AHRC ICT Methods Network Student Bursary Awards

AHC-UK (Association for History and Computing UK) Conference
Distributed Ignorance and the Unthinking Machine: The Challenges of Teaching History and Computing
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CONFERENCE REPORT

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I am nearing the end of a PhD in the Modern History Department at the University of Birmingham. My major source is a 154-page account book, unpublished and still in private hands, kept by a newly widowed gentrywoman between 1764 and 1769. Its richly detailed entries present a heterogeneous text of some 42,000 words: classification – a real challenge - and the creation of a flexible database have taken a considerable amount of time, but entering of the complete manuscript in its original form has facilitated a range of detailed queries and the exploration of some major themes including status, gender and networks.

I realised when I read the email forwarded by my history department that I needed to have known about the Association for History and Computing-UK when I began my PhD rather than at this late stage. So many points raised in the initial information and at the conference reflect my own experience: patchy provision, training more suited to the social scientist than the historian, the absence of sufficiently vigorous early training in the use of online sources and of specific help – internal or external – for those venturing a little further. This is not victim-speak. Looking back, I think I should have pushed harder for help.

The database was created out of need rather than a love of computers, and it does the job. But, as was suggested at the conference, the traditional ways - 'in at the deep end' and 'bumping into' research training programmes – mean it all takes a lot longer than it should; and I suspect, like Simon Trafford, that the continuing popular demand for traditional archive training is a sign of a lack of conviction about what ICT can offer rather than total confidence about its use.

The Annual Conference's half-a-dozen sessions covered a great deal of ground on the subject of postgraduate training. It was agreed that progression from the patchy provision characteristic of many universities required a heightening awareness of both student needs and the training, packages and funding already available to meet them. There were more searching questions about academic standards and the student experience in a collaboratively taught MA course involving the use of wikis in a virtual research environment; and an interesting session on 'digital diplomatics' and how the professional historian is best placed to teach how to test the provenance, authenticity and veracity of information on the web. The final session was a two-header which presented the rather discouraging results of a recent survey on the provision of history and computing in UK higher education, but then went on to outline a book (to be published next year) which aims to bridge the gap between ICT need and provision by providing the key skills and methods needed by undergraduates, postgraduates and amateur historians.

My experience is obviously limited but I do wonder how aware history departments are about available funding, IHR training provision and the range of online help; if they do know, then I suppose the question concerns their conviction of what ICT skills can offer in historical research. The websites I have looked at over the last few days have opened my eyes and I can see how supportive many postgraduates would find them. When the acquisition of skills is still too often assumed to happen by osmosis, and help too dependent on the interest/enthusiasm of individual staff, the provision of resources, as well as a more effective way of drawing attention to them (perhaps an AHC-UK rep in each university history department?), is the obvious interim solution.

I welcome the contacts I made and the general support – ideas, discussions – available on the sites I now know about; but, looking to the future, I've arranged a session next week with a member of staff who I have discovered makes wide use of ICT skills in his own research and I am hoping this might have some spin-off in terms of greater awareness within historical studies and more relevant support for future postgraduate historians.