

Jane Hamlett, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 12 September 2025

Jane Hamlett is Professor of Modern British History at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research focuses on the home, the family and the material world. She is also interested in histories of disabilities, mental health, education and animals. She is the author of the chapter on 'Exhibiting History' in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* (second edition).

Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *Could you tell me when, where and what you studied at university?*

Jane Hamlett (JH): I studied a straightforward history degree at the University of Oxford in the late 1990s. I finished in 1999, so that's a really long time ago now, and the situation for degrees, jobs, employment was obviously completely different from the landscape we're in at the moment. So, after I finished my degree, I wasn't really actually that clear on what I wanted to do. So I went off to London with the aim of getting a job and working for a while and just seeing what would happen. I ended up working as a financial journalist for a year, which was actually very enjoyable. I learned an awful lot about the world that I actually hadn't learned during my degree at all. Made some really great friends, that was good. But then I did decide at that point that I really wanted to study more history, so I went back to do the Women's History Masters at Royal Holloway, which at that time was one of the key places you could go if you wanted to really study that subject. So I did that and it went really well. I really felt that this was something that I wanted to do, that I had a voice, and I think doing feminist history in particular was

This is an edited transcript of an interview carried out on Zoom.

very important to me. I liked it so much that I ended up applying for a PhD, got some funding for that, did that, and then various jobs and then here I am today. So that's how I got into it all.

TL: *It's interesting how few people who end up being historians actually had it as a career goal. It seems a lot of the time that we started at university, just really liked it, and never really left.*

JH: Yeah, I think that's the case. I mean, you know, when you're at primary school, you don't think, oh yeah, I'll be a feminist historian. It's just not up there on the list of things. I think I wanted to be an architect for quite a long time.

TL: *You went on to do an MA in women's history, but when you were studying history at school, did you cover much women's history?*

JH: No, very little. I mean, school history itself was very restricted by the curriculum at that time and it was very much focused on the two world wars. The A-level stuff I did was exclusively modern. We went back and did the nineteenth century, and there was some interesting popular history about the rise of protest movements, democracy, that kind of thing. But women's history wasn't really part of the curriculum at that point. And I have to say, when I got to Oxford, it was not really part of the offer there at that time either. So I was quite keen to try and do it where possible, but there were no courses in women's history that you could do at that time. And I do think if I'd been at a different institution at the same time, say Royal Holloway, I probably would have got to where I was going a lot faster because they were more innovative in terms of their course offering and did catch up with that trend in history more quickly. I think that's quite interesting because you think of Oxford as offering the absolute best in education, and it was a great place for me to go. I loved the tutorial system. I loved going away and reading a load of books every week and coming back and writing, and that kind of style of learning really worked for me. I got an awful lot out of it. But, actually, at that time, it was very male-dominated. I didn't have any female tutors at all during my three years there. And women's and gender history wasn't really on the agenda. And so, I think, I didn't connect with what I was doing in the same way at all.

TL: *That's an interesting point about picking a place to study and a degree scheme. I had a similar experience in that when I was applying to university, I didn't really understand about looking at particular modules and getting a sense of what a department might offer, and how that might fit in with my interests. And, weirdly, I don't remember anybody ever suggesting that I do that, though this was a long time ago.*

JH: Yeah, I'm hoping that we're a lot better at that now. And, obviously, the impact of student fees is not positive in all respects. I don't think anybody could say that it was, but I do think it has made universities

better at saying what their offer is, what the modules are, and what the choice is, to students when they come and have a look. And I think that is really important, because not all history departments are the same. The offering is obviously completely different, according to who's there, who's teaching and the areas of expertise they've developed. So, you know, it is really worth looking at closely, isn't it? And I didn't really have much sense of that at all when I was applying either.

TL: *So, it sounds like you spent time on your undergraduate degree patching together the bits of history that were of most interest to you. Did you have a favourite module?*

JH: Yeah, I really liked a module about Anglo-Saxon Britain. That was definitely my favourite module. Partly because the nature of the period, the sources are naturally a bit more limited, so in a way, there's more room for speculation. But I also found the social history of that period, and its unknowableness, really, really fascinating. Thinking about the ways that you could get back to that was really interesting. My second favourite was a special subject on English Baroque architecture, which I really enjoyed. But it was very much absolute traditional architectural history, learning about architectural features, and analysing architecture in quite a technical sense, and talking about changing architectural styles and things. And I was always really much more interested in how people were using buildings, and how buildings and material structures related to people's social lives. So that actually did really directly inform the research I chose to do a bit later on. It didn't do, at the time, what I would have liked it to do. But I guess that doesn't matter now.

TL: *When you first said Anglo-Saxons and then Baroque architecture, it seemed so far from the kind of history you do now, but talking about it a bit more, those modules sound very material, very visual, very much about how people live. With the Anglo-Saxons as well, presumably, there's more archaeological evidence too.*

JH: Yeah, and also more literary evidence. So things like Beowulf and Anglo-Saxon poetry and so on. I think because your evidence base is more limited, you're required to kind of draw on everything that's there in quite an interesting way. And as an undergraduate student as well, it's more possible for you to get a grip of those sources. I mean, because I didn't have Latin and Old English and so on, taking studying that further would have been a bit difficult, although I did write some essays on medieval and Anglo-Saxon women as part of my Women's History Masters, so I did get to do a bit more of that history. But one of the things with medieval and ancient history is that if you haven't had Latin from quite an early stage in your education, then you are a bit less likely to go in that direction. If

I had had the language skills, I think I might have done that instead of the nineteenth century.

TL: *I suppose that working with fragments, and in areas where there's a lack of evidence, is great training for a social historian.*

JH: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

TL: *Moving onto other aspects of your undergraduate degree, I wanted to ask if you had to take any skills or historiography modules as an undergraduate?*

JH: Thinking back, there was a historiography module and there was an Approaches to History module, which was actually really interesting. That was one of the places where we did actually touch on gender and feminist history, because we thought about anthropology, Marxism and structuralism, feminist thought, and we did a bit of postmodernism as well, I think. So we did have to think about historiography and the development of thought across the discipline and how that was related to changes in other disciplines as well. But we didn't really have much emphasis on skills. It was just assumed that you would acquire skills, and that wasn't something we really talked about.

TL: *That was very much my experience as an undergraduate as well, at pretty much the same time. There's so much more emphasis in universities now, particularly on skills, I think, and most institutions have some sort of historiography module. Have you taught on those kinds of modules?*

JH: Yeah, I have. We've got a first-year course called History in the Making, and that covers a range of different approaches to history. I sometimes give a gender lecture for that one, which is about the rise of the study of women and gender, the shift towards gender studies, and then more recent changes as well, like the rise of queer history and trans history.

TL: *Do you find it challenging teaching those kinds of modules or giving guest sessions on them?*

JH: I suppose it's always a bit funny, isn't it? If you're teaching a specific course, then you've got a close relationship with those students, which you build up, you meet them at the beginning of term, you're seeing them every week, you really get a sense of who they are. And then when you're teaching them, you can make that connection with them really easily, and get the subject across, and try and encourage people in different ways. Whereas if you rock up to give a lecture to a hundred first-year students, they don't know who you are, so it is harder to make that connection on those kinds of courses. But I do enjoy speaking to larger numbers of people in those formats though as well. I think most lecturers do, it's quite a nice thing to do sometimes.

TL: *I also wanted to talk a little about the topic of your Practical Guide chapter, which is 'Exhibiting History'. Could you say a bit about how that topic relates to your own research and teaching?*

JH: Because I started off being very interested in histories of material culture and the home, domestic objects and museums, there's always been a natural connection with my research. So, in the last year of my PhD, I worked as a research assistant at the Museum of the Home in Hoxton. At that time, they were rethinking their period rooms and thinking about how they could use primary evidence to do that, so I got the opportunity then to work with them. That for me was really, really exciting. And I went on to work with them on various other projects as they arose, if you like, during my research career. My first book and PhD ended up informing an exhibition which looked at how men and women interact with choosing things for their home. It was called 'Choosing the Chintz', and it went back to the nineteenth century and looked at how certain objects in the house were associated with both genders, and what it meant for the power structures between men and women if one person is allowed to choose things for the home and the other isn't. So that was certainly quite fun to do. Following that, I worked on a project on material life and domesticity in lunatic asylums, lodging houses and schools in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. So that was about going inside institutions and thinking about how they were decorated and how they were furnished and what that really meant for people who lived there. As a part of that, we ended up looking quite closely at some institutions for the poor in London and homelessness and so on. Out of that research, we developed another exhibition with the Museum of Home called 'Homes of the Homeless', and it looked at the kind of spaces and places that were available to the very poor, to people who had little or no money in London in the late nineteenth century, and we tried to recreate those spaces. That was a really great thing to be involved with. I'm still really happy with the results of that exhibition. It was really, really good to be able to get some of our research out to a wider audience and to share it with the public. And most recently, I've been working on a collaboration with Julie-Marie Strange from Durham on the history of pets. We worked on this fairly big research project together, then got some follow-on funding to work with the Museum of Home, and we created an exhibition aimed at children and families that recreated four stories of pet-keeping in families from the nineteenth century onwards. That was back in 2021, so that's a little while ago now. But it's always been really important to me to try and find different audiences for the research that we've done and to share it in new ways.

TL: *And am I right in thinking that Royal Holloway was one of the earliest centres of public history teaching in the UK?*

JH: Yeah, that's right. So we've had a Public History Masters from, gosh, probably about 2010, I think. That's been a really good course for us. At times, I've taught on that course too, on the role of museums, or that kind of thing for that option. It's been good to bring those interests into teaching sometimes as well.

TL: *Was there any kind of engagement with public history as a concept when you were doing your degree?*

JH: No, no, definitely no sense of that at all. In fact, I think if you go back to the late 1990s, early 2000s, there was even a sort of disdain in some quarters for people who were very successful public historians, you know, people who had TV series. Some academic historians were a little bit snotty about it, weren't they? So I'm glad to say that that era is definitely over. And we now fully recognize the value of that kind of work.

TL: *Do you have any sense of what contributed to that shift within the discipline of history, towards more openness towards different audiences, and thinking differently about the possibilities of history?*

JH: Well, one very obvious driver is the impact agenda in universities, isn't it? So as universities have been told by government funders that they have to demonstrate impact, public-facing activities have become much more valuable within institutions. Now people are rewarded and promoted for doing those things. So, that's one very functional explanation as to why that has happened. But I would say that there are also genuine trends within the discipline, where we are becoming more outward-facing. And there have been some really interesting developments in things like participatory history. One area that I'm really interested in is family history. Collaborations between academic historians and family historians, like Laura King's recent book, for example, are becoming much more a part of what we do. That's really exciting as a new and different way of doing history. I suppose, as well, it's the nature of the world, isn't it? As we've gone into the twenty-first century, I think we've become less comfortable and more aware of world problems, things like the environment, things like the international situation, and so forth. Partly, I think, historians are becoming more outward-facing because of those changes in the world as well. Overall, I think the benefits have been huge, and we're now much more able to value that kind of outward-facing work. What I would say though, is that we shouldn't lose sight of the value of doing academic research as well, which sometimes institutions aren't that good at recognizing, because at the end of the day, that is what we have to offer. If we don't cherish and develop that expertise, there's literally no point in what we do. We might, in the university, we might as well not be here.

TL: *That's a very good point, because obviously, it's a two-way relationship when you're engaging with people outside the academic sector – you're interested in the expertise they have, from the position they're coming from, and they're interested in your expertise as a historian. And if the expertise you have as a historian isn't valued in the first place, you can't bring that to them and be of value to them.*

JH: Yeah, exactly. To work with a partner, you have to have something to offer.

TL: *This does anticipate something I was going to ask about. Could you say a bit more about the benefits for historians of working with museums and galleries, but also the benefits for those in museums and galleries of working with historians?*

JH: I think for historians, the benefits are very, very obvious, really. Working with a museum gives you access to a completely different kind of audience. Museums are often set up to share and create research in a participatory way, that as an academic, perhaps your training would not allow you to do. So, for example, the 'Homes of the Homeless' exhibition that I worked on, the museum ran a parallel project, which worked with young people who'd experienced homelessness through the charity New Horizon. They put together a creative work based on images and texts from homeless people in the nineteenth century. And it was really amazing to see how that worked. It created something completely different, it made a very different meaning from both things. It just wouldn't have been possible for me to do that with the research, you know, off my own bat, as it were. So, working with them in that way opens up a lot of exciting and creative possibilities that you certainly wouldn't be able to get just by working within the confines of the university.

TL: *And what do you think those working in museums and galleries get out of working with historians?*

JH: Well, increasingly, curators are really pushed. So there is a value to academic expertise and research, because we can bring that in. And it can be really useful subject matter, and it can be used in new ways in that context. Historically, curators would have perhaps done more of their own research, and that would have been part of the job. But actually, it's harder for them to do that now. So there's definitely that side of it. It's about getting a perspective, isn't it, on material sometimes, and I think perhaps collaborating with a number of different people, you've got different stakes in a topic. So, for example, when we worked with the museum on the pets material, we also collaborated with Blue Cross. The resulting exhibition had the historical stories, but it was also framed in a way that was hopefully designed to teach more about the care of animals. Blue Cross were able to advise on how that was done. So, if you're creating a, an exhibition, by working with a number of different people with

different perspectives, different interests, you create something better in that way.

TL: *Are there any challenges to this sort of work? There seem to be lots of benefits, but is there anything that might potentially put people off engaging with museums and galleries?*

JH: Well, time is a major challenge, isn't it? And resources. Museums and galleries are increasingly strapped for cash and resources. To get to achieve these projects, increasingly, you need to apply for research funding, or funding from the national lottery or something like that. And that's a complex and very competitive process. So you might well have a really good idea about what you want to do, but it's very difficult to actually get the resources that you need to achieve it. That's probably the main difficulty. Getting that money is very hard, so that does hold people back.

TL: *This is the last question specifically about the chapter. Is there one particularly important point that you would like readers to take away from your chapter?*

JH: Hmm, well, I think really, it's the value of historians and museums working together, and that what you can achieve by coming together is much better than working independently. I think that will probably be the takeaway point.

TL: *Excellent. Now, this is shifting topic a bit, but perhaps not that much. I know a lot of your research engages with visual and material sources, which students who aren't at university may not have encountered in any depth before. Could you say a bit about why you like working with those sorts of sources?*

JH: Hmm, well, I like photography in particular. Because to a certain extent, it gives you a very immediate and different access to the past than a written source. By looking at an image, you have a real physical representation of what life was like, especially if you want to know what a room looked like. Obviously, it's subject to certain constraints, and you have to think quite carefully about how you interpret it. But it does allow this quite different and immediate access to the past. And I think it's the same with material culture, with material objects. Quite often, as well, you've got the tactile dimension of those objects. You can imagine how something felt, or how heavy it was. And so, if you're interested in trying to reimagine the material worlds of the past, seeing these things can be really evocative.

TL: *You're clearly enthusiastic about all kinds of aspects of history, but what do you most like about being a historian?*

JH: Oh, well, I mean, it's fun, it's just fun. It is very creative, so you're constantly being asked to reimagine the world of the past, and to think about it in new ways, whether you're trying to teach it to seminar students, or write about it for academics, or maybe giving

a public talk. You're constantly engaging with it and reimagining it. So it's a constant creative process.

TL: *People who work in literature departments, or in more explicitly artsy subjects, often tend to think of history as not being creative, and yet it's one of the words that historians most often use to describe what we do.*

JH: Hmm, yeah, that is really interesting, isn't it? Yeah, I suppose they probably tend to think of it as more about factual evidence. Which it ... it has that side too, doesn't it? Which I also like. I suppose it's what you do with the evidence, isn't it?

TL: *Yeah, that's the fun bit! Moving on, what do you think has changed most about the student experience since you were an undergraduate?*

JH: Well, it would be really remiss not to say fees, because I didn't pay fees for my degree, and also, I had a small grant. So, the economic basis for the degree has changed completely, and that's obviously, an enormous change. On a more positive side, I think we've become much, much better at supporting students as they go through their degrees. We're much more aware of a range of different learning needs, things like dyslexia and so on. We teach people better, and we support people far better than we did when I was at university. Not to complain about my experience, but you were very much left to get on with it. You would show up at your weekly tutorial, talk to your tutor about the subject, then just be given your reading list, and that was it. Off you went. There wasn't very much in terms of support in that way, and I think we've just gotten better at supporting people, which is good.

TL: *Yeah, it's a very, very positive move. The final question is, what is your top tip for students today on getting the most out of studying history at university?*

JH: Oh, to try and find the things you enjoy and go with that. Yeah, because I think as soon as it starts to feel boring, then it's much, much harder to engage with it and get the most out of it. So yeah, just try and find the bits that interest you the most, and really go for it.

TL: *That's great advice.*