

# 1. Introduction

This is a non-tutor led course that can be completed at your own pace and at a time of your own choosing. We strongly recommend that you complete each module and its component sections in the order suggested, however you are free to move around the course as you see fit. The modules can be accessed via the icons below or by using the *Module Index* on the left hand menu. In turn, each module is broken up into sections. These can be accessed via the arrows or the 'Jump to' drop-down menu at the bottom of each page, or via the lower left hand menu.

The aim of this training course is to equip you with the skills required to build and utilise a relational database for historical research. Creating databases can be a relatively simple process, especially with today's desktop software which is geared to offering help at every stage; and with a little bit of extra effort additional functionality can be built into the 'database application' which will enable it to form the most valuable and powerful of customised research tools. Entering data into the database can be a time-consuming endeavour, but if it is done correctly into a well designed database then the potential improvements offered in terms of information management and analysis more than repays the effort.

This training course is concerned with practical matters – how to use the software to build and employ databases in historical research – and is not overly concerned with the conceptual context of these activities. Therefore, before beginning a database project in earnest for the first time, you may find it valuable to have a look at the [Handbook: Designing Databases for Historical Research](#) which deals not only with the theoretical aspects of database design, but also looks in detail at the specific issues that face historians when using databases.

The handbook also covers activities which comprise the first stage of the 'database lifecycle', the remaining stages of which form the structure of this course, along with the implicit and ongoing testing phase:

- Building the database (creating tables and relationships)
- Using the database to capture information (constructing data entry forms, applying standardisation, using automation)
- Using the database for research analysis (designing and building queries)
- Generating research output (reports, exporting data to other formats)

Before you begin to design and build a database it is essential that you have thought through what it is that you wish to achieve by building a database and what benefits and limitations using a database implies.

*The module was written by Dr Mark Merry, the tutor for Databases for Historians I; and Databases for Historians II.*

## **2. Foreword by the Director of the IHR**

Welcome to Databases Online! This is the first of our new suite of comprehensive online training packages, designed to provide historians of all kinds with the skills they need to undertake research. This database course complements our existing face-to-face training courses, which have been run at the IHR in London for many years. Many historians across the UK and overseas are not able to attend courses at the IHR in person, and so this is a way for you to access IHR training online and to benefit from courses designed and written by members of the Institute's excellent training staff. We hope that you enjoy the course, and we welcome your suggestions and feedback once you have completed it.

*- Professor Miles Taylor, Director of the Institute of Historical Research*

## 3. What to expect from this course

The Building and Using Databases for Historical Research online course comprises an introductory Module that explains in more detail what you need to know when beginning this course, and three principal Modules that take you from building a database through to its management and application for your research.

Each Module will contain various sections looking at different aspects of creation, analysis or management in using databases. You can move between sections by following the orange arrows at the bottom of every page thus



You can also select a section from a dropdown menu at the bottom of the page or from the left hand menu **Module Sections**. Where relevant, links will also be made available in the text that will take you to related material in the course. All links within the main body of text will open in a new window or as a reveal on the actual page.

We recommend that you initially follow the course in a linear way, following each section through the arrows at the bottom of the page. However, there will be times when you will want to cross-reference to other sections.

Each Module begins with an audio introduction and then contains a variety of handbooks, lessons, exercises, and video content. Each section has its own dedicated forum area where you can join other students in discussion of that sections topic.

### 3.1 Duration guidance

#### Length of time needed to complete the course

It is estimated that this course will require at least 40 hours to complete, over a period of time. This does not including the final exercise nor additional thinking time. We therefore recommend that you make available the time necessary to work on this course.

However, the course is designed to allow you to move through it at your own pace and we would expect most students to dip into the course over a long period of time. Once payment has been received you will receive a confirmation email. From that time you will have access to the course for **four months** or until you request a letter of attendance. An extension of this four month period is only offered in exceptional circumstances and at the discretion of the Institute of Historical Research.

#### Expected hours required

It is estimated that this course will require at least 40 hours to complete over a period of time. This does not including the final exercise nor additional thinking time. We therefore recommend that you make available the time necessary to work on this course.

## 3.2 Software Requirements

This course employs *Microsoft Access* as its database software. *Access* is one of many relational database software packages on the market – other examples include *Paradox*, *FoxPro*, various versions of *dBase*, *Oracle* and many other older relics of the pioneering days of computing. It is used in this course for a variety of reasons, but principally because *Access* is both flexible and powerful enough for most historical research purposes,[1] and because it is the database software most commonly supported by academic institutions. There is also a very large body of help in terms of tutorials, forums and reference resources available to historians wanting to learn about various features of the software.

As you work through the course you will see a number of screenshots of *Access* ‘in action’. These screenshots have been taken from *Access 2010* but you will be able to use any version of the software from *Access 2003* onwards for the practical exercises (although what appears on the screen may look somewhat different from the images and videos in this course). There are lots of versions of *Access*, with a new version released almost every other year in the recent past, and this is something to bear in mind if you want to move your *Access* database between computers. Generally speaking there are more tools and more powerful functionality to help the user in later versions, and if you use these in the construction of your database, then you might encounter problems if you try to use your data in an older version of the software, or if you share your database with someone else. There are ways and means of getting round this problem, but the best solution is to avoid the situation altogether.

The file suffix for Microsoft *Access* files depends upon the version being used. For *Access 2007* and later, the file will be called xxxx.accdb. For earlier versions the file will end with xxxx.mdb. Whilst an *Access* file is open and in use, a temporary file will be created by the software in the same folder as the database file which will have the same name as the latter but will end with the suffix xxxx.ldb. This file will disappear once the database is closed. It is very important not to mix up the two files – the actual database (‘exciting\_database.mdb’ or ‘exciting\_database.accdb’) with the temporary file (‘exciting\_database.ldb’) – as this will likely lead to considerable confusion!

One thing to bear in mind is that Microsoft *Access* currently only runs on the Windows platform, meaning that if you are a Mac user you will not be able to run the software without jumping through a number of hoops, some of which can be somewhat complicated (such as running emulator environment software, or using ‘bridging’ software). However from *Access 2010* it is possible to use an *Access* database for analysis – although you will not be able to create one – through the functionality of Microsoft *Excel*, by importing tables from an *Access* database and then using *Excel*’s tools. An alternative approach is to install Mac OS database software, of which there are a number of candidates: perhaps the closest to the look and flexibility of *Access* (called *Base*) can be found within the free cross-platform Apache *OpenOffice* software suite.[2]

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[1] There is one context in which *Access* is less suited to historical research projects, and that is where the database is to be used as a platform for online data delivery. Other software packages handle the ‘online’ aspect of these types of projects better, although that is beyond the scope of this course. It should be noted however that even in these projects *Access* is often used in the data entry stages before the data are then exported to other software.

[2] <http://www.openoffice.org/product/index.html>

## 3.3 Letter of attendance

At the end of the course you will have the option to request a letter of attendance. It is important to note that this letter only proves that you have registered for this course with the Institute of Historical Research, not that you have completed it or obtained a grade or credit. By registering for this course you acknowledge that the letter of attendance does not constitute or convey academic credit or successful completion of a course run by the Institute of Historical Research. The letter of attendance is available at any time upon reception of payment, however, once requested you will only have access to the course materials for a further two weeks or until the four month period is over.

## 3.4 Final Exercise

The final exercise is an optional element of the course where you can test what you have learnt. The exercise will take you through the entire process of building and using databases. Once submitted the exercise will be checked by a member of the research training staff at the Institute of Historical Research and short feedback given. It should be noted that the provision of this service does not constitute in anyway tutor participation in the online course and additional advice will not be possible.

## 3.5 Grades

Throughout the course are a series of quizzes and lessons for which you will receive a score. These scores do not count towards any kind of qualification or credit and are there solely for your own information. If you wish to check your grades you can do so from the **Settings** menu on the bottom left column; you will also be offered the opportunity to view grades at the end of quizzes and lessons.

## 3.6 Print options

Sometimes you might find it easier to print off parts of the course. Any page can of course be printed through your browser options, but the handbooks offer you an easy way to print either a chapter (i.e. one page) or an entire handbook in one go. You will find this option on the left hand menu whilst browsing any of the handbooks in this course.

## 3.7 Accessibility

If you would like to increase or decrease the size of text on the screen you can do this from the **Accessibility** option on the left hand menu. From this menu you can also change the colour of the browser window and activate an additional toolbar (the ATbar) which gives you additional options including text-to-speech.

## 3.8 Group sections

The Group area provides you with a profile. You can, if you wish, use these profiles as a social networking opportunity, building friendships with others on the course. You can also interact with other students on the course forums. Throughout the course you will be encouraged to make use of these spaces to discuss with other students the various topics that are covered and any problems you have come up against in your own databases.

## How to register

You will need to have a registered account with the History SPOT platform before you can register for this course. From the Databases for Historians Online home page you can select the registration option and follow the instructions.

**[Register for this course here](#)**