

The Daily Courant.

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There were no daily newspapers in England in the 1600's. The Licensing of the Press Act of 1662 had the long title "An Act for preventing the frequent Abuses in printing seditious treasonable and unlicensed Books and Pamphlets and for regulating of Printing and Printing Presses". It also covered the importation of books, the appointment of licensors, and the regulation of the number of printing presses and typefounders.

The Act was initially limited to two years, but it was extended several times, until it 1695, the Commons refused to renew it, but the provisions relating to the licensor and to the regulation of the number of presses continued to be asserted for some years hereafter. The Government later controlled newspapers with a Stamp Tax, originally introduced under Queen Anne in 1711 at the rate of 1d. per sheet, but it was increased to 4d. per sheet in 1815, in order to force up the price of the cheaper radical newspapers to levels their readers could not afford. The tax was not only a financial burden, but, since it had to be paid in London, it was a heavier burden for newspapers in other parts of the country. The tax originally applied only to reports of news, and not to expressions of opinion; this enabled some newspapers to avoid liability to the tax. In this generally unfavourable situation, it is not surprising that nobody felt inclined to put money into producing newspapers; the chances of falling foul of the law and losing the product, the equipment, and all the investment were too high.



Blue plaque near Little Britain; photo Victor Grigas

On 11th March 1702, the first issue of the Daily Courant was launched by Edward and Elizabeth Mallet, next door to the Kings Head tavern at Fleet Bridge. This happened to be three days after Queen Anne ascended the throne, and ushered in a period of calm and prosperity after the wars of the previous reign.

The Daily Courant is generally considered to be the first British daily newspaper.

The first issue was a modest affair, just one sheet with two columns containing six paragraphs translated from the Haarlem Courant, three from the Paris Gazette, and one from the Amsterdam Courant. The reverse side contained only advertisements. It was priced at

one penny, and the complete print run sold out before noon. It avoided printing home news, because of the risk of offending the government and being prosecuted. It announced "Nor will (the Author) take upon himself to give any Comments or Conjectures of his own, but will relate solely Matters of Fact, trusting other People to have Sense enough to make Reflections for themselves."

The newspaper was sold to Samuel Buckley in 1703, who moved the printing office from Fleet Street to Little Britain. The paper went from strength to strength. In 1712, it printed an account of business in the House of Commons, taken from a Dutch source. Buckley was prosecuted and given a heavy fine, though the publicity was helpful to sales.

The Daily Courant continued for 34 years until it merged with the Daily Gazetteer. This publication survived, with several changes of name, until 1797.

