

SOURCES FOR LOCAL HISTORY IN THE NATIONAL COLLECTIONS

BEING PART OF AN ADDRESS TO A SUMMER SCHOOL IN LOCAL HISTORY,
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At the outset it is necessary to be clear about the kind of local history with which we are concerned and what qualities a good local historian should possess. I am happy to introduce an independent witness, H. P. R. Finberg, the only professor of local history known to me (at Leicester University in England) who has said: 'In sketching the ideal attributes of our historian we have specified ripe scholarship, wide reading, wider sympathies, and sturdy legs. It is much to ask but to these requirements let us add one more. The local historian should be no stranger to the art of composition. . .'¹ In my own view he should know something of historical techniques, possess all the desirable clerical virtues of accuracy and orderliness, be systematic and ideally have the power of total recall over his material the interrelationships of which will immediately work themselves out in his mind as soon as a new fact is brought to light!! He should also be a historical geographer, a sociologist and a psychologist with a broadly based understanding of human motives and failings; he should have a sense of community and have worked with people in a political activity of however humble a character. If experience as a Captain of the Hampshire Grenadiers was not useless to the historian of the Roman Empire the local chronicler who has even held office in a ratepayers' organisation or been a minor civil servant—and paraphrasing Gibbon 'the listener may smile'—will have some effective background in interpreting his material. It is also an advantage if he has a dispassionate but kindly irreverence, and finally, in paraphrase of numerous scriptural injunctions: 'He who hath eyes will see' which is really my basic theme. It is not simply a matter of a degree in history, which can be a limitation, but of some social maturity for which even some academic staff at times have to struggle.

In the production of a local history there are normally three stages: research, writing and publication. Perhaps it was wise of the Seminar organisers to eschew publication although one is reminded of the final line in Eliot's *East Coker*: 'In my end is my beginning'. The prospects of publication, probably the fact that the work may have been commissioned—and is required by a specific date—will have a crucial effect on earlier stages of research. In this paper we shall assume that publication is intended and that the researcher is not deceiving himself by refusing to admit that such a gross objective as some sort of book is in mind, or, alternatively, that he is a not uncommon type with whom one is much