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From the Bristol Post Boy to the Twin Towers: local newspapers in England

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Abstract:

This paper touches on the history of local newspaper publishing in England and describes the diversity of fact and incident that makes their contents such a fascinating prime source material for local historians. From the early broadsheets to the present online editions, local newspapers give a colourful and always unique picture of everyday life, national, regional and parochial.

Here we have what could well have been the smallest public reading room in the country - half way up a stair on a landing in Skipton Library in Craven, north Yorkshire. It is only recently that this space was abandoned, to the delight of those who had to brush past the readers of the tabloids and to the dismay of those for whom sitting reading on the landing was part of their lives.

Reading the news has always been a tradition. In Rome Julius Caesar advised that announcements about military campaigns and the activities of the Senate be posted on whitened boards in public places. Almost a century later Marco Polo noted the existence of the *Court Gazette*, a printed Chinese newspaper. People are totally curious about the activities of their fellows. Even in this age of mass communication and instant electronics there is nothing better than sitting down with the regular local news about our locality, our town, our neighbours.

In the past, news of supernatural events, deaths of kings, births and marriages was spread by word of mouth – intelligence of the defeat at Thermopylae reached Athens not by satellite broadcast but by runner.

The chronicle of William the Conqueror's success at the Battle of Hastings "was passed from town to town by individuals employed to call out the King's proclamation". (1)

In Tudor England, as well as oral hearsay there was written information about contemporary events and official announcements. Peddlers sold manuscript ballads and broadsides. "War correspondents" and "Foreign correspondents" sent newsletters from abroad to the nobility and to merchant traders who wanted to know about major incidents and prevailing economic conditions. Hand-written Venetian 'gazettes' containing articles on European real-politik were distributed and read in London in the sixteenth century, while the wealthy employed secretaries and "news-walkers" to inform them about any intrigue at court or in parliament while they spent time on their country estates.

The introduction of the printing press from the continent in the fifteenth century would eventually remove the need for manuscript, and increased the audience for news. A surviving printed newsbook contains a contemporary account of the disastrous defeat of the Scots by the English at Flodden in Northumberland dated 1513.(2) Another publication of 1608 gives news of a perennial English concern, the weather – *The Great Frost: cold doings in London*.

News-sheets recounted particular anecdotes such as Nathaniel Butters' reports of some sensational Yorkshire trials in 1605. However the first publications that could be called newspapers appeared in Germany in 1609. They were issued regularly, and attempted to describe current events. An English official at that time complained that his country was being "*reproved in foreign parts*" because it lacked a publication to report "*the occurents every week*".(3) The first newspaper in English, associated with English Puritans who later joined the Voyage of the Mayflower, was produced in Holland in 1620, but the oldest surviving newspaper actually printed in London appeared in September 1621 under the long title: "Corante, or weekely newes from Italy, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Bohemia, France and the Low Countreys...according to the Dutch copy".(4)

Royal prerogative forbade the publishing of domestic news in the reign of Charles I, but the unrest of the Civil War period opened the gateway to many newspapers, printed to promote the ideology and the victories of both Royalists and Parliamentarians. Between 1640 and 1660 the bookseller George Thomason collected over 7,000 issues of newspapers. A woman – "a she-intelligencer" – was even employed to collect news and newsboys and newsgirls sold the papers in the streets. "And now by a strange alteration and vicissitude of the times", one editor explained, "wee talk of nothing else but what is done in England..." In 1649 there was the scoop headline "*This day the King was beheaded, over against the Banqueting house by Whitehall...*" (5)

In 1665 Henry Muddiman published the Oxford Gazette. This title used double columns for the first time and was quickly renamed the London Gazette. It is this gazette which can be considered the first real newspaper in this country.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, most of the larger county towns had local newspaper titles, encouraged by an increase in levels of literacy, the rise of larger urban centres and the development of the postal service. Newspaper titles flourished and also disappeared. Rose and Drury of Lincoln advertised in the 1770s that they would "*Supply Gentlemen, &c (in the Town or Neighbourhood) with magazines, London and County newspapers...*"(6) Printing and bookselling were linked and the newspapers carried advertisements for the owner's printing business, bookselling and other enterprises and, often, his circulation library.

The country's oldest provincial newspaper claims to be the *Norwich Post*, probably first published in 1701(7) even before the distribution of the first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant* (1702). However the earliest extant copy of a provincial newspaper, William Bonney's *Bristol Post Boy*, dates from August

1704, numbered 91, indicating a possible first issue in 1702. The Bristol Post Boy in 1704 was a two-page weekly containing news taken from newspapers printed in London. There is no local news, and only one advertisement in the first existing issue, for a local Bristol physician. Reporting of local news began to be more usual only in the later eighteenth century.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Duties on newspapers, the Advertisement Tax and the Newspaper Tax, were successively abolished, allowing a huge increase in the amount of local news and advertisements printed in the papers. The 1712 Stamp Act, which by 1815 was up to fourpence on each newspaper sold, was finally repealed in 1855, legalising the many penny papers of the “pauper press”. More than 560 different unstamped newspapers were printed in England between 1830 and 1836 (8) and it was at this time that the provincial press began to develop individual identities rather than merely re-printing material from the London press.

A feature of the twentieth century has been the publication of newspapers with change-pages holding news specifically relating to different towns of the circulation area and often more recently creating problems for any microfilming programme. Many other dailies and weeklies disappeared. The Derby Mercury for example folded in 1933 after a run of two centuries and some paid-for titles evolved into local free newspapers. The idea of free newspapers had originated many years before. The *Loughborough Echo* had begun as one in 1891.(9) Other recent “freebies”, such as the *Metro*, a free commuter newspaper with local news, have been successful enough that Sydney and Melbourne in Australia considered copying the format. And there are alternative newspapers for other communities and special interest groups, such as Leicester’s *Ame Gujurati* (1980? to date) for the Gujurat Hindu Association, *Poultry News* (1921 – 1925), and Nottingham’s *Football Post* first published in 1903, a useful title for the growing number of sports historians. The British Library’s Oriental Collection includes newspapers produced in Britain in eastern languages.

Historic local newspapers are fundamental to research of their period. In their columns and even in the way the pages are laid out, local historians can investigate the social, literary, economic and political events of the time and the attitudes of the era.

Henry Steel Commager wrote in his preface to a history of the New York Times: “*Here is the living disproof of the old adage that nothing is as dead as yesterday’s newspaper... This is what really happened, reported by a free press to a free people. It is the raw material of history; it is the story of our own times*”. (10)

It is indeed the story of our own times, not only describing episodes of national interest but also the equally profound minutiae of daily lives.

There is significant news from Russia - the death of Tsar Peter II, the grandson of Peter the Great. Only two weeks after the event in 1730, the York Courant prints the item “...*concerning the Death of Peter the Second, Czar of Muscovy...affirm’d for Fact, with this Addition, That he died at Moscow the 29th past, after 8 days Illness of the Small pox having reigned about two years and 8 Months and ‘tis said that the Dutchess of Courland (Anna Ivanova)...was proclaimed Czariana immediately after his Death...*” (11)

Over the years inches of newsprint about various wars was inevitable. There are bulletins from conflicts in all parts of the world, in Europe and the Americas, Africa and the East. There are despatches from Brussels before and after the battle of Waterloo in 1815.

But, in time, editors had no need to wait for news from out-of-town newspapers or from correspondents’ letters. In the early days one had complained, “*No mail yesterday. We hardly know what we shall fill our paper with that will have the appearance of news*”. There is the informative reporting of local headline tragedies - “*Our heroes’ gallery*”, the sad pages of portraits of local men who were killed in the First

World War (12) or the deaths at sea of the four Filey fishermen, three from the same family, in 1948 “*Filey’s worst disaster*”. (13)

As the press developed in the regions, its coverage was influenced by its editors and printers, all of whom had social, political and religious aspirations mirroring those of sections of their compatriots. The brothers, Felix and Samuel Farley, proprietors of the *Bristol Journal*, argued over their religious views. After their deaths in 1753, ownership of the newspaper passed to Felix’ widow, Elizabeth and Samuel’s niece, Hester. Elizabeth Farley referred to her Whig opponents as “*A Plague of Locusts... devouring Insects who have their Origin in Filth and Ordure, and whose very Existence depends on corruption*” (14) She campaigned against Jews, and became the first Bristol journalist to be prosecuted for libel.

Then, as now, editors competed to maximise sales of their titles by slandering their rivals’ productions. “*Saturday last an Anonymous Ill-designing person clandestinely Printed a Counterfeit ignorant News-Paper, being a compleat Composition of Ignorance and Error, as those that bought it plainly perceiv’d: This is therefore to inform the Public, that the Sham News is a grand Imposition... The Sham News has a Ship Printed at one Corner*”. (15)

Newspapers reported on the commerce and economic life of the area. Prices are listed, as are market reports. Cattle markets at Newcastle and Wakefield are advertised in 1846. Wheat is sold in the same year for between four shillings and sixpence to nine shillings and sixpence at Leyburn and Richmond, and “*The 4lb loaf of wheaten bread [in London] has advanced to eight and a half pence by the cheap bakers; ten and a half pence by the full-priced bakers*” due to another rise in the price of bread in the capital. (16) In 1904 the *Darlington and Stockton Times* advertise horses at York, fat stock at Bishop Auckland Mart, farms at Tow Law and furniture at Darlington. (17)

News of merchant shipping also gives an indication of business and commerce. A newly discovered unique edition of the *Exeter-Journal and Advertiser 18 March 1757* reports the arrival at Exmouth harbour on the south coast of England of “...*Madge from Neeth with coals; Property, Dussil, from Plymouth with Slate; Two brothers, Martin, from Falmouth, with Sheeps Pelts, Oil and Tin... Sail’d, the Dolphin, Burridge, for Oporto, with Bale Goods;- and the Friendship, Cockett, for London, with ditto*”. (18)

The importance of the local press is not just confined to news items and advertisements but also to the effect the newspapers had in encouraging discussion on religion, social manners and politics. There were columns debating capital punishment. “*Even in the case of murder, Public Executions do not operate by way of example. It is too notorious to be denied, that the utmost levity is manifested by many of the spectators. Numbers of them indeed attend with no other view than that of picking pockets, or otherwise practising their light-fingered profession... The spectacle of the Execution of a human being ought to be one of a deeply affecting nature to all who behold it...*” (19) Other articles pushed opportunities for learning and self-improvement. There are news items about National Schools and advertisements for boarding schools, such as those placed by Mrs Parr and Mrs Gascoigne alongside Mrs Brooke’s “*Boarding-school for Young ladies, Sutton upon Trent... a pleasant situation on the great North Road, eight miles from Newark, and six from Tuxford: - Coaches pass and repass every day.*” (20) The first issue of the *Craven Herald 1853* reported that “*a Class was formed at the Mechanics’ Institution, when upwards of 40 persons availed themselves of the opportunity afforded them of learning that useful and valuable Science [of phonography and phonotypy].*” (21)

Lists of books in Circulating Libraries were advertised and annual meetings of Subscription Libraries were reported in the press. “*In May, 1844, we congratulated the members of the Subscription Library, in Hawes, on the very decided improvement which this institution then manifested... We have however in our possession two letters, one of complaint against the state in which the books appear.... We are sorry to observe that there is some truth in the complaint as to the dusty state of the books...*” (22) On a lighter note,

Mr Hill inserted a notice in a February edition of the *Lincoln, Rutland and Stamford Mercury 1814*, notifying the public that his dancing schools would open for business again in February in Lincoln, Louth, Barton and Gainsborough.

Newspapers, especially local newspapers, write about what people are doing. A single issue of Jackson's Oxford Journal for 21st April 1810 mentions the names of around 300 persons in its columns. There are the birth, marriages and deaths notices. The *Harrogate Advertiser* announces the death of Eliza Winter in Brooklyn, New York, aged 65 in January 1893 (23), while a recent trend is to celebrate significant birthdays with witty notices in the local paper accompanied by a photo of the individual at a much younger age – possibly the only photograph a future genealogist might obtain of the person concerned. (24)

There are instances of wife-sales and women running away from their husbands:

“Whereas Anne Sargent, Wife of Tho. Sargent, in the parish of St George, Middlesex, eloped from her Husband the 9th of this instant: This is to warn all Persons not to trust her on my Account, for I will not pay any Debts she may or [will] contract from the Date hereof” (25); and there are examples of early Lonely-hearts columns *“Matrimony. Mechanical engineer... widower... family grown up, healthy, educated, good appearance. Churchman, wishes to correspond with lady about 50, spinster or widow... Churchwoman, musical, with view to marriage”*. (26)

Always of great fascination are the crime reports, all manner of robberies (some exceptionally small felonies leading to transportation to the penal colonies), paragraphs describing in much detail the trials for assault and foul murder. There are snippets such as that telling the citizens of Norwich in 1707 that *“On Sunday the 12th of April, 1707, Mr Augustin de Cleve of Norwich-Thorp had his garden Robbed of Tulips, Auricalas or Bears-Ears and Enimonys. Whoever can discover the Persons that committed the Robbery, so that they may be secured with the aforesaid Flowers and Plants, or Rots, shall have three Guineas reward...* (27)

The *Scarborough Daily Post* gives columns to the case of an alleged arsonist with a set of headlines *“Sensational story by a lamplighter”, “Discredited by the government inspector. Brooks recalled. More allegations against him”* and details of *“How the victims died”*. (28)

In 1837 the *Harrogate Advertiser* proclaimed that *“The city of Ripon was... thrown into a state of considerable excitement by the report that a man of the name of Marshall, a shoemaker... had put two of his children to death by drowning them in a tub of water... A third child is missing. No motive is assigned for this rash act.”* (29) Two labourers, James Carney of Leeds and Charles Thackray of Little Wonder were arraigned at Harrogate Police Station in 189, charged with a *“Dastardly assault upon Inspector Burkitt”* inflicting *“...several bruises about the head and face and a severe kick in the back... the Inspector was certainly not fit to leave his bed”*. However the police inspector recovered... *“from the effects of the brutal treatment which he received, as will enable him to give evidence against the prisoners”*. (30)

Advertisements, too, give historical evidence for family and local historians – descriptions and the inventories of houses and farms, transport from the days of the coaching inn to controversies over parking and speed traps on modern roads, sea and rail travel and the rise of journeys to the country or the seaside. In 1815 the White Hart Inn in Market Rasen solicited the *“Patronage and support of families, commercial gentlemen, farmers and the public in general; and by every due attention to air'd beds, choice wines, spirits, &c [the landlord] hopes to merit those favours...”*, while W Holt considered the weather in Nottinghamshire and advertised *“Water-proof Hats, manufactured without glue...By this process even the lightest hats are entirely prevented from glazing with rain...so much to the injury of the health of the wearer...”* (31)

Visitors to the Spa at Harrogate could choose between the attractions of E Jackson, *“Importer of German Patterns, Wools”* begging leave to show the inhabitants the *“ most SUPERB stock he has ever had in his*

power to offer to the Ladies...Zephyr Wools, &c., Silks, Chenilles, Gold and Silver Cord, Tassels, Braids, Canvasses...” (32) and three Evening Concerts of Vocal and Instrumental Music...arranged by Herr and Madame Boai consisting of“...*M. Boai’s extraordinary exhibition of Musical Sounds produced by striking his Chin...*” (33) Meanwhile, Moschell and Son, Surgeon Dentists, announced their “*Incorrodible Artificial Teeth...Of surpassing beauty...*” (34) complementing the multifarious and sinister advertisements for medicaments for everything from neuralgia to sheep-rot, usually using the same potion.

Newspapers, especially local newspapers, are part of the literary heritage of the nation. Newspapers on CD-Rom are available and just as oral news transformed into newsprint, the local press is evolving into the many local online newspapers, opening up new challenges for the archival custodian and for the researcher. Can we say that we are returning to the issues of archiving folk memory and oral tradition albeit in a different form? As yet, less public use is made of the electronic copy. This is likely to change as the number of access terminals in public libraries increase, and as consumer and media markets alter and adapt to increasing electronic literacy similar to that previously experienced with the print revolution.

The Berkshire *Newbury Weekly News* claims to have been “*Newbury’s information provider for 134 years and continues to push the boundaries of news circulation with this latest re-design of newburynet*” (35), while *Bayfair* (serving Robin Hood’s Bay since 1975) is a monthly online newspaper for the Robin Hood’s Bay and Fylingdales area of the East Coast. (36) In the online May 2002 edition there is an article on a village celebration in 1902 commemorating the relief of Mafeking and a feature on this summer’s May Queen festivities.

In a recent regional survey into the use of Newspapers in Yorkshire and Humberside libraries, undertaken for the Newsplan 2000 Project, 50% of the public surveyed were hoping to find material on local, family and house history. 23% were looking at reports on sport, possibly the majority 76% who were looking at newspapers under 6 months old. 22% were looking at business and financial information and 15% were looking at the adverts. 32% intended to write up notes on their findings and 10% were adding to their family trees. 65% intended to continue their researches at a later date.(37)

In the main these results confirmed the conclusions of similar Newsplan surveys conducted in the North West of England and in London and the South East and demonstrated what we all understand. Local and provincial English newspapers have a long history, but, even more important, they are invaluable carriers of an amazing diversity of historical source material and the users appreciate this.

But have we changed very much? There will still be potential tragedies for journalists to investigate. The North Yorkshire mother waiting for news of her son who was working just yards from the Twin Towers when it was subject to the terrorist attack of 11th September (38) is not so far removed from the report in the *Bristol Post-Boy* of 1704 of the terms of capitulation granted to the Garrison of Rain, on the orders off the Prince of Baden, and the Duke of Malborough. “*All prisoners of war and Deserters shall be restored... The Sick and the Wounded shall be permitted to stay in the Place at the Charges of his Electoral Highness of Bavaria*” (39)

There are still stories to be made and read about the smallest things, the daily lives of the local community and the idiosyncratic incidents that fascinate us all. “*Marsh man who wants fleas and pays half a crown a dozen for them. Flea circuses trained and furnished*” (40), relates well to the letter sent to the *Craven Herald* this year from Scrummage and Charles thanking the people of Skipton for the kindnesses they had received. Scrummage, the one-time library cat, was using the local newspaper columns to inform everyone that he and his feline friend Charles had moved home.

Arthur Miller says: “*A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself.*” It is the prime narrative of our past, the benchmark of our society, touching on the lives of all our yesterdays. In Britain, through the Newsplan 2000 project, the news will be preserved in libraries around the country and be made even more accessible to the widest possible audience.

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