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# Magnificent Mercury

*History of a Regional Newspaper:*

*The first 125 years of the  
Leicester Mercury*

by

*Steve England,  
Leicester Mercury Librarian*

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Dedicated to:

Mr Terry Dwyer and the late Mr F Brian Thompson for their work on the official 'Blue' History of the Leicester Mercury; Miss Lisa McQue for the loan of her PC; Janet Rowlands, Leigh-Ann Holland & Carole Inman; Mr Tony Foy, for helping me with the technology behind the writing of this history; my wife, Sue, who now has me back under her feet on Sunday mornings; all former staff who have contributed to this history.

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*Back cover photograph: A printer checks the first edition.*

*Endpapers: The first issue of the Leicester Daily Mercury, from Saturday January 31st 1879. The front page was reset to match the original at the time of the Mercury centenary because the only copy in existence was too mutilated to reproduce. Pages 2, 3 and 4 however are from the original type.*

## Chapter One

# Setting the Scene

## Before 1874

Queen Victoria had reigned since 1837 and was to continue until her death in January 1901. In November 1871, however, she was 'deeply distressed' by a speech by the radical MP Sir Charles Dilke at a meeting in Newcastle. He had denounced 'the political corruption that hangs about the monarchy' and called for Victoria to be deposed and a republic established. Republicanism had been given a boost by the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, who had delivered a series of sneering attacks on Victoria's Hanoverian ancestors in his public lectures on The Four Georges. When he died in 1863, Victoria refused to allow him to be buried in Poets' Corner in the south transept of Westminster Abbey.

Liberal William Gladstone had been Prime Minister since December 1868. The disestablishment of the Irish Church, the Irish Land Acts, the Education Act introducing compulsory national elementary education and the Ballot Act were among the great domestic measures of his government.

In Leicester, the population stood at 95,083 according to the Census in 1871. A population which rose from 17,000 to 219,000 during the century not only had to be clothed, fed and housed, it also had to be provided with water, sanitation, transport, schools, hospitals and open spaces, as well as workhouses, asylums and prisons.

To provide clean water, Thornton reservoir was created in 1853, Cropston in 1866 and Swithland in 1894. Each in turn proved inadequate. For sewage, a pumping and drying station was erected near Leicester Abbey. A number of obstructive mills were blown up and the River Soar straightened to prevent floods after the passing of the Leicester Improvement, Drainage and Markets Act in 1868 and a further Improvement Act in 1874.

The death rate began to fall and Leicester gradually changed from a most unhealthy to a fairly healthy town after the end of the century.

*Below: Leicester in 1868: Horsefair Street looking from Gallowtree Gate before the Town Hall was built.*



◆ The first mechanical press, a hand-press with a mechanism for laying on and taking off sheets and automatic inking, was made by Friedrich Koenig and Andrew F Bauer. It was not a success. The first cylinder presses, also built by Koenig, were used by *The Times* in 1814, producing 1,100 sheets an hour. Readers were proudly informed that they held in their hands 'the greatest improvement connected with printing since the discovery of the art itself.'

◆ Edward Cowper patented perfecting presses in 1818, which printed both sides of a sheet for book and periodical production. These were called 'Applegarth and Cowper Royals' and were driven by steam and could later print between 800 and 1,000 perfected sheets an hour.

◆ The first typesetting machine was devised by Dr William Church. Type was stored in boxes and released by keys and transferred to a channel which acted as a composing stick.

◆ The *Times* was printed on Applegarth and Cowper flatbed 'four feeder' presses for 10 years from 1828. They reached a speed of 4,200 impressions an hour and took four men to lay on white paper and four to take off printed sheets.

The Mechanics' Institute closed in January 1870 and its books were freely presented to the Central Library, which was given by philanthropist Andrew Carnegie and erected on a site provided by the City Council. The Town Museum had opened earlier in 1849, formed with a collection from the Literary and Philosophical Society, at the former Proprietary School Building on New Walk.

The Council had been meeting in the Chamber of the Old Guildhall, but discussions had been taking place on the subject of a new Town Hall. Two sites divided the opinions of the Council. The old Cattle Market in Horsefair Street and the property in Friar Lane formerly belonging to the late Mr Beaumont Burnaby and purchased by the Council in 1866. Friar Lane was decided upon, but rescinded in September 1872 in favour of the site of the Old Cattle Market, which had closed on April 6, 1872 and moved to Aylestone Road. Competitive designs were advertised for, the cost not to exceed £30,000. The first prize was awarded to Mr F J Hames of London, who was appointed architect for the work. A memorial stone was laid near the main entrance by the Mayor, Alderman William Kempson on August 3, 1874, and the building formerly opened on August 7, 1876.

In November 1872, two competing companies gave notice of an application to Parliament through the Board of Trade for a Provisional Order to authorize the construction of tramways in Leicester. The Belgrave Road line was constructed first by the Leeds Company and opened for horse tram traffic on December 24, 1874.

By 1800, there were many newspapers in the country, but they were being printed, page by page, on handpresses and typeset, letter by letter, by hand compositors. News had to be released as soon as possible to readers and mechanisation of the press was required. In 1800, the 3rd Earl of Stanhope developed stereotyping using plaster moulds. They were however too small for newspaper formats. Curved metal stereo plates for newspaper presses were not made until over 54 years later.

Newspapers locally began as early as 1695 with the *Rutland and Stamford Mercury* (no connection with the *Leicester Mercury*), which was published in Stamford and is reputed to be the oldest newspaper under the same title in Britain.

Leicester's first newspaper – the *Leicester and Nottingham Journal* – was published on May 12, 1753, by J Gregory, in the Market Place. It had four pages, each eleven inches by sixteen and a half inches, with three

and a quarter inch columns per page and sold for two and a half old pence.

News reported tended to be predominantly national and its politics Tory. The date of each cable reproduced was given, often a fortnight old. In its early days, advertisements were few and far between. Some interesting ones included an appeal by a promoter for gentlemen to enter birds for a cockfight between the counties of Leicestershire and Warwickshire; a notice about the London to Nottingham stage coach, which left every Monday and Friday at 5am and arrived in Nottingham on Tuesdays and Saturdays, and an announcement of the forthcoming sale of the Manor of Halstead, two freehold houses, three cottages, 464 acres, the tithes of Marefield and third presentation to the living of Tilton, let at a yearly rent of £274/15s.

The outbreak of the American War of Independence and later the wars with France whetted the appetite for news and led to the setting up of newsrooms in the town. Mr W Simpson, of the Wheatsheaf, Gallowtree Gate, boasted he could obtain the London newspapers 20 hours sooner than any other newsroom keeper, as he was a clerk to the stage coach.

Several weekly papers began in Leicester, usually in opposition to the Government. They had various fates, finding that the Journal had become quite established.

First came the *Leicester Herald* and the *Leicester Chronicle* in 1791. Twenty-five year-old Richard Phillips was the founder of the Herald. He had started a commercial academy, followed by a bookseller's business, a pamphlet room with 'the most extensive assortments of new publications in Europe,' a music and pianoforte department, a 'Navigation Office' for the buying and selling of canal companies' shares and a department for the sale of patent medicines.

He ran a Literary Society and it was to members he suggested starting a newspaper with Liberal leanings. On the eve of publication he found to his surprise that there was a rival. Another bookseller by the name of Thomas Combe issued placards announcing the birth of the Chronicle. Phillips contacted him and suggested an amalgamation, but Combe did not agree and so the Herald and the Chronicle came out together. Both fought hard, against each other and against the Government, but soon failed. The Chronicle went first, early in 1793, threatened with prosecution by the Government for 'much political animadversion calculated to make the people discontented with the Government.' Two

months later, Phillips was prosecuted for 'publishing seditious literature' and was sent to prison for 18 months. He carried on publishing from prison, but soon after he was released, he had to close it down in June 1795.

For 15 years, the Journal continued as the sole newspaper in the area. In 1810, the *Leicester Chronicle* was re-launched with a staunch Whig outlook and had among its proprietors Walter Ruding, Whig squire of Westcotes Hall. It appealed, it claimed, to

'the modest and judicious of all parties – the middle class of respectable and patriotic men in which the moral and intellectual health of Britain lives.'

Leicester philatelist and friend of Keir Hardie, Mr P H Cooper, of Greenhill Road, who died in 1965, had in his possession a 'proclamation' made by Thomas Martin, printer, of Market Place, Leicester. The pamphlet records the original announcement of the publication of *The Leicester Chronicle*, No 1 issue, dated November 10, 1810. It was subtitled the *Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser*. The final note in the pamphlet states:

'They (the proprietors) make their appeal to the moderate and judicious of all parties – TO THE BIGOTS OF NONE. They address themselves to that middle class of respectable and patriotic men, in which the moral and intellectual health of Britain lives, not languidly, but vigorously. If they obtain the suffrage of this portion of their countrymen, they will console themselves for the neglect and enmity of the remainder.'

In a continuing, unsuccessful attempt to find a suitable editor, the paper was sold to a Lancastrian, Thomas Thompson, who became proprietor, printer, publisher and editor.



Above: The proclamation made by Thomas Martin, printer, of Market Place, Leicester, announcing the publication of *The Leicester Chronicle* in 1810.

The Chronicle had vicious opposition from the rival Journal, now owned by Gregory's son-in-law, John Price. However, both papers flourished and it was 17 years before another dared to challenge them.

In 1827 came the second *Leicester Herald*, founded as a Corporation organ, with a Tory outlook. In an era when the Press was shackled and not allowed to criticise local or national government, owners and editors continually ran into trouble. The Leicester Corporation prosecuted the Chronicle's owner for severely criticising the administration of justice in the borough – the case was dismissed on technical grounds.

George Brown, a prominent 19th century Leicester Radical, poured scorn on the city's first Tory newspaper, the *Leicester Journal*, and its owner, John Price. He said:

'These curs (the Journal mongrels) were quiet and inoffensive before they were infested with the Price Mange; then they became vicious and almost rabid, snarling at their betters almost very Friday.'

The quotation is included in a review of 'The Press in Leicester' as it was in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, by Derek Fraser, published by the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society.

Mr Fraser relates that provincial newspapers in the 19th century 'could both guide and reflect local public opinion.' During the 1790s, the presence in Leicester of two radical newspapers forced the Leicester Journal to become outspoken in its political bias and this continued for the first decade of the 19th century. There was in Leicester then a Tory journal willing to express Tory opinions, though the editorial as a separate column had not yet arrived. The development of the editorial in the Leicester Journal was accelerated by the presence of John Price, first as a partner in 1803, and then as proprietor in 1806. That it was Price who was responsible for a consistent use of the editorial did not go unnoticed by the Radical George Brown. From 1807 the editorial in the 'Leicester' column, where a strong Tory point of view was expressed, became the central feature of the newspaper. John Price was an important figure in the provincial Tory Press from 1803 to 1831. In many towns it was Radical editors who pioneered editorials and the leading of public opinion.

In many towns, also, the Tory press was slow to copy its rivals. In Leicester, though, Price was by no means the first to use editorials. He made full use of this new expedient and under his guidance the Leicester Journal became an effective force in local affairs. During the proprietorship of

◆ Stereotyping was invented in 1829 using 'flongs' – layers of paper sandwiched with glue, which were impressed on the type by beating or rolling and used as matrices to cast metalplates. It was 1845 before curved stereotypes for rotary presses were made and 1855 before they were produced for newspaper printing.

◆ Wood engraving reached a high standard in newspaper illustration during the 1860s. The photographic halftone plate, invented in 1881, replaced them and by the end of the century there were 95 process engravers working in London and many more outside the capital.

◆ The first newspaper rotary press to print from a continuous reel of paper was invented by William Bullock in 1865. He met an untimely end when his clothes were caught up in one of his American presses. His machine was improved on by Hoe in Britain and it was to become one of the commonest and most durable letterpress machines for newspaper printing. The Hoe Double Supplement press printed 24,000 copies an hour and by 1887 eight of them were used in this country.

◆ The first mechanical folder to be attached to a rotary press was at the North British Daily Mail in 1870. Previously, flat sheets were delivered to vendors, who employed newsboys to hand-fold them before delivering them.

◆ Newspaper tax was introduced in 1712 and abolished in 1855. It started at about one penny a copy but had risen to four pence by 1815 when The Times cost seven pence. Both newspapers and readers resented the tax and there were many attempts at evading it, including faking newspaper stamps.

John Price, the Leicester Journal was never the tool of the Corporation, but another Tory paper, the Leicester Herald, definitely was. Begun in 1827 by Henry Joseph Wilkinson, later to be dismissed for irregularities from the post of retiring officer, it supported the interests of the 'Old True-Blue Flag.' It was a completely scurrilous publication, claiming that its editor had duties more important than animadversions upon matters of general policy – a reference to its frequent malignant attacks upon individuals. Its remarks soon involved Wilkinson in libel suits and in one of them he was ordered to pay Richard Cooke £50 and Cave Brown £30. His inability to pay resulted in a prison sentence, during which time the Leicester Herald was run by William Vickers, under whom, to his cost, was revealed the influence of the Corporation over it.

The weekly *Leicestershire Mercury* burst on to the scene in 1836. Staunchly nonconformist, it was edited, printed and published by Albert Cockshaw from offices in High Street. At first it cost 7d, but with the reduction of the stamp duty on newspapers this was reduced to 4d within a few weeks.

Mr Walter Cockshaw of Shropshire Road in Leicester informs me Albert Cockshaw was his great great uncle and he describes the *Leicestershire Mercury* as the forerunner of a free independent press, a symbol of the future. Walter left school in 1934 and his first

job as copy boy in the proof-reading department of the Leicester Mercury.

Mrs Enid Allison of Wicklow Drive, Leicester, also tells me Albert Cockshaw was a relative, her third great great uncle. She says he was quite a character and a pioneer in his day. His father Isaac was an art master, book seller, engraver and printer. He ran an academy for young gentlemen and had one of the earliest circulating art libraries in the country. After his death in 1818, his two sons, Albert and Isaac Junior, carried on the business in High Street, but later Isaac Junior opened a shop in Gallowtree Gate opposite the Three Crowns Hotel, which was then located at the corner of Horsefair Street.

Albert was a dedicated radical and non-conformist. Acutely aware of the poverty and misery that surrounded him, he used the printed word to help to change the order of things. Along with other reformers, he advocated the disestablishment of the Church, the abolition of slavery, extended suffrage and the abolition of the Church rate.

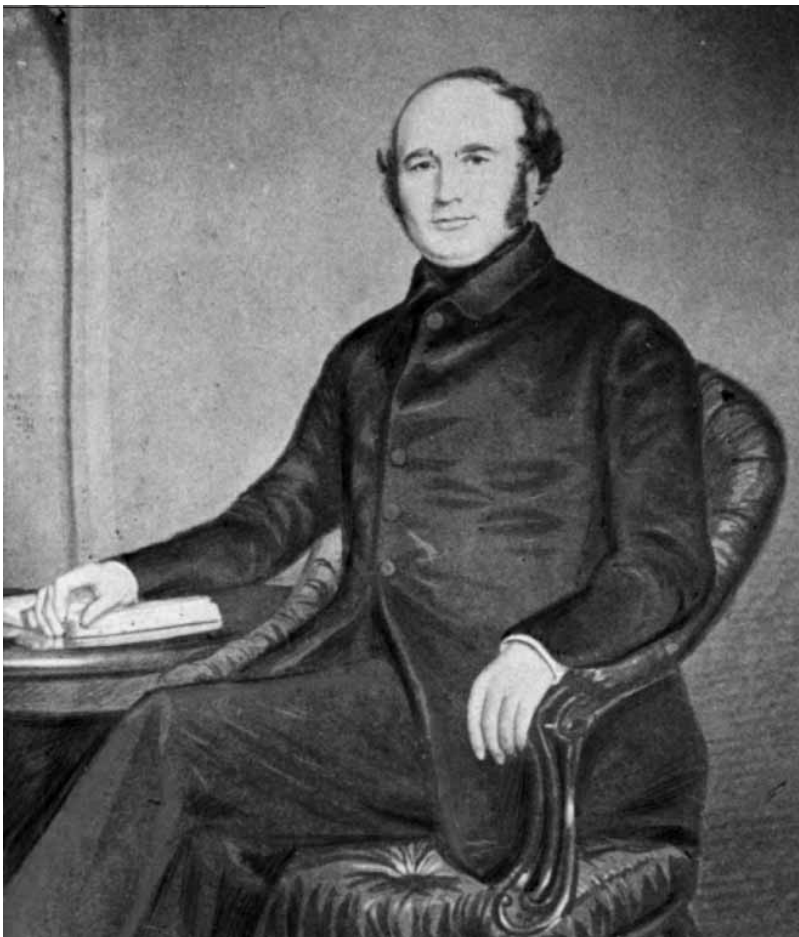
His former news room at his house was let as a general committee room and it was here that the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society was launched on May 15, 1835. Alfred Paget was the provisional Secretary and George Shaw, Esq, MD, was in the Chair. The Leicester Medical Society also used the premises.

He was always in conflict with the town's Corporation. After publishing one of his many pamphlets in 1833, entitled 'A letter to the People of Leicester on Corporate Reform, dedicated (without permission) to the Mayor and Magistrates,' he was charged with libel along with the editor of the Leicester Chronicle, who also published it. The whole affair provoked questions in the House of Commons. The charges were dismissed, however, when it came before the King's Bench Division, on an objection by the defendant's counsel. This was certainly a blow to the town's Corporation, who had brought the case.

On the Mercury staff was the local eminent Chartist, Thomas Cooper. He was found to be contributing to another new paper, the Midland Counties Illuminator. He was sacked and became the Illuminator's editor in 1840, at 30 shillings a week. He eventually owned it, but it failed and for two years he ran a succession of other unsuccessful Chartist newspapers – Chartists' Rushlight, The Extinguisher, Commonwealthian and Chartist Pioneer.

Albert Cockshaw was overwhelmed by the many enterprises he was engaged in and he was declared bankrupt in 1840, but his strong beliefs were unshaken. He moved to

Below: John Biggs.





London, where he was appointed to the executive committee of the Anti-State Church Association. He was also a member of the Liberation Society and was associated with the publication of the 'Nonconformist' journal.

Albert Cockshaw died on December 10, 1870, at his son-in-law's house at Oulton Hall, near Stone, in Staffordshire, where he had resided for some years. The final words in his obituary in the *Leicester Chronicle* of December 17 say: 'He no doubt with vivid remembrance of the past is happy in the change to the Great Presence in which he now lives' – a final epitaph to a man who struggled to change the shape of our society.

The *Leicestershire Mercury* continued, but with one proprietor following another. In 1843 it was in the hands of J Burton. Seven years later, Burton's former partner, G H Smallfield, took charge, but found it was too much to manage and sold his interest to the Biggs family, hosiery manufacturers. J F Hollings, a headmaster and brother-in-law of John and William Biggs, was entrusted with the job of running the paper.

In Loughborough, the town's first newspaper, *The Loughborough Telegraph*, was born in 1837. It must have achieved some success, because its wider circulation resulted in the title change to *The Leicester, Nottingham and Derby Telegraph*. But it did not last, because of the crippling government stamp duty of 4d a copy. In 1859, Mr John Gray started the *Loughborough Monitor*, which was printed in the Angel Yard, off Market Place. It was later renamed the *Loughborough Monitor, Castle Donington, Ashby and Melton Herald*, showing its increased circulation. Mr Rollings Lee bought it for £45 in 1862 and merged the title with the *Loughborough News* in 1870 to become the *Loughborough Monitor and News*. Two more new publications, the *Loughborough Advertiser* and *Loughborough Herald*, were later bought by the *Monitor*.

The *Leicester Herald* had, for the second and last time, gone out of existence in 1842. The *Leicester Advertiser*, named originally Payne's *Leicester and Midland Counties Advertiser*, was launched as an auctioneer's sheet, published 'for the purpose of facilitating business' and it cost two and a half pence in contrast to the four and half pence charged for most other papers by now. Its original neutrality and commercial aim was sacrificed to become the second Tory paper.

James Thompson, the historian, took control of the *Leicester Chronicle*. He was a man highly regarded in Leicester, having helped to found the Mechanics Institute and



the *Leicester Historical and Archaeological Society* and was honorary curator of the town's museum. The paper made rapid progress. He was soon able to acquire the *Leicestershire Mercury* as well and in 1864

he merged the two under the banner of *Leicestershire Chronicle and Mercury*, with offices in the Market Place. It became the most 'sympathetic' newspaper in its attitude towards Chartism in the county. Between 1846 and 1850, the *Leicestershire Mercury's* circulation rose from 750 to 1,100.

In 1848, two young men anxious to learn the printing trade entered Mr James Thompson's office. They were Francis Hewitt and Thomas Windley – both were destined in due course to become Mayors of Leicester. Francis Hewitt was born in May, 1832, into a family of farmers, who lived in the Naseby area on the county border of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire. His father died when he was twelve and he had to earn a living. Thomas Windley recalled 'They were the days of Tom Cooper and the Chartist risings, the days when Leicester mustered perhaps 40,000 population, when the staple industry was the hosiery trade and the Leicester working man was noted over

*Above: James Thompson, historian, who took over The Leicester Chronicle.*



*Above: Thomas Cooper, Leicester Chartist Leader.*

the country for his gaunt visage and his extreme poverty; times when the municipal franchise was limited to a few hundreds of burgesses, when strikes and lockouts were annual occurrences, when books were scarce and newspapers were dear. Those were the days of toil and struggle for freedom, for justice, for enfranchisement, for civil and religious liberty.'

Hewitt and Windley were indentured with two others at four shillings a week, rising annually by one shilling a week for the following six years. Not exactly model apprentices, (on one or two occasions, they were known to have taken half-days off and even return from a weekend at Hewitt's uncle's farm at Welford a day late, having walked there and back – a round trip of 40 miles), they did however progress well and Hewitt eventually became an assistant reporter, having learnt Pitman's shorthand. Francis Hewitt saw the prospect of advancement in sales and in 1859 went into partnership in a stationer's and bookseller's business at Caxton House, 80 Granby Street, opposite the former Picture House. Very soon, his partner retired, leaving him as sole proprietor.

He asked Francis Drake, a Leicester architect and Fellow of the Society of Arts, to design him a new shop front in 1868. Two years earlier he had been elected to the Board of Guardians of the Poor and was renowned as a reformer.

# Chapter Two The Birth 1874 – 1900

James Thompson had for a long time toyed with the idea of starting a daily Liberal paper in Leicester and the failure of other people's attempts did not deter him. He published the very first evening newspaper in Leicester on January 31, 1874, at 3 St Martin's, Leicester.



Above: St Martin's, Leicester, in 1974 with its traffic and modern lighting – No. 3 St Martin's, in the centre, was the first home of the Leicester Mercury.

James was born five years after his father bought the Chronicle and his main education was entrusted to the minister of Great Meeting, the chapel in which the very soul of Leicester piety and radicalism was nurtured in the 18th and 19th centuries. After joining his father as a Chronicle reporter, he became joint proprietor in 1841 and sole owner in 1864.

His evening publication was a halfpenny paper, consisting of four pages, each 20 in by 14 in, with five columns to the page. The front page was devoted entirely to advertisements, with more on page two. Most were Liberal election addresses or notices in the first issue, as the General Election was due to be held. Readers were told that it was 'published daily (except Fridays) at 3pm and 6pm.' It was physically impossible to publish two papers

(including the weekly Leicestershire Chronicle and Mercury) on Fridays and so the Leicester Daily Mercury, as it was named, did not appear on that day. After only three weeks, the publishing times were changed to 4pm and 6pm.

In the first issue, the leader, not unexpectedly, extolled the Liberal viewpoint and the back page was devoted to a report of a 'Great Liberal Demonstration' at the Corn Exchange to adopt two Liberal candidates for the Borough, P A Taylor and A McArthur. Page three contained news, much of it about Liberal prospects in other constituencies. In a three-line paragraph, readers were informed that 'the laying down of the tramway rails have been commenced – the first rail was laid on Tuesday near the horse-trough on the Belgrave Road.' Note the grammatical error – it was certainly not the last mistake. For the first three days of the following week, the date above the leader column appeared as: Monday, February 2; Monday, February 3 and Monday, February 4!

Amusingly, on the front page of the first edition, there was an advertisement which informed the reader:



First edition of The Leicester Daily Mercury. (The full four pages of this edition are reproduced on the end-papers of this book.)



Above: No. 3 St Martin's in 1974 from the rear.

## 1874

◆ Advertisements were accepted at the minimum rate of twenty words for 6d for one insertion rising to sixty words for six insertions for 5/6d. Each additional word would cost one halfpenny and six insertions qualified for one free insertion in the Chronicle as well.

◆ The principal agents from whom copies could be bought were published, with Mr Hewitt of Granby Street heading the list. It also mentioned Mr Oldershaw of Granby Street, Mr Bent of Town Hall Lane, Mr Catlow of Humberstone Gate, Mrs Emery of Belgrave Gate and Mr Bradley of Welford Road.

## 1874

◆ The rateable value of property in Leicester (on March 25 1874) was £289,508 and the rates stood at 7/4d in the pound, but this caused no concern compared with that over the income tax of 4d in the pound. Organisations rose up all over the country to put pressure on the Government to abolish income tax, which was then in its 33rd year. It was at its lowest (it had been 1/4d in 1856-57) but it was claimed that it was a grossly unfair and unnecessary tax. When, on April 16, 1874, the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sir Stafford Northcote) announced a useful surplus, he also calmed the public agitation somewhat by reducing income tax to 3d. In 1875, it fell another penny, but from that point started the upward trend which, in spite of spasmodic small fluctuations, resulted in the 10/- in the pound rate during the Second World War.

'Whereas a paper has been published connected with the Advertiser, a Tory print called the Leicester Evening Times, the imprint being J Hunter, 3 Horsefair Street, Mr James Hunter, of 26 New Walk, begs to inform the public that he has no connection with the miserable production in question and upon calling upon Mr Cox for an explanation he said it was his Superintendent's wife's maiden name.'

Leicester went to the polls on its fourth day of publication and the leader of the previous evening made it clear what it intended the voters to do:

'Tomorrow between the hours of 8 and 4 the electors of Leicester will record their suffrages under the ballot for the candidates of whom they approve. We cannot doubt what will be the result. Messrs Taylor and McArthur will obtain a majority of thousands over the misguided young gentleman who has consented to be politically pilloried to please the Tories of Leicester.'

In the event, Taylor received 7,408 votes, McArthur 7,283 and the 'misguided young gentleman' named Warner, 5,615. Despite Leicester's preference for Gladstone, Disraeli had won.

With the election over, more room was found for news and advertisements. The paper gave much space to the progress of the Ashanti War and a certain amount also to the bringing home of the remains of David Livingstone and the internment in Westminster Abbey.

As a historian, James Thompson wished to continue to tell the story of Leicester, not from hindsight, but day by day, as it happened. Production was largely by hand – handwriting, hand typesetting and handcars for the distribution of his editions. The sale in the early days was small at about 5,000

copies a day. James employed 25 people, not counting the newsboys, who were apparently so unruly that each afternoon a policeman had to be on hand to keep them in order.

Thomas Windley recalls: 'It was to advocate reforms that the Leicester Mercury was started and among its contributors were the Rev J P Mursell, Edward Miall, William Biggs and other well-known reformers.'

James was an energetic campaigner for the preservation of old Leicester and for the creation of modern facilities to meet the city's growing needs. He called for a 'People's Park' in an area of land reclamation in Abbey Meadows on the River Soar. Eventually, the park was designed by a Derbyshire firm, but it was so like the one James imagined, that it would be natural to suppose they knew of his ideas.

Through the columns of his newspapers, he was a fiery crusader in matters of public welfare, campaigning vigorously for better sanitation and drainage in the city, which, he believed, was far more important than building a new Town Hall, extending the Market Place or renovating the Post Office. The Town Council, which held its meeting just round the corner at the Guildhall, constantly came under fire.

James Thompson died on May 20 1877 at the age of 60 after years of fighting off the effects of an incurable disease and the town mourned the passing of a great editor, who, it was said, had brought 'dignity and authority' to the status of newspapers.

The tributes spoke of him as a reforming leader writer (he had written practically every leader in the Chronicle for 30 years), a most courageous opponent of abuses, ever ready with his pen to advocate local and national reforms.

Early in 1877 he saw a threat to Leicester's 14th century Guildhall and came out strongly on the side of its conservation. He did not live to see the outcome of his plea, nor was he to see the construction of Abbey Park.

When he died, a pocket edition of his great history of Leicester, which he had published in two parts, in 1849 and 1871, was being distributed as a timely memorial to a great man of Leicester.

Francis Hewitt was 45 years of age when James Thompson's death gave him the opportunity to buy the Leicester Daily Mercury and the Leicestershire Chronicle and Mercury from Thompson's executors. The late Mr P H Cooper of Greenhill Road, Leicester, had in his possession the original transfer agreement of the Leicester Chronicle to Mr Hewitt.

After just over three months, staff felt the need for a more powerful printing press. It had started with a Wharfedale, which it now advertised for sale:

'To newspaper proprietors. To be sold, cheap, second-hand two-feeder single cylinder news machine now used in the printing of the Leicester Chronicle and Mercury and sold in consequence of setting up more powerful machinery. Will print a sheet 52" x 32".'

To print with this machine meant cutting each page first, printing each side separately and then passing it through a folding machine. The type used was bourgoise, brevier, minion and nonpareil. Headings were never across more than one column and they were inclined to contain adjectives which expresses an opinion: horrible, tragic, amusing, etc.

A Victory web machine was bought and it was an improvement, although the process was still extremely laborious judged by today's modern standards.



Three generations of the Hewitts, Top left: Francis, Top right: Frank and Below Right: F Vernon.

Below: F Hewitt, Bookseller, Stationer and General News Agent of 14 and 15 Granby Street, Leicester – his advertisement in 1865.

Orders carefully executed in approved styles and selected materials.  
Old Carriages taken in exchange or repaired.

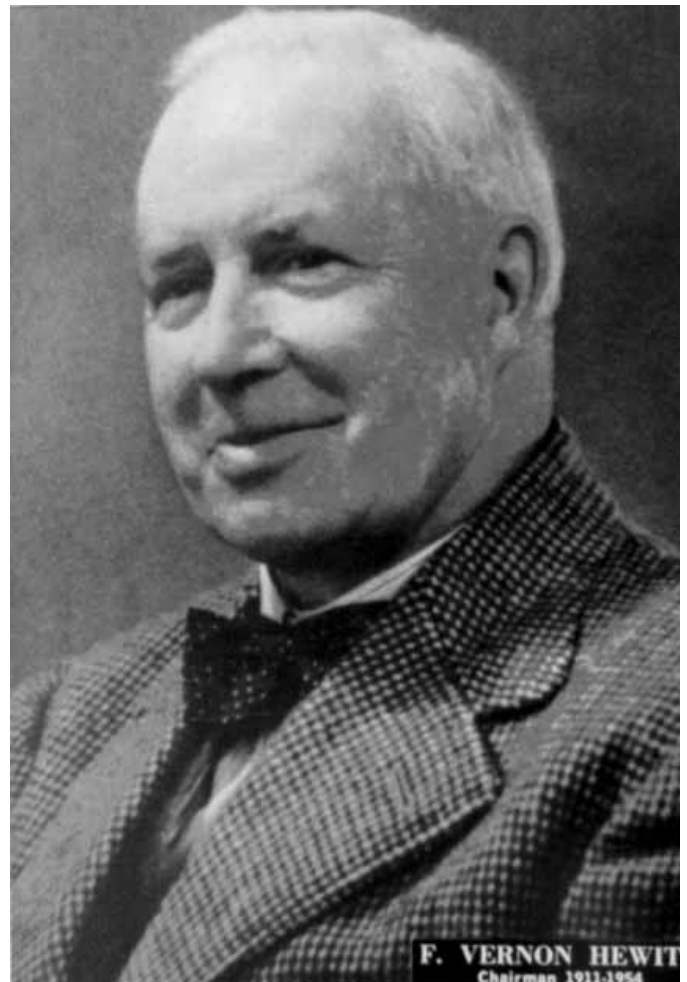
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**F. HEWITT,**  
**BOOKSELLER, STATIONER, and GENERAL NEWS AGENT,**  
14 and 15, GRANBY-STREET, LEICESTER.

**1866.** —ALMANACKS, DIARIES, & POCKET BOOKS for the year 1866.

**CHEAP MUSIC.** — 5,000 Copies of the "Musical Bouquet," at 3d. per Copy (full size), including the newest Songs and Pianoforte Pieces, always in stock.

**P**LAYING CARDS, a large assortment of the newest Designs for the present Season, Just Received.



Mr Tony Waddington of Witney, Oxfordshire, has send me an eight-page pamphlet, entitled *Sixty Years With The Press (1881-1941)* by former sports writer Sam Berridge. He writes: 'It was on May 2, 1881, when young Sam Berridge walked into the Mercury office in St Martin's for an interview with the manager, Mr James (Jimmy) Thompson. He was not alone either, for another boy was there also and each, we found out later, thought we were competitors for the vacancy. That was not so, for there were two openings and we both got a job. Thus Sam Berridge and J E ('Jimmy') Blockley, who later became head of the stereo-typing department, where closely associated for many years. The first thing that attracted my attention whilst waiting for that interview was a placard standing against the wall in the vestibule that read 'Death of Lord Beaconsfield,' which had occurred a week or so previously. In due course I was apprenticed as a compositor. By the way, I am writing these recollections on the late Mr Francis Hewitt's desk on which I signed my indentures, situated, I was told, in the room in which Mr T T Paget, the subsequent banker and MP for South Leicestershire for many years, was born.

Besides the *Leicester Daily Mercury*, as it was then titled, the *Loughborough Herald* and the *Melton Mowbray Mercury and Oakham and Uppingham News* (two bi-weeklies) and the *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury*, a weekly publication largely sought for its serial stories and general and district news of the week, were the papers turned out by a comparatively small staff. But all were happy in their lot and made the most of the opportunity as piece-time compositors, whilst the apprentices were set a task according to age, with a few coppers per 1,000 ens in excess of that task. We apprentices were not confined to the case all the time.

There were other jobs to do. Every Saturday morning I was detailed to take the 'L C and M' second edition forme from St Martin's to Lamb and Palmer's in Granby Place. It was only a single slip-in sheet that constituted the second edition, but that forme hung rather heavy before the journey either way was complete.

The Francis Hewitt and Son enterprise made rapid headway. It really commenced when everyone was astounded when the Saturday issue containing 12 pages for half a penny made its appearance. From that time, the Mercury became an even more household necessity as a result of its news value and advertising medium.

A further step along the path of progress was when Mr Francis Hewitt acquired the *Leicester Daily Post*, previously controlled by the Rev Joseph Wood, chairman of the Leicester School Board and Minister at Wycliffe Congregational Church. Mr Angus Galbraith, editor of the Mercury, was transferred to the Post in a similar capacity, with Mr Harry Hackett, the chief reporter, commencing a long and honoured career as editor of the *Leicester Mercury* (in 1882).

In my early days at St Martin's, the only transport available was a handcart, supplemented by a cab in an emergency. It was on a Friday morning after the Chronicle run had not been any too smooth. 'Fetch a fly,' ordered the manager. A four-wheeler was obtained from a nearby cab rank and off we go post haste for the Midland Station in Campbell Street, but not for far. At the top of Grey Friars, there was a sudden stop and it was found that a piece of the cab floor had given way under the weight of the parcels. That cabby didn't half let go. What he said about the Chronicle and everyone connected with it would not pass any editor in these enlightened days. But we weathered the storm and remained to see many alterations for the better.'



The Granby Street bookseller had served his apprenticeship with James Thompson in what historians now record as the ‘Hungry Forties,’ when the people of Leicester, in great masses, were workless and starving, a grim forerunner to the prosperity which the 20th century was to bring to the city of Leicester.

For ten years after becoming the owner of the Mercury, he retained his bookshop and his flair for knowing what the public wanted was shown when, during the Egyptian wars, he placed in his windows copies of the Illustrated London News and other pictorial periodicals with their graphic reproduction of war scenes – the police had to be called to control the crowds surging round the shop to look at the pictures.

He had been elected to the Board of Guardians in 1866 and in 1871 had beaten a Tory by 255 to 18 votes for a seat on the Town Council, representing North St Margaret’s Ward. He had also given active assistance to Liberal parliamentary candidates and shortly after the general election of 1880, which saw Gladstone and the Liberal Party at the head of the polls, the Liberals of the North Leicestershire constituency persuaded him to establish two more newspapers, the Loughborough Herald and the Melton Mowbray Mercury. Two years later he bought the Leicester Daily Post, a morning newspaper which had been founded by a Nottingham man. It was published from 39 Humberstone Gate, now the Mannie Social Club, with the Rev J Woods as editor.

Ready-set type used to be taken from the Leicester Mercury offices in St Martin’s to Humberstone Gate by hand-truck. On one occasion this truck collapsed under the weight in Cank Street and the type was spilled all over the road. He now owned five newspapers.

Francis left the Town Council for health reasons after his first term ended, but in 1878 he had sufficiently recovered to allow his name to go forward in the place of his friend Thomas Windley, who had been made an alderman. He was returned unopposed and in 1882 he was elected Mayor of Leicester. During his year of office, the Mayoress presented him with a son and to celebrate the event they were presented by the borough with a silver cradle. His son was given the name Leicester to mark the occasion. This was Francis Hewitt’s second son in seven children. By his first wife he had a son, Francis, and a daughter. After her death, he married Miss Elizabeth Cook, by whom he had four daughters and a son. Both sons were destined to join their father’s business, the elder at the age of 27 becoming a partner with his father in 1888 by which time the Mercury had doubled its circulation to 10,000 a day.

1888 was an important year in the Leicester Mercury’s history. The premises in St Martin’s had become wholly inadequate. The publications were being even more widely read and set a standard of journalism which was fully recognised. The business acquired property in Albion Street and Wellington Street. It had been up for auction



*Opposite page: A Triumphal Arch erected in Belgrave Gate specially for the Royal Visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales when they came to open the Abbey Park in May 1882.*

*Left: Albion Street offices were completed for occupation in 1890 – the architect had incorporated this striking heraldic griffin sculpture.*

*Right: Harry Hackett, the Leicester Mercury's first non-proprietor editor.*



### 1895

◆ The average wage of a compositor was between 28 shillings and 30 shillings a week and there was no limit to the amount of hours he might be asked to work. If he could write, he would double up as a reporter as well.

◆ To be first with the story was the name of the game – even if it meant setting the type for a court case held elsewhere at a local firm of printers and bringing it back. A simultaneous fire bell as that which would alert the Fire Brigade in Bowling Green Street would sound and the fire engine would have a place reserved for a reporter from the Leicester Mercury!

in 1883 and when it came on to the market again Francis bought it for £4,900. It contained three cottages in Albion Street, numbers 25, 27 and 29, an engineer's shop, stables and three malthouses. The cottages made way for the boiler-house entry and publishing office, the engineer's premises for the front office and the stable for the side entrance. Completion came in 1890 and the move from St Martin's was made. It was to be the home of the evening paper and its associated weeklies for nearly 80 years until the move the St George Street in 1967.

Francis found he could no longer combine the editorship with his many other duties, therefore in 1890 he appointed Mr Harry Hackett, an employee of 12 years, as the first non-proprietor editor. Francis was on the Board of directors of the Press Association and in 1892 he was elected chairman (an honour in the newspaper world) and he took part in the moving of the headquarters from Wine Office Court, off Fleet Street, to better premises in New Bridge Street, Blackfriars. Later, he was also President of the Newspaper Society, the provincial newspapers' employers' organisation and did much to unite managements under the Society's banner.

To celebrate the move to Albion Street, he entertained staff and a few leading Leicester business men to dinner in what eventually became the composing room.

Mr Sam Berridge recalls the move: 'It was a great day when we entered the more

spacious and convenient premises in Albion Street in 1889, which really marked the beginning of rapid growth of an up-to-date and enterprising newspaper venture. Before the actual commencement of business in the new building, however, Mr Francis Hewitt entertained the staff to dinner in what was to be the composing room in celebration of the occasion. Mr Hewitt's guests included several personal friends and well-known local businessmen. Thus the composing room made history at the very outset. We had already replaced the Wharfdale with a Victory web machine whilst at St Martin's, but it was not long before that was scrapped in favour of the more up-to-date and rapid Hoe Rotary presses. This was a revelation indeed, for where in the old Wharfdale days a paper had three operations – printing each side separately and then feeding each sheet through a folding machine. But the Hoe did away with all that by feeding from a reel of paper some four and a half miles long to produce the finished article and counted into dozens into the bargain.'

It was not long before the first four linotype setting machines were bought, the first to introduce linotype in Leicester and one of the first in the Midlands. By 1894 the Leicester Mercury circulation figures hit 15,000 copies a day and extra staff were continually being engaged and new machinery purchased. In 1895 a second one-unit web press was bought.





*Left: The Francis Hewitt shelter at Hunstanton.*

*Below: The News Room on the corner of Belvoir Street and Granby Street, Leicester, built in 1898.*

*Bottom: Detail of the carvings in a archway at the News Room. It has been suggested the two figures represent Thought and Study.*

Francis was spending more and more time in the healing environment of Hunstanton as his health was failing, leaving his eldest son, Francis, more usually called Frank, more and more in charge. In 1897, at the age of 65, Francis died after a long and distinguished career of public service. A shelter was erected to the memory of Francis in Hunstanton on the cliff tops overlooking the sea in 1898. The local council renovated the shelter in the early 1980s.

The newspaper undertook changes in the editorial make-up, in line with many other papers. Readers were more educated and wanted general knowledge as well as the latest news in their paper. Useful hints on housekeeping and cookery found their way into the weeklies, with supplements containing a serial story by a well-known author. Illustrations in the form of drawings, mostly portraits, were frequently used.

Frank's early training had been on the commercial side of the business and he often joked that the editorial side constituted the 'overhead expenses.' He started daily editorial conferences, attended by himself, the editor, chief sub-editor and the manager, Mr James Thomson, a genial Scot who had been in the position since 1877.

For half an hour, they would discuss the main news items of the day and decide what and how they should be featured. Special editions with outstanding news of the day became more frequent. 1892 saw the first one – the death of the Duke of Clarence, eldest son of the future King Edward VII – and others followed – an account of the execution of a Loughborough murderer in 1894 and a train disaster at Wellingborough in 1898.

