

Malcolm Dick on West Midlands History

Malcolm talks about his research into West Midlands History.

Duration: 4:18mins

My name is Dr Malcolm Dick. I'm Director of the Centre for West Midlands History in the School of History and Cultures at the University of Birmingham.

My main responsibility is to encourage research into the history of the West Midlands region. But not simply looking at the region internally in terms of local histories and microhistories, but relating that history to a wider range of themes - social and economic developments and cultural developments such as urbanisation, religious change, industrialisation, etc.

So we have a number of academics and research students and heritage professionals associated with the Centre who are engaged in research of various kinds. My own personal research interests at the moment focus upon two areas.

First of all, the development of the industrial and cultural West Midlands enlightenment at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. For people outside academic life that would largely relate to the history of the Lunar Society and I am interested in individuals like Matthew Boulton and Joseph Priestley. I'm particularly interested in the ways in which they communicated their knowledge to a wider community and the ways in which intellectual beliefs connected with the development of science and industry.

At the moment, I'm working on both Matthew Boulton in that respect and also a lesser well-known figure - James Kear. But there's a wider community of people we can say associated with the development of industry and science in the West Midlands and its important to move beyond the big names.

My second area of interest relates to the development of minority ethnic communities in the West Midlands from 1700 up to the present.

I'm currently involved in editing a special edition of a journal on that subject. My own interests relate to specifically the development of refugee communities including the Jewish community which has a long history in the West Midlands going back to the early 18th century. But I have a broader interest in the ways in which minority ethnic communities have shaped the landscape, particularly the urbanscape, the cityscape of the area. Particularly, but not exclusively Birmingham. Also, contributed to political and cultural life and contributed to the development of industry and education and the wider life of the region.

Those are my main projects at the moment but I'm interested in integrating discrete local studies with a wider perspective, putting the developments in the West Midlands, not only into a national context, but also into a global context.

So, for example, the two areas that I'm interested in - the West Midlands enlightenment and the development of minority communities - relate very closely to the West Midlands position within a wider world. Because there was a sharing of ideas in the 18th century across continents and across boundaries during the enlightenment. A travel of ideas, if you like. And of course, a presence of minority ethnic communities relates to transnational migration.