

Starting out

Jill Halliday

These are some thoughts about how I started indexing, and where the 29 years that I have been involved in indexing have led me.

It all started with *Woman's Hour*, which all those years ago was an afternoon programme. Like several of us of the same vintage, I had stopped work when my first baby arrived, although I carried on doing some consultancy work, on a part-time basis, for my former employer. Authorized maternity leave and regular childcare were still in the future, and anyway it was time for a change of direction. One afternoon I was listening to *Woman's Hour*, and an indexer was featured. She talked about what an interesting job it was, and how she could do it sitting in an armchair. The relaxation element wasn't attractive, but the opportunity to work on books certainly was. I signed up for the Rapid Results College indexing course with Wing Commander Pemberton as my tutor. Compared with the current Society of Indexers' (SI) course, the training was relatively simple and was not difficult to fit in, particularly as my first child was easy and slept enormous amounts. (My luck ran out after that!)

After completing the course, I needed to find some work. I can't remember now in what order my earliest jobs came, but I managed to persuade a publisher to let me work on a book on fishing (about which I know very little), a family contact got me the job of indexing a short book on the French poet Rimbaud (a topic on which I knew considerably less than fishing), and I was joint author of a chapter in a multi-author book on smallholding, and managed to get the job of indexing that. This was the time of self-sufficiency, and I was very involved in livestock keeping, vegetable growing, dairying and preserving, so the book was an absolute gift to work on. I think I can honestly say that, since those first books, I have never strayed so far from topics of which I have reasonable knowledge.

Gradually the work built up with medical, veterinary and biological publishers, and by the time my youngest child went to school, I was able to sit down at my desk and work all of my child-free hours. By this time I had become Registered, which helped hugely in getting a steady flow of work. The culture change from working in a team to working entirely alone took some getting used to, but gradually I found that I had methods of checking my work and appraising myself which seemed to produce work that satisfied my publishers. As time went on, I gradually built up to full-time work, developing relationships with publishers and editors so they would send me regular commissions. If only it really was that simple! Work is never really a steady flow and bottlenecks inevitably occur.

I started going to SI conferences and meeting other indexers, which gave an opportunity to find out that I was not alone in having to work out my own methods. In the current work environment, there are all the 'buzz' phrases

such as 'lifelong learning' and 'continual professional development (CPD)', but many of us developed our own systems long before these catchy phrases appeared. The conferences were invaluable – I started to get to know other indexers, to network, to have people I could discuss issues with (by phone and letter – email was still way over the horizon), and people I could pass work on to if I was overloaded, and receive work from if they were fully committed.

When I started work, it was in the index card and shoe-box days, with the tedious job of copy-typing from the cards at the end of the job. I took myself off to night school to learn to type properly, and eventually moved on from an electric typewriter to my first computer (an Amstrad) and a copy of MACREX. The slowness of the early PCs may be laughable now, but at the time they took all of the tedious part out of the job, and the indexing software gave all sorts of ways of checking your work, which had not been possible with the manual system. The other 'investment' decision I took was to commit myself to buying at least one reference book each year. I treasure my collection of reference works, even though I use Internet resources extensively now. As the business built up, I got my own phone line, separate from the house phone, so that I wasn't competing with teenagers arranging their social lives, and invested in a fax machine. The computer is upgraded every few years, and as we all know, they just get better and faster and relatively cheaper.

Although I had run a small business for a short while, I knew that I didn't have a particularly good business head, so I never planned to expand or develop beyond what I could do single-handed. Working on my own after years in a highly competitive industry was bliss, even with the tensions of deadlines, changing schedules and the hassles we associate with indexing work. Most of all, I was working on books, and it still gives me pleasure to know that I contribute to readers being able to navigate their way through a book, and that I have constructed a tool for accessing information.

So I have outlined how my business developed, but what about personal development? Working alone does not offer many opportunities in that area. I had been a member of SI since I first started training, but had been unable to get to any activities the Society ran, other than conferences every two or three years. The first thing I became actively involved in was running a conference, which although it was a lot of hard work was great fun. Eventually, I was able to find enough free time to take on a role as an officer, and for the past few years have become involved in the running of the Society and being part of its organization and development. Working in committees, meeting and liaising with people from the other indexing societies round the world, and

representing the Society at events of other organizations certainly develops personal skills.

This began with *Woman's Hour*, and a couple of years ago it came full circle, when a book I had indexed was shortlisted for the Wheatley Medal. I attended the reception before the awards ceremony, and the guest speaker was a broadcaster I admire greatly – Jenni Murray from *Woman's Hour*. There must be as many different ways of developing an indexing career as there are indexers, but this is my story.

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Diary of a trainee indexer, February 2003–May 2005

Rohan Bolton

The third edition of the Society of Indexers (SI) distance-learning training course was introduced in 2002. This diary gives a personal account of one individual's experiences as she works her way through the course, attends training seminars and finally achieves Accreditation. It covers some of the problems encountered and offers hints on how she prepared for the world of professional indexing.

New Year's Day 2003

I have been working as a part-time researcher for a web-based European information service for the past five years. Now that my teenage daughter is becoming more independent I find that I have more time on my hands, so I have decided that this is the year that I will train as a professional indexer in order to expand my work opportunities. Here goes!

February 2003 – Unit A

I choose the paper version of the Society of Indexers (SI) training course as I cannot imagine being able to learn directly from the computer screen. In retrospect I wish I had applied for the CD-ROM version as I soon become accustomed to studying and working directly off my screen. (In fact, I understand that a combined version of CD-ROM and printed booklets is now the standard version.)

The day the first unit arrives in the post I can't wait to open the package and see what I've let myself in for. At a first glance it looks pretty logical and straightforward. As I read through the early stages I have the impression that with a background in librarianship I am going to find the Accreditation process relatively simple. With hindsight the phrase 'pride comes before a fall' comes to mind!

I enjoy the challenge of the exercises in the self-administered test, which include researching American spellings and finding errors in the printed extracts, which I find very satisfying.

The descriptions in Chapter 6 of how individual indexers compile their indexes are particularly fascinating, and it is this that begins to give me cause for concern. How does one ever manage to distil a full-length narrative book into a manageable index?

My aim is to finish the unit before Easter, and I complete Test Paper A within a week – before the end of the allotted three weeks' completion time. To prepare the index I use the 'Tables' function in Word with two columns, sorting the first column of subject terms alphabetically with the second having the locators. I do not feel ready to embark on any of the tailor-made indexing software programs.

Much to my relief I receive news before Easter that I have passed; as my index was described as a 'fair attempt at a first index', I feel reasonably confident about continuing.

April 2003 – Unit B

I had applied for the Unit B booklet at the same time as sending off my first paper for marking, so after Easter I settle down to Unit B, which I hope to finish during the summer term.

I find the identification of 'classes of indexable concepts' challenging, which makes me realize for the first time that there is an important intellectual component to the preparation of an index, not just the need for technical consistency and accuracy.

I like the logic behind the use of cross-references. Having been involved with the compilation of a political thesaurus when I was at the House of Commons Library, I can relate