

Directories

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Trade and commercial directories are a fantastic source of information for nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. The first directories emerged from the late seventeenth century onwards to provide information about trade and industry. They can be traced back to Samuel Lee's published list of City of London merchants in 1677. During the eighteenth century Kent's London directory was published in revised annual editions. Other industrial towns followed suit. For example, Sketchley's Birmingham and Sheffield directories and Raffald's Manchester directory in the 1760s and 1770s.

The earliest directories were established by publishers in response to the expansion of trade, evolving from the lists of traders kept by early registry offices. Publications of this era provided names and addresses of tradespeople as well as details of postal, coach and carrying services. From the late eighteenth century county and regional directories began to be published such as a Hampshire directory and William Bailey's *Northern Directory* in the 1780s. However, local directories were more useful to readers and proved financially viable for publishers. By 1800 they were being produced for many cities and large towns across Britain. Rural areas and small towns followed suit over the coming decades, though small villages did not generally appear until late in the century. Most cities and counties had directories by 1850.

The first national series of directories was produced by James Pigot from 1814-53. In 1845 Francis Kelly began publishing regional directories for the south of England and from 1853 took over Pigot's business. By the early nineteenth century methods of compilation had become more organised. This in part reflected the growing links between directories and the Post Office with many postal officials, such as Kelly, turning their hand to directory publishing as a means of aiding their postal work while also making some extra money. From the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century Kelly's directories were the most famous. There were still other directories at this time of course, such as those of William White as well as many short-lived series.



With Associates, [Kelly's Directory of Torquay and Paignton \(1963\)](#) [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

There emerged a common style to trade directories, beginning with brief histories and topographies of the area, notes on economic development, landownership and administrative units. They listed the principal inhabitants (the wealthy, the notable, court and government officials) and the names of professionals, businessmen, farmers, craftsmen, and tradesmen. Tradesmen and businesses could place adverts in them. Many directories were concerned with communications and listed coach and railway connections. They also came to list important institutions such as schools, inns and churches. By the middle of the nineteenth century directories of large towns, cities and counties were usually organised into sections such as by trade and street.

As the nineteenth century progressed coverage became more extensive with a greater proportion of businesses and the inclusion of more names and addresses of private residents. By 1900 directories were often near-complete lists of heads of households. The heyday of the directory in Britain was in the early twentieth century.

Directories are not comprehensive, nor did they record labourers, servants, and employees. They were also out-of-date from the moment they were published, often up to a year, and it is common to find people listed on directories after they had died or gone out of business. Publishers could also copy information from previous years or from other directories without checking whether it was still correct. They are, however, very useful sources to locate and add colour to the lives of past individuals and communities. Especially when charting continuity and change over time.



Kelly's Directory of Westmorland (1851), 49. Shown on the [Historical Directories of England & Wales](#). Image by kind permission of the University of Leicester.

Historic directories are often available at local reference libraries and record offices while large collections are held by the Guildhall Library and the Society of Genealogists. Many for Britain (and other countries) are available through [Internet Archive](#). The University of Leicester have a fantastic digital collection of [Historical Directories of England & Wales](#) containing 689 trade and local directories from the 1760s to the 1910s, with at least one directory for every English and Welsh county. It includes Kelly's and Pigot's directories, as well as those by regional publishers. Over 700 [Scottish Post Office directories](#) have been digitised by the National Library of Scotland from the 1770s to 1911.

References and Resources:

Information for this post was taken from the excellent David Hey (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Local and Family History* (1996), 132 and Mark D. Herber, *Ancestral Trails: The Complete Guide to British Genealogy and Family History* (2000), 133-40, 481.

Books:

Jane E. Norton, *A Guide to Local and Provincial Directories* (1984)

Gareth Shaw and Allison Tipper, *British Directories: A Bibliography and Guide to Directories Published in England and Wales, 1850-1950, and Scotland, 1775-1950* (1988)

P. J. Atkins, *The directories of London 1677-1977* (1990)