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British Newspapers 1800-1860

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Various source media, *British Library Newspapers*



At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in 1800, Britain had been at war with France since 1793, and would remain so (with a small gap) until 1815. The needs of the nation to fund a protracted war drove events that influenced taxation policy, which in turn influenced newspaper publication in this period. Newspapers remained essentially what they had been—similar in form and style to earlier decades, under-capitalised and produced in small workshops, and financially incapable of drawing upon the services of professional journalists.¹ Equally, there is no doubt that newspapers were well established in all regions of the United Kingdom, in the major cities and in London.

The high taxation imposed by the British government had a real impact upon the production and sale of newspapers. This had the effect of both restricting investment in newspapers, and so their potential for development, while also distorting the patterns of publication. By 1815 the rates of duty had been raised to: paper duty 3d. per pound in weight; stamp duty 4d. a sheet; advertising duty 3s. 6d. for an advertisement. By these means, more revenue was raised for the government, and the circulation of newspapers could be restricted via the cover price to the rich and reputedly reliable members of society. This structure was, however, relaxed gradually. In the years 1833-1836, advertising duty and paper duty were halved, and the stamp duty was reduced from 4d. to 1d. Advertising duty was abolished in 1853; the stamp duty in 1855, and finally, the duty on paper in 1861.²

It is worth recalling that in this period there were none of the means of modern transport that are now taken

for granted—railways and a rail network did not really develop much until the 1840-1850 period, and in some areas, even later. Developments in telegraph technology also occurred during the second half of the nineteenth century. The delivery of news carried on as before, with the mail carrying both newspapers for distribution as well as newsworthy information for incorporation into local newspapers, possibly weekly or bi-weekly. There is evidence to suggest that the mail distribution worked somewhat better during the early years of the nineteenth century; however, the gains in speed of distribution relative to the end of the eighteenth century were unlikely to have been really significant.³

In 1800, four main daily newspapers were being published in London, of roughly equal importance: the *Morning Post*; the *Morning Chronicle*; the *Morning Herald* and *The Times*. The *Morning Post* had recruited the services of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote for the paper regularly from 1795 until 1802, and such was the impact of his work, that the circulation of the paper rose to 4,500 copies by 1802.⁴ The *Morning Post* was said to be the preferred reading of the aristocracy, and its circulation remained largely steady, with some 3,000 copies being sold in 1847. The *Morning Chronicle* (started in 1765) was originally a Whig paper, but was purchased by a consortium of Peelites in 1848.⁵ *The Standard* was started in 1827 as an evening paper with Conservative views. It specifically opposed Catholic Emancipation.⁶ In later years, *The Standard* became one of the principal conservative daily newspapers.

The fortunes of these daily London newspapers were eclipsed by the progress of *The Times*. Under the energetic proprietorship of John Walter (1776-1847), the Koenig Steam press was introduced to *The Times* in November 1814, producing 1,000 sheets per hour. The new machinery meant that the paper could go to press later but still contain more recent news than other dailies. In 1827, the installation of the Applegarth press meant that production could be raised to 4,000 impressions per hour.⁷ Moreover, improvements in the quality of writing in all its departments went alongside these mechanical improvements. Circulation of *The Times* rose from 5,000 copies in 1815 to 10,000 in 1834; then to 18,500 in 1840, 23,000 in 1844, and 40,000 by 1851.⁸ Thomas Barnes edited the paper up to his death in 1841. The appointment of John Delane in 1841, at the age of 23, marked a new era of expansion for the newspaper. During his editorship, *The Times* was loosely identified with Liberalism, but his main concern was always to maintain the paper's independence. Support for the government of the day at any particular time was lent rather than given, and could at any time be replaced by criticism or outright opposition. The power of *The Times* to oppose the government was seen clearly during the Crimean War, when Delane felt it was his duty to condemn those who were directing the war.⁹

These developments were accompanied by changes for the major London newspapers, in the way that their content was created. The use of trained reporters became more common. The significant events of the day were described and assessed in an expert manner. City pages were developed, and City correspondents began to be employed by the main London papers. From the 1830s, parliamentary reporters were used.

For some papers, foreign correspondents were employed, providing expert commentary as events unfolded abroad.¹⁰

The gradual relaxation of various taxation duties assisted in the establishment of other newspapers. In 1846, the *Daily News* was founded. From the start, it championed Liberal ideas, and it remained the champion of Gladstonian liberalism for the next fifty years. Early editors included: Charles Dickens (January-March 1846) and John Forster (March-October 1846). *The Daily Telegraph* was first published on 29 June 1855 at a price of 2d. The cover price was soon halved to 1d in September 1855, and it became the first penny paper to be published in London.

A number of Sunday newspapers were started in the 1840s and established themselves. *Lloyds Illustrated Paper* was commenced in September 1842, only shortly after the *Illustrated London News*, which began on 14 May 1842. The *News of the World* was first published on 1 October 1843, the *Weekly Times* in 1847, and *Reynolds Newspaper* in May 1850. Circulation of the *Lloyds Illustrated Paper* and *News of the World* reached 100,000 by 1855. *Reynolds Newspaper* achieved 50,000 copies sold by 1855, with far larger figures in the 1860s of 200,000 to 300,000 copies. *Reynolds Newspaper* was described in 1857 as: '... advocates the widest possible measures of reform. It contains much strong nervous writing, thickly spiced with abuse of the privileged orders, which causes it to be eagerly read by a certain class. The news and literary departments of the paper are respectably conducted; and, but for its violent

politics, it might be characterised as a good family paper.¹¹

The provincial newspapers of England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland were well established by 1800. Titles were started between 1700-1800 in Worcester, Stamford, Norwich, Nottingham, Newcastle, Bristol, Hereford, Canterbury, Leeds, Exeter, York, Manchester, Cambridge, Oxford, and Liverpool.¹² In 1851, Mitchell cites 477 newspaper titles established since 1800. Of all 563 newspapers established since 1600, the breakdown of political affiliation was recorded as: Liberal—231 titles; Conservative—174; Neutral and Class Papers—158.¹³ This compilation covers both London and the provinces; clearly new titles were also being started in English towns and cities.¹⁴ Equally certain is that many of the titles newly published ceased to exist after only a few years.

On the whole, the provincial newspapers were published weekly. Examples of longer-lived publications include: *The Hull Packet*, *The Ipswich Journal*, *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, and *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*. Many of these provincial papers sought to have the widest possible area of sales and readership. This would typically include the immediate district surrounding a town or city, but the publisher might also aspire to distribute to adjacent counties. Sub-headings, or page headings, testify to the geographic range attempted for each newspaper, even in the era of restricted and slow road transportation, before the coming of the railways.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, revenue from advertisements played a crucial role in the continued publication of these papers. The minutiae of local life

are expressed in these advertisements, which frequently occupied the whole front page of each issue. The introduction of new machinery lagged behind the wealthier example of *The Times* in London. Steam-presses were introduced by the *Manchester Courier* in 1825. The *Manchester Guardian* acquired a steam-press in 1828, and improvements to this were made in 1838. The *Bristol Mercury* acquired its Napier machine in 1836 and the *Halifax Guardian* in 1841. The *Wiltshire County Mirror* announced its use of Napier's double-feeding machine, propelled by steam, in its first issue of 10 February 1852.¹⁶

The situation in London differed from that in the provinces, and was influenced by the rapid growth of London at this time. The population was a million in 1800 and more than two million by the middle of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ The number of new publications for the 1800-60 period in London, for both newspapers and magazines, is large—some 1500 titles. This is very much higher than for the sixty previous years of 1741-1800, when only some estimated 27 new titles were published in London.¹⁸ By 1850, London and its surrounding area were increasingly being described as "Greater London". Newspaper coverage was organised both from London itself, and also from the county towns that ringed London. Newspaper production frequently remained part of an already established printing office, which dealt with other work in addition to that of publishing newspapers.¹⁹ It was also likely that the close relation of a local newspaper to its readership attracted interest from political parties or individuals favouring a particular party.²⁰

The words of Sir Edward Bulwer Lytton²¹, the novelist and parliamentarian, sum up what newspapers had become by the 1840s:

'[The] newspaper is the chronicle of civilization, the common reservoir into which every stream pours its living waters, and at which every man may come and drink: it is the newspaper which gives liberty its practical life, its constant observation, its perpetual vigilance, its unrelaxing activity. It is a daily and a sleepless watchman, that reports to you every danger which menaces the institutions of your country, and its interest at home and abroad. It informs legislation of public opinion, and it informs the people of the acts of legislation; thus keeping that constant sympathy, that good understanding between people and legislators, which conduces to the maintenance of order and prevents the stern necessity for revolution.'²²

A number of impulses drove newspaper development in this period there was political development—the controversy surrounding the first Reform Bill of 1832, and consequent radical working-class thinking as expressed in the press; the actual revolutions of 1848; the many controversies surrounding British involvement in the Crimean War and British Army maladministration of that conflict; and the increasing migration of rural people to cities. There was also continued rapid industrialisation, with Britain hugely increasing its exports of manufactured goods. A famously visible expression of this process was the Great Exhibition held in Hyde Park, London in 1851. This event raised public awareness of what was being achieved by mass production and mechanization. One consequence was more public appetite for news than ever before—and there was a significant growth in the publication of newspapers and magazines in the period following 1860.

NOTES

¹ Black, Jeremy. The Eighteenth Century British Press. In: *The Encyclopaedia of the British Press, 1422-1992*. Edited by Dennis Griffiths. London: Macmillan, 1992, p.23.

² Brown, Lucy. The British Press 1800-1860. In: *The Encyclopaedia of the British Press, 1422-1992*. Edited by Dennis Griffiths. London: Macmillan, 1992, pp.24-5.

³ For a discussion of this, see: Black, Jeremy. *The English Press 1621-1861*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001, p.74-5.

⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Eleventh Edition*. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1911. Vol. XIX, MUN to ODDFELLOWS. [Article on] Newspapers, p.557.

⁵ Brown, Lucy, op. cit., p.27.

⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, op.cit., p.560.

⁷ Black, Jeremy, op. cit., p.74.

⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, op.cit., p.557.

⁹ *Dictionary of National Biography*. Article on John Delane.

¹⁰ Brown, Lucy, op. cit., p.25.

¹¹ Mitchell, Charles. *The Newspaper Press Directory. 1857*, p.30.

¹² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, op.cit., p.563-4.

¹³ Mitchell, Charles. *The Newspaper Press Directory. 1851*, p.376.

¹⁴ In Birmingham between 1800-60, forty-four newspapers and magazines are cited as commencing publication. Source: British Library Newspapers catalogue. <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/newspapers/welcome.asp> Accessed June 2007.

¹⁵ For example, the page heading for *The Ipswich Journal* for 8 January 1870 reads: "The Ipswich Journal, and Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex and Cambridgeshire Advertiser".

¹⁶ Black, Jeremy, op. cit., p.75.

¹⁷ Cited in The Proceedings of the Old Bailey. See: <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/history/london-life/Population%20History%20of%20London.html> Accessed June 2007.

¹⁸ British Library Newspapers catalogue. Search by London and by date range 1740-1800; 1801-1860. Allowance has to be made for the

duplicate citations of the same title across decades. The majority of the titles appear to be newspapers rather than magazines.

¹⁹ Harris, Michael. London's Local Newspapers: Patterns of Change in the Victorian Period. In: *Investigating Victorian Journalism*. Edited by Laurel Brake, Aled Jones and Lionel Madden. London: Macmillan, 1990, pp.105-7.

²⁰ Ibid., p.113.

²¹ A biography of Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton is at:
<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bulwer/bio.html> Accessed June 2007.

²² Mitchell, Charles. *The Newspaper Press Directory*. 1846, p.314.

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