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Chapter 1 : The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History by David Hey

'substantial and invaluable' TLS. The Oxford Companion to Family and Local History is the most comprehensive and authoritative guide available to all things associated with the family and local history of the British Isles.

The first part of the book is devoted to twenty articles on various aspects of family and local history. They are by various contributors, and deal with topics such as beginning family history, surnames, researching Afri-Caribbean ancestry, family and society, landscape, industrial and labour history, domestic architecture, historic churches and more. The second part is arranged alphabetically, like an encyclopedic dictionary, and consists of shorter articles, most of them less than a column in length, on a wide range of topics. A random sampling of entries includes parlour, potatoes, pottery and postcards, lectern, leasehold and leather, contraception, copper and copyhold tenure. The longer thematic articles are a mixed bag, and generally I found them disappointing. Some were interesting and informative, while others were merely annotated bibliographies that conveyed little actual information. An example from the article on Domestic Architecture is typical. From the very beginning it was recognised that a regional approach was necessary to chronicle the separate development of the smaller house in different parts of the kingdom, where local craft traditions responded to climate, topography, available building materials, farming practices and economic prosperity, to create local solutions to the housing needs of the population. The two pioneering studies both came from Yorkshire. Addy, a Sheffield solicitor and prolific antiquary on subjects ranging from dialect to cutlery, published *The Evolution of the English House*, and in C. Both books drew on local examples and remain invaluable because they record rural houses at a period before the radical alteration demanded by changing perceptions of public hygiene had obliterated much of the evidence of the original forms. He tells us nothing about the original forms, or the changes - simply that you can find out about them in two out-of-print books that are probably inaccessible to many readers. Nor does he tell us about how local craft traditions responded to climate, topography, available building materials etc. If you are a family historian, and want to know what kind of houses your ancestors lived in, this kind of article is worse than useless. It tells you nothing, except that you have paid a lot of money for a book that does not give the kind of information you expect to find in it. Several of the thematic articles take this form, being simply annotated bibliographies, with no real information at all. If the book were advertised as a companion to historiography, rather than to history, that might be acceptable, but as it is it verges on fraudulent advertising. This kind of writing might be all right as a literature survey at the beginning of an academic thesis, or as an article in a scholarly journal. But at least the literature survey is followed by the meat of the thesis; here there is no meat at all. I might have given it four or five stars, were it not for this shortcoming. The alphabetical section is generally better. One can read a couple of short articles and perhaps jump around looking for references to other things. One can probably find more information on the Web free of charge, like this article on domestic architecture, for example.

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