



Video transcript

Redefining research: Uncovering climate insights with digitised primary sources – Philip Gooding

One of the major questions in this field is how changes in global temperature affect regional climates. We often move from a global perspective to a much more localised one, asking not just how temperatures will change in specific regions, but also how global temperature shifts will influence phenomena such as wind patterns and rainfall.

These areas are still very much under investigation, and our understanding of how regional climates will vary as a result of global warming is continually being refined. The level of certainty also varies depending on the region in question.

My own archival research seeks to enhance the certainty of climate models that project future conditions. I do this in collaboration with climatologist colleagues, focusing on improving the accuracy of reconstructions of past climatic conditions, which form the foundation of these models. This involves understanding historical climates—reconstructing past rainfall patterns and environmental conditions—so that projections of future climate can be made more reliably.

Although I was trained as a historian, my interest in climate data emerged during my doctoral research on nineteenth-century East Africa, particularly Tanzania. While working in the archives, I discovered that many of the materials I consulted contained valuable climate data.

These sources include letters written by European missionaries who travelled to and lived in East Africa during the 1870s to 1890s. Their correspondence, sent back to their head offices in London and Rome, provides some of the earliest documentary evidence relating to inland regions of present-day Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda.

While the missionaries' primary aim was to spread the gospel, they documented a wide range of observations. They often saw themselves not only as missionaries, but also as amateur ethnographers, anthropologists and natural scientists. As a result, their writings include detailed accounts of climatic conditions, making them an important source for reconstructing historical climate patterns.