

1. Introduction

This report examines a small retrospective cataloguing project I undertook during a two-week student placement at Chatham House Library, in April-May 2018. The objectives of this case study are as follows:

- To provide a reflective context to develop some of my librarianship skills;
- To make suggestions for good practice in similar retrospective cataloguing projects;
- To consider possible implications for professional approaches to retrospective cataloguing and hidden collections

The next section outlines the background to hidden collections by drawing on some studies published in the last twenty years, and Section 3 describes in detail the project I undertook. Section 4 analyses that project with a focus on three challenging aspects, namely the initial appraisal of the hidden collection, the choice of appropriate cataloguing standards and the issue of institutional memory in a small organisation. Section 5 presents the report's conclusions and provides some recommendations.

As the original project was carried out in the context of a taught postgraduate programme, I had a dual role as learner and worker, and my work on the project should be contextualised accordingly. In other words, examples of 'bad practice' could be interpreted positively insofar as that practice has a pedagogical value. For this report's conclusions and recommendations, however, it is assumed that project workers would prioritise the organisation's objectives over their personal development. A draft of this report was made available to Chatham House library before submission.

2. Background

The issue of 'hidden collections' has been discussed widely within the librarianship profession in the last two decades. A survey of members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in the United States in 1998 found that *'for printed volumes, about 15% of collections on average remained unprocessed or uncatalogued'* (Panitch, 2001: 49). An OCLC-led study of special collections and archives in the United States and Canada found (Dooley & Luce, 2010: 47) the same figure of 15% of printed books which were not included in online catalogues, and considerably higher non-inclusion rates for resources in other formats: 44% of archival material and manuscripts, 58% of cartographic materials and 71% of born-digital materials.

While the issue of hidden collections affects various kinds of libraries, it has often been studied in the specific context of archives and special collections, as was the case for the OCLC-led study mentioned above. A very similar study, with the same methodology and survey instrument, and indeed involvement from some of the same OCLC researchers, was then carried out in special collections and archives in the UK and Ireland: this time, the figure for printed books without online records was 22% (Dooley [et al.], 2013: 58). Just like in the American study, non-inclusion rates were higher for other formats, and the authors pointed to some important factors in relation to expertise: for example, they noted how *'for cataloguing of cartographic material, [...] expertise is rarely in-house in any but the largest institutions, and hence an area where further collaborative action would be beneficial'* (Dooley [et al.], 2013: 59).

The UK and Ireland study was able to draw not only on the OCLC methodology but also, significantly, on the findings of an influential study conducted only a few years earlier by *Research Libraries UK* in partnership with the *London Library*.

With data from 75 institutions, 60% of whom had retrospective cataloguing projects under way, that study had found a total of 18.5% uncatalogued volumes in those collections [4] (p. 6). Furthermore, they had noticed *'the presence of 21st century materials in the backlogs suggest[ing] that some libraries are unable to keep up even with current acquisitions.'* (Mertens [et al.], 2012: 40)

It seems then that retrospective cataloguing is indeed so common as to be considered an almost inevitable part of collection management. Many of those retrospective cataloguing projects are instances of retrospective conversion, i.e. the process of creating new versions of existing records in a different format (typically from card catalogues to computer records) and therefore can be seen as a by-product of libraries embracing electronic records in the last three decades of the 20th century. That historical reality, in turn, can create difficulties because potential funders may be unaware of that long lead time. As Dunia García-Ontiveros, who was in charge of retrospective cataloguing at the *London Library* at the time of the study, pointed out, *'fundraising [was] particularly difficult as most donors thought that retro work was old hat. In general, donors were more interested in funding digitisation projects.'* (García-Ontiveros, 2010: 21)

All the studies mentioned above discuss the issue of the cataloguing standards adopted in retrospective cataloguing. The *RLUK-London Library* survey, for example, noted how *'historic practices in retro-conversion [...] leave a legacy of "minimal or inaccurate" catalogue records. These may be visible to potential users but may be misleading.'* (Mertens [et al.], 2012: 23) This important aspect of cataloguing work will be considered later in this report.

3. The Project

The *Royal Institute of International Affairs*, commonly known as *Chatham House*, is a renowned and very active London-based think tank. It is a subscription organisation, with around 3,000 members and 160 staff, many of whom are active researchers. The library has a staff of three: a *Library and Information Services Manager*, a *Digital Resources Librarian* and a *Research Liaison Librarian*.

A particularly interesting feature of Chatham House Library is the way in which the library is at the core of the organisation, both because of its physical location within the building and the ways in which the library's space is used. It seems to be the natural choice for staff who want to escape their office and enjoy a quieter space to work, or have short, informal meetings with colleagues or guests. Library staff actively encourage that kind of use and, although there is clearly a cost to pay in terms of managing noise and expectations, the library's visibility within the organisation is truly remarkable. It is also clear that regular users have an excellent relationship with library staff and feel pride in having them as an asset.

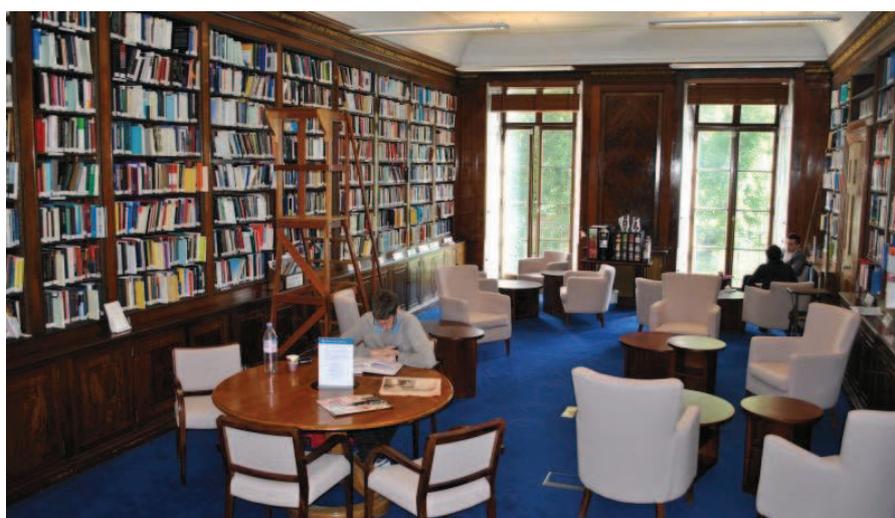


Figure 1: Chatham House Library - Image rights: Chatham House (used by permission)

Chatham House Library has a clear emphasis on recent resources. The printed books collection on open access in the reading room dates almost entirely from the 21st century, whereas materials stored at other locations – while still mostly recent – include some items going back to the Institute’s foundation in the 1920s. Some of the collection is stored offsite, at a location in Cheshire, and offsite items can be delivered on the next working day when requested before 4 pm.

The project I undertook concerned some of that material stored offsite. Two years ago, when the library first decided to use that location in Cheshire, some boxes (40 to 50, according to staff estimates) had to be moved quickly, and it became apparent that they contained items which had been overlooked during a previous retrospective cataloguing project. I catalogued the contents of 6 boxes, creating 40 new records and accounting for an estimated 15% of that hidden collection, which consisted almost exclusively of collections of treaties.

4. Some Important Challenges

This section analyses some challenges encountered during the project in relation to three specific aspects. While no such treatment can be really exhaustive, those three aspects have been chosen to provide a basis for recommendations for good practice.

4.1 Initial appraisal of the hidden collection

In an academic contribution focused on creating access to hidden collections, Barbara Jones suggested that libraries should ‘*develop different work flows for materials in various states of processing, for example, retrospective conversions records versus totally unprocessed materials.*’ (Jones, 2004: 100) The retrospective cataloguing project at Chatham House did not fit exactly into either category: the items in the boxes had all been catalogued before, in the days of the old card catalogue, before an online catalogue was introduced in the 1990s. That old card catalogue was still used occasionally to identify and locate older resources, until 5 years ago, when it was disposed of. As the old records no longer existed, therefore, the resources clearly had to be catalogued anew.

As explained above, the items were stored offsite in boxes and, in the records I created, barcodes for individual boxes were used to record location. At the start of the project it soon became clear that, due to the sudden nature of the move to the new location two years ago, the boxes had been filled in an arbitrary fashion: different volumes of the same resource were sometimes found in different boxes. I therefore invested some time in inspecting the contents of all the boxes and rearranging some items before continuing with the cataloguing. In the specific circumstance of Chatham House, given the number of boxes and the cost of retrieving them from the location, that was probably the most efficient way of doing it. Other libraries, however, may be in a position to appraise an entire hidden collection systematically before the start of the project, depending on size, cost and location.

In one case, when cataloguing a multivolume resource, the fact that one volume could not be found in any of the 6 boxes prevented me from creating a complete record of acceptable quality. I therefore decided to invest some time in going to view the whole resource in the British Library’s collection. Only later did I realise that a record for that resource already existed: a member of the library’s staff had previously catalogued that ‘missing volume’, which was clearly in one of the other boxes at the offsite location. As a result, I had to amend the existing record.

I therefore started systematically checking for the existence of previous records before cataloguing each new resource. The insight proved useful for my attempts to develop my librarianship skills, by allowing me to reflect on the need to adopt a new general cataloguing rule, essentially requiring cataloguers to always check for existing records in advance.

In light of the findings of some of the studies cited above, for example on special collection in the UK and Ireland, which provide evidence of complex collections, often acquired, developed, managed and stored in idiosyncratic ways, that lesson is likely to be applicable to similar projects in many other libraries.

Finally, at the start of the project, library staff made it clear to me that I would be dealing with a low-priority and relatively low-value collection. At the end of the project, that assessment seemed accurate: none of the resources were rare and, even when made fully discoverable, they were unlikely to be of great interest to library users. Nevertheless, their marginal role within the library's collection could be used as an opportunity to highlight lesser known aspects of the library and improve its visibility. For example, although Chatham House Library claims that its collections date back to the 1920s, that hidden collection actually included some late 19th century items. Library staff capitalised on that unexpected find to further improve their visibility, as can be seen in the tweet below, with images of a pre-1920 resource. The novelty of that post may well have generated new interest even in seasoned library users.



4.2 Cataloguing standards

Chatham House uses its own classification system, as well as local cataloguing standards. In outlining the project to me, library staff made it clear that the resources in that hidden collection did not require very high cataloguing standards. Again, that seems to have been the right assessment as, given the fairly homogenous character of the hidden collection, and the very useful classification system, those resources are discoverable even with relatively minimal records. Nevertheless, the adoption of common cataloguing standards and the creation of richer records might create the conditions for potential collaborations with other institutions.

Tensions between short-term needs and long-term objectives, and between local choices and shared standards, are perhaps inevitable in projects of that kind.

The RLUK / London Library study cited above points out that *'the scale of the problem is often beyond individual institutions. Respondents support an online register of retrospective cataloguing and are interested in exploring national initiatives and technical solutions to bring this about.'* (Mertens 2012: 6) At the same time, several of those respondents argue that we should *'advocate, where appropriate minimal levels of cataloguing.'* (Mertens 2012: 42) Reconciling those two essentially contradictory approaches will require creativity and compromise. Ultimately, from an organisational management perspectives, decisions will have to be taken in relation to workflows and available resources (particularly human resources). In the case of Chatham House library, the decision to opt for local solutions seemed appropriate, yet it is difficult to evaluate the potential missed opportunities. For example, had I been able to draw on the kind of expertise about cartographic material mentioned in the study about special collections in the UK and Ireland quoted above, I might have found something of interest in the many maps included in those collections of treaties. In terms of specialist expertise, many libraries will be in the same position, and so this is arguably an area of librarianship where there is still scope for more cooperation.

One unexpected opportunity linked to the project at Chatham House was the availability of a new testing ground for the cataloguing system. The library had recently acquired a new, web-based, cloud-hosted Library Management System and was in the process of customising its interface. The cataloguing module allows for a very large number of fields and, as part of that customisation process, library staff had to decide which ones they would retain. Having the perspective of a new cataloguing project, with some specific features which were different from the usual cataloguing of new resources, provided extra input in that decisional process.

4.3 Institutional memory

The important contextual information I needed to work on those resources at Chatham House was gathered almost exclusively from the personal recollections of library staff. One of the three members of staff was particularly useful in that respect, as he was the only one to have witnessed important changes in the organisation since the 1990s, as in the case of the card catalogue being discontinued. His understanding of the importance of that hidden collection within the library's collections was unique. For example, he was aware of another, potentially more interesting hidden collection of newspaper cuttings from press digests which library staff used to produce. His assessment of the relative value of the collection I was working on was therefore irreplaceable; moreover, that assessment was based on information which was not available to anyone else.

Alison Cullingford, a leading specialist in special collections in the UK, lists five problems posed for libraries by hidden collections, including *'reliance on staff knowledge rather than catalogues: when staff leave, that information is lost.'* (Cullingford 2011: 84) The importance of cataloguing the stock therefore goes beyond the value or potential interest of a given collection: it can be part of a process of communicating institutional memory, including within the organisation. Catalogue records can essentially also be used as organisational records, and provide future organisational managers with the contextual information needed to take informed decisions. Adopting shared cataloguing standards could be a benefit, not just for potential partners and other institutions, but also for an individual library's own records management practices. Once again, organisational decisions about workflows and resources will be crucial; many relatively small organisations, such as Chatham House, will probably conclude that their resources are limited, and that kind of cooperation is therefore not achievable, so this seems likely to remain a significant obstacle in dealing with this aspect of librarianship.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The retrospective cataloguing project at Chatham House provided a useful reflective context for developing my librarianship skills. For example, I gained the simple but important insight that, as a cataloguer, I should always check that the next resource in my in-tray has not been catalogued already. It was also an opportunity to consider wider issues about managing workflows in dealing with hidden collections, particularly in relation to choosing cataloguing standards and identifying opportunities for collaborating with other libraries.

Although it is difficult to generalise based on one small project, the Chatham House experience showed an example of the limits of retrospective conversion: cataloguing the resources anew was the better option.

The following recommendations are offered to libraries which are considering retrospective cataloguing of hidden collections:

- Libraries should consider the opportunities provided even by small investments in retrospective cataloguing projects: for example, newly discovered aspects of the collections which can be used for outreach projects or to improve visibility.
- Libraries should also consider the opportunities for the organisation's internal processes, for example in reviewing their own cataloguing practice and in contributing to records management at organisational level.
- Investment in the initial appraisal of hidden collections is likely to make the process efficient and more easily manageable at later stages: if circumstances allow it, a systematic appraisal of the whole hidden collection before cataloguing starts is recommended.
- Decisions about cataloguing standards will have to reconcile local realities with the opportunities to share records and make resources discoverable even more widely: whilst mindful of constraints, libraries should generally aim for richer records.

Libraries should aim to foster a culture of collaboration encompassing other aspects of the process, for example by participating in the creation of registers of retrospective cataloguing, which is likely to help smaller organisations to maintain and communicate their institutional memory.

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