

The Victoria County History and Publication

Record Society Publishing Conference

Institute of Historical Research

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First, let me give you some idea of where I am coming from in this talk.

I joined the VCH in September 2005, but that came only after many years of involvement with local history more generally. I have been for some years chairman of the Thoroton Society, the principal archaeological and historical society in Nottinghamshire, and as such chairman of its publications committee which includes the Thoroton Record Series.

I do, as a result, have a fair knowledge of how Record Series work, and my own publishing record includes two volumes in the Derbyshire Record Series, and one in the Thoroton series. I am also chairman of the History of Lincolnshire series, which is a series of scholarly publications on the county, but which operates in a similar manner to a record society.

As for the VCH, that has operated at least until recent times, on the basis of publishing between two and four 'red books' annually. These are written by teams of professional historians working in counties from Durham to Cornwall, and published by the VCH Central Office, which sits here in the IHR. The basic structure of the series is as laid out by the founding fathers in 1899, although the detail, and ways of dealing with material have not changed greatly.

Since the books are regarded as encyclopaedic in the sense of recording information about particular places, they have a long shelf life which is in many ways similar to a record series volume.

I bring all this baggage to this talk this morning, but it does, I hope, give me a context in which I can discuss what I see as the key issues in publishing terms. Not everyone will agree with me, and therein I hope lies the discussion which will follow during the day.

I want next to point to a number of what I would term common interests between record society concerns and the VCH, which arise from my eighteen months experience in the VCH office.

1 Record Societies publish relatively short print runs for a restricted audience, primarily involving members and a few copies for sale. Most of the societies I am either a member of, or know of, have a membership – a feature of the societies going back to their nineteenth century origins. Because they were never geared up for non-members, they seldom have much by way of a marketing structure to sell those volumes that do not go straight to members. The VCH also has a relatively restricted print run but it does use its publisher Boydell & Brewer, as a marketing agent not just a distribution agent, in an attempt to widen its sales area, particularly in the international arena.

2. Record Societies usually aspire to an annual publication, and then hope they don't get too far behind in the numerical sequence! Much of course depends on the ability and willingness of editors to complete their volumes, and then of the general editor to see the publication into print. It sometimes depends also on accumulating sufficient funds through members subscriptions to publish the next volume in the series. The parallel with the VCH is that we aim to publish 3-4 volumes a year, but we depend on the receipt of manuscripts from our county offices in much the same way that a record society needs completed MSS if it is to fulfil its commitment to its members.

3. Record Societies are run on a shoe string with volunteer labour and little capital. They have nowhere to store backstock, and they have no marketing mechanisms. In this sense they are not equivalent to book publishers who take on a speculation when they publish a book, except insofar as they are more like a book which is funded, or at least partly funded, by pre-subscription orders. The problem with these arrangements is that they need effort to bring in the subscriptions!

4. Record Societies are remote organisations. Members get the 'annual' volume as the return on their subscription, whether it is relevant to them or not. There are no meetings, except perhaps for a book launch (or an annual meeting in the case of the Lincoln Record Society), and little sociability by comparison with the antiquarian and similar societies with their lectures and excursions. In some respects they were set up in an age in which they were regarded as the serious academic side of antiquarian publishing.

5. Record Societies originally published for the good of the soul as it were, often producing volumes of medieval documents in the Public Record Office and private collections, sometimes in Latin (with or without an English translation). In the past two decades, there has been a significant move away from these types of publication towards a much wider range of sources, many of them modern. In some cases this has had a commercial incentive since the volumes have been deliberately geared to sales. Volumes of hearth tax returns have found a lively market among family historians. Diaries and similarly interesting materials (as opposed to feet of fines, cartularies etc) also attract a market beyond the immediate membership, although this emergence from the closet has been partly stymied by the willingness of family history societies to produce their own records' series.

These are my five traits of record societies, and the VCH fits into much of this pattern because, like a record society, the VCH does not envisage its red books as 'airport novels'. They are volumes to be bought and shelved, dipped into for their encyclopaedic information, rather than read cover to cover and then deposited in the local Oxfam shop. There was a VCH volume on E-Bay last week, but that is unusual.

But because the VCH has at least some similarities to record society publishing, it is I think worth looking at what I see as some of the options for the future.

1. The major problem for record societies is set up costs with relatively short print runs, and then with little margin for error in terms of numbers of volumes printed, hence the importance of the membership list. Most societies hope to sell a few copies, but most have no mechanism for doing so beyond the general editor stuffing books in jiffy bags and taking them to the local post office – before it closes... Most have little or no storage space for backstock. Paying for such space simply complicates the financial

issues. Many an editor has ended up with copies of feet of fines and other over printed volumes stocked in their spare bedroom!

Here the future may well lie with print on demand. In other words, print as many as are required for members, review copies, editor's free copies, and then perhaps add a notional number for 'sales', but this can be realistic. A few years ago the VCH reprinted quite a number of volumes which were then out of print, but the print runs were huge because that was the economics of the time. Unfortunately the books cost us money to store, and were in the longer term unsaleable. One of my first, not especially pleasant, tasks at the VCH, was to identify several hundred volumes of backstock for destruction, partly to halve our annual storage bill.

Modern technology has changed the rules of the game. Boydell & Brewer now put VCH volumes back into print on a print run of 20. This means that when we publish a new volume for a county we can have available the whole set for potential new purchasers. We did that when launching a new volume in Somerset on 31 October last year, and three people contracted for complete sets of all the Somerset volumes published to that date. I am not suggesting the same would happen for record societies, but I am proposing that the technology is there to ensure focussed print runs, which means that the days of well stocked spare bedrooms should now be over.

Similarly important is print-on-demand, the technology which allows us (at a price, it must be said, but probably only in the short term), to print a single volume from an existing volume. We tried this with a volume of VCH Hertfordshire last year, and the results were encouraging. The picture quality was still poor, but the text came out well.

2. Option number 2 is digital delivery. About 10 years ago I went to a conference at Kelham Hall, near Newark, run by the East Midlands Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, or whatever format it took in those days. During the meeting family historian after family historian stood up to condemn the internet, and all those who even suggested that it might be a form of communication. The idea that documents might be made available in digital form, or that record offices might computerise their lists, was vilified as something not far from the gates of hell themselves. And today? Family history comes second only to pornography on the web. So where we will get to in 3, 5, 10 years is so difficult to predict.

One thing I do know, however, is that we still seem to like books. While I see commuters watching films on little DVD players, I have yet to see anyone reading a book on a laptop screen, but I do see plenty of people reading books. The success of Amazon also suggests that we retain an affinity with the written word between covers. But obviously, or so it would seem, if documents are delivered in digital form, particularly if they are freely, or relatively freely available across the internet, the demand for printing books of documents may be affected.

With the VCH, in 2001 our county editors started putting draft text on to their websites. In part this was for members of the public to read their work in advance of a red book being published, but it also encouraged a form of interaction, since punters could, if they wished, feed back to the editors about material which was available online and therefore susceptible to future editing. Then in 2003, some of the red books began to appear on British History Online, about which we shall hear more later in the programme today. There are now more than 100 volumes on this site, with more to follow, and we had

about 2m visitors last year. This is a new market for us, and one which we are only too keen to encourage, even if many of the visitors are those same family historians who were so opposed to digital delivery a decade ago.

And nor does it seem to impact on sales of books. We do not put any red book on to BHOL until it has been in print for at least two years, in order to maximise our sales of the book, but we have done some analysis of what has happened to backstock sales. Allowing for the fact that the figures are somewhat crude, they show that from January 2004 to the present, 59% of our income from the sale of red books which are available on BHOL and only 41% from volumes not on BHOL. Allowing for the most obvious drawback to this analysis, that BHOL not surprisingly looked to digitise the most 'important' red books, this still suggests that sales are certainly not damaged by reproducing our volumes digitally.

I would stress the importance of this because while we all still like to have and read books, the way we access information is certainly changing. Who now reads the Encyclopaedia Britannica when they can go to Wikipedia, whatever its weaknesses? University libraries are looking to empty their shelves of old standbys that can now be accessed electronically like the DNB, Parliamentary Papers, and reels and reels of the Times on microfilm plus its accompanying large index volumes.

For the VCH this has been an important question. Are we a reference book, or are we a collectable book? If we are just a reference book, do we have a future between hard covers? At the moment I don't see us moving away altogether from red books. There is still a demand for them, and until we find any evidence that this has disappeared, we shall continue to produce and publish them. The same principles may apply also to record series volumes. While ever there is a membership willing to pay their subscription and receive the books, they will continue. What might disappear are the institutional members if the sources are available on line, and if they are seeking to clear rather than clutter library shelves. And the loss of institutional members could in the longer term make the societies non-viable.

And then there are the digitization projects being developed by Google and the British Library, in an attempt to turn us all into computer screen addicts, but as these will come up later on in the programme I shall say no more about them at this point.

Before I leave this option, I suppose it is possible that some record societies may want to go over entirely to digitization producing volumes only for electronic publication. This involves different issues, including website design, set up and maintenance, and has knock on questions about what members would get for their subscriptions, and how would the record society charge for its products. Again, I am sure this will come up later in our programme.

My third option is about selectivity. Record societies will also need to be more selective in what they produce. Not only do they now have to compete with record series published by family history groups, they have to be aware that some well known sources are appearing on the web, and consequently putting these in to print may not be financially worthwhile. An example which comes to mind is nineteenth century trade directories. By contrast, sources which are not as easy to use digitally as in paper, such as maps, may continue to enjoy a high take up among potential purchasers. It's a matter of judging where the market is going.

From a VCH perspective the key point is to make our books attractive, and to retain the quality standard which leads people to consult them in the first place. But we are also aware of the need to present material in other forms to a high standard. Our current HLF-funded project 'England's Past for Everyone', takes us into new forms of digital presentation, particularly our forthcoming Explore website, and we are also producing paperback books. We recognise that these are likely to be less long lasting, both because they are paperbacks and also because they have a greater element of interpretation and so can more easily be outdated.

If option number 2 was digital delivery, option number 4 is about forms of printing. I have talked briefly about print on demand, and further issues will be raised at this conference, but set up and production methods are also changing. It is a long time now since hot metal, and typescripts done on typewriters which then needed to be 'set'. You can sit in front of your computer screen now and, with appropriate software, set the whole volume yourself. Turn it into a PDF, and send it off to the printer, who can turn it into a book relatively quickly and easily. Some academic publishers already commission authors on the grounds that they effectively do all the production work themselves, leaving the publisher to be printer and distributor.

To some publishers this is anathema because it takes away the element of editorial control, but for record societies, as for the VCH, which have their own editorial control anyway, it may well be a way forward, especially given the short print runs, and attention to complex forms of text. At the VCH we have not gone down the PDF route yet, but we have an option to do so in our forthcoming contract with Boydell & Brewer, and I do see us going in this direction although at the moment it would meet with resistance from my colleagues.

So how we produce the books may be as important as what we produce. Already record societies have tended to abandon huge screeds of Latin from medieval court rolls and other sources, on the grounds that such volumes have no market beyond the membership, and similarly the VCH has bowed to market forces (although that is not how we would like to express it) in the introduction of economic and social history, local government, and other subjects familiar to the history reader, to supplement rather than replace the descent of the manor and the detailed history of the parish church.

I recognise however that record societies often have to go with what they can attract unless, of course, the officers are willing to draw up a short list of documents for inclusion in future volumes and then to hope they can find editors to take them on!

The challenge is what do we produce, how do we produce it, and in what numbers, given the changing market and demands in the 21st century world. We will hear more today about methods of delivery, but if we assume there is a future for the record society printed volume (not necessarily an exclusive future), we must also accept that there need to be ways of selecting the material, producing it for publication, and then selling or at least distributing it, which continues to make sense – hence my vision, for example, of a VCH which has a much clearer focus on the market for the books, on the numbers which can be sold in the first two years (before we digitize volumes), and how this can be done while minimising production costs, and keeping backstock numbers to an affordable and sensible level. Once we can print a single book from an existing book, as we can, falteringly already, we shall need only a master copy. Thus, after 2 years, we

might decide to do away with backstock, and to keep a single cloneable copy for people who want the red book rather than digital access (perhaps charged for). It is the kind of vision record societies might also find worth investigating.

Record societies were founded in the nineteenth century on a single model and with a single intention of preserving the country's documentary heritage. The model involved national series such as the pipe rolls producing nationally important documents, and local societies re-producing locally significant documents. The volumes were almost clones of each other, but I doubt if the future lies in such a simple model. It may be that the principles which have sustained us since the founding fathers of the nineteenth century are no longer sustainable. Certainly the challenge of preserving and presenting the country's documentary heritage has shifted somewhat. For the VCH the future involves maintaining our core mission and purpose, and, like the societies in the 21st century, to do this by looking for new ways of operating which are financially viable and make scholarly sense in the 21st century.