

Local History Scrapbooks

By WINIFRED M. COMBER

WOMEN'S Institutes are always encouraged to take an interest in the history, traditions and customs of their villages; several counties have already collected and published information obtained from members. Two years ago the Cheshire Federation inaugurated a "Village Scrap Book Competition" and issued suggestions on the kind of records required and where and how to collect them. Stress was laid on obtaining the personal memories of older people, on details of occupations and crafts as well as of interesting buildings, old documents and family traditions. The whole village could help in supplying material but the actual compiling and editing of the books must be undertaken by W.I. members only.

As a preparation for this competition, meetings held in Chester and Wilmslow were addressed by Mr. Arthur Oakes, B.A., Chairman of the Cheshire Local History Committee, Miss Anne Roper, F.S.A., Vice-Chairman of the Kent Local History Committee and Mrs. Davies, B.A. Copies of the questions issued by the Cheshire Committee to their local correspondents were also circulated to Institutes and proved most valuable. For the next twelve months those entrusted with the main responsibility for their respective Scrap Books were hard at work, visiting libraries or the Grosvenor Museum, inspecting church and parish records, interviewing anyone suspected of having a good story to tell. By the closing date of August 31st, 1951, no less than sixty-nine scrap books, many of them hand-bound, richly illustrated by sketches, photographs and maps and with letterpress amounting to several hundred pages, had been personally delivered at the W.I. County Office.

The problem of adjudication was solved by the generous offer of the Standing Conference for Local History to appoint a Panel of their members for this purpose. Final decision rested with Mr. P. D. Whitley, Chairman of the Executive, Mr. R. B. Pugh, Editor of the Victoria County Histories and the Hon. E. C. Corbett of the National Federation of Women's Institutes. They chose five prizewinners in the following order: Mobberley, Audlem, Barthomley, Lostock Gralam and Grappenhall; in addition Barrow, Nether Alderley, Prestbury, Brimstage, Great Budworth and Five Crosses were highly commended. All the Scrap Books were exhibited at the Annual Meeting of the Standing Conference in London and received high praise. The adjudicators have given their opinion that any amount of good material is available for publication. Some Institutes may decide on printed versions of their letterpress for local sale and the Cheshire County Executive is contemplating the issue of a small

volume with selected material from every scrap book. Exhibitions of the books, open to all W.I. members, are also being arranged.

In their historical researches many Institutes have traced their villages to the Domesday Book, Five Crosses has a dedication to the memory of Froda, a Saxon, the earliest known settler in this district (circa 908 A.D.); Grappenhall describes the finding of Bronze Age urns (1,000 B.C.): Delamere the discovery of a keeled dug-out Canoe on the shores of Oakmere and also the possibility of pile-dwellings of the early Iron Age having existed there: Lostock Gralam, in its history of Salt, goes back to the lagoon which once stretched from North Ireland to Staffordshire. Many pages are naturally given to churches and church registers: Barrow records rectors and curates from 1313: one was excommunicated by the Chancellor of Chester for never having taken any Services and yet continuing to hold office. In the churchwardens' accounts Barthomley found such characteristic entries as "to a poore woman that had her house burned 2s. 6d." and "For the heads of three hedgehogs 6d." Mobberley found penalties for failing to obey the order of burial in a woollen shroud and Prestbury the grant of licences to eat flesh in Lent on account of serious illness.

The search for the origin of Field Names has illuminated much local history. "Dead Man's Field" (Acton and Reaseheath) originated from an action in the Civil War, "Gambler's Field" (Audlem) was a favourite spot for cockfighting after that sport was made illegal.

Changes of occupation and the loss of village crafts are recorded in many books. Barthomley once had wheelwrights, tailors and shoemakers — one of the latter always said he lost 2s. out of every pair of shoes he made and when asked how he carried on said, "I couldn't if I did not make a lot." At Five Crosses when the Hiring Fair was held at dawn near the "Ring of Bells," orderly groups of weavers, shepherds, thatchers etc. assembled in appropriate costume carrying the tools of their trade, cowmen had a cow's tail or horns, cooks a long wooden spoon whilst a dairy-maid would be dressed in a blue gown, apron and bonnet and have a three-legged stool and bright milking pail. Poaching and salt smuggling added spice to life in Mobberley; on one occasion when foresters sought for a stolen buck the poacher's wife sat spinning and rocking a wooden cradle in which lay the buck covered over like a baby.

Old remedies include such gems as "For sore throat—apply to throat a piece of fat bacon and wrap round with a stocking that has been used the previous day" (Audlem), and "To stop bleeding hind round with cobwebs" (Minshull Vernon).

Well-illustrated nature notes form a feature of several books. There is something nostalgic in Grappenhall memories of nightingales round Undercliffe Lane Bridge and how "all kind of

transport came and blocked up the roads, from Wagonettes to Four-in-hands."

In the realm of sport pride of place goes to Audlem's account of Dr. Bellyse (b. 1783), the King of Cheshire's cock fighting fraternity. His picked birds were fed on eggs, bread, milk, butter and rhubarb. He recovered a stolen cock in Court because of its soothed behaviour in the hands of its real master and when he returned triumphantly with it to Audlem the church bells rang out.

The Bridgewater Canal has provided fascinating material for Grappenhall and Thelwall; before its construction cries of "River's rising, get your water" meant that inhabitants must rush out with buckets before flood water fouled their springs. One villager tells how her mother, determined to marry the man she loved, eloped by means of the Packet Boat on the canal.

Altogether this competition has revealed unsuspected literary and artistic gifts and stimulated local pride. Much unique information is now safely recorded and pages can be added with fresh discoveries and future happenings. Undoubtedly these scrap books will be treasured village possessions, giving infinite pleasure to readers of today and future generations.

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A very limited number of the No. 1 issue, Spring, 1951, of "THE CHESHIRE HISTORIAN" at 2s. per copy, is still available, and can be obtained on application to The General Secretary, The Cheshire Rural Community Council, 22, Newgate Street, Chester.

The Hon. Editor (G. B. Leach, Ashton, Chester) will be pleased to receive articles, short notes and queries to be considered for inclusion in future issues. He wishes to express his thanks to all who have contributed articles or in any way helped him in his task, also to the Manchester University Press, the Manchester Public Library and the Chetham Society for the use of the cover block.

CORRECTION. "The Cheshire Historian" No. 1, p. 38, eighth line of last paragraph. RICE should read PRICE.