

Newspapers and family history

Info Guide 3.9

How can newspapers assist the family history researcher?

Old newspapers can be an excellent source of information for family history. Sometimes the information reported about an individual may not have been recorded in any other source.

The State Library of Queensland holds an extensive range of Queensland newspapers as well as selected interstate and overseas titles. The majority of old newspapers are held on microfilm. Please consult our One Search online catalogue, <http://onesearch.slq.qld.gov.au>, for details of titles and holdings. We also have two listings in the Micrographics Reading Room on level 3: *Newspapers by place* and *Newspapers by title*.

What types of information can you find in newspapers?

Funeral / death notices

Funeral notices may provide a researcher with clues about their ancestors. Notices may contain such information as the cemetery where the deceased will be buried / cremated, the last address of the deceased and the names of living relatives. They can be particularly helpful in establishing the married names of female members of the family whose marriages occurred after the cut off dates for BDM indexes.

Example from the *Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton)* – 21 October 1909, p.1:

"The friends of Mr. William Black of Greenlake Station are respectfully invited to attend his funeral to move from Burnside, at three o'clock this afternoon, for the North Rockhampton cemetery."

Obituaries

Obituary notices can contain a wealth of background information on an ancestor such as:

- age and birth of the deceased
- wife and children's names
- how many years in the district, state or country
- occupations and community activities of the deceased
- important events or interesting stories in the deceased's life
- a detailed description of the church service.

Example from the *Darling Downs Gazette* - 31 January 1916, p.4:

"An old and respected resident of Freestone, in the person of Mr. David Payne passed away at St. Clair Private Hospital. Deceased, who was born at Mildenhill, Suffolk, England was 77 years of age. At the early age of 18 years he came on to the Downs and settled at Freestone, where he has laboured ever since. His wife predeceased him two and a half years ago."

Inaccuracies in newspaper obituaries and reports may mislead. Dates, names and chronologies may be wrong. Sometimes this is deliberate to cover some embarrassment or crime. Always cross-check information.

Marriage notices

Marriage notices can appear up to several weeks after the date of the event. Apart from the names of the bride and groom, notices may contain the names of the parents of both parties and possibly the suburb or town where they live. Some newspapers have social pages (usually published on a Saturday) with photographs or a detailed description of the wedding. In some instances the newspaper has listed the names of the guests and what everyone was wearing.

Example taken from *The Queenslander* – 28 January 1871, p.1:

"On the 20th January, by the Rev. M.H. Parkinson, Wesleyan Minister, Robt. Jones, of Ipswich, to Catherine, second daughter of Mr John Barr, Springburn, Glasgow."

Golden and diamond wedding celebrations may provide the name of the ship on which the pair travelled to Australia, their early life and movements, a list of descendants and a photograph.

Shipping intelligence

Incoming and outgoing overseas and coastal ships were usually recorded in the shipping intelligence column of the local newspaper. Where shipping lists have been lost newspaper reports may identify some of the immigrants' names. Cabin passengers are usually named but the majority, as assisted immigrants in steerage, are only occasionally listed.

An account on the ship's voyage, recording any unusual occurrences, the number of births and deaths onboard often appeared on the same page as the shipping intelligence column within a few days of the ship's arrival in port.

Accidents and inquests

Newspapers usually reported serious accidents ranging from automobile crashes and mining mishaps to house fires. If an accidental death occurred, articles reporting the inquest or magisterial inquiry may appear within the next few days or even weeks after the date of the accident. These articles can give detailed descriptions of the accident and people involved.

Example of a mining accident reported in the *Townsville Herald* – 2 May 1894, p.3:

“A terrible accident occurred today in No.2 West Uguana. A party of men charged two shots, only one of which exploded. A man named Patrick Shanahan went to see the cause of the miss fire of the other, when an explosion occurred just as he got over the hole. Shanahan was brought up unconscious and taken to hospital.”

Crime and punishment

Crimes and court sessions covering theft, drunkenness, assault and murder are reported.

Personal and social

These two common headings which appear in newspapers tend to record community events and gossip such as dances, church fetes and visitors to the town.

Example from *The Queenslander* - 14 July 1906, p.3:

“Mr. and Mrs. John Munro and family, Chillagoe, passed through Brisbane last week from the South en route for Cairns, where Mr. Munro has purchased Mr. Hobler’s picturesque residence at Juranda, Barron Falls. Mrs. Munro and her children were passengers by the Orontes from Scotland; where they have spent twelve months.”

Which newspaper do I search?

- If you are checking newspapers for obituaries and funeral notices find the exact date the death occurred from the births, deaths and marriages indexes held in the Reading Room on level 3.
- If you are unsure where a death occurred search electoral rolls or directories to determine where the deceased was last resident. Cemetery records may also be useful.
- Some regions may not have had a newspaper or in some cases back copies of the local newspaper have not survived. Check the nearest town’s newspaper, as sometimes it reported regional events. Be aware of where of the deceased lived at different stages. A Melbourne death for example may be reported in a Brisbane paper.

Newspaper digitisation

Many newspapers are being digitised and are accessible on the web. OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software used, which means the text is keyword searchable. The **Advantages are:** that much content previously elusive may now be found, and items which occurred in one state outside the dates digitized in that state may be reported in another state’s paper e.g. sinking of the Centaur 1943 (Qld) reported in southern papers. The **Disadvantages are** that OCR misses key words because of the poor quality of microfilm from which digital images are made, and the faded or damaged newspaper originally microfilmed.

What newspapers are available on the internet?

Historic Australian Newspapers, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>, available through the National Library of Australia is a sample of out-of-copyright newspapers from all the Australian States and territories. Access is free. The digitisation offers flexible searching options and a fluid searching across newspapers regardless of State if the date range of newspapers is available.

Papers Past, <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast>, made available through the National Library of New Zealand, contains more than one million pages of digitised New Zealand newspapers and periodicals. It includes publications from all regions of New Zealand.

Databases <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/find/articles/offsite>

(Log in from home if you are a Queensland resident, using your e-services card or QPL account)

19th Century British Library Newspapers - A rich collection of primary source material, this database provides full runs of 48 titles from the 19th-century, totalling more than two million easily searchable pages.

Times Digital Archives - Complete digital edition of *The Times* (London), searchable by keyword, and including all articles, advertisements and illustrations/photos, divided into categories to facilitate searching.

Need further information?

State Library of Queensland Queensland Cultural Centre, Stanley Place, South Bank,
Reference Services. t. +61 7 3840 7810, w. www.slq.qld.gov.au/enquiry
Visit www.slq.qld.gov.au/about/pub/info_guides/collections/fh to access all family history Info Guides.