Indexes for local and family history: a user's view

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Considers the quality of indexes to local history publications, and their value; the different types of indexes to materials in libraries and record offices; local newspapers as source of data for local historians; the various uses of indexes to family historians; the likely effects of computers on genealogical research.

Local history as a distinct branch of historical study is a relatively young discipline. The history of localities has, of course, been studied for centuries, and in my own county of Wiltshire the indefatigable work of the 17th-century antiquary, John Aubrey, is still consulted daily. But the imposition of standards on local history study has really come about only since the second world war, through the efforts of scholars such as W. G. Hoskins and H. P. R. Finberg. The latter, in despair at the poor quality of much local history writing, delivered a lecture to would-be exponents: 'How not to write the history of a parish'. His somewhat ironic advice included the following:

The obvious course of providing no index at all has many precedents, particularly in the work of foreign scholars. One French academy set out to print and publish the whole series of papal registers, and did actually print about a score of them; but for all the use they have been to students they might just as well have remained unpublished, for hardly any of them are indexed. The concept of an index, in fact, as we understand the term, has found no secure lodging in the Gallic mind. But in this country we like our books to have an index; so it may be as well to make a show of giving the reader what he wants. One sure method of letting him down is to get your wife or a friend to make the index for you. Another is to give about fifty page-references under one entry, without any classification or subdivision. The entries may be confined to personal names, omitting place-names, or vice versa. These are the more obvious inadequacies. A really subtle practitioner will improve upon them. The index he provides will look exhaustive, will in fact be so in all the minor entries, and only prolonged use will reveal that some of the most important references are missing. For a crowning touch, he can add a note apologising for any shortcomings, like the writer who at the end of 500 closely printed pages gave what he rightly called a 'limited index' and explained that it was 'prepared under somewhat difficult conditions on board the Queen Mary between Southampton and New York'.

I should like to describe some of the indexes with which, as a local historian and librarian, I am in daily contact—indexes in books, indexes to materials in libraries and record offices, computer-produced indexes, and indexes of names compiled for genealogical purposes.

Indexes of local history publications

First I must express my dismay over the quality of indexes to be found at the end of local history publications. A survey of twenty parish or area histories published about Wiltshire places since 1981 revealed that only five contained an index, of which three were too brief to be of much value. Many of the unindexed histories were quite short, but at least three were substantial pieces of work, for which one would have thought indexes essential.

The paucity of indexes in local history books is not hard to explain. Most local historians are amateur writers who do not write for commercial publishers and are not familiar with the technicalities of book production. The anticipation of seeing oneself in print determines that once the manuscript is handed to the printer the work should be printed and published with the minimum of delay. Few first-time authors, I suspect, realize that as a rule an index can be completed only at a late stage in the book's production, and so the index is sacrificed to economies of time and space.

The absence of an index, or the inclusion of an index of poor quality, seriously limits the uses to which a local history can be put. Most purchasers of a parish history live in the parish or are in some way connected with it, and buy the work out of interest and for enjoyment—the index is not needed nor missed. But if the work is to be useful as a contribution to social history, the study of a...
region or the location of an individual, the index is essential. Without it the information within the book cannot be exploited by others and will be ignored.

Let me consider the indexes found in some of the main vehicles of local history scholarship—the volumes of the Victoria History series, the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, the county societies and the record publishing societies.

The *Victoria history of the counties of England*, one of the many venerable projects—such as the *Dictionary of national biography* and the *English dialect dictionary*—to come out of the late Victorian period, aimed to describe the political, religious, social and economic history of each county (except Northumberland, which had a similar work in progress) viewed as a whole and parish-by-parish. Dogged by financial problems, the series has almost foundered several times, but now, under the tutelage of the University of London Institute of Historical Research, and with financial help from local authorities, is active in 12 counties, including Wiltshire, Somerset and Gloucestershire. A single index includes personal and place names; place names relating to parishes are extensively sub-divided, with subject subheadings, abbreviated to a common formula. The subject subheadings are not repeated as headings in the main sequence, but this is not a drawback once the user is familiar with the layout of the volumes as a whole. In the text each parish has an individual chapter or section devoted to it, and each is treated in the same stereotyped way, under a sequence of headings. The practised user will know, therefore, precisely where to find each reference to schools, or chapels, or agriculture, for instance.

The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England and its counterparts in Wales and Scotland have been producing inventories, parish-by-parish, of archaeological and historical structures, with detailed architectural descriptions, plans and illustrations, since 1908. In recent years the rigid county-by-county, parish-by-parish, approach has been modified, and volumes are beginning to appear on topics—long barrows in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, for instance, or the archaeology of the Stonehenge area. A volume I have used extensively is that covering the city of Salisbury, published in 1980. In many ways it is an admirable work, but I have misgivings about the index. The double numeration of page and column number, on the one hand, and article number on the other, using the same type, is difficult to follow; there are a great number of *see* entries where duplicate entries would have been kinder to the user and taken no more space; the introduction—which uses roman numerals—seems to have been indexed more thoroughly than the main text; some street names are omitted; and there are niggling conventions, such as the treatment of saints, not consistently applied.

Much local historical and archaeological work is published in county journals, of the *Archaeologia Cantiana* (for Kent), *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Association*, *Oxoniensia* variety. Wiltshire's annual offering, the *Wiltshire archaeological and natural history magazine*, is fairly typical. Begun in 1854, it has now reached volume 76, earlier volumes spanning several annual issues, and a few financial hiccups in recent years interrupting the flow. The work originally appeared without volume indexes, but an index to volumes 1–8 appeared in 8, 9–16 in 16 and so on. After 32, volume indexes appear and are remarkably painstaking in their compilation. A list of Salisbury householders in 1667, published in the volume for 1909–10, occupies no more than 22 pages of a 700 page volume, but each of the 1400 names appears in the index. The index itself occupies 63 pages and contains about 7,500 headings and subheadings. County societies prospered on the volunteer work of educated clergymen in small, undemanding country livings, and as these latter disappeared, so the quality of indexing, and indeed the size of the journals, diminished.

My final example of indexing in local historical publications is drawn from the work of Wiltshire's record society. Such societies exist in most counties, and there are also many national series, devoted to editing and publishing in transcript or calendar form important local and national records. The index which always (I hope) accompanies such volumes often renders useful a mass of unworkable, practically illegible, parchment, and forms a valuable contribution to scholarship. Such indexes are usually very good, reflecting no doubt the importance that their potential users will attach to them. A volume summarizing medieval and later deeds relating to Amesbury, for instance, has an index including headings, subheadings and sub-subheadings. Quite rightly, I feel, there is no consistent indexing policy, as the archives covered in different volumes are so diverse in character as to require individual indexing decisions. Sometimes the documents included have been rearranged in alphabetical order in any case, thus reducing the amount of indexing required.

**Indexes to materials in libraries and record offices**

These indexes form a somewhat miscellaneous collection, produced by librarians, archivists, and their users.

The main index to a library is of course its catalogue, and when the library is pre-eminent in its field or comprehensive in its coverage of a subject, its catalogue may be published and serve as a bibliography; for example, the catalogues of the Gloucestershire collection at Gloucester or the Berkshire collection at Reading. Elsewhere, published bibliographies may be used in conjunction with library catalogues, or indeed as substitutes for inadequate subject catalogues. In Wiltshire a bibliography published in 1929 is in effect a catalogue of the collection at Devizes Museum, and so suffers from any
shortcomings of that library. The most serious drawback of all published bibliographies and catalogues is that they become out of date as soon as, if not before, they are published.

My response to the problem of bibliographical control in Wiltshire has been to capitalize on the computer facilities offered by our general library cataloguing. By inaugurating a programme of reclassification (which was in any case necessary) I can now classify by place (usually parish) and subject (approximately 400 keywords expressed numerically for shelfmark purposes) my entire monographic stock of local history, and have the facility to produce similar entries for periodical articles and other non-monographic media. Because this record is an integral part of the main county catalogue, which must be continually revised, my local catalogue/bibliography (as it will become) is reissued on microfiche every two months, and paper print-outs of just the local portion can be produced when required. This seems to overcome most of the limitations (of access and duplication especially) of a conventional card catalogue, whilst retaining the currency lacking in a conventional printed bibliography. The main difficulty is the laborious nature of the reclassifying and inputting which will take a number of years to complete. Another problem is that a catalogue produced in this way is vulnerable to the inconsistencies resulting from a number of hands inputting and amending records, so that the present catalogue contains many oddities, double entries and the like.

Record offices have a herculean task if they are to index their collections—many of the documents in their custody (rate books for instance) are simply lists of names. Most archivists, therefore, provide indexes only to names and places mentioned in certain categories of documents, and guide their users in other ways to appropriate historical quarries. No-one could be expected, for instance, to index references to Devizes in the Devizes Borough Records, or all the individual contributors mentioned in a land tax assessment. The Wiltshire Record Office has personal names and places indexes to its ‘private’ records (parish, estate, solicitors, business, clubs and so on, as opposed to the official records). However, the indexing is done from the lists, not from the original document; so a court roll will be indexed for the place to which it relates, but none of the personal names in it will be indexed since they are not mentioned in the list. Some archives, however, are so extensive and important that they must be indexed; notable examples are the series of wills and other probate records. Some of the names indexes to these are of great antiquity, compiled in the 18th or early 19th century, long before record offices were thought of, and written in copperplate handwriting in large guard books. This is one of the mitigating features of the lack of indexes in record offices—that many documents, for example minute books of local authorities, were indexed after a fashion at the time of their creation to assist with their use then. Such indexes tend to be idiosyncratic in the manner of their construction, as one might expect.

In both library and record office are many examples of brief ad hoc indexes to solve particular problems or answer particular types of enquiry. Most reference libraries, I know, maintain a card index to information most frequently asked for. Ad hoc indexes used by local historians include the index of architects at the British Architectural Library, the index of nonconformists in Dr Williams Library, at one extreme, and the index of Somerset monumental effigies, or my simple index of parishes covered by the Wiltshire Victoria History series, at the other. But there is one form of indexing often attempted by local libraries which should be considered: the indexing of local newspapers.

Local newspaper indexing

Provincial newspapers have been published since about 1700, but 18th-century issues carry little local news. Even in the 19th century, many local newspapers continued to be as much concerned with national and international affairs as with local ones. However, it is not only the news content in a newspaper that interests historians. Advertisements and official notices, sales of farmhouses, classified births, marriages and deaths, all appear in large numbers and provide useful information. Local newspapers provide a vast and still under-exploited body of social historical data.

Attempts to index newspapers began, I suppose, with Palmer’s index to The Times. Card indexes of significant events reported in local newspapers have long been maintained in local history libraries, but rarely do they include non-news, such as advertisements and notices, and usually they have been compiled over a period of years by a succession of junior members of staff. There have been attempts recently to use government employment schemes to index newspapers; one tried at the West Country Studies Library in Exeter met with considerable success. The aim, I believe, was to reduce the wear and tear on newspapers caused by lengthy searches. So far as the index helped to speed up searches, of course, this object was achieved, but the index also revealed the true wealth of information therein contained and so attracted far more researchers, thus putting a greater strain on the newspapers once more.

The needs of family historians

The study of one’s ancestry has become an increasingly popular pursuit in recent years, and family historians, or genealogists, have become the most numerous class of users of record offices and local studies libraries. Family historians could be said to be striving towards the ultimate name index, which would contain in alphabetical order details of everyone who has ever lived. If such an
index were ever achieved there would be no more family historians, because all the pleasures of research and the thrills of discovery would be at an end, and everyone’s ancestry could be discovered at the press of a button. Meanwhile the research continues, and I should like to run through some of the more common stages in an imaginary genealogical search, to show what a fruitful field for the indexer is offered by family history research.

Let us suppose our seeker wishes to trace back his male line as far as possible, and begins by discovering, from talking to his elderly father, that his father’s father was named James Thomas Mathews and born somewhere near Andover in Hampshire in either 1875 or 1876 (the year is deduced by recalling the year of his death and his age at death: this could be done from a tombstone if memory failed, or perhaps from a newspaper death notice). A search in civil registration records, either at the General Register Office or by visiting the Andover district registrar, reveals only one person of this name corresponding to the date and place, and the researcher notes the exact date, name of the village and name of parents. These records are described in alphabetical indexes for each quarter of each year and in each registration district.

In the hope that his grandfather’s family stayed in the same village at least until he was five, our hero now looks at the 1881 census returns for the Hampshire village—Clatford, near Andover—which are available on microfilm either locally or in London. There is no index to this—it is arranged house-by-house around the village—but it is a small village, and the family is readily found. The census gives details of each member of the family living at home in 1881, including age and place of birth. So now we know where our hero’s great–grandfather was born—it turns out to be Penton Mewsey nearby—and his age in 1881—33; therefore he was born about 1848. A similar search in the 1851 return enables us to go back another generation, and we now have a Charles Matthews born about 1816 at Ludgershall, still near Andover but over the Wiltshire border. Civil registration only began in 1837 and there are no useful censuses before 1841, so now our hero looks at the parish registers of Ludgershall. Using baptismal and marriage registers, the story is taken back another three generations, to a John Mathews, yeoman. So he was a man of substance and may have left a will. On perusing the copperplate wills index in the Wiltshire Record Office, our hero finds that John Mathews of North Tidworth, yeoman, left a will dated 1766. From the original will it is clear that John left much of his property to his son and daughter-in-law, Stephen and Susanna. So, with the mention of Susanna, he has confirmed that the Stephen baptised in North Tidworth is the same as the Stephen married in Ludgershall. The Mathews family seems to have been wealthy, and so they may figure in published works about Tidworth. Several references later we discover that the Tidworth Mathews are descended from the younger son of an important landed family in Berkshire. A printed index of pedigrees (Marshall’s *Genealogist’s guide*) points us to a pedigree in the 1623 Visitation of Berkshire, and this in turn takes us back to the late 14th century.

Our imaginary hero has been very lucky; most researchers will not do so well. They may be descended from peasant stock, who rarely left wills, or the family may mysteriously appear in a village and no amount of searching the Mormon index hint at where they came from; or there may be an illegitimacy in the family—this brings the male line working backwards to an abrupt halt; or someone change their name and so confuse matters. And this is merely tracing the male line; females may well change names each generation upon marriage.

The uses of computers

Genealogists are indeed dependent on indexes; research would be impossible without them; and there is much scope for further indexing projects. With the growth of interest in family history has come the formation of family history societies at national and local level. If the next advance in historical studies is to be the application of microcomputers for indexing, searching and analysis, we may expect the family history societies to be in the forefront of such experiments. Already there is a journal, *Computers in genealogy*, catering for this interest, and genealogical computer programs are now available.
commercially available. In many ways the techniques of family history research admirably lend themselves to computerization. But I have misgivings. There is still no standardized orthography of surnames, nor universal agreement over methodology in family history studies. The discipline has not yet asserted its respectability at an academic level and is shunned by many working historians. This is partly the fault of the family historians, some of whom seem to have little sense of or interest in history as such, and regard family history in much the same way as they would attempt to complete a crossword puzzle. The computerization of some areas of family history research is unlikely to increase historical awareness among such people.

As historians have learnt from sociologists to work with statistics, there has been increasing interest in those local historical sources that can be made to yield statistical data. A recent bibliography of published work derived from census returns identifies over 200 studies in this field alone. By 1970, according to the English Local History Department at Leicester University, more than half of all postgraduate historical theses in Britain were devoted to localized aspects of history. Inevitably such work will rely increasingly on computers—indeed, the study of historical demography has been revolutionized in recent years by the Cambridge Group for Population Studies, who have analysed parish registers and other local sources by computer in order to reconstruct patterns of fertility and mortality, and hence changes in population.

Such sophistication is probably only now beginning to dawn on the traditional local historian. It will be our task, over the next few years, to identify those areas of our discipline where microcomputers can take the drudgery out of research or can perform feats impossible to the human researcher. Many such tasks will involve indexing. But local history research, like indexing, is an art, and the computer must remain merely our handmaiden. A large part of the skill of the local historian is the ability to identify himself with his chosen place and the long-dead people who have lived in it. And, although I am not an indexer, I suspect that a large part of ‘indexing, the art of,’ concerns the indexer’s ability to identify himself with the subject he is indexing.

*The index aggressive*

In conclusion, I should like to draw to your attention one branch of indexing which I suspect is rarely practised but has great potential. The savage footnote is well-known, but I wonder how many of you have tried polemical indexing. An example of this is the index to *Feudal England* by the historian, J. H. Round, published in 1909 by Sonnenschein. Professor Round held a low opinion of the learning of his fellow historian Professor Freeman, as the entry provided for him in the index betrays:

Freeman, Professor: unacquainted with the *Inq. Com. Cant.;* ignores the Northamptonshire geld-roll; confuses the *Inquisitio geldi;* his contemptuous criticism; when himself in error; his ‘certain’ history; his ‘undoubted’ history; his ‘facts’; underrates feudal influence; overlooks the Worcester relief; his bias; confuses individuals; his assumptions; his pedantry; misconstrues his Latin; imagines facts; his supposed accuracy; his guesses; his confused views; his dramatic tendency; evades difficulties; misunderstands tactics; his failure; his special weakness; his Domesday errors and confusion; his wild dream; necessity of criticising his work.

There are far more uses, it seems, to which historians can put their indexes, than as mere guides to the contents of their books.

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I should like to acknowledge the help given me in preparing this paper by Mr Kenneth Rogers and Miss Penelope Rundle of the Wiltshire Record Office.

**Every reader his own indexer?**

The process of creating new knowledge (reasoned judgments) proceeds by what Leon Walras, the great mathematical economist, called *tatonnement*, trial-and-error tapping, by taking fragments of intellectual mosaics whose larger shapes cannot be predicted in advance and fitting them together in different ways, or by regarding large conceptual structures from a new angle, which opens up wholly new prisms of selection and focus. A sophisticated reader, studying a philosophical text, may make use of the existing index at the back of the book, but if he is to absorb and use the ideas in a fruitful way, he has necessarily to create his own index by regrouping and recategorizing the terms that are employed. As John Dewey pointed out in *Art as experience*, the nature of creativity is to rearrange perceptions, experiences, and ideas into new shapes and modes of consciousness. In this process, no mechanical ordering, no exhaustive set of permutations and combinations, can do the task. Descartes once thought that the geometer with a compass could draw a circle more exactly than an artist could freehand. But a perfect circle, or even a set of interlocking circles, is not art without some larger conceptual context that ‘redesigns’ an older or different way of arranging shapes. Art, and thought, as modes of exploration, remain primarily heuristic.