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'Blogging Our Criminal Past: Public History, Social Media and Creative History'

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Article

BLOGGING OUR CRIMINAL PAST:
SOCIAL MEDIA, PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND
CREATIVE HISTORY
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Abstract

Rather than asking should historians use social media - a question frequently posed online and increasingly discussed in seminars and conferences - this article explores how historians currently use blogging and micro-blogging, and how these media are transforming the ways we think and write about history. Blogging, the article argues, has the potential to 'turn history upside down' by breaking down traditional hierarchies separating amateur and professional, young and old, theorist and practitioner, reader and writer. Where early blogger-historians tended to be associated with large-scale digital projects and concerned with digital humanities methodologies, the article detects the emergence of a new generation, led by postgraduates and early careers researchers, committed to writing accessible 'history from below'. Social media is not simply a tool to reach a larger audience for, as a medium, its visual, interactive and open-ended features allow us - encourage us even - to be more creative and reflective. Consequently, the article proposes, blogging is becoming an integral and dynamic part of the research process, not simply a supplement to scholarly publication or a work-in-progress version of it.

Keywords: social media, digital humanities, public history, history from below, popular history, creative history, collaborative history

Introduction

Can social media make us better historians? 'If there is a "crisis" in the humanities', contends Tim Hitchcock, 'it lies in how we have our public debates, rather than in their content.' Though 'the role of the academic humanist has always been a public one', traditional academic platforms, he claims - conference presentations, scholarly journals, and research monographs - have too often limited the audience to specialist libraries and researchers, or at best the Higher Education classroom. Social media, by contrast, lets us open the gates of the research community to include amateurs and practitioners, archivists and curators, creative writers and artists, learners and teachers across the educational spectrum, and readers with potentially infinite interests, expertise, and curiosities.

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Tim Hitchcock proposes that:

> By building blogging, and twitter, flickr, and shared libraries in Zotero, in to our research programmes - into the way we work anyway - we both get more research done, … 'and build a community of engaged readers for the work itself. We can do what we have always done, but do it better; as a public performance, in dialog amongst ourselves, and with a wider public.[2]

But blogging is not only a tool enabling us to reach more readers and users, to do what we have always done but 'do it better', as Hitchcock puts it. More radically, I suggest, this interactive medium might allow us to view our sources from alternative perspectives, re-present and understand them in new ways, and even re-conceptualise our relationship with the past.

In this article I explore how historians are using social media - particularly blogging and microblogging - to share their research and participate actively in conversations with diverse and multiple audiences, but I also consider how the medium might lead us to think and write about history in different ways. I focus on historians of crime in the UK not only because they form a lively branch of the history blogosphere and twittersphere but because they provide a good example of how inclusive online research communities are built.

Since its formation in 2013, the Our Criminal Past network has fostered dialogue between academic scholars, educators, practitioners and researchers in the archive, heritage, and criminal justice sectors. The network's founders, Heather Shore and Helen Johnston, encouraged the uptake of social media within the field, and critical reflection on it, by including papers at its public events on the role of social media in learning, teaching and research, while the network's twitter feed, @ourcriminalpast, has probably become the most important channel of communication within the field.

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[2] Tim Hitchcock, 'Doing it in public: Impact, blogging, social media and the academy', Historyonics, 15 July 2014, (accessed online at http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/2014/07/doing-it-in-public-impact-blogging.html, 18 Aug 2014). See also: Rohan Maitzen, 'Scholarship 2.0: Blogging and/as Academic Practice', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17(3) (2012), 348-54; and *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities,* ed. by Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt. DigitalCulture Books (Online imprint of Michigan University Press), 2013; available for download https://www.press.umich.edu/3981059/hacking_the_academy, accessed 13 May 2013; Mark Knights, 'The Implications of Social Media', *Cultural and Social History*, 11(3) (2014), 329-333, http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/147800414X13983595303156.

As an open and flexible medium for on-going discussion, blogging is enabling us to think aloud about the political and ethical challenges confronting criminal justice historians, whether in the classroom, the museum or the media: how to balance public desire for education and entertainment? How to make records accessible and where to preserve anonymity? How to convey painful historical experiences which touch directly on the personal experiences of those currently living with the effects of crime and punishment? In what follows I examine the creative ways in which bloggers are meeting these challenges but first I outline how their use of social media fits in the current ecology of academic and public scholarship.

1   History of Crime in the Blogosphere

Historians of crime were among early academic bloggers. Sharon Howard, a pioneering blogger, has been posting at Early Modern Notes for ten years. On her website she hosts a wonderful array of aggregated blogs, including The History Carnival, Early Modern Commons, and the New Newgate Calendar (Illustration 1 below) which collates the latest blogs by crime historians.[3] Multi-author blogs, such as the Crime in the Community Blog of the Old Bailey Online, also managed by Sharon Howard and, more recently, Our Criminal Past play a crucial role in opening up the blogosphere to the uninitiated, providing a space for writers new to blogging to test the waters. They also allow bloggers to showcase their work and engage with writers and readers in other areas of the field or from different disciplines.[4] These platforms are offering crime historians an immediate and flexible form of online communication for work-in-progress to complement open access journals like Law, Crime and History produced by the SOLON network.

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[3] Sharon Howard, 'Ten Years Blogging', *Early Modern Notes*, 17 June 2014, Accessed online at http://earlymodernnotes.wordpress.com/2014/06/17/ten-years-blogging/ 18 August 2014. See History Blogging page at www.sharonhoward.org for other links.
[4] Medieval historians were early academic bloggers. For a report on the collaborative blog In the Middle, begun in 2006, see Karl Steel, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Mary Kate Hurley and Eileen A. Joy, 'Why We Blog: An Essay in Four Movements', *Literature Compass,* 9(12) (2012): 1016-1032. doi: 10.1111/lic3.12012.

Illustration 1: The New Newgate Calendar , aggregated by and courtesy of Sharon Howard

Blogging platforms create a vital online presence for collaborative research projects, whether in sustaining and developing long-running projects, as does Crime in the Community for the Old Bailey Online, or in generating interest in new projects and drawing wider participation into discussion of research design, as do newcomers on the block, The Carceral Archipelago: Transnational Circulations in Global Perspective, 1415-1960 and The Digital Panopticon: The Global Impact of London Punishments, 1780-1925. These blogs build on the model of web-based collaborative research, such as the impressive Female Convicts Research Centre formed in Tasmania in 2004. Blogging and the micro-blogging tools which underpin it - notably Facebook and Twitter - form an indispensable infrastructure for the research network. They have enabled Our Criminal Past to establish a virtual network extending well

beyond the academy that keeps archivists, curators, educators and researchers in dialogue before and after face-to-face meetings.

Until recently blogging and related social media generated considerable academic anxiety, particularly over research 'ownership' and copyright. Postgraduate and early career researchers have often been advised to hold back work-in-progress and not to publish their theses online, to avoid their research being misappropriated or to enhance the prospect of publication with prestigious journals and presses.[5] For similar reasons, some historians reserve their core research for traditional academic outputs and blog instead on side-line topics while others do not include references to primary material. Such caution, I suggest, is misplaced. All good researchers share their work-in-progress in seminars and conferences and the blogosphere is simply an online extension of these traditional forums. Blogging allows researchers to stake out their field of research. With built in dates of publication, the blog enables scholars to demonstrate how their work has evolved and to stamp the originality of their methods and arguments. More and more researchers are realising how openness can dramatically extend the reach of their scholarship, while sharing work in public enables ideas to take shape in dialogue with others and sometimes follow directions the lone researcher might never envisage.[6]

Postgraduate and early career researchers have played a major role in developing this more sociable, interactive scholarly practice and are leading the way in showing how blogging can fashion new kinds of research identities and career trajectories. Adam Crymble, a pioneer blogger in postgraduate research, began [Thoughts on Public and Digital History](#) in November 2007 while studying for an MA in Public History at the University of Western Ontario. Fittingly, for a scholar who has pushed the boundaries of what a research blog can do, his first post, '[How to Get Feedback from your Exhibit Viewers Without Their Realizing it](#)', reported on his surreptitious use of an empty display cabinet in the History Department to stage an interactive

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[5] See, for instance, '[American Historical Association Statement on Policies Regarding the Embargoing of Completed History PhD Dissertations](#)', *AHA Today: A Blog of the American Historical Association*, 22 July 2013 (accessed online at http://blog.historians.org/2013/07/american-historical-association-statement-on-policies-regarding-the-embargoing-of-completed-history-phd-dissertations/, 1 September 2014) which generated considerable controversy, evident in ensuing comments.

[6] Laura Mair, 'Blogging: What's in it for PhD Students?', *Blogging Beyond the Classroom*, 15 October 2014 (accessed online at http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=421, 18 December 2014); Emma Fleming, 'Scoffing at Blogging: A Converted Public History Postgrad', *Blogging Beyond the Classroom*, 14 December 2014 (accessed online http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=540 , 18 December 2014).

exhibition on 'The History of Wearing a Poppy', combined with collecting for the Royal Canadian Legion.[7] He blogged regularly throughout his MA and now completed PhD, 'Understanding the London Irish Immigrant Experience through Large-Scale Textual Analysis: 1801-1820', mostly on methodologies, research tools, and wider issues concerning digital humanities and public history. The blog became an educational platform in its own right, hosting related digital and pedagogic projects, including the co-authored open access resource, the [Programming Historian]. Significantly, Adam Crymble decided to end the blog when he took up a full-time academic teaching post, though it will remain online.[8] His decision raises issues many bloggers have yet to face: when should a blog end and, more broadly, where does blogging fit in the overall life-cycle of a research project, or indeed a scholarly career?

While early bloggers in the history of crime tended to be associated with large-scale digital history projects, a new generation of bloggers has emerged in the last couple of years.[9] They join a growing community of blogging historians whose online conversations are not limited to particular historical fields but span interdisciplinary studies of medicine and disability, emotions and material culture, gender and sexuality, and all aspects of history from below. Again, postgraduates and early career researchers are at the forefront of this move, including Lucy Williams who discusses [Wayward Women: Victorian England's Female Offenders] in this issue. Like Williams, Guy Woolnough ([Victorian Policing - Bottom-up history: What happened at street level]), Rachael Griffin [Victorian Detectives: Detective policing and criminal justice in the Victorian capital]), and Melanie Newport, who blogs on the US [Cook County Jail], launched their blogs about half way through their doctoral study. Many historians, however, begin blogging once their research is firmly established. Lesley Hulonce ([Workhouse Tales]) and Nell Darby ([Criminal Historian: Working with Dead People]) started towards the end of their theses; Vicky Holmes ([Victorian Domestic Dangers]) and Jade Shepherd ([Voices from Broadmoor]) shortly after

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[7] Adam Crymble, '[How to Get Feedback from your Exhibit Viewers Without Their Realizing it]', *Thoughts on Public and Digital History*, 29 November 2007 (accessed online at http://adamcrymble.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/how-to-get-feedback-from-your-exhibit.html, 12 August 2014).

[8] Adam Crymble, '[Play with the Big Kids. End]', *Thoughts on Public and Digital History*, 30 August 2014 (accessed online at http://adamcrymble.blogspot.co.uk/2014/08/play-with-big-kids.html, 1 September 2014).

[9] For pioneering PhD and early career bloggers in the field of Victorian Studies, see Amber K. Regis, 'Early Career Victorianists and Social Media: Impact, Audience and Online Identities', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17(3) (2012), 355-62 in conversation with Paul Dobraszczyk, [Rag-picking History: Unearthing Hidden Places & Pasts], [Charlotte Mattieson], Bob Nicholson, [The Digital Victorianist], and Amber K. Regis, ["Looking Glasses at Odd Corners"].

completion. For these historians, blogging provides a vital link to the scholarly community during the uncertain and sometimes isolating period of transition from PhD to employment but it also offers a creative space to repurpose academic research beyond narrow specialisms and to open it up for a wider audience.[10]

But perhaps we are on the cusp of a new trend, already well-established within digital humanities, where students begin blogging as they embark on their research degrees and discover how social media can enhance research design and development from the outset. Laura Mair (Victorian Ragged Schools) and Jim Hinks (Other People's Children: Histories of Paid Child Care, 1860-1910) launched online profiles in the early stages of their PhDs, and use their blogs and feedback from readers to help define their research parameters and questions, test out methods and interpret sources. And, as my second year undergraduate students show in their work for Prison Voices: Crime, Conviction and Confession, c. 1700-1900, blogging is a way of introducing students to online research and communication while involving them, as Zoe Alker discusses in this issue, in demonstrating to a public audience the richness of digital resources such as the Harvard Crime Broadsides and Tasmanian convict records.[11] Engaging students in the creation of public resources enables us to combine research-led teaching with what Catherine Feely has usefully called 'teaching-led research'.[12]

It is striking that most of the individual crime history blogs I have discovered are by UK-based scholars, with the exception of Anthony Vever who has been blogging at Early American Crime since 2008, Executed Today (a long-established blog), and those already mentioned by Rachael Griffin and Melanie Newport. My tweet to #twitterstorians calling for blogs by historians outside the UK yielded one response.[13]

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[10] For an example of the place of blogging in actively 'making a career' see George C. Gosling. 'Early Career Life in 2014', https://gcgosling.wordpress.com/2014/12/31/early-career-life-in-2014/, accessed 31 December 2014. For the role of blogging in providing an online presence and community for scholars without a permanent institutional position, see Daryl Leeworthy, 'Early Career Life in 2014', https://historylabplus.wordpress.com/2015/01/02/early-career-life-in-2014-daryl-leeworthy/, accessed 2 January 2014.

[11] For discussion and resources on the benefits and challenges of blogging and other social media as modes of learning and assessment, see the pedagogical site *Blogging Beyond the Classroom* http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/.

[12] Cath Feely, 'Early Career Life in 2014', https://historylabplus.wordpress.com/2015/01/01/early-career-life-in-2014-cath-feely/, accessed 2 January 2015.

[13] Helen Rogers (@HelenRogers19c) 'Know any history of crime/punishment blogs on History outside UK? Please send links to update this!' http://convictionblog.com/2014/08/18/blogging-our-criminal-past-part-1/ … #twitterstorians', 19 August 2014, 1:39pm. Tweet. Thanks to @KathrynRix for the reply.

This reinforces the importance of online networks, such as Our Criminal Past, in supporting and providing an audience for historical work in the blogosphere. It is notable, too, that the historians mentioned above have consciously designed their blogs to appeal to an audience beyond academia, using contemporary pictures, images of documents and objects, and where possible photography, to illustrate their discussions and make them attractive and interactive. While their posts implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, involve interpretation and analysis, they avoid heavy use of jargon and specialist discourse. Where blogs within the digital humanities tend to focus on method and conceptualisation, evaluating and critiquing tools and processes, overwhelmingly bloggers in the history of crime are principally concerned with recovering from the criminal justice archive the multiple histories and voices 'from below'. Above all, they foreground stories, allowing the sources - and historical actors - to speak for themselves.

In doing so, it is important to recognise that academic historians are part of a lively online community uniting independent researchers, local historians, writers and archivists using social media and blogging to explore 'our criminal past', including Angela Buckley ([Victorian Supersleuth – Investigating 19th Century Crime](#)), Jill Evans ([Gloucestershire Crime History](#)), Christopher Impey ([London's Oldest) Prison](#)), David J. Vaughan ([Mad, Bad and Desperate – Crime and Insanity in Victorian England](#)) and [Sarah Wise](#). 'The Gentle Author' showcases the richness of the criminal archive for local history in his superb [Spitalfields Life](#), while his blog's huge following demonstrates the public appetite for history from below when told in a lively form. Also noteworthy is [Executed Today](#), by far the most prolific blog in the field, and a 'daily chronicle' of executions 'On This Day' in history. 'Executed Today' makes inspired use of social media's ability to link past and present timelines to combine criminal justice history with public advocacy against the death sentence in all parts of the world. It is the potential of social media to allow us to write history in new ways and adapt it for different purposes to which I now turn.

2   History Turned Upside Down?

Blogging carnivals, like those hosted by Sharon Howard, began appearing in the early 2000s. The carnivalesque is a suggestive way of thinking about the transformative potential of social media. By orchestrating multiple voices blogging has a levelling effect, breaking down traditional hierarchies separating amateur and

professional, young and old, new and established, theorist and practitioner, reader and writer. The carnivalesque and levelling qualities of blogging have been seized by early modern historians to reanimate 'history from below' at the aptly named Many Headed-Monster blog, subtitled 'the history of "the unruly sort of clowns" and other early modern peculiarities'.[14] As many academics are discovering, blogging can be a liberating medium, freeing us from the rigid conventions of traditional scholarly discourse. Tim Hitchcock, for instance, set up his gloriously named Historyonics as:

> a space for me to rant in that most seventeenth-century sense of the word; and to cut and paste the ideas and comments that don't seem to fit in more traditional forms of academic publication.[15]

While many historians use blogging as a means of thinking aloud about work-in-progress with a view to writing it up in the conventional format of journal article, chapter or monograph, some are experimenting more consciously with blogging as a medium to see if they can reflect on and write about the past in radically different ways. Since October 2011, Matt Houlbrook has been blogging at The Trickster Prince as he seeks to come to terms with, and complete a book about, an early twentieth-century conman.[16] Trickster Prince was one of the many aliases of Netley Lucas but it has become an alias for the historian, too, as he tries out new guises, poses, and voices: 'Matt Houlbrook: mobile historian; beard growing, head shaving; occasional cycling'. Beginning with a series of short, enigmatic teaser posts, the blog sometimes mimics Netley's furtive and artful style in order to inhabit and bring alive his world. At other times, the historian stands back from his subject to size up the conman and note his deceptions, before revealing (or part revealing) his own sleights of hand and tricks of the trade. By moving between the art of Trickster Prince and the art of the Trickster Historian, (Illustration 2 below) the author's writing has taken different turns as the blog and book, evolving in tangent, become among other things, a meditation on history and fiction.

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[14] Formed in 2012, the Many Headed-Monster is a collaboration between Brodie Waddell, Mark Hailwood, Laura Sangha and Jonathan Willis; see http://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/about/ (accessed 21 August 2014). See also The Future of History from Below: An Online Symposium http://manyheadedmonster.wordpress.com/2013/07/03/the-future-of-history-from-below-an-online-symposium/ (serialised Summer 2013).
[15] Tim Hitchcock, *Historyonics* (accessed online at http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/, 21 August 2014).
[16] Matt Houlbrook, The Trickster Prince, https://tricksterprince.wordpress.com/; Matt Houlbrook, *The Prince of Tricksters: Cultures of Confidence in 1920s and 1930s Britain* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

Illustration 2*:* The Trickster Prince courtesy Matt Houlbrook

The age of the dream palace arrives in Newham (1927)

1920s cinema architecture at its suburban best: looking across the road at the new Broadway Cinema in Newham, London in 1927. | The Guardsman, the teacher and a brutal assault in a Mayfair flat (1929)

A late night meeting on Piccadilly leads to a brutal attack on an American schoolteacher and a nationwide manhunt for the Guardsman who left his traces at the scene. 'Brutal ...

Continue reading → | Dr Hannah Brown's Regulators (1927)

An advert for the "Regulators" sold by Dr Hannah Brown, PHD in 1927. Taken from National Archives: MEPO 3 410: Howard Barron and Annie Bolton convicted of conspiracy and supplying ...

Continue reading → | History behind the scenes: writing The Prince of Tricksters

At the end of September 2014 I am due to submit the completed manuscript for my book The Prince of Tricksters: Cultures of Confidence in Interwar Britain to the University ...

Continue reading → | 1920s pic(s) of the day: the Palace of Industry and Britain's modernity, 1920s style

After I posted footage of the Palace of Industry at the British Empire Exhibition being demolished earlier this year yesterday someone asked to see what the Palace of Industry looked ...

Continue reading → |
| JULY 23, 2013 · LEAVE A COMMENT | JULY 22, 2013 · LEAVE A COMMENT | JULY 19, 2013 · LEAVE A COMMENT | JULY 18, 2013 · 7 COMMENTS | JULY 18, 2013 · 2 COMMENTS |

One of the reasons Matt Houlbrook's blog has been so inventive is that, by assuming the guise of Trickster Prince/Trickster Historian, he fully exploits the performative elements of social media. While many people (and scholars especially) baulk at this aspect of social media, the Trickster Prince shows how playfulness and self-consciousness can be combined to rethink historical practice and produce a more reflective writing style which is, at the same time, entertaining and surprising. In a 'short photo essay' on his blog about the origins of a book chapter, Matt Houlbrook writes:

> It starts with the sources and stories; that's where it always starts. Not stories that exist full-formed and discerned. No. These are stories that exist always-already in-the-process-of-becoming; stories that consist in half-thought ideas, half-glimpsed connections, half-baked moments.[17]

Before there is a story, there are the sources. Yet in so much scholarly history, the sources are made not to tell a story but to make an argument, or if there is a story, it must be kept in its place, subordinated to analysis. As writers, it is the stories and sources we cling to; they are the bits we hate to lose when forced to cut-down a paper. When we allow them to stay, they are sandwiched between topic sentences announcing their purpose and stating what they mean. Rarely are they allowed to lead, except perhaps in an epigram or opening vignette before the voice of the historian kicks in. And as readers, academics are even less tolerant of stories. Our

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[17] Matt Houlbrook, 'The Biography of a Book Chapter: a short photo essay', *The Trickster Prince*, 2 April 2014 (accessed online 21 August 2014).

eyes skate over quotation and illustration to zoom in on the knock out 'punch lines' on method or argument. It is the skeleton we look for, not the flesh and meat.

Writing for an audience beyond the academy, however, reminds us of a different kind of reader, who shares the same curiosity and sense of intrigue that drives us to the archive. Stories, we might find, can be used to suggest interpretation or argument, without beating readers over the head with displays of learning and expertise. Blogging, with its short digestible posts and rich visual potential, lends itself particularly well to this source-led history. Writing for readers who will savour our hi/stories may also invite us to view our work in more open-ended ways, where publication marks the next stage in the conversation rather than the final say. Approaching the last few weeks of writing his book, Matt Houlbrook has blogged about the fear that sets in: the terror of not being able to let go, of wondering if you can finish what you started, and of the hostile reaction if you do not get it right.[18] But a blog can outlive a book as a place of on-going dialogue, a space to rediscover the work with your readers, to find what you did not notice first time round or give a new lease of life to the stories that did not make the final cut. And by engaging readers in the complexity of stories we recreate from the archive we may also start to dispel some of the distorting popular myths around our criminal past.

3   Public Engagement and Creative History

By blogging for a public audience, historians of crime are contributing to popular representations of the 'criminal' past, from the many websites, dramas and 'true crime' books devoted to notorious cases and neighbourhoods, to the discovery of criminal ancestors in shows like Who Do You Think Your Are? And Secrets from the Clink, to museum sites such as Nottingham's Galleries of Justice, which hosted Our Criminal Past's third event on Representing Penal Histories: Displaying and Narrating the Criminal Past.[19] Much of that day's discussion between justice practitioners and advocates, museum workers and academics centred on how to respond to public appetite for education and entertainment: the dangers of sensationalising crime and

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[18] Matt Houlbrook, 'I Started Something I Couldn't Finish', The Trickster Prince, 2 September 2014, http://tricksterprince.wordpress.com/2014/09/02/i-started-something-i-couldnt-finish/, accessed 4 September 2014.
[19] The conference was held 31 January 2014. For discussion at the event and online see storify by @digipanoptic (accessed at https://storify.com/digipanoptic/representing-penal-histories-displaying-and-narra, 21 August 2014).

punishment; objectifying offenders past and present; and the ethics and responsibilities involved in mediating 'dark history'.[20]

As the heritage sector relies increasingly on commercial partnerships and events to maintain sites and attract visitors, these concerns press on curators and museum educators much as they do on scholars. Former gaols, along with asylums and workhouses, are being transformed into boutique hotels and shopping centres, designer apartments and restaurants, while prison museums use their collections' more ghoulish associations to draw visitors to theme nights, notably Halloween. While displays and interpretation can point visitors to the less sensational aspects of crime and punishment - the routine of prison life, the ordinariness of most inmates and their offending, the significance of rehabilitation as well as punishment - incorporating the complexities of lived experience and the politics of the criminal justice system into exhibitions and tours is challenging, especially when current curatorial practice is to limit explanatory text.[21] To tackle these challenges, curators, educators and academics can collaborate in producing online content that encourages visitors to engage critically and imaginatively with exhibition material.[22] By opening up a direct line of communication between scholars and the public, blogging allows researchers to interrogate popular treatments of crime history and

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[20] Alana Barton and Alyson Brown, 'Dark Tourism', *Prison Service Journal*, 199, (2012). For a series of online blogs by Barry Godfrey examining the public presentation of crime history, see the category on Dark Tourism at The Digital Panopticon: The Global Impact of London Punishments, 1780-1925, accessed 28 December 2014. For a wider set of issues relating to public engagement and the prison, see the two special issues on 'The Prison and the Public' in the *Prison Services Journal*, no. 210 (2013) and no. 214 (2014), edited by Alana Barton and Alyson Brown.

[21] Talk by Chris Burgess, curator of the People's History Museum, AHRC/Manchester Metropolitan University, *Creating Our Future Histories* workshop, People's History Museum, 27 September 2013.

[22] For inventive use of online material, blogging and micro-blogging to tie in with and supplement exhibitions and activities, see: The Foundling Museum's use of oral history and creative interpretation in 'Foundling Voices', http://foundlingvoices.foundlingmuseum.org.uk/ (accessed 31 December 2014); and Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse, Norfolk Museums http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/Visit_Us/Gressenhall_Farm_and_Workhouse/index.htm. Supported by heritage lottery funding, both museums use a wide array of social media to increase visitor footprint and historical understanding. Rachel Duffield, an interpreter at Gressenhall, for instance, related her experience of living on a workhouse diet and showed how it changed over the nineteenth century: 'My job is about bringing to life the stories of the people who lived and worked in the workhouse, and food was an important part of their lives', she explained. 'This is a great way of experiencing a little of how they lived, as well as doing a bit of myth busting. Oliver Twist's gruel is here and in 1834, things went Dickensian and grim but food had improved in 1901 with the arrival of suet.' See: http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk/Visit_Us/Gressenhall_Farm_and_Workhouse/Voices_from_the_Workhouse/Workhouse_Diet/index.htm; http://www.theworkhousediet.blogspot.co.uk; https://twitter.com/workhousediet; www.facebook.com/workhousediet and Living the Workhouse Diet channel on You Tube https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr6BgeW7S6A2wCQ2LrvI6tw.

offer alternative perspectives. Guy Woolnough, for instance, uses his blog on Victorian Policing to foster dialogue on media treatments of criminal justice, from reviews of TV series Ripper Street to historical reflections on the use of criminal statistics today.[23] What draws non-academic readers to blogs like Victorian Policing, I suspect, is the way they tell stories of everyday life through the records of criminal justice for, as the popularity of genealogy sites and programmes tracing 'criminal ancestors' attest, interest in social history is at least as strong as fascination with notorious criminals and cold cases. Most importantly, perhaps, blogging gives us space to represent historical sites and archives as repositories of *all* our histories rather than belonging exclusively to those administering and caught up in the criminal justice system, or to those who evaded its gaze.

This was one aim of the blog I began in November 2013, Conviction: stories from a nineteenth century prison, which now amounts to around 40,000 words. While the title signals its starting point - the encounters between inmates and Sarah Martin (1791-1843), prison visitor at Great Yarmouth Gaol - it is as much about prisoners' lives before and after incarceration as their experience of confinement and Christian reclamation, and about rehabilitation or settling as much as criminality. Another aim was to find ways of depicting the mundane nature of most offending and prison life that avoids the gothic and melodramatic tone of sensationalist crime history but instead conveys the complexity, poignancy, and even humour that lie in the historical archive. In the blog, I hoped to work out how to turn my research into an accessible and absorbing book that might appeal to readers outside academia.[24] Serendipitously, the blogging medium is leading me to experiment with alternative writing styles which are helping me envisage the framework for this book. In what follows, I discuss three aspects of the medium that are enabling me to adopt a different voice and to re-think and deepen the research in unexpected ways. These are: the brevity of form which lends itself to short story-telling; the serialisation of blogging; and its visual format.

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[23] Guy Woolnough, Victorian Policing, see blog posts on *Ripper Street*, series 1, posted December 2012-February 2013, http://www.guywoolnough.com/category/ripper-street/; 'Recorded Crime Statistics: the Victorian police perspective', 17 January 2014 (accessed online http://www.guywoolnough.com/recorded-crime-statistics-the-victorian-police-perspective/ 1 September 2014).

[24] Helen Rogers, 'About Conviction', Conviction: stories from a nineteenth century prison, http://convictionblog.com/about/.

For over a decade I have been tracing the lives of hundreds of prisoners by piecing together fragmentary data and description from the visitor's journals, gaol records, census and parish documents on individuals and their families. In the Gaoler's records of the things they stole and their punishments for misconduct, and in the visitor's observations of how they responded to instruction, individuals come briefly into view and sometimes into hearing, often in remarkably vivid ways. I knew this material offered tantalising glimpses of the labouring poor but had no idea how to arrange it into a book-length narrative or find a framing devise that would hold a reader's attention. In writing posts of about 1,500 words, stories began to take shape around these individuals and the sources I use to find them. The short blogging format is proving remarkably appropriate for working with historical fragments and opens up the short story as a device for relating multiple histories.

To pique the interest of readers, I began not with the prison visitor or setting the scene of the gaol but by focusing on how inmates depicted themselves in the tattoos many sported. In coded and enigmatic ways, tattoos tell stories of personal identity and experience whose meanings become clearer when viewed alongside other documentation about their wearer's history. They allowed me to introduce prisoners in their own eyes as well as through the gaze of the justice system and their Christian teacher, and to connect them with family and friends: a boy transported with his brother, tattooed with 'two men arm in arm'; boys caught in their cell in the act of tattooing.[25] As much as possible, I used actions and dialogue, reported by the Gaoler and visitor, to convey the boys as historical actors and lend their stories drama. The overall style of these early posts is micro social history but soon I found myself making greater use of story-telling devices which grew out of the serial nature blogging.

The word 'blog' derived in the late 1990s from the term weblog or online log.[26] The online diary or calendar lend themselves to chronicling past time and the criminal justice archive is well-suited to b/logging for so many of its records take the form of the calendar (the Newgate and Criminal Calendars) or daily log (admissions registers, court records, punishment books). The calendar is widely exploited in

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[25] Helen Rogers, 'Brothers in Arms', *Conviction*, 1 November 2013 (accessed at http://convictionblog.com/2013/11/01/brothers-in-arms/, 4 September 2014); 'Tattooing in Gaol', Conviction, 15 November 2013 (accessed at http://convictionblog.com/2013/11/15/tattooing-in-gaol/).
[26] 'History of Blogging', *Wikipedia* (accessed http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_blogging 24 August 2014).

social media to mark commemorations and festivities, affording historians opportunities to connect and distinguish between present and past timelines and to interrogate popular memory. In Workhouse Tales, Lesley Hulonce makes striking use of the calendar to reveal neglected aspects of pauper life that show 'the House' as a home not just a bastille, a place of care as well as deprivation. Her post 'Altogether a right merrie day'? Christmas in the Workhouse' inspired me to write on 'Christmas in Prison, 1839' which, in turn, led me to blogging in historical time.[27]

Pouring over the admission registers and journals of the Gaoler and prison visitor for the Christmas period pushed home the seasonal nature of offending and imprisonment and the quotidian routine of prison life. They reminded me of the imminent incarceration of five boys, sentenced to thirty days hard labour around New Year 1840. I resolved to blog each day of their confinement, hoping to measure out their sentences as they experienced prison time.[28] Initially I intended simply to log each day's events by drawing on the daily observations of the Gaoler and visitor but, working over the sources forensically, each post led me to read familiar material afresh and follow new directions. When I explored the boys' prison education in a scholarly article, the sources had to be filleted to address the themes of literacy and Christian instruction. In this more open format, the sources led me organically to trace the evolving nature of the boys' relationships with each other and the visitor and to explore the emotional dynamics of their close encounters. Though continuing to use techniques from social history, my writing style evolved organically too, allowing these attachments to unfurl while creating narrative pace and colour.

It is striking that this stylistic shift began as soon as the boys made their voices heard. In the third post, when three boys are sent to solitary 'for fighting and making use of obscene language', I slipped into the present tense and thereafter remained in the historic present when re-telling each day's events, inviting readers to ask the

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[27] See for examples, Lesley Hulonce, 'The Workhouse Games – Sport and Celebration', 24 July 2014; 'High days and holidays for the workhouse child', 22 May 2014; 'Altogether a right merrie day'? Christmas in the Workhouse', 13 December 2013 (all accessed at Workhouse Tales http://lesleyhulonce.wordpress.com/ 24 August 2014). Helen Rogers 'Christmas in Prison, 1839', Conviction, 19 December 2013 (accessed http://convictionblog.com/2013/12/19/christmas-in-prison-1839/, 24 August 2014).
[28] Helen Rogers, 'Serving Time at Yarmouth Gaol', Conviction: stories from a nineteenth century prison, 28 December 2013, http://convictionblog.com/2013/12/28/serving-time-at-yarmouth-gaol/ accessed 24 August 2014.

same question that preoccupied the visitor: will she 'save' the boys?[29] Their words and actions, as reported by visitor, provide the narrative tempo.

Illustration 3: Helen Rogers, '"Them two boys have been shut up in the cell"'. Detail from George Cruikshank, 'Oliver's Reception by Fagin and the Boys', illustration for original serialisation of Oliver Twist (1837-9). Courtesy David Perdue, Charles Dickens Page

Detail from George Cruikshank's illustration for original serialisation of Oliver Twist (1837-9). Courtesy David Perdue's Dickens Page
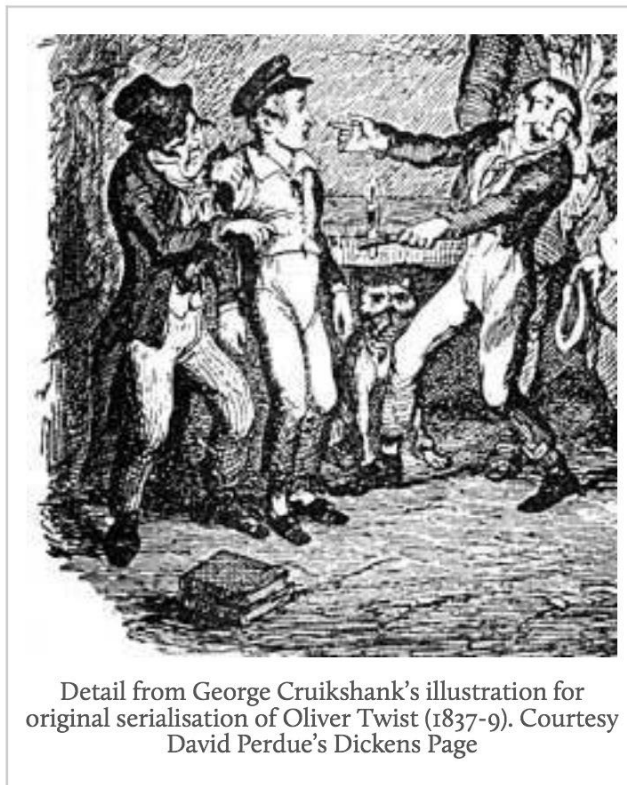
Wednesday 8 January 1840

Today, as soon as Sarah Martin appears at the door of the dayroom in the House of Correction, Walter Tunmore flies forward to take his teacher's paper case. 'Them two boys', he blurts out, 'have been shut up in the cell for behaving ill – for singing.' Indignant at Walter's snitching, his cellmate turns on him: 'You took up your book when you saw the lady coming!' Another joins the fray: 'You threw a red hot coal in his face when he was studying his lessons.'[i]

The dialogue, of course, is a condensed version of conversations that took place on the ward, imprinted on the visitor's memory. Instead of slowing down the narrative by interpreting and speculating on how the boys reacted to the teacher, I used the fictional devices of focalisation and showing and telling to dramatize their responses, taking inspiration from patterns in their behaviour I observed across the historical records.

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[29] Helen Rogers, 'Fighting and Swearing', Conviction, 30 December 2013 (accessed http://convictionblog.com/2013/12/30/fighting-and-swearing/, 24 August 2014).

Illustration 4: Helen Rogers, ["And have you brought the combs?"](). Detail from 'How to Make Culprits Comfortable', *Punch*, 1849. Courtesy Punch Magazine Cartoon Archive - [John Leech Archive]()

Detail: John Leech, Sketch from Punch 1849: How to make the culprits comfortable; or, hints for Prison Discipline

21 and 22 January 1840

The five young prisoners are listening out for their teacher. They run towards Miss Martin to be the first to carry her Paper Case. "Ma'am, we have been waiting for you!" Endeavouring to keep her face stern, the prison visitor drills them: "Are your lessons then perfectly learned, and have you been keeping the Rules?" "Of course! Of course!" they cry in unison.

Unable to contain their excitement, the boys blurt out: "Have you brought the Pictures which you promised to show us?" The teacher looks knowingly at her paper case with the illustrations of Scripture characters she has brought for them: "Yes I have." But it's her other gifts they crave: "And have you brought the combs?" She pauses a moment, watching them pleading: "I have but not having seen the Governor, hope he has nothing to say about you that would prevent your having them."

So readers could see how I was re-presenting the sources imaginatively, I began including digital images from the visitor's journal. To show (rather than analyse) my own emotional entanglement in the history and story I was weaving, occasionally I placed myself in the narrative, as here, unfolding 'the Rules' the teacher drew up for the boys.

Illustration 5: ‘Making their mark’

Taking her leave of her prison scholars, the teacher folds the precious document and encloses it in her Book. The boys remind her to bring more picture books tomorrow and cloth to cut out their new shirts.

Sitting in the record office above Great Yarmouth's library, built onto the back of the gaol after it was bombed in World War 2, I open up the folded paper, browning and brittle, and gasp and weep. The crosses of five boys who could not write their names stare up at me. Grasping the pen, they had stabbed the paper: their first strokes pressed down hard with determination; their second strokes tentative and faltering as hands shifted awkwardly to complete the crosses. Somehow these jagged marks capture the boys' edginess and their vulnerability.

Their marks have made their mark on me. Sarah Martin does not want the boys to leave her. I cannot let them go.

Illustration 6: The Rules, pasted in Sarah Martin's Everyday Book, Monday 13 January 1840. Courtesy Great Yarmouth Museum Service, Norfolk Museums Service.
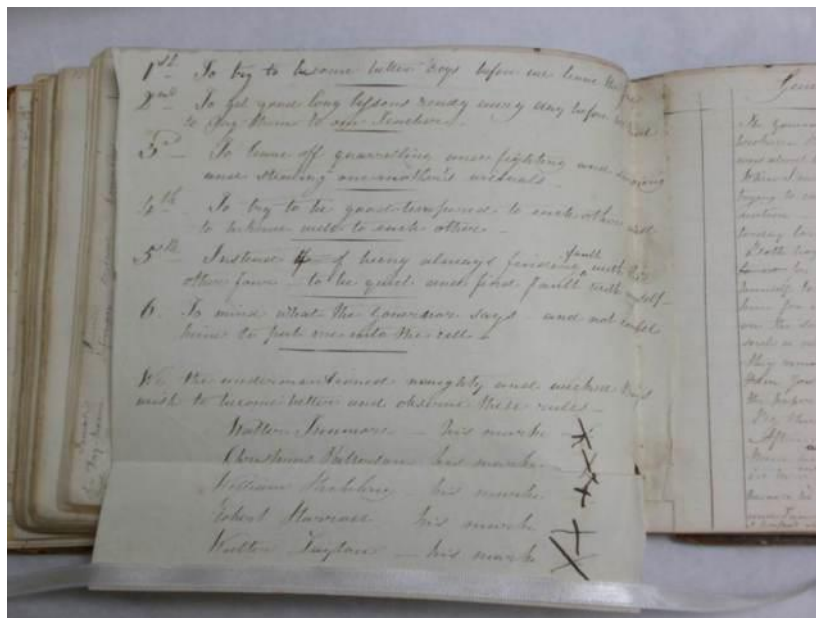
Images from the visitor's journals became part of the visual and material objects I increasingly used not just to illustrate the story but as integral components of it. The visual and hypertext elements of web content make it possible to explore much more effectively than in print publication the material, social and emotional histories of cultural objects, as many bloggers are discovering, including Vicky Holmes

investigating Victorian Domestic Dangers in working-class homes from the records of coroner's inquests. Sourcing images was time-consuming but turned out surprisingly productive in expanding the material and approaches I drew upon. I searched in vain for an image of a grey cotton shirt worn by working-class boys c.1840 that might resemble the shirts the boys began stitching as reward for learning their lessons.[30] Instead, via the BBC's wonderful web portal Your Paintings, I stumbled across the Norwich School of Artists who, in their landscapes with figures, captured labouring folk at work in the early 1800s. Viewing these paintings alongside records from the gaol of what inmates wore on admission, I began to picture more fully how the boys dressed and to appreciate the importance of style to the poor. In the resulting post, paintings and drawings serve not just as illustration but to blend social and cultural history.

Illustration 7: Helen Rogers, 'Grey Cotton Shirts'. 'Beach Scene', attributed to Joseph Stannard. Courtesy of Norfolk Museums Service (accession number GRYEH: 2005.86).

Beach Scene by Joseph Stannard (attributed to) Oil on canvas, 26 x 43 cm Collection: Great Yarmouth Museums

The dress of Yarmouth inmates aged between 11 and 16, like the five boys, displayed their place within the occupational life of the port. Many sported the blue-striped slops worn by fishermen, beachmen and labourers on the dock. Like the fisherboy in Joseph Stannard's 'Beach Scene', John Presant, aged 15, wore a sou'wester hat, blue-striped slop and canvas trousers.[5] These were not his only working clothes for, when admitted again, he had a worsted cap, a red & white mixed neckerchief, and blue duffle slop cord trousers.[6]

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[30] Helen Rogers, 'Grey Cotton Shirts', Conviction, 18 May 2014 (accessed http://convictionblog.com/2014/05/18/grey-cotton-shirts/, 24 August 2014).

Illustrations also helped evoke a pattern of imagery that emerged out of the sources and writing to pull together the threads of the story and give it unity: the visitor's trade as dressmaker, the inmates' instruction in stitching and patchwork, her desire to reclaim them by 'making and mending', and so on. One painting inspired perhaps the boldest piece of imaginative writing in the blog for, sometime around 1840, JMW Turner sketched the figures of three boys in 'Yarmouth, from near the Harbour's Mouth'.[31] My imaginative reconstruction of this scene echoes the visitor's parting ceremony with three of the boys and the way on this occasion, as on so many over the thirty days, they returned the teacher's gaze, searching her face as she did theirs, trying to puzzle her out. The symbolism in the painting is used poetically, I hope, to capture the boys' carefree attitude to authority and gesture to their possible futures.

Illustration 8: Helen Rogers, 'Departure'

He hears them before he sees them, their whoops and cries shrieking like the gulls overhead. Looking up from the easel, he pulls his collar close and scans the horizon, eyes squinting against the biting salt air. Three figures come slowly into view, criss-crossing each other as they pick their way along the shoreline. They disappear behind the jetty until their heads bob up again and he watches them clamber the wall in their oversized coats, bent into the wind like the breakers he has been sketching in the low tide before him.

They eye the stranger suspiciously, skirting round the old man, but turn back to see why he has been observing them. Cautiously they approach to peer over his shoulder at the small picture on the easel. Lobster pots and breakers and the faintly pencilled outline of their town. There's not much to see. They run off laughing.

The artist resumes the picture, quickly sketching in three boys. Back in his studio, he washes the scene blood-orange. Landscape with figures. Restless, yearning.

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[31] Joseph Mallord William Turner, 'Yarmouth, from near the Harbour's Mouth', c.1840. Graphite, watercolour and ink on paper. Copyright, Tate Collection (accessed http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-yarmouth-from-near-the-harbours-mouth-n05239, 24 Aug 2014); Helen Rogers, 'Departure', Conviction, 20 July 2014 (accessed http://convictionblog.com/2014/07/20/departure/, 20 August 2014).

Illustration 9: Joseph Mallord William Turner, 'Yarmouth, from near the Harbour's Mouth', c.1840. Courtesy [Tate Collection](#)

In starting the blog I hoped to discover ancestors of these boys and other individuals and families whose histories I reconstruct through the penal and parish registers, for this is one method I use to analyse patterns of re-offending and desistance and to assess the impact of the visitor's 'rehabilitation' programme. It is also among a number of reasons I do not anonymise the individuals I examine, not least because the research is based on documents in the public domain. I am pleased that descendants contacted through genealogy sites enjoy reading my blog and say it does justice to their family history. While the ethics of identifying individuals in the criminal justice record was raised at the first meeting of Our Criminal Past, it seems to me there is no reason to treat the issue any differently in blogging than in scholarly publication.[32] Caution and sensitivity should be taken when dealing with the recent past and within the life-time of those affected, or cases involving criminal insanity, but practice can be guided by existing protocols developed within the discipline, notably

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[32] See *Our Criminal Past: Digitisation, Social Media and Crime History*, held at the London Metropolitan Archives, May 2013, www.ourcriminalpast.co.uk

by oral historians. But for most of us, and certainly those studying the pre-1900s, our responsibility rests in the integrity with which we represent these histories.

4   Social Media and Collaborative History

In outlining how my research and writing have changed through blogging I am not advocating historians should adopt creative history but rather aim to show that blogging can be an integral part of the research process, not simply a supplement to scholarly publication or a work-in-progress version of it. Blogging as a medium has the potential to change how we think about and do history.[33] Certainly, it has made me more experimental and resourceful in combining a broader array of research techniques than in any previous work. The inventive blogs examined in this article provide examples of how more traditional scholarly forms might evolve to adopt its visual, interactive and open-ended features, particularly by moving from print to electronic publication.

Earlier in the article I posed the question, where does blogging fit in the overall life-cycle of a research project or a scholarly career? The short answer is that blogging lends itself to dissemination and conversation at all stages in the research process, from initial design to post-project reflection. Workload and time are what inhibit many researchers from blogging yet, as most bloggers report, it is time well spent.[34] Rather than seeing blogging as a separate 'add-on' activity, scholars should be encouraged to experiment with it as a fluid form of publication that integrates well with many forms of academic output. Far from blogs needing to consist of short and regular posts, online readers will often engage with 'long-reads', whether written-up conference papers or essays in-the-making, while many will return to an interesting blog with only occasional postings provided its author has an active online presence[35]

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[33] For a more cautious perspective from the veteran blogger, Rohan Maitzen, see 'The Case for "Intelligent, Bloggy Bookchat By Scholars": How's It Looking?', http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/novelreadings/the-case-for-intelligent-bloggy-bookchat-by-scholars-hows-it-looking/, 24 January 2015. Maitzen's pessimistic assessment may reflect variations in the uptake of social media in Literature and History and the different scholarly contexts of North America, which have not experienced the 'impact agenda' of the UK.
[34] See Helen Rogers, 'Slow Blogging' (and comments by bloggers about why and how they blog), http://convictionblog.com/2014/08/05/slow-blogging/, accessed 31 December 2014.
[35] As I expected 'Tattooing in Gaol', shared among the tattooing fraternity, was the most popular post in 2014 but, surprisingly, the second most viewed was a 3,000 word post, based on a conference paper, which circulated outside academic circles; see 'Convict Lads: Friendship and Survival', http://convictionblog.com/2014/10/16/convict-lads-1836-46-friendship-and-survival/ (accessed 31 December 2014).

Where not so long ago it was frowned upon to re-use the same research in different outputs, now, as scholars are expected to interact with audiences beyond the seminar room, re-cycling becomes a means of re-purposing. Blogging enables us to target and move between different audiences and, conversely, to gather them together. The question, therefore, should no longer be, should academics blog but rather, as Lucinda Matthews Jones put it in a recent twitter conversation, what is the value of blogging and, I would add, how do we evaluate it as academic labour, output, and intervention?[36] While nothing is more likely to dampen innovation in the blogosphere than making social media a compulsory scholarly activity we should do all the time (and there are worrying anecdotal reports of academics being instructed by university managers to start blogging), we can recognise individual and collaborative activity by referencing it in scholarly publications and rewarding it in professional development.

Writing this article has been an experiment for, as I prepared it, I published work-in-progress in three blog instalments. I am very grateful for encouragement and feedback from the online community of historians who helped disseminate the discussion via Twitter and Facebook.[37] Their rejoinders demonstrate how the blogosphere is the home of collaborative intellectual endeavour and exchange. Bloggers like all authors need readers. Blogging may not be for every historian but we can all participate in reading and circulating this growing and vibrant body of work. By sharing scholarship via social media, each of us can maximise the chances of it reaching readers outside academia and contribute to developing a genuinely open public history.

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[36] Lucinda Matthews-Jones (@luciejones38, tweet, https://twitter.com/luciejones83/status/559436379462307840 in conversation with Rohan Maitzen (@RohanMaitzen), Pete Orford (@DrPeteOrford) and Helen Rogers (@HelenRogers19c), in response to Maitzen, http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/novelreadings/the-case-for-intelligent-bloggy-bookchat-by-scholars-hows-it-looking/, 24 January 2015.

[37] See http://convictionblog.com/2014/08/18/blogging-our-criminal-past-part-1/; http://convictionblog.com/2014/08/21/blogging-our-criminal-past-part-2-history-turned-upside-down/; http://convictionblog.com/2014/08/24/blogging-our-criminal-past-part-3-public-and-creative-history/. Thanks especially to Sharon Howard, Brodie Waddell and Joanne Bailey who took up the conversation in the Comments, and to Matt Houlbrook who responded to my discussion of creative history with the provocative 'Legitimate speculations or improper fantasies: where do you draw the line?', Trickster Prince, 22 August 2014. (http://tricksterprince.wordpress.com/2014/08/22/legitimate-speculations-or-improper-fantasies-where-do-you-draw-the-line/, accessed 22 August 2014).