

Introduction

Perhaps the title "Computers in Museums" conjours up visions of the Burroughs Atlas missile control computer in the Smithsonian but I wish to address their use as administrative aids rather than exhibits.

Already several voluntary museum groups make use of borrowed computer facilities and one of the larger organisations, the Emerald Tourist Railway Board operator of Victoria's famous Puffing Billy, is in the process of acquiring an in-house machine for an anticipated expenditure of about \$15,000. One microcomputer now on the market can be purchased for less than \$5,000 including typewriter/printer and programs for such functions as word processing, mailing list processing and budgetting. When compared with the outlay presently made by many Societies for major items of office equipment such as typewriters, addressing machines, etc. the investment is not unrealistic, especially for the larger "composite" groups (such as MOTAT).

What can they do?

Almost anything - at a cost, but to perform a task economically it usually means buying a "software package". A software package is a complete suite of application programs designed to perform some common function (such as maintaining an accounting general ledger) and available "off-the-shelf" rather than having been written especially for the organisation concerned using a conventional programming language. Packages provide the benefits of mass production (with costs often in the low hundreds rather than the tens of thousands) but often still require some tailoring to suit each particular user.

Some of the more common applications, which may be of interest to museum groups, include:-

- (a) Membership/mailing list maintenance
- (b) Word Processing
- (c) Basic accounting
- (d) Archival indexing/cataloguing
- (e) Budgetting
- (f) Marketing/Revenue statistics

Membership/Mailing List Maintenance

This application will be demonstrated to the delegates. It is presently being implemented for the TMSV. The particular facility use is a general purpose Data Management System called "Visifile" but many other packages perform similar functions. Besides producing mailing labels (either in postcode sequence or any other desired order) of the complete membership file this system can

- (a) produce the same, or summary, information on a printed report in any cross-reference sequence desired, such as;
  - (i) surname, (iv) postcode (including state),
  - (ii) membership no., (v) others such as below
  - (iii) renewal date,

- (b) Include on the lists or labels additional information such as occupations, society qualifications (eg board member, trained driver), telephone numbers, etc.
- (c) Produce labels or listings of any part of the full list for special purposes (eg. qualified safeworking staff due for re-testing), often even if the particular need was not recognised when the system was established.

### Word Processing

Word processing facilities greatly improve productivity of trained typists through error correcting routines, ability to insert "boilerplate" paragraphs into letters, right margin justification, and even routines which will review the work for spelling errors! Just imagine the productivity gains than can be made by two-fingered volunteers trying to produce "perfect" masters for magazines, etc! In combination with mailing list software it can also produce personalised form letters. The "computer-printout" problem can easily be overcome by connecting the computer to a conventional electronic typewriter which is often cheaper (although slower) than conventional computer printers.

### Basic Accounting

The Emerald Tourist Railway Board runs a sizable business; 17 paid staff, 300,000 passengers per year, and gross revenues approaching \$400,000 per annum. Its major administrative problem is maintaining its basic accounting records, chiefly the general ledger and monthly reporting. The full-time accountant and assistant just do not have any spare time to provide the detailed reporting desired by the volunteer branch managers. Their answer is to acquire a package designed for a commercial business, and after all that's what we are all running - a business not a hobby! Business packages range from complex with 5-digit account numbers and elaborate forms (for an ETRB sized operation) down to something for a non-expert treasurer working at nights pounding on an adding machine for a group one-tenth of the size. One word of warning though - beware of some American packages that don't suit Australian conditions.

### Archival indexing/cataloguing

The same sort of data management systems suggested for mailing list use can also be applied to other museum functions, especially those where the alternative would be some sort of register or card index.

For example:

- indexing of society periodicals,
- cataloguing of library collections,
- cataloguing of archival materials (with cross reference by operator, city, builder, date, etc),
- listing of spare parts
- recording of sponsors and donors.

### Budgetting

Not only budgetting but also checking of ticket journals and many other calculation/valuation exercised can be performed with "spreadsheet" packages such as Visicalc or Supercalc. These packages save the enormous re-calculation effort required in "What-if" type processes where changing of one or two figures on a worksheet requires extensive re-working of the rest of the numbers in a budget. Your treasurer will love this one.

### Marketing/Revenue Statistics

Museums are unlikely to find applications to suit their needs in these areas but with general purpose packages to build data files (eg: Visifile), calculate results (eg: Visicalc), graph the answers (eg: Visiplot) and prepare reports and letters (Mailmerge and Wordstar) can be used as the basis for such systems. At Puffing Billy the statistics officer already uses his home computer to produce the monthly marketing reports.

### But What Sort of Equipment?

The equipment obviously must be inexpensive, accessible, likely to remain on the market, and use languages and facilities which are fairly standard. To me that restricts the smaller volunteer based organisation to

- (a) Tandy
- (b) Apple, and
- (c) Some of the more common "CP/M" based systems.

For the larger organisation (Spending \$15,000 rather than \$5,000) the choice is somewhat broader but it should still look for features such as an industry - standard operating system (CP/M or Unix) and programming language (Basic or Cobol) if it expects the computer trained volunteers in its ranks to help establish and maintain the systems.

### Acquisition and Operation

If I have aroused your interest don't go to your local computer shop for a demonstration or you will end up being told that their particular product is just what you want. Of course they will not have bothered to ask what you want to do with it or anything about your organisation and its business. Instead first search your membership list for two members with computer experience. Why two? Well, computer buffs like most other specialists have their own favourite hobby horses (their own favourite hobby horses and also tend to be so specialised that they are not familiar with anything outside their own super-speciality). Two people should counterbalance each other and provide some continuity to ensure that you don't end up with an expensive bit of gear that nobody in the society knows how to use. Second task is to work with your specialists to develop a statement of requirements (Why you want a computer and what you want it to do.). Only then should you start talking to salesmen and measuring their products against your list. Your advisors will guide you through the subsequent stages.

### Conclusion

Members of museums are used to looking into the past. For the benefit of your organisation I am asking you to look into the future, but not the distant future because these functions I am discussing and demonstrating are just around the corner.