

Institution: University of Oxford		
Unit of Assessment: 28 – History		
Title of case study: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2000-December 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Mark Curthoys	Research Editor	1993-present
Dr Alex May	Research Editor	1998-present
Dr Philip Carter	Research Editor	1997-October 2016
Dr Anders Ingram	Research Editor	2017-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013-August 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>The Oxford DNB is a research and publishing project of the Oxford History Faculty and Oxford University Press. The work of commissioning, editing, writing, updating, and promoting the Dictionary is undertaken by a small team of Oxford historians. The <i>ODNB</i> has had an impact on the curatorial practice of heritage and creative sectors, as well as on public understanding, as the single most authoritative source for biographical identification and fact checking for these sectors. Its 60,000+ lives cover the period 33,000 BC to 2016 and are written by international experts. The beneficiaries have included leading institutions such as the National Trust, National Portrait Gallery, English Heritage, and Westminster Abbey and their millions of visitors from around the world each year.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>The current <i>ODNB</i> was commissioned in 1992 as a research project of the Oxford History Faculty and published in print and online from 2004 by Oxford University Press.[R1] Since then, the project has continued to extend and update the <i>ODNB</i>. In total the dictionary now contains more than 60,000 lives, 11,000 portraits, and 72,000,000 words. The individual entries and thematic collections are primary points of reference for many academic publications.</p> <p>The project has three lead research editors, all members of the History UoA. Across the census period these have been Dr Mark Curthoys (from 1993), Dr Alex May (from 1998), Dr Philip Carter (1997-2016), and Dr Anders Ingram (from 2017). The research editors' distinctive research contribution is to conceive of, plan, and deliver thematic releases of biographical subjects to extend the dictionary's coverage, on the basis of their historical knowledge, background research, and drawing on specialist advice including from non-academic collaborators. The editors identify and commission leading specialists as authors, and work with them to prepare their individual contributions, which the research editors edit for factual accuracy, balance, and accessibility, publishing several hundred articles annually. For example, in 2018, the <i>ODNB</i> published 479 articles, including 464 biographical articles and 9 group articles. Since 2004 Curthoys, May, Carter, and Ingram have collectively commissioned, edited and published more than 7,000 articles, as well as adding corrections or updates to more than 10,000 further articles drawn from new research, discoveries, and digitised primary materials.</p> <p>The process of producing articles and releases involves substantial primary and secondary research on the part of the research editors. Editors frequently contribute primary biographical or archival research findings to articles they are editing, as well as contributing their own articles. One example of this is May's life of British politician Jo Cox, one of four articles which May</p>		

contributed to the January 2020 release [R5]; another is Ingram's group article 'Black lives in the Oxford DNB' [R2] exploring 'figures of African heritage who are significant in British history'. This was researched and written by Ingram for the October 2019 release focusing on early Black British history, which also included an article co-written by Ingram and Leila Kamali on the beggar and street performer Joseph Johnson.

New historical lives are added to the *ODNB* every year. Until 2016 these were divided into two releases, published in May and October respectively, but since the *ODNB* website relaunched in 2017 it has been possible to move to monthly updates focussed on specific themes.[R4] This more flexible schedule allows the *ODNB* to respond to public debate and interest, for example through edited collections tied to anniversaries. Thematic releases have included 'Women in Parliament' (to celebrate the centenary of women's suffrage, in partnership with the #vote100 campaign), 'Early Black Lives' (for Black History Month 2019), and 'Twentieth Century Nursing' (in collaboration with the Royal College of Nursing), amongst many others. Each thematic release – effectively an edited collection of articles – is accompanied by a substantive historical introduction by the research editor.[e.g. R3]

Prominent lives in the *ODNB* authored by other Oxford scholars include King James I by Jenny Wormald (Sept 2014), philosopher Thomas Hobbes by Noel Malcolm (Sept 2010), novelist Jane Austen by Marilyn Butler (Jan 2010), and scientist Alan Turing by Andrew Hodges [R6].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1.[Other - dictionary] Eds. David Cannadine, Mark Curthoys, Alex May, Anders Ingram, Philip Carter, Matthew Kilburn, Vivienne Larminie, Henry Summerson. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online*, www.oxforddnb.com (OUP, 2004-2020), ISSN 1747-1001, ISBN 9780198614128.

Example articles and updates:

R2.[Other - dictionary entry] Anders Ingram, 'Black lives in the Oxford DNB', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (OUP, 2019). <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-369302>

R3.[Other - dictionary entry, available on request] Mark Curthoys and Mari Takayanagi, 'Women in Parliament', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (OUP, 2018), in collaboration with the #vote100 campaign and UK Parliamentary Archives.

R4.[Other - dictionary entry, available on request] Mark Curthoys, 'September 2016 Update', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (OUP, 2017), covering 89 men and women, including 35 in collaboration with the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership Project, University College, London.

R5.[Other - dictionary entry] Alex May, 'Cox [née Leadbeater], Helen Joanne (Jo) (1974-2016)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (OUP, 2020). DOI: [10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-111368](https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-111368)

R6. [Other - dictionary entry] Andrew Hodges, 'Turing, Alan Mathison (1912-1954)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online* (OUP, 2017). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/36578>

A Google Scholar search for "Oxford Dictionary of National Biography" OR "ODNB" returns c. 19,300 citations for the period between January 2014 and August 2020.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Informing organisations' programming, interpretation, and practice in the heritage sector and beyond

The *ODNB* has had a major impact on the heritage sector as the authoritative reference resource for background research, due-diligence, and fact checking biographical details from British history. It informs **the programming, interpretation, and practice of national organisations within the heritage sector** by providing up-to-date expertise and research for curating public-facing collections and information across this sector.

The Research Manager of the **National Trust** confirms that the *ODNB* is used across the organisation as 'a rich and invaluable source' to interpret 350 historic sites for 25,000,000 annual visitors. The accurate, authoritative, and up to date information in the *ODNB* 'feeds directly' into the stories that are used by curators to educate, engage, and entertain the public about the artefacts and architecture that they are visiting, and 'inspires confidence that the narratives we share with visitors are grounded in fact'. The Research Manager also states that the *ODNB* **'supports our visitor experience, being translated into public-facing outputs such as interpretation and programming'**.^[E1]

The Chief Curator of the **National Portrait Gallery (NPG)** confirms that the NPG uses the *ODNB* 'on an almost daily basis' as 'an invaluable resource' 'to ensure consistency and accuracy in ... interpretation ... [and in] consideration of artist and sitter biographies during the discussion of acquisitions, during research for exhibitions [etc]'.^[E2] For example, the NPG has set a policy of taking the *ODNB*'s dating of historical subjects as authoritative when disputes arise among different sources. Testimonial evidence of the dictionary's importance to the NPG is also supported by usage statistics: there are approximately 11,000 links to the *ODNB* on the sitter pages of the Gallery's website, which has around 5,000,000 visits a year.^[E2] **In sum the research in the ODNB is a central source of evidence for the subjects of portraits and is crucial to the curation of the gallery and its exhibits.** The NPG also uses the *ODNB* as part of its acquisitions policy, to determine how to spend the gallery's resources.

Other organisations also use the *ODNB* for reliable, up-to-date, and expert information to shape interpretation and practice at heritage sites and properties across the nation. For example, the *ODNB* is used by the archivists and curators throughout the many properties managed by **English Heritage**. The Senior Historian running the *Blue Plaques* project at English Heritage confirms that the *ODNB* is 'absolutely essential' and used 'on a daily basis'.^[E3] **Westminster Abbey** (like the NPG) has a policy of using the *ODNB* as the authority for biographical dates as a matter of course. Their head archivist states: 'If we did not have *ODNB* I am not sure how we would manage!'.^[E4] **Past Pleasures Ltd** – the UK's oldest professional costumed historical interpretation company with Europe's largest contract for daily live interpretation for **Historic Royal Palaces** – uses the *ODNB* as a 'vital' and 'unrivalled source' for their events and performances, relying on the 'level of expertise ... the concision of ... the entries, and above all its rigour'.^[E5]

The **Notes Directorate of the Bank of England** supplies a particularly high-profile example of how the *ODNB* informs organisational practice. The Notes Directorate **used the ODNB** in the process of selecting Alan Turing to feature on the new £50 bank note. Turing was chosen from a long list of 989 scientists. The Bank of England used the *ODNB* to 'verify biographical details, scientific achievements and identify possible areas of controversy' for these subjects, to cross check information from other sources, and the *ODNB* 'performed an important function within this process providing relevant, accurate and concise information'.^[E6] The *ODNB* article on Alan Turing was written by University of Oxford scholar Andrew Hodges. Thus, research conducted at the University of Oxford and published by the *ODNB* had **an impact upon the decision to have Turing commemorated** in this way.

Enhancing organisations' understanding of their own history and practice

The research editors collaborate with non-academic organisations to curate collections of lives along specific themes relevant to these organisations. This has included collaboration with the **Royal College of Nursing (RCN)** [E7], **Vote100**, and the **Westminster Parliamentary Library**. These collaborations, some of which also address topical themes, enhance the understanding of these organisations of their longer-term membership, the evolution of their profession and the personalities that contributed to the aims that these organisations represent. For example, in June 2020, the RCN and UK Association of the History of Nursing held a public event discussing the February 2020 *ODNB* release of 20 outstanding figures from 20th-century nursing, as part of the World Health Organisation International Year of the Nurse and Midwife. In the introduction to this release, the joint manager of the Library and Archive Service of the RCN noted that 'the contributions are not simply rooted in history but impact on care that is delivered today. This collection of biographies reminds us of the importance of inspiring future generations to enter and support the nursing profession, and to understand the full breadth and depth of the contribution which its members make to our wider society'. [E7] The research of the *ODNB* thus affects both **public and organisational understanding and practice**.

Furthering public understanding and public debate relating to British history

Alongside the testimonials provided above, the **reach and significance** of the *ODNB* is demonstrated by **online usage statistics**, **iTunes usage statistics** (i.e. podcast usage), **citations in media**, **evaluative reviews in media**, and evidence of **public debate in the media**. On account of its reach and authority, the *ODNB* is regularly treated as a significant **curator of the national past**.

The *ODNB* reaches and is used by an **enormous public audience**. From 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020 *ODNB* online was visited 34,237,154 times for a total of 145,461,417 views (an average of 4.25 page views per visit). *ODNB* was accessed from 48 countries between 2013 and 2020. Around 60% of UK public libraries subscribe to the *ODNB* allowing their users free access. Additionally, around 1,000 articles at any given time are made public and are freely accessible via the *ODNB* website.

The popular *ODNB* podcast series (283 episodes) is hosted on iTunes and the *ODNB* website and has been viewed over 5,737,440 times between 1 August 2013 and 31 July 2020. The reach and significance of the podcast is supported by strongly positive evaluative reviews in numerous major print media outlets such as: *Esquire* magazine (01/03/2014); the *Observer* (the podcast 'shoot[s] light on to a subject', 09/08/2014); the *Times* (13/08/2016); *All About History* magazine ('an engrossing tapestry', 01/02/2018); and the *Telegraph* (02/01/2016). [E8] The *ODNB* Twitter account has 12,200 followers.

The annual release of recent lives attracts significant national press coverage and commentary. Over the period 05/10/2013 to 13/08/2020 some 847 print and broadcast mentions, citations, evaluative reviews, and references in public debate have been recorded. [E8] In 2018 the BBC World Service (which reached 279,000,000 listeners each week in 2018) commissioned a 2-part documentary specifically on the *ODNB* (approximately 30 minutes each). The documentary was broadcast on the 12th and 19th September 2018 and was subsequently available as a podcast and on BBC Sounds. [E9]

Public debate in the media about the dictionary is evidence of the role that the *ODNB* plays in promoting awareness, understanding, and engagement with the British historical past for a large national audience. The press often portrays the *ODNB* as a form of national record and thus a reflection of national identity. For example, the *Times* article 'The latest *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* shows how totally our definition of noteworthy has changed' (19/02/2016) interprets inclusion in the dictionary as a reflection of changing standards of cultural esteem. Similarly, the *Independent* asserted 'a venture such as the dictionary challenges both the flash-in-the-pan narcissism of Celebrity Big Brother and the rigid hierarchies of rank, role and gender reflected in Victorian monuments' (08/01/2016). In an editorial on the *ODNB*, the *Guardian* noted that 'Choosing whose story to tell is part of deciding who we are' (14/01/2016) following on from its

review of the January 2017 release.[E8] There is evidence the public engages directly with these debates: the *Guardian* review was commented on 46 times on their website and the following editorial 31 times.[E10] These articles all treat the *ODNB* as not only an authoritative account of British history read by a large national audience, but also as a distillation of the contemporary British relationship with our past. Consequently, the curation of the dictionary as a whole is a vital component of its impact on public discourse. As a four-page article in the *Daily Mail* commented: 'This is more than a mere dictionary. It symbolises something bigger: public acceptance. To make it into the *ODNB* is to be memorialised, to receive the stamp not of approval but of permanence' (23/01/2017).[E8]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- E1. Letter from Research Manager, National Trust (31/05/2019).
- E2. Letter from Chief Curator, National Portrait Gallery (30/04/2019).
- E3. Letter from Senior Historian, *Blue Plaques*, English Heritage (29/03/2019).
- E4. Letter from Head of the Abbey Collection and Librarian, Westminster Abbey (03/07/2019).
- E5. Letter from Research Manager, Past Pleasures (06/02/2020).
- E6. Email statement from Banknote Transformation Programme Manager, Bank of England (29/10/2019).
- E7. Introduction to the *ODNB*'s February 2020 update (including 20 lives of outstanding figures from the nursing profession in the twentieth century), written by the joint manager of the Library and Archive Service, Royal College of Nursing.
- E8. Collated list of 847 national, international, and regional print and broadcast media references to the *ODNB*, containing text from and/or links to the following articles quoted in section 4 (*indicates full URL and screenshots appended at end): *The Observer* (09/08/2014)*, *All About History* (01/02/2018), *The Times* (19/02/2016), *The Independent* (08/01/2016)*, *The Guardian* (14/01/2016), *The Daily Mail* (23/01/2017)*.
- E9. Details of BBC World Service documentary on the *ODNB*: 'Lasting Fame: The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography' (episode 1, 12/09/2018), 'National International: The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography' (episode 2, 19/09/2018).
- E10. Online comments on the following articles published in the *Guardian*: review of the *ODNB*'s January 2017 release of recent lives of subjects who died in 2013 (12/01/2017); follow up editorial (13/01/2017).
- E11. List of *ODNB* organised public events and speaking engagements of *ODNB* editors (2014-2019), including details of public lectures and conference attendance.