Museums On-line: Access to Museum Information

David Dawson

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"It is proposed to call a meeting of the Curators of a few provincial Museums... to discuss the possibility of obtaining... A compendious index of the contents of all provincial Museums and collections..."
H.M. Platneur, 1888

"The Department will draw up a strategy for improving access to cultural assets through information technology."
Department of National Heritage , Treasures in Trust, 1996

The idea of enabling access to museum collections is over 100 years old. The museum profession is closer than ever before as a result of three major factors:- the use of computers for museum documentation, the focus on collections information given by the Museums and Galleries Commission Registration scheme, and new funds from the National Lottery

The wide-spread adoption of SPECTRUM, the UK Museum Documentation Standard, has provided a framework for museums and software suppliers to clearly establish museum requirements and to deliver collections management systems. Existing software, such as MODES or Micromusee has been upgraded to meet SPECTRUM requirements, and SPECTRUM has been used to design new collections management systems, such as Admuse. The largest development has been LASSI - the Larger Scale Systems
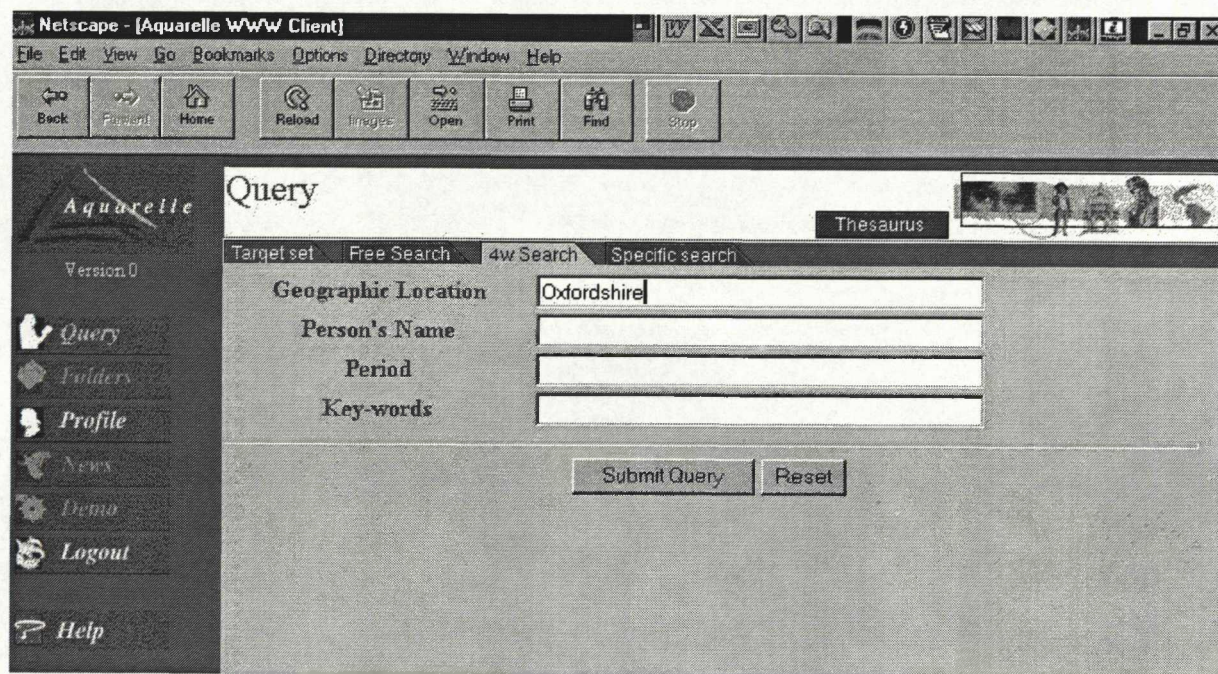

Figure 1: Aquarelle Project

In 1992 Museums and Galleries Commission Registration Scheme was launched, establishing minimum standards for museums. The scheme included a requirement for museums to document their collections and has resulted in a new emphasis of the use of computers for recording collections. The 1997 MDA Survey of IT in Museums shows that over 10 million records having been entered by the 250 museums surveyed, a 40% increase in just 2 years. Increasingly documentation and computers are seen as the vehicle for enhancing public access to information about collections, a theme emphasised by Treasures in Trust, the 1996 Review of Museums by the then Department of National Heritage.

Initiative - a group of large museums which has established common requirements, and selected Multi Mimsy as their preferred system. The suppliers of these systems are now beginning to develop Public Access and Web interfaces to the data held on the systems. However, the first UK museum archaeological data to be available on the Web was created by Hampshire Museums exporting data as HTML pages from their MODES databases and using reports to create linked index pages.

The progress on cataloguing collections has been achieved almost entirely within existing resources, but grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund is enabling a range of county-wide and regional schemes to get off the ground. Examples

include surveys of Geological collections in Dorset and Surrey museums, and a scheme in its early stages to enable access to information held in and about Cornwall, with archaeology forming a major component. The most wide-ranging IT based project is SCRAN - the Scottish Cultural Resources Network. SCRAN is a £7million Millennium Project to build a networked multimedia resource base of object records from Scottish museums, site information from RCHMS and specially commissioned multimedia essays. These will be used for the study, teaching and appreciation of history and material culture in Scotland. At the time of writing, the SCRAN on-line database has just gone live with 60,000 text records of objects from over 30 museums, galleries and archives. A few hundred of these records are attached to images. By the Millennium this is planned to grow to 1.5 million text records and 100,000 multimedia objects, including movies, sound clips and VR.

At the same time, two international projects are looking at enabling access to information held in different databases across the Internet. The Consortium for the Computer Interchange of Museum Information (CIMI) has a project that demonstrates solutions to the difficulties in achieving on-line access to cultural heritage information held in multiple databases independent of the hardware and software used to store the data or search for it. The project is using Z39.50 protocols to access multiple databases, and SGML to deliver object records, bibliographic records and catalogue essays to the end user.

This approach is being further enhanced by the Aquarelle Project (see Figure 1). Funded by the EU, this aims to enable access to Cultural Heritage information, and includes MDA, RCHME and the Culture Ministries of France, Italy and Greece. It will be using a similar technical approach to CIMI but with the added elements of multi-lingual searching and the ability to create SGML digital folders, for publishing on the Internet. A driving force behind the project is the need to digitise the paper files and photographs of archaeological sites and historic buildings, and to relate them to museum collections. The project is nearing the completion of the first prototype, and is already demonstrating what can be achieved. UK museums are becoming increasingly interested in Aquarelle as it is starting to demonstrate that Z39.50 can offer the opportunity to integrate data from museums, SMR's, Record Offices and Libraries.

CIMI, Aquarelle and a range of museum collections management system suppliers are beginning an Interoperability Testbed project which will further expand the range of systems which can implement Z39.50.

For the first time, the mix of new technology, a new commitment to collections information in the museum profession and new sources of funding are making the goal of public access to museum collections seem achievable.

Web addresses

SCRAN - http://www.scran.ac.uk/

CIMI - http://www.cimi.org/cimi/

Aquarelle - http://aqua.inria.fr/

MDA - http://www.open.gov.uk/mdocassn/

Contact details

David Dawson
Outreach Manager
Museum Documentation Association
67 Spring Street
Chipping Norton
Oxfordshire, OX7 5NN
UK
email: david@mdaserv.demon.co.uk