skillington in particular) for introducing a number of major changes which were to give *Transactions* a much more scholarly appearance. Skillington, who was primarily responsible for editing *Transactions* after Farnham's death, a role he combined with that of Secretary to the Society, gave valuable encouragement to Hoskins and other young scholars by inviting them to lecture to the Society and offering to publish their papers. The Society also had an excellent library of books on Leicestershire available to members. Probably no other county society during this period could have offered such support. It is impossible to assess the full significance of the contribution the Society made to Hoskins's development as a historian. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to see that at a time when his own department in the University College was unsympathetic, and his contacts with other historians at a professional level were limited, the Society must have meant a great deal to him, as he himself indicated. In addition, during a period when there was not the range of modern specialist journals available, *Transactions* provided the principal outlet for the publication of Hoskins's work. The significance of his extra-mural classes at the Vaughan Working-Men's College at Leicester should also be noted. At the University College he was responsible for preparing students for London external degrees in economics and commerce, lecturing on public administration, statistics and economics and economic history. It was at Vaughan College that he taught history and had the opportunity to explore historical themes with his students.

Leicestershire, as Professor Phythian-Adams has shown, was the laboratory in which Hoskins's early thinking and development as a historian occurred. Nevertheless, his enforced absence from research when in London during the war proved crucial, as Phythian-Adams also demonstrates, in providing the opportunity for him to develop his ideas as a historian. He returned to Leicester in 1946. After the war the University College was accepted for direct funding from the University Grants Committee. As a result the College Council agreed to promote all Assistant Lecturers who had completed their probation to a full Lectureship, which included Hoskins, 15 years after his original appointment. Although he was an economics lecturer, Hoskins's academic and teaching interests were now entirely focused on history, but despite his reputation as a local historian he felt himself unqualified to apply for a conventional history post because he knew nothing of political history which made up the main content of the undergraduate degree at this time. The solution was found by the Principal of the College, F. L. Attenborough, on whose initiative Hoskins was appointed Reader in English Local History with his own specially-created department in 1948. Attenborough (father of Richard and David) was a personal friend and had explored the county with Hoskins, taking many of the photographs used to illustrate his publications. Hoskins's scholarly reputation was now established, and in 1951 he succeeded R. V. Lennard as Reader in Economic History at Oxford. On his resignation from the Society's Committee following his appointment at Oxford he was elected a Vice-President of the Society. Hoskins was not an enthusiastic committeeman, but the valuable contribution he made to the work of two committees in Leicestershire should be recorded. One was the Society's, of which he was an active member who seldom missed a meeting and whose attendance was marked by his involvement in its work. The other was the County Records Committee, formed in 1948, where he was also a regular and very useful member.

The move to Oxford is now generally adjudged to have been a mistake. Although the Oxford terms gave Hoskins greater opportunities for research and writing, which soon resulted in the publication of perhaps his most influential work, *The Making of the English Landscape* in 1955, he found much of Oxford uncongenial and he was not appointed to a college fellowship. In 1965 Hoskins accepted an invitation to return to Leicester as Hatton Professor of English History. This too proved an unhappy experience, for the University had changed greatly in the intervening 14 years, and he retired prematurely, 'in despair', after only three years. Nevertheless, it was not a period without achievements, particularly in the development of the English Local History Department with the establishment of the English Surnames Survey and the one-year postgraduate MA course.

Hoskins's published contributions on the history of Leicestershire were much fewer after he left for Oxford in 1951. He published only two further contributions in *Transactions*, in 1956 and 1957. This was an obvious consequence of his removal from the county, but it also reflected the availability of a range of new specialist journals, such as *Past and Present* and the *Agricultural History Review*. Nevertheless, he had also moved onto a national stage and widened his interests to broader surveys of his subject. In 1951, Professor Jack Simmons, when reviewing for the *Transactions* two of Hoskins's books (*Essays in Leicestershire History* and *East Midlands and the Peak*), provided a valuable assessment of Hoskins's work on Leicestershire. It was, he wrote, a fortunate accident that originally brought Hoskins to Leicester in 1931,

but that accident has had very important consequences for us. Dr Hoskins arrived here a stranger to the East Midlands. His work was interrupted by four years' war service at the Board of Trade in London. Yet in the sixteen effective years that remain he has done much to set the study of English local history on a new basis, founding a school of his own that may well make Leicester the centre of an important fresh development in historical studies; he has revived our *Victoria County History*, and we may look to see the first results of his labour in the publication of Volume II before long; he has given Leicestershire and the East Midlands a series of guide-books that any other region of England may envy; and he has contributed as many as fourteen papers to these *Transactions*, ranging widely in time and subject, from the Anglian and Scandinavian settlement of Leicestershire down to the Leicestershire Crop Returns of 1801. Some of these papers have achieved a remarkable reputation. The stock of offprints of them was soon exhausted, and requests for them came insistently not only from this country but from South Africa, Australia, the United States.

Hoskins elevated local history from the pursuit of the antiquarian to an accepted and scholarly branch of history. His enduring legacy has been to inspire successive generations of individuals to look at and study anew the historical past around them. Towards this achievement the Society made a not inconsiderable contribution.

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