

Wargrave Local History Society

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Historical Issues Local Historians Might Address

The Wargrave Local History Society welcomed Professor Ted Collins, the President of the Berkshire Local History Association. He began by exploring the relationship between national history and local history. Some historians might think of local history as 'national history writ small', but there are also differences in approach. Local history had grown out of a 17th century interest in local customs, and developed in the 19th century to focus on three aspects - the church, the manor and the courts of justice, with research based on the use of documents such as manorial roles. The popularisation of local history, and its acceptance by professional historians, came from the 1930s and early post war era, with the founding of county record offices. Evening classes and day schools taught many 'novices' the rudiments of document research, and there was a proliferation of local history societies. Most of these were founded by what Professor Collins called 'enthusiastic amateurs', often with little professional help, and differed from the Victorian researchers in being more interested in social and economic history, in a less formal way, and of more recent date, compared to the 'Antiquarianism' of the previous century.

The term 'local' was a very subjective one, and could be taken to mean various types of historical unit, such as a household, a town, village, poor law union, county etc - and the 'community' did not necessarily fit to a local authority boundary, but might depend on the landscape, or the ownership of the land, and might be different 'units' for different parts of a village. Some counties seem to attract more loyalty than others - which might even correspond to the presence of a cricket team - particularly a successful one!

Local and national history seemed to touch most closely in areas of social and economic history. Professor Collins showed this as he looked at some traditional crafts and industries. Many traditional craft industries were pre industrial in origin, and so localised that to discover their place in the national history could only be done by a study of local history sources. Many such trades were rural, often cottage based 'home workers', such as steel faced edge tools, like scythes, made in just 10 villages in the country, needles made in Redditch, chain making in Cradley Heath, button making in east Dorset. Many such trades survived until the 3rd quarter of the 19th century, but most had gone by World War I, whilst most rural textile industries had disappeared by 1800.

In this general area, woodland areas such as the Chiltern beech woods, or the coppiced woodlands of the Kennet Valley gave rise to specific trades. In southern England, about 60% of this woodland has been lost since the war - an area that had been the 'great timber storehouse for England'. The national records often understate the importance of these woodland crafts - in the census, for example, most people who worked the woods in the winter would be listed in one of their alternative occupations, as they laboured on the farms in summertime. In the Chilterns, the beech wood had been used as highly valued fuel, but once coal began to be used, from the 18th century, this use fell, and so the trade changed to the only other suitable use for the timber - furniture making. These furniture trades were clustered around High Wycombe, but few now

survive. In the Kennet Valley, hazel stems were made into wattle (or woven) hurdles, thatching pegs, barrel hoops, broom handles etc. A good wood dealer would find a market for virtually every part of the tree that grew. These trades also started to decline from the 1880s, due to factory competition, foreign competition, changing tastes and styles, new materials etc. Most of the industry was dying by 1914, and dead by 1939.

The Society presented Professor Collins with a copy of *The Book of Wargrave* and *The Second Book of Wargrave* to mark his visit.
