



Using Newspapers to Break Down Brick Walls and Add Details to your Tree



- Jenny Joyce

We all come across brick walls when researching our family history. There are many techniques that can help you break them down, but there is also a valuable resource: newspapers. And not only can they help you break down brick walls, they can also help you uncover lots of details about your ancestors' lives which can make your family history much more interesting than just having names, dates and places.

Where to find newspapers

Many libraries have copies of local newspapers, either on microfilm or in hardcopy. But there are also a lot of websites which give access to historical newspapers. Just some of them are:

- Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com/>) \$
- British Newspaper Archives (<http://britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>) \$
- Findmypast (<https://www.findmypast.co.uk>) \$
- Trove (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>)
- Papers Past (<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/>)
- Gale Historical Newspapers (<https://www.gale.com/intl/primary-sources/historical-newspapers>) \$. These are available for free through some libraries and universities.
- Irish Newspaper Archives (<https://www.irishnewsarchive.com/>) \$
- Old News (<https://www.oldnews.com/en>) \$
- Chronicling America (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/newspapers/>)
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers (<https://about.proquest.com/en/products-services/pq-hist-news/>). These are available for free through some libraries and universities.
- NewspaperArchive (<https://newspaperarchive.com/>) \$

Search tips

Here are a few tips to make your newspaper searches more likely to find the things or people you are looking for.

Use quotation marks

If you just enter the name of a person in the search box without surrounding it with quote marks, for example, just entering the name Thomas Moore, the computer will look for all articles that have Thomas anywhere in the article and Moore anywhere in the article. The 'Thomas' and the 'Moore' might be



nowhere near each other. Not only will your search return a huge number of results, but many of those results will be irrelevant. By putting the name in quotes, i.e. "Thomas Moore" you'll not only reduce the number of articles found, but those that are found are more likely to be useful.

This is particularly important when you are looking for a surname that is also a commonly used word or a place name, like Prince, King, Alway or Bathurst. In those cases you need to search for all the given names of the members of that family, and make sure they are enclosed in quotes. While this means more searches are necessary, it will improve your results. So make a point of searching for "Robert Alway" and "William Alway" and so on.

Check the Help

Check each site's help to learn how to include or exclude certain words or phrases from a search. If there are two terms entered, is there an implied AND or an implied OR? If you want to exclude a term, do you precede it with a NOT or a minus sign (-)? Can brackets be used? What wildcards are available? These are things you should investigate for each online newspaper site.

Use wildcards

Wildcards can be used to replace one or more characters. Common wildcards are the asterisk(*) which replaces zero or more characters, and the question mark(?) which replaces exactly one character. For example John* will match John, Johns, Johnston and Johnson. Barcl?y will match Barclay and Barkley. The wildcards used can vary from site to site, so check the help for the particular website you are using.

Abbreviate the given name

Newspapers often used abbreviated versions of given names, perhaps to save space. Some common examples follow, though this list is by no means comprehensive.

- Wm for William
- Thos for Thomas
- Jos or Jos'h for Joseph
- Hy for Henry
- Geo for George
- Chas for Charles
- Danl for Daniel
- Edw for Edward
- Fredk for Frederick

Search for these versions of given names, along with a surname, and put them into quotation marks (e.g. "Wm Hunter").

Search using titles

People are often recorded in newspapers using their title, such as "Mr Nelson" or "Mrs Williams" or "Miss Manning". Failing to look for these versions of a name can mean missing out some very interesting articles. And don't forget to search for "Dr Martin" or "Rev Wilson" if your relative uses one of those titles. The full stop after the title can usually be omitted.



Use filters

Filters are a way to narrow down the results when the number returned is too high. They can narrow down a search to a particular date range, to a particular country, county or state, or to a particular publication title. Filters vary from site to site, so check the help for a site to see what filters are available.

Check multiple sites

It is worth checking multiple websites, even if they contain the same newspapers. Firstly, the period covered by one site might not be the same as another. Secondly, the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) may have come up with different words. And thirdly, if one of the sites allows text correction, then the human eye may have more correctly identified a name than the OCR did.

Come back later

Many historical newspaper sites continue to add new newspapers to their collections, so even if you have searched a site already, it is worth coming back later in case there have been relevant additions.

Difficult Surnames

‘Mc’ and ‘Mac’ surnames can be tricky to search for.

- Try searching for both versions of a surname, e.g. McDonald and MacDonald
- Try only putting an ‘M’ at the front, e.g. MHugh (Note 1)
- Also try putting a space in and enclose the whole in quotation marks, e.g. “M Hugh” (Note 1), “Mac Nee” etc

You should also think similarly with O’ names, like O’Neill. Added to this is the complication that the Irish have a tendency to add or remove the O’ on a whim. So you would need to search for

- O’Brien
- “O Brien”
- and even Brien

For hyphenated surnames try omitting the hyphen or replacing it with a space

- Bowes-Lyon
- “Bowes Lyon”
- Boweslyon

Some words, when subject to Optical Character Recognition, will see a double t (tt) as an st, and vice versa. For example, the word ‘highest’ is often misread by a computer as the name ‘Highett’.

Note 1: This is because names beginning with Mc may be printed as M’, and processed as an M followed by an apostrophe, M’ (and thus the c is not searchable).

Note 2: Note that newspaper searches are generally not case sensitive, and the mixed case in these examples is only for readability.

