

Ian Mortimer

## *The Time Traveller's Guide to Restoration Britain*

About writing the book

I keep hearing a wonderful myth about my *Time Traveller's Guides*. It is that I have stumbled on to a winning formula and all I need to do is to keep repeating myself for different periods and I can't go wrong. Several people have said that I'm 'on to a good thing', which is not a dissimilar view. Yet it could not be further from the truth. For a start, if I kept repeating myself, the whole series would very quickly go stale. How many times do you want to read the points about relative standards of cleanliness from medieval England? Or those about the economics of getting rid of waste in Elizabethan times? Each book has to include some key themes but the specific insights need to be different, not the same.

Then there is the selection of evidence. Non-historians seem to think that I look up some facts, select the ones I like, and arrange them on the page – and hey, presto! It is not like that. Most of the research is left out of the book. When you buy a TTG you are paying for a judicious exclusion of a vast amount of data. The idea that you can just pick and choose and somehow it will all be representative is risible. Here's a good example. Various medical texts have powdered skull and other human body parts included in recipes. But was such cannibalism common? You can't just cite the powdered skull recipe and leave it at that. You need some other authorities to show that this was a respectable element of seventeenth-century natural philosophy, supported by the king's physician and, indeed, carrying the confidence of King Charles II himself. You need to research wider contexts as well as choice details to write one of these books – and that in itself causes problems. Understanding contexts takes time. Large amounts of it. You have to be able to afford to read primary and secondary sources that you are NOT going to include.

Now, all this reading is essential. But the thinking is even more important – otherwise people are simply going to read what they could have read elsewhere. The text will lack originality. Thinking too takes a lot of time, and you cannot do it well under too-much pressure. But you need to make your subject material – old stuff – appear new to the modern person. You've got to pull off the same trick that a historical novelist tries to do: to produce something which is both new and old at the same time.

At this point you might be getting the message. *The Time Traveller's Guides* are really one big work, not a sequence that can simply be repeated. Yes, the structure of each volume is similar to the others but that is about as far as it goes.

Keeping the standard up without disappointing readers – or boring them by repeating myself – is difficult. I don't know of many people with an academic background who enjoy straying outside their area of expertise. I recall a discussion with a very engaging professor of medieval history once at an academic symposium who looked at me in horror when I told him the subject of my next book. 'You really don't have a comfort zone at all, do you, Ian?' No, I don't. Well, I do, if you call it 'English social history from Magna Carta to the Great Reform Act' – but that is such a massive period of time that no one could call it a 'comfort zone'. How many houses in towns the size of Colchester were glazed by 1580? I could not tell you. How many houses in Exeter had sash windows by 1700? No idea. Instead of a comfort zone I have areas of methodological

expertise. I know how to conduct research and find English material; I know the methodological limitations of evidence; I like to think I understand people's fascination with their past; and I know the philosophical limitations and opportunities of being a historian.

But I come back to the amount of *time* these books take. This is by far the biggest problem.

Here is the reality. I signed the contract for this book on 13 September 2013 but I did not finish writing my novel *The Outcasts of Time* until 25 March 2015. I then started writing two lectures: one for the Dartmoor National Park Authority on the changing medieval world (11 April) and the other for the annual Shakespeare anniversary event in Exeter Cathedral, which I delivered on 23 April. By then I had started reading for *TTG Restoration* but actual detailed noting did not begin until 26 April. On 30 May 2015 I started drawing up some 'sketches' for the start of the book but actual writing of the Introduction did not begin until early August. The first seven chapters were finished by 16 June 2016; by 28 September I had only the last chapter to go – but then I spent a whole month writing the draft of that, which was 31,500 words long. The first draft went off to Jörg, my editor, on 16 November 2016. By that reckoning the book had taken nineteen months to research and write.

Those nineteen months were not wholly dedicated to the book, however. I had a few other commitments that got in the way. I gave up two or three days per month to serve as a Secretary of State Member of Dartmoor National Park Authority. I attended regular meetings of the Exeter Cathedral Fabric Advisory Committee, the national Forum on Historical Manuscripts and Academic Research; and Moretonhampstead History Society. I took on being chair of the Friends of Devon's Archives and arranged the various committee meetings and two conferences, and spoke at both; and edited and produced their newsletters; and edited a book on palaeography. I wrote the proposal for the South West Heritage Trust to be considered for the prize of 'Record Keeping Service of the Year' – in respect of its work in Devon – which I am glad to say the Trust won. I wrote keynote addresses for four academic conferences at the universities of Oxford, Christ Church Canterbury, and Southampton (two at the latter). I wrote speeches for Aldworth Church's 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Aspara writing festival and the UK National Park Authorities' conference. I spoke to U3A groups, literary societies, history societies and undergraduate classes on fifteen other occasions. I gave an hour-long presentation to staff of Historic England on new documentary methodologies for dating the subdivision of listed buildings in ancient boroughs. I arranged an art exhibition, organised and presented three times a 2½-hour-long concert of medieval music, and took up running half-marathons.

As you can see, we are not talking a 9-5 day – unless you call that 9am to 5am. Looking back across the whole period, I cannot quite believe how much I accomplished. In fact, I am even now thinking of other things that aren't on that list. Considering how much time was spent on other commitments, it was just as well that I already had a PhD in 17<sup>th</sup>-century social history before I started writing.

Am I 'on to a good thing'? Is this a 'winning formula?' The 'wining formula' – if you can call it that – is simply total immersion in all things historical, cultural and creative. It is rather a matter of how all these things feed into the book and enhance our understanding of the past. Writing a *Time Traveller's Guide* isn't an easy ride, by any stretch of the imagination. Certainly, I could never have produced the book at all if I had believed in sticking to a 'comfort zone'.

Ian Mortimer,

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