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# Digital Histories of Crime and Research-Based Teaching and Learning

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## DIGITAL HISTORIES OF CRIME AND RESEARCH-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING

*Andrew Davies, Mark Peel and Laura Balderstone*<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The proliferation of digitised primary sources has created exciting possibilities for those of us teaching undergraduate modules on crime and punishment in nineteenth century England and Wales. In this article, we reflect on our experience of devising and running a 'special subject' at the University of Liverpool in which we encourage our students to see themselves as active, independent researchers - as producers, rather than passive consumers, of knowledge. Working on individual projects in a group of 15, students tackle the different stages of the research process side-by-side, discussing issues of research design, record-linkage and the interpretation and analysis of primary and secondary sources with each other as well as with members of staff and PhD students. In our experience, this approach leads to very high levels of student engagement. It also provides invaluable, 'hands-on' research training for final year undergraduates as they prepare to embark on their dissertations.

**Keywords:** digital history, research-based teaching, crime and punishment, developing independent student researchers

### Introduction

In this article, we reflect on our experience of devising and running a 'special subject' module at the University of Liverpool on 'Digital Histories of Crime and Punishment in Nineteenth Century England and Wales'. At Liverpool, as in other UK history departments, special subjects require final year undergraduates to work intensively on primary sources. These modules have traditionally been viewed alongside the dissertation - as the culmination of a single-honours history degree. Crucially, special subjects provide intensive training in primary source analysis: in addition to immersing themselves in related secondary reading, students work through a

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collection of extracts from primary sources, or 'gobbets'. These are often drawn from the member of staff's own research, so that undergraduates receive expert guidance in interrogating and interpreting sources. In our 'digital histories' modules, introduced in 2011, we take a different approach.<sup>2</sup> Our ambition is to encourage undergraduates to see themselves as active, independent researchers, as producers, rather than passive consumers, of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> As staff, we present ourselves to our students as co-researchers as well as tutors. Our aim is to foster a spirit of shared endeavour, and we have had vital support from three of our doctoral students - Lucy Williams, Jim Hinks and Craig Stafford<sup>4</sup> - who have joined our special subject workshops, so that undergraduates, postgraduates and members of staff have worked side-by-side in the classroom.<sup>5</sup>

Inspiration for these modules came from our awareness that the rapid growth of online archives had transformed the possibilities for history undergraduates to conduct original research. Students can now gather in weeks collections of primary sources that would previously have taken months, if not years, to collect.<sup>6</sup> Using digitised primary sources allows students to become active researchers, gathering and analysing new sources, more quickly than ever before. This has opened up

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<sup>2</sup> Since 2011, we have offered two of these modules. The second, 'Digital Histories of Culture and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain', directs students to digitised newspaper archives along with Mass Observation Online: <http://www.amdigital.co.uk/m-collections/collection/mass-observation-online/> and collections of visual sources such as the British Cartoon Archive: <http://www.cartoons.ac.uk>. [Accessed 30 September 2014].

<sup>3</sup> For pioneering approaches to research-based teaching, see Gabrielle Baldwin, *The Teaching-Research Nexus: How Research Informs and Enhances Learning in the University of Melbourne* (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, 2005); Mike Neary and Joss Winn, 'Student as Producer: Reinventing the Student Experience in Higher Education' in Les Bell, Howard Stevenson and Mike Neary (eds), *The Future of Higher Education: Policy, Pedagogy and the Student Experience* (Continuum, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Williams, "'At Large": Women's Lives and Offending in Victorian Liverpool and London', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, 2014; Jim Hinks, 'Other People's Children: Narratives of Paid-Childcare in Britain, 1867-1908' (PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, in progress); Craig Stafford, 'Female Drunkenness in South-East Lancashire, c. 1870-1880' (PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, in progress).

<sup>5</sup> On collaborative working and the use of research mentors, see Mick Healey and Alan Jenkins, *Developing Undergraduate Research and Inquiry* (The Higher Education Academy, 2009), 23-4. Healey and Jenkins drew on the work of the US National Conferences on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) and Council on Undergraduate Research (CUR).

<sup>6</sup> Drew Gray recently made a similar point: 'Putting Undergraduates on Trial: Using the Old Bailey Online as a Teaching and Assessment Tool', *Law, Crime and History*, 4(1) (2014), 104. As Bob Nicholson has commented, the proliferation of digitised primary sources has created 'a great opportunity to bridge the gap between the archive and the classroom, a chance to make original primary research a core part of the undergraduate experience.' See his article and related blog post: 'Digital Detectives: Rediscovering the Scholar Adventurer', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 45(2) (2012), 219; 'Digital Detectives: Bridging the Gap Between the Archive and the Classroom': <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/2014/04/talk-digital-detectives-bridging-gap-archive-classroom/>. [Accessed 26 January 2015].

tremendous possibilities for students to undertake new forms of independent research, and to develop skills of record-linkage, analysis and interpretation as well as data-collection.

Our approach to these modules is informed by our understanding of the distinction between research-*informed* teaching and research-*based* teaching.<sup>7</sup> We understand research-informed teaching to refer to modules in which staff draw on the latest, specialist scholarship in their fields. Typically, on such modules, we use lectures to provide historiographical surveys, with seminars devoted to historiographical debate and/or analysis of primary sources selected by ourselves as module convenors. Special subjects have traditionally tended to follow this approach, but with fewer or no lectures, and more frequent, and longer, seminars.

By contrast, we understand research-based teaching to refer to modules in which students learn by pursuing original, cutting-edge research and reflecting on the research process as they accumulate knowledge, and deepen their understanding, of a substantive topic.<sup>8</sup> Our aim is to use these taught modules to introduce students to the challenge and drama of cutting-edge research, rather than viewing the dissertation as the sole opportunity for students to embark on sustained independent inquiry.

The history of crime and punishment in the nineteenth century lends itself particularly well to this approach. Digitised primary sources available to our students range from the Old Bailey Online and Parliamentary Papers to 19th Century British Newspapers and the rapidly expanding collections - including Criminal Registers, prison records and Licenses of Parole for Female Convicts - available via commercial websites such as Ancestry and Findmypast.<sup>9</sup> Digitised newspapers provide rich opportunities for

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<sup>7</sup> For a more elaborate model of types of student engagement in research, see Healey and Jenkins, *Developing Undergraduate Research and Inquiry*, 7-8. They distinguish between 'research-led' and 'research-tutored' engagement: for historians, these terms would broadly correspond to traditional lectures and seminars respectively: see Nicholson, 'Digital Detectives: Bridging the Gap Between the Archive and the Classroom'.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, pursuing original research as part of their special subject work - and relating their findings to those of established scholars - helps students to develop the 'critical, inquisitive eye towards the past' that historians have traditionally sought to instil among their undergraduates. See Joshua Sernfeld, 'Pedagogical Principles of Digital Historiography' in Brett D. Hirsch (ed.), *Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Practices, Principles and Politics* (Open Book Publishers, 2012), 281.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>; <http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk>; <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/news/newspdigproj/database/>; <http://www.ancestry.co.uk>; <http://www.findmypast.co.uk> [Accessed 30 September 2014.]

students to investigate the historical construction of gender norms and the ethnic/class-based stereotypes, while census returns and records of births, deaths and marriages - also available via Ancestry and Findmypast - offer the means of fleshing out the lives of those brought before the courts: to see them as husbands and wives, and as parents (or children), rather than merely as 'criminals' or 'convicts'. Digital archives allow students to examine these connections, tracking people who endured criminalisation, incarceration and even transportation.

Each of our digital histories modules runs for a single semester (12 teaching weeks, followed by a 'revision week' and a two-week assessment period). Groups are capped at 15. Assessment is wholly by coursework, culminating in a 5,000-word research report, whereas more conventional special subjects at Liverpool are assessed by examinations in which students analyse 'gobbets' and write historiographical essays and 3,000-word coursework essays.

## **1 Module Structure**

Students are provided at the outset with a bibliography of secondary works and a short guide to some of the most relevant digital archives, along with a module booklet, which sets out the module's aims and intended 'learning outcomes'. Here, we stress the opportunities that the module offers for students to develop both their expertise as researchers and their project management skills (including the development of proposals, working with a supervisor, reporting of outcomes, writing up of a project report and offering and incorporating feedback). Mindful of the need to demonstrate that 'employability skills' are embedded in History modules, we stress to students that, by successfully completing this module, they are likely to hone many of the skills that they will utilise in their future paid employment.

The module is delivered through a mix of seminars, workshops and presentation sessions (three hours) and one-to-one tutorials (30 minutes). Workshops are held in computer teaching rooms in the University library. Each student works at a networked PC, while an additional PC linked to a projector is used to demonstrate searches. Students are encouraged to raise individual queries during the workshop sessions with each other, as well as with the tutor and/or PhD students present. We aim to establish a collaborative ethos in these sessions. By sharing our work with our students, and discussing how their individual project findings will advance our

understanding, we hope to create a sense that as a Department of History we are engaged in a collective pursuit of knowledge.

The teaching pattern is as follows:

Weeks 1, 3, 5, 6: Seminars: introductory meeting covers our aims for the module; the collaborative research ethos; relationship between research conducted by staff and students; examples from current projects utilising digital archives); subsequent seminars address historiographical context (identifying current orthodoxies; examining the evidence base for these; identifying new lines of inquiry; aligning new research with existing literatures) and provide training in the analysis of primary sources (through interrogation of primary sources selected by students as well as staff).

Weeks 2, 4, 8, 9: Workshops: demonstrating the key digital sources; conducting searches and sharing findings; identifying potential uses and pitfalls; one-to-one discussion of students' projects with PhD students/staff.

Week 7, 12: Tutorials: one-to-one consultations with tutor, covering research design; samples; planning assignments.

Weeks 10, 11: Presentations: individual presentations of work-in-progress; peer feedback from nominated project partner'; additional responses from rest of class and tutor/PhD students.

Students are required to work independently from the end of Week 12. Week 13 is a dedicated 'revision week'. In the absence of an examination, this provides a clear period for writing up and editing. Students submit their project reports in the first week of the University's assessment period (Week 14).

## **2 Assessment**

Students are required to complete three coursework assignments for this module, weighted as follows:

Week 5	1,000-word scoping document (10%)
Week 8	1,500-word project proposal (20%)
Week 14	5,000-word project report (70%). <sup>10</sup>

The scoping document asks students to think about possible topics, directions and sources for their research projects. They are asked to write in response to one of the following contentions:

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<sup>10</sup> The assignments were initially weighted 15/35/50 in an attempt to mirror the assessment pattern for existing special subjects at Liverpool, most of which culminate in a two-hour examination. In the light of feedback from the 2011-12 cohort, we adjusted these weightings to 10/20/70. Subsequent groups have welcomed this.

- 1 To understand the history of criminality, it is first of all important to understand the history of society and of social relations.
- 2 Crime and criminality are never simply a matter of laws, procedures, courts and penalties; they are the subject of conversations and debates, fears, fantasies and fascination.

In their response, students are asked to begin to sketch, or scope, possible projects. They are encouraged to refer to specific digital sources, and to themes raised in the seminar on historiography held in Week 3. Assessment is based on the coherence of their response to the contention, how well students link their reflections to a specific example or examples, and their ability to identify a feasible research opportunity, case study or project. The advantage of this exercise is that students have an opportunity to put their initial thoughts in writing. Tutors can then respond with feedback that offers direction and focus as students develop their project proposals.

The project proposal, submitted at the end of Week 8, is designed to help students to develop a feasible project. Students are asked to:

- 1 describe (in about 50-100 words) your research interest (for example, 'women and crime') and the case study or question that you will use to address that broader problem (for example, debates about the nature of female criminality in London newspapers between 1860 and 1880').
- 2 describe (in 400-500 words) your digital source(s), showing how you intend to use them, how they help you to address your proposed case study or question and what challenges you might face in using them.
- 3 summarise (in 200-300 words) the main argument(s) of the key secondary source - book or journal article – that relates to your proposed research topic.
- 4 provide a brief outline (400-500 words) of the approach that you intend to take to topic, highlighting what you understand to be the key issues and historical concerns raised by the topic and any problems or questions you want to signal for particular assistance and feedback.
- 5 identify (in about 100 words) a goal or challenge for yourself, based on the feedback you have received for previous university work and your own assessment of your strengths and weaknesses (for example, 'to develop a more structured argument, with a clearer introduction'): this will be discussed during the one-to-one tutorial in Week 12, and will help to guide your tutor's feedback on your project report.
- 6 provide a preliminary bibliography of at least 10 secondary works of historical scholarship you intend to use in your project.

Each student is asked to give a short presentation based on their project proposal to the rest of the group in the seminars held in Week 10 or Week 11. In addition, they

are organised as 'project partners' who exchange and read each other's proposals before the seminar and offer constructive comments in response on the proposal at the seminar. The tutor and the rest of the class also offer feedback. The advantage of this exercise is that each student receives extensive feedback on their work-in-progress prior to beginning to write up their project report. Tutors use these seminars to foster collective reflection on the research process, and students provide each other with valuable encouragement as well as feedback.

The 5,000-word project report, submitted in Week 14 and weighted at 70% of the module mark is, in effect, a mini-dissertation. Students are asked to conceive of this assignment as a report rather than an essay: they are directed to report on the outcomes of their research (highlighting limitations of the sources and 'dead ends' as well as presenting their substantive findings). They are asked to show the evidence they have drawn from their chosen digital archive(s), to reflect on how they have interpreted that evidence, to relate their findings to those of previous scholars, and to develop an argument based on a clear contention or case. There is no fixed template for the project report, but students are provided with an indicative structure, as follows:

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Review of findings of key secondary work
- 3 Discussion of sample of primary sources and reflections on methodology
- 4 Key substantive findings – related to (2) and (3)
- 5 Conclusion

### **Training students - and students training each other - as independent researchers**

In effect, the module takes 15 students through each stage of the research process as a group: identifying a topic; framing a question; gathering primary sources; analysing the primary sources in relation to the existing scholarly literature (or a gap in the historiography); and writing-up and editing.<sup>11</sup> Students benefit from tackling these phases of the research process collectively and, while tutors and PhD students offer advice throughout, in effect they teach each other through continuously sharing their work-in-progress and discussing how to overcome challenges and obstacles.

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<sup>11</sup> In Healey and Jenkins' terms, the module takes students through the 'open' mode of inquiry, in which students 'formulate the questions themselves as well as going through the full inquiry cycle', *Developing Undergraduate Research and Inquiry*, 23.



The contrast with the relative isolation in which many history undergraduates work on individual dissertations is stark.<sup>12</sup>

### **3 Feedback**

Feedback from students in each cohort to date has been highly enthusiastic. In their module evaluation questionnaires, submitted in Week 11, students frequently report having felt some anxiety during the early weeks of the semester. They are, of course, aware from conversations with their peers that the digital histories modules are less structured than other special subjects taught at Liverpool. The vastness of the digital archives available can seem daunting, and the range of possible research projects endless, leaving some students anxious as to whether they have opted for the 'right' one.<sup>13</sup>

By the time that they complete their questionnaires, however, students tend to be hugely appreciative of the freedom and independence that the module offers. Pleasingly for us, as tutors, they report a very high level of engagement, frequently linking this to the opportunities to develop their own research interests. Many students explicitly state that they feel more capable and more confident in their abilities as researchers. Recognising that they are producing cutting-edge work and using their own original research to respond critically to the findings of established scholars, they increasingly see themselves as historians in their own right. This growing collective, as well as individual, confidence is conspicuous during the sessions in Weeks 10 and 11 at which students present their project proposals. To those tutors and PhD students present, these classes feel more akin to conference panels than to traditional undergraduate seminars.

Comments from two members of the 2011-12 cohort capture this wider student enthusiasm for research-based learning.

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<sup>12</sup> Numerous scholars have noted that the growth of 'digital humanities' has promoted new modes of collaborative working among students. As Mark Sandle recently observed, 'Digital learning prefers social to individual learning, is inherently collaborative, and is done concretely through exploration and experimentation.' See his essay *Studying the Past in the Digital Age: From Tourist to Explorer* in Toni Weller (ed.), *History in the Digital Age* (Routledge, 2013), 130.

<sup>13</sup> The challenge posed by the vastness of the digital archives available to history students has been widely noted. As T. Mills Kelly has pointed out: 'where just a decade ago we had to teach students how to find enough primary sources to do interesting and original work today we need to teach them how to pare down the results of their searches for such sources to something manageable in the context of a semester', *Teaching History in the Digital Age* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/dh.12146032.0001.001>. [Accessed 26 January 2015].

One stated: 'I thoroughly enjoyed this module, it was a new approach and really enabled me to become like a detective in some ways, and really feel like I was building my own historical project with both primary and secondary sources.'

Another stated that s/he had begun to feel like part of the Department's research community: '... like attitude of tutor and way [he] treated students as equals. Made our ideas seem valuable.'

A member of the 2013-14 cohort pointed to the value of taking the digital histories module in Semester 1, prior to tackling the dissertation in Semester 2 of the final year: 'I really appreciated the opportunity to compile my own reading list and pursue my own research interests - I think the module is particularly good preparation for the dissertation.'

Questionnaires frequently highlight the value that students attach to having regular opportunities in the workshops as well as in one-to-one tutorials to discuss their work-in-progress on an individual basis. As a member of the 2014-15 cohort put it:

The workshops are especially helpful as [they] allow support whilst researching primary sources. This means that any struggles that may arise from independent study can easily be overcome.<sup>14</sup>

Questionnaires also confirm that undergraduates greatly appreciate the input made by PhD students. However approachable we strive to be as tutors, some undergraduates will always feel more comfortable broaching queries with graduate students, to whom they feel closer in terms of experience (and often in age), especially during the early phases of the research process.<sup>15</sup>

The projects undertaken by students in the first four cohorts enrolled on the module have been highly varied. Some have focused on particular types of crime ('Street Robbery in 1860s Liverpool'), while others have focused on specific groups of offenders and/or victims ('Resistance among Juvenile Offenders in Reformatories and Industrial Schools during the 1890s') or on notorious cases ('The Red Barn Murder').<sup>16</sup> The general standard of the work produced has been impressive, while

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<sup>14</sup> For a useful discussion of the balance between opportunities for autonomous learning and guidance from more experienced researchers, see Sandle, 'Studying the Past in the Digital Age', 142.

<sup>15</sup> For PhD students, whose opportunities for teaching rarely extend to BA dissertation supervision, participation in the digital histories modules provides valuable experience of helping to supervise undergraduate research projects and, we hope, substantially strengthens their academic CVs.

<sup>16</sup> These projects were inspired by the students' preliminary reading. On street robbery in Liverpool: Rob Sindall, *Street Violence in the Nineteenth Century: Media Panic or Real Danger?* (Leicester University Press, 1990); John E. Archer, *The Monster Evil: Policing and Violence in Victorian Liverpool* (Liverpool University Press, 2011). On resistance in reformatories and industrial schools: Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral*

many of the project reports have been outstandingly good and some – including studies of ‘Women and Vitriol-Throwing in Victorian London’ and ‘Changing Responses to Juvenile Crime in the Late Nineteenth Century’ are worthy of developing for publication in our view.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4 Case Study: Suicide in the Victorian Prison

A project recently completed by a member of the 2014-15 cohort demonstrates the potential for students to gather and analyse extensive and strikingly diverse sets of primary sources within a semester-long project. The rationale for Trish Harrison’s study of ‘Suicide in English Prisons, 1870–1890’ was her identification of a gap in two strands of historiography: neither the key studies of Victorian suicide by Olive Anderson and Victor Bailey nor the extensive literature on nineteenth century prisons appeared to offer a comprehensive account of suicides by prisoners.<sup>18</sup> We had previously discussed the case of 15-year-old Edward Andrews, who hanged himself in Birmingham borough prison in 1854, in a second-year module on ‘Crime and Deviance in the Modern World’.<sup>19</sup> Finding no substantial survey of suicide in Victorian prisons, Harrison chose to conduct her own research using primary sources for her third-year digital histories project. She compiled two case-studies: Daniel Murray O’Hara, an Irish-born surgeon, who hung himself in Liverpool’s Walton Jail in 1885, and Mary Lynch, who attempted suicide on several occasions in Millbank and Fulham prisons between 1872 and 1874.<sup>20</sup>

O’Hara was sentenced to ten years’ penal servitude in April 1885, after he was convicted of demanding money with menaces. He committed suicide nine days later.

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*History of Working Class Childhood and Youth 1889–1939* (Basil Blackwell, 1981). On the ‘Red Barn Murder’: Richard D. Altick, *Victorian Studies in Scarlet* (W. W. Norton, 1970).

<sup>17</sup> We have been particularly impressed by the students’ (largely self-taught) skills in record-linkage. Many projects have utilised numerous digital archives, for example, the Old Bailey Online alongside newspaper reports and census returns, to strikingly good effect. The project on vitriol-throwing was inspired by Lucy Williams’ doctoral work, ‘“At Large”: Women’s Lives and Offending in Victorian Liverpool and London,’ cited above. The project on changing responses to juvenile crime offered a critical engagement with the findings of M. Moore, ‘Social Control or Protection of the Child? The Debates on the Industrial Schools Acts 1857–1894’, *Journal of Family History*, 33(4) (2008).

<sup>18</sup> Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Clarendon Press, 1987); Victor Bailey, *This Rash Act: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford University Press, 1998). Prison suicides were briefly discussed by Philip Priestley, *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography, 1840–1914* (Pimlico, 1999), 180–84.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Andrews’ plight was detailed by Michael Ignatieff, *A Just Measure of Pain: The Penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (Macmillan, 1978), 207–8.

<sup>20</sup> Trish Harrison, ‘Suicide in English Prisons, 1870–1890’, unpublished project report, University of Liverpool, 2015.

A coroner's inquest revealed that he had made at least six previous suicide attempts, the most recent just two days before his death (The Chief Warder, who claimed to have O'Hara on the morning of his death, did not notice 'any mental peculiarity about him'.) Using digitised newspapers alongside official and institutional records, Harrison tracked O'Hara to Melbourne, Australia, where he had been convicted of discharging a firearm in a public place and committed to Kew Asylum as a 'dangerous lunatic' in 1873, and to Belfast, where he had been convicted of fraud (and made another suicide attempt while in prison) in 1878.<sup>21</sup>

Lynch was sentenced to penal servitude for life at the Central Criminal Court, London, in May 1872, after she was convicted of feloniously wounding Susan Snelgrove with intent to do grievous bodily harm. She was aged 21. By the time of her release, 13 years later, she had attempted suicide three times and 'expressed suicidal intent' on several other occasions. Despite Lynch's own vehement protestations to the contrary, her prison file recorded in 1883 that her health 'was not injured by imprisonment'. Harrison used press reports of Lynch's trial, along with the trial transcript available through the Old Bailey Online, to make sense of Lynch's prolonged insistence that she had been the victim of a miscarriage of justice. She tracked Lynch's decline through her file in the collection of 'Licenses of Parole for Female Convicts', available via Ancestry. This charts Lynch's physical decline, and offers another clue to her prolonged anguish - her discovery, in 1882, that her son had died nine years earlier.

Harrison's research was mainly conducted using digitised archives, but she augmented these with printed primary sources as well as secondary works. Throughout her report, Harrison drew on the writings of Sir Edmund Du Cane, whose centralised prison regime implemented from 1878, and run for 'maximum efficiency at minimum cost' made little allowance, by Harrison's account, for the vulnerability of prisoners such as O'Hara and Lynch.<sup>22</sup> Harrison's conclusion that 'the penal system itself contributed to the suicide and attempted suicide of prisoners who were under its care and control' could not easily have been reached in a conventional undergraduate essay based on secondary sources.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, 'Suicide in English Prisons'; Edmund F. Du Cane, *The Punishment and Prevention of Crime* (Macmillan 1885).

## **Concluding Comments**

There are some issues we are grappling with. Most of the students we have taught on this module had not studied criminal justice history before. Moreover, their prior knowledge of nineteenth century society was often fairly limited. Their background reading for the digital histories module necessarily focused on their chosen research topics and, in some cases, project reports would have benefitted from a wider knowledge of the secondary literature on nineteenth century crime and punishment. We have toyed with the idea of introducing a short series of lectures at the start of the module to provide students with an outline of nineteenth century social trends along with a stronger grasp of historiography.<sup>23</sup> However, we feel that this risks undermining the ethos of the module, not least by dampening the spirit of discovery and independence that has inspired so much outstanding work since we first introduced 'Digital histories of crime and punishment in nineteenth-century England and Wales' in 2011. As a member of our 2014-15 cohort put it:

Student-led teaching allows group members to participate on their own terms and I believe it actively encourages independent thinking as opposed to passively absorbing the thoughts of others, no matter how better informed and educated those thoughts are; it also enables students to challenge opinions that they may disagree with. Furthermore, I believe that the method of teaching without lectures, as employed in this module, generates a greater sense of equality where every opinion counts and is treated with equal respect, which increases student confidence and belief in personal ability, creating a far more effective learning environment.

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<sup>23</sup> Bob Nicholson similarly lists 'balancing research and historiography' as one of the main challenges posed by running his digital histories modules: 'Digital Detective: Bridging the Gap Between the Archive and the Classroom'.