

Connected Histories: Sources for building British history 1500-1900

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William Payne of Bell Yard was a reforming constable active in the 1770s. The Corporation of London's Collage website shows us an image of a clean and sunlit Bell Yard¹ around 40 years after Payne's death, but British History Online reveals Alexander Pope's description of it 40 years earlier as 'that filthy old place'.² From the *Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser* of 18 June 1774, we learn that, in addition to his duties as a constable, Payne was a carpenter. He is described suing an anonymous 'inhabitant of Cripplegate, builder... to recover five penalties for building a house contrary to the act'. The jury found in his favour.³

Payne's professional exploits also frequently figured in the press. In December of the same year, according to the *Public Advertiser*, he brought 20 prisoners before Mr Alderman Harley at the Guildhall. The alderman refused to hear the cases against them, and nine promptly escaped 'on their return from the justice room'.⁴ In September 1775, Payne wrote to the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* in a personal capacity, revealing strong anti-Catholic sentiments. He signed the letter a 'true-born Englishman, or the Little English Carpenter'.⁵

The London Lives project demonstrates that Payne was more than just a prolific thief taker. In March 1761 he was called to search a house for a murder victim; there he discovered the 'intrails of a human body, viz. the heart part of the liver the lights kidney etc.' He also found concealed 'several pieces of human flesh together with several bones'.⁶ Eighteenth-Century Collections Online offers us a less serious case. In December 1777, Payne testified to the theft of a pig's head from a butcher's

stall. Clearly enjoying his testimony, he noted that, apprehending the thief 'I took up the pig's head with one hand and secured him with the other and took both heads to the stall where the butcher's wife was'.⁷

But such cases were uncommon, and the Old Bailey Online offers us an insight into his day-to-day work, along with a sense of his method. On 23 October 1771, he testified in four cases of petty larceny, all concerned with the theft of linen or silk handkerchiefs. The account of the capture of Edward White exemplifies his approach: 'I observed the prisoner when I was at Guildhall... I suspected what he was about and watched him from place to place, at last I saw him go near the prosecutor, I thought he had picked his pocket; I went up to the prosecutor, and asked him if he had not lost his handkerchief; he told me he had; I followed the prisoner and caught the handkerchief in his hand before he had time to drop it; I found two more in his breeches'.⁸

All of this information is derived from searching for Payne in a range of digital resources which are freely available to users in UK universities (some, like British History Online and the Old Bailey Online, are free to all). Clearly this is now far easier to do than if one had to consult the original manuscripts and newspapers, but it is still a time-consuming and at times frustrating process, involving multiple log ins across different platforms and considerable duplication of effort, for example the repeated refining of search terms. The Connected Histories project aims to break down some of these barriers, knitting together the threads of Payne's and thousands of other individual lives across four centuries of British History

as well as tracing places, subjects and ideas through the sources.

Connected Histories, a collaboration between the IHR, the Universities of Sheffield and Hertfordshire, and King's College London, is one of 11 projects funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) as part of its e-Content Programme. The project aims to create a federated search facility for a wide range of distributed digital resources relating to early modern and 19th-century British history. In the first instance these will include: the 17th-19th Century Burney Newspaper Collection; British History Online; the Charles Booth Online Archive; the Clergy



William Payne of Bell Yard, Reforming Constable, c. 1770.

of the Church of England Database, 1540–1835; London Lives, 1690–1800; the Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 1674–1913; the Origins Network; the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers; and Strype's Survey of London.

Using metadata and other available background information, the project will create a search facility that adapts to each resource (depending on whether and how the data is tagged, and on the text structure) to allow searching across the full range of chosen sources for names, places and dates, as well as keywords and phrases. Background information about the search results will be delivered to the end user, and a facility to save and export search results for further analysis will also be provided. It is also planned to allow users to identify, save and share links between their search results – their individual 'connected histories'.

One of the key challenges for historians, publishers and resource creators in the coming years, now that what might be thought of as the first phase of mass digitisation is at an end, will be to develop and support innovative ways of interrogating digitised source material. A first step is to bring together such material as already exists, quite simply to make it both more visible and easier to use. This in turn will facilitate genuinely new approaches to research, and the identification of novel research questions. Connected Histories will allow users to access a huge range of material, both free and subscription-based, through a single point of entry and in a consistent manner, thereby helping to transform the ways in which researchers engage with the wealth of digitised sources available for this period of British history.

To finish with some figures: in total, Connected Histories will provide access to 14 major databases of primary source texts, containing more than 412 million words, plus 469,000 publications, 3.1 million further pages of text, 87,000 maps and images, 254,000 individuals in databases, and over 100 million name instances. It will be launched at the end of March 2011, and in the meantime you can follow our progress at www.connectedhistories.org

¹ Images of Bell Yard: <<http://collage.cityoflondon.gov.uk/collage/app?service=external/Item&sp=Zbell+yard&sp=863&sp=X>> and <<http://collage.cityoflondon.gov.uk/collage/app?service=external/Item&sp=Zbell+yard&sp=864&sp=X>> [accessed 20 Aug. 2010].

² 'Fleet Street: Northern tributaries - Shoe Lane and Bell Yard', *Old and New London*, i (1878), 70–5 <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=45025>> [Accessed 20 Aug. 2010].



Above: The Iron Bridge, Shropshire.

Below: Excerpt from a statement by Payne from 1761 in which he testifies to having discovered the 'intrails of a human body' in a house he had searched.

Who being upon Oath says that on Monday the 2. of March
Inst. he went by the direction of John Fielding Esq. to the House
of Ann King late of Leicestersfield deceased, and who was then
said to be Murdered by one Theodore Gardelle, in order to
Search for the Body of the said deceased, says upon searching
one of the Bed-chambers belonging to the aforesaid House
he found the Intrails of a Human Body Viz. the Heart, part
of the Liver, the Spleen, Kidney &c, and likewise upon
a further Search in this Informant found ~~in~~ concealed in
the Back-Loft of the said House several pieces of Human flesh
among which was a small piece of Heart, ^{among which was a small piece of Heart,} non produced
together with several Bonds ^{and further says that he also found} among the Ashes in the Garret Chimney of the said House
several ~~black~~ Bones partly burnt, and this Informant
further saith that on the Wednesday following he in company
with one Mrs. Newnes Sister to the deceased searched the
Sawdust Trunk &c belonging to the said Gardelle where they

³ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 18 June 1774 (17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers).

⁴ *Public Advertiser*, 20 Dec. 1774 (17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers).

⁵ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 9 Sept. 1775 (17th–18th Century Burney Collection Newspapers).

⁶ The body was that of Ann King, murdered by one Theodore Gardelles (Old Bailey Sessions: Sessions Papers – Justices' Working Documents, 2 Feb. 1761 – 1 April 1761, *London Lives*, 1690–1800,

LMOBPS450050029 (www.londonlives.org, 20 Aug. 2010)).

⁷ Great Britain, Sessions (City of London and County of Middlesex), *The whole proceedings on the King's commission of the peace, oyer and terminer, and gaol delivery for the City of London ... ([1777]–8), pp. 244–5 (Eighteenth Century Collections Online <<http://bit.ly/bjuMfp>> [accessed 20 Aug. 2010]).*

⁸ Old Bailey Proceedings Online ([www.oldbaileyonline.org](http://oldbaileyonline.org), 20 Aug. 2010), October 1771, trial of Edward White (t17711023-9).