Preface

Local history is widely practised in England today, but what is it, how has it developed, and what do we understand by it? I began my life in local history like many young doctoral students, by tackling a national problem using a local case study. The locality was incidental to the problem, in my case the ownership and occupation of land between the Restoration in 1660 and the mid-eighteenth century. Even so, I could not but be aware that national issues tackled at a local or regional level produced a residuum, a body of knowledge about the area which was of interest locally whatever the 'national' issue. It was on this residuum that I cut my teaching teeth, lecturing to WEA groups in Windermere and remote areas of upland Westmorland where even finding the village hall on a foggy November night was a test of nerve, ingenuity and strong headlights. On these occasions I discovered just how interested people were in 'their' community, which was something which had entirely passed me by as I grew up, because history at school and even at university was about statesmen and their actions, and I had no empathy with these statesmen whatsoever. History only became real when I could study the papers of a Cumbrian landed family and at the same time visit the house in which they had lived, or walk on the quayside at Whitehaven which they had built. I realised that the house in which I had grown up, the ground on which I walked, the land on which my university was built, had a history which was interesting in itself, as well as being part of the wider history of the region and the nation.

In the early 1980s I started teaching local history to undergraduates and to postgraduate students at the University of Nottingham. I took up the baton at a time when local history was still almost exclusively the province of adult education departments, and I also taught on a Certificate in Local History and continued (and continue) to lecture to local societies across the East Midlands and, occasionally, beyond. I recognised that there were two historical communities: undergraduate students whose main interest was in nations, states, and a future career, and postgraduates, usually mature, whose interest was in local history and whose main concern was the subject itself. Faced with the enthusiasm of the postgraduate, I had both to think through the meaning of regional history,¹ and to practise local history to be sure I

knew what I was talking about from first hand experience.² As a result I found, for example, that I understood the place where I grew up in a wholly new light.³ Yet I remained aware of a residual hostile environment among professional historians, for whom ‘local’ meant parochial, antiquarian, and not ‘proper’ history.⁴ That still remains somewhere in the background, and today the problem is compounded by the huge audience for local history, which means the term is used for anything which relates to the past and is perceived to be ‘local’, without much assessment of the ‘history’ involved. I do not think that this problem is insurmountable, and I have sought to combine my professional career with a commitment to local history in the community, both through lectures and through the practical, hands-on business of running a local society. I believe that at whatever level it is practised, local history can and should make a contribution not only to our understanding of national history, but also to our appreciation of our own communities. It is this duality which is one theme of this book: the other is to understand what the subject is, how it has been and is practised, and why it makes a significant contribution to our understanding of past societies.⁴

Notes

- 1 J.V. Beckett, *The East Midlands from AD1000* (1988).
- 2 J.V. Beckett, *A History of Laxton: England's Last Open-Field Village* (1989).
- 3 John Beckett (ed.), *A Centenary History of Nottingham* (1997); J.V. Beckett, ‘The Church of England and the working class in nineteenth-century Nottingham: the building of St. Stephen’s church, Hyson Green’, *Transactions of the Thorton Society*, 92 (1988), 59–73.
- 4 I initially developed the theme of this book in my inaugural lecture at the University of Nottingham, published as John Beckett, ‘What future for the past in local history?’, *East Midland Historian*, 4 (1994), 5–15.