Local and Regional History as Heritage: The Heritage Process and Conceptualising the Purpose and Practice of Local Historians

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The expansion and evolution of local history over the last half century has given rise to both celebration and critical self-reflection. This attention has been stimulated by the continued importance of local history as a popular cultural activity, in parallel with, paradoxically, a relatively recent decline in academic teaching provision in the subject. The reflection on the characteristics and role of local history has yielded searching consideration of its relationship with the pursuit of history more broadly, most especially in the academic discipline. However, little work has approached comprehending local history as being by its very nature also heritage. This paper turns to a series of essays by academic and non-academic practitioners for a county history society’s journal over a period of 35 years, in order to shed light on the place of local history in evolving understandings of heritage as process.

Keywords: Local History; Regional History; Heritage; County; Devon; Process

Local History Today: History and Heritage?

Local history in the early 21st century faces certain key issues that have been provoking critical self-examination within the subject. In terms of intellectual advance, a particularly challenging consideration is whether it should explore more fully the postmodern paradigm, and not remain content solely with established empiricist and positivist historical approaches. Most evidently, it is argued, it should commence a fuller and illuminating process of self-reflection on the way in which it subjectively reconstructs
and represents local pasts. It is through such theoretical endeavour that it can underpin claims to progressiveness, distinctiveness and status as a sub-discipline. A further issue, however, hampers this problem of intellectual development. Despite its continued significance as a popular cultural activity, there has been a contraction in the academic teaching of local history and a reduction in the demand for extra-mural course provision. The dwindling of outreaching academic local history has and is having profound implications for advance in the thinking and practice present in the subject. Notwithstanding, attempts are being made to foster new intellectual vitality in local history.1 This paper seeks to contribute to this by exploring the insufficiently acknowledged and understood centrality of heritage in local historical activity. Indeed, the place of heritage has particular relevance for intellectual debates on subjectivity in a local history that accommodates postmodern thinking.

The modes of intellectual thinking and practice present in local history as a historical pursuit (local history taken in this paper to embrace local and regional history) are relatively apparent, for they are dominated by approaches that are associated with and drawn down from the discipline of history as a whole. Leading local history texts aimed at academic and general readerships discuss, if not unproblematically, principal conceptual preoccupations of theme, place, community, scale, boundary, time, period and context; and the methodological sequence from question formulation to data gathering to analysis to final publication is laid out. There are also specialist papers engaging with the more challenging theoretical, conceptual and methodological questions for local historical research posed by the likes of postmodernism, globalisation, regionalism and microhistory.2

Less clear is a comprehensive and systematic appraisal of the place of heritage. Heritage as a concept escapes substantive attention in the leading local history literature. The Local Historian, for example, the principal journal of academic and non-academic local history, has been and continues to be concerned primarily with local history as history: the unearthing and communication of historical knowledge.3 A problem is that there are to be found sceptical, even negative, attitudes to heritage in some local history thinking. Local history is history, and its seriousness and status as a historical sub-discipline is to be found in methodological rigour. Local heritage, meanwhile, serves another and different purpose, namely that of consumption. Its handling of the past is subservient to that objective, so much so that history in this context is freely open to manipulation and distortion. Edward Royle, for example, remarks:

The contrast [in local history] should not be between serious amateurs and serious professionals, but between well-designed and theoretically structured local historical research conducted on the one hand and the vapid commercial candy-floss of the heritage industry on the other.4

This aversion to heritage amongst some local historians is mirrored more broadly in the antipathy shown by professional historians elsewhere to the concept—an antipathy that has in turn attracted critical scrutiny.5

From elsewhere in the local historical literature, however, can be pieced together various references, if often implicit or made in passing, to the significance of the
concept of heritage. Well-established antiquarian local history has long been obsessed with, and arguably overly so, the antique and the ancient—the material remnants and monuments, in built and manuscript form, of the local past. Moreover, antiquaries and local historians have customarily spoken out against the threats to heritage brought about by changing cultural tastes and development pressures. In more recent times, in the decades following the Second World War, local historians did much to discover documentary records—the raw materials for future study and scholarship. Moreover, the abounding of local history as a cultural activity was to a great extent driven by and dependent upon the preserved documentary heritage accumulating in new public repositories.

In the late 20th century it was recognised that the popular interest in heritage offered the practice of local history the possibilities of applied research work and greater professional recognition. Local historians can, or certainly should, have a role to play in aspects of local government: being consulted on heritage preservation policy, finding involvement in museum work, and contributing to place promotion strategies. The publications of local historians can intentionally or inadvertently promote heritage tourism to a place. Local historical activity is also an established mode of celebrating heritage of place around notable moments and events, such as the turning of the millennium. Local historical work demonstrates a concern for and a potential to foster contemporary senses of local and regional identity, distinctiveness and consciousness. It can also contribute to local social cohesion and community regeneration. For Michael Williams, describing local history as a ‘human journey’: ‘The study of local history is important because of people’s need to feel connected, to feel they have roots in a collective enterprise of living, to share an origin …’. Thus, it appears that the place of heritage in local history is various. Again, though, a comprehensive and systematic conceptual understanding of the significance of heritage in relation to local historical activity requires fuller investigation and analysis.

Academic and Popular Local History: Essays for the Devon History Society

This paper is one of a pair that reviews the published work of a county history society in the form of essays published in its journal, *The Devon Historian*. This has been undertaken to mark the 35th anniversary of the Society and its journal, and to consider its past and future. The review is also occasioned by a change of editor in its 35th year, the author of this present paper. The anniversary and review is also set in the context of the immediate post-millennium years, during which there has been much other purposeful appraisal of the popular and academic local history of up to and centred around the year 2000.

The Devon History Society was founded as a co-ordinating body to promote historical activity and the work of more localised parish- and town-based history societies within the county. This agenda was modelled on that of the Standing Conference for Local History, set up to represent activity and groups nationwide. Devon History Society membership continues to be made up of affiliated local societies as well as individuals, academic and non-academic, with interests in the history of the county.
The new Society would hold conferences and local meetings around the county. Its journal would publish current research, identify areas of much needed investigation, notify members of events and courses, relay contact details and other information relating to local societies and organisations, and feature the provision available at record offices and libraries. Archive repositories, planning offices and adult education establishments would become regular contributors of notices. Since 1970 the journal has been published twice a year. On average each edition has contained half a dozen short articles. The Society and its journal would aim to raise the profile of local historical study in the county. The contribution of the existing antiquarian body, founded in 1862, was considered to be inadequate. For the Devonshire Association for the Promotion of Science, Literature and the Arts history was one of a range of interests, and its local history events tended to be restricted to the county capital, Exeter. Moreover, the Association’s Transactions came to favour lengthy, convention-bound and peer-reviewed papers.12

The earlier companion paper considers issues in local history as a field of history more broadly defined, mutating hand in hand with the wider discipline. Local history over 50 years can in fact be understood as process, and experiencing the problems of intellectual synthesis brought about by mutation—problems mirrored also in the pursuit of history as a whole. It is argued that to engage with this process and its attendant issues adequately requires a far fuller analytical engagement with popular local history, for local history is in its essence a phenomenon that is well entrenched outside the academic domain as well as within. Moreover, in such popular historical activity, contextualised alongside the academic, major intellectual paradigms and the significant shifts taking place between them can be discerned. Accordingly, in essays in The Devon Historian (by both academic and non-academic historians) key paradigm changes in thinking and practice can also be identified, supporting the idea of a local history that is not fixed but dynamic—a process.13 In this present paper essays in The Devon Historian since 1970 are explored for the perspectives that they offer on a process-based understanding of the relationship between local history and heritage. The articles published in the journal over the last 35 years—just over 400—are concerned largely with the practice of history, that unearthing and conveying of historical information. However, the approaches taken in many pieces also fall within academic conceptualisations of heritage.

Just as local history as history can be understood as process, evolving as part of the broader pursuit of the study of the past, academic and popular, it can also be comprehended as a process allied to the evolving endeavour of heritage. Heritage as a publicly or collectively understood set of interests and activities has mutated through time—heritage also has its history. Ashworth’s 1994 conceptual framework focuses on the chronological development of the public planning of heritage in the European context. From the mid-19th century the preservation mode—the care of heritage for its intrinsic worth—dominated thinking and practice. By the mid-20th century preservation had been joined by conservationist approaches—allowing for the factor of contemporary function to be considered as well in heritage policy making and management. In the third quarter of the 20th century a commodification-oriented heritage ‘industry’
came to parallel the others in its public profile and in the popular consciousness. Writing later, with Peter Howard, a differently framed history by Ashworth reflects on the longer view, considering the pre–mid-19th century ‘amateur crusade’ led by antiquaries, learned societies and the early museums, and their paving the way in the practice of discerning intrinsic worth in, collecting, and preserving a collective heritage. In addition, this second history turns to an assessment of subsequent national policy framework development, and its changing emphasis from the end of the 19th century: from inventory making to designation to protection to intervention. In the late 20th century heritage policy evolution had reached a stage of adjustment and modification, and of coming to terms with contradictions and compromise. There is also a fuller realisation in the present of the potential of heritage for both underpinning and undermining cultural identities. Elsewhere, Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge recognise this prominence today of cultural identity formation, alongside commodification, in understandings of heritage. Edson, meanwhile, gives particular emphasis to the contemporary centrality and potency of cultural identity construction, for ‘Heritage, in the best circumstances, enfranchises the emotionally and culturally disenfranchised.’ The various modes of heritage thinking and practice evolving over time—antiquarianism, preservation, conservation, commodification and cultural identity formation—are used here as a way forward in analysing the heritage significance of local history.

Local History and Antiquarianism

The antiquarian approach to heritage emerged well before the establishment of public heritage policy frameworks. Antiquaries studied, collected together, and supported the preservation of the material past: monuments, buildings, manuscripts and other artefacts. They also compiled monumental works of county and national history, originally written by their authors as pioneering histories. However, they are no longer so; antiquarian history would be rejected ‘because of its lack of a consistent subject matter, methodology … or intellectual purpose beyond recording and recovering’. The histories of the antiquaries are now heritage themselves, material fragments of an early modern culture as much as rich encyclopaedic repositories of local historical information.

W. G. Hoskins, leading local historian and founding President of the Devon History Society, was a prominent critic of antiquarian history, deriding its parochialism, chronological and social bias, and lack of contextualisation and explanation. Yet he encouraged local historians in the Society to persist in their popular purpose of collecting and recording knowledge resources in documented and published forms—to meet present and future needs (as Ashworth puts it, ‘heritage implies the existence of a legatee and is only definable in terms of that actual or latent user’). In his inaugural address Hoskins asked the membership to avoid parochialism, but still to undertake grand data-gathering projects in the antiquarian manner—for posterity:

One project that has always interested me—though too big for one man to tackle—was the compilation of a Dictionary of Local Biography, brief summaries of the lives and careers of men and women of note, born or spending their working lives in the
Figure 1  Front cover of the 10th anniversary edition of The Devon Historian. (Reproduced with kind permission of the Devon History Society and Devon Library and Information Services from the collections held in the Westcountry Studies Library.)
county of Devon … A dictionary of these local worthies would be an invaluable work of reference for future generations.\textsuperscript{22}

The antiquarian impulse has customarily attracted individuals from varied backgrounds: doctors, clerics, lawyers, squires and so forth. Henry Williamson, novelist, for example, incorporated amongst his responsibilities as ‘serious historian’ the documenting of the language of a disappearing local rural culture:

Dialect words—they hid them sometimes from strangers, believing them to be inferior, some of them probably in use before the Norman Conquest, others as old … The exact and simple speech of their forefathers, until they understood I was finding value in it, was deprecated.\textsuperscript{23}

Various authors have written for \textit{The Devon Historian} with the purpose of recording what has been or is being lost, the likes of landscapes, standing structures, photograph collections and memories.\textsuperscript{24} Front covers of the journal have been given over almost entirely to the reproduction of 19th-century views, images held in public collections and supplied by local history librarians co-operating with and encouraging the work of the Society. In addition, it is not only in text that Devon local historians have sought to record and memorialise. The Society itself has periodically recognised the heritage significance of physical memorials and participated in their creation: a plaque for Ernie Bevan on a one-time residence, another to mark the birthplace of W. G. Hoskins, and a memorial to commemorate one of the risings of the West, the Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549.\textsuperscript{25}

The Devon local historian Neville Oswald celebrates the ability of local historians to establish the knowledge base required to inform current and future historical research. Moreover, given their varied professional backgrounds and experience, they are arguably better equipped to do this than professional historians. There is a tendency towards antiquarian description and recording, rather than the explanation and analysis required in the practice of academic history. Nonetheless, akin to antiquaries in their collective character, ‘amateur’ local historians have much to offer. Writing of the authors of the various articles published in \textit{The Devon Historian} by non-academics or educationalists:

The remaining half were variously occupied. Five engineers wrote respectively on two distinguished engineers of the past, a floating bridge, a nearby railway and, for good measure, a poet. Farmers, housewives and self-proclaimed amateurs recorded their different interests. Half-a-dozen diplomats and civil servants chose the two most popular subjects, namely biography and a local item from within their parishes … This motley collection of authors, with professors rubbing shoulders with beginners, gives recorded local history its particular flavour.\textsuperscript{26}

Antiquarian work, therefore, may fail to meet the criteria demanded in the craft of modern history, yet it has yielded and continues to yield a resource heritage perceived as valuable in the present. As Lowenthal observes: ‘heritage lumps together all the past, commingling epochs without regard to continuity and context’, and yet also ‘heritage stewards stress that only a past reanimated through present efforts can remain relevant today’.\textsuperscript{27}
Figure 2  Front cover of the 25th anniversary edition of *The Devon Historian*. (Reproduced with kind permission of the Devon History Society and Devon Library and Information Services from the collections held in the Westcountry Studies Library.)
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Local History, Preservation and Conservation

Ashworth’s 1994 conceptualisation of preservation and conservation refers to the development of public policy frameworks from the mid-19th century and through the 20th. Preservation and conservation existed before this time, of course, with antiquarian local historians being among those concerned with the care of the material and non-material relics of the past. In this section, though, is considered the work of local historians in relation more specifically to those evolving policy frameworks as identified by Ashworth. Local historians have featured in protest against the damage brought by modern development, and as activists demanding public policy protection of heritage artefacts—as historical resources and components of the heritage of localities. Moreover, there is a case for local historians developing a greater statutory profile in the planning consultation process, and not being drawn solely into research. The concern of local historians also extends to the conservation of larger and more dynamic heritage contexts, those of local landscapes and built environments. Essential here is the fascination felt by the ‘little platoons’ of popular local history with the physical and visual evidence of the past, a fascination inspired by the work of W. G. Hoskins and other advocates of a ‘history on the ground’.

From the start the Devon History Society promoted and pioneered preservationist approaches amongst its members, and where appropriate work with public agencies and campaigning groups with statutory recognition. Through compiling, recording, surveying and cataloguing, local historians could participate at various points in what Ashworth and Howard term the ‘recognition’, ‘designation’, ‘conservation’ and ‘interpretation’ stages of the heritage process. The economic historian and Society co-founder member Walter Minchinton called upon local historians, among other ‘tasks’, to participate in a milestone survey that could inform a policy of reinstatement, and collaborate with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in a watermill scheduling campaign. The Society’s membership has also counted planning officers among its body. Such individuals have encouraged the forging of the bridge between the practice of preservation and research in local history. They have seen it as their task to notify local historians of key legislative changes affecting the built heritage. They have also conveyed the potential of preserved building and landscape resources as objects of study. Peter Hunt, a conservation officer, articulates particularly well the worth of heritage material for research, acknowledging the significance of the work of W. G. Hoskins. For Hunt and Hoskins a valued and protected vernacular heritage provides a different form of resource. It supports fieldwork rather than the customary preoccupation with archives, and yields new and challenging interpretations:

Local history is rather more about the ordinary man, whether relatively rich or poor, pursuing his daily labour and enjoying his pastimes and humdrum existence, than the national figure however prominent his part in national affairs … Many of the old buildings we see in Devon are as important for their silent commentary on a gradually changing society, as for their beauty and their interesting construction and furnishings.

In their use of visual material local historians have also come to recognise the common ground they share with archaeology. Papers have appeared in The Devon Historian
carrying the findings of archaeologists and discussing the place of archaeological methods in local historical research. Moreover, three of the Society’s 12 presidents have been archaeologists.35

An article by another planning officer, however, acknowledges that antagonistic relations had also become apparent by the 1970s, with preservation and conservation interests of amateur local historians and heritage groups often ranged against the development agenda of planning and other statutory authorities. The author, Robert Sherlock, calls upon readers to place their interests outside the context of academic enquiry, and consider more practical application—to become activists engaging with and collaborating over the protection of heritage:

The town planner looks to the future; the local historian looks to the past. The two have little in common; they can afford to go their separate ways. So, at first sight, it might appear. The salary-earning planner, responding to commercial and political forces to influence the course of history, sets slight value on an academic pursuit. The historian, deriving no financial gain from a pastime occupation, recognises in the planner a profession dedicated to destruction of the buildings that are part of his raw material … The trouble is that it is not the town planner but society as a whole will suffer if decisions are taken and if policies are formulated without due regard for local historical interests.36

The Devon Historian, moreover, does include articles reporting on the activity of local historians, ‘the little platoons’, taking the role of activists in the preservation and protection of local heritage, and on occasions against the position taken by statutory authorities. This is represented, for example, in the recovery, restoration and reinstatement of the preaching cross of Churston Ferrers for the Millennium, an objective that required the overturning of the objections of civil and ecclesiastical agencies. The project was motivated by a sense that the cross symbolised a common people’s heritage that it was a duty for locals to restore.37

Commodification

For Ashworth, commodification is central to the notion of heritage as ‘industry’: ‘a contemporary commodity purposefully created to satisfy contemporary consumption’.38 Yet historians, including local historians, have often distanced themselves ideologically from the distorting and selective tendencies of the heritage industry in its representations of the past: ‘whether hawking medieval squalor or chocolate-box nostalgia, heritage outbids the seemlier pasts of historians, antiquaries, and aesthetes’, as Lowenthal observes.39 This said, some local historians recognise explicitly the role of the heritage industry as a crucial stimulus in generating popular interest in local history and giving it cultural significance: ‘the desire to explore the history of “local” places has never been so strong … the “heritage trade” has recently entered the world of business’.40 Moving on from this position, Dennis Mills points to the opportunity for local historians to become more involved in the heritage industry and more specifically the place marketing process, and to act as authoritative counterbalances to excessive or erroneous practice in interpreting and presenting the past.41
Articles in *The Devon Historian* examining the role of and engagement in the heritage industry in relation to local historical activity are, perhaps understandably, rare, reflecting again the stance customarily taken by local historians. One article, though, by a Society member and also a planning officer does reflect fairly substantively on the significance of the heritage industry as an initial and essential stimulus. Asking the question ‘Exploring Devon’s Past: Why Do We Do It?’, the author, Simon Timms, undertook research on attitudes among archaeology and local history groups and classes. His observations note the considerable growth of amateur activity, and its paralleling of expanding interest in heritage:

A sample of 222 local history societies in existence in 1979 found that less than thirty had existed prior to 1946. At one stage in the 1970s it was estimated that a new museum was opening somewhere in England every week. The popularity of local societies and groups raises the question of why people seek to join them as members. Various reasons have been put forward … the serious purpose of furthering historical understanding … [also] other motivating factors such as nostalgia, a wish to resist modern development and a sort of theme-park escapism.  

Timms found the importance of the place of heritage to be reflected further in the answers to why people had been attracted to local history and archaeology in the first place. His article reproduces a list of reasons why, as given by a number of the local historians and archaeologists questioned. Interpreting the responses Timms gives emphasis to the apparent significance of childhood experiences and contact with preserved heritage as a stimulus for local history interest, for example:

Fascinated by castles as a child … Went on a National Trust guided walk, which happened to start outside the front door … Grew up on a Welsh farm surrounded by historic sites and later went to evening classes … Became interested through visits to the local museum … Taken by father for walks to see historic sites … Taken by mother on walks around Exeter … As a child, saw an historic building being knocked down.  

The place of the heritage industry, however, is not only about its role as an initial stimulus; there is also active engagement by local historians. Another article observes how the published products of local historians—parish and community histories—are multifunctional. They are not solely attempts to convey local historical facts objectively, but are clearly also aimed at the promotion of place to outsiders and consumers. Local history publications can be leisure guides as much as they are authoritative histories, with their authors participating in the commodification of the local heritage.

**Local History and Cultural Identity Formation**

The quest for and creation of cultural identities, and the place of heritage in this, is regarded as being of considerable importance; it is a product of the contemporary world. This encompasses ‘a growing concern with the local, the familiar and the distinctive …’, and ‘an at times nostalgic focus on place is … another corollary of these changes’. In the cultural realm heritage is an essential dimension in the formation of various forms of socio-political identity. Of particular importance for this discussion is...
the construction of senses of place and how they contribute to place identities. The creation of senses of place, and identity with those places—local communities and regions—has gathered in significance, transforming from ‘twee nostalgia to major enterprise’.46

The relevance of postmodernity and globalisation and their relationship with the formation of cultural identity has not escaped the attention of local and regional historians. Some have come to recognise the cultural importance being placed upon local and regional difference and distinctiveness, and the political recognition underpinning this in trends towards the devolution of government and administration. Indeed, the historical study of local and regional entities is given added worth in its informing of the building of contemporary identities.47

In *The Devon Historian* it is evident that some articles discuss interpretations of local and regional change that highlight the erosion of the identities that were apparent in the past.48 In other contributions, however, authors accept change, but also see it as one of their tasks to influence and sustain contemporary constructions of local and regional identity and distinctiveness that are recognisable despite the impact of modern change. In the first volume of the journal in 1970, W. G. Hoskins indicates this possibility through a study of the surname heritage of the county:

There are said to be a hundred thousand surnames in this country, some common to all parts, others more or less peculiar to one county and even one small part of it … Despite the population movements of the past hundred years or so most families still show a remarkably limited range of distribution.49

In the early 1990s Charles Phythian-Adams addressed the Society. A particular focus, he argued, should be the evaluation of 20th-century change in order to discern how far regional identity has been eroded or is being sustained. Indeed, the comprehension and preservation of an awareness of regional identity is dependent upon adequate historical study of recent local change:

Even today, English society is not wholly homogenized—or not quite! All English regions, and the West Country more than most, still retain something of their distinctive local identities. That said it is also true that most of us working in local subjects tend to characterise such identities by evoking them for periods other than our own … The result? We have come to regard the ‘past’ as something ‘lost’ rather than as something constantly ‘replaced’ and hence uninterruptedly connected to *us* … We must guard against the assumption that, within only a few years of its completion, that last century of the second millennium after Christ still contains no matters of significance to local historians and, worse, that the analysis of it which has yet to be unfolded will merely be to do with the sorry degeneration of regional identity.50

Although writing somewhat earlier, in 1977, the political historian Jeffrey Stanyer gave the promotion of local and regional identity particular focus in *The Devon Historian* by discussing the importance of the boundary in study. The concept of boundaries should not encourage parochialism, he argues, but instead the situating of local places in the context of the interplay of wider forces. Furthermore, the study of boundaries is part of the democratic process, for they demarcate historic spatial identities to be defended against political pressures:
All over the world local government systems are created by the confrontation of a downward thrust and an upward thrust from the localities … The achievement of a ‘harmony’ between social and administrative boundaries is a major source of pressure for reform … There is thus great scope for the local historian to study the details of local administrative history, and it can be argued that research into boundaries has a priority, because the drawing of the lines themselves affects the identity and personality of the local community.

Local and regional identities are, of course, neither monolithic nor static. Place identities are socially constructed and reconstructed, contested and debated, and draw selectively and variously on aspects of the past and on contemporary local characteristics. Robin Stanes, reporting in *The Devon Historian* on the unveiling of the ‘Battle’ of Fenny Bridges memorial, reflects on the contrasting and competing local, regional and nationalist claims that could come to be attached to such a site. Curious to him were the various groups and their representatives that attended the event: the West Country ‘Western Rising’ group, from Cornwall Keskerdh Kernow and the Gorsedd of Bards, from Devon the County Council, the Honiton Local History Society and a local Catholic priest.

The article in *The Devon Historian* by Simon Timms on ‘Why Do We Do It?’ recognises the personal identity forming nature of local historical activity. Citing the academic local historian Alan Rogers, he notes that:

much of the popularity [is] down to such factors as a search for roots, identification with community, a sense of exploration, and a concern to slow down the pace of change … [and] a desire to contribute to scholarship and the chance to make contact with real evidence.

However, local historians exhibit a more developed sense of purpose than pursuing merely a self-motivated nostalgic quest for personal rootedness, for the vast output of local history publication plays an active part in the formation of place identities for wider, collective consumption. Examined in articles in *The Devon Historian* and elsewhere, it is evident that published place histories constitute a strata-like body of literature: versions after versions, representations after representations of the local past. Moreover, this practice is well rooted. Local histories of the 19th and 20th century, and earlier, have sought to promote the status of places through the establishment of historical pedigree, even if tenuously or spuriously based on fragmentary archive evidence, relict landscape and architectural features, and hearsay. Histories of Brixham and Axminster are good examples of this. Each local historical publication is a highly subjective product of reconstruction, balancing in contrasting ways ‘record-based history’ and ‘olden days’ narratives.

This literature also aims to serve various functions in the present, constituting the likes of commemorative parish histories, local heritage surveys, visitor guides and the end products of community group work. Such versions and representations of the past are intended to inform senses of local cultural identity, instilling collective historical awareness, fostering social cohesion amongst those within, and stimulating heritage leisure and tourism for locals and visitors alike—‘they help cement identity with a place … gifts both to present and future people’. Moreover, the rounds of published local
histories of place have become heritage themselves over time, ‘artefacts’ of the mutating communities that produced them. Indeed, the literature provides a rich resource for further exploration into, as McLean calls for, the under-researched area of identity negotiation and construction in heritage.59

Conclusion

The theorist of local and regional history J. D. Marshall comes to a particular definition of local history as being a collection of interests rather than a coherent historical discipline.60 It is argued in this paper that an understanding of what these interests encompass can be best achieved by conceptualising the purpose and practice of local history as both history and heritage. It is local history’s combination of interests, modes of heritage and of history that lends it distinctiveness and popularity. ‘Heritage and history are not so much disparate species as opposite sexes, ever contesting roles and domains, yet mutually dependent and with more in common than they like to realize.’ Local history is an exemplar of this mutual dependence, ideally combining ‘history’s lofty universality with heritage’s possessive intimacy’, as Lowenthal adds.61 Heritage is not an unsavoury word to be viewed with suspicion, to be tainted for evermore by its association with aspects of the heritage industry and its ‘playing with the past’.62 It is located here as a dimension—a key motivating force—which runs through and across the pursuit of local history. It is evident in the necessary empirical knowledge gathering that is undertaken in support of antiquarian, preservation and conservation activity; it is present also in the more subjective pursuit of cultural identity creation that is essential to senses of the regional, local and individual and to the heritage commodification process.

Acknowledgement

This article is dedicated to Harold Fox who died in August 2007. Professor Fox was a landscape and local historian of the Centre for English Local History, University of Leicester. He was also a member as well as a former President of the Devon History Society. It was with his encouragement that this exploratory piece on the significance of heritage in local history was written.

Notes

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[22] Hoskins, ‘Welcome from the President’, 1. This project is revisited in Reed, ‘Devon Worthies’.


[27] Lowenthal, The Heritage Crusade, 137, 142.


[38] Ashworth, ‘From History to Heritage’, 16.


[43] Ibid., 26–27.
[48] Jackson, “‘The Serious Historian of the Village’”.
[49] Hoskins, ‘Welcome from the President’, 1–2. The potential of this exercise is indicated in Hey, ‘Continuity in Local and Regional Identity’.
[58] Williams, *Researching Local History*, 263.

References


