

Cataloguing Archives

Notes to accompany PowerPoint slides

SLIDE 1: TITLE SLIDE

SLIDE 2: FIRST QUESTIONS

What is an archive collection?

An archive collection will be unique. Unlike published books, few archive documents are mass produced. If an archive is destroyed the information is likely to be lost forever. If a library, or even a museum, burns down, you can replace the vast majority of the contents.

An archive collection can consist of virtually anything: papers, photographs, film, sound recordings and even objects. The important element is the item **records** something.

Collections are usually created organically. For example, a business doesn't set out to create an archive of its history; it is a by-product of its natural administrative procedures in producing records that document its activities for evidential or legal reasons. The results are valuable records that show the history of the company but the archive wasn't deliberate created as a historical record.

Similarly, an individual may build up a personal collection of correspondence over years with a pen-pal on the other side of the world which after 40 years presents an fascinating insight into the two correspondents and records key world events (or not!). The collection wasn't kept as a historical record but because there was a personal attachment and to reference what they had said previously.

A researcher's own notes are another organic archive. A researcher interested in croft history may pull together photographs, census data, oral histories and newspapers cuttings relating to it and its inhabitants as part of their research before writing it up. This creates an archive.

An archive may be created deliberately to record or capture a history of a town or place. For example, a closing school will call for copies of photographs and documents relating to its history to capture and archive.

An archive repository is the home to a number of different archive collections.

An archive can be large, consisting of millions of items, or the only remaining archive of a person or organisation may only be a single document.



Cataloguing

Cataloguing has several purposes:

- Helps people to locate records that help their research without having to rifle through boxes
- History can be passed on to others – the knowledge relating to a collection can be documented within a catalogue rather than resting in an individuals head
- Allows information to be shared e.g. it can be emailed, or contributed to external projects
- Enhances the security of a collection: By assigning catalogue references you can track who has seen an item, when it was issued and know if its missing during a stock take

SLIDE 3: DO I NEED A CATALOGUE?

What is a catalogue?

A structured list detailing the content of a collection that allows researchers and users to gain access to a collections content without actually viewing the physically collection.

Do you need a catalogue?

Yes

Security

Hi use means things get confused so detailed cataloguing required to keep track of items

Insurance may require some level of documentation

Large collections needs a level of intellectual control

Have to have something for registration purposes

Want to share information with others to publicise collections

No

Small collection, well organised on shelves and we know where it all is

Have main items listed on databases

Have box lists of what is where

Have index lists of key documents that are regularly searched e.g. roll of honour, rent ledgers etc

Have card indexes / other reference system

Some archives do not create full detailed catalogues but work from box lists detailed what items are in each box. It is up to you, although I would always recommend some level of cataloguing.

SLIDE 4: CATALOGUING DESCRIPTION

Archive catalogue using an international standard: General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G)). This is published by the International Council on Archives.

It specifies what types of information should be captured when cataloguing archives but it is not prescriptive as to what terminology you use or how you describe an item – it provides a framework only

However, if we all use this framework then information about our collections can easily be shared through automated systems such as online archive catalogues or cross-searched.

Archives are catalogued hierarchically. This means we start by describing the collection as a whole and then sub-dividing the collection into sections. Each of these sections may be subdivided until eventually you are describing and cataloguing individual items.

For example, the archives of a historical society may fill a cupboard and we can describe the collection as “the archive of the historical society”.

The collection can then be arranged and broken down into sections:

Minutes

Publications

Finance

Membership

Each of these sections can then be described e.g. “Minutes of the Society Executive Committee, 1980-1999, 5 volumes)

These sections can then be broken down into further sections or to item level e.g. Minute book, 1995-1999, 1 volume

This will be explained in greater detail in the next slides

SLIDE 5: STRUCTURE: PRINCIPAL OF PROVENANCE

In approaching the cataloguing of an archive there are two core principals that govern what we do.

1. Principal of Provenance
2. Principal of Original Order

Provenance

Every archive has a creator. This may be the person who brought it together or the businesses who maintained the records. Individual records within a collection may have different creators e.g. letters received from another person will have been created by that person, but that letter now forms part of an archive brought together and maintained by someone else.

This is the principal of provenance.

An individual archive collection will have a single provenance and often this is reflected in the archives title e.g.:

Papers of George MacDonald, mariner, Stornoway
Records of South Uist Historical Society
Records of St Brendan's Hospital, Barra
Records of 29 Bragar, crofting house hold.
Records of Scalpay School, Harris

What's an artificial collection?

This is collecting archive collections into groups of like documents purely on the fact that the documents have a similar purpose but different provenances. For example, a box of family papers comes into your possession. You shouldn't plunder it to remove postcards to join a separate postcard collection that you may have as within this box, the postcards form part of the family archive. You may have a separate postcard collection for items that have come to you that don't have a provenance (and this is perfectly acceptable) but by removing items for a collection to join another collection you are taking it out of its existing provenance.

Context

Provenance provides a context to the collection. By understanding how the collection of papers that form the archive came together you understand more about the archive. If you have a collection of minute books, advertising, ledgers and invoices by searching for their shared provenance you understand the collection. Looking at this example, you may find they all relate to the same business so you then understand the context in which the records were created and brought together.

Evidential value

As soon as you start breaking up a collection it becomes very difficult to ever reconstruct its provenance. With the provenance gone, the collection loses much of its research value as a record of a person's, organisation's or businesses activities.

SLIDE 6: TASK 1 WHAT IS THE COLLECTION?

Look at the handout "Task 1: Identifying the collections" that is available as a separate files from www.tasglann.org.uk

Answers

1. Records of the Castlebay School including log books, registers, teaching notes and correspondence. 1872-1970, 1 box

This is the archive of Castlebay school. The records will have been created by various head teachers and staff employed by the school but it was the school who held and brought the records together, therefore the provenance is the school.

2. Collection of master copies of Comunn Eachdraidh Bharraidh agus Bhatarsaidh newsletter 1999-2010. 11 volumes

As the master copies, these were created and maintained by the Historical Society and form part of its own archive.

3. Papers of Murdo MacKinnon relating to his motor business (1970-1975) in Borge received at the same time as the papers of Mrs Colina MacKinnon (his mother) collection of letters with a pen-pal in Detroit (1940-1990). 1 box

There are actually two collections with separate provenance here:

Papers of Murdo Mackinnon. These are the archives of his business, brought together by him
Papers of Colina Mackinnon. This is her personal archive of correspondence with her pen pal, brought together and maintained by her.

So, while they may come from the same family and be stored in one box, there are actually two provenances here and 2 collections!

4. Bundle of letter headed note paper (unused) of local businesses in Castlebay, Vatersay and Eoligary by Donald MacDonald. c1960s. 1 bundle.

Each piece of note paper has a separate provenance depending on the business who created it but the provenance of the collection is Donald MacDonald who brought this collection together for some purpose. You would not cherry pick from this collection to add letter heads of individual businesses to the archives of that businesses (assuming you have them!)

5. Minute books of Comunn Eachdraidh Bharraidh agus Bhatarsaidh 1995-2011, 4 volumes

The provenance of the minute book is the Historical Society. This could be linked up with item 2 above as it forms part of the archive of the same organisation, viz. Comunn Eachdraidh Bharraidh agus Bhatarsaidh

6. Box of records received from Iain MacDonald containing Common Grazings minutes and papers (1956-1967), Comunn Eachdraidh Bharraidh agus Bhatarsaidh newsletters (1999-2001), title deeds to former croft house now demolished at Ardveenish.

Another collection of multiple provenances!

Papers of the Common Grazings Committee. This is a body in its own right and generated its own records. Iain was probably the clerk and the records rested with him but they are not part of his own personal papers.

Title deeds to the house: these form part of the houses history and they belong with the property and its current owners. They probably form part of Iain's own family papers but the provenance may require a little more research

Comunn Eachdraidh Bharraidh agus Bhatarsaidh newsletters. These form part of Iain's own archives – he retained these published items for his own reference. You may not decide they

are not worth keeping and you could legitimately refuse to take them and give them back to Ian or his heirs as you already have a full set in item 2 above. However, if Ian had annotated them heavily with his own notes, then they become part of his personal archive as he has added information to them and they may be worth retaining as a result.

7. Correspondence received by Comunn Eachdraidh Bharraidh agus Bhatarsaidh from Tasglann nan Eilean Siar, 2010-2011. 4 items

The creator is Tasglann but the provenance – the people who brought the archive together – is Comunn Eachdraidh Bharraidh agus Bhatarsaidh so it forms part of their archive along with items 2 and 5 above

SLIDE 7: STRUCTURE: ORIGINAL ORDER

Before doing anything with a collection always go through the boxes to get a feel for it. Makes notes as you go about the types of items you are finding, any patterns you see emerging. **KEEP EVERYTHING IN THE ORDER IN WHICH YOU FIND IT at this stage!**

Having identified your collections you now need to think about how you go about arranging it prior to cataloguing. Here the archive principal of Original Order comes in to play.

“Records should be arranged in an order which reflects the relationship between them, and that reflects the way in which the records were created and used”

Lets break this down:

“Records should be arranged in an order which reflects the relationship between them”

Essentially, like records should be put together where there is a relationship between them. So, you may find the minute books of a historical society scattered throughout a collection. Minutes are a continuous series of records – one volumes flows to the next, they have a relationship to one another, so these are brought together in order e.g.

Minute book 1900-1903

Minute book 1903-1905

Minute book 1906-1910

Similarly, secretary’s correspondence files would be brought together into a continuous series

“... and that reflects the way in which the records were created and used”

Original order should reflect the way in which the person or organisation used or stored the records. This may not always be immediately apparent and some careful research should be undertaken before getting stuck in.

For example, an autograph collection you are cataloguing has the provenance of being brought together by the autograph hunter. On first inspection, the order in which they are received and stored on separate bits of paper may seem almost random. Your natural inclination may be to rearrange them by surname of the autograph or possibly chronologically. However, closer inspection reveals that they are actually grouped by the hunter into statesmen, pop stars, actors and snooker players. This is the creators’ original order and should be respected.

No original order?

It is perfectly possible that no original order exists and items are dumped in boxes as if someone’s desk had been cleared in a hurry. In such cases, original order may need to be recreated. To do this:

- Make a list of the contents of each box. Give each item a temporary number and a description, including its date and how much of it there is (number of pages, number of volumes etc) so you can easily find it again
- Analyse your box list. Look for patterns of related items that belong together e.g. minutes of the same committee, personal papers relating to their involvement in one organisation etc
- If you type this up on computer you can intellectually rearrange the collection into something that reflects an original order
- Then you can physically rearrange the documents to reflect this new order and begin to catalogue

SLIDE 8: ARCHIVE STRUCTURES

Archives are hierarchical as discussed in slide 4

Here you can see the archive of Comunn Eachdraidh Barra and Vatersay (CEBV). The collection's provenance is clear it being the records of the historical society.

Here you can see the hierarchical family tree. At the top, we see CEBV. Underneath it, we can see the way the archive is arranged, bringing like records together into a structure. This means its very clear to see what is in the collection and for researchers to find information they are looking for.

Each level of this tree can be described in the archive catalogue.

Top level: a collection level description of the archive of CEBV. This will give information on the collection as a whole – how it came into existence, maybe some background to CEBV to help a researcher understand the collection, and a broad overview of the types of records that it may contain: Minutes, Membership records, Publications etc

Level two: Here, the archive is split into sections. The Minutes have been separated off as a section, as have the membership records and publications. These give you your structure to your catalogue under which item level descriptions, or further subdivisions, can be created.

Level three: This can consist of further subdivision or item level descriptions. So, the individual minute books are listed as discrete items. Publications have been further divided into Newsletters and Journals. Another layer of hierarchy can be added below these to list the individual newsletters and journals if you wished.

When to stop?

The beauty of archive cataloguing is you do not have to catalogue everything to item level. It may make no sense to or it may just be too time consuming given your resources.

In the above example, Membership records have not been subdivided. The archive description at this point could just be "Membership records, 1990-2011, 6 boxes". You can come back and catalogue it more fully later! With some collections, you may not get further than a collection level description

Numbering

All items should receive a discrete unique number. Traditionally, archives have used a hierarchically numbering system. In this example, you can see that every item in this particular collection uses the abbreviation "CEBV" to identify the collection.

A hierarchical number is then added to the next level of description

CEBV/1 Minutes

CEBV/2 Membership records

CEBV/3 Publications

The next subdivision adds another slash [/] and a number to show the items place in the hierarchy

CEBV/1 Minutes

CEBV/1/1 Minute book 1999-2005

CEBV/1/2 Minute book 2005-2007

Using such a system means its very easy to add in further records should they come to light later after the main catalogue is finished.

Museum systems

If you catalogue into a museum system you can use full stops instead of slashes

SLIDE 9: TASK 2

See sample archive catalogues as downloadable at <http://www.tasglann.org.uk>

SLIDE 10: 4 RULES OF ISAD(G)

ISAD(G), the cataloguing standard for archives, has four key rules.

Describe general to the specific (collection to individual item)

When cataloguing we start by describing the collection as a whole – a “collection level description”. This is a general description of the entire collection that could be a few lines long or could be several pages. This is the equivalent of your title pages and over view of contents in a book which lets you know if this is something you want to explore more.

We then start to break the collection down, describing it in sections. So, looking at the collection of minutes within it, or the collection of publications, or collection of membership records as per the previous slide. Its still pretty general but it is getting gradually more specific.

The most specific level is the item level description, describing the physical item in more detail.

By describing information in this way, the researcher is able to navigate a collection and drill down through it to find material that is relevant to his or her research.

Information is relevant to the level being described

We'll talk about what information should be recorded at each level in the next slides but, this does as it says: We only give information that is relevant in our descriptions and appropriate.

Each level should be linked to its next higher unit of description

This can be seen in the hierarchical tree used in the previous example. There is an obvious link between each level of the hierarchy – you can clearly see the parent/child relationship. This aids the researcher in navigating and is further demonstrated in the use of the hierarchical numbering system.

Information given at higher levels should not be repeated at lower levels

In a nut shell, try not to repeat yourself. If you've said it in the collection level description, you don't need to say it again elsewhere in the catalogue!

Task: Look again at the sample catalogues and see how these rules have been applied.

SLIDE 11: ISAD(G) DESCRIPTION

When describing at any level of description the following elements must be included. They may be stated explicitly or alternatively may appear through formatting of a paper document.

Each level of description and item should have:

Reference number

A unique reference number that makes the collection, part of a collection or item instantly recognisable. These may form the hierarchical numbering system and the number should be written on the item and the outside of the box it is stored in.

Title / description

This can be the most time consuming element of cataloguing!

For the title of a collection this is relatively straight forward. The Tasglann tend to you use:

- Papers of... when the archive is a collection of personal papers or papers relating to someone's professional career e.g. Papers of James Shaw Grant, journalist, Stornoway
- Records of... when the archive is a collection of business papers or papers of an organisation e.g. Records of Barra Sea Cadets, youth group, Castlebay
- Collection of... when it is an artificial collection e.g. Collection of Election Ephemera relating to local government elections

Everything should be described or given a title. Think about the researcher when you are creating these. Titles can be brief "Minute books" or longer "Publications containing contributions from James Shaw Grant".

When describing individual items try to imagine you are a researcher looking for information. Describing something as just a "Letter" is not very helpful to anyone searching a catalogue of someone's personal correspondence! Instead, maybe something like "Letter from A Macaulay to M Morrison regarding outstanding rent" is more useful.

In a collection where there are many similar items, you may wish to come up with set phrases or descriptive structures to aid consistency. So, you may have a rule that all letters will be described in the format; "Letter from X to Y regarding Z". Similarly, you may decide that all photographs will be described noting the following elements in order: the people who can be named, description of people who can't be named, the activity they are undertaking, the location of the photograph, any other information. E.g. Black & white [photograph of Chrisann Macleod with her dog, Benji, at Beasts of Holm, Stornoway, with Arnish Point and the MV Isle of Lewis behind.]

Dates

All items should be dated. This can be the covering dates of items, such as a volume of minutes 1984-1987, or can be very specific in the case of a letter 3 May 1876.

Where something doesn't have a date, you can take an educated guess at a date and add it to the catalogue in square brackets [c1960s] [early 20th century]

Common dates abbreviations used in description:

[c1960s] – an educated editorial guess by the cataloguer that the items is from the 1960s, possibly based on the fact there are similar datable items in the collection

c1960 – you know for certain that the date is correct based on evidence elsewhere in the collection

n.d. – no date. There is no evidence at all to place a date on the item

[Early 20th century] – editorial guess that the item is from sometime between 1900 and 1950

Extent

For a researcher, knowing how large an archive is, or the number of volumes or letters it contains, is useful as it helps them to plan their time. For the archive, it helps to keep control of the collection and monitor security implications.

At a collection or middle levels of description this may be recorded using any of the following as an example:

6 linear metres
4 boxes
27 volumes

At item level this may be:

1 volume
1 typescript, 2pp
1 manuscript, 6 pages
2 photographs
2MB computer file [if cataloguing electronic records!]

Creator

Who created the individual item? This may be included within the title or description in the case of letters and in the case of minute books and volumes in the title of the whole collection but if its not obvious from these elements, record the creator.

Level

The level of description should be noted. In catalogues generated in a word processor this is quite often evident in the formatting to the document using bold and italics.

Task: identify these elements in the sample catalogues provided. Are they always included? Are some explicitly stated and other demonstrated through formatting or other means?

SLIDE 12: CATALOGUE!

A simple diagram to show the approach to cataloguing a collection

1. Spend some time looking through the collection. Get to understand its contents, identify its provenance and people associated with it. Do you need to do some research into the organisation or person in order to better understand them before you can arrange and work with the archive?

2. Large collections

2.1 Do a detailed box list of the contents of each box. Give each box a number and each item in the box a number. Record the number, a description of the item, covering dates and its extent. This is time consuming but the cataloguing will be a breeze afterwards!

2.2 Type up your box lists into a word processor. Save the document as your master document e.g. collectionboxlist.doc. Save a second version under a different file name that is your working copy – if it all goes horribly wrong you can return to the master document! Apply the rules of original order and cut and paste the box lists into something resembling a catalogue, grouping documents by sections. You may need to look again at some archive items to clarify their description. You may find it useful to draw tree structures of the arrangement of the collection separately to help you understand what is going on. At this point you can also start to think about the final numbering system of the archive.

2.3 When satisfied with the intellectual rearrangement, arrange the physical items accordingly. If any items are left over following the arrangement, check the box lists and add in as appropriate.

2.4. Go through each section and check it against your descriptions. Tidy up your catalogue and apply your numbering system, copying the number carefully onto the original item, and its box.

3. Small collections

3.1 If the collection is very small, spend a little time looking through it to get a feel for its contents.

3.2 Physically rearrange the collection into sections as necessary and within the sections following logical arrangement patterns e.g. creators filing system, alphabetical, chronological etc. You may want to sketch a catalogue structure out on a piece of paper to help you think about a suitable structure for the catalogue. Also think about your numbering system at this point and sketch it out on your diagram

3.2 Take each section at a time and begin to complete your catalogue adding the reference number, description, covering dates and extent into your catalogue. Note the reference number on the item as well as in the catalogue

General tips

- Double check your descriptions for consistency and accuracy
- Ask someone else to read your catalogue for typos and mistakes
- Always work in pencil so things can be easily altered
- Consider splitting large collections between several cataloguers. Agree numbering systems and any consistency in descriptions that you may wish to include. Meet regularly to check one another's work!

- Sometimes you have to emotionally detach yourself from the collection otherwise you'll spend more time reading it than cataloguing it! This is hard to do when dealing with correspondence due to its nature but very easy when cataloguing volumes!
- Contact the Tasglann for help if you are confused or stuck. We're always happy to help!
- Enjoy it. Cataloguing is satisfying work!