

Speech at “The Subject Index” Exhibition, 20 Jan 2015

Hello, my name is Stephen Potter, and I have been working at Southwark Local History Library for over twenty years. I was slightly baffled when Anna said she wanted to borrow a section of the library and exhibit it as a work of art. I didn't think the management would agree, but as you see, she's got away with it.

This is not like the usual art of exhibition where you stand in front of the objects. With this one, you have to talk to the people running it. You have to choose from the subject index, and then you have to rummage, as if you were at a car boot sale.

One thing I like when I'm working at the library is to see people thinking. When a person looks up at the ceiling, or stares vacantly at the wall, then I know history is being digested. I'd like to encourage you to take your time with this stuff- ask questions about, and see if you can re-use it in your own life.

Generally when people come to the Local History Library they want to indulge in a bit of time travel. They might want to go back to their childhood, and see what the shops and the park and the school looked like. It's great when people come in together, and show our pictures to their children and grandchildren: they talk about their neighbours, and making go-carts, and riding on the back bumpers of lorries.

We also get people doing their family tree. You might find your great-grandparents lived in London in 1900. The Local History Library can give you an idea of what their lives were like. You can see that in Peckham the population was three times what it is now. Horse-drawn buses and trams clattered up and down Rye Lane. You could get on a sailing barge right here and sail to the open sea. But when you read the accounts ordinary people wrote about their lives, you can see it was mostly about working very hard, starting a family, and trying to attain respectability.

Another reason people come to the library is to understand the place they live in. How did we get this long walkway that leads up to Burgess Park? Why have we got pubs in the High Street called 'The Red Cow' and 'The Kentish Drovers'? Why is Peckham Hill Street completely flat? If you're new to an area, you can read its history and understand it better. Or if you've lived in an area a long time, you have a sense of how it is unique: -your neighbourhood is not a replaceable commodity, and you can always learn more about it.

You could start by reading a basic book about your area and noting what interests you. Or, you might already know what you're interested in: it could be football clubs, it could be railways, it could be inspirational women, it could be people arriving from foreign countries, it could be living conditions, it could be local artists.

This is where the Subject Index comes in. It's a list of topics that the library has information about. We call it a 'finding aid'. If you're Anna, you find the list itself fascinating; but it's supposed to help you find those books, pamphlets, photos and so on that the librarians have hidden away.

As I said before, do ask the staff how to find things. Be bold, tell them what you're interested in, and ask them what finding aids they've got. Be friendly, and be persistent- keep asking if there's anything else they can recommend. You might find they have old films, paintings, scrapbooks, or maybe there's a local museum with objects you'd like to see.

There are thirty-two local history libraries in London, one in each borough, plus the Guildhall Library, the London Metropolitan Archives, and the Museum of London library. So hopefully, there's something to interest all of you.

Of course, what you ask about does say something about you. But you are part of the story of London, so you may as well accept that and enjoy it. You can put yourself or your family into

the record. Southwark Council would like its collection to be representative of everyone in the community. As Anna says, the history you find in a library is always incomplete. Just as working-class men and women are missing from our Victorian portrait galleries, so today we can see the West African families in Peckham, but so far we have hardly anything in the library about them.

Think how interesting it would be to read the diary of someone who lived in your street a hundred years ago. You could keep a diary now, put in plenty of detail, take some photos, and give it to your local history library. If you like, you can specify that no-one shall read it for a hundred years.

Or you could write your life story, like the ones we have here from Peckham. It might be ten pages long, it might be fifty pages. It would give your grandchildren and people of their generation an idea of how we lived, and what was important to us.

You don't have to give it to the library, just leave some account of your life for your grandchildren. If we can have better relationships between people of different generations, then we will have a better sense of who we are. We need to know the story of our family and of our community, so that we can decide where to take that story in the future.