

RED Activity 1: Chaucer's Readers

1. The earliest reference to Chaucer's works on RED is 1617, when the Lady Anne Clifford, Countess of Dorset, Pembroke and Montgomery mentioned Chaucer amongst the recreational books she was reading. She also read, or had read to her, George Sandy's work concerning the Turkish Empire, Michel de Montaigne's plays and essays and Spenser's 'The Faerie Queen'.
2. Famous reader – Robert Louis Stevenson read and discussed Chaucer in 1870 along with Shakespeare, Marlowe, Fletcher and Webster. He calls these 'old authors' and clearly considers Chaucer's writings to be classics of literature.
3. Artisans, servants and labourers reading Chaucer:
G.A.W.Tomlinson was a collier working in Nottinghamshire between 1900 and 1945. He volunteered for "repair shifts" at the weekends when he could read on the job. He sat on a toolbox half a mile underground, reading Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales', Lamb's essays, Darwin's 'Origin of Species', Wilde's 'Ballad of Reading Gaol', Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village' and anything else he "could get hold of". He was so absorbed in reading that on one occasion he forgot to switch the rails, leading to a collision between coal tubs.
4. Insights into histories of the book and reading habits:
RED is a useful resource for being able to track the readership of particular authors and titles across time, geography and social status. It sheds light on levels of literacy amongst classes and groups of people and the availability of books. It can't, however, reveal the reading habits of casual readers whose journals or biographies are not published