THE THAME HISTORY RESEARCH GROUP

The Thame Research Group had its origins in a local history class organised by Oxford University Department for Continuing Education at Rewley House, Oxford. The class was one of many extra-mural classes throughout the three counties served by Rewley House, which has a strong local history department led by Dr Kate Tiller, University Tutor in local history. Beginning in 1984 with work on the 19th century in Thame, the class then asked to go back into 17th century history which has particular interest in Thame, a Parliamentary stronghold during the Civil War. The work began with classes in palaeography and the first subject of study was the large collection of probate documents from the Peculiar Court of Thame. Over 400 wills and inventories were transcribed and a transcription of the Parish Registers was also begun in conjunction with the work already being done by the late Brian Young. From 1990 onwards the group became self-supporting as the University Department for Continuing Education connection came to an end. Since then the group has transcribed and made available a range of documents for the period in Thame including rentals, school accounts, hearth tax records, Civil War assessments and information from monuments in the parish Church of St Mary. Almost from the beginning, the idea of computerising the data being collected was considered, and to begin with flat file data bases such as ABILITY and QUEST were used. However it was realised that a relational database was essential to the work being done and so DATAEASE was used and then later ACCESS, which is now the database containing all the data collected. The group has evolved methods of working together on the production of the database, although only four of the eight members use the computer directly. The group is now using methods for making the database available to non-computerised members so that they can follow up the areas of their own research.. The work on computerising the data has taken place over the period, roughly, of the emergence of relational databases, which can be used on personal computers, and also the emergence of personal computers with greater power. This has meant that the group constantly changed its objectives from simple holding of data to the present possibility of inter-relating data from all sources. Therefore there has been a great deal of re-planning as the work progressed and it has been essential to check data very carefully.

THE RESEARCH PLAN

The objective of the research is to produce a social and economic history of the town in the 17th century with special emphasis on the way in which local families controlled the economy. The connections between agriculture and the trades of the town are being explored. A biographical dictionary is also being prepared and this involves some family reconstitution. The transcripts of the material used are being deposited in Oxfordshire Archives as raw data for others to use, ultimately disks holding the data will also be deposited. Some articles using the data have been published in Oxfordshire Local History, the journal of the Oxfordshire Local History Association. The Victoria County History of Oxfordshire published a volume containing an article on Thame in 1954, it is hoped that the group's work will add to the material available there. Mary Hodges, who tutored and then led the group from the beginning, used the database at various stages in its development for other courses at the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education and elsewhere. In 1998 the database formed the basis for a new course at the Department entirely delivered by the Internet. This innovative course was designed to teach historians how to use databases in their work.

PLANNING THE DATABASE

The work of the group began with the probate documents which were Xeroxed and then transcribed. The results were placed on the computer using WORDPERFECT which enables searches to be made. These transcripts are now available within the database. Initially a table of details of each document was prepared and this led to a further table containing the names and details of all the people appearing in the probate documents. These two tables form the basis of the database, and it was in trying to use the data in these tables to prepare biographies that it was realised that other data must

also be brought in. Next to be included were the parish registers, as three tables - baptisms, marriages and burials. Then other sources were added as further tables - hearth tax, rentals, assessments, school accounts, lay subsidy and frankpledge. It became clear at an early stage that standardisation of surnames might be required. In the end a table was made listing all the surnames collected from all the documents - in excess of 26000 names (although some are the same person) - and these were grouped together as the FISC table, following the information by now available on spelling variations and family groupings. This table is used in conjunction with other tables to call all those people belonging to a particular surname, regardless of how the spelling of the name varies. This table of names, a table holding all occupations and occupation codes, one holding status and status codes and a table holding sources used and their whereabouts are the four tables in the database which do not relate to a particular type of document. Thus the database is simple in construction, all but four tables correspond exactly to a documentary source or sources. In order to help in working on social and economic topics, individuals have been placed in groups according to occupation, where this is known; this information is held in a table which can be called as required. The plan of the database includes 32 tables where the links are made through unique ID numbers for each table and also by links between surnames and first names. Tables are linked to the key tables holding surnames, sources, status and occupations. Using ACCES we have been able to use the program to make 'front-ends' which enable users to access the data without the need to understand query language and other detailed aspects of the program. We anticipate queries about surnames and individual names, occupational structure, details about inventories, taxation patterns and so on. ACCESS has, in most respects, met our needs in building the database. We have been fortunate in having two professional computer people in our group. Phil Williams suggested that we should set up two linked databases, one for the data itself, the other with various analyses and aggregations dealt with through queries, forms, reports and macros. This database would draw data from the first database and so would also have front ends to make it easy for non-computer people to use. It was interesting that Phil Williams in a study made in June 1995 saw the original design as appropriate. This design has tables constructed as logical representations of the original data source. It has seemed to us throughout that this was the right way forward. It has kept our data sources intact. The code tables are linked across the database in order to allow searches to be made across all the source tables. In order to make the design of queries straightforward the same field names are used throughout, for example sname and fname for surname and first names. Descriptions of the fields appear in the table design where necessary. ACCESS provides useful methods of looking at table design and other design matters overall. For example when the tables list is open using Tools, Analyze, Documenter will display all details of the table, when it was made and revised, number of records and so on.

COMPUTER USE AND THE GROUP

In the group of eight that worked on the database, four did not have access to computers, nor did they want to. It has been difficult at times not to turn these members into 'slaves' collecting and transcribing data but not able to enter the data or make decisions about the database. It has also been difficult at meetings, usually held once a month, to prevent conversation becoming over-technical. However, non-computer based members have proved vital in ensuring that the database has been made to work for non-computer literate users. All members took part in the task of checking output; members also used the data as it was being collected and processed to write articles for Journals. We have come to see co-operation between the computer experts and the non-computer based members of the Group as essential if the work is ever to be used in a records office for general enquiries. Discussions about record linkage have been important in developing the database, we have turned to articles in the journal History and Computing and to books such as Harvey and Press *Databases in Historical Research.* We have also been able to ask advice at the University Computing Centre. We see the ESRC History Data Archive, University of Essex, as the destination for the database since this will ensure a wide use of the database.

PUBLICATIONS USING THE DATABASE

1 A transcript of the Parish Registers together with a names index has been deposited in Oxfordshire Archives.
2 Bell, J *God Keep Them Still From Us - The experience of Thame 1642-43* MS 1994
3 Bell, J *Francis Norris of Rycote, 1579-1622* MS 1995
4 Bell, J *Notes on Edward Wray and the Norris Inheritance 1589-1658* MS 1995
5 Bell, J *The Mortality Crisis in Thame and east Oxfordshire 1643* in Oxfordshire Local History vol 3, no 4, Spring 1990, p137-152
6 Motla, P *Agriculture and Trade : the economy of Thame, 1600-1680* in Oxfordshire Local History Vol 3 no 4 Spring 1990, pp153-165
7 Cray, June *Family reconstitutions : The Cotton and Messenger families in Thame, 1600-1665* in Oxfordshire Local History vol 3 no 4 Spring 1990, pp 166-169
8 Garlick, Joan *Farming Activities at Thame and Woodstock in the early 17th Century : The evidence of Probate Inventories* in Oxfordshire Local History vol 3 no 7 Autumn 1991 pp 291-317
9 Motla, P *The occupational structure of Thame, 1600-1700* in Oxfordshire Local History vol 4 no 2 Spring 1993, pp44-54
10 Motla, P *Changing Attitudes to Poverty in Thame 1600-1700* in Oxfordshire Local History vol 4 no 4 Spring 1994 , pp 120

GROUP MEMBERS

(* indicates members who worked throughout the project)

* Bell, John
* Bell, Myra
* Bretherton, David (secretary)
* Cray, June
Fickling, Helena
Grof, Laszlo
Hammond, Derek
* Hawkins, Tony (treasurer)
* Hodges, Mary (led the group)
* Motla, Paresh
Williams, Phil (joined in 1995 and continued thereafter)

Thame History Research Group
1 September 1999