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News Letter

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History of the News Letter

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News Letter chief leader writer BILLY KENNEDY turns the pages back on the illustrious history of our newspaper

The News Letter – the oldest continuously published daily newspaper in the English-speaking world – has a rich and enduring history, dating back to its inception in Belfast in 1737. The paper was established by Francis Joy in September 1737 in the form of a printed letter from the Sign of the Peacock at Bridge Street in Belfast, and he was joined in the venture by two sons Henry and Robert. This was originally a single sheet of paper, 15 inches long and nine inches wide, and was printed in three columns on each side.

It was called the Belfast News Letter and General Advertiser and appeared twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

The first 15 years of the News Letter's existence, the legal year began on March 25 and ended on March 24. This explains why the paper of October 3, 1738 was No 113 and that of February 16, 1738 was No 152.

Bridge Street, where the News Letter was published, was one of the few streets in what was then a very small town.

The last issue to be printed in Bridge Street was that of Friday August 15, 1758. At this time the publishers moved to High Street, and by July, 1759 the sub-title of General Advertiser, which had been in use from the first issue, was dropped.

When the News Letter made its appearance in those early years, it was recorded that a great many people in the rural districts through which it circulated could not read its contents, and that men anxious for news assembled on certain evenings to hear the district school master read the paper. A Mr Hugh McCall, of Lisburn, a local historian of repute, and a valued contributor to the News Letter, recorded that the news sheet issued from the "Sign of the Peacock" was not only the first chronicler of current events in the Northern province, but had a more extended influence.

It taught the people the necessity of education, night-schools were formed, and grown men went through all stages of the alphabet, spelling and reading until they learned to make their way through the columns of the News Letter.

The annual subscription for the News Letter was ten shillings and four pence Irish money, or about four shillings English currency.

In 1747, the News Letter was printed by Henry and Robert Joy, on paper manufactured at Randalstown by Francis Joy.

Belfast at the time was a town of about 7,000 inhabitants, with Presbyterians having a dominant influence, and the population of Ulster was, for the most part, rural-based with the other main towns Londonderry, Carrickfergus, Bangor, Antrim, Newtownards, Lisburn and Newry.

Francis Joy, the News Letter founder, was 40 when his first newspaper was published. His ancestor, Captain Thomas Joy, accompanied Sir Arthur Chichester to Ireland, settling in Co Antrim and

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century by Ulster Presbyterians, publishing daily advertisements with times the ships were leaving the ports of Belfast, Larne, Londonderry, Newry and Portrush and the fares charged.

In August 1776, the News Letter had arguably its greatest-ever scoop, reporting that America had been declared independent through the July 4 Declaration of Independence.

The ship carrying the first copy of the Declaration of Independence out of America was bound for London, but it ran into heavy storms off the north coast of Ireland and was forced to seek refuge in the port of Londonderry.

Arrangements were made for the Declaration to be sent to by fast horse to Belfast, where it would be passed to another ship for delivery to King George the Third in London.

The News Letter editor gained access to the document and he printed the complete text on the front page of the paper on August 23-27.

The News Letter, being a radical Presbyterian organ, was enthusiastically in support of the colonists, championing their cause for independence.

Earlier, in April, 1739, the News Letter covered the trial and the execution at York of notorious highwayman Dick Turpin.

Other events which the News Letter covered included the French Revolution, the Act of Union in Britain, the Crimean War, the Boer War, the launch of the Titanic in 1912, the Irish Home Rule debate, the creation of Northern Ireland in 1921, the two World Wars (1914-18 and 1939-45) and the Troubles in Northern Ireland dating from 1969 to the mid-1990s.

The last member of the Joy family to be actively engaged in producing the News Letter was Henry Joy, son of Robert Joy and grandson of the founder. He became sole proprietor in 1789.

Henry Joy Jun. was an enthusiastic member of the Irish Volunteers organisation and the News Letter had supported the successful agitation for the abolition of the restrictions on Irish [trade](#) and for the repeal of Poyning's Law, under which the Irish Parliament could not legislate without the sanction of the King and Council in England.

The purchaser of the Belfast News Letter in 1795 was an Edinburgh company, consisting of directors Robert Allan, George Gordon, Ebenezar Black, James Blair and Alexander Mackay Sen.

During this period, the circulation had risen from 2,100 copies in January 1, 1789 to 3,225 on July 4, 1794. The price was two-and-a-half pence, but copies were passed from hand to hand, in some cases until they were in tatters. Joy, himself, calculated that each paper was read by six persons.

In 1804, Alexander Mackay became sole News Letter owner and a family link with the Mackays and the Hendersons was continued until 1991 with Captain OWJ (Bill) Henderson as the last chairman from that ownership.

English weekly publishing consortium Tindale Press purchased the Century Newspapers (News Letter) group in 1991 and they were succeeded by Mirror Group Newspapers in the late-1990s.

In 2003, the newspaper was purchased by the 3i [venture capitalists](#) and in 2005 ownership moved to Johnston Press plc.

The Hendersons assumed control in 1844 after Alexander Mackay's death.

James Henderson (1797-1863), who was proprietor of the Newry Telegraph, was a close friend and adviser of the Mackay family and, in his early days, he was on the staff of the News Letter.

When Alexander Mackay died in 1844, the ownership of the paper devolved upon his representatives, the widow of Alexander Mackay Jun. and his two daughters and it was to James Henderson that they turned to for advice.

Henderson recommended the appointment of his eldest son James Alexander, aged 21, and on April 11, 1845 the Henderson dynasty in the News Letter began.

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paper's size was 28 columns and the sheet was "as large as any hitherto offered to the Irish public". The price was four pence.

The principles of the News Letter were declared to be:

Loyalty to the Throne;

Devotion to the religion of the Bible;

Unservicing attachment to the Protestant constitution of these lands.

The first pictures in the News Letter appeared in the coverage of the State funeral for the Duke of Wellington in 1852.

Readers received a pictorial inset, illustrating the "great funereal pageant, of yesterday se'nnight". The inset consisted of a series of wood cuts printed on a sheet much larger than the News Letter itself.

This was the first issue of pictures by an Ulster newspaper.

In 1854, the News Letter had grown to 32 columns and the first London correspondent for the paper was appointed in 1858.

At this time (January 1861), the paper moved premises to Donegall Street and, for the next 140 years, the News Letter was published from this thoroughfare.

James Alexander Henderson became President of the Newspaper Society in 1862 and he was a founder of the Press Association in 1868.

As an Alderman of the borough of Belfast, he was Mayor in 1873 and 1874 and was a magistrate for Belfast and Co Down.

He died in April, 1883, in his 60th year.

Management of the paper passed to his eldest son James (later Sir James Henderson). He was a barrister and, aged 35, he took control, with knowledge of the newspaper industry acquired from a spell with the Newry Telegraph.

Sir James was also a Belfast Alderman and he was Lord Mayor in 1898. His sound leadership guided the News Letter into the 20th century in a Belfast that was one of the most industrialised and prosperous cities in Britain.

A high point came in 1887 – Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee Year – when the New Letter marked its 150th anniversary.

Sir James Henderson died in on May 1, 1914, a few months before the Great War began. The Hendersons were a family of service to Queen/King and Country and four of Sir James's sons served, one in the Royal Navy and three in the Army.

One Lieutenant George York Henderson, MC, of the 10th Battalion the Royal Irish Rifles (South Belfast), Ulster Division, was killed in action near Cambrai on November 22, 1917. He was decorated for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in the victorious attack on the Messinews/Wytschaete Ridge on June 7, 1917.

Two of St James Henderson's sons – H Trevor and Charles W – took over the paper's management on their father's death as the News Letter continued in its role as Ulster's leading morning newspaper. From 1737 to the middle part of the 19th century, the News Letter was a radical Presbyterian newspaper.

However, from the signing of the Act of Union in 1800, further cementing England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland's role under the Crown, it gradually became a much more Unionist publication which espoused the [economic](#), social and cultural benefits of the links with Britain.

This continued through the 19th and 20th centuries, more especially since the establishment of the Northern Ireland state in 1921, and today, the Unionist position is strongly upheld in its News Letter's

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as the paper itself, containing a report of Lord Castlereagh's speech in the Irish House of Commons on February 5, when he delivered the Lord Lieutenant's message on the subject of a Union between Great Britain and Ireland.

The Unionist theme was to be continued by the News Letter in its policies for the next 200 years!

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