

NORMAN SCARFE, MBE, MA, HONLITTD, FSA (1923–2014)



NORMAN SCARFE, who died on 2 March 2014 aged 90, was born in Felixstowe on his father Norman's birthday, May Day 1923. He was educated at Felixstowe Grammar School, and King's School, Canterbury, and despite the War was able to enrol in 1942 for a services short course in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Magdalen College, Oxford. Soon, with the encouragement of the great medievalist R.B. McFarlane, he turned to studying History, his lifelong passion and vocation. But war service made its call. Norman was with the Royal Artillery in their landing on Sword Beach in Normandy on 6 June 1944; his promotion to Captain followed. His first success as a writer was *Assault Division*, 1947, an arresting account of the 3rd Division's role in the momentous events which led up to the surrender of Germany. This was written during his return to the tranquillity of Magdalen and his studies in medieval history, which led to a lectureship in Leicester University. It was the perfect environment for his future career, for Leicester was a pioneering beacon of local history treated seriously as an academic subject, thanks to the great historian of place, W.G. Hoskins. It was also here that he met Paul Fincham, the partner with whom he shared the rest of his life.

In 1963 Norman and Paul moved from Leicester to Shingle Street in Suffolk; their final move was to Woodbridge in 1981, a house and garden of much beauty and the scene of much hospitality. For both of them, settling in Suffolk was a homecoming. Norman would have appreciated that Tudor and Stuart usage which speaks of one's county as one's 'country': for the next half-century, Suffolk was Norman Scarfe country. Already by the time Norman arrived back in Suffolk, he had published its superb Shell Guide. But his further Shell Guides to Cambridgeshire and Essex were a proof of what he brought to the study and enjoyment of local history: a wide and generous vision.

Norman became the Suffolk Institute's Director of Excursions, leaping athletically into pulpits or commandeering venerable mounds of mortared flint as makeshift platforms for magnificent flights of oratory mercifully audible as well erudite, revelling in the connections, eccentricities and repeated patterns of a single place over centuries, if not millennia. He delightedly quoted kindred spirits from the past, one of his favourites being the seventeenth-century parson-antiquary of Coddensham Matthias Candler, whose austere Puritan theology was tempered by a love of antiquities and a greed for gossip. Norman clearly forgave the Puritanism in return for the antiquities and the gossip.

Norman's history was always local, but it was never parochial. It made comparisons between places so that one can see a bigger picture which is in turn part of a national, even international story. It happily ranged over centuries, so that Norman could engage and intrigue us as much on antiquity from the Roman Empire as on two inquisitive young Frenchmen in Georgian England, or his own military experiences in the Second World War, and on so many different subjects, from fonts to Festivals to farm equipment. This eye for the exquisite detail against history's wide sweep was surely sharpened because he was of that generation who were given the dubious privilege of helping to make history in the Second World War. He is to be placed in the company of other hugely talented historians such as Sir Michael Howard and Hugh Trevor-Roper, Lord Dacre of Glanton. For all of them, the depth and gravitas of their later achievements in the writing of history sprang from their first-hand involvement in that ghastly tragedy: great events were not a hobby for them, but inscribed on their lives.

Norman once reminisced to me about his feelings as his Division rode into the devastated German city of Münster in 1945. He saw how the destruction of so much stately beauty summed up the ruin which Adolf Hitler had brought on a great nation, but he also felt pain and shame that we British had been the immediate agents of this ruin. War had corrupted us all. So much of his later career was devoted to preventing further ruin, to rescuing the beauty and fragility of the past for future generations to enjoy. Those of us in later generations who have been lucky enough to avoid such a formative experience should not forget the roots from which his achievements had sprung, and I hope that the memory enriches our enjoyment of them.

If that dark picture of the ruin of one of Europe's great cities sharpened Norman's resolve to preserve beauty and history elsewhere, we have all gained the benefit by the range and variety of his enterprises. There was not just the Suffolk Institute (of which he enjoyed the longest membership in the last hundred years at least), but his founder chairmanship of the Museum of East Anglian Life with its marvellously appropriate home at Abbots Hall, Stowmarket; there was his historical work for the Aldeburgh Festival, and perhaps his most outstanding achievement, the foundation of the Suffolk Records Society in 1958. There are now many local record societies for publishing local primary sources of history, but few have such a record of regular publication, high standards and wide range as the SRS. Once more it is possible to feel Norman hastening with all his energy and verve to redress a long-standing lack in Suffolk: the absence of any comprehensive, manuscript-rich county history publication from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the first golden age of English antiquarianism, the sort of enterprise for which Norfolk can be grateful in the many volumes of the Revd Francis Blomefield. Thanks to Norman's vision, the gap has been filled in many ways, and he would be pleased that there is a prospect of a modern version of published Suffolk county history in planning once more, thanks to the latest generation who steer the Suffolk Institute.

Of the many qualities which I admired in Norman over half a century, it is worth singling out enthusiasm, wit, a wonderful, precise literary style, an acute aesthetic sense, a divine curiosity, a capacity for friendship. Above all, the quality which united them all was generosity. There is the literal generosity of the Scarfe Charitable Trust, but there was the generosity of time and of spirit, expressed in all that he gave to history, to his friends and to this eastern part of England which he loved so much. He cherished many gifts in his life, not least his long happy years with Paul: and both of them in return have given so much to others, not least in showing us what love and faithfulness can mean in human relationships through good times and bad.

Diarmaid MacCulloch



Presentation to Norman on his retirement as President, AGM at Haughley Church, 7 May 2011:
l-r, Paul Fincham, Norman Scarfe, Diarmaid MacCulloch (the new President) (*photo: Timothy Easton*).

