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Preface

This short work is intended to complement and extend two earlier publications. The first of these is a manual on Reconstructing Historical Communities (1977). In that work we surveyed community studies in history and social sciences. We described, with transcripts, twelve major types of document, and then gave a preliminary inventory of the major sources available to an English local historian. We set out a method of hand-indexing such material, with suggestions on how to locate, transcribe and index it. We assessed in a preliminary way the quality of the data in relation to a specific source, place, family and individual. We discussed the use of such material in relation to physical background, economic life, population studies, social structure, law, politics, education and religion. Finally we assessed some of the difficulties and defects of local records: the problems of record loss, of ambiguities and fictions in the records, the difficulties of linking together different pieces of information, of inferring motivation from behaviour, of studying a particular place given the high degree of mobility and of the invisibility of certain sections of the population. We concluded by providing some estimates of the amount of time and energy required to collect and index the records.

Subsequently we decided to publish full transcripts of all the records for one English parish up to 1750. With the indexes, this would have meant a nine-thousand-page publication,

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prohibitively costly to produce in ordinary book form. We therefore collaborated with Chadwyck-Healey Ltd in producing a computer-output microfiche edition of the records for a tenth of the price. In order to make the documents comprehensible, we had to spend much time and thought in re-assembling them into archival categories. In order to explain the procedures which produced the printed records and the interconnections of the documents three brief introductory pamphlets were distributed with the microfiche. A number of historians and others who saw the introductions asked for copies, since nothing of this nature existed elsewhere. The present book is essentially a re-publication of what was written as brief introductions to particular sets of documents, plus two further chapters considering the growth in the use of historical documents and other topics. The limitations which the particular history of this book's growth have imposed are discussed in the first two chapters. It should be stressed here that in order to prevent duplication of what was said in Reconstructing Historical Communities and other guides, this introduction does not deal with many of the important questions concerning the reliability and utility of historical documents. Instead, its aim is to provide a single introductory description of how documents were produced and connected to each other. I would have welcomed a guide which provided an overview of record-making institutions and records, but I do not know of any other that attempts in a short space to do this. In order to keep it reasonably priced we have, as before, produced the work using computer-output photo-litho methods. I have also kept the description as brief as possible. Thus, for example, the Webbs devoted two volumes to manor and borough records and another two to the poor law. In this work we have made do with a few pages. Thus the treatment is meant to lead interested readers on to a point where they can consult more exhaustive guides as appropriate.

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