# An Online Catalogue for Herefordshire Archives Service

2019 should see the launch of an online catalogue for Herefordshire Archive Service, something many researchers have been waiting a long time to see happen.

Putting information online is not always as easy as it sounds. Most archives that have online catalogues use specialist software, which is used to manage all collections activities and sometimes researcher information and document requests as well. This unfortunately comes at a price. The software itself needs to be purchased and there are usually ongoing license costs. A license is usually needed for each computer the software is installed on and these are renewed on an annual basis. All these costs have been prohibitive to the acquisition of such a system in Herefordshire in the past.

So what has changed? Well, in recent years, a separate development has taken place concerning access to Public Records. Since the Public Records Act of 1958, Public Records have in general been made available to the public 30 years after their creation. Since January 2015 though, for many types of Public Records, this period has been reduced to 20 years. If this took effect from the date it came in; it would mean that in the year 2015, as well as cataloguing Public Records dating to 1985, record offices would also have to catalogue all Public Records dating between 1986 and 1995. Clearly this would be a lot of extra work, and the new legislation therefore allowed for a staggered approach. In the first year they would need to catalogue the records dating from 1985 and 1986, in 2016 it would have been those from 1987 and 1988 and so on. This nevertheless still would require doing double the amount of Public Record cataloguing as had been going on up to that point, so the National Archives made a fund available specifically for this extra work, known under the title of *New Burdens*. The National Archives therefore asked individual record offices to let them know how large their backlogs of uncatalogued Public Records were, information that would be used give out a proportionate amount of money to the size of the backlog. At this time, we had taken receipt of a large collection of Magistrates Court records and the quantity of these records meant that we were eligible for and received £34,700. Rather than use this money specifically for cataloguing the magistrates courts records though, we decided it would be more beneficial to invest some of the money in a collections management system, and spend some of the money on conserving some of our Quarter Sessions Rolls. Doing the former would allow us to both make the catalogue of the magistrates courts records fully available online and would mean we could also make many of our other collections available online too. Doing the latter should improve access to some of the more difficult to use and badly damaged Quarter Sessions records. For the former, we invited quotes from various companies for the provision of such a system and decided on a company called Metadatis, who offered us a product called Epexio, a system which already in use at the South West Heritage

Trust, who run the archive services for Somerset and Devon. We can run Epexio on as many computers as we like without additional license costs, which is also very beneficial.

So what actually is a collections management system? It is a system containing several linked databases, allowing us to manage all aspects of our work on the collections centrally. In the past, new deposits of collections were entered into a paper accessions register and the depositor's details were put in a card index. Later on a more detailed catalogue would be made of all the items in a collection, which was originally type written, but was later word processed and printed out for search room use. Archive collections are always classified according to the provenance, which allows researchers to see the context of the documents, but can make finding documents on a particular person or topic a little tricky. Traditionally there were also therefore three core forms of indexing at Hereford Record Office: location, subject and biographical. These were captured on card indexes located in the search room.

From 2015, before we had found out about the New Burdens funding, the service procured an online index for locations and subjects, for which volunteers typed up the location and subject cards into spreadsheets that were made available online. This gave us an online presence, but only for one aspect of the various collections activities. These would allow you to see if we had documents relating to a particular place or subject, but not allow you to see the full context of their creation and use.

The Epexio system has separate databases covering all the above activities i.e. deposits, depositors, catalogues, loans, conservation work, names, places and subjects. These databases are all cross-referenced, so an entry in the names database will be linked to all the catalogues that relate to that person or organisation, and an entry in the catalogue database will be linked to the record of the deposit, all the names of people and organisations that feature in the collection, all the parishes that feature in the collection and all the subjects that it covers. This means that researchers no longer have to look up an entry in the card or online indexes, and then check the reference in the catalogue as well before ordering the document. The most significant advantage for researchers however is that much of this information can be made available online. Researchers will be able to see if we have a particular document, see who it was created by, all the documents it is linked to and whether there are any access or copying restrictions.

Any new deposit records or catalogues created from now on will be made using Epexio and the catalogues will be available online. What creates more of a problem is how to get all the existing paper catalogues onto the system. We have already uploaded onto the system all our word processed catalogues by sending  Metadatis the Word files, who were very helpfully able to convert them into Excel spreadsheets based on the information that would be needed for the various fields

in Epexio. We then had to painstakingly check these to make sure the data had been copied correctly and would appear in the right place. When Epexio is launched therefore, it should contain all the catalogues we have created or re-typed from the year 2000 onwards. It will not however contain any catalogues written between 1958 and 2000. Not only are these far more numerous, but there are no electronic copies. This is where our ever ready volunteers come back in. We plan to scan all these catalogues and run them through optical character recognition software to create electronic documents which can be imported into Epexio.

We have laid the foundations for having a much greater online presence, but there is considerably more work to do to make all catalogues fully available online. Note that this project does not extend to scanning or digitising any of the archives themselves, which is even more time consuming and expensive, but it should make it far easier to find out if we have archive material of relevance to your research topics. If you are interested in helping with the catalogue scanning, please let us know.

Herefordshire Archives Service

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