

# History and Archives: Data and Quantification

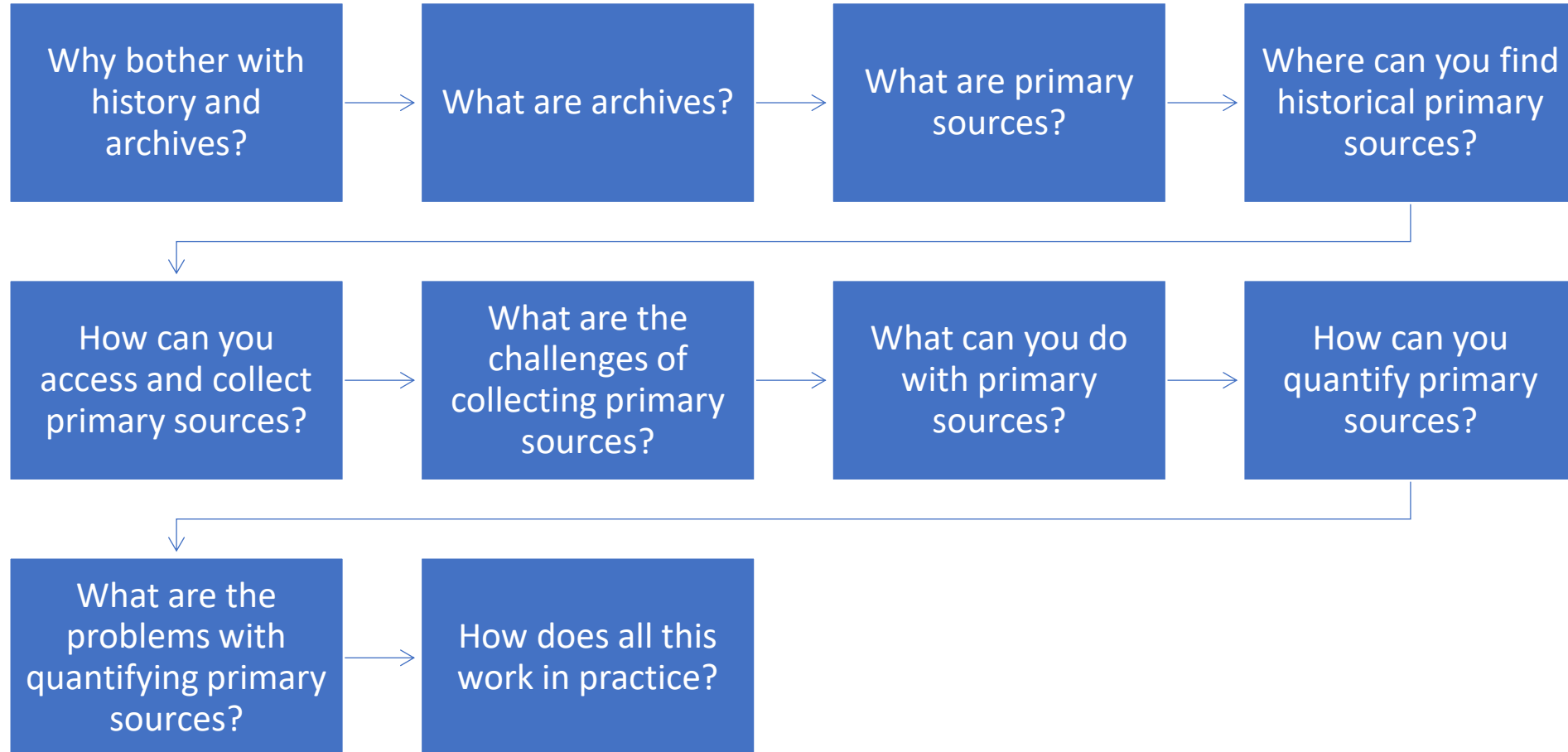
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# Key Questions



# Why bother with history and archives?

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Everything has a history.

- The past shapes all institutions, cultures, ideas, environments and more. It has directly formed specific structures and rules, and indirectly influenced ways of thinking and behavior.

All evidence is, to some degree, historical.

- 'All social sciences require historical evidence, insofar as they deal with social reality, or attempt to verify or falsify general theoretical models by reference to evidence. This is self-evident, since any kind of evidence collected for the purpose of any social science, however contemporary, becomes 'historical' one moment after it has been collected, i.e. it refers to the past, even if it is the immediate past.'

- Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Contribution of History to Social Science', 1981



The Parliament of the United Kingdom, established 1801. Or 1707? Or maybe 1215?



# What are archives?

1. records created or received by a person, family, or organization and preserved because of their continuing value
2. non-record material selected, preserved, managed, presented, and used in the same manner as archives
3. a selection of digital records or digital surrogates of records made available as a curated online collection
4. the official repository of a nation, state, territory, or institution's records of continuing value

'Archives', *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, Society of American Archivists (<https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archives.html>)



# What are primary sources?

*Something created at the time of the period being studied.*

‘A source can in fact be anything that has left us a trace of the past. It can be a charter, recording a land transfer; a court case, presenting the pleas of the witness; a sermon, given to an unknown audience; a list of books, shares, prices, goods, people, livestock, or beliefs; a painting or photograph of forgotten faces; letters or memoirs or autobiographies or graffiti; the buildings of the rich, displaying their power and wealth, or the buildings of the poor, displaying the opposite; stories, poems, songs, proverbs, dirty jokes, opaque marginal comments made by bored scribes or cunning glossators. A source can be a thousand things; it can be the discoloration of a page in an inquisitor’s manual, marked by the imprint of a thousand kisses made in ritual obeisance by those about to be examined. It is a trace of the past.’

- John Arnold, *History: A Very Short Introduction* (2000)



# Where can you find historical evidence?

## Published histories (secondary sources)

- 10K books categorized as 'history' in Birkbeck Library
- 328 journals categorized as 'history' on JSTOR

## Published editions (primaryish sources)

- 35K published items on the *Bibliography of British and Irish History*

## Archives or collections (primary sources)

- national: The National Archives (Kew)
- local: London Archives; Surrey History Centre; Essex Record Office
- repositories: The British Library, The Wellcome Library
- online collections: Early English Books Online, Burney Newspapers Collection

# How can you access primary sources?

## Online

transcriptions: 'Voices of Feminism Oral History Project'

digital images: 'Cause Papers of the Archbishopric of York, 1300-1858'

historical data: 'The European State Finance Database'

## Research libraries

printed sources: *House of Commons, Parliamentary Papers, 1715-2015*

published anthologies: C.H. McNabb, editor, *Medieval Disability Sourcebook: Western Europe* (2020)

## Archives and repositories

official records: LMA, 'Greater London Authority, Minutes, 1988-2008'

corporate collections: Bristol Archives, 'St Vincents Rocks Hotel, minutes and cashbook, 1929-68'

private papers: British Library, 'War and private diary of Sir John Tyson, Bengal, 1939-40'

# What can you do with primary sources?

## Extracting factual information

- How have the Labour Party's official policies on immigration changed since Windrush?
  - e.g. published manifestos, 1948-2024

## Close reading, thick description

- How did people behave at sporting events during wartime?
  - e.g. Mass Observation diaries, 1939-45

## Record linkage, biography, prosopography

- What is the family background of modern trade union leaders?
  - e.g. oral history, newspapers, civil registration records

## Quantification, cliometrics

- How much coverage has the media given to trans issues since Stonewall?
  - e.g. newspaper archives, 1969-present



# 'AI (LLMs)' and historical research



what was the impact of british rule in india

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People also ask

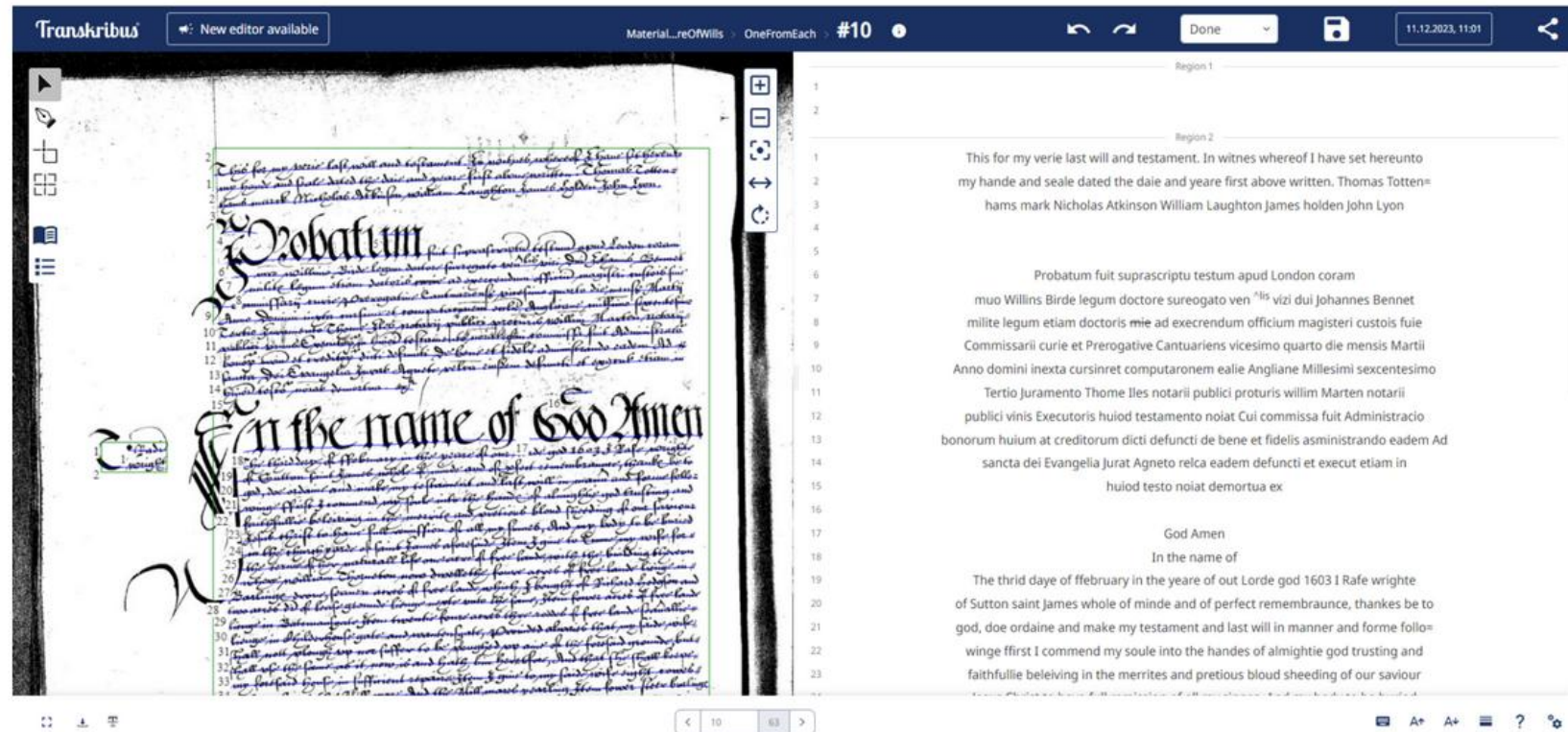
What impact did Britain have on India?

What was the impact of British rule on the making of the Indian constitution?

What were the impacts of the British Empire?

What were the positive and negative effects of British rule in India?

British rule centralized administration, developed infrastructure, and introduced Western education but caused economic exploitation, social divisions, and fueled the independence movement.



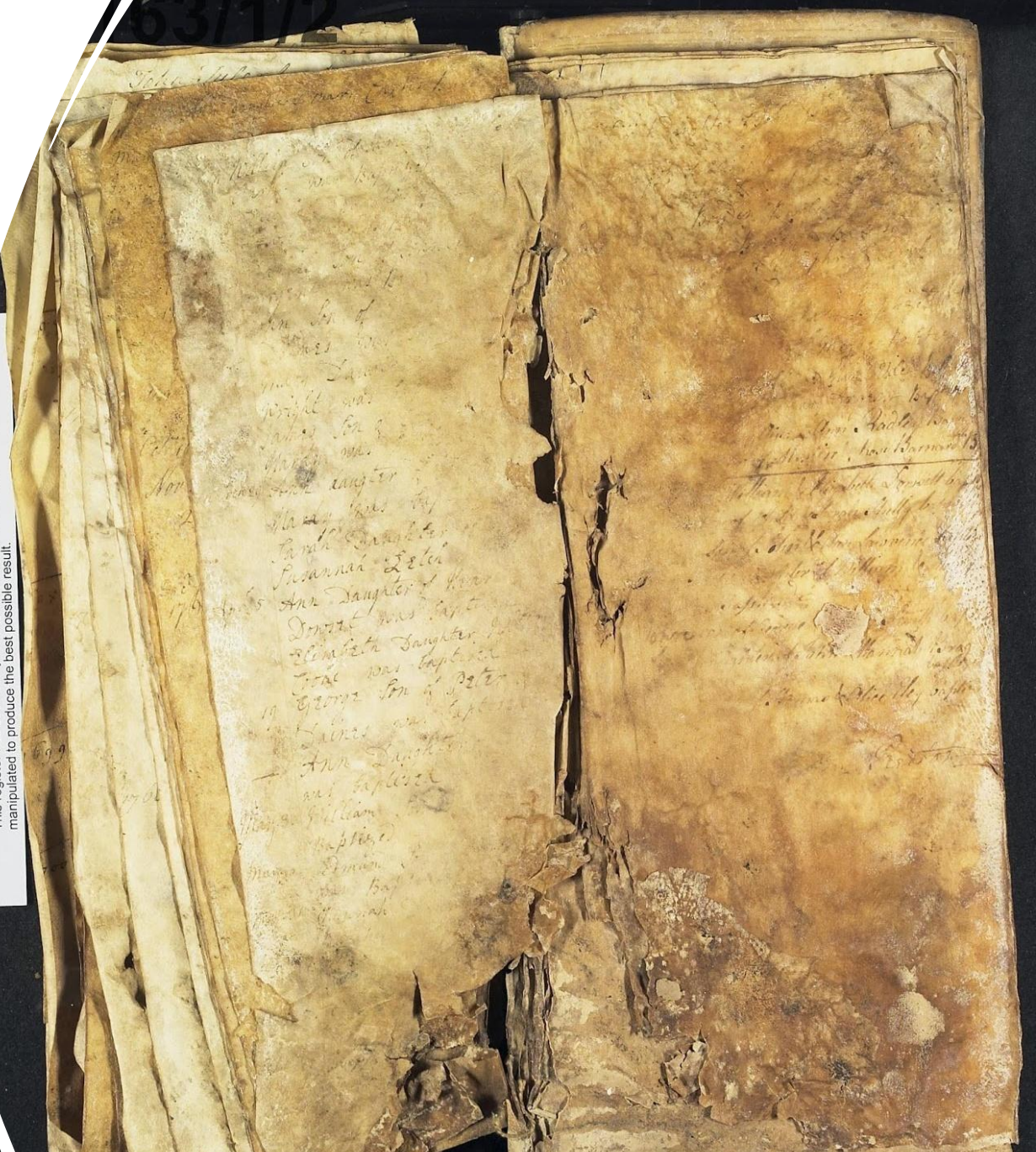
A screenshot of Transkribus, the platform which the project is using to process our handwritten wills.



# What are the problems with quantifying primary sources?

- Messy, non-standardised data
  - Occupational titles (e.g. 'hawker', 'peddler', 'chapman')
- Incomplete data
  - Broken series (e.g. no census in 1941)
- Ambiguous data
  - Spelling variants (e.g. 'Richard Smith' = 'Richard Smythe'?)
- Contextually dependent data
  - Changing word meanings (e.g. 'Mrs', 'prostitution')

Essex Record Office  
This register has been badly damaged by damp. The image has been manipulated to produce the best possible result.






# Conclusions

- Historical sources can be invaluable for making sense of current issues
- Both secondary sources (scholarship) and primary sources (original material) can be useful; best in combination
- There are lots and lots and lots of historical primary sources
- Some are clear and easy to collect; some are almost indecipherable and inaccessible; most are somewhere in between

*The Proceedings of the* **OLD BAILEY**  *London's Central Criminal Court, 1674 to 1913*

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**ON THIS DAY IN... 1846**

Henry Harley stabbed his ex-partner with a carving knife.  
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How does all of this work  
in practice?



Essex Record Office, D-DBm Z8  
(Joseph Bufton sermon notes,  
1680-87)

used to obedience. Children, obey your  
parents, that it may be well with you, and  
you may live long on earth. The apostle,  
saies Chrysostome, speaks not here of y<sup>e</sup> mist-  
eries of Christ, but he directs himself to  
tender minds, & speaks that which y<sup>e</sup> minds  
of children are most intent upon, for most  
youths desire to live long here, & god is plea-  
sed to condescend to their weaknes. If  
you desire to live to old age, & to lead a hap-  
py life, I know no method more sure then  
to be truly duty full to your parents. But  
if after all this, any will chuse to be disobed-  
ient, let them know, they have no reason  
to expect gods blessing upon them, in this  
world, or in the next.

5) The Notes of Two Sermons preac-  
hed by Mr Boys in 8 yeare. 1682  
from Colossians 4.1.

Masters, give unto your servants that whi-  
ch is just & equall knowing that ye also ha-  
ve a master in heaven. The great Go-  
vernour of mankind has appointed his ser-  
vants severall Stations, to every one he  
has allotted sufficient abilities, & according  
to their behaviour will reward or punish.  
He makes one a king, another a subject,  
one a master, another a servant, & expects  
every one should behave himself according  
to his degree god has set him in; for he is  
y<sup>e</sup> wise disposer of all men, & he has appoin-  
ted a day, wherein he will call all men to  
account, & punish all for their sins that  
willfully lived & dyed in them. At present  
I intreat masters to governe their famili-  
es, with prudence & piety, that god may be  
glorified by them. 'Tis no small care th-  
at lies on masters of families, to see all  
parts of their families well disciplined. If  
they are negligent, & let their families

What could you do  
with two volumes of  
sermon notes  
written by a  
clothworker in Essex  
in the 1680s?

His notebooks reveal a constant search for “practical divinity,” the sort of concrete guidance necessary to live virtuously among others in a fallen world. On one occasion he noted that he had copied edifying extracts from “18 books which came into my hand” through lending among acquaintances, and this was merely a fraction of the scores of religious texts that he cited in one form or another.<sup>40</sup> Although the content of this spiritual reading was eclectic, one of the most common themes was the danger of worldliness. He even used the margins of *The Compleat Tradesman* to copy out some verses from Francis Quarles, including a striking epigram “On God and Gold”:

My God & Gold cannot possess one heart  
My God and I, or Gold and I must part.<sup>41</sup>

So, in a handbook devoted to teaching its readers how to succeed in business, he decided to reaffirm his belief that God—not lucre—must come first. This was a much sterner tone than that of the anonymous “Merchant of the City of London” who had authored *The Compleat Tradesman*, and it reflected Bufton’s commitment to the notion that piety was central to working life.

Bufton’s literacy was a key part of this commitment because he not only

Brodie Waddell, ““Verses of My Owne Making”: Literacy, Work, and Social Identity in Early Modern England’, *Journal of Social History*, Volume 54, Issue 1, Fall 2020, pp. 161–184



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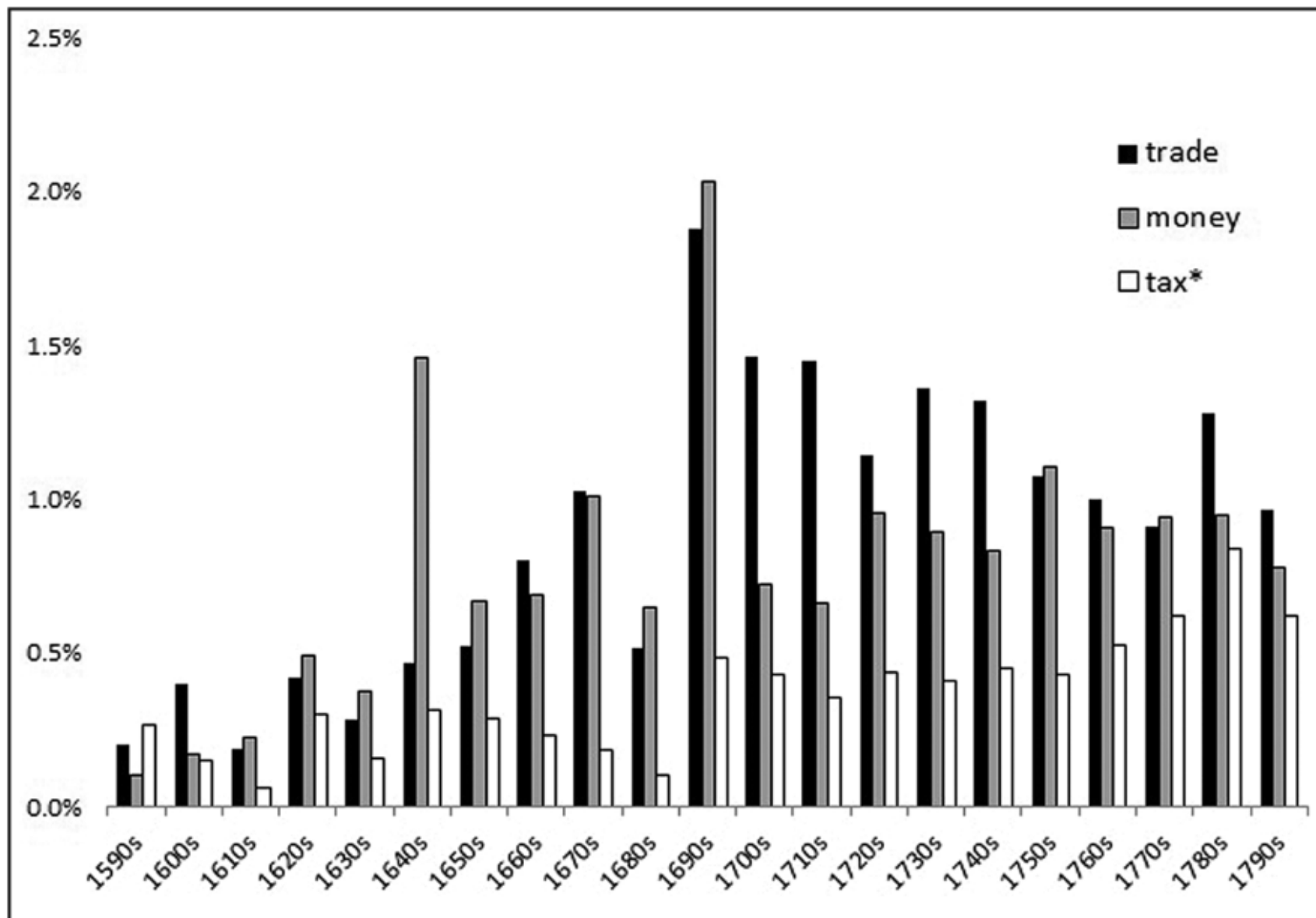
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#		Author	Title	Imprint	Year
<a href="#">1</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Brookes, R. (Richard), active 1721-1763.	<a href="#">The general gazetteer: or, Compendious geographical dictionary.</a>	London : printed for J. Newbery, in St. Paul's Church-Yard; R. Baldwin, in Paternoster-Row; W. J	MDCCLXVI. [1766]
<a href="#">2</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>	S., J.,	<a href="#">Great Britain's glory. Being the history of King Arthur: with the adventures of the Knights of th</a>	Newcastle upon Tine [that is, Tyne] : Printed and sold by John White,	[between 1711 and 1769?]
<a href="#">3</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<a href="#">The case of the woollen manufacturers, and particularly those of the city of Worcester, with rela</a>	[London?] : [s.n.],	[1729?]
<a href="#">4</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<a href="#">Observations on the fishermen's attempt to render ineffectual an act, passed in the twenty-second</a>	[London?] : [s.n.],	[1756-1760?]
<a href="#">5</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<a href="#">Tom Thumb's play-book, greatly improved:</a>	Paisley : Printed by J. Neilson, and sold wholesale by James Lumsden, engraver, Glasgow	[between 1789 and 1799]

What could you do with the bibliographic information about 480,000 items published between 1473 and 1800?



Brodie Waddell, 'The Politics of Economic Distress in the Aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, 1689–1702', *English Historical Review*, vol. 130, no. 543, 2015, pp. 318–51.

**Figure 1:** Percentages of titles published per decade containing the terms 'trade', 'money' or 'tax\*' (i.e. 'tax', 'taxes', 'taxation') as recorded in the electronic *English Short Title Catalogue*, <http://estc.bl.uk>.

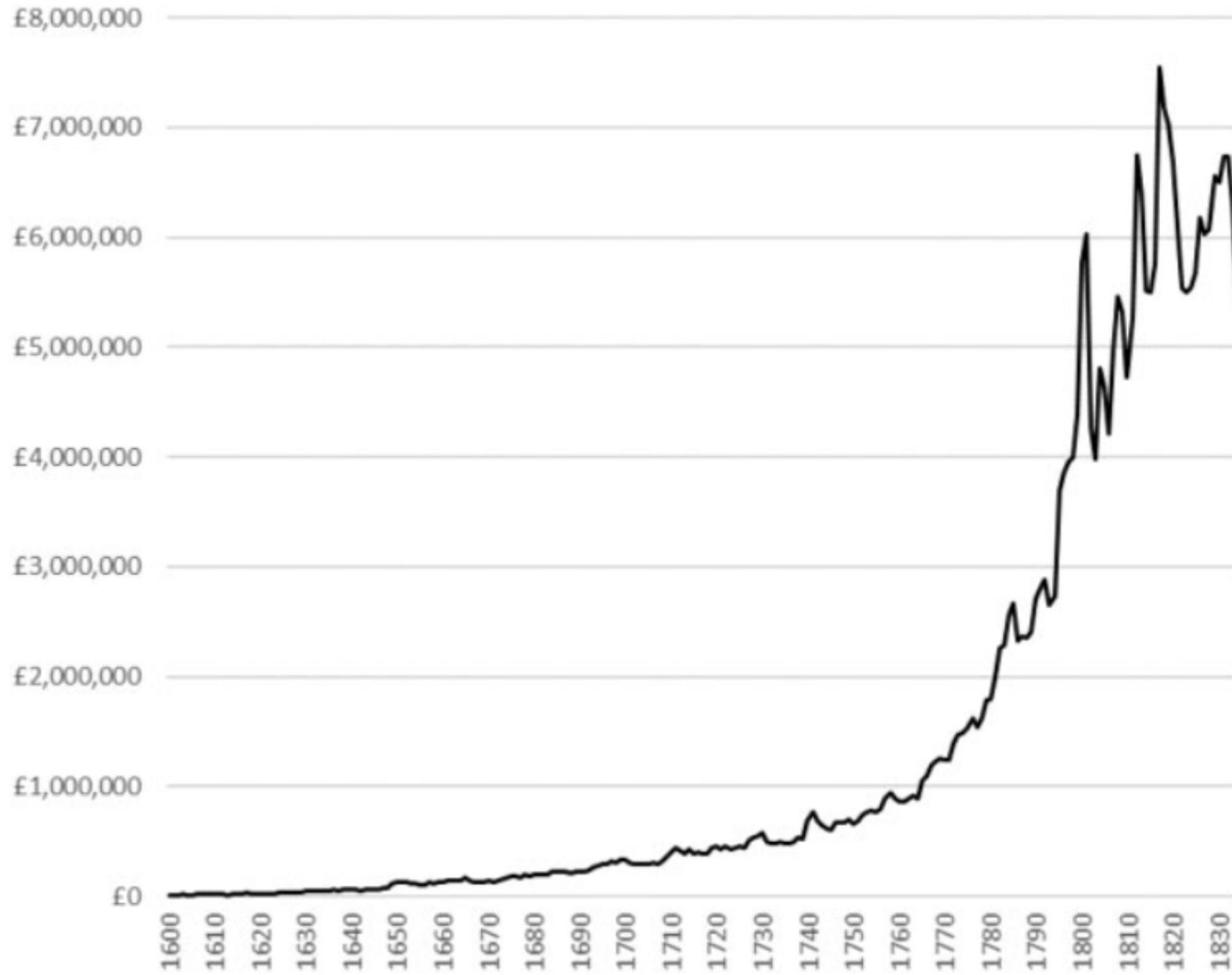


Remaind<sup>r</sup> in our hands  
of the Parish money 01 29.06.

# What could you do with the annual disbursements for poor relief from 184 parishes, 1600-1834?

Huntingdonshire Archives, HP36/12/1,  
42-5 (Great Gransden overseers  
accounts, 1673-4)

**FIGURE 5**  
**ANNUAL NOMINAL DISBURSEMENTS, 1600–1834**



Brodie Waddell, 'The Rise of the Parish Welfare State in England, c.1600–1800', *Past & Present*, Volume 253, Issue 1, November 2021, pp. 151–194

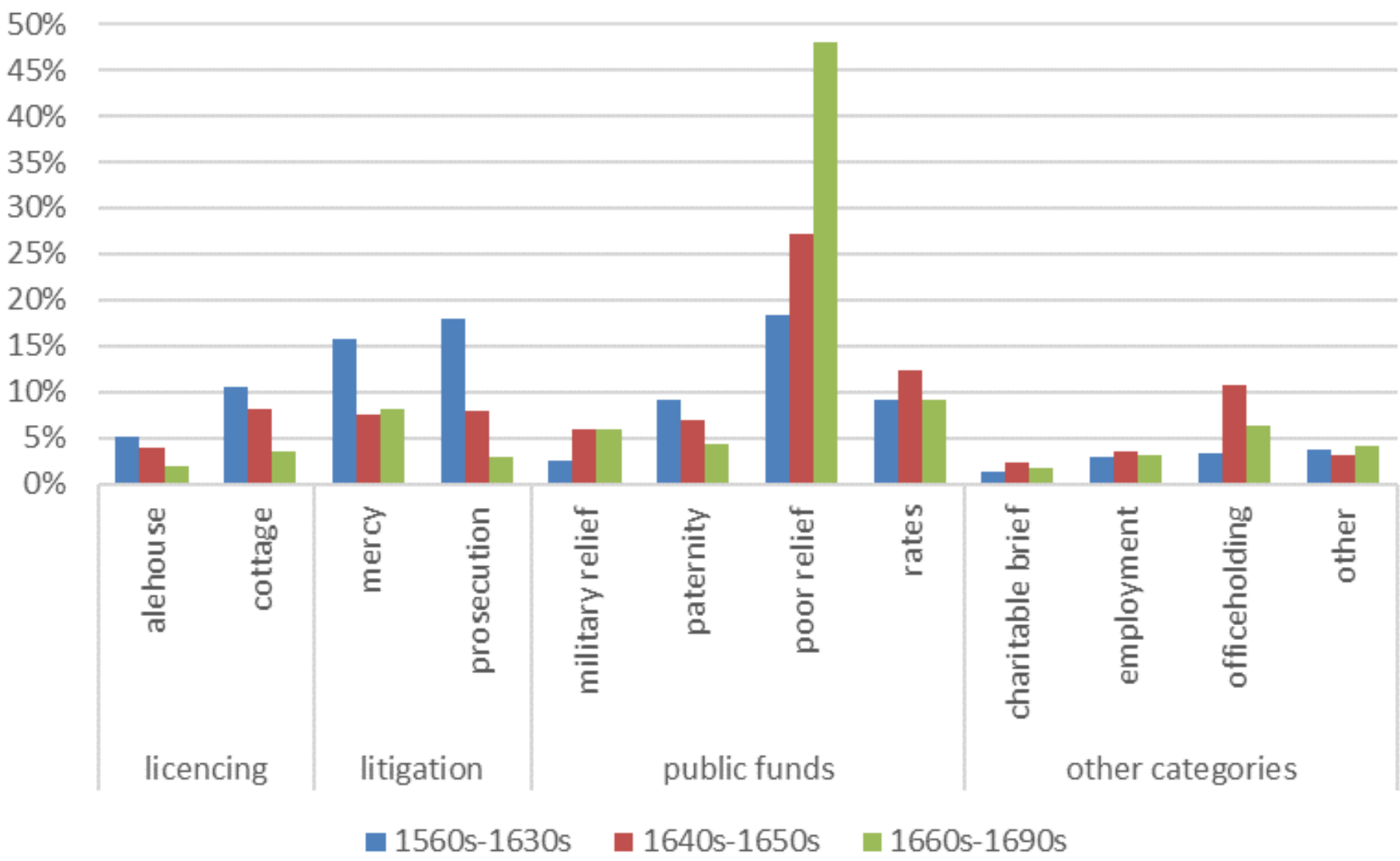


188/77 8<sup>th</sup> October 1700  
Worcestre  
To the Right Wor<sup>sh</sup> his Ma<sup>ties</sup> Justices of the peace for the  
County of Worcester Assembled in Sessions  
We whose names are hereunto subscribed being the Churchwardens  
and Overseers of the poor and other Inhabitants of the parish of  
Saint Clement lying part in the County of Worcester and part in the  
City of Worcester do hereby humbly certify that William Gloster  
David Jones and James shall bee severally sell Ale in that part  
of our parish that lies in the County of Worcester (But whether with  
or without licence we know not) and that they severally keep  
very disorderly houses and sell Ale frequently on the Lord's day  
and doe entertaine and keep persons of very bad and evil  
conversation and reputation in their houses and are a vnder  
great disturbance to the neighbourhood and that the  
severall houses are soe neere the liberties of the City of Worcester  
that we hope yo<sup>r</sup> wor<sup>ships</sup> will be of Opinion w<sup>th</sup> us that there  
is noe need of Allocations there, And therefore Humbly  
desire that the said three persons may be suppressed for  
selling any more Ale thereto And we will humbly pray  
Henry Moorfield  
Hill Smith  
John Wadings  
Nicholas Pagling  
Tho: Reynolds  
Henry Giles  
Wm: Walker  
Henry Taylor  
Rich: Williams  
James Hammond

What could you do with 3,809 petitions to local magistrates, 1563-1799?

Worcestershire Archives, BA1/1/188/77 (Petition of the churchwardens and overseers of the poor of the parish of Saint Clement to the Worcestershire Quarter Sessions, 1700)





Brodie Waddell, 'Shaping the State from Below: The Rise of Local Petitioning in Early Modern England', in Brodie Waddell and Jason Peacey, eds, *The Power of Petitioning in Early Modern Britain* (2024)