

Web Databases for Late Medieval Social and Economic History: England's Immigrants and the Overland Trade Project

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Several large projects focusing upon the social history of the late medieval period have come to completion in the past few years, two of which have culminated in the publication of online resources as their main outputs. The arrival of these resources at the same time offers some intriguing opportunities to consider the ways in which projects are delivering the results of their research in ways that aim both to disseminate their work in an accessible way for students and the wider public, and to make their data available for other historians. The differences, and similarities, in the ways in which the projects have tackled the possibilities and challenges of online publication provide an opportunity to reflect on the state and future of digital resource creation in the humanities.

The [*England's Immigrants*](#) [3] project set out to record and analyse evidence for migration into England between 1330 and 1550; run by Prof Mark Ormrod at the University of York, it was funded by the AHRC from 2012–15. The remit of the project was broad: examining who the migrants were, where they came from, what rules they had to follow, and their cultural impact. The period studied is largely framed by the records of migration generated by the English royal government, such as letters of denization, which recorded the payment of fees and the swearing of oaths by migrants in return for near-citizen status, which were recorded from the mid-14th century in the Patent Rolls. The bulk of the project's material, however, is drawn from the records of the Alien Subsidy: a unique taxation collected semi-regularly between 1440 and 1487. The subsidy was essentially a poll tax, payable by all foreign-born adults, at differential rates for householders and non-householders. The lists generated in connection with this taxation have yielded a dizzying 55,000 of the 65,000 names recorded in the database.

It is important to note that the *England's Immigrants* database records names, not people. Given the immense number of records, and relatively small ranges of names recorded amongst many of the migrant communities (e.g. 1,697 records with the surname Johnson) and the use of toponymic surnames by the English clerks who compiled the records (1,904 records with the surname Frenchman), the project was

justified in the decision not to make any attempt at nominal linkages between individuals from the various taxations, or indeed between the subsidies and denizations. This is also a reminder that while the data is superficially presented as a unified database covering the full period, it might better be conceived of as a collection of many discrete datasets, as not only are the data provided from the (relatively socially exclusive) letters of denization very different to those from the (ostensibly democratic) subsidies, but each grant of subsidy was governed by very different rules, including eligibility for groups such as the Irish and those from Normandy. Variations in local recording practices were just as significant: some fastidious local Justices of the Peace made real efforts to record surnames accurately along with names of wives and servants, while others left out these details, or repeated lists from year to year. Cumulative totals drawn from such disparate data are therefore of limited significance (not least as the subsidies were granted irregularly), as indeed are longitudinal, and even geographical comparisons when very different criteria may have been applied in each circumstance.

The project team were clearly aware of these inconsistencies and exceptionally thorough documentation is provided for the alien subsidies. Sadly hidden away under 'background', then 'sources', then 'alien subsidies', then by region, there are thorough descriptions of the survival and administrative quirks of each individual county's tax returns. For example, the 1452 return for Cambridgeshire is noted as being 'a fiction' because the names returned, the names of the Justices of the Peace administering it, and even the (consequently incorrect) day of the week, were identical to that of 1451: only the year was changed. These kinds of administrative shortcuts and deceptions are distressingly familiar amongst all kinds of late medieval financial and governmental records.

The *England's Immigrants* documentation is wonderfully comprehensive and equips the reader with the requisite pinch of salt with which to interpret the records. However, this source criticism is buried away in a distinct section of the website, and even though search results link back to their source documents and other individuals recorded in the same document, offering an admirable degree of contextualisation, there are no clear links to the appropriate source criticism. This is somewhat of a missed opportunity, and, to use the Cambridgeshire example again, it would be very easy for the casual reader or student to look at the data for mid-15th century Cambridge and conclude that there was remarkable stability in the alien population, when it was in fact 'a fiction'. Another aspect of the website's excellent editorial material is a broad catalogue of blog-style 'Individual studies', offering a range of fully-researched case studies, from county-wide summaries to stories of individual people, both powerful and ordinary. These studies provide useful inspiration for how researchers and students might make use of the often quirky and inconsistent data in their own work in an appropriate way.

The core of the *England's Immigrants* website is a unified search and browse engine, allowing all elements of the dataset to be integrated in a single process. Inevitably the homepage has a basic 'search' box, coupled with an intuitive slider to restrict the time period. However the website's design steers visitors into using the 'Advanced search' tool which offers the opportunity to refine searches by virtually all criteria, including location of residence and of origin, precise years and perhaps most usefully, document type, such as letter of denization, naturalisation, tax assessments and others. The forename and surname search options employ a very effective 'fuzzy' search method to include variant spellings, which is particularly important for these sources. Occupations can be searched by selecting from a list of terms extant in the database, which are helpfully listed with categories that can also be selected as search criteria, although the layout of the form does not make this immediately obvious. The summaries returned from a search can be opened through into full page reports including all information on a name, including links to the source document, and occupation, which is necessary as the fields included in the summary cannot be customised, and do not, for example, include occupation even when that has been used as the search criteria.

More useful than the search function, I would argue, is the browse tool. Given the very different nature of the various types of record contained within the database, beginning your exploration of the data by defining the type of record that you wish to explore, and even the year of the tax collection, in conjunction with reference to the source guides, will actually allow researchers to avoid falsely 'comparing apples with

oranges'. Having constructed your search query, each of the criteria can be instantly depicted as a bar or pie chart, or even a shaded map, all of which can be downloaded as CSV spreadsheets or as image files. This function is not only a useful way of quickly understanding the information, but also serves as a 'smell test' to remind the user to consider the particular characteristics of sources for particular years or places: why were three times as many construction workers recorded in 1440-1449 than in 1450-1459? All in all, *England's Immigrants* offers a wonderfully comprehensive set of navigational tools to explore the copious data, as well as the documentation to successfully make use of it, even if the lack of integration between the two could prove problematic to those who do not take the time to fully understand the material they are presented with.

The [*Overland Trade Project*](#) [4], run by Prof. Michael Hicks at the University of Winchester, also published a website during 2013, which has many similarities to *England's Immigrants*. *Overland Trade* was a gradual project which, over several years, transcribed and digitised many of Southampton's unique Brokage Books. Southampton charged tolls on goods leaving its walls by road, as well as by water, and recorded these in a comprehensive set of accounts which survive for 38 years from between 1430 and 1540, 12 of which, sampled from across the period, have currently been digitised. The books record each cart leaving Southampton through the northern Bargate, including the name of the carter and the cart's owner, its destination (required to calculate the toll of brokage, which was charged by distance) and its contents (required to calculate petty custom, if not already charged when the goods arrived by sea). Even carts owned by citizens of Southampton, who were exempt from most local tolls, had to pay the 1d pontage toll, meaning that the records ostensibly constitute a complete census of goods leaving the city by cart (if not by packhorse or river boat). As such these records are both utterly unique for an English city, and remarkably consistent, allowing economic historians a window into the otherwise hidden world of internal trade in late medieval England. In addition to the guide and source details on the website, the project team have recently published a large format book which explores many of these thematic questions.⁽¹⁾

The primary navigation tool for the *Overland Trade* website is an innovative map interface. The main website has many tabs offering detailed contextual information, including details of the individual manuscripts consulted, a glossary and even a full PDF handbook to the website which also explains the structure of the underlying database. However, it is the 'Interactive map' button which provides access to the data. Users are presented with a navigable map populated with dots sized proportionately to the number of shipments to each settlement. Clicking on the points on the map opens a window with interactive pie charts detailing the commodities carried there, and bar charts recording the quantities in each of the included annual brokage books.

The control panel offers a time slider to limit the years included in the data as well as search boxes to explore commodities, destinations, and even carters. By combining these options queries can quickly be constructed to explore such questions as which carters travelled to which destinations, where different commodities were taken, which commodities dominated the traffic to particular places; and any combination thereof. Crucially the search panel also offers a view of 'destination unknown' shipments; even with this most systematic of medieval sources there are place names that cannot be identified, or were not recorded, which could otherwise fundamentally undermine a map based interpretation. For example only one shipment of oysters was recorded to Salisbury, but 161 shipments of oysters left Southampton with no stated destination, representing 61 per cent of all fish shipments with no destination; a reminder that while the map is an excellent way of navigating most of the data, it must not be used uncritically. The search bar also includes small icons giving access to downloads of the results of the current search as either CSV spreadsheets or KML mapping layers for Google Earth or Geographic Information System software for further analysis. These options offer an excellent compromise between ease of use to browse the patterns of Southampton's trade, and offering a means for a researcher to quickly obtain any particular full body of data.

The *Overland Trade* and *England's Immigrants* websites both offer exceptional new insights into the social and economic history of the late medieval period, and should prove invaluable as innovative and accessible resources illuminating the vibrancy and complexity of 15th- and early 16th-century English society,

especially as a teaching resource, as well as a reference for all manner of future research. Despite the differences in the complexity of their source material, both projects have tried to deliver their main outputs via web publishing in a way that clearly balances accessibility and ease of discovery for casual users with access to detailed data and contextual information for serious researchers. It is particularly notable, and welcome, that both websites, the development of which was contracted out to the Humanities Research Institute at Sheffield in the case of *England's Immigrants*, and the Southampton GeoData Institute in the case of *Overland Trade*, offer interactive charting and data downloads. However, I note with regret that neither project appears to have yet lodged their data with the UK Data Archive; given the inevitable obsolescence of all web technologies and high costs of updating websites, once their originating projects have ended and funding is no longer available the long term availability of the data cannot be assured without formal archiving.

The differences in the two project's approaches to search and discovery of their data prompt some deeper considerations. Online publishing, and indeed any database recording, of medieval records, which inevitably include internal inconsistencies and differences between local and individual record keeping practices, raise some fundamental challenges. By transcribing a record from the unique context of a manuscript to the concrete columns of any database or spreadsheet, nuance, imprecision and administrative context are inevitably lost. The specialist historian is trained with the contextual knowledge and experience of source criticism to consider the necessary caveats to use these sources. Digitisation and online publication democratises access, but in parallel creates the challenge of considering how the contextual information can also be made equally prominent and accessible. Both websites considered here contain considerable contextual commentary, although it is considerably more prominent on the *Overland Trade* website.

The fact that the *Overland Trade* website encourages users to browse the data, rather than presenting them with a prominent 'search' function, encourages a more sympathetic engagement with the records on their own terms. While the ubiquity of Google has encouraged everyone who uses the web to think in terms of search as the default way to navigate information, this is far from always being the best way. The number of cases where a researcher will want to (and be able to) find a specific named individual in the *England's Immigrants* database will actually be very limited: most researchers will want to look for patterns in migration by different nationalities, or occupations, or places of settlement. To answer these questions a page of search results combining material from different sources can actually be very misleading, but a browsing approach encourages users to engage with the records within their own contexts. Web resources for history appear to be most successful where they prioritise a user workflow that suits the sources under consideration and the questions that can reasonably be asked of them, and emphasizes their structure and context.

Notes

1. *English Inland Trade 1430–1540: Southampton and its Region*, ed. Michael Hicks (Oxford, 2015).
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See also review by author forthcoming in *Economic History Review* (November 2015).

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