

# SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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## Historians of Essex

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The now considerable corpus of Essex historical literature and historiography is an important component of county tradition and its heritage. This brief survey of the Essex historians and their books is necessarily constrained by considerations of space and content. There is thus an inevitable focus on those whose work aims to deal with Essex history from its earliest known periods, and which cover the whole county. It is concerned also with those who provided the source materials on which the published works are based. It cannot venture into the field of local histories with which the county is richly endowed; nor the collateral field of defined subject studies.<sup>1</sup>

Neither, although no Essex historian can ignore it, can this essay describe in any detail the *Victoria History of the County of Essex*. That pre-eminent work is being written to the highest academic standards, but no one can foresee its completion or, unfortunately, when the volume on Saffron Walden and the surrounding areas will be completed and published. However, it is the excellence and importance of the *VCH* from which it derives its *sui generis* status, so something must be included. This unique series was launched in 1899 and named in honour of Queen Victoria who had celebrated her Diamond Jubilee in 1897. The first Essex volume was published in 1903, the second in 1907. Subsequent volumes did not appear until 1956 and 1963 because of financial difficulties and the disruption of two world wars. Those now published have reached volume 10 and three bibliography volumes. Less than half of the county has yet been covered and continuing financial and resource difficulties prejudice the future programme of work. The *VCH* needs and deserves the support of all who enjoy and cherish county history.

In approaching the study of Essex historiography it is possible and indeed useful, to identify several chronologically definable streams of thought and endeavour. The first I refer to as that of the Early Chroniclers. They were followed by the Topographers, after whom came what I shall call the Morant Traditionalists. Lastly, there is the current stream of the Modern Eclectics. How are they defined? What did they write?

### **Early Chroniclers**

By the Early Chroniclers I refer to the Roman annalists such as Caesar<sup>2</sup> and Tacitus,<sup>3</sup> Bede,<sup>4</sup> the Anglo-Saxon chroniclers<sup>5</sup> and those anonymous authors who compiled the Domesday Surveys.<sup>6</sup> The Roman historians, from the stance of the victors of course, tell us about the British tribes, the legions and, importantly for us, the invasions of Britain. They describe also the establishment at the Trinovantian capital of Camulodunum of the *Colonia Victricensis* which we now call Colchester. This fine Essex town was the capital of Roman Britain before Londinium. The *Colonia* was at first a military depot and later a planned settlement for the retired Roman legionaries. It had to be re-built and developed as a centre of administration, communications and commerce after its recovery from the destruction it had suffered in the Boudiccan revolt.

The northern monk, the Venerable Bede of Jarrow, in his remarkable historical narratives, tells us of the conversion to Christianity by Bishop Mellitus in 604 AD of the tribal communities then living in what we now call Essex. Bede records the subsequent relapse into paganism and the eventual re-conversion by St Cedd in c.653 AD. He describes also the important religious foundations in Essex such as those at Barking, Tilbury and Bradwell. In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* we read of the chronology and pattern of settlement by the incoming Saxons, Angles and Jutes, the Danish invasions and the historic battles at Maldon in 991 AD and Assandun in 1016. The site of the latter has never been determined. Locally, people like to think of this decisive battle as having been fought at Ashdon, rather than Ashingdon which lies above the River Crouch towards the Essex coast. Why we should so cherish a claim to the scene of the disastrous battle in which it was recorded by the chroniclers 'the English were slaine in heaps' is hard to comprehend! On the whole the historical and philological evidence seems to point to Ashingdon, but as yet no-one can be sure.

Everyone, it is said, knows two dates in English history: 55 BC, the date of the first Roman incursion under Caesar; and 1066, when William the Conqueror laid his rapacious hands upon the kingdom after his triumph over Harold at the Battle of Hastings. We should

also remember 1086 which is the date of the Domesday Survey, the greatest historical archive in European history, at any rate of its kind.<sup>6</sup> The entries for Essex fortunately appear in the so-called Little Domesday in which, paradoxically, the social and economic status of the English counties are recorded in greater detail and at greater length than is the case in the other volumes. Among much else it shows that up to the time of the Survey - and thus before the de Mandevilles - Saffron Walden was a humble manorial entity with no pretensions to the prestigious and handsome town it was ultimately to become.

## Topographers

Historiography in Essex is manifest in the works of the Topographers. Their studies were mainly devoted to the topography, economic and social aspects of the areas they described, though they frequently included some texts of historical reference. The pre-eminent name in this stream is, of course, William Camden,<sup>7</sup> whose *Britannia* was published in 1586 in Latin, the English version appearing in 1610. He has, perhaps unfairly, been criticised by some Essex historians for placing Camulodunum at Maldon; but his description of Saffron Walden will find its admirers here and is still of historical merit. For Essex, we tend to look to John Norden,<sup>8</sup> who in fact assisted Camden with *Britannia*. His *Description of Essex* (1594), although not printed until the Camden Society did so in 1840, is much valued as a work of reference. His interesting and informative references to Saffron Walden are still appreciated and quoted:

About the town of Walden groweth great store of saffron, whose nature, in yielding her fruite, is verie straunge, and bindeth the laborer to great travaile and diligence: and yet at length yealdeth no small advantage to recomforte him agayne.

I especially like Norden's reference to 'the ruynes of an ancient and stately castle, wherein are yet to be seene sundrye deepe and horrible dungions'.<sup>9</sup> The poor man, deserted by his fickle patrons, died in bitterness and poverty. But he was an excellent and innovative cartographer and the first to introduce the grid system on maps which we still use.

Another of the topographers was William Harrison who held the livings of the parishes of Radwinter and Wimbish. His *Description of England* (1577) is a stylish and eminently readable contemporary account of the social, economic and topographical features of English life and countryside. His references to Saffron Walden, Radwinter, Wimbish, the Sampfords and others are important for our knowledge of the ingredients of local life in his time.<sup>10</sup>

Eventually, he gave up history as it interfered with the duties of his ministry!

### **Morant Traditionalists**

With the Morant Traditionalists we enter the mainstream of Essex historiography when texts were buttressed with assiduous and systematic research, supplemented by extensive local enquiry. The first of these and 'father of Essex history' was Thomas Jekyll, a lawyer of Bocking and Clifford's Inn.<sup>11</sup> He prepared foundation documents based on his comprehensive abstracts from national and local archives. On his death, these papers passed via his son and grandson to William Holman, a dissenting minister at Halstead, who realised the value of Jekyll's papers.<sup>12</sup> Despite 20 years of work and travel in pursuit of his chosen subject – Essex history – he failed to complete his study or to publish it before he died, sadly in the church porch at Colne Engaine. The Jekyll/Holman papers were next acquired by Nicholas Tindal from Holman's son.<sup>13</sup> He published two small volumes concerning the history of the Hinckford Hundred from 1732. It is not clear why Tindal carried the Essex history no further, but some have suggested that he turned to more lucrative literary work as he lacked patronage. As we shall see, it was a happy circumstance that Philip Morant was curate at Great Waltham where Tindal was vicar.

All this pioneering work with source documents was continued by Nathaniel Salmon,<sup>14</sup> a clergyman and physician of Bishop's Stortford who came from a literary family and was well qualified to undertake scholarly studies. From 1740 he completed histories of 15 of the Essex Hundreds based on the Jekyll/Holman papers he had purchased from Tindal. There were 22 Hundreds in Essex so Salmon's efforts were easily the most successful up to that date. Morant rather disparaged Salmon's use of his materials, but I think that to be unjust criticism on the evidence of his published work.

Philip Morant (figure 1),<sup>15</sup> the doyen of Essex history, was born in Jersey, educated at Pembroke College, Oxford and took his MA at Sidney Sussex in Cambridge, which was presumably a more convenient venue for a parson living at Colchester. During his time in Essex he was Rector of a number of parishes in the county. As was possible in those days the clergy had not only the education, but just as importantly, the time and personal resources to indulge their academic appetites. In brief, Jekyll had collected the information, Holman organised it and it fell to Morant to revise and collate it for publication. He at first intended only to complete Salmon's work, but eventually resolved to compile the first complete history of Essex which was published in 1768. Morant had

previously published an excellent history of Colchester in 1748, which was later incorporated into his great county history. He had been elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1755, and maintained wide connections with many other scholars working in the field of local history and archives.

Morant's history has been criticised for imbalance on the grounds that it is concentrated mainly on ecclesiastical history and manorial descents. That is not entirely true. Furthermore, given his patronage and clientele such emphases as there are were almost inevitable. By any standards Morant's history is a massive work of scholarship and, pending the completion of the *VCH*, the first complete history of Essex and most impressive in its field.

Included with Morant himself in the category of Morant Traditionalists, there are also those on whose earlier work Morant himself relied. I have also included his lineal successors who have, without exception, derived much of their own materials from him and his sources.

There are thus, to complete the roll-call of practitioners in this stream, a number of others of note. The brash but capable Peter Muilman,<sup>16</sup> of Dutch descent, published from 1769-72, six volumes of county history which were derived to a large extent from Morant's then recently published books, but written in a more popular style.

The engaging Elizabeth Ogborne (figure 3) came next.<sup>17</sup> Judging from the single volume she issued in 1814-17, it was a serious loss to Essex historiography that her work was never carried to fruition. Beautifully illustrated by her talented artist husband John and written in elegant prose, the circumstances and poverty which prevented this admirable lady from completing the work are much to be regretted.

Thomas Wright,<sup>18</sup> while still an undergraduate at Cambridge, was commissioned by George Vertue to edit and write a history of Essex, 'assisted' by 'several literary gentlemen in the county'. He is believed to have visited Essex only twice in his lifetime. Despite that he produced a highly literate, reliable and substantial two-volume account in 1836. It has been disparaged as a 're-hash' of Morant and to a large extent it is. But it was uncommonly well done, stands the test of time and is much more affordable than the now extremely valuable Morant originals.<sup>19</sup>

A very different historian, D.W. Collier,<sup>20</sup> entered the scene in 1861 when he published the *People's History of Essex*, which almost lives

up to its name. He was a journalist who believed, with some reason, that all previous histories of the county were too expensive, deplored the 'dusty genealogies of perished houses' and resolved to write a county history with 'an originality and character of its own'. It is good in terms of its own objectives and still a useful source of detailed reference.

## Modern Eclectics

Who then comprise my fourth strand, the Modern Eclectics? I define them as those subsequent historians who have relied on buttressing their own research and the historical works to which I have already referred with the now much more accessible resources of modern institutions. Those are the Essex Record Office, the University of Essex, the Victoria County Histories and the National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office). So we may enjoy several serviceable volumes varying in scale, written by W.H. Weston,<sup>21</sup> P.H. Reaney,<sup>22</sup> A.C. Edwards,<sup>23</sup> S. Jarvis,<sup>24</sup> and finally my own *Essex in History*.<sup>25</sup> In the latter, and latest of the nine 'complete' histories of the county I have tried to extend the boundaries of Essex history to embody fuller reference to the archaeological background and to broaden the context to embrace the roles of Essex in national and international events. All of the books I have mentioned, apart from their primary value to Essex historiography, serve to enrich Essex traditions and to nourish loyalty to the county heritage. For all that they deserve to be valued.

## Notes

1. This article is a brief summary of the substance of the lecture by Kenneth Neale under the same title.
2. Julius Caesar (c.102-44 BC) *de Bello Gallico*.
3. Cornelius Tacitus (c.55-120 AD), *Annals of Imperial Rome*.
4. Bede (c.673-735), *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.
5. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (450-1150).
6. *Domesday Survey* (1086).
7. William Camden (1551-1623), *Britannia* (1586).
8. John Norden (c.1548-c.1626), *Speculi Britanniae Pars: Historical and Chorographical Description of the County of Essex* (1594). Camden Society, 1840 (edited): for full text see ERO D/DNsP1.
9. See (8), p27.
10. William Harrison (1534-93), *Description of England*, 1577. For edited text (Georges Edelen), see Folger Shakespeare Library edition (1994).
11. Thomas Jekyll (1570-1652).
12. William Holman (1670-1730).
13. Nicholas Tindal (1686-1774).
14. Nathaniel Salmon (1675-1742).
15. Philip Morant (1700-70).
16. Peter Muilman (1708-97).
17. Elizabeth Ogborne (1763-1853).
18. Thomas Wright (1810-77).

19. Morant: there was a reprint in 1816 and a facsimile edition in 1978.
20. Duffield William Collier (1805-84).
21. Weston, W.H., *A History of Essex* (1909).
22. Reaney, P.H., *Essex* (1929).
23. Edwards, A.C., *A History of Essex* (1978).
24. Jarvis, S., *Essex, a County History* (1993).
25. Neale, K., *Essex in History* (1997).