ephemera from his own pen, and scraping the adjectival barrel for anything alphabetical that might be twisted into something remotely connected with indexing. The Indexer is only as good as the material it contains, and since it is your journal, why not contribute your articles, your views, your letters, clippings and gleanings, and enable the editor, if necessary, to cut, polish and set them as gems in the mirror of the Society throughout the world?

ARCHIVE INDEXING

L. C. Johnson

'What is all this fuss about a simple thing like indexing?' This querulous remark by the uninitiated, so often heard, sets the challenge of justification and explanation to all who care for the ready availability of sources of knowledge, a facility specially vital to those who pursue the important task of making history speak for to-day. It must immediately be said that in the case of archives, important and fascinating though they be from the viewpoint of antiquarianism, the archivist, from experience and insight into values, seeks to make his archives fulfil a functional rôle in addition. Browning, in 'A death in the desert', uses a striking figure of a stick once fire from end to end, now ashes save the tip that holds a spark—blown upon, the spark runs back, spreads itself and illumines the ashes into the original form of the stick. So does the live historian blow upon the records of past endeavours until the whole takes fire once more, illuminating the shape of massive undertakings and revealing the calibre of virile courageous men who took hold upon events and circumstances and moulded them into revolutionary enterprises. Indeed 'there were giants in the earth in those days', and we do well in these days to get the true measure of their stature.

Old books, papers, documents—of what use can they be in this thrusting, swiftly moving age when knowledge, we are told, is doubling itself every fifteen years? But knowledge has a habit of making cyclic re-eruptions, and so often what seems to have passed into limbo takes fire and sets a new trail ablaze with live ideas. The modern active man, under the stress of high pressure activities, will sometimes, nay often, be rewarded by a pause and a backward look. But, endeavouring to keep astride of swift developments, how can he stay to unravel the story of the past? The historian can come to his aid with a compact resumé of past events and earlier notions which can still be inspirationally effective and serve a modern need astonishingly well.

But how may the historian, the researcher, find his way through the labyrinth of papers which may often obscure his path by their very multiplicity and complexity, or grievously tempt him to stray from his appointed purpose through the insidious but attractive serpent of serendipity? How blessed then is the guide of sound indexes which may proffer its services. But good indexes do not fall together casually or by chance; they are the work of assiduous meticulous persons who know well that true indexing is no

The substance of a lecture given in the Society's Fourth Training Course.
such simple task as our querulous critic surmises. Such work calls for special skills and a particularly sensitive insight into what is likely to be of real value, not only for to-day but also for to-morrow. A too scanty index is a tantalising begetter of impatience; one overloaded is cumbersome, time-consuming and befogging.

To make a good index is in fact to create an artificial 'memory', so that memory may properly become the thing we can forget with, and so relax to pursue other tasks. Also so that both our contemporaries and posterity may be refreshed and instructed by the treasury of knowledge we have discovered and left on record.

The indexing of archives is especially rewarding, proving not only an instruction as to the past but also by the very act of indexing an appraisal of what we deem vital for us to-day and in the future. This has an important bearing upon business archives, for the business administrator may find that his records may yield vital information relative to a current matter which has arisen. Obviously everything cannot be indexed and indeed the very omissions which we may deliberately make may have their own significance. It is not easy, nor perhaps wise, to endeavour to separate the classification of archives from the actual indexing of them, for these are really two aspects of one act, classification being the broad outline and indexing the detailed notation.

The researcher will legitimately ask the archivist, 'What have you got?' It is not sufficient to answer, 'There is a card index which contains everything'. A true picture of an archive collection cannot be gained by flipping over many thousands of cards—an eye and nerve straining activity in any case. Neither can we properly answer the question by an overall reply of so broad a nature as to leave it wide open. We should be able to present a picture on a large canvas but which is sufficiently detailed to enable the researcher to make a swift estimate as to whether he is justified by the nature of the archive collection in spending time and effort on their study.

It is the writer's contention that the best answer to the question is the creation of a summary register of archives, produced in loose leaf form and arranged to suit the particular kind of archives in the repository. So far as British Transport archives are concerned, these take the form of records of over 1,000 railway companies, many joint committees, some 300 companies in the London Transport system and river, canal, dock and harbour undertakings, as well as about 300 miscellaneous companies including road and hotel undertakings. This must dictate the pattern for such a body embracing so many companies. The arrangement of company records must preserve for all time the separate legal entity of each body from its inception until its extinction. This is a vital archive rule. The notation of relevant records will always therefore be made under the name of the particular company, and the loose leaves recording them will be inserted in this summary register in the strict alphabetical order of the names of the companies. Being in loose leaf form this strict alphabetical sequence will never be disturbed by the acquisition of records of other companies from time to time. These company records form a separate section of the register.

Many other groups of archives are acquired which are not specifically company groups—governmental reports, returns, etc., maps, plans, surveys, parliamentary records, general information, to name only
a few. All are given their group titles, and the relevant loose leaves are filed in a separate section of the register, again in the strict alphabetical sequence of their title headings. In this summary index register each company and miscellaneous group receives a classification sign in the form of letters, usually three, having some relationship with their title heading, i.e., L.N.W. for the records of the London and North Western Railway Company, R.A.C. for Reports and Accounts (in the miscellaneous section). The records are arranged in classes according to their fundamental nature—Minutes of the Governing Body, Capital Stock and Share Registers, Locomotive and Rolling Stock Records, Staff Records, and many others, each class receiving a number which is common to all groups, and each separate item within the group having a 'piece' number. Minutes, for example, of each company group are always Class 1 records. The full, and only, reference for instance, of the first L. & N.W. Rly. Minute Book is LNW./1/1, and this is its identity for all time. Here then is the Summary Index Register which presents the researcher with a ready answer to his question, 'What have you got?' Incidentally a short legal history of each undertaking, and a description of each group of Miscellaneous Records has been written, and appears as the first page of the relevant records, and this gives the researcher important information as to the company or miscellaneous group to which he is referring.

For a more detailed description of the records he may now turn to the second loose leaf register which answers two questions, the researcher's 'What in particular?' and the office staff's 'Where is it?' This detailed register comprises the record of each 'piece' included in each class of each group. The loose leaves in this register are arranged in the strict alphabetical order of the denoting letters of each group, and the numerical sequence of each class, and within the class the chronological order of each 'piece'. Thus to refer to LNW.1 is to find the record of all the minutes of this company in strict date order. In addition, for the use of the staff, the filing location of every 'piece' is inserted in a separate column, the precise location of a whole series of 'pieces' appearing on a single page. The value, precision and ease of reference of this system is considerable. If an alteration in location becomes necessary only one amendment is required in the register for perhaps a dozen or more 'pieces'. If on the other hand the location were recorded on index cards, several of which may have to be created for a single 'piece', the task would become much more difficult and laborious, particularly as time will erode the memory of how many and what cards were created by the indexer, to say nothing of the passing of the indexer himself.

In this second register then the researcher will have a detailed index of the quantity, nature and date range of all the documents in the Repository, at the head office in London and at the two branch offices in Edinburgh and York. The same system obtains for the branches as for the head office, duplicate sets of all the registers being kept by them and maintained up to date by a system of 'amendment sheets' circulated between all three offices. Groups which are located at the branches are indicated by a red ink note at the top of each loose leaf—'Edinburgh' or 'York'.

A third index is necessary. This is in card index form and is termed the Comprehensive Card Index. This, for actual work, is probably the most important finding aid of all three. It is maintained on
a name and subject basis, the references being to group, class, and ‘piece’ number only. Each ‘piece’ is indexed under as many headings as its nature and content warrant. No two persons can be certain of indexing in precisely the same manner, but in order to maintain the index with as much consistency as possible a few main guides to indexing have been formulated, conforming to general principles of indexing and to the particular requirements of the archive group. These are mounted at the index table which has been specially made to fit into a corner of the office with index cabinets on the two adjacent walls. The indexer, seated on a swivel chair, has access to all the index cabinets without rising from the chair and has ample accommodation on the table for the material being indexed. It should be mentioned that during the process of ‘classification’ the notations are made on sheets which conform precisely to the actual loose leaves in the registers. This facilitates the typing of the original sheets considerably, being much easier for the typist to transfer from replica to replica. In this process of ‘classification’ too, the archivist performing this task makes special reference to any particular matter in the ‘piece’ which he has discovered during his examination of the ‘piece’ and which he considers worth bringing out in the index. Indeed during every operation in the office all the staff are constantly alert for any item which it is considered may enrich the index. Indexing is, so to speak, ‘in the air’ as a continuous atmosphere.

Only one comprehensive index is maintained, the tendency to multiply indexes being eschewed. If there are a number of indexes it is almost certain that at times one of them will be forgotten during referencing. The very purpose of a true comprehensive index can be destroyed by multiplicity. There is one exception made and that is the Library Index which is, of course, worked upon a different basis to that of the comprehensive index. Guide cards are liberally used in this latter index to break it up into swiftly ascertainable sections. The maintenance of this index is an essential part of the classification procedure. It is a strict rule that there shall be no hiatus in the process of dealing with an acquisition of archives. At no time may any of them be placed in abeyance waiting to be indexed at some more convenient time. Every piece must be taken through its whole routine and when placed upon the shelves it can be forgotten, leaving the registers and the index to remember it for all time. By indexing thus the task is never left to accumulate and become an almost impossible burden to dislodge. The time taken in maintaining the index is more than saved by its use when staff are engaged upon the research and referencing necessary to run an archive repository successfully. Swift recourse to all relevant material is an absolute essential, and the comprehensive index is a vital part of the administrative system.

Thus then is the ready availability of all archives assured, by what one may term a three-tier system of indexing, combining both classification and indexing as such, the one inseparable from the other. This combination of the loose leaf registers with the card index has worked well, and it seems to the writer is capable of being applied, with perhaps suitable variations, to groups of archives of varying character.

‘What have you got? Quickly, please!’
‘Where is it? Quickly, please!’

Perhaps the foregoing supplies some of the answers.