

Connected Histories transforms historical research

1 April 2011

Millions of historical records have become more accessible to the public today (4 April 2011). Connected Histories provides a single point of access to a wide range of distributed digital resources relating to early modern and nineteenth-century British history.

Connected Histories brings digital humanities research to a new level by providing integrated access to several key resources, moving beyond simple keyword searching to allow structured searching of millions of pages of text by names, places, and dates.

In the process, at the click of a mouse, researchers can find rich bodies of evidence for virtually any topic in British history; whether royal weddings, parliamentary reform movements, famous criminals, or the lives of plebeian Londoners.

The Connected Histories website is fully searchable and provides access to millions of pages of text, hundreds of thousands of words and tens of thousands maps and images. It incorporates the following digital sources:

- British History Online
- British Newspapers 1600-1900
- Charles Booth Online Archive
- Clergy of the Church of England Database 1540-1835
- London Lives, 1690-1800
- Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 1674-1913
- Origins Network
- Parliamentary Papers
- Printed Ephemera from the Bodleian Library
- Strype's Survey of London

The resource will grow substantially over time as new sources are added. The first update, due in September, will include 65,000 British Library books from the Historic Books Platform, 19th century pamphlets from JSTOR, and abstracts of wills from The National Archives.

Connected Histories was funded by Jisc, and created by academics from the Universities of Hertfordshire, London, and Sheffield. Technical work was carried out at the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Sheffield and the website was developed by the Institute of Historical Research, University of London.

The project used natural language processing to identify names, places and dates in unstructured texts, and combined these with structured databases to create a single resource searchable by names, places and dates, as well as by keywords and phrases. Users can save results in their own workspace and document connections between sources.

Professor Robert Shoemaker, from the Department of History at the University of Sheffield and co-director of the project, said: "Connected Histories represents the next big step in digital humanities research. By enabling integrated searching of diverse electronic resources it will allow everyone conducting historical research to work more efficiently and productively."

Co-director, Professor Tim Hitchcock, from the University of Hertfordshire, added: "Connected Histories creates a one-stop-shop for historical information. It will allow us to search newspapers and trial reports, parliamentary papers and images across fifteen different scholarly websites, at the click of a mouse. In the process it will change how we do research."

Dr Jane Winters, Head of Publications, Institute of Historical Research, said: "Connected Histories marks an enormous step forward for historians of Britain, and will transform the ways in which they engage with the wealth of digital material now available. It is also a model of cross-sectoral collaboration to further the UK research agenda."

Alastair Dunning Jisc programme manager, said: "Connected Histories provides a new type of tool for scholars, not just allowing them to find people, names and places from disparate digital resources, but create intelligent links between them. For Jisc such projects are vital, permitting users to make sense of the rich and copious troves of primary sources available on the web."

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND