Although the Society is the principal body that advocates for academic history and for historical scholarship wherever it is practised, we rarely act entirely on our own.

We have particularly close relations with two crucial institutions in the history world, the Historical Association (which has a large and loyal following among teachers of history in schools, as well as in the general public) and the Institute of Historical Research (which provides a lot of crucial infrastructural services to the discipline). One of the great pleasures of my term as President has been developing such a good working relationship with the HA that you couldn’t – as they used to say, but for obvious reasons don’t any longer – put a cigarette paper between us. Most recently we have been having a go at the government’s mishandling of teacher training in the universities – which government pretends to support but has, either by incompetence or design, been steadily undermining. (For more on the latest fiasco, see http://royalhistsoc.org/itt-latest-developments/. While I’m in parenthesis, it’s worth remembering that the last government said it wanted more university involvement in school-teaching, not less – and then, shortly after setting up the A-Level Content Advisory Board to achieve this, it changed its mind and folded it up.) And our partnership with the IHR, which stretches back now nearly a century (to the origins of the Bibliography of British and Irish History), is proverbial. This hardly exhausts our collaborations with historical societies – we have regular meetings with county and local history societies and with other ‘subject associations’ (such as the Economic and Social History Societies), and we are very grateful to subventions from bodies such as the Past & Present Society, History Workshop Journal, and the Economic History Society, which enable us to perform some of our core functions, such as publishing and the provision of small research grants, both of which are targeted firmly at early-career researchers. Perhaps less well-known,
because more recent, has been our burgeoning relationship with other learned societies in the humanities, with whom increasingly we work hand-in-hand to represent the common interests of a wide range of disciplines, principally when dealing with government and the various HE funding bodies. This collaboration owes much to the work of the classicist Robin Osborne, who first brought together a network of learned societies in the humanities in 2008 as the Arts and Humanities User Group. The initial motivation was to protest against the misguided participation of British agencies such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council in a European initiative to rank history journals – an early, ill-starred attempt to ‘metricate’ research assessment, which since then has mostly been avoided at least in the humanities, which continues to rest on the solid foundation of peer review. Over the years, the roster of societies participating has grown to nearly 40, and the network – now known as the Arts and Humanities Alliance (see http://artsandhums.org/ for more information) – has expanded its activities considerably.

A good deal of the modest but real headway we have made on important issues such as Open Access (ensuring that funder rules that facilitate Open Access recognize real disciplinary differences in the patterns and purposes of publishing) and research strategy (striving to minimize the share of research-council funding for the humanities that is reserved to government-denominated ‘strategies’) has come about as a result of such concerted efforts. In recent months, we as a Society have devoted a good deal of time to gathering and submitting the views of our discipline to respond to the important consultations that government has undertaken on its ideas for higher education in the Green Paper and on the future of the Research Excellence Framework (the Stern Review) (for which, see elsewhere in this newsletter). At the same time we have been able to agree a common front with dozens of other societies through the AHA, and it surely must be the case that while the detailed submissions we make on our own carry weight on the basis of their own virtues (especially through the depth of analysis we are able to provide), the fact that there are common principles agreed across the breadth of the humanities must impress for different reasons. In short, we can offer both breadth and depth.

AHA also alerts us to issues that may seem at first to lie outside our strict disciplinary remit, but which on closer scrutiny turn out to have wider implications for all of the arts and humanities. A case in point has been the issue most exercising the AHA societies over the last six months, the government’s threat to de-fund the British Academy Sponsored Institutes (BASIS). The work of BASIS, long famous for the British Schools in Athens and Rome, now extends impressively across a crucial arc of countries from Libya and Kenya to Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Iraq and Iran, with important institutes in Ankara and Nairobi. Common sense would suggest that just now is not the time to reduce Britain’s commitment to the disinterested study of the histories and cultures of these particular countries – but that was one of the cuts on the horizon during the last government spending review. Thanks to an invaluable flow of timely and accurate information from the classicists and Africanists, especially, the AHA learned societies were able to join in an effective lobbying campaign, both behind and in front of the scenes.

In the event, the Chancellor pulled many rabbits out of his hat in the budget, and one of them reprieved BASIS – but on worrying conditions, one of which will require BASIS to bid for what is called ‘Official Development Aid’ (ODA) monies. ODA is specifically reserved by international agreement for the ‘economic development and welfare
of developing countries’. Although it is possible to fit cultural programmes within this definition, the main purpose of ODA is rightly aimed at poverty relief – and requiring BASIS to orient its agenda towards ODA seems likely in the long term to undermine its unique humanistic contributions to inter-cultural understanding in this crucial part of the world. In other words, what might have appeared at first to have been a sectional interest of some particular disciplines turned out to be a broad front of principle along which all of those in the arts and humanities can and should stand. We have to thank our colleagues in the AHA for raising consciousness of this and for giving us a chance to stand on that broad front with them.
Friday 6 May 2016
at 6.00 pm
Professor Bruce Campbell:
‘Global climates, the 1257 mega-eruption of Samalas Volcano, Indonesia and the English food crisis of 1258’
Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre
UCL

Wednesday 6 July 2016
at 6.00 pm
The Prothero Lecture
Professor Pauline Stafford:
‘The making of chronicles and the making of England: the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles after Alfred’
Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre,
UCL

September 2016
Symposium: Political Discourses in Revolutionary Ireland, 1912-23
Teesside University

Friday 23 September 2016
at 6.00 pm
Professor Sarah Pearce:
‘The Cleopatras and the Jews’
UCL

Wednesday 5 October 2016
at 6.00 pm
The Colin Matthew Memorial Lecture for the Public Understanding of History in co-operation with Gresham College, London
Speaker: Dr Tristram Hunt

Wednesday 26 October 2016
Speaker: Dr Adrian Gregory
University of Leeds

Friday 25 November 2016
at 6.00 pm
Presidential Address
Professor Peter Mandler:
‘Educating the Nation. IV: History’
UCL
Just over a year ago the Royal Historical Society published its influential report, Gender Equality and Historians in UK Higher Education, described by Dame Jinty Nelson as ‘an urgent summons to greater institutional engagement’. But how far has that summons been answered, and what still needs to be done? asks Jo Fox (Honorary Director of Communications).
The RHS gender report was based on a survey which received 707 responses from historians working in UK HE (21% of the sector). This data provided clear evidence that significant barriers to the advancement of women in the discipline still exist: the pay gap, variations in contract, challenges in returning to academic careers following parental leave, promotions, the limited number of female professors, and the persistence of unconscious bias. These issues remain live and pressing. However, many historians have since committed to tackling them within their departments. The RHS has been active in keeping gender equality high on the disciplinary agenda, while a significant number of departments are in the process of applying for the Athena Swan Charter Mark, coordinated by the Equality Challenge Unit. The RHS report was the subject of a THES article on International Women’s Day in 2015. Without doubt the RHS Report has raised awareness across the sector, having been discussed at departmental and Institutional levels as part of the diversity and equality agenda.

One initiative emerging from the Report centres on role models. The Report identified the importance of role models in inspiring all historians: 69% of respondents said someone in their department or faculty had served as a role model; 86% an individual in their field of history. Accordingly, the RHS has committed to publish a series of inspirational interviews over the next twelve months. The first set of interviews (with Margot Finn, Roberta ‘Bobby’ Anderson and Anindita Ghosh) was published to mark International Women’s Day and may be found on our website.

International Women’s Day is, however, just one day, and we need to appreciate the challenges women face in the Academy each and every day. Only by doing so can we hope to bring about long term cultural change. In a recent feature in The Times (21 April 2016), Norman Miller declared that Universities are ‘flunk[ing] the equality test’, with ‘higher education found wanting on gender, race and pay.’

At a national level, the UCU’s recent report, ‘Holding Down Women’s Pay’ (March 2016) warned that the gender pay gap will not be closed until 2050 at the rate of progress seen over the past decade. The Union estimated that the shortfall of £6103 for every female academic equated to a ‘gender pay gap of £528 million per year’, with ‘the total salary spend on female academics’ being £1.3 billion less than it is for male academics’.

We await the results of the forthcoming rounds of the ECU’s Athena Swan Charter Mark to determine how far the discipline is engaging with gender equality at a departmental level. That said, promotions and pay – two of the most pressing issues facing women in higher education – frequently lie beyond the purview of departments, and until Universities fully recognise the importance of flexible working, diverse research opportunities for those with caring responsibilities, and the reach of unconscious bias, the proportion of female professors (currently at 23% across disciplines) is unlikely to rise.

The Society will continue to press departments and institutions, teachers and doctoral supervisors, and journal editors and conference organisers to adopt the measures suggested in its 2015 Report. But it is a task we can all embrace in smaller ways. In the recent RHS interviews, Margot Finn stressed ‘the huge and disproportionate difference that even small acts of kindness can make’, while Bobby Anderson also recalled that ‘small acts have helped overcome the inevitable crises of confidence and the mutual support that these friendships provide has been invaluable’. It is perhaps a recognition of the importance of everyday support that may well contribute to long-term cultural change, whilst continuing to push for systemic reform at a national level.
In February 2016, RHS announced on its website the advent of its online book series, New Historical Perspectives, which it is launching jointly with the Institute of Historical Research (IHR). This article provides a bit more detail and explanation about this exciting project.

As of 1 April 2016, all journal articles by British academics must be published in an open-access format if they are to be eligible for the next Research Excellence Framework. For scholarly books, however, the obstacles to making open access workable remain considerable.

One major concern is cost. University presses typically charge more than £5,000 to publish an open-access monograph. Even those seeking to keep prices low remain expensive. The University of California Press’s Luminos imprint, for example, bears part of the cost of editing, peer review and production, and shares the remainder with libraries; but it still asks authors for a Book Processing Charge of $7,500. In the UK, these charges start at £6,500 for CUP, while dedicated Open Access publishers Ubiquity and OpenBook charge from about £3,500.

This is a particular problem for early-career researchers in postdoctoral or fixed-term posts, who need to publish a first book to secure a permanent post but lack access to university funds to support publication.

The new monograph series that the RHS and the IHR are publishing jointly aims to address this problem. New Historical Perspectives aims to help early-career researchers publish the highest quality research. All production costs will be borne by the society and the institute, with additional support from the Past and Present Society and the Economic History Society. Authors will pay nothing.

New Historical Perspectives replaces the society’s Studies in History series, founded in 1975.
to help researchers turn doctoral dissertations into excellent monographs at a time when many publishers were resistant to such publications. The goal of getting the excellent research of newly hatched historians remains the same, but the methods have moved with the times, and, we hope, will set a high standard of simultaneous online and hard copy publication.

RHS decided to collaborate with the IHR, with which we already have a close relationship, for several reasons. Firstly, the society and the institute are the UK’s two leading professional historical organisations, and together have an extensive reach across the historical profession and the historically-oriented public. Secondly, each works closely with postgraduate students and postdocs, providing funding, support for conferences and symposia, and publication opportunities. Thirdly, the IHR, in collaboration with other institutes in the University of London’s School of Advanced Study, is developing a digital platform for producing and disseminating open-access books, complete with a full editorial team.

We see the advent of open-access requirements as an opportunity rather than an obstacle, because online publication methods significantly increase the availability of major new work in history. The new series will provide early-career researchers with exciting possibilities. Monographs will be central to the planned publishing profile, given their importance in career terms, and we shall also include edited essay collections and conference proceedings.

But digital publishing allows publication in a wider variety of formats and lengths than print, so we have decided to open the series to a variety of long and short-form works beyond the usual parameters of scholarly articles and books. Early career researchers rarely get the chance to publish such works.
We shall start with six books a year, with the hope of expanding. Each will be authored, edited or co-edited by a historian within 10 years of having received his or her PhD. Submissions will be peer reviewed, and all authors will be mentored. We have decided to do this face-to-face rather than by the usual method of written reader reports and author reposts. Those producing monographs will be invited to attend a workshop at the RHS, where five experts in their field will spend a day providing advice and feedback on their manuscript. This will be designed to be a constructive and supportive occasion – and certainly not a grilling!

These workshops will be distinct from, but conducted in the same spirit as, the publication workshops that RHS and IHR are holding up and down the country as from June 2016, at which we provide postgraduates and early career researchers with information and guidance relevant to publishing their work in journals, edited collections and books in conventional formats. We plan, in addition, to provide information about the NHP series at these workshops, and at the same time to increase understanding of Open Access publishing and Creative Commons licensing.

The IHR team will provide a high standard of editorial and production support. Publication will be in both print and digital open-access formats, and authors will be able to choose from the full range of Creative Commons licenses, including those that allow downloading and sharing, but forbid others from profiting from or changing the work.

At this stage, a major challenge is discoverability—increasing the awareness and use of books published in this way. Our extensive networks will help us to accomplish this, but we are also seeking novel ways of disseminating digital publications.

We are starting on a small scale, but we have high hopes. We want to show that scholarly organisations, including learned societies and subject associations, can take the initiative in producing open-access scholarship on a no-cost-for-authors basis. Furthermore, we plan to show that it is possible to protect early-career researchers and provide them with the highest quality options for open-access publication, not just for monographs but also for works that they might struggle to publish with trade and university presses. And we plan to achieve this while maintaining the RHS’s and IHR’s high standards.

We hope that by taking the initiative we will encourage those setting out as professional historians to see open-access publication as an opportunity, rather than a potentially insurmountable financial hurdle. And we hope to continue publishing ground-breaking works of history, which may now gain an ever-larger
readership. New Historical Perspectives will succeed by becoming widely known and used, and we are eager to make it a first choice for many younger historians in and beyond the UK, and a resource known to and utilized by historians around the world.

The founding co-editors are Professors Simon Newman, who has been co-editor of the BAAS American Studies series at Edinburgh University Press, and the Atlantic History series of Oxford Bibliographies Online, and Penny Summerfield, who has extensive experience of editing with Manchester University Press, where she has been co-editor of two book series, Gender and History, and the Cultural History of War. Simon and Penny, working with RHS’s Literary Director, are currently building an Editorial Board that will at the same time be big enough to be representative of a range of historical periods, areas and approaches, and small enough to work effectively as a team.

Authors will find a proposal form on line on the RHS website at http://royalhistsoc.org/new-historical-perspectives/, which they are asked to complete and to attach a CV and a section of the proposed volume. We look forward to the first proposals rolling in!
The RHS also responds to calls for evidence, with recent submissions on a range of higher education issues, from the government’s green paper—which includes the TEF—and the future of Doctoral Training Partnerships to Freedom of Information legislation and, of course, the future of REF. All of these formal responses are available on the RHS website for the use of the whole academic and historical community.

The RHS is well placed to carry out this kind of advocacy. When we were gathering evidence about historians’ use of FOI legislation we consulted historical researchers directly and quickly established that, not only was FOI an essential tool for contemporary historians but also that it enabled certain kinds of research that could not otherwise be undertaken. This allowed us to voice our concern that any kind of additional restriction—such as fees or a limit to the number of requests—would restrict certain areas of research within a broader commitment to transparent and accountable government.

Two areas that make heavy or regular use of FOI legislation, for example, are the Northern Irish Troubles and historical child sex abuse, both important and highly sensitive.

Such sensitivity must, of course, be respected and the RHS recognizes that there is a balance to be struck when protecting individuals or state security. But historians reported that FOI requests frequently take longer than the stipulated period, sometimes much longer. There is thus already a ‘lag’ in terms of the

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THE STERN REPORT

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current legislation; it is important that the RHS draws attention to this discrepancy between the intention and implementation of the legislation and that we speak out against further restrictions that are only likely to exacerbate this.

Similar disquiet is often voiced about REF, the latest issue on which the RHS has submitted formal evidence and one that looms large in the lives of all professional academics. REF mechanisms have become too cumbersome, too heavy-handed and, above all from a governmental perspective, too expensive. Hence, many suspect, the review announced by BIS, the Department of Business, Industry and Science, and headed by Lord Stern.

It is essential that an exercise such as the REF commands wide support within the academic community and that its conclusions are respected. There is also no doubt that REF has affected scholarly behaviour in History or that it will continue to do so. The introduction of impact, for example, has encouraged the academic community to be more outward facing and has also diversified the understanding of academic merit. Less happily, the pressure for outputs has altered publication patterns in some disciplines, although not in History where the differential weighting of monographs prevents this downgrading of the book.

What appears to many to be a technicality is thus to us an essential mechanism that both prevents serious distortion of the research process and reflects how research and scholarship is actually conducted. Similarly, while interdisciplinary research is stimulating and valuable, we need to defend multi-disciplinary collaborations and the single-discipline scholarship on which these rest. Promoting interdisciplinary research is not in itself a guarantee of research quality.

In responding to Stern, the RHS has acknowledged the strengths of the current system, mounting a robust defence of peer review as the principal method of assessment. The REF owes its credibility as an assessment exercise to its expert review panels. Panel membership attracts outstanding academics who benefit from the opportunity to survey the field and in whom their peers have confidence. Maintaining this calibre, and this level of participation, is essential. Several REF2014 panel members are RHS Council members, present or past, and their input informed our response at every state. Our consultations showed that the History panel worked very effectively, with a shared understanding of criteria and quality, in contrast to colleagues on panels that covered a range of disciplines, where assessment could be more difficult and even conflictive.

Maintaining History as a single Unit of Assessment is essential for a large discipline with such a broad variety of expertise within it. It also allows us to showcase the international strength of historical research in the UK; all previous REF exercises have confirmed History’s large number of high performing units, and hence the proportion of world-leading historical research for which British universities are responsible.

The RHS thus remains strongly committed to
peer review, which is the only expert device we have to assess quality. Metrics simply do not work across the board. Peer review offers, for example, the flexibility to assess research in new, minority or unfashionable fields; any substitution by metrics may distort subject matter by encouraging publications on well-worn or voguish topics. Even more cogently, no current measures provide reliable data for historical scholarship and this is not likely to change. History has no established rank order of periodicals and impact factors—as in Humanities more generally—mean very little.

There are two additional difficulties. The first is that, for historians, books are of primary importance in disseminating research. This was demonstrated in REF2014 where ‘books and parts of books’ were most likely to receive scores of 4*. There is no way of evaluating this type of output other than through peer review. Second, the download half-life of journal articles in History—and Humanities articles more generally—is very much longer than it is for the Sciences. This is insufficiently recognized; the RHS estimates that the true download half-life of a History article is at least 12 years.

The RHS has therefore argued strongly that the quality of scholarship in History, as in Humanities more generally, is not quantifiable by metrics and its full value and impact become apparent over a significantly longer term than a REF cycle. We would also resist wider use of metrics in general categories such as environment, where some form of metric evaluation is conceivable as research income and PGR numbers are two measures that can be aggregated across all subjects. This is partly because REF is designed to recognize and support essential research activities, including a rich academic culture involving seminars, workshops, conferences etc, participation and leadership in learned societies, editorial work, peer review and collaboration across institutions. Not to assess these vital academic functions would be to undermine them.

More importantly, however, metrics raise real issues of equity. It is clear from the RHS’s analysis of REF2014 that research income and PGR numbers were crucial to success in terms of research environment. Every university in the top 22, bar one, graduated at least 1 PhD per FTE over the REF cycle and 10 more than 1.5; the best predictor of rank in research environment was the number of PhDs per staff FTE between 2008 and 2013. Given the concentration of AHRC funding for doctoral study in a small number of consortia, in which Russell Group institutions predominate, this makes it almost impossible for small units in less-research intensive universities to do well in terms of environment no matter how strong their collective research endeavours. The RHS views this with real concern.

We have thus used Stern’s call for evidence to express concern over specific issues. Another of these relates to impact, which the RHS believes has benefitted the historical profession as it has underlined the deep
public interest in History and the relevance of our research. However, our research into REF2014 demonstrates that, in terms of authorship, Impact Case Studies do not represent the wider research community. 75% of identified PIs were men and just under 65% of PIs were professors. This is of real concern, particularly for young historians. The RHS is clear that it is highly discriminatory against ECRs not to allow them to transfer impact from one institution to another, or to include that based on unpublished research in a PhD thesis. This makes it almost inevitable that institutions will rely on case studies from people at mature stages in their careers.

The close link between teaching and research is one of the great strengths of the British university system. This is reflected in the high proportion of staff on full academic contracts, which could be incorporated as a REF measure. This would provide a clear picture of the employment position and foreground an issue that is of particular importance to ECRs and the future shape of the profession. Given widespread concern at the potential for departments to score highly in REF by only submitting a small proportion of their staff, the RHS strongly favours requiring UoAs to identify the proportion of staff submitted. We share the wider academic community’s clear desire to prevent—or discourage— institutions from gaming the system. We do, though, recognize that the changes to the last REF were very profound and, overall, the RHS believes that there is a strong case for little or even minimal change to allow the present system to bed down.
DISCOVERING COLLECTIONS

Matt Greenhall and Adalgisa Mascio report on new projects at The National Archives

Over the last two years colleagues from The National Archives have provided enhanced access to archival collections, not only at Kew but also across the country, via Discovery, our catalogue (discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk). Three projects in particular, the Unknown Treasures project, our annual Accessions to Repositories Survey, and Traces Through Time, are providing new insights into its collections, those held throughout the country, and the links between them. In doing so, they are making collections more visible and navigable, and are revealing some of the exciting stories they contain.

Archives allow us to connect with the past in a wide variety of ways, to explore experiences of individuals and communities alike, and to place these within wider documentary, historical, and contemporary contexts. Yet they also bring many challenges, particularly those collections that historically have been seen as ‘administrative’ and ‘formulaic’. Frequently, such collections are considered to be ‘hidden’, their potential worth and value being obscured by the perception that they are difficult to use. The Unknown Treasures project, uncovering a significant new resource for the study of common law and litigation in medieval and early modern England, has created a catalogue of writs (or brevia in Latin) from the Court of Common Pleas in Westminster, one of England’s busiest civil courts from its establishment in the late 12th century until its abolition in 1875. Although much of the documentation produced by the court is catalogued on Discovery, not every document produced by the Court has been listed or sorted, notably the CP 52 brevia files between the reigns of Richard II and James II, and beyond. Over 4,900 files from the Court of Common Pleas have now been catalogued and listed in Discovery.

Although many files have been destroyed,
Chief Executive and Keeper of The National Archives, Jeff James, launches Archives Inspire
especially after the Restoration, this sequence of weekly correspondence between sheriffs and the Court of Common Pleas still runs to thousands of boxes of parchments. Court clerks, justices, attorneys and sheriffs are named in the writs, alongside parties in lawsuits. This is, then, an invaluable resource for anyone wishing to trace the careers of legal professionals active in the Westminster courts (and their particular quirks, captured in their playful doodles or the haphazard Latin of sometimes bemused clerks), or to research the centralised administration of common law justice. The writs contain evidence of local people engaging with the central legal and administrative process, particularly through the endorsements of individual sheriffs. The files demonstrate the expansion of the medieval and early modern legal apparatus, the rise in litigation within society, and, through the regular documentation of Court Adjournments, provide commentary on contemporary events such as plague or civil unrest in London. When used alongside other records relating to the court, the writs allow scholars to trace linguistic developments within the legal system, notably the relationship between legal Latin, ‘law French’, and the growth of English for everyday use, particularly in relation to ‘new’ and emerging occupations throughout the period.

Yet this isn’t just about listing documents and making them available to researchers; the records also promote a wider understanding of how these documents were arranged, the skills and understanding of the legal clerks charged with their arrangement, the purpose of the files within the court, and how they relate to other materials within the collection. These were ‘living documents’, carefully arranged by county, labelled by the regnal year, and grouped by the ‘return day in the legal calendar (the day they were returned to the court held together by a leather or gut thong).

The inclusion of collections from other archives in Discovery is an important and increasingly popular tool. The annual Accessions to Repositories survey records the accessions to over 200 collecting institutions from across the UK, from local record offices to universities; from arts to religious archives. Discovery, therefore, provides researchers with the opportunity to link the records held...
centrally at The National Archives and those held elsewhere. Every year up to 37 digests (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/accessions/) are produced which provide a thematic summary of accessioned collections. Whether it arts or architecture, military history or gardening, the published digests provide an overview of those collections relating to a particular topic.

The ability to navigate such a wide variety of records through Discovery offers new possibilities in identifying and understanding the relationships between records, a useful tool for scholars and those teaching students about advanced research skills. Such links between records is being explored through our Traces Through Time project (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/our-role/plans-policies-performance-and-projects/our-projects/traces-through-time/). Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project explores the use of the latest technology and historical data sets to link and suggest records that may be related to a specific individual through Discovery. This feature in Discovery currently covers twenty record series from the First World War, and over half a million newly identified links are now available, each with an associated confidence score. The use of historical data sets, algorithms, and technology will therefore highlight the further possibilities for seeing the relationship between records, wherever they are held.

Through the combination of focused projects pertaining to collections held at The National Archives, the gathering of information relating to collections held in the wider archives sector, and the application of new technologies and data linking techniques, Discovery will remain an invaluable resource to showcase emerging collections, enhance the ability to search existing collections, and place these within wider archival contexts.
TRANSCRIBING WITH TECHNOLOGY

THE BENTHAM AND RECOGNITION AND ENRICHMENT OF ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTS PROJECTS

LOUISE SEAWARD

For historians and archivists, the prospect of computers being able to read handwritten source material might seem a distant dream. But a European research project is turning this dream into a reality.

The Bentham Project at University College London is occupied with producing the scholarly edition of the published work and unpublished manuscripts of the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832). Bentham’s conception of the philosophy of utilitarianism is perhaps most well-known but his voluminous writings cover a vast array of subjects from crime and punishment to economics, education and electoral reform. The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham is superseding a nineteenth-century edition which was both inadequate and incomplete. Editorial work on Bentham’s writings has been carried out by a small group of experts since the inception of the Bentham Project in 1959. This situation changed in 2010 with the launch of Transcribe Bentham, one of the first scholarly crowdsourcing initiatives. With its participation in the READ project, Transcribe Bentham is continuing to lead the way in combining scholarship, technological innovation and public engagement. We are hopeful that the technology developed under READ will make transcription more straightforward for anyone who wants to try their hand at transcribing Bentham.

Transcribe Bentham invites members of the public to explore thousands of digital images of Bentham’s papers and transcribe what they find. Across the past five and a half years, volunteers have transcribed over 15,000 pages at a high level of accuracy. This is a phenomenal effort, for which we are extremely grateful. Each submitted transcript is checked by someone working at the Bentham Project and users are given regular feedback on their contributions. Transcripts produced by volunteers are used as a basis for editorial work on Bentham’s writings and will be credited in forthcoming editions of Bentham’s Collected Works. Volunteer transcripts are also shared in an open access digital repository.

Transcription takes place at our online Transcription Desk. Users work with handwritten historical documents.
register for an account and then browse the manuscripts to find something that they might like to transcribe. The manuscripts are categorised in various ways, according to subject matter, date, folio number and even the legibility of Bentham’s handwriting. The task of the volunteer transcriber is twofold. First, users must produce an accurate transcript of what Bentham has written. This involves deciphering Bentham’s (often difficult) handwriting and untangling the complex revisions he made as he drafted his papers. Second, users must encode their transcripts using Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) compliant mark-up, the standard format for presenting electronic texts. The volunteer uses a toolbar to apply tags to different elements of the manuscript, such as paragraphs, headings, additions and deletions. The use of TEI mark-up helps to ensure that transcripts are an accurate representation of Bentham’s writing and also makes it easier for these transcripts to be stored and searched electronically. Transcribing Bentham is thus far from simple! Although our experienced transcribers cope well with the task, we recognise that new volunteers may be daunted by the prospect of dealing with Bentham’s handwriting and the TEI mark-up.

The technology developed under the READ project aims to erase these obstacles, making transcription easier and thereby encouraging more people to take part in Transcribe Bentham. This is part of READ’s wider mission: to make archival material more accessible through the development and dissemination of Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) and other cutting-edge technologies. Archives have invested a lot of money into the digitisation of their manuscript collections but these digital images are still only available to those who have the time to study them in depth. The next step is to train computers to process and search images of historical manuscripts. Computer scientists working on the READ project will develop HTR and other technologies using thousands of manuscript pages with varying dates, styles, languages and layouts. Testing the technology
on a large and diverse data set will make it possible for computers to automatically transcribe and search any kind of handwritten document, from the Middle Ages to the present day, from old Greek to modern English.

The Transcribus transcription platform, constructed by the University of Innsbruck, is at the heart of the READ project. Users, both individual and institutional, begin by uploading images of manuscript material to the platform. Transcribus facilitates transcription and the addition of metadata via tags, whilst also ensuring that transcripts can be exported in several formats. In addition, Transcribus can be used to apply HTR technology to a set of documents. Optical Character Recognition (OCR) copes quite well with printed documents as it is dealing with a relatively small number of characters in a standard format. Navigating handwritten documents is much more complex since these papers can vary hugely in style, format and quality. HTR technology therefore needs to be trained by being shown examples of manuscript pages which have been transcribed and segmented into lines and paragraphs. This ‘ground-truth’ training material is used to generate a HTR model specific to a particular manuscript collection. This HTR model can then be administered to automatically transcribe and search material within this set of papers.

When it comes to Transcribe Bentham, the idea is that

HTR technology will make transcription simpler for our volunteers. A HTR model based on Bentham’s handwriting has been created and we have begun to apply this technology to our crowdsourcing initiative via TSX, a client platform which is connected to Transcribus. This platform was built by the University of London Computer Centre under the auspices of the tranScriptorium project, the forerunner to READ. Users transcribing Bentham have the option of asking TSX to suggest words they are unsure about. TSX can also automatically generate a complete transcript for users to check and correct. Transcribers still need to tag the features of each manuscript but the TEI mark-up is now hidden from view thanks to a streamlined toolbar, with a what-you-see-is-what-you-get display. The READ project will enhance the functionality of the TSX interface and boost the accuracy of the words suggested to transcribers.
It is also envisaged that the TSX platform could be adopted and adapted by other institutions interested in crowdsourcing the transcription of a set of manuscripts. TSX thus aims to make transcription more straightforward, both for individual transcribers and for those in charge of manuscript collections. It is also envisaged that the TSX platform could be adopted and adapted by other institutions interested in crowdsourcing the transcription of a set of manuscripts. TSX thus aims to make transcription more straightforward, both for individual transcribers and for those in charge of manuscript collections. The READ project is also developing other tools for historians and archivists, which will be made available through the Transkribus platform. Pre-processing techniques will enhance the quality of manuscript images and make them easier to transcribe, by correcting discoloured pages or straightening crooked lines of text. Keyword spotting technology will allow users to pinpoint desired information within a set of handwritten documents. A system of automatic writer identification will assist archivists in ascertaining the authorship of unidentified manuscripts. An e-learning tool will be devised for users who wish to learn how to read a certain style of writing, whether that be Bentham’s hand, medieval French or something else entirely. A mobile app is also being built to support those who work directly with source material in the archives. Users will be able to use their mobile phones to digitise, manage and process documents as they work.

These innovative tools are designed to benefit archivists and researchers and the READ project is committed to spreading awareness of these new technologies. The services offered through Transkribus are free to all, although some payment may be needed from those with very large manuscript collections or specific needs. Research publications and data will be made open access and the majority of the project’s tools will be open source. Interested institutions are also invited to become part of READ by signing a Memorandum of Understanding and testing prototype tools on their manuscript collections.

Although Bentham might have been bemused to see computer scientists poring over his papers, he would surely have recognised the enormous benefits of this collaboration. If the task of transcription is made simpler, members of the public will find it easier to take part in research being conducted by the Bentham Project and Bentham’s ideas can be disseminated to a wider audience. More generally, the READ project promises to provide an invaluable toolkit which could facilitate transcription and research for scholars, archivists and members of the public. Those who are keen to follow the progress of this new technology can do so at the Transcribe Bentham blog and the READ project website.

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