Readers of the Supplementary Series published by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments of Britain have come to expect a high standard of scholarship and presentation from contributors. In the tenth volume of the series, Sarah Pearson’s *Rural Houses of the Lancashire Pennines, 1560-1760*, they will not be disappointed on either count.

The area chosen for investigation is the extreme north-east corner of Lancashire, around Burnley and Colne. Here, between the mid-sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, prosperous gentry and yeomen erected many substantial stone houses, the survival rate of which has been high. By studying these houses in conjunction with evidence taken from a range of documentary sources, Miss Pearson sets out to ‘contribute to the social and economic history of the area in the pre-industrial period’. She is particularly concerned to trace changes in the design and function of the houses and in the social status and aspirations of those who built them. She examines, too, the sources from which funds to construct the houses were derived. The approach is chronological and, at each stage, comparisons are drawn with contemporary houses built elsewhere in Lancashire and in neighbouring parts of Yorkshire. Comparisons are also made within the district studied, not least to show changes in the geographical distribution of housebuilding activity.

Despite serious gaps in both documentary and physical evidence, including a paucity of late-seventeenth century gentry dwellings in the Burnley and Colne area, some significant developments are charted. During the seventeenth century, for example, it seems that a much clearer distinction emerged, or can be identified, between the design and appearance of gentry and yeoman houses. The gentry, it is suggested, regarded their houses as ‘visual expressions of status’, whilst yeomen took a more functional view, preferring dwellings that were designed to meet everyday working needs. One manifestation of this was that whereas yeomen built dwellings two stories high, gentry houses were three-storied, full use being made of the additional height to introduce such stylish architectural features as ogee-headed windows. The gentry also sought greater privacy and comfort. As
a result, warmer and more secluded rooms were provided for eating and sitting; there was a proliferation of bedrooms; and the hall, the focal point of the house in the sixteenth century, became increasingly reserved for public and formal occasions. Further, a more compact house plan was adopted, with service rooms, including kitchens, being located beneath the living and sleeping quarters. The houses of yeomen, by contrast, still contained a hall or main room known as a ‘housebody’, where cooking and other day-to-day activities took place. Evidently, too, the yeomen continued to favour traditional, space-consuming firehoods, whilst the gentry installed stone-stack fireplaces which took up comparatively little space. By the second half of the seventeenth century, three types of yeomen’s house could be distinguished according to size, plan-form and architectural features. At one end of the scale were houses given ‘lavish external treatment’, which contained a ‘proliferation of rooms in rambling plans’. At the other were houses smaller than any which survive from an earlier period, showing ‘the ability of a new group of people to build durably for the first time’. In between were houses which had facades two bays long without projections, but with double-depth plans under a single roof. From these developed the symmetrical, centralised houses which became standard in the eighteenth century.

Other sections of the book analyse the wealth of gentry and yeoman families and consider the sources from which they accumulated capital for building purposes. As far as the families Miss Pearson has studied are concerned, it seems that, in the late sixteenth century, there may have been a crucial connection between the income derived from rent and the ability to build substantial houses. By 1700 however, yeomen who built houses were less dependent on income obtained from land than were their forebears. By then, as in neighbouring Rossendale, they owned smaller estates, in part the result of partible inheritance and the pressure of growing population. Thus, as inventory evidence reveals, a reduced proportion of their assets was invested in farming, whilst credit, along with textile implements and stock, assumed greater significance. How far either of these items generated income that could be used directly in house building is, however, uncertain. Nevertheless, the general economic stimulus to the local economy arising from the growing textile industry may well have brought significant indirect benefits to the house builders. This may have been true, also, in the late sixteenth century, since proceeds from textile production may have helped tenants to pay the high rents then demanded by the larger landholders who built houses.

Another major section of the book comprises a gazetteer, in which ninety-eight of the houses are briefly described and details of the occupiers noted. In most cases, ground-floor plans are included and, less frequently, first-floor plans and sections are given. The gazetteer
reviews 149
provides a useful guide to those wishing to visit and appreciate the houses more fully; it also forms a valuable historical record.

One drawback some readers might find with the book is that no glossary is included to explain the numerous technical terms used in describing the features and plan-forms of the houses. To the knowledgeable student of vernacular architecture, this limitation may bring few difficulties; to the general reader, however, it may prove irksome. It would be a pity if, on this count, the popular appeal of the book was curtailed, the more so since the non-specialist reader could easily have been helped by references to such explanatory texts as R. Watson and M. McClintock’s Traditional Houses of the Fylde, a work which also provides instructive comparisons with the north-east Lancashire examples.

Another concern is how far the subject matter should have been fitted into the context of historiographical debate, most obviously, perhaps Professor Hoskins’ notion of the Great Rebuilding. Certainly, there is enough new evidence contained in the book to allow comment on how well the rebuilding dates in the Burnley/Colne tied in with those suggested by Hoskins for the country as a whole and to assess how far Hoskins’ explanations for the Great Rebuilding are applicable at local level. Equally, since the study aims to shed lights on the social and economic history of the area, reference to the current debate amongst economic historians on the concept of proto-industrialisation, especially the link between upland pastoral farming and the growth of textile production, might have proved helpful. At any rate, those interested in either of these debates will find much of interest and relevance in Miss Pearson’s study.

Yet these considerations do not detract unduly from the value of the publication. Many stimulating ideas are raised and arguments are expressed in a considered and balanced manner. Additionally, the quality of presentation achieved by the publishers is impressive. The maps and diagrams are clearly drawn and the text is amply and appropriately illustrated. Both archive and modern photographs are used, all of which are reproduced to a high standard. Above all, perhaps, the author demonstrates the potential that exists for combining the results of field and documentary investigation. As she suggests, ‘a study of houses in conjunction with documents reveals far more than either does in isolation’.

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The shift from domestic and handpowered manufacture of textiles to factories powered by water and, later, steam, was the culmination of a process that began to change the face of north-west England early in the sixteenth century. Before the middle of the eighteenth century the change was gradual but from then on every aspect of life was subject to radical change as new economic, political, social and religious forces jostled with the old. In view of its pre-eminence in the nineteenth century it is understandable that cotton has usually held the centre of the stage in historical accounts of this period but Gail Malmgreen has redressed the balance by exploring silk rather than cotton. She has also taken us south from the linen-cotton-woollen townships of south-east Lancashire with their dispersed farms and nooks to the small but well established borough and market town of Macclesfield in Cheshire which was second only to Stockport in the north-west in the application of water power to the throwing of silk. The first Macclesfield mill was built in the mid 1740s and it was followed not only by further throwing and spinning enterprises but by the development of silk weaving, first on handlooms and later in the powered factories. As Stockport fell away from silk later in the century, Macclesfield asserted itself as the national centre of silk production and entered a period of rapid growth and industrial expansion. In this process it shared and indeed anticipated many of the problems that were encountered in the cotton towns but there were special factors in Macclesfield that make its story particularly interesting and Gail Malmgreen has very fully explored and skilfully interpreted those factors and the consequences they had for the town and people at Macclesfield.

There were three major influences in Macclesfield’s development that distinguish it from other textile towns. First there was its compact and well established physical and social structure before the factories came. Second, there was the basic fact that its major industry, silk, could only be defended from overwhelming foreign competition by government protection and third, the nature of the product meant that demand for the skill and adaptability of the handloom weaver remained high throughout the period examined and indeed right through the nineteenth century. The other experiences of Industrialisation were those common to all the textile areas. Population growth with heavy immigration both from England and Ireland brought strains on housing and sanitary conditions and sharpened religious differences; the labour of women and children was vital no less to the domestic than the factory system but men restricted the opportunities open to their wives and daughters; boom and slump brought prosperity and misery in irregular and
unpredictable succession and paternalism gave way, though not always and not everywhere, to more impersonal and harsher disciplines. The interplay between these general and specific factors produced a confused situation in which small masters, factory owners, domestic weavers and factory workers united and divided on trade issues in response not to general and over-riding class perceptions but to specific crises. Self-interest and the loyalty of particular sub-groups, whether skilled weavers in silk or stuff hat makers, militated against a united stance against employers as a class while the property owning groups in the town were themselves divided between traditional ideas of fair play and the colder economic calculations of the more thrusting masters. Customary relationships had to change and evolve but in the author’s own words, ‘It would be too much to say that a working class, or any other class, was made in Macclesfield between 1750 and the early 1830s . . .’. A small group of masters grew increasingly wealthy and powerful but their dominance still retained some of the paternal character of an earlier time.

If masters grew wealthy what of the working people? Like so many other places, Macclesfield presents a paradox. Gail Malmgreen sees a bleak statistical picture and has an ‘inescapable central impression that grinding poverty was the circumstance of life for much of the working population . . .’, yet she also perceives ‘a slow improvement over the period bringing a new level of comfort and security to many’; a new consumer economy, with at least some benefits and novelties for all and, she suggests, many of the town’s poorer inhabitants enjoying longer life spans. And, of course, the traditional propensity of all classes in England to drink excessively when they could afford it still held sway and, as in many other places, weavers were often unwilling to work while they had money in their pockets to pay for drink. Clearly, inflation, slumps and dearths, especially those associated with the wars, periodically reduced living standards for many and for the very poorest overcrowding and physical squalor were oppressive and dangerous but the impression gained from this book points to a steady improvement both in physical surroundings and domestic comfort for most working people in Macclesfield.

In social and political affairs, as in economic, the protectionist background to Macclesfield life produced not an all-embracing class struggle but broad coalition against free trade, against the New Poor Law and in favour of an adjustment to the new social and economic arrangements of industrial society that only occasionally gave way to riot. Once again the old gradually gave way to the new as exhibited in the shift of power in the Corporation, in the Borough Recordership, in the persistence of the fairs, Wakes and other customary entertainments alongside which the new middle class were drawing away into their own pursuits. The churches and chapels
meanwhile were developing that socially vertical role which embraced religion and education and provided a series of social networks which offered support to members in a wide variety of ways.

Gail Malmgreen has thoroughly researched all the sources for the period and takes us through the evidence for the growth of the town, its social, political and religious attitudes, the living standards of its people and, above all, the complex relationships between the old and new means of production and what they meant for working people. Her analysis is deep and stimulating, full of information and enlivened and enriched by apposite quotations. In her second paragraph she states, ‘Macclesfield is just the sort of town social historians of industrialisation have tended to overlook’. This book will put Macclesfield on the social historian’s map and, by example, will, I trust, stimulate the study of other English towns which ‘can be located in the more or less uncharted territory that lies between the purview of urban history proper and the study of rural life’.

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Sylvia Harrop, Old Birkdale and Ainsdale, The Birkdale and Ainsdale Historical Research Society, 1985, xvi + 168pp. £7.95.

Born of the sea-bathing boom in Regency days, Southport developed rapidly in the railway age as a commuter area and sea-side resort. Its main streets and buildings still reflect Victorian prosperity and propriety. Yet parts of modern Southport are much older than the town. North Meols, now the old village of Churchtown, was the centre of a medieval parish whose boundaries marched with those of Formby (a detached part of Walton parish), Halsall, Ormskirk and distant Croston. Within and just beyond this isolated poor parish, such hamlets as Marshside, Blowick, Birkdale and Ainsdale existed almost in secret. The people of these settlements took little or no part in the activities of the rest of medieval, Tudor, Stuart and Georgian Lancashire. Martin Mere and neighbouring extensive mosses sealed their isolation. Consequently, local historians have shied at the difficult task of writing the history of these ‘sandgrounders’ before their traditional way of life disappeared in the nineteenth century.

Some twelve years ago, however, Mrs Sylvia Harrop set out to explore this unknown territory of pre-Victorian Birkdale and Ainsdale. She took with her ten members of her Birkdale University Extension Class whom she had fired with enthusiasm for the task and had trained to use documents, interpret topographical features and follow clues wherever they might lead. Each year the pile of reliable information grew higher until in 1984, Mrs Harrop felt it was time to edit her team’s findings and write a clear account of life in Birkdale and Ainsdale from the end of the first Elizabethan age
to the middle of the nineteenth century. At last, we have in this book a well-authenticated description of life in these two villages, which, despite their mention in Domesday Book, have remained unexplored for so long.

Sylvia Harrop begins her story with Robert Blundell’s purchase of the ‘manors and lordships’ of Birkdale and Ainsdale from the bankrupt Sir Cuthbert Halsall of Halsall. Blundell, an austere lawyer, lived at Ince Blundell Hall but worked mostly in London. Step by step he negotiated his bargain purchase in the early 1630s, and Birkdale and Ainsdale remained part of the Blundell (later, Weld-Blundell) estates until the death of the last of the line in 1957.

Ownership, however, was of little concern to Mrs. Harrop and her fellow explorers. They wanted to discover how the ordinary villagers had made their living and ordered their lives during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They soon found three distinct ‘zones’ — the shore area where families supplemented a meagre living from fishing and fowling by aiding smugglers and exploiting wrecks; the extensive ‘hawes’ or sandhills, the territory of the rabbit farmers and subject to the inspection of the ‘hawslookers’ and ‘starr (grass) setters’ appointed by the manor courts; and the ‘heys’ or cultivable land where householders grew barley, oats and potatoes in their small, enclosed fields and pastured their cattle, sheep and horses on patches of common land and, in dry weather, on the edges of the mosses. Not many families lived in any of these ‘zones’. Even as late as the 1821 census, Birkdale, the bigger of the two townships, had only 414 inhabitants. No family enjoyed more than a basic standard of living, yet none were destitute. Almost everyone lived in dark, low-built cottages of two or three bays, which, as surviving inventories confirm, were sparsely furnished. Before 1800 neither village had more than a handful of tradesmen beyond the cottage spinners and weavers who worked chiefly with flax and hemp. All families were largely or entirely self-sufficient. But as the last chapter in the book clearly demonstrates, changes came rapidly, especially to Birkdale, once ‘in-comelings’ began moving into South Hawes (soon to be renamed Southport) either to enjoy a sea-bathing holiday or to build their new home.

*Old Birkdale and Ainsdale* is the second book which is the outcome of a prominent member of our Society guiding a group of interested men and women in the art of historical research. In 1984, Paul Booth edited *Burlon-in-Wirral*, the work of his University Extension Class during the previous decade. Sylvia Harrop’s book appeared in the bookshops at the end of 1985. Well-illustrated and attractively produced, both are excellent examples of what adult classes can achieve. When and where will the third such book appear?

Southport

*J. J. Bagley*
Since 1975 the Historic Stockport Research Group, led by their tutors, Dr Phillips and Dr Smith, have been transcribing and analysing all the probate records for Stockport township between 1578 and 1619 that are held at the Cheshire County Record Office. The task has been a formidable one, demanding skill in palaeography, patience in deciphering words that are almost illegible or archaic and strangely spelt and also considerable expertise in the social and economic history of the Tudor and Stuart era. Anyone who has partaken in such a daunting task will applaud the successful completion of the enterprise. The group is now hard at work on the probate records up to 1650.

No other set of records can illuminate in such a brilliant fashion the everyday lives and surroundings of people living in this era. The uses and limitations of wills and inventories are now well-known. During the past two or three decades they have been used in bulk to transform our understanding of agricultural practices, houses and their furniture, industries and crafts and the workings of the credit system. They remain endlessly fascinating, however, and are indispensable to the study of local communities in the early-modern world.

Stockport was a seigneurial borough and market town of modest size (surely the market pre-dates the 1260 grant and goes back at least to the foundation of the borough in 1206 x 39?), which catered for a wide hinterland. The central township, with which this volume is concerned, was one of the fourteen townships which comprised the ancient parish of Stockport. In all, 112 probate documents relating to 64 people have been transcribed. The editorial conventions are stated clearly and both a surname and a place index accompanies the text.

The brief introduction offers little guide to the content of the wills and inventories. Presumably, the research group eventually hopes to produce a full social and economic history, but in the meantime one is left to delve for oneself. It is puzzling to find that there is no glossary, which is usually regarded as essential in a work of this nature; how many readers will understand, for instance, three consecutive items in Thomas Diconson’s inventory, namely ‘A Kyver, one lyttle esshen, one breweing Kayre’? For someone like the reviewer, who is unfortunate enough to live on the other side of the Pennines, these possessions remain mysterious, despite a long familiarity with probate records.

One is struck by the long list of debts that are recorded in many of the inventories. It would be interesting to compare Stockport with
its surrounding rural townships and to see whether this characteristic was the result of the trading that went on in the market place and adjacent shops. Goods were already obtained from far away; pottery from the south Derbyshire village of Ticknall was included amongst the possessions of Robert Fallowes (1610), for example. James Tellier (1606) appears to have been selling some of his swords, rapiers and daggers in Manchester. But the rural nature of this small country town is brought home when we see that John Smyth (1596) was using gorse to fuel his bakery and that Jane Robinson (1618) had ‘Compost and dunge aboute the house’. Just how are we to interpret the word ‘about’? Probate inventories are full of such minor but intriguing puzzles.

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