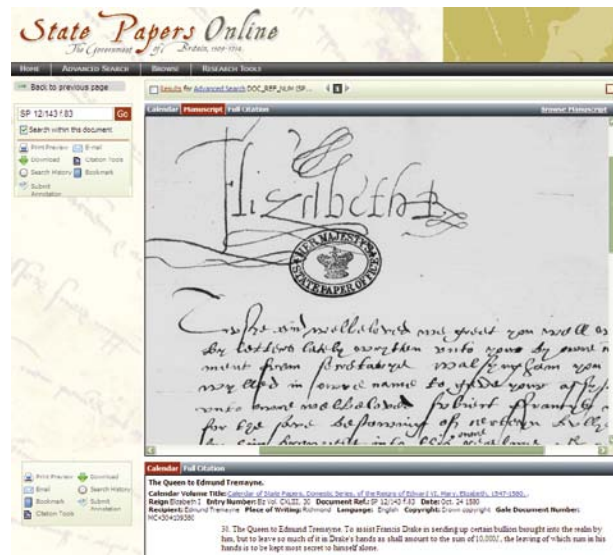

CASE STUDY

State Papers Online transforms early modern historical research at top UK universities



Amongst the first UK institutions to offer students online access to the largest set of government documents from the Early Modern period, the Universities of York and Durham are taking 16th and 17th century historical research to a new level. **State Papers Online, 1509-1714**, from Gale, part of Cengage Learning, offers easy access to the full range of the Tudor and Stuart governments' domestic and foreign activities in a searchable digital format. **Dr John Cooper**, history lecturer at the University of York, and **Dr Natalie Mears**, senior lecturer in early modern British history at Durham University, discuss how this resource is opening up new avenues of scholarship and transforming the field of early modern studies.

The University of York has one of the largest history departments in the UK and a very prestigious research culture, attracting students from all over the world. The university first implemented State Papers Online (SPO) Part I in 2008 and has recently purchased the fourth and final part, completing the collection. Parts I and II cover the State Papers for the Tudor period, while Parts III and IV complete the collection for the whole of the Stuart period. Combined, all four parts create an essential resource for understanding the socio-economic, political and religious issues of the Early Modern period that shaped the future course of Britain and the modern world.

Digital access to irreplaceable original artefacts

Previously, the university held selected printed volumes of the State Papers, some of which were only available as special collections as they were too fragile to be viewed on an open shelf. Staff and students would travel long distances to The National Archives in Kew and British Library in London, to access the originals. Even then, access was restricted as archivists would worry that the acid on peoples' hands would deteriorate the collections and the ink on hand-written manuscripts would be smudged, making some documents unreadable.

Dr John Cooper, history lecturer at the University of York, comments: "State Papers Online is already having a significant impact on research by providing students from undergraduate to PHD level with unrestricted online access to almost three million original historical manuscripts. The manuscripts are linked to fully text-searchable Calendars, which provide a summary of contents in chronological order, thereby reducing the need to consult the originals.

"SPO has removed the cost and burden of travelling long distances to access these documents, as well as the complexity of searching for them. Now students and staff can spend more quality time on developing their research rather than fishing for the information. This can be done from their own PC, considerably speeding up the time it takes to reach the information they need.

"I have just completed a project on Sir Francis Walsingham - government administrator during the reign of Elizabeth I - which I initially struggled to complete as I could not spend all of my time in Kew since I am based in York. However, using SPO I am now able to access all the records from home, compare manuscript records and magnify the ones I want to study in more depth. The ability to access original manuscripts of foreign policy papers has made the foreign policy section of my book possible".*

Raising standards

Dr Cooper explains how SPO can take undergraduate studies to a whole new level, as it helps to improve the research base for dissertations: "What has surprised me the most is second year students using SPO with a great deal of enthusiasm to start to identify their dissertation subjects. They expect to use electronic resources and SPO is very much meeting their requirements.

"During my six years at York, the most interesting dissertation I have marked is from a third year undergraduate that used SPO to trace records on cultural minority groups, studying the

experience of non whites and Irish immigrants and travellers – ‘gypsies’ or ‘Egyptians’ as they used to be called in Elizabethan times. It is very difficult to research this topic as gypsies rarely left records in their own voice. However, with SPO, it is possible to trace official attitudes, such as what the government thought of Irish travellers moving around, and how and why they worried about gypsies.

“This student made very imaginative and innovative use of traditional and political records, including the ‘Elizabeth I and Acts of the Privy Council’ volume, revealing a new area in historical research that was previously largely unexplored. The advanced skills this student displayed, by going beyond the minimum expectation of reading the Calendars to reading the actual manuscripts themselves, would normally be expected of an MA student, and so helped earn them a distinction”.

Digital archive supports flexible independent learning

Durham University has been ranked third in The Sunday Times University League Table for 2012 and 15th in the QS World rankings of Universities. Dr Natalie Mears, senior lecturer in early modern British history, has been working at Durham University for seven years as part of a 30-strong history department, comprising British, European, American, African and Chinese historians. She explains how SPO supports the changing nature of the way students now work: “When I was a student 20 years ago, we would sit in a library and read through the documents. Now, students are more likely to sit in their room late at night to study; with SPO they can go online anytime and work how and where they want.

“Prior to SPO, students would read the printed Calendars, of which there are only three copies in the library, meaning only three students could access them at any one time. With over 600 students in the history department alone, this presented real challenges. Now, the ability to read the Calendars online means more students can work on the same topic, which is really important because there tends to be pockets of interest in particular topics such as Elizabeth I and women in politics – so many students are after the same resources.”

Training students to read 16th and 17th century handwriting

Dr Cooper goes on to explain the importance of accessing the original manuscripts, not only the Calendars: “We implement training courses for undergraduate and MA students on palaeography to help them with the study of 16th and 17th century handwriting so they are able to read the original documents. There are also online tutorials, available through the online archives. I introduce my MA and PHD students to the SPO site, teach them about links between calendars and manuscripts, and how to interpret them. I explain that there is

more to the manuscripts than writing; there are often other clues. For example, if you turn a letter over you can see the original address and date received, a sentence about whether they thought it was useful or not, and whether it was dealt with. Students can trace the prioritisation of records online, which would be very difficult to do in real Calendars.”

Dr Natalie Mears comments: “Prior to the SPO palaeography tool, I would direct students to an English handwriting book, of which there is only one copy in the library, or to the Public Records Office (PRO) website. Undergraduates are normally daunted by original manuscripts but with SPO they are given tools to easily decipher them, meaning more students can now focus their dissertations on the early modern period”.

Teaching first year undergraduates about how historians researched their stories

Although SPO is mainly used by third year undergraduates and above, first years at York University are also being introduced to it. As Dr Cooper explains: “Using SPO we have built in to our new first year undergraduate programme a series of York-based case studies to teach students how historians have researched the stories they are learning about – this is something they will not have learned at school. We ask students to read important works, compare articles and discuss the relative significance of York based stories. For example, Henry VIII’s visit to York in 1541 came about following the Pilgrimage of Grace rebellion of 1536-7 which generated enormous correspondence – all of which can be found in SPO.

“We encourage first year undergraduates to access the resource, view the calendars and manuscripts and see if they can decipher any of it. This introduces them to the idea of using stories to create historical records and teaches them that not all records are complete. The records that historians used were created for political correspondence and for legal reasons, not just for historians.”

Developing students into young researchers

Dr Mears comments: “Many of my students like studying Elizabeth I and marriage, looking at themes such as fashion and ‘did she control her own image?’ I also encourage them to look into other areas such as the Reformation and Henry VIII.

“One of my students completed a dissertation on the experience of religion change in Calais in the 16th century, focusing on religious change on the periphery border between England and France, where there were potentially different development of ideas. My student was able to go through the Calendar and read the whole document, rather than just the index, in order to glean more details. He got a First, which was helped by his use of SPO.

Dissertations are supposed to utilise original sources, not just Calendars, and SPO facilitates this.

“Students often use SPO to search for key words, as they would on Google, however, they are very receptive to the training we have given them on using proper research paths rather than just key word searchers. This is helping them to develop the skills that a proper researcher would deploy. SPO helps replicate the research process and enables them to discover manuscripts.

“At Durham we encourage students to look at primary sources, even for non dissertation teaching, at levels two and three. We show students original Calendars and manuscripts, we take them to the library so they can see them in real life as well as printing some off from SPO, making them feel more comfortable with the material. SPO helps our students tackle primary sources more confidently and independently. A couple of my students have been inspired to stay on to complete a Masters degree next year as they feel confident they will be able to do real research using SPO.”

Boosting post graduate recruitment amidst cuts in research funding

Dr Mears explains: “SPO has added real value to Durham University, especially for non established academic researchers. It is used by staff and students across the university, not just academics, to influence teaching and learning outcomes. Universities originally thought of SPO simply as a high end research tool but it is more than that.

“SPO has helped us to attract more postgraduate students, who can now access invaluable research material despite being situated hundreds of miles away from the Public Records Office in London. There was huge cross-departmental demand at the university to purchase SPO to help deliver value for money to students and attract postgraduate students. As a result, we have seen an increase in the number of MA and PHD applications in the last three years.

“As external research funding tightens and research grants disappear, SPO opens up access to a wider variety of original sources, helping students to complete their dissertations on a diverse range of topics without needing to leave Durham. Having SPO will also help us to secure external research grants, as it demonstrates our commitment to investing in top research resources. SPO has also been part of Durham’s investment in increasing our status as a top international research university.”

Attracting international students

Dr John Cooper comments: “York is very prestigious on account of its research culture and SPO helps us stand out both in the UK and internationally. For example, we have attracted students from Canada and Taiwan studying PHDs in 16th and 17th century English history – they would not have had access to SPO at their own institutions and they chose us over any other British institution because we have it.”

Advice for other institutions

Both academics agree, the teaching of history in schools and universities has gone through a complete change in the last 20 years, moving away from history that is exclusively dominated by political narrative to other types of history such as social history, for which SPO is invaluable.

Dr Cooper enthuses: “My next research project will be on the history of 16th century Ireland, including Elizabeth I’s colonisation of Ireland. This has to be reconstructed from the English State Papers as the Irish equivalent was blown up by the IRA in the 1920s, so SPO is the main repository available today for the exploration of Irish history.”

He concludes: “We live in austere times and SPO is a considerable investment for a university, however, it is beneficial to have all four parts. SPO, alongside ECCO (Eighteenth Century Collections Online) and Early English Books Online, completes our online access to major early records. SPO has the potential to revolutionise the availability and usability of manuscript records, which are the principal records of the 16th to 18th century. Any university that is serious about recruiting PHD students in early modern British history should consider offering access to these records.”

** The Queen’s Agent – Francis Walsingham at the Court of Elizabeth I, Faber & Faber*

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