

Janet Gyford, *Public Spirit: Dissent in Witham and Essex 1500–1700* (illustrated by Ray Brown; published by the author, Blanfred, Chalks Road, Witham, Essex CM8 2BT, England, 1999), pp. ix + 216 including maps, tables, diagrams, facsimiles. Paperback. ISBN 0-946-434-034. £10 + £3.50 p. & p.

In 1996 Janet Gyford published *Witham 1500-1700: Making a Living*. In this companion volume she investigates two inter-related themes: the religious life of the inhabitants of Witham, and how they interacted as they ran the affairs of their town. It is written primarily with local readers in mind. Introductory chapters set the local scene, describe church organization and discuss education and literacy and the use of will preambles as possible indicators of belief. Good use is made of the evidence provided by wills. Within the chronological chapters that follow description and explanation are interspersed with family and individual profiles and each chapter ends with an overview. Any method of organizing such complex material poses problems; this solution works at its best when there is a specific person or incident to focus upon. Occasionally a sentence drawing out the significance of the evidence might help the reader without compromising the approach. Gyford says that she is not an academic but she has many years' experience of research into local history. Though there are one or two notable omissions from the bibliography, she has read widely, and has clearly enjoyed and appreciated the exchange she has had with other workers in the field, including Adrian Davies, whose thesis she acknowledges and whose book *The Quakers in English Society 1655–1725* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) appeared in spring 2000.

The book is extensively referenced. Mostly these references seem clear, but in notes that list several sources a more frequent use of 'quotation from' would be helpful, and in n. 34 to p. 146 surely Thomas Richmond was referring in his will to meetings for church affairs? Meetings purely for worship were not held separately. The standard of production is good, and there appear to be remarkably few printing errors.

For those with an interest in the historical context of early Quakerism three main points emerge. First, the evidence for Quaker involvement in parish affairs that has been accumulating is supported, with the implication for accommodation on one side or the other. Second, the Court of Exchequer cases in 1664 and 1668 in which the vicar complained

against seven and thirteen parishioners for non-payment of small tithes appear to have included Quaker and non-Quaker defendants. When later dissenters complained that they too had suffered, but lacked the records to prove it, they had a point. Finally, Essex has a good survival rate of records for the early modern period, which is a good reason why its inhabitants have often been the subject of study, but its records are not perfect. Unfortunately registers of baptisms and burials do not survive for groups that were to become Protestant Dissenting (Independent) churches in Essex before the eighteenth century. The absence of registers and churchbooks for Witham no doubt contributes to make the picture of post-1660 nonconformity given here seem rather undifferentiated.

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