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Family History and Academic History – and beyond!

Category



Following our workshop on collaboration - between family historians, academic historians, archivists, librarians and many others - on Saturday 14 July, one of our speakers, [Mike Esbester](#) (University of Portsmouth), reflects on what he got out of the day. Mike gave a talk on 'Crowd-sourcing, family history & the British railway accident: An introduction to the 'Railway Work, Life & Death' project'.

You can find out more about the programme, and listen back to our five talks on the [workshop page](#).

On Saturday the [Railway Work, Life and Death project](#) was represented at a really interesting [workshop in Leeds](#), exploring the connections and collaborative potential between family historians and academic historians – and plenty of others, as it turned out! The workshop was part of the '[Living with Dying](#)' project, based at the University of Leeds and exploring the social history of death and dying (something unfortunately close to our project) set within the context of the family. This blog post offers a few reflections on the day; for those on Twitter, live updates from the event are found under the hashtag [#historianscollaborate](#).

Over the course of the day, we covered a lot of important and interesting ground, sometimes focused on the nitty-gritty of doing research and sometimes focused on the bigger issues shaping what we're all trying to do. Some of that was about the value of collaboration, including the hope it will help to democratise research and knowledge, for example by sharing findings as openly as possible (though a caveat about that below, to do with ethics). Connected there was also some discussion about aspects which might flow under the surface but which are worth considering, like the political potential of family history research – here the keynote speaker, [Tanya Evans](#), reminded us that people engaging in finding out about their pasts is a form of active citizenship and involvement in society.

That led into some interesting discussion about who has made it into the historical record and who has been overlooked or even deliberately excluded. This is an issue highly relevant to this project as whilst some worker accidents were investigated, by far the vast majority were not: speaking volumes about the value placed upon lives (often working class lives) in the past. Even those accidents that were investigated have today largely been forgotten, so remedying this and bringing the issues they raise back into public view is important. This awareness of the limitations of our sources and the limitations of understandings at the time is particularly relevant when it comes to digitising resources (do only the most 'popular' sources get digitised? What about the rest?) and working on collaborative projects (how do we deal with 'unpopular' topics or groups?).

In our presentation (which you can listen to in the 'Panel Session' recording above) we talked a little about co-production/ co-creation – so, actively involving volunteers and as many people as possible in shaping the research. This is something we're going to work harder on as we shape our next project extensions, so that we recognise the different expertise, interests and questions that everyone brings to the project. This is really helpful in identifying new ways of looking at the topic, so it has exciting possibilities, including the potential of giving us a more rounded picture of the accidents.

What was pleasingly absent was a strong sense that academics and family historians were on opposing 'sides' of a debate. Instead there was mutual respect about the different expertise that these groups – and others, like archivists – can bring. For anyone who harboured out-dated views about academics 'taking' the research of others (no responsible or ethical historian would do this!) or family historians only being interested in their family and establishing a particular lineage without caring for the wider context in which people lived, those ideas were firmly dispelled.

The enormous social benefits to people undertaking research were clear too – whether it be in terms of skills gained, friends made and support networks established, a firmer sense of self or in some cases even resolution to difficult family pasts. One point that related to this and was made by several people – ourselves included – was about the care needed in research, here in relation to the potential emotional impacts when uncovering difficult pasts. So far as the project goes, this might include 'vicarious trauma', experienced when reading the sometimes horrific reports of worker accidents and their physical consequences. This is just one reason our project has been through a rigorous process of ethical opinion (all of which have been favourable, for the original project and the ongoing extensions). The ethics of researching the lives of individuals was also something that appeared on the agenda, including where this involves difficult pasts. How open can and should we make our research if it involves upsetting, or potentially upsetting, details? Is it legitimate to look into the lives of people unconnected to us personally? Is it our job to 'rescue' people from the 'condescension of posterity'? There are no easy answers to these questions.

Some of the point raised at the workshop are things we've considered before, [in this post](#). Saturday's event only reconfirmed our existing belief that genealogical research plays an important part in our work. We're keen to hear the stories behind the names in our database. We've said before that what we've got is detail about a particular moment, produced with a particular purpose and audience: a formal report into an official investigation. Often we lack the wider context about those concerned. We don't want to forget that each of the cases involves real people, and their families, and their communities. Finding out more about the accidents they were involved in and what impact they had upon the individual's life and the lives of those around them is really important. Amongst other things we're working on is a facility to allow people to upload documents or details about the accidents which they may possess and which may extend our knowledge of the accidents and those involved – or to add accidents not yet in our database. That'll be a way off, however, so in the meantime you're encouraged to email us (railwayworkeraccidents@gmail.com).

To return to the Leeds workshop, there was a lot to take away from the day, but a few points are worth highlighting so far as our project is concerned. Key to successful collaboration is the need to recognise the different expertise of those involved – we may have different aims or reasons for being involved, but we've all made an active choice to contribute and collaborate. Though they may be different things, we're all getting some benefit out of being involved. We'd also highlight the value of the personal to historical scholarship; something that easily escapes the formal/ official record (like the state's accident reports), but is crucial to reconnecting with the people in our database who might otherwise be obscured by the sheer volume of data and numbers having accidents.

Finally, of the day itself, the supportive environment that was fostered was lovely to experience – this wasn't a case of opposing sides coming together to try to talk for the first time, but an open and free exchange (sometimes quite heated!) of ideas, opinions and approaches. It was clear that participants didn't see themselves as having to somehow compromise on cherished 'truths' about how to do 'their' type of research, but had a willingness to learn from and share with others, as well as a feeling that we're all engaged in the same overall endeavour. All that remains to be said here is to thank all participants and particularly the organisers, [Laura King](#) and [Jessica Hammett](#).

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