The Builder was the most important architectural journal of the Victorian age. It was originally intended that the Builder Project, based at the Institute of Historical Research of the University of London, would be able to create the comprehensive cumulative index to its entire contents which readers had been requesting for many years. Sadly, funding is simply not available for the index the journal merits. Let us not bewail this fact; the available financial help from the journal’s successor Building, and from English Heritage, which we gratefully acknowledge, has been utilized to make a positive start.

A decision was taken fairly early on that, as funding was short, rather than attempt a comprehensive index to only one or two years’ issues, we should instead tackle discrete swathes of The Builder’s contents. For the past two or three years, I and my colleague, Robert Thorne, have been engaged on indexing one such swathe: all the illustrations published in The Builder’s first forty years.

Why forty years? Because the journal was put on its feet and consolidated in its position as the pre-eminent nineteenth-century journal in the field of architecture and construction by the architect and social reformer George Godwin, who served as its editor from 1844 to 1883, turning out a fine issue each week over this entire period. The journal had been founded in 1843 by Joseph Hansom—of the patent safety cab—but almost failed before Godwin took it on in 1844, at the age of thirty-one. Godwin put The Builder on the map. His catholic and humanitarian interests are reflected in the journal’s breadth and depth of coverage, and will be clearly shown in our index.

It was intended originally to utilize the Royal Institute of British Architects’ keyword system, lock, stock and barrel, so that the finished index would be consonant with other architectural indexes, and easily accessible to users already familiar with the RIBA system. However, when we came to try this we discovered, to our dismay, that the catholicity of Godwin’s interests forced a fundamental re-think, and it was decided that, while we could use the RIBA system as a framework, we would have to enrich it in order to cope with the huge variety of materials illustrated in the journal.

Due to the lack of funding, we had the use of only a very small-capacity computer—a BBC, with a working memory of only 3,500 words. Nevertheless, whatever its shortcomings, the machine has proved infinitely more swift and practical than index cards.

The BBC is being used as a word processor. Each illustration has a ‘card’ of varying length, according to need. At the top appears the reference: year, volume, page; and below that a code to signify whether the illustration is a perspective, a plan or some other form of illustration. Then follows the title—taken wherever possible from The Builder’s own caption, or from its textual description—using as closely as possible The Builder’s own Victorian words.

Then come entries for the name index—every person associated with the subject illustrated and the production of the illustration itself is listed—architect, contractor, engineer, illustrator, engraver and so on, with their roles in brackets. These lists are occasionally very long, as The Builder often provides voluminous details about the construction of buildings in which the individual joiners, plasterers, slaters and carvers are named, as well as those commemorated by or sponsoring the building. Family historians will, we hope, be able to have a field day with their architectural ancestors.

Following the entries by name, there are geographical index entries, which feature any geographical location of importance mentioned in the text, worldwide. Although London-centred and featuring London’s back-street slums and new street architecture in proliferation, The Builder was the opposite of parochial during Godwin’s time: illustrations of New York jostle with others from the Rhine, Japan, Australia, Venice or English towns and villages. Gleaming new buildings appear beside very old ones, or views of archaeological discoveries. Local historians will, we hope, be satisfied with what we have done.

Then come the subject index entries. This is where the enriched RIBA keyword system comes in. Each illustration is given a number of keywords by which it could be traced. Most of these keywords are architectural features or building materials, but we have devised further headings for the benefit of social historians or picture researchers who may be seeking views of certain trades, for example, or vehicles, flyposters or street scenes.

If there is a particularly revealing short quote in the journal text attached to the illustration, we will occasionally quote it; or, if some short comment seems appropriate, it goes in after all the more structured entries. Then there sometimes follow cross-references, or references to books mentioned in association with the illustration—usually books under review.

When cataloguing is complete—and we are now (January 1988) on our last volume—the whole lot will be transferred to a bigger computer for sorting. After reading Kevin Jones's article in The Indexer of April 1986,¹ we fear some sort of a nightmare to result, and will be very pleased indeed if something less horrifying happens! We have done our best to prevent the nightmare, but are well aware that neither we nor our computer advisers are the most sophisticated computerized indexers in the world. Nevertheless, we have got this far, and we mean to go on if at all possible. Each ‘card’ is separated from its neighbour by a series of dashes which the computer will be able to recognize. Each type of entry—title, name and so on—is distinguished typographically in a computer-readable way, so that the computer—and we—should be capable of discerning whether a line taken out of context is a name, a place or some other type of entry.

I work fulltime on the Project. Working methods have developed as needs arose, and have settled into a routine whereby I work on one of the large volumes at the machine, all day, every day, doing the basic work. Robert Thorne works for English Heritage, and oversees my progress by telephone, and we meet when necessary. When the cataloguing of each volume’s illustrations is complete, I print up, and give Robert the hard copy, which he then corrects: he attends to spelling errors, deletes unnecessary details, and fills omissions and gaps of knowledge. We jointly decide matters of interpretation. By the time Robert returns the corrected printout, I am ready with the printout for the following volume for his correction, and a corrected and freshly printed up copy of the volume-before-last. Robert takes off a new printout to correct and a clean, corrected copy from the penultimate volume for his files.

Robert also compiles wonderful lists of obscure problems which we circulate to members of the committee which administers the Project—architectural experts of various kinds who seem delighted to be asked to share their knowledge of architectural esoterica. We call this group our supporters’ club.

The major problem in doing an index of such magnitude on such an inappropriately small computer is the continuous problem of consistency. It is impossible always to be consistent, especially when it is time-consuming and difficult to check what verbal expedient you used in a similar case months before. As time is the least available commodity on this project, such checking has often proved impossible, but we hope that much will be achieved by Robert’s double-checking, the valuable help of a keen member of our supporters’ club in treble-checking, and our having put aside a clear month this summer—funding permitting—for checking and correcting where necessary. I was most heartened when I expressed during a lecture to the Society of Indexers my fear of making inconsistent index entries: there was a general sigh, and someone said aloud that I was by no means alone.

The most irksome feature of the entire project has been the lack of financial resources. This basic problem has forced us to adopt strategies in haste, make do with inadequate technology and, above all, hurry through the work. At the outset the intention was to endeavour to complete the indexing of each volume’s illustrations within a single week. At first this was possible, but it gradually became apparent that longer periods were needed—though not before we had worked to tight deadlines consistently for nearly two years, which seemed to threaten physical collapse from a mixture of tiredness and guilt from consistently overshot deadlines! Towards our end date of 1883 the volumes are massive, and they each take several weeks to complete. But although we will not know until mid-April whether there will be money in the kitty for that month’s work, we have to keep to our deadlines for another reason, too. 1988 is the centenary of George Godwin’s death, and we want to commemorate this steadfast and honourable, not to say prolific, man with a fine, published volume containing a catalogue and indexes—biographical/geographical/subject—to the thousands of illustrations he saw to press. This object we still hope and intend to achieve.

Reference


Dr Ruth Richardson can be contacted at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, Senate House, London WC1.

Documentation standardization in France

French participation in the work of international standardization in the field of documentation is summarized by Elizabeth Gayon in Documentaliste 25 (2) mars/avril 1988, pp. 92–3. The author includes a list of AFNOR documentation committees. Her article is followed by a list, compiled by Catherine Mattenet, of documentation standards published by AFNOR 1986/7, together with withdrawals, and a list of work in progress (ibid, pp. 93–4).