

Focus on Trade Directories

A trade directory may, at first, seem a strange source to consult in order to find historical information. It's difficult to imagine someone in the future turning to our current telephone directories to look for something other than a telephone number. Yet the trade directories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, besides giving a list of names of greengrocers and plumbers, can yield information on urban history, maps, travel arrangements, family history and much more.

The earliest surviving trade directory of London is generally thought to be Samuel Lee's list, published in 1677.¹ This was just an alphabetical list of names of merchants and bankers with the area of London in which they could be found. Prior to this there had been guild lists (for example, the earliest records in Preston began in 1328)² and professional lists (such as those of the members of the King's College of Physicians in London),³ but as the city of London grew in size and as trade developed in other cities, there was a perceived need of information as to who could supply certain goods and services and who could transport these goods from city to city. By the year 1734 Henry Kent produced his first London directory which was to be revised regularly until 1828.⁴ This directory began as a listing of names and

¹ Samuel Lee, *A collection of the names of the merchants living in and about the City of London; very usefull and necessary. Carefully collected for the benefit of all dealers that shall have occasion with any of them; directing them at the first sight of their name, to the place of their abode.* (London, 1677).

² Gareth Shaw, *British directories as sources in historical geography*, (Norwich, 1982).

³ *An Exact account of all who are the present members of the Kings College of Physicians in London and others authorized by them to practice in the said city, and within seven miles compass thereof: whereby ignorant and illegal pretenders to the exercise of the said faculty may be discovered, who daily impose on unwary people, and claim immunities and priviledges appertaining onely to that corporation* (Londgn sic, 1673), http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_val_fmt=&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:109258.

⁴ P. J. Atkins, *The directories of London, 1677-1977* (London, 1990), p.151.

addresses of merchants and traders 'in the cities of London and Westminster, and Borough of Southwark'⁵ and grew to include a list of bankers, commercial stamps, holidays, postage rates, public offices, Lord Mayor and Aldermen and army and navy agents.

Competitors soon sprung up and produced different combinations of commercial listings. So Osborn's *Compleat Guide to All Persons Who Have Any Trade or Concern With the City of London and Parts Adjacent* (1740) included a list of streets, wards, churches and chapels, company halls, transport and postal information alongside the commercial directory of names and occupations.⁶

Outside London, the first directory to appear was probably the Birmingham directory produced by James Sketchley in 1763.⁷ He had set up a registry office a few years previously, as had Elizabeth Raffald in Manchester who also produced a directory in 1772.⁸ Mrs Raffald kept a confectioner's shop and owned the Bull's Head Inn, so it seems likely that her business interests and contacts prompted her to produce the first directory for Manchester.⁹

Directories were never intended to be complete listings of every occupation and every name. The Introduction to Weston's *Leicestershire Directory of Bankers, Manufacturers and Tradesmen* (1794) warns that 'Several of the

⁵ *ibid.*, p.145.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.152.

⁷ Jane E. Norton, *Guide to the national and provincial directories of England and Wales, excluding London, published before 1856*, (London, 1950), p.183.

⁸ Shaw, *British directories as sources in historical geography*, p.9.

⁹ Norton, *Guide to the national and provincial directories of England and Wales*, p.130.

inferior trades are omitted, without meaning any disrespect to them, because it is not intended as a general list of inhabitants, but as a Commercial Directory, and would have increased the book to more than could have been afforded for a shilling, and too cumbersome to Travellers'.¹⁰

Alongside the increase in trade, and the need of information, the expansion of postal services required more accurate knowledge of names and addresses. Also the lack of consistent numbering and naming of streets could make the delivery of letters difficult. In 1773 a Post Office official, Peter Williamson published a directory of Edinburgh and by 1800 the first Post Office London Directory was produced.¹¹ This was published annually and in 1837 Frederic Kelly acquired the copyright and then used his links with the Post Office to expand his business to many provincial towns.¹²

Directory Contents

As directories became more established, so their contents grew from being just a simple list of names and addresses, to being a much more complete guide to the area they described. For example, *Kelly's Directory of Essex*, 1902 included brief historical, geographical and geological descriptions of the county; a list of the Hundreds and Poor Law Unions; an alphabetical list and brief descriptions of the towns of Essex; list of private residents (with their addresses) and a list of tradesmen; information on the armed services; details

¹⁰ Richard Weston, *The Leicester directory describing the bankers, manufacturers and principal tradesmen with their places of residence also the professors of law, physic & divinity, the Corporation, clergy, militia &c arranged in alphabetical order, according to their trades & professions.* (Loughborough, 1794), p.v.

¹¹ Shaw, *British directories as sources in historical geography*, p.11.

¹² Atkins, *The directories of London, 1677-1977*, p.74.

of the parishes and clergy of the Anglican church; mention of other places of worship; names of parish clerks and gentlemen farmers; lists of fairs and market days; postal services and transports details; Members of Parliament; members of the county council; magistrates; police; a population table and a map of the county. Also included was an alphabetical and classified list of advertisers.

Although originally intended as a source of useful, commercial information for local people and travelling salesmen, the wealth of detail means that a directory can be a fruitful resource for many different types of present day researchers. Urban historians can use them as a source for their study of towns, industry and business. Similarly rural historians can study traditional crafts and communities. An unexpected use has been that of local government officials using them to identify possible areas of hazardous waste by finding the addresses of trades, such as hatters and tanners that used potentially land polluting processes.¹³ Transport historians can find details of carriers, buses, trains, canals, wagons and horse-drawn omnibuses (with maps to help). For the family historian it is sometimes possible to trace names, addresses and occupations of ancestors. In particular, directories may fill in the 'gaps' between information found in census returns.¹⁴

All these possible uses come with various 'health warnings', however. The information-gathering techniques of some directory compilers were not always rigorous. There is some evidence that directory compilers sometimes

¹³ <http://www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/cs/casestudies2.asp>

¹⁴ Dennis R. Mills, *Rural community history from trade directories* (Aldenhams, 2001), p.15.

plagiarised their competitor's work.¹⁵ New 'editions' were occasionally produced without updating the information.¹⁶ Above all directory producers were often selective as to the areas they covered – prosperous areas were covered in detail, whilst slum areas might be ignored.¹⁷ Similarly, as directories became more widespread, some people chose not to have their details included¹⁸ – especially if they had to pay for the privilege.¹⁹ Usually there is only one name given per household – there are no names of tenants or family members. Consequently it's been found that Gore's 1851 Liverpool directory included only 65% of all the households recorded in the Census,²⁰ whilst the Post Office London directory of 1851 only managed to record 6%.²¹

Trade directories do not offer a complete historical record, but they may give you some information on your ancestors and the towns in which they lived. So before you recycle your old telephone directory, remember that future generations may want to check them for information on their ancestors (you!)

¹⁵ Atkins, *The directories of London, 1677-1977*, p.113. Norton, *Guide to the national and provincial directories of England and Wales*, p.18.

¹⁶ Norton, *Guide to the national and provincial directories of England and Wales*, p.23.

¹⁷ Gareth Shaw and Allison Tipper, *British directories : a bibliography and guide to directories published in England and Wales (1850-1950) and Scotland (1773-1950)*, 2nd ed. (London, 1997), p.22.

¹⁸ Norton, *Guide to the national and provincial directories of England and Wales*, p.19

¹⁹ Shaw and Tipper, *British directories*, p.7.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.22.

²¹ Atkins, *The directories of London, 1677-1977*, p.80.

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