Indexing archives for access

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Archival records now in the custody of Australian State and Federal Archives were created by public servants in the normal course of their work. For the most part it was not envisaged that these records would continue to be used by future researchers. This paper looks at how indexing is a means of opening up greater access to archival records, and the challenges that archival indexing poses to both archives and libraries, and private individuals and genealogical societies who publish indexes for researchers.

Difficulties of archival research

Archival records now in the custody of Australian State and Federal Archives were created by public servants in the normal course of their work. For the most part it was not envisaged that these records would continue to be used by future researchers, and archival research poses many difficulties for researchers. For example, many archives, in Australia as elsewhere, are not automated or are still in the process of automation. Cataloguing, or arrangement and description as it is known within the profession, is governed by two principles, provenance and original order. Provenance is the creating agency, and original order is the order in which the records were created. Archivists arrange records according to the creating agency, and leave records in the order they were created. There is no rearrangement into subject or alphabetical order for ease of access. Archivists create agency histories, series descriptions and item lists which may be only for a box and not a detailed list of the files in the box. Once understood, the archival methodology can be used to locate relevant records, then a time-consuming search will unearth relevant items. Once the items are found, illegible handwriting and vagaries of spelling still impede progress, and the fragility of the records puts them at risk of loss.

Use of volunteers in state archives

Microfilm and more recently digitization have been methods of preserving fragile records from over-use, and several archives have taken the opportunity to index records that have been conserved in this way, then sold both the index and the records to interested researchers. The State Records NSW, for example, packaged up several of its convict record series together with various indexes and marketed them as a genealogical kit to genealogical and family history societies at an affordable price. Not only does the availability of an index make the records more accessible, it also helps with their preservation, as researchers can use the index to see if there is any relevant information rather than physically search the original records for a reference.

State archives usually provide access down to item level, which is either a register or a box or sometimes individual files. It is rare for archives to index below this level. They do not have the staffing resources to undertake this level of work, and they do not have the financial resources to pay for it to be done. This has opened up an opportunity for volunteers, and it also explains why family history societies have entered the business of indexing archival records, as it raises revenue for them and also makes records more accessible. A number of state archives and state libraries have volunteers who assist with indexing heavily used record series.

At the Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) we have had a team of volunteers for the last 20 years who have been steadily making their way through the inwards and outwards immigration passenger lists for Victoria. The fruits of their labors are available on the PROV website for all to access. Unassisted inwards passenger lists have been done for British and foreign ports from 1851 to 1923, and unassisted outwards passenger lists for British, foreign and colonial ports from 1852 to 1856. Assisted inwards passen- gers from 1839 to 1871 have also been indexed, and all three indexes are now online on the PROV website (www.prov.vic.gov.au), giving researchers easy access to this information.

Volunteers are recruited from all walks of life, but most typically our volunteers have some form of tertiary education and are involved in history and heritage areas, or are keen family historians. In addition, they are mostly female and over 60 years of age. New volunteers undergo an induction process where they are introduced to all aspects of PROV before settling down in the volunteers room for specific training. This usually includes how to read old handwriting, basic conservation and preservation skills, database use, and transcription of documents. Where possible new volunteers are paired with ‘old timers’ so that they can learn from their prior experiences.

Volunteers are required to sign an agreement with PROV that they are undertaking the indexing work on behalf of PROV and that copyright remains with the Victorian Government. All volunteers are reimbursed their travel costs, provided with tea and biscuits, and have use of the PROV lunch room. There are usually two public launches of new indexes each year, to which all volunteers are invited. At Christmas we have a luncheon, and volunteers are presented with a certificate and a small gift in token of our appreciation.
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Genealogical, family history, and local historical societies

Genealogists and family historians in particular find archival research difficult, as they are usually looking for name-identified data (references to their particular ancestor). Local historians are another group of users, and look primarily for information relating to places and other geographic features. Many genealogical and family history, and local historical, societies have indexing programs involving archival records. Society members, usually volunteers, index series of records which the society publishes, and funds raised in this way then go towards purchasing other indexes for the society library. Some individuals also index and publish archival records.

The Queensland Family History Society is one group which has published a number of indexes to archival records. It has a very active team of volunteers who have indexed topics such as immigrants to Queensland from Germany, horse and cattle brands (1872–1899), sheep brands (1886–1900), and miscellaneous licenses (1860–1899) for auctioneers, billiards, timber, boats, surveyors, and hotels, to mention just a few. Perhaps its biggest archival contribution has been the Queensland School Pupils Index. To date there are over 550,000 names published on CD-ROM, representing about 15 per cent of all admissions. This is an absolutely fabulous resource for anyone looking for ancestors in Queensland primary schools. Another invaluable index is Railway Employees 1889–1940, which has approximately 370,000 entries and is incredibly useful for anyone looking for railway ancestors. The society publishes on CD-ROM and microfiche at a reasonable price.

This is just one example of how genealogical and family history groups are opening up access to archives through their own indexing and publishing programs. This is an Australia-wide initiative, and all state and federal archives assist groups who are doing this kind of work. When I first started researching nearly 30 years ago, there were practically no indexes to archival records apart from departmental control records, and now there are so many it is almost impossible to keep up with relevant indexes.

Why volunteers?

The Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers (ANZSI) conducted a survey as part of the 2001 membership renewal process, and a brief report on the findings is on its website (www.aussi.org). This survey explored what proportion of time members spent on indexing. Of 72 valid responses, 54 spent most of their time indexing books, periodicals and other printed texts, with 12 respondents spending time on databases, and three respondents spending time indexing electronic media. Only two respondents said they spent 100 per cent of their time indexing society papers and archives, and one respondent spent 100 per cent of the time indexing historical documents. One of the conclusions from the survey was that either most indexers spend the majority of their time indexing printed materials, or those who do not see no benefit in membership of ANZSI. Another reason might be that, except for a few projects that attract outside funding, there is no market for paid indexing within the archival/library world. As I mentioned above, archives and libraries have a dire need for indexing for greater access to manuscript collections but do not have the resources to pay for it. Volunteers have stepped into the void.

Challenges of indexing

As the records are so old, they are usually fragile, hard to read, and the edges of the documents may have crumbled. Often they have been water damaged and inks have run or faded. The difficulty in reading the handwriting and the fragile nature of the records mean that indexing can be a slow and time-consuming process. The majority of archival records, particularly for the 18th and 19th centuries – the records of most interest to researchers – are handwritten, and interpreting them requires special care. There are a number of potential traps. Over the years, for example, the spelling of some words has changed. Even more of a problem is that many people were illiterate, and government clerks wrote their names down as they sounded and not as they should have been spelt. In some handwriting, certain letters are indistinguishable. For example, Fl and H can be Flannery or Hannery. The double ‘ss’ often looks like ‘p’ or ‘fs’, so ‘Miss’ looks like ‘Mifs’. Other likely upper-case mix-ups include S and L, C and O, I and J, and M and W, to mention just a few. With lower-case writing the ‘m’ and ‘n’, ‘e’ and ‘i’, ‘o’ and ‘a’ can be problematic. It can also be extremely frustrating trying to decipher cryptic abbreviations.

Sometimes an index will only give basic information, and the records then need to be consulted for more details. Others choose to index the whole record so that looking at the original is not necessary. This kind of indexing takes even longer, although it results in a stand-alone product. It is certainly important to include enough information in an index to assist in identifying individuals, especially those with common names such as John Smith and Mary Brown.

Experienced indexers have learnt, often the hard way, that it is not always possible to index a handwritten record quickly. At PROV we have often had a spirited discussion about what a word really is. Sometimes, sadly, it simply cannot be deciphered. Sometimes we take a vote to determine the most likely interpretation.

Accessibility of indexes

The Internet has become a great vehicle for accessing state archives through online indexes, and also for promoting the existence of indexes for researchers to consult. Visit the website of any family or local historical society, and you will see that it has a range of published indexes for sale, either paper or microfiche and even CD-ROM.

Judy Webster also for many years maintained a central register with particulars of indexes that are likely to facilitate the study of family history in Australia and New Zealand, an Index of Indexes. Responsibility for this has now been.
assumed by the Australasian Federation of Family History Organisations (AFFHO). The purposes of the database are fivefold:

• to allow planners to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort
• to bring past, present, and prospective indexes to the notice of researchers
• to put researchers in touch with indexers
• to put volunteers in touch with index project managers
• to allow publishers to make researchers aware of their work.

AFFHO has drawn up database guidelines for submission including intellectual property rights, product details, authorship details, and a disputes process, together with a list of required fields. The database was released for searching in March 2005, with searches possible on the following fields: name of index, place, state, category of indexed document, and description.

PROV is also in the process of listing available indexes on its website, which will link in turn to the AFFHO website. By having a handy listing of available indexes researchers can do some very quick searching of series that may or may not be of interest to them. PROV has been slowly converting old card indexes into electronic databases for inclusion in the Access to the Collection PROVonline section of its website. In addition it also places online databases received from government agencies. A recent example of this is the Database Index to Teacher Record Books 1863–1959 VPRS 13719/P1.

In August 2005 PROV launched its new digital archive and new user website interface. This technology makes the collections at PROV much more accessible, with more fields visible within searches, allowing researchers to identify more quickly what they want to look at. The ordering process will also be simpler. By having these databases available online researchers can search at home before making a visit to PROV. It also means that they then have more time at PROV to search for records that are not as easily accessed.

Guides to indexing

There are a number of sources relevant to indexing archival records. Perhaps the most useful one for archival indexing is to be found on Judy Webster’s website. This offers excellent advice on how to avoid traps in using indexes, how to compile a good index, and how to publish and promote your index. Judy’s book, Specialist indexes in Australia: a genealogist’s guide, 1998 edition, with sections such as local area indexes, newspaper indexes, one-name (surname) indexes, indexes on other topics, published indexes, and overseas records being indexed by Australians, is well known in the family history world.

Conclusion

PROV has recently started to list which archival record series have been indexed and to record indexing projects in progress for both internal and external projects. We shall also be participating in the AFFHO project as it proceeds. It is important to ensure that duplication of effort does not occur, and also to highlight to researchers what has been done. Indexing handwritten archival series is too long and arduous to have people duplicating indexes. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, indexing and publishing records has become a minor but effective method of income for societies and individuals. At the same time access to the records has been considerably enhanced. Indexing archival records is a challenge, but one that has a variety of rewards to those who become hooked on old records.

Notes

1 PROV itself offers a happy exception. See the articles in the April 1976 issue of The Indexer by Jean Uhl (‘Indexing Victoria’s historic criminal records’: 10, 24–6) and Douglas Bishop (‘Indexing Victoria’s shipping records’: 10, 27–9).

2 Cf the problems with Schedario Garampi (Charles Burns writing in the October 2000 issue of The Indexer (22, 61–4)).

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Shauna Hicks has worked in archives and libraries since 1981, including the State Library of Queensland, John Oxley Library (Brisbane), Queensland State Archives, National Archives of Australia (Canberra) and since 2003 with Public Record Office Victoria. She has a number of qualifications including a Master of Arts in Australian Studies, a Diploma of Family History Studies and a Graduate Diploma in Library Science, and also maintains professional memberships of the Australian Society of Archivists, the Records Management Association of Australia, the Australian Library and Information Association and the Professional Historians Association (QLD). A keen family historian and researcher, Shauna combines her hobby and her profession into a mission to provide easier access to archival records.

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