

## ***A digital future***

The approach of Camden Borough to digital history has been cautious. Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, in a public library, retains a card index, fiches and microfilm: some material is recorded in The National Archives *Discovery* catalogue, but how much of the total is unclear. Camden History Society, whose members have researched history across the borough for fifty years, has a modern web site advertising its publications but only the index can be searched digitally, rather than full texts. And while local societies are members of the London and Middlesex Archaeology Society (LAMAS),<sup>1</sup> there is no digital forum for sharing between local history associations in London. Thus, it is not readily possible to determine how much is being replicated across London in different places or how societies are responding to the digital challenge.

The British Association for Local History publishes *Internet sites for local historians* (only in printed form), currently in its fourth edition.<sup>2</sup> Almost 800 sites are listed and several are mentioned as good practice: for example the guide commends the Wolverhampton History and Heritage Society site, whose Sections include buildings, history articles, people and a multi-item 'Museum'. Locally to Camden, surrounding boroughs have different approaches: Hackney and Westminster have fully searchable catalogues, while Haringey, Islington, Brent and Camden do not. A private web page for the local history of Kingston, in west London, has strong design standards:<sup>3</sup> however, the academic papers (as .pdf files) that were once on the web pages have been taken down, indicating the difficult balance of maintaining an interesting contemporary presentation as well as baseline material for visitors to the site.

While the National Archives *Discovery* catalogue is an important source for finding material held across archives, the relatively standardised system of 'Calmview', used by many local authorities (and, for the present work, Westminster, Kent and Warwickshire) would be welcome for cataloguing Camden's holdings.<sup>4</sup> It is not that all text needs to be fully digitised (which is necessarily expensive, if welcome in enabling remote access) but there would be considerable benefits through making the catalogue searchable online and converting the existing microfilm, such as the collection of Ambrose Heal of St Pancras ephemera, into digital form (even if kept for onsite viewing). As web use develops, the electronic material can diversify, and with electronic search users can quickly gain access to materials they are seeking. The present Dissertation could not have been written without the many existing digital catalogues.

Digital presentation is taking history in new directions. *London Lives*, led by Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker, brings together 15 datasets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from archives in Britain and the USA. The digital edition is searchable for names

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<sup>1</sup> LAMAS <lamas.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Jacquelené Fillmore, *Internet sites for local historians*, [no place] 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Kingston History Research <www.kingstonhistoryresearch.co.uk>

<sup>4</sup> Two local studies pages used for this work with more advanced format are: Bishopsgate Institute <bishopsgate.org.uk/Library/Online-Catalogue> and Kent Archives and Local History <kentarchives.org.uk/our-collections>

and keywords, proving of wide use.<sup>5</sup> An earlier format, *Locating London's Past* sought to locate the data onto Rocque's 1746 map, which itself was recalibrated on nineteenth century Ordnance Survey maps; but the web page has not been renewed since 2011 and functions only weakly.<sup>6</sup> *Layers of London*, using resources from the Museum of London, is digitising maps, pictures, films and stories of people who have lived and worked in London. *Layers of London* is designed for public engagement, encouraging people to submit personal memories and materials and expects to create 'heritage projects' in all 32 boroughs of London. The widely-praised work *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*, while national in scope, has a substantial proportion of data for London.<sup>7</sup>

For Camden New Town, Bev Rowe has developed a web site celebrates people, places and stories for the area, particularly Camden Square and Murray Street.<sup>8</sup> He has investigated the names of residents in the decennial censuses and annual Post Office registers. It is time-consuming work but the results have proved of interest to distant people, with relatives once living in Camden Town, as well as to contemporary residents.

Local history gains interest when people can relate to it. In family history now, with commercial programmes, a person's relatives can readily be traced through several generations. Similarly, the history of individual dwellings is popular. The Census gives both name and address for ten-yearly samples (with cut-off at 100 years past); and for London, the Post Office Directories list a named householder for every address. It would be possible, using the 1890s Ordnance Survey as a base and adding data from the Camden Town estate registers, to represent the chronological sequence of building, perhaps as a 3-D representation, or for a user to find material relevant to a geo-referenced point or area.

### ***Public history and value***

Historians have a crucial role to play with communities concerned with their past.<sup>9</sup> In a review of recent PhD theses that have drawn on local heritage sites or investigated patterns of public response, Tosh Warwick argues the 'huge importance that understandings of the past play in the lives of those who live in towns and cities' and the 'opportunities for urban historians to serve the communities they study'.<sup>10</sup> There are also benefits for historians in collaboration with external partners in exploring urban heritage. The values that professionals, businesses and communities attach to heritage change over time, as do historians' interests in topics and sites, memories and interpretations.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> London lives <[londonlives.org/index.jsp](http://londonlives.org/index.jsp)>

<sup>6</sup> Locating London's past <[locatinglondon.org](http://locatinglondon.org)>

<sup>7</sup> University College London <[www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs](http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs)>

<sup>8</sup> Camden New Town History Group <[camdennewtown.info](http://camdennewtown.info)>

<sup>9</sup> Peter Borsay, 'History or heritage: perceptions of the urban past: a review essay', *Urban History* 1991;18:32-40.

<sup>10</sup> Tosh Warwick, 'Research in urban history: recent Ph.D. theses on heritage and the city in Britain'. *Urban History* 2018;45(3):549-560.

<sup>11</sup> Heritage consortium <[www.heritageconsortium.ac.uk/2017/09/14/policy-engagement-at-a-local-level-a-workshop-for-historians-by-mike-reeve](http://www.heritageconsortium.ac.uk/2017/09/14/policy-engagement-at-a-local-level-a-workshop-for-historians-by-mike-reeve)>

Hampstead in the nineteenth century was objectively an awkward village – a distant commuter journey from London, up a hill slow and steep for horses, with narrow streets and few houses. But the difficulties were balanced by assets of healthy water and clean air, views across the Thames valley, elite residents and the cachet of its name. Value is created through sense of place. Two organisations, led by developers, architects and large London land-owners, have held exhibitions and talks on the theme London’s “Great Estates”. They propose “long-term thinking and investment, high quality placemaking, on-going maintenance and careful stewardship.”<sup>12</sup>

Nineteenth century Camden Town centred around Pratt Street, College Street, King’s Road and Camden Square. Transport was from Camden Town railway station rather than the later Underground at the High Street. Through until 1919, Camden Town was a leasehold estate shared between the Trustees of the Camden and the Church of England. There are records of people from many parts of society – academicians to railwaymen; organisations from literary societies to ragged schools, churches to missions; and businesses from national printers to local photographers. Remembering and understanding this history could contribute to contemporary choices. Re-presenting the Georgian suburb in relation to its particular character enables architecture and planning, society and production from the past to be linked with debates on development for the future.

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<sup>12</sup> London Society <[londonsociety.org.uk/tag/great-estates-series](http://londonsociety.org.uk/tag/great-estates-series)> New London Architecture <[newlondonarchitecture.org](http://newlondonarchitecture.org)> (The organisations have the same chairman – Peter Murray <[petermurraylondon.com](http://petermurraylondon.com)>)