19th-century Perth newspapers indexed and abstracted

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Describes the indexing and abstracting of three 19th-century newspapers of Perth, Scotland, including problems of organizing volunteers, dealing with local history material, and selection policy for headings.

Origins of the project

'And you, Marjory, will do the newspapers.'

Fifteen years ago, these few words were to start me off on a fascinating project. At that time, the potential of Perth (in Scotland) as a rich source of material for urban archaeology was being recognized, and a support group had been set up to help in various aspects of a major archaeological dig. I had no contribution to make in the actual digging, but as a chartered librarian who had worked in a local history department, I was well aware of the kind of information available in early (i.e., 19th-century) newspapers.

The initial request was for me to go through the newspapers* for information about earlier archaeological finds in the town. When I started, I realized that there was a lot of interesting material which was not directly relevant to the dig, but which threw light on Perth's buildings and social history. I decided to abstract this information and index it. By this time, other volunteers had offered their services and for a time, six or eight of us were working in the local library. The organizational problems encountered are probably typical of groups such as this, and our experiences and decisions made may be of help to other groups.

To start with, only two of us had relevant professional qualifications, and I had to explain exactly what I wanted recorded. The significance of advertisements, obituaries, houses for sale, etc. is not readily obvious to those unfamiliar with historical sources. I found it best to give numerous examples of what I wanted and why, rather than a general explanation. In some cases it was neither necessary nor feasible to copy out the whole of an item, so instruction in choice of detail was needed. The importance of the date and name of the newspaper was, however, readily appreciated.

ATHOLL PLACE
2. House for sale 1 Atholl Place belonging to late John Miller. Part of land along Castle-Gable and Blackfriars may be feu'd.


Perthshire Advertiser 1837 March 23

Work of this kind inevitably entails much fruitless searching, and constant encouragement was needed to reassure the amateurs that they were doing a good job. The unpleasant conditions under which we worked eventually put a stop to the work of these helpers. The bound volumes of The Perthshire Constitutional and The Perthshire Advertiser were stored in a basement which was subject to flooding. The fragile condition of the paper in late 19th-century volumes meant we had to work with badly torn and incomplete sets. Work was suspended after a serious flood, and by the time it was possible to resume my helpers had become involved in other things. None the less, they had recorded much useful information.

Organizing the material

I had been working in better conditions on the earliest newspaper, The Perth Courier, which started in 1809, and I continued with that up to its 1822 editions. Finding myself with many loose sheets of my own abstracts and those from the other volunteers, I decided to make a start on organizing the material. It is difficult to imagine now, but when I started, photocopying was so expensive that I had no idea of how copies of the finished product would be made. I did know that I wanted to have a copy in the public library as well as my own working copy. Home computers and word processors were unknown, so it started off (and has continued) as a very 'low tech.' project.

I now have a ring binder of A4 sheets whose basic arrangement is topographical, i.e., street names arranged alphabetically, with additional sheets for particular buildings: e.g., THEATRE, which has occupied three sites in the town, but an enquirer might not know which site was in use at a given date. Each abstract under the heading is numbered, and there is a shoebox of 5 x 3" cards in which names and keywords in each abstract are indexed.

HIGH STREET
47, David Meliss, surgeon and apothecary, 2nd shop below Skinnergate, north side High Street

Courier 1813 May 27
The abstracts under each heading are roughly chronological, so that the story of an individual property or the development of a street can be easily followed. The reason for the 'roughly chronological' arrangement is that the bulk of the entries are from the Perth Courier, but I wanted to incorporate some entries from the other newspapers so that the volunteers could see that they had made a contribution.

**Indexing decisions**

My basic decisions have proved sound, and from time to time I have been able to locate material to answer particular requests, such as an account of a burial in the family vault in the town church. As well as the usual indexing problems, some problems always seem to crop up with local history material.

Spelling was variable in the early 19th century. I decided to choose one version and refer from the others, unless they were so unusual as to seem more like mistakes.

Names of places and things can change over time. An important artificial water course now known as 'the Lade' has at various times been called 'the Miln Lead' and 'the King's Lead'.

Some parts of the town centre were heavily built up and each close1 and vennel1 would have a name. One such area is now an open space used as a car park, with one name referring to the whole area. There is no way of ensuring that an enquirer could trace all the relevant entries without the use of a large scale map to locate 19th-century closes, vennels and streets. Conversely, areas outside the centre might have been open space, or sparsely populated, and one name would refer to the whole area. Now the same area might be heavily built up and information about it might be sought under specific street names. This can present a problem if the dates of buildings or streets are not known to the enquirer.

Kinnoull Hill

5, House and grounds of Pitcullen Bank . . . beautifully situated on east end of Hill of Kinnoull

*Courier* 1816 July 4

Decisions have to be made about the level of entry (general-specific) to be made, bearing in mind that future users might not be familiar with the history or geography of the area. Some people will be interested in a particular family name; others will want to know about a topic. As with other kinds of indexing, one has to gauge the right level from the material being indexed. Some items obviously require specific index entries, e.g. HATS, while other items of apparel can be included in CLOTHES.

**St. John Street**

30, D. Kinnear . . . removed to shop lately occupied by Mr. R. Clink, haberdasher, north corner St. John Street

(shoebox index)

Clink, Mr., haberdasher see St. John Street 30

Perth 281

Guild Hall 3

Hats see George Street 37, 50, 51

High Street 185, 193

St. John Street 53

(shoebox index)

Clink, Mr., haberdasher see St. John Street 30

Perth 281

Guild Hall 3

Robertson, William see High Street 41

Kirk Close 3

Robertson, Mr. see George Street 15

Robertson, Hay see High Street 70

Perth 64, 254, 272

Robertson, James see George Street 31

Robertson, James Hay see High Street 128

Perth 288

Neither were inferences to be made about buildings. This means that some information is not identified as being in a particular street, and there is a large section of abstracts under the heading PERTH.

**Perth**

46, Fire at Perth Brewery, noticed by sentinel on duty at barracks

*Courier* 1816 May 16 p. 4

Some of the most interesting material is not easily indexed. An advertisement in *The Perth Courier* for 9 April 1810 reads, 'John Stewart, Ladies Hairdresser . . . stock of perfumery, jewellery, fishing tackle.' Now, how can I lead an enquirer to the intriguing fact that in 1810, fishing tackle was obtainable at a ladies' hairdresser?

† A close—a narrow passage way leading to the common stair of a tenement; a tenement—a building of 3 or 4 storeys, divided into flats; a vennel—a narrow lane between buildings, just wide enough to allow the passage of a horse and cart.

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Changes over time

Any selection policy must be consistent, but be open to change or the admission of exceptions. This project covers abstracts for a long period, and time can make a qualitative difference to the significance of information; e.g., the earliest mention of a street name can be of more interest than later mentions, especially when there had been some doubt about the date when the street was built. The ignorance of the indexer can also lead to omissions! I had not paid any particular attention to garden flowers mentioned in the earliest issues of the newspapers, but when I discovered a little about the history of gardening, I realized that they might be of interest. The final form of the index will alert the user to the omission of earlier material.

In the early 19th century, Perth was small enough for local news to travel fast, and newspapers carried national and international news rather than local gossip; but houses for sale and other advertisements on the front page are a rich source of information. Local issues were also given a little space on page 4, the back page.

Concepts can change over time and the index must take account of this. Nowadays, our idea of a school will probably include a building specific to that function; but in the early 19th century an individual could teach one or two subjects to a few pupils (possibly in a private house) and call it a school. Perth also had larger institutions and I decided to have one section headed schools with index entries under named teachers as well as entries under streets where the location is given.

**GUILD HALL**
School taught by Mr. James Sim, examined in Guild Hall

*Courier* 1820 August 3 p. 4

On the other hand, churches have been entered under their own names, e.g. St. John's Kirk, or under the streets where they are situated, with index entries for their names. This apparent inconsistency is due to Perth having had a large number of small churches belonging to groups which had broken away from the main denominations. The building may have been in use for a relatively short time, and its main interest now may lie in the building itself rather than its religious use.

**MILL STREET**
3. Tanyard to be sold or let as granaries behind Mill Street Chapel

*Perthshire Advertiser* 1837 January 19

The historic town churches, e.g. St. John's and Kinnoull Parish Church, continue as churches.

Completing the project

As with many enterprises undertaken on a voluntary basis, progress has been slow and irregular. My aim in this project is to continue abstracting and indexing material from the *Perth Courier* until the date at which street numbering starts in Perth, which seems to be in the 1820s. This will link early information about properties to later information where properties can be identified by street number. It also means that the project will be a manageable size. I see it having value as a compact store of information about Perth at an important point in the town's development. Newspaper information has to be treated with caution, but the abstractor and indexer cannot lay down rules for future use and interpretation. The combined effect of snippets of information about buildings and social conditions in Perth is to give life to the formal facts.

**PERTH**
232. Account of St. Crispin's Day Festivities celebrated by Shoemakers... big pageant and pantomine

*Courier* 1814 October 27 p. 4

I see my contribution as being to reveal the information and make it accessible.

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Indexing the library shelves

Writing in *LOGOS* 2 (3) 1991, Maurice Line proposes a worldwide bibliographic database of books. Subject access would be essential, and is, he claims, what most users of public libraries want most frequently. The classification number system is too complex for users, and 'one or two classification numbers for a book of, say, 400 pages offer only the most rudimentary subject access, especially when compared with the average of three or four subject entries that commercial periodical indexes provide to an article of, say, ten pages—and in the form of words, not numbers'. Line calls this 'treating subject access in a derisory way', and suggests instead:

A model is offered by the commercial indexing and abstracting services. Few libraries attempt to index the periodicals they hold, partly because the task is too great and partly because the job is done perfectly well for most periodicals by the commercial databases. Why can the same principles not be applied to books? A database of chemistry articles is a commercial proposition; why should not one of books be likewise? Such a database could either use abstracts which were searchable word by word for subject access, preferably with a controlled vocabulary; or provide keyword access to the contents pages of books, which would be fed into the computer by keyboarding or scanning; or provide subject index entries—perhaps twenty or thirty per book, depending on its length and nature.

After agreement on real needs was reached and standards evolved, all that would be lacking is 'an entrepreneur who was willing to take responsibility and risk as database constructor, host and publisher'.