

**These notes supplement *Access to Archives - www.a2a.org.uk - The website for your historical research, the user's guide* published by West Sussex Record Office in July 2004.**

### Which record offices?

The scope of A2A is catalogues from record offices in England. The majority of the entries have been contributed by the record offices run by county, city and borough councils, and by the archive sections of public libraries. But they have also come from local and regimental museums, learned societies, some universities and a few businesses. Some record offices have not contributed on a significant scale to A2A because they have digitised their catalogues by other means and enable more catalogues to be searched from their own websites. Check whether the record offices serving your locality have contributed and how extensively: About A2A > A2A contributors; and Search A2A > Location of Archives, then key the first (only) letter of the title, and press the down arrow ? to the required repository. The resulting catalogues are listed by date of mounting on the website; to sort into alphabetical order of catalogue title, select in 'Sort your results...', 'By Location of Archives'.

A2A does not cover the very large and important collections of the Public Record Office at Kew (part of The National Archives), [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/searchourcollections](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/searchourcollections), nor of the British Library ([molcat.bl.uk](http://molcat.bl.uk)). Collections in the libraries of universities and colleges of higher education are covered in more breadth on [www.archiveshub.ac.uk](http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk) and, for the greater London area, with learned societies, on [www.aim25.ac.uk](http://www.aim25.ac.uk).

### Which catalogues?

A public library typically has one or only a few catalogues to its stock. But a record office has many catalogues. Usually there is a separate catalogue, in the form of a typescript on paper in a binder, for each archive from one source or creator, e.g. at Berkshire Record Office, for Newbury Borough Council, the Bouverie-Pusey family of Pusey, Wantage Tramway Co. Ltd. There may also be a card index to the names, place and topics

mentioned in these catalogues. A county record office may have 50,000 pages of catalogues containing entries to half a million documents and groups of documents.

The proportion of catalogues which have reached the database varies from office to office, but is rising as further catalogues are added.

### What's in the catalogues?

Most of the catalogues have been rekeyed from paper copies for entry into the database. A few were created in an electronic form. Although they have a uniform appearance when viewed on the website, they are very diverse in their original forms. Some were compiled over 150 years ago, many 50 or more years ago. You can extract information from the A2A database much faster than from the catalogues in their paper form. But the information is only as good as the catalogues.

So be aware of the limitations of the database:

- every record office has some documents which have not been catalogued
- some catalogues are unsuitable in their present form for entry on the database, but can be consulted in the record office
- some catalogues, though suitable, have not yet been submitted for entry
- some catalogues have been augmented or amended at the record office since they were submitted to A2A
- the depth of detail varies enormously: from a transcript or translation of a document, to (for a firm of solicitors), 'c. 250 boxes of clients' papers, c. 1250-20th century'.
- cataloguing practices and standards have changed over the years, particularly with older catalogues reproducing spellings as in the documents, rather than modernising them
- even within one catalogue, the amount of detail may vary from part to part, with older documents tending to be described in more detail than more recent
- the cataloguer may have made a mistake; the typist may have misread the cataloguer's draft; the copy for rekeying may have been unclear; and so on

## How the A2A catalogues are structured

A2A follows the 'General International Standard Archival Description', or ISAD(G), which can be found at

[http://www.hmc.gov.uk/icacds/eng/ISAD\(G\).pdf](http://www.hmc.gov.uk/icacds/eng/ISAD(G).pdf). This standard encourages 'multilevel description', whereby the description of the archive is arranged in a hierarchy. In new catalogues, each 'level of description' usually is assigned a serial letter or number which becomes a part of the reference to an individual document. The nomenclature to describe the levels varies from office to office; A2A has adopted the first in [square brackets below]. So, for example, from East Sussex Record Office:

Rother District Council = DR[Fonds or Collection level]

Treasurer's Department = DR/D [Sub-fonds or Section level]

Battle parish: settlement papers = DR/D/109 [Series or Class level]

Settlement: removal orders from Battle = DR/D/109/1 [Sub-series or Sub-class]

Benjamin and Delia Bran, and their child Eliza, from Battle to Sandhurst, Kent = DR/D/109/1/5 [File or Item level]:

DR/D/109/1/is the reference to the document, which can be produced for the reader.

The information in the 'catalogue entry' at each of the levels is more extensive than reproduced here (for example, by including dates) and adds to our understanding of the document at the bottom level. The higher levels tell us that the document is a removal order among papers of Battle parish relating to settlement, which now form part of the archive of the Treasurer's Department of Rother District Council.

Other branches of the tree are for the Secretary's Department (DR/B), etc., and there may be more levels than the five here. 'Fonds' is a (singular) term imported from French.

Levels appear on the website in three ways. First, 'hits' are displayed with the levels above the record containing the keyword, indented as above. Secondly, in a table of contents the levels are named and records at different levels are differentiated by background colour, size and colour of font. Thirdly in a catalogue they are similarly differentiated, but not named.

ISAD(G) says that the description should run from the general to the specific; that the information should be relevant to the level of description; that the position of each unit of description in the hierarchy should be explicit; and that repetition of information should be avoided, with the information given at the highest appropriate level.

What follows from these principles is that, *although your search may take you to a document's description at one level, there may be relevant information (which happens not to use the keywords in your search) at higher levels.*

ISAD(G) also specifies 26 'elements' or fields into which the cataloguer should organise the information about a document or group of documents. These include the Reference code, the Title, the Date, the Name of the creator, Scope and content, Administrative / Biographical history to the documents, and Conditions governing access (e.g. 'Closed for 75 years'). These same 26 fields are available for the catalogue records in A2A, with some simplifications and limitations. *Note that the A2A 'Keyword (or phrase)' search runs across only three of these fields, Title, Scope and content, and Administrative / Biographical history.*

If a catalogue has been prepared in accordance with ISAD(G), then the information should be in the right fields and in accordance with ISAD(G)'s criteria. But if an old catalogue is being squeezed into the ISAD(G) template, some bits may be in the wrong place, because several elements cannot be disentangled from one paragraph or because different conventions were followed. An important example of the latter is Date: A2A aims to give the date of a document's creation, so a microfilm of a Tudor parish register made in 1988 should be given that date, though may (in this case more helpfully) be dated 1538-1592, because that was the original cataloguer's practice.

The hierarchical structure of catalogues and the insertion of information at the highest relevant level assume that the reader will start at the front of a paper version and will work through it from the general to specific, starting from the trunk and following the branches to the document wanted. Electronic searching is likely to take you deep into the thicket of branches and you need to find your way back to the trunk – which means looking at the entire catalogue and not just the extracts containing your keywords. Furthermore, frequency of occurrence of the search term does not necessarily identify the catalogue with the greatest quantity of records relating to, say, a hospital: if the top-level record includes the hospital's name, the name may not occur again.

*These characteristics of cataloguing reinforce the importance of looking at an entire catalogue which a keyword search suggests may be relevant.*

A catalogue as it exists in the repository may be split into several catalogues in the A2A website, which has a maximum size for a catalogue in terms of bytes. For example, the catalogue for the pre-1974 East Sussex County Council in East Sussex Record Office, which runs to 1366 pages on paper, appears as eight catalogues on A2A. When we refer to catalogues on A2A, it is to the latter.

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