



Intellectual Property Guides

Historical Patent Searching

**A Guide to the Resources Held at Newcastle
City Library**

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Who Needs Old Patents?

In most cases those wishing to consult old patents have a reference to a particular patent (or patents) they wish to see. However, other cases may include:

- Those developing a new idea based on old technology. In many cases the information disclosed in patent applications will never have been published anywhere else. As the patent abstracts are bound in classification sequence it is easy to browse the particular area of interest.
- Academics researching the history of a particular technology will find information here never published elsewhere. Again the classification sequence makes it easy to focus on a particular area of technology.
- Genealogists. Patent literature is not often considered as a genealogical resource, but if you had ancestors who were inventors, scientists, engineers or manufacturers it is possible they applied for a patent. So a search of the name indexes would be your starting point. You may then need to order copies of the full specification (which we don't hold, see page 6). The full patent specification can reveal useful information such as full name, address, occupation, names of business partners (who may be family members) and even religious affiliation!



UK Patent Numbering System

When looking for old British Patents it is necessary to understand the numbering system and this can be summarised as follows:

Patents 1617-1852

There were no official publications during this period. Obtaining a patent required visiting seven different offices and gaining two signatures of the reigning monarch. Patents were granted much earlier (the earliest known was in 1449, granted by Henry VI to John of Utynam for making coloured glass for Eton), but when the Patent Office was established in 1852, Bennet Woodcroft, the Superintendent of Specifications and Indexes, collated and numbered the existing patent records. This first sequence was numbered from 1 to 14359. Note that this sequence ends in September 1852.

Patents 1852-1915

This sequence began in October 1852. Patents applied for from October to December 1852 were numbered from 1-1211. For each subsequent year patents were numbered in annual sequences beginning with 1. Therefore when looking for a patent granted before 1915 you will need to know the year in addition to the number.

Patents 1916 - those filed before 1/7/1978

From 1916 both application numbers and publication numbers were used. Application numbers were in the format YYnnnnn where the first two digits are the year of filing followed by a 5 digit number (beginning at 1 every year). Publication numbers ran in a continuous sequence from 100001. Any number greater than this (but less than 2000001) will be from this period. Patents filed before 1/7/1978 but granted after this date were still numbered according to this sequence.

Patents filed after 1/7/1978

Application numbers remain in the format YYnnnnn. Publication numbers for those patents filed after 1/7/1978 have been numbered consecutively from 2000001 (this first number was published 4/1/1979)



Information on the Internet

Patent Specifications

The esp@cenet database, (<http://gb.espacenet.com>), contains many old British patents. Officially, they are supposed to be available back to 1900, but you will find some dating back to 1892. It had appeared that the intention was to add all the old British patents to this database, but nothing has been added in the last five or six years, so it now looks unlikely this will happen.

This makes Newcastle City Library's historical patent collection a scarce resource.

Title and abstract data may not be available to be searched for older patents, however they will be classified under the European Patent Classification, ECLA (see Patent Information on the Internet Guide); for GB patents the ECLA is allocated from about 1909 onwards. For GB patents before 1978 the applicant's name also appears at the beginning of the abstract. This is useful for older applications originating from abroad where the applicant field actually contains the name of the agent in UK who filed the application, but the original applicant's name will be found by searching in the abstract field. From around 1930 to 1938 the applicant's address also appears in the abstract.

To find GB patents by patent number prior to 1916 you need to know the year of publication in addition to the number. Go to the esp@cenet website and click the Advanced Search link at the left. The number should be entered on esp@cenet in the following format (in the Publication Number field): **GBYYYYNNNN**, where **YYYY** indicates the year and **NNNN** is a 5 digit number (enter leading zeros if the number is less than 5 digits).

Please see our guide entitled **A guide to patent searching using Esp@cenet** (available on the website)



Official Journal (Patents)

The Intellectual Property Office website contains an archive of downloadable journals from issue 5701 (12 August 1998) to issue 6201 (26 March 2008) in pdf format. From issue 6198 (5 March 2008) data is available to download in xml format as well as pdf. Data is searchable from issue 6127 (25 October 2006). They can be found at:

<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/types/patent/p-os/p-journal.htm>

See page 6 for details of Newcastle City Library's coverage

Trade Marks Journal

The Intellectual Property Office website has an archive of only the last 12 months of journals (to be viewed online or downloaded)

<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/types/tm/t-os/t-tmj.htm>

See page 7 for details of Newcastle City Library's coverage



Old British Patent Collection at City Library

If not otherwise indicated all this material is located in the stack, coming just after 999 in the first size sequence. The collection consists of:

Alphabetical Index of Patentees and Inventions, 1617-1852.

A single volume located on the Intellectual Property shelves in the Agency Space, Level 1:

“Alphabetical index of patentees of inventions, 1617-1852”. Bennet Woodcroft, 608.7

Annual Patent Applicant Name Indexes, 1852- Dec 1997

There are some missing volumes: 1874, 1883, 1889, 1890 and 1891. Note that 1853 is not missing: the first volume labelled 1852 contains the 1852 index (which only runs from October to December, see previous information on numbering) and the 1853 index.

Subject Matter Indexes, 1617-1852


This is contained in two volumes and is an alphabetical index for broad subject areas, with sub-classes giving a list of patent numbers, dates, inventors.

Subject Matter Indexes, 1852-1930

At the front of each volume is an alphabetical index of subject areas with cross-references to the subject to look up in the main body of the volume which then gives the patent numbers for that year and subject. However, you still have to locate the right class to find the abstract.

Patent Abstracts, 1617-1883

This sequence has a rudimentary classification system. The volumes are filed alphabetically by classification. There are a number of missing volumes.



Due to the small number of patents covering this period each class may only have one slim volume, but some may cover up to 5 volumes. There are no drawings, just an abstract.

Patent Abstracts, 1855-1930

This sequence is more complex. There is an expanded classification system, but it is still sometimes difficult to determine the right class and may involve lateral thinking or even inspired guesswork. A number of volumes will cover a period of several years and within this group each volume will cover several classes. Within each volume the division is first by class, then each class is divided into years, and within each year the numbers appear sequentially.


The earlier volumes within this sequence are very fragile. The spines are cracked and some volumes are in several pieces. From the volumes covering 1893-96 most are intact. These volumes are numbered from 1-393; although number 136 appears to be missing it is in fact a mistake as 137 follows on from 135.

Official Journal (Patents) 1929- Oct 1998

This may be useful to search if you are unable to find a patent. From 1/1/1884 the patent specification was only published if the patent was granted. So a search of the name index might confirm that a patent was applied for. There is an applicant name index for each journal and a subject matter index which becomes a classification index in later volumes

Note that we do not hold full specifications, but it is usually a good idea to try to find the abstract first to check it is the right patent. We cannot source full specifications on behalf of customers. A number of PATLIB UK libraries do hold full specifications and contact details can be found at:

<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/whyuse/business/business-patlib.htm>



Other Historical Intellectual Property Resources

Trade Marks Journal May 3, 1876-1990

Listing of trade marks in classification sequence and trade mark number index.

Missing volume for 1973, part 1 (covering publication dates between December 29, 1972 and July 4, 1973). Earlier volumes fragile.

Reports of Patent, Design and Trade Mark Cases 1885-2004

Alphabetical index at beginning for case and defendant name.

Designs in View October 1997 to May 2006



Useful Resources

You will find the following resources useful:

Information on old GB patent numbering can be found at the following websites:

<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/types/patent/p-about/p-what-is/p-oldnumbers.htm>

<http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/patentsblog/2008/03/british-patent.html>

<http://www.tymelpatents.co.uk/faqs.html>

The following book is invaluable:

British Patents of Invention, 1617-1977. Stephen van Dulken (British Library, 1999)
Found at 608.7, Intellectual Property shelves, Agency Space, Level 1

You will find a classification list on page 144 and an index to classifications on page 147. There is an extremely detailed guide to the various patent numbering systems. Use the classification list for 1855-1908 to cover the abstracts in our collection for period 1855-1930 (from 1909-1930 the same classes were further subdivided).

Don't use the 1617-1883 classes as these do not correspond with the numbers on the spines of our collection for that period (which are actually volume numbers) or the title headings.

There is a printed list and index of classification headings for the period 1617-1883, which corresponds to the abstract volumes in our collection.

You will find a printout of the class headings and index for both periods in the box with these leaflets and copies are also kept in the stack.



Example Searches

Even if you have the patent number to find the abstract you will need to locate the classification (and possibly also the year).

Searching for a patent from the period 1617-1852


Example 1: We are looking for a Robert Stephenson patent for a locomotive steam engine. We don't know the year, but it's from the early 19th century and we have a patent number 6372.

→Look in the first sequence of abstracts 1617-1883. Look through the list of classes and "The Steam Engine" seems the best one to try. There are several volumes, each covering several years. Part I Volume I covers the period of interest and within the volume entries are ordered first by year, then by patent number. If we didn't know the number we could look in the volume "Alphabetical Index of Patentees and Inventions, 1617-1852" where you will find another patent for locomotive steam engines by the same inventor, number 6372

Searching for a patent from the period 1852-1915

Example 2: We want to find a patent by Joseph Swan for the electric light bulb. We know it was in 1880 but we don't know the number.

→Look in the name index for 1880 and you will find 5 entries for Swan, J.W. patent numbers 18, 250, 4933, 5004, 5014, four being for electric lights and one for measuring and recording electric currents. If you look at adjacent years you will find other electric light patents by Swan which illustrates that there is often no one single patent for an invention but a number of similar patents as the invention is developed and improved. We can then look for the first run of volumes that cover the year and within those the volume that covers the class. The class can be ascertained from the list in Stephen van Dulken's book, page 144, and the one that seems likely is class 39 "Electric lamps and furnaces".



We can find the volume for the years 1877 - 83 and classes 39 - 41. Within the volume entries are ordered first by class, then by year, then by patent number.

Example 3: We know that the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once applied for a patent for an aircraft propeller and we have come across a reference to the number, 27087, but we have no idea which year

→We can be sure the year is not later than 1915 as the number is less than 100001. Knowing that patent numbers from before 1916 start at 1 every year we can look at the table of highest patent number for each year (reproduced on page 11, but also in Stephen van Dulken's book, page 105). The number 27087 could only have originated from the years 1896-98 or 1902-13. As Wittgenstein was only born in 1889 it is very unlikely the patent was published before 1900!

As we are dealing with a patent from after 1900 we can try to find it on the esp@cenet database. Using the guide to numbering on page 2 of this booklet we can try entering numbers of the format GB190027087 and changing the year until we discover a result for 1910.



British Patent Numbers

Highest Patent Numbers 1852 to 1915

1852	1211	1874	4492	1896	30165
1853	3045	1875	4561	1897	30936
1854	2764	1876	5069	1898	27639
1855	2958	1877	4949	1899	25775
1856	3106	1878	5343	1900	23909
1857	3200	1879	5338	1901	26767
1858	3007	1880	5517	1902	28959
1859	3000	1881	5751	1903	28818
1860	3196	1882	6241	1904	29657
1861	3276	1883	5993	1905	27290
1862	3490	1884	17110	1906	29773
1863	3309	1885	16101	1907	28769
1864	3260	1886	17169	1908	28566
1865	3386	1887	18044	1909	30607
1866	3453	1888	19070	1910	30403
1867	3723	1889	20993	1911	29400
1868	3991	1890	21304	1912	30119
1869	3786	1891	22873	1913	30102
1870	3405	1892	24166	1914	24847
1871	3529	1893	25102	1915	18225
1872	3970	1894	25372		
1873	4294	1895	25053		



British Patent Numbers

Highest Application Numbers 1916 to 1977

1916	18686	1937	36298	1958	42277
1917	19358	1938	38006	1959	44495
1918	21933	1939	33129	1960	44914
1919	32892	1940	18266	1961	46811
1920	36680	1941	16863	1962	49187
1921	35163	1942	18628	1963	51469
1922	35512	1943	21948	1964	53104
1923	32637	1944	26200	1965	55507
1924	31383	1945	35334	1966	58521
1925	33019	1946	38185	1967	59290
1926	33094	1947	35440	1968	61995
1927	35487	1948	33698	1969	63614
1928	38593	1949	33500	1970	62101
1929	39927	1950	31686	1971	61078
1930	39367	1951	30513	1972	60281
1931	36127	1952	33142	1973	60312
1932	37063	1953	36401	1974	56250
1933	36744	1954	37871	1975	53400
1934	37429	1955	37551	1976	54561
1935	36116	1956	39730	1977	54423
1936	35900	1957	40498		



British Patent Numbers

Highest Publication Numbers 1916 to 1981

1916	100001	1939	497409	1962	889571
1917	102812	1940	512178	1963	918311
1918	112131	1941	530617	1964	949031
1919	121611	1942	542024	1965	982551
1920	136852	1943	550067	1966	1015491
1921	155801	1944	558091	1967	1058501
1922	173241	1945	566191	1968	1102801
1923	190732	1946	574006	1969	1142501
1924	208751	1947	583360	1970	1180651
1925	226571	1948	595746	1971	1222451
1926	244801	1949	614704	1972	1263601
1927	263501	1950	633754	1973	1306401
1928	282701	1951	650021	1974	1346401
1929	302941	1952	667061	1975	1384031
1930	323171	1953	687841	1976	1424101
1931	340201	1954	704741	1977	1464401
1932	363615	1955	724991	1978	1500801
1933	385258	1956	745421	1979	1540351
1934	407311	1957	768941	1980	1560781
1935	421246	1958	791071	1981	1584611
1936	439856	1959	809321		
1937	458491	1960	829181		
1938	477016	1961	861801		



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