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Peer review

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Early Modern Digital Review

Early Modern Digital Review is an online, open-access, and refereed journal publishing high-quality reviews of digital projects related to early modern society and culture. It is committed to productive evaluation of both established digital resources and recent tools and projects. Its publications are distributed online by the journal and its partners, and in print by *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*.

Allan, Paul Brent, and Dan Taggart, founders.

Ancestry.com, 2006–21. Database.

Lehi, UT: Ancestry.com LLC. Accessed 24 June 2021.

ancestry.com.au.

The unabashedly corporatized name “Ancestry.com” might not immediately suggest itself to researchers trained in archival and material historical methods when they are considering an online research tool. After all, the world’s largest genealogy company has long marketed its products to amateurs interested in reconstructing their personal family tree or, more recently, analyzing their own DNA. Yet it is precisely because the company’s business model is based on expanding its customer base that the online interface has been developed for ease of use and the company continues to expand its stock of primary data collections, making it a powerful tool for historians who might not always be able to access physical collections. The business model also means that the cost of an individual subscription will be a factor in the decision each researcher needs to make about the utility and cost-effectiveness of the tool—there appears to be no sign of the company developing an institutional subscription rate any time soon, given its market focus. Prices vary depending on the user’s location and tiered access level, but a six-month membership with access to early modern records from England, for example, cost me in Australia the same as the deluxe or premium release of a new game on most consoles (\$170 AUD). While the cost is not prohibitive in terms of the marketplace, it is certainly a factor for unwaged or precariously employed early career researchers. This is a concern that institutions and scholarly associations may wish to consider, as access to data continues to be increasingly important for emerging scholars who are also cruelly priced out of the industry.

Is the membership worth the expense? My assessment, based on having spent several months in search of the records of births, marriages, deaths, and wills of more than a dozen members of a pre-Shakespearean playing company, the Earl of Leicester’s Men, is unequivocally that it was indeed worth the cost—I have renewed my membership. There are, however, caveats that I would attach to this assessment, so do please read to the end before rushing off to pay for a subscription. On the positive side, the benefits to researchers of early modern English people are immediately apparent whether searching for a specific name or browsing the registers of a parish. The main search interface under “Births,

Marriages, and Deaths” enables users to nominate a first name or surname (or both), the names of known relatives, likely locations in which they lived, and possible date ranges, as well as to set tolerances for the proximity of a result to a specific match. The algorithm used for name matching is particularly impressive in recognizing that names can vary significantly in records. A search for Smith, for example, is also likely to identify results for Smithe, Smyth, Smythe, and other potential variations in spelling. By selecting collections from the UK and Ireland, users will be searching the *Church of England Parish Registers 1538–1812* from the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), now rebadged in Ancestry.com as the *London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, 1538–1812* collection, and millions of records from hundreds of surviving parish and civil registers.

Results are presented in a digested list form showing the individual’s name and the location and type of record, as well as the collection in which the record is located and whether the original record is available to view online from a photograph or scan of the source image. This last facility is what really sets Ancestry.com apart from other similar sites, and was the main reason that I have found the cost to be worth paying. Some search results are linked to the LMA records, for which the original is available on microfilm or microfiche within the Family History Library; no image is available online but the FHL number is provided. Even among the very earliest records, dating back to Henry VIII’s 1538 mandate that parish registers be maintained, a significant proportion of search results link to images of original registers. The full registers available for viewing can also be located via the “Card Catalogue” menu on the main search interface. The availability of these images of the original registers is of course invaluable for many researchers, especially those based overseas like yours truly, where only a little more than a decade ago the ability to undertake research of the registers was restricted to those who could obtain access in person. To not only have access to reproductions online, but to have the records of multiple parishes all searchable with a single query, represents a paradigm changer for research based on parish and civil registers.

The first of my caveats relates, however, to the search engine. As any database developer will know, a search engine is only ever as good as the metatags used to identify records. In the case of Ancestry.com, the functionality of the search engine may well be a victim of the rapid corporate success of founders Paul Brent Allan and Dan Taggart and their takeovers of other

genealogy services and incorporation of thousands of new collections in a short timespan. As each existing database or collection has been subsumed into Ancestry.com, it appears that the tagging protocols have not always mapped directly from the old to the new, and the business model does not lend itself to hiring people with the relevant expertise in historical records or in database management to tag millions of records anew. Thus, researchers will find after the shimmering nimbus of the initial successful search fades, the rougher edges begin to appear. It may be, for example, that the researcher knows of the existence of an individual with this name and in this specific location or at this particular time but whose name is not among the dozens of pages of results of a given search. Perhaps a renowned scholar has referred to this individual in a published work, but the name is absent from the lines of results on the screen. Users are advised, then, to try the general search interface and to open individual collections from the catalogue and conduct the same search within each collection—lo and behold, there the name appears in the correct record among a new list of successful results.

While I praised the algorithm used to search for variants of names already, there is also some potential for records to be missed if the development team is unfamiliar with some standard shorthand forms in early modern record keeping. Users searching for a person with the first name “Christopher” will invariably miss a good many records in which the clerk has used the shorthand X (chi) for the name’s first part, “Christ.” If the user amends the search instead to find the alternative Xofer, there may be more success. Even then, still more records may be missing because some transcribers will have been unfamiliar with the relatively common use of an Xp (chi-rho) combination to signify Christ, so amending the search for Xpofer yields further successes. The issue is exacerbated, though, in those cases where Xpofer has been transcribed incorrectly as Xtofer by somebody presuming that the first and last letters of “Christ” would be used in the abbreviated form—the burial of Christopher Smith in Oxwick, Norfolk, on 20 August 1556 is recorded in just this fashion as an entry for Xtofer Smith, and so does not appear in searches for Christopher or any of the variants listed here, whereas the original hand can clearly be seen in the register to have entered the name as “Xpofer Smith.”

One other caveat concerns the entry of place names into the “location” search field within the main search page for “Births, Marriages, and Deaths.” Entering text into the field launches a predictive pop-up menu that will suggest

names of locations based on the characters already entered, but the predictions can be frustratingly off the mark. The user who wants to limit a search to the parish of St. Botolph's Aldgate is in for a surprise, even if the UK and Ireland collection has already been selected as one of the search parameters. Entering St. B leads to predictions for St. Bernhard, Hildburghausen, Thuringia, Germany, and other foreign places as well as some loosely proximate records from Cornwall and Wales. Add another character and the predictive ability of the engine dries up altogether, with "No matches found," but if the user continues undeterred to add the next character, a string of new predictions appears, but with locations in Chad or the Philippines. Even if the user enters the full church name as St. Botolph's, with or without the apostrophe, no match is found to the relevant parish in Aldgate, but parishes with that name are offered in Buckinghamshire and Sussex. Sticking with the manually entered correct parish name does not appear to help the search engine to limit its results to those in the relevant parish, either. As a workaround, I have found that the most reliable way to limit searches to a parish within London is to enter London and select "London, London, England" from the suggested locations, and then choose "Exact to this county" in the tolerance range. Results will include many surrounding parishes but will also at least include those for St. Botolph's Aldgate.

For all these foibles that make the search engine a somewhat imperfect tool, the fact remains that any search facility is better than what researchers in parish records have had to use in the past. More to the point, the success of Ancestry.com in securing access for its subscribers to hundreds of parish registers and thousands of wills—which do, incidentally, appear in search results for "Births, Marriages, and Deaths"—means that researchers of the lives of any early modern person not otherwise famous enough to already have an entry in the *Oxford National Dictionary of Biography* are now able to consult the original registers and documents online. The final caveat, which applies to all research undertaken with early modern materials, is that before forking out the money to subscribe to Ancestry.com, any researcher intending to use the site extensively within the six-month period covered by a subscription will want to have their skills at reading secretary hand and common forms of abbreviation up to speed. Armed with the ability to discern the early modern "A" from the modern "E" and the early modern "c" from the modern "r," then, the researcher will have no problem identifying "Alys Lucke" (who married William Johnson in St. Stephen Coleman Street on 31 March 1567) instead of the "Elis Lurke"

under which the item has been tagged. The levels of access that researchers can gain to digital versions of original documents through a facility of this kind promises to be a game changer for this field in the coming years, presuming that Ancestry.com LLC has no immediate desire to change its business model.

LAURIE JOHNSON

University of Southern Queensland

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LeBlanc, Zoe, editor and technical lead; Sarah Melton, managing editor; Ian Milligan, ombudsperson; Anna-Maria Sichani, editor, technical team; Nabeel Siddiqui, editor; Alex Wermer-Colan, editor, technical team. Founded by William J. Turkel and Alan MacEachern.

The Programming Historian. Other.

Accessed 19 July 2021.

programminghistorian.org.

As a novice digital humanist, it can be difficult to know where to begin gaining digital skills beyond job-related training. It can also be daunting to undertake hours of self-teaching and training in digital skills when even understanding the vocabulary and acronyms can seem like a major hurdle. For people trying to learn digital skills for humanities-based work, The Programming Historian offers a potential solution.

Founded in 2008 by Willam J. Turkel and Alan MacEachern, The Programming Historian now offers eighty-six lessons in English and “is now a proudly multi-lingual project” with lessons in Spanish, French, and Portuguese.¹ Since its foundation, The Programming Historian’s editorial board has expanded and there is a strong emphasis on diversity and inclusion. Indeed, members of the editorial board have published articles on the community’s active participation in diversity and inclusion. In 2015, the editorial board believed that the community was gender neutral, as “they had not consciously constructed gender barriers,” but, realizing this was not the case, they sought to find out what they could do to improve via open discussion online and a survey.²

1. Sichani, Baker, Llach, and Walsh, 3.

2. Crymble, 49.