

Handbook for Berkshire

Some Reviews of *A Handbook for Berkshire*

During the summer of 1898, Meade Falkner enjoyed a long cycling tour of Berkshire. He filled four notebooks with pencilled accounts of the places he visited, and they survive as a first hand record of his thoughts – written up on the spot or during the evenings. As his biographer, **Kenneth Warren**, says: *“Falkner’s notes are above all of churches, but there is a good deal also of wider topographical interest and some insight into his interesting ways of thinking and his prejudices. Another fascination of the account, rough-hewn as it is, stems from the fact that it is a description of rural England on the very threshold of the motor age – no more than a decade later the situations which he depicted would have been very different”*. *

Four years later, Murray’s published the fruits of this and other visits to the county. In this *Handbook for Berkshire*, Falkner prefaced the work with the hope that it *“may prove of use to such sober-minded people as can still be found to take pleasure in the quiet scenery and antiquities of an agricultural county”*. As with his *Handbook to Oxfordshire* [1894], Falkner was trenchant in his views – some would say blinkered, - but this made for lively reading.

At Woolhampton, when the old church was destroyed in 1860 and a new one built, *“a unique Norm. font of stone, with an arcade and figures of lead, together with some brasses, were flung into a grave under the present church, and buried”*. Winkfield’s church was rebuilt and is *“without interest”*; Wokingham’s church of St. Lawrence was *“restored till it is uninteresting”*; whereas West Hendred had *“an interesting and happily [1899] unrestored Church”*. Poor old Hungerford, where Falkner stayed in 1898, was *“a clean little town, with historic associations, but now possessing little of interest”*. In his introduction, he fulminated that *“as a county Berkshire churches have suffered more perhaps than those of any other at the hands of ‘restorers”*.

* See Kenneth Warren’s account of the holiday in the Society’s **Journal** No. 5 [July 2004].

