

Coding Literacy for Historians in the Age of AI

Workshop homepage: <https://spatialhistory.net/info/coding.html>

17-18 October 2025 | Old Class Library, South Street - St Andrews

Day 1 – 17 October (11:00-17:00)

11:00-12:30: Living with Large Language Models (LLMs)

Hate them; love them; fear them; Whatever you feel, generative AI isn't going anywhere. To see the real power of LLMs (for good or ill), including for historians, we need some skills to understand how they can create and manipulate code.

Lunch Break

13:15-14:45: Browser Beginnings

While installed apps have eroded its dominance, web browsers and the technology behind them continue to be a critically important way to interact with users. Websites are a common output of LLMs. This session will introduce key technologies behind this and how to use browser 'developer tools' to explore what is going on under the surface. Participants will practice analysing some websites to deconstruct their structure and functionality.

Coffee Break

15:00-17:00: Revenge of the Command Line

Most operating systems today use graphical user interfaces in which clicks and taps are the name of the game. As in the title of Neal Stephenson's famous rant, 'In the Beginning... Was the Command Line' the command line interface (CLI) was long the primary way to communicate with a computer. It never went away, and today it is more useful than ever for engaging with powerful coding capabilities of LLMs. Let's learn some of the key basics: Navigating the operating system, manipulating files, running scripts/commands (including those that Large Language Models produce for you), and getting help.

Day 2 – 18 October (10:00-17:00)

10:00-11:30: Following the Script

This session will introduce some of the basic building blocks of programming used in most languages. We will be using the language Python in our examples. Even without learning to write code, we can use our existing skills engaging with historical primary sources, as well as LLMs and online search, to approach these unfamiliar texts and their structure. During the interactive part of this session participants will be distributed some different examples of code to read and analyse.

11:30-12:30: LLMs: Working with the Unreliable Narrator

“Computer programs are stupid. They just do exactly what you tell them to do.” Those were the days. LLMs sometimes do what you ask them to do, they sometimes give you great answers, and they sometimes give you consistent output when performing repetitive tasks. Sometimes they don’t...at...all. This interactive session has two goals: Build up a healthy distrust for the LLM through examples and develop a workflow for creating digital artifacts and tools with our unreliable narrator.

Lunch Break

13:15-15:00: Sandbox Playtime

This session will be in groups. Everyone will make use of the workflow we discussed in the morning to create something of their own using LLMs. A list of sample projects will be provided if your own ideas don’t work out. Create –test – iterate – rebuild, and at each stage, keep an eye out for what it is getting added or removed by the LLM.

Coffee Break

15:15-17:00: Diagnosing Problems and Challenging Outputs

Using examples from playtime, we will explore challenges that you came across. We will expose lies, denounce folly, and celebrate unexpected success (of the LLMs)! We will highlight examples of how challenges were worked around, or expectations were re-adjusted. We will, at all times, retain our scepticism about the outputs.