

(\earls\potential)

## THE POTENTIAL AND PITFALLS OF LOCAL HISTORY; A CASE STUDY

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### **Prefatory**

I look forward to learning as much from you, as vice versa. Local historical research is a vast a complex art and any one person can only know a little; I hope we shall be able to share our interests together.

### **Major stages in a community study**

1. Comparative reading and thinking - in history, local history and social sciences to generate the questions. A framework of questions.
2. Selecting a particular sample region and then community; secondary reading on the region and community.
3. Visit local area - walk it and photograph it.
4. Locate whereabouts of documents.
5. (Palaeography) - Copy original documents for one's use (transcribe, tape-record, photocopy)
6. Preliminary analysis of documents; name, place, subject, sources indexes.
7. Describe and test the documents for bias/accuracy/coverage/ how they were constructed. Learn about the process that created the sources.
8. A preliminary outline of the social and economic structure of a community.
- (9. Computerize the materials)
10. Analysis of the materials by hand or computer
11. Publication/ dissemination of the results.

In this day-school we will be concentrating on just four of these tasks:

The questions: themes for investigation in local history.

The sources: the range of materials, an Essex example.

Reconstructing a local community by hand.

Future techniques: microfiche, computers, optical disc, video

My own expertise is concentrated on the period 1400-1800; others on the course will be able to comment on earlier and later periods.

### SESSION ONE; THE QUESTIONS

Each individual will have different reasons for wanting to study a community; some will want to trace back their ancestors, others to learn more about the place they live in and to enjoy it more, others as an academic study to deepen their knowledge of history etc.

In this group, it would be good to start by asking each participant to explain

- a. why they were interested in local history - came to this session
- b. what sort of questions they wanted to ask.

### ASK THE PARTICIPANTS AND DISCUSS THEIR ANSWERS

### ANSWER QUERIES CONCERNING OTHER QUESTIONS

Rich though the sources are for local history, they will only answer certain kinds of question. It is as important to know their limitations as their potentials - otherwise there will be frustration and disappointment.

Putting the right questions - that is 'exciting' and 'interesting' questions, yet answerable questions, in the right way, is the most important of the historian's skills.

Although many people may not want to make their study this academic, it might be worth considering a short inventory of questions that might be asked in relation to a community study.

This is partly based on chapter 5 of **Reconstructing**, partly on the unpublished report to the ESRC.

### THE PHYSICAL BACKGROUND; NATURAL WORLD AND MATERIAL CULTURE

- dating of hedges, ditches, buildings and other material remains
- effects and changes in the weather - on prices etc.
- household furniture (inventories)
- clothing changes (inventories)

- heating, fuel (account books, manorial)
- water, pollution etc. (manorial etc.)
- attitudes to natural objects - landscape, animals etc.

Hypotheses: affluent or poor? major changes? exploitative or involved attitudes to nature?

## ECONOMIC LIFE

This is probably the area where the documents are richest, and hence one can only choose a few questions:

- amount of capital invested in agricultural and non-agricultural production
- the occupational structure over time
- the web of debts and borrowing
- how production is organized; the basic unit of production
- the distribution of wealth between groups
- the treatment of poverty and the poor
- the tenurial pattern; land and house holding over the centuries
- the workings of shops and fairs
- the use of money in the village over time
- the use of servants and apprentices
- changing use of and concepts of property
- inheritance patterns, of land, housing and other goods

Hypotheses: depending on the time period and the nature of the documents, one can put forward many hypotheses. My own one concerned whether there had been, in English villages, an "economic revolution" from one kind of system (peasant/pre-capitalist) to another (individualist/capitalist) in the C16 and C17. This involved analysing many of the above for traces of such a revolution.

## POPULATION STUDIES

- the changing age at marriage
- fertility rates (crude birth rates, age-specific etc.)
- mortality rates

- migration in and out and population turnover
- effects of dearth and plague
- abortion and infanticide and evidence of contraception
- the total population at various points, and growth in the population over time
- the changing age structure over time

Again, the questions one asks will depend on the nature of the surviving evidence (e.g. is there a census, a good parish register), and also the intensity of one's method - aggregates, or family reconstitution?

Again, one general question might be as to whether there are signs of a basic shift in demographic regime, say in the C18 or C19, from one pattern to another.

### **THE OPERATION OF THE STATE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

- how the various courts work and interlink, central and local courts
- the activities of the officers of the courts
- effectiveness of certain courts (Assize, Quarter Sessions etc.)
- the working of the central courts - equity, prerogative etc.
- the degree of unlawful behaviour and its treatment
- riots and other threats to public order
- the system of administration and devolution of power down to the local level
- patterns of crime and misdemeanour
- the operation of patronage and the struggles of local politics
- the morality of power; evidence of corruption etc.

Hypotheses: many people believe that 'pre-modern' societies were filled with violence, brutality, feuding, banditry etc. All this was gradually 'domesticated' over time. Is this true - even partly?

### **THE OPERATION OF OTHER FORMAL INSTITUTIONS**

The other two main institutions at the local level were the Church and the Estates (manorial structure). These need to be studied, since their officials created many of the records which the historian uses.

- the workings of the church courts
- the church officials
- the workings of the manorial system
- the manorial courts and their role

### **KINSHIP, MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY**

There is very considerable material in local records on these themes. Among the questions one may approach are:

- household size and structure and changes in
- kinship terminology; terms of reference and address
- the effective links of kinship; borrowing, witnessing, acting as pledges or guarentors
- negative aspects of kinship, including assault and theft
- the degree to which villagers are kin; kinship density
- marriage patterns; distance, any sign of kinship preferences, marriage payments
- patterns of sexual behaviour (in particular pre-marital sex, adultery, incest etc.)
- the strength of kinship bonds

Hypotheses: one can again test the ideas of a very great change in household structure and kinship relations which is often thought to have occurred in the nineteenth century.

### **CLASS, STATUS AND POWER**

There is a great deal in the documents concerning the various kinds of relations of inequality. Among the questions one could ask are those in the following areas:

- the terms of address between individuals and groups; deference and respect
- patterns of social mobility over time; the rise and fall of individuals and families
- the sharing or separateness of leisure and sport
- the degree of group in-marriage
- education as a means of mobility (and apprenticeship)
- signs of 'class' or group conflict
- honour and honourable statuses

Hypothesis: there is a large debate as to whether England in the past was a more or less 'stratified' or 'hierarchical' society than it is today. What is meant by this, and what signs are there of change?

## **OTHER PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

There are many other features of the social structure which can be analysed. A few of them include:

- the degree of opposition or overlap between male and female roles, and the relative status and power of men and women over time
- age groups and attitudes to ageing; the life-cycle for individuals - the attitudes to and treatment of the young and the old
- neighbourly relations; co-operation and conflict
- friendship relations; nature and depth of friendship
- temporary relationships and the treatment of strangers
- local associations, groupings, special-interest institutions and their importance

Hypotheses: a number of people have assumed a radical change in all these structural principles, e.g. the gradual 'emancipation' of women or children. What light do local records throw on this?

## **EDUCATION AND RELIGION**

A vast and interesting field, within which one might look at:

- literacy levels (reading, writing, numeracy)
- local schools and informal education
- nonconformity and the established church (Quakers etc.)
- church attendance
- religious orthodoxy and knowledge (wills, church courts)
- religious holidays, festivals etc. (Sabbatarianism)
- the forbidden seasons and days and their influence
- holy space and the treatment of the graveyard
- attitude to dead souls, spirits, witches etc.

## **THE MENTAL WORLD**

To get inside the minds of our ancestors is one of the most intriguing, yet difficult, tasks of the historians and because of the nature of the local documents, often a frustrating matter from such documents. But among the areas one might try to explore are the following:

- attitudes to witchcraft, sorcery, magic
- millenarianism and strange beliefs
- use of language, speech and linguistics
- the classification of such things as colours, numbers, gestures etc.
- proverbs, sayings, aphorisms etc.
- attitudes to luck, chance, fate, destiny etc.
- topics of conversation, interest in the wider world etc.

Hypothesis: has there been a massive shift from a 'pre-modern' mental world, for instance believing in an ever-present supernatural power, to a modern secular world?

## **THE MORAL WORLD**

Finally, one might try to make a start to enter the moral world of a past community. Again a very difficult task through local records, but worth an attempt. Among the questions one might ask are the following:

- the area of sexual morality; attitudes and treatment
- the area of economic morality; the moral economy, honesty, fairness, corruption, fraud
- personal morality; differences as between male and female, young and old, rich and poor
- standards of good and evil - absolute or relative
- the width of the 'moral community' - morality within the family, the community and in dealing with outsiders

Hypothesis: has there been a major shift from one moral system (appropriate to a small-scale, mainly agrarian, society) to a more universal, flexible moral system suitable for a highly mobile industrial society?

## **SESSION TWO; THE SOURCES - A RANGE OF MATERIALS**

1. An inventory of possible sources for a local community study

see RECONSTRUCTING, PP.39-41; TABLE OF SOURCES

see DIAGRAM showing level of sources (circles)

- other records that should be mentioned (see reviews of English Historical Records):

- borough and gild records

- maps

- records relating to education, communications, buildings, topography and politics

- enclosure records, medieval lay subsidies

- poll taxes

- glebe terriers

- vestry minutes

- what other records?

#### PROBLEMS OF PALAEOGRAPHY

Some examples of the nature of the documents:

SLIDES OF DIFFERENT DOCUMENTS FROM EC/ EXAMPLES FROM THE BOOK

WHAT SOURCES ARE GOOD FOR WHAT SUBJECT; ANNOTATE THE LIST

WHERE THE SOURCES ARE; FROM LOCAL TO NATIONAL

#### **SESSION THREE; HAND-INDEXING**

The way in which different records overlap: diagram of Joseph Tomlinson.

The amount of information about a specific individual; Henry Abbott diagram.

The way in which different records overlap: strife in Colne Park.

The interconnection of records & need to move around between them.

1. The choice when transcribing from the original archives:

- note-taking - full or selective

- xerox copies
- microfilming
- tape-recording
- putting straight into a computer

## 2. Major types of hand-index

- the source index (example)
- the personal name index (example)
- separate name indexes to specific sources (example)
- general place index
- manorial transfer indexes, from and to
- rental index
- map index
- general subject index
- court index

Some examples of different kinds of source indexed:

a parish register

a will

an ecclesiastical court record

## **SESSION FOUR; FUTURE TECHNIQUES - MICROFICHE, COMPUTERS, OPTICAL DISC AND VIDEO**

Even after hand-indexing, however, several problems remain:

1. Although the hand indexes may make access faster, the original documents themselves are very bulky (see transcripts) and it takes some time to find something.

2. It is also almost impossible to distribute them to others; prohibitively expensive to publish etc.

## MICROFICHE

One early solution to the latter problem and having some influence on the former was the advent of microfiche publication:

- see Earls Colne Microfiche

This is a lot cheaper, far less bulky etc. and it has meant that a number of libraries etc. can now have.

Its main disadvantage is that it is still quite slow finding something, and there is no way of making a copy of what one finds except typing it out etc.

## COMPUTERS

The revolution in computing in the 1970's onwards have put a new tool in the hands of local historians. Three of the significant break-throughs were:

- a. the growing possibility to put in ordinary text on mainframe computers in the 1970's, thus overcoming the need to code or to regard computers as merely number-crunchers.
- b. the growth of powerful database systems in the 1980's which would allow one to hold and search large sets of mixed information and retrieve what one wanted; again, first developed on mainframe computers
- c. the revolution in micro-computers in size of store, speed, and actual size: from mainframe, to midi, to desktop to laptop.

When we were working in the 1970's, the Earls Colne data stretched the largest capacities of the huge mainframe computer in Cambridge. Now it would all fit onto a powerful laptop. And this is just the beginning.

There is not time to go into this topic in detail, but clearly any local historian now should think about getting a micro and putting his or her data into such a machine. Probably best to discuss informally on the basis of your experience.

All I would like to stress here is that

- a. The original is put in as little changed as possible and hence one looks around for a good database system that allows flexibility.
- b. That one realizes that one should not be limited to merely and/or/not searches, but that one can search for words within a text.

EXAMPLE - cds 2000 working on a small sample of Earls Colne data within the colne cds directory - write out a couple of records

It should be stressed, however, that computer input is a long and exacting business until the day that they develop optical scanners that can read early handwriting - which may not be too long away. Certainly ocr's can read typewritten materials.

And with the advent of desktop publishing, small interest groups (as local historians tend to be) can envisage publishing their results in restricted quantities but to a high quality.

## OPTICAL DISK

Alongside the development of computers, there have been important developments in the field of laser-written optical disks. (show the small and large (Naga) disc.

This is going to be the major development of the 1990's. What new possibilities does it open up to the local historian?

- a. One can store visual images (maps, old photographs, old film or whatever)
- b. One can store sound (oral history)
- c. It will put huge (hundreds of megabyte) machines, at a very cheap price, on people's desks. The whole of a 'community' could be stored on one cd-rom in this way & interrogated with a computer.

Important to be aware of this, even if only available in the next few years.

## VIDEO

Related but different, the advent of high-quality but cheap Camcorder type video opens up new possibilities. Among the two obvious possibilities are:

- a. as a way of storing information - e.g. as Earls Colne have done, going round old buildings and down the streets and hedgerows filming them. Also, an improved form of local history.
- b. as a way of displaying information - e.g. as I am doing with Thak etc., making up film, intercutting documents, contemporary film, analyses etc., as a teaching and communication device.

## CONCLUSION

Although the new technologies help in all sorts of ways, they are merely a new dimension. The old fascinations remain and the need for the old skills of the historian - putting interesting questions, finding the sources, understanding the procedures of the record-creating bodies, sensibly indexing, and imaginatively recreating the past, all these underlie any successful use of computers etc. etc.

## VISUAL AIDS NEEDED FOR THE COURSE

SLIDE PROJECTOR (Homerton to supply)

SLIDES OF EARLS COLNE

SLIDES OF VARIOUS KINDS OF EARLS COLNE DOCUMENTS (ROOM)

LAP-TOP COMPUTER WITH EARLS COLNE DATABASE ON IT

MICROFICHE READER - DEPT

EARLS COLNE MICROFICHE - DEPT

SAMPLE COMPACT DISC - DEPT

SAMPLE VIDEODISC - DEPT

EARLS COLNE MICROFICHE HANDOUT - DEPT

SELECTION OF BOUND VOLUMES OF THE DOCUMENTS - LODE

ABBOTT KINSHIP DIAGRAM - DEPT. BASEMENT

TOMLINSON OVERLAP DIAGRAM - LODE

RING DIAGRAM - SOURCES - LODE

MAP OF EARLS COLNE - LODE

BLUETACK/DRAWING PINS FOR DIAGRAMS

20 COPIES OF PP.39-41 OF RECONSTRUCTING

BLOW-UPS AND TRANSCRIPTS OF SAMPLE DOCUMENTS - LODE

SOME EXAMPLES OF CARD INDEXES AS FOLLOWS: - DEPT

- the source index (example)
- the personal name index (example)
- separate name indexes to specific sources (example)
- general place index
- manorial transfer indexes, from and to
- rental index
- map index
- general subject index
  - court index
  -

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF EARLS COLNE -