London Lives 1690–1800 – Crime, Poverty and Social Policy in the Metropolis

Happiness is researching someone with a unique name. At least, that's the case in the research environment created by the brilliant new resource, *London Lives 1690–1800 – Crime, Poverty and Social Policy in the Metropolis* [2]. *London Lives* gathers together an unparalleled array of manuscript and printed sources containing evidence that can be used to reconstruct everyday life in the 18th-century metropolis. This project incorporates the records digitized for the *Old Bailey Online* alongside a vast collection of other documents and, like the *Old Bailey Online*, it makes possible keyword searching across a vast corpus of material. But unlike its predecessor, this resource makes possible a new way of searching through the documents: it is now easier to find repeated instances of the same name across a variety of manuscript sources. As some of the sample biographies, or 'Lives', on the site show, *London Lives* allows us to begin to trace individual life trajectories of the labouring poor and of Londoners caught up in the criminal justice system. It is now possible in a matter of days or weeks to assemble evidence related to single individuals that would previously have taken years or decades to amass. In addition, this site provides an opportunity for scholars to be innovative in their research techniques and reflective about their research practices and the theoretical underpinnings of those practices.

This review complements Drew Gray's recent review [3] of the *Old Bailey Online* for this website. Gray raises important questions about the completeness of the resource, the implications of digitization for the long-term preservation of archival sources, and the ways keyword searching can impoverish our research if not done with care. Many of these concerns might be raised about this website as well, though such questions in no way undermine its enormous value. Not only does it offer new ways to access sources, *London Lives* is, like the *Old Bailey Online*, free for all to use. Funding appears to be available to maintain the site, so that we can hopefully avoid the gnashing of teeth that accompanied the transition of the Royal Historical Society's free electronic bibliography to the subscription-based Bibliography of British and Irish History at the start of this year.

A massive quantity of records has been digitized for this resource and added to datasets produced by other projects. Collections have been carefully selected for digitization to create a resource with as much depth and variety as possible. For criminal justice, the records include the Old Bailey Proceedings, supplemented with Ordinary's Accounts (biographies of executed criminals written by the chaplain of Newgate Prison), Sessions Papers (manuscript documents which provide additional evidence about the crimes tried at the Old Bailey and other courts, as well as documents concerning poor relief), Criminal Registers (lists of prisoners held in Newgate Prison), Coroners's Inquests (documents relating to deaths thought to be suspicious, but which did not result in a formal prosecution), and the records of Bridewell (the house of correction for the City of London, where the poor accused of petty crimes were punished). For poor relief, the records of three parishes have been digitized: St Botolph Aldgate (straddling the eastern boundary between the City of London and Middlesex), St Clement Danes (Westminster), and St Dionis Backchurch (City of London). These parishes were chosen for the quality of their records, and the extent to which they exemplify different parts of London. Datasets of settlement and workhouse records from two further parishes (created independently from the *London Lives* project) were included as well: St Martin in the Fields (Westminster) and St Luke Chelsea (just to the west of the built up area of London). The records of one London guild, the Carpenters' Company and partial transcriptions of the registers of the Marine Society, a charity which provided training at sea for poor boys, offer further evidence of poor relief. For evidence of medical provision, the site includes the records of one of the royal hospitals, St Thomas's Hospital, including its detailed admissions and discharge registers. There are also externally created data sets including tax and voting records, wills, fire insurance registers, and urban directories.

With a variety of sources providing many different types of evidence, users will find it essential to learn the nature and functions of the component sets of records if they are to get the most out of their search results. Almost as impressive as the digitized corpus of manuscripts is the background information about London, its institutions and the records they produced that the website offers. Each institution and document type is introduced in a way that should be accessible to people with no knowledge, but the introductory materials provide the background necessary to make sense of the available documents. Experts will find the background someone rudimentary, but the breadth of the introduction should offer something unfamiliar to even the seasoned scholar.

Though users can browse the records, the website's search features are the most likely starting point for users and represent the most important innovation the site offers. In addition to searching by keyword or reference number, *London Lives* has a name search feature that allows you to search for names and to collect them (once you have registered with the website) into your free, personal workspace. The name search allows you to search for strings of characters, but it also includes a sort of 'fuzzy search'. Users can search for 'metaphones' to try to overcome variations in spelling of the same name. In my own research, I came across a woman named 'Lydra [sic] Potter', who was involved in the theft of a tankard from a public house on her way back from a bull baiting at Stamford Hill (t17661022-47). Potter was giving evidence against the accused, who tried to cast aspersions on Potter's character by mentioning that she had previously grassed up her husband. Using a metaphone search for given name: 'Lydra', surname:'Potter', I found dozens of references to Lidia/Lydia/Lydra/Leddey Potter (and to her aliases Lydia Hall and Lydia Brown) that I would not have found by searching for 'Lydra [or Lydia] Potter' as a keyword. Once you have collected names in your workspace, you can link them into sets of names that you believe refer to the same person. These sets are visible to all users and can be searched using the 'set search' facility. The site will eventually contain a wiki where users can write up 'lives' for others to read.

In cases like Potter's, pulling together all of the available references gives us an opportunity to track people over long periods of time as they appear in several different institutions. In Potter's case, we see her appearing for more than 20 years as a witness to and perpetrator of crime. Records suggest she was born c.1744. She was herself tried on a few occasions for buying stolen goods, presumably to sell in her mother's shop in Black Boy Alley. We find out about the sorts of people who visited the shop and of the networks of people familiar to a resident of Black Boy Alley in the final third of the 18th century. Potter disappears from view after 1786 when a woman was robbed in her house.

This resource makes reconstructing lives possible, but not easy. The greatest difficulty is finding people who appear in multiple places and who can be linked reliably. The website includes a search facility (limited to selected researchers) that finds name matches in two specified sets of records, thereby helping researchers to find names that appear multiple times and might refer to the same person. But even with this tool researchers may struggle to find names of people who are useful for their research topic and who appear repeatedly. Common surnames are almost impossible to link with confidence because the information in each document is so limited. Finding individuals who appear often enough to tell us much about their life histories will depend on serendipity and the assiduity and creativity of the searcher. Users will certainly incorrectly link names and create erroneous life histories, so 'sets' and 'lives' have to be treated with the same circumspection as any other web 2.0 product. However there is also the opportunity to employ the connections made by other users and to begin to assemble a large collection of plebeian and middling 'lives'. Users will have to be creative in their methodologies. Hopefully the site's forthcoming wiki for writing up life histories will include a space where people can share their methodologies for using the site. The project has already begun developing a tool that will help researchers identify records of interest more quickly (http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/scrutiny/ [4]). Ideally other digital humanists will contribute further tools, which will be made freely available to others.

The manuscript documents were transcribed twice by separate typists, a process which under ideal conditions produces exceptionally high rates of accuracy. Users will find that some documents have not been accurately transcribed, though the overall quality appears to be very good. Users need to keep in mind that spellings have not been standardized and abbreviations have not been expanded (for instance, a keyword search for 'pish' – the way an abbreviation of 'parish' was rendered by the transcription team – throws up more than 3000 results). Users not familiar with late Stuart palaeography may find it useful to review the National Archives palaeography tutorials (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/palaeography/where_to_start.htm [5]) in order to think about ways to construct more effective keyword searches. The inclusion of images of the original documents alongside the transcriptions is a user-friendly innovation and researchers should refer to the original images constantly to check the accuracy of transcriptions.

Scholars of 18th-century London will find *London Lives* invaluable for research into social, cultural and institutional history. It is an outstanding teaching resource (though it may be difficult to set students the task of creating original lives in short timeframes) and it should appeal to genealogists and other publics with historical interests. The design is attractive and intuitive, at least to someone who has spent a lot of time looking at the Old Bailey Online. Irritatingly, it is sometimes difficult to keep the image of the original document visible in a web browser at the same time as the transcription, which can make comparison difficult. The file size of some of the images sometimes overloads my computer and could be prohibitively slow for those using low bandwidth connections.

London Lives makes new material accessible, but the material it makes available (and some of the questions that the creators are asking of it) also throws up questions that will probably never be answered. The project description declares that 'By examining how individual Londoners engaged with and manipulated [institutions] for their own ends, this project is designed to assess the role of plebeians in the evolution of social practices in the modern metropolis'. Early research outputs by project directors Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker suggest that users (be they poor, criminal, or otherwise) had a clear impact on the ways that 18th-century institutions operated, though the extent to which institutions were responsive to individual

users remains open to question. 18th-century users were undoubtedly knowledgeable about the institutions that surrounded them, but most of the knowledge users possessed remains hidden and unrecoverable. The dark matter of plebeian and middling knowledge and life lurks around these documents. A lot of learning and interaction clearly went on beyond what is documented here, and we can only speculate about *how* people learned to manipulate the institutions they encountered.

More generally, this site gives us traces of people whose lives are not otherwise recorded, but we need to think carefully about what those traces tell us. These are records of patterns of behaviour (or perceived behaviour). The intentions of the people recorded here are more difficult to analyze. Our understanding of what the people in evidence here knew their options to be requires further careful unpacking. As I expect the creators would readily admit, we are only in the early stages of analysis. These resources must be scoured to try to track down the tiny anecdotes and slippages that offer insight into the dark matter of plebeian lives that gives meaning to the patterns of behaviour that we can now gather in massive quantities. There is a set of cross-purposes here. On the one hand this project creates a massive haystack, in which there are numerous needles offering fantastic insights into daily life but which cannot be said to be representative in any statistical sense. On the other, the creators seem to want to allow for larger samples to be created—by making existing sets visible to all users, for example. The matter of statistical significance, of so much interest to the historians from below who trained in the 1960s and 70s, has not been forgotten. Of course, these objectives do not oppose each other, but they do suggest divergent research communities that may be created by this resource.

At the conference organized to celebrate the launch of the site, there was a tendency to talk about the 'agency' of the people captured in these documents. This tendency was questioned at the time, but not adequately discussed. What do the traces of the daily lives of the middling and the poor that are presented on *London Lives* tell us? This site will push us to query our use of the concept of 'agency' for the 18th century and to develop a better sense of what we are actually talking about when we discuss the agency of the labouring poor in pre-modern London. As with any source, the political sympathies of users will shape the type of story they tell. This is an opportunity to think about how modern political and professional objectives shape the types of resources for historical investigation historians create as well as histories historians write. As people come to use this website, they will have think about how their purposes go along or against the grain of both the 18th-century sources that have digitized and the 21st century interfaces that provide access to the digitized documents. The assumptions and biases built into both historical documents and modern resources need to be kept firmly in mind.

Other reviews:
[6]

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