SOME INTERNET RESOURCES FOR MEDIEVAL GENEALOGY: 7

by Chris Phillips[1]

ABSTRACT

Chris Phillips provides his regular update for readers of *Foundations*, concerning Internet resources available to medieval genealogists.

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English Monastic Archives

The fruits of a major research project at University College London are now available on the **English Monastic Archives** web pages:

www.ucl.ac.uk/history/englishmonasticarchives/

The purpose of the project was to reconstruct the archives of English monasteries, and the information is presented in the form of three databases - one listing the religious houses themselves, another listing their properties, and a third ("Archives") listing documents or sets of documents produced by them. Useful reference information is given for all three categories, though there are no transcripts or abstracts of documents. The databases can be searched by locality, time period, and in a number of other ways.

Work on the project has now apparently finished, and the information presented on the website will be useful to those researching people who had dealings with the monasteries. However, the documents listed evidently represent only a selection of those that survive, so the "Archives" database will need to be used in conjunction with the National Register of Archives (***www.nra.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/***), the Access to Archives database (***www.a2a.org.uk/***) and other resources.

Update on Google Book Search and other digitisation projects

Google's huge project to digitise the contents of five major libraries has now been renamed as **Google Book Search** (***books.google.com/***), and the first large collection of out-of-copyright works - including a lot of useful material - is now available.

In addition to these older "public domain" works, which can be freely viewed in their entirety, the database includes more recent works submitted by publishers - only a few pages of which can be viewed - and works scanned in libraries but still protected by copyright - for which only "snippets" of three or four lines are displayed. However, the full text of all the books is searchable, and there is an advanced search page that also allows the title, author, date and/or publisher to be specified.

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Fortunately most of my misgivings about the usability of the project have turned out to be groundless. Since Google has provided a separate search facility for books, rather than combining results for books with those for web pages, relevant material is much easier to find - though to some extent there is already a problem of "too much information". The previous prohibition on copying and printing the page images also seems to have been removed, at least for public domain works.

However, there is one unforeseen problem relating to copyright. Visitors in the U.S.A. are able to view the whole of any work published before 1923, but Google is applying a much more stringent criterion to the rest of the world. For example, in the U.K. it appears that only works published before 1865 are accessible. Of course, the great majority of books published between 1865 and 1923 are legally out of copyright in the U.K. and most other countries. Fortunately, the problem can be solved by a using a proxy server such as ***www.proxify.com/*** to disguise the visitor's country of origin.

A couple of other problems do make the material harder to use than it needs to be. The bibliographical information is often inconsistent or incomplete - particularly for multi-volume works, where the volume number never seems to be indicated. And navigation within each volume is difficult at the moment, except by searching for keywords or stepping through the text page by page. It is possible to view a particular page, but this requires manual editing of the URL displayed by the browser, so the process is not user-friendly. I have collected a few hints and tips on Google Book Search here: ***www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/google.shtml***.

Finally, it's worth noting two other digitisation projects that are being seen as rivals to Google's.

The **Open Content Alliance** (***www.opencontentalliance.org/***) is a consortium including the Internet Archive, Yahoo!, Microsoft (through its Internet portal, MSN), and others - including the U.K. National Archives. Its stated aim is to provide free, searchable access to out-of-copyright printed material, in contrast to Google's emphasis on more recent works, which has led to so many difficulties over copyright. Whether the participation of the National Archives is a pointer to the eventual inclusion of manuscripts I don't know - certainly the commitment to *free* public access to digitised documents is rather different from TNA's current policy.

The European Union has also recently announced a **Digital Libraries** initiative, as part of an information technology programme known as "i2010". This proposal does specifically include manuscripts, as part of "Europe's written and audiovisual heritage", along with film, photographs and music. Evidently it is still in the early stages of consultation, and it may be more a question of coordinating existing work, rather than initiating a grand scheme of digitisation on the scale of the Google project.