

Catholic Archives Society Publications
Archive Advice Leaflet Number 4

Establishing an Archive:
Third Stage: Basic Classification and Cataloguing

This is the third leaflet in a series devised to assist a newly-appointed archivist in re-constituting the archives of an institution from a previously unordered collection of records, and is intended as a continuation of leaflets 1 and 2. It is assumed that the archives will have already been preliminarily sorted in attempt to arrive at an arrangement which best reflects the original order of the material when it was in administrative use. The basic task for the archivist, then, is to produce either a provisional or final listing, which reflects *intellectually* the organisation of the material which they have organised *physically* into boxes, according to advice leaflet 2.

Classification

A classification scheme is essentially a model for the ordering of archives into categories based upon the organisation and functioning of the entity or individual that produced them. The process of classification needs careful thought. There is no model scheme adaptable to any archive. Reference should be had to the classification schemes for diocesan and religious archives produced by the Catholic Archives Society but they should be treated only as guidelines. The archivist needs to proceed pragmatically and to devise a scheme best suited for the particular archives which are in their care. Classification schemes derived from a library environment should generally be avoided as they are usually based on subject, and are designed for secondary source material, rather than primary sources such as archival records. Archives need to be arranged according to the principles of provenance and original order (i.e. in a manner which preserves the link with the original creator of the material. and the way the records were organised when last actively in use)

The conceptual basis of archival classification and description is the *archive group* (or *fonds*), representing the organisation, entity or individual which has created the totality of a particular collection of archives. This entity may then be divided down intellectually into various *sub-groups*, reflecting sub-offices or lower functions of the organisation. The individual classes or *series* of records are linked in the final catalogue to the offices or entities which created them, and may themselves be further subdivided. The scheme of classification adopted will thus probably provide main divisions for the foundation and constitution of the institution, its governing body, subsidiary committees, its operating branches, personnel, accounting, property, and the like, using subdivisions where necessary. Over-elaboration is to be avoided, however. Typically, a hierarchical classification scheme is expressed in a catalogue through a numerical scheme of references, and the final stage in listing or cataloguing of archives is generally the numbering of documents and boxes with a unique code, often alpha-numeric, which will permit speedy retrieval of documents.

Cataloguing

During the process of the initial sorting, the archivist will have already adopted certain general, possibly idiosyncratic, descriptions for the records, such as 'bundle of deeds re X property - various dates', 'minutes, 1940 – 5', 'annual reports and printed papers, misc. dates', etc. However, in order to enable the staff to retrieve documents for reference, and to give potential researchers a clear idea of the content of the archive, more refined cataloguing is required. The detail in which the archivist is able to describe the records will depend on staff time available, on the significance of the documents, and the archivist's own knowledge. A critical attribute of the cataloguing is that the description of the records, in whatever format they are, should be comprehensive, and include certain essential elements.

Based on international standards, it is now recommended. that the minimum number of elements to be used in any archival description should be eight, i.e. *reference code, title, creator(s), abstract, creation, dates, extent and form, access conditions and level of description*. Many archival catalogues produced by larger record offices will aim to describe down to the level of the individual file or document. If this level of detail is not possible, it is wise to ensure that at least the elements described above are utilized in an overall summary description of a collection. It is not possible in this short paper to discuss these elements in detail, but brief guidelines can be given.

The *title* or heading of the list should encompass the whole of the records being described e.g. 'Papers of Cardinal H. E. Manning, 1865 – 1881'; 'St. Philomena's Hospital, Frimley: records, 1902 – 1946'. The full, official designation of the *creator* of the records should be included, be it an individual or institution. If no detailed administrative or family history is appended to the catalogue, then at the least an *abstract* should be included,

i.e. a brief summary of the content and subject of the records being catalogued. Detailed covering dates of the *creation* of the documents being catalogued should be given e.g. May 1945 – Nov 1973. *Extent and form* refers to the need to give a physical description of the collection, including some idea of quantity e.g. 39 volumes, 200 files of letters etc. *Access conditions* are very important, as they indicate whether the whole or part of a collection is closed to users on *grounds* e.g. of confidentiality. Finally the level of description should be indicated, i.e. whether only a summary of the whole *fonds* or records group is being provided, or whether the catalogue is describing the records down to the level of individual series or items.

As to individual entries in a catalogue, a description should cover the documents being described *as a whole*, incorporating key words regarding the persons, subjects, and places covered, such details being necessary for retrieval by whatever indexing method is used. Some archivists prefer what might be termed a more literary form of wording, others a more functional approach in which the information is tabulated in columns. Whichever method is chosen, it is important to be clear and consistent. Letters should be catalogued according to their recipient, though an exception has to be made when letters and papers relating to a particular topic are found together, and this archival order should be retained. Documents of a uniform nature can be described by a common formula. For instance, 'Letters to *y* from family and friends, on domestic and social subjects, 1920 – 50' would suffice, and could be repeated for similar letters of other dates; should such letters include, say, one letter from a person of note, then the description could be 'Letters to *r* from family and friends, on domestic and social subjects, 1920 – 50, including one letter *from Lloyd George, 1925*'.

Dating is a vital adjunct of the description, and here one needs to be as specific as the number of documents covered by the reference allows. It is important also to describe the physical character of the documents, for instance, volume, bundle, file, loose papers, and so on. Some indication of the quantity of documents covered by a single entry should likewise be included. This is necessary both for security purposes and to assist potential researchers. Often, the collections adjudged to be most valuable or likely to be used will be listed in the greatest detail, and documents may be individually numbered (in erasable soft pencil) for ease of access and to enhance security.

Further Information

The length of this leaflet is such that it can only provide a brief introduction to issues relating to the cataloguing of archival documents. Those requiring further assistance may find it useful to contact their nearest local authority record office, as they often have standardised classification schemes for records

such as deeds, parish collections, and institutions such as hospitals. The Catholic Archives Society has also published an occasional paper on 'Archival Cataloguing, Standards and Information Technology', with an extensive bibliography of published and on-line resources.

Robin Gard, June 2000
Updated Paul Shaw. 5/04

Copyright the executors of Robin Gard, Paul Shaw and the Catholic Archives Society
February 2006

This Advice Leaflet may be photocopied or otherwise reproduced without charge. Please acknowledge the authors 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