



**Local History Cafe Online: One Year On**

**A report by Crafting Relationships**

**April 2021**

**Contributors:**

Katherine Brown  
Director, Crafting Relationships  
Email: [craftingrelationships@outlook.com](mailto:craftingrelationships@outlook.com)

Kate Crossley  
Local History Café Online Project Manager (August 2020 – March 2021)

Beth Holmes  
Heritage Education Director, Crafting Relationships (September 2019 – July 2020)

## Summary

The Local History Café programme was established by Crafting Relationships in October 2017 as heritage and wellbeing get-togethers for over 50s, at risk of, experiencing or looking to keep at bay, social isolation and loneliness. They are ordinarily monthly, face-to-face get-togethers at partner sites, across the East Midlands. In March 2020, partners were Calke Abbey, the Sir John Moore Foundation, Erewash Museum, Charnwood Museum, Kirby Muxloe Community Library and Hub and New Walk Museum, (now Leicester Museum and Art Gallery).

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent March 2020 first lockdown in England, all six of our partners' sites were forced to close their doors to the public. At the time, we optimistically thought face-to-face would recommence in the Autumn. In the meantime, Crafting Relationships applied for funding to set up an online presence with a closed Facebook group, to see us through. We are very grateful to Health Matters at the University of Leicester, Leicestershire County Council and the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society for their support.

Up until March 2020, in person cafes were our sole focus. Although some form of online presence for Local History Cafes beyond the blog space had been discussed in idea form, face-to-face work remained our priority, so setting up a Local History Café Online Facebook group was entering new territory.

This report was written by Katherine Brown, Director Crafting Relationships and Founder of the Local History Cafe programme and Kate Crossley, freelance Local History Café Online Project Manager. Sections of an initial report in July 2020 by Beth Holmes, former Heritage Education Director, have been amalgamated.

In it we examine the last year, what happened, what we learned and what comes next. The authors have written this report as both a reflective and live document. We have looked at relevant literature and attended online webinars on topics including using digital in a time of COVID, older peoples use of technology and staying connected. We applied learning along the way and by presenting our findings and thoughts, we aim to support the development of the digital and face-to-face Local History Café programme.

To keep our report short and also ensure it is a useful working document for ourselves and all our stakeholders, we cover the following themes:

- Creating and sharing quality heritage and wellbeing content.
- Building a community.
- Choice of platform.

Key questions we asked ourselves:

- How possible has it been to replicate the face-to-face Local History Café model by moving the programme online?
- What have been the main successes and barriers?
- Have we met our outcomes?
- What next?

Data used for this report has been taken from: Local History Café Online Facebook group content, group member case studies, polls, comments from the Project Manager, speakers, the Crafting Relationships Director, and partners involved in our regular Local History Cafes who have been

contributing to website content. Data from the first three case studies was gathered through interviews on Facebook Messenger, linked to the Facebook group, as well as those individual's interaction within the Facebook group, with the remaining gathered by email. It is important to recognise that any data collected is based on limited data due to the type of relationships that we can ethically and safely form with our online community.

For additional context, an initial evaluation of the face-to-face Local History Café programme was released in August 2019. The programme and/or report has been referenced in the Leicestershire County Council Loneliness Toolkit and the Heritage Alliance 2020 Heritage, Health and Wellbeing report. In September 2019, Crafting Relationships was awarded a Highly Commended Award for Partnership working for Local History Café. Please see [www.craftingrelationships.co.uk](http://www.craftingrelationships.co.uk) for copies and more information.

The main findings from this report are that Local History Café Online has provided a positive, supplementary space for community members during the coronavirus pandemic. During this time there has been an explosion of free, high quality and accessible digital content, and we are proud to have contributed to this by starting a group to remain connected.

The group has helped some people feel more connected during lockdown and has provided a way for its members to engage with heritage material while other face-to-face activities have been closed. While we are not able to claim our Facebook group achieved the same level of impact for anyone at risk of, experiencing or looking to keep at bay social isolation and loneliness as our face-to-face gatherings do, it has been a safe space, without argument or inappropriate controversy sometimes associated with social media, for people to come together around the hook of heritage.

### **Background: About Crafting Relationships**

Crafting Relationships is a social enterprise developing wellbeing programmes with older community members and primary age children, independently and together. They also coach individuals and organisations making a difference. Local History Café is a core Crafting Relationships programme.

It is important to note here that Crafting Relationships has been greatly affected by coronavirus. In March 2020 we were riding high, with three employed team members and a future of growth ahead of us. By August 2020, the organisation returned to Founding Director, Katherine Brown as the sole employee, furloughed between April and September that year – a difficult period of time spent considering 'what happens next', rather than 'time off.' A challenging time too for the other two team members, forced, through the pandemic, to make decisions about their own futures based on the limited information we all had.

Crafting Relationships could have taken the decision to pause all work until at least September 2020, however we felt it was important and right to continue the Local History Café programme in some small way.

Between March and September 2020, funding paid for a Local History Café Online Co-ordinator for 0.5 days per week. Due to the legalities of furlough, as well as a model of working Crafting Relationships supports, remaining team members in that role were given complete autonomy from the beginning to shape the work, making sure it was manageable within 0.5 days per week. As it became clear that the pandemic was far from over, continued funding was secured from September 2020 to March 2021 and allowed the new Co-ordinator an additional 0.25 days per week to work with the Director specifically on shaping the future of the programme.

## **Local History Café Online aims**

The face-to-face Local History Cafe programme aims to:

- Tackle social isolation and loneliness amongst over 50s through a quality heritage and wellbeing programme.
- Support heritage and community organisations to learn new skills and use existing skills, experience and assets to tackle these issues.
- Apply an asset-based, partnership approach, supporting collaboration across sectors working on social isolation and loneliness.

The aims of the Local History Cafe Online programme, set in March 2020, were to:

- Tackle social isolation and loneliness through a quality heritage and wellbeing programme.
- To build on our experience of running Local History Cafes and adapt this approach in order to tackle these issues in a new online medium.
- To continue emphasis on our core themes of active ageing, agency, lifelong learning and crafting relationships.
- To reach a wide audience, recognising that anyone can be at risk of social isolation and loneliness during lockdown and the COVID-19 outbreak.
- To take a partnership approach, working with our Local History Cafe partners, universities and heritage experts to provide a quality heritage and wellbeing programme.

## **How does Local History Café Online work?**

### **Promotion**

Promotion has been through digital means as well as word of mouth. Partners have contacted face-to-face group members as a way of staying in touch where possible and letting them know about Local History Café Online as well as sharing on their own platforms. Additional promotion has been through our funders' websites and social media channels, interviews on BBC Radio Derby, and Erewash Sound, the Charnwood Borough Council newsletter, Facebook recommendations, Twitter and a health and social care publication delivered through doors in the East Midlands.

### **Joining the group**

The group is found through searching for 'Local History Cafe Online' through Facebook. Once someone is a member they can access all of the previous content, they can comment on various features and join in with conversations. They are asked if they would be happy to introduce themselves to the rest of the community. As this is a Facebook site, members can leave at any time.

On joining, individuals are asked a series of questions to ensure the group is geared up to them. A set of 'house' rules, some of which are based on Facebook templates, are shared to highlight aims of the group:

#### **1. We're here to distract**

COVID-19 is all over the news and social media. Let's make this a place to be distracted.

#### **2. Be kind and courteous**

We're all here to connect with others in a challenging time, so let's treat everyone with respect and kindness.

### **3. Please don't swamp the group with posts**

We'll have a planned programme for each week. Appropriate posts are more than welcome. If you have an idea for a new activity, get in touch with Admins.

### **4. Respond to other people's comments**

Just as we would if we were face to face, let's acknowledge each other's comments and create conversations.

### **5. No promotions or spam**

Give more to this group than you take. Self-promotion, spam and irrelevant links aren't allowed.

### **6. Respect everyone's privacy**

Being part of this group requires mutual trust. Authentic, expressive discussions make groups great, but may also be sensitive and private. What's shared in the group should stay in the group. Only share things you are comfortable with others knowing.


### **7. No hate speech or bullying**

Make sure that everyone feels safe. Bullying of any kind isn't allowed, and degrading comments about race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity will not be tolerated.

The model for the programme is to follow an admin set schedule. This is broadly the same each week, though has developed over time.

Tuesday is for 'community connections'. A chance to post, ask questions, and generally contribute. The schedule was important to us, because it created structure, but we recognised that it may inhibit the comfortable exchange of conversation that we desired. Wednesday is for Partner content, a chance to enjoy the 'behind the scenes' from our heritage partners that is a key USP of the face-to-face cafes. Thursday or Monday there is a live talk, delivered through Facebook Live, and lately through Rooms. Sometimes this was pre-recorded, if our speakers were technologically unsure. On Friday we write our Heritage Focus, an open feature that allows the LHCO Coordinator to post interesting heritage content of their choice, such as a podcast or article. This was influenced by the group on many occasions, and sometimes researched by key members and presented by the co-ordinator. The Saturday photo of the week is very popular, typically getting between 60 and 80 views.

This selection of posts received a various degree of success in creating conversations with members through the comments boxes featured below.



YOUTUBE.COM

**Historic Graffiti Talk ~ James Wright**

Historic Graffiti – the Hidden Story of the Hopes, Fears and Desires of a...

6 2 comments Seen by 86

Like Comment

Fascinating. I really enjoyed that. The theory of the burn marks was interesting and shows the change in thinking about this, as last night in The Making of England, Michael Wood described some in Kibworth as if they were accidental.

Like Reply · 9w 1

An 'interesting objects' feature provided by our Wednesday LHC partners which was successful in sparking conversation:

Admin · 6d


Today's Partner's Tuesday is from Charnwood Museum, and is another of their fascinating archaeological objects:

"This Late Iron Age (100 BC – AD 43) bronze 'horn cap' is from High Cross, Leicestershire.

Less than 30 of these mysterious objects are known nationwide. There is no evidence for what they were used for although they may have been mounted on the ends of ceremonial staffs. Part of the object is hollow perhaps suggesting something was placed inside to make a sound when moved."

I've attached a link to a newspaper article in case you wanted to find out more about the metal artefacts discovered alongside this mysterious object

<https://www.heritagedaily.com/2017/11/unique-collection-metal-artefacts-iron-age-settlement-sheds-new-light-prehistoric-feasting-rituals/117601>





As with face-to-face cafes, heritage presentations have been an important 'draw'. There have been a wide range of topics from 'The Witches of Leicestershire', 'Funny things you find in the Census returns' to 'East Midlands Oral History Archive – 'Telling it as it was''. Speakers have included university lecturers, librarians, museum curators, interested amateurs and local historians. Speakers have come from a range of heritage and academic backgrounds, some of whom already knew about the programme. A £40 fee is made available to all speakers, something we'll include more about later.

Delivery has been through livestreaming or pre-recorded using several types of medium including Zoom, YouTube, as well as directly through the Facebook site. At times, the technology aspect of this has been challenging to coordinate depending on speakers' experience and confidence with technology, requiring coaching and considerable staff time. In the early stages the aim was to have two talks per week. More time than originally anticipated was necessary to secure and support speakers, as well as promote talks, so from Summer 2020, our aim changed to one talk per week, with space for a second if capacity allowed.

The following quote from one of our speakers reflects this support well:

*Could you kindly report back to your funders about how useful your technical support has been to me as a creative writing facilitator. I much appreciated access to your group. After attending a few virtual meetings, I was scheduled to talk about creative writing. As I was new to using FB, Kate helped me with using the online technology to join her in the messenger room. Then, there was a small attendance, so she kindly switched my reading to a live streamed discussion. Thus, I was recorded for future listening and that enabled me to share the reading beyond the group. My time was validated by her willingness to adapt to audience participation.*

Between March and December 2020 each talk had between 60 and 85 viewings listed either at the time of the talk or afterward. However, Facebook records views as anything over 3 seconds, including autoplays and autoplays on mute, true viewership is therefore hard to ascertain. Our project co-ordinator estimates livestreaming talks attracted between 5 and 10 live viewers, comparable to our close-knit face-to-face cafes.

A review of group presentations led us to test out Facebook Rooms in early 2021. Group members reported enjoying being able to 'catch-up' on talks at a time to suit them, however communications between group members in the chat sections below remained low, so we asked the group about moving to Facebook Rooms via a poll and that was well received. Speakers also commented they looked forward to speaking to a room as opposed to the 'blank' audienceship Facebook of live streaming.

Facebook Rooms talks have had between 1-8 members watching. One video had only 1 participant, so it was rescheduled. The most successful has had 8 members. Most have had 5-6. There was a great conversational element of these talks. The negative of these talks is that they are not currently viewable at a later date reducing the flexibility for the group.

One of our regular speakers sent us this comment:

*Loved being able to give talks again without driving to distant venues in the dark. Liked it even more when we changed to Facebook Rooms so that you could see the audience.*

*Wendy Freer, Pudding Bag Productions*

## **Partner content**

Following the sudden closure of face-to-face cafes came the closure of all partner sites, furloughing of many, reduced or no contact with volunteers and enormous pressure on remaining heritage staff to rethink their services.

Crafting Relationships was mindful of this when extending an invitation to partners to get involved in Local History Café Online and is grateful to everyone who was able to enhance content at different stages throughout the last year.

In Summer 2020 three of our partners shared their thoughts on Local History Café Online. We returned to them in March 2021 for further comment:

- **Partner A:**

### **Summer 2020**

A regular contributor to our original 'Partners Tuesdays' feature, this partner created a Facebook account so they could comment and engage with members of the group. They answer specific enquiries by group members and have posted content directly onto the site at times. Their impressions of Local History Café Online are that it has 'very professional output' and has an 'ambitious range of resources and interesting material'. At first the volunteer representing our partner site was not confident about posting material on the Facebook site and received support from Crafting Relationships. They responded by saying this had been 'helpful / supportive to me making limited input and to our Local History Cafe members who wanted to participate'.

This partner has engaged their regular Local History Cafe members by setting up a WhatsApp group and sending out a regular newsletter to stay in touch with those who do not have access to/feel comfortable accessing technology. They have speculated that the Facebook group may have 'lost its focus.....in comparison with the original programme idea, in terms of the type of people involved'. This also stems to their opinion of Facebook as a platform for this, where they said that 'I understand the choice in terms of many people's familiarity with it and in terms of having a readymade set of tools etc.' However, they personally do not like to use Facebook. Furthermore, only 3 out of the 10



members of their WhatsApp group are members of the group, one extra joined but then left as they did not like using this platform.

A positive that this partner sees for members is access to 'far more talks and materials on local history than they would have gained through other means' and that there are 'opportunities to engage in discussions with a wider range of people than they would have had - particularly during lockdown'. In terms of future development, they would have 'liked to see more interactions develop in relation to videos and other materials. I know this isn't straightforward with such platforms and, initially at least, is likely to require a lot of organiser input. But it would be a way of trying to develop more of a community than a collection of members.'

- **March 2021** – contributed by a different volunteer to Summer 2020.

Our heritage organisation has been proud to partner with Local History Cafe Online and especially during the last year. The partnership has allowed far more people to be reached not only in the locality but in a much wider online community. Our members have enjoyed reading peoples comments on our Facebook and Whats App pages and are extremely proud that they can contribute in these ways. For many members this has been their first contact with any form of social media and has given them new skills that they transfer directly into their own family lives.

Local History Cafe Online has also provided the group with discussion points during our monthly online Zoom meetings, that we have felt as a vital link to many members who are elderly and live alone. Members especially enjoyed the live video talks and found them a welcome replacement for our own talks that cannot take place at present. Local History Cafe Online has been a vital extra publishing point for our Monthly newsletter which has grown considerably since its inception in May last year.

Local History Cafe Online members have been able to interact with the newsletter and have been the source of further articles that will appear in forthcoming editions. It is vital to maintain close links, albeit remotely, at this time and we are sure that those connections can be carried on long after lockdown is released. I feel we must also mention that in one particular case, one Local History Cafe Online member was able to contact us via both Facebook and Whats App and donate some valuable documentation about a local village shop that now has been acquired for our collection.

This partnership is a vital link not only within communities but also between them and is highly valued.

- **Partner B:**

### **Summer 2020**

This partner organisation already has involvement with a Facebook site dedicated to local history and has been using information and links to this to help to generate material for our 'Partners Tuesdays' feature as well as providing information from their collections. They have not directly engaged with the site. Their opinion of Local History Café Online is that it 'was an excellent prompt and innovative reaction to the challenging situation that was presented with Covid 19. I think the range of activity, presentations and other interesting activities is really great and.....I think that with the resources and the practical considerations you did a fantastic job in responding and providing a resource that reflected the original format but in an accessible way given lockdown/social distancing etc.'

In terms of using Facebook as the platform, they thought that 'it was an obvious choice as a delivery vehicle. My only issue with Facebook is that it can't be accessed by everyone. Having a closed Facebook group makes it safe place in which to engage which is a good thing. I don't have any

solutions for offering it in another way so whilst I can make comments about its limitations in terms of wider access I don't have an alternative suggestion.'

They feel that the main positives the group brings to its members are that 'it widens the reach and profile of Local History Cafe in general, which could be useful for profile and funding would impact on members. It connects the participants of other cafes with each other which is interesting, takes people out of the local context but doesn't remove the shared interests of participants which I think could make people recognise that they can identify themselves with a much wider group of people.'

Ideas for future development include 'something for participants that are unable to connect to online activity or Facebook and 'in the future when life and engagement returns to some kind of normal there could be a possibility of groups getting together with each other a part of a shared experience.'

## **March 2021**

I will happily add to what was said last year for the purpose of the report, but stressing that the comments above are still valid and reflective of the situation months on.

- the online LHC Facebook group was clearly the most realistic and engaging way to respond to the situation both as an immediate reaction and ongoing solution over the past 12 months. I applaud the idea as well as the time, energy and motivation of all those who made it happen.
- Although it will only have engaged a cohort of people who have a Facebook presence and access to computers/broadband/smart phones, it absolutely was the obvious way to proceed and definitely met the needs of those engaging extremely well.
- As with most things this year the big question has been how to meet everybody else's needs and I still am looking for not perfect but adequate solutions to this. The time is right now to reflect on the past year and attempt to find solutions to this issue. I think it will rear its head in the same way, albeit in a different form, when we start to meet up again. There will still be some who are considered/or consider themselves too vulnerable to join face to face meetings and they will be precluded from participation. I would welcome conversations around what we can and importantly can't do to resolve these issues.
- We (Leicester Museums) have tried to support LHC online by supplying information/resources to support the work of the group, we needed to pull our weight to enable others to do their bit. As partner organisations we needed to look at our roles in terms of what we can do effectively and be honest about what we can't do. As a large authority we do have more support financially and otherwise than smaller independent Museums/organisations, but large organisations have bigger restrictions and rules. Not being able to access as many different technical solutions as others has been an issue. We have only just (last couple of weeks) been given work access to Zoom. It wasn't previously supported by LCC for security reasons, we still can't use What's App on phones for work purposes either, two routes that have been well used this year to communicate.

## **Partner CSummer 2020**

This partnership has been sustained by a volunteer who regularly generates material via email for the Co-ordinator to share. Although tremendously supportive of the work, she has raised concerns that most of their face-to-face members would not be able to access a Facebook group due to digital and age factors. As a contributor, she has enjoyed putting features together and found it an

interesting way to spend her time during lockdown, where she and her husband 'have often reminisced about such things as trolley buses, old cinemas'.

In terms of content, she believes that although 'the online offering does give them something regular and interesting to watch and read but obviously cannot replace the personal contact. I am assuming that isn't going to restart any time soon so online seems to be the only way forward.' Furthermore, she would like to see the encouragement of more engagement with the articles that members are reading or talks they are watching, as she has observed that 'My feeling is that whilst people are looking at the articles they are not engaging with each other as a community, possibly because they are not used to Facebook and adding comments? Not sure how you could encourage joining in but possibly could you ask them to post their stories, favourite items or places to visit rather than relying on Museum or similar items?'

### **March 2021**

The online offering has been very varied with a lot of work being put in over the year to make the content interesting. There is still an issue with people engaging with each other but I cannot think of anything more that can be done and maybe they are happy with how they engage with the site.

The organisation I volunteer with has been going through quite a staff reorganisation so I have had little contact with them until last month. As a volunteer, who did not volunteer last year due to Covid, my ability to influence what is happening is limited and I was not sure if they were going to continue with the Local History Cafe until recently. I have emailed participants a few times since we finished to keep them updated where I could. I will work with my organisation to see when they feel best to restart the face-to-face meetings.

### **Expanding to Digital Partners**

Understanding the above challenges for face-to-face partners around creating digital content during a very challenging time led Katherine and Kate to consider other options. In the same way that creating a social media presence for the programme had not been fully considered pre-pandemic, as we moved through the months after March 2020, being in a 'not-knowing what's happening next' situation led us to innovate.

At the time of writing, Creswell Craggs has joined us as our first Digital Partner. Our relationship is symbiotic, adding depth and additional interest for our group members and keeping Creswell on the radar during a period of enforced closure. Digital Partners are also organisations who are interested in exploring the opportunity to join as a face-to-face partner when possible.

### **How possible has it been to replicate the face-to-face Local History Café model by moving the programme online?**

- **Choosing Facebook as our platform**

The Facebook platform is widely used, particularly by our demographics and gave Crafting Relationships access to existing tools to quickly and effectively create a programme of delivery.

With our decision to broaden the geographical area covered in the group from the East Midlands to The Midlands, as well as open up the age range, Facebook allowed Local History Café Online to attract a wider demographic. For those with an interest in local history, it was easy to find and recommend to friends with similar interests.

Facebook is, however, not used by all of those who accessed face-to-face cafes, therefore we have been unable to reach some of those we most wanted to remain in contact with. This may be an area

to develop in the future. There were also some technological issues to overcome for delivery. The positive of this is that LHCO has had to respond to different needs of its speakers, which has meant a positive learning curve in terms of using different types of digital platform to aid delivery.

## **Demographics of Users**

By end of March 2021 there were **223** members. We do not have members' demographic information, although those who have shared tell us they are from the East Midlands. We also have members from geographically further afield, such as America, Australia and Africa. These people anecdotally report that have local ties to the area There is a third defined group that has emerged, which is not based on age or geography. LHCO has a community of history enthusiasts, such as PhD students, historical re-enactors and local historians.

There have been attempts to encourage members to comment and form relationships to give a boost of wellbeing. These appear to have worked more as the year has progressed and our approach has changed to focus more on this and as the group's growth steadily increased. It is worth noting here that a look at several large heritage and cultural institutions Facebook pages showed us that commenting and liking of posts is relatively low.

There have been lots of comments and exchanges on Saturday photos of the week. We tried to create opportunities for people to comment by phrasing posts as questions, being encouraging in the comments, and by adding more controversial elements to Friday Heritage Focus. That was not a success particularly. Appealing to more reminiscence comments created more dialogue and discussion. At the beginning only admins could post and this was altered to allow approved posting to increase interaction and group engagement.

## **Presentations**

Having regular speakers presenting on heritage and history topics is the main replicated feature from face-to-face cafes. However, at in-person cafes, as part of our model, we spend the first session with each new cohort finding out about the topics that interest them and then seeking suitable speakers focussing on an agency model. Speakers and talks are the most similar part to replicate online. However, the model for LHC onsite was to ask speakers to provide an engagement activity and to openly encourage questions and interaction. This was initially not replicated. Facebook Live was chosen because it provided flexibility (watch on catch-up). Speakers found they were 'talking in the dark' and questions came afterwards in comment boxes. They could be answered live, but this was difficult. Gradually questions dwindled. To combat this, the admin team changed to using Rooms, where participants and speakers can see each other and interact in real-time.

As in the original LHC model, the staff presented interesting historical bits of information with the intention to use those as conversation starters. In the group these took the form of posts (not speakers posts). The onsite cafes often would discuss research done by group members, asked them to contribute their thoughts on a discussion, so it was a managed group contribution. On Facebook the posts become more top-down, presented by the admins to be consumed by the groups leading to a lack of engagement which is not true to the model. To react to this admin settings on the group were loosened and posters encouraged to share themselves. There is still a low contribution, but several key members are posting regularly. We instituted Tuesday community

connections to encourage more posting which have been gradually growing in success and forming nice community conversations.

Local History Café is usually for over 50s looking to connect with others who have an interest in local history and heritage. Their aim is to reduce social isolation and loneliness. With the creation of LHCO the decision was made to open up to all adults as the COVID-19 outbreak has led to a hitherto unseen increase in social isolation and people experiencing loneliness in all age groups (RCGP, 2020). The importance of mental stimulation in being able to maintain cognitive functioning in older adults (Vance et. Al, 2008) is an important part of the work of regular LHCs through our themes of active ageing and lifelong learning. With the onset of lockdown the importance of providing people with engaging activities has moved beyond just thinking about older members of society. We therefore wanted to create a community where all adults could connect.

We should also feel proud that we have provided heritage experts a platform to discuss their work and generate income during lockdown. The LHC commitment to paying for an appropriate wage for service so often expected to be given as a 'calling' or as 'exposure' has been continued during a time of deep need, when speakers' other income streams have decreased.

### **What have been the main successes and barriers?**

The LHCO Facebook group has attracted people, no doubt, from a broad range of life situations, ranging from historical re-enactors teachers, historians, interested amateurs, writers, artists and more. In terms of motivations for joining the group, these range from an interest in local history to people who are experiencing shielding, where access to the online talks has been a much-needed source of mental stimulation during this time. One lady, who is a member of a local history group that is unable to meet at the moment, has watched most talks and engaged by asking as to how to link her computer to her television so that she can see the screen better. She has been shielding due to her husband's medical needs and so this has been an important part of her finding positive engagement during lockdown. This user has also recommended the Facebook site to other members of her local history group suggesting word of mouth is an important tool for community groups.

Most members are from the Midlands but there are members from as far away as Australia, America and Africa. The Australian connection is from several people who used to live in Leicester and wanted to find out more about the area's history. The member from America has family routes dating back to the middle ages in Leicestershire, and so again, wanted to find out more about the area his family came from.

There are some members that are very active, posting regularly and sharing their own ideas and interests. These are often history specialists, for example PhD students or local historians, who add more information or context to images, especially the Saturday Photos of the Week, for example the Roger Bannister photo, airship photo and partners Tuesday on Bronze objects. One of our speakers has become engaged in the programme following her talk, sending archaeological blogs to the LHCO Coordinator, commenting on photos and sending in reflections on how the programme is going. She has also offered to do some research voluntarily, all because she admires the group. However, there is a large body of the membership that does not post at all and maybe only accesses the odd talk or other feature. One of these members was asked the reason for this and they said that although they were very interested in what LHCO had to offer they had been filling their days with other activities which were mainly outside 'in the fresh air'. Others felt that the group's structure meant they weren't able to post their own content, something we changed for Community Connections Tuesdays. Many have also felt unsure, even after verbal reassurance from the staff.

After Kate joined the programme much of her work was dedicated to taking the established group and developing it towards the LHC aims of community sharing. Facebook, being a site dedicated to creating continuous conversation online, prefaces constant communication. It is devised to necessitate frequent commenting and without timely comments the post falls off the feed of the group members creating pressure to be available to reply, encourage, and facilitate user interaction. This was a brilliant challenge, but not conducive to wellbeing. Facebook is on your phone, on your laptop, always requesting attention. To compete in this environment, Kate felt a pressure to be available for more than hours would allow. Also, due to the scarcity of interaction at the beginning, we wanted to be there to encourage and respond to group members.

It is hard to comment on how much LHCO has directly affected all its members' well-being and reduced loneliness in this period as most models to capture this data are insufficient to evaluate this. However, the fact that people have joined through personal recommendation, the number of viewings for LHCO talks and the positive comments of our case studies and partners indicate that LHCO gives people experiencing lockdown interesting activities to engage with.

The following quote from one group member shows how beneficial the group has been to some:

*I am so happy that I joined a LHC group. Company, friendship and new learning along with tea and cake! As a retired single person this provided me with a very welcome new interest and an opportunity to meet new people. We have continued our meetings as an extended group.*

*In lockdown we held our meetings on Zoom and kept an eye on each other via WhatsApp, sharing memories, exchanging gardening tips or just telling jokes. I contributed to a monthly newsletter and became a telephone buddy.*

*Now, along with others, I actively participate in local history research projects and Hello Heritage activities and have been meeting up (restrictions permitting) individually with some of my new friends in the group. So....a big thankyou to Crafting Relationships for the Local History Cafe initiative. What a wonderful way to keep active and make new friends.*

One of the main areas of success for LHCO has been in the recruitment of quality speakers from a range of heritage and academic backgrounds. There are some users that have watched every talk, either live or in their own time, which shows a high level of engagement. This will be in part due to the 'experts talking in their fields' and giving 'access to more information and lectures' that would not be seen due to local history groups being cancelled during lockdown. The 'catch up' element of the Facebook site has also been important for engagement, because despite not having many live viewers, it has allowed parts of the demographic who could not tune in at scheduled times to see the talks at a time of their own choosing, those who are working or have young families for example.

### **Limitations of the analysis**

The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that many of the usual ways of analysing a programme's impact on loneliness and well-being cannot be used as so many people have been affected, and so a unique method of data collection was needed in order to create this report. Therefore, this report has been generated through limited access to data. A further study into the backgrounds of LHCO membership may shed further light on some of the reasons for patterns of the site's usage and its demographic, which would aid future development. Further analysis of people's experiences of LHCO would increase the validity of an impact analysis.

## **Additional Case Studies**

In order to maintain anonymity, the names of group members who carried out online interviews in Summer 2020 are fictitious. We approached the group twice in February and March 2021 for new responses to the same questions, but received no responses.

Interviews were structured around five main themes:

- Why they became a member of Local History Café Online?
- Whether being a member has made a difference to their experience of being in lockdown?
- What their favourite experiences are?
- Any recommendations for future development?

### **Case Study One:**

Sarah is of retirement age but runs her own heritage-based company. She has had connections with one of our physical cafes and is keen to share local history of the Midlands with a wide audience. She was invited to do a talk for Local History Café Online and enjoyed the experience. Sarah said that it was important for her to 'retain contact with the organisation during lockdown' as she thinks that the work of Local History Cafe is important. Sarah enjoyed giving her talk as she felt that she was 'still in touch with people' due to the live-streaming element of her talks. She could interact with the audience and included their comments in her talk. Sarah has also enjoyed watching other people's talks and the other features of the Facebook site, often commenting on other members posts and posting extra features of interest, for example she posted links to an article in a newspaper about a new Stonehenge.

### **Case Study Two:**

John is a PhD student in his 20s, with a young family. He has looked to Local History Café Online as a way to find out more about local history and connect with like-minded people during lockdown. John was actively looking for a heritage themed site to occupy him during lockdown. John said that he was attracted to the group 'by the varied programme of events and features promoting an appreciation for history and heritage with an East Midlands bias. It was this geographical focus which made the group stand out from similar pages'.

John said that 'the group has contributed towards a better structured use of my time on Facebook, rather than idly scrolling through my newsfeed, I make sure to check on the good quality posts at regular intervals'. John volunteered to do a talk about his own heritage passion, saying that although he had done talks in the past he had never done one online before, and he enjoyed giving his talk in a new format and responding to the subsequent questions. It is this part of the group that he would like to see develop in the future, as he thinks that encouraging people to participate with discussions would add to the heritage community feel of the website. John's enjoyment, his involvement and recommendation has led to other people requesting to become members, John would also like to see this 'format.... imitated by similar groups' elsewhere in the UK.

### **Case Study Three:**

Emily is in her 50s and has been working during lockdown. Emily found Local History Café Online early on in lockdown. She wanted to find Facebook groups that would be good for her well-being during this time and has an interest in local history. Emily usually attends lectures given by the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society and as these have been cancelled for the foreseeable future, this was an 'interesting and accessible way to continue her interest'. She has enjoyed the fact that she has 'had access to more information and lectures that I would not see', but

as lockdown has not been a particularly negative experience for her the impact of the group has been more centred around enjoying her interest in local history.

She has particularly enjoyed the online lectures and listening to 'experts talking in their fields', and so the quality of the speakers has been important to her. As Emily is working in the day, she often misses lectures that are scheduled during these hours and chooses to catch up with them later. It was important to her that the speakers know that although not many people are watching them live, 'their presentations are valued and watched afterwards'. She would like to see the site develop to allow members to post objects that are important to them so that other members can comment on these, and she would also like us to encourage people who are not 'experts' to talk on the site about heritage places and objects that are interesting to them, so a more personal approach to some of the content.

## **Methodology**

After discussing evaluation vs a more reflective and live document with *What Works WellBeing*, it was established that many of the usual frameworks used to measure loneliness and social isolation, such as the Life Satisfaction Scale and the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (whatworkswellbeing.org, 2020), are not applicable to the current COVID-19 outbreak and the lockdown measures in place. This because the levels of loneliness and social isolation are affecting everybody; COVID-19 is too big a factor to find meaningful data using these previous models. Therefore, the use of more subjective measures is a better approach (whatworkswellbeing.org, 2020). However, this also proves difficult as people may not want or be able to express how they feel about the social isolation that is affecting everyone during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Numerous variables may be affecting our members well-being at present, creating complexity. This guided our decision towards a reflective, live document, in addition to limited time and resources to carry out more detailed evaluation.

Our report does contain a mixture of process and impact evaluation, along with both quantitative user data from the Facebook site and qualitative data in the form of three case studies. Process evaluation will allow us to assess how we are achieving our desired outcomes and how they are working. This will sit alongside some impact evaluation, where we look at the specific experience of some of our online cafe members.

Qualitative data from group members was collected through Facebook Messenger giving a way to easily record responses in a safe way for everyone involved. There is also no facility on Facebook to record the initial base-line questions of our members, and so this cannot be used to measure the demographic of volunteers. The surveying of this information for a second time was beyond the scope of resources for this evaluation and so this is something that could be done in the future if this data is needed.



## Process Evaluation

- document analysis, e.g. press releases and funding applications
- discussion with the LHCO Coordinator
- exploring demographic through Facebook site content, especially introductions



## Impact Evaluation

- 3 case studies
- feedback from our LHC partners
- feedback from LHCO Coordinator
- qualitative data from online interviews through Facebook Messenger
- use of their user specific data from the site, e.g. quantity of posts, number of talks seen
- focus on why came to the site and their experience of Local History Cafe Online
- revealing possibilities for future developments



## Conclusion

- use of both sets of data to answer questions of how we are achieving our desired outcomes
- exploring whether our intervention having some positive impact on our members ' well-being
- discussing implications for future developments

## What next?

The Facebook group is financially unsustainable without funding and £3 donations from group members watching talks has been very low.

In June 2021 Crafting Relationships Director Katherine Brown made the decision to seek fulltime employment with another charity due to the considerable impact of COVID 19 on the business. Discussions with another organisation are still underway to negotiate them taking the programme over.

## References

David E. Vance, Nicole M. Webb, Janice C. Marceaux, Sarah M. Viamonte, Anne W. Foote, Karlene K. Ball, 'Mental Stimulation, Neural Plasticity, and Aging: Directions for Nursing Research and Practice', *The Journal of Neuroscience Nursing*, 2008;40(4):241-249.

*Royal College of General Practitioners* website, viewed 20/07/20 < <https://www.rcgp.org.uk/about-us/news/2020/june/covid-19-is-creating-an-epidemic-of-loneliness-says-rcgp-in-response-to-undetected-home-deaths.aspx>>

*What Works Wellbeing* website, viewed 20/07/20  
<<https://measure.whatworkswellbeing.org/homepage/how-to-measure-it/>>