

Using Historical Trade Directories

Trade directories are a very useful and accessible source of information about English towns and villages, and many are now available online and without a subscription.

What are trade directories?

Trade directories contain general information about towns and villages that would be useful or interesting to a visitor, and a list of some of the people who lived there, with their occupations.

Trade directories were published for some major towns in the 18th century. The *Universal British Directories* of the 1790s extended this coverage to market towns and some large villages, in a single national list. County directories begin to appear from the 1810s, and by the late 1820s James Pigot had published volumes for most counties. Pigot's directories did not include every village, but his series was taken over by Francis Kelly, a rival publisher, in 1853 and the volumes extended to include almost every settlement in every English county. Kelly's directories, and those published by the Post Office, became the best-known names, but other publishers were also active in this market. The directories compiled by William White are among the most informative for today's historians.

Trade directories especially those by the Post Office, continued into the 20th century, and were effectively the forerunner of the telephone directory and 'Yellow Pages', although they retained their village-by-village format.

The list of inhabitants within any directory is always selective, and generally restricted to resident nobility, gentry, professional people, farmers, tradesmen, craftsmen and other people a commercial traveller might find useful to visit. If an occupation is not shown, or

suddenly ceases to be shown, it may simply be that the compiler decided there was no need to include those people. It was a commercial decision – the more names that were included, the more the directory would cost, which could affect sales, but if too many names were omitted, the directory became of less use to its customers, who might not purchase it.

Even small villages can have detailed entries: the entry for Ashby Parva in William White's 1863 Directory for Leicestershire is just over a page long, even though there were only 160 inhabitants at that date. The information includes the location of the village, its nearest station, acreage, population, type of soil, major landowners, a potted history of the parish church and the living, details of village charities and almshouses, the village school, the date of enclosure of the open fields, the location of the post office and times of arrival and despatch of letters. A list of some of the inhabitants follows, including farmers, publicans and tradesmen, the village shopkeeper, schoolmaster and rector.

It is worth looking at a series of directories for your town or village. These will reveal a continual process of change and modernisation: the restoration of the parish church, the coming of electricity, the introduction of bus services, and the creation of a telephone network, to give just a few examples. You should be able to pick up these changes by selecting one directory in each decade, but choose a range of publishers, such as Kelly, William White and the Post Office, as different compilers had different interests.

Where can I find them?

County record offices and local studies libraries will usually contain a good run of trade directories for their own county. Major libraries, such as the public library in Birmingham and the University of Leicester library, have wider coverage.

The 19th-century directories held by the University of Leicester library are now available online at <http://leicester.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p16445coll4> and there are instructions on how to use them on the website.

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