

THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF WILLS, ENGLAND 1540-1790

AUTUMN 2025 NEWSLETTER



Welcome to our fourth newsletter. As you will read, we've arrived at an exciting point in our project, reaching a significant transcription milestone. *Banner art above: Kate Watson*

ZOONIVERSE A ROARING SUCCESS!

As usual, we begin with a heartfelt **thank you** to everyone who has contributed to the project on Zooniverse. Our site has been live for almost a year, and volunteers have continued to work tirelessly checking and correcting will transcriptions over the last few months.

At the time of writing, an enormous **522,334 lines** of text have been checked by **4,496 volunteers**.

In recent months volunteers have contributed to additional workflows which have greatly improved our HTR model's accuracy in transcribing names of testators and marginalia.



VOLUNTEER PHASE DRAWING TO A CLOSE

Thanks to our volunteers' vital contributions, we are now coming to the end of our transcription tasks and the Zooniverse phase of the project will finish shortly.

We will continue to monitor the Talk Boards for now, and will use them to highlight project findings and publications as they emerge.

We will soon share preliminary transcriptions of the 25,000+ wills, ensuring Zooniverse users can access the outcome of their work.

Keep up to date with future developments via our newsletters or **[this Talk Board post](#)**.

SUMMER TRANSCRIBATHON

In July we held a hybrid Transcribathon in Exeter University's Digital Humanities Lab and on Zoom. We were joined by around 20 people in person and more than 70 online, who dialled in from around the world.

The project team gave talks throughout the afternoon on aspects of wills and the project methodology while attendees transcribed on Zooniverse.

There were a couple of unexpected bonuses on the day: Devon based project musician Chris Hoban dropped by, and for those in Exeter, Research Fellow Harry Smith's homemade biscuits were in very high demand!

In total, attendees transcribed or checked an amazing **3494 lines of text in 3 hours!** Project PhD student Kit Barton live-posted the session on Bluesky – catch up on their summary **[here](#)**.



DATA ANALYSIS BEGINS

Having our preliminary transcriptions has meant that Harry Smith, our Digital Humanities Research Fellow, has been able to build the first iteration of our **project database**.

The database includes tables with details of each individual testator (including their gender and occupation), bequests, and objects mentioned within each bequest.

At this early stage we're already able to query the database, searching the transcriptions for a particular object. We're really excited about what it will enable us to discover in our 25,000+ wills during the next stage of the project.

WILLS AS WINDOWS ONTO PAST LIVES



LINOCUT PRINT WORKSHOP, MAY 2025

As part of their creative collaboration, project co-investigator Laura Sangha & musician Chris Hoban organised a workshop in Exeter led by Double Elephant Press.

The workshop explored the close relationship between images, words and music. This is a combination found in popular early modern balladsheets, a vital historical source that Laura has previously worked on.

For more on how it worked, to see more of the artwork, and for what else Chris & Laura have been up to, see Laura's [blog post here](#).

Art - above: Emily Vine, below L-R: Jane Tozer, Kit Barton, Fiona Rourke.



PRESENTATIONS & MEDIA

Since our last update the project team have given research presentations to a wide variety of audiences within & beyond academia.

We were featured on the Zooniverse **'Around the Zoo'** YouTube series and Laura talked about wills in an episode of the **This Shakespeare Life** podcast.

Full details of all our talks can be found on the [website 'About' page](#).

BLOG STILL GOING STRONG

We have now published 20 posts in our 'Will of the Month' series, incorporating full transcriptions of each will.



June's **post** was a very special one, co-written and researched by two of our Zooniverse volunteers, Will Johnson and Barbara Tearle. Will and Barbara have also made their transcription and research notes available for all to use freely [[link here](#)]. Thank you to them both - this is exactly the sort of collaboration that we've so enjoyed as part of the project.