

The Institute of Historical Research: a ‘history laboratory’ in the heart of London

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Abstract

The Institute of Historical Research is one of ten member institutes of the School of Advanced Study. Founded in 1921 by A. F. Pollard, the IHR has become an important resource and meeting place for researchers. The mission of the IHR is to promote the study of history and an appreciation of the importance of the past among academics and the general public, in the UK and internationally. The IHR also provides institutional support for this historical community and offers a wide range of services both on-site and remotely which promote and facilitate excellence in historical research and scholarship. In this article, I introduce the IHR as a historical laboratory in the heart of London, providing insight into its present and future strategic initiatives.

Keywords: Research. Patrimony. Local and Regional History.

The University of London's Institute of Historical Research is a unique institution. Almost unparalleled in the world,¹ the IHR is home to a large research library, two edited journals, hosts seminars and conferences, runs graduate programmes (Masters, PhD and advanced historical training), offers research fellowships, and provides via its website a range of digital resources, listings and podcast services for the history community.² Together with the Royal Historical Society (est. 1868) and the Historical Association (est. 1906), the IHR is the voice of history in the United Kingdom, contributing to debates and discussions on such matters as history in the schools, the declassification of government records, and the preservation of data in the digital age.

The IHR has come a long way since it opened its doors in 1921. At the time of the First World War it was Germany and the USA which led the world in postgraduate research in history. Modelled on the German 'seminarum' library, and on famous centres such as the École des Chartres in Paris and the Johns Hopkins history department in Baltimore, USA, the IHR was founded to support history research across the colleges of the University of London. The Institute was the idea of the Tudor historian A. F. Pollard (1869-1948), who conceived of history as a science, and envisaged a role for the IHR as a 'history laboratory', where scholars would consult records and books, and discuss their subject. Within ten years, Pollard laid the foundations of the Institute's work: a large research library of printed primary sources, a bulletin featuring original articles, historical news and listings, weekly seminars, and an annual international conference, known as the Anglo-American Conference of Historians (so important that British Prime Ministers opened its proceedings in the 1920s). Above all, Pollard had brought the history PhD to the UK, and by 1939, more PhDs in history were being studied in the capital than anywhere else in the UK.

By the time the Institute moved into its permanent headquarters in Senate House in 1948 it had become a key part of the UK history scene. It was home to some of the most important publishing projects of the 20th century: the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the *History of*

Parliament, and the Victoria County History. It had gathered together a unique library, not just of British history materials, but those of all the major western European countries (including their colonies), it was running a full programme of seminars and conferences, and providing advanced research training in subjects such as palaeography, medieval languages, historiography and statistics.

Nowadays, the IHR library has grown to almost 200,000 volumes. We host over 60 seminars per fortnight. And we provide a huge range of guides, teaching and training materials and services for historians across the UK. For example, the Bibliography of British and Irish history (<http://www.history.ac.uk/projects/bbih>), our electronic journal *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/>) – unique as it allows authors to respond to reviews), and regularly updated listings of history scholars and current PhDs (History Online at <http://www.history.ac.uk/projects/digital/history-online>). Our junior fellowship programme – designed for students writing up their dissertations and for post-doctorates – is the largest in the UK. We currently host two research projects – the Centre for Metropolitan History, and the Victoria County History (the largest topographical and historical survey of English local history in the world). The highlight of the Institute's year remains the Anglo-American conference, which takes a different theme each year (recent subjects have included 'Health and History', 'Environments', 'Cities' and 'Food in History') and usually attracts around 300 delegates. In recent years, the Institute has become as much of a digital operation as a physical space. The principal collections of our Library have been digitised as British History Online (<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/>), all our listings services are now on the web, and we run an innovative virtual programme of podcast and live-streamed events (<https://historyspot.org.uk/podcasts>). And the Institute continues to push back international frontiers. For a long time we have been part of the North American history scene (supporting for example the annual North American Conference on British Studies and running a fellowship programme for Canadian and American graduate students), and since the 1990s we have run collaborative programmes

with universities in Moscow, Tokyo and across the EU (for example a seminar on Franco-British history with the Sorbonne in Paris). In the last four years, we have also commenced new partnerships with the universities of high-growth economies such as China (PKU, Fudan (Shanghai), Nanjing, National Chengchi University (Taipei), and South Korea. Every year we welcome overseas scholars on our non-stipendiary Visiting Fellowship scheme, and our doors are always open to overseas graduate students.

It is not an exaggeration to say that most historians in the UK will at some time in their lives pass through the Institute of Historical Research – to use our Library, or to attend our seminars (indeed, giving a paper at the IHR is an important ‘rite of passage’ for junior historians). And many careers have been launched by time spent at the Institute as a research fellow. Our alumni are found all around the world. However, the IHR is also a centre of ongoing scholarship and publishing. For example, the Victoria County History (<http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/>) produces definitive surveys of all the county parishes of England. Our Centre for Metropolitan History (<http://www.history.ac.uk/cmh/main>) comprises expert staff on the history of London, especially on the pre-1700 City of London, with its livery companies and merchant communities. Both the VCH and the CMH have proved to be pioneers in digital mapping, and the application of GIS techniques to the study of history. In this way, the IHR has often been at the forefront of innovation in historical methods and techniques. Under the Directorship of Professor Patrick O’Brien (1990-8) the Institute developed ‘global history’ as an important new discipline. More recently, during the Directorship of Professor David Bates (2003-08), the IHR launched ‘History and Policy’, a research and consultancy unit which brought together historians and policy-makers in government, in ‘think-tanks’ and in the media, to discuss the relevance of the study of the past to present-day political and cultural concerns such as food safety, the environment and constitutional reform.

The Institute is also at the centre of public history and engagement with the world outside of the University and the academy. There is,

perhaps as nowhere else across the globe, a huge public interest in history in the UK. It can be seen in the large number of radio and TV programmes devoted to history, the circulation figures of magazines such as *History Today* and the *BBC History Magazine*, and the industry of family history and amateur genealogical research undertaken up and down the country by people curious about their ancestry or the history of their locality. Through our collaborations with museums such as the Imperial War Museum, and the Science Museum, and partners such as English Heritage, and through the nationwide volunteers' network which sustains the work of the Victoria County History, the Institute runs events and projects designed to capture some of this public enthusiasm for history. Every year, our 'Winter Conference' is devoted to a theme in public history – most recently 'History and Biography' – and our bi-annual magazine *Past & Future* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/sites/history.ac.uk/files/newsletters/past-and-future-2013-spring.pdf>) contains articles and news of general interest to the history-reading public.

The Institute achieves all that it does on an annual turnover of c. £2.5m. Around 40% of our funding comes from the UK government. For the rest, we have a long and enviable record of raising money from research councils, from foundations and trusts such as Wellcome, Wolfson, Leverhulme and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation of New York, as well as many hundreds of individual donors. As public spending on the universities continues to fall, we are looking increasingly to new sources of income generation and additional donor support to guarantee our sustainability. Our current business plan sees us becoming less reliant on government funding by 2018, and achieving significant increases in our income from events, membership, tuition and consultancy fees, service subscriptions and research project overheads.

At the centre of these plans lies the modernisation of our Senate House headquarters. The University of London has embarked upon a £7.5m redevelopment of the Institute. In the autumn of 2014 we shall move back into a refurbished building, equipped with new conference and research training suites, enhanced library and research facilities,

and an expansion of room for our fellows and postgraduate students. It is an exciting project. It preserves the original ethos and layout of the Institute, whilst expanding our capacity to deliver more events, training and teaching, as well as enabling the IHR to become the home of choice for new research projects and centres.

Our refurbishment project is only one of several challenges which the Institute faces as it approaches its centenary year in 2021. Alongside our core activities we need to explore further digital and 'open access' publishing, we aim to develop our overseas links, especially with universities in the middle East, south America, Asia and Africa. We also want to make our work more inter-disciplinary, building partnerships with scholars in medicine, science and technology. And we will. For over 90 years the Institute has been at the centre of adapting the study of the past to the needs of the present and the future.

Notes

* Professor Miles Taylor, FRHS, is director of the Institute of Historical Research. His research interests include the history of Victorian Britain, parliamentary representation since the late 18th century, and Victorian monarchy and India. Professor Taylor has authored and co-edited key works in British History including: *British history, 1600-2000: expansion in perspective* (2010); *Proceedings of the British-Chinese history conference* (2010); *Southampton: Gateway to the British Empire* (2007); *Ernest Jones, Chartism and the Romance of Politics, 1819-69* (Oxford, 2003); *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847-1860* (Oxford, 1995). Among other affiliations, including the Royal Historical Society, Professor Taylor is a member of the editorial board the for Journal of British Studies, a member of the assessment committee for the ESRC; a member of the History Editorial Advisory Board, BBC Worldwide, a committee member of the International Committee, Russian Academy of Sciences, and he is Chair of UK National Committee - International Commission of Historical Sciences.

¹ There is of course the famous Institute of Historical Studies in Calcutta (est. 1962), and there are German Historical Institutes in Washington (USA), Paris and London.

² www.history.ac.uk

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Resumo

O Instituto de Pesquisa Histórica (Institute of Historical Research – IHR) é um dos dez institutos da Escola de Estudos Avançados. Fundada em 1921 por A. F. Pollard, o IHR tornou-se um recurso importante e ponto de encontro de pesquisadores. A missão do IHR é promover o estudo da história e uma apreciação da importância do passado entre os acadêmicos e o público em geral, no Reino Unido e internacionalmente. O IHR também fornece suporte institucional para a comunidade histórica e oferece uma ampla gama de serviços no local e virtualmente, afim de promover e facilitar a excelência no ensino e na pesquisa histórica. Neste artigo, eu apresento o IHR como um “laboratório histórico no coração de Londres”, fornecendo informações sobre iniciativas do presente e futuro.

Palavras-chave: Pesquisa. Patrimônio. História local e regional.