

THE A.A.L.H.S. LOCAL HISTORY PROJECT

In September 2001, the Axbridge Archaeological and Local History Society set up a course designed to give guidance to people interested in doing their own local research who had little or no experience in the field. The project concentrated on the town of Axbridge in the mid nineteenth century.

The period was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the nineteenth century has left a wealth of documentation which is readily available. Most people will be aware of the decennial censuses, parish registers, directories, newspapers and wills. The course aimed to look at these plus lesser known records such as tithe commutation papers, tax returns, poor law documents and court papers. The majority of the documents studied would be available for other parishes, so students could take the knowledge gained on the course and transfer it to other locations. Secondly, there would be no need to learn how to read older styles of handwriting. Though some Victorian clerks had execrable handwriting, the problem of deciphering it is no worse than reading modern scripts.

The course started with nine students who met once a month. The first sessions introduced the various sources, paying attention to the reliability of the documents and showing the need to find corroboration from more than one set of documents if at all possible. This theoretical part of the course lasted until the following summer. Autumn 2002 saw the start of the practical part of the project. Five of the students decided to undertake this section. They chose studies which interested them personally and set about their own research. Meetings continued on a monthly basis but with more emphasis on discussion and mutual assistance. Subjects covered included styles of historical writing and use of databases.

By mid 2003, it was clear that at least three of the studies undertaken would be ready for publication in the Journal for 2004. These three articles differ both in subject matter and treatment, illustrating the variety of local history projects which can be tackled even within a narrow timeframe. Jane Panter has pulled together from a variety of sources the story of the difficulties faced by those trying to bring education to the poor children of the town, whilst Joyce Kirk has looked at the workhouse from the uncommon aspect of how it affected the town rather than the usual story of what happened to its inmates. Elizabeth Holmes took on the difficult mission of trying to trace who lived where in the High Street, a complex task requiring a great deal of corroborative evidence for each house. These three studies, together with that into law and order published in the last Journal, contribute to our understanding of the life of Axbridge in the mid nineteenth century. There is still a further study likely to come out of this project which was not finished in time for this publication but which it is hoped will feature in the next.

Geraldine Jones