The Institute of Journalists reaches its centenary at a period of controversy and change in the British newspaper industry – a situation that is a parallel of the time of its inception.

Today it is the advent of so-called new technology that excites equally the enthusiasts and, for different reasons, those who are reluctant to grasp the advantages of the new methods and devices that have revolutionised the production of newspapers elsewhere in the world.

A hundred years or more ago when the first tentative moves were being made to activate an organisation for the benefit of journalists, it was a different sort of revolution that was being experienced: the advent of cheap journalism and the ramifications, among other things, of the early days of what has been loosely called ‘the new journalism’, and the dilution of earlier professional pride and tradition. Then, it was a sociological rather than a technological revolution that faced the profession of journalism.

The removal of Government levies in the form of stamp, advertising and newspaper duties – what were termed ‘taxes on knowledge’ – twenty or more years before the Institute was formed had given impetus to journalistic enterprise on a wide scale which manifested itself in a profusion of new newspapers.

In the twenty years from 1851, the number of journals had more than doubled to 1390 newspapers, of which 99 were dailies. By 1880 there were 1986 newspapers and at the turn of the century the figure had reached 2488.

Outbreaks of circulation warfare, particularly in the provinces, were frequent: new publications were started which had a short life-span, often launched deliberately to stifle rival publications. History, it is said, repeats itself: there are similarities in that historic situation and the recent competition brought about by the widespread introduction of free newspapers.

Weekly newspapers at that time were frequently launched with
little capital and as an adjunct of a general printing or some other business. There was, no doubt because of the advertising potential, an odd affinity between purveyors of pills and local newspapers: many instances are recorded of chemists and their families launching newspapers – a rather droll mixture of chemistry and culture.

Undoubtedly there was an irresponsible element whose motives and methods were open to suspicion and scrutiny; 'greengrocer' and 'huckstering' proprietors were contemporary derogatory descriptions. But many of the new newspapers were more soundly based financially and more responsible in their approach and coverage of news. They survived and many are still in existence.

The creation of new newspapers on this scale led to a great demand for people with which to staff them. The style of journalism of the period was such that either a remarkable memory or a knowledge of one of the many systems of shorthand was necessary to meet the demands for the long verbatim reports of political speeches which were then a staple of newspaper content.

A shorthand wave swept over journalism bringing into it, as a writer in *The Journalist and Newspaper Proprietor* stated, 'many good men but flooding it with a host of the wholly uneducated and the half-instructed'.

The 'shorthand wave' was not the only evil the traditional journalist had to contend with. The same correspondent added:

Small capitalists of all trades who know nothing of Press traditions, perceived that newspapers worked on grabbing lines were a good 'lay' and they ran newspapers. The people who knew a little shorthand and still less of English grammar were the lifebuoys of these gentry and between the two the trained journalist had a hard time of it.

It was against this scenario that the first cautious steps were taken to remedy the disadvantages journalists suffered through having no corporate voice or organisation to represent them.

Much of the force behind the moves came from the north of England and Manchester in particular. No specific matter appears to have sparked off the initiative but the occasion was provided by the gathering of 'a goodly number' of journalists in