

HISTORY AROUND YOU

BE4

MOST concerned citizens feel their hackles rising and their blood pressure soaring at the destruction of some valued part of our physical heritage - the ploughing up of a ringfort, the demolition of a Victorian landmark, even the felling of mature trees. Yet every day, unremarked and unobserved, a little part of our heritage of knowledge slips quietly into oblivion as elderly people take their folkmemories and their local idioms to the grave, as public authorities and private firms discard redundant records, as local landscapes are modified and altered in minor but multitudinous ways to serve the community's changing social and economic needs. Can anything be done? Should anything be done to preserve this perishable transient and irreplaceable inheritance? Is there anything that you can do?

ARE YOU A LOCAL HISTORIAN YET?

The continuing dissipation, with the passage of time, of local historical material, is so widespread and so unremitting that the handful of professional historians in our centres of learning cannot be expected systematically to ensure its preservation. Their work must be complemented by the efforts of an army of local historians in every district, working as individuals and in organised groups, to study, record and interpret the various historical factors which have contributed towards making our towns and rural areas what they are today - customs and attitudes, events and movements, topographical changes and developments, personalities and organisations.

Amateur historians, through their numerical strength, their local background knowledge, and their lifelong interest in their locality are in a unique position to document local history not only as a matter of personal satisfaction but to provide the source material for future historical research by others.

WHY NOT STUDY A PARTICULAR THEME?

Local history is by definition specialised - a specialised study of a particular district. Yet it provides a variety of study topics to suit particular personal preferences.

How many of these fields of research would interest you?

Archaeological remains

Religion

Local placenames

Oral History

Old maps and prints

Local bibliographies

Public records

Local folklore

Education

Old photographs

Administrative History

Biographies

Buildings

Heraldry

Architecture

Old Tracks and roads

Military history

Genealogy

Law and order

Boundaries

Land & Agriculture

Trade and Industry

Transport

Social Life

Public Utilities

Population

LOOK AROUND YOU - THERE'S HISTORY EVERYWHERE!

A study of topographical features can itself produce an awesome array of historical evidence. The historian - more correctly the archaeologist- interested in the pre-Christian period may find (depending on where he or she lives) a variety of court tombs, portal tombs, wedge tombs, passage graves, standing stones, crannogs, ring forts, hill forts, promontory forts. The person concentrating on religious history will study the pre-reformation churches and monastic settlements, the holy wells, the places of pilgrimage the stone crosses, the graveyards, modern churches both Catholic and Protestant and modern religious houses.

Military historians may encounter the remains of military encampments, barracks, scenes of ambush, earthworks, castles, motte and bailey fortifications and so on. The "Big Houses" with their inhabitants are a subject of almost universal interest. Those with an interest in administrative history will track down the story behind the public water supplies and drainage works, the road building schemes and public housing programmes, the public works, the land reform divisions, the hospitals and workhouses, the Courts, the police barracks, the prisons. Others will concentrate on the schools and convents and colleges in their areas. Industrial archaeological remains are everywhere, perhaps requiring a subdivision into remains of mining activity, of manufacturing activity, of agricultural activity, of communications activity - even of "settlement archaeology".

Even the local roads raise many questions. Why was there a seemingly unnecessary change in direction at a given point? Was there a former settlement there? Was there previously a different road pattern? Did its replacement indicate a change in location of habitation? How old is the road? Who built it and why? What traffic did it carry ... and so on.

The basic and simple roadside objects which have survived to the present can often cast light on days gone by. Milestones in Irish miles still exist, half forgotten, half buried in the hedgerows; post-boxes bearing the monograms of English royalty attest their length of public service; village pumps still quench the human thirst; horses no longer use the track beside the local bridge which led them from the roadway down to the refreshing stream; some horse troughs, dry or empty, still remain: stone monuments remain, vainly trying to preserve the memory of landlords now forgotten. Manhole covers like cast iron tombstones, preserve the memory of local authorities and public utilities now defunct. Even some hair salons retain a red-and-white-striped decor on their doorposts raising questions about the history of their trade.

Yes history is all around us - you cannot escape - unless you haven't noticed. Take a walk along a road or street and ask of everything you meet - why? Find the answers and you will already have uncovered some of the secrets of your native place.

HOW AND WHERE TO START RESEARCH

A prospect of *"oral enquiry, archival research and field work"* might deter any would-be local historian, but rephrased as *"talking to local, mainly old, inhabitants, reading up your subject in books and documents and visiting the actual sites of interest"*, it has a more manageable appearance.

Here are a few signposts to point the apprentice historian in the right direction.

1. DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

In listing types of material available. the following come to mind; printed local histories, ordnance sheets, maps and plans, old newspapers, directories, parish records, census returns, estate papers, local government records, the Lawrence photographic collection, title deeds.

Many local librarians are assembling material of interest relating to the localities they serve. But researchers visiting the major archival sources in Dublin should, to limit frustration to a reasonable level, request access in advance. know precisely what they wish to research, and most of all allow plenty, plenty of time - for archival research is unbelievably time consuming.

2. ORAL SOURCES

Here are some basic guidelines to follow. Research your subject sufficiently in advance to ascertain the questions which should be asked. Secure if possible an introduction from a mutual friend. Have the questions listed precisely on a discreet, small paper - not on a clip-board. When interviewing, do not, except in exceptional cases, record the answers verbatim but tactfully jot down key words from the answers. Before leaving ask for names of other people who have related information. Finally, and most importantly, record the information in full immediately after the interview.

3. FIELD WORK

Some field work (e.g. archaeological excavations) must be left to qualified people, but fieldwork projects for the amateur could include seeking evidence on the ground of disused tracks and roads, searching for signs of abandoned habitations and recording information from tombstones.

ARE YOU A MEMBER OF THE CLUB?

While many historians pursue their interest individually, most find it useful to link with others. Research has little end product unless it results in the presentation of the material in lecture, booklet or exhibition form - all of which involve organisation. Personal contact with others affords an opportunity to exchange news of discoveries and to cross-check information. While membership of an historical society authenticates approaches to strangers for information. Most of all, an organisation ensures a pre-agreed direction to its members activities, affords mutual support and encouragement, ensures a social dimension and provides a contact point for people of similar interests. Not surprising then has been the phenomenal growth in recent years in the number of local historical societies.

TYPICAL FUNCTIONS OF AN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

While activities vary from area to area, most local history societies work on similar lines. Nearly all societies organise lectures and outings, publish a news sheet, journal or series of papers, and hold displays and exhibitions. Some may erect plaques to mark locations of historic interest; some work to preserve historic monuments, buildings, sites and similar features. Many encourage local history projects in schools. Most do local historical research. Some societies, using the help

of foras or other agencies, carry out historical surveys and do restoration work. And some, particularly well organised groups, run a local heritage centre or museum.

All activities seek to promote an interest in local history and an awareness of its importance to the local community.

A ROLE FOR THE NON-ACTIVIST HISTORIAN

Not everyone aspires to join societies, desires to organise lectures, retires into public archives to pursue research. But any observant person cannot fail to amass a vast store of local knowledge, as years roll by. So if you have memories why not write them down or communicate them to someone who will value them?

But there are other things that an unattached historian can do by, for example, moulding public opinion, educating friends and neighbours and in particular urging local Councillors to adopt or continue enlightened policies on preservation of our physical heritage, reviving old placenames when naming new roads, retaining antique street furniture, granite kerbs etc., maintaining Council archives, supporting local museums and so on.

Depending on occupation, an historian may be presented with special opportunities to "promote the cause". A few actual cases come immediately to mind: a teacher who has inculcated a love of their area and its traditions in the younger generation; a librarian who has built up local archives; a public servant who has rescued old documents of local historical interest when redundant records were being destroyed; a plumber who has assembled a collection of antique pumps, pipes and sanitary fittings which would otherwise have been destroyed.

Or you could be a "contemporary local historian".

OPENINGS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY LOCAL HISTORIAN

Much of the valuable source material we use comes from records of local events compiled as they occurred, or from accounts describing conditions which existed at the time of writing. Conversely much of the historian's frustration results when such reports are absent. By becoming a reporter of current events you may well be quoted in learned quarters and scholarly tomes when your name has begun to fade on your weathered tombstone! Here are some ideas. Why not keep a diary of local events and happenings as they occur, together with descriptions of various aspects of community life? Or keep a scrapbook, news cuttings, notices, circulars, election literature, posters and so on. Or again, why not collect local memorabilia products of local (perhaps defunct) industries, local handcrafts, redundant signs etc. Teachers particularly are in an excellent position to play the role of local diarist and may be able to encourage their students to gather the information to be recorded. Camera enthusiasts could record local events and scenes, particularly subjects ignored by professional photographers. The recollections of residents with long memories could be recorded on audio or video equipment.

Notes and records of contemporary life, and indeed records of research carried out into the past, will be of no lasting value if subsequently thrown out, or lost or

destroyed. Always make provision therefore, for copying and lodging of all such material in suitable archives.

WHERE TO GO FOR INFORMATION

For bibliographies related to your own locality or to the study of local history generally consult your local librarian. Your librarian will also be able to supply details of the major depositories of archives in Ireland.

The following contact addresses should be of value to local historians.

Federation of Local History Societies Hon. Secretary, c/o Rothe House, Kilkenny

Federation for Ulster Local Studies Hon. Secretary, c/o Institute of Irish Studies, 8 Fitzwilliam Street, Belfast BT9 6AW. (01232) 235254

The Architectural Archive, 73 Merrion Square, Dublin 2. (01) 676 3430.

Department of Irish Folklore University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4 (2.30 p.m.-5.30 p.m.) Mon.-Fri. (closed for the month of August) (01)706 8216.

ENFO The Environmental Information Service 17 St. Andrew Street, Dublin 2. (See below).

National Archives Bishop Street, Dublin 8.

National Library Kildare Street, Dublin 2.

National Museum of Ireland Kildare Street, Dublin 2.

Registry of Deeds Henrietta Street, Dublin

Royal Irish Academy 19 Dawson Street, Dublin 2.

Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland 63 Merrion Square, Dublin 2.

An Taisce, Tailors Hall, Back Lane, Dublin 8.

All the Universities possess archives containing records valuable to local historical research.

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This is a reprint of a Resource Source leaflet prepared by Liam Clare, illustrated by Geoffrey Johnson and produced originally by the Department of Environmental Studies, University College Dublin.

Aim of ENFO

The aim is to foster increased environmental awareness and thereby facilitate a broad partnership in efforts to promote sustainable development including protection of the environment for the benefit of future generations.

The importance of ready access to relevant information on environmental protection was reaffirmed in the UN/ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, which was signed by the Minister for the Environment Heritage and Local Government in Aarhus, Denmark in June, 1998.

ENFO Services

A drop-in information centre at 17 St. Andrew St., Dublin 2, which is open to the public from 10.00 to 17.00 hours every day (except Sundays and public holidays) contains the following -

- * Information desk for personal callers;
- * Exhibition area;
- * Children's corner with floor games and puzzles, video, colouring, pc with interactive games;
- * Video viewing facilities;
- * Inter-active computer games;
- * Lecture room with audio visual facilities;
- * Function area;
- * Reference library with
- * database of approx. 55,000 titles, a bibliographic reference system which enables users to select most suitable publication;
- * study and research facilities for third-level students, researchers, consultants, journalists, environmental groups and others;
- * Public access to the Internet for environmental subjects;
- * Children's section;
- * Microfiche reading and duplicating facilities;
- * Free photocopying;.

Write to **17 St. Andrew Street,**

Dublin 2,

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