"THE TIMES' INDEX*"

C. H. J. Kyte

I notice in the Autumn number of The Indexer that the title of my talk this evening is given as 'The Times Index'. It would, however, be more accurate to call it The Times Indexes or The Times Indices—which ever you prefer.

Since the paper was first published in 1785, under the title of The Daily Universal Register—it was changed to The Times two years later—there have been a number of attempts to compile an index to the contents of its columns. Some of these lasted a year or two and some a matter of months, but none managed to maintain a regular publication.

However, in the nineteenth century one man did make a success of compiling a regular index to The Times. His name was Samuel Palmer, a bookseller by profession.

He was probably a little more shrewd than his predecessors and realised just how much work there is in indexing a daily newspaper. His first volume covering the period October—December 1867 appeared the following year—in 1868. In 1891, he also started indexing the back numbers of The Times towards 1785—it was necessary for his staff to use the newspapers in the British Museum for this.

As an index, it leaves a lot to be desired; this is possibly because of the necessity for economy for it had to be a commercial proposition. Two or more entries per news item were unheard-of luxuries and cross references were also at a premium; in fact, the rule seemed to be one entry per news item. But it is not just the lack of entries that makes Palmer suffer in comparison with the more modern index. His method of choosing subject headings was, to say the least, eccentric. On pages 128-129 are some typical examples of Palmer's indexing—they are taken from the volume for October—December 1842.

The first relates to a floating chapel which was loosened from its moorings on the River Severn; it is indexed under the heading 'Disgraceful Act'. When referring to the dry weather they were experiencing that year the entry is 'Present Dry Season', but there are also references on the same subject under 'Weather'.

Two women were committed to Ruthin prison, one named Amelia House for firing a pistol at a man called Roberts; the other named Jane Williams for stealing a mare belonging to a Robert Owen. These escapades are indexed to 'Rather uncommon for females'. A storm in France is under 'Fatal Storm' and a small boy sentenced for stealing a twopenny pie goes to 'Atrocious Criminal'.

But considering the need for economy, Palmer did not always keep his references short and to the point. The case of a certain Jane Thomas, who apparently was so overcome with joy at seeing her mother at the stage door that she died in her arms, reads like this:

'Death of Jane Thomas in her Mother's Arms in Holborn at Joy in Seeing her parent at the Stage Door to Receive her.'

Note the odd use of capitals—perhaps there was a shortage of small type in Palmer's printing shop.

In spite of these faults, Palmer's Index was very well received by the press of the day. The Sun said that it was 'most carefully compiled and most admirably arranged'.

The Bookseller said: 'it is the most complete index'.

The Glowworm was also very complimentary and The Times said:

'It is indexed upon a plan at once simple and clear. To all who have occasion to refer to events in these columns, the assistance of Mr. Palmer's work will be found of great value'.

Palmer's Index is still of great value even today. It is possible for anyone wishing to find an item or an article in The Times of

* A talk by the Editor of the Index to The Times at the Society's discussion meeting on November 8, 1966.
1842 to do so, through Palmer's. It may take some getting used to but without it the task would be hopeless—as any member of The Times Intelligence Department will tell you. Some indication of the importance of Palmer's Index is the fact that a set of volumes covering 1790-1905 can fetch upward of £400 when up for sale.

When Palmer died in 1899 his family continued the index until it ceased publication in 1941, the retrospective volumes going back to 1790. The surprising thing about Palmer's is that its style was exactly the same for the later indexes as when he first started.

The next person to attempt an index was a Miss Bailey. Her first annual volume appeared in 1899 and was published by Eyre & Spottiswoode. It was far superior to Palmer's, but even this only lasted two more years.

The Times, meanwhile, had maintained a manuscript index in the office from the year 1865. It was compiled originally by the Publisher and later by Ernest Brain before he became a foreign correspondent. But this must have proved of little value for it was decided in 1906 to publish an index under the paper's own imprint. This first appeared as a monthly volume that was re-edited as an annual volume at the end of the year. It continued in this form until July 1914 when quarterly volumes were issued.

The Index today is a bi-monthly (it was changed from a quarterly in 1957) and is compiled by a staff of seven. The indexing is done on slips of paper (about 7 inches by 5 inches size) and the slips are then filed in hinged boxes, so that they can be easily referred to. Each indexer has his own subjects because we find that it makes for greater continuity and this is an essential part of our work. Three indexers cover foreign news and four cover home news, including the Arts and City pages. The Index is based on the last edition of the paper—News matter taken out of the earlier editions is put on galley proofs and the page, column and edition that they are taken from is marked on them; these are then attached to the last edition to make up the FILE Copy which we index. This means that all editions of The Times are, in fact, covered by the Index.

When the two months' indexing has been completed, the copy has to be prepared for the printer. This is a major task for a volume contains around 30,000 entries. When all the information has been collated and edited, the copy is then sent to the printer and the galley proofs and page proofs are returned to us for final reading and marking of additions.

When this has been done, the completed Index is sent to the binder. The whole operation, from the sending of A Copy until the Printed Sheets are sent to the binder usually takes about 6½ weeks, and involves a daily flow of copy, galleys and pages to and from the printer.

I would say that our biggest problem is time. Starting work on Monday we are already two papers behind—the Saturday and the Monday. Filing index slips absorbs the equivalent of one day a week per indexer, so this leaves six papers to be indexed in four days. With other time spent preparing copy, reading galley proofs and page proofs, it usually means that each indexer is expected to complete two papers a day. With the tendency these days towards longer holidays and with days off for illness, one is always working against the calendar, if not the clock.

An average copy of The Times contains approximately 100,000 words not including the advertisements. At that rate, one of our more experienced indexers is expected to scan—not read—about 45,000 words for indexable news value, and write probably 500 references under relevant headings, in one day. He has to be selective because, like Samuel Palmer, we want it to be a commercial proposition.

Next there is the problem of staff. It is necessary for a newspaper indexer to have a good general knowledge and an interest in current affairs. The actual mechanics of indexing such as putting the date, page and column reference, cross-references, etc., are taken for granted. But a new staff member
can miss a point that should be brought out, even in the more simple tasks, such as indexing an obituary. There may be five or six ways of indexing a particular item but we have our own style and it is necessary for new indexers to learn and remember it. An indexer must also have a trained memory—a former member of the index staff can still remember news items that he indexed 20 years ago. In fact, once we have indexed a story we usually remember doing so, but the difficulty is in placing the date.

Another problem is that news items do not need to be as absolutely accurate as the Index. It is quite normal for a news report to say that something happened near a certain place, and then the follow-up stories will give the exact designation, perhaps somewhere else. This is easily overcome in the same index but should there be a delay of months between the two stories, it can present a problem. Some treasure found in Nottinghamshire can be quoted as an example. The first story in March, 1966, said that the treasure was found near Newstead Abbey, but the second story, in September, 1966, said that the find was at Fishpool. This was overcome by a cross-reference but the indexer could not have been blamed if the two items had been treated as two separate discoveries.

Life would be much easier were all newspaper indexers gifted with foresight! Unlike indexing a book, where you know that the contents are not going to change, the newspaper indexer never knows where a news story is going to lead. A railway strike abroad one day could lead to a general strike, and the overthrow of the government a week later, and it may have to be completely re-indexed. The way the labour unrest in the motor industry has grown in the last few weeks and the prices and wages freeze are other examples of how a particular aspect of news changes and grows.

Our subject headings have to be chosen with great care, and although some subjects are collected under a general heading, we try where possible to put subjects to a particular title. This is where we differ from the New York Times Index. I have an example here of how the same story is treated by us and by the New York Times Index. It is about the plan to replace London Bridge. In the Index to The Times it is under London Bridge—rebuilding plans with no cross references. In the New York Times Index it is under Bridges, with the sub-heading Thames River Crossing, and then there is a run-on giving a précis of the news story. Another example is their treatment of the Los Angeles race riots last year. In the Index to The Times it is under United States: Negroes: California—Los Angeles riots, with a cross-reference from Los Angeles. In the New York Times Index, all of the references to Negroes are collected but there are so many that they have been broken up into sections and numbered. The cross reference reads Los Angeles see Negroes 129, 131, 146, 150, 162, 168, 179, 187 (for Watts riots).

It is difficult to remember all of the small problems one encounters in each index. They crop up—we discuss them—and anyone who can see snags in taking a certain course of action, or using a new heading points them out. Having done this we usually find that the problem can be solved in such and such a way and we proceed along those lines.

Our future at the moment is in the hands of the Monopolies Commission, but I personally hope that one day we will be providing an index to the Sunday Times; it is an excellent paper and contains a mass of useful information, but the public is unable to refer to it because there is no index. It would indeed benefit everyone if all of the so-called quality newspapers published an index—a manuscript kept in the office is not enough. It is only because of the foresight of Samuel Palmer that we are able to read about the historical events recorded in The Times; today's newspapers are, in fact, a record of yesterday's history and it is necessary to be able to refer to them, through an index.