

LOCAL HISTORY

We will consider the following questions in this paper —What is local history? How has it changed over the years? Why have some professional historians become interested in it? How does local history relate to general history? What role could it play in school history? As follow up reading I refer you to Douch, Stephens, Rogers, Finberg & Skipp, Lowe and Everitt listed in the bibliography at the end of the paper.

Introduction

Until very recently local history was regarded as the history of the local gentry or the church or some person or event of national significance. It tended to be the pursuits of amateurs, in particular the local parson, squire or school master. It was regarded by historians as antiquarian, and parochial, lacking depth of analysis and making little attempt to set studies in their wider context. It had little of importance to say to the professional historian whose main interests were the study of the political institutions of the nation or conflicts and wars abroad. Its use in schools has been advocated since 1905 as a means of providing, where appropriate, vivid illustrations to enliven the generalisations of national history.

Within the last twenty to thirty years the situation has changed dramatically. Many professional historians, particularly those studying social and economic history, have become involved in local or micro-studies. A flourishing department has been set up in Leicester and the name of Hoskins is well known in historical circles. Local History still continues as an amateur pursuit and the numbers involved in this have grown. Ideas from the professional historians and the activities of W.E.A. and University Extra-Mural Tutors have brought a 'professionalism' to these activities. Many schools, both primary and secondary, are already involved in local historical studies. What has happened to produce this change?

In this paper I will concentrate on the changing status of local history within history and its relationship to history in general. I am leaving aside, for the moment, the question of why it has become more popular with adults. The paper will also discuss local history in schools and the arguments for and against its inclusion in the curriculum.

Local History in England

W.G. Hoskins, in a radio broadcast, published in the *Listener* December, 10, 1964 pp. 931-932 made a plea 'for a new sort of history, the life of Man, all sorts of men, and not just political men'. He accused English historians of being snobs, of only studying top people, of seeing everything through the eyes of London. His plea for the study of social and economic man as well as political man was nothing new. Economic history had been established for some time but usually not in the 'history' department. The real point in his argument was that, in the main, historians had seen everything in national terms and had concentrated on the 'Kings and Queens' to the exclusion of the common people. This one would expect in the case of political historians but perhaps less so from social and economic historians. He was speaking at a time when the in-depth study of small areas was beginning to overturn many of the accepted generalisations of economic history. His own study of *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village* published in 1957 had set the standard for many such studies. The techniques of analysis introduced by historical demographers, particularly Wrigley have sharpened local studies of population and suddenly local history had become respectable. It was no longer seen solely as an antiquarian study but was making a significant contribution to the understanding of the demographic, social and

economic history of England. Peter Mathias in an article concerned with economic history in the book *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History*, edited by Martin Ballard in 1971 pointed to the role that local or micro-studies, as he called them, had played in reinterpreting much of social and economic history and emphasised the point that in such studies processes can be analysed 'at the grass roots' in the units through which social and economic changes were being accomplished. (See Appendix 1, page 6 for a fuller account of his argument).

Local history is concerned mainly with change in the locality. Finberg (1967, p. 10) defines local history as the 'origin growth and decline of the local community'. Everitt (1971) the present Professor of Local History at Leicester has defines it as the study of the local community and the development of the local landscape. The landscape side of it owes much to the efforts of Hoskins whose pioneering work *The Making of the English Landscape* was first published in 1957.

Stephens, an educationalist, suggests that local historians are particularly interested in the structure of the local society – the whole community, not merely the ruling class - the occupational structure, the demographic structure, the social structure -the economic basis of the society, in particular local industry, trade and farming. To these are related the topography of the locality, its communication system and those aspects of local government and politics that did not merely reflect the national story. (Stephens, 1977, p. 5). Clearly his definition has been influenced by the academics mentioned in the previous paragraph.

More recently the work of people like Margaret Spufford (1974) and Alan MacFarlane (1978) has added a new dimension to local historical studies. Spufford in her study of three villages has tried 'to portray the villager not merely as an economic animal . . . but also as a sentient human being who could possibly read and even write and who might be expected to have some reactions to the successive changes in his parish church'. She is trying to write the 'total history of the village community'.

It is now generally accepted that detailed case studies are not just an enrichment to social and economic history but are in many cases the substance of it. There is some argument as to whether local history is a study in its own right or whether it is just part of social and economic history. Has it been received into academic circles because of the contribution it can make to a better understanding of the changing social and economic scene? Lowe (1977) sees the work of many of the recent English local historians such as Hoskins, Beresford and Everitt as hardly local history at all. It could, be argued, be called 'aspect history i.e. the investigation of broader national problems through local evidence. Yet many of the local historians argue vehemently that local history is a study in its own right and not as Finberg puts it, 'national history writ small'. Nevertheless because local history is still seen by many academics to be synonymous with antiquarianism, some historians prefer to see themselves as regional rather than local historians. The rise of regional history is a response to the idea that a full understanding of the social and economic life of a country demands regional as well as national treatment. There has also been some regional treatment of certain topics in political history e.g. the English Civil War and the study of local government in Victorian cities.

Everett (1980) makes the point that at Leicester they are trying not simply to write the history of particular regions or local communities but also to "sense the underlying movements and forces behind the development of provincial society". Note the term provincial. What does it mean in this context?

Local History in Ireland

Up until now we have considered local history in an English context. What is the situation in Ireland, particularly Ulster? Ireland does not have its Hoskins. In Ulster there are a number of well-established local history societies with journals e.g. Clogher Historical Society with its journal the *Clogher Record* and the Glens of Antrim Historical Society with its journal *The Glynnns*. Recently the Federation for Ulster Local Studies has been formed and now publishes a journal *Ulster Local Studies*. This body is trying to promote the study of localities by individuals and communities throughout the province. It is beginning to have a semi-political, community relations role.

Academically, in line with developments in Britain, there has been a shift towards micro-studies in the field of Irish social and economic history e.g. in the first four editions of the new journal *Irish Economic and Social History* eight of the fourteen articles have been concerned with micro-studies. (This journal was first published in 1974).

Many people come to local history because it is about a place they know and are partly familiar with. They begin to realise that things around them have some historical significance. They often say this is not the kind of history they did at school. It is probably for these reasons that many adult education classes and local history groups are formed. Their interest may not go beyond antiquarianism but many are interested in placing what they learn in a wider perspective. Is there a similar interest amongst schoolchildren?

Local History and the School

Clearly, in a syllabus dominated by a chronological, political, orally taught, notetaking history, there was little scope for local history. However, two developments have occurred recently which have made its inclusion possible. Firstly as more social and economic aspects of history are introduced into the curriculum then the claim for some local or micro-study is strengthened. Secondly, as the ideas of Pestalozzi, Froebel and Dewey spread, the significance of first hand experience, realism and concrete examples, coupled with the value of activity and individual work came to be appreciated, thus stimulating the study of things near at hand. (Douch, 1977, p.105 – see Appendix 2, page 7).

Let us now look at some of the arguments for and against local history in the school.

What are the arguments against:

1. History is mainly about political personalities and events and whilst ‘striking events of local history should be included’ there is little need for any substantial study of local history. Many teachers see it as an irrelevancy not central to the main business of history teaching.
2. It is really sugar on the pill and should, if allowed at all in the school, be an extra-curricular activity.
3. H.P.R. Finberg, one time Professor of Local History at Leicester, has argued that, in its higher reaches, local history demands mature scholarship and a wide background of general culture. It requires a thorough knowledge of the national context in which local events take place and indeed a comparative knowledge of other ‘local’ areas

within the nation. Lack of this knowledge will often lead to studies that suffer from antiquarianism and parochialism and no one can justify, on educational grounds, these kinds of study in the school curriculum.

4. To teach local history requires a knowledge of a wider range of both primary and secondary sources and much time is required in preparing them for teaching.
5. It also requires copies of resources for pupils, not to mention various organisational changes. To introduce it then would involve a commitment of time and energy and a reorganisation of resources, etc. which would not be commensurate with the anticipated gains on the part of the pupil.

Arguments 1 and 2 are much more fundamental in that they reflect a particular view of history. 3 and 4 can be overcome by knowledge and awareness on the part of the teacher, and more specialist courses. 5 probably requires principals and senior staff to be convinced of the value of local history before they will make the organisational changes necessary for its study to flourish. Perhaps more than anything at secondary level it needs to be examined within GCE.

What of the arguments for:

1. If we accept the earlier arguments about the role of local and regional studies in history then it would seem logical to engage in local history if we intend to teach social and economic history.
2. Local history can motivate; it can allow children to proceed from the known to the unknown; from the particular to the general; it can aid understanding by studying situations near at hand. In other words it can improve understanding of more general ideas by their examination in a more limited context near at hand.
3. Local History provides the opportunity to work with a variety of sources, and can serve as an introduction to the modes of working of a historian. One of the reasons that the School Council 13-16 History Project chose to have Local History (*History around us*) as an integral part of its course was to make pupils aware that the visible remains of the past around us are as an important resource for our understanding of history as written documents.
4. Some teachers see it as an alternative to the traditional political course. It can widen a pupils' conception of history. It can help to show links with other subjects.
5. Community aspect - it can help a pupil in a search for his or her identity. It can establish links with the community particularly if children are asked to carry out work in the local community. It can help children to place themselves in their community and in the wider world of which they are a part. John Magee has suggested that a local history project might well begin by looking out from the school at the community and asking questions about it. How long have people lived here? Have we any way of knowing? What is the oldest building in the town? Did the town grow outwards from there? Why did the town grow? Where did the people come from? Once pupils are involved in this kind of investigation, old mills, market places, derelict kilns and public buildings take on a new significance and, hopefully, the pupils begin to realise

that the community to which they belong is the product of historical forces and influences stretching into the past.

6. Magee also points out that, more important, in a local historical study pupils are also being compelled to do the job of real historians—to ask questions and look for evidence. The Ulster landscape is littered with visible evidence of a rich past, megalith and burial mounds, castles, churches and planned towns. Georgian houses, derelict linen mills and crumbling railway stations. As soon as pupils realise that the history of their community is concerned with the discovery and use of evidence like this, they become absorbed in their work, and are acquiring an interest they will develop in adult life.
7. Some teachers see local historical studies as an activity for the less able pupil because it does not involve traditional political history. However, make no mistake – genuine local history is not an easy option. Some teachers see it as part of an Environmental Studies or Social Studies programme. Some see it more as an opportunity to introduce children to primary sources and historical method. Many, however, see it simply as a means of illustrating national events.

Regardless of how one sees or intends to use local history in schools one point is worth reiterating that all such studies, in order to avoid antiquarianism, must be placed in their wider context and should involve the critical examination of primary as well as secondary evidence.

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Appendix 1

Peter Mathias, 'Economic History - direct or oblique' – chapter in M. Ballard (ed.) *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History*, Temple Smith, 1971.

Micro-Studies

The demand to see processes of economic change in the round has given new life to local history and brought very much higher academic standards to it, evidenced by the establishment of a chair and a department of local history at Leicester University. Problems

of manageability the difficulties of handling so many relationships at the national (or wider) level - establish a logic of micro-studies, where processes can be analysed 'at the grass roots' in the units through which social and economic changes were being accomplished. The 'national economy' is an unreal fiction as the appropriate initial unit of study for understanding many of these processes (though for others, such as the study of economic policy, it is obviously an appropriate one). Very great contrasts existed between the fortunes of different regions and different sectors of the economy as variations in wage-rates, prices, local population movements etc. indicate. In such a situation a 'national average' created by aggregating local data may hide more significance than it reveals. Thus, quite apart from the fact that a smaller unit than the national or industry level may be more feasible to study, it may also prove more appropriate. The accumulation of capital, labour recruitment, business leadership, demographic change, transport development and a host of other themes are being explored intensively in such micro-studies. The focus for research can be a locality, or a firm, a family or group of families, a particular occupational group. Business history, urban history, transport history and historical demography are enjoying, and will continue to enjoy, great activity as a result of this. Perhaps the fastest-growing sector of all in local history is 'industrial archaeology' quite apart from its intrinsic attractions as a research activity, its academic results to date have ranged from pure antiquarianism - the cataloguing of local detail for its own sake - to adding a new dimension to the history of technology .

All such 'micro-studies' have temptations to antiquarianism built into them. Any single one of them also raises the questions 'how representative; how untypical?' of the wider grouping in which each 'cell' is placed — the parish within the county, or the region, the firm within its industry, the family within its social group, the canal within the collectivity of other canals.

Appendix 2

Robert Douch sees local history as contributing to a history education where -

The main purpose of studying the past in school should be to enable children to know themselves and their world better and to live in it more satisfyingly and more effectively. The emphasis should be on the present and the future with the past being used both to help to explain the present and to contrast with it. There can be no fifty-year gap between 'history' and 'now'. The idea of change is a much more important, and less difficult, concept than that of time. Children need to be involved in history, to see it, not as a film which they simply watch, but as a continuing play in which they themselves are actors. Usually, the starting-point should be the children, their world and their interests, with attention frequently focused on the tangible and observable and with the children constantly challenged to find out for themselves. Historical studies should be much more concerned with the specific and should afford opportunities for individual involvement in the appraisal of evidence. They should seek to encourage imaginative insights along and across the past-present-future continuum. It is this historical attitude and awareness that we should be seeking to develop.

Douch, R. (1971), 'Local History' in Ballard, M. ed. (1971) *New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History*, London: Temple Smith, pp. 105-115.

W. Macafee
22.10.1980.