Local history and local history education in the early twenty-first century: organisational and intellectual challenges

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The state of local history: time for a survey?

In the early 1970s, which seem now like headier days, the newly-formed Standing Conference for Devon History (later the Devon History Society) published its first journal. It included a listing of eight courses in local history to be offered in eight different towns and villages across the county by Exeter University’s Extra Mural Department. Meanwhile the five Workers’ Education Association districts of Devon were coordinating sixteen courses in local history. In 2005, as part of its phased closure, the University of Exeter’s Department of Lifelong Learning (formerly the Extra Mural Department) withdrew its two remaining courses in local history—accredited courses by this time available solely via internet access. In 2006 the South West regional office of the WEA advertised for Devon just four courses in local history, in Exeter only. None recruited enough students. In the same year the county’s oldest WEA organising district committee, for Exeter, was wound up.

This local narrative of decline is poignant. It adds to and reinforces the generally prevailing impression of retrenchment that is giving rise to wider debate on the current state of local history. More specifically, such evidence of contraction is leading to mounting concerns for the future of local history education, a framework of provision with which local history more broadly is ‘intellectually and organisationally interlinked’. Indeed, the case for a new survey of local history in this context is a very compelling one. However, does such an image of dwindling education provision and uptake represent a decline of local history more widely? As Kate Tiller rightly points out, a curious paradox is evident: key ways of realising the best of British local history [through local history education] have gone. Yet, the popularity of our subject … is undiminished. Indeed, some would argue that there is currently a resurgence. Local history and local history education provision are of course not exactly one and the same thing, even though their fortunes are and have been essentially intertwined. Local history education is an agent in the development of local history widely defined, seeking to stimulate, guide and critique, as well as to reflect and respond. However, local history education does not and cannot attempt to represent all that is going on under the label of local historical work.

Any survey arising out of current concerns for the state of local history, and the place of local history education within it, could ask provocative questions. What is at the heart of this enduring ‘popularity’, or perhaps ‘resurgence’, of local history? How significant is the misalignment that now exists between the local history education provision which survives and the needs of local history as a whole today? How far is the former succeeding or failing in its role of advisor to and observer of the latter? How far are aspirations for ‘widely participatory and high quality’ thinking and practice, as

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cultivated by local history education, still relevant and sustainable? How far is that misalignment a creation of external circumstances or, even, the making of local history itself academic and popular? Has local history education performed the function that local history asked of it—accomplished largely in those heady days from the 1960s up to the 1990s? Are new and more effective forms of local history education now appearing to fill the void created by the winding-up of the traditional, public and formal provision of higher and further education institutions?

**Local history education: ‘origin, rise, decline and fall’?**

In 1952 H.P.R. Finberg set out for local historians a central guiding theme to inform their study of communities, that of ‘origin, rise, decline and fall’.

Might this same life course be applied analogously to the experience of local history education over the last four or five decades? Local history has evolved considerably during the last half-century. Various books and papers have evaluated the scale of the growth and discussed its expansive and altering character. One essential dimension of the remarkable expansion of local history since the 1950s has been the mutually beneficial organisational interface operating between the activity of university academics or ‘professionals’ and the work of ‘non-academic’ or ‘amateur’ local historians. The respective characteristics and merits of ‘academic’ and ‘amateur’ local history, and the advantages and disadvantages of a relationship between the two, have attracted much scrutiny in *The Local Historian.* However, it has been frequently remarked how tutors leading extra-mural classes have initiated considerable community group output, a phenomenon representing a ‘democratisation’ of the practice of historical research. It is also recognised that local history projects perform a function of fostering community identity and cohesion, and aiding place promotion.

Volunteers, meanwhile, have been willing data-gatherers for academic or professional historians engaged in major research projects—for example, through the work of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, the Family and Community Historical Research Society, and the *Victoria County History.* Furthermore, and of crucial importance, the thinking and practice of leading academic local historians have been informed and influenced by their ‘extra-mural’ teaching activity.

The relatively recent decline—from the 1990s—in the demand for local history education and the contraction in its supply have yet to attract comprehensive and systematic analysis, but local history publications (academic, professional and popular) have commented on the decline in local history delivered by the universities, the local authorities and branches of the WEA. In 2005 this trend was described by the chair of the Socialist History Society as the ‘dismantlement’ of a tradition, and in 2007 by Tiller and Dymond as the removal of the ‘bottom rungs’ of an education and training ladder.

Various reasons are put forward to explain this falling away, some specific to local history, others affecting lifelong learning more broadly: the reduction in state funding for liberal adult education; the discouraging of adult learners following the introduction of accreditation; the increased teaching and research demands placed upon academic staff; the presence of more individualistic and less community-group based historical activity; the increased attractiveness of other forms of leisure learning provision through, notably, television history; and the availability of historical information on the internet and in other electronic media. Evidence is emerging of a new form of institutional engagement taking part of the place of the old. This is in the form of increased interaction between library and archive establishments and popular
local history activity, driven by a public policy agenda of enhancing access, e-learning and lifelong learning provision by the local government libraries and archives sector. Voluntary organisations and societies are playing an enhanced role in initiating local adult education development and delivery.\textsuperscript{13} Clearly, despite retrenchment in the local history education offered by further and higher education institutions, popular interest in local history has not declined. It has been stimulated and sustained by television programmes and internet material, the considerable output of local history publishers, and by much public funding for community history and local archiving projects. The greater availability of computers and electronic data in particular is doing much to drive forwards a ‘new history from below’.\textsuperscript{14}

Given the contraction of the established frameworks of local history education, set against the evidence of resurgence of local history in other contexts, any survey needs to comprehend both the changing nature of local history as a popular cultural activity and the relationship between that activity and effective and sustainable education provision. It is crucial to recognise the ways in which new modes of teaching and course delivery, and the harnessing of information and communication technology, can meet local history’s new as well as its long-established requirements. Can new opportunities be found for a revitalised engagement of academic practitioners with wider, popular local history—for the organisational interface to be restructured rather than terminally dismantled, and for those bottom rungs of the ladder to be restored?\textsuperscript{15}

Present and future: ‘It’s local history … but not as we know it?’

When Finberg introduced his central ‘theme’ for local historians in 1952, he also remarked how ‘in recent years universities have shown themselves disposed to take Cinderella [local history] under their protection. This may be just a counsel of despair; but I would rather construe it as an act of faith in the poor creature’s possibilities’.\textsuperscript{16} In the years since Finberg’s observation the growing involvement of academic institutions has not been welcomed universally or unreservedly, with some local historians regarding aspects of the ‘top down’ intrusion and prescription of academe with scepticism and resistance.\textsuperscript{17} However, many accounts reflecting upon fifty years of considerable change in local history have given much regard to the great progress in thinking and practice amongst its various practitioners. Much of this has been led by academic local historians working ‘on the ground’ and extra-murally with groups and communities, and brought about through the operation of the local history education and training ladder. Local history has responded to successive developments in landscape history, the ‘new’ local history, ‘community’ history and microhistory, thereby promoting approaches that would become more socially inclusive, less prejudiced against the ‘modern’ past, and more conceptually and methodologically innovative. This agenda, and the activities of academic and non-academic, local historians have been much influenced by advances made elsewhere in the discipline of history and beyond.\textsuperscript{18}

However, local history remains very sensitive to the charge that it lacks theoretical and conceptual sophistication and rigour. Professional historians often regard it as not ‘serious’ as a distinctive endeavour, despite practising considerable local historical enquiry themselves. The contraction of local history provision by universities can be to some extent be explained by this. Yet, for local history to have a future, academic and non-academic, it requires ongoing intellectual revitalisation.\textsuperscript{19} Local history is largely empiricist and positivist in its leanings—about facts and figures, and objective explanation and contextualisation. Some argue that it now needs a degree of
intellectual restructuring, confronting the post-modern paradigm and making itself relatively more aware of subjectivity, particularity and provisionality in its thinking and practice. Put differently, the objective and empirical pursuit of historical knowledge and understanding ought to be supplemented by a more reflexive engagement with how different versions of the local past are constructed. At a time when local history is seeking to comprehend its present activities, some in decline and some in resurgence, there is certainly a case for closer examination of what local historians choose to think and do, and why. A problem is that with the breakdown of the organisational interface between academics and non-academics, built up through local history education, comes a corresponding erosion of the vital two-way intellectual dialogue. The result is that opportunities for academics to disseminate useful elements of current theoretical, conceptual and methodological progress in history and in other disciplines will be reduced, with a weakening of understanding by academics of what ideas and approaches are being cultivated within the vast and creative output of ‘amateur’ local history. A fuller appreciation of what local historians seek to undertake and achieve is perhaps necessary perhaps, to inform what academic or professional historians can or ought to teach within the local history education of the future. Any enquiry needs to identify what is or what will be relevant and effective in serving and sustaining the ideally ‘high quality and widely participatory’ activity to emerge in years to come.

Appraisals carried out recently highlight the key trends apparent in contemporary local history. Kate Tiller, for example, singles out the growing significance of local historical study of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in terms of what its conceptual and methodological implications may be. Also prominent are the popularity of community and living history projects, the demand created by the pursuit of individual and family history, the progress being made in academic local history around the approach of microhistory, and the proliferation of histories relating to the marking of anniversaries. Margaret Proctor emphasises the need for local historians to participate as activists, influencing policymaking in the increasingly ‘born-digital’ age of electronic source creation, archiving, access, interpretation and manipulation. At the same time there remain for David Dymond the ever-relevant preoccupations of community, locality and region.

There are other unfamiliar, problematic, perhaps even threatening, directions and developments to add to the list of considerations for local historians and local history education providers in the early twenty-first century and beyond. First, information and communication technology is moving far beyond merely preserving historical resources and making them more accessible. Already being realised are increasingly sophisticated virtual local historical environments in which information and knowledge is created, shared, interacted with, manipulated and extracted. These will not replace the printed text, but for many local historians in the years ahead such environments will be a primary trigger of interest in and mode of engagement with local pasts. The use of virtual learning environments to allow schoolchildren to interact with the local past is a conspicuous current trend. Local historians have a role to play in the evolution of these electronically ‘published’, hypertextual local histories, influencing the character and quality of their content and determining their sustainability, accessibility and utility for a wide range of users. As Matthew Woollard indicated ten years ago: ‘the potential impact of “virtual reality” on historical studies is almost unimaginable’.

Second, the concept of heritage in local history has been largely overlooked or (perhaps understandably) avoided as a particular focus of intellectual attention among local historians. Meanwhile academics (historians, geographers, and others) have developed and diversified their analytical understanding of what heritage encompasses.
The long-established contribution made through the custodianship and study of antiquities and inheritable resources, for example, is still recognised as being of great significance. The activity of government in the preservation and conservation of structures, landscapes and townscapes clearly constitutes a powerful dimension. Also very much in evidence is the function of the heritage ‘industry’, that supposed ‘commercial candyfloss’ ever threatening to distract historians from the pursuit of their nobler craft. However, during the last ten years the academic field of heritage studies has brought the investigation of cultural identity to the fore. Indeed this tendency is to be found more broadly in academic research. Of particular relevance here are those cultural identities attached to places and local groups, and the ways in which those identities are formed, represented and contested, today and historically. This view of heritage from the perspective of cultural identity runs through much contemporary local history activity, and is a key to comprehending what local historians do and for what purpose. The study of cultural identity can give a more specific and tangible dimension to progress in postmodern theoretical debate in local history, as signalled in the ‘Sheerans’ article—that is, in explorations of subjectivity in the writing of different versions of local pasts. Cultural identity is a missing conceptual link in Shannon’s valuable consideration of the crucial connection between the ‘producers and consumers of local history’, and how the former meet, fail to meet, or decline to meet the demands of the latter. Cultural identity is a driving force behind so much community history activity and local history ‘anniversary-making’, phenomena in many cases sharing similar objectives: the creation of communal archives and narratives, the enhancement of local awareness and pride, and the empowerment of sets of individuals and groups. After all, heritage agencies are leading providers of public funding for much of the current resurgent community and local history activity, even if such funding brings with it agenda-laden possibilities and limitations. Cultural identity is an explanatory factor in the increasingly high profile of certain relatively new areas of local history research and publication, such as histories of ethnic minorities and local studies of mid- to late-twentieth century themes. Finally, promotion of the cultural heritage of places and groups, and defence against threats to them in the present, remain primary and very powerful stimuli behind the urge for many local historians to preserve, record and chronicle. Reactions to development, despoliation and displacement, as much as opportunities to celebrate and memorialise, often transpose into the clarion calls for new local historians to arise within their communities.

If the development of information and communication technology, and greater recognition of (and sensitivity towards) cultural identity are to become more profound in influencing the work of local historians and of society as a whole, should anything else be named here? A third concern for the decades ahead must be climate change and sea level rise. There are difficult choices to be made: which ecosystems, communities and landscapes will be preserved, which will mutate, and which will disappear. There may be much for ‘rescue’ local historians—equipped with their personal and well-informed knowledge of, and commitment to, local places and societies—to take up, in observing, recording and relating the evolution and disappearance of cultures and environments. In some respects this represents a grand ‘coming full circle’. Twenty-first century local historians would do well to look to work of their antiquarian forebears, a group whose mode of history writing was much criticised in the twentieth century. The antiquarians, typically in the face of non-existent, inadequate or embryonic recording of policy-making and its implementation, bequeathed to us closely observed impressions of some of the great environmental and cultural upheavals of the past and their consequences—Dissolution, enclosure, urbanisation and industrialisation. Antiquarians were (or were allowed to be) far less
'discipline-bounded' than modern academics and professional researchers: 'They wrote and asked ... about everything and anything ... Their interests were diverse, eclectic [even if], to a later generation, often dilettante and even eccentric'. 57 This type of broad-minded curiosity is appropriate when considering the scientific and cultural breadth of the challenge which climate change presents to the historic environment. In the 138th annual volume of Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Promotion of Science, Literature and the Arts—a fine survival of the diverse and eclectic antiquarian tradition—two articles are tellingly brought together: one, by an academic geographer, on predictions for the rate of sea level rise in the South West; the other, by an amateur local historian, on the challenges encountered in caring for Devon’s physical and human environment over the last century and those, including global warming, for the years ahead. 58

Conclusion

A certain fin de ouveau siècle mood, ushered in by the turning of the millennium, has given rise to much rumination on local history past, present and future. Where the focus has been on retrenchment in local history education, that mood might justifiably be tempted into a millenarianist sentiment. However, local history as a whole is something far bigger and more durable, though continuously evolving. This article, like other observations, point to some of the great challenges, possibilities and pitfalls for local history today and in the future. It reflects on the purpose of academic local historians and their responsibility to explain, provoke and predict; the purpose of local history education and its responsibility to encourage analysis of the theoretically, conceptually and methodologically troublesome, and to equip practitioners with essential ideas and approaches; and on the 'continuum of experience and aspiration' 39 that ideally sees the merging of the 'academic' and the 'amateur', 40 a continuum that has been and should remain a defining feature and strength of local history.

Although the organisational and intellectual interface between academic and non-academic local history has contracted, it will not diminish entirely, it can be revitalised, and it can emerge in fresh and more relevant forms. Better evaluation of what has been dismantled and what are the lessons to be learned would be instructive. More important for the future, however, is closer study of the immense amount of popular local history activity being undertaken, a significant amount of it publicly funded. This should determine the education and training needs—theoretical, conceptual, methodological and technological—of practitioners, and shape how academic or professional historians can contribute to knowledge and understanding and to new forms of teaching and learning provision.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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34 Crosby, 'The Amateur Historian and The Local Historian', p.153


36 For example: *Eastern Evening News* (28 Mar 2008) 'Boats to be lost to the sea'; *The Times* (29 Mar 2008) 'Climate change: surrender a slab of Norfolk, say conservationists'

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39 Crosby, 'The Amateur Historian and The Local Historian', p.150

40 Tiller, 'Local history brought up to date', p.157

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