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The small politics of everyday life: local history society archives and the production of public histories,

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Abstract

Thousands of small, private archives sit in attics, cupboard, church halls and computer hard-drives around the country; they are the archives of local history societies. Simultaneously freed from the control of archive sector and government initiatives, and yet saturated with local peculiarities and biases, local history society archives can seem to be the very antithesis of the wider archives movement, apparently private and parochial, undemocratic and uncatalogued. Consequently, local history society archives are rarely included in 'the politics of the archive' discussions. But if the activity of archiving is to be understood as a political act, what are the politics and meanings of local history and their archives?

In this article, I suggest that certain types of local history society archive collections can help us paint a picture of the everyday lives of working-class people in Britain in the twentieth century. They detail the small politics of people's lives- family, work, leisure, beliefs. They give ordinary people a name, a face, and a life lived. Moreover, the workings of local history society archives raise important questions about historical production, for these groups play a significant role in rescuing and preserving archival collections, and in creating and curating their own histories.

Keywords

Archives; local history; local history societies; historical practices; community history; Irthlingborough

Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been extensive recognition and related discussion of the power of the archive. As Elisabeth Kaplan so eloquently stated, the archival record does not just happen, 'it is created by individuals and organizations, and used, in turn, to support their values and missions, all of which comprises a process that is certainly not politically and culturally neutral.'¹ Similarly, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of public and radical history, and independent politically-oriented community archives². In these discussions, however, there has been markedly less attention from academics or archives professionals to local history societies, their activities, and their archives. This would seem an odd anomaly, given the exponential growth of local and community history societies and activity, often supported by grants from funders like the Heritage Lottery Fund, with thousands of local history societies operating in the UK today.³

Local history societies play an important role in the production of history outside the academy – history that is constructed by, created for and consumed within the local community. In many cases, the output of the local history society is one of the few means with which people engage with history, frequently the sole source of historical knowledge for and within their locale. The archives of these local history societies sit in attics, cupboards, church halls and on computer hard-drives, cared for and curated by local history members. Saturated with local peculiarities and biases, managed by (so-called) amateur archivists, local history society archives can seem to be the very antithesis of the wider archives movement, apparently private and parochial, undemocratic and uncatalogued.

In this article, I suggest we re-think the collections and activities of local history societies, their role in collecting, rescuing, and preserving archival collections and in documenting and curating their own histories. Indeed, if all archiving activities are in some way political and not 'culturally neutral', why should we not consider the local history societies to also be political?

Many local history societies work to generate their own archival material, through oral history interviews, reminiscences, by encouraging and collecting autobiographical writing, and archival retrievals exercises.⁴ In these types of self-

¹ Elisabeth Kaplan, 'We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity', *The American Archivist*, 63 (2000), 126–51 (p. 147).

² Andrew Flinn, 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 28.2 (2007), 151–76; Andrew Flinn, 'Archives and Their Communities: Collecting Histories, Challenging Heritage', *Memory, Narrative and Histories: Critical Debates, New Trajectories: Working Papers on Memory, Narrative and Histories*, 1 (2012), 19–35; Andrew Flinn, 'Archival Activism: Independent and Community-Led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions', *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 7.2 (2011).

³ 'Directory of Local History and Allied Societies', *Local History Online*, 2016 <<http://www.local-history.co.uk/Groups/index.html>>.

⁴ This type of local and community history work has its roots in the History Workshop, Community Publishing and Adult Education Movements in the 1960s-1980s. See for example, Ken Warpole, 'A Ghostly Pavement: The Political Implications of Local Working-Class History', in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 22–32; Jerry White, 'Beyond Autobiography', in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981), pp. 33–42; Ian Gwinn, "'A Different Kind of History Is Possible': The History

generated archives, are testimonies of everyday life: the hatred of the factory siren, and the lack of daylight in gloomy, damp workshops; the chores of fetching fresh water, and the agony of having to leave school aged twelve to work a 48-hour week; memories of holidays to Clacton and gossiping at the water pump; the joy of homemade toffee apples and street parties in the summer sunshine. In this way, and with these collections, local history society archive collections can help us paint a picture of the everyday lives of working-class people in Britain in the twentieth century. They detail the small politics of people's lives- their family, their work, their leisure, their beliefs.

Moreover, the workings of local history society archives raise important questions for thinking about historical production, participation and ownership, for these groups play a significant role in rescuing and preserving archival collections, and in creating and curating their own histories.

Local History

Local history has long occupied an odd position in the world of historical endeavour. The origins of local history in Britain rest with the landed gentry from the seventeenth century onwards, who wiled away their days writing the history of their parishes; the focus was on manors, churches, bridges and meadows, while the people of the parish were rarely if ever mentioned. By the late nineteenth century, history had established itself as a respectable academic discipline but concerned itself with constitutional and political history. It was in the 1930s high quality local studies began to be published on a range of themes in local history⁵. In 1948, W.G. Hoskins was able to establish the Department for English Local History at Leicester University College. Hoskins, Finberg and their successors attempted to restore the ordinary people into the history; community was firmly the unit of study and the 'biographical lifeline' of the local community- origin, growth, decline, fall- was the focus.⁶ Local history was later adopted, and somewhat remodelled, under the auspices of 'people's history', exemplified in Centreprise's People's Autobiography of Hackney and QueenSpark in Brighton in the 1970s. Local history went on to be an important component of adult education and life-long learning in the 1980s, as well as urban regeneration and community cohesion agendas in the 1990s.

Though now largely absent from university curriculums⁷, local history is alive and well. As has been the case for many years, its forms, practices, focus and methods of research vary widely between researchers and groups. Today, local history societies are the producers of many local histories in the form of pamphlets, books, exhibitions, and oral histories. They put on plays and photographic exhibitions, painstakingly transcribe census data, and build their own websites. They own,

Workshop Movement and the Politics of British and West German Historical Practice' (PhD Thesis, University of Liverpool, 2015).

⁵ Chris Dyer, 'Local History, with Special Reference to the Leicester School of Local History', *Institute for Historical Research*, 2010

<http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/local_history.html>.

⁶ J. D. Marshall, *The Tyranny of the Discrete: A Discussion of the Problems of Local History in England* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1997), p. 66.

⁷ There seems to have been a decline in local and regional history offer of universities to its undergraduate students. However, it is interesting to note that universities want to build or retain contact with local and community history groups to help them work on 'Impact' and 'Co-Production' agendas.

preserve, catalogue and curate their own archives of documents and photographs. Even with a wide and diverse range of activities and enterprise, there have been some discernible trends in local history in recent years, including the use of the term 'community history', funding awards by bodies such as the Heritage Lottery Fund, and a focus on participation, learning and celebration.

Of course, the practice of local history has long been criticised. Local historians have been accused of ignoring each other and showing little interest in discussing objectives, standards and cooperation⁸; the field has been reproached for lacking engagement with theory, for its narrow empirical methodologies and a focus on the pre-industrial period.⁹ Elsewhere, local history's connections to adult education and community history has seen by some as a dilution of its professional credentials.¹⁰ Even forty years after, Raphael Samuel's observation that local history is 'very much the province of enthusiasts' rings true.¹¹

Perhaps the most substantial criticism of local history has been the tendency towards nostalgia, particularly in its portrait of community life. Joanna Bourke, for example, condemned the way in which social relations of working-class communities were, in her view, 'often recalled through a golden haze; conflict is forgotten in favour of the neighbour who always shared; tiring workdays are ignored in favour of nearly forgotten games which diverted children even during difficult times.'¹² Bourke, Bornat and others have also drawn attention to the omission of certain groups of people from community and local histories, such as disabled people, gay and lesbian people, single parents and people from different ethnic backgrounds.¹³

Just as local history has remained tangential to academic history scholarship, it might also be said that local history society archives have also been peripheral to the archives sector. It is only relatively recently that the 'independent archives' sector more broadly has received recognition from the archives profession.¹⁴ Here, increasing attention has been paid towards community-based independent archives, largely focussed on considering 'activist-archiving' as self-consciously political acts, tracing their emergence through traditions of radical history practice dating back to the History Workshop Movement. Meanwhile, local history society archives and archivists remained marginal to the professional archives sector. They are apparently the 'plastic archivists', non-professionals, producing mere nostalgia, and of limited wider interest.¹⁵ Local archiving activities have, at times, been viewed as

⁸ David Dymond, *Writing Local History: A Practical Guide* (London: Bedford Square Press, 1982), pp. 1–2.

⁹ George Sheeran & Yanina Sheeran, 'Discourses in Local History', *Rethinking History*, 2.1 (1998), 65–85.

¹⁰ Sheeran.

¹¹ Raphael Samuel, 'Local History and Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, 1 (1976), 191–208 (p. 191).

¹² Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890- 1960* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 137.

¹³ Bourke; Joanna Bornat, 'The Communities of Community Publishing', *Oral History*, 20.2 (1992), 23–31; Kevin Harris, 'Respect in the Neighbourhood: Neighbourliness and Narratives of Decline', *Community Safety Journal*, 6.4 (2007), 34–41.

¹⁴ This attention has mainly come from the work of Andrew Flinn. Several programmes by archives services, such as West Yorkshire Archive Service's Community Archive Accreditation, have also recognised the work of community archiving, West Yorkshire Archive Service, 'Community Archive Accreditation Scheme', 2009 <<http://nowthen.org/accreditation>>.

¹⁵ The use of the term 'plastic archivist' is based on anecdotal evidence only ('plastic' meaning fake).

threat to the professional status of the archivist; an attempt by those perusing a 'personal hobby or collecting fetish', mused William Maher, to lend panache or cachet and an air of respectability to their work.¹⁶

The Politics of Local History

Local history societies and their collections are judged to be inspired by interest, leisure and socialising. Consequently, they are rarely included in 'the politics of the archive' discussions, because they are not seen as particularly political. To some people, then, local history societies are the equivalent of stamp collectors, train spotters, or butterfly hunters¹⁷, and their archives apparently private and parochial, undemocratic and inaccessible. But if the activity of archiving is to be understood as a political act,¹⁸ how and where does local history society archiving fit in? What are the politics and meanings of local history and their archives?

Most local history societies have no desire to mimic the explicitly-political local history activities as a mode of 'working-class self-organisation' of the 1970s and 1980s nor as 'activist-archiving' activities of cultural and community organisations of 1990s and 2000s.¹⁹ But this is not to say that local history societies, their activities and their archives are not political. Local history society archives are in fact brimming with their own particular politics, depending on their collectors and curators, the community they serve, the researchers who utilise them, the funding (if any) they receive, and the meanings attached or understandings derived from the archive material or historical outputs that are created from them. As such, local historical practice is *in itself* a political act, and does not have to fall into the binary of 'hegemony' or 'resistance' to be considered as such. The politics of local history can be, and most often *is*, about the small politics in the histories and experiences of everyday life. The subjects of local history about the names, faces, memories and ideas of ordinary people; and the process of doing local history about knowing ourselves, our family, our community, for a sense of belonging, or to escape the present, to recognise those who went before us; and to understand past struggles. Local historical societies have every right to write their own histories and hold their own archives.²⁰

¹⁶ William J Maher, 'Archives, Archivists, and Society', *The American Archivist*, 61.2 (1998), 252–65 (p. 254).

¹⁷ Michael Drake, 'Inside-out or Outside-in? The Case of Family and Local History', in *Beyond the Walls: Researchers Outside the University*, ed. by Ruth Finnegan (Lulu Com, 2013), pp. 212–36 (p. 212); Warpole.

¹⁸ Flinn, 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges'; Andrew Flinn and Elizabeth Shepherd Mary Stevens, 'New Frameworks for Community Engagement in Archive Sector: From Handing over to Handing on', in *Heritage and Community Engagement: Collaboration Or Contestation?*, ed. by Steve Watson Emma Waterton (Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁹ See for example, Flinn, 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges'; Flinn, 'Archival Activism: Independent and Community-Led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions'.

²⁰ Victor Gray, "'Who's That Knocking on Our Door?": Archives, Outreach and Community', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 29.1 (2008), 1–8 (p. 6).

Furthermore, it is unfair, short-sighted and inaccurate to cast local history as stamp collectors, train spotters, or butterfly hunters.²¹ Local history society activity should be understood as a form of historical practice, for as Hughes-Warrington has asserted, 'there is no 'history' apart from historical practices',²² and I would further suggest, local history is valid in its own terms. Likewise, local history researchers should be considered as the producers and organisers of cultural material production,²³ and their profusion as indication that 'traditional approaches to history appear to be failing some people'.²⁴

Case Study: Irthlingborough Historical Society

The best way to see how these dynamics manifest themselves on the ground is to look in detail at the archives and activities of a local history. This article uses the town of Irthlingborough in Northamptonshire and its local history society, as a case-study. Irthlingborough is a small town in East Northamptonshire, in the Midlands of the UK. The town has a population of approximately 8,500 people, of whom more than 93 percent are White British in ethnic origin.²⁵ Irthlingborough makes an interesting case-study being a semi-rural small, Midlands working-class town in a sea of rural conservatism.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Irthlingborough benefitted from the expansion of shoe and leather works, along with cement, brick and tile manufacture and iron-ore mining. In the last forty years, Irthlingborough has been transformed; its once-thriving industries now all but defunct. The abolition of the local urban district council in 1974; the collapse of the shoe and boot industry, which started in the late 1970s and gathered considerable pace in the 1980s; the continued expansion of private and social housing; the lack of shopping and leisure facilities have had a significant impact on the experience of living in Irthlingborough and its sense of community for long-term residents.

The local history society in question is that of Irthlingborough Historical Society (IHS), which was established in 1990. The group originated from an interest in the history of Irthlingborough sparked by adult education courses at the local high school in 1989; several of the original members remain active to this day. Through oral history interviews, written autobiographies and reminiscences, archival retrievals exercises, the Historical Society has established itself as a repository, creator and curator of local history and memory. The Society has produced many publications, from pamphlets to hardbacks, and they also look after a photographic repository, as well as host exhibitions, walks and trips. The Society's early publications documented particular institutions, such as the town's Working Men's Club, the local children's home, and the Coop, as well as the town's streets and yards. The later publications developed to encompass wider themes of life in the town, from memories of the twentieth century on the occasion of the Millennium, to the

²¹ Drake, p. 212; Warpole, p. 212.

²² Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies : Studying History on Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 32.

²³ Warpole, p. 31.

²⁴ *People and Their Pasts: Public History Today*, ed. by Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 33.

²⁵ UK Census Data 2011, supplied by Northamptonshire County Council, 'Northamptonshire Analysis: Datasets', 2016 <<https://www.northamptonshireanalysis.co.uk/datasets>>.

experience of World War II in the town. The themes of the books touched on work, shops, education, leisure, buildings, organisations, and celebrations.

That Irthlingborough and Irthlingborough Historical Society should be the focus on this piece is not an arbitrary choice but rooted in my research project there in 2008-2012, where I was researching the historical experience of a 'sense of community' in the town over the course of the twentieth century, as part of my doctorate. As a researcher interested in the history of Irthlingborough and the activities of the Society, I developed an extremely positive and fruitful relationship with the Society as a whole and with individual members. In an effort to gain a better understanding of the history of the town, I regularly attended the Society's weekly meetings, where members would go to great lengths to involve me in their activities, whispering tidbits of information to me when another member was speaking about events, places and people I did not know. Members directed me to people, places and documents they felt were important to my area of research, and assisted with questions large and small. It was through the Historical Society- their contacts as well as themselves- that many of my oral history interviewees were recruited.

IHS seemed to be pleased that their group and work is of interest to me. In return for their limitless help, enthusiasm and support, I attempted to show my gratitude by sporadically taking biscuits to the meetings, as well as emailing odd images and newspaper references I found in the course of my research that they might not have come across (which was unlikely given the breadth and depth of their own knowledge, research and archival material). I volunteered to help out at their VE Day Tea Party, and, along with other Society members, donned full 1940s dress for the occasion.

As a result, I grew fond of the Historical Society and gained a great respect for the detail of their historical work, and the commitment and enthusiasm which drives it. At the same time, I still hoped to be able to analyse their work, and far from being remote in hope of objectivity, I considered that my emotional investment with the group, and my time as an observer and participant to their writing and doing of history, strengthened my understanding of their role in remembering community rather than undermined it. I was conscious not to use IHS and its archive as my unacknowledged 'under-labourers'²⁶, and this is one of the reasons why I wanted to explicitly examine their work and practices.

Irthlingborough Historical Society has become an important part of the community and cultural life of the town. They are the first port of call for research about the area, be it house histories, derelict buildings, street names or family histories. The Society facilitates social interactions for its members, who meet weekly, and for the audiences who support their activities, motivated by a pre-existing passion and interest in history, but also to 'get involved' and 'meet people'.²⁷ In this respect, members are active participants in history-making; they are, in Samuel's phrasing, just some of the 'thousand different hands'.²⁸

²⁶ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 5.

²⁷ [Anonymised Author], *Irthlingborough Historical Society Members Survey* (Unpublished, October 2010).

²⁸ Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, p. 8.

Irthlingborough Historical Society Archives

The archives of local history societies vary wildly according to the resources, interests and location of local history societies. Generally, though, local history society archives tend to be made up of documents and artefacts relating to the late nineteenth and twentieth century. This might include original documents, such as newspapers and newspaper clippings, magazines, letters, diaries, records relating to the local church, schools, sport and leisure associations. Local history society archives also commonly include photographs- originals, reproductions and digitised images. Increasingly and most significantly, local history society archives also collect and hold 'self-generated' material of oral histories, reminiscences, and autobiographical writings.

Irthlingborough Historical Society have created and cared for their own archives over the years of the group's activities. Their documents are meticulously catalogued, boxed, stored in the cool atmosphere of the Methodist Church Hall. The boxes contain newspaper clippings, magazines, written reminiscences, letters, oral history transcripts, parish magazines, along with digital media including oral history interviews audio and video, stored on their PC. There are, as Grey rightly asserted, 'no medieval charters or Paston letters or 17th-century maps' in these type of local history society archives, Irthlingborough included.²⁹

To some eyes, then, these archives are of little consequence. To others, these types of archives are the bread and butter of social history. Personal papers and narratives enable the researcher to move away from state and official records and narratives, from the manor house to the terraced house, from the parsonage to the factory. As Raphael Samuel suggested, with these types of sources, 'the historian can draw up fresh maps, in which people are as prominent as places.'³⁰

In contrast with records pertaining to elite and prominent families and estates, 'the innumerable postcards, letters, diaries, and ephemera of working class men and women, or the papers of small businesses like corner shops or hill farmers, for example, very little has been preserved.'³¹ Even with sources such as Mass Observation fairly well-known, there remains the ever-present problem 'the relative scarcity of available documentation for the activities of the ordinary citizen.'³²

Local history society archives like those of Irthlingborough Historical Society, with their evidence and testimony about and by the ordinary citizen, can illuminate and complicate our historical knowledge and understandings of nineteenth and twentieth century Britain. In these archives, we can find explore the history of work and poverty; childhood, family and gender; space and place; leisure and religion; and so much more.

²⁹ Gray, p. 5.

³⁰ Raphael Samuel, 'Local History and Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, 1976, 191–208 (p. 199).

³¹ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 4.

³² Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Archives at the Millennium: The Twenty-Eighth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts 1991-1999* (London, 1999); Ian Johnston, 'Whose History Is It Anyway?', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 22.2 (2010), 213–29.

A brief examination of a selection of material from Irthlingborough Historical Society archives can illustrate this. Take, for example, autobiographical writing from Irthlingburian Mr J. F. P. Horner, entitled 'Irthlingborough: 1897-1914' written in 1957. Amongst his reminiscences about the town, its people and events, Horner remembered how, before the First World War, poor people would walk to Wellingborough 'in the rain with no overcoats and leaky boots' so they might 'pawn some treasured belongings' to go and 'buy some bones or bacon pieces for Sunday dinner.'³³ The poor people of the town, Horner recalled, were 'badly dressed clothed and shod' and 'very few wore undershirts or underpants.'³⁴

Elsewhere in the collections of Irthlingborough Historical Society, the experience of starting work as a child is remembered. Nellie Neville's memories of Irthlingborough were documented in writing in 1985. Nellie Neville was born in 1891, the eldest child of six children. She legally left school and started work in 1903 aged twelve:

*Then, when I was 12 someone told me that the 'The Tower' (shoe factory) wanted a girl for cutting ends so I went to see the boss and I go the job 'Oh Nell' said mum 'I don't like the thought of you working there' but I knew the money would be handy so I left school.'*³⁵

Midge Bailey started working a 48-hour week at the age of fourteen, and his situation was not uncommon, as he explained in his reminiscences, written in the 1980s:

*Most children left school at fourteen years of age and went into one of the factories in the town. Not much thought went into the choice of job, it was a matter of how soon you could bring some money into the home. Hardly any of the children had any planned entry into the adult world, it was only the economic state of the family that counted.'*³⁶

Descriptions of life working in the factory brings detail and texture to the experiences of work and family life, and the differences in men's and women's work and home responsibilities. In 1997, Terry Marshall recalled the differentiation in gender roles, and the unfair division of labour meant that women's break from paid labour was spent doing domestic unpaid labour:

*I remember that just before the factory knocking-off siren sounded, anyone classed as physically challenged, i.e. having a wooden leg, club foot, a crutch, or just plain 'bad on their feet' was given the privilege of leaving the factory before everyone else. You could understand why when you saw some of these able-bodied women running up church Street heading for one of the many butchers shop 'to gedda bidde meat frizz dinner.' Every second was precious to them if they were to get back for the afternoon shift without a '4 by late clocking-in'.'*³⁷

Irthlingborough Historical Society archives are dominated by archives relating to work and employment, be them oral histories, autobiographies or records from the factories themselves. This is not surprising, given the dominance of the experience of work in many people's lives. Through sources and account of leisure, we might discern how and where, and with whom they spent their free time. In Dennis Munns's memories of feasts and fairs in the 1930s, he recalled the arrival of gypsies and

³³ J. F. P. Horner, 'Irthlingborough: 1897-1914' (Irthlingborough Historical Society Archive: Unpublished, 1957).

³⁴ Horner.

³⁵ Nellie Neville, 'Nellie Neville: In Her Own Words' (Irthlingborough Historical Society Archive: Unpublished, 1985).

³⁶ E. B. Bailey, 'Irthlingborough As I've Seen It' (Irthlingborough Historical Society Archive: Unpublished), p. 32.

³⁷ Terry Marshall, 'Reminiscence: Irthlingborough' (Irthlingborough Historical Society Archive: Unpublished, 1997).

travelling show-people in the town, who camped on the field owned by the pub his parents leased, The Bull:

It was always an exciting time for us kids when the Fair came, George Billings and his galloping horses and cockerills roundabout, Charles Thurston's Dodgems and various other amusements. My mother and father were always invited to George Billings caravan after [pub] closing time on the last night of the Fair, for a drink and I must say it was a luxury with its cut glass mirrors and various furnishings.³⁸

Midge Bailey recalled the courtship practices of young men and women in Irthlingborough in the interwar years:

...one of the venues of the various dances was the Harmonic Hall in Scarborough Street. This hall was built by the Working Men's Club to use as a skating rink. A sprung rock maple floor was laid down for this purpose and proved not only to be ideal for skating but also for dancing. This hall was a favourite place for the dances for another reason unconnected with dancing. This was because, just a hundred yards up the street, was Irthlingborough Rec., the shortened name given to the creation ground where, during the interval or at the end of the dance, the lads and lassies went to play games. I hasten to add not football or cricket.³⁹

The experience of family and loss in late nineteenth and twentieth century can also be detected in Irthlingborough Historical Society archives. For Clifton Newton, born in 1876, the death of his mother when he was nine years old was a deeply traumatic experience:

Every time I was wanted by my mother used to slip off, but there came a time when I was stood beside her bed being called there by her when she tells me to be a good boy to my father and to my prayers as she was going to leave this world and kissing her we parted never to see her alive again⁴⁰

For Nellie Neville, even at the age of 94, the experience of losing her brother, Ernest, who was killed in action the First World War in March 1917 when he was 24 years old, had a continued impact upon her life:

I used to be a bit spiteful to our Ern sometimes (you know, him that lays in France). I'd tell tales on him or run off without him. I think about them things now. I wouldn't have done them if I'd known our Ern would lie in France all these years. We lost him in the First World War- he lays there- years and years, our Ern. He was a nice boy, you know. He didn't deserve to lay there- it's too far away. I often think about our Ern. I would have liked to go to see where he lays, but I never shall now!⁴¹

Irthlingborough Historical Society archives also tell us about beliefs which shaped everyday life and practices. For Hilda Surridge, who was born in 1907, her mother's many superstitious beliefs which shaped her childhood:

My mother was very superstitious- throw a pinch of salt over your left should you accidentally sill some; turn over the money in your pocket at the sight of a new moon; wish on a black cat; never pass on the stairs; never open an umbrella indoors; never bring bunches of lilac, or branches of in the house; always put a coin into a purse, or handbag given as a gift; never cross knives on a table; never wash your luck away by hanging out the washing on New Year's Day or Good Friday [...] I decided not to pass these superstitions onto my children.⁴²

³⁸ Dennis Munns, 'Memories of Irthlingborough' (Irthlingborough Historical Society Archive: Unpublished, 2002).

³⁹ E. B. Bailey, p. 55.

⁴⁰ Clifton Newman, 'Memories of Irthlingborough' (Irthlingborough Historical Society Archive: Unpublished).

⁴¹ Neville.

⁴² Hilda Surridge, 'Reminiscence: School and Work' (Irthlingborough Historical Society Archive: Unpublished, 2002).

Finally, the surprising and the unexpected are also to be found in the archives of Irthlingborough Historical Society and local societies archives like them; stories of crime, scandal and disaster. Such events and experiences punctuate those concerned with the fabric of predictable everyday life. For example, Grace Bailey recalled a childhood memory from 1924 when one of her neighbours, Alfred Arnold, attacked his wife, Emily:

On another occasion, when one of my brothers was playing in Arnold's house, their dad came home and cut his wife's throat with a cut-throat razor. She ran out of the house with a towel round her neck and went to Mr. Jones's house- he was an ambulance man, and he took over from there. Mr Arnold was sentenced to 3 years in a prison on the Isle of Wight, but was freed about after 2 ½ years. When his wife heard of his release, she packed her bags and went off to London [...] Before she went, she gave my mother her address and my mother never did disclose it to anyone. They corresponded with each other for years!⁴³

Primarily, the archives provide a rich history of Irthlingborough, its people, events and experience in the town, from the unofficial bus strike of 1936 and the building of Crow Hill Community Centre in 1958 to experiences of work, family, housing, religion, war, shopping and leisure.⁴⁴ These rich historical sources have enabled- and have been generated by- Irthlingborough Society's activities in researching, writing, recording, filming, exhibiting and commemorating the history of the town and its residents lives and experiences.

Furthermore, if we move from understanding Irthlingborough Historical Society archives as *local history archives* and instead situate them as *social history archives* (what we might think of as 'transcending the local'), these archives become important sources for exploring ordinary people's histories, experiences, agency and action. The sources lend themselves to the 'doing' of a myriad different types of history such as microhistories to facilitate micro-social levels of analysis⁴⁵; cultural histories to explore understandings, representations and meanings; social histories, to explore experiences, agency, and relationships. As such, Irthlingborough Historical Society archives and local history society archives like them can be understood as playing an important part in social history, people's history, or, 'history from below. Though at times, the sources are fragmented and disparate, they can enrich the 'history of everyday life', as Alf Lüdtke explained:

the history of everyday life [...] center on the actions and sufferings of those who are frequently labeled "everyday, ordinary people" [...] What is foregrounded is their world of work and nonwork. Descriptions detail housing and homelessness, clothing and nakedness, eating habits and hunger, people's loves and hates, their quarrels and cooperation, memories, anxieties, hopes for the future. In doing the history of everyday life, attention is focused not just on the deeds (and misdeeds) and pageantry of the great, the masters of church and state. Rather, central to the thrust of everyday historical analysis is the life and

⁴³ Grace Bailey, 'My Memories' (Irthlingborough Historical Society Archive: Unpublished); 'Jealous Husband. Irthlingboro' Man Charged with Attempted Murder', *Northampton Mercury*, 17 October 1924, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Irthlingborough Historical Society, *The Streets Where You Live* (Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire: Irthlingborough Historical Society, 2005); Irthlingborough Historical Society, *Thanks for the Memories* (Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire: Irthlingborough Historical Society, 2005).

⁴⁵ See for example, Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); Natalie Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983); Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

*survival of those who have remained largely anonymous in history—the “nameless” multitudes in their workaday trials and tribulations...*⁴⁶

Irthlingborough Historical Society and The Production of Public History

Having briefly considered some of the material within Irthlingborough Historical Society archives and how it might contribute not only to local history but a history of everyday life, now we turn to the processes of history-making. The workings and practices of local history society archives raise important questions for thinking about the nature and value of these type of historical practices, for local history society groups play a significant role in rescuing and preserve archival collections, providing an important alternative to institutional repositories, and in creating and curating their own histories.

Like many other archiving endeavours, be them local authority or independent archives, Irthlingborough Historical Society acquire, preserve and make accessible archives and records for use by present and future residents and researchers. Irthlingborough Historical Society hold collections of that are of significance principally to the local community and vicinity.⁴⁷ Irthlingborough Historical Society's county records office is that Northamptonshire Records Office, whose Collections Policy indicates that, from either capacity or inclination, they 'only accept deposits in exceptional circumstances and for records we have a statutory responsibility to preserve.'⁴⁸

Thus, as with other local history societies like it, Irthlingborough Historical Society's archiving activity is in one respect a very practical response to the limited capacity and facilities of county-level archive repositories, especially the backdrop of the continued government austerity programme. Local history societies across the UK are active rescuing (from house clearances, skips and from donations) documents from individuals, organisations and businesses, and storing and giving access to material that central repositories cannot or will not take, and in so doing saving these archives from both potential destruction *and* dismissal.

In terms of access, local history society archives have an autonomy to choose themselves how to organise, secure and make accessible their holdings. Irthlingborough Historical Society archives are stored at Irthlingborough Methodist Church in the centre for town, where they also hold their weekly meetings. As such, the archives are local and accessible, consultation is arranged by an advanced phone-call or email to their archivist, secretary and chairperson, who are keen to

⁴⁶ Alf Lüdtke, 'What Is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are Its Practitioners?', in *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, ed. by Alf Ludtke (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 4.

⁴⁷ As indicated, there are items and collections located within local history society collections with broader appeal to interested researchers. The Irthlingborough Historical Society's collection of parish magazines, for example, offering religious, moral and practical guidance and news from parish to Irthlingburians, is noteworthy, with a run from 1889 and 1912 in excellent condition with only a handful of gaps, and would doubtless of interest to historians with interests in such a field. See, St Peter's Church, 'Irthlingborough Parish Magazine', 1889-1912, (Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire).

⁴⁸ Northamptonshire County Council, *Donating Records at Northamptonshire Record Office*, 2013 <[http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/en/councilservices/Community/archives/Documents/PDF Documents/Deposit info leaflet April 2013.pdf](http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/en/councilservices/Community/archives/Documents/PDF/Documents/Deposit%20info%20leaflet%20April%202013.pdf)>.

share their archive with interested parties. By contrast, mainstream archive repositories have a range of measures in place to organise, secure and make accessible their material, such as intercom entry to buildings, online reservations, County Archives Research Network (CARN) tickets, lockers for bags, CCTV, and pencils-only policies. It is well recognised within the sector that many of these procedures act as barriers to wider access and participation.⁴⁹ The distance, location and transport to local archive services can also affect individuals and groups' inclination to use and deposit archives. For residents of Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire Record Office is not particularly convenient, being twenty miles away, a journey which can take up to an hour and a half on public transport.

It is worth noting that Irthlingborough Historical Society do not see themselves in opposition to other archive repositories in the region (Northamptonshire Records Office and Northamptonshire Local Studies) but instead see themselves 'a link between the community and the records office.'⁵⁰ But, as Flinn suggests, the very existence of independent archives, operating outside the framework of mainstream, publicly funded, professionally staffed institutions is both a reproach and a challenge to that mainstream.⁵¹

In addition to the care of existing archival material, Irthlingborough Historical Society is active in the generation and creation of public history, created for and consumed by local community. Between 1991 and 2010, the Society produced more than seventeen individual publications. Early publications focused on institutions of the town, such as the Lads Brigade, Working Men's Club, the Coop, and Irthlingborough Children's Cottage Home, as well as these streets and yards of the town. Later publications took a broader view of the history of the town, blending research, historical sources and reminiscence, often focussed around photographs, on general memories of the town in *Thanks for the Memories* (1996) and *Days to Remember Images of Irthlingborough* (2006). In 2010, the Society launched their best-selling book to date, *Irthlingborough's War 1939 -1945*, which sold more than 200 copies on pre-order alone. Most recently, the Society has researched and produced a DVD about the history of the Co-operative Laundry, which was established in the town in 1935 and employed as many as 300 people until it closed in 2006, commemorated of the film, *The Battle of Waterloo*, which was filmed in 1913 at Irthlingborough, and published a book about the history of health and social care in the town in *Irthlingborough: In Sickness and in Health* (2016).

The Society has created and curated the history of the town in other ways too. They have held film-screenings, photographic exhibitions, and even a VE Day party re-enactment. Elsewhere, in response to the transformed built environment of the town, Irthlingborough Historical Society has worked to commemorate 'lost' buildings, or sites of demolition, through their own blue plaque scheme. The list of former buildings includes the cinemas, the first Co-op grocery store, a community centre,

⁴⁹ The National Archives, *Developing Access and Participation: Guidance for Archive Services*, 2012 <<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/developing-access-and-participation.pdf>>; Mary Stevens.

⁵⁰ [Anonymised Author], *Irthlingborough Historical Society Members Survey* (Unpublished, October 2010).

⁵¹ Flinn, 'Archival Activism: Independent and Community-Led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions', p. 5.

the Co-op laundry and the civic hall. Irthlingborough Historical Society's role in narrating a/the history of the town has further been cemented and legitimised by its link with the Town who has asked the Society on several occasions for suggestions for names of streets for new developments of houses in the area.

Society members are active and thorough researchers. In order to create their outputs such as books, DVDS and exhibitions, the Society conducts in-depth research using newspapers, business records, health records, and newspapers, using records from their own archive and those held in other repositories. In addition to primary historical research in archives, the Society works to generate historical material for their research and archive through 'memory work', in the form written and oral histories and reminiscences. Indeed, it is their initiation of projects based on local workplaces or experiences, in which they actively seek out individuals to contribute to their research, that produce the oral histories and reminiscences that are recorded and archived for use in the project in question and for future use. For example, the Society's recent project to research and record the history of the Cooperative Laundry has seen the research into history of laundry employees has seen the careful compilation of more than 430 names.⁵² A similar project was carried out to research the 150 men who died in the First World War who were commemorated on the town's cenotaph.⁵³

Irthlingborough Historical Society's publications have had a significant influence on people's knowledge and understanding of the history of the town. Many Irthlingburians had some knowledge of local history, including folklore, myths and the town's 'claims to fame', which were derived from family stories, school, social media, and Irthlingborough Historical Society's publications. For some residents, the boundary between personal experience, and information acquired through reading the Society's histories of Irthlingborough was blurred. In an account of the presence of Prisoners of War who were interned at the Little Addington camp close to Irthlingborough in the Second World War, for example, a resident commented:

I've read stories since, because I wouldn't know. During the war... I wouldn't know. They used to go round with the Dustman. I've read this somewhere. And people in the house would give them cigarettes. I wouldn't know. Not really.⁵⁴

The Politics of Irthlingborough Historical Society

Finally, we turn to consider the politics of Irthlingborough Historical Society and its archiving activity. Irthlingborough experienced rapid social and economic change in the latter part the twentieth century. As noted before, the collapse of the shoe and boot industry, the expansion of housing, and the increasing use of the car have all worked to transform experience of living in Irthlingborough. And of course, such changes are local manifestations of wider social forces related to de-industrialised, neoliberal, globalised economic regimes. Perhaps it is no wonder then that local

⁵² Irthlingborough Historical Society, 'List of Laundry Employees', 2016 <<http://www.erdiburn.org.uk/>>.

⁵³ Irthlingborough Historical Society, 'The Men of Irthlingborough Who Made the Ultimate Sacrifice in World War 1', 2016 <<http://www.erdiburn.org.uk/>>.

⁵⁴ Grace Glass*, *Oral History Interview by [Anonymised Author]* (Interviewed in Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire: Unpublished, 21 March 2011).

residents would want to research and record the histories, memories and experiences of near-obsolete ways of life, from working in shoe factories and laundries, living in Yards and moving into brand-new council houses, going to dance halls and Working Men's Clubs, and buying sugar in blue bags.

The politics of Irthlingborough Historical Society could be said to lie, then, in conveying the sense and actuality of loss and disruption to the experiences of everyday life on a local level. As one of the founding fathers of local history, W. G. Hoskins, said, 'the more incomprehensible the modern world grows, the more people will turn to study something of which they can grasp the scale and in which they can find a personal and individual meaning' is more true than ever.⁵⁵ In this respect, it is not parochial to document these changes and the meanings people of the town attached to them. Here we might turn to Jerry White's insights as to why awareness of the past and of change is so pronounced at a local level:

*Consciousness of the past is a living experience at the local level in a way that it rarely is in any other sphere. It is forced on us every day of our lives by the physical change in neighbourhoods- streets and buildings that were there one, five, ten years ago, but are now gone; by the changing functions of buildings and places- the street market now a car park, the cinema now a warehouse, the factory now a wasteland; by the change in the people around us, the coming and going of our neighbours and our families and our friends. Change has no meaning without comparison with what used to be, and those comparisons in things near at hand are a part of the daily though processes of all of us in recognising just where we are.*⁵⁶

To turn to the question of Irthlingborough Historical Society and the politics of nostalgia, it is true that members of Irthlingborough Historical Society did express some nostalgia for their own experience of their town, which for many, had changed or altered significantly over their lifetime. However, the Society did not look back uncritically through a 'golden haze'.⁵⁷ Instead, they strived to judge social change and historical processes which had affected the town and its sense of community. The Society's members did not reject change, progress, or development in their town. On many levels they welcomed it, having acknowledged extensively the ways in which everyday life was a struggle for working people. Furthermore, Irthlingborough has had to defend itself as being 'a scruffy little town' and as such, nostalgia for the life that Irthlingborough once offered helped to combat such stigmatisation.⁵⁸ Thus, what emerges are nuanced and considered reviews of social and cultural change, as Irthlingborough Historical Society's chairperson Roy York, explained:

We can all see through rose-coloured glasses. I am probably worse than most. But thinking about it, I think we have lost one hell of a lot. Yes, you can be nostalgic; you can say well we used to leave the door open. Well yes of course because there was nothing inside to pinch.

⁵⁵ W. G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (Harlow: Longman, 1984), p. 8.

⁵⁶ White, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Bourke, p. 137.

⁵⁸ Ben Jones, 'The Uses of Nostalgia: Autobiography, Community Publishing and Working Class Neighbourhoods in Post-War England', *Cultural and Social History*, 7.3 (2010), 355–74; Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid Twentieth-Century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

Nobody had anything worth pinching in those days [laughs]. We can be nostalgic, but I think it is an actual fact that we have lost one hell of a lot more than we have gained.⁵⁹

Though some people in Irthlingborough, like Roy York, judged there to have been a weakening of a sense of community, and that the town had lost more than it had gained, in practice, the act of collective remembering- at Irthlingborough Historical Society meetings, exhibitions, re-enactments, films, and publications- where memories of the town 'as it used to be' could be refreshed, exchanged and reinforced, in fact worked to generate the very sense of community for which some residents were grieving.

⁵⁹ Roy York, *Oral History Interview by [Anonymised Author]* (Interviewed in Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire: Unpublished, 27 July 2011).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we should recognise that local history societies, like the one in Irthlingborough, have an important role in historical preservation, practice and production. Local history societies and their archiving activities can and should be part of the discussion about the power of the archive, from the content of their archives, the process of making and writing history, and the narratives that local history societies create and circulate about their locality and community. Clearly, the archives of local history societies are anchored in 'the local', and issues of place, belonging community and change are threads which shape this type of historical production. However, if we reconsider these archives not only as 'local history archives' but as 'social history archives', and their activities not simply as mere leisure or nostalgia but ways by which people document the change and disruption to the experiences of everyday life on a local level, we gain a richer and more rewarding understanding of local history, local history societies, their archives and their practices.

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(asterisks indicates pseudonym)

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