

A HISTORY THE SOCIAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Eric Evans, SHS Vice President

The Social History Society, established in 1976, was the brainchild of Harold Perkin, Professor of Social History at the University of Lancaster. Perkin felt that a rapidly growing subject lacked an appropriate focus. As he put it, social history 'has come a long way in the last two decades from a collection of minority interests to become one of the central areas of historical study'. He canvassed support widely among distinguished academic historians, including such luminaries as Asa Briggs, Peter Laslett and Peter Mathias. Virtually all offered their support. It was a sign of the times, however, that women were conspicuous by their absence from Perkin's 1976 list of the academic great and good to be canvassed.

The Society's first Conference agreed that, for the time being at least, the administrative side would be located at Lancaster. In the events, it has remained there. This owes much to the contribution made by the unflappable efficiency of Linda Persson, the Society's Administrative Secretary, Linda Persson. By the time the Society reached its fortieth birthday, Linda was on the verge of celebrating thirty years of unbroken service.

'Elites in Society' was the chosen theme for the Society's inaugural conference. It attracted papers with both a wide geographical range and a broad time-scale. Contributors included Keith Hopkins on the elite in Ancient Rome and also a tail-tweaking piece by Francois Bedarida on how French elites saw the British 'Establishment'.

In what ways did the fledgling society of the late 1970s and early 1980s establish a distinctive presence? Firstly, it was one of the first Societies which, as an article of faith rather than fitting the convenience of a particular year, organized academic conferences around a pre-agreed, integrative theme. Taking examples more or less random after Elites in 1976, Popular Culture was the chosen theme in 1981, Work in its Social Aspects in 1991 and Consumption, Standards of Living and Quality of Life (1993) and Time and the Construction of the Past in 1997. Although it proved easier to do so in some years than in others, Conference organisers were asked to attract papers which, together, offered geographical breadth and chronological range. The conceptual 'strands' around which the Society has organised its conferences in recent years enable a wider range of these themes to be covered, thus strengthening, rather than undermining, the Society's initial objective.

Secondly, it was decided from the beginning that the Conferences should offer opportunities for postgraduate students to put their wares before sometimes critical, but always kindly, scrutiny. 'PGRs' represent the future of any academic discipline and the Society gave them a larger and a more encouraging 'platform' than most other academic societies. Postgraduates were also elected a members of the Society's management Committee, thus securing broadly egalitarian objectives. They had ample opportunity to meet senior and/or distinguished older colleagues and to 'network'. For several, a long-term scholarly interchange began conversations across the generations during a conference, developing thereafter into close academic friendships and partnerships.

What nearly everyone who attended early conferences will remember was the weather. For many years, the Annual Conference was held in the depths of winter. The reasons were predominantly defensive. A new and successful Society seemed ripe for merger or takeover by ones longer established and with greater resources. It is not appropriate to name them here but rest assured they existed. Soc Hist Society Conferences happened in early January since the Committee could be reasonably sure that no other Society would claim that space as its own or providing an opportunity to muscle us out. Without doubt, our members had to be both hardy & stalwart. Meeting close to the shortest day of the year, they also conferred in rooms which had not been heated for a fortnight.

Conference attendees found it difficult to huddle together for warmth. The numbers attending were much smaller affairs than today: usually between 75 and 110. Inevitably a new society takes time to establish itself and secure its 'street-cred'. Perhaps another factor was also in place. Particularly among historians of Britain during the 'long' nineteenth century, relations between Marxist and non-Marxists were often tense. Many from the Marxist wing initially viewed the society with suspicion, not least because Perkin, as the Society's first chairman, was widely acknowledged as pre-eminent non-Marxist contributor to that now faded, and jaded, debate on 'the Marking of the English working class'.

Undoubtedly, the key development of the early 21st century has been launching of its own peer-group assessed academic journal, *Cultural and Social History*. At its launch in 2004, the Editorial Board of *CSH* indicated that social historians were rowing with an increasingly strong methodological tide. The Board also argued that cultural and social history were 'mutually constitutive and inextricably linked...an appreciation of the constellation of cultural forces that confer meaning on the lives of historical actors is necessary if we are to understand more fully the social experience of individuals and groups in the past'. Culture it saw as not 'an entity distinct from society but as a product of social practice.' The new journal particularly welcomed articles bridging 'what hitherto had been considered distinct

sub-fields of the discipline or that draw effectively on the work of other disciplines in order to enhance our understanding of the past'.

CSH has attracted an ever larger and wider range of articles. Concerns about an excess of indigestible methodological pieces proved groundless. The Journal has flourished. It has contributed to the welcome increase in membership numbers and has augmented the currently healthy state of the Society's finances. Even more important, the Society's success has confirmed the centrality of history's social and cultural dimensions. The key editorial problem is not the absence of publishable articles but finding space to include all of the academic excellence

May I end by a playful dig at the linguistic turners? Some sixty years or so ago, my grammar school teachers dinned into us the message that words such as 'cultural' and 'social' were adjectival. Pieces of chalk were despatched with an arrow-like precision to the heads of those who had forgotten that lesson. But the Society's *Journal* is replete with references to 'the cultural' and 'the social'. The 'cultural' or the 'social' *what*, we might ask. 'Thing' perhaps? The lack of a clear answer to an apparently jejune question suggests that further work remains to be done, not least on lucid, jargon-free and inclusive exposition. Anyway, a government committed, as this one is, to grammatical exactitude even from primary school children is unlikely to look kindly on gratuitous the flouting of basic usage. The Secretary of State for Education should hear of this!! She can be warned c/o Piccadilly Gate, Store Street, Manchester 2.

Enough! The Society convenes for the third time in our forty years in the University which gave birth to the Social History Society. We remains grateful for Lancaster's support and particularly so in the often cash-strapped early years.

Lancaster University has a motto which is used at the end of all formal occasions. With the substitution of a single word - 'Society' for 'University' - it provides us an ideal aspiration for future development and success: 'Long may the Society flourish'.

23.03.2016