# Belfast News Letter completes historic digitisation of archives dating back to 1738



The Belfast News Letter, the world’s oldest continuously published English-language daily newspaper, has recently completed a major initiative that digitises its historic archives, making them accessible to a global audience. Founded in 1737 by Francis Joy, a lawyer of Huguenot descent, the News Letter has witnessed and recorded significant historical events that shaped both Ireland and the wider world. With its earliest surviving edition dating back to 3 October 1738, the publication has now opened the doors to its rich and diverse history, covering everything from the American Declaration of Independence to the Crimean War.

This digitisation project, a collaborative effort between the Northern Ireland Office, the British Library, and online platform Findmypast, aims to enhance the understanding of Northern Ireland's cultural heritage. As anyone with a library pass or an online subscription can now access these editions, the initiative offers a unique glimpse into a bygone era, filled with social mores and events that have been pivotal in shaping contemporary society. The breadth of coverage includes ordinary happenings alongside significant milestones, such as the French Revolution, which dominated reports in 1789, reflecting the paper’s dual role as a chronicler of historical upheaval and local anecdote.

Ben Lowry, the current editor, emphasised the engaging nature of the paper's early editions, stating that despite their austere appearance, they were filled with a variety of content. “They look so severe that they’re like a reminder of an almost ancient age of poverty and hangings,” he noted, “but actually, you see the genesis of newspapers in them. They’re full of fun. They have gossip. They have salacious stories.” The initial run of the News Letter, which comprised just two pages, largely featured letters and relay news, restrained by the stringent censorship of the time. As Beth Gaskell, the lead curator of news and moving images at the British Library, mentioned, the focus was heavily tilted towards international news, indicating a clear prioritisation of reporting urgent events across the globe.

Throughout its history, the News Letter has held firm to its mission of documenting both local and international happenings. The edition that announced the sinking of the Titanic on 16 April 1912 exemplifies this niche; it was reported with a tone that would resonate with modern readers: “1,500 lives lost,” succinctly encapsulating the tragic event just days after it had covered the ship's departure. Such examples showcase how the paper has adapted its reporting styles and content to retain relevance across centuries.

Moreover, the digitised archives provide access to an impressive array of stories beyond just major historical events. For instance, one notable anecdote was published in 1739, detailing a wedding near Dunluce, where the inebriated bride’s antics led to the amusing mention of her falling and breaking her nose immediately after marrying. This blend of formidable historical reporting with local flavour underlines the newspaper’s capacity to capture the full spectrum of life as it unfolded, making it an invaluable source for historians and casual readers alike.

With the completion of the digitisation process, which was initially initiated to commemorate the paper’s 275th anniversary, Lowry articulated a hope that more historic editions may yet be discovered, further enriching the archive's offerings. “It is thrilling,” he remarked, alluding to the prospective future of the digital collection. “It’s very important history, but above all, it’s very readable and enjoyable history.” This commitment to making historical documents accessible stands as a testament to the Belfast News Letter’s enduring legacy, ensuring that its pages continue to resonate with readers long into the future.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/jun/01/worlds-oldest-daily-belfast-news-letter-go-digital), [[2]](https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/belfast-news-letter)
* Paragraph 2 – [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-boosts-digital-collection-of-worlds-oldest-english-language-daily-newspaper), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-24519102)
* Paragraph 3 – [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20552946), [[7]](https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/uk-news/the-belfast-news-letter-is-283-years-old-today-the-oldest-english-language-daily-newspaper-in-the-world-2974250)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-boosts-digital-collection-of-worlds-oldest-english-language-daily-newspaper), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20552946)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/jun/01/worlds-oldest-daily-belfast-news-letter-go-digital), [[4]](https://www.ucs.louisiana.edu/bnl/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/jun/01/worlds-oldest-daily-belfast-news-letter-go-digital), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-boosts-digital-collection-of-worlds-oldest-english-language-daily-newspaper)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/jun/01/worlds-oldest-daily-belfast-news-letter-go-digital> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/belfast-news-letter> - The British Newspaper Archive provides access to 48,915 issues and 640,652 pages of the Belfast News-Letter, covering the period from 1767 to 2003. Founded in 1737 by Francis Joy, the newspaper has a rich history, including its acquisition by Alfred Mackay in 1804 and its transition to a daily publication in 1855. The archive offers insights into the paper's evolution and its role in reporting significant events such as the Crimean War and the Troubles in Northern Ireland.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-boosts-digital-collection-of-worlds-oldest-english-language-daily-newspaper> - The UK Government has initiated a project to digitise editions of the Belfast News Letter from the 18th to the 20th centuries. This collaboration with the British Library and Findmypast aims to make these historic publications accessible online, enhancing the understanding of Northern Ireland's cultural heritage. The digitisation process is set to be completed this spring, with free access available through libraries with a subscription to Findmypast and to global subscribers of Findmypast or the British Newspaper Archive.
4. <https://www.ucs.louisiana.edu/bnl/> - The University of Louisiana at Lafayette hosts 'The Belfast Newsletter Index, 1737-1800,' compiled by John C. Greene. This index encompasses nearly 300,000 items from the newspaper's early years, providing a comprehensive database of news and advertisements. While only about one-quarter of the newspapers from 1737 to 1750 have survived, the index offers valuable insights into the content and scope of the Belfast News-Letter during its formative years.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-24519102> - To commemorate its 275th anniversary, the Belfast News Letter reprinted its earliest surviving edition from 3 October 1738. This edition offers a glimpse into early Georgian Britain, Ireland, and the world, featuring 4,000 words without illustrations. The paper's news editor, Ben Lowry, described it as a 'remarkable document' and a 'key part not only of Irish history but of world history,' highlighting its candid reporting and historical significance.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20552946> - The Belfast News Letter, established in 1737, marked its 275th anniversary with a special supplement. Founded by Francis Joy, a lawyer of Huguenot descent, the newspaper has a storied history, including its coverage of significant events like the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence. The paper's news editor, Ben Lowry, noted the loss of most editions from the first 13 years but highlighted a fascinating intact section from 1739 that provides a glimpse into Ulster life of that era.
7. <https://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/uk-news/the-belfast-news-letter-is-283-years-old-today-the-oldest-english-language-daily-newspaper-in-the-world-2974250> - The Belfast News Letter celebrated its 283rd anniversary, marking it as the world's oldest English-language daily newspaper. Founded by Francis Joy in 1737, the newspaper has reported on events from the War of Jenkins’ Ear to the French Revolution, American War of Independence, and the United Irishmen rebellion. Despite challenges, the News Letter continues to adapt, with its print edition sales recovering and digital audiences soaring, reflecting its enduring presence in Northern Ireland's media landscape.