User approaches to indexes

Jean Stirk

Of the many people who refer to lists and indexes daily few are trained to use such finding tools to maximum advantage. Some idiosyncrasies of different kinds of indexes, and problems encountered by users with differing approaches, are considered.

As someone with an inquisitive mind I am an inveterate 'looker-up' and, therefore, a frequent user of indexes. Unfortunately my enjoyment of the challenge of 'finding out' through indexes can prove embarrassing. Friends have only to mention in passing something they cannot find out or want to know, to send me searching. When I confront them with the information they are sometimes flattered and pleased to have the details; but some feel uncomfortable because they had forgotten the point altogether. Now I approach more warily with my facts trouvé.

From the moment we get up in the morning we are all, to a greater or lesser extent, immediately using lists or indexes: in one household a train timetable, a last-minute detail for school homework and a recipe to complete a shopping list; in another, perhaps more leisurely, household a dictionary for a crossword puzzle and the local telephone directory for the number of a tradesman to arrange repairs. In some instances the result is a direct answer, such as a telephone number; in others we are directed to another reference or to a further source.

Who, then, is this user? There are those who occasionally use an index, others who think automatically of indexes to circumvent long, slow checking through pages of prose, and the unfortunate souls who cannot find their way through such a maze as an index. The untrained people who can use an index competently are in a minority, but trained users of indexes are few.

Learning to use

The majority of untrained users learn by usage—no longer 'working by Nellie' but 'working with indexes'. One may learn a specific filing system in a certain company, or department, as part of one's job or, perhaps as part of one's profession, to use a specialist index. For instance, noting naval appointments and promotions, published in the London Gazette, it would be important to know that while such changes in the Army or Royal Air Force are listed by name and service number, changes in the Royal Navy would be missed unless a search were to be made among the names in the State Intelligence section for those noted RN.

This is a haphazard approach to indexes—what might be missed? Michael Marland, at one time Headmaster of Woodberry Down Comprehensive School, north London, has been much concerned at this state of affairs. He noted in 1978 in The Indexer an increasing emphasis in schools on projects and less on reading, without instruction or guidance for using indexes, any indication as to what sources are available or how to analyse a question, select material and synthesize. Now, in 1987, the problem is heightened, and of even greater concern, with the introduction of project-orientated General Certificate of Secondary Education. In everyday adult life there is an increasing emphasis on using lists and selecting information by computer.

Mr Marland's answer is for schools to give instruction in study skills, library use, understanding of classification, and how to use indexes to best advantage. He says children need to be taught to use bibliographies, the principles of alphabetization and 'alternative terms', i.e., a wider vocabulary.

There are rules for strict alphabetical order, but this is not a panacea answer to users' problems. The rules for indexing Me or Mac, for example, are clearly stated (albeit changed recently) and, presumably, followed by indexers; but what laymen would know these rules? For the general public, uncertain of the area or how to spell, say, Seebord or Segas, basic services are now indexed under Gas or Electricity. One might be somewhat perplexed to know how to approach an index for references to the army; would they be listed under army, military militia or perhaps services? A trade union known by initials as SOGAT could be indexed in alphabetical order as though SOGAT were one word, in a separate listing of entries under initials or under Society of... , but one may not remember the full title. Using an index with these uncertainties in mind is a time-consuming exercise.

Qualities of indexes

So far no proper distinction has been made between index and list, but an amalgam of definitions from the Oxford concise dictionary and Roget's thesaurus suggests that an index is a list, alphabetically arranged to reduce


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the material in it to some order, to act as a guiding principle pointing to a conclusion, whereas a list may be a roll-call or directory of names or places, possibly categorized by belonging to a particular group or class. Professor Hans Wellisch, Colleges Library and Information Services, University of Maryland, writes at length on the etymology of the word index in The Indexer of April 1983; he particularly notes that an index should be a summary or digest of a work, an index to be read in its own right. I prefer to think of an index as showing the way into (or perhaps out of?) a maze of information, as an invaluable finding aid.

An index can be fascinating reading in itself, and may prove to be invaluable reading matter if the subject is relatively unknown to the enquirer. Reading an index may be equally tantalizing if one cannot refer to the text. In a favourite second-hand bookshop I found a slim, leather-bound volume that proved to be an index to The Spectator and Punch over a short period, printed on vellum in 18th-century type—a delightful book to browse through.

Inadequate and poor indexes are utterly frustrating, almost more so than the absence of an index. These will be familiar to all indexers: that which does little more than repeat the contents list, as so many recipe books do; a short index of monosyllabic words to a serious textbook; reference to sections in, say, the Oxford Book of English verse or Roget's thesaurus, where there are also page numbers. Jeremy Gibson in the Autumn 1986 issue of Local Historian notes an inconsistent index, in which the rules of indexing change so that one cannot follow how to use it; he cites a number of entries where 'strict alphabetical order' is followed but the article, or indefinite article, is sometimes included, at other times not—shades of Palmer's index to the early editions of The Times? Palmer's eccentric choice of subject headings fascinates; two women committed to prison in 1842, one for firing a pistol, one for stealing a mare, are both indexed under R: 'Rather uncommon for females'.

Searching in libraries

With increasing emphasis in schools on project work for homework and examinations, many parents find themselves helping children cope with the mysteries of indexes and catalogues in the local library. Some subjects seem straightforward; for History one is directed to the 900 section, with useful subdivisions noted. Geography is quite perplexing; noted under this heading is Bible 220.91, Bibliography 016.91, Elementary Education 372.891, Maths for 510.2491, Statistics for 519.502491, Teaching 375.91, and 710.7 leads to Building and Architecture. Each topic in question is like a treasure hunt. Transport, for instance, notes Town Planning 711.7; Town Planning notes Local Government 352.96, Bibliography 016.711 under Town and Country Planning 711.4, Town Sociology 301.36 and Town Centres, Town Planning 711.552. There is no mention of Transport under Town Planning or Town and Country Planning. One library I use arranges its local studies books by author, so the catalogue references are useless and one needs to use a subject index, hoping to choose the correct words that will lead to the material required.

Idiosyncratic indexes

In the work situation the complexities of any subject seem further complicated unless one is using the appropriate indexes regularly. A visit to the Patent Office to check on a patent taken out some years previously may be noted in the annual indexes by name of the applicant; these are easy and quick to check, if the name shown is the one being searched; however, the applicant noted may be the name of the inventor, the Company name, or that of an employee, say a Company Secretary. Searching the subject and category indexes instead is a specialist matter and may require the help of a patent agent.

In litigation one may wish to refer back to a case of many years ago, not necessarily noted in the standard reference books. The Bernau Index to chancery proceedings lists law suits according to the name of the main person considered to be concerned and by the type of case, e.g. STIDOLPHIE Jane 1627 Town Deposition bdl.536 initial S. This notation bears no relation to the index entry of the actual record of this case at the Public Record Office, where cases are indexed according to the Court of one of the Clerks of the period; there is then no further reference to other related papers (except by deduction) that may be deposited under Allegations or under Act Books, for instance. Such convolutions have led to some people creating modern indexes for certain classes of particular periods, by the name of deceased or litigant or by place—but there are few as yet.

One index that one may prefer not to consult is the Ninth Collective Index of Chemical Abstracts (compiled August 1978), for its 57 volumes stacking 10 feet high are daunting in themselves, let alone the mammoth task of searching in the 95,882 pages among over 20,550,000 entries. This index finds a place in the Guinness Book of Records as the longest index in the world.

Searching indexes to Registered Companies, for more detailed information about the structure of a particular commercial concern, is equally complex. Finding that Company's registered number may take time; even then the papers may be in as many as five locations with an index for each subdivision covering a limited period of time.

The matter of probate may require ancestry to be checked, to ensure that claims to property and possessions are legitimate, so a Solicitor's Clerk will need to use the indexes to birth, marriages and death at the General Register Office. The fallibility of these indexes is manifold; sometimes the events were registered incor-
correctly or not at all; the indexes may also be incorrect, showing a name misspelt, so indexed incorrectly from the searcher's viewpoint (for instance Myles indexed as Myers or Harris as Arris), or omitting an entry, even indexing under married surname when maiden name should be shown.

All in the family

Holidays should be fun but the indexes and cross-referencing in holiday brochures, combined with checking all the small print, test one's patience to the limit. Christmas holidays are the time when we consult indexes and lists most consistently and when our needs are most diverse: surprisingly, perhaps, but then the challenge of the range and depth of questions in the published test set by the King William College, Isle of Man, is sufficient to tax the minds of Brain of Britain contenders, let alone schoolboys home for the holidays. With libraries shut and no friendly librarian on hand we are forced back on our own resources to the most comprehensive yet most frustrating index—one's own pigeon-holed information of encyclopaedic proportions with its own cataloguing system and an infallible means of retrieval—so long as one remembers the combination. Wordsworth's words describe it: '... the marble index of a mind'.

Local and family history

Researching history, particularly local history, an item in isolation can be misleading—it needs an historical context—so finding information in series is important; how can that be illustrated in an index? Dates are a problem: before 1752 the year began on 25 March and a system of double dating was usually employed, e.g. 4 February 1641/2: how then is the user to know if the date was originally given as a double year and interpreted by the indexer? Quite often material within one volume is subdivided; it may be indexed as a volume at the end or by division with indexes scattered through the book—the user needs to remain alert or several indexes may be missed. Two other general problems that seem prevalent in indexes to historical material are the use of abbreviations, so consultation of a further index or legend is necessary, and undifferentiated page numbers.

Tracing some past events, perhaps for a village or a company, in newspapers can be most rewarding—but few are indexed; where they are, the index includes obituaries, advertisements, official notices, sales of property and such, but without evaluation; there is usually no distinction between a main article and a passing mention.

The ability to retrieve information quickly and accurately is not peculiar to the study of history but is particularly important to the researcher. Robert Collison wrote on this topic in the Spring 1967 issue of *The Indexer*.

Researching family history (the picture of the individual within the family and community, not just the pedigree) has its own pitfalls. So much time has to be spent sifting through irrelevant material in the hope of finding just one entry that a well devised index is invaluable. In this sphere almost more time is spent searching through and using indexes than is actually spent with the source material itself.

Much emphasis is placed on names, and variant spelling of those names. If one cannot be sure that mention of people with the same name actually refers to the same person, can one rely on the indexer to differentiate? E. A. Wrigley uses a demographic term 'historic individuation' and cites an instance of an Irish sailor; is he also the Bosun from Dublin? Can the indexer’s and the user’s viewpoint be reconciled here?

The Mormons, because of their particular beliefs, have compiled the International Genealogical Index of births and marriages before 1875 putting different spellings of the same name together, but without knowledge of the origin of names. Stirk, for example, appears with its variants—St[e]ll[e]r[cl][k][e], meaning a yearling highland heifer or bullock; Stark[e] is also included, but that means strong and has developed from a different root.

Aliases are particularly prevalent in 17th and 18th-century documents, causing further problems. An extreme example is that of a woman noted in the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* in 1760:

‘about 24 years of age, of a brown complexion, having a scar at the corner of her right eye, and a mole at the ball of her right thumb, who has gone by the several names of Charlotte Aislaby, alias Vernon, alias Valler, alias Millbank, alias Clarissa Montague, alias Kitty Carpenter, alias Charlotte Gore, alias Charlotte the wife of Edmund Vrigley, alias Kitty Charlotte St Quintin, alias Mary Blith, alias Charlotte the wife of — Shoveller, has travelled about the country, pretending to be related to several of the Nobility and principal Commoners in the Kingdom, and by such pretensions and many other artifices has not only obtained relief from many unwary persons, but otherwise greatly imposed upon them.

We are told that this woman for like offences has been imprisoned at Chelmsford, Dartford, Canterbury and many other places, and has been married to no less than 13 husbands, many of whom are living. To prevent the Public being any longer imposed on by such a wicked and abandoned creature, we have given the above account of her.

Family historians themselves have become amateur indexers, devising personal indexes or compiling them on subjects of special interest such as coastguards or Friendly Societies. They also take part in a national scheme to index the 1851 Census Returns for the whole of England and Wales. Some standards are being set; one is that of the Chapman Code, a three-letter code for British counties, and for countries worldwide.
In some spheres, such as family history and genealogy, people are busy creating indexes to original documents, providing short cuts (sometimes) to that material. As they may be professional, experienced or amateur indexers the results are variable and the degree of reliability uncertain.

There is no agreed format for compiling these indexes and, even if they are checked, unless both compiler and checker are experienced at reading different and older hands, their interpretation of the original may be beset by palaeography. Indexes based on information collected casually, haphazardly, such as names and ages from embroidered samplers, may be of minimal value; others can provide more than just genealogical information where a pattern emerges, such as the Hatters' Index through which it became possible to detect the movements of many Hatters between Stockport, Bermondsey and Bristol.

**Evaluation**

To what extent does the indexer evaluate the material to be indexed, and should the indexer be required to evaluate, in circumstances where nomenclature changes, or the range of material covered changes yet the title of the material indicates no change? Road names are changed from time to time, county boundaries changed radically in 1888 while some counties, like Rutland, disappeared completely in 1974; the names of census and electoral districts may be confused with place names, yet there are probably several variations between each defined area. Authorities amalgamate or are differently entitled; London County Council, being the forerunner of the Greater London Council, is probably generally known; but how is one to locate a lesser-known authority, such as the Grand Junction Canal Company, that became part of the Grand Union Canal, without that knowledge? Records of such groupings may be split up and sent to several places in line with boundary or authority changes; the location of probate jurisdiction records reflects this particularly—for example, wills of Berkshire people may be in Wiltshire, Oxford, Berkshire or London.

The user needs to be very knowledgeable, and to assume the indexer has ‘distributed relative’ or accept an index as a ‘lucky dip’.

**User expectations**

Indexes are almost as important to me as to the Lord Chief Justice, Baron Campbell (1779-1861), who considered an index essential to every book, proposing even ‘to bring a Bill into Parliament to deprive an author who publishes a book without an Index of the privilege of copyright; and, moreover, to subject him to a pecuniary penalty’. Presumably he did not succeed in this! Through an index I expect to answer any question, and the index to be geared to my particular needs. On another occasion I expect the same index to be quite differently orientated.

It becomes clear that the user, and the indexer, work on preconceptions and look under the heading that seems logical to search or index by the defined, accepted rules; these preconceptions develop from experience and training so are unavoidable. To what extent, then, is the indexer to take into account the likely approach of the user, in trying to make the contents of books, journals and documents retrievable by listing names, places and subjects in a predictable order, with an indication of their physical position within the source? Is it possible for the user to understand the indexer’s approach?

An unqualified but frequent user of indexes may best take advice from the professional and read the article in The Times Higher Educational Supplement (26 September, 1980, p. 12) by Ken Bakewell (currently President of the Society of Indexers) entitled, ‘How to let your fingers do the walking and not lose the way’.

One definition of an index is ‘a list in a particular order’. List can also refer to listening or hearing so I would exhort the indexer to list to the user and list for the user.

**References**


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**Patently absurd**

‘An elaborate new Index of Trade Marks is being compiled at the [Patent] Office. It goes on very remarkable principles which I do not quite understand. Under the head of “Biblical Subjects” is included an old monk drinking out of a tankard; and the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist are put among “Mythical Figures”’. 