

**The Trouble With Local
History**
by Brian Edwards

It was in honour of the pioneering George Rudé that Eric Hobsbawm reminded us of the enormous temptation in history simply to reveal that which has hitherto been relatively unknown. Thanks to such lessons from our betters, most historians involving themselves with the global overview manage to elude the trap; but it is indeed rare for such enticement to be avoided in the field of local history.

Local history society magazines, and local history pamphlets, are frequently filled with curiosities and sentiment. The historical oddities that fill these pages can be found by anyone trawling through the local record office, library, junk shop, or bazaar. It will undoubtedly be found to be of interest, and enjoyed if only in passing. As enjoyable as these notes and queries often are however, they are not in themselves history. Published without any further explanation or thought, these notes are impoverishing local history, reducing it to a mere catalogue of parochial trivia. These monuments to historical abstractions, are nothing more than barren chronicles of unrelated footnotes and quaint anachronisms. Isaiah Berlin stated shortly before his death that this type of historical reporting was, "known as journalism in my day". This "journalism" lacks context, and is often brought to our attention for no other reason than because the author wants to show-off about what they have found. It is simply not good enough to publish this egoistic nonsense under the title of history. In order to qualify as history what we want to know, as Eric Hobsbawm would say, "is *why*, as well as *what*".

Any fresher submitting their first essay will hopefully attempt, if not necessarily succeed in, telling us how and why, as well

as what. Every essay will be a coherent argument by the time the MA is attempted, and every line written is another step in historical learning. Despite this, the great bulk of academic writings on history are

never aired in public, and they simply fade from sight unless produced by PhD students. Yet in complete contrast, communities everywhere in England have their popular memory crowded by public history that can commonly be found to have been produced by those who have not necessarily demonstrated any particular perspicacious reasoning or understanding in the idea of history.

High Streets everywhere carry plaques, road names, and titles for shopping malls; many of which will have been proposed and discussed without any specialist input by a professional historian. We may similarly encounter anywhere in England, pamphlets in churches, guides in newsagents, and local histories in libraries; many of which will again have been produced without the benefits of academic research. The greatest example being those nauseatingly obsequious collections of old photographs, where no more than a naive commentary is offered alongside woefully nostalgic plates, and there is a complete failure to recognise the historiographical nature of the medium. In spite of a distinct lack of any officialising through academia however, these histories become recognised by the public as "official histories" because they often carry the name of the local or district council, the civic society, the vicar, or perhaps the "local historian". These officialised emblems of public history carry some weight, and are more likely to be cited as a reference in a publicly placed argument than any lofty footnote from a learned journal. As Sally Morgan recently pointed out in the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, civic art is a conscious deployment of icons used extensively as an apparatus of social memory. It is what the people see most often, and being more aware of it will identify with it and accept it unquestionably as relevant. Yet this public history might in the light of academic research prove to be a travesty

and an injustice to the past of the peoples and the place.

Examples of this misrepresentation will perhaps be found anywhere and everywhere across England, but an exceptional example that has been the subject of recent academic research lies on our doorstep - the Marlborough area of Wiltshire. This incredibly interesting landscape reflects the entire historical itinerary from when hunter-gathering ancestors first settled, to attempts by a modern industrial society to escape its reality by bivouacking in a reinvented past. Most notably, Marlborough has an unparalleled tradition for sedition and rebellion, and the town has become the centre of the nation's attention on numerous occasions due to serious rioting on an unprecedented scale. Despite Marlborough's intoxicating history however, it is neither celebrated nor widely regarded by its inhabitants.

How a place that has such a remarkable past manages to so utterly avoid such historic renown when commemorating its history, is in itself as interesting as it is puzzling. The reasons might vary from being ashamed of previous notoriety, to the wish to promote some other image for political or economic reasons; but the most common influence behind officialdom's failure to exploit and revel in an area's past is perhaps ignorance of it.

Although perhaps continuing to ignore it for other reasons, in the case of Marlborough there are grounds to suggest that the keepers of the area's officially recognised history have remained quite unaware of the history on their doorstep. The reasons for this are once again various, but suffice it to say that it includes over-reliance on local histories as a source that are antiquarian in nature, with the only exception a Trevelyanized Tory tome of narrative.

We must also consider the people involved with the process of recognising history for the purposes of identity. Many of these will have received little if any formal training in history as a discipline, and will lack

instruction in the idea of local history as a process. They will rely on what they learned of history at school, and as it is unlikely that any of them attended school in the last quarter of a century let alone the last decade we might consider their grounding in the subject as rather contrary to the interests of the subject. Plainly put, Sussex University's rural historian Alun Howkins categorises these people as: the usual mid-stream grammar school educated snobs who tend to dominate middle-Englandized councils, civic societies, and history related projects.

History, to many of these people, is no more than something of passing interest. History could not be described as their hobby, let alone their profession. It is perhaps getting at the root of the problem to point out that they should approach a professional historian for advice. In Marlborough's case there is evidence to suggest they thought they were doing so in at least one instance, but they are not aware that there is no such thing as an authority, let alone that the sole "authority" they approach and rely on may have an agenda of their own and prove to be rather less than an oracle. In view of this we perhaps must ask ourselves how available we make advice from our institutions. If we appear foreboding it is not surprising that local societies of self-appointed cultural aesthetes have so much sway in what appears in the shop front of local history, as they at least are accessible in the locality.

Some institutions open their doors to local historians, and offer courses on history where no formal qualifications are required. Surprisingly perhaps, Oxford University is among them, and now offers courses on local history on the Internet. There is of course nothing wrong with self-education in local history, and some of our most interesting and invaluable contributions to heritage have stemmed from such initiatives.

Disciples of Raphael Samuel will be the first to applaud interest in the past being shown by ordinary people. This is part of our expanding historical culture that is far more democratic than earlier histories. The field is at last now open to both the voices of the majority, and the previously unheard minorities. This is a predominantly city-led phenomena at present however, and is rarely seen in rural areas and country towns where the uninitiated still think the past of England is most accurately represented.

Organic history reflecting popular historical consciousness is what we should be working towards. Something that embraces everything from the photographs of dart teams and sponsored domino drives that adorn pub walls, to the peculiar invented traditions that middle England seems to thrive on. The problem in reaching this haven, as that champion of regional history John Marshall points out, is three-fold. Firstly, synthesising the mass of individual interests within any given spatial identity is incredibly difficult. Secondly, those involved and interested in local history are generally intellectually shy and reluctant to debate matters regarding local history. Third, and the most obstructive of local history's problems, is what lies at the root of the problems with regional pasts - antiquarianism.

Antiquarianism can be seen to be the problem that has been highlighted through every paragraph of this article. It is described by Marshall as 'an aberration', 'a disease', 'a malady'; and is what Bernard Deacon defined as an 'evil besetting local history'. Antiquarianism endangers knowledge of history because it masks it. It is primitive, crude, and although it should never get aired in so much as the parish magazine, it is being exploited by those who package the past as heritage.

The antidote to the problems of regional history is to foster ground for spatial awareness. John Marshall continually points out that a clearer sense of place will come from more coherent awareness in localised studies. The answer is what

Bernard Deacon interprets as focusing on place consciousness. This is a good point as a community's consciousness cannot be assumed, its identity is an unconscious taxonomic trait - such as the rebellion that litters Marlborough's history - that has been obscured by attitudes of municipal and commercial prowess selecting and therefore dictating the past. If the expansion of historical knowledge is important for the greater good, then the awakening of the ordinary people to the fact that people just like them were caught up in great historical events will stimulate the grass-roots to retrieve their individual and collective identity. In this way we might achieve a regional history and communal identity that we might all relate to and be able to celebrate.

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Article currency: Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, 1997; Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory Vol. I*, 1994; Raphael Samuel, *Our Island Story: Theatres of Memory Vol. II*, 1998; J.D.Marshall, *The Tyranny of the Discrete: A discussion of the problems of local history in England*, 1997; J D.Marshall, 'Communities, Societies, Regions and Local History', in *The Local Historian: Journal of the British Association for Local History*, Vol. 26 No 1, February 1996; Bernard Deacon in, *Family and Community History*, Vol.I, November 1998; Doreen Massey, 'Places and their Pasts', in *History Workshop Journal*, 39, Spring 1995; Felix Driver and Raphael Samuel, 'Rethinking the Idea of Place', in *History Workshop Journal*, 39, Spring 1995; Stuart Davies, 'Falling on Deaf Ears ? Oral History and Strategy in Museums', in *Oral History: Journal of the Oral History Society*, Vol. 22 No 2, Autumn 1994, Alun Howkins, in *Red Pepper*, February 1997