
Archival networking and standards in the United Kingdom: a progress report

In the United Kingdom, the records of central government have survived in good quantities and may be found at the Public Record Office, now the National Archives, in London, in the National Archives of Scotland in Edinburgh and in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast. In recent years these three bodies have been active in automating and networking descriptive catalogues of the records in their custody.

The survival of local government records is more patchy. Even if the records of a particular body may be lacking, there is normally an adjacent or nearby body where the archives are more complete. Over the last ten years most local authority record offices have made some attempt to automate and network descriptive catalogues of their archives. These resources vary enormously in coverage and sophistication. The 1990s have been a learning process for archivists, software firms, ICT specialists and potential users of government records.

Responsibility for promoting the preservation, care and knowledge of non-government records in the UK has been vested in the Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC), established in 1869 and since April 2003 now part of the new National Archives. These records include the personal papers of individuals, the records of non-government organisations including businesses, churches, trade unions, political parties etc and the papers of aristocratic and other prominent families. Over its long existence, HMC has adopted a number of different strategies to collect and disseminate this information. It has published summary lists and detailed catalogues and calendars. The National Register of Archives (NRA) was established in 1945 to collect and prepare archival catalogues, printed and typescript and develop comprehensive and consistent indexes to their contents.

In the UK non-government records are called 'private'. They remain private property and can be destroyed, sold or otherwise disposed of with few or any restrictions on the owner's actions. The history of the UK as a leading imperial, industrial, trading, literary and scientific influence has complicated the unregulated and random pattern of survival, preservation and disposal of private records by making them attractive to acquisitive archival bodies notably in the USA and other former British colonies. Accordingly the NRA extends its coverage to records of interest to British history, interpreted very broadly, throughout the world. An on-line directory of over 3000 archival bodies and a comparable number of private owners can be accessed at ARCHON.

This situation has been further complicated by recent developments in the automation, digitisation and networking of private archives. Generally these processes have been funded externally by a variety of 'challenge' funding bodies. These include the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) and, in the university higher education sector, the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). Archivists are invited to apply individually or in consortia with other archivists, librarians, museum curators and other information specialists to provide a package of digitised resources or a networked database of archival descriptions.

The most prominent archival networks are Access to Archives (A2A) led by the PRO, HMC and the British Library and funded centrally by government and locally by the HLF, the Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) led by the NAS and funded by the HLF, the Archives Network Wales led by the National Library of Wales and funded by the HLF, the Archives Hub based at Manchester University and funded by JISC, AIM25 based at the University of London Computer Centre and funded by RSLP. Much of this funding has been provided over a short period, 2-3 years, with consequent requirements for haste, uncertainties over long term sustainability and problems of systematic coverage, duplication and interoperability.

On a more positive note the emergence of international and national professional descriptive standards, like ISAD(G), ISAAR and NCA Rules and the exchange standards like EAD and EAC, promises some solutions. More information about these and hundreds of other projects can be found on the Archives Portal.

A major benefit of the merger of the Public Record Office and the Historical Manuscripts Commission is the opportunity to develop greater interoperability between the resources and applications that are now shared within the National Archives. We are now exploring the creation of a National Name Authority File, based on the National Register of Archives, but including government records from PROCAT, hospital records from HOSPREC and catalogue data from Access to Archives.

The NRA already conforms with the four mandatory elements of ISAAR(CPF) 2nd edition, namely record id, type of entity, authorised form of name in compliance with the NCA Rules, and span dates. It is proposed to expand the NRA to include central and local government bodies for the whole of the UK. Archivists working outside the National Archives will be invited to submit and share authority data probably via EAC. We have supported the development of an EAC module for the Archives Hub which will share data from the NRA. We are also looking at establishing a place names authority list to assist systematic cataloguing of archival resources and simple single access points to the range of National Archives resources to remote users and local historians, perhaps in co-operation with the GB Historical Geographical Information System at Portsmouth University.

The NNAF need not be restricted to the archives profession. The publication of ISAAR(CPF) and EAC has created considerable interest in other information professions. The personal names database of the NRA was successfully exported in EAC to the EU funded LEAF project. The Natural History Museum in London is looking to create and share authority data not only in its archives and library but also with the many departments looking after millions of specimens. The NRA has also linked successfully with the on-line Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and the Royal Historical Society bibliographical database. We are in discussions with TRAP, a group of railway historians conducting a detailed survey of surviving railway records in the UK, to create an authority file of railway companies. The NRA has also contributed to the Artists Papers Register, a detailed survey of manuscript sources for the history of art in the UK, which is developing authority records for individual artists and art related bodies. We have co-operated with the National Library of Wales to compile an authority database of landed families in Wales.

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Hitherto it can be argued that automation and networking of archival descriptive data in the UK has not been as systematic and thorough as one would wish. Even archivists find it difficult to discover where best to look for information. It is to be hoped that a resource like the National Name Authority File will offer a much more satisfactory facility for archivists, other information specialists and for the general public.

Dick Sargent 18 January 2006