This was the second Postgraduate Advanced Training Seminar organised by the ARC Network for Early European Research. It was convened by Michael Bennett, with the assistance of network members Elizabeth Freeman and Jenna Mead.

The aim of the seminar was to provide instruction and advice on the use of manuscripts and records relating to medieval England. The idea was to give some idea of the range of sources available to medievalists in Britain, and to give some practical assistance with the technical skills and knowledge necessary to access them and interrogate them. The seminar drew heavily on the considerable experience and expertise of Emeritus Professor Rod Thomson in palaeography and codicology. The visit of Professor Robert Swanson, who has an unrivalled knowledge of church records, not only suggested the timing of the event, but also the linking of it with a specialist symposium for students working on the medieval church and religion.

The Seminar was not over-subscribed, but more than sufficient make it a worthwhile and stimulating exercise. There were sixteen participants, eight from Tasmania and eight from interstate. One of the latter, Merridee Bailey, had to pull out at the last minute, owing to a bereavement. She subsequently requested, and was sent a bundle of outlines and handouts. Her place was taken by a local honours student who intends to do postgraduate work on sixteenth-century England.

All the sessions were plenary. In the event all the five leaders of masterclasses attended each other’s sessions.

On the morning of the first day Rod Thomson provided a brief survey of the history of manuscripts and writing, and led the class in the decipherment of selections from a range of manuscripts. Michael Bennett then talked about the wealth of documentation produced by the England government from the twelfth to the sixteenth century, their strengths and limitations as historical sources, and presented some examples for the class to read.

For lunch we went to Mt Nelson Signal Station, ten minutes’ drive from the University, and enjoyed the spectacular views of the Derwent estuary and city.
In the afternoon Robert Swanson introduced some of the main classes of record produced by the English church in the later middle ages, from bishops’ registers to court records, and again presented a portfolio of photocopies for students to consult.

In the final session, with Elizabeth Freeman in the chair, the students talked about their own research and the sorts of sources they had used or needed to use.

There were no formal arrangements for the first evening. The students made their own arrangements for dinner in Salamanca Place and Sandy Bay.

In the first session on the second day Rod Thomson offered an introduction to manuscript studies, and gave a lot of insight into his work in ‘cataloguing’ medieval manuscripts and editing texts. He took the class through catalogue entries, showing and explaining the meaning of technical terms and the conventions used. He also led the class through further palaeographical exercises. Jenna Mead talked about literary manuscripts, Chaucerian and otherwise, and explored and problematised the boundaries between ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary texts’. She introduced students to some of the electronic facsimiles now available, and gave some instruction in Middle English dialectology and phonetics.

After a quick sandwich lunch, the car-owners took the visitors into the city for a half-an-hour walk round the Botanical Gardens.

In the afternoon Elizabeth Freeman conducted a very useful session on research that can be done from Australia in preparation for a research trip. She produced lists of guides and printed catalogues, and above all web addresses and sample print-outs relating to a range on on-line catalogues and electronic data-sets. She had previously asked the participants to identify archival sources they were interested in, and brought along examples relevant to their researches.

The postgraduate training seminar concluded with Robert Swanson’s paper on prayer indulgences in late medieval England that doubled as the opening paper for the symposium on ‘Religion and Society in Britain from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century.’

In the evening all the participants, and a number of partners, had an enjoyable dinner at La Provencal in South Hobart.

Almost all the participants attended the symposium the following day. There were six papers, two by academics, one by an early career researcher, and four by postgraduates. The day ended with a visit to St David’s Cathedral, arranged by Rod Thomson, the city organist. In addition to providing a rich insight into the history of the Gothic style building, Rod showed the students how to ‘read’ a medieval church. He also treated the group to an impromptu organ recital. After winding down to Mozart’s clarinet concerto, those who did not have to head off to the airport adjourned to the historic Hadley’s Hotel across the street.

The seminar seemed to be a great success. By the end of the third day we were all pretty exhausted and there was a sense of ‘overload’, but I guess there’s no escaping the fact time and resources are limited and that such seminars have to be high impact.
The major problem — identified from the outset — is that postgraduate students in NEER have a range of interests and needs, and even students with identical interests and needs tend to be at different stages of their research career. We addressed this by stressing the importance — not least to students with academic aspirations — of some general familiarity with a range of manuscripts and records, and the technical issues involved in using them. We found it an interesting challenge in our presentations to try to meet the needs of both the beginner and the more experienced researcher.

There is clearly the need for more such practice-oriented seminars, but whether there are enough postgraduates with similar needs at similar stages to provide more specialised classes, I am not sure. One approach — especially in relation to palaeography and Medieval Latin — would be for NEER to adopt (and possibly customise) existing on-line courses, and then to stage residential seminars to support them. Such seminars could range over, say, four days, with beginners starting on day 1 and older hands coming along for days 3 and 4.

The costs of the seminar were reasonably modest, confined to travel subsidies for the eight out-of-state students, $12 per head for lunches, and honoraria of $450 each for Professor Robert Swanson and Emeritus Professor Rod Thomson. The School of History and Classics contributed morning and afternoon teas, the teaching space, and balance of Robert Swanson’s travel costs. Finally I’d like to underline the point made by Stephanie Trigg in her report of the first PATS. The organization of the seminar, the preparation of the sessions and the facilitation of the event took a lot of time. Claire McIlroy made it as painless as possible, and the financial arrangements worked well. The budget should perhaps include some administrative support. I also think that for seminars that involve ‘training’ we might need to pay our non-network experts rather more.

Michael Bennett
30 July 2005