

# A new look at local-history groups

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IN HAMPSHIRE and elsewhere, many local voluntary organisations are currently engaged in ‘preserving and celebrating the past’. For most, archives are a key resource, whether the group is focused on local history, heritage, amenity, family history or are just ‘friends of’ some local treasure. Such organisations are the bedrock of the Hampshire Archives Trust (HAT). They define the constituency that HAT serves and, in turn, nourish it.

Rarely has the structure and function of such groups been subjected to any kind of analysis, and yet, it can be argued, in the midst of a galloping digital revolution there has never been a greater need to examine how they work and how they might change. This article, which comes from a close cooperation between HAT and the Local History Section of the Hampshire Field Club, is an attempt to make a start in this direction. Its purpose is to spark discussion of the role of local history groups (LHGs) and similar organisations; how better to serve them; how they might embrace digital opportunities and play more than a purely ‘local’ role; and to serve as the springboard for further articles based on real-life examples.

Every LHG has a slightly different history, but it seems that no systematic studies have been undertaken. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that LHGs tend to start with either a single individual, or a very small group of people with similar interests. The words ‘local history’ may indicate an interest in researching the history of the locality, or a local group with an interest in history, not primarily local! And the first sense may unintentionally morph into the other through a lack of individuals who carry out research.

LHGs often stem from the enthusiasm of a single person to collect everything they can about the place where they live and may have been born. An appropriate term is ‘the local squirrel’ and such people are an immense asset in the initial stirrings of many an LHG. They may not be well organised, their sources may need firming up, and they rarely manage to catalogue their collections, but they are invaluable to others, who turn their collection into an archive.

Often this next generation of local historians are newcomers to the area – and their relative ignorance is turned to good value by sorting out fact from ‘fake history’. The newcomer, often retired or nearly so, may know little about the place they have moved to, but is determined to find out. They often have professional skills that can be effectively employed in producing publications, organising talks and exhibitions and developing digital products. Some of the recent websites of LHGs are extremely accomplished.

An LHG often emerges from an initiative to support a local feature, such as a threatened building, an industrial site or a museum. These generally start with an essentially social impetus, with coffee mornings, wine tastings and the like. But after a while some members may decide to research the subject in question, leading to talks, exhibitions and similar events. Such groups may come about because of a key anniversary, highlighting events that occurred at a particular time – from the relatively recent to the distant past.

The nature of a given LHG involves major decisions, though these are often not taken consciously. For example, should it ‘record the present for the future’? Equally, should it cover archaeology, which has huge implications in terms of general

direction and involves increasingly complex skills, which require special training. Once a group has started it may develop in a variety of ways. It may focus more on social events, often with charitable aims, perhaps closely allied with the parish council or local church. Despite attempts to lure younger people, almost all LHGs have a membership at or beyond the age of retirement!

It may sound counter-intuitive, but a few LHGs get on perfectly well with virtually no members. This is a consequence of the fact that most are driven by two compelling and competing forces. One directs them to inform, amuse and divert the local community. The other regards them as vehicles for research – often providing a rare taste of academia in otherwise isolated or rural settings.

Whatever form they take, it will almost certainly be the case that, like most voluntary bodies, they are energised and managed by a handful of people. And there are often tensions between those who want to build up a membership, hold meetings and engage in the business of collecting subscriptions, booking venues and associated administrative tasks, and those who prefer to delve into the archives, write articles and mount exhibitions.

Occasionally, after a season of talks and other events – often for a sizeable membership that prefers to sit back and let it happen – the core members of an LHG yearn for a small number of genuinely active members! Thus is born the LHG *sans* members!

Some small-membership LHGs tend to work project by project, perhaps drawing in people with specialist knowledge or expertise as required (such as the owner of the ‘big house’ or a prominent farmer) and working to produce a tangible output from the exercise. Talks and other events may be held from time to time, either with free entrance or a nominal pay-at-the-door fee.

People join LHGs for all sorts of reasons. They may come from a family long established in the place. They may wish to enrich their leisure time. They may have professional interests to contribute. Or, like many of us, they are just interested in knowing how the place where they live developed and in understanding its built environment and social history.

Whatever style an LHG develops, it is sure to have its ‘ups and downs’, as key individuals come and go, or interest waxes and wanes in the events it holds. A careful look at the history of LHGs might determine certain triggers that favoured them: the rise of education, the vogue for celebrating anniversaries, the camera and most recently the digital age have all had profound effects on people’s leisure time, in LHGs as in all other areas. Some LHGs fail because of personal disputes, when enthusiasm vies with egoism!

There are many different models of LHGs, all of which in their various ways provide a focus for those with an interest in the history of their community. Activities, which in various combinations may feature, include:

Archival research – Archaeology – Publications – Oral history – Website – Online catalogue – Digitised archive – Talks – Exhibitions – Local museum – Visits – Information boards – Recording the present – Social events (walks, parties, picnics, quiz nights) – Planning watch (conservation of the built environment) – Heritage support (e.g. volunteering to staff a grand house open to the public) – Fundraising (either for itself or for charity) – Educational initiatives targeted at the young and old.

Most LHGs incorporate archival research, publication, talks, exhibitions and social events. Research generally leads to some form of output, often initially an

exhibition and later a publication. This signals the existence of the LHG and often leads to new members. Moreover, it often encourages someone in the locality to donate a collection of 'stuff in the loft' that they have long wanted to 'get rid of'! Little by little begins the seemingly endless process of accumulating as much material as possible about the locality – documents, maps, artefacts, photographs, film, sound recordings and increasingly digital resources.

Although it seems that every LHG has its own style, there are some general principles that any LHG could usefully work towards as it develops. However vigorously these are pursued, most successful groups will probably thrive or otherwise because of the work of a small core of people who can work together to do what, after all, should be fun and personally rewarding. Principles which might usefully be considered are that a LHG should:

1. Cover a given locality, not necessarily too rigidly defined.
2. Have a constitution, a committee and accounts properly audited.
3. Undertake research and publication, with due regard for accuracy and citation of sources.
4. Collect all manner of relevant historical resources, including sound recordings (oral history), film and video, with a view in the longer term to making them available online.
5. Either set up, catalogue and maintain a secure physical archive, or arrange with a professional body to store and make available the holdings.
6. Embrace the digital age, especially in providing a website and using social media, and
7. Gather contemporary material of all sorts for future historians.
8. Maintain a reasonable balance between, on the one hand, research and publication, and, on the other, providing a social focus and serving the community.
9. Seek contacts with other similar groups in its area, and connect with county-wide organisations, with a view to sharing experience and information.
10. Be aware of sources of funding and make appropriate applications.

The views presented in this article are based on the personal experience of its authors, which may not reflect the wider experience of readers. It is hoped that it will initiate discussions which benefit all LHGs, new and old, and their members. In future work it is intended to examine a number of LHGs in Hampshire, including those few which have survived for a very long time, as well as others which have fallen on hard times or even disappeared, and the few which were later reborn.

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