

NEW BOOKS

Cheshire Before The Romans

by W. J. Varley

(Cheshire Community Council (1964), x and 109 pp., 38 figures,
12 tables, 8 plates. Price: 15s. 0d.)

This is the first in a series of short books on the history of Cheshire produced under the auspices of the Cheshire Community Council, and under the general editorship of Mr. J. J. Bagley. In his foreword, the general editor lays down the purpose of the series, and it is an admirable one, desirable for this and every county. The requirement is, as he says, for easily read, yet authoritative, books for the growing number of people interested in their own regional history. The books are not for specialist consultation, but are nevertheless intended to be reliable and up-to-date. It is well known that the English counties preserve to a remarkable degree the boundaries of minor natural regions so that the pattern of prehistoric settlement, itself closely related to environment, corresponds by and large to these much later historical divisions. Cheshire cannot be claimed as an area of much significance in prehistoric Britain; its position and natural conditions offered no special attractions to men who were not well equipped with iron to clear and cultivate its heavy soils. The ridges and patches of higher and drier soil served well enough for the subsistence of small communities, and as possible routes for long distance communications, but more significant areas of settlement and cultural identity existed to the east, on the Peakland limestone, and to the west along the fringes of the Welsh mountains. These neighbouring regions have a much more positive prehistory than Cheshire, but this is not to suppose that the county should be explained by interpolation; there is enough within Cheshire in topography, field remains, and museum material to warrant a worthwhile exposition of its own characteristics.

What might Mr. Bagley's "growing body of people" look for in an introductory work? In the first place, an explanation of the natural setting, especially regarding relief and soils, and this Mr. Varley has done in his first chapter. Secondly, they would want a clear statement of what they could see in the way of prehistoric monuments in the existing countryside, and maps to show them where finds of stone axes, urns, bronze spearheads, and so forth, had been made within the county. These are the real points of contact between the seeking reader and archaeology, yet Mr. Varley gives no lists of sites or find spots, nor is it at all clear where the objects from the county that he illustrates are now to be seen. Apart from Fig. 1, which is called a relief diagram of Cheshire, there are no maps of distribution or location devoted to the county as such, only small-scale maps covering much larger areas in which the Cheshire element could not easily be distinguished except by specialists. These other maps are indeed specialist, although of a somewhat outmoded kind, and they reflect the nature of Mr. Varley's text which is wide ranging, highly intricate, specialist, and often controversial. This is no plain statement for the folk of Cheshire of the essential course of British prehistory in the north-west, nor of Cheshire in particular. How much more useful, and

interesting, it would have been to have cut out these maps, the complicated chronological charts, and the drawings of non-Cheshire pottery, and to have shown a series of detailed soil and archaeological maps for select areas within the county. There is lots to say on all this, and on comment on lines of country and rivers. Had it been said, this is the kind of treatment that would have practical meaning for the present day inhabitant. It would be excessive to go over all the points, but the unfinished and unchecked condition of many of the chapter notes must also be regretted. Table 8, "Sources of Stone Axes", refers not to Cheshire but to the Peak District. The book has been well produced, and the format is generally attractive.

T. G. E. POWELL.

The Copper King: A biography of Thomas Williams of Llanidan
by J. R. Harris

(Liverpool University Press (1964), xviii and 194 pp. Price 35s. 0d.)

The South Lancashire and North Cheshire plain has often been regarded as one of the classic, if not the classic, stage of the British Industrial Revolution. This was due only in part to the natural resources of the region itself and the skills of its own local people. One of the most significant contributions to the economic history of the area was that furnished by the introduction and expansion of a number of industrial processes based on copper. The ore of this metal did not exist in the immediate vicinity, but coal for smelting and power did, and furthermore, old "pre-industrial" domestic metal-working crafts at Macclesfield, Manchester, St. Helens, Warrington, and elsewhere provided a reservoir of technical skills that could be utilised and developed. To these considerations should be added the rapid growth of the Lower Merseyside area in industrial commerce in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The key pioneer figure in the copper trade and industry of this region was Thomas Williams, to whose career less than justice has hitherto been done by economic historians. Dr. J. R. Harris, however, has now assembled the material that should ensure the inclusion of this Anglesey attorney in a gallery of the great figures of the British Industrial Revolution. Williams is not an easy character to assess. Possibly his legal training inculcated in him a wariness against committing himself often to paper. It is certain that the records of his life and activities are comparatively few in contrast to the wealth of material that survives about his sometimes associate, sometimes bitter rival, Matthew Boulton, to whom he has close affinities as a commercial business-man. He had a greater singleness of purpose than Boulton who, directly through his partnership with Watt, became interested in large-scale copper-mining, and yet, as a manufacturing consumer of that metal, rarely seemed able to obtain adequate supplies of it at what he deemed a reasonable cost. Williams organised what could justly be called the first modern cartel in the copper industry, which, based originally on the Parys Mountain ore-deposits in Anglesey, combined with mining smelting works in Lancashire and South Wales, copper and brass manufactures in Flintshire and the Thames Valley, chemical works in Liverpool, offices and warehouses in London, Liverpool, and Birmingham, and banking houses in Caernarvonshire and Chester.

Williams had the talent to make the utmost use of the managerial control he acquired over the Parys Mines just as they attained their optimum

economic productivity, which occurred when older Cornish mines, albeit still productive, could only maintain or expand their output by incurring vastly greater working costs. This episode in British mining history has been recounted before by economic historians, but Dr. Harris clarifies the role Williams played in the organisation of the Cornish Metal Company and the true nature of the quasi-monopolistic control which he was supposed to have attained in the British copper industry. In his later years, with Anglesey mines declining, his "kingdom" waned, but he had the business acumen to prune off unproductive branches of his business concern, died in 1802 a wealthy man, and some of his descendants were to marry into the higher aristocratic families of Britain. He had lived in difficult but challenging times, and although he must be regarded primarily as a pioneer business-man and industrialist, it should be emphasized that even before he had any direct interest in the Parys mines, he had risen from comparatively obscure origins to becoming the leaseholder of the mansion of Llanidan and had virtually become a member of the landed gentry class.

The industrial empire which he created, however, was more enduring in the Merseyside region than it was in Anglesey. Copper ore once mined is gone for ever, and the best of the Parys ores had been shipped away in Williams' own lifetime. Works established in the St. Helens district could, however, subsist on copper ores coming from Cornwall, Cuba or Chile just as well as they could on those from Anglesey. The "by-product" vitriol might be regarded as the germ of the great chemicals industry of the Lower Mersey. The technique of copper-sheathing naval and mercantile vessels contributed in some degree to the concentration of shipbuilding on the estuary of the river. Enhanced production of copper accelerated developments in engineering which were to be reflected in the increased rate of technological progress during Thomas Williams' last years and those immediately following his death.

This is not a biography in the usual sense of that word, but it is a judicious study of the career and times of a pioneer business magnate in a crucial area and at a crucial time of the Industrial Revolution. Since Williams' interests covered such a wide area geographically, this work is as interesting to local historians concerned with the history of Lancashire and Cheshire as it is to students of the history of Anglesey. A man, however, is more than the aggregate of his financial and business transactions, and besides being a successful business man Thomas Williams' earlier success in the legal profession, measured by the attainment of worldly affluence and status, suggests that he was something of an "uncommon attorney". That he contributed much to Britain's commercial and industrial development, Dr. Harris has proved conclusively in this very readable and richly documented study.

JOHN ROWE.

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