

“This Day is Published”: The Making of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection

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Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection Part II,
Gale Primary Sources¹
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Abstract: In 2024 a second part to the digital resource, *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, was published by the e-research and educational publisher Gale Cengage. This project built on previous microfilm (1977) and digital (2007) resources which made accessible the British Library's Burney Newspaper Collection, named after Charles Burney D.D. (1757-1817), whose collecting practices are responsible for around a third of the modern British Library Burney collection. As well as digitizing fifteen volumes of the original Burney Collection which had somehow escaped the scanner during these prior stages, the 2024 project introduced further contemporaneous material from the British Library's holdings. This article describes the process of digitization, from identifying documents, to imaging, to generating metadata and incorporating the material into an existing platform, for the information of researchers and users of this and similar digital primary sources.

In late 2024, the e-research and educational publisher Gale Cengage released a Part II to one of its most important and widely used resources, the digital *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*. The Burney Newspapers Collection, held at the British Library in London, is the largest single collection of seventeenth and eighteenth century English news media in the world. It consists of over 700 volumes of newspapers, newsbooks and courants from around 1270 titles. As one of the major digitization projects relating to seventeenth

and eighteenth-century newspapers undertaken in the last twenty years or so, the Burney Newspaper Collection may well be familiar to many readers of *The Burney Journal* who have used it for their own research. Moreover, as the title of this essay suggests, it has special relevance to scholars and admirers of the Burney family, since the collection was originally compiled by the Reverend Dr. Charles Burney D.D. (1757-1817).

In recent years, the Burney Newspapers Collection has started to generate significant scholarly interest. Katie Lanning, Andrew Prescott, and Ashley Marshall and Rob Hume have given some account of the Collection's institutional history—including the fact that only one-third of the current Burney Newspapers Collection is comprised by items collected by Charles Burney, with the remainder added by British Museum curators—and have assessed its strengths and weaknesses from a user point of view. Meanwhile, Gillian Russell (172) and Chloe Wigston Smith (147) have briefly assessed Charles Burney's collections of ephemera and theatrical prints. Finally, Sophie Coulombeau has begun to reconstruct Burney's reading and collecting practices from biographical and book historical perspectives, and to trace the process by which his collections ended up in the British Museum following his death in 1817 (72-73). In this article, I do not intend to address these topics; nor do I assess in great detail the specific content of the overall Burney Newspapers Collection, or the material that went into *Part II* of this resource. Instead, as Acquisitions Editor for Gale Cengage, I invite readers along on the process of digitizing such a collection, explaining how bound volumes in the subterranean stacks of the British Library are imaged and subsequently converted into digitized, searchable images on a screen. Along the way, I hope to provide insight into the technologies used,

and the decisions made, that helped to create this digital window into the landscape of print culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is the latest in a long line of ways in which these historical documents have been preserved and used by researchers, scholars and students for centuries—which, of course, began with the day-to-day acquisitions of Charles Burney himself.

I begin by offering an overview of the initial digitization of the Burney Newspaper Collection, which took place between 2007 and 2019. I then move on to explain what the digitization of the “Additional Newspapers” of Part II involved, and offer an account of the process, which was interrupted by the British Library cyberattack. The imaging, post-imaging, metadata and editorial phases of the process are all addressed in turn, with particular attention paid to challenges that emerged around dating and duplication. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on possible future steps for this project, and others like it.

I: Digitizing the Burney Newspaper Collection: 2007-2019

The first iteration of the digitized Burney Newspaper collection was launched online by Gale Cengage in 2007. This resource did not feature photographic quality images of the original documents in the Burney Newspapers Collection, but rather images of the microfilm which the British Library had made in 1977 in an effort to spare the newspapers themselves wear and tear.² From 2007, in partnership with the British Library, Gale Cengage digitized these microfilm images, applied Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to them, compiled appropriate metadata, and then placed the images on an online platform, accessible via subscription. The OCR on this early collection is notoriously dubious; there are many instances in

the original microfilm images where the text is blurred, or the image has been captured as one dark mass with few legible words. It is not possible for OCR to recognise words that are not there, so the output from these images can range from partial, perhaps picking up a few key words, to non-existent (see Figure 1 for an example). As technology progressed over the early years of the twenty-first century, the weaknesses of the original digital resource became more glaring. In 2019, the digital platform that had hosted the Burney Newspapers Collection was entirely overhauled, and the images migrated to an enhanced user interface.



Figure 1: “News.” *Impartial Protestant Mercury Or Occurrences Foreign and Domestick*, July 19, 1681 - July 22, 1681. 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection, link.gale.com/apps/docl/Z2001703197/BBCN?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-BBCN&x-id=7ca57634. Accessed Nov. 4 2025.

The 2019 enhancements included an improved browse and advanced search, with key search functions pulled out and explained for the user's benefit. The "Browse by Date" and "Browse by Publication" functions were brought in line with other Gale Cengage digital resources, such as the *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Nichols Newspapers Collection*, in a cross-product redesign based on user feedback . Other new features of this platform since 2019 include the ability to view keywords "in context" as part of search results (as a portion of the image result with the relevant search term highlighted), and the ability to view the digitized image and the OCR independently or alongside each other.

II: The Burney Additional Newspapers

So, how can there be a Part II to this collection, if it is based on a single, already digitized source?

The continuation of the *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection* was made possible by the existence of 246 volumes known as the Burney Additional Newspapers, a collection of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century material with a shelf mark beginning "Burney.Add," which, for reasons relating to similarity or overlap with other Burney Collection materials, were not processed in either 1977 or 2007. These were, for many years, held in storage at the British Library and inaccessible to researchers. In 2021, these items were conserved and bound into Guard volumes and were added to the ESTC (English Short Title Catalogue), and to the British Library's online catalogue. This work made it possible to digitize the volumes at last. This collection, much like the original Burney Newspaper collection, does not originate from a single source but was put together over time. Sources for the

material include the Paper Salvage campaign, run by the British Government from 1939 until the 1950s in order to promote recycling of materials as part of the war effort. As part of this campaign, items deemed historically significant were sent to the British Library for preservation, where they were gathered as a collection of uncatalogued newspapers. Individual gifts and donations make up the rest of the collection, from individuals including Sydney Robert Turner (1881-1972), an architect and philatelist who collected historic newspapers for their tax stamps.

The Burney Additional papers provide new titles as well as new issues of titles already found in the Burney Newspaper collection. For example, issues of *The Northampton Mercury* and *The Freeholder's Journal* introduced new titles to the online archive, whilst titles for which the Burney Newspaper collection already had holdings were extended. Some, such as the *London Chronicle*, had considerable runs in the Burney Newspaper collection, but a further 355 issues were found in the Burney Additional collection.

Beyond the Burney Additional Newspapers, there is another small but vital component, and that is fifteen volumes held by the British Library as part of the broader Burney Newspaper collection that were not microfilmed in 1977; whether these volumes were part of the original Charles Burney collection itself or inserted later by another hand can be ascertained from Burney's handwritten catalogues at the British Library. The exact reasons for this omission from the microfilm are unknown, but these titles have now been imaged from the original documents and appear alongside the rest of the collection. The shelf marks of this material are: 116a, 117*a, 118*a, 119a, 280b, 512b, 545b, 552b, 627b, 69*a, 84a, 92a,

99a, Burney 83a, and c.38.g.10.

These shelf marks represent around 1500 new issues within 62 titles, dating from the years 1649 to 1775: around 6,300 high-quality new images in total. Titles found here include *Country Journal* or *The Craftsman*, *London Gazette*, and *Weekly Pacquet of Advice from Rome*. There were also a few smaller items bound with the periodicals, which have been made available, including proclamations ordering the burning of certain books, for example Ordering the burning of the book “*The Fourth Commandment, Deformed by Popery Reformed and Restored to Its Primitive Purity*” by James Ockford, 8 March, 1649 (see Figure 2).

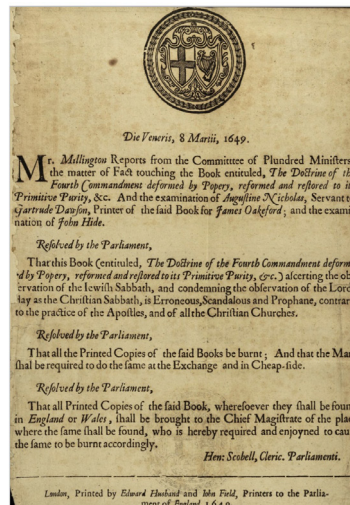


Figure 2: “Ordering the burning of the book ‘*The Fourth Commandment, Deformed by Popery Reformed and Restored to Its Primitive Purity*’ by James Ockford 8 March, 1649.” *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/LKXOYD122298272/BBCN?u=webdemo&sid=-bookmark-BBCN&pg=1&xid=5f7ca02d. Accessed 27 Oct. 2025.

III: Creating Burney Part II.

i. Cyberattack

It was intended that, unlike Burney I, the entirety of II would be imaged from the original documents rather than microfilm, marking a significant step up in quality and subsequently improved OCR, searchability and accessibility for users. Unfortunately, this imaging phase of the project got off to a slow start. In October 2023 the British Library was all but crippled by a cyberattack which, as well as much else, took out their catalogues, their retrieval system, and their ability to find and produce the right documents in the right places from the vast underground stacks. The stacks in St. Pancras are state-of-the-art smoothly gliding shelves, contained in a temperature controlled environment in neat rows of regimented boxes. Down there, in slumberous peace, the Burney Additional material waited. And waited.

Meanwhile, on the surface world, we at Gale were not entirely bereft. We had several large metadata exports to work from: Excel spreadsheets containing the core data for each item extracted from the British Library catalogue by staff there. This gave us the shelf marks, titles, and varying levels of detail on exact issues and dates available. These could not, post-cyberattack, be reproduced or double checked, but we were able to use them to generate an imaging list, albeit one where we did not always know exactly what we would find when a volume appeared in the imaging studio. The sometimes minimal information this initial spreadsheet contained was supplemented by the temporary online English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) at *printprobability.org*. This was of immeasurable help in allowing us to keep moving the project forward, as we were able to look up individual titles and sometimes add to the

information we had concerning the run of the title held at the British Library. We could therefore gain a clearer idea of what we expected to include in the final resource or confirm where titles were continuations or variants. Gradually, we generated a list of items that we needed to image.

ii. Imaging

We were finally able to move to the imaging phase in 2024. We were lucky that the Burney material was held on-site in London (as depicted in Figure 3), not at the British Library's other site at Boston Spa. That site had been deeply impacted by the cyberattack, and items held there were unable to be called to the St. Pancras site for many months. In London, things got moving a little swifter, and we were able to begin imaging on 19 July 2024, concluding on 11 November of the same year.

The imaging studio at the British Library is accessed through a series of passages that appear, and in fact are, identical. Do not forget your breadcrumbs. The room itself is a dim space where the imaging machines work steadily, in a soporific semi-darkness, with operating staff tenderly turning each page. Our imaging was done with Column-Mount overhead scanners, high-resolution Canon 5DS, mostly using an Atiz-Mini cradle scanner with 50-megapixel cameras. Prior to imaging, each volume had been appraised for any necessary conservation work: this might have included dealing with torn or folded pages, cleaning rot, or fixing or removing old bindings. In the case of the Burney Additional material, the material had all been conserved and rebound in guard volumes a few years previously, meaning that it was already in good condition for imaging.



Figure 3: The Burney Additional volumes in the stacks at the British Library. Image by author.

The key challenge at this stage lay in the physical identification of material to be imaged. Many volumes contained several titles, not all of which were in scope for the project. The chief reason for not imaging some titles or issues was to avoid duplication of material that already existed in Burney I. Finding the relevant titles or specific issues within a volume fell outside the purview of the imager, so a member of the editorial team manually identified pages to be imaged and indicated these to the imager. We made the decision to image more than we would probably use in the final resource, to ensure we would capture everything we needed. This allowed for further identification and exclusion of duplicates post-imaging, working from the digital images themselves—although this phase would bring its own challenges. Such an approach allowed the workflow to be kept up and minimised the time the volumes themselves were held in the imaging studio.

iii. Post-Imaging

Next, the images and corresponding metadata were sent to Gale's conversion vendor, HTC Global Services, which is based in India. It is at this stage in a project that every image gets checked and every piece of metadata applied to the correct image or issue. In the case of the Burney Newspaper collections, such metadata included the British Library shelf mark, the title, the city of publication, and the country or territory of publication. Determining the document type and article segmentation also took place at this stage. In practical terms, this matters for a digital resource since the "article" is the item that a user will retrieve when searching. In the 2007 digitization of Part I, many issues, documents, or pages had been treated by the search function as just one article. Even when multiple articles were captured, article titles for Part I were simply "News," "Advertising," "Arts and Sports," and "Business News." In Part II, we were able to allow for a more granular search by using headlines, where they existed, to delineate individual articles.

The final piece of metadata captured was the date of issue of the document. One might imagine this to be quite straightforward: newspapers are conventionally passable at recording dates. However, the material in the Burney Additional Newspapers straddles the passage of the Calendar (New Style) Act of 1750. This Act saw the transition in Britain from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian, which meant that the new year began to be dated from 1 January rather than the more conventional 25 March, the Feast of the Annunciation, or "Lady Day." Usage of the two calendars did overlap, meaning that some periodicals in the collection were using the Gregorian calendar before 1752; sometimes, therefore, it was possible to

find a double indication of the year in the period between 1 January and 25 March, as in issue 139 of the *Whitehall Evening Post* (1770) shown in Figure 4.

In order to maintain the correct order for user browsing, our metadata was captured based on a Gregorian Calendar throughout. This can mean that the physical issue dated January 1694 might appear in the Publication Browse in January 1695, as is the case, for example, for the *Gazette de Londres* of that year.



Figure 4: “Whitehall Evening Post (1770).” January 1-3, 1747. *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/SAJZXR916790421/BBC-N?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-BBCN&pg=1&xid=89c2e19c. Accessed 4 Nov. 2025.

There were also occasional cases where no date at all appeared on the document, as in issue no. 3 of *Momus Ridens or Comical Remarks on the Publick Reports* [1690]. Such an occurrence triggered a round of editorial hunting, where all available information from the library or the ESTC was checked, and the context of any surrounding issues considered, to identify a date where possible. In this example, the date was indicated in the catalogue title received from the British Library.

iv. Putting the Pieces Together

Perhaps the greatest challenge of digitizing this archive lay in the task of avoiding duplication of items between the original *Burney Newspaper collection, Part I*, as imaged from the microfilm and the new scanning of the Burney Additional material. Duplicate search results are a common bugbear of large, digitized archives, which can prove frustrating and a waste of time for the user. Of course, there may be legitimate reasons to digitize different editions or variants of the same book or periodical, particularly with older print material where there are signs of usage such as annotations. In general, however, duplicate items within the Burney digital resource were considered best avoided.

In practice, the process looked like this: a volume, or a particular title within a volume, was imaged. The images were checked for quality, and once they had passed this stage, they were made available to an editor. Using the existing Burney Newspapers resource, and a spreadsheet of metadata for the Burney Additional material, the editor identified which issues were already present in the digital resource, and which were not. The issues and images to be processed and included in the resource were indicated—sometimes this was straightforward,

and sometimes it required specific instructions image by image, if for example a page was found to be missing from an issue, or two pages that belonged to different issues had been erroneously placed next to each other within the bound volume. The issues and images that would have made for an identical duplicate, with no interesting additional factors such as annotations, were excluded. Ultimately, around 30,000 new images were identified in the Burney Additional volumes.

During this process, other elements were also manually checked. Each title was either matched to its existing counterpart in Burney I, or identified as a new title. In the former case, this meant matching it to the existing title's digital identifiers so it would appear alongside the other issues when browsing publication titles or viewing the issues of a specific title. For example, issue 15 of the *London Post* (1644), shown at Figure 5, was added to the six issues of this title already in the resource.

If the title rightly belonged with an existing periodical but appeared as a variant of that title, the variant was noted and added to the details of the publication if not already present (meaning that specific searches on the variant title would still produce results). In case of an entirely new title, for example “The Hue and Cry, and Police Gazette” (see Figure 6), new identifiers had to be created and the format—predominantly “Newsbook” or “Newspaper”—was allocated. The shelf mark was also captured, as were issue numbers where they existed. Finally, instructions were given for capturing the date of issue, as outlined above.

THE Numb. 15. ⁴⁵

LONDON POST:

Faithfully Communicating His
Intelligence of the Proceedings of Parliament, and
many other Memorable Passages certified by Letters
and Advertisements,

From { Oxford. Beist n. Worcester. Skipton.
 Bantury. Salisbury. Knaresborough. Laughone.
 Taunton. Cr. wland. Peckfieldmoore. Scotland.
 Poole. Newa ke. Pontefract. Venice. }

Prince Ruperts Letters written by his Majesties direction, & read in the House of Parliament, and the Committee of both Kingdoms, to send a safe conduct for the Duke of Richmond, and the Earl of Southampton, The report and probability of Prince Ruperts departure from England into Venice, being sent for by that State, to be one of their chiefe Generalls. The assurance of a hundred and sixtie five horse taken by Colonell Norton not far from Salisbury. Generall Lesley going to Scotland. The tender of the Swedes respects unto the Parliament, and their desire of twenty Ships to be lent unto them. The desire of the States Ambassadors to have a safe conduct to go to his Majestie at Oxford. A Vote that no Member in either House shall have any command in our Armies, and the Reason of it.

Passed according to Order, and Printed for G. B. Decemb. 10. 1644.



O let it goe then! Let the appetite of the unsatisfied and greedy Sword devoure all men, and let Religion be contented onely with female worshippers. We heare of the soft aires of Peace, but wee finde in effect the cruell progresse of the Warre, And indeede (if it be fit for holy Text to decent into a Pamphlet) The voyce is Jacobs voyce, but the hands are the hands of Esau.

Hee spoke out, and hee spoke home, whosoever he was, who said

P

that Treaties in this age are made rather to please the multitude, then to conclude

conclude

Figure 5: "London Post (1644)" December 10 1644, Issue 15. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection, link.gale.com/apps/doc/YAJUCQ825869220/BBC-N?u=webdemo&sid=bookmark-BBCN&pg=1&xid=d70dd062. Accessed 26 Feb. 2026.

v. The Finished Product

Images, metadata, xml, and the platform. This final stage of the process is the same across all the *Gale Primary Source* archives, from the early modern *State Papers Online* programme to the twentieth century *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*. However, this does not mean that there is no room to tailor the platform or to represent the various idiosyncrasies unique to each individual archival collection. A collection of periodicals, for example, requires users to be able to browse by publication title and by date, and offers the ability to search based on “place of publication” or “publication section” (options include “Advertising,” “Opinion and Editorial” or “News”).



Figure 6: “Hue and cry, and Police Gazette”, 17 Mar. 1798. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection, link.gale.com/apps/doc/SJKDRT032427610/BBCN?u=web-demo&sid=bookmark-BBCN&pg=1&xid=660dbca1. Accessed 26 Feb. 2026.

There is a further perennial challenge common to all digital archives—providing archival context to users, and helping them navigate a digital archive. The researcher looking at the digitized Burney Newspaper collection might be a scholar experienced with the collection, with newspapers of this era, who knows what they are looking for and at but has never heard of Boolean operators. Or they might be an undergraduate looking for primary source material on the celebration of Oak Apple Day in the seventeenth century, who is used to Google or AI tools doing much of the legwork. Gale resources intend to serve users wherever they are in their academic career; providing context and information to help early-stage users, or those who have not yet used digital archives for research, is a fundamental part of this. The key in-product resource for all such information is the Learning Center.

Here are tailored resources, providing instruction around searching, browsing, citing and reusing the primary sources. The workflow has been developed using learning objectives outlined in the ACRL/SAA Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy.³ This resource includes sample topics and searches, research examples, information on language and terminology, and some tips on researching using newspaper, pamphlets and newsbooks. Information can also be found on the background of the archive, almost exclusively focusing on its acquisition and treatment after Charles Burney's death (Goff, "Burney Newspapers"). Seven essays by scholars provide historical context on topics including the 'Early History of the English Newspaper' (Goff, "Early History") or addressing broader themes such as 'Crime and Justice' (Schumaker) or 'Slavery and Abolition in the English Newspapers' (Carey).

IV: Possible Futures?

The work of maintaining digital archives, responding to developing technologies and user needs, means that no project can ever be considered “finished.” The proliferating field of digital humanities has opened new avenues of research and new demands for ways of manipulating data; the creation of usable, clean data is increasingly important, as is the ability to easily use tools and analyse that data in a variety of ways. Older digitized collections may well see upgrades and improvements along these lines in the coming years. The Burney Newspapers resource is now available alongside other databases on Gale’s digital primary sources platform. At the British Library, anyone with a library card can access it, and it is available to members at many universities and libraries around the world, including the New York Public Library.

The increased coverage digitized as Part II does not mean that every paper from this era is present, of course, or that the gaps in the coverage are all filled. But it does increase the material from which scholars can draw their conclusions, exploring more deeply the historical milieu of Charles Burney and his contemporaries, of print culture at this time, and of the wider social and political landscape, all areas where there is much academic research yet to come. Digitization is the latest move in the long line of preservation and use of collections such as the Burney Newspapers and the Burney Additional material. The opportunities and challenges experienced by users will continue to iterate and change how people interact with these unique materials, hopefully for centuries to come.

NOTES

¹ My thanks to the teams who worked on this resource at Gale, Cengage, and the British Library; any errors or misunderstandings are my own.

² For further information on the earlier projects see Lanning, Prescott, and Marshall and Hume.

³ “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy”, *Society of American Archivists*, June 2018. <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2026.

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