

Victor Gray, M.B.E., M.A., F.S.A., Chairman

Victor (Vic) Gray, our chairman 2014–2021, died at Halesworth on 30 September 2021 after a short illness aged 74. A man of many parts and many talents, if he had a fault it was excessive modesty. Anyone who spent more than a moment with Vic soon became aware that although characteristically unaffected and self-effacing, he possessed a razor-sharp intellect combined with extraordinary shrewdness and panoptic vision. He was fond of the past but also wise and often remarkably prescient about what challenges lay ahead for the historical organisations with which he was involved, invariably in a leadership role.

These were abilities and insights honed across a long and lustrous professional and academic career. Vic graduated from King's College, Cambridge with first class honours in English in 1968 and then trained as a professional archivist at University College London. He gathered experience in the archives of Devon and Suffolk before becoming head of the Essex Record Office in 1978, then recognised as the most prestigious county archive in Britain. After thirteen years at Essex Vic took up the challenge of developing the internationally renowned Rothschild archive. Under his stewardship the Rothschild collection's reputation as one of the world's great business archives was fortified. Vic once reflected that the job had its perks, beyond the obvious. Most organisations that employ archivists do not possess French vineyards that oblige the keepers of records to occasionally visit. He published *The Life and Times of N. M. Rothschild 1777-1836* jointly with Melanie Aspey in 1998 and contributed four articles on members of the Rothschild family for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

The esteem with which Vic was held within his profession was reflected in his part in other senior offices and consultancies. He was chairman in turn of the Association of County Archivists, the Society of Archivists, and the National Council on Archives. He held the presidency of the Society of Archivists from 2005 to 2008 and was also a board member of the Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives, acting as vice-chairman of its Archives Task Force, which reported on the state and future of British archives in 2004. He served on the Historical Manuscripts Commission and on archive advisory committees for the Lord Chancellor, the Master of the Rolls and the Church of England. After retiring from the Rothschild Archive in 2004 Vic continued to devote himself to consulting, writing and lecturing on archive matters. A keen interest in oral history led him to develop the Oral History Archive for Essex and he was the founder chairman of the Community Archives Development Group which supports the development of community archives across the UK. He also undertook archive development work for Faber & Faber and for the T. S. Eliot Estate.

Vic's career achievements and services to academic history were recognised through the award of an honorary degree by the University of Essex in 1993 for contributions to the study and publication of Essex history. In 2007 he was elected a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. Even more celebrated recognition followed in 2010 when Vic was awarded an M.B.E. for services to British archives.

His return to Suffolk in 2011 coincided with the publication of his second monograph. *Bookmen: London; 250 years of Sotheran bookselling* (2011), a history of Henry Sotheran, the oldest-surviving antiquarian book dealers in Britain, reflected his longstanding interest in historic libraries, publishing and bookselling. This was a passion partly stimulated by Vic's work as a trustee of the seventeenth-century Thomas Plume Library in Maldon, Essex. His other main research interest, the history of utopian communities, was reflected in a more recent publication *A New World in Essex: The Rise and Fall of the Purleigh Brotherhood Colony, 1896-1903* (2019).

Retirement in Suffolk also provided further opportunities for Vic to put his experience and talents to greater use on behalf of the county's history community. He served on the Committees of the Friends of Suffolk Record Office and the Suffolk Heritage Forum, as well as acting as trustee of the Halesworth & District Museum and Honorary Archivist at Helmingham Hall. Vic's association with the Tollemache family library was also reflected in his role as general editor for the Suffolk Record Society's volume 61, *The Household Inventories of Helmingham Hall, 1597-1741* edited by Moira Coleman. In 2014 he was appointed to the role of Honorary Research Fellow in History at the University of Suffolk. In the same year, following three years as a committee member, he also became chairman of the SRS.

It was possibly in his role as chairman of our society that many members reading this appreciation will have mainly encountered Vic, although some will have been fortunate enough to have benefited from his expertise and friendship in other contexts too. Like other chairmen of SRS, Vic found himself following in the wake of another stalwart of the Suffolk history scene and with big shoes to fill. However, it came as no surprise, especially perhaps to the former incumbent who had recommended him for the role, that Vic's personal qualities and experience not only made him the consummate chairman, but also the right man for to refocus the society's activities during a period of rapid technological and cultural change. It is largely thanks to him that many of our volumes are now digitised and available to all to read online.

Putting even these qualities and achievements aside, most of us will long remember Vic as a person of great integrity and warmth, with an understated but extraordinary gift with people. He possessed a serious intellect but never took himself too seriously and rarely let an opportunity for humour slip by. He was a lovely man whom one always looked forward to seeing again.

Harvey Osborne (October 2021)