

PRESERVING THE PRINCIPLE OF PROVENANCE

Archives Practices at Reserve Bank of Australia

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Although Australia's central bank has been known under the name "Reserve Bank of Australia" only since 1960, the Bank preserves and continues in existence the body corporate "Commonwealth Bank of Australia" established in 1911. The Reserve Bank has, therefore, an unbroken history of almost sixty years as an autonomous Commonwealth authority. (The present Commonwealth Banking Corporation is a separate entity, newly established in 1959.) From the archivist's viewpoint, the Reserve Bank is in the happy position of possessing in its own custody its permanently valuable records complete from June 1912, when the Bank's first Governor took office.

The Bank began operations as a savings and trading bank and its officers were recruited from other banks. In the circumstances, it was natural that general office procedures would follow the commonly accepted practices of the banking industry. From the outset, a decentralised system for keeping records permitted each of the various operating departments of the Bank to maintain separate groups of records, including general correspondence files. (At least one exception to this common practice in banking institutions is the Rural Bank of N.S.W. Being the descendant of the former, state-owned, Government Savings Bank of N.S.W., it has always followed the usual government practice of maintaining a central registry.)

A discussion of the relative merits and deficiencies of the two broad records systems — central and decentralised — could easily be the subject of a separate article. It may, however, be stated here in principle that inter-departmental structural changes within the framework of an autonomous institution will cause greater repercussions in the management of decentralised records centres than would occur within a central registry responsible for the whole of an institution's records. Further, the consequential effects upon records administration may not cause substantial problems for the current records manager but will almost certainly produce difficulties later for the archivist in his efforts to arrange the records to reflect the structure of the body that created them.

Last year, as the result of recommendations made by a committee appointed within the Reserve Bank to critically examine its administrative structure, the Head Office framework was reorganised to provide eleven administrative departments in place of seven. The changes reflected what seemed to the committee to be a logical reallocation of the functions of the Bank. The proposals required many exchanges of functions between existing departments and the creation of four additional departments to assume parts of the functions of the original departments, in consequence of which some were renamed.

The overall re-arrangement had several implications and effects both for current records management and for archives administration. The special problems that arose for the archivist are the subject of the remainder of this article.

Before the reorganisation occurred, there were seven main administrative departments (archives groups). Separately administered within these departments were two statutory departments of the Bank (the Note Issue Department and the Rural Credits Department) whose business is required to be maintained separately from the other business of the Bank (also separate archives groups). Most of the seven administrative departments were divided into functional sub-sections, each of which maintained its own decentralised records. In total, therefore, archives repository facilities were being provided for nine archives groups, and thirteen sub-groups, all of which were open-ended, active holdings.

As a result of the reorganisation:

- existing archives groups and sub-groups do not match the Bank's revised departmental structure.
- more than one new department may have legitimate claim to use archives in a particular old group. (Previously a department was not permitted access to the archives of another department without first obtaining permission of the "owner".)
- open-ended archives series in an old group may in future be continued in an entirely new group formed to accept the archives of the reorganised department that assumed the relative function.
- some sections (sub-groups) have been transferred complete from a relationship with one department (group) and linked with another department (group)
- parts of departments or sections have been transferred to others, old and new.

In summary, there has been a general shuffling of the functions of the Bank so that the administrative framework is now substantially changed. Had the change been confined to one or two functions only, it would have been possible to cut off the existing correspondence files and to open new files in the new transferee departments. However, the overall reorganisation was too extensive for records staff to treat the administrative break in this way.

An alternative procedure was devised to facilitate archives description and arrangement when finally these files are being processed as permanent archives, perhaps even forty years from now. Every file that was transferred from one department or section to another or whose owning department changed its name was, at the date of the transfer, clearly labelled by placing on the file itself a blue coloured divider sheet bearing the essential details of the change. When, eventually, only the permanently valuable of these files remain for the archivist to arrange, it

will be possible, if it seems convenient to the appropriate arrangement then decided on, to break such files for documenting separately the old and the new administrations in their respective archives groups.

Bearing in mind that we had twenty-two live archives groups or sub-groups immediately before the reorganisation and that the restructuring affected the future affiliation of some complete current records sections and records series, also some parts of series and even some individual files, it will be appreciated that the number and variety of current records management changes would create complex problems later in archives administration. To attempt to outline all anomalies in detail and corresponding remedies would be tedious and profitless. Some of the problems which had to be resolved in ways that would, as far as practicable, preserve basic principles of archives administration are illustrated in the examples outlined below:

Case (A) The name of a department (group) or section (sub-group) changed but otherwise continued operations as before.

The archives group/sub-group continues unchanged except that future inventory leaves will bear the new departmental name. Mnemonic identifying symbols will also change to reflect the new name only for items whose date span closes after the date of the change of name. The circumstances of the change of name are outlined in the short history included as part of the introduction to the group inventory.

Case (B) A statutory department (group) is transferred without change of name from administration by one executive department to that of another.

Administration of the statutory department concerned has been transferred between Bank executive departments on five occasions in forty-four years. Its archives have been maintained intact during that time and its current records are managed separately from those of the "host" department. For archives purposes there is virtually no change but the change of administration is recorded in the short history in the introduction to the group inventory.

Case (C) A section (sub-group) which, until twelve years previously, was an autonomous department (group) is restored to independent departmental status.

Throughout its thirty years operations, this department's records have been maintained separately. Apart from noting the change in the inventory history, there is no change in archives administration.

Case (D) One part of a department (the department mentioned in case (C)) is transferred to another departmental administration.

The part had been administered for thirty years as a sub-section of the

department and its records are identified as separate series in the archives arrangement. The various records series up to the date of the change have been closed. New series will be opened in the transferee department's inventory to receive records whose date spans close after the transfer date. Cross references to antecedent and successive records will be recorded in the inventory histories and on the relative descriptive inventory leaves. The cross references will also explain the purpose of the blue coloured divider sheets on files which were in active use at the date of the change. Such documentation would seem to obviate the need to split files between old and new administrations when archives are being finally arranged, though there would be nothing to prevent this course being followed if desired.

Case (E) An existing section (sub-group) is split into three substantial functions, each of which is transferred to a separate group.

The former sub-group is now closed except to any further records created by the original section and which do not span the date of change. Future action with regard to records documenting the three separate functions in the administration of the transferee departments will depend upon the nature of the records management framework finally agreed upon. One large function which continues to operate as an autonomous sub-section will accession its records to the archives repository as a sub-group. Other, smaller functions whose current records consist only of a small series of correspondence files will most likely be absorbed into the records management systems of their new departments. In all these cases, of course, details of what has occurred to the administrations and to their records are described in the inventory histories.

In deciding the various courses of procedure to be followed in archives arrangement, the major concern has been to preserve patterns of record creation which reflect the structure and functions of the Bank as it has developed over the years. Apart from files in current use (the Bank's files are cut off every five years) no files created by one administration have been merged with those of another. When current files of a transferred administrative section are eventually closed at the end of the five year span, they will contain the papers of the two successive administrations divided by the special marker sheet documenting details of the change. Any of these files that are of permanent value will in due course be accessioned into archives groups that correspond with the administration whose papers are last on file. Archival interests of preceding administrations will be met by cross reference or, if it seems preferable, by splitting. By observing *respect des fonds* in this way we hope that, after the records serve a term of years in the "intermediate" repository, there will be no difficulty in finally arranging those of permanent value with due regard for their provenance.