ACCESSING THE PICTORIAL SUPPLEMENTS

of the Otago Witness

By Lachy Paterson & Anne Jackman[1]

In April 2024, *The Preserving Local History and Educational Trust / Te Pupuri I Nga Hitori o Te Rohe Trust*[2] uploaded newly digitised versions of the pictorial supplements of the early Dunedin newspaper, the *Otago Witness*,[3] covering 1900 to 1924, onto its Recollect site. The Trust expects the years up to the newspaper's demise in 1932 to be added later in 2025. While the Trust's mission is to preserve historical newspapers through digitisation, it maintains a policy of not digitising content that is already microfilmed or digitised. Despite the *Otago Witness* having been both microfilmed and digitised, the Trust made an exception. This article begins with a brief history of the *Otago Witness* and its pictorial supplements and an account of the Trust's work to date. It follows with why the Trust decided to re-digitise the pictorial supplements and the issues it faced and concludes with how it envisages their use in the future.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OTAGO WITNESS AND ITS PICTORIAL SUPPLEMENTS

Newspapers and photography were both early features of colonialism in New Zealand. In Dunedin, the short-lived *Otago News* appeared just months after the colony's founding in 1848.[4] The more successful *Otago Witness*, initially published every two weeks but quickly becoming a weekly, published from 1851 until 1932. The *Otago Witness* first mentions photography in 1853, the closure of a 'Daguerrean Gallery' in the city in 1855, and the opening of the first photographic studio in 1857.[5] It was not until the 1890s that 'photomechanical and half-tone production allowed photographs to be easily reproduced on newsprint',[6] with the *Otago Witness* introducing their pictorial supplements from 1900.[7] As technology advanced, with hand-held cameras and improved film, and as photographs from other districts and countries became more available, newspapers were able to publish a wider range of photographic content.[8]

As a weekly, the *Otago Witness* was aimed at the isolated rural market for whom receiving a daily paper would be difficult. Its publishers had started producing a daily title in 1861, the *Otago Daily Times*[10] and while the *Otago Witness* repackaged news from the daily newspaper, it also developed a different style, including featuring pages for women and children, as well as fiction. It was thus able to attract urban and rural readers from across Otago and Southland, with some subscribing to more than one publication.[11] With the *Otago Daily Times* not printing photographs regularly until 1927, and then somewhat sparingly, the

pictorial supplements of four to twelve (although most often eight) pages were an additional bonus for the *Witness*'s readers. The paper eventually folded in 1932 as better communications enabled most rural folk to receive daily newspapers.[12]

THE PRESERVING LOCAL HISTORY & EDUCATIONAL TRUST & ITS WORK

Formed in 2022, the Trust is a registered charity, whose 'goal is to digitise, and make available, all historical newspapers (from 1840) that are at risk of loss or decay'.[13] Most historical newspapers are no longer being published, and many are not well conserved. In some cases, the only surviving copies have even been scrapped and destroyed. While the loss of physical print artefacts is unfortunate, if they have not been microfilmed or digitised, the knowledge of the history, culture, and people of the communities they served also disappears. Because smaller local communities rarely have the resources to adequately conserve their heritage periodicals, the Trust has taken a particular interest in community newspapers.[14]

Of course, the National Library (through its National Digital Heritage Archive and Papers Past website) is New Zealand's primary repository for digitised newspapers and other texts, but it has a finite budget and priority areas of interest. The National Library is one of the Trust's two strategic partners (New Zealand Micrographic Services (NZMS), who undertake the digitisation work, is the other). Once digitised, the Trust makes the content it creates accessible through its own Recollect site,[15] until the National Library can take over kaitiaki duties for these resources by uploading them to Papers Past. *The Marlborough Express* will be the first Trust title gifted and transferred to Papers Past. This is expected later in 2025.

One challenge that the Trust faces is gaining permission from copyright holders to make digitised material publicly available. Even the copyright for titles that have not been published for decades may still be owned by currently existing legal entities. The rights to the *Otago Witness*, for example, are still held by Allied Press. However, the biggest challenge is funding. The Trust applies for small local grants and occasionally works with local organisations to gather the money needed to meet the costs of digitisation, but most heritage groups just do not have large amounts of cash sitting idle. It was therefore very fortunate to gain a sizeable grant from New Zealand's Lottery Grants Board that has enabled it to kick-start its digitisation programme.

The costs are various and substantial; the first being the safe and secure transport of newspapers

from their existing location to the closest NZMS facility.[16] The digitisation of the material to the high quality required for the National Library's Papers Past website, the intended final home, is not cheap especially when the runs may extend over decades. The *Otago Witness* pictorial supplements from 1900 to 1924, for example, comprise more than 10,000 pages, entailing thousands of dollars in digitisation costs.

THE RE-DIGITISATION OF THE OTAGO WITNESS PICTORIAL SUPPLEMENTS

With the *Otago Witness* already microfilmed and digitised, according to its own policy the Trust ought not have re-digitised the paper's pictorial supplements, especially with so many other titles out there still waiting to be done. Unfortunately, the original digitisation of the newspaper from microfilm was optimised for text, resulting in the very low-quality images now available on Papers Past, in which content is often barely discernible and thus, practically unusable. In discussions with two of Dunedin's premier heritage institutions, Toitū Otago Settlers Museum and Hocken Collections, both of whom were having to reimage *Otago Witness* photographs to satisfy requests for them, the Trust also became aware that students often wanted to utilise this material in their assignments. While local Dunedin students could come into the Hocken or Toitū to copy images from the original newspaper, this was more problematic for students further afield. Creating high-quality images of the pictorial supplements would be valuable for students and others wishing to view or use the images. Refilming these supplements also allowed preservation of the physical newspapers, as the paper could not be retired while still required to provide copies of photographs. Institutions will now be able to retire the paper copy to storage, knowing there are quality images freely available on the Trust's Recollect site.

The following image, one of several photographs from a 1905 issue of the *Otago Witness* of a train accident at Chaneys Station near Kaiapoi, demonstrates the issue of quality of digitisation. The details in Figure 1, from Papers Past, are barely recognisable. In contrast, Figure 2, from the Trust's Recollect site, reproduces the same photograph to a far higher standard.

See Fig.1 and Fig. 2.

USE OF THE PICTORIAL SUPPLEMENTS

Historical research into New Zealand topics is almost unthinkable today without using Papers Past to read newspapers online. This ready access has allowed researchers to go in different directions, find new





Figure 1 & 2.

"A general view of the Derailed Engine and Carriages, showing the full extent of the disaster". *Otago Witness*, 5 July 1905, p. 42.

stories, and ask new questions, whether they are local, professional or academic historians. The range of users is wide, including genealogists exploring family connections, or even government employees looking for historical data that might have missed inclusion in other archives.

Another key user group is school students. As the New Zealand history curriculum beds in, school students will increasingly be accessing online digital newspaper content to undertake their research projects, to satisfy the curriculum's focus on Māori histories and colonisation and settlement more generally, and emphasis on primary resources and contexts relevant to communities and rohe.[17] In discussions with a group of Dunedin history teachers, it is clear that teachers value online digital newspapers, use them in their teaching practice and would like to see more available.[18] One teacher also stated that "next term we'll be looking at WW1 and so plan on using the *Otago Witness* [on the Recollect] website quite often."[19]

The digitised *Otago Witness* pictorial collections are well placed to assist school students and other researchers, providing additional visual information to the preponderant textual material. While many of the images relate to people, places and events in the southern half of the South Island, there is also considerable coverage of the rest of the country, as well as photographs from Britain and the Empire, the Pacific and elsewhere. While tāngata whenua do feature in a number of photographs, the images also reveal an appreciation of New Zealand scenery and natural spaces, pride in the country's farming and industrial progress, as well as both national and imperial sentiments. Related photographs were occasionally grouped together, or as montages, but are often mixed eclectically, as seen in the following pages.

See Fig. 3.

Many images marked the colony's development. This included new buildings such as a proposed new girls' school in Dunedin and Hokitika's public buildings, industrial gold sluicing and a waterfall earmarked to generate electricity, and perhaps more randomly, a haul of game birds, and a Chinese conjuror on tour in New Zealand.

See Fig. 4 on the next page.

Several images show fishing, of a Māori man at Kakaunui, and another near the Māori kāika at Puketeraki. Genealogists may find images of relevant people, such as the couple celebrating their golden wedding. Advances in transport as seen in the first aerial flight to Northland grace the page, as do the visit of the Prince of Wales to a Dunedin convalescent home, the unveiling of a war memorial in Foxton, and the latest in Paris fashion.



Figure 3.

Otago Witness, 26 May 1909, p. 47.

Figure 4.

Otago Witness,
15 June 1920,
p. 36.





Figure 5.

Otago Witness, 22 February 1900, p. 36.

See Fig. 5.

New Zealand was directly involved in two wars during the period the *Otago Witness* was publishing photographs, the Second South African War (1899-1902) and the First World War, both of which the paper covered. The image above shows the people of Christchurch farewelling the Third Contingent about to sail off to fight the Boers in 1900. While

relatively few New Zealanders died in South Africa and the mood of the population was fairly jingoistic, as the First World War ground on, the massive losses resulted in a far more sobering frame of mind, as the faces of men who had made the "supreme sacrifice", as seen below, made their appearance on the country's "Roll of Honour".

See Fig. 6.

CONCLUSION

Re-digitising the *Otago Witness* pictorial pages may have sat outside of the remit the Trust originally set itself, but it was ultimately a good decision. Without these high-quality images being accessible, fewer researchers and school students are likely to bother looking at them. Indeed, the images should be particularly useful for cultural historians, and whoever attempts the much-needed history of New Zealand's illustrated periodicals. Other newspapers the Trust digitises are destined eventually to sit within the Papers Past collection, but due to technical issues the *Otago Witness* images may not, although they remain accessible on the Trust's Recollect website. Ultimately, knowing more of our past allows us to know more about the society we live in now, and where we might want the country to go. Putting digitised newspapers online is one way of making that knowledge available, and the Preserving Local History and Educational Trust / Te Pupuri I Nga Hitori o Te Rohe is pleased to be assisting in this endeavour.



Figure 6.

Otago Witness, 2 January 1918, p. 28.

ENDNOTES

1. The authors would like to thank Ross Harvey, historian of print culture and advisor to *The Preserving Local History and Educational Trust* for his kind and wise advice in the preparation of this article.
2. The Preserving Local History and Education Trust, "Home Page", The Preserving Local History and Education Trust, n.d., available at. https://preservinglocalhistory.com.
3. Preserving Local History and Educational Trust,. "The Otago Witness Pictorial Supplements." Preserving Local History and Educational Trust, n.d., available at https://preservinglocalhistory.recollectcms.com/nodes/view/99.
4. Ian F. Grant, Lasting Impressions: The Story of New Zealand's Newspapers, 1840-1920, Fraser Books, Masterton, 2018, p. 95.
5. Otago Witness, 24 September 1853, p. 4; Otago Witness, 29 August 1857. See also Christine Mary Whybrew, 'The Burton Brothers Studio: Commerce in Photography and the Marketing of New Zealand, 1866-1898', PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2010, p. 29, available at https://ourarchive.otago.ac.nz/esploro/outputs/doctoral/The-Burton-Brothers-studio--commerce/9926479580701891, accessed 7 May 2025.
6. Max Quanchi, 'Towards a single visual history of New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific', in Angela Wanhalla & Erika Wolf (eds.). New Zealand Photography: Images and Essays, Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2011, p. 169; see also Ulrich Keller, 'Early Photojournalism', in David Crowley and Paul Heyer (eds.), Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society (5th edition), Boston: Pearson, 2007, pp.161-2.
7. Grant, p. 388.
8. Keller, pp.162, 164.
9. Grant, p. 388. Ross Harvey, 'Newspapers', in Penny Griffith, Ross Harvey & Keith Maslen (eds.). Book & Print in New Zealand: A Guide to Print Culture in Aotearoa, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1997, p.130.
10. 'Otago Witness' and 'Otago Daily Times'. Papers Past, available at https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/, accessed 8 May 2025.
11. Grant, p. 387; Tony Ballantyne, 'Reading the Newspaper in Colonial Otago', Journal of New Zealand Studies, no. 12, 2011, pp. 51, 55-57; Joanne Mary Morgan, 'Sites of Memory: Memorialisation in the Landscape', Master's thesis, University of Canterbury, 2001, p.18.

12. Grant, p. 387.

13. The Preserving Local History and Educational Trust: Te Pupuri I Nga Hitori o Te Rohe Trust, available at https://preservinglocalhistory.com, accessed 8 May 2025.

14. See 'Digitised Papers: The work that has been completed so far', The Preserving Local History and Educational Trust: Te Pupuri I Nga Hitori o Te Rohe Trust, available at https://preservinglocalhistory.com/digitised-papers, accessed 8 May 2025.

15. The Preserving Local History and Educational Trust: Te Pupuri I Nga Hitori o Te Rohe Trust Recollect site, available at https://preservinglocalhistory.recollectcms.com, accessed 8 May 2025.

16. NZMS have three facilities where digitisation to a high standard can be undertaken, in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch.

17. 'Content Structure', Aotearoa NZ's Histories, Te Poutāhū: Curriculum Centre, Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga: Ministry of Education, 2025, available at https://aotearoahistories.education.govt.nz/about/content-structure, accessed 10 May 2025; 'Services to Schools: Primary Sources – how to use them', National Library, available at https://natlib.govt.nz/schools/teaching-and-learning-resources/teaching-tools-resource-guides/primary-sources-how-to-use-them, accessed 10 May 2025.

18. Lachy Paterson, 'A Kōrero with Local Dunedin History Teachers', The Preserving Local History and Educational Trust: Te Pupuri I Nga Hitori o Te Rohe Trust, 29 April 2024, available at https://preservinglocalhistory.com/blog/dunedin-history-teachers, accessed 8 May 2025.

19. Stephanie Meronek, email message to Lachy Paterson, 5 March 2025.