

## British Library puts 19th C newspapers online

November 29 2011, By JILL LAWLESS , Associated Press

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(AP) -- The newspaper coverage was troubling: London's huge international showcase was beset by planning problems, local opposition and labor woes - and the transport was a mess.

It sounds like the [2012 Olympics](#), but this was the Great Exhibition of 1851 generating stories of late trains, unscrupulous landlords and dangerous overcrowding.

Coverage of the event is found in 4 million pages of newspapers from the 18th and 19th centuries being made available online Tuesday by the [British Library](#), in what head of newspapers Ed King calls "a digital Aladdin's Cave" for researchers.

The online archive is a partnership between the library and [digital publishing](#) firm Brightsolid, which has been scanning 8,000 pages a day from the library's vast periodical archive for the past year and plans to digitize 40 million pages over the next decade.

A glance at the stories of crime and scandal shows some things haven't changed - including grumbling letter-writers complaining about disruption caused by the 1851 exhibition, held inside a specially built Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park.

"People were saying, `This isn't good, I can't ride my horse in Hyde Park,'" said King. One regional newspaper editor complained that the "celebrated p.m. fast train service to London" arrived two hours late and

warned visitors "not to trust themselves to the tender mercies of the numerous private housekeepers" renting out rooms at exorbitant prices.

The library hopes the searchable online trove will be a major resource for academics and researchers. The vast majority of the British Library's 750 million pages of newspapers - the largest collection in the world - are currently available only on microfilm or bound in bulky volumes at a newspaper archive in north London, where the yellowing journals cover 20 miles (32 kilometers) of shelves.

"We've got 200 years of newspapers locked away," King said. "We're trying to open it up to a wider audience."

There will be a cost to download articles online, though they can be accessed for free at the library's London reading rooms.

Most of the first batch of 4 million pages are from the 19th century, and include stories about huge international events, freak accidents and local crimes, as well as articles about Victorian celebrities such as Florence Nightingale, whose nursing of troops in the Crimean War made her famous.

There are stories of war and famine, crime and punishment, alongside birth and death notices, family announcements and advertisements for soap, cocoa, marmalade, miracle cures and treatments for baldness.

Crime columns provide a glimpse at rough 19th-century justice. Newspapers printed lists of people transported to Australia for stealing money, silver, cloth, hay and, in one case, "seven cups and five saucers."

The archive includes national and regional newspapers from Britain and Ireland, as well as more specialized publications. The Cheltenham Looker-On reported on society, fashions and gossip in the genteel

English spa town. The Poor Law Unions' Gazette contained vivid accounts of workhouse life, and descriptions of inmates who had absconded.

King said the library hopes the archive will also help amateur genealogists find information about their ancestors.

Library staff have already highlighted a few links to the famous, including an 1852 appearance in insolvency court by Simon Cowell's great-great-great grandfather, Michael Gashion, and a local newspaper item about the great-great grandfather of actress Kate Winslet, who was "embedded in a mass of bricks and timber" when a hotel facade fell on him in 1903.

Bob Satchwell of press trade group the Society of Editors welcomed the archive - some good news for newspapers amid all the negative press from Britain's ongoing phone hacking scandal.

He said the website "opens up a magical new window on a magnificent treasure trove of real history, recording the lives of ordinary people doing extraordinary things in vibrant communities, rather than merely the cold facts of politics and pestilence."

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