Appreciation

Frank Henthorn

Frank Henthorn was born on 16 April 1905, at Oldham. His father was a wholesale dealer with the Co-operative movement, the family having various homes subsequently in the Midlands, settling in Berkshire. Frank Henthorn was educated mainly at Windsor County Boys' School, and went on to read History, becoming an undergraduate of King's College, London. He graduated in 1927, in which year he began his career as a schoolmaster at Boston Grammar School. He moved in 1928 to the (then) London Orphan School, Watford, and in 1930 back north to Brigg Grammar School. Here he stayed, retiring from the post of Senior Master in 1969, remaining in the home he had had since the 1930s. He married Hazel Mary Parkinson in 1931, and they raised five children; for nearly the last ten years of his life, his wife was seriously ill, and he looked after her completely. She died in 1994. He survived her briefly, until 16 March 1995, one month short of his ninetieth birthday.

Frank Henthorn's contribution to schoolmastering was recognized on his retirement in The Briggenian, the magazine of the former Brigg Grammar School, coinciding with the school's tercentenary celebrations, to which he contributed very largely.

An account of his contribution to the life of the town which he made his home has yet to be compiled, and, since he outlived so many of his contemporaries, it may never be adequately written. The occasional tributes paid to him over the years in the local press are adulatory, but somewhat lacking in substance. It is my purpose here to attempt an appreciation of his historical work which, whilst closely related to his life in Brigg, can be understood apart from his involvement in the town's activities.

His reputation as an historian rests primarily on The History of Brigg Grammar School (1959), covering the years 1669 to 1919. Important as Letters and Papers Concerning the Establishment of the Trent, Anholme and Grimsby Railway, 1860-1862 (1975) and A History of 19th Century Brigg (1987) are, it was this intensely scholarly study of an institution's development within the context of its local community which established him as a county historian. It also gained him his doctorate from his old university in 1961. He had no particular training in local studies, belonging to a generation for whom such a thing would have verged on anathema. The headmaster at Brigg from 1927 to 1944, J. T. Daughton, had published an account of the school in The Lincolnshire Magazine in 1933, and his influence or authorship explains occasional pieces of local history in The Briggenian of the period, but Dr Henthorn said later that his own work's genesis lay in remarks made at the school speech day in November 1945, by E. A. Barber, Rector of Exeter College, Oxford – there was no history of the school, so he would offer a prize for the best essay by a pupil on the subject.

In 1947 a long essay by C. P. Frankish was printed in the school magazine; it concentrated upon the school in the nineteenth Century. To Henthorn had fallen the organization of the scheme and, thus involved, he could not let it go. Having sought out material in the town – especially in the offices of A. A. Stubbs, solicitor – the process of collection became more systematic and wide-ranging. Faced with lack of a school archive, he learned to look elsewhere, to depend on the combination of the oblique search and serendipity which eventually comes to the dedicated local historian.

Dr Henthorn's working papers largely survive, but I have not from them been able to identify the point at which he decided to write a history of the school for publication. He did so at a time when such a thing was difficult, and was encouraged by John Lawson (working on his history of Hull Grammar School (1963)) and Rex Russell (engaged on his series on schools and education in Lindsey [1965-67]). Certainly there was no similar history for any Lindsey grammar school at the time – nor, it has to be said, has anything comparable appeared since. When he undertook the private publication, with its multifarious attendant difficulties, he was changing the face of the history of education in the county.

Yet this is not all the book's appeal or importance. He readily admitted that, school records being few, he had expanded his work to examine a wide context – the Nethorpe family and its estates, the school's trustees, the town itself – so that, until the History of 19th Century Brigg appeared, appeal was made to The History of Brigg Grammar School for local information much more widely than if it had been simply a history of the school as an institution; and this was so beyond county level – Judy Egerton's catalogue of the Stubbs exhibition (Tate Gallery, 1984) cites it as the main source for information on the Nethorpes.

Ten years after the appearance of The History of Brigg Grammar School, in connection with the tercentenary celebrations, Dr Henthorn's contribution appeared, Brigg Grammar School 1919-1969. Nominally he was the editor; in fact he undertook to get contributions from staff and pupils, and wrote the extensive narrative introduction which makes the book an essential adjunct to the earlier history, without swamping the personal reminiscences which make it in part a primary source in its own right. On entering retirement his energies could be fully directed into wider fields – in the long-term working towards a proper History of the town, and more immediately to the Lincoln Record Society volume, Letters and Papers Concerning the Establishment of the Trent, Anholme
and Grimsby Railway, 1860-1862. As early as 1973 the Record Society announced that this had gone to the printers; appearing in 1975, it was recognised as an important new departure for such societies in general, besides being a major contribution to the history of the county. Its scholarship is outstanding, not merely for the collection of documents, but for the extensive introduction. From it there was to come his chapter on 'The Coming of the Railways' for the new history of Scunthorpe, An Industrial Island (1981). All the time however his underlying concern had been collection of material for the Brigg history; the task which had arisen incidentally from his first work on the Grammar School called out to be completed. He

hadn't intended to undertake any such work but... found the various documents provided by A. A. Stubbs so interesting that [he] started what was almost a job for a detective.

So he found himself 'drawn still further, trying to build up a fuller story of the town!'. Materials did not allow any proper narrative before 1800, he believed, there being little to reveal the lives of individuals on a sufficient scale.

He had lectured on local history for the W.E.A. and University of Hull, given talks to groups in Brigg and elsewhere, and published pieces on the town since the 1950s; he completed the History of the Ancholme Rowing Club 1868-1976, for publication in 1980, and seems then to have been able to concentrate upon his single, summative volume. Despite his wife's increasing illness, he saw A History of 19th Century Brigg through publication himself, in an edition of only four hundred. This was not enough, and a reprint was made. Whatever his reservations about any history of Brigg before the nineteenth century, chapter one provides a remarkably full account of the town's eighteenth century growth, notably through the eccentricities of the rent-loving Cary Elwes.

There is no need to repeat here what reviewers said of the work; enough that informed commentators, both in print and in private correspondence with Dr Henthorn, compared it unhesitatingly to Hill's study of Lincoln. Given the immense efforts Henthorn had to make in locating sources - not least that, unaided, he read through the local press of the nineteenth century from end to end - that the town itself offered very few materials within its own bounds, and add to this the historiographical difficulties caused by Brigg not even having had a legal or administrative identity as a town until late in the nineteenth century - the very act of comparison speaks for itself.

Frank Henthorn came of a generation of schoolmasters which has gone; when he taught, there was no stigma in loving your subject first, in being a practising scholar, rather than a seeker after dogma, or a 'manager'. His reputation, as far as most readers of this piece may be concerned, finally is that of the exemplary local historian - but he was not just that. Always well-read - in current affairs as much as historical works - and variously active, in retirement he read more and did more, especially with the church. His modesty and unassuming good manners were a byword amongst those who knew him, as were his industry and his humane refusal to make adverse judgements, of people, or their works. Whereas the simple expression 'Henthorn's Brigg' will stand besides 'Pishey Thompson's Boston', 'Hill's Lincoln', 'Gillett's Grimsby' and many others - acquiring a special resonance in national history of which he himself would have been modestly proud - the man himself was much more.

Nick Lyons

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I could not have written this appreciation, or secured Dr Henthorn's papers, without the extensive help of Giles Henthorn of Entfield, Middlesex.

NOTES

1. Dr Henthorn's working papers and notes have been deposited at the South Humberside Area Archive Office.


A Bibliography of Frank Henthorn's Principal Publications


The History of Brigg Grammar School (Brigg, 1958).


A History of 19th Century Brigg (Stanford and Brigg, 1987).

This does not take into account contributions to the local press, reviews, magazines and local guides, which were sometimes anonymous; nor have I attempted to identify unnamed pieces in The Briggenian.

Addendum

The following article should be added to the list of the late H. E. Hallam's writings published in Lincolnshire History and Archaeology, 29 (1994), pp.5-6.


[C.I.S.]