Trade Directories and the Development of Industries

During the course of your family research you may become intrigued by the work that your ancestors did. What did a ‘clicker’ do? Why were some family members known as ‘snobs’? How can you find out more about an industry that has kept so many people occupied at a particular time in the past?

One resource that can help you to see how a particular trade developed over time in a geographical area is a series of trade directories. These were published to provide useful information for businessmen and women to carry out their trade but they can also be used to give an insight into the development of industry in a particular area. Directories were never meant to be a full and complete historical record of every type of business, but they provide a useful picture of the main commerce of the towns and cities of Britain at a particular time.

At a basic level, trade directories can be used to provide statistics to show how many businesses were operating in a trade in a particular town over a period of time. So studies have been published to show the growth in the number of steelmakers in Sheffield from 1774-1856 (Timmins 1979) or the decline in the silk industry in North Essex from 1826-1851 (Raven 2001) or the increase in trade in Birmingham from 1777-1860 (Duggan 1975). Numerical studies, such as these, can run into difficulties in that directories produced by different publishers can use different classifications for trades which can result in under or over-reporting the total number. Also, depending on the streets where the trades were carried out, coverage in the directories might not be complete since wealthy areas of a city might be better covered than slum areas (Atkins 1990 p.81). However it can be a useful exercise to make a comparison with another source, such as the census, to see what information can be found and to build up a picture of what happens to a trade each year.

Other researchers have used directories to produce maps to show where traders have been situated in a city. Consequently it’s possible to compare maps of tailoring or furniture making in areas of
London in 1861 and 1951 (Hall 1962) or to see how *Marks and Spencer* expanded in the South West of England from 1894-1939 (Shaw and Alexander 1994). This kind of work is best done using a set of directories from the same publisher to ensure consistent reporting. Other research has used directory listings to show how changes in shop ownership have changed the character of streets as traditional shops have been replaced by large scale retail organisations (Dyos 1961).

Some directories can also help with investigations into business history. For example the 1932 edition of *The Mercantile Year Book and Directory of Exporters* included a list of companies that had gone into liquidation since the previous edition had been published and it also recorded the trademarks that had been transferred (Lindley-Jones 1932).

Directories can take the form of national, local, professional or commercial and may not even have the word *directory* in their title. Eighteenth century ladies would probably not have wanted their husbands to consult Harris’s *List of Covent Garden Ladies...for the Year 1788*, since it was a directory of fashionable London prostitutes. Conversely Culpepper’s *Directory for Midwives* of 1651 was not a handy list of midwives to call when going into labour, but a medical guide to conceiving and rearing children (Corfield and Kelly 1984).

The famous names in directory publishing were Gore (in the Liverpool area), White (in the East Midlands and Yorkshire), Pye (in Birmingham), the National directories of Pigot & Slater and the most famous of all – Kelly, or the Post Office directories. These directories became well established and were able to use good resources to collect their data (even though there was stiff competition between them and accusations of plagiarism) (Norton 1950 p.23). Many other individual publishers attempted to produce directories for different areas and whilst there may have been good local knowledge in some cases, the expense of keeping directories up to date as towns and cities expanded, meant that many publishers only produced one or two directories before going out of business.
Commercial directories for towns were being regularly published from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards. However it was not until the early nineteenth century that villages began to be included in county directories and full coverage only really occurred between 1840-1945. During this period it is possible to use directories to show population trends in villages or the decline of particular crafts or trades. Research in directories can also show the interdependency of villages, or their dependency on towns. It can also show the transport arrangements in an area or the study of landed estates (Mills 2001). As with their use for town histories, though, it is important to remember that directories are never a complete record and should always be used with other resources to give a true picture of the countryside at any particular time.

Print directories are most likely to be found in a local Record Office or a Public Library that specialises in local history. They might not appear in an online catalogue, so ask the archivist or librarian to find out what is available in your area. Some local record societies have produced reprints of directories and these may be more easily available, or cheaper to buy, than the original publications. The Historical Directories website, provided by the University of Leicester, gives free electronic access to around 600 directories of England and Wales, covering the period 1766-1919. You can search the site by keyword, date range and geographical area or you can simply browse the directories, a page at a time.

If you want your own electronic copy of a directory, there are a number of online sources who will sell you a CD ROM of a particular directory. Use your favourite search engine to find them.

So what about those ‘clickers’ and ‘snobs’ in your family? You might have needed a good dictionary to tell you that a ‘clicker’ was a skilled leather cutter in the shoe trade and a ‘snob’ was a shoe repairer or cobbler’s apprentice, but then you can get back to some research in the trade directories.
Case Study- Gun and Pistol Manufacturing in Birmingham

An early directory of Birmingham, published by Sketchley and Adams in 1770, lists the number of different craftsmen involved in the making of guns and pistols and claims that ‘Consumption Abroad is very great’ (Prosser 1886 p.87). Only 38 gunmakers are listed in this directory, but by 1818 the number had grown to 45 and Wrightson’s Triennial Directory included an engraving of the Gun-Barrel Proof House that had been built in 1813 to test the guns and provide public security (Wrightson 1818).

Expansion of the trade may have been slow, 1770-1818, but by 1861 the Corporation Directory of Birmingham showed that the number of manufacturers had now reached 141. This directory also presented a list of the different trades involved in the process (8) when describing the manufactures of Birmingham, although the directory section itself has 22 different gun-related trades listed. The Corporation claims that Birmingham supplied all the British army, the militia and volunteers with guns (Birmingham Corporation 1861 p.739) It also reports that £4.5 million had been spent, in the town of Birmingham, on arms during recent years. Specific figures for the number of muskets, rifles, carbines and pistols produced 1804-1815 are given and it notes that the Russians had ordered 20,000 arms in 1806 (but that the contract was never completed). The directory then goes on to make a comparison between the number of guns produced in Birmingham (three million and a quarter) and in London (little more than one million) during a 10 year period.

The possible competition between the London and Birmingham gun trades can, perhaps, be illustrated via adverts in the 1867 Post Office Directory where W.S.Riley of Birmingham, and M.Reilly & Co. of London both advertise their central fire breech loading guns.

Distribution maps, based on White’s 1849 and Jones’s 1865 directories show that the gun trade largely remained within the St. Mary’s Square area of Birmingham (Wise 1949).
The nineteenth century directories showed a steady increase in the gun trade, but the twentieth century directories show a decline back to 33. The directories can provide some statistics, but reasons for the decline need to be found elsewhere.

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Top Tip

Directories can sometimes help to date old family photographs, if they have the photographer’s name stamped on the back of them. Commercial photographic businesses did not always last for long, so an entry in a trade or commercial directory for the relevant town might help to give an approximate date. (Hey 1996 p.348-9).

Watch Out!

When trying to reconstruct the population of a particular area, remember that directories are a highly selective source. Servants and labourers will be ignored. Main roads will be included, but slum areas will not. Directories were designed to be used by the business people of the time – not to provide detailed information for the historian. (Shaw and Alexander 1994)

Sources of Trade Directories

Bibliographies

It might be confusing, at first, to know what directories are available and where to start to find the information you need. The following three publications list most of the directories that have been published in England, Wales and Scotland from 1677-1950:


**University Catalogues**

Once you know that a directory exists, you can try to locate it through an online library catalogue. You can search a range of academic and specialist libraries using Copac at [http://copac.ac.uk](http://copac.ac.uk). If you find a record for the directory you want, the next step is to contact the library to check their access policy.

**Public Library Catalogues**

The UK Public Libraries website compiled by Sheila and Robert Harden at [http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/square/ac940/ukpublib.html](http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/square/ac940/ukpublib.html) lists available online catalogues. Remember that directories were often not catalogued at all, so it’s worth checking your local library – even if no record is found on their catalogue.

**Record Offices**

Most Record Offices will have some local directories, so this is another good place to check. The location of Record Offices can be found via the ARCHON directory at [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon/) Again, check their access policy before your first visit.

**Historical Directories Website**

This free website is provided by the University of Leicester at [http://www.historicaldirectories.org/](http://www.historicaldirectories.org/). The site contains around 600 directories of England and Wales, originally published during the period 1766-1919 and you can search the full text or simply browse the directories to find the information you want. Maps are not included, but all the text and advertisements are available.
References


_Wrightson's new triennial directory of Birmingham : including an alphabetical list of the merchants, tradesmen, and respectable inhabitants of the town ...1818. . Birmingham: R. Wrightson._


Shaw, Gareth, and Andrew Alexander. 1994. Directories and the local historian III: Directories as sources in local history. _Local History Magazine_ 46, 12-17.