

A PLAN FOR AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPERS



HILARY BERTHON DESCRIBES HOW AUSTRALIA'S NEWSPAPERS ARE BEING PRESERVED

ABOVE
'Newspaper Readers',
Illustrated Sydney News,
Supplement, June 1887
Courtesy State Library of New
South Wales

RIGHT
*Western Australian Chronicle
and Perth Gazette*,
26 February 1831
handwritten in ink
Courtesy State Library of
Western Australia, the Batty
Library

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF THE FIRST newspaper in Australia in 1803, newspapers have occupied an important place in Australian life, providing both a unique commentary on and even shaping the communities in which they have been circulated. Australian newspapers have variously served as transmitters of government orders and regulations to providers of shipping news, agricultural reports, news of auctions and property sales, births, deaths and marriages and advertisements. Both guiding and reflecting public opinion, they have served as political instrument and people's advocate, commenting on matters of national importance and of the minutiae of daily life—generally with the commercial imperative to sell copies and stay afloat.

The Australian Newspaper Plan (ANPlan, www.nla.gov.au/anplan), originally established almost two decades ago by the library sector's peak body group, National and State Libraries Australasia, aims to ensure that Australians have ongoing access to this rich newspaper heritage. The by-line chosen for ANPlan—'preserving for permanent access'—amply expresses what this program

is all about. The ANPlan libraries comprise the national, state and territory libraries, with the National Library of New Zealand having observer status. In order to achieve their goal, these libraries are working together on an ambitious program to collect, preserve and make available to the public all Australian newspapers.

Newspapers are much valued by researchers within libraries. Researching at the State Library of Queensland, Jennifer Harrison observes:

No wonder newspapers have names like Advertiser, Advocate, Courier, Express, Herald, Mercury, Observer and Times ... Any day of any month of any year, any and all events, any person and any location throughout this country or the world, if there is a story or a message, it will be found in a newspaper. Because they are the eyes and ears of communities they are an essential research source.

Some newspapers are particularly unusual. For example, the State Library of Western Australia holds early manuscript newspapers, handwritten before the introduction of the printing press to that state, and silk newspapers, produced as mementos for dignitaries. One of the earliest surviving copies of a Western Australian newspaper is the second edition of *The Western Australian Chronicle and Perth Gazette* of 26 February 1831, handwritten in ink in two columns on both sides of two sheets of foolscap paper. The newspaper was written and published every Saturday by William Kernot Shenton and featured copied newspaper items from England, government notices, shipping notes, births and deaths, purchases and sales, and cost a substantial three shillings, equivalent to the cost of two loaves of bread.

Yet, it is not just the content of Australian newspapers that is informative. The establishment, cessation, name changes, format and frequency of a publication also tell a story.

Often newspapers sprang up to serve the needs of emerging communities and, following the fortunes and misfortunes of their inhabitants, dwindled and disappeared. Newspaper historian Rod Kirkpatrick has traced how widespread gold discoveries in the 1850s gave impetus to the development of the provincial press in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. He notes that only 12 of the 47 provincial newspapers in New South Wales established in the first five years of the 1860s survived until 1870, with newspapers established on the goldfields being 'far more susceptible to failure than those in the towns'. He describes the 'hiccoughing' existence of the newspapers of the Palmer River goldfield which were rapidly launched, suspended and 'resuscitated', and shifted location according to the vicissitudes of the mining population they served, finally to languish, 'unwanted', by the close of the nineteenth century.

Some newspapers had to look for alternative sources of income. On 3 March 1908, *Port Fairy Gazette* published the following exhortation to its readers:

You can aid your newspaper greatly by giving the local office your general printing; if you do not feel able to run an advertisement, surely you can afford to give the newspaper your cards, dodgers, billheads, letterheads, envelopes and all

business printing to execute. The newspaper man needs it, and it helps him to pay his printers for setting up the thousand and one free notices he gives you and your town ... Therefore, if you want a good newspaper—one that can still further help you and your town—give it all your printing.

The Australian public has been very supportive of what the ANPLAN libraries have been trying to achieve, with the quest to find missing newspapers being met with an overwhelming level of interest. Nevertheless, little headway has been made in shortening the lists of newspapers which the libraries are looking for, and newspapers previously not known to exist are also being discovered. This reveals a tantalising glimpse of what might still remain to be uncovered.

Known to exist, but only recently recovered, are six issues of Port Lincoln's *The Western Weekly News*, one glued to a piece of plywood. Previously, the State Library of South Australia had held only one issue, which included a contemporary handwritten note indicating that it was the 'last issue'. According to newspaper librarian, Anthony Laube, 'This is the earliest twentieth-century newspaper published in Port Lincoln'.

Grant Collins, Preservation Manager at the State Library of Queensland, is quick to point out that there are many stages through which a newly found newspaper must pass before it can be used. Newspapers which may have been retrieved from the roofing or under



ABOVE
Meekatharra Miner 1909
silk
Courtesy State Library of
Western Australia, the Battye
Library

BELOW
The Western Weekly News
Courtesy State Library of
South Australia





ABOVE
A conservator starts work on restoring the *Barcoo Independent* newspaper. Courtesy State Library of Queensland

RIGHT
The front page of *Army News*, 19 February 1942. This issue was published hours before Darwin was bombed. Courtesy Northern Territory Library

the flooring in someone's home are unlikely to be found in pristine condition. Newspaper fragments must be painstakingly pieced together and fragile papers must be stabilised by conservators. Newspapers are then reformatted, generally to preservation microfilm, including a version for public access.

That many of our newspapers are disintegrating is hardly surprising given their inherent instability. The National Library of Australia has worked for many years with state and territory libraries to save our fragile newspaper heritage. A funding program has enabled the reformatting of newspapers onto microfilm, which, with a lifetime expectancy of 500 years, is considered to be the best method of ensuring permanent access. All newspaper titles chosen for this program are fragile, in heavy demand or otherwise 'at risk'.

The origin of one of Australia's iconic newspapers, the South Australian *Advertiser*, can be traced back to 1858, when it was founded by a Congregational pastor, parliamentarian, ex-newspaper journalist and nephew of Charles Dickens. *Advertiser* claimed to be the first South Australian newspaper to use a motor car to relay news (during a murder case in 1903) and, in another first, flew photographs of the 1933 winner of the Melbourne Cup overnight for publication the next day. As part of a major cooperative project spanning several years, historic issues of the *Advertiser* have been re-filmed and are available online.

Army News, published in Darwin during the Japanese bombing raids of World War II, was recently re-filmed with Library funding. The beginning of the war had seen the establishment of a military presence in the northern part of Australia and, by May 1941, there were over 7500 soldiers in Darwin. Responding to the soldiers' need for news, the free weekly publication of *Army News* 'for all services in the Northern Territory' commenced in October 1941. This newspaper included military news from around the world, as well as local sporting results,

advertisements and public notices. After the bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942, the paper reverted to a one-page daily. At the same time, publication of *Northern Standard*, established by the North Australian Workers' Union, ceased and *Army News* became the only Darwin newspaper until it also ceased in January 1946.

Although *Army News* had been filmed previously, the result was of poor quality and re-filming to a standard which would support future digitisation was a high priority. Complete sets of this newspaper were unavailable in any of the major Australian libraries. Fortunately, the Australian War Memorial was able to lend missing issues so that this project could go ahead.

One of the most innovative and exciting developments in newspaper access is the Library's program to digitise historic out-of-copyright newspapers. Much of the microfilm that has been produced through the Library's filming program will be digitised so that text-searchable versions of these newspapers may be viewed free-of-charge through the Australian Newspapers service.

The ability to enter a search word and find where it occurs in the newspaper is made possible through a process of Optical Character Recognition (OCR), which reads and interprets the text on the newspaper page. Of course, no machine can generate results which are as good as those possible with the human eye. The Library has provided users of the newspaper service with the option of 'improving' the electronically generated text, and sharing their revised version with other users. So popular has this activity become that, as at October 2009, users had corrected over 6.8 million lines of electronic text in over 310 000 articles.

Newspapers selected for digitisation include titles from every Australian state and territory. Currently, over 30 titles are available, spanning from 1803 to 1954. There are plans to deliver 4.4 million newspaper pages—which equates to over 40 million articles—by mid-2011, providing researchers with easy access to a steadily increasing amount of newspaper content that tells Australia's history in a vivid and immediate way.

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