

The indexing work of Family History Societies

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Genealogy has been greatly extended and popularized recently as family history, which adds some muscle, and even some flesh, to the bones. Early indexes by genealogists are briefly described, and the continuing Mormon index, available world-wide, has revolutionized genealogical research. Local societies pursuing these studies are very extensively developed in England and Wales now, and are federated; many others exist elsewhere. A principal activity is the compilation of marriage indexes, and from 1841 the censuses provide a major source. The scope and range of the work that must be done to produce a given result, from a parish index to one with millions of names, is made clear with reference to typical examples. And there are indexes to indexes, and co-ordinators, and indexes to them too.

In the past decade there has been a phenomenal growth of interest in genealogy, searching for ancestors, or, as it is more commonly known today, family history. The two terms are not synonymous. The genealogist tends to concentrate on building up as extensive a pedigree as possible, whether of generations back, of descendants of a particular person, or of different ancestral lines. The family historian will make greater efforts to 'clothe' the bones of, probably, a smaller number of ancestors, finding out not only as many of the records relating to one or more groups of people as he can, but also background material, not directly associated with them, that helps to build up the picture of how they lived.

The family historian may, therefore, be expected to consult indexes of subjects, as well as those of personal and place names. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this article, their aims can be taken to be much the same, with an overriding interest in indexes of personal names, and a lesser one in topographical indexes.

Grouping variant spellings

In these circumstances, there is little room or need for sophistication in indexing techniques. The main problem with indexes of surnames, here as always, is the

'grouping' of those with similar pronunciation but variant spellings. We are normally indexing records of the mid-19th century or earlier. Precise spelling of names is a 20th-century discipline. In earlier times, many people could not write, so when names appear in records they are spelt in the way that the parish or other clerk heard them and decided for himself. Even when a literate person signed his name it could differ from time to time (Shakespeare's variant signatures are notorious). So phonetic spelling is most important, and no significance can normally be read into the difference between 'Cocks' and 'Cox', 'Haines' and 'Haynes'. Even 'Aris' and 'Harris' could be the same name.

To readers, such problems must be far from new, and there can be no hard-and-fast rules to lay down—it must generally depend upon the common sense of the indexer, when to group and list variants under '*see . . .*', and when to use '*see also . . .*'.

Of course there is nothing new in the interest of genealogy, nor in the creation of indexes by genealogists. The British Record Society with its Index Library was founded in the 1880s, and their first indexes, a calendar of Northampton and Rutland wills, a calendar of chancery proceedings under Charles I, and an *index nominum* of royalist composition papers, appeared in 1888 and 1889. Since then more than ninety volumes have appeared, mainly indexes to probate records.

The Society of Genealogists itself was founded in 1911, and from the start its main activity was creating a giant slip index from almost any sources possible. Its very size in the end defeated its usefulness, and it has been formally 'closed' for many years now. It remains a gigantic 'lucky dip' that is perhaps under-used by modern genealogists. Another famous index created between the wars was Percival Boyd's *Marriage Index*, which eventually numbered over 300 typewritten volumes covering more than three and a half million names, of marriages between 1538 (the earliest parish registers) and 1837 (the start of civil registration), from over 4,000 English parishes (37%), but in the main with very partial coverage.

The Mormon index

In recent decades these efforts pale into insignificance beside the activities of the Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) Genealogical Society, based in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. Their computerized world-wide index, mainly of births/baptisms and marriages, known formerly as the Computer File Index and now as the International Genealogical Index, contains many millions of names. It may be consulted on microfiche at Mormon libraries in Great Britain and elsewhere; and several non-Mormon libraries hold copies. A new edition appears every two years or so, and it has certainly revolutionized genealogical research.

However, like the Society of Genealogists' Great Index before it, it is so omnivorous that having consulted it, one has little certainty of what records may have been covered and what remains unsearched. It is a marvellous finding aid, but emphatically a first step only. In particular, its omission of deaths and burials leads, for instance, to many names of children appearing with no indication that in fact they died in infancy, and thus misleads the unwary.

With the last decade has come a great widening in genealogical interests and activity. In the United States this has been symbolized by *Roots*, top-rating television serial and best-selling book. In the UK, the BBC presented a meticulously researched six-part series on the ancestry of popular broadcaster Gordon Honeycombe, repeated a year later.

Local societies and their methods

At a lower level this has been complemented by the formation of locally based societies. The earliest were the Birmingham and Midland Society for Genealogy and Heraldry and the Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society. Others followed, but the movement really took off after the formation of a co-ordinating body, the Federation of Family History Societies. By the end of 1981 there were societies covering every English and Welsh county, most of them individually, the Isle of Man and Channel Isles, and some in Scotland and Ireland; associate societies exist in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and, of course, the United States.

Within the counties, these societies have proved focal points for joint efforts on projects too large for individuals to undertake or even contemplate. What Boyd did partially with his Marriage Indexes, based only on published registers, individual county societies have tackled much more comprehensively. For many counties, indexes to marriages for all or almost all parishes may now be complete, either for all of the period from 1538 to 1837 or for shorter spans.

For instance, my own county, Oxfordshire, whose society was founded five years ago, now has an index to

brides and grooms for all but two (out of 250) parishes between 1813 and 1837, and for all but twenty between 1754 and 1812, and the work is continuing. Marriages are usually a first priority for indexing, because of the custom of marrying in the bride's parish, with consequent difficulty of discovery. Before 1754, when it became mandatory to marry in the parish of one of the parties, it seems to have been usual for the more prosperous to marry away from their home parishes, often in the local market or county town, or even further afield. The Federation publishes a booklet on different ways of compiling these indexes, also listing the various index projects with their co-ordinators' names and addresses, different types of coverage, and charges for consultation. *Marriage indexes: how to find them; how to use them; how to compile one*, edited by Michael Walcot and myself, proved so successful that it is now in its third edition.

Censuses as sources

The second big area of interest for the compilation of indexes is in the 19th-century census enumerators' books, open after one hundred years. The earliest year for which the books survive is 1841; they list all individuals' names and some other details. However, those for 1851 and subsequent decennial censuses (now open to 1881 inclusive) contain significantly more information, and it is on the 1851 census in particular that interest focuses. As well as names, precise ages, and occupations, the relationship to head of household, marital status, and, most important, place of birth (if within England and Wales) are given. The genealogical interest is obvious, and these records are used more and more by social and local historians.

It is quite simple to consult and perhaps transcribe the census for the place(s) one may be interested in. But for family historians, coping with the problems of mobility, looking for an ancestor who is supposed to have come from, say, Nottinghamshire, but with no specified parish of origin, a much wider and more ambitious approach is needed. The approach has varied. Sometimes a county society has decided to try to transcribe a chosen census year in full, from microfilm or xerox print-out, with a system of cutting a duplicate copy into strips for sorting into alphabetical order, usually only by parish, ending up with a series of parish indexes. Certainly, for long-term use, a full transcription must be preferable to anything less.

But the opposite approach, adopted by the Nottinghamshire and Devon Family History Societies, has been to index only the surnames. This can be done direct from the microfilm and because there is usually only one family and surname in each house (or at most two or three, allowing for servants and lodgers) much more can be covered quickly in what is by any standard a gigantic task. The two societies quoted have published their

parish-by-parish indexes, and indeed most of its county is now covered by the Nottinghamshire Society. This very simple index will be of direct use only for those with access to the microfilm, of which there are copies at several libraries in the county, as well as at the Public Record Office in London (and at Mormon libraries overseas). But it can be of indirect use immediately, in telling you where *not* to search.

A more sophisticated and informative approach has been taken by the Hampshire Genealogical Society. This still lists the people in a parish in alphabetical order, but gives forenames, ages, and, by use of numerical codes, birthplaces. Already twelve booklets of sixty or so pages have been published by the Society, covering about a hundred places; of course their size is more significant than their number. For the assiduous searcher, recourse will still eventually be needed to the microfilm, but immediately much more useful information is available, and to local historians, interested in mobility, the birthplaces are fascinating (though these are not, in fact, indexed themselves—it is necessary to identify the code number wanted and search for this).

A booklet on census indexing techniques has been published by the Federation, edited by Colin Chapman (present Chairman of the executive committee) and myself. This is *Census indexes and indexing** and, as its title implies, it includes a list of all known indexes to the census, either in existence or as projects. Amongst these should be mentioned one undertaken by a county record office, rather than a society, namely that for Gloucestershire, where prisoners in the local gaol have been working for some years on a project which now covers three-quarters of the county (some 300,000), available on slips at the Gloucestershire Record Office.†

Indexing 'strays'

The chief efforts of family history societies go into indexing the census, marriages and, associated with the latter, the transcription (and consequent indexing) of parish registers in general. Another form of index maintained by most societies is one to 'strays'—mentions of people from one county in the records of others—and here there is much opportunity for collaboration. Co-ordinators of strays indexes will periodically exchange with other counties slips for people thus found, and it is in reciprocation that a county society's own index is built up. Within the county, indexes may be maintained, too, for people who have moved parishes. Unlike the indexes to the census and to specified parish registers,

*[Reviewed in *The Indexer* 13 (1) April 1982, 60]

†[What an unexpected 20th-century realization of the 'convict indexing' envisaged in *The Nation* in the 1880s! See 'Indexing as hard labor', *The Indexer* 12 (1) Apr. 1980, 27-28. ed.]

such an index to strays is open-ended, and once again in the 'lucky dip' category.

Part of the problem of all these indexes is knowing who is indexing what, and how their work can be consulted. To try to overcome this, in addition to the Census and Marriage Index guides already mentioned the Federation publishes *A directory of family history project co-ordinators*, compiled by Pauline Saul, now in its third edition (1981). Specialist indexes listed in this include, for example, several to the Protestation Rolls of 1641 (returns naming most male adults in different counties), Scottish and Welsh emigrants, coastguards, shoemakers, watermen and boatmen, centenarians, soldiers killed or wounded at Waterloo, survivors of the Charge of the Light Brigade, herbalists, South Gloucestershire colliers, Irish immigrants to Glamorgan, and place nicknames.

As the *Directory* becomes better known, more of these specialist indexes are likely to be heard of and made use of—to the gratification of the dedicated indexers. After all, what is the point of compiling an index if no one ever uses it?

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Publications mentioned are available from Mrs Ann Chiswell, Federation of Family History Societies, 96 Beaumont Street, Milehouse, Plymouth, Devon PL2 3AQ. Prices include postage.

Census indexes and indexing 36 pp. £1.20

A directory of family history project co-ordinators 28 pp. 65p

Marriage indexes 28 pp. £1.20

Indexing and art

Making an index is in many ways like painting a picture; each reflects the individuality of the master of his craft; even Graham Sutherland has had a famous portrait burned, and an indexer must learn that he can never hope to please all tastes. Like the artist, too, indexers have production problems which the critic may not appreciate. We may be provided with a canvas too small to do the subject justice; the quality of the materials we have to work with is sometimes sub-standard, for a poor author, muddled and diffuse in thought, can lead to only a poor index no matter how brilliant the indexer; you cannot tell him so, and even if you could, he is incapable of understanding how you could have seen what he wrote in such a different light.

A good indexer shares with the artist an awareness of his inadequacies, and will never be entirely satisfied with the end result.

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