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Field Day with Digitised Historic Australian Newspapers

It is now a year since the Australian Newspapers [beta service](#), the outcome of the collaborative [Australian Newspapers Digitisation Program](#) (ANDP) was released to the public. The service contains 5.5 million historic newspaper articles dating from 1803 to 1954. More articles are added every week and there will be 40 million by the end of 2010.

The Australian Historical Association recently held its annual conference on the Sunshine Coast and the historians raved about the Australian Newspapers online service and how much time it has saved them. It is no longer necessary to physically go to a library and browse through reels of microfilmed newspapers. Researchers can now keyword search across millions of newspaper articles in a matter of seconds via the Internet.

Researchers, authors and historians are finding fascinating, unusual and unique information in the newspapers, which is helping to further our knowledge of early Australian history.

The [Light Railway Research Society of Australia](#) (LRRSA) aims to record the history of the use of rail transport in Australian industry. It focuses on the 'little lines', rather than the 'main lines', as they are largely undocumented in libraries and archives. Frank Stamford, Publications Officer, says

"For over forty years old newspaper files have played a very important part in the historical research done by members of this Society, and having the newspapers online has made our task much easier and more productive."

The service has generated a great deal of interest, discussion and enthusiasm among the 250 LRRSA members. For example, researchers John Browning and Phil Rickard have been looking for information on sugar cane mills and tramways in Queensland, and early tramways and tram roads in the Northern Territory and Tasmania. Using ANDP, they have found references to previously unknown tramways. They have also located newspaper articles about the early use of timber tramways in Queensland around the 1860s and information about industrial railways in Tasmania that were operating almost 40 years before the first steam public railway opened in the state in 1871. As Rickard says:

"The Australian Newspapers online enables any member who may be living far (or near) from a capital city library, to do a bit of research from home and share the results with all members. For us, the ANDP is reversing the tyranny of distance."

Dr Clare Wright, researcher and author, is fascinated by women in early Australian history. She says, 'In women's history, it is incredibly difficult to follow a thread. Women change their names when they get married, and tend not to feature in official records.' By searching through early digital Australian newspapers, Dr Wright has been able to find

the threads of women's lives and link them together. She has easily tracked down women who 'disappeared' from official records when they moved interstate.

Dr Bruce Moore, Director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre at the Australian National University, has been tracing the development of the Australian accent and of Australian vocabulary, and linking this to major movements in Australian history and culture. He and his colleagues are now determining words that originated in Australia, so-called 'Aussie lingo'. Dr Moore says, 'We can now search Australian Newspapers online and easily find occurrences of words we are trying to verify as being first used in Australia.'

Angus Trumble is an author and another happy researcher full of praise for ANDP. He writes on his blog:

"I cannot think of any single resource for the study of Australian history that has in my lifetime come as close to providing almost overnight such an enormous sweep of access as does the National Library of Australia's brilliant Australian Newspapers beta service—'Historic Australian Newspapers, 1803 to 1954'. I am wholly and happily addicted, and Australian Newspapers beta has already shone an important sidelight onto one or two pressing matters to do with fingernails that will feature in my next book to be published in 2010 ('The Finger: A Handbook')".

Rose Holley.
Manager, Australian Newspaper Digitisation Program.