

John Fairfax and *The Sydney Morning Herald*

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Due to changes in street numbering its exact location is now unknown, but from April 1831 to March 1834, the newspaper proprietor John Fairfax lived at 10 Gloucester Street.¹ Fairfax founded *The Leamington Spa Courier* and *The Leamington Chronicle and Warwickshire Reporter*, but after he was bankrupted by a vexatious libel action, he sought a new life in Australia, emigrating to New South Wales in 1838. Remaining in journalism, he took over a local newspaper and transformed it into *The Sydney Morning Herald*. This became one of the leading newspapers in the Australian colony and the empire as a whole. It remained in the Fairfax family for another 149 years until John's great-great-grandson Warwick Fairfax bankrupted the company, which was by now a major media conglomerate, after borrowing \$1.7 billion to buy all the shares outright. Although no longer run by the Fairfax family, *The Sydney Morning Herald* remains Australia's leading news outlet with an estimated 8.6 million readers.²

John Fairfax was born in Warwick on 25 October 1804. Aged 12, he was apprenticed to a local printer, and after a brief spell working in London, in January 1827 he set up business as a printer and bookbinder in 26 Clemens Street, Leamington.³ In 1828 he founded *The Leamington Spa Courier* with James Sharp, although he left soon after as his Liberal political views clashed with the Conservative outlook of Sharp's son who was editor.⁴

Fairfax had other lines of work and whilst living at Gloucester Street he served as an agent for *The Midland Representative and Birmingham Herald* and the Atlas Assurance Company, and in 1832, launched his own *Fairfax's New Leamington Guide and Directory*.⁵ But he was soon drawn back to newspapers. In 1835 he took over the running of *The Leamington Chronicle and Warwickshire Reporter* from his new home at 37 Bath Street. However, he was ruined by the costs incurred by successfully defending himself against the libel claim of a lawyer who was upset by a letter that Fairfax had published. Just two years later, and with only £5 to his name, he emigrated to New South Wales with his wife, three young children, mother and brother-in-law.⁶

After working briefly as a librarian, Fairfax resumed his journalistic activities. In February 1841 he bought the *Sydney Herald* with Charles Kemp, changing its name the following year to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. At this point Sydney had a population of around 35,000 and was about to enter a boom period, aided in no small part by the New South Wales gold rush of 1851. Fairfax's paper covered it all, establishing itself as the leading paper of eastern Australia.⁷

In 1852 he made a trip back to England. One reason was to enable him acquire a steam-powered printing press – the first to be used in Australia – while another was to return to Leamington to repay outstanding debts owed from his bankruptcy. Whilst here, he took up the invitation from the Literary and Scientific Institution to lecture on 'The Gold Fields of Australia' at the Music Hall.

Fairfax recounted tales of the riches that were being made by gold diggers and the demand this was creating for more labour in the mines, railways and town trades. Those he considered suitable for this

¹ In 1829, 10 Gloucester Street is described as being two doors from Bath Street, close to the present day number 6. *Leamington Spa Courier*, 27 June 1829, p. 2.

² 'Sydney Morning Herald the Most Read Newspaper in the Country', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 November 2021.

³ *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser*, 3 February 1827, p. 3.

⁴ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 11 June 1909, p. 5.

⁵ This was a popular guide printed in 1832 and 1833, and was later taken over John Beck.

⁶ John Fairfax had married Sarah Reading of Warwick in July 1827. Charles John was born in January 1829, Emily in 1832, and James Reading in October 1834. A fourth child, Edward Ross, was born in Sydney in 1843. See *Leamington Spa Courier*, 21 January 1944, p. 6.

⁷ Fairfax, J. O. (1972) 'Fairfax, John (1804–1877)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University.

kind of work were encouraged to emigrate: “To the young man of industrious and sober habits and of moral character, whose anxiety is to pursue a course of honest perseverance – unappalled by difficulty and danger – I say *go*”.⁸ He also spoke of his new political perspective as a colonist, making the case that the Imperial Parliament in London should relinquish its powers of taxation and give the Australian colonies a greater degree of self-government.

These themes of economic industry and political autonomy were central to the settler colonial project, and also informed the editorial position of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Under Fairfax’s ownership the paper moved in a more liberal direction, defending the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders against arbitrary detention, and migrant Chinese mine workers against xenophobic violence.⁹ Yet by the same token, it vigorously defended the rights of white settlers to claim native land on the basis that, as civilised people, they were able to use it productively.¹⁰ This position also extended to foreign policy. The newspaper encouraged volunteers from Australia to join the military invasion of New Zealand’s north island in 1863 and defended the legitimacy of the Waikato War against the indigenous Māori people from critics in Britain who saw it as imperial overreach.¹¹

By the early 1860s Fairfax had become very wealthy. Thanks to the gold rush the *Herald’s* circulation had risen to 6,600 copies daily; a figure exceeded in the British Empire by only the *Times* and *Telegraph* of London.¹² A contemporary wrote that as proprietor Fairfax had a net annual gain of £20,000; enough for him to own “a handsome town house and an elegant country villa” overlooking Sydney harbour.¹³ He also used his wealth for philanthropic purposes, some of which made its way back to Leamington. Fairfax had been one of the founding members of the Congregational Church in Spencer Street and made a number of large donations after he emigrated. At a special service in 1863 to celebrate the repayment of its mortgage, the Rev. Chairman remarked that: “Perhaps there was not one individual who had given so much to Spencer-street Chapel as Mr Fairfax”.¹⁴ A tablet in the apse of the chapel paid tribute to his contribution.

The passions that he developed at Leamington were carried over to Sydney too. Fairfax was a founder and benefactor of Camden College which educated young men for the Congregational ministry and sent out preachers across the Australian colonies. Recalling his work in Leamington as agent for the Atlas Assurance Company, he also moved into the insurance business and became a founding director of the Australian Mutual Provident Society.

But his main legacy would always be the newspaper. When he died in 1877 in his country villa overlooking Sydney harbour, even a rival newspaper had to acknowledge in its obituary that Fairfax had built up the *Sydney Morning Herald* into “one of the best-known newspapers of the British empire”.¹⁵ Control of the paper passed to his two surviving sons, one of whom, James Reading, was himself born in Leamington – maintaining the town’s direct link to the *Herald* well into the twentieth century.

⁸ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 24 July 1852, p. 2. Italics in original.

⁹ Murphy, Damien (no date) ‘John Fairfax’, The Australian Media Hall of Fame: <https://halloffame.melbournepressclub.com/article/john-fairfax>

¹⁰ See ‘The Aborigines’, 30 August 1853, p. 2; ‘A Plea for the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Victoria’ on 2 April 1856, p. 6; ‘The Aborigines’ Protection Society; Or, What Will Mrs Grundy Say?’, 25 July 1864, p. 5.

¹¹ Hutchinson, Sam (2014) *Unsettling News: Settler Colonialism, War and Empire in the Australian and British Press (1863-1902)*. Doctoral thesis, English and Cultural Studies/History, University of Western Australia.

¹² ‘John Fairfax’.

¹³ Published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and reprinted in *Leamington Spa Courier*, 11 January 1862, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 14 February 1863, p. 8.

¹⁵ *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 11 August 1877, p. 177.