

The history of newspapers

The story of the modern newspaper began in 1641 with the English civil wars and the demand for news of the conflict (often heavily biased). Though publication was controlled during this period by the government, as grip loosened and national literacy rates improved, many newspapers began to arise. Attempts to stifle growth and stem influence were short lived and in 1753 almost 7.5 million newspapers were sold in Britain annually. This number had increased to 11.3 million by 1767 and 53 different newspapers published in London alone!

Taxes and duties were reduced from the 1830s onwards and the golden age of newspapers began from here (all duties were removed by around 1855). More people able to read and lower costs (particularly in terms of new printing machinery) led to many different local newspapers, often in the same area but with different political bias or interests. By 1854 122 million newspapers were sold annually in England.

The invention of the telegraph and telephone allowed stories to be sent from long distance quickly, making newspapers even more useful for learning of recent events, with the first photographs published in newspapers in 1891 by "The Daily Graphic" with many more following suit. By the Second World War more than two thirds of the British population read newspapers daily and almost the entire country read the Sunday news. With the advent of the internet, the spread of television and radio the newspaper is now in decline, but it remains one of the most important and largest resources for family history we can use.

General Search techniques

There are numerous ways to look through the British Newspaper Archive and reveal the documents you need.

Search all: A very broad and simple search of all of the millions of pages available in the entire collection. Wherever your search criteria is mentioned across all of Britain, you'll find it here. It's always advisable to start here, but you may find that there are so many results, advanced searching can help you to return fewer and more relevant articles.

Date range: If you know when an event took place, you can look at a particular period of time and read newspapers of interest. This can help to uncover stories where your relations were perhaps not mentioned by name and can be found in other records to tie them in, or to give you wonderful social and local context.

Publication place: Multiple titles could cover the same area, search by a location to find all relevant publications and trawl through them all at once. You often can find reports from multiple publications of the same event, each with their own reporting style and their own opinions. It can be of great use when you are unfamiliar with an area to understand local towns (but remember to look in adjacent regions and that news stories were also syndicated).

Title: Every publication has a title page, which gives you details on the years in the collection, years intended to be added and some historical context to help you understand a little more about what you are reading. A free “on this day” page is available to view to allow you to get a flavor of the publication and you can search solely in your local paper, particularly useful when your ancestors remained in one place for a considerable period of time or all stem from one smaller community.

Top Tips

- There are 30 million pages in the British Newspaper Archive, with so many new pages added from all corners of the British Isles on a daily basis you should check back regularly and take advantage of the ability to search only recent additions with filters in the advanced search and on your results pages.
- All the records in the British Newspaper Archive are also on Findmypast. If you have a top level subscription to Findmypast you can make use of them there also, but they aren’t stored in the main search. You need to use the newspapers and periodicals search you can access from the drop down in the search menu on the header bar. Irish newspapers and British are separately held; you can select between them on the left hand side of the newspaper search screen.
- In some areas where records do not survive so well, newspapers can be your missing link. Take the information you know and search for surnames and locations. You may even find it helpful just to read the local newspaper from your community at particular points in history to get an understanding of your ancestors and the local events they may have been involved in.
- To be able to bring newspapers to you at a non-prohibitive cost, OCR (optical character recognition) transcription is used. Some newspaper pages can be more than two feet wide, and that would be VERY expensive and slow to write by hand. The technology is largely accurate as printed words are much less likely to be misread but bear in mind that slight imperfections can creep in due to marks on the page/microfilm or elements of ink not transferring to paper properly with initial printing. You might need to think laterally when searching for specific words or phrases, with wildcards in commonly mistaken letters.
- Try alternative names when looking for the person you need. Myko C Clelland for example could have been written as M Clelland, Mr Clelland, Mr Myko Clelland, Myko Clelland, Myko C Clelland or even as “the husband of the deceased”. Try a much more general search with the type of event and location at particular times like “Glossop death”.
- The advanced search allows you to exclude words, search for phrases, limit searches to a particular date and even search only recently added newspapers to allow you to go back and attempt the same searches only across new material. Take advantage of it.
- Local newspapers were full of news, but often these stories were syndicated and published many miles from the place they occurred, particularly in more specialist papers or for stories of particular note. Don’t just look at your local publications, search in all newspapers for stories from your area and you may still find your ancestors in places you never could have imagined.

Types of article

Understand the types of newspaper article relevant to your research to better aid your search while you hunt for your ancestors.

- **News Reports:** These covered local and national events, if it was worth talking about it was worth reading. The most important thing here to note is that this covered not just the well to do but the whole community. Many stories will never be found in government records, but are common in these kinds of articles. From a girl being frightened to death by a donkey to a man who grew the largest carrot in Scotland, you'll find it here!
- **Gossip columns and Society news:** In small areas any news could be worth reading, you can find information on birthday parties, club meetings, visitors from out of town and things considered out of the ordinary from a much more personal perspective than in many articles.
- **School related events:** Honor rolls, graduations, scholastic awards and even class photographs can be found in newspapers. If you know the name of the school your ancestors attended, look for this and you may find much more!
- **Legal Notices:** Goings on of local courts (and in some cases national, when particularly interesting cases are concerned) can lead you to legal records and give you much more detail, in some events you can find a word for word transcript account of events inside the court combined with handwritten drawings (photography was and still is illegal inside a courtroom), much more than the official record.
- **Family Notices:** Births, marriages and deaths. You will also find notices of engagements, anniversaries, memorials and birthdays. Later editions can include photographs of those involved and more detail (weddings often listed guests and the gifts they brought also for example).
- **Letters to the Editor:** Your ancestors often held controversial or strong opinions, just like today! Letters to the editors reveal the topics your ancestors were thinking about and how they thought during an era of unprecedented change. Perhaps they hated the new neighbors, then you find they later moved to the United States...
- **Obituaries:** Detailed obituaries can reveal a wealth of detail about your ancestors' lives and the family they left behind. Later versions regularly contained photographs, but took longer to prepare than a death notice. Look in later editions of the same newspaper to see if they appear after a notification of death, particularly if your ancestors were notable members of the local community.

- **Advertising:** Regional newspapers were the first chance for brands to make their mark and become more than truly local. You may find adverts for an ancestor's businesses, items for sale, lost and found, offers of jobs, personal ads and more. They are usually found on the front page of nineteenth century newspapers but quite often can be scattered throughout, found wherever there is space to squeeze them in.
- **Illustrations and photographs:** Early newspapers were illustrated with engravings. From the late 1800s onwards they began to be filled with photographs of events, local weddings and social functions. In some cases, this can be the only place you might find an image of your ancestors! Many of these are tagged as illustrations to make them easier to find.

Resource Index

The British Newspaper Archive: The largest collection of British local & national newspapers online with around 30m pages from every county of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

Findmypast: Sister site to the BNA, home to all of the same newspapers – accessible with an FMP ultimate subscription at no extra cost. You can find some of these in the Record A-Z, but most of these newspapers are in the 'newspapers and periodicals' section of the site, not found through the main homepage search. <https://www.findmypast.com>

The Gazette: The official journal of the British government, a very useful resource that has now been digitized, transcribed and is available for free access. Notices of interest such as name change, military promotions, bankruptcy and more are published here. <https://www.thegazette.co.uk>

Welsh Newspapers Online: A free collection of over 1 million pages of Welsh newspapers, delivered in both English and Welsh languages. <https://www.newspapers.library.wales>

The National Archives Catalog: A source of Government gazettes, the official newspapers of former British colonies and British dominions. <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

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