Stamp magazines, philatelic periodicals, ‘The Bulletin’, call them what you will. They have informed, enriched and strengthened the stamp collectors’ hobby for well over 120 years. Our hobby is unusual in that so much is first published in periodicals, and the strength of philatelic literature rests firmly on the thousands of different periodical titles that we have generated.

The indexes so far

For much of the 20th century, it has been the dream of many philatelic people to provide a comprehensive index covering all periodicals. Many worthy attempts have been made and some have been successful, if only for a limited period. Perhaps the most notable in English have been the Ricketts, the Harris and the NPS index published in The Stamp Lover.

W. R. Ricketts subject-indexed material from 1863 to 1910 in a series of issues of The American Philatelist from 1911 onwards. The volume and time taken to work through the alphabet brought an end to this in 1926, with only A-G complete. It was, though, and remains, a very good attempt.

The ‘Harris’ index is The Standard Index to Philatelic Literature 1879–1925, compiled by A. H. Harris and L. A. J. Baker. It was published in 1933 and did reach Z but concentrated on British and British Empire publications, including 40 periodicals. It thus excluded the vast mass of American material and all texts not in English. Nevertheless, its value remains to this day, albeit covering a period that is now some way from our time.

The Index to Current Philatelic Literature was first published by the National Philatelic Society (NPS) in 1950. It was compiled by A. Blair who was succeeded in turn by H. S. French, J. Negus, L. E. Britnor, A. J. Brown and J. J. S. Goss. It was serialized in parts in most issues of The Stamp Lover covering articles published from 1950 to 1979. Initially it covered only British periodicals and only ten of those, but quickly expanded and eventually covered well over 300 and including many in foreign languages. A cumulation, putting the first 93 serialized lists into one sequence, was assembled by A. J. Brown. There exist five copies covering 1950–63. The NPS library holds one of these precious copies.

The success of this project eventually led to its downfall. The scope and size and volume of the work involved, coupled with the space needed to print it, caused the published lists gradually to fall behind in time so that the last list was published some seven years after the references it contained. Nevertheless, some 30 years had been successfully covered.

Since 1985 the NPS has continued to pursue the goal, but on a more limited and manageable scale. The British Press Checklist by J. Negus has succeeded in remaining manageable in size and up-to-date in publication by concentrating on around twelve British ‘general’ magazines. It is a ‘current awareness’ index to alert specialists to principal articles in British general philatelic periodicals. Specialized magazines are not part of the scheme at all, not even the Post Office British Philatelic Bulletin which is naturally specialized wholly on Great Britain. At the time of writing some 18 lists have appeared in The Stamp Lover from 1985 to 1990. Long may this excellent work continue.

It must be stressed that there have been many other multi-periodical subject indexes in addition to those covered above, but few can claim the success over a reasonable period that they attained.

Recent years have seen a great growth of specialist societies and a related proliferation of specialist journals. The majority provide a conventional volume index at the completion of each volume and many have benefited from cumulative indexes covering many years’ issues. The roll of honour of titles so favoured is a long one. Notable for their high quality or their careful planning are the series of 15-issue indexes for Austria, the recent index to The Black Swan, that for the France and Colonies Philatelist, those compiled for Japanese Philately and those for Vorlaufer amongst others.

General philatelic magazines have been less well served in recent years, although R. King-Farlow did much to set the scene with a succession of good indexes in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

New ambition

However good they are, cumulative indexes to specialist or general journals can, by their nature, cover only a narrow field. It is the articles unknown to us that we are all
after, not those that appeared in the obvious place of the specialist journal dealing with the specific subject.

The Philatelic Periodicals Index Committee of the NPS, chaired by Vice-President David Beech, is determined to maintain the Society's involvement in multi-periodicals subject field, and build on the considerable achievement of the 30-year index. The Society's council is keen to back their belief and enterprise, not just for the benefit of the National Philatelic Society, but also for the greater good of philately as a whole.

So, with any comprehensive, long-term, potential index daily growing to awesome size, how can we contemplate this vast ongoing—and of necessity also retrospective—task?

There is no simple solution, but we can point the way, and we now look at the principles the NPS Index Committee see as being fundamental to their belief that the task can be done.

When Rex Long, Ricketts, Harris, Pike and many other pioneers were working so hard they had to type or write each entry, and then re-type or re-write their work in one sequence, checking it in detail at every stage. Before printing it had to be type-set, with more checking in the form of proofreading needed.

The power for the job

Now for the first time the power is available to match the job. Modern personal computers give us the opportunity to spread wide the collection of data—within a standardized framework. The simplicity of transferring data from one PC to another by diskette or other methods adds to the ease of working. But, of course, the power we have available for the first time is more than that. It gives the ability to key information (title, reference, subjects etc.) once and once only, to last for all time; the ability to make minor changes and corrections easily and rapidly; and the power to sort and re-sort, to print out and to re-print the information and still retain it for re-use and updating.

Another plus for the PC, vital in any project of this size and long-term nature, but often overlooked, is the way it enables people to be involved in a project and thus make it easier to hand the work on to another generation. The number of PCs available in homes continues to increase and each owner is a potential 'helper'. Thus the widespread use of PCs gives the power to spread the workload.

Concentration

The other critical change seen by the Index Committee is the need to fix attainable goals. We probably cannot now 'index the world' and there is no point in trying to do so if we cannot expect to finish the job. Also, even academic specialists are not familiar with more than perhaps two or three languages. Instead the Committee sees the immediate task to build on the previous thirty years' work by concentrating on all philatelic periodicals published in the United Kingdom (UK) and Republic of Ireland (RI) only.

Further, we should start by confining the work to articles published in the years 1980–1989. The third key factor is not to attempt serial publication, but to make it a single, one-off publication.

We would hope to interest and involve other organizations in other countries, firstly the major English speaking countries but then others. After "UK & RI 1980–89", we can look forward in time and we can look backward in time. We can also look sideways with the help of other nations. But let us first plan, work on, complete and publish a serious and useful guide to 10 years of British and Irish philatelic periodical articles.

Let no-one underestimate the volume and complexity of the work and the considerable management control that will be involved. We look not just to the membership of the NPS, willing though we know many are. We look beyond the Society to anyone in philately with the enthusiasm to help in a small or large way. We do so in the belief that such a project can be done, that it should be done and that it will be a major contribution to the literature of philately and thus of benefit to all collectors.

Further reading

This article has been inspired by, and drawn heavily on, the writings of many previous authors on the general and specialized subject of philatelic indexing. In particular thanks must be given and interested readers are referred to:

King-Farlow, Roland. Subject indexes. The Stamp Lover Oct.–Nov. 1949, 42. 68.
Negus, James. Good Bibliographic Practice. A series of four papers from The Philatelic Literature Review, reprinted in one booklet 1971. [now effectively replaced by the next item].
Negus, James. Philatelic Literature. James Bendon, 1991 isbn 9963-7624-3-3 [the definitive work on this and many other related subjects].

and for more general reading the issues of The Philatelic Literature Review, published quarterly by the American Philatelic Research Library.

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