DOCUMENTATION OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN MUSEUMS

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Introduction

I propose to briefly review recent developments
within museums towards the adoption of modern
documentation techniques. As a light relief the
paper will be entirely non-technical.

Background since 1967

You may have heard of the work of IRGMA (the Inform-
ation Retrieval Group of the Museums Association)
which was formed in 1967. It was established by a
small group of curators and information scientists
working in museums who were anxious to apply modern
information techniques — particularly the use of
computers — to their own documentation problems.
From 1967 to 1976 they considered the procedures
in use in museums, and made progress towards
developing basic recording standards and practical
recording cards (IRGMA Standards Subcommittee, 1977).

In parallel with this, OSTI (Office for Scientific
and Technical Information) and — since 1973 — the
British Library Research and Development Department,
funded a series of research projects at the
Sedgwick Museum, Cambridge. Jonathan Cutbill (now
information officer at the National Maritime Museum,
Greenwich) discussed the then state of the work at

this conference in 1974 (Cutbill, 1974). Its three aims were to computerise the Sedgwick Museum's catalogue of 400,000 records, develop a program package tailored to this requirement, and help IRGMA with its plans (Porter et. al. 1977).

When the Cambridge research projects ended in December 1976, it was decided to establish a new organisation to continue the Cambridge work and to take over the publications and plans of IRGMA. This new organisation — the Museum Decumentation Association — and the unit that it established — the Museum Documentation Advisory Unit — have now been in existence for one year. We are funded jointly by the Area Museum Councils and most national museums.

The Museum Documentation System

Much of our work is concerned with the development of a single Museum Documentation System, parts of which can be utilised by individual museums. The system includes a range of record cards and instruction books, a set of computer programs and associated documents, and underlying standards or rules. I propose to look briefly at some of the record cards and aspects of the computer package.

Record cards

A range of 15 cards and instruction books is now available from the unit. These are listed in the four-monthly MDA NEWS and their development, use etc. described in detail in the monthly MDA INFORMATION.

One of the first cards to be issued was for a record
about an archaeological object in a museum (fig. 1).
Over 70,000 of these cards have been purchased by
44 museums in the two years since their publication
(Table 1), and there is every evidence that many
of these museums are making a substantial committment
to the long term use of the cards.

Table 1

Purchasers of MDA/IRGMA A5 Archaeology Object
Cards, 1976-77

SOUTH WEST
  Avon   Bath, Dept. of Leisure & Tourism
  Devon   Ilfracombe Museum
  Cornwall   Penzance, Penlee House Museum
  Wiltshire   Trowbridge, County Museum Service
SOUTH EAST
  Berkshire   Reading
                  Museum and Art Gallery
                  Thames Water Authority
  Essex   Colchester and Essex Museum
                  Harlow Museum
                  Saffron Walden Museum
  Kent   West Malling, County Museum
  London   Horniman Museum
                  Passmore Edwards Museum
                  Queen Mary College, Geology Museum
  Norfolk   Norwich, Norfolk Museums Service
  Oxfordshire   Oxford, Ashmolean Museum
  Surrey   Egham Museum
  Lincolnshire   Stamford Museum

Table 1 continued ...

MIDLANDS
  Salop   Church Stretton, County Museum
                                        Service
  Staffordshire   Tamworth, Castle Museum
  West Midlands   Wednesbury, Sandwell Museum
NORTH
  Cleveland   Middlesbrough, County Museum Service
  Tyne & Wear   Newcastle, County Museum Service
  Cumbria   Carlisle Museum
NORTH WEST
  Greater Manchester   Stockport Museum
  Lancashire   Blackburn Museum
                        Bolton Museum
                        Preston
                          County Museum Service
                          Harris Museum and Art Gallery
YORKSHIRE & HUMBERSIDE
  Humberside   Kingston-upon-Hull, Humberside
                                        Archaeological Committee
  North Yorkshire   Skipton Museum
                        York Archaeological Trust
  South Yorkshire   Sheffield, City Museums
  West Yorkshire   Huddersfield, Kirklees Museum Service
SCOTLAND
  Central   Falkirk Museum
                        Stirling, Central Region Planning
                                        Department
  Fife   Kirkcaldy Museum
                        St. Andrews, University Museum
  Grampian   Peterhead, North East Scotland
                                        Museum Service
  Highland   Kingussie, Highland Folk Museum
  Lothian   Edinburgh, National Museum of
                                        Antiquities of Scotland
  Strathclyde   Glasgow, Hunterian Museum
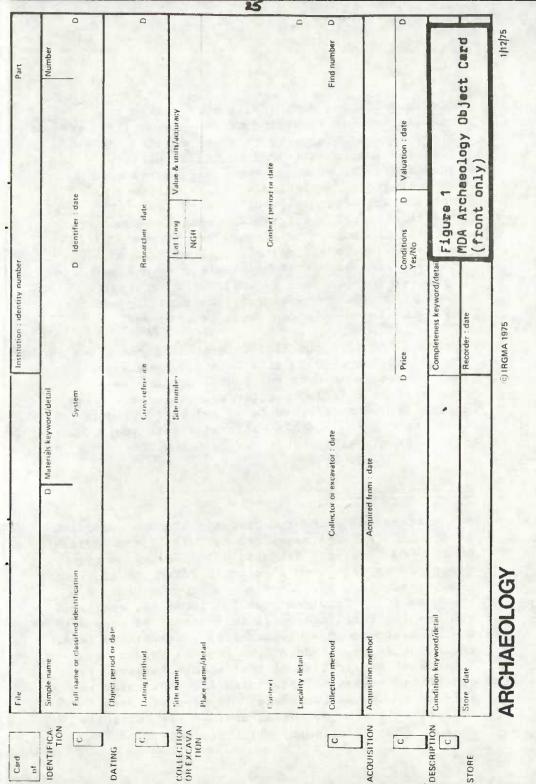   Hamilton Museum
WALES
  Dyfed   Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire County
                                        Museum
  West Glamorgan   Swansea Museum

Card
of

IDENTIFICATION [C]

File	Institution : identity number	Part

Simple name | D Materials keyword/detail | Number

Full name or classified identification | System | D Identifier : date

DATING [C]

Object period or date

Dating method | Cross reference | Researcher : date

COLLECTION OR EXCAVATION [C]

Site name | Site number | Lat Long / NGR | Value & units/accuracy

Place name/detail

Context | Context period or date

Locality detail

Collection method | Collector or excavator : date | Find number

ACQUISITION [C]

Acquisition method | Acquired from : date

DESCRIPTION [C]

Condition keyword/detail | D Price | D Conditions Yes/No | D Valuation : date

Completeness keyword/detail

STORE [C]

Store date | Recorder : date

Figure 1
MDA Archaeology Object Card
(front only)

1/12/75

© IRGMA 1975

ARCHAEOLOGY

More recently, we have published a series of
locality or site recording cards — an A5 field card,
A5 and A4 museum summary card and sheet. The set
presently available is for multidisciplinary
recording — for example, about a locality with
archaeological, geological, natural history or
architectural features, but we also expect to
prepare discipline orinetated versions. Such an
example for geology is already being widely used
by the new national Geological Sites Documentatien
Scheme. A number of Archaeologists have also
expressed interest and we would like te prepare
a specific version to satisfy their requirements —
any comments abeut which would be welcome.

There is insufficient time to discuss these cards in
any detail but I would like to stress one aspect.
They are designed both for manual use and as a
source of data for a computer based system. These
approaches were referred to by Arthur MacGregor
in a paper given at this conference last year
(Shackley et. al., 1976).

MDA Program Package

The present MDA sponsored programs are a development
of the CGDS package developed by Cutbill and Porter
during the Cambridge projects. This work has been
described in detail in a recent British Library report
(Porter et. al., 1977). The new program package —
known as GOS — provides powerful indexing, retrieval
and display facilities. It is designed to cope with
any data stored in a hierarchically structured form,
including of course data frem the MDA cards. A
'Standard' application of the package tailored to
producing indexes te data taken from MDA cards is
already in use at Cambridge. To give you some
indication of its potential use, we are currently
engaged in the following pilot projects:

- processing 600 complex records from the Science Museum's Pictorial Collection; examples of some of indexes being prepared are available for examination.

- processing 8500 records from the Mineral Collection in Ulster Museum, and preparing indexes.

- preparing 4 indexes to 5000 militaria records of the Imperial War Museum.

- preparing indexes to 500 Scientific Instrument records of the Wellcome Museum (part of the Science Museum) as a pilot project prior to the documentation of 200,000 objects

- processing records created by the British Museum's BMUSE programs.

In addition, the 400,000 records from the Sedgwick Museum project have been processed through GOS and index prepared, and a great deal of production work is being undertaken at the National Maritime Museum.

Many national museums intend to use the package themselves over the next few years, with the possibility of a single computing centre being designated for this task. In addition, a number of local authority museums are expressing an interest in its use, either on a regional or local scale. The form of this use should become clearer in the next twelve months.

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