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Local History and Oral History

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Local history, despite attempts to bring it into line with other forms of historical practice, is still very much the province of enthusiasts. The merest squiggle on a parish register may set the historian's imagination alight – a reference to the death of a 'nurse child' or the marginal note of some ancient local cure. Or he may be horrified by the casual brutality revealed in workhouse records or the 'removals' itemised in parochial accounts, such as those reproduced by Reginald Hine, the historian of Hitchin, in his *Relics of an Un-Common Attorney* (these examples are from 1710):

> For a woman's lodging and victuals and to be rid of her, 1s 3d. Paid to a woman big with child and two children to go out of town, 4d. Paid Mary Gregory to go away, her children having the Small Pox, 7s. (Hine, 1946)

An old smithy or brewhouse may set him on the track of local trades, or a rusty old adze, hanging on its hook, or the chance discovery of a Day Book. He may be excited by a story in an old newspaper (or by the advertisements, or by the inquests, or by police court reports); fascinated by Roman remains; or puzzled by the legend of some half-remembered incident which demands an explanatory setting (the Grimsby riot is a good example). Or again, his sympathies may have been aroused by the struggle of his forebears, as they were for Methodist writers of the nineteenth century, tracing the humble origins of the chapel, and as they are for the trade unionist, writing of Tolpuddle times – or the General Strike – today. The sources, once a project has been taken up, are infinitely various, encompassing archaeological finds as well as literary remains, material culture as well as manuscripts and archives, dialect and speech as well as the printed word. Yet they are never so unlimited that the researcher is likely to get lost in them, and much of his time (or hers) will be spent in chasing fugitive facts, dating a wall or a building, mapping a driftway, completing a family tree. Harvesting, at least for the historian of early modern times, is not so much a matter of separating the wheat from the chaff as of reaping (or gleaning) the solitary ear of grain.

Local history demands a different kind of knowledge than one which is focused on high-level national developments, and gives the researcher a much more immediate sense of the past. He meets it round the corner and down the street. He can listen to its echoes in the marketplace, read its graffiti on the walls, follow its footprints in the fields. The abstract categories of social class, instead of being assumed, have to be translated into occupational differences and individual life careers, the impact of change measured by its consequences for particular households. The basic materials of historical process have to be constituted with whatever materials are locally available, or the structure will not stand.

The newcomer will find the path well signposted by aids.[1] Tate[2] – or the local vicar – will elucidate the mysteries of the parish chest; Emmison[3] – or the County Record Office staff – will act as guide to the Militia Lists, Hearth Tax returns or Quarter Sessions. At the town hall the chief committee clerk will use his keys to open up the basement muniments, though this may need patience and tact (at Barrow-in-Furness the historian of the town has only recently been given access to the corporation records, after a diplomatic contest lasting twenty years), while in the local library the researcher will often find a well-stocked and elaborately indexed collection of printed matter and ephemera, including perhaps the notebooks deposited by antiquarian predecessors and, for more recent times, the newspaper cuttings filed by the library staff. (In an old-established central library, such as Birmingham's or Manchester's, there will be obituaries of local worthies stretching back a hundred years). Secondhand bookshops can be a great help too: many of them specialise in local books and, if a wanted item does not come the way of the stockrooms, they can advertise for it in the trade.[4]

Local history also has the strength of being popular, both as an activity and as a literary form. Nineteenth-century provincial newspapers would devote as much as half a page a week to antiquarian jottings (the serialised form in which many local histories of that time appeared); today newspaper publication is rarer, but local diarists – such as the ever-helpful 'Anthony Wood' of the *Oxford Mail* – are often hungry for the items which the researcher can provide (the same is also true of local radio) and a local history pamphlet, what-

ever its quality, is assured of being a local best-seller.[5] People are continually asking themselves questions about where they live, and how their elders fared. They have a keen sense of heritage, treasuring iconography – old apprenticeship indentures or Valentines, bronze attendance medals, Sunday-school prize books, holiday postcards – and once their curiosity has been aroused, they may be only too anxious to help, rummaging around in old papers to see what they can dig up, submitting to detailed questions and volunteering information of their own. Often the local historian will be drawing on the accumulated reflection of his or her own life experience, and it is no accident that so many town and parish histories have been compiled by men and women actively engaged in local affairs, from clergymen and solicitors in the past to community-based agitators, such as the authors of *Fly a Flag for Poplar*,[6] or the editors of the 'People's Autobiography of Hackney' today. Veteran trade unionists, after a lifetime's activity, will take on the history of the trades council, retired teachers will chronicle the local school, JPs and aldermen the record of municipal affairs. The old socialist makes himself a library and archive (Alf Mattison's, now divided between Leeds Central Library and the Brotherton, is a major source of local history); the inveterate rambler, with a stout pair of boots, reconstructs the vanished landscape; the Women's Institute (they were responsible for some of the best local histories of the inter-war years) make an inventory of the home.

Why, then, is so much local history, though undertaken as a labour of love, repetitive and inert? Why, under the historian's microscope, do trades councils, board schools, or family businesses look so alike? Why do the localities themselves, when reconstituted over time, look so interchangeable? In the older parish histories there was a well-worn set of topics, the squire and his relations, the church and its incumbents, the manor and its court. There might be extensive notes on folklore and etymology, and if the author was a keen botanist 'flora and fauna' would be given a chapter (or an appendix) to themselves. Catholics and Noncomformists, though duly noticed, would often get less attention than the fabric of the parish church or the memorials on family gravestones, while industry and trade would often be relegated to the chapter of miscellanies at the end. The bourgeois revolution in local history – a twentieth- rather than a seventeenth-century affair – has changed all that, and today more attention is likely to be given to municipal worthies than to vicars, to philanthropically minded manufacturers than to medieval knights and squires. Transport and communication occupy the chapter once allotted to plants, population changes excite more attention than genealogy, ratebooks take the place of manorial entries and fines. The new conventions however, though different, can be just as imprisoning as the old.

One difficulty lies in the nature of the documents, which vary remarkably little from place to place, and are heavily biased towards local government. One set of churchwardens' accounts – a staple fare for the historian of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century parish – is very much like another and the same may be said of school logbooks: at least from the coming of the School Boards in the 1870s both the form and the matter of the entries were rigorously prescribed. Parish censuses, or the enumerators' returns, tell you little more about family life than household size and, as the Cambridge demographers have been at pains to argue, this shows a broad similarity over time, and comparatively slight local variation. They are an equally unsatisfactory source for the discussion of occupational structure, which often resolves itself into a head count of trades. Charities and poor relief are given an altogether disproportionate space for no better reason than the comparative abundance of their documentation, and the same may be said, in nineteenth-century town histories, of drainage.[7] As a result one local history tends to read very much like another, and though the historian is likely to pounce on any oddity which comes his or her way (churchwardens' payments for hedgehogs, for instance, or mercantilist-inspired instructions for burial in wool), the oddities themselves are apt to be repetitive, reflecting conventional vestry functions or standardised administrative forms. In urban history the administrative bias of the documents is reinforced by the preoccupation with 'improvement', which provides the writer with a ready-made documentation and theme. Victorian Wantage and Victorian Exeter can look very much alike when treated under such headings as the increase of population, public health measures, or the spread of schools.

The bias of 'family' papers – at least of those encountered in the town or county archives – can be quite as limiting as that of borough records, workhouse minutebooks or the parish chest. The great bulk of those deposited in a record office are estate papers and solicitors' accumulations and that mass of conveyances, wills and deeds which take up page after page in the catalogues. They are for the most part landlord–tenant agreements, preserved for accounting reasons, or legal documents resulting from disputes. As a result landownership and property transactions occupy a disproportionate amount of space in many local histories, and there is a one-sided emphasis on great estates. The history of a suburb, for instance, is likely to be dominated by the roadmakers, the house-builders and the property developers simply because they have left more enduring and more systematic evidence of their activity than anbody else. It is easier, for instance, to reconstruct the building history of Belsize Park, as F. M. L. Thompson has done in his much admired *Hampstead: Building a Borough*,[8] than to satisfactorily account for such more fugitive

appurtenances of local life as the Adelaide Branch of the Communist Party, the chessmen at Prompt Corner, or the busmen's ranks on South End Green; the creation of Swiss Cottage gets an interesting chapter to itself, but there is not a word about nursery life in the 1890s (despite the splendidly detailed memoir of Eleanor Farjeon which might have served as a starting-point), nor a hint of what went on in those gigantic drawing rooms in the days before German refugees and Indian students – the penniless intelligentsia of the 1930s and 1940s – took them over from the bourgeoisie. Wills and deeds – the local historian's stock-in-trade – can be made to yield a great deal of economic information, and imaginatively used, as Hoskins has shown for the probate inventories of the sixteenth century, they provide a sensitive indicator to stock-holding and household possessions. But there are limits to their reach. Estate papers can be full of information about tenancy agreements, yet have little or nothing to say about husbandry; conveyances, for all the elaboration of their detail, may tell us little about occupancy – the way in which buildings or farms were used. Business records can be even more unyielding. They tell us more about the marketing of goods than about the people who made them (or who sold them), more about wages than about work (even wagebooks are comparative rarities); ledgers and daybooks make it comparatively easy to write about growth and consolidation, while giving no indication at all of the fissiparous tendencies working in the opposite direction, family rivalries, for instance, scheming managers, or partners who took to the bottle. As a result economic activity is often seen through the eyes of the valuer and surveyor – or for more recent times the accountant – rather than that of worker and employer.

In recent years local historians have called on visual evidence in an attempt to get more sense of the particular, and convey a more immediate sense of place. One dominant preoccupation has been with the making of the landscape and the locational analysis of industries, housing and trade. The difficulty with this kind of work is that it is almost too rewarding, so that the historian's attention is diverted from the people to the place. In the city every stone can tell a story, while in the country there is the abundant testimony of the hedges and fields. Old sites can be identified, field systems mapped and street lines drawn out on a grid. Moreover almost any kind of local document is likely to yield topographical information of some kind, even if it is useless for anything else. The material, in short, is abundant, and the compulsive note-taker (as the present writer can testify) will soon find his files bulging and his headings well filled. The material also provides the writer with a unifying theme. Community life can be intimately related to (and often explained by) the physical peculiarities of the environment; its history can be set out in well-ordered phases of growth, from the geographical factors affecting the original conditions of settlement to the centrifugal forces at work today; structural continuities can be emphasised, while at the same time due allowance is made for development and change. Despite the accumulation of detail, however, it is possible for the people to remain at one remove. The shapes on the ground, as in an aerial photograph, appear with brilliant clarity – Celtic survivals, Roman earthworks, or the sprawling lines of modern villadóm; ridge and furrow (the plough lines of the Middle Ages) stand out in sharp relief, houses can be picked out by the rooftops; the inhabitants, on the other hand, from the panoramic nature of the vantage-point – or the absence of comparable material – may remain comparatively indistinct. The same is even more true of such related enthusiasms as industrial archaeology, which have made such a fruitful contribution to local history in recent years. The workplace is lovingly reconstructed but the workers themselves can remain mere shadows, dwarfed by the physical setting.

The pilot studies of the demographers – another major recent influence on local history – offer an even more aerial view. They have opened up new areas of inquiry, and parachuted into what was previously unexplored terrain, but the sample surveys so far published suggest a bleak landscape, inhabited by statistical variables, and sociological rocks. As with the topographers and the industrial archaeologists, theirs is an attempt to make up for the silence of the records and to recover the texture of life in the past. But household shape and size, the categories they deal in, part company with the social reality they are intended to expose: the ebb and flow of personal relationships, the to and fro of daily life. The documentation on which they rely, whether by necessity or choice (parish registers and census enumerators' returns) precludes the encounter that they seek. Instead of family life, we are given elaborate charts of births, marriages and deaths. The statistical material pre-empts the historian's attention, and provides him or her simultaneously with a subject matter and a problematic, not only a scaffolding but the bricks and mortar, too. As in the case of local government records, the sheer weight of the material (and the preponderance of a single source) is apt to impose itself. When 'social structure' (the demographers' term for class divisions) is derived from these documents, the construct is liable to be both static and unreal. Instead of the world of real economic relationships – patrons and clients, landlords and tenants, buyers and sellers, exploiters and exploited, employers and employed – we are offered statistical aggregates.

So far as the historical demographers are concerned – the pioneers in this field – such misgivings are beside the point. Their effort is avowedly comparative. They are interested in structure, not events, in stratification rather than relationships, in quantifiable variables

which can be assimilated to cross-cultural analysis. Their 'case studies' are cast in local form, but even though the ostensible subject is a village or a town, the sense of place is deliberately eschewed. Alan Armstrong's study of York,[9] for instance, devotes some thirty pages to 'economic characteristics' and about the same to 'social characteristics', and then gets on to the real meat of the study: 'growth of population'; 'mortality'; 'marriage and fertility'; 'household and family structure'. It is no accident that the censuses which provide him with his chief material, appear in the very title of his book, or that 'mortality' should be the subject of one of the longer chapters. His aims are frankly stated at the outset:

> This study . . . may be regarded as an example, albeit imperfect, of both the new social history and urban history . . . I have eschewed descriptions of the provincial 'season', sporting and cultural activities, colourful and quaint illustrations of customs, manners and social events, etc. The spheres of local politics and ideology, important though they are, have been left to others . . . instead there is a heavy emphasis on social structure and demographic trends.

Michael Anderson's study of early Victorian Preston[10] is equally severe. In all its elaborate discussion of the household, and subdivision according to numbers and makeup, there is little mention of individual Preston families by name, or of single instances to illustrate the life cycles and correlations so confidently set out. What he says may be true, but we have no autonomous validation: the world is one utterly enclosed by his constructs. Servant-owning households are singled out for attention, as a class,, but there is scarcely a reference to the millowners (neither Horrocks, the great cotton magnate, nor the Masters' Association of 1853–4 are so much as mentioned). Reference is made to the Irish, as a component of the working population, but not to their streets, to their ferocious attacks on the police (the Quarter Sessions records at Preston have a particularly affecting instance), nor to such interesting and important characters as Micky Gallaher, one of the strike leaders in 1853–4 and, in later years, a local Orange firebrand. Very few streets are mentioned by name either: there is no 'Orchard' for strike meetings to be held, no 'Fishergate' for high street promenades. There is no reference either to Temperance (a national movement founded by the Seven Men of Preston in the 1830s); to Chartism, to trade unionism (despite the existence of an excellent contemporary account of the spinners by their secretary, Thomas Banks); or to Orator Hunt, who was for a time the town's MP. Strangest of all, in a study whose focus is on mid-century, there is not so much as a word about the great Preston strike of 1853–4, the subject of Dickens's lurid but memorable fiction, *Hard Times*[11] (Dickens went up to witness the strike before writing the novel), and arguably the single most important industrial event in nineteenth-century Lancashire, a terminal point for three decades of near-insurrectionary struggle; nor is any use made – even for the considerable light it casts obliquely on domestic life – of the fine collection of strike material housed in the Harris library or the County Record Office, both of them conveniently sited in the very centre of the town. The omissions are all the more striking, because on its chosen topics the book is so thoroughly researched; they are the result not of oversight, but as in Alan Armstrong's fastidious exclusions at York, of programmatic intent.

A final difficulty concerns the very notion of local history: the idea of place as a distinct and separate entity which can be studied as a cultural whole. In the older antiquarian histories almost anything which happened locally was liable to be treated as significant, irrespective of its intrinsic importance, or place in an evolutionary scheme. Strikes and riots rubbed shoulders indiscriminately with 'remarkable occurrences' such as floods, the village stocks might be sandwiched in a paragraph between monumental brasses and an account of local inns. Documents would be faithfully transcribed and affectionately reproduced simply because they were old – 'the actual words written at the time' – and much of the historian's ingenuity would be focused on whimsical sidelights. Miscellaneous chronicles of this kind have always given a great deal of pleasure, and they are unlikely to disappear, however many strictures are directed against them.[12] But the local historian today, following the direction pioneered by Hoskins,[13] Finberg[14] and the Leicester School, is characteristically more selective. In place of the picturesque, they are more likely to be on the look-out for regularities. The preoccupation with place is just as intense as it was in the past, but for those who follow the Leicester School the focus of attention is more likely to be on patterns of development than on individual documents and events. Locality is seen as a distinct phenomenon, with its own peculiar time-scale and laws of growth, a living organism with its own distinctive life cycle which can be studied continuously over long periods of time both in terms of occupational structure, and topographical peculiarities. 'The business of the local historian', as Finberg wrote in 1953, in a much-quoted passage 'is to re-enact in his own mind, and to portray for his readers the Origin, Growth, Decline, and Fall of a local community'. The notion of community, as in the above passage, is often invoked – 'a group of people bound together by certain common interests', 'a true society of men, women and children, gathered together in one place' – and the whole thrust of local history in recent years has been towards identifying community types.

No one who cares about English history can fail to have been excited by one or other aspect of this work, or to acknowledge the major advances in scholarship and

understanding which have resulted from it. But it is possible to be uneasy about some of its suppositions even while welcoming, and being thankful for, the results. In particular the notion of 'community', though freely invoked, is, or ought to be, problematical. In urban history it is little more than a convenient fiction, which can only be maintained by concentrating on civic and municipal affairs. In the countryside it often carries an unwarranted assumption of equilibrium, which it might be the task of the historian to question rather than to affirm. It is possible to live in the same place while inhabiting different worlds, whether as man and wife, parent and child, employer and employed. The lady's maid and the carpenter, even if they eventually marry, will have been shaped by fundamentally different work experiences and give their allegiance to strongly contrasted ideologies: one will have known only the protective patronage of the great house, while the other, however skilled, will have led an itinerant, jobbing life, surrounded by insecurities (in a country town, for instance, victimisation when his trade unionism became known); one would rely on a character reference when it came to a change of job, the other on the unofficial building workers' grapevine. Even in marriage their outlook, shaped by such different experience, would by no means be the same.

Instead of assuming the existence of equilibrium, it might be better if historians were to fathom some of its undercurrents, and to distinguish between interests which were conflictual and those which in some sense were shared. The recent work of the Leicester School has shown that religious divisions can be treated in this way, and in Margaret Spufford's *Contrasting Communities*[15] – a magnificently detailed and thoughtful reconstruction of life in three Cambridgeshire villages of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – one can see the precious insight they give into class and economy, as well as bringing us closer to the mentality and consciousness of the time – to the ways which people thought and felt and grouped themselves. Or again, instead of taking locality itself as the subject, the historian might choose instead as the starting-point some element of life within it, limited in both time and place, but used as a window on the world. This is what, on a modest scale, Ruth Hapgood[16] did with her study of women's work at Abingdon between the wars, and Graham Rawlings[17] in his account of the three working classes in Bath in the 1930s: studies like this can give one more sense of the individuality of a town than much weightier tomes laden with borough records. It would be good to see this attempted for nineteenth-century London. A study of Sunday trading in Bethnal Green, including the war waged upon it by the open-air preachers (at the time of the 1851 religious census, only a tiny proportion of the local population were churchgoers); of cabinetmaking in South Hackney, or of Hoxton burglars (according to one of Booth's investigators in the 1890s, some of them were skilled artisans, neither rough nor poor, but, as he chose to call them 'criminal', who went out safecracking as an evening recreation) would take one closer to the heartbeat of East End life than yet another précis of Hector Gavin's *Sanitary Ramblings*,[18] G. R. Sims's *Horrible London*,[19] or James Greenwood's *Low Life Deeps*.[20] Courting and marriage in Shepherd's Bush, domestic life in Acton, or Roman Catholicism among the laundrywomen and gasworkers of Kensal Green, might tell one more about the growth of suburbs than logging the increase of streets, and the same might be said, on the further fringes of London, of market gardening in Barking, boatmen at Brentford, gypsies at Wandsworth, harvest or haymaking at Tottenham Hale. The study of social structure, too, might be made more intimate and realistic if the approach were more oblique, and focused on activity and relationships. A study of childhood in Chelsea (of whom you could or couldn't play with, or where you were allowed to go), masculinity in Mitcham, the journey to work in Putney, or of local politics in Finsbury, would tell one a great deal about the way class differences were manipulated and perceived, and social allegiances expressed in practice, even if not a word were said explicitly of social structure. Gwyn Williams's little study of Merthyr politics in the 1830s,[21] in which he shows how a cadre of radically minded Unitarian tradesmen transformed the political complexion of the town, brings us much closer to the ambiguities of class feeling than a more flat-footed approach, taking the Registrar General's five-fold divisions as markers.

By using a different class of record – such as the depositions discussed by David Vaisey[22] – or with the aid of living memory (or both) the historian can draw up fresh maps, in which people are as prominent as places, and the two are more closely intertwined. He or she can then explore the moral topography of a village or town with the same precision which predecessors have give to the Ordnance Survey, following the ridge and furrow of the social environment as well as the parish boundaries, travelling the dark corridors and half-hidden passageways as well as the byelaw street. Reconstructing a child's itinerary seventy years ago the historian will stumble on the invisible boundaries which separated the rough end of a street from the respectable, the front houses from the back, the boys' space from the girls'. Following the grid of the pavement you will come upon one stretch that was used for 'tramcars', another for hopscotch, a third for Jump Jimmy Knacker or wall games. 'Monkey racks' (such as the one described by Derek Thompson in interwar Preston)[23] appear on the High Street, where young people went courting on their Sunday promenades, while the cul de sac becomes a place where woodchoppers had their sheds and costers dressed their barrows. The physical environment will come alive too, if seen as an arena of activity rather than as an impersonal ecological force or a repository of archaeo-

logical remains. Particular fields or woods or commons are remembered by their use, by the work done in them, or the provisions foraged: here mushrooms and firewood could be found or rabbits trapped; there potatoes were dug or horse illegally grazed or long summer days were spent at haymaking or harvest.

Oral evidence makes it possible to escape from some of the deficiencies of the documentary record, at least so far as recent times are concerned (namely, those which fall within living memory), and the testimony which it brings is at least as important as that of the hedges and fields, though one should not exclude the other. There are matters of fact which are recorded in the memories of older people and nowhere else, events of the past which they alone can elucidate for us, vanished sights which they alone can recall. Documents cannot answer back, nor, beyond a point, can they be asked to explain in greater detail what they mean, to give more examples, to account for negative instances, or to explain apparent discrepancies in the record which survives. Oral evidence, on the other hand, is open-ended, and limited only by the number of survivors, and by the ingenuity of the historian's questions, and by his or her patience and tact. It is surprising how unwilling local historians have been to admit it, except in a subordinate role. W. G. Hoskins, the doyen of English local history, writing in 1972, warned that while it was 'not to be dismissed altogether', it had to be subject to rigorous checks, and he plainly regards it as inferior, as well as different in kind, to manuscript and material remains.[24] Yet there are certain kinds of inquiry which can only be undertaken with the aid of living testimony, and whole areas of life in which its credentials are beyond question. A man or woman talking about their work know more about it than the most diligent researcher is likely to discover, and the same is often true of childhood, where people's memories are apt to be peculiarly precise if the historian can find the right key to unlock them. Oral evidence can also be crucial for a background understanding. It can give us living contexts which the documents themselves, however closely pressed, fail to yield. The spare entries of a diary, for instance, can take on new meaning if we are able, from other sources, to reconstitute the character of the writer or of the circumstances to which the entries refer. The obscure hieroglyphics of a wages book become comprehensible in the light of the sub-divisions and classification of the work, as it can be described by those who were themselves involved, the measuring book in the light of piecework, the price list in the memory of those who haggled over its terms. Sources like this may only come to life when there are people to explain, to comment and to elaborate on them, when there are other kinds of information to set against them, and a context of custom and practice in which they can be set. Oral evidence can also help to bring the residues of material culture into play. The copper stick or the dolly mop cease to be inanimate objects if one listens to the men or women who used them, the cooper's cresset fills again with fire, the stained black knives are cleaned with Bath Brick or house sand, the dirty old pinny is worn again for Sunday-school, starched white.

As well as making a more extended use of the existing records, an oral history project can also add to them, and build up a whole new documentation of its own. There are in the first place the recordings and their transcripts whose greatest value may still lie unperceived; they will (if safely preserved) be archives for the future as well as answering to the particular purpose of the work in hand. Then there are the autobiographies which an oral history project can encourage, such as Alice Foley's *Bolton Childhood* (a fine, harsh account of a Lancashire childhood in the early 1900s),[25] or those which have been published as the 'People's Autobiography of Hackney'[26] one of the Hackney authors, after writing his own life, has now gone on to produce a 120,000-word reconstruction of his family). Others may be brought to light in the course of research, preserved as family heirlooms – the little history which a Methodist may write of his chapel or the shopkeeper of his shop, the 'brief account' which a grandfather in the closing years of his life will draw up for his descendants, tracing family origins or relating the times he has seen (so far I've found no grandmother's). Then there are the family papers, handed down from older generations, which occasionally make their way into the record offices, but for the most part are treasured, or neglected, in the privacy of the home and which, below the level of the gentry and the high bourgeoisie, escape the investigations of the Historical Manuscripts Commission or the National Register of Archives. Family letters are particularly precious, though much more difficult to find than such more decorative ephemera as Valentines or apprenticeship indentures. The Welsh Coalfield project has been collecting them along with lodge minutebooks, miners' libraries and individual tape recordings. Some of them are from newcomers to the coalfield in the 1900s, writing home, and they give us precious insights into the process of migration which could hardly have been arrived at in any other way. Documents like these will only come the historian's way, if he or she asks for them. The same is true of diaries. In any locality there are likely to be numbers of them waiting to be collected which the historian will only come upon inadvertently, in the course of visits to local homes. The rescue of old photographs is another possible byproduct of an oral history project, and if it is deliberately pursued great numbers of them are likely to turn up.[27] They will be useful anyway as illustrations, evoking the past for those who never saw it, and stirring new memories in those who were there. Sometimes too they will provide new information, or independent corroboration. At their best they will provide the historian with a benchmark, exposing a reality which it is then his or her task to explain. Finally, though more occasionally,

there are the private hoards – cuttings, handbills, posters, diaries – of those who have made themselves unofficial archivists of local activities and events. The best local documents, in short, will be found not in the library or the record office, but in the home.

Oral evidence makes it possible not only to fill in gaps, but also to redefine what local history can be about. Instead of allowing the documents to structure the work – or having it filtered through the categories of law, accountancy, or local government – the historian can make his touchstone the real-life experience of people themselves, both domestically and at work. He can deal with the ordinary unreported troubles of everyday life as well as with such better-documented catastrophes as floods, with family feuds as well as with suicides and murders, courtship and marriage as well as bastardy, working practices as well as strikes. He can take the pulse of daily life as well as registering the more occasional tremor of great events, follow the seasonal cycle, plot the weekly round.

Interview and reminiscence will also enable the historian to give an identity and character to people who would otherwise remain mere names on a street directory or parish register, and to restore to some of their original importance those who left no written record of their lives. Some of them will emerge in the course of family reconstitution, if the historian will pause for a profile at each name in the network of kin, starting from the grandparents and their siblings and working downwards. Some will crop up in the course of personal reminiscence, or stories of incidents and events. Names culled from newspapers of the time can be used as a source of questioning and prompts. Or again, more systematically, it is possible with the aid of a directory or an electoral register to attempt a living reconstruction, house by house and shop by shop, of long-since-vanished streets. In some cases a chain of living testimonies can be brought to bear upon a single character – the woman round the corner who was called in when people were sick, or when there was a baby to deliver, or body to be laid out or a funeral to prepare; the backstreet moneylender who was relied upon for weekly or seasonal loans; the man with the horse and cart, or barrow, who helped out on moonlight flits. This is what Hackney WEA have done in *The Threepenny Doctor*[28], their composite portrait of Dr Jelley, an unfrocked doctor and abortionist who practised locally between 1910 and 1930: in the space of thirty-odd pages it tells us more about popular medicine, and the ways in which illness was coped with in the home, than volumes of Medical Officer of Health reports. Biographies like these will not only make the historian's account more readable, they will also provide a bank of information which could hardly have been arrived at in any other way, and in the course of compiling them the historian will discover all kinds of unofficial networks, hidden from history so far as the documents are concerned, which nevertheless once played a crucial part in backstreet and neighbourhood life. The historian can take down the portraits of worthies and still find his gallery well filled.

Oral evidence makes for a much more realisitc appreciation of capitalist enterprise than one which relies on business records alone. The shopkeeper steps out of the columns of his ledgerbook to become a busy, pushy man, renowned for his penny-pinching ways; the rent collector comes round on a Monday morning, wing-collared and straw-hatted, only to be told that mother is out; the master printer turns out also to dabble in slum property, to have an interest in a public house, and to share his warehouse with a furnisher. Close questioning about custom and practice makes it possible to learn what went on in the counting houses as well as what was reproduced in the books, to take up place beside the small master at his bench and travel with the trader on his rounds; in the case of small farms, as David Jenkins has shown in his fine study of Cardiganshire in the 1900s,[29] it is possible to redress the imbalance in the records, with their bias in favour of the large farms and the great estates, and recover some of the missing elements of peasant life in the past. Class relations can be explored at the point of production rather than by their distant echo, perfunctorily recorded, if at all, in trades council minutebooks, or the surviving records of the local trade union branch: the workplace, instead of being merely listed as plant, can be explored as a social arena.

The notion of work, too, can be complicated and refined. Instead of merely listing occupations – or ranking them according to sociological notions of prestige – the historian can discover what they actually entailed. The labourer, that catch-all title favoured by the Census enumerators, turns out in many cases not to have been a labourer at all, but a man with a definite calling – a holder-up in the shipyards, a winchman at the docks, a welldigger or drainer in the countryside, a carrier or a freelance navvy; conversely the artisan, when one inquires into the succession of his jobs, seems forever to be crossing occupational boundaries, notwithstanding his apprenticeship to one trade; the stonemason, when out of work, turns to furniture-making or carving mantels, the bricklayer to welldigging, the cabinetmaker to hawking tea. The labour process itself is something which with the aid of oral evidence can be reconstituted with great precision – as George Ewart Evans has shown for the ploughmen, the haymakers and the harvesters of East Anglia.[30] People's memory of their work, like that of childhood, is often peculiarly vivid, and extends to incidents and events and stories which give precious insights into the workplace, as a total context and cultural setting – the ambiguities of foremanship and the difficulties encountered by authority, the nature of the learning process, the subdivision of the different classes of work, the shifting balance of power between employer and employed. *Working Lives*, Hackney WEA's collection

of work autobiographies, is an example of the illumination this can bring.[31] Here, for instance, is an extract from the account of Mr Welch, a demolition man of the 1920s, when the work was 'all done by hand', which throws a flood of light on what was then, even more than it is today, a very murderous trade. It tells us something not only of the dangerous quality of the work itself, but also the way people steeled themselves against dangers, and the psychic mechanisms which came into play to cope with accidents, both when they happened and also retrospectively, in stories where, London-style, the tragedy is played for the laughs:

> It was dangerous work. You were always hearing of casualties from the other men on the jobs. If you had been in the game long you would have met most of the demolition men in the London area, including characters with names like 'Bootnose' and 'Gutsache'.
>
> Bootnose himself was killed at Cannon Street, when a cast iron girder fell on him. At Peter Robinson's one bloke fell off the front wall. Arthur Lovell, his name was. As he fell off the wall, he hit the fan. He hit the guard and bounced . . . into the road. For any ordinary man that should be death. They put him into a wheelchair for about 2½ years and he got £250 compensation. It ruined his life and that is all he got. He spent it to buy a greengrocer's business. He did not do all that well with it; with him being like that, his wife had to do all the work. He had to sell it out in the end. It was not a happy life and I heard that he died a couple of years later. My father fell several times. Once he fell when he had been down Covent Garden Market, where the pubs open early. Being a good drinking man, he had been in the pub and had his usual morning drink. He always did this to steady him up to go to work. But this day he was so drunk that when he got to the top (the foreman had told him to pull down a chimney breast).
>
> 'I didn't know which was which,' he told us afterwards. 'There should be six flue holes, but there were eighteen of them.'
>
> He hit down the bottom where there was already a pile of rubbish (we were knocking down a slum) otherwise it would have been his lot. He rolled out into the open and the foreman came out to see if he was still breathing just as he was scrambling to his feet.
>
> 'You all right, Jim.'
>
> 'Aw, me back!'
>
> So the foreman said to one of the other chaps: 'Take him up the Middlesex 'Ospital. See what's 'appened. If 'e's not fit, take 'im 'ome.'
>
> Of course, they had a couple on the way, and then they got to the hospital Dad had an argument with the doctor: 'I didn't want to come to the bleedin' barber's,' he said. (He thought because he had a white coat on he was a barber!)
>
> The doctor gave him an examination. He was a mass of bruises, nothing else.
>
> 'Right, take him back to the job.'
>
> He should have gone home, but they came out, sampling the pubs on the way.
>
> 'I'll get back to work now. I'm all right,' said Dad. The beer made him like that – he wanted to get back to work. (People's Autobiography of Hackney, 1976, pp. 36–7)

Oral history can also provide a different perspective on the family (and give much more space to it) by bringing qualititative evidence to bear. The approach of local historians in the past was largely genealogical – the identification of family origins, the tracing of family trees. More recently, under the influence of the Cambridge Historical demographers, the focus of attention has shifted to household size, but the accounts – despite the importance attached to 'family reconstitution' – remain obstinately external. Names are abstracted from the parish registers, Census returns quantified, but little or nothing may be said about household economy, or the emotional realities of family life. Oral evidence makes possible a much more phenomenological account. Close questioning about specific situations – such as those used in the Essex Oral History project – will reveal a great deal about the inner texture of household life, and enables the historian to explore the different and changing meanings which attached to the notions of a home. Instead of treating the family as a monolithic unity, it is possible to explore specific relationships – mother–daughter, father–son, brother–sister as well as those of the marriage partners themselves. Children are often left out of the demographers' accounts entirely, except as statistics: the frequency or otherwise of their births are recorded and the median age of their marriages, but little else. In an oral history account of the family, by contrast – it is both a weakness and a strength – children are likely to occupy a disproportionately prominent place, if only because informants will be calling on memory drawn from their childhood years. For the same reason the mother is also in the forefront, in many cases overworked and underfed (in a struggling Edwardian home the father would often be given the lion's share of the available food, while the women and children had his leavings), but also chancellor of the family exchequer, strategist and manager, and gaining in authority as her children grew up, while her husband's earning powers waned. Living standards can be explored in the light of the family life cycle, and the peculiarities of the household economy. Instead of looking at earnings only, the historian can inquire into the management of a debt, which in a poor family (or an improvident one) could be as important as wages in the day to day struggle for survival. Earnings themselves will often appear as a family affair, rather than the concern only of the senior male breadwinner. Double banking, secondary

employments, totting and foraging, backstreet dealing and trade will often be revealed in people's memory and nowhere else. The same is true of women's home earnings – so often unrecorded in the Censuses – and of child labour, which in the 1890s and 1900s could still make a big contribution to a family's well-being even if, below a certain age, it was prohibited by law.

Oral evidence is important not just as a source of information, but also for what it does to the historian who goes out into the field, as an invisible corrective and check. It can help to expose the silences and deficiency of the written record and reveal to the historian – in Tawney's fine phrase – the 'shrivelled tissue', which is often all that he has in his hands. It serves as a measure of authenticity, a forcible reminder that the historian's categories must in the end correspond to the grain of human experience, and be constituted from it, if they are to have explanatory force. To say this is not to exalt one kind of evidence over another, but to propose a continuous interplay between them, and a more extended use of both. Oral evidence should make the historian hungrier for documents, not less, and when he finds them, he can use them in a more ample and more varied way than his sedentary colleagues, who confine themselves to the library carrel, or the Record Office search room. He will need them for indications of phenomena which lie beyond the reach of memory, for dates where it may be mistaken, for precisions which it cannot, or will not, supply. He will need them to enrich and inform his questioning, to allow the dead to speak to the living and the living to the dead. Above all he will need them to establish the dimensions and peculiarities of change, if he is not to be chronologically limited by the lifespan of his older informants.

Local history does not write itself but, like any other kind of historical project, depends upon the nature of the evidence and the way that it is read. Everything about it is contingent, from the choice of theme to the subject matter of the individual paragraphs. The whole shape of a work can be pre-empted by the adoption of a particular method – family reconstitution, for example, or the derivation of 'social structure' from the Census enumerators' returns. The questions the historian starts with will, to a large extent, determine the answers. Women and children will only appear if he looks for them, domestic labour if he asks about it, family quarrels if he is alert to their tell-tale signs. Documents are decisive too as an unacknowledged source of bias, especially when the historian is heavily reliant on a single main source: you get a different picture of life from local newspapers than from borough records, from petty sessions than from constabulary reports. Often the crucial evidence for what the historian wants to write about is missing, and it might be better to acknowledge the fact, and signal it to readers, rather than to present a partial picture as though it were the whole. Whatever the limits of the material the historian still has a wide range of optics. The landscape, for instance, will take on quite different hues, depending on whether it is seen through the lens of activity, or the evidence of material remains; the class system will look transparent or opaque according to the materials with which it is reconstituted, and the angle of vision from which it is seen. Precisions can often only be achieved by narrowing the field of vision, perspective by widening it, and the historian should make the reader aware – and recognise himself – the loss which inevitably accompanies either gain.

Documents, I have tried to argue in this chapter, are the most contingent factor of all. Their survival is hazardous and uneven and it is the more bureaucratic and financial class of records which are the most likely to have been preserved: doctors' case notes are a great rarity (there is a good set in the Stockport public library) while board of guardian minutebooks abound. A local history project, however, can generate its own archives and sources as well as drawing on those which have already been deposited or amassed in the record offices, and the historian, even if he does not set out with that intention, will soon find himself the custodian of all kinds of miscellanea. Documents will turn up in the unlikeliest places once you begin to look for them, and the historian who ventures outside the library can bring all kinds of other evidence into play. He will have privileged access to information networks which depend on friendship and word of mouth, to unclassified source materials which are stored as personal hoards, and to men and women who are walking documents, living testimonies to the past. He can supplement the written word with the spoken and call on the visual evidence of the environment, on household iconography and remains. The lottery element in local history can never be eliminated, but for recent times at least it can be substantially reduced.

It would be a great pity if oral history were fetishised, like historical demography, as a project on its own. There are certain kinds of inquiry which can only be undertaken with the aid of oral evidence, others in which its contribution is more marginal. The oral historian is just as likely as anybody else to be stuck in the groove of methodological circularities, and a local history based on oral evidence alone runs as much risk of being routinised – and radically incomplete – as one which depends on the parish chest, even though the repetitions would be different. It would also carry its own characteristic biases. Recalling their past, people will often have much more to say about home life than politics, about habit and custom than about individual occurrences and events (memories of the General Strike are often disappointingly perfunctory, while children's games can cover pages of a transcript). Memory has its own selectivity and silences just as the written record has its bureaucratic biases and irrecoverable gaps. It may be strong on general outline, but fickle when it comes to facts, reticent on some areas of experience

while on others it is unexpectedly vociferous. It cannot tell us how reality was perceived at the time, even when it can be recalled in the uttermost detail; and it is only too easy for difficulties to be softened in the warm afterglow of nostalgia. The threads of consciousness are particularly difficult to unravel, because past and present attitudes are so liable to be tangled up. As in everything the historian must be alert to the nature of the evidence presented, whether it is being retailed at first- or at second- and thirdhand, hearsay and gossip, or the testimony of direct personal experience, 'folk-lore' polished by frequent repetition, and elaborated by the storyteller's arts, or the surprised revelation of incidents and events long since buried in the unconscious. The value of the testimonies depend on what the historian brings to them as well as on what he or she takes, on the precision of the questions, and the wider context of knowledge and understanding from which they are drawn. The living record of the past should be treated as respectfully, but also as critically, as the dead.

Notes: Chapter 19

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1 See, for example, Stephens (1973), Tate (1946), Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (1973), Harley (1972), HMSO (1964), Wrigley (1972), Mills (1965), Steer (1962), Brunskill (1970), Parker (1970), Hoskins (1969), Emmison and Gray (1961), Emmison (1966), Gough (1968), Travis (1896), Herbert (1948), Mackenzie (1865–6), Peel (1888; 1893), Cox (1879), Pugh (1954), Wake (1925), Boase (1956), Hine (1946), Finberg (1953), Hoskins (1968; 1972), Dyos (1972), Rogers (1972), Everitt (1970) and Spufford (1974).
2 See Tate (1946).
3 See Emmison (1966).
4 *The Director of Dealers in Secondhand and Antiquarian Books* (published annually) is a worthwhile buy for those who want to do their own chasing.
5 *Otmoor and its Seven Towns* (Hobson and Price, 1967) has sold some thousands of copies since it was first published in 1961, while the People's Autobiography of Hackney reaches sales of over 1,000 for its pamphlets within a matter of months.
6 See Richman (1975).
7 *Trowbridge's Fight for Pure Water, 1864–1874* (Lansdown, 1968) is the expressive title of a West Wiltshire Historical Association pamphlet, and it could be matched by comparable chapters in many other works.
8 See Thompson (1974).
9 See *Stability and Change in an English County Town, a social study of York, 1801–1851* (Armstrong, 1974).
10 See Anderson (1971).
11 See Dickens (1854).
12 *'Tis a Mad World at Hogsdon* (Coombs, 1974), which has sold some 2,000 copies in and around Shoreditch, East London, since it was first published in 1974, is a representative recent example.
13 See Hoskins (1968; 1969; 1972).
14 See Finberg (1953).
15 See Spufford (1974).
16 See Hapgood (1975).
17 See Rawlings (1975).
18 See Gavin (1971).
19 See Sims (1883).
20 See Greenwood (1876).
21 See Williams (1966).
22 See Vaisey (1976).
23 See Thompson (1975).
24 See Hoskins (1972).
25 See Foley (1973).
26 See People's Autobiography of Hackney (1976; 1977).
27 The second *Hackney Camera* (People's Autobiography of Hackney, 1974a) is a selection from 280 glass negatives discovered in a cellar.
28 People's Autobiography of Hackney (1974b).
29 See Jenkins (1971).
30 See Ewart Evans (1970).
31 See People's Autobiography of Hackney (1976; 1977).