Pioneering Local History and Landscape History: Some Reflections on Anglo-Saxon England in the work of W.G. Hoskins

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As the editors' introduction to this collection of essays makes clear, Barbara Yorke has carved out a very special niche for herself in Anglo-Saxon studies. Apart from Wessex and Exeter as common denominators, however, a common interest in historiography, a shared attention to revealing detail and to continuities, together with the obvious capacity for lucid exposition which they both display, comparisons between Barbara Yorke and W.G. Hoskins (1908–92) do not immediately spring to mind as being particularly revealing. His specialist interests, after all, lay in another period. He was chiefly an early modernist and, descended from Devon yeoman stock himself, he was drawn more to the social and economic history of peasant proprietors in the provinces than to ruling houses, royal foundations and church history which have consistently featured as central elements in Barbara's work. He was most knowledgeable about his native Devon and the Midland counties, especially Leicestershire, where he spent the bulk of his working academic life; for him capital cities, past as well as present, held little allure. A wartime exile in a government department in London reinforced Hoskins's loathing of the "Great Wen." He remained lastingly puzzled why anyone would actually choose to live in that dangerous, noisy, polluted, and vastly overcrowded city.¹

Nonetheless, though they were not Hoskins's chief priorities, the Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest periods and the successive waves of invasion, settlement and colonisation they brought with them occupied a deeply significant position in his pioneering analysis of the evolution of the English landscape published in 1955, and it is for this reason that this aspect of Hoskins's work is the main focus of this paper. Occasional specialised studies in these fields such as *Sheep Farming in Saxon and Medieval England* (a 1955 lecture to the

1 See Joan Thirsk, "William George Hoskins, 1908–1992," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 87 (1995), 339–354, at p. 343. The deliberate omission of London from Hoskins' *Local History in England* (London, 1959; 2nd ed., 1984) emphasised the author's distaste for, and lack of interest in, the capital.

International Wool Secretariat; London, 1956), *The Westward Expansion of Wessex* (Leicester, 1960), and “The Highland Zone in Domesday Book” (1963) took their place in his prolific list of publications.² Family and place-name evidence, land charters, early laws and by-laws, the Domesday survey, boundary markers, fossilized field systems, hedges, Ordnance Survey maps, and painstaking fieldwork all featured prominently in his sources and methodology. Noted Anglo-Saxonist F.L. Attenborough, editor of *Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge, 1922), and Principal of University College, Leicester, where Hoskins was employed, worked closely with Hoskins for a number of years, though chiefly as an expert amateur photographer. He collaborated on a number of occasions with the early medievalist H.P.R. Finberg: their jointly authored *Devonshire Studies* (London, 1952) and Finberg’s 1960 “Supplement to Early Charters of Devon and Cornwall,” included in Hoskins’s *Westward Expansion of Wessex*, are the most notable examples. Finberg succeeded Hoskins as Head of the Department of English Local History at University College, Leicester in 1951 when Hoskins moved on (not altogether contentedly) to a Readership in Economic History at the University of Oxford. Hoskins was fascinated by different forms of settlement—villages, hamlets, and isolated farmsteads—and the local circumstances which apparently explained their distribution. Footnotes to his writings show that Hoskins tried to keep abreast of others’ scholarship in the early medieval field,³ as well as having an intimate knowledge of classic texts such as Frederic Seebohm’s *The English Village Community* (London, 1883), Paul Vinogradoff’s *Villeinage in England* (Oxford, 1892), F.W. Maitland’s *Domesday Book and Beyond* (Cambridge, 1897), H.L. Gray’s *English Field Systems* (Cambridge, MA, 1915), H.C. Darby’s edited collection, *Historical Geography of England before AD 1800* (Cambridge, 1936), and F.M. Stenton’s *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 1943). Leading archaeologist Sir Cyril Fox was a close friend of Hoskins and could be turned to for specialist advice, while *Archaeology in the Field* (London, 1953) by O.G.S. Crawford, “the greatest British archaeologist of his time,” was conveniently on hand and acknowledged in

2 The first and third of these essays are included in Hoskins’s *Provincial England. Essays in Social and Economic History* (London, 1963), pp. 1–14, 15–52 (“The Highland Zone” was new for this collection). The second was published as Department of English Local History, University of Leicester, Occasional Papers no. 13, reissued in 1970.

3 For example, for the 1977 edition of *The Making of the English Landscape* Hoskins made reference to Trevor Rowley ed., *Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Landscape*, BAR 6 (Oxford, 1974), Jack Ravensdale, *Liable to Floods* (Cambridge, 1974), Christopher Taylor, *Fields in the English Landscape* (London 1975), and Don Benson and David Miles, *The Upper Thames Valley: An Archaeological Survey of the River Gravels* (Oxford, 1974).

Hoskins's late 1960s survey of the field.⁴ That said, however, when Hoskins published *The Making of the English Landscape* (London, 1955), archaeologists had not made many inroads into the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods, and some techniques like field-walking were in their infancy. Hoskins himself was chiefly interested in the visible landscape rather than what lay completely hidden beneath it.

Hoskins had preferred to live in Exeter for the last ten of his Oxford years (1955–65). Exeter was his native city, where he had studied for his bachelor and master's degrees and indeed for his PhD awarded in 1937 (as a London University external student), and he moved there permanently in 1968 after his retirement from his second, short, and deeply unhappy, period in Leicester. The University of Exeter awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1974. Given the Exeter connection, a note on the dedicatee of this volume is appropriate here: Barbara Yorke overlapped with him in Exeter during her undergraduate studies and PhD research at the University under Professor Frank Barlow.⁵ She heard Hoskins lecture in Exeter and in her published writings occasionally drew on his work where relevant⁶ though much less so than on that of Finberg, whose research and publications coincided more closely and consistently with her own. Her thematic chapters on social structure, rural life, trade and the growth of towns in her Wessex book harked back to the kind of subject matter favoured by Hoskins while at the same time recognising that his was most certainly not the last word on the subjects in question, especially on population trends and settlement distribution.

Hoskins's *Local History in England* (London, 1959; 3rd ed., 1984) was his chief specific foray in the direction of historiography. Primarily a utilitarian handbook offering advice on sources and methodology, Hoskins's second chapter was given over to a brief survey of the changing nature of local history and its practice over time. Passing quickly over the early topographers, William of Worcester and John Leland, Hoskins gave more space to early modern county historians, William Lambarde, John Carew, William Burton, William Dugdale and Robert Thoroton among them. The later emergence of urban histories was

4 Hoskins, *Fieldwork in Local History* (London, 1967), p. 137.

5 She later contributed an essay to Barlow's *Festschrift*—"Carriers of the Truth': Writing the Biographies of Anglo-Saxon Saints," in *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250: Essays in Honour of Frank Barlow*, ed. David Bates, Julia Crick, and Sarah Hamilton (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 49–60.

6 For example in her *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages* (London, 1995) Yorke draws on Hoskins's *The Westward Expansion of Wessex*: on p. 274, she notes the correlation which Hoskins established between the number of farms and the number of villeins on the higher ground in Devon.

briefly rehearsed. But in assessing these early county and urban histories Hoskins was often severely judgemental. Polwhele's *Devon*, for instance, was dismissed as miserably third rate. More generally he was firmly convinced that, especially in the obsessive preoccupation with manorial history, "the dead hand of the seventeenth-century squire still guided, until recently, the hand of the living antiquary."⁷ Even the best of them provided only sourcebooks, not genuine histories, for others to quarry. A few, however, like Thomas Rymer, Thomas Madox, and Thomas Hearne, by bringing together in print monumental collections of manuscript material laid the secure foundations of later Anglo-Saxon and medieval historical scholarship.⁸ However, too many local historians, Hoskins opined, were blinkered in their approach to the subject, over-preoccupied with factual details and blind to the challenges of problem-solving. Elsewhere he spoke scathingly of "the amateur imbecilities that often marked much of their work in the past."⁹

Hoskins wrote or edited twenty-two books in all in the course of a very long career, the first of them appearing in 1935 and the last in 1976.¹⁰ Some were county guidebooks and some resulted from successful television series. He was an unabashed populariser and became a minor household name. But the 1950s saw the appearance of some of Hoskins's most substantial and significant work; with a light teaching load and with no college responsibilities at Oxford he had ample opportunities for research and writing. The first of them, *Devon* (London, 1954), was a contribution to the series "A New Survey of England," edited by Jack Simmons, Professor of History at University College, Leicester, Devon-born himself and Hoskins's friend. Aimed at the general reader it was a bulky text with an equally weighty gazetteer. Thematically arranged and based on exhaustive fieldwork as well as research in the records, Hoskins devoted a chapter to the English settlement, paying great attention to place-name evidence to address what was seen as an English/British racial frontier eventually formalised in the 10th century between Devon and Cornwall. Revisiting the

7 Hoskins, *Local History in England*, pp. 23, 30. Barbara Yorke's insightful historiographical treatment of *The King Alfred Millenary in Winchester, 1901*, Hampshire Papers, 17 (Winchester, 1999) is characteristically more restrained.

8 See David C. Douglas, *English Scholars, 1660–1730* (London, 1939; 2nd ed., 1951).

9 Hoskins, *Fieldwork in English Local History*, p. 13.

10 A full listing of Hoskins's many publications, but dispersed under the topics to which they relate, appears in Margery Tranter et al., eds., *English Local History: The Leicester Approach; A Departmental Bibliography, 1948–1998* (Leicester, 1999). A consolidated chronological bibliography of his writings is given in C.W. Chalklin and M.A. Havinden, eds., *Rural Change and Urban Growth, 1500–1800: Essays in English Regional History in Honour of W.G. Hoskins* (London, 1974), pp. 342–50.

same subject a few years later in his 1960 *Westward Expansion of Wessex*, he went further and scrutinised individual farm names ending in—hays or—hayne to document the West Saxon advance.¹¹ Most of Devon, he argued, had been conquered—or, more often, infiltrated—by the Saxons before the end of the 7th century and the establishment of the see of Crediton and monasteries at Axminster and Exminster in the early 8th century confirmed the existence of a settled Saxon population. The early creation of villages in Devon, often on royal estates, for Hoskins was a clear indication that they were “planted,” their concentrated, nucleated form providing protection for the new inhabitants.¹² The later spread of settlement in the countryside and the establishment of some new towns, among them Bideford, Dartmouth, Plymouth and Tavistock, and the beginning of a great age of church-building in the 12th and 13th centuries were processes he explored with the sources and methods available to him at the time.¹³

Whereas Hoskins's *Devon* was an act of filial piety from a man born and raised that county, his book *The Midland Peasant. The Economic and Social History of Leicestershire Village* (London, 1957) was the direct outcome of the years spent at University College, Leicester after 1931 and was an offering chiefly to fellow academics who shared his preference for the use of the historical microscope; the book was a detailed case study over time of Wigston, the largest village in Leicestershire when the Domesday survey was compiled. In this volume, as in others, Hoskins paid great attention to place-name evidence, much of it in this case being a compound of Scandinavian and Old English elements. The Vikings first arriving in the 870s, he argued, superimposed their settlement on the existing English village but segregated themselves into their own distinct quarter. As the Domesday evidence showed, Old English personal names such as Godric, Godwin, Edwin and Alwyn, lingered in the village in the late 11th century. However though Hoskins showed a committed interest in the origins and early history of Wigston the bulk of the book was devoted to the history of the village from the 13th century on, and indeed his survey continued up to 1900. It was the considerable presence of peasant proprietors and peasant

11 Hoskins, *Westward Expansion*, p. 10.

12 It is now clear, of course, to Yorke and others, that Hoskins's chronology of settlement and his views on the early appearance of nucleated villages simply cannot be sustained in the light of subsequent research. Writing much later, from a very different research platform informed by field archaeology Lucy Ryder, *The Historic Landscape of Devon. A Study in Change and Continuity* (Macclesfield, 2012) and H.S.A. Fox, *Dartmoor's Alluring Uplands: Transhumance and Pastoral Management in the Middle Ages*, ed. Matthew Tomkins and Christopher Dyer (Exeter, 2012) revisited parts of Hoskins's historical heartland.

13 Hoskins, *Devon*, pp. 58–60.

culture, broadly defined, which gripped Hoskins's attention; even in 1086, when Great Domesday was written, he found that approximately 40 per cent of the land in the village was in the hands of free tenants. Of yeoman stock himself these were the kind of men—vigorous, thriving, and independent-minded—Hoskins instinctively admired and whose social eclipse under the impact of the later agricultural and industrial revolutions he mourned. “The peasant village had been swamped and then submerged completely, and the tide of industrialism rolled on over it unchecked.”¹⁴

The Making of the English Landscape (London, 1955), addressed both to an academic audience and the general reading public, was Hoskins's most significant book of this prolific decade and, several times reprinted, in due course it established itself as a classic, admired by geographers no less than historians.¹⁵ It was a pioneering study, a new kind of history, predicated on the conviction (which he amply demonstrated) that “the English landscape itself, to those who know it aright, is the richest historical record we possess.”¹⁶ He compared it to the complex, richly orchestrated sounds of a symphony, all the more impressive and compelling if its component elements, intricate structures, textures, harmonies and rhythms were carefully analysed in detail. Continuing the same metaphor he thought the smallest of counties such as Rutland were more akin to the subtler intimacies of chamber music.¹⁷ Underlining in this book as in his others the fundamental fact that so much of the landscape was man-made rather than natural, the chronological emphasis was on post-Conquest and later developments. Two substantial preliminary chapters, however, addressed the early stages of settlement and colonisation. The prehistoric

14 Hoskins, *Midland Peasant*, p. 282.

15 It spawned an initially unsuccessful series of county landscape studies under Hoskins's general editorship; very few of the projected volumes were published in the 1950s. There was a distinct time-lapse before the book's impact was fully registered and the the plan for the county series of landscape studies was revived. Landscape History as a recognised sub-discipline did not take off until the 1970s. See Christopher Dyer's foreword, “Landscape History after Hoskins,” in *Medieval Landscapes*, ed. Mark Gardiner and Stephen Rippon (Macclesfield, 2007), pp. xiii–xiv.

16 Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, p. 14.

17 Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, p. 19. Mick Aston in his *Interpreting the Landscape. Archaeology and Local History* (London, 1985; rev. ed., 2002) thought “ants' nest” was a better analogy than “symphony” to describe the ever-changing landscape. Oliver Rackham's preferred metaphor is perhaps even more suggestive: “The landscape is like a historic library of 50,000 books. Many were written in remote antiquity in languages which have only lately been deciphered: some of the languages are still unknown.” Some of the volumes have been “eaten away by bookworms,” others have been thoughtlessly discarded, while yet more have been trimmed and crudely rebound. Rackham, *History of the Countryside* (London, 1986), pp. 29–30.

contribution to the landscape was quickly covered—and certainly undervalued—with passing reference to the Chrysauster Iron Age hamlet in Cornwall and the outline shape of Celtic fields at Fyfield Down near Marlborough, Wiltshire.¹⁸ The Roman contribution through the planting of towns and villas and the ambitious imperial road-building programme was briefly—too briefly and selectively it could be said—considered. Using place-name evidence, documentary sources, and aerial photography, however, Hoskins was seduced into placing too much weight on the early Anglo-Saxon achievement in clearing woodland and in creating nucleated villages. Such developments, it is now recognised by the work of Oliver Rackham and others, came later than Hoskins believed and often in the 9th and 10th centuries. Rackham, a botanist by specialism, was a major revisionist here giving particular attention to woodland and wood pasture and to long-term continuities in the landscape. It is still possible to agree with Hoskins, however, that almost all villages in existence in the 20th century had been created by 1086 and that their different forms—green villages like Finchingfield in Essex, street villages like Henley-in-Arden in Warwickshire, and fragmented villages like Middle Barton in Oxfordshire—bore witness to the different circumstances surrounding their early history. He traced the boundary banks of Anglo-Saxon estates in Devon—Armourwood Lane near Thorverton had once functioned in this way—and rejoiced in the discovery of a sarsen stone boundary marker at Alton Priors in the Vale of Pewsey, Wiltshire.¹⁹ Elsewhere and for other parts of the country he plotted on the map the impact of Scandinavian settlement with new names being given in some cases to old settlements and with completely new centres of population betraying their foundation in place names with—by suffixes in the Midlands and—thwaite in Cumberland and Westmorland.²⁰ Place-name evidence also guided Hoskins—perhaps too rashly—to early examples of land-drainage schemes in Romney Marsh in Kent, the Pevensey Levels in Sussex, and to other places in in Somerset, the East Riding of Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, and even in Devon at Powderham (polde-ham).²¹

Like others before him Hoskins utilised the Domesday survey as a topographical record—of the distribution of watermills, for example. In an overwhelmingly rural landscape there was still waste land and forest, though less than he believed. Sheep were present in the country in enormous numbers, as many place names like Shipston and Shipton in the Cotswolds bore witness.

18 Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, pp. 21, 23.

19 Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, pp. 56–57.

20 Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, pp. 58–60.

21 Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, pp. 63–64.

Self-evidently there were few urban settlements of any size. Only five towns—London, Norwich, York, Lincoln and Winchester—were thought by Hoskins to have had more than a thousand burgesses in 1086.²² A few others, like Newbury in Berkshire and Okehampton in Devon, were brand new at the time and exceedingly small. Other, immediately successful, new towns founded by great ecclesiastics—among them Ludlow, Plymouth, Salisbury and Stratford upon Avon—followed in the 13th century. Early medieval church building and the impact of monasteries and their granges on the landscape were other subjects that seized Hoskins's attention. Field patterns often closely related, he argued, to the kind of plough locally available, fascinated him.²³ Indeed village founding and the creation of open field farming, for Hoskins, were the principal hallmarks of the first great epoch in the development of the English landscape though, as has been subsequently demonstrated by Stephen Rippon and others their chronology confused him. Early Saxon settlements in fact had little in common with medieval villages. This is a far more complex and contentious subject than Hoskins recognised and the regional variations are enormous. The century of parliamentary enclosure for Hoskins was the second great epoch. Borrowing the idea from Maitland, Hoskins was fond of describing the English landscape—not altogether accurately, as others like Christopher Dyer have since pointed out—as a layered palimpsest.²⁴

Hoskins, it is clear, felt an affinity with the Anglo-Saxons and their free peasantry descendants in the Middle Ages; he was fiercely proud of his own Devon yeoman forebears. The Vikings, by contrast, he viewed as reprehensible intruders. "These uncouth characters need not detain us long," he observed in his *Two Thousand Years in Exeter* (Exeter, 1960), "for they made no lasting impression on the city of Exeter though they badly damaged it in 1003."²⁵ The German bombing raids on Exeter in the spring of 1942, he continued elsewhere by way of comparison, "burnt and shattered in a manner not known since the heathen Danes had damaged the Anglo-Saxon town 900 years before."²⁶ The Normans, too, in his view were "plunderers," William the Conqueror behaving like "some avenging maniac" in Yorkshire.²⁷

22 Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, p. 67. For a more liberal reading of the evidence based on a Domesday geography that was beginning to be established as Hoskins was writing, see H.C. Darby, *Domesday England* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 302–09.

23 Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, pp. 66–67.

24 *Medieval Landscapes*, p. 1.

25 Hoskins, *Two Thousand Years in Exeter* (Exeter, 1960), p. 118.

26 Hoskins, *Devon*, p. 198.

27 Hoskins, *English Landscapes* (London, 1973; repr., 1977), p. 23; Hoskins, ed., *History from the Farm* (London, 1970), p. 18; See Hoskins, *Age of Plunder*, p. 233, for a similar reading of Henry VIII.

In his greatly subdued introduction to a new edition of *The Making of the English Landscape* which appeared in 1977, Hoskins freely acknowledged that much that he had written in 1955 in his early chapters was now seriously out-of-date largely due to the vast amount of archaeological research which had taken place as well as to new work on landscape history itself in such books as papers in Trevor Rowley's edited collection *Anglo-Saxon Settlement and Landscape* (Oxford, 1974). Estimates of population in pre-Saxon times—prehistoric as well as Romano-British—which he had unquestioningly relied on in the 1950s he now accepted were quite wrong and had to be pitched much higher. "This means that our knowledge of how much of our land had been cleared and brought into cultivation [...] needs complete revision, for people imply farming systems for their material needs."²⁸

The 1977 introduction was to a book which remained essentially the same, however ("there is so much we still do not know, so much work in progress, that a revision is still premature," he wrote).²⁹ A further, sumptuously-illustrated edition of Hoskins's classic text, edited by Christopher Taylor in 1988, went much further in drawing attention to the many ways in which subsequent research had challenged or invalidated what had been originally offered in 1955. Though still applauded by Taylor as "one of the greatest [and most ground-breaking] books ever written" by a man who was "perhaps the last of the polymaths" and praised for its clarity and accessibility, and for its contribution to the expansion of historical studies, it was—like all others—unavoidably and firmly rooted in its own time and the state of knowledge prevailing in the 1950s when it was put together.³⁰

Hoskins's original text was respectfully preserved intact in this new edition but was carefully framed by Taylor's new contextual introductions, both to the book as a whole and to individual chapters which were themselves interspersed with sometimes lengthy editorial comment showing the many places where Hoskins's statements and arguments were now wholly inaccurate, or at best incomplete. Taylor re-emphasised, as Hoskins himself had come to recognise, that the Saxon settlers arrived in a populous England in the 5th century that had a well-tamed and far from empty landscape.³¹ They adapted

²⁸ Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape* [1977 edition], p. 11.

²⁹ Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape* [1977 edition], p. 15.

³⁰ Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, with an introduction and commentary by Christopher Taylor (London, 1988), pp. 7, 9.

³¹ Stephen. Rippon, Chris. Smart and Ben. Pears, *The Fields of Britannia. Continuity and Change in the Late Roman and Early Medieval Landscape* (Oxford, 2015) has underlined this argument even more through its systematic use of archaeological evidence and analysis of palaeoenvironmental sequences.

themselves to it and their relatively small numbers ensured that they were in no position to create something that was entirely new. Dispersed settlement rather than nucleated villages with open fields was the norm. These features came later between the 9th and 12th century and were often the result of deliberate plantation by ecclesiastical and lay landlords—a “village moment,” as some have claimed.³² Drawing on much new work in place-name studies by Margaret Gelling and others, as well as findings in archaeology, Taylor underlined that place-name evidence required even more careful handling than Hoskins had given it, partly because of possible double meanings and also because the same places existed under different names at different times.³³ Individual place names such as Finchingfield in Essex and Powderham in Devon which Hoskins had confidently used as examples to demonstrate particular points, were in fact, Taylor declared, much more ambiguous.³⁴

Though highly original and path-finding Hoskins, it is plain, was stridently opinionated and was prone to indulge his monumental prejudices pugnaciously even in his more scholarly publications and even when discussing Devon and Exeter. As he got older Hoskins developed a love/hate relationship with his native county and city. He still took comfort in 1959 from the fact that in Exeter:

... you can see the green fields of the country at the end of nearly every street-view and the people have the cheerful, rubicund look of country-dwellers and not the miserable, grey, slave-like expression that one sees in London and the big industrial cities. Devon for all its faults and deficiencies is the best of all places in which to live. Some of us think that Paradise may be no better.³⁵

He was vigorously critical, however, of pre- and post-war redevelopment in the city. Slum clearance in the 1930s had resulted in wholesale destruction of a once important but by then much-decayed sector of the city without even a

32 See Joan Thirsk, “The Common Fields,” *Past & Present* 29 (1964), 3–29, reprinted in the same author’s *The Rural Economy of England: Collected Essays* (London, 1984), pp. 35–58, and Trevor Rowley, ed., *The Origins of Open Field Agriculture* (London, 1981). Della Hooke, *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (Leicester, 1998) also emphasised how slowly nucleated villages came to some parts of the country. They were still arriving in Warwickshire, for example, in the 11th century (p. 131).

33 See, for example, Gelling’s major work on *Place Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984).

34 *Making of the English Landscape* (1988), pp. 55, 72.

35 Hoskins, *Devon and its People* (Exeter, 1959), p. 167.

proper record kept of what had been swept away.³⁶ The City Council, he went on in the same vein, rivalled the German bomber pilots in the havoc they wreaked on post-war Exeter.³⁷ Much of modern Exeter, he lamented, given over to speculative builders by politicians unworthy of trust was becoming “a desert of brick and concrete.”³⁸ Relentlessly opposed to what he saw as the Leviathan state and its mindless bureaucrats and planners, the word ‘politician’ stuck in Hoskins’s throat whenever he used it. “Never trust any party politician of any colour,” he ranted. “Most of us sooner or later have to pay for our mistakes; it is only politicians who manage to make other people pay. One cannot learn too soon to have an absolute contempt for them as a class, whatever their creed or the colour of their ties.”³⁹ Not altogether surprisingly, Hoskins’s caustically expressed views, including allegations of mismanagement and corruption, led to his being on the receiving end of a libel action from Exeter City Council in 1963.⁴⁰ He was forced, at great cost, to make an out-of-court settlement but evidently in general terms he remained unrepentant. “The bigotry of modern Exeter is still unbelievable to civilised people. As for their politics they are savage.”⁴¹

And so it went on. Targets as numerous and various as large-scale capitalist farmers, puritans and Nonconformists, electricity pylons crucifying the countryside, industrial blight, the loss of individuality in many towns and cities as high streets were brutally re-developed and standardised, the decline of provincial culture, London’s stranglehold and metropolitan dominance over the provinces, high-speed trains, road engineers, the relentless profusion of motor cars all aroused Hoskins’s ire. Hoskins was at heart a poetic visionary and romantic conservative and he looked back fondly to an idealised pre-industrial golden age rooted in his view of the Anglo-Saxon past in which peasant proprietors and peasant civilisation flourished side by side. For him the Industrial Revolution and its sweeping transformations started to dissolve all that he held dear—organic, closely-integrated communities, local horizons and quasi-local autonomies, stability, traditional crafts, and vernacular architecture. It is no surprise that Hoskins held the Romantic poet William Wordsworth in such high esteem; the two men’s sensibilities, imagination and predispositions had much in common, as Matthew Johnson has been at pains to emphasise. Even Hoskins’s prose style derived much of its inspiration from the Lakeland poet:

36 Hoskins, *Two Thousand Years in Exeter*, p. 130.

37 Hoskins, *Devon and its People* (Exeter, 1959) p. 88.

38 Hoskins, *Devon and its People*, p. 134.

39 Hoskins, *Devon and its People*, pp. 110, 126.

40 Thirsk, “W.G. Hoskins, 1908–1992,” p. 351.

41 Hoskins, *Old Devon* (Newton Abbot, 1966), p. xiii.

"Wordsworth tramped across the fells, observed the landscape and just gathered it up into his heart and produced a poem. Hoskins tramped across Devon and Leicestershire, pored over the Ordnance Survey map, and wrote a historical narrative."⁴²

Hoskins invariably wrote in a deeply personal way and his preferences, feelings, convictions, prejudices and dogmatism always to some degree coloured his approach to history. *One Man's England* was the title he gave to one of his books in 1978, but in truth this could have been the sub-title of all of them.⁴³ By and large he turned his back on the modern world, on modern technologies, and on what he viewed as the pompous, impenetrable, modern jargon favoured by theorists and sociologically inclined historians. In his inaugural professorial lecture given after his return to the University of Leicester in 1965 he mockingly suggested that, with foresight, he ought to have given his book *The Making of the English Landscape* a more trendy, eye-catching title such as *The Morphogenesis of the Cultural Environment*.⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, Hoskins's subjective vision of landscape history and local history were too exclusively locked into the English provinces to be an easy export to the United States.⁴⁵ Hoskins never went over the Atlantic and, indeed, only in later life did he start crossing the English Channel with any regularity and then only for holidays. In every sense he was most comfortably at home in a specifically *English* local setting. Wales remained largely absent from Hoskins's vision, Scotland and Ireland entirely so. For all this he was stridently unapologetic:

Some shallow-brained theorists would doubtless call this 'escapism', but the fact is that we are not all born internationalists and there comes a time when the complexity and size of modern problems leave us cold. We belong to a particular place and the bigger and more incomprehensible the world grows the more people will turn to something of which they

42 Matthew Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape* (Oxford, 2006), p. 112.

43 See David Matless, "One Man's England: W.G. Hoskins and the Culture of Landscape," *Rural History. Economy, Society Culture* 4:2 (1993), 187–208.

44 Hoskins, *English Local History: the Past and the Future* (Leicester, 1966), repr. in *The Changing Face of English Local History*, ed. R.C. Richardson (Aldershot, 2000), chapter 6, p. 137. It is not difficult to guess what Hoskins would have made of a report on a Leicester retrospective conference on his work published in the journal *Urban Morphology. Journal of the International Seminar on Urban Form* 9:2 (2005), 94.

45 See D.W. Meinig, "Reading the Landscape: An Appreciation of W.G. Hoskins and J.B. Jackson," in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*, ed. D.W. Meinig (New York and Oxford, 1979), pp. 195–244.

grasp the scale and in which they can find a personal and individual meaning.⁴⁶

Hoskins's subjectivity, his largely atheoretical approach to landscape, his insularity and blind-spots have not hindered or even as a rule qualified the high praise which has been heaped upon him. Michael Havinden is just one of many historians who has applauded Hoskins's dazzling originality while another former Oxford student of his, Peter Beacham, praised his rare combination of "scholarly insight, poetic imagination and painterly eye ... [and] the immemorial quality and quiet power" of his prose. David Matless paid tribute to the "holistic particularisation" of Hoskins's vision though he felt bound to recognise its "melancholy strain."⁴⁷ Two large and laudatory 50th-anniversary conferences were held at the University of Leicester in 2005 and 2009 to commemorate the original publication of *The Making of the English Landscape* and *Local History in England* respectively. Both resulted in significant and appreciative publications.⁴⁸

Charles Phythian-Adams, Professor of English Local History at Leicester in the 1990s, has probably gone furthest in the claims he has made for Hoskins's decisive contributions to historical studies. Hoskins, he declared, "revolutionised the historical perceptions of his fellow countrymen. It is difficult to name a single other modern historian in this country who has succeeded thus comprehensively in making history so directly relevant to the citizen."⁴⁹ His vision encompassed the whole of English history and he deserves to be recognised as the founding father of the modern study not only of local history and landscape history but of agricultural history, urban history, historical demography, and of vernacular architecture. Phythian-Adams's appraisal amounted to a eulogy, and it times it verged on the uncritical. Hoskins, he concluded, "is best seen as both visionary and poet of that disappearing world to which he saw himself as having just belonged. His lament for that 'peasant civilisation'... runs

46 Hoskins, *Local History in England*, pp. 6–7.

47 David Matless, "W.G. Hoskins Remembered," *Devon Historian* 69 (2004), 4–7; "One Man's England," p. 203.

48 Gardiner and Rippon, eds., *Medieval Landscapes*, and Christopher Dyer, Andrew Hopper, Evelyn Lord, and Nigel Tringham, eds., *New Directions in English Local History since Hoskins* (Hatfield, 2011). Joan Thirsk's edited collection of essays on *The English Rural Landscape* (Oxford, 2000) unsurprisingly underlined Hoskins's ground-breaking work in this field.

49 Charles Phythian-Adams, "Hoskins's England. A Local Historian of Genius and the Realisation of his Theme," *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* 66 (1992), 143–59. Quotation on p. 159.

like a moving threnody throughout his wonderful writing [...] a momentarily spell-binding glimpse into nothing less than an English Garden of Eden.”⁵⁰ Reverence for Hoskins, the father figure of Local History and Landscape studies, surely comes close here to running out of control and ultimately serves as little purpose as anachronistically criticising him for being out of line with the findings and methods of current research.

Joan Thirsk, whose links with Hoskins were longer and closer, was much more balanced in the appraisal of him contained in her obituary article which she prepared for the British Academy. Like Phythian-Adams, alert to the significance of his pioneering work for fellow academics and to his appeal to the general public and deeply sympathetic to his aims, Thirsk recognised that Hoskins’s accessible and passionately argued writings and broadcasts won a larger public for English Local History than it had ever enjoyed before. Hoskins’s obsessions and increasingly curmudgeonly attitudes, however, at times intruded too much into his work and reached the point where they clouded his judgements.⁵¹ Johnson, in his 2017 *Ideas of Landscape*, concludes that the Hoskins tradition, which here receives extended and insightful treatment, will remain valuable only if it breaks out of its original conceptual limitations.⁵²

For Barbara Yorke, it is clear, Hoskins was not a major direct influence on her work and he does not figure conspicuously in footnotes to her publications. The chapters on social and economic history in her Wessex book follow most closely in his footsteps. Her research has always been sharply and consistently focused on a different specialism, the Anglo-Saxon period, in a way that his was not. In developing his vision and practice of English Local History, however, Hoskins paid due attention to these early centuries and naturally did so within the state of knowledge about them which then existed. Examining the evidence of settlement and using the methodologies of fieldwork and place-name studies then current Hoskins advanced an interpretation that was central to his concept of the complex logic of the evolving English landscape. Anglo-Saxonists, no less than those working in other fields, including local history and landscape history, have moved on since then, to a great extent in this case due to the ways in which archaeology—especially landscape archaeology—has decisively modified historians’ understanding of earlier centuries. The more than 100-page bibliography appended to Stephen Rippon, Chris Smart and Ben Pears’s *The Fields of Britannia* is a striking indication of the huge

⁵⁰ Phythian-Adams, “Hoskins’s England,” p. 159.

⁵¹ Thirsk, “W.G. Hoskins,” *passim*.

⁵² Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape*, chapter 6.

literature in this field which has recently accumulated.⁵³ Barbara Yorke in her own distinctive way has been a key player in this transformation of Anglo-Saxon studies as Hoskins was in different respects in his chosen field in the 1950s and later. That she, an Exeter-trained medievalist should be honoured now in a *Festschrift* as the Exeter-born and Exeter-trained Hoskins was decades earlier is another echo at least of the partial common ground they share.⁵⁴

53 *The Fields of Britannia: Continuity and Change in the Late Roman and Early Medieval Landscape* (Oxford, 2015).

54 Chalklin and Havinden, eds., *Rural Change and Urban Growth 1500–1800*. The volume restricted itself to early modern studies in which Hoskins himself was so conspicuous a presence. There were no contributions on Anglo-Saxon or medieval history. For this volume the medievalist M.W. Beresford, sometime collaborator with Hoskins and author of *The Lost Villages of England* (London, 1954) displayed his versatility by contributing an essay on the re-development of Leeds in the 18th century.