Urban History (2026), **53**, 3–6
doi:10.1017/S0963926824000853

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

SURVEY AND SPECULATION

SPECIAL ISSUE: R. J. MORRIS: AN APPRECIATION

Bob Morris: teacher and explorer

Richard Rodger

School of History, Classics & Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
Email: Richard.Rodger@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Two characteristics that defined Bob Morris were his empathy and his humanity. As a person, not just as a teacher and scholar, these elements infused his approach to people no matter their age or status. This short appreciation considers his contributions to urban and social history, his capacity for synthesis and analysis and his sensitivity in exploring places and spaces using text, data and images. Bob Morris' humility was the hallmark of an exceptional historian, colleague and friend.

In the bowels of Edinburgh University's Adam Ferguson Building, there seemed to be a ghost. Someone else was using the impressive facility with its newly installed Data Card punching and sorting machines that in size would not have seemed out of place in a Victorian steamship. Only many years later, I discovered that ghostly presence was Bob Morris who had also discovered the computing laboratory.

This was Edinburgh University's state of the art Social Sciences Computing Centre in 1970. The facility was so new that there were few who knew of it, far less used it. But Bob recognized its potential and the opportunity to sort and sift the historical data which some years later would underpin his publications on the middle class in Britain, including his powerful *Men, Women and Property*. I never encountered Bob there – or anyone else – but reminiscing many years later we agreed that punching holes in 82 column data cards, sometimes at night, was a lonely and laborious activity. It was heart-breaking, too, when you punched a hole incorrectly in a column or row (Figure 1). It was a 'Do Not Pass Go' moment; the only 'Get Out of Jail' option was to re-punch the entire card – often more than once! No 'cut and paste' option existed though a few years later a 'repair' was possible with fine tape and a level of manual dexterity that merited the M.D. degree as much as the Ph.D.

Bob the explorer, experiencing and experimenting as he did with the delights of the SocSci Lab, was firmly grounded in social science concepts. His Politics, Economic and Philosophy undergraduate degree was the launchpad for that. His conceptual grasp underpinned by a secure evidential basis was encouraged further by his Ph.D. mentors, economic historians H.J. Habakkuk and Maurice Beresford, and by his own – and his future wife, Barbara's – fascination with

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000853 Published online by Cambridge University Press

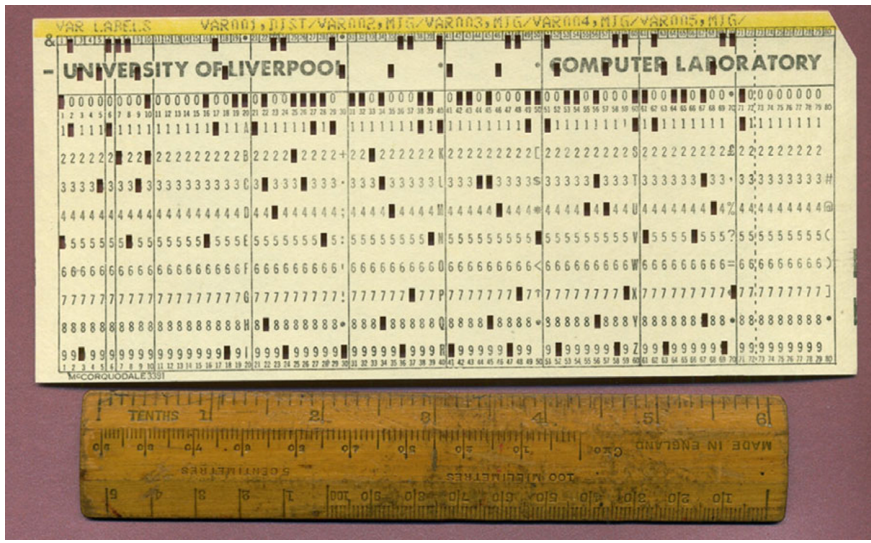


Figure 1. Punched Data Card 1970s for Hollerith IBM390 (image courtesy of Paul Laxton).

archaeology. It was bedded in a belief that an evidential basis to historical writing was an essential initial phase. Then, and only then, did theorizing about causation make sense, he argued.

A degree of empiricism was consistent with the approaches of the extraordinary colleagues Bob Morris joined at Edinburgh University. Rooted in an evidential culture themselves, the Economic History Department (later Economic and Social History Department) was pre-eminent in the field in the 1960s and 1970s. Professors Flinn, Saul, Millward, Smout, Mitchison and, later, Michael Anderson were each in their own way synthesizers, compiling data from historical sources to advance analysis and explanation, underpinned – but not driven – by theoretical concepts. We were fortunate students, both undergraduate and graduate.

Bob's interest in class relations, socio-economic theory and empiricism was grounded in the history of Leeds and developed in an era when interest in urban regeneration had assumed a legitimacy in the developing curriculum of many of the newly established university social science departments. The foundation of New Towns in the 1960s and the redevelopment of ancient city cores gave the study of urban history a currency of its own. Indeed, Bob was invited by H.J. (Jim) Dyos as one of only two graduate students to the foundational meeting of the Urban History Group in Leicester in 1966. The tension between historic city core and modernist town planning brought cities and the study of the urban past into sharp focus in the 1960s, and Bob's exploration of these themes infused his life's work.

A camera was an omnipresent research tool for Bob in any city visit or conference attendance. Fieldwork – the archaeology influence again – meant the lens was his ally. His images captured important, sometimes quirky, local features but what really mattered was that the process of composition and recording assisted the process of recall when, subsequently, Bob sought an example to make a point in a lecture or publication, or often as he did in Q&A conference sessions. The urban milieu was

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000853 Published online by Cambridge University Press

always explored on foot, often accompanied by a conference delegate or two, and, if available, by a local colleague acquainted with the city. By such means, Bob quickly gained a sense of place, of reference markers, as he sought to understand the distinction between the particularities of place and the commonalties of the urban process. Despite a highly original book based on postcards produced in 1907 by Valentine's of Dundee,[1] Bob's own photographs generally avoided the tourist's panoramic picture in favour of a close-up shot of a feature on a building, or some quirky aspect of the built environment. More importantly, he was able to decode and contextualize the feature and many of Bob's urban history friends and students who accompanied him on these forays were treated to his insights as a result.

Bob was both teacher and urban explorer and in those roles we shared many such walks, including end of semester tours through Edinburgh with those students who took our second year Social History course. His use of the particular to reveal an underlying process owed something to the antiquarian or local history interests but invariably it was a device to reveal more general processes of urban development to students. His article 'The capitalist, the professor and the soldier'[2] which he was developing into a monograph – based on St Giles 'Cathedral', John Knox's House and Edinburgh Castle – showed how function and form changed in the evolving context of urban development.

A later exploration was the Computers in Teaching Initiative (CTI). This UK-wide project sought to develop more work-stations in British universities so as not to fall further behind the USA, Japan and Germany where IT developments in humanities teaching were much further advanced than in the UK.[3] In collaboration with Rick Trainor, then at Glasgow University and master minding the CTI initiative, Bob saw how the next generation of electronic data management could transform historical scholarship in the 1980s. The punched card experience had proved the point. Bespoke CTI software packages designed for humanities students sought to demystify data analysis, to manage larger datasets using basic statistical analysis, and to present results in a more readily understandable form often through charts and diagrams. Brief, illustrated 'How To' course guides assisted the learning curve and the availability of relatively cheap PCs and Apple computers meant tutors and students alike, encouraged by Bob, explored how their use enriched historical analysis and interpretation. Enhanced presentational skills meant graphs and charts soon spattered the pages of student essays, and then became part of a presentational skill set which surreptitiously prepared arts and social sciences students for the workplace (Figure 2).

Teaching is not always conducted in the classroom or through urban walks or imagery. Sometimes, impact can be achieved in conversation. Many students and attendees at Urban History Group and European Urban History Conference delegates have said how Bob took the trouble to speak to them after their presentation. He would offer a thought, an idea, or just some general reflections on their research but more important was the fact that he engaged. He had, in this respect as in others, a

[1]R.J. Morris, *Scotland in 1907: The Many Scotlands of Valentine and Sons, Photographers* (Edinburgh 2007).

[2]R.J. Morris, 'The capitalist, the professor and the soldier: the re-making of Edinburgh Castle 1850–1900', *Planning Perspectives*, 22 (2007), 55–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/02665430601052047.

[3]J.I. Gershuny and J.B. Slater, 'Computers in Teaching Initiative: an executive summary', *University Computing*, 12 (1991), 1–18.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000853 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 2. Bob's garden gnomes: a Mac Plus and Mac SE at home in the Borders (image: courtesy of Helen Morris).

very positive impact. A willingness to engage with anyone, regardless of their age or academic status, was just normal practice for Bob. For those conference attendees whom he knew he always had time but not to the exclusion of those who were newcomers, or on the fringe of a conversation in the bar. That humanity, that generosity of engagement, is amongst Bob's most durable of legacies.

Cite this article: Rodger, R. (2026). Bob Morris: teacher and explorer. *Urban History*, **53,** 3–6, doi:10.1017/S0963926824000853

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000853 Published online by Cambridge University Press