British History Today

Queen Mary Centre for British Studies

Thursday Plenary Roundtable I: 'Writing the history of Britain today'

- Sarah Crook, Swansea University
- Alana Harris, KCL
- Miles Taylor, Humboldt
- Chair: Matthew Hilton, QMUL
- Comment: Mike Braddick, Oxford

As was set out in the original call for papers, this conference asks, what might a history of Britain and the world which speaks to the problems of our current world look like? To kickstart the collective attempt to answer this question over the two days, we turn to the editors of forthcoming general histories of Britain to draw on their experiences of deciding what is to be included in the history of the British world. Miles Taylor is the general editor of the *New Cambridge History of Britain*, Alana Harris (with William Whyte) is editing the *Oxford Handbook of Modern British History* and Sarah Crook (with Sarah Kenny) is putting together the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary British History*. We invite them to reflect on:

- Their assessment of the current vitality of the field and recent productive research agendas, topics, themes and questions
- The decisions on which topics to include and which to exclude
- How their volumes differ from previous iterations
- Their intended audiences and thoughts on how British history can be taught in universities
- How the pasts they are compiling speak to our present
- Periodisation, or how the themes in British history change when that history is extended to well before the modern period.

Mike Braddick has been invited to comment on this panel, reflecting also on how the conference looks from the perspective of an early modernist.

Friday Plenary roundtable II: The purpose of British history writing in today's political, cultural, and higher education landscape

- Robert Saunders, QMUL
- Ria Kapoor, QMUL
- Kennetta Hammond Perry, Northwestern
- Charlotte Riley, Southampton
- Claire Langhamer, IHR
- Chair: Emma Griffin, QMUL

To conclude the conference, this plenary session will return to some of the questions raised in the call for papers. What is the purpose of researching and writing British history today? How should the historical profession, broadly defined, navigate an environment characterized by

both strong popular demand for historical knowledge of various forms and the increasingly patchy coverage of undergraduate history education at a time of financial disorder in higher education. What can historical imagination, interpretation and understanding contribute to public life?

Panels

1.1 Beyond the Secularisation Thesis – Rethinking Christianity, Faith, and Belief in Modern Britain'

Speakers: David Geiringer, Matthew Grimley, Grace Heaton, William Whyte
Chair: Alana Harris

It is more than two decades since Callum Brown published his pathbreaking *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001), innovatively reframing but ultimately rescheduling the terminal decline of mainstream Christianity and the desacralisation of the public sphere. The historiographical response in years following was a slew of books and articles – some authored by members of this panel – analysing the 'religious crisis of the 1960s', autopsying 'the strange death' or 'passing' of Protestant Britain, or jettisoning such assessments with revisionist attempts to 'redefine' or 'rescript' religious narratives. As a flexible metanarrative, the secularisation thesis has been a beguilingly persuasive descriptive, causative, and analytical framework for explaining the profound shifts in Christian religious affiliation and practise since the Second World War.

Nevertheless, its limitations as a heuristic, not least in its near-exclusively 'white' Christian focus, have become increasingly apparent in recent histories of contemporary Britain and its explanatory certainties now look rather frayed. No where is this more apparent than in scholarship that has diversified post-imperial narratives or interleaved spirituality with psychological, feminist, or utopian/reformist theories. Debates about 'permissiveness', the demise of a conservative moral consensus, and sexuality have preoccupied reframing agendas to date, but new perspectives attentive to intersectional identities, transnational contexts, religio-racialised identities, and intellectual and embodied articulations of belief (across and beyond Christian denominations) are now needed.

This panel seeks to open out new vistas for understanding the presence and importance of attending to faith affiliations and religiously (and ethnically) diverse communities in post-1960s historical narratives, showcasing new approaches that jettison the secularisation paradigm with its stale debates and causative dead-ends. Each speaker will offer a short paper of 10 minutes, allowing time for 30 mins Q&A.

Dr Grace Heaton (Mansfield College, University of Oxford) – 'Following where we are divinely led': Christianity, Feminism, and Activism during the late twentieth century

Professor Matthew Grimley (Merton College, University of Oxford) – 'The Making of Multi-Faith Britain'

Dr David Geiringer (Queen Mary University of London) – 'Faith, place and race: vicarages and the crisis of the inner city'

Dr Alana Harris (King's College London) – 'Suffer the Little Children'? Historicising the physical and sexual abuse of children within post-war Catholic and Anglican contexts

Professor William Whyte, St John's College, University of Oxford – Let's (not) talk about sex: deliberate silences and the discussion of sexuality in the contemporary Church of England

1.2 'Sites of Fracture – Doing Environmental History at the Margins of Capitalism'

Speakers: Erika Hanna, Mo Moulton, Kevin O'Sullivan
Chair: Matthew Kelly

In our current moment of extraordinary ecological and economic challenges, there is a global search for alternatives to models of extractive capitalism. While these alternatives offer critiques of the global reach and power of modern economic processes, they are often profoundly local in their application. Using Ireland and the work of scholars like Anna Tsing as our starting points, this panel will discuss ways of historicising these margins as sites from which to see beyond capitalism's claim to be all-encompassing. We will focus on how such experiments - the messy, complex interactions between global capitalism and local alternative forms of organisation that we call 'sites of fracture' - have manifested historically and where and how have they been successful. We will also discuss new methods for historicising economic life from those margins: the sources we use to reckon with economic expansion and environmental degradation, and how this shapes our response to the contemporary challenges of living in modernity's sites of fracture. Finally, in conversation with our audience, we will reflect on the applicability of the Irish case for global and comparative contexts. We are especially interested in considering how these histories might be part of or in conversation with UK and British histories, writ large.

Papers Dr Erika Hanna (University of Bristol)
Rainfall, climate resilience, and markets in Limerick, 1899-1932

Situated on the west coast of Ireland, facing the Atlantic, Limerick is a major port both for the export of Irish timber and cattle to Britain, and for the movement of goods between Ireland and north America. This favourable geographic positioning as a port, however, means that the city encounters the full force of weather systems as they roll in from the Atlantic, leading to a notably high number of rainfall days. This paper uses the letters of Joseph Peacocke, Limerick City Surveyor between 1899-1932, to explore how he attempted to mitigate the problem of the weather. Through new road surfaces, new drainage systems, and new materials, he attempted to keep the city's transport networks, docks, and markets functioning in all weathers, a problem which intensified as conflict came to the city in the 1910s and 1920s. However, these infrastructural solutions often had unexpected consequences for how the city functioned for its human and more-than-human residents. Through an exploration of this story this paper historicises how rainfall has been understood and experienced, and explores how local manifestations of the climate emergency have been produced through longer histories of capital and infrastructure.

Professor Mo Moulton (University of Birmingham)
An Anti-Politics Machine? Dairy Co-operatives and Politics in Northern Ireland

The Irish co-operative movement in the early twentieth century emphasised that its societies were free from politics and sectarianism – a space apart from issues of nationalism. In 1941, the president of the Ulster Agricultural Organisation Society underscored this point when he sought government support for the movement. Dairy co-operatives were, he argued, often "the only channel of communal contact between Catholic and Protestant." Suppliers and management committee members – sometimes including "clergy of both denominations" – worked together in their mutual interest, making the societies a precious resource in the region. Such a viewpoint chimes with more recent analyses of co-operatives as a form of economic development designed to be, in James Ferguson's famous phrase, an 'anti-politics machine', diverting attention from national or party-political aspirations and into ostensibly apolitical economic channels. In this paper, I consider how far this view of co-operatives fit with the local realities. Exploring attacks on creameries in the early 1920s as well as evidence of membership and communal engagement, I argue that co-operative creameries enabled politics by other means in the early decades of Northern Ireland's existence. I end by asking what meaning and lessons this history might have for present-day co-operatives.

Dr Kevin O'Sullivan (University of Galway)
Community action in the Wasteocene: A case study from Ireland

How can we use the 'small spaces' of global history to better tell the story of communities living at the intersections of capitalism and climate change? To answer that question, I draw on a case study of a pharmaceutical plant that was never built: the Merrell Dow factory proposed for the small Irish village of Killeagh in the late 1980s. The paper is divided into four parts. I begin with an overview of the case, from the initial planning stages in the mid-1980s, through successive public hearings, to the eventual withdrawal of Merrell Dow in 1989 and victory for the coalition of farmers, fishermen, artists and food producers who opposed it. From this starting point, I suggest three (overlapping) methods for reading the history of global capitalism and climate change. First, I ask how stories like this can help us with what John-Paul Ghobrial (2019) called the *jeux d'échelles*: keeping the 'small spaces' of historical experience in the same frame as globalising processes like capitalism and climate change. Second, I use Marco Armiero's 'Wasteocene' concept to analyse what this case can tell us about the global production of waste at the margins of the Global North (by 1988 Ireland was the world's twelfth-largest producer of pharmaceutical products). In the final section of the paper, I explore how communities have resisted the totalising nature of capitalism. Drawing on the work of scholars like Anna Tsing, I ask: how have alternative forms of organising manifested historically and where and how have they been successful?

1.3 'The Everyday and Experience – Transformational Histories'

Speakers Caitríona Beaumont, Eve Colpus, Ruth Davidson, Laura King, Tracey Loughran, Laura Tisdall
Chair: *Tracey Loughran*

This roundtable brings together in conversation historians who in different ways are working with ideas and meanings of the everyday and experience in their fields. Each of us will reflect on how we define the everyday and experience in modern British histories and how this impacts on our methods of investigation. We will respond to several questions and discuss how 'new histories' and possibly more 'democratic histories' can be written by centring the everyday and experience, and experience of the everyday.

The discussions will bring together orientations to the everyday and experience in histories of children, family, health, and welfare, drawing on participants' recently published or forthcoming interventions: Caitríona Beaumont, Eve Colpus & Ruth Davidson (eds), *Everyday Welfare in Modern British History: Experience, Expertise and Activism* (Palgrave, 2024); Hannah Froom, Tracey Loughran, Kate Mahoney, and Daisy Payling (eds), *'Everyday Health', Embodiment, and Selfhood since 1950* (MUP, 2024); Laura King, *Living with the Dead: Memories, Histories, and the Stories Families Tell in Modern Britain* (OUP, 2025); and Laura Tisdall, *We Have Come To Be Destroyed: Growing Up In Cold War Britain* (Yale, 2026).

These publications build on an emerging body of work that uses these concepts as a key historical frame, including Claire Langhamer's influential article, 'Who the hell are ordinary people? Ordinariness as a category of historical analysis' (2018), Jennifer Crane, *Child Protection in England, 1960–2000: Expertise, Experience, and Emotion* (Palgrave, 2018) and Siân Pooley and Jonathan Taylor (eds), *Children's Experiences of Welfare in Modern Britain* (UoL Press, 2021).

This 'turn' towards the everyday and experience in historical research aims towards better understanding of lived experience, social relations, and how ordinary people altered the world around them and shaped the communities and nations in which they lived/live. But what do we as historians mean when we use the terms everyday and experience? Whose everydays and experiences are we talking about? What are the methodological and ethical implications of embracing the everyday and experience as concepts, and can adopting this approach better articulate and produce more democratic (if more complex and messier) accounts of the past?

Our roundtable provides a space to tease out several of the central challenges posed in this *British History Today* call for papers. Our conversation will contribute to the conference overall through the sharing of our experience and expertise in how we seek to 'open up the past anew' and write histories that speak more directly to the 'problems of the current world'.

Roundtable Participants
Caitríona Beaumont, London South Bank University (beaumoca@lsbu.ac.uk): histories of female activism and family history
Eve Colpus, University of Southampton (E.C.Colpus@soton.ac.uk): histories of childhood, youth and technology use
Ruth Davidson, IHR, University of London (ruth@davidson.net): histories of women and the welfare state
Laura King, University of Leeds (l.king@leeds.ac.uk): histories of the family and publicly engaged methods
Laura Tisdall, Newcastle University (laura.tisdall@newcastle.ac.uk): histories of childhood
Tracey Loughran, University of Essex (t.loughran@essex.ac.uk): histories of gender and health

1.4 'Past Politics, Present Histories – Interdisciplinary Reflections'

Speakers: Emily Robinson, Colm Murphy, Camilla Schofield, Jonathan Moss
Chair: Madeleine Davis

British political history has long been seen as in decline, although political topics flourish under other names. This panel looks outside internal dynamics within our field to consider: what does British history look like from the perspective of political studies? The four panellists are historians, currently working in Politics departments. They will draw on their own experiences to consider what political historians might learn from -- and offer to -- such an encounter.

Modern British historians have recently explored the popular reach of sociology from the mid-twentieth century. The prominence of (flawed) categories like the 'left-behind' in contemporary public consciousness suggests that political science similarly shapes vernacular understandings of political events. Such explanations rely on interpretations of historical processes, such as globalisation, decolonisation, and educational expansion. But they do so in broad-brush terms, distinct from historians' multivocal accounts of contingency and contestation. This leaves historians at a disadvantage in commanding public attention (and funding!).

In 2016, Hugh Pemberton suggested that political historians had lost sight of the importance of elite actors and institutions, as well as the 'big picture'. He argued historians should engage with political science, explore causal explanations, and tell bigger stories. Nearly a decade on, this panel will ask:

- Why have political scientists been so effective at shaping public understandings of the past?
- How might we learn from that in developing and presenting historical accounts of modern Britain?
- Would historians benefit from more explicit theorising and modelling, 'big picture' analyses, and focus on causal explanations, of the kind that characterise political science?
- What would be lost in doing so? Where might we want to push back? What important developments in our field have led us to be cautious of these approaches?
- What can a historian's *perspective*, rather than just historical data or case studies, offer political scientists?

2.1 'Education and Public History'

Saffron East, Dave Hitchcock, Mark Liebenrood
Chair: David Geiringer

Saffron East: The Antiracist University? A future-facing history of antiracist pedagogies in UK Higher Education

What is the purpose of researching, teaching and learning British history today? In this paper I seek to answer these questions through the lens of equity in British Higher Education (HE). I present my findings at the early stages of a new project in which I plan to map out the history of antiracist pedagogies in UK universities. The paper explores the historical context of these radical approaches to teaching and learning in HE, starting with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, and comparing its pedagogies to contemporary decolonial approaches, British Black Studies and the Free Black University. I outline what was/ is radical about the teaching and learning in each case, why these approaches were taken, and how each has been shaped by its historical context. Through this study, the paper illuminates the ways that HE Institutions have adopted, diluted and co-opted radical approaches. As we reach the end of the 'decolonial moment' in UK HE, this research provides critical insights into the work that scholars have done, and are continuing to do, to make HE a more equitable and safe space for racialised and other minoritised students. I explore the positive, groundbreaking work of these scholars with the aim of signalling towards transformative practices for the future. Intersectionality is crucial, and my focus on antiracist pedagogies is not done with the intent of separating connected modes of oppression. Instead, this analytical lens is chosen to move beyond the recent focus on the 'decolonial' and demonstrate that there has been a longer history of radical pedagogical practices in Britain, that HE professionals can continue to draw from.

Dr. Dave Hitchcock: British History, Historical Bullshit, and the Crisis of 'Information Hygiene'.

British History, like British universities, is in a complex state of crisis both internal to our lecture halls and campuses, and external in the form of a sustained informational assault. This crisis is not one of the profession's making, but it is one to which we must respond. In this paper I want to articulate one part of the complex challenge facing us, connected to a piece I am doing with History Workshop. We are in a profound, arguably existential, crisis about the *divergence* of what the academic historical profession *knows now* about British, colonial, and imperial pasts--our broad contours of productive agreement and debate visible in scholarship on empire, on class, on culture, on unfreedom and inequality, gender, environment, emotion--and what significant parts of the wider British and international publics know, or can find out, about those same British pasts.

The reception of scholarship on empire and racial capitalism demonstrates this rupture clearly. The far-right populist Steve Bannon described the technique behind this high-tech manufactured ignorance as 'flooding the zone with shit'. 'Historical bullshit' would be my phrase for one of the most common forms of disinformation used by Bannon and his ilk. I propose that, in order to affect the course of our present, historians must marshal our complex understanding of what truth and fact are and articulate their basis in historical evidence, and we must now consistently combat historical misinformation in public and in our classes. We must train students to be able to find 'clean information' about the past and to unpack its complexities themselves in a hostile information environment. We cannot retreat into the study of the past for its own sake. Dire Orwellian or Churchillian warnings about 'who controls the past' no longer seem that outlandish, given the advance of large-language model chatbots into both our classrooms and into public discourse and public understanding about the shape of the past. It is my hope that this conference can be a beginning in the formulation of our answer.

Dr Mark Liebenrood: Museum closure and access to public history

Museums are one of the main ways that the public can encounter material culture. Yet hundreds of museums have closed in the UK since 1960, with a significant majority of those closures occurring after

2000. Closures have happened across the country, affecting museums of all types and sizes. Although a few closures in the UK and elsewhere have received historical attention, most closures have not been examined closely, if at all. In this paper I argue that investigating the reasons for closure shows that museums are embedded in social and political networks, and are consequently often dependent upon those relationships for support and survival. Exploring those networks reveals connections between museums and both local and central government, independent museum trusts, private collecting and philanthropy, to name a few.

Drawing upon data from the Mapping Museums database and the ongoing project at Birkbeck, 'Museum closure in the UK', as well as archives and a range of secondary sources, I show how the causes of closure are varied but also occur in distinctive patterns. These highlight the many difficulties that museums can face in maintaining a public presence and looking after their collections. Although these include the often-highlighted closures of local authority museums due to austerity and budget cuts, I look beyond these to less well known impacts of government policy and embrace different types of museums that face difficulties such as retaining land and
buildings or covering their costs, or private museum owners who choose to close for
personal reasons.

Although museums have lately been a subject of debate with regards to decolonisation and repatriation of objects, here I draw attention to closure, its consequences for access to collections and the implications that may have for the public availability of material culture and its histories. Mark Liebenrood, Postdoctoral Researcher, School of Historical Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, m.liebenrood@bbk.ac.uk

2.2 'Borders, Beliefs, and Bodies – Race in Modern Britain'

Speakers: Shahmima Akhtar, Saima Nasar, Rob Waters, Hannah Elias
Chair: Leslie James

'Brown, White and Green: Whose Landscape?'
Shahmima Akhtar (Birmingham)

I research how marginalised communities, whether the Irish or South Asian have authenticated their selfhood within a majority hostile state. For instance, the case study of exhibitions enabled me to interrogate how the Irish imagined and re-imagined their person, community and nation over successive decades using the platform of display. This paper will radically rethink health and wellness in Britain. I will map my current project on the more liminal ways in which marginalised bodies exist in public spaces, whether in urban industrial centres or the hills and fells of the British Isles. By broadening my scope from imagined urban utopias within parks, cities and Fairs to wild utopias in Britain whether mountainous or coastal landscapes, I am interested in investigating how marginalised communities such as women, and particularly South Asian women, navigated Britain's vast countryside from the nineteenth century era. How belonging has historically been imagined in Britain tends to tie with a person's employment, labour and profit-making capacity but what happens when we shift our lens to think about enjoyment, nature and rest. By interrogating how South Asian women utilised these spaces I intend to ask questions about where racially marginalised bodies are considered acceptable and how transgression into Britain's wild landscapes challenges and subverts who is entitled to such spaces. This project will therefore move from the imagined space of the fairground to the actual lived space of the British Isles. The paper itself will focus on the health benefits of being outdoors and how marginalisation has typically meant these spaces have been out of bounds for racialised bodies.

'State Racism, Feminist Activism, and the South Asian Family: The Case of Anwar Ditta'
Saima Nasar (Bristol)

Anwar Ditta was born in Birmingham in 1953. After her parents separated, she moved to Pakistan where she later married her husband, Shuja Uddin, and had three children: Kamran, Imran, and Saima. In 1975

Anwar returned to Britain with her husband. She decided to leave her children with their grandparents until she could find a suitable home and fixed employment. When Anwar and Shuja applied for family reunification, however, the children were refused entry on the grounds of 'disputed parentage'. Anwar's return to Britain came at a time when the Home Office was tasked with reducing the migration of dependent youth and, in particular, 'bogus children' from countries like Pakistan (Natarajan, 2023). Immigration officials treated South Asians with suspicion. Their attempts to expose forged documentation and the perceived duplicity of South Asian migrants created the conditions to legalise forms of gendered and racial exclusion.

Anwar appealed the Home Office's decision. She provided birth certificates, a marriage certificate, passports, and testimonies. Her case was again refused on the grounds that 'the couple had not established that they were the parents of the three children.' Still, Anwar's case received widespread publicity. Despite her local MP's refusal to support her, the 'Anwar Ditta Defence Committee' was set up to draw attention to the racialised exclusion of Anwar, her family, and others like her. In March 1981, Granada Television sent an investigative team to report the case in a World in Action documentary. Blood tests were carried out which conclusively proved the children were Anwar's. After six years of separation, the family were eventually reunited.

This paper examines the life and activism of Anwar Ditta to demonstrate how state racism underpinned the ideological construction of South Asian women in post-war Britain. It reveals how border controls not only articulated racialised discourses of South Asian women as passive dependents, but were also used to restrict their right to family life. Similar to the cases of Jaswinder Kaur, Nasira Begum, Afia Begum, and Nasreen Akhtar, Anwar's plight highlighted how South Asian women were not deemed credible witnesses of their own lived experiences (Wilson, 1984). As such, this paper sets out how a South Asian feminist activist milieu in 1970s and 1980s Britain cohered around the fight for citizenship, family, and bodily rights. This not only challenged stereotypes that structured popular conceptions of British South Asians, but it also confronted the neglect of gender within male-dominated class-based and anti-racist politics.

'An Aliens Bill, another Aliens Bill, another Aliens Bill, and another Aliens Bill'
Rob Waters (Queen Mary)

Between 1894 and 1914, ten Aliens Bills came before parliament. Only two passed, but the possibility of their passage shaped the political atmosphere of the period. The majority of these bills were levelled explicitly against the influx of Eastern European Jews. In this paper, I focus on the reaction of Jewish groups to the attempted restrictions on immigration, charting the movement from their campaigns to repeal or amend the Aliens Act of 1905 to their growing recognition of the permanence of immigration control, and the likelihood of its increased severity. I show, also, how the very language of the 'Aliens Bill' took on a rhetorical purchase within Jewish political culture in this period, used to describe wider processes of border-making within Britain, and indeed within Jewish institutions too, between British Jews and Jewish aliens. These were border-making processes that exceeded the administrative machinery of the Aliens Act itself, but that nonetheless represented new and important changes to the varying rights of British subjects and aliens. I make an argument for viewing these processes together, as collectively contributing to the consolidation of Britain not as a multicultural but as a multi-status society in the early decades of the twentieth century. I argue, also, that proposals of, implementations of, and resistances to borders, in this wider purview, were repeatedly overdetermined by questions of race. As the border became an entrenched part of British political culture and social life, it became so as a means for regulating racial otherness as an external and internal threat.

'Race and religion in anti-racist organising in Britain, 1968-1975'
Hannah Elias (Goldsmiths, University of London)

This paper will explore the racial politics that operated within British anti-racist coalitions and anti-racist organisations during the late 1960s and early 1970s in Britain. Britain was home to a vibrant anti-racist movement in the mid-to-late 20th century, one that drew influence from prewar anti-colonial movements, and from active sites of resistance across the Black Atlantic. While Britain had a largely

atomised anti-racist movement compared to the United States; groups representing Bangladeshi, South Asian, African or West Indian workers as well as regional anti-racist groups banded together in coalition, and worked effectively to advance shared aims to address racist practices in housing, employment and education.

This paper will examine how racial categories, identities and ideas of race made themselves felt within coalitional movements and anti-racist organisations in 1960s Britain. It will ask: how did forms of solidarity emerge between groups composed of British citizens from disparate parts of the former Empire? How did Black Power and notions of 'political Blackness' shape the politics of racial identity, community and solidarity in the late 1960s? And what role did short or long-term alliances with white organisers in the New Left, Labour, or religious organisations play in anti-racist coalitional politics? It will also explore politics of colourism, multi-faith coalition, and the extent to which some white activists understood their own 'whiteness' while operating in anti-racist spaces.

In 1964, inspired by a visit from Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. and thanks to the work of London-based organisers including Marion Glean, the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) formed to unify discrete anti-racist movements under a centralised organisation and leadership. Less well known is the work of another movement that formed in response to Dr King's visits to the UK: the Martin Luther King Foundation, and its International Personnel employment agency. These organisations both provide useful opportunities to unpick some of the complex racial politics that operated within the UK's anti-racist movement.

2.3 **'Industrial Sectors'**

Speakers: Helen Glew, John Greenacre, Jim Tomlinson
Chair: Ria Kapoor

Helen Glew: Waves of nostalgia and unease: the end of the typing pool, the desktop computer revolution and women's office work in 1980s and 1990s Britain

This paper explores the cultural reactions to the abandonment of typing pools in white-collar workplaces as the word processor and later the desktop computer emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. The typing pool had been equal parts denigrated as a 'dead end' job for women whilst being recognised as an essential part of office landscapes worldwide. With the changes signalled by the typing pool's demise, however, social and cultural commentary revealed both anxieties about women's position in the world of work and a sense of nostalgia in the face of imagined futures dominated by technology.

The paper discusses this commentary in detail, using an array of newspaper and magazine coverage and examples from popular culture. It builds on work by Allison Elias (2022) on women as secretaries, who argues that women's white collar clerical work has often been overlooked as a subject of study for the post-Second World War period precisely because of its everydayness and ubiquity. Furthermore, the paper argues that the advent of the personal desktop computer was seen contemporaneously as a point from which there was no turning back. More widely, reactions to the end of the typing pool reveal the sense of unease about women's position in office hierarchies and the extent to which women's employment was still contingent and precarious as the twentieth century came to a close.

Helen Glew
University of Westminster
h.glew@westminster.ac.uk

John Greenacre: Competing Interests: The British Fishing Industry at the Close of the Second World War

The populist view of the current British fishing industry is that its dramatic post Second World War decline is somehow the result of European machinations. The blame has often been cited as inequitable

quotas set by the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Union (EU) or the unscrupulous fishing methods adopted by European fishermen. Today, the British fishing industry's contribution to national GDP is negligible but its history still resonates strongly in many coastal communities which in turn exert inordinate political influence via their constituent MPs. There was much talk of a reinvigorated fishing industry around the process of Brexit, but that revival has failed to materialise.

The harsh but inescapable truth is that the British fishing industry's decline is due to steadily reducing catches, the result of decades of overfishing. There was however, in the wake of the Second World War, a fleeting opportunity to place the industry on an economically and environmentally sustainable footing. The reduction in fishing activity during the Second World War allowed the issue of overfishing to be studied and understood. A government committee under the guidance of eminent biologist Edward Russell reported at the end of 1941 and suggested the means by which the industry could be placed on a secure footing post war.

Despite Russell's scientific findings his recommendations were ignored. They were overruled by the interests of other government departments including the Ministry of Food and the Admiralty. His concept of an international solution failed to take hold in post war Europe. The result was an immediate return to overfishing which led to declining fish stocks and, as a result, a steady economic decline in Britain's fishing industry that persists to this day.

Jim Tomlinson: When was 'industrial Britain'?

Deindustrialization has become a widely term in discussion about modern Britain in political and popular, as well as academic circles. Its use throws into relief the question of what came before: what were the defining characteristics of the British 'industrial economy' which preceded deindustrialization? This matters because of the way the idea of a lost industrial past, often nostalgic and problematic, reverberates through understandings of Britain's history and current condition.

The shift to industry in Britain was strikingly early: ''the critical structural shift of labour away from agriculture to industry occurred during the early modern period." (Broadberry et al 2015, p.343). By 1759 industry employed a third of all workers, services almost 30 per cent. These figures can be seen to challenge both the idea that it was the industrial revolution which inaugurated 'industrial society' and that the rise of the service sector is a 'post-industrial' phenomenon. Industrial employment did expand in the nineteenth century but much of this was either confined to one sub-sector, coal, or was not in what most of us would regard as "modern industry" (Samuel, 1977). Industrial employment *never* involved half the working population, and the numbers stagnated between the wars, enjoyed a temporary boost in the 1940s and 1950s, before entering into sustained contraction.

The fact that most people never worked in industry is one reason for regarding the idea of an 'industrial economy' as requiring interrogation and asking how useful it is in thinking about Britain's long-term economic trajectory. Taking inspiration from Samuel's (1977) interrogation of what the' industrial society' of mid-nineteenth century Britain looked like, this paper offers some suggestions about the mid-twentieth.

Broadberry et al. *British Economic Growth 1270-1870* (Cambridge, 2015).
Samuel, 'The workshop of the world', *History Workshop* 3, 1 (1977), pp.6-72

2.4 ‘Wannabe – Writing Histories of Women and Girls on the Cusp of the Millennium’

Speakers: Agnes Arnold-Forster, Sarah Crook, Charlotte Lydia Riley, Eve Worth
Chair: Hannah Charnock

***Wannabe*: writing histories of women and girls on the cusp of the millennium**

The Spice Girls; ‘Blair’s Babes’; ‘ladettes’ and ‘thugettes’; flashy City boys; David Beckham’s sarong: the mid- to late-1990s and early 2000s were a time of flux, optimism and anxiety about gender. Aided by David Bowie, Patsy Kensit, Noel Gallagher and Geri Halliwell – all of whom in different situations adorned themselves with a union jack - Britain projected itself as a creative cradle for fun feminism and confident, rowdy working-class masculinity. But even while ‘Cool Britannia’ reigned supreme, Britons grappled with enduring questions about motherhood and equity, as well as the social implications of this new ‘cool’ for expressions and experiences of gender and femininity. Concerns were never far from the surface that boundaries were breaking down and that moral decay was an unescapable by-product of the unruly phenomenon of ‘girl power’. Perhaps inevitably, discussions around 1990s and 2000s womanhood were inextricably bound up with debates over power, the nation and the welfare state, and ideas about class, race, and sex. This panel explores women’s experiences and identities at this curious historical moment, asking what it means to write these histories and who gets to play a central role in our navigation of them.

Papers:
Sarah Crook (Swansea): Feminism for the *Everywoman*: 1990s womanhood and the new old fights
Eve Worth (Exeter): Women's Social Mobility in 1990s and 2000s Britain

Charlotte Lydia Riley: Girl Power or powerless women? Exploring class, gender and identity with Bridget and Di
Agnes Arnold-Forster (Edinburgh): Giving birth to the millennium: motherhood and maternity in 1990s Britain
Chair: **Hannah Charnock (Bristol)**

3.1 Location: ‘Britain and Europe’

Speakers: James Dennison, Zuzanna Rog, Rob Saunders
Chair: James Ellison

Dr James Dennison: Europhoria! Explaining Britain’s Pro-European Moment, 1988–1992

Britain’s relationship with ‘Europe’ has long been described in overwhelmingly negative terms: at elite level, an ‘awkward partner’, and, at popular level, composed of ‘reluctant Europeans’. Typically, in late 2015, The Economist dedicated its cover to ‘The Reluctant European’ and a nine-article special report variously described British attitudes to Europe as ‘natural ambivalence’, ‘always [having] been rather half-hearted’ and ‘a transactional business’, with ‘deep . . . opposition ’ whereas for other members ‘the project has always been a matter of the heart’ (The Economist, 2015). Academic uses of the term are numerous, framing British Euroscepticism as unique, constant and precluding any pro-Europeanism beyond instrumentalism fuelled by post-imperial desperation (Appendix 1). Indeed, well-documented moments of the relationship – the UK’s initial dismissal of the project, repeated rejected applications, rebates, opt-outs, vetoes, vocal challenges from media and statespersons and finally a dramatic popular and governmental rejection of membership altogether – support this characterisation.

While this account is compelling, it is incomplete. Indeed, there was a time when British citizens were overwhelmingly united in seeing a bright European future as the focus of their ambitions for their country and, in many cases, themselves. Similarly, British governments took the lead in deepening the

European project with profound, lasting consequences for both the United Kingdom and 'Europe'. From roughly the mid-1980s until the early 1990s, rather than being an 'awkward partner' of 'reluctant Europeans', the United Kingdom could better be described as Europe's primary 'proactive partner' composed of 'enthusiastic Europeans' keen for many aspects of deeper integration, owing to the elision of an unusual set of circumstances. This period can be labelled with a portmanteau used by media in the United Kingdom, Europe and beyond to describe the contemporary political, economic and cultural sentiment of the time: Europhoria! (e.g. Lagerfeld, 1990).

This article uses a range of qualitative and quantitative sources to describe and explain an anomalous period in which Britons were highly 'enthusiastic Europeans'. This 'Europhoria' is interpreted using an expanded 'calculation, cues, and community' theoretical framework, including: (1) calculations driven mainly by anticipation of the '1992' single market launch and 'social chapter' and trust engendered by unrealised negative predictions raised during the 1975 referendum; (2) proactive domestic European policy leading to harmonious, influential, insider status; (3) benchmarking of comparable, better performing European economies and (4) newfound belief that Europe was Britain's most important international community. 'Europhoria' interplayed with a sense of European community and geopolitical possibilities stimulated by the fall of the Berlin Wall and unusually 'European' cultural trends in media, sports and arts. The reversal of these factors – in some cases at pan-European level – explains the British return to Euroscepticism thereafter. These findings have profound theoretical implications for public attitudes to Europe and historical understandings of Britain and Europe.
Dr. James Dennison, Leverhulme Early Career Fellow, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of East Anglia | Norwich Research Park | Norwich | NR4 7TJ

Zuzanna Rog: Britons Going Abroad: What a History of Holidays Can Tell Us About Britain's Relationship with Continental Europe

Following Brexit, public discourse increasingly focused on the relationship between Britain and continental Europe. Many people, including scholars, have since attempted to understand why Britons voted to leave. Although this is not my focus, academic literature on this has revealed the limited nature of our understanding of ordinary people's attitudes towards Europe prior to Brexit. Research on Britain and Europe post-1950 is dominated by top-down accounts of the EEC and EU. While studies have termed Britons 'reluctant Europeans', they rarely consider the general public's views towards Europe, or only do so regarding political and economic matters. To better understand Britain's relationship with Europe, it is necessary to seriously consider the views of ordinary individuals towards other aspects of it. Historians have highlighted the significance that daily activities and popular culture had on Britons' mindsets, national identities, and collective attitudes, yet while some influences on these (like Americanisation) have garnered great interest, European influence has not. This paper argues for the value of investigating this, and of exploring how individuals engaged and interacted with Europe throughout everyday life. Reflecting on existing studies, and my current PhD research on holidays to Europe between 1950-2000, I will explore the crucial findings this seemingly mundane history reveals. Using extracts from accounts of holidaying abroad from the Mass Observation Archive, I will discuss the valuable insights these show about the mindsets and attitudes of Britons towards European countries, people, and cultures. Additionally, I will explore how we can use these testimonies to infer the impact that trips abroad had on wider British society and culture, and on individuals' beliefs, behaviours, and sense of belonging. Altogether this paper highlights the benefits and need for such a social and cultural approach, to develop a better understanding of wider issues such as the relationship between Britain and Europe.

Robert Saunders: Brexit, European Integration and the Responsibilities of History

Ever since 1962, when Hugh Gaitskell called entry to the European Community 'the end of a thousand years of history', Britain's European debate has been closely bound up with understandings of the past. In 1975, the *Sunday Times* commissioned historians such as E.P. Thompson, A.J.P. Taylor, Hugh Thomas and Jan Morris to make the historical case for or against membership. Entry formed a starting-

point for JGA Pocock's reconceptualization of Britishness, while William Speck identified entry in 1973 as the end of British history. While some cast membership as an act of historical violence, others saw in it an expression of modernity that left Eurosceptics 'out of sync with the direction of history'. In the 2016 referendum, groups such as 'Historians for Britain', led by the Cambridge academics David Abulafia and Robert Tombs, made a historical case for Brexit, drawing a counterblast from Niall Ferguson, Simon Schama and 300 'Historians for History'.
As this suggests, history has not been a silent witness in Britain's European debate. The EEC/EU has been cast as an ahistorical project or as a binding of historical wounds; as marking the demise of British history or as the fulfilment of its historical mission. Debates about exceptionalism, national identity and 'natural' markets all make claims about the past and invoke its authority in the present. That raises important questions about the relationship between political and historical commitments, and the distinction – if one exists – between historically-informed politics and politically-motivated history. As historians struggle to write the history of Brexit, this paper considers the responsibilities of the historian when history itself becomes the object of political controversy, and the challenge of writing on subjects that bring past and present into an emotive and consequential exchange.

3.2 'Information technology and Artificial Intelligence'

Speakers: Kate Bradley, Finola Finn, Christine Grandy
Chair: Georgios Varouxakis

Dr Kate Bradley, University of Kent, k.bradley@kent.ac.uk: Dialling it up: telephone helplines, information culture and citizenship in Britain from ca.1965 to 2000

To understand British history in the twenty-first century requires an understanding of the so-called digital revolution that gained pace in the later part of the twentieth century, as communication underpins so many aspects of public and private life. Examining the development of computing, the Internet and the World Wide Web is an essential part of this history, but the digital revolution was not only experienced there – other technologies were also part of this shift.

As I will discuss in this paper, the emergence of telephone helplines from the 1960s reflects both the technology becoming more widely available, either through domestic installation or public phone boxes, and changing expectations about when and where seeking help and advice with private problems should take place. Telephone helplines emerged as a radical response to the problems faced by marginalised groups in the 1950s and 1960s, but moved into the voluntary and public sector mainstream in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, provoking periodic culture wars along the way. By the 1990s, the helpline was part of the reimagining of 'modern' government to be at the convenience of the citizen, as per the *Modernising Government* white paper of 1999.

Looking at the growth of helplines enables us to explore the social and cultural shifts around seeking information and how these laid the foundations for popular use of the web in the twenty-first century and the role of the digital in public life. In methodological terms, helplines also prompt us to consider wider questions of how we can do histories of the things that we use to do things, and in doing so to critically explore how the medium may shape the message – and the consequences of this.

Finola Finn, University of Luxembourg, False Parallels: Historical Analogies and Public Perceptions of AI

In Britain and around the world, historical analogies are frequently used in public discourse on artificial intelligence (AI). From articles in The Guardian to heated Reddit threads, the rise of AI is often likened to the Industrial Revolution or the invention of the printing press. Historical parallels are also drawn between AI systems and earlier inventions that disrupted cognitive or creative practices: ChatGPT, for

example, is claimed by some to simply be the new calculator, while AI image generators are likened to the camera. While in some cases such analogies are employed to advocate for caution and increased regulation, they are frequently used to normalise the adoption of AI by suggesting historical precedent. Indeed, AI industry leaders (such as OpenAI's CTO and the president of Microsoft) have used historical analogy in public communications in order to both minimize perceived disruption and frame technological change as inevitable.

This paper argues that, in many cases, such analogies are reductive and misleading – outlining some key particularities of AI technologies and historical contexts that render overly simplistic parallels unhelpful. It then moves on to argue that, although these analogies may often be problematic, historians of Britain and beyond should not dismiss them out of hand, but rather actively engage with this popular tendency to look to the past to make sense of AI's destabilising effects. Drawing on scholarship on historical analogy and analogical reasoning from history, philosophy of science, and psychology, the paper proposes more nuanced and clearly defined historical comparisons that highlight the biases, monopolised power dynamics,and potential benefits of AI uptake.

Christine Grandy: Data's Past and Future in 20th Century Britain

In 1984, the Data Protection Act passed and immediately became unfit for the time. With exemptions for organisations gathering data on paper rather than through the new 'micro-computers,' the Act was meant to assure European interests that the UK was taking the exchange of data seriously, yet its arrival elicited a collective shrug from most of the public. Those most preoccupied with data-sharing were parts of the public sector aiming to make efficiencies as well as racialised people and groups working on their behalf who already had a strong understanding of the potentially devastating impact of the misuse of data. Data would increasingly structure and inform decision-making in the public and private sectors, leading to what I argue was an emergent culture of data as a vital element of 20th and early 21st century British history.

This paper asks us to consider the shifting role of 'data' in the history of 20th century Britain. Large-scale data accrual has been evident in the National Archives since the 18th century, as Jon Agar has noted, and organisations such as the BBC were engaged in collecting personal data as early as 1939 through mass surveying of audience preferences. The embrace of computers from the 1970s onwards allowed data to be more easily acquired in tailor-made databases, while the arrival of micro-computers and spreadsheet software such as Lotus 123 and Visicalc allowed middle managers to imagine 'what if' scenarios of their data in an increasingly computerised search for efficiencies and profits. This paper examines how data and its acquisition shaped organisations such as the BBC, ITV and the Home Office in 20th-century Britain. It considers moments when these organisations began to think with and through data, and occasionally against it. It further considers data's complex legacy in the archive in light of the current commercial appeal of historic datasets in the 21st century.

Christine Grandy is an Associate Professor of Modern British History at the University of Lincoln. Her second monograph, *Race on Screen: Audience Racism in Twentieth Century Britain,* is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press in 2025 in its Modern British Studies series. She has published in the *Journal of British Studies, Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* and *Modern British History*.

3.3 'What Are Things Worth? Expanding the History of Value'

Speakers: Emily Baughan, Tom Johnson, Spike Gibbs
Chair: Emma Griffin

What are things worth? We tend to think of the economy in terms of flows of labour, commodities, and services. Much recent work has shown that the category of "the economy" itself, as well as these subordinate terms that help to constitute it, are the products of contingent processes of modern political and intellectual history. Yet these frameworks continue to deeply shape the history of value, channelling it within the traditional bounds of political economy. What would happen if we expanded our

understanding of the economic? What it would it mean to write the history of value from the perspective of social, gender, or cultural history?

This round-table discussion tackles these questions by bringing British historians of different periods into conversation, to compare moments of radical possibility in which ideas about what constituted 'the economy' were up for grabs. This takes us from everyday practices of accounting in the fifteenth-century countryside, to debates over the morality of exchange in seventeenth-century political economy, to feminists grappling with the value of love and the nature of social reproduction in the 1970s. Our panel discussants will range across these different periods of British history in order to open up a conversation with the audience about how these debates look different for medievalists, early-modernists, and modernists, and what kinds of connections we can make between them.

3.4 'Writing Working-Class History in a Populist Age'

Speakers: Ryan Hanley, Laura Schwartz, Natalie Thomlinson
Chair: Matthew Hilton

Since 2016, right-wing populism has claimed to speak on behalf of 'ordinary working-class people', interpolating them as white (anti-immigration), male (employed in manual/industrial occupations) and heterosexual (pro-family values). The logic of this new class politics is curiously inverted. Working-class interests are no longer seen as a left-wing cause but most frequently associated with support for right-wing parties, patriotism and social conservatism. This panel, made up of members of the 'Writing Labour History in Brexit Britain' network, asks what sort of working-class history we might want to create in and for a populist age? What might labour history tell us about twenty-first century populism? How might we think anew about working-class historiographical traditions in light of right-wing mobilisations of 'the working class'? How do we insist upon the long-standing existence of women, queer and people of colour within Britain's working class, while remaining attentive to the gendered and raced exclusions that were central to its construction as a political category?

'How Queer Became Posh: Class and Representations of Non-Normative Sexuality and Gender'
Laura Schwartz, University of Warwick
Right-wing populist opponents of LGBTQ + rights in the twenty-first century have often depicted them as elite concerns, irrelevant to 'ordinary working-class people'. In doing so, populists mobilise a long-standing trope that portrays homosexuality as a 'vice of the rich' and associates trans and queer lives with upper-class decadence. This paper explores the history of this classed representation of non-normative sexuality and gender, which can be traced back to at least the beginning of the nineteenth century: from the Regency dandy, to the foppish *fin de siècle* aesthete; from the aristocrat preying upon her innocent lady's maid, to the besuited upper-class interwar lesbian. Counter-tropes existed (not least the virile and uninhibited manual worker fantasised about by wealthier homosexuals) but the idea of 'queer as posh' has dominated to the degree that even today being queer or trans is often seen as a way of giving up one's working-class identity (Yvette Taylor, 2023). This paper considers the political origins and effects of this trope, as well as how it has often been reinscribed in queer and labour history – which remain relatively distinct historiographical domains. I discuss some methodological approaches that may better enable us to write a history of proletarian queer and trans people, an endeavour that I argue is particularly important in challenging right-wing appropriations of class politics in the present day.

Laura Schwartz is Reader in Modern British History at the University of Warwick, and the author of three monographs on the history of feminism, class and gender. In 2024 she was awarded a Leverhulme Research Fellowship for a new project entitled 'Queer As Folk: Proletarian Countercultures in Britain 1718-1939', which explores the history of the untraditional working-class including service workers, migrant workers and queer and cosmopolitan working-class cultures.

‘Women and Unemployment, 1975-1990’
Dr Natalie Thomlinson, University of Reading
There were two stand-out trends in the labour market of the 1970s and 1980s. Firstly, from the mid-1970s, unemployment began to rise precipitously, largely as a result of deindustrialisation. Secondly, the participation of women in the labour market – particularly married women with young children – continued its inexorable rise. Despite the overall increasing participation of women in workforce, like men, they too were vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the labour market; indeed, the increasing numbers of women in the labour market also meant that there were increasing numbers of women who were vulnerable to unemployment. More conservative or traditional understandings of women’s domestic role precluded them from being understood as truly unemployed. This vision of womanhood saw women’s domestic role as generally constituting their ‘true work’; men were breadwinners, with women’s work being for pin money, and women’s job losses therefore not entailing the same psychological or economic effects as they did for men. But by the early 1980s, for the first time, the unemployed woman became a subject of concern for feminist policy makers, activists, and sociologists alike. These actors were concerned to expose the plight of unemployed women, and to illuminate the centrality of work to women’s sense of self, and women’s earnings to the family economy. How women without paid work should be understood posed fundamental questions about gender roles; to ask the question itself decentred women’s domestic role, and made visible the reconfiguration of family lives and women’s increasing economic significance to the labour force in the era of postwar affluence. Now as then, discussions on joblessness and the decline of industry often implicitly focus around the figure of the white working-class man; this paper therefore seeks to refocus our political and historical gaze onto the impacts of unemployment and deindustrialisation on women.

Natalie Thomlinson is Associate Professor of Modern British Cultural History at the University of Reading, and author of *Women and the Miners’ Strike, 1984-5* (2023, with Florence Sutcliffe-Brathwaite), and *Race, ethnicity and the women's movement in England, 1968-1993* (2016). Her research focuses on women, gender, and feminism in late twentieth century Britain.

‘Populist Narratives of White Victimhood: Colonial Slavery and the British Working Class’
Ryan Hanley, University of Exeter
In the UK, the abolition of slavery and the slave trade holds a special place in historical memory narratives. Among right-wing populists, abolitionism is seen as an expression of a quintessentially British love of liberty and fair play, the ultimate expiation of our (much longer) involvement in slavery itself. Among certain sections of the left, the ‘original sin’ of slavery looms much larger, but the honour attached to abolitionism is equally distributive. In this reading, slavery was (and should remain) the exclusive responsibility of a stovepipe-hatted, monocle-wearing industrial bourgeoisie, while abolition was a rare triumph for ‘the people’. Both these positions respond to an entrenched narrative of White working-class innocence and victimhood in the history of British colonialism. In reality, working people were no more naturally inclined to solidarity with the enslaved than anyone else in Britain. Undoubtedly, transatlantic antiracism remained a major undercurrent of working-class politics, notably championed by Black British intellectuals such as Robert Wedderburn and William Cuffay. Yet a recurrent theme in the political and labour reform movements of the early nineteenth century was the attempt to situate the British poor as worse off and inherently more deserving than the enslaved in the Caribbean. In some instances, working-class radicals embraced both proslavery and racist thought to underline accusations of abolitionist hypocrisy and ‘telescopic philanthropy’. This paper explores the ideologically contested history of working-class responses to slavery, arguing that more nuanced public messaging about the broad purchase of colonialist thought is needed to combat populist narratives of White working-class victimhood.

Ryan Hanley is Senior Lecturer in Modern British History at the University of Exeter. Ryan’s research interests include the history of slavery and abolition, ‘race’ and radicalism in nineteenth-century Britain, and Black British History. He is the author of *Beyond Slavery and Abolition: Black British Writing, c.1770-1830* (CUP, 2018) and *Robert Wedderburn: British Insurrectionary, Jamaican Abolitionist* (Yale UP, 2025). He is currently working on a new project exploring the global history of British abolitionism, funded by a Philip Leverhulme Prize.

4.1: 'Writing the History of Marginality and Precarity: vagrants, Gypsies, and casual labourers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'

Speakers: Nick Crowson, Kate Mulcahey, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite
Chair: Chris Moffat

This panel brings together scholars working to reconstruct the lives and livelihoods of marginalised groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Understanding these subjects, who lived highly precarious lives, is important, we would argue, as an act of historical recovery. It is particularly important today, at a moment when the postwar welfare system has been profoundly eroded, 'precarity' is on the rise, and ideas of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' claimants have become so prominent. It is also fraught with methodological difficulties, requiring a patchwork of sources, and creative use of those sources. All three papers will examine the tools we might need to use – from social history, labour history, the history workshop movement, microhistory, genealogy, and elsewhere – in order to understand these precarious lives.

Kate Mulcahey, PhD Candidate University of Birmingham "I've a licensed basket." Unlocking the world of the nineteenth-century Romany Gypsy-pedlar

A family tradition of passing a one hundred and thirty-year-old pedlars' certificate through successive generations of women poses the question, 'Why is this document so important?'
This paper will relate how a cherished certificate began my journey to discover the peddling activities of nineteenth-century Romany Gypsies. Despite being a marginalised community that avoided interaction with the authorities, hundreds of Gypsies elected to go to police stations every year to purchase a pedlars certificate rather than trade illegally. When Gypsy, Alice Smith was in court in Bedford in 1868 accusing William Gilbert of assault, she repeatedly stressed her respectability by referencing that she was a licensed pedlar.[1] This paper will relate how the investigation of a simple act of trade and the purchase of a certificate can contribute to our understanding of the Gypsy community and challenge our perception of peddling.

In line with the panel's themes, I will reflect on my reconstructive methodology of using a jigsaw of diverse sources to trace those whose voices are seldom heard. By using the lens of peddling, we can investigate other income streams, gender roles, trading practices, adaptations to market forces, and the interaction with settled society. Individual pedlar stories reveal economic activity and Gypsy agency, showing how peddling created employment for others, opportunities for fortune-telling, the procurement of stock, and the formation of relationships.

Nick Crowson, Professor of Contemporary British History, University of Birmingham Viewing the veteran vagrant

When Ephraim Turner applied to enter the casual "tramp" ward of the Loughborough workhouse on 27 August 1920 he encountered a new additional layer of bureaucratic scrutiny – an interrogation of his military service, on behalf of the Leicestershire Vagrancy Committee, that saw the 'particulars of discharged sailors and soldiers' recorded in an ex-servicemen admissions ledger. Six ledgers have survived recording the names of just over three hundred veterans between May and November 1920. These ledgers were being used by those Leicestershire workhouses that had re-opened their casual wards to report the numbers and cumulative nights of stay as part of county-wide cost-sharing exercise. Since the mid-19th century it had been suspected that many of those presenting as vagrants were former servicemen. Now, in the aftermath of the first world war with Leicestershire, at least, distinguishing a particular vagrant "characteristic" what do these ledgers tell us about official attitudes to the causes of vagrancy at a moment when alarm was growing at the re-emergence of the "vagrancy problem"? What approaches do historians need to employ to understand whether the veteran vagrants' experiences

[1] *Bedfordshire Mercury*, 11 January 1868, p.4.

differed from those of the Victorian and Edwardian counterparts? And ultimately, how far can the day-to-day experience of vagrancy be uncovered from a source created at a moment of crisis in an individual's life?

Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Associate Professor of Twentieth Century British History, UCL
Casual labour and casual life in London, 1938-9

This paper asks what we can learn about the lives of men in the 'reserve army of casual labour' in interwar London from a single source: the interview book in which Major Samuel Price of the Salvation Army recorded incidents of note occurring in Victoria Home, the 'Hostel for Working Men' that he ran in Whitechapel, London, between 19 October 1938 and 4 November 1939. This is the only interview book relating to the hostels and shelters for men that the Army ran before the Second World War that survives in its archive. Victoria Home was a large hostel where men could book beds by the night or by the week, mainly sleeping in large dormitories. In the interwar years, the hostel was run along lines that differed relatively little from those that pertained in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Its inhabitants were men leading precarious lives – in terms of income/occupation and housing. Though most paid for their beds, the Major in charge was also allowed to give 'relief' (free board and shelter) at his discretion. The men of Victoria Home have left relatively slight traces in the archival record; this paper asks what we can excavate from the interview book about their experiences – work, housing, mobility, social networks, and attitudes to politics and religion – in this period, and proposes that 'precarity' can be a useful category of analysis for British history before the Second World War.

4.2 **'Britain and the World'**

Speakers: Richard Carr, Spencer Mawby, Sean Irving
Chair: Miles Ogborn

Richard Carr, Associate Professor, Anglia Ruskin University
Between a Customs Union and a union of customs: how should we write the Irish back into post-1922 British history?

Brexit and its consequences for the Northern Irish border and ongoing trade have presented a new chapter in the British-Irish relationship. In some sense this shift marks a return to the narrative of conflict (albeit, thankfully, less dramatic than that seen during The Troubles) that has shaped much of the historiography, and was inherent in the 'two-nations' view of Irish history long argued by Charles Townshend and others. Yet, whilst no doubt triggered by some shoddy statecraft in recent times, such bumps in the road are also a product of *interconnection*: the unilateral decision taken by one international actor affecting another to such a large degree precisely because the Republic and the UK are so intertwined.

This paper probes those interconnections in the British-Irish story since 1922, and points to some of the challenges inherent in writing anything approaching a unified narrative – an endeavour which itself represents something of a turn against exceptionalist dimensions within 'four nations' history. In part, it highlights challenges of data, particularly surrounding the Irish diaspora. It considers the uniqueness of Ireland's position as a white, former colony, located a few miles from the Mull of Kintyre. It interrogates how we balance everyday interactions in the workplace, sports crowd, or mass organisation (including Church or Party) – and how we get at such material, often lost to the record – with the more public (and often adversarial) pronouncements by statesmen and women. Some of this has been done in the existing literature – but much has been ducked. Using the author's recent experience of writing *Britain and Ireland from the Treaty to the Troubles* (Routledge, 2025), it fundamentally asks what new directions our understanding of the British-Irish story may take.

Spencer Mawby, University of Nottingham: Colonising Privacy: The Legacy of Total Surveillance at the End of the British Empire

Amidst a period of political and psychological turbulence the thought that we are being constantly monitored and observed may induce either reassurance or dismay. On the one hand, it provides a sense that the state may be able to keep us safe against threats of various kinds, while on the other, it induces the troubling thought that the private realm is crumbling. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that, in a British context at least, the totalising surveillance culture of the present owes a measure of its potency to the period of decolonisation. While the Cold War aspects of surveillance culture are well known, the circumstances that led colonial Governors to demand that imperial subjects be observed and monitored when located in metropolitan Britain have been forgotten. Two aspects of this untold story are particularly salient. First when it came the presence of sojourning political activists in the metropolis, the observational culture of late imperialism was surprisingly indiscriminate. The records of the Security Services from this period reveal that almost any figure of prominence in anticolonial politics could be dragged into the net of surveillance culture, ranging from the Rhodesian novelist Doris Lessing to the Kabaka (or King) of Buganda. Secondly, the intrusive character of the monitoring undertaken at this time was remarkable and comprised telephone and mail intercepts, photographic coverage, as well as close surveillance by Special Branch officers. Even though these efforts were focused on a relatively small number of sojourning politicians and activists, this history nevertheless reveals the capacity of the state to engage in minute observation of everyday life long before the invention of CCTV and the smart phone.

Sean Irving, The Anglosphere Discourse and the Populist Right

A renewed history of modern Britain cannot ignore the ongoing debate over its place in the world. This paper examines one element of that debate, the history of the 'Anglosphere' discourse.
Britain's geopolitical position had seemed like a settled, if never consensual, issue. Following Britain's exit from the EU in 2020, however, it is again a matter of debate. A surge in right populism since that date has involved a revisionist approach to issues of race and empire that seeks to rehabilitate a history of Britain as a buccaneering and entrepreneurial nation: an image that can be invoked in support of 'libertarian' capitalism.
Given Britain's diminishing global impact, the challenge for the populist right is to find the appropriate mode for 'Britain in the world', one that continues to grant it privileged status. The Anglosphere discourse does just this. In this complex imaginary Britain is simultaneously understood as island isolate and outward-looking world maker.
The Anglosphere discourse stretches back to Victorian visions of a Greater Britain encompassing the territories of white settler colonials. It has at various times been both a protectionist and neoliberal construct; racially exclusive and culturally open; martial and commercial.
Understanding the contradictions in the discourse illuminates some of the tensions within the geopolitical outlook of Britain's populist right. It also allows for a sketch of different possible future directions. Central to deciding which path is taken will be debates about Britain's national and global history. It is therefore important that our discipline, in seeking to speak to the problems of our current world, pays close and urgent attention to the Anglosphere discourse in a way that draws out its complexities and recognises its power to shape debate.

4.3 'Everyday Activisms'

Speakers: Aleena Din, Benjamin Bland, Valerie Wright
Chair: Andre Smith

Dr Aleena Din, Senior Research Associate, 'Remaking Britain: South Asian Connections and Networks, 1830 to the Present' History Department, University of Bristol 'Networked Activism: South Asian Anti-Racism in Huddersfield, 1969-1980'

In October 1970, during a meeting of the Indian Workers' Association branch in Huddersfield, the organization's chair C.S. Cheema called for its members to join liberal forces to resist racist elements in Britain, a declaration which was published in the local press. This was a response to the growing

popularity of the National Front (NF) in Huddersfield which, after a strong performance in local elections, chose the West Yorkshire mill town as the site for its national headquarters. The NF's galvanisation of anti-immigration sentiments across West Yorkshire, with a focus on job competition and resource scarcity, amplified the violence underpinning Black and South Asian migration to Huddersfield, which in part grew as British industries recruited Commonwealth labourers after the Second World War to undertake the labour white workers had refused. As archival sources demonstrate, local activists, workers and community organizers responded in multifarious ways. The coalition building that Cheema called for was often a fraught and complex process, as individuals and organizations traversed ideological differences, as well as differences of race, gender and generation, to foster co-ordinated action.

This paper will draw on archive collections in Huddersfield to analyse how South Asians created and leveraged wide-ranging community networks to challenge the threats to their belonging. In doing so, this paper will analyse the broader trajectories of networked resistance amongst South Asians who were navigating the legislative redefinition of British citizenship along racialized lines. By focussing on Huddersfield as a site of struggle, this paper will highlight the distinct dimensions of liberation politics in West Yorkshire, in turn recovering crucial actors who formed resistance networks which spanned nationally. This approach will demonstrate the significance of local social, political and economic change in the evolution of anti-racism, particularly in light of deindustrialisation in northern industrial centres. It will also demonstrate the overlapping and diverging articulations of liberation amongst South Asians within a specific geographic context, by examining how objectives and practices changed along race, gender, class, religious and generational lines.

Benjamin Bland (University of Reading) Making Pop White Again? Class, Gender, and Whiteness in the Britpop 1990s

In August 2024, the British popular music industry was set ablaze by the reunion of rock group Oasis, de facto leaders of the 1990s 'Britpop' scene. Millions celebrated, and initial demand for tickets outstripped supply by 10 to 1, despite eye-watering prices. Amidst the joy, however, there was also a significant undercurrent of pessimism, led by dissenters who argued that Oasis epitomised a toxic masculine vision of the British "white working-class" that was best left in the past. This paper takes these critiques seriously, drawing on a broad array of sources (from interviews and oral histories to song lyrics and music videos) to add new complexity to conceptualisations of race and popular culture in 1990s Britain. Building on scholarship that has begun to historicise postwar intersections between whiteness, masculinity, and class (e.g., Schofield, 2023), as well as on recent attempts to demythologise the 1990s (e.g., Geiringer, 2024), the paper makes two interconnected arguments. It suggests, first of all, that the overwhelming whiteness of Britpop (and its ensuing centrality to 1990s popular culture) can be partly understood as the natural culmination of trends that had been gathering steam at least since the punk explosion of the late 1970s. I illustrate this by analysing 1990s variations on long-running debates over race and representation in British popular music. The paper then demonstrates that what was distinctive about Britpop's whiteness was its particular relationship to a material class and gender politics. Leading Britpop acts (from Oasis and Blur to Pulp and the Manic Street Preachers) all attempted to reclaim a stereotypically white working-class masculinity from 1980s images of labour disputes and post-industrial dole queues. In doing so, they contributed to a broader process of re-racialisation that also contrasted dramatically with oppositional readings of race, class, and gender in an (intensely multicultural) wider pop landscape.

Dr Valerie Wright, Scottish History (HCA), University of Edinburgh
New Life for Urban Scotland? Exploring the legacy of Conservative urban policy in contemporary Scotland

In 1989 the Conservative Government aimed to tackle Scotland's supposed 'culture of dependency' through an initiative entitled 'New Life for Urban Scotland'. Four communities were selected for intervention: Whitfield in Dundee, Westerhailes in Edinburgh, Ferguslie Park in Paisley and Castlemilk in Glasgow. All of these areas had been constructed as council housing between the 1920s and 1970s

and had been stigmatised to varying degrees in their localities and nationally as a result of levels of high unemployment and various measures of poverty. New Life for Urban Scotland was arguably an ideological project which attempted through a multi-agency approach to create regeneration partnerships which would run for a decade. The aim was environmental improvement but also the promotion of enterprise and community business. Individuals were no longer to rely on the state but build their own self reliance and entrepreneurial skills. This paper will focus on the long term legacy of this intervention in the West of Scotland and consider the immediate and more recent implications of the very different responses of the communities in Castlemilk and Ferguslie Park. In Castlemilk the community response essentially subverted the government's agenda and highlighted the agency of community groups in engaging on their own terms. The response in Ferguslie Park arguably had a more troubling legacy in terms of community cohesion and in shaping the ongoing reputation and external perceptions of the community. Drawing on oral history narratives and archival sources this paper will highlight how communities in both areas continued to respond to government policy through local grassroots organising. The relationship between this and more formal political engagement will also be briefly traced through electoral results and voting behaviour to reflect on whether this history can help us understand local responses to more recent national political trends in a British and Scottish context.

4.4 'Emigration, Race, and Empire in Britain Since 1945'

Speakers: Freddy Foks, Helen McCarthy, Jean Smith
Chair: Bill Schwarz

This panel explores different experiences of leaving - and returning to - Britain and the Commonwealth in the period since 1945. The papers adopt a range of optics which throw fresh light on how migration has been labelled, managed and imaginatively understood by states, in popular culture, and by migrants themselves. Ranging geographically from Whitehall to Australia, and from the Costa del Sol to Kingston, Jamaica, the papers analyse emigration using intersecting categories of race, nationality and ageing, bringing social, cultural and political approaches into the same frame. Together they seek to explain why acts of departure and return could be problematized in certain contexts and actively facilitated in others, and offer new insights into the ideological work that has sustained these raced demarcations across and beyond the twentieth century. At a moment when populists in Europe and the US seek new ways of bordering the nation-state against 'undesirable' migrants, telling these histories feels more urgent than ever before.

Jean Smith (KCL) 'Opportunities are available for all walks of life in Australia': Cultural representations of emigration in post-war Britain and the assumption of white mobility

The song 'Australia', on the 1969 Kinks album, *Arthur (Or the Decline and Fall of the British Empire),* takes a satirical approach to the appeal of Australia for British migrants, highlighting the sunshine along with the promise of egalitarianism and opportunity. Drawing on lead singer Ray Davies's sadness about the emigration of his sister Rosy with her husband Arthur to Australia in 1964, this song speaks to both his own individual experience and the wider demographic trend of emigration from the United Kingdom in this period, facilitated by subsidised migration schemes not only to Australia, but also to Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Rhodesia. Yet such an explicit discussion of emigration as a broader societal phenomenon is relatively rare in both popular culture and in scholarly assessments of the period, especially when compared to the well-developed academic literature on the experience of postwar immigration to the United Kingdom and its representation in popular culture. Emigration narratives do appear in literary culture, music, film and television; yet with some notable exceptions, they are either part of the background to a bigger story or are presented as an individual experience. Analysing cultural representations of emigration from the 1945 film *A Brief Encounter* to the recent BBC drama *Ten Pound Poms*, this paper will demonstrate the ways in which such cultural representations often reflect the taken-for-grantedness of white British mobility in this period and how its very ubiquity has made it less visible as an important political, social and cultural trend.

Freddy Foks, University of Manchester: '(Un)bordering 'old Commonwealth' migration under the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1962/68'

How did postwar governments differentiate between what they considered 'desirable' and 'undesirable' forms of Commonwealth migration? With the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1962 job vouchers (alongside other measures) limited migration from the Commonwealth into the UK on the basis of employment status and 'skill'. Ministers repeatedly claimed in press and Parliament that these measures treated all Commonwealth citizens equally, regardless of nationality. But surviving papers in the National Archives reveal that officials enacted procedures in direct contradiction to such public statements. So-called 'New Commonwealth' (mainly Caribbean and South Asian) arrivals were subject to heightened scrutiny and suspicion while those from the 'Old Commonwealth' (mainly Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) often had their mobility eased in ways that clashed with the letter of the law. The government combined this easing of mobility with emigration policies subsidising British citizens' passage to Australia. In this way the state sought to boost mobility to and from 'the Old Commonwealth' during the 1960s.
This paper lifts the lid on this unequal system of migration control. As such, it contributes to a growing literature tracking the processes of 'bordering' the UK after 1962. While much existing scholarship focuses on legislative and administrative controls on Commonwealth mobility, this paper shows the other side of the (un)bordering process: how extra-legal loopholes were employed to ease 'desirable' forms of 'Old Commonwealth' migration into the UK, and how emigration was subsidised to Australia. Comparing both sides of the bordering/unbordering process contributes to our understanding of how UK citizenship was racialised after the Second World War.

Helen McCarthy (University of Cambridge)
The Grey Escape: Retiring Overseas in Late Twentieth-Century Britain

In the final decades of the twentieth century, older Britons were on the move. Emigration, long assumed to be the preserve of younger age groups, was increasingly the choice of the recently or soon-to-be retired. Enabled by housing capital and generous occupational pensions, a growing minority of the over-sixties headed for sunnier climes in southern Europe, buying up French cottages, Tuscan farmhouses and villas on the Costa del Sol. Others ventured further afield, including thousands of Black and South Asian elders who had migrated to Britain in the postwar decades and now contemplated a return to their countries of birth. These later-life - and relatively 'unbordered' - mobilities have tended to be studied separately: white expats belonging to the 'lifestyle migration' practised by the relatively affluent, and Black Britons understood as 'returnees', completing a process of circular migration bringing their sojourning to an end.
What might we learn about the relationship between migration, racialisation and ageing by placing 'lifestyle' migrants and 'returnees' in the same analytical frame? Drawing on personal testimonies, newspapers and other sources, this paper seeks an answer through a focus on two groups: British expats in Spain and Black Britons in Jamaica. It uncovers some striking similarities, including the projection of respectability as a two-pronged strategy for securing acceptance and claiming distinction as 'successful' migrants. Yet it also reveals important racial divisions. For some expats, escaping urban crime in the UK was a major push factor, a category carrying racialized undertones. Black Britons, by contrast, fled a racist welfare state only to become a target for criminals at 'home' in Jamaica. Emigration histories may need new concepts to capture these complex intersections of race and ageing after the end of empire.

5.1 'Passing in Britain*:* Trans, Jewish, and Black Lives'

Speakers: Aleph Ross, Leila Sellers, Olivia Wyatt
Chair: Sue Lemos

Throughout history, individuals from oppressed groups have sought to conceal their marginalised identities in an attempt to assimilate into the norm – their motivations ranged from economic gain to

social mobility and political recognition. This panel brings together strands of Queer history, Black history, and Jewish history to emphasise the differences and commonalities between the attempts of different groups to assimilate into heteronormative whiteness. Collectively, the papers consider how the legacies of the eugenics movement informed the efforts of non-white subjects to diminish their racialised characteristics, alongside the role of respectability in shaping the desire for social prestige among trans men and women. By adopting these comparative techniques, the panel presents a new approach to the politics of passing in twentieth-century Britain, while introducing narratives that challenge our traditional conceptualisations of the norm: such as efforts by Jews to pass out of whiteness, and the opportunistic flexibility of passing as white.

Shifting Masks: Passing as White in twentieth-century Britain – Olivia Wyatt

'Racial passing is an exile, sometimes chosen, sometimes not,' writes Allyson Hobbs, in her study of the African Americans who passed as White between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. To reckon with the practice was to reckon with the alienation, isolation, and loss which accompanied it. However, this paper utilises the ambivalent processes of race in Britain to paint an alternative picture of passing. It positions the ways in which the practice led to exile alongside the moments where people of African descent temporarily – and opportunistically – passed as White, without rejecting their roots or severing their familial connections. With a concentration on the period between 1920 and 1960, the paper considers how Commonwealth migration altered the cultural make-up of those who attempted to pass: from fair-skinned, mixed-race British-born subjects to lighter-skinned Caribbean migrants. By examining eugenicist and anthropological works alongside newspapers and films, I argue that the academic and media discourse on passing was informed by – and fed into – public anxieties about the ability of White-looking subjects to transcend racial boundaries. The decisions of these subjects to style themselves as White within specific moments while retaining their social and cultural connections to Black communities, reveals how White-passing subjects manipulated racial boundaries to acquire – or maintain – intimate access to different spaces in Britain.

'Dressing as a woman and passing as a woman are two different things': Passing, privilege and everyday trans identity in the Beaumont Society, 1966-2004 – Leila Sellers

According to C. Riley Snorton, passing has been typically viewed as 'a ploy for power, a lie, or a form of misrecognition', an interpretation that can, as they argue, ignore the psychic and social contours of individual lived experience (and the multiplicity of identities contained within it), particularly within the context of trans lives. Through a study of the Beaumont Society, a UK based support group for trans people, this paper interrogates the multiple forms of passing (and their relationship to power and social privilege) practiced by the organisation's members between the 1960s and the 1990s. The Society, shaped by a postwar narrative of heteronormative respectability, encouraged its members to embody an idealised version of their male and female gender identities, retain their social privilege and, in doing so, allow the non-normative aspects of their genders to pass unnoticed through society. Within this paper I consider the social and psychical dimensions of passing within the everyday lives of Beaumont members and how the pressure (and sometimes failure) to pass as respectable, heterosexual, normatively gendered men and women informed the articulation of their individual trans identities.

From Whitechapel to Notting Hill: Jewishness and passing in mid-century Britain – Aleph Ross

The racial liminality of the Jew has long since troubled, fascinated and occupied historians of race in Britain. Studies of eugenic attempts to demarcate Jewish racial difference abound (e.g. Feldman, 2013), while a growing body of work has addressed the complex relationship of Jewishness with whiteness (e.g. Brodkin, 1999; Boyarin, 2020; Levine-Rasky, 2020). Despite this, the literature on Jewish engagements with 'passing' has thus far taken a disproportionately American focus. Meanwhile, only minimal scholarly attention has been paid to Jewish efforts to self-racialise: that is, attempts by Jews not to 'pass' into whiteness so much as to deviate from it.

Focussing on the racially charged atmosphere of 1960s Notting Hill, this paper will begin to explore some of these themes. It will hone in on the case study of Rhaune Laslett, born to a Jewish family in East London, who would become a leading figure in the formation of the Notting Hill Carnival. Significantly, in her role as a community figure in the largely non-white world of 1960s Notting Hill, Rhaune identified not as Jewish but instead as Native American. Considering her complex biography, this paper will draw on frameworks of 'passing', pioneered by scholars of Queer and Black history, and attempt to apply them to a history of Jewishness in mid-century Britain. It will explore the ethics and politics of 'outing' historical subjects in this context. Centrally, it will consider the relational quality of Jewishness, considering how notions of multiculturalism, antiracism and identity politics have shaped Jewish engagements with 'passing' over time.

5.2 'Economic Elites & Political Economy in Modern Britain'

Speakers: David Cowan, Aled Davies & Robert Yee, David Lawton
Chair: Helen McCarthy

David Cowan, University of Manchester: Where are the rich in modern British history?

Growing concern about wealth inequality since the late 2000s has only accelerated in recent years. And yet despite some excellent recent studies of the changing sources of wealth and wealth distribution over time, and research into shifting elite self-presentation, the rich still lack a comparable position to the less wealthy in histories of modern Britain. This paper argues that efforts to grapple with the power of the rich today need to consider not only their financial power, but their outsize cultural presence. The cultural presence of certain wealthy people—and, as importantly, the relative invisibility of other members of the rich—has influenced social understandings of inequality, helping legitimate stark economic differences. Where historians have tended to engage with the status of the rich in relation to popular class identities, this paper argues for the need to consider the positioning of wealthy people in a broader range of contexts, including in a 'moral economy' and in celebrity culture. Doing so offers a means of building on, and connecting, new histories of capitalism with histories of selfhood and mass culture.

This paper illustrates these arguments by looking at the responses to a planned wealth tax in the 1970s. Savers, pensioners, and small business owners forged temporary solidarities with the rich to successfully lobby the government against adopting the tax. A concerted effort by wealthy interest groups was one important influence on this grassroots campaign—but so too were macro-economic shifts and other government policies. Considering the circumstances that weakened mass consent for redistributive politics in the past can help understand the conditions that might secure this today. Our fascination with the lives of the wealthy—provoking resentments as well as aspirations—might offer scope for seeing their power as more vulnerable than the rich, themselves, would have us believe.

Aled Davies and Robert Yee (University of Oxford): The City of London, Britain, and the Global Economic Order in the Twentieth Century

Our paper offers a reassessment of Britain's historic role within the world economy during the twentieth century. It shows how standard accounts of industrial and imperial 'decline', while still significant in many ways, should not obscure the significant endurance of the City of London as a hub of global finance. From the end of the gold standard in 1931 to the oil shock of the 1970s, the City was able to shape the financial and monetary world order despite the ascent of other advanced capitalist economies. Meanwhile, the Bank of England used its inherited status and established authority to maintain power beyond Britain well into the postwar years. We do not claim that the Bank and the City were simply fixed and enduring features of the national political economy over the century. Instead, we emphasise the need for historians to closely examine how their position, status, and power continued.

Historians tend to see Britain's global role in decline during the twentieth century. Yet, as a vital node in the global financial architecture, the City of London has retained great significance in the international monetary order. This claim has broader implications for how we construct and present meta-narratives for modern British history, not least because it can tell us something important about how Britain continued to shape the international order. Stressing the continuities between prewar and postwar Britain, we argue that the financial sector's international reputation allowed it to remain influential throughout the twentieth century. This interpretation supports the view that Britain today continues to shape the global order due to its membership in NATO, the G7, and the UN Security Council. Nevertheless, rather than focusing solely on formal state institutions, our paper on the Bank of England and the City aims to shift our understanding of political power to some key actors, ideas, and structures outside Whitehall.

David Lawton, Queen Mary University of London: Monetarism and Euroscepticism in the City of London, 1975-1997

Instead of investigating economics as a technical discipline, this paper explores the ways that economics was mobilised as a political discourse, shaped by political values and pressures, understandings of the world, and the arts of political communication. Within the City of London, monetarist 'gurus' were not fringe figures: their names appeared consistently among the 'top ten' most cited economists across all broadsheets in the 1990s. Not all City of London gurus advocated monetarism; this study explores a narrow but influential network of self-described 'diehard' monetarists, and their entanglement with modern British Euroscepticism beyond parliament. Capable of intense disagreements between themselves, monetarist opponents of Britain's entry into the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) came together in groups like the 'Liverpool Six' to establish a new Eurosceptic politics of expertise in Britain.

Through their writing, a genealogy is traced from monetarist networks in the 1970s to Eurosceptic political economy in the 1990s. This paper follows a group of conservative monetarists who were extremely critical of the ERM throughout Nigel Lawson's period as chancellor (1983-1989), attacked European plans for a future single currency, and in the 1990s, developed a more general opposition to the European Union as laid out by the Maastricht treaty. As popular economic experts their reputations fluctuated over this time based upon the apparent foresight of their predictions. In the late 1980s and 1990s, these media-savvy 'gurus' offered what appeared to be a new technocratic critique of European integration, as distinct from the outmoded economic arguments of earlier anti-Marketeer commentary. Monetarist expertise provided conservative Eurosceptics with the authority to engage with and challenge government monetary policy, and to speak on behalf of non-expert citizens affected by Black Wednesday.

5.3 'Historiographies'

Speakers: George Evans, Geoff Hicks, David Thackeray
Chair: Liesbeth Corens

George Evans: 'What Drives Historiographical Innovation? Methodology, narratives and the imperial and global turns in British historiography'

What drives historiographical innovation? One answer, for historians of Britain and indeed elsewhere, focuses largely on the development of new methodologies. The evolution and adoption of new methodologies, often described as 'turns' to new methodologies, is taken to be an important and perhaps the most important motor of historiographical change. Drawing partly on historians operating in different fields who have questioned the conception of a methodological turn, the paper problematises this understanding of methodological development as applied to British historiography. It argues in particular that new methodologies often coexist with older narratives. It takes as its main case the historiography of an imperialised and globalised Britain that developed following the imperial and global turns of the 1990s, which are often seen as having radically 'transformed' British historiography.

The global and imperial turns did change British historiography, but this element of change, the paper suggests, coexisted with important narratological continuities that have been generally underplayed. It argues in particular that the basic narrative advanced by the recent imperial and global historiography bears a strong resemblance to that an account of the place of imperialism and global forces in British history put forward by New Left intellectuals Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn from the 1960s. The paper concludes by arguing for a more plural conception of what historiographical innovation actually is. Engaging with narratives is just as important as developing new methodologies for pushing historiography forward.

Dr George Evans is a historian of Britain and its relationship to empire and the wider world, currently working as a postdoc at the University of Edinburgh on an AHRC-funded project on a global history of British identities during the Second World War.

Geoff Hicks, UEA: Where Next for the Nineteenth Century?

The Regency era and the Victorians continue to fascinate the general public, not least through numerous TV and film presentations of nineteenth-century life, through literature and its spin-offs, and via the heritage industry and genealogical research. Yet in university departments, such an interest is much less evident: where Britain's nineteenth century persists in the curriculum, it is often in niche thematic form or in brief as part of much longer surveys. Frequently, it is swamped or sidelined by its more bloodthirsty successor. In the domain of political history, we may have left behind the story of 'great' people, but a nineteenth century without Wellington, Disraeli or Queen Victoria doesn't entirely make sense; neither does one where they are simply bit-players in the story of imperialism or the onwards journey to democracy. Away from home, we struggle to comprehend the long, complicated story of Britain's relationship with its Continental neighbours if we leap from Waterloo to 1914, or – more likely – begin in 1945. If we are to understand the twentieth century, a broader appreciation of the nineteenth remains essential. Yet, how do we match the necessity for contemporary relevance with breadth? How do we turn the huge popular interest in the period into a continuing presence in curricula and research? This paper will consider what has become of the nineteenth century, and where it might go next.

David Thackeray, University of Exeter: Reconceptualising British Studies in an Era of Backlash Against Postcolonial Settlements

In October 2023 a proposal to introduce an 'indigenous voice to parliament' was rejected in a constitutional referendum by a majority vote in each Australian state. A little over a year later the activities of New Zealand's House of Representatives were briefly suspended when the first reading of a 'Treaty Principles Bill' was protested by a group of indigenous MPs. The bill seeks to redefine the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, which has become central to notions of co-governance and indigenous authority, sparking a wave of protest marches in defence of the Treaty in November 2024. While these controversies have led to renewed public attention to Australia and New Zealand's constitutional histories, funding for Humanities research is facing an unprecedented attack in both nations.

In the current moment, when earlier assumptions about the development of postcolonial settlements are under threat from the rise of a populist Right, it is imperative to reconceptualise the relationship between political history and 'British Studies'. Histories of the 'British World' have come under criticism for 'side-stepping' political and constitutional questions or viewing them narrowly in terms of histories of co-ethnic networks or the study of relationships between nation states. Building on recent research, and focusing on a number of flashpoints from the turn of the twentieth century, this paper argues for a new political history of the 'British World' which decentres Britain and gives a more prominent place to the history of indigenous contestations of constitutional settlements.

5.4 ‘UK Environmental History – Skipping a Step?’

Speakers: Marianna Dudley, Ewan Gibbs, Matthew Kelly, Jake Milner, Harry Parker
Chair: Matthew Kelly

Matthew Kelly (Northumbria), UK Environmental History: Skipping a Step?

Environmental history has all the trappings of an established field. A prestigious journal, several monograph series, established chairs, learned societies, and a strong sense of its own disciplinary history. Or so it can be said of North America. But what of the environmental history of the UK? By way of an introduction to this panel, this paper will reflect on the peculiarities of environmental history in these islands, its relatively under-developed state, and whether its future is intersectional rather than subdisciplinary.
Bio: Matthew Kelly is Professor of Modern History at Northumbria University and co-editor of *Past & Present*. Recent work includes *The Women Who Saved the English Countryside* (London: Yale University Press, 2022) and as co-editor ‘*New Lives, New Landscapes* Revisited: Rural Modernity in Modern Britain’, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 256 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Harry Parker (Science Museum, London), Historicising British ecologies in the twentieth century

Before the emergence of 'environmental history' as its own distinct subfield in the 1970s, a more longstanding tradition of 'landscape history' — and before that, 'historical ecology' — had engaged British scholars interested in the environmental past. Despite the renown of figures like W. G. Hoskins, historians — compared to biologists, geographers, archaeologists and even architects — were not primarily at the forefront of these earlier traditions. This paper asks how recovering and studying these antecedents can illuminate the role of history in debates about the natural world, as well as clarify the role of historians in contributing to them.
Bio: Harry Parker is a postdoctoral researcher at the Science Museum, London. His PhD, which he is now turning into a monograph, was about the history of the social sciences in twentieth-century Britain. He is currently developing a new project about the history of 'landscape history'.

Ewan Gibbs (Glasgow), Trade unions & working-class environmentalism

This paper explores how trade unions which organised workers in energy sectors addressed environmental issues in the 1970s and 1980s. It finds that energy unions were motivated environmental concerns, building from traditions of activism related to workplace health and safety but expanding outwards to the localised, national, and international implications of pollution and toxic wastes. These articulations demonstrate a distinctive form of working-class environmentalism, characterised by commitments towards a more sustainable industrial economy.
Bio: Ewan Gibbs is senior lecturer in Economic and Social History at the University of Glasgow. He is a historian of energy, industry, work and protest in the United Kingdom and the author of *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland* (London: University of London Press, 2021).

Marianna Dudley (Bristol), Renewable energy: historical trajectories

This paper will explore how energy history has re-emerged as a critical subject for historical research, with environmental contexts at the fore. Once the domain of economic and business history, now historians and wider society are interpreting the end of long-term energy systems and the rise of new ones through the lens of climate crisis. What might this ‘new energy history’ offer historians of Britain? Drawing on extensive research on wind energy, this paper will suggest that an energy history of modern Britain reveals new geographies of power (broadly defined); temporalities that trouble commonly used concepts such as energy ‘transition’; and communities which are using history to interpret and respond to environmental change.

Bio: Marianna Dudley is Senior Lecturer in Environmental Humanities at the University of Bristol. An environmental historian of Britain, her book *Electric Wind: Energy and History in Modern Britain* will be out with Manchester University Press later this year.

Jake Milner (Teesside), Just Transition: A historiographical fallacy or a productive paradigm for historians?

This paper will evaluate the utility of the just transition concept for historians particularly in relation to economic change, deindustrialisation and green industrialisation. The just transition has emerged both in political discourse and energic social science research as the dominant framework to ensure a fair and equitable transition to a green economy, yet its value to the historian is critically understudied. It will be argued that the paradigm is productive insofar as it can provide a historiographical centring of injustice in studies of deindustrialisation. Furthermore, historical unjust transitions not only provide case studies through which normative assumptions about current and future transitions can be gauged, but also play an active role in the contemporary green transition through persistent spatial inequalities, lingering industrial identities, and deindustrial 'half-lives' more generally.

Bio: Jake Milner is a PhD candidate and oral historian based at the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law at Teesside University, Middlesbrough. His thesis investigates the development of Teesside's industrial identity between 1973-2023, charting the region's deindustrial narrative and its impact on contemporary green economic development. He has presented papers at events and organisations such as the Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Teesside History, Politics & Ideas Conference, the North-East Labour History Society and the Journal of Energy History's Working Group.

6.1: 'Constructing History – The Role of the Visual in Historical Research'

Speakers: Michelle Henning, Sadie Levy Gale, James Thompson
Chair: Amanda Vickery

Focusing on the visual culture of Britain in the early twentieth century, this panel brings theoretical literatures on the social and material history of photography into conversation with histories of industry, labour, and urbanism. In doing so, this panel seeks to demonstrate that the early twentieth century was a distinct and significant period in the visualisation of Britain as a modern democratic state and industrial power. These papers show that at a time when technological and social change was both rapid and entwined, photography was deployed to legitimate the imperial and industrial strength of the nation, mobilise public support for workers and the right to protest, and construct particular visions of class, gender and the body. An exploration of the visual culture of this moment in British history reveals much about past perspectives and attitudes to state power, populism and evolving conceptions of citizenship. The panel also seeks to demonstrate that approaching visual culture critically entails a rigorous consideration of the circulation of images, their materiality, sites of production, technologies, audiences and publication histories. Together, the papers argue that photographs are not passive 'reflections' of history but objects that have produced and constituted social relations. As a popular form, photography has always been integral to broader conceptions of the past. By grappling with the politics of visuality in the early twentieth century, we can better understand the genealogies of our current hyper-visual culture.

Professor James Thompson, University of Bristol: 'Unemployed!': Stunts, Photography and Coffins in 1930s Britain

This paper examines the demonstrations organised by the National Unemployed Workers' Movement in the winter of 1938/9. It focuses in particular on the journalism of *Picture Post* to think about photography and the visual culture of protest in late 30s Britain. The NUWM's campaign embraced lie-down protests in the snow of Oxford Street, taking tea in the Ritz, and delivering a coffin reading 'He Did Not Get Winter Relief' to Downing Street. It revisits Stuart Hall's account of *Picture Post*'s

'demotic' gaze, drawing upon the wider press coverage, NUWM archives and Mass Observation. It thinks especially about bodies, gender, photography and coffins, locating these in the longer history of the visual culture of marches, processions and protest in modern Britain.

Professor Michelle Henning, University of Liverpool: The Meaning of Infra-Red in the 1930s: Ilford Limited and the Houston-Everest Survey Expedition

This paper takes 2 infra-red photographs from 1933 to explore how photographic materiality, technology and circulation matter when using photographs as visual sources for historical accounts. The first depicts photographic plates being coated in darkness in the Ilford Limited factory in Ilford, London; the second is an aerial view of the Himalayas by the Houston-Everest survey expedition, taken on an infra-red plate manufactured by Ilford Limited. The paper explores how photographs, not only represent historical events but participate in their construction through their material and technological qualities. The technologies of glass-plate manufacture and atmospheric control help to construct the factory as a site of regulation, which substitutes itself for wider environmental regulation of the factory's pollution. Infra-red, as used in the expedition, helps to align scientific and aesthetic modernity with British imperial power.

Sadie Levy Gale, fourth-year PhD candidate, Cardiff University: 'A Worker's Utopia': Visual representations of industrial model villages in the British illustrated press, 1905-1910

This paper explores the visual representation of industrial model villages in the early twentieth-century illustrated press. Between 1905 and 1910, periodicals such as *The Illustrated London News, The Sphere* and *The Bystander* published photo-stories that presented industrial villages such as Bournville and Port Sunlight as idyllic 'workers' utopias'. Built by 'enlightened' industrial capitalists, these settlements were visualised as model garden cities that prioritised health, order and beauty; workers were invariably depicted as healthy, efficient and disciplined citizens who contributed to the growth of Britain's economy. This paper thinks through how these promotional photographs legitimised the continued expansion of industrial capitalism in Britain by obscuring the violent reality of typical working conditions in factories at the time. Situating these images within histories of urban Britain and early photojournalism, it considers how these photo-stories both produced and naturalised a 'capitalist visuality' in which the worldview of the industrialist was always reinforced.

6.2 'Political History in Britain Today'

Speakers: Ayshah Johnston, William Pettigrew, Matthew Smith, Martin Spychal, Mari Takayanagi
Chair: Dr Jennifer Davey, The History of Parliament Trust

How might historians, heritage professionals and policy makers articulate the stories of Britain's political past in an environment where those same narratives can become part of polarised political debate? Histories of political institutions, events or lives are rarely straightforward or easy. They require us to think carefully about how power was presented, articulated, contested and experienced in the past. Reflecting on and presenting those narratives outside the academy offers both opportunities and challenges. Stories about Britain's political history can enable complex and enlightening conversations about how politics, and power, currently operate. This panel, curated by The History of Parliament Trust, will bring together the following experts to reflect on their experience of doing political history today:

Martin Spychal, Who cares about politics? Engaging contemporary audiences with the history of Parliament

William Pettigrew, Legacies of the British Slave Trade 1550-1807: engaging stakeholders and institutions

Mari Takayanagi, From 2018 to 2028: anniversaries, commemoration and parliament

Ayshah Johnston and Matthew Smith, Inclusive History: marginalised communities and curriculum design.

6.3 'Historicising the "Ancient Story" – Race, the State, and the Criminal Justice System in Britain'

Speakers: Liam J. Liburd, Esmorie Miller, Lizzie Seal
Chair: Rhodri Hayward

Liam J. Liburd (Durham University), 'Incarcerating the Crisis: Prisons, Race, and Fascism in 1970s Britain'

Esmorie Miller (Lancaster University), 'Child Q and the Historic, Stigmatising Wider Punitive Effects of Retributive Thinking and Practice'

Lizzie Seal (University of Sussex), 'Press reporting of courtrooms as racialised spaces, 1870-1939'

Reflecting on the 1998 Scarman Report into the investigation of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, the sociologist Stuart Hall described the racist operation of the British criminal justice system as an "ancient story, banal in its repetitive persistence". By this, he referred to the historic failure of British law to protect Black people from racist violence while representatives of the law simultaneously engaged in racist violence of their own. This "ancient story" continues to unfold today. Recent examples include the indecent readiness with which police officers are prepared to strip-search Black children (as with the case of 'Child Q' and many others) or the use of deadly force against Black suspects (as with the fatal shooting of Chris Kaba). However, discussions of such cases are typically conducted without any sense of history. Indeed, outside of the work of Stuart Hall and others (often Hall's students or collaborators at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), there is a relative paucity of historical research on race/racism and the criminal justice system in 20th century Britain. This persists in spite of recurrent calls by some criminologists to critically analyse and historicise contemporary issues of crime and race/racism in Britain, and despite the recent growth of the related subdiscipline of historical criminology. Expanding on earlier sociological and criminological work, this panel seeks to historicise contemporary debates about what are in fact very old issues. Like Hall, the panellists assert the broader 'symptomatic value' of this history. This is not, they contend, just an insular issue of community relations but is instead really about the nature of state power in modern Britain.

Liam J. Liburd's contribution explores a scandal in the late 1970s over the infiltration of the British Prison Service by members and supporters of the white supremacist organisation, the National Front (NF). The scandal was provoked by mounting anecdotal evidence in the press about the level of support for the NF among prison officers in several English prisons. Liburd uses this historical episode to reflect on the history of race and racism in prisons in post-war Britain. They situate revelations about the fascist infiltration of the Prison Service within the context of long running debates about a perceived post-war 'crisis' in the British prison system as well as about the purpose of prison, the role of prison officers, and the rights of prisoners. In doing so, they journey through the archives of the Home Office, the prisoners' rights movement, the anti-fascist movement, and Black political periodicals. Liburd ultimately excavates the underexplored history of race and racism in British prisons in the late twentieth century and considers the nature of the relationship between institutional and "extremist" racism.

Esmorie Miller's contribution focuses on the case of 'Child Q' – a secondary school student strip searched, in Hackney in December 2020 by officers of the Metropolitan Police. They locate the case within the longer history of the British criminal justice system's turn away from rehabilitation and towards retribution during the post-war period. Drawing on African American feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on 'intersectionality', they examine this history of retributive thinking and

practice in its everyday intrusions into the everyday lives of Black, racialised young women, in particular. Miller explores the extension of racialised regimes of retribution beyond the formal boundaries of the criminal justice system – in the case of 'Child Q', into schools. In doing so, they ultimately consider the ways in which retribution has historically superseded care for racialised young people.

Lizzie Seal's contribution examines how local newspaper reports of court appearances by people of colour in Cardiff, 1870-1939 were racialised, and how such reports indicate that courts were racialised spaces. She draws on a British Academy and Socio-Legal Studies Association funded project on racialised people's experiences of criminalisation, victimisation and justice in Cardiff in this period. Newspapers racialised people of colour who appeared in the lower and higher courts through stereotyped physical description, racist humour and reference to racialised urban space, specifically the dockside area of Butetown. These different aspects of the process of racialisation demonstrate how it was multidimensional and provide clear continuities with the racialisation of crime in the post-Windrush era.