

# Hoskins's England: A Local Historian of Genius and the Realisation of his Theme<sup>1</sup>

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This celebration of the central achievement of the late W.G. Hoskins, Professor Emeritus of English History at the University of Leicester, concentrates on the organising principles behind his most influential writing as a local historian. An attempt is made to understand the manner in which his Leicestershire interests in particular were integrated into a wider historical perspective, not only as a result of contemporary intellectual and historiographical influences, but also because of his own personal identification with a dying provincial culture. In the process it is hoped to demonstrate that it is misleading to see Hoskins primarily as a landscape historian. Rather, his was a concern for the whole human condition at local levels.

## i

It was the signal achievement of William George Hoskins to have revolutionised the historical perceptions of his fellow-countrymen. His most widely influential work, *The Making of the English Landscape* which was first published in 1955, remains a masterpiece since it still forces all of us who read it both to look anew at an unnoticed world immediately around us, and then to seek to understand that world rationally, historically, above all organically, and thereby as something *connected* to us. 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.

Yet *The Making of the English Landscape* represented but a lyrical distillation of W.G. Hoskins's more technical concerns over a truly amazing range of historical preoccupations in each one of which he excelled in the academic terms of his day. Indeed, it is a measure of his extraordinarily original contribution to our understanding of the English past that so many of the various emergent historical specialisms of the third quarter of the twentieth century should have been able to claim him, if not as the sole inspiration of each, at least as a powerful force in all of their subsequent developments. Indisputably, William Hoskins must be regarded as one of the great founding fathers of the modern academic study of agricultural history;

1. This paper represents a revised and expanded version of the first annual W.G. Hoskins Lecture delivered to the Vaughan Archaeological Society in May 1991. A shortened version is to be published in the *Local Historian* by permission of the Editors of *Transactions*. I am most grateful to Mrs Pauline Whitmore for typing and retyping various versions of this paper, and to Dr David Wykes for his helpful editorial suggestions.

amongst urban historians of the Early Modern period, he is acknowledged as a trail-blazing pioneer; he may be seen too to have acted in some sense as the catalyst for the demographic study of epidemic and subsistence crises; while for students of the historic landscape and its surviving vernacular buildings, in particular, by systematically linking the results of field-work to documentary and cartographical sources of information, he may be accepted as amongst the very first to have lent respectability to the necessary employment of a wholly new class of evidence, the visual evidence. Above all, Hoskins helped to raise the standing of English *local* history from that lowly level of less-than-kindly condescension in which it used to be held by 'proper' historians, to the status of an academic discipline. He asked deceptively simple questions of local pasts that had never before been put, and he exploited systematically all kinds of archival source materials, like probate inventories, lay subsidies, or freemen's registers which, in the hands of a master, yielded unexpectedly intimate - and therefore human - information about apparently ordinary matters, in wholly fresh and insightful ways. His is the modern local history of Devon, and, although he never wrote his projected economic and social history of Leicestershire, his must still be regarded as one of the most potent contributions to our historical understanding of that county too. Under his direct influence, even that great juggernaut, *The Victoria History of the Counties of England*, was pressed at last into broadening and modernizing the nature of its established concerns. Add to all this, those kindly do-it-yourself introductions to the various crafts of the local historian, and a plethora of popular local or regional guides or gazetteers, newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, let alone successful television series, and you have as well a communicator of outstanding distinction.

Few other historians, whether today or yesterday, may be said to have so completely fulfilled the threefold *social* function of the historian, both for his own generation and indeed for posterity, as recorder, interpreter and then transmitter of his version of the past. Never before in this country has an academic historian either so directly reached out towards, and then touched, the sensibilities of a mass society at the grass roots, or so successfully exhorted others actually to become historians themselves: certainly not A.J.P. Taylor, the only possible rival candidate for this distinction.

## ii

It was Dr Johnson who averred: 'The true genius is a mind of large general powers, accidentally determined to some particular direction'. As is well known, Hoskins himself raised particularisation to the level of aspiration when he headed up his collection of essays, *Provincial England*, with the words of William Blake: 'To generalize is to be an Idiot. To particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit'. In *The Making of the English Landscape*, we find him insisting that 'behind every generalization, there lies the infinite variety and beauty of the detail; and it is the detail that matters, that gives pleasure to the eye and to the mind, as we traverse on foot and unhurried, the landscape of any part of England'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is this quite extraordinary eye for detail that in his writings invariably sparks the dead past into present life. No reader of his essay on 'The Leicestershire Farmer in the Sixteenth Century', for example, is ever likely to forget his references to the apparently dull *minutiae* to be found listed in local probate inventories which are then evoked into reality by his words:

2. W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape*, p.161. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1955

... even the names of the cows that grazed in the ancient fields - like Py and Swallow, Nut and Marigold, who all belonged to Robert Colles of South Kilworth in 1556. We read of the favourite hawk of Mr Anthony Faunt, the Squire of Foston: Ringbell soaring on a blue-and-white morning in May high over the green pastures of Leicestershire, in the year before the Armada.<sup>3</sup>

Here he is again (from the terse unpublished notes for what appears to have been a valedictory address given at Exeter): 'local hist[ory] sh[oul]d contribute to general history, but also exists in its own right - the local hist[oria]n must continually remember the uniqueness of his subject - as every good portrait-painter sh[oul]d or he will produce simply types.'<sup>4</sup> There can thus be no doubting that the pursuit of the unique lay close to the heart of Hoskins's success as an original historian (he used to claim that he made one 'discovery' a week in the field), but this is far from having been the whole story. The true genius of W.G. Hoskins lay elsewhere: it lay in his ability to relate his discovered particularities to universals which others had not previously perceived, and it is that trait above all others which, to my mind, marks out the real genius.

Now what is so remarkable in Hoskins's case is that commentators approach his work only for what suits each of their own specific interests. The very academic specialisms that his example has fostered thus now mask the totality of his viewpoint. Agricultural historians want information on cropping; landscape historians look to his work on deserted medieval villages; and urban historians seek out the occupational structures that he reconstructed. And since thematic historians tend to be confined by the narrow periods within which they seek to specialise, they are also apt to miss the full chronological sweep of Hoskins's vision. For what informs the most fertile years of his writing is nothing less *than* a vision - a new vision of the whole of English history: one grand organizing idea that is not mentioned in the 'Appreciation' of him in his *festschrift* (which inadvertently distorts the nature of his life's work in paying tribute only to his contributions to the period 1500-1800), and which is ignored in an appraisal of his approach to landscape by the American historian, D.W. Meinig.<sup>5</sup> Without understanding that vision, it is impossible to understand W.G. Hoskins. So it is on the making of this highly personalised perspective that it will now be relevant to concentrate, and in the new light that may now be thrown on the matter by Hoskins's own contemporary notebooks which have recently been deposited in the archive of the Department of English Local History at Leicester University.<sup>6</sup>

3. W.G. Hoskins, 'The Leicestershire farmer in the sixteenth century' in his *Essays in Leicestershire History*, pp.123-183, p.125. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1950
4. Department of English Local History Archive, loose notes entitled 'The Pleasure and Pains of the Local Historian. A personal occasion - a farewell lecture.' See n.6 below.
5. Christopher Chalklin and Michael Havinden, 'W.G. Hoskins: an appreciation', in *Rural Change and Urban Growth 1500-1800: Essays in English Regional History in Honour of W.G. Hoskins*, edited by Christopher Chalklin and Michael Havinden, pp.xix-xxvi. London: Longman, 1974. D.W. Meinig, 'Reading the Landscape: An appreciation of W.G. Hoskins and J.B. Jackson', in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, edited by D.W. Meinig, pp.195-244. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979
6. Many of W.G. Hoskins's working papers, etc., are still being catalogued in the Department of English Local History. Those consulted for this essay are the hard-back notebooks (some of them still interleaved with loose sheets) marked 'B', 'C', 'D', 'F', 'H', 'J', and 'The Economic and Social History of a Midland Village' which also contains the loose notes for his farewell lecture (n.4 above).

## iii

It was in 1931, at the age of 23, that Hoskins came to Leicester, to take up a Lectureship in Economics at the then University College. At that time he was also finalising the text of his first book, on *Industry, Trade and People in Exeter 1688-1800* (University of Exeter: Manchester University Press) which left his hands from his home on the outskirts of Leicester, at Wigston Magna, in February 1935. By that year too, he was already probably putting the finishing touches to his Ph.D. thesis on another Devon subject for approval in 1938. Although his initial piece on Leicestershire, on its Anglian and Scandinavian settlements, appeared in the Society's *Transactions* as early as 1935, Hoskins's own notes suggest that, as his other preoccupations imply, he could not yet have started to work seriously on the Midlands. The relevant entry records 'Leicestershire history 1936-51: because records were accessible & countryside there. Years of contemplation first.'<sup>7</sup> And indeed the records *were* accessible; Hoskins used to describe how he was allowed to clamber up ladders in Leicester Castle in order to rummage through boxes and boxes of dusty uncatalogued documents until he found what he wanted. What better training could there have been for an historian of genuine originality?

That said, as an incomer from Devon, Hoskins was also extraordinarily lucky in the Leicestershire sources that were already in print or were soon to be published. A reliable version of the Domesday folios and an edition of the Leicestershire Survey of c.1130 had long been to hand in Stenton's magisterial contribution to the first county volume of the Victoria County History; Nichols's *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, in eight enormous volumes, had ever been one of the most detailed, and erratic, county histories to have been attempted and, as is clear from Hoskins's notes, it was ransacked by him; while Farnham's almost equally extensive *Medieval Village Notes* in six volumes, with their detailed extracts and their carefully calendared entries from the Public Record Office, had just recently been published over the years 1929 to 1933. Moreover, since Leicestershire had belonged to the diocese of Lincoln, many of the former's medieval ecclesiastical records which, in the absence of a Leicestershire Record Society Series, might not otherwise have been available, were also awaiting him in print under the *imprimatur* of the Lincoln Record Society. Above all, in 1933, Hamilton Thompson's edition of *A Calendar of Charters and other Documents belonging to the Hospital of William Wyggeston at Leicester*, bursting with property deeds relating to Wigston Magna, was now published. For someone like Hoskins, nearly all of whose previous research experience had been restricted to the period 1650-1800, it must have been a not inconsiderable advantage to have had so much of the difficult medieval documentation thus conveniently made available to him. When he looked at the borough of Leicester, similar good fortune attended him, given Mary Bateson's existing edition of the early Borough Records and, in 1935, the publication of the last volume of Hartopp's *Register of the Freemen* ('a great catalogue of the obscure' as Hoskins was later to describe it),<sup>8</sup> quite apart from the availability of the same editor's *Leicester Wills*. The accessibility of so much original material in print thus left Hoskins free on the one hand to concentrate his time and his attention on analysing in manuscript especially the probate inventories for the sixteenth century, and on the

7. Farewell lecture notes, as n.4; 'The Anglian and Scandinavian settlements of Leicestershire', *TLAS*, 18 (1935), pp.110-47

8. W.G. Hoskins, 'English provincial towns in the early sixteenth century', in his *Provincial England*, pp.68-85, p.76. London: Macmillan, 1963

other hand, to engage in the time-consuming business of walking or bicycling all over Leicestershire and Rutland in order to unravel, in the first instance anyway, the medieval visual evidence. As he wrote in 1957:

It is a landscape which, after so long an acquaintance, I look back upon with almost unclouded affection: the tree-shaded canal banks by Newton Harcourt, the green bridle-roads round the Strettons and Houghton-on-the-Hill, the breezy upland field-paths by Galby and Frisby, where I first walked in Leicestershire as a young man, ignorant of what I was looking at; the summer-evening hills round Launde and Loddington, returning from longer expeditions into microscopic Rutland, or the wonderful blue distances of Leicestershire from the top of Wardley Hill, coming back by another road; and not least the lamp-lit Victorian suburb of Stonegate, the cheerful, lively streets of Leicester on Saturdays, and convivial evenings with friends over a bottle of hock after some more sombre expedition to South Wigston on a wet and murky November afternoon; or exploring the fields of Wigston Magna, day after day, on spring mornings, unearthing the medieval past in paths, springs, and hedge-banks. I have enjoyed it all ...<sup>9</sup>

That enjoyment, he certainly passed on in his extra-mural classes on the 'Archaeology of England and Wales' and 'Archaeology in Leicestershire and the East Midlands', at the old Vaughan Working-Men's College at Leicester. Such was the atmosphere of discovery generated by him there that his enthusiasm is still re-called by those whom he inspired to found the Vaughan Archaeological Society in 1947 (and which still celebrates its connection with him). Both the careful planning of those courses, and their changing content from year to year, can be observed in his notebooks which contain fragmentary details of them for 1938 to 1940 and for 1946 to 1949-50. Members of these classes, it would seem, were amongst the first to be treated publicly to the accumulating results of his systematic work on 'lost villages', as he was already describing them in 1940, and on other local medieval earthworks, as well as churches, secular buildings and roads: work that was eventually to be summarized thematically with such freshness of vision in a popular local pocket book, *The Heritage of Leicestershire*, which first appeared in 1946. Hoskins's work at Vaughan therefore acted as a catalyst for his publications. The notebooks contain not only lecture course outlines, and relevant research notes, but also the early plans of some of his books: *The Midland Peasant*; *Midland England*; *Leicestershire: A History of the Landscape*; and *Local History in England*. The processes of lecturing and writing thus went hand in hand: seemingly, his ideas were tried out first with his classes; then read as papers to the members of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society; and finally published - usually in these very *Transactions*. If Leicestershire, rather than Devon, was to be his laboratory for theoretical research, Vaughan and this Society together acted as the crucible for his thinking.

With access to this new evidence, then, it is now possible to reconstruct, within a fair degree of accuracy, the point at which Hoskins's thinking moved, as it were, into a new gear. Certainly neither the notebooks nor his publications indicate the emergence of his major organizing idea even so late as 1940-41. Down to that date, and even beyond, Hoskins's mind appears to have been focused on three related local themes: the topography of Leicestershire; the earlier social and economic history of its countryside; and the more detailed study of Wigston Magna. In other words, whether it was visual or documentary, he was still collecting, collating and organizing the data

9. W.G. Hoskins, *Leicestershire: An Illustrated Essay on the History of the Landscape*, p.xv. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957

at this stage. The archaeological evidence, as arranged for his lecture courses, was still being categorized by no more than class of site: castles, moated sites, deserted village sites, village types, ridge and furrow, roads and bridges. Deserted Medieval Village sites were still being visited even in the autumn of 1940; his seminal paper on this subject presumably going to press in late 1944 in order to appear in the Society's *Transactions* the following year. Likewise, his earliest analyses of the sixteenth-century probate inventories appeared first in 1940, on the Leicestershire parson, and, in 1941-2, on the Leicestershire farmer. Yet, pioneering as these essays were, neither these, nor the others published down to 1943, betray any signs of a plane of reference higher than that of the region itself other than that of economic history in general. Hoskins's comparative method of relating the changing experiences of different communities or classes of settlement one to another within *Leicestershire*, is nevertheless already recognizable.

Most significantly, however, in the light of what was soon to happen, by this stage in his career, and in some what idiosyncratic terms too, given his unconventional preoccupation with the visual evidence, Hoskins had at last filled the gap in his research experience. In addition to his pre-existing chronological range of expertise in the Early Modern period, he had now acquired first-hand knowledge of the Anglian and Scandinavian settlement periods, of the Middle Ages, and of Tudor times. In the case of his archival research into Wigston Magna, indeed, he must by then already have reached beyond the Enclosure Award of 1766 and, to judge from his immediately post-war lecture programme, he was soon to embark on the late chronological evidence for Leicester. In short, and with supreme irony, just as Hoskins was becoming a master of research into the whole chronological sweep of localised history, access to his subject-matter was to be abruptly cut off by the Second World War.

#### iv

As it happens, it is probable that Hoskins's experience of this very period was fundamental to the development of his thinking. For nearly five years he was exiled to London to work on the Central Price Regulation Committee. But as he wrote later in *Midland England*,

even that term of imprisonment, for such it must always be to any country man, had its uses. Amid the deadly boredom and futility of life in London the only way to keep sane among the rootless millions of 'countrymen on the road to sterility', as E.M. Forster has so truly described them, was to reflect on the years I had spent in walking through the midland fields and villages, coming home to search out in manuscripts and books the history of what I had seen during the day, and then out again to explore once more.<sup>10</sup>

Removed from both the routine and the detail of his researches, Hoskins was now forced to meditate on wider historical patterns.

Amongst these objects of contemplation were the great historical movements implied by the war itself. There are revealing passages of reminiscence about his hometown in the farewell lecture notes:

10. W.G. Hoskins, *Midland England: A Survey of the Country between the Chilterns and the Trent*, 'The Face of Britain series', London: Batsford, 1949

September 1, 1939 - 'The Germans have bombarded Cracow' - the aged custodian and his glass of milk - rolling up, not the map of Europe, but the poll tax for Exeter in 1660 - 'I shall not want this again for a long time'. The air raid of 1942: the seagulls wailing above the acres of destruction - the destruction of 1003, thought of instinctively. Later, the old lady picking a bunch of wild flowers among the rubble of the High Street - the gipsies tethering their ponies on the grassy mounds where the old South Street had been ... all this is history. Years of thinking along one line makes one sensitive to history.

Of the bombardment of Plymouth he was later to write how 'on 20 March, the barbarians began the systematic destruction of the town', and how in that 'terrible Spring of 1941, the city was pounded from the air by the missionaries of 20th century civilisation [note that phraseology], and suffered vast damage and casualties'.<sup>11</sup>

Hoskins's total and abiding abhorrence of both modern mass society and, worse, the destructive potential of its technology, carries on into the post-war years. The strength of his rising passion about such matters may be gauged from the following - and now justly celebrated - excoriation of the modern world from *The Making of the English Landscape* which was penned possibly in 1954:

What else has happened in the immemorial landscape of the English countryside? Airfields have flayed it bare wherever there are level, well-drained stretches of land, above all in eastern England. Poor devastated Lincolnshire and Suffolk! And those long gentle lines of the dip-slope of the Cotswolds, those misty uplands of the sheep-grey oolite, how they have lent themselves to the villainous requirements of the new age! Over them drones, day after day, the obscene shape of the atom-bomber, laying a trail like a filthy slug upon Constable's and Gainsborough's sky. England of the Nissen hut, the 'pre-fab', and the electric fence, of the high barbed wire around some unmentionable devilment; England of the arterial by-pass, treeless and stinking of diesel oil, murderous with lorries; England of the bombing-range wherever there was once silence, as on Otmoor or the marshlands of Lincolnshire; England of battle-training areas on the Breckland heaths, and tanks crashing through empty ruined Wiltshire villages; England of high explosive falling upon the prehistoric monuments of Dartmoor. Barbaric England of the scientists, the military men, and the politicians: let us turn away and contemplate the past before all is lost to the vandals.<sup>12</sup>

Like so many of his contemporaries, Hoskins was profoundly aware of great cycles of change in human affairs, and saw these in terms of the histories of entire civilisations. But where some of his generation had pondered on Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*; and others, like Herbert Finberg, Hoskins's immediate successor to the headship of the Department of English Local History, looked to Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*; as befitted someone ever concerned with the economic, social and cultural implications of practical matters, Hoskins himself appears to have been deeply struck by some of the early writings of Lewis Mumford. Chapters III and IV of that author's *Technics and Civilisation*, published in 1934, were even part of the set reading for a course led by Hoskins in Yorkshire immediately after World War II.<sup>13</sup> In these pages Mumford declares that 'the state' of what he calls 'paleotechnic society' - that is the industrial revolution period down to at least 1870 and even 1914 - 'may be described, ideally, as one of wardom. Its typical organs, from mine to factory, from blast furnace to slum, from slum to battlefield, were at the

11. W.G. Hoskins, *Devon. A New Survey of England*, p.456. London: Collins, 1954

12. Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, as n.2, pp.231-2

13. Notebook F, as n.6

service of death. Competition: struggle for existence: domination, and submission: extinction'.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere he added 'The paleotechnic phase, then, ... explored the blind alleys, the ultimate abysses, of a quantitative conception of life...'.<sup>15</sup> In contradistinction to this, the previous stage of technology, what Mumford dubbed the 'Eotechnic phase', was clearly not so technically advanced. Yet the moral which Hoskins drew from Mumford's own judgment of the process of development from the one phase to the other was that 'the old civilisation cannot be judged by quantitative standards'. As Mumford had stressed, for example, 'It is easy to put a low estimate on the gains' in productivity achieved by technological advance *within* the older eotechnic economy, when these are compared with the output of today,

if one applies merely a quantitative measuring stick to them: if one compares the millions of horsepower now available to the thousands that then existed, if one compares the vast amount of goods poured forth by our factories with the modest output of the older workshops. But to judge the two economies correctly, one must also have a qualitative standard: one must ask not merely how much crude energy went into it, but how much of that went into the production of durable goods. The energy of the eotechnic regime did not vanish in smoke nor were its products thrown quickly on junk-heaps: by the seventeenth century it had transformed the woods and swamps of northern Europe into a continuous vista of wood and field, village and garden: an ordered human landscape replaced the lower meadows and the matted forests, while the social necessities of man had created hundreds of new cities, solidly built and commodiously arranged, cities whose spaciousness and order and beauty still challenge, even in their decay, the squalid anarchy of the new towns that succeeded them.<sup>16</sup>

Hoskins's own note in relation to this point is, 'Add lovely 17C villages of Stone Belt' [an interesting early hint at one of his later favourite themes] 'Late 16C - early 19C.'<sup>17</sup> All this lends considerable significance to the contents of the most revealing of William Hoskins's notebooks in which is recorded a quotation from Guglielmo Ferrero in Skrine's book on *Chinese Central Asia*, p.167 under the heading 'Qualitative civilisations':

We have need to rediscover, to admire, to save the remains of the old qualitative civilisations which every day we pitilessly destroy to increase our wealth and our power. There - one can never say too often - lies the tragedy of the modern world. The old qualitative civilisations had as their aim perfection, and not power, and are our Paradise Lost.<sup>18</sup>

As the war reached its climax, Hoskins's mind was pre-occupied not only with the contrast between the present and past conditions of men in general, but also with more precise historical considerations. Given the work he had already done on Wigston Magna, it is clear that he must have been contemplating a book on it for some time. To judge from the notebook, entitled 'The Economic and Social History of a Midland Village' which seems to have been started either in 1943 or in 1944, however, up till that point Hoskins had been having difficulty in identifying a central theme. Some previous inkling of what was to come is indicated perhaps in a review he had

14. L. Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, p.195. London: Routledge, 1934

15. Mumford, *Technics*, as n.14, p.210

16. Mumford, *Technics*, as n.14, pp.147-8

17. Notebook F: a lecture session entitled 'The disintegration of the old civilisation', as n.6

18. Notebook entitled 'The Economic and Social History of a Midland Village', as n.6; C. P. Skrine, *Chinese Central Asia*. London: Methuen, 1926

written of *The Changing Village*, by F.G. Thomas, for *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries* in 1939, where he describes how the author, in his discussion of the contemporary rural world, 'speaks of the profound change that the last twenty or thirty years have seen in rural England and of the great exodus from the countryside by those who were born in it ...'. Hoskins then goes on to remark how 'we who pore over manor court rolls and parish registers to reconstruct the past might well lift our eyes now and then to see the thousand year old village breaking up and disappearing in our own times'.<sup>19</sup> If that idea was later to provide a purely chronological framework, there can be little doubt that Hoskins was increasingly emboldened to see wider significances in his microscopic study as a result of a series of books that now came to his attention. F.M. Stenton's great work, *Anglo-Saxon England*, was published in 1943, and a key quotation from it appears in Hoskins's Wigston notes: 'The central course of Old English social development may be described as the process by which a peasantry, at first composed essentially of free men, acknowledging no lord below the king, gradually lost economic and personal independence'.<sup>20</sup> From George Caspar Homans's book, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, first published in the United States in 1941, he drew Le Play's concept of the stem- or root-family 'one of Europe's great sources of strength' to underline the persistence of certain free peasant families at Wigston, a key theme which he was to expand in his article on 'Leicestershire Yeomen Families and their Pedigrees' in the Society's *Transactions* for 1946. In the work of another American, Mildred Campbell's synoptic study of *The English Yeomen Under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts* which Hoskins reviewed for the *Economic History Review* in 1944-5, he found confirmation of his own growing certainty that the yeoman class should be a prime concern of the historian. Above all, it must have been also at about this time that he experienced the full impact upon him of George Bourne's book, *Change in the Village*, published as long before as 1912. It was this work in particular that drew together Hoskins's general appreciation of the desirability of a 'qualitative' as opposed to a 'quantitative' civilisation, with his particular concern to find a theme with which to illuminate his projected piece on village England.

What inspired Hoskins was Bourne's insight into a lost culture of the countryside. As Hoskins recorded, probably in 1943-44, the latter had written: '... the "peasant" tradition in its vigour amounted to nothing less than a form of civilisation - the home-made civilisation of the rural English ... People could find in it not only a method of getting a living, but also an encouragement and a help to live well'.<sup>21</sup> Bourne had been able to detail how, in his example, the enclosure of the commons in 1861 had led by 1900, and more especially by 1910, to a first gradual and then an accelerating erosion of this peasant way of life. The possible parallels with Wigston were thus immediately apparent. The first page of Hoskins's notebook has a heading 'Enclosure at Wigston' and continues: 'The revolution of 17 November 1766 when the award was made', with, superimposed in another ink, a fragment of one of his characteristic purple passages: 'Wiped out the pattern familiar for more than 1200 years, the old names, the old landmarks, the corn cut for the last time', 'the wind was shaking the barley for the last time, the flowering beans scented the village fields no more'. Then, excitedly, comes the nub, under a new heading:

19. *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 20 (1939), pp.332-4

20. Notebook, 'The Economic and ...', as n.18, p.4

21. Notebook, 'The Economic and ...', as n.18, p.11 from G. Bourne, *Change in the Village*, p.116. London: Duckworth, 1912

### The Old Pattern

I have the theme now: the old pattern of life slowly built up - describe at length - then the disintegration of the pattern, shattered beyond recognition. The old peasant tradition when men and women were 'at home' in the world, rooted in place that had meaning and significance for them, among their own people, embedded in an ancient mode of living and conduct. They 'took care of a few fundamental things', not nobly or beautifully perhaps, but they took care of them nevertheless. Attached to a place, and to a family and neighbours, the strongest cement a society can have. And gradually we see the attachments being loosened, the cement crumbling, and the walls of that old society falling into ruin - the visible signs in the ruined church of St. Wistan, the silent water-mill, the tumble-down cottages in the village.

Hoskins had certainly found his theme: indeed he had discovered the central message of his most influential work. Already in his 1944-5 review of Mildred Campbell's book he is to be heard referring to the picture of 'a happy and integrated society' that she depicts for her yeomen and, he continues, 'on the whole one feels that it is a true likeness of a real civilisation, a peasant civilisation, which is better than anything we can show today or are likely to show in this money-ridden, town-minded twentieth century'.<sup>22</sup> It was, therefore, ironic that Hoskins seems to have been unable to find a publisher for his Wigston book which only came out eventually some dozen years later in 1957. Under the influence of R.H. Tawney, what Hoskins had once envisaged as a work entitled 'The History of Wigston Magna: A Study in Peasant Civilisation', emerged as *The Midland Peasant: the Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village*. Despite this delay, ignorance of which had blurred our previous understanding of the sequence of William Hoskins intellectual development, he can now be seen to have begun by systematically developing this fundamental theme in detail at *village* level and in about 1943-4. As a theme its first airing, indeed, was briefly in his essay 'Galby and Frisby' which was clearly written for these *Transactions*, probably in 1943, as a kind of dress rehearsal for the real thing.<sup>23</sup> Instead of the academic full-length village study, however, Hoskins now perforce went on to explore the idea in more popular terms, first at regional level (in *Midland England* which appeared in 'The Face of Britain' series under the Batsford imprint in 1949) and then at national level, though less overtly, in *The Making of the English Landscape* with Hodder and Stoughton six years later. Curiously enough, despite his detailed work on Devon and Leicestershire he never attempted it for a county, although he must have contemplated it for Leicestershire. Indeed the great advance in his thinking about that county is beautifully epitomised by a comparison of two course descriptions for Vaughan College, one for a programme entitled 'Leicestershire Life and People' and designed to begin in April 1940; the other, a direct development of the same theme now labelled '*Old* Leicestershire Life and People' [my emphasis] seven years later. Here is the earlier, *draft*, description: 'The course is designed to show the mode of life of various classes in Leicestershire since the 16th century'. In his personal list of subjects he specifies nobles, squires, parsons, farmers, cottagers, labourers, townsmen and, characteristically, odd characters:

the sort of homes they lived in, how they were furnished, number of rooms, building materials. Incomes and expenditure. Standard of living. Meals. Everyday life - the daily round - the yearly round of the farmer - life from birth to death - the last will and testament - education (village schools *etc.*) - work and amusements.

22. *Economic History Review*, 14 (1944-5), pp.193-6

23. Reprinted in *Essays in Leicestershire History*, as n.3, pp.24-66, especially pp.42-3, 46

By 1947, however, the same course has been radically re-arranged as we can tell from the wording of the printed programme:

The old country civilisation and its characteristics. The self-sufficient Leicestershire village, its economic integration and social structure. The squires and their homes, farming and domestic life. Husbandmen, cottagers, and labourers and the open-field system, their homes and domestic economy. The village craftsmen and their supreme importance to the village. Village architecture in Leicestershire. The break-up of the old country civilisation: enclosure, decay of domestic industry, coming of railways. Decay of the market-town. Leicestershire today.<sup>24</sup>

The gulf that separates these two formulations of the same subject, marks nothing less than an historiographical revolution in modern approaches to the past. Instead of seeing the society of a region as once comprising no more than a series of horizontal social bands that needed to be *separately* characterised, so that their qualities might be taken as illustrative of national class divisions, and therefore inevitably in relation to a 'higher' and superior national culture, Hoskins had hit upon a brilliant alternative viewpoint. He replaced the horizontal divisions with vertical divisions of society according to the different groupings of people *together* by form of community - village, town or country house - and he saw these not in relation to a superior culture, but in relation to an ancient mode of living that was variously expressed according to contrasted regional and social circumstances. From now on, ideally, local history would be able to proceed systematically and comparatively at three interacting levels: the level of the individual community - whether rural or urban; the level of a regional society and its economy; and the level of a wider working culture that the majority of the population, as opposed to the nation's elite, both shared and helped to evolve, in different ways in different regions, over the centuries.

Hoskins's genius therefore lay in the way in which he had adapted and expanded Bourne's observation of the last years of a 'peasant civilisation' to create a breathtakingly bold chronological composition. For Hoskins, the origins of this civilisation were to be sought far back in the Anglo-Saxon period, its most characteristic home being the Midlands. Its fabric was the village and its common fields, the creations of the early Anglo-Saxon settlers; its social backbone were the free peasantry, so often of Scandinavian descent, and later the yeomen; its central qualities were the deep rootedness of its families, 'peasant democracy' at the township level, thrift, and the careful husbanding and exploitation of local resources like building materials for nearly every homely need. Its economic outlet was the local market town; its artists were the craftsmen of both town and country; and, above all, its spirit manifested itself in a sense of community', 'a compact, self-contained society' as he described it in Devon, which subsequently, in *Local History in England*, he was to elevate as the central object of study for every other local historian.

The apogee of this 'home-made rural civilisation' he was to describe as 'the Flowering of Rural England', the hall-mark of which was the great wave of more permanent 'Peasant building' (as he preferred to describe what others call Vernacular Architecture), that which he later characterised for other purposes, and chronologically rather more tightly, as 'The Great Rebuilding'.<sup>25</sup> A single paragraph from *The Making of the English Landscape* encapsulates the totality of Hoskins's wider sense of the chronology of his peasant civilisation as well as the nature of what he saw as the period

24. Notebook H, as n.6, including cut-out printed notice for the 1947 course.

25. W.G. Hoskins, 'The Rebuilding of Rural England 1570-1640', in *Provincial England*, as n.8, pp.131-48

of its greatest efflorescence. It also shows that conceptually he probably owed as much to Mumford as to Bourne:

The English village, insofar as it still remains untouched by the acid fingers of the twentieth century, with its farmsteads, cottages, school, almshouse, and perhaps a decent early chapel, is essentially the product of two centuries between about 1570 and 1770. Before that time life had been hard and comfortless, with little or no margin to spare beyond the necessities of living: what little there was went to the adornment and beautification of the parish church. After that time we witness the break-up of the village community, the degradation of most of the rural population, and the flight into the towns. But for those two hundred years - seven human generations - rural England flowered. The exhausting labour of colonization was over, except in small patches here and there. There were now enough people for an agricultural country at least, and there was time to rest and play. The narrow margin between a hard life and death from starvation, which had haunted so many generations from the dim Saxon times onwards, had widened with the bringing into cultivation of millions more acres of land. There was no longer the need to go out at the end of a hard day's farming to hack down more trees and clear more ground: it was all done, all that was worth doing: now there was time to contemplate, and to think beyond the mere utilities of life. The Stuart or the Georgian yeomen, reached for a book in the evenings, rather than for the axe or mattock of his forebears.<sup>26</sup>

The manner in which Hoskins viewed the demise of his peasant civilisation is best judged from the pages of *The Midland Peasant* whence all these ideas had originally sprung, though now, a dozen years on and possibly under the influence of Tawney, here Hoskins tended to write less about 'civilisation', and more about 'the peasant system'. Since the 'last great bulwark' of this system had been the open-fields, the significance of eighteenth-century enclosures lay

in their sweeping away of common rights, and consequently in plunging the peasant suddenly into a money-economy which he did not understand, loaded with a money debt at the start. It was not simply the substitution of one system of farming by another, which on balance was perhaps more productive for the country as a whole (though even this is questionable), but the destruction of an entire society with its own economy and traditions, its own way of living and its own culture.<sup>27</sup>

In the case of Wigston Magna, if that process had been initiated in 1766, by 1901,

The peasant village had been swamped and then submerged completely, and the tide of industrialism rolled on over it unchecked. Fifteen times as many families now lived and got their living off the same area as had done so in the early fourteenth century, at the height of the medieval boom in farming. But a whole culture, a qualitative civilisation, had perished to bring about this quantitative triumph.<sup>28</sup>

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It should, of course, be emphasised here that neither Hoskins's chronological structure nor his perception of civilisation were exclusively defined. He was well aware of the possibilities of continuities between Roman Britain and Anglo-Saxon England, and he

26. Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, as n.2, p.126

27. W.G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village*, p.255. London: Macmillan, 1957. Tawney's influence on the title is acknowledged on p.xi

28. Hoskins, *Midland Peasant*, as n.27, p.282

was the first to admit that relics of the old rural world survived even the Second World War. More than that, his use of the word 'civilisation' was constricted in the sense that it was simultaneously applicable to the specific cultures of separate contemporaneous forms of community. He referred too, for example, to 'the monastic civilisation' that had existed before the Dissolution.<sup>29</sup> More particularly, he saw his 'peasant civilisation' as in large part complemented, for the latter stages of its existence by what he called 'the country-house civilisation' (though even here he was wont to distinguish 'palaces' and their regimes, from country-houses *per se*). Here Hoskins's genius for lucid simplification could find a ready outlet: who else would have encapsulated the sweep of this subject so clearly by defining its chronological scope through the identification of 'the last castle', 'the last country-house', 'the last park' - 'the last grand gesture, so to speak, of the landed aristocracy before the bell began to toll?'<sup>30</sup>

The country-house civilisation, with all its splendour and urbanity, and with all the beauty it created in the Midland landscape, with its houses, parks, lakes, well-kept villages, and fine woods, reached its height in the eighteenth century, and the early nineteenth; and now (1948) it is nearly ended. For it was created by one of the most unequal societies the world has ever seen, resting upon the concentration of great wealth in a few hands and on the poverty of the many, and such inequality is no longer seriously defended. It was, nevertheless, a civilisation with great merits while it lasted, and by no means only material merits, and we have not yet found anything as good to put in its place, nor look like doing so for some considerable time to come. But the civilisation of the country-houses itself evolved from a crude, ignorant, and rough society and took centuries to achieve its perfection, and it may be that the civilisation which will replace it, of which there is yet no trace, will similarly take centuries to come to full fruition, if indeed it is allowed to grow at all.<sup>31</sup>

And of course it was at the level of the local community that the two 'civilisations' of the peasant and the squire met, especially in Devon where there were more of the latter than in Leicestershire, and both these 'civilisations' were extinguished more or less simultaneously.

The former village community, for such it was in a way we can only dimly apprehend today from the talk of old men and women, is breaking up [this was written on Devon probably in 1952 or 1953] - has broken up in so many places - because there is no central figure to give it stability and continuous leadership ... Even if it sometimes was 'despotism' - and the Victorian squire or his wife was sometimes unfitted to rule any community - it is better to have a personal despotism one knows of, and can attack, than an official many-headed despotism, which can never be identified and brought out into the light of day.<sup>32</sup>

Outside the industrialising areas, what brought all this to nought eventually, however, was war. In Devon,

the year 1914 marked the end of an age, the end of the country-house and the squire, and the old village life. So many of the sons and heirs of the old estates, following the traditions of their families, led those futile, hopeless attacks through the mud of northern France and Flanders, and fell there ... the year 1916 above all gave the real death-blow to the country-houses ... That year, and the two years that followed, did

29. E.g. W.G. Hoskins, *East Midlands and the Peak: A New Guide Book with a Portrait*, 'About Britain', no.8, p.49. London: Collins, 1951
30. Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, as n.2, *passim* and p.137
31. Hoskins, *Midland England*, as n.10, p.60
32. Hoskins, *Devon*, as n.11, pp.299-300

much to put an end to the traditional village life, the counterpart to the life at the great house, when the young men who would have carried on the trades and traditions of their fathers, and would have been the fathers of the next generation, failed to return.<sup>33</sup>

To Hoskins's mind nothing of enduring value replaced 'the monumental stability' of that vanished culture. With Mumford whose view he noted, he regarded us today as 'still living, in Matthew Arnold's words, between two worlds; one dead, the other powerless to be born'.<sup>34</sup>

From another work by Mumford, *Faith for Living*, Hoskins also borrowed a further notion of such meaning for him that he even quoted it in his Inaugural Lecture in 1966:

In the restless movings about of the last two centuries, this essential relation between the human spirit and its background was derided, under-estimated, sometimes overlooked ... Where men shifted so easily no cultural humus formed; no human tradition thickened.<sup>35</sup>

At Wigston Magna, for example, Hoskins observed,

The fifteenth century had seen an almost complete change in the village population; but after this great re-shuffle the community settled down, stabilised itself, and the peasantry proceeded to re-establish the roots that had been torn up by the Black Death and the long agricultural depression, and to strike those roots even deeper into the 'cultural humus' formed by generations of ancestors on that spot.<sup>36</sup>

In turn, however, the continuities of that former world have now become ours. The legacy bequeathed to us by the provincial 'civilisations' - their monument - is the very landscape of England itself which they themselves had formerly made and re-made. As Hoskins remarks of a tract of north Oxfordshire, at the climax of *The Making of the English Landscape*,

... this was a rich and favoured countryside that was beloved of owners of Roman villas, even in places of Bronze Age men. The cultural humus of sixty generations or more lies upon it. But most of England is a thousand years old, and in a walk of a few miles one would touch nearly every century in that long stretch of time.<sup>37</sup>

He articulates his own personal reactions to such a scene in the preface to *Midland England* - his first published statement on the subject:

For my own part I am not much interested in surface impressions. The three visible dimensions of a building or a landscape are not enough: they may entrance for the moment but they make no abiding impression on the mind. One needs the fourth dimension of time to give depth to the scene: one wants to know as much as possible about the past life of a place, about its human associations, and to feel the long continuity of human life on that spot before it can make its full impression on the mind.<sup>38</sup>

33. Hoskins, *Devon*, as n.11, p.298

34. Quoted from Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, as n.14, p.265, in Notebook 'The Economic and ...' as n.18

35. W.G. Hoskins, *English Local History: the Past and Future*, an Inaugural Lecture, p.20. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966

36. Hoskins, *Midland Peasant*, as n.27, p.196

37. Hoskins, *Making of the English Landscape*, as n.2, p.235

38. Hoskins, *Midland England*, as n.10, p.v

For Hoskins then, the landscape represented but one avenue to the past; and its study was not to be regarded as an end itself, a fact that many of his imitators have tended to forget. Other avenues explored by him included demography, sociology, archaeology, even botany, but all of these, like topography, were subservient in his mind to one over-riding task: 'to restore the fundamental unity of human history', as he put it in his Inaugural, a task that realistically could only be undertaken at the scale of the local history.<sup>39</sup> Whether or not then we now accept either his historical conceptualisation of the problem, or his terminology, or his chronological structures, Hoskins's idea of a peasant civilisation at least restores to a disjointed historical world of thematic and periodic specialisms, a sense of shape and of continuity, a sense of the past in which what ultimately matters are the voices, the actions and the solutions of everyman in his never-ending struggle with the physical environment. Humanity, not landscape, was Hoskins's prime concern. The highways of his England are not empty and echoing. They are thronged with people; with husbandmen and butchers, with merchants, craftsmen and labourers, with squires and parsons, and even 'local geniuses'. The cultural humus is thus the sum product of generations and generations of real people whose contributions, however humble, it is the local historian's ultimate duty to reconstruct.

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And so appropriately we come briefly to the man himself. To do this we need to glance back again to that crucial point, at the age of 35 or so, when first he was drafting the outlines of his projected book on Wigston Magna, probably in 1943-4. The relevant notebook is a very revealing document indeed because, as must now be clear, in a few places it is also a commonplace book in which Hoskins recorded quotations from the writings of others that had touched him intellectually. From some of these entries, it may be inferred that Hoskins's new stance as an historian was closely related to what might be called a process of self-discovery that, to judge from the fresh confidence with which he is to be found pronouncing from this very period, must have been a relatively recent experience.

Certainly two of the quotations he recorded are highly relevant in this respect. The first of these is taken from Algernon Cecil, *A House in Bryanston Square*:

The historian ... had to know himself before he could hope to appraise the knowledge that his sense and his studies brought him. ... Without finding at least some provisional solution, the historian's work in selecting and evaluating became hopeless. ... To some degree at least one had to reach an *a priori* opinion about the nature of Being before one ventured out into the wide world of history - of Becoming - ... if one were ever truly to know oneself, or find out what was *really* happening in the world around one.<sup>40</sup>

The second quotation was taken from the Pelican edition of *An Autobiography*, by the philosopher of history, R.G. Collingwood, which had been first published in hard-back in 1939:

Every historical problem ultimately arises out of 'real' life ... historical problems arise out of practical problems. We study history in order to see more clearly into the situation in which we are called upon to act ... If he [the historian] is able to

39. Hoskins, *English Local History*, as n.35, p.21

40. Notebook 'The Economic and ...', quoting from pp.257-8 of Cecil's book, *A House in Bryanston Square*, London: Eyre Spottiswoode, 1944

understand, by re-thinking them, the thoughts of a great many different kinds of people, it follows that he must be a great many kinds of man. He must be, in fact, a microcosm of all the history he can know. Thus his own self-knowledge is at the same time his knowledge of the world of human affairs.<sup>41</sup>

About the crystallisation of Hoskins's self-knowledge, of course, one can only guess, though it is possible to guess to within a reasonable degree of sureness. The key has to be his perception of, and perhaps early on some sensitivity about, his own inherited place in society: as, originally, the scholarship boy from a provincial University College with consequently radical political attitudes and concerns that touched but tangentially on the then interests of the 'high' metropolitan culture of the elitist intellectual world of the 1930's and 1940's. Indeed, a little of this defensiveness - almost shyness - still lingered with him even in the Oxford of the 1960's. But during those war-time years something seems to have given him an access of confidence in himself, a confidence that was doubtless fanned by the growing academic appreciation of his originality and of the evident quality of his promise; and which surely was augmented by the warm reception then being given by the historical 'establishment' to a superb recent work of local history, *Tudor Cornwall*, by another West-countryman, A.L. Rowse. Following the appearance of his own first article to be published in a national as opposed to a local historical journal, the *Economic History Review* for 1943, a new tone of authority is now to be detected in Hoskins's formal writing, and especially around the time he 'discovers' the idea of a 'peasant civilisation'. I have already quoted from his first review in the same periodical of Mildred Campbell's book on *The English Yeomen* in 1944-5, but here is another significant passage with examples gleaned and then concentrated together, not from his own work, but from hers:

It is strange that the yeomen of England, the class which produced Shakespeare, Newton, Latimer, Harvey and Selden, and on the American side, the Adams dynasty and Thomas Jefferson should have had to wait for a full-length study.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, - and, it might seem, discovered from Mildred Campbell's pages - the existing focus of his own apparently 'parochial' historical interests could now be publicly justified through having immense implications for matters of far wider cultural moment. In *Midland England*, only four years later, he is to be found actually calling 'this class of men, the best and most solid that England has ever given birth to', and, then revealingly continuing: 'Perhaps I am a little prejudiced about this, being descended from a long line of such men (though not in the Midlands), six centuries of yeomen farmers, churchwardens, constables, overseers, bailiffs of the manor, rarely anything much above that, just like their Midland prototypes.'<sup>43</sup> Few historians, indeed, have so repeatedly emphasised their social origins in their writings. Again and again and again, Hoskins returns to this theme, if only colourfully to illustrate, from his own family history, a general point which he may then be discussing. In his last big book, *The Age of Plunder* (1976), Hoskins could truthfully write that 'Like that great French social historian, Georges Lefebvre, I can say "j'ai travaillé à mon rang dans la communauté."'<sup>44</sup>

But alongside a discovered pride in his origins, and hence a new confidence in both

41. R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, quoting from p.73 of the paperback edition. In the original (OUP, 1939), this statement is to be found at p.115

42. See above n.21

43. Hoskins, *Midland England*, as n.10, pp.80-81

44. W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: The England of Henry VIII, 1500-1547*, Social and Economic History of England, p.xiii. London: Longman, 1976.

the credibility and the relevance of his life's work, lay another aspect of *himself* as an historian. As a direct personal outcome of these self-same origins, Hoskins could now see himself as a continuing representative of that very world which he was now seeking to recreate with so much affection. The Wigston notebook contains the following illuminating passage under the heading '*The old pattern*':

The lost pattern of living, the lost pattern of integrated life that everyone once knew, of a time when we were all 'at home' in the world [note that 'we'], among our own kindred and in our native places, conforming to the pattern of life handed down from the immemorial past, having our roots deep down in the 'cultural humus' deposited by generations of ancestors before us in the same place - the same house, the same village, or the same small town. At Exeter I can see this old pattern, where my father carries on the same trade in the same traditional way, baking bread by hand and without machinery, as his father and his grandfather carried on before him in the same old town back to the days of George the Fourth.

In *The Age of Plunder* too, towards the end of his productive career, he is to be found placing this sentiment in a wider conceptual context:

Historians necessarily chop history into 'periods', but older human societies often remain encapsulated in a later and an alien age. I therefore write with sympathy of the kind of world I have known and can still see in places, without supposing it was a golden age.<sup>45</sup>

Hoskins thus came to understand himself in some sense to be what might be described as a cultural 'erratic' from an older and more admirable cultural *stratum*. At last liberated from the social and academic prejudices of established contemporary convention, he could thus rejoice publicly - even revel - in the sturdiness of his own highly educated provincialism.

W.G. Hoskins's supreme achievement, then, was to have been both visionary and poet of that disappearing world to which he saw himself as having just belonged: his lament for the 'peasant civilisation' and that 'elder race' (a phrase from E.M. Forster), runs like a moving threnody throughout his wonderful writing. In achieving this - in part surely for himself - his, nevertheless, is simultaneously a great gift to posterity in that he vouchsafes to us all a glimpse of our own 'Paradise Lost', that ideal of which Ferrero had spoken; a momentarily spell-binding glimpse into nothing less than an English Garden of Eden.

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45. Hoskins, *Age of Plunder*, p.xiii