

Whatever Happened to Social History? Social History in the Work of the Economic History Society, 1926–2026

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This paper emphasises the extent to which social history has pervaded the work of the Economic History Society across its first century, challenging narratives of disciplinary separation between social history and economic history in the EHS. Focusing on particular periods and on sample years within them, and drawing on systematic analysis of the *Economic History Review*, Council records, conference programmes, and Tawney Lectures from 1926 to 2025, I trace how social history persisted within the Society even as its methods and institutional context transformed.

The study classifies content by topic (economic, social, or hybrid) and by method (qualitative, quantitative, or mathematical/econometric). It combines quantitative classification of over two hundred articles and conference papers with qualitative analysis of archival records to assess how boundaries between economic and social history were negotiated.

The headline finding is that social history was never relegated from the Economic History Society. Rather, social history in the EHS underwent methodological transformation across three distinct phases.

In the 1920s–1930s founding era, the distinction between economic and social history barely existed in the Society: William Ashley's 1927 programmatic article made no mention of social history as a separate category, yet from inception the *Review's* subtitle described it as 'a journal of economic and social history'. The works of the founding scholars – many of whom were women, as Maxine Berg has demonstrated – were at least as much social as economic. Likewise the early Council minutes reveal a Society actively commissioning bibliographies on industrial revolution and labour history that addressed social questions without requiring explicit demarcation.

In the 1960s–1970s 'golden age', social historians including E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Asa Briggs served on Council; the Society lobbied for a joint Economic and Social History committee at the Social Science Research Council; and the celebrated standard of living debate fused economic and social approaches. Even as cliometrics arrived with Fogel's 1966 railway study and the Social History Society was founded in 1976, Hobsbawm remained on EHS Council until 1978, demonstrating the split was institutional rather than intellectual. Likewise, social and hybrid articles took up a substantial portion of the pages of the *Review*.

Between 1987 (a peak for social history topics in the *Review*) and 2005, social topics continued to occupy significant space in the journal and at Society conferences. Increasingly, however, social history in the EHS deployed quantitative methods. Studies of poverty, illegitimacy, health, and gender employed anthropometrics, height data, and demographic series. The Women's Committee – which gave much attention to social topics - was established in 1988, and dedicated conference sessions on welfare, immigration, and women's work appear, for example, at Edinburgh (1995) and Leicester (2005). Tawney Lectures regularly addressed social themes including famines, child labour, gender, slavery, and inequality. While most university departments of economic and social history in the UK closed from the 1980s, the Society response of greatly expanded activity session – such as broadened funding streams, establishing fellowships named after social as well as economic historians, and supporting the Third World Economic History Group - was thematically inclusive.

A check of the Society's conference and of the *Review* in a recent year – 2019 - confirms the pattern of the persistence of social history in the EHS. The proportion of social history or hybrid articles in the journal continued above 30%, albeit these articles were much more frequently systematically quantitative than in the 1960s and 1970s. A significant change, however, can be found in the prevalence, much more in the *Review* than in the conference, of the mathematical/econometric methods possibly more often found in the analysis of economic than of social topics. This divergence between conference culture and journal methodology suggests that social history persists to a substantial extent in the Society's activities even as publication norms have shifted toward formal modelling.

The interim conclusion of this work in progress is that social history was never relegated from the Economic History Society; it underwent methodological transformation while thematic overlap persisted. The Society's centenary offers an opportunity to recognise this continuity and to reflect on what has been gained and lost as social history in the EHS became more quantitative whereas elsewhere (for instance in the Social History Society and its journal *Cultural and Social History*) social history reflected, much more than in the EHS, a 'cultural turn'.