Review article

The London encyclopaedia: a user’s experience

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As a book this is splendid: it looks good, it feels solid, and it is imaginatively illustrated; it is packed with information and anecdote on the buildings, streets, districts, customs, landmarks and services of Greater London. The editors and their numerous contributors have set out to produce a modern version of Wheatley and Cunningham’s London, past and present of 1891, with added ‘smell and gusto’. (Indexers may be interested to know that the Wheatley of the earlier work was our own H. B. Wheatley, the ‘father of modern indexing’.)

The user of this book for information retrieval, even on the simplest level, has, however, obstacles to overcome; the first being that there are no instructions on the use of the encyclopaedia, so some imagination has to be used.

The arrangement is word-by-word. Whether you as an individual expect to find ‘Eastcheap’ between East Bedfont Middlesex and East Greenwich Pleasance see burial grounds or over the page between Eastcastle Street and Eastcoate Middlesex, you will not be helped to locate yourself by guidewords at the tops of pages: there are none. Moreover, while riffling towards where you suppose ‘E’ to be, you may be confused by finding Richmond Park and Roof Garden; these turn out to be sub-entries of GARDENS (two and a half pages of them).

There are no fewer than eleven pages of STATUES, each with its lower-case bold title. Sub-entries are usually arranged in alphabetical order, though in the case of ‘Statues’ this is obscured by the use of the wretched I.e. bold for the whole title (they are all real people, no ‘Peace’ or ‘Peter Pan’) with no inversion:

General Lord Baden-Powell  
Sir Joseph Bazalgette  
Admiral Earl Beatty  
St Thomas Becket  
5th Duke of Bedford  
Alfred Beit

The sub-entries of ROMAN ROADS are apparently in topographical order:

Watling Street  
Ermine Street  
Colchester Road

This very interesting article on regional and local route-systems cries out, as do many other articles, for a map. There is no map anywhere, in this encyclopaedia concerned entirely with places, apart from the endpapers which give us part only of the ‘three-dimensional’ Balloon view of London as seen from Hampstead (1851); this is exquisite and stimulating but of very little practical help.

There is a main entry amid the Ws for the modern Watling Street EC4 which makes mention of ‘the main Roman Watling Street’. A computer has doubtless been trained to recognize ‘Roman Road’ wherever it finds the term and to print in small caps to indicate cross-reference, but cannot recognize ‘Roman’ by itself; so the user who started here might suppose there was no major reference to the Roman Watling St (the index supplies 15 references for ‘Watling Street’ including the two above, so with luck and perseverance you might get there in the end). I found many other inconsistencies of cross-referencing: BETHAM SCHOOL in the ‘Greenford’ article leads to a non-existent article; and there is an article on the Boar’s Head Tavern although the ‘Eastcheap’ article refers to it with no typographical distinction. The Gothick heading is used for buildings and streets which no longer exist: an excellent idea.

There has been, it seems, no control over coverage or vocabulary as between contributors. The bakery where the Great Fire started is spelt variously ‘Farryner’s’ and ‘Farriner’s’. Pie Corner (junction of Cock Lane and Giltspur St), where it ended, is not mentioned in the splendid article on the Great Fire, but it is mentioned (with reference to ‘a small gilt statue of a boy high on the wall’) under ‘Pudding Lane’; under ‘Cock Lane’ (where it has ‘a fat gilt cherub’); and under ‘Giltspur Street’ though not by name: ‘The gilded figure of a little boy by an unknown sculptor was erected here in 1910 . . .’

The ideal encyclopaedia is no doubt its own index. This one, however, with its shortcomings of design and con-
consistency—of which in an evening's hunt-the-slipper through its pages I found a great many—clearly needs a separate index. It has two: one 'Names', one 'General' (wasn't it Wheatley who spoke of 'the index, one and indivisible'?); they cover between them 49 four-column pages, and there are no running heads to tell you which one you're in.

The indexer cannot, in a work of this nature, be reasonably expected to index what is not plainly referred to in the text; so, for instance, the only full reference to the Pie Corner statue (in the 'Giltspur Street' article) will not be found in the index since 'Pie Corner' was not named in the article.

There is no use of typographical distinction: 'Cock Lane' has four references; but nothing indicates that one is to a main article, and nothing that one is to another Cock Lane (an earlier name for Upper St Martin's Lane, apparently).

There are no subheadings at all: 'Dance the Younger, George' [sic] has 22 undifferentiated references, 'Charles II' has 97, 'Thames' has about 100 (I gave up trying to count).

Topics covering more than one page are usually indicated by the first page-number only, but there are page-sequences here and there; I was unable to work out the system by which page-sequences had been awarded to lucky topics.

In the Names Index the 99 names beginning with 'de' are indexed under 'D'. Sighting several 'de Rothschild's and a 'de Reuter, Baron' (one ref. only) among these, where in my ignorance I should never have sought them, I looked for cross-referencing under 'R'. There is an entry: 'Rothschild see de Rothschild'. There is another entry: 'Reuter, Paul Julius, Baron von' with two different references. (No names at all under 'von' in the Vs; praise be.) Locating these reveals that they are both the same chap: founder of (p. 286) 'Reuters World News Service established in 1855'; or, if you prefer p. 646, of 'Reuter's Ltd founded in London in 1851' (just Paul Julius Reuter here). The article on his statue (title but no particule) describes him as 'founder of the worldwide news agency'. The indexer cannot be blamed for not sorting out all the editors' inconsistencies, but it does seem a pity that searching under 'D' or 'R' in the Names Index would mean missing at least one reference.

Despite 'Roman Roads', the selective list of 'Statues', and many others, there is a great shortage of 'pull-together' articles—no 'Rivers', 'Museums', 'Prisons', though all seem to be entered individually if you know their names in the first place—and the indexer has not been able to make up this deficiency.

This is potentially an excellent book, and it must have had huge library as well as bookshop sales; but it bears all the signs of a deadline/cashflow panic having overcome Macmillan's usual expertise and high standards. May we hope that in future editions of the London encyclopaedia information will be better co-ordinated and much easier to find? (By the way, the binding on the library copy of which I am the fourth borrower is wearing through to the nasty substance underneath. Also, future readers might be grateful to find somewhat fewer literals.)

Reference

Dynamic indexing

This should not blind us to the new possibilities which electronic media open up for us. In books, information is frozen in a particular arrangement, which is only partially counteracted by the rare aid of a good index. In an electronic medium such pathways through the content are necessarily far more important, offering the reader a greater sense of involvement in the process of use. At present, the potential of the medium in this respect has hardly been recognized, but current developments begin to show some of the ways in which the traditional relationship of reader to text may be shifted.

Two such developments are the 'Dynabook', and 'interactive fiction'. The concept of the Dynabook owes its origin to one of the most imaginative innovators in the field of computing, Alan Kay, currently director of research for Atari. It refers to a prototype personal computer, ultimately to be the size of a pocket notebook, which allows users to store, retrieve and manipulate the content of its vast store of words, pictures and animations using a powerful language called Smalltalk. Experimental Dynabooks allow users not only to find material by using existing concept indexes, but also to add their own cross-references and comments, to highlight words and to add subtitles. Browsing is made easier through a system of 'windows' which make it possible to compare one item with another. Such dynamic encyclopaedias led Dr Chris Evans to write that 'the world is about to move on from the era where knowledge comes locked up in devices known as books ... In the era it is about to enter, the books will come down from their shelves, unlock and release their contents, and cajole, even beseech, their owners to make use of them.'

—from Young learners and the microcomputer by Daniel Chandler (1984), quoted by permission of Open University Press.