A rather unexpected kind of opportunity which may arise for the indexer is a request to compile, for editorial office use, an index to the editor’s collection of issues of his journal accumulated over the years, possibly from the first issue. When such an index is required, it will commonly involve the issues of fifteen to twenty years—in the case of a monthly journal that is up to some 240 issues, the office copies of which may or may not be in the form of a series of bound volumes.

Some notes about dealing with a commission of this kind might prove useful to other members tackling such work for the first time.

The Nature of the Task

In most cases, what is required is a single card index complete in itself up to the time of compilation, in a form which will readily lend itself to the making of additions continuously or at suitable intervals, and which is not intended to appear in print.

The job is usually a biggish one and significantly different from that of preparing an index for publication. In the first place, the ‘available space’ restriction is virtually removed; also, one can usually quote any reasonable period for completion with every prospect of obtaining agreement. These are desirable circumstances in that more detailed treatment is possible for any material which warrants it, and there are no printers’ ‘deadlines’ to contend with (although it has been found that editors do look forward to having possession of the completed index around the estimated date). Editors’ reasons for desiring such an index may vary: some periodicals have never been indexed in any shape or form and the need to have this done is ultimately felt; or it is found that the integration of separate annual indexes cannot, for various reasons, produce a homogeneous whole; or, again, an outgoing editor who has himself managed to get along with no cumulative index has perhaps realised that his successor might benefit substantially from the existence of such a key.

That such work is requested from freelance indexers, in spite of the fact that in some cases serial indexes already exist, together with the virtual absence of space restrictions previously mentioned, has seemed to me to indicate that between over- and under-indexing, the latter would be the greater evil, and this has been substantiated in reactions from editors for whom I have done this type of job. While redundant entries and unnecessary ‘padding’ must always be guarded against, there is no need for treatment of useful matter to be skimped.

Typically, the total number of individual entries in the finished index may be in the range of 4,000 to 7,000, taking up to 250 hours or thereabouts to carry out (this depending of course on the subject matter and the indexer’s speed of working). In allocating one’s spare time on an index of this size, it is worth mentioning here (for those not yet aware of it) that over-long spells of the work can be very fatiguing: some time off should be allowed for. Any attempt to share the job with others will almost surely result in inconsistencies (not to say divergencies) of style and in the technical treatment of subject matter. It almost goes without saying that where technical or other specialist matter exists in more than a minor proportion, the prospective indexer should be confident of his ability to cope with it reasonably before putting forward a quotation.

Estimating the Work

Initially, the indexer will probably be sent a few specimen issues of the journal to enable him to decide whether he is interested in taking on the commission and at what fee.

In assessing the amount of work involved, I have found that the procedure of carrying out a timed trial run on two or three issues,
using paper slips, then scaling up the time in proportion to the total number of issues, works out fairly well. Theoretically, one would imagine, the actual total time—when eventually known—should turn out to be lower than that which is calculated thus, because, for example, some entries need only page numbers added to an existing entry, but general ‘editing’ and revision tends at least to cancel this out.

The calculation of the estimated charge is then a matter of simple arithmetic involving the required rate of hourly payment (regarding which some explicit proposals have lately been circulated by the Society), plus costs for cards and transport or postage of the work.

The indexer who is without sufficient typing proficiency to type straight on to cards may have to allow for payment to a typist copying from his written slips. For the clear writer (especially in a script style) there is the possibility of writing entries direct on cards. I have had accepted one job carried out in this way, but there is usually a preference for typewritten work.

Referring again to the costs for cards, there seems to be a tendency for editors commissioning these office indexes to prefer 6” x 4” cards, which are a bit more expensive than the standard 5” x 3”, and this is another point to be queried. Sometimes existing storage equipment influences the choice, and the editor will be glad to be reminded that he can specify the size. I have found that the work is facilitated, for me, by the use of the larger card.

A Further Preliminary

It is common for two methods of identifying issues to be employed simultaneously, these being (i) year and month, or season, of issue, and (ii) some form of cyclic serial numbering. The latter may be a quite arbitrary system and will not necessarily remain always in step with the former—the simple chronological notation.

Since it is obviously desirable that any index entry should lead the searcher directly to the volume containing the sought reference, there would surely have to be a very good reason for using in the entries any indicator other than that which appears on the binding, and most often this is the year or years of the included issues.

Where the editor’s reference set exists in bound form it is therefore advisable to borrow the volumes in order to work directly from these, in spite of the fact that loose issues are easier to handle in the physical sense. Having due regard to the information on the bindings and on the included issues, a scheme should be chosen which will lead as easily and directly as possible from the index entry to the page containing the wanted item, and ensure that it can be applied throughout the work. I have found that some discrepancies can occur which, if not seen early, might result in a chosen dating method for entries proving less than ideal, half-way through the work. In this respect, it is worth inspecting particularly the dates of first and last issues in a volume: two issues are sometimes combined, and ‘Winter’ issues may appear at the end of one volume or at the beginning of the next. Anything of this kind which might necessitate a change of method after work has begun should be very carefully guarded against.

Having examined the volumes and decided on the best scheme of notation, the indexer should obtain the editor’s approval of this before the indexing proper is started. In case of greater difficulty, the editor will no doubt be happy to collaborate in determining what will eventually be best for him in this connection. There is always the possibility that whichever of the two usual serial notations does not appear on the bindings could be added with patent marking tape if this would result in a better overall system being devised.

Making a Start

Journals are so varied in character that not all generalisations about indexing treatment would apply. However, one general precept,
always applicable, is 'think of the user'. If the index maker can put himself in the place of the index user—in the present case not a journal's readers but its editorial staff—a better notion as to approach should emerge.

Any topic discussed at length should of course have at least one index entry. There will be a need for recall not only of entire articles but also, on occasion, material within articles: length alone is not much of a criterion. For example, an article about developments in a particular science might well embody sections of considerable interest or usefulness on narrower aspects or related research in connected fields, and perhaps on some prominent worker in that sphere. Any of these components may at some future time be remembered independently of the others and specifically sought; the indexer must work accordingly. His sense of what could be potentially important to a future user must come into play; after all, the exercise of judgment in this regard is what indexing work is all about.

What amounts to trivia in one context assumes considerable interest in another. For example, we have all seen those small passages of news about personalities in their respective fields which appear in many journals. House magazines often contain large sections devoted to staff news, and a journal mainly intended for the employees will plainly care a lot about personal material. Some names can be seen to crop up repeatedly because of an outstanding talent, ability or characteristic of the person concerned. Manifestly, such individuals are a source of valuable 'copy' to the magazine and should be treated in the index as such, as there is at least a fifty-fifty chance that the editor will wish to recapitulate on such a personality when future events dictate the need. A nominal entry will be provided, also one under the interest associated with the person, to facilitate retrieval by whichever may arise or come to mind.

In thinking of the present user, an important fact to know is that the work of planning future issues figures very largely in every editor's day. Each occasion of reference via the index will in one way or another have a definite connection with this work; and it will be of value if any item which can be visualised as the subject or as one ingredient of future editorial matter, is suitably indexed.

With the same purpose in mind a chronological arrangement of the entries (subheadings) on a particular card is almost certainly best. Supplies of new material are not endless, and it is quite usual for a previous article to form the basis of a new one, especially in a subject which is developing. Hence it is useful to see, readily, what interval has elapsed since a certain topic was written about. The chronological arrangement of subheadings is also, as it happens, convenient for the indexer as the whole work can be tackled in its original order. The method also gives no trouble when later additions for updating are to be carried out.

As well as the more specific headings, collective ones should be provided, each of which 'gathers together' subjects of related interest in the broader sense. For example, a journal might have a hobbies section which over a period could include articles on, say, Oil Painting, Sculpture, Woodcarving, Lapidary, etc., for each of which a separate heading would be made. Some real benefit could, however, derive from the provision of a collective card entitled, perhaps, in this case 'Arts and Crafts', which would contain 'See' cross-references only to the specific headings mentioned—and to any of the numerous other possible ones which could arise within the scope of the general head. This will permit the searcher to find out readily which individual arts and crafts have at some time been dealt with, which others he might plan to cover in future, and whether the time is right for a fresh approach to previously published matter.

One journal which I have indexed features regularly material which could be described as of nautical interest, although that term was never prominent in the text. I used the
term, however, as a collective heading with 'See' references leading to more specific cards detailing articles on such topics as Lighthouses, Weather Ships, Whaling, The Herring Fleet, Lloyds and so on. This field, being an important source of material for the magazine, deserved to have a name on an index card, providing an intermedium through which useful material, previously unseen or forgotten, can be traced.

This principle can be applied in practically every field and the reader will almost certainly be able to consider it in terms of a subject with which he is familiar. There is every reason why it should be employed extensively for the kind of index we are thinking about now, since it will help in the searching out of ideas, and assist editors to plan future issues with as much variety of content as possible within a given brief. A given publication may, on analysis, reveal quite a number of these main 'bones' but they are unlikely to be conveniently labelled; they have to be recognised by the indexer. If he perceives fairly regular, related items and these suggest a rather broader or 'family' description, and if he can put a simple, accurate name to this, it will probably constitute a good collective heading. Under this, he will list only 'See' references to the narrower topics.

Coming to the question of the treatment of synonymous expressions, I consider that in the case of our 'open-ended' card index the best approach is to avoid, where possible, the duplication of entries (sub-headings) under different, though synonymous, headings. This differs from the advice often given in respect of book indexing that where synonymous, or inverted, headings are considered justified, one or two sub-headings may be no bar to giving both entries in full. The reason for avoidance of this in the card index is that such an index cannot be regarded as complete (in fact, is 'open ended'). Care should be taken to ensure that later additions—possibly made by different hands—do not inadvertently get shared out under different headings. The way to do this is, of course, always to use 'See' references from synonymous headings, and inversions, to the card bearing the preferred form of heading. Unlike the printed form of index, the card index cannot easily be 'scanned' for anomalies or inconsistencies.

On the other hand, there is plenty of space for synonym and inversion types of cross-reference in the card index, and free use of these can be made, subject only to the dictates of common sense—and the 'See' reference rule! The more widespread the use of such cross-references in a particular index, the less likely it will be for later entries to be inserted on the wrong cards, since there will be many pointers to the right one.

The following are the terms of affiliation which were agreed at the Special General Meeting of the Society held on 19th October, 1971, and also by the American Society of Indexers.

Whereas the Society of Indexers founded in London in 1957 (hereinafter referred to as the Society) and the American Society of Indexers (hereinafter referred to as the American Society), have agreed that an affiliation between the two Societies would promote the objects of the Societies and would be in the interests of the members thereof, they further agree as follows—

1. The American Society may indicate in its name or title that it is 'affiliated to the original Society of Indexers (Great Britain)'. The Journal of the Society, at present entitled The Indexer, shall indicate that it is also the official journal of the American Society of Indexers.