

# LOCAL HISTORY IN BRITAIN

## THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LOCAL HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

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Dr. A.M. Everitt is als hoogleraar verbonden aan het Department of English Local History, waarvan hij tevens de leiding heeft. Onderstaande bijdrage is een gedeelte van de inleiding die hij schreef voor een inventarisatie van geschriften door leden van het Department, English Local History at Leicester 1948 - 1978 (Leicester, 1981).

### introduction

The Department of English Local History was founded in 1948 with W.G. Hoskins as Reader in charge. Its origins were threefold: first, the scholarly interests and researches of Hoskins himself; secondly, the interest of the Principal, F.L. Attenborough, and his personal friendship with Hoskins; and thirdly, the existence in the College Library, as it then was, of the Hatton Collection of works on local history and topography, which had formed one of the original benefactions to the College in 1920. Hoskins had first been appointed to the teaching staff in 1930 as an Assistant Lecturer in Commerce; but his real interests had always lain in the study of provincial society, particularly in Leicestershire and his native Devon. He had published a wide range of seminal works and papers during the 1930's and 1940's, moreover, and these helped not only to give the Department a distinctive emphasis from the outset, but also to reorient the study of local history itself in a more professional and scientific direction. The nucleus of a basic research library in the Hatton Collection was no less fundamental to the fortunes of the Department than the appointment of W.G. Hoskins. The original collection had been formed by Thomas Hatton of Anstey Pastures, a wealthy Leicester businessman, and his munificent gift was instrumental not only in the establishment of the Department itself but in the foundation of the College Library. (1) It comprised about 2,000 volumes, including most of the classical county histories and many works dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since 1920 it has been expanded to some tens of thousands of volumes, covering all the English and Welsh counties; it now forms the largest collection of its kind outside London and Oxford. Since the mid-fifties a valuable working map collection has likewise been built up, and now comprises many thousands of items, including (for example) a complete run of the 2½" Ordnance Survey, a full set of the early county maps of Greenwood, and some hundreds of local plans and estate maps for all parts of England. This collection is especially important in connection with our research on settlement-history and topography, and the map-room in which it is housed, eighteen floors up, and the highest point in Leicester has appropriately come to form our 'workshop'.

Despite its wide range of interests, the Department has always remained a small one. During the past 33 years only twelve people in all have been appointed to the academic staff. Our numbers rose to a maximum of six in 1965, but now stand at four, together with a secretary and a honorary research assistant. When Hoskins moved to Oxford in 1951, he was succeeded by H.P.R. Finberg, who remained head of the Department until 1965. Hoskins then returned to Leicester for a short spell before his own retirement, and was succeeded in 1968 by the present writer. In 1950 a Research Fellowship in Agrarian History was instituted, to which Joan Thirsk was appointed, who remained at Leicester until her appointment to succeed Hoskins at Oxford in 1965; she was eventually followed at Leicester by David Hey until he moved on to Sheffield, when he was succeeded by Dr C.A.H. Howell (1974-1977). (2) In 1960 a Research Fellowship in Urban History was established, of which the first incumbent was the writer, who was followed in 1965 by Charles Phythian-Adams until

his appointment as lecturer in 1968. In 1965 a new post in English Topography was set up, which was held by Peter Eden until his retirement in 1976, when he was succeeded by Harold Fox. Two other research fellowships were also established in 1965. One was in Vernacular Building, and was held by Michael Iaitwaite until 1974. The other was founded in connection with the English Surnames Survey, which was established and financed by the generosity of the Marc Fitch Fund; this has been held since its inception by Richard McKinley. At present the academic staff of the Department thus comprises Charles Phythian-Adams, Richard McKinley, Harold Fox, and myself.

Over the past thirty years, the study of local and regional history has found a firm foothold in several other universities such as Leeds, Hull, Lancaster, Exeter, East Anglia and Kent. By 1970 more than half of all postgraduate historical theses in Britain had come to be devoted to localized aspects of history. But the Department at Leicester has remained the only independent one, so that the basic principles behind its development, and behind the cherished independence, ought perhaps to be briefly stated. First, it is essentially a department of English, and not Leicestershire, Local History, and specifically sets out to cover the whole country, from Cumberland to Cornwall and Kent, and to range across the whole timespan from the Roman occupation to the twentieth century. In this respect it differs from most other centres, which have quite justifiably tended to concentrate on the evolution of their own region; behind it the wide-ranging historical interests of W.G. Hoskins and H.P.R. Finberg, and the fact that the Hatton Collection covers England and Wales as a whole, have been of crucial importance. For this reason the Department attempts, secondly, not simply to write the history of particular regions or localities for their own sake, but rather for the light they shed on historical evolution in general, and thus to identify the underlying movements and forces behind the development of provincial society at large. Thirdly, it has always been our aim to combine the visual evidence with the documentary, or in other words to explore the making of the landscape with the economic and social history in mind, and the development of local history with the landscape and the buildings in mind. Fourthly, we have also sought to formulate and practise the general methods and basic principles of the subject as an academic discipline, and for that reason the Department has deliberately remained a postgraduate and research institution. The issues involved in this decision are complex ones that cannot be adequately argued here; but since history is concerned with the interpretation of facts rather than with facts for their own sake, some grasp of the general framework of the subject is imperative if the local picture is to be seen in perspective and rightly interpreted. While we have always run specialist undergraduate options for other departments, and at present offer one to Economic History students, we have never believed, as a consequence, that a first degree in local history as such is either practicable or justifiable. (3) Thirty years of experience have confirmed our view that in the university context a general basis of history, economic history, historical geography, or archeology is essential before proceeding to detailed local investigation. Otherwise the subject itself is likely to lapse into mere antiquarianism unilluminated by general ideas.

## publications

These principles behind the Department's work have necessitated a wide-ranging approach. As many generations of students will bear witness, they have also created an intensely demanding discipline. Yet if the challenge has been great, it has also been rewarding. A summary analysis of the contents of the Bibliography we compiled to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Department, and which contended the historical writings of all its past and present members, both staff and students down to the end of 1978, may serve to illustrate this point. Of the 1,214 items included, 1,158 are books, articles, and reviews, and these may be classified as follows:

	Publications	Authors
Articles	496	47
Short Books and Pamphlets (20-100 pages)	170	42
Longer Books (101-960 pages)	90	25
Reviews	402	24
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,158</b>	<b>70</b>

The first general point to note about these publications is the extent of their coverage. If reviews are excluded, some 230 of the total relate to broad themes or fields of study rather than individual places; these include such works as W.G. Hoskins's Fieldwork in Local History (1967), Charles Phythian-Adams's Local History and Folklore: a New Framework (1975), and my own Pattern of Rural Dissent: the Nineteenth Century (1972). The remaining 526 books and articles relate to individual places, districts, counties, or regions, and here the outstanding fact is the geographical range represented. There are only three

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### AT LEICESTER

1948-1978



A Bibliography of Writings by  
Members of the Department of  
English Local History, University of Leicester

counties in England on which nothing has yet been published by members of the Department, namely Wiltshire, Herefordshire, and County Durham, though these figure of course in the more general works. Owing to the special interests of some of our students and colleagues, certain counties have naturally received more attention than others, and it may be of interest to cite those that figure most prominently:

#### Books and Articles

1. Devon	116
2. Leicestershire	68
3. Gloucestershire	38
4. Yorkshire	36
5. Cambridgeshire	28
6. South Wales	26
7. Oxfordshire	22
8. Lincolnshire	15
9. Cornwall	15
10. Kent	14
11. Norfolk	11
12. London	11

As statistics, these figures are necessarily crude ones, since the items in question range from a few paragraphs to three or four hundred pages. Nevertheless, they suffice to indicate the diversity of our interests, and that diversity has been essential to the traditions of the Department. There are many ways in which it has helped us not only to highlight local and regional contrasts, but to sense their underlying causes in a way which would not otherwise have been possible. The contrast between 'fielden' and 'forest' communities which came to light in so many places when Joan Thirsk and I were working on The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 1500-1640 (1967), for example, would not have been recognized for what it was - a fundamental distinction throughout English (and indeed European) society - if our sights had been limited to a single region.

No less important than the geographical spread is the range of subject matter covered by these publications. By and large the Department has tended to concentrate chiefly on pre-industrial and proto-industrial society rather than on manufacturing cities as such, which clearly demand somewhat different approaches and techniques; but within those limits the interests of both staff and students have extended very widely. One of the broad conclusions to emerge, indeed, has been the unsuspected degree to which pre-industrial society itself survived in England alongside the industrial down to the end of the Victorian era. Altogether, if works of historiography and bibliography are excluded, some 550 articles and books have been published on provincial society and economy, and 106 on landscape and buildings. Topography, or the 'making of the landscape', has long formed a special interest of the Department, particularly in recent years as we have come to appreciate the importance of visual, topographical, and cartographic evidence. That interest is very clearly reflected in the third Part of this Bibliography.

Is it possible to discern any special emphasis amongst the 550 publications devoted to provincial society and economy? No brief answer to this question can be given, but the crude statistics are as follows:

#### Publications

1. General	37
2. Agriculture and Rural Society	155
3. Towns	111
4. Origins of Society	82
5. Ecclesiastical History	38
6. Industry and Trade	35
7. Transport	25
8. Family History and Biography	22
9. County Society and Government	20
10. Surnames	16
11. Education	9

In some respects these figures are misleading. They give little idea of our interest in county society and culture, for example, or of the importance of Richard McKinley's work on the English Surnames Survey, which has already covered the five counties of Lancashire, Oxfordshire, the West Riding, Norfolk, and Suffolk, and is now covering Sussex. Nevertheless, they highlight three prominent areas of interest, both past and present, on which it seems appropriate to comment. The concern with the origins of society was first pioneered in the Department by H.P.R. Finberg, and is now a special interest of Mr Phythian-Adams, Dr Fox and myself. The study of agriculture and rural society, which has been particularly concerned with the early modern period, is especially associated with the names of our former colleagues Joan Thirsk and David Hey, but is still a very lively interest of the Department as a whole. Our work on towns has ranged widely in date, from their medieval and pre-Conquest origins down to the late nineteenth century; under Charles Phythian-Adams's inspiration it is now perhaps especially - though by no means exclusively - preoccupied with the late medieval and early modern period.

So brief a summary of the Department's record in research and publication is inevitably a superficial one. Some books and articles have quite properly been produced to meet local needs and interests; others have proved of seminal importance and have helped to orient extensive subsequent research by other scholars. Amongst the latter one might cite, from many examples, H.P.R. Finberg's Roman and Saxon Withington (1959), which reopened the whole problem of continuity between Roman and Saxon settlement; Joan Thirsk's 'Industries in the Countryside' in the Festschrift for R.H. Tawney (1961), which focused attention on the crucial role of early by-employments in the origins of industrialization; W.G. Hoskins's 'Rebuilding of Rural England, 1570-1640' in Past and Present (IV, 1953), which has proved fundamental to the study of vernacular architecture; my own Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-60 (1966), which explored the relationship between county society and the community of the realm; Margaret Spufford's Contrasting Communities (1974), which brought to light the profoundly dissimilar experience of three Cambridgeshire parishes in the early modern period; Charles Phythian-Adams's 'Ceremony and the Citizen', in Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700 (ed. P. Clark and P. Slack, 1972), which turned a vivid and novel light on urban society and its decay at the end of the Middle Ages; and Richard McKinley's regional investigation of English surnames, which has demonstrated, amongst other matters, the remarkable extent of migration in the medieval period. Any list of this kind must of necessity be selective and arbitrary; it takes no account of work in progress, moreover, or of books and articles published since 1978. But it is perhaps sufficient to illustrate one reason why a department specifically devoted to the comparative study of local and provincial society is justified. For one of the characteristics of the authors just mentioned is that they have not limited their sights to a single period, a single subject, or a single region: their interests have ranged extensively over a variety of fields, and it is this that has enabled them to perceive many unsuspected connections and complexities in the tapestry of provincial development.

## postgraduate training

Research and publication have never been the sole purpose of the Department; postgraduate training has always been our major concern, and normally there are about 35 or 40 students on our roll at any one time. At Leicester an enlightened university policy has made it possible to read for the M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees on a part-time basis, and we have always had a considerable number of graduates in this category: mostly drawn from the staff of schools, polytechnics, archive offices, libraries, and museums, but also including doctors,

administrators, laboratory technicians, housewives, and retired people. In recent years a welcome development has been an increase in the number of full-time postgraduates, usually financed by D.E.S. or S.S.R.C. awards, though occasionally by university scholarships or from their own resources. It has always been our belief that students should be encouraged to develop their own bent rather than be geared into grandiose departmental research programmes; education is concerned with developing personality and enriching experience, after all, as well as with advancing knowledge. The consequent diversity of subjects studied is frequently reflected in the following pages, and supplies a further instance of our wide-ranging approach.

In 1965 the Department established a one-year postgraduate M.A. course in English Local History, and this has become the central feature of our formal teaching. Parts of the course are also taken by students of other departments, and new research students are encouraged to attend relevant lecture courses during their first year. The M.A. course is a very demanding one, providing basic training in all respects of the subject from the Anglo-Saxon settlement to the nineteenth century. It is specifically designed to cover both the evolution of society and the making of the landscape, so that great emphasis is placed on both the documentary and the visual and cartographic evidence. As an illustration of the scope of our work it may therefore be of interest to outline its five constituent elements:

(a) Methods and Materials of English Local History. This is designed to indicate the nature and whereabouts of the principal sources normally available for reconstructing the history of local society in England over the past 1,000 years. It provides a basic training in the techniques and problems of documentary analysis.

(b) Selected Urban and Rural Communities. In this course, designed to supplement the former, a number of varied types of local community are studied in detail in order to demonstrate some of the principal social and economic themes in the history of provincial society.

(c) English Topography. This covers the making of the landscape in the country as a whole, and includes an introduction to maps as historical documents, to place-names, and to methods of interpreting visual evidence in the field. It covers such topics as settlement-origins, village morphology, field-systems, urban topography, deserted villages, emparking, and enclosure.

(d) Topography: a Selected Region. This course complements the former and examines a limited area intensively instead of the country as a whole. It is a part of the purpose of this course to study an area which contrasts with the Midlands, since fieldwork is necessarily limited to the latter region during term time; a week's intensive fieldcourse is spent in the selected region during the Easter vacation.

(e) Palaeography. Training in early modern palaeography is given during the autumn term, and in medieval palaeography during the spring term.

After completing their examinations at the end of May, M.A. students are then free to proceed to their dissertations, which must be based on substantial research, and which run to 20,000 words. One of the most interesting aspects of the M.A. course as it has developed has been once again the diversity of subjects represented in these dissertations, as the following pages bear witness. In part this diversity stems from the fact that students come to us from all parts of the country and often wish to work on their home area, in part from the very varied spectrum of subjects taught and the individual interests developed while attending the course. (4)

From this account it will be evident that the study of English Local History at Leicester is no soft option. The M.A. course in particular is one of the toughest postgraduate courses in the country. It has become more taxing as the subject itself has expanded, moreover, both for staff and for students, particularly because we set out to cover the whole field rather than offering alternative options. Looking



back over the past decades, we realize that we have been fortunate with our students, both on the M.A. course and in the field of research. Standards have risen substantially since we began; the fact that so many postgraduates have been prepared to finance themselves is some measure of their dedication to scholarship.

## conclusion

In conclusion it may be asked how far it will be possible in future to maintain the broad approach described here. In this connexion three problems face us. The first is the massive expansion of the subject itself. It is no exaggeration to say that in recent years the study of English Local History has exploded in all directions. As we seek to practise it, moreover, it demands not only a working knowledge of the historical field as a whole, but a certain acquaintance with such related disciplines as historical geography, archeology, anthropology, economic history, demography, folklore, English literature, place-name studies, and vernacular architecture. While it is this that makes the subject an exciting intellectual challenge, and has occasioned many memorable interdisciplinary seminars by outside speakers, it may eventually force us to modify our traditionally encyclopaedic approach, though in doing so we should be grievously impoverished. It has already meant that recent theses have tented to cover a shorter timespan than we used to advocate; but that has in some respects proved advantageous. What it also means is that the Department itself cannot readily be slotted into any precise academic category, since in many ways it is closely related to geography, economic history, and anthropology, as it is to the work of a history department.

These problems are accentuated by the further necessity, in the university context, of investigating the evolution of local society, not for its purely local interest, as already remarked, but for the light it sheds on a tract of English history as a whole. It is the ability to discern the general within the particular in this way that distinguishes works like H.P.R. Finberg's study of Withington (see item 189), W.G. Hoskins's of Wigston Magna (305), David Hey's of Myddle (358), Margaret Spufford's of Chippenham (319, 378), Charles Phythian-Adams's of Coventry (439), Joan Thirsk's of Lincolnshire (326), and Richard McKinley's of Oxfordshire (666) from mere antiquarianism. In other words, it is not our primary task to write local history for local consumption but for the world of scholarship at large. The interpretation of historical evidence involved in this approach is a far more time-consuming and intellectually demanding task, however, than the straightforward accumulation and formal arrangement of facts characteristic of antiquarianism. Over the past thirty years, as a consequence, it has occasioned a gradual shift of emphasis in our studies, an increasing preoccupation with broad historical themes and problems, and a tendency to write fewer short notes and articles on individual places than in the early years of the subject as an academic discipline. With a full-time staff of only four members, moreover, it has also driven us to cut down on outside commitments, in attending conferences, sitting on committees, and extra-mural activities generally. This decision has been a reluctant one, and it is one that has occasioned some resentment among those more interested in organization than in scholarship. What is perhaps more regrettable is that it has become increasingly difficult to give personal advice to the many genuine labourers in the harvest field outside the university system. We have come to feel, however, that in the long run we can more generally assist the amateur scholar - as well as the professional historian - by concentrating our energies primarily on postgraduate training and on research and publications.

The third problem that faces the Department is that of dwindling university resources. It is neither possible nor

appropriate to discuss this matter in any detail here; but it would be idle to pretend that the outlook before universities is reassuring. When the Secretary-General of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals himself asserts that it is the "national interest" that must come first, and that it is the needs of society that "must always be foremost among the concerns of those who make university decisions", there is cause for disquiet. (5) No one would question that universities should take account of the national interest; if they act contrary to it, indeed, their activities must be called in question. But what is at risk in the present economic climate is that the essential purpose of a university will be lost sight of: its purpose as a centre of scholarship dedicated first and foremost to the discovery of truth, whether it is in the national interest or not, and to all that enriches and enlightens the human spirit, as well as to that which contributes to its material advantage. If one considers the great creative intelligence of the past - the historian F.W. Maitland, for example, or the physicist James Clerk Maxwell - it seems very doubtful if they could have convinced contemporaries that their work was in any practical sense in the 'national interest'. Yet it is to figures like these that scholarship in this country, and in the world of learning at large, owes most.

Yet if the outlook is sombre, we should not assume that it is hopeless. When Thomas Hatton gave his topographical collection to the infant College in 1920, he can have had no idea that 28 years later it would lead to the foundation of a unique Department of English Local History. When the struggling University College established its new venture in 1948, it can have had no idea that a department of local history might achieve international recognition and attract visiting scholars and students from every continent in the world. (6)

Yet in the present crisis in the universities it is important to remember that it is also a testimony to more than that: to that insatiable thirst for human knowledge on which ultimately scholarship itself is founded. The fact that increasing numbers of students are applying to us to read for higher degrees, and that so many of them are still prepared not only to finance themselves but to sacrifice most of their leisure hours to the pursuit of learning, is one little sign of that longing, one eloquent symbol of hope. For what it points to is the remarkable renaissance of historical studies which many of us have witnessed on our own lifetime, almost without realizing it, and which the universities themselves should be proud to acknowledge. In visiting other centres, and in talking to graduates and undergraduates in many parts of the country, I now sense a far more questing interest in the English past than when I was an undergraduate thirty years ago. In the development of that interest the University of Leicester as a whole has played no inconsiderable part, and the Department of English Local History has exerted a distinctive influence of its own. Shortly after I came to Leicester myself, at the termination of a conference of archivists, the redoubtable Joan Wake of Northamptonshire rose to her feet and said that for her, and for many others like her, the work of the Department had opened up a new world of historical understanding. I have often recalled her words, because they echoed my own feelings, and because it was precisely this sense of a 'new world' opening up before us that first attracted me to the University in 1957. To have been associated with that work, and to have been a partner with so many students and colleagues in the discipline of learning, and the joy of discovery, has been a wonderful experience.

## notes

1. See Jack Simmons, *New University*, 1958, pp. 78-79, 92. In May 1981 Thomas Hatton's daughter, Mrs Phyllis Howells, visited the Department and Library and had much of interest to tell us about her father and the origins of the Hatton Collection. He was a remarkable