The Society of Indexers' conference: Indexers in a world of change

Seventy-five indexers attended the conference held in July at Newnham College, Cambridge.

At the reception on the first evening, the Society's newly-elected President, Robert Collison, welcomed in particular the overseas representatives, from Canada, Australia, the West Indies and Western Europe, as well as one of the Vice-presidents, L. M. Harrod, and the winner of the Besterman Medal awarded by the Library Association for an outstanding bibliography, Professor J. D. Pearson. The joint winners of the Wheatley Medal for an outstanding index were both members of the Society, but unfortunately unable to be present. (See pp. 79-80.)

Mr Collison declared his intention of devoting the rest of his life to the elimination of see references—the bee in his personal bonnet. He hoped to see more regional conferences held in future.

During the three days of the conference, four speakers delivered excellent and stimulating addresses. Two of these are reproduced in this issue of The Indexer (see pp. 65-72, 73-78).

Norris D. McWhirter, editor of Guinness book of records, spoke on 'Facts and how to find them', and John Cheshire, Director of Heffers Booksellers, Cambridge, on 'Modern methods of bookselling'. The texts of these addresses will appear in the next issue of The Indexer.

Full advantage was taken of the superb historical and cultural city in which we found ourselves, with guided tours of its colleges, gardens, museums and research institutes. A guided tour was offered of Cambridge University Press and the University Library for those who could remain until the Monday. In the Library Glynne Parker had set up an exhibition of indexes to books in the library's collection showing impressive examples of early indexing, and pointing to changes in ideas of alphabetization, layout and terminology. It is hoped to preserve in the Society's library a list of the books shown.

For each Sunday session we divided into four groups for workshops on specialist topics connected with indexing. Following are reports on each.

1. Problems of Archaeological Indexing
Leader: Cherry Lavell

Cherry Lavell's introductory talk, with slides, covered a great many aspects of indexing archaeological publications. As there was little time to develop each point it is hoped a fuller version of her talk will be available later on.

The first problem is that archaeology takes in many and various subjects: climatology, pottery styles, archaeomagnetism and statistics are just a few. The indexer has to cope with an ever-widening range and keep in mind the ways in which the index will be used, by the specialist, the scholar, the teacher and the amateur. Archaeologists will look in particular for parallels, which help to relate new finds to those on other sites and in museums. Even a passing mention can be a useful pointer.

Concepts such as trading and seasonal migration are often looked for, and there is need for cross-references to link similar ideas which are differently worded.

Whether dealing with concepts or material objects and sites, one author's terminology may differ from another's but refer to the same thing—often a problem in multi-author works. There may be changes in usage; for example, a causewayed camp or a henge may become an interrupted ditch enclosure.

Arising from the terminology problem there was some discussion on the possible advantages of thesauri as guides to synonyms and preferred terms. The National Monuments Record, we were told, is in course of preparing two thesauri (one for site types, one for artefacts), and the British Museum Research Laboratory has a keyword scheme.

The arrangement of sub-headings was considered, including the use of chronological order where suitable, and grouping of objects under material (bronze, wood and so on). From examples quoted it was clear there is plenty of scope for ingenuity to bring everything in while contriving to save space.

Several members said they would welcome practical guidance. Cherry Lavell mentioned that the Council for British Archaeology is preparing Notes for Indexers and although these will apply mainly to CBA publications they could be helpful in any archaeological indexing. Good and still relevant advice was given 30 years ago by Sterling Dow in a paper on archaeological indexes in American Journal of Archaeology (Vol. 54, pp. 41-57).

Problems of cumulative indexing of journals were also discussed. Where indexes for (say) every five volumes have been compiled, there is usually need to go...
back to the text in order to prepare an overall index. New counties are particularly troublesome in such indexes.

It was apparent that there should be a market for the specialist indexer. Cherry's advice was to 'specialize or drop it'. There are not, she said, enough good indexers. Reviewers of some recent books have deplored their poor—even farcical—indexes. However, the market must depend on the positive wish of publishers and authors to have careful and comprehensive indexes rather than minimal ones which cost much less.

Freda Wilkinson

2. Biography and single-subject works
Leader: Ann Hoffmann

First was discussed the vexed question of how large should loom the main subject of such works, with reference to the texts of Carey, Anderson and Knight. A compromise was recommended, with only personal traits and main events cited. Examples were given of the opposite practice from indexes to children's books: a book on giraffes with the entry 'giraffes' followed by 42 sub-heads; and one on Queen Victoria where each regal entry was followed by 42 sub-heads and then pruned. The style of indexes was dictated by the text; ideas cannot be compressed as facts can. The index scheme should be self-explanatory; we wondered how far notes preceding indexes are in fact consulted by users, apart from their seeking the explanation of abbreviations used.

Doreen Blake deplored the setting of sub-heads run on. She had counted up the space saved in this way on a 20-page index, and found it only half a column, not justifying the inconvenience of this method to the user. Brian Hunter pointed out that short indexes are more expensive than long, as they must first be indexed fully and then pruned. The style of indexes was dictated by the text; ideas cannot be compressed as facts can. The index scheme should be self-explanatory; we wondered how far notes preceding indexes are in fact consulted by users, apart from their seeking the explanation of abbreviations used.

Hazel Bell

3. General computer indexing
Leader: Robert Collison

Richard Raper circulated his paper, 'Computer-aided indexing project for books, journals, pamphlets and other written materials'. He hopes to market a system whereby indexers would purchase an input computer with video screen, floppy disc on-line store and printer output, together with a specially compiled program which would allow the indexer to leave the computer to perform the mechanical functions of indexing, while the indexer still applied his professional conceptual judgement.

Robert Collison described the computing system used on a large scale in the preparation of historical abstracts. After careful checking the information is fed into a computer, and made available both on-line (via a computer terminal) and in printed form.

There followed a lively discussion, mainly about relatively small-scale indexing using microprocessors, rather than the production of large indexes by big computers. Much time was devoted to the costs and problems faced by the indexer who wishes to use a microprocessor. It was suggested that publishers could provide microprocessors for indexers, rather than individual indexers buying their own. It was mentioned that information can be transferred directly from a computer to a printer without the intermediate production of typed copy, thus reducing costs. However this makes checking and correcting errors much harder.

John Gordon expressed his concern that publishers might try to cut costs by using computers to produce indexes without the assistance of indexers. This can be done while typesetting but produces a poor-quality, bulky index consisting only of entries and page numbers without the sub-headings and cross-references that make for a good index. Despite fears that use of computers might result in poor-quality indexes it was accepted that they could reduce the routine work involved.

It was suggested that the Society must watch the development of computer indexing, and particularly the programs involved, very carefully, to ensure that high-quality indexes meeting the British Standard are produced. To this end a working party is being set up. Anyone interested, particularly those near London who could visit equipment manufacturers, should contact the Secretary.

Monica Frisch

4. Law and crime
Leader: Jean Simpkins

After an exchange of experiences on matters common to indexers in general, attention was turned to the views of some users of legal indexes which had been expressed in correspondence. There had been remarkable consistency in the dislike of the see reference; opinion being that entries should, where practicable, be duplicated under the alternative forms of a heading. While bearing in mind the practical objections likely to be made by publishers to this as a general practice, we...
came to the conclusion that a standard list of subject headings might—in certain circumstances—provide an answer to the problem. It was agreed that consideration should be given to work done by other bodies along these lines before considering initiating such a project ourselves.

Further discussion centred on the debate about the presentation of indexes and whether slips (or cards) were preferable to typescript, as has been suggested recently in The Indexer. The general feeling was that arguments in favour of typescript should be put on record to adjust the balance. These arguments may be summarized as follows:

(a) time spent in numbering slips and in preparing them for the printer can be almost as great as that spent in preparing typescript;
(b) an index on slips is a unique record and cannot safely be sent by post. It is also very bulky and expensive to transport;
(c) a typescript can be posted with no need for personal delivery, and a carbon copy retained as a precaution;
(d) an indexer who prepares his own typescript has a further opportunity to refine his index, being able to assess the effect on the printed page more easily;
(e) publishers' editors are made very happy by typescript indexes.

Another matter was raised and briefly debated, leading to a tentative proposal; this, however, was subsequently and incidentally covered by discussion in the second session of the morning on general indexing. It was thought that it would be an advantage to have access to a professionally qualified subject specialist when difficulties arose in terminology. We wondered whether professionally qualified members of the Society could be persuaded to make their expertise available to others who had need of advice. A simpler solution was indicated in the later session when it was urged that indexers should have more contact with authors. An author should surely be capable of advising an indexer in an area of terminological difficulty.

This was interesting in the light of a letter received from an editor at Butterworths, and discussed by legal indexers. It appears that there is sometimes a difficulty in obtaining a good index for an unusually complex text, and our opinion was sought as to whether some form of assistance from an author in such cases would be acceptable. The general feeling was that nothing but good was likely to come from such contact; and from the general reactions in the later, general session, it seems that contact between authors and indexers could have various benefits.

Jean Simpkins

5. Archives
Leader: M. J. Petty

The hour allotted was barely enough for M. J. Petty, the Cambridge Local Studies Librarian, to outline the growth and organization of the Cambridgeshire Collection and to discuss with our group the proposed contents of the manual about it which he has been commissioned by the Library Association to write.

We learned that the Collection has been built up over 125 years and that it contains a copy of virtually every book on Cambridge and the county (excluding university and college administration) published in the last 200 years; files of local newspapers from 1770 to date; also maps, illustrations, advertisements, playbills and much other material of value to the local historian. When Mr Petty took over in 1964, the archive was totally unsorted. Today, meticulously catalogued and indexed, it is generally considered to be the best organized local collection in the country; a great achievement by Mr Petty with a staff of only three full-time and one part-time assistants.

We were interested to hear of the work in progress to index the Cambridgeshire chronicle from 1770 onwards. This is being done in three sections: items relating to Cambridge and to persons and organizations; village news, arranged alphabetically by village name; subject index arranged in classified order. Other indexes in the Collection include chronological name and subject indexes to maps; alphabetical and classified subject indexes to illustrations; a biographical index of Cambridgeshire men and women; and an index to sales catalogues.

Asked whether he intended to issue a Cambridgeshire bibliography, Mr Petty replied that he was more inclined to take subjects individually in the form of topic studies. Time was too short for much discussion, but members put forward some useful suggestions, including that some indication might be given in the manual as to the location of relevant material housed elsewhere, possibly in the form of an appendix. We should have appreciated another half hour's talking time.

Ann Hoffmann

6. General end-of-book indexing
Leader: Cecilia Gordon

Indexes are for the user, and users learn to consult them at school—or they should.

As a former children's librarian Mrs Gordon deplored the (illegal) practice now common in schools—since the government's stringent cuts in money allotted to education—of supplying children with photocopies of pages rather than with full books. In this way children are missing training in the use of a valuable
professional tool; how to consult indexes and preliminary pages. They must however learn on properly compiled indexes; (but first they must learn their alphabet. A mural alphabet displayed in a secondary school library was surprisingly often consulted by pupils).

We greatly considered the question of responsibility. Who should teach children the correct use of books? Who should insist that all children's books include indexes—can this be left to the teachers? Must we as individuals, indexers or parents, press for them? Who should determine the nature of, and pay for, the index—author or publisher? Some members deplored the payment for the index from the poor purse of the author; others felt that if the index is seen as integral to the text, rather than extrinsic like the jacket, then it should be accounted part of the MS which the author submits and receives payment for, rather than a physical accommodation provided by the publisher. Questions of status vied with hard economics. Those championing the author's freedom from financial responsibility for the index considered how best they might make their sympathy effective; should we advise the Society of Authors that we would back them in such a campaign?

Relationships with authors were the subject of much discussion. The illustrator was seen as more closely involved with the author and more effective on sales than the indexer; but closer co-operation between author and indexer was seen as desirable.

John Gordon described indexes seen from the publishers' viewpoint as very much the tail end of the exercise. How they can be less even than that was revealed by Fiona Barr, who, having been the third indexer to turn down the indexing of one book, was told by the publisher, 'Oh well—we'll just publish it without an index then.'

Hazel Bell

7. Medicine and allied subjects
Leader: Giles Moore

Giles Moore, himself a publisher, passed round two indexes, one prepared by an author and one by an indexer. Many points raised in discussion made clear that there were differing ideas as to what constitutes a good index; this became an important aspect of the discussion.

Liaison between indexer and publisher was held paramount. In special subjects such as medicine it was thought important that indexes should be checked by author, indexer and publisher. There was general agreement that indexers should be responsible for any shortening necessary, and should make sure that punctuation, spelling and lay-out were according to House Rules.

On the difficult area of the competence and confidence of the indexer, particularly those who had done few special-subject indexes before, there was considerable discussion. There were no helpful answers but it was thought to be essential that subject-experts should be proven, and that reference books should be available for consultation.

Mr Moore said that he could allow about six weeks for the preparation of the index for a medium-to-long textbook, which satisfied those present. He said that when a publisher asked for an index to be done quickly it was usually because an author had decided against doing it at a late stage, or another indexer had let him down. No comment was made on the wry remark that printers were very often unable to keep to schedule, but indexers were pressed over work which requires time.

Mr Moore also said that he thought cross-references were essential, illustrations and tables should be included, and that he preferred an overfull index to one which was inadequate.

Doreen Blake

8. Abstracting periodical articles
Leader: Professor Kenneth Mellanby

Clearly too much literature was published for it all to be read. Hence the need for abstracts, but who reads abstracts? According to Professor Mellanby, editor of Environmental pollution and editorial consultant to a number of other journals (which members of the seminar were able to examine), established workers have no need of abstracts to keep in touch with progress in their subject, though they might use abstracts as a check when half-way through a piece of work. Consultants may refer to them, but again are likely to be served through personal contacts. Directors of research stations would go to a review article in preference if one were available. Certainly authors of review articles must use abstracts, and workers who are turning to a new branch of study find them invaluable.

The high cost of published abstracting journals and the fact that their use is occasional and often by non-experts suggest that they are best kept for consultation in large centres. Being kept for reference, they cannot be borrowed, whereas primary journals may sometimes be, and articles may be photocopied.

Editorial responsibility was also considered. Professor Mellanby had found that a paper submitted to a journal and subsequently printed required the writing of about 10 letters. The need for editorial checking of authors' abstracts was noted, to ensure that they were factual, complete and unbiased. Reference was made to the existence of published guides to abstracting, notably the section on making abstracts in Guidelines for the preparation of camera-ready typescript, reviewed on pages 104-5 of this issue.

Mary Piggott
The closing session

John Gordon gladdened all hearts by announcing that fees and fares for attending such a professional conference might be off-set against tax. He offered thanks to the Cambridge organizers for a splendid conference with excellent speakers, well planned and enjoyed by all. Constant stimulating arguments had developed, but friendliness, charm and intelligence had been abundant throughout, and there had been no dry patches.

It was agreed that 1983 should be the date for the next conference, perhaps at Bristol, York, Oxford or Bath.

Josephine McGovern said that she would take back a happy report to AusSI. They shared the UK Society's problems of scattered membership, with their office bearers all centred round Melbourne.

Peter Greig told us the same applied to the Canadian Society, which also has not succeeded in establishing regional groups. He would like to see greater liaison between the different national Societies of Indexers. Most of our problems are similar, and we could benefit from each other's solutions.

We considered setting up working parties to consider specific problems of administration and development; and whether indexers' subject specializations might usefully be added to their names on The Society's membership list.

The tale of an indexer and the law

Gerald Fowler-Bassett

Gerald Fowler-Bassett is the pseudonym of the Society's only member in New Zealand, a medical technologist and public servant

When I started compiling end-of-book indexes I was offered an interesting job. The book was to be a limited edition of 200 copies at $150 each. (NZ $2·3 = £1.)

I estimated $185 and found that my cost-sheet came out at $425 because the author-publisher and his co-author had been such a nuisance, but I billed fees for $240. I had taken a risk; I guessed I would have to work for a loss but I hoped that the publicity would be useful and I was prepared to pay for it, even to $185; but eventually it cost me $305.

The co-author collaborated and at the last moment I did something stupid: she asked for the slips (cards 3 in. × 1 in.) and I surrendered them for a nominal fee. I sent off the manuscript-index and was about to make out the account when she started making complaints. I found that she had mutilated the typescript, mostly because of ignorance of the principles of indexing, but I said, 'that is your privilege as an author'.

I sent out an invoice and, on the third monthly statement, I noted that I regretted I could not allow extended credit. A couple of months later, I did a round of the local debt-collectors.

'Would you collect a bad debt for me?'

'Come-in,' they all said. 'How much?'

'Two-forty dollars.'

'Take a seat. Who is it?'

They all refused, except the fourth and last, who looked at me and said, 'Right.'

The author-publisher still refused to pay, on grounds that the index was unusable.

After two years, the duns' lawyer obtained a hearing; a second hearing. He and I had two meetings, one in a library where a statutory-copy of the book had been deposited. The similarities between my index and the published index were undeniable, but the alterations were excusable.

I attended the court, as an observer, but outside the building the publisher's lawyer offered a settlement. The duns' lawyer had already pointed out to me that the money was peanuts. He looked over his shoulder at me. 'We're not settling, are we?' 'Good gracious, no,' I said, and we went into the court. Neither the author-publisher, nor his co-author, nor two of his witnesses turned up. The magistrate started hearing the case. The lawyers retired after some discussion about the absent witnesses. The hearing resumed. The lawyers announced settlement in full. The magistrate stipulated two weeks to pay. The whole transaction cost me $120 in duns' commission and legal fees.

In the meantime I had not had a contract for nearly two years; but there was irony. I have now indexed a manual on the industrial law of New Zealand. The editors and publishers are pleased with my work and do not seem to have made any alterations; in fact I have promise of more to come.

The law would not leave me alone. I received a cheque from the duns on the day I was called for jury-service, and after I had paid it into a bank I walked across the road and found the duns' lawyer in a café. By a mere couple of weeks, I missed being called for jury-service on a high court case involving the publisher.

Oh, double, double irony!