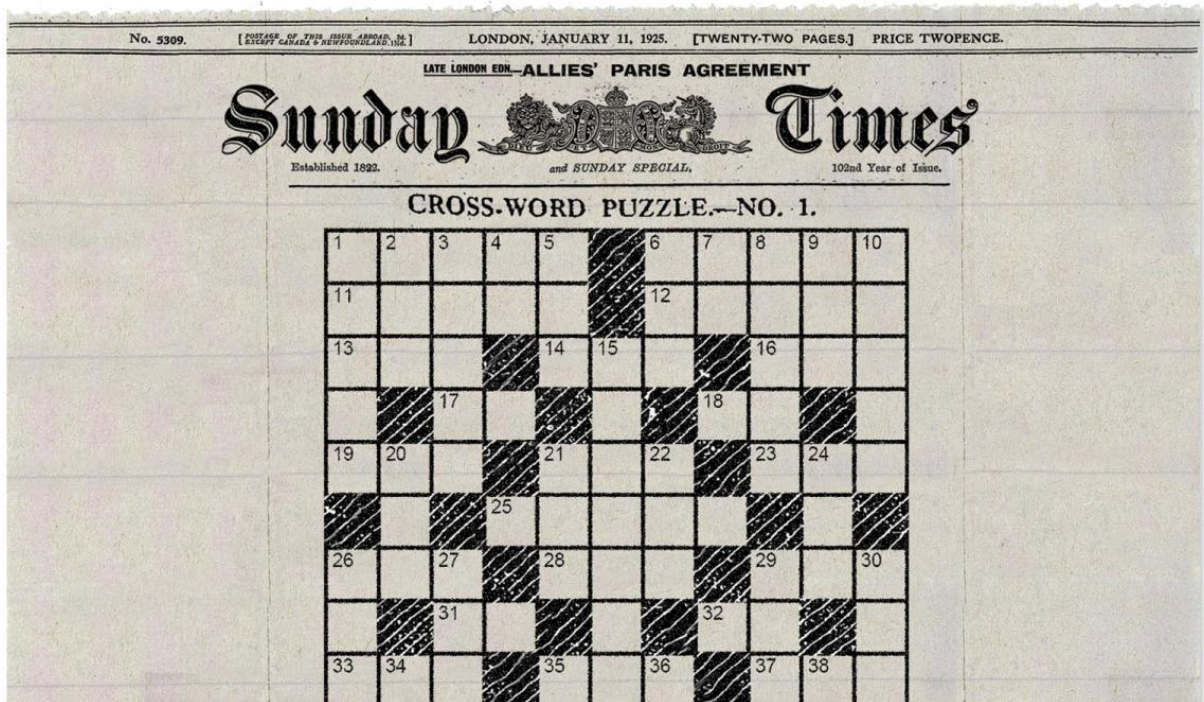


# Have a go at the very first Sunday Times crossword — from 1925

We publish our 5,000th crossword today. Sunday Times readers have now been puzzling over our fiendish clues for 97 years, writes crossword editor Peter Biddlecombe



A mock-up of the first Sunday Times crossword from January 11, 1925

Peter Biddlecombe

Sunday March 27 2022, 1.01am BST, The Sunday Times

**T**oday we print The Sunday Times crossword No 5,000.

On January 11, 1925, we printed our “Cross-word Puzzle—No. 1”, after this announcement: “CROSS-WORD VOGUE: The Sunday Times, which has always made a feature of such popular pastimes and skilled games as Acrostics, Chess, and Auction Bridge, has fallen victim to the universal craze of Cross-Word Puzzles.”

The prize was three novels, awarded to “each of the five competitors whose correct solutions are first opened”. “When you have completed the square,” continued the instructions, “paste it down on a piece of white paper, add your name and address in block letters, and post to ‘The Editor’.”

This crossword was the first in any of today’s broadsheet newspapers and appeared shortly after the first British newspaper crossword was published, on November 2, 1924, in the Sunday Express, and even sooner after The Times printed an article headed “An Enslaved America” by its New York correspondent, saying that the crossword there “has grown from the pastime of a

few ingenious idlers into a national institution: a menace because it is making devastating inroads on the working hours of every rank of society”.

The Times remained sniffy about crosswords until 1930, when falling sales made one a requirement. And by some strange repetition of history, Wordle, also created by a Briton in America, has started another puzzle craze, this time with a better reward for the inventor.

Our first crossword — which novices may be pleased to know is not cryptic — was almost certainly written by Ernest Bergholt, who seems to have been our de facto puzzles editor. Officially he was the Acrostics Editor, responsible for an earlier type of word puzzle that we began printing in 1899. I suspect our No 1 was his first attempt at a crossword. To some extent it shows — three clues are used twice, and the answer to two of them is the same. Elsewhere it’s a mixture of clues that seem trivially easy and a few that now (and almost certainly then) seem seriously obscure (good luck with those). The small 11x11 grid was not unusual in the early days. To go by our archive, 13x13 seems to have been the usual size for about a decade before an increase to 15x15 in 1937.

Bergholt died in November 1925 and we know very little about the setter(s) who took over. In more recent times we’ve had a team of three to four setters, who remained nameless in print until 2011, when I became crossword editor.

Our old crosswords seem easier than those in The Times. As the two evolved independently (apart from sharing one of the few mid-20th-century setters I’ve identified), there are some rules about Times crosswords that we’ve never observed. We allow living people other than the reigning monarch to appear in the grid or clue text, for example.

An article about Sunday Times crossword 1,000, which appeared in 1944 and took the “opportunity of saluting [a pleasure] so innocent as the Crossword”, noted that “even total war has not succeeded in banishing it from, alas, sadly diminished pages”.

Less seriously, I also found what may be the oldest recorded grumble about a mistake in one of our crosswords. On December 9, 1928, we printed a letter about some recent errors, including “A Mohammedan feast” (rather than “fast”) as a crossword clue for “Ramadan”.

We have printed crosswords in other languages. Solvers of No 2 were advised that all the answers were in a French-English dictionary. At least one German puzzle was printed in wartime, after one correspondent pointed out that “we are not fighting the German language”.

In a letter in November 1961, Elizabeth Jameson wrote in asking about the probability of a sent correct solution being selected for one of the “elusive” prizes. She reported trying “a variety of means of catching the opener’s eye”, including using outsize or tiny envelopes, all to no avail. One week she said: “I knew I had won, something told me so, and I tore open The Sunday Times only to find the name of one of my sisters there in place of mine. When I [phoned] to ask what she meant by taking my prize, she admitted that it was only the second or third time she had sent it in.

Anne Parker of Coventry wrote, a week or two later: “Sir, I read with a feeling of ineffable superiority my sister Elizabeth Jameson’s jealous lament in The Sunday Times. I would like to remind her that our father, the late Professor Thomas Bodkin, held strongly to the view that the doing of crossword puzzles was the last refuge of the incurably frivolous and lightminded. To my certain knowledge all five of his daughters do The Sunday Times crossword every week, thereby confirming yet another of his strongly held opinions.”

In about 2013 a woman wrote in to say that our crosswords had become too difficult. I rang her back. She politely told me the problem had started when we introduced three new crossword setters.

I told her this wasn't true — all three had been setting crosswords anonymously for us for at least eight years. I said that the difference she'd noticed was really the absence of my predecessor, Barbara Hall, who used to write half of our crosswords but had retired. "Bring her back, then!" suggested the complainant. When I explained that Barbara was now 89 or 90 and had made it very clear that her retirement was final, the reader's response was: "She's ten years younger than me!"

Barbara wrote Sunday Times crosswords for more than 30 years, and since taking over from her as the crossword editor 11 years ago, I have overseen the publication of just over 10 per cent of our 5,000 puzzles. The puzzle, which is a few years away from entering its second century, has changed a lot since 1925, but it has always been clear how much our readers value their weekly tussle with our deviously ingenious crossword setters.

*Peter Biddlecombe has been The Sunday Times crossword editor since 2011*