

Web provision for medieval studies in the UK : a user's evaluation

James ROBINSON
British Museum

The task of controlling, managing and invigilating academic resources on the web in the UK has fallen mainly to universities and university libraries in particular as a logical extension of their research and bibliographic remit. Quality control and cataloguing skills are essential if the browser is to be directed in a sensible, efficient and productive way. For the purposes of this paper I have restricted myself to the official academic search engines established in the UK to provide links to quality assured sites. I intend to examine briefly their structures and effectiveness under the following headings:

Gateways

Websites

Evaluation Criteria

Gateways

The Resource Discovery Network (<http://www.rdn.ac.uk>) is the UK's free national gateway to internet resources for academics. It basically represents a government-funded consortium of universities and related organizations such as Public Record Offices, Archives, Libraries and Museums. It was conceived in 1999 out of the Joint Information Systems Committee which funds it at a cost of £1.5 million a year, guaranteed funding until 2007. The Strategy Document which the Resource Discovery Network has produced for the years 2004-2007 recognizes the competition it faces from established, non-specialist search engines, especially Google. The way that it hopes to attract researchers away from Google is by offering carefully selected resources which are vetted by subject specialists in partner institutions. Its stated mission is:

To be the resource discovery service of choice and a trusted provider of internet research and training for UK further and higher education.

It aims to address what it terms the 'teaching, learning and research community'. This audience definition is clearly intended to break down the traditional perceptions of higher education and is a symptom of the democratization of education which, in many ways, the web represents. A 'learner' need not, by any means, be a university student. While politically admirable - and certainly politically correct in its inclusiveness, the wider ranging public that this term describes creates certain interpretational tensions in how information should be explained and presented. The Network currently links to 100,000 resources through eight internet-based gateways, termed 'hubs'.

Each hub has a different structure and service:

ALTIS is hosted by the University of Birmingham and deals with hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism.

EEVL is hosted by Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh and deals with engineering, mathematics and computing.

GEsource is hosted by the University of Manchester and deals with geography and the environment.

BIOME is hosted by the University of Nottingham and deals with health, medicine and life sciences.

SOSIG is hosted by the University of Bristol and deals with Social Science, Business and Law.

PSIgate is hosted by the University of Manchester and deals with the Physical Sciences.

ARTIFACT is hosted by Manchester Metropolitan University and deals with the Arts and the creative industries.

HUMBUL is hosted by the University of Oxford and deals with the humanities.

The extensive distribution of partnership which the eight hubs provide

is what the Resource Discovery Network considers to be its inherent strength since no single institution is likely to have the range of expertise required to support all of the topics represented. The final two hubs, *Artifact* and *Humbul* are the ones which concern the medieval studies students.

Artifact (<http://www.artifact.ac.uk>)

The Artifact database describes over 4,000 quality assessed web-sites and aims to supply the best of the web in the arts and creative industries including architecture, art history and the visual arts, which includes museums and art galleries.

Humbul (<http://www.humbul.ac.uk>)

Humbul is the humanities hub with responsibility for history, archaeology and literature. As with each of the hubs, Humbul has its own strategic partners:

1. The Archaeology Data Service at the University of York
2. The Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre at Royal Holloway College, University of London
3. The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, University of Leeds.
4. Senate House Library, University of London
5. Institute of Historical Research, University of London.

Websites

The latter has produced a booklet entitled Internet Resources for History. The addresses it contains have been selected by the Institute for their usefulness to lecturers, researchers and students specializing in history. It was produced originally as a paper publication and is now out of print but it can be downloaded from the Humbul website (<http://www.humbul.ac.uk>). The cost of publication was sponsored by Proquest, an electronic history collections service. The intrusive advertising for Proquest on the cover of the booklet is an ominous sign of the price that some of the free education resources have to pay. The guide is divided into:

Subject Gateways**Learning and Teaching****Data Service and Sets (some of which require a subscription)****Organizations****Archives and Libraries****Primary Sources****Journals and Texts****Bibliographies**

Since my tactic was to conduct a completely random exercise, I decided to access at will a number of the sites that the guide recommends. *Breaking the Seal* is from the *Learning and Teaching* section (<http://www.open2.net/breakingtheseal>) . It is an Open University website which provides an introduction to using historical documents. The Open University is a site-less university which has relied on mail, television and radio for instruction. This means that their intake of students can be very large with a high number of students with disabilities. (10,000 from a total of 180,000). The Open University also prides itself on waiving conventional university entrance examination standards. The internet is obviously ideally suited to the Open University's techniques.

From the Home Page we are invited to chose 6 options:

Domesday**Tax****Military****Church****Legal****Land**

I chose Domesday and discovered that the form the page took was a transcript from a BBC television programme on the value of public records. I clicked on 'Script' imagining that there might be a greater degree of detail on the document but discovered that 'script' referred to the television script and not to the script of the Domesday Book. It is difficult to judge whether the informality of the Open University's approach has been heightened by the use of the web or whether the very poor content standard of the

site reflects a decline simultaneously in broadcasting and education. (The design of it, incidentally, I find quite pleasing). The site is a very static, electronic presentation of a television broadcast. No searches are possible and no real detail is given. In this sense, though it caters for a university undergraduate audience, I would consider it deeply inadequate.

The address for *British History Online* (<http://www.british-history.ac.uk>) is contained in the *Data Services and Sets* section of the Institute for Historical Research's guide. It is a digital library of primary and secondary sources created by the Institute of Historical Research and the History of Parliament Trust. This is one of many collaborations which brings resources together electronically in a way that would have been scarcely possible before the advent of the web. It is a sensible and thorough site which has a very controlled and clear mechanism for accessing its pages. First time visitors are encouraged to register. Registration gives extra benefits such as a personal bookshelf of links to the most useful resources and the use of a split screen facility to compare two documents.

At the top of the home page we are invited to search under:

Places

Subjects

Sources : primary sources and details

Maps

Full text search

I used the full text search to retrieve records relating to the use of seals by women in the Middle Ages. Eight records were found and by clicking on the first (Calendar Roll D) I discovered gems such as the account of John Wittfihe's attack on a woman named Isabella. However, there was no quick identification of passages which described women using their seals. This was undoubtedly due to my search being wrongly expressed, but no obvious search guidance is available on the site.

In its home page, *British History Online* speaks of its commitment to 'promoting these priceless resources for their historical value, cross-searchable, in one place and free of charge'. But free access clearly comes at a cost which undermines the seriousness of the site. I am referring to the Google advertisements which can be seen in the right

reading pane. It is bad enough to be solicited by a link which offers proof that the Pope is not the antichrist without being introduced to a demonic dating agency. It does a serious site little credit to have distracting and ludicrous advertising in its margins. Many of them are animated which causes an additional annoyance.

The National Archives address (<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>) is stored in the guidance notes' section on *Archives and Libraries* section of the guide. Again it represents a collaboration, this time between the Public Record Office and the Historic Manuscripts Commission. The wide, chronological scope of this web-site, as with *British History Online*, makes retrieval potentially complicated. Guidance is offered through the tabs at the top of the page; 'Research, education and online exhibitions' yields a drop down menu which leads to 'Academic Research'. Explanatory notes are immediately available. Among the first of many links is that to the online catalogue which offers additional information on how to search. The search criteria are more specific than with *British History Online*. The search engine includes a date field and the results of a search for 'women AND seals' between 1066 – 1540 was more satisfactory.

Evaluation Criteria

Humbul offers access to many more sites than those cited in Internet Resources for History. A search for Welsh Castles yielded www.castlewales.com. The site, though well-intentioned, is of mixed merit. It does not adhere to the basic evaluation criteria in English offered by Esther Grassian in *Thinking Critically about World Wide Web Resources*, 1995 (www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/help/critical/index.html) and *Thinking Critically about Discipline-based World Wide Web Resources*, 1997 (www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/help/critical/discipline.html). Other authors have produced similar guidelines in English. The most useful is Susan Beck, *Suggestions for Successful Internet Assignments*, 1997 (www.lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/evalsugg/html). Sonja Cameron identifies very much the same evaluation criteria in *Evaluating Internet Sites for Academic Use* (www.hca.ltsn.ac.uk/resources/Briefing-Papers/bp2php).

The strengths of the site are that it offers a database with a brief description of each Welsh Castle; it includes maps and architectural elevations; it provides links to other, creditable sites and it supplies a bibliography. Its weaknesses are that it tends to offer very general rather than detailed knowledge; it includes a number of non-authored

contributions; it is highly personalised and has distracting, trivial graphics.

A much more successful site to be found through Humbul is one which documents pre-19th century Welsh churches (www.cpat.org.uk/projects). It is the result of studies undertaken in 1995-6 and 1998 by the Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust supported by Cadw (Welsh Historic Monuments). It is balanced and offers information in layers, providing a greater degree of detail and more specific geographic and descriptive searches at each stage. Architecture presents a particular problem for the gateways since some architectural sites are catalogued by Humbul as 'archaeology' but, technically Artifact is the hub which has responsibility for it. This can cause confusion and the hubs seem not to be cross-referenced. Consequently, the word search 'Romanesque' produces very different results depending on whether the search is made in Humbul or Artifact. The Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland (www.crsbi.ac.uk) published by the Courtauld Institute at the University of London is to be found in Humbul under 'Archaeology' but not in Artifact under 'Architecture' or 'Art History'. The Corpus is an exemplary resource. The lucidity of its design is matched by the clarity of its search mechanism which is organised alphabetically by county and then by individual monuments. It is also possible to explore by an architectural feature such as 'doorways' and then again by location. The information is non-interpretative, factual, authoritative and comprehensive. Artifact offers few sites of comparable quality. The most disturbing example is *Earthlore Explorations: gothic dreams* (www.elore.com/gothic.htm) which implies that the hubs are not adhering to their founding principle of providing quality assured sites.

The Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture was conceived as a paper archive and developed as an electronic resource which is freely available. The emphasis on free access is one of the distinctive features of the web's educational resources. FAIR (Focus on Access to Institutional Resources) is an initiative led by the Resource Discovery Network to make institutional assets, including the papers published by university academics freely and widely available.

The Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture was conceived as a paper archive and developed as an electronic resource which is freely available. The emphasis on free access is one of the distinctive features of the web's educational resources. FAIR (Focus on Access to Institutional Resources) is an initiative led by the Resource Discovery Network to make institutional assets, including the papers published by university academics freely and widely available. The constraints and costs of conventional publishing have been considerably diminished by

electronic access in the home. The additional freedom and ease of access have made it possible for anyone to be a self-styled authority on any subject. The social consequence of this democratisation of knowledge places us at the forefront of the biggest learning revolution since the invention of the printing press and the production of paper. The challenge is for us to exploit all of the web's undoubted strengths and yet maintain publication standards and learning skills. University academics as well as librarians and archivists must be actively engaged in invigilating the new technologies if this is to be achieved.