

David J. Shaw, 'Retail distribution networks in East Kent in the eighteenth century'. Pp. 197–205, in: *Worlds of Print: Diversity in the book trade*, edited by John Hinks and Catherine Armstrong. British Library & Oak Knoll Press, 2006. xiii + 240 pp. ISBN 0-7123-4937-5. (Paper given at the annual British Book Trade History conference, University of Edinburgh, July 2004).

Retail distribution networks in East Kent in the eighteenth century

David J. Shaw

At earlier meetings of the British Book Trade History conference,¹ Sarah Gray and I have looked at some aspects of the activities of Canterbury printers and publishers in the eighteenth century.² Canterbury's first printer (excluding the ephemeral press of John Mychell in the mid sixteenth century) was James Abree who established himself in the city in 1717 after completing his apprenticeship under Ichabod Dawkes in London between 1705 and 1712.³ His activity as a book producer was documented in my earlier article.⁴ Abree's surviving output of books and pamphlets between 1717 and his death in 1768 amounts to just over 100 books and pamphlets (a number of them being single-sheet ephemeral items such as the annual bellman's verses). It is clear that he cannot have hoped to make a living in Canterbury solely as a book printer. No doubt he also did jobbing printing which either does not survive or which cannot be recognised as Abree's work. His advertisements show that his bookshop sold titles from London producers and also the usual range of goods including stationery and patent medicines. As with printers in other provincial towns in the early eighteenth century, Abree no doubt intended from the start that his business plan was centred on the regular income to be had from the production of a newspaper.

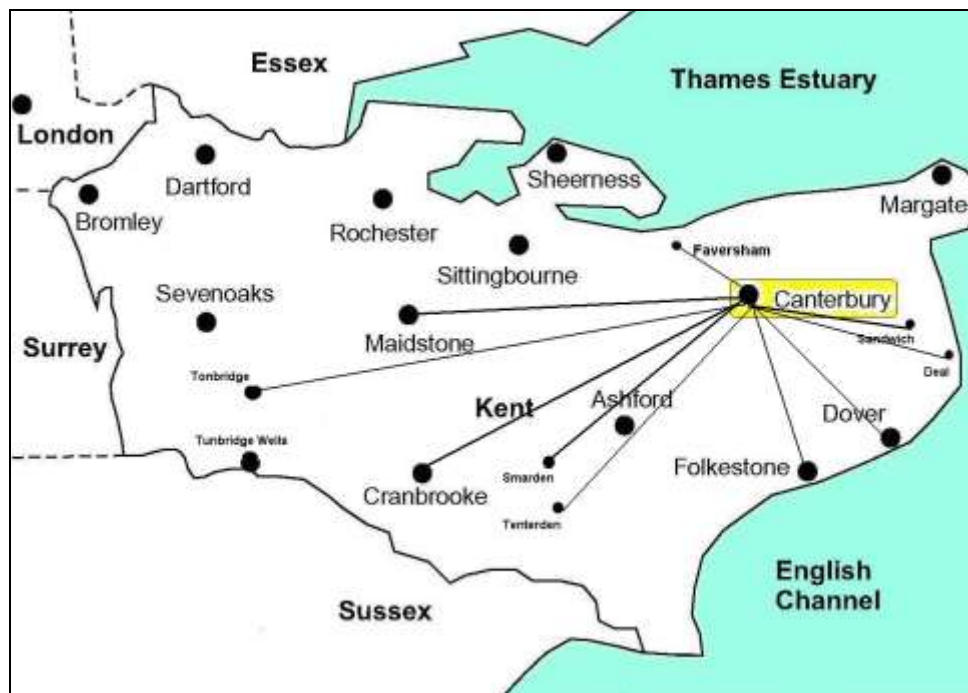


Figure 1. Distribution of books printed by James Abree by other booksellers in East Kent

Another factor in Abree's business plan would seem to be the establishment of retail opportunities beyond the city of Canterbury itself, whose population was probably insufficiently large to support his activities. We shall look later at the distribution networks for the newspaper. For books printed in his workshop, Abree from time to time arranged distribution deals with other booksellers in the region (in addition to trade connections with London booksellers). The imprints of his books show a variety of such co-publication arrangements during his career:⁵

1722 : Sandwich

1739 : Cranbrook, Smarden, Tenterden

1744 and 1745 : Cranbrook

1748 : Maidstone

1762 : Deal, Dover, Faversham, Folkestone, Maidstone, Sandwich, Smarden, Tonbridge

The second half of the eighteenth century saw this pattern of regional co-publishing and distribution continue, though most co-publishing ventures by Canterbury printers are with London tradesmen.⁶ Within Kent, Canterbury printers shared imprints with tradesmen in the following towns:

Chatham (2), Cranbrook (1), Dover (6), Faversham (4), Folkestone (2),
Maidstone (4), Margate (17), Ramsgate (10), Rochester (6), Sandwich (3)

This pattern is not essentially different from Abree's, though it now extends to the Medway towns.



**Figure 2. Masthead of the *Kentish Post*, 19–22 December 1722
(Canterbury Cathedral Library)**

As indicated above, newspaper production also required a larger distribution than could be found within Canterbury itself. The first newspaper was *The Kentish Post and Canterbury Newsletter*, printed in Canterbury by James Abree, and produced bi-weekly from 1717 to 1768 when it merged with James Simmons's newly founded rival, *The Kentish Gazette*. The merged paper, called *The Kentish Gazette, or Canterbury Chronicle*, started in July 1768 and is still in business today, appearing every Thursday.⁷

In order to sell the newspaper twice a week in the towns and villages in Kent, a distribution system was needed. This was no doubt a typical situation for newspaper proprietors in the provincial towns. The solution was to employ newsmen who carried the newspaper twice a

week on a circuit of the county, both selling the paper and collecting advertisements for the next issue and delivering goods such as patent medicines. Early issues of *The Kentish Gazette* carry lists of the towns visited by the newsmen and I had hoped to study the patterns of distribution throughout the century. Unfortunately, Abree did not list his distribution rounds in the *Kentish Post* in the surviving copies produced between 1726 and 1767. However, the existence of the newsmen is clearly indicated in some of his book imprints and in advertisements in the newspaper. For example, the colophon for issue no. 795 (1–5 January, 1725/26) reads

Canterbury, Printed and Sold by J. Abree in St. Margaret's. Where
Advertisements are taken in. And all sorts of ALMANACKS Sold for the Year
1726. To be had also by the News-men. Likewise several sorts of MUSICAL as
well as Playing Cards.

There is an advertisement in another issue in 1726 (no. 801, 22–26 January 1725/26, page 3) for 'Dr. Daffey's Original and Famous Elixir ... NB. The said Elixir is brought, Carriage free, by speaking to the Men who carry the Canterbury Newsletter'. Another advertisement for a patent medicine in 1729 (no. 1184, 7–10 January 1729/30, page 3) announces 'Dr Richard Rock's Famed Stomach Plaister, Sold at the Printing Office in Canterbury, and by the men who carry the Canterbury News Paper'.

Some advertisements give details of the other Kentish bookshops where goods can be purchased; these almost certainly indicate part of the route travelled by the newsmen. For example, a book advertisement (no. 801, 22–26 January 1725–26, page 4) lists trade partners in Sandwich, Ashford, New Romney, Dover and London:

Subscriptions for Mr De Gols's Book, Entitled, A Vindication of the Worship of the Lord Jesus Christ. ... Will be sold under five Shillings in Sheets. Subscriptions are taken in by Mr. Silver at Sandwich, Mr. John Smith Junior at Ashford, Mr. Hammond at New Romney, Mr. Gill at Dover, Mr. Bettsworth in Pater-noster Row London, and at the Printing-office Canterbury.

Another advertisement for Daffey's Elixir (no. 1183, 3–7 January 1729/30, page 4) gives a long list of tradesmen in the region to whom Abree had sub-contracted the sale of the brew:

Dr Daffey's Original and famous Cordial Elixir Salutis ... Truly prepared at London, and appointed to be sold at no other place in Canterbury, but at Mr. James Abree's ... Printing Office. Price 2s.6d. The large Half Pint.

Also appointed to be sold at ...

Mrs Hickels by the Market Place in Deal
Mr Bayleys *Shopkeeper* at Folkstone
Mr Richard Harrys in St Peter's in the Isle of Thanet
Mr John Atkinsons *Grocer* in Ashford
Mr Rigden's, *Grocer* in Faversham
Mr Robinson's *at the Bull* in Newington
Mr Samson Price's, *Grocer* in Dover
Mr Boys's at Charing
Mr Goodwin's *Grocer* at Pluckley
Mr Richard Oliver's *Grocer* in Sandwich

Mr Armstrong's *at the Rose and Crown* in Margate
 Mr Stonestree's *Gardener* at Sittingbourne
 Mr Hopwood's near the Little Conduit, Maidstone
 Mr Thatcher's *Grocer* at Wye
 Mr Nicholas Peckers *Butcher* near Ramsgate

Interestingly, none of these are book-trade personnel: they are a mixture of publicans and shopkeepers. It can be assumed that the newspaper would also be sold in these towns and probably by the same people.

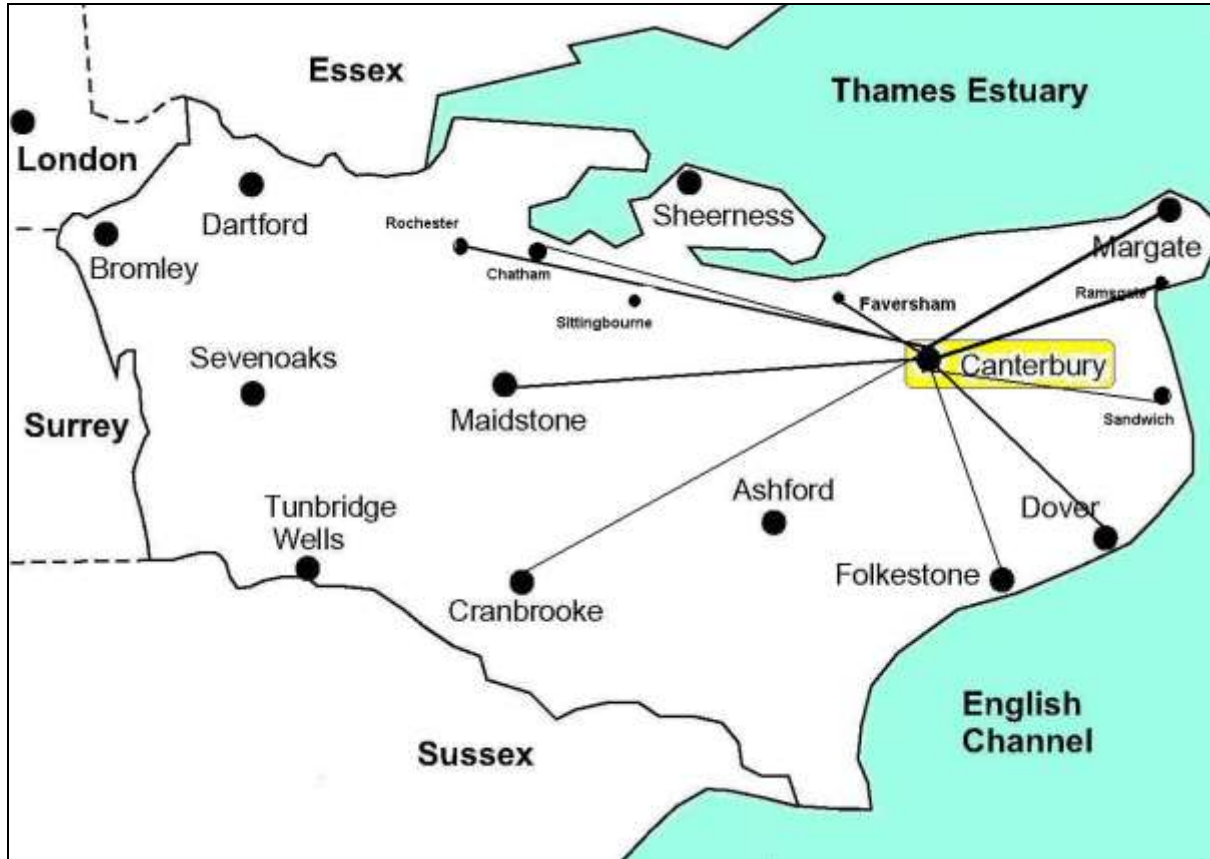


Figure 3. The probable extent of distribution of Abree's Kentish Post in 1767

Towards the end of Abree's career, the newspaper still gives no indication of the routes of the newsmen, but once again the location of advertisers indicates distribution to the following towns:

Littlebourne, Petham, Elham, Birchington, Broadstairs, Deal, Dover, Sandwich, Wye, Ashford, Ivychurch, Faversham, Sittingbourne, Charing, Biddenden

By the middle of 1768, the elderly James Abree was preparing to hand over his business to his former assistant George Kirkby, who immediately set to work to modernise the paper. He purchased new type and redesigned the masthead.



Figure 4. Masthead of the *Kentish Post*, 16–20 July 1768
(Canterbury Cathedral Library)

Another innovation was the introduction (at last) of a colophon carrying a list of the towns visited by the newsmen. Almost all of the outlets mentioned are public houses, with the addition of two London coffee houses:

The Fountain in Dover; the Five Bells in Deal; the Old Bell in Sandwich; the Spread Eagle in Ramsgate; the Fountain and Old Crown in Margate; the Three Kings at Sittingbourne; the Bull at Newington; the Haunch of Venison at Maidstone; the Windmill at Hollingbourne; the Bell at Harrietsham; the Dog and Bear at Lenham; the George at Newnham; the Woolpack at Chilham; the Flying Horse at Wye; the Saracen's Head at Ashford; the George at Bethersden; the White Lyon at Tenterden; the George at Cranbrook; the Red Lyon at Biddenden; the Chequer at Smarden; the King's Head at Charing; the Rose at Elham; the White Hart at Folkestone; the White Swan at Hythe; at Mr Mate's, Saddler, at New Romney; the George at Lydd; the Royal Oak at Newing Green; the Drum at Stanford; and at Tom's Coffee-house in Cornhill, and St. Paul's Coffee-house in St. Paul's Churchyard, London.

This set of routes shows a well-defined circulation area in East Kent and out to the Medway Valley and Romney Marsh.

The rival *Kentish Gazette* appeared on 25–28 May 1768 before Kirkby's plans were complete. Its imprint announced an intention to distribute far more widely than Abree's paper had:

Printed by James Simmons, at the King's Arms Printing Office, in
Christ-Church-yard, Canterbury

This paper will be published in Canterbury every Wednesday and Saturday Morning, and circulated not only to those parts of the County where the News Paper has been usually sent, but to many more distant towns, a Correspondence for that purpose being already established.

Simmons seems to have set out to establish links with other members of the book trade in Kent. His announcement that ‘Advertisements, Letters and Orders are taken in’ listed booksellers in Sittingbourne, Rochester, Maidstone, Tonbridge, Ashford, Tenterden, Deal, Sandwich, Margate, and ‘Mr. G. Pearch, Bookseller, London’. He also listed a shopkeeper in Hythe, and the postmaster in Romney and in Folkestone. Issue no. 2 added ‘Mr. Newport, Bookseller, Dover; Mr Walter, Bookseller, Faversham’ and issue no. 4 added ‘Mr Ingram, Shopkeeper, Cranbrook’.

Simmons made Kirkby an offer of a merger of the two newspaper but in early July (*Kentish Gazette*, no. 12, 2–6 July 1768) he announced Kirkby’s rejection of the merger and boasted that

Many improvements have already been made in the different circuits throughout the County ... The *Kentish Gazette* is now sent to Tunbridge the very day it is published, making a circuit between forty and fifty miles beyond Maidstone, where a Canterbury paper was never sent before. ... It is also circulated through Stroud, Rochester, Chatham, and Brumpton, early each day, and in London every Wednesday and Saturday evening.

I have certain sale for upwards of SEVENTEEN HUNDRED papers every week, besides the accidental papers sold on the different roads, and the demand at my own office.

It is clear that James Simmons was a vigorous and ambitious businessman and within two weeks, Kirkby had capitulated. Issue no. 16 of the *Kentish Gazette* (16–20 July 1768) announced a partnership between Simmons and Kirkby to produce *The Kentish Gazette and Canterbury Chronicle*. The partnership proved to be long lasting: it remained in existence until the end of the century.

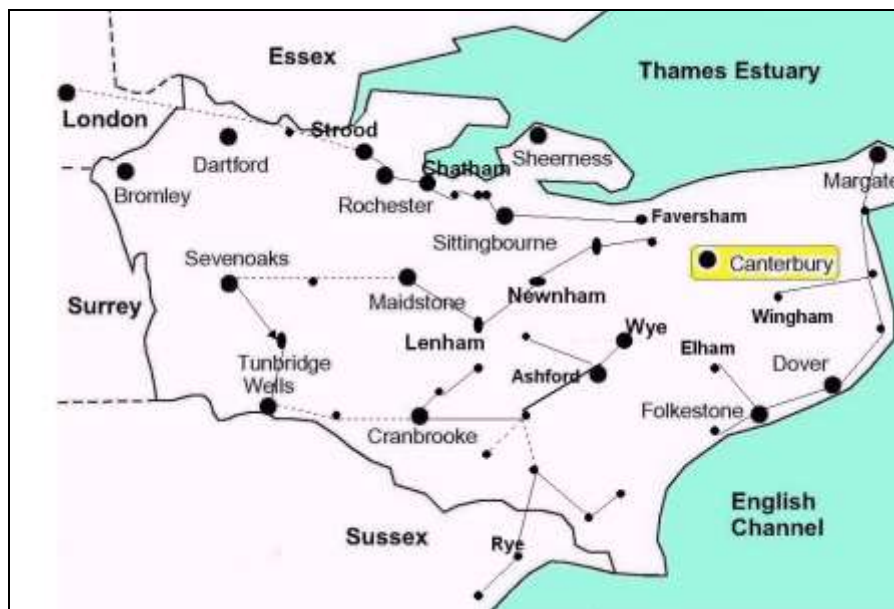


Figure 5. Reconstruction of the circuits of the *Kentish Gazette*'s newsmen in 1775

Distribution of the *Gazette* continued to expand. In 1775 it covered

Rochester, Chatham, Strood, Brompton, Rainham, Newington, Milton, Sittingbourne, Faversham, Maidstone, Lenham, Newnham, Ospringe, Boughton, Charing, Ashford, Tenterden, Wye, Cranbrook, Biddenden, Smarden, Margate, Ramsgate, Sandwich, Dover, Deal, Wingham, Folkestone, Hythe, Elham,

Romney, Lydd, Appledore, Rye, Winchelsea, Brookland, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells, Sevenoaks, Sandhurst, Goudhurst, Seale, Northfleet, Gravesend, and London coffee houses.

There can be no doubt from the attention which both Kirkby and Simmons gave to developing their distribution circuits that Canterbury on its own could not assure the economic viability of a bi-weekly newspaper. It is well known that the regional newspapers of the time had surprisingly little local news and drew extensively on the London papers for their content. Provincial booksellers of course had of necessity to have good links to London if they were to satisfy their customers' needs for books (not to mention patent medicines and fire insurance). Both Kirkby and his rival had London coffee houses as the final stop in their list of places served by their newsmen. It is difficult to be sure what sales a Canterbury paper might have had in the capital but clearly a London presence was thought to be an important element in the sales strategy, possibly for reasons of prestige. In 1772 – 1775 the new *Kentish Gazette* listed its London outlets as the Surrey, Sussex, Chapter, London, Peele's and Guildhall coffee houses and also listed one or more wholesale booksellers as distributors, no doubt the same wholesalers who were used for book supply:

G. Pearch to April 1771

R. Baldwin from April 1771

J. Johnson from April 1775

In conclusion, we have seen that book publishing was merely an extra sideline for a typical provincial printer like James Abree. The regular income from printing a newspaper was much more lucrative. However, Canterbury was not big enough to support a bi-weekly newspaper on its own and from the start it seems to have been an essential part of the strategy to secure advertisements and sales by means of newsmen who carried the newspapers throughout East Kent. Regional distribution must always have been vital to the economics of the newspaper. Extending this distribution network seems to have been an essential part of George Kirkby's plan to modernise the paper and also the key to James Simmons's aggressive takeover of the old *Kentish Post*.

[2006]

Dr David Shaw is Secretary of the Consortium of European Research Libraries and was President of the Bibliographical Society (2002–2004). His main area of research is European printing in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries but he has had a long interest in the provincial book trade in eighteenth-century England, particularly in Kent. He was the Editor-in-Chief of the *Cathedral Libraries Catalogue* (union catalogue of books printed to 1700) and is currently preparing a typographical catalogue of the British Library's books printed in France between 1510 and 1520.

Notes

1. This paper is an edited version of the PowerPoint presentation given at the British Book Trade History Conference held at the University of Edinburgh in July 2004.
2. David J. Shaw and Sarah Gray, 'James Abree (1691? – 1768) : Canterbury's first "modern" printer', in: *The Reach of Print : Making, selling and reading books*, ed. P. Isaac and B. McKay, St Paul's Bibliographies (Winchester, 1998) 21–36; David J. Shaw, 'Canterbury's external links: book-trade relations at the regional and national level in the eighteenth century', in: *The Mighty Engine: the printing press and its impact*, ed. P. Isaac and B. McKay, St Paul's Bibliographies (Winchester 2000) 107–119; Sarah Gray, 'William Flackton, 1709–1798, Canterbury bookseller and musician', in: *The Mighty Engine*, 121–130.
3. D.F. McKenzie, *Stationers' Company Apprentices 1701–1800* (Oxford, 1978), 104 (record 2421).
4. Shaw and Gray, 'James Abree', 29–36.
5. For further discussion, see Shaw and Gray, 'James Abree', 23.
6. For a fuller discussion, see Shaw, 'Canterbury's external links', 108–109 (Canterbury and Kent) and 110–112 (London); see also Tables 2 and 3.
7. The take-over battle is further documented in Shaw and Gray, 'James Abree', 26–28.