

THE HISTORIC SOCIETY OF LANCASHIRE AND CHESHIRE

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The Historic Society was founded at a public gathering in Liverpool on 20 June 1848, meetings began in the autumn and the first volume of the annual *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire* was published in 1849. The Society is thus the oldest of the region's 'county' historical societies, though of course the Chetham Society, a 'printing club', was set up at Manchester in 1843. The Society's history can best be followed through the centenary supplement to volume 100 of *Transactions*, and through the 150th anniversary lecture series printed in volume CXLVII of *Transactions*. These lectures initially focused on Liverpool's middle-class culture in 1848, before widening first to look at learned societies in the region, and at early-Victorian urban society in general and then to make some international comparisons with American historical societies.

There have been many developments in the membership and activities of the Society over a century and a half. The early members were drawn from the clergy and the professional and commercial ranks of Merseyside society, plus a leavening of county landowners and country dwellers scattered over the two counties. Men from outside the region who were prominent in similar national and local societies also joined – Thomas Heywood of Herefordshire, and Edward Hawkins of the British Museum, being good examples. The social character of the membership has widened. Before the end of the century there were a number of local correspondents scattered through the two counties. Latterly such contacts have been maintained by local bodies taking membership as affiliated societies, for example the Widnes Historical Society. The first public library joined in 1870, but not until the end of the next decade was there a noticeable number of institutional members. One of these was the Boston (Mass.) Athenaeum, which became the first international member. Now nearly 100 individuals and libraries from eight countries are members. The recent political emphasis in Great Britain on cutting taxation has, no doubt, contributed to a reduction in the number of 'home' libraries among our members, a trend which, if it continues, will once more change the character of the membership. Nevertheless, the Society enjoys, and is grateful for, the support of Cheshire and Lancashire County Councils. Individual membership is steady, and we have just under 500 members in all.

One could claim that not much has altered in the Historic Society between 1848 and the present: Thus the 1998 lecture programme was printed in *Transactions*, as was that of 1848. While the continuity of *Transactions* is welcome, the Society's membership has changed with time. The prominence of female members in the Society's affairs is especially apparent in its third half century. Another recent trend has been the increasing importance in the Society's business of 'professionals' (university, college, and schoolteachers of history; librarians; and archivists), and a corresponding decline in the prominence of 'amateur' members.

There is, of course, a risk of over simplification in such judgements, and members from other backgrounds continue to give valuable service to the Society.

Something of the Society's old identity went when, in 1958, the Society left Colquitt Street, Liverpool, where it had met for about a century. The Council of the time arranged to locate the Society's library in the Liverpool Record Office, where it can be consulted by the public and continues to make a significant contribution to local studies, and to Liverpool City Libraries. The collections are housed and cared for in a way which the Society by itself could no longer undertake. The Central Library also became the venue for the Society's lecture programme. This usually comprises eight lectures a year, though of recent one meeting has taken the form of a day school. The lectures also are open to the public. The programme and library catalogue can be accessed on the Society's website at <http://www.art.man.ac.uk/~mfshscp/Hslc.htm>. The relocation of 1958 broadened the Society's contribution to the community's perception of history through the welcome, and increasing, public use of the Society's library. It fitted well with the change in the Society's legal status when it became a registered charity under the 1961 Charities Act.

Another change as the years have passed is the increasing emphasis on document-based history. Excursions which concentrated on physical remains have disappeared from the Society's programme. Although archaeology, art history, architecture, and musicology have all figured in recent volumes of *Transactions*, a decline in the prominence of archaeology in the Society's publications and meetings in the twentieth century is noticeable. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century the Society widened its interests away from history and into, for example, science and literature. There are what look to be some "fossils" of this time in the Society's library, at least such works as *Notes By A Field-Naturalist In The Western Tropics*, by H.H. Higgins, published in 1877, are not obviously the stuff of a Liverpool-based historical Society. These years might be termed the Society's polymath period, but the loss of focus nearly proved fatal c.1880, and the Society almost folded. Most of the Society's subsequent work through the years has concentrated on history. It was by no means the first English county historical society, but its founders in 1848 conceived of the new body as much more active than, for example, the Chetham Society or the Surtees Society. It was to be a vehicle to gather the information with which to write a very wide—ranging study of the district's past. The Society has never achieved that, though a number of its members have, in various capacities, written or contributed to major county and regional studies, and *Transactions* are frequently cited in such works. While the Society's chief interests have changed over time, it has not taken much notice of two modern concepts of history, namely 'heritage' and 'family history'. These are areas that strike a cord with many people who have an interest in the past, and it maybe that the Historic Society might have done more to offer a scholarly lead in these areas.

Reviews of recent volumes of *Transactions* have endorsed the Society's reputation as a supporter and publisher of scholarly research, a reputation, which the Society's Council aims to enhance. To supplement its *Transactions*, the Society has commissioned an index to volumes 1-150 which will be available shortly. Occasional publications have included a facsimile of Burdett's map of Cheshire of 1777 (book and sheets), Yates's map of Lancashire of 1786 (book), and Bennison's map of Liverpool of 1835 (sheets), though sadly all are currently out of print. Equally popular has been *Liverpool, The African Slave Trade And Abolition*, edited by Roger Anstey and Paul Hair, first published in 1976, and now available in the enlarged edition of 1989. In all, the Society's *Transactions* and publications must

amount to over 1,000 contributions to the history of Lancashire and Cheshire.

Despite this publishing achievement, the continued existence of the Society has been in doubt. One old report speaks of 1879 as a bad year for the Society, while some of the present Council remember the precarious financial position of the early 1970s. The hard work, goodwill, and support (sometimes given posthumously as well) of the members has, however, triumphed so far. **If you want to join, visit our website, or write to the membership secretary, Dr D.E. Ascott, the School of History, Liverpool University Liverpool L69 7WZ. You will be very welcome.**



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