Trial Trench

Above is the splendid title of a new newsletter for archaeological indexers compiled by Cherry Lavell, former editor of British Archaeological Abstracts, and member of Council of the Society of Indexers. The inaugural issue is dated August 1992, and includes a meditation of interest and relevance to all indexers, which we quote in full below, as a sample of this welcome, highly readable, enterprising new publication.

To split or not to split

When it comes to wondering whether to separate an index into various sections, e.g. geographical/author/period/whatever, I find myself firmly in the lumper’s camp. A long time ago, when I was pondering how to index British Archaeological Abstracts, Bodley’s Librarian (no less) who was at that time the much-loved J. N. L. Myres (of Anglo-Saxon pottery fame with his other hat on) told me, ‘Dictionary order is the only way’. So I meekly did as I was told; and over 25 years I never found cause to regret it. True, putting all entries into a single sequence does mean that (e.g.) authors can appear in almost unbroken ranks for inch after inch—not just the Mcs/Macs/Smiths/Joneses, either. However, if one obeys modern usage, with upper case employed only for proper names, the subjects in lower-case stand out very well from the ruck.

In any event, this scheme has one overriding advantage to my mind: the index-searcher does not have to (a) find the page where the indexing categories are listed; (b) engage the brain to decide which of them will answer the question; (c) find the appropriate section and start hunting. Instead, all the searcher’s effort can go into turning straight to the appropriate part of the alphabet, and no messing. If there is no useful entry (?inadequate cross-referencing) the user can then concentrate on thinking up likely synonyms. After all, no less an authority than H. B. Wheatley, the father of modern indexing, says firmly that an index ‘should not be broken up into several alphabets’. Similarly, Sir Edward Cook noted (Literary recreations, 1918) that ‘multiplication of indexes is an unmitigated nuisance’. There are, of course, exceptions to this dogma, notably in legal works or poetry books; but I cannot see much of a case for splitting archaeological indexes. In particular I find the most recent cumulative index to the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society rather too complicated for easy use, with its four different categories (subjects, sites, authors-of-articles and authors-of-books-reviewed). For instance, if you were interested in a particular author you might check the articles list but forget to look in the book reviews section.