



# Research Impact Case Study



## 1641 Depositions: Sharing Our History, Building a Legacy

The 1641 Depositions provide the chief evidence for the sharply contested allegation that the 1641 Rebellion began with a massacre of Protestant settlers in Ireland. As some of the most controversial documents in Irish history, the Depositions have been exploited by propagandists, politicians and historians, and the disagreements surrounding them have never been satisfactorily resolved. As a result, they have been central to one of the most protracted and bitter of historical debates.

The [1641 Depositions Project](#) made publicly available, online, a unique and unparalleled source of information for the causes and events surrounding the 1641 Rebellion and for the social, economic, cultural, religious, and political history of seventeenth century Ireland, England and Scotland. This project has transformed our understanding of how controversial events are recorded and remembered. In doing so, it has made a contribution to the on-going peace process in Ireland and become a flagship digital humanities project for others to learn from.

This project showcases Trinity's expertise in curating and cataloging historical collections. Our research teams enhance technologies, ensuring the conservation and preservation of artefacts. We generate new research opportunities and encourage public scholarship to address societal challenges.

**Trinity Long Room Hub**  
Arts & Humanities  
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**FUNDERS:**

Irish Research Council; UK  
Arts & Humanities Research  
Council; Library of Trinity  
College Dublin

**SUBJECT AREAS:**

History; English; Geography;  
Library; Linguistics; Language  
and Literature; Computer  
Science; Information Science

**IMPACT KEYWORDS:**

Cultural Heritage; Innovative  
Technologies; Peace Building;  
Knowledge Exchange; Open  
Scholarship



## Research Summary

Amounting to 19,010 pages in 31 volumes, the original Depositions are difficult to read, not only because of their sheer volume, but because of the handwriting. Inconsistent spelling, erratic use of grammar and a lack-of punctuation also made it difficult for non-specialists to read them.

Following two previous attempts in the 1930s and 1960s, the 1641 Depositions Project was successful in publishing all Depositions. Utilising a fully searchable Text Encoding Initiative compliant format, the project conserved, digitised, transcribed and made the Depositions available online for anyone, anywhere to access.

Digitisation involved the capture of preservation images of the manuscripts, carried out with the utmost standards for the safety of the source materials. The transcribing process involved researchers who described the content of each Deposition in a structured fashion, allowing for detailed searches to be performed across the Depositions as a collection, a first.



*Image: President Mary McAleese and the Rev and the Rt Hon. Ian Paisley, the Lord Bannside, at the launch of the 1641 Depositions Exhibition, Trinity College Dublin, 2010*

## Impact Summary

Before the 1641 Depositions Project, the records could only be accessed in the manuscript reading room in the Library of Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. Approximately 20 scholars per year consulted them. Now, open and accessible, the virtual images and transcriptions allow anyone who is interested to independently browse, research and read the testimonies. Since 2010, more than 23,000 people have accessed the Depositions and the six-month exhibition in the Long Room was viewed by more than 300,000 visitors.

This Project continues to transform our understanding of Irish history, changing attitudes towards this controversial period and making new research possible. The 1641 Depositions Project has brought politicians and members of the public together, improved artificial intelligence technologies and shaped curricula. This transdisciplinary project, involving historians, geographers, computer scientists, linguists and literary scholars, has resulted in a number of spin-out research projects which continue to advance digital humanities.

**“We are, even after the publication of the Depositions, unlikely to agree a common version of history but we can agree that to have a common future, a shared and peaceful future, there is nothing to be gained from ransacking the past for ammunition to justify the furthering of hatred and distrust.**

**There is, however, everything to be gained from interrogating the past calmly and coherently, in order to understand each other’s passions more comprehensively, to make us intelligible to one another, to help us transcend those baleful forces of history so that we can make a new history of good neighbourliness, understanding and partnership between all the people and traditions on this island.”**

**President Mary McAleese  
1641 Depositions Exhibition Launch, 2010**

# Details of Impact

“Here are the tragic stories of individuals, and here too is the tragic story of our land. To learn this, I believe, is to know who we are and why we have had to witness our own troubles in what became a divided island. A nation that forgets its past commits suicide. Before us in these cases is the real hand of history ... and tonight that hand reaches out beyond its page, beyond its century, and touches us. Now, the question is, what will we do? Let us grasp that hand and hold fast to it and introduce its work to our schools. If we learn the lessons of the past we may use them to unlock a stable and promising future for everyone on this island.”

The Rev and the Rt Hon. Ian Paisley, the Lord Bannside, 1641 Depositions Exhibition Launch, 2010

“Working with Trinity College Dublin’s arts and humanities is exciting for IBM – we get a completely different perspective and insights that we can apply in different areas to create entirely new products.”

Marie Wallace, Senior Research and Development Manager, IBM Language Ware, 2010



Image: Professor Jane Ohlmeyer engages with secondary school students, empowering them to “be” historians and “do” history

## ADVANCING THE ALL-IRELAND PEACE PROCESS THROUGH EVIDENCE-INFORMED DIALOGUE AND DEBATE

The 1641 website and an accompanying exhibition on *‘Ireland in Turmoil: the 1641 Depositions (2010-2011)’* were launched on the anniversary of the Rebellion, 22 October 2010, by President Mary McAleese and the late Ian Paisley, Lord Bannside. The exhibition raised awareness about one of the most traumatic moments in Irish history with a goal of promoting greater understanding between the different traditions on this island. This allowed political leaders to embrace a peaceful approach to a subject that once polarised.

## DEVELOPING NEW TECHNOLOGIES WITH INDUSTRY PARTNERS

The process of digitisation and semantic tagging contributed to and benefitted from IBM’s Language Ware processing technology. Since the Depositions contain reams of historical data that are unpredictable with no consistency of spelling, grammar or syntax, they offered a fertile testing ground for dealing with ‘dirty’ or ‘noisy’ data, enabling experimentation. The exchange of knowledge with IBM continued in subsequent projects, providing insights into the technology used by IBM Watson, a suite of services and tools that combine artificial intelligence with sophisticated analytical software.

## ACTIVATING PUBLIC HUMANITIES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS, NORTH AND SOUTH

Students and teachers have benefited from access to the main website with all Depositions, but also to a set of [freely available online teaching modules](#) aimed at 14 to 16-year-olds, developed by an additional grant by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs’ Reconciliation Fund led by Professors Jane Ohlmeyer and Brendan Tangney. These interactive digital resources encourage students to investigate the Depositions for themselves. Launched in 2015, the modules reached close to 5,000 students across Ireland by 2016.

## ATTRACTING RESOURCES AND TALENT TO ADVANCE HUMANITIES RESEARCH

The project received funding from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, the Arts & Humanities Research Council in the United Kingdom, and the Library of Trinity College Dublin, employing three postdoctoral researchers for three years and resulting in five PhD and three MPhil theses.



## TARGET 4.7

### PROMOTE A CULTURE OF PEACE AND NON-VIOLENCE, GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AND APPRECIATION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The project has had a significant impact on the Northern Ireland peace process in terms of understanding cultural trauma. History Ireland's Hedge Schools on the 1641 Rebellion were held in Letterkenny, Ireland, as well as in Omagh and Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Additionally, the way the Project reconciles memory and trauma has the potential to help other nations and their leaders in dealing with conflicts.



## TARGET 11.4

### STRENGTHEN EFFORTS TO PROTECT AND SAFEGUARD THE WORLD'S CULTURAL AND NATURAL HERITAGE

The 1641 Depositions Project conserved and made cultural heritage accessible. The project also became the foundation for other associated research projects in the Digital Humanities that sought to develop new ways of interacting with cultural artefacts. Notable examples are [Language and Linguistic Evidence in The 1641 Depositions](#); [CULTivating Understanding Through Research and Adaptivity \(CULTURA\)](#); the [Downs Survey](#) and the [Books of Survey and Distribution](#), and the [UK Civil War Petitions Project](#).



## TARGET 17.16

### ADVANCE MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS THAT MOBILIZE AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE, EXPERTISE, TECHNOLOGY AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES, TO SUPPORT THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The project is an example of how historians and computer scientists, academia and enterprise, policymakers and members of the public, can mobilise to share knowledge, expertise and innovations for sustaining peace-building and the protection of the world's cultural heritage.

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#### CITE THIS DOCUMENT:

Ohlmeyer et al. (2020) '1641 Depositions: Sharing our history, building a legacy.' [pdf] Dublin: Trinity College Dublin. <https://doi.org/10.25546/93837>



*Image: The Principal Investigators of the project, which began in 2007 and ended in 2011, were Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, Professor Micheál Ó Siochrú, Professor John Morrill and Professor Thomas Bartlett. Professor Aidan Clarke edited the transcriptions. The researchers on the project were Dr Edda Frankot, Dr Annaleigh Margey and Dr Elaine Murphy. The College Librarian at the time, Robin Adams, the Keeper of Manuscripts, Dr Bernard Meehan, and his colleagues, especially Jane Maxwell, were an integral part of this project, as were Susie Bioletti, Keeper (Conservation), and conservator Laura Caradonna.*