

The History of Parliament Online

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The History of Parliament is widely recognised as a monumental scholarly achievement. Since its origins in the dreams of Josiah Wedgwood in the early part of the 20th century, and then its establishment as a charitable trust in 1940 (with government funding from 1951), it has produced a voluminous output. For scale and ambition it is up there with the *Dictionary of National Biography* (now the *ODNB*) and the *Victoria County History*, and since 1964 it has produced over 40 fat volumes, containing biographical entries on over 21,000 MPs who sat between 1386 and 1832, as well as around 3,000 constituency histories, and a staggering 20 million words. It has been home to some giants of 20th-century scholarship, including Sir Lewis Namier, Sir Frank Stenton and Sir John Neale, and it has employed countless other scholars, many of whom look back fondly at their time 'at the HoP', otherwise known as 'the H.O.P', or (simply and grandiloquently) as 'The History'. And its work is not yet complete. Funds permitting (and there have been some narrow scrapes over the years), it will continue to fill the gaps in its coverage. Work is on-going for the periods 1422–1504 and 1640–60, and the Trust has recently embarked on an ambitious (and slightly re-jigged) project to cover the period between the Great Reform Act and the end of the Second World War.

Of course, the project has had its detractors. It is sometimes described as old fashioned, a charge which is hard to deny given that its prosopographical approach owes so much to Namier and his disciples, and by concentrating on biographies it does not exactly do what its name implies, in terms of offering a genuine history of Parliament. Its focus on the Commons also seems out of touch with long-established historiographical trends which acknowledge (and indeed emphasise) the role of the peerage, although this is now being addressed by new sections which are starting the process of dealing with the House of Lords (currently 1660–1832). Others will point out that the History has not always been staffed by professional scholars, such that the quality of its research is not uniformly high, and it is certainly true that recent work is a great deal more thorough than some of the older output. Nevertheless, few can doubt that it has produced mighty reference volumes that have been invaluable to generations of scholars, far beyond the narrow field of parliamentary history, and it can honestly be said that new volumes are eagerly anticipated. Moreover, the purpose of this review is not so much to judge the quality of what has been produced as to discuss the latest method by which it has been presented to the world: [*The History of Parliament Online* \[2\]](#). And at this point it is probably appropriate for me to declare a double interest, having formerly been employed as a

researcher on the project (for too many years), and having more recently made a very small contribution to the new website.

This is not the first time that the History has experimented with modern technology, and in 1998 it worked with Cambridge University Press one what was, at the time, a fairly impressive CD Rom. This was probably done in recognition that the project's massive achievement might not have the impact and readership it deserved, because of the limitations of the print format. The huge volumes that had been appearing periodically over the previous three decades were wonderful to use in many respects, but they suffered from major drawbacks. They were prohibitively expensive, and it was no longer clear even that university libraries were buying them. And, in the absence of an index, they resembled giant haystacks that were unlikely to yield up too many needles for those whose approach to history (and indeed to Parliament) was not biographical in nature. This was the problem that the CD Rom, with its search facility and hyperlinks, overcame, even if only briefly. What quickly became apparent, of course, was that CD Rom technology had been superseded by the internet, a development with which scholars and publishers are still experimenting, in order to find exciting new ways of delivering old information.

How successful, then is the *History of Parliament Online* at providing readers with something that is useable, and which genuinely has added value? The most obvious point to make in the site's favour is that it is entirely free. Other similar projects have either required vast amounts of research council money, which has not always been wisely spent, or have involved commercial ventures, whose databases have sometimes been insanely expensive, unless and until JISC makes them available to UK universities. In what is a sometimes depressing web age, therefore, it is immensely refreshing that the History (like so much of *British History Online*) is accessible to absolutely anyone, anywhere in the world. Beyond this, moreover, the site also has the merits of being well-designed, user-friendly and useful.

In essence, the site involves a web version of the printed output, which appears under the heading 'Research' on the opening page. This involves the work of nine sections, the most recent of which (covering 1820–32) was published in 2009, with the latest research (published in 2010, and covering 1604–29) due to appear on the web in late 2012. This part of the site comprises a series of clearly marked layers. Readers thus choose whether they wish to explore 'members', 'constituencies' or 'surveys', the latter of which refers to the substantial analytical introductions which have appeared with (almost all of) the printed sets. Having made their choice, they can then choose which chronological period they seek to explore, and then browse the entries by means of alphabetical keys. These various pathways enable readers to call up on screen the exact text of what appeared in print, and although these do not provide references to the volumes and pages of the original volumes, they can be easily cited by anyone who wishes to do so. Indeed, one of the small but important signs of the thought that has gone into the website involves the way in which the citable 'urls', while inevitably a little long, at least provide a clear and logical description of the article to which they relate.

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These entries also come complete with their original footnotes, the reference numbers for which are hyperlinked for easy navigation within pages, and the content of which is made explicable by a guide to the History's arcane abbreviations. Each entry also has links which enable readers to click through to other relevant sections of the site where they are mentioned, and to any other pages for MPs or constituencies that are mentioned in a particular entry. Readers of the constituency article for Glamorganshire in the early 16th century are thus offered a link to other constituencies in the same county (Cardiff boroughs), while people who are enthralled (like me) by the career of William Prynne will be able to click through to biographies like those of Sir William Waller, the MP who was famously tripped up by Prynne's sword on the steps of the Commons in 1660. Equally, those of a more methodical nature can also read this mass of data as if it were in printed form. The presence of a 'next' link enables biographies and constituencies to be read 'forwards' in strict order (whether alphabetical for biographies, or within alphabetical counties for constituencies), or even backwards, with the help of the button marked 'previous'.

Beyond this, the site's opening page also points readers towards sections called 'explore' and 'gallery', as well as to one which provides further information about the Trust and its history. Each of these sections

explains clearly and concisely what readers will find, and these too are easy to navigate. They also provide at least part of the key to the 'added value' that the site provides. 'Explore', therefore, offers the chance to read a series of newly commissioned articles, which 'suggest ways of exploring the content of the History', and which have been written by experts both inside and outside the organisation. These can be accessed by one of two methods, either through a route marked 'period' ('medieval', 'Tudor', 'modern' etc.), or through one labelled 'theme' ('politics', 'economy', 'diplomacy and war' etc.). These essays are generally short and readable, and they are clearly aimed at a general audience. My own browsing, therefore, took me to fine little articles on 'The Independents and the Long Parliament, 1644–8' (by David Scott), on 'The Old Palace of Westminster' (by Stephen Farrell), and on 'Fast sermons' (by Vivienne Larminie). In a variation on the idea of 'googling' one's own name, I also revisited my own essay, on 'Publicising parliament in the seventeenth century'.

Yet further 'additionality' is to be found under the tab marked 'gallery', which provides the site's much needed visual element. This involves a range of pictures, under headings of 'members' (portraits, alphabetically arranged), 'constituencies' (mostly maps) and 'parliaments', the latter of which has illustrations of parliamentary sessions and vivid election scenes. There is even one image of a curious parliamentary artefact: an 18th-century ceramic 'toasting' bowl from Wallington House, which bears the motto 'lett us drink success to Blackett and Fenwick'. This is accompanied, naturally enough, by links to the biographies of both men, as well as to the constituency for which they sat. In time, the aim is clearly to enhance both of these sections with even more specially written essays, not least on individual Parliaments, which will provide readers with still further material that cannot be found in the print volumes.

There is much more to the site's 'added value', however, than merely the new material. There will be those who will welcome the ease with which browsing can take place across material that originally appeared in numerous volumes. Each constituency article, for example, contains a link to other similar entries relating to other periods, and this means that people who are so minded can read the history of a parliamentary borough like Bath from 1386 through to 1831. More obviously, however, the real benefit of the site comes from its capacity to be interrogated by means of word searches. One way in which this can be done involves a hi-tech randomised search facility on the front page. This kind of thing probably has a geeky name – perhaps 'haphazard word cloud' – and it whizzes around when the cursor hovers over it, and directs the reader to any biography or constituency upon which they descend with the click of a mouse. I have to confess that it made me feel a little queasy, but the kids will probably love it. There is also another random element to the site, in the form of 'feature' biographies, constituencies and essays, which obviously rotate every so often.

For old-fashioned types, however, who have more purposeful searching in mind, there is also a more conventional 'search' box. My first search (which probably reveals how sad I am) was for 'Prynne', and it produced 86 articles in which his name is mentioned. This is around 70 more than could be found by linking through from his biography. It transpires, therefore, that there is evidence about him in biographies of Richard Dowdswell (1601–73) and Edward Turner (1617–76), as well as in the constituency article on Wells, none of which are referred to in his own entry. Such searchability might help historians to overcome the failure of the project to really offer an institutional analysis, and parliamentary historians might thus wish to pull together and extract evidence about topics like 'divisions' and 'impeachments', and even election ballads. They could certainly find evidence about the Palace of Westminster, from the famous medieval Hall (102 hits) to the Painted Chamber. The latter turned up only five entries, although one of these – a reference to Sir John Conway being reprimanded for late night revelry and dancing there in 1692 – was certainly entertaining. Searches on my own areas of interest also revealed the logical thought which has gone into the site, and it came as something of a relief to discover that 'lobby' and 'lobbying' produced the same entries (396 of them).

Beyond this, however, the real area where the site adds value involves making the History's material useful to those whose interests involve topics other than parliament, its MPs, and their constituencies. This was always true to some extent, of course, not least because many members had (more) interesting lives outside Parliament, from Dick Whittington to Geoffrey Chaucer and William Wilberforce. Now, however, it would be nice to think that this site will attract many more people, including those who would not instinctively

think of the History as a project which enhances our knowledge of, say, William Shakespeare. That it indeed does, even if perhaps only in small ways, through biographies of men like William Gardiner (1531–97), the ‘common wrangler’ who once quarrelled with the bard, and who may have been the role model for Justice Shallow in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

My own fascination with early modern print culture led me to try out the term ‘Gazette’, which produced 484 references. Most of these merely involved its use as a source, but some of them also provided fascinating examples of the newspaper as an historical topic. In 1704, for example, Charles Bertie made enquiries about having an address from the town of Stamford inserted into the official newspaper after the battle of Blenheim, explaining that ‘we long to see ourselves in print’. Other historians might choose to revisit the issue of ‘riots’ (433 articles), or ‘divorce’ (174) or indeed the ‘duel’ (303). Not all of these involved MPs as culprits, of course, although it would certainly be possible to research those in the Commons who were mad, bad, and dangerous to know. These included Alexander Grant, whose last known trace involved being held under restraint in Bedlam in 1717, railing about William, Lord Cadogan. They also include a ‘pretty young fellow’ like Richard Liddell, who was not just MP for Bossiney in the 1740s, but also a serial adulterer, who was once caught *in flagrante delicto* with Lady Abergavenny, and who was forced to pay her cuckolded husband £10,000 in damages. And, perhaps best of all, they include a man who once sat as MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme in the early 15th century, but who was much more interesting for being involved with a ‘notorious gang of ruffians’ who were indicted for murder. His name, amazingly enough, was John Hardhead.

This impressive search facility – which will enable new needles to emerge from the History’s bountiful haystack for years to come – even makes it possible to search for more than one term at a time. Given recent historiographical fascination with the ‘public sphere’, therefore, it might be interesting to know that, while there are 484 references to the *Gazette* and 276 to ‘newspaper’, as well as 104 to ‘coffee’ and 38 to ‘coffeehouse’, there are ten articles that combine ‘coffee’ with gazette, and two that refer to ‘coffeehouse’ and ‘newspaper’. This may be fewer than Habermas would have expected. Of course, there are limits to such composite searches (using three terms did not seem to work), just as there are limits to the functionality of the site in general. Searching for ‘weavers’ (337 hits) threw out a lot of references to people with the name ‘Weaver’, and there is no facility for narrowing searches by time period. It is perhaps not that helpful for anyone who is interested in petitioning during the medieval period to discover over 5,000 entries for their chosen subject, most of which refer to more recent parliaments.

Other glitches seem to involve minor technical issues. The requisite links, for example, are not all in place. Thus, while the list of secretaries of state from the late 17th century provides links to the biographies of those who sat as MPs, no such links exist for those who are named on a list of men who chaired Parliament’s Committee of Privileges. Similarly, biographical entries permit readers to click through to articles about the constituencies for which they sat from the ‘cursus’, but the same cannot be done to jump from constituency articles to their MPs. Beyond this, search results do not appear in any very obvious order, and they also merely serve to identify the individual biographies, constituencies, or survey sections in which they appear. Many such entries are long, and, unlike *British History Online*, the search facility does not guide the reader to the specific citation within an individual page. However, such problems are relatively minor, and some of them will probably be fixed in due course. Indeed, readers are reminded that ‘work is still underway on checking and cleaning the data that has been transferred into the website from a number of sources’, and that ‘the current version of the site is still provisional’. In the section on FAQs, indeed, readers are even provided with an address to which factual corrections can be sent, although they are also warned that any changes that are found to be necessary might take a while to appear!

In short, the History of Parliament Online admirably overcomes the key problems with the printed volumes. Its output has gone from being expensive and unwieldy to free and usable. The site is clear and logical, and also bright and colourful, and the aim genuinely seems to have been to produce something which will not only be valuable to academics, but also attractive to the general reader and enthusiastic amateur, whatever their historical interest might be. The first of these goals is easier to achieve, and a whole new generation of

scholars will be grateful for having so much great research dumped into a website. The second is more of a challenge, but one to which the History has risen with admirable skill, and the site does a good job of offering guidance and explanations, in terms of explaining what can be found where, how the material was produced, and what readers can expect from a biography or a constituency article. If the History's research output was being assessed by the government alongside other academic departments, this would now be called 'impact', but since this is presumably not the case, perhaps we can revert to an older and nobler name for what this site represents: a public good. Indeed, given that there is so much duff information out there in the ether (even if Wikipedia is now more trustworthy than it once was), such an 'authoritative' resource is all the more valuable. It probably won't get as many 'hits' as ancestry.com, or make the History of Parliament a household name, but it might just encourage people to rummage in its haystacks.

Notes

1. For example, <<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/prynne-william-1602-69> [3]> [accessed 31 May 2012].[Back to \(1\)](#)

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1267>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/19978>

[2] <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/>

[3] <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/prynne-william-1602-69>