The Gentleman’s magazine: its cumulative and special indexes

Peter Christie

The monthly publication known as The Gentleman’s magazine was begun in January 1731 by Edward Cave who, writing under the pseudonym of Sylvanus Urban, addressed his readers thus in a preface to the first number:

Upon calculating the Numbers of News-Papers, 'tis found that (besides divers written Accounts) no less than 200 Half-sheets per Month are thrown from the Press only in London, and about as many printed elsewhere in the three Kingdoms; a considerable part of which constantly exhibit Essays on various Subjects for Entertainment; and all the rest occasionally oblige their Readers with Matters of Publick Concern, communicated to the World by Persons of Capacity thro' their means; so that they are become the chief Channels of Amusement and Intelligence. But then being only loose Papers, uncertainly scatter'd about, it often happens that many Things deserving Attention contained in them are only seen by Accident, and others not sufficiently publish'd or preserved for universal Benefit and Information. This Consideration has induced several GENTLEMEN to promote a Monthly Collection, to treasure up, as in a Magazine, the most remarkable Pieces on the Subjects above mentioned, or at least impartial Abridgements thereof, as a Method much better calculated to preserve those Things that are curious, than that of transcribing.

These ambitious aims were quickly fulfilled and the magazine was well enough established to survive Cave’s death some twenty years after its first appearance. Its survival in fact lasted until 1908—certainly one of the longest runs of any magazine or newspaper in Britain, although its character changed greatly over the years from an early hotch-potch of material to a later staid and rather uninteresting journal.

The complete set, running into hundreds of volumes, can be found in many libraries and record offices and is generally accompanied by the standard index volumes prepared at different times and by different workers:

Volumes 1 and 2 by Samuel Ayscough covering the period 1731–86
Volumes 3 and 4 by John Nichols covering the period 1787–1818
Volume 5 by Charles St. Barbe covering the period 1731–1818 listing and indexing the plates.

These volumes are merely compilations of the annual indexes, which themselves were often incomplete.

Articles are indexed on a completely haphazard basis, with little or no cross-referencing. There have, however, been a number of specialized indexes produced in more recent times, viz:

Index to Marriages from the Gentleman's Magazine 1731–68, (by E. A. Fry), 1922. (This is, in fact, a calendar but has recently been indexed by Miss D. S. Dear, the slips being sorted by county and distributed to member societies of the Federation of Family History Societies. It is also believed that these marriages up to 1762 were included by Percival Boyd in his great Marriage Index at the Society of Genealogists and elsewhere.

The sheer bulk of the complete publication puts many people off searching it, and it must be admitted that unless one knows when a particular event occurred it is very difficult to locate required information.

Although the magazine started as a digest of other publications, especially local newspapers, within a short time after its initial appearance the Gentleman's magazine became a vehicle for original essays, letters and news reports. Most of these items have not been indexed in any suitable way, especially not with regard to personal names and locations.

The scope of items is far ranging, and too voluminous for any single worker to extract and list. Here, I would suggest, is a major field of study suitable for the local societies that now flourish. Over the last few years I have myself been recording all entries relating to Suffolk and Norfolk, and the list so produced for the period 1731–56 covers thousands of people, places and events.

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*This detailed and useful compilation has been continued by Benjamin C. Nangle, The Gentleman's magazine biographical and obituary notices 1781–1819, New York/London 1980.