

Murders and Marvels:

the Chapbooks Project at the University of Leicester

**Notes from a presentation to the Bibliographical Society on 15 December 2009
by Roey Sweet, Kate Loveman, Malcolm Noble and John Hinks**

John Hinks, 'The prologue': a brief and somewhat selective account of the genesis of the Chapbooks Project at the University of Leicester

Five years ago, the Bibliographical Society brought together a working group of people interested in chapbooks. The original plan was a published checklist of English chapbooks but this soon expanded into a very ambitious plan to create a major website to support research on chapbooks. Three elements were planned:

- a database of libraries' holdings of chapbooks
- (eventually) digitised text and images from a range of chapbooks
- information on historical background, production, distribution and readership of chapbooks

A Chapbooks Study Day was held at the Victoria & Albert Museum on 24 October 2005: a number of distinguished speakers discussed various aspects of chapbooks and another, slightly different, working group was established. Fast-forward to Summer 2008, when the Bibliographical Society invited applications for a unique series of large research grants, of up to £10,000 each (in addition to the Society's usual major and minor research awards). The University of Leicester was fortunate in obtaining one of these grants, for which we are most grateful to the Society. This enabled us to employ a research assistant (Malcolm Noble, one of our PhD students) to work for six months, part-time, on the Chapbooks Project, under the joint supervision of Professor Roey Sweet (Historical Studies), Dr Kate Loveman (English) and myself.

We decided that it would be appropriate to sample chapbooks from three collections. Our own university library does not have a chapbooks collection but in any case we felt that a study based on a single collection would not provide the broad comparative perspective that we wanted. Individual collections of chapbooks (Samuel Pepys is the most obvious example but there are others) are inevitably shaped by the interests and quirks of the collector. The collections studied were those of Cambridge University Library, Nottingham University Library and Birmingham City Library.

The aim of what we have been doing at Leicester is to demonstrate what *needs* to be done and what *can* be done. I have been pleasantly surprised by how much has been achieved but please bear in mind that this represents the work of one person, part-time, for just six months. Nevertheless, I think that our results are of value as an indicator of what could be achieved if ever funding could be secured for a major chapbooks project along the lines originally envisaged.

The study of chapbooks is complicated by the fact that there is no generally accepted standard definition of a chapbook. When they were produced and bought, in huge numbers, nobody called

them 'chapbooks'. The word 'chapbook' (= cheap book) is a much later back-formation from 'chapman', a pedlar or hawker who typically sold a range of cheap print and other goods. In their day, they were probably known as 'little books', 'penny books', or perhaps even just 'books' as those buying them would not have owned any more substantial printed items except perhaps in some cases a family Bible.

There is a parallel problem of what to call this broad genre of literature, *i.e.* chapbooks, ballad-sheets, broadsides, and many other forms of cheap print. Well, 'cheap print' is actually quite a clear description. I personally like 'street literature' which rightly emphasises the urban nature of these items – in terms of production that is; they were of course 'consumed' in both urban and rural areas. 'Popular literature/print' is another possibility but does tend to reopen the old binary divide of 'popular' and 'elite' culture, which we can well do without! (Other terms sometimes found, 'ephemeral print' and 'non-canonical literature', are too judgemental and negative for my liking.) Librarians and bibliographers have their own problems in describing and cataloguing this type of material. As a former librarian I can sympathise with them but what matters to me, now, as a historian (and if you pressed me to be more specific I might admit to being an urban, cultural historian), is the breadth and depth of this huge range of cheap print, of which chapbooks are just one part (albeit an important part) and its significance as an indicator of how people (often of low or zero functional literacy) interacted with printed texts and images that were very widely available for much of the seventeenth century, all of the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth.

Malcolm Noble, an outline of the research and the pilot database

- The main task for the Research Assistant was the production of the database, inputting data into this framework, and drawing some conclusions, of both qualitative and quantitative nature, to assist in the identification of future questions for the project to address, as well as some of the issues relating to cataloguing this kind of literature, which would be most effectively highlighted through practical application.
- A simple, relational database was required, capable of storing links, substantial amounts of text, and images and files relevant to any given chapbook. Given the exploratory nature of the project, and the fact that the end goal was a research agenda, this wasn't to be a technical exercise for its own sake. I'd encourage you to bear in mind the prospect of unified standards for cataloguing early printed street literature, and the fact that the scope of this project was limited and finite, limited effort was to be placed on this. The most recent version of the common Access was employed, given that it enabled lookup tables, attachments and near universal accessibility.
- Purpose – identify future questions
 - What cataloguing issues are best discovered through practical application
- The specification was designed with close approval from the supervisory team.
- Had to be straightforward – proprietary systems such as ICONCLASS, whilst useful, were not practicable, given the finite resources.
- The basic data was held in the Chapbooks table.

- ChapID is an automatic number, for statistical and control purposes.
- Shelfmark, Accession and Collection are obviously to locate the item again. A field hidden from this view, but set at the start of each stage of cataloguing bears the library name (LibName)
- Full Title is a full transcription of words in the title, as given, without; single vertical strokes¹ have been set aside in order to facilitate full-text searching, and because the purpose of the database has
- ShortTitle is a lookup field, used to analyze frequency of titles within the sample.
- PubYr is only used when a year of printing is given, not when one has been traced by means of various catalogues.
- Imprint: full transcription of all details.
- Price – records the price as stated, e.g. Price One Penny
- PriceInst. For use, in what transpired to be relatively rare cases of more than one price being given
- Format, being the format, where this could be ascertained
- NoPages, number; pagination
- No Illustr notes illustrations.
- Typeillus details the types, and what is contained in them.
- Red Ink Self-obviously.
- Marginalia
- OwnerMarks
- Contents = summary of what's in it
- Verse indicated some verse was present
- RecType enabled me to record what I had skipped, alongside a reason in SkippedReason.
- If Bound with other titles, which ChapbookIDs?
- Binding notes
- Colophon, where present
- Almost always R[oman] typeface
- Provenance, where known
- Cover Coloured
- CoverType
- Data added
- Nottingham University Library. All but one. 60 in SCM pamphlets, plus 29 from East Midlands Collection.
- Cambridge University Library. Sampling. Within chapbooks proper at first.
 - According to the fact sheet, the collection is 3,900 volumes in size, 'of which around 2,350 are chapbooks proper of the type sold cheaply by travelling hawkers in the 18th and 19th centuries'.
 - Initially 56.d.111/CCD7.56.111
- Birmingham
 - 13 volumes bound. All surveyed.
- In total 434 actual chapbooks

¹ P. Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (1972), p. 325.

- Having done this, some metadata was added.
- Title tagging. Based on title rather than full contents, as most titles could not be read, due to time constraints.
 - Animals, canonical, crime, death, education, empire, garlands, gender, health, historical, letter, local, magic, military, morality, news, political, redactions, religion, romance, royalty, sea, song, tales, topography, travel, urban, wit, women, youth, NUL
- Person as subject
- Sampling
- Every 10th full record.
- Bibliographic search
 - EEBO
 - BBTI
 - ESTC
 - BLIC
 - COPAC
 - Specialist catalogues
- Image Sample
- Through the database, raw data to analyse and identify questions.

Kate Loveman, Research Aims

- Investigate content of chapbooks: What are the common subjects? How are chapbooks related to other genres?
- Assess evidence for readership
- Assess evidence for publication

Popular short titles

These are one way to identify chapbook content using the database
Short titles assigned to 203 out of 434 chapbook records.

Short title	Number
A Collection of Songs	18
Robin Hood*	14
Jack and the Giant(s)/Killer	14
Valentine & Orson	10
Cinderella	8
Cock Robin	7
Tom Thumb	6

The House that Jack Built	6
Bluebeard	6
Robinson Crusoe	5
Old Dame Trot	5
Mother Hubbard	5
Dick Whittington	5
Red Riding Hood	4
Mother Goose	4
Jane Shore	4

The numbers of 'Robin Hood' chapbooks are increased by the focus of the Nottingham collection on locally related titles.

From a 21st century perspective, many of these are what we'd identify as nursery rhyme subjects or fairy tales. However *Valentine and Orson* is a romance, *Robinson Crusoe* based on the best-selling novel and *Jane Shore* is about the famous royal mistress.

The Chapbook Title-page Top Ten

An alternative way of identifying the common content of chapbooks is to use the 'tags' which label the types of information provided on title-pages (and thus what chapbook publishers believe will sell). An item can have more than one tag.

Popular tags from 434 works surveyed.

1. Morality (118)
2. Gender commentary/ exemplar (112)
3. Tales (65)
4. Historical figures [?] (62)
5. Death (57)
6. Animals (48)
7. = Crime (46) and Magic (46)
8. Religion (45)
9. Local Interest (36)
10. = Wit (34) and Song (34)
13. "Canonical" (29), i.e. claiming connection to well-known work or author.

Crime

Within any one tag there can be a range of works, e.g. for 'Crime'

The Singular Life, Adventures, and Depredations of David Haggart, The Murderer,... In various Parts of Scotland; also in Berwick-upon-Tweed, Newcastle upon Tyne, Durham, York & other places...

Related by Himself, while Lying under sentence Death. With an Account of his Execution. At Edinburgh, July 18, 1821 (Newcastle, no date)

[the naming of places here suggests readers will be attracted to mention of these locations and thus may indicate where the chapbook publisher expects the work to find a market]

The Bloody Tragedy. Giving a full and true Account of one John Day in the Town of Dereham, in Norfolk. Who most barbrously murdered his FATHER and MOTHER by cutting their Throats from Ear to Ear, and quartered them in a most cruel manner (no publication details) [unlike the above example, the lack of date here is probably intended to give the work a more “enduring appeal”]

The Life of Richard Turpin, The Notorious Highway Man, Containing an Account of his Bold Adventures, Daring Robberies, his Expertness in Horse-stealing; Also his Trial, Execution &c (Newcastle, no date)

[Not Turpins ‘Depredations’ but instead suggests and exciting adventure narrative]

The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Moll Flanders ... (London, c. 1750)

[the chapbook titlepage adheres fairly closely to Daniel Defoe’s 1722 original, with the addition of a lot of naming of London prisons (projecting a particular idea of the metropolis) and a woodcut commissioned for the work showing Moll.

Moll Flanders

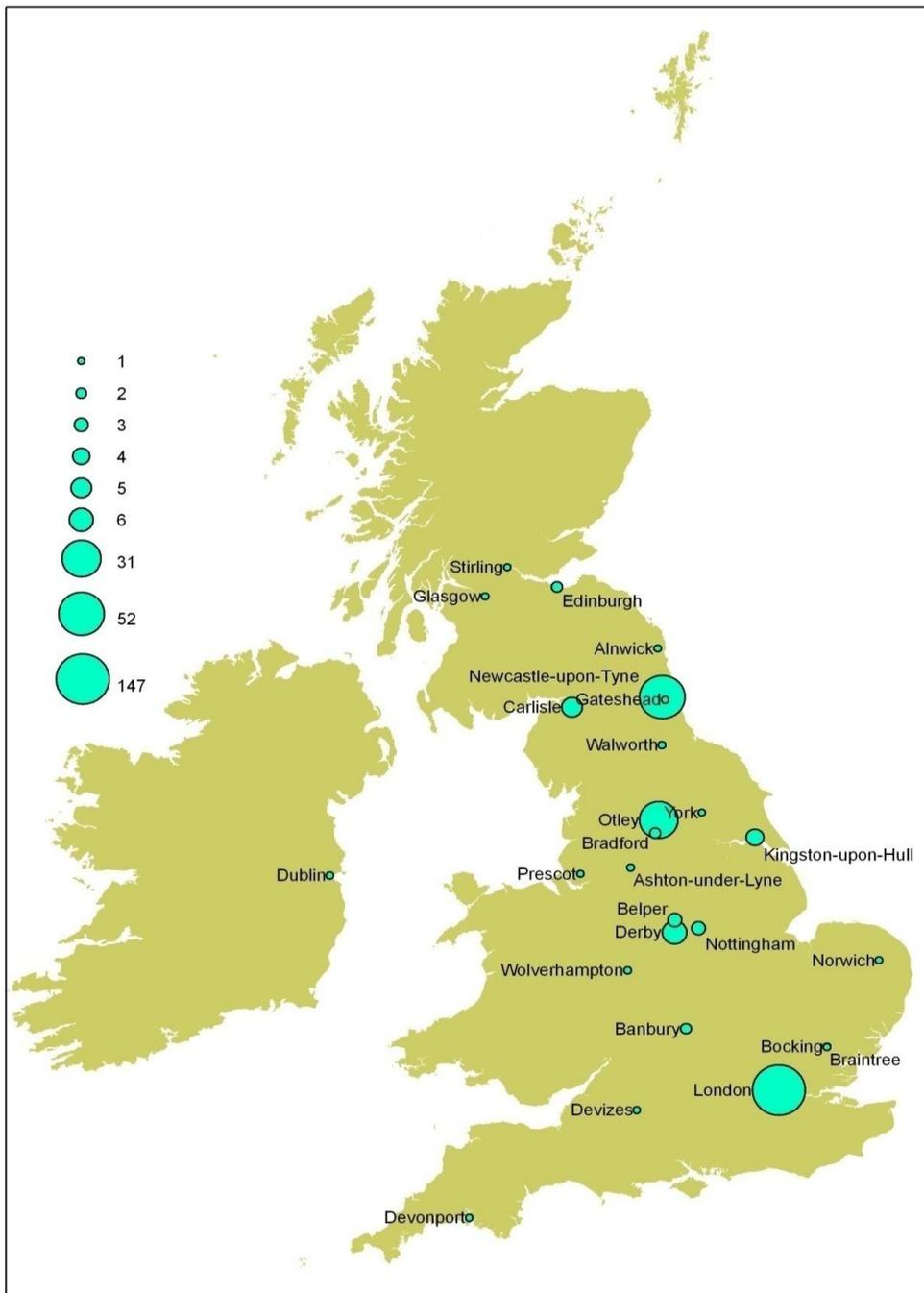
Differences between an ‘original’ narrative and the chapbook version can tell us about expectations for chapbooks and their readers, and about the reception of famous works.

Readers

Readers’ annotations can be particularly revealing. 7% of chapbooks surveyed have annotations (31). These can be used to date chapbooks where evidence in the text itself is wanting, e.g. Black Ey’d Susan’s Garland (Nottingham University Library, SCP PR777.N4) was being read in Alnwick in the second decade of the nineteenth-century by members of the Lauder family.

Mapping publishing

The database can be used to produce maps that show the publishing place for contents in the individual collections. This is for chapbooks at Nottingham University Library:



This in turn can help provide contexts for readers. *Black Ey'd Susan's Garland* was published in Newcastle – a major centre for chapbook publication that is well-represented in all 3 collections surveyed. It was read in Alnwick, which had many bookselling and publishing businesses in the early nineteenth century, some of them producing chapbooks.

Roey Sweet, Future Directions

Building on the findings of the pilot project we have attempted to formulate a series of research questions and to map out a strategy for funding and research.

- The qualitative content of the chapbook needs closer examination: chapbooks proliferated in the 18th century and encompassed a very wide variety of genres - which makes them problematic to categorise, but as the most affordable form of literature they constitute a crucial means of accessing non-elite culture. Thematic questions which cut across the divisions of genre will be particularly significant. These can be explored using the tags employed in the database.
- Importance of deconstructing existing teleologies: eg decisions of 19th century collectors as to what constitutes a chapbook; model of decline of chivalric romance and rise of more radical, even potentially subversive forms of literature, linked to politicisation of working class in later 18th and 19th centuries.
- How far are these changes reflected across the spectrum of chapbook literature?
- What are the broader implications for the very clear continuity with 16th and 17th century chapbooks for much of the 18th century? When does this continuity begin to breakdown and why?
- Nations and Regions: 18th century saw distribution of chapbooks from the metropolis (which fits with London-centric models of 18th century culture): chapbooks follow same distribution networks as newspapers, but arguably reach a wider audience. What do they contribute to development and expression of national identity in this period?
- Do chapbooks articulate a sense of Britishness or Englishness (or foreignness against which national identity can be constructed?)
- What version of national history and national events do they represent (18th century chapbooks become more responsive to contemporary events; more topical and more specific reference to historical past).
- How much awareness do they show of themes associated with national identity in other studies: eg Protestantism, empire, maritime traditions.
- But also increasing numbers of chapbooks were produced locally by jobbing printers (as mapped in pilot project). Provincial collections show strong local bias (decision on part of collectors?) but this also allow for analysis of chapbooks as vehicles for expression of regional or local difference and identity.
- Morality and gender related themes were the most frequently tagged in the pilot project: what kind of values are associated with masculine and feminine characters in the chapbooks?
- To what extent was morality gendered?
- How consistent were constructions of masculinity and femininity, and in particular, what evidence is there that these changed over time?
- How far do the gender norms of chapbooks correspond with those articulated in other forms of literature?

- Religion and piety: also frequently tagged in the pilot project, despite deliberate exclusion of religious tracts from the sample (distinction between 'godly' chapbooks and religious tracts not always easy to maintain).
- What kind of religious sentiments do chapbooks express in the eighteenth century, and what evidence is there for change over time (particularly in wake of Methodism and subsequent evangelical revival)?
- What can chapbooks tell us about forms of lay piety, religious belief (eg role of providence?) and persistence of older 'superstitious' beliefs (eg miracles).
- What does interest in magic indicate about popular religious belief?
- Urbane and rustic chapbooks: what role did chapbooks play in disseminating cultural assumptions regarding urban and rural society?
- What kind of lessons on urban life and living do they offer?
- How are London and other towns and cities represented? (eg use of prisons as metonym for London in chapbook edition of *Moll Flanders*).
- Use of images: what is the relationship between image and text in chapbooks? Are they simply 'clip art', or is there a more sophisticated relationship (as indicated in the annotated image in *Moll Flanders*).
- How far were images re-used and recycled and which ones were particularly popular? What does the commissioning of new images indicate?
- What recurrent themes do we see in images and in the choice of subject matter? (preliminary tagging indicates, for example, disproportionate popularity of images with a maritime theme; also ubiquity of animal images).

Funding

- University of Leicester has agreed to fund a 3 year full time fees only PhD studentship on 'National identity, popular culture and eighteenth-century chapbooks:
- <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/finance/funding/scholarships/chapbooks>
- contact Roey Sweet: rhs4@le.ac.uk

Longer term

- Investigate possibilities for AHRC collaborative doctoral awards with libraries such as V&A and BL with significant chapbook collections as partners.
- Plan towards a major Leverhulme or AHRC grant.
- Plan a major comparative conference on chapbooks/street literature in long 18th century
- Collaborative application with eg Edinburgh or Glasgow for comparative study of Scottish and English chapbooks.