BOOK REVIEW

David A. Hinton, *Alfred's Kingdom: Wessex and the South* 800–1500. London, J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1977. xii + 228 pp., plates, figures.

THE only part of this fascinating book that can be seriously criticised is its title-page. As the sub-title shows, the reference to King Alfred hardly serves to define the period it covers; in purely chronological terms we might as well name Edward III in the title of a work going down to the present day. Nor does it really define the geographical area: like Alfred's Wessex, the book takes as its axis a line from Southampton Water to the middle Thames valley, but it deals with an area to east and west that is wider for the Anglo-Saxon period than for the later middle ages so as to cover in each case a meaningful cultural region. The book belies even the name of the series it inaugurates, 'History and the Landscape': it is concerned not just with traces of the medieval past that can be seen in the landscape today, but with all the evidence of that past that archaeology can provide. Indeed, we may perceive a certain bias against large visible antiquities: we learn more of what excavation has discovered of the Old and New Minsters at Winchester than of what is to be seen in the post-Conquest cathedral, more of the very interesting building phases of the medieval All Saints' Church at Oxford, which disappeared at the end of the seventeenth century, than of the still standing abbey church of St. Frideswide's.

The real theme of the book is the medieval archaeology of central southern England; the period is viewed through its material remains. No one could be better equipped than the author to do this. Mr. Hinton was an Assistant Keeper at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and is now a Lecturer in Archaeology at Southampton University as well as editor of *Oxoniensia*. The geographical axis of the book is thus that of his own career, and it so happens that each of its poles has been the site of important archaeological work over the last few years. He has a close, often very close, knowledge of the discoveries he describes, and reading between the lines one realises the extent of his own contribution to our knowledge of the area, just how much important recent work, on a wide variety of sites and material, he has been personally involved in.

Throughout the book there is a particular emphasis on what is topical. The implications and problems of recent excavations and other current research are fully discussed, but questions long settled are treated more summarily or ignored. Thus we are told of the current debate on the form and development of the early mottes, but nothing of the well attested changes in castle design in the thirteenth century; the frustrations of work on the partly vandalised site of Bicester Priory are described, but no account is given of the basic essentials of the monastic plan, which could be well demonstrated from such long exposed sites as Titchfield and Netley. What Mr. Hinton gives us is in fact an invaluable guide to the present state of play. In ten years' time it will be sadly out of date, but it is none the worse for that as it serves an immediate purpose. It is essential reading for anyone who is interested in current work in the area's medieval archaeology, whether as participant or as onlooker. Not only is it commendably up to date (it contains quite a number of references to discoveries made

in 1977), but by relating recent work to the general historical background it shows just what is significant in work now going on, what are the implications of next year's discoveries, what (most important of all, perhaps) should be the priorities in choosing sites for excavation. It is aimed at the reader who knows the broad outline history of the period and who is prepared to come to terms with the elementary jargon of both historians and archaeologists—words like 'demesne', 'assart', 'wall-stud' and 'jettying' are used without explanation.

What impression do we get of the middle ages, seen through the medium of archaeology? In his last chapter Mr. Hinton disarmingly comments that 'To many of those who are used to dealing with the data . . . in documents, medieval archaeology seems a random, often haphazard, study'. To some extent it does; but the reason why the book particularly gives this impression is at least partly because it deliberately concentrates on current problems and recent discoveries in preference to giving a more comprehensive picture. And the written documents of social and economic history may well give a picture that is scarcely less haphazard and random; it is very easy for the historian to assume that the written word was as central to the society that produced it as it is to his own work, whereas in fact the events that got written down in medieval England may well be as arbitrary a selection of the totality as the things that survive as material objects today. The historian's work can read very like an official trade guide to a foreign country: the structure, the details, of the economy, are set out in ordered accuracy, but we may be left knowing nothing of what the inhabitants and their daily life are really like. The archaeologist's approach can produce a result like the account of an impressionable traveller abroad, who describes all he sees of the people and their customs, but with no more than informed guesses about the overall pattern into which they fit. For a balanced picture of the medieval past, as of a foreign country today, the methods need to be combined. This is already being done in research on towns, where archaeologists and historians are collaborating with marked success, but it has still to be achieved in work on the medieval countryside. This is partly because archaeological work has concentrated so much on urban sites—for economic and practical reasons that spring from the position of towns in society today rather than their position in the past. This bias is reflected in Mr. Hinton's book: a medieval reader would probably be surprised that so much of what he says concerns towns rather than villages and fields.

These reflections are not meant to denigrate *Alfred's Kingdom*. Mr. Hinton writes with spontaneity, verve and considerable charm: 'The only Saxon male whom I have excavated was about my age, and had far better teeth than I have. But he nevertheless had the disadvantage of being dead: his life expectancy was much lower than mine'. He purveys a great deal of information, much of it very detailed, without losing the reader's interest and he is never dull. There is a very occasional obscurity. Thus Old Sarum was 'the only English example of a hill-top castle and cathedral'; but he can hardly have overlooked Lincoln and Durham—what does he really mean? More often, particularly in dealing with historical background, he presents as settled facts conclusions that are very much open to question: the authenticity of Asser's *Life of Alfred*, for example, or defence against the treachery of one's own retainers as the key to late-medieval castle planning. But these are incidental to the main theme of the book, and indeed many of these are questions on which archaeological work may throw new light. The book is learned, thorough and readable. It may be recommended without hesitation to all Hampshire archaeologists, antiquaries and historians.

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