

REVEALING COLLECTIONS: DISCOVERY, ACCESS AND INTEROPERABILITY

ABSTRACT

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This paper will look at a practical application of collection level description as a means of improving access to analogue and digital collections. Collection level description services provide a way of discovering the rich collections of physical objects, books, archives, digital resources, digital surrogates and of learning objects that are held by libraries, museums, archives and others. They may perhaps provide a way of bridging collections held across Europe. Participants at CAA will be familiar with the use of resource discovery metadata to offer network access to digital collections - and familiar with the difficulties in finding and locating analogue collections. Collection level descriptions provide a common framework for describing collections of all types (object, physical archive, book, digital resource, learning object) and a means of discovering their location, content and access arrangements. The HEIRNET register provides an example of a collection level description service enabling researchers and cultural heritage managers to discover collections held by multiple content providers across the UK.

In the United Kingdom the phrase 'historic environment' is used to encapsulate the archaeological monuments, historic buildings and other structures that survive in our landscape. Many people and organisations are involved in recording different aspects of the UK's historic environment in databases and in other information systems for conservation management, research, public information services and for a range of other reasons. Few would think of these information bases as being collections, however they form only one element of our knowledge base about the historic environment. Other elements, such as the finds from an archaeological excavation of a monument and the associated excavation archives are more familiarly referred to as 'collections' as are the reference collections and library collections that are so important to research.

The term 'collections' is used in this paper as a generic way of referring to clusters of information about the historic environment whether the cluster comprises of a database, GIS, museum collection, documentary archive, library collection or type series. This paper will suggest that, by taking a step back from the detail of the format and looking at the collection, we may be able to find ways of improving access to these resources for research in the UK and internationally.

THE BENEFITS OF SHARING INFORMATION

Those who are involved in collecting information about the historic environment will recognise the fact that no collection is ever complete. However well developed the collection, invariably it will be complemented by a collection that is held by another. For example, in the UK the National Monument Records provide an index to known archaeological monuments and historic buildings which is complemented by local authority Sites and Monuments Records and enhanced by specialist thematic databases developed by research projects. Completing the distribution map of the UK's archaeological resource involves gathering together information held in different collections.

There are many reasons why different information about the historic environment is divided between institutions. Some are practical - a museum has the resources and skills to curate collections of archaeological archives but not to provide the services of a research library. Some are political - a local authority will only collect information that relates to sites and monuments within its administrative boundary. Others still are historical - an archaeologist may deposit material with different institutions at different stages during a career or posthumously. The result is fragmentation - with information about specific aspects of the historic environment being held by many different institutions at different geographic locations.

DISCOVERING COLLECTIONS

The problem that faces us is finding out what information is available and where it is held. Without this most basic of information, undertaking a programme of research can involve a lifetime journey visiting institutions to check their catalogues. It is extremely difficult for the national heritage agencies to build up a picture of the historic environment and to plan conservation strategies. There may also be a risk of duplication of effort, with people and organisations developing collections that overlap rather than complement each other.

HEIRNET AND ITS REGISTER OF HEIRS

HEIRNET, the Historic Environment Information Resources Network, is a consortium of organisations that came together in 1998 under the auspices of the Council for British Archaeology. The members of HEIRNET, recognising the difficulty in knowing who holds information about different aspects of the UK's historic environment, set out to create a register of available collections (Baker et al. 2000). This register (online at <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/heirnet/>) is being developed to provide a searchable online index to collections.

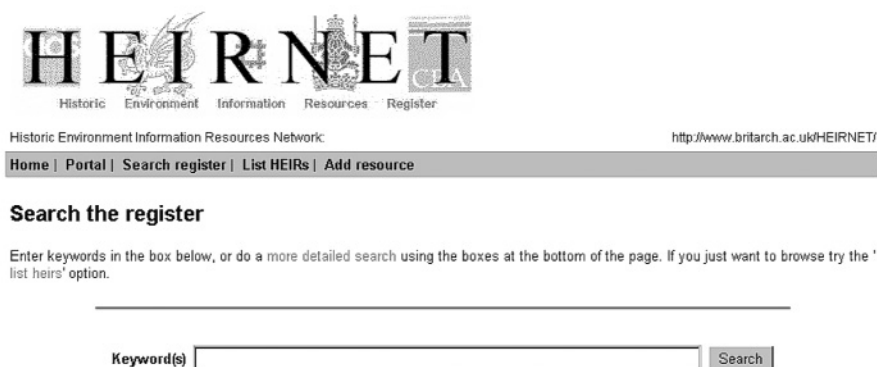


Figure 1 The HEIRNET Register search interface

The information contained within the HEIRNET register provides a collection level description of the resources that have been identified. A register entry provides a general overview of a collection - a brief description of its scope together with an indication of its subject coverage, geographic area and the formats of the material held. Perhaps the most important information of all, are the details of how and when to contact the person or organisation which holds the collection. Where a collection is available online, the Register provides researchers with a direct link to the resource.

HEIRNET's aim in developing its register is to help researchers to find resources (Fernie 2003). The register offers a simple and easy to use mechanism for searching and browsing through the available collections to find out what material is available for a research topic, which organisation holds it and what the access arrangements are.

OTHER UK INITIATIVES

HEIRNET is not alone in developing collection level descriptions. In the UK, there are a number of other initiatives that are developing similar indices that are of potential interest to archaeological researchers. For example, Re:source (England's national agency for museums, libraries and archives) is developing Cornucopia, a national database which describes museum collections. In another initiative, the JISC (Joint Information Services Committee) is developing the Archives Hub to provide descriptions of collections of archives and manuscripts held by UK universities and colleges. Further initiatives include AIM 25 (an index to archives held by institutions within the greater London area), Enrich UK (an index to collections developed through the New Opportunities Fund) and SCONE the Scottish Collections Network.

REASONS FOR COLLECTION LEVEL DESCRIPTION

There are two principle reasons why organisations in the UK have begun to create collection level descriptions. Many institutions have significant cataloguing backlogs. By creating an index to their own collections, these institutions are able to prioritise their cataloguing programmes, identify vulnerable collections that require conservation and plan programmes of work. Another reason, both within and between institutions, relates to the desire to provide users with a fin-

ding aid to aid their discovery of collections that are often under-used. Both the HEIRNET register and Cornucopia are examples of collection level description services intended primarily to aid resource discovery.

Much of the work to create collection level descriptions in the UK has, directly or indirectly, been influenced by the Research Libraries Support Programme (RSLP). The RSLP funded a large number of digitisation projects in UK higher education institutions and developed a schema for describing the collections that were created to make sure that these were both consistent and machine readable (Powell et al. 2000).

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DESCRIBING COLLECTIONS

The RSLP schema covers both concepts that are familiar to users of library catalogues (title, description, author, date) and concepts that are familiar to collections managers (physical location, deposit conditions, access arrangements). The RSLP schema was developed within the libraries sector with reference to existing schemas. ISAD[G] (the General International Standard Archival Description) and EAD (Encoded Archival Description) are comparable schemas which are in use by archivists (Powell 2003). Although comparable to the RSLP schema, ISAD[G] is much richer and requires archivists to provide more detailed information about an archive collection.

Although it was originally developed for use only by digitisation projects funded by the RSLP, the RSLP schema has had impact across the cultural heritage sector in the UK. This is because, like Dublin Core metadata, the RSLP schema is relatively simple and provides a consistent core of useful information. Mapping between the RSLP and both the ISAD[G] and EAD schemas has provided a framework for searching across the collection level descriptions being created in libraries, museums, archives and the historic environment sector.

USING COLLECTION LEVEL DESCRIPTIONS

Most researchers who have undertaken a programme of research that required them to find material held in many different institutions will recognise the potential of a service that helps to identify what is available. Such services are invaluable at the start of a research programme. For institutions the benefits are twofold. Firstly, creating an index to collections helps to plan their management and secondly it provides a mechanism for informing potential users about the existence of collections.

Having a sound standards framework for the creation of collection level descriptions by different institutions is important as it enables this information to be shared between institu-

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tions. If the collection level descriptions that are created by HEIRNET, Cornucopia and the Archives Hub are sufficiently similar this provides a framework for machine-to-machine communications and for cross-searching. Rather than duplicating work undertaken by Re:source and the JISC, in future HEIRNET might be able to provide a portal (Ferne 2003) to enable users to search both its own register and the Cornucopia and the Archives Hub.

Inter-operability between collection level description services requires a good measure of consistency in the way in which information is recorded and also compatible subject classification. Classification at the collection level requires a broad-brush approach that does eliminate some of the differences between subject disciplines, although terminology remains a hot topic for discussion at Collection Description focus meetings in the UK between librarians, archivists and museum curators (Robinson 2003).

WHAT ABOUT EUROPE?

Work in the UK is developing the RSLP schema to provide a consistent recording framework for museums, archives and libraries and similar work is already underway in Canada (Dunn 2000). The involvement of a wide range of individuals and institutions is important because it is enabling the methodology to be tested against a range of situations and

refined to provide a simple and consistent way of recording collections (Miller 2000). If this is successful in providing researchers with a useful finding aid for UK-based collections, collection level description could provide a framework for resource discovery across European collections. After all archaeology does not confine itself to modern political boundaries. The development of a register of collections relating to the historic environment across Europe would have great potential for research.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

To some extent the challenge in developing a collection level description service for the historic environment is facing up to the past. There are many reasons why information about the historic environment is divided between institutions that have different professional traditions, funding regimes, responsibilities and emphases. Building a picture of the information resource means working with institutions that have very different backgrounds. Getting the information that we need about collections and making sure that it is consistently recorded is one of the main challenges that we face in developing such a service. In the UK, HEIRNET is meeting this challenge by being pro-active in its development of the HEIRNET register and in seeking opportunities to bring institutions with an interest in the historic environment together.

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