

'LOCAL HISTORY' AND THE CULTURE OF THE
MIDDLE CLASSES IN NORTH-WEST ENGLAND,
c. 1840–1900

Alan J. Kidd

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There are thousands of cyclists who leave Lancashire for Cheshire any fine summer's day. They visit a country studded with fine works of art, solemn temples embellished with monuments of our fathers, of beautiful architecture, sculpture, and carving, all hallowed by the long associations of history. This interest and this beauty . . . seems lost to the modern tourist. Wisdom may cry aloud though none regardeth her. Turn in to this old church where in its quiet shade we may rest and dream awhile. Here are the tombs of the Crusaders. Here are the effigies of men who fell in the fierce slaughter on Flodden. Here are the memorials of those who fought the death-grip battles with France and Spain. And nearer still, here are . . . the actual weapons of Cavalier and Roundhead, when our present liberties and peace were fought for and ensured . . . Is this nothing to you, oh all ye that pass by? And the hurrying cyclist gasps—'Which is the best pub for a shandygaff?'

The young, and possibly working-class, tourists Fletcher Moss had in mind were the latest in a long line of 'excursionists' to explore the rural hinterland of Liverpool, Manchester, and the other trading and industrial towns of the North-West. The city dweller's (re)discovery of the countryside earlier in the nineteenth century had drawn the Manchester 'cottentot' and the Liverpool merchant away from their houses of business and towards the history and heritage of their region. The increased

1 Fletcher Moss, *Pilgrimages to old homes*, I (Manchester, 1901), pp. viii–ix.

possibilities of travel in the railway age had done much to stimulate this activity.² In part it had been given shape by a habit of study and learning expressed through bodies such as the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, and the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society, of which Fletcher Moss was a member. By the time Moss began his series of *Pilgrimages to old homes* at the turn of the century, the antiquities of Lancashire and Cheshire had provided a focus of cultural interest for the educated middle classes for over fifty years.

An awareness of their place in history was a characteristic of the culture of the Victorians and a vital intellectual influence throughout the nineteenth century. Despite living in an age which had witnessed unprecedented change in technology and transport, industry and urban growth, social and political institutions and ideas, the Victorians approached the past with a reverence and respect only possible because they no longer felt threatened by it. The social as well as technological processes known as the industrial revolution had fractured, though not destroyed, continuity with the past. However, its impact caused concern at the loss of what was coming to be seen as the nation's 'traditional heritage'. This found reflection in a number of ways, from the folklorists' concern to record the decaying customs of popular culture to the architectural societies which promoted the preservation of the Gothic. What we now call local history arose in this climate. The purpose here is to explore, not so much the development of local history as an academic study in the nineteenth century, but more its role in the cultural experience of the middle classes.

'Local history' was arguably a central feature of nineteenth-century middle-class culture and has been unjustly neglected by historians. It found its chief expression through the existence of a number of voluntary societies, most of which were locally organized.³ The voluntary societies were a central

2 See, for example, R. N. Dore, 'Manchester's discovery of Cheshire: excursionism and commuting in the nineteenth century', *T.L.C.A.S.*, LXXXII (1983), pp. 1-21.

3 Full lists of these societies can be found in P. Levine, *The amateur and the professional: antiquarians, historians and archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838-1886* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 179-83.

element in Victorian culture. There were innumerable associations for various purposes formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ranging across the social classes although rarely between them. A characteristic working-class form was the friendly society; perhaps the definitive middle-class version was the charitable society. To describe the voluntary associations and networks of this period is virtually to describe civil society itself.⁴ Moreover, voluntary societies were essential to the construction of an identity for the nineteenth-century middle class. The religious bodies, missionary societies, health and welfare organizations, occupational associations, scientific societies, educational charities, and learned societies, as well as the myriad of individual voluntary bodies which defy classification, together expressed a culture of voluntarism that was characteristic of a society in which the State was often regarded with suspicion. The various medical, poor relief, and education charities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are examples of voluntary effort which subsequently has been replaced by or subsumed under statutory provision. However, the functions of middle-class involvement in voluntary activity in the nineteenth century were of intra- as well as inter-class significance. In other words whilst much voluntary provision faced outwards towards the rest of society and its perceived needs, much of it also or exclusively attended to the cultural requirements of the middle classes themselves. The learned societies founded in the northern industrial towns are a case in point.

The various learned societies formed from the later eighteenth century onwards contributed directly to the creation of a self-image that was deemed appropriate to the new urban élites of the growing towns and cities of the provinces. The Literary and Philosophical societies are the prime example of such institutions. Founded in several provincial towns from the 1780s (e.g. Liverpool 1779–83 and 1812, Manchester 1781, Sheffield 1822), it was through these

4 R. J. Morris, 'Clubs, societies and associations', in *The Cambridge social history of Britain, 1750–1950*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (3 vols, Cambridge, 1990), III, pp. 395–430.

societies that 'science was built into middle-class and urban élite identity as part of a bid for legitimacy and power'.⁵ But it is not only the natural sciences that have been cast in this role. As well as the 'natural knowledge' of the Literary and Philosophical societies movement, the social science of the statistical societies and the art collections and exhibitions of bodies such as the Manchester Royal Institution have been included by some historians as contributing to the cultural formation of the middle-class élite.⁶ This array of intellectual and aesthetic endeavours was active in the construction of a cultural identity for northern provincial urban élites eager to distinguish themselves from metropolitan and aristocratic culture.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the attention given to the societies of the first phase of middle-class cultural formation in the half century or so following 1780, little credit has been given to the plethora of learned societies formed from the 1840s onwards. Many of these were concerned less with the study of the sciences and society of industrialism and more with the preservation of knowledge about the pre-industrial past. The middle decades of the nineteenth century constituted something of a 'golden age' for the serious amateur local historian. The professionals had not yet claimed this territory and the preservation of the past seemed the responsibility of the Victorian propertied classes.

Following the formation of the British Archaeological Association in 1844, numerous county archaeological societies were founded. Philippa Levine has described the origins and development of the three overlapping communities of antiquarianism, archaeology, and history and the extent to which these terms were interchangeable for much of the

5 Ibid., p. 410.

6 For example, on the role of art see *The culture of capital: art, power and the nineteenth-century middle class*, ed. J. Wolff and J. Seed (Manchester, 1988); R. Bud, 'The Royal Manchester Institution', in *Artisan to graduate: essays to commemorate the foundation of the Manchester Mechanics Institution, now U.M.I.S.T.*, ed. D. S. L. Cardwell (Manchester, 1974); U. Finke, 'The Art Treasures Exhibition', in *Art and architecture in Victorian Manchester*, ed. J. Archer (Manchester, 1986); C. P. Darcy, *The encouragement of the fine arts in Lancashire, 1760-1860* (C.S., 3rd ser., XXIV, 1976).

nineteenth century.⁷ But archaeological, antiquarian, and historical societies were formed not only in ancient towns and boroughs but also in the industrial towns of the Midlands and North (notably Birmingham, Bradford, Huddersfield, Manchester, Liverpool, and Sheffield). They formed part of a national movement of predominantly middle-class amateur scholars and enthusiasts. It could be argued that historical knowledge should join natural knowledge, social knowledge, and art as learned collective pursuits constitutive of middle-class culture in the nineteenth-century provincial city.

The study of these learned societies of the 'golden age' of amateur archaeology and history not only throws light on the Victorian obsession with the past but also exemplifies the vibrancy of provincial as opposed to metropolitan culture. It highlights the relationship of region to nation in an age when civic pride and local identities were more marked than today. A local history community grew up in the North-West based upon the existence of certain key societies. These were broadly of two types. Firstly there were the printing clubs. Members received club publications in return for their annual subscription. Printing clubs such as the Surtees Society, founded in Durham in 1834, and the Camden Society of 1838 established the tradition. The Chetham Society in Manchester followed suit in 1843.⁸ Later, the Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire was founded in 1878 and the Lancashire Parish Register Society in 1898. The Chetham Society, founded for the publication of 'Remains Historical and Literary Connected with the Palatine Counties of Lancaster and Chester', shared with the other printing clubs of the 1830s and 1840s the desire to develop the private

7 Levine, *Amateur and professional*. By the 1880s the divisions between these 'communities' were becoming solidified by the advent of the university academic disciplines of history and archaeology, thus marginalizing antiquarianism as amateur and implicitly inferior. In this process local history itself became side-tracked by the professionals only to be taken up by them once again in the generation following the Second World War. See H. P. R. Finberg and V. H. T. Skipp, *Local history: objective and pursuit* (Newton Abbot, 1967), pp. 1-3.

8 For the Chetham Society see A. G. Crosby, 'A Society with no equal': the Chetham Society, 1843-1993 (C.S., 3rd ser., XXXVII, 1993).

printing of historical records in the wake of the poor quality and eventual demise of the Record Commission publications and the uncertain future of public records despite the passage of the Public Record Office Act of 1838.⁹

Secondly, there were the 'social' or 'associational' societies with their meetings, excursions, and events as well as their published transactions. These offered a vastly different experience to the comparative passivity of printing club membership. The two most notable of such societies in the North-West were the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, founded in Liverpool, and the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society, formed in Manchester. Although each was based in a single city, like the Chetham Society, they were self-consciously regional in scope. Other county societies in the vicinity included the Chester Architectural, Archaeological, and Historic Society of 1849, the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society of 1866, and the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society of 1878. Between 1843 and the end of the century the existence of these and other related organizations encouraged the growth of a 'local history culture' in the North-West.

The broad and overlapping intellectual interests of the educated middle classes found expression in the expansive remit of the Historic Society, which at its foundation in 1848 was determined to avoid any charge of 'narrowness'. In his inaugural address, the Rev. Abraham Hume identified the society's 'operations' as 'comprehensive'. It was not solely a documentary, archaeological, genealogical, or topographical society, but all of these, indeed the purpose was to cover 'every subject of historic interest in a given locality'.¹⁰ In the event the Historic Society's 'operations' proved to be much more comprehensive than even this. The antiquarian and historical principles of 1848 were subsumed in the early 1850s within a broader intellectual base reflecting the broader interests of the educated middle classes as well the particular circumstances of

9 F. J. Levy, 'The founding of the Camden Society', *Victorian Studies*, VII (1964), pp. 295-305.

10 *T.H.S.L.C.*, I (1848-9), p. 7.

Liverpool's mid-century cultural institutions.¹¹ Thus through the 1850s to the end of the 1870s, the Historic Society provided a base for lectures on a wide variety of subjects, not always with a regional focus, and divided broadly into sections archaeological, scientific, and literary. The society reached a low ebb in the late 1870s, faced with a declining membership and a loss of direction, but it rediscovered both by reasserting its antiquarian and historical roots. From 1879 onwards under the presidency of T. Glazebrook Rylands, the Historic Society approximated more to the model of a county historical society. In its papers it sought to offer members the best in antiquarian and historical studies and its ambitions were seriously academic. The publication of papers in the annual *Transactions* was accompanied by the continued accumulation of artefacts and museum items. Since 1860 this collection had been on permanent loan to the Liverpool Public Library.¹² In addition, and characteristic of the county societies, the Historic Society had built up its own library and its bibliographical functions were further served by the inclusion in its published proceedings of the Congress of Archaeological Societies' annual index of publications. Thus the Historic Society reflected an increasing specialization within intellectual culture as the century progressed. Its concern for academic credibility was also responsible for its decidedly sober approach to its work, involving at times an almost purist predilection for scholarly papers delivered in sombre surroundings. In this it differed markedly from the approach of the Manchester-based Antiquarian Society which from the outset in 1883 concentrated on events and excursions which took its members out of the city to visit places of archaeological and historical interest.

Founded a generation later than its Liverpool counterpart, the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society marked the

- 11 It is not the intention here to provide a history of any of the societies discussed. Details of the development of the Historic Society may be found in Bertram B. B. Benas, 'Centenary of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire: a retrospect', *T.H.S.L.C.*, supplement to volume C (1950); and J. Lea, 'The Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire', *University of Lancaster Regional Bulletin*, III (11) (1974), pp. 4-6.
- 12 It was destroyed by enemy bombs in 1941.

culmination of the era of amateur local history in Manchester and the North-West.¹³ In addressing the society at a *conversazione* to commemorate its formation, the society's president, the eminent geologist Professor Boyd Dawkins, referred to what he called the 'kindred associations' which had preceded it. He identified not only the Chetham, the Historic, and the Chester Archaeological societies but also the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, the short-lived Philological and Bibliographical societies, and the even more ephemeral Lancashire Antiquarian Society of 1829, which had issued only a single volume of transactions.¹⁴ Dawkins was able to cast the net widely because the realm of antiquarianism and the methods of the antiquary themselves were broadly conceived. In theory the antiquarian was interested in all aspects of the human past, generally circumscribed only by the passion for collecting, classifying, and describing objects. By definition antiquarian objects were objects studied by the antiquarian, from Phoenician vases to flint tools, from Roman coins to ecclesiastical architecture, from literary 'remains' to geological 'remains'.

Eclecticism remained a hallmark of much in antiquarian studies, as did the desire of 'leisured gentlemen' to possess antiquarian curios which could be displayed at home or at society soirées. However, the day of dilettantism in local studies, so often satirized in the figure of the 'antiquary' from Pope's 'To future ages may thy dulness last/As thou preserv'st the dulness of the past', and Scott's amiable but gullible Jonathan Oldbuck, to the hilarious generalities of the Pickwick Club, was slowly passing.¹⁵ There is good reason to adapt Kargon's analysis of the development of the scientific community in Manchester to that of the local history societies across the North-West. Kargon argues that the 1840s saw the emergence of a class of 'devotees' of science who saw it as their calling, rather than the less committed, more

13 For the history of the Antiquarian Society see V. I. Tomlinson, 'The Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society, 1883-1983', *T.L.C.A.S.*, CXXXIII (1985), pp. 1-39.

14 *T.L.C.A.S.*, II (1884), p. 97.

15 Levine, *Amateur and professional*, p. 17.

'gentlemanly' cohort from the previous generation who often possessed wide-ranging interests. These devotees were still self-trained amateurs but rather than pursuing science as a form of moral and intellectual elevation or as a means of disseminating knowledge to the lower orders, they were far more concerned with contributions to knowledge as such.¹⁶ Levine argues that the antiquarian, historical, and archaeological societies of the Victorian period attracted a similar class of devotee, committed to extending the boundaries of historical knowledge for its own sake.¹⁷

In practice many leading antiquarians active in the North-West specialized in particular areas and saw themselves as serious scholars contributing to the development of human knowledge. They came from a variety of, mostly professional, occupations. The first council of the Antiquarian Society included two architects, a librarian, legal clerk, chemist, artist (wood engraver), cleric, university academic, university official, and a member of one of Liverpool's merchant families. The undoubted focus of many antiquarians was the locality, whether conceived narrowly to mean the village or town or more broadly to encompass county or even regional concerns. This was the antiquarianism which gave rise to local history. In reality Dawkins could have cast his net even wider in the search for 'kindred associations', for as well as the printing clubs and archaeological societies of mid-Victorian local history the activities and interests of the Antiquarian Society had their origins in the work of societies as disparate as the Manchester Literary Club, which had included numerous antiquarian papers in its early sessions plus an annual bibliography of locally published works, and the natural history societies of the Manchester district, especially the Field Naturalists' Society and the Scientific Students' Association.¹⁸

The contribution of the Field Naturalists' Society and the Scientific Students' Association suggests the attraction of scientific and antiquarian studies to the broader middle class.

16 R. H. Kargon, *Science in Victorian Manchester: enterprise and expertise* (Manchester, 1977), esp. pp. 31–5.

17 Levine, *Amateur and professional*, p. 7.

18 *T.L.C.A.S.*, LXXXIII (1985), pp. 6–8.

Each emphasized the sociability of cultivated leisure pursuits conducted in concert with others of like mind and generally of like social status. As well as the self-consciously serious work of the learned devotee, the excursions and soirées of the enthusiastic seeker after leisure and companionship as well as knowledge were part of the appeal of the natural history, antiquarian, and similar associational societies. The Field Naturalists' Society, founded in 1860, had as its stated purpose not to make 'recondite scientific inquiries and investigations . . . but to diffuse existing knowledge, to stimulate and assist beginners, and very specially to promote that kindly social companionship which renders the open air study of nature so delightful', hence the emphasis on excursions.¹⁹ The impact of Darwinian evolutionary theory served to undermine the natural history movement of the mid-Victorian era. One of the consequences of this was a move towards other outdoor studies as well as natural history. This was reflected in the renaming of the society in 1875 as the Manchester Field Naturalists' and Archaeologists' Society. A similar process took place in the Manchester Scientific Students' Association. This society, devoted to a broad range of scientific pursuits, including the geological and mechanical sciences, was formed after the meeting of the British Association in Manchester in 1861. By the 1870s the Association's excursions were including those of a clearly antiquarian character, and interest in the collection and display of antiquarian remains is evident in the exhibition by members of objects at the 'Coming of Age' soirée held by the Association in the Free Trade Hall in 1882. These included coins, prehistoric stone implements, arms and armour, and antique pottery as well as a selection of fossils, spiders, shells, engineering equipment, and working models of steam engines and pumps.²⁰

How far did the existence of such societies constitute a local history network? It is worth noting the extent to which society memberships overlapped. This is based less on a comparison of

19 *Manchester Field Naturalists' and Archaeologists' Society, Report and Proceedings for 1884*, p. 1.

20 Special report on the 'Coming of Age' soirée bound with *Manchester Scientific Students' Association, Reports and Proceedings, 1881-3* in M.C.L.

general memberships—which would draw on a broader base of middle-class supporters of local ventures and elevating pursuits and might not necessarily be local historians as such (this would be particularly true of the printing societies where nothing more might be required than the payment of an annual subscription)—than on the key figures, the members of the respective society councils. Of the fourteen members of the council of the Chetham Society in 1848–9, the year the Historic Society was founded, seven were either founder members of the latter, Liverpool-based, organization or were to join during its first three years. Three Chetham Society council members were also elected council members for the Historic in its first year. This cross-membership between societies, particularly significant at point of formation, continued over time. When the Record Society was founded in 1878, six of its thirteen council members and officials were members of the council of the Chetham Society in the same year. Five years later when the Antiquarian Society was formed its ten-strong council included members from the councils of the Chetham Society, the Record Society, and the Historic Society. Also represented was the Manchester Literary Club, with three members of the Antiquarian Society's first council.

The overlap in membership with the Manchester Literary Club is an interesting one, suggesting as it does a broader-based cultural community or the intersection of related branches in middle-class cultural life. Among the 263 members of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society in its first year, the overlap with the Literary Club (31 were members of both societies in 1883) was as significant as the overlap with the Historic Society (32 members of both). By comparison, joint membership of the Antiquarian Society and the nearby county archaeological societies was strikingly low, at four with the Derbyshire society and seven with the Chester society. Both geography and the narrow topographical interests of many in the field limited such inter-society membership. There were, however, notable society enthusiasts such as W. E. A. Axon, who in 1884 was a member of at least seven local societies: the Antiquarian, the Historic, the Field Naturalists, the Scientific Students, the Literary and Philosophical, the Literary Club, and the newly formed Manchester Geographical Society.

Many of these enthusiasts were avid antiquarian collectors of artefacts, manuscripts, and books. Joseph Mayer, a successful jeweller and silversmith and one of the founders of the Historic Society, built up his own private museum of 'Archeologia and Ethnology', which he described as a product of 'the intellectual love of bygone days and the honest worship of the dead'. In 1867, the year he presented his collection to the corporation of Liverpool, he expressed the hope that it might become the core of a 'School of advanced Archaeology' in his adopted home town.²¹ According to a later assessment, Mayer's collection gained 'a world-wide reputation due to many important and often unique objects contained therein . . . Egyptian and early Roman antiquities, medieval ivories, enamels, glass and illuminated manuscripts, very important pottery collections (both British and European) and Anglo-Saxon antiquities'.²² Others were similarly at work, although in most cases their collections remained private in character during their lifetimes only to be sold at auction after their deaths. An example is the library of the Manchester-born antiquarian and historian John Earwaker, sold posthumously in 1895. The auction catalogue ran to 2,321 items, including numerous manuscripts such as charters and deeds.²³

What of the broader memberships of the local history societies? A study of the council members and of published local historians will tell us only so much. The vast majority of members were not major antiquarian collectors, active archaeologists, or writers of local histories; they were not equipped to offer recondite assessments of the historical significance of this artefact or that monument. However, without their interest and enthusiasm, and especially without their subscriptions, the local history societies would have been very short-lived indeed. A notable feature of these societies is their class- and gender-based character. Although societies sometimes felt it necessary to obtain aristocratic or gentry

21 *T.H.S.L.C.*, N.S. VII (1866-7), pp. 3-4.

22 J. A. Clubb, 'The Public Museum of Liverpool', in *Handbook on Merseyside for the British Association, 1923*, pp. 151-2, cited in *T.H.S.L.C.*, supplement to vol. C (1950), p. 5.

23 *Manchester Faces and Places*, X (July 1895).

patronage, the vast bulk of the membership was middle-class. They provided its foot soldiers as well as its generals and gave the antiquarian and historical societies movement in the North-West its defining character. Generally speaking the working classes were excluded from the activities of these societies. The requirements of dress and comportment may have operated to mark out the social distinctions making cross-class involvement unlikely. It is a reasonable assumption that the subscription fee was fixed not only at a rate which would secure society finances (although few societies were ever secure in their finances) but at an amount which would make the social composition of membership suitably predictable. Thus the Chetham Society charged members an annual rate of £1 from its inception. The Historic Society's subscription was one guinea whilst membership of the Antiquarian Society required the initial payment of a 10s. 6d. 'entrance fee' as well as a subscription for the same amount. The annual subscription of about £1 for membership of a learned society (payable in advance) was well beyond the pockets of most working men.

There were few attempts to broaden the social base of historical knowledge. The Chester Architectural, Archaeological, and Historic Society was unusual in its ambition to reach out to the labouring classes. From the outset it established three categories of membership. Whilst full members paid the subscription of £1, 'associate members' could pay only 10s. per annum for use of the library and admittance to lectures and excursions; finally 'quarterly members' were entitled to free attendance at lectures and exhibitions (but not excursions or use of the library) for the sum of 4s. a year paid in four quarterly instalments. This was similar to the quarterly sums charged by the mechanics' institutes and was thought sufficiently low to attract 'that large class of young men who were engaged in the shops and offices of the city as well as . . . the industrious and intelligent artisan'.²⁴ However, there is little evidence that this category of membership affected the social balance of the Chester society so that it differed from any of the other more overtly

24 *J.C.A.S.*, I (1857), p. 11.

exclusive societies. Of the membership in 1857, 12.5 per cent were titled and 32.5 per cent were Church clerics. The predominance of their social superiors in the activities of these societies would of itself have been sufficient to deter those of humble rank, regardless of the affordability or otherwise of the subscription rate. Working men tended to form their own societies, focusing chiefly on their needs for social security (friendly societies) but also including learned subjects, the best example of which are those working-men botanists who formed their own natural history societies and who contributed much to knowledge of the flora of the textile districts.²⁵ But the collective study of local history remained a middle-class prerogative. As Philippa Levine notes, the evidence from Chester 'does little to dispel the image of antiquarianism as a pursuit of the socially confident'.²⁶

If the antiquarian world was class-specific was it also confined to the male middle classes? Could women join and become active in the work of the societies? At a time when the advanced education of women was considered unnecessary if not unnatural, were they also to be excluded from the amateur pursuit of historical knowledge? Those of us who are aware of the subordinate position of women in the nineteenth century will have assumed the answer to these questions to be in the negative. The theory of the public (male) sphere of business, politics, and public life, and the domestic (female) sphere of domesticity is a well known model of gender relations in the Victorian era. It has been seen as central to an understanding of middle-class ideology.²⁷ However, this was an ideal type against which behaviour was to be judged, and women could transcend its boundaries occasionally and indeed challenge them, as some did increasingly as the century drew to a close. One entry point for the respectable middle-class lady into the public sphere was the work of the

25 W. E. Axon, 'The artizan naturalists of Lancashire, III: list of societies', *Manchester City News*, 23 Jan. 1875; J. Percy, 'Scientists in humble life: the artisan naturalists of south Lancashire', *M.R.H.R.*, V (1) (1991), pp. 3-10.

26 Levine, *Amateur and professional*, pp. 56-7.

27 L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (London, 1987).

charitable society. Compassion for suffering and the care of the needy were considered female qualities and thus suitable grounds for women's work outside the home in the public sphere of voluntary charity. However, the female intellectual was not so favourably considered. To what extent was it possible for women to participate in the activities of respectable and learned bodies like the Historic and the Antiquarian and the county archaeological societies? There are two sources of evidence, the rules of membership to see if they could and the lists of members to see if they did.

The Chester Architectural, Archaeological, and Historic Society's rules were unusual in including a specific invitation to 'ladies' to become members; but this was not on the same terms as men. There was to be a special reduced subscription of 5s. a year which gave ladies the right to attend lectures, purchase the society's *Journal* 'at a moderate price', and present communications through the secretaries. However, such terms of membership denied access to the management of the society. According to the rules this was to rest solely with a council in part elected by £1 subscribers (the rest of the council comprised non-elected civic and clerical officials). Clearly some ladies responded to this invitation. For example, the membership list for 1857 includes thirty-one females (14 per cent) in a total of 217 names. One might have expected the proportion of women to rise as the century progressed, but this was not particularly evident. The membership list for 1895 identifies thirty-nine females, or 17 per cent of the total of 228 individual members. The Chester society's policy of a differential subscription for women may appear patronizing but at least it drew some women into the arena of local history. In the other local societies the place of the ladies was as members' guests on the occasional excursion. Although there was nothing in the rules of these societies to exclude women from membership, few took up the opportunity. In 1870 the Historic Society could count only two female members within its ranks. By 1893 this had risen to eleven, or 4 per cent of the individual membership of 287 (institutional memberships have been excluded in this calculation). The Antiquarian Society was little different. In 1893 its individual membership of 272 included only twenty-three women (8.5 per cent). What was the status of the women who joined?

They were occasionally wives of male members, but much more frequently were unmarried women, young daughters, or perhaps 'independent women' who may have found the constraints of married life inhibiting to their intellectual development and freedom of association.²⁸

What sort of activities did the 'local history' societies generate? Membership of a printing club generally implied no more than the payment of an annual subscription in the expectation that this would elicit the response of a regular supply of volumes. For the antiquarian this offered the prospect of periodic mental stimulus, but for many the rewards of membership may have been more prosaic. The publication of membership lists was a public display of cultural as well as social status, and the accumulation of bound volumes on the shelf a private affirmation of an intellectual curiosity suggestive of a mind which reached beyond the counting house or the private office (the hanging of appropriate pictures to decorate the walls served a similar purpose). Joining an associational society generally required a more active expression of involvement since these societies developed a range of activities in which members could participate. However, it must be said that each also held out the prospect of bound volumes of proceedings and transactions which might for some be the chief return for the subscription fee.

For those who took part in the activities of the associational societies what events usually comprised the society year? Although there were variations in the frequency and organization of activities between the societies, there were several elements which they all shared. Each society held regular meetings at which papers were read by members or invited guest speakers. At these meetings it was common for members to exhibit artefacts and for these to be the object of discussions which were either structured or informal in character. One of these gatherings would be the occasion for the annual general meeting at which the president or hon. sec. would present a report of the annual proceedings of the

28 See Martha Vicinus, *Independent women: work and community for single women, 1850-1920* (Chicago, 1985).

society. Most societies organized excursions to places of historic, archaeological, or architectural interest. These generally took place during the spring and summer months and often substituted for the regular meetings of society members. This often involved papers being read *in situ* as it were. The particular choice of destination reflected the intellectual focus of the particular society (archaeological societies, for example, were naturally more likely to organize expeditions to sites of ancient provenance) but also its self-designated geographical area. The need for county societies to achieve geographical coverage was especially true of those which flourished in the North-West with their dual county constituencies. Thus the members of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society visited various sites in the twin northern counties as a means of bringing the society to its members. This necessity also explains the Historic Society's decentralized pattern of organization, with its local committees and local secretaries, reflecting a concern to draw in supporters unable to attend meetings in Liverpool.

If we leave aside the intellectual ambitions of those who were active on the councils of the various societies and who were instrumental in their intellectual as well as administrative structures, how did the ordinary member experience society membership? It is not enough simply to state that members must have enjoyed the activities otherwise they would not have come. This is patently true, but more can be said. For example, in cultural terms the activities of these societies can be regarded as a series of experiences which had symbolic meaning for those who participated and perhaps for those who did not. The meetings and excursions were collective affirmations of identity. They enabled individuals to engage with others of similar rank who shared the same interests in associative acts which identified the individual not only with the pursuit of knowledge about the past but also with a community of other like-minded persons. Thus membership of these societies marked a distinction not just in terms of social status (they were respectable and required a certain level of income to participate) but also in cultural terms within a class and an age acutely conscious of its place in history. Membership was a 'badge' of knowledge, a symbol of shared

and therefore affirmed intellectual status. Thus membership of an archaeological or historical society was both a form of cultural capital and a collective cultural act following a prescribed pattern with a shared meaning for those who participated.

To begin with, let us take a year in the life of the Antiquarian Society early on in its existence.²⁹ The year began with the third annual meeting of the society, held on Friday 8 January 1886 in the reading room at Chetham's Hospital, at which the new president and council were elected. This was followed on 15 January by the monthly meeting (generally held on the first Friday of the month) at Chetham's Library (the regular venue at this date) at which three papers (on Cockersand abbey, the turnpike system in Lancashire and Cheshire, and the orientation of churches) were read. Two of these were subsequently published in the *Transactions* of the society. Also at this meeting, three members exhibited objects from their own collections, viz. silver pennies from the reigns of Edward II and Edward III found in Lincolnshire; a 'supposed' portrait of Sir Thomas Lowe, lord mayor of London, 1604; a small gold gorget clasp found in Wiltshire in 1885; and some lead tokens and abbey pieces of the sixteenth century. This was a fairly typical agenda for the monthly meetings, combining as it did a trio of unrelated papers with an eclectic selection of members' conversation pieces. In addition new members were 'elected' at the monthly gatherings and motions of condolence were passed when existing members or other notables died. Thus at the meeting in Chetham's Library on Friday 5 March, a resolution was passed condoling with the relatives of Richard Hanby, the late governor of Chetham's Hospital, whilst Robert Cecil Potter, George F. Buckley, and Thomas Bagshaw were elected as new members. The community of membership was thus regulated, and respect for its recently deceased acknowledged.

This latter meeting of 5 March is representative of the miscellaneous character of much antiquarian studies, in which

29 The following account is derived from the Antiquarian Society's report on its annual proceedings published in *T.L.C.A.S.*, IV (1886).

the antiquity and curiosity value of the exhibited object or presented paper were its defining qualities. Thus at this March meeting in 1886, David Headridge exhibited a stone hammer found by him at Baguley, Cheshire; T. Oxley passed round 'interesting photographs of the lake dwellings of New Guinea'; J. B. Robinson submitted a banker's receipt for money paid on shares in the intended Manchester Ship Canal in 1825 (the canal was a major local issue in the mid-1880s); George Yates, the hon. sec., displayed a 'curious piece of carving from Trafford Hall and several old legal documents'; H. Musgrave Briddon had brought along ancient Greek gold coins from the Sahara; G. Esdaile showed the members portraits of Cobham, Gower, and Wyclif; and John Eglington Bailey exhibited tracts dating from the late 1650s and borrowed from the Bradshaw Library at Marple Hall. In addition to these discussion pieces members were invited to peruse a collection of rare books on numismatics recently added to the collection of Chetham's Library. The papers which followed continued the eclectic and visual character of the proceedings. A talk on the Roman remains at Nimes and Arles by R. D. Darbishire was accompanied by a series of 'large photographs'. Charles F. Collmann's paper on 'One of the earliest lists of printed books' involved the presentation to each of those present of a photograph of the list in question. Finally, and closer to home, C. T. Tallent-Bateman read a paper on 'The ancient Lancashire and Cheshire local courts of justice'.

These monthly winter meetings were superseded in May 1886 by the central feature of the Antiquarian Society's calendar, a series of fourteen excursions for society members running between May and October, prior to the resumption of the winter meetings in Manchester. Seven of these were Saturday events, whilst six took place on a weekday and one was a residential trip lasting four days (to Ripon and district in June). Several of these can be regarded as the society 'in progress', as its regular round of business was conducted at a variety of excursion venues. Some of the weekday excursions occurred in the evening, such as the visit to Stockport on 27 May, when Henry Heginbotham (Stockport J.P., society member, and author of a *History of Stockport*) acted as host and the mayor placed the Court House at the disposal of the

society. Relics and documents, chiefly from the private collections of Heginbotham and the Rev. P. M. Herford, were displayed, and a guided tour of the antiquities of the town was followed by a talk on its early history. This was the common pattern. Each visit included a talk (or talks) by a relevant authority (usually a society member) who often also acted as host for the occasion. The talks were often printed in the society's *Transactions*. However, the chief purpose of the visits was the guided tours of points of interest. Thus was achieved the combination of leisure and learning in pleasant and appropriate company. The 'grand tour' of the eighteenth-century aristocrat was brought closer to home for the edification of the Victorian gentleman of business.

The Saturday excursions were the best attended. Thus fifty travelled by train into Cheshire in May 1886 to visit Warburton old church, Agden Hall, and High Legh. Double that number turned up in June to view Wythenshawe and Baguley halls. Around forty joined the party for Winwick in July and a similar number visited Alderley in August, whilst the figure fell to thirty when Rochdale parish church was the venue in October. Given that the society had a membership of just over 300 that year, attendance on the excursions might not seem so impressive. It is not possible to detect from the report of the proceedings what proportion of members attended one or more event or whether a hard core made up the party at each. At any rate one occasion on the calendar, the trip to Wythenshawe and Baguley halls, was sufficiently appealing to attract one third of the membership on a Saturday in June. However, the major event of the winter season was much better attended. The highlight of the colder months was the 'Winter Conversazione'. That held at the Manchester town hall in November 1886 drew an attendance of 250 members. The 'conversazione' was an informal affair in which a single lecture was accompanied by a large number of antiquarian objects generally arranged on tables or hanging on the walls for the interest of those present. This was the major social occasion on the society's calendar, hosted by the mayor of Manchester in the mayor's parlour.

Excursions featured in the life of each of the 'local history' societies in the North-West, but the Antiquarian Society was unusual in the large number it was organizing in the 1880s.

The Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society organized three 'expeditions' for its members in 1886 and again in 1887. The structure of the days' activities was similar to that outlined for the Antiquarian Society. Thus an expedition of society members to Castleton left Derby station on the morning of Saturday 13 August 1887 in special saloons attached to the 9.27 train. From Hassop station they were conveyed by 'breaks' via Hope to Castleton. Following lunch at the Bull's Head Hotel the party proceeded to Peak castle for a paper on the history and architecture of the castle. After touring the ruins the party dispersed, some visiting the Peak cavern, others the church and its library. One member took several platinotype views of the castle. At 5.15 the breaks left Castleton for Buxton for the return journey to Derby.³⁰

The activities of the Historic Society were much more low key than this and might be considered more severely cerebral. The academic profile of the Historic may have been higher than that of the Antiquarian Society at this date if institutional memberships (*libraries and the like*) are anything to go by. The Historic could boast twenty-five institutional memberships, including the public libraries of Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, and St Helens, and extending to American libraries in Boston, Chicago, and Detroit. The proceedings of the Historic Society in the 1880s make no reference to extra-mural activities like excursions. Instead they consist of sober listings of the papers that were read to members during the year. There were eight in 1886 for example: E. M. Hance delivered two papers on the Liverpool burgess lists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Rev. Mansell's subject was Lancashire witchcraft in the seventeenth century, W. O. Roper spoke on the 'missing history of Warton in Lonsdale by John Lucas', the Rev. J. Venn's offering dealt with the life of John Ashton, the Lancashire Jacobite executed in 1691, Lieut.-Col. Fishwick's paper was entitled 'Old Rochdale', whilst James Dixon addressed the members on the 'Ormskirk town's chest' and last but not least the indomitable W. E. A. Axon speculated on

30 *Journal of the Derbyshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, X (1888), pp. xix-xxxii.

'Shakespeare's dark lady of Gawsworth'. In addition to this emphasis in the Historic Society upon academic lectures there was much less time given to the exhibition of relics and artefacts. Only three occasions were identified for 1886 in which members had displayed items from their private collections. Thus in February J. Harris Gibson displayed a prayer book of 1760 printed in Venice and bearing a book-plate and coat of arms of Richard Massie of Coddington, Cheshire, and C. Potter brought in 'bosses and studs for the ornamentation of leather obtained from the Cheshire shore'. In April, George Grazebrook exhibited a charter dating from the reign of Edward II relating to land at Fazakerley, and the November meeting was offered the opportunity by W. T. Watkin to view correspondence between Whitaker, the eighteenth-century historian of Manchester, and the Rev. West, author of the *Guide to the Lakes*.³¹ The annual excursion (and the occasional conversazione) which had become a feature of the unreconstructed Historic Society in the 1850s and 1860s did not long survive the transition to a 'local history' society proper in the 1870s and 1880s. However, perhaps due to declining subscription income or pressure from existing members the practices of excursion and conversazione were revived in 1891 and continued through the 1890s.

Two members, James Bromley and John Hargreaves, played a key role in the revival of the excursion, acting as guides to parties of Historic Society members and their guests; as for example when forty members visited Stonyhurst College, Mitton church, and Whalley abbey in June 1891.³² By the mid-1890s the society had appointed an 'excursions secretary' in the shape of W. E. Gregson. During the summer of 1896 Gregson arranged four Saturday half-day excursions for society members, although attendance was poor compared to the turnout for Antiquarian Society expeditions from Manchester. On 4 July seventeen 'members and friends' comprised the party which visited Ince and Thornton le Moors in Cheshire; the number was twenty for the next excursion on 18 July to Hoghton Tower; James Bromley was

31 *T.H.S.L.C.*, XXXVIII (1886), p. 172.

32 *T.H.S.L.C.*, XLIII and XLIV (1891-2), 'Report for 1891', p. 353.

the guide when seventeen toured Ormskirk and Lathom on 15 August; and finally the party was eighteen strong for the excursion to Beeston and Peckforton castles and Bunbury church when John Hargreaves and E. W. Cox were the guides. In the printed *Transactions* of the society Gregson regaled members about the poor attendance on these occasions: 'It is to be regretted that more members do not avail themselves of these excursions. They are very troublesome to arrange and are remarkably cheap, and no person can become an able antiquary or archaeologist without placing himself in contact with the glorious monuments in church, abbey, and castle which have been bequeathed to us by a long line of pious and noble ancestors.'³³ By 1900 attendance for the excursions may have improved. Reports of each outing appeared in the pages of the *Liverpool Mercury* and although no specific numbers are given the articles refer to 'large' parties of members and friends. Better attendance may have been obtained by the reduction in the number of trips to three, although the names of the destinations had a familiar ring. In June Thornton le Moors figured once more on the itinerary, the second excursion in July was a day trip to Stonyhurst, Mitton, and Whalley, whilst the third was a half-day excursion to the Lymm and Grappenhall district.

The value of the excursion in bringing members together in a pleasant collective activity was a characteristic feature of the county archaeological and historical societies as it was of the natural history societies to which they were closely related. It was emblematic of the combined social and intellectual functions of the societies. As W. E. A. Axon put it in an address to Antiquarian Society members: 'The summer meetings and excursions of the society are doing a good work, and have a social as well as a scientific value. They give opportunities of getting away from the grimy town and of coming into actual contact with the antiquities studied.'³⁴ Thus the physicality of place was central to the recovery of a local past from the neglect of a rapidly changing present.

33 *T.H.S.L.C.*, XLVIII (1896), p. 298. He had made similar complaints in 1895: *T.H.S.L.C.*, XLVII (1895), p. 259.

34 *T.L.C.A.S.*, VII (1889), p. 242.

In the activities of the county historical societies, a sense of place and a sense of history were united in something more than nostalgia. Middle-class concern for 'local history' was part of a collective search for identity by a class and a region. This identity was to be respectable and bourgeois, but also ennobled by association with a heroic past and firmly rooted in a tradition of provincial (as a complement to national) greatness. Despite a respectful nod to aristocratic patronage, it none the less claimed the past glories of the region for the masters of the new society of industrialism. It shows that the new middle classes regarded themselves as the rightful heirs to local traditions and local heritage. For some it represented an escape from an inelegant present ('the grimy town' from which one wished to get away) in favour of a more 'picturesque' past which could be brought to life through its words, its architecture, and its artefacts. For others, it provided an endorsement of present triumphs through the study of past glories. In either case, quite literally, it was a culture of conservation, which displayed an almost sacred reverence for the quiet dignity of the local heritage, with its 'monuments of our fathers . . . all hallowed by the long associations of history'.³⁵

35 Moss, *Pilgrimages to old homes*, I, p. ix