U.K. Parliamentary Papers: House of Commons

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House of Commons

- **URL:** https://parlipapers.proquest.com
- **Publisher 1:** ProQuest, http://www.proquest.com
- **Primary Category:** History & Area Studies
- **Secondary Categories:** Business & Economics ,

  Government Information ,

  Political Science & Law ,

  Science, Technology, Computers, Engineering (including

  Environment)

- **Review Type:** Primary source digital content
- **Access Types:** One-time purchase
- **Composite Score:** 4
- **Reviewed by:** Chelcie J. Rowell, Boston College

Abstract

The House of Commons Parliamentary Papers provides access to text and digital images of working documents created by and for the lower house of the Parliament of the United Kingdom from 1688 to the present day. The quality and comprehensiveness of the content is unparalleled by any other collection, whether analog or digital, either freely available or for purchase. The recently redesigned user interface facilitates traditional search and browse with ease. Desirable directions for future development by ProQuest include unmediated access to collections data in batch format for computational research.

At A Glance

Primary Subject	History & Area Studies
Review Type	Primary source digital content
Audience Level	Undergraduate , Graduate/Faculty/Researcher
Access	One-time purchase
Composite Score	4

Overview

Parliamentary papers—including bills, debate transcripts, votes, proceedings, and statistics for each parliamentary year—constitute one of the most important sources for the historical record of Britain and British colonies. ProQuest's House of Commons Parliamentary Papers provides access to the most comprehensive online collection of papers related to the activities of the House of Commons of the U.K. Parliament from 1688 to the present day.

Together with the House of Lords Parliamentary Papers, the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers is part of ProQuest's *U.K. Parliamentary Papers*. The papers of each House are available for purchase separately. Other primary source databases included in ProQuest's government program include U.S. Congressional materials, as well as the *Digital National Security Archive*.

The House of Commons Parliamentary Papers was developed and released as several collections, each of which is available for purchase as a separate module:

- Eighteenth Century (1688–1834)
- Nineteenth Century (1801–1900)
- Twentieth Century (1901–2004)
- Twenty-First Century (2005–2015)

These collections collate materials from numerous sources in order to create a single comprehensive collection. The neat phrase "parliamentary papers" belies the complexity of both Parliamentary record-keeping practices and the provenance of sources that ProQuest's digital primary source collection brings together. The following overview of each collection's content highlights some of those complexities.

The Eighteenth Century collection provides access to parliamentary materials held at the University of Southampton, the British Library, and the University of Cambridge and digitized by the British Official Publications Collaborative Reader Information Service (BOPCRIS). During the eighteenth century, there was no systematized printing of papers from parliamentary sessions, but they were subsequently compiled and re-printed. In addition to these sessional papers, the Eighteenth Century collection also includes Journals of the House of Commons and House of Lords, Private and Local Bills and Acts, debates (from the Parliamentary Register), and Histories and Proceedings of the House of Commons and House of Lords.

The Nineteenth Century collection draws upon the Chadwyck-Healey microfiche edition of House of Commons Session Papers, which in turn was sourced from printed volumes and documents held by the Library of the Department of Trade and Industry, House of Commons Library, House of Lords

Library, British Library, Home Office Library, and Cambridge University Library.[i] The Twentieth Century and Twenty-First Century collections draw upon both microfiche and print materials.

For institutions subscribing to the Nineteenth Century or Twentieth Century collections, the Hansard (the Official Report of all parliamentary debates) from 1803–2005 is provided at no additional cost. This content is drawn from transcribed text (rather than digital images of original documents) made freely available as XML files on the U.K. Parliament website.[ii]

The audience for ProQuest's House of Commons Parliamentary Papers is broad, ranging from undergraduates still developing primary source literacy, to faculty and graduate students performing original research, to employees of government agencies researching historical activities of Parliament in support of contemporary work. These users' familiarity with parliamentary procedure and record keeping will vary widely. Together with such a broad audience, the breadth of materials that make up this database, often with complex documentary genealogies, creates a challenging user experience design problem for ProQuest developers. The interface must provide context and scaffolding for the novice, as well as powerful search for the researcher more familiar with the complexity of parliamentary papers.

[i] *House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1801-1900* (Cambridge, England: Chadwyck-Healey, 1980–1982). http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/42842715

[ii] "Hansard Archive (Digitised Debates from 1803)," *U.K. Parliament*, n.d. http://www.hansard-archive.parliament.uk

User Interface

A researcher's first encounter with the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers is likely to be the basic search interface, which is visually dominated by a single search bar. From there the researcher can jump right in with a keyword search, opt instead for advanced search, or explore one of the other specialized searches highlighted under the heading "New to U.K. Parliamentary Papers? Here are some useful starting places."
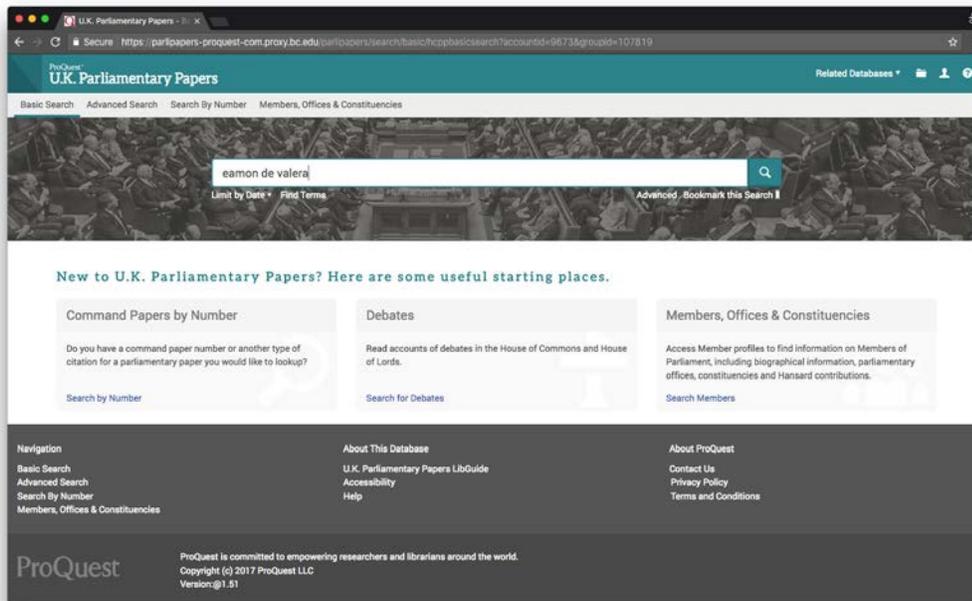
Figure 1. Basic search

While "Debates" is simply an advanced search limited to papers of the type "Hansard" or "Debates," both "Command Papers by Number" and "Members, Offices & Constituencies" offer specialized types of search. Searching by number is especially useful for tracking down an item known from a citation. Searching members results in lists of Members of Parliament, which can be limited by constituency, office, party affiliation, or nation. It's the work of a moment, then, to identify the 89 MPs who were members of Ireland's Home Rule party. The entry for each member provides biographical details including terms served, as well as links to each time that individual appears in the Hansard, or record of Parliamentary debates.
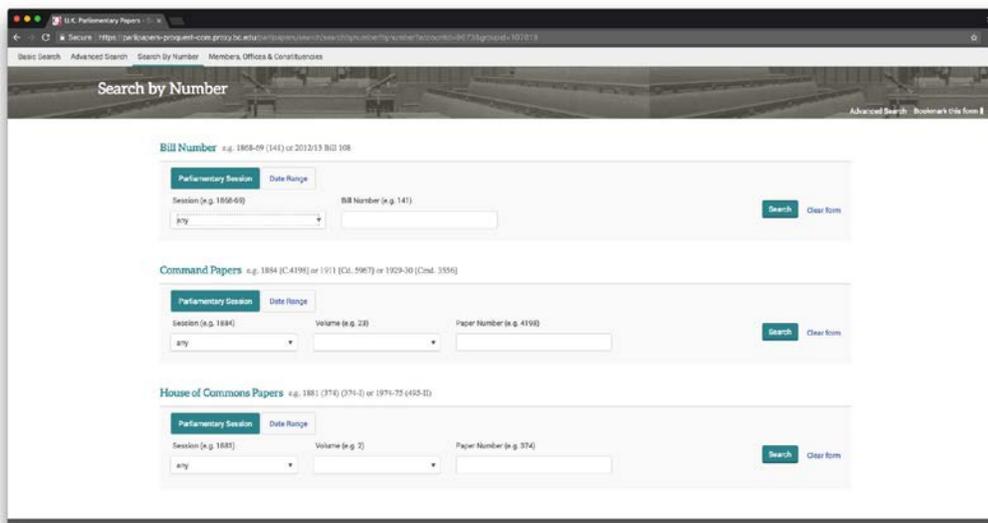

Figure 2. Search by number
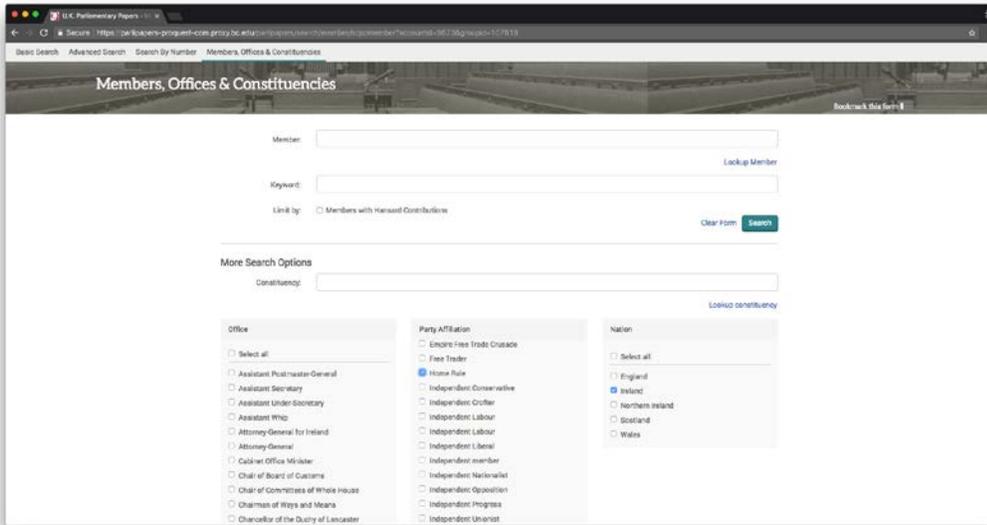
Figure 3. Search members
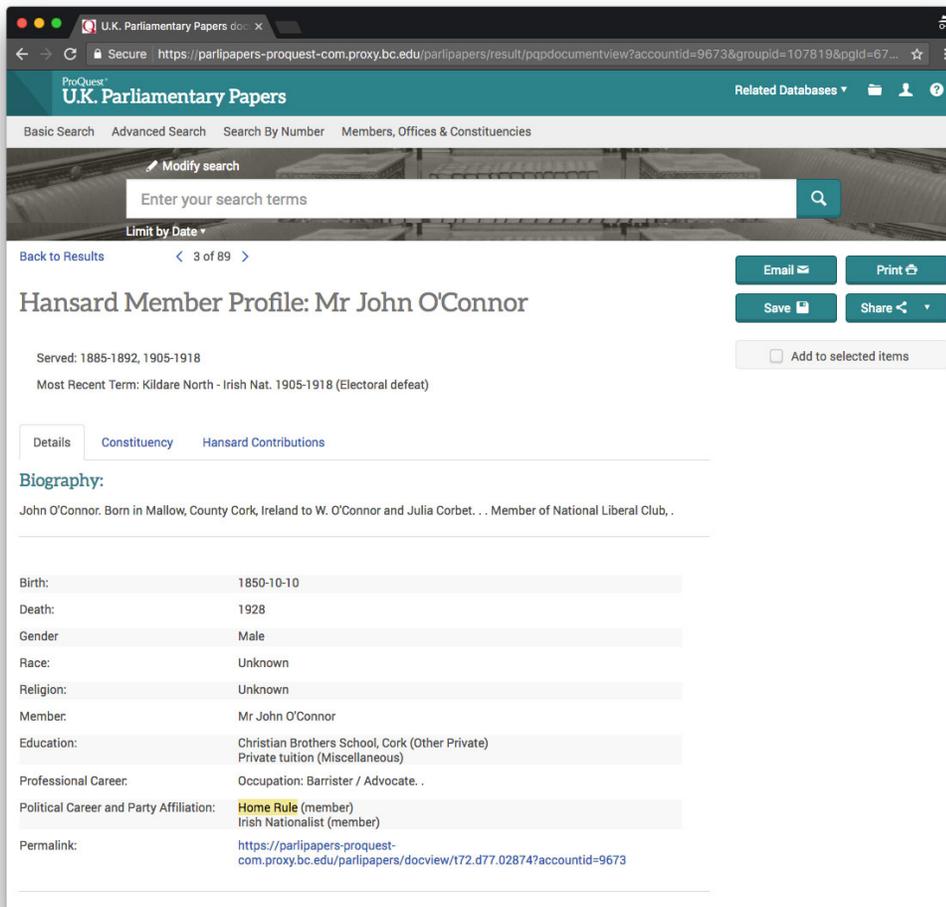
Figure 4. Member details

If their complexity were not already apparent to the researcher new to parliamentary papers, the advanced search makes that complexity undeniable. The organization of the advanced search form communicates many dimensions of the organization of parliamentary papers, such as parliamentary session and type of paper. Keyword searches can apply to descriptive metadata fields and/or full text. Results can be limited by date, collection, paper series or type, and document features such as illustrations or tables. For institutions that also subscribe to the *House of Lords Parliamentary Papers*, the database is searchable across both houses of Parliament.
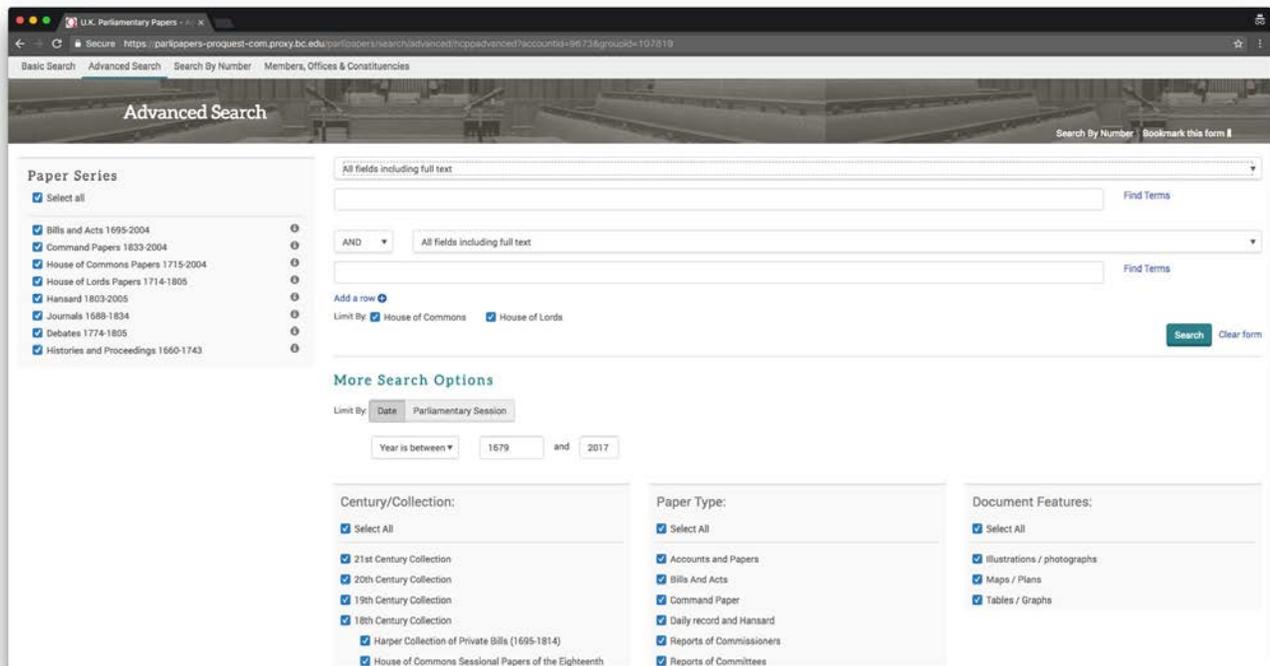
Figure 5. Advanced search

From the results page, researchers can quickly view the item details or full text, or they can export selected items to email or the reference manager of choice. Results can be limited by a few additional facets, including document type and subject—though it's somewhat unclear what additional selection power is provided by document type versus paper series or paper type. By default, results are sorted by relevance, though the nature of that relevance is sometimes opaque, especially given that the search results page does not provide snippets placing search terms in context. Researchers can choose instead to sort by date or by volume and page, although these sort options are complicated by the fact that not all documents are indexed by date or volume and page. Another recent reviewer, Kate Wilcox of the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London's School of Advanced Study, emphasizing the importance of sorting by date, observed that "Many users will either want to browse through them chronologically to follow the progression of the discussion through parliament or narrow by date to find a particular document."[i] The tension

between standardizing ProQuest search interfaces and customizing to the peculiarities of parliamentary papers is especially felt here with the default sort of search results.
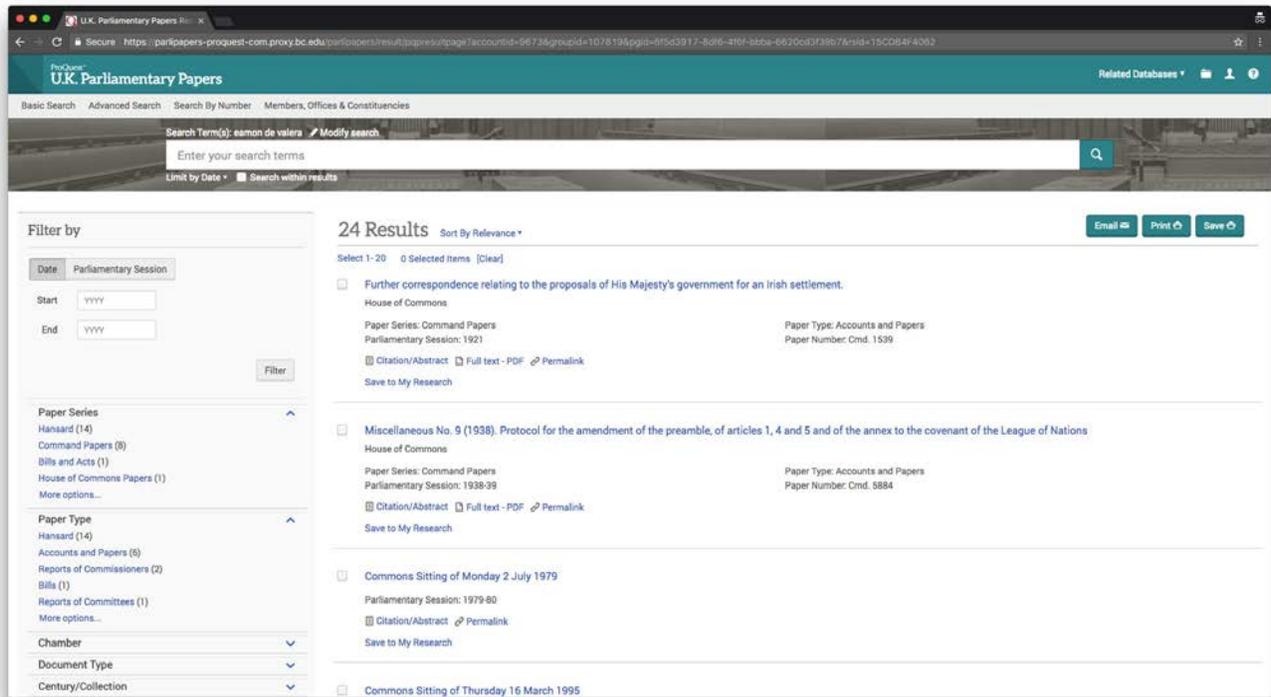
Figure 6. Search results

By default the item page displays the full text item rather than the item details. This choice makes sense, as it's often easier to determine a document's relevance by skimming the document itself, rather than its accompanying descriptive information. The full text item view highlights search terms on document pages. Based on institutional subscriptions, the item page also shows related results from ProQuest historical newspapers. Sometimes, however, these related results, well, aren't. For example, a command paper presenting "Further correspondence relating to the proposals of His Majesty's government for an Irish settlement" presents news related not to the nature of Irish government following the Irish War of Independence, but rather to the settlement of various legal cases that took place at roughly the same time.

Although PDFs are easily downloadable from both the search results page and the item page, the availability of more formats is desirable, including high-resolution page images and OCR text. Additionally, while permalinks are easily available from both search results and item-level pages, the fact that the permalink is institution-specific makes House of Commons Parliamentary Papers resources less likely to be formally cited than their print sources.
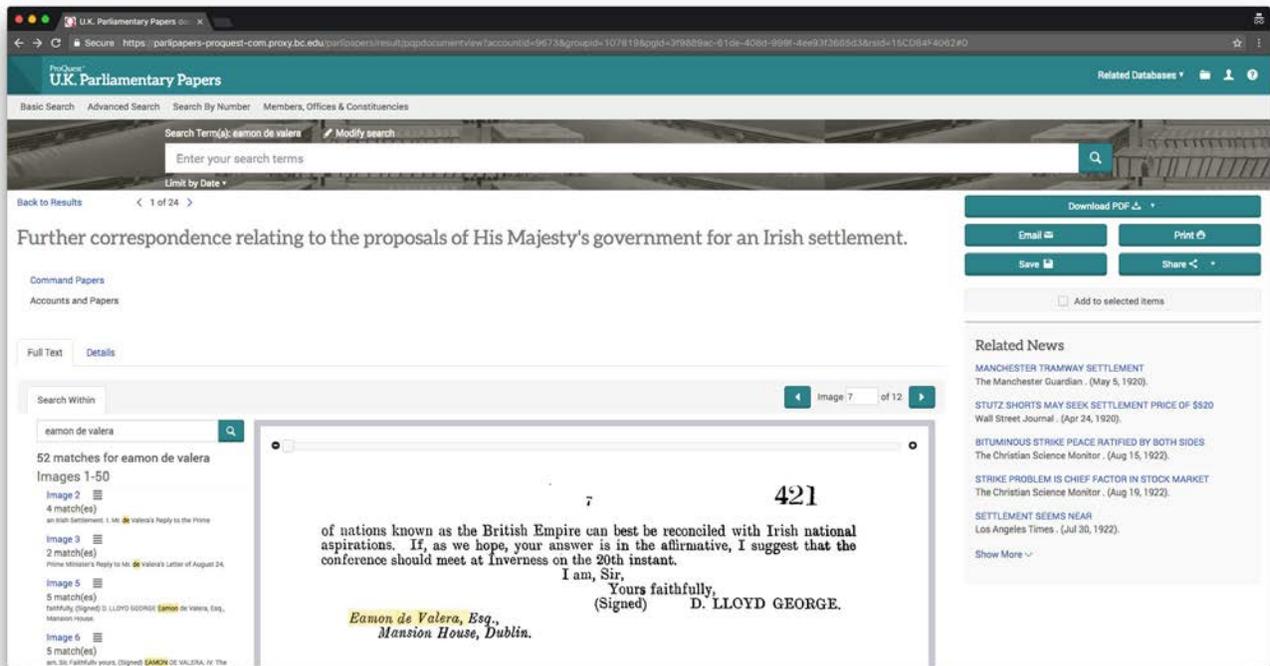
Figure 7. Item page (full text)

Though search is privileged over browse, it is possible to browse subject headings by clicking on "Find Terms" from either basic search or advanced search. No subject terms are applied to materials in the Eighteenth Century collection. Subjects for the Nineteenth Century collection are drawn from Peter Cockton's *Subject Catalogue of the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1801-1900.*[ii] Subjects for the Twentieth Century collection are drawn from Her Majesty's Stationery Office (HMSO) general indexes from 1901–79 and the Parliamentary On-Line Information Service (POLIS) database from 1979. These controlled vocabularies are highly specialized, and the relationships among the vocabularies are unclear to the non-expert. For those who are already familiar, however, their absence would be keenly felt.
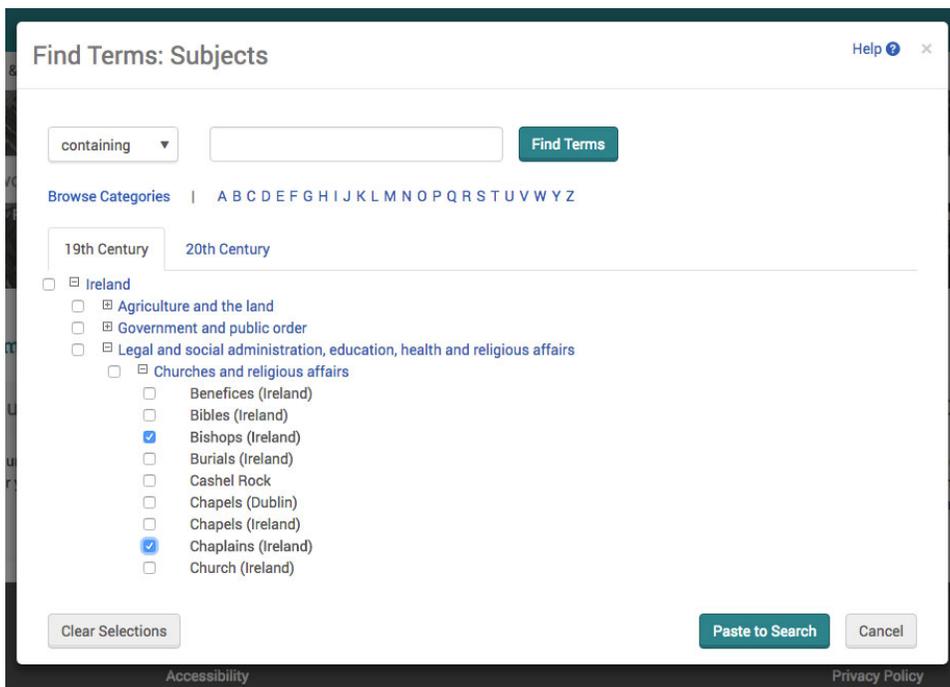
Figure 8. Subject browse (nineteenth century)
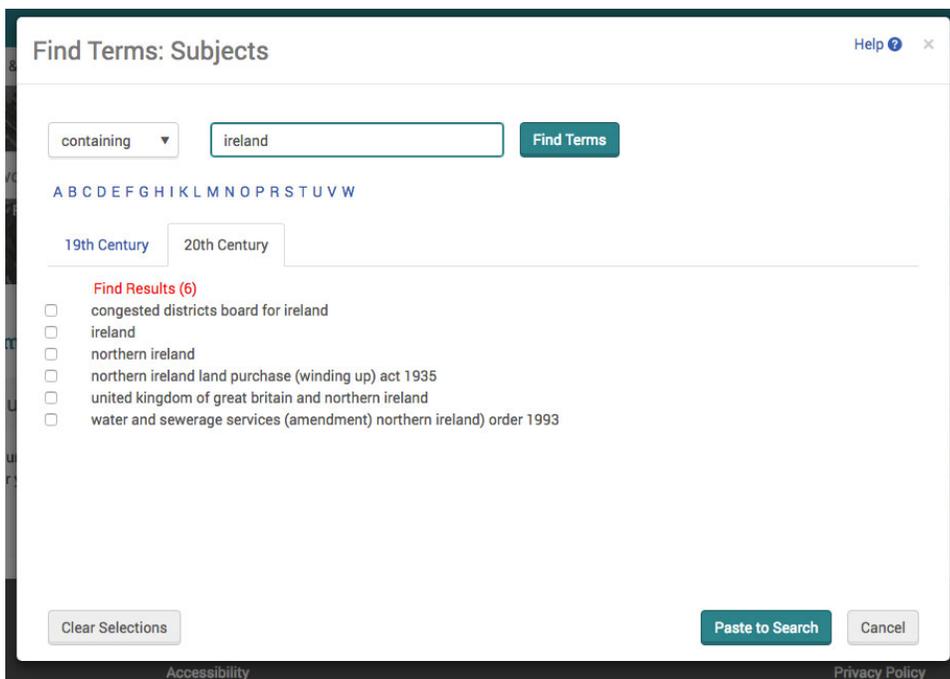
Figure 9. Subject browse (twentieth century)

ProQuest aspires to accessibility for all. The interface of the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers was designed with web accessibility standards in mind.[iii]For researchers using screen readers, PDFs may need to be downloaded to be read using desktop software. The website is largely responsive, and it's not impossible to perform searches on a mobile device, though most researchers will opt to perform extended searching on their laptop or desktop computer.

[i] Kate Wilcox, "Review of 'ProQuest UK Parliamentary Papers: House of Commons.'" *Reviews in History*, 2017, doi:10.14296/RiH/2014/2048.

[ii] Peter Cockton, *Subject Catalogue of the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1801-1900* (Cambridge, England: Chadwyck-Healey, 1988). http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/606059843.

[iii] "Accessibility Statement for ProQuest Products," *ProQuest Support Center*, May 6, 2014. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA140000000GuuVCAS&l=en_US.

Critical Evaluation

The greatest strength of the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers is its unparalleled content, the most complete online collection of parliamentary papers currently available anywhere. ProQuest's product has maintained this status from the early days of its availability, when one reviewer characterized the Nineteenth Century collection as a "feature-rich resource totally fit for the purpose of interrogating and exploiting its complex data sets."[i]

Its interface meets the needs of the majority of researchers the majority of the time. Smart user experience design decisions mean that there are few steps in between the basic search bar and downloading documents from either the search results page or item page. To the extent possible in an interface that prioritizes search over browse, context is provided to help the researcher navigate the complexities of parliamentary papers. ProQuest should continue to build upon this foundation, in future design cycles seeking still more ways to provide appropriate scaffolding to the range of researchers using parliamentary papers. ProQuest should also consider making more file types available for download—in addition to PDFs, page images and OCR text.

Parliamentary papers are sources not only for traditional forms of scholarship, such as scholarly journal articles and monographs, but also for emerging forms of digital scholarship such as text analysis, mapping, and network analysis. Because of the particular suitability of parliamentary papers for computational research, ProQuest should consider providing unmediated batch download access to collections data, such as descriptive metadata, page images, and full text. Even without this easy accessibility, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers data underpins the historical database Trading Consequences, which "aims to assist environmental historians in understanding the economic and environmental consequences of commodity trading during the 19th century" (212).[ii] Like EEBO (another ProQuest product), the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers could significantly impact the realm of the digital humanities if its data were made available to the public, perhaps through a public-private partnership modeled after the Text Creation Partnership.[iii] As noted in a report commissioned by JISC in cooperation with ProQuest, the open availability of EEBO texts has led to the development of a number of tools for analyzing and viewing the collection such

as Lancaster University's Corpus Query Processor, the searchable EBBOTCP database provided by Brigham Young University, and the EEBO N-gram viewer at Washington University in St Louis.[iv]

[i] Martin Myhill, "Review of 'House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online (HCPP)–Nineteenth Century,'" *The Charleston Advisor* 7, no. 4 (April 2006): 23–25.

[ii] B. Alex et al., "User-Driven Text Mining of Historical Text," in *Working with Text: Tools, Techniques and Approaches for Text Mining*, ed. Emma L. Tonkin and Gregory J.L. Tourte. E-Book, Chandos Information Professional Series (Cambridge, MA: Chandos Publishing, 2016), 209–230.

[iii] "About," *Text Creation Partnership*, n.d. http://www.textcreationpartnership.org/home.

[iv] Eric T. Meyer and Kathryn Eccles, "The Impacts of Digital Collections: Early English Books Online & House of Commons Parliamentary Papers," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, March 1, 2016). https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2740299http://www.britishparliamentarypapers.com

Competitive Products

It may strike some as curious that the historical working papers of the U.K. Parliament are not more easily available as public information to U.K. citizens and researchers around the world. The fact remains, however, that no other online resource, free or paid, compares to ProQuest's House of Commons Parliamentary Papers in completeness. In fact, no single library brings together all parliamentary papers in their original format, not even the House of Commons Library or the British Library. Perhaps in the future the U.K. Parliament or National Archives will undertake to make the full historical range of parliamentary papers openly available online, much as the United States is working to provide congressional materials through Congress.gov.

In the meantime, institutions with limited resources may wish to investigate alternatives for providing access to their researchers. Freely available online, some parliamentary papers are held by the HathiTrust Digital Library[i]and British History Online,[ii] although coverage varies. The U.K. Parliament website provides access to current and recent publications, as well as some archived publications.[iii] Worth noting in particular is the freely available transcribed text of the Hansard (official record of Parliamentary debates). *Hansard Online* on the U.K. Parliament website provides access to debates from 2010 to the present.[iv] Additionally, the *Hansard Archive* makes XML files of transcribed text from 1803–2005 available for batch download. Finally, the *Hansard 1803–2005*, built using the freely available XML files, provides search and browse of the Hansard.[v]

Print and microfiche alternatives are also available—not least of which is the 1000-volume series of nineteenth-century British parliamentary papers published by the now-defunct Irish University Press (IUP).[vi] Without even considering the costs, most institutions would not consider acquiring these

alternatives due to space constraints. However, some institutions may be able to refer patrons to local research libraries that already include such resources in their collections. Additionally, members of the Center for Research Libraries can borrow titles from the IUP series.

[i] "HathiTrust Digital Library." Accessed July 20, 2017. https://www.hathitrust.org

[ii] "British History Online (BHO)." Accessed July 20, 2017. http://www.british-history.ac.uk

[iii] "Publications & Records," *U.K. Parliament*, n.d. http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications

[iv] "Hansard Online," *U.K. Parliament*. Accessed July 17, 2017. https://hansard.parliament.uk

[v] "Hansard 1803–2005." Accessed July 17, 2017. http://hansard.millbanksystems.com

[vi] "The Irish University Press Series," *British Parliamentary Papers*. Accessed July 20, 2017. http://www.britishparliamentarypapers.com

Purchase Contract

Resources available through the ProQuest Government program now fall under the umbrella ProQuest license, and no doubt many institutions will be familiar with its provisions. For those that aren't, however, a summary is provided below.

The license to purchased content is perpetual. In the event that purchased content were no longer accessible online, for example, if ProQuest discontinued the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, subscribing institutions could obtain digital copies for local loading. Subscribing institutions can also request local digital copies in order to facilitate text mining. In either case—archiving or text mining—purchased content should be restricted to authorized users, and subscribing institutions are responsible for file transfer costs.

Permitted uses of purchased content specified by the ProQuest umbrella license include but are not limited to the following:

- research and analysis—displaying and using reasonable portions for educational or research purposes, including illustration, explanation, example, comment, criticism, teaching, or analysis
- interlibrary loan—digital or print loans to other libraries provided that the magnitude of the loan wouldn't replace the need for the receiving institution to subscribe
- scholarly sharing—digital or print sharing of minimal materials with colleagues, again provided that the extent of the sharing wouldn't replace the need for the recipient's institution to subscribe

For course reserves, subscribing institutions should provide access via persistent URLs.

Definitions of authorized users are generous. For public libraries authorized users include library staff, residents of the library's service area, and on-site users. For school and academic libraries authorized users include currently enrolled students, faculty, staff, visiting scholars, and on-site users. For other types of organizations authorized users includes employees and independent contractors.

MARC records are available to subscribing institutions via the Ex Libris Primo and ProQuest Summon services or via an FTP site accessible through the ProQuest Administrator Module (PAM). [i].[ii] Collection level records are available for the Hansard and the 18th Century module; item-level records are available for the 19th Century module and forward.[iii] COUNTER-compliant usage statistics are also available through PAM.[iv]

[i] "U.K. Parliamentary Papers," *ProQuest LibGuides*, July 6, 2017. http://proquest.libguides.com/parliamentary

[ii] "ProQuest House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Customer Resources," *ProQuest Support Center*, September 21, 2016. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA140000000GxPFCA0&l=en_US

[iii] "House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Migration," Fall 2015. https://www.slideshare.net/proquest/house-of-commons-parliamentary-papersmigration

[iv] "ProQuest Product Usage Statistics Improvements & Enhancements," February 20, 2017. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA140000000PDZfCAO&l=en_US

Pricing

ProQuest offers a variety of purchase options designed to fit the content needs and budgets of many institutions. For academic libraries, pricing varies depending on the type of school, size, and location. Using a standard range (domestically based, masters level school with FTE between 5,000–15,000) subscription list pricing would be:

- Eighteenth Century – $1,198 to $1,717
- Nineteenth Century – $4,131 to $5,923
- Twentieth Century – $5,544 to $7,949

The modules are also available to purchase on perpetual access model:

- Eighteenth Century – $6,735 to $9,657
- Nineteenth Century – $22,328 to $32,015
- Twentieth Century – $21,266 to $30,491

Authentication

ProQuest supports IP address, proxy, barcode, Shibboleth, referring URL, and manual login as authentication methods for its databases, all of which can be set up via the ProQuest Administrator Module.[i] The ProQuest Support Center provides further information on configuring EZproxy for remote access to the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers.[ii] Although ProQuest is transitioning from HTTP to HTTPS to provide more secure access to its most widely held products, the House of Commons Parliamentary Papers is not currently slated for transition.[iii]

[i] "Log into ProQuest," *ProQuest Support Center*, June 1, 2016. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA0400000004JMLCA2&l=en_US

[ii] "How Do I Setup House of Commons Parliamentary Paper with EZproxy," *ProQuest Support Center*, March 18, 2017. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA0400000004OBnCAM&l=en_US

[iii] "ProQuest Support for HTTPS," *ProQuest Support Center*, June 28, 2017. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA140000000ThceCAC&l=en_US

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"Hansard Online." *U.K. Parliament*. Accessed July 17, 2017. https://hansard.parliament.uk.

"HathiTrust Digital Library." Accessed July 20, 2017. https://www.hathitrust.org.

House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, 1801-1900. Cambridge, England: Chadwyck-Healey, 1980. http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/42842715.

"House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Migration." Fall 2015. https://www.slideshare.net/proquest/house-of-commons-parliamentary-papersmigration.

"How Do I Setup House of Commons Parliamentary Paper with EZproxy." *ProQuest Support Center*, March 18, 2017. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA0400000004OBnCAM&l=en_US.

"Log into ProQuest." *ProQuest Support Center*, June 1, 2016. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA0400000004JMLCA2&l=en_US.

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"ProQuest House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Customer Resources." *ProQuest Support Center*, September 21, 2016. http://support.proquest.com/apex/homepage?id=kA140000000GxPFCA0&l=en_US.

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About the Author

As Digital Scholarship Librarian and History Liaison at Boston College Libraries, Chelcie Juliet Rowell works closely with Boston College faculty, students, and library colleagues to imagine, carry out, and sustain digitally inflected research and teaching. She also performs collection development, research consultations, and library instruction on behalf of the History Department. From 2013–2016 Chelcie served as Digital Initiatives Librarian at Wake Forest University's Z. Smith Reynolds Library, where she was responsible for building a digital collections program. Chelcie earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from Oglethorpe University in 2009 and a Master of Science in Information Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2013.

Scorecard

Composite Score	4	
Content	5.0	Nowhere else is this breadth of papers produced by and for the House of Commons of the U.K. Parliament available online, making this resource invaluable across a range of disciplines and research levels.
User Interface/Searchability	4.0	The search interface is consistent with other ProQuest databases. Although PDF items are easily downloadable, many users will also wish to download other formats, such as high-resolution page images and OCR text. Because of the suitability of parliamentary papers for computational research, ProQuest should consider providing unmediated batch download access to collections data.
Pricing	3.0	The one-time purchase cost will be out of reach to institutions that are less than well-resourced, so some may opt to subscribe rather than purchase.
Purchase/Contract Options	4.0	The ProQuest license terms are standard within the industry.