

ARRANGEMENT AND DESCRIPTION OF RECORDS AT QUEENSLAND STATE ARCHIVES

by Lee McGregor

Early in 1974, after a good deal of soul searching, we made the decision to abandon our existing system of arranging and describing archives and to devise and adopt a new one. The system introduced by Robert Sharman, the first archivist of the Queensland State Archives, and still in operation in 1974, had a good deal to recommend it.¹ To archivists unfamiliar with it, it may have sounded rather complex but in fact it was a straightforward system which provided a general scheme of description of record groups and series which could be very useful, particularly to staff. For example, if a reference was made to a particular symbol, say EDU/G4, a member of staff would know immediately that this was the fourth volume of the outletter series of the Education Department. In other words the symbol told the researcher or staff member a good deal about the item without the necessity to go and take it off the shelf to look at it. With an anonymous numbering system this advantage is lost.

The system did have one overwhelming disadvantage. As a location system it was almost impossible to apply given our limited staff resources. To the best of my knowledge, Robert Sharman was considering alternative location schemes at the time when he left Queensland in 1970. Under the existing system, records were shelved in alphabetical order according to record group symbol. In practice it proved impossible to predict accurately just what volume of records would be transferred from any given department. So we were constantly faced with the problem of reshelving if the records were to be kept in their proper order. In fact we tended to use space allocated for other departments to avoid large-scale reshelving. As the quantity of records under the control of the archives increased, some records had to be stored in other buildings in the city. The attempt to use the classification system as a location order gradually broke down completely.

So we were faced with the need to devise a new location system. We considered retaining the classification system alongside a new location order, but experience with researchers has shown that the fewer numbers or symbols given in the finding aids the better. We wanted a system which would be simple and flexible, which would provide a method of shelving and of location and which would give a fairly detailed description of the records.

While it is undoubtedly useful to staff to have records shelved in such a way that each series is shelved in one sequence and all the series in a record group are shelved together, there are overwhelming practical difficulties in trying to do this. If one was dealing only with dead series it would be easy enough. But where a large proportion of the record groups contain continuing series, there is no way to predict accurately the space requirements for any given series, let alone for a whole record group. Consequently if the principle of record group order is to be preserved, there has to be constant reshelving—an expensive and time

consuming exercise with diminishing returns. It goes very much against the grain for any archivist to abandon the concept of original order on the shelf even when that order is being meticulously preserved in the finding aids. I am very conscious that the decision to do so leaves us open to the charge of giving repository management a higher priority than basic archival principles. To which charge I can only reply that any archivist who feels he can afford to ignore repository management is either very naive or possessed of unlimited staff, time and money. Accordingly, with considerable reluctance, the decision was made to dispense with the parallel relationship between the order on the shelf and the order in the finding aids. The shelving order now has no relationship whatsoever to the description on paper beyond the provision of a location symbol for each unit of description.

It is not intended to reprocess the records already classified under the old system. Since there will be no more interfiling of records with those already held, they can now be put into the correct alphabetical sequence by record group symbol. In effect it will be a fixed location system which will be perfectly satisfactory as the main weakness of the system will no longer operate. The finding aids provided for this material viz. the provenance catalogue and the subject and form catalogue will also remain, at least until a published guide to series can be produced. All material processed after August 1974 has been done under the new system.

Before describing the new location order, I should explain to those people unfamiliar with the Queensland State Archives that because of the high cost involved, we do not store our archives in boxes. Instead, bundles of documents are wrapped in brown paper and tied with tape. This means that our finding aids are described in terms of bundles rather than boxes. In our finding aids we have used the term "item", perhaps rather loosely, to mean a volume or a bundle of papers rather than a single document or letter within a bundle.

The location system, which is similar to that used in the New South Wales Archives Office, is designed to make shelving and retrieval of archives as easy as possible. Each volume or bundle is assigned a single running number independent of any other consideration. The only qualification to this is that each number is prefixed with a letter. So A/1522 is the 1,522nd item processed irrespective of what record group or series it belongs to, or when it arrived. B/ is used for the items too large to be housed in the ordinary shelves and C/ for large index cards housed in special drawers. When we reach A/99,999 we will go on to D/ and so on to avoid running into excessively high numbers. Thus records are shelved in processing order. Re-establishment of original order is through the finding aids, not through the shelving of records. Initially, when a transfer is received, it is assigned a transfer or accession number, and housed in shelving set aside for unprocessed material. Location numbers are not assigned until the records have been arranged and described.

When a transfer arrives it is registered in the *Control Register*, and the transfer number, the source and the provenance of the records, the date they were received, the quantity, a very brief description of the records and the file number of our correspondence with the

transferring Department are recorded. The Control Register serves as a preliminary control over unprocessed records. Like most institutions, we have a backlog of unprocessed material, but with recent additions to our staff and more streamlined processing methods, we hope to eliminate this problem. In the last year or so we have reduced the backlog by about half.

Each transfer is then sorted into record groups and series. The new finding aids consist of a *Register of Series and Items* and a *Register of Subjects*. The records are described at series and item (i.e. bundle or volume) level although subjects are assigned at series level only. A series registration sheet (See following example) is compiled for each series received and filed in provenance order.

SUBJECT

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SERIES REGISTRATION [OBVERSE]

<p>PROVENANCE: HOME SECRETARY'S OFFICE</p> <p>TITLE: General Correspondence</p> <p>DATE RANGE: 1931-5</p>	<p>LOCATION No.: A/3500-3814</p> <p>ACCESS: B</p> <p>QUANTITY: 22.87 m</p>
<p>DESCRIPTION: This is the main system of correspondence (inwards and outwards) of the Home Secretary's Office and it covers the whole range of his functions and responsibilities. These included police, prisons, health, local government, charities, conciliation courts, fire brigades, cemeteries etc. and all matters of internal arrangement not confided to another minister.</p> <p>An annual single number system of file registration is used for in-letters. A carbon copy of each out-letter is filed with (and given the same number as) the in-letter to which it is a reply. There are two sets of registers to control the correspondence, the registers of general letters (A/4736-4741) and the registers of letters from institutions (A/4746-4750). A top numbering system is used; so to find a particular letter, it is necessary to trace the sequence of numbers through the registers until the final number is reached.</p> <p>SYSTEM OF ARRANGEMENT/CONTROL: Annual single number with top numbering of files.</p>	

[R E V E R S E]

PREVIOUS SERIES:	HOME SECRETARY'S OFFICE General Correspondence HOM/J 1-807
SUBSEQUENT SERIES:	HEALTH AND HOME AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT General Correspondence A/3815-4455
RELATED, CONTROLLING OR CONTROLLED SERIES:	HOME SECRETARY'S OFFICE Registers of general letters received A/4736-4741 (Controlling) HOME SECRETARY'S OFFICE Registers of letters received from institutions A/4746-4750 (Controlling)
RECEIVED FROM:	Health Department
DATE OF RECEIPT:	February 13, 1973
RELATED CORRESPONDENCE:	M009.11
ACCESSION No.:	506
SUBJECT ENTRIES:	
REMARKS:	

As can be seen from the example given above, we are attempting to give the researcher a clear idea of the provenance, date range, quantity and access category of each series, as well as a general idea of how the series is organized, what kind of information it is likely to contain and how it relates to other series in the same or other record groups. These series registration sheets are filed in provenance order.

If a transfer of records should contain a continuation of a series already held, then the original series registration sheet is amended to include the second transfer but the two parts of the series will be shelved separately. Where a series moves from one agency to another, there will be two series sheets, each filed according to provenance and linked by the references to previous and subsequent series given on the sheets.

The second level of description is the item registration sheet which contains a brief list of items within each series. (See following example)

These item sheets are then filed behind the relevant series sheet. The series registration sheets are on blue paper and the item registration sheets on white so they are quite easy to differentiate quickly. Thus a researcher can look quickly through all the series sheets for a particular

ITEM REGISTRATION SHEET			
PROVENANCE: HOME SECRETARY'S OFFICE			
DESCRIPTION	DATE RANGE	DEPARTMENTAL No.	LOCATION No.
General correspondence	1931	1 - 110	A/3500
General correspondence	1931	111	A/3501
General correspondence	1931	113 - 200	A/3502
General correspondence	1931	201 - 280	A/3503
General correspondence	1931	281 - 397	A/3504
General correspondence	1931	401 - 600	A/3505
General correspondence	1931	601 - 751	A/3506
General correspondence	1931	755 - 998	A/3507
General correspondence	1931	1010 - 1197	A/3508
General correspondence	1931	1201 - 1400	A/3509
General correspondence	1931	1401 - 1600	A/3510
General correspondence	1931	1601 - 1800	A/3511
General correspondence	1931	1801 - 2000	A/3512

department, only stopping to look at item sheets where the series appears relevant to his study.

The *Register of Series and Items* will be the basic finding aid. In fact this is really an expansion of our old provenance card catalogue with more detail given. It is also intended, although this is probably looking some distance into the future, to include short administrative histories of the more important record groups.

Under the old system we also had a subject and form catalogue.² Although this was only a fairly general subject index at series level it has proved to be a very useful finding aid over the years and we were reluctant to abandon it. The difficulties of subject indexing archival records in any depth are too well known to all archivists to need elaborating here. However, in spite of the difficulties, we decided to retain the subject approach although not, of course, as a substitute for the indexes and registers created by each department for its own records. A separate register of duplicate series sheets is therefore being compiled and filed in subject order. In library terms, the series sheet in the *Register of Series and Items* can be considered as main entries, and the entries in the *Register of Subjects* as added entries. In the absence of a suitable published list of subject headings for archival material, we are obliged to make up our own headings although this is not a very satisfactory procedure.

Subject indexing is confined to those series which have readily identifiable subjects e.g. a series of minutes of the Board of Enquiry into Lead Poisoning. However, it is not considered feasible to list all the subjects in a general correspondence series of a department. Here the researcher must rely on the departmentally created indexes and registers. In other words the *Register of Subjects* is not intended to be a comprehensive subject index—it is merely a guide to be used in conjunction with other finding aids.

Given the small volume of published material on the history of Queensland government administration, there is an obvious need both

from the point of view of the researcher and of our own staff, for a finding aid which describes those agencies which create the records we hold.

Drawing on the example of the excellent system of agency registration in use in the Australian Archives, we have commenced drafting agency sheets for all agencies whose records we hold. Obviously this is going to be a lengthy project to be done over several years and for this reason the *Register of Agencies* is not likely to be available for public use for some time. The format for the agency sheets is still undecided but will probably include the kind of information shown in the following draft agency registration sheet.

AGENCY REGISTRATION SHEET

Agency	Fair Rents Office
Date Range	Sep. 1948 - 31 Dec. 1970
Portfolio Controlling	Attorney-General, Sep. 1948 - 4 Nov. 1957 Minister for Justice and Attorney-General, 4 Nov. 1957 - 31 Dec. 1970
Agency Controlling Agencies Controlled	Justice Department, Sep. 1948 - 31 Dec. 1970
Previous Agency	Commonwealth Department of Works and Housing, Rent Control Division
Subsequent Agency Functions	Rent control
Legislation/Regulations	Landlord and Tenant Act, 1948 Landlord and Tenants Acts, 1948-61 Termination of Tenancies Act, 1970 Landlord and Tenant Rules. Queensland Government Gazette, 1948, Vol. CLXXI, p. 1867 - 1876
References	Queensland Government Gazette, 1948, Vol. CLXXI, p. 2027 Queensland Year Book, 1970, p. 390
Note	

In addition to the agency registration sheets there will be some kind of functions index to agencies, probably on cards, using the functions listed on each sheet. The headings will tend to be general rather than specific. The index should provide a quick guide as to which agency or agencies were responsible for any given function. Thus in addition to the administrative approach provided by the *Register of Series and Items* and the *Register of Agencies*, there will be a subject or functions approach provided by the *Register of Subjects* and the functions index. One hopes that this will make it considerably easier for researchers to use our records whether they are interested in working through all the records of one agency or merely want to extract a specific item of information on a particular subject.

In addition to these changes in the processing of archival material, some changes have also been made regarding intermediate or semi current records. In the past we have not made any formal distinction between intermediate and archival records at the time of receiving

them. In general, archival records have been processed while intermediate records have simply been given storage space. Departments were not required to set a disposal date when they transferred records to us. The result is that there is a good deal of intermediate material here which has ceased to be of real administrative value to the transferring department and which ought to have been either destroyed or processed as archives as part of a continuing administrative procedure. It is hoped to eliminate this problem in the future by making the Department specify, at the time of the transfer, whether or not the records are intermediate, and for how long they are likely to be required by the Department. The Department is required to fill out the following form for each series so that the terms of transfer and disposal are clearly understood by both parties.

**QUEENSLAND STATE ARCHIVES
DISPOSAL RECOMMENDATION**

Transferring authority Originator of series Quantity (in linear metres) Date range Description of series System of arrangement/ control	
Please tick appropriate box This series is <input type="checkbox"/> Archival <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate If this series is designated Intermediate, please complete the following:	
It is estimated that this series will cease to be of administrative use to the transferring authority in <input type="checkbox"/> years from (a) the date of transfer or (b) the date of creation of document or file. (Cross out whichever does not apply)	
..... (Head of transferring authority) (State Librarian)
..... (Official Title)	
..... (Date)	
<p align="center">THIS SECTION IS TO BE COMPLETED BY THE QUEENSLAND STATE ARCHIVES</p> (a) Destroy in - - - - - <input type="checkbox"/> years (b) Transfer to Archives in <input type="checkbox"/> years (c) Review in - - - - - <input type="checkbox"/> years	

At the time when the series is scheduled for disposal, the Department is contacted and if they are agreeable, then the disposal recommendation listed on the form is carried out.

There is nothing particularly new or different in a theoretical sense about the system we are adopting. It is simply an attempt to devise a more accurate and more complete method of registering the records so that access to information may be more speedily obtained. Naturally the system is still evolving and we hope to correct and improve it where necessary as we try to put it into practice over the next few years. We also expect to face some initial user resistance from researchers accustomed to dealing with our card catalogues. However, so far the system appears to be working well and we are optimistic that this is at least a step in the right direction.

REFERENCES

1. For a detailed description of this system see Robert Sharman's Article "An experiment in Archives classification" in *Archives and Manuscripts*, 2(6) April 1964.
2. See J. Carroll's article "To catalogue or not to catalogue: The Subject Form catalogue of the Queensland State Archives", in *Archives and Manuscripts*, 4(1) Nov. 1969.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT AND ARCHIVAL SERVICES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

by P. J. Crush

The following article represents a critique of the relevant sections of the Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Public Service of South Australia (the Corbett Committee).

On May 23, 1975, the South Australian Government invited written comment on the report of the Committee of Inquiry. The unsigned comments on pp. 129-30 of the August issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* prompted me to refer to the Editor of this journal my own comment on those sections of the report which deal with records management and archives. My comment was as follows:

The Committee of Inquiry recognized the importance of good communications in transacting the government's business. In appendix 9/1 to the Report, the Committee listed specifically some of the criticisms levelled at the "docket system" which I assume, comprises the major part of the S.A. Public Service's records management system.

The Committee has suggested the following changes to improve the public service's records management programme and to enable it to take its place as an important part of the service's information system.

- a. Create a Records Management Services Division within a Government Information Department "which would have planning and co-ordination responsibilities for related activity throughout the Public Service" (p. 176). It would (a) introduce new methods to departments, (b) gain the confidence of management and (c) establish good working relationships with