

40 YEARS OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Pat Thane, SHS Vice President

It's lovely to be able to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Society, back at Lancaster where Harold Perkin founded it, so we should celebrate and thank him.

I can't remember whether I attended the very first conference- I have a clear memory of an early, quite small, enjoyable, conference here, but suspect it was not the first... fantastic how the conference has grown and flourished since.

1976 - when it started - was an interesting year for Social History- also the year when *History Workshop Journal* and the journal *Social History* started - no relation to SHS of course, our journal, *CSH*, is much more recent. They are also both still highly active. It was the year that Social History firmly arrived as an academic sub-discipline in Britain. It is interesting and important that the three arrivals differed from one another : HWJ was a 'journal of socialist historians', (from 1981 a 'journal of socialist and feminist historians') grown out of the History Workshop movement and the longer history of Marxist-influenced social history, *Social History* and SHS were more diverse, open to a wide range of perspectives.

There is a persistent belief that social history in this country really began in 1963 with publication of EP Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* and its main drive was left oriented, focussed on class and class conflict. This strand was hugely important, but social history had a longer, more diverse history back to at least the beginning of the century including the Webbs and Hammonds outside academic life, those who blended economic and social history within universities, like Labour Party activist RH Tawney, then GM Trevelyan, Prof. at Cambridge, both of whom were influential and had broader interests than class, though they didn't ignore it. And from 1964 Peter Laslett ran the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure which transformed our understandings of the history of the family and population, important dimensions of social history. This diversity has continued.

Harold Perkin became a Lecturer in Social History at Manchester University in 1951, which also suggests it was a recognized sub-discipline quite some time before 1963. I don't know whether he was the first lecturer in Social History

in Britain, just as he was justly proud of becoming the first Prof of Social History at Lancaster in 1967. In 1969 he published his first major book *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780-1880* which challenged the Thompsonian class conflict analysis, though Perkin didn't make a polemical thing of it, by asking how a society in which there certainly were tensions between classes moved towards, not severe conflict and revolution, but to what he called 'a viable class society', in which the different classes co-existed, however uneasily at times, as they did. Along the way he examined the upper and middle classes in 19th c England as well as the working classes on whom more left-wing historians focussed, and he continued to do so in his later writings.

Perkin established the SHS as an inclusive Society, open to a range of ideologies and perspectives and to new approaches. These included the recognition that was emerging in the 1970s that class was not the only significant identity and source of division in society. Recognition that gender, race, sexual orientation were and long had been centrally important categories for analysing societies influenced the writing of social history as it did much else internationally, as a result of the new social movements that flourished in the 1970s.

The SHS was open to these new approaches from the beginning. A reason for its continued great success and growth has been its continuing openness to new ideas and new people and it's great, and a great tribute to Harold Perkin, that the Society has carried on so successfully for so long.

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