

Gaslight Gazette.

Introduction.

Charles Baker Strutt, publisher, journalist, printer and poet, devout Baptist and campaigner for Temperance, celebrated Christmas 1853 by becoming a newspaper proprietor. His printing works, where he lived 'over the shop', was in Church Street, Kensington, only a stone's throw from the Queen's birthplace, Kensington Palace, and yards from the old parish church built in the days of Dutch William. Cows grazed on the Palace meadows nearby and on those of the Holland House farm but all around the rising tide of bricks and mortar was creeping higher up the slopes of Campden and Ladbroke hills as it had already swept over Brompton and the riverside village of Chelsea in the wake of the Great Exhibition, held only two years earlier in Hyde Park. Now the 'Crystal Palace' had been moved to Sydenham (you could still see it on a clear day from the top of Campden Hill) but Kensington and the surrounding area would never be 'the country' again.

Charles Strutt was already well known as a printer of cowkeepers' bills and other necessities for the ever-increasing number of tradespeople taking shops to serve the residents moving in to the new elegant terraces and villas of the 'Old Court Suburb.' But he had other things to offer than his utilitarian trade as a printer, apart from his burning zeal to further the cause of Temperance (in an era when gin and brandy were cheaper than bread). He believed passionately in the right of people to be informed on the affairs of their own neighbourhood as well as those of the nation and the world. Poverty was rife and social conditions appalling outside privileged circles, Cholera had swept through London with a heavy death toll only a few years previously and was still claiming victims in the filthy piggeries and brickfields of Notting Dale. England was on the verge of war with Russia, and in domestic politics the first great Reform Bill was bringing new power to the people to have their say in the government of the country.

There could hardly be a time more ripe for the launching of a newspaper to news hungry people, many more of whom were now able to read...and Charles Strutt's 'Gazette', small though it was, was free.....

The Daily News ' a London morning newspaper , cost fivepence, so did ' The Times ' (a lot of money in the context of prices of articles such as top quality coal at a shilling a hundredweight) so expansive in fact, that newsagents made it available on loan at a shilling a week). In the mid-nineteenth century, not only were newspapers expensive but they were taxed through Paper and Advertisement Duties , the latter about to be repealed following a campaign vigorously supported by Charles Strutt.

The first issue of his ' Gazette ' appeared early in December 1853, by February the following year it had grown in size and he was expressing the pious hope that ' his small creation ' would become a ' vital parochial institution ' . Later, after eighteen months of publication , when the Gazette was no longer free, but selling for one penny, he displayed a spark of prophecy in an editorial (after reading Leigh Hunt's ' Old Court Suburb, a classic history of the area) that his ' Gazette ' might also become a ' kind of historical record of things and opinions.'.

People do not normally keep newspapers, certainly not the kind which Charles Strutt produced, which are the most ephemeral of the articles in everyday use, although perhaps more than any other provide a link with the past which is touchingly intimate .

Over thirty years ago, on a hot afternoon in July 1953, a very old lady arrived at the offices of 'The Kensington News ' in Kensington Church Street, carrying a tattered brown paper parcel. Her name was Edith Strutt, Charles Strutt's youngest daughter, now in her nineties, who had made the tiring bus journey from her home in Kentish Town to return to the place of her birth and bring with her the only surviving copies of the paper that had also been born in Church Street a century ago. Although bound into book form its fragile pages were brown, brittle and flimsy , as paper scorched in a fire . It must not, she prayed be destroyed when the time came when most of her other belongings , including dozens of her fathers poems would be consigned , as such personal treasures , worthless to others, usually are, to the dustbin.

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Her gift was gratefully received and cherished , the bound copy passed to Kensington and Chelsea Libraries for microfilming, the original carefully stored and preserved and read... for the columns of its living history form the basis of this book which tells the story of mid-Victorian London at its roots, on the streets and in the homes, in shops and factories, places where people lived and died. 'The Gazette', by recording the trivia of the times brings us closer to them than their grand events. Squabbles, scandals , even the patent medicines, the bargain offers in clothes or groceries, these are the stuff that everyday life is made of but are seldom recorded for posterity, the paper they are printed on being screwed up and thrown away .

But the 'Gaslight Gazette' has survived. The light it sheds is often far from gentle, piercing the shadowy romance of the past with harsh reality of poverty, squalor, disease and death, which were part and parcel of Victorian life - but also revealing the homely domesticity of a generation only a century or so removed from our own which took the first steps leading to the world as we know it today.

Glasgow Gazette

Introduction

Looking back on five years of the past century from the perspective of the present day ~~is rather~~ ^{may seem} like looking through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars, encapsulating events and scenes into a museum piece miniature with little relevance to modern life. Yet out of this study of a Victorian Editor, his publication and his readers in one small area of London comes the lesson of the relentless repetition of history and its failure to teach us (or more correctly our failure to learn) to change our ways. There are many times when even the heavy and verbose prose of the 19th century seems to be recording events of our own time - the controversy between state or private enterprise in the water industry or gas supplies, the re organisation of local government, troubles in Ireland, unemployment, even a Channel Tunnel! Charles Strutt, Editor of the 'Gazette', in a despairing editorial doubted that the year 2000 AD would see the resolving of many of their troubles, that year is now not so long distant and in many respects he was right. There are many times when those tiny figures at the wrong end of the telescope seem to be waving at us with despairing hands, not waving but drowning, or at least begging us to learn by their experience and their mistakes. Technical and scientific achievement have changed the whole world about us in a way which these men and women could never have even imagined, but human nature has not changed and if there is such a thing as a readership in the year 3116 AD they will be looking back at us in the same quizzical way that we now view those Londoners who read and wrote to the 'Gazette' in those first five years of the mid decade of the 19th century.

' A dangerous thing.. The Tax on Knowledge.

History is not the sole property of historians, it belongs to those who make it by living, and pass their story on to their children and their children's children. History is being made now, as you read these words, and will be published tomorrow in ' The Times ' and other great newspapers, which ever since the growth of mass journalism have proved the best chroniclers of their age, written for the time at the time, not with the wisdom or bias of hindsight, and with little hope of endurance. Letters and diaries are personal histories but a newspaper, through its reporters and correspondents, even its advertisers, presents an impersonal record, its very ephemeral character giving it immediacy, because those who create it do so in the knowledge that they are writing for the present. They may well live to regret what they say, for time makes fools of us all, but even though we may look back on them and deplore their self righteousness, their brashness , over confidence , or naivety, we are magically transported back in time to the way things were when those who recorded them so rashly committed their words to print.

' London is like a newspaper. Everything is there and everything is disconnected. There is every kind of person in some houses but there is no more connection between the houses than between neighbours in the lists of births marriages and deaths. As we change from the broad leader to the squalid police report, we pass a corner and we are in a changed world. '

Walter Bagehot, editor and economist, writing in ' The National Review ' in 1858 encapsulated the relationship between journalism and urban communities and the enormous growth of the press in the first half of the 19th century , only equalled by the growth of the cities themselves where the newspapers were born and circulated. They replaced village gossip with the written word communicated to thousands, although reading skills were still limited. Those who could not manage the words could look at the pictures in new periodicals such as The Pictorial or Illustrated Times , both of which published lithographs which depicted the squalor rather than the splendour of the times. The latter was the speciality of the ' Illustrated London News ', which viewed the capital through a decidedly rosy veil, depicting a city of change , development and achievement, or great national pomp and ceremony in which poverty hunger dirt and disease had

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Charles Strutt's newspaper, in common with others of its time, carried few illustrations, those there were being confined to drawings in the advertisement columns. It was left to the journalists to convey in words alone the drama of the news: a skill which could lay them open to accusations of sedition if their influence went against the interests of the Establishment, be it the Crown, the Church, or Parliament.

Government had long been aware of the power of the written word and feared its consequences, both in politics and religion, especially when even primitive printing took it from the hands of the elite into the reach of a wider public. Even if the masses were still illiterate, they were able to listen to those who could read, and one literate man could inform hundreds.

The freedom of the press, now taken for granted, was still a novelty in the 1850s and even then not entirely released from the shackles which only two centuries earlier could put the pain of death upon those who offended parliament or priest by this means. In the 17th century those who wanted access to dangerous information had to rely on clandestine news sheets, usually published abroad, especially in Holland. In England the Star Chamber restricted the size and content of newspapers. In 1625 Charles I suspended all news sheets when he dissolved Parliament, and during the Commonwealth, Cromwell was no more ready to allow the masses free access to the news of the day. On the Restoration of the Monarchy, Charles II appointed Roger L'Estrange, one of his cavalry officers, (who could have had little professional qualification for the task) to take charge of licensing newspapers, a position he immediately turned to his own advantage by granting himself a licence to produce 'The Public Intelligence' of 1663 and suppressing a rival publisher, Henry Muddiham.

The Great Plague of 1665 forced the Court out of London to Oxford, and the King, wishing to keep in touch with events, allowed Muddiham to produce a news sheet 'The Oxford Gazette' which on the Court's return to the capital became 'The London Gazette' a source of news not only for England but the colonies. Not that the circulation of news was desired in some outposts of English rule, in Virginia in 1691, the Governor, Sir William Berkeley, thanked God 'they had no free schools, nor printing and hoped that state would continue these 300 years'.

' Learning, ' he said, had brought disobedience heresy and sects into the world and printing had divulged them. ' Feminists will be pleased to learn that the first daily newspaper in England was published by a woman, Elizabeth Mallet, who brought out ' The Daily Courant ' in 1702 and only took on her male partner , Samuel Beckley , when she ran into financial difficulties. ' The Courant ' continued for thirty years , during a period in which it was joined by numbers of other small but thriving newspapers, often to the embarrassment of the government, still aware of the power far greater than their own which had become known as ' the Fourth Estate ' (the others being the Lords Spiritual, the Lords Temporal and the Commons). The title is attributed to the 18th century statesman , Edmund Burke, who referring to the Reporters Gallery in Parliament, said ' Yonder sits the Fourth Estate, more important than them all'. Such power had to be held in check and the methods of doing so varied from the bludgeon of censorship , backed by laws of treason, sedition and libel, or the more subtle means of licensing and taxation. The Press was well aware of its power and not always too scrupulous in its use of it. ' The Times ' accepted £ 300 a year for supporting the government of the younger Pitt, an action not so unethical as it appears today, in the 1780s bribery was a way of life. It did not prevent 'The Times' proprietor, or ' conductor', John Walter being sent to Newgate Gaol for two years for publishing a ' false, wicked and seditious, scandalous and malicious libel ' against the Dukely sons of King George III, including the Prince Regent, (John Walter had implied that the royal offspring were not sincerely pleased at their father's recovery from his bout of insanity). The sentence was passed only three days before the storming of the Bastille during the French Revolution which made the Establishment even more sensitive to its precarious position and the threatening voice of radical dissent. (Walter was eventually restored to royal favour and given £250 in compensation !) Mob rule in Paris and the continuing Revolution, culminating in the death of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette on the guillotine, did nothing to encourage a free press in England where it was felt that information on the uprising of the French proletariat could only set a match to the tinder already smouldering on this side of the Channel.

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Much of this political unrest was blamed on the works of Thomas Paine. The son of a Quaker, he had travelled to America at the time of their Revolution, added his voice later to the French rebellion and inflamed the poor workers of England with his publications, in particular 'The Rights of Man', which caused him to be tried, in his absence, as a traitor.

In February 1793 French newspapers were declared contraband in England. 'The Times' had already set up its own foreign news service and chartered a cutter to bring despatches across the Channel. (In the 1790s the Post Office set up a news service monitoring foreign newspapers and selling censored news to papers in England).

The price of news was high enough, the first issue of 'The Daily Universal Register' in 1775 cost 2½ pence including a 1½ pence stamp duty with a two shillings and sixpence tax on each advertisement. By 1795 the price had risen to sixpence and the stamp duty to 3½ pence, prodigious sums in the currency of the day. (In 1853, when Charles Strutt founded his 'Gazette' the cost of 'The Times' was fivepence compared to the price of gin at ten shillings a gallon).

Among the multiplying newspapers of the late 18th century, in addition to 'The Times', were 'The Morning Chronicle' founded in 1769 and 'The Morning Post' (1772) contributors to which included Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, Robert Southey and Wordsworth. The success of these journals was not attributable to any great technical progress in the printing/craft, the wooden press having hardly changed since the time of Gutenberg.

In 1772, an iron press was invented in Basel but not introduced into England until the end of the century when Charles, Earl of Stanhope produced one. The first power press, steam-driven, was introduced at 'The Times' in 1814, made by Koenig and Bauer, it produced over 1,000 sheets in an hour (two men would have had to work for eight hours to turn out the same number by hand.)

The introduction of what John Walter II (the son of the founder of the paper) described as 'the greatest improvement connected with printing since the discovery of the art itself,' was not without trepidation that the workmen might demonstrate against a method which could reduce the work force. The machine was installed in secret and Walter asked some of the men to stay on after the night's work as he expected some late news. When it came, it was to announce that the paper was already printed ..by steam !

Although such progress was being made in the actual printing process, type-setting was still a tedious hand craft until the production in the latter part of the 19th century of the linotype (1886) and monotype machines (1893) The first not only set the type at a keyboard but cast it in lines (as the name implies). The Monotype cast in single letters by a double process, using paper rolls punched with holes (similar to a pianola roll) to transfer the instruction to the casting machine .

Until these inventions the setting of type was a laborious and time-consuming operation. Type is 0.918 inches (2.5 cms) high and in its smallest form less than 2 mm thick, imagine the skill required to select the letter from the 'case' (wooden trays divided into compartments to contain all the letters of the alphabet, plus punctuation) arrange them into a hand-held container (a 'stick ') from which they could be transferred into the long steel trays , a column wide and open at one end (the ' galleys ') ready for proofing and correction before being finally placed into position in the page . Water was used to hold the thousands of single pieces of type together by suction during the transferring process.

Early printers had cast their own type but in the 17th century this had become the function of type foundries, the master printer buying his fonts, complete sets of characters , in various styles and sizes the styles bearing , as they still do, the names of early masters of the printing craft, such as Bodoni (Giambattista Bodoni, an Italian typographer) Sizes also had names until the American Point System was introduced late in the 19th century nonpareil brevir and pica being replaced by 6, 8 and 12 point. Hand-setting printers worked in front of sloping wooden frames supporting two cases one of capitals and the other of small letters, one above the other (capitals on top, causing them to be known as ' upper case ') Such work by the poor light of oil lamps, or even candles was tedious in the extreme, causing eye strain and back ache,

The Times established an ingenious short cut to hand setting in 1784 with its founder, John Walter taking out a patent on his logographical system which consisted of the most frequently occurring words being ready cast in metal to speed up composition.

The satirists of the day suggested that from 'The Times' content these should include 'wet, dry, murder, dreadful, atrocious outrage, fearful calamity, and alarming explosion', which indicates that journalism has not changed all that much in the ensuing years!

Further progress in printing machinery required the production of paper in a continuous roll instead of sheets, a process perfected in France at the turn of the 18th century.

Stereotyping, in 1727, had long ago allowed a complete piece of type setting, either a whole page, or an item such as an advertisement to be duplicated by taking an impression on a mould, or matrix, that could then be used to copy, or stereo, in an alloy of lead, tin and antimony. This innovation aroused opposition from printers who saw it as a threat to their livelihood.

The first material to be used to take impressions consisted of a mixture of blotting and tissue paper called 'flong' (a term enduring in the printing craft up to modern times although the material later used was papier mache).

These and other technical improvements which allowed speedier and cheaper production served to bring to a head the dilemma of three centuries. On one side, the Establishment regarded knowledge as dangerous and likely to arouse undesirable passions in the working classes, others took a more enlightened view, such as Ashley Cooper (Lord Shaftesbury) who in addition to his evangelical religious motives, saw refinement, born of education and better health through improved hygiene, could lessen the danger of insurrection from a savage ignorant population.

Nothing had provided better ammunition for the big guns against press freedom than Paine's 'Rights of Man', advocating as it did, universal suffrage, the abolition of the House of Lords and the monarchy, and Paine's publications were reputed to be in the hands of many of the lower orders, particularly the journeymen the better educated among the workers.

Thus the association of popular journalism with radicalism was unavoidable as the campaign for press freedom was one of the platforms of radical politicians such as Richard Cobden, who with John Bright was one of the founders of the Anti Corn Law League.

The last curb on press freedom was through taxation , the stamp duty which in 1815 was still fourpence a copy (although this was offset to some extent for those papers with circulations beyond London by allowing the stamp to cover postage to the provinces) and a continued high tax on advertising. Publishers went to great lengths to avoid paying these dues and many prosecutions were taken out against ' black market ' news sheets. The story is told of a seller of unstamped newspapers in Shoe Lane who smuggled out 50,000 copies a week of ' Cleave's Police Gazette ' a republican-minded journal, to its distributors concealed in coffins supplied by a friendly neighbouring undertaker, until the other residents of Shoe Lane became alarmed by the number of funerals taking place there and fearing the plague, notified the authorities and the plot was discovered

Prosecutions were not confined to those who evaded stamp duty , Richard Carlile , one of the most courageous of radical journalists and publishers, was imprisoned for a total of nine years between 1818 and 1843 for re-publishing ' Paine's Age of Reason ' (his attack on established religion for which he was cited as an atheist). and other progressive works, and in the early part of the century there were numerous other convictions for blasphemous or seditious libel.

Many prosecutions were brought by two ' vigilante' societies, the Constitutional Association and the Society for the Suppression of Vice and the Encouragement of Religion and Virtue.

The pamphleteers could not be described as newspaper publishers as their sheets were usually confined to virulent political diatribes rather than purveyors of information. Among the more moderate of these, and certainly one of the most prolific, was William Cobbett of ' Rural Rides ' fame, whose home had been in Kensington when Charles Strutt was still a little boy in Kilburn. Living in America in 1793, Cobbett produced a pro English newspaper there under the name of ' Peter Porcupine's Gazette, the prickliness of which earned him a fine for libel. Returning to England he produced his weekly ' Political Register ' in 1802 and was imprisoned for attacking flogging in the Army. After another spell in America to escape further persecution he eventually settled fairly quietly in Kensington, where he ran a seed farm before writing his ' Rural Rides ' the work which has best endured into modern times and which gives a vivid contemporary account of life in England in the early decades of the 19th century.

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In 1836 the newspaper stamp duty was reduced to a penny, the advertisement tax having also been cut three years earlier to one shilling and sixpence as well as the excise duty on paper being lowered (this had been another subtle curb on press freedom) . It was probably these reforms, and certainly the abolition of advertisement tax in August 1853 that prompted the printer/poet Charles Strutt to launch his ' Gazette ' in the 'December of that year ...' Guaranteed gratuitous circulation 4,000, published every Wednesday '

England was already becoming proud of her freedom of the written word. Thomas Carlyle wrote in his ' Latter Day ' pamphlet in 1850 ' In countries that can stand a free press, which many cannot, but which England , thanks to her good training, still can, is not ' The Times ' newspaper still an open forum, open as forum never was before, where all mortals can vent their opinion, state their grievances, from the loss of your umbrella in a railway , to the loss of your honour and fortune by unjust sovereign persons ? Strutt's 'Gazette ' was not ' The Times, which in 1853 was already 68 years old (counting its birth as ' The Daily Universal Register ' in 1785) but in its small way it performed the same grievance-outlet as Carlyle attributed to the grander publication. Charles Strutt was not slow to pontificate on the shortcomings of local and national government , grievances large and small scratched from his pen, sometimes with embarrassing impulsiveness (having predicted that the Crimean war would end successfully in weeks, he had to eat his words 18 months later and recognise it as a long drawn out disaster).

In his first issue, dated December 7 1853, the fledgling newspaper proprietor/ editor in his editorial extols the wonders of the age ' Bridging the Pacific by the simple aegis of steam, drilling the solid Alp for the transit of the train and anon webbing the beds of the deep with the wire of the telegraph.' . What steam has achieved in shortening the chasm from shore to shore, the 'ress, through its advertising columns has done for the buyer and seller, narrowing the gulf long-existing between supply and demand. ' Advertising ' said Charles Strutt ' is an art as well as a trade ' . A free newspaper relies on the zeal of its distributors, as those who have revived these publications in our own age well know, and Strutt is soon exhorting his readers to inform him if they fail to receive a copy and 'respectfully requesting heads of families to enquire of domestics lest long detention in the kitchen should lead to mutual loss o. disappointment.

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Early in the New Year 1854 a Soiree was held at the Whittington Club in Arundel Street , off the Strand, to celebrate the Repeal of Advertising Duty, honouring T. Milner Gibson, one of the MPs who had campaigned for its abolition, speakers included Richard Cobden and the chair was taken by Sir John Villiers, ' with appropriate music by professional vocalists ' .

In March, a confident Charles Strutt confounded his critics who ' had deemed this enterprise doomed to failure ' . ' " It won't do said one " It can't live " said another , but the rise and progress of this weekly journal confirms to the doubters the power of perseverance and faith '

' After all ' he continues ' When London was to be lighted by gas the foolish predicted its early conflagration, the Thames Tunnel, left half finished was to be ever choked by the stream and to become at once a danger to the traffic and the tide, the railways were to ruin the country, navigation by steam was offered to be impossible... ' .

' ...But ... the metropolis has not exploded, the great bore has become a great fact, the British Empire remains unruined by the rail and the funnel of the steam packet has carried a stream of smoke from our shore to the antipodes ' ...

In October 1854 Charles Strutt launched another new venture, the first of a series of Monthly Supplements to circulate in Kensington Brompton, Knightsbridge , Chelsea and Hammersmith, price one penny taking as his subject for the leader in the first edition the very suitable subject of the newspaper tax.

' "e have buried the feudal system in the common grave of ages but retain unfortunately many of its evils. Among them is the restriction upon the received method of conveying a subject of intelligence from one man to another , to one city, or an empire or one hemisphere to another . If a popular commotion takes place in the Bull Ring at Birmingham and the editor of ' The Manchester Guardian' sees fit to inform the constituents of Mr Bright (John Bright MP for Manchester) of the fact, it seems very odd that the government of a civilised people must step in and demand a penny every time that information is given.

' "e will consider for a moment that Mr Williams, our butcher, has obtained a copy of a newspaper and been fleeced already by law of the twelfth of a shilling, he communicates to his tailor or his printer, by word of mouth, the exact amount of news he gets in print. The listener knows all he knows, but the government does not fine him a penny.

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' Therefore it is an imposition to be despised because it taxes a man for talking to another. It is the peculiar practice of all despotic governments to withhold from their subjects the means of the pursuit of knowledge '. The electric telegraph, he argues, can transmit news freely, why not a newspaper without that ' blot on its corner ' (the stamp).

Outlining his pious intentions for the future, he continues (Parochial inconsistencies and abuses whether administrative or physical will be unsparingly revealed in order to their amendment and remedy. The local wrongdoer ...may writhe under the threatened censorship ...endeavours will be made to redeem the parish...from the reproach that no public foundation of an associate literary character (he meant a public library) is found within its bounds '.

The last free newspaper was published in December 1854. In January 1855 the ' Gazette ' was sold for one penny, circulation now 5,000. The price of ' The Daily News ' (the paper founded by Charles Dickens) was still fivepence and an advertisement for it appeared regularly in the ' Gazette's columns . 'The only paper besides ' The Times ' which excludes and has always excluded from its columns all offensive advertisements . The Head of the Liberal press in Great Britain , advocating free commerce in its broadest sense and all sound and practical reforms, whether political, social or ecclesiastical '.

In the same month the Gazette carried an advertisement^e for a meeting of the Association for Promoting the Repeal of Taxes on Knowledge to take place at Exeter Hall on Wednesday February 21 1855 , addressed by John Bright, Richard Cobden , T. W Gibson and John Lawson.

In April 1855, Charles Strutt attacked ' The Times ' for ' its failure to support the campaign for the abolition of the stamp tax ' because its proprietor benefits from the law as it now stands . The payment of the stamp for every copy now daily issued of that paper and its supplement ensures its transit by post without further cost of any kind, a rule by which the journal and its extra sheet are carried through the post ~~post~~ office for 1½d with a weight which, if replaced by the tariffs of carriage as applied to letters and all other packages, would cost something like sixpence... but then ' The Times ' is an article with a voice whose utterance is in favour of the government ' cont.

As such, considered Mr Strutt, it was likely to be desired and conciliated. The consequence of the repeal of the stamp on newspapers, he continued, would certainly be that a vast number of new journals would be started. ' Every locality will have its own... but from this change such journals as the London daily papers will suffer very little in a pecuniary way.....'

' The Times ' certainly would not suffer, he predicted, having ' a singularity of merit which will continue to command our subscription and excite our admiration when the stamp is removed and forgotten. '

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