

## Two Dissertations

### *Terry Sheppard*

A typical understanding of dissertation is as the final, often heavyweight, piece of work that comes at the end of a substantial academic course. In this context the substantial academic course was the Advanced Certificate in Local History offered in the 1990s at the University of Nottingham. Part-time in format, requiring attendance at the University on Tuesday mornings over a three year period, and including extra sorties to sites and places each term. The course followed a similar syllabus to the MA offered by the Department of English Local History at Leicester University, but differed in the student cohort to which it appealed.

The Nottingham course was designed to appeal to that generation who had been enjoying the modern pastime of family history research, picking up along the way a taste for what such research could uncover. It was a natural progression to want to understand the historical setting against which families emerged, and the Nottingham course was an excellent format to hook onto people with those interests.

Along the way, students on the Nottingham course picked up a thorough training in the “trade” of local historian. They became proficient in reading and recording landscape and its development over time, well skilled in investigating and interpreting sources of historical material, and competent in following up enquiries into topics of interest.

Attendance on the Nottingham course by two particular people, though at different times, led to a meeting up and a continuing joint involvement in historical projects. One of those was Terry Sheppard, who in the 1990s was the Bursar at St John’s Theological College in Bramcote, Nottingham. From his home in the village of Rothley, just beyond the southern edge of Charnwood Forest, Terry motored up each day to Bramcote, passing over the Beacon Hill crossroads in the Forest.

One of the features of life in such a Theological College was the particular benefit awarded to the Lecturers, the academic faculty, of a five-month long study break, a sabbatical, every five years. It was felt that they needed such a break to review their life and work, and hopefully inject some new zip into their teaching. Logistically such breaks were not too difficult to organize when the long summer vacation could count as part of the break.

But what about that other senior member of the College team, the Bursar. No such provision for him, just carry on with the grind of monthly accounting, property repairs and organizing residential hospitality. It was probably felt that Bursars only stuck the job for five years anyway, and moved to another job. But not this Bursar, Terry Sheppard, who was of that generation that had caught the family history research bug. A brochure for the new Advanced Certificate in Local History at the nearby University of Nottingham came his way. Terry found a method of awarding himself a sort of sabbatical by absenting himself to the University on Tuesday

mornings. He did not steal much time from his Bursar duties, arriving at College by 6.30am each Tuesday morning before slipping away to the course.

The course had all the potential of being an absorbing pastime over the next three years. The first assignment required the students to study a parish of their choice and come up with a substantial report of its physical layout, field features and boundary. Terry chose his own parish of Rothley, and had a merry time the first autumn out in the landscape with his camera, clipboard and maps. At his College Terry has access to a comb-binding machine, and submitted his report on wads of A3 paper bound in landscape layout.

That particular assignment exercise was the means of Terry coming to know the other person forming part of this story. Two or three years after Terry began the course he was contacted by Charley resident Maureen Havers. She had joined the Nottingham Course and was facing up to tackling that first landscape assignment. Her Lecturer suggested she made contact with Terry to talk through the opportunities and possibilities of the exercise. A new long-term friendship was launched as a result of that meeting.

At the other end of the course the matter of the dissertations loomed. Terry had long been interested in Charnwood Forest. When the Nottingham course required investigations of the filed source material on the chosen parish of Rothley, there were interesting links with the parliamentary Enclosure of Charnwood Forest and Rothley Plain in 1808. There was also that happy event each year when the Charley locals put on the Oaks Country Fair in the field next to the church of St James the Greater, perched on its lonely rock outcrop.

For his dissertation, Terry decided to investigate that Church, perched on its lonely rock outcrop. Relatively modern as churches go, opened in 1815, but so unlike most churches, not set cosily surrounded by a village settlement. How did it come about, was the question. It turned out that it was a by-product of that 1808 Enclosure process. It meant an exhaustive study of the Enclosure papers at the Record Office, some more at the National Archives, and many hours at the Diocesan papers at Lincoln. The Oaks Church project was driven mainly by Thomas Babington, Rothley's manorial lord, who persuaded the Bishop of Lincoln to have a clause inserted into the Enclosure Act to award land to accrue income for the establishment of churches. Babington thought that the burgeoning new post-Enclosure inhabitants would suffer 'spiritual destitution' without such provision.



St James the Greater Church

The post-Enclosure forest was never settled in a populous enough way to warrant such attention, but in the end three churches resulted; The Oaks Church, opened on Waterloo Day in 1815, St Peter's Copt Oak and St Paul's Woodhouse Eaves, both opened on adjacent days in 1837. Terry's dissertation was well received, and eventually became a published book, *Church Planting in Charnwood Forest*.

Maureen Havers very much enjoyed her participation in the Nottingham course and uncovered lots of clues to the history of her place up on the Charnwood hills and the Forest. It seemed a good thing to do to bring together a group of Charley locals into a Charley Heritage Group which came about in 1998. Sitting at the heart of their patch was Mount St Bernard's Abbey, full of historical potential, but which had already been documented by other historians. But hiding away in the Abbey woodlands was the ruins of an earlier version of the Abbey. In the course of Maureen's new-found inquisitiveness it was discovered that the old building had sheltered an whole other side of activity by the monastic community. Between 1856 and 1881 it was run as a Reformatory, taking in recalcitrant young men from mainly the streets of Liverpool to give them not only a dose of fresh country air and toil, but also a new and healthy mindset. What could better fill the dissertation topic slot for Maureen's course than the story of the Abbey's Reformatory? It too became a published book, *The Reformatory at Mount Bernard Abbey 1856-1881*.

Happily for Terry, this contact with Maureen led to his invitation to become a member of the Charley Heritage Group and so begin to enjoy the adventure of the discovery of further historical joys in Charley and the Forest.