

GUIDE TO MANAGING HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

Developing a significant collection

Cataloguing

Why catalogue collection items?

- Know what is in the collection
- Know where items are located
- Improved access to collection items for members and other researchers

Information to collect and record when cataloguing an item:

- Descriptive information
Describe the item
- Accession information
How item acquired, date acquired, name (& address) of donor or supplier, price (if purchased)
- Condition Report
Statement on condition of item – fair, good, poor, date item assessed, statement listing problems if condition of item not good
- Cataloguing Details
Details of cataloguer and or data enterer, date item catalogued and or entered in database

Computer databases are now frequently used by societies when cataloguing collections though some societies still use card catalogues.

Databases usually used by societies in Victoria are DB/TextWorks, File Maker Pro, Access and Collections Mosaic.

Data structures are available for use with some programs – Maxus Museums Data Structure for DB/TextWorks and Collections Mosaic based on Access. These data structures were primarily designed for cataloguing objects but do include fields for cataloguing photographs and books. Depending on the program it may be possible to design a data structure for a program or modify an existing one.

Information is entered in fields in a data entry form in the computer and the information is then manipulated through the creation of report and display forms to be viewed in a variety of ways.

The small museums cataloguing manual, originally published by the Museums Unit of Arts Victoria with the fourth edition published by Museums Australia (Victoria) in 2009, provides detailed information about cataloguing. The information is especially useful for cataloguing artefacts and it is recommended that the museums data structure described in the manual should be used for cataloguing collections of objects. This publication can be downloaded from the Museums Australia (Victoria) website - <http://www.mavic.asn.au/resources>

When purchasing a database to use for cataloguing it is recommended that societies look for a database that has the flexibility of creating a variety of databases and the ability to alter data structures to suit the requirements of the collection being catalogued if necessary.

The *Cataloguing Guide for Historical Societies* blog (<http://hscatguide.blogspot.com/>) contains a section on what to look for when choosing a database and lists a number of the databases used for cataloguing collections in small museums and historical societies.

Cataloguing objects is not the same as cataloguing information items though there are common fields that can be used for both types of collections. If the collection to be catalogued is a research collection (not artefacts) ensure that, if the program used includes a museums data structure, the validation in selected fields can be modified and new fields added if required, that report forms can be modified if necessary or a new data structure created.

In 2003 a survey undertaken on how historical societies in Victoria use information technology included a section on computer cataloguing of collections. A full copy of the *Technology and Historical Societies* report containing the survey results can be downloaded from the shared files of the Computers and Cataloguing My Connected Community. In 2010 a similar survey is being undertaken by the RHSV and the report comparing the results of the two surveys will be made available later in the year.

Regional databases

The Internet provides the opportunity to publish catalogues of collections online. Few societies have the resources to do this themselves but there are opportunities for participation in regional or state-wide database projects such as the *Victorian Local History Database*, a state-wide database of research collections of RHSV affiliated societies. Any society affiliated with the RHSV can include their records in this regional database. Just contact the RHSV for further information. The *Victorian Local History Database* can be accessed from the *Local History Online* section of the RHSV website - <http://www.historyvictoria.org.au/online.htm>.

A list of other regional local history databases, often managed by public libraries, is also available via *Local History Online*.

Images from local history collections can be included in *Picture Victoria* – www.picturevictoria.vic.gov.au/. Picture Victoria aims to increase the accessibility of images held in local history collections in Victorian public libraries and in other local history collections, including historical societies. A number of historical societies work in partnership with their public library service to include their images in Picture Victoria.

Collections Australia Network (CAN) Partners can include information about collection items, particularly artefacts, in their database - <http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/>.

Card catalogues

A few societies still record cataloguing information in card catalogues. A card catalogue includes a series of cards for recording the description of the item, a donor file and a file for recording the condition of items.

Thesaurus and Authority Files

The English language provides a variety of terms to describe an item or a concept. If one of the aims of cataloguing is to make the collection accessible to researchers, consistency is important when using subject headings.

A thesaurus is a list of subject headings providing terms used for cataloguing as well as listing related broader or narrower terms that may be useful.

Examples of a thesaurus suitable for cataloguing local history collections are:

Victorian Local History Thesaurus – <http://www.historyvictoria.org.au/online.htm>

Australian Pictorial Thesaurus – <http://www.picturethesaurus.gov.au>

Creating and using authority files – lists of names of people, organisations or places – when cataloguing provides consistency when such terms are used.

Catalogue Workshops and / or Training

Training in cataloguing collections and using databases is available from a number of sources.

The RHSV provides general cataloguing advice as well as advice on creating and using databases in response to phone and email enquiries. Visits to societies can also be arranged for training in cataloguing collections and the use of databases. General cataloguing workshops for a group of societies can also be arranged.

Museums Australia (Victoria) provides cataloguing workshops as part of their workshop program.

Some software distributors provide assistance in the use of their database in the form of an enquiry service (including in some cases, online support and forums), support groups, workshops, and onsite assistance for users of the software.

The *My Connected Community Computers & Cataloguing mc²* offers a forum for any cataloguing enquiries (regardless of the software used) and also provides a listing of workshops, links to useful Internet sites plus a shared files section for providing documents containing specific cataloguing advice.

The *Cataloguing Guide for Historical Societies* blog (<http://hscatguide.blogspot.com/>) provides information for cataloguing projects.