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CARIBBEAN FAMILY HISTORY AT SOLIHULL CENTRAL LIBRARY

Tracey Williams

In 2006, Solihull Library Service, in partnership with Solihull College, successfully bid for funding through the European Social Fund's Equal Engage programme to run free family history courses for beginners tracing Asian or Caribbean ancestry. Although many libraries and record offices have run similar day or half-day events, we believe our 10-week courses to have been the first full-length such courses in the UK.

There were initial expressions of interest from people with Indian and Iranian ancestors but, overwhelmingly, the take-up of the courses was by those researching African-Caribbean ancestry. We were amazed by the enthusiastic response of students who were also questioning why other libraries and educational establishments weren't running similar courses.

Finding tutors

Part of the answer for the lack of courses on African-Caribbean ancestry is undoubtedly the lack of experienced tutors. Certainly, this was a difficulty that we encountered, as our initial three potential tutors all moved overseas before the courses even started! However, we were fortunate in that we had contact with a local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) Family History Centre and the wealth of experience of their advisors. We were able to recruit two tutors – one an experienced family history advisor, able to help people researching ancestors from most countries in the world, and the other a qualified teacher who had more recently started researching his own ancestors from Nevis. The skills and experience of the two tutors complemented each other well and students said that they were inspired by one of the tutors being on the same journey as they were, just a few steps ahead.

Similarities with other courses

The first challenge for the tutors was in developing a programme of study, given that the courses were new and had no established curriculum. One tutor made contact with authors Guy Grannum¹ and Stephen Porter². Paul Crooks also came to Solihull and gave an inspirational talk about his experiences and his novel, *Ancestors*³, based on his research. He has since produced a new book⁴, which is a more in-depth research guide.

The course content was broadly similar to what may be called 'traditional' family history courses, in terms of the golden rule of working backwards from oneself, asking around the family for information and identifying and locating vital records relating to birth, marriage and death. The records themselves were slightly different and had to be considered in a broader context of a country's history. This was especially true as regards changes in colonial administration, affecting the records kept, the language of those records, and the custodial history and location of any surviving records. The tropical environment, particularly the impact of hurricanes, was also a consideration in the survival rates of records, something that people tracing UK-based ancestors don't normally encounter!

As students progressed with their research, the necessity of background information from other family members became clear. This could sometimes be a challenge, as older relatives were sometimes reluctant to talk, or had little information, as they themselves may have been discouraged from asking questions of other relatives when they were young. Many of the students had relatives scattered all over the world – some of the places mentioned were the United States, Canada, Panama and Cuba, as well as places throughout the UK and the Caribbean. It is also common practice for pet names to be used within families of Caribbean descent and, often, younger family members may not actually know an individual's official name.

A significant part of the course was looking at how information could best be obtained from within the family. One strategy was, rather than 'fishing' for information from older relatives, to present some information obtained from another source and ask for the person's opinion. Few people can resist the chance to correct information and what might have appeared impertinent as a question, becomes instead a matter of setting the record straight!

Age profile and course delivery

Most of the students on the Caribbean family history courses were in their 30s and 40s and, as most were in full-time employment, this also had an impact on course times and attendance.

The courses were delivered at Solihull Central Library and at Solihull College's campus at Smith's Wood, in the north of the borough. Classes ran in the evening at the college and, initially, during the day at the library. However, the daytime class was not well attended so, after consultation, we changed the timing of the library classes to Saturday afternoons. This worked well whilst the courses were free and it mattered less if students couldn't attend one or two sessions. However, this did become an issue once we were looking at whether the courses could continue once the year's funding ended. It was not possible to sustain paid-for courses on Saturdays, which has also been our experience with traditional family history courses. However, a group of ex-students has formed the Solihull Caribbean Family History Group, which continues to meet at Solihull Central Library to take advantage of the People's Network PCs and the support of the library staff. The group continues to acquire new members and acts as a referral point and support group for new researchers.

Identity

It became clear from the first session of the courses that there were much more fundamental questions of identity amongst some of the students beginning their

Caribbean family history research than was usual amongst more traditional family historians.

It was upsetting to hear some of the students' experiences, such as that recounted by a woman in her 30s who was born and brought up in Birmingham but who experienced racism whilst growing up. During her childhood there were frequent taunts of "Go back to where you came from" and she didn't quite feel that Birmingham, or Britain, was really home. Then, when aged about 13, she was very excited to be visiting Jamaica and 'going home' for the first time. However, her excitement soon turned to puzzlement when she arrived in Jamaica only to be told by people there "You're English". This confusion and lack of a feeling of truly belonging anywhere was a common story related by students on the courses and was given by many as a reason for their interest in family history.

Clearly, family history research for these students was not the nice, time-filling pastime for the retired that it is often portrayed to be. I'm sure all librarians involved with family historians know of the importance of the research and discovery process to individuals. However, my experience of being involved with the Caribbean family history students was that this really mattered in a very much more personal way.

During the 13 months that the courses were running, there was much media coverage of 'black on black' knife crime. The feeling amongst the students was that if the family history courses could be rolled out to young people, the feelings of pride, belonging and identity that would be engendered could help to offset the disengagement and need for a sense of belonging that often lies behind the gang culture. Some of the students were also youth workers and said that they would be cascading what they had learned on the courses to their youth groups.

Impact

Most established courses involving African-Caribbean history appear to focus on the general history and administration of the islands, set in the context of issues around colonialism and slavery. What is often missing is what Nick Barratt calls personal heritage⁵ and which our Caribbean family history courses in Solihull aimed to deliver.

It's this very personal connection to the past that often brings history alive and makes it relevant. Whilst this is true for almost all family historians, it seems to be especially true for Britons tracing African-Caribbean ancestry.

One participant said he felt that he had been on a personal journey and had arrived at a place where he was able to embrace all of his ancestors, black and white, and accept their legacy to him with pride. Another comment from a student is: "Here in the 21st century, I was able to somehow 'peek through a portal hole', made possible from the documented events of those who had lived before me, those who had a direct link to me. I feel honoured!"

For library staff, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to have been involved with the students as they embarked on their family history research. I'd encourage all libraries to consider offering similar sessions and to make contact with their local LDS Family History Centre as a starting point. Our website ⁶ also includes guidance on Caribbean family history research and has links to useful sources.

References

- ¹ Grannum, Guy. *Tracing Your West Indian Ancestors*, 2nd rev. ed. London: The National Archives, 2002.
- ² Porter, Stephen D. *Jamaican records: a research manual*. London: Stephen D. Porter, c.1999.
- ³ Crooks, Paul. *Ancestors*. London: Black Amber Books, 2002. Paul's website is at www.netcomuk.co.uk/~prcrooks/
- ⁴ Crooks, Paul. *Tree Without Roots : The Guide to Tracing African, Anglo and Asian Ancestry in the Caribbean*. London: Arcadia Books, 2008.
- ⁵ Barratt, Nick. From memory to digital record: personal heritage and archive use in the twenty-first century. *Records Management Journal*. 19 (1), 2009.
- ⁶ www.solihull.gov.uk/familyhistory - follow the link to Caribbean family history.

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BEATING THE CRUNCH: report of a course in the North East

Anne Sharp

On April 29th 2009 the Society of Chief Librarians North East (SCLNE), and the Local Studies Group through Committee member Anne Sharp, held their first regional professional training day for Local Studies Librarians.

Each year a panel of Local Studies Librarians in the North East has coordinated an annual family or local history training day for frontline staff. The group meets quarterly to discuss current issues and explore opportunities for collaborative working. In 2008 SCLNE reformed the group, extending the remit to support the local heritage agenda. With the closure of the regional MLA and with it the loss of local training and networking events for professional practitioners, the group sought fresh opportunities to link with colleagues across museums, archives, academic and voluntary sectors. The training day sought to provide opportunities to network, share ideas and good practice, and was open to those working in local studies, students, the unwaged, archivists, museum staff and librarians working in other fields.

This event was hosted by South Tyneside Libraries and costs were deliberately kept low, mindful of the economic climate and that attendees may not receive financial support.

The event was opened by Mark Freeman, South Tyneside Libraries Manager and Chair of SCLNE. His talk "Why bother?" explored the value of local studies collections and services to individuals and communities, and to local and national agendas.