

Catholic Archives Society Publications
Archive Advice Leaflet Number 2

Establishing an archive
Second stage: Preliminary Sorting and Listing

This leaflet offers advice on the next stage which a novice archivist might follow after completing the initial collection and appraisal of miscellaneous archive material gathered together to establish "the archives" of an institution, as described in Leaflet No.1. The situation now envisaged is that the records discovered in the various boxes, cartons, plastic bags and other receptacles in which they were found or placed will have been roughly described, per container, and transferred into more convenient temporary boxes, open-top cartons being suggested as serviceable for the purpose of the next stage of intermediate sorting, since they would provide the archivist with useful visual oversight. The temporary boxes should still retain the numbering and description of their original containers, because the provenance of the records may be a factor in their sorting and listing.

Preliminary sorting

Assuming that all possible locations of potential archive material have been explored and that the assembled records constitute all that is likely to found, the archivist is now in a position to undertake the next stage, that sorting and listing. It is presumed that the powers that be will have provided the archivist with working space, tables for sorting and, hopefully, some shelving and good standard boxes for archive storage, although the acquisition of archive quality boxes, folders and other supplies may come later. With an acquired knowledge of the history of the institution, the archivist should now have the confidence to place the records in categories reflecting an original hierarchical order. It will be relatively easy to separate the formal records of the institution, for example, the minute books, letter books, account books, annual reports, etc. and to put these in their respective series, and then to list them so as to check that each section is complete.

In undertaking this preliminary sorting of the miscellaneous records, the archivist should always bear in mind that the archival objective is to try to arrange the records in an order which reflects their creation in the normal routine of the institution's administration. The minute books and other primary records should provide a good guide to the functions and work of the institution, and both the arrangement of any non-current records and the filing-system of current records will suggest categories into which miscellaneous records can intelligently be sorted so as to correspond with relevant aspects of the administration.

Extract printed and extraneous material

Before sorting the miscellaneous records, their bulk can probably be reduced by extracting any printed material, for example, in-house publications, leaflets, newspaper cuttings, copies of booklets received from elsewhere, and the like, some of which may provide useful information about the institution while others may be irrelevant and can be put aside for possible disposal. Likewise, the extraction of any obvious series of records and associated material should help reduce the residue into a more manageable, if still confused, quantity.

Sorting the miscellaneous records

In sorting miscellaneous records, it is tempting to put together records of a similar physical or business character, for example, to group together correspondence, or bills and vouchers, irrespective of the subject to which they relate. This is to be avoided and, instead, the archivist should seek to associate together records of whatever description which relate to a common topic of the institution's business. Thus, it is proper to put together records to do with the institution's property, maintenance, insurance, etc., rather than detach them into separate categories of deeds, insurance documents, bills and vouchers and so on. Similarly, with correspondence the determining factors should be the subject to which the letters and copy letters relate or, if personal, the person to whom the letters were addressed. Gradually, even the most difficult records to sort will fall into place. However, there will probably still remain a quantity of records which will defy this preliminary sorting and which the archivist will be at a loss how to treat. Rather than attempt to sort these into forced categories, it would be better to leave such a residue until a later stage, hoping that their relevance will become apparent in time.

Summary

The situation now envisaged is that the bulk of the records originally found in a variety of boxes, cartons, bags, etc., or gathered together in the first instance, and subsequently transferred into more convenient, even open-top, boxes for easier sorting will now have been mostly transferred for a second time into more permanent boxes in an order reflecting as far as possible the order in which they were created, or categories corresponding to the work of the institution. The archivist will so far have made three lists: firstly, the rough lists of the content of the original containers when first examined; secondly, more detailed and possibly itemised lists of the records when re-examined after their transfer into the second stage boxes; and thirdly, lists of the records in their sorted categories. The first two lists will have been made simply for working purposes and the archivist will have used them to mark the movement of each record by applying cross references to new locations and any notes of individual treatment. Such list should be kept as evidence of the procedure followed, however scored and grubby they may have become by constant use. The list of the records as provisionally arranged will, however, provide the archivist, the administrator, and even at this stage, possibly the researcher, with a working knowledge of, and access to, the records. The final classification and notes will be discussed in a future leaflet.

Robin Gard, June 2000

Copyright the executors of Robin Gard and the Catholic Archives Society

February 2006

This Advice Leaflet may be photocopied or otherwise reproduced without charge. Please acknowledge the author and the Catholic Archives Society if a large number of copies are made.

Details of the Catholic Archives Society are on the Catholic History web-site www.catholic-history.org.uk