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Introduction

The Ermine is a large housing estate in Lincoln built by the local authorities in the 1950s. This article reports on investigations of the history of the estate carried out since 2008. The account draws upon a summary of progress that was presented to ‘Researching and Writing Local Histories of the Twentieth Century’, a combined conference of the British Association for Local History and the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology in 2010. The conference paper explored a relatively uncharted aspect of the history of Lincoln, the story of the Ermine, as well as made reference to a wider historiographical context concerning the development of local history and approaches to the local historical study of the twentieth century. This article, developing upon the conference paper, brings together a number of lines of enquiry opened up by the case-study explorations on the Ermine.

The research on the estate has prompted reflection on the nature of local history, and the rise to prominence of a ‘community-focused’ agenda in the present. Local historians working on the twentieth century are examining a period in which the pursuit of
local history itself evolved considerably. Local history would develop hand-in-hand with other recognisable and closely-related fields of study, which include: community history, landscape history, oral history, family history and micro-history. Influence on local history would also derive from advances elsewhere in the wider discipline (in social and economic history, and quantitative history, for example); while progress among local historians, notably of the ‘Leicester School’, would come to have an impact on broader historical practice. The local history identifiable by the end of the twentieth century was relatively more open to embracing the study of ‘modern times’, keen to engage with an array of documentary and field, and tangible and intangible, source types, and would aim for greater inclusivity in its investigation of local societies in the past. Developments in other areas of the discipline of history, and indeed in other disciplines sharing common ground, have contributed much to this process.\(^2\)

In this article, and in the original conference paper, is a certain amount of consideration of the disciplinary and sub-disciplinary interplay that has taken place, and its influence on thought and method in local history today. The opening section examines the existence of and relationship between local history and community history, and draws attention to the presence and relevance of a ‘community-focused’ local history. Here the attention turns to the history of the Ermine Estate and the ethos and rationale guiding its study. There then follows a discussion of the significance of the community engagement dimension of local authority programmes of landscape characterisation. The recent work of the Lincoln Townscape Assessment is introduced. A further aspect, and one featuring most
prominently in the conference paper of 2010 and in this article, is research on the role of community newspapers and magazines, and their importance as a primary source for later twentieth-century community history. The significance of a community newspaper, the *Ermine News*, is evaluated.

**On ‘people-focused’ community history and ‘community-focused’ local history**

The level of self-reflexivity and meta-theoretical engagement, or rather lack of it, within local history has been the subject of critical comment. There have been calls for closer examination of core purpose and pleas for more progressive intellectual endeavour among practitioners of local history, in particular attending to the need to come to terms with postmodernist approaches. An ongoing challenge has been that of putting forward a persuasive case for self-reflection and the advancement of theory-informed thinking while also managing to ensure that practice, output and ethos remain as accessible as possible to the local history community as a whole: ‘academic’ and ‘amateur’, ‘professional’ and ‘popular’. The case-study work on the Ermine estate has stimulated broader consideration of the aims and approaches of local history in the early twenty-first century. The relationship between local history and community history is of special relevance. This article explores where local history can be seen to overlap substantively with community history, and identifies a sphere of shared interest and application labelled here ‘community-focused’ local history.

The nature of the engagement with the Ermine raises the question: is the research that is in progress on the estate best
Are the terms local history and community history interchangeable then? Ought the two to be distinguished from one another at all? Mills comes to the view that community history is ‘more consistently analytical and academic in
approach than a great deal of local history’.  

John Beckett, meanwhile, sees the study of community as a long-established and central concern for the local historian. For many local historians the study of the local means, in effect, the study of community. Moreover, in Beckett’s chronicle of local history certain specialisms of interest to local historians are recognised as having formed disciplines in their own right: family history, urban history, landscape history, vernacular architecture, industrial archaeology, oral testimony, place-names and heritage. However, community history does not earn inclusion in this list. In a more polemical treatment, J.D. Marshall also bypassed the presence of a community history. Marshall, like Beckett, discussed the dominance of the concept of community within local history. He rounded upon this, though, arguing that the obsession with community served to contain and constrain thought and practice among local historians.

Sheeran and Sheeran, in another chronological overview of local history, give greater prominence to the place of community history. They recognise the attempts made to carve out for it an identity as an academic discipline as well as a popular pursuit. Community history played a part in the expansion, modernisation, diversification and democratisation of local history. Proponents of community history saw it as being especially accessible to those coming to local historical interests via family history. It would also open up new methods and secure rigour through interdisciplinary approaches. The contribution of Open University programmes in family and community history through the 1990s is essential here. Community history also addressed certain shortcomings evident in local history. The ‘Leicester School’ agenda of Hoskins and
Finberg had brought much progress, but it did cultivate in local history a preference for rural and pre-modern contexts. However, Sheeran and Sheeran ask whether community history, like local history, has also fallen short of delivering progressive theoretical advance. Quite a number of conceptualisations of its central concern, community, have evolved, but no one framework has been settled upon as paradigmatically definitive. This said it is questionable whether it is possible or necessary to arrive at a precise crafting of such a complex and mutable concept as community. Assessment of the differences and similarities between local and community history recognise some important areas of distinctiveness, but is there a strong case for fundamentally separate identities for the two? Similarities in methods, if perhaps not so much in standards, appear to outweigh differences. Quite sensibly some proponents of community history have concluded that the primary task should be about encouraging the emergence and application of sophisticated and robust methodologies for exploring communities, rather than seeking a precise conceptualisation of the central theme of community, or indeed dwelling on the distance between community history and local history. The development of community history, it can be claimed, has served to enrich, strengthen and extend local history. It has contributed to the evolution of community-study methodologies, and to understandings of how communities exist within and across places, and, in certain contexts, express placelessness.

In the early twenty-first century the ideological edge that community history might have had over local history no longer holds the same force. Local history has closed the gap with community history in becoming far more open to exchange with
family history. In addition, the early twenty-first century has seen a great deal of the work of local history steered by community engagement and accessibility, ushered in, notably, by the turning of the Millennium, and by the operation of outcome-driven heritage funding. This movement is reflected in the recent work of the *Victoria County History* and its adoption of the more populist ‘England’s Past for Everyone’ programme. The driver of heritage funding that lies behind much of the community-led local history of today has been called into question. Such funding of local history is vulnerable to political changes, bringing fluctuation in the levels of grant-funding that is available and modification of application criteria. Community-led activity is no less prone to selectivity and partiality in its objectives as other forms of local history, and is quite likely to be guided in this by the whim of local and national government directives. Furthermore, community engagement supported by public funding will not alone provide for a secure and sustainable future for professional local history, reeling after the closing of much adult education provision. Community group work, cooperation with local societies, and an ethos of popular mission are, or perhaps were, well-established traditions within academic professional and academic local history. They were essential features of the work of the historians that used to run university extra-mural and Workers Educational Association classes ‘of old’. Now heritage funding has emerged as a more likely sponsor and terms of reference. Indeed community engagement and participation, much directly funded by the state, has been a particular feature of local history over the last ten years. This agenda has lent local history considerable momentum, and has brought further popularisation. The community-led context is recognised as a fertile ground, if as yet little explored, for local historians
seeking to situate and open up theoretical interpretations of the contemporary purpose and practice of local history. It could be investigated more fully, in order to inform study of the significance of cultural heritage formation and processes of place- and group-identity construction, both within the field of local history and without.\textsuperscript{17}

This article reports on the first phase of a community-focused local history project. Such history brings a perspective on place, in this case the Ermine council estate in Lincoln. Of equal significance is the perspective on people, with a primary aim being the production of a history of a group of people – here, the community of the Ermine. Furthermore, where community-focused local history relates to the twentieth century up to the present, it is representing a community that is quite likely to be to a great extent still alive. In this context the material output can become a history for as well as of the people. Such historical study of the twentieth century has a living constituency to speak for. Indeed historians, community-led in their mission and approach, can take on the role of agent or advocate, representing communities whose histories have not been adequately recorded and reproduced. In doing so, the work of historians can help to contribute to a local community’s feeling of collective cultural identity and heritage, as well as exploring areas of entrenched dissonance and discord.\textsuperscript{18} It is such objectives of community-focused local history that have much motivated the research on the Ermine, that is, historical activity closely engaging with, responding to, and speaking for the living. It is a type of history that has great significance, for it engages with the near past with the express purpose of affecting local life in the present. There are of course issues relating to how far community-focused
methodologies are community led – or ‘bottom up’. The ‘community-focused’ descriptor might better signal the presence of an external agent directing research on the ground – as on the Ermine. Whatever the description, if handled clumsily, community engagement can be partial, excluding and misrepresentational; if handled skilfully and sensitively, it can be awareness raising, identity building and socially empowering.

Local history, landscape characterisation and community engagement

The article so far has discussed the development of and relationship between local and community history, and the existence of a ‘community-focused’ agenda today. The research on the Ermine has also drawn attention to an interesting overlap between the community focus in current local history and the type of landscape history that has been brought into being by programmes of landscape characterisation. The first phase of the study of the Ermine required some initial place orientation: an exploration of the local built environment and the physical and human place of the Ermine. Such research incorporated well-established methodologies within local history: the mapping of boundaries, description of topographical features, the study of building types, and identifying the legacy of long-view environmental change. Such practices are of course familiar within landscape history, a discipline closely related to local history. In fact investigations have paralleled the work of the City Council in producing a Lincoln Townscape Assessment (LTA), which incorporates the Ermine as well as the rest of the city. This programme has been generating assessments that capture the inherited townscape features of 108 character areas
of the city. The purposes of this are to promote awareness and appreciation of local environment, and to provide an information base for the planning system.\textsuperscript{19}

The LTA programme, with support from English Heritage, aims to secure wider and popular endorsement through its methodology. The field-study process includes public meetings and interviews, in order to record the environmental and cultural perceptions of local residents themselves, and capture some of the historical knowledge of place held within communities. The LTA and historic landscape characterisations more broadly are making active engagement with local people an essential part of their approach - part of a ‘place-centric rhetoric’ and ‘sense of place’ agenda guiding the contribution of characterisations to the planning and management of the environment.\textsuperscript{20} There is some common ground between such publicly-funded landscape characterisation and the community focus in local history. The self-reflexive practitioner interested in the future development of local history may find the comparison of the conceptual and methodological frameworks of characterisation and community-focused historical activity quite illuminating.

Field study and archive work, together with reference to the Lincoln Townscape Assessment, has informed the preliminary local historical research on the place that is the Ermine.\textsuperscript{21} To put the Ermine in a wider context, the estate was established at a time when addressing housing shortages and improving living standards was seen as a national priority. Between 1945 and 1966, some 60\% of Britain’s homes would be built by the local authorities. In Lincoln, over this same period, the city achieved
a higher proportion, 70%. Targets for house building set by national government would be raised in the early to mid-1950s, at a time when much of the Ermine was constructed. Lincoln developed new council estates, a few miles south of the city centre, at Hartsholme and Boultham, but it was the Ermine that was the biggest of all, located between the radial roads of Burton Road and Nettleham Road to the north of the city centre. Riseholme Road, meanwhile, the line of the Ermine Street, runs through the middle, dividing Ermine East and West. Today the Ermine constitutes 9% of Lincoln’s built up area, and houses around 6,000 people.\textsuperscript{22}

The Ermine townscape assessments map the estate’s sinuous road design, a layout making very little reference to the former landscape of enclosed fields.\textsuperscript{23} The construction of the estate began in 1950, and it was largely completed through the 1950s. At various points in the estate are to be found large land plots holding a range of public and commercial buildings, such as the combined church and community hall on Ermine East of 1956, the Lincoln Imp public house of 1957, and the Congregational Church of 1960. The design of the estate also featured wide verges and many small, green open spaces. There is also a diversity of housing types: low blocks of flats in a yellow brick; terraces and bungalows houses in red brick; and some semi-detached pre-fabs. Into this predominantly 1950s landscape are some structures characteristic of the 1960s. These are one tower block, Trent View of 1964, on Ermine West; and, on Ermine East, the church of St John the Baptist of 1963 designed by Sam Scorer, with its hyperbolic parabaloid roof.
Community-focused local history and the potential of community newspapers

The opening phase of the research on the Ermine has considered people alongside place; with the townscape of the Ermine being investigated along with community life. Study has explored how were the people represented, and how do their lives feature in primary sources? The main primary sources used for the study of the Ermine to date are located in the parish church of St John the Baptist on Ermine East. There is held in the church an archive on the development of the estate, collected together by the present and former incumbents, and the church-going community. In 2009 Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln secured funding that has allowed for the digitisation of much of the archive, especially the older, unique and historical material.

One of the most important items in the archive is the *Ermine News* of 1957-65. This can now be found, in an electronically-searchable format, on the church’s website, in its e-archive. This community newspaper is a little smaller than tabloid format in size, comprising, generally, four printed sides. It has many of the design and content features of a professionally-produced, wider circulation, local newspaper. It is also akin to a community magazine, being aimed at a localised market, produced by and for the community. The publisher is in fact the parish church, and the editor, the incumbent. The *Ermine News* came into production not long after the arrival of the editor-to-be, the Reverend John Hodgkinson, following his appointment as Priest-in-Charge on the estate. The *Ermine News* seems to have appeared once a month, although there is not an edition for every month of the nine-year run. Its first issue is that of January
1957, seven years into the life of the estate. Its production comes to an end with the edition of May 1965, upon the departure of the incumbent to the United States for a year’s exchange. The *Ermine News* was printed by the parish church, and the life of the church and of community groups using the church hall facilities do feature prominently. However, good representation is also in evidence of the life and work of other institutions, facilities and networks emerging across the estate, such as schools, shops, the library, and also Congregationalist and Methodist groups.\(^{25}\)

Historians have done a great deal of work on local and regional, or ‘provincial’ newspapers, especially of the nineteenth century. Local newspapers are records of the past for historians to plunder, and schemes have been devised for transcribing, indexing and cross referencing their content, and reproducing them in microfiche or digital formats. Local newspapers, however, are also rather more than this; they are artefacts, a physical legacy of the function that such printed matter performed in contributing to the creation of senses of local place and group identity. Local and community newspapers, historically and today, are influenced by their readerships, and, in turn, seek themselves to influence their readerships. There are important questions for historians to ask of any newspaper being used as a primary source, notably, of its selectivity, partiality, representativeness and impact. Nonetheless, to greater or lesser extents, local and community newspapers exercise a role in the forming of place and group identities, and this comes across in a number of ways.\(^{26}\) The *Ermine News* sheds light on four modes of local influence here: spatial, political, economic and social.
Perhaps first and foremost newspapers map out territories: that is, they form and are formed by readership catchment areas. The Ermine News was produced for the developing estate. Significantly, it actively sought to bridge across the divide of Riseholme Road, between Ermine East and West. In its articles it aimed to cultivate a sense of community cohesion across the whole of the estate as it was being constructed. This was advanced in 1958 when the estate became an ecclesiastical parish. Indeed this was celebrated in an article in the Ermine News in the January of that year, announcing the forthcoming independence of St John’s from the parish of St Nicholas. The same front cover features a model of the new community church and hall for Ermine West. This would be built, and there would emerge hopes expressed in the Ermine News for a parish for Ermine West as well. However, trends in churchgoing would not come to justify a second Ermine parochial unit, and in the 1980s the hall church would be deconsecrated as a place of worship. This front cover also contains an article entitled ‘Let’s drop “Estate”’. This and other similar articles give some suggestion of the sense of community identity that had built up by this point - in the eighth year of the life of the estate. The term ‘Estate’ implied for the writer here a housing estate under development, not, as perhaps might be assumed, a council estate, a term coming to carry derogatory associations. The columnist is arguing that the Ermine estate was far less of a building site now, and more a neighbourhood, a living community in fact; the word ‘estate’ could be dropped. Moreover, the ancient and well-recognised name of ‘The Ermine’ would suffice as the neighbourhood’s title.
Local newspapers and community magazines can be political, or, at least on certain selected issues, they can be campaigning for the people and groups that they aim to represent. There is some evidence of this in the *Ermine News*. The front page of the first edition of the paper notes that 1353 houses had been built, allowing for 5000 people to be accommodated; and that 600 further houses were planned. The article also draws attention to the deficiencies becoming apparent in the design of the estate. The newspaper called for more corner shops to supplement the work of the church and public house in cultivating a sense of neighbourliness. In articles in other editions the newspaper follows through the planning process much-needed enhancements to community facilities: a new church and community hall for Ermine West, a replacement church for Ermine East, and extensions to the Lincoln Imp public house.

There are also occasionally articles discussing the crossing over of aspects of religious and political life, such as a notice on the visit of the local MP and a talk by him on the subject of ‘Christians and politics’.

Local newspapers and community magazines can also be commercial. They may be profit-making businesses themselves, or, perhaps, they set out to raise money for charities or to at least cover their overheads. Whatever their financial basis, where they provide advertising space they can take on an important commercial function. The inclusion of advertisements means that they contribute to the fostering of local economic networks and patterns of trade. The centre spread of the final edition of the newspaper of May 1965, for example, features a number of the retail premises that had been constructed across the Ermine, with their trader occupants. The *Ermine News* advertisements
can be used to repopulate the new shops that had been built, such as in the Lambeth House parade on Ermine East. The advertisements placed in the *Ermine News* also include those for services elsewhere in Lincoln, not accommodated on the Ermine itself. There is to be gained here an impression of the form of trade relationships that had to be maintained by inhabitants beyond the bounds of the estate, or at least the external trade relationships that these advertisers were seeking to cultivate.

Local newspapers and community magazines represent and promote forms of social life. This may in fact be their primary function. They report upon and foster the local leisure and pleasure activities at hand. As might be expected, the *Ermine News* was going to feature most prominently the social life revolving around the church and church hall. However, it has to be remembered that public buildings were, in the early years, very scarce in number on this large estate. The combined church and community centre on Ermine East was the first public building to go up, in 1956; the Lincoln Imp public house followed in 1957. The combined centre is now just a church hall, following the building of the later church of 1963. The *Ermine News* suggests that it a was a much used venue. In the 1950s it saw church services, as well as various other forms of activities. Pages with news from local groups, such as in the April 1958 edition, suggest that some more than others incorporated a religious or Christian dimension to their organisation and activity, for example: the Church Lads’ Brigade, self-evidently; and the Young Wives’ Club, with its talks on ‘When to call the doctor’ alongside ‘The family of God and the Prayer Book’. 32
An effective method of using the *Ermine News* has been to juxtapose its content alongside that of the local newspaper the *Lincolnshire Echo*. Files of the *Echo* are available in public repositories. In addition the Ermine community archive itself holds a series of *Echo* cuttings on events considered important to the repository’s contributors, in most instances the current or former incumbents. Articles from the *Echo* serve to amplify or extend the content of the *Ermine News*. Some while before the *Ermine News* appeared, for example, as the building of the estate was underway, there were reports in the *Echo* on progress. In July 1952 articles reported on the balance to be achieved between speeding up the rate of construction, while not compromising living standards. Faced with this dilemma, planners took the decision to reduce corridor space and provide one rather than two W.C.s.\textsuperscript{33}

The richness of the source material uncovered in the church archive, especially the content of the *Ermine News*, has the potential to support a local history of Britain in the 1950s and 1960s as much as yield a chronicle of the development of the Ermine. This assessment of the significance of the archive led to the funding of its digitisation, and will encourage further research on the estate.

**Conclusion**

This article is a summary of some of the work carried out so far on the history of the Ermine in Lincoln. Early investigations have identified various historical themes, important primary sources, and rewarding lines of enquiry relating to the
development of the estate. The study has also opened up historiographical perspectives of wider significance.

Local newspapers are a major source for historians of the twentieth century. Community or neighbourhood newspapers and magazines, where they survive, will become a valuable primary source as well. They are of particular relevance for the community-focused local historian. Collections of such newspapers and magazines not only offer a record of the life of communities, but they are also the legacy of the contribution that this type of media made as an agent in fostering community life. These publications offer an insight into community processes: the formation and function of networks and the creation and evolution of identities. They show selectivity and partiality, as do all newspapers and magazines, but this is an inevitable, essential and indicative element of the purpose that they aimed to fulfil.

Consideration of the state of local history, present and future, would benefit from further and deeper examination of contemporary activity. There are legitimate calls for opening up contexts in which postmodernist approaches can be considered. However, substantive responses to this agenda are still awaited, and are far from securing a conspicuous and credible place within local history. The community focus of much current research and engagement is evidently a striking feature of practice today. This focus has its roots in the evolution of local history and community history in the last century. Differences in the intent and output of these two histories are apparent, but it is the common ground that is of greater prominence now. The
wide-ranging community-orientated impetus over the last decade has weakened the relevance of the lines drawn up between the two. The community focus has given rise to both possibilities and misgivings. Yet, there is useful investigation to be done in making a connection between such work and developing theoretical thinking in local history. What does this mode of activity offer to intellectual progress in local history and history as a wider discipline? What is the nature and significance of its contribution to societal processes, such as its instrumental role in forming collective heritage and group identity? Does the community-focused or led agenda offer up contexts for exploring reflexively, seeking connections with meta-theory, and examining the case for the application of postmodernist thinking in local history?

There is also a relationship to be explored between community-focused local history and landscape characterisation, where practice across the two displays similarities in method and outcome. Moreover, it might be asked how far developments in such areas reflect some wider convergence of work in local history with policymaking initiatives in cultural heritage and the statutory planning and management of the environment. The construction and then deconstruction of liberal adult education through the second half of the twentieth century has been much discussed. Highlights of this process have been the dismantlement of university adult and continuing education departments and the contraction of Workers’ Educational Association provision. With this has been a falling away of institutional support structures for local history, and the rapid shrinkage of a corporate context for academic and professional local historians to operate within and from. Today, how far is
heritage policy a more conspicuous driver of local history, especially of the community-focused and community-led varieties; and to what extent does it act along with or aside from education policy? How influential are state heritage frameworks and instruments in the outreach, engagement and productivity of early twenty-first century, academic and professional, local history?

NOTES


3. A number of articles by George and Yanina Sheenan form an essential component of this critical perspective, for example: ‘Reconstructing Local History’, The Local Historian. Vol.29, No.4. 1999; and “‘No longer the 1948 Show” – Local History in the 21st Century’, The Local Historian. Vol.39, No.4. 2009. Others have also reflected on the course of theoretical progress in local history, such as: Malcolm Chase, ‘Stories We Tell Them? Teaching Adults History in a Postmodern World’, Studies in the Education of Adults. Vol.32, No.1. 2000; Alan Crosby, ‘The Amateur Historian and The Local Historian:


12. David Hey overlooks community history in his historical overview of modern local history, but does celebrate the coming together of family and local history; in ‘Local and Regional History: Modern


24. Content from the St John the Baptist Parish Church Archive (SJPCA) is at St John the Baptist, Ermine, Lincoln (SJBEL), ‘eArchive’. (SJBEL. Lincoln 2010), available online at: http://www.stjohnthebaptistparishchurch.org.uk/eArchive/index.php [accessed: 30 April].
