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Springbank Park Zoo, c1920. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.



London and Port Stanley Railway exit to Richmond Street Dec.1931. Seen on the tracks is locomotive 852 (2-6-0 F7a).
Courtesy of The Canadian Museum of Science and Technology (STR29577).

London's "Subways"

Mike Rice

The word "subway" conjures up images of a heavy rail transport system underneath the city. However, in Canada, during the first half of the 20th century, "subway" referred to a road going underneath a railway right-of-way. In London, Ontario, we have two subways, Wellington Street and Richmond Street, both under Canadian National Railway (C.N.R.) tracks.

As with many large building projects, there is an interesting and fascinating past. Due to the amount of work involved to create the subways a four unit construction project was required. The units were the G.T.R./C.N.R. station, Richmond Street subway, Wellington Street subway, and Maitland Street subway. For the purpose of this article G.T.R. refers to the time period before 1923 and the Canadian National Railway (C.N.R.) refers to after 1923.

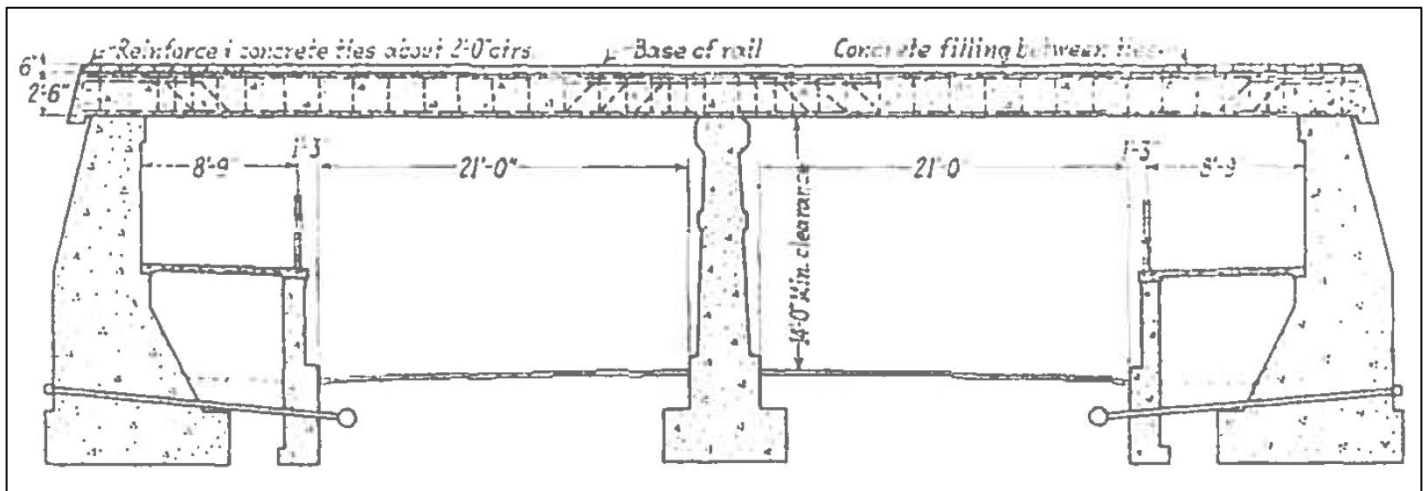
While four main sites were chosen for the subways, other locations in the city were also suggested where subways would be beneficial. Residents were asking for a subway on the Grand Trunk Railway (G.T.R.) at Ashland Avenue in east London. As discussions began to develop in London about possible subways, the G.T.R. along with several other railways were merged, and the new railway was called Canadian National Railway (C.N.R.) The citizens of London, represented by J.K. Little, appeared before the Board of Control of the City of London and made their presentation. The request was passed, and as a result City

Council asked for an order to be issued by Dominion Railway Commission. The Commission's purpose was to look after all affairs relating to the railways. *"The cost of the subway had not [been] definitely estimated, but in making the application the City apparently will be liable for the entire expenditure."*¹

"Says G.T.R. will build subway"²

As discussions continued about the proposed project, Controller J.P. Moore gave an interview to the *London Advertiser*, and referred to the subway under Ridout Street. He, also, suggested the City make an application to the Dominion Railway Commission.

"...We have reliable though indirect information that the Grand Trunk will ask for such a subway, and in this way the cost will be saddled upon the company and upon the street railway. If the city made the application, we would have to pay a portion of the cost. The building of a subway at Ridout Street at the city's instigation might block a movement for elevated tracks later as the Railway Commission could say that we had the subway and did not need anything else."



Longitudinal section through Richmond Street Bridge showing general details of construction.
Courtesy of Railway Age, page 356, Sept. 10, 1932.

The G.T.R. typically handed out five-year leases on pieces of its property which in the opinion of many citizens, indicated that the company would not be prepared to go ahead with any improvement plan. One person in the know lamented the following:

*"You will see that the Grand Trunk will not do anything in London for five or ten years, and in the meantime we will continue to drift along without the Ridout Street subway accommodation that we so greatly need. The time to make a move is now, and it is up to Council to act."*³

At this point the subways for Wellington and Richmond Street had officially been decided, however the Ridout Street phase had not progressed further than initial discussions. When G.T.R. officials visited London for the funeral of Cy Warman (a high ranking G.T.R. official); they were approached and asked about the Ridout subway, since it was such a popular topic with citizens. The G.T.R. officials shut down future hopes however with their response, *"London had her chance once, but did not want it. The Grand Trunk had money to spend here, but that money is now being spent in other places, with the result that it is not available."*⁴ This statement was made at a time of rate cutting by the Dominion Railway Commission.

With the building of a subway, as with many large municipal construction projects, lawyers were involved. City Solicitor T.G. Meredith K.C. was to meet with J.P. Pratt, solicitor, and T.T. Irving, Chief Engineer of Central Region of the C.N.R. The purpose of the meeting was to present a revised agreement on grade separation, the process of aligning a junction of two or more surface

transport axes at different heights to avoid disrupting traffic flow on other routes when they cross each other. The agreement specified that the total project would be completed by 1945. The Maitland Street subway was to be one of those units. The agreement specified that there would be four units to the construction project consisting of the following: a \$700,000 new station and office building, Richmond Street subway, Wellington Street subway, and Maitland Street subway. All were to be completed sometime in 1933, except the Maitland Street subway. The first part of the project, the station and track elevation was to be given high priority, *"a clause is being inserted as agreed upon by the C.N.R. guaranteeing protection for the London & Port Stanley Railway in regards to freight facilities"*.⁵ According to the *London Free Press* the meeting between legal counsel occurred in August of 1929 as the C.N.R. solicitor was to be in London on Aug. 13 or 15. Both dates were kept open to go over the agreement clause by clause. In the meantime the grade (or project) committee which included City Council members *"made some changes in the phrasing of a number of clauses while the section providing for a Maitland Street subway to be constructed at some future period when the Railway Commission is convinced of its necessity was altered with a definite date inserted"*.⁶ Following the agreement review, further details emerged. Due to the changes made to the agreement, it was decided that the City and C.N.R. would share the cost of the Maitland Street subway. The consensus was that a joint application would be approved by the Railway Commission and construction would start on one unit first which at the time was not specified. The last detail to emerge was that Talbot Street would be closed because of the construction for the elevation of the tracks.



Construction begins at Wellington and Richmond Streets 1931. Courtesy of Western Archives, Western University (RC41958).

Construction Begins

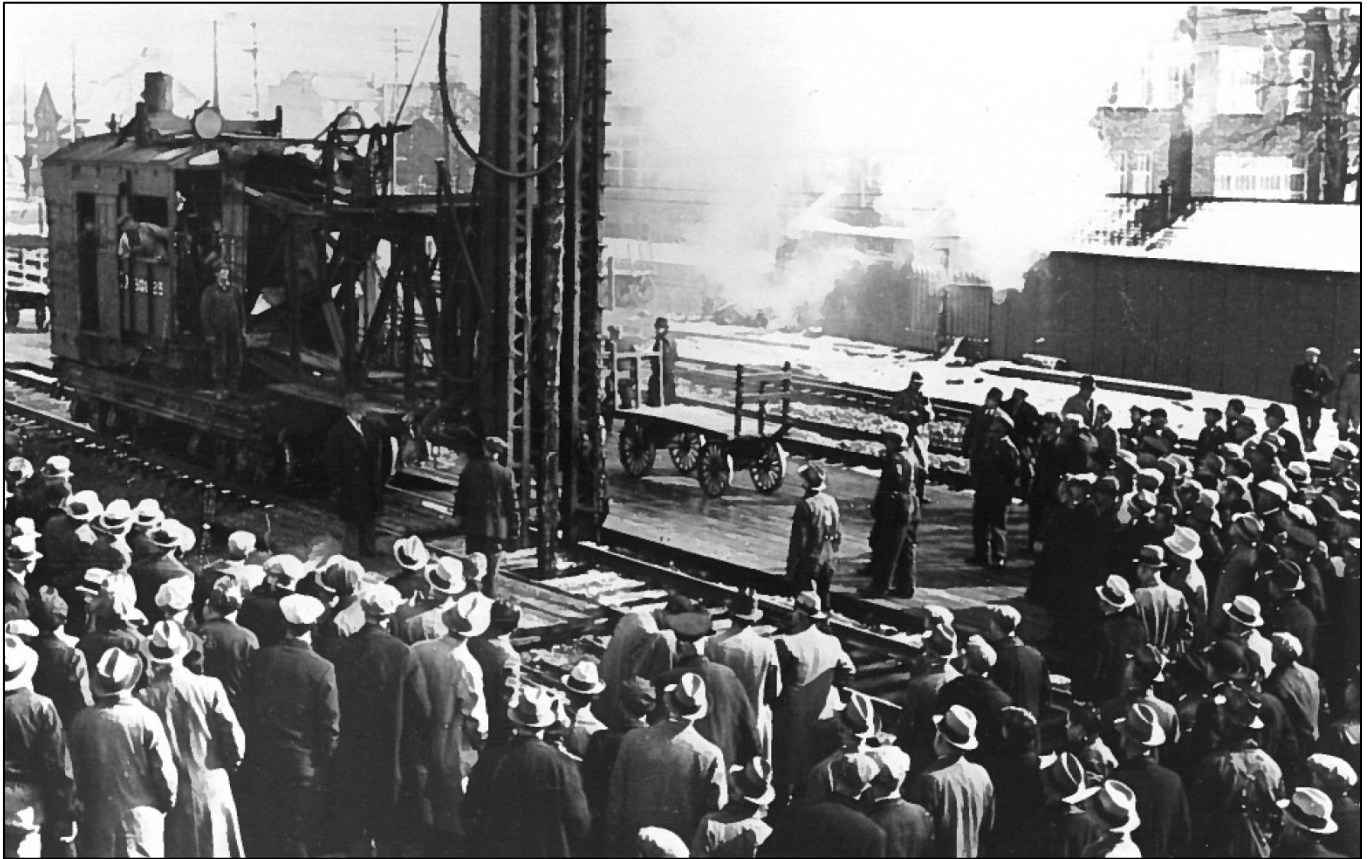
Construction began with a controversial decision by C.N.R. to purchase the McLaughlin Buick building for \$50,000; at Bathurst and Richmond Streets. Sources at McLaughlin Buick stated that the company would move to a new location. The general understanding was that it would be cheaper for the C.N.R. to purchase the building and demolish it rather than reinforce the foundation due to structural issues. The work to acquire another building was to start Jan. 23, 1931. The Scott-McHale building, located directly opposite the McLaughlin Buick property, was obtained for use of the building and not just the property, however it needed improvements. The building needed:

"... a new foundation under the northern portion of the building and a heavy abutment wall along Richmond and Bathurst Streets because of the fact that the subway will be lower than the present foundation of the building."⁷

G.H. Rayner, general superintendent of W.H. Yates Construction Company of Hamilton, further stated *"Equipment will arrive in London as soon as can be assembled and shipped here and the construction will proceed as rapidly as possible."*⁸ Regarding workers, Mr. Rayner explained *"only a small number of men will be required but as work progresses and the excavation for the subway is begun, more men will be used in as many cases as possible in accordance with the contract."*⁹ Mr. Rayner further went on to say that *"the Richmond and Wellington Street subways will be construct[ed] at the same time or as closely as the company can do so, and excavation in either case will be started at the earliest possible date."*¹⁰

With each major construction project there was a ceremonial start. The Wellington and Richmond Street subways' official start began at two o'clock in the afternoon on Jan. 16, 1931. The ceremony was led by Mayor George Hayman. C.N.R. officials, parliamentary representatives and Yates Company officials were also in attendance. The speeches were short and took place just west of Bathurst Street on Richmond Street. Before the ceremonies started, preliminary work began with the placement of barricades at various streets shortly before noon the same day. Barricades closed Richmond Street at York Street and Bathurst Street at Richmond Street. Originally Clarence Street was to be left open for a few days as construction began, but it was decided to permanently close it due to the agreement between C.N.R. and the City of London. The officials talked about the cost of the grade separation scheme - a figure of \$4,000,000. This building project was mammoth, and the largest in London's history. The Mayor had the honour of driving the first "pile" (a large length of tree trunk used for shoring up slopes needed for the grading process). This work required street closures and the rerouting of streetcars and buses. The Richmond and Oxford routes were diverted to run east instead of south on Richmond Street. The Oxford route saw a reduction in service. An additional bus was added to the Hamilton Road route increasing it from five to six buses. Wellington Street buses were rerouted to Waterloo Street, crossed the tracks and then proceeded to Bathurst Street to Wellington Street.

Changes were made to Richmond Street to prepare for the construction, however it was not closed to pedestrians. Fifty feet east of the intersection wooden planking was laid down, going part way to the temporary London & Port Stanley station also, it was used by pedestrians wanting to travel along Richmond Street.



Pile-driver equipment is used in first phase of construction at Wellington and Richmond Streets 1931.
Courtesy of Western Archives, Western University (RC40323).

An area of planking was available for the London Street Railway patrons on the south side of York Street. Street car overhead wires were removed along with embedded rails and diamonds. Also affected was the taxi stand in front of the London Shoe building which previously had allowed for two United taxis and two independent taxis to be located on the south side of York Street at the corner of Richmond Street. During the construction a temporary taxi stand was located on Clarence Street at the C.N.R. platform.

Employment

During the subway construction, skilled labour was required for the underpinning of adjacent buildings.

*"At an early hour 250 men seeking jobs at the C.N.R. intersections, many of these being from out of town and therefore ineligible for this work... A great number of unemployed men had gathered, but all men being taken on are being sent from the un-employment bureau. According to the contracts all labor is to be supplied by Londoners."*¹¹

The inexperienced were not completely left out: some would be hired as general labourers as work progressed. The unemployment bureau on Carling Street sent men to C.N.R. subway. At the bureau, lists were prepared and arranged so that no time was lost in supplying men. Many requests came by mail from all types of workers looking for work. Local civic works were sped up, *"According to City Engineer Near the civic construction for 1931 is apt to be lighter than usual."*¹² This C.N.R. construction and the reconstruction of Victoria Hospital were seen by many as steady employment in the economically challenged 1930s.

As work continued additional streets were closed including Wellington Street over the C.N.R. During the week of Jan. 27, 1931 more equipment arrived in London.

*"An industrial railway will be built from east of Wellington Street to Richmond Street."*¹³

Many unemployed men were interviewed by C.N.R. Resident Engineer Sydney G. Smith; he could not do the hiring as all workmen were engaged by the local unemployment bureau. While material and equipment were arriving in London, the pile driver was making progress.

*"Pile-Driver cause crash of stove pipes"*¹⁴ screamed the headline in the *London Advertiser* on Jan. 28, 1931. The ticket agent was surprised when a long section of stovepipe crashed in the CNR ticket office. The office was sixty feet away, and the vibration of the pile-driver was not anticipated there. The stove pipes were re-erected and reinforced to avoid further disruption, and business returned to normal. Over at the McLaughlin-Buick building expensive plate glass windows were removed and an *"inside wooden shelter is being erected to keep out the cold."*¹⁵

As work continued, the pile-driver had to be positioned carefully to avoid contact with high tension wires. The road-bed of the London & Port Stanley portion of the road at Richmond Street had to be reconstructed during the project and was filled in with gravel. In addition falsework additional wall construction to provide support during the pouring of concrete. This work commenced on Jan. 28, 1931. Progress was rapid and details about the pile-driver were detailed in the Jan. 29 edition of the *London Free Press*.

The trestle was erected quickly across Richmond Street. So quickly in fact that The London & Port Stanley Railway began service as early as noon on Jan. 29, 1931. An incredible amount of work went into this phase, specifically using the pile-driver. Each pile measured about 25 feet with a total of 48 piles.



Richmond Street looking south Dec. 1931. Courtesy of The Canadian Museum of Science and Technology (STR29575).



Richmond Street looking north Dec. 1931, showing the London & Port Stanley bridge. Courtesy of The Canadian Museum of Science and Technology (STR29581a).



Richmond Street exit to Bathurst Street looking north, Dec 1931. On the bridge is train 852 2-6-0 E7a. Courtesy of The Canadian Museum of Science and Technology (STR29576).



Richmond Street looking north-west from London and Port Stanley Railway entrance, Dec. 1931. Courtesy of The Canadian Museum of Science and Technology (STR29588a).

The last pile to be driven caused some problems. Work was stopped temporarily because of a solid block of concrete was found, part of the foundation of the old Catalano and Sansone business. The workers had to dig down five feet, as well as around it to finally move the concrete block.

After the pile-driver finished at Richmond Street; it was moved to Wellington Street to continue construction work there. However, this work was delayed as re-work was needed first. Unfortunately in all the excitement to keep the project moving, the water mains weren't replaced as planned. The site had to be excavated again and water mains dug up and replaced before work could continue at Wellington Street. As a result final plans for the subway at Wellington were delayed because the pile-driver was scheduled for work in Windsor for Jan.29, 1931. Other track work in London continued in the meantime. This included moving the C.N.R. siding at Clarence Street to a vacant lot for the purpose of handling the materials and equipment of the Yates Company, who was also erecting an office at the corner of Clarence Street and the C.N.R.

"Two Motorists Mired In Subway"¹⁶

"Drivers Fail To See Barricades - Have To Be Pulled Out"¹⁷

"Two motorists driving from the south entrance through the Richmond Street subway were marooned in the heavy mud on the north slope last night and early this morning. The south entrance is paved while the north end is still to be finished and barricaded. Apparently the drivers failed to notice the barricade and kept right ongoing. It was necessary to obtain assistance to pull these cars out."¹⁸

Opening Ceremonies

On the evening of Nov. 30, 1931 Mayor Hayman along with other dignitaries officially opened the Wellington Street subway. Despite the delays earlier in the year, this phase was completed and worthy of a celebration. The dignitaries lead a parade of the band of the First Hussars, they were greeted by a crowd of several thousand people. Festivities started at 7:45 p.m. Speeches were made. These speeches touched on the past, and talked about the numerous accidents between vehicles and trains that occurred before the creation of the subways. They then talked about hopes for the future now that this major phase of the project was completed. After the speeches ended a street dance began. The citizens of London awaited the next phase of the project, the opening of the Richmond Street subway.

As the construction continued for the Richmond Street subway, the *London Advertiser* continued to update citizens of London on that phase of the construction. On Dec. 4, 1931 the paper provided a brief timeline of the construction process, starting with the purchase of the Dominion House at the corner of Clarence and York Streets on or about Nov. 25, 1930. The purchase allowed the C.N.R. to have a complete block for subway and station construction. The Dominion House sat on the same spot for so many years, it had "*a sort of squatters right.*"¹⁹ According to the paper many Londoners and travelling salesman from across Ontario would miss the Dominion House. At the work site a large number of "*rubber neckers later to be named excavation-watchers were in large numbers and from then on never left the scene of operations.*" Steam shovel fans were also used at the scene. Before excavation could begin a number of homes on the north side of Bathurst Street had to be demolished.



Wellington Street looking north, Dec. 1931. Courtesy of The Canadian Museum of Science and Technology (STR29584a).



Wellington Street looking west to Richmond Street, 1936. Courtesy of Elgin County Archives (516-2030g).

The laying of temporary sidewalks at Wellington Street occurred on Feb. 26, 1931. Work continued through spring and summer and only halted when it rained. The last batch of concrete was poured on Nov. 4, 1931; the heavy mixing machine left soon afterwards.

Details from the *London Advertiser* provides a new perspective on the story. The work took only eleven months to complete and thanks to the creation of the subways accidents between cars and trains at Richmond and Wellington Streets became a thing of the past. The paper, also, noted that businesses on Richmond and Wellington streets suffered during construction. Lastly, the detailed articles in the *London Advertiser* provide the location of the official platform, at the south end of Richmond Street subway.

In an article dated Dec. 4, 1931 the *London Advertiser* sets the scene, providing the planned parade route, names of dignitaries in attendance, and the time the ceremonies were to commence.

*"Colored street lights on both sides of Richmond Street from Dundas to the subway will turn the street like a Christmas tree to-night. The lights will be left to flash their colors along the business section until after the New Year. The lights have been put up by the merchants of the street."*²⁰

The parade started at City Hall at 7:45 p.m., and marched to York and Richmond Streets with all participants falling in behind the band. Speeches were start at 8:30 p.m. with Mr. Cyril Thomas as chairman of the event. If weather co-operated, the ceremonies would take place in the open-air on the road at the site of the new subway.

Not to be outdone *London Free Press* commented on the festivities.

*"Gayley Colored lights, festooned from pole to pole on Richmond from Dundas Street will add a carnival appearance to the subway opening ceremonies."*²¹

The businesses along Richmond Street were happy to see opening ceremonies as the Richmond Street subway gave access to and from south London. A platform was erected at the site of the old Tecumseh Hotel at the north end of the subway. Crowds were expected to be large:

*"The streets were blockaded for hours as pedestrians and motorists alike jockeyed for an opportunity to be among the first to pass under the newly elevated tracks."*²²

On Dec. 4, 1931 the *London Free Press* informed Londoners of some of the tests carried out on the subway. For instance, the heaviest steam locomotive was brought to London. Delicate instruments were used in the testing. To construct the walls, roadway, etc. the structures required more than 6,000 cubic yards of concrete, and over 500 carloads of gravel, and hundreds of tons of steel reinforcing were used. The *Free Press* also gave a detailed picture of the design. The roadways (lanes) were divided by a series of columns. Lighting was adequate and motorists did not need to use their headlights day or night. When the subways opened in December 1931; they had one lane in each direction, *"The roadways are wide enough for three or more cars abreast in each line of traffic"*²³ the approaches were not "overly inclined" (meaning not too steep). It was considered to be up-to-date, modern and most importantly, safer.



Wellington Street looking south, 1936. By this date the sidewalks and curbs were all in place.
Courtesy of Elgin County Archives (516-2030a).



Wellington Street subway looking north, 1936. Courtesy of Elgin County Archives (516-2030e).

The cost in 1931 was not considered extravagant; it was \$250,000 for both subways. In fact, the cost for both was lower than expected. But it was money well spent. A modern and up-to-date design gave the impression to visitors that London was an innovative and important Canadian city. Many motorists used the Wellington Street subway to get to the south part of the city.

The *London Free Press* stated that: "*Londoners are now a little ahead of many larger cities in the province in the matter of overhead rail tracks.*"²⁴ Safety and a more convenient route to the business district were mentioned.

The Railway Commissioners wanted London to pay its share of the grade separation project. However the City wanted to wait to pay after the \$700,000 station was completed.

The C.N.R. was supposed to start construction of the station in 1931. There was no appropriation available; "*inquiries by the City revealed that next year's policy had been decided, and the assurance was given that anything under contract would be carried out.*"²⁵

The City wanted assurance that the station would be started and completed on schedule. The city considered the subways and station as one unit "the agreement for station facilities was a big factor on the electors' endorsing the project by a vote of 3 to 1."²⁶

The station was eventually built, but not before much back and forth between the C.N.R. and The City of London. But that is another story unto itself!



Wellington Street subway looking north, 1936. Courtesy of Elgin County Archives (516-2030e).

Fun fact!

The heavy-duty pile driver equipment used clear the site for London's subways was so powerful that it inspired one of the most controversial wrestling moves in the sport's history. In the 1940s Wild Bill Longson invented the piledriver, a finishing move, popularizing it as he became a three-time National Wrestling Association World Heavyweight Champion.

The piledriver was performed by the wrestler grabbing his opponent, turning him upside-down, and dropping into a sitting or kneeling position then driving the opponent head-first into the wrestling mat. The move is now restricted with only two WWE wrestlers allowed to perform it, as incorrect use of the move was responsible for injuring and ending the career of Stone Cold Steve Austin.

Who knew the pile driver machine would have such an impact!



Wild Bill Longson.
Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum.

Endnotes

- ¹ *London Advertiser*, Apr.11, 1914, page 1.
- ² *London Advertiser*, Apr. 8, 1914.
- ³ *London Advertiser*, Apr. 8, 1914.
- ⁴ *London Advertiser*, Apr. 8, 1914.
- ⁵ *London Free Press*, Apr. 10, 1914, page 2.
- ⁶ *London Free Press*, Aug. 10, 1927.
- ⁷ *London Free Press*, Aug. 2, 1929, page 8.
- ⁸ *London Free Press*, Jan. 16, 1931, page 1.
- ⁹ *London Free Press*, Jan. 16, 1931, page 1.
- ¹⁰ *London Free Press*, Jan. 16, 1931, page 1.
- ¹¹ *London Free Press*, Jan. 16, 1931, page 1.
- ¹² *London Free Press*, Jan. 26, 1931, page 1.
- ¹³ *London Free Press*, Jan. 26, 1931, page 1.
- ¹⁴ *London Advertiser*, Jan. 28, 1931.
- ¹⁵ *London Advertiser*, Jan. 27, 1931.
- ¹⁶ *London Advertiser*, Jan. 28, 1931, page 1.
- ¹⁷ *London Advertiser*, Jan. 28, 1931.
- ¹⁸ *London Advertiser*, Jan. 29, 1931.
- ¹⁹ *London Advertiser*, Nov. 2, 1931.
- ²⁰ *London Advertiser*, Dec. 4, 1931.
- ²¹ *London Free Press*, Dec. 4, 1931, page 14.
- ²² *London Free Press*, Dec. 4, 1931, page 14.
- ²³ *London Free Press*, Dec. 4, 1931, page 14.
- ²⁴ *London Free Press*, Dec. 4, 1931, page 14.
- ²⁵ *London Free Press*, Dec. 4, 1931, page 14.
- ²⁶ *London Free Press*, Dec. 4, 1931, page 14.