

## UK Parliamentary Papers: House of Commons

**Review Number:** 2048

**Publish date:** Thursday, 19 January, 2017

**Date of Publication:** 2015

**Publisher:** Proquest

**Publisher url:** <http://www.proquest.com/products-services/House-of-Commons-Parliamentary-Papers.html>

**Place of Publication:** Ann Arbor, MI

**Reviewer:** Kate Wilcox

The parliamentary papers of the UK are one of the most important sources for the history of the UK and its former colonies in the 18th and 19th centuries, in their original form a series of thousands of printed reports. Chadwyck-Healey produced a microfiche edition of the 19th-century *House of Commons Sessional Papers* in the 1980s which together with other material became the basis for the online *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers* in 2005. In November 2015 ProQuest released a new platform for the online version, renamed *UK Parliamentary Papers*, and the older version was switched off in autumn 2016.

The *UK Parliamentary Papers* 'product suite' is part of the ProQuest Government platform, and the name change from *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers* was made to allow incorporation of the new module *House of Lords Parliamentary Papers*, though each is available by separate subscription.<sup>(1)</sup> The *House of Lords Parliamentary Papers* is the first digitised version of the 19th-century *House of Lords Papers* created from the collection at the National Library of Scotland, launched in late 2015. It is outside the scope of this review, but for subscribing libraries would be cross-searchable.

The sources of the House of Commons content are:

- The microfiche edition of the 19th-century *House of Commons Sessional Papers* together with Peter Cockton's thematic index.
- 20th-century material microfiched and later scanned from the official record.
- 18th-century *Parliamentary Papers Collection* from BOPCRIS covering 1688–1834 and incorporating *Journals of the Lords and Commons*, *Private Bills*, and *Pre-Hansard Debates* alongside the *Sessional Papers*.
- *Hansard* from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords for 1803–2005, using the publically available XML files produced by the Hansard Digitisation Project.

The broad scope of the content means that the resource is used by a wide variety of researchers, ranging from parliamentary history specialists to those investigating particular subjects with little knowledge of parliamentary history. They will include people used to the print and microform versions of the material as well as those using parliamentary material for the first time. The site describes its value across the disciplines, in 'departments as varied as Engineering, English, and Social Policy'.<sup>(2)</sup> It has therefore been a huge job to design an interface that will meet everyone's needs: simple to use, providing advanced search options for those who need it, and providing enough guidance and context for researchers not familiar with the material.

## Search interface

The ProQuest website lists a range of improvements that have been made to the new platform.<sup>(3)</sup> The site is designed to have ‘faster, more intuitive searching’. The search interface is cleaner than the older version, offering on the landing page one search box which searches all fields. When using the initial search box, subject terms beginning with the same letters are offered as the user starts to type, useful in some situations. The interface is standard across other ProQuest resources. The Advanced Search form allows combinations of terms, searching different fields, limiting by different parts of the content and collections, and limiting by date and parliamentary session.

Three other search options appear on the landing page. These are under a heading ‘New to *UK Parliamentary Papers*? Here are some useful starting places’. The ‘Command Papers by Number’ search form is helpful if you have a precise citation for a parliamentary paper and gives useful examples. The ‘Search for Debates’ form is similar to the Advanced search form, but limits the search to the Debates series (Hansard and the pre-Hansard debates). The ‘Members, Offices & Constituencies’ form allows searching and to some extent browsing through these categories and provides useful reference information. For each Member of Parliament, brief biographical information, their constituencies and parliamentary offices and contributions to Hansard are listed. Although these search options are all incredibly useful they are quite limited within the scope of the parliamentary papers and it would be useful to include here some guidance on subject/keyword searching the papers more widely.

The designers have chosen to offer searching rather than browsing, stating that ‘Usage and focus groups proved that few people use’ the browse functionality.<sup>(4)</sup> The old interface, by contrast, had a ‘Browse’ tab which allowed browsing by year, listed the miscellaneous contents of the 18th-century collection, and included browse options for the subject catalogue and for the listings of members of parliament and constituencies. Usefully, the old browse pages also gave brief guidance to the arrangement of the material.

For someone using the Journals or Hansard it can be useful to be able to browse to an exact month or parliamentary session as that is often the way references are given. This is still possible by leaving the search fields blank, limiting by collection and session and sorting by date, but less easy to find now. I also found flaws in the way that the 18th-century *Journals of the House of Lords* content sorts. The sort by volume and page didn’t appear to work correctly, perhaps because the page numbers aren’t indexed. Sorting by date brings up the material in chronological order but because several entries can appear on a page it means that content is duplicated, making browsing more cumbersome. I also found some gaps in the parliamentary sessions, where the session hadn’t been indexed, meaning that the volume couldn’t be located in this way (for example, vol. 43, 1787–8). For this kind of research it is still more straightforward to browse the material in the printed volumes, and the online resource seems to have taken a step backwards.

Searching by subject terms involves a combination of Peter Cockton’s hierarchical subject index for the 19th-century material and an alphabetical subject list for the 20th and 21st centuries. Both have their limitations. They can be searched together but are constructed on different principles and the subject terms do not overlap closely. There are no subject terms for the 18th-century material, and I couldn’t locate the indexes which were browseable on the old version. Subject searching can be useful, as it is often hard for the novice user to know the terminology used in this type of material, and a later name for something may not have been used at the time. Subject searches are best done in conjunction with other search strategies.

The results are clearly presented. As the titles of the papers often give no real idea of the content, some kind of snippet view of the search term in context would be useful. It is hard to see how the standard default of ‘Sort by relevance’ is useful for most users, and in all the example searches I tried, I found I wanted to revert to ‘Sort by date’ or ‘Sort by volume and page’ (within a particular series) to place the results in chronological order. The relevance sort may be useful for particular kinds of searches, although I couldn’t find any examples where it produced meaningful results. Many users will either want to browse through

them chronologically to follow the progression of the discussion through parliament or narrow by date to find a particular document. Each result includes a link to citation/abstract and permalink, enabling users to keep track of the results of interest and provide proper citations. The permalink is however customised to the subscribing organisation so wouldn't be applicable if the user wanted to share results, cite or use with a different subscription. Using the 'My research' feature it is possible to save searches and results.

It is possible to focus an initial search that has produced too many results by using the 'facets' on the left: narrowing the search by date/parliamentary session, paper series or type, chamber (i.e. Lords or Commons), document type, century/collection, document features, or subject. Helpfully, the sidebar shows at a glance how many results there are in each category. The interface for this is intuitive, and it is easy to add and remove the facets. The search can be modified using the 'Modify search' link above the search box, and it is also possible to search within results.

### **Document view**

The user can choose to see an abstract or the full text of a search result. From the results list, the title can be clicked and a Document view loads. The user has options to Download a PDF, Email or Save bibliographic details, Print or Share the item. Printing doesn't format well from this screen, and the better option is either to print a list from the results screen or print from the pdf version of the document, where available.

The 'Search within' box highlights the search terms, but doesn't work for phrase searching. For example, a search for 'William Hogarth' produces results for all the Williams and all the Hogarths. This makes browsing results harder as it isn't possible to go straight to the searched-for phrase within the document. The old interface had the useful 'orange box' browsing, which although perhaps difficult to navigate for the novice user, provided quick access to the relevant page of the document, and made it easier to see at a glance the context of the phrase within its report or volume. It is also possible to click on Full text – PDF and go straight into a PDF version of the file. This PDF is searchable, but I found it to be not as fully indexed as the full text search, and words that did appear in the document were not coming up using this method.

The platform displays what it calls 'Related news' alongside the search results, but in none of my examples could I see any benefits; it seemed just to display results from the same time period but on unrelated subjects. I also felt that this was confusing to users who might not understand the source of this information. No explanation is given alongside the list, but the help pages reveal that 'Related news' consists of 'newspaper and historic newspaper documents included in your institution's subscription directly related to the key words, phrases, or concepts as the displayed document'.<sup>(5)</sup> Perhaps there is some value in this for particular kinds of searches or documents, or as more metadata is added.

### ***Hansard* material**

The *Hansard* content is based on rekeyed text in XML format rather than scans of documents. This works very well. The topics list displays on left hand side and moves down the page as the user scrolls down, making the page easy to navigate. The new interface comes close to replicating the ease of using the print volumes, useful for certain types of non-specific browsing, easier for scanning through and picking out particular terms, with the advantage of being more easily searchable.

### **Help pages**

The help pages are less easy to find than in the old interface, but people used to ProQuest's platform will know to go to the question mark symbol in the top-right corner. The distinction between 'Help' and '*UK Parliamentary Papers* LibGuide' is perhaps confusing, but both contain useful information covering how to use the resource and explaining the parliamentary material. It is good to see that a lot of the useful guidance on the sources has been moved over from the old platform. Some of the guidance on using the search interface is very brief and could be developed more fully. Much of it is generic advice on the ProQuest interface. While the separation of interface and content is advantageous, it would be useful to have

more guidance on searching this specific type of material. As mentioned by one of the interviewees in a recent study of the *HCPP*, ‘You really need to know what Select Committee or Command Paper you’re looking for. Even to use the search I think you’ve got to have a really good understanding of what actually a parliamentary paper is’.(6)

### Other features and future developments

ProQuest provide an overview of forthcoming improvements to their user interface generally.(7) It is stated that enhancements ‘will initially focus on making the document viewing [and] results display simpler [and] easier to use’ and ‘full text easier to navigate’. The records are available via the Ex Libris PRIMO and ProQuest Summon services and can also be supplied as MARC records. There is also work being done to improve mobile access/ responsive design. This is useful for a resource which is often used for a quick check of context/wording/reference alongside other resources.

Overall *UK Parliamentary Papers* is an excellent resource and it is good to have so much material all in one place. A downside of the new arrangements for libraries is that a separate subscription is needed for the newly digitised House of Lords material. The new interface is attractive and clear, and generally very intuitive to use. Implementing phrase searching within the document preview should be a priority in any further enhancement of the site. Allowing some browsing of the material would help new users to understand the extent of the material and assist users familiar with using the print volumes. The complexity of the parliamentary material available through the resource means that clearly accessible and comprehensive help facilities are essential. In that respect, ProQuest could do more to put contextual help on hand when the user needs it. This would further one of the stated aims of the resource, namely helping students to ‘develop their critical acumen’.(8) All users will find that getting the most out of this resource will take some time and effort in understanding the structure and potential of the sources, but that has always been the case with the UK parliamentary papers. The latest version of ProQuest’s resource is an immensely powerful and wide-ranging tool for research.

### Notes

1. Back to (1)
2. <<http://www.proquest.com/products-services/House-of-Commons-Parliamentary...> [2] [accessed 19 January 2017].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. <[http://proquest.libguides.com/ld.php?content\\_id=16193069](http://proquest.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=16193069)> [3] [accessed 19 January 2017].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. <<http://www.slideshare.net/proquest/house-of-commons-parliamentary-papers...> [4] [accessed 19 January 2017].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Help – Document view – Document page options.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. E. T. Meyer and K. Eccles, *The Impacts of Digital Collections: Early English Books Online & House of Commons Parliamentary Papers* (London, 2016), p. 31. Available online: <<http://microsites.oii.ox.ac.uk/tidsr/case-study/2016-idc> [5]> [accessed 19 January 2017].[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. <<http://www.slideshare.net/proquest/upcoming-proquest-user-interface-impr...> [6] [accessed 19 January 2017].[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. <<http://www.proquest.com/products-services/House-of-Commons-Parliamentary...> [2] [accessed 19 January 2017].[Back to \(8\)](#)

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- [1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/256925>  
[2] <http://www.proquest.com/products-services/House-of-Commons-Parliamentary-Papers.html&gt;>  
[3] [http://proquest.libguides.com/ld.php?content\\_id=16193069&gt;](http://proquest.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=16193069&gt;)  
[4] <http://www.slideshare.net/proquest/house-of-commons-parliamentary-papersmigration&gt;>

[5] <http://microsites.oii.ox.ac.uk/tidsr/case-study/2016-idx>

[6] <http://www.slideshare.net/proquest/upcoming-proquest-user-interface-improvements>&gt;