
The Future of Welfare History: the Local Perspective

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Abstract

This short article examines what local perspectives have added—and continue to add—to welfare history. The paper begins by summarising the work of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure on households and the ways they functioned and shows how work on local populations set many of today's research agendas. It then argues that a fruitful way forward might be to use national and regional studies to identify local case studies that would be particularly interesting or informative. This point is illustrated by discussing a range of examples. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of 'big' data and digitisation for local studies of welfare in the past.

No reader of this journal will need convincing of the utility of the local study; nor will he or she need reminding that many of the seminal local studies in British history have been concerned with population size and structure. But population studies are never far from wider questions in economic and social history and, in this short article, I will examine what local perspectives have added—and continue to add—to welfare history.

While the godparent of this journal, the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (CAMPOP), was founded principally to investigate the size and form of the population of England and Wales, it also always had a close interest in households and the ways that they functioned in terms of interpersonal relationships. Indeed, work on household structure by Richard Wall and Peter Laslett came to public attention considerably before the national-level aggregate population work by E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield was complete.¹ This was not a new perspective even then, of course. The magisterial overviews of the Victoria County History project date back to 1899, and CAMPOP's own work had been inspired by detailed local studies being carried out in France by Louis Henry among others.² But the local approach popularised by Laslett, Wall, Wrigley, Schofield and their colleagues was something quite new. For one thing, the large-scale quantitative record sets it had at its back allowed it to set local studies much more firmly in their wider national (and international) context. And, second, it directed attention

1 See P. Laslett and R. Wall (eds), *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, 1972). The major monograph output from the aggregate population dynamics research was E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871: a Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 1981).

2 <https://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/> [accessed 26 June 2018]. E. Gautier and L. Henry, *La Population de Crulai, Paroisse Normande: Etude Historique* (Paris 1958). For examples of some of the British local studies published over the twentieth century see J. Healey, *The First Century of Welfare: Poverty and Poor Relief in Lancashire, 1620–1730* (Woodbridge, 2014), note 41, p. 15.

anew to the smallest social unit of all: individuals, and the ways that they arranged themselves in families, households and neighbourhoods. I would argue that it is this combination of the demographic with the interpersonal which has made local studies of welfare so valuable.

The work which came out of CAMPOP, especially taken in conjunction with the local landscape perspective popularised by W.G. Hoskins and the Leicester school, did two things. First, it pointed out local particularities in welfare regimes and the abilities of families and households to support their own poor. But second, and perhaps more notably at the time, it revealed great continuities in local welfare strategies across large parts of the country and over long periods of time. Laslett, Wall and others, for example, demonstrated a classic and enduring tendency towards nuclearity in English households, meaning that they could not rely on co-resident kin for support in times of need as they seemed to do in the more southern and eastern parts of Europe. Instead, they had recourse to the ‘collectivity’ (in the English, Welsh and Scottish cases—though the vast bodies of local studies were, admittedly, English in focus—principally the poor laws; in Ireland, charities and the church).³ Laslett’s work on illegitimacy, on the other hand, revealed differences of scale in different parts of the country, although there was again evidence of common patterns over time which have tentatively been linked to factors like urbanisation, migration and wage patterns.⁴

This work on local population thus set many of the agendas which remain live today: the impact of household forms on poverty and welfare; the nature of the interaction between poor laws, charity and kin; and the extent of local particularity in any of these areas. It is worth noting, however, that this was not the only way in which historians were tackling the history of welfare at this time. The individual-level approach still went against the grain of much other work in social and economic history, and many other studies privileged the ‘top down’ perspective of the law, policy-makers and implementers.⁵ However, the two approaches seemed to proceed in tandem, and scholars found themselves increasingly able to link them usefully. Certainly, given the highly localised nature of welfare practises across

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- 3 Peter Laslett, ‘Family, kinship and collectivity as systems of support in pre-industrial Europe: a consideration of the “nuclear-hardship” hypothesis’, *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), pp. 153–75; P. Laslett, ‘Introduction’, in Laslett and Wall *Household and Family*, pp. 1–89. The household classification scheme that Laslett and Wall set out in this volume has recently been criticised for being too rigid compared with contemporary understandings of nuclearity and extension and failing to take into account the variety of household forms experienced over the life cycle. See N. Tadmor, ‘Early modern kinship in the long run: reflections on continuity and change’ *Continuity and Change*, 25 (2010), pp. 15–48. Many studies of European households have also thrown into doubt the impermeability of Hajnal’s ‘line’ separating household and welfare forms between northern/western and southern/eastern Europe. See for example T. Dennison, ‘Household formation, institutions and economic development: evidence from Imperial Russia’, *The History of the Family*, 16 (2011), pp. 456–65.
 - 4 P. Laslett and K. Oosterveen, ‘Long-term trends in bastardy in England: a study of the illegitimacy figures in the parish registers and in the reports of the Registrar-General, 1561–1960’, *Population Studies*, 27 (1973), pp. 273–82. For a more recent interpretation of the reasons behind changed courtship and marriage practices see E. Griffin, ‘A conundrum resolved? Rethinking courtship, marriage and population growth in eighteenth-century England’, *Past and Present*, 215 (2012), pp. 125–64.
 - 5 For example, P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1988).

the British Isles up to 1834 and considerably beyond, it was readily apparent that the local perspective was a necessary partner to the ‘grand theory’. Some of the local welfare studies carried out in the 1970s and 1980s are still standard reference points today, from contributions to Richard Smith’s edited volume *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle* (particularly the essays by Newman Brown and Wales on poor relief), to Digby’s work on East Anglian workhouses, and Levine and Wrighton’s on Terling to name just a few.⁶

By the 1990s, the value of local studies for the history of welfare and social relations was well established. However, the publication of Hitchcock, King and Sharpe’s edited collection *Chronicling Poverty* in 1997 popularised a new agenda: that of the ‘pauper perspective’.⁷ This formed part of the growing emphasis on ‘history from below’ and was based on interrogation of documents created by or on behalf of the poor: classically, pauper letters and appeals. In a move away from the earlier emphasis on quantification, many of these studies borrowed techniques and questions from cultural history and the social sciences to examine agency, self-representation and the ‘economy of makeshifts’. This term was first coined by Olwen Hufton in her 1974 study of the French poor, but in the British context it is most clearly allied with local microstudies, often at the parish level.⁸

Local studies such as these have enabled us to understand far more about how poverty was experienced ‘on the ground’ in different places, and how far this was contingent on local personnel, cultures of giving and thrift, the strength of the voluntary movement, and economic opportunities. It also demonstrated that the letter of the law is not always a good guide to how people experienced poverty—on either side of the Poor Law Amendment Act—and how this impacted on their households, living arrangements and experiences of work and migration. Essentially, it put the people back into welfare studies. It was an enormously influential approach and opened up themes which continue to be discussed today. We could quite comfortably continue to target more and more local units for this treatment (record survival permitting), a suggestion which Steven King made recently in this journal, creating an ever more detailed map of poverty and welfare.⁹

However, I suggest that a more fruitful line of enquiry as we move forwards is to keep an eye to the ‘bigger picture’, targeting areas which will help us to understand differences and similarities across a range of local boundaries; geographical, cultural and economic. Fortunately, we also have an abundance of national and regional-level work to help us do this. One of the classic and most frequently cited studies here is Steven King’s own *Poverty*

6 R.M Smith (ed.), *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle* (Cambridge, 1984); A. Digby, *Pauper Palaces* (London, 1978); D. Levine and K. Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Wickleham, 1560–1675* (Oxford, 1991). See also S. Hindle, *On the Parish?: The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, c.1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004); and T. Sokoll, *Essex Pauper Letters, 1731–1837* (Oxford, 2006).

7 T. Hitchcock, P. King and P. Sharpe, *Chronicling Poverty: the Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, c.1640–1840* (Basingstoke, 1997).

8 O. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1975). For examples, see S. Williams *Poverty, Gender and Life-Cycle under the English Poor Law, 1760–1834* (Woodbridge, 2011) on Bedfordshire; A. Tomkins, *The Experience of Urban Poverty, 1723–82* (Manchester, 2006) on Oxford, Shrewsbury and York; J. Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: a London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987); Hindle, *On the parish?*

9 S. King, ‘Thinking and rethinking the New Poor Law’, *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp. 5–19.

and Welfare in England, which was published in 2000.¹⁰ In this work King mined welfare records to highlight local variations in poor relief and culture. Broadly speaking, this mapped on to a relatively parsimonious attitude in the north and west of England, where self-help was valued highly (both by officials and by the poor themselves); and a more generous and expansive outlook in the south. This has informed welfare studies ever since, and its broad conclusions still stand. It naturally has many implications for the ways that households were formed to accommodate the needy, and how people moved around for work or to access charity. In a broader sense, it informs our understanding of the ways that people built relationships with localities: the poor law system meant that almost everyone had a place to which they ‘belonged’ in terms of welfare provision.¹¹ Perspectives like these have been important in shaping the way that local historians, and scholars of poverty and welfare more generally, have viewed social relations and identity in the past. Bob Woods’ work on demography in Victorian England has (along with Wrigley and Schofield’s) given us an equivalent national context from which to make sense of local patterns in vital events and allied trends such as epidemiology and maternal work and health.¹²

Work like this enables us to place local studies in their wider geographical and cultural context and arguably makes them more useful for understanding social relationships, both with locality and with welfare and kin. Of course, there are many reasons for carrying out local studies and some scholars may have a specific interest in one place alone. However, I would suggest that this sense of comparability is useful because of the inevitable tendency otherwise to highlight what was unusual about a specific place. Without a sense of what other parishes, unions, villages and towns were doing, we risk achieving a complete map of local welfare practices, but with little sense of overall typology or distinctiveness. Fortunately, the growing sense of a wider perspective allows us to ask more penetrating questions of our local studies, and set them up to ask meaningful wider questions.

This is a process I saw at first hand during my first academic job, when I worked as a research officer on a project examining municipal medicine in interwar England and Wales.¹³ The project had two halves. First, we carried out an examination of expenditure by all 83 county boroughs in England and Wales on a wide array of health measures (county boroughs were the largest and most urbanised units of local government at this time, and possessed the widest array of powers when it came to local health and welfare policy). Second, we used this analysis to select four case studies for detailed investigation, specifically targeting the four quadrants of high/low rate base (crudely: ‘rich’/‘poor’), and high/low representation of the Labour party on the local council (this being frequently

10 S. King, *Poverty and Welfare in England 1700–1850: a Regional Perspective* (Manchester, 2000).

11 See K. Snell, *Parish and Belonging: Community, Identity and Welfare in England and Wales, 1700–1950* (Cambridge, 2009).

12 R. Woods, *The Demography of Victorian England and Wales* (Cambridge, 2000).

13 This was the Wellcome-Trust funded project ‘Municipal medicine in interwar England and Wales’ led by Professors John Stewart and Martin Powell. For the full findings of this project see A. Levene, M. Powell, J. Stewart and B. Taylor, *Cradle to Grave: Municipal Medicine in Interwar England and Wales* (Bern, 2011).

correlated with high levels of spending on health and welfare).¹⁴ The local element of this study was thus very much informed by looking for, and explaining, difference from within an aggregate national picture.

The process of selecting the case studies was instructive, and at times entertaining. The original project proposal had outlined four potential towns based on prior knowledge of their wealth and political affiliation. However, once the ‘bigger picture’ was complete, we realised that not all of our earmarked localities were as different as we had hoped they would be. Worcester, Bootle and Barrow-in-Furness were all jettisoned once their characteristics could be compared with the national picture, in favour of Barnsley, West Hartlepool and Newport. Only Eastbourne made it through the selection process to claim its title of a rich, low-Labour borough. We were careful not to focus on absolute outliers, but we wanted boroughs likely to reveal a variety of practices and policies.¹⁵

The four towns we selected were certainly very different from each other, and the detailed studies were highly revealing of the human behaviour and political priorities which directed the spending patterns we had seen at the national level. The first section of the project had pointed to enormous disparities in spending on health per capita, from Liverpool at the upper end to Dudley at the lower. It was already clear that in many cases this correlated with high rateable values (that is, a comfortable tax base), but there were already some suggestions that certain towns *chose* to prioritise areas of expenditure over others. Some were clearly spending highly on measures to prevent tuberculosis or maternity and child welfare schemes, for example (Rotherham and Lincoln, respectively), while others were still investing in isolation facilities for infectious diseases (Barnsley and Wakefield, for instance). Very few boroughs spent at a consistently high or low level across all of the health and welfare services.

The local studies revealed these processes and preoccupations in true technicolour. In some instances, we found that predictable factors had a big impact: the influence of a well-organised local Labour party in Barnsley, for example, backed by a strong miners’ union, which kept spending levels high despite economic depression and a low tax base. Similarly, the strong history of voluntarism in parts of Wales was revealed in Newport, as well as a distinctive relationship with the Welsh National Memorial Association and the Welsh Board of Health. However, in other cases we found that infighting and dominant personalities had a disproportionate impact on local welfare regimes and in ways which the national picture could not have revealed. In Eastbourne, for example, the state of health provision was enormously skewed by one, relatively elderly, Medical Officer of Health named William Willoughby. Willoughby had trained during the high period of infectious diseases, and he remained wedded to isolation as a key plank of the town’s health strategy. ‘New-fangled’ innovations like X-ray diagnostics for tuberculosis received short shrift from him, and the town continued to prioritise institutional facilities for isolation. Similarly, in both Newport

14 Levene *et al.*, *Cradle to Grave*, p. 107

15 We also placed an upper population threshold of 100,000 in order to make an intensive local study more feasible.

and West Hartlepool, spending remained low because of a reluctance to raise the rates, especially in West Hartlepool. At a regional level, too, local pride could stymie attempts to unify welfare services: several of the county boroughs in the West Midlands would not countenance sharing facilities because of long-standing animosities.

I would argue that our study revealed the value of detailed local work in explaining and contextualising difference. Perhaps more importantly for our current purposes, it explained how and why we got there. With the national picture in place it was easy for us to contextualise the local studies, too; in other cases this is more difficult, but it adds considerable weight to the conclusions which can be drawn. Eilidh Garrett and Andrew Blaikie's work on illegitimacy in two areas in the Scottish Highlands is a fine example of the way that a local demographic study can be enriched by an appreciation of wider factors like migration, women's work, and the nature of the local economy. Their census data revealed quite distinctive patterns of illegitimacy in their two areas, but the study was brought to life by a realisation that what was critical was the combination of female employment (or its lack) and access to grandparental and sisterly care for babies born out of wedlock.¹⁶ Barry Reay's *Microhistories* remains a classic demonstration of the richness which can be brought to local studies (in this case of the Blean area of rural Kent) by a multi-layered approach which here extended to oral testimony as well as demographic and welfare sources.¹⁷ The result is a study with a deep sense of both place and people, and which suggests conclusions with wide applicability. Similarly, Jonathan Healey's recent work on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Lancashire evokes an awareness of the physical landscape as one of several factors influencing the economy of makeshifts, in both a positive sense (natural resources) and a negative (dearth).¹⁸

Healey's study also made use of a much earlier set of pauper narratives than is common, in a body of pauper appeals to the Lancashire Quarter Sessions from the 1620s to the 1710s. It revealed many of the same negotiating tactics, language and expectations as have been more thoroughly explored for the early nineteenth century by Sokoll, King and others. A lot of reflective work has been done by these authors and others in the last decade or so on the use of first-person documents written by or on behalf of the poor. King and Jones have recently and usefully reshaped this area of research within a longer context of petitioning and letter-writing, setting up new ways of thinking about pauper agency and self-expression; or, in the words of the title of their edited collection, *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*.¹⁹ This is particularly valuable for encouraging scholars to think carefully about the way that they use terms originally borrowed from other contexts and other disciplines.²⁰

16 A. Blaikie, E. Garrett and R. Davies, 'Migration, living strategies and illegitimate childbearing: a comparison of two Scottish settings, 1871–1881', in A. Levene, T. Nutt and S. Williams (eds), *Illegitimacy in Britain, 1700–1920* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 141–167.

17 B. Reay, *Microhistories: Demography, Society and Culture in Rural England, 1800–1930* (Cambridge, 1996).

18 Healey, *First Century of Welfare*.

19 P. Jones and S. King, 'From petition to pauper letter: the development of an epistolary form', in P. Jones and S. King (eds), *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute under the English Poor Laws* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2015), pp. 53–77.

20 See, for example, K. Williams, *From Pauperism to Poverty* (London, 1981), pp. 136–44 on the mis-characterisation by historians of ideas about social control and the poor.

Scholars are still extracting new ideas and perspectives. One particularly interesting approach used by several contributors to King and Jones' edited collection on the poor laws is the prosopographical study of individual paupers. Alannah Tomkins has been an advocate for this method for some time, and in this volume she develops the technique to demonstrate what is hidden from first-person testimony.²¹ She reveals that one particular candidate for welfare in Staffordshire, widow Ellen Parker, was not quite as she portrayed herself to the authorities. Specifically, she was not entirely lacking in other sources of support, as she suggested, and actually had kin living relatively nearby. Ellen was careful to conceal their presence lest she be thrown on their mercy instead of being assisted to remain independent. The prosopographical study of not just a single locality, but a single person with a set of relationships to locality and individuals, reveals another square or two in the 'welfare patchwork', as well as hinting at how they were sewn together—or, alternatively, left (carefully hidden) in the scrap bag.

When it comes to future directions of research in local welfare studies, then, there are signs that scholars still have some new tricks up their sleeves. Local studies are certainly still vigorous: the *Economic History Review's* most recent list of publications included articles on poverty and welfare in seventeenth century Lancashire, nineteenth century Sutherland, seventeenth century Dundee, and nineteenth century Nottinghamshire, while the 2016 review of periodical literature in *Local Population Studies* finds a yet livelier field by taking a more expansive remit.²² *Local Population Studies* itself of course continues to provide a forum for research on welfare; the issue preceding this one was a collection on regional and local perspectives on the New Poor Law, and included pieces on the Poor Law Guardians in Hertfordshire, the New Poor Law across Scotland, England and Wales, medical care in local health economies, pauper lunatics in Cumberland and Westmoreland, and children and families in Antrim, Ballymena and Ballymoney.²³

21 A. Tomkins, 'Poverty, kinship support and the case of Ellen Parker, 1818–1827', in Jones and King, *Obligation, Entitlement and Dispute*, pp. 107–38.

22 J. Beckett, 'Politics and the implementation of the new poor law: the Nottingham workhouse controversy, 1834–43', *Midland History*, 41 (2016), pp. 201–23; J. Healey, '“By the charitie of good people”: poverty and neighbourly support in seventeenth century Lancashire', *Family and Community History*, 19 (2016), pp. 83–94; P. Jones and S. King, 'Voices from the far north: pauper letters and the provision of welfare in Sutherland 1845–1900', *Journal of British Studies*, 55 (2016), pp. 76–98; J. McCallum, 'Charity and conflict: poor relief in mid-seventeenth-century Dundee', *Scottish Historical Review*, 95 (2016), pp. 30–56; W. Farrell and A. Hinde, 'Review of periodical literature', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp. 95–109. See also M. Reynolds, *Infant Mortality and Working-Class Child Care, 1850–1899* (Basingstoke, 2016) and A. Nicholls *Almshouses in Early Modern England: Charitable Housing in the Mixed Economy of Welfare 1550–1725* (Woodbridge, 2017), both of which take a local perspective.

23 The articles cited are: K. Rothery, '“Who do they think they are?” An analysis of the Boards of Guardians in Hertfordshire', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp. 20–30; P. Jones, 'The New Poor Laws in Scotland, England and Wales: comparative perspectives', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp. 31–41; A. Ritch, 'New Poor Law medical care in the local health economy', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp. 42–55; C. Dobbing, 'The circulation of pauper lunatics and the transitory nature of mental health provision in late nineteenth century Cumberland and Westmorland', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp. 56–65; J. Purser, 'The workhouse population of the Nottingham Union', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp. 66–80; S.A. Gallaher, 'Children and families in the workhouse populations of the Antrim, Ballymena and Ballymoney poor law unions in the mid nineteenth century', *Local Population Studies*, 99 (2017), pp. 81–92.

Local Population Studies 99 also contained an article by Steven King on ‘future directions’.²⁴ Some of these are arguably the sorts of nuanced extension of previous work noted above: more attention to the ways that paupers could shape their experiences; more local studies to fill in some of the gaps in the welfare map; more work on the nature of outdoor relief. These all seem like valuable endeavours, but I think that there are other, and perhaps more novel, ways that we could proceed. The first is to pay more attention to aspects of the welfare encounter which have not received much attention yet. King notes examples like religious practice and education in the workhouse, but calls them ‘smaller questions’. I disagree: I think that areas like this are very revealing of attitudes to the poor and the priorities for their treatment, the way that their behaviour was monitored and shaped by officials, and the ways that they could resist such shaping in different places. Similarly, we could pay more attention to the fabric and material culture of the workhouse and other institutions, to systems like ticketing for charity which show the way that the poor encountered the better-off, and the character of individual charity boards, workhouse committees, Boards of Guardians and other bodies providing education, welfare and health services to the poor.

I certainly agree with King over one particular area for future work, however, and that is the need to work comparatively across the British Isles as a whole. Peter Jones makes a powerful argument for such an approach, pointing to the growing evidence both for variation within one so-called ‘welfare regime’, and for similarities across supposedly very different regimes, particularly the different legal frameworks of the poor laws of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland, but even between England and Wales, which shared a common law.²⁵ This clearly complicates our still limited understanding of the ways that the poor experienced poverty in different parts of the British Isles. Again, this research trajectory is not entirely new, but the growing momentum we see in recent studies is a very welcome suggestion that we are moving away from a tendency to see the study of Wales, Scotland or Ireland as intrinsically local simply because these are smaller units of geography than England. Furthermore, we are coming to realise how much such studies can enrich our understanding of the ways that poverty was recognised, shaped and treated in different geographical, cultural, economic and religious contexts.

The final area it would be remiss to ignore if we are thinking about where to go next, is the utility of online and ‘big’ data. The mass digitisation of historical records has had an enormous impact on the work we can do, and it has made some of those records far more accessible to scholars outside formal institutions too. Arguably the trend has itself shaped research, as the provision of funding and resourcing inevitably does: witness the large amount of work using the records of London’s central criminal court since the release of the impressive Old Bailey Online.²⁶ In the area of local population studies, however, the impact of digitisation has been variable, especially for places outside London. The headline

24 King, ‘Thinking and rethinking’.

25 P. Jones, ‘The New Poor Laws’.

26 <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org/> [last accessed 26 June 2018].

stories are repositories like the United Kingdom Data Archive, which includes datasets on oral histories in Stocksbridge and Stevenage, infant mortality in Georgian London, and women and the household economy in industrial Britain just among its recent deposits.²⁷ The Wellcome Trust has also funded the digitisation of many records of relevance including local Medical Officer of Health reports from 1848 for London, and admission registers and patient notes for children attending Great Ormond Street Hospital and the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Glasgow.²⁸ Those with university affiliations can access databases like the Burney Collection and nineteenth century periodicals, which can shed light on many areas of interest in local social and economic history. Meanwhile, family history sites like ancestry.com and findmypast.com have opened up huge amounts of local data which go well beyond the census listings to include militia, probate and emigration records, for a relatively small membership fee. Beyond this, however, local archives often lack the money to make their sources available online (and perhaps fear the financial implications of doing so in terms of footfall in the archive itself). The Digital Humanities Institute's list of projects does not contain many with a local focus (although there are a few exceptions—admittedly not always very useful for population studies).²⁹

We are in a situation where many individual scholars probably have large amounts of local data on their own personal computers but lack the resources and common purpose to share them more widely except via personal networks. As Tim Hitchcock recently observed, digital humanities are very much shaped by the availability of funding (many of the mass open resources, like *The Times Digital Archive, 1785–2012* and the Gutenberg project, are so widely accessible because large companies like Kodak and Google put up the money).³⁰ Meanwhile, one of the benefits of local studies is that they can be done with relatively little investment, at least initially.

Where, then, lies the future of local population studies in welfare? It is clear that we need not fear for its continued vibrancy either as a perspective in its own right or as a way of understanding population trends at a more individual level. In fact, as more and more electronic sources do open up, and computer software allows the least digitally literate among us to create databases and carry out nominal linkage, it is likely that perspectives which permit detailed examination of interpersonal relationships on many levels will become more valuable still. This is magnified by the fact that scholars of local history are not shying away from connecting their studies to bigger narratives, thoroughly putting paid to the question we all dread: 'interesting....but so what?'. It is hard to imagine what

27 Nicola Spurling, 'Oral histories of homes and daily lives in Stocksbridge and Stevenage' (<https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=852575&type=Data%20catalogue>); Romola Davenport and Jeremy Boulton, 'Infant mortality by social status in Georgian London' (<https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=851119&type=Data%20catalogue>); Jane Humphries, 'The industrial revolution and household economy in Britain' (<https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=850699&type=Data%20catalogue>) [all last accessed 26 June 2018].

28 <https://wellcomelibrary.org/moh/>; <http://www.hharp.org/> [both last accessed 26 June 2018].

29 See <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/projects/> [last accessed 26 June 2018].

30 <http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/2016/07/the-digital-humanities-in-three.html>; <https://www.gale.com/uk/c/the-times-digital-archive>; <http://www.gutenberg.org/> [all last accessed 26 June 2018].

genuinely new sources may be awaiting us (although that has no doubt always been true, and King does point out at least one under-utilised source in the MH12 series at the National Archive), but it is also reassuring that scholars are willing to use those which might otherwise grow a little thin, to ask new questions and take up new perspectives. Perhaps one of the most valuable things we can do is to continue to share data, opening up new ways of combining the spreadsheets and databases that we so love, to create new perspectives on local welfare regimes.