**Intellectual History at Sussex**

In 1969 Sussex became the first university in this country to offer an undergraduate degree in the branch of history known as Intellectual History (IH), a label that expresses its concern with a human activity as natural and pervasive as any of those transactions that interest economic, social, or political historians. Judged by long-term results I think we can claim that it was a successful innovation, certainly more successful than the numbers of faculty or students involved in it would suggest. By the end of the twentieth century it was becoming common for outside observers to refer to the published research of those appointed to teach the subject as the work of a distinctive ‘Sussex School’.\(^1\) No fewer than five of the Fellowships of the British Academy awarded to members of faculty with a Sussex connection, about half the total so far, have gone to those with an IH affiliation.\(^2\)

Although IH was not part of the founding fathers’ plans, it undoubtedly came into being as a result of the opportunities to create new coalitions that existed within a system that allowed Schools of study to have as much influence in determining the shape of the curriculum as conventional single-discipline departments had elsewhere. Initially, the IH degree combined the skills and interests of members of faculty appointed to teach philosophy, classics, economics, sociology, and cultural history. But if IH had continued to rely on the variable goodwill of these contributing departmental interests its future would have been

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\(^1\) The best short treatment of the subject can be found in Stefan Collini’s introduction to the two Festschrift volumes presented to John Burrow and Donald Winch on their retirement; see *History, Religion and Culture* and *Economy, Polity and Society*, with their common sub-title: *British Intellectual History, 1750-1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); and the extract on the website of the Sussex Centre for IH: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cih/research/history).

\(^2\) In order of election they are: John Burrow (1986), Donald Winch (1986), Peter Burke (1994), Blair Worden (1997), and Stefan Collini (2000).
insecure. It was only when those teaching IH acquired autonomy that the subject could develop according to its own priorities.

In achieving this status by the early 1970s another feature of the Sussex academic scene was crucial: contextual courses designed to underline the identity of the Schools. Some of these courses were particularly welcoming to the interests and habits of intellectual historians, especially when they provided opportunities for joint teaching with literary scholars and philosophers -- those who shared an interest in interpreting complex historical texts. Members of the IH group became regular contributors to such courses as the *Modern European Mind* in the School of European Studies and a variety of *Literature and History* courses in the School of English and American Studies. But one contextual course in particular played the earliest and most important formative role in the development of IH: *Concepts, Methods and Values* (CMV), a compulsory course taken by all third-year students in the School of Social Sciences, the only School on the arts and social studies side of the university whose identity derived from the nature of the disciplines it housed rather than from some overarching cultural or geographical entity. CMV began as a course that made use of the literature on the philosophy of science to explore similarities and differences within the social sciences and between the social and natural sciences and the humanities. The aim was to provide students with a ‘second-order’ standpoint from which they could assess the nature of the knowledge claims made by the social sciences in the light of modern controversies on the subject.

After a couple of years it was decided that the same goal could be achieved by considering the historical development of the social sciences over the period that began with the Enlightenment and ended with their professionalization as academic disciplines at the beginning of the twentieth century. There was, after all, a rich literature based on classic pronouncements on the methodology and philosophy of social science by such figures as
John Stuart Mill, August Comte, Karl Marx, Emil Durkheim, and Max Weber. The course was not constructed around heroic founding fathers or texts treated biblically. We avoided another prevailing characteristic of the historiography by not organising the teaching around the individual disciplines that comprise the modern map of the social sciences. We were more interested in accounting for the differences between that map and the ones that had been plotted in the past, the ways in which the borders between the various territories had been conceived or shifted. Above all, by aiming to show that there was more to the history of the social sciences than pioneering attempts to anticipate what current social scientists were doing, we avoided teleological or Whig history.

The early teaching by existing members of the School was greatly strengthened by the recruitment in 1968 of John Burrow by Donald Winch, one of the first generation of CMV teachers who was about to become Dean of the School. Burrow was the first person to be appointed solely to teach a contextual course at Sussex. He had published *Evolution and Society* in 1966, a much-acclaimed work that dealt with the role played by various non-Darwinian evolutionary theories in nineteenth-century social thinking. He brought an expertise in the history of social anthropology, political thought, Darwinism, and Anglo-German historiography to what already existed at Sussex by way of the history of the social sciences, chiefly a knowledge of the history of sociology, jurisprudence, empirical social inquiry, and political economy. From the moment Burrow was appointed it was clear that although CMV was the initial beneficiary, IH had gained a fillip that was going to transform it from being a mere strategic coalition of existing interests into something more ambitious and durable. This was announced to a wider world when Burrow was promoted to be the first

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3 Burrow, who died in 2009, left a privately-printed memoir of his life entitled *Memories Migrating*, a copy of which can be found alongside his papers in Special Collections at the University of Sussex Library. A documented history of CMV and those who contributed to it will also be deposited there.
occupant of the Chair of IH in 1982, the year after *A Liberal Descent*, his next major work, a study of Victorian historiography, appeared.

The rise in demand for the services of intellectual historians generated by the growth in the numbers taking the School’s one remaining compulsory contextual course made it possible to justify another permanent appointment, Stefan Collini, in 1974. This was eventually to result in a collaborative work by Collini, Winch, and Burrow, *That Noble Science of Politics; A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History* (1983), the opening chapter of which contained the anti-Whig manifesto that had guided CMV teaching and was to become a distinctive feature of the ‘Sussex’ approach to IH. CMV was forced to retreat from some of its earlier ambitions during the austere 1980s, but was not abolished until 1998 when the School, a few years before its own dissolution, adopted a pick-and-mix formula for its courses. An innings that lasted 35 years would be regarded as a good one by Sussex standards, and there were few other contextual courses that generated research as well as teaching.

The disappearance of such courses and the cuts to higher education spending during 1980s were unfavourable to the broad spread of academic expertise encouraged by the original School system. Small groups were thought to be vulnerable unless they could be hidden within larger ones: IH was required to merge with History in 1986. Since it was only a marriage of administrative convenience between entities that had independent origins and lives various safeguards for the autonomy of the minority group were put in place. For a time, while memories were fresh, these were honoured in the observance rather than in the breach, though often only after a tussle that harmed internal relations. Two replacement posts were filled in 1993, though only the former has been retained; it is now held by Richard Whatmore in the form of a personal chair. The established chair was filled from an international field in 1997 by Martin van Gelderen, with Blair Worden being appointed at the
same time in the hope that he would bridge the gap between IH and early modern history.
The chair was filled again in 2005 by its present occupant, Knud Haakonssen, whose success in obtaining external research funding has kept IH alive as a postgraduate entity and enabled the Centre for Intellectual History to mount a sequence of high-profile events on a shoe-string budget. Whether these initiatives will be sustained into the next half century will depend on the university’s willingness to resist reversion to the mean.

Comment added in April, 2016. The above was written for a publication designed to mark the 50th anniversary of the university. Minus its prophetic final sentence, clearly not thought suitable for a celebratory occasion by the editor, it appeared in Making the Future; A History of the University of Sussex (2011), just as the fortunes of IH were allowed (encouraged?) to fall into a serious decline. Two major losses occurred: Knud Haakonssen took early retirement in 2011 and later went to a post in the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Study at the University of Erfurt; and in 2013 Richard Whatmore left Sussex for a chair in the School of History at St Andrews, where he rebuilt an Institute of Intellectual History along the lines of the Sussex Centre with support from Haakonssen in a part-time capacity. In both cases the losses could have been avoided if the senior management had been prepared to take a stand against the hostile inertia and active depredations of the historians.

As some of the letters to the 7th VC, Michael Farthing, will show, the departures of Haakonssen and Whatmore were almost inevitable in the light of the shabby way in which they were treated. This continued right up to the end of their employment at Sussex: Haakonssen’s election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 2011 went almost unnoticed by the senior management and most of his immediate colleagues in History. Approval of his emeritus status by one of Farthing’s deputies was only granted after inexplicable delay and during a period when the VC was away from Sussex.
When their plans for expansion were blocked Haakonsen and Whatmore entered into discussions with members of the English literature department in the hope of effecting the transfer of IH from History to English, to a setting in which the study of complex texts was better understood. They were instructed by the head of History, Ian Gazeley, acting under the cover of the PVC (Education), Joanne Wright, to ‘cease and desist’ from such discussions. Gazeley threatened withdrawal of approval for future research grant applications if Haakonsen and Whatmore failed to ‘demonstrate significantly more collegiality’ by accepting ‘the ruling of the university on your position for the foreseeable future’. Anger management treatment was suggested as a remedy for any further failure to yield to authority. Invocation of collegiality and loyalty was rich coming from Gazeley, whose attendance at History work-in-progress seminars was a notably rare event, and who had made unavailing yet determined efforts to transfer out of History into Economics some years earlier.

One of the letters Donald Winch sent to the VC in support of the IH case brought an irate reaction (see memo dated 20 May, 2008) from PVC Wright in which she ordered Haakonsen and Whatmore to ‘desist from involving parties from outside the University’. It had to be pointed out to the PVC (who, incidentally, left the following year, having spent just over 3 years at Sussex) that the outsider in question had an official connection with the university that by then had lasted 45 years. Only the gender of Angelo in ‘Measure for Measure’ needed a little adjustment -- ‘but man, proud man/Drest in a little brief authority/Most ignorant of what he's most assured’ -- to make the Shakespearean verdict a perfect fit for the arrogance of the new managerial mentality.

Despite further correspondence with the VC, and what proved to be worthless assurances from him that IH still had a part to play in the plans of those in charge of History (now including a Dean, Matthew Cragoe, brought in for a specific job from another university), things were allowed to drift further downwards. Norman Vance, a member of the English
department who regularly taught IH courses and took on administrative duties after

Whatmore left, retired in 2015. The established chair in IH occupied by Haakonssen was
never refilled. Nor was Whatmore’s post replaced in IH, though an appointment in Gazeley’s
field was made. An establishment of five posts in 2000 (three of them at the chair level) had
fallen to a single lectureship currently held by Iain McDaniel. ]

Donald Winch