

WILLIAM OWEN HASSALL, a long-time member of staff of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and librarian to successive Earls of Leicester, was an antiquary and a manuscript scholar full of knowledge and enthusiasm and rich in eccentricities. Those of us who sat at the feet of this great authority on illuminated manuscripts and English local archives in his later years never tired of hearing about his earlier life — stories which doubtless improved with each telling. He was never the most coordinated of people nor the most tidily dressed: the reminiscences of his military career during the Second World War were the best since they seemed the most incredible. His father had been a soldier and it was always Bill Hassall's proud boast that he had been baptised in a silver rose-bowl in the military prison at York Castle. His father was its governor.

His own war service was extraordinary in its own right. It began in the Royal Artillery, where he was 1614379 Gunner Hassall ("What a number," remarked one of his colleagues at the Bodleian Library, "much worse than the Summary Catalogue"). He was put under anti-aircraft training, a task for which he was peculiarly unfitted. "I shall never be a good gunner," he wrote to Bodley's Librarian, "as I can never see properly a cricket ball quickly and consequently could never aim properly at a moving target. Though my room-mates laugh because I wash so often I find it terribly hard to look smart."

In less than a year he was released from military service to take up duty at the Ministry of Economic Warfare where, as its topographical expert, he equipped the cloak-and-dagger people with essential information based on an unrivalled collection of directories, railway timetables and the like which he squirreled up from all over England. At the end of the Second World War, with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel (and with his wife to accompany him), he was sent to Germany to procure "Enemy Publications" for British learned libraries.

Before the war however he had already been appointed to the two great institutions which he was to serve for the whole of his working life. His First Class degree in Modern History from Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 1936 led to work on his doctoral thesis on the

cartulary of the nunnery of St Mary, Clerkenwell — work which he combined with a research assistantship at the Institution of Historical Research. In 1937, however, he was appointed librarian to the Earl of Leicester at Holkham and in 1938 assistant librarian in the Department of Western Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library (following an interview conducted by Bodley's Librarian in the Athenaeum). He held both positions until retirement from Oxford in 1980 and Holkham in 1983.

When Bill Hassall returned to the Bodleian Library after the war it was to serve under another great medieval manuscript scholar, Richard Hunt, and the two men put together, in the years of expansion of the 1950s and 1960s, an impressive departmental team. Hassall's contributions to the work were many but his greatest were in two areas: the construction of an iconographical index of pictures in illuminated manuscripts — each illumination captured on a slide or film-strip and available for sale; and the expansion of the Bodleian's interest in local archives. The latter activity brought with it responsibility for operating a one-year training course for archivists from 1947 onwards. This training, abandoned in 1979 as the work or archives became increasingly professionalised, supplied county record offices with a succession of archivists all of whom had been trained by Hassall and most of whom were infected with his enthusiasm for local history.

He claimed to be able to test the suitability of individual undergraduates for a career in archives by making them work for him for one afternoon a week in their final year, during which he would give them the most tedious jobs he could find and interrupt their concentration at irregular intervals. It was a good test of determination, and it also got a lot of the unpopular work of the department done at no cost.

Above all Hassall was an enthusiast, with a highly original mind capable of motivating others to follow his lead and convincing each of them of his or her essential role in the team of which they might play a very humble part. The enormous iconographical index on which scholars have now come to rely was constructed largely by using volunteers (known as "Hassall's vassals") many of who had had no previous experience of such work.

His eccentricities were many. The idiosyncrasies of his typing were legendary and he often wrote letters by hand while carrying on a conversation on a quite different topic and not looking at the paper on which he was writing. The finished letter could often only be deciphered by himself. His lunch was normally taken on the move in Brasenose Lane on his way back to the library from the Covered Market where it had been bought. An alternative venue was in one of his series of somewhat battered vans which conveyed him between his home at the Manor House at Wheatley and the library, between Oxford and Holkham, and all over southern England, where he was

an indefatigable lecturer on manuscripts and local history in places ranging from universities to village halls. He preserved the fashion of addressing people (including close friends) by their surnames long after it had generally died out in academic circles.

He published widely and addressed himself to a series of different audiences. He was for many years a leading figure in the British Records Association. For almost 30 years he was secretary of the Oxfordshire Record Society which published his *Wheatley Records, 956-1956* (1956). The edition of *The Cartulary of St Mary Clerkenwell* which was derived in 1949 from his doctoral thesis is a model of exact scholarship, and the breadth of his knowledge is amply shown in *The Douce Apocalypse* (1961), *The Holkham Library Illuminations and Illustrations* (for the Roxburghe Club, 1970) and *Treasures from the Bodleian* (1976). In much of this work he was helped by his wife, Averil, herself a noted art historian.

He also aimed to interest those without a historical training in the fun to be derived from studying the past, and to that end published popular works, with titles such as *Who's Who in History*, and *How They Lived*. He was in addition a well-known local broadcaster with a phone-in programme on the origins of surnames and street-names.

His last work, produced in 1993 with Jacques Beauroy, was the massive 660-page *Lordship and Landscape in Norfolk, 1250-1350: the early records of Holkham* in the British Academy's series of "Records of Social and Economic History".

All of Bill Hassall's friends have their own collection of stories about him: how in his younger and more impoverished days he fattened goats for their meat only to find that his four children grew too fond of them and wept when they were served up at table; how he sometimes found the late Northamptonshire archivist and historian Joan Wake so formidable that on seeing her in the Old Schools Quadrangle he locked his door and hid with the trainee archivists under the table until she went away; and many more.

There were times, to be sure, when Hassall could be stubborn and even curmudgeonly, but in the end happiness and humour always broke through. He would have liked to have succeeded Hunt as Keeper at the Bodleian but when Hunt retired he was deemed too close to retirement age himself, and a much younger man — one of his ex-trainees — was appointed. He never showed a resentment which he must have felt.

Bill Hassall was one of the great characters in the library and archive world and that world is a poorer place without him.

**David Vaisey**

*William Owen Hassall, librarian: born York 4 August 1912; Librarian to the Earl of Leicester, Holkham 1937-83; staff, Department of Western Manuscripts, Bodleian Library, Oxford 1938-80; married 1932 Averil Beaves (three sons, one daughter); died Wheatley, Oxfordshire 19 July 1994.*



**Hassall: eccentric**