



In praise of Local History

For most people, once they leave school, local history is the most common and popular form of history they come into contact with. The reason is easily explainable. Local history can often be more interesting and more personal than other varieties. And readers will be immediately familiar with the names of the people, places and buildings in their own locality.

Local history can serve other important functions. The broad canvas of man's historical development could well be described as a gigantic jigsaw. The documentation of history can be likened to the piecing together of a series of the small parts that go to make up the whole seamless picture. So the efforts of local historians can be a valuable source of material for the general historian.

A relatively small number of dedicated enthusiasts throughout the country have given generously of their time and energies in the cause of local history. Their work of documenting and interpreting the story of their own people and places has added much to our understanding of history. Their quiet labours among forgotten records have brought clarity and light to hitherto dark and obscure corners of the past.

Regrettably not all local history has been able to claim the high place it deserves in historical studies. There are, of course, reasons - some valid, some not so valid - why this position should be so. It can certainly be said that not all writers of local history have served the cause they espouse as well as they might have done. All too often uncritical sentimentality and airy romanticism have masqueraded as local history. The case for an objective, well-researched account of our parochial past is, therefore, all the more vital.

Recent years have brought an increased awareness and appreciation of what local history should be all about. While it must take account of the passing parade of prelates, merchant princes and landlords across the centuries, local history should chronicle the world of the common man - the story of the countless hundreds of thousands of ordinary people who struggled for survival and left little wealth or glory behind them.

Like local history itself, this story is worthy of a central place in history's pages.

