PROVINCIAL NEWSPAPERS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES: THE CREATION OF A SEASIDE RESORT NEWSPAPER FOR ILFRACOMBE, DEVON, 1860–1

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The use of provincial newspapers by historians continues to develop. Study into their form and function is ongoing, while programmes of digitisation and electronic publication are opening up new opportunities for research. This article considers the relationship between newspaper production and the development of local communities. Provincial newspapers reported on the evolution of particular places and the lives of their inhabitants (as they continue to). As such they constitute a valuable primary source of information for the historian today. In addition they are cultural artefacts, a tangible legacy of the role of provincial newspapers in fashioning and sustaining local networks and identities. This article takes as its case study the earliest surviving newspaper for the seaside town of Ilfracombe, north Devon, a publication that lasted for just one year. The newspaper, Bright’s Intelligencer of 1860–1, is being selectively digitised as part of ‘Devon History Online’, a new electronic repository.

Introduction

This study is set in the context of wider research interests relating to the development of community history activity in the early twenty-first century (Jackson 2008a: 372–5; 2008c: 269–70). Innovation in information and communication technologies is a conspicuous driver of change, with digitisation and e-learning projects abounding. Alongside this, community history is recognised at different levels of government to be an important agent in cultivating local cultural identity, cohesion and empowerment. Indeed publicly-funded digitisation and other forms of local recording and archiving often incorporate the pursuit of social and political policy outcomes (Nash 2005; Sheeran and Sheeran 2009: 321–2; Thompson 2008: 102–3). In 2007 ‘Devon History Online’ (DHO) got underway. The project, funded by Devon County Council as part of its ‘Celebrating Devon’s Culture’ strategy, is engaged in the digitisation of a wide range of historical sources relating to the 29 market and coastal towns of Devon. These sources are to be made available through a public web resource. Objectives of the project include
bringing together sources to be found in various repositories across the county, and making those sources more accessible. The pursuit of these outcomes also overlaps with an economic regeneration and place-promotional agenda for the 29 towns. The various aspirations associated with the project will be accomplished through the exploitation of electronic media.

A pilot exercise for the north Devon town of Ilfracombe has compiled material from a number of repositories in Exeter and north Devon (Jackson 2007a, 2007b). A rewarding dimension of the DHO project is the bringing to wider attention illuminating sources located in disparate repositories. Additional funding from the Museums Libraries and Archives Council provided further support for this purpose. The museum in Ilfracombe contains a great deal of source material of value for historians investigating the town’s past. Within its holdings of newspapers is to be found the earliest surviving one for the town, Bright’s Intelligencer and Arrival List for Ilfracombe, Lynton and Lynmouth.

Bright’s Intelligencer was not Ilfracombe’s first newspaper. A newspaper bibliography for Devon (Maxted 1991: 58) notes that a Banfield’s Arrival List and General Advertiser is mentioned in local guide books as being in print from around 1854. No copies survive in public repositories, however. Banfield’s would ‘possibly’ become the Ilfracombe Advertiser (see Kelly 1866: 874). This in turn went through a number of other changes of title — to the Stewart’s Arrival List and General Advertiser, and then, in 1874, the Ilfracombe Gazette (see White 1878–9: 497) — before being incorporated into the Ilfracombe Chronicle in 1920. There is some evidence for a Stewart’s Arrival List dating back to the mid-1850s (Maxted 1991: 105). Surviving examples from this particular line of papers (Banfield’s, the Ilfracombe Advertiser, Stewart’s, and the Ilfracombe Gazette) exist from the mid-1870s only: with copies available from 1876 in Ilfracombe museum, and from 1873 in the British Library. Also appearing in the late Victorian period was the Ilfracombe Observer and North Devon Review. This paper lasted from 1883 until 1893, when it joined with the Ilfracombe Gazette (Maxted 1991: 82; Kelly 1889: 268).

The issues of Bright’s Intelligencer in the museum’s collection are dated: 1, 8, 15 and 22 June; 6, 13, 20 and 27 July; 3, 10 and 17 August; 7, 14, 21 and 28 September; and 2 November. The remaining copies for 1861 bear the dates of months only: January, February, March, April and May. The bibliography for Devon (Maxted 1991: 60) goes on to establish that the Intelligencer was ‘probably’ continued as the Ilfracombe Chronicle, North Devon News and Visitors’ List (Kelly 1866: 874; Morris 1870: 106; White 1878–9: 497). The Chronicle lasted from 1861 to 1954, when it was incorporated into the North Devon Journal Herald. The bibliography confirms as surviving only that run of the Intelligencer existing in Ilfracombe Museum — copies of the newspaper being absent from the collections of the North Devon Athenaeum and the British Library. The Chronicle, meanwhile, exists from 1869 in the British Library and from 1872 in Ilfracombe Museum. Although only Bright’s Intelligencer and its possible replacement, the Chronicle, survive from the 1860s, the presence of the other early and likely rival line of newspapers is recorded in a trade directory for the period. Bright’s Intelligencer finds itself not far apart from Banfield’s Advertiser in an alphabetical listing of commercial services for 1866 (Kelly 1866: 874).
The contents of the various issues of the *Intelligencer* have much to fascinate historians of Ilfracombe, as well as those studying the rise of English seaside resorts or Victorian towns more generally, or examining the development of provincial newspapers. Given the digital capacity and funding term of the DHO project only the front pages of the newspaper have been digitised. Sampling and digitally reproducing in this way is not without its conceptual and methodological problems (McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 10). Samples from newspapers can yield for readers new and exciting insights. They can also convey something of the immediate and rich sense of local identity that newspapers so potently capture. However, it does not provide for the breadth of analysis and understanding that can arise from a substantive scheme of reading, indexing and extracting from numerous pages and editions (Murphy 1991: 16 and 20). Nonetheless, it is a general objective of DHO to select a range of sources, and sections of sources, that can offer up illuminating insights and powerful senses of the local past, rather than attempt to complete an extensive and comprehensive electronic repository (Jackson 2007a and 2007b).

Despite the limitations of the digitised material, the content extracted from the *Intelligencer* does allow reflection on certain themes in the histories of seaside resorts and of nineteenth-century newspapers. Studying the front pages does permit connections to be made between the local history of Ilfracombe and the wider processes of change affecting English seaside resorts and Victorian urban centres more broadly. J. K. Walton (2007: 76–7) observes that there has been a growing interest in the distinctiveness and importance of seaside towns, stimulated by regeneration policies. Devon County Council’s choice of Ilfracombe as a pilot for DHO is indicative of this (Jackson 2007a and 2007b). However, as Walton continues, much recent research still fails ‘to recognise the unique scale, significance, complexity and diversity of this distinctive “family” of settlements’. Furthermore, such work has not managed to secure the credibility of the study of the seaside resort, for the research undertaken has not adequately located local change in the context of wider processes.

On the subject of newspapers, a 2008 conference discussed the importance of local and regional newspaper production, 1800–1925, and the significance of research to date. Contributors (McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 5–7) set out the historiography of the newspaper press. The nineteenth century itself, a time of spectacular growth in newspaper output, yielded a number of major press histories. However, it has been work by historians since the late 1950s that has come to recognise, chronicle and analyse the place of the press in Victorian culture, and to steadily establish its study as a field of specialist and systematic enquiry. Moreover, considerable research activity in the last twenty years has done much to extend and deepen knowledge and understanding among historians of the press. Approaches have moved on from regarding the value of newspapers as being measured only in terms of their potential as primary sources of historical information. There exists today a more holistic appreciation of their character and purpose in the past. Research has shed new light on the diversity apparent within historical newspapers, and the nature and extent of their political and cultural influence. Also evident in press history is a much-welcome growth in interest in the form and function of local and regional newspapers. This has sought to challenge the dominance of discussion of metropolitan publication within the historiography — a tendency that has lingered too long (McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 8; and also Walker 2006: 373–4).
conference of 2008 (McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 10) also drew attention to areas open to further enquiry: the examination of specialist subject newspapers; the study of particular content across newspapers (for example, on children’s columns, Milton 2009; or, on football in the Sheffield press, Jackson 2009); the relationship between metropolitan and provincial production (see Hobbs 2009 on the ‘national’ function of ‘provincial’ newspapers); a shift of attention towards publication in the first half of the twentieth century (a recent example, on sensationalism in the Edwardian press of Wolverhampton, being by Benson 2009); and, considered in this article, the role of newspapers in community identity formation (see also Lester 2009 on North-East London).

A helpful approach considered in the conference of 2008, and one pursued in this article, is to understand newspapers not only as primary sources (as the ‘mine’ of information that they have long been for historians), but also as cultural artefacts, the legacy of the historical processes that newspapers themselves were active participants in. Provincial newspapers were agents or ‘fora’ contributing to the creation of communities, not just ‘fact’-laden reports (McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 9–10). As the former they shed light on the interconnections between local and wider networks of influence and place-identity formation (Hobbs 2009: 22–3; Lester 2009: 44–5). Indeed by utilising newspaper history methodology this minor study of a north Devon resort seeks to position itself into a broader research context. A glimpse at Ilfracombe through the pages of Bright’s Intelligencer is an insight into the function of provincial newspapers in the development of nineteenth-century communities, and more specifically those communities of the seaside resort type.

The Reporting of Facts: Newspapers as Primary Sources

Bright’s Intelligencer is a valuable source for exploring the history of Ilfracombe in the early 1860s. The editions of June 1860 to May 1861 provide rich commentary on the development of this seaside resort. The front pages of the Intelligencer are dominated by the editor’s leader, generally occupying the wide left hand and some of the equally-sized right hand column. A narrow centre column begins a listing of ‘Residents and Visitors’, arranged alphabetically by address, which continues on through the pages of each issue. On the front pages this central column accommodates the names of those in residence at Adelaide Terrace, followed by Bath Cottages, Belvedere Terrace, Broad Street, Caroline Place, Castle Place and, where space allows, the first entries for those staying in Church Street. The remainder of the right hand column (from after the end of the leader), presents local news and notices, and occasionally national events that were deemed to be worthy of a front page profile.

Effective editorial input, however selective and subjective in manner, would be mindful of the pragmatic consideration of attracting a subscribing readership (Murphy 1991: 20–1). Thus, the front pages of the Intelligencer ought to offer relevant and helpful insight into the life of mid-Victorian Ilfracombe. Through the various lengthy leaders one can read commentary on what the editor at least perceived to be as among the foremost interests and concerns for many of the inhabitants of Ilfracombe in 1860–1. By this time the town had become well established as a tourist centre, with provision improved and much building works undertaken. Between 1801 and 1851 the population
of the town had doubled. This coincided with national trends that saw the seaside resorts as some of the fastest growing centres — ‘industrial’ places offering ‘health and leisure as [their] products’ (Walton 2005). Indeed the appearance of the newspaper came at an essential time of transition for the town. It was reaching the end of its phase of development as a ‘select’ resort. Its reputation was being brought to wider attention through publications like Philip Gosse’s *A naturalist’s rambles on the Devon coast of 1853* and *Sea-side pleasure: sketches in the neighbourhood of Ilfracombe* of 1861 (Travis 1993: 168; Walvin 1978: 73–4). Ilfracombe was soon to enter a new period, from the 1870s, that featured its mutation into a more ‘popular’ centre. This would bring greater visitor numbers and a wider social mix, as well as further urban growth; a direction mirrored in resorts elsewhere (Walton 1981: 249). The town would double again between 1861 and ‘91. The arrival of the railway in 1874 was summoned by and in turn hastened such processes (Bates 2007: 29–30; Hoskins 1954: 414–5; May 1983: 195–200).

Regionally, a significant number of the county’s first town newspapers were those of the emerging, large seaside resorts. These early newspapers were designed to meet the interests and habits of visitors as well as permanent residents. Like the *Intelligencer*, production was more regular in the summer season, and content included lists of the ‘more fashionable holiday makers’ and local directory information (Maxted 1991: 40–1). The arrival’s lists themselves offer valuable information for analysis (Brown and Brown 2003, 87–92; Walton and McGloin 1979: 324–7). Among the early town newspapers of the county were those for Torquay (1839), Teignmouth (1847), Sidmouth and Dawlish (1850) and Ilfracombe (*Banfield’s Arrival List* of 1854). Moreover, newspapers have proved a source of great worth in tracing the evolution of the county’s seaside resorts (Travis 1993). Ilfracombe was one of the relatively later expanding, north-coast seaside resorts. Its physical form and cultural life would come to be dominated by the impact of its Victorian and Edwardian phase of development, and popular tourism practices. Georgian architecture and select manners would not continue to feature as prominently as they would in some of the older resorts of the south coast of Devon (Cherry and Pevsner 1991: 499–501; Travis 1993: 122–3, 154–5).

Much of the editorial content on the front pages of the *Intelligencer* concerns aspects of, and challenges arising from, the expansion of the town and changes in its identity. Some issues were common to Victorian towns and cities more broadly. Hoskins (1984: 250) draws upon an indexing system of 33 master headings devised by a University of Hull team categorising the content of *The Hull Advertiser and Exchange Gazette*. Murphy (1991: 23) adapts and extends this to a list of 49. A number of the categories in Hoskins’ and Murphy’s lists appear as subjects for discussion in the *Intelligencer*, as they might for the newspapers of other Victorian urban centres. Forms of ‘improvement’ — in Murphy’s longer list of headings — recur in numerous contexts. The front page leader of the second edition of 8 June 1860 is, in fact, dominated by the issue of ‘Gas Products’, and the failure of the Ilfracombe Gas Company and the local Board of Health to provide for the appropriate disposal of industrial waste. The article opens:

’Dirt’ has been well defined as ‘matter in the wrong place’. . . Now as matter is indestructible, in other words as it must be somewhere, the object of all cleanliness is to remove it from where it should not be. Which things being so extremely self-evident, and clear to the most ordinary understanding, the recent conduct of Ilfracombe Gas Company becomes to us a matter of the most intense astonishment.
Descriptions of the strains being placed upon local infrastructure and services by urban development reappear in other leaders, as do discussions of the operation and effectiveness of local government and administration. Ilfracombe, like other resorts, struggled to keep service and infrastructure provision up to a level that was appropriate for a desirable health resort (May 1983; Travis 1993: 157–8; Walton 1983: 133). Elsewhere on the front pages, outside of the editorial articles, are to be found further reports relating to aspects of local government and social conditions. By the mid-nineteenth century provincial newspapers had become noticeably more opinionated and political, reporting and campaigning on issues arising from rapid urbanisation (Walker 2006b: 378–9).

Some of the subjects examined by the editor relate closely to the town’s emergence as an aspiring leisure and tourism centre, for example: the weather, flower shows, public architecture, footpaths, and the prospect of a branch-line connection. In the ‘Local News’ sections, completing many of the left-hand columns of the front pages, are to be found various accounts and notices. The contents of these frequently echo those of the editorial leaders: the activities of local government, the erection of new public buildings, meetings of amenity societies, and, again, the weather. The leader of 14 September 1860 devoted itself to the subject of the climate, commencing:

The autumnal show of the Cottage Garden Society, which took place on Wednesday last, was not, indeed, abundant enough in fruit, flowers, and vegetables, to give the chance visitor any fair idea of our usually mild and prolific season, but it was sufficiently good to justify the cheerful view of our meteorological condition which happily prevails at present.

For seaside resorts the promotion of the likes of good governance, public health, well-appointed facilities, attractive scenery and good weather was essential in attracting visitors. Claims would often be exaggerated in order to bring repute and to out-compete rival resorts (Travis 1993: 54–5, 92–3, 145). Newspapers were not alone in this, for other forms of local print culture also engaged in the promotion of place. Indeed Banfield published not only an Arrival List and Advertiser, but had also been producing local guides for some time, such as the A guide to Ilfracombe and the neighbouring towns of 1830 and 1840 (Banfield 1830; Banfield 1840).

The Formation of Networks and Community Identity: Newspapers as Artifacts

The value of Bright’s Intelligencer extends further than offering a record of local change in an English seaside town. The opening and closing editorial leaders give the historian a useful insight into how one particular newspaper sought to act as an agent by operating within networks and contributing to the creation of community identity. Anonymity in the writing of newspapers means that the ‘processes behind the making of the newspaper remain illusive’ (Murphy 1991: 22). However, historians studying the development of newspapers may find the two leader articles interesting in themselves as sources. They are a reflection of what was in the minds of publishers and editors at a time of considerable expansion for provincial newspaper production and consumption. Improvements in printing technology, the reduction of stamp duty on newspapers in 1836 and its abolition in 1855, and improvements in transportation were of great significance in bringing about a new phase of growth (Walker 2006b: 382–4). It seems
that *Bright's Intelligencer* was launched with an air of aspiration and expectation. For its editor, the newspaper’s creation reflected the innovativeness of the age. The first leader, dominating the front page, opens with:

A hasty pen-scrawl on a well-worn blotting-pad was the embryo of SIR JOHN PAXTON’S great glass palace of ’51: the ink-stained barrel of a used-up pen the embryo of GEORGE STEPHENSON’S mighty tubular bridge which spans the whirling eddies of the Menai Straits as lightly as a scaffold-plank, and as firmly as the primal rocks.

The subsequent section develops the ecological analogy further in order to express the newspaper’s hopes and intentions. Envisaged here is an organic entity dependent for its existence on the local populace:

Now an embryo though historically an imperfect, is not, necessarily, a useless organism. It holds its own in the scale of organisms. It is supporting and supported in its little life. But, and herein it differs from typical perfection, it is progressive, this is its essence; if it lives, and as it lives, it improves, rises in the scale towards that type of which it is the sketch. With which analogy we preface our first number of a local Intelligencer, to which, however insignificant in form and obvious in matter, we venture to call the attention of the residents of the district, as being essentially an embryo.

The next paragraph is a key one in which a number of perspectives interrelate:

And of what may it be asked? Of that, we reply, which is the want, and which it is to be either the blessing or curse of every town which is rising from insignificance to notoriety; from the deadness of isolation to the activity of centralised accumulated thought. A local literary organ, in simple words, a newspaper, written, printed, and published in the place whose name it bears, is a boon only fully appreciated perhaps, as most blessings are, by its loss. But such a paper must be well written, ably edited, of no extreme party principles, and self-supporting. Of the former items we have to speak hereafter; on the last cause we may say a few words. It is no difficult or uncommon thing to speculate in the foundation of local ‘organs;’ so much capital, so much talent is risked upon the chance of creating a demand which confessedly does not exist. So a ‘cheap Jack’ carries his wares to market in a gaudily painted cart, and blows a trumpet and jangles his well-worn coppers in his ample pockets; but, the wares are not always sold: the rural mind is perhaps too ‘bovine’ to eat hay even from gilded mangers, when it is contented with grass from dewy meadows.

This section reflects on the importance of a newspaper in the development of a local community. It considers the relevance of the publication’s political and cultural agenda. Here there is an undertaking not to represent extreme opinion, although the editorial does not rule out party-political leanings. It may be of significance to note that the Ilfracombe Chronicle, the newspaper that the Intelligencer became, would later be categorised as ‘liberal’, while the successor to Banfield’s Arrival List, the Gazette, as well as the Observer, would be regarded as ‘neutral’ (Kelly 188: 268). Recognised as well in the first leader is the difficult compromise to be made between achieving the desired level and quality of content, and also appealing to a readership wide enough to make the enterprise viable. By the mid-nineteenth century newspapers had become more political and actively engaged in informing opinion and policy-making. In addition the scale and complexity of newspaper production had demanded changes to the authorship and management structures. The function of editor became more distinctive, different from that of sub-editors, correspondents and reporters. The editor would come to focus more specifically on writing leading articles and reviews, and establishing the overall tone of the publication (Walker 2006b: 377–81).
From the analogy-laden opening paragraphs the article turns to a discussion of the production and format of the new newspaper. The publication of newspapers in seaside resorts would be attuned to seasonal fluctuations in demand. Understandably the *Intelligencer* would test the market rather than aim for regularity from the outset: ‘we shall offer a newspaper only when the locality is desirous of having it’. The editor continues more hopefully: ‘we usher in an embryo “Intelligencer”, which may at any time develop into the full grown honours of an Ilfracombe weekly Journal’. In the initial instance, though, the column adds: ‘This programme we propose to carry out weekly, until the end of the “season”, and we are able to guarantee a circulation of several thousand copies’.

The editorial goes on to elaborate upon intended content. One section reflects the newspaper’s attempt to appeal to both the interests and needs of visitors to the resort, as well as a broad section of the permanent, resident population of the town and surrounding district:

As we have said we begin life simply and humbly, we give weekly a short account of local sayings and doings—a occasional brief leader or resumé of local topics of interest—a sketch of some short tour or ramble which may be made by our readers with ease and advantage. We add an ample ‘arrival list’, and a bountiful stock of trade and lodging house advertisements. If to this were to be added an epitome of news foreign and domestic, a series of careful written papers on local matters, notices of new books and of all improvements and novelties in art, trade, farming and the like, we should have the type of Ilfracombe weekly Newspaper, which would be a public boon, and would prove both useful and interesting to all classes of the community.

The opening leader concludes by bracing itself for the response of the market: ‘the community must decide for itself. If it will inaugurate the demand we will guarantee the supply’. However, the publication of the *Intelligencer* lasted for one year, from the edition of 1 June 1860 until the last of May 1861. The copies held in the Ilfracombe Museum dating from June to September 1860 suggest that the publishers came close to their aim of weekly production through what was ‘the season’ for Ilfracombe. The town would have to work hard to gain the reputation of a winter resort that had been secured by Torquay on the south coast (May 1983; Travis 1993: 157). By the Autumn of 1860 either editions had become less frequent, or the museum’s collection is incomplete. Whether the surviving run has missing copies or not, it is certainly apparent that the rate of issue slowed. From early in 1861 editions cease to be dated by day and month, but by month only — with monthly editions evident for January to May.

The fate of this early newspaper for Ilfracombe is outlined in the leader of the final issue. Failure to achieve financial viability is not suggested in the article. However, there seems to be a recognition of the need to enhance the content in certain ways in order to maintain the newspaper’s readership. The editor writes that the ‘Publisher avails himself of this circumstance to return his respectful thanks to his subscribers and the public generally for their liberal patronage’. The column continues: ‘he begs to draw attention to the ensuing change which will take place in his publication, and which he trusts will give increased satisfaction to his customers’, and heralds the instigation of a new ‘weekly broad-sheet of the ordinary newspaper size’.

The final leader then goes on to outline the format and content of the replacement publication. Changes identified here include a quite different front page than that of the
Intelligencer of 1 June 1860. Leading articles would continue to appear ‘on some subject of general interest’, but, in the new publication, ‘short’ in length. One might speculate that the publisher had become uncomfortable with the lengthy editorials that had appeared since the first edition. Advertisements and leisure features would be introduced to the first page, and all arrivals’ listings moved to the fourth page. It could be suggested that greater advertising revenue and popular appeal were being sought by the publisher. When the proposals being described are compared against those set out in the first Intelligencer, there also appears to be a bringing more to the fore of general, national and metropolitan perspectives. Again this is perhaps to enhance the status and appeal of the publication. The second and third pages promise ‘all the features of a general newspaper, embracing leading articles, letters from a London correspondent, all the principal events of the past week both foreign and domestic’. Further comment indicates that the new format would enjoy wider popular and commercial appeal:

By this arrangement the Publisher trusts that he will be able to please all classes of readers, whether visitors or residents in town or country. Believing also that a general newspaper of this kind will have a larger circulation than one of a merely local description, he ventures to call the attention of advertisers to this medium.

Finally the leader announces that the title of the replacement publication will be ‘Bright’s Ilfracombe Chronicle, and general arrival list for Ilfracombe, Lynton and Lynmouth’. The article is rather shorter than the leaders of preceding editions. Certainly its final paragraph appears quite pointed: ‘The present editor of the Intelligencer desires it to be understood that he will not have any connection with the Ilfracombe Chronicle’. The May 1861 leader may leave readers today wondering whether relations between editor and publisher were a determining factor in the winding up of the Intelligencer and its replacement by the Chronicle. The lengthy and opinionated leading articles may possibly have been a basis for disagreement over the content and tone of the paper. Local newspapers are by their very nature partial, and this may well be most apparent in the content of leaders and editorials. It can be difficult to establish how popular they were, how well they were received, and how representative they proved to be of local concerns and attitudes (Jackson 2008b, 108; Murphy 1991: 20–1; McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 9). The last editorial does invite further research. How well did the Bright’s Ilfracombe Chronicle that followed fare, for example? How much did its style come to differ from the Intelligencer? The Chronicle is in evidence in a local directory of 1866 under the proprietorship of Bright (Kelly 1860: 874). However, historical research is hampered by the fact that copies survive from 1869 only (Maxted 1991: 60).

Bright’s Intelligencer of 1860–1 is evidently an illuminating source for examining the function of a provincial newspaper as an agent in building local networks and community identity at a time of great change in an English seaside resort. Provincial newspapers as ‘fora’ contributed to the formation of local identities in various ways (McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 7–8). They sought out and influenced networks and constituencies of a particular political persuasion (Packer 2006: 415–6; Stokes 2006: 427–9). In the first half of the century the social and political leadership in Ilfracombe broadened to include more men from business and the professions. These included the publisher, John Banfield, who joined in calls for civic improvement and administrative reorganisation (May 1983: 191–3). The Intelligencer declared no party leanings, but local politics and
governance were clearly to the forefront among the editor’s chief concerns. Moreover, newspapers would often declare impartiality while clearly practicing the contrary, in order to capitalise on a time of political change (Walker 2006b: 382). Provincial newspapers also marked out catchments that served to reinforce or modify existing spatial entities and their boundaries (Jackson 2009; Lester 2009). The *Intelligencer* carved out for itself a market district from within a wider region served by the established *North Devon Journal*. However, its full title — *Bright’s Intelligencer and Arrival List for Ilfracombe, Lynton and Lynmouth* — signalled its aspiration to encompass a stretch of the coast, including two neighbouring, minor and more specialist resorts.

The coverage of certain aspects of cultural life by newspapers was another approach to the fostering of senses of community identity. The increasing coverage of sport from the late 1800s, for example, is understood to be an important strategy through which provincial newspapers enhanced their identification with localities and regions at a time of increased competition with the specialist sporting press and the cheap national daily papers (Jackson 2009; Walker 2006a). In the seaside resorts newspapers played an active part in debates over the relationships between entertainment provision, visitor types, public behaviour and morality (Walton 1983: 210–3). In the case of the *Intelligencer* it is evident that prominent coverage of cultural life in Ilfracombe was attuned to the town’s evolving identity as a leading leisure centre, incorporating commentary on the likes of desirable facilities and undesirable conduct. In addition, provincial newspapers were part of wider systems and networks that determined what balance was to be reached between the local and the national in the content of publications (Hobbs 2009; Packer 2006: 423–4). Commitment to local interests and material would vary. It is evident that at the replacement of the *Intelligencer* with the *Chronicle*, the publisher sought to incorporate more national and international news, and to make the newspaper of more general appeal. It aimed to serve the seasonal influx of visitors as much as the permanent residents of the town.

Provincial newspapers contributed further to the construction of local identity through their operation within and by business networks (Stokes 2006). The publication of lists of hotels, boarding- and lodging houses, and their returns of visitors, could be the main function of a resort newspaper (Walton and McGloin 1979: 324–5). In the selection and placement of advertisements provincial newspapers more generally fostered the development of local trade identities (Toplis 2009: 85). The last edition of the *Intelligencer* indicated that its replacement, the *Chronicle*, would seek to make advertisements more prominent, while also consolidating the information provided on visitors and their accommodation. In addition local newspaper production was often just one activity among others for printing businesses concerned with the output of various published matter (Hobbs 2009: 39). The examination of the content of newspapers along with supplementary information from trade directories gives insights into their role in local economies. In the case of Ilfracombe the development of its early newspapers would form part of mixed businesses closely connected with the town’s primary economic function of providing for tourism and leisure. Banfield had already established a business before the appearance of the *Advertiser*: ‘Booksellers, printers, etc Banfield, J., (and lib. & stmps.)’ is the listing in a directory of 1850 (White 1850: 594). Banfield’s Library, with 2,000 volumes, was one of three libraries competing for trade in Ilfracombe by 1840 (Travis 1993: 91). By 1866 Bright’s, publisher of the *Chronicle* (formerly the *Intelligencer*), and Banfield’s, publisher of the *Advertiser*, appear to be likely rivals,
serving similar client groups of residents and visitors. Banfield is given as ‘bookseller, stationer, printer, bookbinder, subscription library & publisher’, and Bright as ‘stationer, printer, news agent, & circulating library & publisher of the Ilfracombe Chronicle’ (Kelly 1866: 874). By 1870 J. P. Bright, ‘printer, bookseller, stationer, house and newsagent, circulating library’ appears to have transferred the proprietorship of his newspaper. Again, though, its publication remains part of a diverse service business, the new owner being one Cornelius Griffith, listed as ‘tobacconist, and proprietor and publisher of the Ilfracombe Chronicle and North Devon News, and of Griffith’s Household Almanack (Morris 1870: 325).

Conclusion

For Lester (2009: 44–5), ‘local newspapers are often not merely the best available source for local history and community identity, but the only available source’. Provincial newspapers were of great significance as ‘formers as well as reporters of local identity’. Indeed there is further theoretical work to be undertaken on their contribution to the creation of communities (McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 11–2). Brought together, the leading articles and the remainder of the content of the front pages of the Intelligencer appear to give a ready overview of what constituted many of the key aspects of and issues in the life of Ilfracombe through the course of one year in the mid-Victorian period. The leaders suggest how a local newspaper sought to reflect and inform opinion, as well as project an impression of how the town perceived or ought to perceive itself. In a wider research context, Bright’s Intelligencer offers a useful example of the function of provincial newspapers within local networks and in the forming of community identity. In certain respects the role of a resort publication such as the Intelligencer appears to be similar to that of the newspaper media of urban and rural district areas more generally. However, there are distinctive features to be discerned in a seaside paper like the Intelligencer that would merit further study and wider contextualization, for example, in: the targeting of different consumer groups, the selection of content on local cultural life, the weighting of local and national material, the marking out of catchment areas, and the development of publication businesses. The study of provincial newspapers and seaside resorts makes a very suitable area of enquiry. In the wider history of the emergence of modern and mass leisure, the popular press and seaside towns are to be seen side-by-side enjoying an especially dynamic phase of development (Bailey 1999: 131–4).

For heritage theorists the exploration of community identity formation in the present is an important area of study. For local historians the creation of community identities in the past is also of significance (Jackson 2008a: 375; Jackson 2008c: 269–70). A publicly-funded digitisation and e-learning project like Devon History Online actively engages with these two processes, current and historical, simultaneously. Furthermore the compatibility or incompatibility of identity constructions, present and past, is particularly pronounced in the regenerating seaside resorts of the early twentieth-first century. Indeed in their heyday they were ‘crucible[s] of conflict’ that ‘brought together mutually incompatible modes of recreation and enjoyment’ (Walton 1983: 3). There is still much research to be done in connecting historical knowledge and understanding with the perceptions and policy making of today (Walton 2007: 66).
For the historian the provincial newspaper is an especially valuable source for exploring the past and more specifically the creation of community identity, given its reporting on and informing of this process. Microfiche technology assisted the ‘discovery’ of newspapers as a source for local historians from the 1960s, as did programmes of surveying, cataloguing, and indexing (Murphy 1991: 12–9; Rowles and Maxted 1991: vii–viii). It is apparent that information and communication technology is stimulating anew access to provincial newspapers and their exploitation as a rich historical resource (Copeland et al. 2006: 65–6; Hobbs 2009: 40; McAllister and Hobbs 2009: 10).

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Biographical Note

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