

THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF WILLS, ENGLAND 1540-1790

AUTUMN 2024 NEWSLETTER

Hello, and welcome to our second newsletter. In this edition you will see we've had a busy summer on all fronts, and that we are now on the brink of a very significant milestone.

HATS OFF TO OUR EXPERTS!

First, a huge **thank you** to our team of 22 Expert Volunteers, who have finished the transcriptions used to train our



Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) model. **They have transcribed 414 pages of wills, consisting of 26,199 lines of text.** They've also checked and corrected a further 62 pages of HTR-generated text, and had the opportunity to see what the early outputs of the model look like.

The next step is to apply the corrected HTR model to our entire sample of wills, enabling us to auto-generate 25,000 will transcriptions.

ZOONIVERSE NEWS

Once we have our 25,000 auto-generated will transcriptions these must be checked carefully for accuracy and will require correction. Since we will have around 2 million lines of text to check, we will need help!

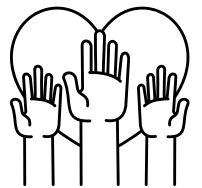
Fortunately the crowdsourcing platform 'Zooniverse' is perfectly suited to our project. There volunteers can check a line or two of a will quickly and easily. Our Research Fellow Harry Smith has created our project Zooniverse site, and it is currently going through beta testing and final checks.

TRAINING THE HTR MODEL

The project Technical Expert Mark Bell has been hard at work refining the Transkribus HTR model.

The wills in our sample date from 1540-1790, and the handwriting changes over this 250-year period. This difference means the HTR model can more accurately generate transcriptions of some types of handwriting than others. Another problem is the clarity of the microfilm scans that we're working with – poorer quality scans mean the HTR model can struggle to accurately 'read' the handwriting.

Thanks to Mark's expertise we're continually correcting and training the model, to ensure it can effectively transcribe writing from across the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

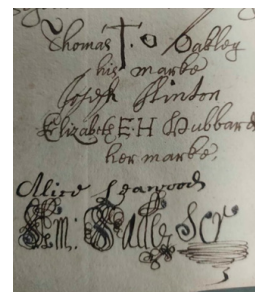
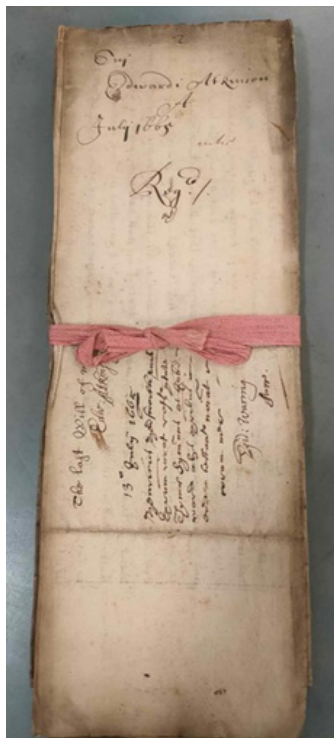


THE WILLS PROJECT WILL LAUNCH ON ZOONIVERSE VERY SOON, SO IF YOU WANT TO VOLUNTEER TO HELP US DO LOOK OUT FOR OUR NEXT EMAIL.

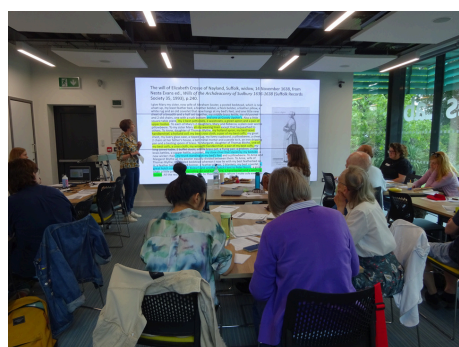
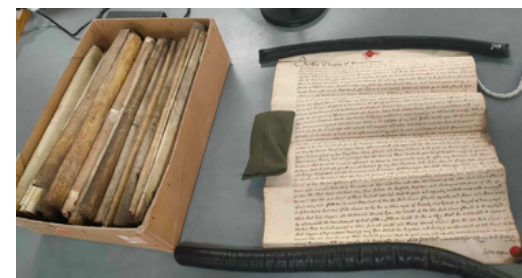
The screenshot shows the Zooniverse project page. At the top, it says 'The Material Culture of Wills: England 1540-1790' and 'UNDER REVIEW'. Below this is a preview of a handwritten will snippet from 1664-1666. The interface includes navigation links for 'ABOUT', 'CLASSIFY', 'TALK', and 'COLLECT'. There are also buttons for 'SUBJECT INFO', 'ADD TO FAVORITES', and 'ADD TO COLLECTIONS'. A 'FIELD GUIDE' button is visible. The main content area is divided into 'TASK' and 'TUTORIAL' sections. The 'TASK' section contains instructions for transcribing a line of text, including advice on handling illegible text and languages other than English. The 'TUTORIAL' section provides more detailed guidance on transcribing old handwriting, including a reference to the 'Field Guide' section on Palaeography.

ORIGINAL WILLS IN THE ARCHIVE

Most of the wills we're looking at for the project are registered copies – that is, copies of wills entered into a large volume (register) by church court clerks when wills were proved before the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC). However, back in May, Research Fellow Emily Vine visited The National Archives to view original wills, which were written by a scribe usually in the presence of the testator, and contain the original signatures of the testator and witnesses. This archival research informed our two June workshops and first article.

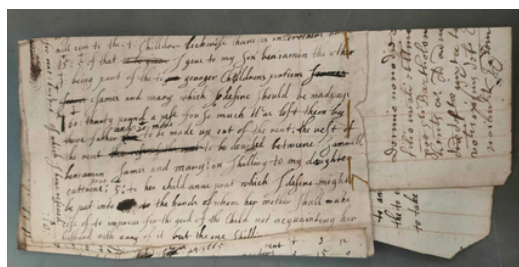


Some of the wills Emily consulted at TNA from the PROB 10 series.



WHAT'S IN A WILL?

In June we held two workshops, one at The National Archives, and one at the University of Exeter. We were delighted to be joined by many knowledgeable and generous participants, who we learnt a lot from. Both days involved a mix of talks, activities, and discussions about using wills as a historical source. You can read more about the workshops in our [blog post here](#).



Above left: Project leader Jane Whittle presents at the Exeter workshop

Above right: Mark, Harry & participant chat at TNA workshop.

BLOGS POSTS FOR ALL

We're very active on our [project blog](#), where you can read more about our progress, and where we showcase some of the interesting things that we've found in our wills.

We also have our regular 'Will of the Month' series, which in June and July featured fantastic blog posts from our Expert Volunteers **Liz Wood** & **Austen Hamilton**. Many thanks to both of them for sharing their fascinating research.



FIRST PROJECT PUBLICATION

Finally, we are delighted to report that team members Harry Smith & Emily Vine recently had an article accepted for publication by *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. The article is entitled 'Material and Digital Archives: the case of wills', and it explores the range of digital sources available to historians, and what has been gained and lost in the digitisation of the probate records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury. The article is the first publication from the project - it will appear towards the end of this year, and it will be freely accessible to all readers.



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