with plentiful cross-references; this has been typed out as an authority file which I consult constantly to ensure consistency. Consistency is difficult to achieve in serials indexing done over a long period. The proper form of subject heading also appears on a guide card in the card index, with tracings for cross-references; this enables me to use extreme contractions for subject headings while indexing, which does save much time. For example, instead of writing out fully Gold prospecting and mining (Transvaal: Zoutpansberg), I write GPM(T-Z).

I thought at first that by indexing two newspapers simultaneously I would need only to add references from the second paper to entries made from the first. Instead, I discovered that about half the material in the second paper had not appeared in the first. The time taken to index the first paper is about 4 to 5 hours; the second takes a further 3 hours.

I have found the project fascinating, and indexing has become compulsive. I seem to know the people of the 1870s better than my contemporaries! But, sadly, the project has not gained official support, and the indexes seem doomed to remain unpublished, and the indexer unremunerated.

William Baxter fights for his index

A. H. Watkins
Former Borough Librarian of the London Borough of Bromley

Bromley Kent by E. L. S. Horsburgh was published in 1929, in an edition of 400 at 5 guineas leather-bound, 3 guineas cloth-bound. It was the outcome of more than twenty years’ work by members of the History of Bromley Committee which was convened in 1908, suspended during the war years and reconvened in 1921.

One member of the original committee, William Baxter, remained on it throughout, collecting data and visiting libraries in Kent and south-east London to conduct research for the project, classifying masses of papers, contributing an Itinerary of the town, and assembling the illustrations.

In 1926-7 he checked early drafts, and in May 1928 he informed the committee that he was prepared to index the book; his offer was accepted. Entries in his diary show the progress and problems of the compilation of this index, and are quoted below. His style betrays his character; his impatience to get on with the work. But he may have proved a most uncomfortable committee member to work with!

Before starting work on the index Baxter estimated that he had already written 255,378 words for the history, as well as notes on other writers’ manuscripts. He received a proof copy of the book (xvi + 463 pp) for indexing on 21 August 1929. He notes in his diary:

Hazell’s thinking only 16-17 pp will do for it and not 43 as in Chislehurst and they propose 3-column pages. Won’t do. Must be 2 cols.

(Hazell, Watson & Viney were the printers for the volume; they had previously produced The history of Chislehurst by E. H. Webb et alia with 438 pages of text and 42 pages of index in double columns.)

On 9 September Baxter had ‘finished the indexing after 163 hours work at cost of 5/3’. (Five shillings and three pence; this must have been for stationery only.) The next day, he himself took the index copy to the printers, noting that it weighed 13½ lb. The diary continues:


Sept. 16. Not heard from Hazell’s yet. Wrote them.

Sept. 21. Comes a letter from G. W. at Dartmouth re Index and letter from Hazell, Watson & Viney about increased X’s owing to the length of Mr Baxter’s Index. G. W. sends a circular letter abt it to the other members of Committee + proof page of Index (Lot they know about it and it was interesting to learn that it was I who nearly went without having one of these proof pages, but G. W. found one and sent it.) Hazell’s say that the increase of paper from 492 to 516 would be £19.10s.0 including extra composing, machining and binding. If the Index is reduced by the deletions suggested it would save abt 4 pages in which the extra charge would be £15.7.6 extra.

(a) They suggested either the whole index be revised, or
(b) cut it down as we think advisable. I told G. W. I was ready to do (a) at home here drastically but (b) would not sit on sub-committee to tinker with it. So he got it back on Sept. 28 Sat. and I commenced at it.

From 28 Sept.—6 Oct. Baxter records a daily total of 6, 8, 5, 6, 8, 8, 9, 3, 3 hours revising the index—56 in all,
removing by his count 2264 references, and leaving a total of 3252. He notes:

The former Indexing took me 163 hours, cost 5/3. Now has taken 56 hours, total 219 hours. Its weight then was 13.3 lbs, now is 11 lbs 14 ozs.

After one week had acknowledgement of the Index from Hazell's. They refer to my original no. of refs. of 5516 but they say their estimate was 4549. They also say my new refs 3252, whereas they make it 3507. They point out that therefore the reduction now shown is not so great as it would have been and the Index now stands at 28 pages. They were sending to Mr Weekes and awaiting instructions.

Oct. 17. G W. called; been to Hazell’s. Index comes in galley form next week and must not be kept more than 4 days incl. Sunday.

Oct. 25. No proofs to hand yet.

—What a very familiar tale coming down the years! But the proofs did eventually arrive, and Baxter, in his own terse words;

Went through the lot and saved a lot of lines but told G. W. I could not agree to come down there, to chew it over. Sent him my corrections and let him do as he pleased. I suppose they went back within the 4 days. Prob. publ. date 21 Nov. publ. at last 28 Nov.

The index as finally printed ran to 26 pages in double-column.

My life and hard lines: a tale of unspeakable horrors
Paul Barnett
Sole Trader, Paul Barnett (Editorial)


Writing horror stories is rather like writing pornography: about half-way down the second page the temptation to start taking the mickey out of the genre becomes irresistible. So it is with something more than the usual dread that I approach these blank pages. Will I be able to convey to you the heart-stopping horrors of some of my experiences in the world of indexing? Will I be able to persuade you to suspend your disbelief long enough to find my tales credible? I think not.

Nevertheless . . .

I lead a curious life, inasmuch as I’m actually two quite distinct people. On the one hand, I’m Paul Barnett, who offers ‘editorial services’, including indexing. (I’ve often thought it would be fun to place an ad for ‘editorial services’ in the personal columns of Private eye, just to see what would happen.) On the other, I’m ‘John Grant’, who writes books which few have heard of and which fewer still actually buy. There are disadvantages in leading such a double life; but one of the advantages is that I can view various aspects of book publishing from every conceivable angle. I am a voracious reader and user of books; I buy books; I commission, edit, copy-edit,