



TIM MCDONAGH

# Back to the future

The online archives of London's oldest court hide keys to our past. You just need cutting-edge tools to find them, says Jennifer Ouellette

**F**IRE up the time machine, pop it in reverse and rewind 213 years. Mary Hall is standing in the dock at the Old Bailey, London's oldest court, as a string of witnesses give evidence against her. A few days before, Hall had picked up a labourer named John Martin as he stumbled home from the pub. "She asked me what I would give her for a bed that night," Martin told the court. "I agreed to give her two shillings."

The next morning, however, Martin caught Hall stealing from his purse. Martin grabbed her to get the money back and Hall cried out. A man wielding a knife burst into the room and threatened to stab Martin in the heart. Another woman hit him with a pair of tongs. As Martin bolted, fearing for his life, yet another man struck him from behind. His attackers tossed his shoes and stockings out of the window into the street, where he dressed and went to fetch the police. Despite the violent assault, only Hall was arrested. For the theft of 5 guineas – many months' wages for a servant – she now faced a prison ship to Australia or, worse, the gallows.

Serious crimes have been tried at the Old Bailey for more than 400 years. Hall's trial is just one of roughly 200,000 recorded in *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, a detailed account of nearly every case heard within its walls between 1674 and 1913. The archive is the largest body of recorded speech in the world. "All of human life is there," says historian Tim Hitchcock at the University of Sussex, UK.

In a 10-year undertaking, the *Proceedings* have been digitised, tagged and published online. The Old Bailey is just the start. From transcripts of US congressional debates since the 1980s to parliamentary records from the French Revolution's year-long Reign of Terror from 1793 to 1794, historical archives are being digitised across the board. Vast libraries that were once for human eyes only can now be read by computers. And that changes everything – history is becoming a science. "Once you digitise, you can get a birds-eye view that would have been impossible before," says historian Caroline Winterer at Stanford University in California. "For the first time, we can begin to quantify unknowns that historians routinely overlook."

The sheer scale of many written archives means that historians typically have no choice but to be selective in what they read. The Old Bailey archive, for example, runs to 137 million words. "If you sit down and start reading at the beginning you won't get to the bit you're interested in for 10 years," says Hitchcock. So historians have zoomed in on fragments, looking at pickpockets in the 1800s, say, or piecing together trends from a few significant

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samples. Here digitisation has helped. Tagged and searchable archives make it easy to connect the dots between different records. A quick search in the *England & Wales Criminal Register*, for example, tells us that Hall was born in 1772, making her 29 at her trial.

The potential of digitisation goes far beyond stitching together different documents, though. Historian Jo Guldi at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, thinks her field is standing on the brink of a quantitative revolution – one that will enable historians to tackle questions previously beyond the scope of human research alone.

Hitchcock is at the forefront of this new way of doing history and played a part in the digitisation of the Old Bailey archives. For Hitchcock, these court records have a lot to reveal about the civilising process in Western society. Each jury trial is a key moment when a place and its citizens come together to define the limits of acceptable behaviour. But he was frustrated by digital history that merely skimmed the surface. The trick would be to dig deep and shine a light on patterns that nobody had seen before. The information was there in the archives. The question was how to get at it.

Enter Simon DeDeo of Indiana University in Bloomington. Trained as a cosmologist, DeDeo now studies complexity closer to home. "Simon is interested in finding patterns in large-scale chaotic systems," says Hitchcock. "Culture is the largest and most chaotic system you could imagine." ➤

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