

Research resources

The Letters of Richard Cobden Project; by Simon Morgan

The Letters of Richard Cobden Online

A new resource for Liberal history

SEPTEMBER 19, 2023, saw the launch of the Letters of Richard Cobden Online (www.cobdenletters.org) at Portcullis House, Westminster. The open-access website includes previously unpublished transcripts of over 5,500 letters by this influential Liberal statesman, alongside a virtual exhibition of



scanned original letters drawn from archives around the world, contextual essays, and teaching resources for the teaching of citizenship and history lessons for Key Stage 3. The launch event, kindly organised by the History of Parliament Trust, was the culmination of a year-long project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). However, this is merely the latest phase of a project that has already lasted over two decades and looks set to continue for some time yet.

The background

The Letters of Richard Cobden Project began at the London School of Economics in April 2002, with the aim of publishing all extant letters by Cobden. The original project team comprised Anthony Howe as director, with me as the first research officer (the second was Gordon Bannerman, who joined the project after I moved to the University of Leicester in 2005). We also employed a floating population of hourly-paid transcribers. Neither Anthony nor I quite appreciated the mammoth task we had undertaken. With over 7,500 letters eventually discovered – more than twice the original estimate – the initial plan for a comprehensive edition published by Oxford University Press had to be scaled back

Richard Cobden (1804–65), circa 1860
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to a four-volume selected edition, published between 2006 and 2015. These were edited and introduced by Anthony, whom I was privileged to join as co-editor of the final two volumes, by which time I had secured a permanent position at Leeds Beckett University.

However, when the final selected volume rolled off the press in 2015, we still had well over 5,500 unpublished transcripts on hand, all at different stages of annotation. These included several hundred letters each to correspondents ranging from Cobden's wife Catherine and his brother Frederick to political collaborators such as John Bright, the Welsh peace campaigner Henry Richard, and Birmingham anti-slavery activist Joseph Sturge. Initially, we were both too busy with other projects, in my case a new monograph *Celebrities, Heroes and Champions: Popular Politicians in the Age of Reform* (Manchester, 2021), originally inspired by my work on Cobden's letters. However, in 2019 we began seriously to think about the next phase of the Cobden project.

Our preference had always been to publish the remaining letters in an accessible online edition, inspired by the existence of similar projects including the Olive Schreiner Letters. Indeed, my Leeds Beckett colleague Helen Dampier had been one of the Schreiner Letters team and was also the principal investigator on another digital correspondence project, the Letters of Emily Hobhouse. Helen introduced us to Mike Pidd, director of the world-leading Digital Humanities Institute at the University of Sheffield, which had provided technical support for the Hobhouse and Schreiner projects. Working with the DHI enabled us to choose an 'off the peg' content management system rather than designing one from scratch, saving an estimated £60,000 in development costs.

The obvious funding source was the AHRC's 'Follow-on' scheme, designed to unlock the engagement and impact potential of projects it has previously funded. Luckily

the Letters of Richard Cobden qualified for this, having received two tranches of funding between 2002 and 2006. With Anthony now on the verge of retirement from the University of East Anglia, I took the reins as principal investigator with Anthony as co-investigator. We were pleased to welcome Helen Dampier on board as a second co-investigator, an obvious choice given her experience of working on two similar projects. However, the question remained as to how we achieved impact and engagement from the Cobden letters. What relevance did the personal and often private correspondence of a long-dead politician have for the present day?

Active citizenship

Inspired by other projects, we were keen to develop a theme that involved schools in some way. One of the spaces in the National Curriculum where we felt Cobden could add significant value was Citizenship. This is a compulsory part of the curriculum, but one often taught by non-specialists who might particularly welcome additional free resources. The theme of 'Active Citizenship' seemed particularly apt for Cobden, who was an active citizen in every sense of the word. He became involved in voluntary organisations in Manchester, including the Literary Society and the Manchester Athenaeum; he was the promoter of schemes of secular education to get around the 'religious difficulty' which prevented a national system of education being established in England until 1870; and he became increasingly involved in local politics: writing a pamphlet called *Incorporate Your Borough* as part of the campaign to establish Manchester's first elected municipal council, and later serving as one of the town's first aldermen.

Of course, Cobden is best remembered as the leader of the Anti-Corn Law League, the organisation that successfully campaigned

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for removal of import duties on foreign grain that were held responsible for starving the poor and undermining international trade during the 'Hungry Forties'. The League was renowned as the most successful pressure group of the nineteenth century, and its tactics of constitutional pressure backed by formidable organisation and relentless fundraising were widely imitated both in the UK and overseas. Cobden himself advised and mentored reformers involved in a wide range of campaigns, from the repeal of the 'Taxes on Knowledge' which kept newspapers and improving literature out of the hands of the poorest, to the international movement for universal peace. Consequently, his letters are full of advice and examples that modern day active citizens could find useful. He also had a knack of tailoring his message to different audiences: whether fastidious quakers like Joseph Sturge, newspaper editors, or government ministers. In short, he had a consummate knowledge of where power lay and how it might be influenced – even if this didn't always translate into success.

The project

With the theme in place, a multi-pronged project emerged, beginning in September 2022. The key elements were development of teaching materials for Citizenship lessons; a virtual exhibition involving over eighty archives worldwide; and a 'real world' exhibition entitled 'Richard Cobden: Manchester Citizen to International Man' at Archives+ in Manchester's Central Library. The History of Parliament Trust also worked with us, agreeing to theme their annual school competition around Cobden. All of this had the database of over 5,500 previously unpublished transcripts of Cobden's letters at its heart. Without doubt, the most rewarding part of the project was our work with our three partner schools in Leeds, Bradford and Rochdale. We employed Mark

Jamieson and Rachel Wood of the GreenWing project to run intensive three-day workshops, coaching small groups of hand-picked Year 9 students who then led small groups of Year 7 or 8 students to develop a presentation on some aspect of Cobden's work which had inspired them to campaign to improve something in the present. This was tied into the History of Parliament Trust's school competition, which asked pupils to demonstrate how a historic campaign for change had inspired them to develop their own campaign in the present. Seeing how the students responded to this challenge, and some of the fantastic work they produced, made the whole project worthwhile.

The winning competition entry was by a Year 8 pupil from Lawnswood School in Leeds. Inspired by his involvement in the Cobden project, he developed a campaign called 'Black Voices Matter', aimed at raising awareness of the works of inspiring black authors in school libraries who might otherwise go unnoticed. Along with the Year 9 leaders, he attended the launch event, receiving a prize of £50 presented by Lord Norton of Louth. The pupils also received a tour of the Houses of Parliament organised by the History of Parliament Trust.

The website

The website is now up and running and available to access free of charge. The scope of Cobden's interests mean that the letters cover a wide range of topics, from the Anti-Corn Law League to the international peace movement; the Indian Rebellion of 1857 to the American Civil War; the workings of the Victorian newspaper press to the campaigns for mass education. They also give insights into domestic and family life through Cobden's letters to his wife, siblings and children. Some of the latter went on to make their own mark on political life. Jane Cobden Unwin was a notable Liberal, who maintained her father's critical attitude

to empire through involvement in the early Pan-African movement and was one of the first two women to be elected (illegally as it turned out) to the London County Council. Her sister Annie Cobden-Sanderson was a socialist and noted suffragette, who spent time in prison for her activities.

Our impact activities continue; we are keen to get more schools to take up the Cobden resources, and to spread the word about the ‘Black Voices Matter’ project. In February we ran a seminar on ‘Cobden and the British Way in Trade’ at Senate House in conjunction with History & Policy. And then there is more work to do on the website. Much work remains to complete the annotation of the transcripts. The letters will be a valuable resource for scholars, teachers and the general public for

years to come. Their publication brings to fruition not only a project that has occupied the Cobden Letters team for over twenty years, but one that was first attempted by Cobden’s own daughters over 140 years ago. We hope you will enjoy the results. ■

Simon Morgan is professor of modern British history and head of History at Leeds Beckett University. With Professor Anthony Howe, he is editor of *The Letters of Richard Cobden*, 4 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2006–2015). He is Principal Investigator of the AHRC-funded ‘Letters of Richard Cobden Online: An exploration in active citizenship’. The database of letters can be found at www.cobdenletters.org, along with teaching materials suitable for Key Stage 3 lessons in History and Citizenship.

If you would like to know more about the Letters of Richard Cobden Online, please contact me at: DigitalCobden@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

The Victorian Commons

A free online resource for historians

‘The House of Commons 1832–68’ project is part of the History of Parliament’s series of widely acclaimed scholarly reference works charting the personnel and activities of the UK Parliament. The project is producing biographies of all the 2,591 MPs who sat between the first and second Reform Acts, and detailed local studies of all the 401 constituencies in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales.



Highlights from this research on electoral and parliamentary history can be found on the free-to-access Victorian Commons blog, containing over 300 articles: <https://victoriancommons.wordpress.com/>

Drafts of over 1,500 biography and constituency articles are available on a password-protected preview site. For access, contact the project editor, Dr Philip Salmon at psalmon@histparl.ac.uk

For details of and access to the wider work of the History of Parliament, which covers the House of Commons and the House of Lords in periods ranging from the 14th century to the modern (including interviews with former MPs as part of the oral history project), see www.historyofparliamentonline.org.

The History can also be found on Twitter/X (@HistParl @TheVictCommons @GeorgianLords) and other social media platforms.