

## **LOCAL HISTORY DAY, 2011**

Historians from across Britain, meeting in London early in June, 2011, expressed concern about the possible impact on local history societies of a stagnant British economy and local authority cut-backs.

One speaker at the annual 'Local History Day' of the British Association for Local History (BALH) cited Nottingham University's abandonment of its dedicated local history course. While plenty of local history societies remain in business in Nottinghamshire, she added, around two thirds had reported a decline in membership. During discussion, possible reasons put forward for such a decline across Britain were: ageing population (reflected in declining and possibly less active society memberships); difficulty of recruiting younger people interested in history; changes to national curricula militating against the study of history; competition for members from, for example, the University of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Age (U3A); scarcity and/or high cost of local authority and other venues for meetings.

On the other hand it was pointed out that among the one third of Nottinghamshire societies reporting an *increase* in membership were many smaller ones which said they *benefited* from a growing number of older residents with time on their hands and a personal involvement with local history.

It was suggested that progress must come 'from the bottom up' (an analogy was drawn with the present Government's 'Big Society' initiative). Local history societies needed actively to recruit, to offer a varied programme of events and visits, capitalise on the time and expertise available among older people, and seek partnerships with like-minded organisations such as the WEA.

The importance of a society building up, caring for and promoting a collection of local history materials was stressed; again Nottinghamshire provided an example of a short course for members on 'Making the Most of Your Local History Collection' which had proved successful in attracting members, and catching the attention of local media. It was important to keep such collections in the public eye through media contacts, and through specially arranged events.

A number of BALH awards were made, for ‘personal achievement’, for a society newsletter (winner: Eastbourne Local History Society) and for research and publication; among the last were Chris Hall, for ‘Class distinction, democracy and proper drains: how Witney was civilised’ (*Oxfordshire Local History* vol. 8 no. 4, autumn 2009).

Later in the day Dr. Rowena E. Archer, Fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford, delivered the annual lecture: *Eviscerating, Embalming & Boiling: medieval funeral practices*, a subject relevant to the study of local history, she pointed out, because of the importance of *wills* in local history research and, of course, the considerable number of surviving monuments and relics of monarchs and others whose wills frequently included detailed instructions about the disposal of their human remains – in many cases these finished up divided between locations – bones in one tomb, heart in another.

*Information about BAHL’s programme and publications at: [www.balh.co.uk](http://www.balh.co.uk).*  
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