

Eighteenth century London directories

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EIGHTEENTH CENTURY LONDON DIRECTORIES

When interrogating the ESTC it is important to have in mind a list of alternative key words. Directories of names and addresses in London, for instance, were published under an alarming variety of titles. They also came in several formats and one purpose of this note is to alert the reader to the evolution of this type of publication.

The first London directory was Samuel Lee's *A collection of the names of the merchants living in and about the city of London*, published in 1677. No emulator followed his lead until 1734, when Henry Kent published a slim volume entitled *The Directory; or list of principal traders in London*.¹ At about 1300 names (in 1736), the contents are one third less than Lee's directory, but the occupational information is much more detailed. The 6d cover price was reasonably good value considering the absence of competition.

Kent was soon joined in the market by competitors. In 1738 W. Meadows, L. Gilliver and J. Clarke published *The Intelligencer or, merchants assistant*. Their list of about 2000 merchants and traders was not remarkable (Henry Kent's directory of the same year contained 2100), but their novelty was the inclusion of: lists of stage coaches and carriers operating from London; distances from London to the principal towns and cities; and of the fixed and moveable fairs of England and Wales. This information foreshadowed by thirty years or so the conveyance directories which were to become a regular feature of general directory series in the later eighteenth century.

In their *Universal pocket companion* (1741), J. Fox et al. expanded upon Meadows's model.² In addition to the names and addresses of 2300 merchants and retailers, and a section on transport, they also included: miscellaneous information on the companies of the city of London; the prices charged by building tradesmen; postal information; the composition of the House of Lords and the royal household; and even a ready reckoner. The third edition of this work was not published until 1760, now under the imprint of C. Hitch et al.

Because Henry Kent was aiming at a mass market, he included the bare minimum of information beyond the name list. He and his successors were able to hold the price at one shilling from 1738 to 1795, a remarkable achievement.

Kent's imitators were few in number, though persistent. In 1740 J. Osborn launched *A Complete guide to all persons who have any trade or concern with the city of London, and parts adjacent*,³ and this series lasted until 1783 with several changes of proprietor. Osborn et al. published their directory irregularly at two or three year intervals. They included detailed lists of conveyances, and also a guide to the location of the streets, squares, lanes and courts in London. These sections were bound together in a volume costing 1/6d.

An altogether more serious competitor for Kent was *The London directory*.⁴ This was an annual publication originated in 1768 by J. Payne, and from 1772 taken over by T. Lowndes of Fleet Street. The existing directory publishers were shaken out of their complacency by this interloper, as demonstrated by their immediate reaction. Henry Kent produced a *Shopkeeper's and tradesman's assistant*⁵ to answer Payne's list of stage coaches and carriers, and Baldwin in his *New complete guide*⁶ was obliged to include full occupational information in his name list for the first time.

The keys to competitiveness were bulk and price. Lowndes's directory was a cheap pocket-size volume produced for convenience rather than completeness. In 1775, for

instance, Kent's and Lowndes's directories were of similar size (5800 and 6500 names respectively) for the same price, one shilling, whereas the *Complete guide* retailed at 1/6d for 7000 entries. The *Complete pocket book*, however, in its 1776 edition contained only 3800 names for two shillings and the *London register* 6500 for one shilling.⁷ Again in 1790 Kent and Lowndes score highly on a scale of value for money, with over 7000 names for one shilling, whereas Wakefield's *merchant's and tradesman's general directory* (1794) cost three shillings for 16,500; Fenwick's *The London and Westminster directory* (1796) 1/6d for 8500; and McCullough's *The London guide and merchant's directory* (1796) 1/6d for 8200.

The *Complete guide* finally succumbed to this new competitive atmosphere. The 1780 edition failed to appear, and the sixteenth edition, dated 1783, was the last. The *London directory* under H. Lowndes continued annually until 1799, but was not published in 1800 when it would have been in direct competition with the *New annual directory*, sponsored by the Postmaster General. The Causton family, proprietors of Kent's directory from 1772, were made of sterner stuff. They saw off all comers in the late eighteenth century, with the least possible adjustment to their format; and until 1828 they even managed to survive the hot breath of semi-official competition from what became the *Post Office London directory*.

In the second half of the eighteenth century at least half a dozen other publishers tried their hand at a London directory. Few lasted for long, but one or two are worth discussing because of their innovative approach. Thomas Mortimer's *Universal director* of 1763 is particularly interesting.⁸ His significant contribution to the evolution of the directory was the inclusion of a classified trade and professional section. Part I was a list of people engaged in the arts and sciences, music, and medicine, arranged under separate headings. Part II covered 74 trades, mainly manufacturing, and Part III was devoted to merchants, bankers, agents, attornies, auctioneers, brokers, notaries, warehousemen, shopkeepers and booksellers.

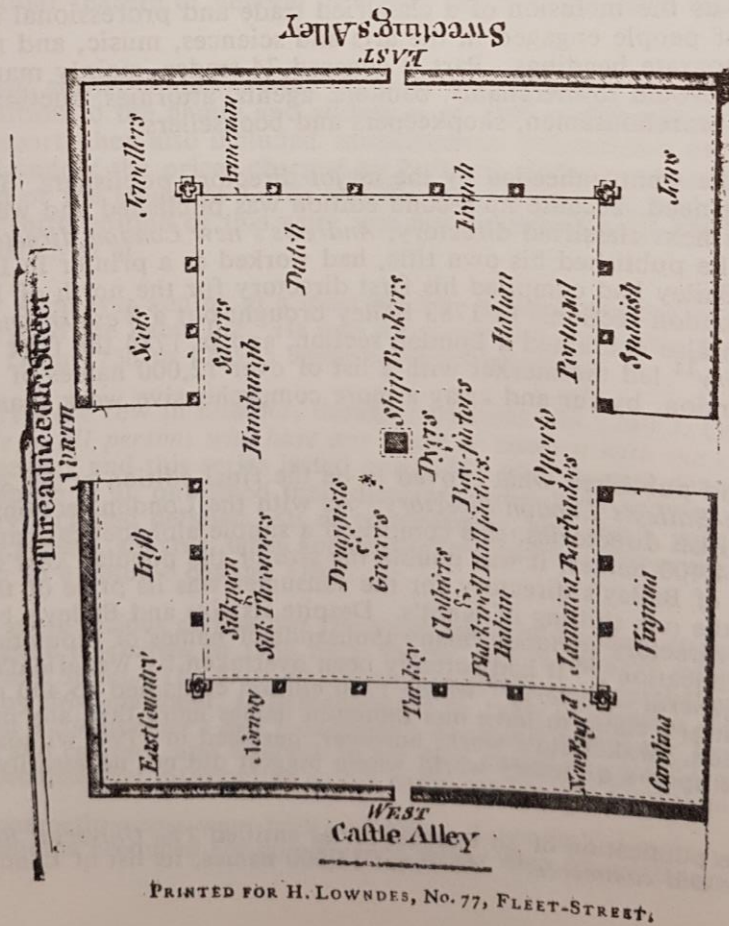
Mortimer's example went unheeded by the major directory publishers. It presumably did not fulfil a strong need, because no second edition was published and we have to wait until 1789 for the next classified directory, *Andrews's new London directory*. James Andrews, before he published his own title, had worked as a printer in London for a William Bailey. Bailey had compiled his first directory for the north of England, and had included a London section. In 1783 Bailey brought out a *Western and Midland directory*,¹⁰ which also contained a London section, and in 1784 the first volume of his *British directory*¹¹ led the market with a list of over 12,000 names of merchants and traders in London, by far and away a more comprehensive work than those of his rivals.

By 1790 Bailey had published what proved to be the final edition of his specifically London directory: *Bailey's London directory*. As with the London sections of his provincial and British directories, this comprised a simple alphabetical name list, but, with about 14,400 names, it was double the size of the popular *Kent's directory*. The disadvantage of Bailey's directory for the consumer was its price of three shillings, against the one shilling of Kent's. Despite its size and Bailey's bold assertion that his directory included 'many thousands of names of reputation omitted in every other publication',¹² it had actually been overtaken by Wakefield's *Merchant and tradesman's general directory*,¹³ whose 1790 edition contained 15,400 names, bearing out the latter's claim to have one thousand names more than any other directory of London. Wakefield's work, however, perished in 1794, without making a significant impact upon a directory world where biggest did not necessarily mean most profitable.

In 1790 began the publication of an unusual series entitled *The Universal British directory of trade and commerce*.¹⁴ At about 16,000 names, its list of London

businessmen was the largest on the market at that time. A drawback for the historian is the cloud which hangs over the reputation of its compilers, Peter Barfoot and John Wilkes. Jane Norton has shown how they pirated material for the provincial volumes.¹⁵ The *Universal British directory* continued to be re-published or reprinted from 1790 to 1798, but we are unsure about the precise bibliographical details of the series. Because the numerous sections were sold separately, library holdings are often incomplete, and surviving volumes are made up of varying contents. A more serious problem was the practice of Barfoot and Wilkes of reissuing their old directory stock as new editions, but with little or no revision of the information they contained. The 1791 edition of volume 1, for instance, is virtually identical in every way to the 1790 edition except for a slight modification of the title, the changed date on the title page, and the alteration of the name of the Lord Mayor of London.

Plan of the Royal Exchange,
Shewing the Several Walks,
 for Merchants, Traders &c.



Another fascinating and famous series of directories was initiated in the 1790s. In 1792 Patrick Boyle brought out the first edition of his *Fashionable court guide, or town visit directory*.¹⁶ There was nothing outstanding about its size, but the format was unusual. It was a specialist 'Court' directory in that only the names and addresses of the fashionable and wealthy were recorded, and in this regard it was second only to Wilke's *Directory of the nobility* (1790). It was also the first London street directory, although limited to the West End. Boyle was an entrepreneur who had clearly identified a gap in the market and then set about satisfying the unfulfilled demand. So successful was his idea that he and his successors published two editions of their directory every year until 1925.

The editions were usually published in January, for the beginning of the calendar year, and in April, for the start of the London social season. These were genuine revisions and must have taken considerable effort to prepare. The necessary research and the class of likely clientele are reflected in the cover price, which rose from 3/- to 5/- in 1818. The price was then steady for nearly a century, however, a fact which seems incredible today.

The nineteenth century was the golden age of the London directory.¹⁷ There was a further elaboration of format and a remarkable proliferation of titles, especially in the rapidly growing suburbs. The eighteenth century directory nevertheless is an important source for historians, and the expansion of ESTC will help us to compile a fuller list of editions and their whereabouts.

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Notes

1. ESTC t031891.
2. ESTC t109185.
3. ESTC t031036.
4. ESTC t131651.
5. ESTC t014313 (1773).
6. ESTC t021337.
7. In BL catalogue, but recorded as missing.
8. ESTC t013191.
9. *Bailey's northern directory; or, merchant's and tradesman's useful companion for the year 1781*. ESTC t093410.
10. ESTC t140057.

11. ESTC t187007.
12. W. Bailey, *Bailey's London directory*, 1790. Title page.
13. ESTC t132145.
14. ESTC t050463.
15. J. E. Norton, *Guide to the national and provincial directories of England and Wales, excluding London, published before 1856*, London, 1950, p. 32-35. See also C. W. Chilton, 'The Universal British directory - a warning', *Local historian* 15 (1982), 144-46.
16. ESTC t132127.
17. See C. W. F. Goss, *The London directories 1677-1855: a bibliography with notes on their origin and development*, London, 1932, and P. J. Atkins, *The directories of London 1677-1977*, forthcoming.