

BURY LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Terry Ashworth

Bury stands proudly among that chain of industrial towns which occupies the south-east corner of what was once Lancashire. At one time the smallest County Borough in the country, it is now believed to be the smallest Metropolitan District and when boundary changes were under consideration, in the early 1970s, it was threatened with merger with nearby Rochdale. Both towns, however, fought vociferously against the proposal (it was suggested that the hybrid should be named Botchdale) and the idea was abandoned.

Bury was proud to be a County Borough, to be up there in the big league, yet it remained small enough in terms of population to retain a sense of community, to remain a township. Bury people took pride in their history. The statue of Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister who repealed the Corn Laws, stands overlooking the Market Place (though it was his father who brought industrial prosperity to the town). Kay Gardens in the centre of the town were laid out in memory of John Kay, who invented the Flying Shuttle and became another father of the Industrial Revolution. Long before that, Bury-born Henry Dunster had sailed to America to become the first President of Harvard University.

Yet all too often it takes an 'outsider' to bring a town's history to the attention of its people. A vicar's wife, Jean Bannister, ran a WEA course on Local History at the Arts and Crafts Centre and it was here, in 1971, that the germ of an idea for a local history society was born. A letter from Derek Johnston in the local paper, the *Bury Times*, proposing the formation of a society, provided the spark and on 4 March 1971 a meeting was held in Bury Art Gallery, attended by 63 people. A steering committee was set up and it was decided that the name of the society should be Bury and District Local History Society, the 'and District' added in recognition of the five towns (Ramsbottom, Tottington, Radcliffe, Whitefield, Prestwich) which had recently been absorbed into the new Bury Metropolitan District. Douglas Newton became the first chair and the elected committee included Derek Johnston (secretary), Jean Bannister (press officer) and Geoff Wild (treasurer - a position he still holds!).

The first meeting of Bury Local History Society was held on 14 April 1971 in the Central Methodist Church in Union Street and thence monthly. By September a syllabus had been established and included a talk by R. Sharpe France, the County Archivist, a coach trip to Chatsworth, a folk group and a film of the town made by Bury Cine Society.

In addition to visiting speakers, it became clear that the Society had a rich resource among its own members, among them Margaret Chorlton, a practising barrister, whose academic style was subtly flavoured with a shrewd wit. Another regular contributor was Fred Campbell, whose 'Memories Galore' evenings were filled with vivid tales of his childhood and his life on the

railways. He had, too, a keen interest in the history of the town and wrote several small books and newspaper articles. The Society published a book by Mr Campbell on the Bury and Bolton Canal and another on Bury folk at Peterloo by Ruth Slater during the 1970s, but with only limited sales. However, during this period two of the Society's members, Vernon Sandiford and Terry Ashworth, had been researching a remote valley between Bury and Rochdale. This had once been the site of considerable industrial activity, with some fourteen mills operating along the banks of Cheesden Brook, a watercourse rarely more than a metre wide, although all these had now gone. In 1981 the Local History Society persuaded Vernon and Terry to publish a book on the subject under the title *The Forgotten Valley*, which proved to be an immediate success. An initial run of 1,000 copies produced in October was sold out by Christmas. The book still sells steadily today with the number of copies sold now approaching 6,000. To celebrate their success the annual walk in the following year was along the Cheesden Valley and again exceeded expectations. A hoped-for 30 to 40 walkers turned out to be 128 on the day.

The Society has made attempts to attract younger members. In 1984, for example, it launched a Junior Local History Competition and distributed application forms to local schools to encourage children to take an interest in their town. They were allowed to submit their entry in written form, or with drawing or diagrams. Due to a conflict of exams and holidays, however, entries were lower than had been hoped for and in consequence no junior members joined the Society. The Society has nevertheless benefited from having professional people within its membership. Bill Bennion, who was Bury's Chief Librarian when the Society was formed, became chair in its second year and remained in that office until last year (2003), when he was elevated to President. Another who makes an active contribution to the work of the Society is Kevin Mulley, the local Archivist, who readily provides material for research and for exhibition displays.

The Society also publicises its work in other ways. The first time it had an exhibition stand, for example, was at the Local History Fair at Lytham in 1990, when displays from the Bury Archive service were exhibited alongside a variety of publications and leaflets by the Society. The venture turned out to be a great success, not least the opportunity to talk to fellow local historians, and further exhibitions followed at Higher Mill Museum in Helmshore, at Manchester Town Hall and at Salford University.

In 1993 an attempt was made to produce a society newsletter, a modest single sheet of A4, but, as in many cases, the venture foundered through lack of support. Nevertheless, publicity officer Terry Ashworth felt that the wealth of knowledge held by the Society's members and their guests should not be allowed to pass unrecorded and in 1999 he turned to fellow member Roy Turner, to see what he could produce on his computer. The

impressive result was immediately accepted by the Society's committee, and in the summer of that year the first edition of the Journal was produced, a 32-page A5 booklet with a variety of articles by members and reports on activities. In addition to providing for members, a substantial number of copies were supplied to Bury libraries through their Resource Services Department and to such outlets as the Tourist Information Centre and fellow local history groups. Soon copies were finding their way to ex-pats abroad and a lively correspondence arose with Bury folk in Australia. Publication is limited to two issues a year as it is felt that this does not put too much of a demand on contributor or producer, yet serves its purpose of providing a tangible record of the Society's activities. It is a formula that appears to have worked and allows for a variety of material to keep each edition interesting.

Since 2002, the Society has also had its own website, which includes pages showing the society's meetings and publications, details of the latest Journal and back issues, and a projects page detailing the progress of the Bury Place Names Survey at present being undertaken by a group of members. There is also a 'Guestbook' where visitors can make a contribution or make an



Bury Local History Society stand, Helmshore

enquiry, which has yielded some interesting and informative dialogue. The website address is www.burylhs.freeserve.co.uk.

Over the years the Society has met in a variety of places. Following an initial period at the Central Methodist Church, we moved to the Children's Library in Manchester Road. This was suddenly closed during the 'asbestos scare' of 1991 and we hurriedly had to find new premises. We almost moved to the Unitarian Chapel across the road, but finally found ourselves among the Anglicans at Bury Parish Church. Members were unhappy with the room, however, as the acoustics were poor for speakers and two years later we moved back to our original venue at the Central Methodist Church. In 1999 redevelopment required the demolition of the building and once more we were on the move. This time we found sanctuary with the Roman Catholics in the clubroom of St Marie's Church in Manchester Road, where we still meet today. When our previous clubroom at the Methodist Chapel was demolished it was found to have been built over an old graveyard, still with its occupants!

Bury is a very different place from what it was forty years ago. Administratively it is almost three times the size and encompasses townships which are still reluctant to lose their identity. So where is the viewpoint of the Local History Society? Its title 'and District' gives us a certain latitude, but most of Bury's history lies beyond the 1970s and is the history of a smaller town with a strong sense of community. We are always aware, however, that we cannot be too parochial or too nostalgic since even our memories will soon become history.

Membership Enquiries

Contact: Mrs. W. Rohmann, Hon. Secretary, 45 Princess Parade, Bury, BL9 0QL.

Tel: 0161-764 8636.

The Society meets monthly (excluding August) in St Marie's Church Room, Manchester Road, Bury (near the Library). New prospective members are welcome to attend meetings before joining. Meetings are published on the society's website: www.burylhs.freeserve.co.uk.