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Seek and ye shall find

An interactive web database of Anglican clerics helps out historians and amateur genealogists

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Ecclesiastical history is not, at first glance, a topic naturally associated with the web. Yet a pioneering web database is taking shape that whizzes church history smartly into the 21st century. The Clergy of the Church of England database (CCEd) aims to provide a constantly updated digital record of the identity and career of every Anglican clergy man in England and Wales over three centuries, from the Reformation to the start of the Victorian age.

The database, so far featuring over 105,000 "clerical CVs" and counting, is intended to establish the first clear picture of one of the most important professions, filling gaps in church history and providing a resource for academics, amateur historians and genealogists. Along the way, it is shining a light on a host of extraordinary individuals: characters to emerge include James Mayne, campaigning 19th-century curate of Bethnal Green and unlikely ancestor of the actor Patsy Kensit, and the less dutiful Richard Thursfield, vicar of Pattingham, who was reportedly "frequently seen lying in the roads in a state of intoxication".

The project, conceived 12 years ago, might seem an unlikely marriage of the latest technology and a somewhat stuffy subject, acknowledges Arthur Burns, history professor at King's College London and one of three historians collaborating on the scheme. "We have always been seen as the most traditional types of scholars, very archive-heavy historians," Burns admits cheerfully. "Ecclesiastical history is often seen as a musty, old-fashioned discipline. But this has helped bring out our non-tweediness."

The CCEd is, indeed, at the cutting edge of "digital humanities" – the bit of the academic Venn diagram where computing and history (and its fellow humanities disciplines) meet. Information gleaned from ledgers piled in county record offices has been repackaged in a slick, searchable online database, capable of constant revision and featuring sophisticated software that can highlight the source and reliability of each bit of data.

Users can search by name, parish or other elements, digging down into the history of a particular parish, seeking out a clergyman ancestor, exploring an issue such as the unexpectedly high number of female patrons, or studying trends such as clerical migration around the country. The sheer accessibility of the web-based data is, for Burns, one of the great attractions, though not all academics share his enthusiasm:

"Some people discouraged us – they felt this was not proper scholarship. They thought it made research too easy." Such criticisms were less about the need for academic toil, he adds, than a fear that conclusions could be drawn too lightly from the web without a full understanding of context.

The benefits of free access easily out-weigh the drawbacks, according to Burns and his colleagues, Professor Kenneth Fincham, of the University of Kent, and Reading University's Professor Stephen Taylor. Aside from the kick the three get from turning their dry subject outwards, interactivity lets local historians and genealogists add to or correct material. A web resource can be constantly amended, doing away with clusters of errata slips.

Dust busting

The team originally envisaged a far less ambitious CD-rom of clerical careers. But with persuasion from computing colleagues, and a £500,000 grant, the historians opted for the web, starting work in late 1999. The team first established a set of documents identifiable in every diocese in England and Wales, which could be combed for clergy. The task was not easy: before the establishment of Crockford's directory in the mid-19th century, recorded details of clerical careers were haphazard and local. The team visited more than 50 record offices across the country, blowing the dust off vast ledger books filled in by long-dead diocesan officials.

With the documents settled upon, Burns and his colleagues turned to staffing, recruiting around 100 skilled volunteers, spread across all 27 dioceses of England and Wales. Schoolteachers, archivists, squadron leaders, ex-MI6 cryptographers and professional genealogists (but, curiously, few vicars) joined the project, uploading their results into a master database at King's.

Over five years, their labours produced over 1.5m records of clerical appointments, ordinations and resignations between 1540 and 1835. Each chunk of information is cross-checked by Burns, Fincham, Taylor and two research assistants. They then "construct" individual clergy by collating all the records believed to belong to a particular person, merging and adapting along the way as it emerged that two John Joneses, for example, were the same cleric popping up in different parts of the country.

The team found a further gaping hole in ecclesiastical knowledge – no reliable list of parishes existed either. They had to create one and then add in the chapels, jails, workhouses, towns, ships, schools and individuals to whom clerics might also be attached, a journey that extended beyond England's shores to America and the colonies, to Riga and Constantinople.

With the first tranche of information in place, the database was launched in 2005; the latest version is newly live. Almost 10 years after work began, the database is still continually updated, but the information is now sufficiently clustered for pictures and patterns to emerge. One early conclusion is that, though the Church of England was the single most important employer of educated men in England and Wales during the period covered by the database, there were fewer clergy than has been assumed, partly because clerics often held more than one post at a time (the poet George Crabbe was ordained in Norwich, then beneficed in Dorset, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire, apparently with little free time for poetry). This trend – often criticised – will be

scrutinised to determine whether peripatetic clerics might have served a number of parishes perfectly effectively.

Female patrons

A myriad of other topics await: the number of female patrons who have emerged from the research has overturned previous thinking, while the scale of clergy turnover during some periods and levels of clerical education will also come under the microscope.

For all the light the database sheds on four centuries of ecclesiastical history, its true significance may be its role in opening up the raw material of scholarship to the widest possible audience. "This is part of a much broader process of encouraging academics to engage with the wider public," says Burns. "Involving the public in our research and always having a sense of this being a collaboration seems to go along with computer projects. It is very different from the old model of a lone scholar. It doesn't replace lone scholarship, but it has its own peculiar strengths, and does help you set new agendas and questions."

www.theclergydatabase.org.uk

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