

SESSION: COMPUTER CATALOGUING YOUR COLLECTION

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1. Introduction

This paper reviews the basis of cataloguing a museum collection and then looks at the use of a proprietary data base management system - Inmagic DB/Textworks. Although the Ballarat Tramway Museum (BTM) was relatively late in starting its formal cataloguing, the benefit of going onto a good database management system which can handle image information, has been very positive. The methodology and system used by the Museum is one recommended by Arts Victoria for use in small museums. Having a "standardised" system which is then modified for us has benefited the museum in not having to invent its own. The system certainly was a bonus when it came to our recent museum accreditation.

2. Why Catalogue your Collection ?

If a museum is going to play an active and responsible role in managing its heritage material, a formal cataloguing system is necessary. Documenting an object's history and its special attributes is an important aspect of cataloguing. Recording as much factual information about an object as possible is what makes that object unique.

Some of the advantages of cataloguing are:

- Legal ownership of an object can be determined more easily
- Research standards within your museum will improve

- Display standards within your museum will improve
- Locating and accessing collections will be easier
- Developing a history of objects whilst in the museum
- The securing of an object is improved
- Determination of a collection's strengths and weaknesses is possible once properly documented
- Answering public queries becomes easier
- Developing a condition history for objects
- Reducing wear and tear on a object
- Co-operative collecting between museums

Prior to establishing a cataloguing system a museum needs to know what it is collecting through its Collections Policy. A Collection Policy determines which items belong in the collection and which items do not. Having such a policy assists museum workers in understanding the responsibilities and functions of their museum. For example, it shows that various paperwork items from a past tramway system are of value.

3. Systems in Use

Cataloguing systems follow the basic library system styles such as:

- Manual - hand written or typed cards and sheets
- Computer database systems using such programmes as dbase, MS Access and other systems. These tend to be written around various fields and do not generally allow for extensive textural data or information in each field, such as an item description or a detailed condition report. These have to be put into memo fields and tend to be difficult to handle or search upon. Some programmes these days do allow for image handling as part of the record.
- Text data base programmes which have multiple fields like other data base programmes but which also allows words within each field to be indexed makes searching easier and faster. The programme that BTM is using is known as DB/TextWorks text base written by Inmagic Corporation of the USA.

4. The Inmagic System

The Inmagic DB/TextWorks is a programme recommended for use in museums by Arts Victoria and as such carries a subsidy. The programme is also used in libraries and other organisations that have large text base databases. It is based around the Windows 95 interface. The cost to the Museum was \$1050. It was included within an Arts Victoria grant of \$5000 for the software and the hardware.

The system allows for photos or object image files to be attached to each record. It also allows look up tables for standard entries such as Classifications, Materials and Production methods. The inclusion of images helps with research queries and collection management. This aspect is yet to be fully utilized by the Museum pending the acquisition of more equipment, in particular a slide scanner.

When we acquired the system, it came with the basic information fields and lookup tables already set up. This made life a lot easier and we have found that it was very easy to learn and use, allowing the museum to set up its own entry sheets, reporting sheets etc. This has allowed us to customise the system for our own use but retaining the basic Arts Victoria system. By customising the system we have developed it to allow direct entry into the database without having to formally write out a cataloguing sheet with someone else then undertaking the data entry and checking it. The cataloguing sheet is then printed out along with a primary card to allow someone to search if they are not familiar with a computer system.

When we finally started to formally catalogue our collection we used two different database systems to record information. After a bit of trial and error both of these systems were transferred over to the Inmagic system by importing them directly into it. The hardest bit was getting the fields such as classification, which had to be of an exact nature, correct.

We have by no means fully developed the system. The fine tuning will take some time but experience so far has been good and it is relatively user friendly, though like all computer software products there are some shortcomings and things to be learned. For example it took me quite a while to find out how to place default settings into some fields.

The advantage of being able to just put a word in a search field, or a group of words to narrow the search, is excellent and response time is very quick. So far we have about 750 records on our database. However a number of the records entered on the early system will need to have additional information added, because of limitations with the early systems.

4. Advantages

- Makes a collection catalogue easily searchable on any word, or a number (for example a tram car number), or a person
- Does not require a large cross-referencing system to be set up
- Allows for a photograph or series of photographs to be included into the record file thus giving additional protection to the originals
- A collection which can then be transferred onto an on-line database for use on the web
- Relatively easily learnt compared to the intricacies of a manual card system where the cross-referencing has to be particularly well done to be useful
- Data entry for fields can be made consistent and are relatively easily checked
- Compatible with a number of other users which allows for the swapping of information or learning from each other about the way to use a system.

5. Disadvantages

- Need for a relatively large capital investment
- Need to train people - both data enterers and users
- With Inmagic - the need to export data to put through a spell checking

process

- Compatibility with systems that may replace it the future
- The reliance on computer equipment - thus must do backups and have hard copies.

6. Conclusion

A computer based cataloguing system is the way to go forward as a museum. The benefit of being able to display a copy of an image to the searcher rather than having to find the photo and having the possibility of it being damaged or disappearing is very significant. From the BTM's viewpoint the resource investment in the form of preparing and submitting a grant application was something worth undertaking.

Reference:

Caroline Carter, *The Small Museums Cataloguing Manual*, Arts Victoria and Museums of Australia, Melbourne 1996.

DISCUSSION:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| R Gilbert | Noted ease of access |
| R Pearce | Asked about capability |
| J Phillips | Noted system compatibility |
| Dr J Radcliffe | Asked about slides and negatives - cannot be scanned without a very expensive adapter |
| A Roi | Asked about a list of participating museums |
| Dr J Radcliffe | Asked about scan time |
| Dr J Radcliffe | Asked about a hard disk |
| G Cornish | Asked about cost. Can plans be scanned in ? Transcription of oral histories - e.g. of retired rail staff |
| Dr J Radcliffe | Public record office collections - access easy or is there a fee ? More "tradeable" ? Less pedantic. Copyright still a major problem. |