

Local Population Studies Society Autumn Conference

15th November 2008, The Humanities Research Institute (HRI),
University of Sheffield, 34 Gell Street, Sheffield, S3 7QY.

Is all population history local population history?

Conference Report

Some 30 people gathered from all points of the compass at the Humanities Research Institute, University of Sheffield, on November 15th, 2008 for the Local Population Studies Autumn conference. As well as local Yorkshire folk the audience included travellers from Wales, East Anglia, Northumberland, London and the West Country, promising interesting and lively discussion.

The conference title posed the question ‘Is all population history local population history?’ and six speakers rose to the task of talking to this subject. Chris Galley, well known to readers of *Local Population Studies* as the Journal’s Book Review Editor, opened the day by debating the theme in the context of national and local studies of infant mortality and still births. Pursuing ‘parish register studies’ could, Chris argued, make one feel ‘old fashioned’ as currently such studies appear to have rather fallen out of favour in academic circles. However, knowledge of historic demographic behaviour at the national level has been derived from analysis using only a small selection of parish records and without an understanding of the many other ‘local’ pictures a full appreciation of the complexities of the ‘bigger’ picture will remain unattainable. Small parishes with really accurate and detailed records can be just as informative as demographic statistics covering wider areas; as they highlight consistencies with or deviations from ‘the bigger picture’. The importance of understanding the records one was working with was a theme which emerged from Chris’s talk, and his audience were certainly receptive to the idea of increasing the number of local level demographic studies, particularly with a view to comparing and contrasting the results.

Bob Woods, Professor of Geography at Liverpool University, the second speaker, also considered how knowledge of individuals in their local setting can further understanding of wider events; and how demography can inform medical history. In a highly illustrated talk (which came with a health warning, given the graphic nature of some of the slides), he introduced the audience to Dr Smellie, ‘man-midwife, lecturer and author’ and Mrs Stone, a West Country midwife who reputedly delivered over 300 children. In the eighteenth century they had each written manuals on midwifery, and although both were undoubtedly selecting particular cases to illustrate particular points they were making, Bob argued that their work may be used to consider how improvements in midwifery, particularly the use of forceps may have had a ‘beneficial influence’ on the survival chances of both newborn infants and their mothers, making a (probably small) contribution to the decline of maternal and foetal mortality across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The final paper of the morning was presented by Sian Pooley, from the University of Cambridge, who considered late Victorian and Edwardian ‘cultures of parenting’ in

three localities; Auckland in County Durham, Burnley in Lancashire and Bromley in Kent. Drawing on local newspaper items, childrearing manuals and other local records Sian was able to show that, while child health was of great concern to parents in all three communities, the different perceptions of health as well as the variation in the provision of services and care available, in conjunction with diverse political and social attitudes meant that both within the home and at the level of the community the children received quite different levels and forms of care. Population change could thus not be understood by undertaking national level studies alone, she argued, as even nationally disseminated ideas and concerns would manifest themselves in diverse ways from one community to another.

In the afternoon the themes of the papers shifted away from the survival chances of the very young, with presentations on three quite diverse topics. The Humanities Research Institute hosts several websites on historical topics and in her paper 'Internet sources for local population history' Sharon Howard described two of them: the 'Old Bailey Proceedings' [www.oldbaileyonline.org] and the 'Plebeian Lives' project [www.shef.ac.uk/hri/projects/projectpages/plebeianlives.html]. In an interactive presentation Sharon demonstrated that although the Old Bailey records, running from 1674-1913, are primarily the records of a criminal court, they offer fascinating glimpses into the lives of ordinary citizens particularly those living in and around the capital. When it goes 'live' the Plebeian Lives project will offer researchers further insights as it includes documents such as bastardy and pauper examinations, as well as documents detailing criminal justice and the running of welfare institutions from a selection of London parishes. The websites allow remote searching and the audience had fun discovering for themselves that of the 2650 murders tried at the Old Bailey between 1674 and 1913, 289 were perpetrated by individuals under 25 years of age!

The second speaker of the afternoon, Prof David Hey, a past president of the Society and Emeritus Professor at Sheffield University, was well known to the audience and while his paper on 'modern approaches to the study of surnames' ranged widely his many allusions to Sheffield and its environs were much appreciated. Once again the importance of local historical studies were highlighted as David demonstrated that surname dictionaries, maps and DNA evidence can all tell rather different stories. DNA evidence was not a magic wand, he warned – it can be even more ambiguous than documentary testimony. Maps showing the distribution of particular surnames were very helpful in identifying 'the country' or neighbourhood where those names were familiar and thus pointing to the areas, or communities, best placed to offer clues as to the origins of the names, although once again different circumstances in different communities might mean that the trajectory of a name was quite different from one locality to another.

Finally the current president, Prof Colin Pooley, from Lancaster University, picked up several of the themes running through the previous presentations in his consideration of 'using local information to understand regional and national trends in migration and mobility'. Drawing from the thousands of individual life and migration histories which he and his colleague Jean Turnbull had collected, he noted that different types of historian consider the phenomenon of migration from rather different perspectives. Local historians tend to look at the impact of migration on specific localities, whereas social historians are more likely to work at a rather larger scale or on estimating long term trends. Those concentrating on national or regional perspectives will tend to

focus on net migration, whereas when migration is considered from the perspective of the individuals moving then it is gross migration, the total amount of movement, which takes precedence. The individual – local – regional – national and international elements of migration had led Colin to consider the overall theme of the day's papers once more and he concluded with an apt culinary analogy. If individual life histories may be considered as ingredients in a recipe, he argued, then the local historian draws these ingredients together for one particular community to produce one appetising dish. However to prepare the full meal that is the 'national' picture a combination of dishes has to be prepared, put together with a proper understanding of how the various elements come together to compliment each other. The audience agreed that there was still great scope for local population historians to prepare their own dishes to bring to the feast that is population history.

The Society wish to express their thanks to all the speakers for their excellent contributions to the conference. Thanks are also due to the Humanities Research Institute for hosting the event, particularly to Julie Banham for her help and assistance, and to PJ Taste for providing a delicious lunch and other refreshments. As always Peter Franklin and Terry Shaw brought a large display of Book Club stock for perusal and purchase by those attending the conference. This involves a lot of organisation, hard work and commitment for which they deserve a very large thank you. [Finally the Society are grateful to the Economic History Society for providing a grant which contributed greatly to the running of the conference and allowed the fees of postgraduate students attending the conference to be waived.]

A picture of those attending the conference is posted on the Society Website and shows that the sun does shine in Sheffield – even in November!

Eilidh Garrett.