Fifty Years of Local History

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In many ways the most important change and the greatest advance in the study of local history during the last half century has been its democratisation: the people have at last entered into their own heritage and have discovered how much the past, their own past, holds for them. Fifty years ago local history was a very gentlemanly pursuit; knowledge of our country and countryside was deep and almost passionate among some squires and parsons of the villages, among also some well-to-do of the towns and cities. Every gentleman's library had its great folio or quarto county or district history, and grateful indeed we are for them, but the merest glance shows that they were intended to be beyond the reach of ordinary simple people. They were large, heavy and expensive: they fitted in well with fine mahogany bookcases, with servants to fetch and carry, dust and arrange. If you looked inside the gilt-edged pages, prominently displayed was the dedication, fulsome in its admiration and dutiful in its sentiments, followed by the family trees, the engravings of monuments, and above all the armorial bearings of the great ones. With the turn of the century came the County History to end all county histories, the Victoria History of the Counties of England, still, after more than 50 years, in progress and showing (like the History of Parliament) little sign that it will ever be completed. The Victoria County History is indispensable for all of us, but it is big and clumsy and expensive, in spite of the fact that it has attracted a good deal of public money centrally and locally. Yet it bridges the gap from the days of patronage to the present time, and some of the recent volumes, largely describing birds and beasts and flowers, hunting, shooting and fishing, are very good indeed.

Fifty years ago we relied for our local history almost entirely upon the archaeological societies, and here again few things are more instructive than to compare a 1969 volume with one issued in 1919. In almost every case there is marked improvement - the parts that come now into our hands are better printed, better illustrated, of wider appeal and of superior scholarship. And so of course they ought to be: like John of Salisbury in the twelfth century we are pigmies standing on the shoulders of giants, but because we stand on their shoulders we see further than they did. Above all the scope is much wider: archaeology, by which I mean mainly the history of man before the survival of written records (and in some cases where the written record can be and must be supplemented by the artifact) not only goes much further back in time but also embraces new forms of human activity. We all know (thanks partly to the picture press) far more than we did.
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One of the most notable features of the past fifty years has been a passion for excavation. The difference between the blundering amateurism of the last century and the wonderful professionalism of today, is enormous. The care with which successive layers of soil are removed, the skill with which the trial trench is plotted and the deductions that can be worked out by very small changes and variations, the careful sifting of so much soil and the identification of minute objects are all vast improvements. When we think of the way in which William Bateman crashed into a barrow in an afternoon and returned triumphant with a large urn or collection of bones leaving devastation and disaster behind I am glad that such things are no longer tolerated. I was introduced to this modern technique by two very different exponents. The late Sir Ian Richmond taught many how much can be learnt from what is not there, how for example you can recognise a post hole although the post has long since rotted away. We can see so much more if we know what to look for and what otherwise imperceptible or unaccountable markings mean. The great progress made in the knowledge of Roman Britain (not likely to be overlooked in Lindum Colonia) has been the result of a felicitous combination of the classical interests of the days of Mr. Gladstone, with the twentieth century advance in history and science. Sometimes we look a little enviously at the resources and successes of the Roman archaeologists and think how much we could learn if we diverted some of this money and energy to uncovering remains of Anglo-Saxon England and then to the reconstruction of some of the medieval sites, especially monasteries, some of which have been much neglected during the last fifty years.

Another exponent of a new world of research was one who (like Mr. C. W. Phillips and his colleagues) has done much for Lincolnshire as well as its neighbour, the late Mr. A. Leslie Armstrong. In many a lecture and discussion he demonstrated the new evidence for the greater antiquity of man which can be derived from these parts and also how it was possible to subdivide the great "ages" of pre-Greek and Roman civilisation. It is enough to mention the Creswell caves to demonstrate how far we have advanced in fifty years. In nearly every case it is local history, the exploitation of particular local areas, that has made advance possible. Fifty years takes us back to 1920; the half way mark is 1945. War has always been the enemy of human progress and 1945 saw the end of a conflict that brought European civilisation to the brink of disaster.

It had, however, added a new dimension, incredible though it may seem, to local history, albeit an expensive one, air photography. Seen from the air much of our countryside is a marvellous palimpsest: older methods of cultivation, older areas of cultivation, villages which have disappeared, and much else, become apparent particularly if the photography is carried out in the right place and at the right time which local knowledge alone can supply as Mr. St. Joseph has shown. At Barlings, from whence you can see Lincoln Cathedral, there is practically nothing to see of a Premonstratensian Priory above ground (it needs excavating) but the air picture shows church, cloister and fishpond clearly. So too with Cistercian Kirkstead near Woodhall Spa, or Revesby near Boston, Scunthorpe 'lost in the fields of Kesteven between Sleaford and Boston', its ally Cattley and Tupholme (Premonstratensian) and, what I find most impressive of all, Bardney, 8 miles east. These things do not make headlines or get TV coverage but they add to our knowledge. Again and again dictators have tried to blot out history, ordering walls to fall and sites to be ploughed but they have failed to obliterate the past which is there now just as surely as we are here.

Next it must be said that it is almost entirely the result of local investigations that we know far more about Anglo-Saxon England than we did fifty years ago. There were 600 years between the Romans and the Normans, and these were the years (and it is as far in time as between us and Edward III) when the country became recognisable as we know it today. It would be interesting to compare what Maitland had to go on when he wrote Domesday Book and Beyond (beyond being earlier) in 1896 with what we now know from Mr. Loyen, Mr. Lennard, Mr. Finberg and several others. Most of this new knowledge has to be sought in
periodicals (and this is not a bibliographical review) but the advances reached are tremendous. Compare for example the pioneer work of Baldwin Brown on pre-Conquest building with Mr. and Mrs. Taylor's *Anglo-Saxon Architecture*. We see at once how much more we now know and also how we can apply our knowledge so much better.

Fifty years ago place names were largely matters of guess work and extraordinarily far fetched guesses there were. It was fifty years ago that Sir Frank Stenton and Sir Allen Mawer were forming the Place Names Society; they have both lectured in Lincoln: we are not likely to forget hereabouts that Anglo-Saxon England is also Danish England. Work on place names depends almost entirely on local knowledge and local research: a great deal has been done to collect variants and to record field names, but to those who say "Look what has been done" the echo answers "Look what has got to be done". When someone addresses the Lincolnshire Local History Society fifty years hence he will in Maitland's words "throw a footnote of gratitude" to those who provided the indispensable on-the-spot materials.

Highly important work in the field for these years hereabouts has been recorded by C. W. Phillips. He came in what may be called the 'flint-hunting years' because we were all learning much about them then. Again just over thirty years ago, while we were all poised to hear news of the intentions of Hitler, Mr. Phillips and a small party were exploring the contents of the Suffolk barrow. The result was the most spectacular English discovery of the half century - Sutton Hoo, formerly unknown, now world renowned. Fifty years of local history - this is an event which happens only once in a century perhaps: the interesting thing is that discussions are still going on as to the meaning and significance of the objects there raised. To appreciate them, however imperfectly, you need to see them on display in the British Museum - which makes it possible to add a tribute from local history to our museums for helping our cause. The advance in methods of bringing what matters to the notice of the public, and to that not insignificant part of the public still at school, in our museums has been amazing. When I was a boy a museum was a place full of stuffed birds, and dead lions, polar bears and alligators. What a difference there is now and how often a museum curator nowadays is also an active local historian as well.

To be this he has also to be something of an experimental scientist - carbon analysis, pollen analysis and much else have to be resorted to for pre-history, and for the ages of records we have the ultra violet ray to enable us to read better under the surface and a great deal of other techniques which many historians know all too little. The "record" story itself is one of the transformations of local history. It is not too much to say that fifty years ago most local records were inaccessible, although Firth and Poole, Tout and Jenkinson were expounding the potentialities of the Public Record Office, then not much used and in any case not easily reached by poor students.

This, indeed, was often true of those wishing to investigate the history of their own town, borough records were usually in the care of the Town Clerk, who, with a very small staff had often little active desire to help local historians. In one city there were records dealing with the details of Kett's rebellion - this could be transcribed only at certain inconvenient times only at a fee of 10/6d. a time. County records with the Clerks of the Peace were often similarly inaccessible, all of which helps to account for the leisurely expensiveness that accompanied local history.

A further illustration can be found in the career of the author of an article in the *English Historical Review* on *The Sheriffs of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire 1066-1130*. This was William Farrer, a country gentleman who "built a spacious and beautiful library" in Lancashire and wrote *The History of the Parish of North Meols in 1903* (a model of its kind) and then went on to *Early Yorkshire Charters and Honors and Knights Fees* (published at his own expense), the dullest book ever written, but packed with information including a good deal about the lands of the Honor of Chester in Lincolnshire. Such investigations and publications however were then possible only for the leisureed and the well to do.
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Similarly, diocesan (as distinct from parish) records were often cared for by the Bishop's Chancellor or Registrar, who only too often seemed to regard it as his duty to stand between his documents and the public.

The Royal Commission on Historical MSS. did what it could in its reports to make more knowledge about private collections accessible to the public, but the compilation of these reports was done in very leisurely fashion fifty years ago.

Two or three things helped to change the whole historical climate - one was the operation of death duties, taxation and wage and price increases which diminished the number of leisureed amateurs who had done so much in the past. Even archaeological societies began to take something of a new and slightly more professional look; to the Farrers and the Ryes succeeded men like A. Hamilton Thompson and Sir Frank Stenton who made local history part of their career as teachers and at the same time showed how scholarship could and must be applied to local history. It is most instructive to compare the kind of articles that were written for the societies before 1919 with those written after 1939. Not only are the topics often different but the standard of historical scholarship is very much higher. All this is to the good. The growth of our universities helped still further, not only in departments of history which meant that many more young men learnt something of what history was and meant but also by a deepening and widening of the subject itself. In particular William Cunningham at Cambridge and J. E. Thorold Rogers at Oxford indicated that to military and constitutional history must be added economic history, the history of the national kitchen as Sir John Clapham later labelled it. Matiland himself, trained as a barrister, moved in the same direction, so that the Downing Professor of the Laws of England was able to urge that "by slow degrees the thoughts of our forefathers, their common thoughts about common things, will have become thinkable once more".

It was also the common man who was coming into his own. Although you could hardly have had a stronger conservative than Cunningham, economic history in a subtle and interesting way was made a kind of ally of the labour party. Karl Marx put a great deal of economic and social history into his classic on Capital; among the avowed followers of Thorold Rogers were Mr. and Mrs. Hammond who set the history of the Town Labourer and the Country Labourer in a new perspective and Sidney and Beatrice Webb whose advocacy of collectivism was very largely historical. They wrote the first sympathetic History of Trade Unionism, which was to have a very wide sale. It encouraged a great deal of local activity and, again, it is largely due to local effort that we can now see the history of working class movements in a very different perspective. The foundation of the Workers Educational Association by two Rugbeians, Temple and Tawney, was another step in the same direction. Tawney admitted that much help, inspiration and local knowledge for The Agrarian Revolution came from his W.E.A. classes - for the first time ever working men, emancipated from illiteracy after 1870, started to read and discuss their own history.

Along with this our public libraries began to change with the times. From being neglected rooms in a back street where a few elderly spinsters borrowed three-decker novels and the betting fraternity consorted to consult the racing columns of the daily press, they became the ally of the schools and colleges and real foci of local interests. Here it was the cities and boroughs that led the way. The growth and utilisation of municipal, and then of county, libraries during fifty years has been phenomenal and has itself been linked with social history. Slowly, librarians became manuscript conscious. Behind their printed books lay the original sources, and readers were wanting to know more about these. There is a curious two way traffic as all this - partly demand and supply, partly the supply stimulating the demand. The librarians were anxious to be useful because they had to demonstrate that there was a call for their services, and so local materials were accumulated, advertised and made available. Just as for the Victorians the teaching of very nationalist history was encouraged in the "Board" schools in order that patriotism might be stimulated, so the twentieth century realised that
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with a shifting and industrialised society local patriotism would have to be stimulated if it was to continue to exist. In this libraries and schools and museums have joined forces in seeking to interest children in the heritage that lies at their doorsteps. City archives, county archives - it has never been too easy to disentangle them - as again Maitland taught us to realise when he quoted that lapidary sentence, in Cambridge ‘the town hall . . . is obscurely situated behind the shire-hall . . . for good and ill, borough and shire have been bound together’.

With city and county record offices, stimulated by the work of the British Records Association, has gone the creation of the new profession, of archivists with schools of professional training at three or four universities and with their own society. France had its departmental archiviste-paléographe long before we did partly because she also had the Ecole des Chartes, but now we are catching up.

The war of 1939 - 45 marks a dividing point in local history in another respect: more and more it has become impossible to maintain and staff the country seats, the now notorious stately homes which were once so characteristic a feature of our civilisation. And so many of their abundant archival treasures have become available for the common man to explore as they are placed on deposit with public authorities. This is not as simple a matter as it sounds. What public authorities? Great estates, those of the Percies, the Nevilles, the Cecils, the Cavendishes, the Stanleys, the Bentincks, spread over many counties, and no one county, or borough, or university can necessarily claim the lot. And yet they must be kept together because they comprise the history of a great estate which is local history all right, but of a different kind from that represented here.

The same is true of Diocesan archives: Oxford, as every one knows, was in the diocese of Lincoln but not every Oxonian is convinced that matters relating to Oxford parishes ought not to be in Oxford. A similar problem arises over the ancient diocese of Coventry and Lichfield. It is, however, fair to say that a great deal has been done to knit together these repositories by the National Register of Archives. This Register was almost the creation of the late Col. Malet and it is only now that the fruits of his enterprise are being reaped. It does for private owners and collections what the Public Record Office has done for national public documents, and a measure of the advance during the twenty years or so of its existence is that its value has been so generally recognised. On a voluntary basis and with less resources but invaluable in its limited scope, too, has been the Standing Conference on Local History sponsored by the National Council of Social Service, an organisation which, incidentally, did a great deal to encourage the Rural Community Councils when they began to get off the ground after the war.

A notable feature of more than fifty years of local history has been the Record Societies. 1910 saw the Lincoln inauguration, so I suppose 1970 is diamond jubilee year.

There is no need to praise the Lincoln Record Society here: it has been active for 60 years and it flourishes. It might however be noted that its major achievement, the Registrum Antiquissimum, still on its course, is almost fifty years old. Plans were being laid by Canon Foster for it in 1923 and the original inspiration was supplied by Sir Frank Stenton in 1916. It is not only the model society: its standards have influenced others and it has attracted public money through the British Academy. This again is part of the fifty year picture: fifty years ago there was no thought of coming on the rates and taxes - now the climate of opinion is different and a good many record societies have been helped very considerably to keep afloat by the Stationery Office’s assistance with their publications. It is not enough, however, simply to put documents in print; they need to be read and appreciated. Fortunately we are in a better position to appreciate them because of fuller knowledge - thanks to Professor Galbraith and others we know how to use the tools that have been provided by those to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for much hard and unpaid toil.

There are fashions in local history as in some other fields. Take for example heraldry. The older antiquaries, from Dugdale onwards, paid much attention to armorial bearings, and
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rightly, partly because their clientele was for the most part armigerous. Then came a diminution in attention - some people listened to Carlyle who assured them that heraldry was the science of fools, and the numbers who understood what it was about diminished. Nowadays, partly because of the passion for genealogy and family coats of arms shown by so many from the United States, partly because of the enthusiasm of some members of the College of Arms who have come out of their hiding place in Queen Victoria Street a little, partly because of an appreciation even of the decorative value of these records of descent, marriage and inheritance, heraldry is getting somewhat one more interest. Dr. A. L. Rowse once said that the most important piece of equipment for a historian was a pair of boots - local history must be seen on and from the ground and the chase of coats of arms, not excluding royal arms in churches, can add enormously to the excitement of a day out. The family car has helped in this too: more and more people in the past fifty years have been enabled to visit places as never before and are asking questions about what stones, inscriptions and other objects mean which it is for us to answer. There has been a decline in church attendance but interest in the history of our churches as buildings, and care for them, has grown. Another new fashion of the last fifty years, perhaps the last five, has been the renewed interest in brasses and brass rubbing, particularly by school pupils. This again is all to the good, for from the brasses these young people may be attracted to the person whom it commemorates and be reminded that history is about real people doing real things - themselves projected backwards in fact.

Or again local history has always relied for new knowledge upon finds, and the most exciting find to make is that of a hoard of coins. Coins have meant a great deal for humanity, and interest in them has always been there. But in the last ten years or so it has grown enormously. We need not be so naive as to suppose that all coin collectors are passionately interested in history. There are, of course, other motives. But along with the desire to arrange, classify and display some very fine examples of the numismatists' art must go a growing appreciation of what they stood for. Fortunately it is now well known that people are well advised in every way to report finds of coins or any other unusual objects to the expert or museum rather than try to dispose of them privately. Local history has made us much more aware of what we have and what an ancient civilisation we represent than has ever been the case before.

Ancient, but also modern. In my grandfather's lifetime Great Britain was justly called the "workshop of the world". Coal, steam, textiles, iron and steel - British natural advantages were exploited by British brains and hard work to give us a remarkable lead which we have not altogether lost. The Industrial Revolution is now so much part of history that we are already arguing as to whether there was such a thing, just as there are those who would tell us that there was no Renaissance and even no French Revolution.

For the local historian it is usually obvious enough that something happened very much to alter our countryside in the nineteenth century and we had better learn about it while we yet may. The history of local transport in the pre-petrol era, only remembered by the really aged, is something that can only be worked out locally and has proved of intense interest and attraction. Rivers, canals and waterways, coaches, carriers and railways, how men and goods got about the countryside and how machines displaced individual activity - all this has now become a relatively new science - industrial archaeology. It is the story of invention, adaptation, trial and error, of canals which might have been so valuable (and still might be useful) bought out or starved out by the railways which themselves are no longer what they were. The electric train and the steam locomotive are already museum pieces - it is how they were used, and how they changed much of our countryside and our society, that we need to know about. More people than ever are willing to join in the hunt if they are told what to look for and where to look. The same thing is true of agriculture - there was an agricultural revolution in the seventeenth century as all who have pursued Enclosure Awards know very well: there
has also been an agricultural revolution in the twentieth century in which we are even now involved, and it is fast becoming part of unrecorded local history unless we help to save some of its monuments and records.

Much has been done in fifty years, but it is only a beginning. It is with confidence that we predict new and much greater advances in the next half century.

This paper was read to the Local History Society at the 1970 Annual General Meeting.