



HISTORICAL  
GEOGRAPHY  
RESEARCH  
GROUP

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Copy for the next issue:

**May 26, 2019**

Please send to:

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HGRG Newsletter, Winter 2019



Historical Geography Research Group

# NEWSLETTER

- WINTER 2019 -

## Letter from the Chair

Dear HGRG members,

Welcome to the Winter 2019 edition of the newsletter. It's been a busy #histgeog winter so far. The 24th annual Practising Historical Geography workshop was held at the Royal Geographical Society in Kensington Gore in early November. It featured keynotes from Prof. Miles Ogborn and Dr Cheryl McGeachan, workshops from Dr Sarah Evans and Dr Paul Griffin, and the ever-popular 'postgraduate voices' session, this year delivered by Benjamin Newman (now Dr Newman—many congrats Ben!). This was followed by our second HGRG Writing Retreat which took place in mid-January, again at Gladstone's Library in North Wales, where an impressive 21,224 words were written over two days. For anyone who's not yet tried the writing retreat model, I can only say I heartily recommend it! Postgraduate members may also be interested to attend the forthcoming Postgraduate Forum Mid-Term Conference at Manchester Metropolitan University, 24-26th April 2019 (with HGRG-sponsored bursaries available to support historical geographers).

The RGS-IBG annual conference takes place as always in late August, this year in London. The Conference Chair is Prof. Hester Parr (Glasgow) and the conference theme is *geographies of trouble/geographies of hope*. As a research group, we've offered to sponsor sessions on a range of topics from the historical geographies of water technology to those of religion, from the histories and geographies property, protest and public space to those of the 'end of days'. There are also HGRG-sponsored sessions on the geographies of collaboration and non-representational historical geographies, as well as the ever-popular 'New and Emerging' session for PG and EC researchers and an author-meets-critic session on Elaine Stratford's new book *Home, Nature, and the Feminine Ideal*. Make sure you put the dates in your diary, and watch out for the programme (due out in mid-May).

Before that, I'll be travelling to the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Washington DC, where I'll be representing the HGRG on a panel about publishing in historical geography (on Sat 6th April). If you're there, do come along and say hi! I'm also delighted to be chairing—along with Dr Kirsten Greer, Chair of the AAG's Historical Geography Speciality Group—the HGSG *Distinguished Historical Geographer Lecture*. The lecture will this year be given by Prof. Georgina Endfield (Liverpool) on the title of 'Weather Heritage and Elemental Place Making'.

Readers might also like to take note of the call for applications for the HGRG's Biennial Conference Organisation Funding Scheme. As members will know, the Group are keen to support conferences dedicated to the advancement of historical geography and supporting the profile and careers of postgraduate and early-career historical geographers. Applicants should be members of the HGRG and application forms can be found on the Group's website at [hgrg.org.uk/grants-and-prizes](http://hgrg.org.uk/grants-and-prizes). The page also includes information about our Postgraduate Support Scheme, Small Conference and Seminar Funding, and Undergraduate Dissertation Prize. The deadlines for the first two schemes are 1st April, 1st August, and 1st December in any year, so postgraduate readers might like to consider making an application for the next round.

Finally, my thanks go to all those who have written for this issue of the newsletter. Our contributions come from Dr Philip Howell, who writes about the long and complex path he followed to eventually become a 'card-carrying historical geographer', even whilst noting that there are many ways of writing and practising historical geography. Prof. Charles Watkins's 'From the archive' reflects on the process of selecting documents for an exhibition currently hosted at the University of Nottingham's Weston Gallery. As Charles tells us, the exhibition includes a range of manuscript material from the University's Manuscripts and Special Collections including from the Willoughby family of Wollaton Hall. Those of you who visited the British Library's recent Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms exhibition may recognise the name: it was the Willoughbys who used pages of the eighth-century Ceolfrith Bible—on display in the BL's exhibition—as wrappers for the family's estate documents sometime in the early modern period!!! Finally, University of Edinburgh's Rachel Dishington presents her 'Shelfie', offering us insights into the five key texts that have helped orientate her ongoing doctoral research on the historical geographies of engineering in nineteenth-century Scotland. The usual announcements and notices follow.

Members keen to contribute to any of these new regular features are encouraged to get in touch with our newsletter editor, Dr Jake Hodder ([jake.hodder@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:jake.hodder@nottingham.ac.uk)), or to drop me a line.

Kind regards,

Dr Briony McDonagh, HGRG Chair

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# How I became a historical geographer

## Philip Howell



**Philip Howell** is Reader in Historical Geography at the University of Cambridge. His research interests include the regulation of prostitution in Britain and its Empire; geographies of gender and sexuality; the 'animal turn' in history and human geography; and literary geography. He is the author of three edited collections, and two monographs: *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and *At Home and Astray: The Domestic Dog in Victorian Britain* (University of Virginia Press, 2015).

I am an historical geographer made, not born. At school I loved Geography (a shout out here to my excellent teachers Mr Richard Willan and Mr Bob Howard), but History, not so much. My abiding memory is of a teacher reading monotonously from a textbook. This is puzzling, since I came later to love history, for its own sake, with no reliance on contemporary relevance, or the ways in which it spoke to me, personally or politically. Thus, I am going to blame the teachers, or the curriculum, or both.

I had no idea of what I wanted to do after school. In so far as I had any idea, striding about glaciers in North Face clothing seemed to be the thing. There was no notion of the attraction of the archives at all. After an accidental Gap Year, most of which I spent making pork pies in a local factory, I started at Cambridge in 1984. This was entirely my idea: my teachers advised against it, since I had an offer of a place at Durham, which was not to be sniffed at; UCL effectively said that they would have me if Cambridge would not, for which I have always thanked them. Moreover, I sometimes think that I would have become an historical geographer anyway, in a kind of convergent evolution, since Richard Dennis would have been there, and I would have found him as inspiring as an undergraduate as I have done as a fellow historical geographer.

But Cambridge called, and I had plenty of time to prepare. In the downtime allowed me after the pork pie shift was over (in the interests of accuracy, I had graduated to cornish pasties, and later pioneered the factory-production of quiche lorraine), I worked my way through much of the Cambridge Geography Department's recommended reading. This included ploughing through ALL of *Locational Analysis in Human Geography*, and ALL of *Explanation in Geography*. Why Cambridge considered this introductory reading is beyond me, and the whole quantitative business was pretty alarming, even with my Maths A-level. Luckily, I was busy remaking myself as a Marxist at the time—I was very keen on

Trotsky—so that I was as it were pre-adapted to the kind of social and critical theory that I received as an undergraduate at Cambridge, and mainly from the historical geographers. I liked all the historical geographers—Robin Glasscock and Robin Donkin, for instance—but from Alan Baker, Mark Billinge, and Derek Gregory I learned that historical geography had a special mission. It had a certain glamour and arrogance. I lapped it up, and asked for more in the form of a PhD. Taking my inspiration from Derek Gregory's work, though he himself soon upped sticks to Vancouver, I mapped the geography of the Chartist movement. All too eventually I managed to hand in a dissertation and produce a couple of articles, but I look back with amazement at the boats missed along the way. Still, I should not be too harsh on myself, since I had successfully applied for an assistant lectureship, and had to learn how to teach along the way. It was a struggle, and a really close-run thing.

All this I consider by way of a very long apprenticeship, and at a certain stage I just needed to change tack. Everything that I submitted seemed to be going to the same grumpy reviewer, and in any case I had moved on—from Marx (and Arendt and Habermas) to Foucault (and Said and Butler). After a few false starts, I found a calling in the historical geography of sexuality (way back when this seemed brave bordering on the foolhardy), finally producing a book on the regulation of prostitution in Britain and the Empire. Issues of gender, sexuality and race (which I had managed to ignore earlier) were essential to understanding the career of disciplinary power in the 19th century. This was very much a traditional historical geography, not departing much from archival reconstruction. I very belatedly realised, however, that there were different ways of doing historical geography. I had already developed a kind of academic 'side hustle', in historical animal geography (again, back when this seemed brave/foolhardy). When this became a bigger project, I struggled, because I could not secure access to all the archives that I thought I needed. But the world





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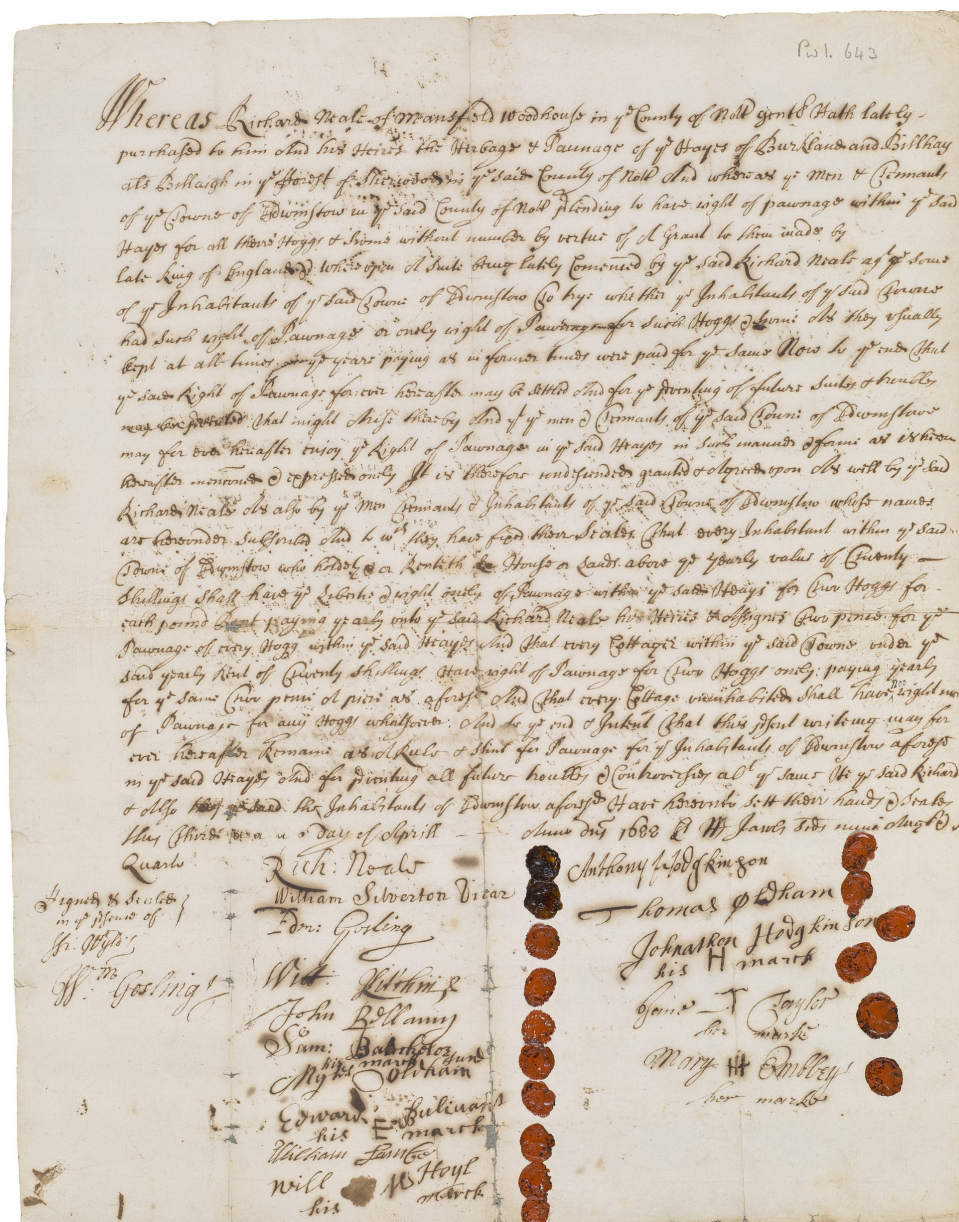
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had already moved on, particularly with regard to the online availability of material. Not only did I not need to be in the archives for every chapter, I felt able to tackle bigger themes, with fewer footnotes. This felt like moving from hugging the shore to the open ocean, exchanging a galley for a galleon: risky, but ultimately rewarding. I also made a particular effort to make this book more readable. I have now taken to advising graduate students that it is better to be read than to be right: being able to tell and sell a story is a primary academic responsibility, not an optional extra.

I pursued historical geography because it seemed to me as an undergraduate the most exciting and appealing field, one that actively encouraged eclecticism in methods and material. I never felt that history belonged to historians, and have consistently argued against such blatant restraint of trade; but I also learned along the way that historical geography can be practised in a variety of ways, and not just by card-carrying historical geographers. Still, I am ever thankful to have become one. □

## From the archive



Agreement between Richard Neale of Mansfield Woodhouse and the inhabitants of Edwinstowe to regulate the number of pigs allowed to eat acorns in Birklands and Bilhagh, April 3, 1688  
Source: University of Nottingham's Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections (Pw 1/643)

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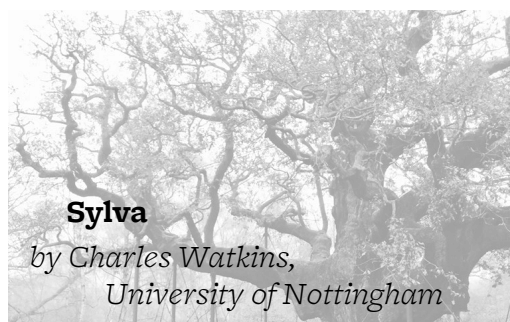
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## From the archive



I've recently been studying archives held by the University of Nottingham's Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections for the exhibition [\*Sylva: 'To Slowly Trace the Forest's Shady Scene'\*](#) (Weston Gallery, Nottingham until 7 April 2019). The exhibition includes around 100 exhibits including medieval legal documents, eighteenth century estate records and maps, and nineteenth and twentieth century photographs, novels, letters, poems and drawings. Many of the documents relate to the history of Sherwood Forest which had a dynamic history of monastic and royal power in the medieval period, and later saw the rise of powerful aristocratic estates and state forestry.

The process of selection and exposure of documents is a fascinating one and individual items provoke valuable discussion between the curator, archivists and members of the public and suggest research ideas. The medieval Roll of Sherwood Forest (NUMD Mi 2/75/5) from the archives of the Willoughby family of Wollaton Hall, for example, was catalogued as late fifteenth century. But discussions with medieval historians about the style of writing and the naming of William de Vescy (1245-97), who held a forest office as justice north of the Trent in the 1280s-90, indicate that it is much more likely to originate in the late thirteenth century. Further research is planned.

Forests are sites where the competing interests and demands of villagers, aristocrats, farmers and kings have been played out over centuries. They are places dominated by the management of trees and of wild and domesticated animals. One document from the papers of Henry Cavendish, 2nd Duke of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1630-1691, who succeeded to the Dukedom in 1676, is an agreement dated 3 April 1688 between Richard Neale of Mansfield Woodhouse and the inhabitants of Edwinstowe to regulate the number of pigs allowed to eat acorns in Birklands and Bilhagh (NUMD Pw 1/643—see previous page). These areas of oak and birch wood-pasture were part of the Royal Forest and local tenants and cottagers had rights of pannage in them. One of the Duke's principal

estates was Welbeck Abbey with extensive landholdings in Sherwood. In the autumn of 1688 during the Glorious Revolution the Duke was a key figure in failed attempts to defend the interests of James II against William of Orange and for a time in November 1688 he became a prisoner at his own house at Welbeck.

The Duke survived the Revolution and continued to be keen to increase the profitability of his estate and to understand the level of common rights over land bordering his estate in the Royal Forest. The agreement from his archives follows a dispute between 'Richard Neale of Mansfield Woodhouse in the County of Nott gentleman' who had 'lately purchased to him and his heirs the Herbage and Pannage of the Hays of Burkland and Billhay als Billhaigh in the Forest of Sherwood.' It goes on to state that 'the Men and Remnants of the Town of Edwinstowe' were 'intending to have right of pannage within the said Hayes for all their Hogs and Swine without number by virtue of A Grant to them made by late King of England.' This agreement instigates a very significant change and limits the number of pigs that could enter the forest. Instead of unlimited numbers the number of pigs that might roam in the forest for acorns was related to the value of property held by a tenant. Thus 'every Inhabitant within the said Town of Edwinstowe who holds .... a House or Lands above the yearly value of Twenty Shillings shall have the liberty and right only of Pannage and within the said Hays for two Hogs for each pound rent paying yearly unto the said Richard Neale his Heirs and Assignees Two pence for the Pannage of every Hogg.' Meanwhile, 'every cottager within the said Town under the said yearly rent of Twenty shillings have right of Pannage for Two Hogs only paying yearly for the same two pence the piece as aforesaid.' Finally 'every Cottage uninhabited shall have no right of Pannage for any Hogs whatsoever.'

Those who signed agreed that this 'writing may for ever hereafter Remain as a Rule and stint for Pannage for the Inhabitants of Edwinstowe aforesaid in the said Hays And for preventing all future troubles and controversies about the same.' The signatories included Richard Neale of Mansfield Woodhouse, William Silverton the Vicar of Edwinstowe (1680-1699), and thirteen tenants, eleven men and two women; six of the tenants made their mark rather than a signature.

Later documents show that keeping pigs at Edwinstowe remained important for the local economy and inhabitants into the early nineteenth century. An Account of pigs and mast—Birkland and Bilhagh of 1749

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(Nottinghamshire Archives DD/SR/211/266) in the estate papers of Sir George Savile, of Rufford provides an itemised account of the prices individual inhabitants paid Sir George for the right to take pigs into the forest to eat acorns, including the cost of branding the pigs, providing ale for ‘Abram’ the brander and expenses for ‘crying the Mast’ (advertising the availability of pannage) at surrounding villages. By the 1860s, however, the time when local inhabitants could turn their swine into

the forest was only a memory for the oldest inhabitants. Today the area known as Birklands is the core of the Sherwood Forest National Nature Reserve. Knowledge of past land use management practices such as pannage is essential for developing plans for re-introducing domestic stock to help conserve the characteristic heathland and birch and oak woodland and the species they sustain. □

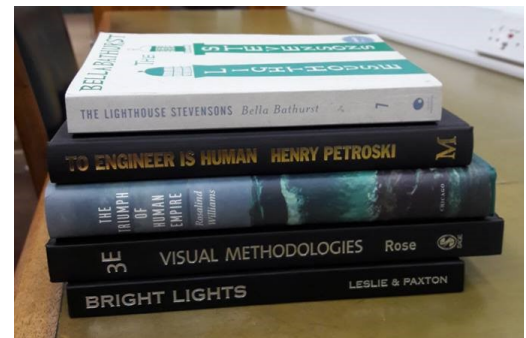


## Shelfie

## Shelfie

by Rachel Dishington

The books in this shelfie have all contributed to my work exploring the historical geographies of engineering in Scotland in the nineteenth century. The empirical focus of my PhD is the working archive of the Stevenson engineering firm, a civil engineering company owned and operated by successive generations of the Stevenson family from the 1790s through to the mid-twentieth century. The firm designed and oversaw the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects including harbours, river works, lighthouses, roads and bridges. The Stevensons were operational during a period in which the engineering profession and associated attempts to reshape space were changing rapidly. It can therefore provide a useful case study to consider how engineering in nineteenth-century Scotland changed space in physical terms, but also the role played by engineering within society through the development of the engineering profession and ways of thinking about space, science and expertise.



expansion. It is also shown that engineering could be understood as a romantic endeavour, in that it used abstraction from selected features to impose order and allow for the modification of the world instead of attempting to represent every detail. Williams therefore sees engineering as a way of thinking and acting which influenced societal consciousness more generally. This provides a useful contrast to the typical accounts of activities undertaken by engineers and broadens conceptions of what can be included in studying histories of engineering.

### Engineering the Nineteenth-Century World

The first three books shown in my shelfie reflect three different approaches to examining the cultures of engineering. The first is Rosalind Williams’ *The Triumph of Human Empire: Verne, Morris and Stevenson at the End of the World* (2013). Analysing literary sources, including the works of Robert Louis Stevenson, Williams examines the ways in which engineering influenced understandings of the relationship between humanity and the Earth at the end of the nineteenth century. She traces shifts in how the role of humanity in shaping and controlling the world was imagined, exploring contemporary anxieties over the rate and scope of technological change and colonial

Henry Petroski’s *To Engineer Is Human: The Role of Failure in Successful Design* (1985) similarly addresses the ways of thinking that underpin engineering as a profession. Challenging those histories of engineering which deploy linear notions of development and progress, Petroski instead analyses the concept of failure. Engineers, he argues, fundamentally aim to make something new, whether that be a bridge, a car or a building. However, by its nature the process of creating something new cannot escape the possibility of failure. Petroski therefore examines the strategies employed by engineers to address this very possibility. In the nineteenth century, engineering was characterised by the imperative to calculate and mitigate the risk of failure to an acceptable level, prior to commencing construction. Instead of earlier systems of trial and error, modern engineering



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## Shelfie

attempted to exclude failure at the design stage through calculation. The mitigation of failure entailed increased financial costs meaning that engineering became a delicate and high-stakes balancing act using the tools of modern science to ensure safety and cost-effectiveness. Petroski's book hence raises questions about what failure in engineering is, how it is categorised, understood and accommodated and argues that understanding the threat of failure and the attempt to avoid it is vital to understanding the engineering endeavour as a whole.

Although not about engineering specifically, Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (2012) has been very useful for my research. The book asks readers to think more critically about how they approach visual materials and reminds us that images are not straightforward representations of an external reality but are constructed within a given context so as to convey a specific impression. Rose argues that images should therefore be given as much careful consideration as written words. Engineering has historically made heavy use of visual materials. Maps, plans, surveys, diagrams and sketches played a vital role at every stage of the engineering process from initial investigation and surveying through refining a plan to the presentation of finished designs. Learning the conventions of technical drawing was a vital part of engineering education and plans, sketches and diagrams accompanied the specifications, reports and estimates sent to clients, learned societies and contractors. Visual materials were not simply flat representations of places and things but themselves played important roles in design and construction. Developing a nuanced interpretation of these images is therefore key to understanding fully the processes by which engineering was theorised and implemented.

### In Search of the Stevensons

The final two books I have chosen are two different histories of the Stevenson family and firm that formed the starting point for my research. Aside from providing lively and engaging introductions to the Stevensons, these books proved invaluable in giving an accessible overview of their activities that challenged many preconceived notions of the boundaries of engineering as a discipline. The first, Jean Leslie and Roland Paxton's *Bright Lights: The Stevenson Engineers, 1752-1971* (1999) presents a collective biography that interweaves technical analysis of their contributions to the engineering profession

and the success of their works with a more personal account of them as members of a family. The second account is *The Lighthouse Stevensons: The Extraordinary Story of the Building of the Scottish Lighthouses by the Ancestors of Robert Louis Stevenson* (2005) by Bella Bathurst. This book retells the history of the Stevenson family and firm as the history of a dynasty of lighthouse engineers. Unlike Leslie and Paxton's work, Bathurst structures her book around specific projects that contributed to lighthouse design, not all of which involved the Stevensons. The Stevensons are instead seen as part of a wider history of the development of lighthouses and other means of ensuring the safety of sailors and those travelling by sea.

These biographies have enabled me to refine the focus of my work, which will approach the history of the Stevenson engineers slightly differently. I combine Leslie and Paxton's focus on the interconnectedness of different elements of the Stevenson's working lives with Bathurst's interest in wider movements in development of engineering in nineteenth century Scotland. Unlike Bathurst, I do not limit my study to one form of engineering, drawing instead from a range of project types, including harbours, river works and bridges. Unlike Leslie and Paxton, my aim is to draw connections from the individual histories of the Stevensons to other parts of society in order to further understand nineteenth century Scottish engineering as a whole.

### Final Thoughts

Taken together, these books inspired me to think about the different ways in which the history of an individual, a family or a profession could be written. The narrative choices of each of the authors reshape how the same events are interpreted, placing the family within different contexts and thus reshaping how their work is understood. This plays an important part in my research in two ways. Firstly, many biographical or autobiographical accounts of the work of the Stevensons were published while the family were actively involved in engineering, working collectively to shape a specific narrative about the family and firm. An awareness of how biographies of the same individual can shape the same events into different narratives enables me to think more deeply about how these narratives were deployed historically and for what purposes. Furthermore, I have become more aware that through my writing, I am also placing the Stevensons within a specific context and thus shaping how their history and the history of engineering as a whole is understood.



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## Shelfie

My research draws on these books, alongside the archive of the Stevenson firm, to explore questions about engineering in the nineteenth century. One fundamental question I will address is how engineers constructed and defended their professional status, position and authority within society. How did they build their reputations and gain the authority required to undertake large-scale changes to physical space? How successfully were they able to maintain their status after high-profile failures? This will entail consideration of processes of teaching and training engineers, the building of personal and professional networks and interactions between engineers with others through consultations, projects or publications. It will also involve analysing the stories that engineers told about themselves, their colleagues and their works to ask how

they understood and represented their own profession, and to what extent this was challenged in contemporary society. Other interests that I pursue include questions about how engineering influenced thinking about the relationship between human action and physical spaces; how the inevitable failure of some structures was reconciled with the reputation of the profession and of individual engineers; and what role drawing and visual materials played in engineering processes. □

**Rachel Dishington** is a second year PhD student at the University of Edinburgh and National Library of Scotland, UK. She is supervised by Prof. Charles Withers, Alison Metcalfe and Chris Fleet.

Twitter: @RADishington

## Announcements

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### Collections in Circulation: Mobile Museum Conference, 9-10 May 2019

We are pleased to announce that registration has opened for this Conference, to be held at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, on **Thursday 9<sup>th</sup>** and **Friday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2019**.

Full details of the programme and a link to booking registration are now available at <https://royalholloway.ac.uk/mobilemuseum/conference>

Early bird ticket sales end 18th March



The conference will bring together scholars from the UK and overseas with a shared interest in the mobility of museum collections, past and present. Their papers will address various aspects of the history of the circulation of objects and their re-mobilisation in the context of object exchange, educational projects and community engagement.

**Confirmed speakers** include Claudia Augustat, Paul Basu, Joshua Bell, Martha Fleming, Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, Luciana Martins, Wayne Modest, Catherine Nichols, Jude Philp, Daniel Simpson

This conference is organised by the Mobile Museum project, a collaboration between Royal Holloway, University of London, and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Webpage: <https://royalholloway.ac.uk/mobilemuseum>

Email: [mobilemuseum@kew.org](mailto:mobilemuseum@kew.org)

Twitter: @KewMobileMuseum #KewMobileMuseum

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## ARE YOU A FULL MEMBER OF THE HGRG?

Some of you reading this newsletter and, perhaps, participating in our activities will not be a full member of the HGRG. Some of you, for instance, will have expressed an interest in the work of the group when you became a member of the RGS/IBG and so joined that way. And that's just great! We welcome and celebrate the breadth of our membership.

Nevertheless, there are some important benefits to be gained by switching to Full membership and we would encourage you to consider doing so. It would be of immense benefit to the Group and we promise to make you feel 'special' in return! As it stands if you are with us as a RGS/IBG member only, we receive a minimum contribution (as little as £2 *per annum*) from that. In return all you receive is this newsletter.

In short we would be delighted to welcome you to join us as a full member of the HGRG community! Membership subs are essential for us to continue to provide the full range of support and we are grateful for the collegiate generosity of members in this regard.

### **Full Membership** £12.00 *per annum*.

Should you choose to become a full member you will be added to the e-circulation list, will receive the HGRG Research Series and the HGRG Newsletter. Your subs will help support the grants that we provide to the HGRG community and you will be eligible to apply for these. Finally, you will get a reduced rate on back issues of the HGRG Research Series and have the opportunity to take up an Officering role.



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