

“The Chronicle Series”

Congleton Chronicle – Alsager Chronicle - Biddulph Chronicle – Sandbach Chronicle

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Annual report

Introduction

We are family-owned paid-for weekly whose currently titles date back to 1893. In an earlier form we go back further and a similar business has operated from our address for at least 250 years.

We publish four titles. The *Congleton Chronicle* is our flagship title, brings in most revenue and has the most sales (10,000 of our total 15,000, but see below). We also publish the *Biddulph Chronicle*, *Sandbach Chronicle* (est 1944) and the *Alsager Chronicle* (established two or three years ago).

We are not members of ABC and use modelled data based on our print run for circulation: 25 years ago circulation was 16,500, now it is 15,000. This is a drop of 10% over 25 years, mainly due to outlets closing.

As with most weeklies, our audience is everyone.

We are a traditional paper in many ways but try to be outspoken and act as a voice for the community. We have a strong op-ed section, including editorial, letters from readers, and a column called *Open Debate*, where people can sound off at more length than a letter, not that we limit letters. We also have an outspoken columnist called Mr Grumpy and another, less regular one, called Simple Soul.

Standards

Our minimum standard is the editor's code of conduct.

We also adhere to the US Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics, which can be summed up as: ethical journalism should be accurate and fair; ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect; ethical journalists act independently and serve

the public, and ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public. (See attached).

All our stories are verified. We speak to both sides of any story. The only times this fails is with new trainees, because they are learning on the job. All stories are checked on the page by the editor or his deputy, and any stories that do not appear fair are pulled from that page, though this is rare.

Complaints

It should be made clear that we are accessible to readers. We are on social media – our editor has his own page – and most readers communicate via email. Most of our staff live in the area. We have amicable relationships with local groups and societies. Internally, we only employ six reporters and three subs; we talk all the time.

Complaints arrive in a variety of ways: social media, the telephone, email, being stopped in the street, having your ear bent in the pub. Any that concern factual errors or “proper” errors are recorded and investigated.

To define this further: we might get a complaint about *how* we covered an event, usually along the lines of:

“Why didn’t you cover event x?”

“Did you tell us?”

“No”

“That’s why”.

We might get a complaint about Mr Grumpy/Simple Soul or a reader’s letter along the lines of:

“XX was a bit off this week, I might write a letter.”

“Please do.”

Subsequent letter (actual letter): “As someone who long since gave up reading the comments of your resident parochial and tediously predictable columnists, it has had to be pointed out to me that a Simple Soul last week returned - like a dog to its own vomit - to another pathetic justification for his use of the offensive term of breeding when referring to migrants who raise families.”

We also receive regular complaints about addresses given in court, saying Defendant X does not live at that address and is unknown by anyone there. People are usually being economical with the truth. (How are court documents served if the address is not correct?). We refer them to the court clerk, police or their solicitor.

Occasionally we do make a mistake, which is logged and corrected. Rarely do we correct an address, and the correction must come from the court, the police or a solicitor.

Complaints where we have actually made a factual error, or error of judgement that warrants an apology, are logged. We investigate the causes and if appropriate, issue a clarification / apology / correction, depending on the circumstance. If the error is more than a simple mistake we will consult the staff member who is responsible, to avoid the mistake happening again.

Complaints are channelled according to their seriousness. Most are dealt with by the reporters and more serious ones by our deputy editor. He may consult the editor.

As the old saying has it: "The man who never made a mistake never made anything" so mistakes go with the job. We have no problem printing corrections and apologies. We see apologies as a way of maintaining our standing in the community, and not as something to hide. If we make a mistake, we admit to it and people appreciate this.

All corrections go on the letters page. We have noted Ipso rulings on letters pages, but our letters pages are the best read part of the paper, so we are in no sense "burying" corrections. We have five or six pages of letters every week.

After speaking to Ipso, we now run a corrections panel on the same position in the letters section, whether or not we have any corrections to make. We do not use page templates or run identical lay-outs each week so it is hard to run the corrections section on the same page each week.

If the complaint was about a front page story (or back page – we have news not sport on the back) the correction would go there if we/the complainant felt this was necessary.

We have a weekly panel that gives people various information, including how to complain. It must be said that few people take any notice, and contact us in the ways described above.

Training/general comments

None of this conveys how we actually operate - we are a community newspaper that the community feels it owns and controls. Most "complaints" are not actually complaints but friendly emails or requests for a follow-up. Even people who we don't know, know that we will correct mistakes, so it's more a dialogue than a complaints procedure.

We routinely apologise for errors that have been made in the submitted copy, ie it is the sender's fault. If it is a bad error, we will say it was in the information given to us but usually we just print a correction – we don't want our correspondents to look silly so we take the blame.

This is always the case in errors in funeral reports; the last thing a bereaved family wants is a squabble as to who made the mistake.

We also print (in the spirit of the SPJ) an occasional column that lists all errors and tries to explain why they happened. In most cases, we know the people who have complained and are still in regular contact with them. Attached are the two most recent.

As for training: we take on trainees who leave once they have passed the NCE. We do not have a separate training system for mistakes – training is an integral part of our system.

Jeremy Condliffe

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeremy Condliffe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and 'C'.

Editor / MD / Responsible Person

Congleton Chronicle Series

CODE of ETHICS

PREAMBLE

Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity.

The Society declares these four principles as the foundation of ethical journalism and encourages their use in its practice by all people in all media.

SEEK TRUTH AND REPORT IT

Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.

Journalists should:

- ▶ Take responsibility for the accuracy of their work. Verify information before releasing it. Use original sources whenever possible.
- ▶ Remember that neither speed nor format excuses inaccuracy.
- ▶ Provide context. Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.
- ▶ Gather, update and correct information throughout the life of a news story.
- ▶ Be cautious when making promises, but keep the promises they make.
- ▶ Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information as possible to judge the reliability and motivations of sources.
- ▶ Consider sources' motives before promising anonymity. Reserve anonymity for sources who may face danger, retribution or other harm, and have information that cannot be obtained elsewhere. Explain why anonymity was granted.
- ▶ Diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.
- ▶ Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional, open methods will not yield information vital to the public.
- ▶ Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.
- ▶ Support the open and civil exchange of views, even views they find repugnant.
- ▶ Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.
- ▶ Provide access to source material when it is relevant and appropriate.
- ▶ Boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.
- ▶ Avoid stereotyping. Journalists should examine the ways their values and experiences may shape their reporting.
- ▶ Label advocacy and commentary.
- ▶ Never deliberately distort facts or context, including visual information. Clearly label illustrations and re-enactments.
- ▶ Never plagiarize. Always attribute.

MINIMIZE HARM

Ethical journalism treats sources, subjects, colleagues and members of the public as human beings deserving of respect.

Journalists should:

- ▶ Balance the public's need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.

- ▶ Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent. Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment.
- ▶ Recognize that legal access to information differs from an ethical justification to publish or broadcast.
- ▶ Realize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than public figures and others who seek power, influence or attention. Weigh the consequences of publishing or broadcasting personal information.
- ▶ Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do.
- ▶ Balance a suspect's right to a fair trial with the public's right to know. Consider the implications of identifying criminal suspects before they face legal charges.
- ▶ Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication. Provide updated and more complete information as appropriate.

ACT INDEPENDENTLY

The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.

Journalists should:

- ▶ Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Disclose unavoidable conflicts.
- ▶ Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and avoid political and other outside activities that may compromise integrity or impartiality, or may damage credibility.
- ▶ Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; do not pay for access to news. Identify content provided by outside sources, whether paid or not.
- ▶ Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.
- ▶ Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur the lines between the two. Prominently label sponsored content.

BE ACCOUNTABLE AND TRANSPARENT

Ethical journalism means taking responsibility for one's work and explaining one's decisions to the public.

Journalists should:

- ▶ Explain ethical choices and processes to audiences. Encourage a civil dialogue with the public about journalistic practices, coverage and news content.
- ▶ Respond quickly to questions about accuracy, clarity and fairness.
- ▶ Acknowledge mistakes and correct them promptly and prominently. Explain corrections and clarifications carefully and clearly.
- ▶ Expose unethical conduct in journalism, including within their organizations.
- ▶ Abide by the same high standards they expect of others.

The SPJ Code of Ethics is a statement of abiding principles supported by additional explanations and position papers (at spj.org) that address changing journalistic practices. It is not a set of rules, rather a guide that encourages all who engage in journalism to take responsibility for the information they provide, regardless of medium. The code should be read as a whole; individual principles should not be taken out of context. It is not, nor can it be under the First Amendment, legally enforceable.

CONTACT THE SOCIETY

For more information on the Society of Professional Journalists or for more on journalism ethics, visit SPJ's website at spj.org or contact SPJ at:

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Improving & Protecting Journalism



Errors round-up (1)

We're a quarter of the way through the year so we thought we'd present a round-up of all our errors of the last three months. The intention is to be transparent, persuade people that we do own up to mistakes and to try and explain how they happened.

- Court reports. As a class of complaint we get more regarding court cases than any other; not surprising really. There are two main reasons: people don't want to be embarrassed in front of friends and neighbours, and criminals lie. We can report what is said in open court, but we are limited after that — if a defendant gives the wrong address to the court, that's the address we give. On the whole we get court reports correct but we did make one mistake: we said a person was up for drink driving when in fact it was drunk in charge of a vehicle — there is a difference. We won't name this person, but apologies once again. The error was human — we list hundreds of court cases every year and are bound to slip up once or twice.
- Editorial. The worst error of the quarter was committed by our editor, who wrote a too-hurried editorial complaining about opposition councillors on Cheshire East Council attacking leader Coun Michael Jones. As part of the comments, he mentioned Sandbach's Coun Sam Corcoran, cleared of a complaint in 2012; the editorial implied he had been guilty of this complaint. We apologised to Coun Corcoran in the newspaper and have since apologised in person and made him a nice cup of coffee. That mistake was unintentional and caused by rushing to meet deadline.
- Brain freeze. Journalism is about trusting reporters to interpret things correctly, and occasionally they get things wrong. In our Biddulph edition we used quotes from a letter and slightly mangled the meaning, and compounded the error by not calling the person for a quote. In Alsager, we misquoted a Liberal Democrat as having concerns with Cheshire county, Congleton borough and Cheshire East councils, whereas Cheshire County Council had not been named. Apologies once again to Jacky Palmer and Rod Fletcher.
- Assumption. There's an annoying management phrase about "assume" making an "ass" of "u" and "me". Sadly it's true. Submitted reports sometimes miss out names and we usually guess correctly what the missing name is (or can find it quickly on the internet). This failed in a report of the Congleton Dane Probus Club, where we named Doug Wisener (the report just said Doug) when the report meant Doug McKenzie. Mr Wisener is a member of Congleton and District Probus Club. Apologies to both Dougs again; the error was again our editor's, who handles most of the emailed copy. He assumed his memory was working correctly at 6am, and everyone else assumed he was correct. The error did highlight the fact that we like full names in reports. Where clubs refer to people by first name only, we either delete the name or work out what the surname is. Obviously it's better all round to have the full name so please: unless you want our editor to randomly rename club members, please give full names if possible.

- Blips. Most of the other errors we committed were just blips or accuracy failings for a variety of reasons — mishearing, writing down a wrong number or reading notes back wrongly.

The only interesting one (though after reading the explanation you might disagree) concerned the NSPCC. We reported that a coffee morning had raised £2,495. In fact the event raised £249.05. This was our editor's fault again: he uses a process in Word that automatically tidies up the files we receive, one piece of tidying being removing surplus 0s in numbers (for example instead of £2.00 we just want £2). The flaw is that figures like 249.05 lose the .0 and become 2495. Very rarely we don't spot this, and it's in one or two files in literally thousands. Apologies again to the NSPCC.

Apologies also to Biddulph Moor Post Office, where we got the opening times during a refurb wrong; St Lawrence's Church, Biddulph, where we said a defibrillator cost £200 when it was really £1,800; Geoff Banner, chairman of the trustees at the Hospital League of Friends but described by us as shop manager; Dawn Allen, who we called "Coun Dawn Allen" in a letter, when she was writing in a personal capacity; Leighton Hospital Prostate Cancer Support Group, who we said were running a session from 7am to 10pm instead of 7pm; and Daintry Hall Day Nursery, whom we accidentally called Hilltop Nursery.

- Press officer calumny. Finally, Trevor Green at Cheshire East Council Press office sent in a Press release about the Lyme Green fiasco that coincided with a letter on the same topic from Coun Sam Corcoran — Trevor was putting the council side while Sam was saying the opposite. They went together well. We ran both as letters and rather than sign the council letter as "Cheshire East Council" we signed it as Trevor Green, though we added a footnote saying this was our doing and no fault of Trevor. Nonetheless, the council was not happy and complained, so we apologised to Trevor and will do so again. And yes, that was our editor's fault, too.

Errors round up (2)

We missed the usual slot for our round-up corrections but this week we present our regular (attempted) explanation of mistakes. We've omitted a couple of sensitive ones for reasons that would be only too obvious if we told you, so if you think you've been left out of what follows for any reason, apologies again.

- Elections. The local elections (which seem a long time ago) prompted a rash of bad mistakes, partly because of the volume of biographies we receive at once, and partly because we are, after all, only human. All too human.

The least-worst gaffe was to omit Congleton candidate's Gordon Baxendale profile; at least there was time to run it before the election. Worse, in Biddulph, we confused Jill and Lisa Salt, magnified because one was standing for UKIP and one Labour*. We can't improve on reporter Alex McIntyre's grovelling apology at the time: "It was an unforgivable lack of concentration and my heartfelt and sincerest apologies go out to both Jill and Lisa for the error." Alex (the last round-up mainly featured our editor, so it's good to see other staff being to blame) also managed to copy and paste Parliamentary candidate Trudie McGuinness's information into Labour town councillor candidate Nigel Yates's biography, or possibly vice versa.

Either way, we were able to run the kind of apology that makes its way onto ITALICS Have I Got News For You: "Mrs McGuinness does not own a ribbon and textile business and was not a special constable for 15 years. Nor did she spend the majority of her working life at Selectus having been an engineering apprentice at Fodens. She is not connected with the organising committee of Biddulph Youth Orchestra and hasn't produced a book for the Biddulph Historical and Genealogy Society. Mrs McGuinness is also not involved with the Safer Communities working group and Biddulph Regeneration Forum." Alex's earlier apology probably goes for that, too, though the error should have been noticed in our subbing and page correction stages – we all know Mrs McGuinness did none of those things.

We can only apologise once again to all those candidates.

- Similarly, we reported that the world's biggest radio telescope was going to be built at Jodrell Bank, when in fact the international Square Kilometre Array project is a collection of telescopes around the world, the headquarters being at Jodrell Bank Observatory. However confused our reporter might have been, someone else should have spotted that, not least because the Lovell Telescope is so iconic.

- Shameful errors. In similar fashion to the mistakes above, we made other errors that were, to be honest, rather shameful, and for which pressure of work is the only excuse.

We called Marton and District CE Aided Primary School's head "Mr Deakin" throughout, despite it being clear from the school's emailed comments that the head was actually Mrs Deakin.

Bernard Moore also wrote in to point out that we referred to The Bull's Head at Congleton, instead of the pub of the same name at Smallwood. "I am amazed you can make such an error," he wrote. So were we.

Again, apologies to the pub, which does very nice food, and to Marton and Mrs Deakin, who runs a very good school.

We also got the date for Mossley Old School Trust's 15th anniversary celebration wrong – it was on Saturday, 18th July, not 18th June. This was a particularly bad error as it itself appeared in a correction.

- Minsundersandings. Some errors were down to easier to understand situations, or even errors in copy that we were sent.

We recently said that Biddulph Film Club would not know which film it would be showing “until two days before the event” – this was a slip of the pen, when our reporter should have written two weeks. Sorry, film club.

We also reported that a driver was taken to hospital after a collision in Astbury. The driver who was taken to hospital asked us to correct this; the error was due to information we received via the emergency services, who themselves are compiling information from complex situations.

We got confused between Macclesfield District General Hospital and ParkingEye, the company that runs the hospital parking system. We said fines went to the hospital when they go to the company, and conversely that the company had reassured people that parking fines would be cancelled in cases with genuine mitigating circumstances, which was actually the hospital.

Again, a simple mistake: our reporters use shorthand and it is all too easy to confuse who said what. Similarly, we incorrectly reported that a decision to quash the approval of the Lask Edge wind turbine was a result of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council challenging the appeal decision, when the appeal decision was actually challenged by judicial review brought by resident Hal Wilson. Apologies, Mr Wilson.

We described Congleton company Thrive as a PR company, when it is “a brand communications agency”. In our defence, most readers will know what a PR company is but fewer will understand “a brand communications agency”, but if we are going to simplify, we should be more careful. Apologies once again to Thrive.

Finally, we said Astbury Church's rector, the Rev Jeff Cuttell, was planning to visit housebound churchgoers. He said that through infirmity, illness or injury, most people faced periods when they were unable to get to church. Mr Cuttell's email address was mangled – our software can do this to long email addresses, not helped by the fact that we scan some copy in – and should have been jeffrey.cuttell@btinternet.com

Anyone who needs the new service can email there or call 01477 500536.

* Note to Ipsos: she was actually Independent, but we're not apologising for a mistake in the round-up of mistakes apologising for earlier corrections!