

THE CHETHAM SOCIETY

Alan Crosby

How, a century and a half ago, did the country gentlemen of Lancashire and Cheshire and the newly-prosperous merchants of Manchester and Liverpool fill the shelves of their libraries and so create the impression of gravitas which was such an important indicator of status? One useful method of ensuring a good long run of uniformly-bound and substantial volumes, which could occupy a couple of feet or so and which would look suitably weighty, was to join the Chetham Society. A member who joined on the foundation of the Society in 1848 and maintained his annual subscription of £1 for twenty years, would by 1863 have acquired sixty volumes. For some, at least, this may well have been a significant motive for joining the Society; another was that the names of members were regularly printed in the annual reports which were published with the volumes.

The Chetham Society was founded in 1843¹ and is, by some five years, the oldest local history organisation in North West England,² and an air of early Victorian respectability is carried with it to this day. It has no truck with frivolities such as members' meetings, excursions to places of interest, or the production of glossy newsletters. Its sole purpose and *raison d'être*, in 1996 as in 1843, is the publication of local history. To be precise, and to use the magnificently obscure language of the beginning of Victoria's reign, it exists solely 'for the publication of remains historical and literary connected with the palatine counties of Lancaster and Chester', a purpose which does cause occasional doubts among those in the Charity Commission office in Liverpool who have dealings with the Society. What exactly are 'remains historical and literary', and how do Merseyside and Greater Manchester fit into this scheme of things, they ask plaintively.



JAMES CROSSLEY, ESQ., F.S.A.
A PEN AND INK SKETCH FROM LIFE

TRAVELS
IN
HOLLAND THE UNITED PROVINCES
ENGLAND SCOTLAND
AND IRELAND

M.DC.XXXIV.—M.DC.XXXV.

BY

SIR WILLIAM BRERETON, BART.

EDITED BY

EDWARD HAWKINS, ESQ.

F.R.S. F.S.A. F.L.S.

PRINTED FOR THE CHETHAM SOCIETY.

M.DCCC.XLIV.

The first volume published by the Chetham Society.

The Chetham Society was established by a group of gentlemen antiquarians and bibliophiles in Manchester and was one manifestation of the vigorous and enthusiastic pursuit of knowledge which characterised the middle classes of that phenomenal city. Beginning with the Literary & Philosophical Society in 1781, and continuing through such bodies as the Natural History Society (1821), the Botanical Society (1827), Statistical Society (1833) and the Geological Society (1838), the men of Manchester founded a series of major private institutions which paralleled similar bodies in London and which represented a new spirit of the age. Many of these organisations drew for their membership and their committees upon a numerically small but commercially, socially and politically powerful group of leading citizens, so that there was a great deal of shared ground among the personnel. In the case of the Chetham Society the membership, as befitted an antiquarian body, was essentially conservative, usually Conservative, and largely Anglican. Radical Mancunian liberalism had little place in its activities.

The founder of the Society, and its guiding spirit and dominating influence until his death in 1883, was James Crossley, a Halifax-born lawyer who had come to Manchester in 1816 to study and had never left, becoming an ardent enthusiast for all things Mancunian. Crossley, an intimate friend and dining-partner of almost all the leading men of the city, was a passionate bibliophile and the Society was his personal project. It was he who was mainly responsible for defining its scope as 'remains historical and literary', he contributed a number of volumes to its output, and for forty years he had well-nigh exclusive control over



The Reading Room, Chetham's Library.

the selection of titles for its publications programme. In conjunction with a few other luminaries, notably Canon Richard Parkinson of St Bees and Manchester Cathedral, and Canon Francis Raines of Milnrow, he directed and governed the Society with benevolent firmness throughout its formative years and into its maturity.

The Chetham Society was a publishing society, following the example which had been set by bodies such as the Camden Society and the Parker Society. Its nearest inspiration was probably the Surtees Society, founded in 1834 to publish material relating to North East England. The two societies were closely related during the later nineteenth century, with several members serving simultaneously on the Councils of both. Bodies such as these had only one role – to produce volumes. Their other activities were negligible, and the fact that they did not maintain a regular contact with the membership or publish transactions meant that they were not like the later Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire (1848) or the Antiquarian Society (1883), which were local history societies in a more modern mould.

The Chetham Society, like many comparable organisations of its time, chose to conceal its purpose behind a title which, though logical, is not explanatory. The name was derived from the renowned Manchester merchant Humphrey Chetham (died 1653), on the grounds that he was the most significant and influential benefactor of public learning in the history of Manchester and its region. With the exception of a few years in the 1860s the Society has always held its Council meetings and Annual General Meetings in the Reading Room at Chetham's Library, the room in which it was founded, but technically the name derives not from the institution but from the man himself.

The founders felt, quite correctly, that there was a need to make manuscripts and texts which were in private hands —

as most were, of course — more widely available for the interest and practical use of historians and literary scholars in and of the North West. There was no overall or systematic publishing strategy, but instead individuals on the Society's Council and some of its more active ordinary members put forward suggestions for documents which they felt would be appropriate, often using their own collections or those held by Chetham's Library. This wide-ranging and eclectic policy has remained characteristic of the Society to the present day. Several of the early members, including Crossley himself, were primarily interested in literature, so that a high proportion of the early output was devoted to early English drama and poetry, but this aspect of the Society's work soon dwindled and after 1880 its work was confined entirely to the publication of historical material.

The output was impressive in quantity though variable in quality. Canon Raines, one of the rather unsung heroes of nineteenth-century antiquarianism and historical research in the region, personally contributed no fewer than eighteen full volumes as well as a series of shorter items which appeared in the *Chetham Miscellanies*. His work was of a high standard, and was always delivered on time, whereas others were less professional in their approach and caused Crossley much heartache because of their dilatory and erratic ways.

By the 1880s, however, the original impetus of the Society had long since waned. The rate of publication had diminished, the finances were becoming uncertain, and the Chetham Society was in serious danger of collapse as, one by one, the founding generation died. It was rescued by the intervention of Richard Copley Christie, one of the fathers of Manchester University and a leading figure in the city's late Victorian intellectual and cultural life. Christie revived the organisation and in the process attached it firmly to the new university, so that after 1890 the appointment to the Council of academics, rather than town and country

The Chetham Society.

THE GENERAL MEETING will be held in the AUDIT ROOM of the CHETHAM LIBRARY, Hunt's Bank, Manchester, on *Wednesday, March 1st, 1916*, at 3.30 p.m., PROFESSOR JAMES TAIT, President, in the chair.

The attendance of Members and others is earnestly requested.

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gentlemen, became increasingly frequent. The result was that the academic quality of the Society's publications was greatly improved as the dilettante jottings and sometimes rather amateurish editing which had characterised many of its earlier works were replaced by up-to-date academic rigour. This process culminated in the election of the great James Tait as President in 1915.

During Tait's ten years in office the Society moved away from the publication of editions of documents (not least because the Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire was increasingly seen as the appropriate medium for such work) and instead began to publish academic monographs, often deriving these from the output of doctoral theses from the Manchester history department. In 1922 it published the seminal *Place-Names of Lancashire* by Eilert Ekwall, and in 1927 the equally durable and influential *Economic History of Rossendale* by G.H. Tupling. Works such as these placed the Society in the forefront of new directions of historical research and gave its publications a permanent value. This policy has continued ever since the 1920s, so that most of the post-war publications were monographs. The present editorial policy is guided by the view that it is desirable – indeed, essential – that commercially non-viable but academically important work should be made available in this way.

There were periods of decline, as there are in almost every voluntary organisation. The 1930s were a time of vigorous output but, ominously, the membership figures were static. By the early 1950s membership was shrinking fast and for several years no volumes were produced. For a Society which existed solely to publish, and for which the books were the only evidence of its activity and the main incentive to recruitment, this was potentially disastrous. As in the 1880s, however, salvation was at hand, this time in the persons of John Roskell, Reg Ward and the highly-controversial figure of Bill Chaloner. They overhauled the administrative and financial procedures of the Society, sought new authors, and were able to use the accumulated unspent reserves from several years of inactivity to begin regular production once more.

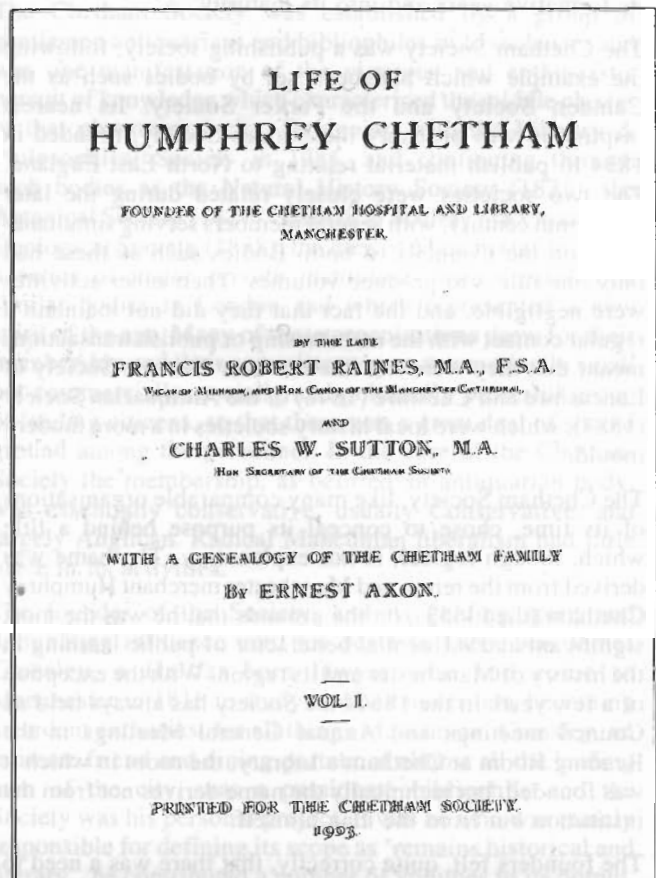
The late 1960s and the 1970s was among the most important and productive periods in the Society's history, many of the volumes produced then becoming "instant classics" which are now firmly established as key sources for the history of the North West – John Marshall's edition of the autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster (1967), Christopher Haigh's *The Last Days of the Lancashire Monasteries* (1969), P.H.W. Booth's study of the financial administration of Cheshire 1272-1377 (1981) and Gordon

Blackwood's work on the Lancashire Gentry and the Great Rebellion (1978) are obvious examples.

Ever since 1916 the Society's volumes had been printed and published on its behalf by Manchester University Press, but in the late 1980s M.U.P. made clear its wish either to withdraw from this arrangement or to cease to offer the Chetham Society the minor (to the Press) but very valuable (to the Society) financial and administrative concessions which had hitherto been enjoyed. There was a period of crisis, during which the Society faced not only financial ruin but also the loss of its publisher, a situation only resolved in 1991 when Carnegie Publishing of Preston agreed to take over from M.U.P.

The nature of the Society itself had also been changing. Until the early 1980s it was tied, unofficially but closely, to the Manchester history department, from which most members of Council were drawn and which provided much of the material which was published. Nevertheless, during the 1970s there had been a growing awareness of the existence of other sources of publications, Council members and officers, and ordinary members, so that the influence of Manchester began to diminish. The developing crisis of the 1980s, coinciding as it did with the retirement or death of several leading members of the Manchester department, accelerated these trends and led to the Chetham Society becoming more broadly-based, geographically and academically.

Since 1992 the President has been P.H.W. Booth, of Liverpool University, and at the time of writing the Council (for the first time in over a century) does not include a single current member of the Manchester University history department, although several retired members serve. The changing nature of university history, as well as of the Society, is reflected in the presence of representatives of,




Title-page of the first volume of "Life of Humphrey Chetham".

among other institutions, Manchester Metropolitan, Keele, Lancaster, and Leeds universities. The Council, which has a total of 21 members, also includes librarians, archivists, and freelance and retired historians, so that its composition probably reflects the structure of the world of history in the North West more accurately than at any other time in the past 150 years.

The output of the Chetham Society since 1843 is impressive by any standards, for it has published a total of 262 volumes. It must be admitted that quite a few of these (notably those on literary subjects published before 1880) have sunk almost without trace: not only can they scarcely, if ever, be used today but they can only have been of minimal interest at the time when they appeared – the Society's archives,³ containing comments received from members in the 1850s and 1860s, support this contention. These obscure works were the fruits of the personal and highly esoteric enthusiasms of the Society's founders.

On the other hand, even from the early period there are volumes which remain key sources and will always be in that position. In some areas of research the Chetham Society changed the course of historical investigation. For example, the printing in 1844 of Potts' *Discoverie of Witches*, the only contemporary account of the celebrated Lancashire witch trials of 1612, made available for the first time one of the most important pieces of evidence for a subject of major relevance to seventeenth-century England. The publication of the journals or diaries of several seventeenth-century clergymen and divines, such as Adam Martindale and Henry Newcombe, was a powerful element in the reappraisal of the history of nonconformity which took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, while more recently these same works have been widely used by social historians to illustrate such themes as the history of the family, attitudes to life and death and marriage, and the development of personal and family relationships in the period. Among many other primary sources of lasting value are the several monastic cartularies andoucher books, including those of Cockersand and Furness.

Some of the monographs which the Society has published and which have become regarded as definitive works have already been mentioned. It is the Society's policy to continue with this role, producing material which will not be superseded for the foreseeable future. The recent *Letters of Thomas Langton, flax merchant of Kirkham 1771-1788*, by Joan Wilkinson, Dorothy Clayton's *The administration of the county palatine of Chester 1442-85*, and John Swain's *Industry before the Industrial Revolution: North East Lancashire c.1500-1640*, among others from the past ten years, will be regarded in this light for many years to come. The Society aims to publish from as wide a geographical, thematic and chronological range as possible, to ensure that its volumes are of relevance and interest to the maximum number of people. Our most recent volume is Michael Turner's *Reform and Respectability: Manchester Liberalism 1815-1832*, for which we have received generous financial support from the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities and two other bodies. Roger Dickinson's



Chetham Society

FOR THE PUBLICATION OF
HISTORICAL AND LITERARY REMAINS
 CONNECTED WITH THE PALATINE COUNTIES OF
LANCASTER & CHESTER.

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fascinating work on the Isle of Man in the seventeenth century and Mary Higham's investigation of the effects of the Conquest on the landscape and society of North Lancashire will soon be appearing.

The membership of the Chetham Society has been increasing in the past three years, a very encouraging sign that the work which we do is well-regarded and valued. We now have more members than at any time since 1890, but of course the Society always welcomes others. Each member receives a copy of every volume published during the relevant subscription year — we try to publish at least one title each year, and in some this rate is exceeded. Membership currently costs £12 per annum (£15 for institutions), but the market price of the volumes is in the region of £25 so that membership represents a real bargain. This worthwhile Society, mildly and amiably eccentric, is full of historic interest in its own right, and anybody who is interested in the history of North West England is encouraged to join. The Society is almost entirely dependent upon subscriptions for its financial security and well-being. Without its membership it could not publish, and the invaluable work which it has been undertaking for over a century and a half would come to an end. If you would like to join, or to obtain details of membership, please contact the Hon. Membership Secretary, Miss Diana Winterbotham, 9 Riverside Drive, Stoneclough, Radcliffe, Manchester M26 9HU.

NOTES

- 1 Much of this article is based on the present author's official history of the Chetham Society: A.G. Crosby, 'A Society with No Equal: The Chetham Society, 1843-1993' (Chetham Society Third Series, vol.37, 1993).
- 2 The next oldest is the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, founded in Liverpool in 1848.
- 3 The archives of the Chetham Society are held at Chetham's Library, Manchester.