

# MANCHESTER WOMEN'S HISTORY GROUP

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**Manchester Women's History Group first met in January 1980 and as I write we are approaching our seventh birthday. This in itself seems worthy of some celebration at a time when many other history groups are no longer meeting regularly. Despite changing membership and the usual crises of morale that affect any voluntary group, Manchester Women's History Group has managed throughout its lifetime to run a regular monthly programme as well as to engage in collective research, teaching and writing. What follows is a description of the group, its history and current interests.**

Although the Manchester Women's History Group is not offered as an ideal model an account of our history can suggest the range of activities that any local women's history group might pursue and may even encourage the birth of new groups or sustain the interest of existing ones. It may also persuade other women to join the group which is always looking for new members. More generally the history of this particular group should indicate the breadth of women's history to those unfamiliar with its specific nature. The practice of the group, at least in its intentions, might also be suggestive to other history groups who would like to involve more women in their work.

There were about five of us who met together in a pub in January 1980. One thing we all shared was the pleasure in finding other women who were equally enthusiastic about women's history and who were embroiled in the same kind of dilemmas in trying to do it. All of us were engaged, in one way or another, with researching, teaching or representing women's past and felt isolated in the enterprise. Although what we were each doing was different — Jill (Liddington) and Jill (Norris) had already published *One Hand Tied Behind Us*, whilst Karen and I (at this stage we didn't want to confuse anyone with too many first names!) were doing doctoral research and Gaby who had done some research, was trying to introduce the insights of women's history into the museum world — the recognition of similar concerns and of meeting similar resistance, convinced us that there was a basis for a group. In that at least we were not wrong.

We quickly moved onto more practical, and in many ways more crucial, questions. Mutual sympathy was not going to sustain us for very long. We had to decide on what kind of a group we were going to be; what we were actually going to do, when, where, how we could get other women to join us and, significantly, what we could call ourselves. Not all these questions were as straightforward as they might now seem. One question we debated then, and which has remained on our agenda ever since, may seem the most inconsequential of all these questions. Yet it has provoked the charge of anti-feminism, and has prompted much soul-searching. The problem was, and is, the time we should hold our meeting in order to ensure maximum access to the widest number of women, including those with children. **I hope there** is no need to rehearse the very real problems women with childcare responsibilities have in getting to **twilight meetings** or in getting babysitters for evening meetings, whilst women who work in the city can be reluctant to hang around for later meetings or are

anxious about travelling home late at night on their own. There are very real practical problems for women coming from a wide area in meeting together. Over the lifetime of the group we have held regular meetings on the third Wednesday of every month (except August) but have experimented with a range of starting times from 6pm to 8pm. Our current practice is to have a business meeting at 7pm followed by the meeting itself at 7.30pm. For those who cannot get home first we meet for a meal beforehand, and there is also the chance to go to the pub afterwards.

So what was it that we wanted from a women's history group? First and foremost, we wanted a support group for women actively engaged in historical research and others interested in history, to share their work and the common problems of isolation, working in an unsympathetic environment and struggling with the new questions which women's history necessarily raises. What we needed, and felt we had not got anywhere else, was the space to meet as women to discuss and develop these matters. We were, and are, very clear that this space must be women-only but there was some debate originally as to whether the group should be an explicitly feminist history group or bear the less contentious title of women's history. In the end it was decided to adopt the title of Manchester Women's History Group as it sounded less intimidating, coupled with some members' reluctance to describe themselves as feminist historians. We have kept the name throughout largely through inertia as a change of name might now only confuse potential members. Yet I also suspect that developments both in women's history and feminist history and also in politics more generally, might make it easier now for the group as a whole to identify itself more self-consciously as feminist. But **such** a discussion would also be affected by the fact that the present group is an all white group. Our programme for 1987 on ethnic minority women's history may help the group to clarify further the appropriateness of either label, given many black women's criticism of the irrelevance of feminism to their lives in their struggle against racism. Now may be the time for the membership to reconsider these difficult but crucial matters.

Have we succeeded in providing mutual support for women working in, or interested in, women's history? The answer to this is, in the end, a very personal one, depending on the needs of individual members and how these are voiced. What we do provide space for at our meetings is the presentation of material in a sympathetic but, we hope, not unrigorous environment. Our task is to lose all the negative qualities of academic seminars; the elitism, the competitiveness, the destructiveness and the hostility to feminist ideas. This does not mean we substitute uncritical acclamation. For a sympathetic environment where basic assumptions do not have to be fought over, frees one to take risks, develop new ideas and test out arguments without having one's confidence mauled in the process. Yet many members of the group have been schooled in the academic model and despite deep ambivalences about it, have been marked by it and continue to have to deal with it. We do want rigour and stimulation but not confrontation and point-scoring. **We**

therefore encourage work-in-progress to be presented so that, for example, women can use the group to discuss methodological issues arising from their work. Because the group does not have a static membership and contains women with wide historical interests, this mitigates against too much of a focus on the empirical in discussion. The group can draw on the insights of wider historical interests and this produces useful comparisons between schools of history and beyond, which one rarely has access to in one place. For there are current members of the group who work on very diverse aspects of seventeenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century history, of whom some have a primary focus on women whilst others are feminists engaged in other areas of history or non-history, ie. work! It is our shared interest and commitment to women's history which is the foundation of our desire to produce a supportive environment for the development of women's history and feminist-historians.

Our programme has always been *very* wide-ranging both in content and contributors. The main fare of the meetings tends to be a paper, from a member of the group or from an outside speaker, followed by a group discussion. Topics have included: Hannah Culwick; Women in Zimbabwe; the politics of maternity in the 1930s; women and almanacs in the seventeenth-century; socialism and free love, and women office workers in the nineteenth-century. But we have also included films, such as *Red Skirts on Clydeside*; dramatic readings, in particular of suffrage plays; slide presentations, for example, on women artists; discussions on issues for feminist historians, which have included marxism and feminism, and sexuality. We have also held joint meetings with other feminist history groups, including Sheffield and Liverpool, as well as reports from visiting members from other groups including from as far afield as the Boston Lesbian History Project. Monthly meetings can also be used for discussion of work-in-progress as well as report-backs to the whole group of the work of our own research group. We also make sure that about twice a year we have a social event to help members get to know each other in an even more informal setting. The programme is drawn up by the group itself, offering papers themselves, suggesting someone they would like to hear, or themes which we ought to address. The arranging of the meetings themselves, booking rooms, preparing publicity and mailing to all members are tasks which are shared out and although these tasks have occasionally devolved to the few, a moan or two and a swift genuflection to the feminist orthodoxy of revolving tasks stops the work falling on just one head. It also means that the larger group feel involved and committed to the month-to-month business of the group and this has therefore contributed to the group's longevity.

One of the functions that the group implicitly has is the promotion of women's history. Although we do not have the time to put the maximum amount of energy needed into a pressure group, we do attempt to meet most of the demands made on us, either as a group, as individuals or as a contact to others. In the past the group has taught a WEA course and individual members have taught a variety of women's history courses for the WEA, Extra-Mural Department and at the University. The group also convened the women's history strand for the national History Workshop held in Manchester in 1983, as well as contributing to the local history workshop and to the 1985 Feminist History Conference. We have also had a strong link from the beginning with the Pankhurst Appeal, set up to save and restore Emmeline Pankhurst's home in Nelson Street as a resource for local women. We

produced a guide to a walk through Manchester Women's History for the Pankhurst Appeal and many of us have been sponsored to walk it several times! We are currently engaged in expanding that original walk into several shorter walks focussing on different aspects of women's history. We also bring women's history to our involvement in the women's movement generally, for example by providing the historical dimension to an International Women's Day celebration. We want to emphasise not only that women's history is fascinating in itself, but that the reclaiming of our history is crucial to women's political activity today.

The other aspect of the group which links to the promotion of women's history and the support for feminists working in history, is that of research itself. Although not explicitly set up for that purpose the group has engaged in various collective research activities. Preparing the original Manchester Women's History Walk and writing a collective piece for the 1983 *Spare Rib Diary* on doing women's history, gave us a taste for exploring collective work further. The project we have been working on for some time, with varying degrees of energy, is Manchester Women's History between the Wars. We originally chose this for the simple reason that none of us were working on this period, and we wanted to find out about it, drawing on resources such as oral history which we were unable to use in our own research. We were galvanised into action by agreeing to run a WEA course on this theme and since then have run several day schools on the subject. To begin with we looked broadly at a range of issues, including women and politics, education, housing, health and the peace movement. Later we chose to develop further one of these topics, housing, to consider women's experience of, and influence on, the growth of public housing in this period.

We would meet monthly on a Sunday bringing with us some food, some drink and even some new research. Having ambitiously thought we would write a series of pamphlets, we decided first to produce a paper which we presented collectively at the national Feminist History Conference in 1985 and subsequently at a local history workshop day-school. As part of that original presentation we also considered critically our experience of attempting to work collectively, for despite our political commitment to it, we ran up against our own individual (and individualist) training as well as the practical clash of competing commitments and cycles of lassitude and energy. We do want to consider this matter further, both theoretically and practically, but in the meantime we have written up the women and housing material as our contribution to the Jill Norris Memorial edition of the *North West Labour History Bulletin*.

As for our current and forthcoming activities, we continue to meet on the third Wednesday of each month. Our current location is the College of Adult Education and our focus for 1987 is the much neglected area of ethnic minority women's history. Although the research group has taken a rest from inter-war history, new women's history walks are being compiled. We hope to return, re-invigorated, to the broader research project during 1987 which will provide a good opportunity for new members to join. If you would like any information about the activities of the group, its current programme and the research group, please contact Alison Adam, 13 Westwood Avenue, Timperley, Altrincham; 061-962 7472. Pamphlets on the Women's History Walks are available from the Pankhurst Trust, 2-4 Oxford Road, Manchester, M1 5QA.