

Twenty-first century technology gives access to the libraries of 18th and 19th century dissenting academies



Cheshunt College, Herts (n.d.)
Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of Dr Williams's Library

Today we worry about 'faith schools' and whether they promote social integration and 'cohesion'. In the 17th-19th centuries, members of the religious and social majority may have had similar worries about 'dissenting academies'. Rejecting the established religion, such academies were controversial, and sometimes subject to harsh sanction. Their role, activities and influence have long been debated by historians. Thanks to this project led by Professor Isabel Rivers and Dr David Wykes and funded by [Religion and Society](#), such work can now be informed by access to the holdings of their libraries.

The earliest dissenting academies were established as a result of the 1662 Act of Uniformity. Their main purpose was to prepare candidates for the ministry, but many of them offered higher education to lay students as well. They catered for Protestant students dissenting from the Church of England, and thereby excluded from Oxford and Cambridge. The 1689 Act of Toleration improved circumstances for dissenters, but left in place the restrictions on nonconformist teaching. The 1714 Schism Act, initiated by the High Church party, sought to exclude dissenters from teaching. After the Act was repealed in 1719, dissenters gradually achieved greater freedom to teach. Their academies played a significant role in ministerial and lay education up to the mid-19th century, at which point the founding of London University and provincial universities, and the removal of religious tests at Oxford and Cambridge, undermined their role as providers of higher education. The surviving academies were transformed into denominational training colleges for ministerial candidates.

The dissenting academies' libraries have left behind a wealth of sources (archives, books, catalogues, loan registers, student essays and lecture notes), which had been little studied prior to this research project. As a result of the work which has been carried out, they are now accessible via an innovative online catalogue – the Virtual Library System (VLS). This was created between 2009 and 2011 by a team under the direction of Isabel Rivers and David Wykes. Their work involved digitally photographing material, inputting records, and searching and interpreting bibliographies and catalogues.

The three main sources of material in the VLS are: English Presbyterian (later Unitarian) academies, represented by Manchester College (founded 1786); the Congregational academies, represented by Mile End (1754-1769) and Homerton (1769-1850) academies; the Baptist academies, represented by Bristol Baptist Academy (founded 1720). The libraries included have been selected on the basis of their significance to dissenting education and the survival of library records and books which allow for their reconstruction. The VLS captures over 30,000 individual borrowings from these libraries, providing an unprecedented view into the reading preferences of students and tutors, with more to be added. It is the first time any historic library catalogues have been digitized in this way.

The VLS constitutes part of the *Dissenting Academies Online* project, which is providing an essential guide to the subject for anyone interested in the social, religious, economic, intellectual, and literary history of the British Isles. Fully integrated and fully searchable, it sets a new standard in historical digital humanities resources.

Find out more...

- Keep an eye out for the major publication to come out of the Dissenting Academies Project *A History of the Dissenting Academies in the British Isles, 1660-1860* to be published by Cambridge University Press.
- Visit the websites of the two institutions which co-founded the Dissenting Academies Project: Dr Williams's Centre for Dissenting Studies: www.english.gmul.ac.uk/drwilliams and the Sussex Centre for Intellectual History: <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/cih/>

You might also be interested in...

- Reading about findings from the Mark Burden's collaborative studentship about dissenting religious academies funded by the Programme, which Isabel Rivers and David Wykes supervised: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/anxiety_about_religious_academies_is_nothing_new
- Listening to podcasts recorded with Mark Burden, Isabel Rivers and David Wykes about this research: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/dr_williams_s_library_discussion

Award Title

Dissenting academy libraries and their readers, 1720-1860

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Award Type

Phase 2 Large Grant

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