

Greetings from the Director of the Institute of Historical Research

I am writing this autumn to VCH members, researchers and readers up and down the counties of England from our temporary headquarters overlooking the British Museum. After 63 years in our Senate House home the Institute of Historical Research is being refurbished and modernised, and must relocate for two years. We all said a fond farewell to the old Institute over the summer, packed up our library, offices, the VCH and its archive, and much else (including the odd dusty souvenir from the original IHR of 1921) and are now comfortably in place for the new academic year with a full programme of teaching, training, publishing and events ahead of us. One of the last memories of the 'old' Institute was a hugely enjoyable Marc Fitch lecture given in July by Professor Jeremy Black (Exeter). The VCH Central Office staff are now in the 'Tower' of Senate House – by no means as captive as it sounds – and from their eyrie can see across the square to the majestic Hotel Russell, another great national monument from 1899.

I am delighted to see the VCH in robust health.

VCH's digital portal has just been launched, new red books appeared this quarter from Oxfordshire and Wiltshire, and next June we will run a new summer school in Local History, aimed particularly at the needs of VCH volunteers.

Fundraising in hard times remains a challenge. I was pleased to attend the launch of the VCH Gloucestershire Trust in the summer, and also encouraged to see the new VCH Essex appeal getting off the ground. Here at the Institute we have a professional Development Office and they are always happy to offer advice on some dos and don'ts of fundraising.

Miles Taylor – October 2011



A view of the tower, Senate House, London.

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Keeping in touch

The VCH team in the IHR plays an important part in the IHR's mission to facilitate historical research through the help and encouragement we can give to the network of VCH researchers and supporters. VCH News, edited by my colleague Jessica Davies, has proved an excellent way to communicate VCH developments throughout the country, letting you know what research is underway, how volunteer projects are progressing, successes in fundraising and about events which reach out to a wider public. It helps give a full picture of the wide range of activities in which the VCH becomes involved, with the aim of drawing on the best local and national resources and the widest range of skills, and gives faces and voices to many of those involved.

Our websites too, relaunched at an enjoyable event on 10 October, have attracted new and very skilled volunteers who are now beginning to contribute to several county projects. This is a most encouraging development, which will enable us to reach more easily our goals of more pre-publication research on the web

and a continuing stream of 'big red books'.

In addition to the very effective Links campaign Jessica Davies is running (see page 8) and our rapidly growing band of influential Twitter followers, we are expanding and improving our contacts database to make sure the VCH is as widely known and supported as possible. If you would like to suggest names and contact details of those who might wish to be included in the VCH network – through regular email communications, web links, E-news or Tweets – please let us know or ask them to contact us via info@victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk. Rebecca Reed, the VCH Administrator we will be welcoming on 27 October, will be in charge of maintaining these contacts. We will be keeping very strictly to Data Protection rules so will be making sure everyone has a choice of whether to stay on our list or not.

Work on the database was initiated by our former VCH Administrator, Carlos Galviz-Lopez, who left the VCH at the end of September to become a research officer

with a major project, *Pumping Time – geographies of temporal infrastructure in fin-de-siècle Paris*, at Royal Holloway, University of London. You can see an example of Carlos's research interests concerning a rather different type of communication on page 5. Carlos contributed to the running of the VCH and IHR in many invaluable ways and we will miss both his enterprising administration and his wonderfully relaxed and cheerful manner.

We are keeping in touch with the network of county societies by working with the British Association for Local History, the Historical Association and the Royal Historical Society to help those organisations share their expertise. A second County Societies Symposium will be held at the IHR on 15 September 2012; it will provide a forum to discuss matters of mutual interest and best practice in communications, publication and research. We hope to include a wide range of county societies, including some of the county history networks which have been established quite recently. The symposium is by invitation (invitations have been issued to up to two representatives of each county's record or history society for RSVP by 30 November 2011), and details will be posted on the VCH website as they are confirmed, but if you would like further information, please get in touch with the IHR Events Officer, Manjeet Sambi manjeet.sambi@sas.ac.uk.

Elizabeth Williamson

October 2011

elizabeth.williamson@sas.ac.uk



Red books.

Latest Wiltshire volume launched

After the publication in July of the latest Wiltshire volume, *Wiltshire XVIII: Cricklade and Environs*, we're pleased to report a successful launch was held in Cricklade's United Church on 10 September. Following a warm welcome from David Tetlow, Chairman of the local town council and a keen local historian, John Bush, Lord Lieutenant of Wiltshire, formally presented a copy of the new volume to Jane Scott, leader of Wiltshire Council, our major partners on the project. Elizabeth Williamson, Executive Editor of the VCH, also gave the audience a brief history of VCH Wiltshire, describing its place at the heart of the modern VCH project, thanks in no small part to the pioneering efforts of Wiltshire historian and former Editor of the VCH, Ralph Pugh.

Following a break for refreshments and a chance to peruse the book itself, John Chandler gave a light-hearted talk

about the history of the area, with some more serious reflections on the importance of the VCH and its role in an uncertain future.

To mark the occasion the museums of Cricklade and Purton both had extended opening hours, and people were encouraged to visit both as part of the day of celebration. The event was well attended, and we were very pleased to sell several copies of the new volume on the day.

The historical societies of both Cricklade and Purton have expressed an interest in producing paperback offprints of their sections of the volume which would accompany the paperback history of Minety already published as a pre-print of the volume. We will in due course explore these options. An event is planned in the near future (date TBC) at the UWE Regional History Centre to celebrate both the publication of the volume and the appointment of John Chandler

as Editor of VCH Gloucestershire. Keep checking our webpage for details.

The focus now returns to our ongoing research for Volume 19, already underway, which will feature Longleat and the Deverill valley. Andy Foyle, an architectural historian who has recently published Pevsner guides for both Bristol and North Somerset, has been commissioned to write the history of Longleat house and park. This will be published as a paperback in the England's Past for Everyone series. Meanwhile, the histories of the parishes of Brixton Deverill, Hill Deverill and Compton Chamberlayne have all been written, and work is underway on the histories of Horningsham and Longbridge Deverill. This volume will also include the parishes of Monkton Deverill and Kingston Deverill.

Alex Craven
VCH Wiltshire

From left to right: Dr John Chandler, VCH Wiltshire Consultant Editor; Mr Chris Atkins, town crier of Cricklade; Mrs Vicky Landell-Mills, Chairman of the VCH Wiltshire County Appeal Trust; Mr John Bush OBE, Lord Lieutenant of Wiltshire; Mrs Jane Scott OBE, leader of Wiltshire Council; Mr David Tetlow, Chairman of Cricklade Town Council; Dr Virginia Bainbridge, VCH Wiltshire County Editor.





Locality and Region seminar Autumn 2011 programme

Venue:

Stewart House - please note the change of venue due to IHR refurbishment.

Time:

Tuesday, 5.15pm

25 October Architect-Surveyors as designers of speculative housing in London: the Case of Norfolk & Prior, 1893–1923.

David Kroll

8 November The manor court of Danby: medieval or modern?

Gillian Cookson

22 November Lordship, the geld and the peasantry in the West Midlands in the 11th century.

Andrew Wareham

24 November William Andrews Nesfield and the Origins of the Landscape Architect.

Nina Antonetti

6 December The Great Fire of Westminster, 1834.

Caroline Shenton

For the complete programme 2011/2012 please see our website

www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/learning/seminar

This seminar welcomes all those who are interested in the relationship between local and national history and who wish to share ideas, viewpoints and work in progress. It seeks to make an original contribution to local and regional history by drawing upon the long-established national resources of the VCH and co-operating with participants from universities, record offices, local history societies and heritage organisations, as well as with those engaged in independent research. If you would like to join our mailing list, please contact: elizabeth.williamson@sas.ac.uk.

Cornwall VCH: Farewell to Coral and hello to Elaine

We send our best wishes and thanks to Coral Pepper who, after many years of dedication to the VCH, retired in the summer from her position as Administrator for VCH Cornwall. Coral has been replaced by Elaine Henderson...

English literature is my first love and, after university, I worked as an Adult Education tutor in literature for several years while studying for an MPhil degree, following which I went into publishing. Over the years

I progressed from editorial assistant and proof reader to editor, compiler and project manager of titles in the popular reference field, working mainly as a freelancer. I have a lifelong interest in history, particularly in the minutiae of ordinary people's lives, and when I discovered that the Victoria County History project was active in Cornwall, I immediately felt I wanted to become involved. I hope that I will be able to contribute my skills and experience to the challenging new

projects that are in line for VCH Cornwall.

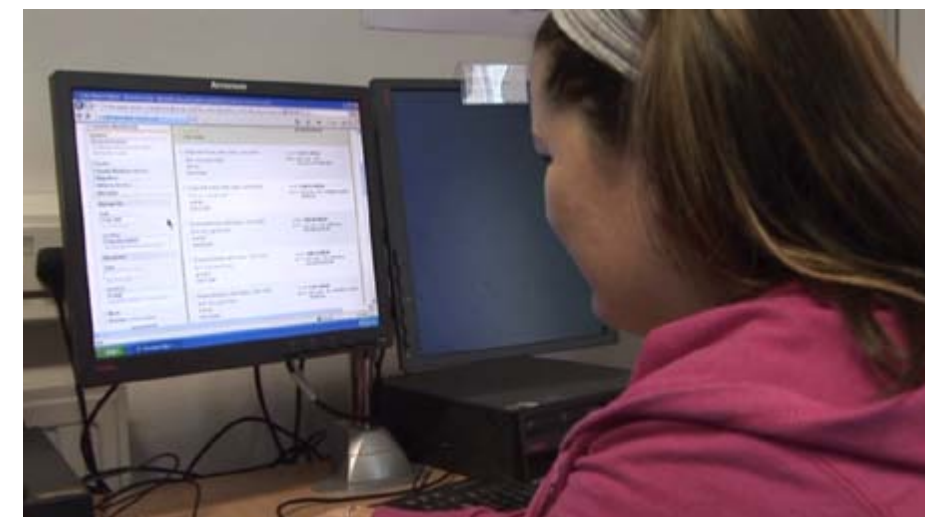
To learn more about VCH Cornwall please see our website www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/cornwall

Somerset's M People

Somerset Heritage Learning and Somerset Youth Services worked together to ensure that young people had their say in the developments for the new Museum of Somerset and Somerset Heritage Centre. Fifteen young people aged 12 to 20 years from across Somerset came together over three and a half years and contributed ideas, information and opinions on the proposals. Their comments shaped the direction of many plans.

They were known as the M People and visited a number of heritage sites and worked on many activities including film making. As part of the consultation around the SHC development they explored what an archive does. Knowing that the archive helps people to find out about their family history, the young people secured Youth Opportunity Fund money to research their own family histories.

We worked directly with the young people to help them find out about research routes and how to interpret the information they found. We worked on 20th-century family history



One of Somerset's M People researching her ancestry online.

in the computer suite at Hestercombe House on the outskirts of Taunton using online resources such as birth, marriage and death records and medal records. The young people came from a variety of backgrounds and for some it was a challenging, but still a valuable experience. A few knew very little about their family history but others were able to get back to the census records and learn more about their roots. Some were able to contact grandparents for help.

Many of the young people wanted to visit places connected with their family or went to interview their grandparents, especially maternal grandmothers,

'nans', who are clearly very important people in their lives. Many had to face traumatic incidents in their family history but were able to talk about them. We worked with the Engine Room in Bridgwater to create a film of their journey through the project, which was recorded on DVD and shown at a party to celebrate the end of the project.

Helen Mansfield
Heritage Learning Officer

Mary Siraut
VCH Somerset

To learn more about VCH work in Somerset see:
www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/somerset



Explore Westminster Road semaphore

By the 1860s, railway signal boxes had become one of the most conspicuous structures of the rapidly changing landscape of Victorian London. Their size reflected the scale of incoming and outgoing flows of goods and people, affecting not only railways, but also the river Thames, canals and key thoroughfares. The regulation of these flows concerned accommodating their constant growth as well as securing the safety of connections across several modes of transport. Late in 1868, Saxby and Farmer, railway signal engineers of the London Brighton and South Coast railway, built a composite of 'semaphore signals and coloured lights [...] to regulate the street traffic'. The semaphore was erected at the intersection opposite Palace Yard of the newly rebuilt Houses of Parliament. It consisted of a pillar fitted with three arms facing Bridge Street, Great George Street and Parliament Street that were operated by a constable. The experiment was successful if short-lived. A series of gas explosions early in January 1869 caused by a leak in one of the mains underneath the pavement injured the constable on duty raising doubts about the mechanism's safety¹. The experiment was abandoned and revived once the first electric signals made their appearance in

¹ For a brief report on the gas explosions see 'Westminster Street Semaphore Signals', *The Times*, 6 January 1869, 10. For a detailed description of the semaphore, see 'The Perils of the Streets.-A Novelty in Signals', *The Illustrated Police News*, 12 December 1868.



A police notice street crossing signals.

the 1920s.

The proponent of the street semaphore was John Peake Knight, at the time traffic superintendent of the South Eastern Railway. Knight's idea, rather than creating new layers for continuous traffic, such as the increasingly convoluted network of underground and overground railways that had been built by the late 1860s, relied on directing flows at street intersections by introducing intervals for pedestrian crossings in order to secure a 'regular stream of traffic' along busy roads. During the hearings of the Select Committee on the London (City) Traffic Regulation Bill in 1866, Knight used the example of the Parisian sergeants de ville, as an illustration of the relative success of stricter rules for traffic and the consequent gains for the safer movement of pedestrians, horse-drawn vehicles and cart drivers.

The street semaphore encapsulated an innovative way

of looking at the circulation of people, animals and vehicles, which was based on Knight's long experience with railways and according to which flows could be regulated in terms of their speed and direction as well as their place within a route hierarchy, all three key features of how we understand modern road traffic today.

For a vivid impression of the ebb and flow of early 20th-century London streets see the four-minute clip 'Old London Street Scenes' (1903) available from the British Film Institute YouTube channel at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-5Ts_i164c

This article appears as an item on our Explore site. For more on this topic and others see: explore.englishpastforeveryone.org.uk/

Latest Oxfordshire volume launched

VCH Oxfordshire Volume 16, *Henley-on-Thames and Environs*, was formally launched on 1 October, at a gathering attended by over 100 friends and supporters. The event was hosted by the VCH Oxfordshire Trust (now the principal local funder) and by the Chairman of Oxfordshire County Council, Councillor Patrick Greene, who spoke of the Council's continuing relationship with the VCH. Other addresses were made by the Trust Chairman Dr Kate Tiller, the Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire Tim Stevenson (President of the VCH Oxfordshire Trust), and the former Director of the VCH, Professor John Beckett.

Through the kindness of the owners the launch was held

at Harpsden Court, one of the historic houses featured in the book. The house is a complex building of several periods, which began as a medieval manor house. The main event was in the large panelled hall, and guests were able to see some of the house's hidden medieval features and its 18th-century domed music room.

The new 375-page volume provides comprehensive coverage of Henley-on-Thames and of the surrounding Chiltern parishes of Bix, Harpsden, Rotherfield Greys, and Rotherfield Peppard. Famous now for its annual Regatta, Henley began as a planned medieval town and inland port shipping grain to

London, developing later into a coaching centre and (from the 19th century) up-market resort and commuting town. A substantial introduction sets the area in its historical and geographical context, and for the first time in an Oxfordshire VCH volume there is a section of full-colour photographs, supplementing the numerous maps and text illustrations. The book (ISBN 978 1 904356 38 7) is available from all good booksellers, or direct from Boydell & Brewer (www.boydellandbrewer.com).

Simon Townley
VCH Oxfordshire

From left to right: Dr John Beckett, former Director of the VCH; Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, Tim Stevenson; Dr Kate Tiller, Chairman of VCH Oxfordshire Trust; Cllr Patrick Greene, Chairman of Oxfordshire County Council; Dr Simon Townley, VCH Oxfordshire County Editor.





Log on, join in, make links...

The recently overhauled VCH website is gaining much interest and rapidly establishing itself as the 'go to' website for many in the local-history community. Over the next year we hope to encourage its roots to expand further by initiating a links campaign. The VCH has long enjoyed happy and fruitful relationships with many partner organisations in both formal and informal capacities. By mounting a targeted links campaign we plan to raise the profile of our own work and help support the work of other similar projects. A links campaign needs much planning and preparation time but if successful can really help to improve search engine optimisation and spread the word about our activities too.

Common types of links are:

- Reciprocal
- Resource
- Forum
- Blog
- Directory

Over the next few months the VCH is concentrating on the first type. Usually found between two websites (for example between VCH and BALH), a reciprocal link

helps to improve both websites' rankings in search engines such as Google. It also helps to target visitors and try to control traffic to our site. The time-consuming part of a links campaign can be researching specific types of links which would be relevant to us as an organisation, as Google clearly state, 'quantity, quality, and relevance of links count towards your rating' (Google Webmaster Central). In fact linking to non-relevant sites can actually affect your Google rating negatively. Once links have been established they should be monitored to ensure they are still current and some research needs to continue to foster more links from newer websites and organisations.

And what does our website offer for potential link partners? We feel that the revamped VCH website offers our users a wealth of well-researched and attractively-presented information with features such as:

- information about us as an organisation
- news of research projects both current and completed
- draft text
- quick access to digitised

- volumes
- parish index search function
- resources for teachers, researchers and students
- guides to writing for the VCH and our paperback project EPE
- news of events both centrally-based and around the counties
- VCH Twitter feed updates

Since our soft launch in the spring these features have helped us to increase the number of visitors to our site, meaning that organisations which link to us can hope also to reap the benefit of these developments. Underpinning these technological advances is the VCH's guarantee of high-quality scholarly research and writing which is a common thread found in all our varied activities.

As we are unique in what we do, our published output (both print and online) is in demand internationally as well as nationally. Therefore any organisation who chooses to link to us may feel the benefit of not just higher visitor numbers but a growth in visits from around the globe and from those engaged in serious historical research who may add your site to their favourites.

The VCH Publications Manager will begin to contact organisations over the summer to establish reciprocal links with them. If you would like your organisation's website to share links with us then please do get in touch with a member of staff at central office or email the Publications Manager via info@victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk



The VCH homepage.

Novel approaches: 17-18 November

The relationship between academic history and historical fiction is a subject of great interest to historians. Major academic conferences, for example the American Historical Association gathering last January and the Leeds Medieval Congress this July, have included papers and sessions on the subject, and they are proving among the most lively and well attended.

There are numerous examples of historians who have successfully moved into the sphere of fiction, and conversely of authors whose fiction is underpinned by rigorous research. The large and growing public interest in history in Britain takes in both historical fact and historical fiction. And it is clear that many historians were at least in part inspired

to pursue historical research by novels that they had read, or indeed are currently either planning to write or are writing their own works of fiction.

'Novel approaches' seeks to explore this phenomenon. It brings together a wide range of speakers, including academic and public historians, authors and publishers. They will be examining such questions as: Why have historical novels become 'respectable', and why anecdotally are historians being encouraged to write them? What is the difference between historical fiction and academic history, and how rigid are the boundaries between the two? How good are readers at differentiating between 'fact' and 'fiction' and how much does it matter if they don't?

Does the success of historical fiction benefit or threaten academic history, and what can literary authors and academics learn from each other?

For more information, the programme or bookings please see the IHR's website:

<http://www.history.ac.uk/historical-fiction>



@VCH_London

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Future editions

If you would like to contribute to future editions we would be happy to hear from you. We are also able to advertise your event from local talks to book launches and everything in between. Please contact the Publications Manager: jessica.davies@sas.ac.uk in the first instance.