The Burney Newspapers at the British Library

Moira Goff

British Library
The collection widely known as the Burney Newspapers is now kept among the British Library’s extensive holdings of early printed books at St Pancras, London. At its heart is the library of the Reverend Dr Charles Burney, acquired by the British Museum following his death in 1817. The Burney Newspapers comprise the most comprehensive collection of early English newspapers anywhere in the world, providing an unparalleled resource for students and researchers. Newspapers are among the most ephemeral productions of the printing press, and digitisation reveals the immense range of this unique collection, while making its content fully accessible for the first time.

Charles Burney and His Collections

Charles Burney, born in 1757, was the son of the music historian Dr Charles Burney and brother of the writer Frances [Fanny] Burney. After his riotous early years, he settled down as a schoolmaster in 1781 and became the headmaster of his own school in 1786. During the 1780s, he established a reputation as a classical scholar. In 1808, he was ordained within the Church of England. At his death, Burney’s library comprised more than 13,000 printed books, mostly editions of classical authors. There were also more than 500 volumes of manuscripts and nearly 400 volumes of materials relating to the English stage (about which Burney had hoped to write a history). In addition, there were about 700 volumes of [mostly English] newspapers. The importance of these collections was such that the House of Commons granted 13,500 to the British Museum for the purchase of the entire library in 1818.

Extent of the Collection

Following their acquisition by the British Museum Library, Burney’s newspapers were amalgamated with others already in the collection (including some once belonging to Sir Hans Sloane, on whose library the British Museum had been founded in 1753). Burney had arranged his collection of newspapers not by title but by date—which presumably helped his own research, but made access difficult for later users. As such, the issues of a number of different newspapers for a particular date were grouped together, and were usually bound in annual volumes. Later in the 18th century, when many newspapers were being published simultaneously, several volumes were needed to cover a single year. However, some issues were arranged by title and then by date within the annual volumes. The material already within the British Museum Library was apparently inserted into the existing volumes according to one or other of these arrangements.

More titles and issues were added by the British Museum Library over the years, to increase the size of the Burney Newspapers collection by some two-thirds. Much of this development was piecemeal, but there were some notable additions. For example, a bequest from the architect and philatelist Sydney R. Turner, following his death in 1972, not only filled gaps in runs but added fresh titles like the Corn Cutter’s Journal (a government newspaper closed down by the prime minister Sir Robert Walpole in 1735). Some of this new material was inserted into the main Burney sequence, but other titles were kept in their own chronological order and the volumes merely inserted where possible, thereby interrupting the overall order of the collection. Some annual volumes, in the course of rebinding, have
been rearranged by title and then by date. Burney’s own manuscript catalogue, which still survives, records (imperfectly) his own arrangement, while also reflecting (through later annotations) subsequent additions and changes. The original arrangement and subsequent development of the collection has led to some duplication, with duplicate issues bound in different volumes. Digitisation has brought many of these to light.

The Burney Newspapers are now bound into some 136 volumes of 17th-century newspapers and about 1,145 volumes of 18th-century newspapers. Many of these volumes are very fragile, and the whole collection was withdrawn from issue in the British Library’s reading rooms some years ago. Before the digitisation project, they were accessible only through microfilms, which followed the chronological arrangement of the original volumes, so that individual titles or issues could be difficult to locate. The website of digitised newspapers provides access to more than 1270 titles and well over 900,000 pages—virtually the whole of this unique resource.

**Range and Scope of the Collection**

The Burney Newspapers are predominantly London newspapers of the 17th and 18th centuries. The titles range in date from 1603 to the early 1800s. The earliest item in the collection is, in fact, a book—*The Summe and Substance of the Conference*, published in 1604, records the deliberations of the Hampton Court Conference of 1603, which led to the publication in 1611 of the well-loved King James version of the Bible. As well as acquiring such older publications, Burney continued to add current newspapers to his collection until his death. Most of the newspaper issues dated after 1800 were transferred to the British Museum’s Newspaper Library, when its new building opened in 1932, but some from the very early 1800s remained with the main collection and have been included in the digitisation.

Among the earliest materials in the collection are English newsbooks of the 1620s. They are called newsbooks because of their format—they are small books or pamphlets, and were the first publications to regularly disseminate news. *Weekly Newes* from Italy, dated 23 May 1622, was one of the first of these ‘corantos’, known only from the copy surviving among the Burney newspapers. There are many newsbooks from the 1640s, the period of the English Civil War, and they provide news and propaganda from both the King’s side and that of Parliament. As an example, the Burney Newspapers include an extensive set of the *Perfect Diurnall of Some Passages in Parliament*, which ran from July 1643 to November 1649, a period that saw most of the principal events of this unhappy conflict—including the execution of Charles I.

The collection has few newspapers from the 1650s and 1660s, although it does have an extensive run of the *Oxford Gazette* as well as its more famous successor the *London Gazette*, titles established in 1665 and 1666, respectively. The latter is often referred to as the first English newspaper because of its single-sheet format and its double-column layout. Apart from a flurry of short-lived publications around the Popish Plot of 1678, and the arrival of William of Orange to effect the Glorious Revolution in 1688, there are few
newspapers from the 1680s and 1690s before the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695. An exception is the Athenian Gazette, a periodical rather than a newspaper, which ran from 1691 to 1697 and was devoted to answering enquiries from its readers. The Post Boy and its offshoot the Post Man, which began with the removal of press controls in 1695 and continued publication into the 1720s and beyond, are represented in more extensive runs than can be found anywhere else.

With the beginning of the 18th century, London newspapers came into their own with the creation of the first English daily, the Daily Courant, in 1702. The Burney newspapers reflect and record the growth and development of the London press over the years up to 1800. All of the major newspapers of the period are represented, many in extensive if not complete runs of issues. The Burney Newspapers often provide the only substantial collection of issues for individual titles. The Daily Courant is almost complete from its very first issue, except for gaps during the period 1727 to 1733. A selection of other titles illustrates the riches of this unique collection. The London Evening Post (1727-1806), among the longer-lasting of the tri-weekly evening newspapers, is substantially complete before 1781. The opposition journalist (and Jacobite) Nathaniel Mist ran, in succession, the Weekly Journal, or, Saturday’s Post (1716-1725), Mist’s Weekly Journal (1725-1728), and Fog’s Weekly Journal (1728-1737). All survive in substantial runs not to be found elsewhere. The Daily Gazetteer (1735-1746), founded at Sir Robert Walpole’s behest to replace several other titles including the Daily Courant, is almost complete for the period 1736 to 1744. The quarrelsome and satiric Grub Street Journal (1730-1737) is all but complete. The Public Advertiser (1752-1794) is almost complete and provides the only surviving substantial run of this title, which was one of the more successful newspapers of the period. The Star (1788-1831), the first of the daily evening newspapers, is wanting most issues for the first few years of its existence, but thereafter has a virtually complete run to 1800. The World (1787-1794), with an interest in fashionable society and its scandals, has very few gaps and again provides the only surviving substantial run of issues.

The Burney Newspapers do not include many British provincial titles. These became the responsibility of the Newspaper Library when it was created in 1905, although those within the 17th and 18th-century volumes of the Burney Newspapers were not transferred either then or later. Very few of these extremely rare provincial newspapers are present in other than scattered issues, although they occasionally have runs covering a year or more. Among the Irish newspapers, the Dublin Mercury (1766-1770) has issues for 1769 to mid-1770—the only ones known to survive for that period. There is a complete run of the Lounger (1785-1787), published in Edinburgh. Among the English provincial newspapers, the Bath Chronicle (1770-1925) is principally represented by a good run of issues for the period 1784-1789. The Burney Newspapers include the only known surviving copies of the Chester Chronicle or Commercial Intelligencer (1775-1779), principally for 1775 and 1776. The earliest of the English provincial titles is Jos Blis’s Exeter Post Boy, the single issue of which is numbered 211 and dated 4 May 1711.
There are also a few newspapers from further afield. There are scattered American titles, for example, a few issues for 1721 and 1722 of the *Boston Gazette* (1719-1741) and a run of issues between August 1721 and September 1723 of the *New England Courant* (1721-1726). The Burney Newspapers also include two unique issues of the *Barbados Mercury* (1762?-1786?) and a single unique issue of the *Barbados Gazette* (1731-1788).

Burney made no clear distinction between newspapers and what are now referred to as periodicals—serial publications that contain general comment or criticism or are devoted to the discussion of particular topics, but do not feature news. The Burney Newspapers include some very famous periodicals, for example the *Tatler* (1709-1711) and the *Spectator* (1711-1712), edited by the writers and politicians Joseph Addison and Sir Richard Steele. The *Tatler* appears only in its collected edition of 1710-1711, under the title *The Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff*, but the issues of the *Spectator* are the originals published three times a week. Both the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* make many references to London’s theatres, but Aaron Hill’s *The Prompter* (1734-1736), which is also among the Burney Newspapers, reflected Hill’s zeal to reform acting as well as the theatre more generally. Reforming politics is represented by John Wilkes’s *North Briton* (1762-1763), including the infamous number 45 in which he attacked George III’s ministers for the terms they had agreed in the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years’ War.

Many of the treasures within the Burney Newspapers are well known, to scholars and researchers at least, but the many pamphlets and broadsides also included have remained largely hidden. The pamphlets cover a variety of topics. There are news pamphlets alongside the newsbooks of the 1620s and 1630s, as well as the period of the English Civil War. Other pamphlets, from the mid-17th century onwards, deal with a variety of political and religious controversies. There are also a number of 18th-century pamphlet editions of speeches given by successive monarchs to parliament. The broadsides are very miscellaneous. Some are political, others commercial (including many advertisements), and some report extraordinary events at home or abroad. Most relate in some way to the newspapers they are found with, but there are also some that seem to have found their way into the Burney Newspapers by pure serendipity. All will now be accessible to researchers because of their digitisation.

**Subjects for Research**

The sheer size and extent of the Burney Newspapers collection make it a uniquely valuable resource for an extremely wide range of topics of research and study. It is a primary source of first resort for historians of the 17th and 18th centuries, whether they are dealing with politics or society at large. The collection is useful to those studying religious history. Its value as a resource for economic historians is now beginning to be realised, for the Burney Newspapers provide all sorts of economic information, from prices of stocks and shares, through shipping information, to commerce more generally. Many trades are represented in the advertisements, which form a substantial part of newspapers from the early 1700s. The book trade is
particularly well represented, through advertisements for forthcoming books as well as those already published. For literary historians there are also essays, poems, and more substantial works published in parts within both newspapers and periodicals. Advertisements can be explored as a developing genre, as well as source of information on disparate topics—medicines (quack or otherwise), goods to be sold, property to be sold or leased, runaway servants, lost or stolen personal effects, and many, many others. From the publication of the first daily newspaper, theatres regularly advertised their performances and soon prompted criticism of their repertoire as well as gossip about the players. The newspapers are a rich source of information about individuals, useful to family as well as social historians, not only in the form of notices of births, marriages, and deaths, but also through the many individual men, women, and children (of every social standing) mentioned in their pages. There are aristocrats, gentry, merchants, tradesmen, authors, doctors, entrepreneurs, and many others who are the subjects of surprising, morally improving, or amusing anecdotes. The Burney Newspapers are a rich compendium of British history from the early 1600s to the first years of the 19th century.
CITATION


© Cengage Learning 2007