

royal historical society

e-newsletter

July 2009

Presidential Letter

This special issue of the Newsletter comes to you at a defining moment in the Society's history. On 1 January 2010, the RHS Bibliography of British and Irish History, one of the Society's flagship enterprises, will be relaunched as part of a major new partnership with Belgian publishers Brepols.

For nearly a decade, the Bibliography has been financed largely by generous AHRC grants. These end in 2009, with no possibility of further renewal. As a consequence, the Society, together with our long-standing partners at the Institute of Historical Research, has been concerned to identify a new and sustainable platform for the Bibliography. Led by our indefatigable Literary Director, Ian Archer, we believe we have now achieved this, and that the new collaboration between the Society, Brepols and IHR will ensure the Bibliography's health for the foreseeable future.

I would like to acknowledge Ian's magnificent efforts on behalf of the Society, and also to thank Jane Winters at the IHR for taking on the role of Technical Editor of the Bibliography. We are delighted that, even in these difficult financial times, the IHR's commitment to the Bibliography has been maintained and that the new service will be available free of charge at the Institute.

The tie-up with Brepols is exciting for all of us. The company has an excellent portfolio and is responsible, *inter alia*, for the International Medieval Bibliography. We are convinced they will bring to the operation both commercial savvy and a strong commitment to high academic standards.

The shift from what has hitherto been a free service to one based on a subscription is the price we have to pay for prolonging the Bibliography's life. Our consultations made it clear that no other option delivered the dual objectives of high-quality service and economic sustainability. A set of FAQs relating to the new arrangements is available on the Bibliography web page; a leaflet outlining the new features available can be downloaded from the address at the top of page 3 of this newsletter, below the new BBIH logo.

These are, of course, difficult times for libraries everywhere, but I would call upon Fellows to do their utmost to ensure that their institutions subscribe to the new service. It remains a vital resource for scholars of British history across the world, at every level.

While the Bibliography has dominated much of our attention in the last few months, the Society has been active in many other areas. On June 26th, for example, a delegation from Council visited Queen's University Belfast. Such visits, which take the Council away from our London base, are a regular feature of the Society's life.

Each year the Society invites applications from departments who would like to host a Society visit - the next call for proposals will be in January 2010, for the 2011 card of session. At Belfast, we were experimenting with a new format, which involved support for an excellent symposium devoted to 'Poverty and Welfare in Ireland, c. 1833-1948'. Society funding helped the conference organisers to bring over from North America Professor Anna Clark (University of Minnesota).

One advantage of such visits is that they allow us to get a sense from departments of the key current issues of concern. A topic particularly weighing on all minds at the moment is the 'impact' agenda taking shape within the Research Councils. I believe we are all anxious about just what 'impact' may be adjudged to be and how it will be measured. In light of this, we thought it important to gather views on the topic and also to disseminate available information.

In collaboration with the IHR, the Historical Association and History UK, we have accordingly organized a meeting on the morning of 1 July to which all History departments have been invited. Speakers include Laura Lugg, who has responsibility in this area at AHRC; Professor Pauline Stafford, well known to us all as Chair of the History Sub-Panel in the 2008 RAE; and Professor Rick Rylance, who had the same responsibility for the English Literature Sub-Panel.

In inviting Rick Rylance I was particularly keen to see whether we in History could establish common ground with another major arts discipline facing many of the same dilemmas. Our interest in what he has to say will be heightened by the announcement last week that Rick will succeed Philip Esler as Chief Executive at AHRC in September 2009.

A synopsis of the proceedings of this meeting will appear on the Society's website and I shall also be inviting comments from colleagues on this developing topic.

Finally, we have timed the delivery of this newsletter to remind you of a key event in the Society's calendar of events: the Prothero lecture, which takes place on 1 July in the Cruciform Lecture Theatre at UCL, beginning at 5.30pm.

The Prothero is traditionally the curtain-raiser for the Anglo-American Conference at the IHR; this year it will be delivered

by Professor Michael Bentley of St Andrews University. His lecture deals with a theme decidedly Protheronian (if such a term exists!) It is entitled 'The Age of Prothero: British Historiography in the long fin de siècle, 1870-1920?'

The lecture will be followed by another key ritual in the Society's calendar: the reception at which the winners of the Society's Prizes are announced, and their success celebrated.

We hope that you will be able to join us for one or all of these events, and we thank you for your continued support of the Society.

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RHS Bibliography

BIBLIOGRAPHIES IN THE DIGITAL AGE: CHANGING FRAMEWORKS, CHANGING SOLUTIONS

It is one hundred years since the Society took the decision to develop a series of historical bibliographies to rival those being produced on the continent by Rankean minded scholars; it is twenty years since the Society decided to create a searchable database, which would bring together material in Writings on British History and the Society's own Annual Bibliographies. In delivering its bibliographies the Society has responded to changing publishing possibilities and changing funding scenarios. The new deal for the Bibliography of British and Irish History (BBIH) represents our latest evolution.

In the years after 1989 funding was secured from the Leverhulme Trust and the [British Academy](#). Under the direction of John Morrill, an army of scholars laboured to add indexing terms to the underlying bibliographic records in what he described as 'an extraordinary modern example of what the early modern period would have called the putting out system'. In 1998 Oxford University Press published a CD-ROM, allowing the complex searching of around 250,000 records on British history from 1900 until 1992.

The static character of the CD-ROM, the greater flexibility of the web and the prospect of new funding opportunities shaped the next phase. The cusp of the new century was a good time for public funding of electronic projects; following initial support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Esmée Fairbairn Trust, the AHRB and its successor the AHRC provided three consecutive Resource Enhancement

grants (2001-9) to make the bibliography available on the internet free at the point of use, and to develop interoperability with other resources.

This public and charitable support enabled the project to develop successful collaborations with [London's Past Online](#) and [Irish History Online](#). We were also able to develop important additional features such as cross-searchability with resources like the [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#) (ODNB), linkage to library catalogues and online text through OpenURL technology, and Z39.50 compatibility, enabling the querying of the bibliography by bibliographical software packages such as EndNote. In the seven years between going live in July 2002 and July 2009 the database grew in size from around 300,000 to over 460,000 records.

But as we embarked on the third Resource Enhancement grant it was becoming clear that the climate for supporting electronic resources was changing; lots of new resources had been created, but sometimes with insufficient thought as to how they might be supported in the longer term; 'sustainability' was the new buzzword. For the Bibliography this was a particular challenge, because we are a resource whose utility depends on its data being current. And high quality data with high level indexing - the crucial value added we offer over, say, Google - requires expert academic input. It cannot be automated - and it does not come cheap. There was, however, a mounting reluctance both among the research councils and the charities from which we had previously secured support to offer a long-term commitment.



BIBLIOGRAPHY OF BRITISH AND IRISH HISTORY

http://www.brepols.net/publishers/pdf/Brepolis_BBIH_EN.pdf

So the new arrangement with the Institute and Brepols offers the prospect of a more stable future for the Bibliography. We are being rebranded, so Fellows will have to get used to a new acronym (BBIH) and logo (above). There will be a great deal of continuity: we retain the existing indexing schemes, and the ability to search by period covered, and the data will continue to be compiled and the project supported by Simon Baker and Peter Salt working at the IHR. But BBIH will also offer a number of new features, such as an auto-complete function, an auto record count per search field, a multilingual interface and extended export possibilities. You will be able to choose between a simple or an advanced search, both offering significantly faster returns of results.

We will also be retaining the existing features of interoperability. The new Bibliography will be compatible with OpenURL, facilitating linkage to full text. Links to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, the National

Register of Archives, Who Was Who, BL Articles Direct, Google Books, COPAC, H-Albion reviews, British History Online and Reviews in History will also still be available.

Turning a free resource into a subscription resource is a real challenge in a time of cash-strapped Library budgets, and we very much hope that you will be able to assist in bringing BBIH to the attention of your librarians, and encouraging participation in the trialling of the resource in the autumn. The RHS Bibliography will be switched off at the end of December; from 1 January 2010 you will require a subscription to use the successor resource BBIH.

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Forthcoming Events

Wednesday 1 July 2009 at 5.30 p.m.

Venue: Cruciform Lecture Theatre 1, UCL

Prothero Lecture

“The Age of Prothero: British historiography in the long *fin-de-siècle*, 1870-1920”

Professor Michael Bentley

Friday 25 September 2009 at 5.30 p.m.

Venue: University College London

“The purpose of religion? Monks and the city in late medieval Italy”

Dr Frances Andrews