

Newspapers

In the days before the internet, local newspapers were how information on local happenings was communicated. As such, many of our ancestors appeared in these publications at some point in their lives. An appearance could be as simple as a brief announcement of their birth, marriage or death or could be something much more interesting, giving an insight into a long-forgotten corner of their lives or provide information not available elsewhere.

For example, in many cases the coroner's records following an inquest do not survive, however there is likely to be a report of the inquest in the local paper. The following is the report on the death of my 2x-Great-Grandmother from the Shields Daily Gazette following her death in 1876:

DEATH FROM FALLING DOWN STAIRS. Last night, about 8 o'clock, Ellen Bryson, living at No. 6 Hamilton Terrance, North Shields, was seized with a fit and fell down the stairs of her house where she was found lying by her neighbour, Mr Irvin, who got her carried up stairs into her own room. She was found to be severely injured at the back part of her head. Dr. Peart was sent for, but Mrs Bryson died between 12 and one o'clock this morning. Deceased was 44 years old and married.

In addition to specific information on your ancestors, newspapers can also give you a feel for the environment in which they lived. For example, the Durham Chronicle of Friday, 5 October 1849, gives a description of the early Consett Iron Works and the fledging Consett. This includes:

...the Consett Iron Works, commenced in 1841, on a high, bleak, remote and thinly inhabited moorland, fifteen miles from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and which, in the course of five years, became covered with fourteen blast furnaces, with machinery and rolling mills, capable of making 15,000 tons of bar iron and sheet iron per week. The company built 1300 houses for the work-people; speculators erected many more, and this interesting community now numbers upwards of 15,000 persons.

The article includes a description of the living conditions of the workers and facilities provided in the developing community together with information on the wages paid:

...the average wages of the colliers during the late bad two years of trade have been from 3s to 3s 6d per day of 8 to 9 hours; and the miners up to July last, 3s per day of ten hours...

Finding Information in Newspapers – Online

The British Library are working to digitise their vast collection of local and historical national newspapers. Currently they have digitised ca. 34,000,000 pages with more being added every week. These images have been indexed using optical character recognition which means they are fully searchable.

This database – the British Newspaper Archive – is currently available through two online subscription sites:

- www.findmypast.co.uk
- www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

Both sites offer a range of subscriptions and a pay-as-you-go option. You may also be able to access the database for free at your local archive or library.

Libraries may also allow you free access to the online archives of various national newspapers such as the Times and The Guardian.

If you are interested in ancestors appearing in newspapers in other parts of the world then use Google to see what is available. Some of these databases are available for free. For example, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/> has a large collection of Australian newspapers.

When searching online newspaper archives, it is good to try a range of searches – the optical character recognition system can give rise to errors! You also need to be aware of conventions in use at the time the newspaper was published. For example, women might be referred to as Mrs xxx surname, where xxx is their husband's forename, or people might just appear with initials or titles.

Searches can be refined by location, date, newspaper title, county, type of record and a range of other criteria.

Finding Information in Newspapers – In Archives and Libraries

Although online newspapers are an invaluable resource, it must be remembered that not everything is online and so, if you can't find anything on your ancestors, you should consider what might be available off-line.

Copies of local papers are likely to be available at your local library or record office. For example, there are copies of the Consett Chronicle 1923-1969 and the Consett Guardian 1937-1970 available on microfilm at the Durham Record Office.

To check what is available at the various local facilities then you should look at their websites and catalogues or speak to staff.

A publication called "Local Newspapers: 1750-19920. England and Wales, Channel Isles, Isle of Man" by Jeremy Gibson, Brett Langston and Brenda W. Smith gives details of newspapers and where copies are held. Copies are available from the Federation of Family History Societies¹ and the Society of Genealogists².

¹ <https://www.familyhistorybooksonline.co.uk/shop/>

² <http://www.sog.org.uk/books-courses/featured-publications/>

If all other options prove negative, the British Library holds copies of most British newspapers, a collection dating back to the 1600s. Hardcopies of these can be accessed in the Reading Room at Boston Spa, near Wetherby, Yorkshire.

The Gazette

The London, Edinburgh and Belfast Gazettes – collectively “The Gazette” – are the official publications of record for the UK. The Gazette was founded on the 7 November 1665 as the Oxford Gazette – the location being because Charles II and his court had evacuated to Oxford for fear of the Plague!

A whole range of items are required by law to be published in the Gazette, including many of which are of interest to family researchers. In other cases, people and companies may opt to voluntarily make announcements in this official forum.

The types of information in the Gazette which may be useful include:

- Announcements of medals and other awards
- Military promotions
- Announcements of changes of name by deed poll
- Announcements of bankruptcy
- Company information, such as names of directors

An example of a notice from The London Gazette, 18 June 1847:

The Court for the Relief of Insolvent Debtors, Durham: Charles Robson, formerly of Heart of Oak, Lanchester, Durham, Miller, afterwards of Berry Edge, Lanchester, Grocer, Baker and Confectioner, and late of Wrekenton, Gateshead Fell, Durham, Journeyman Miller.

This simple notice tells us much about Charles Robson, not just that he was in financial trouble but also three stages in his career.

A notice in the Durham Chronicle on the same date gives similar information on Charles, together with some additional data, including the fact that Charles was also a chemist and druggist and proprietor of an omnibus running between Berry Edge and Gateshead!

Website: <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/>

This website is free to search.

Hint & Tips

- Not all newspapers are online. See what papers covered the area where your ancestors lived and then check coverage of those papers in the British Newspaper Archive.
- Try a general search for your surname – interesting stories were often reproduced in local papers far from the actual event.
- Allow for spelling variations and historic naming practices during online searching

Disclaimer: This document is intended as a guide to get you started with researching your family history. It is not intended to be comprehensive and Cameo Family History does not accept responsibility for errors and omissions.