

LOCAL METROPOLITAN AND NATIONAL HISTORY

BY PHILIP D. WHITTING, G.M., B.A.

(adapted from an address delivered to the London and Middlesex Local History Committee's Annual Conference held at Guildhall on 23rd November, 1968)

Local history can look very different in Northumberland from, shall we say, Birmingham; and in London there is the even more confusing problem of distinguishing the part played by the national capital, as well as that of the City and Metropolis, from the communities of men and women from which these powerful, grander and less human bodies emerged. But the problems are everywhere similar even if difficulties may be greater or less. Professor Finberg provided the clue in his first Inaugural Lecture at Leicester in 1952 when he broadly propounded the equation LOCAL HISTORY=the HISTORY OF A COMMUNITY. It was seminal thinking, clarifying in a flash where much floundering effort was seeking to disentangle itself towards a logical solution. Local historians owe an immense debt to Professor Finberg, who has given not only a new twist to local history but—and it is more important—a new confidence to those who work on it; his work is a milestone towards the respectability of an academic discipline which is now somewhat grudgingly being conceded.

It can be asked, especially by those who have not lived there, whether there can be true local history in London, where administrative necessities have dominated the local scene for over a century. Where are the basic communities to be found? The shot-gun marriages of boroughs for administrative convenience have recently highlighted the problem. Yet the uneasy collaboration of Brentford and Chiswick since 1932 comparable with that of Plymouth, Devonport and the urban district of East Stonehouse, or of Hammersmith and Fulham (and many another!) since 1965, surely shows that there are indeed deep-seated bonds and traditional loyalties that are still actively in being. These must be taken into account if a successful emergence is to be planned into the so very different quickly-shifting world of today. Surely it is the local historian who can help in achieving this by his understanding of the past without a slavish preservation of it. The schemes drawn up with the greatest computerised expertise seem to fail more frequently than ever to take into account the people most affected. 'What's for their good, not what pleaseth them,' as Cromwell would say. In the long run it is a dangerous doctrine, as post-war events bear out *ad nauseam*. Unfortunately the historian (unlike the economist) is little accustomed to working in the practical field of administration; yet he has many of the keys required, and especially so the local historian, if only there were more with an early training in the disciplines of the study. Fifty years ago it was commonplace for historians to deride the efforts of the local antiquarian or chronicler as achieving the kind of history that dealt in detail with Middle Puddleton in 1588 and forgot the Spanish Armada. Obviously the full implications of such a 'national' event should be and probably are well known to the local historian, but events are of quite different importance in local history and national history. The Great Plague of London was locally so devastating as to become a 'national' event in the textbooks: perhaps some of us need reminding that it was equally devastating in the little Derbyshire village of Eyam as it was in the parish of St. Mary le Strand. The war of 1914 brought to some the reminder that

in spite of all the international agreements, of 1893 and 1907 in particular, Russian villagers regarded France and Britain as enemies from stories handed down from their Napoleonic and Crimean War ancestors. Peasants served in the army and some took an elementary but real story of life back to their communities, where it remained. Local history is not national history: the bicycle and the tractor can become of local importance comparable to the greatest event in the national field in their effect upon individuals in communities. Equally the impact of national events can be slow and strange. In 1944 several allied servicemen reported villages in southern Italy that knew nothing of Mussolini; and as the columns of tanks and troops moved up Route 6 through Campania the peasants would often hardly glance up from their work. What lay behind this latter non-event? Was it the armies of Attila, Aetius, Belisarius, Roger II, Manfred, Gonsalvo di Cordoba, Marshal Murat and Garibaldi, to name but a few who took the same road? It was of such peasants as these in Burgundy that H. M. Tomlinson wrote in *Cote d'or*, 'How can they be omitted from history when history is nothing without them?' It is local history that begins at least to place *them* more rightfully, and of course history will look completely different from such an angle. The difference is not so difficult to appreciate now as there are plenty of examples of Communist histories from the angle of the toiling proletariat. We can deride these too easily. Distortions are always to be found, but it is the angle from which the view is taken that makes the essential difference in the story history tells. People have become so accustomed to thinking in terms of nations and to dating modern history from the Renaissance that it is hard to conceive things differently or even to realise that, say, the Renaissance had a background extending back to the eleventh century, and indeed in many respects to the ninth century: it did not spring fully-fledged like Athene from the head of Zeus. Immediately after the first World War Lord Robert Cecil in his effort to put the League of Nations on to a proper conceptual basis, as against a utilitarian lifeline, campaigned to show how recent was the bloodthirsty, hate-provoking nationalism of today. One recalls a 'Times' leader headed 'The Curse of Nationalism' quoting a speech of his. But if this is a valid and desirable angle on history it is not yet reflected in books for schools in the way that the Communists, for instance, have seen that Marxism is. Indeed, a casual observer might think that the United Nations has less solid backing in this country than its predecessor. Nationalism possessed the western European field and certainly in this country held onto its gains in education and thought. Even the reaction against the heartbreaking casualties of Verdun or the Somme did not oust it.

Take the example of the Elizabethan period, so full of ebulliance in all kinds of ways in this country. Not all the ways were as nationalistic as the sea-dogs and Shakespeare who play so large a part in the popular image of the times. More particularly one might point out that the Drakes and Hawkins and their imitators and epigoni had only the same gusto and bravery as the more lonely members of the Mission to England—the Gerards, Campions and their like: it was their motivation that differed, the one highly practical and national and the other longterm, ideal and oecumenical. There was one Edward Squire, a lesser light, who was in fact both one of Drake's crew and a missionary who suffered the half-hanging, disembowelling and butchery that some Elizabethans seem to have enjoyed watching. There remains some doubt over Squire's seriousness as a missionary, but of his courage in risking his life each way one may say there is none. Professor Finberg has been struck by a different aspect of the same facts: 'The nation,' he writes, 'is not the same thing as the village or the town writ large . . . In 1574 the grammar school of Leicester was remodelled by the locally

all-powerful Earl of Huntingdon in strict accordance with the most advanced principles of the Elizabethan religious settlement. At that very time . . . the grammar school of Burnley was sending forth one recruit after another to the seminaries in Flanders where the recusant clergy were trained for the English Catholic Mission . . . The local community has not always conformed promptly and gracefully to patterns of thought and conduct imposed upon it from above'. One thinks today of education committees all over the country becoming suddenly converted to the idea of comprehensive schools: it is perhaps more difficult to be free and independent today.

This artificial entity, the nation, is now deeply engrained and is likely to last long. It is difficult to get people to think *bigger* into internationalism or even supranationalism, but why not *smaller* in terms of the local community? This, of course, has its difficulties in the great conurbations where the community has often only vestigial remains, and is also occasionally swamped by such numbers of newcomers without even a common language that it can hardly survive at all. But local history has many forms and history might well begin to be taught in the widest possible way on local lines, thereby keeping closely in touch with what is going on around, and with what has been or is about to be built; for the questions 'why have this building at all?' and 'why precisely there?' can always be asked for a start, and the importance of history lies in the questions to which it gives rise. One of the impressive factors continually cropping up in any attempt to start local studies has been the horror generated by history lessons in the past. 'Oh, not history: I hated it at school!' These words can be heard over and over again. There must surely be something wrong with the material selected as well as with the way in which it is presented. The material as it appears to children is perhaps too far removed from reality to be meaningful. Local history seems to me to have many of the answers to the problem of teaching history for, above all, pupils can participate in the work, and teachers are bound to think more about its presentation as local history is NOT what they learnt at the university or training college. Over the years a great number of schoolmasters, however solitary they may have felt, have been experimenting with the teaching of local history *in spite of* the syllabus requirements of 'O' and 'A' level Certificates. Some of the best work was being done in Secondary Modern Schools while they still retained their original purpose and privilege of being untroubled by external examinations. This short-lived experiment was killed by a grand alliance of almost all the interested parties except some of those actually teaching and many of the pupils. The C.S.E. examination, however, gives possibilities for doing local history; but the organisation of comprehensive schools has yet to prove well adapted to the subject.

Before pursuing this matter further one must comment on the really momentous advances made in the extra-mural field by W.E.A. and university tutors. The Standing Conference for Local History has long made the point that every area in the country is covered by this network and, given a demand, *some* university will respond to its utmost, and indeed has the obligation to do so. It seems curious that Professor Hoskins in his inaugural lecture of 1966 was so disappointed at the lack of results in local history, especially from amateurs. An immense amount of work is going on both in extra-mural classes and in amateur societies, though both are still somewhat hampered by long-standing difficulties over publication. In fact the response to local history has been something justifying the adjective *phenomenal*. Professor Finberg has commented on one of these efforts, in which he has calculated that *five years'* work by a professional teacher has been done by an amateur group in *three*. The work, 'Discovering Sheldon' (near Birmingham), was done by one of Victor Skipp's

groups and he has set out his methods clearly in 'Local History—Objective and Pursuit,' which may be recommended as a reference book for those interested in any aspect of the subject.

Mr. Skipp also writes in this book of his work in schools. Such work is not easy as school time-tables are at present organised. Nor is the presentation of local history in the early stages easy either. But if you have ever met children taught in this way you may well have been surprised at their remarkable grasp, confidence and enthusiasm, the result of their being firmly grounded in experiences that they understand. They may not worship in the church or the chapels, but these are buildings that they take for granted, and their memorials and their very shapes can be made to live in a way in which it seems that Cromwell (was it Thomas or Oliver?) cannot. Boredom and a feeling of uselessness must set in when a history course speeds on regardless and often leaves literally not a wrack behind in memory. It is the limitations of local history that make it such a good educational subject: one can, and must, afford to take time and piece together detail. It must be a poor teacher who cannot make Oliver Cromwell come alive in a lesson, but it is the need to push on to the Restoration that is so damaging. Over the years pleas have been made for an education in national history in the merest outline, a framework without a picture if you like, but let it be backed by the greatest detail in local and area history, involving all the fascination of geology, natural history, archaeology, drawing, photography, observation, discussion and real co-operative work. This could be the basis of work up to 'O' level and would help to break down the rigidities of subject specialisation, which start long before the preparatory stage for university entrance. Some people may have been fortunate in learning in the early stages from a single teacher English, History, Geography, Divinity and Latin, or a similar range of subjects. Such a teacher saw his pupil enough to know something about him and to know what appeared to him difficult or easy, and what his reaction to difficulty was. Organisation is so different today and so specialised, but the virtues of the village school with its very limited staff are becoming clearer—its drawbacks seemed obvious enough. Especially can the teaching of local history be made a lever in the integration of school work; and parents can play a part, like everyone else, in asking that some attempt be made to base early teaching on the area itself and on the participation of pupils themselves. I believe that children would no longer 'hate history at school' but would become clearer over fact and theory, differences of opinion and logical argument, and more satisfied and stable perhaps in knowing about their environment. Local history *does*, however, make big demands upon the teacher, who must blaze the trail by original work before co-operative work can begin. An aura of unreality surrounds the textbook history for schools; and as schools and their curricula are very much in the melting pot at present, it is a good time to push the claims of local history as an important nucleus for environmental studies, not just in itself and for itself, but as an educational subject especially conducive to the participation of pupils, to discussion and argument, and to the development of logical thought and co-operation with other disciplines. All this depends, however, on something happening in the universities and training colleges as well. Local history has got to be accepted there as other than hairbrained antiquarianism: it must be seen as a logical discipline capable of bringing order into evidence of widely different kinds. Some training colleges will not look at local history at all but, as might be expected, the newer universities with freedom to create new syllabus requirements are doing their bit, and especially at Leicester the subject appears to be settling down with, at last, a professor of its own. Here in London efforts have been made without meeting with the response that could be wished. Of course, if a student has no background, however keen he is,

he sees danger in launching into a new subject at university level. Imagine undertaking a course in Byzantine history, knowing that you will have to begin by learning the Greek language: you would have to be very keen and would need very sympathetic teachers. Some students, however, have faced the challenge. Local history still needs much wider acceptance at national level and more knowledge on the part of the general public, so that schools and universities can work in harness towards higher standards. This is where the Standing Conference comes in. It is only just attaining its legal majority and I recall the discussions in the 'ad hoc' committee working out a constitution over what we should call ourselves: it *sounded* absurd to have *national* in the title, say 'The National Association of Societies of Local History,' but of course that is what we were. The pioneering work is far from over, especially at county committee level: it is in this Middlesex Local History Council and its counterparts that lies what should be the power-house of the local history movement. Middlesex has now the great advantage of an old Society and its *Transactions* as a means of disseminating the Local History Council's ideas. There is plenty of pioneering still to be done, especially in the field of education at all levels.

The Standing Conference has its own publication, *The Local Historian*, which it tries to make of maximum value to all those interested in the subject. It has won high praise but its success has not been such as to enable it to expand as it needs to. Suggestions about its content and distribution have always been welcome and even its name has recently been changed as a result: but it still needs more support and your constructive criticism.

Publication is a matter where once more national, intermediate and local interests (and resources) have to be taken into account. National publishers, dependent upon national sales, have been traditionally chary of undertaking local history publications in spite of some very successful essays in the field like J. C. Atkinson's *Forty Years in a Moorland Parish* (1891), J. D. Beresford's *History on the Ground* (1957) and Professor Hoskins' masterpiece, *The Making of the English Countryside* (1955). Now the outlook is brighter for Messrs. David and Charles from their headquarters in a redundant railway building at Newton Abbot have broadened their original field, through industrial archaeology into local history generally. Their list deserves careful watching. The book twice quoted above, *Local History—Objective and Pursuit* by Professor Finberg and V. H. Skipp, is from David and Charles' publishing house. Local history needs more publications; and fortunately at a professionally academic level grants both for work and for publication are becoming much more readily available through the British Academy and other bodies. Work, and very useful work too, at a local group level and perhaps narrowly local, is still far less easy to publish even when well worthy. That admirable endowment the Marc Fitch Fund has for the past dozen years been taking an interest in exactly this type of publication to the general benefit of everyone. There still remains much work deserving consideration and its publication is perfectly possible despite the expense (especially the rising cost of alternatives to printing). Such publication requires, of course, enthusiasm at source and the agreement and help of a county committee, such as this London and Middlesex Society one, to publicise the venture in areas likely to be interested, and perhaps to help with finance. A century and a half ago numerous local histories were being published on a subscription list basis and this is still a good way, together with interest-free loans raised locally so that immediate bills can be met. The backing of schools and adult education groups is important too. There must also be confidence in, and enthusiasm for, local work. Granted these, experience has shown that the sums required for publication can be raised and repaid within a few years if the planning is careful enough. By such publication

a third stage is added to amateur effort. First comes interest and enjoyment; next work to expand knowledge; and, finally, the greater discipline of putting results in writing. All participants cannot perhaps achieve this last and would not wish to, but what a pleasure it is to find people facing the difficulties of authorship for the first time, determined to pass on their own enthusiasm.

Whether or not the material produced is published there is now a crying need for an Institute, a central repository and clearing house for local history work. The obvious place for such an institution would appear to be Leicester but the position hardly matters if the place can be reached easily and if it has financial backing for personnel and buildings. It is in such an Institute that note could be taken of the humblest typescript and of its whereabouts even if it were not in fact placed in the central library. What is now being experienced is a glut of somewhat ephemerally produced work (even if the material deserves better) along with increasing numbers of books printed through the normal channels. *The Local Historian*, unable to find room for enough reviews, has for two years been wrestling with the problems involved in producing a Local History Bibliography for 1965-66, and when it is published people may well ask why it was decided to start with those years. The answer is simple: in 1966 the Standing Conference decided that it must do something about such a bibliography and the teething troubles have proved bigger than anticipated. A recognised central Institute could do this type of work much more easily. Local history depends so much on the work of amateurs that anything requiring long-term organisation and co-ordination becomes difficult for lack of a permanent staff. This is where the National Council of Social Service has helped so greatly in providing a central office for the Standing Conference and considerable help at county level. The recent publication by the Standing Conference of the *Glossary of Mediaeval Farming Terms* provides a good example of the needs and interacting forces. For many years such a book has been recognised as a major need for students of mediaeval manorial records. Canon Fisher has collected the farming terms for Essex over many years but had found difficulty over publication. The Standing Conference was able to bring together financial help from the Marc Fitch Fund, the Essex Record Office and Brentwood Historical Society, and to enlist the services of Dr. Powell to give the book as wide an application as possible. The Standing Conference then itself provided the services to publish the work through the normal channels of the National Council of Social Service. It can hardly be realised how much devoted and unpaid work has gone into this little book, which perhaps would not have been published at all without a permanent office staff to keep all the threads together over a long period. The end-product will, one hopes, be a very useful book though only an intermediate one, and help future scholars to produce something more finished and comprehensive. The obvious needs at the moment for local history, if it is to prosper and make good use of widespread and diversified enthusiasm, are continuity and finance. An Institute of Local History if it could be financed and sponsored by an academic institution would be an admirable solution. But these are not the days when state aid on this scale can be expected to be given easily, so there may yet be a need to persevere in the typically British 'ad hoc' compromises which lie behind the work of the Standing Conference for Local History. When the time for reorganisation does come, the work of the National Council for Social Service should be recognised, alongside that of the extra-mural departments of the universities, as of fundamental importance in nourishing the study of local history in the post-war period. There is no shadow of doubt now that local history is an established and growing study both for amateurs and professionals.