



INTRODUCTION

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF OUR CRIMINAL PAST¹

Heather Shore and Helen Johnston²

Our Criminal Past: Caring for the Future is a recently established research network, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which has sought to explore and reflect on the development and future presentation, preservation and dissemination of historical criminal lives and practices. The research that underpins the network, and the work of many of our contributors, has raised significant questions about the ways in which the history of crime should be displayed, transmitted and interpreted in heritage and educational contexts. In particular there has been a lively debate between participants from across the academic, archival and heritage fields, on the most productive, engaging and ethical ways to convey the criminal past to the public. People learn about the criminal past in a variety of settings: in higher education courses and as part of the National Curriculum, in museums and archives, most of which now have dedicated educational resources and departments, and also through their own family history searches.³ It is important then that we seek to understand and interpret the criminal past in relation to broader shifts in social, political and cultural life. The network has started to invigorate the discourse between academic researchers, educationalists, archivists and other heritage practitioners, through collaborative discussions about how those of us invested in history might benefit and learn from shared ideas and practice.

¹ Our Criminal Past is an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research network established by Heather Shore (Leeds Beckett University) and Helen Johnston (University of Hull). The network Twitter account is @ourcriminalpast. The website is at www.ourcriminalpast.co.uk, however this is currently in the process of being relaunched. Please direct any queries to the authors, details below.

² Heather Shore is Reader in History at Leeds Beckett University, h.shore@leedsbeckett.ac.uk. Helen Johnston a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Hull, h.johnston@hull.ac.uk.

³ At key stage 2, where pupils can study 'changes in an aspect of social history such as crime and punishment from the Anglo-Saxons to the present...', https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/239035/PRIMARY_national_curriculum_-_History.pdf

This collaborative approach to crime history has been enabled by the inherent interdisciplinarity of crime history. Thus participants (both academic and non-academic) in the network come from a variety of backgrounds, including history, criminology, education, law and area studies. Indeed, the development of the history of crime during recent decades has consolidated the field as one with fluid boundaries, particularly overlapping with criminology, sociology and law. This reflects the tendency in some UK higher education establishments to develop interdisciplinary working practices.⁴ Collaborations between historians and criminologists, for example, have created new resources and opened up new approaches through which we have sought to interpret and understand the histories of crime and penalty.⁵

Whilst governmental and institutional policy-making remains a key plank of this research, much recent work has revisited the perspective of history from below, with key themes such as identity, gender, and ethnicity often fundamental to the type of crime history that is now being produced. Whilst accounts of individual criminals or small groups of criminals are still undertaken it is perhaps at the macro level that the bigger and broader questions and paradigms are being addressed. Thus, the recent impact of the digital project has enabled historians of crime to explore criminal lives, both individually and collectively through 'big data' in a way that was rarely possible in the past. Significantly, the ability to work across datasets and the enhanced access (through the digitisation of catalogues and holdings lists) to archive collections has meant the new histories of crime increasingly look at offenders and prisoners broader 'lives' rather than simply their criminal lives. Thus the exploration of the digital project and the preservation of (and access to) crime history through the digitisation of records, has been an important theme in the network discussions.

In thinking about the future of the criminal past, another key consideration has been its presentation. Engagement and collaboration with museums, heritage hubs, the broadcast media and their related archives is increasingly becoming a core activity of academic collaborations. New social media is one way in which public engagement has been explored through the network meetings. Hence, the decision-making and priorities of the custodians of

⁴ For example, see the Wellcome Trust funded, 'Harnessing the Power of The Criminal Corpse' (<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/research/projects/criminal-bodies-1>), drawing in academics from the disciplines of history, archaeology, folklore, literature and philosophy.

⁵ See Barry Godfrey, David Cox and Stephen Farrall, *Criminal Lives. Family life, Employment and Offending* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Barry Godfrey, David Cox and Steven Farrall, *Serious Offenders: A Historical Study of Habitual Criminals* (Oxford University Press, 2010). Also the ESRC, AHRC and Leverhulme funded projects, 'The Costs of Imprisonment: A Longitudinal Study', led by Dr. Helen Johnston of the University of Hull; 'After Care: Youth Justice and Its Long Term Impacts, 1850-1945' and 'The Digital Panopticon: The Global Impact of London Punishments, 1780-1925', both led by Barry Godfrey of the University of Liverpool.

the material culture of crime and penal history should be a consideration for historians concerned with our criminal past. The impact of our work is increasingly measured in terms of public engagement. Heritage audiences are one part of this and future collaborations between academics and museums are a significant step in the preservation and presentation of crime history. However, our key audience remains our students, and the transmission of our criminal past to schools, to undergraduate students and to potential students is undertaken in an increasingly diverse and challenging environment. This special edition collects together short versions of some of the presentations given to audiences at the Our Criminal Past events.⁶ Seven of the short articles provide versions of papers originally given between 2013 and 2014, revised in light of the network discussions. Two other articles, by Knight and Ireland, further develop themes raised at the network. Knight's article explores the challenges faced by museum staff in representing documentary explorations of history, and the imaginative responses to their presentation of the criminal past. Ireland presents a personal and sometimes controversial set of propositions arising from his impressions of the discussions raised at the network events.

1 Digital Histories

The digitisation project, as we might call it, has been swiftly escalating within academia in recent years. In 2010 the *New York Times* published a series of articles named, 'Humanities 2.0: The Liberal Arts Meet the Data Revolution', to address the question, 'how digital tools are changing scholarship in history, literature and the arts'?⁷ These articles acknowledged the mainstream arrival of digitisation in our lives. A reflection of how far the digital humanities have evolved can be seen in the large-scale digitisation of primary source materials such as newspapers, court records, and parliamentary committees, which have provided historians with new insights into the place of criminality in plebeian and working-class lives. An example of how effective digital technologies and methodologies are in marshalling this evidence can be seen in the work undertaken by Hamish Maxwell Stewart and his colleagues Matthew Cracknell and Kris Inwood, on the physical characteristics of Tasmanian convicts between 1865 and 1924. As Maxwell Stewart, Cracknell and Inwood point out, the 'elaborate bureaucracy of surveillance', established in Tasmania during the convict era, created highly structured records that were easily convertible into digital format. Because the records contained many observations for the same individual, digital tools enabled the

⁶ The following events took place: Our Criminal Past: Digitisation, Social Media and Crime History, London Metropolitan Archives, 17 May 2013; Our Criminal Past: Educating Historians of Crime: Classroom, Archive, Community, Leeds Metropolitan University, 6 September 2013; Representing Penal Histories: Displaying and Narrating the Criminal Past, Galleries of Justice, Nottingham, 31 January 2014.

⁷ Patricia Cohen, 'Digital Keys for Unlocking the Humanities' Riches', *New York Times*, 16 November 2010.

researchers to piece together individual criminal lives and create statistical time series in order to address questions about conviction histories over time. This work illustrates the important advances made in the handling of 'big data'. It is the bureaucratic format of documents produced on behalf of the criminal justice system, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which make these records so suitable for digitisation. But, as Sharon Howard notes here, historians 'should aim to digitise in a way that most effectively captures the information in a particular source'. Thus, the textual sources such as the Old Bailey proceedings and Ordinary's Accounts which were assembled for the Old Bailey Online, and the documents such as sessions papers, coroners' inquests and settlement examinations, which were collected for the London Lives digital history project, were digitised in a way that would achieve far reaching benefits. As Howard points out, the original Old Bailey resource has had significant impact on subsequent digital history projects. In the digitisation of the Old Bailey Proceedings, a highly versatile resource was created which has had a huge impact beyond the original scope of the project. The Old Bailey Online speaks to a range of different audiences, from family historians to teachers and to 'Londoners who simply found reading the story of their city's past addictive'.

One of the results of the digital innovation required in order to handle significant bodies of material, such as in the examples described by Howard and Maxwell Stewart et al, is that complex technologies have evolved in order to interrogate large datasets.⁸ One of the implications of this is that academic historians are facing a 'skills' gap in the face of increasingly sophisticated technology. Howard points to the digital skills that researchers need (both current and future) to work with the new forms of digital data, highlighting the importance of 'skilling' beyond a basic familiarity with online sources and digital media. But she also comments on the advantages to be accrued from such skilling, thus learning to digitise can lead to further collaborative and partnership. This is something which has been stressed by Tim Hitchcock in a recent article where he points out that,

The driving force that led to the creation of major resources historians are now reliant upon in order to undertake their day-to-day research and teaching came from beyond the academy, and this has resulted in web resources that have been designed and implemented for other purposes and other audiences.⁹

⁸ Tim Hitchcock, 'Big Data for Dead People: New Approaches to the Old Bailey', paper given at Our Criminal Past: Digitisation, Social Media and Crime History, held at London Metropolitan Archives, 17 May 2013. For a version of the paper see, <http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/2013/12/big-data-for-dead-people-digital.html>

⁹ Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital: Or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot', *Cultural and Social History*, 10/1 (2013), 9-23, 10. See also, Jim Mussell, 'Doing and Making: History as Digital Practice', in Toni Weller (ed.), *History in the Digital Age* (Routledge, 2014), 79-84.

As Howard notes here, it is not enough to simply collaborate with other academics and publishers. Indeed, she argues for the importance of new approaches to sharing and collaborating on research, such as crowdsourcing, which plays a vital role in 'deeper public engagement in cultural heritage and history'. The digital projects discussed here, such as Old Bailey Online, London Lives and the work on Tasmanian convicts, were shaped at least in part by public engagement. Similarly, crowdsourcing with family historians contributed significantly to the Founders and Survivors project, a study of the 73,000 convicts transported to Van Diemen's Land between 1803 and 1853.¹⁰ As *Chainletter*, the project newsletter aimed at a popular audience, noted in April 2012, 'Crowdsourcing is being adopted by more historical projects as a way of transcribing or digitising enormous collections of documents and data'.¹¹ Other types of public engagement which are shaping the future of the history of crime are forms of social media, particularly in the guise of blogs and tweets.

2 Social Media

Several members of the Our Criminal Past network are regular contributors on social media, and have used blogs, wikis and Twitter to promulgate their work. Indeed, Twitter proved to be a valuable tool in establishing the network.¹² Early career academics like [Adam Crymble](#), [Lesley Hulonce](#), and [Lucy Williams](#), have deftly employed social media to both share and publicise their research on Irish migration in early nineteenth century London, the poor law and the workhouse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and Victorian female offenders. Social media, particularly blogging and Twitter, offer new platforms through which academics can reach both their traditional audiences, but also new audiences. As Lucy Williams and Helen Rogers demonstrate here, research-focused blogs have a number of merits. Thus Williams points to opportunities for what she calls, 'virtual collegueship', underlying the emphasis on collaboration in the digital world stressed by Howard, and shown in practice through the work of Maxwell-Stewart et al. Moreover, as Rogers notes, blogging and micro-blogging tools such as Facebook and Twitter form the infrastructure for such collegueship, collaboration and networking.

If the web and Twitter have enabled new forms of networking and collaboration, blogging has other advantages. Williams argues that blogging has actually improved her communication skills. She started her blog, WaywardWomen, as a postgraduate PhD student. Whilst the main focus was originally her doctoral research on female offenders in

¹⁰ <http://foundersandsurvivors.org/>

¹¹ *Chainletter*, issue no.10, April 2012, 11.

¹² The network Twitter feed can be found at @ourcriminalpast.

Victorian London and Liverpool, the blog has organically expanded to reflect new directions in her work since joining the Digital Panopticon digital history project. Importantly, in terms of her development as a researcher, the blog helped her writing skills and enabled her to refine and shape her ideas in a public forum. This is a benefit that has been stressed by other academic bloggers. For example, Matt Phillpott has commented on how liberating such writing can be, taking away the constraints of academic peer review and providing, 'An informal place for research ideas, notes, and thoughts'.¹³ This theme, that social media (and particularly blogging) can make us better historians, is one taken up by Helen Rogers. She argues here how social media has the capacity to make us rethink our sources, 'to view our sources from alternative perspectives, re-present and understand them in new ways, and even to re-conceptualise our relationship with the past'. These are significant claims and both Rogers and Williams offer examples of the ways in which blogging has shaped their work, and the work of others. For example, Rogers discusses the 'performative elements of social media' (hence, writing for a very 'present' and responsive audience) and the reflective writing style it produces. Rogers' experience of blogging has led her to a more creative and imaginative approach to her sources, recognising the importance of storytelling in translating history to a wider online audience. Nevertheless, blogging and other social media tools are not without their drawbacks, as Williams acknowledges. She draws attention to the challenges of intellectual copyright and acknowledgement, and the possible plagiarism of such easily accessible work. Thus she argues, 'the wider, more diverse, and unknown audience garnered by blogs does in some ways make plagiarism more of a risk'. Whilst Williams emphasises the importance of academics being aware to the disadvantages in running a blog, for her the benefits clearly outweigh the former. Another area in which blogging has started to change our experience of how we interact with academic history practice is in teaching.

3 Teaching History

In this special edition, Zoe Alker and Andrew Davies and colleagues write about their experience of using social media and digital sources in teaching practice. Indeed, American academic T. Mills Kelly has argued that digital technology is transforming the ways that students learn about the past, and that the future of teaching

depends on our ability and willingness to accommodate ourselves to the rapidly accelerating, technology-driven cycle of change that is transforming the teaching, learning, research and production of historical knowledge.¹⁴

¹³ Matt Phillpott, *Blogging for Historians: A Best Practice Blog: Academic, Archival and Library History Blogging*, https://bloggingforhistorians.wordpress.com/guide-to-blogging-main-index/uses-of-blogs-for-historians/#foot_note_5

¹⁴ T. Mills Kelly, *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 3.

Over the course of the Our Criminal Past network events the importance of education and the synergies between academics, teachers, archivists and heritage professionals, became increasingly evident.¹⁵ Thus public engagement is most often filtered through an educational lens, whether that is in schools, universities, museums or archives (as we see in Beth Wilburn's article here). A number of network members have talked about the ways in which they blend new technologies, digitisation and new media in working with students and in outreach work with school children and prospective students. This is exemplified in the pioneering work done at Liverpool John Moores University by Helen Rogers and Zoe Alker, and written about here by Alker. Their module 'Prison Voices' develops student engagement with a field trip in which students 'leave the classroom and pound the streets' of Liverpool, exploring the spatial and temporal place of crime in relation to communities' cultural and social experiences.¹⁶ Students were able to visit sites in the community which featured in the local crime histories which they were researching: a former Bridewell on Argyle Street and the nineteenth century Assize Court in St. George's Hall, culminating in a seminar held at the courtroom. Alker writes here about the benefits of using digital and media technologies in this module, in which students are required to develop their digital literacy through a range of assessment practices. As the module has developed students have written research proposals, blogs and wikis using the universities virtual learning environments. From 2013, Higher Education Academy research funding meant that students work could be featured on a website, leading to the innovative PrisonVoices.org. The website not only operates as a form of social media, but is part of the students' assessment process. Thus, students are assessed for research collaboration, part of which involves maintaining the website and disseminating their work. Moreover, it is not only the students who benefit from using the online sources. By using social media, the students showcase the wide range of evidence held by archives that have now been digitised and bring these to a public audience. Thus 'blogging encourages students to write for multiple audiences'.¹⁷

Alker shows how the unparalleled access to digital primary sources is creating a new generation of 'digital apprentices'.¹⁸ In the Digital Histories module taught at the University of

¹⁵ A version of Drew Gray's paper which he delivered at Leeds Metropolitan University (Educating Historians of Crime: Classroom, Archives, Community, 6 September 2013) can be found in Drew Gray, 'Putting Undergraduates on Trial: Using the Old Bailey Online as a Teaching and Assessment Tool', *Law, Crime and History* (2014), 1, 104-113; 106.

¹⁶ Zoe Alker, 'Walking the Streets of Victorian Crime and Punishment', *Journal of Victorian Culture Online*, 22 February 2013 (<http://myblogs.informa.com/jvc/2013/02/22/walking-the-streets-of-victorian-crime-and-punishment/>).

¹⁷ For another example of how blogging can be used in teaching practice see Anissa Ryan Stewart, Jacqueline Marie Reid and Jeffrey C. Stewart, 'Students Engaging in Diversity': Blogging the History of Jazz', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19/8 (2014), 931-942.

¹⁸ See Helen Rogers writing at, http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?page_id=5

Liverpool and described in the article by Andrew Davies, Laura Balderstone and Mark Peel, a similar ethos can be identified. Thus the students are perceived as 'active independent researchers - as producers, rather than passive consumers, of knowledge'. This module is built on the growing awareness of the possibilities available from the greater access to historical sources; which have transformed the possibilities for undergraduate researchers. Whilst the special subject and dissertation at undergraduate level have always encouraged students to engage with primary research, the advantages of quick access to thousands of records of individuals mean that students can direct and shape original research quickly and as (increasingly) active researchers. On the Digital Histories module, students are encouraged to gain a much deeper understanding of the research process, and a high level of student autonomy and reflective practice is emphasised. Small groups of students are taken through the research process; they are required to devise their own research topics, identify goals and challenges in the research, collect their own primary sources and relate their findings to secondary literature. Both the modules described by Davies et al and Alker seem to provide the students with a sense of empowerment. As Davies et al note,

Recognising that they are producing cutting-edge work - using their own original research to respond critically to the findings of established scholars - they increasingly see themselves as historians in their own right'.

The classroom is increasingly the site in which academics are able to innovate and experiment with new practices and pedagogies. In contrast, it is museums and archives that have arguably been the most active in developing the presentation of Our Criminal Past to younger students.

4 Presenting Crime and Policing History

The connection with pedagogy remains a key issue for archive and heritage professionals who work with school groups but also other groups (children and adults) in the community. However, other concerns also drive their presentation of the criminal past, including those about resources and funding, the specific role of documents and artefacts in transmitting narratives about crime and social history, and in particular, the tensions between education and entertainment. Hence, heritage organisations are subject to more pragmatic drivers, '...museums are operating in a difficult environment where the visitor is vitally important to these institutions achieving their revenue and access goals'.¹⁹ Commentators have demonstrated how education in museums and heritage sites play a considerable role beyond the classroom. For example, the 'I Pledge' project (run by the Galleries of Justice in

¹⁹ Leonie Lockstone, 'Major Case study: Shape Shifters – the Role and Function of Modern Museums', in Ruth Rentschler and Anne-Marie Hede (eds), *Museum Marketing: Competing in the Global Marketplace* (Routledge, 2007), 61-68, 63.

partnership with Nottinghamshire County Council) introduces 8 to 11 year olds to the contemporary criminal justice system, drawing on the Galleries' resources in visits where the children explore the historic Crown Court, and undertake role-play and mock-trials.²⁰

Other ways in which heritage hubs, educationalists and school children can work together in ways which encourage engagement with criminal, policing and penal histories, but also serve a community function, include the Home Office financed project, Tackling Knives Action Programme, which ran between 2008 and 2011. Beth Wilburn, education officer on the programme, writes here about the problems in negotiating the relationship between heritage, education and crime prevention, particularly in the context of sustaining funding avenues. The Greater Manchester Police Museum and Archives employed Wilburn in her role of education officer, 'to use heritage to reach out to young people in different communities in Greater Manchester, and continue to break down barriers between them and police officers at GMP'. Wilburn used several methods to achieve these aims, visiting young people in their classrooms through outreach work, creating resources for teachers, and providing tours and workshops at the Museum. A key part of the work was getting students to handle historical artefacts, such as uniforms and equipment. Wilburn also conducted a session on gang crime in the Manchester area, which specifically drew historical parallels in areas that had current meaning for these young people. Perhaps one of the most important findings of Wilburn's work was the way in which historical engagement not only benefitted in terms of awareness and understanding about crime and policing, but also led to a greater understanding and interaction between young people and police officers, some of whom accompanied Wilburn on her outreach work.

New ways of engaging with students and young people also shaped 'On the Beat: The Great War 1914-1918' Exhibition, part of the Heritage Lottery Funded project undertaken at Bishop's Stortford Museum, and discussed here by museum assistant Dorian Knight. The exhibition showcased the Museum's collection of policing records, which were donated to the Museum and local archives in the 1990s. The exhibition sought to tell stories about the experience of the First World War in Bishop's Stortford. As Knight comments, 'a policeman's typical day at the time could involve reports of foreign spies by the railway station, the attempted suicide of a returned soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or a theft from the local orchard'. However, the most innovative element of the exhibition was the design and communication of the historical evidence. Thus staff at the museum decided to take the unconventional step of approaching illustration students from Middlesex University

²⁰ <http://www.galleriesofjustice.org.uk/further-recognition-of-the-vital-work-carried-out-at-the-galleries-of-justice-museum/>

to produce graphic novels to communicate the stories found in the policing records. By using the medium of the graphic novel, as well as video and audio and the more traditional display of artefacts, the exhibition appealed to young people, particularly to school groups who clearly responded to the fresh and innovative approach. Moreover, the museum has used its website as a way of promoting the exhibition, with a short blog about the project and a link to the Heritage Lottery Funding projects page.²¹

As the Bishop's Stortford Museum website demonstrates, growing numbers of museums, archives and heritage institutions have some sort of web presence and utilise Twitter as an indispensable tool in reaching new audiences. At the events ran by Our Criminal Past network it became clear from speakers from the heritage sector, that new media was increasingly central to their public engagement. For example, the Galleries of Justice in Nottingham, the Law and Order Museums in Ripon, and Oxford Castle, all have websites and Twitter accounts.²² And, as Adam Crymble has argued, archives have also been savvy to the digital revolution. Thus he notes that a 2005 study by the National Archives, 'revealed that genealogists visited the PRO website seventy-two times more often than on-site visits'.²³ Such websites have become virtual archives, sitting alongside or working in commercial partnership with companies like Findmypast.co.uk and Ancestry.com. Whilst there has been some disquiet about the commercial gate keeping of such public records, the original records (or microfilm copies) are available to consult at the archive, and most regional archives and local studies services have free access to commercial genealogical websites.²⁴

In the final article in this special edition the legal historian Richard Ireland provocatively takes an aim at the complacency of historians of crime. In a lively and informal piece, he presents a series of propositions problematising some assumptions that he sees as underlying the digitisation of criminal justice records. These include the dominance of research on serious crime, the privileging of modern (post 1750) criminal and penal history, the tendency to read history through a teleological lens, the focus on change rather than continuity, and on urban rather than rural experience. The network events, and this special edition, provide Ireland

²¹ For the museum blog see: <http://www.rhodesbishopsstortford.org.uk/museum-news/>. For further detail about the project see: <http://www.hlf.org.uk/our-projects/crime-homefront-policing-bishops-stortford-during-first-world-war>.

²² See the following websites: <http://www.galleriesofjustice.org.uk>; http://riponmuseums.co.uk/museums/workhouse_museum_gardens/; <http://www.oxfordcastleunlocked.co.uk> and Twitter accounts: @GOJMuseum @riponmuseum @OxfordCastle.

²³ Adam Crymble, 'An Analysis of Twitter and Facebook Use by the Archival Community', *Archivaria*, 70 (2010), 125-151, 127.

²⁴ There is a useful discussion in Barry Godfrey, *Crime in England, 1880-1945: The Rough and the Criminal, the Policed and the Incarcerated* (Routledge, 2014), 94.

with a chance to address and rail about these issues in an unorthodox way, one that is personal and humorous, but one that also transparently demonstrates his engagement with critical review, via the editors and our reviewer, who offered correctives to some of Ireland's propositions. Ireland's response, complete with his comments, is presented here in the spirit intended by the author, of openness and its discursive form. Whilst readers will form their own opinions on the points of debate, the chance to engage with the writing process actively is one that we would encourage, and indeed we would welcome further responses to this piece and to any other of the articles presented.²⁵ Our aim, both in the Our Criminal Past network events and through the publication of this special edition, has been to foster discussion, the sharing of experiences, to seek and build on exchanges and collaborations between academics, heritage and museum staff, and those working in education, in universities, schools and museums. By sharing their ideas, practices and experiences in the articles that follow, we hope that readers will also contribute to the on-going intellectual and cultural investment in our criminal past.

²⁵ We recognize how recent debates about the process of academic intellectual production have come under the spotlight. For example, see the website established by Tim Hitchcock and Jason Kelly from 2013, <http://www.historyworkingpapers.org>, an open peer review system for the humanities.