

Chris Sparks, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 15 September 2025

Chris Sparks is Senior Lecturer in Digital History at Queen Mary, University of London. His work revolves around the use of computers to improve the ways in which people can investigate, teach, and learn about the past. He is the co-author of the chapter 'Doing History in a Digital World' in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* (second edition).

Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *The first question is just to set the scene. So, when, where and what did you study at university?*

Chris Sparks (CS): So, I did my undergraduate, Masters and PhD at the University of York. I studied history, and, relatively early on, I specialized in medieval history, which was something I'd done at school and enjoyed at school. We could choose a specialism in A-level history, and I chose medieval history.

TL: *Why did you choose to study history at university? Was it just an interest in the subject?*

CS: I did an unusual slate of A-levels. So, I did history, chemistry and maths. History definitely wasn't my strongest A-level. I think it's the one I enjoyed most, but actually, I got better results in maths. Yeah, I think it was just an enjoyment of the subject. Fundamentally, it was about a desire to understand why the world was the way that it was, understand why people behave in the ways that they do, that kind of thing.

TL: *That sense of human interest seems to be what is driving most of the historians I'm talking to for these interviews. I'm interested that you did medieval history, because there's a perception that this is less popular, or that students are less exposed to it nowadays.*

This is an edited transcript of an interview carried out on Zoom.

CS: Yeah, they probably are nowadays. At school, it was the particular interest of the teacher who was head of history at the time of the school. At university, York's always had a strong specialism in medieval history. They've got a Medieval Studies MA, and the Centre for Medieval Studies, which was very active at the time. I don't think I knew that when I applied to York. To be completely honest, I was very bad at the 'planning my life' element of applying to university. We were encouraged to apply to Oxford or Cambridge, which I did. And then I remember selecting York, and I can't remember anything about what my other options even were. But it was a great university, and it was a great experience being a student there. I think what interested me about medieval history is, there's something really compelling about this period that is so fundamental to the elements of our society that persist today but is also so alien in many ways to our own society. That makes it a really compelling period of history to study, because it becomes a primary exercise in understanding 'the other'. I didn't really know this before I started, before I had done a lot of it. But also, I think the fact that there's such a strange set of materials that survive, and that the set of materials that survive is, broadly speaking, knowable and has been known about for a long time, means there's a really defined landscape to explore. The other thing that's biographical about it, I guess, is that churchgoing played a major role in my childhood. I think that drew me towards medieval history in terms of understanding that world in which church and society were much more deeply interlinked than they are for many people today. What I now think I subconsciously felt was a desire to understand more about that relationship and that world, to maybe make sense of a world that I'd grown up in, but a lot of my peers hadn't grown up in and had no experience of.

TL: *That sense of similarity and radical difference is really at the heart of fascination with studying the past in many ways, I think.*

CS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. After I did my PhD, I was applying for postdocs and one of the phrases I used in my application was about history being at its core an exercise in understanding 'the other'. The study of history is closely linked to the particular time and place and context, so it's something that's very balanced, that's very context-defined, but it's also something that as an exercise is fundamentally important as a tool to use in all sorts of social human interaction in life and work and politics and international relations. That exercise in understanding 'the other' is at the core of what makes history interesting for me, and makes it is a core human skill that we all need and use.

TL: *Did you take any skills, historiography or theory modules as part of your undergraduate degree?*

CS: Yes, but they didn't make a big impression, and my general impression is that we didn't really like them and didn't really understand why we had to do them. Though looking back on it, I sometimes think, well, of course, no one should have listened to us because at the time, of course, we didn't know they were useful! Sometimes you don't know that it's going to be useful until a year or two years later. The skills modules that we took were very much 'skills separate from application'. Of the skills classes that we did, one thing I do remember is being taught in a big computer room how to use this new thing called JSTOR and a big cautionary talk about how there were worthwhile things on the internet, but basically you shouldn't really use it for any part of your university work. I started my undergraduate degree in 2001. So it was just around when digital things were really starting to take off. You know, my halls of residence were being hooked up for internet while I was there, and you still went to a big computer lab to use the computers to do all this stuff. So I remember that being something that was new and not really well understood and not really a very big part of studying. Also, looking at my shelves where I have Hayden White's *Tropics of Discourse*, which I think I still don't understand now, I remember that in our second year we had this module where we looked at approaches in history, a historiography module.

TL: *To be honest, as somebody who ends up teaching historiography modules all the time and does get some brutal feedback occasionally, it's actually reassuring to hear you say that you didn't really necessarily like it, but you also don't remember very much of it! Because sometimes students write that feedback as though those modules have ruined their life.*

CS: I convene our first-year history and practice module now, which is a transition to university-slash-methods and skills course. I didn't create it, so I can say I think it's cleverly done because it does the skills element, but through the history of the East End of London. So it's got that historical content, which satisfies what I as a student felt, and what some of our students now feel, about 'I've come to study history, not to study methodology or skills or historiography. So why are you making me do this abstract stuff?' So in this module, we try and do that abstract stuff, but we do it through practical applications. I don't think I did anything like that myself as a student. It was much more, you know, big themes, big ideas, maybe big thinkers, or approaches, but not in the same kind of applied way.

TL: *Yeah, which is often so much more engaging for students.*

CS: Yeah, it's just so almost immediate. And the student body is so different in all sorts of ways now. You know, we have a lot of students who come to QMUL because they live in London and they're living at home and they're commuting to university

or they're commuting into London because London is a place that's commutable to. And that just means that all sorts of different elements of the university experience are different. People also come with different school experience and different academic expectations. Reflecting back on my university experience, I'm struck by how from another world it was, in a way. And that's probably true of all students now, right? I was one of the last years before higher fees were introduced. So just the whole framework around going to university, and the government rhetoric around what university was for, and what we expected from university was just very different. I mean, in some ways, universities are the same as they've been for hundreds of years. And in some ways, the experience of being a student is fundamentally different to how it was when I did it twenty years ago.

TL: *So that's quite a lot of things that have changed in the student experience since you did your undergraduate degree, but what do you think is the main difference?*

CS: The understanding in society of what university is and what it's for has changed quite markedly. And a big part of that is the way that university is now funded, or maybe the way it's *not* funded. When I was a student, the average student left with under £10,000 worth of debt. And now students leave with about £60,000 worth of debt, or something like that. They pay about £10,000 a year just in tuition fees. I'm not qualified to comment on the best kind of economic model for funding higher education. That's not really what I'm talking about. But the fact that going to university creates a certain amount of personal debt, even if that debt is really a graduate tax that is described in a different way and most people never pay it back, that changes the way we all think about what the experience of university is and how to approach it. And you can look at it in a positive way, that it leads people to be more focused in their approach to their studies in university, but there are also downsides to it. When I was a student, there was a feeling of freedom, freedom to try things out intellectually. It was less pressured, I suppose, in a way. I mean, we still wanted to do well in the degree or some of us did, I guess. Those of us who were swots, you know, presumably those of us who ended up doing it for a job. But still the fees regime has changed the way we all think about what going to university is. And it's changed the relationship between staff and students. And again, some of that is very positive. You know, I think a lot of institutions now have an increased focus on quality of teaching in a way that is probably a good thing, you know, taking teaching more seriously in a way that is good. Yeah, in a way that I think is a good thing. And I know I'm not doing the interview, but what would *you* say?

TL: *What would I say about what's changed most? That's a good question. I'm glad I'm not being asked it [laughs]. Well, and this is related to what you said, I think students are so much more anxious now, so much more visibly anxious, which is down to a lot of different things. To a certain degree, this has coincided with the fact that the students we're seeing now had the major experience of COVID at some point in their past. So they've got that legacy, but I don't think it's just that. It's also that there's so much weight on the idea of that sort of debt. When people describe it as a tax, or that most people don't end up paying it back, that's technically true, but you need to have an enormous amount of confidence at eighteen in your capacity to go and get a job and do everything to write it off in that way. That means students then end up being a bit more concerned about their choices. It's what you said about not having intellectual freedom.*

CS: Yeah, you know, one needs to have an attitude towards debt that is like, well, I'll never pay this and it will get written off if I have never paid at age sixty. You have to have a certain amount of financial comfort, you know, either personally or within your family, to think like that.

TL: *And it's a real shame because ideally when you're eighteen to twenty-one, there just shouldn't be that much at stake for you. You know, everybody tells you that this is a really important time of life, and of course it's important what you do, but it should also be a time of experimentation in all sorts of different ways. And I think that's being cut out now. But quite a few interviewees have said that there's now much more emphasis on good teaching and pastoral support, and that is possibly linked to the fees regime, so ...*

CS: I mean, there's also a degree of professionalization, which has good and bad qualities. It has good qualities in that it makes us take our role as educators, and our relationship to students, and the power dynamics that might be at play there, it makes us take those seriously. But also, I think it makes all of us, teachers and students, much more ... cautious, I suppose. And something is lost there, which is difficult to express.

TL: *I think that's a very good way of putting it. I also wanted to ask some questions about your chapter, and also how your student experience relates to that. In talking about your own undergraduate experience, you described a digital world that will sound very primitive to most people reading this interview. So, how did you end up becoming more interested in digital methods?*

CS: Good question. So, all history is biography, to an extent, right? So, I have always had an interest in computers and computing. My dad originally trained as a statistician, in the 1960s, I guess. And then he became involved in IT when the company that he was working

for first started having an IT department, so that then became his career. So there were always computers and computing paraphernalia around when I was a kid. Like, I used to do my colouring-in on that printer paper that had these tracks down the side of it with holes punched in so that the printer could feed it. My dad would bring home reams and reams of this paper from work that had had stuff printed on that they didn't need anymore, and I'd use it to draw cartoons on and stuff. So, computers had always been around.

I realized more recently, when I was putting together my module on the history of the internet, which I now teach, that I myself had kind of grown up in the early web era. I had been part of this first wave of the idea that people would create their own websites. I taught myself how to make HTML and made a website for my little sister's primary school when I was seventeen. It was a world where that could happen and it was at the start of something, I suppose, and so it was very open. So I'd always been into computers and computing, I taught myself how to build things on the web, and it was something that I carried on doing, as what people would now call a side hustle, when I did my PhD. You know, I kind of did bits and bobs of work for people to earn a bit of money. Throughout that, I never really thought of it as something that aligned with my work as a historian at all. It's absurd. When I did my PhD, which is about the involvement of laypeople in a thirteenth-century heretical movement now controversially known as the Cathars, it used records of interrogations, which are essentially police records with a lot of cross-referencing and looking back to statements made by other witnesses and that kind of thing. So, to take my notes, I created this web-based note-taking application where I related all the different notes to each other, and I created a way of tagging them with different kinds of tags, it was basically like a digitized card index, which could be related together, and where I could both quantify things and also kind of pull up the detailed information. I built it to work the way my mind works, which is remembering scraps of things, and then having to look up what those scraps of things actually relate to. And I typeset my PhD thesis in LaTeX, which is this text-based markup language, which is largely used by people in the sciences to write academic papers. Never through any of this was I aware of, or did I think that, there was a thing called digital humanities or digital history. I just thought I was doing my own weird thing that no historians that I knew were interested in, or had much involvement with. So I had these two interests running in parallel, and kind of intertwined, but not in a way that I realized were intertwined.

And then after my PhD, I applied for lots of academic jobs and didn't get any of them, and I decided that what I needed was a 9-to-5

job where (a) I was earning some money, and (b) I had something to do during the day. So I worked for a while in the e-learning team at the University of York, which is kind of like digital pedagogy, I guess, and then, after I'd been there for twelve to eighteen months, can't remember exactly, I saw an advert for a job in the history department at Queen Mary, which wanted someone with experience of e-learning and a postgraduate degree in history. I was like, well, there must be about two people in the country with those qualifications. And I later discovered that they did, in fact, interview two applicants for the job, of which I was one, and I got the job. And at that point, I became aware that there was this thing called digital humanities, this thing called digital history. I realized that I had this quite unusual combination of skills that might be quite useful. My original job was to do with the launch of a new Virtual Learning Environment at Queen Mary. That was why my job was originally created. It was a fixed-term post. And then I managed to evolve that job into a broader digital teaching and research role. And then recently-ish, in the early 2020s, I moved from a professional services role to an academic role. I'd always done a job that had elements that would traditionally be categorized as support or professional services, and elements that would be categorized as academic. So I flipped from doing a professional services role that had a large academic component, or increasingly large academic component, to an academic role that initially had a lot of admin to do with supporting digital research and teaching.

TL: *I've been interviewing a few people who have gone outside academia, done a lot of other things, and then ended up in a role where they're pulling on that different experience. And those people often seem to be connected to areas that are more at the cutting edge of research. So, people who work on public history, or material culture, or digital humanities. So in some ways these are historians who seem to start out with these very niche interests, but then there are enough people with these niche interests that it becomes a cutting-edge trend.*

CS: I've always felt like, in life, there were people who had plans, and then there were people who muddled through and kind of shaped something out of the opportunities that were presented to them. And I increasingly think that actually everyone is, in fact, just muddling through. I mean, in any academic career, there's so much that's down to chance, and the things that are put in front of you, and there's also what you make of those things, but more of it is muddling through than people might think.

TL: *Yeah, and I think that's also true of some people I've spoken to who have gone straight through undergraduate degree, postgrad, PhD, straight jobs in history, they've tended to describe it as falling into*

it. So what I'm discovering is that nobody seems to grow up with a dream of becoming a historian and a clear plan for doing it. And that might say something about the discipline, because we're looking at the past, but the past's very big, there's a lot of it, and lots of different ways you can study it. So it's not surprising that people were bringing in lots of different skills and experience and perspectives to bear on that. Anyway, moving onto the last question: what would be your top tip for students today on getting the most out of studying history at university?

CS: The thing that I immediately think, is read. Try to find what interests you, and do that. In any subject, you'll probably be able to find something that is interesting to you. Because in any area of history, in any thematic or period-based approach to history, human experience is so rich and complex and varied that you'll always be able to find an angle that makes the material interesting to you.

TL: *That's very good advice, and also read is very good advice.*

CS: I was really thinking, what's the thing that, if I could click my fingers and make it happen, it would be that everyone had read everything before the seminars. Because it's just painful, isn't it? When you have a seminar, and you do an activity around some of the themes that you asked people to look at in the reading, and it's very dry and stilted, and then you ask who did the reading, and it becomes apparent that no one's done it. And if I was going to give a bit of advice that was stereotypically related to the chapter that we wrote, or related to the intersection of technology and history, it would be, your degree is only valuable to the extent that you use it as an opportunity to develop skills yourself. You know, it actually doesn't matter whether AI is good at summarizing historical argument or bad at summarizing historical argument. When I was a student, we used to think that if you highlighted enough of the key texts, it would have entered your brain, but it doesn't. Now, it doesn't matter how well the AI can summarize it, the summarizing will remove a whole load of depth and nuance and, frankly, interest that you could have gained from reading the thing yourself. And you will have cheated yourself of that experience and opportunity, and, you know, history as a discipline has never been about the right answers. It's about interpretations and approaches, and, like I said at the beginning, that exercise in understanding 'the other'. If you haven't engaged with the material, then there's no understanding to be had. Actually, there's no point in history in a world where what's happening is text generation engines are just summarizing text, and you're just reading those summaries. You know, reading is thinking, and writing is thinking. They're both essential parts of the thinking process. At its best, AI helps you shortcut some processes to do quicker something you already know how to do well yourself. As a student,

you're developing those skills, developing those understandings, at the beginning of working out how to do those things well in the first place. I like technology, and I think it can be a great positive force, and AI can be part of that too, but it's important for all of us to think about the extent to which we want it to be a supplement to existing skills and opinions and interpretations and understandings, or a replacement for those. And I think what we want is for it to be a supplement, not a replacement.

TL: *That's a good strong point to end on!*