

New Uses for Old Weather

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oldWeather (<http://oldweather.org>) combines research in physical science and the humanities: Climate researchers need the millions of historical weather records archived in Royal Navy ship's logbooks from decades and centuries ago, marine historians want the day-to-day records of people, ships and places in the same documents. oldWeather is a community of volunteer researchers who are reading the logbooks and transcribing the contents.

To fully understand today's weather and climate we need to put them in context of past changes, which means we need to know what the weather was like 100 and more years ago. Climate researchers are collecting hundreds of millions of historical weather observations to provide this knowledge, and ships are valuable sources of such observations: Mariners are careful and frequent weather observers, and they travel widely. The National Archives (TNA) holds millions of pages of Royal Navy ship's logbooks going back over three hundred years. We have photographed about 350,000 of those pages (covering the period 1914-23) and are transcribing their contents - aiming to capture every weather record and any other information of particular interest. The weather records are being added to international databases for widespread use (<http://icoads.noaa.gov>), the everyday events from the logs are being edited into ship histories (<http://www.naval-history.net>).

In 18 months, 12,000 volunteers have transcribed almost all these pages. As each page is transcribed three times to ensure the necessary accuracy, more than 1 million pages have been transcribed – the equivalent of perhaps 20 person-years full time work. Participants in the project vary greatly in the time and effort they contribute: many transcribe only a single page, but others have contributed regularly since the start; completing thousands of pages, participating in discussions in the project forum, and building impressive expertise in the logs, the ships, the history of the period, and even the weather. The logs from about 270 ships are included in the project, and participants tend to concentrate on one ship at a time, often developing strong affection for 'their' ship.

The original project (RN logs 1914-23) is almost finished, but there are many more logbooks in TNA and other archives. A follow-on project using US logs is under development.