

London Directories: a Reassessment

P.J. Atkins

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In 1933 Charles Goss published his classic text *The London Directories 1677-1855: a Bibliography with Notes on Their Origin and Development*, Dennis Archer, London. This book has served as an invaluable guide for two generations of those local historians interested in particular editions of the many series of directories published in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The fifty years or so which have elapsed since Goss's work have, however, revealed certain inaccuracies in the text, and many new volumes have come to light of which he was unaware. The time has now come for a reassessment of London directories as historical raw material and for a new listing of editions and their whereabouts.¹ The main gap to fill is the period after 1855 which was ignored by Goss. His reasoning for using this terminal date was that Frederic Kelly had seen off the last major rival to his *Post Office London Directory*, F.W. Watkins, in 1855, and that there were few major changes in the directory world thereafter. This was a short sighted view because, although the *Post Office London Directory* continued to hold sway in the field of general all-purpose directories, there were many important and interesting developments in specialist and local suburban publications.

What is a London directory?

Superficially it must seem a very straightforward task to identify a London directory. The present author certainly believed this until he was faced with the tens of metres of shelves in the British Library which hold the directory-like books of relevance to London and its suburbs.

The O.E.D defines a directory as 'a book containing one or more alphabetical lists of the inhabitants of any locality, with their addresses and occupations; also a similar compilation dealing with the members of a particular profession, trade or association.' In practice the various publishers had multifarious views on what was worth recording in a London directory, and their output defies a simple all-embracing definition. Suffice it to say that most such publications were produced with the sole intention of making available to a wide public, for commercial, professional, or private reference, a comprehensive list of the names and addresses of residents, businessmen and public officials. These lists were ephemeral and were not compiled as a semi-permanent data base for taxation, voting, rating, or the mustering of troops.

One problem of identification encountered is that some non-directory publications included directory-like lists in their format. Almanacks, for instance, compiled data on officials in Whitehall and members of Parliament which were very similar to those found in the larger directories; and the various series of 'court books' and 'peerages' were really only more detailed and elaborate versions of the fashionable court directories. Figure 1 illustrates the links between these directory and non-directory materials.



FIGURE 1: Links between directory and non-directory materials.

The mainstream directories themselves fell into four broad sub-types, which were published either separately or in various combinations. Commercial Directories comprised alphabetical lists of businessmen and traders. This was the earliest form taken by the London directory, which for the first one hundred years of its life was basically a list of merchants, wholesalers, and to a lesser extent retailers. Towards the end of the eighteenth century and in the early nineteenth century this type of listing gradually gave ground to the *classified trade directory*, which was pioneered in 1763 by Mortimer's Universal Director.² From the consumer's point of view this was a valuable innovation because hitherto it had been necessary to search through the whole alphabetical list in order to find all the cheesemongers or apothecaries. Now, one could simply turn to the appropriate class of trader. The historian needs caution, however, because the classification adopted was very much the subjective choice of the editor, depending upon his predilection for the 'lumping' or 'splitting' of classes and upon his perception of what was a trade worth recording. Occasionally we are able to test the directory's comprehensiveness, for instance when a register of licensed traders or professionals is available for cross-checking. Thus in London in 1880 only 56% of licensed cowkeepers, a much despised 'noxious' trade, were listed in the *Post Office London Directory*,³ whereas a comparison of the same directory with the *Law List*⁴ showed an 88% correspondence of the names and addresses of London solicitors.

Street directories formed a third distinct sub-species of London directory. They listed people's names, and sometimes their occupations, street by street. Patrick Boyle is credited with the invention of this type of publication. His *Fashionable Court Guide* was issued in 1792.⁵ Boyle's constituency was strictly limited to the 'West End' of London, and herein lies the key problem of geographical selectivity, because not even the *Post Office London Directory* could claim a comprehensive coverage of the whole of central London until well into the twentieth century.

Finally, there was the court directory, which started as a listing of the elite eligible to move in court circles, but eventually became simply an alphabetical arrangement of private residents. This non-commercial type of directory did not become popular in London until the 1830s, and even then no directory publisher ever attempted a complete coverage of all the residents in his hum. The example of the *Post Office London Directory* is again instructive because, from its re-organization by Frederic Kelly in the 1840s, its large bulk and authoritative appearance suggest comprehensiveness to the casual user. In reality this directory never recorded more than 16% of the households in the London administrative and postal districts.

in the period 1851-1961 (the peak year was 1891). Moreover there was a high degree of spatial compilation bias in favour of the 'high class' districts, presumably because these were the areas where most directories were sold. A comparison of sample addresses recorded in the Post Office London Directory with those in the population census enumerators' books (Table 1) shows the woeful inadequacy of directory data in working class areas of the East End of London.⁶ The well-off area received more assiduous attention, and within that district Belgrave Square and Wilton Crescent were more fully covered than Belgrave Mews and Wilton Crescent Mews. This was because upstairs- downstairs corresponded to front street-back street.

TABLE 1: *Spatial bias in the Post Office London Directory*

	<i>Bethnal Green</i>		<i>St George, Hanover Square</i>	
	<i>1851</i>	<i>1881</i>	<i>1851</i>	<i>1881</i>
	%	%	%	%
Name and address identical in both census and directory	8	4	50	46
Address recorded in <i>P.O.L.D.</i> , but details of occupations different from census	4	4	16	12
Name and address not recorded in <i>P.O.L.D.</i>	88	92	34	42

Sources: *Post Office London Directory* and census enumerators' books.

The uses of London directories

London directories have utility for research in which the historian needs general or specialized lists of the names and addresses of residents and/or businessmen, service providers, etc. We are fortunate to have a number of recent articles,⁷ several of which were published in this journal, discussing the potential and problems of directories in broad terms, and many of the points made are of relevance to London. The following is a brief summary of the major categories of uses to which London directories have been put hitherto:

1. Genealogical research, tracing individual people.⁸
2. Work on the evolution of specific trades or professions.⁹
3. Geographical studies employing address data as input for the analysis of locational patterns.¹⁰
4. Social history, for instance the description of residential differentiation and mobility.¹¹
5. Local history, where a local suburban or general London directory becomes a data base for the reconstruction of the changing structure of specific neighbourhoods within the metropolitan area.
6. Topography, or the examination of the changing ground plan of London.
7. Record linkage, in which the directory is one of several data sources used to recreate a historical reality. Other sources might include rate books, parish registers, census enumerators' books, and electoral registers.

Despite their enormous and exciting potential for historical work, London directories should not be taken on trust. Unfortunately there are a host of problems which may entrap unsuspecting readers who are unwise enough to assume that they are dealing with an objectively compiled source which is representative of the whole economy and society in London. We have already mentioned the class and neighbourhood biases. To these we should add:

1. Double counting.¹²

2. Inefficient, delayed, or even fraudulent revision.
3. The problem of multiple occupancy. Only one name per property was allowed in many directories.
4. Renaming and renumbering, which affected about 5,000 streets and terraces between 1889 and 1912, about a quarter of the total.
5. Inconsistencies from year to year in details recorded, such as the spelling of a surname, or initials.

There are indeed many such drawbacks to directory use, but they are outweighed by the rewards. Above all, London directories, which are available annually from the mid eighteenth century in their various series and editions, represent one of the richest veins of evidence we have concerning people's daily lives. The advent of the computer has at last put the analysis of this vast data matrix within our grasp.

REFERENCES

- 1 The author's book *The Directories of London 1677-1977* is forthcoming.
- 2 Mr Mortimer (1763), *The Universal Director: or, the Nobleman and Gentleman's True Guide to the Masters and Professors of the Liberal and Polite Arts and Sciences, and of the Mechanic Arts, Manufacturers, and Trades, Established in London and Westminster, and their Environs*. J. Coote, London.
- 3 P.J. Atkins (1977), 'The milk trade of London c.1749-1914', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, p.276.
- 4 *The Law List ... 1880* Stevens and Sons, London.
- 5 P. Boyle (1792), *The Fashionable Court Guide, or Town Visit Directory ...* P. Boyle, London.
- 6 The sample size for each parish at the two dates was fifty addresses.
- 7 J.L. Oliver (1964), 'Directories and their use in geographical enquiry', *Geography* 49, 400-9; W.K.D. Davies, J.A. Giggs. and D.T. Herbert (1968), 'Directories, rate books and the commercial structure of towns', *Geography* 53, pp. 41-54; C.R. Lewis (1975), 'Trade directories – a data source in urban analysis', *National Library of Wales Journal* 19, pp.181-93; D. Page (1974), 'Commercial directories and market towns', *Local Historian* 11, pp.85-88; E.P. Duggan (1974), 'Industrialization and the development of urban business communities: research problems, sources and techniques', *Local Historian* 11, pp. 457-65; P. Wilde (1976), 'The use of business directories in comparing the industrial structure of towns: an example from the south-west Pennines', *Local Historian* 12, pp.152-6; G. Shaw (1979), 'The content and reliability of nineteenth-century directories', *Local Historian* 13, pp. 205-9; G. Timmins (1979), 'Measuring growth from trade directories', *Local Historian* 13, pp. 349-52; C.W. Chilton (1982), "'The Universal British' – a warning", *Local Historian* 15, pp. 144-6; G. Shaw (1982), 'British directories as sources in historical geography', *Historical Geography Research Series* 8.
- 8 Of thirty or so potentially relevant books on genealogy consulted, surprisingly few devoted more than a sentence or two to directories.
- 9 For instance P.J. Atkins (1980), 'The retail milk trade in London, c.1790-1914', *Economic History Review* 2nd series 33, pp. 522-37.
- 10 A good example is P.G. Hall (1962), *The Industries of London Since 1861*. Hutchinson, London.
- 11 For a discussion of problems here see C.G. Pooley (1979), 'Residential mobility in the Victorian city', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* new series 4, pp.258-77.
- 12 T.E. Whibley (1864), *Whibley's Shilling Court Directory and London Fashionable Guide*. T.E. Whibley, London. This directory is particularly amenable to checking the double

counting problem because the alphabetical section acts as an index, showing the number of times each individual is recorded in the street section. Approximately 3% of names were duplicated.

DR. P. J. ATKINS is Lecturer in Geography at the University of Durham. His forthcoming book *The Directories of London 1677-1977* was recently awarded a special commendation by The International League of Antiquarian Booksellers in its Ninth Triennial Prize for Bibliography.