

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Using the *Oxford DNB* online

The online edition of the *Oxford DNB* is designed to be **easy and fast to use**. As with the print edition, you can **look up people by name**—and name searching is the most popular way to find people. But online you can also **search across the text to discover groups of people** (for example dictionary subjects who shared the same profession or who lived in your town in a particular period).

This makes the online dictionary an excellent resource both for learning more about the people who shaped history and for undertaking project and course work or discovering historical figures in your region.

There are many ways to search for the 55,800 men and women online. Of these the most important are:

- searching for people by name
- searching for groups of people
- text searching across the dictionary's 63 million words.

All are fast, efficient, and very easy to use.



1 Searching for people by name

'Quick name search'

To find a person in the dictionary type their name in the **Search for the biography of a person** field in the middle of the subscriber home page and hit **Go**.

- Enter the name in natural order: *John Smith*.
- Use surname, initials and surname, or forename and surname: *Webb*, *B Webb*, or *Beatrice Webb*.
- Searches aren't case-sensitive, and you don't need to type accents: *john of gaunt*, *Du Pre*.
- You will find people with aristocratic titles too: *earl of essex*, *lord north*.
- You don't need to know what someone is called in the dictionary: *william the conqueror* finds William I; and *George Eliot* finds Marian Evans.
- If in doubt, just type the name by which you know them: *Henry VIII*, *Dick Turpin*, *Pitt the elder*, *Captain Cook*, *Sid Vicious*.

How else do I find people?

- **By browsing**

Simply go to the **Browse** tab and scroll through the dictionary, alphabetically or chronologically.

- **By looking for ‘themes’**

The **Themes** tab leads to the ‘themes’ area of the site—in effect an online companion guide to British history. And because every theme links through to the relevant *Oxford DNB* biographies, it’s also a guided introduction to the dictionary.

- **Reference lists:** office-holders in all walks of life, from kings and queens to captains of the England cricket team or recipients of the Victoria Cross
- **Reference groups:** the movements, clubs, and factions that shaped our past: who enforced Magna Carta? who campaigned for women’s rights at Langham Place? who opposed appeasement in the 1930s?
- **Features:** expert essays on major topics and anniversaries in British history: for example the Gunpowder Plot, shapers of the industrial revolution, or the legacy of the 1906 Liberal government

2 Searching for groups of people

The online *Oxford DNB* will also find sets of people whose names you may not already know. Advanced searching by ‘People’ identifies subjects in the dictionary who share common biographical information. For example, find people who:

- share a date of birth, baptism, death, or burial
- lived in the same county, town, or even street
- went to a particular school or college
- shared a profession or held the same religious beliefs at the same or different times

Combined ‘People’ searches allow you to discover individuals with a range of common attributes—a great source for projects and local history work. For example:

- Which engineers lived in Manchester between 1800 and 1850?
- Who were the Roman Catholics who lived in my town in the reign of Elizabeth I?
- What was the family and educational background of the women who campaigned for universal suffrage?
- Who are the most influential surgeons in British history? How did their role change between 1500 and 1800?
- Who went to France between 1914 and 1918 as an army officer or airman, a reporter, a physician or nurse?
- Who were the Britons active in India in the period before independence?

3 Searching the text of the Oxford DNB

A full text search allows you to locate key terms in the dictionary’s 63 million words. But with a twist: you can choose what kind of word you are looking for, by restricting your search to, for example, place names, personal names, organization names, quotations, or book titles.

Text searching also opens up many possibilities for exploring landmark historical events—from the foundation of Roman Britain to the Suez crisis—through the lives of those who took part. For example:

- Find the soldiers who fought in the **battle of the Somme** in 1916. What were their backgrounds? How old were they? How many survived the war?
- Who were the advocates of eighteenth-century **enclosure**? What were the aims of these agricultural reformers?
- Who were victims of **leprosy** in medieval Britain? Who treated the disease and how?
- Who was involved in the **general strike** of 1926? Learn more about the event from the perspective of politicians, trade unionists, journalists, and others.

4 Reading the Oxford DNB

- **The results page**

When you have run your search, if there is only one person in the dictionary with the name you searched for you will go straight to the article. Otherwise you will go to a results page.



A your results list

B what you searched for, and the order in which your results are displayed

C the navigation bar: move through your results list page by page, or go to the first or last page

D this icon shows that there is an illustration of this person in the dictionary; click on it to see the picture

E ordering options for your results set: sort alphabetically or chronologically

F refine your results list by searching within the results: for example you could choose to see only the women from your results list ... or only the politicians ... or only those alive in the sixteenth century ... or those who lived in Cornwall

G context-sensitive help is always available here at the top right of the screen

H quick search is always available here for another person or text search; use the drop-down to choose

Click on the name of the person you are interested in to go to their article.

- The article page

The screenshot shows the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography article for Harriet Mary Baring. The page layout includes a header with navigation links, a search bar, and a main content area. The article text (A) is on the right, the portrait (C) is in the center, and the left-hand pane (D) contains links to related articles and the original DNB article. The navigation bar (E) is at the top right, and the references section (B) is at the bottom. The print button (I) is in the top left, and the help link (G) is in the top right. The quick search bar (H) is in the top center.

- A the article text (this is a very short one)
- B the references section: the sources used in the writing of the article, the subject's known archives, known portraits or photographs of the subject, and any record of how rich they may have been when they died
- C portrait of the subject; click on it to see a larger version of the picture
- D the left-hand pane contains links, including cross-references to other articles in the dictionary, and a link to the original ('old') DNB article (if there was one)
- E the navigation bar: go to the previous or next articles in your results list
- F return to your results list
- G help is always available here
- H quick search is always available here for another person or text search
- I print out a printer-friendly version of the article to read at leisure