

# An Introduction to Some of the Best Books about Axminster and its Surrounds

## James Davidson

Over 150 years after his death, Axminster's leading chronicler remains James Davidson, who moved to the town as a young man, and died here in 1864. There is general agreement among commentators and critics that his extensive researches and writings can be regarded as both reliable and comprehensive.

What is so frustrating is that his overarching 'History of the Town and Parish of Axminster' (dated 15 August 1832 on the flysheet) was never published. This may well have been due to its sheer bulk, and the unwillingness of publishers to take a chance on an as-yet unknown author. Fortunately a bound manuscript copy can be consulted in the Devon Heritage Centre (DHC ref Z19/21/1). We can also take comfort from the fact that Davidson himself treated his unpublished manuscript as raw material for several smaller books which did indeed find a publisher, and which established his professional reputation (see below for further details).

As well as the main 'History', Davidson assembled an accompanying, and substantially larger, bound book of notes (called the 'Collections for a History of the Town and Parish of Axminster'). The 'Collections' includes some information which he gathered after 1832 (DHC ref Z19/21/2).

The table of contents of the 'History of the Town and Parish of Axminster' is as follows:

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Note 1 The estates covered are: Ballhays / Balls, Beerhall, Bevor\*, Brewershays\*, Cuthays, Clocombe, Fawnsmoor, Fursleigh\*, Hunthay, Lodge Farm, Shapwick\*, Secktor, Sisterwood (includes some information on Greatwood), Tolshays and Yeatlands. Those marked \* are covered in Chapter XIV, and the entries in Chapter XIII are simply cross-references.

The named houses are: Pursebrook House, Hilary House, Terrace Lodge, Furzebrook House, Hill House and Hill Cottage. In addition several other unnamed houses are covered, based on descriptions of their locations.

Note 2 Most if not all of the information in Chapter XIV was published in 1843 in Davidson's 'The History of Newenham Abbey in the County of Devon'.

Note 3 Plenynt and Norton are in Cornwall.

Note 4 Chapter XVII actually covers all non-Church of England denominations represented in Axminster, including the Roman Catholic Church.

Note 5 The persons covered were mainly clerics, as follows: William Tyler (16<sup>th</sup>C), Bartholomew Ashwood (17<sup>th</sup>C), John Ashwood (17<sup>th</sup>C), Joseph J Crabb (17<sup>th</sup>C), John Prince (17<sup>th</sup>C, author of 'The Worthies of Devon'), Micaiah Towgood (18<sup>th</sup>C) and John Cranch (18<sup>th</sup>C).

Note 6 The rail-road described was not the railway as built in 1860, but a proposed tram-way to link Axminster to the harbour at Axmouth.

James Davidson's published books include:

- (1) 'The British and Roman Remains in the Vicinity of Axminster' (1833);
- (2) 'The History of Axminster Church in the County of Devon' (1835, re-published in 1895 with an additional chapter);
- (3) 'The History of Newenham Abbey in the County of Devon' (1843); and
- (4) 'Axminster during the Civil War in the Seventeenth Century' (1851).

Axminster Heritage Centre has copies of all four of these books, which can also be borrowed from Axminster Library.

### **George Pulman: The Book of the Axe**

A very different, and much more populist, approach can be found in 'The Book of the Axe' by George Philip Rigney Pulman. He was born at Axminster in 1819, and was a newspaperman by trade, but an angler whenever the opportunity arose. Most copies that are found today are modern re-prints of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition, which was published in 1875, and which is very significantly bulkier and more informative than earlier editions.

'The Book of the Axe' traces the length of the river, from its source near Beaminster to the sea at Seaton, together with the main tributaries, and fishing is the theme that runs through the book. Nevertheless Pulman provides a great deal of local colour and history along the way. He readily acknowledged his debt to Davidson's researches and writings. He also incorporated several very attractive illustrations produced by William Newbery, a well-known local artist who lived in Axminster.

Axminster Heritage Centre now holds George Pulman's own bound manuscript copy of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition, thanks to the generous gift of Colonel Edward John Mayo OBE of the Isle of Man, in remembrance of his father, Rev. Thomas Edward (Tom) Mayo JP of Axminster.

Tom Mayo, who was a baker in Axminster before being ordained later in life, bought the large volume at auction on 23 June 1937 for the sum of 4½ guineas. The sale was run by Messrs R&C Snell at Uplyme on the instructions of Mrs Barrow Pulman of Derby, the author's daughter-in-law, and included several other high-profile books. One of these, George Pulman's own autographed copy of the printed 4<sup>th</sup> edition, was bought by Charles Snell of Cloakham House, Lord of the Manor of Axminster, for 5¾ guineas. Between them, Charles Snell and Tom Mayo bought about half of the books offered for sale that day.

George Pulman had produced the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of The Book of the Axe in the 1840s, while still a young man. At 184 small pages it was mainly concerned with fishing. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (1845) was simply a re-print of the 1<sup>st</sup>.

In 1848 he founded Pulman's Weekly News and moved to Crewkerne, though he remained a frequent visitor to Axminster. In 1851 he won a medal at the Great Exhibition for his fishing flies.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of The Book of the Axe (1854) was significantly expanded, to 496 pages including 20 illustrations and a map, and added much more about the history of the towns strung along the Axe valley. Pulman's main source on historical matters was James Davidson of Sector Hall, Axminster (see above). Whereas Pulman was a journalist and enthusiastic story-teller, Davidson's researches provided a solid basis for much of the new material.

In 1871 he set about writing a 4<sup>th</sup> edition, and the bound manuscript copy that Axminster Heritage Centre now holds was his (literally) cut, pasted and annotated working draft, based on the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition and much new material, and showing his instructions to the printer. Pulman's hand-writing, while not particularly neat, is nevertheless perfectly legible. The 4<sup>th</sup> edition was first published in 12 parts between January 1873 and February 1875, at a price of 2/6d (12.5p) per part.

When published in consolidated form, in 1875, the 4<sup>th</sup> edition ran to over 900 pages, each larger than those of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, including 15 large illustrations and about 80 woodcuts. The production of illustrations was supervised by William Newbery, an old angling friend of Pulman's, and a life-long resident of Axminster, whose drawings formed the basis of several of the best-known lithographed illustrations.

In 1878 George Pulman retired from business to Uplyme, where he died in 1880.

The author's bound manuscript copy is a delicate book, and likely to be of interest mainly to scholars. However, Axminster Heritage Centre also has a leather-bound 4<sup>th</sup> edition which had belonged to George Edwards, the son of Rev. Zachary Edwards, himself the author of 'Ferns of the Axe Valley', based on his observations of nature as he walked from his house in Axminster to his parish church in Combyne. This copy was very kindly passed on to Axminster Heritage Centre from Axminster Library in recognition of its historic significance.

For day-to-day use Axminster Heritage Centre also has copies of the 1969 re-print of *The Book of the Axe* produced by Kingsmead Reprints of Bath; and a 2004 CD-ROM edition from Historical Aspects. The Devon library service also has several copies (including more than one in Axminster Library) which can be borrowed. The full text can also be found on-line via the archive.org website.

### **Other authors**

In terms of balancing thorough research and accessibility to a lay reader, arguably the best single book on the history of Axminster is 'The Book of Axminster: The making of a town within its landscape' by Angela M W Dudley (Barracuda Books, 1988). As well as clear text (which draws heavily on Davidson's work) this book contains many maps and illustrations, including a high proportion by the author herself. The main criticism which can be levelled against it is that the illustrations are not closely integrated with the text, but this should be qualified by the observation that both are excellent in their own right.

This book was published in a limited edition, and hence is much less freely available than the other sources cited here. However, one copy is held by Axminster Heritage Centre, and others are in Axminster Library, and the Devon Heritage Centre (DHC) in Exeter.

Les Berry and Gerald Gosling have together produced two books about Axminster, both of which contain a lot of the best old photographs and images of the area. They are entitled 'The Book of Axminster with Kilminster: Portrait of a Devon Market Town' (Halsgrove, 2003), and 'Around Axminster – in old photographs' (Alan Sutton Publishing, 1993).

The 2003 book is particularly strong on turnpike roads, public transport, the postal system, Axminster's schools, the fire brigade, Axminster carnival, and local football and cricket teams.

There are other books published by Halsgrove in the series of 'The Book of XXX' covering other neighbouring towns and villages.

Mention must also be made of 'A History of Axminster to 1910' by Geoffrey Chapman (Marwood Publishers, 1998). This adds considerable detail to the other histories listed above, but it suffers from the fact that its author had to stop at 1910 because of failing eyesight. This very unfortunate development also impacted adversely on the proof checking and editing process. However, so long as it is understood that some errors and inconsistencies were not ironed out, there is much to enjoy in the text which had been completed by the time the author drew a line in the sand (some of which does in fact extend beyond the notional 1910 cut-off).

One other source which covers Axminster and all of the adjacent parishes, indeed all of Devon, is 'Magna Britannia: Volume 6, Devonshire (A general and parochial history of the county)' by Daniel and Samuel Lysons. (T Cadell and W Davies, 1822). This can be found on-line in full via the [british-history.ac.uk](http://british-history.ac.uk) website (see the Links page). There is an equivalent history of Dorset and its parishes available via the same website.