

Living in the Gap – a review

After five years of painstaking research, Whilton villager Anthea Hiscock has just published a wonderful history of our small rural parish - a cracking story that spans a thousand years.

In 280 well-illustrated pages, *Living in the Gap: the story of Whilton and its thousand acres, 1,000-2,000 AD.*, reveals how the lives of local folk have been influenced by their geography and by events in the wider world during the period between the beginning and end of the second millennium.

The work has been a real labour of love for Anthea, for she regards it partly as "a celebration" of the 25 years she has lived in the village. As well as bringing up three daughters, she has been a playgroup supervisor in Whilton, president of the village W.I. and parish council clerk. In recent years she has shared her enthusiasm for delving into the past with members of her local history group.

Her scholarly credentials for the mammoth task of producing the book include a history degree from London University and a diploma in archive administration, followed by work with the London borough of Barnet and Bedfordshire Record Office. The discipline of research is enhanced by her attractive, straightforward style. Each of the 19 chapters can stand alone as a jolly good read.

She draws on a long list of sources to reveal changes and challenges in the parish in its passage from years of woad-growing and ox-drawn ploughs to heady times of wars, religious ruptures, lordly litigations and the coming of the railway, the canal and the M1. Her detective work has unravelled a complex web linking Whilton with many old families, estates and crafts in nearby parishes and adjoining counties.

Her main focus, however, is always on local villagers and their dramas, tragedies and triumphs. Numerous ancient wills are analysed, disclosing changing circumstances over many generations. Later chapters are packed with fascinating accounts of intimate oral and written memories of present inhabitants and others not long gone.

Present day references often based on personal interviews and documents provided by well known residents, make a gripping climax to a story that for me fully lives up to that wise comment by author and historian Thomas J. Noel: "History happens to all of us all the time. Local history brings history home; it touches your life, the life of your family, your neighbourhood, your community." This book will undoubtedly be cherished on many local shelves, and welcomed throughout the county and beyond as a model of its kind.

Anthea concludes with comments on the present and future. "The inhabitants of Whilton no longer expect to be sustained by the fields around them, nor are their livelihoods dependent on the thousand acres which are home to them. The people of Whilton are better educated, have higher expectations and wider experience than their forebears, but they may not have more ingenuity or awareness of their environment."

Whilton's location as part of the famous Watford Gap, she notes, has brought involvement in events including Simon de Montfort's rebellion, Charles 1's attempt to feed the Oxford garrison, and the arrival of the M1 motorway. Its geography is yet again presenting new challenges from planned nearby developments which will involve a larger population and greater levels of traffic and other activity.

Tom Price (November 2010)