Public History

Overview

Public History is a unique and innovative course. Students will investigate the ways in which history and heritage are put to use in a wide variety of contexts in Britain and internationally: in museums, monuments, turns of phrase, commemorations, digital media, film and fiction, for example. Through exploring professional, popular and community engagements with the past, you will become aware of the practices and methodologies of public history. The Public History course draws on History staff’s track record of successful engagement in community history and heritage-related projects locally, nationally and internationally.

A major element of the Public History course is the work placement in your second year, which will enable you to apply your learning and gain first-hand experience of the public history/heritage sector. You will work on local projects, in archives, museums or heritage organisations connected with the University’s Heritage Hub. Our students have worked as authors and editors on Hertfordshire’s online community archive, produced a heritage trail leaflet, and conducted oral history interviews for a variety of community-based projects. Second year students will also learn the skills involved in creating a historical documentary and have the opportunity to make their own short feature. In the final year module, Finding the Past, students will discover how online resources have transformed how communities write and share their own histories, while Thinking with History will invite you to consider how history can be applied to contemporary issues, debates and controversies.

“Public History opens your eyes to the fact that history is all around us. Studying Public History has enabled me to appreciate the ways in which history is, or isn’t, remembered and how it is presented to the public. You’ll never again be able to walk along the street, flick through a newspaper, watch the television or visit an exhibition without considering the historical thought process behind it.”

George Worby, BA (Hons) History with Journalism
What is it like to study Public History?
You will attend two-hour workshops or one-hour lectures followed by a one-hour seminar and are expected to study independently. In heritage-related modules you will make site visits to museums, heritage sites and historic buildings, such as Hatfield House or Stowe. You will have the opportunity to take part in the community history and heritage projects organised by History staff and the University’s Heritage Hub.

Year one modules
Semester A
Introduction to Public History
Assessment: 100% coursework
In this module you will be introduced to the ‘public’ dimensions of history and the ways in which the past is represented, remembered and used. You will gain an appreciation of the sheer variety of forms of public history and the practical, intellectual and ethical issues associated with it. Drawing on case studies from Great Britain, North America, Australasia and Anglophone Africa, the module explores themes such as film and fictional representations of the past; monuments and ceremonies; museums and heritage; national curricula and text books; and ethical issues related to memory and the keeping of artefacts.

Semester B
English Heritage, 1500-1900
Assessment: 50% coursework 50% examination
This module will introduce you to the modern heritage industry and some of the theoretical issues surrounding it. It will examine how key people, places and events from 1500 to 1900 have been represented by the heritage industry in the twentieth century. It explores the work of leading “heritage” bodies in modern Britain, focusing on the British Museum, English Heritage, the National Trust and the National Gallery and will set it in an international context. You will also be introduced to some of the theoretical critiques which have arisen around the ‘heritage industry’: what is being preserved, by whom and for what ends. The module explores some of these historical and theoretical issues through case studies of heritage in action, which will include visits to local heritage sites.

Year two modules
Making a Historical Documentary
Making Histories (work placement module)

Final year modules
Finding the Past: local and global communities
Thinking with History: Applying Historical Insight into Real-life Issues

Entry Requirements:
280 UCAS points. GCSE Maths and English Language at grade C or above.

Contact:
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Public History
As a student of Public History you will find yourself encouraged to get involved in a variety of additional activities. These will provide you with concrete examples of your skills to list on your CV to impress potential employers.

They might include:
• Helping organise Heritage Hub events, such as ‘Remembering the First World War’, drawing together representatives of over 70 heritage organisations.
• Working with the ‘Instant Oral History Team’, conducting interviews in a day.
• Working on a paid or voluntary basis on a range of projects led by members of History staff.

Entry Requirements:
280 UCAS points. GCSE Maths and English Language at grade C or above.

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Career Paths
If you have Public History as part of your degree you will be ideally placed for a career in arts, museum and heritage organisations, policy setting and commercial and not-for-profit enterprises as well as those careers traditionally open to Honours graduates in the Arts and Humanities: teaching, general management, the Civil Service, Local Government, journalism and publishing. You will also be well-equipped to undertake postgraduate study, on both academic and vocational courses.