RESEARCHING AND WRITING LOCAL HISTORIES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: AN INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

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This themed edition of the journal brings together a number of the papers presented to ‘Researching and writing local histories of the twentieth century’, a conference held at the University of Lincoln in April 2010. The event was organised and supported by the British Association for Local History (BALH), the Society for Lincolnshire History and Archaeology, the University of Lincoln and Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln. Thanks are expressed to the various representatives of these organisations and institutions who assisted in the planning and delivery of the conference.

The conference developed out of an initiative to provide a national, residential, local history tutors’ conference. Such a tradition had been maintained up to 2008 by the Association of Local History Tutors. This Association merged with the BALH in 2009, a move which followed the direction taken a little earlier by CORAL (the Conference of Regional and Local Historians).¹ This retrenchment and consolidation was a reflection of wider processes including, notably, the contraction of local history teaching provided by universities and other lifelong learning providers.² Notwithstanding, in the manner of ALHT events, the BALH conference aimed to appeal to a national constituency of local and regional history academics and practitioners, while also drawing upon the assistance and
contribution of local societies. Former members of the ALHT are thanked for their encouragement of the hosting of the 2010 conference, and its drawing upon the tradition of the annual local history tutors’ event.

The BALH conference of 2010 sought to identify a theme of general interest and significance, which could also be examined and reflected upon in the context of the particular locality in which the event was to be staged. This rationale had been one influencing the format of the ALHT conferences; the Association’s last had been on ‘Local history at a crossroads’, which considered the challenges for local history in the early twenty-first century, alongside innovative new directions in the subject. The 2010 event chose a theme that had been featuring more prominently in historiographical and agenda-setting articles in the journal of the BALH, *The Local Historian*, and other publications: the comprehensive and systematic conceptual and methodological engagement with the local past of the twentieth century. Some commentators have commented on the long-standing cultural inertia, perceived and actual, within local history, which has weighed against its embrace of the historical investigation of more recent times. Others, meanwhile, have nudged and prompted local historians to turn their gaze more fully square upon the twentieth century.

The choice of Lincoln as a place to host the event was especially appropriate. In 1989 Lincolnshire had offered up the first county history of the twentieth century, and in so doing established something of a model for other regions to follow in bringing their local histories more closely up to the present. The editor, Dennis Mills, referred to the understandable hesitance shown by
local historians towards tackling the volume of primary material that the twentieth century has left and the various and numerous lines of enquiry that could arise from such material, as well as their discomfort in confronting a past seemingly so near to the current. Nonetheless, for Mills, the task was essential while memories were relatively rich. Moreover, the acceptance that the future will inevitably bring rounds of critical revision and review should not discourage local historians from rising to the challenge. As a historical geographer, Mills was also less deterred by the coming together of, and collaboration between, history and heritage in their attending to the near past. For Mills, history, like heritage, could be put usefully and expressly to the service of the present, in promoting places and fostering identities. Indeed, over the last decade, historians of the county have been coming together to produce a ‘Survey of Lincoln’ series, which, among its achievements, is ensuring that aspects of local twentieth century change are adequately chronicled, better understood and more popularly appreciated.

A series of papers was presented to the conference. David Stocker, in ‘The East Midlands: does such a region really exist?’, investigated regional boundaries and identities in ‘the long view’, and also considered approaches to local and landscape histories of the Cold War. In ‘Making our voices heard: using oral history to uncover Lincolnshire's hidden female agricultural workforce’, Abi Hunt examined the rewards, and methodological and ethical dilemmas, arising from the employment of one key source for investigating the twentieth century - the oral testimony. Claire Hall, in ‘Twentieth-century prisoners of war in Lincolnshire’, and John Makin, on ‘Conscientious objectors’, turned to a moment in time into which historians have found themselves ‘parachuting’, in order
to conduct local historical studies of a particular phase of the twentieth century – a reflection of a current and broader preoccupation with the reinterpretation and re-presentation of the Second World War.

A paper by Kate Tiller opened the conference and opens the proceedings here, appropriately subtitled ‘an overview and suggested agenda’. Dr Tiller discusses the formidable task of approaching twentieth-century local history and how well local history as a subject is equipped for the undertaking. The article turns to the great body of work by anthropologists, sociologists, geographers and oral historians that indicate ways forward. The paper also considers the use and abuse of the past through personalisation, commercialisation, consumerisation and commemoration. In the second part of the article the author outlines an agenda for local history, setting out a thematic approach to the study of the twentieth century, and illustrating it with references to local studies undertaken in the UK as well as observations on the treatment of the recent past in the likes of the Irish Republic, Germany and Russia. The article concludes by touching on the nature of the source material at hand, and the saving and sorting of sources. Finally, Kate Tiller reflects on watersheds and endings - in particular, what point in the later twentieth century is far enough from the present for objective assessment not to be compromised?

The second paper, by Andrew Jackson, opens with a historiographical discussion of the evolution of local history. He makes a series of connections between the development of local history and of community history, considering how the two share common ground while also expressing alternative purpose
and method. Dr Jackson notes the relatively more open stance of community history towards the study of the twentieth century. The article examines the degree of synthesis between the two ‘histories’, and the emergence in the present of a ‘community-focused’ local history driven by cultural and political agenda. The paper then turns to illustrations of community-focused activity apparent in the recent townscape character assessment undertaken by the local authorities in Lincoln, as well as the author’s own work on a 1950s council estate in north Lincoln. The work on the estate has made much use of a neighbourhood newspaper, exploring its value as once a creator of, and now a historical source for studying, community identity. Andrew Jackson concludes by speculating on the role of heritage policy as a key factor in evolving local history today, replacing the lead once offered by the now largely withered away frameworks of extra-mural education and lifelong learning.

In the third paper, by Andrew Walker, local and regional case-study work features more prominently, as does a key theme – relations between the urban and the rural. In this study the specific conceptual context is relations played out between a city, Lincoln, and its rural hinterland. Dr Walker examines the expression and mediation of this relationship through the histories of an annual horse fair, a hiring fair and a county agricultural show. Around these events relations have evolved and contrasted. The article prompts consideration of when does or should local historical study of the twentieth century begin? The need here, in Walker’s paper, for tracing events, beliefs and practices back into the nineteenth century, or at least forward from it, conjure up notions of a ‘long twentieth century’ as a concept. The article is also about the need for professional historians to explore and then challenge certain prominent
cultural constructions, perceptions and prejudices that endure in popular understanding, notably, idealisations or stereotypings of the nature of the rural and of the levels of discordance or concordance between urban life and rural life.

The final article is by Shirley Brook, and is a synthesising of landscape, architectural and oral history in the study of smallholder farming in areas of Lincolnshire. The paper’s value is in, among other things, the reminder that it issues to local historians of the already vulnerable state of the primary sources available for investigating local history of the twentieth century, in this case farm buildings. The article rightly calls upon local history practitioners to engage now, given the degree of loss to the historical record that is taking place in the present. Dr Brook’s article is also an illustration of how strong political and ideological impulses have set government policies in train, only to see them fade, and all within the course of the twentieth century. The study of such impulses is of course a challenge, especially when their undermining is relatively recent, and a succeeding ideology might be the one that currently prevails. Shirley Brook’s paper, at the case-study specific level, is an examination of the legacy of local and national state intervention in the planning and organisation of land tenure and farm practice.

The proceedings selected here touch on many issues and considerations faced by the local historian setting out on the study of twentieth century history, as did the conference itself: interdisciplinary historiography, chronological scope, source types, methodological techniques and conceptual frameworks. In the content of the articles are to be found cautionary tales and
compromises, as well as promising lines of enquiry and new approaches. Unifying the articles is the authors’ call upon local historians to engage now: to save and to record primary sources, before those which are fragile crumble away, and those which are less tangible fade; to set out agendas and systems of organisation to guide and assist future local historical enquiry; to name and to challenge the prejudices and misconceptions that are so readily arrived at and assimilated, even within a generation or two; and to set down interpretations and lines of argument – if to see only some endure, and others crushed. As Dennis Mills wrote of writing twentieth-century local histories of Lincolnshire: whatever the difficulties, they still ‘add up to an argument that a start must be made... authors will be well pleased if their work is used as a springboard for further research and publications, leading to a revised view of the subject more trustworthy than our own’.10

NOTES AND REFERENCES


3. See Jackson, ‘Decline and Survival – In and of Local History’, Local History News. No.90. 2009. pp.9-10; and Kate Tiller and David


