Indexing 19th-century North Devon newspapers

Peter Christie

Archive volumes of the *North Devon Journal* and the *Bideford Gazette* have been indexed by teams funded by the Manpower Services Commission. Work on both schemes is still in progress and has led to the creation of other similar groups and projects.

Devon is at the end of England and North Devon is a bit further. Thus might one locate my present home area in relation to libraries and Record Offices. As a tutor in local history for the University of Exeter, I found myself constantly having to say to my classes 'Of course, the records are at Exeter/London.' All very efficient in terms of administration, but not much good for people living, say, in Combe Martin, nearly fifty miles from the County Record Office.

The one repository we do have is the North Devon Athenaeum which, as its name suggests, is a survival from the Victorian period of privately-run charity libraries. It has a small but helpful staff and a good collection of reference books for the local and family historian. Its main strength in manuscript material lies in its holdings of the Barnstaple Corporation archives and associated items; little is held for other places. There is, however, one source it contains that does cover the whole of North Devon: the back files of the *North Devon Journal*, published weekly since July 1824. I had used these, but just the sight of over 130 bound volumes plus some 10 reels of microfilm is enough to daunt the keenest searcher.

**Indexing of North Devon Journal**

This being the only large source of original historical material for the area, I decided to try to open up these riches. I discussed the possibility of indexing these newspapers with the directors of the Athenaeum and they agreed to make a room (with heating) available if I could secure funds to pay the indexers' wages. In 1982 I applied to the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) for these funds under the Special Community Projects Programme, initial contact having been made with the MSC office in Exeter. A site visit to the Athenaeum was made by one of their field officers, who agreed that the scheme would be discussed if we applied.

The task of writing the job description and employee specification then arose, and I prepared both. The first summarized the need for the scheme, its benefits to the community, and the costs involved. It also included a very brief description of how the scheme would work in practical terms. To put it simply, all items of interest (see below) would be reduced to a one or two line précis and entered with date, page and column number on ordinary sheets of A4 paper. This material would then be transferred to 5" x 3" index cards.

Next came the preparation of the employee specification. I required three people, and we asked that all be of at least A-level standard. The actual wording used was: 'A good standard of general education is necessary, together with a working knowledge of North Devon. A knowledge of local North Devon history is very useful. Those with A level or graduates are preferred, but lack of formal qualifications will not bar an otherwise suitable candidate. Handwriting must be readily readable.'

After a slight 'hiccup' at the outbreak of the Falklands War, the team was recruited and began indexing in early 1983. Although the *Journal* dates back to 1824, we began with the 1850 volume as this was the first 'hard' copy the Athenaeum held, the earlier ones being on microfilm which was deemed too tiring on the eyes to begin indexing immediately. Our stated aims were to index all local—that is, North Devon—news items and advertisements. I, as a professional geographer, decided the area limits and these were rigidly adhered to.

**Indexing methods employed**

The *Journal* follows the usual pattern of nineteenth-century newspapers, so we were able to use an existing index as a model. This was the index to the *Exeter Flying Post*, housed at the West Country Studies Library in Exeter. The librarian there, Ian Maxted, kindly supplied us with a list of the headings his indexers had finally arrived at. All subjects had separate headings, each subject being subdivided according to location. Typical examples were 'Pawnbrokers—Barnstaple' and 'Shipbuilding—Bideford'.

The *Exeter Flying Post* index extended back into the eighteenth century, and thus there were a number of subject headings we never used. The one major difference between the *EFP* index and ours came from our decision to include 'Crime' as a heading. This had not been done for the *EFP*, but even a brief glance at any nineteenth-century newspaper will show just how 'staple' an ingredient crime was—and also how many other aspects of life it touched on. The main heading of
Crime' was subdivided into various other categories which were narrow enough to be useful to researchers and broad enough to encompass the many 'grey' areas always found when one attempts to classify crime. The sub-categories were very much what one might expect: arson, assault, breach of the peace, drunkenness, forgery, fraud, indecency, manslaughter, murder, poaching, prostitution, theft, transport offences and vandalism.

The mechanics of the scheme have already been described. There were a few problems over classification and cross-indexing, but most of them were overcome by having one person do all the necessary checking and cross-indexing in order to maintain continuity. I did this job myself, both out of interest and also from sheer necessity because when the scheme entered its second year all the workers had, under the MSC rules, to be changed.

After cross-indexing, the entries were made on ordinary 5" x 3" index cards under subject/location headings in strict chronological order. As a card was finished (with an average of eight entries), it went into the filing system. While this subject indexing was proceeding, volunteers from a local history group and the Devon Family History Society were indexing the personal names noted in the précis entries. On individual slips, surnames were entered in capitals, forenames in lower case; the associated place-name was entered as well, to overcome problems of common surnames. A year and a page number for the précis files were also given. These index slips were then sorted into alphabetical order in a separate series of filing drawers. In addition, one other index was started which covered birth/marriage/death announcements. Different coloured inks were used for the three different types, and the slips were again housed in a separate series of drawers.

The initial three workers were replaced after one year by a further seven, the MSC allowing us to re-employ two members of the original group for one month to help in training the new group. By the end of our second year, when MSC funding ceased, we had covered the years 1850-1894 in précis form. Our aim had always been to reach 1900, but the ever-increasing bulk of material defeated us. Over both years the indexers had divided their time between indexing and slip writing, and this work has continued due to the enthusiasm of a few volunteers. At the time of writing (December 1985), material from the years 1850-1865 has been fully slip indexed, with the largest subject categories completed up to 1875. Some 60,000 separate entries exist in the subject index, and roughly 90,000 entries in the name index. Both are being added to daily, and we intend to apply to the MSC for a further year's funding so that we can attempt to complete the transfer of the précis material to index cards. The various records are now held in the North Devon Athenaeum.

Benefits, drawbacks and problems

Benefits have been obvious and immediate. Researchers, both casual and regular, local and postal, have acquired a means of using the vast storehouse of material generated over nearly fifty years by the local newspaper. Many articles have already been published based on this material. In addition, ten previously unemployed people have been given experience both of work and of indexing.

Drawbacks have been less obvious, but they do exist. It is a common finding with schemes such as this that once an index is made available, use of the newspaper increases enormously. The researcher can turn directly to his or her reference rather than leaf through the whole volume, but there are many more researchers than before. All the copies indexed are now on microfilm and it seems clear that, as in other libraries, only the film copies will be produced in future in order to save wear and tear on the originals. With the spread of microfilm printout units, this trend will become even more marked.

Minor problems concerned the indexing technique used. Decisions had to be made on how to classify multi-subject entries; for example, a drunken carpenter assaulting a policeman would go under 'Assault', 'Carpenter' and 'Police', but not under 'Drunkenness'. As usual with indexing jobs, there was a residuum of baffling entries. These we put under the heading of 'Unusual events'. Included in this rag-bag were cases of spontaneous human combustion, lightning strikes, and the finding of live toads in stone.

Perhaps our one major mistake was not to employ seven people during the first year. This was the first such scheme I had attempted, and I underestimated the amount of indexing needed.

Indexing of Bideford Gazette

In September 1983, a second scheme supported by the MSC was initiated in Bideford by Frank Gent, then Principal of the Bideford Arts Centre, with help from me. Known as the Bideford Community Archive, this had as its core the indexing of the Bideford Gazette which began in 1856. Four indexers were recruited. Various other posts were also created: a building recorder drew up plans and surveys of historic buildings in the town; two photographers helped in this task as well as recording current events and building up an archive of copies of old photographs; an oral historian tape-recorded the memories of older residents, and a fulltime supervisor was put in charge of the whole scheme with help from a clerical assistant. Six months later, another historic buildings recorder and two further indexers were taken on.

The Indexer Vol. 15 No. 2 October 1986
The newspaper indexing followed the same pattern as the original Barnstaple scheme. Owing to the smaller circulation and size of the Bideford Gazette, its indexing was much more rapid than that of the Journal. So far the years 1856-1903 have been put into précis form, and the transfer to index cards is progressing. MSC funding again extended into a second year, allowing the numbers employed to rise to sixteen, including interpretation officer and an exhibition officer. Local exhibitions were staged, drawing on the material collected and indexed in the first year. Also employed during the second year of the scheme were five indexers who continued the indexing of the Gazette. To date there are some 68,000 subject entries, with smaller numbers of name entries and birth/marriage/death announcements.

The index to the Gazette is very similar to that for the Journal, though more cross-indexing has been done at the expense of area coverage. A computer-based index has been compiled to the 11,000 negatives in the photographic collection, classifying them by location, date and event. A separate index has been made to the 185 oral history interviews. The latter task was difficult, as the amount of time spent reminiscing on any particular topic varied greatly but each topic had to be indexed separately. The records of buildings are indexed simply by location.

MSC funding for this Bideford scheme ended in November 1985, and control of the material has been transferred to the Bideford Community Archive Council, a body which has representatives from many local organizations and councils and serves both to formulate future policy and to raise funds. The various indexes are now held in a room in Bideford School kindly donated by the headmaster. Some 25 volunteers are still working to extend the various holdings.

The establishment of the Barnstaple scheme led directly to the formation of the Bideford group, and this in turn has led to the creation of other similar groups and projects here in the West Country.

As I am not a professional indexer, I do not feel competent to comment on the various questions posed in earlier issues of The Indexer as to the morality of employing non-indexers for indexing work (The Indexer 14 (1), 29; 14 (3), 193-5). However, as a local historian I do know that without the MSC these undertakings would never have been started owing to lack of funds and more pressing needs elsewhere. I am therefore all in favour of MSC funding, and would like to thank the Commission for their support.

---

Peter Christie lectures in Local History at North Devon College and for Exeter University.

CONVERSATION, loose and scandalous

ABOUT ending differences
DIFFERENCES, a paper about

Not an assessment of a members’ meeting of the Society of Indexers, but entries from the Yearly Meeting Proceedings of the Society of Friends around 1692!

The Society of Friends established its Library in the 17th century, on the principle that it should contain two copies of every publication by a member of the Society, and one copy of each publication written positively against the ideas of the Quakers. The resultant collection is unique and fascinating.

The Society early recognized the value of indexing entries to the collections of papers, but more interesting for the researcher are the many name entries for families of renown in the movement, and the places where activities of the Quakers were effective. Presumably, once the researcher has clicked into the thought processes of the indexers for particular volumes, finding information is possible as well as intriguing.

The Society of Indexers was fortunate to be given a talk by Peter Daniels, assistant librarian at Friends House, on 6 March 1986, which opened our eyes to the value of the collection and the amount of work before the present staff to make the astounding amount of information at their disposal easily accessible. Worth remembering is their booklet My ancestors were Quakers by Edward H. Milligan and Malcolm J. Thomas, which is of especial use to genealogists.

The Society welcomes personal searches by readers, charging £2.00 per hour; you should write for an appointment to Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ.

P.L.G.

All part of woman’s work

‘The work women do as wives is not, of course, confined to housework—i.e. to the conventional list of tasks covering cooking, washing, shopping and cleaning. These are merely the tasks all wives (and daughters) do in the home. They are what is common to all households. In addition, some wives help their husbands in their occupations. The wives of publicans serve in the bar and make the sandwiches, the wives of theatre directors fill in for any member of the staff who falls sick (prompting, helping out behind the scenes), the wives of heads of state and ambassadors entertain and the wives of university lecturers proofread and make indexes.’

—from ‘Women in the family’ by D. Leonard and M. A. Speakman in Women in Britain today, ed. by V. Beechey and E. Whitelegg; Open University Press, 1986; quoted by permission.