

Long Live the News!

Hilary Berthon explains how NPLAN is working to save our newspaper heritage

MARRIAGES CELEBRATED by Clergymen, with due solemnity, in strictest privacy, at HOLT'S MATRIMONIAL CHAMBERS, 443 Queen-Street, Melbourne, opposite Old Cemetery, or elsewhere, from 10a.m. to 10p.m., daily (Saturdays included): no notice required. Marriage fee, 5/6; or marriage, with guaranteed gold wedding ring, and necessary witnesses provided, 10/6; or marriage, with massive guaranteed gold wedding ring and necessary witnesses provided, £1 1/- . Marriage certificates are same as supplied by leading clergymen of Victoria. P.S. - 15,300 marriages celebrated at Holt's during last 14 years by ordained clergymen, undermentioned denominations:- Presbyterian, Church of England, Congregational, Baptist.

—*The Age*, 12 May 1906

Providing an amusing glimpse into matrimony at the turn of the century, this classified advertisement illustrates what is so interesting about newspapers. They allow us to be voyeurs of societies which no longer exist, immersing us in the cultural milieu of a bygone era. They report



what was of interest to the communities of their time—from shipping news, social and political commentary, court reports and news about construction to reports on prominent characters in the community, cultural events and, inevitably, births, deaths and marriages.

In 1992, the state and territory libraries decided to work together to save Australia's remarkable newspaper documentary heritage. The Council of Australian State Libraries (now National and State Libraries Australasia) launched National Plan for Australian Newspapers (NPLAN) which aims to find and preserve all Australian newspapers and ensure that the public have adequate access to them. Under the plan, each state is responsible for newspapers published in its own state. The National Library is responsible for certain national titles such as the *Australian* and the *Australian Financial Review*. In addition, the National Library of New Zealand has recently become associated with the plan. NPLAN's current five-year plan (2005–2010) focuses on achieving goals in NPLAN's key areas of locating missing

above:
Musical comedy star Dorothy Brunton reading Sid Nicholl's 'Fashion-plate Fanny' in the children's section of *The Sun* newspaper with a small boy at St Margaret's Hospital 1925 Hood Collection, State Library of New South Wales
Courtesy of State Library of New South Wales

left:
Buddy Gard de Sylva (1896–1950)
Good News 1927
London; Sydney: Chappell & Co., 1927
Music Collection
nla.mus-an5631958

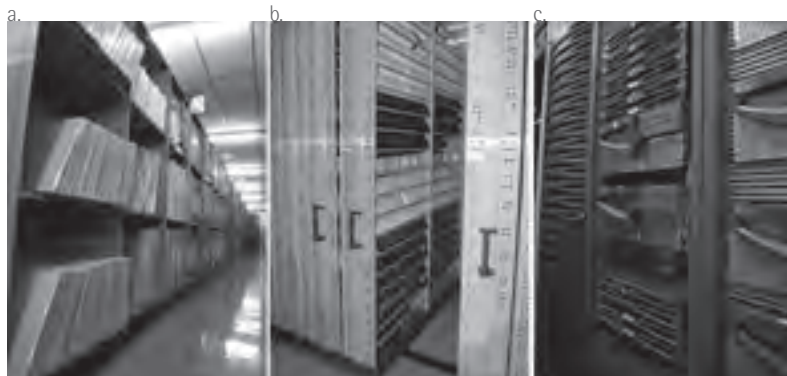


above (clockwise from left):
The Tasmanian Mail
 vol. 1, no. 3, Saturday 21 July 1877
 Hobart: Davies Brothers Limited,
 1877–1921
 Courtesy of State Library of
 Tasmania

The People's Horn Boy
 no. 3, Saturday 20 September 1834
 Courtesy of State Library of
 Tasmania

*The Colonist: A Weekly Journal
 for Town and Country*
 vol. II, no. XXXII, Saturday
 10 August 1889
 Courtesy of State Library of
 Tasmania

- below:
 Newspaper storage and access
 Courtesy of State Library of
 Queensland
- Original hard copy newspapers. Traditionally bound into monthly editions.
 - Preservation microfilming. A medium for long-term preservation of newspaper content.
 - Digital storage of digitised pages/files of newspapers on mass servers.



newspapers, preserving newspapers, and providing access to newspapers.

Interestingly, it is often the incidental newspaper commentaries that are the most revealing. Take, for instance, this observation from the *Launceston Examiner* on 5 April 1906:

Among the election yarns going the rounds is one about two sets of lady canvassers who were particularly keen on getting hold of one of the newly-enfranchised. Both called and solicited her vote, and made sure that they would get it. But the one was more worldly-wise than the other, and it was demonstrated later in the day, when the one party called with a cab, and on going to the house found the canvasser for the opposition in possession of the fort and industriously feeding the baby, whilst the mother had gone down to record her vote. That is one of the things which the useless male tout would never think of doing.

Advertisements, too, provide a fascinating glimpse into the values of a society. For example, a classified advertisement in *The Age* on 3 May 1906 for 'Dr SHAW'S Anti-Alcohol':

A guaranteed cure for home use; can be given secretly, and does not interfere with drinker's occupation but makes him healthier and homes happy. Rev. V. Knightly and Dr. Rutledge highly recommend it. Confidential advice free. Write or call, Dr. Shaw's Est., 300 Collins-street. Destitute treated free.

Unfortunately, our newspaper collections are by no means complete. Tantalisingly, references exist to newspapers that no one has been able to find. Or there is an unscheduled hiatus in a story where crucial issues of a newspaper are missing. Often it is a chance conversation between a librarian and a member of the public that uncovers these 'fugitive' papers which may have been lying hidden in someone's storehouse, in an elderly person's collection of keepsakes, or even in the vaults of a local historical society or archive. NPLAN hopes that the public will help to find these missing pieces of the jigsaw of our history, so that libraries can preserve them and make these newspapers generally accessible. A list of some of the nationally significant missing issues has been published on the NPLAN website (see www.nla.gov.au/nplan).

The search for local Nambour newspaper, the *Chronicle and North Coast Advertiser*, published between 1 July 1903 and 13 March 1931, ended when rolls of preservation master microfilm of this newspaper were discovered at a local publishing company. Prior to this, the rolls were stored in the local bank vault. None of the original hard copy newspapers could be tracked down. Once found, these master rolls were put in cold storage at the State Library

of Queensland for long-term preservation. The newspaper was then digitised and duplicates were created for the public to use.

Newspapers are an inherently fragile repository of a community's history, with an alarming propensity to become brittle and crumble into dust. Through a variety of ageing processes, millions of pages of newspapers documenting our early history are threatened by these 'slow fires' of destruction which render their contents irretrievable. The task of saving these newspapers requires concerted action on a number of fronts.

Preservation microfilming is considered to be the most effective way of creating a permanent copy. Assuming that the film onto which the image has been made is of high quality, that processing is carried out to a high standard and that the microfilm is stored under optimal conditions, preservation microfilm is estimated to last for at least 500 years. A second generation 'printing master' is then made from the preservation microfilm, and multiple third generation 'service' copies can be produced from the printing master to enable users to access the newspapers. All microfilming is done to a standard which will allow conversion to a digital format in the future.

Providing suitable storage (with careful attention being given to location, temperature and humidity, housing and disaster planning) is critical to the long-term survival of newspapers, both for the original 'hard copy' versions and for microfilm masters.

One of NPLAN's national goals over the next five years is to ensure that a small number of nationally significant newspapers are preserved and made accessible to the public. In some instances, this involves filming previously unfiled newspapers, in others, re-filming is required as the existing microfilm is not of good quality. One of these significant newspapers is the *Adelaide Observer*, established when early newspaper proprietor John Stephens sent John Dickins to walk around the country districts of South Australia canvassing whether a weekly newspaper for the farmers would be popularly received. The response was an overwhelming 'yes', and the first issue of the *Adelaide Observer* was published in 1843. Between 1852 and 1853 the newspaper was delivered to the hundreds



of South Australians living on the goldfields of Victoria during the great gold rush. A regular 'Messages to the Diggings' column was printed in these years, containing such items as 'Tobias Pearce—Your infant son died Oct 22nd'. Early issues of this newspaper give a particularly good coverage of South Australia's fledgling industries.

In 1918, one of the casualties of World War I was the high quality sporting newspaper, the *Winner*, whose very first issue was published just one week before the commencement of the war. The *Winner* gave in-depth coverage of Victorian national and international sporting events. The early career of one of Australia's greatest sporting stars, billiards champion Walter Lindrum, can be traced through its pages. It also featured plentiful topical sporting cartoons and photographs.

Also considered to be of immense importance in documenting Australia's past, but currently 'at risk', is the *Register*—the primary source of information relating to every facet of the history of the establishment of South Australia as a British colony. The *Register*, also known as *South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register* and *Register News-pictorial*, was South

above:
Page of *The Winner*
Melbourne: Walter R. May for
the *Herald* and *Weekly Times*,
1914–1918
Courtesy of State Library of
Victoria

below:
Reading *The Winner*
Courtesy of State Library of
Victoria



Australia's first newspaper. It is the earliest and most complete source of shipping information for a period during which, at its peak, 250 immigrants per week were arriving in Port Adelaide. (The *Register* shipping lists are indexed for 1846–1887, pre-dating the incomplete official lists which do not begin until 1847). The *Register* is also the only source of early South Australian legal history and court records. Both the *Register* and *Winner* will be microfilmed through NPLAN.

At the heart of NPLAN is the partner libraries' belief that communities should be able to explore their rich newspaper heritage. This is partly achieved through microfilming newspapers and creating copies for the public to use. Equally important is the facility for users to find out where newspaper versions are held. The new Libraries Australia search facility

(librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au/) has gone some way towards achieving this, enabling users to view the scope of the collection. Standardised ways for libraries to record information about their microfilm holdings—which is high on the agenda of NPLAN partners—will complete the process.

Being able to search for stories and news through a simple keyword search—perhaps track down who arrived in your township, who was convicted of a crime, who the political characters were or just what the society of 100 years ago thought was newsworthy—will undoubtedly be part of exploring newspapers in the future. With the ease of access to text and images that digital versions afford, NPLAN partners want to digitise their newspaper collections and make text fully searchable. The National Library's ambitious Newspaper Digitisation Project is one such endeavour. Pilot studies have revealed the need for high quality microfilmed versions of newspapers from which digitisation and optical character recognition can be undertaken successfully. (Early newspaper microfilming was sometimes of poor quality and not done to preservation standards.)

Not intended for permanence and peculiarly ill-equipped to survive the ravages of time, newspapers nevertheless provide us with a glimpse of the past which is too valuable to relinquish. Saving our newspaper heritage has led Australian libraries to cooperate in this exciting project to locate, collect and preserve every newspaper published in Australia to ensure that the public has access to this unique collection. The advent of online newspapers and new capabilities for digitisation will certainly change how the libraries go about their task. However, their determination to ensure that users can explore our newspaper heritage will undoubtedly continue.

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South Australian Gazette and Colonial Register
vol. 1, no. 1, Saturday 18 June 1836
Courtesy of State Library of South Australia
The first issue was published in London, but from the second issue onwards it was published in Adelaide by Robert Thomas & Co.

