

## Contribution Submitted by Ross Bourne

### **Public Library Computerisation**

Name: Ross Bourne BA FLA

Current age: 61

Location of post/posts:

Hendon / Barnet Libraries, 1961-1972

LASER, 1972-1975

The British Library, 1975-1998 - At the time of my retirement I was Special Projects Officer, Bibliographic Services and Document Supply, at Boston Spa.

Time period covered: 1965-1972

Position and age at the time: Assistant Cataloguer, firstly in Hendon Borough Council library service, and following local government reorganisation in April 1965 the London Borough of Barnet library service, at which time I was 27.

#### **1. Background**

Prior to April 1965 Hendon was one of a number of north-west London local authorities outside the former London County Council area. As well as Hendon itself, the local government area included Golders Green, Mill Hill and Edgware. Although part of the old Middlesex County Council, Hendon operated its own library service, as did the neighbouring Finchley Borough Council. In 1965 Hendon and Finchley were amalgamated along with two Friern Barnet libraries operated directly by Middlesex County and three Barnet libraries operated by Hertfordshire County; the new borough became the London Borough of Barnet, with its town hall situated in Hendon and most of its new services operated also from there.

#### **2. Problems to be resolved**

Leaving the two ex-county areas aside, the new authority had to accommodate two borough and two deputy borough librarians. The posts of Chief, Deputy, Associate and Assistant Borough Librarian were created; in the event, the Associate Borough Librarian (J.D. Reynolds, previously Borough Librarian of Finchley and a former editor of the *Library Association Record*) was on the point of retirement and his Finchley deputy, the Assistant Borough Librarian, took up a post elsewhere within a few years of reorganisation.

Donald Reynolds' major area of responsibility was the expanded cataloguing and acquisitions department. Hendon's Chief Cataloguer, Katharine Middleton, continued in charge until her retirement in 1968; Finchley's cataloguer, Eleanor Steff, was less than totally delighted to lose her status, and her resignation took place within a year or so of reorganisation. Although open warfare did not actually break out, there were undoubtedly tensions during the first few months, not helped by the nature of the personalities involved. The present author was an observer of all this, keeping his head well below the parapet; if it isn't too old-fashioned to say so, the old adage about two women sharing a kitchen might have been appropriate in these circumstances.

The existing catalogues were a mixture of sheaf and card, different editions of the Dewey schedules and varying cataloguing practices. Both Hendon and Finchley operated classified catalogues which were comprehensive of their respective library non-fiction stocks across all the various branches. The former Middlesex and Hertfordshire libraries had no catalogues of their own; locations were represented in their county catalogues, but it would not have been practical to extract their holdings, nor would it have been practical to carry out a physical amalgamation of Hendon's and Finchley's catalogues.

### **3. The solution**

The received wisdom of the time was that the Borough Treasurer's department had spare capacity on its computer, an ICL machine. Moreover, software existed which could handle minimal records with a limited number of fields. Where this software originated was always a mystery to those of us who had to adapt our culture to accommodate it. Basically, four fields were provided to carry all bibliographic information; these fields were of fixed length: the first field of 40 characters was reserved for the author, the second field of 78 characters for the title (plus other information such as edition and date), the third field of ten characters for the classification number and the final field (whose character length I have forgotten) for up to 15 or so branch locations. These constraints were relaxed after a year or two: the difficulty of accommodating quite long strings of characters representing authors' (especially corporate authors') names within such a small amount of space may not have actually led to the fixed character lengths being replaced - more likely, new, more flexible software had become available - but the result was a considerable improvement. Both authors and titles could be extended into a second and even third line, and "see" and "see also" references could be used.

However, a major difficulty, the ordering of classification numbers, was identified, fortunately before the first output was produced. (I have always been proud that I was the first person to spot this.) Because of the filing system inherent in the software, a number took precedence over a blank; hence,

123.456  
123.45  
123.4

- whereas the correct order should of course be the reverse. The solution was to fill up the ten characters allowed for the classification number with zeroes, which would then be suppressed at the output stage.

Output was on A4 pages, produced as I remember at monthly intervals. There were two sequences, author and classification number, joined when the new software was introduced by a separately produced subject index appearing at six-monthly intervals. The basic structure remained therefore that of a classified catalogue. The ideal would have been to link particular subject index entries with the titles they referred to, along with any associated references, but a holistic MARC-type structure was beyond the capability of the system, and I suspect that as time went by and catalogue entries were deleted a number of subject index and reference entries lost the reason for their existence.

Input was on paper tape, originally prepared by the town hall, but eventually within the cataloguing department itself on a Flexowriter; this enabled the cataloguers to exert much more control over the process.

I left Barnet Libraries in 1972. COM output and UKMARC were certainly in active discussion at the time I left, and to the best of my knowledge the first of these replaced paper output shortly after.

#### **4. The lessons**

The lessons are probably obvious. At my relatively junior level I was not aware of a great amount of staff consultation. In any case, the library service was run on what would probably be described now as paternalistic lines: Miss Middleton certainly attended meetings at which the outline of the system was described, but my impression now is that she was probably not sufficiently assertive to influence matters (or perhaps there was nothing which she could have changed, even if she had wanted to). Thirty-five years later, I think more effort would almost certainly have been taken to bring staff at all levels into the planning stage and senior management would, I hope, have been more sensitive to staff concerns.

From the professional point of view, I think the major problem was the status of the new and old catalogues. There was little or no effort put into retrospective conversion; hence, in the first few months it would have appeared that some prolific authors were barely represented in the library's collections. I have also alluded to the problem of keeping the catalogue up to date: I don't believe that we paid sufficient attention to ensuring that subject index entries continued to correspond with actual items in the collection or that branch locations were as accurate as they could be. And with the benefit of hindsight, it seems to me now that there should have been research into how the catalogue was used by both staff and users. It is ironic that what seemed at the time to be the worst damage, the artificial curtailing of authors' names and title information to fit the limited space available, was probably invisible to catalogue users. Accustomed as I am now to catalogues made available through the Internet (my local Wiltshire library is an excellent example of this), I suspect that librarians would have had a greater influence on World Wide Web development if we had shown more imagination in the 1960s and 1970s. In that respect, the move away from the catalogue card format, which we were having trouble learning to live with, was a development which we signally failed to exploit; essentially, the computerised version of the classified catalogues which Barnet and other public library services produced at this time were the bibliographical equivalent of the horseless carriage.

#### **Postscript**

Shortly before the London Borough amalgamations in 1965 we had a visit from Camden's chief cataloguer, Barbara Brooke; Camden was in the process of adopting the same ICL system as ourselves, and not surprisingly Mrs Brooke was keen that we should share ideas. In the course of the meeting she mentioned that she was taking a week or two's leave after the Easter break, which was imminent. However, that holiday was to prove significant, especially to Gerald, her husband: shortly after Easter, we were amazed to learn that he had been arrested in Russia for distributing

religious literature. For some years, Barbara was to travel to and from Russia; he was eventually released in 1969. I did meet her again at a conference at the University of Southampton, in the event just prior to his release; ironically, the conference was devoted to MARC, which the British National Bibliography was in the process of implementing. Our conversation remained largely professional, although at one point, and probably in my cups, I did find myself speculating aloud to a group of colleagues, including Mrs Brooke, that if I ever found myself behind bars I would probably become the prison librarian ...