The Old Bailey Proceedings Online

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[The Proceedings of the Old Bailey](#) [2] have only been available to historians online since 2003 but, speaking as someone who probably visits the site two or three times a week, I am bound to wonder at how we all managed before then. When I commenced my doctoral research in 2000 I consulted the pages of the proceedings while hunched over an old microfilm reader in a far corner of my university library as I trawled through pages and pages of text in the hopes of finding criminal cases that linked to my own work. It was like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. Now I need only fill out a search sheet, click a button and in seconds I am presented with information that would have taken me hours if not days to discover previously. Naturally, no resource is without its problems and within the *Old Bailey Online* (*OBO*) there are things that can frustrate the user from time to time but overall this is a tremendous achievement and a boon for social historians everywhere.

For those unfamiliar with the resource the website offers an excellent description of what it contains:

> The *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* makes available a fully searchable, digitised collection of all surviving editions of the *Old Bailey Proceedings* from 1674 to 1913, and of the Ordinary of Newgate's Accounts, 1679 to 1772. It allows access to over 197,000 trials and biographical details of approximately 2,500 men and women executed at Tyburn, free of charge for non-commercial use.

The site allows the user to browse editions of the proceedings by session, search for particular offences or individuals, or create graphs and tables for statistical analysis. Contemporary maps have been added which allow one to look up the scene of crimes or defendant's homes and consider the reported trials at Old Bailey

in a geographical context. If we take just one random example, the case of James Drummond indicted for highway robbery in 1729, we can see how the site works.

Drummond robbed Jacob Wakeling while he was on the road to Bow in London. Wakeling was assaulted by two men who took money and his watch and threatened his life. Wakeling then found a watchman and set off in pursuit. He captured Drummond but the other robber escaped on a horse. The trial gives us a little detail about the assault, the efforts to catch the criminal and the decision of the jury to find Drummond guilty. (1) He was sentenced to death and the Ordinary of Newgate's (the prison's chaplain) account of the prisoners set for execution at the Tyburn gallows describes Drummond as 40-year-old ex-sailor from Stepney who had lived an otherwise blameless life. He was penitent in the gaol and 'died in Peace with all the World'.(2) A statistical search reveals that Drummond's trial was one of 26 for highway robbery that were published in the *Old Bailey Sessions Papers* (*OBSP*) in 1729, 23 of men and three of women. The statistical search allows the user to then link directly to these cases.

The resource is very easy to use. The search pages do require a bit of thought to retrieve statistical data but the site offers a useful guide to conducting searches under each heading (keyword, surname, offence, punishment etc.) and one is able to search in a number of ways. Statistical searches can be displayed as a simple table, or as bar or pie charts. The 'Associated records' section of the site also allows one to cross reference trials with archival sources held elsewhere. Thus for example, we can see that in addition to the Ordinary's account of James Drummond's confinement and death there is a record of his appearance in 'The lives of the most remarkable criminals', a copy of which is held in the British Library. For other offenders I have been directed to sources in the London Metropolitan Archives and the National Archive at Kew. This is another time saving device that this resource offers.

The trials themselves are fascinating documents of social history, of use to a wide range of people – not all of them academics and certainly not all of them historians of crime. The proceedings contain a wealth of social and cultural history. If one is interested in the fashions and consumer behaviour of the 18th and 19th centuries then the lists of goods stolen and from where is invaluable. I have recently used the site to explore the nature of burglary in the second half of the 19th century to try and see how householders and servants described these invasions of their homes. This allowed me to look at the ways that burglars entered property and at who discovered the break-ins, providing an interesting glimpse into the nature of servant/master relationships in the period. Others have been using the *OBO* to look at gender or to search for ethnic minorities in the records of trials. All this is made much easier by the digitisation of the proceedings and the carefully constructed database.

The authors of the project, Professors Tim Hitchcock (from the University of Hertfordshire), Robert Shoemaker (from the University of Sheffield) and Clive Emsley (from the Open University), along with their team of researchers, have also published historical essays and bibliographies on a range of topics directly related to the material in the resource. Thus we have mini-articles on crime and punishment, gender, the Old Bailey courthouse and London itself. These are properly referenced and written to the highest academic standards. As a result I am able to direct students of all ages to these essays with the confidence that they might find something more useful to read on the web than poorly referenced cut and pastes from Wikipedia. Hitchcock and Shoemaker have also produced a volume of cases from the Old Bailey which has been well received and offers students and the general reader another useful overview of the nature of the Old Bailey court and the sorts of crimes and offenders that came before it.(3)

The *OBO* has been an ongoing project initially funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB), the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and the New Opportunities fund. It has recently begun to carry advertisements to help it continue to exist as a free resource for users and these, so far, have not detracted from the content. Many other useful digitised resources (such as the *Burney Collection of English Newspapers* [3], *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO)* [4] or the *Times Digital Archive* [5]) have high subscription charges that are sometimes beyond the budgets of smaller university libraries let alone the pockets of individual researchers or members of the public. The fact that the *OBO* is a free to all resource makes it extremely valuable. In giving talks to local history societies on the nature of crime and punishment

I find that local historians and genealogists are also using the site for their own research.

Thus the *OBO* offers added value to a wide range of users. It has recently added a User Wiki which 'allows users to contribute information on people mentioned in the *Proceedings*, historical background, related source materials, and corrections' and has information for schools and reading lists. This means the site can continually be updated (as it has been since its creation in 2003) as new resources and information becomes available. There are quizzes and source material for both schoolteachers and university lecturers to use. Here are easy to use sections on 'canting' language (underworld slang), referencing, cultural diversity and attitudes towards topics such as prostitution. I have been using the *OBO* site in undergraduate teaching for the past five years and now get students to recreate trials from the proceedings and discuss the themes and issues that relate to the history of crime across the 18th and 19th centuries. The students find it easy to use, rich in detail and fascinating. They enjoy the fact that the trial records have been carefully transcribed (while the original scans are provided for those that like to see the 'real thing', or to check on the occasional misreading the transcription team have made) and so they do not have to try and decipher those long Ss and dense text associated with the period. This could of course be viewed as 'dumbing down' but in this new cyber age perhaps teachers at all levels need to be less hung up on forcing students to read the original and more concerned that they are trying to engage with primary sources – however they are presented.

The *OBO* is also an attractive resource. It contains plenty of high quality images and is presented in a readable font with neat links to content elsewhere on the site. It looks serious without being off-putting for the casual visitor for which the designer, Mark Hadley, deserves credit. In terms of its technical design the site works extremely well and has very clear and detailed information about the digitisation and transcription process with clear acknowledgement of all those involved from the Gale Groups (who had previously published the microfilm collection of the *Proceedings* from 1714-1834) to the Humanities Research Institute (HRI) at Sheffield and the Higher Education Digitisation service at the University of Hertfordshire for their contributions to the project. This gives the careful visitor the opportunity to seek out expertise and advice for similar future projects.

The site won the Cybrarian Project Award in 2003, in recognition of its 'outstanding effort and contribution towards the accessibility and usability of online information via their design' and was a finalist for a British Computer Society Project Excellence IT award, under the category 'Social Contribution'. Clearly the funding it has received has been well spent and no doubt has influenced decision to fund the team's most recent project, *Plebeian Lives and the Making of Modern London*, which will extend the digitisation project that started with the *OBO* to include 'primary sources on criminal justice and the provision of poor relief and medical care in eighteenth-century London'.(4) This should be online by the time this review is published and will hopefully again be a free resource offering a tremendous breadth of material to researchers.

The *OBO* website is highly professional and well designed resource available free to the general public, academics, schools and students of all ages. It is hard to find fault with it but I would like to offer a small note of caution by way of balance. The digitisation of the *Old Bailey Proceedings* (and other similar printed sources such as newspapers) presents historians and others with some serious issues that need to be considered.

First, the *Proceedings* do not contain all of the trials that took place at the Old Bailey between 1674 and 1913. Nor do the trials themselves offer a verbatim record of what took place in court, both facts that are recognised by the authors of the site and clearly explained. Thus this is a partial record of the workings of the Central Criminal Court throughout the long 18th and 19th centuries. Despite the best efforts of the team to acknowledge this there will always be a tendency for casual users to miss this information and assume that what they are looking at represents the sum total of all trials in London between these given years. Now, one should perhaps accept that all sources are subject to interpretation and often require explanation and qualification before being used: this can of course be provided in the classroom or lecture theatre. However it is perhaps the second issue that concerns me more. The key strength of the site (its free availability and ease of access) means that it inevitably becomes the first point of reference for anyone seeking to research crime and punishment in the period. Countless students and academics have and will continue (as I have

myself) to trawl the site seeking statistics of crimes, details of policing agents, records of punishments and information about stolen property to use in essays and articles for years to come. Does this mean then that other sources will be neglected or that in some way the Old Bailey will assume an importance that is in some ways disproportionate? It has the danger of narrowing the focus of attention to the capital and to the higher courts where the 'Bloody Code' of the late 18th century was practised so dramatically. In reality most of those that experienced the criminal justice system of the 18th and 19th century did so without ever entering the Old Bailey's walls.

As for the digitisation of the Proceedings themselves this should also give some cause for concern about the future of archival material, an issue that I know Professor Shoemaker has himself considered. If we select some material to be digitised and transcribed but leave others in their dusty brown archival boxes then are we engaging in a filtration process that determines what is useful and important and what is not? Will this allow archives pressed for space to dispense with material that is considered unnecessary or will it, to take a more positive view, mean that material can now be stored electronically allowing space for things that might have been discarded? For my doctoral thesis I had a series of microfilms made of the justicing notebooks of the Lord Mayor of London from the 1780s. When I returned to the London Metropolitan Archives some years later and wished to consult the original documents I was directed to the microfilms. Who now reads the pages of the *London Chronicle* or indeed, the printed *Proceedings of the Old Bailey* in their original form? We access them electronically and often in a piece meal fashion – disconnected from the form in which they were originally published. Does this matter? Frankly I do not have an answer to this but I think it is a question worth asking. The digitisation of often delicate material is clearly a positive development in recent years. Material can now be exchanged and accessed across the globe at the click of a mouse but we do run the risk that future generations many never need to don white gloves and experience the frisson of unwrapping a sessions roll or turning the pages of a newspaper from the 1770s. We also need to guard against a tendency for researchers to opt for the easily accessible Old Bailey records rather than try and understand the history of crime from a wider perspective.

However, these criticisms are not really fairly directed at the team that have created the *OBO* project, they are instead questions for those that use it and for the directors of archives and university research clusters across the world. The *OBO* is a fantastic resource with almost limitless potential. With the addition of the *Plebeian Lives* database later this year it will continue to allow us to reconstruct how 'ordinary' Londoners lived through the pages of the Hanging Court and the details of the trials recorded there.

Notes

1. James Drummond, highway robbery, 3 December 1729. Reference Number: t17291203-12.Back to (1)
2. Ordinary's Account, 22 December 1729. Reference Number: OA17291222.Back to (2)
3. T. Hitchcock and R. Shoemaker, *Tales from the Hanging Court*, (London, 2006).Back to (3)
4. <http://www.shef.ac.uk/hri/projects/projectpages/plebeianlives.html> [6] [due for publication March 2010].Back to (4)

Other reviews:
[7]

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