

The Archival Records of the Council of the City of Sydney

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In outlining the archival activities of the Council of the City of Sydney, it is perhaps pertinent to make a few general comments regarding local government records. It is probably well known that there are, at present, only two professional archivists working in this field in Australia. Sydney and Adelaide are the only two local government bodies to appoint professional archivists, and there has been very little written about the records of this particular sphere of governmental activity.

Local government in New South Wales operates under the Local Government Act 1919, an Act which does not define records at all. Even where records are mentioned, the Act does not take into account the newer formats, such as microforms and machine readable tapes. Photographs do not rate a mention either, although they are of course a legitimate and valuable source of evidence. To some extent then, the local government archivist in New South Wales has little in the way of legislative guidance — or protection.

There is at present little incentive for, or legal obligation upon, Councils to retain their non-current records. Ordinance 1, Clauses 55/56 of the N.S.W. Local Government Act, 1919 specifies a very limited range of records which have to be kept in perpetuity. These are minute books, registers of legal documents, legal documents, registers of correspondence, and Returning Officers' declarations. Any other records may be destroyed after six years from the date of the last entry. Thus, all correspondence, rate and assessment books, maps and plans, ledgers, not to mention photographs, E. D. P. tapes and tape recordings — all these may be destroyed.

At various times since 1960, the Archives Authority of New South Wales has considered the possibility of having all records of local government in New South Wales declared public records under the provisions of the Archives Act, 1960. The effect of this would be to place all records on the same basis as the records of the State Government, that is, *inter alia*, that no such record may be destroyed without the approval

of the Archives Authority, and that some records may be required as State Archives. This has recently been carried out in New Zealand by way of the Local Government Amendment (No. 3) Act, 1977. As far as New South Wales is concerned, the Governor would merely need to declare the records of local government in New South Wales public records under the terms of the Archives Act, 1960. No legislative amendment would be necessary. Presumably, however, this would necessitate amendment of the Local Government Act, 1919.

Local Government commenced in New South Wales with the incorporation of Sydney. The first Municipal Council of the City of Sydney was an interim one, set up by the Governor pending the election of Councillors, who would in turn elect the Aldermen and Mayor.¹ The first meeting of the new Council took place on 9th November, 1842.² It is interesting to note that although it had been intended that the legislation which incorporated the City should apply generally to all local government areas in New South Wales, this was not subsequently carried out. Council continued to administer the City, (which, incidentally, is an area roughly the same as at present, bounded by Pymont, Cleveland Street and Rushcutters Bay) under a series of Corporation Acts. On 1st January, 1949, however, the Council finally came under the aegis of the Local Government Act, 1919.³ In 1900 there were eight wards of the City, returning twenty-four Aldermen. The area of the City had increased slightly in 1905, with the addition of areas at Moore Park and Wentworth Park and, in 1908, with the inclusion of the Camperdown Municipality, including the University of Sydney.

A decision was made in January, 1976, to appoint a professional archivist to Council's staff. This was the first appointment of its kind in local government in New South Wales, indeed, the first professional appointment in this specific area in Australia. This initiative of the Council will ensure that the valuable set of records under their custody will be preserved and made available for research purposes.

To emphasise the fact that this appointment was one that involved the broad spectrum of records and archival techniques, Council decided that the archivist was to facilitate the systematic flow of non-current records to archival storage by implementing records disposal schedules, was to form guide lines for the destruction of ephemeral material, and to be responsible for the implementation of microfilm, photographic negatives, and E.D.P. records storage and retrieval. It was, therefore, a positive and progressive step.

On taking up duties in July, 1976, many problems were immediately obvious. Amongst these, for example, was the lack of a policy, or guidelines under which the archival functions could operate; the lack of any records scheduling which could both ensure the retention of vital records while preventing the massive build-up of ephemera; the sheer volume of 134 years of accumulated, unsorted records, which was quite

clearly a crucial problem; and a lack of space and facilities for academic research.

Following detailed discussions with Council's management consultants, Council finally adopted a clear policy regarding archives, embodied in Report 8 (Part 1) on 29th November, 1976. The schedule of duties laid down for the Archivist were as follows:

Disposition activities, which include appraising records prepared for disposal or for transfer to the Archives, reappraising accessioned records, segregating and removing to semi-current storage records of temporary value, segregating and destroying records of no value, and taking other actions affecting the disposition of records.

Preservation and arrangement activities, which include packing and labelling records and shelving the records in the stacks; re-arranging and consolidating records, according to plans, by repacking, relabelling and reshelving them; inspecting and selecting records for repair and rehabilitation and selecting records that should be reproduced for purposes of preservation.

Reference Service Activities, which include furnishing information from or about accessioned records; finding and lending such records to departments, making such records available for research use; selecting and identifying records for exhibit or reproduction; and authenticating reproductions of accessioned records.

Analysis of the organisational and functional origins of records to obtain information on their origins, content and interrelations. This information is used in appraising, arranging, describing, publishing, and servicing records.⁴

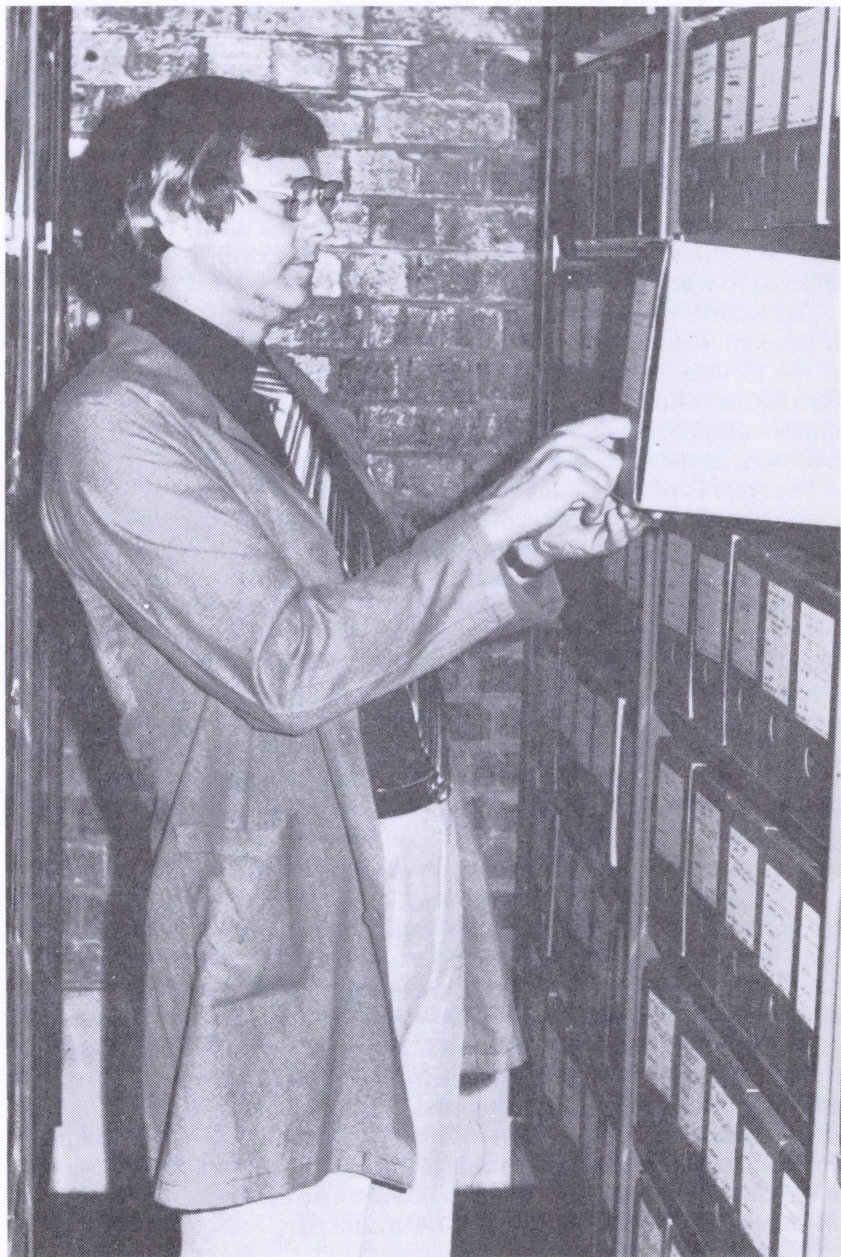
In the Report, the archives policy of the Council, the job description of the Archivist, and the relationships between the Archivist, the Records Manager, the Information Services Engineer and the City Librarian, are defined in some detail. For example the Records Manager is to provide storage for all *current files* in current use, whilst the Archivist is to store all non-current internally originated material. The job description of the Archivist also includes the following:

To facilitate the systematic flow of non-current records to both semi-current storage and to archives by designing and implementing a records disposition schedule in order to dispose of records in a controlled and systematic manner, thus facilitating the fast retrieval of the relevant information.⁵

The policy has five sections:

1. A brief definition of archives, and the types of records included.
2. A "statement of intent" which outlines Council's intention to "Preserve its cultural heritage", etc.
3. A full job description for the Archivist, with principal responsibilities, and schedule of duties.
4. A description of the "Archives Panel", which acts as an intermediary between the Archivist and Council.
5. A definition of relationships between the City Librarian, the Records Manager, the Information Services Engineer, and the Archivist.

The Council of the City of Sydney holds records of the Council dating from its incorporation in 1842. Records defined as archival are, at present, those dating to 31st December, 1948. There are two reasons for



Ken Smith in the Town Hall archive vaults, 1980

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this; firstly, the fact that the composition of the Council, and the area administered by it, changed dramatically on 1st January, 1949;⁶ and secondly, by using thirty years as the age at which records are available for research, the Council is in line with the State and Federal governments in regard to access policy.

Council has determined that records designated as archival shall be available for research, under the control of the Archivist. However, should the Archivist, or a senior officer of the Council, feel that there may be sensitive records even within that time period, then the right is reserved to withhold such records.

The records of the Council could well constitute the most complete set in local government in New South Wales. There are no gaps in Minutes of the Council since the first meeting, and the Minutes of the various Committees also appear intact. Council's correspondence appears to be almost complete, as do the rate and assessment books, survey plans, and contracts. In local government, these are the "core" records.

The records of the Council are of two main types; those of Council as a whole, and those of the various departments, for example, the City Engineer's Department. Departments of the Council exercised a fair degree of autonomy with regard to records in the period under review, and retain some records themselves. As far as correspondence is concerned, the central files, or Town Clerk's files as they were known, were by far the most important. These are complete, although pressure of space will mean some culling of ephemeral material. Most of the correspondence files of the departments have been fairly rigorously culled over the years. Two examples of departmental records that are both extensive and complete are rate and valuation books of the Treasury, and maps and plans of both the City Engineer's and Planning and Building Departments.

Since January, 1979, Council has operated a central file system, and all correspondence files, always the largest series, are raised in the Secretariat. In the main, the various departments now create records of a more temporary nature, which, under the Local Government Act, have to be retained for six years. There are exceptions of course: records such as maps and drawings, rates and valuation records, some personnel records and legal records, such as deeds, are generally kept in perpetuity.

There are some records which are archival in terms of Council's definition but which are not yet under archival control. These include maps and drawings of the City Engineer's and City Planning Departments. The reasons for this are historical, as well as attributable to the fact that the archival activity is still a one person operation. Some assistance has been forthcoming over the past two years, but of a temporary, unskilled nature. The maps and drawings, for example, represent very large holdings, probably in excess of 1,200,000 sheets. It is planned to relist and relocate these holdings in 1980, and to commence a

microfilming programme. The problems of appraisal can, however, be imagined.

There are 308 Minute Books, in nine different series, referring to both Council and the various committees, and all are indexed. In addition, there are 82 volumes of *Proceedings*, which are virtually the Minutes with some notable additions such as Mayoral Minutes, or comments. The Minutes proper are, of course, very important, containing as they do the resolutions of Council. They are not, however, verbatim.

The Minutes of Council from 1842 to 1905 are handwritten, and all have separate indexes. The indexes dating from 1899 to 1905 have unfortunately not survived. From 1906 to 1948, the books are printed, and have a comprehensive index at the front of each volume. Each Committee of Council also produced a separate Minute Book. By 1900, there were five committees — Finance, Works, Health, Electricity and General Purposes. From time to time there were also special purposes committees, whose Minute Books are also available. One such committee was the National Emergency Services Committee, responsible, in part, for the air raid precautions of the City during the 1939-45 war. In 1935, the Electricity Committee ceased to exercise a supervisory role, following the creation of the Sydney County Council. Up to that time, of course, the Municipal Council of Sydney was responsible for the City's electricity supply. The Health Committee had various titles over the period, such as Health and By-Laws, and Health and Recreation. A new committee was created in 1936, that of City Planning and Improvements.

One interesting group of records are those known as "Reports". From 1842 until the turn of the century, these documents were, in effect, bound files. Following a matter being raised, either in Council or by a letter, a report would be requested and the matter referred to the appropriate Council offices. In due course, a written report would be produced, often quite long, and be referred back to Council for a decision. All written material would then be bound in a series of various Committee reports, and some of the material is quite fascinating.

The term "report" was used in a different context by 1900, and took the form of Annual Reports, which were usually submitted by the Town Clerk and the various departments. Due to the rather ad hoc submission of departmental reports, it is difficult to establish with certainty just how complete the holdings really are. The most complete set appear to be those of the City Treasurer, with an unbroken run of Annual Reports, plus Abstracts of Accounts. Some reports of the Town Clerk are missing between 1902 and 1945. Annual reports which have survived are those of the City Surveyor (1900-1920), the Electricity Department (1924-1934), City Commissioners (1928-1930), and the City Librarian (1925-1949), whilst those of the City Engineer are complete for the years 1926 to 1948. Annual Reports are no longer produced, although the Treasury Department does produce abstracts of accounts.

The many contracts entered into by Council, for example, for the Queen Victoria Building, are of great value to researchers, and these records contain information of several kinds. Contracts were made regarding all items, from the supply of materials on an annual basis, to the importation of heavy machinery from overseas. They include the original tender, detailed specifications, the price or prices agreed upon, any general conditions, and the signed articles of agreement. They give a good picture of the type of machinery used, together with technical specifications.

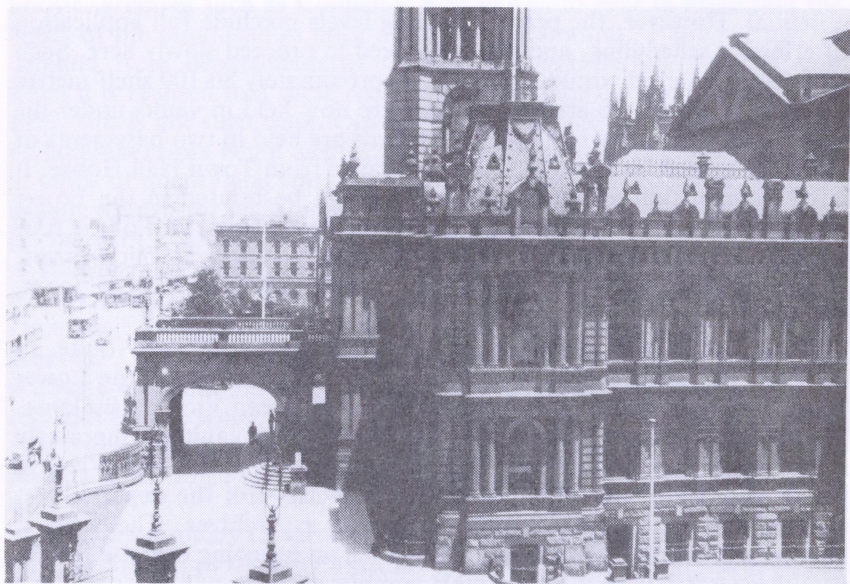
One of the more statistical type of records are the Assessment and Rate Books. These records are a valuable source of information for students of history, geography, architecture, and economics. They contain statistics which relate to building styles, ownership of property, population movements, and the quality of housing in the City.

At the turn of the century, the volumes were produced every 2-4 years, but the later volumes were produced annually. There is a volume for each Ward, and they are indexed by street, within each volume. The early Assessment Books contained such information as occupier, owner, type of construction, number of rooms, annual value, and other comments on the general condition of the house. The later books contain less information, concentrating upon land dimensions. The Rate Books are not as detailed, containing mostly financial information. One of the most pressing needs here is for an overall index by street. Ward boundaries were often changed, and it is sometimes difficult to trace a given property over time.

In all, there are over 800 of these volumes dating from 1843 to 1949, and over 500 volumes since that date. The significance of 1949 is that prior to that year, the Council of the City of Sydney was quite unique in that valuations of property were conducted by Council staff, as the Council did not come under the provisions of the Local Government Act until 1st January, 1949. Since that date, valuations have, in common with the rest of local government in New South Wales, been issued by the Valuer-General. These records are so valuable that a microfilming programme is in progress, in order to obtain both a working copy and a security copy.

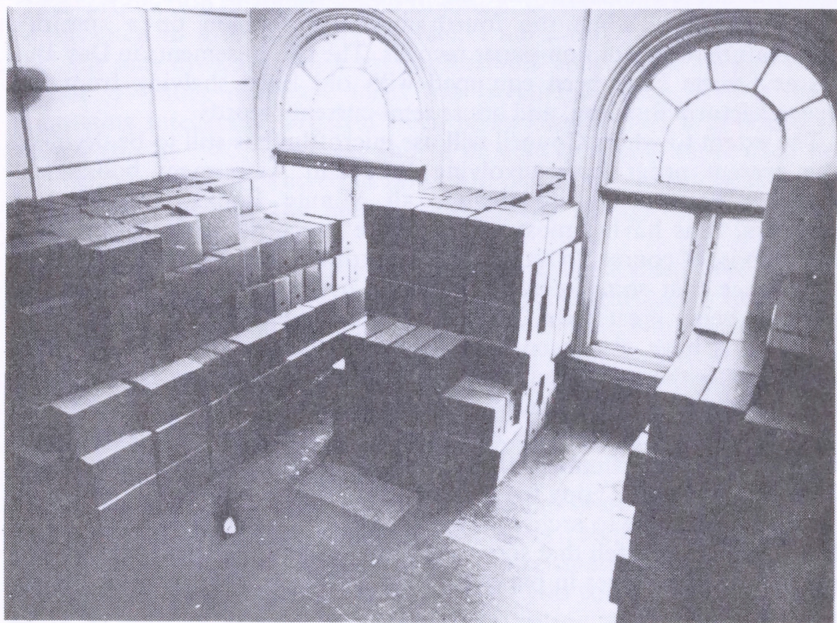
In common with other levels of government, the correspondence of the nineteenth century was contained within letter books, and separated into "Letters Received" and "Letters Sent". Between 1900 and 1948, approximately 240,000 separate files were created. The registration system used was the annual running number type, that is, the files each received a number in order of creation, within the year. There was no attempt at a hierarchical system, and there is no "precedent index".

Holdings of material definitely identified as being archival now total 1885 shelf metres, whilst semi-current records amount to 596 shelf metres. The semi-current component represents probably 40-50% of the



The Town Hall c.1920

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Temporary record storage in the Queen Victoria Building

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potential. However, the present staffing levels preclude full application of effective scheduling, and there is a need to proceed slowly here. Such records transferred would amount to approximately 80-100 shelf metres per year. Most of the archival records are now held in vaults under the Town Hall, whilst the semi-current records are held in two basements of buildings owned by Council, a short distance from Town Hall House. It is anticipated that eventually all records will be housed in the Lower Town Hall area in a complex of four restructured vaults. One of the four is likely to be reserved for non-paper records, such as microforms, photographic prints and negatives, and machine readable records, tapes, and film.

The provision of adequate storage space has itself been quite an exercise. In 1976, records were kept in four main vaults in the Lower Town Hall area, plus sixteen basements in the Queen Victoria Building. The problem was to restructure the Town Hall vaults, temporarily relocate the records they held, sort the records in the Queen Victoria Building, institute an initial scheduling exercise with the departments, and attempt to list the records designated as archives. The sorting, boxing, relocating and destruction has been an on-going exercise for the past three years, and is now almost completed. Two of the Town Hall vaults have been restructured, air-conditioning has been provided, and semi-automatic compactus shelving has been installed. One other awaits similar shelving, while the fourth awaits a decision on a specific-temperature room for non-paper records. The two basements in Day and Sussex Streets have been equipped with old fixed shelving from the Queen Victoria Building, and house semi-current records.

The extent to which Council will use microfilm has still to be decided. The present programme involving Rate and Assessment books will probably be extended to include all Minute Books, Indexes and Registers, thus having most of the "core" records in microfilm. The intention is, of course, to retain these records in paper format also. There is evidence that some records generated by the Treasury Department might be better created on COM-fiche, thus by-passing the paper stage. Discussions have also been held regarding the possibility of partially microfilming the maps and drawings held in the Planning Department. The probable order of operations here would be, firstly, a "sort" of those drawings relating to buildings no longer in existence; secondly, a microfilming programme of those relating to buildings still extant in the City, with a working copy for the Department, and a working copy, plus the master negative to archives; thirdly, a relisting and re-indexing of all drawings. It is also felt that some of the more significant drawings should be retained in archives in paper format. It will, in any event, be a long-term project.

Access to the archival records of the Council by outside researchers is permitted, but does not take precedence over internal use. With an "in-

house" archives such as Council's, it is as well to bear in mind that the needs of the organisation must always be paramount. There is constant demand from departments of Council for semi-current records, and when it is realised that these records include some created as recently as 1979, this is not surprising. Obviously, the demand for archival records by administrators is not as great in volume, but nevertheless demanding in terms of quality and specificity. If such records are required, they are usually needed for an important and in-depth piece of research, perhaps involving title to Council property, or usage thereof.

There has, however, been a considerable amount of research carried out by persons outside the Council. From December, 1976, to 31st December, 1979, eighty-six applications for access were considered and granted. Of these, fifty-six applications were for graduate or post-graduate academic research. Two students have pursued fairly constant research for the whole period, and one Ph.D. likely to be submitted this year comprises research derived largely from Council records. In 1980, a revised access form was introduced, and applicants will need to re-apply each year.

In addition, many research enquiries are received in archives. Research into specific areas is undertaken on behalf of Council staff, and postal enquiries are also handled. In 1979, there were fifty-three such postal enquiries, involving many hours of work in some cases.

The production of sophisticated finding aids has unfortunately, had to be relegated to a low priority to date. I am aware of the disapproval that this may evoke amongst my professional colleagues, but the sheer volume of more mundane tasks has precluded much of the more stimulating intellectual archival work being carried out. It is hoped to remedy this in 1980, however, and to be able to supply more than the rudimentary lists constructed so far. I will plead the overriding necessity to physically protect the holdings, a priority always emphasised by Jenkinson!

Fortunately, nearly all of the records of the Council from 1842 have an index of some type, making it quite possible for researchers to use them. As I stated earlier, it appears that indexes to Council Minutes for 1900-1905 have not survived, although the Minute Books have, whilst from 1906 each volume contains its own index. Over the period 1850 to 1899, a subject approach was gradually introduced in the Minute Indexes, together with cross-referencing. These volumes thus have both a name index, and some subject indexing.

Letter Registers for Council correspondence were maintained from 1853 to 1913. They simply contain date letter received, the sequential letter number allocated, a precis of the subject matter, when answered, and the action subsequently taken. The last two columns were dropped by 1877, until 1912, when a subject classification was introduced. The volumes cease in 1913, and in 1914 an overall index was introduced for

correspondence, which incorporated both a name and subject approach.

From 1842 to 1854, letter books were maintained for Letters Received and Letters Sent. The former were usually indexed by proper name within each volume. A separate series was kept for letters received from the Colonial Secretary. As with the Colonial government of New South Wales at the time, new administrative arrangements were introduced from 1854 on, and separate indexes for both Letters Received and Letters Sent were created. These usually had an "index within the index", by proper name and page. Each entry also included a precis of the letter, and the annual running number allocated. These indexes gradually became more specific, and by 1899 had been sub-divided into subject areas, such as government departments, petitions, mayor's letters, letters from Council departments.

From 1900 the "letter folder" concept was introduced. This was an attempt at a modern file. Initially, however, only the letter received was included. From 1907 to 1913, a copy of letter sent was also gradually introduced, and from 1914 the conventional file made its appearance. All this is reflected in the indexing methods used. Whilst from 1900 to 1913, separate indexes for both in and out letters were created, they slowly assumed a subject approach in addition to the proper name system, until 1907, when the subject listing was dropped. The annual running number allocated was used in the folder, the precis was still included, and there was a column for the appropriate committee or subject. For some reason, not yet established, there were separate indexes for letters sent maintained until 1935, and one for letters sent to government departments until 1950.

The main index to the entire correspondence used virtually the same approach from 1914 to 1978. From 1914 to 1925, two indexes were created for each year, one an alphabetical name index by writer, the other a subject index. From 1926, the indexes are combined in a subject index, with cross-referencing in some detail. There was increasing use of the "sub-division" concept, whereby specific known subject areas received a number of pages allocated to them. The indexes were all hand-written until 1963, when they were reduced in physical dimensions, and typed. The indexes from 1914 to 1977 have been microfilmed, and are used in the Records section on cartridge format, with the master negative deposited in archives.

Other records have finding aids of various kinds, all created by administrators. Committee minutes are indexed within each volume, committee reports also, whilst contracts have separate indexes. Maps and drawings, not yet under archival control, also have their own card indexes.

The problem for the archivist in Council's service is to both use the existing indexes, and to expand the usefulness of these indexes by providing Guides to specific areas of interest. In-depth explanations of

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Wednesday 16th November 1842

Present. The Right Worshipful the Mayor

Mess^{rs} Aldermen Allen - Withere - Owen -
 Mitchell and Broughton -

Mess^{rs} Councillors. Seacock - Macdonald - Little -
 David Jones - John Smith - Chapman -
 Fox - Egan - Holden - Keale -
 Rowley - Hollingshead - Hill - Flood -
 Taylor - Macdonnell - Hunt and Holt.

The Right Worshipful the Mayor in the Chair.

After a reading

The Clerk by direction of the Right Worshipful Mayor having read the Public notice under which the Meeting had been convened.

Proposed

Moved by Mr Councillor Macdonnell seconded by Mr Councillor John Jones
 That at all Meetings of the City Council the Clerks be admitted to report proceedings. Carried unanimously.

Proposed

Moved by Mr Councillor Fox seconded by Mr Councillor Holt
 That the present elections in this Council be by Ballot. Carried unanimously.

Motion

Moved by Mr Alderman Allen seconded by Mr Councillor Hill
 That the salary or allowance of the Right Worshipful the Mayor for the present year be fixed at (£800) five hundred pounds.

Moved as an amendment by Mr Councillor Holden seconded by Mr Councillor Holt.

That the salary or allowance of the Right Worshipful the Mayor for the present year be (£500) five hundred pounds.

Amendment negatived - original motion carried.

Applications for Town Clerk opened.

Moved by Mr Councillor Macdonnell seconded by Mr Councillor Keale
 That the applications from Candidates for the office of Town Clerk now before the Council be opened and read. Carried unanimously.

Applications for Town Clerk

The Town Clerk opened and read applications for the office of Town Clerk from the undermentioned gentlemen - namely.

G. H. Holden
 Charles Henry Chambers
 W^m Henry Moore.

the existing indexes are needed, and it is likely that completely new indexes to the twentieth-century correspondence will be created, having in mind the culling of material that has taken place.

In conclusion, I must agree with David Haworth, who has argued that local government records are more complex, in many ways, than the records of other levels of government. In a plea for more concern for these records, he said:

Greater attention needs to be given to local government records. At present there is no programme for preservation of these records. They are important because they provide a record of changing land use and document, in a personal way, community problems and needs.⁷

I have tried to demonstrate in this article that, in the Council of the City of Sydney at any rate, there is care and concern for both the records of the past and those of the future also.

FOOTNOTES

1. 6 Vict. No. 3 (1842)
2. 4/1, *Minutes of Council*, November 1842.
3. M. R. Wilcox, *The Law of Land Development in New South Wales* (Sydney: Law Book Co., 1967), pp. 419-421.
4. *Report 8, Part 1* (Internal document of Council). See also T. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1956), pp. 117-118.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Local Government (Areas) Act, 1948.
7. D. Haworth, "The Organisation of Records in Local Government in New South Wales", *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (February, 1976).