

Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
Unit of Assessment: D29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Enhancing Regional Identity and Public Awareness of Cultural Heritage through Medieval Manuscript Research
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Regional and national audiences have benefited from enhanced perceptions of the linguistic and literary heritage of the West Midlands. Cultural capital has been created by engaging members of the public in the discovery of their linguistic and literary past through their unprecedented access to and understanding of a manuscript written in the dialect of the medieval West Midlands. Increased national interest in the region's cultural heritage has been generated.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Creating a digital edition of the Vernon MS has made it accessible to the public for the first time. Originally produced c. 1400, the Vernon manuscript in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (MS Eng. poet. a. 1) is the largest extant Middle English manuscript and arguably the most important. Few scholars have had the opportunity to engage with the manuscript and it has remained almost entirely unknown to the wider public. Supported by the AHRC Resource Enhancement Scheme (2006-9), Professor Scase (appointed at the University of Birmingham in 1999) has edited a digital facsimile edition of the volume with full parallel transcription (over 1,250,000 words) and 350,000 words of codicological and art-historical description. Scase's edition is the first complete transcription and description of the manuscript and the first time it has been completely photographed in full colour. Producing it involved making the first complete and detailed analysis of the artwork, the first complete record of punctuation, corrections, and paratext such as guide text for the rubricator (some of the material never previously seen), and the first complete transcriptions of many Vernon texts. It also involved developing methodologies to address the formidable problems of data capture and display posed by such an exceptionally large manuscript. The project was a collaboration with the Bodleian (Drs S. Fanous and B. Barker-Benfield) and Evellum.Com (N. Kennedy of Lovestock & Leaf, Digital Architects (Melbourne) and Prof. B. Muir of the University of Melbourne). Scase was the PI, managing the whole project, other University of Birmingham researchers and the production of all of the intellectual content.</p> <p>New research on the manuscript based on the project files has been carried out by Scase since 2010, supported by the AHRC Research Leave Scheme, in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team convened by her. In the resulting edited book (2013), she offers a new hypothesis concerning the origins, production, and aims of the manuscript. This work questions the thesis that the manuscript originates from a West Midlands religious house, proposing instead a West Midlands-London production nexus associated with regional magnates. A further output is XML files of 122 MB, and 730 images of c. 94 MB each. These files formed the basis for the edition and are also being used for further research.</p>
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>R1) <i>The Vernon Manuscript: A Facsimile Edition of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. a. 1</i>, ed. by W. Scase, Oxford: Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, 2011 [listed in REF2].</p> <p>R2) <i>The Making of the Vernon Manuscript: The Production and Contexts of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Poet. a. 1</i>, ed. by W. Scase, Turnhout: Brepols, 2013 [listed in REF2].</p> <p>R3) 'A digital edition of the Vernon Manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng.poet.a.1)', £313,062, AHRC Resource Enhancement award ID 119208, 01/07/2006-31/07/2009.</p> <p>R4) 'The Production and Contexts of the Vernon Manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng.poet.a.1)', £37,480, AHRC Research Leave ID AH/H002162/1, 11/01/2010-10/05/2010.</p>
<p>4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)</p> <p>The project enhanced West Midlanders' perceptions of regional identity and contributed to the cultural life of the region by engaging widely with audiences through various media and public events. The impact strategy put the involvement of wider audiences at the heart of the processes</p>

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of discovery of and transmission of the past. Several channels were used to reach the public, to capture their knowledge and to enable them to become co-creators of new knowledge and thus to acquire cultural capital.

Beneficiaries: A. People of the West Midlands

Before the project, West Midlanders were unaware of the existence of the manuscript. The project has engaged regional audiences with the research through live events and several media channels. The aim was to make the manuscript more usefully and fully accessible to its 'source community' (Peers and Brown, 2003), the peoples of the West Midlands. The events enhanced West Midlanders' perceptions of West Midlands English and regional identity. Also, by utilising West Midlanders' knowledge of the dialect today, the project has involved them in the discovery processes of the research, increasing cultural capital. The regional events included:

- A series of events *Connecting West Midlands Communities with Linguistic Heritage*, marketed via the project website and a press release, and held in museums and libraries in September 2011. Members of the public were invited to explore the edition and to consider relationships between the language of the medieval West Midlands and the dialect of the region today. A similar experience engaged the public at the University Community Day, 10 June 2012.
- *Discovering the Vernon Manuscript*, an edition launch event on 15 May 2012 at The Studio, Birmingham, was also aimed at a regional audience. Brendan Hawthorne, a poet of the Black Country dialect, worked with the PI and audience to discover how the manuscript may have sounded when read aloud by its first readers. The event captured the poet's and audience's knowledge of Black Country dialect to add a further dimension to understanding of the manuscript; the positive impact on West Midlanders' valuation of their regional dialect was noted and discussed by Hawthorne and TV historian Michael Wood in a roundtable and in audience feedback. A follow-up event is on the programme of the 'Book to the Future' public-facing literary festival, University of Birmingham, 25-26 October 2013.

Impact: Testimonies from participants in the *Connecting* and *Discovering* events provide evidence for the significance of the impact of the research on public perceptions in the West Midlands of the language, history and culture of the region [see source 1 below]. The 191 participants shared several recurrent responses. The manuscript was completely unknown to many participants -- several compared the importance of the manuscript in this respect to that of the Staffordshire Hoard (e.g. 'I've never heard of it and I'd love to see it. It's like the Staffordshire Hoard. That interested people and this is the same thing.'). Participation in the project enhanced participants' sense of pride in coming from the region and in its heritage (e.g. 'This gives us a chance to celebrate our history, our heritage, but also what's current ... we can be proud of who we are and where we're from'.) Learning more about the history of the regional (sometimes disesteemed) language was felt to be personally meaningful and affecting (e.g. 'Personally, I have to say that because people from the West Midlands are a bit ashamed of their accent ... you have something like that to show you 600 years ago people were talking like this; it's not something that's grown up in the last hundred years'). Research on the manuscript was viewed as a way of sustaining important local traditions (e.g. 'It [making the manuscript available to the public] will benefit people because it will keep the thing [regional dialect] alive. It's like heritage, it's like history disappearing, you need to preserve this thing to teach the kids ...it's important that we keep this sort of thing.'). Participation in the research was seen as a chance to learn more about an aspect of history they knew little about (e.g. 'I think it's very important because it puts it into a perspective really ... to have something that really is really local, I think is very important to hear.')

Evidence of reach and increased interest in the West Midlands: By 10 July 2013 the project had achieved an estimated potential reach of over two million persons in the West Midlands alone:

- 154 members of the public took part in six *Connecting* events held at five venues, Birmingham Cathedral, Birmingham Central Library, Walsall Museum, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, and Wolverhampton Central Library, 6, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18 September 2011. 37 people attended the *Discovering* event. These numbers are encouraging, taking into account that the innovative nature of the events means that comparator figures are not available.
- The research achieved an estimated audience of 2,051,636 for combined print and broadcast coverage in the week of the *Connecting* events in September 2011. [Source 3]

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- The *Connecting* events were featured by regional BBC radio and television (Phil Upton at breakfast – BBC WM, 9 September 2011, 3 broadcasts each reaching an estimated 77,000 people; Midlands Today – BBC TV, 9 September 2011, two broadcasts each reaching an estimated 458,000 people). [Source 3]
- Newspaper coverage included ‘Accent is on Origin of Regional Dialect’ in two key regional papers, the *Walsall Express and Star*, 10 September 2011, reaching an estimated audience of 18,365 and the *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 10 September 2011, estimated audience 39,733; ‘You can help Boffins in bid to unlock Brummie Accent’, in the key regional paper the *Birmingham Mail*, 13 September 2011, estimated audience 48,660; and ‘Accent Placed on Tracing our Regional Dialect’ in the regional *Stourbridge Chronicle*, 15 September 2011, estimated audience 44,080. [Source 3] There has also been regional and national magazine coverage in print and online based on interviews with Scase: ‘The Mystery of the Vernon Manuscript’, by Chris Mowbray, *Warwickshire Life*, April 2011, Archant Publications: Great British Life Magazines, pp. 60-62 and online warwickshire.greatbritishlife.co; ‘Translating Ancient Worcestershire: The Mystery of the Vernon Manuscript’, by Chris Mowbray, *Worcestershire Life*, Archant Publications: Great British Life Magazines, April 2011, pp. 62-65 and online worcestershire.greatbritishlife.co; and ‘That’s the Right Way’, by Chris Mowbray, *The New Writer*, June 2013.

Beneficiaries: B. National Audience

National audiences’ awareness of the cultural heritage of the West Midlands has been increased through engagement of publics beyond the region with the research: Scase’s presentation on *The Vernon Manuscript – An E-Reader on Parchment* adapted the material for a national audience at the Hay-on-Wye Festival of Literature and the Arts, 6 June 2012. The event was disseminated online in a *Hay Festival News* article: ‘Was the kindle first conceived in the Middle Ages?’ <http://news.hayfestival.org/post/24559425865/was-the-kindle-first-conceived-in-the-middle-ages>.

Impact: Approx. 250 members of the public attended the event. An audience member tweeted ‘New obsession might be the Vernon manuscript which I’d never even heard of before!’ (@booksanddance); and another emailed Scase about how the presentation inspired her as a teacher: ‘I was lucky enough to attend your session on the Vernon manuscript at the Hay Festival... I have a lovely Year 12 class ... studying Language Change and the session I attended at Hay would certainly bring the topic to life for them’ (Lisa Farrell, Staffordshire). [Source 4]

Evidence of reach and increased national interest in the cultural heritage of the West Midlands:

- *The Vernon Manuscript: A Literary Hoard from Medieval England*, an online exhibition based on the research, curated by Scase and aimed at the general public, is hosted on the Bodleian website, <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/about/exhibitions/online/vernon>. It provides non-academic audiences with a window onto the research and a means of discovering the edition and book. It went live on 11 May 2012. Page views to 8 July 2013 were 4,976 with 14 shares of content onto Facebook, February 2013- 8 July 2013. [Source 5]
- The project website, hosted at the University of Birmingham, also has outward-facing content (www.birmingham.ac.uk/vernonmanuscript). Page views to 8 July 2013 were 3,442. Video material from the *Connecting* and *Discovering* events is available on YouTube, with 158 views of the *Connecting* material and 465 views of the *Discovering* material by 10 July 2013. [Source 6]
- The project also gained online coverage. One of the BBC features was uploaded to YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OvkfG4woPY>, 126 views on 30 May 2012; the item was also featured on BBC News Online, 11 September 2011, with audio, reaching an estimated 753,798 people, from where it entered Twitter and the blogosphere; and the material was featured on BBC journalist David Gregory’s blog, 9 September 2011 (173 views by 10 July 2013); in all YouTube videos attracted 845 views by 12 July 2013. [Sources 6 and 7]
- The edition is sold on DVD through the Bodleian Bookshop, an online outlet with a shop for the large numbers of tourists who visit the Library. By 9 July 2013 it had sold 47 copies. [Source 5]

Through online and live engagement of non academic audiences with the Vernon manuscript, the public’s awareness of the rich linguistic and literary heritage of the West Midlands has been

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heightened and West Midlanders' perceptions of their individual and community identities have been enhanced.

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

- [1] Testimonies for *Connecting* and *Discovering* events from the project website: www.birmingham.ac.uk/vernonmanuscript; additional material (available on request).
- [2] Audience figures for the events recorded by the organisers (available on request).
- [3] Audience figures for broadcast, print, and online news media coverage of the *Connecting* project events provided by the University of Birmingham Press Office, 19 September 2011.
- [4] Hay Festival audience responses from Twitter (available on request).
- [5] Hits for *The Vernon Manuscript: A Literary Hoard from Medieval England* and DVD sales data provided by Bodleian Library.
- [6] Hits for Vernon Manuscript Project Website, www.birmingham.ac.uk/vernonmanuscript, and related YouTube videos
- [7] Viewing figures for BBC Feature, 'The Vernon Manuscript' by BBC presenter David Gregory on YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OvkfG4woPY>, from YouTube.