The first Leicester thesis in English Local History

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Url: [https://elhleics.omeka.net/firstthesis](https://elhleics.omeka.net/firstthesis)

For the first blog post, it seemed appropriate to look at the first thesis in the collection L. A. Parker’s *Enclosure in Leicestershire, 1485-1607* awarded in 1948.

Leslie Arthur Parker (1917-2005) studied History at University College Leicester from 1936 to 1948. He was clearly a good student, winning the honours prize in 1938 and 1939. Like many current students, he lived around the Narborough Road area, first on Cambridge Street and then on Mavis Avenue. He registered for an MA in Economic History in 1939, but he was not awarded the second degree until 1946/47. His doctorate came the following year. This quick succession of awards is unusual - researching a PhD in a year seems impossible! Perhaps Parker was working on this research through the Second World War, even if he was not formally registered with the University.

Parker’s choice of subject suggests that W.G. Hoskins was his supervisor, although this is not recorded on the bibliographic record, or on the thesis itself. His topic - enclosure - was the process by which open fields were converted into pasture by landholders, and the common rights of villagers were eroded. It has long been seen as a key development in the agriculture and landscape of England. Hoskins was also working on the history of rural Leicestershire through the 1940s and 1950s, culminating in his famous study of Wigston Magna. Both cited each other’s work and Hoskins thanked Parker in the acknowledgements to *The Midlands Peasant*. Parker was also active in the projects that Hoskins had done much to promote. He published two articles in *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society* (Hoskins was its editor), and contributed to the third volume of the Leicestershire Victoria Country History, which Hoskins had helped to relaunch.

**Map of Enclosure in Leicestershire, 1485-1550**

Map 1 from L. A. Parker’s “Enclosure in Leicestershire, 1485-1607”, p.250.

The thesis is divided into two parts: an analysis of enclosure in the first half, and a reproduction key documents in the second half. Such an arrangement would be unusual today, and there is also far less discussion of historiography than today’s student are expected to provide. In other respects, the thesis is very similar to contemporary work in local history. It is structured around a defined region, and Parker places the research within the context of the county’s geography, settlement history and socio-economic structure. He uses a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches, including mapping as shown above.
The focus on primary sources points to Leslie Parker’s future career. Soon after being awarded his PhD, he was appointed Assistant Archivist at Leicestershire County Council. He was promoted to County Archivist in the 1951, a position he held until retirement in 1979. Here Leslie Parker played a leading role in the development of a modern record service, and the move to a new building. Many of the accessions during the 1950s and 1960s were the kinds of records he had worked on as a student: estate papers, probate and enclosure awards. He oversaw an increasing number of users, and encouraged group visits to use the archives. One of the earliest groups was the English Local History Summer School.

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References

Archives and records


University of Leicester Archives, Student Record Cards, ULA/SR1/P-Z.

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Books and articles


———,'The agrarian revolution at Cotesbach, 1501-1612', Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society, 24 (1948).
