

Courtesy of Alexander Quennell.

Fig. 1. Marjorie Quennell and Charles Henry Bourne Quennell, *A History of Everyday Things in England*, vol. 3, 1733-1851, London, 1933. Cover by Marjorie Quennell.

The Quennells and the ‘History of Everyday Life’ in England, c. 1918–69

by *Laura Carter*

A new social history developed in mid twentieth-century England, one that has seldom been taken seriously by historiographers of social history. The ‘history of everyday life’ involved disparate threads that are challenging to weave together: Arts and Crafts aestheticism, liberal citizenship education, and new teaching methods formulated for mass secondary education and popular heritage tourism. These threads can be united using the life and work of Charles Henry Bourne Quennell (1872–1935) and his wife Marjorie Quennell (1883–1972). The Quennells were the authors and illustrators of a series of interwar bestsellers called *A History of Everyday Things in England*, which remained in print until the late 1960s.¹ (Fig. 1) This article presents a close examination of the intellectual influences, networks of socialization, and practical activities surrounding these books. Its focus on the Quennells and the ‘history of everyday life’ opens an important window into the history of British social history. This episode has been little examined and poorly conceptualized, due to its ambiguous position between the decline of Victorian romantic and Whiggish histories and the rise of ‘history from below’ in the 1960s.

The period between the wars has proven persistently problematic for scholars contemplating ‘the place of the past’ in English culture. Peter Mandler has traced the decline of the nineteenth-century ‘history boom’ to a point of fragmentation, bound up with disciplinary professionalization.² Paul Readman has downplayed the impact of these changes, arguing that the 1890s and 1900s saw England’s ‘antiquarian sensibility’ deepen.³ The First World War ruptured the fabric of the cultural nation, and popular historical cultures between the wars manifested through a range of new, non-literary media, with the rise of broadcasting, cinema attendance, mass secondary education, and the democratization of museums.⁴ Modernization and reformist agendas gradually robbed the preservationist movement of the political and international urgency that ‘heritage’ had enjoyed in the late nineteenth century.⁵ This uneven landscape has not readily lent itself to precise estimations of history’s place in mid-twentieth-century culture. Raphael Samuel’s *Theatres of Memory* (1994), which championed the ‘unofficial knowledge’ of a people’s history, identified many instances of the

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'history of everyday life', but did not argue that it was a coherent project with chronological specificity.⁶

In *Theatres of Memory* Samuel demonstrates that our focus has too often shifted onto the more manageable course of academic history, carrying the unsatisfactory assumption that historical trends simply trickled down into mainstream society.⁷ This has had particularly reductive consequences for understanding popular social history. The origins of academic social history, 'history from below', lay with a generation of Marxist historians who understood modern British history through the experience of class struggle.⁸ Their Marxist telling has become the received wisdom: social history is a post-1945 phenomenon, inextricably linked to the rapid social change of that era and to the Left.⁹ This article shows that an alternative vein of social history predated that movement. The 'history of everyday life' had a largely liberal political agenda, and therefore cannot be understood exclusively through either the radical Left or the nostalgic Right. It was built on the notion of an ordered yet participatory democracy, an ideal prevalent among progressive members of the middle class between the wars.¹⁰ The liberal ideal of citizenship, a facet of the so-called 'culture for democracy', has not been adequately explored by scholars examining the role of history in citizen-making. Their focus has been on ideological extremities: jingoistic and imperialist conservatism or the Leavisite socialism of the adult education movement.¹¹ Even pacifist internationalism, as promoted by some supporters of the League of Nations Union, used history to mould a distinctive breed of political citizen.¹² The 'history of everyday life' stood quite separate from these movements. It was both a more mainstream and more politically muted way of engaging with history in the mid twentieth century.

The Quennells' 'history of everyday life' was designed to make democratic, rather than revolutionary, citizens. This is best understood by unpacking the social background of the Quennells themselves, once described by John Betjeman as self-conscious members of the 'silent middle classes'.¹³ Charles was an architect, Marjorie (née Courtney) a painter.¹⁴ (Fig. 2) Theirs was a household of the professional middle class, hit hard by the economic slump of the immediate postwar years. The resultant feeling of social disenfranchisement was crucial in shaping their ideals about educating the new democracy.¹⁵ Although rhetorically in sympathy with the plight of the beleaguered worker and with female emancipation, Charles clearly feared the autocracy of socialism and unionization and was uneasy with the reality of militant suffragism.¹⁶ The working-class subjects of their histories were predictably 'respectable': skilled artisans and happy peasants.¹⁷ Drawing on the Arts and Crafts vision, they imagined a modern social order united by common aesthetic standards. But they encouraged a more genuinely populist method of recovering these standards, wanting citizens to experience traces of this history for themselves. This approach was better adjusted to the conditions of mass democracy than the paternalistic Victorian notion of 'uplift'. Active participation aligned the 'history of



Courtesy of Alexander Quennell.

Fig. 2. Marjorie and C. H. B. Quennell on holiday, late 1920s.

everyday life' with the zeitgeist of thinking on mass secondary education from the mid 1920s, which emphasized the importance of linking abstract intellectual ideas to the pupil's 'environment'.¹⁸ Since the *Everyday Things* books were primarily Charles's project, the beginning of this article will mainly explore his intellectual leanings.¹⁹ The final section will reflect more closely on Marjorie's career after Charles's death as an individual and as a woman historian.

ARTS AND CRAFTS ROOTS

The Quennells were Arts and Crafts disciples and it was the Arts and Crafts mandate for practical social action, rather than romanticized Utopian socialism, that inspired them and made their history so culturally relevant after 1918. In a 1961 interview, Marjorie recalled that she and Charles had socialized with the leading lights of the Edwardian Arts and Crafts world as a young couple.²⁰ Charles fitted into this environment comfortably, as a materials-focused architect guided by his social conscience. He had begun his practice in Westminster in 1896, mainly designing and building homes for London's growing affluent suburbs.²¹ This vocation strongly coloured the *Everyday Things* books, and each volume contained lengthy discussions of building methods and architectural styles.²² Marjorie too fitted in well with the Arts and Crafts milieu: many members of the Women's Guild of Arts made their living by illustrating children's books.²³ She came from a highly creative and 'intensely active' Victorian family, and wrote fondly in her later years of an idyllic childhood in suburban Bromley, partaking in traditional fair days with the Pearly Kings and Queens.²⁴ After attending various art schools as a young woman, Marjorie turned down further professional opportunities in order to raise a family.²⁵ The Quennells had three children. The eldest, Peter (1905–93), became a well-known biographer and editor.²⁶

Whereas Marjorie's upbringing had been artistic and relatively comfortable, Charles hailed from modest beginnings, the son of a builder who was often drunk and absent.²⁷ In 1889, as a teenager, he was apprenticed to a local carpenter whilst convalescing in the Kent countryside after suffering a nervous collapse. The year-long stint proved to be something of a conversion for Charles: like George Sturt ensconced in the daily tasks of his wheelwright's business, Charles's physical work at the bench gave him a deep regard for traditional skills learnt through practical transmission.²⁸ He was first articled to the architectural practice of Newman and Newman in 1890 and spent the following six years working for various London firms, taking evening classes to complete his training.²⁹ By the mid 1890s Charles had formed a Guild of Handicrafts in Lambeth, training boys from the East End in joinery, ironmongery and ornamental metalwork.³⁰ The little guild succeeded in exhibiting an easy chair and two altar candlesticks at the sixth exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1899.³¹ At the same time, Charles had volunteered as a social worker at Cambridge House in Camberwell between 1898 and 1904. He frequently cited these early

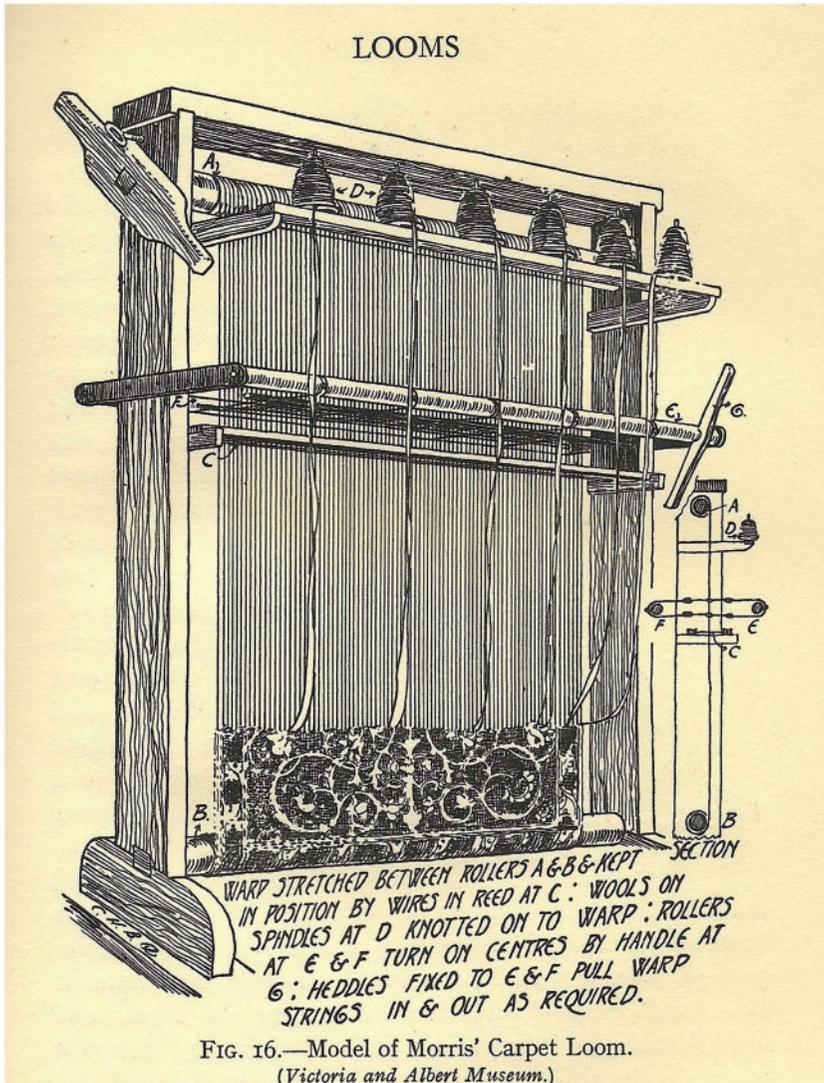


Fig. 3. 1878 William Morris Carpet Loom, *History of Everyday Things in England*, vol. 4, 1851–1934, 1933, fig. 16, p. 21. C.H.B. Quennell.

experiences as contributing to how he thought about the possible uses of English history. When Charles and Marjorie married in 1904, the couple deliberated over how they might 'bring home' that uninteresting and mechanical work was 'de-civilising'.³²

Both John Ruskin and William Morris were major influences on the Quennells, and contemporaries saw their books as operating directly in

this tradition.³³ Echoing Morris, they wrote that as everyday things in olden times were each ‘the separate work of some craftsman’ rather than ‘turned out by the thousand from some machine’, ‘each bore the stamp of the love and labour expended’ on it.³⁴ (Fig. 3) Ruskin’s moralistic message resonated throughout the *Everyday Things* series, most obviously in an emphasis on the ethos of neighbourly charity.³⁵ The Quennells were not, however, ‘disciples’ of Ruskin, if such a thing can be defined. They actively favoured the progressive interventionism that separated Ruskin’s orthodox liberalism from the many early twentieth-century reformers who found him to be a useful intellectual resource.³⁶ The Quennells were more deeply influenced by William Morris, and their reception of Ruskin was almost entirely filtered through him.³⁷ However, Morrisian socialism was kept at a distance.³⁸ Despite their frequent critiques of unbridled capitalism, the Quennells never advocated the social history of class struggle as a political remedy, nor did they approve of any system that administered taste from the top down. Their solution to society’s ills was a reconditioning of hearts and minds, achieved through mass education, within a participatory democracy.

As a young architect in the 1850s William Morris had developed the notion that medieval social history should be learned through buildings anchored in the fabric of their local townscape.³⁹ This chimed precisely with the Quennells’ own conception, but they harboured a sense of regret at the waning practicality of Morris’s artistic ventures in his later life. Those original Arts and Crafts visionaries had come to practise ‘an extreme form of sophistication’. Ernest Gimson, for example, ‘should have been trying to improve the work of his own time’, ‘instead of playing at peasant art’.⁴⁰ The Quennells shifted their spotlight onto the ‘practical utopians’ of the twentieth century, such as the garden-city designer Ebenezer Howard.⁴¹ This emphasis on socially accountable design is also seen in the Quennells’ reconciliation with mass production, via the life and work of the American industrialist Henry Ford, whom they admired for his modern functional factories (with ‘excellent’ lavatories).⁴² Marjorie explained that her husband ‘admired William Morris’s work very much’, but he thought that ‘one shouldn’t rely on retrogressive work; one must go forward’.⁴³ The Quennells wanted to reveal the social function of history for modern life and inspire society en masse.

As Michael Saler’s work has shown, the received chronology of the Arts and Crafts movement based on a narrow art-historical, object-centred view needs rethinking. Projects such as Frank Pick’s London Underground and the Quennells’ history-writing were part of a revitalized Arts and Crafts discourse.⁴⁴ Here was the next reforming generation, with a more positive view of modernity wrought in the transition from Victorianism and with a democratic political conscience. In early 1918 Charles wrote a series of articles for *The Architects’ and Builders’ Journal* anticipating reconstruction after the First World War. He was willing to accept Labour on some issues, but sought liberal compromises between the oppressive extremes of

socialism and reactionary Toryism.⁴⁵ 'The war means a trial of democracy; the enemy stands for Feudalism and Privilege.'⁴⁶ He was a liberal reformist, placing his greatest hopes in the 1918 Education Bill with its promise to 'humanize' mass education and promote an ordered equality.⁴⁷ An awareness of historical everyday things, nourished by mature Arts and Crafts thinking, would come to improve everyday life in the present. Mass education and publicly funded museum programmes were the appropriate channels for this new social history because they were the cultural organs of a modern democracy.

THE BOOKS

The First World War diminished Charles's architectural practice and the family had to abandon their home in Bickley, Kent. In 1917 the Quennells established themselves in Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, and Volume 1 of *Everyday Things* was published in October 1918. The first print-run, of four thousand, had sold out by December. Volume 2 was published in October 1919; by 1934, the two volumes had sold over one hundred thousand copies; and by 1938 the first had reached its seventh impression.⁴⁸ These first two books covered 1066–1499 and 1500–1799. Their chapters dealt with the costumes, buildings, town and country life, games and ornament of successive centuries. The final two volumes, covering 1733–1851 and 1851–1934 respectively, divided each period into the 'three great trades': farming, building, and clothing.⁴⁹ It was estimated in 1961 that their total sales exceeded one million copies, and in the succeeding seven years a further quarter of a million were sold.⁵⁰

The *Everyday Things* books reduced the 'high' political developments of each century to a couple of opening paragraphs. This distinctive approach earned the books widespread acclaim.⁵¹ In contrast, Henrietta Marshall's popular *Our Island Story* (1905) repackaged the Whig progressive narrative into a 'story' for a school-age audience.⁵² Marshall lionized kings and princes as role models. The Quennells instead named inventors, architects and scientists as the 'makers of the modern world', those taking practical measures for the good of society.⁵³ This vision of society fitted into the radical-liberal tradition of improvement based on mutual effort – as promoted by Samuel Smiles – rather than a deferential or hierarchical one. Nor do the Quennells' books resonate with popular 'romantic' accounts of the past, such as J. R. Green's *Short History of the English People* (1874), still selling well in the interwar years. The backbone of Green's social history was a national narrative, which the Quennells consciously avoided.⁵⁴ Their examples were of local 'things' produced in the rich variety of English vernacular styles.⁵⁵

Scholars have noted a new fascination with 'everyday life' during the 1930s, from the documentary-film movement to Mass Observation, but the Quennells were set quite apart from these experimental pursuits.⁵⁶ The outlets they chose for dissemination (mass-market books, schools, the radio

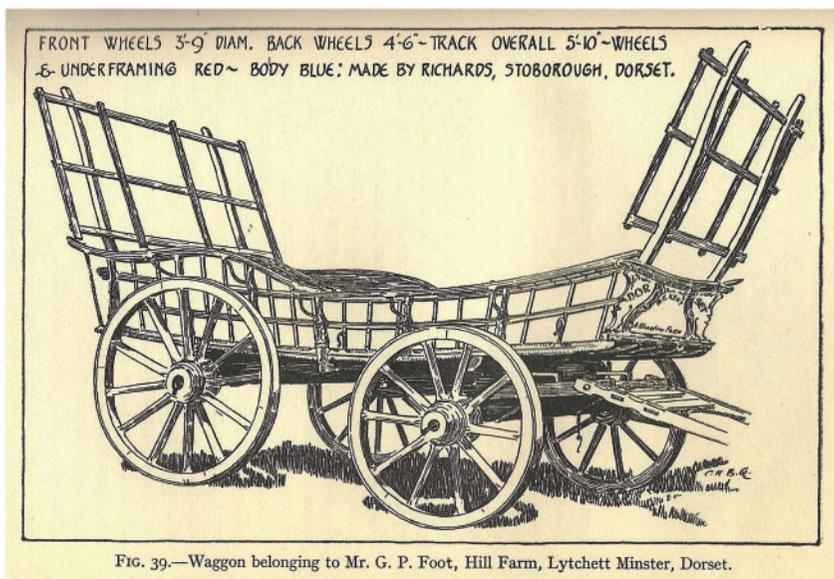


Fig. 4. Traditional Dorset Waggon, surviving in 1934, *History of Everyday Things in England*, vol. 4, 1851–1934, 1933, fig. 39, p. 55. C.H.B. Quennell.

and museums) were more effective pulpits than those sought by the avant-garde, and even their research methods reflected their position outside the intellectual elite. The Quennells turned to the world around them to bring the history of England to life. They used very few general secondary historians' works, selecting instead specialist authorities on particular topics such as coaching, gardens or telegraphy.⁵⁷ Thomas Hardy helped them to identify surviving examples of Wessex waggons.⁵⁸ (Fig. 4) They recovered an old plough when 'motoring' on holiday in Norfolk in 1919. Marjorie recalled: '... We toured all over England in the weekends and picked up what information we could and we wrote about it'.⁵⁹ They deployed an impressive array of medieval primary source material and a range of published diaries, chosen for their descriptions of the everyday. Marjorie studied costume patterns and plates, museum holdings, and items borrowed from collectors. In her sketchbooks she drew costumes and accessories from different periods,⁶⁰ and these informed her illustrations for the books. (Figs 5 to 8) Such quests were quintessentially middle-class and interwar: more makeshift and amateurish than the antiquarian tradition, yet more elitist than the local, community, and family history booms of the later twentieth century.⁶¹

Having made many of their drawings from real life, the Quennells cautioned their readers to imagine ruined castles as they once were: a practical necessity to the people and their way of life.⁶² Fittingly, one reviewer in 1933 described how the books inspired him to explore such a local castle.⁶³ This

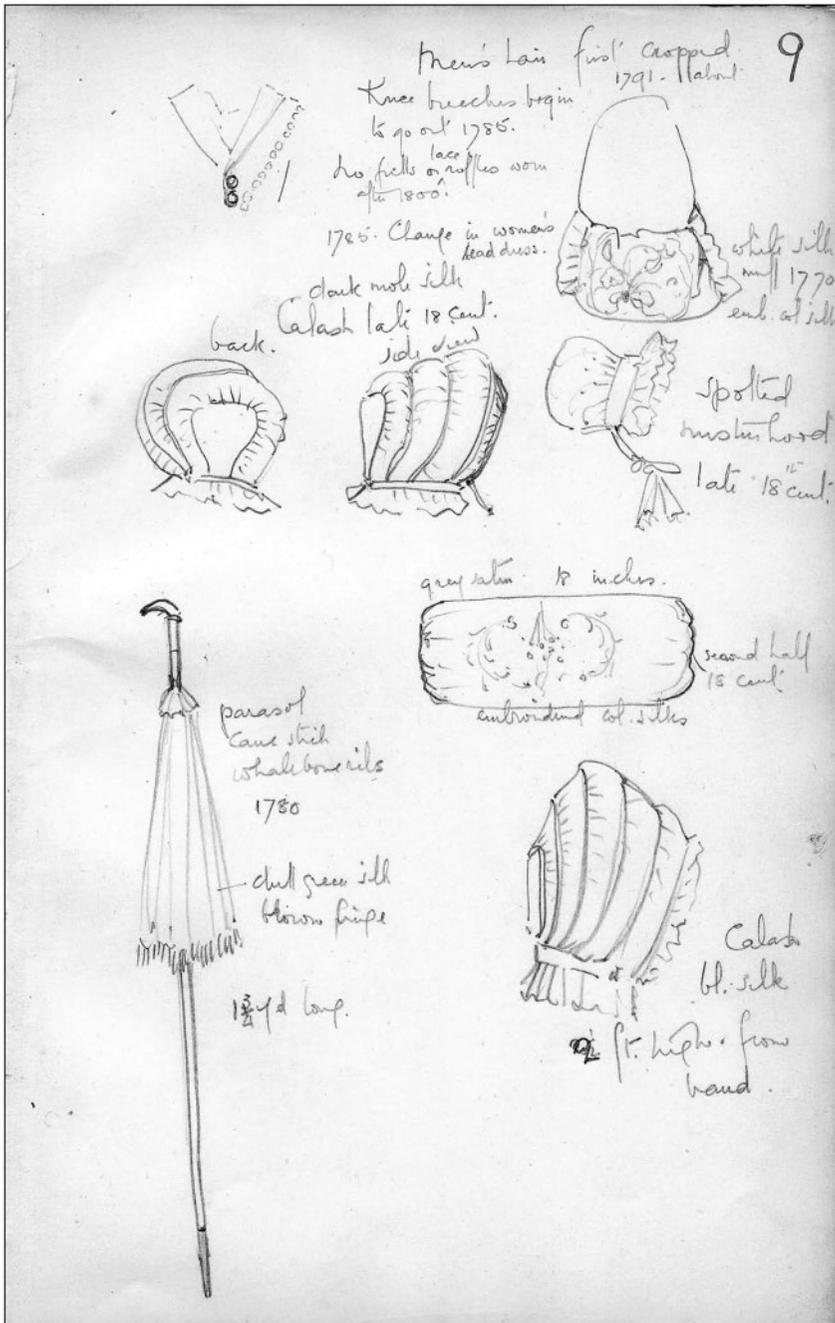


Fig. 5. Bronze Age figures with details of accessories. From Marjorie Quennell's sketchbooks.

Courtesy of Alexander Quennell



Fig. 7. Mid-eighteenth-century women's dresses and shoes. From Marjorie Quennell's sketchbooks.



Courtesy of Alexander Quennell

Fig. 8. Details of eighteenth-century female accessories. From Marjorie Quennell's sketchbooks.

was a topographical and populist approach to heritage, driven not by romanticism but by the imprint of everyday life. It captured the vernacular acquisition of historical knowledge, often haphazard and local, by adopting the conventions of motoring guidebooks, a genre which Charles also dabbled in.⁶⁴ The Quennells spoke directly 'through the books' to their readers, often adding personal memories and anecdotes.⁶⁵ For this reason, the *Everyday Things* books came to be regarded as books for adults as much as for children, evident in the range of serious non-fiction works that list them in their bibliographies.⁶⁶ One reviewer explained, '... their books are perfectly suited to my own age of grown-upness'.⁶⁷ The Quennells did, however, make it clear that their intended audience was 'boys and girls aged between fourteen and eighteen', in line with their desire to use history to inspire a vocation.⁶⁸

Many interwar history schoolbooks were written by professional historians for the expanding school textbook market.⁶⁹ Simultaneously, 'popular' history publishing underwent a prolonged decline.⁷⁰ It was only the more textured histories that gained a popular audience in this period, when history mingled with other genres and disciplines. The *Everyday Things* books were published by B. T. Batsford, and were therefore publicized alongside Batsford's other high-quality artistic, craft and tourism books, undoubtedly securing them a domestic middle-class readership.⁷¹ A recent study of history teaching in interwar elementary schools has affirmed the lack of resources and the limited amount of time devoted to history.⁷² The Quennell books were expensive: each volume of *Everyday Things* was priced at 8s 6d, while a popular educational history book between the wars would usually cost between one and two shillings. Although Batsford later split *Everyday Things* into 'parts' for classroom teaching priced at five shillings, cheaper copycats soon capitalized on the format.⁷³ Therefore, it was not until after the Second World War that the Quennell books were more widely available to a working-class audience in state schools.⁷⁴

However, the Quennell books were central to a lively debate within the historical profession after 1918. Journals like the Historical Association's (HA) *History* were littered with references to bringing history closer to 'everyday life' and 'the Quennell method' was hailed for filling in the background of history.⁷⁵ In the 1920s the HA was promoting a technically accurate visual history for the new 'modern pupils' that utilized technologies such as aerial photography. 'Imaginative illustrations' were deemed to be of 'no special value'.⁷⁶ The illustrations in *Everyday Things* were in line with such thinking. Executed by a master draughtsman (C. H. B. Quennell) and an artist (Marjorie Quennell), they did not replicate the 'storybook' style designed to crystallize epochs in the text's narrative, as seen in the plates of Henrietta Marshall's work drawn by A. S. Forrest. The prose was ordered and directed around technically descriptive pictures. (Figs 9–12) For example, in volume three readers were introduced to changes in the clothing industry during the eighteenth century with reference to a series of labelled

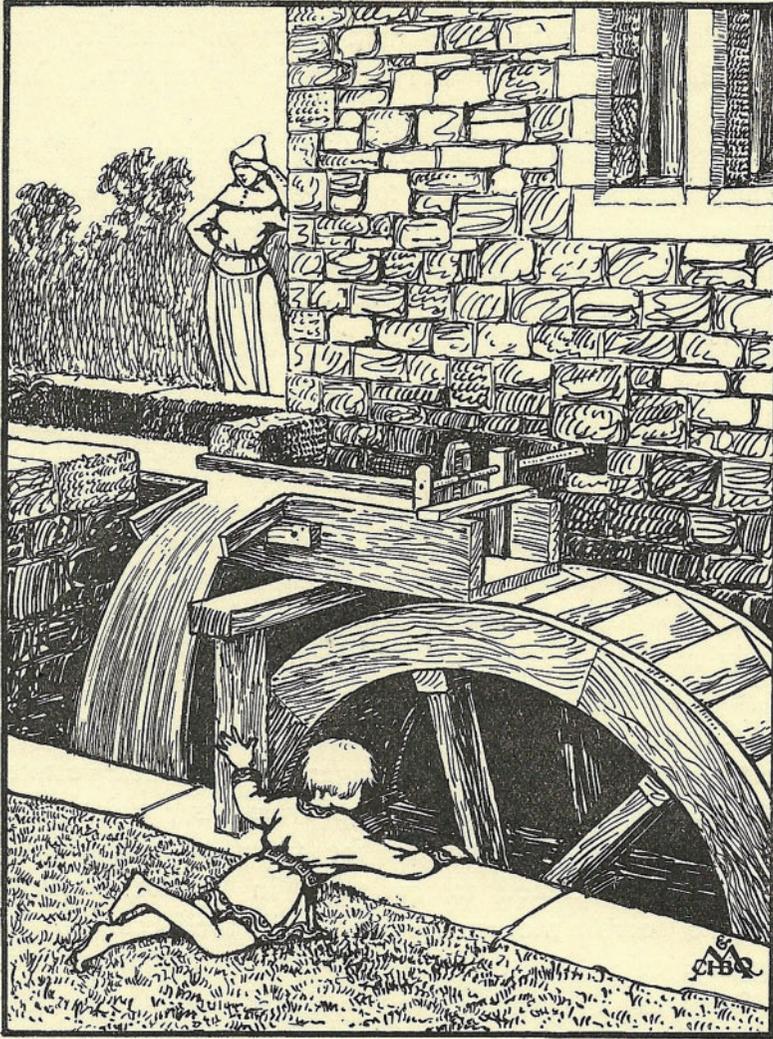


FIG. 39.—A Water-Mill.

Windmills, pp. 140, 185.

Courtesy of Alexander Quennell.

Fig. 9. Thirteenth-century Watermill, *History of Everyday Things in England*, vol. 1, 1918, fig. 39, p. 94. M. Quennell and C.H.B. Quennell.



Fig. 10. Eighteenth-century Kitchen Crane, *History of Everyday Things in England*, vol. 2, 15001799, 1919, fig.101, p. 181. M. Quennell and C.H.B. Quennell.

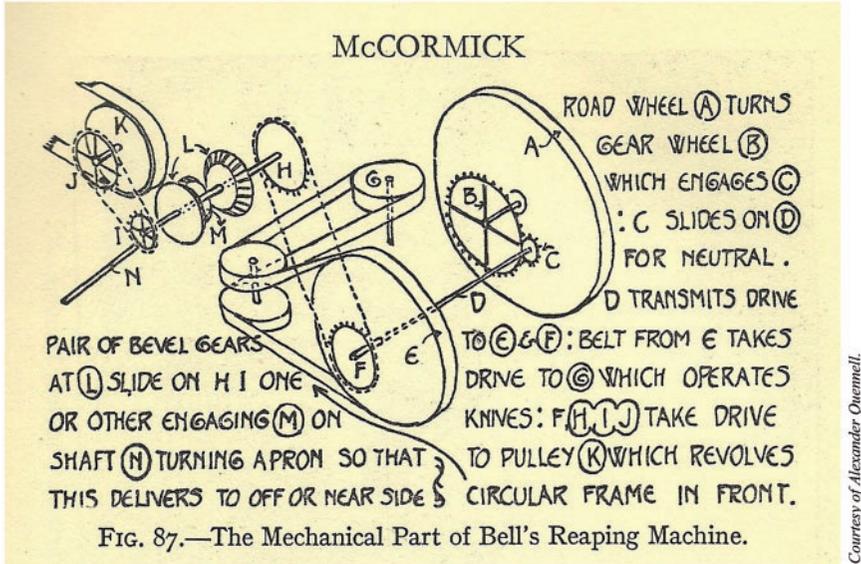
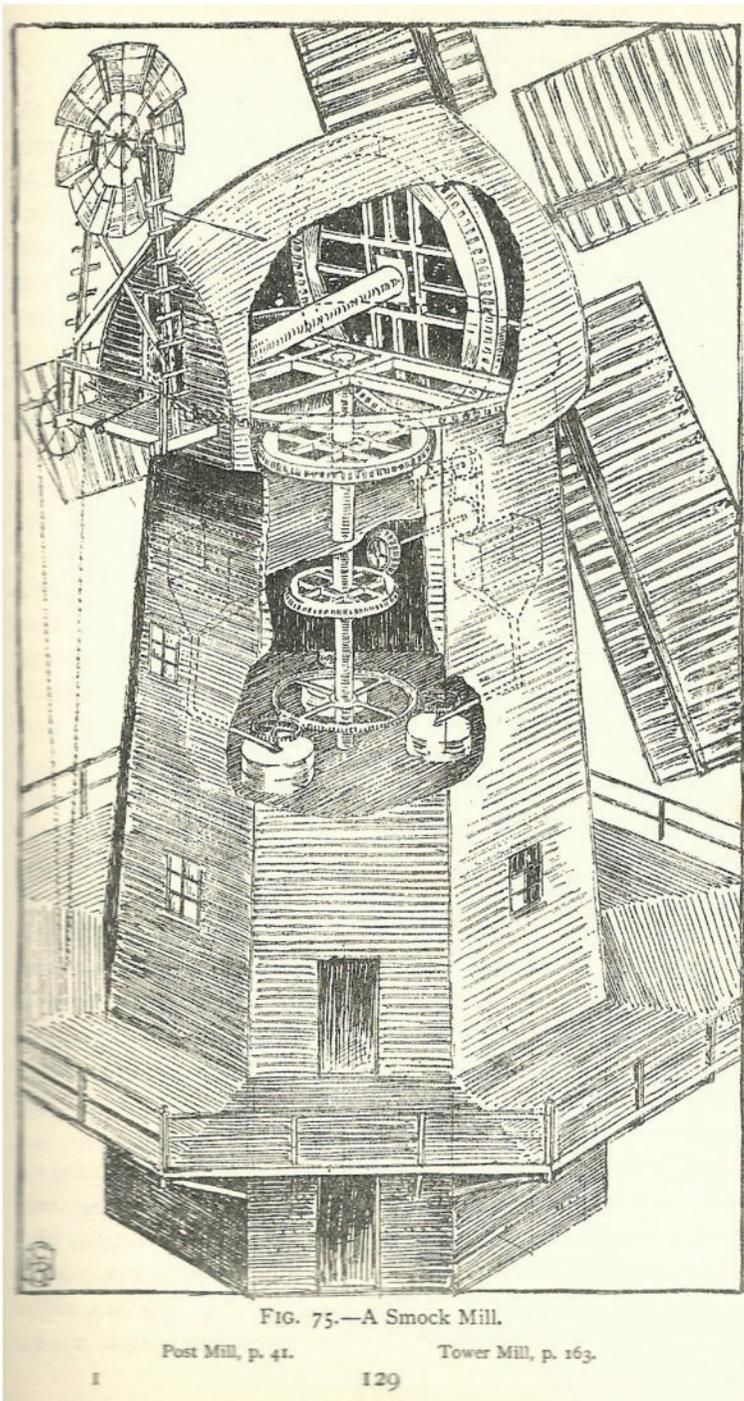


Fig. 11. Bell's Reaping Machine (1827–8), *History of Everyday Things in England*, vol. 3, 1733–1851, 1933, fig. 87, p. 126. C.H.B. Quennell.

diagrams of looms, shuttles, and spinning machines.⁷⁷ As one reviewer noted, 'The Quennells... really enable us, if we take a little trouble with the A's and B's of their diagrams, to understand how the new machines worked'.⁷⁸ Marjorie's figures were meticulously researched and rendered to communicate the weight, hue, measurement, and fold of the materials of historical clothing, with the accompanying text explaining how such details reflected the people's spirit.⁷⁹

BERKHAMSTEDIANS

In Alan Hollinghurst's 2011 novel *The Stranger's Child*, partially set in 1967, we meet G. F. and Madeleine Sawle. The Sawles are authors of *An Everyday History of England*, which had 'come out some time before the War'. The narrator comments, 'It was slightly magical that G.F. Sawle and Madeleine Sawle should even be alive, much less battering around the country in an Austin Princess'.⁸⁰ In this neat fictionalization, Hollinghurst pinpoints the Quennells' provinciality. Comparing the Quennells' position as amateur historians living outside of London in Berkhamsted (a point where Hollinghurst diverges: the Sawles are history professors, but based in Birmingham) with their more prominent neighbours George Macaulay Trevelyan (1876–1962) and John and Barbara Hammond (1872–1949; 1873–1961) is a useful device for isolating the 'history of everyday life'.



Courtesy of Alexander Quennell.

Fig. 12. Seventeenth-century Smock Mill, *History of Everyday Things in England*, vol. 2, 1500–1799, 1919, fig. 75, p. 129. M. Quennell and C.H.B. Quennell.

Trevelyan and the Hammonds were both also Berkhamsted based historians and popularizers of social history, and they roughly characterize the major veins of liberal social-history writing in England by the 1920s: Trevelyan with his Whig sympathies and the Hammonds with their socialism. Each Berkhamstedian, in their own way, used popular history to reconcile their liberal inheritance with twentieth-century culture and society.

The Trevelyans lived in Berkhamsted for a decade from 1918 and it is clear that the Quennells and the Trevelyans interacted locally and were friends.⁸¹ Charles and George were men of the same generation: both born in the 1870s, they got married in the same year (1904) and were drawn to Berkhamsted by the promise of an excellent grammar-school education for their children.⁸² Both men were deeply interested in preservationism and civic engagement, lecturing for the Berkhamsted Citizens' Association, and taking part in the 1922 Berkhamsted historical pageant.⁸⁴ But their different backgrounds ultimately framed the histories they wrote: Trevelyan wrote history out of a higher sense of familial duty, the Quennells penned their first volume out of sheer necessity, to plug the gap in their income produced by the wartime architectural slump.⁸⁵ Although the extent to which Trevelyan can be understood straightforwardly in the Whig tradition of history has been questioned, it is largely agreed that he bore Whiggish streaks, stylistically apparent in his literary and poetic style.⁸⁶ Unusually for a popularizer, he was also an established academic at Cambridge for much of his career. He had his most sensational success with the *English Social History* (1944). A four-volume illustrated version came out in 1949–52, offering photographic images from woodcuts, texts, and prints that were supplementary to the text.⁸⁷ The introduction explained that the real appeal of history is imaginative; our imagination craves to see our ancestors going about their daily lives. These ordinary lives were ordered by the 'complicated, ever-shifting fabric of custom and law, society and politics'.⁸⁸ Trevelyan's story was people-centred, but oriented around cultural and literary figures that had shaped the people's progress. In contrast, the Quennells approached people through their work and objects, without the explicit assumption that an over-arching narrative or higher tastes were guiding them.

From 1912 the historians John and Barbara Hammond lived in a farmhouse about five miles east of Berkhamsted. They were not professionals of Trevelyan's pedigree, but both were classical scholars at Oxford who obtained honorary doctorates later in life.⁸⁹ The Hammonds were most famous for their trilogy on labour in the period 1760–1832, which presented the coming of enclosure and industrialization as a moral and social calamity.⁹⁰ The Quennells socialized with the Hammonds occasionally at their home during the 1920s, and had certainly read and sympathized with their thesis.⁹¹ For both couples, the period since the mid eighteenth century represented a seismic temporal rupture in the human story. Echoing the Hammonds' critique of ruthless economic logic, the villains of the Quennell books were the

financiers whose speculation had created an economy no longer based on the simple exchange of the craftsman's commodities.⁹² The Quennells' chief grievance, however, was aesthetic. The industrial revolution had recast a richly colourful medieval world into a grey Dickensian nightmare.⁹³ Whilst they fully acknowledged the cataclysm, the Quennells were more optimistic about the democratic possibilities for assuaging the consequences of industrialization. One week before he died, Charles wrote to John Hammond with his feedback on the Hammonds' final collaborative book, *The Bleak Age* (1934). He felt that the Hammonds had misunderstood the nuances of work in the industrial period. Not all work was uninteresting; the tradesmen had served apprenticeships to learn their craft. It was these tradesmen who were 'the backbone of all the movements you describe – not the labourers'. His note concluded, 'give me credit for courage – to write to a Doctor of Literature – in which subject I am a mere labourer in really great cheek'.⁹⁴ Quennell the architect centred his argument on the loss of skills, which in turn had debased the aesthetics of production.

In the end, the Quennells were amateur historians, weeding their garden in between compiling their books.⁹⁵ Marjorie expressed an acute awareness of their 'unprofessional' status:

... Neither of us had been to college; we were not history people. And though we were very interested, both of us, we didn't consider we were professionals in any light. Therefore we simply spoke as the man in the street.⁹⁶

It wasn't a case, as with Trevelyan, of artfully revealing the 'social side' of a national story that was already known. Nor, as with the Hammonds, was it about offering a systematic social analysis that might demonstrate the power shift of class struggle. Citizenship was an inherently local question and the 'history of everyday life' was meant to be perceived by average citizens in the world around them. Trevelyan and the Hammonds struggled in their later years to reconcile with the conditions of a rapidly democratizing society. They had each subsided into a defeatist mood by the 1930s, favouring preservationism over active politics.⁹⁷ As Trevelyan wrote to the Hammonds in 1947, the advent of a truly mass culture combined with democratic choice had 'cooked the goose of civilization'.⁹⁸ Doubtless the Quennells nursed similar contemporary grievances, but they still offered a more positive commitment to mass democracy by creating a mode of history that was palpably linked to everyday experiences and personal participation.

POPULAR EDUCATION

As established authors the Quennells became involved in a range of public educational initiatives, through which they advocated the active nature of the 'history of everyday life'. This idea of 'doing history' was an enduring legacy, and it was bound up with the social and political question of mass

secondary education. The BBC's Adult Education Committee suggested the Quennells as broadcasters early on, due to the success of *Everyday Things*. Charles wrote seven evening radio talks for the BBC, on everyday life through history, which he delivered between October and December 1924. This was followed by a schools broadcasting course on 'Everyday Things of the Past', undertaken jointly by Marjorie and Charles for the summer term of 1927.⁹⁹ Charles was initially unconvinced, explaining in 1924 that the books 'depend very much on our illustrations'.¹⁰⁰ Feedback on their schools broadcasts suggested that Charles spoke too quickly and used specialist language, both common problems in the early years of schools broadcasting.¹⁰¹ Charles reflected in 1927, 'It is easier to teach boys how to conjugate verbs, than to tell them of the complications of everyday life'.¹⁰² The 'history of everyday life' was contingent on a visuality that the Quennells struggled to evoke via the spoken word alone.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, in their attempts at popularization through this new technology the Quennells were reaffirming that everyday history was best experienced through engaging with the world around us.

The Quennells had more success with museums, which always figured prominently in their historical pantheon.¹⁰⁴ They compared the 'dead' atmosphere of the Victoria and Albert Museum with the lively crowds at the Science Museum, where a purpose-built Children's Gallery had opened in 1931.¹⁰⁵ With its interactive exhibits (such as pulleys and jacks), the Science Museum was ahead of its time in the early 1930s, but there was increasing pressure on other institutions to follow suit.¹⁰⁶ Already in 1930 Charles had been involved in an initiative to establish a Children's Museum.¹⁰⁷ He argued that the layout and framing of museums required a fundamental rethink, reporting that in traditional museums he had often been saddened to see well-intentioned but confused parents dragging their children 'from one room to another on a wet afternoon... quite unable to explain each object in its proper relation to human life and work'.¹⁰⁸ In 1935 the London County Council (LCC) made a pioneering break in placing the Geffrye Museum in Shoreditch, which it had acquired in 1911, under the administrative control of its Education Office.¹⁰⁹ A few months after Charles died, Marjorie began working as the Geffrye's new curator, charged with developing a new educationally focused agenda for the museum (Fig. 13).

From 1914 to 1935, the Geffrye had functioned as a museum for local cabinet-makers. The exhibits were collections of eighteenth-century paneling and other architectural features salvaged from demolished properties across London.¹¹⁰ The move to the Education Office represented a commitment to mass secondary education, rather than traditional vocational training, in a particularly impoverished part of London. This new audience also necessitated a physical reorganization.¹¹¹ By 1937 the Geffrye Museum had three full period rooms, while the other galleries contained exhibits grouped by period. In 1938 this was further developed into eight rooms in



Courtesy of Corbis Images.

Fig. 13. Marjorie Quennell shows schoolchildren her painted figures in one of the Geffrye Museum's period rooms, late 1930s.

chronological order, from 1600–1850.¹¹² These new period rooms were deliberately constructed to be used in the teaching of history, in contrast to traditional museum period rooms, which were reconstructed as static works of art. The Geffrye's newly installed dioramas, which told the story of everyday things from prehistory to the present day, doubtless drew their inspiration from those at the Science Museum showing how scientific developments related to 'our daily lives'.¹¹³ In 1938 the Geffrye Museum received a total of 41,337 visitors, over 20,000 of them schoolchildren, of whom about 10,000 came on their own initiative during holidays.¹¹⁴ Much of this success was due to Marjorie's method of encouraging students to sketch objects in the museum, and her emphasis on explaining how domestic items evolved from 'how the people lived'.¹¹⁵

Molly Harrison (1909–2002), an LCC schoolteacher seconded to the Geffrye Museum, succeeded Marjorie Quennell as curator in 1940.¹¹⁶ Harrison continued to use Quennell's methods, encouraging children to look at objects, ask questions about them, and trace their development across the centuries. She eventually developed a practical programme based around crafts, dressing up and free play in the museum.¹¹⁷ By the

time she retired in 1969, Harrison had made her mark as a pioneer in twentieth-century museums education.¹¹⁸ She stressed that her idea of history was accessible because it was simply about ways of looking: ‘one does not need different eyes for looking at old or rare or beautiful objects’. Although frequently portrayed (not least by herself) as a postwar crusader against the elitist museums establishment, Harrison was clearly building on the same Morrisian arguments for social reform that had inspired the Quennells.¹¹⁹ The gendered aspect of this work at the Geffrye Museum is especially important in linking the two women’s agendas. In the final third of the nineteenth century women had typically worked in museums as charwomen or custodians. But education was the key portal into museums for women in the twentieth century as mass education climbed up the political agenda, exemplified by both Quennell’s and Harrison’s appointments.¹²⁰ Although these specialized entry points meant women were limited to certain spheres of museum activity, namely education or conservation rather than research, the educational museum setting permitted them a latitude to work as popularizers that would not have been possible for the limited number of women historians in universities during the same period.¹²¹

Marjorie expressed uneasiness in her later years about Harrison’s work at the Geffrye Museum, particularly radical plans to replace the eighteenth-century panelling with modern furniture displays.¹²² Although asserting that the two women ‘got on’, Harrison believed that Quennell ‘had limited ideas about what popular meant’, because she was ‘a rather aristocratic lady’ who had written books for ‘the upper class child’.¹²³ Here Harrison was interpreting in class terms what was more of a generational demarcation. Molly Harrison’s ambition to make history more active and accessible was in fact altogether harmonious with the aims of the Quennells in 1918, but Harrison was operating in a social climate where the rhetoric of democratization was meeting new social realities. Marjorie was herself conscious of how much Britain had transformed after 1945. She felt sales of *Everyday Things* were greatly inhibited before the Second World War because people were ‘chary’ of the intention to install a less political and less hierarchal history into the educational establishment.¹²⁴

CONCLUSION

In recent years ‘everyday life’ has entered the vocabulary of modern social and cultural historians quite markedly, as a way of acknowledging the subjectivities and inconsistencies in how individuals in the past have experienced and negotiated social change. This history remains linked to a radical agenda, altered by the cultural turn and the ascendancy of a more individualistic politics, but still inherited from the Marxist social-history tradition.¹²⁵ It is perhaps surprising, therefore, to uncover a very different story when the history of the ‘history of everyday life’ is itself excavated. It demonstrates that the chronology of academic social history in Britain is ultimately unhelpful for thinking about popular manifestations. In British universities,

the mid twentieth century was a period when ideas about how social history might relate to political history fragmented, and when a statistical economic-social history dominated.¹²⁶ But, beyond academia and in the same period, the 'history of everyday life' was providing citizens with a material and aesthetic vocabulary that related history to the 'things' that populate daily life. This was a mild and liberal social history with conservative streaks, not wholly compatible with struggles of class, gender or race that were to become the mainstay of academic social history after 1968.

However, when infused with 'bottom-up' notions of democratization prevalent from the 1960s, the 'history of everyday life' continued to prove itself useful in making history less academic and more palatable to a mass audience in schools and in the heritage sector. Molly Harrison's methods of progressive history-teaching were entering the mainstream of comprehensive secondary education by the 1960s, and were beginning to provoke a reaction from traditionalists.¹²⁷ In 1972 the Schools Councils History project was founded with the aim of making history comprehensible to pupils of all abilities.¹²⁸ At the same time, Britain was on the verge of a heritage boom, which placed history once again at the centre of national life. An increasingly market-oriented heritage sector found that 'living history' generated audiences on the Thatcherite model, but could also incorporate 'everyday life' as experienced in diverse regions and localities.¹²⁹ As Samuel argued, the New Left could not accommodate this strain of populist history in their historiography. Affronted by its commercialism, they found it more reassuring to condemn it as crude and sanitized.¹³⁰ Yet it is still 'history from below', born of the academy, which is credited for stimulating both of these developments in popular historical education. Evidently, we should also be looking back to a longer history of social history, beyond the activities of professional historians and past the labels of 'Tory' and 'socialist', to understand the eclectic origins of such phenomena.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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