

Facts and how to find them *

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Any talk thus entitled presents an immediate difficulty. It is not, however, necessary to go into the matter of what is or is not a fact. The talk could equally well be entitled 'Information and How to Retrieve It'. Logically, of course, the problem is one which is of more direct application to librarians than indexers. However, indexers worth their salt are for ever finding errors in reference books, and many of them become experts in the non-fiction field; since after all, who has heard of indexed novels and fiction books?—though I must interpose that as a dyed-in-the-wool non-fiction man I only wish novels were indexed since it would eliminate the irritation of almost having to re-read a whole book to put your finger on one particular incident or passage.

The first surprising fact on addressing oneself to this subject is the remarkable lack of any one book which deals with the subject in a stimulating and comprehensive way. If there were such a book it would logically be a very steady seller and would also have the benefit of a high rate of obsolescence.

In a country which spends more on education than on health or on defence or on housing, in fact which spends on it 9.6 billion pounds a year, it seems illogical that elementary teaching on facts and how to find them is absent from the curriculum. After all, it is more important to know where and how to look things up than it is to be able to memorize them. The Americans are less backward in this respect although I must say that I find their Bibliography of Bibliographies rather turgid reading.

The first problem to overcome in the retrieval of information is, I feel, one of credence. Most people, with the exception of genealogists, find it impossible to believe how much information has been recorded and is available since Gutenberg printed his first Bible and how much material exists in manuscript form before the first functional typewriter†.

Once people can grasp the vastness of the data pool they are half way to success. The other half is, however, tremendously demanding in tenacity, stamina and intelligent application.

The countless man-hours wasted by people who go at information retrieval bald-headed is really rather depressing.

I met a man recently who had spent years on and off looking for a print of a 17th-century building in which he was particularly interested. It had never occurred to him first to establish that what he was looking for existed. Alternatively there are people who convince themselves that certain facts are unrecorded and will never come to light whereas a moment's thought might well lead them straight to the answer.

In the extraction of facts there are three little-publicized, but from experience highly effective rules.

1. Never ask a person, especially a Civil Servant, for a fact. Rather present him with what you believe to be a fact and ask him to advise you as to whether it is correct or nearly correct. People have infinite resistance to supplying information but very few can resist correcting someone else's assumption.
2. If you want a fact about Britain (say, the location and length of the longest piece of straight road) do not write to the Department of State or the Automobile Association while you are in Britain. Wait until you are abroad, because people react far more diligently to a foreign enquiry than they do to a domestic one.
3. If you want information from a Frenchman, write in impeccable French. If you are, however, trying to extract information from Germany, write in English. A German is insulted to get a letter in his own language because he assumes that you feel that he is unable to understand English, whereas a Frenchman is insulted to get a letter in English because he feels that you cannot be bothered to write to him in his own language.

In the matter of extracting information I recall one or two illustrative examples.

The name of the first person ever to fly in a heavier-than-air machine was not Wilbur nor Orvil Wright in 1903, but an unnamed coachman near Scarborough in 1853. It irritated me that this historic pioneer who flew in Sir George Cayley's man-carrying glider was always described as 'unnamed'. It suddenly occurred to me that it was surely likely in mid-Victorian times that this coachman had been in the employ of Sir George for some little time and therefore his identity might well be deducible from the Census Return of 1851 for

*Text of the address given to The Society on 11 July 1980.

†The first patent for a typewriter was by Henry Mill in 1714 but the earliest known working machine was made by Pellegrine Turri (Italy) in 1808.

Brompton Hall near Scarborough where the great Baronet lived. A study of the Census Return revealed that the most probable candidate was one John Appleby.

On another occasion I was asked to believe that there had been a considerable number of fatalities in an earthquake in Inverness in 1766. A study of the Mortcloth Dues Register around the date indicated that, as expected, this was an unlikely contention.

My late twin brother, Ross McWhirter, who wrote the definitive book on the origins of Rugby football, was always puzzled as to the date and place of death of the alleged inventor of the sport, W. W. Ellis, who 'picked up the ball and ran'. He found that searches among the death certificates index revealed nothing and then began a search through the obituary notices in *The Times* and suddenly came across a reference to the death of a Reverend W. W. Ellis in Mentone on the French Riviera. Further persistent correspondence revealed the number of the Caveau where reposed the great man's remains. This intelligence was communicated to the French Rugby Union, and it was then a matter of a very short time before the disgracefully unkempt and ignored grave was refurbished regardless of expense and was the scene of an official delegation with a military band. Today the grave has been plied with a continuous supply of wreaths and cut flowers. My brother was however unable to retrieve any definite information on the cause of death of our hero, who was reputed to have fallen off the end of a pier in a drunken stupor. That of course would be the way which many of our lesser and hence more numerous rugby players themselves would like to go.

One of the techniques of extracting information might be described as the adversary technique. I recollect when compiling a list of the highest points in every country in the world we had a difficulty when two adjoining countries both claimed the same mountain summit as exclusively in their own territory. The French said that Mont Blanc was their highest point at 4807 m. (15,711 ft), the Italians made the claim that the highest point in Italian territory was Monte Bianco at 4807 m. (15,711 ft). Perhaps mischievously but in the end efficaciously I sent the French letter to the Italians and the Italian to the French. Warfare broke out immediately. Maps of larger and larger scale signed by officials of greater and greater importance began to be interchanged. Just before or after the matter reached the desk of President de Gaulle himself I decided to bring the Swiss into the fray as traditional non-combatants. They pronounced that the international boundary ran across a shoulder just below the summit and that the highest point in Italian territory was on a contour line for 4760 m. (15,616 ft). The duelling pistols were duly put away in their velvet-lined cases and once again heat was turned to light.

One of the most difficult areas in which to extract unqualified information is, of course, where the data base is incomplete or uncollated. Take the simple question 'Who was the oldest serving MP of all time?' The strict answer is, of course, that the dates of birth of many MPs since 19 December 1241 are unrecorded. I consulted the librarian of the House of Commons who informed us that the Rt Hon Charles Pelham Villiers, 22 times returned unopposed for Wolverhampton, was in the House for his 96th birthday and died on 16 January 1898, 13 days later, having been a member for 63 years and six days. From so authoritative a source we were, we thought, entitled to say that there was a record holder. However, unbeknown to us and to the librarian of the House of Commons the doughty Mr Villiers was technically outdone by the Irish Nationalist MP for East Cavan who represented that seat from 1892 to 1918. He was Samuel Young who was born on 14 February 1822 and who, when he died on 18 April 1918, was aged 96 years 63 days—50 days senior to Mr Villiers. The distinction however was that in over a quarter of a century Mr Young never once put a foot inside the Palace of Westminster.

As a general rule it is easier to find out who is the best at something than who is the worst at something.

The most inept Olympic team in history was the Tunisian modern pentathlon team at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. As horsemen they fell off, as swimmers they sank, as riflemen they were warned off the range for nearly killing a marker, and in the fencing events one was disqualified for impersonating an even less competent team member in an attempt to appear against the same opponent twice.

In golf there is a celebrated case of a lady golfer who took a cool 160 strokes not for a round but for a single hole in a championship match in which it was essential to finish in order to qualify on the cut-off for the next day's competition in the Shawnee invitational. She got into difficulties in the Binniekell River in the days of gutty balls which floated. She put out in a boat with her exemplary but statistically-minded husband at the oars. Each time she thrashed at the ball he marked 1 on the score card. Eventually she beached the ball one-and-a-half miles downstream and had to play back through a wood to get back on to the 130 yards 16th hole. Then there was the world's worst goal-keeper who let through an average 24 goals in a match. The figure would have been higher but this Intermediate Youths Victoria B Team lacked netting and thus good playing time was wasted retrieving the ball from the next pitch. My favourite sporting record however was set on 29 September 1974 when the world's slowest racing pigeon, Blue Chip, belonging to a Mr Harold Hart, arrived in its loft in Leigh, Greater Manchester, seven years and two months after it had been released. It had covered a distance of 370 miles at an average speed of

0.00589 mph; which is rather slower than the world's fastest snail, a *Helix aspersa*.

In July 1970 our office learnt that a park ranger in Virginia, USA had been struck by lightning for the third time when his left shoulder was badly seared. He had already lost his big toe nail when struck in 1942 and had his eyebrows burned off in July 1969. On 16 April 1972 he was struck for a fourth time and his hair was set on fire but he managed to extinguish it under a tap. On 7 August 1973 his new hair was re-fired and his left leg badly seared. On 5 June 1976 he was struck for a sixth time sustaining a quite serious ankle injury when he was knocked to the ground. He then retired from his dangerous occupation as a human lightning conductor but on 25 June 1977 a body was carried into Waynesboro Hospital with serious chest and stomach burns. Ex-park ranger Roy C. Sullivan had been struck for the seventh time while out fishing.

Discussion

Cecilia Gordon asked how the speaker had entered this strangely esoteric field. He explained that his father edited three national newspapers, so he and his brother grew up in a home full of reference books and devoted to the establishment of facts. They set up their own telephone service answering queries, and when the director of the Guinness Brewery required someone to prepare a book to be used to settle arguments in pubs, Christopher Chataway, a fellow student at Oxford, recommended them.

The most difficult facts to establish were reported to be the highest vertical cliff in the world, and the tracing of specific, statistically possible individuals; any great-great-great-grandmother, for instance.

Hilda Pearson asked whether Guinness make use of computers. Ten years previously they had abandoned computer typesetting as rigid, inhuman and unsatisfactory; but now there had been such improvement that much of the work was computerized, especially for translation for overseas countries. Twenty-four per cent of the material becomes obsolete each year; updating is a major task.

Dorothy Dainty referred to the indexing of novels; some have now been indexed, the works for example of Scott, Dickens and Trollope. Mr McWhirter wanted to see immediate indexing of fiction, rather than the indexing of collections many years later. There was good nautical indexing to the Hornblower stories. Robert Collison pointed out that indexing could reveal inconsistency in fiction, and John Gordon that Kurt Vonnegut had published a new novel, *Jailbird*, complete with index (reviewed in *The Indexer* 12(2) p. 109)—another first for the *Guinness book of Records*!

Mr McWhirter considered indexers usually un-

dervalued; but the first edition of the *Guinness Book* gave acknowledgement to its indexer (Ray Marler), though none to its author (himself). The company had only once produced a book without an index, at the insistence of its author who highly esteemed his own chapter plan; the reviews had criticized the lack of an index (see *The Indexer*, 12 (1) April 1980, 43) and the next edition would indeed include one.

Joyce Skinner referred to the American strip cartoon by Robert L. Ripley, 'Believe it or not'. Mr McWhirter described this as cynical, successful, and thoroughly unreliable. The magic formula, 'believe it or not', meant exactly what it said. The confusion of fact with fiction for commercial purposes was in his view reprehensible, and nowadays even has a name, 'faction'.

James Pearson asked whether anyone had visited all the countries in the world. Of the 223 countries, 221 had been visited by one American, on his salary as a school teacher; he died only in 1979. It was becoming quite common practice to visit all football league grounds, the graves of all the apostles or the highest points of each county, in an attempt to set up a 'record'. The attitude of Guinness to silly feats attempted merely to achieve record in the book, was one of tolerance, but discouraging dangerous feats involving speed on public highways, consumption of spirits or food. These feats Mr McWhirter saw as irresistible to those without talent; four per cent of the book of records is its 'zany' section. Many record breaks were accidental; reaching extreme old age, becoming the tallest or heaviest man. Statistics of record breaking showed that champions were way out ahead, not in a cluster of close followers.

Mr McWhirter's own career was based on study of international relations at Oxford, three years in the Navy, further study of economics and contract law, an interest in science, excellent memory, professional concern and genuine interest in his subjects.

Wisden for morons

'This index, compiled by J. D. Coldham, Editor of the Cricket Society Journal, is of course selective. A completely exhaustive index, such as that of *Wisden* which signposts everything with a clarity making all things evident to the veriest moron, would scarcely have either been practicable or necessary. The more significant references to persons and places, clubs and other kindred institutions, happenings on the field and in the councils of the game, and other events in due orders, are noted.'

From note at the head of the index to *Barclays world of cricket: the game from A-Z*, ed. E. W. Swanton (Collins in association with Barclays Bank International, 2nd ed., 1980).